Dreaming of the Feminine in Man¹:
A Reading of Steinbeck’s *Of Mice and Men*

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Abstract

After a brief survey of relevant criticism, a reading of *Of Mice and Men* is presented focusing on the theme of the “feminine in man.” First, the way in which the male ranch workers—in particular, George—have been traumatized by the economic and social conditions in California in the 1930’s is examined. Then, the way in which Lennie, the idiot-child, serves as a guide—one who can lead the traumatized characters toward a path of healing—is discussed. Next, the feminine presence in the novel is outlined. The center of this presence is, of course, the one female character, Curley’s wife, but key male characters also embody attributes of the feminine. Finally, the tragic rejection of the feminine by the male-dominated world is discussed, and the question of George’s emotional growth throughout the novel—his movement toward recognition of the feminine in himself—is addressed. In the concluding remarks, consideration is given to how this reading of *Of Mice and Men* places it in the American literary canon.

Introduction

Despite his literary success in the 1930’s and the 1940’s, and his winning of the Nobel Prize in literature in 1962, John Steinbeck has often suffered at the hands of critics who have deemed his work sentimental and superficial. *Of Mice and Men* has received much of that criticism. In 1942, Alfred Kazin wrote that the novel’s effect on the reader depends entirely on a “calculated sentimentality” (309). In 1974, Howard Levant wrote that because the novel centers on Lennie, “a reduction of humanity to the lowest common denominator,” it is doomed to remain “a simple anecdote,” one in which “the result is merely arranged,” one which lacks the “widening insight” that a successful novel requires (134–137).

A number of critics, though, have taken exception to the argument that the novel centers on
Lennie; they insist that the focus is not on any single character, but rather on Lennie and George as a pair. By revealing a certain sophistication in the structure of *OMAM*, readings of the novel by such critics serve to raise it, as a work of art, above the level of a merely superficial and sentimental tale. But if George and Lennie are to be read as a pair, what kind of pair are they? What is the meaning of their relationship? In a 1942 piece, Stanley Edgar Hyman wrote of George as “Steinbeck’s type for the radical,” of Lennie as “a symbol of the masses,” and of the novel as depicting a failed attempt at a social utopia (Tedlock and Wicker 159). In his 1985 book, Louis Owens suggested that George and Lennie’s relationship is like that of Cain and Abel, and that the story is a failed attempt to recapture a lost Eden, though not an entirely meaningless attempt, as George at least recognizes the importance of being his brother’s keeper. In her 1995 book, Charlotte Cook Hadella suggested that one way of reading *OMAM* was to see that Lennie and George are really just “different facets of one personality,” with Lennie playing “a powerful id to George’s ego” (51).

I too believe that *OMAM* is much more than a superficial, sentimental tale and, with an eye to improving the critical reputation of the novel, would like to offer one more possible reading of it. Like Hyman, Owens, and Hadella, I believe that the structure of *OMAM* focuses not on a single character but on the George-Lennie pair—and that it is not unreasonable to see the two men like this: George is a confused, traumatized male desperately needing to recognize the feminine in himself, while Lennie is a child-idiot who, though a huge man of incredible physical strength, naturally intuits the importance of the feminine in man and feels no shame in expressing his feminine side. While George is Lennie’s carekeeper, Lennie has the potential to guide George toward a heightened awareness of his own need for the feminine. George’s attempt to keep Lennie under control is in fact an attempt to control himself, and as Lennie himself displays two different sides to his own character—extreme masculine and feminine sides—George’s attempt to control Lennie becomes an attempt to reconcile his own masculine and feminine sides. In this reading, then, the crux of the novel is whether George will or will not find a way to accommodate his feminine self.

1. Traumatized Males and the Idiot as Guide

As *OMAM* opens, we discover that George has been traumatized by the grim economic realities of California in the 1930’s—realities that have left him without dignity in work and without hope of ever having a home or a significant relationship with a woman. His willing-
ness to assume custody of Lennie illustrates a genuinely kind heart, but it’s a constant struggle for him to find even the most insecure of work, and Lennie’s unpredictable behavior loses him whatever work he does manage to come by. His predicament leaves him bitter and angry. He snaps out at Lennie repeatedly—and “furiously”: “You can’t keep a job and you lose me ever’ job I get. Jus’ keep me shovin’ all over the country all the time” (11). He speaks “hopelessly”; he stares “morosely” into space (3, 4). The presence of Curley’s wife, whom he quickly labels a “bitch,” exasperates his stress and confusion further. As Hadella suggests, Curley’s wife “stimulates [his] sexual consciousness, challenges his manhood, inspires self-doubt, and taunts him for his meanness” (56). In all, George is a lost soul, incapable of finding a meaningful, dignified way to live. Much of the time, his greatest desires are a gallon of whiskey and an evening in a brothel. In this sense, he is just like the majority of the itinerant ranch hands. He may be more cerebral than most of the others, but in the end, they all suffer from the same lack of dignity in work and are all living without a lasting relationship with a woman. They are all socially traumatized.

“The mind at war with itself wants to be healed,” Griffin writes in Pornography and Silence (98-99), “but still clings to the old damaged way of being.” Although Griffin had soldiers traumatized by their experiences in the Vietnam War in mind when she wrote this, her statement certainly applies to the traumatized ranch workers in OMAM as well. If the men on the ranch were better communicators, perhaps they could find ways to overcome their trauma, but their male-dominated world discourages communication. None of the men trust any of the others. The mere fact that Lennie and George seem to care about each other makes the ranch boss suspicious of them. In turn, George lies to the boss (Lennie was kicked in the head by a horse when he was young) because he does not think that the boss will believe the truth. George is suspicious of what Candy tells him about the bunks they will be sleeping in, and of course, Curley, the only man with a wife, drives himself crazy distrusting her—he cannot believe that someone is not trying to make a cuckold of him. The lack of trust among the men on this ranch is what prevents them from confiding in one another—from communicating. As Candy says, “A guy on a ranch don’t never listen nor he don’t ast no questions” (24).

Who, then, can lead these traumatized itinerant workers to a possible path of healing? It is the only one of them who lacks the mental capacity to understand the direness of their social situation, and who is thus immune to the trauma that debilitates them: Lennie. Levant described Lennie as “a reduction of humanity to the lowest common denominator,” but in the most important way, Levant’s evaluation is the exact opposite of the truth. Lennie is, I be-
lieve, in a long tradition of child-idiots who remain more closely in tune with nature—and thus the most fundamental human needs—than the men surrounding them. In an evaluation of another work in which a child-idiot plays a crucial role, The Sound and the Fury, James M. Mellard states, “[T]he child-idiot is thought to have what Empson refers to as ‘the right relation to Nature’” (235). The child-idiot’s instinctive judgments indicate, Mellard argues—borrowing wording from Kermode—“how much baser the corruption of the civilized can be than the bestiality of the natural” (243). Like Benjy in The Sound and the Fury, Lennie’s mental weakness enables him to remain closer to his essential humanity. Without question, this is how Steinbeck wanted us to think of Lennie. He “was not to represent insanity at all,” Steinbeck stated, “but the powerful yearnings of all men” (Watt 61–62)—he was to help men overcome their trauma and find meaningful ways to live.

Steinbeck emphasizes Lennie’s child-like innocence. While he’s a huge man, lumbering about like a bear dragging its paws, he remains a “baby,” as George refers to him (OMM 8). He is still “jes’ like a kid,” as Slim, the one god-like, authoritative figure on the ranch, tells us (OMM 41). He is “[j]us’ like a big baby,” Curley’s wife echoes (OMM 90). And while the gritty experience of the other male characters has left them believing that “ever’body in the whole damn world is scared of each other” (OMM 35), Lennie’s innocence allows him to initiate conversation with everyone and anyone. And in his presence, one character after another—Candy, Crooks, Curley’s wife—is able to open up his or her heart. Curley’s wife, though frustrated by her lack of opportunities for communication, has never given up on the possibility of communication, as her constant attempts to engage the male laborers in conversation reveals; Candy and Crooks, on the other hand, seem to have given up on the possibility of sincere communication with others and of dreaming of a better life for themselves—until they find themselves in Lennie’s presence.

Of course, it is George himself who Lennie most opens up to possibility. The morose, angry George sees a bleak future, while the innocent Lennie retains the ability to dream. Lennie, however, cannot remember the details of his own dream and needs George to keep it whole and real. In the opening scene, Lennie asks the depressed George to remind him of the details. At first, George resists, but then gives in, and as he repeats Lennie’s dream—their dream of having their own farm and living off the fat of the land—he warms to it. In Chapter 1, George stops in the middle of the telling, his bleak outlook still too strong; by Chapter 3, though, he is ready to believe in it himself. As he tells it to Lennie yet once again, he looks “raptly” at the wall of the bunkhouse, envisioning the dream farm clearly (OMM 58).
This thing they had never really believed in was coming true. George said reverently, "Jesus Christ! I bet we could swing her." His eyes were full of wonder. "I bet we could swing her," he repeated softly. (OMM 60)

The farm they dream of—with its soft, furry rabbits, abundant milk with thick cream, and a warm, cozy hearth—is a clear refuge from the lonely and traumatizing male world. George’s speaking “softly” of it in his strongest moment of belief and “wonder” is of the greatest significance. He is, at this brief moment in the novel, very close to his feminine self.

2. The Feminine Presence

Without question, the novel portrays a world that is hostile to women. George, when first confronted with the presence of Curley’s wife, can only comment, “Ranch with a bunch of guys on it ain’t no place for a girl, specially like her” (OMM 51). George’s comment leads to a conversation with Whit about prostitutes, and it seems the only relationship with women these ranch hands can imagine is one in which they buy them. Curley’s wife is known as just that—“Curley’s wife”—for, as a woman, she is regarded by the ranch hands to be, not an individual, but rather a mere extension of her husband. George, who fears her, repeatedly warns Lennie to “keep away from her” (OMM 32). Whit’s comment about her—“I don’t know what the hell she wants” (OMM 51)—illustrates how baffled the men on the ranch are in regard to the nature of women and the feminine they embody. None of them seem to understand (as Steinbeck explained in a 1938 letter written to Clare Luce, an actress who at that time was playing the part of Curley’s wife in the stage version of OMAM) that her flirting does not derive from any innate moral looseness or abnormal sexual appetite, that it is, instead, a part of the “thousand little defenses she has built up” to cope with a perverse male world that can only see her as “a girl to try to make” (Steinbeck, Elaine and Wallsten 145). Sandra Beatty writes that it is “difficult to understand why a group of men who, by their own admission, are lonely most of the time and who crave companionship, cannot recognize the same need in a woman” (9), but I think there is an easy-to-understand explanation: they are scared of the feminine in themselves—and scared of the feminine in the one woman in their midst.

At the same time, however, that the ranch is hostile to women, a strong feminine presence can be felt throughout it. Of course, as the one female character in the novel, Curley’s wife provides the strongest image of the feminine. Perhaps the two most salient attributes that she
exhibits that the majority of the ranch hands do not are 1) a sincere desire to interconnect with others, to communicate with others—including a willingness to listen to others and to help others find their voices; and 2) an innate belief in the power of touch to soothe human beings, a natural tendency to cherish and share "softness." Of course, these two attributes are, in a sense, just one.

George and the other men on the ranch tolerate Lennie's obsession with soft, furry animals, but only because they see him, mentally, as a mere child. It is not so much because he is a child, however, that he likes to touch soft things, but rather that his child-like nature makes him unashamed of exhibiting his feminine side. Unlike most of the men on the ranch, Curley's wife is able to see Lennie's desire for soft things as a basic human need—something "feminine," yes, but something feminine needed by men and women alike. She understands his "feminine" needs—and those of the others—because those needs are so strong within herself. She likes to stroke her own hair, "[be]cause it's so soft," and she likes "to feel silk an' velvet"; and when Lennie, in the barn, says to her, "I like to pet nice things with my fingers, soft things," she replies, "Well, who don't? [...] Ever'body likes that" (OMM 90). Everybody may like touching soft things, but with the exception of Lennie, none of the men on the ranch can admit it.

The men also may need to be caressed by soothing words, but again, their masculine pride prevents them, most of the time, from admitting that to themselves. Curley's wife, in contrast, is extraordinarily open about her need for human contact and communication. "Think I don't like to talk to somebody ever' once in a while?" she says to Lennie, Crooks, and Candy, when they have excluded her from their circle of talk (OMM 77). Some days later, in the barn, she pleads her case to Lennie—and admits her loneliness.

"[...] Why can't I talk to you? I never get to talk to nobody. I get awful lonely."
Lennie said, "Well, I ain't supposed to talk to you or nothing."
"I get lonely," she said. "You can talk to people, but I can't talk to nobody but Curley. Else he gets mad. How'd you like not to talk to anybody?" (OMM 86–87)

Indeed, her every appearance in the novel centers on her need to interact with another person—to share a few simple words. From beginning to end, she is desperate for simple conversation and the sense of self-worth and sense of belonging it would bring.

Curley's wife and Lennie are not the only characters to embody the feminine. Other key
male characters, too, display feminine sides, and as with Lennie, their feminine sides are perhaps best understood through imagery of their hands. Candy, the old man, is missing his right hand; it was lost in an accident while working on the ranch. The injury has emasculated him. No longer capable of the heavy labor expected of men, he has been “reduced” to the role of swamper—sweeping up, keeping the bunk house clean—work that is, in the eyes of the other ranch hands, housework, “women’s work.” His name, Candy, emphasizes his feminization. While he does not seem to dislike the work that has fallen to him, he feels alienated from the other male hands, and he fears the day when he is deemed completely unnecessary. Thus, he is delighted when he overhears Lennie and George talking of their dream farm; suddenly, he can imagine a place where he can make himself useful washing dishes and cooking and feel self-respect at the same time.

Slim, a highly-skilled jerkline skinner (a mule driver), holds a more secure position than the other men, and his relatively high self-esteem enables him to feel more comfortable with the gentler side of his identity. While he is a man’s man “capable of driving ten, sixteen, even twenty mules,” he also possesses hands “as delicate in their action as those of a temple dancer.” Slim also is the one superb communicator among the ranch hands: “His ear heard more than was said to him, and his slow speech had overtones not of thought, but of understanding beyond thought” (*OMM* 34). At ease with his feminine side, he is the one man on the ranch that the ranch hands feel comfortable confiding in. He is the one man who is trusted.

Curley, too, displays masculine and feminine hands, though in his case, in a perverse manner. While he mainly uses his hands for boxing and barnyard brawling, he keeps one hand nestled in a glove full of Vaseline, “keepin’ that hand soft for his wife,” as Candy reports (*OMM* 27). Of course, this is highly ironic, for, as his wife tells us, he is not—to her—“a nice fella” (*OMM* 89). Curley spends all his time, she tells us, thinking about how he’s going to pummel with his fists everyone he does not like—and “he don’t like nobody” (*OMM* 78). In all, Steinbeck’s creation of a supporting cast of male characters who display both feminine and masculine sides highlights the feminine/masculine conflict in the George-Lennie pair.

Of course, it is Lennie whose two sides are most at war with each other, something that can be seen clearly in the movements of his hands, too. Lennie is strong enough to lift “a four hundred pound bale” (*OMM* 21) and throw it in the back of a wagon and does the physical labor of two men, but his greatest happiness comes from caressing furry animals—mice, rabbits, and dogs. Unfortunately, he needs to control the soft creatures he caresses and is frustrated when he cannot. He pets the animals too hard, and when they resist, he panics and
crushes them. He loves with his hands—and he kills with them.

George’s frustration with women parallels Lennie’s frustration with furry animals. If he were rid of Lennie, he says, “he could get along so easy and so nice” and “maybe have a girl” (OMM 8), but despite that desire, most of his daydreams are filled with images of evenings spent with prostitutes. Prostitutes, after all, can be controlled. George wants a woman in his life, and his and Lennie’s dream of domestic bliss on a cozy farm is an extension of that desire. However, his fear of non-submissive women overwhelms him. He needs the feminine in his life, but is scared of it. Thus, like the other ranch hands, he is quick to label Curley’s wife a bitch and is unprepared to recognize her essential loneliness.

3. The Rejection of the Feminine

The rejection of the feminine by the male-dominated world of the ranch manifests itself in three clear ways. First of all, there is the rejection of Curley’s wife by Candy and Crooks, the black stable buck, in Chapter 4. Crooks suffers racial discrimination. Candy’s injury and old age prevent him from full participation on the ranch. Lennie’s mental feebleness leaves him less than a full-fledged member of society. Their gathering is a gathering of the weak; and yet, despite the comfort they receive from one another, they refuse to let a woman join their conversation. “Funny thing,” she says, when they reject her,

“If I catch any one man, and he’s alone, I get along fine with him. But just let two of the guys get together an’ you won’t talk. Jus’ nothing but mad.” She dropped her fingers and put her hands on her hips. “You’re all scared of each other, that’s what. Ever’ one of you’s scared the rest is goin’ to get something on you.”

When Crooks tells her, “Maybe you better go along to your own house now. We don’t want no trouble,” she replies, “Well, I ain’t giving you no trouble. Think I don’t like to talk to somebody ever’ once in a while? Think I like to stick in that house alla time?” (77).

This brief conversation speaks volumes. When she can get them alone, the men are open to her—they need the feminine in their life. But they have been trapped in a male-dominated world for so long that they are scared of admitting what they need to others. To these ranch hands, the “trouble” Candy speaks of certainly refers to the wrath of a jealous husband, but in this particular scene, this gathering of the weak, the trouble Candy refers to must seem to
mean, at least from Curley’s wife’s point-of-view, “even the most innocent conversation with a woman.” The scene clearly illustrates that of all the discrimination that takes place in the novel, the discrimination toward women is the most severe; it is the only form of discrimination that is impossible to overcome.

Secondly, there is Lennie’s actual taking of her life. In the barn, Lennie is distraught, having just killed his puppy. When Curley’s wife comes in and attempts to console him, Lennie resists her kindness, as George has warned him about getting involved with her. He needs soothing, but he is scared of her. Her kindness spurned, she shouts out, “What kinda harm am I doin’ to you? Seems like they ain’t none of them cares how I gotta live”—and then she gives expression to her feelings in “a passion of communication” (OMAM 88). At this point, she seems to embody perfectly the feminine attributes highlighted in the novel overall: she wants to soothe and console, and she believes in the power of communication. Of course, Lennie wants to be soothed by her, but does not know how to control his feelings toward the feminine. When she allows him to stroke her hair, to feel how soft it is, he strokes too hard. His rough masculinity overwhelsms the feminine in him. When she resists him, he turns violent—and ends up breaking her neck.

The final rejection of Curley’s wife—and in some ways the cruelest—occurs after her death. Candy looks down on her dead body without the slightest compassion.

“You goddam tramp,” he said viciously. “You done it, di’nt you? I s’pose you’re glad. Ever’body knowed you’d mess things up. You wasn’t no good. You ain’t no good now, you lousy tart.” (OMM 95)

And then her own husband, discovering her dead body, expresses no grief; he merely desires revenge—that is, more killing. With the exception of George, Candy, and Slim, all the ranch hands get caught up in the passion of Curley’s revenge. Adrenalin pumping, they rush off with Curley to hunt Lennie down. This image of the ranch hands—thundering through the countryside on their horses, guns in hand, a violent retribution in mind—is one of raging masculinity. They have avoided her at all costs, and with her death, the last trace of “softness” in their world is lost. As they hurl themselves through the countryside, they seem doomed to remain, eternally, in their collective state of trauma.

Earlier, I quoted from a letter Steinbeck wrote to the actress Clare Luce. In that letter, Steinbeck stresses that if the men on the rich could see beyond those “thousand little defens-
es” in her behavior, they would discover that she is “a nice, kind girl and not a floozy ... [they] would find a nice person, an honest person, and [they] would end up by loving her.” But in this novel, with these traumatized men, Steinbeck goes on to explain, “[s]uch a thing can never happen” (Steinbeck, Elaine and Wallsten 145). Such a thing can never happen because the male world has failed to recognize her, and failing to recognize her, it has no qualms about isolating her no matter how devastating it is for her—and for all of them. At the end of the novel, she, Lennie, and their mutual love of things soft and tender lie dead.

4. The Emotional Growth of George

In OMAM, the male-dominated ranch’s overwhelming rejection of the feminine is clear and tragic, but it is less clear to what degree George—the surviving member of the central pair—rejects the feminine. Before addressing this final issue, it is perhaps necessary to examine Steinbeck’s thinking in general.

Although Steinbeck believed that man was a species subject to biological and ecological principles, he was not, as Benson points out, the same type of writer of naturalism as Sinclair, Norris, and Dreiser (243–244). Yes, man was subject to the laws of nature, Steinbeck thought, and men in groups, like other living creatures, often acted as a phalanx—but still man’s most salient natural feature was, unlike any other living creature, his ability to “[walk] up the stairs of his concepts” and to “[emerge] ahead of his accomplishments.” Man has an “ache” to “stumble forward, Steinbeck thought, and although he “may slip back,” he slips “only half a step, never the full step back” (The Grapes of Wrath 193). While Lennie—the “id” in Hadella’s reading—lacks the mental capacity to climb “the stairs of his concepts” George—the “ego”—does not. Though traumatized, George possesses the ability to think himself into a higher state of being; and Lennie, though doomed (given the harsh ecology of the ranch and his own weaknesses), provides George with the spark he needs to get that thinking ability going, to take the first strides toward those “stairs of his concepts.” In his 1962 Nobel Prize acceptance speech, Steinbeck stated, “I hold that a writer who does not passionately believe in the perfectibility of man has no dedication nor any membership in literature.” In OMAM, George is the one unskilled ranch hand with the cerebral power to overcome his trauma, free himself from a broken and debilitating male group, and move toward perfection.

So how far toward perfection—recognition of the need for the feminine in himself—does he move? In this regard, the novel ends somewhat ambiguously—or rather, open-endedly:
readers have to imagine for themselves what George will do next. However, there is much
evidence to suggest that even if George has not completed his recognition of the feminine,
and even if he may have slipped back a time or two, he has taken a few steps toward forming
a healthy relationship with the feminine.

As a first step, he shows an understanding of his trauma—the male world’s trauma—and
he is gradually able to confess what he has come to understand to the “calm, God-like” Slim
(OMAM 40). He understands that men on ranches are lonely and mean; he understands that
he has been lonely and mean. He is able to talk of personal feelings to Slim, to tell him, for
example, of the time he told Lennie to jump into the Sacramento River—even though Lennie
did not know how to swim. He can confess to Slim his loneliness and his fear of being lost
in male meanness:

“I ain’t got no people,” George said. “I seen the guys that go around on the ranches
alone. That ain’t no good. They don’t have no fun. After a long time they get mean.
They get wantin’ to fight all the time.” (OMM 41)

As a second step, he does indeed—for a time—embrace Lennie’s dream of acquiring a
small farm, a dream that is, to a great extent, feminine. The farm will be a refuge from the
lonely, mean male world in which so many men waste what little money they have in bars—
and often end up in trouble with the law. The farm will be a place where they will talk to each
other, care for each other, feel compassion for each other.

As a third step, George learns, by the end of the novel, to control his anger—a sure step
forward on his road to recovery. He comes to understand that all of Lennie’s “bad” deeds are
not the result of any meanness in Lennie, but rather the result of Lennie’s mental limitations,
his inability to physically control himself in moments of discomfort or stress. After Lennie
kills Curley’s wife and admits that he has “done another bad thing,” George, now in control of
his own emotions, simply replies, calmly and collectedly, “It don’t make any difference”
(OMAM 103). He has moved beyond anger. Unlike Candy, he does not blame Curley’s wife
for her own death; he has moved beyond the days when he called her a bitch. When he decides
that he himself will be the one to put an end to Lennie’s life, he has moved beyond any bitter
whining—and is calmly taking responsibility for his and his best friend’s difficult situation.

Of course, he takes half steps back. When he sees what Lennie has done to Curley’s wife,
he tells Candy that he never ever really believed that their dream would come true, and he
repeats his old mantra of how nothing lies in his future but short-time labor at low wages and unfulfilling nights in whore houses, but given the circumstances, this sort of reaction can be expected.

However, what seems to be of more importance is, one, that before raising the Luger and shooting Lennie, he once again recites their dream, and when Lennie asks him if he isn’t angry, he replies, “No, Lennie. I ain’t mad. I never been mad, an’ I aint now” (OMAM 106). He realizes that the anger he has expressed over their time together was unfair. Lennie has not deserved it. George has just been handling his trauma the only way he knew how—until now.

And two, as the men gather around Lennie’s body, Carlson carries on excitedly about how George must have wrestled the gun away from Lennie and shot him, but George can only respond in weak whispering. When he and Slim walk away, tramping back up toward the highway, Carlson ends the novel by saying, “Now what the hell ya suppose is eatin’ them two guys?” (OMAM 107). This remark by Carlson seems to echo the one that Whit made earlier about Curley’s wife: “I don’t know what the hell she wants.” The traumatized male ranch hands were baffled by Curley’s wife earlier, and they seem baffled by George and Slim’s behavior now. George and Slim seem to have come to an understanding that the other ranch hands are yet incapable of.

Certainly, as the novel ends, George finds himself in a heavy-hearted daze, and a reader would not be unreasonable to suggest that George experiences an intense moment of hopelessness. At the same time, over the course of the novel, George has struggled with his own feelings about women, he has learned to accept Lennie as he actually is—a man incapable of hiding his feminine side—and he has seriously considered finding a refuge from the world in which so many men do nothing but become mean and hateful. Thus, as George and Slim stumble up toward the highway, it is not difficult to imagine that George is climbing up the stairway of a concept, that he is moving, at his own pace, toward recognizing the need for the feminine in himself—and recognizing the need for the feminine in the male world as a whole.

**Final Remarks**

In the 1960’s and 1970’s, multi-culturalism became a buzz word in American academics, and the voices complaining that the American literary “canon” was overrepresented by “dead
white males” became louder and clearer. One result was the creation of *The Heath Anthology of American Literature*, which tried to respond to such questions as “where are the minorities?” and “where are the women?” (Lauter and Levene). The people behind the development of the Heath Anthology deserve praise for their efforts to make the voices of as many different types of writers as possible available to students of American literature.

At the same time, it is important to note that many of the “white males” who had found relatively secure places in the “old” canon believed, themselves, that American culture could gain from some degree of feminization. At the end of *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne has his heroine, Hester Prynne, declare her hope—and assumedly his—that the patriarchal Puritan society would one day give way to a society more balanced in masculine and feminine traits, that “a new truth would be revealed, in order to establish the whole relation between man and woman on a surer ground of mutual happiness” (*SL* 227). In *Billy Budd*, Melville lets us know that the tragic execution of the “handsome” sailor is the result of the male military world refusing to listen to “the feminine in man” (*BB* 362). As *Moby Dick* races towards its catastrophic conclusion, Melville contrasts the “murderous thinkings of the masculine sea” with “the gentle thoughts of the feminine air” (*MD* 542, my italics), and he allows the vengeful Ahab a moment to reflect that had he left room in his life for the feminine, it might not have been such a “desolution of solitude” (*MD* 543). It is no accident, then, that when the *Pequod* goes down, Ishmael survives by hoisting himself atop Queequeg’s floating coffin. Ishmael had, after all, recognized the feminine in himself, had allowed himself, in the Spouter Inn, to be enveloped in Queequeg’s “bridesgroom clasp” (*MD* 26).

In the 20th Century, William Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury* and Tim O’Brian’s *Going after Cacciato* stand out as novels in which men-dominated worlds, much to their misfortunes, fail to recognize the importance of the feminine. As with *OMAM*, both these novels rely on mentally weak characters to emphasize the male world’s need of the feminine. Faulkner called Caddy—one sister among three brothers—“the beautiful one” (*Faulkner in the University* 1), but of the three brothers, it is only the idiot Benjy who recognizes his need for the feminine beauty and love she possesses. The other two brothers, Quentin and Jason, remain trapped in their own prejudices against women—and suffer immeasurably as a result. In *Going after Cacciato*, it is only the mentally-weak Cacciato who can imagine walking away from a man’s war in Vietnam, and thus he is the only one who can lead the traumatized Paul Berlin and his fellow platoon members (in Berlin’s imagination, at least) to the woman—Sarkin Aung Wan—who ultimately fails but does her best to convince the men that they
need to communicate their feelings better, that they need to admit their need for things soft and soothing. As Kali Tal writes, “The division between men and women in this novel is unbreachable, and it is the male half which must triumph, even though that triumph will bring about the destruction of men and women alike” (78).

The reading of *Of Mice and Men* I’ve presented here, then, is one that puts it firmly in a long tradition of works by American male writers dealing with the theme of the “feminine in man.”

**Notes**

1 As pointed out in the final section of this paper, the phrase “the feminine in man” comes from Melville’s *Billy Budd*. In *Moby Dick*, Melville had described “murderous thinking” as masculine and “gentle thoughts” as feminine. It is not my purpose in this article to define, outside the world of *Of Mice and Men* and the other novels I associate it with, what is meant by the word *feminine*, but rather to identify what image of the feminine Steinbeck, Hawthorne, Melville, Faulkner, and O’Brien developed in these novels—that is, what characteristics the female characters or “feminine” entities in these novels possess that the majority of the male ones do not.


**Works Cited**


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