

**Transformation from Man to Superman: A Study of John Steinbeck's *The Moon is Down* and *Of Mice and Men***

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**Abstract**

Once in a joint letter written to his agent and publisher, Elizabeth Otis and Pascal Covici, John Steinbeck (1902-1968) declared, "My whole work drive has been aimed at making people understand each other..." (Fensch38). Therefore, most of his writings deal with the lives and feelings of the ordinary people, of whom he writes with profound sympathy and heartfelt care. The vitality, strength and honesty of his works must be due to his keen perception of mankind and his success in discovering that within every man is sleeping the seed of a superman which springs up when events demand. This transformation from man to superman may take place when one has to save his own country and its people or when one is simply desperate to save one's best friend's life. This paper aims to explore the seminal role love plays in transforming the lives of the characters from ordinary to the extraordinary ones and focuses on two novellas, *The Moon Is Down* and *Of Mice and Men* to establish it.

**Keywords:** Steinbeck, *The Moon is Down*, *Of Mice and Men*, superman, ordinary man, love, mover

Before being a vibrant lifer at literature, John Steinbeck, the sixth American to fetch a novel prize in literature (1962), has been a onetime reporter on a newspaper in New York, a brick layer of the Madison Square Garden, a chemist, a marine biologist, a painter's apprentice, a ranch hand, a day laborer and the caretaker of an estate at Lake Tahoe for one whole snowbound winter. The list clearly implicates that life has offered this enormously sensitive writer myriad chances to make wonderful connections with people and to freely and refreshingly document their experiences, both blissful and baneful, in his writings. Mayor Orden and George Small are two characters who Steinbeck has wrought out of his real life experience.

It is better not to expect from these characters any superhumanly achievement as readers do from the age-old supermen, they are very much familiar with by means of their repeated ventures through numberless superman comic series or ever- recurring TV adaptations. Steinbeckian superheroes are hoi polloi like us only with the slight yet grand difference that they are movers; they can make moves out of patriotism and love, which entail sheer courage and inborn integrity of mind and soul. They are supermen because they can break their ordinary human shells and transport themselves to such a humane level, which even the fictitious superman cannot. Furthermore, they are unlike the superman or Ubermensch of Nietzsche, upon whom this maverick philosopher has placed the consummate expression of highest human development. When Nietzsche suggests, “the Roman Caesar with the Christ’s soul”(Stumpf 379) as an ideal for his Ubermensch or superman, Mayor Orden or George only have their share in “the Christ’s soul” part as alike Christ they sacrifice their life or dream to save others.

Many of Steinbeck’s novels are staged in his hometown Salinas, California, but sometimes the raconteur takes a flight outside it to savor the world around better. When the United States of America entered the Second World War Steinbeck responded eagerly to the calls of various government agencies to help and used his journalistic capacities and abilities to record events in forceful details paid off during this period. About the only war based novella of Steinbeck, Watt says , “*The Moon is Down* had its origins, in a similar way, in the interest of the Office of Strategic Services in helping resistance movements in occupied Europe: it was to be a kind of celebration of the durability of democracy.” (Watt77). This anti – Nazi novel, captures a small Norwegian town under German occupation during the Second World War. The people of this town have a long tradition of freedom and they never have tasted domination. The sudden and rather treacherous and forced seize of their hometown leaves these peace loving people at a loss and disoriented for a time. Because for the first time they are experiencing how it feels to be conquered. But this phase is very short. They pull themselves together and embark on a mission of freedom hunt. As days, weeks, and months drag on these people metamorphose. Very silently and in an imperceptible way they begin to revolt in their own individual fashion. At one point of time, the conquerors confront such lines of attack which they are completely unprepared for and which is beyond their war strategies. Each able man and woman changes, presenting a deadly weapon bent upon to liberate the town. And to top them all is the Mayor of the town who is the very embodiment of his office. This small town is such a world where Mayor Orden is the leader of men, the Idea-Mayor, the patriarch, and the shaman of his people, “He and his office were one. It had given him dignity and he had given it warmth. (214)”.

At the outset six young men of the town were killed in an attempt to scare and scar the town’s people but the plan backfired. The conqueror party has a proven stratagem that worked

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out so far fittingly - the best way to throw the people of a city off guard is to startle them. Citizens of this town are scarred but definitely not scared. In order to keep the tides of victory unabated they need to unearth and ship the coal of this town desperately. The town has mines to produce premier quality coal and most of the residents are also miners. To give them an impression that they are operating in this town with the mayor's direct approval they set their temporary camp right in the palace of the mayor. But the commoners are not to be misled so easily. When Mayor Orden is first introduced he appears rather a clown than the circumspect elected representative of the people. He seems thoroughly careless about his look and surrounding, a person who likes to be bossed over by his wife and spends days free from care. But as the story moves forward the picture reverses.

Actually, it is not the mayor to revolt against the conquerors first, it is his cook Annie. When Colonel Lanser asks mayor Orden whether his people are going to work for the invaders without offering any hostility or how they are going to behave if they have to serve for the enemies, the mayor simply replies that he does not know. At one point he says, "I don't know sir. They are orderly under their own government. I don't know how they would be under yours. It is untouched ground, you see. We have built our government over four hundred years. .... They made me and they can unmake me. Perhaps they will if they think I have just gone over to you" (219). Immediately after, he says so Annie throws boiling water at the soldiers guarding the backyard. This is the first piece of physical revolt that the army encounters and many such attacks follow, personal or collective, till the end of the novel. She is a part of people who has never been conquered and now when it has happened, she finds it hard to swallow. Since she, like every other person of the town does not have familiarity with fear, she boldly clarifies her position. To get co-operation of these people neither coaxing nor threatening works. When chapter one closes Annie is angry and Christine is angry. Probably the whole town is angry. Anger lights up the town slowly but surely. They are not very violent, but they are very hushed in their daily rounds, which is more tormenting for the army. The town dwellers have simply forgotten how to laugh. They embark on a remonstrance against the occupation in unison. When one of the miners is sentenced to death penalty as an attempt to quell down further disobedience it fails miserably. Rather this event sends invitation for the people to be more impatient to unfetter the town. They do not give up their pursuit even for a moment. One of their very plain yet tormenting and gruesome tactics for the enemy is their simple and unbreakable silence that settles on the shoulders of the conquerors like unshakable loads. With every move, glance, gesture and posture they made it vivid that the outsiders are outsiders and will always remain so. This town will never give in; it will never yield to their unlawful demands. The victors begin to feel that the world is closing in upon them and it is a matter of moment for the town to get ignited and to cause a deluge which will flood away the enemy battalion without leaving behind

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the tiniest residue: “Now it was the conqueror was surrounded, the men of the battalion alone among silent enemies, and no man might relax his guard for even a moment” (65).

The second and decisive attack on the invaders comes in the form of a young man, Alexander Morden. When ordered to go back to work he refuses. And when he is forced, he attacks one of the officers to stop him without any ulterior intention of killing him. When his mock trial is held under the roof of Mayor Orden only to establish to the townspeople that the Mayor is working in collaboration with the invaders, he plainly asserts that he is a free man and has gone mad of taking orders from aggressors. When he receives death penalty for his crime even then he says, “No, I don’t think that I’m sorry” (239). The ball has gathered momentum and it doesn’t need any more pushes. His public execution, which is intended to intimidate people, has galvanized the people into activity. They want their town free. Intrepidly Mayor assures Alex in their final parting, “Alex, go, knowing that these men will have no rest, no rest at all until they are gone, or dead. You will make the people one. It’s a sad knowledge and little enough gift to you, but it is so. No rest at all” (239). The mayor keeps his promise. One act of uprising follows another automatically and effortlessly. People are shot in warning and it made no divergence. The residents have forgotten to laugh, drink, sing or dance. Even most of their conversations take place in monosyllables. They move about the town in seamless silence and carry out the duties imposed on them noiselessly and even without looking at enemies, “Thus it came about that the conquerors grew afraid of the conquered and their nerves wore thin and they shot at shadows in the night. The cold, sullen silence was with them always (241).

It has been pointed out before that the Steinbeckian heroes are not like the mythological heroes or the puissant superman imbued with extraordinary intellectual supremacy and miraculous bodily strengths. They are not miracle – makers. They are common, peace loving and closely knitted. But this change is the inevitable upshot stemming from an unexpected and unlooked for reversal of state of affairs for which they were not geared up adequately. Everyman actually takes up the challenge to throw the yoke of enslavement away. But surely Mayor Orden is the trailblazer. He does not participate in the war directly which is not possible on his part as he shared the same roof with the occupants and is under constant watch. But he supports every move for freedom from behind the screen and assures the townsfolk again that he is not only their political leader but also their spiritual chief. He is nothing different from his people. He and his people are on the same side of the line. He will always voice their thought and mirror their will.

Mayor Orden faces his ultimate destiny in life at the end of the book but readers can sense it coming just from the beginning. Both Doctor Winter and Mayor accept calmly their final destiny. The coda has been set very carefully by the raconteur. When Corell suggests that they

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can hold the Mayor as a hostage to control the people Colonel Lanser unambiguously asserts that it is not going to work. Still he orders the arrest. So far, it's been seen that Mayor Orden is an unassuming man with an uncanny power over his people, which stems from his sheer simplicity and redoubtable propensity to stand by his people. He is not a superman and he is a common man. Like any regular man he is scared at the prospect of his imminent death. He even considers the possibility of seeking mercy to avoid death. He is just as afraid as was Alex but finally he is able to amass the courage to admit to his friend, as old as his life, "You know, Doctor, I am a little man and this is a little town, but there must be a spark in little men that can burst into flame".

Very beautifully Steinbeck has juxtaposed and blended the last moments of one ordinary man with those of an extraordinary trailblazer, an immortal sage. He recollects and recites some lines from Socrates' *Apology*. These extracts he memorized when he was a school going boy and his performance on stage was poor. Forty years back, instead of listening to his recitation, teachers and students were busier holding their breath so that a burst of laughter might not blurt out because his shirrtail was out and peeping from his pant. He never has shown the promise of being someone uncommon. But his second and last performance just before his looming death passes out smoothly. He does very well in his denunciation, "If you think that by killing men you can prevent someone from censuring your evil lives, you are mistaken" (267).

He knows it very well that his being held as a hostage is not going to prevent his people from acting rebelliously. The flicker has been there before and was twinkling like a firefly in the dark. His death will only light up the torch to blaze the road from darkness to dawn. His people are in his blood and he knows them as he knows his own self. His people are not born to be bridled and bent down: "The people don't like to be conquered, sir, and so they will not. Free man cannot start a war, but once it is started, they can fight on in defeat. Herd men, followers of a leader, cannot do that, and so it is always the herd men who win battles and the free men who win wars" (269). His death is not offered before us, but we know it is to happen. So, in *The Moon is Down* Mayor Orden is the superman, he is the mover as he overcomes the fear of death to ignite the rebellious souls of his people to claim their freedom.

*Of Mice and Men* is the fourth novel of the introvert Californian, Steinbeck, and the first financially successful one. Published in 1937 this best-selling novel brought for him the extraordinarily enthusiastic reviews from the critics and keen attention from the readers. For Steinbeck it was a kind of experiment. "It is nothing but a trial horse – a copybook exercise. I wrote it simply to develop a form. Yes, the form of a play. I had no idea how to write a play, but I experimented, and it looks as though it worked" (Fensch 7) as he explained to the reporters of The New York World Telegram on 23<sup>rd</sup> April 1937.

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The setting of this rather short novel is in California, Steinbeck's California, which he knew so well. Of his bondage to California Champney comments, "More perhaps than any important contemporary American writer, except William Faulkner, his writing has grown out of a special reason." (Davis 21). The characters are drawn from actual life, though Steinbeck has attached fictitious names to them. He worked with them in the same farm. The two major characters are two farm hands and alike other immigrant workers of that period they are rootless drifters. At the beginning of the action these two characters are seen to camp by the side of a small pond for the night. The author is very wary to show from the start that they are diametrically opposite to each other: in their physical and mental built up. Lennie Small is mentally slow titan who is capable of mighty labor and George Milton is a small man who is compassionately intelligent. Watt views their mysterious relationship as, "George and Lenny are bound by feeling more articulate beings would have called love, even though it may often seem the kind of love that joins master and dog"(Watt 58). Chance has teamed them together, has made them soul mates. When pressed by reports of New York Times to comment upon the characters of this novella Mr. Steinbeck said, "Lennie was a real person. He is in an asylum in California right now. I worked alongside him for weeks" (Fensch 9).

Lennie loves to touch soft things – which range from dead mice to the soft silk dress of a lady in a fair. Because of this last item these two friends were forced to flee from Weed as Lennie was charged with attempt to rape. Now they are on their way to a farm in Soledad, in another part of California. As the night draws in they gather by the side of the fire and George made Lennie do some drills regarding the role that he is going to play the next day, when they are supposed to meet their new boss. Before falling asleep George fatefully points to a particular bush and asks Lennie, " Well, look Lennie, - if you jus' happen to get in trouble like you always done before, I want you to come right here an' hide in the bush"(Steinbeck 17).

On their arrival the duo meets Curley who suffers from Napoleon complex and he immediately targets Lennie as his victim. This man starts to hate this gigantic man unprovoked. Curley has an unhappy wife whose favorite pastime is to flirt around with the cowhands of the ranch. But her twisted nature is never entertained by the men of the farm. Everyone identifies her as a "rattrap" (Steinbeck 36), too poisonous to get near to. On one of her searches to find her husband she comes to the bunkhouse and Lennie watches her admiringly. But as George warns him of the potential threat, she can pose for any man from her over possessive husband; Lennie cries out ominously, "I don't like this place, George. This ain't no good place. I wanna get outta here" (Steinbeck36). But as days are passing by these two friends settle in their workplace smoothly and everybody except Curley grows a soft corner for the dumb Lennie.

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When Slim's, the jerkline skinner dog gives birth to a couple of puppies, Slim presents Lennie a brown and white one. They feel that Lennie is dumb but not crazy. Unlike other cowhands George and Lennie have a dream for future. They want to buy a small farm of their own and they are going to raise all kinds of domestic animals there. Lennie's most favorite activity is to make George talk on and on about that Adamic dream farm where he will be permitted to tend the rabbits of all colors. These two tramps are saving money to that end. But fate comes to Lennie in the shape of a woman, Curley's wife. One evening when all the men of the farm are off to the city except old cook Candy, the nigger stable buck Crooks and the imbecile Lennie, who have no use for the city, stayed back. After a friendly chat with the two men Lennie goes to the stable to have a look at the puppies. There comes Curley's wife, a nameless woman in the novel, who begins to share her happy past, almost unbearable present and rosy future to an unwilling listener Lennie. George's repeated warning is being flashed at the back of Lennies' mind when he falls for in the pit – an invitation from Curley's wife to feel her soft hair. This is irresistible for Lennie, the dangerous giant.

When Lennie touches her silk like hair he freezes and keeps on doing so until her hair gets messy. She tries to stop him and when the man becomes overpowering, she screams out. Lennie asks her to stop and she yells the more. A frightened Lennie puts his mighty hand on her mouth and he gives her a jerk to make her stop. She dies with a broken neck. As Lennie perceives that he has “done another bad thing” (Steinbeck103), he rushes out to the spot where George asked him to go. He holds an imaginary conversation with his Aunt Clara, the only person apart from George who loved Lennie unconditionally. George reaches the spot before the posse which has set out to hunt Lennie down. Both friends sit together and talk of their dreams when all the while George is aware of the footsteps of the farm lynching party nearing towards them to get Lennie. At one point George shoots Lennie to death.

*Euthanasia* is a word which originated in the early 17th century with a Greek root. According to Helga Kuhse, Australian philosopher and bioethicist, “Euthanasia is compound of two Greek words – *eu* and *thanatos* literally meaning ‘a good death’”. Generally speaking, it means the killing of one person by another person for the betterment of the first mentioned.

*Of Mice and Man* has been banned for a period of time in the United States with an accusation of promoting Euthanasia. George murders Lennie. But why? George's love for Lennie is without limit. Whenever George blurts out his anger at Lennie, he ends up with a list of things he could have done if he doesn't have to carry Lennie on his back. But he actually tells the truth. Life without Lennie would have been much lighter and carefree for George. George is not a kin to Lennie and in no way he is answerable to anybody for not taking proper care of Lennie. But he has been doing it since his boyhood. He has sacrificed his own happiness to make Lennie

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happy. Most of the time he shouts at Lennie but his kindness prevails over his rudeness. One speech from Aunt Clara suffices as a proof, “He been doin’ nice things for you alla time. When he got a piece of pie you always got half or more’n half. An’ if they was any ketchup , why he’d give it all to you”(Steinbeck114). George’s sheer love for Lennie makes him understand Lennie even more than Lennie himself. When the lynching party will drag him to any large tree he will not realize the course of events. But definitely he’ll be afraid , afraid to death. He will meet a brutal death which he undeserves. George wants to prevent this.

It is not easy for a human being to destroy what he has built. But George, the mover, has accomplished this feat. To George , Lennie is the only friend and family. Though Lennie invites mostly troubles for him , the good time spent together washes up the irritation. Taking care of Lennie is obviously painful for George , but it also gurantees him happiness. Lennie , for George , is like a mirror where he can see his own reflection. To take the decision to kill Lennie and to materialize it demands out of George the uprooting of his own life. Geoge steadies his mind and hand and kills himself and Lennie together with one shot. It takes the courage of a superman. A superman delivers people out of trouble and George delivers Lennie out of troubles. By shooting him George has blocked the doors for all the fear, danger, hatred or threats to enter his life. George knows even before killing Lennie that life will never be the same, the agony of his actoin will stay with him till the remainder of his days. He will never get the chance to spend time of unalloyed joy with his best pal, life from now on will be grey and dismal. With Lennie, George also kills their lifelong dream of owning a small farm of their own, “With Lennie gone, George will not try to keep the dream alive.” ( Davis 67). He will be an ordinay man like many other ranch hands who spends an entire lifetime of a confirmed vagabond and George can master the courage to let this happen.

It is not that supermen always has to wear a cap or a uniform. It is not even mandatory that he has to shoot spider web at his enemies or glide in the darkness unnoticed and noiseless like a bat. In his noble winning speech Steinbeck declares, “... the writer is delegated to declare and to celebrate man’s proven capacity for greatness of heart and spirit – for gallantry in defeat – for courage, compassion and love”. Mayor Orden has proved the greatness of his heart, his gallantry in the face of inevitable death. He places his town and its people above his mere existence. George is capable of compassion and love and thereby let himself be the annihilator of his beloved friend. He is firm to free his friend who is completely unable to grasp the impact of his action, from the fright of a meaningless death decided for him by others. One mayor Orden is not an Achilles who can bring devastation for one nation single handedly. One George is not one Messiah to save his nation from the verge of extinction. Mayor Orden or George is not semi divine creatures, but their deeds are larger than life. They are movers; they make moves going

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out of their ways. They only want to make sure that this warm little world takes another turn on its axis with its happy dwellers. Steinbeck has faith on their superhuman ability, so do I.

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\*These two entries are originally two interviews of John Steinbeck taken by New York World Telegram (1937) and New York Times (1937) respectively.

\*\*This entry is a reference to anthology which has no editor, compiler or translator's name on it except an introduction by Joseph Henry Jackson.

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