Friends with nature

Nature and male bonding in Steinbeck’s
Of Mice and Men and Kerouac’s On the Road

Cecilia Johansson
Abstract

In this essay I discuss the two novels *Of Mice and Men* by John Steinbeck and *On the Road* by Jack Kerouac in relation to nature and male bonding.

The great American nature with its many different landscapes is what is most noticeable in both novels along with the male bonding and the importance of having a good friend to share your life and dreams with. I use Ecocriticism as my theoretical angle as I look closer at this wild and masculine described American nature of hills, mountains and wide prairies. To discuss the male bonding, I use Eve Sedgwick’s *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*.

The wilderness of the American nature can be connected with male bonding in the sense that men must have something masculine around them in order to bond without being seen as weak or too feminine. My claim is then that the theme of American nature and masculinity that is central in both novels is crucial for how the male bonding occurs and how the friendships are described and developed. As the novels are published 20 years apart I take the historical aspects of the depression and the end of World War II into account as well as class. I also look at the American dream in relation to history. They all have dreams, but the dreams are different due to the fact that they live in different times.
# Table of Contents

Introduction .................................................................................................................4

The Historical Differences Along with the American Dream .................................6

The Theme of Nature in *Of Mice and Men* and *On the Road* ...........................8

Necessity, Choice and Class ......................................................................................18

Male Bonding ............................................................................................................22

Conclusion ...............................................................................................................24

Bibliography ..........................................................................................................26
Introduction:

Whether it is the search for the freedom of owning your own piece of land or the search for kicks by driving your car all over America, the feeling of being close to nature and having a good friend by your side is evident in both John Steinbeck’s *Of Mice and Men* and Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road*. These two novels both concern men and male friendship along with the longing to be close to nature while creating your own version of the American dream. George and Lennie try to attain goals and dreams that might seem unattainable during the American depression, while Sal and Dean follow the roads from coast to coast in the beginning of a new America after the Second World War has recently ended. Both novels then concentrate on nature as a masculine landscape of mountains and rough scenery where men can bond and find happiness.

*Of Mice and Men* circles around the friendship of George and Lennie, two migrant workers in California during the American depression, who go from farm to farm looking for work with the dream of one day owning their own piece of land. As homeless and poor migrant workers they live close to nature and are often reminded by others that their dream of actually owning their own land is beyond their reach. George and Lennie have each other and the dream is nurtured by them both and it is what binds them together. *On the Road* takes place a couple of years after World War II has ended and follows the adventures of Sal and Dean. The aspiring writer Sal is recovering from a divorce when he is first introduced to Dean, the former juvenile delinquent who is intrigued by Sal’s writing and knowledge of academia and the rather uneven pair comes to share a close bond as they roam the roads together. They are experiencing a different America than George and Lennie, but they also have a dream of being near nature and to find “IT”. They see the American nature as unexplored and Sal is, as Matt Theado says, inspired by Dean’s excitement for life as Dean “stirs up a belief in Sal in renewal and the possibility of adventure” (Theado 57).
The American nature of big prairies, hills and long roads makes one think of a masculine almost cowboy-like nature where men are in charge and animals are the only ones that are experiencing the wilderness with them. Both novels clearly associate strong friendships with nature and nature becomes a foundation on which their friendships are built, as does the American dream as they clearly need a partner to share their dream with. The protagonists are all male. The men are roaming the roads while the women are settled and domesticated. Eve Sedgwick brings up the question of male homosocial desire and how female friendship or the bond between mother and daughter is not questioned while a friendship or bond between two men is considered to be something out of the ordinary if it is just a platonic relationship between two men (Sedgwick 2-3). The masculine nature suggests that only strong men can conquer it, but at the same time, men also need a good friend. As Sedgwick points out, a bond between men is perhaps less common than a bond between two women and it is as if the roughness of the American nature is needed in both novels in order to explain the friendships without losing any of the masculinity. The aim of this essay is therefore to discuss Of Mice and Men and On the Road in relation to the American nature and men. How is nature evident and used in the novels? The issue of male bonding makes me wonder if lines can be drawn between masculinity and nature. The novels were published 20 years apart which means that there is a historical aspect to take into account. The essay will begin by discussing the historical differences along with the American dream. The theme of nature in Of Mice and Men and On the Road will follow along with a discussion of necessity, choice and class in relation to the fact that George and Lennie are migrant workers while Sal and Dean are middle class. Male homosocial desire, male bonding and the importance of having a good friend by your side will also be dealt with in the essay.

My statement for this thesis is that I believe that the theme of American nature and man that is central in both novels is crucial for how the male bonding occurs and how the
friendships are described and developed. History, class and their own personal versions of the American dream also play major parts in why the male bonding occurs.

The Historical Differences Along with the American Dream

*Of Mice and Men* was first published in 1937 and *On the Road* in 1957 and we are consequently provided with a gap of 20 years. Major changes took place during these 20 years in history, society and in the American nature. The historical aspects must therefore be taken into account when comparing the novels and the different opportunities, experiences and dreams that George and Lennie, Sal and Dean had. It also means that the authors came from very different societies. John Steinbeck became known for having his heart close to the lower classes of society (Sørensen 67) and for his way of describing humanity (George 62-4) while Jack Kerouac became a figure for the new “beat generation” where normal society norms and values were challenged and dismissed to a great extent (Sørensen 83-4). Steinbeck being a man of his generation experienced the depression and the hard times many Americans had to go through and subsequently portrayed the darker sides of society. Kerouac was born later and therefore experienced a different America where the country was involved in World War II and he got to see what happened when people started living again after the war ended. Kerouac describes darker issues and personal problems in *On the Road*, but due to the different historical times, his novel is more hopeful when it comes to the opportunities that Sal and Dean have. The four protagonists and their stories can therefore be seen as products of the society in which their author lived and worked in.

In *Of Mice and Men*, George and Lennie experience the depression that hit hard on many Americans as people lost their farms and livelihoods. Many decided to search for work elsewhere as migrant workers. These workers were treated badly and with no respect and were forced to accept low wages and poor living situations (Bruszt 5-6). Migrant workers
usually travelled alone and that caused loneliness as George explains as he is talking to Lennie, “Guys like us, that work on ranches, are the loneliest guys in the world. They got no family. They don’t belong no place” (Steinbeck 15). “The migrant workers were outcasts of society, and were welcomed neither by the authority nor by ordinary citizens” (Bruszt 6) and George and Lennie are trying to survive during this time. The general notion appears to be that migrant workers should not have dreams; they will never be able to implement them anyway. This can also be connected to the loneliness that so many men experienced during the depression. Maleness and loneliness are entwined as George states that they do not belong anywhere. Society had at that time set up certain regulations for workers and the American dream is held back, but as Bruszt states, “The American way of thinking supposes that everything is possible for someone who has some talent, enterprise and wants something badly enough” (Bruszt 17).

Sal and Dean however, live in an America that is full of new hope and they have the opportunity to search for their own identities and the new America while jazz is being played in the background. They dream of exploring their country and they have the chance to do that as the American spirit came back after World War II. A new approach to life came forward and dreams were high up on the agenda. Sal and Dean are young and curious at the end of the 1940’s when soldiers have returned home and people can rebuild their lives. The norm of family and steady employment is rejected by both Sal and Dean and the new era gives them a chance to search for Dean’s “IT” and the “kicks” that they seem to associate with a good life. Matt Theado brings up the issue of Sal and his friends growing up with war and now dealing with the consequences when he states, “that is, Sal’s friends represent a peculiar subset of the demographic group who came of age during World War II and are now coping in its aftermath” (Theado 58) and how being on the road is their way of using history to find themselves. Sal and Dean have a way of looking at nature and homeless people in a
rather immature or naïve way but as Sal encounters a cowboy during his first trip there are
associations made to the depression and the cowboy states that the roads have not always been
fun filled, “In those days you’d see hundreds of men riding a flatcar or in a boxcar, and they
weren’t just bums, they were all kinds of men out of work and going from one place to
another and some of them just wandering. It was like that all over the West” (Kerouac 18).
George and Lennie are representatives of that generation of men, the lost men who in a sense
vanished due to the fact that they did not belong anywhere. Sal’s encounter with the cowboy
shows how much America has changed during those 20 years and while panic and
hopelessness travelled the roads during the depression, the roads of the late 1940’s are happier
roads.

The Theme of Nature in Of Mice and Men and On the Road

The wild American landscape of hills, mountains, rivers and roads are constantly referred to
in Of Mice and Men and On the Road. As a reader, I get the impression of rough scenery, wild
flowers and wide prairies where men are riding their horses or driving their cars in an effort to
survive and at the same time follow a dream. As nature is a constant theme in both novels, I
will use the theoretical angle of Ecocriticism to describe the nature in Of Mice and Men and
On the Road. The Green Studies Reader gives a clear and rather open view on the matter by
stating that nature in literature can be seen as, “the relationship between the non-human and
the human” (Coupe 119). This offers an idea of how nature and humans are intertwined and
that there is a bond in the way man uses nature to live in and live off. The nature that is found
in Of Mice and Men and On the Road is the North American nature of hills, mountains and
prairies. The long roads are a part of that scenery as they take the four characters and
especially Sal and Dean on adventures. The US is a big country and by following the roads or
the bank of a river with mountains in the distance they all search for a purpose and a dream.
Animals are making sounds in the background and George and Lennie encounter animals in different ways and their lives can be bound together with the mouse Lennie has in his pocket in the beginning and the puppy he kills in the end. Animalism along with a wild landscape then becomes a main feature for the characters.

George and Lennie sleep and cook their food in nature as they look for work and the landscape that surrounds them is introduced as they come to the Salinas River, “On one side of the river the golden foothill slopes curve up to the strong and rocky Gabilan mountains, but on the valley side the water is lined with trees” (Steinbeck 1). This offers the picture of a great landscape where the sun is making everything golden but at the same time there is a sense of the greatness that the mountains offer that stands for something rougher. In On the Road, Sal is surrounded by wilderness after he has just started his first trip, “High up over my head the great hairy Bear Mountain sent down thunderclaps that put the fear of God in me. All I could see were smoky trees and dismal wilderness rising to the skies” (Kerouac 11). Mountains are then mentioned in On the Road as well and the wilderness plays a major part, especially when Sal is all alone, surrounded by a threatening masculine landscape.

The wilderness brings me back to Ecocriticism and the Ecocriticism that we see today has its ground in the 19th century and then mainly from authors like, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Margaret Fuller and Henry David Thoreau. These are all American authors and it could be that the nature that is to be found in America is considered more wild and the landscapes so much greater because of the size of the country, the colonization and cultivation of it. The masculinity can also be seen here as subjugating and controlling land is very much connected with men and how they travelled over America to make a living. There are so many different landscapes in America and Sal and Dean are very much interested in getting to know their own country and all the different types of scenery it has to offer. I have mentioned wilderness and I would like to emphasise Thoreau here as he seems to have specialized in
wilderness (Barry 239-41), by as Peter Barry says, “return to nature” (241). Thoreau’s book *Walden* describes how Thoreau himself left society and lived in a hut in an attempt to find himself (241). The wilderness and how people search for a meaning or their own persona is then something that can be taken from Thoreau and be applied to both Steinbeck and Kerouac. Steinbeck has George and Lennie camping in nature while they are looking for work while Kerouac send Sal and Dean out on various road trips where the two friends are trying to find what it is that will make them content with life. However, the two pairs are men who bond with each other and they need nature in order to keep the bonding masculine. Nature might be more clearly depicted in *Of Mice and Men* as Steinbeck uses nature in a rougher way. George and Lennie have to live in nature and are in a way also to be seen as being in the mercy of nature’s hands. Kerouac uses nature in a less concrete way and has a more romanticised way of describing it as jazz music is playing in the background while Sal and Dean go to clubs to have fun with their friends and pick up girls. What makes the romanticised feeling in *On the Road* even clearer is that Sal and Dean are experiencing an adventure which they have chosen and they have the option to go home and back to a regular life if they want. However, the thing that surely combines the two novels is the fact that it is nature that drives all four of them.

I believe nature as a driving force can explain why these novels are about men. As pointed out before, the issue of two men bonding can be seen as unusual and might need a very masculine frame in order for it to stay masculine. Nature and male bonding can be linked as nature and especially this rough American nature can be perceived as a more male environment. The wilderness can be related to the four characters in the sense of the wilderness of nature being transferred into the wilderness of the characters. Wilderness and the American landscape, along with the strong male bonds also brings forward the connection to cowboys, and the cowboy life style in the way George and Lennie travel in order to find
work. The myth of the cowboy can be seen as the ultimate figure for male bonding. Cowboys were close to nature, travelling over America on horseback, moving cattle on the wild prairie and being a part of a very male dominated world. George and Lennie are closer to the myth of the cowboy than Sal and Dean, although I would like to apply the idea to both novels. George and Lennie work with their hands, they are dependent upon nature and as they work on farms they are in a very male dominated society; fields during the day and a bunkhouse at night. Sal and Dean are different; they are modern cowboys and have traded in their horses for a car. History then shows again and On the Road also shows an awareness to the historical changes as the myth of the cowboy becomes real for Sal when he encounters a cowboy who talks about the sadness of the depression and how men left their homes to search for work. The myth of masculinity is brought forward by Kerouac as he makes the historical connection between roads and the depression. Men often travelled alone and it is understood in Of Mice and Men that George and Lennie’s close friendship is something rare when Slim and George are talking, “Ain’t many guys travel around together” (Steinbeck 39). Slim suggests that everyone is too scared of one another and I believe this could very well be true when the issue is male bonding. The underlying thought that men are strong and can take care of themselves can be the explanation. Men are supposed to be ok on their own; the loneliness should not scare them because they are men. Male bonding and male friendships were perhaps not as common in the 1930’s and especially during the depression when everyone struggled to survive. The mentioning of a cowboy also makes me think of a toughness that is connected with men and masculinity. Men were strong and independent and because of that the thought of having a close friendship with another man was probably not seen as masculine. Sal’s meeting with the cowboy also shows how his and Dean’s America has changed as they are not desperately travelling the country in order to find employment; they are instead in a way doing what Thoreau did, namely searching for their own personalities and needs. Sal and
Dean plan to make the most out of their lives on the road as stated in the novel, “It is your portion under the sun” (Kerouac 10). It is then interesting to find that Sal’s meeting with the cowboy refers back to a time when the roads were not fun to travel. People did it because they had no other option and I believe it is an important point that Kerouac makes. He obviously wants Sal and Dean to find happiness on the road but at the same time he wants to make them aware of the fact that just 20 years back, men did not see any happiness in being on the road. History has changed a great deal and it is almost pointed out that Sal and Dean should be grateful for having the opportunities they have and that history must not be forgotten.

History is very much present in both novels and so is the nature and as Peter Barry states: “For the eco-critic, nature really exists, out there beyond ourselves, not needing to be ironised as a concept by enclosure within knowing inverted commas, but actually present as an entity which affects us, and which we can affect, perhaps fatally, if we mistreat it” (Barry 243). Nature is everywhere as the two pairs are surrounded by it and even the titles immediately offers the suggestion of nature. As I have said before, George and Lennie are not only surrounded by a landscape of hills and trees, they are also surrounded by animals, something the title makes quite clear. Of Mice and Men brings forward the idea of a mouse against a man, something small against something big. From the historical background it is made clear that migrant workers are poor and that they are seen as being the lowest class of society. The title could therefore very well also be a reference to different society classes. It suggests a struggle between the rich and the poor, the weak and the strong. The man as the higher class and the mouse as the lower class imply a fight that the mouse, which can also be a symbol for George and Lennie, can never win. This means that the dream George and Lennie have is unattainable already on the cover of the book. Katalin Bruszt points to the fact that Steinbeck took the title from a poem by Robert Burns and how the poem refers to the
“illusory condition of man’s highest hopes” (Bruszt 11), again giving the idea of the little man fighting a battle that can not be won.

When it comes to *On the Road*, the title hints that the novel will in some way bring up a road and that travelling will be involved. I also believe that the title gives a hint about the vagabond lifestyle that both Sal and Dean seem to find so desirable. My earlier claim that Kerouac uses nature in a romantic way can also be seen in the title as a road offers a person a chance to dream. To drive a car and just follow the road to wherever you want to go is freedom and it gives an illusion of a happy person who follows his or her feelings and needs. It is also about the urge to move forward.

The urge can be found in both novels. George and Lennie want to move beyond working for others, and Sal and Dean just want to keep moving. The American nature is introduced and Thoreau’s sense of something wild and basic can be found in the way nature and animals foreshadow the events in *Of Mice and Men*. Water is a big symbol for George and Lennie which is apparent from the first few lines in the novel, “A few miles south of Soledad, the Salinas River drops in close to the hillside bank and runs deep and green” (Steinbeck 1). I think that this points to the river being strong and that the green could both be the water and the plants growing on the bank of the river. The green then stands for life and to make this clearer, Steinbeck describes how Lennie runs to the river to drink, “His huge companion dropped his blankets and flung himself down and drank from the surface of the green pool; drank with long gulps, snorting into the water like a horse (Steinbeck 3). The connection to animals, as mentioned before, is again noticeable here as Lennie, the lower class man is compared to an animal by the water. Animals find their water by the river, out in the nature and so do George and Lennie. Water continues as a main thread throughout the novel as George warns Lennie about drinking too much of the water. George’s warning comes to foreshadow how Lennie’s life will end by the river. Lennie drinks big gulps of the water at
the beginning and in the end, by the same river bank, Lennie hides after the killing of Curley’s wife. The issue of nature being potentially dangerous if not tamed or subjugated is relevant here. If Lennie had been able to control his temper, his natural way of reacting to things, Curley’s wife would not have lost her life. A man then has to be able to be the master of nature in order to survive. It is also by the river that Lennie’s love for soft things is presented in form of a dead mouse that he has in his pocket: “George looked sharply at him. ‘What’d you take outta that pocket?’ ‘Ain’t a thing in my pocket, Lennie said cleverly” (Steinbeck 5). Lennie likes to pet soft things, but George takes the mouse and throws it across the water. The dead mouse, thrown away over the water forms a link with Lennie and how he dies by the water in the end. Water is a symbol for life and death. Without water there would be no life, but too much water causes death. There has to be a balance, and in connection to Ecocriticism the balance between man and nature is obvious here as well as the incident with the dead mouse. The mouse shows that Lennie needs to balance his temper and his strength, a balance Lennie never finds. The fact that Lennie uses his strength and personal wildness ultimately means that the dream George and Lennie shared dies with Lennie.

When they are setting up camp in the beginning of the novel, they talk about their dream, “O.k. Someday --- we’re gonna get the jack together and we’re gonna have a little house and a couple of acres an’ a cow and some pigs and --- ‘An’ live off the fatta the lan’, Lennie shouted” (Steinbeck 16). This story that Lennie wants George to tell over and over again is their dream in a nutshell and it ties George and Lennie together. It is a far off dream but the fact that they are two people who have the same dream gives them hope, and their amazing story of how they will live off the land, have rabbits and take breaks when they want even inspires the older workers they meet on the farm. Once again the issue of taming nature in order to control it is brought up. George and Lennie want to control their own land and how to run it. They share the same dream which means that the dream actually has
substance. The dream also means that George is willing to stand by Lennie’s side as he stirs up trouble. One could argue that George stands by Lennie only for the sake of the dream but I believe the ending makes it clear that George is completely on Lennie’s side for Lennie’s own sake as the river comes into light again as Lennie is hiding by the river bank. Lennie comes to the river and once again drinks the water and he is sitting by the river when George finds him. They seem to have almost a ritual around Lennie’s messes, where Lennie says that he can go away, George speaks about how easy his life would be if he did not have to look after Lennie and then George always describes how guys like him and Lennie are the loneliest guys in the world, but how George and Lennie are different because they have each other. While sitting by the river bank, Lennie asks for the ritual of the story once again and George willingly fulfils Lennie’s wish and the ending is the same as always “Because I got you an’ --- ‘An’ I got you. We got each other, that’s what, that gives a hoot in hell about us,” (Steinbeck 118). The sadness is deep as Lennie is lying dead by the river. Their dream died with Lennie, it drowned in the water as the gun went off. Water is once again used as a symbol in Of Mice and Men, but this time the water stands for an end.

George wants to save Lennie from the angry mob that is looking for him. He does not want to see Lennie get killed by them and a life in captivity is something that Lennie could not handle. As George sees it, to do the right thing is for George himself to take Lennie’s life. Their close bond and friendship means that George kills his friend Lennie out of mercy. It is as if George is killing an animal in pain and a parallel can be drawn to the killing of Candy’s dog. The dog is old and sick which makes the killing of it seem like an act of mercy. Lennie is not old or sick, but he can not control his temper and it is for his own good that George kills him. It is George’s way to protect Lennie and give him a respectful end. To honour the promise he made to Lennie’s aunt to take care of Lennie, he even takes care of his death. George encourages Lennie to look at the water and picture their farm being there and
Lennie’s last words then become, “Le’s do it now. Le’s get that place now” (Steinbeck 120). Lennie is surrounded by the dream of his own nature as a sort of protective wall as George gets ready to use his gun.

The theme of nature in *On the Road* is somewhat vaguer and not as violently used to portray the lives of Sal and Dean. The connections between nature and the actual events of Sal and Dean are not as clearly stated; nevertheless nature is still a big factor in the novel as Sal and Dean are restless and eager to roam the roads and experience new situations and new people. They, just like Thoreau, leave normal society and live as bums or vagabonds in order to find a meaning or a truth that they can live with as Sal declares, “I was a young writer and I wanted to take off. Somewhere along the line I knew there’d be girls, visions, everything; somewhere along the line the pearl would be handed to me” (Kerouac 10). Dean is already a restless person and as Sal meets him, he takes the same leap and goes off to search for “IT”. Hills, mountains, city lights or the sound of people talking and sharing stories are all things portrayed in the novel as nature that Sal and Dean encounter in cities or by the side of some far off road in the middle of nowhere, “South Main Street, where Terry and I took strolls with hot dogs, was a fantastic carnival of lights and wildness (Kerouac 77). The wild is often described both in nature and in people, especially the wildness in Dean when he gets excited about something. Can the wilderness of nature then perhaps be transferred into the wilderness of a person, a character? Dean would in that case be the person who represents the wild in *On the Road*. The older he gets, the crazier he becomes as he appears to be more unstable, as visible when he gets excited and Sal describes it, “Damn! I gotta go!’ cried Dean. For a while I closed my eyes in utter exhaustion and kept hearing Dean pound the wheel with his fists and say, ‘Damn’, and ‘What kicks!’ and ‘Oh, what a land!’ and ‘Yes!’” (Kerouac 252). Dean is the guy who gets married a number of times. He becomes a father and he wants to settle down but just like the wild American nature, he can not be
domesticated. The wildness in Dean is moving inside of him and he is unable to control it which makes him act crazy. It can also be argued that he is a threat to his own happiness as his urge to keep moving is always present. Sal sees the craziness in Dean and as the two friends grow older and the novel reaches the end, it is clear that Sal is the more stable person of the two. Sal is a searcher but at the same time he is calmer and more “normal” than Dean which could explain that nature in *On the Road* is described in a rather naïve way. The landscape that surrounds the road has a sort of shimmer in the way it is described, “And here for the first time in my life I saw my beloved Mississippi River, dry in the summer haze, low water, with its big rank smell that smells like the raw body of America itself because it washes it up” (Kerouac 13). The connection between masculinity and nature is again clear as the nature is described in a way that would suggest male values. The smell and the tough body of nature are linked with masculinity. The bums and the vagabonds along the roads are almost idolized and portrayed as heroes by Sal and Dean. Sal and Dean share the urge to find excitement by experiencing different parts of America. The country is in a way calling out to them and even though they do not know what they are really searching for, they know that they have to be “out there” in order to find it. It could be freedom that they are experiencing “out there” on the road. The war is over and they have the opportunity to experience a new America. They reject the ordinary life with a home and a steady job and instead nurture their dream of nature and of being vagabonds together, which is a rather inexperienced thought, as shown when Sal meets the ghost of the Susquehanna: “He was about sixty years old; he talked incessantly of the meals he had, how much butter they gave him for pancakes, how many extra slices of bread, how the old men had called him from a porch of a charity home in Maryland and invited him to stay” (Kerouac 94). The description of Sal’s meeting with the old homeless man is described with the same shimmer as the nature. The extra food the old man gets and how he can wander from state to state and be invited to stay over at different
places, the road is his home and Sal follows him for a while and states, “We were bums together” (Kerouac 94).

The dream is then to live freely and to be able to do whatever comes to mind. They are so shaped by nature and the freedom of the road that it is clear that as Peter Barry suggested earlier, nature really can affect us to a great extent. The question is then of how it affects us and once again history has to be brought in. During the depression nature became almost enemy-like as farmers struggled to survive and many were forced to move. Nature then affected people in a bad way. Due to the fact that times are different in the 1940’s, Sal and Dean are excited about nature and all the different landscapes that America has to offer. To go from New York City to Texas is an adventure of fun filled roads with interesting people and to them, unexplored nature. If nature during the depression meant struggle and limitation, nature in post-war America means roads and endless opportunities.

**Necessity, Choice and Class**

In the sense of humans having a relationship with nature it could be argued that we make choices regarding the nature we live in. We might choose to live in a city or in the countryside, consequently choosing what type of nature we want to be surrounded by. By pointing out that people make choices regarding nature I would like to present the words, necessity and choice. The issue of free will could be brought into this as a way of explaining how George and Lennie, Sal and Dean experience nature in different ways. In the case of George and Lennie, Katalin Bruszt states, “All the characters in the novel are determined by their social and economic conditions” (Bruszt 9), a statement that can be seen as true, as George and Lennie are poor and not meant to have big dreams. Workers like George and Lennie travelled to find work out of necessity, but the thing that sets George and
Lennie apart from many other workers is that they stay together and that they have a
dream. On the other hand, their dream also involves nature but then the idea of
nature becomes a choice, it is free will. It is free will in the sense that they
themselves make a choice to buy their own land and then work there. The
connection to the lonely cowboy and the masculinity of the American nature is
useful here as well. To have your own piece of land means that you have to work
hard and you have to work with your hands. It is hard labour to keep a farm up and
running and that kind of work is associated with masculinity and I believe that the
roughness of wild nature can be tied to the roughness of the manual labour that
comes with owning a farm. To be able to survive in nature or to be a successful
farmer means you have to be strong both physically and mentally, two words much
associated with men and masculinity.

Out of necessity George and Lennie have to make nature their home
and livelihood and are forced to travel and set up camp in the wilderness with
coyotes and dogs howling in the background. Choice and free will is presented in
form of their dream of one day owning a piece of land where they themselves
would be in charge. Even though they are good workers who appreciate the life that
a farm offers, a masculine life, or even the hard work it requires, they are not happy
with nature in the sense that means that they are employees. To own their own place
would give them the stability of actually having their own home, but to reach their
dream they have to use other people’s nature and reside in nature while between
jobs, which means that there is a link between necessity and choice in George and
Lennie’s world. The difficulty is to pursue the dream when the nature that they are
experiencing as migrant workers includes harshness and cynicism, “You guys is
just kiddin’ yourself. You’ll talk about it a hell of a lot, but you won’t get no land.
You’ll be a swamper here till they take you out in a box (Steinbeck 85). As migrant workers it could be argued that choice is primarily determined by class but George and Lennie does not fit in that presupposition. They have each other and that sets them apart from other men in the same situation. The fact that they are men also adds to the fact that they have the ability to change their situation. They can save money to buy their own farm. Masculinity and free will come together here.

I would like to argue that Sal and Dean primarily make a conscious choice to be close to nature, but that there can be links drawn to necessity as well. They are not in the same situation as George and Lennie when it comes to necessity, so at first their vagabond life style is regarded as a choice as Sal had thought about travelling before he met Dean. It is their free will that takes them out on the road in the first place as Sal has planned for the trip. Sal also admits that he is mourning his divorce and feels like life needs a new meaning. In contrast, Dean is less of a planner and more of a restless soul without many thoughts about consequences; he simply wants to find something. So while Sal initially makes a choice to go on the road, it soon becomes a necessity, the necessity of having the freedom of the road, when ordinary life never seems to function in the way they want. Just by coming to New York City and meeting Sal for the first time, Dean felt he had to know how to write and as Sal is a writer, Dean felt he had to meet him. However, the necessity that both Sal and Dean later come to share for being on the road and experiencing nature is not the same necessity that George and Lennie are dealing with. The difference in class and society for the two pairs can be taken into account here since George and Lennie are struggling migrant workers seen as “the outcasts of society” (Bruszt 6), and Sal and Dean are of middle class and Sal even has a university degree. Dean had a hard childhood but appears to have turned over
a new leaf. To be middle class in 1940’s America came with opportunities for the younger generations as World War II ended.

George and Lennie’s dream of stability was met with disbelief and to an extent also contempt due to the class they belonged to. Sal and Dean, as members of a higher class have the means to create stable lives for themselves but there is obviously something missing to make them happy where they are. Matt Theado brings up the reasons or lack thereof as he uses the question asked by a carnival operator who offers a job, “You boys going somewhere, or just going?” Sal muses, “We didn’t understand his question, and it was a damned good question” (Theado 59). Theado also puts forward the question if there even is a logical reason for Sal to go on the road other than using the experience in his writing (Theado 59-60). Perhaps Sal’s reasons for going on the road is not that logical, but after experiencing a divorce at a young age he probably needs to see what life out there has to offer and Dean is a breath of fresh air. The inspiration he needs to finish his book and to move on is not to be found at his aunt’s house in New Jersey. He has a curiosity to search for something that will eventually make him settle down and by meeting Dean, he finds a person who is completely different from anyone he has ever met.

Sal is in a way infatuated with Dean’s excitement for life and the road. Masculinity again comes into the picture as they are two men that bond and even though Sal is infatuated with Dean’s way of living and looking at life he is able to see Sal’s flaws and they become almost like brothers. The male homosocial desire to have someone by your side who understands you is clear as they begin their journey together. This does however not in any way weaken the masculine side of
things and the fact that gender is of great importance when looking at the lives of George and Lennie, Sal and Dean.

Male Bonding

The idea of male friendship should not have to be regarded as something unusual or strange and as evident as nature is in *Of Mice and Men* and *On the Road*, as evident are also the portrayals of strong friendships between the two pairs. Eve Sedgwick, as pointed to before, says that a connection between two women are not questioned. Women share friendships and it is not seen as strange in any way. However, for a man to have a similar bond of friendship with another man appears to be seen as something out of the ordinary, especially if it is not a sexual relationship (Sedgwick 2-3). It is then interesting to have Sedgwick’s thoughts in the back of your head when you read *Of Mice and Men* and *On the Road*.

The main characters share a special and strong bond and the fact that they are all men causes questions about their friendships and if the novels are just about men. It is a legitimate question to ask; how come these two novels are so male dominated? And why women are almost non-existent? I believe that it is possible that the explanation here is, as pointed out before, nature. Perhaps a male friendship needs the roughness and adventure of nature, farms and roads to be considered acceptable. Nature and male bonding could therefore be linked as a result of nature being perceived as a more male environment, at least in the way nature is used in *Of Mice and Men* and *On the Road*. The choices that men had to make during these two different times in America in regard to the nature around them and the nature of society along with the opportunities or duties that men possessed and women did not. The farm life or the vagabond lifestyle could maybe only be taken seriously if it is portrayed by men and their masculinity and strength. Adventure and struggle therefore becomes synonymous with male friendship and the way men want or need to live in order to find
fulfillment. It is also interesting to bring up the fact that these two friendships are connected to different sorts of crises. Does male bonding need a reason to happen? George and Lennie have known each other for a long time and they stay together during the rough years of the American depression. The poverty and hopelessness that followed was easier to deal with as a twosome.

Sal and Dean meet when Sal is newly divorced and trying to write a book which is also to be seen as a crisis, although a more personal one. World War II is over, a big crisis for society as a whole and new opportunities arose as the war ended.

It could then be argued that these relationships are very much related to crises and the uncertainty that those can bring. To have a close friend is then a vital component in order to get by and move on. It might take two to dream and you might need a friend who understands your need to travel along a road

\textit{Of Mice and Men} only has Curley’s wife to in a way represent all women of the depression and while the women in \textit{On the Road} are more in number, they are not really there as individuals as they are kept in the background as beautiful things that are a part of the “kicks”. Society most likely plays a large role here where men are perceived as tougher than women and therefore also less likely to open up to another man as a close friend. The American issue of the Wild West and cowboy-like lifestyles of George and Lennie, Sal and Dean can be applied here. Men are meant to be tough and in a sense “untouchable” by feelings of sadness, confusion and fear. The masculine way to live is to search for new land, to control it and make it prosper. Men are suppose to survive and stay tough no matter what and by having a close friend and someone to actually talk to about fears and problems, George and Lennie, Sal and Dean break an old notion or image of how men are suppose to act and how they are suppose to carry out relationships or friendships with other men. As pointed out by Eve Sedgwick, the idea of women being close and looking out for one another is not seen
as unusual and George and Lennie, Sal and Dean are good examples of how men can be close friends as well. They also show that masculinity does not mean having to be alone without anyone to share a dream or a problem with.

**Conclusion**

In this essay I have tried to describe the wild American landscape that is visible in *Of Mice and Men* and *On the Road* and how the roughness of nature helps explain the two friendships of George and Lennie and Sal and Dean.

It is obvious right from the start that nature is a big part of both these novels and especially the American nature of big prairies, long roads and great mountains. “The relationship between the non-human and the human” (Coupe 119) which is brought up earlier in the essay becomes apparent as water becomes a symbol for the lives of George and Lennie, whereas roads come to be a symbol for Sal and Dean. The long roads bring forward the myth of the lonely cowboy, a myth that can be applied to both pairs even though Sal and Dean are more modern cowboys. The characters all experience nature in different ways, a fact that has a lot to do with history.

While *Of Mice and Men* portrays the lives of migrant workers during the depression of the 1930’s, *On the Road* is the story of post-war America where new possibilities and a new sense of freedom is a part of people’s lives. History affects the characters in the sense of how they have to deal with nature and how their dreams fit with the nature they are experiencing. George and Lennie are forced to live in nature and work on other people’s farms while they nourish a dream of one day owning their own little piece of land. Sal and Dean on the other hand, could have a very normal and stable life but they reject that notion of stability and head out on the roads instead. They want to search for their
country and find themselves. It is as if they can not function in normal society and the road becomes their solution.

The masculinity of the American nature with its big mountains and deep rivers suggests a landscape that a man must tame and control. However, the nature can never be completely controlled and therefore man and nature must find a balance in order to have a successful relationship. Whilst George and Lennie, Sal and Dean are experiencing different things during different times in America they come to share a special bond. The male bonding and the male homosocial desire is strongly depicted in both novels and it is clear that these four men all need a close friend in order to survive and follow a dream. As Eve Sedgwick pointed out, a bond between men is perhaps less common than a bond between two women (Sedgwick 2-3) and it is as if the roughness of the American nature is needed in both novels in order to explain the friendships without losing any of the masculinity. The male bonding is perhaps seen as feminine and the wild nature is then needed in order to counterbalance it with the masculinity. The same can be said about the historical aspect as two major historical events lies beneath the two friendships.

Men are often perceived as being strong and without a need to discuss feelings or dreams. George and Lennie, Sal and Dean go against that as they find a great friend; a confidant that they can trust while they search for whatever it is that will make them happy. As pointed to before, Thoreau did “return to nature” (Barry 241) and I would like to end this essay by saying that George and Lennie were a part of nature and stayed there while Sal and Dean were city boys that found peace of mind in nature.
Bibliography


