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The Interplay of Botany and Identity in John Steinbeck's *Of Mice And Men*

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ABSTRACT: *This paper seeks to draw parallels between the botanical characteristics of certain trees and plants mentioned in John Steinbeck's Of Mice and Men—notably the willow, sycamore, alfalfa, and weeds—and the identities of characters such as Lennie, George, Slim, and Curley's wife. First, the willow symbolizes the grief and harsh working conditions endured by the ranch hands, as its leaves are bitter. Additionally, the willow may evoke the destruction of Willows, California, by dust storms during the Great Depression, reinforcing themes of loss. Second, alfalfa represents the ranch hands' hope for a prosperous life, as it is a flowering plant with vibrant purple leaves, suggesting vitality and growth. Third, the California sycamore, known for its hard-to-split timber, symbolizes the unity among the ranchers and the tough, bleak atmosphere within the ranch. Finally, the term "weed" refers to an unwanted plant, reflecting the sense of undesirability that follows George and Lennie wherever they go. Weed also symbolizes the various disruptions faced by the ranch hands, as it is as noxious and troublesome as Curley's wife who frequently causes problems, especially for George and Lennie.*

KEYWORDS: Botany, *Of Mice and Men*, John Steinbeck, Willows, Alfalfa, Sycamore, Toyon, Weed and Wood.

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Introduction

"Look deep into nature, and you will understand everything better"
-Albert Einstein-

Einstein's words resonate with John Steinbeck's profound reverence for nature, a central theme woven through much of his work, most notably *Of Mice and Men*. Steinbeck's deep connection to his hometown of Salinas, California, serves as both inspiration and setting for many of his stories, reflecting his enduring bond with its landscapes. Expressing his love for the region of his youth, he observed, "It seems to be one of those fertile places from which extraordinary wonders emerge... I was born into it, as was my father. Our bodies originate from this soil—our bones are formed from the local limestone, and our blood is infused with the essence of this earth" (Shillinglaw, 2006, p. 4). Richard E. Hart further described Steinbeck as "a writer deeply connected to the land and its natural inhabitants, guided by a moral commitment to preserving the integrity of nature. In both his thoughts and writings, he was an integral part of the natural world, perpetually studying its intricacies" (Beegel et al., 1997, p. 45). Together, these perspectives illustrate Steinbeck's intimate and enduring relationship with nature and his commitment to exploring its profound influence on human life.

Steinbeck's works align seamlessly with the principles of ecocriticism, a field that explores the intricate relationship between literature and the natural environment. The term "ecocriticism," introduced by William Ruekert in 1978, refers to the application of ecological concepts to literary analysis (Ruekert, 1978, p. 71). Ruekert highlights humanity's persistent tendency to dominate and exploit nature, juxtaposed with nature's enduring presence and resilience. Steinbeck's ecological ethos has drawn considerable scholarly attention, particularly Yuji Kami's (2005) analysis of his profound appreciation for the beauty and enigma of nature, notably the desert, which Steinbeck regarded as a teacher of resilience and survival (Kami, 2005, p. 77). Steinbeck believed deeply in nature's transformative impact on the human spirit (Kami, 2005, p. 78) and advocated for a symbiotic relationship between humanity and the environment as essential to confronting ecological challenges (Kami, 2005, p. 81).

In "From Self to World: The Holistic Ecology of John Steinbeck's Early Fiction," Ashley E. Reis (2015) argues that novels such as "To a God Unknown,""Pastures of Heaven," and "The Grapes of Wrath" embody the concept of holism that Steinbeck adopted to underscore the relationship between humans and their environment. "To a God Unknown" exemplifies this holistic ecology by showcasing the interconnectedness of the various elements within a land community. "Pastures of Heaven" delves into Steinbeck's ecological beliefs, with each short story exploring the link between individuals and their land. Reis contends that individual analyses of these stories offer opportunities to elucidate environmental themes within the text (Reis,2015, p. 8). Furthermore, in "The Steinbeckian Land Ethic: Environmentalism and The Red Pony," Derek Gladwin (2007) demonstrates how painful experiences shape and build human environmental consciousness. He draws parallels between Steinbeck's narrative and Aldo Leopold's ecological ethics and holistic environmental theories, where the land, its components, plants, and animals are portrayed as a "living organism," akin to the biotic pyramid of nature. Steinbeck relies on this pyramid to convey his "environmental awareness" in "The Red Pony" (Gladwin, 2007, p. 5). Susan Shilinglaw, in "A Journey into John Steinbeck's California," highlights Steinbeck's profound connection to his homeland and the traditional family farms that surrounded him during his childhood. She underscores Steinbeck's idea of human interaction with nature, as articulated in "To A God Unknown." Additionally, in "Steinbeck and the Environment: Interdisciplinary Approaches," she reaffirms Steinbeck's view of the environment as "the physical surroundings of living plants" (Beegel et al.,1997, p. 45).

It is worth noting that Steinbeck's interest in living plants is a reference to his awareness of botany, a scientific discipline that explores the life conditions, characteristics, and structure of plants and plant-like organisms. Botany is vital for understanding the significance of plants in the world (Shipunov,2020, p.1).

David R. Hershey (1996) defines botany as encompassing "any discipline with a major focus on the plant kingdom" (p.1), and Robert K. Zuck (1949) regards it as one of the natural sciences that tells the story of how plants have evolved over time and in different environments (p.1). While a considerable amount of scholarship exists on Steinbeck's relationship with disciplines like ecology and the environment, little attention has been paid to his connection with botany and the reasons behind his use of specific trees and plants in his works, notably in "Of Mice and Men" (OMAM). This paper fills this gap in Steinbeck's interdisciplinary studies by exploring the connection between OMAM's characters and the botanical characteristics of the mentioned plants and trees such as willow, sycamore, weed, alfalfa, and toyon. It invites readers to investigate characters' interactions with botany in Steinbeck's other works.

Willow

"Of Mice and Men" opens with a vivid depiction of Soledad, where willow and sycamore trees extend their roots alongside the 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... There is a path through the willows and among the sycamores" (Steinbeck, 1937, p.1). These trees reappear throughout the novel, symbolizing various themes linked to their botanical traits. Elaine Wilkes(2010), in "Nature's Secrets Messages," notes that, throughout history, the willow tree with its narrow tear-shaped leaves and drooping branches has symbolized sadness (p. 85). She also points out that willows typically grow in damp conditions and have a bitter taste (2010, p. 87). These characteristics of willows are profoundly significant in the novella, as they underscore the bitter working conditions endured by the ranch hands. Indeed, signs of the workers' misery are evident when Steinbeck portrays the bunkhouse, intended as a place of rest after a grueling day of labor. However, it is ill-equipped and dismal, providing little comfort to the ranch hands. Steinbeck's description of the bunkhouse reinforces this grim atmosphere: "The bunkhouse was a long rectangular building. Walls were whitewashed, and the floor unpainted. In three walls, there were small, square windows, and in the fourth, a solid door with a wooden latch. Against the walls were eight bunks, five of them made up with blankets, and the other three displaying their burlap ticking" (Steinbeck,1937, p. 19). In such a setting, the ranchers live akin to prisoners, yearning for a sense of freedom. Their basic rights, such as having a clean and comfortable bed, are denied to them. George, upon his arrival, expresses his shock at the deplorable state of his bed: "He looked into his box shelf and then picked a small yellow can from it. 'Say. What the hell's this?'... 'What the hell kind of bed you giving us, anyways?'" (Steinbeck, 1937, p.20)

The melancholy associated with the physical presence of willow trees, as described by Wilkie in her book, permeates the atmosphere of Steinbeck's "Of Mice and Men", set against the backdrop of the United States during the Great Depression of the 1930s. During this period, Steinbeck was acutely aware of the suffering experienced by homeless and destitute families. Among these families are Lennie and George, who, like many others, grapple with homelessness as they wander in search of work. To earn money and fulfill their dream of owning land, they are compelled to toil on a ranch and endure the harsh treatment of the boss's son, Curley, who has a penchant for picking fights with larger men (Steinbeck, 1937, p.29). Both Lennie and George grapple with feelings of depression and frustration during their time on the ranch, yet they persevere through these hardships, determined to save enough money to achieve their dreams.As Steinbeck writes, "Lennie cried out suddenly—'I don' like this place, George. This ain't no good place. I wanna get outa here.' 'We gotta keep it till we get a stake. We can't help it, Lennie. We'll get out jus' as soon as we can. I don't like it no better than you do'" (Steinbeck, 1937, p.36).

Moreover, other ranch residents, like Candy and Crooks, also wrestle with feelings of sadness and despair brought on by their difficult life circumstances. Candy's life takes a bleak turn after losing his arm and being compelled to part with his aging dog. As he grows older, he feels increasingly redundant on the ranch, fearing the day the boss will deem him dispensable. His dog serves as a poignant symbol of the fate that awaits workers who, after years of dedicated service, are cast aside without compassion when they are

no longer able to perform as they once did. Accordingly, Carlson underscores the dog's deterioration, saying, "Tha dog of Candy's is so God damn old he can't hardly walk... Why'n't you get Candy to shoot his old dog and give him one of the pups to raise up? I can smell that dog a mile away. Got no teeth, damn near blind, can't eat. Candy feeds him milk. He can't chew nothing else" (Steinbeck, 1937, p.39). Similarly, Crooks endures deep sadness from being excluded from the bunkhouse solely because of his skin color. Isolated and marginalized in a society that devalues him, he voices the pain of his loneliness: "A guy goes nuts if he ain't got nobody. Don't make no difference who the guy is, long's he's with you. I tell ya... a guy gets too lonely an' he gets sick" (Steinbeck, 1937, p. 80). Crooks's words reveal his yearning for connection and the heavy impact isolation has on his spirit.

The somber symbolism of the willow trees reaches a tragic culmination at the story's end, where George is forced to make the painful decision to kill Lennie to shield him from Curley's wrath. Choosing mercy over cruelty, George ends his friend's life peacefully rather than allow him to face a brutal fate. Upon discovering the lifeless body of Curley's wife, George reassures Candy, "I won't gonna let 'em hurt 'im" (Steinbeck, 1937, p. 104), highlighting his unwavering commitment to protect Lennie, even in the bleakest circumstances. George approaches Lennie, who sits by the river, lost in dreams of a peaceful life where he can tend to rabbits, and gently ends his life. The symbolism of the willow trees is complex, embodying more than just a sense of melancholy; the wispy branches' pliability and resilience mirror Lennie's gentle innocence and unyielding hope in the face of a harsh world. To illustrate this, Lennie's attachment to soft things and his desire to care for smaller, weaker creatures, such as the puppy and rabbits, highlight the fragility of his life and his childlike nature. When questioned by Curley's wife about his fondness for rabbits, Lennie earnestly explains, "I like to pet nice things with my fingers, sof' things" (Steinbeck, 1937, p.98). Likewise, Lennie's innocence is further evident when he becomes entranced by Curley's wife's soft hair, leading him to stroke it with all his might. Steinbeck describes this moment, writing, "She took Lennie's hand and put it on her head. 'Feel right aroun' there an' see how soft it is.' Lennie's big fingers fell to stroking her hair" (Steinbeck,1937, p. 99). Despite his mental disability and unintentional acts of violence, such as killing mice, the puppy, and Curley's wife, George underscores that Lennie has never acted with malice, saying, "all the time he done bad things, but he never done one of 'em mean" (Steinbeck,1937, p. 104). Indeed, Lennie's innocence shines when he finds joy in simple pleasures, such as his dream of tending rabbits, without harboring prejudice against people of different races or women. His pliable nature allows him to connect with individuals like Crooks and Curley's wife, both of whom are marginalized by the other ranchers.

Moreover, Wilkie (2010) suggests that willow branches' suppleness signifies their capacity to alleviate joint pain, a reference to Hippocrates instructing people to chew willow leaves for pain relief (p. 87). Steinbeck introduces the novel with an emphasis on the beautiful willow trees along the riverbank: "on the valley side, the water is lined with trees—willows fresh and green with every spring carrying in their lower leaf junctures the debris of the winter's flooding" (Steinbeck,1937, p. 1). This foreshadows the hope and relief the characters find in their dreams. The gloom lifts as George, Lennie, and Candy begin to believe their dream may be possible with Candy's down payment. For the first time, George is convinced they could buy a farm, and readers share in their growing hope as they plan their future. Similarly, Curley's wife clings to her dream of becoming a film star, offering her a fleeting escape from her unhappy marriage to Curley.

Alfalfa

Incorporating themes of hope and optimism, Steinbeck introduces the plant alfalfa into his work, establishing positive connections with the characters of "Of Mice and Men". Alfalfa, cultivated in the southeastern United States, is renowned as the 'Queen of Forages' worldwide. Growers appreciate alfalfa for its high yield, adaptability, disease resistance, and excellent nutritional quality. It plays a crucial role in addressing several significant environmental challenges in the United States due to its deep roots and

effective absorption of water and chemical compounds from deeper layers (Putnam et al., 2001, p.19). When George describes the land he and Lennie dream of, he imagines a simple life with "a little house and a room to ourselves [. . .] you'd go out in the alfalfa patch and you'd have a sack" (Steinbeck, 1937, p. 64), painting a picture of peace and independence in their future. Likewise, when Lennie shares his dream with Curley's wife, he includes alfalfa in his vision: "We gonna have a house and a garden and a place for alfalfa, and that alfalfa is for the rabbits, and I take a sack and get it all fulla alfalfa, and then I take it to the rabbits" (Steinbeck,1937, p. 98). Steinbeck uses alfalfa to evoke feelings of optimism and ambition. It plays a key role in Lennie and George's vision of a hopeful future, symbolizing the peaceful life they dream of on their own land. The mention of alfalfa also highlights the harmony between humans and nature, reflecting Steinbeck's transcendentalist beliefs. In this context, Steinbeck posits that "man is a determined, fully constituent unit of nature" (Beegel et al.,1997, p. 46). By associating alfalfa with their hopeful future, Steinbeck emphasizes how nature can help individuals rise above their harsh realities and achieve a sense of spiritual fulfillment.

Sycamore

Steinbeck introduces another type of tree: the sycamore. According to George H. Hepting, sycamores are large tall trees that grow quickly with straight trunks. As some of the biggest hardwood trees, they are known for being difficult to split. The Californian sycamore, found along streams and valleys, has short trunks and long, twisting branches that form a wide canopy. This tree is incredibly resilient, capable of enduring high temperatures and living for over a century (Hepting, 1971, p. 377).The strength of the sycamore symbolizes the unwavering solidarity between George and Lennie. Despite occasional frustration with Lennie's uncontrollable actions, George never abandons him. Even when George yearns for independence, he recognizes his responsibility to care for Lennie, saying, "I want you to stay with me, Lennie. Jesus Christ, somebody'd shoot you for a coyote if you were by yourself. No, you stay with me. Your Aunt Clara wouldn't like you running off by yourself, even if she is dead" (Steinbeck,1937, p. 14). Their friendship is as enduring as the sycamore's wood, as Lennie aptly expresses, "I got you to look after me, and you got me to look after you, and that's why" (Steinbeck, 1937, p.15). Slim also observes the unbreakable bond between Lennie and George, contrasting it with the transitory relationships of other ranch hands, noting, "Hardly none of the guys ever travel together... it just seems kinda funny, a cuckoo like him and a smart little guy like you traveling together" (Steinbeck, 1937, p.43).

Moreover, the sycamore not only symbolizes the strong companionship of Lennie and George but also reflects the sense of solidarity among the ranchers. Despite their challenging circumstances, they often gather in the bunkhouse to play cards and share moments of camaraderie as a way to alleviate their hardships. Furthermore, the physical characteristics of the sycamore tree parallel those of certain characters. Its short trunk mirrors George's compact stature, while its long, twisted branches evoke the crooked forms of both Lennie and Crooks. This comparison highlights the connection between the natural world and the individuals in Steinbeck's narrative. Besides, Steinbeck employs the sycamore to convey shifts in the story's mood. At the outset of the novel, he provides an optimistic depiction of the sycamore, describing "sycamores with mottled, white, recumbent limbs and branches that arch over the pool" (Steinbeck,1937,p. 1). This evokes a sense of hope and tranquility, hinting at Lennie and George's opportunity to find new work on a ranch and their dream of owning land where they can live independently, free from the control of others. However, as the plot unfolds, the mood shifts toward darkness and uncertainty. Steinbeck subtly foreshadows the potential fracture of Lennie and George's bond through imagery of the shade and wind moving through the sycamores, signaling impending change: "By the pool among the mottled sycamores, a pleasant shade had fallen... A far rush of wind sounded and a gust drove through the tops of the trees like a wave. The sycamore leaves turned up their silver sides, the brown, dry leaves on the ground scudded a few feet" (Steinbeck, 1937, p. 109).

Weed

The term "Weed" holds significant symbolic weight in the novella, particularly in relation to George and Lennie's past at their previous place of employment. The recurring mention of "Weed" throughout the story, especially when George recalls the trouble Lennie caused there, reinforces the sense of past mistakes and the consequences of Lennie's actions. For example, as they travel to the ranch, George warns Lennie, "And you ain't gonna do no bad things like you done in Weed, neither. Lennie looked puzzled. 'Like I done in Weed?' 'Oh, so ya forget that too, did ya? Well, I ain't gonna remind ya, fear ya do it again'" (Steinbeck, 1937, p. 7). Similarly, when speaking to Slim, George refers to Weed again, stating, "Of course he ain't mean. But he gets in trouble all the time because he's so God damn dumb. Like what happened in Weed" (Steinbeck, 1937, p. 45). This repetition of Weed highlights not only the mistakes of the past but also the ongoing burden of Lennie's innocence and the challenges it brings to their lives.

In a literal sense, "weed" refers to any plant that is unwanted or disruptive, hindering human activities and damaging ecosystems. Weeds can negatively affect land use by stunting crop growth and reducing quality (Booth et al., 2003, p. 6). Therefore, the term "weed" is associated with problems and disturbances to the surrounding environment. Similarly, in "Of Mice and Men", both Lennie and Curley's wife are viewed by other characters as sources of trouble. Despite Lennie's inherent innocence and goodness, his physical strength and mental limitations often lead to complications for both him and George. George, aware of Lennie's tendency to unintentionally get into trouble, cautions him: "Lennie, if you just happen to get in trouble like you always done before, I want you to come right here and hide in the brush" (Steinbeck, 1937, p. 15). This precautionary advice stems from an earlier incident in Weed, where Lennie, fascinated by a woman's red dress, innocently tries to touch it. His actions cause the woman to scream, setting off a chain of events that forces the two men to flee. This incident highlights how Lennie's lack of understanding of social norms often leads to unintended trouble. George later explains to Slim, "He just scared her. I'd be scared too if he grabbed me. But he never hurt her; he just wanted to touch that red dress, like he wants to pet those pups all the time" (Steinbeck, 1937, p. 46). On the ranch, Lennie's physical power, despite his good intentions, leads to further tragic events, including the accidental death of the puppy and the unintentional killing of Curley's wife.

The term "weed" symbolizes the disruptions and troubles that the ranch hands experience, particularly due to Curley and his wife. Although she is married, Curley's wife feels lonely and seeks companionship among the ranch workers. She confides her isolation to Crooks, despite his initial reluctance to let her stay in his room, saying, "I ain't giving you no trouble. Think I don't like to talk to somebody every once in a while? Think I like to stick in that house all the time?" (Steinbeck, 1937, p. 85). Her attempts to connect with the ranchers, however, often provoke her husband to confront them, causing tension. The men on the ranch view her as a source of trouble. George, particularly wary, advises Lennie: "Don't you even take a look at that woman. I don't care what she says and what she does. I've seen them poison before, but I've never seen a piece of jailbait worse than her," adding, "Well, you keep away from her, 'cause she's a rat-trap if I ever seen one" (Steinbeck, 1937, p. 36). When Curley's wife intrudes into Crooks' room, he echoes this sentiment, saying, "Maybe you better go back to your own house now. We don't want any trouble" (Steinbeck, 1937, p. 85). These interactions underscore how her loneliness and desire for connection make her a catalyst for conflict, while the ranch hands view her as a dangerous source of potential trouble. Furthermore, Lennie grows apprehensive about talking with Curley's wife, fearing George's anger. He admits, "If George sees me talkin' to you, he'll give me hell... George says you'll get us in a mess" (Steinbeck, 1937, p. 96). Although Curley's wife has no harmful intentions, the ranch hands see her as a troublemaker, which leaves her feeling as isolated and unwanted as a "weed." This perception reinforces her loneliness, as she is kept at a distance by everyone around her.

Toyon and Holywood

Having explored the connections between the characters and the plants in the novella, we can now examine the botanical symbolism in the relationship between Hollywood and Curley's wife's unfulfilled dreams. In a conversation with Lennie, Curley's wife reveals her dream of becoming a Hollywood actress, saying, "Another time I met a guy, and he was in the pictures. Went out to the Riverside Dance Palace with him. He says he was gonna put me in the movies. Says I was natural. Soon's, he got back to Hollywood, he was gonna write to me about it…" (Steinbeck, 1937, p. 96). This dream, like a delicate plant that never blooms, underscores her isolation and frustration, as her hopes remain stunted in the harsh, barren environment of the ranch. This reveals Curley's wife's deep desire to become a Hollywood star. Hollywood, however, is not only the place where she dreams of realizing her ambitions; it also shares symbolic botanical features with her character. In Hollywood, a plant called *Heteromeles arbutifolia*, known as Christmas Berry or California Holly, grows abundantly, producing clusters of bright red berries. In fact, Hollywood takes its name from this plant ("About Toyon"). Curley's wife mirrors the vibrant red of the Toyon berries through her distinct fondness for the color red, which is evident in her clothing and makeup: "She had full, rouged lips, and wide-spaced eyes heavily made up. Her fingernails were red... She wore a cotton house dress and red mules, on the insteps of which were little bouquets of red ostrich feathers" (Steinbeck, 1937, p. 34). She uses this striking color to enhance her allure, drawing attention to herself in an environment that otherwise overlooks her beauty and aspirations. The red symbolizes both her passion and her unfulfilled desire, making her a vivid yet isolated figure among the ranchers.

Secondly, in early summer, the Toyon plant's beautiful flowers attract butterflies and other insects, and its berries provide food for various birds ("About Toyon"). Similarly, Curley's wife captivates the attention of the ranch workers with her beauty, particularly Lennie. Steinbeck writes, "Lennie watched her, fascinated... [He] still stared at the doorway where she had been. 'Gosh, she was purty.' He smiled admiringly" (Steinbeck, 1937, p. 35). Just as insects are drawn to the Toyon's flowers, Curley's wife seizes opportunities to attract and flirt with the ranchers. This is evident in the line, "Well, she's got the eye... I seen her give Slim the eye... Slim's a jerkline skinner. Hell of a nice fella. Slim don't need to wear no high-heeled boots on a grain team. I seen her give Slim the eye. Curley never seen it, and I seen her give Carlson the eye" (Steinbeck, 1937, p. 31).In this way, the commonalities between Curley's wife and the Toyon plant that grows in Hollywood encompass themes of attraction and allure, symbolized by the color red and her captivating presence.

Wooden Language

Finally, botany not only enriches the thematic depth of the novella but also shapes the descriptions of character body language. This is evident in Steinbeck's analogy: "[a]nd finally, when he stood up, slowly and stiffly, his face was as hard and tight as wood, and his eyes were hard" (Steinbeck, 1937, p. 103). Here, Steinbeck likens George's facial expression, after discovering Curley's wife's lifeless body, to the unyielding rigidity of wood, symbolizing his shock and hardened resolve.

Additionally, this wood-like hardness characterizes Curley's wife's manner of speaking, especially in her interactions with Crooks, the African American ranch worker. She employs what could be seen as a figurative 'wooden language'—a stereotype often tied to a rigid and impersonal style that conveys a power dynamic, where 'the other' is regarded as an adversary or inferior (Thom, 1987, p. 4). This association of wood with inflexibility and control highlights the power struggles and tensions between the characters. In *Wooden Language: Past and Present*, Violeta Negrea (2018) argues that "wooden language calls for interpretations between the lines as it hides realities" (p. 3). This insight applies to *Of Mice and Men*, where Curley's wife uses language loaded with power, hostility, and dominance, particularly when addressing Crooks, whom she views as "the other." Her words carry a veiled, underlying racism,

especially evident in her threat to have him lynched if he resists her. This is starkly illustrated in the passage:

She turned on him in scorn. 'Listen, Nigger,' she said. 'You know what I can do to you if you open your trap?' Crooks stared hopelessly at her, and then he sat down on his bunk and drew into himself. She closed on him. 'You know what I could do?' Crooks seemed to grow smaller, and he pressed himself against the wall. 'Yes, ma'am.' 'Well, you keep your place then, Nigger. I could get you strung up on a tree so easy it ain't even funny (Steinbeck, 1937, pp. 88–89).

Here, Curley's wife's language mirrors the "wooden language" Negrea describes, where her surface-level words mask the harsh, violent realities of racial power dynamics. Her threat reduces Crooks, stripping him of agency, while her language functions as a tool of intimidation and dominance.

Curley's wife's language is charged with hostility, particularly in her derogatory use of the term "nigger" to offend Crooks. Beyond the insult itself, her words evoke a painful historical reality—lynching—one of the pervasive forms of racial violence that occurred during the period from 1877 to 1901. This era is often referred to as "the dark ages of recent American history" (Logan, 1954, p. 7). During this time, despite the ratification of two amendments to the U.S. Constitution that were supposed to secure the political and civil rights of Black Americans, racial hostility remained widespread. These amendments were meant to ensure that citizens could not be denied the right to vote based on their race, yet this shift in policy was met with resistance from many white southerners. In 1879, Senator Westrom of Minnesota declared that Black men had the right to control elections, a statement that contributed to the widespread fear among white southerners, who responded by lynching Black people as a means to preserve white supremacy. As Logan (1954) notes, this period saw the emergence of racial violence aimed at undermining Black citizens' rights. By referencing such a violent and racially charged act, Curley's wife's threat reflects the deep-seated racism of the time, further emphasizing the power imbalance she enforces over Crooks.

Conclusion

This paper explores the significant role of specific plants in John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*, delving into the botanical symbolism behind the willow, sycamore, alfalfa, weed, and toyon. Each of these plants serves a distinct purpose in enhancing the novella's thematic depth, from representing the harshness of the characters' lives to symbolizing their dreams and desires. By examining the botanical structures and symbolic meanings of these plants, we gain insight into how Steinbeck weaves nature into the fabric of his story, allowing the natural world to echo the emotional landscapes of the characters. The willow, with its bitter leaves, reflects the grief and suffering of the ranch hands, its resilience amid harsh conditions mirroring their own endurance in the face of life's hardships. The alfalfa plant, on the other hand, represents hope and the possibility of a better life, symbolizing the dream that sustains the men despite their struggles. Similarly, the sycamore tree, known for its tough timber, serves as a symbol of unity and strength among the ranch workers, highlighting their shared adversity. In contrast, the weed embodies the undesirable and disruptive nature of George and Lennie's existence on the ranch, while also symbolizing the tensions that arise due to Curley's wife and the unspoken challenges the workers face in their pursuit of dignity and connection. The toyon plant, with its bright red berries, mirrors Curley's wife's dream of becoming a Hollywood actress, her allure and vibrant appearance reflected in the striking color. Through these plants, Steinbeck not only deepens the reader's understanding of the characters' emotional and psychological states but also ties the natural world to the socio-political and economic issues of the time, such as loneliness, hope, exploitation, and the struggle for personal identity. Steinbeck's recurring use of plants and trees across his works further emphasizes his ability to blend literature with other disciplines, such as botany, to reinforce the themes of his narratives. In *Of Mice and Men*, these plants are not merely background details

but active symbols that resonate with the plight of the characters and their desires for a better life. Moreover, their symbolic value is not confined to *Of Mice and Men* alone. Throughout his literary career, Steinbeck consistently incorporates trees and plants into his novels, using them as metaphors for human existence. Whether it's the fruit trees in *The Grapes of Wrath* or the olive trees in *East of Eden*, nature in Steinbeck's works often serves as a silent yet powerful commentator on the human condition. This paper invites readers to further explore the relationship between botany and character development in Steinbeck's broader body of work. By examining how different plants reflect and enhance the lives of his characters, we can uncover new layers of meaning in his writing. From the bitterness of the willow to the brightness of the toyon, each plant serves as a key to understanding the broader themes of survival, hope, and human connection that define Steinbeck's novels. Ultimately, the plants are not only a tool for characterization but a reflection of the struggles and dreams that shape the lives of Steinbeck's characters, offering a profound commentary on the intersection of nature, society, and individual aspiration.

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