OF MICE AND TYRANTS: POWER RELATIONS IN *OF MICE AND MEN*

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Abstract: Many are the studies on the novel *Of Mice and Men* across the last decades (Belk; Wallendorf, 2012; Meyer, 2009; Mehmet, 2016; Ganiyeva; Rajabova, 2023; Lisca, 1956). However, we have decided to re-examine the novel from a new perspective. Norton's Identity Theory (1997, 2000, 2013) provides a holistic framework for understanding the interplay of identity, power, investment, and imagination in the novel. *Of Mice and Men* is an American novel written by John Steinbeck and published in 1937. The book follows the path of a pair of ranch workers, George and Lennie, while they try to find jobs in the rural lands of California during the Great Depression. The ranch workers of the novel, besides the main characters, Lennie Small and George Milton, are Candy, Slim, Crooks, Carlson, and Whit. Therefore, we do not focus our analysis on the main characters, but on the interrelationship between all novel's characters. Power relations, discrimination, misogyny are all found in the novel and analyzed through Norton's (1997) lenses. In conclusion, the novel depicts power in many ways between the characters. Whether due to gender, race, respect, capital or emotions, the relationships between them happen with a form of authority over the other, there being an imbalance in the way each one connects.

Keywords: *Of Mice and Men*. Theory of Identity. Power relations.

De camundongos e tiranos: relações de poder em "Of Mice and Men"

Resumo: Muitos são os estudos sobre o romance *Of Mice and Men* nas últimas décadas (Belk; Wallendorf, 2012; Meyer, 2009; Mehmet, 2016; Ganiyeva; Rajabova, 2023; Lisca, 1956). No entanto, decidimos reexaminar a questão sob uma nova perspectiva. A Teoria da Identidade de Norton (1997, 2000, 2013) fornece um arcabouço holístico para entender a interação entre identidade, poder, investimento e imaginação no romance. *Of Mice and Men* é um romance americano escrito por John Steinbeck e publicado em 1937. O livro acompanha a trajetória de dois trabalhadores rurais, George e Lennie, enquanto tentam encontrar emprego nos campos da Califórnia durante a Grande Depressão. Os peões do romance, além dos protagonistas Lennie Small e George Milton, são Candy,

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Slim, Crooks, Carlson e Whit. Portanto, nosso foco de análise não está nos personagens principais, mas nas inter-relações entre todos os personagens da obra. Relações de poder, discriminação e misoginia estão presentes no romance e são analisados através da lente de Norton (1997). Em conclusão, o romance retrata o poder de diversas formas entre os personagens. Seja por gênero, raça, respeito, capital ou emoções, as relações entre eles ocorrem com uma forma de autoridade sobre o outro, havendo um desequilíbrio na maneira como cada um se conecta.

Palavras-chave: *Of Mice and Men*. Teoria da Identidade. Relações de poder.

Introduction

Many are the studies on the novel *Of Mice and Men* across the last decades (Belk; Wallendorf, 2012; Meyer, 2009; Mehmet, 2016; Ganiyeva; Rajabova, 2023; Lisca, 1956). However, we have decided to re-examine the issue from a fresh perspective. However, it is important to remember the story. *Of Mice and Men* is an American novel written by John Steinbeck and published in 1937. The book follows the path of a pair of ranch workers, George and Lennie, while they try to find jobs in the rural lands of California during the Great Depression. Although they are the main characters of the story, many other characters also intertwine in different types of relationships, often based on an imbalance of power caused by various aspects.

California, in the 1930s, time of the Great Depression, became a place where workers went from ranch to ranch, looking for a way to achieve financial stability amidst an economic crisis. According to the California State Capitol Museum website[3], this situation was mostly common for people escaping the event known as the Dust Bowl, a weather phenomenon that devastated the Great Plains. Buying a piece of land was difficult, as everything was expensive, and the lower classes were not well paid, having to live with unstable jobs, as stated in the museum's website. In this scenario, Steinbeck presents in his novel a group of men, all working in the same farm and developing a kind of brotherhood, with its specific functioning and rules.

Bonny Norton's Identity Theory (1997; 2000; 2013) provides a holistic framework for understanding the interplay of identity, power, investment, and imagination in the novel. The ranch hands in the story—beyond the central duo of Lennie Small and George Milton—

[3] Check these and other information at their website. Available at <https://capitolmuseum.ca.gov/exhibits/the-dust-bowl-california-and-the-politics-of-hard-times/#:~:text=Driven%20by%20the%20depression%2C%20drought,large%20numbers%20to%20the%20state> Access: 20 mar. 2025.

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include Candy, Slim, Crooks, Carlson, and Whit. Thus, our analysis focuses not on the protagonists alone, but on the complex web of relationships among all characters. Through Norton's lens (1997), we examine how power relations, discrimination, and misogyny manifest in the text. Ultimately, the novel portrays power in multifaceted ways: whether through gender, race, respect, capital, or emotional leverage, each interaction reinforces an imbalance of authority, shaping how the characters connect—and collide.

Theoretical background

In order to understand the nature of society and the relationships present in the book, it is important to understand the concept of power: "[...] power, in political science and sociology, is the capacity to influence, lead, dominate, or otherwise have an impact on the life and actions of others in society" (Munro, 2025). In this essay, Max Weber's view of power will be considered to analyze how power is structured within the characters of *Of Mice and Men*: "power (*Macfet)* is the probability that one actor within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his own will despite resistance, regardless of the basis on which this probability rests" (Weber, 1978, p. 53).

Norton's Theory of Identity

Norton's Identity Theory emerged from her experiences in apartheid-era South Africa, where she witnessed firsthand how power dynamics shape language and identity. She posits that identity is not fixed but continuously reshaped through social interactions, particularly those influenced by power relations. Language, in this view, is more than a communication tool—it is a social practice that constructs and is constructed by one's experiences, histories, and future possibilities (Norton & Toohey, 2004). This perspective aligns with Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, framing acquisition (SLA) as an interpersonal activity embedded in specific sociocultural contexts (McKinney & Norton, 2011). The following subsections delve into the core constructs of Identity Theory.

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Identity

From a poststructuralist standpoint, Norton rejects the idea of identity as a fixed set of traits (e.g., extroversion, motivation) or rigid social categories (e.g., native/nonnative speaker, gender, race). Instead, she defines identity as multiple, dynamic, and complex, shaped by how individuals position themselves within broader social structures (Norton & De Costa, 2018).

Identities evolve through interactions in various settings—home, work, school—and are influenced by cultural norms and power dynamics. For example, Norton's (2000) case study of Eva, a Polish immigrant in Canada, illustrates how she navigated power imbalances with a younger, native-speaking coworker. Initially feeling marginalized, Eva later reclaimed agency by sharing her life experiences, demonstrating the fluidity of identity negotiation. Identity is thus co-constructed in social interactions, with learners constantly reorganizing their sense of self in relation to the world (McKinney & Norton, 2011).

Power Relations and Language Opportunity

Power relations significantly impact language learning, determining learners' access to target language speakers and communities. Drawing on Foucault, Norton argues that power operates at micro-levels in social interactions, either enabling or restricting learners' language opportunities (McKinney & Norton, 2011).

For instance, Eva's ability to engage in workplace conversations depended on shifting power dynamics—she initially felt disempowered but later asserted her voice. These asymmetrical relations also affect one's agency, as their engagement fluctuates based on perceived equity in interactions (Norton Pierce, 1995).

With globalization and digital communication, individuals now navigate more complex power structures, including online spaces where they may exercise greater agency (Darvin & Norton, 2015). However, these interactions remain embedded in broader ideological systems that shape language access and legitimacy.

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Investment and Motivation

While motivation (a psychological construct) explains an individual's general drive to acquire a language, for instance, investment (a sociological construct) captures their dynamic commitment to specific interactions. Norton Pierce (1995) introduced investment to account for why some people engage in some interactions but avoid others, depending on perceived benefits.

Investment entails an expectation of return—whether symbolic (e.g., social acceptance) or material (e.g., career advancement) (Norton, 2001). For example, a learner may invest in English to gain job opportunities, imagining future professional success. However, hostile environments (e.g., xenophobia, discrimination) can deter investment, even among highly motivated learners (Norton & De Costa, 2018).

Darvin and Norton (2015) expanded the investment model to include ideology and capital, emphasizing how societal structures influence an individual's opportunities. Digital spaces further complicate investment, as they may adopt different identities online (e.g., in gaming communities or virtual workplaces) (Leung, 2013).

Imagined Identity and Imagined Community

Imagined communities (Anderson, 2006), initially coined to refer to the sense of nationalism and national identities, was later broaden to indicate groups someone aspires to join, such as professional networks or global communities. These are not fantasies but aspirational affiliations that motivate learning and engagement. For example, Eva envisioned integrating into Canadian society while retaining ties to her Polish heritage (Norton, 2000).

Imagined identity reflects how individuals see their future selves within these communities (e.g., a confident professional, a fluent speaker). These visions guide present actions, as learners invest in language practices, for instance, to align with their aspirations (Kanno & Norton, 2003). Imagination is rule-governed, shaped by past experiences and future goals (Vygotsky, 1978). Learners' imagined communities may have a stronger

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influence than their immediate social circles, driving long-term investment (McKinney & Norton, 2011).

Therefore, Norton's Identity Theory provides a framework for understanding the interplay of identity, power, investment, and imagination. Individuals are dynamic agents who negotiate their identities within social structures, investing in language practices that align with their aspirations. This perspective challenges traditional views of motivation and highlights the sociopolitical dimensions of language learning.

Results and data analysis

The ranch workers of the novel, besides the main characters, Lennie Small and George Milton, are Candy, Slim, Crooks, Carlson, and Whit. They are all subordinates to the same boss, unnamed in the narrative, and to the boss' son, Curley. Although the boss does not have an active role in the story, Curley abuses the other workers with his whims, which are a fruit of his privilege as the boss' son. When George and Lennie get to the farm, Candy already warns them about Curley's misconduct of his privilege and constant use of violence, as seen in

> S'pose Curley jumps a big guy an' licks him. Ever'body says what a game guy Curley is. And s'pose he does the same thing and gets licked. Then ever'body says the big guy oughtta pick on somebody his own size, and maybe they gang up on the big guy. Never seem right to me. Seems like Curley ain't givin' nobody a chance. (Steinbeck, 1993, p. 26-27)

According to Norton's theory, this power struggle suggests a restriction in the workers' imagined community, because they cannot develop their investments freely with the authority Curley exerts over them. Their identities must be negotiated within the hierarchy they are inserted in. The financial control of Curley and his father is the top of the hierarchy of the powers, as the itinerant workers, including George and Lennie, are entirely dependent on employment for survival, making them vulnerable to exploitation, to achieve the American Dream—their imagined community and identity, a ranch where George and Lennie can be their own bosses and live how they want to.

However, despite not having the same privilege through economical means as Curley does, Slim has power over him and the others. When Lennie breaks Curley's hand

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(Steinbeck, 1993, p. 63), Slim is the one that tells Curley that he must not tell his father. The same demonstration of power happens when Carlson and Candy rely on Slim's opinion when Carlson says they should sacrifice the dog, knowing the matter is decided when Slim lets it happen, as is seen in "Candy looked helplessly at him, for Slim's opinions were law" (Steinbeck, 1993, p. 45). Curley should have absolute power over the workers, but he feels intimidated by Slim's respect among his peers, as it is seen when he explains himself, after irritating Slim for asking if he knew where his wife was (Steinbeck, 1993, p. 62). The source of Slim's power comes from his ability in the ranch and from his personality. His physique, as his nickname indicates, allows him to develop a certain ability as a skinner, which opened the door for him to be respected by the other workers and by the boss, and his quiet, confident demeanor maintains this respect. This can be perceived in the second Chapter, when he is firstly described:

> He was a jerkline skinner, the prince of the ranch (…). There was a gravity in his manner and a quiet so profound that all talk stopped when he spoke. His authority was so great that his word was taken on any subject, be it politics or love. (Steinbeck, 1993, p. 33)

Again, we see Slim's identity and power over the others as a construct he built by using language opportunities in a way that allowed him to develop a relation of power. This shows that identity does not have a fixed social category, as it can be reshaped through social interactions, and it can also shape and change how someone is perceived by others. According to Norton's (1997) theory, it is possible to perceive that Slim has had investment in his interactions, by choosing to have an opulent, respectful demeanor in order to achieve the power he has in the ranch. On the other hand, if he somehow loses this respect, his power vanishes, as he still has to answer to the boss' wishes, like the others. Power can be lost easily if the circumstances change–if the boss and Curley lost their money, they too would notice a change in their influence.

Besides the men, a woman lives in the ranch too. She is Curley's wife, and the reader is not presented with her name. Both Crooks, the only black worker, and Curley's wife exemplify how power relations constrain identity formation and language opportunities. Crooks faces racial exclusion that denies him meaningful participation in the ranch's social world, limiting his ability to assert his identity beyond the racist "stable buck" stereotype. Similarly, Curley's wife's namelessness reflects her gendered erasure, forcing her to perform

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femininity through flirtation and aggression as her only means of claiming agency. Their struggles reveal Norton's concept of nonparticipation–though motivated to connect with others, systemic oppression (racism for Crooks, patriarchy for Curley's wife) sabotages their investment in social interactions, leaving them linguistically and socially marginalized.

Their fleeting attempts to imagine alternative identities highlight the tension between aspiration and systemic constraints. Crooks briefly entertains belonging in George and Lennie's dream farm, while Curley's wife clings to her Hollywood fantasies, both representing Norton's imagined communities that motivate resistance. However, these imagined identities collapse when confronted with reality, –Curley's wife wields racial power over Crooks in a hollow attempt to claim status, while Crooks retreats into isolation after her racist threat. This illustrates Norton's argument that investment in language and identity is always mediated by unequal power structures, where the marginalized must navigate between resistance and survival within oppressive systems.

Analyzing this part of the novel, we believe it effectively demonstrates Norton's (2013) framework by showing how systemic power structures actively suppress identity formation. Crooks' racial isolation and Curley's wife's gendered performance reveal how oppression manifests differently but equally destructively, –what Norton calls "relations of power" that determine who is allowed to speak and be heard. Their forced nonparticipation isn't passive disengagement but what Norton (2013) would identify as systemic denial of language opportunities, where their attempts at investment (Crooks' momentary solidarity with Lennie, Curley's wife's flirtations) are rendered futile by the ranch's oppressive hierarchies. The "stable buck" stereotype and namelessness become what Norton (1997) calls "subject positions", –fixed identities imposed by dominant groups that constrain self-definition.

Their imagined alternatives powerfully capture Norton's (2000) concept of identity as aspirational yet fragile. The dream farm and Hollywood fantasies function as what Norton (2000) terms "imagined communities", –potential spaces of belonging that motivate resistance but remain unrealizable under current power structures. The violent collapse of these imaginings (through racial threats and gendered violence) exemplifies Norton's argument about how systemic oppression actively sabotages investment. Most insightfully, you show how their oppression becomes cyclical, –Curley's wife exercises racial power precisely because gender oppression denies her other avenues of agency, demonstrating

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what Norton calls the "unequal power structures" that force marginalized groups into complicity with the very systems that oppress them.

Although she is part of the family of the owner of the ranch, Curley's wife does not have much power over the others, as she is a woman in a patriarchal society. Every time she shows up in the barn, she is constantly treated as an inconvenience, and does not have anyone to talk to, as she says: "Think I don't like to talk to somebody every once in a while? Think I like to stick in that house alla time?" (Steinbeck, 1993, p. 77).

Women, in the world of the novel, are only heard when they are denouncing the poorer, less influential men, accusing them of harassment. Another meaningful mention of women in the novel happens when George is telling about why they had to leave the previous ranch: "Well, that girl rabbits in an' tells the law she been raped. The guys in Weed start a party out to lynch Lennie" (Steinbeck, 1993, p. 42).

The sort of demeanor is seen by Norton as a lack of speech opportunity greatly interconnected with power and, in this case, misogyny. Still, her investment is unceasing as Curley's wife continuously shows up among the men in the narrative, using Curley as an excuse for being around them. When Lennie and Candy visit Crooks, who is the only black worker, in his room, she follows them, but she uses a different approach this time: she implicitly threatens to accuse Crooks of harassment if he does not do what she wants, as it is observed in: "'Listen, nigger' she said. 'You know what I could do to you if you open your trap?'" (Steinbeck, 1993, p. 80).

Here we have clear marks of racism, especially in a society in which lynching was taken as the status quo (and even lawful). Crooks' identity as the black stable hand is already marked by exclusion, and his social position confines him to the margins. His imagined identity is systematically denied, as it can be seen in the situation mentioned, when a racial slur is used against him, reducing him to a position of inferiority. His wish of belonging to an imagined community collapses with society's validation of the act of lynching, which goes against his identity as a human being.

Also in this excerpt, we perceive something of a hierarchy of power relations, even though she is the one with no power or opportunity of speech amongst the other workers, she still instills her power on discrimination. A clear, to the authors of this paper, demonstration of her wanting to become more acknowledged.

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It is possible to perceive in this chapter that Crooks is the lowest in the hierarchy of power, having to even live by himself, excluded from the other workers–he even has to refer to some of them as "Mr." (Steinbeck, 1993, p. 50); his words are not heard by society, so whatever Curley's wife says it will be seen as true. It shows that race is a potent instrument of power, perhaps the most indisputable one in the narrative. Crooks shows motivation to work in the farm but does not demonstrate investment in changing the status quo.

When Curley's wife threatens Crooks, he firstly imposes himself, but later accepts the woman's demands out of fear. Candy also recognizes that, despite her being a female, she is still valuable as a possession to Curley, and he is voiceless compared to her–as it is perceived in "Candy subsided. 'No…' he agreed. 'Nobody listen to us' (Steinbeck, 1993, p. 81). In her book *Women, Race & Class,* the scholar Angela Davis states that

> in the history of the United States, the fraudulent rape charge stands out as one of the most formidable artifices invented by racism. The myth of the Black rapist has been methodically conjured up whenever recurrent waves of violence and terror against the Black community have required convincing justifications. (Davis, 1983, p. 101)

While Crooks endures exclusion and systemic racism, Curley's wife is confined by rigid gender expectations that leave her dependent on her husband and unable to follow her own wishes. Both Curley's wife and Crooks suffer from societal oppression, yet their struggles highlight different aspects of marginalization. Curley's wife's lack of name reinforces her powerlessness and lack of autonomy. In an attempt to assert some control, she flirts with the men and belittles Crooks, both attempts to assert herself and reclaim some power. However, the gender norms of the time ultimately strip her of the ability to truly have agency and live a fulfilling life.

Furthermore, the relationship between the two main characters is also one permeated by imparities and power struggles (Norton, 2019). Whereas Lennie is the best at working in the farm, due to his physical strength and physique, he has mental disabilities that lead him to behave similar to a child. George takes the role of controlling him, as he indicates how he should talk and act in every situation.

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Final Considerations

In conclusion, the novel depicts power in many ways between the characters. Whether due to gender, race, respect, capital or emotions, the relationships between them happen with a form of authority over the other, there being an imbalance in the way each one connects. Steinbeck, inspired by the realities of the time, creates a great example of how interpersonal relationships can act in times of crisis. These power struggles highlight themes of isolation and injustice, emphasizing how the unattainability of the American Dream reflects the harsh realities of the Great Depression and the human condition during that era.

Ultimately, the tragedy of Crooks and Curley's wife lies in the collapse of their *imagined communities*—the dream farm and Hollywood fantasies that briefly sustain them. Norton's (1997, 2000, 2013, 2019) framework illuminates how these aspirational identities, though powerful motivators for resistance, are inevitably crushed by the very structures they seek to transcend. Most poignantly, the cyclical nature of their oppression—where Curley's wife wields racial power as compensation for gendered subjugation—underscores Norton's (1997) assertion that unequal power structures force the marginalized into complicity with their own oppression. This analysis not only deepens our understanding of Steinbeck's characters but also affirms the enduring value of Norton's theory in examining how language, identity, and power intersect in both literature and lived experience. The ranch's hierarchies mirror real-world systems of exclusion, reminding us that until oppressive structures are dismantled, the investments and imagined futures of the marginalized will remain tragically out of reach.

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