John Steinbeck’s treatment of loneliness – a biographical and fictional experience – an analysis of loneliness in *Tortilla Flat*, *Cannery Row* and *Of Mice and Men*  
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There are two major problems with this thesis. The first problem is that it needs a clear, sophisticated definition of its central theme: loneliness. The second problem with the thesis is the biographical criticism of Steinbeck’s life mixed with the analysis of his novels – both (biographical criticism and the analysis of the novels) are fine enough ideas, but Purkrábková should have chosen one route or the other as the thesis is far too muddled.

In regards to the first problem – the definition of the central theme: Purkrábková uses only a thesaurus and two dictionaries to define loneliness, alienation and isolation. This is odd. Any potential reader already understands what those words mean on such a basic level. Purkrábková should have used better, more advanced texts to flesh out what she means by loneliness. She only uses one sophisticated text, i.e., Bekhet’s, in addition to the simple ones.

In regards to the second problem – the muddled thesis – Purkrábková bends many of the characters of the novels, and Steinbeck himself, to fit her argument that loneliness is a blessing and a burden and that because Steinbeck wrote about lonely characters, loneliness must be reflected in his life. Examples: A) Crooks in *Of Mice and Men*: Crooks is lonely because of racial disharmony – there is no blessing here, only burden – Crooks says he values the solitude of his quarters, yes, but because he is trying to preserve his dignity. If he were fully accepted by the whites, it is most likely he would embrace their companionship. B) Mack and the boys in *Cannery Row*: Purkrábková writes that Mack and the boys are lonely because they are “ravening individualists”. But an individualist does not have to be lonely. Mack and the boys want to be together so as not to be alone – but this is a choice – they could have also chosen to be hermits. The fact is they are not lonely. C) Steinbeck himself: Purkrábková writes on page 22: “It is indeed this ambiguity that celebrates Steinbeck’s own inner fight with isolation (NOTE: MISSING FULL STOP)”. Is it? Simply writing this in a sentence does not make it true. Biographical criticism is always tempting, especially in our age of Reality TV and best-selling memoirs but it can be difficult to pull off. Many tend to feel or want to believe that a writer must have experienced what he/she wrote about. An antithesis of this that springs to mind is another realistic (naturalistic) writer, Stephen Crane – who wrote a very psychologically real portrayal of war – without having experienced battle at all. So, Steinbeck was lonely and loneliness was a theme in his work. Aren’t all writers lonely to a degree? It is the nature of the work (at least when a writer is working – this is seen the blessing part of Purkrábková’s duality) and cannot all people be deemed as being lonely to a degree, at least sometimes (the burden part of Purkrábková’s duality)? This type of argument does Steinbeck and his imagination a disservice. He wrote about lonely people because he was lonely – okay – does it follow, then, that if he had written about a serial killer, that Steinbeck must have been a serial killer?

In the end, this thesis bites off more than it can chew. It is an attempt at original scholarship – which is commendable – but it is not in the end, effective.

Some other points to note:

(over)
A. There are a great many slips in the use of English in this thesis – too many to note, some of which could have been caught by running a spell-check. Here are only three from page seven: 1. place him by his side? – 2. reversely? 3. lonelines? (on page 21 – third paragraph – loneliness! And loneliness is the theme of the thesis!).

B: MLA Citation Style not applied correctly:
ITALICS must be used for novels. This is not done in this thesis consistently. It must always be done, including in the Works Cited page and in the in-text citations

Inverted commas/Quotation marks: Sometimes double inverted commas are used, while sometimes single inverted commas are used. A writer must be consistent.

Wrong position of final full stop for in-text citations.

Capitals should be used in important words of titles: e.g., Cannery row should be Cannery Row.

Works Cited page: this must be in alphabetical order (Elaine Steinbeck and Warren G. French are out of order).

C: Crooks should be described as a black stable hand rather than a black stable buck in the thesis. Buck is a derogatory term for black male.

D: The thesis deals with three novels but the analysis is not divided equally. Of Mice and Men gets ten pages, Cannery Row five pages and Tortilla Flat five pages.

Recommended Grade: 3 Dobře

Mark Farrell, May 2011