

John Steinbeck's *Cannery Row*
Dr. Alan Haffa
Biography (1902—1968)

- ▶ Born in Salinas; Father was County Treasurer
- ▶ Worked Fields
- ▶ Attended Stanford
- ▶ 1925: New York
- ▶ Back to California, 1930; Met Ed Ricketts
- ▶ Successful writer in 30s and 40s and 50s
- ▶ War Correspondent for New York Herald Tribune
- ▶ Nobel Prize for Literature in 1962 for

Bibliography

- ▶ *Tortilla Flat*, 1935, first Success
- ▶ California Laboring Classes: *In Dubious Battle* (1936), *Of Mice and Men* (1937), *Grapes of Wrath* (1939)—won Pulitzer
- ▶ *Cannery Row*, 1945
- ▶ *The Pearl* (1947)
- ▶ *East of Eden* (1952)

Cannery Row as a Realistic Utopian Novel

- ▶ Utopian Presentation of the Lower Classes:
 - Generous
 - Sociable and Symbiotic
 - Fun Loving and Easy Going
 - Ethical
- ▶ Realistic Counter Point
 - Suicides
 - Violence
 - Cruelty

Steinbeck as Voice of the People

- ▶ "Steinbeck was not just a bard of the people in the thirties; he continued to be engaged through World War II, through Vietnam, until the end of his life. **Steinbeck** is part of a stream of American literature trying to find the voice of the people," says Susan Shillinglaw, professor of English at San Jose State University and director of the Center for **Steinbeck** Studies. (Rogers)

Characters and Place

- ▶ The appeal stems in part from **Steinbeck's** portrayal of a community. His **characters** range from the powerful to the insignificant; to omit one would injure the whole. "The concept of living in place is essential," says Shillinglaw, "how we are connected to our environment in the largest sense--people, plants, animals, cultures." (Rogers)
- ▶ One technique he uses in characterization is that the Place associated with a character is first introduced. Then the character. Like an animal in its environment.

Characters form an Ecosystem

- An understanding of place is important to **Steinbeck**, but Shillinglaw believes that **Steinbeck** goes beyond physical place in **Cannery Row**. "It is really a complex book. He's trying to encompass an ecological whole that's also psychological and spiritual, if you will. There is a lot in it that is Darwinian, a constant metaphor of death and survival." Each organism fits into a special place in the ecosystem and ensures the health of the whole. (Rogers)

Haffa Theory of Characterization in *Cannery Row*

- ▶ Four Primary Place Modes: Lee Chong's Grocery; Palace Flop House; Dora's House; Doc's Western Biological Lab
- ▶ First the physical place is described
- ▶ Then the character most closely associated
- ▶ Then an anecdote that shows the character interacting with another character.

Four Levels of Meaning

- Steinbeck himself claimed that *Cannery Row* was written on "four levels," and that no critic had ever explained it.
- Platonic Ladder of Reality and Truth
- Shadow; Real World; Intellectual World; World of Ideas
- Animal world—survival of the fittest as represented by Tide Pool and the Gopher; Reality of Human World—survival and competition; Intellectual world of Doc Rickett's—He seeks to understand the animals and environment in a detached, scientific way; Spiritual World—social cooperation of **community** seeks to balance the **competition of individuals**

Tide Pools and Biodiversity

- ▶ “The sea is very clear and the bottom becomes fantastic with hurrying, fighting, feeding, breeding animals. Crabs rush from frond to frond of the waving algae. Starfish squat over mussels and limpets, attach their million little suckers and then slowly lift with incredible power until the prey is broken from the rock. Orange and speckled and fluted nudibranchs slide gracefully over the rocks, their skirts waving like the dresses of Spanish dancers. And black eels poke their heads out of crevices and wait for prey... The smells of life and richness, of death and digestion, of decay and birth, burden the air.” (31-32)
- ▶ Metaphor for Social Life of Cannery Row
- ▶ Doc Ricketts studying the tide pools parallels Steinbeck studying the people of Cannery Row
The Economy of Cannery Row
- ▶ Source of Life: you can get everything you want there, but it isn't free
- ▶ Lee Chong is enterprising but not heartless; he gives credit “until further trust became ridiculous.” (10)
- ▶ Anecdote with Horace Abbeville: Paid off his debt by selling house—Palace Flophouse and Grill
- ▶ Suicide

Deal with Lee Chong and Horace Abbeville

- ▶ “They finished the deal with dignity and Lee Chong threw in a quarter pint of Old Tennis Shoes. And then Horace Abbeville walking very straight went across the lot and past the cypress tree and across the track and up the chicken walk and into the building that had been his, and he shot himself on a heap of fish meal. And although it has nothing to do with this story, no Abbeville child, no matter who its mother was, knew the lack of a stick of spearmint ever afterward.”
Analysis of Anecdote
- ▶ Dispassionate description
- ▶ The point of the anecdote is to show that Lee Chong is a compassionate man—not a heartless capitalist.
- ▶ Structurally, the suicide of Horace introduces the specter of death, which is always present on Cannery Row, just as it is always present in the Bay's tide pools—life and death mingling together, beauty and ugliness both.

Characters both Real and Mythic

- Just as his grocery functions like the Bay—the source of life—so does he function as something more than a man.
- “Lee Chong is more than a Chinese grocer. He must be. Perhaps he is evil balanced and held suspended by good—an Asiatic planet held to its orbit by the pull of Lao Tze and held from Lao Tze by the centrifugality of abacus and cash register... a hard man with a can of beans—a soft man with the bones of his grandfather.
- Digs up his grandfather's graves at China point and sends the bones back to China for burial.

Mack as the Leader of the “Boys”

- “Mack came in. Mack was the elder, leader, mentor, and to a small extent the exploiter of a little group of men who had in common no families, no money, and no ambitions beyond food, drink, and contentment. But whereas most men in their search for contentment destroy themselves and fall wearily short of their targets, Mack and his friends approached contentment casually, quietly, and absorbed it gently.”
- Mack then cons Lee into “renting” the house to them. They never paid any rent, but they did spend their money on food and beer at his grocery.

Mack and the Boys and the Palace Flophouse

- ▶ “The Palace Flophouse was no sudden development...Mack with a piece of chalk, drew five oblongs on the floor, each seven feet long and four feet wide, and in each square he wrote a name...Each man had property rights inviolable in his space. He could legally fight a man who encroached on his square. The rest of the room was property common to all.” (39)

Glorification or Reality of Poverty?

- Mack and the Boys live on what they can get from theft and trickery
- They work when they must, but no more
- While lazy, they have big hearts
- They want to put on a party for Doc
- But at the same time, the party for Doc is more a party for them, and the first attempt ends in disaster
- Mack: “I ain’t sure we’re doing it for Doc. I ain’t sure we ain’t doin’ it for ourselves. And Doc’s too nice a fella to do that to.”
- They are complex characters who are realistic in many ways—hard but soft; foolish but deep; good-for-nothings, but principled.

“Family Life” on Cannery Row

- ▶ Mr. and Mrs. Malloy and the boiler from the Hediondo Cannery
- ▶ “In 1935 Mr. and Mrs. Sam Malloy moved into the boiler...it was a roomy, dry, and safe apartment. True, if you came in through the fire door you had to get down on your hands and knees, but once in there was head room in the middle and you couldn’t want a dryer, warmer place to stay...Mr. Mallow was happy and contented there and for quite a long time so was Mrs. Mallow.”
- ▶ Renting of Pipes: “Mrs. Mallow had been contented until her husband became a landlord and then she began to change.” (47)

Bear Flag Restaurant

- ▶ “a decent, clean, honest, old-fashioned sporting house where a man can take a glass of beer among friends. This is no fly-by-night cheap clip-joint but a sturdy, virtuous club, build, maintained, and disciplined by Dora who, madam and girl for fifty years, has through the exercise of special gifts of tact and honesty, charity and a certain realism, made herself respected by the intelligent, the learned and the kind. And by the same token she is hated by the twisted and lascivious sisterhood of married spinsters whose husbands respect the home but don’t like it very much.” (19)

Doc as a “Good Man”

▶ “Mack nodded his head soberly. ‘That Doc is a hell of nice fella,’ he said. ‘He’ll give you a quarter any time. When I cut myself he put on a new bandage every day. A hell of a nice fella.’

▶ Party

Frog Hunting in Carmel Valley

▶ At last Mack said, “God damn it. I hate a liar.”

Who’s been lyin’ to you? Eddie asked.

“Oh, I don’t mind a guy that tells a little one to get along or to hop up a conversation, but I hate a guy that lies to himself.”

“Who done that?” Eddie asked.

“Me,” said Mack. “And maybe you guys. Here we are,” he said earnestly, “the whole God damned shabby lot of us. We worked it out that we wanted to give Doc a party. So we come out here and have a hell of a lot of fun. Then we’ll go back and get the dough from Doc. There’s five of us, so we’ll drink five times as much liquor as he will. And I ain’t sure we’re doin’ it for Doc. I ain’t sure we ain’t doin’ it for ourselves. And Doc’s too nice a fella to do that to... You know one time I put the bee on him for a buck. I give him a hell of a story. Right in the middle I seen he knew God damn well the story was so much malarky. So right in the middle I says, “Doc, that’s a fuggin’ lie!” And he put his hand in his pocket and brought out a buck. ‘Mack,’ he says, I figure a guy that needs it bad enough to make up a lie to get it, really needs it.’ and he give me the buck. I paid him that buck back the next day. I never did spend it. Just kept it overnight and then give it back to him.” (77)

First Party

▶ The “reality” that in fact that ARE giving the party for themselves

▶ The sentimental idealism of the ‘honest liar’ and ‘generous beggar’ is undermined as Mack and the Boys have the party without Doc, at his place, and trash it.

▶ Mack goes to Doc the next day and takes a beating.

Second Party

▶ “Mack and the boys—the Virtues, the Beatitudes, the Beauties. They sat in the Palace Flophouse and they were the stone dropped in the pool, the impulse which sent out ripples to all of Cannery Row and beyond, to Pacific Grove, to Monterey, even over the hill to Carmel.

▶ Boys are so low that they don’t even look at a parade

▶ The whole community plans a party to make up for the first party

▶ Gifts: Cats

▶ Mack lies about his birthday: “When’s your birthday?”...it sounded perfectly casual...But it must be remembered that Doc had known Mack a very long time. If he had not he would have said December 18 which was his birthday instead of October 27 which was not. “October 27,” said Doc. “Ask Hazel what that makes me.”

▶ Doc understands and analyzes Mack just as he does a Starfish

Conclusions

▶ Party: Democratization of Culture as everyone participates in fighting, but also music and poetry

- ▶ Gopher awaits a female gopher; Need for a Soulmate; Mack lost his; Doc doesn't have one
- ▶ Ambivalent ending: The life on Cannery Row is neither praised nor condemned; it is what is—a swirling, chaotic, shifting, rough tidal pool in which the struggle for life is constant
- ▶ Life is a constant struggle, but at the same time there are symbiotic relationships