



Hugvísindasvið

John Steinbeck's characters

Representing different social and political groups

Ritgerð til B.A.-prófs

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Háskóli Íslands

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Abstract

In this B.A. thesis, I intend to explore the reasons why John Steinbeck aimed most of his novels towards the land owners and political figures during the Great Depression. I seek to examine if he always felt so strongly about the corruption and injustice, and if not, what influenced him to start writing those types of novels. Furthermore, I am interested in the way he used his characters in the novels as a way to represent the many different social groups of the era and how they experienced the economic crisis. Are they as a part of the action, or does he have a greater purpose in mind for them? I aim to show how John Steinbeck put his characters through conflicting real and fantasy worlds in order to inspire the nation and send out the simple message of how there was still hope around, even though times were at their darkest. I will be looking mostly at some of his more famous novels, *Of Mice and Men*, *Tortilla Flat*, *The Grapes of Wrath* and *The Winter of Our Discontent*, but I will, however, briefly mention some of his other stories as well.

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Introduction

The Great Depression affected countries around the world during the 1930s to 1940s with its worst cases mostly being felt in North America and Europe. The era created harsh living conditions for the working class who found it difficult to earn enough money to survive. These difficult times became major focus points for many authors around the world, but amongst American novelists John Steinbeck perhaps stands out as best representing the harsh ordeals of the ordinary working folk during this period.

Steinbeck, who grew up in the Salina's Valley region of California, wrote several novels that focused on both the economic and the personal hardships of the Great Depression. The most popular of these works take place around his childhood home. His novels often praised nature and were immensely important during the Great Depression as they helped influence the lives of ordinary people, and in the process they paved the way for future artists. His tales have clear moral aspects which are not only relevant to his time, but also perhaps for our own which suddenly seems to have so much in common with the 1920s and 30s.

It has been claimed that John Steinbeck did not intend his stories to be vehicles for his political views, and that he only wanted was to tell stories. Others maintain that it was because of his sudden realization of how severe the economic climate was that he decided to apply it to his novels. Whatever his reasons may have been, his novels exhibit clear images of life during these times of struggle for the working class. In them, we are faced with the battles these characters must fight every day and we are introduced to different social levels through the characters. These characters go through life with their own problems and worries, and their battles closely resembled those of the working class.

John Steinbeck's novels give us a glimpse of the lifestyle and conditions which the American public was forced to endure, while those who were higher on the social scale were the ones who lived the so called "American Dream". The Great Depression affected each class in a different way and the differences can be seen through the characters in the novels. The living conditions of the average working man was brutal, but the way he romanticized the nature in his novels worked as a contrast between the real and the fantasy, and the characters often had to rely on being able to escape the real world and enter the fantasy one. It was with that action that Steinbeck used his characters to try to make a difference in the society.

Steinbeck's politics

The effects of the Great Depression struck the American working class hard. Suddenly people no longer had solid ways of providing for their families. Work was hard to come by which left thousands of people applying for every hundred jobs and working the few odd jobs that were available did not earn them all that much money. This would usually meant that after a full day's work husbands could barely afford to give their families a decent meal, and medical bills often put too much strain on the family budget. This resulted in many deaths, mostly due to starvation. A staggering number of these deaths were children, but a big portion of them resulted from minor injuries or illnesses which could have been prevented had the individuals received proper medical care.

Steinbeck spent a few years early in his career working as a journalist for the *San Francisco News*, and the articles he wrote there seem to pre-echo the voice that later became so important in his novels. Around 1936-8 when he was carrying out research for a seven article series for the newspaper, John Steinbeck witnessed firsthand the true and horrifying effects of the Great Depression. It was an experience that changed the way he approached novel writing. During his visit to Visalia, where he was doing the research, Steinbeck was exposed to the horrible living condition of the migrant workers. He witnessed the results of the floods, starvation and the horrid living situation that the workers had to suffer through. He witnessed firsthand how the migrant workers had lost everything and had to work hard all day without being able to feed their children, many of whom in turn did not live long. **This experience had profound effects on Steinbeck, and it caused a major focus shift in him.** He wanted to make the people who were at fault take responsibility for their actions. **Since the newspapers would not touch subject** he felt that he needed to write a story on it

(Dickstein 123). The first novel in which he expressed his newly reformed attitude was *The Grapes of Wrath* which was published about a year later.

Steinbeck often derived the titles of his novels from various literature sources. The title of *Of Mice and Men* came from the poem *To a Mouse* by Robert Burns, *The Winter of Our Discontent* originated as a line in William Shakespeare's *Richard III*. The title of *The Grapes of Wrath* has more of a complex origin. The title itself comes from Julia Ward Howe's *The Battle Hymn of the Republic*, which in turn is a referral to the biblical passage "Revelation". This passage deals with the apocalyptic appeal for justice and the freedom from oppression which is the major theme in *The Grapes of Wrath*.

Lois Parkinson Zamora argues that the articles Steinbeck wrote for the *San Francisco News* clearly showed that he felt the need for political change (52). Steinbeck witnessed many horrifying things caused by the Great Depression during his time as a journalist and later as a war correspondent at the time of the Second World War, which truly opened his eyes to the world around him. The seven articles which he wrote for the *San Francisco News* read much like one of his short stories and he does not try to exaggerate the details one bit. Instead he reports them exactly as they appeared to him:

The squatters' camps are located all over California. Let us see what a typical one is like. It is located on the banks of a river, near an irrigation ditch or on a side road where a spring of water is available. From a distance it looks like a city dump, and well it may, for the city dumps are the sources for the material of which it is built. You can see a litter of dirty rags and scrap iron, of houses built of weeds, of flattened cans or

of paper. It is only on close approach that it can be seen that these are homes.(Curtis, Gabrick and Markham Article II)

This opening passage from the second article in the series titled “The Harvest Gypsies” sets the tone for his later novels and paints a good picture of how the migrant workers lived. His experience working as a war correspondent would also serve as an incentive for his later novels. One of his novels, *The Moon is Down*, a book which focused on the Nazi conquest, became highly controversial and made people ask the question why Steinbeck was so interested in the fight against the Axis (Hyman 185). The truth most likely was because he was exposed to it so much that it inevitably had profound effects on him.

According to Morris Dickstein, Steinbeck first gained fame with his novel about the happy and joyful migrant *paisanos* at *Tortilla Flat*. Later he became commercially recognized with his novel *Of Mice and Men* which was considered to be his least political novel in a three novel series of migrant farm workers (113). This was the path that Steinbeck was interested in pursuing with his writings; he wanted to create memorable characters in a novel that praised the wonders of the land. These two novels are set during the Great Depression and as a result they focus on the subject. He does not seem to romanticize the migrant worker any more here than he does in his later novels. For example, the group of friends in *Tortilla Flat* does not seem to be too affected by the economic crisis. They are not depressed, do not seem to be dying of starvation and are never seen struggling to find work. His stories about the migrant workers did not come about because of his commitment towards being a reformer. They came from the simple fact that he was always on a look out for a story (Dickstein 117). Because he grew up in the Salinas Valley in California, he was frequently exposed to this particular subject. The migrant laborers frequented in California during

the Great Depression and thus the opportunity for these stories presented themselves to Steinbeck.

The experience he gained through both his job at the *San Francisco News* and from his time as a war correspondent helped him set the tone for *The Grapes of Wrath*. In the novel he includes 16 intermediate chapters. These are chapters that do not include any of the main characters, but are there to present both the social background of the period to amplify the actions taken in the novel. They also provide the reader with important historical information such as the development of land ownership in California as well as the development of migration labor (Lisca 297). These **intermediate** chapters are derived from Steinbeck's work experience from writing his newspaper articles, and they echo the voice he had started to express so clearly throughout his career as a journalist.

John Steinbeck's earlier works seemed to carry the simple message of loving the land and enjoying life. His characters were usually placed in such a vivid scenario that the reader could not help feeling a bit patriotic. We see that in *Tortilla Flat* where even though the **paisanos** are poor and cannot hold on to a dollar longer than it takes them to buy themselves a jug of wine, they are happy and have everything they want in life. In their case it is companionship and some wine. Everything usually works out for them and they have no worries about the future. In *Of Mice and Men*, Lennie and George have each other and we get the sense that if they were apart, they would be more affected by the sorrow and struggle of the Great Depression. Each of them earned 50 dollars a month from working on the farm but as Steinbeck mentions in article number five of the "Harvest Gypsies" series it was difficult to hold on to even the smallest savings.

The older boy and the father together made \$60. At that time the automobile broke out some teeth of the differential and the repairs, together with three second-hand tires, took \$22. The family moved into Kern County to chop grapes and camped in the squatters' camp on the edge of Bakersfield.

At this time the father sprained his ankle and the little girl developed measles. Doctors' bills amounted to \$10 of the remaining store, and food and transportation took most of the rest. . (Curtis, Gabrick and Markham Article V)

Steinbeck starts to focus more on the seriousness of the situation with the release of *The Grapes of Wrath*. The events which he was exposed to during his research in Visalia had clearly made their way into the novel. We are introduced to a group of people who are forced to leave their homes and migrate over to California to find work. The journey is long and hard and a few casualties occur on the way. Once in California, they realize that work is not going to be easy to find. People from all over the country were making the same journey in hopes of finding a job. The tones of the novels from then on become darker.

The working class was forced to evacuate its homes and travel long distances across the country in hopes of finding some form of a paid work. These journeys were tedious and took their toll on the travelers. Because there was a shortage of both food and water not everyone made it to the final destination. Just as Steinbeck portrayed in the novel, the few jobs that were available did not pay well and there were claims that the employers kept their workers poor to increase their dependence. When on the rare occasions the migrant workers started to think a union, the police were called in to deter them. The employers did not want the workers to organize themselves and

demand higher wages and better treatments. Any attempts to rise up against the higher authorities were quickly dispersed by the representatives of the law enforcement offices. Steinbeck includes these elements in to *The Grapes of Wrath* and uses his novel as a powerful weapon of political attack. The employers in the novel saw the workers who demanded better wages as being greedy and referred to them as red agitators. A red was a person who wanted 30 cents when the going rate was 25, which meant that all of the workers were reds (Dickstein 128).

Steinbeck drew his influences from various places. His love for the nature and social reforming are similar to the messages made famous by Emerson, Whitman and Thoreau. Jackson J. Benson tells us about the major influence on Steinbeck's career. This was a man who surprisingly was not a literature figure. He was a marine biologist and a self proclaimed philosopher without a degree. It was with the help of Edward F. Ricketts that Steinbeck developed an interest for ecology. This helped shape his literary career into what we later came to know. Benson does point out that Steinbeck had shown interest in biology before being influenced by Ricketts, and while at Stanford he even asked to take a course on dissecting cadavers. His reasons for doing so were that he "wanted to understand human beings" (74). This shows his desire to fully understand his subject matter and also explains his immense attention to detail which made his novels the more powerful. Because of how influential his novels became, he helped pave the way for Folk music artists such as Woody Guthrie who felt inspired by Steinbeck's message. Guthrie's first album *Dust Bowl Ballads* even featured a two part song called "Tom Joad".

When he started to use his writing as a tool for social protest, Steinbeck was met with some scrutiny. His ideas and social protest were even considered to be acts of Communism. He was never a Communist but rather a follower of the New Deal

Democratic politics (Dickstein 124). Harold S. Nelson has labeled him a Marxist during these earlier stages of his career and maintains that as the time passed the heat and the social angst that is prominent in *The Grapes of Wrath* slowly started to cool down over time. He stated that "*The Grapes of Wrath is radical (in the popular sense) and forward-looking; The Winter of Our Discontent is conservative and oriented to the past*" (118). Steinbeck not only intended for his novels to attack all the corruption of the political figures but he also intended for them to serve as an incentive for people to wake up and notice what was going on in their own community. He writes in the forewords to *The Winter of Our Discontent*: "Readers seeking to identify the fictional people and places here described would do better to inspect their own communities and search their own hearts, for this book is about a large part of America today."

Nelson goes on to suggest that Steinbeck is making the banks and the heads of the economic system to be the monsters that are terrorizing the entire population. The bank, according to Nelson, is Capitalism and it is seeding its own destruction (119). Steinbeck would frequently attack those who were in charge in the country and would accuse them of being dishonest and corrupt. Evidence supporting his claims can be found still today, especially if we look at the current economic crisis which is affecting countries all over the world. We still have the corrupt political figures dragging the world down into another crisis. The banks and insurance companies, institutions who are meant to help the citizens of the world, are still coming together to cause extended damages to the economy. Companies like AIG have caused severe damages to the economy by swallowing over 170 billion US dollars of tax payers money and then paying over 165 million dollars of it to the incompetent executives in charge (Hirsh). Just like it was in Steinbeck's day it seems that the ones we were supposed to be able trust with our economic affairs are the ones who have let us down.

There are several reasons why Steinbeck gradually started to tone down his political views. One of them might result from the fact that the economic crisis was slowly dissolving, and the fact that Steinbeck wanted to write history as it happened (Dickstein 127). It can even be perceived that he changed his views again during his research for *Travels with Charley*, where he embarked on a nearly ten thousand mile trip across the United States with his dog Charley as his traveling companion. Whatever the reasons were, *The Winter of Our Discontent* does appear to be less openly critical and vitriolic as *The Grapes of Wrath*.

The Grapes of Wrath marks an important turning point in American literature. It put Steinbeck on the map as an author, as well as a citizen was tired of seeing how horribly some people were being treated. He loved his home region, cherished every river and hill and often romanticized them in his novels. He did, however, dislike the political system which is something that becomes clear when the central characters of *The Grapes of Wrath* get suppressed by the corrupt Californian political system (Dickstein 117).

There are those who criticize Steinbeck for limiting his subjects regarding the Great Depression to just a certain group of individuals, but Lincoln R. Gibbs is not one of them. He states: “If we applaud the scientist for restricting his field, we should permit the novelist to select his province and have his favorite types. We should insist only that he tell us the whole truth within the limits he chooses” (177). The fact that Steinbeck would spend most of his time focusing on the lower class means that he had the opportunity to incorporate his own voice to the novel. He does this by victimizes his central characters and telling his readers about the injustice that they are faced with each day and gives details of the extreme gap between poverty and wealth and all the evils that the industrialism had brought on the factory towns (Gibbs 178). Steinbeck

explains this vast difference in a simple sentence spoken by Tom Joad: “The good rich lan’ layin fallow, or maybe one fella with a million acres, while a hundred thousan’ good farmers is starvin’” (*The Grapes of Wrath*, 435, ch. 28). One of his biggest critics was Edmund Wilson, who branded Steinbeck as a “minor regionalist”. This prejudice was shared by many and it even went so far that *The New York Times* printed a lead editorial stating that Steinbeck did not deserve the Nobel Prize (Benson 73).

Background influences

The Grapes of Wrath became John Steinbeck's most famous book, and is often cited as the novel in which he began his attacks on the social and economic changes which were occurring due to the Great Depression. Steinbeck had been touching on the subject earlier in his literary career, even if he did not take a personal stance on the matter at that time. The Great Depression was frequently a part of his novels and usually examples of it can be found by looking at his characters. The extremely harsh economic situation had created an enormous gap between the social groups. The land owners and the aristocrats were living the care-free life while the working class was forced to endure hard and painful labor jobs so they could afford to feed their families, which they could not even do because of the poor salary they were earning. When we read his novels, we quickly notice how Steinbeck purposely placed several different social groups in his different characters. We have the rich upper class citizens, the struggling migrant workers, the Negro slaves and of course the old timers who were looking down the end of their own road.

These representations are made clearest in *Of Mice and Men*. Even though it is not one of the major themes of the novel it is possibly one of the most recognizable features in it. We are introduced to this straight away when we meet George and Lennie. This unlikely pair can be seen as representing three different groups: the working class, the health care worker and the handicapped. As a duo their purpose in the novel is to portray the migrant workers who go from town to town in a desperate search for work. They do not have an easy life and struggle to hold down a job for a lengthy period. As a result they never have an actual place to call home. Lennie Small also represents a completely different social group on his own. Being a mentally challenged individual, Lennie is incapable of taking care of himself and must rely on

George to survive. George can therefore be seen as a representation of someone working in the health care system. The connection is made by George taking on the role of Lennie's caretaker. Steinbeck draws up a clear image of the struggling migrant workers in the novel and even though it pre dates *The Grapes of Wrath* by a couple of years, the details of the migrant workers do resemble his telling of what he witnessed while carrying out his research in Visalia.

It is when we look at Curly and his father that we get a glimpse of how big the gap is between the upper and lower class. While this gap still exists today the differences are not nearly as extreme. While the workers did whatever needed to be done around the farm, Curly and his father were the ones reaping all the benefits. This is how things worked and indeed still work today. The difference is that today workers have more rights and have unions to make sure that they are not being mistreated at their jobs. In the 1930s the workers did not have that; however the upper class citizens did not have to worry about those sorts of things. Those who were born into the upper class family usually had a heritage just waiting for them and never had to know the meaning of hard work. We see that shine through Curly who has never had to do any manual labor for himself. He has a beautiful wife and is living the good life while the workers are forced to fight for their survival and deal with all the work and the hard times that came with the Great Depression.

One of the more vulnerable social groups of the era gets mentioned in *Of Mice and Men*. Candy represents the group of individuals who are coming to the end of their usefulness. They are old or crippled, perhaps even both, and can barely work anymore. Bert Cardillo maintains that the shooting of Candy's dog, even though it serves as a parallel to the shooting of Lennie, serves a much greater purpose in the novel. He argues that it opens Candy's eyes to his situation (19). Candy is approaching senility

and soon he will no longer be of any use around the farm. When his dog is taken out back and shot, Steinbeck is criticizing the treatment of group. The dog is too old to be of any use and must therefore be killed. It was a terrible situation, and at times, they even wished for the same fate as the old dog:

“He said miserably, “You seen what they done to my dog tonight? They say he wasn’t no good to himself and nobody else. When they can me here I wisht somebody’d shoot me. But they won’t do nothing like that. I won’t have no place to go, an’ I can’t get no more jobs...” (Steinbeck 59).

People like Candy were the ones that had the hardest time trying to survive during the Great Depression. When they were facing starvation, extreme poverty and constant migration, it could only add to their constant pain and suffering to know that they would soon no longer be of any use and would therefore not be able to earn enough money to survive. The migrant workers were often forced to travel excruciatingly long distances, far away from their homes, and like it occurs in *The Grapes of Wrath* when Grandpa and Grandma Joad do not survive the journey. As a result this group of people more often than not passed away on their long journeys. Their struggles in life, as well as people’s general views on these individuals is signified in the novel not only with the previously mentioned fate of Candy’s dog but also from the fact that Candy comes off as being on the same mental level as Lennie. He even starts to sound like Lennie when he is telling Crooks about the land which the three men plan to buy together. In fact, Candy is the only one in the novel who seems to be on the same mental level as Lennie (Cardullo 20).

Steinbeck includes these social groups so there is a character which everyone can relate to. He can, therefore, use his novels to criticize the political system of

California and declare his distrust for the people in charge. He can also take the opportunity to inspire his American readers, and let them know that changes need to be made because the progress the country was making was not going in the right direction. They deserved more than what they were getting. Ethan Hawley's role was to show people how things in the world truly worked, and to show that it was not impossible to make a difference in the community. All they had to do was to keep at it and not give up on themselves.

Romanticizing certain characters

Even though Steinbeck had not taken a specific stance against the treatment of the migrant workers before the publication of *The Grapes of Wrath*, it is clear to that he was beginning to develop some personal opinions on the matter. This becomes obvious to the reader when he takes a look at how the characters are presented in *Of Mice and Men*. Steinbeck does not romanticize the migrant workers. Lennie and George are facing a tough battle in life but they remain upbeat. They have their special plan which drives them forward and the two men are the focus characters in the novel. Steinbeck does not glorify them in any way. He does the same with his previous novel when he describes the *paisanos* in *Tortilla Flat*.

Steinbeck's depiction of the upper class, however, shows his distaste for those who were in control. Curly, the representation of the upper class, is shown as the arrogant tough guy who picks on those who are weaker than him and then immediately caving when someone actually stands up to him. His manhood is constantly being questioned both by the reader and the author with suggestions being made that he is impotent. Curly walks around wearing a glove filled with Vaseline to keep his hand soft for his beautiful wife who seeks companionship from the workers on the farm since she does not seem to be getting any affection from her husband. The upper class population are portrayed as the cowardly bullies who pick on those beneath them and are usually made out to look like the villains who are without any sense of morality, and would most likely not even shed a tear for a dying family member.

Ethan Hawley, the main protagonist of *The Winter of Our Discontent*, sheds away all his previously held morals to become somebody in his town. As a decent, loyal and trustworthy individual his social position could only stand still at the mediocre level he was positioned at, and then we are made to figure out through the

course of the story that it is not until he becomes a cold, oppressing and almost an evil person that he starts to see success come his way. This novel gives out the clearest signs of Steinbeck disgust towards the upper class and even though it has been called less attacking than *The Grapes of Wrath*, it obviously is not at all without its criticism. What Steinbeck wanted to show his readers was that if they wanted to succeed in the corrupt society they had to transform their entire persona and become just like every other corrupt political figures that controlled the country. There truly was no place in it for individuals who would not step over other people to get what they wanted. This concept has since been replicated many times as plotlines in Hollywood movies, usually the ones that feature a young and slightly naïve man trying to make it on Wall Street. A movie version of *The Grapes of Wrath* was released in 1940, although the film differs significantly from the novel. The ending of the movie version was changed considerably because the novel version was deemed too controversial to be carried over to the movie. Instead of the dark ending included in the novel we all of a sudden have a much happier one in the film. The movie does not end with the downfall of the Joad family. The film makers felt that it was more appropriate for the film to conclude with the family ending up in a good camp which the government provided for.

Steinbeck loved California and he often praised its glorious landscape in his novels. What he did not like, however, was how selfish and manipulated the system was. His opinion was that ownership turned people ugly (Dickstein 117), which an opinion which was slowly starting to change from his attitude towards the *paisanos* and their property at *Tortilla Flat*. By making Curly out to be a selfish, arrogant and manipulative rich boy, Steinbeck is showing his distaste for the way the politics are being handled in his home state.

Steinbeck frequently featured conflicts between the social classes in his novels. Curly had issues with just about everyone in *Of Mice and Men* and he acts as the oppressing authority figure with the objective of keeping anyone below him in their place. *In Dubious Battle* centers on this issue. The fruit growers are going head to head against the higher authorities by striking and forming a union to protest the awful treatment they had to endure, and the terrible compensations they have received. *The Grapes of Wrath* also includes this subject where the workers are trying to get a fair treatment in the work field. The truth of the matter is that this really was that common of a thing. The land owners were oppressing the workers so they could profit more off the products they were selling.

Steinbeck does, as mentioned above, blend his personal feelings about the social groups into *Of Mice and Men* by making one group out to look like they are the roots of all that is evil in the world while at the same time romanticizing another group. He appears to favor the hard working migrant workers, and he seems to be especially fond of the old man who is getting close to retirement and knows that it is only a matter of time when he will no longer be of any use on the farm and will be fired. In a time when it was highly unusual for anyone to do so, Steinbeck seems romanticized the negro stable buck, who even though he is crippled, gets treated horribly by the owners and avoided by the rest of the working men does stand out as being the one who can see clearly what is going on around him. He appears to be the smartest character in the novella. The stable buck knows exactly how the world works and knows what the system does to a working man. He has seen many men come through with their hopes and dreams that ultimately only lead to then being brought back down to reality. He sees straight through George and sees his true nature and has him completely figured out. Steinbeck still gives him the same personality feature as he does with most of his

characters by making him feel momentarily excited about the living on the farm with them. It is likely that by doing this Steinbeck is showing us that every one of us is in some way idealistic, and that all people needed was a little bit of hope. Crooks the Negro stable buck is scraping the bottom of the social ladder, which is possibly the reason why Steinbeck seems to take pity on him and at the same time his entire social group. As a result we get the sense that the Negro stable buck is being praised even higher than the migrant worker which in this case could very well be true, yet at the same time Steinbeck brings him down a few levels though by having the rest of the characters avoid him like he was infested with the plague.

Real versus Fantasy

Steinbeck takes the time between his social attacks to pay tribute to the land. He romanticizes the landscape by painting a magnificent picture of the scenery that not only the reader can imagine himself being in, but he can also identify another purpose with the novels. The images of nature and of the beautiful landscapes that the characters find themselves in serve as a contrast to what Steinbeck is telling us about the Great Depression and all the corruption that follows. The opening paragraph of *Of Mice and Men* is perhaps the best example of this: "A few miles south of Soledad, the Salinas River drops in close to the hillside bank and runs deep and green. The water is warm too, for it has slipped twinkling over the yellow sands in the sunlight before reaching the narrow pool."

He draws up a striking image in the opening lines that the reader can both picture it vividly and at the same time see that Steinbeck's descriptions of nature work out as a contrast between the real and the fantasy worlds. In the real world we find everything that has gone wrong. We have a corrupt political system, huge gaps between social classes and people being taken advantage of. The Real world centers on the Great Depression and its effects on individuals and families.

In the fantasy world, however, we get a sense of nostalgia as we are reminded of simpler times where everything is perfect and everyone is safe. Steinbeck introduces this world in several ways. It can either be his poetic descriptions of nature, a dream which the characters are pursuing or it can even be an actual safe place which the characters can escape to. Todd M. Lieber states that in a few of his novels, Steinbeck gave his characters a special spot where they could escape to and be safe. It could either be a hidden cave, a house or a thicket in the willows (264). These places provided shelter for when the characters were in trouble and needed to think or hide out. These

places seemed to somehow be connected to the characters. Steinbeck never revealed why he chose to include these relationships between the place and the characters, but Lieber believes that it had implied a relationship between the places and the deeper parts of the human psyche. He mentions how Ethan's cave links up with the "dark places" of his consciousness as an example of this theory (264). This theory could also help explain the connection between George and Lennie and the land that they intended to buy. Their dream of owning their own land was a subject of the more positive aspects of the human mind, and signified their longing to progress in the world.

The characters were living in a cruel world, and that is why the idea of the fantasy world became so important. Its effects are strongest in *Of Mice and Men* and *Tortilla Flat*. In the aforementioned novel we have the safe place where Lennie eventually goes to hide out in, and we also have the pair's dream which is the main driving force of their lives and whenever things start to get too real for them. The two men can just go there in their minds and picture the house, the land and the rabbits. *Tortilla Flat* is special in the way that the almost the entire novel takes place in one of these special places. The *paisanos* have their little place which happened to be Danny's house. When they are located in the house they do not have to worry about the fact that they do not have any money, and they certainly do not need to think about all the corruption and anguish which is going on in the real world. The idea of saving up their money is lost to them as all they need is friendship and company.

The adventures of the *paisanos* at *Tortilla Flat* can be linked to another great tale of heroism, fantasy and adventure. Steinbeck was a fan of Sir Thomas Malory, and at one point in his career he wrote a retelling of his tales about King Arthur and Lancelot. This work was not released until after Steinbeck's death. One thing Steinbeck admired about Malory was the way his characters were portrayed, especially Lancelot

and he used a similar combination of the consciousness of the human frailty and heroic imperatives of behavior when he created the characters in *The Winter of Our Discontent* (Ditzky 634-635). The *paisanos* at *Tortilla Flat* can be seen as representations of the Knights at the Round Table with Danny taking the place of King Arthur. The men go on with their lives living in their fantasy world and whenever they come across a friend who needs help, each one of them is quick to offer their assistance and shelter as well. The men are not as classy and respectable as the Knights were but the resemblance to Malory's tale is clear none the less.

This is a concept often used in the Hollywood musical. If for example we were to look at *The Wizard of Oz* we can see that this is one of the major themes of the movie. In it we have a young girl who is living in a dark and depressing place and dreams of going away to a more magical and colorful world. However, once she gets that wish fulfilled when she arrives in Oz she figures out that there is no place like home. Even though life on the farm in Kansas was pretty cruel at times, she was still surrounded by family and friends. In a similar way, that is a part of the charm of Steinbeck's novels. If they are analyzed thoroughly, it becomes clear that he did not write them for the single purpose of ranting and moaning about how horrible things in the country were but rather that he wanted the reader to take something out of it by having the two contrasting worlds. He wanted them to see that if they searched within themselves, they would see that there was still hope. Steinbeck wanted to motivate the nation and make them see that the opportunity to change could be found in each of the nation's citizens. George gives up at the end of *Of Mice and Men* and decides that his dream, his safe place, is gone forever after he is forced to kill Lennie. Even though he still has Candy and could have achieved his dream, he does not look for that path. The reason most likely is that he loved Lennie too much and because of that fact does not

allow himself to take a chance on something new (Cardullo 21). Ethan Hawley on the other hand, as he is getting ready to give up and commit suicide, does follow this idea and finds within himself the beacon of hope he needed, his daughter, and chooses not to end his life but decides to fight on.

We can derive from this that even though it is easier and perhaps more fun to live in the fantasy world, it is the real one that defines us. It is easy for the characters to be inside their heads all the time but it was what they did outside their dreams that really mattered. Surviving in the real world made them stronger, smarter and had profound effects on them and those are some of the morals Steinbeck wanted his readers to absorb. Being able to escape into a better place was an important thing but the characters had to be able to take something from that stay and apply it to the real world. That was the point of having the real and the fantasy world coexist in the novels. If people want to change a community they must first change the lives of its citizens, which is one thing that Steinbeck to be a duty of the writer as he makes clear in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech: "The ancient commission of the writer has not changed. He is charged with exposing our many grievous faults and failures, with dredging up to the light our dark and dangerous dreams for the purpose of improvement." His novels inspired people and made them want to fight for changes in the community. This was extremely important during the Great Depression and as a result great advantages were achieved with the labor laws.

Steinbeck had high hopes for the future and mentions in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech that "Man is our greatest hazard and our only hope", a statement which Lesleigh Patton claims not only to show his optimism and faith in man but also how he had a paradoxical view on the world (180), which could very well be explained by this aforementioned of the two conflicting worlds located within the novels.

Conclusion

John Steinbeck was exposed to horrifying details of the Great Depression early on in his career as a journalist and war correspondent. These events helped shape his point of view on the economic crisis and served as a major turning point in his literary career. It was his great attention to detail and his need to fully understand the human being that made his novels the success that they turned out to be, and through them he could let his voice out to be heard by the public. It is through his characters that we can fully understand how horrid the situations that people had to endure were. His characters were also used to show his different opinions on the social classes. The upper class would generally be described as being oppressing and free of all morals while the lower class was being taken advantage of in the novels. In *The Winter of Our Discontent* we find out through the main character that to gain some success in the world and achieve social mobility they first had to ignore all their principles and eventually become corrupt and evil like the rest of them. Furthermore, Steinbeck introduces to us the idea of the Real versus the fantasy worlds. The fantasy world is usually accessible to the characters either through a dream or as an actual place where they can feel safe. It is with the coexistence of these two worlds that Steinbeck can hope to achieve the biggest results of his social reforming, as they show us that it is not enough to dream about something. To change the community it had to happen in the real world. George sees his dreams shatter before his eyes and gives up. Ethan Hawley is on the verge of ending his life when he sees the glimmer of hope before him and realizes that cannot let his daughter down. That was a part of what Steinbeck wanted his readers to see. Even though things seemed dark and depressing and it was easier to live in a dream world, there was still hope in the real one. He had the upmost believe in man, but was also vary that man's greatest hazard was man himself. If he could change that man by

steering him in the right direction and giving him hope, changes in the community could be made. His characters lived through the same events as the people of the nation did. They underwent the Great Depression and were oppressed, but they fought back. Steinbeck's works were extremely important to the period. His characters were representations of the different social groups which meant that all of his readers could find someone to identify with. His stories were so detailed that they helped put a spark into the hearts of the nation and would also serve as a foundation for future artists to carry on his messages. Artists like Woody Guthrie had a venue to get their voices out thanks to Steinbeck, and future generations will have the same opportunity.

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