John Steinbeck
Tortilla Flat
Cannery Row
Appendix: Of Mice and Men

by Peter Cash

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John Steinbeck (1902-1968)
**TORTILLA FLAT** (1935)
**CANNERY ROW** (1945)

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**CURRENT EDITIONS**

**BOOKS TO READ**

Howard Levant, *The Novels of John Steinbeck*, 1974
Susan Shillinglaw, *A Journey into Steinbeck’s California*, 2006

Jim Cullen, *The American Dream*, OUP 2003
W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley, *The Verbal Icon*, 1954

**TORTILLA FLAT (1935)**

As a writer, John Steinbeck first sprang to prominence with *Tortilla Flat* in 1935. To the Penguin edition, Thomas Fensch’s introduction is informative and scholarly. Because I first came to the text by the direct way of the New Windmill edition, I was startled almost at once to encounter these sentiments:

> And who, during the years of the Great Depression, couldn’t be enchanted by reading *Tortilla Flat*? ... For many who read *Tortilla Flat* during the Depression, the novel was pure escapism and entertainment.

‘Enchanted by reading *Tortilla Flat*? For me, reading *Tortilla Flat* was not ‘enchanting’, but unsettling: as I read, I could not help feeling that, beside every good deed that Steinbeck described, there abided a sense of impending doom. Far from ‘escaping’ the suspicion that things were likely to take turns for the worst, I found that there were indeed recurring twists in his tale: in short, that every corner was a turn for the worst.

In this exegesis of *Tortilla Flat*, I will not therefore be committing the intentional fallacy: in my reading experience, no text has produced a response more richly at variance with the intention of the author. Thomas Fensch explains that Steinbeck was quick to react to his first readers’ appraisal of his peasant characters: it had not, he wrote in 1937, occurred to him that they were in any way “dispossessed or underdoggish”: “They are people whom I know and like.” Is he being disingenuous? It is well worth wondering, for it seems to me that, from the outset, his presentation of his characters *demands* an altogether more complex response.
At the outset, it is imperative to praise the style of Steinbeck's prose. *Tortilla Flat* is beautifully written, not least because Steinbeck's grammatical constructions are consistently succinct: from start to finish, he writes concise sentences in which every action and reaction/ every feeling and thought is stated with economy. In these sentences, Steinbeck makes an extensive and immaculate use of adverbs. Descriptions of Tortilla Flat itself benefit richly; in particular, its trees find themselves vividly brought to life by means of personification: 'The pines waved slowly and voluptuously' (Chapter 5), 'The tree-tops in the wind talked huskily, told fortunes and foretold deaths' (Chapter 8), 'The trees hushed their whispering' (Chapter 12) and 'The trees dripped mournful drops into the dust' (Chapter 15). Dialogues too acquire a poetic clarity, especially because Steinbeck makes such an imaginative use of 'said' + adverb: 'jauntily', 'rhythmically', 'helpfully', 'hopefully', 'severely', 'sadly', 'bitterly', 'enthusiastically', 'virtuously', 'acidly', 'pointedly', 'angrily', 'hazily', 'dreamily', 'sagely', 'firmly', 'hopelessly', 'pleasantly', 'ungraciously', 'socially', 'pleadingly', 'savagely', 'delicately', 'happily', 'quickly', 'sarcastically', 'philosophically', 'gently', 'gallantly', 'tartly', 'defensively', 'judiciously', 'wickedly', 'stubbornly', 'cooly', 'kindly', 'humbly', 'gravely', 'excitedly', 'evenly', 'wearily', 'wanly' and 'speculatively'. In addition, there are 'asked plaintively', 'asked incredulously', 'asked despairingly' and 'continued ecstatically'. This is no ordinary catalogue of adverbs, but an array. Each one of these 48 words has been selected for its exemplary attentiveness to an exact tone of voice.

In his Preface, Steinbeck takes pains to introduce us to the mixed-race inhabitants of his eponymous location among the pines:

"This is the story of Danny and of Danny's friends and of Danny's house. It is a story of how these three became one thing ... a unit of which the parts are men, from which came sweetness and joy, philanthropy and, in the end, a mystic sorrow. For Danny's house was not unlike the Round Table, and Danny's friends were not unlike the knights of it. And this is the story of how that group came into being, of how it flourished and grew to be an organisation beautiful and wise. This story deals with Danny's friends, with the good they did."

In his introduction, Fensch quotes from Joseph Fontenrose's list of the narrative parallels between Thomas Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur* (1470) and Steinbeck's *Tortilla Flat* and he does so in order to confirm that, as far as Steinbeck is concerned, 'Danny's friends' are little less than Arthurian heroes: reading *Tortilla Flat*, we shall be struck by their 'philanthropy', their beauty and their wisdom; away with us, we will carry an indelible impression of 'the good they did'. Contrary to Steinbeck's expectations, I thought that Danny and his five friends – Pilon, Big Joe Portagee, Pablo Sanchez, Jesus Maria Corcoran and the Pirate – were little more than feral youths: not heroic adventurers, not knights, not philanthropists, but bums, scumbags, loafers, louts – not so much examples of Malory's 'good man' as 'good' for nothing. "Little hobos and tramps", they exist in a state of complete worklessness (Chapter 15). It is not clear why, when the religious culture of Tortilla Flat is so obviously Roman Catholic, Charles R. Metzger (whom Fensch quotes) confirms that Steinbeck's peasants refuse to "subscribe to those views of the world and right conduct in it which would render them respectable and/or understandable to such neighbours or readers as have bought the White Anglo-Saxon Protestant ethic". His point, however, holds well enough: that 'Danny and his friends' are not obedient to any conventional morality, Catholic or Protestant or anything else quite so organised. Danny's house is not 'an organisation', but a shambles; first and foremost, he and 'his friends' act out of self-interest. Being to these extents immoral, they did not enchant me.

Three critics (whom Fensch lines up) protest that Steinbeck's Mexican-American *paisano* is a racial stereotype: that is, he is not like any Mexican-American to have lived in the vicinity of Monterey in the 1920s – least of all in his speech-style. Before they press this case too hard, critics might like especially to bear in mind that Tortilla Flat, 'that uphill district above the town of Monterey', where the *paisanos* live in a shanty town, 'isn't a flat at all'. Furthermore, they should note a] that 'Tortilla Flat' is a place-name transplanted from the Carmel area of
California to Monterey Bay and b] that Steinbeck’s friend, Susan Gregory, a teacher at Monterey High School, lived at 889 Johnson Avenue from which – at that time – she could look into a woody ravine (Madison Gulch) and see shacks in which paisanos lived. In short, both the place and its people are composites. Significantly, Steinbeck dedicates his novel to ‘Susan Gregory of Monterey’ because he owes to her both the idea for his fictional location and the anecdotes from which his fictional characters are put together/composed.

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“He hath lost his fellows  
And strays about to find ‘em”  
Shakespeare The Tempest  
Prospero Act I Scene 2

According to my reading, Tortilla Flat is a fascinating vision of flawed humanity. If it is a tragic vision, then this is because Steinbeck’s human beings mean well: that is, they mean to correct their flaws of character, but fail. It seems to me that Steinbeck, in presenting ‘Danny and his friends’, is adopting Prospero’s perspective upon the Ferdinands of this world, young men who have got lost and go in search of good fellowship, straying about to find it. To object that ‘Danny and his friends’ are not like Californian paisanos of the 1920s is a bit like arguing that Stephano and Trinculo are not representative of Milanese butlers and jesters in the 1620s. No, they’re not; they’re specimens of humanity ... Not unlike Shakespeare’s Italians, they are literary characters conceived to contribute to a vision of man.

Danny, the central figure of the novel, is an alcoholic: ‘No one in Monterey better knew the price of wine than Danny’ (Chapter 3). At the end of the Great War, he is discharged from the U. S. Army; aged ‘twenty-five’, he returns to Tortilla Flat, not to work, but to eke out a living, begging, stealing, borrowing – and drinking. Whenever he tries to solve the puzzle of life, he finds that he has only one clue: wine. When he discovers that he has inherited two small houses, he is overwhelmed by ‘the responsibility of ownership’ and takes immediately to drink: ‘Before he ever went to look at his property he bought a gallon of red wine and drank most of it himself.’ From Chapter 1 onwards, Danny conducts himself in a feckless manner. His first thought/his priority is not to shoulder a responsibility, but to satisfy an appetite and thereby become oblivious of it.

In Tortilla Flat, Steinbeck interrogates the concept of ‘comradeship’/friendship. When Danny encounters ‘his old friend Pilon’, he is preparing to ignore him until he ‘suddenly ... noticed’ that Pilon was concealing a bottle beneath his coat. Because we know that Danny’s original intention (“I will pass Pilon by”) was to blank his old friend, we can hear that his subsequent terms of endearment – ‘amigo’, ‘my little friend’, ‘dearest of little angelic friends’, ‘little dumpling’ – are hypocritical and insincere. What endears him to Pilon is not the warmth of his companionship, but his bottle of brandy.

For his part, Pilon is under no illusion that Danny, in insisting that they are good companions, has an ulterior motive. It is therefore instructive that Pilon, rather than reproach him for his disingenuous expressions of friendship, tolerates them and shares his brandy: ‘The brandy receded quickly down the bottle’. He understands that Danny’s relationship with him is exploitative and manipulative. Of course, such an understanding calls into question the whole concept of friendship: to what extent, if they meet only to exploit and manipulate each other, are they friends at all? When Danny inquires after Pablo Sanchez, the following exchange raises an identical question about the concept of goodness:

“Where is Pablo, that good man?”  
“In jail,” said Pilon.
On Tortilla Flat, good men are in prison. Steinbeck’s narrative challenges the conventional definition: to what extent, if he is ‘in jail’, can a man be ‘good’?

Fensch’s research reveals that there are models for two of Danny’s friends: for Pilon, a rogue and peasant slave by the name of Eddie Romero; for the Pirate, an English dog-lover by the name of Lloyd Litton, known as ‘Shakey Tom’ because his body shook, possibly with Parkinson’s Disease. In Tortilla Flat, Pilon, even more often than Danny, presents an ethical problem. As soon as Pilon learns that Danny has inherited ‘two houses’, he seeks to turn this development to his own advantage. He warns Danny that his inheritance of property will change him: “Thou wilt forget thy friends who shared everything with thee, even their brandy.”

Exactly as Pilon has calculated, Danny, fired by his own noble opinion of himself, is ‘upset’ by this bold accusation and swears that he will never see his friend without a roof over his head.

Throughout the novel, there exists an ironic tension between Steinbeck’s use of the word ‘friends’ and the self-serving arguments and actions of these ‘friends’: consistently, we find that ‘Danny’s friends’, if they are to be judged by their motives, are ‘unfriendly’. Like a hypnotist, Pilon suggests to Danny that he should rent out one of his houses and, because he longs to enjoy the elevation in social status, promptly puts himself forward as a tenant. Steinbeck makes clear that, although he agrees to pay fifteen dollars per month, Pilon is taking cynical advantage of Danny’s offer: he ‘had never possessed fifteen dollars in his life’. In Chapter 3, Pilon’s behaviour deteriorates further. On two occasions, he sets out to pay rent, but on each occasion gets waylaid by the temptation to buy wine; on the second occasion, he encounters Pablo Sanchez (“Ai, amigo”) who has been put on parole. Pilon (‘a cunning mixture of good and evil’) extends hospitality to his friend simply in order to get him drunk and then take advantage of him; his plan is to sub-let Danny’s second house to Pablo, but to charge him the fifteen dollars as if he is doing him a favour: “Look, you will pay only fifteen dollars a month!”

By means of his self-serving logic, Pilon is able to square his own failure to pay Danny with the false promise that he will pay “when Pablo pays”. Even though he knows that Pablo too will never pay, such dishonest thinking – a mental/self-deceiving passing of the buck – succeeds in soothing his conscience.

In Chapter 1, Danny was to be heard lamenting the death on a French battlefield of his neighbour Arthur Morales; in Chapter 4, he is found to be comforting Arthur’s fifty-year-old widow, not least because ‘a little wine’ has come into her possession. “Love and fighting, and a little wine” is how Pilon (Chapter 14) sums up the good life. It is in this light that Danny – “That is a pretty woman in some lights” – finds Mrs Morales attractive. To reciprocate, he wants to ‘buy her a box of big candy’, but cannot do so because he has received no payments of rent. When he raises this issue for the first time, Pilon, being cunning, resorts instantly to moral blackmail:

“Always the rent,” he cried. “You would force us into the streets – into the gutters, while you sleep in your soft bed. Come, Pablo ... we will get money for this miser, this Jew.”

Measured by the principles of a conventional morality, Pilon’s way of thinking (eg. his unjustified resentment, his casual anti-Semitism) is incongruous and outrageous. Because it is incongruous, it can sometimes sound funny. Indeed, his dialogues with Pablo often have a ring of comic repartee:

“We have been his friends for years. When he was in need, we fed him. When he was cold, we clothed him.”
“‘When was that?’ Pablo asked.
“Well, we would have, if he needed anything and we had it.
That is the kind of friends we were to him.”

There is an intentional irony at Pilon’s expense, but it is ultimately dark: ‘that’ [= fair weather friends] is precisely ‘the kind of friends’ that they are.
Like Pablo Sanchez, Jesus Maria Corcoran (‘a good man’, ‘a humanitarian’) is a vagrant; he too is discovered in a roadside ditch. Seeing that he possesses ‘a half-full gallon bottle of wine’, Pilon (‘Ai, amigo’) embraces him in the usual way. Learning that he also possesses ‘three crumpled dollar bills’, he leads him to the rented house and takes swift advantage of his drunkenness: ‘They rented the use of their house to Jesus for fifteen dollars a month’. Once again, the blackmail is moral: “Unless we pay Danny two dollars we shall all be turned out into the street, and it will be your fault.” Once again, the humour – “You will have it on your soul that we sleep in ditches” – is dark: because they are quite accustomed to sleeping in ditches, Jesus Maria need not have ‘succumbed’ to the pressure put upon him. After Jesus has handed over two of his dollars, Steinbeck reports that there was ‘a warm deep comradeship’ in the room: inevitably, such a juxtaposition sets us wondering just how ‘warm’ and ‘deep’ this ‘comradeship’ is – and, in the final analysis, whether it is ‘comradeship’ at all.

Likewise, Pilon and Pablo remain concerned to take advantage of Danny’s charity. In Danny’s parasitic relationship with Mrs Morales, the two layabouts perceive a threat to their own free way of living (“Love and fighting, and a little wine”) and they resolve to stave it off. They affect a concern for Danny’s dental health, professing to fear that, if he eats any of the candy, then he (‘our friend Danny’) will suffer from tooth decay and develop tooth-ache:

“'It would be a bad thing if Danny's friends, on whom he depends, should bring about the aching of his teeth.”

Depends for what? Consistently, their logic serves only their own interests. Not only do they persuade themselves that it will not be good for Danny if he buys a box of candy for Mrs Morales, but they also come up with a predictable justification for an alternative use of the two dollars. Following the logic of his fellow drunkards, Jesus Maria knows what he is expected to suggest:

“A gallon of wine makes a nice present for a lady,” he suggested in a musing tone.

Pilon and Pablo were astonished at his brilliance.

Out of any course of action which serves their needs, they are ready to make a virtue. Here, Steinbeck’s satire is at the expense of this moral duplicity; that phrase ‘astonished at his brilliance’ means that Pilon and Pablo smile with delight when Jesus Maria says exactly what they want to hear, thereby absolving them of guilt for thinking up the way to misuse the money. Worse still, they prompt Jesus Maria (‘their feeder of lines’) to complete their next thought for them: that, rather than give the two dollars to Danny, lest he should still buy the candy, they should buy the wine themselves ‘and then give it to Danny’. Steinbeck comments upon the ‘principle’ by which they made this convenient decision; he adds that it was made in ‘a philanthropic cause’. He means – surely? – that it pleases them to think that they are motivated by a spirit of generosity to their fellow man: that, by withholding Danny’s money from him, they are doing him a very great favour/saving him from himself. By the start of Chapter 5, they are drinking his wine and congratulating themselves upon doing so:

“'It is just as well that we do not take two gallons of wine to Danny,” said Pilon. “He is a man who knows little restraint in drinking.”

Dramatic irony was never more pointed: rather than amuse, it points to Pilon’s cynical and hypocritical way of looking at the world. His language – ‘just as well’ – reveals just how self-deceiving and self-satisfied he is.

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1 In Chapter 3, Pilon has asked Pablo if he ever gets “tired of sleeping in ditches, wet and cold, friendless and alone.” Pablo replies, “No.”
What's more, this brief history repeats itself when Danny later (Chapter 9) forms a relationship with Sweets Ramirez. Steinbeck's euphemistic metaphor – 'Pilon and Pablo and Jesus Maria Corcoran in turn assaulted the nest of his affections during his absence' – explains that each of Danny's friends tries in turn to have sex with her. Equally euphemistic, the language in which he records that they failed – 'but she stoutly refused to share with Danny's friends that which was dedicated for the time being to Danny' – enjoys the irony that, behind Danny's back, 'Danny's friends' show no amity nor loyalty whatsoever. Such circumlocution threatens to lighten the nature of this situation. At once, the formality of the next sentence – 'Wherefore the friends, in despair, organised a group, formed for and dedicated to her destruction' – corrects any impression that 'the friends' are easy-going/friendly and confirms that, when they do not get their own way, they become desperate and spiteful.

Even at the best of times, Danny's friends are mean: in this context, it is instructive also to consider Chapter 13, for it has a familiar/similar narrative. By its courtly style, the title – How Danny's Friends threw themselves to the aid of a distressed lady – proclaims that the friends embark here upon an Arthurian labour, a sustained act of gallantry: namely, to feed the starving family of Senora Teresina Cortez, pregnant with her first child at the age of fourteen and now pregnant with her ninth at the age of twenty-nine:

Jesus Maria felt the gratification of a leader with followers.
Their was no idle boast. Fish they collected. The vegetable patch of the Hotel Del Monte they raided. It was a glorious game. Theft robbed of the stigma of theft, crime altruistically committed – what is more gratifying?

By the Biblical symmetries of this language, Steinbeck implies that Jesus ('a leader with followers') is living up to his name. 'Altruistically': the adverb derived from Auguste Comte's term (1849) for a man's overriding concern for the welfare of others ... Sadly, the final paragraph of the chapter places this 'glorious' burst of energy into a revealing context: afterwards, Teresina ('a good figure of a mature woman, nearing thirty') discovers that she is pregnant with her tenth child and is left wondering 'which one of Danny's friends was responsible'. It transpires that these virtuous knights/these merry men were taking turns to have sex with her. If they were acting out of altruism, then it was out of a rewarded altruism: for their selfless endeavours, they were given daily access to a promiscuous ('lively') and voluptuous woman.

In the very first paragraph of the Preface, Steinbeck refers three times to 'Danny's friends'; in the second paragraph, there is a fourth reference; and, in the remainder of the narrative, the narrator uses this epithet another nine times. In addition, Steinbeck takes up this refrain in his chapter-titles: from Chapter 6 onwards, nine of the chapters [= 6 to 17] bear a title which makes specific reference to 'Danny's Friends'. There is something oxymoronic about this epithet in that the men whom it denotes may frequently profess their friendship for Danny, but rarely, in any recognisable form, show it. Quite the contrary: having established what kind of men 'Danny's friends' are, the narrator – with increasing frequency – unrolls an emphatic use of the shortened term, inevitably to imply an ironic criticism of their unfriendliness. I reckon (literally) that, from Chapter 6 onwards, the narrative (as distinct from dialogue within the narrative) has ironic recourse to 'the friends'/'his friends' or some variant in no fewer than 112 places. No 'doings of Tortilla Flat' are more sharply at variance with 'the sweetness of comradeship' (Chapter 6) than the events which surround the Pirate's treasure.

The Pirate – whom we first encounter in Chapter 7 – is not a typical ne'er-do-well, but an unkempt figure (so named because of his 'black and bushy beard') whose mental age is

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2 And yet additional epithets for Jesus Maria assure us that he is a 'humane man' (Chapter 7) and 'a great-hearted man' (Chapter 8) through whom 'kindness' flows.
below his age in years and leads to eccentric behaviour: eg. he lives ‘in a deserted chicken-house’. Not unlike Lennie Small in *Of Mice and Men*, he is a poor unfortunate who might be easily exploited. When Pilon learns that the Pirate may have somewhere stashed away ‘a great hoard of money’, he considers this possibility. Because the Pirate is a ‘poor little half-made man’, Pilon (‘that acute man’, ‘that clever man’) argues that he must require help, especially in looking after such a hoard. In this ‘charitable’ vein, he visits the Pirate and explains to his astonished listener that he is ‘a worry’ to his ‘friends’. The Pirate’s retort expresses his sheer incredulity at this revelation: “I? To my friends? What friends?” In the reader’s ear, this retort rings both innocently and indignantly/rhetorically at the same time: what friends, indeed? More than once, Pilon is to be heard expressing the view that all experiences are didactic: “It is a lesson to us ... never to leave wine in a house overnight,” he concludes in Chapter V, grieving more for the lost wine than for the burned house. Characteristically, the ‘ethical lesson’ that his experiences teach him is to be still more acquisitive and selfish – even if it means stealing the savings of a pitiable and susceptible vagabond/a man of ‘meagre wits’.

To Pilon’s frustration, the Pirate (“I have all these friends?”) is not so simple that he falls for this devious approach; by instinct, he is a cynophile whose trust resides more readily in his five dogs (Enrique, Pajarito, Rudolph, Fluff, Senor Alec Thompson) than in his fellow men. To begin with, Danny and his friends blackmail him emotionally and stalk him remorselessly, but without discovering where he has hidden his trove. In the end, the Pirate relents of his own accord; he brings his ‘heavy bag of silver quarters’ to Danny’s house and explains that he has been saving up to buy ‘a gold candlestick’ in honour of San Francisco de Assisi, the patron saint of animals. He asks them to ‘guard’ this bag for him, thereby depriving them (‘his friends’) of the pleasure of tricking and robbing him. By enlisting them to such a cause, the Pirate spoils their sport. Here, of course, the satire is directly at the expense of their ideas of amity and morality: obliged to act in a *genuine* spirit of philanthropy, ‘their defeat’ – reports Steinbeck – ‘was bitter’.

In *Chapter 12*, Big Joe Portagee steals the canvas bag of money. The retribution which ‘his friends’ exact upon him is a further satire upon the Tortillan concept of ‘human brotherhood’/friendship. In this episode, Danny and his friends choose their blunt instruments3 and administer a brutal beating to a fellow man; they gang up on Big Joe and, in the ‘cold and methodical manner’ of sadistic thugs, deliver a savage hiding. By virtue of his spare style, Steinbeck –

> They covered his body from the neck down. Each blow found a new space and welted it ... Then the friends went over his back with the same deadly precision ...

> With the can-opener he cross-hatched his skin so deftly that a little blood ran from each line. Pablo brought the salt to him and helped him to rub it in all over the torn back

– is expert at describing the calculated nature of this violence: not only do ‘the friends’ mete out the corporal punishment with ‘precision’, but they also rub salt in the wounds. In short, this lesson (“I think he will be honest now”) involves the use of torture. It is not enchanting. If Steinbeck’s aim is to lionise ‘the paisanos of Tortilla Flat’, then he has gone about it in a problematic way. O for an episode in which their motives are not complicated, in which their antics are not reprehensible and in which things do not finally turn nasty/ugly!

*Chapter 15 – How Danny brooded and became mad* – marks the beginning of Danny’s decline. First, he runs riot; then, he sinks (‘like a half-melted man’) into a deep depression;

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3 Yet another epithet for Jesus Maria Corcoran (who used a pick-axe handle) is ‘that lover of the humanities’ (Chapter 9).
finally, he falls ‘forty feet’ into Madison Gulch and is killed. The ultimate irony is that Danny’s friends are the only people in Tortilla Flat who feel unable to attend his funeral:

for in all Tortilla Flat, they, who had loved Danny most, who had received the most from his hands, they, the *paisanos*, were the only ones who could not attend Danny’s funeral.

Dissolute youths, they wear ‘rags’ and cannot afford to buy clothes suitable for the dignity of the occasion; in Chapter 17, they are depicted observing the cortège from the edge of the cemetery. After Danny’s burial, it is appropriate that they should return to his ‘quiet house’ and hold a wake: ‘Ceremoniously they filled the fruit jars and drank’. *Tortilla Flat* tells a coherent story. Above all, it can boast a great ending: that is, an ending towards which the narrative moves as if it were a poem, an elegy. The closing passage draws its elegiac strength from a series of epitaphs:

“Danny liked wine,” they said. “Danny was happy when he had a little wine.”

‘They’ put it mildly.

“Maybe it would be all right to sing a few sad songs,” said Jesus Maria. “But Danny did not like sad songs,” Pablo insisted. “He liked the quick ones, about lively women.”

It is fitting that Danny should be remembered for his lifelong dedication to ‘the good life’: wine, women and song. The wake culminates in Danny’s friends’ decision to destroy his house: lest ‘some stranger’ inherit ‘this symbol of holy friendship’, they set fire to it and watch it burn to the ground. Chapter XVII – How Danny’s sorrowing Friends defied the conventions. How the Talismanic bond was burned. How each Friend departed alone – proceeds to this conclusion:

Danny’s friends still stood looking at the smoking ruin. They looked at one another strangely, and then back at the burned house. And after a while they turned and walked slowly away, and no two walked together.

It is instructive that, at the very end of the story, each arsonist ‘departed alone’. The revelation that ‘no two walked together’ finally concedes that Danny’s friends were not friends at all and never had been.

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How, then, to account for the loose association between Danny, Pilon, Pablo, Jesus Maria, Big Joe Portagee and the Pirate? How to explain the ‘warm companionship’ (Chapter 7) and ‘holy friendship’ to which Steinbeck repeatedly alludes?

In the second paragraph of the Preface, Steinbeck likens Danny’s friends to King Arthur’s knights and Robin Hood’s merry men and explains that he is committing ‘this cycle’ of events to paper so that future generations will not be similarly skeptical about them: ‘This history is designed now and ever to keep the sneers from the lips of our scholars’. The puzzle is that Steinbeck then designs a narrative which undercuts this ambition to immortalise ‘the *paisanos* of Tortilla Flat’.

Danny, Pilon, Pablo and Big Joe Portagee are brawlers, drunkards and thieves. It might be argued that Steinbeck regards them as noble savages: if so, then the nobility of this savagery – especially after their cruel assaults and thefts – is difficult to identify. Underlying such wild behaviour may therefore be an existentialist theme, an eagerness to make a mark on an alien world. Into Chapter 8, Steinbeck inserts this poetic passage:
They walked side by side along the dark beach towards Monterey, where the lights hung, necklace above necklace against the hill. The sand dunes crouched along the back of the beach like tired hounds resting; and the waves gently practised at striking and hissed a little. The night was cold and aloof, and its warm life was withdrawn, so that it was full of bitter warnings to man that he is alone in the world, and alone among his fellows; that he has no comfort owing to him from anywhere.

Here, Pilon and Big Joe are depicted against a cosmic background and exposed to its vast indifference. Explicitly, Steinbeck is warning that each individual is ‘alone in the world’ – even ‘among his fellows’. His vision is of isolated creatures straying about a beach in search of some significance; as on a darkling plain, they cling together for the ‘comfort’ that companionship – any kind of companionship – can temporarily bring. In Chapter 12, the friends take the recovered money to Father Ramon and ask him on the Pirate’s behalf to purchase a gold candlestick; at once, this transaction gives a meaning to their existences/was ‘a great good marker in their lives’. This visit looks forward to Chapter 16 in which Steinbeck explores Danny’s frame of mind:

What is it, Danny? What makes you feel this way? Danny didn’t know. There was an ache in his heart like the farewell to a dear woman; there was vague sorrow in him like the despair of autumn.

The answer is that Danny is experiencing an existential anxiety: that is, he feels no longer able to make a mark on the world. His penultimate utterance takes the form of a pathetic plea: “Am I alone in the world? Will no one fight with me?” The juxtaposition of these two questions is sadly instructive: in order to make a mark, Danny needed to be fornicating (‘a dear woman’) or fighting – otherwise, he was drinking. He understood only how to make a literal mark ... Despairing of that, he craved oblivion – to which his pass-port was a constant supply of wine – or he craved death itself – to which he finally falls or jumps.

**CANNERY ROW (1945)**

Monterey sits on the slope of a hill, with a blue bay below it and with a forest of tall dark pine trees at its back. The lower parts of the town are inhabited by Americans, Italians, catchers and canners of fish.

So begins the third paragraph of *Tortilla Flat*. The allusion is to ‘Cannery Row’, the colloquial name for that section of Ocean View Avenue ‘in Monterey in California’ on which the sardines caught in Monterey Bay were processed and canned in the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s.

The first page of Steinbeck’s novel is headed *Cannery Row*. In this form, that heading doubles up: it is both the title of the book and the title for the first three paragraphs of writing. Accordingly, the self-contained passage that prefaces the thirty-two chapters both is and is not a preface, a prologue. In a similar way, the passage both is and is not a description of Cannery Row.

In the Penguin edition, the opening passage occupies forty-nine lines. For nineteen lines, Steinbeck gives us a memorable description of Cannery Row, a stretch of sixteen canning factories/canneries dedicated to the processing of fish on an industrial scale. Not least because of its syntactical parallelisms and its intransitive verbs, it is a masterpiece of topographical writing:

Then from the town pour Wops and Chinamen and Polaks, men and women
in trousers and rubber coats and oilcloth aprons. They come running to
clean and cut and pack and cook and can the fish. The whole street rumbles
and groans and screams and rattles while the silver rivers of fish pour in out
of the boats and the boats rise higher and higher in the water until they are empty.
The canneries rumble and rattle and squeak until the last fish is cleaned and cut
and cooked and canned and then the whistles scream again and the dripping,
smelly, tired Wops and Chinamen and Polaks, men and women, straggle
out and droop their ways up the hill into the town and Cannery Row become
itself again – quiet and magical. Its normal life returns.

The prose is remarkable for its polysyndetic effects: within four sentences, Steinbeck uses
‘and’ 26 times. To begin with, the polysyndetic coordination of races (‘Wops and Chinamen
and Polaks’) is there to indicate that Cannery Row is a cosmopolitan community; the terms
(though racist by today’s standards) are meant to show that the strip is host to a profusion of
cultures/is teeming with a variety of life. At the same time, the polysyndetic coordination of
tasks (‘clean and cut and pack and cook and can’) is there to signal that it is a hub of
commercial and industrial activity; the smooth sequence of monosyllabic verbs implies the
mechanical efficiency of the factories. The polysyndetic rush of onomatopoeic verbs (‘rumbles
and groans and screams and rattles’) confirms that by day the whole place is in noisy and
perpetual motion. In short, the rhythms of the prose convey an impression of hectic, on-
going movement.

For nineteen lines, Steinbeck is busy describing the cacophony (‘a grating noise’) of the
working day on Cannery Row; on the twentieth line, he rests and devotes himself to depicting
the ‘quiet and magical’ life of this particular locale. When is Cannery Row ‘itself’? Quite literally
in Steinbeck’s book, ‘its normal life returns’ – ironically – only after the cannery workers have
stopped and gone home; only when the din of the day has subsided does the neighbourhood
assume its true identity. In Steinbeck’s book, the ‘normal life’ of Cannery Row is to be equated
not with the intensity of the fishing industry, but with the quality of the social intercourse
between its full-time inhabitants – those who remain at the end of the day. One by one, Steinbeck lists them: Mack and his friends, Dora and her girls, Doc, Lee Chong, Henri. Finally,
he explains what his literary method in Cannery Row will be; contrarily, ‘the way to write this
book’ will be by the scientific method of a marine biologist, inspecting and recording these
specimens of humanity and thereby presenting us with an ostensive definition of the place. To
this extent, Steinbeck simply cuts off ‘a slice of life’ and looks at it as under a microscope.

As a result, this narrative is even less teleological than Tortilla Flat was ....

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“No use of metal, corn, or wine, or oil.
No occupation: all men idle, all,
And women too, but innocent and pure.
No sovereignty –”

Shakespeare The Tempest
Gonzalo Act II Scene 1

Steinbeck sets out to demonstrate that Cannery Row (‘a stink, a grating noise’) cannot be
reduced to an olfactory or an auditory sensation, but represents in reality a version of
Gonzalo’s ideal ‘commonwealth’: in addition, it is ‘a poem ..... a quality of light, a tone, a
habit, a nostalgia, a dream’. These images hint how different the residents of Cannery Row
will be from ‘the paisanos of Tortilla Flat’. Look in particular at the bums (‘Mack and the

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4 Susan Shillinglaw refers to ‘the multiplicity of life’.
5 It was in The Living Theatre (1892) that the French playwright Jean Jullien (1854–1919) referred to his own
naturalistic technique as follows: “A play is a slice of life [= ‘un tranche de vie’] put on stage with art ... which leaves
the spectator free to speculate about what goes on beyond.”
boys’) and the prostitutes (Dora Flood’s girls): although all ‘idle’, these men and women will repeatedly show how considerate and good-natured they are. By contrast with Tortilla Flat, Cannery Row is an enchanting book.

Le Chong, Doc, Mack, Gay, Dora, Henri, Mary: ostensively, their ways of living define ‘the flow and vitality of Cannery Row’ (Chapter 1). There is no meaness: on the contrary, this cast of characters exudes goodwill to all men – even if its form of expression will sometimes be misguided and cause catastrophe. Unlike their Tortillan neighbours, they are ‘pure’ of heart: for a prime example, there is Lee Chong, the Chinese-American grocer. His grocery was a shop where a customer could find ‘everything he needed or wanted to live and be happy’; the grocer himself – ‘Lee’s mouth was full and benevolent and the flash of gold when he smiled was rich and warm’ – complements it by virtue of his radiant benevolence. To illuminate this quality, Steinbeck recounts Lee Chong’s dealings with Horace Abbeville. Before he commits suicide, Horace comes to settle up: because he cannot pay the bill that he has run up, he signs over to Lee a building which he owns on the edge of a vacant lot. Lee pays for Horace’s funeral and sends a basket of groceries to each of his two families; moreover, ‘no Abbeville child, no matter who its mother was, knew the lack of a stick of spearmint ever afterward’. Such are the measures of Lee’s generosity, his purity of heart.

In one sense, Cannery Row embodies that utopian vision of the United States of America which its priests, philosophers and writers first began to cherish in the 1630s; it chimes with America’s idea of itself as a shining ‘city on a hill’, an ideal republic/an ideal ‘commonwealth’ which can comfortably accommodate religious and racial mixes. By the 1780s, optimists were gaining confidence that different nationalities, cultures and races might well blend into a new and harmonious society; it was not, however, until the 1900s that Israel Zangwill premiered a play – The Melting Pot – which supplied a metaphor for this ideal process of integration. Cannery Row (where ‘Wops and Chinamen and Polaks’ live and work together) is just such a ‘melting pot’, an enclave in which the races mix easily/coalesce peacefully. Despite the racist terms for Italians/Portugese and Poles, its residents exhibit a high degree of racial tolerance. One sign of this peaceful coalition/this ‘magical’ tolerance is that, even though he is a Chinaman, Lee Chong has ‘the respect of all his neighbors’ (Chapter 1).

Central to Cannery Row/Cannery Row is ‘the vacant lot’ (‘piled high with old boilers, with rusting pipes, with great square timbers, and stacks of five-gallon cans’). At the back of the lot is the Abbeville Building which, re-christened, acquires the ironic sobriquet of the Palace Flophouse and Grill; on the left of it is the Bear Flag Restaurant, actually Dora Flood’s brothel/’whore house’. Another measure of Lee Chong’s generosity is the arrangement to which he comes with Mack for residential use of the decrepit building. At the start of the story, ‘Mack and the boys’ (an epithet used 39 times in all) are vagrants, squatting in the ‘rusting pipes’; they propose that they should move into the Building and protect it from possible vandalism. Like Pilon and Pablo in Tortilla Flat, Mack and the boys are young idlers who do not intend to become rent-payers. There, however, the similarities end, for Mack is nothing more menacing than the ‘leader’ and the ‘mentor’

of a little group of men who had in common no families, no money, and no ambitions beyond food, drink, and contentment.

In Mack’s eyes there was good will and good fellowship and a desire to make everyone happy.

Although they may be operating a protection racket, this ‘little group’ of rootless individuals is entirely without malice; it is therefore in ‘a spirit of philanthropy’ that Lee Chong accedes to

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6 ‘Red smiled good-naturedly’ (Chapter 11).
7 It is in his Sermon on the Mount (Matthew: Chapter 5 Verse 14) that Jesus tells the throng, “You are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hidden.”
their ‘innocent’ demands.\textsuperscript{8} He humours them; better still, he profits from them, for ‘the boys’ cease their petty pilfering from his store and – out of respect for their smiling ‘benefactor’ – begin instead to trade exclusively and legitimately there. As a result of a fair exchange, there is no longer any robbery.

Before \textit{Cannery Row} commences, there is one of those pages on which the writer prints a disclaimer: ‘The people, places, and events in this book are, of course, fictions and fabrications’. As Susan Shillinglaw’s work explains, that ‘of course’ is totally disingenuous, for neither Lee Chong nor Mack, neither Dora Flood nor Doc, is an entirely fictional creation, each having an identifiable model in real life. For instance, Dora Flood is Flora Woods. She is the stereotypical ‘tart with a heart’; her very name signifies that she has a heart of gold. Described in \textbf{Chapter 3}, the Bear Flag Restaurant (her euphemistic name for her bordello) is ‘a decent, clean, honest, old-fashioned sporting house’:

\begin{quotation}
ad a sturdy, virtuous club, built, 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.
\end{quotation}

The adjectives with which Steinbeck describes it (‘decent, clean, honest’, ‘virtuous’, ‘disciplinary’, ‘respected’) are consciously and resolutely at odds with its ill repute. Although Dora’s twelve girls are paid, they seem to give their bodies gladly to the fleets of sardine fishermen and thereby offer a social service. They practise a sort of philanthropy: after all, a philanthropist – etymologically and literally – is ‘a lover of humanity’!

Dora is a flamboyant individual; her striking appearance – ‘a great woman, a great big woman with flaming orange hair and a taste for Nile green evening dresses’ – advertises an all-embracing compassion. Indeed, she herself is a philanthropist: because she operates on the wrong side of the law, she needs to give triply generously to charities for fear that the authorities will close her ‘restaurant’ if she does not. At the same time, Dora contributes less expediently to the welfare of the community. Even after the Wall Street Crash of 1929, prostitution is a trade that continues to thrive: as a consequence, she finds herself uniquely placed to distribute largesse to ‘the hungry children of Cannery Row’. In 1932, an epidemic of influenza runs through the tight-knit community: in an equally altruistic manner, Dora and her girls service their clients and then go ‘in shifts’ to sit with the infected families – ‘and they carried pots of soup when they went’ (Chapter 16). Concerned and observant, Dora’s girls remain credits to her.

Susan Shillinglaw writes that some of the chapters in \textit{Cannery Row} are ‘interchapters’: that is, chapters of three or four paragraphs in which Steinbeck suspends his narrative (such as it is) in order to make way for sideways reflections upon it. It is unhelpful that she does not then provide her complete list of these ‘interchapters’\textsuperscript{9}. Certainly, one such chapter is \textbf{Chapter 8}. This ‘interchapter’ – actually, an interlude – relates what happened to the huge boiler from the Hediondo Cannery after it broke down in April 1932. It ended up on ‘the vacant lot’:

\begin{quotation}
The boiler looked like an old-fashioned locomotive without wheels. It had a big door in the center of its nose and a low fire door. Gradually it became red and soft with rust and gradually the mallow weeds grew up around it and the flaking rust fed the weeds. Flowering myrtle crept up its sides and the wild anise perfumed the air about it. Then someone
\end{quotation}

\textsuperscript{8} It is instructive that, in \textbf{Chapter 4}, Andy (a ten-year-old boy from Salinas) hurls racial abuse at an ‘old Chinaman’ and has a terrifying vision of loneliness; for his pains, he sees not the magical dawn of Cannery Row, but ‘a lonely countryside’ – ‘the desolate cold aloneness of the landscape’.

\textsuperscript{9} My own list would include Chapters 2, 4, 8, 10, 12, 14, 19, 22, 24, 26 and 31.
threw out a datura root and the thick fleshy tree grew up and the great white bells hung down over the boiler door and at night the flowers smelled of love and excitement, an incredibly sweet and moving odor.

In 1935 Mr and Mrs Sam Malloy moved into the boiler.

In *Cannery Row*, one of Steinbeck's aims is to romanticise an area over which an air of dereliction and dilapidation hangs. Here, he describes a literal flowering of the human spirit in material circumstances [= commercial, industrial circumstances] inimical to its growth. The aromatic flowers – as if from the bower over a cottage door – are fitting images for this spiritual resilience. Clearly, Mr and Mrs Malloy are Irish immigrants who escape vagrancy and acquire human dignity by taking up residence in the rusty boiler. From their point of view, it is an ideal home: as a result, Mrs Malloy becomes house-proud, but not of a house. For her home, she is eager to buy 'real lace curtains', but – in a truly poignant moment – has to be reminded that her home, being a boiler, has no windows.

Usually, Steinbeck's 'interchapters'/interludes are vignettes of eccentric characters: Chapter 4 Andy, Chapter 8 Mr and Mrs Malloy, Chapters 10 and 28 Frankie, Chapter 12 Josh Billings, Chapter 19 The flag-pole skater, Chapter 22 Henri, Chapter 24 Mary Talbot, Chapter 26 Joey and Willard, Chapter 31 The gopher. **Chapter 14** is an exception in that it is a second passage devoted to Cannery Row itself. At the start, Steinbeck informed us that Cannery Row is 'itself' only when the noisy, smelly canneries themselves are not operational. Here, he describes 'the flow and vitality of Cannery Row' just before dawn:

> Early morning is a time of magic in Cannery Row. In the gray time after the light has come and before the sun has risen, the Row seems to hang suspended out of time in a silvery light .... It is a time of great peace, a deserted time, a little era of peace. Cats drip over the fences and slither like syrup over the ground to look for fish heads .... It is the hour of the pearl – the interval between day and night when time stops and examines itself.

Once again, Steinbeck monitors the traffic of Cannery Row with verisimilitude; here, he captures the ‘magical’ atmosphere of ‘early morning’. Once again, an air of romance attaches itself to ‘the corrugated iron of the canneries’ and the ‘deserted’ street alongside them; over the naturalistic setting, an air of tranquillity hangs. Time stands still: in this ‘interval’, Cannery Row offers itself up for examination ...

Sentence by sentence, Steinbeck describes the various comings-and-goings and builds up a composite picture of the place. Cats, no less liquid than their shadows, ‘drip like syrup’ ....10 ‘Silent early morning dogs’ urinate .... The sea gulls sit ‘on the cannery roofs’ .... ‘In the back gardens the gophers ....’ ‘One of Dora’s girls’ rolls home from an all-night stay ... Out of La Ida stumble two soldiers and two ‘big breasted’ blondes in clingy ‘rayon party dresses’. It is instructive that ‘they strolled softly in the pearly light’: significantly, they are carefree. What therefore emerges from the examination is that Cannery Row offers an ‘era’ of timelessness in which all mortal creatures can feel free from the troubles of Depression-era America.

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In **Chapter 2**, Steinbeck explains why ‘Mack and the boys’ (Hazel, Eddie, Hughie, Jones and Gay) are content to make their homes in a flophouse: that is, to doss down indefinitely in rudimentary accommodation which, except for their sleeping quarters, is ‘property common to all’. In effect, the Palace Flophouse is a commune. For this reason, Steinbeck’s rhetorical

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10 *Cats* is a poem by A. S. J. Tessimond (1902-1962).
question – ‘What can it profit a man to gain the whole world11 and to come to his property with a gastric ulcer, a blown prostate, and bifocals’ – echoes Biblical language in order to dignify this choice of domestic arrangement and thereby register a criticism of soul-destroying materialism. At the same time, it looks forward to Doc’s endorsement of Mack’s life-style in Chapter 23.

No character is more easily identifiable than the main character of the novel. Doc – no other name – is based on Edward Flanders Ricketts, the close friend for whom Steinbeck wrote Cannery Row: ‘For Ed Ricketts who knows why or should’. Significantly, Ed Ricketts (1897-1948) was a marine biologist whose Pacific Biological Laboratories re-located to Ocean View Drive in New Monterey in 1931; in the novel, the premises (still standing today) become The Western Biological Laboratory which Doc owns and runs. Social intercourse between Doc and the other characters is frequent because Western Biological (as it is known) is situated ‘right across the street’ from ‘the vacant lot’ where the Palace Flophouse and the Bear Flag Restaurant are. Because Steinbeck shares Ricketts’ enthusiasm for marine biology, he treats Cannery Row as if it is an eco-system. As a consequence, he examines it as Ricketts would have examined the specimens of a tide-pool: as Susan Shillinglaw puts it, ‘a tide pool teeming with life after the ocean of commerce recedes’.

In Chapter 5, Steinbeck introduces us formally to Doc and his Laboratory. His forensic analysis picks out Doc’s wasteful virtues, not least the breadth of his sympathy for his fellow creatures (‘his sympathy had no warp’).12 Since his face is ‘half Christ’, it is not surprising that his love for all creatures great and small is unconditional. Particularly quaint is his San Franciscan love of animals, not least his cynophilia: here, ‘Doc tips his hat to dogs as he drives by and the dogs look up and smile at him’; in Chapter 17, ‘Driving up to Lighthouse Avenue he waved at a dog that looked around and smiled at him’. Doc is not only a scientist, but also a musicologist and a philosopher. Steinbeck reports that, in Doc’s library, ‘a great phonograph stands against the wall with hundreds of records lined up beside it’. Doc plays these ‘records’ throughout the story, scoring the action. It is significant that, at various times, the sound of this music – Gregorian chants, Bach, Scarlatti and Monteverdi – can be heard throughout Cannery Row, helping to soothe its pains, to civilise it, to spread ‘a kind of gladness’, a ‘benignant influence’ (Chapter 25). Incongruously, Early Music is audible in the seraglio.

With Lee Chong, Doc shares a good nature and a tolerant attitude: informing their decisions is a non-judgmental acceptance that it takes all sorts to make a world. The special beneficiaries of Doc’s forbearance are ‘Mack and the boys’ who, as the chapters unfold, are to be defined primarily by their relationship with him. More than once, Steinbeck puts ‘Mack and the boys’ in oxymoronic apposition to ‘the Beauties, the Graces, the Virtues’. He hereby implies that they are unlikely embodiments of the Three Beauties (Beauty, Chastity, Passion), the Three Graces (Faith, Hope, Charity) and the Four Cardinal Virtues (Prudence, Justice, Temperance, Fortitude) and invites his readers to identify those occasions on which Mack or a boy thus excels himself. Such an exhaustive survey is beyond the scope of this commentary, but it would surely encompass Mack’s saintly determination to take up Dora’s suggestion and atone for the calamity of the first party by holding a second party (Chapter 27).

Not least in their aversions to property ownership and their addictions to drink, Mack and the boys are the equivalents of Danny and his friends, ‘the paisanos of Tortilla Flat’. The difference is that there is no harm in them: although they are ‘rascals’ who commit petty crimes, they are ‘innocent of viciousness’ (Chapter 6). On the contrary, they are especially receptive to Doc’s benign influence and spend their time seeking to reciprocate it:

Chapter 1: “That Doc is a fine fellow. We ought to do something for him.”

11 “For what shall it profit a man, if he gain the whole world and lose his own soul?” (Mark: Chapter 8 Verse 36).
12 In Responsibilities, W. B. Yeats writes: “Only the wasteful virtues earn the sun” (1914).
Chapter 7: "That Doc is a hell of a nice fella .... A hell of a nice fella."

Chapter 13: "Doc is the nicest fella I ever knew. I don't want to be the kind of a guy that would take advantage of him."

It is sad that Mack's 'search for contentment' has an unintended consequence. At the end of Chapter 15, the proleptic irony - "From the way things are pannin' out, it looks like Doc is a pretty lucky guy" - is entirely at his expense.

Mack's idea of a good time is a party: consequently, he can think of no better way in which to 'do something' for Doc than to organise a party in his honour. The way in which he goes about this task tells us everything that we need to know about these 'boys': at the same time as they are motivated by a spirit of 'good fellowship', they are scheming. From Chapter 9 onwards, the chain of events - communicated mainly through dialogue - takes a bit of following. Suffice it to say that Mack, if he is to finance the party for Doc, will need to borrow Lee Chong's Model T Ford truck, but Lee Chong's truck has completely broken down ....

By this turn of events, Steinbeck gives himself an opportunity to sing the praises of an unsung hero. In Chapter 11, Gay has just become one of Mack's boys, another knight of that round table. Although he is a wife-beater, he is a good man and a welcome recruit a] because he hits his wife only in self-defence and b] because he possesses a special gift. Gay is a car-mechanic, but he is no ordinary car-mechanic. Fortunately, he is 'an inspired mechanic'; this is because he has 'green thumbs' [= green fingers]. The familiar metaphor means that, if he were a gardener, then he would be able to get any plant to grow; by the same token, he can get any old 'jalopy' going again. Upon Gay, Steinbeck's epithets - 'a wonder', 'little mechanic of God', 'St Francis of coils and armatures and gears' - confer a semi-divine status: at his miraculous touch, conked out engines - such as Lee Chong's Ford - come straight back to life. Dwelling on Cannery Row is a host of dispossessed people whose rare talents for living go unrecognised: throughout his novel, Steinbeck keeps hinting that, among the mallow weeds, such unacknowledged legislators/geniuses survive and grow.13

In Chapter 13, the road to and from the Carmel Valley is paved with good intentions: "There ain't nobody likes a party better than Doc. We're giving him a party." It is very unfortunate that, while Mack and the boys travel in that direction in search of frogs, Doc travels in another direction in search of octopi - and that, while Mack and the boys return to Western Biological in good time, Doc is delayed by his traumatic discovery of a floater (Chapter 18). Disturbing him, unsettling him, the 'picture' of the dead body in the tide pool - 'The girl's eyes had been gray and clear and the dark hair floated, drifted lightly over the face' - burns itself on his mind's eye.

In Chapter 20, Steinbeck describes how badly things go awry/get 'out of hand'. Because Doc believes that people are 'essentially honest', he does not lock his door; consequently, Mack and the boys decide to hold the party in Western Biological - not least because they want to see Doc's face when he returns to find lights blazing, decorations flying and music playing. What, of course, the drunken party-goers see instead is Doc's face when he returns to find the damage that they have done to his premises. Expertly, Steinbeck's simple sentences - 'The crashing of jars was unpleasant', 'The floor was littered with broken glass', 'Whiskey glasses lay sadly on their sides' - understate the extent of this damage. Even the frogs have escaped ....

The function of this incident is to assay the strength of the relationship between Doc and Mack. In Chapter 21, Doc surveys the wreckage and reveals that he does not after all have the patience of a saint: already disturbed and unsettled, he hits Mack twice and he hits him hard, loosening a tooth. For his part, Mack ("I got it coming") is so full of remorse that he suffers these painful punches with equanimity, reacting as if they are no more than his just

13 “Mack has qualities of genius” (Chapter 23).
deserts. He is contrite to the point at which he begins to pity himself; in the end, he confesses that the story of the failed party is the story of his life: "It don't do no good to say I'm sorry. I been sorry all my life ... Ever'thing I done turned sour". To this honest and humble expression of self-knowledge, Doc responds with a restored magnanimity:

"We'll pay for it, Doc."
"No you won't, Mack," said Doc. "You'll think about it and it'll worry you for quite a long time, but you won't pay for it."

Doc is wise enough to understand that Mack is without the moral capacity to mean what he says. Furthermore, he is forgiving enough to accept Mack for the moral inadequate/genial rogue/well-meaning scoundrel that he is and always will be. It is for such a compassionate attitude to human frailty that Steinbeck campaigns in *Cannery Row*.

As if to reassure us that Mack and the boys had nevertheless had the right idea, Steinbeck inserts *Chapter 24*. Of this interlude, his heroine is Mary Talbot: 'More than anything in the world Mary Talbot loved parties’. She is neither a prostitute nor a bar girl, happy to let a soldier lift her cheap skirt; on the contrary, she – ‘Mrs Tom Talbot’ – is a happily married woman. Steinbeck concentrates on the means by which this quirky resident of Cannery Row sustains the happiness of her marriage.

He relates that Mary is 'lovely' and manages to suggest that this loveliness is a matter not only of her red hair, high cheekbones and long legs, but also of her temperament. Fortunately for the times, she is an irrepressible optimist: when all else failed, she ’gave tea parties for the neighborhood cats ... and held long and detailed conversations with them’. As an ailurophile, she enjoys an imaginative and mutually supportive relationship with her cats. As a wife, she is equally resourceful, forever planning zany parties ('costume parties, surprise parties, holiday parties') to keep her husband’s mind off the poverty threatening to engulf them:

She could infect a whole house with gaiety and she used her gift as a weapon against the despondency that lurked always around outside the house waiting to get in at Tom.

During the Great Depression, Tom Talbot is suffering from a great depression. Because she herself seems congenitally inured to any sort of spiritual deflation, Mary is an antidote to his ‘despondency’. As the following exchange reveals, this is just as well:

Tom said, "Why don't we face it for once? We're down. We're going under. What's the good kidding ourselves?"
"No, we're not," said Mary. "We're magic people. We always have been .... Nothing can happen to us."

Whereas her husband is a defeatist, she is a morale-booster and a pep-talker. As a good wife, she gives him hope and she gives him sex. Chapter 24 concludes:

Mary Talbot gave a pregnancy party that year. And everyone said, “God! A kid of hers is going to have fun.”

Of course, one potential benefit of this baby shower is that their guests may shower the poor Talbots with presents for their child. Even so, no one on Cannery Row seems to have attributed this ulterior motive to them. Although they may question Mary’s sanity, her neighbours do not question her integrity, her purity of heart. By contrast, ‘everyone’ seems to think that she is holding another party – and, on this occasion, why not? – because she remains herself, a blithe and free spirit. She is a girl who exemplifies Cannery Row in that she just wants 'to have fun'.
In Chapter 17, Steinbeck explains that, contrary to outward appearances, Doc is ‘a lonely and set-apart man’: for this reason, he needs to arrange a conversation in which Doc can be heard speaking philosophically about Mack and the boys. In Chapter 23, Doc talks confidentially to his ‘brilliant young’ neighbour Richard Frost and makes a speech worthy of a manifesto:

“The things we admire in men, kindness and generosity, openness, honesty, understanding and feeling are the concomitants of failure in our system. And those traits we detest, sharpness, greed, acquisitiveness, meanness, egotism and self-interest are the traits of success ...

You know how they tried to give me a party and something went wrong. But they wanted to give me a party. That was their impulse.”

Summed up, Doc’s simplistic philosophy is, “It’s the thought that counts.” If anything, he acquits Mack of serious wrong-doing on the grounds that his thought for others [= his ‘kindness and generosity’, his altruistic ‘impulse’] is a Forsterian virtue of the first rank, vastly superior to the ‘sharpness’ and the ‘meanness’ that Pilon and Big Joe Portagee prefer. Like Gonzalo, Doc (who can barter) appears to have no time for the concept of ‘use’: that is, for business/trade organised according to the capitalist ethic of ‘self-interest’ and exercising a corrosive effect on the human soul. To this clear extent, Cannery Row – not Tortilla Flat – encapsulates Steinbeck’s ideal commonwealth. In his mythology, Cannery Row is a microcosm of the world as it ought to be.

For a while, Mack and the boys find themselves ostracised for their desecration of Doc’s laboratory/his holy place; ironically, these social outcasts become ‘social outcasts’ all over again (Chapter 23). Gradually, however, there is a resurgence of community spirit on Cannery Row and it coheres around Dora’s suggestion that, in order to compensate for their recklessness, the boys ought to organise a second party: “a party he does get to.” For this occasion, Doc finds himself making ‘his own’ magnanimous and philanthropic provision:

Doc ordered fifteen pounds of steaks, ten pounds of tomatoes, twelve heads of lettuce, six loaves of bread, a big jar of peanut butter and one of strawberry jam, five gallons of wine and four quarts of a good substantial but not distinguished whiskey.

Eventually, this order serves a symbolic purpose: such quantities go to prove Doc’s point that such qualities as magnanimity and philanthropy are in vain. Extending hospitality to Cannery Row is a thankless task, for the second party, after it has been gate-crashed by ‘the crew of a San Pedro tuna boat’, also ends in a fight and almost leads to ‘a riot’. As on Tortilla Flat, so on Cannery Row, parties – as a matter of course – end in violent disorder. Like Danny and his friends, Mack and the boys cannot control a forlorn urge to make some mark on the world.

The surprising structures of Chapter 30 and Chapter 32 reinforce this sorry point. In Chapter 30, Doc reads poetry aloud. During a lull in the party, he suddenly reads verse-stanzas from Black Marigolds by Bihara Kavi, a Kashmiri poet of the 11th Century, translated from Sanskrit into English by Edwin Powys Mathers in 1919. From his introduction to his translation, it is clear that Mathers hoped that his repetitions of ‘Even now’ [= his rendering of ‘Adyapi’] would give to the symmetrical stanzas ‘a recurring monotone of introspection’ as might befit a young man recalling his illicit affair with a king’s daughter and expecting to be executed for it. Doc’s knowledge of this long love-poem is a telling measure of his enlightenment: he knows Black Marigolds because it is a poem which, at the same

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14 In Chapter XII of Howards End, E. M. Forster refers to ‘virtues of the second rank’ which ‘have formed our civilization’: ‘neatness, decision and obedience’ (1910).

15 What is not made clear is that Doc in Chapter 30 reads only eight of the forty-nine stanzas and that his selected stanzas do not occur consecutively.
time as it celebrates the sensuous journey of life, anticipates its end. In the end, Doc’s vision is of the futility of human joy.

The verse of *Black Marigolds* cuts into the prose in order to convey Doc’s philosophical outlook. It does so adroitly because Mathers’ translation begins with an epigraph from a 15th Century book of Arabian erotica (*The Perfumed Garden*) which accounts for its title: ‘And sometimes we look to the end of the tale, that there should be marriage-feasts, and find only, as it were, black marigolds and a silence’.16 It is highly significant that, at the end of Doc’s reading, each of his tipsy listeners *is* introspective and tearful because ‘Everyone was remembering a lost love’. Loss affects and informs the life of every party-goer, putting the pleasure of this night (and others) into a more sober perspective. The image – of ‘black marigolds and a silence’ – is an image of existential desperation.

In Chapter 32, Doc clears up a second mess in Western Biological and reflects ruefully on the reason for such abandon. For this further ‘introspection’, one context is his recent image of human transience, that gray-eyed girl floating in the tide pool: ‘The picture was set for all time.’ Another is his own enjoyment of the riotous party: ‘Even Doc was happy.’ It is in these contexts that he can be heard reciting the forty-ninth and final stanza of the poem:

> Even now
> I know that I have savored the hot taste of life ...

In this quotation, Mathers’ anaphoric ‘Even now’ has a specific reference to the imminent moment of the young poet’s death: even at that moment, the young man can console himself with the thought that, in enjoying the ‘beautiful’ princess, he has *at least* lived life to the full. Lost in translation is that ‘at least’: in Doc’s case, ‘Even now’ implies his realisation that, ‘even though his house has been trashed again, he can say that he has *at least* savoured’ the good life. Dialogue throughout the novel indicates that Doc has led neither an abstemious nor a celibate life; here, however, his heady sources of comfort finally feel insufficient to him .... He knows this final stanza of *Black Marigolds* by heart and can recite it. Doing so – ‘He wiped his eyes with the back of his hand’ – brings tears to his eyes; literally, his appraisal of the human lot ends in tears.

16 If the party were being held today, then such a host might instead have played or recited Johnny Cash’s *Hurt* – to which the chorus is, “What have I become, my sweetest friend?/Everyone I know goes away in the end.”

**APPENDIX**

**John Steinbeck (1902-1968)**

*OF MICE AND MEN* (1937)

*Page-numbers in this commentary are from the Longman edition of the text (2000).*

The second section of the American Declaration of Independence (4th July, 1776) begins: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”

In 1862, the Homestead Act enshrined in American law the right of any citizen over the age of 21 to ownership of 160 acres of land, provided that a filing fee of $10 was paid and the
land was occupied for 10 years and a crop raised on it: from that time, the constitutional 'pursuit of Happiness' became equated with a man's ownership of his own 'little bit of land'/a little piece of land'/a little stake'.

It is in response to this cultural/social development that, in 1931, J. T. Adams wrote *The Epic of America*, a book which is famous for a phrase italicised and then defined in its Epilogue: "But there has been also the *American dream*, that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man, with opportunity for each according to his ability or achievement." It is in this context that Steinbeck wrote *Of Mice and Men* in 1936 (published February 1937).

Steinbeck's title, of course, is derived from Robert Burns' poem *To a Mouse* (1785). Burns, a ploughman, had disturbed the nest in which a timid mouse was hibernating. In Ayrshire dialect, he reflects upon the unfortunate lot of his 'poor, earth-born companion an' fellow mortal'. He pities all such creatures and reflects memorably upon the way in which things have a habit of turning out for them:

"But Mousie, thou art no thy lane,
In proving foresight may be vain:
The best-laid schemes o' mice an' men
Gang aft agley,
An' lea'e us nought but grief an' pain,
For promised joy!"

The mouse is not alone in discovering that its 'best-laid' plans for the future are in vain. In Steinbeck's short novel, the plans of George Milton and Lennie Small also go awry. To give point to this cussed course of events, Steinbeck presents the relationship between Lennie and mice: he intends to take care of them, but ends up killing them ("besides, you've broke it pettin' it"). Running parallel with this ironic course of events is George's relationship with Lennie: he intends to take care of him, but ends up killing him ('He pulled the trigger').

* * * * * * * *

George Milton and Lennie Small are different from other itinerant workers ('bindle-bums') in that they have made plans for the future: "We got a future." The 'best-laid schemes' of these men are to save up enough money to purchase a small-holding [= 'a little house and a couple of acres/their 'own little place'] and then subsist off it. From Chapter One, there are increasingly obvious signs that these Californian dreamers will be disappointed. In *Of Mice and Men*, Steinbeck makes a prolific use of prolepsis: that is, an accurate fore-shadowing of events to come/a flash-forwarding to later events/a direct anticipation of the future. There are no fewer than 20 proleptic ironies, all – virtually by definition – to be found in the first three of the six chapters. In this tragic story, there are two human deaths: one accidental, one intentional. Steinbeck flags up both deaths repeatedly and vigorously.

The first set of prolepses/proleptic ironies involves Lennie's fascination with tactile sensations. Most ominously, Lennie Small is King Midas in reverse: that is, every living thing he touches turns to carrion. Whether his pet is a mouse ("Jus' a dead mouse, George") or a puppy, his affectionate fondling of it has a sad and unintended consequence: he literally kills it with his cumbersome kindness. Quickly, we learn that Lennie's lack of self-awareness has already and only recently got him into big trouble:

"Jus' wanted to feel that little girl's dress — jus' wanted to pet it like it was a mouse — Well, how the hell did she know you jus' wanted to feel her dress?" (p 29)

"Well, he seen this girl in a red dress. Dumb bastard like he is,
he wants to touch ever’thing he likes. Just wants to feel it. So he reaches out to feel this red dress an’ the girl lets out a squawk ....” (p 67)

“The guys in Weed start a party out to lynch Lennie.” (p 68)

“He jus’ wanted to touch that red dress, like he wants to pet them pups all the time.” (p 68)

Steinbeck signposts the direction in which the story is heading. His signposting is not subtle: Lennie (‘strong as a bull’) is attracted by the red rag of the dress; because he cannot make academic distinctions, he treats the cotton fabric as if it is mouse fur; the “trouble with mice is you always kill ’em” (p 31). Consequently, George’s adverb (‘always’) predicts that, no different from a mouse or a puppy, any girl in red clothing is in mortal danger: “You’ll kill him, the first thing you know” (p 69). Lennie (‘a nice fella’, ‘a nice guy’) is a tragic figure: in him, physical effectiveness and mental defectiveness form a fatal combination.

Ironically named, Lennie Small (‘such a strong guy’) is an ungentle giant; he means no harm, but tragically does not know his own strength: “I wasn’t doin’ nothing bad.” It is central to the plot that Lennie should be physically strong and mentally weak. In the vocabulary of 1937, Lennie (‘a huge man, shapeless of face’) is an imbecile – a condition for which Steinbeck substitutes the colloquial epithets ‘crazy bastard’, ‘poor bastard’, ‘crazy fool’, ‘dumb bastard’, ‘crazy son-of-a-bitch’ and ‘a god-damn nuisance’. In 1937, the clinical terms for Lennie’s condition were explicit and even less friendly: at the time, he would have been classified as ‘educationally sub-normal’ (ESN) or ‘mentally defective’ or ‘mentally retarded’; at the time, ‘not bright’ was an euphemistic way to refer to his ‘arrested development’ or ‘retarded development’. Political correctness requires that today we say that Lennie (‘dumb as hell’, ‘a dum-dum’) is suffering from a learning disability; he is intellectually challenged and certainly has an IQ lower than 60. Fatally, he is without the capacity to assess the impact of his physique upon others around him; in any language, he is a danger both to others and to himself [= in George’s words, ‘too dumb to take care of ’imself’].

Lennie’s powers of concentration and recollection are extremely limited: indeed, it seems that ‘rabbits’ – a subject which he brings up no fewer than 25 times – are the only things on his mind. In one respect, Lennie’s obsession with rabbits ("An’ rabbits") is an index of his mental incapacity; in another respect, it reinforces the main theme of the novel: namely, every American’s quest for his ‘own little place’ [= his own idea of ‘heaven’] on which he can grow crops and keep animals. “Seems like ever’ guy got land in his head,” says Crooks, thereby endorsing this theme (p 108).

In Of Mice and Men, Steinbeck’s aim is to offer a criticism of the American Dream. He aims to show that this Dream, if not altogether an illusion, is inherently difficult to realise. George Milton’s dream that he and Lennie Small will one day ‘live off the fat of the land’ is a Biblical dream of plenty. The grand ambition which they share – to ‘live off the fatta the lan’ – is expressed five times and runs through the narrative like a chorus. At the same time, it is touchingly modest: first, it is for only ‘a couple of acres’ (p 32); then it expands, but only to ‘ten acres’ (p 84). They do not have great expectations: on the contrary, ten features of this domestic paradise – ‘a little win’mill’, ‘a little shack’, ‘a few berries’, ‘a few hutchies’, ‘a few pigs’, ‘a little whisky’, ‘a few eggs’, ‘a little house’, a ‘little fat iron stove’, ‘a few pigeons’ – are diminutives. They would be thankful for small mercies. When it seems that, with Candy’s help, they will finally be able to afford this small-holding, they fall silent in amazement: ‘This thing they had never really believed in was coming true’ (p 87). Sadly, Steinbeck’s aim is to show that, in mid-century America, even these ‘little’ goals remain unattainable for ‘small’ men: “every damn one of ’em’s got a little piece of land in his head an’ never a god-damn one...”

17 It is in Genesis (Chapter 45 Verse 18) that the Pharaoh originally promises Joseph that he ‘shall eat the fat of the land’
'em ever gets it,” says Crooks scornfully (p 106). It is by showing how ‘little’ such men can achieve that Steinbeck makes his criticism of the state of the Union.

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For the purposes of the plot, Curley’s Wife, possibly no older than 16, is presented as a traditional ‘floosy’: although she may not walk the streets, she certainly walks the ranch in search of male admiration. She knows that she is ‘purty’ and speaks ‘playfully’: “Nobody can’t blame a person for lookin’” (p 53). She is a flamboyant attention-seeker in whom ‘the ache for attention’ cannot be subdued: "Seems like she can’t keep away from guys” (p 78). She is never named because she is simply an agent of the plot; her sole function is to simper (“I get awful lonely”) in a seductive way: p 122. Although she is Curley’s wife, of only two weeks, she is stereotypically coquettish and flirtatious. She knows that she is sexually attractive (‘purty’) and is especially promiscuous with her glances: that is, she gives men ‘the eye’ and flaunts her young body in a cotton dress (“You’ll see plenty.”) Steinbeck’s nine epithets for her (‘a tart’, ‘a tramp’, a ‘piece of jail-bait’, ‘a rat-trap’, ‘a looloo’, ‘floosy’, ‘that bitch’, ‘god-damn tramp’ and ‘lousy tart’) strongly suggest that her brazen coquettishness represents an exhibition of hubris – which inevitably invites its nemesis in the great barn.

For Curley’s Wife, the model is most probably Jean Harlow (1911–1937). Aged 16, Harlean Carpenter (as she then was) got married to the boss’s son; in 1930/1931, she broke into films (Hell’s Angels/Platinum Blonde) and became one of Hollywood’s first icons/first sex symbols. From her references to ‘pitchers’ and ‘shows’, it is clear that Curley’s Wife also sees herself as a ‘Blonde Bombshell’ (a sobriquet for Harlow18) whom movie stardom in Hollywood awaits. Like Jean Harlow’s, her voice too has ‘a nasal, brittle quality’ (p 53).

Curley’s Wife has amorous and glamorous ideas above her station and poses ostentatiously: ‘she smiled archly and twitched her body’/she ‘put her hands on her hips’ (p 53/p 110). She has a roving eye; her looks are arch in that they have designs on the ranch-hands. Fortunately, Candy has the measure of her and tells her to go away, using an image – ‘roll your hoop’ – which implies that, though pretty and nubile, she is barely old enough to be out of the schoolyard.

Consistently, Steinbeck’s sartorial imagery suggests that Curley’s Wife is a scarlet woman: ‘She had full, rouged lips and wide-spaced eyes, heavily made up’ (p 53). Furthermore, ‘her finger-nails were red’; so, too, were her ‘mules’ [= backless shoes] on which there were ‘little bouquets of red ostrich feathers’. Ominously, she is an identikit picture of the girl in the red dress whom Lennie had molested in Weed ....

When Curley’s Wife re-appears in the barn, she is literally dressed to be killed: ‘She wore her bright cotton dress and the mules with the red ostrich feathers’ (p 122). Given his tactile nature, it is inevitable that Lennie will want to touch her cotton frock and that he will certainly welcome her invitation to feel her ‘soft and fine’ hair: “Here – feel right here” (p 127). It is a measure of her vanity that Curley’s Wife then panics not because Lennie’s big fingers are assaulting her, but because they are messing up her hair-do: “You stop it now, you’ll mess it all up” (p 127). Ironically, it is her vain struggling and writhing that leads to her death.

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It is at the end of Vanity Fair (1847) that William Thackeray writes that ‘he can close up the box’ and ‘put the puppets away’. Likewise, Steinbeck is an adroit puppeteer. Like the Victorian novelist, he manipulates his characters to meet the demands of his plot. His second set of prolepses/proleptic ironies involves Curley, the tetchy son of the ranch-owner. Curley is

18 Harlow: a surname in which the t is silent.
'pugnacious'/'pretty handy': in fact, he is 'a lightweight' boxer so adept with his fists that he has even enjoyed successes 'in the ring'. For the purposes of the plot, Curley is a stereotypical 'little guy': he 'hates big guys' and is always spoiling for a fight 'with big guys' (p 48). Worse, this 'son-of-a-bitch', this 'mean little guy', is newly married to his very young wife who wears a flimsy dress, paints her lips/nails red, does her hair 'in little rolled clusters' and makes eyes at men.

Curley's fight with Lennie is quite deliberately fixed: 'The next minute Curley was flopping like a fish on a line, and his closed fist was lost in Lennie's big hand' (p 91). Steinbeck fixes Curley to Lennie's line: if not like a fish, then Curley could easily be described as 'flopping' like a rag doll, like a puppet. Nor is Steinbeck finished with this verb, for it has a forward-looking [= proleptic] effect of its own:

"Don't you go yellin'," he said, and he shook her; and her body flopped like a fish. And then she was still, for Lennie had broken her neck.

As signalled, the history of Weed has repeated itself. Significantly, Curley's flighty wife is described as both a floppy puppet and a hooked fish.

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The third set of prolepses/proleptic ironies involves Candy's 'grizzled', old sheep-dog. In Chapter Three, Steinbeck constructs a long section of dialogue between Candy and Slim in which Slim argues that the 'ancient dog' should be put down (pp 71/72). He sets out three arguments for euthanasia:

**first**, that the blind and crippled dog can no longer enjoy a decent quality of life ("An' he ain't no good to himself"/"That dog ain't no good to himself");

**second**, that a clinical shot to the head ("Shoot him right in the back of the head .... why, he'd never know what hit him") will be immediate and painless;

**and third**, that it is cruel to let the dog go on living in such rheumatic pain ("Well, you ain't being kind to him keeping him alive") and that it would therefore be 'kind'/merciful to "put the old devil out of his misery."

Slim reiterates that a swift end to such an existence will be absolutely painless: "It won't hurt him none at all!"/"He won't even feel it." Afterwards, Candy – "I ought to of shot that dog myself, George" – regrets that he did not take responsibility for shooting his old dog himself (p 89).

It emerges that this conversation, to which George listens, has been crafted to foreshadow the hours after it becomes clear that Lennie has inadvertently killed Curley's Wife. It looks forward darkly to the time when Curley's posse, intent on a grisly revenge, goes after Lennie and it rehearses George's arguments for shooting Lennie before a mob of scary strangers has a chance to hang him up or gun him down. Candy's subsequent regret – that he did not shoot his own dog – supplies George with his ultimate justification for shooting Lennie himself.

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19 Candy's old dog is a symbolic underdog: that is, it keeps working till it reaches the point at which it is fit only to be taken out and shot.
George is an altruist; as a result, he keeps up an unselfish concern for Lennie’s welfare. For Lennie, his ‘poor earth-born companion and fellow mortal’, a very vulnerable individual, not quite right in the head, he has nothing but compassion. Because Lennie has the mental age of a child and cannot look after himself, George (‘Poor bastard’) pities him. It is plain that he has taken it upon himself to take care of Lennie; he has done so out of the goodness of his heart and at a personal cost to himself: “I could get along so easy and so nice if I didn’t have you on my tail.” George behaves ‘morosely’ (x 3) because he knows that, without Lennie, he could have a better quality of life: “I could live so easy and maybe have a girl” (p 24). Rather than make do with an occasional visit to a cat-house, such as Old Suzy’s brothel, he could perhaps settle down with a wife ....

To the surprise of his fellow labourers, George remains totally loyal to his travelling companion; he allows no let-up in his grim determination to stand by his vulnerable friend. More than once, a ranch-hand queries this altruistic devotion: “Well, I never seen one guy take so much trouble for another guy” (p 43)/ “Ain’t many guys travel around together” (p 57)/ “I hardly never seen two guys travel together” (p 65). Such sceptical tones express the false suspicion that George and Lennie’s relationship is ‘funny’: that is, homosexual (p 65). Although Steinbeck does not employ the word ‘love’, a personal response to the text might justifiably conclude that George loves Lennie as a man might love a child (‘a big baby’).

The ultimate test of George’s loyalty to love for Lennie comes after Lennie accidentally kills Curley’s Wife. George (“Lennie never done it in meanness”) knows that Lennie is guilty not of homicide, but of manslaughter on the grounds of diminished responsibility; he knows that there was no malice aforethought. He knows too that such an argument would be too sophisticated for Curley and that Lennie can expect only the rough justice of the Wild West. Ever since his hubristic pride in his pugilistic prowess met its nemesis in Lennie’s vice-like grip, Curley has had a powerful motive for getting even with him. By his emotive language, Curley (“I’m gonna shoot the guts outa that big bastard myself”) signals that he will not be taking any extenuating circumstances into account; to him, it does not matter that Lennie is ‘nits’ [= mentally handicapped]. It is therefore to pre-empt Curley’s gory revenge that George, recollecting Candy’s regret, takes responsibility for ending Lennie’s life in a humane way; compassionately, he acknowledges that this responsibility is his. George’s killing of Lennie is a mercy-killing in that it puts the ‘poor bastard’ out of his misery: that is, it releases him from the difficulty of living a handicapped life. In Chapter One, George had thought of ‘the swell time’ which he could have without Lennie and he complained: “I never get no peace” (p 30). To George, Lennie proves burdensome and is a continual worry; at the same time, there is no sense at the end of the book that Lennie’s death is an equally blessed/welcome release for him. Rather, killing Lennie is presented as something which George ‘had to’ do for his handicapped companion’s own good: “You hadda, George. I swear you hadda,” says Slim in a sensitive effort to console him/comfort him (p 148). In the final analysis, George is Malory’s and Steinbeck’s idea of a ‘good man’.

At the end, George absolves Lennie of blame for his lethal actions (“I never been mad, an’ I ain’t now”) and induces in him a peaceful state of mind. Steinbeck uses Biblical imagery to suggest that Lennie is sent to his death with a feeling of fulfilment. In order to complete their difficult journey out of Egypt, the Israelites had to cross the River Jordan: on the far bank of this river, there lies the Promised Land. For this reason, George, before he kills Lennie, points twice to ‘a little place’ on the other side of the river: “Look down there across the river, like you can almost see the place” (pp 146/147). Finally, George is directing Lennie’s attention to the land which he had promised him, the patch of fat land on which he can rear his rabbits; in Burns’ phrase, it is a ‘promised joy’. We are invited to imagine that Lennie, when he dies, goes straight to this tranquil ‘heaven’ and experiences that ‘joy’.

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One of Crooks' functions is to be pessimistic/skeptical about the possibility of realising the American Dream: "I never seen a guy really do it .... I seen guys nearly crazy with loneliness for land, but ever' time a whore-house or a blackjack game took what it takes" (p 109). In the end, it is George's lot to share this pessimism: "I think I knowed from the very first. I think I knowed we'd never do her" (p 131). Consequently, Candy's reproachful words over the body of Curley's Wife – "You ain't no good now, you lousy tart .... I could of hoed in the garden and washed dishes for them guys" – form a requiem for the American Dream. Like George and Lennie, Candy was desperate to escape his lowly circumstances and was inspired by 'the beauty of the thing': that is, by the homely/humble simplicity of an independent existence. In Of Mice and Men, ‘this lovely thing’ (p 88) is presented as being frustratingly and stubbornly out of reach.

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