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FILLING THE “SILENCE” AND CO-AUTHORSHIP:  
STEINBECK’S AGAPIC INVITATION IN  
*OF MICE AND MEN*

I would like to focus on little more than a moment: a dog is led away, an old man remains sadly contemplative in his bunk, the cards are laid for a game meant to distract and not to entertain, and, finally, a shot resounds breaking the strained silence. The scene to which I am referring is, in essence, one of many of similar ilk contained in John Steinbeck’s play in book form, *Of Mice and Men* (1937). Though it is necessarily terse (just under a page in the Penguin edition), this episode lends itself conveniently to a fuller understanding of how Steinbeck wants his reader to be, as he remarked to interviewer Nathaniel Benchley, “so involved that it will be *his* story” (Benchley 185). This is not an uncommon concern among writers who wish to retain readers. What makes Steinbeck’s seemingly unoriginal desire apropos particularly, however, is that it springs from the womb of non-teleological thinking: a political-philosophy celebrating the virtues of “is” thinking nurtured since his wine-drinking days with soul mate Ed Ricketts.

To “is” think, which is to perceive blamelessly, is to surrender making judgments based on worldly, relative, and arguably superficial values. As a mantra political for its denial of unmistakably institutional values and philosophical for its admittedly abstruse and contradictory dimensions, non-teleological thinking begs, in part, the reconsideration of human inter-relationships. Contexts of community as a goal distinct from the lure of exclusive individuality and, hence, isolation become not serendipitous niceties, but coveted necessities essential for one’s holistic well-being. As Crooks sums it up ten or so pages after the “moment” in question, “[a] guy goes nuts if he ain’t got nobody. [...] I tell ya a guy gets too lonely an’

he gets sick” (72–73). While the “moment” takes place in the very bunkhouse whose occupants—huddled together against the darkness of the night—exclude Crooks, the loneliness is no less profound. It is, in fact, compounded by the irony of greater numbers versus the singleness of the black stable hand. Steinbeck’s iteration of the loneliness concern, to be sure, is prodigious in *Of Mice and Men* as, indeed, it is in his corpus of work; yet, surprisingly little focus has been afforded to Steinbeck’s unique and, I think, endearing non-teleological remedy. A fundamental grasp of what I will call Steinbeck’s agapic invitation (one toward communities based on unconditional love) can be found by examining the significance of a “moment” with emphasis on the presence of silence, giving greater depth to the admittedly legitimate, yet lacking arguments that such “moments” have a solely structural function as opposed to a humanitarian mission.<sup>1</sup> An elucidation of the “how” of this elixir, however, begins by recognizing the psychological, if not spiritual intimacy Steinbeck wants with his reader as a means toward a less lonely end.

A sad façade is being perpetuated by the inhabitants of the bunkhouse after Carlson exits with Candy’s dog. As a game of euchre is hastily thrown together so is an illusion of camaraderie quickly manufactured in an undeniable attempt to find solace from the imagined goings-on of Carlson without and the desperate goings-on of Candy within. Many scholars describe the characters’ reaction to Candy’s despair as a reaction typical of the “Cain” syndrome—that is, the bunkhouse-mates choose not to be Candy’s “keeper” in fear of certain social ramifications including ostracism or, in this case, a rebuke from either Slim or Carlson who place how bad the dog smells over how much the dog means to the “old swamper” (18). Characterizing those social ramifications as the inevitable projections of “an evil social system” (IX), for example, Joseph Henry Jackson alludes to the sadly unspoken and, in truth, flawed mores dictating the rules of human inter-action. There is, he suggests, a force

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<sup>1</sup> “Agapic” comes from the Christian term “agape,” which means spiritual and selfless love. While I focus on the “moment” involving the death of Candy’s dog as an invitation (albeit not taken) to engage in this type of love, a more pronounced invitation comes in Steinbeck’s more popular novel *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) when Rose of Sharon invites the emaciated man in the final chapter to nourish himself with her mother’s milk. The “moment” in *Of Mice and Men*, however, aims the invitation more toward the reader, thereby making the realization of such an ideal interactive and, therefore, I think, potentially more powerful.

that eludes articulation yet influences nonetheless how each participant (here, used ironically) in the scene is supposed to act: removed, apathetic, and unfeeling. The term “social system,” while not qualified beyond its use or contextualized and, therefore, validated by a more ostensible public phenomenon, can easily be juxtaposed to the “Cain” syndrome. For this, in any case, Jackson’s insights remain relevant.

Viewed more for its “mythic and allegorical implications” (Goldhurst 126), however, *Of Mice and Men* and, in a stricter sense, the scene in question garners a greater potential in terms of explaining the callous reaction had by the bunkhouse-mates to Candy’s obvious bereavement. Between man as “a solitary wanderer on the face of the earth” (Goldhurst 126), which is a direct reference to the fate of Cain after he murders his brother, and man saved by the choice to love rather than vindicate, the “moment” demonstrates clearly the tragic repetition of an archetype that is irrevocably intertwined in the cultural fabric of, at least, 1930s America.<sup>2</sup> Each man is alone with his thoughts as evidenced by the crippled conversation. Slim, for example, is the first to share what is really not on his mind: “Slim said loudly, ‘One of my lead mules got a bad hoof. Got to get some tar on it’” (48). The comment remains unheard, and, beyond that, the lack of action (or even words) on behalf of Candy is indicative enough of precisely what ethics—Cain’s or Abel’s—the bunkhouse-men choose. The undeniable gravity that has caused the otherwise jovial atmosphere to wilt, however, denotes something that inhibits the easy classification of “Cain.” In other words, in their taciturn response, there is a sense of guilt. Where they are inactive, there is the impulse to react. The suspense is undoubtedly present, implying strongly a subdued will to come to the assistance of Candy. Were it not for the hold “Cain” values had on a sub-culture described by Slim as one where “ever’body in the whole damn world is scared of each other” (35), the “moment” might have had a different outcome.

Steinbeck is not unmindful of the inclined outcome, though he does present an opportunity that flies in the face of damaging individualism. In

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<sup>2</sup> I would argue that the “Cain” syndrome becomes exacerbated after World War Two, especially in a Cold War America striving to create a distinction between itself—a nation that celebrates individuality—and Soviet Russia—in theory, a nation whose ideals are based on the virtues of the group. Nonetheless, 1930s America, with the admittedly dog-eat-dog mechanism in place as a means to survive, was a fertile ground for “Cain” ethics. To be sure, Depression America provided much fodder for the cult of “me” thinking after the war.

the course of the “moment,” “silent” or “silence” is repeated seven times. It was “silent,” for example, “outside” (48) immediately after Carlson left the bunkhouse. The “silence came into the room,” and “the silence lasted” (48). Throughout the “moment,” in fact, “silence” fell and “silence” kept invading the room. The incessant presence of silence is precisely Steinbeck’s imploration to the reader to fill in that silence. To put it another way, Steinbeck affords his readers a unique opportunity to deny Cain values. This explains the subdued impulse, the common guilt, the practically tangible hesitation discoloring the social atmosphere of the bunkhouse. The “moment” is undeniably poignant; emotional buttons are deliberately being pushed and, I think it is fair to say that the reader is aware of this. The reader, to be sure, willingly follows Steinbeck on a brief emotional ride, knowing that the result will, to borrow a trite phrase, tug on the heartstrings. It could even be argued that the reader relishes this experience; however, the desired effect goes beyond mere pathos. Steinbeck’s gift is not merely his ability to evoke emotion but, beyond that, the presentation of a choice to the reader vicariously through the experiences of the bunkhouse-men.<sup>3</sup>

To view the “moment” as an opportunity requires, first, the assumption that there are core human values. Steinbeck, in fact, has been both lauded and panned for his insistence that such values exist and that they are not necessarily relative—that is, they are not always malleable to suit whatever social or political dictate. In regards to the “moment” with specific attention given to the presence of “silence,” Steinbeck’s concept of non-teleological thinking can come into play in only one manner. The “is” political-philosophy seeks to repudiate norms that, in essence, place barriers between people. In the context of the “moment,” the barriers are exactly those that keep people from acting on Candy’s behalf. To “is” think is to perceive without considering cause and effect, which is to say social backlash, and, therefore, it is to perceive without judgment. There is not the factoring in of the past; there is no fear of negative reaction. What “is,” accordingly, is what is present.

It is true that the political-philosophy is an ideal and, as such, wide open to criticism. Accusations abound in Steinbeck criticism that label this political-philosophy and, in turn, Steinbeck himself as hokey, artistically weak, and, as Arthur Mizener even states, “sentimental” (44).

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<sup>3</sup> See *East of Eden* (1952) and Steinbeck’s appropriation of the Hebrew word *timshel*, which means “thou mayest.”

Of course, this is all to say that non-teleological thinking has been perceived by many as a detriment to Steinbeck's craft. To discard the skepticism that people can form communities outside of socially imposed values as, for instance, the bunkhouse-men are privy to, and embrace the possibility, though it be brief, of utopian social constructs where the participants forget temporarily what social dictates they are *supposed* to do and, instead, do what is in the emotional and psychological best interest of one of their brethren, however, is to take a leap from the comfort of objective methods of analysis to the more ineffable context of subjective understanding. Dare I say that if the academic community cannot do this (I include myself, of course) then the academic community still lacks the proper tools to discuss the human experience through literature. In any case, Steinbeck's vision deserves careful consideration if not for its truly beautiful appeal to a greater potential in humankind but also for its ability to repudiate that which restricts the fullest expression of the human spirit. Though it be sentimental to some, it is, nonetheless, significant in terms of comprehending and, perhaps, altering a continually evolving social system.

With the bunkhouse-men, their fate is sealed when they succumb to social pressures, which, of course, are precisely those Cain values in question. William Goldhurst even goes so far as to classify the outcome of the moment as a perpetuation of what he calls "Man Alone" (128). As do other critics, he suggests that this fate is predicated upon the actions of the Cain figure who, in many ways, is a dominating figure in "the modern world" (128). The "moment," in this sense, emerges as a microcosm: an isolated example of not only what happens daily but also what is typically deemed as given in modern society. Cain will more often than not "kill" his brother. Though it be a "moment," it is representative and, therefore, a part of the norm. There is no surprise; rather, there is only the sad fulfillment of a socially endorsed role. The reasons that this role is so dominant are many and deserve mention before an understanding of Steinbeck's agapic invitation through the presence of silence can take place.

To explain fully the foothold Cain values have on society in general and on the bunkhouse-men in specific would be to go beyond the scope of analysis of a "moment." The task is simply too ponderous, necessitating a thorough explication of the tendencies of human nature. Instead, it suffices to accept the fact that human beings are products of their own design for better or worse. In the course of human history, contributions

good and bad are made that direct the flow of ideological evolution, and we are left, constantly it seems, to celebrate our advances or pick up the pieces. The reasons people injure other people are, indeed, nebulous, for doing so only precipitates a profound loneliness the likes of which have been demonstrated by the archetypal Biblical Cain as well as by the bunkhouse-men who go so far as to “gratefully” (49) look to the sound of gnawing as a means to escape their own solitude: “Sounds like there was a rat under there.” said George. “We ought to get a trap down there” (49). It is a hollow comment, eliciting no response and demonstrating the lengths a person will go in order to deny compassionate—need I say—agapic impulses. Each person, to be sure, is a victim conditioned to resist relationships that are formed unabashedly from the start out of compassion and understanding and not out of the conventions that decide how one man (and here I am being gender specific) is to view another man. As with the true Cain, the initial fear of rejection by the “father,” which is to say the dominant norm, supersedes even the consideration that the effect of conformity—spiritual isolation—is much worse. The solution, in this sense, seems to be obvious, though deduced in retrospect; yet, the initiative needed to change a persistent fate is left, as Steinbeck presents it, to the reader: the unwitting participant in a bunkhouse drama.

Steinbeck is sharing authorship with the reader by appealing to the reader to fill the silence. It is a subtle foist, banking on the non-teleological tenet that forming relationships unpolluted with judgment is not only a nice thing to do but, beyond an end that, to be fair, might only deserve accusations of sentimentality, is essential to survival. Of course, the word “survival,” here, does not rest within the fact that a person can live with only shelter and sustenance but moves to, I think, a more realistic context that people, simply, need the affections of other people. It is the difference between humans as machines and humans as complex animals, and it is a difference that must be recognized as valid and not, as functionalists would have it, mawkish. Thus, by surrendering the pencil during the “moment,” Steinbeck entrusts the responsibility of arriving at a context of community based on brotherly love to a reader who has the curious advantage of peering inward at an inclusive situation in the sense that it is a common social model. This vantage point only serves to emphasize the absurdity of choosing, as the bunkhouse-men do, Cain values, for as the drama unfolds, the reader actually witnesses the undesirable consequences. In this light, the act of filling the “silence” is itself an act of creating in the same sense that Steinbeck himself is

creating. There is co-authorship, which is to say that the reader “*participate[s]* in authorship in a way that is more than simply yielding to it. It must be grounded in enactments of the authorial attempt to give way to the new” (Crosswhite 101). The new or that which is against an old and destructive social paradigm is precisely at the heart of a political-philosophy geared toward re-evaluating for the purpose of repudiating anti-social values.

There is an assumption being made when Steinbeck passes the baton of authorship to the reader. It is an assumption based on the premise that, inherently, human beings will opt for that which benefits them. This is not to say that people will not sometimes succumb to that which harms them as exemplified clearly in the “moment”; however, it is to suggest that people have, if you will, built in needs that go expressly beyond socially imposed “needs” as in the “need” to sport the latest fashion or the “need” to fit into a role in order to avoid ridicule. Steinbeck’s sense of “need” transcends those constructed by society. For him, the ultimate need is the need for human beings to commune with one another beyond the strictures of whatever social expectation, for doing so will facilitate the expression of a greater human potential. It is the practice of “acceptance-understanding” where one is regarded zen-like as “is.”<sup>4</sup> Conventional social codes of conduct are disregarded. What are nurtured in their place are codes based on common welfare: human inter-relationships couched in fundamental and undeniable truths in terms of what else beyond the material is essential for human happiness. Steinbeck’s kinship with, most directly, the Transcendentalists is striking, adding validity to a political-philosophy that otherwise receives negative criticism for its utopian quality. No doubt, this is an ideal, but, I think, it is a bold ideal in how it directly challenges the Cain social epidemic exacerbated by the dog-eat-dog virtues of an industrialized world. The “moment,” in this respect, might even be viewed as the raw result of a world that fosters alienation to lengths not before seen. The primeval Cain had been ushered into the twentieth century by riding upon the back of a mechanized steed, and the effects were indubitably permeative.

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<sup>4</sup> See Steinbeck’s *The Log from the Sea Of Cortez* (1951) for a detailed explanation of “acceptance-understanding” through non-teleological thinking. Although Steinbeck does not explicitly juxtapose non-teleological thinking with Eastern philosophy, the similarities are evident, thereby adding strength to the argument that Steinbeck’s form of social protest has a deeply spiritual base.

Norman N. Holland in “Where is a Text?: A Neurological View” states plainly that “[w]hat you know of a text is simply the sum of your perceptions” (21). If this is the case, then a text has as many meanings as the number of readers who encounter that text. As complexly composed as each reader is, so is there the possibility that their interpretations will be equally complex and, more importantly, individual in nature. Certainly, this is what gives a literary work its value: the more well-founded interpretations a work gathers, the better it is. The pathos evoked by the “moment,” accordingly, would be a pathos as unique as the reader; no one feeling would truly be the same. What must be considered, however, before reaching this type of conclusion is the surreptitious influence popular social dictates have on one’s interpretive process. This is to suggest that, while what one arrives at is, indeed, personal (though this itself deserves further qualification), it is as well colored by various social and, more importantly institutionalized hegemonies. Holland later introduces an intriguing insight as it relates to the perception of a text. He asks, “Why? Why do we describe—even sense—the world as “out there,” in a not-me when patently the only way it occurs to us, in us, is as electrochemical pulses, action potentials, in our neurons, in me?” (23). To Holland, the outer world is comparatively trivial, for, ultimately, it is the inner, *socialized* world that decides the “how” of perception. Beyond the distinction between individual judge and, as he puts it, “not-me,” he contends that knowledge of the world is intimately derived—a decisively internal process where the outer can only be understood as it relates to the inner. This is an intrepid statement of the process of perception because it centers the world around the ego.

In this sense, I see both an element of truth, which contributes to my own argument for why and how one would be inclined to fill the “silence,” and a point of contestation, for we are largely not masters of those ideologies that orbit us and, thus, we are in no position to say that “not-me” is, at least, secondary in rank. The inner-self is influenced heavily by the “not-me” or outer world. This is done so regularly, in fact, that the very implements the inner-self uses in order to negotiate the constant barrage of external stimuli are themselves externally derived. Our methods of understanding are constructed, not innate. This, however, is only to the extent that ideologies are imposed, which is to say that it only goes so far as the ability of *social* values to infiltrate one’s psyche. Though the ability is, without a doubt, great, there is, I think, a potentially



more influential force that emerges from more primal (which is not to say “savage”) impulses.

In relation to the “moment,” an explanation of one’s primal impulses as opposed to one’s socially dictated impulses requires an understanding of Steinbeck’s concept of the “phalanx” or “group-man.” The “phalanx,” simply, is a metaphor derived from ancient Roman military tactics where individual soldiers unite in order to facilitate the realization of some goal. In the actual sense, a Roman phalanx was a four-sided unit able to protect its members and go on the offensive simultaneously. The tactic was without a doubt efficient and effective as the Roman army proved time and again to be a lethal fighting force. Like a school of fish or a herd of animals, the “phalanx” worked off of primarily one principle: there is strength in numbers. At the same time, the individual who is a part of the phalanx is, to an extent, empowered because there is built into the “group-man” the element of protection and, from that, freedom from worry. This is to say that the interests of the individual are best served by the advent of the group. It is a complementary relationship like, I might imagine, any good relationship where individuality grows within the context of the group. While the actual phalanx was held together for the common purpose of vanquishing an enemy, Steinbeck’s metaphorical “phalanx” appeals to a more humanitarian goal. It is not aggression, per se, that binds Steinbeck’s “group-man” but rather the common necessity of love.

Some critics are overly wary of inter-human relationships grounded solely in affection. There is the unfortunate tendency, in fact, to characterize such relationships as inherently problematic. Some critics even push the envelope by implying that such relationships are morally questionable. Robert Cardullo, for example, wagers that George’s attachment to Lennie is “unnatural” (3), suggesting that the love between the two men is homosexual in nature. Accordingly, the human connection between the two bindlestiffs is sexually motivated; indeed, George’s elusiveness when asked to explain the reasons why he and Lennie travel together makes sense, at least, within the framework of this analytical lens. When Cardullo asserts further that George’s “unnatural” love for his compatriot functions as a way to “put up with one such as Lennie” (2–3) in that George somehow needs to feel sexually attracted toward Lennie in order to justify their relationship, an egregious line of logic is being perpetuated. What is being presupposed in this reasoning is that, beyond the possibility of there being an enlightened form to their relationship, their relationship is one ultimately centered around function. In other

words, there is no cohesion between George and Lennie beyond that which is provided by impersonal necessity. Theirs is an arrangement and not a friendship. The demands of an existence where, oftentimes, George and Lennie “ain’t got any” (11) ketchup both metaphorically and literally has warranted the formation of a partnership where practical concerns can be addressed. Cardullo’s supposition, perhaps, is one that, at least, credits George for seeking ways to emerge from the cold confines of a relationship based solely on usefulness; nonetheless, the basis of his position fails to consider a fundamental dimension of Steinbeck’s art.

Although the ranch boss echoes the suspicion that George may be “takin’ his [Lennie’s] pay away from him” (22), adding validity to any argument that George and Lennie’s relationship is purely one grounded in practicality, such an argument can quickly be dismissed by George’s response:

“No, ‘course I ain’t. Why ya think I’m sellin’ him out?”

“Well, I never seen one guy take so much trouble for another guy. I just like to know what your interest is.”

George said, “He’s my ... cousin. I told his old lady I’d take care of him. He got kicked in the head by a horse when he was a kid. He’s awright. Just ain’t bright. But he can do anything you tell him.” (22)

Of course, George admits later that the story about Lennie being kicked in the head by a horse was completely made up. This might be an irrelevant but amusing detail—an ornamental tidbit, perhaps—if it were not for the fact that George never actually articulates clearly the reasons why he looks after Lennie. The question simply evaporates as the plots heats up. Knowing something about the ideal Steinbeck seeks to express, however, equips the perceptive reader with the tools to answer the question nonetheless.

George “take(s) so much trouble” for Lennie because he loves him. It is not a love of convenience where he loves more so the *thought* of not being alone and not Lennie per se, and it is most certainly not a homosexual love, which, as far as I am concerned, is absurdly reductionistic not to mention politically obsequious. As a two-person exemplification of the “phalanx,” George and Lennie have a love where the individual grows and is nurtured under the auspices of the group. They are the ideal complement. It is interesting that any characterization of this type of relationship is beyond the breadth of George’s vocabulary as well as it is beyond the comprehension of the ranch boss. Neither can justify in spoken language the need for or the nature of an agapic relationship,

although George, at least, intuits that such a relationship is worth defending. An honest question is answered with an off-the-cuff lie and, the Truth (that being the bond between two people which renders words futile) remains hidden in yet another contrivance of man.

It is important to reiterate the true core of George and Lennie's relationship because it provides a premise for understanding the "moment." Agapic love is a powerful agent in Steinbeck's fiction not because of its ability, as some would have it, to jerk tears but for its ability to repudiate deftly manners of human inter-relationships that emanate from social mandates. Most obviously, the social mandate in *Of Mice and Men* is one advanced by the Great Depression, albeit it certainly did not begin with the infamous Wall Street crash of 1929. The primary Cain value of selfishness only found a more fertile ground from which to grow during the 1930s, and it was Steinbeck's noble charge, it seems, to remind America that truly decent relationships are not built upon distrust and resentment but, rather, upon reciprocated compassion. If this is hokey then the accuser is a victim conditioned to believe that agapic relationships are valueless in the grand scheme of an advancing society. On the contrary and as Steinbeck would have it, agapic relationships are the cornerstones of great societies because they simply address basic human needs before other needs as directed by whatever social movement are even considered. Steinbeck's was an almost impossible task toward profound ends.

The reader witnesses Steinbeck's "phalanx" in the agapic relationship between George and Lennie. Steinbeck begins early in the novella, in fact, when the two companions dream in unison and, in doing so, reveal that a hallmark of an agapic relationship such as Steinbeck presents it is the open recognition that agapic feelings exist:

Lennie was delighted. "That's it—that's it. Now tell how it is with us."

George went on. "With us it ain't like that. We got a future. We got somebody to talk to that gives a damn about us. We don't have to sit in no bar room blowin' in our jack jus' because we got no place else to go. If them other guys gets in jail they can rot for all anybody gives a damn. But not us."

Lennie broke in. "*But not us! An' why? Because... because I got you to look after me, and you got me to look after you, and that's why.*" (14)

The passage is famous. The conversation, worn to each of them like a favorite sweater, exposes the quintessence of their camaraderie. It is as

basic to their well-being as it is complex in light of sundry pejorative social mores whose subscribers would readily brand such a relationship as bizarre, yet what is noteworthy particularly about this prescribed exchange is that it is public, meaning that it is openly admitted. There is no secret between George and Lennie about how they feel about each other. There is simply agape: Steinbeck's "group-man" ideal exemplified in the smallest group possible.

A common functionalist argument for George and Lennie's relationship being the way that it is—endearing, perhaps even touching—would be that it sets the stage for an ironic ending. The killing of Candy's dog, accordingly, is seen as foreshadowing: a useful literary device to show, in this case, the sometimes tragic discrepancy between the demands of an oftentimes unforgiving society and the tender bonds of love. It is easy to see the appeal of this situation. What surfaces by juxtaposing the "moment" with the cataclysmic end scene in such a clinical manner, however, is a stilted analysis that ignores the fact that the very nature of George and Lennie's relationship is, in and of itself, important. Any qualification that the relationship is less than essential to understanding Steinbeck's humanitarian mission is, thus, frustratingly dismissive. No doubt, the novella's conclusion *is* ironic, yet I contend that the irony long precedes the abrupt ending. Beyond the clinical irony of George's introduction of a bullet to Lennie's head, there is an irony encapsulated in a "moment," which addresses adroitly issues that are common to both characters and the reader alike. Recognizing the "moment" as a double-bladed sword wielded by Steinbeck as a means to foreground the problem of the "Cain" hegemony against the backdrop of a fiction and to do this for readers themselves very much enmeshed in those values, in fact, necessarily broadens an approach to any thought-to-be textbook literary device. Simply, more can be gleaned from the "moment" by understanding that much of what the "moment" means is derived through participating in it. The reader is as much a part of the semantic of the story as the characters.

As an example of the "group-man" ideal, George and Lennie's "unusual buddyship" (Bellman 26) becomes a point of reference throughout the novella. All other situations are judged according to the criteria set by two men who have somehow transcended the predominant Cain morality of the world and, instead, defensively situated themselves in the context of a yet-to-be-realized dream: "a little house an' a room to ourself. Little fat iron stove, an' in the winter we'd keep a fire goin' in it"

(58). The fact that the pair is composed of opposites—one, large and brutish and the other small and quick—further demonstrates that a “phalanx” can successfully emerge out of contrary components. Although an argument certainly exists that such an ideal “suggests the futility of the all-too-human attempt to recapture Eden” (Goldhurst 135) where George and Lennie are merely naïve dreamers wishing to reverse the degenerative direction of humankind, at least, among themselves, the fact of the matter is that, above every other relationship in the novella (Curly and his wife, Curly and Slim, everybody and Crooks), theirs is a relationship that strives toward perfect goodness. By contrast, the Cain values that allow the outcome of the “moment” to occur are those that are socially debilitating. There is no redeeming quality; rather, what surfaces is an example of how not to regard a fellow human being.

As such, it is precisely in the interchange between the “moment” and the reader where Steinbeck’s tacitly delivered agapic invitation occurs. It is a deduction that draws upon comparison. Witnessing the ineffable bond between George and Lennie then experiencing the “silence” of a moment in lieu of witnessing the bunkhouse-men come to the assistance of an old man reluctant to part with his canine companion can lead to only one conclusion beyond the functionalistic notion that the death of Candy’s dog is merely a foreshadowing device. Choosing to love one another in the agapic sense of the word is not only away to reject popular, yet destructive standards, but it is the only way to preserve the possibility of utopian communities. The realization of this context is the quintessence of Steinbeck’s vision, and to repudiate it or deem it to be merely “sentimental” would be to grossly overlook Steinbeck’s humanitarian mission.

Peter Smagorinsky remarks in “If Meaning Is Constructed, What Is It Made From?: Toward a Cultural Theory of Reading” that “[r]eading is [...] a constructive act done in conjunction with mediating texts and the cultural-historical context in which reading takes place” (137). Self-evident to most though it may be, this is a truth that, in fact, evolves as the cultural-historical context occupied by the reader inevitably evolves. In other words, a reading of a text metamorphoses with the accumulation of time no matter if it is done by the same reader. Interpretation and the context from which an interpretation takes place is an ever-changing phenomenon. The “silence” that is filled in the “moment” as a means for the reader and Candy to form, if you will, a surrogate agapic relationship in the image of George and Lennie in reaction to the lack of words or

actions from the bunkhouse-men is filled with successively different intuitive materials. A reader of *Of Mice and Men* upon its 1937 publication would have responded differently than a reader of today. While simple-sounding, this is an important facet in understanding the importance of an agapic invitation to a present-day audience.

As the curse of Cain has mutated since the end of World War Two and the inception of a society whose values are relative if not based on capitalistic struggle altogether (and here, I speak from the perspective of a classic Marxist), so does the “silence” in the “moment” grow more deafening.<sup>5</sup> The need to participate in an agapic relationship in the way that George and Lennie participate in each other is greater in the present than it was a few short decades ago, and it will be greater still in the future given the relentless momentum of “progress.” This is the value of a “moment” concerning an old man, a dog, and a small group whose members tragically choose to refrain rather than to react because of what society mandates as right. In this light, the social worth of *Of Mice and Men*, in general, and the “moment,” in specific, grows exponentially. Steinbeck’s subtle imploration cunningly keeps pace with society’s machinations on the human spirit, yet the responsibility of the first step toward communion still remains, as it always has, with the reader. It is, first, to see the example that Steinbeck provides in George and Lennie, and then it is to seek to replicate it by participating in the text according to Steinbeck’s agapic vision. The old man suffers under the weight of the silence, and the dog unwarily receives its fate, but the message is ultimately not one that privileges passivity: a laissez-faire approach to the darker times of life. Steinbeck demands a stronger regard for human suffering. In truth, Steinbeck’s is an appeal to reject Cain values in place of love and compassion, for only by those values can there be holistic well-being. In a phrase, this constitutes the core of Steinbeck’s humanism.

Before any realization of agape can occur, there is initially the consideration of choices. In terms of the “moment,” the reader sees what route was chosen and, hence, sees the outcome as it affects the characters involved. Without a doubt, Steinbeck intends for the reader to witness the results of a poor choice as a means, I would argue, to edify. Because the responsibility of authorship is, in part, surrendered by Steinbeck, how-

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<sup>5</sup> Of course, this is in reference to the ideological decay that was a part of the postmodern experience. The idea that Cain values have only been exacerbated as a result of this facet is not difficult to discern under this lens.

ever, the reader is presented with an opportunity to demonstrate what can be learned by, at least in a meta-textual sense, filling the “silence” in a manner that bolsters corn passion. Like the characters, the reader is presented with an agapic invitation. Steinbeck’s desired response from the reader is obvious and, in light of the evident trend of Cain values today, necessary, yet the actual decision resides nonetheless within the individual conscience where occurs the battle between social mandates and spiritual imperatives. Interactive though the “moment” may be, what meaning is derived comes from precisely *how* the conflict is understood; however, given the nature of Cain values to be infectious, what once may have depended may, in the more “modern” future, depend no longer.

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