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THE RECONCILIATION BETWEEN SELF AND  
SOCIETY IN JOHN STEINBECK'S  
MAJOR NOVELS

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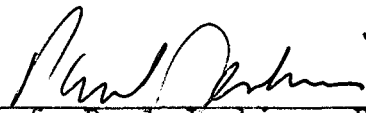
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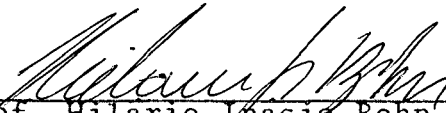
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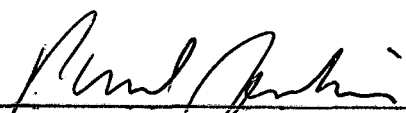
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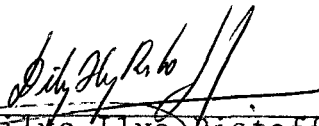
  
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Para  
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## ABSTRACT

Reading John Steinbeck's fiction one can feel an inner, subjective current running underneath the author's strong preoccupation with society and social reform. Because Steinbeck criticism has generally explored the social message of his work, the present dissertation tries to correct this imbalance in the criticism by emphasizing the individual, inner self, which certainly plays a special role throughout his novels.

I will show that in Steinbeck's most famous novels (In Dubious Battle, Of Mice and Men, and The Grapes of Wrath) the individual becomes crucially important to Steinbeck's tireless quest for a better self.

Among these aspects that could contribute to the achievement of this final goal of discovering man's best self, three are widely developed in this work--the male-bonding, in which a man takes on the responsibility for pointing out a different vision of life to the other; nature, to which the individual goes in order to meditate upon his inner afflictions, and from which he must reemerge at the right time so as not to miss himself completely; and loneliness, which is also good for the individual up to the point where he finds out that in community and in devotion to his fellow-men lies the answer he was searching for such a long time.

## RESUMO

Lendo-se a ficção de John Steinbeck, percebe-se um lado interior e subjetivo, oculto sob uma forte preocupação do autor em revelar suas opiniões sobre a sociedade e a reforma social. Uma vez que a crítica sobre Steinbeck tem geralmente explorado a mensagem social de seu trabalho, a presente dissertação tenta corrigir esse desequilíbrio, enfatizando o ser interior, individual, o qual certamente possui um papel de destaque nos romances do referido autor.

Mostrarei que, em suas obras mais famosas (In Dubious Battle, Of Mice and Men e The Grapes of Wrath), o indivíduo torna-se decisivamente importante em função da incansável busca de Steinbeck por um ser melhor.

Entre os aspectos que poderiam contribuir para a concretização deste objetivo final, isto é, o homem descobrindo o seu ser melhor, três são amplamente desenvolvidos neste trabalho - o relacionamento masculino, através do qual um homem assume a responsabilidade de mostrar a outro uma visão diferente da vida; a natureza, para onde o indivíduo se encaminha com a finalidade de meditar sobre suas aflições interiores e de onde ele deve ressurgir no devido tempo para não se perder completamente; e a solidão, a qual também é benéfica ao indivíduo até o momento em que ele descobre que, na comunidade e na devoção aos seus companheiros, reside a resposta que há tanto buscava.



John Steinbeck  
The Grapes of Wrath

STEINBECK  
OF MICE  
AND MEN



John Steinbeck

STEINBECK  
IN DUBIOUS  
BATTLES

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

#### 1.1. Statement of Problem

What most struck me when I first read John Steinbeck was his compassionate treatment of mankind. "Composed of the stuff of the soul,"<sup>1</sup> his work suggests again and again that man's story is a steadily continuing one, full of social uncertainties and personal aspirations that seem as familiar in a setting of our own time as in the world of the 1930s in which they are placed. Deeply touched by Steinbeck's writings, I felt that no other author would be more personally satisfying to examine in greater depth. Among the great quantity of Steinbeck's novels, short stories, and nonfiction pieces, I decided to concentrate on what critics generally agree to be his three major novels--In Dubious Battle<sup>2</sup> (1936), Of Mice and Men<sup>3</sup> (1937), and The Grapes of Wrath<sup>4</sup> (1939).

Those same critics, however, turned out to be essentially unhelpful in answering my first questions about these novels. The majority of them emphasize almost exclusively the political and social aspects of Steinbeck's work. Some of them suggest the existence of socialist ideas behind his words; others even address him as "communist." My own impression of the novels, by contrast, was of suffering individuals trying to come to grips with their shared fate, a process which obviously has social dimensions but which also, as I read these novels, is much more grounded in the inner, individual life than the criticism, in general, would allow. I have therefore chosen to explore the inner, subjective side that exists in Steinbeck, partly to correct what I think is an imbalance in his criticism, partly to express what I feel is the most satisfying aspect of Steinbeck's work.

And what exactly interests me in Steinbeck is certain characters' quest for a better self. In searching for it they undergo a long process of self-education, which could be compared to a journey into awareness--from selfishness and individualism (their bad self) to unselfishness and cooperation (their better self).

Once this theme was in my mind, I began arguing with myself about it, and questions like the following ones appeared: what does it mean to achieve a better self in Steinbeck's novels? Does the relationship between individual and community have any unexpected dimensions in the quest? How and when do Steinbeck's main characters find their new self? What is the importance of male-bonding in the achievement of this goal? Why are all the male pairs separated through death at the end? How is nature and lone-

liness connected with this search?

As criticism on Steinbeck generally avoids these kinds of questions I am raising here, it became easier for me to provide, if not a completely new (see the review of criticism section for a few critics who do anticipate my questions), at least a more complete view of the inner side of Steinbeck's work.

## 1.2. Review of Criticism

As I have pointed out in my statement of problem, the basic criticism on John Steinbeck naturally concentrates on Steinbeck's social vision, his attitude toward social conditions in the 1930's and 1940's in the United States and his opinions about society and social reform.

The major works of criticism on Steinbeck's novels have consistently taken this direction--Peter Lisca (The Wide World of John Steinbeck<sup>5</sup> and "Escape and Commitment: Two Poles of the Steinbeck Hero"<sup>6</sup>), Warren French (John Steinbeck<sup>7</sup>), Maxwell Geismar ("John Steinbeck: Of Wrath or Joy"<sup>8</sup>). Each major critic is somewhat different in terms of what aspect of Steinbeck's outlook he chooses to emphasize. Geismar, for instance, attempts to relate Steinbeck's work to a kind of search for social values. He sees Steinbeck's whole career up to The Grapes of Wrath as a long, erratic search for values:

In the variety of his early 'solutions'—the life of egotistic adventure, and that of bloody daring, the primitive way, the natural and anti-social

life, the return to the soil, the dabblings with the abnormal—Steinbeck seems almost to traverse the entire circuit of contemporary artistic escapes. In him are reflected the evasions of his generation.<sup>9</sup>

Besides, Geismar mentions Steinbeck's special interest in American society:

Mirror of typical American sentiment that he is, though applying this sentiment to the relatively fresh field of social welfare, Steinbeck is perhaps closer to the American audience than any other comparable writer.<sup>10</sup>

Among other critics who tend to take a similar position, Frederick I. Carpenter<sup>11</sup> should be mentioned, along with Robert Murray Davis,<sup>12</sup> James P. Degnan,<sup>13</sup> Richard F. Peterson,<sup>14</sup> and even Richard O'Connor,<sup>15</sup> in his biography of John Steinbeck.

This vision of Steinbeck as a recorder of American conditions leads many critics to consider Steinbeck a disciple of naturalism, pitying man as the product of forces beyond his control, suggesting that his life is entirely determined by social, political and economic conditions. This extreme concept of Steinbeck's interest in social matters, which reduces man to the level of the animal many times, is clearly reflected in Geismar's words:

And what one notices again is how much more interested Steinbeck really is in the natural scene, and in animal life, than in the people or the human emotions of his narratives.<sup>16</sup>

We cannot forget, however, that the first influential critic to voice this idea and embody it in a terminology which subsequent writers would use, was Edmund Wilson. In his essay "The Californians: Storm and Steinbeck" Wilson wrote in 1940:

It is the symbol of his tendency in his stories to present life in animal terms.

Mr. Steinbeck almost always in his fiction is dealing either with the lower animals or with human beings so rudimentary that they are almost on the animal level.

Edmund Wilson bases the above naturalistic conception on his following conclusion: "What is constant in Mr. Steinbeck is his preoccupation with biology. He is a biologist in the literal sense that he interests himself in biological research."<sup>17</sup> Wilson and other critics who have followed his lead understand Steinbeck's preoccupation with biology and natural systems not as the product of a naturalist's research, but as the product of a novelist looking for figures-of-speech to express his view of man's place in the world.

In its turn, this way of dealing with Steinbeck suggests the existence of another group of criticism, which could be called marine biology school of criticism. Critics of this "school" deal with a specialized form of naturalism, pointing out the way in which group dynamics in a biological system enter Steinbeck's conclusions about human social organizations. According to these critics, the predominant figures who strongly influenced Steinbeck in this field were Edward F. Ricketts and William E. Ritter, both of them biologists. Critics such as Stanley Alexander,<sup>18</sup> Joseph Fontenrose,<sup>19</sup> and Joel W. Hedgpeth<sup>20</sup> take this tack with Steinbeck, but the only critic who deeply analyses this aspect, making clear the influence it exerts on Steinbeck's fiction, is Richard Astro.<sup>21</sup>

At its most extreme, such a naturalistic outlook leads some critics to a Marxist position. In this view, Steinbeck is pic-

tured as an American-style revealer of class-structure, having a deep desire for social upheaval. This opinion is shared by critics like Freeman Champney,<sup>22</sup> André Gide,<sup>23</sup> and Charles T. Dougherty.<sup>24</sup>

The most wide-ranging critics, of course, tend to see things in a somewhat broader light. Warren French, for instance, in spite of giving some indications of being in the naturalistic camp, admits that Steinbeck's outlook changed somewhat over the years:

I wish to demonstrate ... that Steinbeck began in the late 1920s—during the 'Waste Land' era of prosperity—to write a kind of drama of consciousness quite conventional at that time; that he turned during the Depression of the 1930s to novels focused upon Naturalistic characters; ... and that in The Grapes of Wrath he then turned what had started to be a Naturalistic novel into a drama of consciousness.<sup>25</sup>

French also takes a much deeper look at the relation of the individual to society in Steinbeck's novels. He does not merely assume that the individual is subordinated to the world; on the contrary, at one point at least, French talks about "the 'committed man' who develops a conscious responsibility for his own behavior coupled with a conscience that is at the service of his people."<sup>26</sup> In the end, however, Warren French concludes that Steinbeck's social vision does require the elimination of the individual as an independent entity.

Peter Lisca goes along in much the same line. His interest also falls in "the relationship of the individual to society." In fact, when writing about this subject, he tries to make a division in Steinbeck's fiction:

We are presented with characters who choose one of two extremes—either to reject society's demands and escape into individualism, or to reject individualism and commit themselves to goals and values which can be realized only in terms of society.<sup>27</sup>

According to Lisca, the first type of hero is found in some of Steinbeck's books, while the other type appears in a different group of his novels. Sometimes, as in Of Mice and Men, argues Lisca, there is a "nice balancing"<sup>28</sup> of these heroic escapees and committed heroes.

For all of Lisca's attention to this theme, the emphasis he gives to it could be summarized by his preoccupation with the rejection of society or the commitment to a cause, mainly in terms of society. Therefore, at the end we clearly deduce that the group is much more important than the individual himself in Lisca's point-of-view. He says: "Many of his novels concern themselves with men primarily as mystical, social, psychological, or biological unit-protagonists, rather than individuals per se."<sup>29</sup> A little further, Lisca confirms this opinion by saying that the protagonists of In Dubious Battle, for instance, submit themselves to the group, but "they fail to use this experience to fashion their own individuality."<sup>30</sup> In like manner Lisca writes that when the "group disperses the single man is left a hull."<sup>31</sup>

Other reviewers could be mentioned at this very point: Stanley Edgar Hyman<sup>32</sup> and R. W. B. Lewis.<sup>33</sup> Howard Levant,<sup>34</sup> in his turn, presents a further (and for me rather unrevealing) elaboration of this group view. His book is an attempt to examine the narrative structure and the structure of the society portrayed in each novel, with the intention of showing that each book ar-



rives at a quite different artistic embodiment of social structure.

Only a few humanistic critics have bothered to notice that in Steinbeck's novels the individual is given special emphasis--through a long process of illumination he finally discovers that by devoting himself to the group, self-fulfillment is easily reached. In this light, Charles Shively writes that "the individual must change from an isolated self to an involved member of the community."<sup>35</sup> If at first this would seem to be no different from what Lisca or French might say, Shively goes on to emphasize the continuing importance of the subjective and the individual to Steinbeck: "The community becomes the way that the individual can, by his participation in, and his devotion to, find himself."<sup>36</sup> Betty L. Perez<sup>37</sup> shares this same thought, but none of her comments are so striking as the ones I have quoted above.

Because critical attention has usually focused on the social message of Steinbeck's fiction, I decided to develop Shively's and Perez's slight suggestions that the individual plays a special role throughout Steinbeck's novels. With this thought in mind, I will try to point out all the necessary steps required of the individual in the long process to which he must submit, in order to find his better self.

### 1.3. Statement of Purpose

This dissertation is an attempt to answer the doubts described in the first section of this chapter. To that purpose, I have divided the present thesis into four chapters and a conclusion, many of them having one or more subdivisions.

In this preliminary chapter, I delimit the subject developed throughout this work, followed by the review of major criticism.

The second chapter will be concerned with Steinbeck's chief interest in man, more specifically on the relationship of the individual to society. In describing this relationship, I will also state its importance to the achievement of the individual's self-realization--of his better self, which occurs due to his final consciousness of a reality larger than himself. As marine biology has much to do with this aspect of Steinbeck's writings, I will present, also in this chapter, two marine biologists' studies (William E. Ritter's and Edward F. Ricketts') which influenced Steinbeck's work and life considerably.

My third chapter will point out the influence male-bondings exert on some characters' quest for their better self. First of all, I will place Steinbeck's three most famous novels in an important historical tradition which, according to Leslie Fiedler,<sup>38</sup> establishes that the American novel is distinguished by an archetypal sequence of close relationships between male pairs. Contrary to Fiedler's opinion, however, I see something different from latent homosexuality at the heart of male pairs in Stein-

beck's novels. Then, to express myself more clearly, I will subdivide this chapter into three sections, each one dealing with a specific novel. In each novel a male pair is going to be emphasized, as well as its importance to the individual's reeducation into a sense of the whole--the answer to his constant quest.

In the fourth chapter I will deal with the relationships between man and nature, and man and loneliness, giving special emphasis to their positive and negative influences upon the individual's search for a better self. Based on Karl Jaspers' observations,<sup>39</sup> I will show that Steinbeck constitutes an important break with the traditional concept of nature in American literature, as represented by authors as diverse as Emerson and Hemingway, in whose novels man finds himself returning to nature and remaining there alone, sometimes forever. Then, in this chapter I will try to prove that in Steinbeck's novels nature is good for man only when he retreats to it to stop and think of himself. Moreover, I will show that at the very moment this meditation comes to an end, nature becomes extremely destructive, since the man who stays alone in nature can miss himself completely in the end. Therefore, even loneliness will only be useful for man when he takes advantage of it to solve his inner doubts; otherwise, it will be considered a negative aspect to the individual's state of self-realization, which can only be achieved through his commitment to his fellow-men.

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## CHAPTER II

### INDIVIDUAL AND COMMUNITY

During all his literary life Steinbeck's chief interest has been in man, more specifically on the relationship of the individual to the "whole," to society. Steinbeck himself saw his career in this light. In his Nobel Prize speech he announced that he lives as a writer "to celebrate man's proven capacity for greatness of heart and spirit... courage, compassion, and love." "Man himself has become our greatest hazard and our only hope."<sup>1</sup> In particular, Steinbeck's concept of the ideal social man holds that "the individual approach is no longer the way" and that the "commitment to a cause" in cooperation with his fellow-men makes "the individual... greater than himself."<sup>2</sup> This means that many of Steinbeck's characters, in finding what we could call their better self, will be led from a state of depression to a state of self-realization. Only in relation to the group, however, is

the individual permitted to feel such a transformation. The ultimate consequence of Steinbeck's vision of the ideal social man is of course to extinguish the individual as a self-sufficient unit. But before the self can be extinguished, it must come to know itself and its best inner impulses even more deeply than normal consciousness allows. In The Log from the Sea of Cortez Steinbeck writes that

... most of the feeling we call religious, most of the mystical outcry which is one of the most prized and used and desired reactions of our species, is really the understanding and the attempt to say that man is related to the whole...<sup>3</sup>

The detailed examination of Steinbeck's three most important novels and their relationship to Josiah Royce's notion of the "loyal community" demonstrates that Steinbeck really owns "a genuine theory of society," for "their ideas concerning the individual and the community are quite analogous."<sup>4</sup>

The basic premise for the 'loyal community' is that the individualistic, self-orientated approach was not the answer. The individual must change from an isolated self to an involved member of the community.<sup>5</sup>

In Steinbeck's novels many characters make this change--Jim in In Dubious Battle, George in Of Mice and Men, and mainly Tom in The Grapes of Wrath are good instances. All of them have discovered that "to survive" they need some unifying aim; i.e., they need to commit themselves to a general cause. As Royce has said: "The sense of the community, the power to work together, with a clear insight into our reasons for so working, is the first need of humanity."<sup>6</sup> In regard to this idea and referring to Steinbeck's work Warren French says also that



Juan Diego [The Forgotten Village], Mayor Orden [The Moon is Down], and the bomber crew [Bombs Away] that may live or die together have all learned the lesson of working together.<sup>7</sup>

In view of this comparison between Steinbeck and the Idealist, Josiah Royce,<sup>8</sup> we arrive at the conclusion that

the basic philosophical premises of both men—the commitment to a cause and an understanding of the relationship of the individual to the whole—are nearly identical.

Thus, based on the ideas developed above, one can imagine Steinbeck agreeing with the maxim of William Dean Howells, the novelist and humanitarian--a maxim inspired by the reading of Tolstoi:

'Men are more like than unlike one another. Let us make them know one another better, that they may be all humbled and strengthened with a sense of their fraternity.'<sup>10</sup>

For many characters Steinbeck has accomplished this.

But despite Steinbeck's commitment to the social whole, the actual focus of In Dubious Battle, Of Mice and Men, and The Grapes of Wrath is not on the vision of an achieved community of cooperation, but on the way individuals can be brought to accept the need for such an attitude toward others. In fact, the importance of the idea of the necessity of cooperation, selflessness, anti-individualism is confirmed by the fact that it is spread throughout these three books. Some characters, mainly the central ones, undergo a long process of education that ends with their complete transformation from selfish and individualistic selves to unselfish and cooperative ones. This reeducation takes place throughout the whole novels; only at the end will

the characters reach the culmination of their development.

Therefore, despite their clear social message, Steinbeck's novels actually devote the great bulk of their pages to the individual who is at odds with the vision of "group-man"; i.e., Steinbeck is worried not with merely expressing his social visions, as most critics have wanted to claim, but with resolving the inherent contradiction between self and society. So, over and over, he points out man's "need for cooperative effort and unity with his fellow man"<sup>11</sup> and also suggests that such "co-operation can be achieved only when individuals of their own volition put aside special interests and work together to achieve a common purpose."<sup>12</sup> By doing so, the individual reaches inner fulfillment and becomes indispensable to the formation of Steinbeck's ideal society which, according to his vision, should be composed by men conscious that "the community becomes the way that the individual can, by his participation in, and his devotion to, find himself."<sup>13</sup>

To speak truly, the "miracle of consciousness" is for Steinbeck, "man's greatest burden and his greatest glory."<sup>14</sup> The dilemma that preoccupies Steinbeck in his main work is to show how one can be conscious as an individual without being divided, separated from others, since "the self is always in conflict with society."<sup>15</sup> Individuals unconscious of themselves, like Lennie in Of Mice and Men, have no difficulty in being selfless and committed to brotherhood. The problem, however, lies in the individuals who are conscious of themselves, like Tom in The Grapes of Wrath, Jim in In Dubious Battle, or even George in Of Mice and Men,

perfect examples of selfishness and self-absorption, as Steinbeck points out at the beginning of the novels.

So, each novel's development reveals Steinbeck's struggle to find out possible ways of bringing individual and community together. Steinbeck does not allow himself easy solutions to the dilemma, either. Neither the nuclear nor the extended family-- which some other writer might have fastened on as a convenient bridge between the individual and the group--strikes Steinbeck as being a true middle ground. Instead, when Steinbeck deals with families at all, he deals with them as merely enlarged individuals subject to all the self-absorption, selfishness, and blindness characteristic of individuals consciously of themselves. In order for the family to become part of the larger whole, it must submit to the same process of reeducation which an individual must undergo. Warren French describes the transition that the Joad family makes in The Grapes of Wrath as "a change from the family's jealously regarding itself as an isolated and self-important clan to its envisioning itself as part of one vast human family."<sup>16</sup> In The Grapes of Wrath the whole family is regarded as an individual who needs to learn "that the individual approach is no longer the way."<sup>17</sup> The family has to understand that "if man is to survive he must cooperate with others for the benefit of all."<sup>18</sup> But almost up to the end the Joads selfishly think of help only as a means towards maintaining the family. Then little by little they adopt the concept that "one must help whoever needs help."<sup>19</sup> During the building of a bank to hold flood-water out of a cotton-pickers' camp, Pa, for instance, learns the lesson of cooperation:

"We can do her if ever'body helps,"<sup>20</sup> he exclaims. Soon after, Uncle John, too, finally breaks with tradition in order to transmit to the world a lesson. Instead of burying Rose of Sharon's still-born baby, he sets it adrift in an apple box, saying: "Go down in the street an' rot an' tell 'em that way. That's the way you can talk. Don' even know if you was a boy or a girl. Ain't gonna find out."<sup>21</sup>

Undeniably, Ma's attitude of accepting responsibility beyond the family is one of the most important steps to the final education of the family. Ma shows it in a conversation with a neighbor whom she thanks for having helped during Rose of Sharon's delivery:

The stout woman smiled. 'No need to thank. Ever' body's in the same wagon. S'pose we was down. You'd a give us a han'.'

'Yes,' Ma said, 'we would.'

'Or anybody.'

'Or anybody. Use' ta be the fambly was fust. It ain't so now. It's anybody. Worse off we get, the more we got to do.'<sup>22</sup>

Up to this moment an "education of the heart" has transformed the family's ideas; henceforth, it is expected that it also transforms its behavior. The opportunity arises at the very end, in the barn where the family finds out a starving man. There Ma puts into practice her idea that "worse off we get, the more we got to do" by suggesting that Rose of Sharon should give her milk to the man. Therefore, through Rose of Sharon, the family gives the only thing it has left to it to offer--in fact, the great importance of such a gift lies in its intimacy. This first entirely unselfish "action" proves that the Joads' education is

finally completed. According to Steinbeck, the Joads made the change from "I" to "we."<sup>23</sup> Now they are not a self-sufficient unit anymore, but are integrated to the whole, to the "group-man," which represents the final revelation they were expected to receive.

It is interesting to note that the final assimilation of the Joad family into a state of community--mindedness happens at the very end of the novel, some time after individual characters have already learned their lesson of selflessness. In Steinbeck's world it is perhaps even more difficult for a family to become part of the social whole than it is for the individual. For in order to reach that state, one has to pass from self consciousness--not back into unconsciousness, which might have been easy for the family to do--but on to a higher state of consciousness, what others writing about Steinbeck have termed his vision of "pure consciousness."

"Pure consciousness" is the final victory, and diminution, of the individual self. Again we see Steinbeck remaining true to the contradiction between the individual and society while continuing to insist on their final merger.

When we speak of 'pure consciousness,' we are speaking... of the embodiment of all individual men in what Steinbeck in Chapter Fourteen [of The Grapes of Wrath] calls 'Manself.'... At this level of 'pure consciousness,' individual distinctions are obliterated.<sup>24</sup>

If this happens, it is because man finally becomes aware of himself as an integral participant of the whole, of society. And only by accepting responsibility for the benefit of others, man

has his drive outside of himself, that is, toward altruism, which means that the so expected "miracle of consciousness" finally occurs.

This whole idea has already appeared in In Dubious Battle where Doc Burton asserts Jim's sympathetic identification with mankind--"Jim,... sometimes I love men as much as you do, maybe not in just the same way."<sup>25</sup> In fact, Burton never learned how to love people in the way Jim did. Afterwards, in Of Mice and Men the same idea arises but on a small scale, for according to Howard Levant, in this novel, the main characters, "[George] and Lennie represent an idealized variety of group-man."<sup>26</sup> And a dialogue between George and Slim (the man who is going to stay with George at the end) makes this explicit--

'You guys travel around together? ...'  
 'Sure,' said George. 'We kinda look after each other.' He indicated Lennie with his thumb. ...  
 Slim looked through George and beyond him.  
 'Ain't many guys travel around together,' he mused.  
 'I don't know why. Maybe ever'body in the whole damn world is scared of each other.'  
 'It's a lot nicer to go around with a guy you know,' said George.<sup>27</sup>

But only in The Grapes of Wrath Steinbeck would fully develop the idea of "pure consciousness." Besides the expression "Manself"--which Steinbeck coined as a substitute for "mankind" in order to emphasize the individual's inner fulfillment as an essential stage before his entire commitment to the group--many other passages of the novel would also make this clear. Among the best is the one in which Tom says: "Well, maybe ... a fella ain't got a soul of his own, but on'y a piece of a big one."<sup>28</sup>

So, in spite of having the "group-man" concept as his main

goal, Steinbeck presents the individual growth as the only method for improvement. This means that, first of all, the individual has to reach the state of self-fulfillment, which then makes him ready for his transformation into an "active participant"<sup>29</sup> of community. Steinbeck's most important novels show this progression very clearly through their central characters. Dissatisfaction, selfishness, individualism, all change at the moment these characters are able to "transcend their inner conflicts and their outer circumstances and so achieve a paradise of the mind and heart."<sup>30</sup> This point is reached by their breaking "through to a vision of a reality larger than themselves."<sup>31</sup>

In one of his essays called "The Philosophy of Breaking Through," the marine biologist, Edward F. Ricketts, (Steinbeck's best friend) defines this "breaking through" as "a coherency of feeling and thought which leads man into a sense of 'deep participation.'"<sup>32</sup> And in his turn, the biologist William E. Ritter, when analysing this problem of consciousness, says that "man's supreme glory" is not simply "that he can know the world, but that he can know himself as a knower of the world."<sup>33</sup> Ritter's work was well known to Steinbeck, and Steinbeck admitted more than once to admiring his ideas.<sup>34</sup> As Steinbeck makes explicit throughout his work, unfortunately "only some men can understand their dilemma, their situation," which suggests that "awareness takes place"<sup>35</sup> only once in a while.

## 2.1. Scientific Influences on Steinbeck

Interestingly, marine biology has much to do with Steinbeck's literary work, mainly with his concept of the ideal society. His curiosity about that subject started in the summer of 1923 when he enrolled for the summer course in general zoology at the Hopkins Marine Station in Pacific Grove, where he was exposed to the ideas of the biologist William E. Ritter, whose notion of the "organismal conception of life"--the notion that "a whole is more than the sum of its parts," reflects his belief that

'in all parts of nature and in nature itself as one gigantic whole, wholes are so related to their parts that not only does the existence of the whole depend upon the orderly cooperation and interdependence of its parts, but the whole exercises a measure of determinative control over its parts.'<sup>36</sup>

W. E. Ritter, as quoted by Richard Astro in Testumaro Hayashi's A Study Guide to Steinbeck: A Handbook to his Major Works--

Ritter's organismal conception of life, ... postulates the notion that any organism (including man) must work toward recognizable ends and goals if it is to survive.<sup>37</sup>

In other words, any individual organism, even man, has to be conscious of its decision to cooperate with other individuals of its own species, which means that this cooperation among them cannot be something automatic, but the result of their consciousness of an



existing goal ahead. That Steinbeck was intrigued by Ritter's biological research is demonstrated by the amount of space he devotes to observing marine biology in The Log from the Sea of Cortez, his record of a research cruise he made with a marine biologist friend, Ed Ricketts, in 1940:

'There are colonies of pelagic tunicates which have taken a shape like the finger of a glove, ... each member of the colony is an individual animal, not at all like the sum of its individuals. ... Here are two animals, and yet the same thing.'<sup>38</sup>

Although it is not immediately clear exactly what Steinbeck means to conclude in this passage, his desire to deny differences among individual organisms and to suggest that each individual has the same relationship to the whole is clear. This of course is an idea which became increasingly important to Steinbeck's fiction. He thought a great deal about Ritter's conclusions and decided to apply the fundamental rules of the organismal conception to relationships between characters and sometimes between groups of characters.

Nevertheless, it was his close friend, the marine biologist Ed Ricketts, not Ritter, who exerted the most important influence on Steinbeck as a writer and even as a man.

Steinbeck met Ed Ricketts in 1930, and their friendship was solidified by the fact that Ricketts, who had recently immigrated to the Monterey Peninsula from the University of Chicago where he had studied biology under the eminent marine ecologist, W. C. Allee, gave impetus and professional insight to the ideas about man and his social and natural environment that Steinbeck was attempting to work out in his novels.<sup>39</sup>

With a highly original mind, Ricketts "became a sort of unofficial

collaborator and Steinbeck's 'artistic conscience.'"<sup>40</sup> When he died in 1948, Steinbeck, referring to Ricketts in some letters to other friends, spoke of "a kind of conscience being removed."<sup>41</sup> Undeniably, after Ricketts' death, Steinbeck's work underwent a visible decline.

During his life, in fact, Ricketts developed many ideas which Steinbeck chose to apply to his main work. One of the best is Ricketts' concept of the "toto-picture," which helped Steinbeck to formulate his concept of man's consciousness of the whole, and consequently his conception of the ideal society.

Ricketts posited an ecological and holistic world-view in which he sought to develop a 'unified field hypothesis' which would reflect what he called the 'toto-picture.' Often, Ricketts' explanations of this 'toto-picture' are scientific and are based upon the associational ideas of Allee. At other times, however, Ricketts reaches for an extra-physical interpretation of a cosmic whole in which everything in the creation is related and has its proper place.<sup>42</sup>

Ricketts' emphasis on unity differs from Ritter's "organismal concept" not in substance, really, but in its degree of abstraction. Where Ritter writes about marine biology, with only occasional attempts to apply its lessons to human relationships, Ricketts keeps his eye first and foremost on the human, moral implications of "holism." It is at these more philosophical moments, when he speaks of the "essential unity," which he tries to understand through what he calls "the non-teleological method of thinking."

For by thinking non-teleologically, in terms of what is instead of what could be or should be, Ricketts believed he could 'break through' to an understanding of the whole.<sup>43</sup>

Then, in contrast to what Ricketts calls (as Richard Astro describes and quotes it)

teleological thinking, which "considers changes and cures--what 'should be' in terms of an end pattern" ... and which often leads to "a fierce but ineffectual attempt to change conditions which are assumed undesirable ...," Ricketts prefers non-teleological ideas which imply ... an open, non-blaming, non-casual approach to life by the man who looks at situations and events and accepts them as such. In so doing, the beholder perceives the whole picture and becomes an identifiable part of that picture. "The method extends beyond thinking even to living itself," insists Ricketts, "in fact, by inferred definition, it postulates 'living into.'"<sup>44</sup>

Ricketts clearly defines this situation by calling it "understanding-acceptance."<sup>45</sup>

Influenced by both men, Steinbeck skillfully fuses Ricketts' holistic world-view with Ritter's organismal conception of life without forgetting to distinguish between Ricketts' gospel of non-teleological thinking and the teleological nature of the organismal idea. As we have already seen, non-teleological behavior implies accepting the cosmic whole as a preformed given and relating to it as such, while teleological thinking offers man the possibility of changing the nature of the whole by adding his individual presence to the group. In In Dubious Battle, for instance, Doc Burton is a non-teleological thinker who only wants "to be able to look at the whole thing,"<sup>46</sup> without participating in a possible social change. Through Burton, Steinbeck demonstrates his clear attraction to the idea of non-teleological behavior, but at the same time he does not hide a kind of reservation. This probably happens due to his pursuit of the ideal of a "group-man,"

which requires some degree of intention of goal, of teleological purpose. So, in The Grapes of Wrath, Jim Casy begins as a non-teleological character (his holistic view proves this: "Maybe all men got one big soul ever'body's a part of."<sup>47</sup>), but ends up a teleological one, for he dedicates himself to "go where the folks is goin',"<sup>48</sup> i.e., he starts to work toward a recognizable goal.

In regard to Steinbeck and Ricketts' agreements and disagreements, one can say that they put special emphasis on the contemplative function of the human mind, but that Steinbeck, in contrast to Ricketts, insists on the idea that this function will only have real meaning at the moment it serves some socially responsible end. So perhaps what Steinbeck really learned from Ricketts is that any significant action has to be the consequence of a vision of the whole; that the man of vision, while "living into life," can use the principles of this vision to commit himself to the others and to a cause, which, due to his insight, he is perfectly able to understand. Steinbeck's acceptance of this rule is shown in his best fiction, where he always combines vision and commitment--as with Jim in In Dubious Battle, or Tom and Casy in The Grapes of Wrath, specially. In short, Steinbeck makes a clever combination of "the compelling metaphysic of Edward F. Ricketts with a personal gospel of social action."<sup>49</sup>

But the relationship between Steinbeck and Ricketts does not end here. A more careful observation of it would reveal a possible connection between this real life friendship and Steinbeck's fictional vision. In fact, by a curious coincidence, Steinbeck's fictional attachments to the uncomplicated comradeship of men,

instead of to relationships between men and women, in a certain way also happened in his own real life. His matrimonial inconstancy (Steinbeck got married three times) paralleled to his faithful friendship for Ricketts is the best proof of Steinbeck's preference for the world of men.

One can even say that their friendship suggested the very process Steinbeck developed throughout his work by which individuals could be reeducated into a sense of the whole. In view of this possibility we arrive at the conclusion that their relationship may have functioned as a model for Steinbeck's fictional pattern of male pairs, in which one takes on the responsibility for revealing a vision of the whole to the other. Far from the scenes and situations of Steinbeck's books, Ricketts, not even knowing about the great influence he exerted on Steinbeck, would transmit to him his conclusions about the vision of the "toto-picture," which would become of extreme importance to Steinbeck's work.

## CHAPTER NOTES

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- (4) Ibid., p. 28.
- (5) Ibid., p. 30.
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- (8) The comparison has been formerly made by Charles Shively in his essay "John Steinbeck: From the Tide Pool to the Loyal Community," in Astro and Hayashi, op. cit..
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- (12) French, op. cit., p. 99.

- (13) Shively, op. cit., p. 33.
- (14) Astro, Richard, "John Steinbeck and the Tragic Miracle of Consciousness," San Jose Studies (Vol. I, no. 3) p. 63.
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- (18) McCarthy, Paul, "House and Shelter as Symbol in The Grapes of Wrath," South Dakota Review (Vol. V, no. 4, 1967-68) p. 52.
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- (34) Astro, Richard, "Steinbeck's Sea of Cortez," in Hayashi, op. cit., p. 168.
- (35) Covici, Pascal Jr., "John Steinbeck and the Language of Awareness," in French, Warren, ed., The Thirties: Fiction, Poetry, and Drama (E. Edwards: De Land, Fla., 1967) p. 54.
- (36) Astro, "Steinbeck and Ricketts: The Morphology of a Metaphysic," op. cit., pp. 28-29. Of all the critics I have read, Richard Astro is the only one who deals with this aspect of Steinbeck in two different articles, "Steinbeck's Sea of Cortez" and "Steinbeck and Ricketts: The Morphology of a Methaphysic."
- (37) Astro, "Steinbeck's Sea of Cortez," op. cit., p. 178.
- (38) Astro, "Steinbeck and Ricketts: The Morphology of a Metaphysic," op. cit., p. 29.
- (39) Astro, "Steinbeck's Sea of Cortez," op. cit., pp. 168-69.
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- (45) Astro, "Steinbeck and Ricketts: The Morphology of a Metaphysic," op. cit., p. 27.
- (46) In Dubious Battle, p. 130.
- (47) The Grapes of Wrath, p. 24.
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- (49) Astro, "Steinbeck and Ricketts: The Morphology of a Metaphysic," op. cit., p. 32.



## CHAPTER III

### THE INFLUENCE OF MALE-BONDINGS ON THE QUEST FOR A BETTER SELF

#### 3.1. Leslie Fiedler and the "Boyish" Theme in American Literature

Leslie Fiedler writes in his Love and Death in the American Novel that the great American novelists tend to avoid treating the passionate encounter of a man and a woman which might otherwise form the center of a novel. Indeed, instead of any full-fledged, mature women, capable of passion, they give us monsters of virtue (like Ma Joad in Steinbeck's The Grapes of Wrath), or bitchery (like Curley's wife in Steinbeck's Of Mice and Men), symbols of the rejection or fear of sexuality. The legacy of female inadequacy in the American novel (and the inability of novelists to create complete woman characters) led a great number of American writers to that strategy of evasion, that flight from the world

of women to the haunts of womanless men. Fiedler says:

Found here and there in British literature, scarcely at all in other traditions, this 'boyish' theme recurs with especial regularity in American fiction, most notably in the two greatest novels ever written in the United States, Moby Dick and Huckleberry Finn, but elsewhere, of course, in Twain and Melville, as well as in Dana, Stephen Crane, Henry James, Hemingway, Faulkner, and Sherwood Anderson, among others.<sup>1</sup>

Certainly, Steinbeck could be included among these other novelists Fiedler refers to.

One of the most likely reasons for the constant use of this "boyish" theme is suggested by Fiedler:

It is maturity above all things that the American writer fears, and marriage seems to him its essential sign. For marriage stands traditionally not only for a reconciliation with the divided self, a truce between head and heart, but also for a compromise with society, an acceptance of responsibility and drudgery and dullness.<sup>2</sup>

What Fiedler wants to say is that American literature tries to avoid the relationship between men and women because it compromises the freedom of men especially.

The quest which has distinguished American fiction is the search for an innocent substitute for adulterous passion and marriage alike.

Is there not, our writers ask over and over, a sentimental relationship at once erotic and immaculate, a union which commits its participants neither to society nor sin—and yet one which is able to symbolize the union of the ego with the id, the thinking self with its rejected impulses?<sup>3</sup>

Fiedler's thesis that the American novel is differentiated by an archetypal sequence of close relationships between male pairs, which border on what he calls, with some reservations, the

"homoerotic,"<sup>4</sup> helps place Steinbeck's In Dubious Battle, Of Mice and Men, and The Grapes of Wrath in an important historical tradition, although no one would quarrel with Mme. Claude-Edmonde Magny's statement that

for Steinbeck the normal, valid, durable couple can be formed only by two representatives of the male sex—and this without the least suggestion of homosexuality...<sup>5</sup>

or with Burton Rascoe's early assessment of Of Mice and Men, that "the relationship between George and Lennie is a paradigm of all the nonphysical, nonsexual emotions, concerns, and aspirations in the world."<sup>6</sup>

### 3.2. Male-Bonding in In Dubious Battle, Of Mice and Men, and The Grapes of Wrath--its Importance in the Quest for a Better Self

In the novels I have chosen by Steinbeck there are the very closely knit associations of Mac and Jim in In Dubious Battle, Lennie and George in Of Mice and Men, and Casy and Tom in The Grapes of Wrath. Women appear in these novels but their allurements are overshadowed by the more solid attractions of male companionship.

As though by design, in each novel Steinbeck emphasizes the development of one of the characters who belongs to the male pairs. In In Dubious Battle, for instance, although the strike itself, or "group-man" who is created from the workers' unification, might be regarded as the true protagonist of the novel, the

narrative development is more closely connected to the character of Jim Nolan, beginning with his "birth" into the Party and ending with his sacrificial death. Even in In Dubious Battle--one of Steinbeck's most realistic novels--"the emphasis is not on the social issues involved, but on the psychological state of the protagonists,"<sup>7</sup> Peter Lisca has written.

Jim--a serious, disenchanted young man without a family and recently released from jail--remarks several times within the first few pages of the novel that he feels dead. While talking to a radical recruiter he says: "I feel dead. I thought I might get alive again."<sup>8</sup> And his coming-alive provides "a structuring device for the rest of the action."<sup>9</sup> As soon as he joins the Party, he is sent with Mac, a mature Party man, to organize a strike among apple pickers in Torgas--a near-by valley. Mac is the male companion who will be "responsible for Jim's education,"<sup>10</sup> for through him Jim is going to learn how to find his better self.

Of Mice and Men, in its turn, is the story of two migrant workers--George and Lennie. Lennie, in his retardation, needs protection all the time; therefore, George takes care of him. Among several reasons, he feels responsible for Lennie in return for the latter's unfailing loyalty and on account of their having grown up together. In addition, George tells Slim (another workman) that Lennie is "dumb as hell, but he ain't crazy. An' I ain't so bright neither, or I wouldn't be buckin' barley for my fifty and found."<sup>11</sup>

In spite of all attentions that surround Lennie, one can feel that the emphasis falls on George, for he is the "only developing character"<sup>12</sup> of the novel. Once again it is the empha-

sized character who is going to be taught about the better self by the other component of the male-pair. At first sight, it is almost impossible to believe that Lennie will transmit something to George. But in fact, from Lennie's dullness and humbleness George will take out an important lesson for his life.

Finally, The Grapes of Wrath narrates the story of the Joad family's pilgrimage from a farm near Sallisaw, Oklahoma, to California, after they are tracted off the land they have been share-cropping. More than half of the book is formed by "intercalary chapters," as Peter Lisca has called them, in which Steinbeck states a general point-of-view about the migration. This theme, however, serves primarily as background for Tom Joad (one of the Joads' sons) and Jim Casy's (an ex-preacher) relationship. Tom, who "undergoes a long process of education"<sup>13</sup> throughout the novel, will improve greatly till the end; and Casy will show him the way to reach the state of being better.

According to what has been said, the lessons transmitted by Mac, Lennie, and Casy to their male companions can be considered parallel, despite all of the different devices they use to fulfill their intentions. Through their examples their "mates" discover a reality beyond individual ambition and self-realization--a reality based on selfless cooperation and love among human beings. In their lessons they add the suggestion that everyone has "to become aware of himself as an integral part of the whole design of existence"<sup>14</sup> --in other words, one must be conscious of the importance of his cooperation with and devotion to his fellow-men throughout life, since it is from this indi-

vidual consciousness that a communal one is going to be reached. Only then can things change for the better.

### 3.3. Jim and Mac in In Dubious Battle

At the beginning of In Dubious Battle, a series of images sharpens the meaning of Jim's awareness that he had been "dead," and is about to become partly "alive":

'At last it was evening. The lights in the street outside came on, and the neon restaurant sign on the corner jerked on and off, exploding its hard red light in the air.' The sign conveys the ugly, mechanical 'illumination' which Jim has experienced. And, of his family, Jim begins: 'My mother had light blue eyes. I remember they looked like white stones.' Eyes like stones connote a living-death; this suggestion reappears in an image uniting eye and death references in a machine image: 'mother was quieter even than before. She moved kind of like a machine, and she hardly ever said anything. Her eyes got a kind of dead look, too.' This sequence illuminates the inner sense of Jim's background—his father is a drunken, fighting man, his sister runs away to a life of sin, his mother suffers and dies silently—and deepens the implications of Jim's introduction to Joy, an old Party man, whose life suggests the useless violence of Jim's father: "'This is Joy,' said Mac. 'Joy is a veteran, aren't you, Joy?' 'Damn right,' said Joy. His eyes flared up, then almost instantly the light went out of them again." This sequence indicates Jim's own passage from death to life, from 'dead' eyes to 'his eyes flared up.' Jim is aware of his symbolic passage, for he describes his 'conversion' to the Party as a coming alive. The effect of this connected imagery is to strip Jim of his dead past and to establish him as a 'tabula rasa.'<sup>15</sup>

Another proof of Jim's awareness of the necessity of change is stated by himself in one of his first conversations with Mac:

'All the time at home we were fighting, fighting something—hunger mostly. My old man was fighting the bosses. I was fighting the school. But always we lost. And after a long time I guess it got to be part of our mind-stuff that we always would lose. My old man was fighting just like a cat in a corner with a pack of dogs around. Sooner or later a dog was sure to kill

him; but he fought anyway. Can you see the hopelessness in that? I grew up in that hopelessness.'<sup>16</sup>

This is the right moment for Jim to begin a new education. And Mac will take responsibility for it, "I'll train you, and then you can train new men," Mac tells Jim. Jim, in his turn, feels that it will be very nice and useful to have Mac constantly near him. With "his small grey eyes ... ashine with excitement," he says: "Thanks for taking me, Mac."<sup>17</sup> And during the first night in the Torgas Valley, Mac helps to deliver a woman's child. Symbolically this stands for Jim's birth into a better new life, which is shown by Mac, who plays the role of midwife to Jim. "The unification of the men, Mac plainly, tells Jim, is their most important and crucial job."<sup>18</sup> And unification is born from cooperative effort only. Through Mac's words, Steinbeck tries to show the importance of each man's participation in the struggle to reach the same goal.

Mac also anticipates the idea Steinbeck will formulate very clearly in Chapter Fourteen of The Grapes of Wrath when he talks of Manself: "Having stepped forward, he may slip back, but only half a step, never the full step back."<sup>19</sup> The same thought is expressed by Mac when he answers Jim's following question: "D'you think we'll win this strike, Mac?" And Mac:

'We haven't a chance. I figure these guys here'll probably start deserting as soon as much trouble starts. But you don't want to worry about that, Jim. The thing will carry on and on. It'll spread, and some day—it'll work. Some day we'll win. We've got to believe that.'<sup>20</sup>

For Steinbeck, for Mac, and now for Jim, who gradually understands

and absorbs his new education, man has to give his contribution in the struggle to gain something better, even when the result is not immediate. Some day things and people will improve because of this struggle, which is the best reason for one not quitting it.

In between the whole process of Jim's inner education, a comment made by him points out the newness of his feelings: "Seems to me I never did much of anything ... Everything's new to me."<sup>21</sup> Among the different things introduced into Jim's life is Mac's advice that Jim has "to take advantage of every opportunity"<sup>22</sup> if he wants to get the final goal, i.e., to participate in a common struggle for the benefit of all. Early in the novel Mac advises Jim:

'You ought to take up smoking. It's a nice social habit. You'll have to talk to a lot of strangers in your time. I don't know any quicker way to soften a stranger down than to offer him a smoke, or even to ask him for one. And lots of guys feel insulted if they offer you a cigarette and you don't take it. You better start.'

Jim immediately understands the validity of such words and thinks of the possibility of accepting them: "'I guess I will,' said Jim."<sup>23</sup> And soon after this conversation he really finds himself in a situation which requires a similar attitude:

One of the big brown squad tents stood nearby. Hearing voices inside, Jim went in. In the dim brown light he saw a dozen men squatting on their blankets. The talk died as he entered. The men looked up at him and waited. He reached in his pocket and brought out the bag of tobacco Mac had given him. 'Hi,' he said. The men still waited. Jim went on, 'I've got a sore arm. Will one of you guys roll me a cigarette?'

A man sitting [sic] in front of him held out a hand, took the bag and quickly made the cigarette. Jim took it and waved it to indicate the other men. 'Pass it around. God knows they



ain't much in this camp.' The bag went from hand to hand. A stout little man with a short mustache said, 'Sit down, kid, here, on my bed. Ain't you the guy that got shot yesterday?'<sup>24</sup>

Jim's period of education even allows him to learn that men's confidence can be obtained by the imitation of any dialect he is confronted with. This strategy reflects Mac's psychological behavior of taking benefit of every opportunity. As Mac had earlier counseled Jim:

'Men are suspicious of a man who doesn't talk their way. You can insult a man pretty badly by using a word he doesn't understand. Maybe he won't say anything, but he'll hate you for it.'<sup>25</sup>

Nevertheless, the use of such psychology makes Mac appear rough sometimes. After Jim has helped the woman in the Torgas Valley, for instance, Mac advises Jim:

'We've got to use whatever material comes to us. That was a lucky break. We simply had to take it. 'Course it was nice to help the girl, but hell, even if it killed her—we've got to use anything.'

This apparently tough exterior, however, is immediately erased by Mac's next words, which prove that everything he does is on behalf of a noble cause:

'I'm all in, but I feel good. With one night's work we've got the confidence of the men... And more than that, we made the men work for themselves, in their own defense, as a group. That's what we're out here for anyway, to teach them to fight in a bunch... You know all that.'

Jim answers: "Yes... I knew that, but I didn't know how you were going to go about it."<sup>26</sup> Through Mac's words and attitudes Jim is becoming aware of the conflict that exists between ends and means and "accepts the validity of the paradox that good may come out

of evil."<sup>27</sup> Little by little Jim learns, as Mac had already learned, to distinguish between what is right and what has to be done in order to reach a final good purpose. And his increased interest in helping Mac in the unification of the men to struggle for a better life becomes clear throughout the novel: "Well, let me do things, won't you, Mac? I don't want to be a stooge all my life,"<sup>28</sup> Jim says. Later on he cries out: "I want to help... I want to go right on helping."<sup>29</sup> And still further he asks Mac again: "What do you want me to do? ... All I do is just listen. I want to do something."<sup>30</sup>

In fact, Jim absorbs so much of Mac's idealism and his way of doing things unselfishly that, at a certain point, he is even able to tell Mac he has surpassed him: "I'm stronger than you, Mac. ... You and all the rest have to think of women and tobacco and liquor."<sup>31</sup> Not that he understands Mac's outlook better than Mac himself does. Rather, Jim possesses one trait that Mac doesn't, a trait which Steinbeck suddenly introduces as still another prerequisite for human goodness. Jim has no interest in women. By contrast, Mac more than once shows signs of this weakness: "'If I saw a decent-looking woman, I'd go nuts,' said Mac."<sup>32</sup> In addition, there is a dialogue between Mac and Jim which confirms the latter's total purity:

'Smoke, Jim?'  
 'No, thanks.'  
 'You got no vices, have you ... Don't you  
 even go out with girls?'  
 'No,' said Jim.<sup>33</sup>

As we can see, Steinbeck's conception of "purity" throughout In Dubious Battle is mainly based on the character's lack of inter-

est in women. Moreover, Steinbeck does not imply in Mac and Jim's relationship any of the features one normally considers characteristics of man-woman relationships, which makes us think that for Steinbeck purity requires, in In Dubious Battle, the absence of sexual feelings altogether.

Even before Jim's own comment about his superior strength, Mac had already felt it: "I bring you out here to teach you things, and right away you start teaching me things."<sup>34</sup> He admits: "You're getting beyond me, Jim."<sup>35</sup> And later on he tells Jim: "Everybody loses their head except you."<sup>36</sup> The fact is that Jim finally realizes that his participation in the strike extends beyond the present reality and links him to all humanity and all time, and his belief that no sacrifice would be too great if it helped achieve a better life for more men leads him from the depths of depression to a pinnacle of self-realization, dedication, and almost religious transfiguration. Thus, in his commitment and self-sacrifice Jim finds his personal fulfillment, which is revealed through different comments made by himself: "'I'm happy,' said Jim. 'And happy for the first time. I'm full-up.'"<sup>37</sup> "I do feel fine,"<sup>38</sup> he also comments. And in another passage he says: "I never felt so good before. I'm all swelled up with a good feeling."<sup>39</sup> Jim is finally conscious of having found a better self, for only by helping the others can one be really happy and self-fulfilled--it is what Steinbeck seems to emphasize over and over in the novels I have chosen.

From a certain point on, as we could see, Jim's and Mac's roles are reversed. Mac, who has taught Jim so many things, needs

Jim too; Jim, who has been the pupil, suddenly becomes the master. Without reservations Mac praises him: "You never change, Jim. You're always here. You give me strength."<sup>40</sup> Interestingly, Mac needs Jim the way one needs Christ. Many striking images link Jim to the sacrificial Christ figure. At the end of Chapters Six and Thirteen, for example, roosters crow. Suffering from a wound, Jim asks for water. Further on when Jim is killed, he does not have a chance to say "You don't know what you're doing," for he and Mac are ambushed and his head is blown off by a shotgun at close range, so that Mac finds him and exclaims simply--"Oh, Christ!"<sup>41</sup> And finally, Mac uses the "he-died-for-you" theme: "This guy didn't want nothing for himself..."<sup>42</sup>

So, Jim stands for that sacrificial Christ figure who comes to save "the outcasts" and does, in fact, give his life for them. But one cannot forget that the moment of his death arises only after his consciousness of having reached a better stage of his self. His last conversation with Mac suggests this. On that occasion, Mac asks him to talk to the men, to unite them, giving him the opportunity of finally doing something great for his fellow-men: "Here's your chance. You do it. See if you can bring 'em around. Talk, Jim. Talk. It's the thing you've been wanting." Jim immediately answers: "You're damn right I can do it." At this moment, "his face was transfigured. A furious light of energy seemed to shine from it."<sup>43</sup> Undoubtedly, such words remind us of Christ again, and like Him, Jim also "talks" to his fellows through his own death, which, by the time, serves to unify the men. Jim's death, at this point, can be visualized as the pinnacle

of his goodness or as an extreme example of his commitment.

A deep sorrow for the death of a friend is Mac's response to Jim's murder. In its turn, this very feeling measures the beauty and the strength of their lost relationship.

Mac shivered. He moved his jaws to speak, and seemed to break the frozen jaws loose. His voice was high and monotonous. 'This guy didn't want nothing for himself—' he began. His knuckles were white, where he grasped the rail. 'Comrades! He didn't want nothing for himself—'44

His addition of the single word "Comrades" to his basic speech is the expression of his personal loss. Apart from its political reference, the term suggests universality--brotherhood--which contains the best of Jim. His most human aspect is his wish to help "the poor bastards." So Mac delivers a dirge for Jim, who had been his best male companion, an entirely committed pupil, and who has finally achieved the status of Mac's teacher. With this reversal of their roles, In Dubious Battle follows a kind of formula which is repeated in Steinbeck's most famous novels. Through it, Steinbeck suggests that the disciples will carry on the received teachings, while their masters will be crushed.

#### 3.4. George and Lennie in Of Mice and Men

Concerning the theme of Of Mice and Men, Steinbeck wrote to one of his agents:

'The microcosm is rather difficult to handle and apparently I did not get it over—the earth longings of a Lennie who was not to represent insanity at all but the inarticulate and powerful yearning of all men.'45

Such words as "microcosm" and "of all men" indicate that the problem Steinbeck set himself in Of Mice and Men was similar to what he had treated in his previous novel, In Dubious Battle, and similar to the one he would also deal with in his next novel, The Grapes of Wrath. But whereas in the two other works the protagonists are easily absorbed into a greater world of social community, in Of Mice and Men the protagonists find themselves physically separated from the world at large and must create a vision of community on their own. Steinbeck means to suggest that even George and Lennie, living for a dream of their own, show, on a small scale, that man has to cooperate with each other to find his better self.

Man is not merely the creature of an unknowable pattern of existence. He has made himself unique among animals by accepting responsibility for the good of others. <sup>46</sup>

On one hand, George is responsible for Lennie because he takes care of him:

'Lennie!' he said sharply. 'Lennie, for God'sakes don't drink so much.' Lennie continued to snort into the pool. The small man leaned over and shook him by the shoulder. 'Lennie, You gonna be sick like you was last night.'<sup>47</sup>

In another passage George warns Lennie: "Well, we ain't got no ketchup. You go get wood. An' don't you fool around. It'll be dark before long."<sup>48</sup>

But on the other hand, Lennie is responsible for George's learning that the good life is located in friendship; that only through it, through cooperation, can one find his better self. The main device Lennie uses to explain this to George is his

dream of them both having a farm of their own. (There are historical precedents for this dream. One is suggested by Thoreau's experiences recorded in his Walden.) Lennie insists on talking about the plan, constantly:

'George, how long's it gonna be till we get that little place an' live on the fatta the lan—an' rabbits?'

'I don' know,' said George. ...

Lennie said, 'Tell about that place, George.'

'I jus' tol' you, jus' las' night.'

'Go on—tell again, George.'

'Well, it's ten acres,' said George. 'Got a little win'mill. Got a little shack on it, an' a chicken run. Got a kitchen, orchard, cherries, apples, peaches, 'cots, nuts, got a few berries. They's a place for alfalfa and plenty water to flood it. They's a pig pen—'<sup>49</sup>

'An' rabbits, George.'

Many other times Lennie repeats or makes George repeat the fantasy. (At the beginning George does this for Lennie's benefit only; later he comes gradually to understand the importance and meaning of Lennie's dream to his own life.)

Lennie pleaded, 'Come on, George. Tell me. Please, George. Like you done before.'

'You get a kick outta that, don't you? Awright, I'll tell you, and then we'll eat our supper. ...'

George's voice became deeper. He repeated his words rhythmically as though he had said them many times before. 'Guys like us, that work on ranches, are the loneliest guys in the world. They got no family. They don't belong no place. They come to a ranch an' work up a stake and then they go inta town and blow their stake, and the first thing you know they're poundin' their tail on some other ranch. They ain't got nothing to look ahead to.'

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' 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.'<sup>50</sup>

The above context extends friendship beyond its usual boundaries. At first sight, we even have the impression that this special relationship removes both men further and further from society, suggesting that Steinbeck might be changing his mind about, say, Mac's vision of goodness in In Dubious Battle. But in fact, what at first seems to distinguish Of Mice and Men from the other two novels--the removal of the male pair from society and a vision of solitude and withdrawal--turns out to confirm the outlook of the other two and the importance of human beings participating in and devoting themselves to the "Whole." This very idea recurs in Of Mice and Men because the protagonists, George and Lennie, represent a variety of this "Whole." In microcosm, they symbolize the importance of one's living for the sake of other people. Over and over Lennie reminds George that it is not good to live alone. George, in his turn, struggles against this idea several times, during the first pages of the novel. Continually he rags Lennie about what a nuisance he is and how much happier he would be if he could somehow be rid of Lennie:

'God a' mighty, if I was alone I could live so easy. I could go get a job an' work, an' no trouble. No mess at all, and when the end of the month come I could take my fifty bucks and go into town and get whatever I want. Why, I could stay in a cat house all night. I could eat any place I want, hotel or any place, and order any damn thing I could think of. An' I could do all that every damn month. Get a gallon of whisky, or set in a pool room and play



cards or shoot pool.' ... 'An' whatta I got,'  
George went on furiously. 'I got you!'<sup>51</sup>

Little by little, however, George's irritation comes more and more to sound like banter; in the meantime George is learning the beauty of sharing one's life with somebody else. To Slim (another worker of the same farm) he tells his deepest feelings:

'It's a lot nicer to go around with a guy you know,' said George.<sup>52</sup> George's voice was taking on the tone of confession. ...

'I ain't got no people,' George said. 'I seen the guys that go around on the ranches alone. That ain't no good. They don't have no fun. After a long time they get mean. They get wantin' to fight all the time.'<sup>53</sup>

In between his confession, George talks about his relationship with Lennie and about Lennie himself: "'We kinda look after each other.' He indicated Lennie with his thumb. ... 'Hell of a nice fella... I've knew him for a long time.'"<sup>54</sup>

It is worth mentioning that in Of Mice and Men Steinbeck makes the components of the male pair depend almost equally on each other and that the teacher-pupil formula does not play such a large role as it does in the other two novels. For all of this, one can see, however, that to learn about his better self George needs Lennie much more than Lennie needs him. This becomes true for George because only by suffering a long process of education (through Lennie) does he finally realize the importance of cooperation and friendship to his inner self. What proves this in an indirect way is George's consciousness of the necessity of having Lennie beside him: "I want you to stay with me here,"<sup>55</sup> George tells Lennie. Lennie, in his turn, knows from the beginning that he and George are different from other people because as he con-

stantly remembers: "We got each other, that's what, that gives a hoot in hell about us..."<sup>56</sup>

This kind of credo which appears repeatedly throughout the novel is Lennie's constant lesson to George. Despite his mental retardation he is always trying to show George the idealized vision of cooperative friends. For a long time, George simply retells Lennie's words, without giving them the importance they really deserve. But it comes the day his attitude changes--finally he accepts the dream of the farm, which represents the definitive proof of his learning of Lennie's lesson. On this day he suddenly realizes the newness of those common words: the farm: "George said reverently, 'Jesus Christ! I bet we could swing her.' His eyes were full of wonder. 'I bet we could swing her,' he repeated softly." And a little further George even pronounces words that materialize their dream: "In one month. Right squack in one month. Know what I'm gon'ta do? I'm gon'ta write to them old people that owns the place that we'll take it."<sup>57</sup> So, Lennie and George, as Mac and Jim in In Dubious Battle, follow the pattern of unselfish deeds. Both pairs see "beyond themselves" by seeking unselfishly to band together.

Interestingly, as in In Dubious Battle, Steinbeck deals with the subject of "purity" in Of Mice and Men. George, like Jim Nolan, is sober, chaste, almost monastic in his habits. He seems apart from sex. When Whit, a friend of his who works at the same place, talks about the wife of the boss's son, George does not show much interest in her:

'Well, ain't she a looloo?'

'I ain't seen that much of her,' said George.

Whit laid down his cards impressively. 'Well, stick around an' keep your eyes open. You'll see plenty.'<sup>58</sup>

And even when he speaks of going to a brothel, George has as little interest in sex as getting drunk: "I might go in an' set and have a shot, but I ain't puttin' out no two and a half."<sup>59</sup>

Lennie, in contrast, is associated with sex, for he is uncontrollably sensuous:

Lennie's eyes moved down over her body...  
Lennie watched her, fascinated...  
Lennie still stared at the doorway where she had been. 'Gosh, she was purty.' He smiled admiringly.<sup>60</sup>

His great hands "cannot resist the temptation to touch and caress any soft thing they encounter. A mouse will do but a girl is better."<sup>61</sup> He himself confesses:

'I like to pet nice things. Once at a fair I seen some of them long-hair rabbits. An' they was nice, you bet. Sometimes I've even pet mice, but not when I could get nothing better.'<sup>62</sup>

But what Lennie's weakness urges him to touch his strength compels him to kill. So, when the provocative, amoral wife of the ranch boss's son attracts Lennie's interest and lets him pet her soft hair, once again there is a tragic end:

'Here—feel right here.' She took Lennie's hand and put it on her head. 'Feel right aroun' there an' see how soft it is.'

Lennie's big fingers fell to stroking her hair.

'Don't you muss it up,' she said.

Lennie said, 'Oh! That's nice,' and he stroked harder. 'Oh, that's nice.'

'Look out, now, you'll muss it.' And then she cried angrily, 'You stop it now, you'll mess it all up.' She jerked her head sideways, and Lennie's fingers closed on her hair and hung on.

'Let go,' she cried. 'You let go!'  
 Lennie was in panic. His face was contorted. She screamed then, and Lennie's other hand closed over her mouth and nose. 'Please don't,' he begged. 'Oh! Please don't do that. George'll be mad.' [He always advises Lennie to be rid of troubles.]

She struggled violently under his hands. Her feet battered on the hay and she writhed to be free; and from under Lennie's hand came a muffled screaming. Lennie began to cry with fright. 'Oh! Please don't do none of that,' he begged. 'George gonna say I done a bad thing. He ain't gonna let me tend no rabbits.' His moved his hand a little and her hoarse cry came out. Then Lennie grew angry. 'Now don't,' he said. 'I don't want you to yell. You gonna get me in trouble jus' like George says you will. Now don't you do that.' And she continued to struggle, and her eyes were wild with terror. He shook her then, and he was angry with her. '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.<sup>63</sup>

It hardly seems that Lennie's sensual urgings are an advantage, even though he acts them out in total innocence, which suggests that Steinbeck once more (as in In Dubious Battle) is on the side of the a-sexual "purity" which George represents.

Discovered in that tragic situation, the wife of the boss's son dead of strangulation, the only thing Lennie can do is to run away and hide in the brush beside the river, as George has told him to do if he got into trouble. Thus, George is obliged to find his pitiful friend before the posse can do so and shoot him as an act of kindness. If the boss's son, or the police, or the mob had taken Lennie, "the death would have been a meaningless expression of group force, the exaction of an eye for an eye rather than an expression of love."<sup>64</sup> And George does his killing as a kind of ritual. When for the last time he recites the tale of "their Promised Land"--first, he asks Lennie to look across the river and

then he describes the scenes of the dream so vividly that they become almost visible. And when Lennie begs "Le's do it now. Le's get that place now,"<sup>65</sup> George shoots him out of a real affection for his best male friend. Friendship could go no further than it goes here.

In a way, Lennie's fate on the week-end when Of Mice and Men takes place parallels the events of the Crucifixion. After dying Lennie will go to Heaven as Christ did. George's words make this very clear: "Ever'body gonna be nice to you. Ain't gonna be no more trouble. Nobody gonna hurt nobody nor steal from 'em."<sup>66</sup> When talking to Lennie, George repeats the name "Christ" many times: "Jesus Christ, somebody 'd shoot you ..."<sup>67</sup> "Jesus Christ, Lennie!"<sup>68</sup> Naturally, these devices suggest some resemblance between Lennie and the Christ image. And like Christ, Lennie leaves a lesson to his fellow man--a lesson of love and dedication. Through him George learns that it is not good to stay alone--that cooperation and love make anyone greater. Therefore, at the very end George is not alone. To start a new, similar relationship he chooses Slim, the man he completely trusts early in the novel. In fact, this very choice is already suggested by a foreshadowing which appears almost at the beginning of the book: "George had been staring intently at Slim. Suddenly a triangle began to ring outside, slowly at first, and then faster and faster."<sup>69</sup> With the first words Steinbeck seems to hint that George foresees something in relation to Slim. In its turn, the "triangle" he mentions can symbolize Slim's future relationship with Lennie and specially with George. As a metaphorical "triangle," which rings "faster

and faster," the plot that culminates in Lennie and George's separation intensifies throughout the novel. For all of the negative aspects apparently caused by the couple's necessary disunion, the disunion also establishes Slim's definitive integration into George's life. Immediately after Lennie's death Slim is given a chance to prove his special friendship for George. Steinbeck's own words define this perfectly:

George shivered and looked at the gun, and then he threw it from him, back up on the bank, near the pile of old ashes.

The brush seemed filled with cries and with the sound of running feet. Slim's voice shouted, 'George. Where you at, George?'

But George sat stiffly on the bank and looked at his right hand that had thrown the gun away. ...

Slim came directly to George and sat down beside him, sat very close to him. 'Never you mind,' said Slim. 'A guy got to sometimes.'<sup>70</sup>

And the last words of the novel, pronounced by a man called Carlson, refer to this new couple that has arisen: "Now what the hell ya suppose is eatin' them two guys?"<sup>71</sup> Steinbeck, in his turn, does not answer Carlson's question, giving anyone the opportunity to develop his own imagination; however, Steinbeck's suggestion that a new male pair is born for one man to transmit his experience about the better self to the other remains extremely alive.

At this point we can say that, more than In Dubious Battle, Of Mice and Man offers us a clear vision of what happens to the male pair. Lennie, who has been an unconscious master, dies at the end, while George, the disciple, is left alive to "preach" the master's teachings. Once again, despite the slight differences previously analysed, Steinbeck follows the formula established in

## In Dubious Battle.

### 3.5. Tom and Casy in The Grapes of Wrath

While in In Dubious Battle and in Of Mice and Men Steinbeck merely initiates his lessons of optimism, in The Grapes of Wrath he finally achieves a striking way to present his message of love, cooperation and consciousness. Once more it is a male couple which is supposed to transmit these optimistic ideas. Tom Joad and Jim Casy show the world in The Grapes of Wrath a touching story of love and dedication for mankind, besides the necessary development of one's inner self in order for this new state of mind to be reached.

At the very beginning of the novel, Tom proves to be an individualistic person. His isolated attitude is illustrated by a rude remark to a truckdriver who had been good to him: "Nothin' ain't none of your affair except skinnin' this here bull-bitch along, an' that's the least thing you work at."<sup>72</sup> A little further Tom shows his determination to avoid any involvement: "'I'm still layin' my dogs down one at a time. ... I climb fences when I got fences to climb,' said Tom."<sup>73</sup> And while he is roasting a rabbit for dinner Tom rebukes all attempts by Casy and Muley, an acquaintance of theirs, to become involved in any personal conversations:

'Fella gets use' to a place, it's hard to go,' said Casy. 'Fella gets use' to a way a thinkin' it's hard to leave. I ain't a preacher no more, but all the time I find I'm prayin', not even thinkin' what I'm doin'.'

Joad turned the pieces of meat over on the wire. ... 'Smell her,' said Joad. 'Jesus, look down an' just smell her!'

Muley went on, 'Like a damn ol' graveyard ghos'. I been goin' aroun' the places where stuff happened.' ...

Joad cleared his throat. 'Think we better eat her now.'

'Let her get good an' done, good an' brown, awmost black,' said Muley irritably. 'I wanta talk. I ain't talked to nobody.'<sup>74</sup>

These passages demonstrate Tom's self-absorption and also anticipate the emergence of his initiation into a long process of education. He has to learn much about his heart, about his self, and Jim Casy will teach him by slow suggestion and example.

When Casy, the ex-preacher, first appears in the novel, he is a troubled man who has lost his first sure faith; nevertheless, he has never lost the spirit of a faith or the sure desire for one. Like Ralph Waldo Emerson, he gives up the church and becomes a humble "free-thinking seeker" of the truth: "I went off alone, an' I sat and figured. The sperit's strong in me, on'y it ain't the same. I ain't so sure of a lot of things."<sup>75</sup> And it is along the way to California that the revelation of his new calling comes to him, as a result of his sharing other men's hardships, miseries, and hopes. Thus, his new faith grows out of an experiential understanding and love of his fellow men.

Eric W. Carlson has organized Casy's faith into some major beliefs, which I think it is worth quoting here:

A belief in the brotherhood of man, manifesting itself as 'love'—i.e., good will, compassion and mutualism; ... a belief in the spirit-of-man as the oversoul or Holy Spirit shared by all men in their outgoing love; ... an acceptance of all life as an expression of spirit.



But according to Frederick Carpenter (also quoted by Carlson), Casy develops "a new kind of Christianity—not other-worldly and passive, but earthly and active."<sup>76</sup> Casy tells Tom:

"'Maybe it's all men an' all women we love; maybe that's the Holy Sperit—the human sperit—the whole shebang. Maybe all men got one big soul ever'body's a part of.' Now I sat there thinkin' it, an' all of a suddent—I knew it. I knew it so deep down that it was true, and I still know it."<sup>77</sup>

Here the echo of the American transcendentalist philosopher Ralph Emerson is evident again to anyone who has read his essay on "Nature"—"Man is conscious of a universal soul within or behind his individual life."<sup>78</sup> And Casy's knowledge of the "oversoul" is derived from the same source as Emerson's--from within himself, or from God speaking within him. (Emerson's influences will be analysed a little further in Chapter IV).

Certainly Casy's new faith is not "the hell-fire, damnation, washed-in-the-blood, shout-to-the-Lamb religion"<sup>79</sup> that he had known before; but whatever it is, it reaches the same belief in the brotherhood of man under the fatherhood of God, and emphasizes that a man cannot live by and for himself alone: "not one fella for another fella, but one fella kind of harnessed to the whole shebang—that's right, that's holy,"<sup>80</sup> preaches Casy.

Once he has found his own truth, Casy is ready to help Tom in the "education of his heart"—in the quest for his better self. And as I have mentioned before, from Casy Tom Joad learns, both through words and through deeds. We can even say that the beginning of this process of education is symbolically indicated by a common but significant silent gesture on the part of Casy

toward Tom Joad found early in the novel before any real relationship between them has developed:

The evening light was on the fields, and the cotton plants threw long shadows on the ground, and the molting willow tree threw a long shadow.  
Casy sat down beside Joad.<sup>81</sup>

Tom and Casy begin to talk: Tom about his past, his people; Casy about his inner doubts and his recent discoveries. In between their personal revelations Casy transmits to Tom his major beliefs --his first lessons. Concerning his idea of a universal brotherhood, manifested as "love," he tells Tom: "'What's this call, this sperit? ... It's love. I love people so much I'm fit to bust, sometimes. ... an' I want to make 'em happy.'" The concept of an over-soul shared by all men is expressed to Tom through Casy's following words: "'Maybe all men got one big soul ever'body's a part of.'"<sup>82</sup> Finally, Casy makes clear his reverence for life, by saying that "'All that lives is holy.'"<sup>83</sup> But Tom would really understand all this much later.

Up to this point Casy can be considered merely a "dreamer," a "spiritual," for his first chance to put his faith into dramatic action only arises much later at the Hooverville camp, when he offers himself to go to jail in Tom's place in an altercation over a deputy. This deed comes to represent the first practical example he gives Tom. And by the time they meet again after Casy's arrest, Tom is given a more practical explanation that illustrates the benefits of cooperation. Speaking of his inmates, Casy says:

'Well, they was nice fellas, ya see. What made 'em bad, was they needed stuff. An' I begin to see, then. It's need that makes all the trouble. I ain't got it worked out. Well, one day they give

us some beans that was sour. One fella started yellin', an' nothin' happened. He yelled his head off. Trusty come along an' looked in an' went on. Then another fella yelled. Well, sir, then we all got yellin'. And we all got on the same tone ... Then somepin happened! They come a-runnin', and they give us some other stuff to eat—give it to us.'

Tom's reaction to his friend's kind of teaching, however, proves to be entirely negative, showing that in spite of his listening to Casy's words, he is still too much absorbed in the most desperate situations he and his family are subjected to. At the moment Casy finishes his explanations he asks Tom: "Ya see?" And Tom simply answers: "No." Then, putting "his chin down on his hands" Casy adds: "Maybe I can't tell you. ... Maybe you got to find out."<sup>84</sup>

Soon after, when Casy is given a second chance to practise what he believes (i.e., the opportunity of leading a strike against starvation pay in a peach orchard) he also makes another attempt in relation to Tom's inner education. At this time he teaches Tom that:

'Anyways, you do what you can. An', ... the on'y thing you got to look at is that ever' time they's a little step fo'ward, she may slip back a little, but she never slips clear back. You can prove that, ... an' that makes the whole thing right. An' that means they wasn't no waste even if it seemed like they was.'

Once more Tom seems to react against Casy's speech. As soon as Casy falls silent, Tom comments: "'Talkin', ' said Tom. 'Always talkin','"<sup>85</sup>

Differently from Jim Nolan in In Dubious Battle and George in Of Mice and Men, whose inner, subjective development visibly

progresses throughout the novels, Tom only learns his master's message of unselfish love, cooperation and consciousness after Casy's death. This becomes clear when, while Tom is hiding out in a cave, after having struck down the vigilante who had killed his mentor, he himself confesses to his Ma:

'Lookie, Ma. I been all day an' all night hidin' alone. Guess who I been thinkin' about? Casy! He talked a lot. Used ta bother me. But now I been thinkin' what he said, an' I can remember—all of it. Says one time he went out in the wilderness to find his own soul, an' he foun' he didn' have no soul that was his'n. Says he foun' he jus' got a little piece of a great big soul. Says a wilderness ain't no good, 'cause his little piece of a soul wasn't no good 'less it was with the rest, an' was whole. Funny how I remember. Didn' think I was even listenin'. But I know now a fella ain't no good alone.'

Tom also tells Ma that according to Casy

'Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their labor. For if they fall, the one will lif' up his fellow, but woe to him that is alone when he falleth, for he hath not another to help him up.'

On the same subject Tom adds:

'If two lie together, then they have heat: but how can one be warm alone? And if one prevail against him, two shall withstand him, and a three-fold cord is not quickly broken.'

So Tom finally sees the meaning of Casy's words. To Ma he transmits his last conclusions which arise after long thought.

'I been thinkin' a hell of a lot, thinkin' about our people livin' like pigs, an' the good rich lan' layin' fallow, or maybe one fella with a million acres, while a hunderd thousan' good farmers is starvin'. An' I been wonderin' if all our folks got together an' yelled.'

Soon after, Tom proves that his feelings go so deep down that he is even able to assert his spiritual unity with all men:

'Well, maybe like Casy says, a fella ain't got a soul of his own, but on'y a piece of a big one—an' then ... I'll be all aroun' in the dark. ... Wherever they's a fight so hungry people can eat, I'll be there. Wherever they's a cop beatin' up a guy, I'll be there. If Casy knowed, why, I'll be in the way guys yell when they're mad an'—I'll be in the way kids laugh when they're hungry an' they know supper's ready. An' when our folks eat the stuff they raise an' live in the houses they build—why, I'll be there. See? God, I'm talkin' like Casy. Comes of thinkin' about him so much. Seems like I can see him sometimes.'<sup>86</sup>

This inner change is even materially symbolized by a long scar Tom gets across his cheek during the fight against the vigilante--"You got a bad scar, Tom,"<sup>87</sup> somebody tells him. Both his face and his spirit would never be the same again. Therefore, Tom leaves his hiding place as a new man. Inspired by Casy's ideas, he is now willing to sacrifice his personal needs, so that he may act for others unselfishly.

And Casy, this very person responsible for Tom's acquaintance with his better self, plays the role of a kind of Christ who leaves his teachings behind for his single disciple and whose death is an extreme proof of commitment to an honorable cause --the struggle against individualism, selfishness and alienation of one's participation in life.

To start a possible comparison between Jim Casy and Jesus Christ, we can say that both names have the same initials. Maybe Steinbeck has been influenced by Stephen Crane, who also attempted to show the same parallel between Jim Conklin and Jesus Christ in his The Red Badge of Courage. Another aspect that brings Casy near the Christ figure is that like Christ, who began his mission after a period of withdrawal into the wilderness for medi-

tation, Casy enters the book after a similar retreat. He tells Tom: "I went off alone, an' I sat and figured."<sup>88</sup> And later when they meet again Casy says that he has "been a-goin' into the wilderness like Jesus to try find out somepin."<sup>89</sup> Many times Casy's words paraphrase Jesus', as in this passage: Christ--"God is love. ... A new commandment give I unto you: that ye love one another."<sup>90</sup> Casy--"'What's this call, this sperit? ... It's love. I love people so much I'm fit to bust, sometimes."<sup>91</sup> And particularly significant are Casy's last words directed to the man who murders him--"You don' know what you're a-doin'."<sup>92</sup> Here, his words can be compared to those Jesus said, as they crucified Him--"Father forgive them; they know not what they do."<sup>93</sup>

By a curious coincidence, once more it is the male master who is given striking sensual characteristics, which, in their turn, contrast sharply with his constant association with the Christ figure. From the beginning of the book an aura of sensuality surrounds Casy: "His cheeks were brown and shiny and hairless and his mouth full ... sensual."<sup>94</sup> Further on, he himself confesses his "weaknesses": "Tommy, I'm a-lustin' after the flesh."<sup>95</sup> "...you know what I'd do? I'd take one of them girls out in the grass, an' I'd lay with her."<sup>96</sup>

Tom, on the other hand, like the other pupils (Jim Nolan in In Dubious Battle and George in Of Mice and Men), earns a reputation for purity throughout the novel. As soon as he appears, Tom is given the characteristics of a non-sensual man: "... since his teeth protruded, the lips stretched to cover them, for this man kept his lips closed."<sup>97</sup> And when he "tentatively explores

the possibility of relieving his spiritual weariness and disgust by loosing his self-imposed controls over his physical desires"<sup>98</sup> he is told: "You can't, Tom. ... They's some folks that's just theirself an' nothin' more. There's Al—he's jus' a young fella after a girl. You wasn't never like that, Tom."<sup>99</sup>

While the male masters in all three novels are afflicted with lust, they are at the same time the only characters provided with the knowledge of one's better self. Interestingly, Steinbeck suggests here that knowledge is a mixed virtue, similar perhaps to the vision of knowledge contained in the book of Genesis and symbolized by the apple in Paradise. Nevertheless, as soon as the disciples become aware of their better selves through the influence of their masters, Steinbeck seems to revise this formula. For the disciples, whom Steinbeck characterizes as pure-of-heart, pre-Edenic by nature, knowledge contains no evil and is not accompanied by heightened sexual longing. In spite of the disciples' developing knowledge they are not given sensual characteristics. In fact, we could say that Steinbeck establishes a kind of punishment for the masters due to their irreversible sensual state. And his law dictates death for these men.

Over and over, Steinbeck seems to reinforce his advice that man has to avoid lusting after women, that male bonds are much more secure than man-woman relationships. According to what has been said about this theme in regard to In Dubious Battle and Of Mice and Men, we can see that once again Steinbeck is on the side of the a-sexual "purity." This means that in his conception, male relationships do not necessarily imply sexual intercourse, which,

in its turn, is immediately suggested when a man and a woman meet. This is probably why Steinbeck trusts male-pairs and so strongly disbelieves in man-woman relationships.

Therefore, only the free and innocent access between men could make it easier for Jim Nolan (In Dubious Battle), George (Of Mice and Men), and Tom (The Grapes of Wrath) to finally understand that selfishness and individualism are no longer the way. Male bonding becomes, then, the responsible agent for these characters' initiation into such a process of education. Lionel Tiger in his anthropological study of men in groups confirms that male bonding is "an ancient and essential feature of human society."<sup>100</sup>



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## CHAPTER IV

NATURE AND LONELINESS AND THEIR  
POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE EFFECTS ON THE QUEST FOR A BETTER SELF

Solitude in nature can indeed be a wonderful source of 'self-being'; but whoever remains solitary in nature is liable to impoverish his self-being and to lose it in the end. To be near to nature in the beautiful world around me therefore became questionable when it did not lead back to community with humanity and serve this community as background. ... Alone, I sink into gloomy isolation—only in community with others can I be revealed in the act of mutual discovery. ... Isolated or self-isolating Being ... disappears into nothingness.<sup>1</sup>

Karl Jaspers' words will be of great usefulness for a further understanding of what I intend to explore in this chapter, for my main purpose here is to show the positive and negative influences nature and loneliness exert on some characters during their quest for a better self.

Thus, on one hand, nature will be presented as a positive aspect when it serves as a place of withdrawal for the characters

to think of themselves, even when this happens in a symbolical way. Its positiveness remains when nature appears at the very moment of some characters' death, since it represents the ideal place for their coming to an ultimate realization about their quest. And death is this last realization which means that some characters achieve wholeness--or a deep sense of personal fulfillment--only through it.

As the chapter proceeds we are also going to see that Steinbeck's characters return to nature only when something is out of balance in their own lives; otherwise, nature would become negative, for much the same reason that Jaspers says "to be near to nature... became questionable when it did not lead back to community with humanity and serve this community as background."

When talking about nature I will emphasize the symbolism of caves, groves, and willow thickets by a river which figures prominently in many of Steinbeck's novels and stories. There are, for instance, the cave that appears during Jim's dream in In Dubious Battle, the little spot by the river in Of Mice and Men, and Tom's cave and a willow thicket in The Grapes of Wrath among others.

On the other hand, loneliness is going to be shown as a negative influence on the achievement of a better self. Such a fact will be clearly seen when a character ends up alone. As Jaspers says, "isolated or self-isolating Being ... disappears into nothingness." Loneliness, however, becomes useful at the moment a character takes advantage of it to solve his inner

doubts, realizing that the "individual must change from an isolated self to an involved member of the community,"<sup>2</sup> i.e., he has to cooperate with his fellow-men to finally reach his better self.

#### 4.1. Nature and Loneliness in In Dubious Battle

Near the beginning of In Dubious Battle nature--the cave image in particular--is presented as an image of Jim's inner state-of-mind. While travelling to Torgas Valley by train he fights off sleep twice but the roaring rhythm of the machine makes Jim more and more drowsy. So, "his sleep was a shouting, echoing black cave, and it extended into eternity."<sup>3</sup> And a few pages later:

Almost instantly he was in the black, roaring cave again, and the sound made dreams of water pouring over him. Vaguely he could see debris and broken bits of wood in the water. And the water bore him down and down into the dark place below dreaming.<sup>4</sup>

As we have seen in Chapter III of this dissertation, when Jim Nolan enters the novel he seems tired of his life. Harry Nilson, a Party man, expresses this very clearly when he tells Jim: "Drink your coffee and have some more. You act half asleep."<sup>5</sup> And a little later Jim himself confesses: "Everything's been a mess, all my life. ... I feel dead. I thought I might get alive again."<sup>6</sup> Jim knows he has to change--"I cut off from everything. I wanted to start new."<sup>7</sup>

At the moment of his admittance to the Party, therefore, a



new Jim Nolan is born. And his rebirth begins in nature, in that cave. (Caves in Steinbeck have sometimes explicit overtones of a return to the womb and rebirth). "The water bore him down and down into the dark place below dreaming" symbolizes Jim's returning to a pre-natal state from which he would come out as a new person. Besides, the "water pouring over him" cleans Jim's mind, throwing away all the bad images that belong to his past. And the "debris and broken bits of wood in the water" that Jim sees in his dream could stand for his doubts about the future, for there is a long process of education that has to be undergone, although he is not aware of the steps of this education that will make him find a better self. Jim's waking up when the train reaches the setting where his "reformation" will take place--Torgas Valley--coincides symbolically with his birth into a new life. "Jim rubbed his eyes hard." At just that moment Mac says, "Well, get yourself together. We're coming into Torgas."<sup>8</sup>

So, we could say that Jim's retreat to a figurative nature symbolizes the starting-point for the understanding of his inner dilemma since the dream unconsciously works on Jim to prepare him for his reeducation which will be completely developed at the very moment of his death. The importance of Jim's symbolical retreat to nature during his dream is then confirmed by his death (for only through it he achieves wholeness) which also takes place in nature, to where Jim consciously comes by the first time. Nevertheless, the answers for his existential afflictions which he symbolically starts to receive during his dream, and which are completely solved at the moment of his death, reach an

important stage when Jim gets together with his fellow-men and realizes that cooperation and union among men are synonyms for self-realization. Very soon after arriving in Torgas he becomes aware that his participation in the strike extends beyond his present reality and links him to all humanity and all time and that no sacrifice would be too great if it helped achieve a better life for more men. Jim comments: "Nothing I ever did before had any meaning. It was all just a mess."<sup>9</sup> "'I'm happy,' said Jim. 'And happy for the first time. I'm full up.'"<sup>10</sup> And Doc Burton, the doctor, confirms Jim's love for men: "Jim, ... sometimes I love men as much as you do, maybe not in just the same way."<sup>11</sup>

Jaspers has said that

Solitude in nature can indeed be a wonderful source of 'self-being'; but ... to be near to nature ... became questionable when it did not lead back to community with humanity and serve this community as background ... Alone, I sink into gloomy isolation—only in community with others can I be revealed in the act of mutual discovery.

His words fit Jim's situation, for as we have seen he comes to nature in a symbolical way to think of his inner self and of the doubts which afflicted it. But from the figurative nature Jim also returns to community and serves it with the knowledge he has gained as soon as he leaves nature, which could be translated into cooperation and understanding among men, as the main formula to reach one's better self.

In fact, one can say that nature represents a safe and profitable place for Steinbeck's characters only when there is something out of balance in their own lives, since their coming to it

is frequently mentioned in case of trouble. We have seen, for instance, that it is in nature that Jim symbolically starts to be provided with the answers of his inner doubts. On the other hand Mac advises Jim that:

'If hell should pop and we get separated, you get to that bridge and go underneath, clear up under the arch, on the side away from town. You'll find a pile of ... willows there. Lift 'em aside. There's a deep cave underneath. Get inside, and pull the willows over the hole. ... Now will you remember, Jim? Go there and wait for a couple of days. I don't think they'll root you out of there.'<sup>12</sup>

By this point in the novel, the image of the cave seems to have changed somewhat. It no longer represents inner discovery but seems now to offer a safe retreat from the possibility of a society turned threatening.

However, figuratively Mac could be telling Jim that he has to retreat to nature if his inner doubts remain. And Jim who does not ever need to take Mac's advice literally, in a way does not accept this one, for his last realization comes to him in nature. There he finally realizes that only through self-sacrifice can he find a deep sense of personal fulfillment. This tendency to imitate the Christ figure is previously shown by the time Jim gets a wound in one shoulder and confesses to Burton that "it seems good to have it."<sup>13</sup> A little further he also says: "This pain in the shoulder is kind of pleasant to me; and I bet before he died Joy was glad for a moment. Just in that moment I bet he was glad."<sup>14</sup> And a definitive proof of Jim's (like Christ's) acceptance of his self-sacrifice as an extreme deed for his fellow-men is given by Burton who answers Jim's first comment by saying: "Yes, I thought

it might be like that. ... I mean you've got something in your eyes, Jim, something religious."<sup>15</sup> To a certain extent, Jim had known how good death would be for him. And it is in nature (which, according to what has been said, is the appropriate place for such a fact) where Jim finally experiments with it.

With his death the cave image arises again since he crosses an "open space" and dashes "into the dark shadow of the trees" (which resembles a cave) to receive the shot that would kill him.

Across the open space they tore. The boy reached the line of trees and plunged among them. They could hear him running ahead of them. They dashed into the dark shadow of the trees.

Suddenly Mac reached for Jim. 'Jim! Drop, for Christ' sake!' There was a roar, and two big holes of light. Mac had sprawled full length. He heard several sets of running footsteps. He looked toward Jim, but the flashes still burned on his retinas. Gradually he made Jim out. ...

London saw them at last. He came close, and stopped; and the lantern made a circle of light. 'Oh,' he said. He lowered the lantern and peered down. 'Shot-gun?'

Mac nodded and stared at his sticky hand.<sup>16</sup>

A kind of foreshadowing for Jim's final scene in nature occurs some moments before his death. Then he tells Mac: "You're damn right I can do it." And at this moment "his face was transfigured. A furious light of energy seemed to shine from it."<sup>17</sup> Such words point out Jim's ultimate step in his searching for a better self.

On one hand nature offers certain positive benefits to Steinbeck's characters. In Jim's case, for instance, he has his process of illumination started and ended in nature. Through his experiences in nature he finds out that his increased "sense of involvement with all humanity"<sup>18</sup> no longer allows him to feel

frustrated and solitary. Shortly before his death he confesses:  
 "I used to be lonely, and I'm not any more."<sup>19</sup>

On the other hand, nature represents, to the degree that it introduces loneliness, a pitfall in each character's progress toward accepting the ideal of the social man. As it happens to Jim, the character comes to nature alone and there he starts his inward examination which turns into an essentially individual and lonely experience. At this point the character has to be wise enough to recognize nature's limitations and the right time to leave it forever. Such an attitude will provide him with the certainty that only by being helpful to the group is he going to be inwardly fulfilled and consequently a good example of the ideal social man.

Steinbeck himself reinforces the idea that loneliness in nature is no good by saying, according to Richard Astro, that "... man must 'key-into' the phalanx," i.e., he has to take part of the "group-man," which in other words means that he has to cooperate with his fellow-men in community (as a result of meditations during his withdrawal).

And once a man becomes a unit in a moving phalanx, he becomes more powerful than were he acting as individual man. Finally, insists the novelist, it is impossible for a man to defy the phalanx without annihilating himself. For if a man goes into a wilderness, his mind and heart will dry up, and at last he will die of starvation for the sustenance he can only get from phalanx involvement.<sup>20</sup>

Once again we can return to Jaspers, whose words fully agree with Steinbeck's:

... whoever remains solitary in nature is liable to impoverish his self-being and to lose it in

the end. ... Only in community with others can I be revealed in the act of mutual discovery.

Besides Jim's, Mac's role also bears out the idea above (at least the last part of it), for once in a while we are made aware of Mac's humanitarian feelings, as when he tries to calm Jim:

'No, I don't think we have a chance to win it. ...  
But you don't want to worry about that, Jim. The  
thing will carry on and on. It'll spread, and  
some day—it'll work. Some day we'll win.'<sup>21</sup>

All the time he acts usefully, having in mind that his last purpose is to help achieve a better life for more men. Being conscious that the cooperation among men is the quickest away of reaching any goal, Mac tells Jim that "the unification of the men ... is their most important and crucial job."<sup>22</sup> And, in spite of his general terms, we can conclude that such a work offers to Mac's inner self some special benefit: "The thing that takes the heart out of a man is work that doesn't lead any place. Ours is slow, but it's all going in one direction."<sup>23</sup> Therefore, this cooperation among men that Mac preaches and lives excludes loneliness from his life and makes him sense inner fulfillment, that represents the achievement of his better self.

Whereas Jim and Mac act and cooperate with their fellow-men, rejecting loneliness for their own benefit, Doc Burton wants no more than to observe the men—"I want to watch these group-men,"<sup>24</sup> he says. And when he is asked by Mac "Why do you hang around with us if you aren't for us?" he simply answers "I want to 'see.'"<sup>25</sup>

Doc's attitude in relation to men can be seen as a flaw in his nature for "he is unable to join with men or to have any deeply human contacts." And such "emotional deadness is indicated

by the identifying tag, 'his sad eyes,'"<sup>26</sup> which appears many times throughout the novel. But besides this, he clearly condemns the group-men and the strike by saying that "you can only build a violent thing with violence,"<sup>27</sup> which implies that he may be denying what he cannot share, for he himself confesses "I'm lonely, Jim."<sup>28</sup> "I'm awfully lonely. I'm working all alone, towards nothing."<sup>29</sup>

Thus, Burton who is unable and unwilling to "key-into" the "phalanx," (for he does not participate with the men in their struggle toward a better life) "grows lean and hungry and drifts away into the night,"<sup>30</sup> disappearing "into nothingness."<sup>31</sup>

#### 4.2. Nature and Loneliness in Of Mice and Men

Realistically or symbolically nature always appears in the beginning and at the end of the three novels we have been analysing. In fact, as we have already seen in In Dubious Battle, "nature becomes the fixed point to which the novel returns"<sup>32</sup> providing final answers to some characters' situations.

As soon as Of Mice and Men begins George and Lennie are presented in a little spot along the Salinas River. While in In Dubious Battle Jim's process of illumination starts in a figurative nature, in Of Mice and Men, as we could see, such a process happens in the actual state of nature. Nevertheless, even in the presence of nature itself, Steinbeck introduces a figurative level to it, by showing Lennie as an "earth symbol."<sup>33</sup> In fact, several

points make it easy for us to realize this symbolic aspect of Lennie's role. His insistence on the dream of living "off the fatta the lan'"<sup>34</sup>; his desperate desire "to lose himself in a cave"<sup>35</sup>: "... I can jus' as well go away, George, an' live in a cave"<sup>36</sup>; his constant association with that little spot by the river: "Lennie came quietly to the pool's edge"<sup>37</sup>; and even his abnormal attraction to rabbits, mice and pups (and by extension, to soft things in general) which underscores his earthly characteristics bring him so near earth that sometimes we are almost able to visualize him as a part of it. And at the moment Lennie becomes nature George needs his presence to make his inward examination. His need for Lennie--as a metaphor for nature--in order to solve his inner doubts, actually makes the vision of nature in this novel more similar to nature's role in In Dubious Battle than it might at first appear. Otherwise, in spite of the symbolical connotation given to nature in both novels we could say that in In Dubious Battle the experience of nature (figurative or real) is essentially individual and lonely, while in Of Mice and Men nature in its actual form is consistent with the shared self, with the communal self, so long as it is not experienced merely as nature, so long as it has a human element, that also stands for a symbolical aspect. Lennie--this human element--with his sympathy for natural life and as a metaphor for the natural man, becomes a kind of mediator between nature in its raw state and Steinbeck's vision of social man. That is why George's decision regarding loneliness and togetherness cannot happen in communion with nature alone but requires the mediating presence



of Lennie , as a metaphor for nature. Therefore, Lennie is always involved in George's inner questioning. When the latter first poses the problem of loneliness, saying that:

'Guys like us, that work on ranches, are the loneliest guys in the world. They got no family. They don't belong no place. ... They ain't got nothing to look ahead to.'

Lennie immediately shows him a solution: "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."<sup>38</sup> In the same way George is tempted by Lennie to accept his dream, which, in fact, would represent his final understanding of the beauty of sharing one's life with somebody else. Steinbeck's ideal vision of the social man would be entirely fulfilled then. Later on George would finally realize that the dream should be accepted for his own benefit. And by the first time in the novel, he would seem different, happy, for having released his better self from within. Even a childhood image would come to his mind:

George's hands stopped working with the cards. His voice was growing warmer. ... 'No, sir, we'd have our own place where we belonged and not sleep in no bunk house. ... An' we'd keep a few pigeons to go flyin' around the win'mill like they done when I was a kid.'<sup>39</sup>

But with George's inner doubts finally solved, Lennie's death becomes necessary. As an "earth symbol" Lennie has to be left behind, for

to be near to nature ... can indeed be a wonderful source of 'self-being'; but whoever remains solitary in nature is liable to impoverish his self-being and to lose it in the end.<sup>40</sup>

George has to leave nature and consequently, Lennie. Ironically,

George himself is given the hard mission of killing Lennie at the same spot they are firstly presented. Once he dies near "water," nature becomes at this point a kind of purifying agent for Lennie, whose sensuality, already discussed in Chapter III, has led him to an extreme and disastrous act--his murder of Curley's wife. But at the moment Lennie is regarded as a metaphor for nature, one could say that not just Lennie but nature itself does need purification. The reason lies in the fact that nature is good for man only when he retreats to it to stop and think of himself. When such a meditation comes to an end, however, nature becomes extremely destructive, for the man who stays alone in nature can lose himself completely in the end. Here a question arises: could George have stayed in nature with Lennie if he had remained alive? According to what has been said, this final choice would be completely impossible--first of all because since the beginning Lennie's death was something established and irreversible; secondly because according to Jaspers and Steinbeck himself nature turns against man at the moment he decides to remain there, alone; and finally, due to the symbolism that involves Lennie, making him merely an extension of nature, George would be alone anyway.

Therefore, time has finally arrived for George's departure from nature, which in fact, resembles a kind of rebirth into a new life. The womb opens to permit his way out--George is led "into the entrance of the trail and up toward the highway"<sup>41</sup>--and forever he leaves those "natural surroundings," mature and aware that life alone has no meaning anymore. To prove this, George goes away with Slim--"Slim twitched George's elbow. 'Come on,

George.'"42 --the man who is previously drawn to George and who, very early in the novel, worries about loneliness while talking to him: "Ain't many guys travel around together... I don't know why. Maybe ever'body in the whole damn world is scared of each other."43

Indeed, "perhaps the most suggestive dualism of the novel is its contrast between men who travel together and those who travel alone."44 And the black man Crooks, the crippled stable buck, is probably the loneliest man of the book. He, like Doc Burton of In Dubious Battle, knows that he is terribly alone and that loneliness is no good:

'A guy needs somebody—to be near him.' He whined, 'A guy goes nuts if he ain't got nobody. Don't make no difference who the guy is, long's he's with you. I tell ya,' he cried, 'I tell ya a guy gets too lonely an' he gets sick.'45

In spite of such feelings he does not believe in George and Lennie's dream, which in a way represents his acceptance of loneliness. When Lennie tells him "We're gonna have rabbits an' a berry patch," Crooks says:

'You're nuts.' Crooks was scornful. 'I seen hunderds of men come by on the road an' on the ranches, with their bindles on their back an' that same damn thing in their heads. Hunderds of them. They come, an' they quit an' go on; an' every damn one of 'em's got a little piece of land in his head. An' never a God damn one of 'em ever gets it.'46

He is told so much of their dream, however, that Crooks is even tempted to take part in it a little later:

'.... If you .... guys would want a hand to work for nothing—just his keep, why I'd come an' lend a hand. I ain't so crippled I can't work like a son-of-a-bitch if I want to.'47

But like Burton again, Crooks is unable or afraid of having "any deeply human contacts." As a result, he very soon makes up his mind again and by this time he denies the dream forever:

' 'Member what I said about hoein' and doin' odd jobs?...'
   
'Well, jus' forget it,' said Crooks. 'I didn't mean it. Jus' foolin'. I wouldn' want to go no place like that.'<sup>48</sup>

Crooks' refusal to embrace their dream of living "off the fatta the lan'" suggests that he has missed something essential which nature could have offered to him. Through George and Lennie's dream in nature Crooks would have understood the importance of companionship in one's life. Unfortunately he is not wise enough to understand nature's ephemeral but essential value, since only the truly wise learn how to discriminate between nature's good face and its bad one. As we have seen, even George requires most of the novel to arrive at understanding of nature's value and its limitations, for only at the end is he aware that nature had already played its role in his life.

As a matter of fact, Crooks' case involves something more, I mean racism. He has struggled against it once in a while, and there were people who even tried to help him; but in the end he simply allows himself to be defeated and loneliness swallows him forever.

#### 4.3. Nature and Loneliness in The Grapes of Wrath

Whereas in Of Mice and Men the experience of characters in nature is consistent with the communal self, in In Dubious Battle and in The Grapes of Wrath experience in nature is more individual and lonely. Very early in The Grapes of Wrath we are made aware that the ex-preacher, Jim Casy, like Jesus Christ, had retired into the wilderness, completely alone, to search for new answers to the problems that were afflicting his inner self:

'I been thinkin',' he said. 'I been in the hills, thinkin', almost you might say like Jesus went into the wilderness to think His way out of a mess of troubles. ...'

'Seems like Jesus got all messed up with troubles, and He couldn't figure nothin' out, an' He got to feelin' what the hell good is it all, an' what's the use fightin' an' figurin'. Got tired...an' His sperit all wore out. Jus' about come to the conclusion, the hell with it. An' so He went off into the wilderness. ...'

'I ain't sayin' I'm like Jesus,' the preacher went on. 'But I got tired like Him, an' I got mixed up like Him, an' I went into the wilderness like Him.'<sup>49</sup>

In like manner Emerson had already written in his "Nature" that only "in the woods, we return to reason and faith."<sup>50</sup> So, a century after, Emerson's thought and ideas would reappear through Jim Casy in Oklahoma. There in the wilderness, Casy experienced "the religious feeling of identity with nature,"<sup>51</sup> which has always been the heart of the tradition of natural transcendentalism in America: "There was the hills, an' there was me, an' we wasn't separate no more. We was one thing. An' that one thing was holy,"<sup>52</sup> says Casy. Like Emerson, Casy came to the conclusion that holiness, or goodness, is a result of this feeling of unity: "I got

thinkin' how we was holy when we was one thing, an' mankin' was holy when it was one thing."<sup>53</sup> And the utmost point of Casy's philosophy is that any man who only worries about himself destroys this unity or "holiness":

'An' it on'y got unholy when one mis'able little fella got the bit in his teeth an' run off his own way, kickin' an' draggin' an' fightin'. Fella like that bust the holiness.'<sup>54</sup>

Or, as Emerson phrased it, while discussing "Nature": The world lacks unity because man is disunited with himself. ... Love is its demand."<sup>55</sup> Thus, love is the truth Casy has found in the wilderness: "I says, 'What's this call, this sperit?' An' I says, 'It's love. I love people so much I'm fit to bust, sometimes'" --Casy tells Tom.

As a continuation of this thought Casy also meditates upon the idea that "maybe all men got one big soul ever'body's a part of."<sup>56</sup> (Here Emerson reappears with his conception of the oversoul.) One can even say that Casy's philosophy is totally based upon his personal discovery of the oversoul. As Tom recalls at the end, Casy

'went out in the wilderness to find his own soul, an' he foun' he didn' have no soul that was his 'n. Says he foun' he jus' got a little piece of a great big soul. Says a wilderness ain't no good, 'cause his little piece of a soul wasn't no good 'less it was with the rest, an' was whole.'<sup>57</sup>

Through these last words we can clearly see that even in The Grapes of Wrath Steinbeck keeps on the idea that nature helps man in his search for ultimate answers, but that it becomes harmful for him if he does not return to the community to serve it with the knowledge learned from the experience in nature.

Undeniably, Casy has performed his "mission" entirely, for more than anybody else he has struggled to be near the people he loved and to teach them that "when they're all workin' together, ... one fella kind of harnessed to the whole shebang—that's right, that's holy."<sup>58</sup> And this idea of togetherness, it is worth emphasizing, represents the answer Casy has looked for during his withdrawal. As it is suggested above, togetherness embodies unselfish cooperation, by which "the individual may become greater than himself."<sup>59</sup> Among his people Casy develops such cooperation and by doing so he starts the process that turns the "I" into "we."<sup>60</sup> This changing, in its turn, represents a necessary step to the accomplishment of Steinbeck's ideal social man.

In fact, Casy goes so far in his unselfishness that he even dies for the people he loves. Interestingly, Casy returns to nature shortly before his death, in the same way Jim Nolan does in In Dubious Battle. And as it has happened during Jim's death, the cave image also reappears figuratively some moments before Casy dies. It seems that by entering the cave Casy suffers a kind of awakening to the ultimate answer he was looking for. Finally, he discovers that only through his personal sacrifice could he commit himself entirely to the people he loved. As soon as he comes out of the symbolic cave Casy acquires characteristics of a sacrificial Christ figure, by mentioning to his murderers words that paraphrase Christ's: "You don't know what you're a-doin'." Like Christ, Casy gives his life for his people, in the name of a cause which could probably improve their existential conditions.

They moved quietly along the edge of the

stream. The black span was a cave before them. Casy bent over and moved through. Tom behind. Their feet slipped into the water. Thirty feet they moved, and their breathing echoed from the curved ceiling. Then they came out on the other side and straightened up.

A sharp call, 'There they are!' Two flashlight beams fell on the men, caught them, blinded them. 'Stand where you are.' The voices came out of the darkness. 'That's him. That shiny bastard. That's him.'

Casy stared blindly at the light. He breathed heavily. 'Listen,' he said. 'You fellas don' know what you're doin'. ...'

'Shut up, you red son-of-a-bitch.'

A short heavy man stepped into the light. He carried a new white pick handle.

Casy went on, 'You don' know what you're a-doin'.'

The heavy man swung with the pick handle. Casy dodged down into the swing. The heavy club crashed into the side of his head with a dull crunch of bone, and Casy fell sideways.<sup>61</sup>

But in contrast with the above "interpretation" of Casy's death, which underscores the purity and religiousness of his act, it is important to mention that like Lennie, in Of Mice and Men, Casy dies near water (as it appears in the quotation above), which could clearly represent a sign of his necessary purification, due to the fact that he is constantly assaulted by sinful ideas. Near the beginning we learn from ex-preacher Casy's own confession to Tom that his "religious fervor and aroused emotions"<sup>62</sup> frequently found outlet in sexuality. Being given this very human weakness he becomes troubled in his soul over this "sin" into which he falls always in moments of highest religious feeling: "An' then—you know what I'd do? I'd take one of them girls out in the grass, an' I'd lay with her."<sup>63</sup> And to speak truly this was one of the important reasons that made him retire into the wilderness prior to the beginning of the novel's action. As we have seen, Casy



really solved part of his dilemma during this withdrawal, for in nature he began to develop the idea that union and cooperation with his fellow-men bring him inner fulfillment. But in regard to his problem with sexuality, which keeps on torturing him over and over after his retirement, Casy did not find a solution. At this point we could say that Casy's death symbolizes a kind of punishment from which he cannot escape. A punishment that, on one hand, would be bringing him a complete purification from his "sins," as suggested by the appearance of water at the very moment of his death. At the same time Casy could be receiving that ultimate answer--the extreme sacrifice of self for others--he was so anxious to find out.

For all of Tom Joad's indifference to the state of nature which Casy enters and reenters from time to time in the novel, Tom's own development also requires his exposure to the natural world at several points. According to what has been said in Chapter III of this thesis, Tom Joad (a son of the Joads) is selfish and individualistic at the beginning of the book: "Nothin' ain't none of your affair except skinnin' this here bull-bitch along, an' that's the least thing you work at."<sup>64</sup> This is Tom's remark to a friendly truckdriver. Afterwards when Tom meets Casy, the latter tries to transmit to the former the communal love and worry which he has started to feel during his withdrawal in nature: "They's gonna come a thing that's gonna change the whole country." And Tom simply answers--"I'm still layin' my dogs down one at a time"<sup>65</sup>--showing a complete lack of interest in his fellow-men.

Despite Casy's attempts to point out the importance of the communal self to Tom, Tom fights the idea of changing himself. In Chapter Six, for instance, when Tom and Casy reach the deserted Joad farm and learn from a neighbor, called Muley Graves, that the family has been evicted and gone to Uncle John's house to prepare to move to California, Tom is invited by the neighbor to spend that night in a cave, since it was impossible to keep on traveling. But Tom refuses it decisively: "'I ain't gonna sleep in no cave,' he said."<sup>66</sup> Figuratively his attitude represents a refusal of retreating to nature and of starting a kind of conscience examination. And for a long time Tom remains with the idea that it is much better to worry about himself only.

But in the middle of the novel Tom shows the first signs of his coming inner change--it is when he first rebels against the injustice all the migrants are subjected to:

Tom said angrily, "Them peaches got to be picked right now, don't they? Jus' when they're ripe? ..."

"Well, s'pose them people got together an' says, 'Let 'em rot.' Wouldn' be long 'fore the price went up, by God!"<sup>67</sup>

Not too many pages before this scene, the cave image reappears and Tom is once again linked to it. This time, differently from the first one, however, Tom is willing to stay inside; he alone chooses to go to that spot: "Tom walked in among the willows, and he crawled into a cave of shade to lie down."<sup>68</sup> Significantly, it is soon after Tom leaves the cave that he has his first reaction on behalf of his people--little by little he understands that "the individual must change from an isolated self to an involved

member of the community."<sup>69</sup>

But his final "conversion" occurs almost at the end of the novel, while he is hiding out in another cave, after having struck down the vigilante, who had killed Casy. There Tom's last meeting with his mother takes place. During their talk Tom asserts his spiritual unity with all men:

'... I'll be all aroun' in the dark. ... Wherever they's a fight so hungry people can eat, I'll be there. Wherever they's a cop beatin' up a guy, I'll be there. ... I'll be in the way guys yell when they're mad an'—I'll be in the way kids laugh when they're hungry an' they know supper's ready.'<sup>70</sup>

Now he is completely aware that "a fella ain't no good alone."<sup>71</sup>

That last meeting between Tom and Ma happens under conditions reminiscent of the prenatal state:

The entrance to the cave is covered with black vines, and the interior is damp and completely dark, so that the contact of mother and son is actually physical rather than visual; she gives him food.<sup>72</sup>

At the moment Tom comes out of the cave after announcing his conversion, it is as though he were reborn. In fact, this symbolic womb which has been dressed with the garments of nature provides Tom with enough breathing-space and with a good place to ready himself for his reappearance as a new human being.

The explanations given above show us that even though the experience of nature has an ambiguous value in this novel, both, Casy and Tom have significant experiences in nature; in fact, some aspects even reveal a close relationship among them. During their withdrawals in nature they meditate on themselves and very soon they come to the conclusion that "the community becomes the

way that the individual can, by his participation in, and his devotion to, find himself in relation to the Whole"<sup>73</sup>--i.e., only by being helpful to their fellow-men can they really discover their better self.

Unlike Casy and Tom, however, other characters are not able to learn about the importance of their "participation in" and "devotion to" the community. One of them is Muley Graves, who insists on staying alone. When he first appears at the beginning of the novel, he is immediately linked to the cave image and at that moment he already states his love for living in seclusion: "Muley pulled at the covering brush and crawled into his cave. 'I like it in here,' he called. 'I feel like nobody can come at me.'"<sup>74</sup> Thus, at first hand it seems that the cave symbolizes apparent independence and security for Muley. When he offers his cave to Tom and Casy to spend a night inside, he even tries to transmit those feelings to them: "'You'll be hidin' from lots of stuff,' said Muley."<sup>75</sup> But a more careful analysis of the subject will show us that the cave mainly represents "the limitations and dangers of an existence which has made Muley lonely."<sup>76</sup> He stays alone in nature for such a long time that at the end when he is asked by one of the Joads if he is some day going to leave Oklahoma in order to join his people, he is only able to reply: "No, I won't. ... I got to stay now. Time back I might of went. But not now. Fella gits to thinkin', an' he gits to knowin'. I ain't never goin'."<sup>77</sup>

As we have seen, in contrast to Casy and Tom, Muley misses himself completely during his withdrawal in the fields and in his

cave. The major proof of this fact is given by Muley himself in a quick speech with Noah Joad: "Noah said, 'You gonna die out in the fiel' some day, Muley.'" Muley answers, "I know. I thought about that. Sometimes it seems ... good."<sup>78</sup>

So, while almost everybody in the whole country tries to become a great group, cooperating with and devoting themselves to each other, Muley simply decides to "run an' hide like a damn ol' graveyard ghos'."<sup>79</sup> In view of his opinions and attitudes we can easily conclude that Muley, like Doc Burton in In Dubious Battle, "disappears into nothingness."<sup>80</sup> Muley loses himself forever with- in his loneliness in nature.

Noah Joad (the Joads' "first-born" son) follows Muley's ex- ample. Since his presentation we are made aware that Noah "spoke seldom"<sup>81</sup> and that "there was a listlessness in him toward things people wanted and needed."<sup>82</sup> Sometimes he even seems "cold," as it happens when his Grampa dies. At that time he tells Casy: "Funny thing is—losin' Grampa ain't made me feel no different than I done before. I ain't no sadder... ." <sup>83</sup> In short, we could say that Noah symbolizes the asocial man according to Steinbeck's conception.

In Chapter Eighteen he definitely decides to give up his family's struggle to survive. Some words foreshadow his final de- parture--while laying in the water of the Colorado river in the company of his male relatives "Noah said lazily, 'Like to jus' stay here. Like to lay here forever.'" <sup>84</sup> So, a little later when he meets Tom alone he really announces his decision: "Tom, ... I'm a-gonna walk on down this here river. ... Get myself a piece a

line. I'll catch fish." "How 'bout the fam'ly?" Tom asks him; but Noah's individualism only lets him say: "I can't he'p it."

He turned abruptly and walked downstream along the shore. Tom started to follow, and then he stopped. He saw Noah disappear into the brush, and then appear again, following the edge of the river. And he watched Noah growing smaller on the edge of the river, until he disappeared into the willows at last.<sup>85</sup>

This very last vision we have of Noah, i.e., he disappearing "into the willows" gives us the impression he is entering a big and dark cave, a womb which is never going to open due to Noah's own will, since like Muley Graves, he decides to remain there all alone.

In the same way, Connie deserts his wife, Rose of Sharon, and the Joad family because he is not able to sense the need for communal action. His individualism and selfishness do not allow him to think of the others. All the time he is worried about himself, about money.

He wishes to learn about technology in order to rise in the world. He does not admire technique for itself, as Al does. He is a sexual performer, but he loves no one.<sup>86</sup>

Therefore, his final attitude perfectly fits his spiritual deficiency. As we could expect, Connie goes away completely alone, without saying a word to anybody. It is only when Rose of Sharon asks Al: "You seen Connie?" that we learn about his departure: "'Yeah,' said Al. 'Way to hell an' gone up the river.'"<sup>87</sup> His lonely figure entering nature could easily symbolize his soon destruction. As Al himself mentions, Connie's direction is "to hell."

In contrast with Muley's, Noah's and Connie's example the remaining Joads show an increased sense of union and cooperation. And their great opportunity to prove their complete transformation arises at the very end, in the barn where they find out a starving man. Then, through Rose of Sharon, who nourishes him with her milk, they give the only thing it has left to them to offer, which represents their first entirely unselfish "action."

It is interesting to observe that there is a meaningful preparation for this final scene. As just that moment, a gigantic storm had occurred, and its rain almost inundated the boxcar where the Joads are living in. It is as if all that water has purified the family from its "spiritual bigotry," preparing them for the great moment of their awareness of a larger loyalty to mankind and of their learning of cooperation as the essential element for survival.

Once again we could realize a close relationship between nature and human beings who struggle to reach their better self. In fact, in The Grapes of Wrath this connection occurs so often and so visibly sometimes, that we almost have the impression of a formula being repeated over and over. At this point of the chapter one can conclude that the experiences in nature, performed by some characters throughout the novels that have been analysed, show slight differences among them. In In Dubious Battle, for instance, the character comes to a figurative nature alone and there he starts his inward examination which turns into an essentially individual and lonely experience. Nature appears for Jim Nolan during a dream, which unconsciously works on him to

prepare the character for his final reeducation. On the other hand, nature is presented in its raw form in Of Mice and Men, and becomes consistent with the shared self, with the communal self, due to George's and Lennie's presence in nature during the former's process of illumination. This means that until the end at least, when George finally leaves that natural world forever, nature and community are potentially compatible in Of Mice and Men. The same thing, however, does not happen in The Grapes of Wrath, where the experiences in nature resemble those of In Dubious Battle, with the only difference that in The Grapes of Wrath nature once again appears in its actual form. Anyway, it is in nature or through it that the main characters of In Dubious Battle, Of Mice and Men, and The Grapes of Wrath finally reach their better self and consequently the condition of ideal social men.



## CHAPTER NOTES

- (1) Jaspers, Karl, "Existenzphilosophie," in Kaufmann, Walter, ed., Existentialism (New American Library: New York, 1975) p. 174.
- (2) Shively, Charles, "John Steinbeck: From the Tide Pool to the Loyal Community," in Astro, Richard and Hayashi, Tetsumaro, eds., Steinbeck: The Man and his Work (Oregon State University Press: Corvallis, 1971) p. 30.
- (3) Steinbeck, John, In Dubious Battle (Penguin Books: New York, 1979) p. 35.
- (4) Ibid., p. 37.
- (5) Ibid., p. 6.
- (6) Ibid., p. 7.
- (7) Ibid., p. 8.
- (8) Ibid., p. 37.
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## CONCLUSION

At this point, I would like to say that undertaking this study has proved to be extremely gratifying to me, since repeatedly I could give wings to my imagination, with which I found myself almost completely alone so many times. I only hope that my own wings have taken me in a direction which helps to locate the direction of Steinbeck's imagination.

Among the author's diversified writings I decided to analyse what the majority of critics generally agree to be his major novels—In Dubious Battle (1936), Of Mice and Men (1937), and The Grapes of Wrath (1939). As these books belong to the same decade (in fact, to the late 1930's), it seemed to me more interesting and convenient to search for similarities and differences among them. This accounts for my decision to exclude from consideration such other standard Steinbeck works as East of Eden (1952), Cannery Row (1945), and The Pastures of Heaven (1932). In the cases of these other novels, it is possible that Steinbeck formu-

lates the relationship between self and society rather differently than the manner in which he presents it in the novels under discussion. Nevertheless, it is clear that Steinbeck was devoting special attention to this issue in the novels he wrote throughout the late 1930's, and the discussion of the various combinations and solutions he experimented with during this period has aimed at revealing the substance of his thinking about self and society during this highly productive period of his life.

I think that after all I have said throughout this dissertation, it is clear that Steinbeck's fiction really owns an inner, subjective side. And the crucial point which suggested the exploration of this chief purpose was Steinbeck's strong interest in the individual's inner growth, for under the preoccupation with revealing his opinions about society and social reform lies his emphasis on the individual himself. The main characters of Steinbeck's novels are constantly involved in an existential quest, and this quest frequently results in their finding of a better self. As the novels proceed, these characters undergo a long process of education, which, according to what we have seen, can be compared to a journey into awareness that leads them from selfishness and individualism (their bad selves), to unselfishness and cooperation (their better selves).

This new state of life, in its turn, is reached when characters finally understand, paradoxically, that their inner realization and comfort derive from their participation in and devotion to the community. The long process to which they must submit, in order to find their better selves, teaches them that by joining

in a common social battle, they are at the same time fighting for their own private "cause."

Nevertheless, this whole change occurs in a character's life due to somebody else's influence. The resolution—Steinbeck's resolution—of the contradiction between self and others is not something that individual characters are capable of discovering on their own. Interestingly, in all three novels, it is always a male companion who exerts great influence upon other character of the same sex. And as I tried to make explicit in the dissertation's third chapter, this kind of relationship brings out a new pattern in Steinbeck's fiction—that of male pairs. To reach this point, Leslie Fiedler helped me with his audacious ideas about the relationship between male-bonding and a latent homosexual theme in American novels. They also helped me to clarify the extent to which male-pairs in Steinbeck fail to fit Fiedler's model. In my opinion, if we concentrate on deciding whether latent homosexuality exists beneath Steinbeck's handling of male pairs, we miss the main point. As we have seen, Steinbeck is insisting, consciously, out loud, on the necessity and virtue of sexual purity—on chaste behavior between men. This is one of the central moral virtues which his heroes are made to express. And this is exactly the emphasis which is lost if we accept Fiedler's hypothesis fully.

Curiously, in Steinbeck's male pairs one always takes on the responsibility for revealing a different vision of life to the other. At the end, however, all these pairs are separated through death. In some cases the character's death symbolizes an extreme



proof of his commitment to a cause, which consequently turns to be the ultimate answer for his existential afflictions. In fact, that is for the character his moment of deepest sense of personal fulfillment. Jim in In Dubious Battle and Casy in The Grapes of Wrath illustrate this in a good way. On the other hand, Lennie's death in Of Mice and Men acquires a different dimension. Being visualized as a metaphor for nature (i.e., an element that must disappear after the character's discovery of a solution to his inner doubts) Lennie has to stay behind.

In connection with this, we have also seen that nature in its wild form and personal loneliness, despite their seeming opposition to the goal of human solidarity, have much to do with this quest. Despite the apparent contradiction, these elements exert, at one and the same time, positive and negative influences upon the Steinbeck's characters who are in their full search. Nature, for instance, is portrayed by Steinbeck as a positive aspect, at the moment it serves as a place of withdrawal for the characters to meditate upon themselves, even when this happens in a figurative way. But when this very meditation comes to an end, nature becomes extremely destructive, for according to what Steinbeck constantly suggests, the character who remains alone in nature can miss himself completely in the end. So, loneliness, in its turn, also plays a double role during Steinbeck's characters' existential quest—on one hand, it is useful for them while they take advantage of it to solve their inner doubts; on the other hand, it becomes a harmful aspect if the characters are not wise enough to realize that their self-realization depends on their

reintegration into the community and their consequent commitment to their fellow-men. At this point, we conclude that such characters' recognition of the right time to leave nature and loneliness behind represents their final acquaintance with their better selves; and that besides, this very attitude allows them to reach the condition of true examples of Steinbeck's ideal social men, a position acquired by the individual soon after obtaining his self-realization.

Some readers may wonder how the moral and occasionally Christian orientation of the previous chapters fits with the traditional critical view of Steinbeck as a political novelist with possible Marxist commitments. Of course it is possible to think of Steinbeck's interest in community, in brotherhood, in a context which is primarily political. We know that Steinbeck himself wasn't adverse to being considered a social reformer. And it is even possible to see a kind of overlap between the political aspect of these novels and the moral-spiritual aspect I have been emphasizing, in the sense that they sometimes share the same vocabulary: community and brotherhood (as we have seen above), justice, equality, solidarity, victim, love, comrade, etc. But in spite of any coincidence which may exist between the political and the moral-religious aspects, I think that the latter deserves separate treatment because it hasn't been dealt with separately before, and mainly because, in the end, Steinbeck's attitude toward human development depends first on the individual, moral education before it leads to a sense of community.

As we now see, the subjective side of Steinbeck's work can

be strongly felt by one who is able to see beyond or behind the glare of Steinbeck's social message. Consciously or not, Steinbeck allowed his readers to discover a wide subjective field hidden under that first impression of pure social criticism. In this light, perhaps this thesis can be a kind of starting-point. From here on the passage is open and new explorers can easily search for other riches.

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