

FINDING STEINBECK'S UTOPIA IN *CANNERY ROW*
AND *TORTILLA FLAT*

By

Christian Troy Roemer

Christopher Stuart
Department Head and
Katharine H Pryor Professor
(Chair)

Matthew Guy
Associate Professor
(Committee Member)

Rik Hunter
Lecturer
(Committee Member)

FINDING UTOPIA IN STEINBECK'S *CANNERY ROW*
AND *TORTILLA FLAT*

By

Christian Troy Roemer

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of the University of
Tennessee at Chattanooga in Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements of the Degree of Master
of Art in English

The University of Tennessee at Chattanooga
Chattanooga, Tennessee

August 2014

ABSTRACT

My thesis will explore the idea of utopia that John Steinbeck intimates through the two novels *Tortilla Flat* and *Cannery Row*, and how he crafts his utopia in concordant Marxist, social, and ecological frameworks. These two novels possess striking commentaries regarding Steinbeck's views on social status, materialism, and freedom all in conjunction with his larger socio-ecological confines. It is in this symbiotic social interaction that Steinbeck crafts his utopia along with the physical landscape that constitutes Monterey. Written a decade apart, the two novels' structural similarities suggest that Steinbeck maintained a consistent social vision, and that these two novels function as incubators for Steinbeck's idea of a utopic society. Steinbeck's romanticization of his childhood home reflects his left-leaning politics and social theories. The Salinas Valley that he creates is comparable to other utopic fabrications such as El Dorado or Milton's Eden than the town that physically rests in California.

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my wife, friends, and family who supported me economically, socially, psychologically, and mentally throughout this project.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to acknowledge Dr. Stuart who guided me throughout the arduous process of drafting, re-writing, formulating ideas, and almost giving up in frustration. His patience and guidance were instrumental in my ability to finish this project, and it is due to him that has turned out so well. I'd also like to thank my other committee members, Dr. Hunter and Dr. Guy, who were extremely amicable with me and provided a great experience for my defense. Thanks to Jay Parini for writing such a thorough biography of Steinbeck that helped spark interest and direction for my thesis, and thanks Mr. Steinbeck for writing such wonderfully influential novels.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	ii
DEDICATION.....	iii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	iv
CHAPTER	
I. THE PERFECT CALIFORNIA.....	1
II. DOC’S DEPRESSION AND THE SOCIAL ECOLOGY OF <i>CANNERY ROW</i>	15
III. MATERIALISM IN <i>TORTILLA FLAT</i>	30
IV. LET’S PARTY.....	46
REFERENCES.....	61
VITA.....	64

CHAPTER I
THE PERFECT CALIFORNIA

“I guess the trouble was that we didn’t have any self-admitted proletarians. Everyone was a temporarily embarrassed capitalist.”¹
-John Steinbeck

Steinbeck wrestled with the idea of the Edenic throughout his career, and the works that come closest to realizing his vision of what such a place would entail come in the form of the two novels, *Tortilla Flat* and *Cannery Row*. In these two works, Steinbeck crafts a culture focused on the dispossessed and poor, and both are set in Monterey, California. The Salinas valley, Steinbeck’s childhood home, is a familiar setting for many of his novels, and the small, sea-faring town of Monterey serves as the perfect setting for Steinbeck’s greater political, ecological, and philosophical aims. While Monterey is no picturesque Eden or whimsical El Dorado, *Tortilla Flat* and *Cannery Row* share many similarities with those paradisiacal locations, and Monterey’s ethos evokes a sense of a nearby and attainable utopia. Steinbeck’s own dynamic biography and political involvement inform the artistic liberties taken in the development of the revolutionary misfits that shape the stories. These bohemian characters that populate his perfect society are economically anti-Capitalist and spiritually individualist, exactly reflecting Steinbeck’s own complicated worldview. Jay Parini argues in his extensive biography

¹ From *America and Americans* p. 27

that Steinbeck's career can be defined by his search of Eden that he never found.² *Tortilla Flat* and *Cannery Row* represent his most successful attempts at creating the utopia he desperately wished for—a utopia that serves as the ultimate marriage of his political, economic, social, ecological, and spiritual theories. These ideas are hinged upon Marxist anti-materialism, emancipation from Capitalist economic oppression, and the location of Monterey, California.

Steinbeck's complex personal history helps illuminate his obvious reverence for the poor and explain his disdain for the bourgeois and its fickle value system. Steinbeck's father was a self-admitted capitalist, though his success at claiming such a title is debatable. He held multiple white-collar positions such as manager for a flour-mill (which collapsed under his guidance), an accountant, and finally, treasurer of Monterey county (Parini 9-10). Steinbeck's family was never the wealthiest in town, but they were well provided for, and Steinbeck's childhood home is now renovated into a museum in his honor. The house is of modest size with large bay windows on a neighborly street. Despite the house's friendly exterior, Steinbeck's father locked himself in his room in depressive states, most likely due to the failure of his business ventures. Jay Parini states, "Charles Dickens, of course, was dealt a humiliating blow that never ceased to sting when his spendthrift father's fortunes crashed...Steinbeck's reaction to his father's failure was similar, if less open" (15). From an early age, Steinbeck was exposed to the stresses of capitalism, the instability of social status, and the transient nature of bourgeois existence.

Steinbeck's subsequent rebellion from the bourgeois culture and downgrade in living conditions is hardly surprising given his father's constant struggle to maintain the appearance of financial stability. While Steinbeck's father continually worked to improve his social status through various failed business endeavors, he remained estranged from his family. Steinbeck's

² Stated most directly, "A careful reading will also find here signs of Steinbeck's abiding quest for Edenic experience combined with his sense of high moral purpose" (84).

opinion from his youth could have been heavily skewed against whatever process led to his father's constant depression and anxiety. Even though his father was constantly put under the stresses of entrepreneurship and social climbing, he provided for his family quite well, and Steinbeck's needs were always well accommodated. However, when Steinbeck left for college at Stanford, he began his career in the dormitory, but he later moved off campus in order to live a more independent lifestyle. His choice in living quarters, dubbed The Sphincter, was a single room apartment with no running water. Parini writes, "The Sphincter was infested with ants, pill bugs, and spiders, but Steinbeck appears to have relished the sordidness of it all" (42). The privacy, freedom, and simplicity appealed to Steinbeck, and it allowed him to write in peace and focus on the nature of living outside of the sterile and controlled confines of the bourgeoisie.

Steinbeck's trajectory from a comfortable and pampered middle class child to dirty bohemian is unusual, but the transformation fits perfectly with the works of *Tortilla Flat* and *Cannery Row*, where poverty serves as the desirable state of existence. The idea of shunning Main Street for a more naturalistic environment is not a foreign concept to America and American Literature—Thoreau was one of Steinbeck's favorite authors and *Walden* one of his favorite books—so Steinbeck's enthusiastic and headlong dive into poverty is not quizzical. After he ended his stint in the Sphincter, his new quarters in the lake Tahoe region were not an overall upgrade.³ He remained at Tahoe for a few years, continuing to perpetuate his simple lifestyle and practice his writing. The problem with working as a caretaker in Tahoe, however, was that it involved too much work and allowed too little time to writing, so Steinbeck

³ Parini dedicates a chapter to Steinbeck's Tahoe days, where he worked as a caretaker for a wealthy woman, watching her property and living in the caretaker's lodge. It was just one room where he slept on a cot (59).

eventually abdicated this life of separation in order to move back to San Francisco to concentrate more heavily on his writing.

Steinbeck continued to cling to the idea of equality in poverty after his move back to the coast, and his admiration for an anti-materialistic lifestyle is reflected in the utopic cultures that he creates in *Tortilla Flat* and *Cannery Row*. As his writing began to garner him more money, he still preferred the simple life to one of ostentatious consumption and fame. He lived in small, mostly secluded living spaces, and he continued his minimalist existence. Parini notes, “Steinbeck had mixed feelings about his new prosperity...he was also afraid that if the money continued to roll in (as it would) he would lose something of himself” (169). Steinbeck, as his fame and fortune grew, remained wary of the negative effect that money and wealth may impress upon him, and these insecurities are reflected in *Cannery Row*'s Mack and the boys and Danny's gang in *Tortilla Flat*. Steinbeck's disdain for unmitigated wealth permeates through almost all of his subsequent works, and even today, he is known predominantly as a leftist writer who defended the every day workingman in works like *The Grapes of Wrath*, *In Dubious Battle*, and *Of Mice and Men*. *Tortilla Flat* and *Cannery Row* differ from his other novels in that they don't defend the workingman; instead, they expose the ethics of the *non*-workingman.

When crafting his unique utopias in *Tortilla Flat* and *Cannery Row*, he combats the American idea of work, presenting industrious characters that operate outside of the oppressive confines of the capitalistic success structure. In novels such as *The Grapes of Wrath* and *In Dubious Battle*, the protagonists' poverty is congenital, unwelcome, and undesirable. These characters are disgruntled and disenfranchised by huge farms and agriculture conglomerates that are denying them an opportunity to better themselves financially. These other novels supply a voice for the voiceless; they offer a perspective of the population that is quelled by the interests

of the rich. *Tortilla Flat* and *Cannery Row* depart from this tradition of defending the poor and instead operate on the premise that some citizens do not need a voice in the capitalist framework, because they operate completely outside of it. Characters such as Mack and Danny transcend the materialism and degeneration that arise from capitalist enterprise. These unique bums and paisanos abdicate the pressures, expectation, and emptiness of the capitalist, corporate ladder-climbing structure by disregarding it all together.

Mack and Danny and their respective gangs operate on a separate set of principles such as responsibility for one's fellow man, simplicity in living conditions, and a kind of divine or holy charity that shape the utopia that Steinbeck wishes to capture. Warren French argues that *Cannery Row* "is to be a relentless attack on the pretentious middle-class, go-getting American concept of success in comparison with the outsider life-style" (99). The central theme of both *Tortilla Flat* and *Cannery Row* lies in the unequivocal rejection of the typical American value system. This repudiation illustrates Steinbeck's belief that a nearby, more fulfilling lifestyle is possible in America, and it exists in the communities of superficially poor, dispossessed, underrepresented, and abhorred citizens of Monterey. While they physically possess little, their life is one of freedom and independence. Steinbeck forces the reader to adjust him or herself to a new point of view in order to gain a deeper understanding about what it means to live well. Howard Levant argues, "Like love, *Cannery Row* is a creation of its inhabitants. They choose to live there, and they make their lives the creation of love in any of its forms" (175). Levant rightly identifies that *Cannery Row* is a world inhabited by characters that choose the trajectory and status of their existence. The unique cultures shared amongst the hooligans of *Tortilla Flat* and *Cannery Row* are more than just a manifestation of love—they serve as a direct indictment of the American capitalist structure.

Since Steinbeck was unable to find any proletariats because they were all embarrassed capitalists, he imagines a subculture where the poor feel shame for the capitalists, perhaps hoping that such disdain will highlight the unsustainability and injustice of Laissez-faire capitalist behavior. He creates groups of friends who live in penniless conditions, because it is only in poverty that they are able to exist as equals. After experiencing the hollowness that plagued his father's primary goals of affluence and high social status, Steinbeck rejects the capitalist model and instead creates characters that are content and find meaning in their poverty. With the characters all on equal and low economic standing, they are free to engage in more constructive and spiritually fulfilling activities like doing something nice for Doc, rescuing children from starvation in Robin Hood like escapades, or just enjoying one another's company. The bums of *Cannery Row* and the poor paisanos of *Tortilla Flat* seamlessly grasp the understanding and fulfillment of living a free life outside of the American concepts of material gain and social Darwinism.

What differentiates *Tortilla Flat* and *Cannery Row*'s politics from his other novels is that direct capitalist oppression on the protagonists is largely absent, allowing him to illustrate what society could be instead of relying on negative attacks on what it is. These two novels reveal the emancipatory effects of eschewing the capitalist worldview en lieu of a system in which the community cares and looks out for one another. *Cannery Row* and *Tortilla Flat* represent what Marx wishes for Communism to accomplish, "Man, in Marx's view, has created in the course of history a culture which he will be free to make his own when he is freed from the chains, not only of economic poverty, but of the spiritual poverty created by alienation" (Fromm 50). These novels revolve around the enlightened and spiritual leaders of the proletariat. The characters within these novels disregard the arbitrary value associated with the materialistic definitions of

success, and they freely choose to establish their own set of mores and social codes. Each group regards man as an individual and also an inextricable member of the group. Just as Marx wishes to free man from the binding chains of alienation that are pervasive in the Capitalist system, Steinbeck also creates examples of emancipated men as guides for how one can live life more freely. Steinbeck's utopia does not function around strict rules and complicated justice systems; it does not deny man the ability to more appropriately and freely choose how he or she will live. His utopia embraces each individual's place in the community, both locally and worldwide, though that position can be fluid and ever changing. Steinbeck's fantasy relies on a communitarian ethos in which one's inclusion in a group is the natural state of existence which stands in direct opposition to the capitalist objectivism that claims that selfishness is humanity's primary instinctual directive.

The fact that Monterey serves as the setting for both of these novels suggests that California, and more specifically Monterey, plays a pivotal role in how Steinbeck views utopia. As a native of the Salinas valley, it makes sense that Steinbeck would repeatedly revert to the town with which he is most familiar, but the physical topography and personal affinity that he possesses for the region make it an obvious choice for his Eden. Monterey sits about one hundred miles south of San Francisco and across the Monterey Bay. California, at the time of Steinbeck's youth, was not the economic behemoth that it is today, and instead still possessed the remnants of the wild west that would have made it somewhat exotic for the casual American reader. Salinas, the larger city to which Monterey is a suburb, had a population of around 3,000 people (Shillinglaw 13), and it was hardly a bustling metropolis. Since Monterey is such a small town, it would have been relatively unknown to most Americans, and this mystery allowed Steinbeck the luxury of embellishment. In these two novels, he is able to craft a fantastical

locale of interesting and eccentric characters that possess an identity all to themselves. In direct opposition to more mainstream American values such as laboring until death, desire for opulence, and expanding one's social rank, he populates Monterey with characters whose primary concern are each other's wellbeing, fullness of life, and freedom.

The nature of poverty naturally lends itself to a state of inclusiveness that synchronized to Steinbeck's idea of the phalanx. The phalanx will be discussed in depth throughout the following chapters, but in short, it represents the idea that everything is connected in a subconscious and indivisible way. Steinbeck operates under the assumption that the earth, and even the universe on the macro level, can be viewed as a sort of super-organism, where every organism and non-organism impacts one another in inextricable and sometimes indecipherable ways. Steinbeck uses the tide pool as a metaphor to help better explain his views, and Charles Shively explains, "The pool appears as a holistically unified cosmos which leads Steinbeck to conclude that 'it seems apparent that species are only commas in a sentence...And the units nestle into the whole and are inseparable from it'" (25). In Steinbeck's view, the entire state of existence is one of inclusiveness. As he would have discovered during his youth, the culture of the bourgeois is one of exclusivity and constant jockeying for enhanced social position. His mother and father held memberships in the free masons and his father "carried himself like a man of importance. It mattered to him what the neighbors thought about him" (Parini 8). Steinbeck's father carried himself in a way that exuded exclusivity, and it is against this exclusivity and constant competition among the wealthy that Steinbeck bases his utopia.

Mack and the boys and Danny and the gang represent for Steinbeck the proletariat that he searched for but was unable to find; they live a life of equilibrium where social stratification does not exist. Similarly, in Voltaire's *El Dorado*, everyone shares in extreme opulence so that

wealth becomes mundane—equality defines the utopic. Children play with invaluable gems in the river, exposing their complete disregard for material possessions that Candide finds totally unimaginable. He intimates to Cacambo, “If we abide here we shall only be upon a footing with the rest, whereas, if we return to our old world, only with twelve sheep laden with the pebbles of El Dorado, we shall be richer than all the kings in Europe” (46). Candide exposes the exact corruptive properties of material wealth against which Steinbeck rallies. To Candide, the true value of wealth comes not in what one actually possesses, but rather what one possesses in relation to others. Candide, given the opportunity to live the rest of his life in supreme comfort in El Dorado, chooses instead to leave it because he finds no satisfaction in being a commoner in El Dorado. Steinbeck’s protagonists in *Tortilla Flat* and *Cannery Row* operate on similar premises to the population of El Dorado in that they share their possessions and social status is not a concern. In order to craft an American novel that functions on these premises, Steinbeck crafts his story around the poor, because the rich have internalized the struggle for material wealth and continue their quest for more at the expense of others.

Monterey’s physical topography lends itself easily to Edenic imagery, and Steinbeck utilizes California’s coast liberally to make the setting feel desirable. Monterey’s shoreline is among the most beautiful on the west coast, possessing large bluffs that overlook the Monterey Bay that opens into the Pacific Ocean. The Salinas Valley is astoundingly diverse as Steinbeck illustrates in *East of Eden*, where only thirty miles separate lush farmlands from arid, flinty hills. Following the tradition of Edenic literature such as *Candide* and *Paradise Lost*, Steinbeck chooses a setting that reflects the magnanimity of the characters that inhabit it—the town supports and enhances the grandeur of the large personalities within it. As Parini puts it, “Monterey became a setting for several of Steinbeck’s best-known novels and stories, and it

became for him a sacred place” (16). *Tortilla Flat* and *Cannery Row*’s Monterey operates as the combination of Steinbeck’s perfect human-centric culture in the most idyllic setting possible.

Monterey, as a relatively small and mostly unfamiliar town to the rest of the United States offers Steinbeck the luxury of making his utopia exotic and simultaneously quintessentially American. Like Eden in *Paradise Lost* and El Dorado in *Candide*, Steinbeck crafts Monterey as desirable, exotic, and separated from the mainstream. Fromm describes, “It was expressed somewhat obliquely in the great utopias of the Renaissance, in which the new world is not in a distant future, but in a distant place” (54), and in this way, Monterey is like these other utopias because it feels distant and foreign. It differs from Eden and El Dorado in that instead of insurmountable physical separation, it loiters in the alleyways and empty lots so commonly overlooked by the average American. The world of Mack and the boys and Danny and the gang supplies an exotic perspective that is diametrically opposed to the typical Western worldview, and it occurs in a naturally beautiful and diverse location right under the noses of the people who never take notice of it.

Steinbeck goes to great lengths to display the physical beauty that Monterey exhibits, and he does so similarly in both *Tortilla Flat* and *Cannery Row*. He describes the physical location of Tortilla Flat:

Monterey sits on the slope of a hill, with a blue bay below it and with a forest of dark pine trees at its back...on the hill where the forest and the town intermingle, where the streets are innocent of asphalt and the corners free of street light, the old inhabitants of Monterey are embattled as the Ancient Britons. (2)

Tortilla Flat is located in a place where one may more easily envision an enuring palace or opulent gardens, but instead, the great purveyors of this beauty are the poor paisanos who live on

the hills. The paisanos who inhabit the flat are entrenched in their position and are embattled against the onslaught of what Steinbeck considers an aggressive oppressor: American business. The paisanos occupy a space both physically and spiritually above the capitalist system, despite their undoubted economic position below it. The words that Steinbeck uses to describe the paisanos in their separation from main street are unabashedly anti-capitalist: “*innocent of asphalt,*” “*free of street lights,*” and “*clean of commercialism*” (2 *emphasis mine*). Steinbeck’s microcosm of paradise stands in direct opposition to the nearby and imposing specter of capitalism right down the hill from which the paisanos are perched.

Steinbeck introduces *Cannery Row* in similarly romantic language that immediately grounds the novel in anti Main Street sentiment. What one would assume to be a smelly and totally unattractive part of town, Steinbeck transforms into the magical—a perfect setting for the carefree individuals who live there. In one of Steinbeck’s most famous passages, Cannery Row begins:

Cannery Row in Monterey in California is a poem, a sting, a grating noise, A quality of light, a tone, a habit, a nostalgia, a dream...its inhabitants are, as the man once said, “whores pimps, gamblers, and sons of bitches,” by which he meant Everybody. Had the man looked through another peephole he might have said, “Saints and angels and martyrs and holy men,” and he would have meant the same thing (1).

The contradictory statements within this introductory paragraph inform many of the themes that pervade the entire novel such as the ephemeral nature of morality, the charitable nature of the characters, and most importantly, the danger that the protagonists pose to the capitalist status quo. The paradoxical elements that comprise Steinbeck’s description of Cannery Row establish

a foundation of vigilant perspective that the reader must harbor in order to navigate the subsequent chapters. Steinbeck claims that the Row is “a nostalgia, a dream.” He exposes his reverence for the characters and location of the novel and perpetuates his fondness and reverence for both the Cannery Row the place and the characters who inhabit it.

The intrinsic spiritual wisdom and acute moral compass that guides Mack and the Boys and Danny and the gang serve as the differentiating factors that make Cannery Row and Tortilla Flat such compelling, utopic locations. Warren French argues that *Cannery Row* “is to be a relentless attack on the pretentious middle-class, go-getting American concept of success in comparison with the outsider life-style” (99); and *Tortilla Flat* follows suit, “because of the characters’ uninhibited libidos and flagrant disregard for property and propriety” (56). Rejection of the typical American value system defines the themes of both Cannery Row and Tortilla Flat, and that repudiation opens the possibility for what Steinbeck illustrates as a more fulfilling way of life—one exhibited by the superficially poor, dispossessed, and underrepresented. Because the inhabitants are poor from their own choosing, they are not distracted by the empty lure of capitalist materialism and instead concern themselves with the health and well being of their fellow man.

Steinbeck’s choice to craft these two utopic novels around questionable moral scrupulousness forces the reader to question the premises of the capitalistic social structure such as how one defines success, right, wrong, and even friendship. The questionable actions that Mack and the boys and the paisanos engage in occur in direct opposition to shallow American-Christian bourgeois concepts such as monogamy and abstinence from alcohol, and instead concentrate on deep and authentic altruism and individual freedom of expression. Steinbeck espouses values that positively impact the community in sustainable forms instead of

shortsighted objectivism. The fact that such revolutionary underpinnings transpire in California further adds to the paradoxical nature of Steinbeck's utopia, because they do not all reflect the true nature of economic relations of California at the time. Steinbeck's own career is defined most commonly with his defense of worker's rights, especially against the onslaught of large farms paying paltry wages. California itself, during the time of Steinbeck's youth and early adulthood, would have still possessed residual mystique from previous mass-migrations such as the gold rush and Manifest Destiny. It was and continues to be the quintessential capitalist location—the place with an indisputable reputation as the land of opportunity where huge fortunes await anyone willing to work hard enough for it. Steinbeck's California is diametrically opposed to this tradition; it is a place in which man can discover himself spiritually, not necessarily economically.

Monterey, California serves as the idyllic physical location that, when combined with the unique culture of the eccentric bums who inhabit it, illustrates Steinbeck's unique worldview and concept of utopia. With its magnificent shores and extensive forests, the topography lends itself easily to desirability, and its distance from the mainstream economic center of America on the East coast allows it to seem exotic and distant. *Tortilla Flat* and *Cannery Row* revolve around the enlightened and spiritual leaders of the proletariat that disregard the arbitrary value associated with capitalistic endeavors, and instead engage in living a life full of experience and friendship. These characters adhere to their own set of moral codes that reflect Steinbeck's holistic philosophy of the phalanx, admiration for nature, and compassion for humanity. These men understand the falsely conflated value attached to material wealth and reject the social Darwinism that defines capitalist enterprise. These groups of individuals live peacefully in poverty, because it is in poverty that they are all equal. Steinbeck's utopia is one that is easily

attained, and it is open to anyone willing to accept it. All one must do in order to achieve the sublime state of existence experienced by Mack, Danny, Pilon, Hazel, or even the Pirate is to reject the capitalist premises on which Main Street America operates and choose instead to live a life with and for one's fellow man.

CHAPTER II:

DOC'S DEPRESSION AND THE SOCIAL ECOLOGY OF *CANNERY ROW*

Human accountability and communal responsibility rests at the center of Steinbeck's ideas of utopia, and Doc's depression in *Cannery Row* illustrates the culmination of the writer's holistic philosophy of man and earth in socio-ecological terms. Doc and Mack and the boys function as unshakable fixtures of the community, and they are directly involved with the lives of the people who occupy Monterey. Mack and the boys are generally carefree and happy in their low social standing, but Doc suffers from a profound and unshakable bout of depression throughout the novel's duration. Steinbeck creates Doc's depression as a metaphor of social responsibility on which Mack and the boys become transfixed, leading them to undertake great pains to relieve Doc of his maladies. Their desire to "do something nice for Doc" illustrates Mack and the boys' intuitive desire to help cure Doc of his ills so that the town and all who inhabit it can prosper. This deep altruism that the boys display signifies the positive influential power that solidarity impresses upon the community. *Cannery Row's* theme of depression and social responsibility illustrate Steinbeck's philosophical concern of the phalanx, which also helps better explain his political leanings.

The foundation of Steinbeck's world-view begins with an extremely broad, sweeping belief in the underlying connection of all aspects of existence that are constantly impressing their influences upon one another. Steinbeck dubs this greater interaction the phalanx—a biological and non-biological super-organism. Jay Parini offers a well-crafted explanation for the phalanx and how Steinbeck purveys this idea:

The Term (phalanx)...refers to group behavior of any kind...Steinbeck's central thesis is that men in groups, like all units made up of individual parts, appear to connect to a larger spirit or will that exists somewhere beyond individual response. (105)

The Grapes of Wrath illustrates this idea on the macro scale: droughts in the Midwest cause the Dust Bowl, which leads to mass migrations into California, which leads to workers' rights revolutions. Steinbeck claims that all humans interact with the phalanx subconsciously, and that connection can potentially cause an unhealthy schism between one's sense of individuality and attachment to the larger group. Doc's depression is the result of this discord.

Steinbeck's leftist political leanings stem from the idea of the phalanx, and he weaves these philosophical and political motifs throughout the novel in complimentary patterns. Throughout his career, Steinbeck was an ardent advocate for workers' rights, and his anti monetary sentiments manifest in *Mack and the boys*. Steinbeck states his criticism against materialism in *America and Americans*, "I believe in the despotism of human life and happiness against the liberty of money and possessions" (88), and *Mack and the boys* depict Steinbeck's ideal for how one can live life with disregard for accruing wealth. *Mack and the boys* represent for Steinbeck the opposite end of the economic spectrum from the large agriculture businesses who wreaked havoc in California for years and against which Steinbeck was very vocal, "The large growers, who have been shown to be the only group making a considerable profit from agriculture, are devoting their money to tear gas and rifle ammunition" (*America* 76). To Steinbeck, the idea of profits being spent on guns and ammunition at time when millions of people are starving and destitute perfectly illustrates the perverse nature of the capitalist. Business would rather kill people than help them. Steinbeck speaks through Doc:

The things we admire in men, kindness and generosity, openness, honesty, understanding and feeling are the concomitants of failure in our system. And those traits we detest, sharpness, greed, acquisitiveness, meanness, egotism, and self-interest are the traits of success. (131).

Big business and behemoth farms, for Steinbeck, represent the highly unethical American capitalist drive and ideal for profits above all costs. In response, Steinbeck creates Mack and the boys: representatives for the desire for communal health above all else. In this novel, Mack and the boys represent Steinbeck's "hopes that people might create among themselves a life beyond narrow, immediate, private wants, a life in which the satisfaction of one's needs can be pursued with the support of and in support of others" (Gibbons 159). Doc again speaks for Steinbeck when he states, "The sale of souls to gain the whole world is completely voluntary and almost unanimous—but not quite. Everywhere in the world there are Mack and the boys" (131). For Steinbeck, Mack and the boys represent the rare individuals who cast off the corrupt morals and philosophical premises of capitalism en lieu of a humanistic style of living, and it is in these types of men that hope for a more fulfilling future rests.

Cannery Row possesses a distinct distance from capitalistic means of production by concentrating on poorer citizens who are not blinded by greed or frivolous materialism, and instead focus on the mutual health and well-being of the community in which they live. Because they disregard the capitalist values for profits and material wealth, Mack and the boys become harbingers of the phalanx and ensure its health in the face of the oppression that hangs over nearby Main Street. According to Steinbeck, if the social fabric of a community falters, the group's health will suffer both collectively and individually. Steinbeck fights against the alienation that capitalist values inflict upon populations, and he argues, "We will not permit the

methods of production or destruction to be used or controlled by men or nations for the exploitation or enslavement of peoples” (Quoted Lewis 206). Steinbeck displays his disdain of capitalistic enterprise in the face of human suffering while simultaneously illustrating his human-centric philosophy. In Steinbeck’s estimation, mankind is meant to be independent from economic oppression and allowed to thrive in relation to one another and nature.

Doc’s self-destructive psychology stands in direct opposition to Mack and the boys, who live in satisfaction and contentment as dilettantes, closely related and connected to the subconscious driving forces of the phalanx. Throughout the novel, Steinbeck argues that Mack and the boys intuit a profound connection in the world around them, making possible their carefree lifestyle. A conversation shared between Doc and Richard Frost reveals Mack and the boys’ wisdom, “There are your true philosophers. I think that Mack and the boys know everything that has ever happened in the world and possibly everything that will happen...They can satisfy their appetites without calling them something else” (129). Doc sparks this observation when a parade goes through town and he correctly predicts that Mack and the boys will be admiringly disinterested in it. Doc further elaborates, “They could ruin their lives and get money. Mack has all the qualities of genius...they just know the nature of things too well to be caught up in that wanting” (130). Doc, while unable to partake in the deep connection that Mack shares with his environment due to his involvement in the capitalist system, is still able to identify the characteristic latent in his friend that allows for his self-sustaining lifestyle. Steinbeck distances Mack and the boys from capitalist enterprise by commenting on the emptiness of material wealth, arguing that striving for money would destroy Mack’s most valuable asset: his concern for his friends and his community.

Mack and the boys realize and identify the façade of the capitalist structure, and due to their subconscious connection to the town and its inhabitants, they innately identify the emptiness of money in the greater scope of existence. In many of his novels, Steinbeck pits his protagonists in direct opposition to the overarching oppression of capitalism, but Mack and the boys are unique because they are able to disregard it altogether. Steinbeck humorously demonstrates the schism between mankind and its deeper ecological and biological nature when he writes, “Two generations of Americans knew more about the Ford coil than the clitoris, about the planetary system of gears than the solar system of stars” (61). At the expense of naturalistic instincts such as sexual desire and natural inquisitiveness, Steinbeck demonstrates the absurdity of the distance being placed from one’s biological and physical instincts en lieu of materialism and mechanical invention. Leland Person explores the relationship between Steinbeck’s social and biological philosophy, “He (Steinbeck) explores the way that ecological understanding warrants a conception of human relationships and how it may lead logically to homosocial and even homosexual bonds between men” (8), identifying the interconnected ecology that Steinbeck wishes to illustrate for the reader in Mack and the boys’ relationship with their surroundings. Lack of strong, independent female characters is a common trait in many of Steinbeck’s novels, and *Cannery Row* is no different in that regard, but as constant parishioners of the Bear Flag, Mack and the boys do not seem to share in any sort of sexualized relationship. Mack even expresses his distrust of the marriage institution when he claims, “You just can’t trust a married guy” (72). Instead, Mack and the boys’ friendship and involvement with Doc and the women at the Bear Flag should be interpreted as Steinbeck’s way of undermining the Western conception of marriage, suggesting a Marxist view of sexuality, reproduction, and gender relations.¹

¹ Marx argues against the concealed prostitution of women in capitalist society veiled as

The humorous frog-hunting trip encapsulates Steinbeck's all encompassing ecology that Mack is able to manipulate in order to achieve the highest frog yield possible. In this story, Mack exploits the previously established role between man and frog in order to capture more frogs than he would have otherwise been able to do. Howard Levant notes, "The natural man comprehends the true nature of things" (171), and Mack functions as Steinbeck's natural man. Steinbeck begins the hunt by arguing that a naturalistic pattern subsides in the relationship between frog and man:

During the millennia that frogs and men have lived in the same world, it is probable that men have hunted frogs. And during that time a pattern of hunt and parry has developed...that is the way it is done, the way it has always been done. Frogs have every right to expect it will always be done that way. (84)

This passage enumerates some of Steinbeck's most revealing thoughts on the relationship between man, nature, history, and ecology. Firstly, it claims that frog hunting is a natural occurrence that pits frogs and man against one another—they are enemies. This adversarial relationship occurs solely in the natural realm, and it is wholly a result of man's status on the food chain in relation to the frogs. The passage then suggests that frog hunting consists of a pattern that may have once been arbitrary, but has since developed into a game of sorts, where each player's role is known and each party is expected to abide by those regulations. It suggests a self-regulation in nature that protects frogs from becoming over-hunted if humans remain true to their role in the natural order of things. The passage last intimates that men, through their enhanced mental capacity, are capable of manipulating nature in order to best benefit themselves.

marriage between the bourgeois. He advocates for an "open society of women" who are free to choose mates as they see fit, and Steinbeck hints that the women in *Cannery Row* possess a similar capacity to choose their mates as they wish.

The frogs, of course, are not capable of this deeper thought, despite the fact that Steinbeck concedes that they do possess naturally endowed rights.

This chapter depicts an ecology in which all beings operate on a mutual understanding and interdependence on one another, and Mack utilizes his innate knowledge of the system in order to capture the most frogs possible. Steinbeck argues that the frogs understand the hunting habits of man, and the men understand the escape tendencies of the frogs. Both operate on a familiarity with one another's nature, and they are ingrained in their relationship through millennia of cohabitation. Mack's knowledge of these patterns allows him to manipulate the frog-human structure in order to catch the most frogs possible for Doc. Warren French observes, "Steinbeck has sometimes been condemned for treating men as if they were no different from animals, but men have capabilities available to no other animals if they will but avail themselves of them" (134). Mack possesses and displays the capabilities available to humans; Mack is able to understand frogs' natural escape mechanisms, so he utilizes that knowledge to assist him in catching the frogs. In this story, Steinbeck also depicts why humanity must possess restraint in its dominion over the animals and environment in which he lives. Steinbeck uses Mack, a character who is utterly unconcerned with accumulation of wealth for personal gain, to expose the potentially damaging power of humans in nature if the balance between the two is manipulated.

Mack's innate connection to the world around him stands in stark contrast to Doc, whose life is dedicated to the study of biology yet possesses a lesser understanding of the greater scope and purpose of life. Doc observes the world but does not feel connected to it, and his inability to intuit this deeper connection manifests pervasive depression that directly affects him and the inhabitants of *Cannery Row* throughout the novel. As a biologist, Doc makes his living through

studying various species of sea and land animals, and his laboratory is filled with numerous fauna to observe. Steinbeck attributes Doc's depression as a result of his psychological disconnection from the town. He attempts to understand the functions of all the creatures in his nearby ecology while disregarding or refusing to acknowledge his own role within it. Doc alienates himself from his environment by not calculating his own importance within it, leading to depression and anxiety. The relationship between his occupation as a scientist and his deeper desire to understand life as an artist causes an imbalance that he is unable to reconcile on his own.

Doc, while aware of natural hierarchies between animals, plants, humans, and nature, is unable to navigate the intricacies of the social fabric of Cannery Row, and his mental health suffers due to this disconnect. In human interaction, the wellness of the phalanx not only depends on the physical health of the individuals in a given community, but also their mental health. Mack more thoroughly grasps the relationship between individuality and community than Doc, and since Doc is unable to engage fully in the community, his psychological health suffers. Steinbeck points out, "In spite of his friendliness and his friends, Doc was a lonely and set-apart man. Mack probably noticed it more than anybody" (92). As a biologist, Doc's profession rests on his observation of different organisms, most of the time removing them from their natural environment to do so. Ironically, he suffers from the same type of separation anxiety as the fauna he observes. Mack perceives Doc's importance in the social ecology of Monterey, and so he dedicates himself to rescue Doc from his own self-destructive mentality. Mack understands that a sick Doc means an unhealthy phalanx, and an unhealthy phalanx is detrimental to Monterey's community.

Steinbeck further supports and emphasizes his theory of the phalanx and its influence on the characters that live on Cannery Row by fluctuating between times of exaltation and exasperation to highlight the connectedness of seemingly unrelated events. Steinbeck describes Doc's nature, "He was concupiscent as a rabbit and gentle as hell. Everyone who knew him was indebted to him. And everyone who thought of him thought next, 'I really must do something nice for Doc'" (26). Mack shares this sentiment, though his first attempt at doing something nice for Doc results in Mack's teeth being bashed in. Mack attempts to throw Doc a party, but Doc never shows up, and the miscommunication creates significant tension between Doc and Mack that initiates a downward spiral of depression and anxiety that resonates throughout the community. During this time, Monterey experiences an all-encompassing funk that the characters are unable to circumvent. Mack and the boys are constantly in trouble, the bourgeois townswomen crusade against the Bear Flag, men of normally amicable dispositions beat their wives, and Mack's dog Darling spirals into a debilitating illness. All of these events spurn from Mack and Doc's fight after the first failed party, and Steinbeck explains the desolate time, "Every man blames himself. People in their black minds remember sins committed secretly and wonder whether they have caused the evil sequence" (133). This passage unveils the underlying human tendency for people to blame themselves for series of unfortunate events that occur in succession to one another. This inclination suggests a powerful connection that exists between the entire society of Monterey, and that however loose one's bind to the other inhabitants, all of the citizens feel equally responsible for the malaise that grips the town. Steinbeck attributes the townsfolk's feeling of responsibility to the phalanx's underlying driving force in the community. Charles Shively observes, "The community becomes the way that the individual can, by his participation in, and his devotion to, find himself in relation to the Whole" (33). Doc eventually

heals Mack's sick dog, and with her rehabilitation, the community follows suit, illustrating how truly connected Doc and Mack are—not just to each other, but also to the community at large.

In *Cannery Row*, Steinbeck proposes a social constructionist viewpoint in the origin of mental illness, and he also offers solutions on how depression can be overcome. Doc helps Darling overcome her sickness, and as a result, the town emerges from its funk. Mack is then able to throw the party for Doc that he always wanted to, and the town is able to celebrate in happiness once again. This mutually beneficial exchange suggests that, to Steinbeck, mental illness is not simply the result of personal chemical imbalances, but rather it is an epidemic created by and perpetuated through one's failing relationship to his or her surrounding natural and social worlds. Understanding Steinbeck's view of mental illness and the role of community in preserving the health of the individuals within it, reveals the underpinnings of his leftist politics. Steinbeck was an unyielding believer in the autonomy of the individual to choose his or her own path in life, and he fought ceaselessly against capitalists' onslaught of monetary hoarding and oppression of the poor. Erich Fromm argues, "Marx is primarily concerned with the emancipation of man as an individual, the overcoming of alienation, the restoration of his capacity to relate to himself fully to man and to nature" (3). Borrowing this definition of Marxist philosophy, Steinbeck's politics thoroughly reflect Marxist thought. Like Marx, Steinbeck argues that man must be free from economic alienation in order to garner deeper connection to one's fellow man and nature itself. Along those lines, one must also own the responsibility to one another's overall wellbeing. To Steinbeck, everything is connected, and those connections are strengthened or severed depending on the community's ever-fluctuating consciousness.

Steinbeck further illustrates the restorative power of human altruism in the relationship that Doc has with Frankie, a mentally damaged child who is neglected by his family. Frankie's

life consists of aggression from his mother's many lovers, and disdain from the children of school. Frankie is unable to attend school, because he tells Doc, "They don't want me there" (51). Frankie represents the truly alienated and neglected individual in the community, and his story is one of heartbreak. Just like Mack and the boys want to do something nice for Doc, so Doc also wants to help Frankie. He buys him new clothes, cleans him up, and teaches him how to complete small tasks around the lab. While Frankie's mental health is never improved upon, nor is he ever accepted into the community completely, Doc's attempt to care for him shows that Doc does understand the need and responsibility for the community to care for one another. Doc's methodology offers a humanist approach for the mentally ill; they should not be institutionalized, they should be accommodated and allowed to function to the best of their capacity.

Steinbeck contends that mental limitations should be treated openly and unabashedly amongst the community in order to prevent further alienation from the phalanx. Doc finds activities in which Frankie can participate despite the fact that he knows he cannot be healed completely. In many ways, Frankie reflects another of Steinbeck's famous characters, Lenny, from *Of Mice and Men*. Both are characters of lesser intelligence, yet with the assistance and oversight from others in the community they are able to function in productive ways. Ultimately, when left to their own devices, their judgment falters. Frankie and Lenny exhibit Steinbeck's overwhelming sympathies for the mentally challenged and the importance of proper communal and social interaction to their overall health and ability to function. The capitalist response for how one should deal with the less mentally capable is death, medication, or incarceration—People like Lenny and Frankie are treated as outcasts and swept into the

periphery. Steinbeck advocates for the rights of the mentally ill, proposing an inclusive culture in which the community cares for and protects the less fortunate.

Cannery Row operates on the premise that community is the driving force in authentic existence and that selfish individualism leads to destruction and alienation. The capitalist value system operates on totally opposite premises; individual hard work is honored above altruism, and the individual is more important than the group. Mack dedicates himself throughout the novel to live for himself while continuing to care for the other citizens of Monterey. His actions are selfish on the surface, but he possesses a deep sense of commitment to the betterment of those around him. According to Steinbeck, the community functions as the basis for positive human experience, whereas rugged individualism leads to social barriers, violence, and discord.

The parable of the gopher should be interpreted as a naturalistic allegory to the insufficiency of rugged individualism to create and perpetuate sustainable, successful communities. Steinbeck argues for a community-first existence where one's involvement and participation to the group assures each individual within it health and prosperity. Mack and Doc function as the ideal men to display that community is the driving force for a healthy and fulfilling life, and they simultaneously establish the grounds that rugged individualism can be destructive to both oneself and one's environment. The gopher is the true capitalist in the novel, and his bravado in assuming that through intense individual work one can become successful makes his eventual fall disheartening despite his great potential. The gopher displays the capitalist knack for disregarding the whole for the parts. The gopher assumes that the underground home that he built himself is the best in the land, and therefore he is entitled to a large family with many offspring. Doc and the gopher parallel one another to the extent that they both carve out their own existence in hopes that they can find happiness, and they both possess

desirable physical traits. The gopher, however, has no Mack to help him ensure that his life becomes fruitful, and the gopher perishes from his inability to assimilate into a group. He painfully learns that the formula for life is much more complex than just possession of the correct tools, fanciest abode, or the best genetics. Individual effort can be unrequited by one's environment which can lead to personal suffering. The community is both a healing and protective agent where the power of many can outweigh the power of one. In *Into the Wild*, John Krakauer informs the reader what Christopher McCandless wrote in one of his books shortly before passing, "I think I have found what is needed for happiness. A quiet secluded life in the country, with the possibility of being useful to people to whom it is easy to do good...such is my idea of happiness" (169). Just as McCandless eschewed society thinking that true happiness is found in solitude and seclusion, the gopher establishes a life in which his own needs are put above the needs of those around him, and that bravado eventually leads to his demise. Steinbeck himself was no stranger to the idea of seclusion into a natural setting, but what separates his own experience from that of Christopher or the gopher, is that he came to understand the restorative effects of the community while others argue that communal responsibility is restrictive and oppressive.

Understanding *Cannery Row* in Marxist terms is pivotal to grasping Steinbeck's purpose in constructing the novel—he argues for an alternative lifestyle that is sustainable and fulfills one's needs along with the needs of the community more thoroughly and sustainably. It is a political and philosophical novel, and both of those characteristics inform its plot. Doc's depression and isolation from the community illustrates the overarching influence of the phalanx in human life, and the phalanx helps bring Steinbeck's political views into clearer focus. Steinbeck believes in the power of the individual to thrive and live a fulfilling life, and this right

is destroyed when one is not allowed a livable wage to feed one's family. Steinbeck argues for economic equality so that one may live an independent and free life. Mack and the boys function as picturesque—at least as much as such a thing is possible—rejections of capitalist ethics and morality. Steinbeck finds business distracting, so he paints Monterey at its most peaceful when the canneries are quiet, “Early morning is a time of magic in Cannery Row...The street is silent of progress and business...It is a time of great peace, a deserted time, a little era of rest” (77). So, without the distracting desire for money, Mack and the boys' primary concern is their fellow man, and their needs and appetites are natural urges that do not need to be disregarded for the idea of Western propriety or success. Jason Dew observes, “The compulsion to celebrate ‘Americanness’ in the form of capitalism continued to create human relationships based on money and fraught with competition. Thus, America continued to define itself exclusively in familiar terms: progress, advancement, material comforts, and personal gratification” (52). Mack and the boys represent the total rejection from that frame of thought, and Steinbeck echoes, “Financial bitterness could not eat too deeply into Mack and the boys, for they were not mercantile men. They did not measure their joy in goods sold, their egos in bank balances, nor their loves in what they cost” (108-9). Even though Mack and the boys are hardly angels, their attachment to the community and their drive to help Doc display the power of cohesion that is possible when one understands one's true nature as small part to a larger whole instead of as an individual whose needs trumps those of all others. The novel illustrates distrust of materialism and instead endorses a holistic connection between all of the inhabitants of Cannery Row and their surrounding environment. The phalanx is inherently antithetical to the capitalist world-view; Marxist socialism offers a realm of politics in which the community is responsible for one another's health, because it is to the mutual benefit of all to be well provided for. Person argues,

“To live non-hierarchically in nature should mean living non-hierarchically in other relationships” (7), and capitalism does not allow for such egalitarianism. Mack and the boys are the heralds of American socialism; they are the rugged individuals who are too egotistical to live alone, and Doc explains their lives most succinctly:

There are your true philosophers...In a time when people tear themselves to pieces with ambition and nervousness and covetousness, they are relaxed. All of our so-called successful men are sick men, with bad stomachs, and bad souls, but Mack and the boys are healthy and curiously clean. (129)

Mack and the boys represent Steinbeck’s life-purists, and they should be commended for their refusal to acquiesce to the nefarious sway of capitalistic enterprise and instead preserving their own humanity and restoring it for others.

Cannery Row reveals Steinbeck’s belief in the healing power of the community and the interconnectedness necessary for a healthy and ideal society. Capitalist and American tendencies to institutionalize the mentally ill not only destroy the interpersonal connectedness of communities, but lead to individual marginalization. Doc’s depression stems from his feelings of separation from the rest of the people who live on Cannery Row, but Mack and the boys make a point to include Doc in the social fabric of the town. Their effort to “do something nice for Doc” is an attempt to ensure that he does not become marginalized from himself of the fragile social ecology of the town itself. According to Steinbeck, and as depicted through Mack and the boys, for a society to be healthy, the individuals within it must be healthy. It is everyone’s responsibility to care for one another, and everyone can benefit from a more altruistic lifestyle.

Chapter III

MATERIALISM IN *TORTILLA FLAT*

Abdication of private property serves as one of the primary requirements for the formulation of Communist society, and *Tortilla Flat* reflects this basic tenant by illustrating the stresses that private ownership places on a community. Many anecdotes occur throughout *Tortilla Flat* that reflect Steinbeck's profound distrust of man's inherent materialistic propensities, displaying how private property fractures the social bonds of communities, ultimately leading to undesirable hierarchies. Marx's attack on personal property is direct while Steinbeck chooses satire and absurdity to depict the inherent emptiness of wealth and accumulation of property. Through humorous tales such as Dolores Engracia Ramirez's vacuum cleaner and the Pirate's treasure, Steinbeck creates preposterous interactions between the protagonists in order to undermine the Western fetishism of commodities and the false value placed upon them. These stories help us to understand Steinbeck's view of private property, how it can distort the community and individuals within it, and also how it can bring people together. The *pasianos*' culture suggests that, when shared, property can be a unifying object around which stable and virtuous communities can be built, but when the wealth is unequally distributed, it can lead to anxiety, jealousy, and unwarranted social stratification. *Tortilla Flat* functions as an extension of Steinbeck's own aversion to wealth and the power of the community to support one another outside of the confines of a capitalist economic structure.

Marx is unyielding in his desire to destroy the idea of private property, because it leads

communities into inequality, alienation, and oppression. He states in the *Communist Manifesto*, “The theory of the Communists may be summed up in the single sentence: Abolition of private property” (27). Later, he continues “And the abolition of this state of things is called by the bourgeois, abolition of individuality and freedom! And rightly so. The abolition of bourgeois individuality, bourgeois independence, and bourgeois freedom is undoubtedly aimed at” (29). Marx’s argument hinges upon the idea that material wealth, owned predominantly by the bourgeois, leads to economy of life that is not available to the proletariat. Marx’s idea then is to remove the idea of private possessions altogether so that every person in the community is afforded equal opportunity for self-actualization. Marx is not opposed to products in themselves, simply those forms of capital that the bourgeois exploit at the expense of the poor, “We by no means intend to abolish this personal appropriation of the products of labor, an appropriation that is made for the maintenance and reproduction of human life” (28). Products are not evil in themselves, Marx argues, but rather it is their private ownership that leads to alienation, inequality, and unfair appropriation. *Tortilla Flat* reflects this Marxist argument through satire in the paisanos’ anti-capitalist culture. Jay Parini argues that *Tortilla Flat* “cannot be called a political novel in any real sense” (160), but such a dismissal disregards Steinbeck’s blatant condemnation of American capitalist culture that permeates throughout the novel.

The paisanos’ community in Danny’s house is unequivocally anti-capitalist, and the Marxist underpinnings of their group inform its utopic characteristics. Danny and his friends operate within the confines of capitalist “Main Street” insofar as it benefits their basic needs such as food and water that they can steal. Aside from Big Joe Portagee’s attempted theft of the Pirate’s treasure, the paisanos find little interest in theft for material gain or increase in their overall socio-economic status. Their self-guided escapades for wine and food are born out of

necessity and not empty symbolic desires for wealth and opulence. To explain how Marx views human historical progression, Erich Fromm argues, “For Marx the history of mankind is a history of the increasing development of man, and at the same time of increasing alienation. His concept of socialism is the emancipation from alienation, the return of man to himself, his self-realization” (37). Borrowing this definition of Marxism and socialism, the paisanos perfectly illustrate the emancipated man—the free individuals who operate outside of the capitalist framework of labor and production to exist and come to understand life in a more meaningful way. A deep distrust of material wealth perpetuates the paisanos’ poverty, while ensuring their ability to pursue their own self-realization by not subjecting themselves to the throngs of the rat-race capitalist culture. In *Tortilla Flat*, Steinbeck constructs a way of life “beyond narrow, immediate, private wants, a life in which the satisfaction of one’s needs can be pursued with the support of and in support of others (Gibbons 159). The novel concludes with Danny’s swift self-actualization and subsequent demise; Steinbeck crafts a story of a culture that is able to adequately function in a form that is opposed to the capitalist goals of economic enhancement and social mobility through wealth. Instead, the paisanos operate on a plane of relative equality in poverty. Jay Parini writes, “He (Steinbeck) sympathized deeply with the plight of the workers and admired the idealism that lay, in theory, behind communism” (151). *Tortilla Flat* is not a story about workers, however the novel displays a profound appreciation for the poor paisanos and a reverence for their more simple and pure lifestyle. He creates a communist community that exists in Danny’s household, and the friends become the image of what a more egalitarian society could entail outside of the restrictive confines of capitalism.

Steinbeck establishes the premises of the paisanos’ counter culture early in the novel, and the anti-capitalist sentiment continues throughout its duration. The paisanos’ community is one

that Steinbeck purposefully places at odds with the flippant main street values of capitalistic wage earning, family structure, and jockeying for social status. Steinbeck introduces Tortilla Flat and the paisanos:

But on the hill where the forest and the town intermingle, where the streets are innocent of asphalt and the corners free of street lights...the paisanos are clean of commercialism, free of the complicated systems of American business, and, having nothing that can be stolen, exploited, or mortgaged, that system has not attacked them very vigorously. (2)

In this paragraph, Steinbeck describes the paisanos as philosophically antithetical to American business (i.e. capitalism) and content in their existence on the hill above Monterey. Steinbeck suggests that, since they own little, the system has not attacked them vigorously; however, he does not state that the system has not attacked them at all. Because of his choice of language, he suggests that the capitalist system has been lurking in the periphery of their community to plot its takeover but has so far been unable to penetrate its communistic ethos. Steinbeck's language in describing Tortilla Flat's physical makeup indicts capitalism of ugliness, oppression, and aggression. He states that the paisanos are "clean of commercialism," suggesting that capitalism is dirty and undesirable; the corners are "free of streetlights" alluding to the idea that capitalist infrastructure is burdensome and oppressive; the paisanos are "free from the complicated systems of American business," establishing their innocence and independence from the alienating American capitalist establishment.

Danny's sudden inheritance of his Abuelo's houses represents then a fall from innocence in which the egalitarian nature of the paisano's existence becomes threatened and complicated. Even though on the hill they are free from the crushing throngs of American business, the

paisanos are still occasionally swayed by the allure of personal property and the social climbing possible to one who owns a house. Danny's initial response to the news that he is the owner of two houses is less than enthusiastic, "When Danny heard about it he was a little weighed down with the responsibility of ownership" (5). To Danny, home ownership represents a relinquishment of sorts from his previous and preferred bohemian lifestyle. The houses instantly threaten his worry-free way of life, "Pilon noticed that the worry of property was settling on Danny's face. No more in life would that face be free of care" (13). Danny's friend Pilon voices apprehension with the influence that the houses may impart upon Danny, "Thou art a man of property. Thou wilt forget thy friends who shared everything with thee" (11). Danny vehemently denies the accusation, exclaiming, "Pilon, I swear, what I have is thine. While I have a house, thou hast a house!" (11). Danny revolts against Pilon's claims that home ownership will taint their friendship, putting to rest the fear that their ideal communal system will become unbalanced and endangered because of Danny's inheritance. Michael Gibbons states in his essay about Steinbeck's politics, "In Steinbeck's stories the modern economic system and corresponding technology are the most fundamental sources of the corruption and disfigurement of human life" (156). So, in response, Danny decides to rent out one of his houses to Pilon so that they may remain equals, neither without a house and both free from the corruption and inequality that private ownership may place upon them.

The arrangement of Danny as landlord and Pilon as tenant disintegrates quickly, and what was intended to be a gesture of good faith places friction in the friendship by skewing each friend's role to one another. Danny, the owner of the house that he rents to Pilon, possesses leverage in the arrangement, and Pilon begins to feel indebted to him. When Danny asks Pilon to get dinner for both of them while Danny collects firewood, Pilon responds, "I am getting in

debt to him,' he thought bitterly. 'My freedom will be cut off. Soon I shall be a slave because of this Jew's house'" (14). Pilon's indebtedness leads to guilt, which then leads to resentment. Despite the fact that Danny has provided Pilon with a house—a major social boon in Tortilla Flat—Pilon's feelings of servitude to Danny cause immense discord in his feelings of self worth. He fears becoming enslaved to Danny, the owner. Enmity grows between the friends. The weight of being held under the expectation of paying rent disconcerts Pilon greatly, "Pilon began again to worry about the rent. And as time went by the worry grew intolerable" (20). Instead of discuss these newly acquired stresses directly with Danny, Pilon instead decides to rent part of his house out to Pablo, further distressing the role of renter to landlord. The expansion of tenants exacerbates the debt between the friends and further distresses their friendships.

During this time of turmoil, the paisanos are unable to surmount the newly acquired responsibilities to one another and their property, and their relationship to one another suffers greatly. Danny's social rank holds little value if he is disassociated from his peers, and while Pilon's intentions in renting the home were never malicious, the resulting social stratification only distresses the friends. A candle tips over while Pilon is passed out after a night of drinking, and the smaller of Danny's two houses is burned to the ground. Danny's response is one of relief and elation instead of anger. Steinbeck writes, "He had thought over the ruin of his status as a man with a house to rent; and, all this clutter of necessary and decent emotion having been satisfied and swept away, he had finally slipped into his true emotion, one of relief that at least one of his burdens was removed" (50). Danny's reaction to losing his home reflects his true inner desire to regain the humanity he lost when he became landlord over his friend. Danny sentimentally reflects, "It is good to have friends...How lonely it is in the world if there are no friends to sit with one and to share one's grappa" (54). Danny finds no joy in holding social rank

over his friends, and instead, the arrangement only brings strife and resentment upon what should be equals and friends.

Danny gains insight from the loss of his house, and he develops a skepticism towards personal property and an awareness of the strain that it can place upon friendships and communities. Danny invites his friends to live in his remaining home after the smaller house burns down, and Pilon attempts to give Danny a gift to atone for the destruction. He tries to give him a brassiere that he can then dote on his girlfriend, Mrs. Morales. Even as a token of atonement, Danny refuses to accept the brassiere, because he understands that contrition does not gain value or credibility when exchanged for physical property. He wisely intuits that gifts one passes along to others create powerful bonds of indebtedness that are not easily shaken. These binds, while sometimes beneficial, can also be harmful, and he rightly rejects their attempt to apologize through gifts, and instead forgives them without an exchange of property. Danny posits, “That is not a woman to give presents to...too often we are tied to women by the silk stockings we give them” (54). While Danny is directly commenting on gifting Mrs. Morales the stocking, he is also implying that he would become indebted to Pilon with further exchanges of property. Instead, he pulls out a jug of wine, and the friends are able to partake in communal slugs out of the bottle, leading to shared experience and camaraderie instead of exchanging an empty, physical simulacra of remorse.

The house remains a symbol and manifestation of oppression, and Danny constantly battles the responsibility that the ownership affords him. The strain of proprietorship haunts Danny’s psyche until his untimely passing, and Danny eventually rebels against the burden of the house. Chapter fifteen functions as the culmination of his frustrations from the burden that the house places upon Danny, and he renounces his position completely. He becomes a menace

to the town and even his friends; the home that was supposed to serve as a settling place becomes a prison—a metaphor for the lost freedom that Danny once had, and so he terrorizes all of those around him in order to regain the part of himself that he lost when he became a homeowner:

“The weight of property was not upon him. He remembered that the name of Danny was a name of storm. Oh the fights...storm and violence, sweet violence...Always the weight of the house was upon him.” (170)

In Danny’s mind, the house is an obstacle to his ability to live freely and recklessly. The house was once seen as a social boon for Danny—an ability to climb the social ranks of the Tortilla Flat community—but instead has become the bars and chains that sever him from the freedom of his past. Danny falls into the trap that Marx describes, “The past dominates the present; in Communist society, the present dominates the past” (*Manifesto* 29). Danny as the bourgeois homeowner becomes the expression of materialistic emptiness, fixated on the past, and his friends take it upon themselves to bring him back into the present by throwing him a party. Danny’s fall from freedom and rise to homeowner illustrates the class antagonisms that Marx argues destroy humanity and cause alienation within communities.

Steinbeck parodies the capitalistic tendency towards fetishism of commodity in the anecdote of Dolores Engracia Ramirez’s vacuum cleaner, undermining the false equivalency and value that products in capitalist cultures possess. This vignette highlights Steinbeck’s cutting opinions on the nature of material possessions and the conflated worth that is placed upon them. Danny, in order to impress Dolores (Sweets) Ramirez, purchases her a vacuum cleaner in order to gain favor with her. Such acts undermine Danny’s own trepidation in conveying emotion through doting as exemplified previously with Pilon’s brassiere, but the gift ultimately parodies the very act that it describes. Danny buys Sweets a vacuum because, “it was large and

shiny...no woman of Tortilla Flat had one” (103). Danny, in his romantic stupor purchases a large and expensive item to impress the object of his affection, but the purchase ultimately leads to ridicule and absurdity. Steinbeck accentuates the frivolity of the purchase by pointing out the fact that Tortilla Flat has no electricity.

The vacuum cleaner becomes a symbol of property that enhances Danny and Sweet’s standing in the community, but Steinbeck forces the reader to accept that the vacuum cleaner is useless in Sweets’ house because of her lack of electrical power to run it. The absurdity of the purchase further illustrates Steinbeck’s Marxist influences in crafting the story. Marx states, “The character of having value, when once impressed upon products, is fixed only by reason of their acting and re-acting upon each other as quantities of value” (*Kapital* 42). In the instance of the vacuum cleaner, Steinbeck makes a distinct point to display how the vacuum cleaner impacts the inhabitants of Tortilla Flat, and also how it gains value in comparison to the other commodities within it. After Danny gives Sweets the vacuum, “Her friends tried to belittle the present, saying, ‘It is too bad you can’t run this machine.’ And, ‘I have always held that a broom and dust-pan, properly used, are more thorough.’” (103). Not only are the ladies of Tortilla Flat attempting to decrease the value of the vacuum cleaner by criticizing its inherent lack of use-value, they are also attempting to argue that their tools are better and worth more in comparison. The brooms and dustpans, when properly used, are better than a vacuum cleaner. They are attempting to reduce the vacuum cleaner’s value by comparing it directly to the value of a broom and dust-pan—in their estimation, a broom and dust pan are better, because they possess more use-value. The other ladies’ attempts to depreciate the value of the vacuum cleaner reflect the bourgeois system of establishing value by comparing the qualities of one product to another. Parini argues that this particular story is Steinbeck’s attempt to show that “appearance is

everything” (158), but that view is a vast oversimplification. Appearance is only a part of the system of establishing commodities’ values. Steinbeck forces the reader into taking the position that owning the vacuum cleaner without electricity is absurd; he displays the act of commodities acting upon one another in order to gain value through their relation to all other commodities in the community. The story begs the question, why do the paisanos attach so much value to the vacuum cleaner? The true question should be, why does anyone attach so much value to any commodity?

The commoditization of Danny and Sweet’s relationship is ultimately its undoing, and their foray into bourgeois value system crumbles under its own emptiness. Danny first gives Sweets the vacuum cleaner in order to impress her, it becomes a taboo in the community, and their relationship deteriorates under the stresses that the idea of the vacuum cleaner places upon it. Danny and Sweet’s affair is “built upon the rock of the vacuum cleaner” (106), and when the community no longer appreciates the fact that Sweets owns the vacuum, she and Danny become objects of ridicule. Pilon intimates to Danny, “That machine will not work unless wires are put into the house. Those wires cost a great deal of money. Some people find this present very funny” (107). Danny, unwilling to remain in this position of mockery, hatches a plan to steal back the vacuum cleaner from Sweets. By removing the token of love that Danny purchased for Sweets, the relationship sours, and their relationship ceases. The paisanos have lived apart from the trade and commodity worship that is common in capitalism, and the vacuum cleaner represents an unwelcome intrusion into their community. Pilon states, “Also we learn that it is sinful to give presents of too great value, for they may excite greed” (109), so the vacuum is bartered to Torelli for wine that is then dispersed among Danny’s gang. To further illustrate the absurdity of Danny’s gift to Sweets, Torelli discovers that the vacuum has no motor, so the gift

never possesses any use-value of any kind.

Where most of Steinbeck's anecdotes display the negative influence that material wealth can impart upon a community, some of them display the virtuous and unifying nature that shared wealth can propagate. Danny and his friends' culture in their dilapidated home is not anarchistic; it possesses rules and boundaries that establish and help maintain order in the group. Marcia Yarmus argues that Danny and his friends represent Steinbeck's foray into picaresque literature, with the main digression occurring in Danny and his friends' relationship with one another. Where true picaresques would cheat and steal from even their best of friends, Danny and his group protect one another. Yarmus argues, "Although the true Spanish picaresque makes no friends whom he would not betray for an advantage, loyalty to friends is a primary characteristic of Steinbeck's picaresques—a kind of honor among thieves" (88). This view highlights the social code that exists between the friends, but it also trivializes the deep connection that they feel towards one another. Danny cares deeply for the tenants of his home, and the feeling is mutual. The Pirate's treasure functions then as a manifestation of the respect and mutual admiration that the group feels amongst one another, and it also reflects Steinbeck's more positive views on shared wealth and how it can work to unite communities.

The Pirate's treasure functions as a method for Steinbeck to promote socialist values by espousing a more community-centric method for wealth responsibility, showing how communal sharing can alleviate the stresses that can accompany private ownership. The house encumbers Danny, and the nature of his inheritance place the burden on his shoulders. The Pirate's treasure operates on the opposite premise: he first buries his gold to hide it from others until the group takes charge of it and shares responsibility for its safekeeping. The Pirate is mentally underdeveloped, and Steinbeck describes him, "The paisanos of Monterey knew that his head

had not grown up with the rest of his body” (57). Ordinarily, this mental handicap would spell disaster for the Pirate, and he would be easy prey for the swindlers on Tortilla Flat. Instead, Danny and his friends take it upon themselves to protect him and his treasure from potential pilferers. Steinbeck is able to use the Pirate’s treasure to illustrate the psychological and economical benefits of wealth distribution in a constructive and endearing form. The Pirate was always nervous and paranoid about his treasure when he was its sole owner, but when the group assumes responsibility for its safe-keeping, the responsibility is spread amongst the group, helping to prevent the same estrangement that the house impresses upon Danny.

The Pirate’s treasure becomes a great source of pride for Danny and his crew, and what originally begins as an attempt to swindle the Pirate out of his money instead becomes a unifying symbol of the group’s virtuousness and the power of the community to manage wealth. Steinbeck doubts the affluent population's ability to manage money constructively for the community, and the Pirate’s treasure becomes an illustration for him of how it can be better regulated. Pilon altruistically argues:

Poor little half-formed one...God did not give him all the brain he should have.

That poor little Pirate cannot look after himself... Would it not be a thing of merit, to do those things for him which he cannot do for himself? To buy him warm clothes, to feed him food fit for a human? (60-61)

Pilon structures his argument for communal wealth management by explaining that the Pirate is unable to care for himself because of his mental deficiencies, and therefore the group should help elevate him into a more adequate standard of living. While these charitable premises mask his original, more nefarious intentions, Danny and his friends ultimately become maniacal defenders of the Pirate’s treasure and his well being. The transformative power that the treasure holds over

the group becomes evident through the gradual change in attitude that the paisanos have regarding it; the money eventually loses its economic value to them completely, and instead it becomes a manifestation of the connectedness of their group and the mutual respect and responsibility that they share between them. Steinbeck writes, “In time they would take pleasure in the knowledge that this money lay under the pillow” (75), and he confirms this sentiment a few chapters later, “The bag of money had become the symbolic center of the friendship, the point of trust about which the fraternity revolved... This money had long ceased, in the minds of the friends, to be currency” (128-29). The greatest riches that the paisanos have ever seen transform into intrinsic representations of the power of their friendship. The capitalistic wealth that the money represents is eschewed for their own socialist symbolism. The money represents the social bonds of the group itself and not the potentiality for material things that such currency could buy.

Steinbeck then constructs a sort of paisano socialism that is built around the Pirate’s treasure and stands in direct opposition to the capitalist framework in nearby Monterey. One such example occurs when a boat shipwrecks on the coast and many of its supplies wash up on the shore nearby. The paisanos plunder the shipwreck for valuables that they can sell, making this particular date the only one in which Danny and his friends do what can actually be described as work. Steinbeck writes, “Danny and Pablo and Pilon and Jesus Maria and the Pirate and his dogs joyfully started over the ridge; for if there was anything they loved, it was to pick up usable articles on the beach” (129). Steinbeck points out that they only pick up articles of use-value, not necessarily strictly economic value. The group ends up selling their portion of found merchandise for five dollars, and the money goes into Danny’s pocket. The paisanos work a full day, and the spoils initially go to Danny, which would reflect a capitalist power structure in

which Danny—the bourgeois home owner—owns the other paisanos' labor from his position as landlord over the others. However, Steinbeck's *Tortilla Flat* is anti-capitalist, so Danny does not pocket the surplus for himself. Instead, he first gives twenty-five cents of the five dollars to the pirate for the day of work that he sacrificed to go to the beach instead of chop firewood, as he was accustomed to. The balance of the five dollars is then spent on food and drink for the rest of the friends:

The five dollars from the salvage had lain like fire in Danny's pocket, but now he knew what to do with it. He and Pilon went to the market and bought seven pounds of hamburger and a bag of onions and bread and a big paper of candy. Pablo and Jesus Maria went to Torrelli's for two gallons of wine, and not a drop did they drink on the way home either. (136)

Danny owns the five dollars, and none of the paisanos quibble about it. But Danny, instead of keep the money as he may deserve and would certainly do in a capitalist environment, spends all of the money on a feast that the friends share with each other equally. Pablo and Jesus Maria even abstain from drinking any of the wine on the way back to Danny's house. The friends all earn the money, and all of the friends reap equally in the profit. Marx writes, "The owner of the money has paid the value of a day's labor-power; his, therefore, is the use of it for a day; a day's labor belongs to him" (*Kapital* 127). Danny rejects this hierarchy of production and wage distribution and instead takes the communist approach: the money is spent on food and drink for the entire crew, and all receive equal shares, including himself.

From the first lines of the novel, *Tortilla Flat* operates as an anti-capitalist and anti-materialistic novel, and it unveils a cultural alternative to the standard American capitalist economic system. The women are promiscuous and rarely married or encumbered by

monogamy. Danny's friends feel profound connection to the well being of those in their community and ensure that none go hungry through whatever means are necessary.¹ Socialist actions permeate the story and construct a society in which the needs of the many mirror the needs of the individual. Conflicts of interest in property ownership, labor, and surplus do not exist among Danny and his friends. They share all of their food, wine, thoughts, and women with one another. Even though they are poor, each is provided for, and none are left on their own to suffer or starve. Steinbeck understands and despises the emptiness and callousness of the capitalist economy and finds value instead in the communal connection that the paisanos share. In *Tortilla Flat*, Steinbeck creates a society of people who reflect the Thoreauvian idea of "voluntary poverty,"² and his paisanos function as his enlightened philosophers posturing on the nature of their existence in their world instead of working incessantly for material gain and socio-economic prosperity. Steinbeck crafted the story in a way that falls in line with modern satirical media such as John Stewart and Stephen Colbert, where the absurdity of the presentation makes the premises being attacked even more trivial. *Tortilla Flat* possesses many political arguments and claims throughout its pages; the satirical voice makes the material more approachable for an audience that would potentially be resistant to blatantly preached socialism.

Tortilla Flat undermines the value of commoditization by displaying the difficulty in owning property and uprooting the speciousness of capitalist morality. It espouses a reverence for charity, the overwhelming transformative power of community, and the ability of the group

¹ In Chapter 13, Taserina Cortez runs out of beans for her extensive progeny, and they face impending starvation. Danny and his friends respond to the crisis by stealing massive amounts of food and giving it to the family.

² Jay Parini writes, "What varies from book to book is the degree of choice involved in the poverty of certain characters; the less choice, the less Steinbeck is willing to write benignly about their state" (159). *Tortilla Flat* revolves around a group of characters that thrive in their poverty and are content in their economic position. Mack and the boys occupy this same status of "voluntary poverty."

to assist individuals in rising above the circumstances of one's oppression. Poverty is a relative term invented by those who possess much as a way to discredit those with little while ensuring an ever-expanding presence of labor in the marketplace. Marx writes, "All are instruments of labor, more or less expensive to use, according to their age and sex" (*Manifesto* 21), and the Danny and his friends reject this establishment. Instead, they manipulate the capitalist system in order to propagate their own idea of community: a true egalitarian democracy in which all are fed, clothed, and sheltered to his or her needs and no one's possessions are speciously valued or used for social gain. Food, wine, and camaraderie serve as the morality that binds the paisanos together; commoditization, social rank, and exploited labor are the forces against which they revolt. Steinbeck's leftist values permeate the text with the ultimate conclusion that capitalism insufficiently nurtures humanity's well being. Instead, true psychological, spiritual, and bodily health come from community and equality—not from the empty articles that fill shelves and glimmer in the sun.

CHAPTER IV

LET'S PARTY

“With humanity’s long, proud history of standing firm against all of its natural enemies, sometimes in the face of almost certain defeat and extinction, we would be cowardly and stupid to leave the field on the eve of our greatest potential victory.”¹

-John Steinbeck

The parties that conclude *Tortilla Flat* and *Cannery Row* represent the return to equality that Steinbeck finds necessary for his utopic world; they serve as a metaphorical reversion to the tide pool that Steinbeck bases his larger socio-ecological views around. Both stories enact many expressions of alienation from one’s environment and peers, and the parties represent a return to equilibrium. The parties are dedicated to the disheveled and disenfranchised protagonists, Danny and Doc, who are in need of reintegration into the community. Each character’s rescue and resuscitation is the result of a large soiree whose knowledge grows organically among the patrons, and the entire community is involved and represented. Peter Lisca argues that *Tortilla Flat* and *Cannery Row* “demonstrate a serious and sympathetic interest in the theme of escape from society” (80), however the parties suggest the exact opposite. Each party occurs in what is a previously disjointed neighborhood, and the party negates the separation that grows throughout the novel and serves as a reunification of all who feel estranged from themselves and their place in their community. Steinbeck shows that a party has the power to enjoin and empower communities by reestablishing diminishing social bonds through communal contributions and

¹ From Steinbeck’s Nobel Prize acceptance speech (*America and Americans* 87).

participation. The parties function as an idealistic and micro communist revolution where egalitarianism directs the community's interaction, and each character gives out and takes in no more or less than he or she is capable. Warren French claims that *Cannery Row* "shows how the individual may not only strive for but achieve a measure of contentment in a generally deprived society" (120), and the parties perfectly illustrate how beautiful and binding celebratory chaos can be. The true enemy to fullness of life lies not in immorality or poverty but alienation and oppression in a distracting world. The party offers Danny a reprieve from his identity of homeowner and allows him to indulge his past; Doc's party fosters his inclusion into the community from which he feels estranged.

Throughout his career, Steinbeck's sympathies rested in the interests of the working class, and the parties that conclude *Tortilla Flat* and *Cannery Row* can be interpreted as the characters' disavowal of capitalist social structures en lieu of communistic egalitarianism. Cliff Lewis' essay "Steinbeck: The Artists as FDR Speechwriter" presents wonderful insights into Steinbeck's politics during the time of the Great Depression, and in particular a piece of writing Steinbeck dubbed, "Manefesto [sic]" that FDR referenced when crafting the New Deal (195). Lewis's essay illuminates Steinbeck's direct involvement with politics, allowing the reader to better understand Steinbeck's solutions to the capitalist structure with proposals that may bring about a better society. Number three of Steinbeck's propositions reads, "We believe that no people can long prosper in isolation, that all must rise together or sink separately" (205), reaffirming Steinbeck's convictions in the healing and transformative power of the community to help raise up and support the individuals within it. In seemingly direct opposition to the previous assertion, Steinbeck writes in *America and Americans*, "I believe in and will fight for the right of the individual to function as an individual without pressure from any direction...the greatest and

most permanent revolution we knew took place when all men finally discovered that they had individual souls” (90). To help explain how these two seemingly contradictory statements synergize with one another, we can turn to Erich Fromm who writes about Marxism:

For Marx the aim of socialism was the emancipation of man, and the emancipation of man was the same as his self-realization in the process of productive relatedness and oneness with man and nature. The aim of socialism was the development of the individual personality. (31)

Using this definition, Steinbeck’s political viewpoint can be described as one in which the individual is able to exist outside of dehumanizing interference brought about by one’s socio-economic status. In other words, Steinbeck’s politics reflect his belief that man should be free from economic oppression—i.e. free market, capitalistic social Darwinism—so that one may focus on cultivating an individual identity which should allow for a more human centric society. Since Steinbeck’s main philosophical and political goal is man’s ability to relate fully to himself through the community in which he is situated, then the parties that conclude *Tortilla Flat* and *Cannery Row* serve as the realization of how such an arrangement would look.

Communism, especially in the United States has been met with vitriol and profound denunciation, so the parties within *Cannery Row* and *Tortilla Flat* allow Steinbeck a veil under which he can propagate his socialist political sympathies. Marx argues in the *Communist Manifesto*, “The immediate aim of the Communists is the same as that of all the other proletarian parties: formation of the proletariat into a class, overthrow of the bourgeois supremacy, conquest of political power by the proletariat” (27). Steinbeck understands the role of revolutionary action in order to overthrow the oppressive capitalist value system, and so he concludes *Cannery Row* and *Tortilla Flat* with revolutionary assemblies that denounce the value system that defines

capitalist America. Steinbeck writes in *America and Americans*, “Even in the sort time that these American migrants have been out here there has been a change. It is understood that they are being attacked not because they want higher wages, not because they are Communists, but simply because they want to organize” (76). To Steinbeck, organization functions as the true threat to the capitalist framework of economic individualism and objectivism; the community possesses a cumulative power that is unavailable to individuals. The aim of the parties in these two novels are two-fold: firstly, they unite each respective community which allows for the emancipation of the individuals who attend; secondly, they represent counter-capitalist revolutions that display the transformative power of organization.

Doc’s party in *Cannery Row* sheds light on a community’s ability to arrange themselves out of necessity through non-verbal means, illustrating a synthesis of the naturalistic sway of the phalanx along with individual effort on behalf of the partygoers. Steinbeck purposefully reveals that the party possesses an organic quality—a spontaneity that seems planned from the beginning of time. He writes, “Mack and the boys sat in the Palace Flophouse and they were the stone dropped in the pool, the impulse which sent out ripples to all of Cannery Row” (152), implying an intrinsic and subconscious influence to congregate that originates in Mack and the boys and resonates through Cannery Row. Steinbeck again explains, “The knowledge of it (the party) just slowly grew up in them. And no one was invited. Everyone was going” (152). The community is adeptly connected to an impetus that is just out of cognition but nonetheless propels it together. The subconscious connection to the party, suggests a parallel to the tide pool on which Steinbeck based his philosophical viewpoint of the phalanx, and it also reflects the socialistic values that influence his politics. No one is invited to the party because there is no need; all are equals. Everyone is going because it is the natural thing to do. Howard Levant writes, “Their

Anarchistic goodness measures the inadequacy of bourgeois values. The existence of this community—its adventures, its relationships—recapitulates in the human sphere the complexities of the tide pool community” (170). Every aspect of the party reflects an anti-capitalist ethos; each step taken towards Doc’s laboratory for the party is a further distancing of the social stratification and anti-naturalistic nature of the surrounding capitalist system.

The party’s arrangement is communist, and Steinbeck demonstrates its socialistic economy through the gifts that the partiers bring for Doc. Each group that attends Doc’s birthday party brings a gift for him, and each gift serves as a representation of communistic labor. The first gift that Steinbeck describes is a quilt that the prostitutes from the Bear Flag sew out of their undergarments and unused evening dresses. The gift is wonderfully sentimental, but more importantly, it functions as a binding agent for the girls and provides Doc with an item of use-value that he needs. Steinbeck writes, “Under the community of effort, those fights and ill feelings that always are present in a whore house completely disappeared” (153). This passage reveals that Steinbeck is not anti-labor, but that he does believe in the ability of work to be constructive if it occurs in a freely contributive manner. The girls, usually controlled in their label under Dora’s direction become an independent labor force that produces an object of use-value for Doc. Mack and the boys contribute twenty-five tomcats, Henri the artist makes Doc a pin cushion, and Lee Chong dotes a string of firecrackers. Sam Malloy’s wife crochets six dollies for beer glasses. All of these gifts rely on talent and non-oppressed labor, and each item possesses some form of use-value unique to the giver. The guests do not purchase their gifts, so they do not support the capitalistic notion of gift giving. Their presents are not hollow simulacra of tokens of appreciation; instead, each individual spends time and effort in procuring or creating them, imbuing each item with the sentiment of he or she who made the gift. Steinbeck creates a

Marxist arrangement for Doc's gift giving by creating a system in which each person makes an item to the best of his or her abilities, and they create it in the absence of any exchange of currency. Steinbeck creates a socialistic economy in which each individual is able to labor freely and without alienation or oppression.

Steinbeck uses certain gifts as satirical jabs at capitalistic materialism, displaying the frivolousness of value-economy through literary absurdity. Sam Malloy, an antique collector, scours his shelves to find the perfect present for Doc. Steinbeck pokes fun at the antique market writing, "Old furniture and glass and crockery, which had not been very valuable in its day, had when time went by taken on desirability and cash value out of all proportion to its beauty or utility" (154). Steinbeck assaults the bourgeois system of value appropriation that allows him to humorously flip the system on its head. Sam decides to give Doc a connecting rod and piston from a 1916 Chalmers automobile. Such an item, separated from the automobile for which it was designed, possess no use-value whatsoever, especially considering that Doc doesn't own a Chalmers. Separated from the automobile for which it is intended renders the item nothing more than a few connected pieces of polished metal. Sam is unable to comprehend that rarity does not necessarily equate to value, even though he once saw an old chair sell for five hundred dollars. Steinbeck ridicules the idea that old items should possess any sort of increased value just because of their age. Steinbeck again flips the use of the rod on its head by eventually turning it into a weapon that Doc uses to defend himself during the party from the onslaught of unsolicited sailors. Steinbeck ensures that even the useless and valueless piston and connecting rod do not go unused and that every item he receives has some sort of use-value outside of capitalistic and bourgeois appraisal.

Through the communistic gathering for Doc's party, Steinbeck is simultaneously able to deride capitalistic values as well as display the healing power that a community has when it rallies together to support one another. Doc, previously estranged from the culture of Cannery Row is able to feel connection to his community through the thoughtful gifts that the partygoers give him and by also contributing food and drinks for them. Steinbeck purposefully reports on Doc's mood throughout the party, exhibiting his increasingly relieved mental strain that plagues him during the beginning of the novel. Mack and the boys conceive the idea of the party in order to reel Doc back into the group from which he had become alienated, and in that mode, the party is raging success. Even though Doc's laboratory is in shambles at the party's conclusion, his inclusion in the group-activity reaffirms his role in the community, and he relishes the feeling. In the concluding stanza of the poem that Doc recites, he pronounces, "Even Now, / I know that I have savored the hot taste of life / Lifting green cups and gold at the great feast" (181). The party represents Doc's return to himself—his previous feelings of alienation and disassociation from the community of Cannery Row are expunged, and he is able to find happiness as a non-oppressed individual who is included in and supported by the community.

The party that concludes *Tortilla Flat* displays Danny's return to his past; it operates as a reversion to his life of freedom that was terminated when inherited his house and represents the alleviation of the alienation caused by homeownership. Danny reflects the tensions between individuality and the community, feeling encumbered by the weight of responsibility from those who depend on him and his desire to be free and reckless. Steinbeck comments in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech, "Having taken Godlike power, we must seek in ourselves for the responsibility and the wisdom we once prayed some deity might have. Man himself has become our greatest hazard and our only hope" (174). Steinbeck understands and conveys the

responsibility that man must take for one another—that Danny’s greatest enemy is himself in an alienated state of being that must be alleviated through the compassion and effort of community. Warren French attacks the actions and lives that the paisanos live claiming, “The novel (*Tortilla Flat*) is not a sentimental valedictory for simple-minded irresponsibility, but a shrewd ribbing of those who lead lives of ‘quiet desperation’ and whose indiscriminating response to the barbaric makes them even more despicable than the untutored savage” (61). French does not feel that the paisanos live a virtuous life in any sense of the word, and instead the characters are despicable in their lewd acts. Such an indictment ignores the sympathy that Steinbeck consistently displays in his works for the less economically fortunate, and it also fails to address the fact that Steinbeck is denouncing the exact values that French insists are being tarnished. The paisanos are humorous in their simplicity, but it is the lack of complication that makes them attractive for Steinbeck, and their economic status affords him the ability to eschew the socio-economic values in capitalism that Steinbeck finds reprehensible such as poor wages, class-warfare, and even romantic repression. The paisanos disregard the arbitrary mores of capitalist society, and in so doing, they reflect what Steinbeck suggests is a more pure and naturalistic lifestyle that is crafted around the necessity of community to harbor a fostering environment for self-actualization.

Steinbeck illustrates the importance of community through the Danny’s depression and subsequent rescue from his infirmities. Danny feels overburdened by his perceived role as protectorate instead of equal, much like Doc experiences in *Cannery Row*. Danny is discontent with the dependence that he feels his friends place upon his shoulders; he feels as if his friends’ needs outweigh his own and that he is not an equal with them. Steinbeck writes, “Thy life is not thine own to govern, Danny, for it controls other lives. See how thy friends suffer! Spring to life, Danny, that thy friends may live again!” (187). Danny’s status in the community displays

the conflict that rests in the relationship between the individual and community, “Steinbeck’s comradeship also depends upon the elimination of hierarchies and the money nexus that promotes them...a scavenger and barter economy that promotes sharing” (Person 11). Danny’s rebellion functions as a revolt against his perception of an unequal distribution of responsibility in the community, one that he is not comfortable or able to maintain. He struggles between what he identifies as two options: rebel against the community or relinquish his freedom for participation and leadership of his group. Steinbeck writes, “Here thou sittest like the first man before the world grew up around him; and like the last man, after the world has eroded away” (187). Around Danny, the group of friends flourishes and away from the group Danny’s world disintegrates.

For the paisanos, the party represents a way for individuality to manifest while actively participating in and reestablishing the community and their roles within it. The party begins similarly to Doc’s; the community rallies together to obtain party favors, gifts, food, and wine with each member of the community contributing what best suits them. Since the party is instrumental in reassessing the value of the community at large and the individuals within it, each patron’s gift represents their reallocation into their place of significance. Some bring chickens that they slaughter, others makes ribbons to decorate Danny’s house. Even Torelli, the cantankerous bootlegger whom Danny and his friends have swindled countless times brings wine to the party. Everyone is included. Fromm argues that Communism, “It is not an impoverished return to unnatural, primitive simplicity. It is rather the first real emergence, the genuine actualization of man’s nature as something real” (51). The party reflects this ideology; each community member has an innate contribution to the group that ultimately culminates in a full

and robust party. The community rallies together and creates a harboring environment for both themselves and Danny who feels abjectly dislocated from it.

The party enacts a wild frenzy in Tortilla Flat; it forms into a revolution of sorts for the characters where the needs of both the individuals and community are fulfilled. The tide pool imagery permeates throughout its duration, and Steinbeck uses biological language to explain the party's ethos. He writes:

Sometime a historian may write a cold, dry, fungus-like history of The Party...He may conclude, "A dying organism is often observed to be capable of extraordinary endurance and strength." Referring to Danny's superhuman amorous activity that night, this same historian may write with unshaking hand: "When any living organism is attacked, its whole function seems to aim toward reproduction." (194)

Steinbeck's own eco-philosophical views reflect through his decision to describe the party organically. The party represents a reversion to a naturalistic state of existence where the super-organism—the party itself—becomes an ecosystem that can be observed and documented. Steinbeck preserves his humanistic viewpoints by pointing out that a mere recitation of the party's events would detract from the transformative power that the party holds over the community itself. He writes, "The whole happy soul of Tortilla Flat tore itself from restraint and arose in the air, one ecstatic unit" (194). The party illustrates how individuals may interact with one another freely while reinforcing their bond to one another—the macro and microcosms exist co-dependently.

Steinbeck illustrates his belief in the power of Danny's party's organizational effects through the use of highly evocative and revolutionary language. Steinbeck equates the

community to a war-torn battalion, intent on rescuing Danny from his alienation, “It was a portent, like the overthrow of government” (188). Steinbeck impresses upon the reader that the party is not simply a fraternal sharing of a few drinks—it is a raging defense against an oppressive burden on Danny’s shoulders. Steinbeck continues, “So must the Old Guard have looked when they returned to Paris after Austerlitz” (190), displaying the gravitas of the undertaking that the party connotes. These highly evocative images instill upon the reader a deep sense of importance that the stakes of the party will influence the trajectory of history. The Communist threat has possessed a similar impending threat to the perceived freedom of the capitalist and American way of life. Steinbeck refers to the gathering as “The Party,” carrying even in its nomenclature the reminiscence of communistic ideology. Danny’s funeral acts as the final indictment against capitalistic social structures—his best friends are unable to attend because their clothing lacks respectability. Even death is commoditized in capitalism. Pilon states, “‘In this we learn a lesson’, said Pilon. ‘We must take it to heart that we should always have a good suit of clothes laid by’” (202). Because of their substandard clothing, the friends are unable to attend Danny’s funeral while the more affluent citizens of Monterey, galvanized by their wealth, nonchalantly attend.

Doc’s party also possesses the qualities of more than just a gathering of friends, and Steinbeck continues his use of war-time imagery to convey that the party is like a militia battling against the onslaught of an ever-widening capitalistic social existence. Steinbeck writes, “The party had all the best qualities of a riot and a night on the barricades” (174), continuing his use of revolutionary terminology and imagery. The party is a revolt—a battle for freedom. In the middle of the party, a group of fishermen arrive to Doc’s lab unannounced and uninvited thinking that it is the Bear Flag. The brashly inquire, “Where’s the girls...Ain’t this a whore

house?” which quickly incites a massive brawl between the partygoers and the sailors. The fight erupts when the fishermen introduce unwarranted sexual commoditization to what Steinbeck creates as a communistic revolution—the intrusion of the capitalistic monetary system insults the connectedness and freedom that the party intends to establish. Continuing the war-like imagery, Steinbeck describes the brawl, “Driven to a corner the newcomers defended themselves with heavy books from the bookcases. But gradually they were driven back,” and he continues a few sentences later, “The enemy was driven half-way up the lot when the sirens sounded” (174). The tuna fishermen represent the intrusive nature of capitalistic culture, constantly aiming to monetize natural human nature and sexuality. The partygoers destroy this outside threat, and the fishermen are eventually invited back to the party once they are no longer a threat to the economic egalitarianism that the party establishes.

Cannery Row and *Tortilla Flat* establish locations with a strong communal bond that is further bolstered by an overarching act of benevolence by the community for the character who is most conflicted and needs help the most. In the case of these novels, Doc and Danny are the recipients of the altruism that Steinbeck would find necessary for a society to be well rounded, healthy, and productive to achieving self-actualization and freedom from the ever widening grasp of what Steinbeck views as an immoral capitalist system. The fact that these two stories and their parties rally around Doc and Danny is due to the fact that Steinbeck had to effectively demonstrate his socialistic political aims—the realization of the individual as part of a larger, interrelated system—in non-threatening language that could ruin his career by being associated with Reds. Parini explains, “This fascination with the inevitable conflict between the individual qua individual and the individual as part of a larger social unit remained with Steinbeck all his life” (106), and these parties illustrate Steinbeck’s attempts to reconcile these ideas that seem on

the surface to be at odds with one another. By framing the emancipation of the single man— Danny and Doc—through the combined efforts of the communities in which each character lives, Steinbeck illustrates that a strong community assists rather than deflates one’s ability to escape existential alienation. Steinbeck illustrates in these novels that it is only through such communal intervention that true self-actualization is possible; a retreat into solitude such as Thoreau’s does not allow the individual to grow in relation to the community, therefore it is not as valuable to the greater good of humanity as a whole. Indeed, the characters of Danny and Doc are paramount to understanding Steinbeck’s admiration of individualistic significance, but only insofar as that greatness does not alienate or oppress any other individuals with whom they come into contact. The phalanx functions properly when all species harmoniously interact with one another. Rampant egotism is destructive to the health of the community’s ecology, just as mass homogeneity would be destructive as well. If one were to reduce the analogy to that of the human body, each individual part could represent a different organ. Each organ must function properly and in conjunction with one another for the body to be healthy. When the body becomes imbalanced or is introduced to a contagion (i.e. unfettered Capitalism in American culture), the health of the body suffers even though every organ may not be affected. By the same token, a body only needs one heart, one brain, and one stomach, and each organ functioning in its own way produces a healthy body that will thrive.

The fact that each party functions as a small, micro-revolution becomes most apparent when one realizes the method through which they come into existence. They are arranged for and provided by the community, all are willing participants, and emancipation is the end goal. Fromm argues, “Man is independent only if he is not only free from but also free to” (31), and the parties represent Doc and Danny’s liberty from their responsibilities which weigh on them

heavily. Their previous reliance only upon themselves and their own strength contribute to their slow and constant torture manifested in their depression. Once the parties occur, the community reaffirms their position within it as an independently moving cog with extreme value to the larger community. In *Danny and Doc*, one can see what Fromm claims about Marx, “He represented, in fact, the very concept of man which was at the center of his thinking. The man who is much, and has little; the man who is rich because he has need of his fellow man” (69). Both Danny and Doc, due to their natural talents are revered, and both men are freed from their shackles when they are accepted and validated through the group’s combined effort.

Danny and Doc are the fulcrum on which the community hangs, and the responsibility of such admiration weighs heavily upon them. Marx ends his famous Manifesto by imploring, “The proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains. They have a world to win” (48). The fact that Steinbeck chooses to frame these novels around the poor and disenfranchised further reinforces the anti-capitalistic sentiment held within them. The characters are separate from the alienation of their labor, yet with their possession of capitalistic fetters (Doc’s laboratory and Danny’s homes), they become estranged from the communities in which they live. When the paisanos and Mack and the boys throw the parties for their respective patriarch, they reaffirm the power of the community by establishing the value and the worth of the individuals within it. In this way, each party is its own revolution—even referred to as such by Steinbeck—intent on reestablishing the bonds around which healthy communities function. Marx wrote hoping to emancipate man from the alienating shackles of capitalism, and Steinbeck carries on that tradition in *Tortilla Flat* and *Cannery Row*. He crafts a world in which the community and the individual are regarded with equal importance, and he illustrates the freedom that accompanies the relinquishment of materialistic and egotistical aims. The parties represent Steinbeck’s

cultural revolution; they are the saving graces in cultures that are resistant to the capitalistic norms that exist peripherally in the surrounding communities. Steinbeck's politics shine through in the motivations of the characters that help shape and preserve these two communal cultures. The community must function in a balanced way for the individual to thrive within it, and the individuals must likewise be engaged with the community. It is only through coming together as one that the individuals are able to proliferate themselves to create a more perfect society.

REFERENCES

- Benton, Robert M. "The Ecological Nature of *Cannery Row*." *Steinbeck: The Man and His Work*. Ed. Richard Astro and Tetsumaro Hayashi. Corvallis: Oregon State University Press: 1970. Print.
- Dew, Jason. "Cold War reflections in *Travels with Charley*: Steinbeck's New Americanist Evaluation of Intra-Imperialist America." *Steinbeck Review* 4.1 (2007): 49-64. *JSTOR*. Web.
- French, Warren. *John Steinbeck*. New York: Twayne Publishers Inc., 1961. Print.
- , *John Steinbeck's Fiction Revisited*. New York: Twayne Publishers Inc. 1961. Print.
- Fromm, Erich. *Marx's Concept of Man*. New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 1961. Print.
- Gibbons, Michael T. "The Indifference of Nature and the Cruelty of Wealth." *A Political Companion to John Steinbeck* ed. Cyrus Ernesto Zirakzadeh And Simon Stow. Lexington: U of Kentucky Press: 2013. Print.
- Hedgpeth, Joel W. "Philosophy on Cannery Row." *Steinbeck: The Man and His Work*. Ed. Richard Astro and Tetsumaro Hayashi. Corvallis: Oregon State University Press: 1970. Print.
- Krakauer, Jon. *Into the Wild*. New York: Anchor Books. 1997. Print.
- Levant, Howard. *The Novels of John Steinbeck: A Critical Study*. Columbia: University

- of Missouri Press, 1974. Print.
- Lewis, Cliff. "Steinbeck: The Artist as FDR Speechwriter." *Rediscovering Steinbeck-Revisionist Views of His Art, Politics and Intellect*. Ed. Cliff Lewis and Carroll Britch. Lewiston, NY: The Edwin Mellen Press. 1989. Print.
- Lisca, Peter. "Escape and Commitment: Two Poles of the Steinbeck Hero." *Steinbeck: The Man and His Work*. Ed. Richard Astro and Tetsumaro Hayashi. Corvallis: Oregon State University Press: 1970. Print.
- Marx, Karl. *Communist Manifesto, The*. New York: Bantam Dell, 2004. Print.
- , *Das Kapital: A Critique of Political Economy*. Washington DC: Regnery Publishing, 2009. Print.
- Meltzer, Milton. *Up Close: John Steinbeck*. New York: Viking, 2008. Print.
- Parini, Jay. *John Steinbeck: a Biography*. New York: Henry Holt and Company, Inc. 1995. Print.
- Person, Leland S. "Steinbeck's Queer Ecology: Sweet Comradeship in the Monterey Novels." *Steinbeck Studies* 15.1 (2004): 7-21. *Project Muse*. Web.
- Shillinglaw, Nancy. *A Journey into Steinbeck's California*. Berkeley: Roaring Forties Press. 2006. Print.
- Shively, Charles. "John Steinbeck: From the Tide Pool to the Loyal Community." *Steinbeck: The Man and His Work* ed. Richard Astro and Tetsumaro Hayashi. Corvallis: Oregon State University Press: 1970. Print.
- Steinbeck, John. *America and Americans*. New York: Penguin. 1966. Print.
- , *Cannery Row*. New York: Penguin. 1945. Print.
- , *Tortilla Flat*. New York: Penguin. 1935. Print.

Voltaire. *Candide*. New York: Dover. 1991. Print.

Yarmus, Marcia. "The Picaresque Novel and John Steinbeck." *Rediscovering Steinbeck-
Revisionist Views of His Art, Politics and Intellect*. Ed. Cliff Lewis and Carroll
Britch. Lewiston, NY: The Edwin Mellen Press. 1989. Print.

VITA

Christian Troy Roemer was born in Hampton, GA to the parents of Herbert and Virginia Roemer. He is the second of three children with an older and younger sister. Perhaps driven to the books by his bully of a big sister, he became engrossed with literature during his tenure at Henry County High School. His interest in writing spurned from his interest in punk music, and his life revolved around writing music, poetry, and studying literature at that time. Christian studied Religion at the University of Georgia, where he graduated in 2010. He took one year of reprieve from higher education during which time he married his beautiful wife Elizabeth and worked full time. He began his graduate degree at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, which he completed in 2014. He is heavily interested in American Literature, and specifically the themes of psychological illness and sociology. He currently has no plans on attending a doctoral program.