

“Saints And Angels And Martyrs And Holy Men”: Portrayal of Common Man in Steinbeck’s Cannery Row

Kadavakollu Tejaswani, Ph. D.

I. Introduction to John Steinbeck:

John Steinbeck (1902 - 1968) was born in California. He started his writing career in the late 1920s. When California was hit by natural calamities, with great pain he witnessed people who were displaced from their native land and migrated for work to unfamiliar lands. Steinbeck’s Grapes of Wrath (1939) based on this migration, won Pulitzer Prize in literature. Steinbeck received critical appreciation and was conferred Nobel Prize for literature in 1962 for his commendable literary contribution.

Steinbeck uses his experience as a marine biologist in depicting characters with autobiographical elements. Doc, one of the main characters of Cannery Row, is the owner of a biological center and collects marine samples. The description of the labs and the work are given in intricate detail. He uses his knowledge and real life experience to enrich his narratives.

Introduction to Cannery Row:

Cannery Row is a novella published in 1945. Steinbeck, in the introduction of this novella, says that it is impossible to write a novel based on “the stink and the grating noise, the quality of light, the tone, the habit and the dream.” He decides to “open the page and to let the stories crawl in by themselves” (2). The narrative is about simple people in a town who wish to give a party to the Doc, a marine biologist whom they love and respect.

Introduction to the characters:

In this narrative, Steinbeck recalls a comment made by a man regarding the inhabitants of Cannery Row; the man says that the inhabitants are “whores, pimps, gamblers and sons of bitches” (1). Steinbeck says that if the man had taken trouble to look at them from a different angle, he would have said the inhabitants are “saints and angels and martyrs and holy men” and the meaning would not have changed much.

The important characters in this story are Doc, the owner of Western Biological Center, Lee Chong, the grocer, Mack and his boys, and Dora and her girls. The other characters, Henri who is forever building a boat, the watchman of the Bear Flag, Frankie who prefers to stay with the Doc, Sam Malloy and Mrs. Malloy who live in the boiler on a vacant lot, the Palace Flophouse where Mack and his boys reside, Darling, the dog, and Cannery Row itself are the framework for the stories.

Doc is an important character in the novel who is forced to conform to people’s expectations. Doc is the owner of the Western Biological Laboratory. People do not accept his reason that he walks for pleasure and doubt his motives and distrust him. When he lies to them that he is walking for a bet, they appreciate his gaming quality, offer him food and hail him as a “fine fellow” (104).

Doc collects marine samples. He has an open house. Moreover, he understands Cannery Row and its inhabitants. He has a soft corner for Mack and his boys and Dora and her girls. Doc is greatly loved and respected by the inhabitants and also by most people who know him by reputation. The high esteem for Doc is the main reason for Mack and his boys to think of hosting a party for him.

Lee Chong is a Chinese grocer in Cannery Row. Steinbeck describes him in great detail. Lee Chong stocks everything that a man needs in his tiny shop. He accepts credit and he never presses people for money. But after a certain point, he simply cuts off the credit.

Mack and his boys are not boys in reality. They are middle-aged men who let reality pass by them. They are into their forties and without any steady job or family. Every day they spend most of their time observing the time roll by. They go to work in case of extreme necessity and get back to their routine once the necessity elapses. They do not force anything. They go with the current, happiness to them is not material gains but time spent together sharing food, wine and time.

In Cannery Row, Mack and the boys seem to live for the moment, they are relaxed. They are not troubled by worries related to possessions. They do not try to impose on the nature or the order of things. Dora runs the Bear Flag restaurant. It is actually a front for entertaining men. As her business is illegal, she is expected to pay more towards charity. She also likes the Doc and helps Mack plan for the party.

Lee Chong and Dora Flood are two important members of this small town. Most people run up bills in Lee Chong’s grocery as everything a man can want is available there. In fact Steinbeck terms it as a “Miracle of Supply.” And Steinbeck says that the only element that is not available at Lee Chong’s grocery store is available at Dora’s restaurant. Dora Flood, though runs a brothel under the cover of a sporting house, Bear Flag Restaurant, is the only member in the community who contributes generously for the benefit of the community. At the time of influenza epidemic, when the entire town is affected, it was Dora and her girls who make soups and sit with the sick night and day.

II. Discussion:

Steinbeck seems to portray his disenchantment of materialistic America by depicting these characters. He seems to glorify the serene approach of Mack and the boys towards life. Mack and the boys are not ensnared by the self-centred and profit-making aspects of life.

Doc’s comments on Mack in a dialogue with his friend, Richard Frost wraps up everything:

“(. . .) Mack and the boys know everything that has happened in the world and possibly everything that will happen. I think they survive better in this particular world better than other people. 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. They can do whatever they want. They can satisfy their appetites without calling them something else.” (142)

They have their own social group where the members are idle or lazy, poor, live for the moment, and not ambitious.

In the time period when most American citizens were running after the great American Dream, and when writers were portraying the difficult times and writing about the failure of realizing the American Dream, Steinbeck’s characters stand out as a breath of fresh air for their rank disregard for money, power and respectability. Steinbeck’s characters tune in with nature and in spite of problems, regain their evergreen nature very similar to nature.

Steinbeck, through this novel, seems to condemn the modern definition of success which is nothing but greed, malice and egoism. He speaks through Doc,

“the things we admire in men, kindness and generosity, openness and honesty, understanding and feeling are the concomitants of failure in our system. And these traits we detest, sharpness, greed, acquisitiveness, meanness, egotism and self interest are traits of success.” (143)

About virtues and vices, Steinbeck has a definitive opinion, “while men admire the quality of the first they love the produce of the second”

In *Cannery Row*, Steinbeck presents a detailed positive socio-analysis of human beings belonging to the working class. Socio-psychological issues and behavioural patterns of working class groups as observed in Cannery Row inhabitants and especially Mack and his boys are analyzed. Though the members of Mack’s group have highly individualistic traits, sometimes they lose their identity and adapt the group’s priority, identity, and opinions. Their union is defined by their poverty, their nature, and their necessities. Their priorities are defined by their common possessions like the house they live in, Palace Flophouse and the pet they adopt, Darling. In their love and respect for Doc they are all united along with the entire town. Actually, this love is the cause of troubles in Doc’s life.

In spite of their poverty, the boys have some standards for themselves like pride of ownership of the Palace Flophouse. Once they occupy it, they take it on themselves to furnish it. Gradually, the Palace Flophouse acquires a respectable look due to the combined efforts of the inmates. The look of the Flophouse also reflects on the inmates’ development of self consciousness. Consciousness of self and how they present themselves to the society is also seen in Mrs. Sam Malloy who lives in a discarded boiler on a vacant lot yet craves to buy colourful curtains for her makeshift house. The fact that the discarded boiler does not possess any windows is immaterial to her.

Though they do not have any regular income, they provide for themselves with the money they earn from the odd jobs they do. They depend on Lee Chong’s generous nature when they do not have money. At the same time, they hate to bear the burden of debt as they fear becoming a slave due to the debt. So they offer to perform odd jobs for Lee Chong in lieu of groceries.

Out of his love and respect for the Doc, Mack thinks of arranging a surprise party for him. Being poor does not stop them from organizing a party for Doc. The first time they plan a party they go on a frog hunt with an intention to sell the frogs to Doc’s Lab and with that money they plan to organize the party. But unfortunately, the boys start the party before Doc arrives and it goes out of control. Unaware of the activities,

Doc turns up late for the party meant for him and ends up cleaning the mess created by Mack and his boys. Mack feels miserable about the whole fracas and decides to throw another party on Doc’s birthday. The second time they organize the party, each distinct group plans to offer presents according to their tastes.

Studies have proved that persons who are intellectually weak and lack judgment need an identical social group to latch on. In the absence of a group identity, crisis sets in their temperament which might possibly lead to anti-social behaviour. Hence, a sense of belonging is necessary for these people so as to follow the acceptable social path. The behaviour and attitude of the group members should conform to the group as a group’s priorities are different compared to individual priorities [2].

In Cannery Row, though the groups have different guiding principles they seem to be trying to assimilate with societal surroundings. They rise up as one and work towards a common goal when the situation demands as we see Dora and her girls work at the time of influenza epidemic. Again we see the unity in them when Mack decides to give a party to Doc. Though belonging to diverse groups, we do not see any differences among the various groups that inhabit Cannery Row. Instead they come together to give a party to Doc.

In spite of their shortcomings, the individuals in Cannery Row try to become an integral part of society without losing their individuality. Surprisingly, their inadequacies do not become an obstacle in their quest for belonging and identity.

III. Conclusion:

The groups we see in Cannery Row yearn for a particular goal, i.e. to give a good time to a person, the Doc, whom they consider an appropriate person for such an honour. Mack and his boys, Dora and her girls, Lee Chong and most of the people belonging to Cannery Row are in unison regarding this aspect and unite to work selflessly to make Doc happy.

Social group implies interrelations and interdependence among group members. Being deprived of relations with others can result in traumatic experiences for a social outcast. A group has certain expectations related to the group members, and who do not conform to them are considered as deviants. The altruistic nature of the people belonging to Cannery Row can be attributed to the sense of belonging in a group. In spite of their numerous personal and financial problems, the members of the group are not a threat to the society as they are bound by group solidarity [2].

All the riches in the world do not benefit a person who lacks concern for his fellow human beings. In the present world, most men are materialistic and for these men, life is a run to amass as much wealth as possible. Very few people stop to think about their fellow human beings putting their wants and needs aside. Concern and consideration for fellow human beings is an encumbrance to progress in today’s rat race [1].

Mack and his boys, Dora and her girls, Lee Chong, and Doc are the important characters in Cannery Row who in spite of their needs try to reach out to others. The characters in Cannery Row were termed as “saints and angels, and martyrs and holy men” for the complete lack of selfishness, avarice, covetousness and egoism. They were kind, generous, openhearted, sharing and moreover above the scheming nature of mankind in their quest for acquisition. Probably, it is high time man started re-thinking about his priorities in life and his role as a human being in the society. Steinbeck, through this novella, asserts that riches are never a substitute for social awareness.

References:

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