

NATURE SYMBOLISM IN THE FICTION OF JOHN STEINBECK

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This thesis is concerned with nature as a source for much of the symbolism and imagery in the novels and short stories of John Steinbeck. The symbolism is examined from the perspective of the philosophy governing Steinbeck's artistic use of nature: that life is a unity and that man is one with nature.

The analysis of the symbolism is organized into four parts, each concerned with a particular motif for the nature symbols. The first part discusses Steinbeck's use of the land as a symbol representing man's unity with nature. The second deals with animals as symbols. Many of Steinbeck's characters are endowed with animalistic traits. Furthermore, he frequently uses animals as symbols of human behavior. The third part concerns the nature symbolism that embellishes themes of birth, death, and fertility. The final chapter concerns Steinbeck's use of the sea as a nature symbol.

Sources for the thesis are Steinbeck's major novels and collected short stories. In most of these works, nature symbolism frequently plays a major artistic role and falls into one or more of the four thematic patterns. Basically, the symbols serve to interpret and comment upon the idea that all life is sacred and that man is a part of the unity of nature.

NATURE SYMBOLISM IN THE FICTION OF JOHN STEINBECK

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PREFACE

Any discussion of literary symbolism must be guided by the limitations implied in the term "symbol." In simplest terms a literary symbol is "a trope which combines a literal and sensuous quality with an abstract or suggestive aspect."¹ In other words, it is an object which exists itself and at the same time suggests something else, something abstract. Thus the cross, an object perceived by the senses, is symbolic because it embodies all the philosophy, tradition, and feeling behind Christianity.

William York Tindall distinguishes symbol from sign by defining sign as an exact reference to something definite and symbol as an exact reference to something indefinite.² If we accept Tindall's distinction, a simile or a metaphor, which expresses a relationship between two objects, must be called a sign. We encounter a problem with Tindall's distinction, however, when we consider the following simile from To a God Unknown: "[The madrone trees] thrust up muscular limbs as red as flayed flesh and twisted like bodies on the rack."³ This simile is an analogy between two definite things, the limbs of the trees and tortured human flesh. Yet the image cannot be

¹William F. Thrall and Addison Hibbard, A Handbook to Literature (New York, 1936), p. 478.

²William York Tindall, The Literary Symbol (New York, 1955), p. 6.

³John Steinbeck, To a God Unknown (New York, 1933), p. 11.

called merely a sign because in context it suggests something greater and more indefinite than a twisted body. Implicit in the image is the hint of evil which pervades the entire novel.

To draw a distinction between image and symbol is difficult, especially in Steinbeck's works, where so many of the images carry meanings beyond themselves. In Of Mice and Men, for example, the constant comparison of Lennie to the small, furry creatures he loves to pet cannot be dismissed as only imagery or metaphor, for these animals suggest the character and fate of Lennie. For a meaningful analysis of Steinbeck's nature symbolism, then, the reader must recognize that image and metaphor may be symbolic; that is, they may imply more than the one-to-one correspondence between sign and referent. Whenever nature imagery appears in Steinbeck's fiction to suggest something larger, more abstract, than the literal, sensual aspect of the image itself, it will be viewed in this study as symbolic. Perhaps the best working definition of a symbol, at least for the purposes of this discussion of nature symbolism, is Steinbeck's own:

A symbol is usually a kind of part of an equation-- it is one part or facet chosen to illuminate as well as to illustrate the whole. The symbol is never the whole.⁴

In Steinbeck's fiction, then, when any object, image, or act serves to "illuminate as well as to illustrate the whole," it may be considered symbolic.

⁴John Steinbeck, Journal of a Novel (New York, 1969), p. 27.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

In evaluating the significance of John Steinbeck as a twentieth-century American writer, one must certainly take into account the versatility of his literary art. A prolific novelist, he experimented with a variety of themes and techniques. The thematic concerns of his fiction encompass a vast scope, from the carefree, idyllic life pictured in such novels as Tortilla Flat and Cannery Row, to the quasi-religious devotion to the land in To a God Unknown, to the ardent social protest of In Dubious Battle and The Grapes of Wrath. Steinbeck's artistic technique is as diverse as his subject matter. He can reproduce the vernacular of the itinerant workers and the poetry of the Bible with equal facility. In form his novels vary from the loose, episodic structure of The Pastures of Heaven to the tightly unified Of Mice and Men. Imagery and symbolism embellish the narration and exposition in his stories, making it possible to interpret them on several levels.

For all of Steinbeck's diversity of form and content, however, certain metaphorical and symbolic patterns recur frequently enough throughout his fiction to require close scrutiny. One such motif is nature, which plays a significant technical role in most of his novels. Much critical attention has been devoted to the nature theme in the novels, but a comprehensive examination of exactly where and in what context Steinbeck uses nature as a symbol is a task which as yet has not concerned

critics. The purpose of this thesis is to investigate the recurrence of nature symbolism in Steinbeck's fiction and to attempt to trace significant patterns in its use.

Steinbeck is no stranger to the natural world from which he selects his symbols. He was born and reared in the Salinas Valley, in central California, a fertile and picturesque area which runs parallel to the Pacific Coast for about one hundred twenty miles. Bounded on the east by the Gabilan Mountains and on the west by the Santa Lucia Mountains, the valley consists of Salinas, Steinbeck's birthplace; the Monterey Peninsula, the setting for Tortilla Flat, Cannery Row, and Sweet Thursday; and Pacific Grove, a middle-class, Methodist community which Steinbeck gently satirizes in several stories. His love for this rural valley is evident in his fiction. It serves as the setting for most of his works, and almost all the natural features of the valley appear symbolically throughout his fiction.

Most of Steinbeck's symbolic use of nature is governed by his belief in the unity of all life. In The Log from the Sea of Cortez, the journal of a semi-scientific expedition Steinbeck made with his biologist friend Ed Ricketts, he

expresses the core of the philosophy that underlies his use of nature symbolism:

If one observes in a relational sense, it seems that species are only commas in a sentence, that each species is at once the point and the base of a pyramid, that all life is relational to the point where an Einsteinian relativity seems to emerge. And then not only the meaning but the feeling about the species grows misty. One emerges into another, groups melt into ecological groups until the time when what we know as life meets and enters what we think of as non-life. . . . And units nestle into the whole and are inescapable from it.¹

To Steinbeck all individual life is part of a great whole, and each individual organism is both itself and the expression of this whole. Man is a part of this whole, and he intuitively realizes his relationship to the rest of natural life. For Steinbeck, there is a mysticism approaching a religious feeling in the recognition of the place of man in the unity of all life:

And it is a strange thing that most of the feeling we call religious, most of the mystical outcrying which is one of the most prized and used and desired reactions of our species, is really the understanding and the attempt to say that man is related to the whole thing, related inextricably to all reality, known and unknowable. This is a simple thing to say, but the profound feeling of it made a Jesus, a St. Augustine, a St. Francis, a Roger Bacon, a Charles Darwin, and an Einstein. Each of them in his own tempo and with his own voice discovered and reaffirmed the knowledge that all things are one thing and that one thing is all things--plankton, a shimmering phosphorescence on the sea and the spinning planets and an expanding universe, all bound together by the elastic string of time (LSC, p. 217).

¹John Steinbeck, The Log from the Sea of Cortez (New York, 1951), p. 216. Subsequent references to this volume will be indicated in the text as (LSC) with appropriate page number.

Steinbeck's position, then, is somewhere between the naturalist and the mystic, the scientist and the priest. Man's relationship with nature is in part instinctive, and in part, religious. To him, nature is at once a mother, a god, and an extension of himself.

Because Steinbeck views "Being as a mystical allness,"² it is appropriate that one of the main sources for the symbolism and imagery that interprets human activity should be nature. Nature symbolism in the novels appears in connection with four main motifs. The most predominant is the relationship between man and the land, a relationship which has at times a mystical, intuitive quality, as does man's relationship with all of nature. Corresponding to man's kinship with the land is his unity with animal life. Besides giving many of his human characters distinctly animalistic traits, Steinbeck uses animals as symbols to comment upon human actions. He also uses nature symbolism in themes of birth and death, for both express and affirm the cycle of nature. Finally, he occasionally uses the sea as a symbol, for man is related to the sea in the same way he is related to the land.

In this paper the examination of Steinbeck's use of nature as symbol will be organized into four chapters, which will discuss in detail the four thematic uses of nature symbolism. Each chapter will be concerned with explaining the particular

²Charles Child Walcutt, American Literary Naturalism, A Divided Stream (Minneapolis, 1956), p. 264.

symbols and determining their significance in the context of the novel in which they appear. An understanding of Steinbeck's use of nature as a major symbol will facilitate a clearer perception of his observations about man.

CHAPTER II

LAND SYMBOLISM

Recognition of the unity of all life is the basis for Steinbeck's artistic use of nature. One of the major expressions of this unity is the kinship that man feels with the land. To Steinbeck, the land may be a source of man's strength, giving a pristine purity to those who are attuned to the rhythm of nature. This appreciation of the unity between man and the land is intuitively felt by many of his characters and at times assumes the characteristics of a religion, a mysticism.¹ Another important manifestation of man's feeling of unity with the land is the longing of many of Steinbeck's characters for an earthly paradise, a dream of a "safe place," where, unencumbered by society, they may enjoy the simple, primitive life.

These variations on the theme of unity of the cosmos underlie the land symbols in Steinbeck's fiction. Setting plays an integral part in the fiction, for the topographical features of the land, as well as the land itself, are sources for much of Steinbeck's nature symbolism. This chapter will be concerned with land symbols and their importance to the themes of the novels. The discussion will reveal certain recurring uses for land symbols and will demonstrate the importance of setting in Steinbeck's work.

¹Woodburn O. Ross, "John Steinbeck: Naturalism's Priest," College English, X (May, 1949), 434.

Steinbeck's first novel, Cup of Gold, is important to this discussion because it introduces themes which in his later works are developed through the use of land symbols. Already in this novel the theme of the unity of man and the land appears in rudimentary form. Robert, the father of the pirate Henry Morgan, is portrayed as a "primitive" whose feeling for the land borders upon eccentricity. The symbol for this feeling is the rose:

Robert was working the soil about the roots of a rose bush with his strong brown hands. . . . Now and again he stroked the gray trunk of the bush with the touch of great love. It was as though he smoothed the covers over one about to sleep and touched its arm to be reassured of its safety.²

The bloom of the rose reappears in the novel with implications of the mystical nature of the man-land relationship:

'One day, when I was pulling the dead leaves from my roses, it came upon me to make a symbol. This is no unusual thing. How often do men stand on hill tops with their arms outstretched, how often kneel in prayer and cross themselves. I pulled a bloom and threw it into the air, and the petals showered down about me. It seemed that this act gathered up and told the whole story of my life in a gesture' (CG,pp. 145-146).

Another prominent theme that is introduced in Cup of Gold is the need of man to dream. The dream idea that appears in this novel is translated in subsequent novels to the desire for an earthly paradise. Here, however, the dream of Henry

²John Steinbeck, Cup of Gold, (New York, 1929), p. 18. All subsequent references to Cup of Gold will be indicated in the text as (CG) with the appropriate page number.

Morgan is to be a pirate, and the symbol for his dream is the cup of gold. In one passage, the seer Merlin speaks of the moon as a symbol for the dream:

'You want the moon to drink from as a golden cup; and so, it is very likely that you will become a great man--if only you remain a little child. All the world's great have been little boys who wanted the moon; running and climbing, they sometimes caught a firefly. But if one grows to a man's mind, that mind must see that it cannot have the moon and would not want it if it could--and so, it catches no fireflies' (CG, p. 27).

Later, when Henry commands the ship Elizabeth, the wind is the golden cup: "The wind, blowing out of a black, dreadful sky, was a cup of wine to him, and a challenge, and a passionate caress" (CG, p. 88). When Henry becomes a pirate, the cup of gold, the dream, becomes Panama and the legendary woman, La Santa Roja. After the Red Saint, the object of his dream, has scorned him, he symbolically throws away a golden cup. He loses his desire to dream; he is no longer a "little boy."³ He spends the rest of his life in dull, mediocre respectability.

The dream motif in Cup of Gold shows the dual nature of man's dreams. While dreams may be what makes life exciting and ennobling, they are very seldom attainable, and, even if attained, they may prove unsatisfactory and empty. This dual nature of the dream is repeated many times in Steinbeck's later novels. Its most frequent form is a longing for land, a longing which is rarely satisfied for Steinbeck's people.

³See also Harry Thornton Moore, The Novels of John Steinbeck (Chicago, 1939), pp. 12-13.

Of lesser importance are two other Steinbeck conventions first presented in Cup of Gold. One is the character of the seer, an unusually wise mystic who derives prophetic strength from a ritualized communion with nature. Merlin in this novel reappears in To a God Unknown as the old man who sacrifices an animal each night to the setting sun and in Sweet Thursday as the eccentric man of the sea. Also introduced in Cup of Gold is a valley as the setting. Steinbeck's Salinas Valley is the model for the valleys which are settings for almost all his novels and short stories.⁴

The themes that Steinbeck introduced with Cup of Gold are developed more extensively in his second novel, To a God Unknown. Set in the fictitious Valley of Nuestra Señora, probably the Jolon Valley of Southern California,⁵ the story develops the theme of the man-land kinship through abundant use of land symbols. The unity between man and nature has acquired religious overtones, so much of the land symbolism has religious connotations. The religious elements in the symbolism are taken from both Christian tradition and ancient Druidic fertility cults. There is an element of the unexplainable surrounding nature and man's relationship with the land.

⁴Ibid., p. 14.

⁵Peter Lisca, The Wide World of John Steinbeck (New Brunswick, N.J., 1958), p. 43.

This mystery is explored in the tensions between Christianity and paganism in the novel and is suggested by the title and by the poem which appears as the epigraph.⁶ The poem from the Rigveda celebrates the Creator of all things and repeats the refrain, "Who is He to whom we shall offer sacrifice?" The multiplicity of religious, mythical, and natural elements deepens the aura of the unknowable that pervades the relationship between the central character, Joseph Wayne, and the land he rules.

The story is about Joseph and his brothers, Thomas, Benjy, and Burton, who settle in the Valley of Nuestra Señora to found a dynasty. Joseph is the patriarch, having received the blessing from his father. He is also somewhat of a fertility god whose duty he feels is to protect the land and keep it fertile. He ultimately sacrifices himself to save his land from destruction by drought. The story explores symbolically the strange role of Joseph as father and lover and god of the land.

The structure of the novel follows the cyclical pattern of nature. The events take place over a period of four years. Joseph receives his father's blessing and moves to California in the winter. The rains come in the winter, promising renewed

⁶Ibid., p. 41.

fertility of the land. Joseph's self-sacrifice to save the land from drought occurs in winter (New Year's Day). In the spring and summer, planting and growing seasons, the house is built; the families arrive; the crops grow abundantly.

Joseph's child is born in summer, the season of growth. Elizabeth's life with Joseph begins with their wedding in autumn and ends with her death in autumn two years later. Benjy dies in autumn; the symbolic oak tree is killed in autumn, and the land begins to die from drought in autumn. In one sense, autumn is the time for death, but in another sense, it is a season for rebirth. With the marriage to Elizabeth in autumn Joseph's fertility is anticipated; after Elizabeth dies, Rama symbolically ensures Joseph's fertility by sleeping with him.

Life on the Wayne land corresponds also to the seasons of rain and the seasons of drought. Human life on the land is cultivated and thrives when the land thrives: the brothers move human life to the land; Joseph takes a wife and fathers a child; the people of the community prosper. When the land dies, however, the family unit dissipates. Burton moves away; Elizabeth is killed; Joseph gives up his child; Thomas' family leaves; and many of the people desert the village of Nuestra Señora. The seasonal cycles and the cycles of plenty and famine are the background for the novel's structure.

Joseph Wayne is the central symbolic figure of the novel. His words and acts develop the theme of man's mystical relationship with the land. The other symbols in the novel derive much of their meaning from his interaction with them. To enhance the suggestion of religious fervor in the man-nature unity, Steinbeck has endowed Joseph with the attributes of an Old Testament prophet and a fertility deity. Some passages even emphasize his Christ-like nature.

Joseph's story parallels in places the Genesis account of Joseph. Both receive the blessings of their fathers to found a dynasty in a promised land. They bring life from the land of their ancestors to the new land. Both fathers remain on the land of their ancestors. The cycle of the years of plenty and the years of famine appears in both stories. In the Old Testament account, Joseph provides for the seven years of famine. In To a God Unknown, Thomas alludes to the Biblical Joseph story when he questions his brother's sacrifices to the oak tree: "'Is it about the dry years, Joseph? Are you working already against them?'"⁷

Implications of the Biblical Joseph story in the characterization of Joseph Wayne help in portraying him as a patriarch, a protector of the land. His love for the land is characterized

⁷John Steinbeck, To a God Unknown (New York, 1933), p. 51. All subsequent references to this work will be indicated in the text as (TGU) with the appropriate page number. For further discussion of the Biblical allusions, see Joseph Fontenrose, John Steinbeck: An Introduction and Interpretation, American Authors and Critics Series (New York, 1963), p. 14.

at times as a fatherly feeling:

There was pity in him for the grass and the flowers; he felt that the trees were his children and the land his child. For a moment he seemed to float high in the air and to look down upon it. 'It's mine' he said again, 'and I must take care of it' (TGU, p. 12).

He believes himself to be the source of the land's fertility: "He willed that all things about him must grow, grow quickly, conceive and multiply " (TGU, p.42). When the land begins to die, he believes that he has failed as a protector. His actions, culminating in his self-sacrifice to ensure the fertility of the land, are motivated in part by his desire to protect it.

Joseph's role as guardian of the land assumes added dimension with allusions to the Christ. To Elizabeth, Joseph is a Christ figure:

. . . when she drew a picture of the Christ in her mind, He had the face, the youthful beard, the piercing puzzled eyes of Joseph, who stood beside her (TGU, p. 88) .

Toward the end of the novel Elizabeth's thoughts are echoed by the priest, Father Angelo:

'Thank God this man has no message. Thank God he has no will to be remembered, to be believed in.' And in sudden heresy, 'else there might be a new Christ here in the West' (TGU, p. 310).

Rama strengthens the Christ similarity when she talks of the universality of Joseph:

'You cannot think of Joseph dying. He is eternal. . . . I tell you this man is not a man, unless he is all men' (TGU, p. 121).

Joseph as lord of the family has Christ's power of forgiveness of sin. He forgives Juanito for killing Benjy and can even understand and forgive Burton for killing the symbolic oak tree.

Joseph's sacrifice to save the dying land echoes the theme of Christ's suffering to save mankind. Joseph himself recognizes the parallel and tries to express it to Elizabeth:

'Christ nailed up might be more than a symbol of all pain. . . . Christ in His little time on the nails carried within His body all the suffering that ever was, and in Him it was undistorted' (TGU, p.96).

Shortly before Joseph sacrifices himself, Juanito sees in his image "the crucified Christ, hanging on His cross, dead and stained with blood" (TGU, p. 303). Joseph completes the parallel with his final sacrificial act. As Christ willingly died to save mankind, Joseph offers himself to save the land.⁸

The Christ references function to strengthen the image of Joseph as god of the land and to prepare the reader for Joseph's sacrificial act at the end of the novel. They also add to the air of mystery and ambivalence suggested by the title and by the refrain of the epigraph: "Who is He to whom we shall offer sacrifice?" The ambivalence is developed by a conflict in the novel between orthodox Christianity and Joseph's nature-worship. Burton and the priest represent the forces of Christianity that view Joseph's nature-worship as

⁸See also Lisca, Wide World, p. 46.

heretical. Burton kills the oak tree that represents to Joseph the spirit of his father and the forces of nature. The priest opposes Joseph's strange religion, but is keenly aware of its power over Joseph. The priest also expresses the Church's disdain for the pagan practices of the Indians who are driven to bacchanalian frenzy by the coming of the long-awaited rain. The mystery of what finally brings the rain, Joseph's sacrifices, the priest's prayer for rain at Joseph's insistence, or the natural cycle, is purposely left unsolved. The unknown god is never identified.

Another theme behind the symbolic role of Joseph is the nature god whose power gives fertility to the land. Peter Lisca identifies Joseph as the Fisher King.⁹ Joseph is a nature god who is symbolically identified with the land. When he first rides over his land, he is aware of a "feeling for the land," a feeling that is both paternal and sexual. His identification with nature gives him a universality and makes him impervious to human emotion:

'I am cut off. I can have neither good luck nor bad luck. I can have no knowledge of any good or bad. Even a pure true feeling of the difference between pleasure and pain is denied me. All things are one, and all a part of me' (TGU, p. 113).

His knowledge that "his nature and the nature of the land were the same" (TGU, p. 132) leads at one point to his mystic vision

⁹Ibid., p. 45.

of his body as the land crowned by a world-brain. This image prefigures his dying vision of himself as the land: "'I am the land. . . and I am the rain. The grass will grow out of me in a little while'"(TGU, p. 322).

Joseph's potency is symbolically related to the fertility of the land. His marriage to Elizabeth is the symbolic union meant to make the king, and the land, fertile. The birth of their child occurs when the land is most fertile. After Elizabeth's death, which, because it brings a small rain shower, prefigures Joseph's sacrifice, Rama engages in a symbolic sexual union with Joseph in order to renew the potency of the king: "'It was a hunger in me, but a need to you'" (TGU, p. 245). Thomas sarcastically alludes to the Fisher King myth when Joseph decides he will not desert the dying land: "'And you'll get another wife, and there won't ever be another drought'" (TGU, p. 270). Joseph is the nature deity whose death, rather than restoration, saves the land.¹⁰

In addition to the three traditional themes combined in the character of Joseph, certain land symbols amplify the mystic-religious nature of his relation to the land. The two most important symbols are the oak tree and the glade in the forest. Both figure prominently in the rituals Joseph practices to preserve the fertility of the land.

¹⁰Fontenrose, John Steinbeck, p. 16.

The oak tree is introduced as a symbol with the death of Joseph's father. The old man had promised Joseph that his spirit would follow the brothers to the new land in California: "I'll go right along with you, over your head, in the air" (TGU, p. 2). When Joseph learns of his father's death, he knows intuitively that his father's spirit has entered the tree: "My father is in that tree. My father is that tree! It is silly, but I want to believe it" (TGU, p. 32). From then on, he regards the tree as a symbol of his father's spirit and, more importantly, as a symbol of nature. He gives offerings to the tree, hanging on its branches hawks he has killed, nailing to the bark ear notchings from the cattle, and smearing the blood of slaughtered pigs on the trunk. When he chooses Elizabeth for his wife, he places her in the crotch of the tree, and when his son is born, he places the child in its branches.

Joseph's libations to the tree coincide with the coming of the rain. The first time he smears pig's blood on its bark, the first of the winter rains follows. During a fiesta at the ranch, he pours wine at the foot of the tree, and soon afterward, the party is interrupted by a thunderstorm. Conversely, the land becomes barren soon after Burton kills the tree. These coincidences suggest that the tree is much more than the symbol for Joseph's father. It is related also to

the forces of nature. Tradition provides some clues to the meaning of the tree; the oak traditionally symbolizes strength and long life.¹¹ As all trees, it may represent the Tree of Life, which is the basis for the Christian symbol of the cross. The oak symbolizes to Joseph, then, the life force, the principle that governs the cycle of nature, of which human, animal, and plant life are part. The semi-religious overtones in Joseph's obsession with this tree suggest Steinbeck's own reverence for life.

A second land symbol explicitly religious in character is the glade in the forest. Steinbeck's attention to the glade is evidence of what Woodburn O. Ross calls his "recognition of a mysterious spirit of place."¹² In many of Steinbeck's novels there are places which have special meaning to the characters.¹³ This reverence for place is first developed in To a God Unknown and in later novels serves as a ramification of the dream motif.

The glade, like the oak tree, represents the eternal, absolute cycle of nature, before which man stands in reverence and awe. It is an intensification and an embodiment of the religious atmosphere that pervades the entire valley. The

¹¹Juan Eduardo Cirlot, A Dictionary of Symbols, translated by Jack Sage (New York, 1962), p. 227.

¹²Woodburn O. Ross, "John Steinbeck: Naturalism's Priest," p. 434.

¹³Lisca, Wide World, p. 135.

First description of the valley contains some of the imagery that gives a cathedral-like atmosphere to the glade:

the endless green halls and aisles and alcoves
seemed to have meanings as obscure and promising
as the symbols of an ancient religion (TGU, p. 8).

In the first description of the glade, Steinbeck gives it this majestic, cathedral-like quality. Tall pines, symbols of immortality and fertility,¹⁴ stand "straight as pillars," with their boughs joined at the top "to make one complete, unbroken ceiling of needles" (TGU, p. 54). The grove is silent and gloomy, like an ancient cathedral. Its "altar" is a huge rock covered with green moss which guards a cave from which flows a small stream. As Joseph first enters the glade, he is taken aback by the sight of a great "hornless bull with shining black ringlets on his forehead" (TGU, p. 55).

In one sense the glade is a fertility symbol. The bull clearly represents fertility. Juanito tells of the ritualistic visit to the glade by pregnant Indian women. Elizabeth, while she is carrying Joseph's child, discovers the glade and feels mysteriously drawn to it. Indeed, the glade seems to stir some kind of subconscious racial memory in those who enter it. Joseph feels he has seen the glade before in a dream. Juanito claims he was drawn to the glade by some undefined instinct: "'the Indian in me made me come, Señor'" (TGU, p. 56). And Elizabeth feels she has seen the glade before and is compelled

¹⁴Cirlot, p. 244.

to return to it after her baby is born. The subconscious attraction of the glade is indicative of man's kinship with nature. Instinctively he wishes to return to a primeval state.

If the glade has an attraction, it also carries an atmosphere of evil that frightens those who enter it. The horses refuse to venture past the thicket that guards the glade, and Thomas, who has the instinctive fear of an animal, is frightened by it. To Elizabeth, the rock's shape is "as evil as a crouched animal and as gross as a shaggy goat" (TGU, p. 182), and the glade arouses in her a feeling of horror and panic that drives her frantically from it. Realizing her simultaneous fascination and fear of the glade, she prays for protection against "the ancient things in my blood" that have drawn her to the place. When she later attempts to conquer her fear by climbing the rock, she falls from it and breaks her neck.

To Joseph, however, the place is sacred. When the oak dies, he convinces himself that his father's spirit has moved to the glade. His frantic efforts to keep the rock moist he believes will prolong the life of the land. His final act to restore the land is his self-sacrifice on the moss-covered rock.

The ambivalence of the glade symbol, the holiness and the evil that emanate from it, symbolizes the duality of nature,

whose scheme includes fertility (the bull) and destruction¹⁵ (the buzzard that circles over the glade the first time Joseph visits it). The glade is nature at its purest, and the responses of the characters to it symbolize man's responses to nature. He may be awed by its force and mystery or horrified by its cruelty, but he is inextricably united with it:

' . . . the earth is our mother, and . . . everything that lives has life from the mother and goes back to the mother' (TGU, p. 33).

Though the religious spirit that accompanies man's feeling for the land is centered in the symbols of the oak tree and the glade, it is suggested also in other land symbols. One of these symbols is the rain, which, though primarily a fertility symbol, is also used in a religious context. Joseph's first tour of his land, during which he first expresses his strong love for the land, is climaxed by a thunderstorm, a violent baptism which marks the beginning of Joseph's initiation into the mysteries of nature. Rain follows the semi-religious sacrifices to the oak and the "sacrifice" of Elizabeth on the moss-covered rock. The final sacrifice of Joseph is accompanied by rain, another baptism, this time marking his complete unity with the land. The rain, which has been closely identified with Joseph throughout the novel, becomes his symbol. With his death, he and the rain are one.

¹⁵Frank William Watt, John Steinbeck, Evergreen Pilot Books (New York, 1962), p. 32.

In addition to rain, water symbolism is manifested in the frequent references to rivers, pools, and streams. A spring-fed stream runs through the glade, suggesting the River of Life. The stream figures prominently in the scene in which Joseph forgives Juanito for the death of Benjy. Joseph recognizes Juanito's act as a natural act, according to his instinct, and so refuses to punish the Indian. Significantly, this declaration of the naturalness of Juanito's act is followed immediately by Juanito's drinking from the stream, which he says "'comes from the center of the world'" (TGU, p. 131). The drinking from the symbolic source of life represents Juanito's recognition of his kinship with all natural life. When the stream from "the heart of the world" goes dry, Joseph knows the land will soon die, so he desperately tries to keep the stream alive.

Water imagery accentuates Joseph and Elizabeth's symbolic rite of passage into the valley, a journey loaded with sexual symbolism and imagery. Water imagery is associated frequently with Elizabeth. When she arrives at her new home she is so overwhelmed by the suddenness of Benjy's death that she feels as if she "sat on the edge of a deep black pool and saw huge pale fishes moving mysteriously in its depth" (TGU, p. 116). This image reappears as a symbol after her own death, when Joseph walks up the river bed and sits beside a pool, "deep

and brown and ill-smelling" with eels swimming about "in slow convolutions" (TGU, p. 237). His thoughts are of how Elizabeth's death has bound him more closely to the earth and helped him to gain insight into the mystery of the cycle of nature. Of her symbolic sexual union with Joseph, Rama says, "'The long deep river of sorrow is diverted and sucked into me. . . .'" (TGU, p. 245). The old man's hut is on the edge of the ocean, a traditional symbol of death, and he is "the last man in the western world to see the sun" (TGU, p. 259), that is, to see life. Running water in the novel--the river, the glade stream--is symbolic of life forces, a "vein. . .pumping blood" (TGU, p. 232) to the land. By contrast, still, deep pools seem to be associated with the insight which accompanies death.

Water symbolism, especially rain, and the theme of sacrifice are juxtaposed throughout the novel. Each of the sacrificial rituals prefigures the ultimate sacrifice of Joseph. The most overt foreshadowing of his sacrifice, however, is the passage concerning the old man who sacrifices a small animal each day to the setting sun. Like Joseph, the old man can give no rationale for the ritual; but its connection with fertility is indicated by the richness and verdancy of the hilltop in contrast to the arid valley. He claims to practice

the ritual for the spiritual and sensual satisfaction that it brings:

'I do it for myself. I can't tell that it does not help the sun. But it is for me. In the moment, I am the sun. . . . I, through the beast, am the sun. I burn in the death' (TGU, p. 266).

The old man's feelings about the ritual prefigure Joseph's self-sacrifice when he, through the death of his physical self, will become the rain. Joseph's death, the perfect sacrifice, is anticipated in the words of the old man:

'Some time it will be perfect. The sky will be right. The sea will be right. My life will reach a calm level place. The mountains back there will tell me when it is time. Then will be the perfect time, and it will be the last' (TGU, p. 267).

When the land becomes so dry that even the mossy rock is brown, Joseph remembers the old man and sacrifices a calf. This ritual is ineffectual, but it leads to Joseph's climbing upon the rock-altar and sacrificing himself. His is the perfect sacrifice the old man anticipated, for it brings the much-needed rain and completes Joseph's union with the land.

The figure of Joseph, the ritual of sacrifice, and the overtones of mysticism combine to lend a complex ambiguity to the land symbols in the novel. Simultaneously contained in each symbol are many meanings: good and evil, violence and purity, fertility and sterility. All these meanings, with the frequent addition of religious connotations, are evoked each

time the symbols appear. Added to the interplay between the various meanings of the symbols is a juxtaposition of symbolism and reality that makes the novel a cross between drama and myth. Each reality is also a symbol, and the surface story of the settling of an area of land is, on another level, a myth of the relationship of man to nature.

Frederic Carpenter cites the inadequacy of both realism and symbolism as a primary reason for the novel's failure. As realism, he says, the story is incredible, and as symbolism it lacks the "visionary grandeur" of poetry.¹⁶ Warren French also condemns the novel for its failure to reconcile realism and symbol.¹⁷ Steinbeck's main concern in the novel appears to be symbolism. Joseph is strong and credible only as a symbol, and at times he is even confusing as a symbol. The events of the novel, while described in realistic detail, derive their meaning primarily as symbolic acts. In To a God Unknown Steinbeck displays a genius for endowing symbols with as many meanings as they can artistically carry, giving them a richness appropriate to express the profundity of man's relationship with nature. He shows a reverence for nature, approaching the level of worship, that persists throughout his art.

¹⁶Frederic I. Carpenter, "John Steinbeck: American Dreamer," Southwest Review, XXVI (Summer, 1941), 460.

¹⁷Warren French, John Steinbeck (New York, 1961), p. 47.

Steinbeck's third novel,¹⁸ The Pastures of Heaven, contains some of the themes and conventions used in the two previous novels. The "spirit of place" theme is evident in this novel, though it has lost most of its religious overtones. This theme, as well as the theme of man's dream of paradise, is given an ironic twist in The Pastures of Heaven. The novel, actually a series of short sketches with a unifying setting and theme, is set in a picturesque and fertile valley, dubbed Las Pasturas del Cielo by the early Spanish settlers.¹⁹

Description of the valley has a pastoral tinge:

And the air was as golden gauze in the last of the sun. The land below them was plotted in squares of green orchard trees and in squares of yellow grain and in squares of violet earth. From the sturdy farmhouses, set in their gardens, the smoke of the evening fires drifted upward until the hill-breeze swept it cleanly off. Cowbells were softly clashing in the valley; a dog barked so far away that the sound rose up to the travelers in sharp little whispers. Directly below the ridge a band of sheep had gathered under an oak tree against the night.²⁰

To a group of sight-seers who view the valley from the surrounding hills, it seems a paradise, and its beauty awakens in each tourist a longing to live an idyllic life there.

¹⁸Although The Pastures of Heaven was published in 1932, a year before To a God Unknown, Steinbeck's letters to his publishers indicate that he had been trying to find a publisher for To a God Unknown before he even began work on The Pastures of Heaven. Lisca, Wide World, p. 39.

¹⁹Actually Corral de Tierra, twelve miles from Monterey. Ibid., p. 56.

²⁰John Steinbeck, The Pastures of Heaven (New York, 1932), pp. 239-240. All subsequent references to this work will be indicated in the text by (PH) with the appropriate page number.

Ironically, the valley is anything but tranquil and idyllic. Each episode in the novel deals with one of the inhabitants of the valley and depicts frustration, disillusionment, bitterness, and tragedy. Once again Steinbeck is aware of the duality of man's dreams, the impossibility of the ideal. What may seem ideal is often empty and disappointing when examined closely.

The theme of the desire for an ideal place is developed separately in several episodes. Again, the land is the symbol. To Bert Munroe, the fulfillment of the dream is the restoration of an old farm which carries a legendary curse. This curse gives structural unity to the novel; some member of the Munroe family is inadvertently responsible for the crisis or tragedy in every episode. Helen VanDeventer's ideal place is a home in Christmas Canyon where she can hide her mad daughter from the world. The beauty of the land fills her with a sense of peace and frees her from the self-imposed burden of caring for her daughter. To Molly Morgan, the schoolteacher, the dream symbol is an old cabin purported to have been built by Vasquez. There she can indulge in romantic fantasies about her father, who disappeared when she was a child. To Pat Humbert the dream is embodied in the parlor of his house, which he redecorates in the hope of impressing Bert Munroe's

daughter. And to Richard Whiteside it is a vast farm on which he hopes to establish a patriarchy.

The Richard Whiteside story contains many of the elements of To a God Unknown. Richard's first view of the valley that is to be his home gives him "a feeling of consummation." The breeze waves the branches of the oak trees toward the valley, giving him an omen to affirm his choice of the valley. The fertility theme is also developed in the Whiteside story. Richard's dreams include many children, but ironically, he is able to produce only one son, who also fathers only a son. There is a correlation between the land's fertility and man's fecundity. Alicia's pregnancy coincides with the blossoming of the flowers and the increase of the livestock. In the second generation, when John learns of his wife's pregnancy, he seriously cultivates the land for the first time since he has taken over the farm.

The symbolic end of the Whiteside dynasty comes with a fire that destroys the ancestral home. John's son Bill decides to marry Mae Munroe and live in town, thus breaking the family tradition of the new generation taking over the farm from the old. A brush fire consumes the house and, through it, the dynasty that Richard Whiteside had dreamed of.

Through the symbols of the house and the farm, the White-side story develops the themes of man's identification with the land and the importance of land in man's dreams. Coinciding with these themes is the theme of the loss or failure of man's dreams. The dream motif is repeated, with allusions to the Eden myth, in the Junius Maltby story.

The central symbol in this episode is a huge sycamore tree, one limb of which branches out horizontally over a meadow stream. On this limb the dreamer Junius, his hired hand Jakob, and the boy Robbie happily indulge in rambling, speculative daydreams. The entire Maltby farm is an Eden; the men live in "ordered disorder," symbolized by the weeds that grow wildly all over the land. Weed images and tree images are abundant. The three do not converse much; rather they "let a seedling of thought sprout by itself, and then watched with wonder while it sent out branching limbs" (PH, p. 93). Their conversations bear "strange fruit," for they do not "trellis or trim" their thoughts. Like the farm that is overgrown with weeds, the men are ragged and unkempt. There is even an allusion to the eviction from the Garden of Eden in one of the conversations.

Robbie is the "Adam" of this Eden; he is a human weed, growing freely, innocent of social convention. His loss of innocence occurs when he attends school and learns that, in the eyes of the community, he is to be pitied for his material

poverty. With this knowledge comes the expulsion from Eden. Junius is shamed into leaving his "paradise" and attempting to conform to society's Puritan, middle-class standards. Once again Steinbeck depicts the impossibility of man's dream of an idyllic existence.

Each of the stories in The Pastures of Heaven is concerned with dreams and disillusionment, but the Richard White-side story and the Junius Maltby episode are important to this discussion because they employ land symbolism more extensively than the other stories. Steinbeck uses the pastoral setting repeatedly in his art, and the idyllic setting is more often than not tinged with irony. This novel begins a prevailing trend to use setting more realistically than mythically.²¹ He continues to use nature symbolically, nevertheless, though with less mystery and ambiguity than in To a God Unknown. With The Pastures of Heaven, he begins to portray the man-land relationship in terms more naturalistic and psychological than mystical and pseudo-religious.

The pastoral tone pervades the setting of Tortilla Flat, the comic saga of a group of paisanos. Steinbeck emphasizes the carefree life of Danny and his friends by giving an idyllic tone to the story. Several episodes begin with a description of the setting to establish the mood for the action. A notable example is the episode concerning the bootlegger

²¹Lisca, Wide World, p. 71.

Torelli's attempt to take possession of one of Danny's houses. On this day fog covers the sky, and the pine trees "dripped dusty dew on the ground."²² The sea gulls scream "tragically," and the faces of the people reflect the gloom of the sky. When Torelli's attempt proves unsuccessful, the sun comes out and "Mrs. Morales' new chickens [sing] a hymn to the sun" (TF, p. 118). Similarly, the search on St. Andrew's Eve for the mystic treasure is set in a pine forest made to appear ominous and dream-like by the moon shining through the fog.

The pine forest figures prominently in the action and serves as another expression of Steinbeck's belief in the "spirit of place." It is the natural home of the paisanos. In the forest the men form the group that shares Danny's house, and most likely they return there after the burning of the house dissolves the group. Pablo, Pilon, and Jesus Maria sleep in the forest for a time after the first house burns. The Pirate hides his treasure in the woods and preaches to his dogs about Saint Francis in a "cathedral" guarded by the pines. Danny escapes to the woods when he becomes restless from the burden of being a man of property. The forest represents

²²John Steinbeck, Tortilla Flat, in The Short Novels of John Steinbeck (New York, 1953), p. 114. All subsequent references to this novel will be indicated in the text as (TF) with the appropriate page number from The Short Novels.

The primitive state of the paisanos. They are happier existing in the forest on a natural level than living in the house in the role of "men of property."

Several stories in The Long Valley, a collection of Steinbeck's early short stories, feature a place which has symbolic importance. Gardens are frequently part of the setting and are used to represent order and stability reminiscent of the Garden of Eden. A garden is the major symbol of "The White Quail," a story which develops symbolically the theme of life versus art.

Mary Teller's garden is a symbol of perfection, order, and stasis. It is situated on the edge of town; its row of fuchsias provide a fortification against the wild live oak and poison oak that threaten to destroy the order of the garden. Mary has envisioned the garden all her life and has even planned her life around it. She zealously guards it from change and from the slugs and the cats which are to her "the world that wants to get in, all rough and tangled and unkempt."²³ To Mary, the embodiment of the perfection of the garden is a white quail that comes to drink from the garden pool. She

²³John Steinbeck, The Long Valley (New York, 1938), p. 32. All subsequent references to this work will be indicated in the text as (LV) with the stories in appropriate page number.

orders her husband to shoot a cat that threatens the quail, but instead, out of loneliness, frustration, and defiance, he shoots the symbolic quail.

The Garden in this story represents the sterility of an aestheticism which prefers unchanging beauty and perfection over life. Mary is the aesthete who sees the garden as an extension of herself. She identifies with its primary symbol, the white quail.²⁴ She views her life in a series of static images, as ordered and unchanging and lifeless as her garden. She prefers image and illusion to reality. Her husband's business repulses her like the cat preying upon the white quail. As she will not allow animal life to mar the static beauty of her garden, she refuses to let her husband know her inmost self. She is repulsed by his sexual feelings and locks her bedroom door against him at night. She will not allow him to have the dog he wants so much, for the dog will ruin the beauty of the garden. Her husband threatens Mary's narcissistic self-image as the cat threatens the white quail in the garden. Harry's shooting of the quail is an unconscious rebellion against the wife who has shut him out of her life; it is an

²⁴Peter Lisca sees the white quail as symbolic also of Mary's lack of sexual vigor. Lisca, Wide World, p. 95.

act of choosing life over art. Harry, the cat, and the wilderness bordering the garden represent the life force which is in direct conflict with the sterile aestheticism symbolized by the garden and personified in Mary.

In this story Steinbeck develops the Hawthornian theme of the danger of being obsessed with perfection. Mary has selfishly pursued a dream that is empty and life-denying. In placing image above reality, she has been the cause of loneliness and fear in her husband. "The White Quail" is the story of a dream that becomes destructive.

The dream motif appears in modified form in two other stories using land symbols, "The Chrysanthemums," and "The Harness." A dream of fulfillment as a woman is symbolized by the chrysanthemums in Elisa Allen's garden in the short story "The Chrysanthemums."²⁵ Implications of fertility and sexuality are present in the chrysanthemum symbol. Elisa's identification with nature is symbolized by her "planting hands" that tenderly and eagerly care for the flowers. Mordecai Marcus suggests that the care and tenderness she shows toward the plants makes them symbolic of her mother impulse.²⁶ The mature blooms of the chrysanthemums suggest to one critic the "voluptuousness of a sexually mature woman."²⁷

²⁵Mordecai Marcus, "The Lost Dream of Sex and Childbirth in 'The Chrysanthemums'," Modern Fiction Studies, XI (Spring, 1965), 55.

²⁶Ibid.

²⁷Elizabeth E. McMahan, "'The Chrysanthemums': A Study of a Woman's Sexuality," Modern Fiction Studies, XIV (1968), 455.

Elisa's longing for wider experience and fulfillment is awakened by an itinerant tinker who tells her of his free, nomadic existence. The yearnings he arouses in her are sexual:

'When the night is dark--why, the stars are sharp-pointed, and there's quiet. Why, you rise up and up! Every pointed star gets driven into your body. It's like that. Hot and sharp and lovely' (LV, p. 18).

She gives the tinker one of her "children," a chrysanthemum plant, as a token of what she believes to be her spiritual closeness to the man. When she sees that the tinker has discarded the plant along the road, she weeps in bitterness and frustration. The tinker has committed, for Steinbeck, an unpardonable sin; he has exploited for his own gain the dream of another.²⁸

In "The Harness," which concerns a man who attempts to escape the suffocating moral and spiritual influence of his wife, the dream is symbolized by a crop of sweet peas. While his wife was alive, Peter Randall had been the image of propriety. After her death, he attempts to escape this image, and one of the manifestations of his rebellion is his planting a crop of sweet peas, not for profit, but for the pleasure their beauty gives him. Ironically, he cannot shake his wife's influence; even in death she keeps him in a "harness."

²⁸French, John Steinbeck, p. 83.

The novelette The Red Pony, which comprises the last portion of the anthology, deals with the unity of life through land symbols which also suggest the "spirit of place" motif. Jody's communion with nature, a "semi-mystical experience in which time and place are eliminated,"²⁹ is represented by his love of the novel's life symbol, a moss-covered tub by a stream. The place is a source of comfort and strength to him, much like Joseph Wayne's glade. The place, however, is more important as a symbol of the life and death theme in the story. As such, it is more appropriate for discussion in the chapter of this thesis dealing with life and death symbolism.

Steinbeck's next novel, In Dubious Battle, is a departure from the man and nature theme. Nature in this novel is not used symbolically; it is primarily a background for the action. Steinbeck's main concern is with social themes in this story about a Communist-organized strike of migrant workers in California. In The Grapes of Wrath he enlarges upon the social themes and approaches them from his customary viewpoint that gives emphasis to the unity of all life.

The man-land theme reappears in Of Mice and Men in terms of man's desire for a paradise where he will be at one with nature. The dream for George and Lennie is a small farm. There

²⁹Arnold L. Goldsmith, "Thematic Rhythm in The Red Pony," College English, XXVI (February, 1965), 393.

is a type of ritual connected with this dream; Lennie derives pleasure from George's recitation of "how it's gonna be."³⁰ Rabbits are the functional symbol for the dream; so the discussion of this theme is reserved for the chapter concerning animal symbolism.

Once again there is the special place where man may find safety and strength. The story begins and ends in a thicket by a river. Lennie and George camp in the relative security of the thicket the night before they go to their new job, which is certain to contain hazards and uncertainties. George instructs Lennie to return to this thicket if he should ever get into trouble. After Lennie kills Curley's wife, he returns to the thicket and awaits George, who kills Lennie while reciting the dream.

The security of the river thicket represents a retreat into a world of innocence, a kind of return to the womb.³¹ It is, then, a realistic counterpart of the dream of the farm where George and Lennie hope to gain security, freedom, and dignity. Although the death of Curley's wife destroys all hope for realization of the dream, in a sense the vision is never

³⁰John Steinbeck, Of Mice and Men, in The Short Novels of John Steinbeck, p. 211. All subsequent references to this novel will be indicated in the text as (OMM) with the appropriate page number from The Short Novels.

³¹Lisca, Wide World, p. 134.

interrupted. Lennie dies in the "safe place," the site which most closely resembles, complete with rabbits, the farm of his dream. He dies while listening to George recount the dream, so his vision of the farm remains, for him at least, undestroyed.³²

Man's relationship to the land is translated into social and humanistic terms in Steinbeck's epic novel The Grapes of Wrath.³³ In this novel there are traces of mysticism in the man-land relationship, as evidenced by the remark of Jim Casy: "'There was hills, an' there was me, an' we wasn't separate no more. We was one thing. An' that one thing was holy.'"³⁴ But the relationship is expressed largely in naturalistic and pragmatic terms. Man is at the mercy of natural forces and social forces that nature, in part, creates. Unity with the land is seen as strengthening human dignity, whereas separation from the land leads to dehumanization and "moral erosion."³⁵ Land symbols in The Grapes of Wrath help develop the social, spiritual, and naturalistic implications of man's unity with nature.

³²Ibid., p. 137.

³³Ibid., p. 153.

³⁴John Steinbeck, The Grapes of Wrath (New York, 1939), p. 83. All further references to this novel will be indicated in the text as (GW) with the appropriate page number.

³⁵Lisca, Wide World, p. 154.

The novel represents the man-land relationship as one which is vital to man's sense of self. The sharecroppers maintain their dignity and identity through their closeness to the land, so to separate them from the land is to rob them of their identity:

This land, this red land, is us; and the flood years and the dust years and the drought years are us. We can't start again (GW, p. 89).

In the narrative this identification with the land is embodied in Muley Graves and Grampa Joad. Muley has refused to go with his family to California because to leave his land would be to destroy a part of his soul. Likewise, Grampa Joad refuses to leave the land; he must be drugged and carried onto the truck. Even though he goes with the family, he never actually leaves the land, for he dies before the family leaves Oklahoma and is buried in his homeland.

To Steinbeck rightful ownership of the land is not signified by a deed, but by living, working, and dying on the land:

Sure, cried the tenant men, but it's our land. We measured it and broke it up. We were born on it, and we got killed on it, died on it. Even if it's no good, it's still ours. That's what makes it ours--being born on it, working on it, dying on it. That makes ownership, not a paper with numbers on it (GW, p. 33).

The narrative parallel to this passage is Muley's preoccupation with "goin' aroun' the places where stuff happened" (GW, p. 52), and the memory of that "stuff" compels him to remain there "like a damn ol' graveyard ghos'" (GW, p. 52).

Because ownership is a feeling for the land, the great evil is absentee ownership, which is de-humanizing:

"Funny thing how it is. If a man owns a little property, that property is him, it's part of him and it's like him. If he owns property only so he can walk on it and handle it and be sad when it isn't doing well, and feel fine when the rain falls on it, that property is him, and some way he's bigger because he owns it. . . ."

'But let a man get property he doesn't see, or can't take time to get his fingers in, or can't be there to walk on it--why, then the property is the man. He can't do what he wants, he can't think what he wants. The property is the man, stronger than he is. And he is small, not big! (GW, p. 37).

The bank represents this absentee ownership, farming the land not out of love for the land but out of love for money. The bank is characterized as a monster gone mad, stronger and more powerful than men:

The bank is something else than men. It happens that every man in a bank hates what the bank does, and yet the bank does it. The bank is something more than men, I tell you. It's the monster. Men made it but they can't control it (GW, p. 34).

Steinbeck develops the monster comparison in his description of the tractor, the functional symbol for the bank and the social conditions that combine with the drought to force the sharecroppers off the land. The machine is the mechanized version of the drought, the modern form of the natural enemy.³⁶ These tractors, "snub-nosed monsters," crawl over

³⁶Harry Slochower, No Voice is Wholly Lost (New York, 1945), p. 299.

the land like giant insects, "ignor[ing] hills and gulches, water courses, fences, houses" (GW, p. 35). Driving these monsters makes men into inhuman robots: "the monster that built the tractor, the monster that sent the tractor out, had somehow got into the driver's hands, into his brain and muscle. . . ." (GW, p. 35). The tractor driver has no feel for the land; he is welded to an iron monster and so becomes a monster himself, as lifeless as the tractor.

A man plowing his own land gives life to it, experiences "the deep understanding and the relation" (GW, p. 118). Plowing the land with a tractor is done for efficiency and, in the case of the sharecroppers' farms, for destruction. A union of man and land produces growth, love for the land; a union of tractor and soil is sterile. Steinbeck appropriately compares the tractors' plowing into the soil to rape. The "shining disks" behind the tractor cut the earth--"not plowing but surgery" (GW, p. 36). The seeders are "twelve iron penes erected in the foundry, orgasms set by gears, raping methodically, raping without passion" (GW, p. 36). This violation of the earth cannot produce a rich crop, for the seed has not been planted in a loving union:

And when that crop grew, and was harvested, no man had crumbled a hot clod in his fingers and let the earth sift past his fingertips. No man had touched the seed, or lusted for the growth. Men ate what they had not raised, had no connection with the bread. The land bore under iron, and under iron gradually died; for it was not loved or hated, it had no prayers or curses (GW, p. 36).

The monster-bank, with its monster-tractors, represents to Steinbeck the evils of a system which replaces a life-giving closeness to the land with absentee ownership for efficiency and profit.

Steinbeck sees the migrants, who still possess this lust for the land, as a powerful social force, dangerous to the great owners whose loss of this primal relationship with the land has left them weak and afraid. He views as inevitable the revolution that will come when the dispossessed unite under their basic earth-hunger and try to regain their land:

Here is the node, you who hate change and fear revolution. . . . Here is the anlage of the thing you fear. This is the zygote. For here 'I lost my land' is changed; a cell is split and from its splitting grows the thing you hate--'We lost our land' (GW, p. 155).

Because ownership "freezes you forever into 'I' and cuts you off forever from the 'we'" (GW, p. 156), the great owners will not understand nor be able to cope with the force of the organized migrants.

Steinbeck sees as essential man's will to endure the adversities forced upon him by social and natural forces.³⁷ The prevalence of this will is partly what gives the novel a note of affirmation. Symbolic of the natural forces man must

³⁷ Joseph Warren Beach, American Fiction, 1920-1940 (New York, 1941), p. 332.

endure are the drought that begins the novel and the flood that ends it. The first and last intercalary chapters contain parallel passages which praise man's resistance to the destructive power of nature. The drought threatens to break the spirit of the sharecroppers, but when the "faces of the watching men lost their bemused perplexity and became hard and angry and resistant" (GW, pp. 3-4), their strength had triumphed. The flood at the end of the novel threatens the same destruction of spirit, but Steinbeck assures us that "the break would never come as long as fear could turn to wrath" (GW, p. 457).

Themes of famine and fertility, developed through land symbols, form a counterpoint which develops the dependence of man upon the forces of nature and his ability to endure these forces. The first third of the novel is concerned with the drought that converts the land into a waste land and forces the sharecroppers from their homes. Chapter One is a vivid poetic description of the desolate land. The opening paragraph, which Peter Lisca has compared to an overture of an opera,³⁸ contains a pattern of color imagery that succinctly depicts the slow death of the land. The dark red and gray country pales in the dryness. Green corn turns to brown, and the once dark, rich land is covered with a mantle of gray dust. The dust is the symbol for the land's death. Dust darkens the

³⁸Lisca, Wide World, p. 161.

sky by obscuring the sun, which through the dust looks "as red as ripe new blood" (GW, p. 3). It mixes with the air, making the air so poisonous that the doors and windows of the houses must be sealed. The dust is one embodiment of the force which drives the people from their land.

Images of heat, dust, and drought pervade the section dealing with the death of the land and the journey to California. The waste land images of Chapter One are echoed in Chapter Eleven in a picture of the empty houses of the sharecroppers. Weeds sprout around the houses; dust covers the floors; the wind bangs the open doors and flutters the curtains. Aridity and stifling heat are characteristic of the country all the way to California. This land is described in images of starkness and desolation. The sun, always the color of fire or blood, sends up shimmering waves of heat and scorches the Joads as they travel in their open truck. The mountains of Arizona are "jagged broken peaks," "terrible ramparts" that glare under the sun. Most threatening and desolate is the final stage of the journey, the desert the Joads must cross to get to the fertile valleys of California.

Peter Lisca suggests that the saga of the Joads parallels the Old Testament--the oppression in Egypt, the exodus, and the wanderings in Canaan.³⁹ Certainly the drought and dust in

³⁹Lisca, Wide World, p. 161.

Oklahoma brings to mind the Egyptian plagues. Like Moses' people, the migrants cross a "red" river (the Colorado River) and a desert on their way to the "promised land" of California. Like the Israelites, the migrants form a kind of tribe and make their laws--the unwritten rules of the roadside camps. In both the Old Testament journey and The Grapes of Wrath, the wanderers look for a Promised Land, only to find hardship and oppression once they arrive.⁴⁰

California is the "land of milk and honey," and as soon as the Joads cross the desert, the hot, dessicated landscape becomes a rich, verdant valley. Images of fertility replace images of drought and dust. The blood-like sun is now a "golden sun," and the color images of red, gray and brown are replaced by blue, green, and gold.

The symbol for abundance and fertility is the grapes of the title. Grampa Joad's dream of the happiness he hopes to find in California is embodied in the image of grapes:

'Gonna get me a whole big bunch a grapes off a bush,
or whatever, an' I'm gonna squash 'em on my face an'
let 'em run offen my chin' (GW, p. 85).

However, the grape symbol soon becomes a symbol of the oppression of the migrants and the bitterness with which they endure it. Chapter Twenty-five introduces the grape symbol in this context and expresses one of the major social themes

⁴⁰Fontenrose, John Steinbeck, pp. 75-76.

of the novel. Steinbeck decries as outrageous a system which will allow people to starve to death in the midst of plenty. The fertile valleys yield an abundance of crops, but much of the fruit is destroyed or left to rot in order to keep prices high:

There is a crime here that goes beyond denunciation. There is a sorrow here that weeping cannot symbolize. There is a failure here that topples all our success. The fertile earth, the straight tree rows, the sturdy trunks, and the ripe fruit. And children dying of pellagra must die because a profit cannot be taken from an orange. And coroners must fill in the certificates--died of malnutrition--because the food must rot, must be forced to rot (GW, p. 363).

So the grapes of plenty become the grapes of wrath, for the hungry become enraged at the sight of the rotting fruit:

In the souls of the people the grapes of wrath are filling and growing heavy, growing heavy for the vintage (GW, p. 363).

By virtue of its dual meaning, the grape symbol stands for California, which is the embodiment in this novel of the dream motif. Man dreams of a paradise, a Promised Land, only to be cruelly deceived by the dream.

The grape symbol has a Biblical source, as Lisca has pointed out. The title, from "Battle Hymn of the Republic," refers to passages in Deuteronomy ("the grapes of gall"), Jeremiah ("sour grapes"), and Revelation ("the great winepress of the wrath of God"). As symbols of plenty, the grapes have their source in Numbers, where they are symbolic of the

richness of Canaan. In addition, the Biblical Rose of Sharon (in Song of Solomon) is extolled for her breasts that are like clusters of grapes. In The Grapes of Wrath, Rose of Sharon achieves madonna-like stature when she feeds a starving man the milk from her breasts.⁴¹

Biblical echoes are also perceivable in the symbolic motif of rivers and streams. Many significant events either occur near a river or a stream or contain reference to one. The Joads' first campsite in California is by a river, which, with the desert (a juxtaposition of the drought and flood themes), forms a symbolic "gateway" into the Promised Land. Here the men bathe in the water while they listen to the bitter story of a man and boy (perhaps a prefiguration of the starving man and boy in the novel's last scene) who have crossed the river and found the Promised Land a place of poverty and degradation. It is at the river camp that the Joads first experience for themselves the oppression they are about to suffer; Ma hears the word "Okie" for the first time when she is insulted and threatened by a law officer. Noah refuses to cross this

⁴¹Lisca, Wide World, pp. 169-170.

river and accompany the family into California. He is last seen walking along the edge of the river, a Moses who cannot enter the Promised Land.⁴²

Casy's offering of himself to save Tom from being jailed occurs by a river. His ultimate sacrifice, his murder as a labor agitator, takes place after he has crossed a stream. Martin Shockley suggests that the stream setting here represents the "'crossing over Jordan' Christian motif."⁴³ Later Tom Joad, having killed Casy's murderer, hides in a culvert by a stream. Here he decides to carry on the work of Casy. The scene in which he announces to Ma his "rebirth" as a disciple of Casy is set in the rain, signifying a symbolic baptism. As a boy, Tom had been baptized by Casy into Bible-belt religion; he is now symbolically baptized into humanism by the spirit of Casy.

⁴²A possible parallel to Noah's departure is the desertion of Connie Rivers, the name perhaps suggestive of remaining by the river which bounds the promised land. The parallel, however, is tenuous. Unlike Noah, Connie stays with the family as they venture into California, but deserts soon afterward. Noah is close to the land. Connie's dream is not to farm but to have a house in town and study to become a radio technician. Noah is a member of the Joad family; Connie is an outsider, related only by marriage. Noah tells the family of his decision to remain behind and tries to explain his reasons. Connie sneaks away, explaining his desertion to no one. As will be discussed in a subsequent chapter, the desertion of Noah is more closely akin to the deaths of Granma and Grampa than to the desertion of Connie.

⁴³Martin Staples Shockley, "Christian Symbolism in The Grapes of Wrath," College English, XVII (November, 1956), 88.

The symbolic drought and flood are both destructive forces; the drought forces the sharecroppers off their land and the rain floods the lands on which they hope to find work. As the drought is a symbol of despair, the flood is, in a sense, a symbol of hope. The body of Rose of Sharon's still-born child is sent down the flooded stream to be a sign to the rest of the world of the desperation of the migrants. Rose of Sharon's gift of milk to the dying man, an act of affirmation, occurs during the flood. Harry Slochower sees a parallel to the Biblical flood. The barn in which the Joads take shelter is a kind of "Ark," and the "family" in this Ark is "the nucleus of a future humanity," one which recognizes the brotherhood of all men and promises the movement from "I" to "we."⁴⁴

Much of the artistic greatness of The Grapes of Wrath comes from the balance of themes and symbols: drought and flood, man and machine, the small farmer and the absentee owner, the grapes of plenty and the grapes of wrath. The theme that embraces all these dichotomies is the reverence for the unity of all life as symbolized by the relationship of man and nature. Jim Casy's declaration that "All that lives is holy" (GW, p. 148) is the underlying truth that governs the symbolic

⁴⁴Slochower, No Voice is Wholly Lost, pp. 363-304.

use of nature in this novel. The sharecroppers recognize this truth from their closeness to the land, and mankind must recognize it in order to endure.

Steinbeck's next novel, The Moon is Down, marks a departure from the California valley setting. The unity of life theme is expressed in political terms in this tale about the attempts of a conquered town to resist Nazi-type conquerors. In a manner reminiscent of the migrants in The Grapes of Wrath, the people as a unified force silently battle their oppressors, who are made vulnerable by their refusal to recognize the effectiveness of a unified people. Imagery of light and darkness emphasizes this conflict.

Both motifs are partly carried by the snow, which begins to fall after the first political execution. This death triggers the fierce underground resistance movement, which is accomplished by work slow-downs and sabotage. The conquering soldiers describe the people of the town as "frozen," "cold people."⁴⁵ Snow piled in front of the houses muffles sound and camouflages everything with a white cover. Like the snow, the "white people" are silent and inscrutable in their resistance. The snow is clearly symbolic of the quiet

⁴⁵John Steinbeck, The Moon is Down, in The Short Novels of John Steinbeck, p. 319. All subsequent references to this novel will be indicated in the text as (MD) with the appropriate page number from The Short Novels.

resistance of the villagers. "The soldiers bring winter early" (MD, p. 325), and the winter they bring is the cloud of "sullen" hatred that demoralizes the enemy.

Images of darkness balance the images of light. The first snow brings a darkness over the town symbolic of the darkness of oppression and the cloud of "sullenness and. . . a dry, growing hatred" (MD, p. 310) for the conquerors. The darkness is usually associated with the conquerors. Dr. Winter speaks of the snow, but suggests the occupation when he refers to the snowstorm as a "big cloud; maybe it will pass over" (MD, p. 306). When the soldiers enter the mayor's palace for the first time, "It seem[s] that some warm light [goes] out of the room and a little grayness [takes] its place" (MD, p. 278). The soldiers force the people to blacken their windows at night against the bombers, but the people manage to illuminate the targets for the planes.

The light and darkness motifs, suggested even in the title, from Macbeth, not only emphasize the relationship between conquered and conqueror but comment upon the larger theme of the perseverance and superiority of a people who act as a unit. The moon is temporarily down in the occupied village, but through the courage and obstinacy of the conquered people, the light will triumph over the darkness of oppression.

The people-as-unit theme is suggested in The Pearl by the contrast of the townspeople of La Paz to the Indians who dive for pearls. Also present is the garden symbol, with its accompanying connotations of artificiality and sterility. Stone and plaster walls isolate the town from the brush houses of the Indians. The images of stone suggest solidity in contrast to the impermanent Indian houses; the Indians are weaker than the villagers who exploit them.⁴⁶ In contrast to the natural beauty of the beach is the artificial beauty of the gardens behind the walls:

They came to the place where the brush houses stopped and the city of stone and plaster began, the city of harsh outer walls and inner cool gardens where a little water played and the bougainvillaea crusted the walls with purple and brick-red and white. They heard from the secret gardens the singing of caged birds and heard the splash of cooling water on hot flagstones.⁴⁷

Bougainvillaea symbolically camouflages the walls that shut out the Indians. Ernest Karsten, Jr. suggests that the colors of the bougainvillaea are symbolic. Purple, the color of

⁴⁶Ernest E. Karsten, Jr., "Thematic Structure in The Pearl," English Journal, LIV (January, 1965), 3.

⁴⁷John Steinbeck, The Pearl, in The Short Novels of John Steinbeck, pp. 477-478. All subsequent references to this novel will appear in the text as (Pearl) with the appropriate page number from The Short Novels.

royalty or rank suggesting the conquistadores who first exploited the Indians, symbolizes the sins of avarice and prejudice which keep the Indians subjugated. The red of the flowers represents both the blood shed in the conquering of the Indians and the hatred of the townspeople for them. The white indicates cowardice, and can be associated with the clergy, whose hypocrisy represents the Church's exploitation of the Indians.⁴⁸ The caged birds and artificial fountains suggest that the people are as lifeless and unnatural as their gardens.

In contrast, the beach swarms with life:

The beach was yellow sand, but at the water's edge a rubble of shell and algae took its place. Fiddler crabs bubbled and sputtered in their holes in the sand, and in the shallows little lobsters popped in and out of their tiny homes in the rubble and sand. The sea bottom was rich with crawling and swimming and growing things (Pearl, pp.480-481).

Unlike his previous novels that concern the downtrodden and the dispossessed, The Pearl does not affirm that the durability derived from their primitive existence will enable the Indians to throw off their yoke. On the contrary, Steinbeck shows that the Indians, through ignorance and fear, are hopelessly at the mercy of the doctors, the clergy, and the pearl buyers. Though artificial and lifeless, stone and plaster is far more durable than brush and straw.

⁴⁸Karsten, "Thematic Structure," p. 3.

The Pearl is an allegory whose major symbols, with the exception of the city and the brush houses, are taken from the sea. In The Wayward Bus, also an allegory, the land provides many of the symbols. The setting is once again California, though the geography of the book is fictitious. Although realistically depicted, enough to cause Norman Cousins to accuse Steinbeck of an obsession with realism for realism's sake,⁴⁹ the setting is more important as allegory.

The novel recounts the bus journey of a group of passengers, led by Juan Chicoy, "all the god the fathers you ever saw driving a six cylinder, broken down battered world through time and space,"⁵⁰ from one main highway to another, through back roads and washed out bridges. The characters represent "type-specimens" of modern civilization.⁵¹ There are "The Businessman," Mr. Pritchard, and his wife, "The Lady," a character similar to Mary Teller; their daughter Mildred; Ernest Horton, a traveling salesman who sells novelties; the

⁴⁹Norman Cousins, "Bankrupt Realism," Saturday Review, XXX (March 8, 1947), 22.

⁵⁰Quoted from a letter from Steinbeck to his publisher (7/12/45). Lisca, Wide World, p. 232.

⁵¹Antonia Seixas, "John Steinbeck and the Non-Teleological Bus," Steinbeck and His Critics, edited by E.W. Tedlock, Jr. and C. V. Wicker (Albuquerque, 1957), p. 278.

adolescents Pimples and Norma; the stripper Camille Oaks; and Van Brunt, a disgruntled, disagreeable old man. Each is caught up in a civilization which bases its verities on advertisement cliches. From the conflicts and tensions, mostly sexual, among the characters and the difficulties of the journey come the plot and the allegorical meaning of the novel.

The journey begins at Rebel Corners, site of Juan Chicoy's cafe and garage. Rebel Corners is at the crossroads between a highway and a country road that leads to the city of San Juan de la Cruz. It is described as the most beautiful spot in the valley; indeed, "there was no more lovely place in the world."⁵² Distinguished by great white oaks that provide cooling shade for travelers, the place is a kind of sanctuary, providing in its cafe all the physical comforts for travelers.

Ruling over this apparent paradise is Juan Chicoy (the initials are intriguing to critics), a type of Steinbeck hero. He is a capable man, skillful with machines, self-assured and able to see things in perspective. Juan serves as a kind of Vergil, guiding the passengers through their allegorical trip.

The trip's destination is the town of San Juan de la Cruz (St. John of the Cross). Seen at night, it's "little lights winking with distance, lost and lonely in the night, remote and cold and winking, strung on chains" (WB, p. 312) suggest

⁵²John Steinbeck, The Wayward Bus (New York, 1947), p. 12. All subsequent references to this novel will be indicated in the text as (WB) with the appropriate page number.

to critics that San Juan is a heavenly city.⁵³ However, other details of the journey suggest more strongly that San Juan merely represents death, or more precisely, purgatory. The coldness and loneliness of the lights, which obviously represent stars, contradict the traditional idea of heaven as a place of reward and comfort. Steinbeck customarily sees only coldness and strangeness in stars--never the comfort and strength apparent in earth symbols.⁵⁴ The journey begins at dawn (birth) and ends in evening (death). Furthermore, San Juan itself is at a crossroads; at the town the country road joins a north-south highway that leads to Hollywood. To the modern civilization that worships illusions of instant glamor and mail-order success, Hollywood, not a rural village, would seem the proper heaven. San Juan is more properly purgatory, for which the journey has prepared the passengers. The tensions among the passengers surface when Juan temporarily abandons the bus. Though the conflicts are by no means resolved, the fact that they have caused each of the characters to see himself without illusion suggests that there is a possibility, at least, for the characters to heed the warning, "Repent" scrawled on a nearby cliff.

⁵³Fontenrose, John Steinbeck, p. 109.

⁵⁴See To a God Unknown, p. 108; The Grapes of Wrath, p.231; The Pearl, p. 573.

Obstacles encountered in life are allegorized by the flooded river and washed-out bridges. When the bus arrives at the first bridge of the flooded San Ysidro River, named after the patron saint of agriculture,⁵⁵ the passengers are confronted with a decision: to cross the bridges on a gamble that they might not break, or to take an abandoned country road around the loop of the river. The direct route to heaven/purgatory is shorter, but more perilous. Conversely, the round-about way is longer, with the risk of getting stuck in the mud (suggesting perhaps a spiritual quagmire), but offers the certainty of arriving, sooner or later, at San Juan. The passengers choose the old road; the bus does get bogged down, but they manage to arrive safely at San Juan.

The Wayward Bus is, then, an allegory of the spiritual journey of a modern Everyman through life. Antonia Seixas offers perhaps the most precise critical summation of the meaning of the allegory:

Confronted with a swirling flood over which we have no control, our only crossing the skimpily built bridges--skimpily because of the dishonesties in our civilization and the stupidities and short-sightedness which prevent us from making proper use of our 'funds'-- the 'sure thing' is the back road, the old road, the long way around. And even that isn't a sure thing. Our time-dented bus, brave in its aluminum paint, gets stuck and, deserted by our tough, unsentimental realists, we're helpless.⁵⁶

⁵⁵Lisca, Wide World, p. 244.

⁵⁶Seixas, "The Non-Teleological Bus," pp. 279-280.

Guided by realistic and capable people like Juan Chicoy, the weak Pritchards and Normas of the world may possibly overcome the spiritual perils and achieve salvation.

East of Eden is the last novel set in California⁵⁷ and the last in which a dream motif is developed in terms of land symbolism. Although Steinbeck does pay some attention to this theme, it is not his main concern; rather, he has shifted his focus to ethical problems. In East of Eden he explores the problems of free will and good and evil in terms of the Garden of Eden and the Cain and Abel myths.

Significantly, the dream motif is presented with frequent allusions and parallels to the Garden of Eden. Biblical echoes are apparent from the first chapter, which catalogues the topography of the Salinas Valley in a manner reminiscent of the Genesis account of the Creation. The Garden is Adam Trask's ranch, to which Adam moves from Connecticut (as the Biblical Adam is led to the Garden of Eden) and which he abandons after his "fall" from innocence, his realization of his wife's evil.

The similarity between Adam Trask and the Biblical Adam is so obvious as to appear trite and overdone. Adam Trask

⁵⁷Sweet Thursday, written a year and a half after East of Eden, is set in the Monterey Peninsula, but it is merely an extension, a sequel to Cannery Row, published in 1944.

even says at one point, "'Remember my name is Adam. So far I've had no Eden, let alone been driven out.'"⁵⁸ Likewise, the general parallel of the Trask land and Eden is obvious. What becomes apparent only upon further scrutiny is the similarity in detail of the Trask ranch to Eden as depicted in Milton's Paradise Lost. The Trask ranch is a "miniature valley" surrounded by foothills and shaded by huge live oaks. Milton's Eden is a valley crowned by lofty trees:

and over head up grew
 Insuperable highth of loftiest shade,
 Cedar, and Pine, and Fir, and branching Palm,
 a Silvan Scene, and as the ranks ascend
 Shade above shade, woody Theatre
 Of stateliest view.⁵⁹

Adam's ranch is "a fair place even in the summer when the sun laced into it" (EE, p. 156). Milton described Eden as made more beautiful by the sun:

On which the Sun more glad impress'd his beams
 Than in fair Evening Cloud, or humid Bow,
 When God hath show'r'd the earth; so lovely seem'd
 That Lantskip⁶⁰

⁵⁸John Steinbeck, East of Eden (New York, 1952), p. 169. All subsequent references to this novel will appear in the text as (EE) with the appropriate page number.

⁵⁹John Milton, Paradise Lost, edited by Merritt Y. Hughes (New York, 1962), IV, ll. 137-142.

⁶⁰Ibid., IV, ll. 150-153.

Adam's valley is fed by a "precious ever-running spring of sweet water" (EE, p. 136), similar to Milton's "River large" that "with many a rill/Water'd the Garden."⁶¹ The river in Milton's Eden divides into several streams:

With mazy error under pendant shades
Ran Nectar, visiting each plant, and fed
Flow'rs worth of Paradise⁶²

Adam Trask's gardener "brought the living spring in little channels to wander back and forth through the garden" (EE, p. 156).

The Tree of Life in Milton's paradise has its counterpart in Adam Trask's "garden." A giant oak grows at the symbolic "center" of the land; from it Adam can view his entire ranch. The house, the center of life, is situated near the oak. Several important scenes take place under the giant oak. Here Samuel Hamilton meets Cathy for the first time and feels a renewed sense of the "black violence" that is on the valley. After Cathy has shot Adam and deserted him, a scene between Adam and Samuel under the oak reveals to the reader the spiritual "death" of Adam. The naming of the twins, following a lengthy philosophical discussion of the Cain and Abel myth, takes place under the big oak.

⁶¹Ibid., IV, 11. 229-230.

⁶²Ibid., IV, 11. 239-241.

As Satan threatens Eden in Paradise Lost, evil threatens, and finally dissolves, Adam Trask's paradise. Samuel, digging a well on the Trask ranch, discovers a fallen meteorite, which he later associates with Cathy. Joseph Fontenrose sees the "shooting star that fell a million years ago" (EE, p. 197) as symbolic of the fallen angel, Lucifer.⁶³ The identification of the meteorite with Cathy, in whom evil is personified, reinforces Fontenrose's interpretation. Samuel's prophecy of the blackness over the valley is fulfilled by the evil Cathy and the tragedy she brings to Adam.

Steinbeck has been roundly scolded by critics for his heavy, awkward overstatement of the good and evil theme and for the obtrusiveness of the Genesis myth. Indeed, subtlety is not Steinbeck's forte, especially in this novel. The implied parallels to the Eden myth are obvious enough, but when Steinbeck, after implying them, explicitly states them, the reader cannot help but feel that he has gone too far. The overstatement of the Eden theme mars the artistry of the land symbols.

As Steinbeck grew away from his naturalistic view of the unity of man and nature, his use of land symbolism became less frequent. East of Eden was followed by Sweet Thursday, a sequel

⁶³Fontenrose, John Steinbeck, p. 123.

to Cannery Row almost devoid of the ecological point of view that pervaded the earlier novel, and The Short Reign of Pippin IV, a social and political satire set in France. His last novel, The Winter of Our Discontent, echoes the ethical approach of East of Eden, but is set in New York and uses the sea as its major nature symbol.

Steinbeck's work up to, and partly including, East of Eden, however, is characterized by its partial dependence upon land symbolism to develop the unity of nature theme. Steinbeck has been compared to Emerson and Whitman⁶⁴ in his insistence upon the unity of all life and to Wordsworth⁶⁵ and D. H. Lawrence⁶⁶ in his mystical, somewhat religious approach to nature. In spite of the mystical, semi-pantheistic approach to nature, Steinbeck's viewpoint is basically that of the naturalist.⁶⁷ He does not see beyond nature to a God; rather, he finds ultimate mystery and wonder in nature itself.⁶⁸ This mystery and wonder is implied in the spiritual character of the man-land relationship.

⁶⁴Frederic I. Carpenter, "The Philosophical Joads," College English, II (January, 1941), 315-325.

⁶⁵Woodburn O. Ross, "John Steinbeck: Naturalism's Priest," p. 438.

⁶⁶Maxwell Geismar, Writers in Crisis (New York, 1947),

⁶⁷Ross, "John Steinbeck: Naturalism's Priest," p. 432 ff.

⁶⁸Ibid., p. 438.

CHAPTER III

ANIMAL SYMBOLISM

Kinship between man and the land is only one aspect of Steinbeck's celebration of the unity of all life. As man is one with the land, so is he one with the animal life that inhabits the land. Man is part of nature, and his social and biological behavior is not unlike that of the lower forms of animal life. Furthermore, the biologist who observes the living habits of animals can correctly apply his observations to human nature. Steinbeck the biologist is "interested in the animal motivation underlying human conduct."¹ Frequently in his fiction he equates human and animal conduct, "not simply as commentaries one on the other, but as indications of the same nature in the two apparently disparate sorts of creature."² This close association between human and animal life leads to the extensive use of animal imagery and symbolism in his fiction.

Steinbeck uses animal life symbolically in three ways. First, he frequently describes the human community with the image of a many-celled organism, a "group-man" whose individual

¹Robert E. Spiller, The Cycle of American Literature (New York, 1955), p. 290.

²John S. Kennedy, "John Steinbeck: Life Affirmed and Dissolved," Fifty Years of the American Novel edited by Harold C. Gardiner (New York, 1951), p. 228.

cells contribute to his total function. This image is a basic one and is the foundation of much of Steinbeck's social theorizing. Second, many of his individual characters display obvious animal characteristics and are closely associated with, and often symbolized by, particular animals. Third, he uses animals to symbolize many of the human problems, emotions, and activities appearing in the novels and short stories. Both the human community and the individual, then, are related to animal life.

In The Log from the Sea of Cortez, Steinbeck sets forth the basic image for his biological observation of human nature and indicates his method as an observer of humanity:

We have looked into the tide pools and seen the little animals feeding and reproducing and killing for food. We name them and describe them and, out of long watching, arrive at some conclusion about their habits so that we say, 'This species typically does thus and so,' but we do not objectively observe our own species as a species, although we do know the individual fairly well (LSC, pp. 16-17).

Steinbeck's modus operandi as a novelist is to look at humanity as a species, studying it the same way a scientist would study the animals in a tide pool. For the human community is much like the tide pool, and its members act much the same as the tide pool animals--"feeding and reproducing and killing for food."

The tide pool is the central metaphor in one of Steinbeck's later novels, Cannery Row.³ As the tide pool is a microcosm of the sea, Cannery Row is a microcosm of the world. In the novel, Doc, a character based closely upon Ed Ricketts,⁴ runs a biological laboratory and collects "the lovely animals of the sea."⁵ Cannery Row is the home of Mack and the boys, a group of "free souls":

. . . the Virtues, the Graces, the Beauties of the hurried mangled craziness of Monterey and the cosmic Monterey where men in fear and hunger destroy their stomachs in the fight to secure certain food, where men hungering for love destroy everything lovable about them (CR, p. 364).

Mack and the boys exist but little above an animal level. They are only minimally concerned with satisfying their basic biological needs, and are not destroyed by the hunger for wealth and success that claims many victims in society. To the "normal world," Mack and the boys would seem "no-goods, blots-on-the-town and bums," but to "Our Father who art in nature," they are "the Virtues, the Graces."

³Joseph Fontenrose, John Steinbeck: An Introduction and Interpretation, American Authors and Critics Series (New York, 1963), p. 106.

⁴John Steinbeck, see "About Ed Ricketts," in The Log From the Sea of Cortez (New York, 1951), pp. vii - lxvii.

⁵John Steinbeck, Cannery Row, in The Short Novels of John Steinbeck (New York, 1953), p. 364. All subsequent references to this novel will be indicated in the text as (CR) with the appropriate page number from The Short Novels.

The tide pool appears as a symbol in no other novel as explicitly as in Cannery Row;⁶ however, the basic idea and the attitude toward the human species is implicit throughout most of Steinbeck's fiction. A second metaphoric motif for the human community is the recurring image of group man. The function of the image could best be explained by citing a passage from The Log from the Sea of Cortez describing the function of an individual organism in a colony:

There are colonies of pelagic tunicates which have taken a shape like the finger of a glove. Each member of the colony is an individual animal, but the colony is another individual animal, not at all like the sum of its individuals. Some of the colonists girdling the open end, have developed the ability, one against the other, of making a pulsing movement very like muscular action. Others of the colonists collect the food and distribute it, and the outside of the glove is hardened and protected against contact. Here are two animals, and yet the same thing. . . . So a man of individualistic reasoning, if he must ask, 'Which is the animal, the colony or the individual?' must abandon this particular kind of reason and say, 'Why, it's two animals and they aren't alike any more than the cells of my body are like me. I am much more than the sum of my cells and, for all I know, they are much more than the division of me' (LSC, p. 165).

To Steinbeck, the group is an organism which is the sum of its members, yet has a character distinct from the individual

⁶Fontenrose suggest that a roadside ditch in The Wayward Bus (p. 217) is a variation of the tide pool image in Cannery Row. Though the similarity between the life in the ditch and the human characters could be considered valid, the image appears only once in the novel and is not as important a group symbol as the bus. Fontenrose, John Steinbeck, p. 111.

members. This idea appears frequently in his fiction, usually in the image of a many-celled organism. In his first novel, Cup of Gold, the idea of the group as a single organism is mentioned briefly. Panama, the cup of gold that the pirate Henry Morgan captures, is depicted as an organism which, because of its wealth and prosperity, has "grown soft in its security" (CG, p. 155).

The group as a single organism is discussed at length in the strike novel, In Dubious Battle. The theory that the group has an identity distinct from those of its individual members is developed at some length by Steinbeck speaking through Doc Burton:

'I want to watch these group-men, for they seem to me to be a new individual, not at all like single men. A man in a group isn't himself at all, he's a cell in an organism that isn't like him any more than the cells in your body are like you.'⁷

In Part Four of The Red Pony, "The Leader of the People," the image of the group as a single organism is used to describe the wagon trains moving westward:

'It was a whole bunch of people made into one big crawling beast. . . . Every man wanted something for himself, but the big beast that was all of them wanted only westering.'⁸

⁷John Steinbeck, In Dubious Battle (New York, 1936), pp. 144-145. All subsequent references to this novel will be indicated in the text as (IDB) with the appropriate page number.

⁸John Steinbeck, The Red Pony, in The Short Novels of John Steinbeck, p. 199. All subsequent references to this novel will be indicated in the text as (RP) with the appropriate page number from The Short Novels.

the "moving westward" image is reiterated in The Grapes of Wrath when the dilapidated trucks of the migrants are pictured as "bugs" crawling slowly westward along the highways (GW, p. 200). Furthermore, the migrant workers can be an effective force against the growers only when they organize, become a group-man (GW, p. 155).

The group organism theme appears in The Pearl in the form of two ecological units, the town of La Paz and the Indian community. Each inhabitant of the town is primarily concerned with self-preservation, usually at the expense of the welfare and safety of the Indians. A more thorough discussion of the two ecological units in this novel will be undertaken in that part of the chapter concerned with predatory animals.

These illustrations indicate the importance of the community in Steinbeck's work. Steinbeck's group-man theory and its effect upon the thematic unity of his work has been a favorite subject of Steinbeck critics, and it would be unnecessarily digressive to review all of the criticism in this thesis. The tide pool metaphor and the closely related image of the group as a biological organism is important to this discussion because of what it reveals about Steinbeck's use of the animal as a literary symbol.

Steinbeck's comparison of human and animal behavior is not restricted to the group organism idea. The novelist-biologist carefully studies many of the individual animals in the species. Many of his human characters are represented by one or more animal symbols. One of the most prevalent character types in his fiction is the "beast-man," the man whose physical appearance and behavior more closely approximate the animal than the human. Steinbeck's beast-men have several common characteristics. They are gigantic men with tremendous physical strength. They are generally mentally retarded, with little or no ability to think rationally; therefore, they act amorally, and can assume little responsibility for their actions. In their almost complete innocence and amorality, they are the epitome of the natural man. Steinbeck, therefore, frequently describes these beast-men in animal terms.

The best known example of the Steinbeckian beast-man is Lennie, the child-like brute in Of Mice and Men. Lennie is described as "a huge man, shapeless of face, with large, pale eyes, and wide, sloping shoulders" (OMM, p. 204). He drags his feet as he walks, "the way a bear drags his paws." He drinks from the river, "snorting into the water like a horse" and dipping his "big paws" into the pool. When George discovers that Lennie has a dead mouse and demands that Lennie

give it up, the huge man approaches "slowly, like a terrier who doesn't want to bring a ball to his master" (OMM, p. 208). The author repeats the bear imagery frequently; when Lennie is intimidated by Curley, he covers his face "with his huge paws and bleat[s] with terror" (OMM, p. 243). After he has killed Curley's wife, he returns to the thicket by the river "as silently as a creeping bear moves" (OMM, p. 267).

Lennie's mentality makes him more animal than human. His memory is elusive, and he depends upon George to do his reasoning. His amazing physical strength ("'He damn near killed his partner buckin' barley.'") is emphasized throughout the novel, and it is this strength which ultimately destroys him.

Even though he is compared to a bear, Lennie is identified symbolically with the small, furry creatures he loves to pet.⁹ In spite of his brute strength, Lennie is gentle in spirit and basically timid and afraid. Both he and George scavenge, like mice, for their food and shelter; they are itinerant workers, moving from job to job and working for their "fifty and found." Charles C. Walcutt sees the two as "little better than mice in the maze of modern life."¹⁰ In spite of their dream of a farm of their own, their ignorance and helplessness

⁹Walter Allen, The Modern Novel in Britain and the United States (New York, 1964), p. 163.

¹⁰Charles Child Walcutt, American Literary Naturalism, A Divided Stream (Minneapolis, 1956), p. 262.

will never allow them to be more than "bindle stiffs." Moreover, Lennie, like the mouse and the pup he inadvertently kills, is himself destroyed because of his innocence and helplessness. The mouse, perhaps more than the bear, is Lennie's symbol.

Lennie is identified symbolically with still another animal, Candy's old, blind dog. The men persuade Candy to let Carlson shoot the dog because it is no longer useful and is suffering needlessly. Candy, reluctant to part with his dog, feels guilt for not killing the dog himself. Like the dog, Lennie must be shot to prevent his suffering at the hands of the vengeful Curley. George, however, can do what Candy could not; he has the courage to "put Lennie out of his misery." Candy's dog, therefore, becomes a symbol for Lennie; and the killing of the dog foreshadows the merciful killing of Lennie.

Steinbeck's attitude toward his beast-men is understanding and compassionate. Even though they are more animal than human, the beast-men are endowed with the basic emotions, longings, and dreams of "civilized" men. Steinbeck's statement that he intended for Lennie to represent "the inarticulate and powerful yearning of all man"¹¹ attests to his recognition of the basic humanity of these beast-men. The tragedy

¹¹Quoted in Peter Lisca, The Wide World of John Steinbeck (New Brunswick, N.J., 1958), p. 134.

inherent in men such as Lennie, however, is that society, unwilling to accept and understand them, treats them as madmen. George is aware of this attitude when he shoots Lennie; one of the reasons for the killing is to prevent Lennie's having to be institutionalized. Because society is not compassionate and understanding, the Lennies of the world are doomed to tragedy.

This theme of the misfit versus society is developed in the story of Tularecito in The Pastures of Heaven. Tularecito is a beast-man; physically he more closely resembles an animal than a human. He possesses unusual, brutish strength and minimal mental capacity. Like Lennie, his strength and imbecility cause a crisis which leads to his own suffering at the hand of society.

Tularecito, Spanish for "Little Frog," is so named because he closely resembles a frog:

The baby had short, chubby arms, and long, loose-jointed legs. Its large head sat without interval of neck between deformedly broad shoulders. The baby's flat face, together with its peculiar body, caused it automatically to be named Tularecito, Little Frog. . . .(PH, p. 48).

Furthermore, he has abnormally long, dexterous fingers, suggestive of the flippers of a frog, which enable him as a boy to

do the work of a man. When angered, he emits a "savage growl" and charges his enemy, "leaping like a frog on his long legs" (PH, p. 63).

In his characterizations of Tularecito is a motif that recurs in many of Steinbeck's "natural" men: the unusually close affinity for nature. Steinbeck emphasizes Tularecito's "planting hands, tender fingers that never injured a young plant nor bruised the surface of a grafting limb" (PH, p.49). His closeness to animal life is further indicated by his talent for drawing and carving perfect likenesses of animals, a talent which comes with a temper that transforms him into savage fury when he sees his art destroyed.

In the portrait of Tularecito, Steinbeck includes some element of the mysterious, the unexplainable. There is a legend in the valley surrounding Tularecito's origin; he is half believed to be a demon, a gnome. This hint of the demonic is strengthened when Tularecito, at the suggestion of his teacher, begins to search for "his people," the elves and spirits. Here is a variation on the beast-man type, a suggestion of the supernatural in the "natural" man.

Tularecito is a misfit who is misunderstood and eventually destroyed by intolerant society. Even though "after the fifth year his brain did not grow any more," society insists upon

making him conform to its rules by going to school. When he attacks Bert Munroe, who fills up a hole the "little frog" has dug to attract the gnomes, he is judged a menace to society and is sent to an institution for the criminally insane. Only his compassionate guardian, Franklin Gomez, understands the boy and allows him to exist on his own terms. Like Lennie, Tularecito is condemned by a society that fails to understand him.

A less sympathetic portrait of the beast-man is given by Steinbeck in the short story "Johnny Bear." The moronic brute Johnny Bear conforms to most of the characteristics of the beast-man. Like Lennie, he physically resembles a bear:

He looked like a great, stupid, smiling bear. His black matted head bobbed forward and his long arms hung out as though he should have been on all fours and was standing upright as a trick. His legs were short and bowed, ending with strange, square feet (LV, p. 148).

Along with the bear images are images suggestive of general animal characteristics. He moves like "some prowling night animal" (LV, p. 148). The narrator is clearly revolted by an involuntary shiver of Johnny Bear's scalp when a fly lands on it: "I saw the whole scalp shiver the way the skin of a horse shivers when a fly lands on it" (LV, p. 151). In the bar he does not sit at the tables as the other men do, but crawls under a table and curls up, like a dog or a hibernating bear.

Like Tularecito, Johnny Bear has a mimetic talent; he can perfectly reproduce any voice he hears. His ability as a mimic earns him the whiskey he loves; like a circus animal that performs tricks for a reward, he will reproduce in the bar any conversation he overhears. Johnny Bear's "talent," like Lennie's colossal strength and Tularecito's monomaniacal attitude toward his art, leads to destruction.

The destruction Johnny Bear brings, however, is not his own. He is primarily a vehicle in the story; his role as a mimic causes the shattering of a myth in the village of Loma.¹² He reveals that one of the town's most respected women, "what we tell our kids when we want to. . . describe good people" (LV, p. 155), has committed suicide because she has become pregnant by a Chinese servant. The revelation explodes the myth surrounding the respectable Hawkins sisters, whose example of virtue and decency has given the community of Loma something good and wholesome to believe in. The destruction that Johnny Bear brings is not to himself, but to an entire community that has been living under an illusion to make life tolerable.¹³

¹² See also Warren French, John Steinbeck (New York, 1961), p. 85.

¹³ Blake Nevius, "John Steinbeck: One Aspect," Pacific Spectator, III (Summer, 1949), 304.

Because Johnny Bear is mainly a device to perpetrate the larger theme of the destruction of a myth, Steinbeck does not give this character the depth he gives Lennie, or even Tularecito. There is no attempt to analyze his emotion or his motivation; Steinbeck seems satisfied to dismiss Johnny Bear as even as human as Tularecito. Probably because of the hideous secrets that Johnny Bear reveals, the character is not merely quaint or fantastic, but revoltingly grotesque.

In spite of the repulsion Steinbeck and the characters in the story feel toward Johnny Bear, they seem to be fascinated by the creature. Steinbeck realistically portrays human psychology when he notes the intense curiosity of the men in the bar to hear what Johnny Bear will reveal about the Hawkins sisters. Even though the men are somewhat ashamed of their curiosity and deeply appalled by what they hear, they keep buying whiskey for Johnny Bear in order to get him to reveal more about the sisters. Only when Alex Hartnell tries to stop the idiot, and gets beaten by him in the attempt, do the men allow good taste to rule over curiosity.

Frank William Watts sees Johnny Bear's role in the story, as well as the morbid curiosity of the men, as representing a theme of privacy versus art:

. . . for Johnny Bear does. . . resemble the writer in his ability to reveal the secret shames of people, and the reaction to him is undoubtedly what any writer must face if he exploits his own community: a mixture of intense curiosity and shocked revulsion.¹⁴

Peter Lisca also suggests the artist's role in society as a possible theme of the story. He maintains, however, that Johnny Bear's role as "a recording and reproducing device" is secondary to the conflict within his listeners between their "innate curiosity and. . . desire to perpetuate the symbols of . . . decorum."¹⁵ If Johnny Bear represents the artist, as Watts and Lisca suggest, then one must assume that Steinbeck's attitude toward Johnny Bear is his attitude toward his own role as a writer. It is difficult, however, to conceive of Steinbeck comparing the artist to a moronic "reproducing device." The writer, unlike the cretin Johnny Bear, takes moral responsibility for his work. Steinbeck's careful struggle to maintain his artistic integrity throughout his career can attest to his feeling of moral responsibility for his work.

¹⁴Frank William Watt, John Steinbeck, Evergreen Pilot Books (New York, 1962), p. 44.

¹⁵Lisca, Wide World, p. 96.

At the time this story was published (September, 1937), Steinbeck's reputation as a writer was already well established with Tortilla Flat, In Dubious Battle, and Of Mice and Men,¹⁶ so undoubtedly both audience and artist were conscious of each other. Perhaps Steinbeck, aware of the controversy such books as In Dubious Battle would create, was at this time brooding over his task of exposing to man his own frailties and outrages. It is doubtful, however aware or unaware of his audience Steinbeck may have been, that he would see the artist as no more responsible for his art than a Johnny Bear.

Variations on the beast-man character appear throughout Steinbeck's work. Hazel, in Cannery Row and Sweet Thursday, possesses some of the beast-man characteristics: a limited mentality and great physical strength. Yet he is not portrayed in animal terms and is not as moronic as Lennie. He also takes responsibility for his actions. In Sweet Thursday, he believes his duty is to break Doc's arm, and he is greatly anguished at the thought of harming his friend. Moreover, Hazel is not a misfit; he is accepted and loved by his peers on the Row. The pathetic misfit on Cannery Row is the retarded Frankie, who is sent to an institution when he is caught stealing a clock to give to Doc, whom he loves deeply.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 93.

Noah Joad, in The Grapes of Wrath, is another modification of the beast-man. He is something of a misfit, strangely odd and misshapen in appearance and taciturn to the extent that he is regarded by his family as somewhat mentally retarded. He is not the typical Steinbeck beast-man, however; he is not described in animal terms, nor does he possess the brute strength coupled with animal innocence that causes crises for the beast-man.

In addition to the animalistic moron character-type, Steinbeck frequently includes in his fiction the character who, although more human than the beast-man, nevertheless has a stronger kinship with animals than with the human community. Such characters are Thomas, in To a God Unknown; the Pirate, in Tortilla Flat; and Billy Buck, in The Red Pony. All three men are distinguished by their size and physical strength. They are somewhat uneasy in the company of men and trust animals more than humans. They display some animal instinct and a great empathy and understanding of animal nature. They are trusted by animals the way few humans are. Unlike the beast-man, this type of character acts with responsibility, but his judgment is more instinctive than rational.

Of the three characters mentioned, the one who perhaps most closely resembles the beast-man is the Pirate. He is rather imbecilic, but gentleness and an absence of the brutishness of a Lennie or a Johnny Bear make him more man than beast.

In Tortilla Flat Steinbeck draws a conscious parallel between the Pirate and Saint Francis, the patron saint of animals. The Pirate, a "huge, broad man, with a tremendous black and bushy beard" (TF, p. 39), is always attended by his five dogs, who are "very respectful toward him and very solicitous of his happiness." He seems to be able to communicate with these dogs, in contrast to his inarticulateness in the company of men; consequently, the point is made that the dogs trust no one but the Pirate and protect him fiercely. The Pirate's home is a chicken house, for, being basically an animal spirit, "he would have thought it presumptuous to live in the house itself" (TF, p. 39). Typically, when he comes to live with Danny and the paisanos, he prefers to sleep with his dogs in a corner of the house.

The Pirate is symbolically identified with Saint Francis when he purchases a golden candlestick in honor of the Saint. He must attend church the day the candlestick is dedicated, but his dogs disrupt the mass when they burst into the church to be with their master. The priest expresses the symbolic connection with Saint Francis when he consoles the Pirate in his embarrassment:

'Do not be ashamed,' Father Ramon said. 'It is no sin to be loved by your dogs, and no sin to love them. See how Saint Francis loved the beasts' (TF, p. 91).

After the mass, the Pirate leads his dogs into the forest to "preach" to them. As he speaks about Saint Francis, the dogs listen intently, as if they understand his words. Steinbeck cannot resist carrying the symbolic connection a step further. When the Pirate finishes his "sermon," the glade suddenly becomes still, and the dogs look up alertly as if they see someone behind their master:

The Pirate was so happy his heart pained him.
'Did you see him?' he cried. 'Was it San Francisco?
Oh! What good dogs you must be to see a vision' (TF, p.92).

The suggestion of Saint Francis inherent in the character of the Pirate is a symbolic expression of the affinity for animals that is also characteristic of such persons as Thomas and Billy Buck.

Probably the prototype for the Pirate was Thomas Wayne, in To a God Unknown. He, too, is a "thick, strong man," a capable handler of animals. He seems to know animals intuitively, and cares for them with neither kindness nor cruelty, for he is "too much an animal himself to be sentimental" (TGU, p. 36). Similarly, animals trust him and follow him everywhere.

In contrast to Thomas's rapport with animals is his awkwardness in the company of humans:

Thomas understood animals, but humans he neither understood nor trusted very much. He had little to say to men; he was puzzled and frightened by such things as trade and parties, religious forms and politics. When it was necessary to be present at a gathering of people he effaced himself, said nothing and waited with anxiety for release (TGU, pp. 36-37).

Thomas is more comfortable in a barn than in a house. His wife, understanding his nature, "treated him as though he were an animal, kept him clean and fed and warm and didn't often frighten him" (TGU, p. 37).

One characteristic that especially allies Thomas with animals is his instinct. Several times in the novel this instinct is either implied or expressed. Thomas is instinctively afraid of the glade that is to his brother Joseph a mystic fertility symbol. He distrusts ritual, and though he tolerates his brother's need to practice it, is himself afraid of it. When the brothers visit the old man who ritualistically sacrifices animals, Thomas's animal instinct causes him to fear the insanity of the old man.

In contrast to the helplessness of the beast-man and the naivete of the Pirate, Thomas is portrayed as an admirably capable man. His quiet strength and almost intuitive wisdom and competence are qualities consistent in Steinbeck's heroes. Perhaps Thomas's ability to act competently comes from his close identification with nature. Guided by intuition and instinct, the natural man avoids many of the weaknesses and emotional quagmires that plague his supposedly more rational, civilized brothers.

Billy Buck is another Steinbeck hero who derives strength from his rapport with animals. He exudes physical strength, though he is not very large. He is a natural man who recognizes nature as an amoral and absolute force. His kinship with nature is represented by his identification with horses:

'Why I'm half horse myself, you see,' he said.
 'My ma died when I was born, and being my old man was a government packer in the mountains, and no cows around most of the time, why he just gave me mostly mare's milk. . . .And horses know that. . . .'
 (RP, p. 182).

Horses instinctively trust him and respond to him. This rapport with horses is evident in Billy Buck's care of the dying red pony and in his capable handling of the birth of the colt.

Billy Buck's empathy for animals extends to humans. Though he recognizes the sometime cruelty of nature, he can empathize with man's outrage against this cruelty. When the pony Gabilan dies, Billy understands the boy Jody's rage at the buzzards that pick the carcass of the horse. Likewise, he feels compassion for the old Gitano who has come to the mountains to die and for Jody's grandfather, who mourns the passing of an heroic era. Billy Buck's understanding is a model for Jody. Part of the initiation of Jody is his growth to an understanding and compassion comparable to Billy's.

The similarities between characters such as Thomas and Billy Buck and beast-men such as Lennie are several. Both types enjoy an almost complete freedom from the worldly struggles most men must face. All are comparative "innocents"; they act according to natural law and accept life as they encounter it. As natural men, they are animal-like, and some are symbolically associated with certain animals. Where the "natural men" differ from the beast-men is in their ability to exist outside society without succumbing to, or being destroyed by, the human community. The innocent beast-men bring destruction when they attempt or are forced to exist on society's terms; men like Billy Buck and Thomas are natural men superior to, and so able to survive in, the human community. Both types are symbolic of "the primitive instincts that abide in all men."¹⁷

Throughout his fiction Steinbeck suggests these primitive instincts in man by his frequent use of animals as symbols or as metaphoric devices in characterization. Even though not all of Steinbeck's characters are as animalistic as the beast-men, the strong physiological and behavioral bond between man and animal is underlined by the use of animal symbolism. Certain patterns can be discerned in Steinbeck's

¹⁷Lester Jay Marks, Thematic Design in the Novels of John Steinbeck (The Hague, 1969), p. 42.

use of animal symbols, both in the types of animals used and in the thematic context in which they appear. To expedite thorough analysis of the animal symbolism, it is necessary to organize this discussion according to the types of animals used and the contexts of the symbols.

One of the most frequently recurring symbolic animals is the predator, the strong, cunning animal who survives by preying upon those who are weak. Steinbeck uses predatory animals symbolically in three ways. First, they represent natural balance, the absolute, sometimes cruel law of nature which awards survival to the strong and cunning. Second, as this law of nature can also be applied to the human species, predatory animals are also used to symbolize the predatory nature of man. Third, sometimes Steinbeck imposes an ethical or moral viewpoint upon human actions and uses predatory animals to represent evil. Whatever its use, the predatory animal symbol is of vital thematic importance in the novel in which it appears.

To a God Unknown, the earliest novel to employ the predator symbol, has as its major thematic concern the unity of man with the rhythm of nature. This rhythm is emphasized by the cyclical structure of the book, the mythopoeic allegory of the Fisher King, and the juxtaposition of the themes of

birth and fertility, drought and death. Predatory animals appear symbolically in the novel to emphasize the cyclical quality of nature and the place of man in the cycle.

The predatory symbol first appears as Joseph is riding across his newly acquired land and feeling a mystic spiritual kinship with nature. He sees a boar eating a little pig, and his first impulse is to shoot the boar in anger. He realizes, however, that he has not the power to so disturb the balance of nature:

'I'm taking too great power in my hands,' he said. 'Why he's the father of fifty pigs and he may be the source of fifty more' (TGU, p. 10).

This scene has its counterpart after the death of Elizabeth, when Joseph walks by the river. He sees a group of pigs (one of them a boar) feeding on some eels in the stream. Suddenly a mountain lion attacks and kills one of the pigs. Joseph's reaction at this point is similar to his response the first time he encountered the predatory boar:

'If I could only shoot you,' Joseph said aloud, 'there would be an end and a new beginning. But I have no gun. Go on with your dinner' (TGU, p. 239).

In the first encounter with a predator, Joseph's impulse had been to set himself morally above the boar. Now he does not even attempt to do so. It is significant to note that immediately preceding his encounter with the mountain lion, Joseph had been contemplating the natural cycle which allowed the death of Elizabeth:

'There is some cycle here, steady and quick and unchangeable as a fly-wheel.' And the tired thought came to him that if he gazed into the pool and cleaned his mind of every cluttering picture he might come to know the cycle (TGU, p. 238).

While Joseph may not at this point completely understand the cycle, he recognizes man's place in it, for he makes no attempt to assert his power over the boar. He knows and accepts the fact that he has no such power.¹⁸

Predatory animal symbols appear twice in connection with Elizabeth. When she first meets Joseph, she is mystified and a little afraid of this man who seems to "indicate and symbolize the ripe stars and the whole cup of the sky, the land . . . and the mountains" (TGU, p. 78). After their first meeting Elizabeth notices in the yard below her window a "long, low, shadowy cat creeping away with some little creature in its mouth" (TGU, p. 66). Immediately before her death, as she and Joseph are approaching the rock from which she later falls and breaks her neck, she is frightened at the sight of a hawk attacking a rabbit.

As well as symbolizing the rhythm of nature's cycle, of which Elizabeth's death is part, the predatory animals represent in one way her relationship with Joseph. The nature of this relationship is indicated by Thomas's wife Rama, who predicts to Elizabeth that the young bride will worship her husband but will never know him:

¹⁸See also Lisca, Wide World, p. 55.

'Joseph has strength beyond vision of shattering, he has the calm of mountains, and his emotion is as wild and fierce and sharp as the lightning and just as reasonless as far as I can see or know' (TGU, p.121).

Though Joseph is not a predator, his spiritual strength is fierce as a wild boar or a mountain lion, and Elizabeth, the smaller, weaker animal, is overshadowed by his power. She is not weak, but her strength is not equal to Joseph's, and she is not strong enough to survive in the cycle.

In this novel Steinbeck does not intend for predatory animals to signify evil, but only to emphasize the violence of nature.¹⁹ Joseph learns to accept this violence and to recognize his own place in the natural scheme. This is the lesson that Jody must learn in The Red Pony. His experiences with death and birth, parts of the rhythm of nature, contribute to his growth and awareness. Predatory animals have a symbolic function in this novel as expressions of the violence of nature.²⁰ Predatory animals appear in section one, "The Gift." This section deals with Jody's experience with death. He is given a pony, and in part through Jody's carelessness, the pony is left outside during a rainstorm and becomes sick and dies.

¹⁹Ibid., pp. 66-67.

²⁰Fontenrose, John Steinbeck, p. 64.

The story is a precursor to the third section, "The Promise," where Jody is exposed to both aspects of the cycle, birth and death. Predatory animals in "The Gift" symbolize the violence of natural law which man must accept if he is to recognize the unity of all life.

Buzzards appear twice in the story. Before he even knows of the gift of the red pony, Jody notices buzzards in the distance as he walks toward his house:

Over the hillside two big black buzzards sailed low to the ground and their shadows slipped smoothly and quickly ahead of them. Some animal had died in the vicinity. Jody knew it. It might be a cow or it might be the remains of a rabbit. The buzzards overlooked nothing. Jody hated them as all decent things hate them, but they could not be hurt because they made away with carrion (RP, p. 139).

The appearance of the buzzards at the beginning of the story foreshadows the death of the pony and the final scene, in which Jody angrily kills a buzzard that has been picking at the carcass of the pony. Other birds of prey contribute to the atmosphere of death in the story. At one time during the pony's illness, Jody notices a hawk flying through the sky with two blackbirds "driving him down the sky, glittering as they attacked their enemy" (RP, p. 154). The night before the pony dies, there are owls shrieking through the barn looking for mice (RP, p. 158).

What these predators symbolize, and what Jody must learn, is that death, though sometimes cruel and violent, is a part of the rhythm of nature. In nature, survival depends upon strength, and both the strong and the weak contribute to the balance of nature. Even though Jody hates buzzards as reminders of death, he knows he can do nothing about them. They are even useful; they eat carrion. His fierce slaughter of the buzzard that he finds on his dead pony symbolizes his outrage against death. He must accept death, however he may hate it, just as he must accept the necessity of buzzards.

Man, being part of the rhythm of nature that gives a place to predators, may also be predatory. Steinbeck attempts to show that man's predatory activities are for self-preservation and are as much a part of human nature as animal nature. In The Pearl, symbols of predatory animals are used as a commentary on the nature of man. One of the themes of the novel is the exploitation of the Indians by the community of La Paz. The Indians live in extreme poverty. Their chief livelihood is pearl diving, but the pearl buyers in the town cheat them by not offering fair prices for the pearls. The church perpetuates this exploitation by threatening the Indians with God's punishment if they try to rise above their social position. The doctor refuses to treat the Indians without money; he considers them animals.

The town's exploitation of the Indians is symbolized in an image similar to the tide-pool image of Cannery Row:

Out in the estuary a tight-woven school of fishes glittered and broke water to escape a school of great fishes that drove in to eat them. And in the houses the people could hear the swish of the small ones and the bouncing splash of the great ones as the slaughter went on And the night mice crept about on the ground and the little night hawks hunted them silently (Pearl, p. 492).

The great fish and the hawks represent the doctor, the priest, and the pearl buyers who prey upon . . . the Indians, who are the small fish and the night mice.²¹

The theme of predator and victim recurs in various images throughout the novel. Twice the reader's attention is directed to ants. In one image, the ants are trapped by an ant lion, as the Indians are trapped by their fear and ignorance and are easy prey for the "ant lions" in the village. When Kino is in flight from his pursuers (a situation foreshadowed by the predator symbols), he is identified with the ants that climb over his foot and doggedly persist in their path; in the same way Kino must overcome the obstacles created by his pearl. Images of scavenging, closely related to predatory activities, also occur. In one image, "the hungry dogs and the hungry pigs of the town," which represent the greedy townspeople, search along the beach for dead fish (Pearl, p. 481), which symbolize the Indians, who are "dead" because they have no power to resist the greed of the villagers. Another scavenger image

²¹Harry Morris, "The Pearl: Realism and Allegory," English Journal, LII (October, 1963), 492.

pictures the fish who live on the oysters thrown back by the divers. Like the fish that feed upon the oysters, the townspeople feed upon the Indians, "thrown back" by society.²²

While there is no doubt that Steinbeck uses predatory animals in The Pearl to symbolize the predatory nature of man, it is not clear to what extent, if any, he exercises moral judgment upon the predators. Fontenrose believes that the pearl buyers, the doctor, and the priest are not evil; they are merely "animals" doing what they do out of a desire for self-preservation. The evil, he says, comes about from Kino's attempt to leave his station in life.²³ Lisca calls the parable a fine example of a non-teleological tale, that is, a story that takes no moral stand but simply reports the events that occur.²⁴ For support of this interpretation, critics cite the following passage as evidence that Steinbeck does not condemn the pearl buyers:

And although these men would not profit beyond their salaries, there was excitement among the pearl buyers, for there was excitement in the hunt, and if it be a man's function to break down a price, then he must take joy and satisfaction in breaking it as far down as possible. For every man functions to the best of his ability, and no one does less than his best, no matter what he may think about it (Pearl, p. 497).

²²Ernest E. Karsten, Jr., "Thematic Structure in The Pearl," English Journal, LIV (January, 1965), 4.

²³Fontenrose, John Steinbeck, p. 114.

²⁴Lisca, Wide World, p. 228.

This passage is interpreted to indicate that the buyers exploit the Indians, not from greed, but as an exercise of their predatory instinct. Furthermore, these critics cite the church's admonishing the Indians not to step above their social level, not as a criticism of the church, but as a statement by the author of the duty of man to recognize his place in the Chain of Being.²⁵

The problem in accepting The Pearl as a non-teleological tale and the predatory symbols in it as having no suggestion of evil arises when the reader encounters the strong overtones of evil that pervade the tale. Steinbeck states in the prologue that, "as with all retold tales that are in people's hearts, there are only good and bad things and black and white things and good and evil things and no in-between anywhere" (Pearl, p. 473). In the tale itself the atmosphere of evil is dominant. Images of poison and the symbol of the scorpion are juxtaposed with a description of the town's reaction to Kino's pearl:

The news stirred up something infinitely black and evil in the town; the black distillate was like the scorpion. . . . The poison sacs of the town began to manufacture venom, and the town swelled and puffed with the pressure of it (Pearl, p. 486).

²⁵Fontenrose, John Steinbeck, pp. 113-114. See also Lisca, p. 224.

Kino's child is bitten by a scorpion, and the Song of Evil enters Kino's brain. The scorpion symbol and the appearance of the doctor are related; the doctor refuses to treat the child until he hears of the discovery of the pearl, and when he finally does see the baby, he gives the child a medicine to make him ill. The doctor, usually a personification of strength and healing, is more poisonous to the Indians than the sting of a scorpion.

Furthermore, the pursuers of Kino are always described in terms indicative of evil. They are "dark men" whose identity is never known but whose presence is felt, as the presence of evil can be sensed. We may assume with some justification that these "dark watchers" are agents of the pearl buyers, or perhaps sent by the doctor. The emphasis upon evil in imagery and symbolism seems to indicate that Steinbeck did take a moral viewpoint in this tale. If he did, then this view is a radical departure from his biological view of man as a part of amoral nature. If he did not, then the symbols of evil create an ambiguity that weakens the novel.

The predatory animals in Steinbeck's later novels, East of Eden and The Winter of Our Discontent, are clearly symbolic of evil. In both, they are representative of the predatory activities of man, but these activities are viewed from the

perspective of the moralist, not the biologist.²⁶ Predators are associated in East of Eden exclusively with Cathy Trask, who is a completely evil woman. She is described alternately as a monster, a cat, and a snake. The author offers a naturalistic theory to explain Cathy's evil by suggesting that she is some sort of spiritual monster:

And just as there are physical monsters, can there not be mental or psychic monsters born? The face and body may be perfect, but if a twisted gene or a malformed egg can produce physical monsters, may not the same process produce a malformed soul? (EE, p. 72)

Various passages in the novel suggest a demonic element in Cathy. Steinbeck describes her feet as "small and round and stubby, with fat insteps almost like little hoofs" (EE, p. 73). She does not like light, claiming that it hurts her eyes. The author says of her, "There was a time when a girl like Cathy would have been called possessed by the devil" (EE, p. 73). In a letter to his publisher, he calls her "a fascinating and horrible person to me," an "animal anomaly."²⁷

It is obvious that Steinbeck wants the reader to see Cathy Trask as evil. Violence and evil are implicit in the predatory animal symbols associated with her. There is the

²⁶Fontenrose, p. 119.

²⁷John Steinbeck, Journal of a Novel (New York, 1969), pp. 45 & 79.

suggestion of the serpent as well as the monster in the characterization of Cathy. She has wide-set eyes that droop, making her look "mysteriously sleepy." These eyes have no message, no communication; "they were not human eyes" (EE, p. 177). Her face is heart-shaped, her mouth "abnormally small," and her ears "very little. . .pressed so close to her head that even with her hair combed up they made no silhouette" (EE, p.73). Her body is "like a boy's body, narrow-hipped, straight-legged" (EE, p. 73), and she moves about quietly and talks little. She has a "little, pointed tongue" that "flicks" around her lips when she swallows. Even the sound of the language Steinbeck uses to describe Cathy's voice is suggestive of a snake. Note the s sounds in the following passage: "Her voice was huskily soft, and it could be so sweet as to be irresistible" (EE, p. 73). Her snake-like character is noted by Samuel Hamilton when he is bitten by her while trying to help with the birth of the twins: "Humans are more poisonous than snakes" (EE, p. 193).

In addition to the serpent imagery, cat imagery is used to symbolize the predatory evil of Cathy. Like a good cat, she waits patiently for what she can get and abandons what she cannot. To do otherwise would be "waste motion, and dissipated energy, and foreign to a good cat" (EE, p. 159). When

she gives birth, she snarls at Samuel with "lips raised snarling from her little teeth" (EE, p. 193). Samuel later remarks about the birth, "This was too easy--like a cat having kittens" (EE, p. 196).

The symbols of the snake and cat as predators are strengthened by a passage cataloguing the predatory animals Samuel sees on the Trask ranch the night he meets Cathy for the first time:

The predators were working too--the long weasels like waves of brown light; the cobby wildcats crouching near to the ground, almost invisible except when their yellow eyes caught light and flashed for a second; the foxes, sniffing with pointed upraised noses for a warm-blooded supper; the raccoons padding near still water, talking frogs (EE, p. 176).

Cathy is a predatory animal. She preys upon people for her own selfish gains. She murders her parents in order to get away from home. She marries Adam to escape the whoremaster Edwards, and when Adam is no longer useful to her, she discards him, leaving him emotionally "dead." She kills the prostitute Faye in order to gain ownership of a brothel. As the owner of the house, she preys upon the weaknesses of men, feeding their perversions and then blackmailing them. Ironically, she is destroyed by another predator; the pimp Joe preys upon her fear of what another prostitute knows about the murder of Faye.

The predatory theme is repeated in The Winter of Our Discontent, and the symbol is a cat. The theme of this novel is the corruption of Ethan Allen Hawley, a man who resorts to dishonesty to regain the fortune and social standing his family has lost. To do this, he literally preys upon his best friend, a dissipating alcoholic named Danny Taylor. He gives Danny money, ostensibly to "take the cure." He knows, however, that Danny will use the money to drink himself to death, thus leaving Ethan the owner of Danny's land, which he has taken as collateral.

Frequently mentioned in the novel is an alley cat that tries daily to get into the grocery store through the back door. The day after Ethan's "temptations" begin (Good Friday), he gives the cat a bowl of milk, but the cat refuses it. After Ethan gives Danny the money he knows will eventually get him Taylor Meadow, the cat actually does get into the store. Ethan discovers it "hooking out with its claws for a hanging side of bacon."²⁸ On the day that Ethan becomes the owner of the grocery store, which he has acquired by revealing his boss's illegal entry into the country and causing him to be deported, the cat finally accepts the milk. Later, when Danny is found dead, the police chief remarks that his face looks as if cats "got at him" (WD, p. 257).

²⁸John Steinbeck, The Winter of Our Discontent (New York 1961), p. 158. All subsequent references to this novel will be indicated in the text as (WD) with the appropriate page number.

The cat is clearly symbolic of Ethan. Trying to get in the "back door" to wealth and esteem, he at first refuses the milk, the bribe of the wholesale food salesman. He hooks his claws into Danny and causes his death, and into the owner of the grocery store and causes his deportation. The cat's final acceptance of the cup of milk from Ethan unites the two symbolically and represents Ethan's acceptance of the fruits of his corruption.²⁹

As the alley cat is associated with Ethan, rabbits are associated with Danny Taylor. Ethan expresses his distaste for shooting some rabbits that have eaten the carnations in his yard. Because the war took away Ethan's "appetite for destruction," shooting the rabbits makes him "miserable in the stomach" (WD, p. 115). After he gives Danny the money, Ethan recalls "my small rabbit slaughter" (WD, p. 154). Danny is the rabbit, defenseless against slaughter, and Ethan's indirect murder of Danny is similar to a "small rabbit slaughter."

²⁹Warren French sees the cat as symbolic of more than Ethan's corruption. The attempts of the cat to sneak into the store also represent the "intuitive predator's constant threat to effete civilization." Warren French, "Steinbeck's Winter Tale," Modern Fiction Studies, XI (Spring, 1965), 67.

A prototype, perhaps, for this incident appears in The Red Pony, where Jody's grandfather compares Jody's attack upon the barnyard mice to Indian fighting in the Old West:

'Have the people of this generation come down to hunting mice? They aren't very strong, the new people, but I hardly thought mice would be game for them. . . .'

'It wouldn't be much like hunting Indians, I guess?'

'No, not much--but then later, when the troops were hunting Indians and shooting children and burning tepees, it wasn't much different from your mouse hunt' (RP, p. 192).

In human affairs as well as animal affairs, the weak are destroyed by the strong. Perhaps the two passages discussed are also commentaries on modern man's incapacity for nobility and heroism. He no longer commits acts of courage; he is reduced to destroying small, defenseless creatures.

The predator symbol is a mountain lion in the short story "Flight." Two themes weave the thread of the story: the initiation myth and the regression of man to his animal state.³⁰ The second theme is developed as Pepé, in flight to escape death by an avenger, discards one by one the accouterments of civilization.

Pepé reaches manhood when he stabs a man who has insulted him. He must then flee into the mountains to escape the avengers. First to be discarded is the knife, then the horse

³⁰Lisca, Wide World, p. 99.

(escape), the hat (protection), the gun (defense), and finally, the coat.³¹ As he discards these emblems of civilization, he takes on the characteristics of an animal. He crawls up the cliffs with "the instinctive care of an animal" (LV, pp. 62-63). In his pain from the wound on his hand, he "whine[s] like a dog." When he knows he must die, he tries to pray, but "only a thick hiss came from his lips" (LV, p. 92).³² His regression into savagery is also signified by his encounters with a wildcat and a mountain lion, that show none of the usual fear of humans. Pepé has become as much an animal as these beasts of prey.

The snake symbol, with all its predatory connotations, is the central focus of the short story "The Snake." The incident upon which the chilling story is based actually occurred in the laboratory of Ed Ricketts, who is the Dr. Phillips of the story.³³ The meaning of the story is a mystery; Steinbeck himself has admitted that the motives behind the woman's actions are unknown:

What happened or why I have no idea. Whether the woman was driven by a sexual, a religious, a zoophilic, or a gustatory impulse we never could figure (LSC, p. xxiv).

³¹Ibid., p. 100.

³²Hilton Anderson sees a great deal of snake imagery in the story and interprets the imagery to symbolize the evil in man which Pepe's death expiates. Hilton Anderson, "Steinbeck's 'Flight'," Explicator, XXVII (October, 1969), 12.

³³Steinbeck, The Log from the Sea of Cortez, pp. xxiii-xxiv.

The plot concerns a young woman who purchases a male rattlesnake from a biological laboratory so that she can watch the animal prey upon a live rat. As in the case of Cathy Trask, there is a hint of a strong spiritual connection between woman and snake. Like the motionless rattlesnakes in their cages, the only active part of the woman's body is her eyes. These eyes are snake's eyes, "dusty" eyes that "seemed to look at nothing" (LV, p. 73). Her body, tall and lean, is inert except for the slow movement of her head. As she watches the snake stalk the rat, her body at first stiffens, then weaves slowly. After the snake has eaten the rat, both the woman and the snake are relaxed and sleepy.

Part of the effect of the symbol of the snake is achieved by the way the author invests the symbol with the suggestion of the traditional kinship between woman and serpent. Equally pervasive is the atmosphere of evil intensified by Dr. Phillips' fear and horror at the pleasure the woman derives from watching the snake. The scientist's detachment from death and violence is set against his emotional reaction to watching the woman and the snake:

He hated people who made sport of natural processes. He was not a sportsman but a biologist. He could kill a thousand animals for knowledge, but not an insect for pleasure (LV, pp. 80-81).

One of the primary concerns of the story is the emotional involvement of the usually objective scientist.³⁴ Dr. Phillips feels a sense of sin at putting a rat in the rattlesnake cage, feels fear of the woman's fascination with killing, and feels the need to pray after she leaves the laboratory.

Sexual connotations are also attached to the symbol of the snake; Dr. Phillips mentions psychological sex symbols as clues to his understanding of what happened. It is important to the woman that the snake is male. The killing of the rat (the snake's gradual, deliberate preparation for attack; the strike; the relaxation of the snake after having swallowed the rat) follows the phases of the sex act.

Tension in the story is achieved by the interplay of the many connotations of the snake symbol. To the scientist, who is accustomed to viewing a snake eating a rat as an embodiment of the laws of nature, the idea of the act's having violent or sexual implications is horrifying and evil. "The Snake" is an excellent example of a story that is enriched by the connotations of a symbol.

Steinbeck's frequent use of predatory animals in themes dealing with human activity signifies his intention to compare one aspect of human and animal behavior. But predatory habits

³⁴French, John Steinbeck, p. 82.

are not the only traits man and animal share. As the image of the ants doggedly pursuing their path suggests, man has the single-minded persistence and industry of some animals. The major animal symbol of man's determination, and the best known animal symbol in all of Steinbeck's fiction, is the land turtle in The Grapes of Wrath.

The reader is introduced to the land turtle symbol in Chapter Three of the novel, one of the best prose passages in Steinbeck's fiction. The entire short chapter describes the efforts of a land turtle to cross a highway. Steinbeck's painstaking attention to minute detail creates a sense of slowness and effort in the turtle's progress. It "threshes" slowly along the roadside, "boosting and dragging its shell along" (GW, p. 14) and turning aside for nothing. Its efforts at climbing the highway embankment become more and more frantic until it reaches the top. It carefully surmounts every obstacle in its path. Two motorists spy the turtle; a lady in a car swerves to avoid it, and a truck driver swerves to hit it and spins it off the highway. The chapter ends with the turtle headed back toward the highway, undaunted by the obstacles.

The allegory of the turtle is of thematic and structural importance to The Grapes of Wrath. The turtle's symbolic magnitude grows as the novel's theme develops. At first the turtle is

identified with Tom Joad, who sees it along the roadside and picks it up to take to his little brother: "Joad stopped to watch it and his shadow fell on the turtle" (GW, p. 18).

Tom strengthens the comparison when he says of himself, "'I'm jus' puttin' one foot in front of the other'" (GW, p. 174).

Jim Casy also compares himself to the turtle and thus enlarges the symbol:

'Nobody can't keep a turtle, though. They work at it and work at it, and at last one day they get out and away they go--off somewheres. It's like me. I wouldn't take the good ol' gospel that was just layin' there at my hand. I got to be pickin' at it an' workin' at it until I got it all tore down' (GW, p. 21).

Tom keeps the turtle until he sees that his family has lost the land. As he releases it, the turtle heads southwest, the same direction the Joads later travel on their way to California. Watching the turtle crawl away, Tom remarks:

'I seen turtles all my life. They're always goin someplace. They always seem to want to get there' (GW, p. 45).

The turtle symbol has once again enlarged so that it now represents the Joad family. The Joads also crawl along the highway, carrying their home with them in a truck. At one point the author describes the trucks as land turtles. The family is determined to get "someplace" and doggedly surmounts each obstacle in its path. Those who aid them--the sympathetic service station owner, the head of the government camp--are

represented by the woman who swerves her car to avoid hitting the turtle. Conversely, the truck driver who hits the turtle represents those who try to destroy the Joads--the growers, the vigilantes, the police. Significantly, the turtle survives the truck's attempt to crush it, just as the Joads survive their hardships. The turtle crushes a red ant that gets inside the shell; the Joads similarly defend themselves against threats to the welfare of their family. The turtle carries an oat head across the highway in its shell; the Joads carry life with them to California. The same "indomitable life force" that drives the turtle drives the Joads.³⁵

While they exist as individuals, the Joads also serve to represent the migrants. By extension, then, the turtle also symbolizes the will and determination of the migrants. From this will and determination which gives them strength to "put one foot in front of the other," not knowing what lies ahead, will come a movement of change:

'They's stuff goin' on and they's folks doin' things. Them people layin' one foot down in front of the other, . . .they ain't thinkin' where they're goin'. . .but they're all layin' 'em down the same direction, jus' the same. An' if ya listen, you'll hear a movin', an' a sneakin', an' a rustlin', an' . . .a restlessness . . . They's gonna come somepin outa all these folks goin' wes'--outa all their farms lef' lonely. They's gonna come a thing that's gonna change the whole country' (GW, p. 174).

³⁵Lisca, Wide World, p. 159.

In Chapter Fourteen, the dogged persistence of the turtle becomes the symbol for mankind's will to endure, and so the turtle symbol is expanded to include all mankind:

For man, unlike any other thing organic or inorganic in the universe, grows beyond his work, walks up the stairs of his concepts, emerges ahead of his accomplishments. This you may say of man. . . man reaches, stumbles forward, painfully, mistakenly sometimes. Having stepped forward, he may slip back, but only half a step, never the full step back (GW, p. 154).

Here the turtle symbolizes not only Tom's struggle home from prison, Casy's struggle with his soul, the Joads' struggle to get to California and to survive once they get there, but mankind's struggle toward progress.

As the turtle grows in symbolic importance, so grows the Joads' consciousness of the unity of all mankind. At the beginning of their journey they are a closely-knit family, concerned only with the family's welfare and suspicious of anyone who tries to intrude into the family unit. As their hardships multiply, the family's communal spirit expands; Rose of Sharon's offering of her milk to a starving man signifies the Joads' ultimate awareness of the brotherhood of all men.³⁶ As the symbol of the turtle expands to represent all mankind, the Joad family grows to embrace all mankind.

³⁶See also Ibid., p. 177.

Animal allegory is used significantly in Cannery Row, in which a gopher performs the same symbolic function as the turtle in The Grapes of Wrath. One of the digressive chapters in Cannery Row is concerned with a gopher who burrows a hole in a vacant lot on the Row. The place is perfect; the gopher can watch the activities of the Row and does not have to worry about such hazards as cats and traps. There is one flaw in his "Eden," however; no "lady gopher" appears to complete his home. So the gopher finds he must move elsewhere, "two blocks up the hill to a dahlia garden where they put out traps every night" (CR, p. 467).

The allegory of the gopher depicts the struggle of the individual to survive in civilization.³⁷ Walcott believes that the story of the gopher is the story of Cannery Row: "you cannot enjoy the luxuries of civilization without paying for them."³⁸ The price the gopher pays for the "luxury" of a lady gopher is the trap set for him in the dahlia garden. Man pays the price in different kinds of traps:

What can it profit a man to gain the whole world and to come to his property with a gastric ulcer, a blown prostate, and bifocals? (CR, p.364).

The boys on Cannery Row have no desire for the luxuries of civilization, so they avoid the trap:

³⁷Ibid., p. 232.

³⁸Walcott, American Literary Naturalism, p. 268.

Mack and the boys avoid the trap, walk around the poison, step over the noose while a generation of trapped, poisoned, and trussed-up men scream at them and call them no-goods, come-to-bad-ends, blots-on-the-town, thieves, rascals, bums (CR, p. 364).

The gopher's plight allegorizes the plight of civilized man that Mack and the boys are able to avoid. To be able to enjoy the conveniences of civilization, money, property, and status, modern man must risk being trapped by the pressures of the world he chooses.

The gopher symbol and the turtle symbol have similar artistic functions. Both allegories appear in the intercalary chapters as separate incidents which only briefly touch the main narratives. They are important as commentaries upon the narratives, and by extension, upon the condition of modern man. They are the most notable examples in Steinbeck's fiction of the use of animal allegory as commentary upon the theme of a novel.

Most of Steinbeck's animal symbolism is employed to emphasize the similarity of man and animal. In a few of his works Steinbeck puts animal symbols to other uses. One of its functions is in the theme of man's dream of an ideal life, an earthly paradise. This recurring theme has been discussed in the preceding chapter in terms of man's relationship to the land. Since this man-land relationship also inculcates man's

relationship to animal life, the dream of an earthly paradise may be expressed in animal imagery. Occasionally in Steinbeck's fiction animal symbolism has been associated with the dream. Certainly a part of Joseph Wayne's love for his land and vision of himself as a fertility deity includes the animal life on the land. Mary Teller's dream of perfection embodied in her garden includes a symbolic white quail. In no other work, however, does the animal symbolism figure so centrally in the dream motif as in Of Mice and Men.

George and Lennie's vision of an earthly paradise, a "safe place," is a "little house an' a couple of acres" where Lennie can tend rabbits and they can "live off the fatta the lan'" (OMM, p. 212). The symbol for this dream is the rabbits, for, as Lisca states, the rabbits make a more easily manipulated symbol than the ritual about the farm.³⁹ The rabbit symbol, as it represents the soft creatures Lennie loves, makes a pattern for the action in the novel. Lennie pets soft, furry animals and inadvertently kills them with his blundering strength. The mice, the pups, and finally Curley's wife are all crushed by this strength. The action in the story is thus inevitable, for the reader soon realizes that even if the dream becomes reality, the imaginary rabbits will likely meet the same fate as the mice and the pups.⁴⁰

³⁹Lisca, Wide World, pp. 135-136.

⁴⁰Ibid., p. 136.

Lennie's love for soft, furry creatures is the basis of the novel's intricate pattern of symbol and action. This pattern is indicated in the first scene, where Lennie wiggles his fingers in the pool and creates a circle of widening ripples:

Lennie dabbed his big paw in the water and wiggled his finger so the water arose in little splashes; rings widened across the pool to the other side and came back again. Lennie watched them go. 'Look, George. Look what I done' (OMM, p. 204).

These unobtrusive lines prefigure the structure of the story; events and symbols radiate outward from Lennie.

Lennie is the center of the dream motif and the core from which it develops. He, more than George, seems to nurture the dream. Furthermore, it is while George is reciting the dream to Lennie that Candy asks to be included in the plans; and Lennie includes Crooks in the dream when he tells the stable buck about it. The persuasion of Crooks to join in the plans of the men is evidence of the dream having reached its greatest power--⁴¹ the widest circle of ripples. The dream seems to convert Crooks temporarily from cynicism to optimism. Also, with the inclusion of Candy and Crooks, the dream has a chance of becoming reality. The dream of the farm has its basis for existence in Lennie, and Lennie is the means by which it grows and finally is destroyed.

⁴¹Ibid., p. 138.

The actions which lead to the failure of the dream also originate with Lennie. The symbolic motif for the destruction of the dream is introduced in the form of a mouse which George takes from Lennie in the first scene. The mouse is, in a sense, the antithesis of the rabbit symbol; whereas the rabbit is the basic symbol for the dream, the mouse is the basic symbol for the dream's failure. Like the rabbit as symbol for Lennie's dream, the mouse extends its meaning to include other symbols.

When George takes the dead mouse from Lennie, the reader learns that because of Lennie's mindless strength, he consistently destroys soft, furry creatures while stroking them. Later in the story, he kills a pup (brown and white, perhaps a combination of mouse and rabbit symbols) while petting it; this act was prefigured by the mouse symbol. The symbol is expanded even more when it becomes embodied in Curley's wife, a soft "creature" who is accidentally killed by Lennie. This act also has its precursor: the incident in Weed with the woman who became frightened when Lennie tried to stroke her dress. More specifically, the role of Curley's wife as the agent for the dream's destruction is prefigured when she intrudes upon the men in Crooks' room and counters their illusions with scornful reality. The mouse symbol expands further and joins with the rabbit symbol when Lennie, hiding in the thicket, imagines a giant rabbit chastising him for having

destroyed the dream. This giant rabbit, as well as the mouse, is a reminder of the futility of the dream. When Lennie is killed by George, he becomes, in effect, the mouse. As Lennie's killing of the mouse prefigures the failure of his dream of rabbits, his own death is the final destroyer of that dream.

Of Mice and Men is a masterpiece of structure. Each incident is both prefigured and magnified by parallel incidents. The animal symbols, the mouse, the pup, the rabbits, interact with one another to form an intricate pattern. The widening of the effect of Lennie's actions upon the plot and the expanding of the mouse and rabbit symbols remind one of the ripples in the pool. Significantly, the ripples are made by Lennie, just as his acts and his symbols lead to the inevitable tragedy in the story. Animal symbols are associated in this novel with man's dreams and the futility of these dreams.

Another function of animal symbolism, though not as obvious and extensive as the functions previously discussed, is nevertheless worthy of comment. Steinbeck makes frequent use of domestic animals as symbolic of permanence and order. Many of the domestic animals in his stories are characters no less memorable than his human characters. Saint Katy, the pious pig in "St. Katy the Virgin," is perhaps his most notable, but no less charmingly drawn are such animals as Jody's dogs, Smasher and Doubletree Mutt; Mack's dog Darling; Steinbeck's

own Charley, the "star" of Travels with Charley; and the horses: the Lopez sisters' Lindo, Old Easter, and Sam Hamilton's Doxology.

The symbolic function of domestic animals can best be explained by citing a passage from Chapter Eleven of The Grapes of Wrath, in which Steinbeck describes a sharecropper's deserted shack:

When the first folks left, and the evening of the first day came, the hunting cats slouched in from the fields and mewed on the porch. And when no one came out, the cats crept through the open doors and walked mewing through the empty rooms. And then they went back to the fields and were wild cats from then on, hunting gophers and field mice, and sleeping in ditches in the daytime. When the night came, the bats, which had stopped at the doors for fear of light, swooped into the houses and sailed about through the empty rooms, and in a little while they stayed in dark room corners during the day, folded their wings high, and hung head-down among the rafters, and the smell of their droppings was in the empty houses.

And the mice moved in and stored seeds in corners, in boxes, in the backs of drawers in the kitchens. And weasels came in to hunt the mice, and the brown owls flew shrieking in and out again (GW, p. 119).

Cats are emblematic of the stability and order of domestic life. Almost all of Steinbeck's descriptions of farms or homesteads include one or more cats. When there is no more order, as in the case of the deserted farm house, the domestic animals, the cats, leave, and symbols of decay and desolation--mice, owls, and bats--replace them. In fact, it is the presence of a lone,

scraggly cat on his family's deserted homestead that causes Tom Joad to realize how completely the land has been abandoned.

Another symbol of order in the novel is the family's dog. The Joads take their dog, an important part of their home, with them to California. Hit by a car on the highway, the dog is the first family member to die. The dog's death foreshadows the deaths of Grampa and Granma and the gradual dissolution of the family.

A dog as symbol of familial closeness appears also in Cannery Row. Mack and the boys become an unofficial "family" when they acquire the Palace Flophouse and assume collective ownership of the dog Darling. Both Mack in Cannery Row and Mac in In Dubious Battle make friends with dogs as a means to getting a favor from the dogs' owners. In The Moon is Down, one of the devices of the leader to demoralize the people is to take away their dogs. The soldiers are surprised to notice that the people of the invaded town still have their dogs, in spite of a food shortage. To the de-humanized political machine, dogs are of no practical value, hence, of no value at all. Domestic animals in this passage not only signify normalcy and order, but human sentiment as opposed to unfeeling practicality. The same contrast is drawn in The Grapes of Wrath between the horse and the tractor. Dogs, as almost all domestic animals in Steinbeck's fiction, suggest order, peace, stability, "rightness."

In spite of the diverse patterns and motifs in which animal symbols and images appear in Steinbeck's work, the unifying purpose governing their use is the author's desire to emphasize the unity of all living things. By depicting man in animal terms, he attempts not to degrade humanity, but to show its kinship with all forms of life.⁴² Critics disagree on how successful is this attempt. Alfred Kazin states that, though Steinbeck sees the animal nature of human life from a sympathetic perspective, he understands humans only as animals.⁴³ John S. Kennedy also criticizes Steinbeck for reducing man to the level of animal.⁴⁴

Critics who see only the degrading in Steinbeck's man-animal analogies are guilty of failure to "see the whole picture" (IDB, p. 143), a failure that the Steinbeck hero does not commit. In spite of the many parallels to animal behavior, man is unique. The passage from The Grapes of Wrath previously cited asserts this uniqueness: "For man, unlike any other thing organic or inorganic in the universe, grows beyond his work, . . . walks up the stairs of his concepts. . ." (GW, p. 154).

⁴²Walter Allen believes Steinbeck is at his best when he is dealing with human life in animal terms because he is showing that "human beings are at least as dignified as animals." Allen, The Modern Novel, p. 163.

⁴³Alfred Kazin, On Native Grounds (New York, 1942), p. 397. Edmund Wilson also discusses Steinbeck's reduction of man to animal level. He believes that although it does little to make the characters individuals, the technique is skillfully managed by Steinbeck. Edmund Wilson, The Boys in the Back Room (San Francisco, 1941), p. 48.

⁴⁴Kennedy, "Life Affirmed and Dissolved," p. 228.

Man, unlike the other animals in the tide pool, has the capability for awareness of his place in the whole of life. As Frederick Bracher states, "To be aware of the whole thing and to accept one's part in it is, for Steinbeck, the saving grace which may lift man out of the tide pool."⁴⁵ Joseph Wayne, Dr. Burton, Jim Casy, Doc--all are able to "see the whole picture," and all indicate the potential of every man to do the same. Steinbeck wants his readers to see man as an animal, for the ability to accept this vision is an ability to recognize the oneness of all life.

⁴⁵Frederick Bracher, "Steinbeck and the Biological View of Man," Pacific Spectator, II (Winter, 1948), 29.

CHAPTER IV

BIRTH AND DEATH SYMBOLISM

Steinbeck, the naturalist, sees man's basic animality and his identification with the land as manifestations of the oneness of man and nature. As part of nature, man participates in the cycle of birth, growth, and death. Steinbeck sees human fecundity as related to the fertility of the land. Birth and death are closely related in Steinbeck's philosophy as expressions of the absoluteness of the natural cycle. Ma Joad capsulizes Steinbeck's view of birth and death in The Grapes of Wrath:

" . . . dyin' is a piece of all dyin', and bearin' is a piece of all bearin', and bearin' and dyin' is two pieces of the same thing' (GW, p. 217).

Human births and deaths reaffirm the continuity of all life. Significantly, themes of birth and death are often juxtaposed in Steinbeck's fiction, and both themes are often accompanied by nature symbols to emphasize the unity of both in the natural cycle.

The best fictional expression of the oneness of birth and death is The Red Pony. Composed of four sections, the novelette concerns the initiation of a young boy into the mysteries of the natural cycle. Each episode deals with some aspect of the novel's unifying theme, the life-death cycle.¹

¹Arnold L. Goldsmith, "Thematic Rhythm in The Red Pony," College English, 26 (February, 1956), 392.

In Part One, "The Gift," Jody is initiated into an awareness of death when a red pony, given to him by his father, becomes ill and dies. Part Two, "The Great Mountains," concerns an old man who has come to the mountains to die. In "The Promise," Jody is initiated into the full cycle when he is given the responsibility of caring for a mare from the conception to the birth of her colt, a birth which is accomplished only through the mare's death. The final section, "The Leader of the People," concerns the death of an old way of life and its replacement with a new order. Nature symbols accompany each of the four variations upon the life-death theme.

The novel's most pervasive life-death symbols are a mossy tub that catches spring water and a cypress tree upon which hogs are hung to be slaughtered. The former is a symbol of life, the latter, of death.

Situated near a brush line, the tub is a place of comfort and security for Jody:

This place had grown to be a center-point for Jody. When he had been punished, the cool green grass and the stinging water soothed him. When he had been mean the biting acid of meanness left him at the brush line. When he sat in the grass and listened to the pulsing stream, the barriers set up in his mind by the stern day went down to ruin (RP, p. 179).

It is also a place of timelessness,² as when Jody sits by the tub and dreams of the great adventures he will have with his new horse: "As usual the water place eliminated time and distance" (RP, p. 189).

Directly opposed to the mossy tub symbol is the cypress tree. This is a place of cruelty, fear, and ugliness to Jody:

On the other hand, the black cypress tree by the bunkhouse was as repulsive as the water-tub was dear; for to this tree all the pigs came, sooner or later, to be slaughtered. Pig killing was fascinating, with the screaming and the blood, but it made Jody's heart beat so fast that it hurt him. After the pigs were scalded. . . Jody had to go to the water-tub to sit in the grass until his heart grew quiet. The water-tub and the black cypress were opposites and enemies (RP, p. 179).

The geographical proximity of the two places and the frequency of their concurrence in the novel points to the close relationship between life and death. Jody is constantly moving from one place to the other. At the opening of "The Gift," both places are described as visited by Jody. On the way to the barn to see the red pony for the first time, Jody passes the cypress tree, the symbol that foreshadows the pony's death. In "The Great Mountains," Jody is consoled after meanly killing a small bird by drinking from the tub and washing the blood from his hands in the cold water. Later, from the grass near the brush line, he watches old Gitano disappear into the mountains to die. At one point in "The Promise" Jody finds himself thinking of the mare Nellie and the

²Ibid., p. 394.

colt while he is under the black cypress, so he quickly walks to the brush line "to counteract any evil result of that bad conjunction" (RP, p. 180). Just as the tree and the spring are part of nature, so are the forces they represent. Though the one place is a comfort and an inspiration to the boy and the other a threat, Jody must learn to reconcile them, and what they symbolize, as belonging to the natural pattern.

The lesson of the unity of life and death that Jody must learn is represented also by the two horses that he is given. The red pony Bagilan represents Jody's initial encounter with physical death. The care of the mare Nellie, from the conception of her colt to its birth, initiates Jody into the violent experience of birth. Each of these horses teaches him some insight into birth and death as part of the cycle.

The red pony is given to Jody by his father, who obtained the horse from a show that had gone broke. Artificial beauty is suggested by the horse; it is a show horse with an embellished red morocco saddle. Both Billy Buck and Carl Tiflin show their disgust for show horses, and Carl admonishes his son against turning Gabilan into a trick horse.³ The pony has an unusual origin (a show) and an equally "freakish" death; "'a little rain don't hurt a horse,'" Billy Buck assures Jody (RP, p. 150), but the rain compounded by Jody's carelessness, kills this horse.

³See also Peter Lisca, The Wide World of John Steinbeck (New Brunswick, 1958), p. 101.

The superficiality of the pony's beauty and the anomaly of its origin indicate the incompleteness of the lesson Jody learns from its death. His reaction to the death is anger; he rages against the buzzards that light on the carcass of the pony. By contrast, his father's passive acceptance of the death, implied by his admonition, "'Jody, . . .the buzzards didn't kill the pony. Don't you know that?'" (RP, p. 159) draws a severe reprimand from Billy Buck: "'Course he knows it, . . .Jesus Christ! man, can't you see how he'd feel about it?'" (RP, p. 160). The mature response is a combination of feeling and acceptance, a perspective which recognizes the absoluteness of death while feeling the pain of it.⁴ The experience with the red pony awakens Jody to man's fallibility (he begins to distrust Billy Buck, who had assured him the pony would recover) and to death's cruelty, but the boy has yet to learn acceptance.

By contrast, Jody's experience with the mare Nellie and the birth of her colt completes his initiation into the life-death cycle. This colt does not appear magically out of nowhere; Jody witnesses its violent conception and its equally violent birth. The mare undergoes a healthy, normal, but to Jody, endless, pregnancy, only to suffer a painful delivery

⁴Ibid., p. 102

which results in her death to save her colt. The birth occurs in the midst of death, and from it, Jody learns how precious life is:

He tried to be glad because of the colt, but the bloody face, and the haunted, tired eyes of Billy Buck hung in the air ahead of him (RP, p. 186).

Implied in the title "The Promise" is the idea that the colt, because of Jody's participation in its birth and the death of its mother, promises a life more precious than the red pony did. Jody's initiation into the oneness of birth and death and the violence, cruelty, and promise of nature is complete.

Another important symbol associated with life and death is the mountains. The Salinas Valley, where Jody lives, is bordered by two mountain ranges, the Gabilans, on the east, and the Santa Lucias, on the west. To Jody the Gabilans are "jolly mountains," representing life: "people lived there, and battles had been fought against the Mexicans on the slopes" (RP, p. 162). The western mountains, however, are dark and savage, full of "a purple-like despair."⁵ It is to these mountains that the old Gitano journeys to die. Symbolically, the Tiflin ranch lies in a valley between the two ranges.⁶ The mountains, then, are both a life and a death symbol.

⁵This feeling of Jody's for the mountains is no doubt reminiscent of Steinbeck's own boyhood feeling. The contrast of the two mountain ranges is repeated in East of Eden (p.1).

⁶Lisca, Wide World, p. 102.

To Jody the mountains represent the mystery of life.⁷ He longs to know what is beyond them, as man longs to know and experience life. Man, however, cannot know what is on the other side of the mountains until he crosses them; he cannot know the full meaning of life until he has lived it, and then he arrives at the ocean which is death. Significantly, in the morning (man's youth) the peaks invite Jody, yet in the evening (age and approaching death) they frighten him. The mountains are an ambivalent symbol, representing both the experience of life and the death which alone reveals the meaning of life.

The importance of the mountains as symbolic of death is heightened by the figure of Gitano, who has come to the Tiflin ranch, his birthplace, to die. Gitano is identified with the mountains:

Gitano was mysterious like the mountains. There were ranges back as far as you could see, but behind the last range piled up against the sky there was a great unknown country. And Gitano was an old man, until you got to the dull dark eyes. And in behind them was some unknown thing (RP, p. 169).

Significantly, he seems "more at home in the evening," and is irresistibly drawn to the mountains of the evening as Jody is drawn to the man himself.

⁷See also Goldsmith, "Thematic Rhythm," p. 393.

A second symbol identified with Gitano is the ancient nag, Old Easter, who is too old to work and is ready to die. Carl cruelly drives home the analogy between man and horse when he suggests that "'Old things ought to be put out of their misery. . . '" (RP, p. 167). Billy Buck responds with, "'They got a right to rest after they worked all of their life'" (RP, p. 167). Gitano feels affection for the old horse, and symbolically rides him into the mountains to die. As the mountains are an extension of Gitano, the old man is an extension of the horse. As Jody watches from the brush line "a black speck crawling up the farthest ridge" (RP, p. 171), man, horse, and mountains seem to blend into one.⁸ Jody is filled simultaneously with "a nameless sorrow" and a sharp longing (RP, p. 171), a combination of a desire for experience and a death-wish.

In contrast to the violence and pain accompanying the deaths of the horses, "The Great Mountains" deals with peaceful death. The story expresses the theme that man should come "home" to die, that death may be meaningful and symbolic, and expression of the cyclical character of nature. The gypsy was born in the mountains and now returns to the origin of life to experience the mystery that is death.

⁸Ibid., p. 394.

The fourth section, "The Leader of the People," deals with death and rebirth on a symbolic, figurative level. Jody's grandfather, with his endless stories about the westering movement he led, represents a past age of heroism and adventure that has died. The grandfather realizes the death of an era and mourns it. Steinbeck is not clear about what will replace it. The grandfather is discouraged by the new lack of heroism that reduces man to hunting mice in haystacks. More importantly, however, there is a faint promise implicit in Jody's compassion and sympathy for his grandfather. Perhaps Jody will be the new leader of the people.⁹

Spiritual and symbolic, as well as physical, death and birth are recurrent throughout Steinbeck's fiction. Figurative death and rebirth is an important theme of The Grapes of Wrath. Peter Lisca has traced concurrent death and birth movements throughout the novel: the "death" of the family unit and the "birth" of the communal unit.¹⁰ The novel is, indeed, a series of beginnings and endings, symbolized by the juxtaposition of life and death scenes.

Almost every ending introduces a new beginning. The drought which devastates the land forces the sharecroppers to begin new lives as migrants. Grampa's death, symbolizing the dissolution of the Joad family unit,¹¹ occurs in a tent

⁹Ibid., p. 392.

¹⁰Lisca, Wide World, p. 172.

¹¹Ibid.

borrowed from another family, the Wilsons. The two families are drawn close together, having shared the experience of Grampa's death, and the uniting of the Joads and the Wilsons marks the birth of the communal spirit which will replace family unity. The death of Granma (juxtaposed with a "life" scene--Connie and Rose of Sharon make love in the back of the truck while Granma is dying) accompanies the family's entrance into California. Grampa's and Granma's deaths are symbolic of an "inability to adjust to the changed conditions the migration imposes upon the family."¹² Furthermore, the death of the Joads' former agrarian way of life is represented by these two deaths.¹³ The symbolic beginning associated with these deaths, then, is the coming life of migration and deprivation which unites the dispossessed into a brotherhood.

Tom Joad's recognition of the oneness of humanity is accompanied by symbols of death and rebirth. His desire to carry on the work of Casy is generated in part by Casy's murder. The scene in which Tom reveals his plans to his mother is replete with images of birth. As has been pointed out, the scene occurs in a thicket by a symbolic river. The conditions of their meeting approximate a prenatal state. The

¹²Warren French, John Steinbeck (New York, 1961), p. 104.

¹³Harry Slochower, No Voice is Wholly Lost (New York, 1945), p. 300.

cave is like a womb; it is guarded by "a great mound of wild blackberry bushes" (GW, p. 432); the inside is so dark and damp that contact between mother and son is physical; and the mother gives the son food. After announcing his conversion, Tom exits from the "womb" in a symbolic rebirth.¹⁴

The stillbirth of Rose of Sharon's child, itself a paradox of birth and death, creates the occasion for two symbolic affirmations of life. Uncle John's sending the child's body downstream to be a symbol is an act of promise. So is the final scene in which Rose of Sharon gives her milk to a dying man. Steinbeck is asserting throughout The Grapes of Wrath that as out of death comes life, out of despair comes hope. Both "dyin'" and "bearin'" are indeed "pieces of the same thing."

This life-from-death motif is repeated to a lesser extent in other works. In two short stories the death of a somber, prudish character releases his survivor from a restrictive way of life. In Pastures of Heaven the death of Pat Humbert's aged parents gives Pat new life, symbolized by the blooming rose bush over his door and by the parlor he redecorates. In "The Harness" a husband's unsuccessful attempt to free himself from his dead wife's influence is

¹⁴Lisca, Wide World, p. 174.

symbolized by the back brace he discards and the sweet pea crop he cultivates. Ethan Hawley's corruption in The Winter of Our Discontent is presented in imagery suggestive of death and rebirth. The rebirth of Ethan as a dishonest man begins on Good Friday with a Tarot-card prophecy preceded by Ethan's figurative spiritual death and rebirth:¹⁵

I straightened up and moved on and they didn't even know it had happened. I understand how people once believed the devil could take possession. I'm not sure I don't believe it. Possession! The seething birth of something foreign with every nerve resisting and losing the fight and settling back beaten to make peace with the invader (WD, p. 77).

When the full realization of his dishonesty drives him to despair, instead of committing suicide, he symbolically passes the hope for honesty and courage to his daughter, thus implying for Ethan a rebirth of honor.

The life-from-death theme is developed to some extent in East of Eden in connection with Samuel Hamilton. Samuel represents what to Steinbeck must be the proper attitude toward death. Having lived a full life, Samuel quietly rages against death, but realizes he must accept it. His last gift to Adam is the truth about Cathy, which awakens Adam from his dream world and gives him new life based in reality instead of illusion. Significantly, Adam's visit to Cathy, when he tells her

¹⁵ Donna Gerstenberger, "Steinbeck's American Waste Land," Modern Fiction Studies, II (Spring, 1965), 63.

of his new freedom, occurs on the day of Samuel's funeral. Samuel dies in March, the season of flowering; from the courage and wisdom that comes from facing death, he has given Adam a gift of life, a promise of ruling over evil. This promise is repeated at the end of the novel when the dying Adam forgives his son Cal. With his forgiveness he is giving Cal the option of a new life, a life of hope and pride in the ability to conquer evil.

The death-and-rebirth motif is handled with variation in some novels as a kind of mystical transfiguration which is accomplished after death. It has already been noted that Joseph Wayne's father undergoes a type of transfiguration in To a God Unknown when his spirit symbolically enters the oak tree. Joseph's becoming the rain through his sacrifice is another type of "rebirth" through transfiguration. In a comic vein, the death of Danny in Tortilla Flat transforms him into some kind of super-human, mythical figure:

Where Danny went, a magnificent madness followed. It is passionately averred in Tortilla Flat that Danny alone drank three gallons of wine. It must be remembered, however, that Danny is now a god. In a few years it may be thirty gallons. In twenty years it may be plainly remembered that the clouds flamed and spelled DANNY in tremendous letters; that the moon dripped blood; that the wolf of the world bayed prophetically from the mountains of the Milky Way (TF, p. 125).

In each of these cases a nature symbol signifies the transformation after death: the oak, the rain, and the moon dripping blood.

Steinbeck's attitude toward death is that of the naturalist. Death is no profound anomaly, no mystery to be feared or mourned, but a manifestation of the continuous cycle of birth, growth, and death. Since it completes and perpetuates the cycle, death reaffirms life. Spiritual or figurative death and rebirth have much the same function, and so physical and spiritual death are depicted in similar images and symbols.

The other end of the cycle, intricately related to death, is fertility, or birth. To a God Unknown, with its interwoven themes of fertility and death, develops, as we have seen, the continuity of the cycle. A related theme, also developed in this novel, is the sexual character of man's relation to the land. This theme is introduced most explicitly in Joseph's first visit to the land. Sexual images describe the land; the valley is enclosed by "two flanks of the coast range," and at its southern end "a pass opened in the hills and let out the river" (TGU, p. 6). Joseph, riding across his new land, senses a "curious femaleness" about the land and becomes "timid and yet eager, as a young man who slips out to a rendezvous with a wise and beautiful woman" (TGU, p. 8).

His sexual feeling for the land is symbolized by a passage suggesting a sexual union with the land:

Then the exuberance grew to be a sharp pain that ran through his body in a hot river. He flung himself face downward on the grass and pressed his cheek against the wet stems. His fingers gripped the wet grass and tore it out, and gripped again. His thighs beat heavily on the earth.

For a moment the land had been his wife (TGU, p. 14).

Afterward the author calls the reader's attention to a "sharp black pine tree" that "pierced the moon and was withdrawn as the moon arose" (TGU, p. 15).¹⁶

The most explicit sexual passage using land symbols is the account of Joseph and Elizabeth's crossing the mountain pass to the valley after their wedding. The movement through the pass is the symbolic consummation of their marriage. Following the rhythm of the sex act, the "horses hunched along stiffly, pounding the air with heads. . .like hammers" (TGU, p. 94), its climax (the walk through the pass), and its descending movement.

The valley as soon from above is pictured in sexual images:

The mountain was split. Two naked shoulders of smooth limestone dropped cleanly down, verging a little together, and at the bottom there was only room for the river bed (TGU, p. 94).

In the middle of the river there is a huge monolithic rock "cutting and mangling the current like a boat prow driving upstream making an angry swirling whisper" (TGU, p. 95).

¹⁶Stanley Edgar Hyman discusses the moon as a sexual symbol in Steinbeck's fiction. See Hyman, "Some Notes on John Steinbeck," Antioch Review, II (June, 1942), 189-190.

Elizabeth is afraid to look at the river and lets Joseph lead her through the pass with her eyes closed.

Elizabeth's feelings as they go through the pass are like those of a bride on her wedding night. The journey through the pass represents to her the transformation from girl to woman that marriage brings:

'There may be pains more sharp than delight, Elizabeth, like sucking a hot peppermint that burns your tongue. The bitterness of being a woman may be an ecstasy' (TGU, p. 99).

The sexual overtones of the passage are explicit enough, but as usual, Steinbeck overstates the analogy :

'Yesterday we were married and it was no marriage. This is our marriage--through the pass--entering the passage like sperm and egg that have become a single unit of pregnancy. This is a symbol of the undistorted real' (TGU, pp. 96-97).

Once again the overstatement mars the effectiveness of the images and symbols.

To a God Unknown also reveals Steinbeck's attitude toward childbirth. To Steinbeck, the birth, not the child, is the important thing:

'Yes--the child is precious, but not so precious as the bearing of it. That is as real as a mountain. That is a tie to the earth' (TGU, p. 169).

Because childbearing is a "tie to the earth," the mother becomes a kind of "earth mother" in her pregnancy. Pregnant women in Steinbeck's fiction always exhibit a mysterious

"wisdom of childbearing" (TGU, p. 188). Elizabeth understands Joseph's reverence for the oak tree only when she is given insight by her pregnancy. Pregnancy gives Rose of Sharon a new maturity and beauty which Steinbeck suggests she would not otherwise have. In Burning Bright the pregnant Mordeen has a new beauty in the eyes of her husband.

Burning Bright is Steinbeck's only attempt to treat human fecundity as a major theme. The play-novelette concerns the desire of the principal character, Joe Saul, to fulfill his manhood by fathering a child. His wife Mordeen, suspecting his sterility, gives him a child fathered by another man. The lesson to be learned by Joe Saul is similar to Joseph Wayne's attitude toward childbirth and Jim Casy's view of life as holy. It is not the individual human life that is important, but the perpetuation of the entire human species:

'I know,' he said. 'I had to walk into the black to know--to know that every man is father to all children and every child must have all men as father. This is not a little piece of private property, registered and fenced and separated. . . . This is the Child.' 17

The unity-of-all-life theme expressed in biological and humanistic terms elsewhere in Steinbeck's fiction is developed in Burning Bright partly by the universality of setting and language. Each of the play-novelette's three acts is set in

¹⁷John Steinbeck, Burning Bright (New York, 1950), p.158.

a different context: the circus, the farm, and the sea. Steinbeck explained that the purpose of the three settings is "to indicate a universality of experience" by placing the story "in the hands of three professions which have long and continuing traditions."¹⁸ The universal language, he claimed, is used "to lift the story to the parable expression of the morality plays."¹⁹ Another convention which attempts to emphasize universality is the masking of the players in the last scene to conceal their identity. Steinbeck wants this family to represent the "family of man."

Burning Bright was generally proclaimed a failure by critics. The language and the settings appeared to critics to be "an unnecessary bit of stage conjuring."²⁰ Another complaint is that the unceremonious and un-symbolic death of the child's real father, Victor (he is hit on the head and dumped off a ship by Friend Ed), is inconsistent with the "all that lives is holy" theme.²¹ When the play appeared on Broadway in November, 1950, audiences rejected it;²² the language was considered by the audience as dirty, and the subject

¹⁸John Steinbeck, "Critics, Critics, Burning Bright," Saturday Review, 33 (November 11, 1950), 20.

¹⁹Ibid.

²⁰Lisca, Wide World, p. 255.

²¹Joseph Fontenrose, John Steinbeck: An Introduction and Interpretation, American Authors and Critics Series (New York, 1963), p. 116.

²²Lisca, Wide World, p. 252. It ran for only two weeks.

of pregnancy was a matter for laughter.²³ Steinbeck at first vehemently defended his play,²⁴ but later admitted that "the play was a failure in writing, that it was too abstract, that it preached too much, and that the audience was always a step ahead of it."²⁵ Burning Bright appears to be another example of Steinbeck's tendency to spoil the artistry of his work by overstating his theme.

The significance of Burning Bright lies in its contribution to the recurring theme of the unity of all life. Couched in the imagery of fertility, pregnancy, and birth, it reinforces the idea of life as holy because it is a part of the cycle of nature. Birth, sex, and death, because they are natural, are full of mystery and wonder. All reaffirm the absoluteness and eternality of nature. Man can rejoice at birth and accept death if he sees both in the context of the unity of nature.

²³Steinbeck, "Critics, Critics," p. 20.

²⁴Ibid.

²⁵Lisca, Wide World, p. 258.

CHAPTER V

SEA SYMBOLISM

Though the land is a primary source for the majority of the nature symbolism in Steinbeck's fiction, Steinbeck's use of the sea as a setting and a source of nature symbolism in several works is significant enough to warrant brief discussion.¹ Traditionally, the sea, "a mediating agent between life and death," represents both the source and the goal of life.² It can suggest simultaneously death and the return to the womb. Steinbeck is aware of the sense of the unknown, the unconscious implied in the symbol of the sea as the primal and ultimate condition of life. This meaning of the sea is suggested in "The Great Mountains" section of The Red Pony; the mountains that represent both death and the mystery of life lead ultimately to the ocean. The traditional connotation of the sea symbol harmonizes with Steinbeck's consciousness of the unity of man and nature. As man is one with the land, so is he one with the sea. Furthermore, man has an intuitive knowledge of his kinship with both land and sea. Sea symbolism, then, has a function in Steinbeck's fiction essentially similar to that of the land.

¹The tide pool metaphor, discussed in Chapter III of this thesis, attests to the importance of the sea in Steinbeck's view as a microcosm of the natural world.

²Juan Eduardo Cirlot, A Dictionary of Symbols, trans. Jack Sage (New York, 1962), p. 268.

Steinbeck's first and last novels use the sea as a setting and as a major symbol. In Cup of Gold the sea represents adventure and romantic illusion. A harbor town is the setting of The Winter of Our Discontent, a novel in which the sea is used in connection with death and with the "safe place" theme. The sea in The Pearl, Steinbeck's only other major work to use the sea artistically, is the source of the novel's major symbol, "the pearl of the world." This chapter will discuss Steinbeck's artistic use of the sea in these three novels.

Though it is not the primary symbol in Cup of Gold, the sea does have some significance in the context of the dream motif introduced into Steinbeck's fiction with this novel. To the young Henry Morgan, who dreams of being a pirate in the West Indies, the sea is a means for realizing his goal. It is symbolic of adventure and the unknown: "'my dream is over the sea that I do not know'" (CG, p. 25). Beyond the sea lie mysterious lands conquered by violence and filled with treasure for plunder.

Henry's romantic self-image is bound up with his dream of traveling the seas as a pirate. He identifies, therefore, with the sea:

Four wild days the persistent storm chased them out to sea with the ship in joy at the struggle. . . . And in this time Henry exulted like a young god. The wind's frenzy was his frenzy. . . a chanting exultation filled his chest to bursting--joy like pain. . . . Ah! to be a god and ride on the storm! not under it. Here was the intoxication of the winds, a desire which satisfied desire while it led his yearning onward. He cried for the shoulders of omnipotence, and the elements blew into his muscles a new strength (CG, pp. 59-60).

Henry's identification with the sea is like Joseph Wayne's paternal-sexual feeling for the land. The sea is Henry's "mother and his mistress, and the goddess who might command him and find him ready and alert for service" (CG, p. 86). His kinship with the sea extends to the ships that sail the waters. Steinbeck compares Henry's sensitive handling of a ship to a "man, who, laying his head on his mistress' breast, reads the flux of her passions in her breathing" (CG, p. 88).

Henry's kinship with the sea lasts only as long as his dreams. When he sees his dreams for what they are, empty, insatiable, and foolish, he gives up the life of a pirate and succumbs to the strictures of society. As a symbol of romantic illusion, the sea has no meaning for Henry once he has lost his ability to dream.

Steinbeck does not develop extensively the sea symbolism in this novel. Nevertheless, suggested in the sea as symbol of the unknown is the connotation that he later gives it when he uses it to represent death. The sea as a death symbol appears briefly in To a God Unknown accompanying Elizabeth's death (she overlooks the sea from a mountain ridge and becomes nostalgic for her childhood) and in connection with the old man who sacrifices to the setting sun. In The Winter of Our Discontent, death as well as the other possible implications of the sea symbol are present to enrich it and make it one of the novel's dominant symbols.

The Winter of Our Discontent is set in the fictional coast town of New Baytown, New York, a once-great harbor that has dissipated since the end of the whaling era. The harbor and the sea bind the principal character, Ethan Hawley, spiritually with his seafaring ancestors. The focal point for Ethan's connection with his heritage is a cave-like niche near the Hawley dock in the Old Harbor. Here Ethan can visualize his grandfather, symbol of the Hawley pride, and here he can come for comfort and strength. The Old Harbor place is this novel's representative of Steinbeck's "spirit of place" motif:

It's a spot in which to wonder about things. . . .
 I wondered whether all men have a Place, or need a
 Place, or want one and have none.

.
 Of course I know of the theories of back to the womb
 and the death-wish, and these may be true of some men,
 but I don't think they are true of me, except
 as easy ways of saying something that isn't
 easy. I call whatever happens in the Place
 'taking stock.' Some others might call it
 prayer, and maybe it would be the same thing
 (WD, p. 44).

The Old Harbor place is the setting for the novel's two key scenes revealing the spiritual crisis of Ethan. He first goes to the place to "take stock" after he has been offered a bribe by a wholesale food salesman and has been intrigued by a friend's prophecy of wealth. The scene reveals the struggle within Ethan between on the one hand, his dissatisfaction with his lot as a grocery clerk and desire for wealth triggered by the prophecy and the bribe, and on the other, his obligation to maintain his own integrity and the honor of the Hawley family. The two sides of the struggle are symbolized by a star rising over the harbor, which Ethan interprets to be a sign of good fortune, and by an imaginary dialogue with his grandfather recalling the grandfather's bitterness over the burning of a Hawley ship for money.

This first harbor scene has its counterpart in Ethan's attempted suicide at the end of the novel. The familiar implications of the "safe place" are present in this scene,

but the sea symbol has added connotations of death. Certain images appear throughout the novel to prepare the reader for the sea-as-death symbol. One of these images is of a ship, introduced at the Old Harbor place where Ethan sees the lights of a ship heading into the channel. His symbolic death and rebirth, discussed in the preceding chapter of this thesis, is accompanied by his feeling of being driven "like a helpless ship, dismantled before it could shorten sail" (WD, p.77). Once he has resolved to gain wealth by dishonest means, his deciding what strategy he will follow is compared to "a great ship being turned and bunted and shoved about and pulled around by many small tugs" (WD, p. 93). These ship metaphors clearly represent Ethan in his moral dilemma. Tugged and battered about, and in danger of sinking from corruption, as did the grandfather's ship, the Belle-Adair, Ethan nevertheless manages to find the harbor.

Images of water also anticipate the last scene. In his dreams Ethan sees himself "standing on the edge of black water" (WD, p. 86); this image describes Ethan's moral and spiritual crisis. Ethan dreams of Danny Taylor, whom he later destroys out of a desire for wealth: "I heard his voice, distorted and thick like words spoken under water." In this dream Danny appears to be "melting" (WD, p. 103).

In the last scene of the novel, the sea is for Ethan a "warm bath" which gives him a sensation of freedom from physical incumbrance, usually associated with death. Light and dark imagery in this scene adds to the death symbolism of the Old Harbor place. Once again the star appears, though this time it is not a symbol of fortune but of Ethan's lost honor: "Then I could see a star--late rising, too late rising over the edge" (WD, p. 280). A ship also reappears, but now its mast light is not burning. Ethan's desire to kill himself is a longing to return "to the other side of home where the lights are given" (WD, p. 281). His own honor is lost; his own light is out. Then he thinks of his daughter's integrity, symbolized by the talisman that "gathered very bit of light there was and seemed. . .dark red" (WD, p. 281), and realizes that she will never let the light go out. The Harbor Place that was to be a symbol of death is now a symbol of rebirth. Ethan fights the water to get out of the cave, to struggle from the womb in a desperate effort to be reborn.

In this novel the sea carries the traditional symbolic connotations as the source and goal of life. As a "safe place" it suggests the need to return to the womb, to confront life in its primal state. As the place of Ethan's ancestors, it represents a tie with the past, a source of identity. The

sea also represents death, the ultimate goal of life; the sea is the site of Ethan's expression of a death-wish. The meaning of The Winter of Our Discontent is enriched by the multiple suggestions hidden in the symbol of the sea.

The sea is both the setting and an important symbol of the allegorical novel, The Pearl. Most importantly, however, it furnishes the novel's central symbol, the "pearl of the world." The Pearl is a moral allegory, a tale of good and evil. Kino, the central character, finds a magnificent pearl in the sea and dreams of the wealth and good fortune the gem will bring him and his family. Ironically, the beautiful pearl brings him only evil.

The irony of the pearl symbol is implicit in the epithets applied to it: "the pearl of the world" and "the pearl of great price." When Kino finds the pearl, it represents a means of escaping the poverty, ignorance, and social oppression of his people:

And in the incandescence of the pearl the pictures formed of the things Kino's mind had considered in the past and had given up as impossible (Pearl, p. 485).

The pearl promises for Kino worldly fortune. It is a "guarantee of the future," a "poultice against illness and a wall against insult" (Pearl, p. 496). It promises to be a "pearl of the world;" it will broaden Kino's world considerably.

What the pearl actually does is to broaden Kino's world, not by making possible wealth and promise, but by admitting greed, fear, and evil into it. When the news of Kino's pearl reaches the town, "the essence of pearl mixed with the essence of men and a curious dark residue was precipitated" (Pearl, p. 486). The pearl awakens in the townspeople a greed so great that it threatens the lives of Kino and his family.

More important for the allegory is the danger the pearl threatens for Kino's soul. His magnificent dreams for the future are spoiled by growing fear and suspicion. He buries the pearl in the sand floor of his hut, then re-buries it in fear that the hiding place will be discovered. This action is the first indication of the growing suspicion in Kino's mind. Several times his hut is searched and he is attacked by "dark thing[s]" looking for the pearl. The atmosphere of fear and evil is heightened by the mysteriousness of these figures. They are never identified or even discerned clearly in the darkness; their presence is only felt.

Another artistic device that helps create the atmosphere of evil is the light and darkness imagery. Light, of course, is goodness, except when it is associated with the "ghostly gleam" of the pearl. Evil is signified by darkness. The night

air is considered by the Indians to be poisonous. The pearl buyers' offices, where the buyers attempt to cheat Kino of his pearl, do not admit much light, "only a soft gloom" (Pearl, p. 501). The doctor and the priest, both of whom attempt to cheat Kino, visit his hut at night. Kino's unknown assailants always attack in the darkness, which prohibits their identification as anything but unknown, unseen forces. At one point Juana lights a consecrated candle to ward off the evil brought by these "dark ones."

When Kino is forced to flee rather than give up the pearl that has become his soul, he flees at night and is thereafter identified with the darkness: "'It is all darkness. . .and shape of darkness'" (Pearl, p. 511). The darkness of Kino is a darkness of spirit; as his misfortunes grow, he journeys deeper into spiritual blackness.³

The growing aura of evil surrounding the pearl causes Juana to fear it and to plead with Kino to throw it back into the sea. But Kino, his brain still "cozened" with the pearl's beauty, insists upon keeping it. The growing evil effect of the pearl upon Kino's soul is indicated when he strikes Juana as she is attempting to throw away the pearl:

³Harry Morris, "The Pearl: Realism and Allegory," English Journal, 52 (October, 1963), 490.

Kino looked down at her and his teeth were bared. He hissed at her like a snake, and Juana stared at him with wide unfrightened eyes, like a sheep before the butcher. She knew there was murder in him. . . . And then the rage left him and a sick disgust took its place (Pearl, p. 508).

The pearl has now brought discord between husband and wife and self-disgust to Kino. Shortly afterward, when Kino kills one of the "dark ones" that has come to steal his pearl, he realizes how inextricably he is bound to the pearl: "'This pearl has become my soul,' said Kino. 'If I give it up I shall lose my soul'" (Pearl, p. 513). Now when he looks into the pearl, instead of finding his customary vision of wealth and promise of the future, he sees only the evil and horror it has brought:

He looked into his pearl to find his vision. 'When we sell it at last, I will have a rifle,' he said, and he looked into the shining surface for his rifle, but he saw only a huddled dark body on the ground with shining blood dripping from its throat. And he said quickly, 'We will be married in a great church.' And in the pearl he saw Juana with her beaten face crawling home through the night. 'Our son must learn to read,' he said frantically. And there in the pearl Coyotito's face, thick and feverish from the medicine (Pearl, p. 515).

However, Kino cannot now part with the pearl, for its evil has become too much a part of his fate. Kino and Juana must leave

the Indian village with the pearl and flee to safety, for they cannot have peace there as long as Kino possesses the pearl. They become fugitives, pursued into the mountains by the "dark ones."

Only after this pursuit results in the shooting of the baby Coyotito does Kino give up the pearl that has become his soul. In the novel's last scene, Kino and Juana return to the village significantly, in the "golden afternoon," the sun shining on them so that "they seemed to carry two towers of darkness with them" (Pearl, p. 526), and walk to the edge of the Gulf, where Kino throws the pearl back into the ocean. The pearl has indeed been a "pearl of the world." To Kino, it was not only the greatest pearl in the world, but promised riches that would make him part of the world he had been denied because of his poverty and ignorance. But the pearl brought only the world's evils: fear, avarice, hatred, and suspicion. Kino's final act of throwing away the pearl symbolizes his rejection of both worlds--the world of wealth and status and the world of evil. The "great price" of the pearl was the lesson about good and evil that Kino learned at the expense of his son's death.

As allegory, The Pearl lends itself to a variety of interpretations. Basically, it is a spiritual allegory, in one sense a story of initiation, in another, a story of "the fall."

Kino is in a state of ignorance from which the pearl promises to release him. The pearl, superficially and deceitfully beautiful, charms Kino into believing in its ability to bring about greater knowledge. The knowledge that it brings is the knowledge of evil, and the extent of Kino's fall is measured by the identification of his soul with the pearl.

The significance of the ending is a subject of critical controversy. Is Kino's act of throwing back the pearl a gesture of noble renunciation or of defeatism? Warren French interprets the ending as a symbol of defeatism. Kino is not only rejecting the materialism symbolized by the pearl, but is accepting the way of life he had hoped to escape. French sees Kino not as a noble figure, but as a pathetic figure defeated by the world.⁴ Likewise, Charles C. Walcutt views Kino's symbolic gesture as a "desperate withdrawal from the world that has hurt him."⁵ Peter Lisca, however, views it as restoring dignity and pride to Kino.⁶ To Harry Morris it is indicative of Kino's determination to apply the knowledge of good and evil that he has acquired and to attempt to win his salvation.⁷ As Steinbeck has frequently argued, in such

⁴Warren French, John Steinbeck (New York, 1961), p. 139.

⁵Charles Child Walcutt, American Literary Naturalism, A Divided Stream (Minneapolis, 1956), p. 267.

⁶Peter Lisca, The Wide World of John Steinbeck (New Brunswick, 1958), p. 227.

⁷Morris, "Realism and Allegory," p. 494.

novels as Cannery Row and The Wayward Bus, the price of civilization is sometimes the soul. Kino symbolically rejects the world that has taught him evil at the expense of his soul. Whether or not his rejection is courageous or cowardly is up to the reader to judge.

If the pearl is symbolic of the world and the evil that exists in it, then the sea, from which the pearl comes and to which it returns, has symbolic significance as both the beginning and the end of life. The beach houses of the Indians huddle along the edge of the sea; they hover between the civilized world and the vast expanse of ocean, not really a part of either life or death. From the sea Kino finds the pearl that he thinks will allow him to experience life. When this life proves perilous and filled with evil, he rejects it by throwing the pearl back into its source, the sea. The sea as traditionally symbolic of the primal condition is reinforced in this novel.

The sea symbol contains for Steinbeck some of the same implications inherent in the land symbol. Like the land, the sea is a source of purity, strength and identity, as suggested by the "safe place" connotations given it in The Winter of Our Discontent. Like the land, it can be a symbolic expression of "the dream." Most importantly, it represents life in its most basic form, suggesting both the prenatal state and death. Steinbeck is aware of all these connotations when he employs the sea as a symbol.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

This study of Steinbeck's use of nature symbolism was approached without any preconceived idea of what conclusion would be reached, indeed, with only the slightest hope of arriving at any coherent conclusion whatsoever. Steinbeck's work seems to defy a comprehensive critical statement, for his themes and subject matter are so diverse and his technique so varied that any attempt at pigeonholing him as a writer carries with it the risk of being incomplete and contradictory. A survey of Steinbeck criticism reveals the difficulty of coming to any simple conclusions about his art. What to one critic is Steinbeck's greatest achievement is to another his most abominable failure. The critical chaos surrounding Steinbeck's work led understandably to the author's general disdain for criticism as "a kind of ill tempered parlor game in which nobody gets kissed."¹ It is partly because of the vast diversity of critical opinion that this thesis makes little attempt to deal with the critics and approaches conclusions with some trepidation.

¹John Steinbeck, "A Letter on Criticism," Colorado Quarterly, IV (Autumn, 1955), 218.

R.W.B. Lewis' statement that Steinbeck sometimes sacrifices "poetry" for politics² is valid when applied to Steinbeck's use of symbols. Often Steinbeck is not content to let the symbols speak for themselves, but rather, he insists upon intruding into his work, instructing the reader how to interpret the symbols. When he yields to this temptation, as he does too frequently in East of Eden, he sacrifices art for politics. At such times the beauty of the fiction is marred by overstatement. Steinbeck is not always guilty of this obtrusiveness, however. His most skillful use of symbolism is in Of Mice and Men, where the various animal symbols are interwoven in a subtle, intricate pattern. In The Grapes of Wrath, he manages to fuse art and politics successfully without sacrificing poetry for the message.

Though Steinbeck's technique in identifying his nature symbols may be inconsistent, the underlying theme of the unity of nature is always apparent. Steinbeck sees all life as a unity manifested in the kinship of man to nature. To Steinbeck, life is an absolute, a principle that is reaffirmed in nature and must be recognized by man as the most important reality. He does not see beyond the unity of nature to a

²R.W.B. Lewis, "John Steinbeck: The Fitful Daemon," The Young Rebel in American Literature, edited by Carl Bode (London, 1959), p. 127.

God, but rather, he stands in awe of the life principle itself. Anything that affirms life is to him basically good. Because he believes in life, he can love the "blots-on-the-town bums," the prostitutes, the paisanos, and the dispossessed migrants. Because his feeling for nature approaches the religious, he can inject a note of mysticism and nature-worship in the nature symbols of such a novel as To a God Unknown. His outrage against that which is life-denying is behind his disdain for the absentee owners, the pearl buyers, and the Mr. Pritchards of modern civilization.

Although Steinbeck's dislike for some of his characters is apparent, his devotion to life and his affinity for scientific objectivity usually keeps him from coming to any moral or ethical conclusions about man. Certainly he decries the social and economic conditions that allow people such as the Joads to go hungry, but he does not attempt to fix the blame for these conditions upon any one person or group. He pities Kino and his people for their oppressed condition, but he also tries to explain the law of survival which causes the pearl buyers to cheat the Indians. Steinbeck sees life as it is, not as it could be or should not be. He views humanity as a "many-celled organism," fighting for survival and living according to natural law.

Only in his later novels does Steinbeck attempt to come to conclusions, and this attempt noticeably weakens his art. In East of Eden he tries to deal with good and evil in ethical, instead of biological, terms and encounters some inconsistencies. His attitude toward Cathy Trask, for example, seems to be a rather smug, self-righteous opinion that she got what she deserved. In this novel he tries to reconcile the ethical point of view with the biological point of view, and the result is confusing. In The Winter of Our Discontent, he abandons the biological viewpoint altogether. Steinbeck is at his best when he observes life as a naturalist, aware of the harshness and cruelty of nature, yet glorifying in the life principle that governs it.

Even though Steinbeck's focus shifted in his later novels to moral and ethical problems, his "celebrational sense of life"³ remains his predominant concern. His affirmation of life is manifested in his recognition of the unity and sacredness of life, most artistically and effectively expressed in nature symbols which interpret human activity. In Steinbeck's best work the use of symbols, especially nature symbols, greatly enhances the artistic effectiveness of his fiction. In Steinbeck's symbols, man and nature are one, each existing in itself, yet both comprising the whole, the unity of Being. Through the use of nature symbols, Steinbeck reveals his reverence for this oneness that is life.

³Ibid., p. 125.

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