

# Harmonious Coexistence Between Human and Nature in Monterey Trilogy

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**Abstract**—John Steinbeck (1902-1968), the winner of the 1962 Nobel Prize in Literature, is one of the most significant American writers of the 20th century. Steinbeck's works are known for their wide spectrum of literary genres, the variety of themes, and the richness of connotations. This paper focuses on Steinbeck's Monterey Trilogy (Tortilla Flat, Cannery Row and Sweet Thursday), trying to examine, from an ecological perspective, the human's physical and spiritual dependence upon nature and the symbiotic or coexisting relationship between human and nature, clarifying how to achieve the pursuit of harmonious coexistence in Monterey Trilogy. On the basis of the foregoing discussion, this paper aims to make a more thorough and detailed study of Steinbeck's ecological view rendered in Monterey Trilogy, i.e., the idea that a harmonious ecosystem is constituted on the basis of the symbiotic or coexisting relationship between human and nature.

**Keywords**—Steinbeck; Monterey Trilogy; ecological view; man and nature; harmonious coexistence

## I. INTRODUCTION

Since the 1930s till the beginning of 21st century, various studies on John Steinbeck and his works appeared one after another with a wide range of viewpoints. Those studies focused on theme, plot, structure or writing styles. Up to 1960s, one of the most important studies was Peter Lisca's "The Wide World of John Steinbeck" [1], in which Lisca analyzed most of Steinbeck's major works, focusing on his unique styles different from those of the other writers. In 1972, a collection of essays, "Steinbeck's Literary Dimension: a Guide to Comparative Studies" was published by Tetsumaro Hayashi. Those fourteen essays of comparative study on Steinbeck in the collection were written by Steinbeck specialists like Susan Shillinglaw, Barbara Heavilin, Warren French Roy Simmonds, and John Ditsky. The essays explored a variety of themes ranging from spirituality, to Steinbeck's vast international appeal, as well as his ambiguous portrayal of women. At the end of the 20th century, Steinbeck research expanded to the interdisciplinary field — with attention paid in particular to the connection between Steinbeck and environment. In 1997, a collection of essays was published: "Steinbeck and the Environment: Interdisciplinary Approaches" [2]. The collection explored Steinbeck's ecological view from various perspectives, ranging from the literary criticism to the practicing scientists.

While comparing Steinbeck's ecological reasoning to that of the environmentalist's in the 1990s and analyzing Steinbeck's critique of America's despoliation of the environment in Steinbeck's nonfiction works, the essays failed to examine the ecological features in Monterey Trilogy. Considering that the above mentioned research on Steinbeck's Monterey Trilogy is merely restricted to the theme, the structure, the language, there is much work left to be done in the exploration and demonstration of the ecological view in Steinbeck's works. Meanwhile, studies on Steinbeck's ecological thinking are mainly confined to some nonfiction works or several few novels such as "The Grapes of Wrath" or "Of Mice and Men". Few of the studies have taken Steinbeck's works as an organic whole. Obviously, not much attention has been drawn to Steinbeck's ecological view and environmental visions embodied in Steinbeck's Monterey Trilogy, the backdrop of which has long been the most important setting of his novels. With that literary review, the paper will define the origin of ecological criticism as follows.

The word "Ecology" was first used by Ernst Haeckel in 1869. From then on till the end of the 19th century, ecology began to emerge as a sub-discipline in biology [3]. According to Encyclopedia Britannica, the word "Ecology" refers to the interrelationships among organisms themselves and between organisms and their environment [4]. It was not until the early 20th century that the fundamental principles of ecology were ushered into the field of liberal studies. Ecology began to be closely connected with social studies.

With a keen interest in and knowledge of marine biology, John Steinbeck regards man not as the center of the whole nature, but rather as another species interrelated with others, struggling to survive in nature, alone, or in a group. Therefore, thanks to his scientific training and ecological thought, Steinbeck forms his own understanding of the relationship between humans and the environment, which is unique among the major literary figures of his time. From the Monterey novels, Steinbeck's profound understanding of the harmonious relationship between human and nature could be effectively presented.

In the three novels of Monterey Trilogy, Steinbeck shows great respect for nature, specifically through the character of Doc. He spends most of his time at the tide pool collecting specimens for Western Biological Lab and revels in the raw beauty of nature's creation. Steinbeck also plays on the

traditional Lord's Prayer, replacing heaven with "Our Father who art in nature" [5] to show that nature is not something simple but all encompassing. Just as Robert M. Benton points out that it is "Steinbeck the ecologist who wrote *Cannery Row*" [6]. According to Benton, Steinbeck has demonstrated the keen observation on and the impressive depiction of the relationship between nature and human. Humankind is only one part of the larger living organism which is composed of various parts, both human and nonhuman. Meanwhile, as a part of nature, human heavily depends on nature, physically and spiritually.

## II. HUMAN'S PHYSICAL AND SPIRITUAL DEPENDENCE UPON NATURE

Ever since the very beginning of the birth of human beings on this planet, human beings have been supported by nature with the supply of food, clothing, shelter and other living materials. Human beings instinctively depend on the sun, air, water, plants, animals, land, minerals and the other living or non-living entities in nature. The energy that powers our cells, the nutrients that make up our bodies, the ecosystem services that clean our water and air are all provided by nature from which we have evolved. As a great novelist, Steinbeck has demonstrated human's dependence upon nature in his works, especially in his three Monterey novels.

In *Cannery Row*, Steinbeck has shown that the novel cannot be known and understood apart from the relationships among all the human beings and the other entities. The novel is more than the residents, the land or the buildings. It contains more than Mack, Doc, Lee Chong, or the Palace Flophouse. It is Monterey's attitude toward Josh Billings, Willard's cruelty to Joey, Doc's love of beer; it is about all the entities: frogs, starfish, abandoned but inhabited pipes and black stink bugs. The canneries are not *Cannery Row*. Neither Mack and the boys nor Doc is the *Cannery Row*. They are only a part of that larger living organism [7].

In the world of *Cannery Row* Steinbeck depicts the human's dependence upon nature in the aspect of living resources. In the second chapter, Steinbeck points out that "our Father who art in nature, has given the gift of survival to" [8] human beings and other creatures. With the gift, the drunks, bums and the other residents survive side by side on the basis of the abundant resources bestowed by Nature. The bums live in some large rusty pipes abandoned in a vacant lot when the weather is damp, but in fine weather they live in the shadow of the black cypress tree at the top of the lot. Instead of relying on mechanical gadgets, the paisanos depend much on nature in ordering their days around the ebb and flow of the natural environment. Since Mack and the boys are comfortable and safe in the natural environment, they see no need for conventional material items and comforts. Steinbeck explains, "Clocks and watches are not used by the paisanos of Tortilla Flat. ... For practical purposes, there was the great golden watch of the sun. It was better than a watch, and safer" [9]. The paisanos' life follows the time and the changes of seasons of nature. Their life is closely connected with nature.

Doc's business at the Western Biological Laboratory relies on the animals in the Great Tide Pool and the diversified resources from nature. Doc has to keep up his collecting and selling of the biological or medical specimens for his living. "The sea rocks and beaches were his stock pile... All the articles of his trade were filed away on the coast, sea cradles here, octopi here, tube worms in another place" [10]. Doc knows where to get all the marine animals but he could not go for them exactly when he wanted. For Nature locked up the items and only released them occasionally. Doc has to catch up the retreating waters so as to fulfill his business order. Doc has to wait for the exact time of the low tide when Nature will release all the treasures — the marine animals. In *Sweet Thursday*, Steinbeck demonstrates his ecological thought via Doc. The example of Doc's specimen — plankton — is a good case to show human beings' dependence upon nature. Doc perceives his research object — plankton as neither plant nor animal but somehow both. It is "the reservoir of all the life in the world, the base supply of food for everyone. If all of these should die, every other living thing might die as a consequence" [11]. The tiny plankton, as the epitome of nature, is something that all the other animals depend upon, with no exception to human beings.

Besides the important role that nature plays in granting life supporting system to human beings, nature has also bestows human beings' spiritual nourishment, that is to say, apart from providing humans food, clothes and all the other materials humans need to survive and develop, nature also gives human joyfulness, recreation and enlightenment. There are ample examples in Monterey Trilogy which can demonstrate the spiritual influence offered by natural environment. In *Tortilla Flat*, when Pilon moves into one of Danny's house, the worry about the possible rent grows intolerable in him. On his way to Danny's house, he enjoys the scenery of the purple dusk, the pine trees, and the seagulls. His soul has been washed and saved by nature. "Pilon is a lover of beauty and a mystic. He raised his face into the sky and his soul arose out of him into the sun's afterglow" [12]. Pilon is deeply impressed by the quietness and beauty of nature. His soul gets refined and enlightened. Nature is the Father who can strike his heart and save his soul from selfishness and lust. Nature is the spiritual harbor for the residents where human beings can get the generous grant of recreation, refinement and enlightenment which are the inextricable treasures for human to survive and develop.

Nature depicted by Steinbeck in Monterey novels is one of the important places where human's happiness and companionship come. In *Tortilla Flat*, the wood full of black cypress pine trees is the place where Danny and his friends will like to dwell and to enjoy the company of beautiful, dynamic and vigorous nature. In *Cannery Row* Mack and the boys came down to the little sandy place at the base of a high cliff a few miles up the Carmel Valley happily. "It was a perfect place. It was a place to relax, a place to be happy" [13]. At the sandy place, Mack and his boys enjoy the beautiful scenery and the wild animals in the valley. Whether in the wood beside their house or in the valley around their town, Mack and the boys can always find their shelter, food

and what's more, the place to get relaxed, get their companion and to be happy about their life.

### III. HARMONIOUS COEXISTENCE BETWEEN MAN AND NATURE

With a keen observation and profound contemplation of the destruction that human beings inflicts upon nature, Steinbeck keeps a clear mind and has made all efforts to find an appropriate approach to sustain and develop a harmonious relationship between human and nature. According to Steinbeck, the way to a harmonious coexistence lies in the following three aspects: setting up a holistic ecological view, having reverence for nature, and living a life of simplicity.

First, in the Monterey novels, Steinbeck advocates his holistic view — human and nature are symbiotic or coexisting as inseparable members of the same biosphere on our planet. Humankind cannot live apart from nature and nature is the inextricable part of the whole biosphere composed of human, society and nature. In *Tortilla Flat*, during the adventures of the paisanos, Steinbeck elaborates the landscape around them to present the integrity of human and nature. The story of the paisanos is not just a story about a group of friends; it is also about the natural environment and everything that constitute the ecosystem of the community. Since Monterey plays such an important role in the characters of Danny and his friends, Steinbeck has given the town its own life and its unique color so that the lives of the marginalized people are presented in a deeper, wider and more holistic viewpoint. There are the drunkards in the ditches and the houses of ill-repute with their girls hanging out the window. All the seemingly trivial details help the readers understand the way of life in Monterey, which can then be applied to Danny and his friends. The story of the colorful blend of misfits-gamblers, whores, drunks, bums and artists in Cannery Row shows Steinbeck's dramatic illustrations of the harmonious relationship of man with his natural environment. In a letter to his Stanford college roommate Carlton Sheffield, Steinbeck writes: "Each figure is a population, and the stones, the trees, the muscled mountains are the world, but not the world apart from man, the world and man, the one inseparable unit of man and his environment. Why they should ever have been understood as being separate I do not know"[14]. From the letter, a conclusion can be inferred that Steinbeck strongly advocates the holistic understanding of the relation between human and nature — the relationship between human and nature is symbiotic or cooperative within a symbiosis. Each entity is one inextricable part or population of the integration of our biosphere.

The characters in *Tortilla Flat*, together with the warm sun, spectacular shoreline, colorful plants and animal life closely match the paisanos themselves. More often than not, Danny and his friends spend entire days just staring at the pine trees and enjoying the splendor of nature. Pilon, in particular, is often halted in his tracks by the spiritual beauty of the place. It is also worth noting that the weather in Monterey coincidentally aligns itself with the spirits of the characters in many places. Steinbeck has presented his holistic view — human beings and nature are closely

connected and constitute a developing organism. Humankind is one part of nature. From his own experience and speculation, Steinbeck has gained profound understanding that whether nature is instrumental to human beings or not, everything in nature has its own living standards and has an intrinsic value and a right to live. Humankind, as one member of the interconnected whole and as maybe the most highly developed species, should interact in a responsible manner with our natural environment.

Second, Steinbeck believes that it is of vital importance for human to keep reverence for nature which is the only life supporting system human beings can rely on. In *Tortilla Flat*, the residents show their reverence for nature in one way or another. Though Danny has the company of Pilon and Pablo, he is lonely and there is an ache in his heart. He has sunk in great sadness and lonesome. When Pablo finds him at the end of the dark pier, Pablo sees "a black cloud in the air over Danny's head... it was a big black bird, as big as a man. It hung in the air like a hawk over a rabbit hole" [15]. That's not only the omen of Danny's death, but rather the reverence that Danny's friends show toward nature. Ever after that day, Pablo has not stopped telling the residents of the fear nature may impose upon their community. On Saint Andrew's Eve, Pilon and Big Joe go to seek the mystic treasure. The wind in the woods illustrates people's reverence for nature and their worry about the future. "The wind rose as they walked, and drove the fog across the pale moon like a thin wash of gray water color... The treetops in the wind talked huskily, told fortunes and foretold deaths" [16]. Steinbeck demonstrates human's worry about future through Pilon's experience. The residents hear the whispering of nature to which they could turn for help and deliver their deep reverence for nature.

In *Cannery Row*, Doc, the protagonist, keeps his own close relation and interaction with nature. Keeping the reverence for nature, he takes only limited amount of animal specimens from the ocean each time. Though he makes a living on the collecting, owing to his reverence for nature, he has never tried to take more than he needs in an excessive way. Doc's own work represents sustainable and balanced environmental practices. He goes out to the tide pools and appreciates glimpses of natural interaction in that ecosystem. As Richard Astro asserts, "The Great Tide Pool represents all that is natural in the world: beauty and ugliness, love and hate, life and death" [17]. As he gathers specimens, Doc observes and admires the magnificence of this habitat: "When the tide goes out the little water world becomes quiet and lovely. The sea is very clear and the bottom becomes fantastic with hurrying, fighting, feeding, breeding animals" [18]. Life occurs in this space, and the narrative perspective shifts from a concern only with human pursuits and human life to the beauty of the natural environment and the fascinating existence of these ocean creatures.

Third, Steinbeck underscores the simple style of life as the path to a harmonious interrelationship between nature and human. Steinbeck underscores the theme of simplicity in *Tortilla Flat*, where Steinbeck depicts modern conveniences in Danny's life and what problems the convenient devices become in the end. The vacuum cleaner that Danny gives to Sweats Ramirez is a perfect example at this point. Sweats

Ramirez likes it because it is shiny and it represents pride and noble status even though it has no usefulness because of the lack of electric power. When the vacuum is later traded to Torrelli, who runs a grocery store, a scandal is created by the fact that it has no motor. That symbolizes the emptiness of modern conveniences like the vacuum.

Valuing the simple living style, Mack and the boys avoid much greed and are able to get relaxed in their community. Mack and the boys are not cultured or worldly people, but in their ignorance of modern technologies and ways of thinking, there is something genuine and appealing about them. They do not identify themselves from a capitalist viewpoint that labels them as vagrants or homeless. When Doc talks about Mack and the boys with his friend Richard Frost, Doc asserts that "the sale of souls to gain the whole world is completely voluntary and almost unanimous — but not quite. Everywhere in the world there are Mack and the boys" [19]. He clearly denounces the capitalist system — selling one's soul for economic gain is not worth the expenditure. Against the backdrop of the constant noise and flurry of the industrial canneries in the near background, Steinbeck sets Mack and the boys at their ease. Mack and the boys "... have qualities of genius. They're all very clever if they want something. They just know the nature of things too well to be caught in that wanting" [20]. Steinbeck underscores the simple and natural way of living which perfectly embodied in Mack and the boys. Doc comments that Mack and the boys are true philosophers and they survive in this particular world better than other people. Hinting at the anxiety and pressures of the modern world, Doc continues, "in a time when people tear themselves to pieces with ambition and nervousness and covetousness, they are relaxed" [21]. Doc specifically sets the carefree life of Mack and the boys against the economic functions of a growing capitalist society. Doc identifies the capitalist view of the world as existing merely for potential economic profits as the root cause of devastating ambition and greed.

The Pirate, who joins the community of Mack and the boys at last, is another example of how a simple thing, in this case a mind, is shown to be far from worthless. He is a huge man with the mind of a child, and when Danny's friends find that he is hoarding money, he is defenseless against their manipulations. However, he is saved by the simple innocence and sincerity of his intentions for the money, and also by the fact that he is ignorant to what the friends, led by Pilon, were doing to him. Instead of leading the friends to the money so that they could eventually take it, he simply gives the money to them, thinking that it would be safer with them. When they see this and hear the conviction in his story about San Francisco and the sick dog, the friends completely reverse their purposes. They help him to reach his goal of a thousand quarters and the money becomes a physical representation of their friendship.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

From the aforementioned discussion, a conclusion can be inferred that humankind is the son of nature and humankind cannot survive physically or spiritually without the support and nourishment from nature. Owing to the destruction from

the industrialization, the abuse of modern science and technology, our nature, or, even the whole biosphere has suffered the devastating destruction from human activities and the development of human society. Fortunately, more than pointing out the unhealthy relationship between human and nature, Steinbeck reveals the key to reconstruct healthy and harmonious relationship between human and nature. He advocates the importance of human's holistic ecological thinking — to establish a harmonious coexisting relationship, underscores human's reverence for nature and advocates human's simple living style. As British historian Arnold J. Toynbee asserts in his *Mankind and Mother Earth*, human is the first creature on earth that is capable of destroying our biosphere [22]. Humankind is the first and to some extent, the most powerful and endangered factor inside the biosphere that can inflict devastating destruction upon nature. The key to build harmonious human-nature relationship lies in human, human's attitude and our social activities.

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