

TED ANKARA COLLEGE FOUNDATION HIGH SCHOOL

EXTENDED ESSAY

ENGLISH B

RESEARCH QUESTION:

TO WHAT EXTENT ARE THE NOVELS *OF MICE AND MEN* AND *CANNERY ROW*, BOTH BY JOHN STEINBECK PARALLEL TO EACH OTHER IN THEIR THEMES, SYMBOLS AND HISTORICAL FEATURES?

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ABSTRACT:

John Ernst Steinbeck Jr. wrote sixteen novels, seven non-fiction books and five short stories throughout his life. He won a Pulitzer Prize and a Nobel Prize for Literature in his career. *Of Mice and Men* and *Cannery Row* are the two of the widely-known novels of the author concerning the research question:

To what extent are the novels *Of Mice and Men* and *Cannery Row*, both by John Steinbeck parallel to each other in their themes, symbols and historical features?

By a careful scrutiny, it is seen that both of these novels approach and investigate many important themes. *Of Mice and Men* handles the themes of dreams, friendship and family, loneliness, views about women, outsiders and survival of the fittest; likewise the novel *Cannery Row* analyzes the themes of outsiders, family, friendship and humanity, loneliness, prostitution and views about women.

Moreover, the links between these two novels with their symbols are analyzed. The related symbols of the novels, reflected by the characters, settings and objects cover a great place in Steinbeck's depictions.

The linkages between the historical backgrounds of these best-sellers are surveyed with the use of external resource. Both of these novels revolve around 1930s, in the time of Great Depression and World War 2, and it is seen that the profound effects of this period are expressed in these novels. Dreadful effects of this historical chaos can be examined in both of them.

In conclusion, by the deep examining of these novels, it is observed that *Cannery Row* and *Of Mice and Men*, both by John Steinbeck are closely related to each other with their themes, symbols and historical features.

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CONTENTS

1. BACKGROUND INFORMATION	4
2. TO WHAT EXTENT ARE THE NOVELS <i>OF MICE AND MEN</i> AND <i>CANNERY ROW</i>, BOTH BY JOHN STEINBECK PARALLEL TO EACH OTHER IN THEIR THEMES, SYMBOLS AND HISTORICAL FEATURES?	6
2.1. THEMES	6
2.2. SYMBOLS	10
2.3. HISTORICAL FEATURES	13
3. CONCLUSION	15
4. BIBLIOGRAPHY	16

“Cannery Row in Monterey in California is a poem, a stink, a grating noise, a quality of light, a tone, a habit, a nostalgia, a dream” (Steinbeck, Cannery Row, 5)

“‘We gonna get a little place,’ George began. He reached in his side pocket and brought out Carlson’s Luger; he snapped off the safety, and the hand and gun lay on the ground behind Lennie’s back” (Steinbeck, Of Mice and Men, 146)

1. BACKGROUND INFORMATION ABOUT *CANNERY ROW* AND *OF MICE AND MEN*

John Steinbeck is one of the most famous novelists throughout the history. His novels, non-fiction books and short stories reflect many messages and allusions throughout their characters and plots. Generally concerning the utopia and dystopia identity conflicts, John Steinbeck urges his readers to think. According to Pascal Covici, son of Steinbeck's long-time editor and friend,

"Each of enjoys a reader for many reasons, most of them having more to do with what we bring to his works than with what the works may themselves offer. But I want to try to say why I think that John Steinbeck provides satisfactions not so much unique as, rather, uniquely perceptible in his writings." (Covici, 8)

Of Mice and Men is a novel by John Steinbeck which was published in 1937. The novel tells the tragic and unfortunate story of two friends George and Lennie in a ranch in California during Great Depression. The story of the two protagonists introduces a wide variety of messages concerning the conditions in U.S. during the Great Depression. These ideas and messages that are intended to be reflected in *Of Mice and Men*, are more significant than the characters or the plot of the novel.

Cannery Row is another important novel by John Steinbeck. *Cannery Row*, which was released in 1945, is exclusive among his writings for its obscurity of theme, message and emotion. Although *Cannery Row* was published at the end of the World War 2, at a time when affluence had returned to America, it depicts a group of people still "stuck" in Depression-era circumstances and ways of thinking. The "local" of the Row are nevertheless beneficial people whose dignified intentions and feelings for one another get them through the harsh times; however, they do not belong to the society they live in.

If these novels are genuinely examined, it can be analyzed that the basic components of these books such as their themes, symbols and historical features, are intimately related and this creates the research question of the essay:

To what extent are the novels *Of Mice and Men* and *Cannery Row*, both by John Steinbeck parallel to each other in their themes, symbols and historical features?

2. TO WHAT EXTENT ARE THE NOVELS *OF MICE AND MEN* AND *CANNERY ROW*, BOTH BY JOHN STEINBECK, PARALLEL TO EACH OTHER IN THEIR THEMES, SYMBOLS AND HISTORICAL FEATURES?

2.1. THEMES

A novel's idea, purpose and message lies on its themes. John Steinbeck, in his novels *Of Mice and Men* and *Cannery Row*, deals with many themes and uses descriptions to express his points. If these novels are profoundly scrutinized, it can be noticed that, although published 8 years apart, these novels' themes are parallel in many ways.

To begin with, *Cannery Row* is a story of misfits. The major theme in this novel is the ability of blending in the society for "outsiders". Gamblers, prostitutes, drunks, bums, artists, biologists, grocers live side-by-side in Cannery Row. People living in this utopian world are outsiders; however, they are connected both to each other and the Row. Throughout the novel, we meet a great diversity of people who come from different places and have different statuses which do not change during the story and this variety gives the novel its "color". Steinbeck's depiction of the setting with,

"Cannery Row is the gathered and scattered, tin and iron and rust and splintered wood, chipped pavement and weedy lots and junk heaps, sardine canneries of corrugated iron, honky tonks, restaurants and whore houses, and little crowded groceries and flophouses." (Steinbeck, *Cannery Row*, 5)

clearly sets the assorted atmosphere of the Row in our minds. The major characters of the novel; Mack and the boys are "bums" and live in a place owned by Lee Chong; Dora runs a brothel in the name of a restaurant; Doc is the only hope of the town since he has knowledge; Lee Chong, a Chinese man, is a grocer who sells various materials and supplements. Although they are all outsiders and have different properties, they all share the same town and do not

suffer from a sense of belonging. They are the parts of Row and Row is a part of them. In the same way, *Of Mice and Men* also consists of “outsider” figures. All temporary workers in the ranch, including the protagonists Lennie and George do not belong to the society they live in. They are “aliens” who always travel from farm to farm and do not have any sense of fitting: “‘Guys like us, that work on ranches, are the loneliest guys in the world. They got no family. They don’t belong no place.’ ” (Steinbeck, *Of Mice and Men*, 31-32)

Other issues that Steinbeck placed in these novels are friendship and family. Friends and families are the two “elements” that form up an individual: as the old proverb also emphasizes, “Tell me your friend and I’ll tell you who you are”. Throughout the novel *Of Mice and Men*, we can see any sign of neither a friendship nor a family except the “compulsory” relationship between George and Lennie. These two main figures of the novel are close friends only because of the history between them and Aunt Clara. The reason why all the characters of the novel are single handed and do not have either trust or sympathy to each other is because of the society’s denial in sheltering friendships. Every single worker in the ranch has a hidden abhorrence to each other and this creates turmoil in the farm, in my opinion. Unlike *Of Mice and Men*, all characters in the novel of *Cannery Row* are good-hearted and tolerant. They are all helpful and supportive to each other and their solid friendships. For instance; the statements of Mack, “‘I been wondering for a long time,’” Mack continued, “‘what could we do for him-something nice. Something he’d like.’ ” (Steinbeck, *Cannery Row*, 38) shows the amiable nature of the “bum” and his willingness to throw a party for Doc, whom they love too much for his even-tempered nature. Moreover, Lee Chong can very easily trail and force his clients in the Row to acquire the debts he owed, but, instead, he prefers to let the money come back to him automatically: “‘He never pressed his clients, but the bill became too large, Lee cut off credit. Rather than walk into the town up the hill, the client usually paid or tried to.’ ” (Steinbeck, *Cannery Row*, 7). Despite the fact that these

characters have no family, they have each other as friends who can help one another when he or she needs and this solid atmosphere creates the utopist identity of the Row.

Another theme, loneliness, covers a magnanimous place in the novel *Cannery Row* with the character of Doc. If Doc is deeply examined throughout the novel, surprisingly, it can be realized that he is more complicated than he was firstly portrayed. In spite of being a beloved and a valued member of the Row, Doc, is, profoundly, a very distressed and desolate person and he never gets on one's chest until the end of the novel. He prefers drinking beer by himself or listening to music alone than throwing a party or going to Bear Flag Restaurant:

"In spite of his friendliness, and his friends Doc was a lonely and a set-apart man... In a group Doc always seemed alone" (Steinbeck, *Cannery Row*, 87). Also, if the plot of *Of Mice and Men* is carefully analyzed, the concept of loneliness' as a major factor in the lives of the characters can be deeply sensed. For example, Curley's wife is lonely even if she is married and flirts with other workers in the ranch in order to end his loneliness. Crooks also serves as an example in the theme of "loneliness" since he suffers from the abundance of companionship because of his skin color. (Steinbeck, *Of Mice and Men*, 105)

Furthermore, both of these novels give us an idea about the views about women during the times of "Great Depression". The only female character in the novel of John Steinbeck, *Of Mice and Men*, is Curley's wife. Curley's wife represents the views about women in the 1930s. We see that women are not respected in the community. Every worker in the ranch is afraid of Curley's wife because they think that she always causes trouble. She is lonely and because of this, she searches for any signs of love in the arms of other men. In addition, we do not even know the real name of Curley's wife and this shows the worthlessness of women in the society. Furthermore, George's views about a whore house, which illustrates and adds up to the insignificance and trumpery of female society, reveal the attitudes toward women in 1930s:

“A man can go into a whorehouse and get a beer and sex for a price agreed upon up front - unlike less professional relationships, you know what you're going to get and what you will have to pay for it’ ” (Steinbeck, Of Mice and Men, 83)

Similarly, Bear Flag Restaurant is the setting through which the theme of prostitution is examined throughout the novel, *Cannery Row*. The Bear Flag Restaurant is a business not only that provides a service in demand, but also run orderly and frankly. Although, it benefits the community, the brothel is still considered as “a place without honor”. Similar to the views of George in *Of Mice and Men*, women are valueless in this novel but on the other hand, some are highly esteemed in the society. People living in the Row-especially men- somehow show some respect to the women working there because they know that they are doing this job because of their need for money. Unlike other female characters in John Steinbeck’s novels, Dora Flood, the owner of the Beer Flag, is treated with immense respect in the society. Even the women, whose husbands go to Beer Flag Restaurant, behave Dora with reverence. She is a strong, determined and wise female character who guides people with her advice, apart from other women characters in the novels of John Steinbeck as it is obvious in the lines,

“This is no fly-by-night cheap clip-joint but a sturdy, virtuous club, built, maintained, and disciplined by Dora who, madam and girl for fifty years, has through the exercise of special gifts of tact and honesty, charity and a certain realism, made herself respected by the intelligent, the learned, and the kind.” (Steinbeck, Cannery Row, 16)

2.2. SYMBOLS

Symbols throughout a novel can indicate many ideas. These symbols can be objects, pictures, locations and even characters themselves. Apart from their themes, *Cannery Row* and *Of Mice and Men* by John Steinbeck are also related to each other with the symbols reflected throughout the novels.

To begin with, every single figure in the novel *Of Mice and Men* by John Steinbeck has a dream. All figures search for euphoria and vivacity in their fictional world they have created and hope their wishes to come true. Some want to be very strong, some want to be a movie star and some- like Lennie and George- want to own a farm:

“‘OK. Someday- we’re gonna get the jack together and we’re gonna have a little house and a couple of acres an’ a cow and some pigs and...’ ” (Steinbeck, *Of Mice and Men*, 32)

The two protagonists’ dream farm is the most powerful symbol in the book. Their dream seems so resilient and steadfast that even Candy and Crooks, whom they have known for a short time, become impressed by this phenomenon and want to get involved in their “future” farm. This farm is the representation of freedom, protection, belonging for them. Moreover, it also symbolizes the “American Dream” and the impossibility of it. On the contrary, in *Cannery Row*, a location, Carmel Valley, symbolizes “the American Dream”. Though Carmel Valley covers a short part in the novel, it shows a significant relation with the novel *Of Mice and Men* by John Steinbeck. The description of Carmel Valley and Mack and the boys’ futuristic plans involving this place reminds us of the dream ranch of George and Lennie. Corresponding with Lennie and George, Mack and the boys see the impressive beauty in the Valley and dream to live off the land: “Mack and the boys came down to this place happily. It was perfect... It was a place to relax, a place to be happy.” (Steinbeck, *Cannery Row*, 66).

Other symbols that convey a significant part throughout the novel *Of Mice and Men* are portrayed through animals. In the first place, the puppy which Candy gave to Lennie mitigates Lennie's desire for softness in the novel *Of Mice and Men*. However, his devotion to touch soft materials causes the death of the puppy like so many other mice that Lennie rubbed out. This mortality of the puppy symbolizes the weak ones that cannot survive. The forceless puppy illustrates the main rule of the nature by dying in the hands of Lennie, the strongest man in the novel (*Steinbeck, Of Mice and Men, 120*). Mice and Rabbits also outline the willingness of Lennie to the soft things but, unlike the puppies, these animals portray the precarious and sensitive side of Lennie. Although he is a vigorous man, he has a massive weakness towards soft skinned creatures. His desire for gaiety and satisfaction by rubbing these soft animals shows us the irony in his personality as it is stated in the novel:

“George snapped his fingers sharply, and at the sound Lennie laid the mouse in his hand. ‘I wasn’t doin’ nothing bad with it, George. Jus’ strokin’ it.’ ”(*Steinbeck, Of Mice and Men, 31*).

However, in *Cannery Row*, Steinbeck often illustrates the characters as symbols in the novel. For instance, Frankie is a mentally handicapped boy who is neglected by his mother and taken in by Doc to the Western Biological Lab. He is capable of neither doing any work nor understanding or learning anything, and he just seems to do everything a little bit wrong. Frankie has a lot in common with Lennie in *Of Mice and Men*. Like Lennie, Frankie symbolizes all the “amity” in the world: love of one's friends, amour of beauty, and the desire to show your fondness to those who are significant and meaningful to you. Similar to Lennie, throughout his life, Frankie becomes a victim of the misunderstandings and intolerance of the community. The pitiful part of Frankie's fate is that the problem is not in his intentions but in his impulses and the he carries them out are indeed harmful to others:

“He couldn’t learn and there was something a little wrong with his co-ordination. There was no place for him. He wasn’t an idiot, he wasn’t dangerous, his parents, or parent, would not pay for his keep in an institution” (Steinbeck, Cannery Row, 50).

Moreover, another character in the novel that serves also as a symbol is Doc. Collecting activity of Doc represents the irony in Doc’s personality. Although collecting a wide range of animals can be inferred as the vast productivity of nature, it also means a population’s massive destruction which cannot be expected from a person like Doc. Doc is a good-natured person who loves to help and guide people but this destructive collecting activity that ends up with deaths of many animals contradicts with his gentle personality and this attributes a paradox in his character. *(Steinbeck, Of Mice and Men, 27)*

2.3. HISTORICAL FEATURES

Great Depression is one of the most important features throughout the U.S. history. The quotation, “It began in the U.S. soon after the New York Stock Market Crash of 1929 and lasted until about 1939. By late 1932 stock values had dropped to about 20% of their previous value, and by 1933 11,000 of the U.S.’s 25,000 banks had failed for a combination of reasons, including declining property values, bank runs by panicked customers, and defaults on loans.” (*Encyclopedia Britannica Online*) briefly summarizes the history of this major event.

John Steinbeck’s *Cannery Row* and *Of Mice and Men* are stories of dissidents during the Great Depression in 1930s after the World War II. Throughout the novels we examine the penetrating effects of this on economic and social crisis. The soldiers walking to the beach and the soldiers patronizing the Beer Flag and the Doc’s party are the reminders of the concluded war and the Great Depression in *Cannery Row*:

“On such a morning and in such a light two soldiers and two girls strolled easily along the street...The watchman shouted at them and when they did not move he came down on the beach and his dog barked monotonously. ‘Don’t you know you can’t lay around here? You got to get off. This is private property!’ The soldiers did not even seem to hear him.” (Steinbeck, *Cannery Row*, 76).

During the period of failed businesses, harsh poverty and long-term employment, large amount of migrant workers came to California from other parts of America in order to find a place to work. This migration, mainly caused by the droughts and failed crops, happened in the south of the U.S. Men migrated from ranch to ranch on short-term with poorly paid contracts to “build up a stake” as Lennie and George reflected in *Of Mice and Men* by John Steinbeck. (Steinbeck, *Of Mice and Men*, 43)

In fact, this job opportunity was the only type of employment, available to these inerudite workers. Moreover, the society's ignorant identity is also dominant throughout the fiction. Ranch workers' simple dreams, playing cards on their free times, dogmatic views about women and tendency to violence are the most significant examples for the uneducated side of U.S. during Great Depression as it is mentioned in the following lines:

“The nigger's got a shotgun. You take it Carlson. When you see 'um, don't give 'im no chance. Shoot for his guts. That'll double 'im over.’ ” (Steinbeck, Of Mice and Men, 134)

We also see a great deal of unemployed and poor people caused by the Great Depression within *Cannery Row* too: Prostitution is being held up by many women in Dora's Beer Flag Restaurant; Mack and the boys are unemployed although their ages are suitable for work and people like Sam Malloy live in awful conditions. Despite the abominable conditions in the Cannery Row, characters in this town are generally satisfied and do not intend to change their status during the novel. This gratified atmosphere among people in the Row creates the town's utopist identity and it also provides happiness for the reader.

3. CONCLUSION

Although these two novels, *Cannery Row* and *Of Mice and Men* both by John Steinbeck, are written with a differentiation of eight years, it can be observed that these best-sellers have a lot in common.

Firstly, it can be concluded that similar themes, like outsiders, loneliness, views about women and friendship are examined in both novels. For example, the ranch workers in *Of Mice and Men* and local people in *Cannery Row* are misfits; the characters in both novels are profoundly lonely and sad; Dora, Women at the Beer Flag and Curley's Wife in these separate novels represent the same belittling view about women. In the second place, the symbols are also significantly parallel in *Of Mice and Men* and *Cannery Row*. For instance, Lennie and George's dream farm and Carmel Valley are the symbols which represent the American Dream and the impossibility of it. In addition, Frankie in *Cannery Row* is the illusion of love, pureness and innocence in the community just like Lennie in *Of Mice and Men* who is also mentally handicapped like Frankie. Last but not least, the stories of the novels take place in California during the time of Great Depression. It can be observed that poverty, unemployment and the soldiers of the post-war years are all the products of the same periods of Great Depression and Second World War.

To conclude, by considering the statements above, it can be affirmed that *Of Mice and Men* and *Cannery Row* are novels closely parallel to each other in their themes, symbols and historical features.

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