

# A Study of *Cannery Row* : John Steinbeck and the Old Chinaman

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In October of 1953 John Steinbeck wrote that *Cannery Row* (1945) was “a kind of nostalgic thing written for a group of soldiers who had said to me ‘Write something funny that isn’t about the war. Write something for us to read—we’re sick of war.’”<sup>1</sup> According to Peter Lisca, Steinbeck also said that he wrote *Cannery Row* as a relaxation from the war, which had depressed him, and that he wanted the troops to read it and enjoy it.<sup>2</sup> From the description above, it seems that Steinbeck wrote *Cannery Row* only for the soldiers to heal their wounded minds, but actually he wrote it for himself, too. He was so sick of the war that he needed to go away from it for a while. He knew what he needed was a quiet life and wrote to Webster F. Street that “it [*Cannery Row*] is a kind of fun book that never mentions the war and it is a relief to work on.”<sup>3</sup>

However, the terribleness of the war was always on the author’s mind, and the readers can see the dark side of men through the death scenes of Horace Abbeville, William, Josh Billings, a young girl between two weeded rocks on the barrier reef of La Jolla, a

baby who appears in Henri's hallucination, and Joey's father. This is the reason why we feel some kind of serious and gloomy mood in the novel even though the main story, which is how Mack and his fellow try to have a nice party for Doc, is of a light touch.

However, the effect of the war is not the only reason for the author to make the novel in a dark tone, for he describes some characters' dark side without any grotesque expression. For example, Mack feels desperate when he thinks of his runaway wife, and Dora is afflicted how she gets along with the people in Cannery Row. On this matter, their distresses are still the same whether the author experienced the war or not, because their sad feelings come from loneliness; they feel miserable because nobody is on their side. Anyway the readers can understand why they are sad, but there is one exception that Steinbeck does not explain why he is so lonely in *Cannery Row*. It is the old Chinaman who does not have anything to do with the main characters. Many readers are probably puzzled by this Chinaman, for they cannot understand why he appears in the novel. However, it is also true that they are given such a strong impression by him that they cannot forget him. What is the significance of the old Chinaman, then?

The old Chinaman appears in *Cannery Row* only four times. First, in Chapter 4, it is found that he goes down the hill toward the sea every dawn and then comes out of the sea and goes back to the hill every dusk flip-flapping his shoes. In this scene, the story continues that one day a boy named Andy has a very mysterious experience when he taunts him. That is, the old Chinaman's eyes spread out until they become one huge eye and through it the desolate landscape appears. The remarkable point here is that the author uses the words "lonely", "loneliness", and "aleness" to describe the scene. Steinbeck tries to implant the old Chinaman's sad atmosphere in the readers' minds here. Second, in Chapter 14, the old Chinaman again comes out of the sea flip-flapping his shoes

at the hour of the pearl. Third, in Chapter 21, just like the scene in Chapter 14, he comes up out of the sea and flip-flaps up the hill. Finally, fourth, in Chapter 29, he flip-flaps down the hill and disappears to the sea at five-thirty in the evening. Like this, description about the old Chinaman is very little, and he merely goes back and forth between the hill and the sea without talking with anybody. On each scene, he is the picture of loneliness and has the atmosphere that makes people in the row keep away from him.

The readers will probably have the impression that he is a strange old man at first, and then they will have the following questions. Why does Steinbeck make the old Chinaman appear in the novel? What is his intention on that? It is true that there were many Chinese people in California since gold was discovered,<sup>5</sup> but is that all the reason why the author describes Chinese in the novel? In my opinion, Steinbeck has a certain image on Chinese, and he describes some Chinese people in his works. Therefore, I would like to see what kind of characteristic the author gives them.

Lee in *East of Eden* is probably the most remarkable Chinese character in Steinbeck literature. He is a servant of the Trask family, but more than that, he plays the important role as a sage or a philosopher who speaks for the author. It is he who always gives pieces of valuable advice to Adam, Caleb, and Abra when they need help. However, it is not that everyone approves him; there are some people who see him as a dubious character, too. Lee knows it and tells Samuel:

I tried it [cut the queue, dressed and talked like other people]. To the so-called whites I was still a Chinese, but an untrustworthy one; and at the same time my Chinese friends steered clear of me.<sup>6</sup>

Moreover, he remembers when he went back to China that "They [people in China] said I looked like a foreign devil; they said I

spoke like a foreign devil....They wouldn't have me.”<sup>7</sup>

It is interesting that the author had the similar experience in his own life. That is, even though he had a good feeling about going back to Monterey from New York, once he went back, he got disappointed to know the actuality :

You [Pascal Covici] remember how happy I [Steinbeck] was to come back here [Monterey]. It really was a home coming. Well there is no home coming nor any welcome. What there is is jealousy and hatred and the knife in the back....Our old friends won't have us back--always except for Ed [Ricketts]....I am just not welcome here ....There's no one to talk to except Ed....This isn't my country anymore. And it won't be until I am dead. It makes me very sad.<sup>8</sup>

Lee Chong in *Cannery Row* is another remarkable Chinese character ; he is not a sage like Lee in *East of Eden*, but he is admitted as a sharp man by the people in Cannery Row. They need him because they buy everything at Lee Chong's grocery and also because they know that he does not press for payment of debts. They see him very often, so it seems as if they trust him and understand him. However, there is a clear line of demarcation between them and him. In Chapter 2, Lee Chong is described as follows :

Perhaps he [Lee Chong] is evil balanced and held suspended by good—and Asiatic planet held to its orbit by the pull of Lao Tze and held away from Lao Tze by the centrifugality of abacus and cash register--Lee Chong suspended, spinning, whirling among groceries and ghosts. (CR p. 124)

As is seen here, Chinese characters who appear in Steinbeck literature are the different kind of people compared with American

characters. It seems that Chinese get along with Americans on the surface, but as a matter of fact, Chinese are taken as strange and mysterious people by Americans. Americans tend to see Chinese as the stereotyped characters, so it is sometimes too hard for Americans to understand Chinese as they are or to see them without preconception.

The old Chinaman in *Cannery Row* is not the exception, that is, he is the outsider in the row. People in Cannery Row see him as God or Death or a very funny old Chinaman feeling a little cloud or fear. They feel that there is something different in him, so they never see him with a friendly feeling. As the result, he is always alone, and that is similar to the author's feeling when he lost his home country. Both the old Chinaman and Steinbeck do not belong anywhere, and they are alone all the time.

It is clear that the old Chinaman and Steinbeck have the similar part now, and next I would like to consider the significance of the sea. Is there any special reason why the author makes the old Chinaman go to the sea? According to Professor Inazawa, water is very important in Steinbeck literature because it is associated with protection, peace of mind, consolation, and revival. Steinbeck makes the characters head for some kind of water, which is not the tap water but the spring water, when they face with hardships.<sup>9</sup> In this way, Steinbeck makes the characters who are in trouble go back to the ancient times. As a matter of fact, the water takes a very important role in some of his novels, and the spring or the river in *To a God Unknown* (1933), *The Red Pony* (1937), *Of Mice and Men* (1937), *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), and *The Pearl* (1947) are the examples.

As mentioned before, the old Chinaman goes to the sea every day, and the sea is of course one of the shapes of water. Therefore, I would like to examine the image of the sea next. It is a well-known fact that the Bible had a great effect on Steinbeck, so

it is helpful to see how the sea is described in it. The depictions about the sea in Genesis are as follows :

2 And the earth was without form, and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters. (Genesis, 1 : 2)

That is, when God creates the heaven and the earth in the very beginning, the deep, which is the prototype of the sea, is already there. It has been waiting for God's words to create the world. There is another description about the sea even though it is not called the sea yet :

6 And God said, Let there be a firmament in the midst of the waters, and let it divide the waters from the waters.

7 And God made the firmament, and divided the waters which were under the firmament from the waters which were above the firmament : and it was so.

8 And God called the firmament Heaven....(Genesis, 1 : 6-8)

Here, God divides the waters by the firmament which takes the role of a wall so that the waters under the firmament and the waters above the firmament will not be mixed again. In other words, God makes the firmament not to put back the world into chaos. Like this, it is clear that the deep has existed before God creates the heaven and the earth. The following sentences also show that the sea has existed before God creates the dry land. The sea has been there when it is called the deep or the waters, before God names it the sea :

9 And God said, Let the waters under the heaven be gathered together unto one place, and let the dry land appear : and it was so.

10 And God called the dry land Earth; and the gathering together of the waters called he Seas: and God saw that it was good. (Genesis, 1 : 9-10)

There is a description about the sea in Psalms, too:

2 For he hath founded it upon the seas, and established it upon the floods. (Psalms, 24 : 2)

From these descriptions, it can be said that the sea is the very first thing of all. The sea has been in the universe when there is not any order or partition. It has already existed when chaos is the whole thing and even before God creates the heaven and the earth. However, it is not that the sea has a mere dangerous image; it contains the embryo of every creation, order, and unity at the same time.

Next, I would like to think over the word "sea" in the broader sense. Jackson J. Benson points out that Steinbeck relates to the Greek thought very much. He says:

If there is any evidence that Steinbeck was deeply involved in any national or cultural tradition of thought, it was not the American, but the ancient Greek....It was a relationship that made him particularly receptive to the Greek concept of nature, first as a boy who had the Greek myths read to him, then as a teenager who read about the ancient Greeks, and as a student who studied Greek civilization in college....his continued reading of Greek history and philosophy long after college suggests a strong sympathy for the ancient Greek world view.<sup>10</sup>

Water is one of the four elements which forms the origin of everything with earth, air, and fire in ancient philosophy. It is the

original substance as the Greek philosopher Thales thinks that all nature is born from water. Therefore, Steinbeck probably thinks that water is a mysterious and unlimited substance that all the things come out of and then go back to. It is true that the universe is in chaos when there is nothing except the water in the Bible, but it shows that the water or the deep is the whole big substance in a sense. It helps to show the vastness of the universe when it is looked from the different angle because nothing is divided yet.

When all these things are taken into consideration, what is the significance of the old Chinaman's going to the sea everyday? Steinbeck realized that he lost his home forever, but still he could not help wandering about his home country looking for the place where he could get a peace of mind. Jackson J. Benson says:

In order to try to pick up his life as it had been before, Steinbeck began taking the Bay, up and down, watched the seagulls, inspected the boats, and occasionally stopped for a cup of coffee or a beer along the way.<sup>11</sup>

Steinbeck knew that he did not belong anywhere but still wanted to go back home at least in his memories. Once he became famous, people in Monterey quitted to accept him and became cold to him, so he became alone. Therefore, it was his hope to go back to peaceful Monterey where nobody was hostile to him. The author yearned for the days when there was no trouble, and he tried to project himself on the old Chinaman. That is, the old Chinaman goes to the sea everyday looking for a peace of mind just as the author went to the Bay over again. Therefore, it can be said that the old Chinaman is the author's ghost who is in a deep grief.

Edward F. Ricketts considers *Cannery Row* as "an essay in lone-

liness",<sup>12</sup> and it expresses Steinbeck's mind at that time very well. As John H. Timmerman says that "The novel [*Cannery Row*] is surely one of the darkest in Steinbeck's canon",<sup>13</sup> Steinbeck was very homesick when he wrote the novel. He longed to go back to the past, the days when he could live in quiet and calm, even though he knew that it would be impossible. As the result, what he could do was just projecting himself on the old Chinaman indirectly. It is true that there are other lonely and sad people such as Mrs. Malloy and Mrs. Talbot in *Cannery Row*, but they have somebody to talk with. Maybe such talking is just a consolation, but it sometimes helps them to ease their pain anyway. Compared with that, the old Chinaman does not talk anything even once, or in other words, he does not have anybody to talk with. He is exactly alone, and it makes him more sad.

Therefore, it is clear that the old Chinaman is very special in *Cannery Row*, and it is understandable why he gives such a strong impression to the readers even though he appears in the novel only four times. He is the shadow of the author and cries all alone with grief. Once Steinbeck said that he wrote *Cannery Row* to entertain the troops as mentioned before, but as a matter of fact, he wrote it for himself. He felt very lonely because of homesickness, and he tried to go back home at least in his mind, but doing so, he realized that there would be no way to get back the quiet and calm life.

Like this, *Cannery Row* is a very dark work, but it is not only because Steinbeck got the terrible effect from the war but also because he lost his home. He always searched for the place where he could return, and he tried to get the place where he could feel at ease. When he found that he lost his home, he lost the very important support. He tried to recover from the shock and forget about it, but he could not help being attached to the good old thought for his home. Steinbeck was not a very strong man, so

the deep thought for the home sometimes encouraged him, but it made him weak, too, in other times. When the old Chinaman flip-flaps his loose sole, the author's cry echoes all around. His voiceless cry of despair can be heard if the readers read the novel carefully. Home is really precious for him.

### Notes

- 1 John Steinbeck, "My Short Novels," *Wings* (October, 1953), p. 8.
- 2 So described by Peter Lisca in a conversation with Steinbeck, in *The Wide World of John Steinbeck* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1958), pp. 198-99.
- 3 Elaine Steinbeck and Robert Wallsten eds., *Steinbeck: A Life in Letters* (New York: Viking Press, 1969), p. 270.
- 4 John Steinbeck, *Of Mice and Men/Cannery Row* 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Penguin Books, 1986), p. 134. Further references to this book will be indicated in the text in parentheses by the abbreviation CR, followed by a page number.
- 5 See Tom Mangelsdorf, *A History of Steinbeck's Cannery Row* (Santa Cruz: Western Tanager Press, 1986), Chapter 1.
- 6 John Steinbeck, *East of Eden* 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (New York: Penguin Books, 1986), p. 214.
- 7 *ibid.* p. 215.
- 8 Elaine Steinbeck, pp. 280-81.
- 9 See Hideo Inazawa, *John Steinbeck Bungaku no Kenkyu*, Gakushuin-Daigaku Kenkyu Sosho 28 (Tokyo: Gakushuin-Daigaku, 1995), Chapter 10, pp. 162-176.
- 10 Jackson J. Benson, *True Adventures of John Stesbeck, Writer: A Biography* (New York: Viking Press, 1984), p. 234.
- 11 *ibid.* p. 560.
- 12 Lisca, p. 217.
- 13 John H. Timmerman, *The Dramatic Landscape of Steinbeck's Short Stories* (London: Pinter Publishers, 1990), p. 250.

### Summary

John Steinbeck の *Cannery Row* には何故暗い雰囲気か漂っているのか、年老いた中国人を分析しながら考察した。この中国人は作品中わずか4回しか登場しないが、非常に強い印象を残す不思議な人物なので、作品を考察するには好材料だと思ったからである。

まず、Steinbeck の中国人観を探るために、Steinbeck 文学に出てくる代表的な中国人2人、すなわち *East of Eden* の Lee と *Cannery Row* の Lee Chong について考えてみると、彼らはいずれもアメリカ人とは一線を画していることが分かる。表面的には周囲に溶け込んでいるように見えても、心のどこかでアメリカ人は彼らを自分たちとは異質な人種だと考えているからだ。よそ者扱いされる彼らと故郷を失ったSteinbeckには、共通点がある。

次に、年老いた中国人が毎日海へ行く意義であるが、Steinbeck 文学にとって水はいかに大切な意味を持っているだろうか。聖書で海または深淵について書かれているところを分析すると、水は何よりもまず初めに存在していたもので、混沌としてはいるが、秩序や統一を内に宿しているものと見ることができる。更に、Steinbeck は古代ギリシアの世界観に強い共感を示していること、ギリシアの自然哲学者タレスは「生命ある一切のものは水から生じた」と考えていることから、水は大変神秘的で、全てのものが生まれ、そして帰っていくものであるといえる。

Steinbeck 自身、もう故郷を失くしたことは悟っていたが、それでもなお心の拠り所を求めて故郷の町をさまよわずにはいらなかった。せめて想像の世界だけでも、いざこざの起こる前の平和な故郷へ戻りたい、一番初めからやり直したいという思いは、こうして年老いた中国人に託された。つまり、この中国人は安らぎを求めて毎日海へと向かうSteinbeck 自身であり、悲しみに打ちひしがれたSteinbeck の亡霊なのである。

Steinbeck は、この作品を「戦争で傷ついた兵士らを楽しませるための作品」と述べた。しかし、実際には彼は自分自身のためにこの作品を書いたのである。年老いた中国人の靴の底がべったんべったんと通りに響くとき、Steinbeck の声にならない悲痛な叫びがこだましていると考えられる。

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