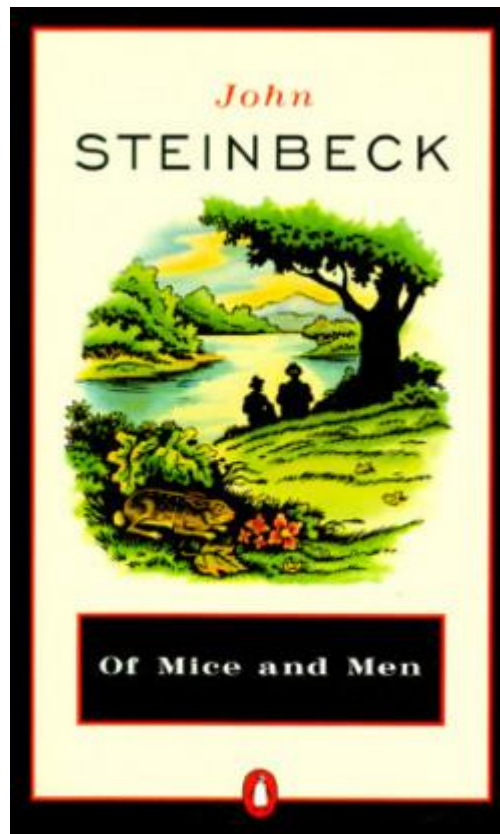


## John Steinbeck's Fictional World and American Dream

Dr. S. Chelliah, M.A., Ph.D., D.Litt.

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Courtesy: <http://www.booksamillion.com/p/Mice-Men/John-Steinbeck/9780140177398>

### Abstract

This article is an effort to bring into light the theme of American Dream for the betterment of individual characters in John Steinbeck's novels. It is the natural inclination of all humans to dream. Here the American dream is sought after by many different characters. The main theme is, how these dreams are unattainable and how because of great depression all American dreams were dead. However, the meaning of living American dream is something that differs for everyone. For some people, the American dream might be acceptance and equality. The American dream was no more, and the land of opportunity had become the land of misfortune. It is the idea of an individual overcoming all obstacles and beating all odds to become successful one day. This subject is the predominant theme in John Steinbeck's novels.

**Keywords:** Steinbeck, despair, self-hatred, egotism, appetites, mundanity, wilderness, steadfastness, obstacles.

## Image of Man

The uniqueness of John Steinbeck's novels lies in its well-defined image of man. Truly speaking, Steinbeck's image of man is something complex and fascination reflecting the same ebullience of the American dream and of America in the 1930's.

His assertion of a man's achievement in a group paves the way for his non-teleological thinking which "concerns itself primarily not with what should be, or could be, or might be, but rather what actually 'is' – attempting at most to answer the already sufficiently difficult questions *what* or *how*, instead of *why*" (Steinbeck's *The Log from Sea of Cortez*, 135). His biological analogy assisted him in formulating his idea about group with an objective reality. This realism paves the way to apprehend the inherent conflicts which often drive a man to the brink of a tragedy and social dynamism.

Man is a complex creature with different drives and notions. Steinbeck's pre-occupation with life and living unfolds the image of man lending itself for a comprehensive viewpoint. In order to overcome his inadequacies, he incessantly thrives with hope. Steinbeck's man, taken as a product of dreams and instincts has a similar identity *en masse*. In his achievement, he is either a victim of society or one by a flaw in his character. Though his image of man has a universal appeal, it is "the obvious product of despairing self-hatred, extended from the individual self to the whole race of man, with its accompanying will to degradation and humiliation" (Fuller 7).

This 'accompanying will' present in man makes Steinbeck declare that the danger, the glory and choice rests finally in man. He observes: "Man himself has become our greatest hazard and our only hope, so that today St. John the apostle may well be paraphrased. In the end is the word and word is Man and he word is with man" (Steinbeck 7).

## American Dream

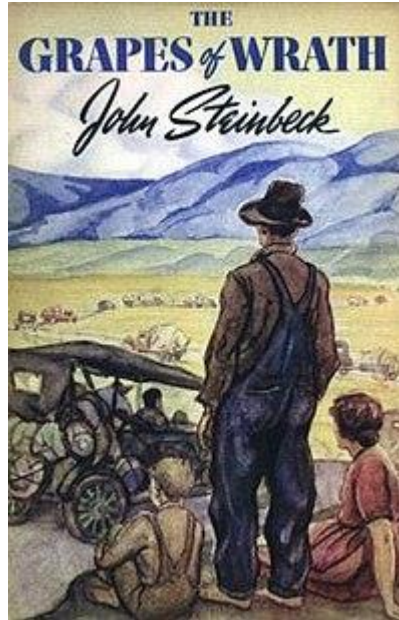
Many of Steinbeck's novels represent the American dream – for betterment – and this dream is prevalent with successive phrases. Frederic Carpenter writes:

"First the dream of conquest, then of escape, then the settlement and ownership. But something was lacking in all these dreams – some possessive egotism vitiated them. The novels of Steinbeck's second period describe more unselfish types of Americans, who fail for other reasons: irresponsibility or fanaticism or defective mentality. Most recently *The Long Valley* and *The Grapes of Wrath* have suggested the possible realization of the American dream through courage and active intelligence ... and characters have integrated dream with action and have lived on both levels, independently of their author" (Carpenter 68).

## Meeting Natural Necessity

Taking into account the second period of Steinbeck's dream in *Of Mice and Men*, *In Dubious Battle* and *The Grapes of Wrath*, it is also worthy to adduce it with the appetites – desire to satisfy the natural necessity. The natural necessity to own a house and a piece of land in *Of Mice and Men* gives significance to a story of outcasts and failures.

This simplest form of this dream is found in George, Lennie, and Candy and these characters achieve significance because they give expression to the American Dream. Here one can find: “Steinbeck has compassion without mundanity, sentiment without sentimentality, a stern, realistic, very observant and deductive sense about realities and about the consequences in a chain of cause” (Rascoe 346). Even unmindful acts of Lennie and George’s rescue of him thereafter do not lead them to lose hope thereby rejecting their dream. In due course because of their lack of pragmatic intelligence, they remain mere dreamers.



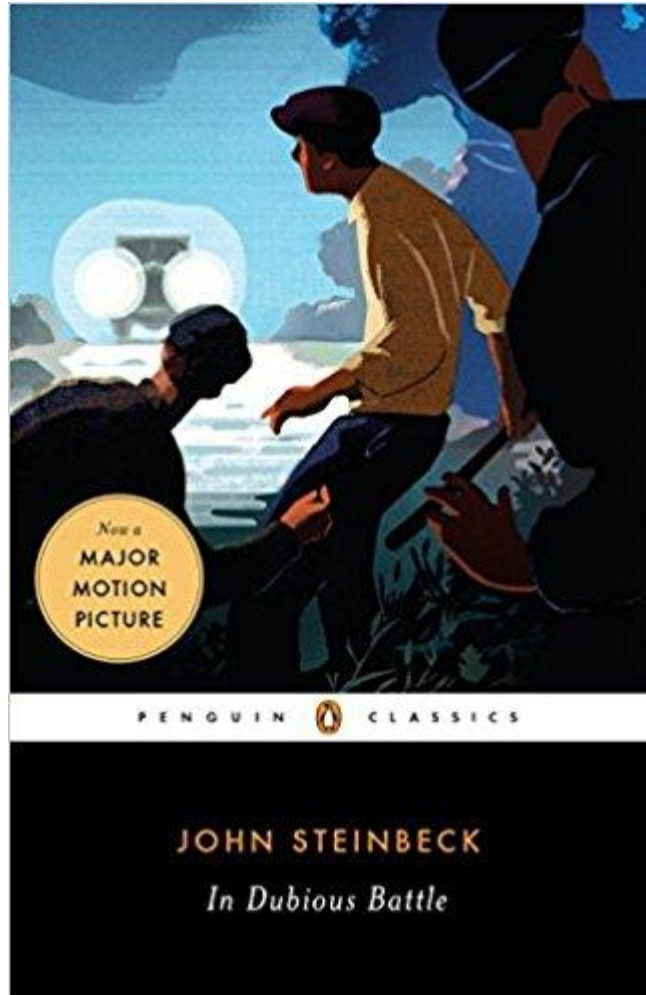
Courtesy: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Grapes\\_of\\_Wrath](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Grapes_of_Wrath)

### **Dream Devoid of Self-interests**

The intensity of the dream, devoid of self-interests, takes shape as a dream which stresses the struggle for freedom in *The Grapes of Wrath*. The Joad family is ‘traced out’ by the share-croppers and they move to California with a hope of survival. The experiences which Jim Casy and Tom Joad undergo make them abandon their ‘possessive egotism’ and educate them to work for the development of the whole mass. As Warren French says:

“Wherever prejudice and a sense of self-importance without co-operation ... which can be achieved only through willingness of individuals of their own violation to put aside special interests and work towards a common purpose” (P 107).

Jim Casy is the advocator of the great human soul and is the action hero who even sacrifices himself for the cause. The selfless unity amidst the dispossessed thereby paves the way for a new strength and is first suggested when Tom and Casy meet Muley Graves. Casy’s wilderness philosophy incorporates with Muley Graves’ idea of sharing the food and the past holiness of mankind – and this transforms him and leads him to realize the dream by his death. Tom learns both by Casy’s deeds and words that even if Tom dies, it will not matter, for the dream will live. “His soul will become the soul of America, struggling for freedom .... His soul goes marching on. The dream continues” (Carpenter in “Dreamer” – 78).



### **Dubious Battle**

This dream for betterment for the whole humanity is present in *In Dubious Battle* which presents the actual problems of the promised land – California – and its real state of the farmer’s association and the migrants. This objective novel suggests:

“the abyss between dream and reality, the heroic describes the attempt to make the dream real ... therefore it becomes exclusively realistic. The very existence of the dream is denied by its dreamers” (P 75).

The leaders – Jim and Mac – guide and torment the ranch workers for a feeble protest. The workers dream of high wages, while Mac and Jim dream for the cause and Doc Burton dreams for the values of his people. They all fail because of the steadfastness to achieve it without thinking about the imbalance of power. They live on a realistic level as men of action should do and abandon the very existence of it. On realistic grounds, they struggle and fight for their survival, while trying to accomplish the dream. They, as a group or as individuals, are subjected to the conditions of animal existence.

Steinbeck depicts man as a social organism who is imbued with certain instinctual qualities. These instinctual qualities present in his man make one feel the animalizing tendency of his man, for Steinbeck himself found it valid to study him first as an animal. Man in his success or failure exposes his animal nature. Edmund Magny – Claude observes:

“Steinbeck has an extraordinary power to catch and paint man in his most elementary terms .... those that bring him closer to other men or even to other beings” (P 148).

### Portraits of Animals

The animals presented with a symbolic significance in Steinbeck’s novels help one to find out the underlying drives and urges present in man. The primordial nature of Lennie, represented in *Of Mice and Men* gives his man a bestial quality. Regarding intellect, he lacks the will for social motivation. In *In Dubious Battle*, the whole group, when they resort to violence, become a group animal and are subjected to bloodshed, starvation and death. In the words of James Seth,

“The best ambition a man could cherish, both for himself and for his fellows, is that he and they alike may, each in himself and each in his own way ... find the fellowship of a common life and a common good” (P 245).

### Seeking Common Good

This seeking of the common good by malformed leaders makes the strikers purely animals. In *The Grapes of Wrath*, the presentation of animals with their symbolical significance directly or indirectly presents the instinctual nature of man.

The group man concept is highlighted in a subtle manner in *In Dubious Battle*, *Of Mice and Men*, and *The Grapes of Wrath*. In these novels, Steinbeck’s men form a group to achieve their ends and “this group idea is American, not Russian and stems from Walt Whitman, not Karl Marx” (Carpenter 246). The group theory evolves of *Of Mice and Men*, with the leadership of George over Lennie and Curley over others, except slim thereby suggesting for two groups – George, Lennie, Candy and Crooks and Curley, Curley’s wife and his father. With this group, especially under the leadership of George, Steinbeck makes the American dream prevail thereby giving us the idea about egocentric nature present in it.

Later in *The Grapes of Wrath*, the group concept is merged with Emerson’s ‘over-soul’ concept to the big soul by Jim Casy and merges with Walt Whitman’s “religion of love of all man and his mass democracy” (324). This love to his fellow-feelings makes Tom Joad and Ma Joad evolve as leaders from the strugglers and the experiences found parallel in their society where “oppression and intimidation only serve to strengthen the social group” (Lisca 172).

Having achieved the democratic way of life, they strive to attain it. When they fail, they still emerge with hope and courage to achieve it. In *In Dubious Battle*, the group idea is informed by Doc Burton and is not maintained by the malformed leaders. Here what is to be understood is:

“Human life .... is wasted for the sake of dogma,  
and the strike .... portrayed on the surface of it  
as so glamorous – emerges indeed as horrible” (Geismar 262).



The leaders – Mac and Jim – favouring the cause fall a prey to their ideologies and Doc Burton emerges as an ideal hero who thinks of the group – man values and wishes to know his nature, his ends and his desires. The tension between illusion and reality governs the motives and actions of John Steinbeck’s characters. The dreamy nature of the characters, who are the products of the American dream, is responsible for their failures. This is due to their lack of adjustments and practical intelligence to overcome the obstacles in society. Hence, they fall prey to the predatory nature of the society which is, in fact, reality. On the other hand, the society comprises of a group of egocentric individuals. It is a collective product of envy, malice, rivalry and dominance that is present in the individual character. The results are dehumanization, violence, disintegration and humiliation of the individual who wishes for betterment. This is the central theme of Steinbeck’s works. In the words of Frederic Carpenter,

“Always his fiction has described the interplay of dream and reality: his thought has followed the development of the American dream” (68).

### **End in Disillusionment or in Hope**

So by seeing the individuals through their illusionary world, one can derive one aspect of the image of man as portrayed by Steinbeck. The presence of the American dream in the characters takes different forms which either end in disillusionment or in hope. The dream for “a bit of earth to give him sustenance and dignity” (Gardiner 223) is sheltered by the lack of pragmatic intelligence in *Of Mice and Men*.

In *The Grapes of Wrath*, “The conflict springs from the opposition between the “Golden West” of the Imagination and the actual California of the father’s association, and the migrants through not realized, ends in the hope” (Dreamer 68).

In *In Dubious Battle*, the contemporary dream of collective action leading to the building of a new social order is unaccomplished because of the failure of the characters to realize their own strength, the exploitation by the leaders, and the imbalance of power in the endless battle.

In *Of Mice and Men*, the two itinerant ranch workers, George and Lennie, dream of owning a piece of land. This dream attracts Candy, the Swamper, and he comes forward to provide financial help. Though this dream does not materialize, the only person to be benefitted, atleast by the thought of it, is Lennie by often hearing the recital of the dream from George. Man’s instinct always strives to achieve an improved and elevated state and this paradigmatic dream of a vaulting man is found in George’s recital to Lennie:

“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 35).

### **People with No Ambition**

On the Contrary, he also portrays ranch workers who have no ambition – dream for betterment – in life. Of them, Steinbeck says through George thus:

“Guys like us, that work on ranches, are the loneliness guys in the world. They got no family. They don’t belong to no place. They came to a ranch an’ work up a state and they go into town and below their stake, and the first think you know they are pounding their tail on some other ranch. They got nothing to look ahead to....”

In presenting the individual characters, man is shown here as an unreformed but (Lennie) and the other (George) with an awakening consciousness. Through their dream survives here like a ritual, its advancement for realization is subtle. Though they are calculative in trying to achieve it, they fail because of weak bond on the intellectual level to achieve it practically and also due to the by Curley’s wife) which shatters their dream and concludes as a tragedy. Frederic Carpenter observes:

“Security, independence, a piece of land, the pioneer’s dream and once almost the American reality... is just in their head. This is the American tragedy ... it is a tragedy of idea. These “heroes” achieve significance because they give expression to the American dream in its simplest form .... if they are doomed, it is .... because .... they lack only the pragmatic “intelligence” necessary to bring the dream to realization .... And so they remain dreamers merely”.

Apart from George and Lennie, the other dreaming men are Candy and Crooks. Through his character Candy, the Swamper, who over hears the recital of George to Lennie, “Steinbeck emphasizes the natural bond between life and productive property” (Gardiner 223) and at the same time portrays Candy’s in compatibility and the want of dignity in man. His wish is seen when he says to Crooks:

“Everybody wants a little bit of land, not much Jus’ Som’ thin’ that was his. Som ’thin’ he could live on and there could not nobody throw him off of it. I never had one ... it wasn’t none of my harvest” (OMM 90).

### **Skeptical**

But Crooks is presented as a skeptical man who is aware of the futility of such dreams which exist just in their head. His rejection of the dream by withdrawing is a foreshadowing of the overall disillusionment of the novel. Being a negro living in a crippling confinement, he evolves a personality and finds a dignity in himself. When Curley’s wife comes to his room he is irritated and forgets that she is his employer’s wife and tries to maintain his dignity – which is eventually his dream. He orders her to get out of the place and when he reminds and warns him of the reality he says to Candy after his departure, “well, just forget it .... I wouldn’t want to go no place like that” (OMM 96). Here, he loses his personality and ego and is disillusioned. Though Crooks is skeptical of the dream of Lennie, George, and Candy, he lacks the adjustment that might have preserved his individuality of which Steinbeck says:

“Man is a double thing, a group animal and at the same time an individual.... he cannot successfully be the second until he has fulfilled the first” (P 22).

### **Dream That is Never Realized, Yet Hope is Not Lost**

The characters plan and try to execute the dream that is “never-quite – realized”, too often tragically shattered dreams of men toward an ideal future of security, tranquility, ease and contentment runs like a Greek choral chant throughout the novel ... infecting, enlivening and ennobling...” (Rascoe 61). But the element of hope is present even after disillusionment here, with slim consoling George and also in *The Grapes of Wrath*

and in *In Dubious Battle*. In *The Grapes of Wrath*, the representative work of exodus during the depression years, the Joad family dreams of the Promised Land – California. They are forced to travel in their jalopies with hopes – the basic form for the dream to materialize. The individual dreams of the Joads get incorporated to the universal dream of achieving freedom. “Not the freedom of a region or sector point of view. Just freedom, the condition in which man feels like a human being, like himself” (Hughes 51). Thus, the ‘i’ dream is merged with the ‘we’ dream on humanitarian grounds as the diction of Tolstoi:

“Men are mere like than unlike another. Let us make them know one another better, that they may be all humbled and strengthened with a sense of their fraternity” (Gibbs 103).

But this sense of fraternity is made and brought out as a mere contribution by the leaders in *In Dubious Battle*. They are steadfast almost to the point of fanaticism, but they are no heroes of romance, complete with every imaginable strength and grace (Gibbs 98). The dreamy nature of man which falls under the demands of heart is to be accomplished by a strike. The novel represents the typical situation of the Depression years by giving a picture of nine hundred unorganized fruit pickers who with a dream of gaining good wages find themselves steeped in starvation, bloodshed and death. The fruit pickers, instigated by Jim and Mac, propose for a feeble protect. But when the Crower’s Association resorts to violence the strikers also adhere to suicidal violence. They go “spinning around and around croaking” (Steinbeck – IDB 181). and are found with blood smeared faces. Their battle becomes dubious and leads only to a suggestive disillusionment because of the imbalance of power. As Tedlock says:

“the failure of the strike demonstrates the hopeless situation of unorganized labor. Political democracy fails in an emergency because nothing remotely like economic equality is seen” (PP.101-102).

To point out the individual’s egocentric dream Anderson egoistically accepts to be exploited by the exploiter Mac. He helps the striking fruit pickers to stay in his ranch with an assurance form them that they would pick apples from his ranch. Finally, he finds his barn burnt and his picked apples are left to rot by the intrusion of the Co-Growers. He dreams of more profit when the other ranches are unpicked but finally is disillusioned.

The men are selfish and the leaders without Mac and Jim – become purely exploiters. They, with a notion of attaining the individual values for their men, intentionally overlook their values and advises them to adhere to violence. When their violence is reciprocated by weapons, it becomes either a sacrifice or as an irrational mob’s act. To imagine Steinbeck’s man by the dreams, the individual hatred and anguish turns to become a dream of love for the mass with hope either by sacrifice or by instigating them – by showing them the sacrificed corpse – to fight.

## **To Conclude**

To conclude, Steinbeck’s man dream and bridle and buck under failure. These Adams, who may be strong or gullible, revolutionary or sentimental are subjected to the tragic end in spite of their stoical endurance. Steinbeck, in giving a sympathetic assertion of the American dream with its paradoxes, says:

“These dreams describe our vague yearnings towards what we wish were and hope we may be; wise, just, compassionate, and noble. The fact that we have this dream at all is perhaps an indication of its possibility” (P 7)

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**Language in India** [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com) ISSN 1930-2940 18:4 April 2018

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And this possibility can be achieved by “Man’s proven capacity for greatness of heart and spirit – for gallantry in defeat – for courage, compassion and Love” (22). In an attempt to accomplish their dreams, the characters endure instead of bemoaning for their lot. Their conditions become worse and their social struggle becomes “a tragic comedy of animal instincts”.

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Dr. S. Chelliah, M.A., Ph.D., D.Litt.  
Professor, Head & Chairperson  
School of English & Foreign Languages  
Department of English & Comparative Literature  
Madurai Kamaraj University  
Madurai – 625 021  
Tamil Nadu, India [aschelliah@yahoo.com](mailto:aschelliah@yahoo.com)