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Thesis Proposal

**“We Should be Like Water, Choosing the Lowest Place Which All Others Avoid:”**

**John Steinbeck as a Modern Messenger of Lao-Tzu’s *Tao Te Ching***

John Steinbeck’s *Cannery Row*, written in 1944, is virtually plotless, highly metaphorical, and interspersed with chapters that seem both irrelevant and unnecessary. Due to rumors that the book was Communist propaganda, Steinbeck was essentially blacklisted, and copies of the book were burnt in protest. Steinbeck’s fellow residents of Monterey, California, which served as the backdrop for the controversial text, lashed out against him. Yet, despite harsh criticism, Steinbeck offered no explanation or defense for the text and instead, quietly relocated to New York. The meaning of the text remains a mystery for scholars and Steinbeck readers alike.

In 1975, Peter Lisca revealed in a short article, “*Cannery Row* and the *Tao Te Ching*,” what should have been a groundbreaking revelation about the meaning of *Cannery Row*. He argues that the text demonstrates morality through the philosophy of Lao Tzu’s *Tao Te Ching*. Lisca asserts that the characters in the text partake in non-action and non-materialism, the basic elements of Taoism. However, Lisca’s apparent postulation that his readers would be familiar with the ancient Taoist text was possibly a faulty assumption, and thus his argument was substantially overlooked until 2002 when Michael Meyer again suggested a relationship between Taoist philosophy and the Steinbeck canon. This time, Meyer suggested that Steinbeck’s *Sea of Cortez* is a

“reflection of the balance advocated in Lao Tzu’s *Tao Te Ching*” (17). Meyer, unlike Lisca, relates excerpts of the log to passages from the *Tao Te Ching*.

For my thesis, I propose to expand Lisca’s argument by discussing additional themes of Taoism in *Cannery Row* that have not previously been explored. By emulating the methodology adopted by Meyer in his similar comparative analysis, I will compare passages from *Cannery Row* to those of the *Tao Te Ching*. In addition, I will include the Taoist principles apparent in Steinbeck’s unfinished, unpublished, essentially unstudied early version of *Cannery Row*, the three chapters of *The God in the Pipes*. This text, which was released to the small reader audience of the *Steinbeck Newsletter* in 1995, will reinforce my interpretation of Steinbeck as an author of Taoist ideas. Since this recently discovered text encompasses many of the same Taoist themes as *Cannery Row* itself, I will bring new insight to both Meyer and Lisca’s assertions. Both contend that Steinbeck was first introduced to Taoism in 1942 with the publication of Lin Yutang’s translation of *The Wisdom of China and India*.

I will argue, however, that Steinbeck became acquainted with Taoism at least as early as 1940, the year he wrote *The God in the Pipes*, and thus was familiar with an earlier translation of the *Tao Te Ching*. I contend that Steinbeck studied Ed Ricketts’s personal copy of *Laotzu’s Tao and Wu Wei*, which was translated by Dwight Goddard in 1939. In fact, Ricketts’s fascination with *Laotzu’s Tao and Wu Wei* may have been Steinbeck’s inspiration for writing *The God in the Pipes*, the text which later set the thematic foundation for *Cannery Row*.

I do not intend to prove that Steinbeck was himself a practitioner of Taoism. However, Taoism interested him, and more importantly, intrigued his only real friend, Ed

Ricketts, to whom he dedicated *Cannery Row* by writing, “For Ed Ricketts: who knows why or should.” *Cannery Row* and its predecessor are visions of how Taoism bares its face in our modern world, a world filled with people who appear to be less than honorable. Steinbeck reveals that Taoism is unknowingly encompassed by these everyday citizens; that its preachings are demonstrated by the actions of people who choose to give up materialism and greed to follow a simple path through life; by the people that we, as a society, often characterize as bums and louses. Lao Tzu instructs that a teacher of Taoism should not, in fact, directly teach at all, but should instead show by example. Steinbeck did just this when he revealed the fictional world of *Cannery Row*, where “whores, pimps, gamblers and sons of bitches” are, in actuality, “saints and angels and martyrs and holy men” (1).

In chapter one, I will introduce Ed Ricketts’s fascination with Taoism, and how he continuously influenced and inspired Steinbeck in his own study of philosophy. I will use letters and diaries to discuss the significance of Steinbeck’s relationship with Ricketts, to whom *Cannery Row* is dedicated and who is represented in *Cannery Row* by the character of Doc Ricketts. This friendship will serve as a motive for Steinbeck to write the Taoist texts.

Chapter two will expand and intensify Peter Lisca’s assertion that *Cannery Row* is a modern retelling of Taoist philosophies. In chapter three, I will provide one of the first analyses of *The God in the Pipes*, by relating its Taoist themes to those evident in *Cannery Row*. To analyze both texts, I will emulate the methodology used by Michael Meyer in his own comparative analysis of one of Steinbeck’s works and the *Tao Te Ching*.

Chapter four will explain the larger significance of my argument. I will address how my study benefits Steinbeck scholars as well as validating how my findings relate to the current beliefs and criticisms of Taoism in modern America. Steinbeck's writings bring Taoism back to its roots, back to the belief that to teach Taoism is contemptuous, but to show Taoism is the work of a sage. The very fact that Steinbeck did not defend the accusations brought against him at the publication of *Cannery Row* may, itself, be an example of "non-defense," an important element of Taoist philosophy.

### Annotated Bibliography

Astro, Richard. John Steinbeck and Edward F. Ricketts: The Shaping of a Novelist.

Minneapolis: Minnesota UP, 1973. This is the most comprehensive study of the relationship between Ricketts and Steinbeck to date. Since the relationship between the two men will serve as an important motive for Steinbeck to have written a novel based largely on Taoism, this book will provide the background to discuss how Ricketts's own life experiences served as the motivation for many of Steinbeck's novels. In addition, the book briefly discusses Ricketts's and Steinbeck's curiosity in Taoism.

Benson, Jackson J. John Steinbeck, Writer: A Biography. New York: Penguin, 1990.

This is a very intensive, 1116 page study of Steinbeck's life. It is largely accepted by Steinbeck scholars as the most complete and factual account of his life, and was written with the help of his three wives and two sons. Most of the biographical information I will include about Steinbeck for my thesis will come from this book.

Borel, Henri. "Interpretive Essays." Laotzu's Tao and Wu Wei. Ed. Dwight Goddard.

Vermont: Dwight Goddard, 1939. 77-124. These essays are included in the version of the *Tao Te Ching* which Ed Ricketts owned. I will argue that Steinbeck used this version as source material for both *Cannery Row* and *The God in the Pipes*, and therefore would have read these essays before writing *The God in the Pipes*. The essays discuss, in detail, what Taoism means, and were more than likely Steinbeck's main source for understanding and interpreting Taoism.

Cook, Sylvia J. "Steinbeck's Poor in Prosperity and Adversity." The Steinbeck

Question: New Essays in Criticism. Ed. Donald R. Noble. New York: Whitston, 1993. 125-142. This essay serves as an in-depth study of Mack and the boys, the main characters in *Cannery Row*. Cook argues that these homeless men were actually wealthy in life because of the fact that they were financially impoverished. This argument will support my assertion that *Cannery Row* is a Taoist text, since one of the main statements of Taoist thought is that materialism and greed function only to imprison the common masses.

DeMott, Robert J. Steinbeck's Reading: A Catalogue of Books Owned and Borrowed. New York: Garland, 1984. This book asserts that Ed Ricketts owned the Goddard translation of the *Tao Teh Ching*, and thus, Steinbeck almost certainly was familiar with this particular edition. This is the version I will argue that Steinbeck used to write *The God in the Pipes* and, possibly, *Cannery Row*.

Gold, Christina Sheehan. "Changing Perceptions of Homelessness." Beyond Boundaries: Rereading John Steinbeck. Ed. Susan Shillinglaw and Kevin Hearle. Tuscaloosa: Alabama UP, 2002. 47-65. This essay explores the issue of homelessness as portrayed in the Steinbeck canon. Since most of the characters in both *Cannery Row* and *The God in the Pipes* are indeed homeless, this argument will be beneficial to my overall understanding of the characters in both texts.

Hiroshi, Kaname. "*Cannery Row* and the Japanese Mentality." Beyond Boundaries: Rereading John Steinbeck. Ed. Susan Shillinglaw and Kevin Hearle. Tuscaloosa: Alabama UP, 2002. 101-106. While this essay does not specifically address Taoism in *Cannery Row*, it does argue that Steinbeck was purposefully viewing the world through an eastern lens. Hiroshi also asserts that Steinbeck held a

fascination for all things eastern, which would, of course, encompass the philosophy of Taoism.

Kelley, James C. "John Steinbeck and Ed Ricketts: Understanding Life in the Great Tide Pool." Steinbeck and the Environment. Ed. Susan F. Beegel, Susan Shillinglaw and Wesley N. Tiffney, Jr. Tuscaloos: Alabama UP, 1997. 27-42. This essay is an analysis of Steinbeck and Ricketts as an inseparable, working pair of philosophical men. Kelley contends that Steinbeck held the beautiful words to portray all of the insightful ideas that Ricketts held within his mind. In this way, the two men often functioned best when they worked together as a team. The relationship between the two men, according to Kelley, is more important to understanding Steinbeck than many scholars have imagined.

Laotzu. Tao Teh-King. Trans. Bhikshu Wai-Tao and Dwight Goddard. Laotzu's Tao and Wu Wei. Ed. Dwight Goddard. Vermont: Dwight Goddard, 1939. 25-69. Although there is no evidence that Steinbeck ever owned this text, it was a part of Ricketts's library, and thus Steinbeck would have certainly had access to it. Steinbeck scholars have often assumed that the books in Ricketts's library were, at some point, read by Steinbeck himself. This text includes the edition of the *Tao Te Ching* which I believe Steinbeck used to write *The God in the Pipes*. It may have also provided him and Ricketts a first encounter with Taoism.

Lisca, Peter. "Cannery Row and the *Tao Teh Ching*." San Jose Studies 1.3 (1975): 21-27. Lisca's argument will lay the foundation for my thesis. I will expand his argument, and add my own elements and ideas to it. Lisca asserts that Steinbeck was revealing Taoism in Cannery Row. Although the article is, in my opinion,

quite brilliant, it is a bit short. I believe that I have many insightful elements to add to this interesting and unique discussion.

McEntyre, Marilyn Chandler. "Natural Wisdom: Steinbeck's Men of Nature as Prophets and Peacemakers." Steinbeck and the Environment. Ed. Susan F. Beegel, Susan Shillinglaw and Wesley N. Tiffney, Jr. Tuscaloos: Alabama UP, 1997. 113-124. This essay discusses the idea that Steinbeck intentionally created specific characters to teach morality to his readers. Although this analysis largely provides an environmental reading of *Cannery Row*, elements of the discussion will be beneficial to me. At least in modern times, Taoism and environmentalism tend to overlap, both emphasizing respect for nature and a mistrust of materialism and commercialism.

Meyer, Michael. "Living In(tension)ally: Steinbeck's *The Log from the Sea of Cortez* as a Reflection of the Balance Advocated in Lao Tzu's *Tao Teh Ching*." Beyond Boundaries: Rereading John Steinbeck. Ed. Susan Shillinglaw and Kevin Hearle. Tuscaloosa: Alabama UP, 2002. 117-129. In this essay, Meyer follows Lisca's assertion that Steinbeck incorporated Taoism into his writing. However, Meyer asserts that *The Log from the Sea of Cortez* advocates the principals of Taoism by actually relating the text from the log to passages of the *Tao Te Ching*. I will use the Meyer article as a methodological archetype for my own thesis.

Railsback, Brian. "Dreams of an Elegant Universe on *Cannery Row*." Beyond Boundaries: Rereading John Steinbeck. Ed. Susan Shillinglaw and Kevin Hearle. Tuscaloosa: Alabama UP, 2002. 277-294. This essay essentially argues that *Cannery Row* is a modern-day Utopia. This argument is quite contrary to the way



the text has been historically interpreted, but it certainly is in alignment with the Taoist interpretation. Taoism, though often deemed impractical, has often been compared to utopian ideas and philosophies.

Shimomura, Noboru. A Study of John Steinbeck: Mysticism in His Novels. Tokyo:

Hokuseido, 1982. Shimomura argues that Steinbeck frequently uses diversity and religion in his novels to teach morality and humanity. This may be useful to me as I write my own thesis, since Taoism is often followed, not only as a philosophical movement and way to live, but also as a religion. Even if I do not use any of the ideas from this article for my own analysis, its' structure is very much like that of Meyer's, and thus this article will provide me with an additional example for my own format and style.

Simmonds, Roy. "*The God in the Pipes: An Early Version of Cannery Row*." Steinbeck

Newsletter 9.1 (1995): 1-10. This short article is the only one, to my

knowledge, that discusses the unpublished chapters of *The God in the Pipes*.

While Simmonds's argument does not encompass the elements of Taoism that are apparent in the text, it does demonstrate how the beginnings of this text are related to *Cannery Row*. Undoubtedly, the two texts are related thematically.

Thus, since I can discuss Taoist elements in *The God in the Pipes*, this will provide additional evidence that Steinbeck was, in fact, incorporating the philosophy of Taoism into his writing.

Steinbeck, John. Cannery Row. New York: Penguin, 1992. *Cannery Row* has,

historically, been read and interpreted as Communist, Environmentalist, and

Humanist. While I believe it encompasses all three of these elements on some

level, Lisca's argument that the text is a reflection of Taoism has virtually been overlooked. It is certainly apparent that Ed Ricketts was greatly interested in Lao Tzu's *Tao Te Ching*, and it is also apparent that Steinbeck took great interest in almost all things that interested Ricketts. I think the fact that Steinbeck dedicated this text to Ricketts is indeed, itself, very telling of its content. The text was meant for Ed Ricketts. In addition, the Taoist elements of the text are apparent and important to those who study modern ideas of Taoism. This novel will serve as my primary source, and I will expand and clarify Lisca's argument that the text is a consequence of Ricketts's and Steinbeck's study of Taoism.

Steinbeck, John. The God in the Pipes. Ed. Roy Simmonds. "The God in the Pipes: An Early Version of Cannery Row." Steinbeck Newsletter 9.1 (1995): 4-10.

Although written in 1940, the unfinished few chapters of this novella were not printed until 1995 and even then, only revealed to the small audience of the Steinbeck Newsletter. The unfinished text, handwritten by Steinbeck himself, is on display at Stanford University. The chapters will be one of the primary sources for my argument and will serve three purposes to my thesis. First, the inclusion of this text will bring great originality to my thesis, since Simmonds's brief description seems to be the only study in existence. Second, by demonstrating that this text reflects Taoist principals in the same way that *Cannery Row* does, I will be able to argue that Steinbeck was familiar with Taoism earlier than originally believed. Finally, by inducting yet another piece of writing into the Steinbeck/Taoism connective genre, my thesis will be adding

to the importance of Taoism as an avenue for studying not only Steinbeck's work, but also his life.

Steinbeck, John. Steinbeck: A Life in Letters. Ed. Elaine Steinbeck and Robert Wallsten. New York: Penguin, 1989. This book of Steinbeck's letters will supplement the biographical information I will need to complete my thesis. In a few of these letters, he mentions Lao Tzu, the father of Taoism. Additionally, many of these letters are addressed to Ed Ricketts and/or discuss *Cannery Row*. Since portions of my thesis will include elements of biographical readings, this collection will serve an important role in fully understanding Steinbeck as a writer.

Tsuboi, Kiyohiko. "Cannery Row Reconsidered." John Steinbeck: Asian Perspectives. Ed. Kiyoshi Nakayama, Scott Pugh and Shigeharu Yano. Japan: Osaka Kyoiku Tash, 1992. 113-125. This essay looks at the Asian elements of Cannery Row. It is quite similar in content to "Cannery Row and the Japanese Mentality." Although Taoism is not analyzed, specifically, Tsuboi thoroughly discusses the Asian characters in *Cannery Row*. This essay also discusses Steinbeck's appreciation of eastern ideas and is one of the very few that has mentioned Lisca's impressive argument.