Flight Study Guide

Flight by John Steinbeck

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Introduction

John Steinbeck's short story "Flight" was published in 1938 in *The Long Valley*, a collection of stories set in the Salinas Valley in California. The book appeared just three years after Steinbeck first received critical acclaim for his novel *Tortilla Flat* and one year before the publication of what many consider his greatest work, *The Grapes of Wrath*. "Flight" is generally considered one of Steinbeck's best works of short fiction, wntten at the height of his career. It is the story of young Pepe Torres, an unsophisticated youth from an isolated farm along the California coast. He wants very much to be considered a man. On his first trip alone to town, he kills a drunken man in an argument and flees to the mountains, only to succumb to thirst, infection, and the bullets of his pursuers. Critics have interpreted the story as a parable of the journey from youth to manhood. In writing the story, Steinbeck drew on his own experiences growing up in the Salinas Valley to give a vivid portrayal of the arid, rocky mountains east of the valley, which are filled with wild animals and danger. His energetic narrative style gives "Flight" its suspense and dramatic power. Steinbeck's sympathy for the struggles of the peasant against the forces of nature and wealthy landowners, which forms the basis for *The Grapes of Wrath* and many of his other works, is apparent in this story.

Author Biography

Winner of the 1940 Pulitzer Prize in literature for his novel *The Grapes of Wrath*, the 1937 New York Drama Critics Circle Award for his theatrical adaptation of his novella *Of Mice and Men*, and the 1962 Nobel Prize for literature, Steinbeck enjoyed popular as well as critical success during his lifetime and beyond. Although Steinbeck's romantic portrayals of dignified and noble common folk are now seen by some as simplistic, his works continue to appeal to critics and readers of the present day, supporting Steinbeck's enduring reputation as one of the most important twentieth-century American writers.

John Ernst Steinbeck was born on February 27, 1902, in Salinas, California. He grew up in the Salinas Valley and used it as the setting for many of his works, including "Flight." He used this familiar terrain as a setting in which to test his characters' relationship to their environment. Peter Shaw comments that "[T]he features of the valley at once determined the physical fate of his characters and made symbolic comment on them." Steinbeck's studies at Stanford University in California, where he became interested in biology, led him to take an evolutionary view of human society. He referred to this as his "biological" approach to understanding and writing about human behavior. This placed him in philosophical alignment with other naturalist writers who were influenced by Charles Darwin's theories of evolution and natural selection. In naturalistic works, the characters are products of their heredity as it acts upon their environment Such stories end usually with the destruction of the main character, who by acting in response to his impulses and instincts, is crushed by the forces of the environment. However, Steinbeck is not strictly naturalistic, as he frequently casts his stones in mythic frameworks, giving them romantic or spiritual dimensions lacking in much naturalistic fiction.

Steinbeck's greatest achievement was *The Grapes of Wrath*, published in 1939. It is the story of the migration of an Oklahoma family during the Great Depression of the 1930s from their drought-destroyed farm to the dream of prosperity in California. When the Joad family reaches California, they find many others like them, all competing for low wages to pick fruit on corporate-owned farms. Steinbeck's epic and sympathetic presentation of this story led to charges that he was a communist. In the resulting controversy, the book was both banned and praised. Steinbeck continued to write, in 1952 publishing *East of Eden*, a novel paralleling the biblical story of Cain and Abel. He also served briefly as a war correspondent during the Vietnam conflict. Steinbeck died in New York City on December 20,1968.

Plot Summary

"Flight" opens at an unspecified time, probably in the 1930s, on the Torres farm on the California coast, fifteen miles south of Monterey. Nineteen-year-old Pepe Torres is amusing his younger brother and sister, Ermlio and Rosy, by skillfully throwing his switchblade at a post. The knife is his inheritance from his father, who died ten years earlier after being bitten by a rattlesnake. Their mother scolds Pepe for his laziness and tells him he must ride into Monterey to buy salt and medicine. He is to spend the night in Monterey at the home of a family friend, Mrs. Rodriguez. Pepe is surprised that he will be allowed to go alone, and he asks to wear his father's hat, hatband, and green silk handkerchief. He tells his mother that he will be careful, saying, "I am a man." His mother responds that he is "a peanut" and "a foolish chicken."

Before sunrise the next morning, Pepe returns unexpectedly to the farm. He tells his mother he must go away to the mountains. He tells his mother that he had drunk wine at Mrs. Rodriguez's, and that a few other people had shown up as well. He tells her about a quarrel he had with a man. His knife seemed to fly on its own, and the man was stabbed. Pepe concludes by saying, "I am a man now, Mama. The man said names to me I could not allow."

Mama Torres agrees that Pepe is now a man, but she also has her doubts She has worried about Pepe's knife-play and where it might lead him. She gives him his father's black coat and rifle, as well as a water bag and some provisions. Dressed in his father's garments, Pepe hurries off to the mountains. Mama Torres starts the formal wail of mourning for the dead. Emilio asks Rosy if Pepe is dead, and Rosy replies, "He is not dead.. . Not yet."

Pepe rides into the mountains, and as he climbs, the trail changes from soft black dirt beside a stream to redwood forest to rough, dry. rocky open country. He avoids a mounted man on the trail. As he rides higher toward the pass, he glimpses a dark figure on the ridge ahead, then looks quickly away. He stops in the evening by a small stream, tying the horse. A wildcat comes to the stream and stares at Pepe, who does not use the rifle for fear of revealing his location to his pursuers. He sleeps, then wakes suddenly in the night when his horse whinnies to another horse on the trail. After hastily saddling his horse and going up the hill, he realizes that he has left his hat behind.

He continues riding into the dry waste country. Then, without warning, his horse is shot dead from under him. Pepe, under fire, crawls up the hill, moving "with the instinctive care of an animal." He worms his way up, running only when there is cover, otherwise "wriggling forward on his stomach." He waits as wild animals go about their business, the buzzards already circling over his dead horse below. When he sees a flash below him, he aims and fires. In the return fire, a chip of granite embeds itself in his right hand. Pepe takes the stone out and the cut bleeds. He stuffs a dusty spider web into the wound to stop the bleeding, then slides and crawls slowly up the hill. He is almost bitten by a rattlesnake, and lizards scatter before him as he crawls upward. He sleeps in the

bushes until night. His arm is infected and swollen tight inside the sleeve of his father's coat. He leaves the coat behind. He is very thirsty and his tongue is swollen.

That night he conies to a damp stream bed and digs frantically for water. Exhausted, he falls asleep until late the next afternoon. He awakens to find a large mountain lion staring at him. The big cat moves away at the sound of horses and a dog. Pepe crouches behind a rock until dark, then moves up the slope before he realizes he has left his rifle behind. He sleeps, then awakens to find his wound swollen and gangrenous. He clumsily lances the wound with a sharp rock and tries to drain the infection from his hand. He climbs near the top of a ridge only to see "a deep canyon exactly like the last, waterless and desolate."

He sleeps again in the daylight, awakening to the sound of pursuing hounds. He tries to speak, "but only a thick hiss came to his lips." He makes the sign of the cross with his left hand and struggles to his feet. Standing tall, he allows his pursuers to take aim. Two shots ring out and Pepe falls forward down the rocky cliff, his body causing a "little avalanche."

Detailed Summary & Analysis

Summary

Out on the coast of California, 15 miles south of Monterey, Mama Torres lives on her farm with her three children, Emilio-12 years old, Pepé-19, and Rosy-14. Overall, they are a hard-working family except for Pepé, who, much to his mother's disappointment, is incredibly lazy. While Emilio and Rosy go out and catch fish when the tides cooperate, the gentle, Pepé does not do anything around the house or the farm. However, Mama Torres loves her eldest child dearly and thinks that he is very brave, though she never tells him this.

One fine day along the coast, Mama Torres is looking for Pepé because she has some work for him to do. She calls for her son several times, but decides to search for him when he does not respond. She does not have far to look, since Pepé is just outside the house, entertaining his brother and sister with his knife-throwing skills. He places the switchblade knife, which once belonged to his deceased father, in his lap. Then, with an almost unnoticeably quick motion, he throws it into a redwood post with deadly accuracy. In fact, he must have been practicing this for a while, since he can repeat the trick over and over again with absolute precision. However, Mama Torres is unimpressed and merely wants her son to stop fooling around and get some work done.

Mama Torres tells Pepé that he must ride into Monterey to buy some medicine and salt, since the family is out of these important goods. Pepé is to ride there alone, and Mama Torres admonishes him to buy only the medicine and the salt—no candy, and to avoid spending too long in church. Mama Torres also tells her son that he should stay with Mrs. Rodriguez, a friend of the family, and come back the next day with the supplies.

Hearing that he is to ride alone to Monterey, Pepé is excited. After all, this is a manly thing to do, and it will allow him to ride one of the family's horses while wearing his father's hat and silk bandana like a real man. Thus, Pepé quickly catches the horse, puts on the saddle and rides off into the distance.

That night, Pepé returns home with the salt and medicine, but Mama Torres is surprised that Pepé did not spend the night with Mrs. Rodriguez. When she asks Pepé why he came home so quickly, Pepé explains that he went to Mrs. Rodriguez's house but, while he was there, a man who was also there began insulting him horribly. Because Pepé had been drinking wine, he was not thinking clearly, so he threw his switchblade at the man and killed him.

Hearing this tale, Mama Torres knows that there will be men chasing Pepé, so she quickly rouses Emilio and Rosy and they all help Pepé get ready to run away. Mama Torres gives Pepé a rifle and ten bullets, a bag of beef jerky and a full water bag to help him along the road. Then, once the horse is loaded with all the supplies, Pepé quickly mounts and rides off toward the mountains.

Following the instructions of his mother, Pepé rides all through the next day in order to put as much distance as possible between him and any pursuers. He eats lightly and drinks sparingly to keep from using up his meager supplies while he flees. However, as he rides along the road, a man approaches and Pepé ducks behind a large redwood tree to avoid being spotted. Fortunately, the man does not notice Pepé and Pepé escapes capture. Unfortunately, Pepé knows the men pursuing him are close by.

Pepé continues on through the canyons and over the mountains as he resumes his flight, much more wary now. However, he does not see anyone else chasing him, though he does see one of the mysterious dark watchers—strange men who live in the mountains—but Pepé knows that they will not bother anyone who does not bother them.

After crossing the mountains, Pepé arrives in a large, flat valley where he finally has an opportunity to refill his water bag and rest. Pepé believes that he is finally safe enough to get some sleep, because he has not seen any pursuers since he hid behind the redwood tree. In the middle of the night, Pepé is awoken when his horse whinnies. Knowing that there must be a cause for this, Pepé listens carefully until he hears the answering whinny from another horse. Knowing this is not good, Pepé jumps onto his horse and rides onto a trail leading away from the valley and back up into the mountains.

By the time dawn arrives, Pepé is feeling safer. There is no sign of anyone about and he believes he can relax. However, just then, Pepé's horse falls dead beneath him, killed by a shot from a rifle. Pepé quickly scrambles behind some rocks and takes aim with his rifle. He does not know where the shooter is, but Pepé knows that the man will be coming. Therefore, he waits patiently for a sign of the shooter and, when Pepé sees movement in the brush, he fires. However, an answering shot comes back and sends a sliver of granite into Pepé's right hand. Though the wound is not too severe, it does bleed badly and Pepé uses spider webs to stop the bleeding before he flees farther into the mountains.

Throughout the day, Pepé works his way through the canyons and along the ridges in order to escape his pursuers. Unfortunately, the cut on his hand is infected and it makes both his hand and his arm swell and throb horribly. Adding to the misery, Pepé does not have his water bag and he is suffering from severe thirst. Since he is in the mountains, there is no water to be found anywhere; even the streambeds are dried up.

That night, Pepé falls asleep in a dry streambed, and he continues sleeping until the following noon. Then, as Pepé wakes, he notices a mountain lion watching him carefully. However, when the mountain lion suddenly runs off, Pepé knows that the men pursuing him are nearby. He escapes into some brush where he hides until nightfall.

Under cover of night, Pepé works his way forward as best he can but, after taking in some needed sleep, he forgets his rifle in some brush, leaving him completely unarmed and unprotected from the men chasing him. Because when he goes back to look for the rifle he cannot find it, he must go on without it.

As Pepé climbs over the top of the next hill, he looks down into the canyon to see another dead, dry streambed that clearly has no water at the bottom. As well, he looks at the cut on his hand, which has turned black from infection and it now sending a black line all the way up into his armpit. Though Pepé tries to scrape the dead flesh out of his wound, he realizes it is no use. He cannot go forward; he cannot go back, and he will die from either dehydration or infection even if he does somehow manage to get away from men chasing him on horseback.

With one final struggle, Pepé drags himself to his feet and climbs up onto a rock standing high on top of the ridge. Then, waving his good arm weakly at his breast, a bullet fired from below strikes the young man dead.

Analysis

The knife-throwing skills that Pepé displays to his brother and sister foreshadow Pepé killing the man at Mrs. Rodriguez's house. Since the movement is so natural, it stands to reason that it will occur at a bad time, such as it does when Pepé has too much wine and another man insults him.

Before Pepé goes off to Monterey, he wants to wear all sorts of gaudy things, like his father's hatband and green, silk handkerchief. Thus, Pepé believes that he is a man simply for the things that he has on him. This symbolizes the belief that manhood comes with the things one can acquire, not the things that one does. However, Mama Torres still calls him a "peanut," showing that this is not true at all. In fact, Pepé is borrowing his manhood off of his father, as symbolized by the fact that all of the things he is so proud to wear actually belonged to his dead father. Another foreshadow occurs as Pepé wears his father's clothes, setting up a similar fate between the father and the son.

When Pepé returns home from his trip to Monterey, he tells his mother that he is a man now that he has killed another man, and his mother agrees with him. Thus, Pepé has symbolically changed from a child into man. However, the man of action that Pepé becomes is less than admirable; he killed a man simply for insulting him. Thus, Pepé has become a man, but his progression as a person is not complete. When Pepé leaves for the mountains, Emilio asks Rosy, "Is he dead?" Rosy replies, "Not yet." This provides yet another foreshadow—the death of Pepé at the hands of the men chasing him.

This story is a symbolic journey of life for Pepé. He starts the story as a lazy boy who does nothing and does not even have the respect of his mother. However, when he returns from Monterey, he is a man of action who is capable of taking the life of another man. Following that, Pepé rides off into the mountains, and he loses all the things that he believes made him a man, such as the hat, the coat, the horse and the rifle. Thus, he is no longer a man, but an animal simply attempting to survive. However, at the end, he knows he is destined to die, so he gives in to death. As he stands up on the rock, he has his arms spread wide, in an imitation of a cross. Thus, Pepé has lost his manhood,

moved past his animal side, and has become a symbolic Christ figure dying for his own sins.

Characters

Mama

See Mrs. Torres

Papa

See Mr. Torres

Mrs. Rodriguez

Mrs. Rodriguez lives in Monterey and is a friend of the Torres family. Although she does not appear in the story, it is at her home that Pepe becomes drunk and stabs the drunken stranger. Her home is the only location of social gathering in the story.

Mr. Torres

Mr. Torres is Pepe's father who, ten years prior to the time of the story, died when he tripped over a stone and fell on a rattlesnake. The switchblade Pepe now owns was inherited from his father. Although the story says nothing about the father other than his manner of death, his presence is constantly felt.

Mrs. Torres

Mrs. Torres is Pepe's widowed mother. She lives on the family's seaside farm with her two sons and her daughter and is determined to maintain her home without the help of a man. She keeps the two younger children home from school so they can fish and bring in food for the family. She believes that Pepe is "fine and brave," though there is little evidence to substantiate her opinion. In fact, she constantly tells Pepe how lazy he is, and says that he is foolish when he asserts that he is a man.

When Pepe returns from an errand in Monterey and tells his mother he must flee, she helps him pack, admitting that she had been worried about his quick reflexes with the knife. Despite the fact that he has failed to stay out of trouble while on his errand, she believes that Pepe's experience in Monterey has made him "a man now," for "[h]e has a man's thing to do."

Pepe Torres

Nineteen-year-old Pepe Torres is the main character in "Flight." He is tall, thin, gangly, and lives on the family farm with his widowed mother and a younger brother and sister.

While his mother believes that he is "fine and brave," there is no indication that he is anything but lazy. He is very skilled in throwing his father's switchblade, however, and wants to prove that he is a man.

In Monterey, Pepe gets drunk and knifes a man who quarrels with him. He tries to explain to his mother how much of a man he is now, but refuses to accept full responsibility for his actions. He even claims that, at one point, "[T]he knife—it went almost by itself." Pepe then flees to the mountains, taking only his father's coat, rifle, and a few provisions. In his flight, he loses the hat, the provisions, the rifle, and his horse—everything he needs to survive. Such carelessness shows how much Pepe still has to learn about being a responsible adult.

With no skills to aid him and with an infected hand becoming gangrenous, Pepe becomes exhausted, hungry, thirsty, and is reduced to crawling away from his pursuers like an animal. His parched mouth can no longer form words. In his degradation, he is able to stand up—like a man—to his pursuers, and face his death.

Themes

Growth and Development

At the beginning of "Flight" Pepe Torres is a nineteen-year-old youth living on an isolated farm with his mother and two younger siblings. He keeps insisting to his mother that he is a man, but she dismisses him with belittling names. Pepe does not understand what it means to be a man. When he is given the responsibility of riding to town to buy medicine and salt for the family, like a child he excitedly asks if he can wear his father's hatband and handkerchief. The clothing makes him appear to be an adult, but his idea of maturity is very superficial. In town he gets drunk and argues with a drunken man who insults him. He does not accept responsibility for knifing the man. He tells his mother that "the man started toward [him] and then the knife—it went almost by itself. It flew, it darted before [he] knew it." He insists that because he is now a man he cannot allow himself to be insulted. While Pepe does appear changed—his eyes are sharp and bright and purposeful, with no laughter or bashfulness in them anymore—he is not mature. When his mother tells his brother and sister he is a man now, Pepe's appearance changes "until he looked very much like Mama."

The ride into the wilderness is a test of Pepe's maturity. However, he loses his hat, his horse, his father's coat, his father's rifle, and his water supply. These are all necessary to protect him from the heat of the sun and the cold nights as well as the dry desert mountains while he tries to escape punishment for his crime Injured by a chip of granite which his pursuers' bullet drove into his right hand, Pepe becomes more and more debilitated as the infection spreads. He is described as an animal, as he crawls on his stomach, wriggling and worming toward the top of the next ridge. Because he is so thirsty, he loses the ability to talk. At the end of the story, he manages to stand on his two legs again at the top of the ridge and face his pursuers. Most critics see this stand as proof that Pepe has finally matured and now, like a man, is able to accept the consequences of his actions.

Individual versus Nature

When Pepe flees to the wilderness to escape from the consequences of his crime, he also flees from his humanity The wilderness tests not just his maturity but also his place in the natural world. It is no longer just a question of whether he will become an adult but whether he will become human. He loses the marks of his humanity when he loses his tools and the ability to speak. He is just one animal among others in the natural world. He is reduced to digging for water and struggling to find shelter from the hot sun. But instead of dymg like an animal among animals, Pepe stands up like a man in both senses of the word to face his punishment for his crime.

Change and Transformation

The central idea of "Eight" is Pepe's transition from boy to man. In the course of running from his crime, Pepe starts as a youth fleeing responsibility. As he loses the tools that define his humanity, he is reduced to crawling on the ground like an animal, wriggling like a snake and "worming" his way along. This recalls his father's death ten years earlier from a rattlesnake bite. Pepe first changes not as from boy to man but from human to animal. He even loses the most distinctive trait of his humanity—the ability to speak. After suffering with thirst, a wound which becomes gangrenous, and the effects of being without shade in the hot sun, Pepe pulls himself to his feet to face his pursuers. Most critics see this as the point where Pepe becomes a man. Maturity is not a condition which comes at a certain age; it must be learned and earned through suffering. It is this suffering which changes Pepe into a man. Other critics, however, maintain that Pepe fails in his quest for manhood.

Style

Narrator and Point of View

"Flight" is told from a third-person point of view. The narrator, the person telling the story, is outside the story and relates events as an observer would see them For most of the story, the narrator is not omniscient, or "all-knowing," about the characters in the story. When a narrator's point of view is limited, the reader is not told a character's thoughts or feelings during the course of the story. Instead, the reader must determine what a character is thinking or feeling from what the character does or says. One exception to this limited point of view appears near the beginning of the story, when the narrator says, "Mama thought [Pepe] fine and brave, but she never told him so." The narrator is stepping into Mrs. Torres' mind and telling readers what she thinks. For most of the story, however, the reader can tell what a character is thinking or feeling only from the external clues which the narrator gives provides. For example, when Pepe is dressed up in his father's hat and green silk handkerchief, readers know he is feeling proud and happy because the narrator says that "Pepe grinned with pride and gladness" as he rode off to Monterey. As Pepe crawls up the mountain, thirsty and without his hat or horse, the narrator does not say that Pepe is feeling uneasy. Instead, the narrator says, "[h]is eyes were uneasy and suspicious," and this description of Pepe provides a clue to readers about how he is feeling.

The use of the limited third-person point of view in this story puts the reader in the same position as an observer. This makes the reader infer Pepe's motives from what he says and does. If the narrator were all-knowing, the reader would be told the reason why Pepe stands up on the ridge at the end of the story. Because the narrator does not know what Pepe is thinking, readers do not have access to Pepe's thoughts. Consequently, the reader can never be sure why Pepe stands up to certain death. The limited point of view contributes to the story's ambiguity.

Setting

"Flight" is set in an indeterminate time on the coast of central California as well as further inland in the coastal mountains. The story could have taken place any time between the late 1800s and the mid-1900s. The Torres farm is located on the cliffs overlooking the Pacific coast, at the edge of the continent. The country to the east, toward which Pepe flees, is a wilderness first of redwood forest and then dry, rocky hills and mountains. It is the ideal setting for the confrontation of man against nature.

Imagery

Animal imagery dominates "Flight." Pepe's mother compares him to a big coyote, a foolish chicken, a descendant of "some lazy cow," and a big sheep. He is described as grinning "sheepishly." His wrist flicks like the head of a snake. After his horse is shot

underneath him, Pepe crawls, worms his way, wriggles, darts, and flashes like an animal. As he is crawling away after his hand is cut, he slides "into the brush on his stomach" and crawls close to a rattlesnake. His movements are those of a rattlesnake. These images evoke his father's death as a result of falling onto a rattlesnake. On his final day, Pepe moves toward the top of the ridge "with the effort of a hurt beast." He tries to speak, but can only make a "thick hissing noise." When he lances and drains his infected hand, he whines "like a dog" at the pain. He again tries to speak, but can produce only a "thick hiss." Only at the very end is he able to stand erect on his feet, like a human.

Structure

"Flight" is a short story which can almost be read as a folktale. It is set in an indeterminate time, almost a "once upon a time." Pepe is the hero who is sent out into the world on an errand, much as Jack of "Jack and the Beanstalk" was sent to sell the cow. Pepe encounters a problem, and he must flee for his life. His mother is his helper, and she gives him his father's coat and rifle for warmth and protection on the journey, as well as advice on how to survive. Pepe is, like many folktale heroes, a peasant. He passes into the wilderness and is tested. However, Pepe loses his horse and his father's rifle. He loses his power of speech and is reduced to the level of an animal. The "dark watchers" provide an element of the supernatural; it is never explained whether they are some type of imaginary power or just the men pursuing Pepe.

Naturalism

Although "Flight" is similar in tone and form to a folktale, it is written in a highly naturalistic style Naturalism is a style of fiction which developed from the ideas of Charles Darwin's mid-nineteenth century theories of evolution and natural selection. Naturalist writers, according to M. H. Abrams's *Glossary of Literary Terms*, "held that a human being belongs entirely in the order of nature and does not have a soul or any other mode of participation in a religious or spiritual world beyond nature; that such a being is therefore merely a higher-order animal whose character and fortunes are determined by two kinds of forces, heredity and environment."

Steinbeck was influenced by such naturalist writers as Theodore Dreiser, as well as by his study of biology at Stanford. "Flight" is considered a masterpiece of naturalist writing. This story is a combination of a folktale form and a scientific attitude toward the human condition. The folktale and naturalistic short story are conflicting forms and styles, and this conflict emphasizes the ambiguity of the story's ending. Did Pepe simply die, as a failure and an animal, or did he succeed in his quest for manhood by standing up before his enemies?

Historical Context

California Geography

Steinbeck's "Flight" is set on the mid-California coast about fifteen miles south of Monterey and in the coastal mountains to the east This was familiar terrain to Steinbeck, who was born and raised in Salinas. The Salinas Valley is the valley to which the title *The Long Valley* refers. As an adult, Steinbeck lived in Pacific Grove, a short distance from Monterey. He was very familiar with the terrain, from the rocky cliffs above the Pacific south of Monterey to the redwood forest inland to the dry, saw-tooth mountains to the east, then to the fertile Salinas Valley further east. This is the country through which Pepe passes on his flight from his pursuers.

In the 1930s, when Steinbeck was writing many of his works, the valley was a fertile farming region. During the Great Depression, however, many of the area's inhabitants were forced to sell their land to wealthy industrialists, who compelled those who worked the land to work hard for little in return. The people in the area who had farmed for generations were often Mexicans or descendants of the pioneers who had settled the land in the mid-nineteenth century. Pepe's Indian features could be attributed to earlier intermarriage between Mexican settlers and Native Americans from the area.

The dialogue in the story highlights the area's Spanish influences. Not only do specific phrases in Spanish appear in the dialogue, but the family uses the familiar form of the personal pronouns, "thee" and "thou," instead of the formal "you" when speaking with each other. Spoken English no longer makes these distinctions, unlike other languages. The resulting archaic feeling to the language helps place the characters in another, mythical time, or the indeterminate era in which folktales take place.

The Labor Movement

Steinbeck studied biology at Stanford in the 1920s. He developed a biological view of the human condition based on Darwinian ideas of evolution, natural selection, and adaptation. He liked to set man against nature in his writing, as he does in "Flight," and to examine how well man can survive in the wild. In addition, he was sympathetic to the poor and the exploited, who often became the central characters in his writings. He supported the labor movement, and he despised the exploitation of workers by corporate farms and large ranches. In novels like *The Grapes of Wrath* and In Dubious Battle, his clear sympathy for dispossessed farmers and striking workers led to accusations from some critics that he was a communist. Steinbeck addressed the political and economic stresses of the 1930s by writing of the effects on the poor, but he did not subscribe to a specific ideology.

"Flight" was written during the Great Depression, which began in 1929 and lasted through the 1930s. During that time, many people lost their jobs, homes, and became

itinerant, often moving their entire families westward in hopes of finding work on farms that had not become part of the Midwestern "dustbowl" region. The poor became a viable political group because they had very little to lose. In this atmosphere, many labor unions, both in the industrialized North and the agricultural West, formed and became powerful. By exerting their political clout, and with the assistance of President Franklin Roosevelt's activist relief agenda, unions were able to compel Congress to enact laws establishing a minimum wage, worker's rights to organize and bargain collectively, and safe practices in the workplace

Critical Overview

Well received by critics and the reading public when published in *The Long Valley* in 1938, "Flight" is considered one of Steinbeck's best stories. It was written at the height of his powers and published a year before *The Grapes of Wrath*. However, Steinbeck's views have declined in popularity in the decades since he first published these works. His romantic portrayals of dignified and noble common men are now seen by some as simplistic. In spite of this, his forceful and energetic writing style continues to earn him readers.

Critics still debate the meaning of "Flight." Most see it as a parable of what it means to be human, or in terms of the story, a man. Some see the story as showing how Pepe earns the right to call himself a man by suffering on his flight from his crime. Edward J. Piacentino in Studies in Short Fiction, catalogs the many animal references in the story and concludes that "the patterns they form give 'Flight' a richly suggestive texture that is often characteristic of some of the more artistically impressive short stories of twentieth-century literature." He notes that while Pepe is still at home on the farm, his mother refers to him in the imagery of domestic animals. For example, an ancestor of his must have been "a lazy cow," and Pepe is "a big sheep," and a "foolish chicken." Twice she also refers to him or his ancestors as having the traits of a "lazy coyote." This and several references to his skill with the knife as being "snakelike," are indications of his "primitive animalism" underneath his domesticity.

Piacentino finds that this use of domestic animal imagery in the first part of the story is in contrast to the imagery of wild animals used to describe Pepe's predicament and behavior in the mountains. Doves and quail are stalked by a wildcat "creeping toward the spring, belly to the ground." Lizards on the trail slither away from Pepe and his horse. At night owls hunt rabbits. After his horse is shot out from under him, Pepe himself must act like

an animal, "worming," "wriggling," "crawling," "slithering," and "hissing." At the end, Pepe climbs to the top of the ridge "with the effort of a hurt beast," and though unable to speak, stands like a man. His fall is not just a fall from grace; it is also the fall from youthful innocence in attaining maturity.

John H. Timmerman sees "Flight" as a story of "an exploration of one individual's flight into unknown regions—a spiritual odyssey into the high, and regions far from the nurturing sea." Timmerman uses letters written by Steinbeck and selections from Steinbeck's notebooks and other published works to supply a background to Steinbeck's philosophy of life. Steinbeck's passionate interest in marine biology and the sea was, in the 1930s, a strong influence on his work. The metaphor of the sea as a nurturing mother is evidenced in "Flight" as the secluded Torres farm by the sea. Pepe' s flight from this protected environment for the dry, unknown mountains is not only, as Timmerman says, a story of "a modern man in search of his manhood and finding the animal within," it is also "a devolution, paced by a divestment of civilized tools and in incrementally intensifying animal imagery." In a notebook entry about the humanity' s

evolutionary development from lower forms which lived in the sea to an organism able to stand on dry land, Steinbeck had written, "Oh man who in climbing up has become lower.... What nobility except from pain, what strength except out of anger, what change except from discomfort." When Pepe loses his tools, his water, and his protective clothing, he is stripped down to himself alone. As his thirst takes away his human speech, his movements are described as those of a snake. Although Pepe has lowered himself to the level of a snake, he finally regains his humanity. In standing up to his responsibility, he becomes a man.

Dan Vogel, in an article in College English, finds that "Flight" shows characteristics of myth and tragedy. Pepe's flight is an "ordeal of transformation from innocence to experience, from purity to defilement." The physical pain of the festering cut to his right hand and the psychological pain of being the hunted are the components of his ordeal. Pepe must separate himself from the mother and lose the knife, gun, hat, and coat of the father before he can stand alone. Vogel sees "Flight" as telling the myth "of the natural miracle of entering manhood."

In contrast to most critics, Walter K Gordon asserts that Pepe's flight is not the story of a youth leaving behind his mother and the tools of the father to become a man, but rather the opposite. In Studies in Short Fiction, Gordon argues that the story shows "man's moral deterioration and regression that inevitably results when he abandons responsibility for his actions." While Pepe and his family believe that the experience in Monterey has made him a man, the story demonstrates that he is unable to utilize the tools he has been given to help him succeed in his flight. He does not learn and grow and attain a sense of maturity from his experiences. For Gordon, "Flight" is a journey away from manhood.

As these various critical interpretations show, the ambiguity of the story itself lends it to conflicting interpretations of what it means. The value of "Flight" is that it is complex and does not yield easy answers to the human condition.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3
- Critical Essay #4
- Critical Essay #5

Critical Essay #1

Munro is an lawyer who works for UAW— Ford Legal Services. She is pursuing a doctorate in British and American literature at Wayne State University. In the following essay, she provides an overview of several critical interpretations of "Flight," but gives special focus to it as a work in which Steinbeck combines a naturalistic outlook with what could almost be called a folktale, with Pepe featured in the role of a Trickster.

Most of the criticism of Steinbeck's "Flight" discusses the story as Pepe Torres's journey from childhood to maturity. Nineteen-year-old Pepe wants very much to be considered a man and not a child. However, when he is given the responsibility of going to Monterey alone, he is unable to complete his errand without getting into trouble. He drinks too much wine, then knifes a drunken man who insults him. His flight into the mountains and the hardships he endures reduce him to the level of an animal. At the very end, Pepe stands up on the ridge to face his pursuers. He is shot and falls. To Edward J. Piacentino, Pepe's fall from the ridge is a fall from childhood into maturity. By standing up to his pursuers, Pepe finally faces responsibility for his actions in Monterey. Dan Vogel, in an essay in College English, sees the story as mythic and tragic. Pepe's flight is an ordeal taking him from innocence to experience, and Pepe's death is the death and burial of childhood. John H. Timmerman suggests that the central theme of "Flight" is that Pepe discovers, tragically, "that indomitable, spiritual consciousness of himself as human that separates him from the animals."

Other critics also see a spiritual dimension in Pepe's journey. Not only does Pepe move from childhood to maturity, he also grows from reacting like an unthinking animal to acting like a responsible human. John Antico writes of the animal-like, crawling Pepe that "[i]t is only by standing up on two feet sad facing death that the sub-human Pepe can give birth to Man." In an article on "Flight" in the Explicator, William M. Jones sees Pepe's major flaw as being the sin of pride. "The details of Pepe' s flight show how Pepe gradually conquered the family pride that caused his original sin and how through suffering he expiated that sin." By undergoing the hardships in the mountains and by being reduced to the level of an animal, Pepe makes amends both for his own impulsive action of stabbing a man who insulted him and for his condition of being born with original sin.

However much the reader wants a satisfying ending to this dramatic story, "Flight" refuses to give one. Walter K. Gordon argues in Studies in Short Fiction that Pepe actually flees from maturity. Pepe is first broken down in the story "from boy to animal, then from animal to an inanimate part of nature " How can one story generate such different interpretations?

Because the story itself refuses to give Pepe either a clear triumph or a defeat at the end, it remains open to interpretation This lack of closure at the end keeps the reader thinking about what the story means long after it has been read. The critics who interpret Pepe's stand at the end of the story as redemptive overlook the particular

features of the story itself. Perhaps this is why their arguments do not explain the story satisfactorily. The story is more ambiguous than these readings suggest.

Another look at the animal imagery inm the story opens up further interpretations of "Flight." The narrator describes Pepe as having "sharp Indian cheek bones and an eagle nose." As he throws the switchblade, "Pepe's wrist flicks like the head of a snake." The comparisons of Pepe to wild animals and the reference to his Indian heritage invite the reader to consider the significance of the coyote in Native American folklore. The fact that Mrs. Torres makes two references to the coyote suggests that the coyote has a special meaning in the story. The coyote is not just a wild animal or a sly, lazy animal, but a form of the Trickster in some Native American traditions. A Trickster is a "disruptive character appearing in various forms in the folklore of many cultures," according to Merriam Webster's Tenth Collegiate Dictionary. The Trickster is part divine and part animal. He has a skill or magic power which he uses sometimes to benefit humankind but which sometimes backfires on him. Often he can change his shape. He freely crosses the boundaries both between human and animal and between the divine and the human.

During both his nights on the mountain, Pepe hears a coyote. Like Coyote the Trickster, Pepe has a dual nature. Mama Torres is certainly aware of this. Her son is both boy and man, and human but with potential to act with animal-like instinctive reflexes. Each time he asserts to her that he is a "man," she refuses to acknowledge it, responding that he is a "peanut" or "a foolish chicken." At the same time, she thinks of him as "fine and brave." After Pepe rides off to Monterey, her younger son Emilio asks her, "Did Pepe come to be a man today?" She replies, "A boy gets to be a man when a man is needed." She thinks Pepe is "nearly a man now." When Pepe returns from Monterey changed, he again asserts, "I am a man now, Mama," and this time she nods and says, "Yes, thou art a man, my poor little Pepe. Thou art a man. I have seen it coming on thee. I have watched you throwing the knife into the post, and I have been afraid." For her, Pepe is at the same time both a man and her "poor little Pepe." But the man she acknowledges is the one who too easily throws the knife, the one she has feared he might become. The distinction between "man" versus "child" and "man" versus "animal" is made early in the story.

When Pepe begins his flight to the mountains, "his face was stern, relentless and manly." But as he goes on, he is gradually reduced from riding to walking to crawling like an animal up the dry mountains. Pepe, the man-boy and the man-animal slides on his stomach, wriggles, and squirms his way forward, much like the rattlesnake he encounters. He gets up on his feet "[w]ith the effort of a hurt beast." When he tries to speak, he can only make "thick hissing" sounds. When he drains his infected hand, "he threw back his head and whined like a dog."

The terrain itself almost seems to take on human characteristics. The trail "staggers" down. The granite is "tortured." The oak trees "whisper." The mountain has "jagged rotten teeth" and "granite teeth." Pepe begins by observing the animals, but later, they are observing him. After the mountain lion watches him for hours, then slinks away into the brush, "Pepe took his rifle in his left hand and he glided into the brush almost as

quietly as the lion had. Only when the dark came did he stand up." Pepe has become more animal than man.

As the plot of the story resembles a folktale concerning a Trickster, other aspects of the story also resemble a folktale. The story is set in an indeterminate time, almost a "once upon a time." Pepe rides to Monterey like a youth in search of his fortune or his manhood. When his manhood is challenged, he reacts unthinkingly and with fatal results, and he must flee for his life. His mother gives him talismans of his dead father, the coat and the rifle, and he rides into the wilderness. "The dark watchers" in the wilderness add a supernatural element to the story. In the folktale, anything can happen. Frogs change into princes and men into toads. On his flight, Pepe is "changed" into an animal who crawls, wriggles, and worms his way along. At the end, he seems to change back into a man, depending on how the reader interprets his stand against his pursuers.

But while the story has some elements of a folktale, it is at the same time a naturalist work of fiction. Naturalism refers to a style of writing fiction which is almost scientific in its attempt to portray characters and how they react to their environment. This approach to fiction is, according to M. H. Abrams in A *Glossary of Literary Terms*, "a product of post-Darwinian biology in the mid-nineteenth century," which holds that "a human being belongs entirely in the order of nature and does not have a soul or any other mode of participation in a religious or spiritual world beyond nature; that such a being is therefore merely a higher-order animal whose character and fortunes are determined by two kinds of forces, heredity and environment." The folktale and the naturalistic story are very different, almost opposite, styles. For Steinbeck to superimpose them in the same story is for him to write a story which is based on a built-in contradiction.

This type of contradiction may be the story's major strength. It helps to explain why the ending is ambiguous. Is Pepe a man or an animal? Or, like the Trickster, is he two things at once, animal and divine9 Perhaps the story resolves this question by refusing to resolve it. This leaves the reader to draw his or her own conclusions as to whether Pepe succeeds in becoming a man

Source: Joyce Munro, "Overview of 'Flight'," in Short Stories for Students, Gale, 1998

Critical Essay #2

Timmerman is affiliated with the Department of English at Calvin College. In the following excerpt, he discusses how Steinbeck's use of thematic patterns and images in "Flight" effectively portrays the main protagonist as a person "in search of his manhood," whose powerful and enduring spirit enables him to rise above "the animal in man."

Steinbeck's interest in marine biology was inflamed to a passion in the early 1930s. The sea, with its endless surgings and its proliferation of life, would remain a powerful influence upon his life and art throughout his career. We can acknowledge the homing quiet and clashing of dubious battles in his valleys; we can celebrate the high, sun-splashed reaches of his mountains; but we must return over and over to the timeless swell of life and death in the sea as a metaphorical pattern as well as a geographical place in his work.

The sea represents, at once, life and death. For Steinbeck it is the mother: the bringer of life in swarming generation. It is also, beneath its unruly and deceptive surface, a place of primeval violence. That uneasy juxtaposition is captured superbly in Cannery Row. In chapter six, Doc surveys the sea, from quiet tidal pools to the deep reaches. His vision moves from the serene grace of the shallows to the primeval undertows. There a chaotic world of ferocity reigns, a feral world. For Steinbeck, probing into the sea is a probing into the origins of life itself, a descent into the mythic subconsciousness of human nature. From The Log from the Sea ofCortez to The Winter of Our Discontent, the sea functions powerfully in Steinbeck's prose.

The sea also functions metaphorically in "Flight"—by its absence. In one of his notebooks of the early 1930s, during one of his frequent breaks from writing stories to pen personal reflections, Steinbeck turned his attention to the sea. "Man is so little removed from the water," he observes. "When he is near to the sea near the shore where the full life is, he feels terror and nostalgia." There we find our evolutionary predecessors, our lost memory "Come down to the tide pool, when the sea is out and let us look into our old houses, let us avoid our old enemies."

Having paused to look into the tidal pools, Steinbeck recounts the course of humanity:

We came up out of the water to the barren dry, the desert dry. It's so hard to get used to the land. It is a deep cry. Oh man who in climbing up has become lower What good thing but comes out of the depths. What nobility except from pain, what strength except out of anger, what change except from discomfort. We are a cross race so filled with anger that if we do not use it all in fighting for a warm full body, we fight among ourselves Animals fight nature for the privilege of living but man having robbed nature of some of its authority must fight man for the same right.

It is precisely that movement into the dry reaches, where we fight like animals "for the privilege of living," that marks the thematic pattern of "Flight." The story is a

fictionalization of the idea Steinbeck expressed in this notebook entry; Pepe is very much modern man in search of his manhood and finding the animal within. But, as Steinbeck discovered in telling the story, Pepe also discovers something more, a human spirit that is inviolable and undefeatable, possessing an enduring power that lies below and rises above the animal in man.

The change in the title of the story from "Manhunt" to "Flight" is in itself significant. The story changes from a simple narration of a posse's manhunt to an exploration of one individual's flight into unknown regions—a spiritual odyssey into the high, arid regions far from the nurturing sea. Like the change in title, the story itself changed dramatically in the writing. As it first developed, far more attention was given to the knifing itself. After buying the necessary things in Monterey, Pepe stops at a church to light a candle for his father and then visits the house of Mrs. Rodriguez and her two daughters. After affirming that Pepe has grown to be a man, Mrs. Rodriguez tells Mm that the surly Carlos is drunk in the kitchen. Pepe, avowing that he is a man, says he will send the troublesome Carlos away. He enters the kitchen to confront him.

The passage that follows, from *the Long Valley* notebook, amplifies the scene. In a fashion he adopted to conserve ink and paper during this penurious time, Steinbeck did not pause in his writing to observe minor paragraph breaks:

"Awaken'" said Pepe He shook a pan. A big black face arose from the table, and sullen sleepy eyes looked at him. "Who are you?" "I am Pepe Torres Mrs. Rodriguez wants you to go away now " Behind him, Mrs. Rodriguez said helplessly, "This is the son of Jose Torres. You know him, Carlos." The sullen eyes looked at her and then back at Pepe. "I know Jose Torres He was a thief" The sentence was uttered as an insult, was meant to be insulting. Pepe stepped back "lamaman." He looked inquiringly at Mrs. Rodriguez. She shook her head. Pepe's stomach was sad and then ice got into his stomach and then the ice grew up to ins beard His hand went into his pocket and came out and hung listlessly in front of him He was surprised at the sound of his voice. "Thou art a bar and a pig." Carlos stood up. "Dirty naked Indian. You say that to me?" Then Pepe's hand flashed. The blade seemed to bloom from the black knife in midflight. It thudded into the man's chest to the handle Carlos' mouth was open in amazement His two black hands came up and found the knife and half pulled it out. And then he coughed, fell forward on the table and drove it in again Pepe looked slowly around at the woman His sweet girlish mouth was quizzical, "I am a man," he said "I will go now "

While Steinbeck conveyed the entire scene indirectly in the final version, having Pepe report what happened in several quick sentences, the excised portion shows that the act of killing is allied with Pepe's manhood, and death itself is attended by blackness, both of the knife and of Carlos.

The opening line of the next paragraph in the first draft, inked out in a heavy line, indicates one direction the story might have taken: "They found him in the church sitting in a pew and looking at the lights on the altar. He had said many [undecipherable word] Ave Marias." After the crossed-out line, Steinbeck wrote, "Pepe's movements were swift but unhurried." He heads back to his house, covering the same route through Point

Lobos that he had taken earlier. From here the final version follows with a few exceptions. In the first draft, Pepe shoots one of the trackers, in the final version he does not. Most of the revisions were the ones Steinbeck typically made, changing passive verbs to active constructions and sharpening details. The materials included in the two-page notebook entry, "Addenda to Flight," written several days after the first draft, are incorporated into the conclusion of the final version.

With its riveting power as a story, its feral imagery that stalks nearly every paragraph, and its mystical ambiguity, "Flight" has both enchanted and puzzled critics. It has occasioned some of the very best literary criticism of Steinbeck's work as scholars match their wits against a compelling drama. For its sheer, evocative power, few of Steinbeck's short stories match it.

Artistically, the tale is a tour de force, with layer upon layer of craftsmanship revealed in close reading. The ostensible plot and conflict—Pepe's quest for manhood against intractable odds of humanity and nature—appear simple enough. Since his father's death from a rattlesnake bite, Pepe inherits the place of manhood in the family. The one legacy from his father is the black-handled knife, with which Pepe demonstrates a fluid grace. But Mama Torres is reluctant to allow Pepe the place of manhood, berating him incessantly as a "peanut," "lazy coyote," or "big sheep." Nonetheless, she "thought him fine and brave, but she never told him so."

As Pepe leaves for Monterey to buy some medicine, his parting words are, "I will be careful. I am a man." The trip is allied with his manhood, and indeed he will acquire the adult knowledge of death on the trip. When a drunken man at Mrs. Rodriguez' s house calls him a name—in the first draft he called Jose Torres a thief—Pepe's sense of manly honor will not permit it. The knife, says Pepe, "went almost by itself."

Many readers have focused exclusively upon that action and the subsequent flight to the exclusion of suggestive imagery patterns undergirding the tale. Thus, Dan Vogel sees the tale as "the ordeal of transformation from innocence to experience, from purity to defilement." In a brief note on the story ["Steinbeck's 'Flight,'" Explicator 18 (Nov. 1959)], William in Jones suggests,

The details of Pepe's flight show how Pepe gradually conquered the family pride that caused his original sin and how through suffering he expiated that sin Not only does he subdue the proud flesh but in so doing he regained a place in nature that his family, scratching away to get what they could out of the world, had failed to find. This progress seems to be Steinbeck's explanation of the maturing process.

Walter K. Gordon argues, "What is important in 'Flight' is not the crime itself but Pepe's mental and physical response to it, how he deports himself when the circumstances are propitious for a boy to become a man," an effort at which, in Gordon's view, Pepe ultimately fails Like Steinbeck's note in the *Tortilla Flat* notebook, detailing humanity's trek from the sea to the arid heights, however, the story bears a yet more supple richness and probing of what it means to be human than these views suggest.

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In Flannery O'Connor's "The Life You Save May Be Your Own," Mr. Shiftlet, spellbound by his own empty phrases, asks Mrs. Lucynell Crater, "What is a man?" The answer comes some time later: "a moral intelligence." The same question puzzled John Steinbeck. Is humanity the product of evolutionary eons, the offspring of the dark sea's surging?

The Log from the Sea of Cortez suggests as much:

third pattern is woven into the loss of civilized tools and the heavy use of animal imagery—the increasing images of darkness."

There is tied up to the most primitive and powerful racial or collective instinct a rhythm sense or "memory " which affects everything and which in the past was probably more potent than it is now It would at least be more plausible to attribute these profound effects to devastating and instinct-scanng tidal influences during the formative times of the early race history of organisms

Or, in Steinbeck's view, is humanity also a moral intelligence7 His answer unfolded steadily throughout his literary career. In *The Grapes of Wrath*, he speculates,

For man, unlike any other thing organic or inorganic in the universe, grows beyond his work, walks up the stairs of his concepts, emerges ahead of his accomplishments. This you may say of man—when theories change and crash, when schools, philosophies, when narrow dark alleys of thought, national, religious, economic, grow and disintegrate, man reaches, stumbles forward, painfully mistakenly sometimes Having stepped forward, he may slip back, but only half a step, never the full step back.

And in a letter to John O'Hara written a decade later, he asserted,

The great change in the last 2,000 years was the Christian idea that the individual soul was very precious. Unless we can preserve and foster the principle of the preciousness of the individual mind, the world of men will either disintegrate into a screaming chaos or will go into a grey slavery And that fostering and preservation seem to me our greatest job.

Steinbeck's own answer to the question is that humanity is unique by virtue of mind and spirit.

In the hot, sun-blasted world of "Flight," however, when a lazy boy asserts his manhood with a knife, when civilization's code of conduct is violated and the posse mounts, man is very much reduced to an animal. One recalls Steinbeck's reflection in bis notebook: "Oh man who in climbing up has become lower." Pepe's flight into the mountains is also a devolution, paced by a divestment of civilized tools and in incrementally intensifying animal imagery. He loses gun and knife, saddle, horse, and food, John Ditsky notes the pattern of loss [in "Steinbeck's 'Flight': The Ambiguity of Manhood"]:

Beyond the simple deterioration of his possessions— as when his clothing tears away or his flesh is ripped— leading to a contemplation of man's naked state like that in King

Lear, there is the importance of the fact that the objects just named are Pepe's from his father; they are, as the knife is in fact described, "his inheritance." Pepe's attempt to sustain the manhood he has claimed in a single violent act—by means of the tools which were his father's badge of manhood and his estate—fails, he is finally stripped down to what he brings with him within himself: his own gifts, his own courage

Stopped of civilized tools, Pepe's movements are increasingly described in verbs that suggest a primordial or serpentine creature. Pepe "crawled," "wormed," "wriggled," "darted," "flashed," "slid," "writhed," and "squirmed" in the final stages. Furthermore, his paralyzing thirst stops him of the one thing that separates humanity from animals—speech: "His tongue tried to make words, but only a thick hissing came from between his lips." Even his tongue becomes infected with blackness—"Between his lips the tip of his black tongue showed"—and the only sound of which he is capable is a "thick hiss."

As several critics have mentioned, a third pattern is woven into the loss of civilized tools and the heavy use of animal imagery—the increasing images of darkness. From his early fascination with the lights on the altar and the sun-swept cliffs of his home, Pepe's world is subsumed by blackness, culminating in the Dark Watchers. He leaves for his flight on a morning when "Moonlight and daylight fought with each other, and the two waning qualities made it difficult to see." Louis Owens observes,

The theme of death is woven on a thread of blackness through the story It is Pepe's black knife which initiates the cycle of death. When Pepe flees he wears his dead father's black coat and black hat. It is the two "black ones," Rosy and Ermlio, who prophesy Pepe's death. The line of gangrene running the length of Pepe's arm is black, foreshadowing his death, and it is the "dark watchers" who finally symbolize death itself. From the beginning of the story, Pepe grows increasingly dark, until in the end he will be black like the watchers.

The climactic final portrait is thick with darkness, and even as a new morning breaks the sky, the eagle, which has been present from the start, is replaced by predatory black vultures.

Yet that progression is incomplete. Too many readers confine their attention to that stripping and figurative pattern. At his moment of most profound abnegation, wandering a black wasteland, stopped of civilized tools, an animal contending with animals, Pepe reclaims a uniquely human attribute, the power at once to defy and to submit to his own death. It is the conscious decision of a human, not an animal, and it is accompanied by spiritual awareness: "Pepe bowed his head quickly. He tried to speak rapid words but only a thick hiss came from his lips. He drew a shaky cross on his breast with his left hand." When the first bullet misses him, Pepe hauls his broken body straighter still to receive the death blow.

John Antico is one of the few scholars to pay attention to that scene and the story's religious dimension. He observes [in "A Reading of Steinbeck's ' Flight'," Modern Fiction Studies 11 (Spring 1965)], "It is only by standing up on two feet and facing death that the sub-human Pepe can give birth to Man. An animal does not face death; death

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happens to it. A man is aware of what he is facing, and it is this awareness that makes him a man." Yet, Antico wonders what exactly enables Pepe to get up and face death. What is this quality of manhood that he has discovered? It is not a miracle in response to his sign of the cross. Rather, it arises from an indomitable power within Pepe himself:

Indeed it was a long struggle for Man to emerge, and what prompts this sub-human to get up from all fours and stand on two feet is the inexpressible quality within him which later developed into what we call religion. To attempt to name or define this quality would, however, falsify it. It is not God or religion as civilized man knows them, but that inner quality which eventually leads to religion and the concept of God

Many have read the story as a supreme document of literary naturalism—as indeed it is. Stripped of all civilized customs and tools, man engages in an animalistic struggle for survival. In the naturalist tradition, "Flight" ranks with London's "To Light a Fire" and Crane's Maggie: A Girl of the Streets as among the best of a kind. But the story is not only that. It is a discovery of what separates humankind from the animals.

In the article "Cutting Loose," Michael Rat-cliffe provides a narrative account of an interview with Steinbeck in 1962 on the occasion of his receiving the Nobel Prize. Steinbeck reflected on the Nobel speech he had made, pointing out, "A story is a parable; putting in terms of human action the morals—and immorals—that society needs at the time. Everyone leaves the bullfight a little braver because one man stood up to a bull. Isaiah wrote to meet the needs of his people, to inspire them. It is a meeting of needs." Ratcliffe asked what kinds of needs, and Steinbeck responded, "Needs of beauty, courage, reform—sometimes just pure pride." It may well be that Pepe's response in "Flight" is pure, indomitable pride. His standing to receive the fatal bullet is the asseveration his speechless tongue can no longer make: I am a man! But it is signaled by religious signs, and that too is a pattern of the story. Antico correctly notes, however, that

One hesitates to mention the numerous tnads with all their Biblical overtones throughout the story, for then one is tempted to find or seek out strict Biblical parallels or a rigid sort of symbolism or religious allegory which twists the significance of these details all out of proportion Steinbeck's method is not symbolism or allegory; he merely suggests religion and Biblical overtones; he actually seems to blur the edges of his analogies so that one feels a religious atmosphere but not a strict and limited Christian reference.

Antico's caution is well observed. The religious references do not suggest that the story is a parable, a modern crucifixion of a saintly man Rather, the imagery supports the central premise— that Pepe, finally, is not an animal but a man discovering, albeit tragically, that indomitable, spiritual consciousness of himself as human that separates him from the animals.

While Steinbeck changed the title of his story from "Manhunt" to "Flight" to draw attention from the civilization that pursues to the individual that flees, there is an applicable irony in the first title. Pepe also hunts his manhood, and in his act of knowing acceptance, he finds it While the story bears all the trappings of a naturalistic document,

or to use the terminology Steinbeck was becoming fond of, a nonteleological telling, the flight of Pepe does arrive at a goal.

Source: John H. Timmerman, "'Flight'- What Is Man That Thou Art Mindful of Him'" in The Dramatic Landscape of Steinbeck's Short Stones, University of Oklahoma Press, 1990, pp. 189-98.

BOOKRAGS

Critical Essay #3

Piacentino is an Associate Professor of English at High Point College. In the following essay, he "attemptsJ to demonstrate [that] there are a significant number of animal references which seem to function either to define features of Pepe Torres' character or to accent some of the physical challenges he experiences during his flight for survival and the resulting psychological traumas of this ordeal."

Published initially in *The Long Valley* (1938), "Flight," a work that one of Steinbeck's most discerning critics [Warren French, in John Stem-beck, 1975] has called a tale of "frustrated young manhood," a "depressing account of an unprepared youth's failure to achieve maturity," has often been regarded as one of John Steinbeck's best stones. Peter Lisca, in his analysis of the story [in The Wide World of John Steinbeck, 1958], sees Pepe Torres' flight as reflecting two levels of meaning. "On the physical level," Lisca observes, "Pepe's penetration into the desert mountains is directly proportional to his increasing separation from civilized man and reduction to the state of a wild animal.... The symbolic meaning of Pepe's flight moves in the opposite direction. On this level, the whole action of the story goes to show how man, even when stopped of all his civilized accouter-ments..., is still something more than an animal."

Other critics have also given notice to the story's animal references. Joseph Fontenrose, for instance, in correcting an erroneous comment made by Edmund Wilson about *The Long Valley*, generally interprets the plants and animals of the stories in this collection as having a "symbolic function, helping us to understand the human characters who are really central and really human." John M. Ditsky, who sees the meaning of Pepe's manhood as ambivalent—"the contradictions inherent in a situation in which a man gains his life only to lose it"— generally perceives that Pepe must revert to brute animalism as an essential stage in becoming a man, or at any rate must use animal mannerisms to "preserve his manhood." Ditsky goes on to offer only brief support for this claim by citing in the last part of the story Pepe's movements, his primitive way of treating his wounded hand, his lancing of his infection, and his desperate digging in an attempt to find water

The most cogent and perceptive treatment of animal references in "Flight" yet to appear is a brief article by Hilton Anderson, which persuasively demonstrates that "by repeated references to snakes, by the use of such words as crawl, wiggle, wriggle, zig-zag, and hiss, and by his physical descriptions of Pepe, Steinbeck has suggested a rather strong kinship between Pepe and a snake." Anderson's interpretation of Pepe as exhibiting snake-like traits is, however, too reductive, for it fails to take into account the diversity and suggestiveness of the other animal references in the story. In other words, some of the characteristics Anderson cites seem to be more related to animal-like behavior generally than to the mannerisms of a snake exclusively. But more will be said about this later.

Animal imagery abounds in "Flight," from the reference in the first sentence to "hissing white waters" of the Pacific Ocean to the "thick hiss" that comes from Pepe's lips as he

tries desperately to speak just before he is shot and killed at the end. In characterizing Pepe near the outset, Steinbeck points out his "sharp Indian cheek bones" and his "eagle nose," the latter a suggestive image which serves to establish Pepe's primitive, animal-like nature. Mama Torres, Pepe's mother, likewise uses animal imagery in describing her son's laziness. As she tells Pepe," 'Some lazy cow must have got into thy father's family, else how could I have a son like thee'." And at an earlier tune, while she was pregnant with Pepe, she playfully and simplistically points out to him, "'. .a sneaking lazy coyote came out of the brush and looked at me one day. That must have made thee so'." The coyote mentioned here is, of course, a wild animal, an appropriate reference to highlight Pepe's primitive animalism.

Pepe's animal-like nature is further emphasized by the repetition of his somewhat snake-like appearance (He has a "tall head, pointed at the top."), and also as he throws his big black knife into a redwood post, his wrist, it is noted, "flicked like the head of a snake." This last image, while reinforcing Pepe's quick, seemingly instinctive manner of reacting, should perhaps also be viewed in the broader context in which the snake is a universal emblem of evil. In this context, the snakelike quickness that Pepe displays in this basically carefree activity of knife throwing importantly reflects his impetuous nature and foreshadows the ease with which he succumbs to evil in murdering a man in Monterey. As Steinbeck describes Pepe's rash, seemingly instinctive action during the quarrel scene that leads to the murder, one can see a first-hand manifestation of the youth's latent animalism: "... the man started toward Pepe and then the knife—it went almost by itself. It flew, it darted before Pepe knew it." From the apparent noncommittal manner with which Steinbeck recounts Pepe's spontaneous, unthinking action, one may get the distinct impression that the author does not wish to call the reader's attention to the fact that the youth is morally culpable, anymore than any cornered, enraged animal would be under similar perilous circumstances.

Another way of interpreting the snake in the image used to describe Pepe's wrist action when he throws his knife, particularly if one is willing to think in terms of the snake as being poisonous, is to see it as a force potentially destructive to human life. This is especially true when the snake senses his security is in jeopardy. After all, a snake, whether it be poisonous or not, will, by its very nature, usually attack potentially threatening elements that come within its striking range. And in fact this is almost precisely what Pepe, who exhibits snake-like traits, seems to do in Monterey in the fatal quarrel scene. In this scene, which Pepe himself describes to his mother after the fact, he strikes out to defend himself when, in the kitchen of Mrs. Rodriquez, a man, whom he senses to be his adversary, starts toward him in anger, threatening his security. Thus the affinity between the quick movement of Pepe's wrist and the defensive reaction of a distracted snake becomes functionally appropriate in the quarrel scene for defining another significant facet of Pepe's character.

There are other animal references in the first part of the story that accent Pepe's primitive animalism. When Mama Torres orders Pepe to go to Monterey to have the medicine bottle refilled, she calls him a "big sheep," which by conventional association can be interpreted as an established symbol of primitive, gentle innocence (the lamb being a universal symbol of innocence). Yet, in retrospect, this reference becomes

ironic, for Pepe's nature, as his murderous behavior forthrightly demonstrates, is not that of any submissive domesticated farm animal but rather that of a wild beast. Also, before he begins his journey to the town, Mama Torres calls him a "big coyote," that will probably sit, she tells him, in the church in Monterey, "flapping .. [his] mouth over Aves all day while ... [he] looked at the candles and the holy pictures." The coyote reference here seems to take on a different meaning from that discussed previously. Initially, it should be remembered, Mama Torres had seen the appearance of a coyote as a sign prefiguring Pepe's laziness. In this later scene, however, the coyote Mama Torres uses to characterize her son suggests Pepe's primitive animalism as reflected in the fact that he has been conditioned to respond through very basic, repetitive, mechanical behavioral patterns—which in this instance are evidenced in prayer by rote. Finally, just before Pepe, who claims at this time to be a man, departs, Mama Torres—who is not as convinced of Pepe's manhood as he himself is—calls him a "foolish chicken," an apt and degrading metaphor to designate Pepe's weakness, instability, and immaturity. Dubbed a sheep, a cow, and then a chicken, Pepe, at least in his mother's eyes, is, at this stage of his innocent life, much like a domesticated farm animal that needs to be fed, sheltered, and generally watched over by others.

The sheep reference is reintroduced soon after Pepe's departure for Monterey in the description of Emilio and Rosy, his younger brother and sister who remain at home in the relatively safe, secluded environment of their farm home, sleeping, we are told, in boxes "full of straw and sheepskins." This reference to sheepskins is thematicalry functional as a counterpoint, for it serves to recall by symbolic association the primitive, innocent, and largely protected environment which the boy Pepe has left. As far as we know Mama Torres does not tell Emilio and Rosy specifically why Pepe will have to flee to the mountains after his return from Monterey, and if this conjecture is correct then most of the animal references which have been employed up to this point in describing Pepe, who as a carefree and lazy youth remained on the farm, reinforce the notion of the Torres' home as a place mainly of sheltered innocence. Yet this innocence, Steinbeck implies, is only for children.

The second part of the story which focuses on Pepe's flight to the mountains in an effort to escape his mysterious pursuers also contains numerous suggestive animal references. In fact, an important pattern emerges here when late on the first day of his flight, Pepe moves farther and farther away from sheltered domesticity into the unpredictable and unprotected realm of primitive nature. As Pepe's horse makes his way slowly and cautiously along a steep mountain trail of broken rock, it is pointed out that lizards "scampered away into the brush as the horse rattled over the little stones." This seemingly incidental event may actually be viewed as a microcosm of Pepe's repeated response to his predicament: that is, the lizards flee the potential and uncertain danger of the large and intruding horse as Pepe himself flees his inimical pursuers.

This pattern of using animals to accent Pepe's flight is repeated several other tunes. As Pepe's horse continues to proceed along the trail, the sound of his hooves also frightens vigilant birds and rabbits that sense the danger. Moreover, on the evening of the first day of Pepe's flight, doves and quail that gather near a spring are stalked by a wildcat

that "was creeping toward the spring, belly to the ground ... ". This situation, like the two previously cited, parallels Pepe's own and provides another illustration of withdrawal from danger as fitting behavior when the circumstances of survival depend on man's ability to resort to strategies of primitive animalism. And finally on the night of the first day, the pursuit and flight pattern is further illustrated when the owls hunt the slopes, looking for rabbits. This incident like the others recreates through remarkably similar animal actions the tremendous fear and tension that Pepe's flight from danger has caused him. In short, the similarly patterned behavior of the animals in this series of scenes serves to reinforce quite blatantly the primitive animalism of Pepe Torres.

As Pepe progresses farther into the mountains, an environment of uncertainty and hostility, he seems to feel even more compelled to act in the manner of a hunted wild beast When his horse is shot by one of his pursuers, Pepe, Steinbeck observes in the scene that follows, moves with the "instinctive care of an animal," "worming" and "wriggling" his way to safety behind a rock. The point Steinbeck seems to be making here is certainly not vague, for he emphasizes it throughout the story—namely, the naturalistic view that man must resort to behaving like a brute animal in his struggle to survive. Even though Pepe spots a single eagle flying overhead, free and unencumbered, just before his horse is shot, this eagle becomes ironic when viewed in retrospect and within the context of Pepe's own greatly restricted and reduced mobility, the result of the untimely loss of his horse and a painful, near maiming injury to his right hand.

Other animal references also serve a functional thematic purpose during the period of Pepe's flight In fact, it might be argued that nearly every successive animal image becomes more threatening and sinister than the ones that preceded it. Soon after the injury to his hand, Pepe views a number of wild animals in the following order of appearance: a small brown bird, a high-soaring eagle that "stepped daintily out on the trail and crossed it and disappeared into the brush again," a brown doe, a rattlesnake, grey lizards, a "big tawny mountain lion," that sits watching him, and last circling black birds, presumably buzzards, a universal portentous sign of disaster, in this case Pepe's own approaching death.

It is curious and perhaps significant to note that Pepe displays an almost animal-like cautiousness and vigilance during this time. Though he crawls very near to a rattlesnake before actually seeing it, he, nevertheless, manages to avoid its deadly fangs (unlike his father, who tripped over a stone and fell on a rattlesnake which fatally bit him). Though the grey lizards may not be as formidable a threat as a poisonous rattlesnake, still Pepe, in his animal-like urge to survive, does not want to take any chances and consequently crushes one of these unsuspecting lizards with a stone as it creeps near him. Interestingly, this action seems to anticipate Pepe's own sudden destruction at the end of the story. The mountain lion, the largest and possibly the most dangerous of the animals Pepe observes during his ordeal, watches Pepe for a long time and in turn is viewed by Pepe at a safe distance before it finally slinks away into the thick brush.

Just after the lion departs, Pepe, hearing the sounds of horses' hooves pounding loudly on the rocks and the sharp yelp of a dog, and sensing danger to be near, instinctively glides quickly into a nearby brush "almost as quietly as the lion had" and then crouches "up the hill toward the next ridge," where he stays until dark. Pepe's withdrawal for self-preservation and the emphasis on his distinct crawling and crouching movements aptly complement his many other previously observed animal-like mannerisms. Then, a short time later, when greatly bothered by the excruciating pain in his infected arm and very much dismayed by having carelessly lost his gun, Pepe, whose state again resembles that of a wild animal, climbs to the top of a ridge "with the effort of a hurt beast." And finding he cannot speak, the only sound that he utters from his lips is an unintelligible hissing noise, an utterance that is another striking manifestation of his transformation into animalism, a sound, more-over, that he repeats on the next day, the final day of his life, when he realizes that his pursuers (he hears the "crying yelp" of their hounds) are still following his trail.

In observing Pepe's hissing and crawling and several other of his mannerisms, one may be inclined to accept the view of Hilton Anderson, cited previously, that Steinbeck seems to be consciously emphasizing close affinities between Pepe and a snake. To draw such a connection seems quite logical, except that Anderson tries to push his analogy too far outside the bounds of reasonable credibility. When Pepe crosses himself with his left hand just before the start of the final scene in the story, Anderson, recalling the always readily accessible Edenic myth, sees Pepe's action as an exorcism of his "serpent qualities." This observation, though ingenious, is not entirely accurate, however; for as noted earlier in this essay, Pepe is portrayed in the last section of the story as exhibiting several other animal-like traits, such as the dog-like whine he makes when he scrapes his infected arm with a sharp stone or his withdrawing into the brush as the mountain lion had done, neither of which relates to the snake analogy or to the Edenic archetype.

Furthermore, though Pepe Torres stands erect, apparently transcending his animalism in exhibiting some degree of manliness at the story's conclusion, the sense of his fall or loss must not be interpreted exclusively within the limited context of the Edenic myth but in the more general sense of a human being's loss of youthful innocence as represented here in Pepe's death.

The final animal reference that should be commented on is the circling, scavenging buzzards, a foreboding reminder that the end of Pepe's flight is inevitable death. As the ending of "Flight" clearly indicates, Pepe can flee no farther (He finally reaches the top of the big rock on the ridge's peak), and importantly his subsequent stoicism and courage, reliable indicators of his maturity, reveal he realizes this: "Once there, he arose slowly, swaying to his feet, and stood erect"—this time as a man, but a man on the verge of losing the precious sense of living he has only recently acquired through the dual acts of murder and the ordeal of flight.

Thus in "Flight," as I have attempted to demonstrate, there are a significant number of animal references which seem to function either to define features of Pepe Torres' character or to accent some of the physical challenges he experiences during his flight

for survival and the resulting psychological traumas of this ordeal. One set of these references establishes a readily discernible pattern wherein before his journey to Monterey Pepe's innocence is complemented through descriptions of selected domestic farm animals while later his frenzied flight, which, as we have seen, becomes a jungle-like struggle for survival, is complemented through descriptions of wild, potentially dangerous animals. In the mannerisms of these wild, predatory animals, moreover, a second pattern emerges as they become imposing threats to weaker, smaller animals, which at the sign of danger are compelled to withdraw to safety. This pattern, it should be noted, can be conveniently viewed as a close parallel to Pepe's own precarious predicament after he commits murder in Monterey. In addition, there are references in which animals seem to be consciously employed as ominous signs, prefiguring Pepe's inevitable doom. Viewed within the context of the story, then, the various animal references and the patterns they form give "Flight" a richly suggestive texture that is often characteristic of some of the more artistically impressive short stories of twentieth-century literature.

Source: Edward J. Piacentino, "Patterns of Animal Imagery in Steinbeck's 'Flight'," in Studies in Short Fiction, Vol 17, No 4, Fall, 1980, pp. 437-43.

Critical Essay #4

Gordon is affiliated with Rutgers University in New Brunswick, New Jersey. In the following essay, he discusses Pepe 's moral deterioration in "Flight."

Critics have generally agreed with Peter Lisca's contention [in The Wide World of John Steinbeck, 1958] that "Flight" describes "the growth of a boy to manhood and the meaning of that manhood," thereby identifying Pepe Torres' experience with that of Huck Finn, Henry Fleming, George Willard, and Eugene Gant in one of the most familiar intellectual odysseys in American literature. I should like to suggest, however, that Steinbeck's short story is not really in the Bildungsroman tradition at all; for rather than depicting the spiritual evolution of an adolescent developing and struggling toward manhood, the story, I think, portrays just the opposite—man's moral deterioration and regression that inevitably results when he abandons responsibility for his actions. Pepe, then, begins as a child and becomes by running away less than an animal rather than a man.

Steinbeck's parable of crime and punishment is not vitally concerned with either but merely employs the archetypal pattern of the chase as a framework for psychological delineation of character. Steinbeck, for instance, never explicitly tells us that Pepe did kill his victim, nor do we know the specific circumstances out of which the crime evolved. What is important in "Flight" is not the crime itself but Pepe's mental and physical response to it, how he deports himself when the circumstances are propitious for a boy to become a man. It is true that Pepe, his mother, brother, and sister all think that his drunken quarrel in Mrs. Rodriguez' kitchen initiates him into manhood. Mrs. Torres even says in this connection, "Pepe goes on a journey. Pepe is a man now." But it is patently evident that Steinbeck does not accept this primitive ethic, for at no time thereafter does he portray Pepe as an adult with any of the duties, obligations, or responsibilities that adulthood implies. Nor does Steinbeck show any growth or intellectual change in his protagonist—no enlightenment, no increased perception of his world— which normally accompany the process of growing up Indeed, we can measure Pepe's intellectual, physical, and moral deterioration from that night when he returns from Monterey to tell bis mother of his decision to escape retribution for his crime by fleeing into the mountains.

Steinbeck attempts to illustrate this deterioration on the symbolic as well as the narrative level and incorporates into his story several objects associated with Pepe's father—the long, black-handled knife, the black coat, and the saddle It is significant that each of these symbols of adulthood is lost or abandoned in Pepe's flight from responsibility. Dan Vogel interprets this as a divesting of the artifacts of the father because the youth, now a man and able to stand alone, no longer needs them. But is not the point here precisely that Pepe is not able to stand alone? Does he not sorely need these objects to survive, their loss putting him at the mercy of a hostile environment that makes of him more a thing than an adult?

Also supporting this view of Pepe's flight is its structure, which is oriented around the two-stage dehumanization of the protagonist, first from boy to animal, then from animal to inanimate part of nature, an indistinguishable part of the barren landscape. Pepe begins the first stage of his regression by shunning humankind in his avoidance of the red-cheeked fat man on the trail, then by later losing the outer trappings (his hat and the tear in his jeans) that distinguish him from the animals. When his horse is shot, he is forced to walk, then crawl, then wriggle forward on his stomach. Steinbeck describes him at this point as moving "with the instinctive care of an animal."

The second stage of his retrogression, his progressive identification with a physical waste land that symbolizes his increasing moral and spiritual degeneration, begins when one of the posse's bullets slivers a piece of granite that pierces Pepe's hand. At this point Pepe becomes one with the setting of the story. Here the union is only temporary, and he is able to remove the sliver of stone from his hand. In order to stop the bleeding, however, he gathers spider webs on two occasions and presses them into his wound. Later, in order to assuage his thirst, he eats mud; and as he retreats further, those faculties which separate man from lower forms of nature disappear, and Pepe loses the power of speech, his tongue being unable to articulate words and giving rise to hissing sounds only.

The final degradation takes place when after being struck by two bullets, he rolls down a hill, starting a small avalanche that covers only his head, an action symbolic of the obliteration of all reasoning powers. The identification with nature and the journey from manhood and its compelling responsibilities are complete!

Source: Walter K Gordon, "Steinbeck's 'Flight'- Journey to or from Maturity"" mStudies in Short Fiction, Vol 3,No. 4, Summer, 1966, pp 453-55

Critical Essay #5

Vogel is chairman of the Department of English at the Jerusalem College for Women in Israel. He is the author of The Three Masks of American Tragedy (1974) and a critical biography of poet Emma Lazarus. In the following excerpt, Vogel examines the mythical elements of Steinbeck's "Flight "

More than a mere allegory, "Flight" reveals characteristics of myth and tragedy. A myth is a story that tries to explain some practice, belief, institution, or natural phenomenon, and is especially associated with religious rites and beliefs. The natural phenomenon, for Steinbeck, is not the facts of nature, with which historical myths deal; rather, it is ... the development of innocent childhood into disillusioned manhood. The myth that Steinbeck wrought also contains another quality of myth, the rite. The plot of "Flight" narrates symbolically the ritual: the escape from the Mother, the divestiture of the Father, and the death and burial of Childhood. To discern these mythic symbols, it is necessary to review the narrative facts.

At the beginning of the story, Pepe, though 19 years of age, has all the innocence of the "toy-baby" his mother calls him....

When his rather domineering mother—who constantly taunts him with his inability to be "a man"—asks him to go to Monterey, "a revolution took place in the relaxed figure of Pepe."... He is asked, surprisingly, to go alone; he is permitted to wear his father's hat and his father's hatband and to ride in his father's saddle....

When Pepe returns, he has killed a man with his father's knife, left behind him at the scene of the crime. The look of innocence is gone; he has been shocked by a fact of life, an extreme independent act. His mother quickly understands and helps him outfit himself for the flight into the mountains. She gives him especially his father's black coat and rifle. Weighted down by the accoutrements of his father, Pepe separates himself from his mother. She recognizes the change She tells the little boy, "Pepe is a man now. He has a man's thing to do." ... Logically, however, this is not necessarily so A man might possibly have been expected to give himself up and pay for his crime. It seems to me, then, that Pepe's mother perceived that her son is entering manhood and must stand alone. This he must do.

The ordeal of transformation from innocence to experience, from purity to defilement begins. There is the physical pain of the ordeal, symbolized by a cut hand that soon becomes gangrenous. There is the psychological pain—the recognition of a strangeness in this life that is omnipresent, silent, watchful and dark—the sense of Evil, or Tragedy, or Retribution. This realization is symbolized by the narratively gratuitous, unrealistic presence of the black figures, the "dark watchers" who are seen for a moment on the tops of ridges and then disappear. ... These are the silent inscrutable watchers from above, the universal Nemesis, the recognition of which signals a further step into manhood ..

Only [when] having been separated from his mother and having cleansed himself of all the accoutrements and artifacts of his father, can the youth stand alone. But to Steinbeck this is far from a joyous or victorious occasion. It is sad and painful and tragic. Pepe rises to his feet, "black against the morning sky," ... astride a ridge. He is a perfect target and the narrative ends with the man against the sky shot down. The body rolls down the hillside, creating a little avalanche, which follows him in his descent and covers up his head. Thus innocence is killed and buried in the moment that Man stands alone.

Thus the myth ends, as so many myths do, with violence and melodrama. What the myth described is the natural miracle of entering manhood. When serenity of childhood is lost, there is pain and misery. Yet there is nevertheless a sense of gain and heroism which are more interesting and dramatic. It is a story that has fascinated many from [William] Wordsworth to [Ernest] Hemingway, and what Steinbeck has written is a myth that describes in symbols what has happened to each of us.

Source: Dan Vogel, "Steinbeck's 'Flight'- The Myth of Manhood," in College English, Vol. 23, No. 3, December, 1961, pp 225-26.

Adaptations

"Flight" was adapted as a film by Barnaby Conrad, starring Efrain Ramirez and Ester Cortez and produced by Columbia Pictures in 1960.

Compare and Contrast

1930s: Many street gangs that arose during the 1920s in order to take advantage of Prohibition move on to other illegal ventures. The romanticized "Dead End Kids" (also known as the East Side Kids and the Bowery Boys) star in a number of movies during this time.

1990s: Gang members range from grade-school children to adults. Drug dealing and related crimes are a major activity and means of profit for gangs In Los Angeles alone, there are an estimated 70,000 gang members. In 1997, a new California program attempts to curtail gang violence by bringing criminal charges against parents of gang members. The program makes use of a 90-year-old law requiring the reasonable care and supervision of children.

1930s: During the Great Depression, murder rates are considered high. They peak in 1933 at 9.7 murders per 100,000 people annually.

1990s: Murder rates begin to fall in urban areas after skyrocketing in the 1970s and 1980s. In 1996, the murder rate hovers near 10 per 100,000 people.

1930s: During the Great Depression, many farmers lose their farms because they are unable to pay their mortgages. Part of the problem is that farmers produce more than people are able to buy. President Roosevelt creates the Agricultural Adjustment Agency in 1933 to address this problem. The agency is declared unconstitutional in 1936 but is redeveloped and reinstated in 1939. Other programs developed by the government during the same time seek to protect farmland from being misused or overused. These are eventually taken up by the Farm Security Administration.

1990s: Many farmers in the 1980s and 1990s go bankrupt. Musicians such as John Mellencamp and Willie Nelson organize the Farm Aid concerts to assist families who have lost their livelihood. Other farmers struggle to remain profitable and become increasingly involved in environmental land issues, including prevention of soil erosion and runoff and contamination of crops from insecticide and herbicide residues.

What Do I Read Next?

The Red Pony, also by Steinbeck, was first published in 1937 and revised in 1945. It is the story of a boy's confrontation with death and his resulting maturation.

The Pearl, Steinbeck's last work of short fiction, was published in 1947. It is a parable of a poor fisherman who discovers a pearl of great value which brings evil to his family. Like "Flight," it is told in almost the tone and form of a folktale.

"The Bear," by William Faulkner, is included in Go Down, Moses, first published in 1940. This story is really a novella in a collection of short stories, all set in a particular place, Faulkner's fictional Yoknapatawpha County, Mississippi, and featuring characters who appear in more than one story "The Bear" is the story of a sixteen-year-old boy who is finally allowed to hunt with the men. The main character seeks "to earn for himself the name and state of hunter." The novella displays the complex interrelationships among different races and social classes when a group of men go into the wilderness to hunt

The Old Man and the Sea by Ernest Hemingway was published in 1952. This novella is told in the form of a fable that chronicles an old fisherman's struggle to land a legendary fish. The tone, like that of "Flight," is almost mythic.

Toni Morrison's The Bluest Eye, first published in 1970, is the chilling tale of a young girl5 s flight from her own identity in response to the pressures of racism, poverty, and brutality.

Ceremony by Leslie Marmon Silko was published in 1977. It traces the efforts of Tayo, a young Native American soldier released from a Japanese prisoner-of-war camp after World War n, to evade the memories and nightmares of his captivity. As he realizes that the country he fought for during the war has no place for him and that he has no role in his home pueblo, he is compelled to begin a quest to find—and heal— himself

Further Study

French, Warren "Adventures in *the Long Valley*," in John Steinbeck, pp 80-94. New York Twayne Publishers, 1961 Discussion of Steinbeck's short fiction which finds "Flight' * comparable to Theodore Dreiser's novelAn American Tragedy, "since Pepe, like Dreiser's Clyde Griffiths, is an impetuous but not too intelligent young man who is destroyed when a social situation places upon him responsibilities he is unequipped to assume."

McCarthy, Paul "The Steinbeck Territory," in John Steinbeck, pp 23-45. New York Frederick Ungar Publishing Co, 1980.

Discusses "Flight" as a story which is enriched by its successful blend of several important elements. McCarthy notes that the story's symbolism, imagery, and setting combine with "such traditional tiiemes as the flight from society into the wild, and passage from innocence to experience" to form an "excellent story" which is richer and more complex dian other Steinbeck stories, such as "The Chrysanthemums" and "The White Quail."

Young, Stanley "The Short Stones of John Steinbeck," in The New York Times Book Review, September 25,1938. p. 7.

Review of *The Long Valley* which finds "Flight" a story concerned primarily with Pepe's struggle with the primitive emotion of raw fear. Young considers the story "as terrifying and as vivid as the flight of Reynard the Fox as [John] Masefield set it down."

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Short Stories for Students (SSfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's For Students Literature line, SSfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on classic novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of SSfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of SSfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in SSfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamedfor instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as The Narrator and alphabetized as Narrator. If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name Jean Louise Finch would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname Scout Finch.
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by SSfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

SSfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Short Stories for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Short Stories for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Short Stories for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from SSfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from SSfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Short Stories for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Short Stories for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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