

*Original Paper*

## Seeking Wholeness: Talismanic Patterns and Rituals in Of Mice and Men

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### **Abstract**

*John Steinbeck's fiction is widely recognized for its allegorical and expressionist qualities, yet the relationship between symbolic objects and ritualized behavior in *Of Mice and Men* has received comparatively little attention. Drawing on Todd M. Lieber's theory of talismanic patterns together with Steinbeck's reflections on symbolism and monism in *The Log from the Sea of Cortez*, this article examines three recurring talismans in the novella—soft things, the dream ranch, and the brush—and the rituals through which they acquire psychological and spiritual significance. Lennie's compulsive petting, George's repeated narration of the ranch dream, and the sacrificial killing in the brush are interpreted as ritual performances that enable the characters to project values onto material objects, affirm threatened identities, and seek reunion with a larger natural whole. By analyzing the interaction between talismans and rituals, this article argues that Steinbeck's expressionism is grounded not only in symbolic imagery but also in repetitive performative acts that reveal his ecological monism and his understanding of humanity's persistent longing for wholeness.*

### **Keywords**

*Of Mice and Men, Talismanic patterns, Ritual*

### **Introduction**

Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* as a tragic fable demonstrates intrinsic affinities for visual reinterpretation through its clear-out theme, setting cinematicity, and intense rhythm—qualities that have precipitated its recurrent adaptation into theatrical and cinematic forms. This adaptability aligns with broader critical consensus regarding the expressionist tendencies in Steinbeck's writings. Theatrical critics like Jeannie M. Woods pointed out the “naturalism and even expressionistic elements of Steinbeck's story”(628); literary critics like Hakutani mentions “Steinbeck's penchant for the Arthurian legends and the Old Testament”(305) in an article published on *American Literature*; among

the research of Steinbeck's symbols and metaphors, Todd M. Lieber argues the religious nature of his characters—driven by an intuitive drift to mysteralize things as spiritual fulcrum. As “a scathing portrait of mental illness, despair, and the irrevocable and often tragic bonds between human beings set against the backdrop of the Great Depression” (Hess 73), this irrational pursuit can only be metaphorized and manifested in an unarticulated form: in the concrete serving as a talisman, transforming material objects into vessels of metaphysical yearning through irrational, ritualistic performance. This paper studies three main talismanic symbols in *Of Mice and Men*: soft things, land, and brush, as well as the rituals performed to fulfill talismans' functions. By analyzing how George and Lennie perceive, affirm, and express through the talismanic patterns, this article aims to illuminate Steinbeck's distinctive expressionist aesthetics.

### 1. Talismanic Patterns

Talisman stems from people's primitive simple instinct of “man's habitual practice of spiritualizing and consecrating a naturalistic world, man's continual need for a talisman”(Lieber 262). Steinbeck in the *Log from the Sea of Cortez* noted that “man's symbol-making and symbol-responding faculties have their origin in a collective racial unconscious”(30), addressing people's inevitable and inherent reliance on talismanic patterns. These patterns build human animals' identity, connect spiritually and emotionally with them and give a sense of fulfillment. There are three modes of this mechanism of identification and fulfillment as claimed by Lieber, and this chapter will explain them in detail in *Of Mice and Men* accordingly. First, man attaching spiritual value to an object as a means of satisfying some deep and unidentifiable need (Lieber 267). It is an unarticulated and even unnoticeable need for people to seek irrational fulfillment. There's nothing mysterious or supernatural about this drive but it simply governs people's conduct. One great example of this attachment is manifested in Lennie's obsession with soft things. Lennie takes a soft, fluffy critter with him everywhere he goes, sometimes a little mouse and sometimes a puppy. Even his biggest dream is to be able to tend to the bunnies on his and George's farm. Lennie is mentally retarded, but is well aware of his love of soft objects. Steinbeck never gives us reasons or a character childhood background for why Lennie was so attached to soft and fluffy things. To a writer known for “scientist observing” it is only to be considered as a qualitative question that hints “it ought to be so”. Besides, a double confirm comes from Lennie's intellectual retard for there would be no rational thinking for someone with limited cognitive capacity to do something. It is completely an instinctive move to hold, pet and rub the soft. Emotionally, except for George, what can most mobilize Lennie's passion is those soft creatures. He would cry and get thrilled each time when George tells about that “ranch dream”, and even enraged by the illusory bullying of the fantasy cats to his fantasy rabbits though he's been timid and childlike non-aggressive normally. “Lennie breathed hard. ‘You jus' let 'em try to get the rabbits. I'll break their God damn necks. I'll . . . I'll smash 'em with a stick’”(Steinbeck , *Of Mice and Men* 63) . Although born with a large physique, Lennie has never intentionally harmed anyone, and it was his mental deficiencies that cause him

occasionally kill small animals for not being able to control his strength. However, when he learns that his beloved rabbit, who makes him feel safe and content, is in danger, Lennie resorts to violence, which is a testament to the strong bond the rabbit has with him. When Crooks and Curley's wife tried to talk to him, he was also absentmindedly talking about his puppy and possible bunnies because his mind was all on these softs. In a movement perspective, Lennie's acts and decisions are much dependent on George's orders, but there was one time Lennie decided and accomplished autonomously when he went to the nest to see the newborn puppies and slept alone in the stable for the night. The power of the soft is so strong that it leads Lennie's emotions and behaviors, drawing him closer and giving him sense of fulfillment. Lennie felt at ease just by stroking the soft object, which had become his "sanctuary of sorts where he can retreat from worldly traumas"(Lieber 264)

The second talismanic pattern is "man infusing his spirit into his possessions or the objects of his work"(Lieber 267), which appears as a dream ranch in *Of Mice and Men*, and although the possessiveness is imagined, it is also the most emphasized about the ranch. George and Lennie's motivation and passion for life are infused into their dream land where one day they will own and live off the fat of the land. Their favorite relaxation was listening to George talk about their abundance, dignity and power when the dream's realized. "We'd jus' live there. We'd belong there. There wouldn't be no more runnin' round the country and gettin' fed by a Jap cook. No, sir, we'd have our own place where we belonged and not sleep in no bunkhouse"(Steinbeck, *Of Mice and Men* 62). Farm land transcends the physical properties of material space and is sublimated into a core symbol that carries the meaning of existence. Owning a farm means the return of the subject from a replaceable means of production to a controller of one's own destiny. Not only will they have the right to decide to rest on rainy days, but also have the right to invite friends to stay when they visit; "We'd know what come of our planting"(63) highlights a sense of control over one's own efforts and future. The sweat poured into the land can grow predictably in the form of animals and plants, and knowing what they are planting means that they are permanently emancipated from rootlessness, no longer have to go into exile, being. In addition to investing ideals and dignity into the talismanic land, George and Lennie also injected their subjective uniqueness into this symbolic amulet. Shortly after the novel begins, George's initial articulation of their vision strategically contrasts their condition with that of migrant workers, "They got no family. They don't belong no place. (...) They ain't got nothing to look ahead to," "With us it ain't like that. We got a future. We got somebody to talk to that gives a damn about us"(21). This contrast performs a dual affirmation of subjectivity: they are more than aware of their collective fate as "depression discards" who finds it fortunate enough to live one day's lives; while they are particularly innocent and fearless ones, in the face of such a dumping environment, having visions and comrades who care for each other. The land they dream of serves as a vehicle of their friendship and uniqueness, telling the world that they are different, and they live with dignity, ability, and feelings.

Brushes, as a recurrent literary archetype, are often associated with meaning groups like melancholy, mystery, danger, etc.. In *Of Mice and Men*, George and Lennie regard the brushes as a safe zone, both

as a refuge they find after escaping from another farm at the beginning of the story, and as a reception for dangerous situations when something goes wrong in the future. It might be a slight indication of the paradoxical and tragic nature of their fate: confusing safety with danger, reality with illusion. If so, the sense of security that the brushes give is doomed to be disillusioned like the ranch dream. George repeatedly emphasizes to Lennie throughout the novel that if anything goes wrong, run to the brushes: “if you jus’ happen to get in trouble like you always done before, I want you to come right here an’ hide in the brush,”(Steinbeck, *Of Mice and Men* 22) “Hide in the brush till I come for you. Can you remember that?”(23) “Hide till I come for you. Don’t let nobody see you. Hide in the brush by the river. Say that over.”(37) George’s recurring command to Lennie transforms the thicket into a symbolic emergency sanctuary. This spatial strategy mirrors their psychological pattern of masking harsh realities with idealism: just as they ignore the reality of brutality with ranch fantasies, the dense trees and leaves serve as a tangible shield against external threats. Hiding in the brushes as a solution shows their reliance on escaping from the real world, coherent with their usual habit of masking reality and indulging in fantasies. In addition, combined with their ambition to create a world of their own, it is clear that their trust and attachment to the brushes is not only a sign of distress, but also a symbol of their belonging to nature. They are the children of nature—they live their whole lives in the field, their work is to rattle grain bags, Lennie loves little animals to the point of obsession—they belong to the natural world and are one with the world. It’s a sound demonstration of Lieber’s third element of talismanic patterns and Steinbeck’s monism: “man using the talisman as a vehicle for perceiving and affirming his relatedness to a larger whole”(Lieber 267). Steinbeck, who had studied under marine biologist Eddie Ricketts, advocates ecological holism by transferring the concept of biomes to the analysis of human society. In *Log from the Sea of Cortez* he proposes that “the feeling we call religious, most of the mystical outcrying which is one of the most prized and used and desired reactions of our species, is really the understanding and the attempt to say that man is related to the whole thing, related inextricably to all reality, known and unknowable”(Steinbeck, *The Log* 217) . His monism is projected on George and Lennie’s unconditional trust in the brushes for giving protection to affirm their relatedness and significance with the physical environment. These workers work with nature and, of course, find self-fulfillment in it.

## 2. Rituals

Steinbeck speaks highly of human instinct to seek unity and oneness, highlighting that “an innate sense of the unity of all things is a psychological legacy of the human species”(Lieber 266). However, he also suggests that due to the complex structure of modern society and the fragmented relationship between human beings and nature, people’s perception of oneness is often deeply buried and repressed, and “it becomes difficult to express or affirm except through symbol and ritual”(266). To put it simple, if the talisman is the instrument by which human feels and expresses his/her sense of wholeness, then ritual is the means/process by which the talisman functions to overcome the alienation of separate beings in the

universe and to reaffirm the cosmic unity of humankind. Cultural anthropologists generally accept a very vague definition of the term as scripted, stereotypic forms of collective action (Gluckman, 1975). The more unusual the ritual, the more it reminds the client of the needs and desires inscribed on the talisman. The form of the ritual is variable, and the most iconic feature may be the repetition of a particular act or sacrifice. For the three talismans analyzed in the first chapter, the bearers also perform the corresponding rituals to achieve them.

Lennie's compulsive stroking of soft things is very much similar to believers' repetition of a cyclic action like spinning beads or circling themselves around the altar. He can't help but take his little animals with him and pet them wherever he goes, even walking, "I could pet it with my thumb while we walked along"(Steinbeck 13). Ever loyal, he would also lie to George in order to steal a puppy to pet. It was one of the few times he used his sense: to hide the puppy against his stomach, just to keep petting the puppy. This repetitive behavior is often interpreted in neurobiology as mental illness. George and Slim have commented on Lennie that he is like a kid, "He's jes' like a kid, ain't he." "Sure he's jes' like a kid". (48-49) Combined with Lennie's speech and behavior we know that his cognitive level is equivalent to that of a child. According to Boyer's research, childhood rituals are hypothesized to be a way to calibrate the system (2006). Lennie's preference for objects and the repetition of specific actions are calibrating the boundaries of perception of the world, testing the threshold of safe interaction with the material world through a tactile feedback loop as well as testing the right way to connect with the world. By interacting with the fur and warmth of puppies and illusory bunnies, Lennie is actually orienting himself, making a connection with the universe, confirming that he is functioning normally as part of the world. He might not understand the rules of society, but can be recognized by society in the soft touch on the talisman to achieve fulfillment.

George's ranch fantasy is also a product of repeated ritualization, though it is only extracted and manifested from the depths of his heart when he is asked by Lennie rather than being a compulsive one. George's repetition of fantasies is more of an active conscious reminder than Lennie's childlike disorder. He is well aware of his status as an exile, with no fixed abode, living on the face of others who can drive him away at any time. And the repetition of fantasies is a mnemonic resistance that reinforces the subjectivity. There were three times in total when he talked about that future land. It appeared in the first chapter when they were about to begin a new life on Curley's ranch. They just ran out of trouble and held hope for the next employer as well as their future: "because I got you to look after me, and you got me to look after you, and that's why"(Steinbeck, *Of Mice and Men* 21). George's second talk about the ranch ideal is in Chapter Three, when Candy joined the gang and they were ever closer to their dreamland. The land would "be our own, an' nobody could can us"(63) and the three of them were all "amazed" for "This thing they had never really believed in was coming true" (65). The third time the dream of a piece of land of one's own appears is when George was about to shoot Lennie, trying to fulfill Lennie's wish and comfort him from guilt and punishment. "We gonna get a little place,"(107) "Sure, right now. I gotta. We gotta"(109) became George's last words to his good fella.

The ranch dream does not appear simply as an abstract symbol for three times, but is also supplemented with a lot of lifelike details, such as small windmills, alfalfa, eggs laid by chickens, etc., to enhance realism. However, it is worth noting that he confessed that from the beginning he knew that it would not be possible: “I think I knowed from the very first. I think I knowed we’d never do her. He usta like to hear about it so much I got to thinking maybe we would”(98), which is to say, the land dream itself is not the goal pursued, but the recognition brought by the dream, the subjective confidence of one's spirit. By repeatedly emphasizing the details of a free land, George creates a cognitive fortress against destiny. The dispossession is dismantled and human dignity is established.

The brush/bush is a composite of natural and religious imagery, representing the natural wholeness that is always sought after, eternity, vitality, while suggesting the sublime force of nature to destroy. George and Lennie's dependence on the brushes is doomed from the outset both because of their confusion with the hazard and the safe, and because of the profoundly entrenched class pressures that make it impossible for them to ever turn around and find their own “oneness”. However, the brush as the talisman bearing the highest wholeness, is irresistibly drawn to them, at least to George, who is capable of rational thought, to fulfill its function. And the way to do it is a sacrificial ritual. George's act of killing his comrade Lennie executes the man who cannot adapt to the rules of society and thus exchanges himself for being part of a social group of itinerant workers rather than an alien who holds his own dreams and possible lands. Through a highly symbolic scene of bloodshed, George could “retreat from worldly traumas and, through a sense of harmony and oneness with his environment, gather together the fragments of his being and find wholeness and unity within himself”(Lieber 264). After the shooting, George came out of the trauma of the ideal-reality gap, no longer had illusions, and could live numbly. Through this ceremony, he was officially integrated into the group of seasonal laborers he once despised, who “get(s) in jail they can rot for all anybody gives a damn,” and “ain't got nothing to look ahead to”(Steinbeck, *Of Mice and Men* 21). Although George's intentions for the shooting were good: to spare Lennie from torture, leaving him with dignity and to make him die without pain in a beautiful land dream; the ritual objectively fulfills George's purpose of oneness and Lennie's purest innocent destiny. Lennie is like the nature that brush symbolizes, to which one can seemingly transform and provoke at will without getting any punishment, but the consequences are radically irreversible. George had always prided himself on being able to order Lennie around at will, and even when he expressed his guilt at teasing and almost getting Lennie drowned he could habitually speak up, “Why he'd do any damn thing I tol' him. If I tol' him to walk over a cliff, over he'd go”(45). There was surely confession and gratitude in George's voice but also confidence and pride of how great he is to handle such a big powerful man, let alone his endless complaints about Lennie at the beginning of the story. It is exactly like how people treat the nature—occasionally repenting, and then remodeling as if nothing had happened according to their own will: the plains are transformed into wheat fields and the forests pastures. Lennie has a nature-like indiscernible personality and destructive power, and

eventually returns to nature. This is the duality of their sacrificial ritual, not only did George get released from the burden of dreams, but Lennie also got to return to innocence.

### Conclusions

At the heart of Steinbeck's work is a conviction that the writing most worth doing is that which can penetrate to the sources of human thought and behavior and present in the form of some objective correlative the archetypal and mythopoeic knowledge that lies deep in the mystery of human experience (Lieber 274-275). George and Lennie, led by their inherent tendency, have attached their values, infused their spirits, and connected themselves to the physical environment through three corresponding talismanic patterns: soft things, land, and brush. By petting the soft, Lennie connects his preferences and values with the material world; by retelling the land dream, George affirms his doomed identity as an alienated homeless; by the killing in the brush, both George and Lennie achieve emancipation from secular burdens. The rituals they yielded to fulfill the talismans' functions are vehicular and transitive, helping them respond to the deep voice that asks for identification and oneness.

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