



## A Very Poisoned Cream Puff: The California Eugenics Movement through Steinbeck's *Cannery Row*

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“Steinbeck has hinted several times at some mystery at the heart of the novel, something beyond the characterization of Doc and beyond the comedy of Mack and the boys” (Benson 133). One critic, who noted the violence in a book that was supposed to be a comedy, said *Cannery Row* was “a very poisoned cream-puff.” Steinbeck responded that if the reviewer had read the book again, “he would have found how very poisoned it was” (Benson 133). In one of Steinbeck’s letters, he notes that “no critic has discovered the reason for those little inner chapters in *Cannery Row*” (Benson 133). I believe these inner chapters deliver Steinbeck’s underlying message against the eugenics movement in California and America at the time, an embarrassing and obscure piece of U.S. history that became a model for Nazi Germany.

Steinbeck scholars have already identified ecological themes in his fiction based on his nonfiction work *The Log from the Sea of Cortez* (Beegel, Shillinglaw, and Tiffney). As in *The Log*, a narrative about a trip to collect and study common forms of marine life, his fictional *Cannery Row* focuses on common forms of life and provides a holistic view of the community. Doc, the central character, is beloved by everyone, so much so that the only propulsion of the narrative is his friend Mack’s desire to do something nice for Doc by throwing him a party. What ensues is a comedy of errors when the first party is a bust because it was “forced,” while the second party is a success because it “just happened.” This idea evidently stems from Steinbeck’s reading of the *Tao Te Ching*’s philosophy of *wu-wie* or “action through inaction” (Ong xvii) and the consequences of forcing order, rather than letting things happen naturally (Lisca 118). It appears also to stem from his non-teleological thinking, based on the principle of “what is,” in contrast to teleological thinking focused on “what should be.” In *The Log*, Steinbeck devotes chapter 14, “March 24, Easter Sunday,” to defining the difference in this thinking, but in *Cannery Row*, he seems to sum up this philosophy through an exchange between Doc and Hazel, when Hazel asks about stink bugs, “Well, what they got their asses up in the

air for?’ . . . ‘I don’t know why, . . . The remarkable thing,’ said Doc, ‘isn’t that they put their tails up in the air—the really incredibly remarkable thing is that we find it remarkable’” (34). “Non-teleological thinking,” says Steinbeck in *The Log*, “concerns itself primarily not with what should be, or could be, or might be, but rather with what actually ‘is’—attempting at most to answer the already sufficiently difficult questions *what* or *how*, instead of *why*” (112).

In addition to Steinbeck’s holistic view of community and non-teleological thinking, there is yet another ecological theme in *Cannery Row*. The Great Tide Pool works as a metaphor for Steinbeck’s belief that everything is connected. Or in the Taoist belief, “Human beings follow the Earth. / Earth follows Heaven. / Heaven follows the Tao. / The Tao follows the way things are” (Tzu chapter 25). In *The Log*, Steinbeck echoes this philosophy:

. . . it seems apparent that species are only commas in a sentence, that each species is at once the point and the base of a pyramid, that all life is relational to a point where an Einsteinian relativity seems to emerge . . . One merges into another, groups melt into ecological groups until the time when what we know as life meets and enters what we think of as non-life: barnacle and rock, rock and earth, earth and tree, tree and rain and air. And the units nestle into the whole and are inseparable from it. (178)

In *Cannery Row*, Doc takes us to the tide pools to collect starfish and other marine life. In the intertidal or littoral zone, marine life must adapt to extremes. At low tide, the species are exposed to air and various weather conditions, with the motion of the waves dislodging and uncovering them. At high tide, life resumes underwater. The characters who live in Cannery Row are little different from the marine animals. They, too, must adapt to their unusual environment. During the day, the “cannery whistles scream and all over the town men and women scramble into their clothes and come running down to the Row to go to work,” until day’s end when the whistle sounds again, and the workers “straggle out and droop their ways up the hill into the town and Cannery Row becomes itself again—quiet and magical. Its normal life returns” (1-2). Steinbeck’s pantheist-Taoist philosophy holds that everything from the tide pool to the stars is connected and has a purpose (*The Log* 178-79). This would include everyone in a society, even the misfits and mentally challenged, like those characters portrayed in *Cannery Row*.

Through the idea of connection, the seemingly insignificant chapters in *Cannery Row*, the so-called “inter-chapters,” become more important. These are the chapters that introduce the reader to such characters as the old Chinaman, Mr. and Mrs. Sam Malloy, Frankie, Henri, Mary and Tom Talbot, and

the gopher, to name a few. One interpretation might be that these sketches are Steinbeck's way of showing us more of the Cannery Row community and giving readers a wider lens through which to see further connections among people. It is also a way to demonstrate the biodiversity in the Great Tide Pool of human existence. Mack, Hazel, Eddie, Hughie, and Jones are like the five points on a starfish, "for a starfish loves to hang onto something" (46). Mr. and Mrs. Malloy are like hermit crabs, finding a new shell when they take up residence in an old boiler. Dora, "a great big woman with flaming orange hair and a taste for Nile green evening dresses" (14) is like a flamboyant sea anemone. Frankie is like the "little octopi," which are timid and young, preferring "a bottom on which there are many caves and little crevices and lumps of mud where they may hide from predators and protect themselves from the waves," that is, his "uncles" (52, 93). The mysterious old Chinaman walks through the town to the shore like a ghost shrimp, "so transparent that [he] hardly throw[s] a shadow" (23). Even Lee Chong's grocery is like a tide pool with its diverse wares (5, 111).

But a darker side to these inner chapters, the "very poisoned cream puff," might be the eugenics movement. In the late 1800s, Sir Francis Galton, a cousin of Charles Darwin, "theorized that if talented people married talented people, the result would be measurably better offspring" (Black). Eugenics became known as the science of improving the human race by selective breeding, with an emphasis on race and intelligence. Eugenicists came from varied scientific backgrounds: animal and marine biology, horticulture, and environmentalism (Stern 22). As the United States became inundated with immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe in the late nineteenth century, a spirit of nativism took hold in many of those with deep roots in American soil. Fearful that the Yankee stock might eventually be outbred—numerically and politically—nativists worked to restrict the number of immigrants by establishing quota laws. This "race suicide" alarm peaked in the early 1900s and was sparked by eugenicists (Carmack 24-25). Throughout the early part of the twentieth century, eugenics organizations proliferated: American Breeders' Association, American Eugenics Society, Eugenics Society of Northern California, and Race Betterment Foundation, to name a few. Conferences and expositions, such as the Panama-Pacific International Exposition, propagandized eugenics. Newspapers ran regular columns on eugenics. Even the still-popular column in *Ladies Home Journal*, "Can This Marriage Be Saved?," had eugenic roots (Stern 26).

California became the leader in this new movement. With the ongoing influx of Mexican and Chinese immigrants, eugenicists sought legislation not only to curb their entry into the state, but ways to control their increase and

miscegenation with whites. Charles M. Goethe, a prominent and vociferous California eugenicist, wrote in the *Santa Cruz Sentinel* in 1927, “[T]he Anglo-Saxon birth rate is low. Peons multiply like rabbits . . . . If race strains remain absolutely pure, and if an old American-Nordic family averages 3 children while an incoming Mexican peon family averages 7, by the fifth generation, the proportion of white Nordics to Mexican peons descended from these two families would be as 243 to 16,807” (qtd. in Stern 140).

California eugenicists such as Goethe, Paul Popenoe, Luther Burbank, Charles B. Davenport, and David Starr Jordan (president of Stanford University, which Steinbeck briefly attended), chaired eugenics organizations and supported compulsory sterilization laws, first passed in the state in 1909. The targets were the mentally unfit, the feeble-minded, sex offenders, alcoholics, and women who were sexually promiscuous. In fact, teenage girls “tagged as unruly, promiscuous, and mentally inferior were briefly interned with the intent of sterilization” (Stern 106). At an institution in Sonoma, California, in the mid-1920s, it appears that “something like 25% of the girls who have been sterilized were sent up here solely” for surgery.” “They are kept only a few months—long enough to operate and install a little discipline in them; and then returned home” (qtd. in Stern 106-07). Each time the laws were revised, the scope of individuals to be sterilized expanded. Not surprisingly, in California, Mexicans were disproportionately sterilized (Gottshall; “California: Eugenics”). (This raises at least two additional questions not addressed here: Was *Tortilla Flat*, in particular, born of the eugenics movement? When critics accused Steinbeck of sentimentalizing his proletariat characters, were the critics motivated not by Marxist criticism, but rather by support of the eugenics movement?)

Immigrants and race weren’t the only factors motivating eugenicists, however. Inheritable genetic conditions were also a concern. John Harvey Kellogg, a physician who specialized in nutrition and who, with his brother, invented Corn Flakes cereal, calculated that in the United States, ten percent of the population suffered from mental deficiencies: “500,000 lunatics, 80,000 criminals, 100,000 paupers, 90,000 idiots, and 90,000 epileptics” (Stern 52). Kellogg estimated these figures from statistics presented by Harry H. Laughlin and Charles B. Davenport’s *How to Make a Eugenic Family Study*, published in Bulletin no. 13 of the Eugenics Record Office (ERO) in 1915.

The Eugenics Record Office in Cold Spring Harbor, New York, became the largest eugenics research organization in the United States. In operation between 1910 and 1944 its purpose “was to study human genetics and to use this knowledge to reduce heritable problems in the human species” (Roderick, et al. 98). During this period, genetic and genealogical data to determine

human traits were compiled on thousands of individuals. Field workers gathered information from patients in mental institutions and from their families. Data were also gathered from volunteers who had special hereditary defects. Information contained in these records includes name and maiden name for women, birthplace and birth date, date and place of marriage, total number of sons and daughters, diseases and illnesses, surgical operations, cause of death and age at death, height and weight, color of hair and eyes, complexion, and more. The locations of the institutions and families the field workers visited span nineteen states: Arkansas, California, Connecticut, Illinois, Indiana, Maryland, Massachusetts, Maine, Michigan, North Carolina, New Jersey, Ohio, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Virginia, West Virginia, Texas, Utah, and Wisconsin. Forms were also sent to college teachers around the country to use as part of class projects, expanding the survey's reach (Roderick, et al.). Could Steinbeck or his best friend, marine biologist Ed Ricketts, have filled out eugenics forms at some point in their lives, perhaps when they attended college?

Although the microfilmed records of the ERO have restricted access because of privacy concerns,<sup>1</sup> the indexes are available to the public on microfilm at the Family History Library in Salt Lake City, Utah. In checking the Index to Records of Family Traits Files (FHL microfilm #1711558), I found no entries for Steinbeck or Ricketts. The Surname/Locality/Specific Trait Index also had no entry for the Steinbeck surname, except for one in Germany (FHL microfilm #1684083). We know that Steinbeck's German grandfather's name was actually Grossteinbeck, however. While there are several cards with the Ricketts surname, none are in the localities where Ed was known to have resided (FHL microfilm #1684025).<sup>2</sup>

While Steinbeck and Ricketts might not have had any personal ties to the eugenics movement, there is little doubt that the movement had an impact on Steinbeck's philosophy of life and his writing. Louis Owens in "Deadly Kids, Stinking Dogs, and Heroes: The Best Laid Plans in Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*" identified undertones about the eugenics movement through that novel's characters, and Kevin Hearle has questioned Steinbeck's views on race in "These Are American People: The Spectre of Eugenics in *Their Blood is Strong* and *The Grapes of Wrath*."

But there is one aspect of the eugenics movement that would have aligned with Steinbeck's life philosophy. Eugenecists were also environmentalists. In California in particular, they were fierce preservationists of the landscape, lobbying against those who wanted to disturb the natural environment by building highways and skyscrapers or felling trees for the logging industry. Eugenecists founded organizations, such as Save-the-Redwoods League, and

were instrumental in financing and supporting parks and nature habitats throughout the state (Stern 115-26). Steinbeck wasn't the only one who considered the Pacific West the Garden of Eden, but eugenicists saw saving the state's environment as akin to racial purity, "ensuring the survival of white America" (Stern 124).

Steinbeck certainly wouldn't have been ignorant of California eugenicists' influence evident in his own backyard. Although hard data are impossible to ascertain because of deliberate record destruction, researchers estimate that more than 20,000 people were sterilized in California prior to 1979, when the statutes were finally repealed. Sterilization operations peaked between the late 1930s and early 1940s, right when Steinbeck was refining his philosophy via *The Log of the Sea of Cortez* and when *Cannery Row* was germinating in his mind. Of those sterilized, "almost 60% were considered mentally ill and more than 35% were considered mentally deficient" ("California: Eugenics"). They were people much like the characters Steinbeck portrays in his works, people like many of the loveable characters in *Cannery Row*. As I'll show, almost all of the inner chapters reflect Steinbeck's non-teleological philosophy and suggest his opposition to the eugenics movement.

*Chapter 2:* On one level, this chapter can be interpreted as having Biblical ties. The chapter begins with "The Word," and Mack and the boys, who are social misfits, alcoholics, and bums, are likened to "the Virtues, the Graces, the Beauties" (13-14). Looking at the first chapter of the *Tao Te Ching*, however, another correlation appears. Steinbeck begins his Chapter 2 with "The Word is a symbol and a delight which sucks up men and scenes, plants, factories, and Pekinese. Then the Thing becomes the Word and back to Thing again, but warped and woven into a fantastic pattern" (13). There are similarities in the *Tao Te Ching*:

The Tao that can be followed is not the eternal Tao.  
 The name that can be named is not the eternal name.  
 The nameless is the origin of heaven and earth.  
 While naming is the origin of the myriad things. (chapter 1)

Like Steinbeck's opening, which is deliberately vague and difficult to grasp, the *Tao* "can never be grasped completely by any individual mind or encompassed in the finite meaning of any concept" (Ong xxv). (For more on the relationship of the *Tao* to *Cannery Row*, see Peter Lisca's "*Cannery Row: Escape into the Counterculture.*")

In this second chapter also, the reader is introduced to Mack and the boys and the message of survival of the fittest. Steinbeck invokes "Our Father who art in nature," who has a love of everyone, even "no goods and

blots-on-the town and bums. Virtues and graces and laziness and zest” (14). In Chapter 68 of the *Tao Te Ching*, there is a parallel to this section in *Cannery Row* as well:

The best warrior is never aggressive.  
 The best fighter is never angry.  
 The best tactician does not engage the enemy.  
 The best utilizer of people’s talents places himself below them.

This is called the virtue of non-contention.  
 It is called the ability to engage people’s talents.  
 It is called the ultimate in merging with Heaven.

This chapter sets the tone of connection among all the characters of *Cannery Row*, that no one is less valuable in a society than another.

*Chapter 4:* The only ethnic slur in *Cannery Row* is made by a boy named Andy toward the mysterious old Chinaman who walks through the town to the ocean. Andy chants an anti-Chinese song at him: “Ching-Chong Chinaman sitting on a rail—‘Long came a white man an’ chopped off his tail” (21). The Chinaman gives Andy an evil eye, which scares the boy. “Andy was the only boy who ever did that and he never did it again” (22).

The old Chinaman and Lee Chong, the grocer, both represent an ethnic group targeted during Steinbeck’s time. The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 limited immigration to only diplomats, scholars, travelers, and merchants. It froze Chinese immigration with its imbalanced sex ratio, making the group largely a male bachelor society. Some of these “bachelors,” however, had wives and families in China, who were not allowed to immigrate. Chinese laborers had essentially three options if they wished to have a family: return to China permanently, since the Scott Act of 1888 stipulated that once Chinese laborers left, they would be barred from re-entering; if single, they could stay in America as single, since there were laws forbidding interracial marriages in some states, such as California; or, if already married, their families were prohibited from immigrating. Furthering the sex-ratio problem of the Chinese in America, the quota laws of the 1920s made it impossible for American citizens of Chinese ancestry to bring their wives and children here. The Chinese Exclusion acts were repealed in 1943 (Carmack 154-55), around the time Steinbeck was beginning to write *Cannery Row*.

*Chapter 8:* Mr. and Mrs. Malloy are a homeless couple living in a boiler. They would not make ideal parents according to eugenics standards, but Mrs. Malloy is doing her best to be a good wife, one who would make eugenicists proud. She decorates their “home” with a rug, a washtub, a lamp, and wants to add “real lace curtains,” even though they have no windows over which to

hang them. She wants them because she likes to have nice things and wants to make a nice home for her husband. She claims her husband doesn't understand "how a woman feels" (44).

In the 1930s, the American Institute of Family Relations, sponsored by eugenicists, opened clinics where couples could get marriage and genetic counseling. Couples were given a barrage of psychological tests, such as the Johnson Temperament Analysis Test to reveal husbands' and wives' temperaments, and they used pedigree charts like those created by the Eugenics Record Office to identify potential problems with offspring. More often than not, women were the ones counseled to control and adjust their unbalanced temperament when there was dissatisfaction in their marriages. They were to channel any aggressiveness toward their husbands into feminine behavior, such as cooking, cleaning, child-rearing, and taking care of their homes and husbands (Stern 150-78). Mrs. Malloy was only trying to do what eugenicists and marriage counselors would advise her to do.

*Chapters 10 and 28:* Frankie is the young boy who "couldn't learn and there was something a little wrong with his co-ordination. There was no place for him. He wasn't an idiot, he wasn't dangerous, his parents, or parent, would not pay for his keep in an institution" (52). When Frankie steals a clock to give to Doc as a gift because he loves Doc, the arresting officer reminds Doc that they have a "mental report" on the boy. The officer says to Doc, "'And you know what's likely to happen when he comes into puberty?' 'Yes,' said Doc, 'I know,' and the stone weighed terribly on his heart" (160). Minors like Frankie, especially those with IQs of 70 or lower, were often institutionalized in California. "Once so interned, these young inmates were prime candidates for sterilization, done with or without parental consent. . . . [R]eproductive surgery [was] a mandatory precondition for release from a state institution" (Stern 95).

*Chapter 12:* When writer Josh Billings dies and his body is embalmed by a local doctor, who had studied in France, the doctor discards Billings's intestines and liver in the gulch, "where I always do" (66). They are found by a little boy and his dog. This chapter suggests an allusion to the discarding of bodies of Jews in mass graves.

*Chapter 16:* Although no one in Cannery Row dies from the influenza epidemic, a deadly flu virus is part of natural selection. Epidemics signal there is something environmentally out of balance. Only those fit enough to fight off the flu will survive.

*Chapter 22:* Henri, the "French" artist who isn't French and whose real name isn't Henri, is building a boat despite his fear of the ocean. Eugenicists would no doubt find him not mentally fit. Henri also has hallucinations. That

his hallucination is about a “devilish young man, a dark handsome young man,” who cuts the throat of a “golden-haired little boy, hardly more than a baby” (124-25) can’t be ignored for its eugenics interpretation. The boy represents the American Nordic stock; the dark young man, who “looks nice” and not like a murderer, could be any dark-skinned race: African American, Mexican, or a European immigrant. His looks are deceiving, though, as his kind are killing off the white race.

*Chapter 24:* The Talbots are paupers, but Mrs. Talbot loves to give parties. She has red hair with green highlights. She comes from sturdy New England stock, but her fifth great-grandmother was burned as a witch. Mary Talbot gives tea parties for the neighborhood cats, and although it is part of natural selection, she has difficulty knowing Kitty Casini killed a mouse and wonders how she’ll be able to invite Kitty Casini to her tea parties ever again (141).

“[I]t is a fact obvious to every intelligent observer, whether layman or specialist, that . . . feeble-minded parents beget feeble-minded children,” claimed John R. Haynes, a Los Angeles physician and supporter of compulsory sterilization (Stern 85, 103). Mary Talbot may be feeble-minded, but on Cannery Row, this is not seen as a disadvantage. When the residents learn she is pregnant, all agree, “God! A kid of hers is going to have fun!” (142). While Steinbeck might be portraying the type of woman who would have been institutionalized and sterilized, he shows how people accepted her as she was and why she shouldn’t be the target of eugenicists.

*Chapter 26:* The babies in bottles and its implication of abortion will be discussed in more detail later.

*Chapter 31:* The gopher and his home are presented as “perfect.” He is described in terms of a creature with ideal genes: “His little ears were clean and well set and his eyes were as black as old-fashioned pin heads and just about the same size. His digging hands were strong and the fur on his back was glossy brown and the fawn-colored fur on his chest was incredibly soft and rich. He had long curling yellow teeth and a little short tail. Altogether he was a beautiful gopher and in the prime of his life” (175). Yet he cannot attract the perfect mate, as eugenicists would want him to. When the gopher realizes he will live his life alone, all the perfection in the world is not good company. He decides it is better to take his chances in the garden where they “put out traps every night” (177).

Perhaps the most chilling section of *Cannery Row*, however, is the frog-gathering scene in Chapter 15, which has frightening parallels to the Nazis rounding up the Jews:

But how could [the frogs] have anticipated Mack's new method? How could they have foreseen the horror that followed? The sudden flashing of lights, the shouting and squealing of men, the rush of feet. Every frog leaped, plopped into the pool, and swam frantically to the bottom. Then into the pool plunged the line of men, stamping . . . Hysterically the frogs displaced from their placid spots swam ahead of the crazy thrashing feet and the feet came on . . . A few frogs lost their heads and floundered among the feet and got through and those were saved. But the majority decided to leave this pool forever, to find a new home in a new country where this kind of thing didn't happen. A wave of frantic, frustrated frogs, big ones, little ones, brown ones, green ones, men frogs and women frogs, a wave of them broke over the bank, crawled, leaped, scrambled. They clambered up the grass, they clutched at each other, little ones rode on big ones. And then—horror on horror—the flashlights found them . . . Tens and fifties of them were flung into gunny sacks, and the sacks filled with tired, frightened, and disillusioned frogs, with dripping, whimpering frogs. Some got away, of course, and some had been saved in the pool. But never in frog history had such an execution taken place. . . . (84-85)

Throughout the 1930s, "California and German eugenicists traded ideas, statistics, and protocols, and complimented each other's escalating sterilization programs" (Stern 108). When Nazi Germany began practicing genocide, however, the relationship changed. As an American war correspondent and a believer in non-teleological thinking, Steinbeck would have been morally outraged at the crimes against a race of people, as was the American public. Although *Cannery Row* wasn't supposed to be about the war, Steinbeck carefully crafted the frog scene with striking similarities.

Other examples in *Cannery Row* deliver further covert messages about eugenics and the blending of races. Eddie mixes a punch of left-over alcohol at the La Ida, an "interesting and sometimes surprising . . . mixture of rye, beer, bourbon, scotch, wine, rum, and gin . . . but now and then some effete customer would order a stinger or an anisette or a curaao and these little touches gave a distinct character to the punch" (38). When Jones says, "Eddie, I don't mean to complain none. I was just thinkin'. S'pose you had two or three jugs back of the bar. S'pose you put all the whiskey in one and all the wine in another and all the beer in another—" Eddie is shocked at this purification and deliberate segregation of alcohol. Jones sees the error of his question and quickly corrects himself, "What I like about it this way [the mixture] is you never know what kind of drunk you're going to get out of it" (71).

Similarly, when Doc decides to try a beer milkshake, he wonders about the combination of the yellow-amber beer and white milk. Steinbeck appears to be making a reference to the California statute amended in 1880, which now barred “Mongolians” from marrying whites, and the result of their potential offspring (Stern 87): “Would [the beer] curdle the milk? Would you add sugar?” (95). When Doc finally gets up the courage to try one, “it wasn’t so bad” (98).

When Mack goes back to the Captain’s house to treat the bird dog and see the puppies, the Captain remarks, “I s’pose I should have drowned them all but one . . . People don’t take the interest in bird dogs they used to. It’s all poodles and boxers and Dobermans” (81). When Mack selects what he deems the ideal pup, he “felt bone and frame, looked in eyes and regarded jaws, and he picked a beautifully spotted bitch with a liver-colored nose and a fine dark yellow eye” (86). Steinbeck used a similar puppy drowning scene/selection of the fittest in *Of Mice and Men*, which Louis Owens ties to Social Darwinism (226-27).

According to the *Tao*, “people are considered to be virtuous in so far as they fulfill their proper roles and functions” (Ong xxiii). Through Doc, Steinbeck reminds us that even the misfits of society have their place and something worthwhile to contribute to society. In a dysfunctional world, they are perhaps more functional than the rest of us:

Look at them. There are your true philosophers . . . I think they survive in this particular world better than other people. In a time when people tear themselves to pieces with ambition and nervousness and covetousness, they are relaxed. All of our so-called successful men are sick men, with bad stomachs, and bad souls, but Mack and the boys are healthy and curiously clean. (129)

The things we admire in men, kindness and generosity, openness, honesty, understanding and feeling are the concomitants of failure in our system. And those traits we detest, sharpness, greed, acquisitiveness, meanness, egotism and self-interest are the traits of success. And while men admire the quality of the first they love the produce of the second . . . The sale of souls to gain the whole world is completely voluntary and almost unanimous—but not quite. Everywhere in the world there are Mack and the boys.” (131)

In *The Log from the Sea of Cortez*, Steinbeck writes that “animals in the tide pool have two major preoccupations: first, survival, and second, reproduction” (58). Because the main theme in *Cannery Row* is how the community is like life in the Great Tide Pool, oddly, the only reference to reproduction

is Mrs. Talbot's pregnancy (142). Although one might infer that the Irish-Catholic prostitute Eva Flanagan was pregnant when Steinbeck wrote that "she was bagged and Dora wouldn't let a bagged girl work," he puts her condition solely within the context of drinking, saying that she was an "unpredictable drunk" (18). Dora doesn't allow drunks in her establishment and girls were not allowed to drink when they worked; they waited until they heard the clink of the bottle on Dora's glass, knowing once she drank, she would be unable to smell liquor on her girls (16, 164). Although Eva is planning a trip to East St. Louis, there is no indication that she was going there for any purpose other than a vacation, to a place she had been when she was younger and a time "when she had had so much fun there" (145). "Bagged" is a colloquial term for "pregnant"; but it is also slang for being drunk, a term commonly used in Northern Ireland, where Steinbeck's maternal grandfather originated.

Assuming *Cannery Row* is indeed a subliminal message against eugenics, then how do we account for what appears to be the condoning of abortion in *Cannery Row*, as well as in Steinbeck's own life? Eugenicians supported not only reproductive control and championed for family planning clinics, but they also would have been pro-abortion for those deemed unfit to have children (Stern 107, 153). Yet there are subtle hints in *Cannery Row* that Doc might be an abortionist: "It is said that he has helped many a girl out of trouble and into another" (25). In Doc's lab there are jars of "little unborn humans, some whole and others sliced thin and mounted on slides" (23). Did Doc perform abortions, and if so, how does this reconcile with the overriding anti-eugenics message?

There is no evidence in the text of *Cannery Row* that Doc performed abortions. Abortion in the 1930s and 1940s, although illegal, was widespread and common. "[C]linics operated in open defiance of the law, and were often run by trained doctors, nurses and midwives" ("When Abortion Was Illegal"). But Doc, who had "no right to practice medicine," was a trusted member of the Cannery Row community; everyone came to him for "medical *advice*" (emphasis mine, 89). His Western Biological Laboratory is located across from Dora's whorehouse, where all of the girls "had at one time or another gone over to the laboratory for advice or *medicine* . . ." (emphasis mine, 153). If anything, this is evidence that Doc most likely dispensed abortifacients, natural chemical and botanical remedies that women have used for centuries to induce spontaneous abortion (miscarriage). Doc has cabinets full of drugs and chemicals, such as acetic acid (24). Acetic acid is found naturally in the leaves and flowers of the pennyroyal plant, the oil of which has been a commonly used abortifacient by women of all classes ("Pennyroyal"). If Doc needed whole human fetus specimens to sell, producing a miscarriage is the only way to get

them. An abortion procedure, done with instruments, would damage the fetus. That Steinbeck, in Chapter 24, fuses two boys discussing “this guy in here got babies in bottles” (150) with their discussion about Joey’s father killing himself with rat poison, points further to the use of chemicals to end life.

Turning to Steinbeck’s life, when he learned that his first wife, Carol, was pregnant in December 1939, he insisted she get an abortion. The abortion caused an infection, which in turn required her to have a hysterectomy—sterilizing her (Parini 227-28). Could this ironic parallel to the eugenics movement of sterilization have escaped Steinbeck? It’s unlikely. One of the main reasons Steinbeck wrote, he said, was for the “opportunity to transcend some of my personal failings—things about myself that I didn’t particularly like and wanted to change but didn’t know how” (Kiernan xi). According to Jay Parini’s biography of Steinbeck, “Steinbeck was afraid that fatherhood would interfere with his writing. His own childhood had been painful enough for him to feel shy of reproducing a similar environment, and he may have feared turning into another John Ernst [his father]: shy of his offspring, dependent on his wife” (227). Steinbeck received harsh criticism from at least one friend, Joseph Campbell, who became livid when he heard about Carol’s abortion: Campbell “vented his rage about what he considered the ‘inhuman and brutal’ treatment of Carol” (Parini 227). Is the inclusion of abortion in *Cannery Row* a means for atonement, perhaps, from the guilt Steinbeck might have felt for Carol’s abortion and subsequent sterilization, he being no better than an eugenicist? Are Doc’s babies in bottles a way to make a positive statement about abortion, to imply that human fetuses can be used for humanitarian scientific purposes that aren’t sinister? Steinbeck was known to be deliberate about everything he included in his works. We can only surmise now what his motive and message might have been for including aborted fetuses in *Cannery Row*, when there is so little in the story about human reproduction. That he had personal experience with an abortion gone wrong, though, seems more than coincidental.

Life on Cannery Row, like life in the Great Tide Pool, is what it is, with a biodiversity of creatures living holistically in relative harmony. As a “very poisoned cream puff,” however, Steinbeck’s anti-eugenics message might otherwise be lost on today’s reader, given the fog under which the eugenics movement in California has been clouded in history texts.

Steinbeck posits in *The Log from the Sea of Cortez*, “And suppose some all-powerful mind and will should cure our species so that for a number of generations we would be healthy and happy? We are the products of our disease and suffering. These are factors as powerful as other genetic factors. To cure and feed would be to change the species, and the result would be another animal entirely” (98). The cautionary tale in *Cannery Row* becomes

clear: Without the Macks and the Henris and the Frankies and the Mrs. Talbots in the world, “the new animal resulting from purification of the species might be one we wouldn’t like at all” (*The Log* 98).

### Notes

1. The originals are housed at the American Philosophical Society in Philadelphia and the Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory in Cold Spring Harbor, New York.

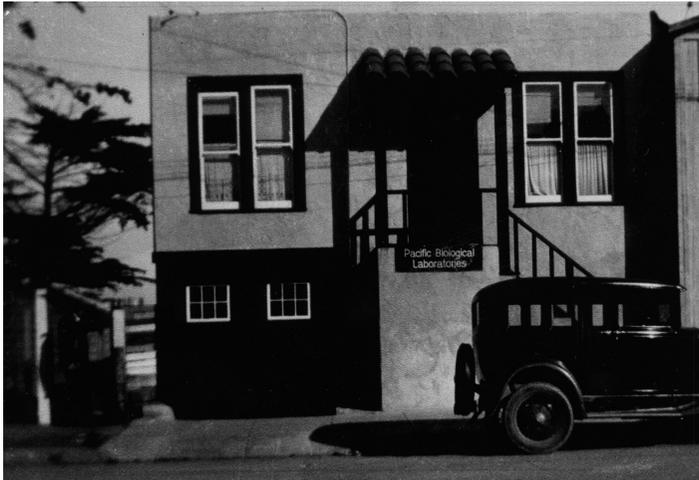
2. The Ricketts surname is recorded in Washington, D.C., England, Indiana (counties of Bartholomew, Jefferson, and Switzerland), Kansas (counties of Jefferson, Shawnee, and Stafford), Missouri (Saline County), and Ohio (Franklin County). The cards do not give first names or dates, but code numbers.

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Original building of Ed "Doc" Ricketts' Pacific Biological Laboratories, 740 Ocean View Avenue (later 800 Cannery Row). This building burned down in November 1936.