

## ANALYSIS

“Flight” (1938)

John Steinbeck

(1902-1968)

The isolated farm is on a “wild coast,” precariously close to a cliff above the ocean and also on the brink economically. The Torres place is part of the natural order: “The little shack, the rattling, rotting barn were gray-bitten with sea salt, beaten by the damp wind until they had taken on the color of the granite hills.” The hissing of the surf below introduces a snake motif. Mr. Torres was killed by a rattlesnake and his son Pepe takes on traits of a snake that lead to his death as well. Pepe inherited his knife from his father and Steinbeck uses repetition to convey the importance of the knife to him: “The knife was with Pepe always, for it had been his father’s knife.”

The loyalty of Pepe to his father is natural, but what he inherits, though necessary on a “wild coast,” proves to be his undoing in society. He fails to make the transition from the Wilderness to the City. He is individualized as gangling, easygoing, listless, smiling—a “gentle, affectionate boy, but very lazy.” In the tradition of Realism, he is also a *representative* Indian male, granting some truth to the stereotype. Pepe is “very lazy.” This is not a fault in Steinbeck, it is even a humanizing pastoral virtue, as is evident in his portrayal of *paisanos* in *Tortilla Flat* and *Cannery Row*. If Pepe had only been too lazy to practice throwing his knife he might have lived happily ever after.

He is so lazy his mother must lift him up. “Pepe grinned sheepishly and came half-heartedly to his feet.” He is like a sheep in behaving reflexively, without thinking. The comparisons of people to animals is common in Naturalistic fiction, as in Crane’s *The Red Badge of Courage*, Dreiser’s *Sister Carrie*, and Norris’s *McTeague*. As a lay biologist Steinbeck is particularly inclined to such comparisons. Above all Naturalistic fiction emphasizes determinism. Young Pepe’s fate is largely but not completely determined by instinct, poverty, character, family, culture, immaturity, and conditioned reflex.

The natural beauty of the landscape induces an illusion of benevolence in Nature, so that “even the stone mountains looked kindly.” Poetic rhyme evokes this feeling in “the white surf creamed on the reef.” In Naturalistic fiction characters lose the feeling when they experience the cruel indifference of Nature, as most famously in “The Open Boat” by Crane. Pepe *conditions himself* to throw his knife reflexively. His skill with the knife gives him a feeling of power, of transcending the limitations of his youth and poverty, of becoming a man. “Pepe looked smiling at the sky.” He is contradicted by a simile identifying him with the lowest of creatures, the symbol of evil: “Pepe’s wrist flicked like the head of a snake.”

His wise mother, acting also in the role of a father, calls Pepe foolish and lazy “like a toy-baby.” She gives him an opportunity to prove himself by sending him to Monterey for medicine and salt. He claims to be a man already, but she calls him a peanut. His mother is a Realist like the mother of Henry Fleming in *The Red Badge* who debunks his romanticism before he goes off to war, though Mama Torres trusts that when he goes off to town her son will prove to be no “foolish chicken.” She trusts in Nature, for “a boy gets to be a man when a man is needed.”

When the boy returns from Monterey, “The moon was near down to the water.” The moon is a standard measure of romanticism. Mama sees that “He was changed.” He tells her he drank wine and got into a quarrel and “the man started toward Pepe and then the knife—it went almost by itself....The man said names to me I could not allow.” His romantic sense of masculine honor, or *machismo*, triggered his reflex. Pepe straightens up and his “mouth changed until he looked very much like Mama.” He is forced to become a Realist like her and take flight to the mountains. “The moonlight was being thinned by the dawn and the big white moon was near down to the sea.”

Kissing him goodbye, Mama cautions him, "When thou comest to the high mountains, if thou seest any of the dark watching men, go not near to them nor try to speak to them." Steinbeck here incorporates a legend among Indians of the region, who reported many sightings of paranormal entities in the mountains. This reference to spirits in the high mountains gives this setting a dimension transcending the material world. "Moonlight and daylight fought with each other, and the two warring qualities made it difficult to see." Pepe is not yet able to differentiate illusion from fact, nor romanticism from truth. Then he sees "one of the dark watchers" for himself, transcending ordinary consciousness. This establishes a spiritual dimension in the story that enlarges the context of his struggle to redeem himself. It means that, within his belief system, he is being watched and in his final act he may attain salvation.

The abundant physical description evokes real life, while the detailed account of Pepe's arduous journey builds suspense and intensifies the vicarious experience of the reader at the end. Climbing into the high mountains, "his face was stern, relentless and manly." Then he gets spotted by a man standing on a distant rock. By now Pepe has hardened like the rocks. "His face was blank, but it was a man's face." When he hears some hooves approaching over the broken rocks, he spurs his horse and rides away into the darkness leaving his hat behind, the first in a succession of losses. In the dawning light, his horse gets shot out from under him. More shots turn him into a crawling animal. "Rapidly he wormed his way." He fires back, then a sliver of granite rock gets shot through his hand. He crawls away almost into a rattlesnake but escapes dying like his father did. No longer an affectionate gentle boy, he takes out his feelings by crushing a lizard with a stone. He loses the knife and takes off his father's coat and leaves it behind as well, then climbs uphill to the top of a ridge.

He hears horses and yelping dogs approaching and is compared to a mountain lion gliding into the brush. This time he has left behind his rifle. He only had ten bullets. His arm is infected and swollen and he climbs another ridge with "the effort of a hurt beast. His tongue tried to make words, but only a thick hissing came from between his lips." When he killed a man with his knife without any warning, Pepe was worse than a rattlesnake. Steinbeck reminds us that Pepe is guilty of murder. Scraping and squeezing his wound to cleanse it, Pepe "threw back his head and whined like a dog." This degeneration of sensibility and regression to an animal state, called *atavism*, is common in Naturalistic fiction.

Pepe crawls uphill in a waste land "waterless and desolate." Nature is overwhelming and hostile now. "Strewn over the hill there were giant outcroppings, and on the top the granite teeth stood out against the sky." Hair littered with bits of the spider web he used to stop his hand from bleeding, Pepe has been caught in a web, or trap, partially of his own making. The trap is a stock metaphor in Naturalistic fiction. Hounds are yelping on his trail now and vultures are circling over him on the ridge. He tries to pray "but only a thick hiss came from his lips."

He redeems himself by crawling to "the top of a big rock on the ridge peak. Once there, he arose slowly, swaying to his feet, and stood erect." No longer running away like an animal, no longer crawling like a snake, he stands erect as a man to take his punishment. Accepting responsibility for his crime, he deliberately exposes himself in black silhouette on top of the big rock on the ridge peak—to die in the sky. The title "Flight" connotes both fleeing and flying, or rising above like a bird—transcendent. The story is about fleeing until the final moments when he stands up to die with dignity. Literally, of course, Pepe does not rise at all. He topples over dead and rolls down the ridge. No one will ever know what was in his head, the meaning of his death, or that he was a man. The truth will be buried like his head under an avalanche. He will appear to have been a dumb kid to stand up like that.

"Flight" illustrates how at his best, though he seems to be simple, Steinbeck combines Realism, Impressionism, Naturalism, and Modernism. He is most Modernist, most like Hemingway and Faulkner, in affirming the capacity of the human spirit to rise above anything.

Michael Hollister (2013)