

Limits of nature in Twain's "the Californian's tale" and Steinbeck's Of Mice and Men

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Abstract

A more realistic and scientific focus will overcome the romantic view on arts in the United States in the second half of the XIX century. Thus, the attempt to explain society through "natural laws" such as Darwinism results in the concept of Naturalism. Through Naturalism, two works of the American literature will be analyzed, "The Californian's Tale", by Mark Twain and Of Mice and Men, by John Steinbeck, both having California as background, in the Gold Rush of 1848 and in the Great Depression of 1929. The limits of nature are found in both works acting on the migrant on the way to the West in such a form that not only the external nature influences the human being, but also the own human nature must be controlled in order to reach adaptation to the new situations. At last, another natural limit is California itself, the geographical limit of the West.

Key words: Naturalism, California, Gold Rush, Great Depression.

Resumo

Um enfoque mais realista e científico vai ultrapassar a visão romântica nas artes nos Estados Unidos na segunda metade do século XIX. Com isso, a tentativa de explicar a sociedade através de "leis naturais" como o Darwinismo eclode no conceito de Naturalismo. Através do Naturalismo, são analisadas duas obras da literatura americana, "The Californian's Tale", de Mark Twain e Of Mice and Men, de John Steinbeck, ambas tendo a Califórnia como pano de fundo, na Corrida do Ouro de 1848 e na Grande Depressão de 1929. Os limites da natureza são encontrados em ambos trabalhos agindo sobre o migrante a caminho do Oeste de tal forma que não apenas a natureza externa influencia o ser humano, mas também a própria natureza humana deve ser controlada para se alcançar adaptação às novas situações. Por fim, outro limite natural é a Califórnia, o limite geográfico do Oeste.

Palavras-chave: Naturalismo, Califórnia, Corrida do Ouro, Grande Depressão.

If we go for the origin of the word "California", we find it first in a knightly novel of 1510. It was the name of an island where queen Califa ruled over the land of the

Amazons who, adorned with pearls and gold, would have contact with men only once a year. When the Spanish navy commanded by Hernán Cortez arrived in the present

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American West, in 1535, they considered having found that mythical island.

Nowadays, the “Golden State”, as California has been nicknamed since 1968, firstly reminds us of its wonderful beaches, astonishing landscapes and enormous blazing cities like its capital Sacramento, Los Angeles, San Francisco and San Diego. But that land silently endures some scars from the past, too. California has already been for many a symbol not only of beauty and fun, but also of new life and new opportunities, mainly in two particular moments in the American history – the Gold Rush, in 1848, and the Great Depression, in 1929.

Both happenings led to great waves of migrations to the American West and, in both moments, California was the place where migrants would set on. During the Gold Rush, California was a synonym of wealth, a possibility for a better life. During the Great Depression, however, California was the last hope to help migrants survive with some dignity. Such migrants had to face all the setbacks that one can face being a stranger in a new land: indifference, discrimination, sicknesses, humiliation and the worst living conditions. However, the West was historically the direction to move in times of necessity, it was something that had already been embedded in the American spirit since the first pioneers’ migrations in the first half of the 19th century, symbolizing the American dream of life improvement. Attacked by the famous “gold fever”, thousands of “forty-niners” went to California in the name of financial independence and wealth in the Gold Rush. Some years later, attacked by famine and misery, thousands of rural workers, called “Okies”, had to endure suffering in the Golden State simply because there was nowhere else to go after having lost their farms and jobs in the severe drought of the 30` s in the Great Plains, what was worsened by the economic collapse of the Great Depression.

As it could not be different, once more literature complies its task of immortalizing human history in its own way, through the characters’ eyes, feelings and sensations in a given setting. Such crucial periods in American history are depicted in two American pieces of fiction – “The Californian’s Tale”, written by Mark Twain in 1906, having as setting a post-

Gold Rush California, and *Of Mice and Men*, a novel written by John Steinbeck and published in 1937 which presents a portray of migrant life in California during the Great Depression.

In this paper, literature is not understood only as a closed system of technical specifications which serve to be applied on a text itself, but rather, a powerful tool for mankind in which new perceptions and dimensions of life are awoken in one’s minds and transmitted to the next generations. Moreover, in this work, the term literature must be recognized as the one that keeps the treasure of knowledge of our civilization, together with other sciences, and sometimes even assisted by them.

California, as the last American Western frontier, besides its historical and geographical meaning, may also remind us that it has already signified the last frontier in other ways, too. Obviously, it is the last Western land before the Pacific Ocean. But California in those historical moments could also be faced as the last step between poverty and wealth. The last obstacle between fight and fulfillment. The last limit between man and his own instincts. In the end, the last division between dream and frustration.

This essay will present a study about the migrants of the Gold Rush and Great Depression ages based on the works of Mark Twain’s “The Californian’s Tale” and John Steinbeck’s *Of Mice and Men*, taking into consideration historical aspects about the migrant and the action of nature on him, and focusing on the naturalistic features of both works as well. Thus, Naturalism is going to be one of the key issues on this paper and, in a first moment, a brief review about this concept is necessary.

According to the website *Wikipedia*, Naturalism has the following definition:

Naturalism is any of several philosophical stances, typically those descended from materialism and pragmatism, that reject the validity of explanations or theories making use of entities inaccessible to natural science.

Naturalism as a philosophical view was highly and mainly influenced by Charles Darwin’s Evolution theory (1859), which states that according to laws of natural selection, the

most adapted organisms in a given environment tend to survive and transmit their genetic features rather than others. However, at that time, science was also expanding in many other areas in terms of nature, including the study of man. To bring some examples, Karl Marx was discussing about the severe demands on the common worker, Sigmund Freud was formulating theories about the human being and his unconscious, and Sociology was in open development in many areas. According to Robert E. Spiller, "It was the still fumbling attempt to discover adequate ways of giving expression to views of the universe and of the human destiny which were everywhere supplanting the views of the Enlightenment." (1955, p.139).

A good sample that portrays the deep influence of Darwinism in the social relationships of the second half of the 19th century is found in the work of the sociologist Charles Horton Cooley. In 1902, he publishes *Human Nature and the Social Order*, whose introduction of the chapter "Heredity and Instinct" states that:

It means that if we go far enough back we find that man and the other animals have a common history, that both sprang remotely from a common ancestry in lower forms of life, and that we cannot have clear ideas of our own life except as we study it on the animal side and see how and in what respects we have risen above the conditions of our cousins the horses, dogs and apes. (1992, p.4)

Naturalism found its own way in art first by the work of the French writer Emile Zola (1840 – 1902), who wrote the treatise *Le Roman Experimental (The Experimental Novel)*, published in 1880. Although Naturalistic features had been felt in French art since 1840, it is in Zola's works that Naturalism took its concepts in art. In *Le Roman Experimental*, Zola compared the artist to a surgeon, someone who was going to apply the scientific techniques and postulations on art rather than create, demonstrating the obstinacy of Naturalistic works for science.

Basically, Naturalism attempts to apply science and scientific theories to analyze human beings, which are described by Zola in *Le Roman*, as "human beasts". This concept of human being is linked with Hippolyte Taine's (1828 – 1893) Determinism theory, which affirms

that happenings in people's lives are determined by unchangeable reasons like heredity, social class, addiction and race. For this reason, the religious concept of free will, according to Determinism was just an illusion, because the human being was actually a prisoner of his own instincts and natural needs.

Furthermore, Zola's work affirms that, "characters can be studied through their relationships to their surroundings" (ZOLA apud CAMPBELL, 2004)¹. In this statement Zola means that human beings can be compared to products from the environment where they are embedded, and "should be studied impartially, without moralizing about their natures" (ZOLA apud CAMPBELL, 2004).

Taking the explanations above into consideration, it is possible to say that Realism itself portrayed the social causes of the conflicts in a first moment, and any other thing would be secondary, whereas Naturalism would appeal to a scientific view of the facts to explain the reasons of the conflicts, beginning with the heredity, environment and finally, social context. However, both styles in literature would mainly demonstrate concern with social problems.

This link that Naturalism makes between character/setting forced the careful description of the environment in those novels in order to make the reader understand the characters' real situation by analyzing their resulting behavior in a given place. At the time, Naturalistic novels were also called "scientific novels", and because nature would define the possible actions that the characters presented, due to their own instincts and sense of survival, the figure of the anti-hero came up, a human being that was not gifted with the divine free will, opposed to the Romantic hero, who had a much more harmonic relationship with nature.

Undoubtedly, Naturalism was an outcome of the age it came up. The world had never experienced such development level and so many changes in such a short period of time. During the European Industrial Revolution, thousands and thousands of people were forced to abandon their country and simple lives, which included a healthy contact with

¹CAMPBELL, Donna M. "Naturalism in American Literature". Available at: <http://www.gonzaga.edu/faculty/campbell/enl413/natural.html>.



nature in order to work in the big cities for almost 16 hours daily, in the worst conditions. Naturalistic literature catches this social tension very well: the romantic green fields with daffodils no longer exist, and nature is not inspiring anymore, nature can be brutal.

In terms of art, in the USA, Realism, followed by Naturalism, took place in Literature after the Civil War (1861 – 1865), firstly with the works of Hamlin Garland (1860 – 1940) from 1891 on, which referred to the social changes in a country that showed a massive technological advancement, opposing this new kind of literature to the previous works of Thoreau, Poe, Melville and other writers, whose focus was much more centered on transcendentalism or symbolism. This new way of American life, surrounded by increasing technology and economic power awoke in literature the taste for portraying people's common lives.

It was with William Dean Howells (1837 – 1920), in the late 19th century, however, that his new American society began to become independent from European literary influence. Howells and his literary inspiration from Taine started to present in his works signs that the forces that controlled man were found not into man himself, but rather in the social and economic order. By this time, the old Realist concept of individualism in literature was overwhelmed by this society in transformation. Little by little, Realism put American society in a frame and gave value to what was called "local colors", making this kind of literature bloom all around the country. According to Malcolm Bradbury, "A ficção começava a ser menos a expressão de uma realidade comum que todos poderiam reconhecer, e mais uma reação às realidades e sistemas incomuns subjacentes à vida moderna e que clamavam por revelação" (BRADBURY, 1983, p.16)².

Besides, the end of the 19th century and the natural anxiety that such periods of transition cause on people, allied to new social systems in terms of economy and market job and the advances in scientific areas related to the human being, like Biology and Sociology, helped

literature find its own way and enter the 20th century with proper features in the USA.

By this time, Naturalism in Europe was not so fashionable anymore, being overcome by more modern concepts of Psychology. However, in the USA, the struggles and the social fights were still in evidence and Naturalism provided explanation to processes that were altering the XXXXXXnation's face. Besides, it was combined with the popular belief of the so called "Social Darwinism", theory developed by Herbert Spencer (1820 – 1903) in the 19th century and published in the USA, in 1862, in the work *First Principles*. This theory stated the survival of the fittest ones in a given social environment. However, such theory was also linked with racial and social prejudice, because many believed that the white Protestant ones were to be considered "the fittest" in this new American society. The spread of the social Darwinism idea led to a vision that the jungle law could be one of the highest forms of civilization, because the top of social evolution would only be reached when the individuals were able to survive in the middle of a harsh competition among them. In literature, the writers absorbed this historical moment and pictured society not only realistically as it had been done before, but also through its endurance and beliefs.

In this scenery, the works of some writers can be pointed out, such as the already mentioned Hamlin Garland in *Main Travelled Roads* (1891) and *Prairie Folks* (1893); Frank Norris, in *McTeague* (1899); Jack London in *The Sea-Wolf* (1904) and *South of the Slot* (1909), and mainly Stephen Crane, with his short stories, especially *The Open Boat* (1897), *The Blue Hotel* (1898) and *The Bride comes to Yellow Sky* (1898). All of them, in different ways, wrote about the position of man as absolutely rational and free, showing that there were many other natural features that should be taken into consideration to understand human vices or virtues. Furthermore, the pieces of fictions written by these authors coped with human nature in a way that made the reader discover the evil and the good sides of all the characters, practically extinguishing the old concept of "good characters" and "bad characters" in the story. Life in the USA, by this time, was far from being

²"Fiction began to be less the expression of a common reality which every person was able to recognize, and more a reaction to the uncommon realities and systems related to modern life which claimed for revelation" (my translation).



the one idealized, considering that not everybody was able to get rich, as formerly believed. These writers backgrounded fiction in settings that were common to the average American person. According to Bradbury:

Eles se voltaram conscientemente para cenários modernos – a cidade de choques, o Oeste, os guetos, as pequenas propriedades e as lojas de departamentos – ou para temas da época – a ruptura entre cultura e materialidade, entre idealismo e forças econômicas subjacentes. (BRADBURY, 1983, p.21)³

In this way, American Naturalistic literature portrayed a parcel of its own society that had not been given any consideration, or worse, not even known. It worked as a tool in art to cope with this new mentality, to cope with this new American who had to make an effort in the search of wealth, or at least, of survival, and, at the same time, had to discover ways to go ahead in a society that affirmed that some people were simply doomed to fail because they were not the “fittest ones”.

In terms of historical perspective, the environment of the Gold and Rush and the Great Depression are the backgrounds of “The Californian’s Tale” and *Of Mice and Men* respectively, and the historical facts become even more present in the literary works analyzed in this paper as the writers of the works really witnessed the happenings and the environment of the Gold Rush, in the case of Twain, and Great Depression, in the case of Steinbeck. These two distinct moments in the USA are closely related to the significance of the West in the American History.

Bayard Still, professor of History in the New York University, states that:

[...]Nonetheless the existence of the West and the exploitation of its potential have figured in an inextricable way in the growth of the American tradition. The story of the Westward movement is still the great American epic; and its *dramatis personae* include the most traditionally American types. In

this respect, the cowboy, the Indian, the miner, the lumberman, and the fur trader have had somewhat more attention than they deserve. The real heroes of the saga are the farmer pioneers, the settler-homesteaders, who laid the foundations of the civilization in the wilderness [...] (1961, p.14)

The last period of the quotation above is very meaningful to understand the real human side of the Westward migrations. The beginning of the West colonization opened opportunities not only to the USA to enlarge their territory but also to people who were looking for a place where they could, assisted by the promise of the Manifest Destiny, live with dignity and reach wealth. In different ages, history is repeated, and finds good examples of later West migrants in the works “The Californian’s Tale” and *Of Mice and Men*.

Nevertheless, a fundamental difference divides the first pioneers who settled in the wild Western American lands in the first half of the 19th century from the ones who went to the West during the Gold Rush or Great Depression. The first ones moved West to make that place their own homes, facing the West with the conviction that it would be the place where they would settle and live well, in spite of all the dangers and uncertainties of the new land, while the forty-niners and the Okies went to the West because of the opportunities to get rich or to find a way to survive economically, but not to make California their homes.

Once more, we find in Still (1961) a general profile of the first American pioneers going West: “[...] the facts seem to show, however, that few factory workers moved West, either because of the costs involved or because of lack of interest in or aptitude for farming” (p. 13). Thus, we understand the agrarian atmosphere of the West during the first pioneers’ migrations. This fact, however, would serve as a model to make the migrant profile become constant – people who were able to cultivate the soil and did not have practically any other kind of knowledge unless what was related to agriculture. In other words, these people who could just cultivate the soil and could not cultivate. However, when the Gold Rush and the Great Depression took place, this time, the hero would be not only the agrarian pioneer: the hero now would

³“They turned consciously to the modern sceneries – the city of shocks, the West, the ghettos, the little properties and the department stores – or to contemporary subjects – the break between culture and materiality, between idealism and related economic powers” (my translation).



be the late pioneer, the forty-niner, looking for gold while the Okie would look for a job.

The forty-niner narrator of "The Californian's Tale" tells the story thirty-five years after the factual happenings, and we do not know where or in what conditions he is telling such story. This character does not have even a name, a classical example of impersonality in literature. These facts are meaningful, because many books have been written about the forty-niners, but few *after* the Gold Rush age. In the very beginning of the tale, he describes some of the simple equipment with which he is always "expecting to make a rich strike" – pick, pan and horn. Although these tools were what they had at that time, it also expresses the sense of ingeniousness and adventure of the forty-niners, because he tries the "strike" but confesses, "never doing it". What follows is a brief description of the region and its beauties, and then, he quotes later the drama of living far from home, in a miner's cabins: "[...] dirt floor, never-made beds, tin plates and cups, bacon and beans and black coffee, and nothing of ornaments but war pictures [...]". Such descriptions bring light on the average forty-niner – normally, a stranger in the place, poorly equipped and practically drawn to the mining camps by the gold fever.

Following the same tendency of being strangers in the environment where the character is embedded, there are George and Lennie, the main characters of *Of Mice and Men*. Both characters are built to serve as a symbol of the typical migrant during the Great Depression – people who come from elsewhere going up and down throughout California, looking for jobs that would not only signify some gain, but mainly survival. Although George keeps by Lennie's side because of a promise, at the same time, George and Lennie convey that they simply cannot live apart, as if one completed the other. While George symbolizes the hard effort to find jobs and bear a tough life with dignity and no comfort, Lennie is the guardian of the dream that makes them go ahead, the dream of getting themselves a farm, where they would be able to have a place that they could call a home and enjoy their lives as they wanted. Once more there is no information in the text that shows us from

where they come nor what happens to George after Lennie's death. Actually, that was the spirit – the "Okies" had neither past nor future. They had to struggle to live for the present.

If in both "The Californian's Tale" and *Of Mice and Men* the characters moved West for similar reasons, it is undeniable that there is a fundamental difference in their motivations for the journey, because if the first ones, the forty-niners, went to California with the hope of getting rich, making gold their main goal, the latter, the Okies, moved West running away from a situation of despair in terms of economy, looking only for survival, without any hope of making wealth. Undoubtedly, in both works, the soul of capitalism is present, making the characters act and undertake the adventure of going to California, first of all, for financial reasons.

In the case of the forty-niners, their goal was to get rich in order to improve conditions to live, what meant they had some hope that, at any moment, they would "make a strike", they would find the nuggets "as big as an egg", even hardly ever finding anything. This explains the fact why the narrator of "The Californian's Tale" said that he went on prospecting, even in the middle of a practically devastated place. However, in the case of the Okies, their motivation dwelt in the fact of getting a job to get some food for today at least because the opportunity for their next meal could be unpredictable. Moreover, the hope to see their dreams come true was almost null. It is not by chance that Lennie, the one who dreamed of a farm and rabbits, is portrayed as naive, mentally sick and not taken seriously by the other characters.

In "The Californian's Tale", there is a character that perfectly expresses a little of the so-called gold fever, which is Tom. The fact of waiting for his dead wife can be compared to the hopeful miner-narrator looking for gold and never finding it. In both cases, Tom's wife and the gold the narrator was looking for seemed to be so near, so touchable, so powerful that they could suddenly bring all the happiness to them. So, Tom and the narrator suffer from this kind of fever that blinds them totally – waiting for a woman that is already dead, while everybody says the opposite, or looking for gold with the simple means they had, never finding it, but still believing in the

rumors that gold existed somewhere. Tom has to believe the wife will come back, because believing is the way he finds to survive and keep the dream alive. In this same environment, the narrator has to believe he will find gold, still prospecting almost in a ruined land, a place where the other miners “went away when the surface diggings gave out”. As we see, the spirit was hopeful, and it helped them keep alive and trying. But, at the same time, the object of their dreams, be it a wife or be it wealth, was already practically dead. The dream was an illusion for most of the forty-niners.

On the other hand, if the forty-niners had hope enough to go ahead grounded by visions of wealth, the migrants of the Great Depression, in *Of Mice and Men*, look like quite deprived of any illusions, and more aware of their real situation. In their case, there was no gold to be found at all. What could be considered “gold” for them would be simpler things, like a job, a place to sleep or a simple meal.

There are Lennie and George crossing woods, walking kilometers and suffering all kinds of humiliation and privation to get to the ranch where they would get another job. They knew that getting a job, anyway and anywhere, was the sole way to support themselves, and they also knew that a job in those circumstances might not be wasted. Thus, they had to find motivation living the present, which meant they could not make plans to a farther future because they never knew where or how they would be next. Even so, they kept the dream of getting a farm, where they would be free from any kind of exploitation and humiliation. But, to reach that goal, they first needed to overcome the environment of the ranch (a kind of Western society’s microcosm) where they were working.

A meaningful sample of how George and Lennie find motivation to go ahead is expressed in the scene when they have a meal in the woods. They are going to eat beans, and Lennie says that he likes them with ketchup. George gets angry and says: “Whatever we ain’t got, that’s what you want. God a’mighty, if I was alone I could live so easy. I could get a job an’work, an’no trouble. No mess at all, and when the end of the month come I could take my fifty bucks and go into town and get whatever I want” (p. 23 – 24). And then, he

finishes: “An’ whatta I got, I got you!” Maybe, George knows that his life without Lennie could be different, but he could not lose his partner because Lennie was the part of the couple that was able to keep the dream alive and remind George that they could make their dream come true. However, this hope was far from being something to be fed, in fact, it was just something to give them enough spirit to face the real despair that they were living and that the real Okies should have faced as well.

Nevertheless, nature had already demonstrated its influence in the West American expansion before. For many years the West was the way for the ones who wanted to find new alternatives to make a living, at the same time, those lands were a synonym of danger and of the unknown. The new wide open spaces that the pioneers found during their migrations might have given them the sensation of being very small in the middle of that huge nowhere. Even so, they kept moving West, believing to be going to the promised land, in spite of the myth of the Great American Desert, which could mean the barren of the lands that the pioneers thought to be fertile, the Indians fighting to protect their own lands and to repel the pioneers and the natural uncertainty of moving to an unknown place. Besides, frontier after frontier, nature was there, in the form of a huge mountain to be climbed by the wagon caravans, in the form of a beast lurking around, in the form of hunger, in the form of fear and, at the same time, in the form of astonishing green landscapes that may have given the first pioneers courage enough to keep going West.

Undoubtedly, in the same way, during the Gold Rush and the Great Depression, nature was something to be glorified and beaten at the same time. It was there when the gold yearned by those miners, who dreamed of changing life from night to day, came from the soil or from the waters of rivers. It was there when those miserable hand workers left their homes to find jobs in more fertile lands in the limits of the country. However, the exhaustion of gold ores made thousands of miners go home as poor as they were before, leaving trails of a devastated land after so many diggings and floods that would victimize whole Indian tribes who



depended on it. Nature was also there when gigantic dust storms covered the skies of the Great Plains and made whole plantations disappear, or originating long years of drought that turned life practically unbearable. These facts attest that, when related to naturalistic literary works, nature can not be understood as being good or evil toward the human being. Nature is only itself, acting in its own way and demanding from man a single thing – adaptation.

It is not different in the naturalistic traits of “The Californian’s Tale” and *Of Mice and Men*. The characters are constantly facing the limits that nature itself imposes and, beyond it, even their own human limits. In both texts, Darwinism shows its face very clearly, showing that the only way to face nature is to be the fittest in that environment. Here, nature is understood not only as the environment itself, but also the inner nature of the characters, which is going to be decisive to their destinies at the end of both texts.

The description of the place that the narrator of “The Californian’s Tale” gives shows pretty well the human condition under natural rules: “In one place, where a busy little city... had been, was nothing, but a wide expanse of emerald turf, with not even the faintest sign of human life”. Going on, he describes “the prettiest little cottage homes”, but “so cobwebbed with vines snowed thick with roses that the doors and the windows were wholly hidden from sight”. Now, in the symbol of vines covering everything and roses growing unbridledly, hiding the little cottages, we metaphorically see the power of nature taking control of the human place. It is not by chance that what follows in the text about the description of the cottages refers to “[...] deserted homes, forsaken years ago by defeated and disappointed families”, which had been forced to abandon what they had in the name of survival.

In other cases, such abandonment was actually a sign of lack of adaptation to the place, proving that it is what that nature requires – the narrator finds along his way some cottages that might have been built by the “first gold miners, the predecessors of the cottage-builders”, that had gone away much before. But,

such adaptation can come through more dramatic ways, like insanity, for example. That is what is found in Tom. The strategy he uses to deal with nature in that case was to believe that, at any moment, his life would suddenly change by the arrival of his wife, or, in his early days, wealth. It is clear because of his cabin’s description: “one of those cozy little rose-clad cottages of the sort already referred to. However, this one hadn’t a deserted look; it had the look of being lived in and petted and cared”. In his own way to find a means to live, his garden was flowered, “abundant, gay and flourishing” what means that, in spite of the unaware condition of insanity of the character, he is able to cope with the situation. On the other hand, if with this fact it seems that the character adapted well to the situation, Tom is actually doomed to live an illusion, far from reason and understanding. There is no way back to Tom, once that if he faces reality, he is going to be destroyed by it. Joe, one of Tom’s friends, when the narrator wants to understand Tom’s behavior says that they “drug him to sleep, or he would go wild”. It might mean that, if Tom accepted the reality of his wife’s death, his instinctive nature would come up, giving place to the human beast, that, in the end, is what Tom’s friends want to avoid.

This way, instinctively, adaptation finds its place in different ways. Something similar happens to George and Lennie. The first thing that calls the readers’ attention is the mutual adaptation of the characters, once they are so different. George, the rational part, has to adapt to Lennie, the daydreamer. On the other hand, Lennie, the hopeful simple-minded part, has to adapt to George, the practical and living-for-today part. For many reasons, it is possible to ask what holds each other together, with so many differences, and we find the answer in nature again, once Lennie needs George to lead him in such a brutal atmosphere, and George needs Lennie for his great physical strength and power of dreaming. This adaptation is nothing more than a matter of instinct.

The very beginning of *Of Mice and Men* is rich in terms of descriptions of the natural environment. “ A few miles south of Soledad, the Salinas River drops in close to the hillside bank and runs deep and green [...] on the valley

side the water is lined with trees [...] rabbits come out of the brush [...] (p. 7–8). Such descriptions bring to our minds a quite peaceful nature, it is just nature itself. Then, “the rabbits hurried noiselessly for cover. A stilted heron labored up into the air [...] and then two men emerged from the path and came into the opening by the green pool”. (p. 8–9). In this beginning, when George and Lennie appear on the scene, there is the impression that they are not actually entering the scene, but invading the place, considering the peaceful images that Steinbeck builds in contrast to the appearance of George and Lennie. In this beginning, man invades nature, not only the natural environment, but, as we are going to see later, his inner nature. To belong to this place, he has to understand that such peace is not free. Nature has also a cruel side, which demands from the characters to live according to its rules.

As *Of Mice and Men* unfolds, nature constantly acts brutally on the characters. First of all, not only are George and Lenny victims of this impartial nature, but the other characters as well, presenting a sense of fate which is nearly disturbing. To begin, most of the characters in the ranch are inserted in a condition of subordination, and this subordination does not come only from Curley, but from their own features, which make them different. As if the historical natural conditions that pushed Okies to California (drought, famine) were not enough, they also had to adapt to their natural conditions of gender, like in the case of Curley’s wife, a single woman in a male environment; to their color, like Crooks, always kept apart from the others, as if he belonged to a different species of man; to their age, like Candy, considered to be unworthy of respect anymore, and other conditions like poverty as well. All these differences give the characters a perspective in which they seem doomed to capitulate unconditionally. Determinism becomes the key to understand why the human relationships are taken to such extent and the reasons for Lennie’s death, including the fate of the other characters.

Through Lennie’s sacrifice, we can observe a symbolical death of all the characters – the outcast has to die. Once more, we see instinct acting on George when he is obliged

to kill his partner. The final part of the book works as if Lennie’s death were obvious in the environment where they were living in (the ranch), ruled by indifference and individualism. Unable to understand his own differences, he is killed by the animalistic and deterministic social rules of the place. Exactly the same happens with Curley’s wife. Deterministically, and according to Darwin’s concepts, nature does not give any chance to the ones that do not follow the best pattern and do not adapt to the environment.

The book ends at the same place where it begins. Even with all the happenings, even with all that human suffering, even with all that brutality, the sensation is that nature follows its course indifferently. This idea puts man as single part of nature, being forced to cope with his own handicap. Man dies, but nature goes on.

Thus, we see like nature transforms the characters into its simple puppets if the characters are unable to live according to its rules. In Twain’s or Steinbeck’s works, not only the land and the environment will be definitive to the fulfillment of the characters’ goals, but also their inner nature, the power to make them live in balance with the surroundings and also with Zola’s human beast which lives inside them. Even being doomed by their own life stories, the characters cannot surrender – the only thing they can do is to try to survive, and to have this change they need to reach adaptation.

Since the pioneers’ times, being a stranger in a place where everybody was struggling for life was something common. This was the result of the waves of migration that came from different parts of the country, making different people meet in their new land in the West. Thus, the sense of individuality was high, once your neighbor would probably be someone whom you had never seen. However, those first pioneers were able to keep a kind of unconditional hope that they would find a new life in the West, in such a way that would make them able to live on their own. In reference to this, Still explains:

From the beginning of nationhood, the existence of the west was seen to have significance for the American economy. Men like Benjamin Franklin and George Washington were alert to the



opportunities for individual profit through speculation in Western lands; but they sensed also that the vast unexploited resources to the Westward could overwrite a society capable of standing on its own, with qualities that would recommend it over the older nations of the world. (1961, p.258)

Not by chance, individuality is a strong characteristic in "The Californian's Tale" and *Of Mice and Men*. In both texts, the human being seems to lose most of its aspects of social being to be forced to live with himself in his own world. To make matters worse, in the excerpt above, Still reminds us of the vastness of those wild new Western lands that could make the human being feel even weaker in terms of capacity to face the new situation in which the characters of the texts were inserted. And finally, if going West was a historical solution that was already marked in the American spirit, getting to California was the last chance because there was no West after California anymore.

Thus, the characters in *Of Mice and Men* and "The California's Tale" are facing not only the geographical limit of the Westward direction they believed, or were told to believe, but, as seen before, their own human limits. Here, nature shows its face in such a comprehensive way that it does not give any other alternative to the characters – either you face all the imposed limits or you die. For this reason, adaptation is not only required, but a necessity.

The human limits are also presented in "The California's Tale" and *Of Mice and Men* in the most realistic way through the frontiers between sanity and insanity. There is Tom, a character that has already surpassed that human limit and is nothing more than a living ghost in a ghost city, waiting for a ghost. There is Lennie, unable to deal with the evil social rules that killed him. Such facts show that nature does not reward the ones who do not respect its limits or adapt to it.

As said before, the immensity of the West would inevitably drive the characters to a sense of loneliness to test their resistance. Allied to the historical facts of the Western colonization, we find in the characters a struggle to learn how to live by themselves, facing the own human limit of solitude. Quoting Still again, he wrote that

"traditionally, the United States, like the 19th century West, is prevailingly democratic, individualistic and concerned with material considerations" (1961, p.13). Clearly, here, the democracy mentioned by Still is different from the democracy where the focus is the sovereignty of people that charmed Alexis de Tocqueville in his visit to the USA. The democracy of the West lands means that you have the right to build your life, but, at the same time, you yourself must find your own ways to live. Such fact leads to the individualism and materialism present in Steinbeck's and Twain's works, where the characters can count only on themselves to go on living. Of course, in the case of George and Lennie, although being two men, they can be considered metaphorically two faces of the same coin. As for Tom, his loneliness is soothed by his friends, who were 27 and then became only three, besides living by himself in a place where the others had already gone away.

Going further, the characters find limits that look impossible to be overcome. Many of these limits mean the acceptance of new human conditions, like suffering and adaptation to this suffering and the clear difference between reality and fantasy. That is why George is kept alive. For the same reason, Candy is also kept alive, even having his friendly dog killed. The narrator of "The Californian's Tale" keeps its lucidity three decades later to tell the story. Nature imposes limits. Geography imposes limits. Life is always on the edge and "only the fittest survive".

Even so, in the mood, in the actions, in the beliefs and even in the atmosphere in which the characters of "The Californian's Tale" and *Of Mice and Men* are inserted, it is possible to perceive a little of the old spirit of those first fur trappers that History called the "Mountain Men", the first explorers who moved and lived in the wild American West.

Not only did the Mountain Men find in the West a possibility to expand the country and get new chances of life improvement, but also because they faced all the dangers and setbacks that that land was reserving for them. In this way, the real expansion was much more related to the individual expansion in terms of financial increasing and discovery than any other thing. For this, those first Mountain Men found

themselves in such a situation where nature and all its demands were something that absolutely could not be neglected, and they had to adapt as well as they could to it. And so they did.

Learning with some Indians, fighting others, repelling beasts, extracting from the ground their food and finding in wild animals the precious fur that would make their adventure worth, they left a kind of legacy to the next bold pioneers that would move West, and later, to the ones who moved to California searching for gold and jobs – they can count only on themselves, and they had to learn how to live like that and accept nature as a whole.

In the character of George, we have maybe the best example of it. In such an environment, he had to learn how to get along with what he had, adapting to the circumstances and living with a nature that is always challenging individuals. However, in Lennie, there is the innocent wish to beat nature and get something (the farm with rabbits), not considering how one can do that individually. Once the demands of nature and circumstances are not understood and respected, Lennie's end could not be different. Moreover, practically all the characters in *Of Mice and Men*, are obliged to learn how to live by themselves, and it is what keeps them alive.

In Tom, the solution refers to the adaptation to a belief that charges him a high price and simply deprives him of reality. This character is beaten by his human nature once he cannot rescue his own individuality, depending on his friends to keep a lie. Unfortunately, this character is doomed to live in cycles where his dream will never be fulfilled.

Then, set in California, we see George, Lennie, Tom, the narrator of Twain's short story and other characters struggling for a dying dream – independence. However, we see that this independence ends up in being nothing more than a utopia, provided that man himself cannot simply deny how nature and the environment act over him. The characters see, day after day, their dreams fading and the perspectives ending. What to do next?

If the West had always been the solution, now, it was time to move elsewhere, because the projected West did not exist anymore. This change in direction to find life conditions,

metaphorically, is the same change that made eternal migrants move to urban areas and made the old rural worker become an urban citizen in the following years. They became aware of the fact that there were not West "Gardens of Eden" anymore and this fact demanded adaptation and a change in the American spirit.

In sum, both "The Californian's Tale" and *Of Mice and Men* do not mention the outcome of the characters. Nothing could be more meaningful, because, in a sense, history hardly tells the outcomes of forty-niners and Okies. However, it is known through the texts that the ones who adapted to the natural setbacks of the Gold Rush and of the Great Depression were the ones who got the most desired prize – survival, and became witnesses of future changes that would make the USA go beyond their own West and develop their influence and economic power in other countries.

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