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Scientist God Sacrifices Savior to the System: the Divine Implications of Failure in *Cannery Row*

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Michelle Correll
Spring 2017
Capstone Abstract

Scientist God Sacrifices Savior to the System:
The Divine Implications of Failure in *Cannery Row*

Deemed “nostalgic” by John Steinbeck and “sentimental” by early critics, *Cannery Row* (1945) remains a compelling, yet confounding text. The character of Doc’s relationship to Steinbeck’s friend and inspiration Ed Ricketts dominates the critical landscape surrounding the novel. While several scholars apply a biographical approach to the character, my research aligns Doc with elements of the supernatural. Expanding on Jackson Benson’s arguments³ surrounding Doc and the work’s portrayal of parties, I connect the town’s celebrations for Doc with forms of worship. The elaborate failure of the first party provides a metaphor for human nature, which Steinbeck encapsulates in the microcosm of the town. Informed by the historical practices described in James Frazer’s *The Golden Bough*, this essay also discusses the character of Frankie, a hapless young sinner, as representative of the tragic scapegoat. Frankie’s institutionalization absolves the sins of the town, facilitating the success of the final party. Ultimately, this argument considers Steinbeck’s alignment of socially outcast characters with elements of the divine as a means to critique the maltreatment of the lower-class.

¹ Steinbeck, John. “How Six Short Novels Came to Be.” *Readings on John Steinbeck*, edited by Clarice Swisher, Greenhaven Press, 1996, pp. 27-30.

² Mullaney, William. “Uncle Tom’s Flophouse: John Steinbeck’s ‘Cannery Row’ as a (Post-Feminist) Sentimental Novel.” *The Steinbeck Review*, vol. 4, no. 2, 2007, pp.41-51. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41582053>. Accessed 24 Jan. 2017.

³ Benson, Jackson J. “Steinbeck’s Cannery Row: A Reconsideration.” *Western American Literature*, vol. 12, no. 1, 1977, pp.11-40. JSTOR. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43017991>. Accessed 24 Jan. 2017.