

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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## ***Cannery Row* (1945)**

John Steinbeck

### OVERVIEW

Steinbeck wrote *Cannery Row* during the Second World War, but he preferred to avoid the theme of war in the plot and maintain a rather light and sentimental tone throughout the story. He had had the idea of writing a novel about the people that worked in the sardine canneries at Ocean View Avenue in Monterey, California, for some years, but it was only after 1943 that he started working on it more consistently until it was finally published in 1945.

In the author's words, *Cannery Row* is a 'kind of nostalgic thing', which could never gain the same critical acclaim that his *chef-d'oeuvre*, *The Grapes of Wrath* did. Indeed, the critical reception at the time of publication was less than enthusiastic. Critics considered that *Cannery Row* was 'less substantial than a short story', a mere revision of some old material. There was, however, a reviewer in the *New York Times Book Review* (1945) who highlighted its 'genuine and warming humor and tenderness'.

Steinbeck dedicated his novel to his close friend, Edward Ricketts, on whom he seems to have based his character of Doc. Ricketts was a marine biologist at and owner of Pacific Biological Laboratories in Cannery Row, the local name for Ocean View Avenue in Monterey. The sardines caught in Monterey Bay were processed and canned there between the 1920s and 1940s. Ricketts, however, would deny any connection with Steinbeck's character whenever readers turned up at his door to ask him whether he was Doc.

The narrative does not always follow a linear pattern. The chapters focusing on Mack's group and Doc are interspersed with some shorter chapters that either have the town itself as character or give some snippets of other characters' life.

In 1982, David S. Ward adapted Steinbeck's novel to the big screen, starring Nick Nolte as Doc.

### SYNOPSIS

Set in Cannery Row, Monterey, California in the 1940s, the story revolves around Mack and his group of vagabond friends and their efforts to organize a surprise party for Doc, a marine biologist whom everyone in town is fond of. Their first attempt fails lamentably since Doc gets to the laboratory only after it is over. Mack turns for advice to Dora Flood, the madam of a local brothel. This time the pretext for a new party is Doc's birthday. Sensing that Mack is up to something, Doc gives him a wrong date, and then forgets about it. When he realizes that Mack is going to secretly organize a party for his birthday, Doc makes his own secret party arrangements, and lets everyone believe that it is his birthday. The party degenerates in a fight when some strangers come asking for Dora's girls. The story ends with Doc taking his time to clean his lab while listening to one of his albums of Gregorian music and recalling some fragments of a poem he recited to his guests at the party.

### MAIN CHARACTERS

*Doc* A marine biologist, who owns and lives in a laboratory called western Biological.  
*Mack* The leader of a group of vagabonds who find contentment in life's little pleasures.  
*Lee Chong* A Chinese man and the owner of a profitable grocery store in Cannery Row.  
*Dora Flood* The madam of the Bear Flag Restaurant, a local brothel.  
*Hazel* One of 'Mack's boys' who sometimes helps Doc to collect sea creatures.  
*Frankie* An eleven-year old boy who frequents Western Biological and becomes very fond of Doc.

## PLOT

*The deal* Horace Abbeville owes Lee Chong a great amount of money, so he proposes clearing up his debt to Lee by selling him a storehouse he owns. After they close the deal, Horace kills himself. Lee cannot make up his mind on how he can use the Abbeville building.

*Mack's proposal* Mack comes into Lee's grocery store to convince him to allow him and his boys to move in the Abbeville building, in exchange of their keeping the property safe. Lee concedes to rent the place to Mack and his friends for five dollars a week. One day, while checking out Western Biological across the street, Mack tells his friends that they should do something for Doc.

*Another suicide* William, the watchman of the Bear Flag tries to join Mack's group, but every time he gets near them, the conversation stops and 'an uneasy and hostile silence' falls on the group. After several failed attempts, William confesses to Dora and one of her girls that he thinks of 'bumping himself off'. They show him little sympathy, so William loses heart and kills himself.

*Dora's business* The Bear Flag Restaurant is an illegal club where men come to drink and be entertained by Dora's girls. Dora makes regular donations to different institutions and families in need to keep her place open. Alfie, the new watchman, helps Dora run her business smoothly by dealing with 'the delicate and dangerous tasks' such as 'stopping fights', 'ejecting drunks', 'soothing hysteria' and 'tending bar'.

*Western Biological* Doc owns and operates Western Biological laboratory, which sells a wide variety of sea animals. It is located across the street, facing Mack and his boys' place, with Lee Chong's grocery on the right and Dora's restaurant on the left.

*Collecting marine animals* Hazel, one of Mack's boys, helps Doc with an order for star fish in the great tide pool on the tip of the peninsula. Doc explains to a curious Hazel that star fish are needed for research by North western University. They then change the subject and start talking about other people in town.

*The Palace Flophouse and Grill becomes home* Mack decides to turn the building they rented from Lee into a home. With a piece of chalk, he draws five bed-sized squares on the floor to mark the space allocated to each of his boys. They all bring in scraps of furniture to embellish the place. Eddie, who works as an understudy bartender at La Ida, collects all the alcohol left in a jug and then takes it to his friends. One afternoon, while they 'sip the result of Eddie's latest contribution', Mac comes up with the idea of throwing Doc a surprise party.

*Mac's plan* Doc has just returned from his star fish collecting job when Mack comes in. After dodging the conversation for a while, Mack asks Doc what they can do to help him. Doc says that he could use three or four hundred frogs since he has to go down by La Jolla to get some octopi the next day. As Doc needs the car for his own job, Mack asks Lee Chong to lend them his old truck.

*Convincing Lee to help* Mack tells Lee about Doc's big order for frogs from the New York Museum and that he and the boys will help him. Lee Chong remains 'silent and watchful', and tells Mack that he cannot lend them his old truck because it is out of order. Mack shows him Doc's note and says that he will get Gay, the mechanic, to repair the truck. At the sight of Doc's note and the prospect of having his truck repaired, Lee circumspectly agrees to Mack's proposal.

*Doc's helper* Frankie watches Doc from the distance for some time, but then comes closer when he realizes there is no danger. Doc finds out that Frankie is not welcomed at school because of his learning disability and lack of coordination. Frankie starts spending a lot of time at the lab because he says Doc neither hits him nor gives him a nickel like all his other 'uncles'. Doc buys Frankie some new clothes from Lee Chong. Frankie tells Doc that he loves him and does everything to 'be of great help' to him.

*Frog hunting* Mack and the boys drive up the valley and set up camp on a sandy place by a pool at the base of a cliff. They take some time to rest, waiting for night as the best time to catch frogs. An armed military captain turns up, urging them to leave the place at once as neither camping nor hunting is allowed there. Mac apologizes and says that they are there to collect frogs for some scientists. He notices that the captain's pointer has a wound on the shoulder, and advises him what to do for the nursing female dog to recover quickly. The captain invites Mack and the boys over to his

place where he has a pond full of frogs they can hunt.

*At the captain's place* Mack checks the puppies and their mom, and tells the captain that the puppies have to be weaned. The captain explains he has been very busy running the place by himself since his wife went into politics. He tells Mack that he can have one of the puppies, and offers everyone a drink before the frog hunt. After filling the sacks with frogs, the men continue to drink for some time. The captain falls asleep, and Mack and his friends take the leftover alcohol, one of the promised female puppies, and return to Palace Flophouse.

*Doc's trip* Doc picks up a hitchhiker on the highway while driving south, then stops for beer. The hitchhiker says that a car in the hands of a drunk driver can become a weapon, which makes Doc mad. Doc continues his trip alone, drives through La Jolla and stops the car by the cliff, waiting for the tide. At dawn, while gathering octopi, Doc finds a girl's dead body. Doc tells a man who has turned up in the area that there is a dead body in the reef. The man says that there is a bounty for such discoveries, but Doc suggests that he should report it to the police and get the bounty instead of him.

*Back to Cannery Row* Mack pays Lee Chong a visit to thank him for lending them the truck and to ask him to buy some frogs. Mack reminds Lee about how indebted he is to Doc and asks for some groceries for Doc's surprise party. Lee unwillingly agrees to the transaction and gives Mack two dollars' worth of bacon, eggs and bread.

*The party* Mack and his friends set up Doc's lab for the surprise party and become more enthusiastic as they finish drinking a gallon of whiskey. Mack concludes that Doc would be really happy to see the frogs, so they place the frogs in the middle of the room with some bunting and a 'Welcome Home, Doc' sign on it. Things get out of control at the party, and the frogs escape.

*Doc gets angry* On his return Doc is shocked to find his lab in a complete mess and Mack standing 'uncertainly in the middle of the room'. Doc loses his temper when he realizes that Mac is to blame for the disaster, so he starts hitting him. Filled with guilt, Mack does not fight back. Doc calms down and goes to buy some beer at Lee Chong's. He gives one to Mack and finds out about the boys' plan to organize a surprise party for him. Doc spends all day cleaning up the mess.

*Darling gets sick* The boys panic because Darling, their puppy, gets very sick. They take turns to take care of her, but, as her state worsens, Mac asks for Doc's help. After a few days, the boys are happy to see that Darling is slowly recovering.

*A new plan* Mack goes to the Bear Flag to talk to Dora about what they could do to show Doc their respect. She suggests that they should first make sure they organize an event that Doc also attends. Mack pays Doc a visit in the attempt to find out the date of his birthday. Distrustful of Mack's real intentions, Doc gives him a random date.

*Party preparations* Mack and the boys want to make sure that Doc is present at the party this time. Some sense of conspiracy slowly grows in Cannery Row, with the party preparations unfolding in secret. One evening, Doc stops at Halfway House for a beer. Not knowing who he is, the bartender asks him if he is going to the party organized for Doc's birthday. Doc starts his own preparations for the party in secret; he buys food and removes everything breakable from the lab.

*Frankie's gesture* When Frankie hears about the party, he wants to get Doc a present, too. He breaks into Jacob's shop and steals a clock and a bronze statue, but gets arrested by the police. After the chief's call, Doc goes to the station to get Frankie paroled in his custody. The chief doubts that the judge will do that, given Frankie's mental report. Doc rushes out of the jail on hearing that Frankie stole the things out of love for him.

*The party* On the day of the party, Doc carefully considers all possibilities and locks animals and valuable objects up. In the evening, Mack and his boys go to Doc's lab to wish him happy birthday and give him twenty-one cats as a present. Doc pretends to be surprised and invites them in for a drink. A little later, Dora and the girls also come in and accept a little drink. Soon many others, including Lee Chong, come to bring Doc a present. Doc plays some dance music on the phonograph and goes to the kitchen to fry steaks, and the party livens up. When some men arrive at the lab shouting for Dora's girls, a fight ensues. The newcomers are gradually driven back out into the street. On hearing the sirens of the police cars, Doc and his guests rush back to the lab, switch the lights off, and continue their party in the dark.

*The day after the party* When Doc wakes up the next day, he slowly assesses the mess caused by the

party. He looks outside the broken windows and sees that the street is quiet. He has a sandwich and drinks beer while listening to music. Doc then does the washing-up and slowly rearranges his lab to its normal set-up.

## THEMES

### SOCIETY (*Materialism*)

*Materialism* One major theme explored in *Cannery Row* is capitalism and its mercantile concern with the material and commercial aspects of life. On the text-level, the concept is associated with language such as 'financial bitterness', 'measuring joy in goods sold, and egos in bank balances', 'interest and discounts', 'keep up the property', 'commodity', and 'men in fear and hunger destroy their stomachs in the fight to secure certain food'. Interestingly, the main protagonists' financial decisions and lifestyle reflect quite the opposite. Mack and his boys 'avoid the trap' of being 'eaten by financial bitterness' because 'they were not mercantile men'. They even get mildly irritated when Lee takes them 'for an economic ride or perhaps hop' and calculates how much their food and drinks cost. As Doc views them, they are 'the true philosophers' and survivors because they are 'relaxed' in a time 'when people tear themselves to pieces with ambition and nervousness and covetousness'.

### RELATIONSHIPS (*Friendship*)

*Friendship* Although not specifically described as such, friendship motivates many of the characters' actions in the story. Mack and his boys' come along together as friends due to their shared social situation ('no families') and view of life ('no ambitions beyond food, drink and contentment'). Then their entire plot to organize a surprise party for Doc stems from the affectionate respect and friendship they feel for him. Mack's actions clearly show his 'good will and good fellowship and a desire' to make Doc happy. He even offers to collect frogs just because it 'means a lot to Doc'. Lee Chong and Dora are also fond of Doc. Lee agrees to go along with Mack's various requests while carrying out his secret party plan, and Dora comes to Doc's aid during the flu epidemic. The unusual connection between these characters is indicative of the power of friendship to go beyond social, racial and professional differences. Its absence, however, may lead to social isolation, depression, and even to extreme gestures such as suicide. When, for example, Horace Abbeville kills himself, Lee 'wished he might have known and perhaps tried to help' as 'a friend' could have made it 'unnecessary'.

### PSYCHOLOGY (*Innocence, Loneliness, Suicide*)

*Innocence* Another theme, which contributes to the melancholic tone of the narrative, is that of innocence or rather the loss of it in a world obsessed with 'wanting' and money only. Frankie is the only character whose innocence seems intact even though he is a victim of abuse. As it turns out, it is, in fact, his cognitive disability that makes him dismissive of it. He develops an innocent affection for Doc, who is the first to have shown him some kindness. However, when Frankie lands in jail for stealing a clock and a statue that he means to give his protector as presents for his birthday, not even Doc can deal with the boy's innocently justifying his deed, saying he did it out of love for him. Understanding that Frankie's situation is hopeless, Doc rushes out of the jail, giving up his idea of taking him under his wing.

*Loneliness* The theme of loneliness pervades the entire narrative. Both nature and the residents of Cannery Row are affected by a deep sense of loneliness. For example, nature is referred to as 'a lonely countryside', 'the desolate cold aloneness of the landscape', or 'the lonely sky'. All the characters appear to be lonesome even when together with others. Doc is the protagonist that embodies loneliness *per se*. Despite the fact that everyone in Cannery Row is highly respectful and fond of him, he is a 'lonely and a set-apart man'. Doc always seems 'alone even when he is in a group'. Mac senses 'a dreadful feeling loneliness' when he looks down on Doc's laboratory. It is perhaps Doc's high level of education, musical elitism and life philosophy that place him in sharp contrast with the other characters.

*Depression / Suicide* The entire narrative of *Cannery Row* is suffused with melancholy, which is enhanced further by some tragic suicides. The theme of suicide is included as a way of reflecting how devastating the consequences of financial debts or social inadaptability upon an individual may be. For example, to clear his debts to Lee Chong, Horace Abbeville sells him a storehouse he owns and then shoots himself. Similarly, William gets extremely depressed and lonely and kills himself after he

vainly tries to befriend Mack and his boys. Their extreme gestures are interwoven in the story to point to the fragility of the human spirit in the face of difficulties when alone and marginalized by others.

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#### APPEARANCE vs. REALITY (*Hypocrisy*)

*Hypocrisy* The hypocritical attitude of the Cannery Row community towards Dora's business illustrates another important theme explored in the novel. On the one side, there is 'a group of high-minded ladies in the town' who 'demand that dens of vice must close to protect young American manhood society'. On the other side, there is a 'curious enigma which said the business was illegal and then taxed her [Dora] for it'. Among the regular customers are also 'the city officials and prominent business men'. What is more, local public institutions such as the police and the Chamber of Commerce, do not hesitate to accept her 'unsung, unpublicized shameless' money. For example, 'when the Chamber of Commerce improved its gardens, the merchants each gave five dollars' whereas Dora contributed with a hundred. \

#### CHARACTER ANALYSIS

##### **Doc** (*Compassionate, Paternal, Forgiving*)

*Character* Doc is a small, bearded man, with 'mild' manners. He has 'a cool warm mind' and uses his hands with a brain surgeon's precision. He helps everyone in need, which makes him so highly respected in Cannery Row that they all think of doing 'something nice' for him. A sympathetic listener, Doc can say profound things in a way that is intelligible even to children. He is a 'fountain of philosophy and science and art', and lives in 'a world of wonders, of excitement'. Occasionally, he also has moments of 'passionate anger'.

*Compassionate* Even though Doc is a marine biologist, he cannot remain indifferent to suffering and often uses his medical knowledge to help the Cannery Row community. One such example is the moment an influenza epidemic breaks out among the residents. Since the doctors in Monterey are all busy with other cases and do not consider Cannery Row 'a very good financial risk', Doc finds himself 'running from shanty to shanty taking temperatures, giving physics, borrowing blankets and even taking food from house to house'. Making desperate efforts to help the stricken families, Doc even mobilizes Dora and her girls to help.

*Paternal* Doc finds out about the hard time Frankie is given at home by the 'uncles' visiting his mother and that his father is dead. Moved by the boy's life story, he becomes protective. After making sure that Frankie's school 'didn't want him' because of his learning and co-ordination disability, Doc appears to take on a parental role. He lets Frankie continue to come to and even sleep at the lab when there is 'a crisis at home'. He also takes care of the boy's hygiene and clothing: he clips and removes the lice off his hair, teaches Frankie that he needs to wash his 'dirty hands', and buys him new clothes. When Frankie fails to understand how to grade crayfish according to size, Doc patiently explains the procedure to him again. When Frankie gets arrested for stealing, Doc tries to reason with the police and have the boy paroled to him, by offering to pay for the stolen objects.

*Forgiving* Doc cannot hold a grudge long. One of the most illustrative examples of his lenient character is the post-fiasco party episode when he punches Mack in a roar of rage. As Mack refuses to defend himself, and explains that the party was meant to honor him, Doc calms down and buys beer for both of them. After some time, when Doc realizes that Mack is going to throw another party on his birthday, he does not intervene. Instead of revealing to Mack that he has given him the wrong date, Doc continues to play along, and lets him proceed with what he thinks it will be a surprise birthday party. In parallel with Mack's preparations for the party, Doc makes his own purchases despite his being aware that he cannot afford the cost.

**Mack** (*Wily, Resourceful, Quick-witted*)

*Character* Mack is an intelligent 48-year-old man, 'the leader, mentor and to a small extent exploiter of a little group of men' who, just like him, have no families, money or any other 'ambitions beyond food, drink and contentment'. Mack and his boys' petty crimes, lies and cheating mean no real harm, since, in his view, the end justifies the means.

*Wily* Mack's lovable character helps him to conveniently turn situations to his advantage. One such situation occurs when he pays Lee Chong a visit right after he becomes the owner of the Abbeville storehouse. 'With a winning honesty', he talks Lee Chong into letting the building to him and his friends in exchange of their protecting the property against thieves and fire hazards. When Lee insists that Mack and his boys pay a five-dollar-a-week rent, Mack feels 'generous' and smiles 'broadly'. He plays along and pretends he has to discuss the matter with the boys before making a decision.

*Resourceful* Mac is the one who slyly negotiates with Lee Chong the rental of the Abbeville building, which he then makes sure is shared by 'his boys' fairly. When they first move into the Palace Flophouse, he knows that 'some kind of organization was necessary particularly among such a group of ravening individualists'. Therefore, with a piece of chalk, he draws five oblongs on the floor to simulate the bed space for each member of the group, thus giving them the illusion of 'inviolable property rights'. Mack's pragmatic actions show his great ability to find quick solutions and overcome obstacles. Later on, he finds the right arguments again to first convince Lee Chong to lend his Ford truck for their frog hunt, and then even buy some frogs in exchange for some groceries for Doc's party.

*Quick-witted* The encounter with the Captain episode is an illustrative example of Mack's intelligence and remarkable ability to judge a character and a situation so as to benefit him. Through his humble and solicitous attitude, cunning flattery and story about how their frogs will help the cancer research, he impresses an initially belligerent Captain to such an extent that he invites them over to his place for the frog hunt and drinks. After they have collected the frogs and the host falls asleep heavily drunk, Mack looks around and tells the boys that the Captain will feel 'lousy' when he wakes up. To avoid getting the blame for the mess in the house, Mack urges everyone to leave the place at once.

**Dora** (*Cunning, Sympathetic, Protective*)

*Character* Dora is an imposing woman with flame-colored hair, a complex personality and great adaptability. She manages to overcome all the economic difficulties and keep her illegal business at the Bear Flag 'booming'. Dora can be 'soft as a mouse's belly', but also 'as hard as carborundum' when the situation calls for it.

*Cunning* Dora's great adaptability translates into her managing to keep her business running and 'booming' despite its illegal nature and the social opprobrium. She understands that her kind of business requires her to be 'twice as law abiding as anyone else' and 'especially philanthropic', so she acts accordingly. For example, she is aware that there cannot be any drunks, fights or 'vulgarity', so she has hired a watchman to help her with any issues that may give the authorities a reason to close the Bear Flag. She also knows that, in her case, she has to accept and use her 'shameless dirty wages of sin' for taxes and donations for the local authorities and various institutions at a much higher rate than any other merchant in Cannery Row.

*Sympathetic* Dora does not remain impassive to the impoverished families and their 'hungry children' during the continuing economic hardship. Her kind-heartedness nearly got her 'broke in the process' since she topped up her 'usual charities' with paying for the grocery bills for these families. During the later flu outbreak, her compassionate streak emerges again when she offers her help to Doc, whom she sees exhausted and overwhelmed by the situation. Dora mobilizes her girls in shifts so as to keep her business up but also helps the sick children and their families, by taking some soup pots to them and sitting with them.

*Protective* Dora looks after 'her girls' even if, due to age or 'infirmities', they are not able to bring in much income. When necessary, she does not hesitate to protect them even physically. One such instance is the fight at Doc's second party. Some drunkards crash in asking for 'the girls'. As they insist that they have been directed to that place for the 'whore house', a fight between them and Doc's

guests breaks out. Dora joins the 'battle' without hesitation. While her girls 'clip a man on the head with the spike heel', she comes out of the kitchen 'roaring', with 'a meat grinder' in her hands.