

Philology

The Narrative Structure in John Steinbeck's Novel *Of Mice and Men*

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The purpose of the present paper is to explore the narrative structure in John Steinbeck's early short novel *Of Mice and Men* (1937). The writer himself referred to it as a 'play-novelette' to emphasize that the novel could be performed on stage by working directly from the text. With his decision to write a novel that could be turned without revision into a play, Steinbeck imposed rigid restrictions on the narrative discourse – the events are exposed and the plot advances through the dialogue and action of the characters. In other words, the story is shown or enacted, as opposed to told or recounted. The reader hears and sees the story unfold. The hopeless struggle of the landless migrant laborers to become independent landowners during the Great Depression of the 1930s is dramatized and the protagonists are projected against a very thin background in contrast to the epic *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) in which the dramatization of the narrative is counterbalanced by the panoramic narrative elements. Steinbeck employs an experimental narrative strategy – he makes use of language, action, and symbol as recurring motifs. All three of these motifs are presented in the opening scene, are contrapuntally developed through the story, and come together again at the end.
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narrative structure, play-novelette, dramatic action, experimental narrative strategy, contrapuntal compositional technique

One of John Steinbeck's early short novels *Of Mice and Men* (1937) was called a 'play-novelette' by the author himself. It was a specific form of the novel that could be performed on stage without revision. Each chapter can be read as a scene or dramatic action: the opening paragraphs set the stage for the dramatic action that will follow. Each section of the book is a clearly focused episode in which Steinbeck conveys a sense of stage lighting and the opening and closing of scenes. The events

are exposed and the plot advances through the dialogue and action of the characters, almost without the author's/narrator's intervention by means of explanations or comments. In other words, the story is shown or enacted, as opposed to told or recounted. The reader hears and sees the story unfold. The desperate struggle of the landless migrant workers to become independent landowners during the Great Depression of the 1930s is dramatized against a very thin background. The

narrative passages throughout the novella/novelette are descriptive and rarely does the narrative voice break from this descriptive mode. This is a kind of naturalistic fable, originally titled *Something That Happened*.

The whole affair is simply “something that happened” – the only things that can give meaning to the characters’ meaningless, empty existence and keep them going are their dreams. The story is about two rural American boys who are naïve enough to believe that their American dream will come true and one day they will have their own land. “Nobody never gets to heaven; and nobody gets no land” [1: 72] - Crooks, “the Negro stable buck”, observes ironically when he hears of George and Lennie’s dream of buying a farm, summarizing the vision behind the book.

George and Lennie, agricultural workers hired as ranch hands, are an odd pair. Lennie is underdeveloped mentally but he is physically very strong - an infantile giant who is unable to control his own physical power. On the one hand, George often complains that he is an extra burden for him but, on the other, as Warren French points out, he benefits “of having someone to take care of and to share his dream of independence on a small ranch” [2: 80]. What distinguishes this pair from the countless migrant laborers seeking jobs in America during the Great Depression is the dream they share. The dream tempts other ranch workers as well but its hopelessness is suggested in the opening chapter when we learn that George and Lennie had to run away from their last job because of Lennie’s supposedly sexually harassing a girl. Lennie is also keeping a dead mouse, for he loves to pet soft things. Unable to control his immense strength, he inevitably kills everything he loves. George tries his best to keep Lennie out of trouble, but this dull-witted giant keeps finding mice, puppies, and girls to maul.

George senses the possible trouble as soon as he meets Curley, the quarrelsome son of the ranch owner. Despite George’s efforts, Curley starts to

fight with Lennie and bloodies his face. Outraged, George orders Lennie to fight back and Lennie breaks Curley’s arm. George and Lennie are afraid of losing their jobs, but they warn Curley that if he spreads the news, he will be ridiculed. Curley prefers to keep silent and the problem seems to be solved, but then the danger reappears in the form of Curley’s wife, a restless, overpainted girl dreaming of going to Hollywood. She tries to draw Lennie’s attention and allows him to touch her fluffy hair, but when Lennie starts to muss it up, she panics and Lennie breaks her neck. Lennie runs away and hides in the grove of willows by the river. When George discovers what has happened, he realizes that his dream is ended. He pursues Lennie to the grove and shoots him with a gunshot, before Curley and his accomplices, determined to lynch Lennie, can reach him, thus saving him from the cruel vengeance. At the same time, by killing Lennie George also completely destroys the dream that has given his own life a direction and meaning.

The finale of the novel sheds light on the title – it is an allusion to Robert Burns’s poem “To a Mouse” in which the ploughman, while plowing, accidentally destroys the mouse’s nest. The poem’s famous line – “The best laid schemes o’ mice an’ men/Gang aft agley” – reads as a poetic equivalent to the medieval Latin proverb “Homo proponit, sed Deus disponit” (“Man proposes, God disposes”) and conveys in a nutshell Steinbeck’s philosophy embodied in the novelette – any person, whether ruled by instincts (Lennie) or rational mind (George), is a helpless victim of indifferent natural forces beyond his/her control.

The finale is preceded by an episode that evokes the novelette’s dominant theme: a water snake, obviously looking for the prey, swims the length of the pool and comes to the legs of a motionless heron that stands in the shallows. A silent head and beak lances down and plucks it out by the head, and the beak swallows the little snake while its tail waves frantically [1: 97].

Discussion

This is a masterful prelude to the finale in which Steinbeck's naturalistic worldview as well as the influence of Charles Darwin (struggle for survival and the principle of natural selection) and Herbert Spencer's social Darwinism find impressive expression. The parallel between the natural/animal world and human society suggests that both are governed by the same laws: the man who has achieved a certain amount of control over his instincts — like George, or a snake in search of the prey, are helpless alike in the hands of an indifferent, imperfect nature. However, it should be also noted that, as we will see below, the force of the circumstance is, to some extent, counterbalanced by the protagonists' free will. Otherwise, the narrative would have been unconvincing and devoid of persuasiveness. Needless to say, this is simply one of the possible readings of the multi-layered text that cannot be reduced to the embodiment of Steinbeck's naturalistic philosophy or Darwinian biological concepts.

Throughout the narrative, Steinbeck intentionally refrains from reproducing the broad historical and socio-cultural contexts of the Great Depression decade. As Peter Liska points out, the protagonists are projected against a very thin background and must suggest or create this larger pattern through their own particularity [3: 69]. To achieve, Steinbeck employs experimental narrative strategy — he makes use of language, action, and symbolism as recurring motifs. All three motifs can be found in the opening section, are contrapuntally developed in the course of the narrative and finally they come together in the novel's finale again.

The first and main symbol of the novelette is a small "safe spot" by the river where the story begins and ends. In Steinbeck's fiction one often finds riverside groves and caves that play an important role in the narrative. In this case, finding shelter in a cave or grove by the river symbolizes a retreat from the civilization to primeval innocence. While the riverside grove or the cave is a safe place, it is

physically impossible to stay there, i.e. this symbol of primeval innocence must be translated into the language of the modern, real world. For George and Lennie, it is "a small house" and "a few acres of the land" [1: 15]. Out of this translation emerges a second symbol, rabbits, that serves several purposes. As a synecdoche, it denotes a "safe place" and becomes a much more "flexible" and easily manipulated symbol than "a small house" and "a few acres of land". In addition, by emphasizing Lennie's love for rabbits, Steinbeck is able not only to dramatize Lennie's longing for a safe place, but at the same time to define the basis of this longing at the lowest level of consciousness — Lennie's passion for soft, warm fur, which is the most crucial aspect of their plans for Lennie.

Transferring symbolic value from the farm to the rabbits is also important, because it turns the action into the motif. This is introduced in the first scene by the dead mouse which Lennie is carrying in his pocket. As George talks about Lennie's obsession with mice, it becomes apparent that the symbolic rabbits will have the same fate — they will be killed by Lennie. Thus, Lennie's killing of the mouse and then the puppy sets up a pattern, which the reader expects to be repeated. This pattern of expectancy turns the action into a motif and foreshadows the fate of the rabbits and, consequently, that of the dream of the "safe place".

The third motif, that of language, is also present in the opening scene. Lennie asks George: "Tell me-like you done before", George's word seem to acquire a ritual nature: "George's voice become deeper. He repeated his words rhythmically, as though he had said them many times before" [1: 15]. The Ritual element is stressed by three components of the speech: repetition; rhythmicity; the frequency of the repetition that forms a pattern, so that even the dim-witted Lennie remembers the words, the entire linguistic fabric of George's story: "*An' live off the fatta the lan'*," Lennie shouted. "*An' have rabbits. Go on, George! Tell about, what we're gonna have in the garden an*

about the rabbits in the cages and about ...“ [1: 15]. This ritual is often performed in the novel whenever Lennie feels unsafe. Interestingly enough, George shoots Lennie while he is caught up in his dream vision. So, on some level this vision is accomplished – the dream never interrupted, the rabbits never killed.

Conclusion

The critics have acknowledged Steinbeck's success in creating a highly patterned narrative through the three motifs described above, but they debate over the effect of this achievement. Some critics argue that such strict patterning creates a sense of mechanical action [4: 275; 5: 396]; others believe that this patterning regulates the narrative, giving the story a meaningful design and a tone of classic fate [6: 396; 7: 181]. A sense of inevitability, I would argue, should not be experienced as mechanical contrivance, but as catharsis conditioned by the sense of fate. Although the motifs of symbol, action, and language form a solid pattern of inevitability, the movement is not unbroken. Approximately midway in the novel (chapters 3 and 4), a countermovement is introduced which seems to threaten the established firm pattern. Until now, the dream of a “small house” and “a few acres of land” seemed unrealizable. Now it turns out that George has a real farm in mind (ten acres), knows the owners, and knows why they want to sell it - the owners are old, and the old lady needs surgery: “The ol' people that owns it is flat bust an' the ol' lady needs an operation” [1: 58]. He even knows the price – “six hundred dollars”. Besides, an old worker, Candy, wants to buy a share in this dream with the three hundred dollars he has saved up. It appears that at the end of the month George and Lennie will have another hundred dollars. In the next chapter, the hope that the dream will be realized is further reinforced by the fact that it seems plausible even to cynical Crooks. However, at this very moment the symbol of the mouse reappears in the form of Curley's wife who

threatens the dream by bringing back the harsh reality and by arousing Lennie's interest.

Representing the dream as a real possibility temporarily interrupts the pattern of inevitability, but Steinbeck does so without actually reversing the situation. Though the countermovement works against the pattern, it makes this pattern more credible by introducing the necessary ingredient of free will, thus adding credibility to the narrative – the delicate balance between the protagonists' free will and the force of circumstances is unmistakably established.

In addition to creating a sense of inevitability, strict patterning of narrative events has the function of expanding the content of the narrative. Hemingway called this the “fourth dimension”, Joseph Warren Beach defined it as an “aesthetic factor” achieved by the protagonist's repeated participation in some traditional “ritual or strategy” [8: 311-328], and Malcolm Cowley referred to it as the “almost continual performance of rites and ceremonies” suggesting recurring patterns of human experience [9]. Through the novel's three motifs the story of two migrant workers dreaming of a safe haven becomes an archetypal model that exists on three levels.

The first one is the realistic plane, with its shocking climax. There is also a plane of social protest – a protest against the exploitation of migrant workers. The third level is an allegorical one, that allows for diverse subjective interpretations. It can be, as Carlos Baker notes, “an allegory of mind and body” [10: 42]. It can also be a dichotomy between the clumsy but strong mass of laborers and their shrewd manipulators, between the conscious and the unconscious, id and ego.

The title adds another level to the complex narrative structure of the novelette which is implicit in the context of Burns's poem. Just as Burns extends the experience of the mouse to include that of the humans, Steinbeck generalizes the experience of the two migrant workers to the human

condition. On this level, perhaps the most important one, he is dramatizing the antiteleological philosophy. The original title of the book also indicates to this level of meaning. From this point of view, the end of the novel, like the destruction of the mouse's habitat by the ploughman, is neither tragic nor violent, it is simply the underlying logic or recurring pattern of events.

As we have seen, the complex narrative structure of John Steinbeck's play-novelette *Of Mice and Men* is largely shaped by the genre poetics – the action is dramatized at the expense of panoramic/panoptical narration in contrast to the epic *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) in which the dramatization of the narrative is counterbalanced by the panoramic narrative elements.

ფილოლოგია

თხრობის სტრუქტურა ჯონ სტაინბეკის რომანში თაგვებსა და ადამიანებზე

გ. ჩიქობავა

ივანე ჯავახიშვილის სახ. თბილისის სახელმწიფო უნივერსიტეტი, ამერიკისმცოდნეობის ინსტიტუტი, თბილისი, საქართველო

(წარმოდგენილია აკადემიის წევრის ე. ჯაველიძის მიერ)

ნაშრომის მიზანია, თხრობის სტრუქტურის კვლევა დიდი ამერიკელი მწერლის, ჯონ სტაინბეკის ადრეულ რომანში *თაგვებსა და ადამიანებზე* (1937), რომელსაც თვით მწერალი „პიესა-რომანს“ (‘play-novelettes’) უწოდებდა. რომანი ისეა დაწერილი, რომ თეატრალურ დასებს შეუძლიათ მისი, როგორც პიესის, სცენაზე დადგმა. ფაქტობრივად, აქ თითოეული თავი ერთგვარი სცენა თუ დრამატული მოქმედებაა: პირველი აზნაცები ქმნის სამოქმედო გარემოსა და ფონს, რაც საშუალებას აძლევს ავტორს მხოლოდ მინიმალური ჩარევით, დიალოგების საშუალებით წარმართოს თხრობა, გადმოსცეს მოქმედება და ხასიათები. რომანში პიესის მსგავსადაა დრამატიზებული უმიწაწყლო მიგრანტ მუშათა უიმედო ბრძოლა დამოუკიდებელ მიწათმფლობელებად გადაქცევისათვის 1930-იანი წლების დიდი დეპრესიის დროს. ის, რომ მწერალი არ გვიხატავს ათწლეულის პანორამულ სურათს, განპირობებულია თხრობის სტრუქტურითა და ჟანრის პოეტიკით, რომელიც პანორამული თხრობის ელემენტების ნივთიერების ხარჯზე მოქმედების დრამატიზაციას მოითხოვს, უფრო გვიანდელი ეპიკური ტილოსაგან *მრისხანების მტევნები* (1939) - განსხვავებით, სადაც თხრობის დრამატიზაციას პანორამული ელემენტები ერწყმის. თხრობისას სტაინბეკი თავს არიდებს ისტორიული ფონის ფართო პლანით ჩვენებას, დიდი დეპრესიის ეპოქის პანორამული სურათის დახატვას. მწერალი ექსპერიმენტულ თხრობით სტრატეგიას მიმართავს - იყენებს ენას, მოქმედებას და სიმბოლიკას, როგორც განმეორებად მოტივებს. სამივე მოტივი რომანის პირველივე ეპიზოდში

გვხვდება, შემდეგ თხრობის კვალდაკვალ კონტრაპუნქტულად იშლება და ბოლოს ისევ თავს იყრის რომანის ფინალში. *თაგვებსა და ადამიანებზე* მრავალშრიანი, მრავალპლანიანი პიესა-რომანია რთული სიმბოლიკითა და კომპლექსური თხრობის სტრუქტურით, რაც განაპირობებს კიდევ ნაწარმოების სიცოცხლისუნარიანობას.

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