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THE REAWAKENING OF STEINBECK

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at the

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Department & Date

For my parents, Jim and Jean Jacobs,

And my sister, Beth Eidenmiller,

Because they always believed in me and gave me the strength to succeed.

# THE REAWAKENING OF STEINBECK

CHRISTINE E. JACOBS

## ABSTRACT

This analysis of the works of John Steinbeck will show that Steinbeck's works have more depth and revelation that has been previously discovered. Through application of the concept of queer theory from Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, this work will examine the relationships of John Steinbeck's Lennie Small and George Milton and Danny and his friends from the classic novels *Of Mice and Men* and *Tortilla Flat*, respectively. This theory states that there is a fine line between what is considered a homosocial behavior and what is homosexual desire.

Because Steinbeck's novels and characters are regarded with an almost child-like innocence, many people have chosen to skim past the sexual ambiguities that adumbrate within the text and therefore he has gone mostly unread by critics in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Close examination of the interactions between George Milton and Lennie Small and Danny and his friends will reveal the apparent sexual nature of the novels, and a queer reading of the novels *Of Mice and Men* and *Tortilla Flat*. This work will demonstrate through examples from Sedgwick's theory that there is indeed a continuum between homosocial and homosexual behavior in Steinbeck's the characters.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

By applying the concept of queer theory from Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, this paper will examine the relationships of John Steinbeck's Lennie Small and George Milton and Danny and his friends from the classic novels *Of Mice and Men* and *Tortilla Flat*, respectively. This theory states that, "To draw the 'homosocial' back into the orbit of 'desire,' of the potentially erotic, then, is to hypothesize the potential unbrokenness of a continuum between homosocial and homosexual – a continuum whose visibility, for men, in our society is disrupted" (Sedgwick<sup>1</sup> 1-2). Essentially there is a fine line between what is considered a homosocial behavior and what is homosexual desire. Because Steinbeck's novels and characters are regarded with an almost child-like innocence, many people have chosen to skim past the sexual ambiguities that adumbrate within the text and therefore he has gone mostly unread by critics in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. I intend to closely examine the interactions between George Milton and Lennie Small and Danny and his friends to show first, the apparent sexual nature of the novels, and second another possible reading of the novels *Of Mice and Men* and *Tortilla Flat*. I will demonstrate through examples from Sedgwick's theory that there is indeed a continuum between homosocial and homosexual behavior in Steinbeck's the characters.

There has been limited commentary and criticism about the works of John Steinbeck. Much of what is written has focused on Steinbeck being projected as an “all American” writer and one with deeply rooted Christian values. This common perception of Steinbeck and his writing is demonstrated in Jackson Benson’s article, “John Steinbeck: Novelist as Scientist”:

When I say he was born a romantic, I mean that his roots were in the adventure of the journey West to California taken by both his paternal and maternal grandparents. When he was young, a sister read the Greek myths to him, and from uncles, aunts, and parents he heard the Bible, Shakespeare, *Paradise Lost*, *Pilgrim’s Progress*, and the fairy tales of Hans Christian Andersen (252).

Instead of Steinbeck’s actual works, emphasis has been placed on Steinbeck himself as a protest writer and on the time period in which his stories take place; mainly the Great Depression. As critic Morris Dickstein states, “Unfortunately his success as a protest writer undermined his literary standing, especially after the war, when such commitment came to be seen as limiting and simplistic” (2). Perhaps because of this popular view, Steinbeck has escaped more mordacious criticism and theorizing by critics. Dickstein rightly continues, “There was something elemental about them [Steinbeck’s novels], a rich, sensuous simplicity that also leads many readers to leave Steinbeck behind as an enthusiasm to be outgrown” (1). Perhaps this explains the lack of interest and commentary when it comes to his work. “Simplistic” and “limited” are clearly not the case however when we utilize Sedgwick’s queer theory to revisit the works of Steinbeck, particularly that of *Of Mice and Men*. While Steinbeck is considered by many critics a protest writer in that he called attention to social wrongs, such as the mistreatment of migrant workers, Sedgwick’s theory would lead us to believe that he may have been protesting more issues than early twentieth century critics realized; for example gay



rights. As the following commentary will show, Steinbeck may have been revolutionary for his time - surpassing many early twentieth century authors by including homosexual characters in his literature.

Kim Welter echoes the sentiments of Sedgwick's queer theory in her article "The Wayward Bus: Steinbeck and Queer America." Welter notes that Steinbeck is fond of using seemingly simplistic characters to slide homosexual attributes past the reader. She states "Steinbeck has provided the reader with a fascinating series of character sketches, complete with innermost desires described for the reader" (Welter 67). While she primarily focuses on the lesbian desires his female characters display, many equivalent ideas can be applied to his male characters as well. Sedgwick states in her theory that she uses the term 'desire' instead of love because her theory is a study of the structure of social impulses, these social desires then, can be interchangeable between the genders – further helping to establish a pattern of homosexuality through Steinbeck's novels. Welter's work also labors to establish Steinbeck's connection to the homosexual cultural trends of his time and also his relationship with other homosexual writers, "There is little doubt that homosexuality was an issue Steinbeck dealt with" (Welter 69). While I agree with Welter's interpretation of Steinbeck's archetype lesbian characters in *The Wayward Bus*, she and I part ways when she argues that "Lesbianism is a safer sexual 'perversion' for Steinbeck to write about [rather than homosexuals]" (Welter 70). Here Welter contradicts herself in that she spends a great deal of time establishing Steinbeck's role in a homosexual sector of society – his "relationship with the artist and theatrical communities – traditionally a haven for homosexuals" (Welter 70); yet, she oddly remarks that he needs to err on the side of caution with his writing subjects. As history

well shows, Steinbeck was never afraid to tackle taboo topics and was frequently criticized for that very reason, so much so that it led to the burning of copies of *The Grapes of Wrath* in 1939. I would argue that Steinbeck was not fearful of others' opinions and ideas that upset the average reader and therefore began the process of intentionally introducing homosexual characters into American Literature.

The overt sexual undertones of this novel are recognized by one critic in her comparison of *Of Mice and Men* to Alice Munro's "Open Secrets." In the article, *Studies of Short Fiction*, author Ildiko de Papp Carrington refers to many of the sexual aspects of *Of Mice and Men*. Though she does not comment as to the sexual preference of George and Lennie, her comparisons make implications that would suggest a homosexual relationship between them. "Her [Munro] allusions to Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* make the Slaters' relationship parallel the relationship between Steinbeck's two itinerant ranch hands, George Milton and the retarded Lennie Small" (Carrington 598). Stating that the relationship between the Slaters and Lennie and George is parallel is significant for the simple reason that she is comparing George and Lennie to a married couple and therefore making the implication that they are intimately involved. Carrington makes a point of emphasizing Lennie's obsession with touching and "stroking" soft items by first making another comparison between Lennie and the Munro character, Theo Slater. "Theo's sensuous stroking of his wife's feather hat... identify[s] Theo's behavior not only as 'simple-minded' but as overtly sexual. Steinbeck's Lennie is similarly obsessed with stroking soft things, mice, rabbits, newborn puppies, pieces of velvet, and women's hair and clothes" (Carrington 601). After establishing Theo and Lennie's obsession with touching things, Carrington completes this erotic triangle and diagnosis of unhealthy

sexual obsession by tying in Munro's character Stephens. "In his senescence Stephens has developed a 'new appetite' for violent sex in which the two languages of talking and touching are combined" (Carrington 601). This association between sexual touching and violence is consistent with Lennie's character and conjointly what leads him to most of his misfortunes such as the non-malicious killing of animals and then later, the murder of Curley's wife: "Both Girard and Freud treat the erotic triangle as symmetrical – in the sense that its structure would be relatively unaffected by the power difference that would be introduced by a change in the gender of one of the participants" (Sedgwick 23). In literature, the foundation or connection between many stories is a triangle between three characters, for example two men competing for the love of one woman. Sedgwick's theory suggests that the attraction between the characters in the triangle can move in any direction, for instance, the two men are erotically charged by the competition with one another, not by the love of the woman and are therefore actually drawn to each other. If the intimacy between the three characters is proportionate at all points of the triangle, then the characters become inter-changeable. That said – the association between these three men, Lennie, Stephens and Theo, is as strong if not stronger than if a woman was introduced to the situation. Thus, comparison of Lennie and George to a married couple combined with her correlation of sexual nature of Lennie with the character Stephens and Theo; sets the stage for the appropriate application of Sedgwick's theory to *Of Mice and Men*.

## CHAPTER II

### QUEER THEORY

According to Sedgwick's theory, scientists who study society and the interactions of people, have deemed over time the relationships formed between two people of the same sex as homosocial. "Homo" to indicate that the interactions being studied were between two people of the same sex and "social" to mean that these interactions were additionally supposedly platonic companionship.

Homosocial is a word occasionally used in history and the social sciences, where it describes social bonds between persons of the same sex; it is neologism, obviously formed by analogy with 'homosexual,' and just as obviously meant to be distinguished from 'homosexual' (Sedgwick<sup>1</sup> 1).

These scientists, philosophers, and theorists, have gone to great lengths in their documentation to make a very clear distinction between homosocial behavior and homosexual behavior, claiming that these were two entirely different interactions so as not to incite a homophobic panic. This distinction, however, is little more than a barely perceivable line. Moreover, who gets to make the decision as to what behavior is deemed "normal" behavior for men and what is homosexual? Heterosexual or "normal" relationships between men are perfectly acceptable and in fact are expected. In order to be accepted as "masculine" or as so many men strive to be: "one of the guys," a male has to be part of an athletic team, a comrade, a fraternity brother. These relationships help a male to define his heterosexuality and find approval among other males. Men,

sometimes consciously and others subconsciously, have a homosocial bond to protect themselves from accusations of being a homosexual. This is because the men who choose interests that exist outside of this “man’s man” matrix are often labeled as “metrosexuals” or worse (in most of society’s view) homosexuals. Because it is such a fine line between the homosocial and the homosexual, it is difficult to discern where the line is crossed. How do men keep these relationships from slipping into a genital bond? “What goes on at football games, in fraternities, at Bohemian Grove, and at climactic moments in war novels can look, with only a slight shift of optic, quite startlingly ‘homosexual’” (Sedgwick<sup>1</sup> 89). Men would like to maintain the façade that there is an invisible barrier or gap that exists between this homosocial bond and homosexual bond. Sedgwick would have us believe that there is indeed no barrier or gap between the two and that in reality it is a slippery slope that leads one from the homosocial bond on to the continuum of the homosexual bond: “For a man to be man’s man is separated only by an invisible, carefully blurred, always-already-crossed line from being ‘interested in men’” (Sedgwick<sup>1</sup> 89). In short, men already are and always have been interested in other men; it is only the restricted view of a homophobic society that keeps them from fully acknowledging and exploring this interest.

According to Sedgwick, it is only natural that individuals who are grouped together, who are of the same gender, same interests, desires, emotional and physical needs and of the same circumstances be sexually attracted to each other. “It is the most natural thing in the world that people of the same gender...should also bond together on the axis of sexual desire” (Sedgwick<sup>3</sup> 87). Why then this homosexual panic that keeps all twentieth century, heterosexual men on guard of their “manliness” and so protective of

their sexuality? As Sedgwick explains, homosexual panic is a form of oppression used to keep males within the prescribed societal norm. This panic is the fear of being viewed by other men as “gay”, so to keep that from happening, men will create stereotypes for other men (such as the metro-sexual) and make offensive jokes about gays in order to distinguish themselves and their actions from that of homosexuals. By keeping men on edge of slipping out of their own heterosexuality and into homosexuality and all of the stereotypes and social stigmas that are accompanied by such a label, those wishing to dictate what constitutes a “normal” sexual relationship gain the upper hand. This “upper hand” is crucial in maintaining a society dominated by patriarchal concepts and thus the oppression of not only women, but transmitting those same policies to oppress the weak or effeminate male as well. As men mature and enter into “male friendship, mentorship, admiring identification, bureaucratic subordination” (Sedgwick<sup>2</sup> 452) it is only with the education and understanding that, as sort of a right of passage, they must also carry with them homosexual panic to keep from being labeled by society as a homosexual.

The continuum of male homosocial bonds has been brutally structured by a secularized and psychologized homophobia, which has excluded certain shiftingly and or less arbitrarily defined segments of the continuum from participating in the overarching male entitlement (Sedgwick<sup>2</sup> 452).

The fear in homosexual panic is furthered by the fact that homosexuals have been terrorized, murdered and abused throughout history and men want to remain separated from such torture. For example, the execution of men in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries under sodomy laws, the continued lynching of homosexuals, and the persecution of gays during the Nazi reign in Germany, much of this violence still exists in our modern society today. In fact, as the AIDS epidemic became rampant in the early

1980s and continuing on to today, homosexuals bore the brunt of the blame for this disease and it became another excuse for gay bashing and homosexual panic:

It is evidenced in the literal bloodbaths that seem to make the point of the AIDS-related resurgence in violent bashings of gays – which, unlike the gun violence otherwise ubiquitous in this culture, are characteristically done with two-by-fours, baseball bats, and fists, in most literal-minded conceivable form of body-fluid contact (Sedgwick<sup>3</sup> 129).

Not only are homosexuals being blamed for a disease which cannot be relegated to one group of society, they are being mercilessly beaten to death for it. This violence helps create homophobia: “homophobia [is] a mechanism for regulating the behavior of the many by the specific oppression of a few” (Sedgwick<sup>1</sup> 88). These “oppressive few” have created this fear of one’s own homosexuality, of being stereotyped, brutalized or even a victim of violence along with the ideology that “this can happen to you, too.” This fear amongst men that the masculine environment that they have endeavored to create can at any moment be stripped away is enough to continue the regulation of their behavior and to continue to pass it on to future generations. The oppressive use homosexual panic and this self naïveté as a tool to manipulate the actions and opinions of society and to regulate a societal norm for sexuality.

This oppression then is used to further the agenda of the patriarchal society. To fully understand this oppression, it is helpful to have an understanding of masculinity within the culture. While men, as a general rule, have the upper hand due to their gender, in politics, the work force and compensation, there still exists a hierarchy within the male gender. R.W. Connell explains in his book, *Masculinities*, that the levels of masculinity can be divided into four basic categories: hegemony, subordination, complicity and marginalization. Hegemonic masculinity is made up of the more dominant men. The

men who typically exhibit social and political power and who are defined by feminists as the patriarchs. These men use the same form of oppression against homosexuals as they do to suppress women as well. Within this group is a psychological formation in the mind that white, heterosexual men are more desirable and a higher quality of human being. It is the arrogance and attitude that these men carry this idea with that makes it so convincing. These white men create power relations and then take it upon themselves to judge whole groups of people, dominating over and discriminating against them; creating the subordinate group of masculinities. The hegemonic then relies on these “subordinate” classes of homosexuals, minorities and women in order to survive.

The importance of women (not merely of ‘the feminine,’ but of actual women as well) in the etiology and the continuing experience of male homosexuality seems to be historically volatile (across time, across class) to a similar degree. Its changes are inextricable from the changing shapes of the institutions by which gender and class inequality are structured (Sedgwick<sup>1</sup> 27).

Using Sedgwick’s theory along with Connell’s idea of masculinity it is not surprising then that homosexuals would filtered into the same inferior class as women: “oppression positions homosexual masculinities at the bottom of a gender hierarchy among men. Gayness, in patriarchal ideology, is the repository of what is symbolically expelled from hegemonic masculinity” (Connell 78). Given that the oppression experienced by women and homosexuals is virtually the same; they are the feeding ground for an ancient institution (patriarchy). While not all men are actively oppressing weaker groups of people, there are those who are simply compliant with the system. “A great many men who draw the patriarchal dividend also respect their wives and mothers, are never violent towards women, do their accustomed share of the housework, bring home the family wage” (Connell 80), yet are content to sit back and judge those who would fight for equal



rights and gay marriage as extremists. Finally, there is the marginalized. Men who are exempted from certain aspects of the masculinities system, such as professional black athletes who are wealthy and respected. The admiration and respect however, does not filter down to the average black man who is part of the subordinate due to racial discrimination. Having an understanding of queer theory combined with the idea of levels of masculinity will help us to understand not only the extreme discrimination experienced by George and Lennie in *Of Mice and Men*, which led to Lennie's death, but it will also help to explain the male characters and their actions in Steinbeck's *Tortilla Flat*.

### CHAPTER III.

#### *OF MICE AND MEN*

Sedgwick felt that when children were being raised by an individual parent, their sexuality would form in that direction and they would identify stronger with that gender. To understand how George and Lennie fall under this theory of homosocial desire we must first examine the character of Lennie. Lennie was raised by his Aunt Clara; “femininity is reinforced by her original symbiotic union with her mother [care-taker] and by the identification with her that must precede identity” (Sedgwick<sup>1</sup> 25). Lennie’s effeminate personality is reinforced by his Aunt Clara before he perceives his own identity; she not only was his caretaker, but also enabled Lennie in his habits to stroke soft things by providing him with mice and pieces of velvet. For Lennie it seems only natural that he would make the transition from being cared for by his aunt, to leaving home to be cared for by another loved one – in this case, George. When we view Lennie’s obsession with stroking soft things as sexual like Carrington did, it continues to be natural that he would transfer his desire from a dead mouse, to the person who is the source of his sexual satisfaction (the mouse), George. George continues to satisfy Lennie with items to pet as a way of showing love to Lennie, “Cause I want you to stay with me...Tell you what I’ll do Lennie. First chance I get I’ll give you a pup...That’s be better than mice. And you could pet it harder” (Steinbeck<sup>1</sup> 13). Because of the sexual

satisfaction that Lennie gets from stroking, the gesture of George providing Lennie with something he can stroke harder becomes sexual in nature. This in turn takes George and Lennie beyond homosocial behavior and into the continuum of homosexual desire. George is going beyond the duties of a basic caretaker and performing the tasks of a lover, in other words, fulfilling Lennie's desires in attempts to please him and prolong their relationship.

These loving qualities become evident in George and Lennie's relationship as it progresses throughout the novel. Carrington's comparison of Lennie and George to the married couple the Slaters, makes it easier to see the correlation between the two. This criticism is very helpful in continuing to link the homosexual desire between George and Lennie. Lennie's identification with female traits is what leads to his desire to be feminine and essentially to play the role of George's wife throughout the novel. Lennie consistently needs words of affirmation from George, as he always asks George to tell him about their future together, "Lennie pleaded, Come on George. Tell me. Please George? Like you done before?" (Steinbeck<sup>1</sup> 13). He also needs George to tell him how they are "different" from other guys that work on ranches, "George went on, with us it ain't like that. We got a future. We got somebody to talk to that gives a damn about us [each other]" (Steinbeck<sup>1</sup> 14). These effeminate qualities are part of what establishes George and Lennie into subordinate masculinity. Feminine characteristics are associated with gayness by the hegemonic masculinities (Connell 78). Both George and Lennie emphasize the word 'different' throughout the novel, not only to each other – but also to other characters when questioned about their relationship. It seems clear, in a queer reading, that 'different' is just a synonym for queer or homosexual. Lennie clearly takes

on the persona of a wife in the 1920s, he allows George (presumably his husband) to lead him by making decisions for their life about where they will live, sleep, eat and work; George does all of their talking and is very condescending to Lennie if he tries to interfere with his plans, George has the final say (which he attempts to hide from the others on the ranch), “Le ‘s go, George. Le’s get outta here... We gotta stay” George said shortly. Shut up now. The guys’ll be comin’ in” (Steinbeck<sup>1</sup> 33). On the other side of the spectrum however, when it comes time to display Lennie’s capabilities – George brags about how great he is to the other men, “George spoke proudly. ‘Jus’ tell Lennie what to do an’ he’ll do it...he sure can take orders” (Steinbeck<sup>1</sup> 39). He is also very protective of Lennie and will not let any of the other men get too close to him, “You try to keep away from him...Don’t never speak to him. If he comes in here you move clear to the other side of the room” (Steinbeck<sup>1</sup> 29). This behavior can also presumably be interpreted as jealousy and George’s approach to keeping Lennie to himself. Lennie accepts this and even allows George to make such extreme decisions such as what he should think and when he will die.

Given that Lennie spends much of his time trying to please George; George certainly becomes the more dominant figure in the relationship. Unlike Lennie however, George is not as open about his sexuality. Because he is aware of their social status: working class, farm hands (which also which also links them to the subordinate masculinity) and the social stigma that goes along with being a homosexual, George stays in the closet a great majority of the time. It is a choice he must make each time he and Lennie relocate; whether or not to let someone in on their secret. “For many gay people it [the closet] is the fundamental feature of social life (Sedgwick<sup>3</sup> 68). In order for

George to be accepted by those around him, he must protect himself and Lennie, by staying in the closet. It is only with those whom George can truly trust that he lets his guard down and allows himself to be who he truly is; a homosexual. This aspect of George's character begins to manifest itself through the character of Slim. According to Connell's hierarchy, Slim exhibits marginalized masculinity. Even though he is part of the working class and a ranch hand, his God-like perception and calm demeanor has earned him more respect and notoriety than the boss and owner of the ranch. Slim attempts to draw George out of his closet by talking about his relationship with Lennie, "Funny how you an' him string along together. It was Slim's calm invitation to confidence" (Steinbeck<sup>1</sup> 39). There are several times in the novel, when Slim is described as God-like and as having the ability to truly know people without them having to say much. This however, as stated earlier with marginalization, does not filter down to the other ranch hands. It is simply limited to and beneficial to Slim. This invitation to confidence is Slim's way of not only expressing his perceptive knowledge of George and Lennie's real relationship, but of providing support to their lifestyle by alleviating some of the pressure George feels in keeping he and Lennie's secret and giving him an outlet, someone to talk to.

It ain't so funny, him an' me goin' aroun' together, George said at last. Him and me was both born in Auburn. I knowed his Aunt Clara. She took him when he was a baby and raised him up. When his Aunt Clara died, Lennie just come along with me out workin'. Got kinda used to each other after a little while...George's voice was taking on the tone of confession (Steinbeck<sup>1</sup> 40).

This confession of the truth of he and Lennie's relationship allows George to momentarily come out of the closet and be in full acceptance of his choice to be a homosexual.

George's closet could be binary in that not only is staying in the closet a mode of protection, but it could also relate to homophobia: "It is justifiable to suggest that the form of knowledge – one marked by his own wracking juncture of same-sex desire with homophobia...is fatal paranoid knowledge" (Sedgwick<sup>3</sup> 100). George knows he is a homosexual, but at the same time is torn from his desire for other men by his own socially driven homophobia. To prove his heterosexuality to the other guys on the ranch, George accompanies the men to a cathouse. Lennie knows where he has gone and expresses his loneliness to some of the other characters. When he is taunted by the stable buck about the possibility of George not coming back, he gets angry and confidently states that George will be back for him. "He won't do it, Lennie cried. George wouldn't do nothing like that. I been with George a long time. He'll come back tonight" (Steinbeck<sup>1</sup> 71). This also falls in line with Sedgwick's theory in that part of George's homosexual tendencies, stem from his homosocial desire – to be accepted by men in all aspects. George's need to go with the other men to the whorehouse "is the use of women as exchangeable, perhaps symbolic, property for the primary purpose of cementing the bonds of men with men" (Sedgwick 26). Lennie's limited ability to comprehend ideas still seems to bring him to the conclusion that George "can have women and still keep loving me" (Sedgwick 34). Predominantly given the line of work that George and Lennie are in, George is trapped in a "man's man" atmosphere, where only the toughest survive. He is surrounded by hegemonic and complicit masculinities, so there is the desire to be "one of the guys" and fit in with those masculinities, but also the innate desire to have a relationship and feel loved by another human, in this case, Lennie. This relationship with Lennie would then relegate him back to the subordinate and exclude him from any type

of acceptance by other men. These two competing emotions put a lot of pressure on George and it helps to explain his decision to kill Lennie at the end of the novel. George's final break down comes when he can no longer suppress his knowledge of homosexual desire because of the realization that to have Lennie, as a partner, would make George incapable of fulfilling his dream of owning a ranch for their future together. On the other hand, if George does indeed feel homophobic along with desire, then Lennie's desire to do and touch what pleases him, and his failure to decipher the difference between appropriate and inappropriate, which continually causes a strain on he and George's relationship, could add a sense of terror and loathing towards Lennie. Either of these explanations could appropriately explain what it is that leads George to the fatal comprehension that to prolong Lennie's life is to prolong the now painful, yet unrealistic dream of a better life together, thus he decides to shoot Lennie.

George realizes that in order to have any kind of future, outside of being a ranch hand, he must remain in the closet and hide his sexual preference. Otherwise, luxuries available to other white men, such a house, would be unobtainable due to discrimination against homosexuals. "The closet is the defining structure for gay oppression in this century" (Sedgwick<sup>3</sup> 71). In order to keep homosexuality from becoming "normal" and accepted in society, those who wish to continue to oppress homosexuals must keep them in the closet and make it painstakingly difficult for them to emerge. For example, George desires to be the master of his own ranch and to "live off the fatta the lan'" (Steinbeck<sup>1</sup> 14), however in order to be given such power and control over his own life he must become part of the patriarchal society. George and Lennie are white males so this should not be a problem for them; however as homosexuals and subordinates, they fall short of

this dream. This leads to their inability to control the outcome of their own fate, to make their own decisions and it confines what options they have in life. This hegemonic oppression mirrors what women in this era also experienced. The “real” men (heterosexuals) have the ability to control George and Lennie’s future, just as they did with women. These heterosexual men used oppression to manipulate the social norm into giving them the power and to severely limit the options for these are two groups of people. As homosexuals, however, George and Lennie are not even treated as equivalent to women, given that within social reality, women are not expected to be masculine. They have sunk to being even lower than the women of a patriarchal society in that accusations made by women against them had the ability to get them into serious trouble and possibly even lead them to death. As Curley’s wife reminds George, “you know what I could do to you if you open your trap?... Well you keep your place then” (Steinbeck<sup>1</sup> 81). This puts Lennie and George in a double bind as they exist in a society where sexuality “is a profound determinant of power” (Sedgwick 26). Not only are they oppressed by hegemonic men, but they are now also oppressed by heterosexual women. If one were to factor in that they were also oppressed because, as “bindlestiffs”, they were considered to be of a very low class, then it becomes obvious that George and Lennie never had a chance at succeeding in achieving their American dream. In George and Lennie’s case, the patriarchal society accomplished their goal of subjugating George and pushing him back into his closet. George makes this defeat apparent when he stops fighting for Lennie’s freedom, abandons the possibility that, together, he and Lennie could achieve the American dream, and accepts his station in life by making the decision to end Lennie’s life. Lennie’s murder exemplifies the violence that society uses against



homosexuals to help create the social stigma. Not only were Curley and the other ranch hands hunting down Lennie like a rabbit in hiding, they were planning on killing him slowly and painfully, “When you see ‘um, don’t give ‘im no chance. Shoot for his guts. That’ll double ‘im over” (Steinbeck<sup>1</sup> 97). The realization that these men planned to torture Lennie is the final blow in breaking George’s spirit to fight back. He alone cannot beat the system and he knows that with or without Lennie, the American dream does not exist for him. Sadly, America’s political system is built on the idea that only a select few can succeed and those few are definitely heterosexual. Therefore he has lost Lennie even before Lennie actually physically dies.

The American dream becomes yet another symbol of oppression for homosexuals in that it is truly the “American” dream. It is here that we begin to “grasp the leverage that sexual relations seem to offer on the relations of oppression...” (Sedgwick<sup>1</sup> 31). The term “American Dream” was coined in James Truslow Adam’s book *The Epic of America* in 1931. His original definition for the American dream found in the Library of Congress, is as follows:

It is not a dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position.

This is exactly what George and Lennie were seeking, the ability to receive all that they were capable of working for. This quote came during the American Industrial Revolution, when immigration to America was at an all time high and people believed they could make a better life for themselves and their families by coming here. Immigrants were wooed to America by stories such as that of John D. Rockefeller, Standard Oil tycoon, and Andrew Carnegie, who made his fortune in the steel industry –

both men who immigrated to America with little more than the shirts on their backs and yet became multi-millionaires, bringing to life Adams' definition of living the American Dream, yet also defining the masculinities of the hegemonic. Rockefeller and Carnegie could have been the poster boys of hegemony; powerful, wealthy, heterosexual white men. The American Dream became a symbol of the American family; a husband and wife, two kids and a white picket fence, in that order. Millions flocked to this image and a ranch in the suburbs, ignoring the fact that this dream was more like a straight jacket. While it's illusion seemed mesmerizing, it's limitations were inexorable. By integrating the American Dream with the American family, it excluded multitudes of people and primarily those choosing to live a homosexual lifestyle. After all, how could a group of people who could not and cannot be legally married be considered a family? Sedgwick makes the point in her writings that marriage is a patriarchal institution created by the men who oppress the homosexual component of human sexuality and therefore, homosexuals (3). The men who immigrated to America brought with them their patriarchal belief systems, their preconceived notions of what it meant to be masculine and their religious restraints. The sham of building our country on the foundations of the American family was excellent framework for the exclusion of those who do conform to hegemonic standards. While the dream of freedom in America was noble, it was impossible to fully escape the class system that was so prominent in European culture. While Adams' dream was supposed to be "regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position," for Lennie and George this dream was not what they could work hard for and achieve together. It was what hierarchy in society told them they could achieve – if they were the right skin color, correct social status, appropriate gender and of course if

they chose the right sexual preference. For a person to lack any one of those things, success and happiness really was only a mirage – the dream to be accepted solely based on who the individual was as a person, and not based on preferences. Thus the American dream in the novel *Of Mice and Men* was not really a dream at all, but more a gift or a reward from the heterosexual matrix for making the “right” choices in life. This is ludicrous given that many of those factors (i.e., skin color, social status, sexual preference) are ones that human beings have no control over.

Using Sedgwick’s theory as a means for interpreting *Of Mice and Men* sheds a new light of understanding on the novel that has previously been ignored. A heterosexual reading of the novel leaves many gaps in the story and leaves the reader wondering several things. For instance, the purpose of Lennie’s obsession with stroking soft objects, George’s reluctance to purchase the land when he has the money for it, and finally, since Lennie has gotten him and George into trouble before why George doesn’t run again at the end of the novel and protect Lennie. A queer reading, however, answers all of those questions in addition to others and leaves the reader with a more thorough understanding of what the novel is really about. A queer reading also gives the reader a greater empathy for George and Lennie and the oppression that they had to endure. It makes George’s decision to murder Lennie more climactic and emotional because of the tragic reality that in that society George and Lennie could never break outside of the closet. They would never succeed and their dream of a life together was merely a sham and because ultimately, it was the closet, emotionally and physically, that killed them both.

## CHAPTER IV

### *TORTILLA FLAT*

It is the same suffocating closet that leads to the demise of Danny, in Steinbeck's *Tortilla Flat*. The homosexual aspect of *Tortilla Flat* is more overtly obvious than the subtlety that is throughout *Of Mice and Men*. It is here that Steinbeck portrays the relationship between Danny and his friends as though they are representative and characteristic of the bonds of female camaraderie as opposed to the stereotypical friendship between men, which generally tends to promote homophobia. Steinbeck removes these men from the homophobic realm by womanizing their relationship. For example, Danny becomes Pilon's caretaker by giving him a place to live. In return, Pilon strives to make meals and see to the house. These men also give each other fashion advice, gossip about the women in town and are characteristically female in their traits. In giving the men these transgender qualities, Steinbeck sets up the parameters of a homosocial and possibly homosexual relationship. This feminization of Danny and his friends sets them firmly within subordinate masculinities and leads us to examine yet another aspect of Sedgwick's queer theory in order to fully comprehend the level of homosexuality present in *Tortilla Flat*. The main characters in the novel; Danny, Pilon, Pablo, Jesus Maria and the Pirate are all homeless "Paisanos" living in the woods in the hills above Monterey, California. Because these men do not hold jobs and are minorities,

they are considered by society to be low class individuals. These leverage points (race, class, gender) are what define the level of subordinate masculinity and are the “sets of categories by which we ordinarily try to describe the divisions of human labor” (Sedgwick<sup>1</sup> 11). These divisions are what allow the hegemonic masculinities to label and thereby subjugate those they view as lesser. While this division began with the separation of genders, “gender alone [is] the most radical division of the human experience” (Sedgwick<sup>1</sup> 11), it conveniently provided a foundation for eradicating the males who were deemed unworthy of patriarchal status. In order to do this, it was necessary to give these males effeminate qualities, making them weak, powerless and thereby on the same playing field as women of the early twentieth century, thereby “expelling them from the circle of legitimacy” (Connell 79). This “equality” then with women, makes Danny and his partners “permanently feminized or objectified in relation to other men” (Sedgwick<sup>1</sup> 51).

The novel opens with Danny seeing another man, Pilon, from a distance and being attracted to him, thus he invites him in for dinner. “I looked for thee, dearest angelic friend for see, I have here two great steaks from God’s own pig, and a sack of sweet white bread. Share my bounty Pilon, little dumpling” (Steinbeck<sup>2</sup> 8). Danny’s use of pet names for Pilon instantaneously alerts the reader, that there is more to their relationship than a casual friendship. Shortly after dinner together, the two call to mind that Danny has inherited not one, but two houses from his grandfather, and so they opt to move in together. According to Connell, “Gay masculinity is the most conspicuous” aspect of the subordinate class (79). However, because of his inheritance, Danny is able to flirt with marginalized masculinity because owning two houses gives him the

appearance of wealth and therefore social status. This however, as previously stated, has no beneficial effect on his friends. While Pilon doubts Danny's intentions of providing for him, Danny makes a vow to him, much in the same fashion as one would make a martial vow: "Pilon, I swear, what I have is thine. While I have a house, thou hast a house" (Steinbeck<sup>2</sup> 11). Just as George and Lennie transition from the homosocial realm into the homosexual through George's desire to please Lennie, so also do Danny and Pilon, by Danny's vow to always provide for Pilon. Their appearance of a married couple is further expressed in the novel when Danny takes Pilon to see their home for the first time, "Pilon looked in the door. Three rooms, he said breathlessly, and a bed and a stove. We will be happy here, Danny" (Steinbeck<sup>2</sup> 13).

Shortly after Danny and Pilon settle in together, they come up with the idea of renting the other house. Since they know of no one else who could rent it, Pilon dutifully agrees to be the renter and thus in turn reciprocates Danny's asseveration to provide for him. However, as with many conjugal relationships, Pilon quickly begins to feel the pressure of his commitment to Danny. With Danny being in the position of authority over Pilon as the owner and provider of the houses (essentially assuming the role of Pilon's husband) Pilon fears that he is inadequate and not worthy of his relationship with Danny. "Poor Pilon would have paid the money if he ever had any, but he never did...Pilon was an honest man. It worried him sometimes to think of Danny's goodness and his own poverty" (Steinbeck 19). When Pilon does come across a small sum of money, he joyfully buys a gallon of wine and goes to Danny. "Pilon fell into his arms and placed everything at Danny's disposal" (Steinbeck<sup>2</sup> 19). This image of Pilon falling into Danny's arms and offering his wine, money and self for Danny's disposal gives

substance homosexual desire and cements in the reader's mind a homosexual relationship between the two friends. His "personal desire to be of service both goes with the terms of employment (renting) and at the same time testifies to a special, personal rapport between them" (Sedgwick<sup>1</sup> 69). Pilon's exuberance in being able to recompense to Danny is a sign of his desire to maintain a healthy give and take relationship and an effort to avoid the bitterness that often accompanies the individual giving more to the relationship. His eagerness (so much so as to fall into his arms) authenticates their bond of male desire and elevates them from the homosocial bond to homosexual desire. This idea is more deeply secured by the continued homosocial bonding that ensues following Pilon's gift and the drinking of the wine:

...There was a really fine fight. Danny lost a tooth and Pilon had his shirt torn off. / At last Danny got off the floor...for a little while Danny and Pilon wept over the perfidy of women. / Thou knowest what bitches women are, Danny said wisely. / I do know, said Pilon. / Thou knowest not. / I do know. (Steinbeck<sup>2</sup> 19).

This act of boisterous copulation followed by the mourning of the inadequacies of women, acquiesces to the homoerotic nature of the novel. "Apparently almost regardless of what counts as 'ruin' or what counts as 'woman' – is just the right lubricant for an adjustment of differentials of power between landlord and tenant, master and servant, tradesman and customer, or even king and his subject" (Sedgwick<sup>2</sup> 76).

Regardless of Pilon and Danny's ever strengthening bond, the tension between property and lovers, the codependency of commitment and responsibility, continued to weigh heavily on Pilon until he violates the homosocial ideal established between he and Danny by inviting in Pablo Sanchez. Pilon's goal in including Pablo Sanchez is to rent part of the house he himself is renting from Danny, thus providing a source of income

allowing him to be able to pay rent to Danny and alleviate his own guilt. Thereby being unfaithful to his relationship with Danny, to be faithful to his commitment to Danny. Steinbeck uses this situation as a parody for heterosexual relationships, showing that as absurd as Pilon's idea is, affairs are often used as excuses for stress and unhappiness in heterosexual relationships. The implication by patriarchs, that heterosexual couple is better or more pure than that of homosexuals is unfounded. Pilon and Pablo then rent part of the house to Jesus Maria Corcoran for \$15.00 a month with the same motive in mind. Here again, the subordinate masculine stereotype is exemplified through Pilon, Pablo and Jesus Maria. Each man exhibits feminine tendencies, has no form of employment and hence no wealth and are a minority, all of which makes them easily dominated over by the hegemonic. Although Pilon ostensibly intends this rent money for Danny, he ends up spending it on wine (as a gift for Danny), which indirectly—because of the drunken state into which the three men fall—leads to their burning the house to the ground. Danny however is actually relieved at the burning of the house because he is alleviated of two problems, one the responsibility of ownership of two houses, which relegated him to marginalized masculinity, separating him from his friends and two, this means Pilon will rejoin him in his own house.

He had indulged in a little conventional anger against careless friends, had mourned for a moment over that transitory quality of earthly property which made spiritual property so much more valuable. He had thought over the ruin of his status as a man with a house to rent; and, all this clutter of necessary and decent emotion having been satisfied and swept away, he had finally slipped into his true emotion, one of relief that at least one of his burdens was removed (Steinbeck<sup>2</sup> 42).

Though he feigns anger over the situation, he more enjoys the groveling and attention he receives from these men. It provides a connection between Danny, Pablo and Jesus



Maria, though initially intended as an apology, the apology quickly takes on the appearance of flirtatious foreplay.

Pilon opened the bag he held and exposed the ham sandwiches...[Danny] began having a little trouble remembering, for Pablo had taken two deviled eggs out of his bosom...Pilon pulled the pink brassiere from his pocket and let it dangle listlessly from his fingers. Danny forgot everything then (Steinbeck<sup>2</sup> 53).

Steinbeck's word choice makes the gestures seem sexual with only a slight shift of the words. Pilon "exposed" himself, Pablo touched his bosom, and then Pilon tacitly exposes lingerie. These intimations make Danny forget what he was thinking, much in the same fashion that a man who is sexually aroused would lose his focus. Pilon reentering his house, along with his flirtatious friends, also gives Danny an adequate excuse to end his relationship with his neighbor, Mrs. Morales. "Too often we are tied to women by the silk stockings we give them" (Steinbeck<sup>2</sup> 54). He is more content with himself and his male roommates, opting more for the utopian relationship with these men, rather than the often stressful and complicated relationship with a women. With Pilon, he has the security of knowing that Pilon wants to give as much back to him (Danny) as Danny wants to give to him. With Pilon, Danny knows he is not simply being used because he is a man of two houses (as was the case with Mrs. Morales), he has a roommate, who even if he can only repay him with wine, provides "just enough to promote the sweetness of comradeship" (Steinbeck<sup>2</sup> 54). The homosexual desire among these men is fueled, so to speak, by the burning of the other house. This bond created by Steinbeck is "rather than being a traditional bond, it is an explicit, ideologizing narrative about such a bond (Sedgwick<sup>1</sup> 70). On their first night of living together the men sit around the warmth of the stove, making promises to each other and Steinbeck closes the chapter with clearly feminine and homosexual thoughts from the men. "They sat around the stove with tears

in their eyes and their love for one another was almost unbearable. Pablo wiped his wet eyes with the back of his hand, and he echoed Pilon's remark. "We shall be very happy here" (Steinbeck<sup>2</sup> 56). This "unbearable love" they feel for each other, certainly does not only not disqualifies them for the "man's man" category, but it also imitates the thoughts and feelings of a young couple newly in love. These characteristically new love emotions are evidence of the new direction their relationship is taking. It seems with *Tortilla Flat* that, "every touch, every relationship, every exchange, seems to beg to be translated into sexual language – into the language of blood engorgement, of pulsing dilation of sexual fungibility" (Sedgwick<sup>1</sup> 74).

Much like any new relationship that moves to fast too soon, it is not surprising that the male utopian relationships in *Tortilla Flat* do not last. To start, what begins like a blissful orgy of men and emotions, quickly becomes a burden for all of the men. Each has his own agenda from the spending of what little money they have and each has his own idea of how the others should act. Pilon dictates to Pirate (the newest companion to the group) how he should spend his money on new clothes and dress more presentably. "Pilon looked distastefully at Pirate's dirty, ragged clothes. 'Tomorrow,' he said sternly, 'you must take the seven extra two-bitses and buy some decent clothes'" (Steinbeck<sup>2</sup> 134). This concern with appearance has historically been an attribute given to homosexual men. While Pirate accepts this criticism and does indeed go shopping, when he returns, it is only with two expensive accessories (for his already dirty clothes) instead of a new outfit. Pirate's flamboyant choices, "He came back to Danny's house in triumph, bearing a huge silk handkerchief in purple and green and also a broad belt studded profusely with colored glass jewels" (Steinbeck<sup>2</sup> 134), not only reflects typical female tendencies in the

market place, but his lack of purchasing actual clothes reflects his rebellion against Pilon's remarks. Here, Pirate's "blurring with femininity is obvious" (Connell 79).

Next, regardless of the fact that the men attempt to pretend they have equal interests in their home, legally Danny is the rightful owner of the little house and therefore higher up on the masculine hierarchy. This revisits Pilon's, and now the other men's, earlier feelings of inferiority and guilt about not being able to repay Danny for his kindness. This desire to provide for Danny leads Jesus Maria to make a promise the friends cannot possibly keep, "It shall be our burden and our duty to see that there is always food in the house for Danny...Never shall our friend go hungry" (Steinbeck<sup>2</sup> 55). This promise, though made with good intentions, brings about even more tension between the men simply because, due to their lack of employment, they are barely able to feed themselves. Food is generally a product of stealing from someone's unattended garden or conning someone out of what they have for a lesser trade. As Pilon remarks, "if this promise were enforced, it would be worse than rent. It would be slavery" (Steinbeck<sup>2</sup> 55). These feelings of guilt, resentment and anger towards each other build until they culminate together to bring the novel to an end.

Danny feels pressured by the strength of commitment that is now upon him, not only the burden of homeownership, but also of being tied long-term to the men he lives with, "Always the weight of the house was upon him; always the responsibility to his friends" (Steinbeck<sup>2</sup> 170). It is the day-to-day routine of relationship that leads him to dream of "the good old days", "The friends had sunk into a routine which might have been monotonous for anyone" (Steinbeck<sup>2</sup> 169). He begins to long for the times when he could come and go as he pleased, do as he wanted and be responsible for no one. It is

these feelings of confinement that lead Danny into a dark depression and finally madness. Finally, Danny flees the house and is nowhere to be found. While his lovers urgently seek him out, they have no success and their mourning in this is apparent, “Come, Danny, our little sugar friend, we need thee with us,” and “Where has our happiness [Danny] gone” (Steinbeck<sup>2</sup> 175). For the friends, Danny represented happiness because he was the only man that accepted these Paisanos for who they were, he invited them out hiding in their own homosexual closets, into his house and an atmosphere that allowed for the comradeship that they were getting comfortable with. Unfortunately for Danny, his friends came to represent just the opposite for him, they pushed him back into the closet and into a suffocating environment. For Danny, it was the “amorphousness of the body of ‘the sexual’ is where its power resides” (Sedgwick<sup>1</sup> 99), meaning that the lack of boundaries, the thrill of the unknown and the possibility for danger was what made his homosexual experiences invigorating. Now, he was no longer free to experiment with himself and with others and hence was destroyed by the very freedom that brought life to his friends.

However, because this profligate relationship has brought so much joy to the others, they fail to see how it could be asphyxiating to their friend. So, spurred on by rumors around Monterey of people having seen him, the friends try one desperate attempt to bring their Danny back along with the homosocial Eden that he created. Danny was the creator of their Eden and so losing him would result in the eviction of the bond between these men, thus threatened the unity of the entire group, and their future relationship together. The friends decide to throw a party for Danny to raise his spirits, show their love and bring him home. The excitement of the party whips the whole town

into a frenzy and since everyone in the small town is involved, Danny has no choice but to attend. Instead of the unifying affect that they hoped for, the party only brought about more fights, “Never had their been so many fights; not fights between two men, but roaring battles that raged through whole clots of men, each one for himself” (Steinbeck<sup>2</sup> 194). These fights lead to Danny’s death as he rages into the middle of one with the leg of a table and is then thrown forty feet down into a gulch. The death of Danny brings an end to the dream of acceptance for these men. They know that Danny’s house will be given to a nameless relative, and never again would they find a place that evoked such acceptance of their circumstance and homosexual lifestyle.

CHAPTER V  
CLOSING REMARKS

While Steinbeck may not have intended to write a novel that portrays the homosocial lifestyle in the early 1920s, both *Of Mice and Men* and *Tortilla Flat* give a clear and adequate representation of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's queer theory. Even though queering Steinbeck is still relatively fresh in the minds of critics, I believe that others, such as Kim Welter, will take a renewed interest in Steinbeck's writings in relationship to this theory. Steinbeck may have been considered simplistic in his writing due to the fact that he was well advanced in his writings for the time period. Now, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, as homosocial and homosexual arguments gain more attention in the personal, political and literary realm, Steinbeck's writing can be viewed as anything but simplistic, as queer theory poses a response to questions about his writings that have long been unanswered, and gives a revitalized perspective that could very well make John Steinbeck truly one of the most advanced and innovative American author's of our time.

## End Notes

<sup>1</sup>Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. Between Men English Literature and the Male Homosocial Desire. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985).

<sup>2</sup>Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. "The Beast in the Closet." Contemporary Literary Criticism. Ed. Robert Con Davis and Ronald Schleifer. (New York: Longman, 1994, 448- 474).

<sup>3</sup>Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. Epistemology of the Closet. (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990).

<sup>1</sup>Steinbeck, John. Of Mice and Men. New York: Penguin Books, 1993.

<sup>2</sup>Steinbeck, John. Tortilla Flat. New York: Penguin Books, 1977.

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