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The Inverted Economy of Steinbeck’s *Cannery Row* Ecology

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Abstract

Steinbeck’s propensity to explore the effects of economics is exemplified in the continually depressed economy of Cannery Row, where cash is often a rarity among the close community of “whores, pimps, gamblers, and sons of bitches,” and “[s]aints and angels and martyrs and holy men” that populate the area, leaving the denizens to find other mediums of exchange (1). An analysis of the overall economics of Cannery Row using social exchange theory, with particular attention to Doc, Mack and the boys, and Dora, reveals how Steinbeck uses the social behavior of his characters to create an inverted economic system within the context of the book and within the ecological system of Cannery Row. Doc describes this inversion of the materialist economy in his observations of Mack and the boys as “relaxed” compared to the “so-called successful men . . . with bad stomachs and bad souls” (129). The application of social exchange theory reveals how Steinbeck’s inverted economy works in the ecology of the novel on an individual basis, as with Doc’s exchanges with Hazel and Frankie; on a group basis, as with Mack and the boys; and on a business basis, as with Dora and the Bear Flag Restaurant. This inverted economy centers on people rather than wealth, relationships rather than profit margins. In Steinbeck’s novel, individuals are parts of the whole, and social exchange theory reveals the interconnectedness of a community focused on one another rather than on the material culture found outside Cannery Row.

Keywords: Cannery Row, social exchange theory, inverted economy, John Steinbeck, George Homans, alternative economy
Many of John Steinbeck’s novels reflect the author’s propensity to explore the effects of economics both on individual characters and on society as a whole. The most famous example is *The Grapes of Wrath*, where Steinbeck uses circumstances surrounding the Joad family to explore the societal situation facing migrant workers in California. Another example occurs in the continually depressed economy of Steinbeck’s *Cannery Row*, where cash is often a rarity among the close community that populates the area—those whom Steinbeck facetiously dubs “whores, pimps, gamblers, and sons of bitches” or “saints and angels and martyrs and holy men”—leaving the denizens to find other mediums of exchange (i). Because much of Steinbeck’s work hinges on how economics affects individuals in society, a fuller understanding of those works requires a theoretical lens that focuses on people as well as economic factors. Social exchange theory, as articulated by George Homans in “Social Behavior as Exchange” that he and others later expand, explains the dynamics of relationships by observing how human behavior, as well as material goods, may be traded as a commodity between and among members of a group. Using the economic formula of profit equals reward minus cost (P=R-C), this theory suggests a person’s motives when acting within the group (603).

Therefore, social exchange theory may be utilized as a lens to understand relationships in literature, or as a tool to discover information not readily available to the casual reader. *Cannery Row*, to illustrate, provides a plethora of material with which to explore a mimetic, or life-like, application of Homans’s theory, giving insight into the inner workings of the small group of characters living on Cannery Row. Paying particular attention to Doc, Mack and the boys, and Dora, an analysis of this novel reveals how Steinbeck uses the social behavior of his characters to create an inverted economic system within the context of the book and within the ecological system of *Cannery Row*. Additionally, an analysis shows that Steinbeck’s concern with the effect of economic systems is not limited to works such as *In Dubious Battle* or *Grapes of Wrath*, in which economics is a key focal point. *Cannery Row* also models a system in which relationships within the group—the behavioral exchange—take precedence over material gain.

Before analyzing characters on the Row, an explanation of social exchange theory gives the reader a general understanding of the major precepts of Homans’s work. Then, a short discussion of the inverse nature of the novel as a whole indicates how the inverted economics of *Cannery Row* functions
consistently within the text. Social exchange theory is used extensively to understand business relationships, and Jason Colquitt and others maintain that it is “one of the most oft-evoked theories in industrial and organizational psychology” (12). Indeed, two of the subgroups on the Row—Mack and the boys and Dora and the girls at the Bear Flag—may be thought of in terms of their organizational structure. Using an amalgam of sociological, behavioral, and economic theories, which inform his view of social behavior as exchange, Homans examines relationships and presents his most important observations as propositions, or suggestive statements of what a social exchange theory should contain:

1. Social behavior is an exchange of goods, material goods but also non-material ones, such as the symbols of approval or prestige.
2. Persons that give much to others try to get much from them, and persons that get much from others are under pressure to give much to them.
3. This process of influence tends to work out at equilibrium to a balance in the exchanges.
4. For a person engaged in exchange, what he gives may be a cost to him, just as what he gets may be a reward, and his behavior changes less as profit, that is, reward less cost, tends to a maximum.
5. Not only does he seek a maximum for himself, but he tries to see to it that no one in his group makes more profit than he does.
6. The cost and the value of what he gives and of what he gets vary with the quantity of what he gives and gets. (“Exchange” 606, numeration added)
These statements work as the basis of social exchange theory, and I will clarify other important social exchange concepts that contribute to the investigation of Cannery Row throughout this study.

Several scholars explicate Steinbeck's works by basing their analyses on the economics of the particular text in question, and Cannery Row is no exception. However, most view the primary focal point of this novel to be its ecological principles, which, like the analogous tide pool, fits the general definition of ecosystem as the interconnectedness of the living creatures with one another and with their environments (d'Eaubonne 178). Susan Beegel observes that the focus of the novel is more about humans’ relationships with one another and with their habitat than about their lifestyles: “The characters in Steinbeck’s fiction are also intimately related to one another in the ecological web of interrelationships we call economy” (18). The connections, therefore, among personal relationships, ecological systems, and economics are noteworthy; and Homans’s theory suggests that they are all interrelated concepts within small group interaction. Thus, social exchange theory as a means by which to understand the inverted economy, or economics of behavior, in Cannery Row is an important addition to Steinbeck studies because it considers such group relationships. Economics of behavior thus posits a system in which the interrelationships between and among members of a group are more important than monetary or material exchanges. While Homans's theory includes both material and behavioral exchanges, in Cannery Row, Steinbeck inverts the status quo of the materialism to create an ecological pool based on behavioral exchanges. The shift in emphasis from material wealth to relational interaction in this novel, then, is an inversion of the economic system of the United States during Steinbeck's times. For while a capitalist economy has as its basis monetary and material gain, the economy of behavior that Steinbeck creates is based on the functioning of relationships and the value placed on individuals as part of a greater whole.

Social exchange theory—including the economics of behavior, the interconnectedness of individuals within a group, and both material and non-material goods—shows how group behavior functions in terms of economics, ecology, and the multitude of exchanges working within the Cannery Row community. Additionally, the exchanges of behavior that Homan suggests serve to reflect the types of relationships found in Cannery Row. That is, in exchange for their association with the group, individuals have to pay a price; simultaneously, they receive rewards for that association. Watts and Smith state that several writers (Steinbeck among them) recommend particular economic behavior (299). Opposed to the capitalist culture outside the Row, in Cannery Row, Steinbeck sets forth a new economic system based on the relationships between and among
the residents of the community and how they relate to their environment both as individuals and as a group. A conversation between Doc and Richard Frost serves to describe this inversion of the status quo, suggesting that in an inverted system admired behaviors and traits are rewarded:

“It has always seemed strange to me,” said Doc. “The things we admire in men, kindness and generosity, openness, honesty, understanding and feeling are the concomitants of failure in our system. And those traits we detest, sharpness, greed, acquisitiveness, meanness, egotism and self-interest are the traits of success. And while men admire the quality of the first they love the produce of the second.”

... Everywhere in the world are Mack and the boys. ... You know how they tried to give me a party and something went wrong. But they wanted to give me a party. That was their impulse.” (131)

Here Steinbeck signals the possibility of a system in which that “impulse,” the desire to give, along with other noble traits, outweighs the disastrous results and material loss of their efforts. Mack and the boys feel the effects of failure, but Doc clearly has gotten past the shock of the destruction (132). While Mack and the boys are never portrayed as innocents, in the inverted economic system of Cannery Row, “the leading characters are wholly natural men who resist the growing threat posed by the acquisitive brand of American” (Astro, “Trilogy” 114). Although several of the characters in Cannery Row attempt to improve their living situations—Mack and the boys with the fishmeal warehouse, the Malloys with their boiler, Henri with his continually redesigned boat, and the gopher with his hole—no improvement is a detriment to others in the community.

Jacqueline Tavernier-Courbin extends this idea of an inverted system, maintaining that the satire of both Tortilla Flat and Cannery Row relies on Steinbeck’s “inversion of the logic of traditional morality and social expectations, which assumes that respectable people are better human beings than disreputable ones” (51). Steinbeck exemplifies this inversion with the flu epidemic of Chapter Sixteen in which Dora, the madam of the Bear Flag Restaurant and brothel, supplies both sustenance and personnel to assist families who have been rejected by local medical doctors (89). The prostitutes, who are of much lower social status than the doctors, provide the care needed in their community, indicating an ecological interdependence of behavior among the Row’s residents. The ecology of Cannery Row requires each individual to fulfill a function as part of the whole in both giving and taking, in paying a cost to be part of the group,
and in receiving material and behavioral rewards as part of the process. For Steinbeck’s *Cannery Row* residents, societal rules are ineffectual, requiring for happiness a rejection of societal norms and expectations, which function most places outside the inverted ecology of the novel (Benson 251–252). The details of those inverted economics, in which the interaction of individuals is more important than rules and propriety, are perhaps best seen by applying Homans’s social exchange theory to the behaviors of the characters in *Cannery Row*.

Behavior as exchange is prevalent throughout *Cannery Row* among several of the residents—in particular Doc, the protagonist; Lee Chong, the grocer; Mack and the boys; and Dora at the Bear Flag Restaurant. Doc is a marine biologist who, it seems, is initially attracted to the Row because of its proximity to the tide pool where he gathers specimens for sale and study. Early in the novel, the narrator describes him as an essential ecological presence of intrinsic value and as one related to the other residents:

Over a period of years Doc dug himself into *Cannery Row* to an extent not even he suspected. He became the fountain of philosophy and science and art. In the laboratory the girls from Dora’s heard the Plain Songs and Gregorian music for the first time. Lee Chong listened while Li Po was read to him in English. . . . Everyone who knew him was indebted to him. And everyone who thought of him thought next, “I really must do something nice for Doc.” (Steinbeck 23)

That felt obligation of “must do something nice” is at the heart of Steinbeck’s novel as well as Homans’s social exchange theory, in which he maintains, “Persons that get much from others are under pressure to give much to them” (606). Doc is more highly educated than any other Row resident and, more importantly, he is always willing to share the benefits of his education; hence, the quality of what he offers in an exchange situation is rare and, therefore, more valuable than what others can offer to him. Still, his willingness to provide a valuable commodity creates pressure because group members want to balance the exchange.

Doc sometimes employs Mack and the boys to assist his collecting efforts, and Chapter Six, in which Doc receives an order for three hundred starfish, exemplifies how the P=R−C exchange of material and non-material goods between group members creates profit within the ecology of the Row. Doc hires Hazel to assist him, and Doc’s profit in this particular exchange is monetary since he will sell the specimens to Northwestern University (27). Hazel, however, receives other rewards in the exchange in addition to whatever money Doc pays him. First, he loves hearing the “tone of conversation,” though he
wishes to avoid speaking, and Doc provides this “tone” as they work. Also, he gets “six or seven undersized abalones,” which he will carry back to the Palace Flophouse and Grill for Mack and the boys (29). These rewards, however, do not come without costs. Not only does Hazel exchange his time and work, but he must feign conversation in the form of questions in order to receive the “tone of conversation” from Doc—thereby raising the possibility that he be required to fulfill the obligations of conversation beyond the prompting questions that he prefers. Doc also pays a cost in the exchange other than the monetary payment for an assistant; for, if Hazel is caught, the abalones will be credited to Doc’s permit with the possibility that the game warden will fine him for over-collecting or perhaps even revoke his permit. In this exchange, Doc accepts the fact that Hazel takes more than is authorized—a reflection of Ricketts’s non-teleological acceptance of what is (Astro, Shaping 38).

This activity also extends to the larger ecology of the community, for Hazel takes “six or seven” of the illegal abalones rather than a great many of them, suggesting that he wants only enough to feed the people currently residing at the Palace Flophouse, a number that fluctuates. Doc, however, takes only those starfish needed for research (29). By limiting themselves to what is needed, the individuals involved in the exchange—Hazel and Doc—are also involved with keeping the tide pool as an integral part of the Cannery Row ecology. Although Steinbeck does not suggest that the pool itself is a sentient being, it plays a reciprocal role by providing sustenance to the Row and by receiving the protection of personal limitation from Doc and Hazel. The extended community of Lee Chong’s grocery and the Palace Flophouse residents also profit from Doc and Hazel’s exchange, and the pool is left intact for future use.

While social exchange theory reveals the intricacies of exchange between Doc and Hazel, it also exposes the motives behind an individual’s actions. Tavernier-Courbin points out that Doc, Dora, and her prostitutes, act selflessly during the influenza outbreak (54). And Doc’s relationship with Frankie suggests that Doc’s non-teleological thinking concerning particular circumstances, such as Hazel’s illegal abalones, also extends to individuals; for he accepts the fact that Frankie is unable to perform well even the most rudimentary of tasks, such as sweeping (Steinbeck 50). Doc incurs costs in his relationship with Frankie through money for clothing and food, as well as time spent teaching him basic hygiene and ways to help in the lab. In return, Doc receives Frankie’s love and devotion. These emotional rewards, however, are not enough to enable Doc to sustain the relationship. The real reward, unstated in the novel, is Homans’s “symbols of approval and prestige,” which come as Doc fulfills his role as the “supernatural presence” in place of the prayers available to

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characters in other Steinbeck novels: “When there is a need a call goes through to Doc” (Homans 606; Timmerman 165–166). Homans asserts that “behavior changes less as profit . . . tends to a maximum”; and when Frankie serves the single beer and makes the girl smile, Doc is rewarded by being regarded a “fine fellow,” as Mack first identifies him (Homans 606; Steinbeck 8). As a result of Frankie’s action, Doc is able to brag, “Frankie is a great help to me” (52). At this point in the relationship, Doc’s profit is greater than his costs. Nevertheless, when disaster strikes, first in the form of spilled beer and later in the act of theft, the costs to Doc for his relationship with Frankie outweigh the profit, and the “behavior,” that is, the continuation of their relationship, must change. Although Doc suggests to the police chief that Frankie be paroled to him, he does not argue against the “heavy stone of inevitability” (160), for he is true to the cruel ecology of the tide pool and the non-teleological acceptance of what is. He accepts, then, the court’s decision to “put [Frankie] away”—a complex exchange, in which Doc incurs additional costs of loneliness and isolation but profits because the future ecology of the Row is protected from “what’s likely to happen when [Frankie] comes into puberty” (160–161).

Much of the behavior as exchange involves Mack and the boys—a small subgroup within the Cannery Row community—and their behavior frequently centers on doing something for Doc, “something nice,” as Mack, who is “the elder, leader, mentor, and to a small extent the exploiter” of the Palace Flophouse group explains it (36; 5). The Flophouse situation exemplifies Homans’s point that the “process of influence tends to work out at equilibrium to a balance in the exchanges” (606); Mack exchanges his leadership abilities for the right to exploit those he leads. He exhibits his value to his group by exploiting those outside of it, as in the attainment of the fishmeal warehouse later named the Palace Flophouse and Grill. The warehouse belongs to Lee Chong, and Mack suggests to Lee that they could “Move in and keep up the place,” adding that this would stop kids from breaking windows or burning it down. Lee perceives this request as a veiled threat, expecting that if he denies it, then Mack and the boys may break out the windows before asking again to move in (6). They agree to five dollars a week rent, both knowing it will never be paid. However, Lee Chong does not lose in the exchange. Not only does he gain protection for the building, but when they have money, Mack and the boys spend it at his grocery. Additionally, their security services protect the store from any drunk or group of kids who start trouble. Finally, “One further bond it established—you cannot steal from a benefactor. The saving to Lee Chong in cans of beans and tomatoes and milk and watermelons more than paid the rent” (7). Also, Lee’s competitors experience a sudden “increased leakage” of goods (8). By his skills
in persuasion, Mack bargains for a much better place for him and the boys to live other than the large pipes or canopy of limbs that they previously occupied, and both Lee Chong and Mack and the boys profit from the exchange.

Mack's value can also be seen in his ability to negotiate and lie. Mack and the boys go on an expedition to gather several hundred frogs, for which Doc will give them a nickel per frog. The purpose of the money is to throw a party for Doc, which the text suggests Mack believes will help alleviate the loneliness that Doc feels even with a group of friends or a lover. For transportation, Mack negotiates the use of Lee Chong's truck by offering to have Gay, a gifted mechanic described as the “little mechanic of God, . . . the St. Francis of coils and armatures and gears,” repair the truck, with the reasoning that Doc is such a nice fellow, and his friends ought to do something for him (57). Lee feels pressure because, as the narrator makes clear later in the novel, “Lee was indebted to Doc—deeply indebted” (106). In this instance, Lee Chong contributes the use of his truck, a cost to him as it risks the possibility that Mack and the boys might never bring it back. But the reward is two-fold: he does something nice for Doc, helping to ameliorate an off-balance exchange, and he gets his truck repaired. Mack and the boys return Lee's truck along with a better carburetor courtesy of Eddie, who shows his value to the group as a thief by obtaining a battery and, after the truck breaks down again, the replacement carburetor.

Mack's skills in negotiating and lying are displayed again in the exchange with the land owner, the captain, after they arrive at their destination, set up camp, and eat a wandering chicken; the owner of the property appears with dog and shotgun to send them away. Mack immediately apologizes and compliments the owner, who has been a captain in the armed services: “You are a military man, aren't you sir? I can always tell” (73). Mack guesses correctly, and the slouching owner straightens but does not back down. Mack agrees that they will leave immediately but takes time to explain that the frogs will help scientists cure cancer. He also compliments the captain's dog, comparing her to Nola, the bitch that won a recent competition in Virginia. Mack suggests a cure for the dog's lame leg, and the captain invites the group to hunt frogs at the pond by his house, where frogs are more plentiful. The behavior that Steinbeck's characters exhibit here reflects Homans's suggestion that individuals feel pressure to equalize an exchange, which eventually “tends to work out at equilibrium to a balance in the exchanges” (606).

Mack compliments the owner, never acts offensively, and gives sound advice about the dog. The owner, in turn, feels pressure to give something in return. Once Mack and the owner have left to treat the dog, the boys discuss Mack in tones of admiration, pointing out that he “could have been president of the U.S.
if he wanted” (75). The captain's wife is away, and he is lonely, a major theme in
the novel; Mack is not a person to pass up the opportunity to take advantage
of a situation. Once Mack works his way into the house, he heaps praise on the
captain, the dog, and her puppies until the captain offers Mack the pick of the
litter. And here, “the captain seemed to feel that they were doing him a favor.
He didn’t want them to leave” (81). The captain is willing, in exchange for some
small amount of fellowship, to allow a group of bums into his home. The captain
offers whiskey that he had purchased during prohibition and hidden from his
wife. He starts to explain but does not have to continue because “it was apparent
that they understood” (82). The captain has been lacking the companionship
he now receives from Mack and the boys and is willing to trade his material
goods for the more valuable, yet non-material, camaraderie that he lacks. In
the totality of the exchange, the captain receives the needed companionship,
which costs him in material goods, including the curtains and towels that catch
fire while they are drunk. Mack and the boys are temporarily ensconced in the
captain's home, serving to highlight, by juxtaposition to the captain's loneliness,
Steinbeck's inverted definition of success, wherein characters “sacrifice physical
security to satisfy psychic needs” (Meyer 55). According to the narrator, “It was
doubtful whether the captain ever had so much fun. He was indebted to Mack
and the boys” (85). Mack, however, predicts that the greatest cost to the captain
will come in the next morning: “He's going to wake up feelin' lousy and it's
going to be all our fault” (85). In leaving before the captain wakes, Mack avoids
the costs associated with his actions, and he profits with a gallon of the bootleg
whisky, a puppy, several hundred frogs, and, on the non-material side, enjoy-
ment. As he says, “I don’t think I ever had such a fine trip” (86).

After returning to the Row, Mack and the boys throw Doc a party—even
though Doc does not arrive in time to enjoy it. In the process of the party, Doc's
lab is destroyed, and he has to take out a loan to replace his glassware. Mack
and the boys pay a price as they are ostracized, temporarily, from the other
community members, and “a black gloom settled over the Palace Flophouse”
(127). Homans identifies this phenomenon in his discussion of the “influence
process,” wherein a group exerts pressure on deviant members by withholding
sociologically valuable rewards (intrinsic or extrinsic) and minimizes interac-
tion with those members (599–600). Mack and the boys lose the frogs, which
they had traded to Lee Chong for food and alcohol for the party; therefore,
they cannot go to his store for groceries. When Mack goes to discuss the sit-
cuation with Dora, she meets him at the door with a cold greeting and terse
responses. Even though Doc is unaware of their ongoing punishment, the entire
community blames Mack and the boys because “they couldn't do a thing like

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that to Doc,” but the situation eventually returns, as Homans would predict, to equilibrium in the exchange among the group members (128).

Dora, the madam of the Bear Flag Restaurant, and her girls represent another subgroup within the Cannery Row ecology, and they are a significant part of the community. Robert Morsberger discusses the Bear Flag as a “necessary part of the ecosystem” and labels Dora as a “public servant satisfying men’s natural needs” (43). Steinbeck indicates the Bear Flag’s importance to the community in the discussion of the flu epidemic; however, he shows that Dora’s importance in the economic system reaches beyond the smaller Cannery Row community and into the greater Monterey area. Dora, as proprietor of an illegal business, must be “twice as law abiding as anyone else” because of the type of her business, a brothel (Steinbeck 12). Homans indicates that “The cost and the value of what [a person in an exchange] gives and of what he gets vary with the quantity of what he gives and gets” (606). The separation of cost and value is important in Dora’s case, for even though she may give more, by paying a higher cost in terms of exchange than other businesses in the area, the value of her giving is less because of her lower status in the larger community:

Also being illegal Dora must be especially philanthropic. Everyone puts the bite on her. If the police give a dance for their pension fund and everyone else gives a dollar, Dora has to give fifty. When the Chamber of Commerce improved its gardens, the merchants each gave five dollars but Dora was asked for and gave a hundred. With everything else it is the same, Red Cross, Community Chest, Boy Scouts. . . . (Steinbeck 12)

The quantity of Dora’s contributions to those outside the Row must be greater than others because the value of her contributions do not carry the same weight as those from other businesses. Furthermore, she supplied groceries for the children and many families of the Row during the depression to the point of near bankruptcy (12–13). Dora is generous outside the Row community because she must be to remain in business, but she is generous inside the Row community because those relationships are more valuable to her than any monetary gain she may accumulate.

The Bear Flag’s wider economic influence, however, is understood best through an attempt by a “group of high-minded ladies” whose concern was the morality involved (133). After a two-week closure, the ladies were warned against possible economic consequences to the town of Monterey. The same principle that forces Doc to end his relationship with Frankie causes the “high-minded
ladies” to retreat from their crusade to close the Bear Flag because the Monterey community profits from its relationship with Dora and the Bear Flag Restaurant, and this relationship will continue until that profit is reduced.

Not only does Steinbeck use the Bear Flag to explore the economic exchange in Cannery Row, as well as within the greater Monterey area, but, as Stephen George and Luchen Li suggest, he also probes “the negotiation of values between mainstream America and its subcultures” (xii). In his “Business, Sex, and Ethics in The Wayward Bus,” Joseph Allegritti states that “Steinbeck’s critique of American business and business ethics is intensified by the subtle way he weaves together threads of business, sexuality, and power” (161). Whereas the sexual relationships in The Wayward Bus are “often brutal,” Steinbeck presents no explicit picture of sexual relations in Cannery Row (161). However, Steinbeck shows an overt relationship between prostitution and the community through Dora’s philanthropic efforts and the reference to the “one commodity that Lee Chong did not keep” (1). The more “subtle” weaving of sex and business comes in the form of traffic from “the city officials and prominent businessmen who came in the rear entrance back by the tracks and who had little chintz sitting rooms assigned to them” (88). Besides the back door frequency, the greater economic relationship is revealed through the closure efforts as business owners outside the Row area are forced to make revelations to their spouses concerning their business ties to Dora and the Bear Flag. These connections are part of the ecology of Cannery Row, the interconnectedness that Homans indicates in his discussion of “practical equilibrium,” in which “the more closely a member’s activity conforms to the norms the more interaction he receives from other members” (600). Because “Steinbeck enjoys inverting the logic of traditional morality,” Dora is protected from those “high-minded ladies” whose behavior is outside the norms of the Cannery Row culture and their own families’ business practices (Morsberger 39).

The application of Homans’s theory reveals how the inverted economy works in the ecology of the Cannery Row on an individual basis, as with Doc’s exchanges with Hazel and Frankie; on a group basis, as with Mack and the boys; and on a business basis, as with Dora and the Bear Flag Restaurant. Even though an application of social exchange theory opposes the pure non-teleological thinking that Marilyn McEntyre describes as “a way of understanding the natural and thence the social world independent of the causal relations and presumed purposes we so readily posit,” an understanding of how relationships function in Steinbeck’s work is important to this field of study because Steinbeck’s inverted system, his economy of behavior, centers on people rather than wealth, relationships rather than profit margins. In Cannery Row, individuals are parts
of the whole, and social exchange theory reveals the interconnectedness not only of those on the Row, but the Row’s interaction with the surrounding area as well, suggesting a still greater ecology.

This novel is a call to intellectuals like Doc, or like Ed Ricketts on whom Doc is based, to come away from the traditional economies and ecologies and to come away as Emersons, Whitmans, and Thoreaus to a practiced balance of self-reliance and communal interdependence. Doc’s second party is an act of redemption, one “with an ecology based on cooperation and generosity, returning Cannery Row to a point of what Homans calls “practical equilibrium,” wherein the community works out a balance in their exchanges (Beegel 19; Homans 600). Homans looks at behavior in group settings as exchange systems, as economies that can be measured and charted, although he also points out that “human nature will break in upon even our most elaborate theories” (606). Steinbeck, on the other hand, suggests an economy of behavior—an alternative to the material culture popular outside the Row—suggesting that outside economic ties are necessary for the insular ecology to function. He proposes a place where attributes such as “kindness and generosity, openness, honesty” belong to Mack and the boys because “honesty” is a person’s revealing his or her true self rather than sneaking in the back door of the Bear Flag (131; 88). And “generosity” is embodied in a person like Dora—whose efforts at good are ignored or abused because of where that good originates. And “kindness” is when an able person like Doc, who could increase his monetary profits elsewhere, accepts the “what is” of his situation and makes himself an important part of the ecology in a place like Cannery Row.

**Works Cited**


