

A Comprehensive Analysis of Steinbeck's *Cup of Gold*

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Abstract

Steinbeck Cup of Gold begins by page two to discuss Morgan's early career and plans for capturing Panama. He provides general background for his specific story of Morgan; the century old struggle between Spain and England for the new world and the colonization of their possessions in the West Indies. The rest of the story describes the gathering of the forces, the invasion, the looting and destruction of the city, and Morgan's meeting and parting with the lady in *InfraRed*. *Cup of Gold* is the first work known for thematic structure, character, symbols and imagery. This article explores the detailed analysis of *Cup of Gold* as a seminal novel.

Keywords: Destruction, Invasion, Panama, Seminal, Struggle

Steinbeck's first published novel, *Cup of Gold: A Life of Henry Morgan*, Buccaneer, with Occasional reference to History, appeared in August, 1929, under the Robert M. McBride imprint. The novel was greatly expanded and often revised of a short story written several years before, entitled *A Lady in Infra-Red: Being the Sad Story of Piracy Unrequited*. Steinbeck worked his way on a freighter to New York and back again, visiting Panama, the *Cup of Gold* of his novel, on a way. On his return to California, he lived for two years in the Lake Tahoe area, supporting himself with odd jobs and serving as caretaker during the winter months at Fallen Leaf Lodge, where he wrote and rewrote his first novel. By his twenty-sixth birthday, Steinbeck completed *Cup of Gold*.

Fifteen-year-old Henry Morgan lives in Cambria in the Welsh Glens with his father Old Robert, and his grandmother Gwennifer. On a cold winter night, Dafydd, their former farmhand who went away to sea years ago, returns rich and cold. He is forced like the ancient mariner to tell his tale before he returns once more to the jungle in the West Indies.

When Henry tells his father that he too must leave his valley now, Robert insists that he first visit Merlin on his Crag-top, tell him his plans, and listen to his advice. Merlin pleads for the wild black hills of Cambria, the hills of a million mysteries where great Arthur lived. Henry assures him that he will return to the hills he too loves when he is whole again. Merlin replies:

You are a little boy. You want the moon to drink from as a golden cup; and so, it is very likely that you will become a great man – if only you remain a little child. All the world's great have been little boys who wanted the moon; running and climbing, they sometimes caught a firefly. (48)

On the way back, Henry goes to the hut where Elizabeth, a small girl with yellow hair, lives with her father, a poor tenant. Drawn yet repelled by Elizabeth, Henry whistles, sees her at the window and runs. When he reaches home, his mother forbids him to leave Cambria; but his father gives him five pounds and a letter to his uncle, Sir Edward, who lives in Jamaica. Gwenliana prophesies that Henry will shed blood, sack cities, plunder, govern, and marry “a white-souled maiden of mighty rank.” (76) That night Henry commits his first cowardice, leaving for Cardiff before morning to avoid saying goodbye to his mother and father.

In Cardiff, a sailor bound for Barbados takes Henry to his ship where he is permitted to work in the galley to help pay for his passage. Henry is sold at Barbados, however for a five – year term as an indentured slave to James Flower, an inefficient, kind old planter. He makes Henry his companion and teaches him Latin, Greek, and Hebrew as they read books in his library. After two years Henry becomes the overseer, then the master of the plantation, merciless in his power. At eighteen, grown and strong, he has paid himself a secret horde of golden coins as a sort of commission for his success. He buys a ship to carry produce to Jamaica, launches it and goes to sea. When he returns, he brings Paulette, a sensuous, passionate beauty, as house servant and mistress.

On the fourth Christmas, Flowers gives Henry the torn fragments of his indenture papers as gift, announces that Henry is no longer his servant but his son, and offers him half his plantation now and all on his death. Henry replies however, that he must goadventurer and sails for Port Royal, where his uncle, a strutting counterpart of Henry’s real father, is Lieutenant Governor. Sir Edward’s daughter Elizabeth, a proud pretty girl, appears briefly between practice sessions on her harp. Henry reveals his buccaneering plans and asks for financial help. Sir Edward refuses and warns Henry that he will have to punish him if he is caught marauding. That night Henry meets the buccaneer Griffio and buys a half interest in his ship, but all of her command.

They capture four vessels before they reach Tortuga, where the mighty buccaneer Mansfeldt makes Morgan vice-admiral of his fleet. When

Mansfeldt is lost at sea, Morgan becomes the paramount leader of the Spanish Main, sailing the ocean for ten years, fighting, plundering and burning. Though he gains the adulation of his brotherhood, he is not content, for he is lonely in his glory, despising the men who fawn on him. He now hears the rumour of La Santa Roja, the mysterious Red Saint of Panama, “the quest of every man’s heart” and “a new virgin for their worship” (98). In need of a friend to talk to and trust, Henry selects young Coeur de Gris from among his followers and tells him of his long-lost Elizabeth, now the daughter of an Earl in his embellished story. But the Circle-like voice of the Red Saint coaxes, mocks, jeers, and cozens Henry until he forgets the sea, while he buccaneers, penniless in their long inactivity, he about the ships and curse their caption for a dreaming fool as he struggles in the meshes of his fantasy.

Meanwhile, his uncle, suffering from mortal battle wounds, tells his daughter that her cousin Henry should take care of her, since he leaves her little money. Back in Cambria, fifteen years after Henry’s departure, Old Robert visits Merlin, carrying the rumours about Henry’s great deeds. “so he has come to be the great man he thought he wanted to be,” Merlin muses. “If this is true, then he is not a man. He is still a little boy and wants the moon” (108).

When Panamanians hear of Morgan’s threatened invasion, they treasure and prepare to rebuff the marauders, chiefly by gathering ten thousand wild bulls to stampede upon the approaching horde. Morgan, meanwhile, sends messages over the Spanish Main, promising unlimited plunder to every man who joins the conquest. After Morgan leads his forces towards Panama for nine exhausting days with little food, he begins to wonder why he wished to conquer the city. When Coeurde Gris tells him that he wants the woman, not Panama, Morgan replies: “You cannot understand my yearning. It is as though I strove for some undreamed peace. This woman is the harbour of all my questing. I do not think of her as a female thing with arms and breasts, but as a moment of peace after turmoil, a perfume after rancid filth” (128). Coeur de Gris assures him that all men have the same desires, even the little epileptic cockney following behind.

As they approach the city, the Panamanian troop ride headlong into a swamp, then loose the bulls to trample the robbers. Morgan's men fire into the herd and it stampedes in terror and annihilates the Spanish ranks. Now the Cup of Gold lies helpless before Morgan.

As the men rampage and loot and the city burns, Morgan asks wearily for the Red Saint. At dawn, she enters the Hall of Audience as Henry awakes in the serpent chair; she tells him that she is Ysobel, whom he has sought. Shocked at her appearance hair black as obsidian, opaque eyes, a sharp, almost hawklike face, Henry remembers his fair Elizabeth. Drawn and yet repelled by Ysobel, he nevertheless announces: "You must marry me, Elizabeth ... Ysobel. I think I love you, Ysobel" (141). She informs him that she is satisfactorily married, but Morgan is undeterred by those dull circumstances. Ysobel taunts him: "I am tired of these words that never change. Is there some books with which aspiring lovers instruct themselves?" (143). Henry leaves the Palace and, in his frustration, kills the Cockney. He returns for another encounter with Ysobel and she battles with him, stabbing him with a pen as she defends herself against his advances. When Coeur de Gris, who has been with Ysobel on the previous night, previous night, appears and asks Henry if she has capitulated, Henry kills him. A messenger arrives with an offer of ransom from Ysobel's husband for her return.

Henry, "sick with a disease called mediocrity," now desires nothing but peace and time to "ponder imponderables." He receives the money for Ysobel's ransom and informs her the henceforth he will be gallant for two reasons only money and advancement. Having decided that money is his anchor, his security and comfort, he makes plans to keep all the Panama plunder for himself. With the treasure stored in one ship, he supplies kegs of rum for the men on the beach, disables the other ships, and puts out to sea alone with the riches.

When Morgan arrives at Port Royal, a great crowd gives him a hero's welcome and takes him to the Governor, who informs him that they are both ordered to England. Before they leave, Elizabeth flatters, cajoles, and finally tricks Henry into marriage. In England, Morgan, too popular a figure to punish, is knighted instead by Charles II, who

appoints him Lieutenant – Governor of Jamaica with instructions to stop all piracy.

Back to Port Royal, Henry sentences two of his old pirate followers to be hanged. One gives him a talisman, a rose pearl, as a gift for his wife, now a harassing, intimidating, pestering scold. Soon the victim of an unexplained disease, Henry is confronted on his deathbed by his faceless sins until they cower and bow before an approaching form. Elizabeth, little Elizabeth from Cambria with her glowing hair. Elizabeth is replaced by a smoulder ash who speaks to Morgan as both expire to the accompaniment of a great tone.

Conclusion

Cup of Gold is an early novel by John Steinbeck, and his the use language and imagery is remarkable in describing the unique and exciting life of this intriguing historical figure. The *Cup of Gold* is eventually won by Henry at the end. When Henry enters the palace, he directs his troops to search out La Santa Roja. Henry is anxious that Coeur de Gris, who disappeared, has discovered her first. When Henry is finally acquainted with the lovely Ysobel, he is astonished by how distinct she is also from his fantasy.

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