Of Titles and Texts – a Study of Two Allusive Titles: Of Mice and Men and Nectar in a Sieve

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**SYNOPSIS**

The thesis investigates the nature of the allusive links that exist between the novel *Of Mice and Men* by John Steinbeck and the poem “To a Mouse” by Robert Burns, and *Nectar in a Sieve* by Kamala Markandaya and the poem “Work without Hope” by Samuel T. Coleridge, as both novels have their titles taken from the respective poems. This fact makes one wonder what the significance of such allusive titles is. Are the titles chosen more or less for decorative purposes, or do important links of, for instance, theme and message connect the poems and the novels? What is the nature of the existing links? Four analyses of the four works are presented, and several critics are cited.

The conclusion is that close links do exist. The link between *Of Mice and Men* and “To a Mouse” is a parallel one: the message of the novel that the two main characters’ dream of owning a farm, is crushed and is thus an enactment of the a central line of the poem: “The best-laid schemes of Mice and Men Gang aft agley.” Furthermore, the works share features of deviating language and a tone of tender compassion. The link between Markandaya’s novel and “its” poem, is more complex. Objectively considered the novel is an exemplification of the many futile attempts of the main character and this corresponds closely to the title *Nectar in a Sieve*. But in addition to this parallelism there is also a “reversed link”, one of opposition, since the novel depicts a narrator whose spirit is not defeated, whereas the poem, on the other hand, presents a severely depressed speaker longing for his previous, poetic fame. One difference between the works seems to be that the character of the novel has an unwavering faith in God whereas the speaker of the poem has religious doubts. In both pairs of works, the close links enrich and strengthen both the works.
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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

“One must not worry about whether a work of art will last, but whether it has planted seeds that give birth to other things. An artwork must be fertile. It must give birth to a world.”

Miró

A search on the internet for “book titles” will readily produce a list of 165 book titles that are quotations from literary works. Even though such a list is only a partial one and for instance excludes numerous Shakespearian allusions, a count of the various literary genres might give a slight indication of what type of literature authors have tended to select when opting for an allusive title. In almost sixty percent of the cases, 97 instances, the book titles have been taken from poems and this is a significantly high number. In almost twenty percent of the cases the source is religious whereas the remaining titles, around twenty percent, have other genres as their origin, such as plays or prose. The examples of allusions to poems are thus many: The title of the play Alien Corn by Sidney Howard is taken from the poem “Ode to a Nightingale” by John Keats. And the short story “The Alien Corn” by W. Somerset Maugham is naturally taken from the same source. The phrase “Amid the alien corn” describes someone who is in unfamiliar surroundings as described in the Bible in The Book of Ruth. Michael Morpurgo’s work Alone on a Wide, Wide Sea borrows its title from “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” by Samuel Taylor Coleridge. George Bernard Shaw’s Arms and the Man is based on “The
Aeneid” by Virgil, and As I Lay Dying by William Faulkner comes from “The Odyssey” by Homer. The list could easily have been made longer.

One list of a mere 165 titles naturally cannot convey any decisive truth about authors´ preferences when selecting an allusive title. Nevertheless it makes one wonder what functions the allusions have. My view is that they cannot be selected simply because they represent memorable and famous lines. The allusions probably also serve other purposes such as conveying contrasting themes, or themes that the works have in common.

This thesis will seek to investigate the nature of the relationship between works that are linked together by an allusive title taken from poetry. In my view such titles are often ignored to a certain extent by critics, even though the title represents the first thing we see about a book. Typically the allusion is briefly mentioned without deciding what the connection between the works in question is. Only by careful analysis and comparison of both works can the nature of the allusion be established, and my assumption is that an interpretation of the source of the allusion, the poem, may contribute extensively to the interpretation of the novel. I have selected the titles of the two novels Of Mice and Men by John Steinbeck and Nectar in a Sieve by Kamala Markandaya that are taken respectively from the poems “To a Mouse” by Robert Burns and “Work without Hope” by Samuel T. Coleridge to demonstrate the function these allusions might have.

Any book title, also those that are not taken from literature, ought to give the reader an impression of what the novel is about, but not all titles succeed in this respect: The popular novel Wild Lavender by Belinda Alexandra for instance, depicts the artistic career of a young woman who was brought up at a farm where wild lavender grew, but
since she chooses a career far away from farm life, the title appears almost meaningless. Likewise, the title *Where Shall We Go Next Summer?* chosen by the then developing author Anita Desai for a novel that has nothing to do with travelling whatsoever reveals, in my view, poor judgment in selecting a title.

I now want to address the difficult, but important question of theoretical approach. I also want to explain what is meant by “allusive” or “allusion.” Originally I was advised to use the term intertextuality as a theoretical foundation on which to base my findings. This piece of advice led me both in the wrong and in the right direction. It is probably correct that the terms allusion and intertextuality have something in common in that they both deal with how texts are somehow related to one another. Indeed, if one investigates an article on intertextuality in a dictionary of literary terms, one will find that it, among other things, points to the article on allusion and vice versa. But on the other hand, one will soon realize that the term intertextuality is far wider than the term allusion. The term intertextuality covers namely all possible connections between texts; similarities, differences, historical, internal, external, intended, unintended, conscious, unconscious etc. and is thus a far wider and unmanageable term than allusion which means that a piece of text, in my case the titles of two novels, directly or indirectly points to some other text, in my case two poems, or to a known event or person. Furthermore, an allusion is normally a result of a conscious choice made by the author. With the use of allusions, which have existed for hundreds of years, ties and connections are created between texts, and the works in question thus serve as foils to one another. Allusions have the interesting effect of enhancing and adding depth to at least the work that contains the allusion, but in the end, the allusion also works the other way around, in my view. Yet, intertextuality is a highly fashionable and interesting term. It was coined by Julia Kristeva in an essay
published in 1967 and had predecessors like de Saussure, Barthes and Bakhtin, and also followers like, for instance, Genette. The term seemed to have filled a void, but is currently used differently by various theorists. As such it is therefore a highly problematic term. Graham Allen states in his book *Intertextuality*, for example, that “Intertextuality is one of the most commonly used and misused terms in contemporary critical vocabulary.” He continues by explaining that by judging from the number of titles of works that include the term “intertextuality,” it might seem as if this term is “generally understood and provides a stable set of critical procedures for interpretation. Nothing, in fact could be further from the truth” (Allen 2). M.H. Abrams gives the following account of the term:

Intertextuality…is used to signify the multiple ways in which any one literary text is inseparately inter-involved with other texts, whether by its open or covert citation and *allusions*, or by its unavoidable participation in the common stock of linguistic and literary conventions and procedures that are “always already” in place and constitute the discourses into which we are born. In Kristeva’s formulation, accordingly, any text is in fact an “intertext” – the site of an intersection of numberless other texts, including those which will be written in the future (Abrams 285).

Martin Gray, however, states in his *Dictionary of Literary Terms* about intertextuality that “structuralism argues that a text is a system in which language does not refer to `reality´ but only to itself and the patterns created within the text. Literature as a whole is also perceived as a self-referential system or structure” (Gray 151, 152). An account of this term’s history and current usage, at any rate, falls outside the narrower and “allusive” scope of this thesis. Attempting to give such an explanation would be similar to giving an account of the nutritious value of - say - all vegetables, when what one is interested in is only that of a carrot. But this does not imply that allusions are straightforward and simple either. Rather, as I will demonstrate in my thesis, they open up for fascinating insights of the works in question. One main reason for this is that especially one of the poems I have
analyzed, “Work without Hope,” proved to be filled with allusions pointing to religious
texts, especially. These allusions add flavor to the poem which then in turn give color to
the novel that borrowed its title from the poem. Allusions thus seem to form an almost
never-ending chain of references that are fascinating to track down and estimate the
effects they have. I do not know whether I can agree or not with Kristeva’s claim that all
texts are intertexts, they might well be, but that numerous texts are tied together by
allusions, this fact I will demonstrate throughout my thesis.

My point of departure was two seemingly simple novels: Of Mice and Men (1937)
by John Steinbeck and Nectar in a Sieve (1954) by Kamala Markandaya. I read the first
as part of the curriculum when I was an exchange student in Minnesota thirty-one years
ago, and I have used it as a teacher in Upper Secondary School with success. The second
novel I encountered in the interesting course given by Professor Tone Sundt Urstad
“Between Two Cultures: Authors from India who Write in English.” I instantly fell in
love with the novel and wrote a term paper based on it, which has been incorporated into
this thesis. I think my future students will enjoy it too, because it is, like Of Mice and
Men, a very gripping novel. Originally I had planned also to include a third novel, Far
from the Madding Crowd by Thomas Hardy, which has borrowed its title from the well-
known poem “Elegy Written in a Country Church Yard” by Thomas Gray. For reasons of
space, however, this fine novel was excluded. In my view Of Mice and Men and Nectar
in a Sieve form a congruous pair and have a lot in common: both are set in a rural
environment in the first half of the twentieth century and both depict vulnerable and
exploited characters at the hand of unmerciful forces. They may thus both be read as
passionate cries of protest against social injustice. The American ranch workers in Of
Mice and Men and the Indian peasants in Nectar in a Sieve may symbolize millions of
farmers from times immemorial. Steinbeck, however, felt dissatisfied with the novel since his goal was to depict all men, and I can understand his reaction because his one, mentally retarded character may lead one in the direction of the specific situation of a minority in society, that of the mentally disabled, and thus not represent a so-called normal person. Steinbeck’s reaction would be an example of an instance where the authorial intention is not always so important to a work. Furthermore, and as is well-known, the, in my view, trivializing and meaningless title Something That Happened was the first title that Steinbeck had in mind. Another likeness between the two novels is the simplicity of the works as both are short simple tales, almost like fables, in which the events are presented in a chronological order without any complicating subplot(s) or digressions. They begin in an Eden like environment and move towards a naturalistic, tragic end with a sprinkle of hope in it. The principle of circular composition is applied in both works – in Of Mice and Men the same idyllic spot by the river is returned to and in Nectar in a Sieve it is the village that represents the starting and end point. Without any specific depth of characterization the novels depict tender and pathetic main characters. Some critics, for instance Mark Van Doren, have found the characters in Of Mice and Men too unbelievable and its plot too sentimental, but these are views that I cannot share. The sentence that contains the title, “The best-laid schemes of mice and men gang aft agley” from the poem “To a Mouse,” has reached proverbial status and is listed in The Penguin Dictionary of Proverbs under the heading “Imperfection” (Fergusson 132). And this fall I heard a detective on television explaining to her superior why she was late; she began her sentence: “The best-laid schemes…”

My main focus in this thesis is to point to the allusive links that connect the two novels to two poems that include expressions that have been used as titles for the novels.
The two poems in question are “To a Mouse” (1786) by Robert Burns and “Work without Hope” (1825) by Samuel T. Coleridge. The first poem contains the phrase “o’ Mice and Men” and the second has the words “nectar in a sieve.” The titles of these poems I have not commented on in any great detail, but both of them seem apt since the first poem consists of a monologue to a mouse, and the second is a poem about how “Work without Hope draws nectar in a sieve,” in other words that it is an impossibility. Thus, the poem expresses, in a manner of speaking, hopelessness. I have neither, as I touched upon above, studied the effects of the other allusions in the poems in great detail, for reasons of space. I have done my work thoroughly, though, and carried out a total of four analyses: two of the novels and two of the poems that the novels allude to. One chapter is applied to each pair of novel and poem. Each chapter begins with an interpretation of the poem in question, and is followed by a discussion of the effect it has had on the novel.

As mentioned above my focus has been on allusions. Still neither allusion nor intertextuality offer any consistent theoretical framework. If anything, intertextuality proposes the idea of pieces of texts existing within each other, quite separate from the authors of these texts. If New Historicism deals with “subversive, social energies,” one might perhaps imagine that intertextuality is about “textual energies” that form an autonomous world wide web, as it were. To me, however, the authors matter a great deal, and s/he is very much “alive,” although s/he was declared “dead” by the essay “The Death of the Author” by Barthes, and has remained “buried” for many decades. I recently heard of a course at the University of Oslo this fall (2011) with the title “The Return of the Author” and I am glad that there may exist signals that show that the author is taken into some consideration again. Having stated this, I must add that I see no direct link in all cases between the life of the author and the contents of his or her work. The degree of
relevant autobiographical information will vary from one work to another, the way I see it, and therefore I have assigned different emphasis on the role of the author of the four works I have analyzed.

Generally, the lives of the poets seem more relevant to their works than the lives of the novelists. To take them in order of appearance: Robert Burns’ life is dealt with extensively both because this has been conventional and because I too choose to see the agony expressed at the end of his poem as a reflection of his own troubled, agricultural life. I have not, however, mentioned that he was probably suffering from the mental disease bipolarity which in some people may lead to an increased libido. Burns’ numerous affairs with women must have complicated his life to a great extent also, but most of this trouble does not fit the content of the poem “To a Mouse,” therefore I have not elaborated on all his female affairs or his ill health both mentally and physically. What I have dwelt on, however, are the numerous, almost excessive, criticisms of this little poem. In my view they are a bit exaggerated, but the fate of this little “mousie” has obviously melted the critics’ hearts, and one will find the mouse on everything from t-shirts to stamps and even bank notes today.

John Steinbeck, another bipolar author, by the way, I read a lot about, but decided that this information seemed neither very central nor crucial to the interpretation of the novel as such. It is a fact that Steinbeck loved both horses and dogs, animals which appear in the novel, but this fact cannot be said to be very vital to its interpretation, therefore most of Steinbeck’s life remains in his biographies.

Coleridge is the most intriguing author of the four I write about. His poem “Work without Hope” depicts such great contrasts and so inexplicable and seemingly contradictory ideas, that I was not satisfied with the thought that this was merely a poem
about a self-pitying speaker reminiscing about his loss of creative powers. I wanted to dig deeper and by what one may call a method of psycho-biography I have brought not only Coleridge’s life, but also his bipolarity, his mental illness, onto the scene. I think that his poem exemplifies a speaker, in other words Coleridge, who is experiencing both depression and a religious trauma. I am also surprised that this fine poem is not more well-known with all its suggestive allusions.

The last of my authors is Kamala Markandaya (1924-2004). She was born into a high caste family in India and spent some of her childhood travelling with her father who worked for the railways. After having graduated from the Madras University, she moved to England where she married an Englishman, and became an expatriate writer. Prior to writing *Nectar in a Sieve* she spent two years living in an Indian village. This is approximately what is known about her since she shunned publicity and gave few interviews during her life. Still, the British doctor Kenny in the novel might probably be said to be her mouthpiece, and Markandaya lets him, as it were, ameliorate the situation in her home country by building a hospital there. The author might have based her novel on an existing family in an Indian village, or she might not. I have no way of finding out.

I am dealing on the one side with an old term, allusion, that may be placed under the much more recent and fashionable and vague umbrella term intertextuality which, almost by definition, does not include the author. In dealing with the allusions in practice, however, I have, on the other side, based my interpretations partly on relevant biographical information of the author as explained above. I see that this is an unusual and somewhat paradoxical blending of two approaches far apart. Furthermore, I have concentrated my comments on the works on the themes and messages, as a result of a close reading quite typical of the New Criticism. My thesis might also be said to be
reader-response oriented since I bring forth the views of so many critics. But first and foremost the interpretations are my own, personal ones. To me choosing a single theoretical approach seems an impossibility. Various theoretical, literary approaches remind me of the programs of political parties. When one reads them one by one, they all seem so convincing, but if one were to have all one’s opinions put forward, one would still have to form one’s own political party. In this thesis I have done just that, I have used elements from various schools and formed, not a theoretical approach of course, but a somewhat paradoxical mixture of various beliefs that have seemed sensible to me. In general, my thesis has a practical rather than a theoretical bias.

M.H. Abrams defines allusion as a reference “without explicit identification” (Abrams 8), but I am not certain that I can agree to this in my thesis since both the novelists I have studied, are quite explicit. Steinbeck must surely have been aware that his title stemmed from a line of proverbial status, and Markandaya had the relevant lines of the poem printed on the first page of her novel. At any rate, I suppose any author desires a really “Full-Knowing Reader” to borrow a title of a book on allusion by Joseph Pucci, but that in reality the readers’ awareness of allusion varies wildly. As a teacher of Norwegian I have often had to explain the allusion “Evig eies kun det teipte” (a text in a commercial for video tapes) to eighteen year old students who have never heard of Ibsen’s “Evig eies kun det tapte.”

Pucci’s book raises important and problematic aspects about allusion. In its first chapter various definitions of allusion are juxtaposed and commented upon. He writes, for instance:

There ought to be something troubling about the fact that two distinct versions of allusion exist in the old and new edition of *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*. Then, too, there ought to be cause for confusion when one realizes that the two theories most closely associated with allusion in contemporary
criticism – Harold Bloom’s “Anxiety of Influence” and the idea of “intertextuality” invented by Julia Kristeva – are not, by their authors’ own admission theories of allusion at all…But allusion has never invited consistency of conception or critical consensus. Critics have always felt justified in choosing and defining their own terms. One finds instead a complex history (Pucci 4,5).

Pucci elaborates on this complex history and it is indeed tempting to give a theoretical account of the “Contemporary Versions of Allusion” as he calls the first chapter in his book, in this introduction. I will resist this temptation, however, keeping in line with my practical approach, but nevertheless mention that Kristeva never intended her term “intertextuality” to mean, among other things, allusion. Her term “transposition” on the other hand, is closer to allusion. Whether or not allusion is to be considered as a subterm to the wider term intertextuality, as I have presupposed in this introduction, is therefore debatable! Also, Pucci explains that the New Critics gave much prominence to the author in questions of allusion despite the reputed weakened stress of the importance of authorial power. Pucci’s main aim, however, is the advocating of a “special sort of reader (the full-knowing reader) – who is just as busy as the author of the literary work and, so I hope to suggest, just as powerful” (Pucci 26). I do hope that I may be considered a powerful reader of the four, forthcoming works of this thesis.

Despite the questionable role of the term intertextuality for this thesis, Plett’s book *Intertextuality* provided a very interesting and relevant piece of information in the chapter “Titles and Mottoes as Intertextual Devices” by Wolfgang Karrer:

Thus, *World’s End* or *Of Mice and Men* do not simply quote the Bible or Burns…*Of Mice and Men* thus suggests, beyond its literal or elementary reference to the lines in a poem by Robert Burns, a structural or generic reference to the dignity of philosophical titles simply by beginning the quote with “Of” (from Latin “De”). “Of” plus noun(s) is a syntactic title paradigm, which serves to enrich the title quote with a structural reproduction. Both together overcode the following text by Steinbeck, and make it – among other things – a philosophical treatise on the human condition (Plett 127, 128).

I was totally unaware of this fact when I invented my own title for this thesis, *Of Titles*
and Texts and can guarantee that I do not consider my thesis philosophical at all. My title should be read as a simple reference and tribute to the title *Of Mice and Men.*

Thinking about allusions, or intertextuality, does make one wonder where a certain text begins, and also, ultimately, where it ends. I can use this thesis as an example since I have no definite certainty of the beginnings of the works I will analyze. It is simple enough to point to the title or to the introduction and call these the beginnings, but this is not the whole truth as one beginning of this thesis had the form of a ten minutes compulsory speech I held a long time ago, about the relationship between the title of the novel *Nectar in a Sieve* and the poem “Work without Hope.” The written version of this revised speech is now placed in the middle of this thesis, however. I chose to do that speech because I like poems and consider them the “bouillon cubes of literature,” with lots of wisdom concentrated in a relatively few words. Later the speech was turned into a term paper, and afterwards I decided to write a thesis of about one hundred pages, my original plan was to write a shorter thesis. The end is easier to determine at this point, but I must confess I wish I could continue to study titles. In a similar manner, one may ask, for instance, where the poem “To a Mouse” ends. There are no definite answers to this question since the poem has proved to be fertile. I have even encountered a poem titled “To a Mousse.”
“To a Mouse”

On Turning Her up in Her Nest with the Plough, Nov 1785

Wee, sleekit, cowran, tim’rous beastie,
O, what panic’s in thy breastie!
Thou need na start awa sae hasty,
Wi’ bickering brattle!
I wad be laith to rin an’ chase thee,
Wi’ murd’ring pattle!

I’m truly sorry Man’s dominion
Has broken Nature’s social union,
An’ justifies that ill opinion,
Which makes thee startle,
At me, thy poor, earth-born companion,
An’ fellow mortal!

I doubt na, whyles, but thou may thieve;
What then? Poor beastie, thou maun live!
A daimen-icker in a thrave
‘S sma’ request:
I’ll get a blessing wi’ the lave,
An’ never miss’t!

Thy wee-bit housie, too, in ruin!
It’s silly wa’s the win’s are strewin!
An’ naething, now, to big a new ane,
O’ foggage green!
An’ bleak December’s winds ensuing,
Baith snell an’ keen!
Thou saw the fields laid bare an’ wast,
An’ weary Winter comin fast,
An’ cozie here, beneath the blast,
Thou thought to dwell,
Till crash! the cruel coulter past
Out thro’ thy cell.

That wee-bit heap o’ leaves an’ stibble,
Hast cost thee monie a weary nibble!
Now thou’s turn’d out, for a’ thy trouble,
But house or hald.
To thole the Winter’s sleety dribble,
An’ cranreuch cauld!

But Mousie, thou are no thy-lane,
In proving foresight may be vain:
The best laid schemes o’ Mice an’ Men,
Gang aft agley,
An’ leave us nought but grief an’ pain,
For promised joy!

Still, thou art blest, compar’d wi’ me!
The present only toucheth thee:
But Och! I backward cast my e’e
On prospect drear!
An’ forward, tho’ I canna see,
I guess an’ fear!

This poem, presenting the tender and apologetic feelings of a speaker, a farmer, who has unintentionally destroyed the nest of a mouse, appeared in Burns’ first collection of poetry, *Poems Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect*, published on 31 July 1786 in Kilmarnock. Published by John Wilson this collection is also known as the “Kilmarnock edition.” The volume proved to be an immediate success; the entire print run of 612 copies was sold out within the month and contributed to Burns’ status as Scotland’s immensely popular national poet, a position that has lasted until this day. Half of the number of copies went to subscribers. On 17 April 1787 a new and enlarged edition of the same book appeared in Edinburgh and is thus named the “Edinburgh edition.” This edition was brought out by
the leading publisher of the Scottish Enlightenment, William Creech, and was even more in demand as it was subscribed to by over 1300 individuals. To aid English readers both publications included a glossary explaining Scottish vocabulary. It is also important to notice that at the time of publication “Scotland had one of the highest levels of literacy in Europe. Without that Burns could never have enjoyed the success he did among his own people” (Sprott 30). As indications of Burns’ popularity worldwide today “somewhere in the order of 900,000 Burns Suppers celebrate ‘Burns Night’ around the world in the early twenty-first century. Another marker of Burns’s global identity is that along with ‘Happy Birthday’ his ‘Auld Lang Syne’ is the most sung song in the world.” Furthermore, his work has been translated into more than forty languages and calculations have shown that “there were 2,000 different editions of his poems” in a period of two hundred years from 1786 to 1986” (Carruthers 2009: 1).

In the years prior to the first publication of his poems Burns, however, was faced with both personal problems and difficulties in farming and he therefore planned to emigrate to Jamaica once his poems were published. The berth was booked in the early months of 1786 and originally he was to sail in the summer the same year. He was to work in Jamaica as a so-called “assistant overseer” which meant that he would be in charge of slaves! Jamaica may seem as a peculiar place to depart for, but as much as one third of the population on this island consisted of Scots people, and the plantation Burns had selected was managed by a fellow Ayrshireman named Charles Douglas. According to Robert Crawford Burns’ “readiness to become involved in slave management may have been a sign of personal desperation; it is still shocking, and contradicts the ideology implicit and explicit in much of his poetry” (Crawford 223). But Burns continuously postponed his departure for Jamaica during the fall of 1786, and ended up staying in
Scotland. The most probable reasons for his decision to stay were the success of the first edition of the poems, his almost immediate plans to publish a larger edition, and the fact that Jean Armour who in 1788 was eventually to become Burns’ wife, gave birth to his twins in September 1786. These babies represented the second and third child to be born illegitimately, since Burns’ first child was born to Elizabeth Paton in May 1785.

Throughout his life Burns had a highly complex love life and enjoyed numerous affairs with various women. One Burnsian begins the chapter “Women, Love and the Body” this way: “The most certain area of Robert Burns’s personal notoriety concerns sex. The poet sired at least thirteen children to at least five women and had a series of affairs and liaisons, the precise number of which is not easily computed by biographers” (Carruthers 2007: 62). His complicated affair with Jean Armour, whom he may have met as early as the end of 1784, and her parents, might indeed have been one of the most important reasons why he originally planned to emigrate. Mr and Mrs Armour were very much opposed to the couple’s plans of marriage in the spring of 1786 and consulted a lawyer to invalidate Burns and Jean Armour’s legally binding agreement to marry (Jean must have been aware of her new pregnancy at this point). During spring Jean seems to have sided with her parents against Burns and Burns courted Margaret Campbell (“Highland Mary”) instead. It is also possible that “Highland Mary” was to join Burns on his voyage to Jamaica, but she died of fever in the autumn of 1786. During the summer of 1786 both Burns and Jean had to meet in church three consecutive Sundays to be rebuked for fornication. Burns’ biography will be dealt with in more detail below since it may contribute to the interpretation of the poem “To a Mouse” which was written about half a year prior to its publication. According to many critics the poem may undoubtedly best be understood in an autobiographical context and I have therefore chosen to accentuate this
aspect. Having stated what my individual stance is, however, it is important to underline that the poem in addition contains a universal and general expression of loss and destruction as will be demonstrated below.

In the preface to the collection of poetry Burns deliberately exaggerated his lack of education since he wanted to preserve his ties with his humble and rural background. The famous epithets of Burns as the “heaven-taught ploughman” and the “ploughman poet” were coined by Henry Mackenzie in a review of the poetry collection in *The Lounger*, 9 December 1786, and have lasted to this day in the popular view of the poet. The labeling is not entirely suitable, however, since Burns had knowledge of French, some Latin, and the most important eighteenth century English writers, a learning that was quite uncommon for the son of a poor, tenant farmer. William Burnes was an ambitious father, however, and arranged for his two eldest sons, Robert and Gilbert, to have a private tutor, John Murdoch, aged 18. This arrangement lasted from Burns was six years old until he was nine. In subsequent years William Burnes taught his sons himself in the evenings, and the young Burns read voraciously. Later, when Burns was fourteen, he attended Hugh Rodger’s school to study mathematics and land surveying, and he kept contact with his old tutor Murdoch on occasions. In young adulthood Burns established the Tarbolton Bachelors’ Club, a debating society, and he was inducted as a Freemason when he was 22 years old, in 1781. In the words of Nigel Leask, “There is some warrant for Walter Scott’s claim that Burns `had an education not much worse that the sons of many gentlemen in Scotland’” (Leask 11). Having stated his learning, however, “we must not forget that he was a working farmer for the most of his life, and that he acquired his book learning by sheer determination in the midst of arduous physical toil” as Daiches ascertains in the preface of Gavin Sprott’s *Robert Burns Farmer* (unpaginated).
Literary critics would first refer to Burns as a “rusticus abnormis sapiens,” and the fact that Burns would wear his farmer’s boots on his tours to Edinburgh, undoubtedly underpinned their impression. Be that as it may, Burns remained close to the “soul,” or the “roots” of Scotland his entire life. Since Burns is such a highly respected and widely celebrated poet it is easily forgotten that the scope of his daily activities was farming successively at a total of four farms: Mount Oliphant (70 acres) near Alloway when he came of age (1766-77); Lochlie (130 acres) in the parish of Tarbolton during his major period of poetic creativity (1777-1784); Mossgiel (118 acres) in the parish of Mauchline (1784-1788) and finally, and for the first time on his own without the assistance of his father or brother, Ellisland (170 acres) outside Dumfries (1788-1791). Burns finally gave up farming to work as an excise officer in 1791, and biographers seem indecisive as to whether to evaluate Burns as an untalented farmer or simply as the victim of poor soil and barren, mountainous lands. On the one hand, Burns took great interest in farming and was extremely well read in the theory of farming improvement, yet he was stymied by appalling harvests, bad weather conditions, soaring rents and undercapitalization, a fate he shared with other lowland tenants. The weather conditions in the years from 1782 to 1785 were particularly disastrous and this fact is important as background knowledge to an improved understanding of the despair expressed at the end of the poem. On the other hand, Burns is said to have suffered from a severe lack of concentration while farming so that “He would send carts away unemptied or lose his concentration when ploughing, his lips moving silently as he worked on a poem forming in his head” (Sprott 36).

Critics are generally highly favorable in their view of the poem. David Daiches, for example, lists it as one of the “first rate Scots poems” and calls it “one of Burns’ most charming and best known poems [that] nevertheless lacks the tautness of the skilful
manipulation of irony and humour that we get in `To a Louse.’” He continues: “The fellow feeling for the little creature is spontaneous and conveyed in a cleverly controlled verse, and the introduction of the proverbial note, as in `To a Louse´ is most effective; but the emergence of self-pity at the end as the real theme seems somewhat forced and there is a touch of attitudinizing about the poem” (Daiches 1963: 17, 24-25).

In my view Daiches appears as too much of a New Critic when he calls for the irony and humor found in “To a Louse,” but I agree with him that the emerging real theme of human suffering in stanza eight seems somewhat forced: the speaker of the poem focuses on the deprived situation of the mouse so intensely in six out of eight stanzas that the real theme of human agony or self-pity in stanza eight comes as a surprise, at least, and a bit out of line with the rest of the poem. On the other hand, the human theme of man’s fear and distress has universal appeal and without stanza seven and eight the poem could be understood as nothing more than the advocacy of animals’ rights, rights that Burns was said to support, incidentally. The reason why the lines “The best laid schemes o’ Mice and Men / Gang aft agley, / an’ lea’e us nought but grief an’ pain / For promis’d joy” have acquired proverbial status is the fact that they somehow have a comforting effect on man’s inevitable disappointments in life. This is how life is, at worst a series of disillusions.

Elsewhere Daiches had described “To a Mouse” as “wholly successful,”

Though here as in the other animal poems he [Burns] makes some kind of identification of the animal with the human world, the poem is essentially about himself, and the mouse is interesting to him because its plight reminds him of his own. The comparison, however, is neither forced nor sentimental, and the gap between the world of mice and that of men is bridged by a friendly compassion. The poem has charm and vigour as well as technical skill (Daiches 1952: 164).

Franklyn Bliss Snyder praises the poem excessively by stating that it is as superbly inimitable as Hamlet or `The Rime of the Ancient Mariner.’ Like them it bears the marks of stark
genius. To read it understandingly is to realize the truth of Emerson’s utterance, ‘I ask not for the great, the remote, the romantic; what is doing in Italy or Arabia; what is Greek art of Provencal minstrelsy; I embrace the common, I explore and sit at the feet of the familiar, the low.’ By the sheer power of his sympathetic and creative imagination, Burns has touched ‘the familiar, the low’ and transformed it not into an object of sensuous beauty, but into something far more notable – a perennially beautiful symbol of human life. There is no need to use many words in commenting upon a poem which has passed into the literature of the entire world. But it is perhaps worth noting that here, in eight short stanzas, one sees Burns’ uncannily accurate poetic vision supplying him with the materials out of which to construct his poem; one sees his artist’s imagination culling the important from the unimportant details, and then, by what mysterious process can never be explained, raising everything to a high level of poetic significance, one sees, too, his skill in transmitting to his reader the results of his imaginative re-working of the products of his observation. As has often been suggested, great art shows three qualities in proper proposition: observation, imagination, and sense of form, or technique. If any one of the three predominates to the detriment of either of the others, the resulting poem is sure to be lacking in balance. There is no such disproportion in ‘To a Mouse.’ On the contrary, each of the three qualities makes its contribution to what Emerson termed ‘the perfect whole.’

Snyder is also full of praise for Burns’ language: “But one may well point to the expression ‘At me, thy poor earth-born companion / An’ fellow mortal’ as an example of Burns’ ability to tell the truth in language which is beyond praise for its simple effectiveness.” Snyder ends his long comment on the poem in the following manner: “There is nothing else in the Kilmarnock Volume quite so notable as ‘To a Mouse’”

(Snyder 178-181).

Surprisingly, James Currie, one of Burns’ first biographers, as far back as 1800, finds it “difficult to decide whether the Address to a Mouse be considered as serious or as comic.” Nevertheless he describes the poem as having an admirable descriptive part and a beautiful moral reflection, and he concludes. “To extract out of incidents so common, and seemingly trivial as these, so fine a train of sentiment and imagery, is the surest proof, as well as the most brilliant triumph, of original genius” (Low 1974: 140).

A more recent comment on the poem is found in Gerard Carruthers’ Robert Burns.
He refers to the poem as “obliquely political.” He contends that:

A thread that runs through the text is the projection of human values onto the animal the narrator encounters. Thus he refers to the perception of the mouse that the narrator is intent on ‘murdering’ her (l. 6) and the idea that the creature knows how to ‘thieve’ (l. 13). There is a twist to this anthropomorphism, however, delivered in stanza two: I’m truly sorry Man’s dominion/Has broken Nature’s social union, / An’ justifies that ill opinion,/Which makes thee startle, / At me, thy poor, earth-born companion, / An’ fellow mortal! As in ‘The Twa Dogs’ there is something sinister about mankind as it is nature, paradoxically, that is more truly ‘social’ than humanity. The apprehension in the text here looks towards the pessimism inherent in the Romantic attitude in opposition to the progressive optimism of the late eighteen century. The ruination of the dumb creature’s habitation ought to be read against Burns’s own experience of seeing his father’s travails at Lochlea farm, which the family came close to losing during 1783-1784, when sued by their landlord over rent arrears. At a time when landowners were realizing spiraling rents from smaller farmers, William Burnes agreed to pay a very high fee for land that was extremely marshy and, according to Burns himself, both the work on this unyielding terrain and the stress of attempting to meet his payments on it contributed to his father’s demise. The mouse in Burns’s poem wants very little, receives very little and is now wantonly chastised: ‘That wee-bit heap o’ leaves an’ stibble,/Has cost thee monie a weary nibble!/Now thou’s turn’d out, for a’ thy trouble’….The small man often struggles beneath forces much bigger than he himself can realistically control, an apprehension appropriate to an age of increasing bankruptcy and uncertainty within the circumstances of speculative agriculture and economics generally (Carruthers 2007: 52-53).

The apprehension that the poem is best understood with Burns’ autobiography in mind is mentioned by other critics apart from Carruthers: Daiches describes only the final stanza, where human fear and uncertainty are evidently “autobiographical” (Daiches 1952: 167). In my view this represents a somewhat restricted, but not at all wrong, interpretation of the poem: Burns was prolific during the winter of 1785-86 and it might be that writing was a manner of dealing with all his anxieties at that time. Occasionally too, he would suffer from depression and this fact may have enhanced the feelings of despair expressed in the last stanza. But also from an objective point of view his life was not easy in November 1785 and I have already mentioned that he booked a berth to Jamaica shortly afterwards: The farm Mossgiel which Burns and his younger brother
Gilbert had subleased the fall of 1783, and moved to in February 1784 due to their father’s law case, had experienced the second (of four) poor crops, his first illegitimate daughter had been born in the spring and Burns had been rebuked in church, he was enjoying an intimate life with Jean Armour which might result in more illegitimate children to provide for, and last, but not least, his younger brother John had died, aged sixteen, in the beginning of November. It was therefore not at all surprising that “issues of looking back and looking fearfully forward undergrid a number of poems written in late 1785 and early 1786” (Crawford 202). In a recent biography on Robert Burns Crawford supports Daiches’ view that the speaker’s distress and despair in the last stanza might be paralleled in the author’s personal life, but at the same time he points out, like Carruthers does above, that it is “implicitly a political poem, it invites sympathy for dispossessed people, as well as for the natural world” (Crawford 201). The mouse is dispossessed and the Burns family had faced the fear of homelessness themselves at Lochlea a few years earlier (1783-84). The ensuing law case was bitter and when William Burnes at last won his appeal in January 1784, he died only weeks later, aged sixty-three. Naturally, this tragic event must have had a deep impact on the family and made them feel utterly vulnerable and at the mercy of uncontrollable forces, just like the tiny creature in the poem.

Crawford quotes Nigel Leask who points out “that the poem may also reflect something of the worries of old-style cotters (tenants of sub-tenants on a farm) made redundant by improving tenant-farmers like the poet himself” (Crawford 201). Leask further explains that the cotter class was virtually eliminated through the 1770s and 1780s due to processes of rationalization in farming, developments that changed the traditional system of agriculture. The period between 1760-1830 constitutes the years of the British
Agricultural Revolution and one of its consequences was that thousands of cotters and tenant farmers migrated. In the part of the country where Burns farmed this event was referred to as the lowland clearances. Sprott puts it in the following manner:

When Burns died in 1796 the Ayrshire of his birth had changed quite drastically. Within the compass of thirty-seven years the pattern of land use, the balance of live stock, transport, housing and the population itself were all different. By the end of this period the change in farming technology was becoming evident. This was this Agricultural Revolution as it is known to history or improvement as people then called it (Sprott 25).

Similarly, Leask informs us that “William Aiton wrote of Ayrshire during the lifetime of Robert Burns that `never was so great a change effected in the condition of the people of any districts, in so short a period´” (Leask 10). And finally Leask equates the cotter’s and the mouse’s fate: “I’ve argued in Chapter 5 that Burns gets closest to addressing some of the dire human consequences of improvement [i.e. improved farming] in ‘To a Mouse´ where the `cleared´ cotter is represented as a small rodent, and where the poet’s plough is itself the engine of destruction” (Leask 225).

As is evident, most critics that I have studied give a highly positive assessment of the poem. One exception is Ian McIntyre in his Dirt and Deity, A Life of Robert Burns. He is critical of all the “owlish exegies heaped upon the back of his [Burns’] ‘wee, cowran, tim’rous beastie´ over two centuries.” A footnote exemplifies these exegies, but in the author’s view the poem is only an “occasional piece” (McIntyre 88). Perhaps needless to say, I do not agree with this critic.

Leask lists Anna Barbauld’s poem “The Mouse’s Petition to Dr Priestly Found in the Trap where he had been Confined all Night” published in 1773, as a major source of “To a Mouse” (Leask 159) and it is therefore included in the Appendix. As is evident this is a poem for animal rights, but even though the plea is put in the mouth of a poor encaged mouse who faces death due to experimentation with animals and is thus the
victim of human oppression like Burns’ mouse, the poem lacks the compassionate, sincere and tender tone that characterizes “To a Mouse.” It is important to underline, however, that both mice are victims of human “improvement”: Barbauld’s mouse in the discovery of oxygen, Burns’ creature in working the land.

Burns` religious reading in boyhood might also have served as inspiration to the poem:

The whole natural world, William Derham informed him, was a ‘Physico-Theology’ providing ‘a Demonstration of the Being and Attributes of God’. Not just the starry heavens but even ‘field mice…hiding their food before-hand against winter’ might demonstrate ‘the great Creator’s providence’, so that John Ray, Fellow of the Royal Society, put it in The Wisdom of God Manifested in the Works of the Creation, ‘provision…is made for the preservation and security of weak and timorous creatures’(Crawford 52, 53).

The edition was also admired by the 16-year old Wordsworth who praised its “newness and freshness” (Wu 261). Burns’ style was original at the time and he is seen as a progenitor of the Romantic Movement. As is well-known, the romantic poet Wordsworth included a poetic “manifesto” in the preface to the second edition of Lyrical Ballads in 1800 “in which he denounced the poetic diction of the preceding century and proposed to deal with materials from common life in a selection of language really used by men” (Abrams 127). This is exactly what Burns exhibits: the lives of ordinary folk are recurrent themes in his writing and he was a vernacular poet at a time when Scots as a living literary language was disintegrating and thus did not represent an obvious choice. Furthermore, the subject matter of this particular poem, a mouse, a part of nature’s fauna, and the focus of the speaker’s own feelings, make this poem a typically romantic one.

Originally Scots, or more precisely Lowland Scots, was applied in literature and elevated speech in Scotland up until around 1600 when it was gradually supplanted by Standard English. The Reformation in 1560 and the introduction of the English Bible, the Union of the Crowns in 1603 and the Parliamentary Union in 1707 all contributed to
make Standard English the language of prestige in Scotland whereas Scots was reduced to a dialect associated with informal speech, the domestic, the sentimental and the comic. Burns was born into this somewhat confused and unstable linguistic situation and was, due to his extensive learning and reading in English, fully acquainted with Standard English. His mother and her family, on the other hand, represented and gave him Scottish traditional songs, and folklore, and as a result Burns was “bilingual.” Burns was not the first one to apply Scots in his poems, the poets Robert Fergusson (1750-1774) and Allan Ramsay (1685-1758) for example, both of whom Burns admired greatly and was influenced by, had used Scots in their poetry. But Burns was the first one to achieve great success with poems written “Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect” and he therefore came to be the most important figure in the Scottish vernacular revival. The word “chiefly” in the title of his collection of poetry is important to note, however, as Burns would often combine Standard English and Scots in the same poem:

…that mixture, in varying degrees, of Scots for the particular in description and narrative, in which the poet intimately participates, and English or Englified Scots for the more reflective and philosophical passages, when the poet steps back as a commentator and adopts a persona more remote from his subject (Low 1975: 62).

One example of such a mixture of languages within the same poem can be found in “To a Mouse” where the second stanza is written in Standard English: “I’m truly sorry man’s dominion/Has broken Nature’s social union, / An’ justifies that ill opinion / Which makes thee startle / At me, thy poor, earth born companion / An’ fellow mortal!” whereas the rest of the poem is written in Scots or Englified Scots, for instance the beginning of the poem: “Wee sleekit, cow’rin, tim’rous beastie, / O, what a panic’s in thy breastie! / Thou need na start awa sae hasty / Wi bickering brattle! / I wad be laith to rin an’ chase thee, / Wi’ murdering pattle.”

Rather than viewing the Scots poet as restricted in linguistic range, Burns believed that he could access
diverse registers (what he called *copia verborum*) in a manner unavailable to the English poet. Far from writing exclusively in Scots, Burns deftly switched between Scots, Anglo-Scots, and English; many of his most celebrated poems (famously ‘To a Mouse’ and ‘To a Mountain Daisy’) were couched in the idiom of sensibility, and many of the songs are written in English with only a ‘sprinkling’ of Scots diction (Leask 8).

As a final clarification of the complex linguistic situation in Scotland, one must be aware of the fact that there are as many as four varieties of language in Scotland between which the lines are blurred: The oldest one is Scottish Gaelic which is a Celtic language partly suppressed by English from around year 1100. The second is Lowland Scots, used by Burns, appearing around year 1400 and originating in fact from northern English dialects. A third variety is Scottish English developed from Standard English and used by the upper classes. This language gradually spread to areas where Lowland Scots was spoken, and was also used by Burns. Finally, there is Highland English which is a variety of Standard English highly influenced by the old Gaelic language.

“To a Mouse” is one of very few poems by Burns with a specific time reference and one source gives the following background to its composition:

Burns was holding the plough, with Blane [a farm servant] for his driver when a little creature was observed running off across the field. Blane, having the pettle, or plough-cleaning utensil, in his hand at the moment, was thoughtlessly running after it, to kill it, when Burns checked him, but not angrily, asking what ill the poor mouse had ever done him. The poet then seemed to his driver to grow very thoughtful, and during the remainder of the afternoon, he spoke not. In the night time he awoke Blane, who slept with him, and reading the poem which had in the meantime been composed, asked what he thought of the mouse now (Gunnyon 9).

The general rhyme scheme of the eight stanza poem is aaabab, and the first, second, third and fifth lines, the a lines, of each stanza are mostly in iambic tetrameter, with catalexis occurring in some of the lines. The fourth and sixth lines, the b lines, of each stanza are mainly in iambic dimeter also with catalexis in some places. This stanza form is most often called the Standard Habbie and was originally used in court poetry and the love hymns of the troubadours, but in 1640 the poet Robert Sempill of Beltrees wrote
the first notable poem in this format. This elegy was named “Lament for Habbie Simpson” or “The Life and Death of the Piper of Kilbarchan,” and lamented the town bagpiper in a humorous tone. Later the metre was named “Standart Habby” by Allan Ramsay who used it himself in several poems, and it was also widely applied by Robert Fergusson who inspired Burns to write in it. Crawford claims that, “Beginning to write in Standard Habbie helped make him Robert Burns” (Crawford 154). Today it is often referred to as the Burns stanza. The Scottish stanza or the six line stave are other names used to denote this stanza form. In “Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect” 16 out of 44 poems are written in Standard Habbie. In the words of Leask, “Although use of this stanza [i.e. Standard Habbie] by earlier poets in the Scottish vernacular revival (…) focused on comedy and satire, we’ll see Burns often deploying the form in a more sentimental and sententious manner” (Leask 8). “To a Mouse” exemplifies Burns sentimental use of this metre.

In the first stanza the speaker of the poem addresses the “Wee, sleekit, cow’rin, tim’rous beastie” directly. The four adjectives denoting the mouse underline most strongly and clearly what a terrified little creature the speaker views the mouse as, and our sympathy is immediately aroused. The use of the diminutives beastie and breastie expressing smallness in size, also shows endearment and there is a touchingly tender and compassionate tone that runs through the entire poem. Leask informs us in a footnote that the first five words of the poem are not as genuinely original as we might suspect:

Ritter traced the structure of this famous line to Matthew Prior’s rendering of Hadrian’s ‘animula, vagula, blandula,’ namely ‘Poor little, pretty, fluttering thing,’ adapted by Green, Fielding, and Oldys. ‘Thus the English neo-classical tradition has made its own peculiar contribution to one of the best-known lines in Scottish vernacular poetry’(Leask 161).

The second, fourth and sixth lines end with exclamation marks and these
contribute to a sensation of urgency and danger. In a second the reader can envisage and recognize an utterly terrified rodent, for we have all seen such a creature perhaps without paying it very much attention. The reassurance and comfort the speaker attempts to give the mouse in the last two lines: “I wad be laith to rin an’ chase thee / Wi’ murdering pattle” come as no surprise after the first four lines of compassion and sympathy: “We, sleekit, cowran, tim’rous beastie, / O, what panic’s in thy breastie! / Thou need na start awa sae hasty, / Wi’ bickering brattle! And the effective pause after the fourth line adds emphasis to the statement of the speaker’s attitude in the last two lines.

In the second stanza the speaker continues the one way communication with the mouse and the apologetic and tender tone of the first stanza is elaborated. The speaker is “truly sorry man’s dominion/has broken Nature’s social union,” thereby causing the tiny creature to be frightened. “Nature’s social union” refers to the natural state of affairs that nature intended. David Daiches suggests that we may wince at the neo-classical phrase “Nature’s social union” since it “stands out from the Scots dialect of the poem as a whole,” but, he continues: “in fact the sudden and brief introduction of a graver phrase is not inappropriate in its context; it gives us a momentary flash of a philosophical view of an order in nature, which is not made the subject of moralizing but only lightly suggested. Light though the suggestion is, it swells out and provides an implicit moral basis for the poem” (Daiches 1952: 165).

Burns’ source for `Man’s dominion´ and `Nature’s Social Union´ is the third epistle of Pope’s Essay on Man, descriptive of the state of Nature when,

`Man walk’d with beast, joint tenant of the shade;/ The same his table, and the same his bed; / No murder clothed him, and no murder fed.’ In this ecological golden age before the rise of man’s `Conquest, Superstition and Tyranny, `When Love was Liberty, and Nature Law,’ rational man imitated the instinctual harmony of the animal kingdom, including `all [its] forms of social union´ (Leask 161-62).
According to Megan Coyer “Burns’ regret at breaking ’Nature’s social union’

echoes [Adam] Smith’s notion [in The Theory of Moral Sentiments] that all earthly
creatures are bound together through benevolent exchange. Burns was an early advocate
against cruelty to animals. Men who derive pleasure from the pain of animals receive the
wrath of his pen.”

The ties between the speaker and mouse are strengthened in that the mouse is
indirectly referred to as “earth-born companion” and “fellow mortal” in the last lines of
the stanza, and when the speaker of the poem describes himself in such words he exhibits
humanity and thus equates himself with the “wee” creature. They are both inhabitants of
this earth and an unusual fellowship of man and mouse is established.

The speaker’s benevolent feelings for the mouse are further expanded in the third
stanza by him excusing the fact that the mouse is, from a technical point of view, also a
thief of corn. The speaker minimizes the amount of corn the mouse has stolen and assures
her that he will be content with the remainder. Interestingly, the third stanza thus alludes
to verse 24:19 of “Deuteronomy,” the fifth book of the Hebrew Bible and also part of the
Jewish Torah. The relevant verse reads:

When thou cutest down thine harvest in thy field, and hast forgot a sheaf in the field, thou shalt not go again
to fetch it: it shall be for the stranger, for the fatherless, and for the widow: that the lord thy God may bless
thee in all the work of thine hands (quoted in Wu 269).

In other words one is to show benevolence and generosity by giving to the needy and
weaker ones, for example a tiny mouse. This attitude contrasts sharply with that of the
common farmer at the time: “…mice were vermin, pests rather than pets, and accordingly
fair game for the farmer, especially considering the fact that they were prolific breeders
and prodigious consumers of grain” (Leask 163).

In the Old Testament a similar humanitarian way of thinking is told in the Book of
Ruth 2, where the widowed Moabite Ruth is in a foreign land. She is allowed by Boaz to gather food in the field: “She gleaned in the field until even, and beat out that she had gleaned: and it was almost an ephah [about 30 liters] of barley” (verse 17).

Since the poem tells of “December’s winds ensuing” and since it has a winter setting it is unfortunately too late in the season for the mouse to glean, or to have any hope of reconstructing her home. The speaker’s apology is therefore, in reality, a sweet and kind, but empty gesture.

The fourth, fifth and sixth stanzas all depict in detail and with great compassion the terrible and worsened situation the mouse is in due to external, destructive forces beyond her control. The mouse emerges as an innocent, hardworking creature overpowered by ill fortune.

In the fourth stanza the new and dire situation of the mouse is minutely described: Since its “housie,” another choice of word that shows endearment, has been damaged by the speaker during cold winter time, there is no material left to rebuild its nest and the mouse will be forced to live outdoors in a harsh climate with winds both “snell an’ keen.” Death seems a likely outcome for the rodent. Again, as in the first stanza, an effective pause after the fourth line adds emphasis to the bitter and cold December winds, and the exclamation marks after the first, second, fourth and sixth lines add urgency to the sorry plight of the little animal. As a matter of fact, there is a total of fifteen exclamation marks in this poem of forty-eight lines, and consequently a sense of urgency and expressiveness runs through the entire poem. Similarly, the many occurrences of the forms “thy,” “thou” and “thee” in the poem, eighteen in all, contribute to an exceedingly personal and intimate tone. It is as if the speaker is talking to a dear, human friend. The fact that the recipient in reality is merely a rodent unable to understand the language of the speaker is
easily forgotten.

The first four lines of the fifth stanza center around the situation of the mouse prior to the tragic accident: she had instinctively planned for winter in advance and “thought to dwell…beneath the blast.” The spondaic “Till crash” in the fifth line imitates and underlines the terrible fact that the iron cutter in front of the ploughshare smashed the mouse’s dwelling place.

In the penultimate stanza the endearing diminutive form “Mousie” is used to accentuate the speaker’s compassion with the homeless little creature whose plans and hopes were crushed. Again, the speaker attempts to comfort the tiny and defenseless animal by stressing the fact that she is not alone in having her plans shattered; man is equally vulnerable to disaster. Once more, as in the second stanza, the idea of equality and fellowship is stressed for it is “The best laid schemes of Mice and Men / Gang aft agley” [my italics]. The idea that despite careful planning the result may be that of “grief and pain” instead of “promis’d joy” is easily understandable and universal. No matter how well thought out or how well intentioned our plans may be, even the best of them can be ruined by a simple turn of events brought about by powers beyond our control. The mouse’s nest, a careful construction of a diligent summer’s labor, was just as easily destroyed as any plan of man.

In the final stanza the focus shifts as the speaker for the first time points out the great difference between the mouse and himself. In the preceding stanzas the gap between the speaker and the mouse has been bridged by friendly compassion, but now the difference between the two is brought out: the mouse may be a fellow mortal and its plight may remind the speaker of his own, but the mouse has no intellect and thus cannot experience life the way man can. The animal may exist
happily and instinctively in the present, uninfluenced and undisturbed by troubled thoughts of the past and the future. The speaker is almost envious of this fact, calling the mouse “blest compare wi’ me.” The speaker, by contrast, has an intellectual ability to view both the past and future with dread and frightful uncertainty respectively, causing him to grieve and fear. Unable to seize the day the speaker is deeply tortured by his own thoughts. The allusion to Samuel Johnson’s *Rasselas* is evident:

> As he [Rasselas] passed through the fields, and saw the animals around him, ‘Ye,’ said he, ‘are happy, and need not envy me that walk thus among you, burdened with myself; nor do I, ye gentle beings, envy your felicity, for it is not the felicity of man. I have many distresses from which ye are free; I fear pain when I do not feel it; I sometimes shrink at evils recollected, and sometimes start at evils anticipated. Surely the equity of providence has balanced peculiar sufferings with peculiar enjoyments’ (quoted in Wu 269).

Man’s distress is, after all, greater that the sufferings of an animal, and this emerges as the major theme of the poem. This despondency points to sentiments that many readers can relate to. It is often pointed out that the Burns family suffered from oppression and poverty and it is suggested that this is the context behind the poem. This is undoubtedly true, and I have already mentioned the hard farming conditions, but at the same time through history grief and anxiety are common to all people at all times and thus the theme of the poem is universal despite its individualistic expression. At the end of the poem the mouse’s de-housing is transformed into a tale of human eviction and homelessness.

There is, however, a possible contradiction in the line “The present only touches you” as the preceding lines “You thought to dwell” and “In proving foresight may be vain: / The best laid schemes o’ Mice and Men” [my italics], present the rodent as if it had the mental capacity of a human.
We may suspect that the unfortunate plight of the mouse, described in the first six stanzas of the poem has served as an emotional catalyst for the speaker’s own repressed distress. Simultaneously the mouse may also be regarded as a representative of not only lowly creatures, but also of lowly human beings, for instance poor tenant farmers, living at the mercy of a shifting and harsh climate, or more generally, common folk who are tyrannized over by the high and the mighty. Actually, how contemptuously the poor were treated by the rich constituted a favorite theme with Burns. As already mentioned, the area where Burns’ farm was located, Mossgiel near Mauchline, had been distressed by several years of inclement weather with severe cold and wind, creating even greater hardship for those involved in marginal agriculture, among them the Burns family.

In my view the poem might be read at different levels simultaneously: either as a poem teaching us to show benevolence to all creatures, be they insignificant animals or oppressed or dispossessed people. If one chooses to focus on the last stanza especially, the poem depicts both Burns’ personal anxieties at the time it was written, and is simultaneously a token of man’s possible self-pity, or highly understandable great distress as a victim of unpredictable and uncontrollable internal and external forces.

The Connection between the Poem “To a Mouse” and the Novel Of Mice and Men

The novel was published in early February 1937. It received quite favorable reviews, was chosen by the Book-of-the-Month Club which guaranteed it a very large sale, and within less than two weeks the total number of copies sold was about 117,000. In Dubious Battle (1936), Of Mice and Men (1937) and The Grapes of Wrath (1939) all deal with migrant farmers and constitute three successive novels of proletarian literature.
conveying various degrees of social protest. One reason for the popularity of the novel might have been that in the mid-thirties many people regarded themselves as helpless victims of external forces beyond their control like the main characters. Perhaps surprisingly Steinbeck was “dissatisfied with the novel and he often spoke of it in pejorative terms such as a `simple little thing’ or the `Mice book’” (Timmermann 101). According to the critic F. W. Watt Steinbeck expressed the opinion that the novel was “a thin, brittle book, and an experiment but at least it was an honest experiment” (Watt 59).

What the author was attempting to do was to compose a short novel, or a novella, in three acts with restricted elements of place and time, which could be turned into a play. In this respect one might say that Steinbeck succeeded for the novel has both been staged and filmed a number of times using about eighty five per cent of the dialogue in the novel.

Originally Steinbeck had given his work another title, *Something That Happened*, but his close friend, the marine biologist Edward Ricketts, suggested the final title *Of Mice and Men* - a fragment from the seventh stanza of Burns’ poem discussed above:

```
But Mousie, thou art no thy lane
In proving foresight may be vain
The best-laid schemes o’ Mice and Men
Gang aft agley
An’ lea’e us nought but grief an’ pain
For promis’d joy! [my italics]
```

Using words from a poem was not a new concept for Steinbeck since his novel *In Dubious Battle* alludes to a passage in Milton’s poem “Paradise Lost”: “In dubious battle on the plains of Heaven” (line 104). For reasons that will be explained below the title *Something That Happened* is also quite suitable, but the final title of the novel is superbly appropriate as will be demonstrated shortly.

Even if considered in isolation, without its allusion to the poem by Burns, the title *Of Mice and Men* makes sense: the first little animal we encounter in the novel is a
mouse, since one of the protagonists, Lennie Small, has a compelling urge to fondle it. Simultaneously the mouse may symbolize all the defenseless creatures, both human and non-human, we later hear of in the novel. Also, the novel is set in an exclusively male environment on a ranch with only one female, so this is indeed a work about mice and men, both in a literary and a figurative sense.

Even so, bearing in mind the seventh stanza, or for that matter the entire poem, will enhance our understanding of the novel as there are many similarities between the two. One of the most obvious common features is the tender and compassionate tone throughout the novel. Despite the depiction of a rough and laborious ranch life, the care and affection the two main characters give one another through their companionship in their numerous dialogues throughout the novel are heartwarming. The most simplistic and genuine expression of this is Lennie’s utterance in the beginning of the novel:

…because I got you to look after me, and you got me to look after you... (36).

George Milton and Lennie Small are two itinerant ranch hands who have travelled together for a number of years. They are an incongruous pair. Lennie is a simpleton and a giant and thus his last name is utterly ironic. Even though he is clean and manages to partake in some conversation with various people, he is totally dependent on George who leads him and gives him directions, much in the same manner as a parent would do to a child. At the beginning of the novel they are in search of a new job since their last ended in trouble. A girl mistook Lennie’s urge to caress the soft material of her dress for attempted rape and thus the two migratory ranch hands had to flee to avoid getting lynched. The novel is set during the Depression, in the middle of the 1930s, perhaps, but as Anne Loftis points out: “the year after Of Mice and Men was published, about half the nation’s grain was harvested by mechanical combines that enabled 5 men to do the work that had been done
formerly by 350” (Benson 40), so migratory workers like George and Lennie were
disappearing during these years, pushed by twin forces of mechanization and economic
recession. Consequently, both the poem and the novel are set in times of agricultural
hardship. Another likeness between the works is that they both center around the idea of
home and shelter; the mouse of the poem loses its precious nest and is left utterly
vulnerable. The main characters of the novel on the other hand, long for their own home,
a small farm, a favorite theme for Steinbeck, to escape their current position of
vulnerability. They long to be their own masters, to gain independence, and not to have to
fear the risk of losing their jobs. These dreams and longings will be elaborated on below.
In addition both works use language deviating from the standard norm. Burns’ use of his
Scots dialect has already been elaborated on. The novel, on the other hand, includes the
dialogues of rough laborers using swear words, and consequently the language of the
novel was considered by a number of librarians as offensive and vulgar. “Where the hell
is that God damn nigger?” (52) could serve as an exemplification of such language. As a
matter of fact the novel appears on the American Library Association’s list of the Most

George is the leader of the two itinerant farm hands. He carries their work cards,
he prepares supper, he leads the way as they walk in single file, even in the open, and he
attempts to get Lennie to remember various incidents, without much success for Lennie
has the mind of a child and his attention span is extremely short. When they camp the last
evening before reaching the ranch George urges Lennie not to drink so much water in
case it is infected, and Lennie does as he is told, he also frequently copies George to find
the right position to sit and he even adjusts his hat so that it resembles George’s. Clearly,
George is Lennie’s role model and Lennie is George’s devoted follower. As mentioned
above, mice are mentioned quite early in the novel: Lennie has a propensity for caressing furry and soft materials so he would catch mice to pet them, but since he cannot control his huge strength he inadvertently kills them. Since George does not appreciate the idea of dead, stale mice he has to force Lennie to discard them while trying to explain to Lennie that he does not intend to be mean. George also keeps Lennie in check by telling him that he will not be allowed to tend the rabbits on the future farm of their dream unless Lennie behaves and stays out of trouble. Although George exhibits great patience and care most of the time, he explodes once in a while, calling Lennie a burden and dreams of the easy life he could have had without having to care for Lennie:

> God a’mighty, if I was alone I could live so easy. I could get a job an’ work, an’ no trouble. No mess at all, and when the end of the month come I could take my fifty bucks and go into town and get whatever I want (33).

But he quickly apologizes and resumes his role as Lennie’s guardian, and continues to plan ahead and think for both of them.

At the ranch the same pattern emerges: George instructs Lennie to remain silent while George talks to the boss, afraid that Lennie’s limited mental faculties will prevent them from getting the job. He also lies and reports that Lennie is his cousin and that Lennie was kicked in the head by a horse when he was younger. In reality George has known Lennie since childhood and promised Lennie’s aunt Clara to take care of him when she passed away. They are hired, but the boss is suspicious because he has “never seen one guy take so much trouble for another guy” (45). This comment is worth noting for in the setting of this novel true comradeship is rare and most workers wander alone. As if to accentuate this fact the novel is set near the town of Soledad which means lonely in Spanish. Soon it is evident that George is to take more trouble for Lennie. Both the boss’ son, the pugnacious and jealous Curley, and his flirtatious wife without her own
name, are introduced, and George instructs Lennie to stay away from both of them to avoid trouble. As Curley is a small-statured man he suffers from an inferiority complex and he quickly develops a dislike to the tall and powerful Lennie. George warns his companion early on:

Look, Lennie! This here ain’t no set up. I’m scared. You gonna have trouble with that Curley guy….He was kinda feelin’ you out. He figures he’s got you scared and he’s gonna take a sock at you the first chance he gets (52).

Curley’s beautiful wife constantly seeks company on the ranch and is perceived by the workers as a tart. In George’s words he has “never seen no piece of jail bait worse than her” (55). The introduction of this newly married couple creates an ominous atmosphere in the novel, Lennie senses this and cries “I don’t like this place, George. This ain’t no good place. I wanna get outa here” (56). George agrees with him and even considers finding work elsewhere, but all the same he decides to stay. After all, they are practically broke and in need of immediate employment.

Fully aware of Lennie’s fatal weakness for fondling furry animals George asks if Lennie can be given one of the puppies on the ranch; he reckons that since it is bigger than mice Lennie will not kill it so easily. Like a kid, Lennie is beside himself with joy when he constantly plays with his little puppy. The reader hopes that George’s assumption that a larger animal than mice will not be fondled to death, is correct and that finally Lennie’s craving for soft materials is obliterated. Later, the belligerent Curley picks a fight with Lennie and since Lennie is not a bit mean he does not retaliate until George orders him to. Shortly every bone in Curley’s fist is broken by Lennie’s force and for the first time Lennie’s immense and uncontrollable strength is obvious. After all a human fist is far more solid than a tiny mouse. As a farm hand however, he is superb and does the work of at least two men, but uncontrolled his power is extremely dangerous,
especially since Lennie tends to hold on more tightly to the animals or persons in question the more scared and frustrated he gets. Towards the end of the novel, unguided by George, we learn that he has unintentionally killed his beloved puppy, he has literally and paradoxically stroked it to death. Finally he also breaks Curley’s wife’s neck. She just wanted him to stroke her soft hair, but Lennie’s hand was too heavy, she was scared and started to scream, Lennie did not manage to let go and ended up shaking her so that her neck broke. Lennie did try not to converse with her as George had instructed him to, but her arguments, company and tempting soft hair were more than he could resist. As a final gesture of mercy George shoots Lennie so that the vicious Curley will not “shoot for his guts” (124) to revenge his dead wife and his broken hand. Curley’s anger towards Lennie is understandable in the sense that no one would appreciate the person who killed one’s spouse. But his instruction to the ranchmen to shoot for Lennie’s intestines is cruel. If Lennie were shot this way, his death would be slow and extremely painful. Instead, Lennie is shot, unaware, in the back of his neck by George and dies immediately. George’s endless caring precautions and instructions to Lennie bore no fruits. His attempted and compassionate foresight and careful advice to keep Lennie out of trouble were utterly “in vain” as the words say in the seventh stanza of Burns’ poem. Also, devastated when having to shoot his best friend, George’s feelings echo the first two lines of the eight stanza: “Still thou art blest compar’d wi’ me / The present only toucheth thee”. For Lennie lives mostly in the present, he forgets easily, and he dies happily listening to George telling him about their imaginary, future farm. The only instruction Lennie did recall was to return to the campsite they visited before they gained employment, in case of trouble. This idyllic place, minutely described in the beginning of the novel, is important for several reasons: Firstly, it is presented as a peaceful, almost
Eden like place where the main characters thrive. It stands in sharp contrast to the spartan and dark environment of the bunk house they later inhabit on the ranch. Secondly, beginning and ending the novel at the exact same place with similar descriptions of scenery creates a circular recapitulating composition of the novel. A heron is included in both sections, but in the end section the heron swallows a water snake. This act may foreshadow Lennie’s death, although the heron kills the snake dispassionately whereas George on the other hand, has to force himself to kill Lennie. Most importantly, the placement of this site gives George a realistic possibility to reach Lennie before Curley and his men do. As is known, George and Lennie earlier worked north of the ranch, in Weed. Any camp on their way to the ranch would naturally also have been north of it. When Lennie returns to it he runs north, but George informs one of the leaders of the ranch that Lennie would have gone south. This way the posse is led in the wrong direction. Curley’s comment that “You George! You stick with us so we don’t think you had nothin’ to do with this” (125) must clearly have been ignored by George and, more surprisingly, by Curley.

George’s tender care for Lennie runs through the entire novel much the same way as the farmer’s compassionate feelings for the mouse in the poem. The farmer of the poem takes great pain to understand the desperate situation of the homeless mouse. Quite similarly, George tries to protect and understand Lennie. And even though Lennie is not a mouse his vulnerability and helplessness are as large. The combination of limited mental capacity and enormous bodily strength makes Lennie’s existence in society an impossibility. Furthermore, George and Lennie’s companionship is rare and touching, another similarity with the unusual bond between the man and the mouse in the poem, and it is commented on by significant characters in the novel. I have already mentioned
the boss’ comment, but another leader on the ranch, the jerkline skinner Slim, also finds this relationship extraordinary: “Ain’t many guys travel around together,” he mused. “I don’t know why. Maybe ever’body in the whole damn world is scared of each other” (58). Since Slim is described as the “prince of the ranch” (57) his reflections carry extra weight. A character on the other end of the social scale on the ranch, the black stable buck Crooks, expresses downright enviousness of Lennie and George’s relationship. His situation will be commented on below. One might question why George puts up with Lennie who keeps him “in hot water all the time” (33), after all he has only a slight obligation to do so. His promise to Lennie’s aunt mentioned above, is one answer, another is probably that George both enjoys the company and the feeling of being superior, and that he simply has come to love Lennie who brings out his responsible and adult qualities. As is well-known, man need not necessarily thrive with an equal partner; pets and children may offer valuable social relations for anyone. The view of the critic Peter Lisca that Lennie serves a necessary excuse for George’s own failure and lack of success in life, is a bit exaggerated in my opinion.

Lennie, not only George, also brings forward the sympathetic and endearing tone of the novel in that he is an amiable fellow. Readers easily feel sympathy for this helpless retarded person who is as devoted to George as a dog to its master. As Slim asserts “He’s a nice fella” (64). Likewise, Curley’s wife expresses the thought “But you’re a kinda nice fella. Jus’ like a big baby” (116). Much the same way as children can touch us so does Lennie with his childish and innocent responses. That he simultaneously is a dangerous giant capable of killing people unintentionally is thus easily forgotten. We learn to love Lennie almost the way George does in spite of Lennie’s tragic flaw. The civil manner to handle his misdeed of killing Curley’s wife would be to incarcerate him, but many would
feel that his death by his friend’s hand in a happy moment is arguably more benevolent because asylums in the 1930s would entail being almost maltreated. As Slim puts it: “An’s’pose they lock him up an’ strap him down and put him in a cage. That ain’t no good, George” (124). Society tragically has no place for individuals like Lennie. Two of the loniest characters in the novel, the socially excluded Crooks, and Curley’s desperate and heavily made up wife, both confide in Lennie because they too recognize his kindness: Crooks is ostracized on the ranch due to racial prejudice. He has his own, separate room where only the boss and Slim may enter, and he lives there permanently. When visited by the unknowing Lennie one evening he cannot resist his company. So instead of telling Lennie to leave he allows him to stay and exhibits his desperate loneliness, especially as a colored man. Full of envy of Lennie’s friendship with George, he tells him “S’pose you didn’t have nobody. S’pose you couldn’t go into the bunk house and play rummy ‘cause you was black….A guy goes nuts if he ain’t got nobody” (97). His longings are heartbreaking.

Socially, Curley’s wife’s situation is not much different. All the ranch men shun her due to Curley’s jealousy. Her attractiveness which under other circumstances could have been an asset, is a liability. She seeks out Crook, the old swamper Candy and Lennie in Crooks’ room one night and says “Think I don’t like to talk to somebody ever’ once in a while?” (103). In the same manner she finds Lennie in the barn and starts to confess her loneliness and her dreams to him despite his numerous attempted rejections. She admits “I never get to talk to nobody. I get awful lonely” (112). Conversation is awkward at best during these encounters, dialogues with Lennie tend to be, but both these desperately lonely characters acknowledge Lennie’s warmth and amiability. As a matter of fact, he might seem easier to confide in than many other people partly and paradoxically because
he does not understand, and partly because he represents no “threat.” He is no successful person, this fact makes people relaxed and less afraid of exhibiting their own vulnerability. In sum then, George’s tender care and Lennie’s childish reactions color the entire book and contribute to a compassionate tone that closely resembles the tone of the poem.

As part of a ritual, much in the same way as a parent repeatedly will tell a child his or her favorite bedtime story, George has his story that he tells Lennie partly to confirm their uniqueness as friends, partly to have something to dream about to forget their dreary situation, and partly to keep Lennie in check because if Lennie does not behave according to George’s instructions, he will not get to tend the rabbits on their little dream farm as mentioned above. This may seem a mild threat, but as Lennie is obsessed with the thought of furry, soft rabbits, it is highly effective and mentioned by Lennie several times.

He [George] repeated his words rhythmically as though he had said them many times before. ‘Guys like us, that work on ranches, are the loneliest guys in the world. They got no family. They don’t belong no place. They come to a ranch an’ work up a stake and then they go inta town and blow their stake, and the first thing you know they’re poundin’ their tail on some other ranch. They ain’t got nothing to look ahead to.’…With us it ain’t like that. We got a future. We got somebody to talk to that gives a damn about us. We don’t have to sit in no bar room blowin’ in our jack jus’ because we got no place else to go. If them other guys gets in jail they can rot for all anybody give a damn. But not us.’…’O.K. Someday – we’re gonna get the jack together and we’re gonna have a little house and a couple of acres an’ a cow and some pigs and -’…’Well,’ said George, ‘we’ll have a big vegetable patch and a rabbit hutch and chickens. And when it rains in the winter, we’ll just say the hell with goin’ to work, and we’ll build up a fire in the stove and set around an’ listen to the rain comin’ down on the roof – Nuts!’ (36, 37).

The value and rareness of their friendship is elaborated on in this recitation as their bond is exclusive and heartwarming as mentioned above. What is more important here, however, is the role of their future dream farm. Even though George often refers to
the dream, their version of the American Dream, he hardly believes in it which is evident by his final word “nuts.” The obvious reason is lack of money. We learn early on that George and Lennie have had to flee from their last job in Weed, and naturally no payment was given them. As long as the disaster prone Lennie keeps getting them into trouble because of his strength and urge to caress, they keep losing the jobs they get, and are unable to save money. When the novel begins all they have saved is ten dollars. All the same, George knows of a little farm they can purchase for six hundred dollars, and when Candy, the old, handicapped swamper or handyman at the ranch, overhears Lennie and George talking about their dream he offers all his life savings and insurance money, three hundred dollars, to participate in the dream. With additional fifty dollars from each of the three men at the end of the month, George reckons they can make a down payment of 450 dollars on the little farm he knows of. Suddenly the dream of becoming independent “an’ live of the fatta the lan’,” an allusion to Genesis 45:18, as Lennie expresses it (37) seems realizable, and for a brief period of time the hope of an existence in idyll and harmony without vicious people like Curley seems an attainable goal. The monotonous life at the ranch, bucking barley eleven hours per day, would be substituted for a life in freedom to be their own masters and for instance to go to a baseball game if that was their fancy. Their constant fear of getting fired would disappear, and they would reap what they sowed. The pair may be seen as sons of Nature seeking freedom in Nature. Lennie’s murder of Curley’s wife kills this dream, however, and even if Candy and George from an objective point of view still could have bought the farm and sowed and reaped more successfully without Lennie who, although an excellent worker, would probably have caressed to death all the rabbits, George informs Candy: “- I think I knowed from the very first. I think I knowed we’d never do her [the dream]. He [Lennie] usta like to hear
about it so much I got to thinking maybe we would” (121). The little farm without the irreplaceable Lennie has no meaning for George. He is, like the poem says, left with nothing but “grief an’ pain / For promised joy” despite careful planning. His “best-laid schemes” have gone wrong, exactly as the poem says; the parallel is obvious. The critic Kiernan phrases it this way: “The phrase [Of Mice and Men] was from a Burns poem that lamented man’s enslavement to forces of nature that he cannot control and that relentlessly but indifferently destroy his ambitions and illusions” (Kiernan 208).

Steinbeck wrote in a letter to Annie Laurie Williams years later:

M & M may seem to be unrelieved tragedy, but it is not. A careful reading will show that while the audience knows, against its hope, that the dream will not come true, the protagonists must, during the play, become convinced that it will come true. Everyone in the world has a dream he knows can’t come off but he spends his life hoping it may. This is at once the sadness, the greatness and the triumph of our species. And this belief on stage must go from skepticism to possibility to probability before it is nipped off by whatever the modern word for fate is. And in hopelessness – George is able to rise to greatness – to kill his friend to save him. George is a hero and only heroes are worth writing about (Timmermann 98).

Sunita Jain expresses that “The tragedy is not that Lennie has to die; the tragedy is that George has to go on living after having killed Lennie” (Jain 39). What she refers to of course, is the idle and lonely lives of ranch hands that George tells Lennie of. This is also the life – a life with alcohol and women - that George at times has longed for, but it is equally obvious that this urge is only superficial and shallow, and not rooted in his real desire. Nevertheless I find Jain’s comment too exaggerated in that I disagree that it is not a tragedy that Lennie dies. Indeed, both deaths in the novel are tragic, and both the dead characters are situated in a society that holds no place for them.

George is not the only one who suffers, however, as there are more characters in the novel who have their ideas and plans thwarted: one is the temptress at the ranch, Curley’s pretty wife who is initially presented as such: “She had full, rouged lips and
wide-spaced eyes, heavily made up. Her fingernails were red. Her hair hung in little rolled clusters, like sausages” (54). By such a presentation focusing on her cosmetics, typical of prostitutes among others, and the color red symbolizing feminine allure, the reader more easily accepts the derogatory comments Candy and George have about her: “tramp, tart, bitch.” At first she does seem exclusively silly in her futile efforts to find her husband as a pretence to seek attention from the men at the ranch. Also, when she later visits Crooks the Saturday evening she is downright vicious since she threatens those weaker than her, Candy and Crooks, calling them “bindle stiffs, a nigger and a lousy ol’ sheep” (104). But in her final attempt to talk to and confide in Lennie, shortly before she is killed, she reveals that she is desperately lonely at the ranch, and extremely unhappy in her marriage, and our sympathy is roused. She tells Lennie of how she was offered a part in a show, but that her mother would not let her go, and of how she was to receive a letter from a man in Hollywood who promised her a future in the movies. She suspects that her mother stole the letter, if it ever arrived. “I coulda made somethin’ of myself” she complains, and then adds “Maybe I will yet” (114). So obviously she also dreams of leaving Curley and the ranch, and enjoys fantasizing about fancy clothes, fame and a more sociable lifestyle far away from the ranch where she is shunned by all the laborers and has no mother-in-law, sister or children yet to keep her company. After her death she is described this way: “And the meanness and the plannings and the discontent and the ache for attention were all gone from her face. She was very pretty and simple, and her face was sweet and young” (119). According to the critic Warren French Steinbeck pointed out that “…She is a nice, kind girl and not a floozy” (French 74) and it seems as if Steinbeck wanted her real traits to appear after her death. Incidentally, her appearance in the film adaptation from 1992 correponds with this picture of her. In this movie she is
more sweet and natural looking than overpainted and voluptuous. At any rate, her schemes and probably unrealistic ambitions amounted to nothing and all her illusions were shattered by her sudden death. Again, the similarity with the dark message of the poem is evident.

Curley who married only two weeks before the novel commences, must have dreamed of a happy marriage and perhaps to have children with his beautiful wife. Upon her death his dream of family life is shattered as well. Since he is an utterly unsympathetic character it is easy to overlook his fate, and the critics I have read have ignored his fate, but it too deserves mentioning in my opinion. It remains uncertain whether he has good reasons for his jealousy or not, since it is practically impossible to ascertain whether his wife is an attractive young woman innocently seeking the only company there is at the ranch, namely men, or whether she is too flirtatious and sensual towards these workers. I believe she is quite innocent and that all the foul comments that George, especially, gives her, in reality are a projection of his own sexual desires. She is undoubtedly young and highly attractive and simultaneously unattainable to the men, so instead of understanding her, they make her into something unattractive, a fallen woman, a classic motif. It is also interesting to note that the heroic and godlike character Slim is the only one who dares to call her by her “real name”, he simply says “Hi, Goodlookin’” (55) upon addressing her, and there is no evidence that he partakes in the criticism of her. I therefore tend to believe that Curley’s jealousy is quite independent of his wife’s actions and that it is just another one of his many unsympathetic traits.

Candy, the disabled, old swamper, is the one who finds Curley’s wife dead. He immediately suspects that his plans with George and Lennie are off: “Now Candy spoke his greatest fear, ‘You an’ me can go there an’ live nice, can’t we, George? Can’t we?’”
Since George does not give him a confirmative answer, Candy’s dream of living independently on a little farm with George and Lennie is broken as well, and instead he faces a painful and lonely old age without the support of a family: “They’ll [the ranch owner and Curley] can me purty soon. Jus’ as soon as I can’t swamp out no bunk houses they’ll put me on the county,” (84) he explains to Lennie and George earlier in the novel. In other words, Candy’s future is doomed. His beloved dog is shot and this reinforces his loneliness. Just like Lennie is irreplaceable to George, the dog is vital to Candy and he will not accept Slim’s kind offer of having one of the new puppies on the ranch as a substitute. For a brief moment, though, when visiting Crook the Saturday evening, he is so enthralled with the dream of owning the farm that he dares to criticize the way of life at the ranch and to tell Curley’s visiting wife to leave. Forgetting that George has instructed him and Lennie to keep the farm plans to themselves he angrily and proudly tells her of how their future, independent life will be and that he is not scared of losing employment at the ranch anymore. His anger and violent outburst stand in great contrast to the defeated and depressed character we meet towards the end of the novel. As is to be expected he blames Curley’s wife for the destruction of his dreams when he sits by her corpse in the barn: “You God damn tramp,” he said viciously…”Ever’body knowed you’d mess things up…You ain’t no good now, you lousy tart” (122). He then goes on to recite parts of the dream, a dream he now knows is utterly unattainable.

Perhaps Candy represents most men on the ranch when blaming Curley’s wife for what happened. But in reality, and as Sunita Jain points out, no single element, or any combination of these elements can be solely responsible for Lennie’s death. The jealous Curley, his possibly flirtatious wife, Lennie’s prodigious strength, his guilelessness, all these factors undoubtedly contribute to the climax of the novel, but the author refuses “to
delineate evil” and blame someone in particular as one critic has pointed out (Jain 38). Rather, the blame is to be found in life’s unpredictability. Although I agree with Jain that there are various unfortunate elements that contribute to the climax of the novel, I wish to stress Curley’s role as especially blameworthy. Had the highly sympathetic character of Slim been Curley’s wife’s spouse, the deaths might not have happened. Jain also appreciates the novel’s totally objective point of view and contends that this makes it more than a protest novel and at the same time prevents is from depicting sentimental portraits of Lennie and George.

Crooks, the acrimonious and crippled stable buck, a victim of racial segregation is visited by George and Candy who tell him about their plans to buy the farm, as already mentioned. At first he is highly skeptical and tells them of the hundreds of guys he has witnessed who all have futile dreams of owning a piece of land: “I seen too many guys with land in their head. They never get none under their hand” (101). He thus summarizes the pessimistic vision behind the work. However, when Candy explains to him that they have the acquired money, he is convinced and offers to work with them for nothing. For a brief moment he too is fascinated with the dream and attempts to protest, for the first time, against the visit of Curley’s wife. Defeated a little later by her cruel and threatening verbal harassment, a close parallel to Candy’s experience, he withdraws his offer, however. Crooks’ dreams have been buried a long time ago, but his momentary excitement reveals that they once existed. When he confides in Lennie, he tells of a sociable childhood interacting even with white children. At the ranch, however, he is ostracized; he is not allowed to partake in card playing and is left home the Saturday night when the other workers go into town. He lives on the periphery of ranch life. For reasons that are easily understandable Crooks has ceased to dream and emerges as a
pessimistic and tragic character quite suited for the message of both the novel and the poem. His utterances about the futility of men’s dreams prove to be true, unfortunately.

One important event in the novel is when Candy’s beloved dog is shot. Unlike George, Candy has not the courage to do this deed himself, and the rough and insensitive ranch hand Carlson puts the dog out of its misery. Lennie acts, as mentioned, much like a dog to George and obviously this scene foreshadows George’s killing of Lennie. Both Lennie and the dog are shot by Carlson’s luger, a type of weapon used by the Nazis. But the shooting of the rheumatic and toothless old sheepdog also parallels in a way what fate awaits anyone who outlives his usefulness at the ranch; the powerless Candy and Crooks in particular. They will not be shot, but they will eventually lose their jobs and face a dark and lonely old age.

As mentioned above, *Something That Happened* was the original title of this novel. In an interview December 1937 Steinbeck informs us:

I was a bindlestiff myself for quite a spell. I worked in the same county as the story is laid in. The characters are composites to a certain extent. Lennie was a real person. He’s in an insane asylum in California right now. I worked alongside with him for many weeks. He didn’t kill a girl. He killed a ranch foreman. Got sore because the boss had fired his pal and stuck a pitchfork right through his stomach. I hate to tell you how many times, I saw him do it. We couldn’t stop him until it was too late (9).

The Steinbeck biography written by Jay Parini warns us to “Trust the tale, not the teller” (Parini 215) regarding this interview, but even so it seems quite likely to me that Steinbeck wrote from personal experience since he had to take various odd jobs for a number of years. He set this novel, and others, in a vicinity he grew up in, in the Salinas Valley, so why not base some of the characters in the novel on personal experience? In an interview in April 1937 called “More a Mouse Than a Man” Steinbeck informs us: “As for the two principal characters in *Of Mice and Men* they were portrayed as they actually exist in California” (Fensch 7). At any rate, the title *Something That Happened* also
depicts Steinbeck’s non-teleological view which is concerned not so much with what
should or could happen, but what happened from a non-judgmental point of view. Or, as
one critic, K. Sreenivasan, puts it: “Viewed in this [non-teleological] light, the shooting
of Lennie and the bursting of the bubble are like the ploughman’s disrupting of the
mouse’s nest, neither tragic nor brutal; they are simply a manifestation of what happens
anywhere and everywhere” (Sreenivasan 73). The critic Lester Jay Marks states similarly:

He [Steinbeck] is concerned not with the why but with the what and how of the individual’s illusions. The title
Steinbeck originally intended for the novel, “Something That Happened,” is a typically unsentimental
comment upon the tragic reversal of fortunes experienced by George and Lennie (Marks 59).

McCarthy, also, expresses: “Both the men and their dream are defeated by circumstances,
by chance, by `something that happened´” (McCarthy 60). And finally in the words of the
critic Warren French: “Originally Steinbeck had in mind a work for children, to be called
`Something That Happened´ and to emphasize from a non-teleological viewpoint the
absence of any external controlling force responsible for causing the events depicted.”
(French 72-73). As mentioned in my introduction I dislike the original title, and I cannot
share the view of the critic Sreenivasan. The shooting of Lennie is deeply tragic.

According to the critic Richard Astro the real subject in Of Mice and Men “is the
frail nature of primeval innocence, a theme which emerges through the author’s
compassionate treatment of the futile attempt by Lennie and his partner, George Milton,

to translate an impossible dream into reality” and he reads the novel “either as a tragedy
or as dark comedy” (Astro 104, 105). Other critics, such as Warren French, hold a slightly
more optimistic view: “This is a story not of man’s defeat at the hands of an implacable
nature, but of man’s painful conquest of this nature and of his difficult conscious
rejection of his dream of greatness and acceptance of his own mediocrity” (Davis 67).
Joseph Fontenrose is one of many critics who refer to Steinbeck’s own statements about
the novel: “…that Lennie represented `the inarticulate and powerful yearning of all men´ and referred to its scene as a microcosm, making it plain that this novel was meant to express the inevitable defeat and futility of all men’s plans” (Fontenrose 57). In this respect I do not believe that Steinbeck has succeeded as an author since the message of the novel seems to me to express the fate of the exploited and the downtrodden in particular, and not all men’s fate. But naturally I do realize that the message might be extended to pertain to all people as many critics have done. Louis Owens informs, in his highly informative article “Of Mice and Men: The Dream of Commitment” of the various pessimistic readings of the novel: “Fontenrose suggests that the novel is about `the vanity of human wishes´ and asserts, more pessimistically than Burns, `Steinbeck reads, `All schemes o’ Mice and Men Gang ever agley [his italics].’” The words used in the poem is *aft* which means *often*. And furthermore he refers to Howard Levant who declares that “the central theme is stated and restated – the good life is impossible because humanity is flawed” (Owens 101). Owens himself, on the other hand, is far more positive and focuses on the fact that:

The dream of George and Lennie represents a desire to defy the curse of Cain and fallen man – to break the pattern of wandering and loneliness imposed on the outcasts and to return to the perfect garden. George and Lennie achieve all of this dream that is possible in the real world: they are their brother’s keeper…they have someone who cares (Owens 102).

He concludes his article by underlining the fact that since George is not alone after having killed his best friend, but is accompanied by Slim, the novel ends “on a strong note of hope” and that “the crucial dream, the dream of man’s commitment to man, has not perished with Lennie” (Owens 105, 106). This is an interesting and correct reflection, and the end of the novel and the roles of Slim and Carlson deserve a fuller comment:

Steinbeck presents Slim as an almost godlike character. “His authority was so great that
his word was taken on any subject, be it politics or love…his slow speech had overtones not of thought, but of understanding beyond thought” (57). As already mentioned, he does not partake in the derogatory conversations about Curley’s wife and he has no apparent interest in the pulp magazines the other workers read that glorify the lives of the ranch workers. He is a doer, not an unsuccessful dreamer. Bearing these facts in mind, it is therefore not surprising that he is the only one who understands what a tragic loss Lennie’s death represents to George. In the final scene of the novel he goes directly to George to comfort him and says “Never you mind…A guy got to sometimes” (134). And even though George lies about the killing to Curley’s men and pretends he shot Lennie in self defense, Slim probably also comprehends what has really happened. He offers George a drink and they go off together. Whether this represents a beginning friendship between the two, is impossible to decide, such a formation would at any rate be of a totally different quality that the bond Lennie and George had formed. At any rate, the last word of the novel is given to Carlson. “Now what the hell ya suppose is eatin’ them two guys” (154). This is of great significance and adds to the pessimistic tone of the work. Insensitive and thus well suited for a rough ranch life, all Carlson can see is that a dangerous murderer is killed. His limited understanding may represent a number of human beings in a world of hardships, and his unintelligent comment concludes the novel. In the film from 1992 the director, Gary Sinise who also plays the role of George, has chosen to delete this final scene and the film ends with the death of Lennie.

I read Of Mice and Men as a social protest depicting the maltreatment of the have-nots – the migrant laborers like George and Lennie in particular, and also of the disabled like Crooks and Candy, the pathetic wife of Curley, and all ranch workers in general. The novel depicts their essential helplessness and powerlessness in an environment controlled
by people like Curley, and their hopes are in the end nothing but illusions as Crooks pessimistically and correctly concludes. The fact that two quite innocent people are killed and that nearly all the characters’ dreams and hopes are shattered and fractured makes this simple tale, containing perhaps too strong foreshadowings, originally intended for children, a tragic and pessimistic story, a superb and stronger elaboration and exemplification of the dark message of the poem. Simultaneously, and as I have expressed many times, there is an ineffable tenderness in the relation between the two main characters which stands in stark contrast to the grim events of the story. This note of compassion, which is also present in the poem by Burns, certainly gives hope for mankind, despite the many futile endeavors individuals may experience. Quite a few critics do mention and comment on the obvious parallels between the works, but their comments are short ones as mentioned in my introduction. An example of a more unusual reading of the novel is the suggestion of the Cain and Abel theme - that man, son of Cain, is exiled from Eden and condemned to a life of work and worry. This obviously fits the main plot of the novel perfectly. Carlos Baker, quoted by Marks, suggests another symbolic interpretation, namely that the relationship between George and Lennie may be considered as “an allegory of Mind and Body” (Marks 60). Given the fact that Lennie, according to Steinbeck, “was not to represent insanity at all, but the inarticulate yearning of all men” (Watt 61-62), I find this allegoric interpretation a bit stretched. The main themes of the novel - loneliness, friendship, inequality and broken dreams - are presented in a rough tone with an underlying note of compassion that I find especially attractive. Hopefully it is not true that the dark forces of violence and death are stronger than the power of love.
CHAPTER THREE: “WORK WITHOUT HOPE AND NECTAR IN A SIEVE

The main aim of this chapter is to give an analysis of Coleridge’s poem “Work without Hope” and to comment on how its message is to be understood and linked to the title and the main themes of Markandaya’s novel Nectar in a Sieve. The reason why this is intriguing is that the title of the novel is taken from the poem, and that, in addition, the two final lines of the poem are presented as an epigraph in the novel.

Furthermore, I will comment on some of the elements of hope in the novel, I wish to explain what I perceive as the main problem to the characters in the novel: the lack of moderation of various external and internal forces. I will thus give examples of the complicated and double-edged effects of the forceful powers in the novel. Finally, I will present various critical views of the novel.

“Work without Hope”

LINES COMPOSED 21ST FEBRUARY 1825

All Nature seems at work. Slugs leave their lair –
The bees are stirring – birds are on the wing –
And Winter slumbering in the open air,
Wears on his smiling face a dream of Spring!
And I the while, the sole unbusy thing,
Nor honey make, nor pair, nor build, nor sing.

Yet well I ken the banks where amaranths
blow,
Have traced the fount whence streams of nectar
flow.
Bloom, O ye amaranths! Blooms for whom ye
may,
For me ye bloom not! Glide, rich streams,
Away!
With lips unbrightened, wreathless brow, I stroll:
And would you
learn the spells that drowse my
soul?
Work without Hope draws nectar in a sieve,
And Hope without an object cannot live.

The poem “Work without Hope” relates nature to the emotions of its speaker. It seems to
celebrate nature and contrasts its beauty to the gloomy and unproductive mood of the
observing speaker.

The poem is a sonnet: fourteen lines of iambic pentameter lines are linked by the
intricate rhyme scheme of ababbb ccddeeff. It falls into two main parts: a sestet and an
octave. Both the rhyme scheme and the fact that the sestet comes first and not last, make
this sonnet an unusual one. The rhyme scheme of the Petrarchan sonnet, for example, has
on the whole favoured a statement of the problem, situation, or incident in the octave,
with a resolution in the sestet. In “Work without Hope,” however, another variant
appears: the first sestet presents the situation, a description of a bounteous and active
nature as opposed to an “unbusy thing,” the speaker. The octave seems to be a repetition-
with-variation: the images of nature’s beauty, “amaranths” and “streams of nectar,” are
presented and then rejected by the speaker. The final couplet of the octave expresses the
idea that hope is vital; the last two lines thus present the overall theme of the poem,
developed in the first twelve lines, and can be viewed as a rather pessimistic resolution:
“Work without Hope draws nectar in a sieve, / and Hope without an object cannot live.”
The poem expresses the activity of nature in a beautiful manner. “Bees are stirring - birds are on the wing / And Winter slumbering in the open air, / Wears on his smiling face a dream of Spring!” Likewise the never fading, poetical and imaginary flowers, “the amaranths,” and the “streams of nectar” evoke beautiful imagery for nature. According to Wikipedia the word “amaranth” originates from the Greek word amarantos, which means “unwithering,” and it came to symbolize immortality. The flower is mentioned in several literary sources. The earliest one is the Bible where it is used in ten places according to Easton’s Bible Dictionary. Similarly, Aesop’s Fables from the sixth century BC tells of the “everlasting” beauty of the amaranth compared to the shortlived beauty of the rose. Coleridge however, probably found the flower in Milton’s “Paradise Lost:” “Immortal amaranth, a flower which once / In paradise, fast by the tree of life, Began to bloom…” Nectar, alluded to in the sestet, is, according to Greek mythology, the drink of the gods and also the sweet liquid in many flowers, used by bees for the making of honey. The poem thus presents the productivity, bounty and beauty of nature in spring in a wonderful, mythical way, in my opinion. It is as if all of God’s creatures awaken and embrace the spring. To many readers, however, some of these images may appear trite and unconvincing, the personification of winter may serve as an example of this: “And Winter slumbering in the open air, / Wears on his smiling face a dream of spring.”

Agneta Lindgren writes about Romanticism: “If we were to make an attempt to state what Romanticism stands for, it would be this awareness of a self and the legitimacy of emotion” (Lindgren 235). This seems to make “Work without Hope” a typically romantic poem. The parallel between nature and men is a prevalent theme throughout literature of the Romantic period, and the recognition of this fact is an important one for its interpretation. One has to accept the underlying principle of the poem that nature and
man are to be viewed as comparable entities. When such an understanding is established, the art of destructive comparison is evident. By setting up a stark contrast between a productive nature, nature in its most productive season, the spring, the quality of the speaker’s self-esteem is correspondingly reduced. He feels that he is utterly unproductive and of little worth. He realizes and understands the beauty of nature, but is unable to appreciate it himself. This contrast is established at once in the sestet which included four lines describing nature, followed by two lines expressing the speaker’s deep despair. He seems stuck in the desolate and dreary season of winter. The depressing and overwhelming effect nature has on him might even be mirrored in the graphic set up of lines in the sestet: The four lines of nature are above him, as it were, and the “weight” of these lines presses him down, so he is left with half the number of lines, two lines of depression: “And I, the while, the sole unbusy thing / Nor honey make, nor pair, nor build, nor sing.” The same graphic principle applies for the octave.

In the octave, the contrasting principle is developed and intensified. In the sestet nature’s activity was the focus, now the speaker expresses his keen knowledge of nature’s beauty: “Yet well I ken the banks where amaranths blow / Have traced the fount whence streams of nectar flow.” And since the speaker first, in the sestet, felt belittled and disparaged by nature’s productivity, now, his situation is worsened: he realizes he is a very poor recipient for nature’s beauty and his resolution is then, logically, to reject it: For me ye [the amaranths] bloom not! Glide, rich streams [of nectar], away!”

The speaker is left “With lips unbrigihetted” and “wreathless brow.” He is not only unproductive, but also sad and not famous. The speaker regards himself as barren, he does not pair, he is fruitless and with no hope of success. The final couplet sums up his insight: “Work without Hope draws nectar in a sieve, / And Hope without an object..."
cannot live.” These lines may imply that he has nothing to hope for, and without hope there is little chance for accomplishments, productivity and happiness. He is dejected and feels unable to contribute and participate.

For a romantic poet like Coleridge nature is seen as the expression of the Creation. The last line of the sestet “nor honey make, nor pair, nor build, nor sing,” alludes to the gospel according to St. Matthew, chapter 6, verses 26 and 28: “Behold the birds of the heaven, that they sow not, neither do they reap, nor gather into barns; and your heavenly Father feedeth them. Are not ye of much more value that they?...And why are ye anxious concerning raiment? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they toil not, neither do they spin: yet I say unto you that even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these.” These lines express the beauty of nature and also its effortless activities, in a similar manner to that of the poem. But the main message of these lines in the Holy Bible, the verses 25 through 34, is to be found in the last verse: “Be not therefore anxious for the morrow: for the morrow will be anxious for itself. Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof.” One is taught to have trust in God, one is to view nature as an exemplification of God’s care, and, therefore one is not to worry, for God will provide. In a modern Norwegian translation, (Det nye testamentet 21), the verses 25 through 34 have the subtitle “Vær ikke bekymret” which translated means “Do not Worry.” The poem, on the other hand, is based on the idea that nature is not a source of inspiration or consolation for the speaker. This being the case, one might also suspect that the speaker has lost his faith in God. At any rate, whether he has retained his faith in God or not, he does worry.

I find it difficult to fully appreciate this poem. The idea of comparing nature to man is an old one and it is comprehensible, as both nature and man can be seen as results
of the Creation, both represent “life.” But, on the other hand, man and nature are also fundamentally different in that man also has a soul, will and intellect. Consequently, what seems to be effortless work on the part of nature may represent hard struggles for a human being. If man and nature are to be viewed as comparable entities, as this poem suggests, man is bound to lose, as no one can be as busy as a bee, literally speaking. In front of a mountain any man will appear small. The implicit comparison between man and nature in the simile “my love is like a red rose” and in numerous other expressions, is based on the idea that nature represents something beautiful (or unpleasant; “a thunderous voice”) for man. Nature serves as something to take inspiration from, and not something that he should measure himself to by literal comparison. This poem demands that its reader should see a direct link between nature’s beauty and the depressed state of a human being’s mind. I perceive the establishing of this link as too strained. If the point of this poem is to express the low spirits of a poor soul, I think that imagery of nature in winter time, for instance a frozen lake and a grey sky, would have been a more apt choice since such imagery would underline, elaborate and parallel the speaker’s depressed state of mind. This choice would have lessened the gap of the contrast mentioned above. In this poem we are to perceive and accept a mind of despair without any easily understandable explanation other than the last two lines of it at the end of the sestet and the octave. Others might disagree with my opinion of the poem, and argue, quite conversely, that just because of the discrepancy between the description of the blooming life in nature and the desperation of the speaker is so evident, the message of the poem is more strongly brought forward.

Either way, the despair and depressed feelings of the speaker of the poem are obviously heartfelt and sincere. The author, Coleridge, is known to have had numerous
difficulties in his life and it may therefore be enlightening to interpret the poem autobiographically. An opium addict before the age of thirty he was often penniless and felt worthless. Also, he had great difficulties in his interpersonal relationships, causing him to divorce his wife and to break with some friends - Wordsworth, for instance. As J. R. Watson puts it in English Poetry of the Romantic Period 1789-1830: “Coleridge’s own difficulties and hesitations, his aspirations and failures, his limitations, his family problems, his hopes and fears – all can be discovered in his poetry, in the letters and notebooks, and in what we can induce from other evidence: the result of a figure whose life and work arouse admiration and pity…pity for his distress, for his unfinished work, and the mess he often got himself into.” Later Watson continues: “What is clear is that for much of his life Coleridge was especially subject to moods of energetic activity, and to other moods of helplessness and despair” (Watson 212, 213). A chronology of Coleridge’s life (1772-1834) will show that he took up residence with his physician, Dr Gillman and this may indicate that Coleridge might have suffered from manic depression, or bipolarity as is the current term, a complex, mental disease varying in degree and often found with poets. This is only a suspicion as I have read of no such diagnosis in the biographies about Coleridge, but the Internet abounds with hits on Coleridge and this disease, and he is listed in the book Touched with Fire, Manic-Depressive Illness and the Artistic Temperament by Jamison (pp. 219-224). Coleridge’s ill health, mentally and physically, is at any rate common knowledge. Neil Vicker expresses that Coleridge’s arrangement of living with the Gillmans was the better solution “for it was with them that he was allowed to occupy the role he had sought all his life, that of a child” (Burwick 86, 87). Various critics confirm Coleridge’s unhappy and pain-ridden life from early childhood: he was the tenth child of his father’s second wife, but his idealized father died
when Coleridge was only nine years old. In the following years he attended Christ’s Hospital Charity School and was to return to his home only twice. His relationship to his mother seems to have been a distant one. In the recent *The Oxford Handbook of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, Neil Vickers informs us that Coleridge’s feelings towards his mother “were hostile,” and that “he did not attend her funeral” (Burwick 69, 70). Despite these emotional stresses, Coleridge was a prodigy intellectually, but all the same he left Jesus College, Cambridge without a degree. In the controversial book *Coleridge, the Damaged Archangel*, Norman Fruman quotes Coleridge – feeling like a deserted orphan: “No one on earth has ever LOVED me” (Fruman 25), and the author himself undoubtedly regarded his dark childhood as the explanation for his continuously troublesome later life. Furthermore, Fruman writes that “one may be inclined to assume that a major feature of this personality was a profound and perhaps self-destructive modesty” (Fruman 10). Also this pervasive self-doubt is supported by many other critics: Kelvin Everest writes for instance: “But these encouragements, [i.e. Coleridge’s drama *Osorio* and his journalism] were overwhelmed by a brooding sense of personal failure, an inability to discipline himself to the production of work on a scale which could properly articulate the undoubted power and extraordinary breadth of his intellect and talents” (Newlyn 26-27). Even so, this strange mixture of both self-assurance and self-depreciation “is the paradox on which so many of Coleridge’s biographers have come to grief” (Burwick 87). In my view this strange blending of divergent moods is closely connected to the already mentioned disease bipolarity. The causes of this disease are not to be found primarily in childhood, but in an inherited disorder of the biochemical substances of the brain. The facts that Coleridge’s daughter Sara became addicted to opium, that one of Coleridge’s older brothers committed suicide at the age of twenty-two, and that Coleridge’s eldest
son, Hartley, was bipolar, as Jamison informs us, certainly point in the direction of inheritance. If the poem is the expression of Coleridge’s own feelings, he is indeed in a pitiable state. If the poet suffered from a severe depression, it is, however, easier to understand why the beautiful imagery of nature in the poem, representing his past, manic state, is so vividly in his memory, so desirable and yet so unattainable, to him. Had he chosen to include some more explicatory, convincing reasons for his depressed state in his poem, for instance the loss of a person dear to him, it might have been easier for everyone to sympathize with and understand his feelings of hopelessness and worthlessness. But if the words of the poem are an expression of a person suffering from depression as a disease, feelings of despair may arise endogenously, originating internally, without any reasonable, external, explanatory factors, like bereavement, to cause them. Consequently, such factors are absent in the poem. Yet the speaker of the poem does mention “unwreathed brow” and thus, possibly accentuates his feeling of lack of poetic achievement. One may then ask whether this sensation of lack of poetic achievement is true or whether it is the exaggeration of Coleridge’s depressed state. I think that both these explanations are true. George Whalley informs us, for instance that “During the last thirty years of his life, Coleridge was abused, often and publicly, for being a poet manqué. As a young man (the argument goes) he had shown exceptional promise and accomplishment as a poet, but somewhere along the line (some have suggested “Dejection – an Ode” [1802] as the watershed) he lost the tread – through neglects of his talents, through indolence, perversity or lack of courage” (Brett 7). This view might also explain why Coleridge’s later poetry has been somewhat neglected by critics, and extensive commentary of the late poem “Work without Hope” almost impossible to find. One exception to the short critiques I will present below is the
extensive comment of the poem in James D. Boulger’s *Coleridge as a Religious Thinker*. He describes the poem as “The furthest point of spiritual isolation” and as “the dichotomy between Nature and spirit. The critic stresses the point that the key word in the first line of the poem is “seems” instead of “is:” All Nature seems at work…” Boulger is of the opinion that this indicates “the poet’s hesitation to attribute any spiritual meaning to Nature; he has become conscious of the `pathetic fallacy.´” He further elaborates the second stanza where the “present scene is suddenly charged with symbolic values and associations drawn from Coleridge’s earlier career.” Boulger asserts that the “amaranths” and the “streams of nectar” are drawn from “the misty land of the imagination, and the landscape of `Kubla Khan´ and `The Ancient Mariner´”. He translates the word “ken” (as in “Yet well I ken the banks where amaranths blow”) into the word “remember”, and explains that the lines “Bloom o ye amaranths! Bloom for whom ye may / For me ye bloom not! Glide, rich streams /Away” “refer to the deadness of external nature in the present spiritual void, but primarily indicate that the mythical sources of poetic inspiration in the mind’s imaginative powers have dried up…The spell cast by “streams of nectar”…had long been broken; only in an imaginative flight of memory could it be partially revived.” Boulger seems thus to suggest that the “amaranths” and “streams of nectar” represent Coleridge’s earlier imaginative powers, for example exhibited in the famous “Kubla Khan.” Boulger ends his extensive and interesting comment this way: “Coleridge could not revive the analogy [of Nature] or sentiment of being from which Christian poets through the ages have drawn mythical and imaginative power” (Boulger 210-213).

In a similar manner Lindgren supports this view and states “that the normal consolations of a Christian – for instance joy – are largely absent from his [Coleridge’s]
major poems and later poetry…For a Christian, even the Fallen world is mitigated by the belief in the redemptive powers, powers which are not related to Nature but belong to man’s spiritual inheritance, his soul” (Lindgren 236). This comment seems to me to suggest that this poem is also an exemplification of the speaker’s deep religious crisis.

Patricia M. Adair devotes a full chapter to Coleridge’s later poetry in her book *The Waking Dream. A Study of Coleridge’s Poetry*. In this chapter she writes: “‘Kubla Khan’ and ‘Work without Hope’ belong to different kinds of poetry, and it seems no service to Coleridge’s reputation not to distinguish between them” (Adair 221). She presents the first stanza of the poem and comments: “The bee is, again, an image of fertility – and the poet can no longer sing or ‘honey make’ undoubtedly recalls “Kubla Khan”: He on honey-dew hath fed, / And drunk the milk of Paradise.” She continues:

The Paradise imagery continues in the second half of the poem…with the fountain, the amaranth and nectar, but it is no longer a creative burst whose power flings up the sacred river. The clumsy archaisms, apostrophes and rhetorical question are also stylistic evidence of poetic sterility (Adair 229).

A conclusion of my line of argument about the quality of the poem is that I find its value and idea of composition questionable, but nevertheless easier to grasp when I think of the author not as a “mentally disturbed” person in the negative sense of the word, but as a poet whose mind and poetry hold the capacity for inexplicable, deep, distorted despair (depression) and at the same time exceeding, exuberant energy (mania). The lack of public, positive assessments of his poetry must have contributed to his feelings of despair. On the other hand, Boulger’s interpretation of the poem which I read long after my own reading of the poem was completed, really deepened and slightly altered my comprehension and appreciation of the poem. If Boulger is correct in claiming that the word “seem” in the first sentence of the poem (cf. “All nature seems at work”) is crucial, then the speaker of the poem does not depict nature as beautifully and convincingly as I
imagined (and as I have experienced nature personally). Rather, it may seem as if the speaker’s attitude to nature is one of ambivalence: on the one hand he observes and depicts nature at work and contrasts its exuberance to his own lack of productivity. On the other hand, however, he does not really present any original depiction of nature. As I will point out below, he was not the first poet to write about busy bees and nature’s beauty. Furthermore, the poem also contains religious allusions as mentioned earlier, and to the speaker Man and Nature represent a unity; the One Life. Therefore, by claiming that nature only seems at work in the first stanza, and later, in the second stanza, by asking it to move away from him (cf. “Glide, rich streams /Away!”), the speaker implies that he also feels spiritually alienated from himself. This fact, in turn, probably makes him feel guilty and even sinful in the eyes of God, for Coleridge was a deeply religious man. My final conclusion of this poem is that I find it highly intriguing.

One may suppose that the line immediately following the title of the poem, “Lines composed 21st February 1825,” can give a clue to an improved understanding of the poem. But as Fruman points out, by presenting highly convincing material, such information supplied by Coleridge may lead to nothing more than uncertainty: The poet often included dates and places in his poems; sometimes they are correct and other times they are not.

What is interesting, however, is to read Fruman’s account of Coleridge’s journal entry:

The affecting 'Words without Hope' first appears in a journal to an unnamed friend. Immediately preceding the poem, Coleridge wrote: 'Strain in the manner of G. Herbert…N.B. The Thought and Images being modernized and turned into English.' He subsequently drew his pen through everything following 'N.B.,' and when the poem appeared in 1828, 1829 and 1834, no mention was made of the debt to Herbert (Fruman 259).

In a footnote Fruman gives the titles of the two poems by George Herbert that inspired
Coleridge to write his poem, and these poems, “Employment I” and “Praise I,” are included in their entirety in the Appendix of this paper. The relevant fifth stanza of the poem “Employment I” reads: “All things are busy; only I / Neither bring honey with the bees, / Nor flowers to make that, nor the husbandry / To water these.” The superficial and obvious parallel to Coleridge’s “Work without Hope” is that both the poems contain descriptions of an unproductive speaker as opposed to the active bees. Herbert’s poem “Praise I” also echoes the busy bees found in “Work without Hope”: “O raise me then! Poor bees, that work all day / Sting my delay / who have a work, as well as they, / And much, much more.” “Praise I” thus has a far more optimistic tone to it than “Work without Hope.” To arrive at any conclusive comparison between these three poems a full and far more detailed analysis of Herbert’s poems would have been required, and such a comparison falls outside the scope of this thesis. All the poems can be said to deal with man, nature and God, but in various ways. Margaret Turnbull’s article “George Herbert Journal” informs us that N. H. Mackenzie has discovered a similarity between “Work without Hope” and Gerard Manley Hopkin’s poem “Thou art indeed just, Lord, if I contend” (the full version of the poem in the Appendix). The twelfth line of this poem reads: “birds build – but not I build; no, but strain.” Once more we can see the clear parallel to some of the ideas in Coleridge’s poem. As a final proof of the many sources of inspiration to “Work without Hope,” Morton D. Paley refers to an early biographer of Coleridge, James Dykes Campbell. He compares “Work without Hope” to Robert Browning’s “Andrea del Sarto” published in 1855 (Burwick 693). Since this poem consists of 266 lines, I have chosen not to include it in the Appendix. A summary of this poem has the following sentence: “…as he [the speaker] thinks back on his concerns and laments that his worldly concerns have kept him from fulfilling his promise as an artist.
Such a regret is similar to the sorrow and “unwreathed brow” expressed in “Work without Hope.”

Some critics I have read agree on a quite positive assessment of the poem: A.C. Swinburne is enthralled: “…sunbright and honeysweet, `Work without Hope´ (what more could be left to hope for when the man [Coleridge] could already do such work?) – of these, and of how many more! What can be said but that they are perfect, flawless, priceless?” (Jones and Tydeman 93). I agree with Swinburne in his praise of the poem, of its description of nature’s brightness and sweetness. But the most interesting part of his comment, as I see it, is to be found in its parenthesis within which Swinburne expressed the view that there could be no more to hope for when the poet “could already do such work.” I disagree most strongly with Swinburne’s view in this respect as I definitely do not think that Coleridge’s expression of despair in this poem was a result of his sensation of having achieved in the past what he wanted as a poet. Coleridge must have been aware of the fact that his poetic powers had largely left him, and I think that Swinburne must have overlooked Coleridge’s poetic words “With lips unbrightened, wreathless brow.” In my view these words can hardly be interpreted as the words of a contented poet.

According to Fruman “Coleridge wrote twice as much [from the age of eighteen] up to the age of twenty-six…than in all the following thirty-six years of his life. The astonishing creative potency of 1797-98 was thereafter to elude him, except for brief and ever more fleeting encounters” (Fruman 260). Watson writes in a similar manner about Coleridge’s later poetry as “occasional and fragmentary.” And as a direct comment to the final couplet of the poem, he continues “…images for his [Coleridge’s] own condition are often memorable, single reminders of the buoyant magic of earlier years” (Watson 246). Fruman is the most indecisive: “Though the poems [“Work without Hope” included] are
considerably diminished when considered solely in themselves, they take on a distinctly tragic quality in the context of his [Coleridge’s] later life” (Fruman 260). Whalley considers the poem as “moving, finely wrought and accessible” (Brett 29).

The Connection between the Poem “Work without Hope” and the Novel Nectar in a Sieve

As a contrast to the poem none of the characters in the novel are merely passive and depressed observers of a bounteous nature. Instead they cling to their hope of a better future, being active tenant farmers making a living out of a sometimes merciful and sometimes merciless nature. Having stated this, it must be added that the land, or nature, also supplies moments of joy and inspiration for them. At the very end of the novel, upon the main character Rukmani’s return to her village, she states: “I looked about me at the land and it was life to my starving spirit. I felt the earth beneath my feet and wept for happiness” (186). Such moments of joy in nature are rare, however, and the novel focuses on their fight for survival through farming the land. As farmers they are inextricably bound to nature.

Markandaya chose the four words, Nectar in a Sieve, of the poem to constitute the title of the novel, and the epigraph includes the last couplet of the poem (“Work without Hope draws nectar in a sieve, / And Hope without an object cannot live”). Markandaya had of course read the entire poem, but chose to include only its final couplet. As a part of the couplet of the poem, the title of the novel seems to indicate merely vain attempts, like filling water in a bucket full of holes. The novel has abundant evidence of such futile efforts. Unsuccessful farming and subsequent starvation due to nature’s destructive forces
and the fact that the rented land is sold, are some examples. The fact that five out of six providing sons disappear, and that the only daughter in the novel turns to prostitution to save her starving baby brother, are others. As a matter of fact, many readers would claim, with good reason, that all these heartbreaking hardships are what constitute the main message and themes of the novel. The critic Anil Kumar Bhatnagar who has written an interesting thematic study of the novels of Markandaya which will be referred to later, puts his very short comment on the title like this:

Markandaya’s themes are reflected in the titles of most of her novels. The titles are ironical. Nectar in a Sieve refers to the illusory happiness of man in his Sisyphian struggle for survival (Bhatnagar 139).

As will be shown presently I disagree with Bhatnagar, because I do not conceive the title as ironic. I do not imagine that the characters are victims of illusions when they have their happy moments; to claim this, I think, is to focus too much on the characters’ ill fate, and too little on their stoicism.

To regard the expression Nectar in a Sieve, as the title of the novel independent of the poem, however, gives a quite different perspective that in my opinion the abovementioned critic ignores: The preciousness and the connotations (mentioned above) of nectar, the initial word, stands out to a greater extent, implying sweetness and beauty. And this nectar’s speedy “way” through a sieve is also an indication of brevity and swiftness. Nectar may thus be interpreted as the sweetness of life, including love for family members, very evident in the novel, or the occasional abundance of nature, also apparent in the novel, or both. Religious connotations, such as nectar being the drink of gods in Greek mythology, may be added to this image, widening the implications of the title which is highly suitable for a novel depicting a deeply religious couple. Professor Williams gives the following account of the nectar’s mythological associations:

Came for the Dhanwantari, the gods' physician.
High in his hand he bore the cup of nectar –
Life-giving draught – longed for by gods and demons.
Then had the demons forcibly borne off
The cup, and drained the precious beverage,
Had not the mighty Vishnu interposed.
Bewildering them, he gave it to the gods; (Srivastava 2).

Also, a farmer’s toil can be interpreted as his “nectar” and the rented land his “sieve.” But the sweetness of life, of sexuality, work, children, or nature - both its beauty and produce - may “seep out” rapidly and disappear. They do so for many people and as I will explain later, this couple’s blessings are in many cases tragedies in disguise. It is thus of the utmost importance to make the best of one’s present opportunities, to seize the day. The main character displays a great talent for this, she believes firmly in God, counts her blessings, she seldom broods over her past and there are quite a few joyous moments in the novel, otherwise the contents of the novel would have been unbearable. After Rukmani realizes that two of her sons will depart for Ceylon and that her third son is to be a servant in a distant city, she is naturally dispirited. Then her husband, Nathan, accuses her of brooding too much, and after a while he manages to heighten her spirits to see the joys that are still with them.

The couplet (“Work without Hope draws nectar in a sieve, / And Hope without an object cannot live”) is thus the link to the novel, and it is a “reversed” or an ironic link because the message of the poem and that of the novel differ widely: The speaker of the poem is deeply distressed and depressed, for no very obvious reason, by the beauty of nature. The narrator of the novel, on the other hand, is both happy when faced with life’s joy, and distressed when faced with disastrous, external forces like the death of two of her children or failing harvests due to droughts or too violent monsoon rain. Actually, one might suspect that Markandaya’s reaction to the poem was a negative one. That she
perceived the speaker of the poem as self-pitying, and decided to write a novel where the narrator is a fighting fit female who is not prone to self-pity even if her misfortunes arouse any reader’s compassion. One main message of the novel is namely that in spite of numerous devastating hardships, like the ones already mentioned, the main character’s soul triumphs in her silent and quiet manner by not letting fear be her guiding force. The novel reads for instance: “Hope, and fear. Twin forces that tugged at us in one direction and then in another, and which was the strongest no one could say. Of the latter we never spoke, but it was always with us” (78). Also Rukmani’s optimism, realism and religious spirit are shown clearly when Kenny, the British village doctor, has told her that she must “cry out if you want help” and that there is “no grandeur in want – or in endurance,” and she thinks:

Well, and what if we gave in to our troubles at every step! We would be pitiable creatures indeed to be so weak, for is not a man’s spirit given to him to rise above his misfortunes? As for our wants, they are many and unfilled, for who is so rich or compassionate as to supply them? Want is our companion from birth to death, familiar as the seasons or the earth, varying only in degree. What profit to bewail that which has always been and cannot change?

Kenny then continues, as if he had read her thoughts:

“Acquiescent imbeciles,” he said scornfully, “do you think spiritual grace comes from being in want, or from suffering? What thoughts have you when your belly is empty or your body is sick? Tell me they are noble ones and I will call you a liar.”

Rukmani then replies:

“Yet our priests fast, and inflict on themselves severe punishments, and we are taught to bear our sorrows in silence, and all this is so that the soul may be cleansed” (111.112)

I must add that Kenny, obviously, has a point too, and he manages to raise funds to improve the medical conditions in the village by building a hospital, but from Rukmani’s point of view, as the wife of a poor tenant farmer, her answers are astonishing and unmistakable signs of the Eastern philosophy of life stressing a somewhat passive
acceptance of one’s fate. So what is created, I think, by Markandaya’s not including the many lines of the entire poem’s description of a bounteous and beautiful nature in the epigraph, but only its last couplet concerning the importance of human hope, is to create an expectation in the reader that this will be a work about “hope” and an “object” for this hope. The last line of the poem reads: “And hope without an object cannot live.” My opinion is that the novel is a work about hope and its “objects,” despite the all too apparent tribulations. The novel is definitely not a work about the beauty of nature and its seemingly paradoxical, saddening effect on a speaker’s mind. To me the novel is a work describing constantly renewed hope and “objects” for hope against all odds - human beings’ ceaseless creation of hope in spite of devastating internal and external forces.

There are, naturally, numerous other differences between the poem and the novel. The first mirrors a moment in the life of a single person; the second the lives of many characters. In one sense they differ too widely to be compared. My main topic, however, is to comment on the link between the main messages of the works.

In the first, short chapter of the book *The Novels of Kamala Markandaya: A Critical Study* Ramesh K. Srivastava discusses the implications of the title: He too sees the title first and foremost as a pessimistic one and something that suggests “the futility of their [Rukmani and Nathan’s] labour.” He lists the couple’s various misfortunes and asserts: “After giving them a momentary excitement and pleasure, the nectar goes down the drain.” He further informs us that the word “nectar” has mythological associations and that “it was claimed tactfully by the gods.” He explains that “Nathan is a *karma-yogi*, who, having belief in God and *karma*, does his duty without caring for rewards and it is this faith that sustains them even when blows after blows of misfortune fall on them.” But much in the same way as I have argued above, he too stresses that Rukmani has an
unfailing spirit and an “optimistic view of life.” Indeed, he writes that “For her, disappointment leads only to hope” (Srivastava 1,2,3). I could not have agreed more.

Having stated the idea of a “reversed link,” the notion that the poem expresses the thoughts of a dispirited human soul, while the novel tells of a spirited human soul, it must be added that one might also view the link between the message of the poem and the main message of the novel as a parallel and not a reversed one. To arrive at such a conclusion one would need to understand the message of the poem as an extension of the abovementioned analysis. This would mean to read the poem as an indirect celebration of the after all surviving human spirit and not “merely” as an expression of a human being’s despair. It might be that the unromantic and stern message of the poem is the belief that human nature cannot and will not be like nature. A human being, unlike nature, can only be productive with a sense of hope and an object (for this hope). Thus the poem might be interpreted, in a more modern sense, as a work which presents a speaker who does not view nature as the goal for the seeking, human soul, and as one who does not think that the answer to the human condition is to be found in nature. If this is the case, the poem insists on the pre-eminence of the human soul and finds perhaps God in the human being? At any rate, such an interpretation would confront the reader’s conventional assumptions about nature’s inspiring beauty by expressing the idea that human beings, be they depressed or joyful, have minds and souls, and are therefore placed above, and yet within, the automatic activity of nature. Human beings may hope for something eternal. This understanding would also be in accordance with the gospel of St Matthew, chapter 6, verse 26 referred to above: “Are not ye [human beings] of much more value than they [the birds, in other words, nature]”? The title of the poem “Work without Hope” would then refer to nature’s activities carried out without conscious thought, and would also
explain why Coleridge has chosen the wording “nature seems at work.” This might also be what Fruman is thinking of when he refers to the poem as “peculiarly modern in spirit” (Fruman 260). This reading would to a greater extent reflect and parallel the main message of the novel: the superiority of the human spirit. But even though such a reading is conceivable, and perhaps even tempting if one seeks after parallelisms and connections between works as I do, I still believe that my initial, abovementioned analysis, the one presenting the speaker as a deeply dispirited soul, alienated from nature, is the most viable and likely interpretation since Coleridge accentuated the union of man and nature in his other works. Such an interpretation stands in direct opposition to one of the main messages of the novel, namely that Rukmani’s fate is that of spiritual survival.

A Comment on Elements of Hope in the Novel

As indicated above the novel contains a lot of hope, despite all the tragedy. To want children is most people’s hope and needs no further explanation. To desire children, preferably sons, in a rural village in India around the 1950s is of even greater importance since sons, and not daughters, are expected to provide for their parents through old age. Daughters, on the other hand, mean expensive dowries. Consequently, the fact that in this novel five of six sons are lost (two die and three move away) cannot be over emphasized, not only as a bereavement for the parents, but also as a loss of means to sustain life. Acting as a savior, the son Selvam represents the concept of unconditional family love. He is initially willing to sacrifice his career as a medical assistant to become an untalented farmer to save his parents from moving from their village, but his offer is rejected. His final words to his mother when she returns to her village, at the very end of
the novel, are reassuring: “We shall manage” (186). He represents hope.

The British doctor Kenny acts as another element of hope in the novel: he “fathers” Rukmani’s sons by fertility treatment, and he founds a hospital as already mentioned. He represents a future with improved medical care and he provides work for Selvam referred to in the paragraph above. The character, Nathan, as a contrast, stands for the declining and largely hopeless, agricultural past. He dies as a result of ill health and overwork, unattended by medical care. As a tender and basically loving husband, however, he also represents hope.

Although a minor character, Puli, the orphan child Nathan and Rukmani encounter and “adopt” in the city, stands for hope. He assists the old couple in the tough and violent atmosphere of the city and finds work for them in the stone quarry so that they are able to save money for the return fare to the village. As is known, Nathan dies in the city and it is therefore Puli who accompanies Rukmani on her journey home.

But naturally the understanding of hope and its fulfillment is also a relativistic one; it depends on what your hopes are. Throughout the novel Rukmani’s hopes are continuously and steadily reduced. She learns to “bend like grass” (28). Initially, for example, she and her husband dream of owning their land and perhaps to have a better place to live than in a hut. Their aspirations thus parallel George and Lennie’s dream in Of Mice and Men discussed in the previous chapter. Also, Rukmani dreamed of having sons, but certainly not that five of them were to disappear. So, as time goes by, many of her hopes vanish.

With so many crushed hopes and an inability to extricate herself from the vicious cycle of poverty, it is almost unbelievable that Rukmani survives, both mentally and physically. But her belief in God and the inevitability of her karma sustains her (she, as
Nathan, is a so-called karma yogi, one who does her duty without caring for rewards). Her deep love for her family also gives her many objects for hope as well as for disappointments. Hope is indeed the poor man’s bread in this novel. Rukmani becomes a master of ceaselessly finding new hope whatever her circumstances are. As a result of her skills her soul and spirit triumph. In the poem “Work without Hope” hope is non-existant.

Traits of Double-Edged Swords and Lack of Moderation in the Novel

As indicated in my introduction the problem of lack of moderation of external and internal forces is very evident in the novel. This absence of limited forces continuously leads to either excess or to scarcity and inadequate supply. The happy medium is notably absent in the novel. This can be exemplified in a number of ways: Nature’s supply of rain, life-giving water, a hope, is often either too generous, causing destructive monsoons, or too scarce, resulting in disastrous droughts and starvation.

The number of children, hopes for the future, also represents a problem in that a large number of children inevitably means too many mouths to feed. So, a female’s fertility, a hope, can be too excessive and lead to problems of starvation as it does in Rukmani’s family. On the other hand, a woman’s infertility, barrenness, or having only daughters, is even worse, not only as a disappointment to any married couple wanting sons, but also as a reason for a married man to divorce his wife. This fact explains why Rukmani and Nathan are so disappointed at their daughter Ira’s birth and why seven years of waiting for a son is almost unbearable. Curiously enough, we never learn that Nathan considers leaving Rukmani during those years. The importance of male heirs cannot be over exaggerated in a (rural) Indian society “where the heaven is believed to be denied to
a person who has no son to propitiate manes…” (Srivastava 14). I find it peculiar that both the critics Srivastava and Ganesan, the author of the introduction of the paperback version of the novel that I have read, state that Rukmani delivers six children when she in fact gives birth to seven: Ira, Arjun, Thambi, Murugan, Raja, Selvam and Kuti. Perhaps these critics too simply ignore the daughter? Ira is naturally the example of what can happen to a seemingly barren woman as she is returned by her husband to her parents after five years of marriage.

Sexual desire, sound lust vaguely described in Nathan and Rukmani’s marriage, is seen to cause pain and problems too: Kunthi, the village’s lustful lady, and Nathan’s desire and their intercourse lead to infidelity and offspring. Rukmani is shocked by this information, but she decides to “Let it rest” (85). In reality she does not have much of a choice, and I cannot help thinking of the much worse consequences it would have had, had Rukmani been the adulteress. Rukmani’s third son, Murugan, is unfaithful to his wife due to an excessive sexual appetite. He leaves his wife and child as a result of this, and she turns to prostitution. In this way her paid sexual services mirror Ira’s prostitution as they both, as rejected wives, provide such services to survive. The concept of misplaced sexual desire is therefore a highly problematic one: morally it is undesirable, but at the same time males’ lust leads to survival for prostitutes like Ira and Murugan’s wife. An additional complication of this topic is the fact that all three prostitutes in the novel, Kunthi, Ira and Murugan’s deserted wife, give birth to valuable sons. Kunthi and Ira could probably not have borne children other than as a result of illicit affairs as Kunthi’s husband is impotent, and Ira is a rejected, seemingly infertile wife. According to the critic Almeida Ira’s choice is an untypical one even when her motives are to save her baby brother from starvation: “Vernacular Indian literature has frequently portrayed woman
who have preferred death rather than succumb to the indignity of prostitution” (Almeida 151). Ira’s situation after having given birth to her albino son, Sacrabani, will be dealt with below.

The concept of literacy, shown by Rukmani’s teaching her children how to read and write, the same way her father taught her, is an important and positive element throughout the novel. Even the illiterate Nathan who could have opposed her practicing her talent since it renders him inferior to her, allows Rukmani to enjoy her talent. But also a desirable intellectual skill may be problematic: Rukmani’s two eldest sons, Arjun and Thambi, soon surpass the mother’s literacy, and this competence gives them the confidence and medium to express their frustrations as spokesmen for the strike at the tannery. Eventually this leads to their departure for Ceylon (Sri Lanka) and Rukmani loses two of her sons. Also, the officials of the tannery regard the sons as problematic agitators, and this perception leads them to beat Rukmani’s fourth son, Raja, a petty thief, to death. Fortunately, literacy does not only have negative implications, it also leads to hope: the fifth son Selvam’s gift of literacy thus represents survival and a future income for the family at the end of the novel, as mentioned above. Also, without work or money in an unknown, bewildering city it is Rukmani’s writing skills that make her earn a few annas, in other words, her skills contribute to the hope of survival when all other doors seem closed.

Last, but not least, the new tannery in the village, the major event in the area, can be viewed in two ways, positively or negatively: As a positive sign of modernity and industrialization it provides opportunities for low paid employment. Compared to nature’s wildly varying and destructive forces resulting in unpredictable and unstable harvests, the tannery can offer a more stable and steady income. At the same time, and by
contrast, the effects of the tannery are negative ones, indeed. As mentioned above in connection with the concept of literacy, the tannery, with its low wages and cruel officials, leads to the disappearance of three of Rukmani’s sons. More importantly for the village as such, the tannery disturbs the quiet, peaceful village life. The playground area for the children must yield to the building of it, nature’s wildlife is disturbed, and there is noise, inflated prices and the arrival of many foreign people. In the end of the first part of the novel the tannery owners purchase the land Rukmani and Nathan rent and thus force them to move to an unknown city where they are to face theft, disappointment and starvation and finally Nathan’s death. To this couple and their children the tannery is therefore undoubtedly an evil, fatal force. Even so, Rukmani’s comment on the tannery is:

Tannery or not, the land might have been taken from us. It had never belonged to us, we had never prospered to the extent where we could buy, and Nathan, himself the son of a landless man, had inherited nothing. And whatever extraneous influence the tannery may have exercised, the calamities of the land belong to it alone, born of wind and rain and weather, immensities not to be tempered by man and his creations (132).

The poem “Work without Hope” and the novel Nectar in a Sieve depict two highly different narrators: A man (?), a victim of wildly varying internal forces, and a woman, a victim of wildly varying external forces. Both are struggling survivors.

The Themes in Nectar in a Sieve

The critic Bhatnagar lists five themes in the novel: Human relationship, hunger and degradation, rootlessness, fatalism and East-West encounters. I will comment on each of them in the following:
Since most novels present human relationship in one form or another, I believe that family and friends would be a more apt titling of the theme. The novel depicts a closely knit family and village life seen through the eyes of the narrator Rukmani. She is a child bride at the age of twelve, and since she has no apparent beauty and no dowry as the fourth daughter in a family, she marries below her. But the marriage is a blessed one and this is evident from the very beginning of the novel where she describes how her parents had married her to a tenant farmer who was poor in everything, but in love and care for her. `A poor match,´ they [her relatives] said, and not always quietly. How little they knew, any of them!” (4). Still, Rukmani is shocked to the extent that she feels ill, to experience that her new home will be a hut made of mud, a lot smaller in size than the house she was brought up in. Her husband, Nathan, senses this and says “… [we might] maybe even buy a house such as your father’s. You would like that?” But Rukmani seems determined to face her new life style and retorts “It suits me quite well to live here” (6). In the first months of their marriage she reflects “While the sun shines on you and the fields are green and beautiful to the eye, and your husband sees beauty in you which no one has seen before…., what more can a woman ask for?” (8). Similarly, she asserts in the first chapter “For myself, I am glad I married `beneath me´ for a finer man no one could have had…” (9). In the first period of their marriage Nathan praises her for her achievements and Rukmani informs us that she had received “Not one cross word or impatient look, and praise for whatever small success I achieved” (10).

As time goes by Rukmani gives birth to seven children, one daughter and six sons, but we learn little of their years as children other than that the eldest daughter is a
caring sister and that the sons quickly learn the skill of writing and reading. The fate of
the youngest child, Kuli, who dies from starvation before he is five years old, is
portrayed though. But this is definitely not a novel of the problems of bringing up
children. On the contrary, family life seems free of conflicts and disagreements even
though they live in one room in a hut and face hunger and the constant lack of money. In
my view this is somewhat unrealistic. Rukmani states: “At any rate in our family my sons
and daughter had always been one in their thinking: such schism as there was opened
between them and us, never between themselves” (124). The schism she refers to is the
fact that none of their sons chose to work the land like their father: The oldest ones, Arjun
and Thambi, first work at the tannery, and later leave to work at tea plantations in Ceylon.
Murugan becomes a servant in a city a two days’ journey away, and is later to disappear
completely. Raja also works at the tannery where he is beaten to death due to minor theft.
Kuti dies, and Selvam has little talent for farming and works as a medical assistant to the
British doctor Kenny. It is indeed ironic that none of the six sons follow in Nathan’s
footsteps; had this been the case there would have been no need for the couple to try and
seek to live with Murugan in the far away city towards the end of the novel. But as I have
mentioned above, Selvam does offer to alleviate his parents’ desperate situation at this
point by becoming a farmer: “I can always return to the land…I am young and able-
bodied…together we can rent another piece of land…live as we did.” But Nathan
resolutely reject his offer (134).

Apart from the fates of the children we hear of some kind neighbors, and of old
granny who tragically dies alone of starvation. There are only two characters in the
village that cause anxiety, however, one is the neighbor Kunthi, who tempts Nathan into
infidelity and gives birth to two of his sons. Later she blackmails both Rukmani and
Nathan to obtain some of the scarce food they have. The other is Biswas, the money–lender, who in Rukmani’s words “thrives on others’ misfortunes” (73). As a contrast the poem “Work without Hope” depicts the situation of a lonely speaker, and no human contact is described.

Hunger, Degradation and Rootlessness

As mentioned above Rukmani and Nathan never manage to extricate themselves from the vicious cycle of poverty and life therefore often becomes a struggle for life’s bare necessities: food and shelter. Both droughts and monsoons destroy their harvests and lead to periods of starvation. The severe consequences of these external forces of nature are depicted in detail and with great credibility. This is how Rukmani describes nature:

Nature is like a wild animal that you have trained to work for you. So long as you are vigilant and walk warily with thought and care, so long will it give you its aid; but look away for an instant, be heedless or forgetful, and it has you by the throat (39).

When Arjun and Thambi decide to work at the tannery, much against Rukmani’s wishes, Arjun explains: “I am tired of hunger and I am tired of seeing my brothers hungry. There is never enough, especially since Ira came to live with us” (51). When the rent collector Sivaji comes to collect his master’s dues Nathan protests: “do you not see the crops are dead? There has been no rain and the river is dry” (72). Still the rent is due and they have to sell garments and kitchen utensils to the money lender Biswas to manage to pay only half the rent. Later the situation is even worse: “Long before the paddy ripened we came to the end of our dried-fish stocks. There was no money left – every pie had gone to pay the land dues. Nothing left to sell” (78).

Thereafter we fed on whatever we could find: the soft ripe fruit of the prickly pear; a sweet potato or two, blackend and half-rotten, thrown away by some more prosperous hand; sometimes a crab that Nathan
managed to catch near the river. Early and late my sons roamed the countryside, returning with a few bamboo shoots, a stick of sugar cane left in some deserted field, or a piece of coconut picked from the gutter in the town. For these they must have ranged widely, for other farmers and their families, in like plight to ourselves, were also out searching for food; and for every edible plant or root there was a struggle – a desperate competition that made enemies of friends and put an end to humanity (85, 86).

Markandaya also includes extensive, minute and highly convincing descriptions of both the mental and physical effects of hunger: “… there is a gnawing and a pain as if your very vitals were being devoured…” and “…saw their flesh melt sway and their skin sag and sink between the jutting bones, saw their eyes retreat into their skulls, saw their ribs curve out from under the skin” (86). But, with the exception of the son Kuti, they survive and their final blow is when the effects of industrialization reach them and the tannery owners decide to buy their rented land. They unsuccessfully seek their son in a far away city. Their last money and their few belongings are cruelly stolen from them at the temple where they sleep, and they are looked upon as beggars by strangers even though they have no begging bowls. In desperation they turn to degrading and exhausting work in a stone quarry in order to survive, and to try to earn enough money to return to their village. As is known, Nathan dies in the city; uprooted from his beloved soil he suffers from rheumatism, malnutrition and overwork. The couple’s tragic and bewildering experiences in the city exemplify clearly both the theme of hunger and degradation and the theme of rootlessness. One feels that Nathan might have lived longer had he not had to stay in the city for more than a year. After all he is not more than approximately fifty years old. Rukmani expresses their dislike for the city this way: “And at the same time, keeping pace with these longings [for their village] our distaste for the city grew and grew and became a sweeping, pervading hatred” (166). One might also argue that the three eldest sons, Arjun, Thambi and Murugun, all represent rootlessness as they all leave the village. The speaker of the poem, on the other hand, is presumably well-fed and
secure in his home.

Fatalism

There are numerous examples in the novel that exhibit that the characters believe firmly in God and in fate: During the years when Rukmani fears that her daughter will be her only child, she accompanies her mother to the temple “…we would pray and pray before the deity, imploring for help until we were giddy. But the Gods have other things to do: they cannot attend to the pleas of every supplicant who dares to raise his cares to heaven” (18). Later, when Ira is returned to her parents by her husband as a barren wife, Rukmani tries to soothe her by stating: “We are all in God’s hands, and He is merciful” (50) and this statement is repeated. Later Rukmani ascribes Ira’s situation to fate. When the rains fail Rukmani seeks the Goddess: “We threw ourselves on the earth and we prayed. I took a pumpkin and a few grains of rice to my Goddess, and I wept at her feet. I thought she looked at me with compassion and went away comforted, but no rain came” (71). But also in prosperous times she takes seed to her goddess to receive her blessing. Her profound faith doubtlessly makes her endure with stoicism all the trials of her life; it comforts and soothes her, yet she is not pacified by it: She prays for sons and wears the stone lingam, the fertility symbol that her mother gave her, but simultaneously she seeks fertility treatment with Doctor Kenny. The speaker of the poem, as a contrast, probably has little faith in God.
Both the presence of Doctor Kenny in the village, and the industrialization in the form of the tannery might be regarded as representations of the West in the novel. In addition the citation of two lines of English poetry on the first page of the novel may be said to represent a West-East encounter. Indeed, the novel form as a genre was imported to India by the British in colonial times. As I have explained earlier the tannery is undoubtedly an evil in the lives of Rukmani and Nathan in that it destroys the peaceful village life, steals their sons, and eventually leads to the eviction from their land and village. Others in the village might be more open-minded to the factory since it offers a steady, low income in sharp contrast with nature’s highly varying yielding.

Doctor Kenny is a highly sympathetic representative of the West in that he is a philanthropist who manages to raise funds to build a hospital in the village. Prior to that he works as a much needed physician. Rukmani is deeply fascinated with him from the first moment she stares at him as he is the first white man she has ever seen. After having given Rukmani a highly successful fertility treatment, he becomes a welcomed guest in Rukmani’s home, and she also seeks him to cure her daughter’s fertility problems. Together Rukmani and Kenny have numerous conversations that illustrate how different their outlooks of life are. Kenny may seems extremely impolite and he scolds Rukmani on various occasions, calling her an “ignorant fool” (20), for instance, but underneath his exasperations he is undoubtedly a noble man. I have already quoted one of their conversations, and many of their other exchanges of words evolve around the same topic, namely that to Kenny Rukmani’s stoicism and placid endurance are highly annoying. When in times of starvation Rukmani informs him that they “have a little rice – it will
“Times are better until times are better,” he explodes: “‘Times are better, times are better,’ he shouts. ‘Times will not be better for many months. Meanwhile you suffer and die, you meek, suffering fools. Why do you keep this ghastly silence? Why do you not demand – cry out for help – do something? There is nothing in this country, oh God, there is nothing!’” (43). Rukmani is left not understanding him at all, and she wonders what she can do.

From Kenny’s point of view his irritation is comprehensible since he comes from the West where people assert their rights, and he also succeeds in informing the West about the needs of the village so that he receives funding. But from Rukmani’s point of view her reaction is equally logical, for from whom is she to demand? The novel is after all set in rural India around the 1950s and not in a modern welfare state. Also Kenny’s unsuccessful marriage, probably caused by his numerous trips to India, stands in stark contrast with both Rukmani’s own marriage and her view of marriage where a wife’s duty would be to accompany her husband. So as Bhatnagar rightly observes: “In Nectar in a Sieve Markandaya presents the West as trying to energize the East by exhorting its people to rise to the occasion and activate themselves for the struggle for their basic rights” (Bhatnagar 32).

Some Inaccuracies and Faults in Nectar in a Sieve

Even though the novel brought the author international success and much praise by critics when it was published in 1954, critics have also detected various instances of inaccuracies and faults in the novel. These instances which I will present below, are the result of the author’s status as an expatriate writer relying to some extent on her imagination rather than her childhood memories and first-hand experience. In 1948
Markandaya moved to England on a permanent basis. She did, however, spend almost
two years living in a village in South India to collect material on which to base her novel,
but this period has obviously not been sufficient to avoid some mistakes in her text.
The critic Srivastava devotes a full chapter in his book *The Novels of Kamala
Markandaya, A Critical Study* to discuss Markandaya’s limitations whereas the critic
Almeida has touched on the same subject several places in her work titled *Originality and
Imitation, Indianness in the Novels of Kamala Markandaya*. Naturally I cannot present all
their findings here, but I will present some of them. Initially I regarded many of these
critics’ comments as tedious and petty, and I still think that some traits in the novel are
too insignificant to deserve mentioning. However, I now find that that they are worth a
presentation and comment since the faults for an Indian audience often ring a false note.
Had an expatriate Norwegian writer confused the celebration of the 17th of May with, say,
the festivities of Midsummer Eve, I too would have felt the urge to criticize. In addition
the various mistakes prove that expatriate writers belong to a distinct group of writers.

Both of the abovementioned authors agree that Markandaya must be confusing
her description of the Deepavali festival with the Holi since the first is the festival of
lights and Holi is that of fire and colors as presented in the novel in chapter ten, and this
is correct. The spelling of the word varies – Deepavali, Diwali, Dipavali and Divali. *The
Dictionary of Hinduism* explains it as “a festival during which all the lamps of the
household are lit to celebrate the reappearance of the sun which had been “hidden” during
the rainy season by the malevolent water-spirit” (Stutley 79). The festival occurs from
mid-October to mid-November. Quite in accordance with the critics’ comments the Holi
(or Holaka) spring festival on the other hand, includes the elements Markandaya
describes as Deepavali, among the bonfires, according to the *Dictionary of Hinduism*. 
Almeida finds it blameworthy that Rukmani and Nathan do not settle in a typical joint, Indian family with Nathan’s family and instead bring up their children in a nuclear family without the interference of grandparents and uncles and aunts. Even if the couple’s relatively small family appears as a trait untypical of India, it must be taken into consideration that any author needs to have a manageable amount of characters to convey the plot, themes and messages of the work. Markandaya is certainly not the only Indian author who applies a relatively small number of family characters, novels including only a few characters may be said to constitute a new genre in Indian literature. R.K. Narayan’s novel *The Vendor of Sweets* and Anita Desai’s *Fire on the Mountain*, for instance, depict relationships of a father and a son and a grandparent and a great grandchild, respectively. The authors, with Vikram Seth’s *A Suitable Boy* as the exception, have found ways of reducing the number of family members to a size they can deal with. The same unfair accusation of inauthentisity might equally well be applied to the novel already discussed, *Of Mice and Men* since the ranch owner has no spouse and only one son. Such a pair does not represent the average American family either, but if the boss had had a wife or a daughter, Curley’s wife would have had female company, and the plot would have disintegrated. I believe Markandaya’s aim has been to depict a simple tale of a rural past represented by a married couple challenged by traits of modernity represented by most of her sons. One can hardly expect a writer to include extra family members just to adhere to a general standard in a society, and I therefore find this critique superfluous.

Of perhaps greater consequence is the totally wrong impression given when Ira’s illegitimate child, Sacrabani, is born. On the tenth day a ceremony is held: “So they came: friends, neighbours, bringing sugarcane and frosted sugar sticks of striped candy
for the new baby. Ira accepted them in his name, smiling, graceful as ever, unperturbed” (117). Srivastava informs us that not only would an illegitimate child as the result of prostitution be looked down upon, it would also be “considered outcaste” (Srivastava 55) in a rural community. Consequently, both the gifts from friends and neighbors, and also Ira’s reaction are highly unlikely, totally unimaginable. Likewise Srivastava refers to the critic Naik who “considers the rustic life in the novel ‘contrived’ due to the novelist’s description of the ‘public naming ceremony of Ira’s child which is born in sin’ and feels ‘convinced that Rukmani’s village exists only in the expatriate imagination of her creator. Surely, no traditional Indian village will allow so permissive a code of sexual morality’” (Srivastava 6).

To Almeida the fact that the celebration is held as early as the tenth day after the birth is far too early, and she explains that the Indian tradition is to give the mother a post-natal rest of forty days before cooking meals for friends and neighbors.

Generally, Almeida finds several signs of inauthenticity in Markandaya’s novels due to the fact that the author has written from her imagination and not based her novel on first-hand experience of India. She also suspects that Markandaya has written for a Western audience. The explicit explanation at the beginning of the novel where Rukmani informs us that she calls her husband ”Nathan” in the novel, and not “husband” as would have been customary, is an example of a piece of information totally superfluous to an Indian audience. In my view it is not blameworthy to write with a Western audience in mind.

The fact that practically all of Rukmani and Nathan’s belongings are sold to meet the demands of their landlord, is elaborated on by Srivastava who contends that it is highly unrealistic that the price of their possessions does not equal even half of the land
revenue, and he thus accuses Markandays of inflating the land rent. Since the novel does not purport to be a factual account of the price levels of the Zamidari system in India in the mid-twentieth century, I fail to see the relevance of this mistake. Both the critics Almeida and Srivastava focus on many trivial inaccuracies. They thus both emerge as error hunters when they comment on, in great detail, for instance, Nathan’s nakedness on one occasion, Rukmani’s use of detergent instead of soap, the unlikely speed of the spokes of the bullock cart, Ira’s name and the fact that Rukmani must be too poor to use the spice saffron.

Even though both of the abovementioned critics also praise Markandaya’s authorship, I, as a Western reader, cannot avoid getting the impression that they focus too closely on minor details perhaps to prove that they are far better acquainted with Indian customs that the expatriate author Markandaya. It is as if a Norwegian critic commenting on an expatriate Norwegian-American writer would be almost delighted by detecting that a thin pancake of rolled dough (a “lefse” in Norwegian) typical of the Northern part of Norway is eaten in the south.

The only faults in the novel of any consequence, in my view, are connected with the fate of Ira, especially the ceremonies regarding her baby, and the confusion of the festivals. The descriptions of both these occurrences occupy several pages of the novel and are therefore more important than an inaccuracy mentioned by a word or two.

A Short Commentary on the Language in the Novel

Even though S.K. Wali has completed a highly interesting stylistic study of the novel, including syntactic, lexico-semantic, phonological and graphological features, a detailed
rendering of her linguistic findings is beyond the scope of this thesis. I wish to include her main conclusion, however, which is that the styles of the novel range “from the archaic and Biblical to the contemporary formal-colloquial, and the poetic” (Wali 104). She continues:

On the whole it may be considered a major shortcoming of the novel that the language does not seem to have its roots fully in Indian culture and ethos, in the sense that there are hardly any references to Indian legend, mythology, superstition etc. Nor does one find, incorporated in Rukmani’s language, those speech rhythms and turns of expression that are characteristic of and embedded in the Indian mother tongue (Wali 114).

This critic would have wanted the author to avoid the extremes of the archaic and the modern and to confine themselves to a “simple slightly formal and old fashioned style” (Wali 115).

Also the above mentioned critics, Srivastava and Almeida, comments on the language of the novel and their criticism coincides: “Markandaya the writer has stepped too close to Rukmani the character, and credibility is endangered” (Srivastava 52). Almeida detects and exemplifies convincingly a more simple language in the beginning of the novel than in its end. It may almost seem as if the barely literate and rather unsophisticated Rukmani has become more learned by living in a village raising children and farming the land. The critics’ point of the intrusion of the author is correct, but since the levels of language are heightened so slowly and gradually through the novel it is easily ignored by the reader. Finally, the title in itself, alluding to classical English literature, the famous poet Coleridge who Markandaya probably had studied at the university, also clearly points to a far more learned author than that of the narrator.

I will use the two informative books, Perspectives on Kamala Markandaya by Prasad Madhusan and Kamala Markandaya’s Nectar in a Sieve (A Critical Study) by S. Z. H. Abidi to offer some conclusive comments on the novel. The first one is a collection
of essays mainly about *Nectar in aSieve* and the second deals exclusively with the novel. These authors agree with Almeida and Srivastava, referred to above, and mention several times and with ample exemplification, that Markandaya’s language is not a fully Indian-English language, and the fact that the author steps too close to her simple, but clever chief character by using too sophisticated a language. In addition it is noted that Markandaya’s extensive explanations of Indian customs and traditions in the novel will seem superfluous to the Indian reader, but will probably be a necessity to the Western audience that Markandaya must have had in mind. On the whole these critics seem to appreciate to a much larger extent the fact that Markandaya was an expatriate writer, that her first novel shot her into prominence and that the novel was a Book of the Month Selection that almost guaranteed her large sales, just like *Of Mice and Men* did. Madhusan offers the interesting interpretation that the damage of a human’s roots is important in the novel: Nathan’s roots in the land are cut off and therefore he dies, whereas Rukmani’s roots are first and foremost planted in her children and thus she survives. Furthermore, he refers to one of the few interviews Markandaya gave during her life time where she stated the she wanted to write “purposive novels.” By this she meant that she hoped that her novels could ameliorate humanity to a much larger extent than, for instance, documentaries on television. I think Markandaya has succeeded in this respect. I too have seen reports from hunger stricken areas of the world, but I had developed a kind of a “defense mechanism that shuts off unpleasant truths,” as Markandaya described it. To read the novel made a far deeper impression on me than any news report has ever done. The critics agree that the characters in the novel lack psychological depth, and at the same time they praise Markandaya for letting her characters from somewhere in (Southern) India be symbols of thousands of suffering
peasants in the world. Markandaya is thus more oriented towards the sociological aspects of her gripping story than of the inner, complex thoughts of her characters. This fact is to some extent regretted by the critics and Abidi writes that Markandaya “emerges as a novelist of mediocre ambition” (Abidi 25). It is as if he and others believe that Markandaya could have had potential for a more advanced structure, imagery and narrative technique. But it must be born in mind that Markandaya herself claimed that she did not write to please the critics but to give the readers “a good, easy read” (Almeida 94). In his comment on the title Abidi surprisingly calls the two last lines of Coleridge’s poem that Markandaya chose as the epigraph in her novel, famous, and this makes me wonder whether it is Markandaya’s epigraph that have made them famous since the poem itself is not one of Coleridge’s well-known ones. Abidi regards the title as appropriate and the novel as “an enactment of these lines” (Abidi 55). This is in exact accordance with my own interpretation discussed above. Also, the critic Rao states that the “real truth of the novel is the spiritual stamina of Rukmani against such formidable enemies to her culture” (Madhusan 5). In the end the ultimate main cause of evil in the novel, besides landlordism, is nature, and even today this challenge has not been conquered in many parts of the world.
CONCLUSION

In a linguistic, or more precisely, lexicographic, study I once carried out a survey where I examined one thousand occurrences of the word “wildly” and my findings had some significance due to the large number of instances of the word. In this thesis, on the contrary, I have examined in depth, two titles. It therefore goes without saying that it is impossible to draw any definite conclusions about allusive titles based on such an insignificant number: perhaps a hundred titles would be necessary. On the other hand, I have probed deeply into the four works and demonstrated that there exist close links between both the novels and the poems that their titles are derived from. Some of these findings might well be coincidental; I cannot know. At any rate, what does seem clear from my research is that the link between the novel Of Mice and Men and the poem “To a Mouse” is parallel in nature. The main plot and main theme of the novel are enactments of the sentence in the poem “The best-laid schemes of Mice and Men Gang aft agley.” George and Lennie’s dream is broken. Incidentally, also the second novel, Markandaya’s Nectar in a Sieve could be said to be an exemplification of this universal message of a truth of life. Moreover, Of Mice and Men and “its” poem share the same touching and compassionate tone. In the novel it is George’s tender care of his friend that exhibits the tenderness; in the poem it is the speaker’s feelings for the tiny creature, the mouse, which exemplify the compassion. Furthermore, both works are set in rural surroundings and are presented in a language which deviates from the standard norm. If one reads the novel
with the poem in mind, one’s sensation of compassion and tenderness is enlarged. One may equally well read the poem with the novel in mind, and think of how many exploited endangered creatures, both human and non-human, that exist. As a matter of fact, all creatures may experience suppression at one time or another and feel weak and vulnerable. Consequently, both the works express the universal message of vulnerability and helplessness when faced with external, or internal, forces.

*Nectar in a Sieve* is not less universal in its message that the sweetness of life is easily lost, and that life may be extremely challenging, but its link to the poem “Work without Hope” is more complicated than the link between *Of Mice and Men* and “To a Mouse.” The reason for this complication is the fact that the author has chosen to include two specific lines of the poem in the epigraph of the novel: “Work without Hope draws nectar in a sieve, / And hope without an object cannot live” and not the entire poem. One may of course view these two lines as the conclusion and the main message of the poem and contend, as I have done, that the novel is a parallel story, a tale of countless, futile attempts, a depiction of the lives of human beings going, in a materialistic sense, steadily downwards. Considered this way, the novel and the poem closely resemble one another, and show parallelisms similar to that of the link between *Of Mice and Men* and “To a Mouse” discussed above. But this is not the whole story for, as I have demonstrated in the chapter on “Work without Hope” and *Nectar in a Sieve*, one main truth of the novel is the amazing, spiritual survival of its main character, Rukmani. Her spiritual survival is probably due to her close bonds with her children, her husband and her belief in God. It seems as if God is her panacea. And this spiritual survival stands in stark contrast to the dispirited speaker of the poem. One might therefore speculate whether the authorial intention is that of creating also a contrast to the speaker of the poem. It may seem as if
Markandaya’s reaction to the poem has been one of ambivalence and that she might have thought that she would create a character far worse off than the speaker of the poem: a woman on the verge of starvation, and pressed down by numerous tribulations but who still survives, both mentally and spiritually. This is, needless to say, a mere speculation, but the conclusion is nevertheless that the novel both parallels the message of the poem, and simultaneously contradicts it. The effect is a tight “double” link adding an intriguing enrichment to both the works. On a deeper level however, the novel and the poem might be said to unite in a religious theme, although this is very vaguely expressed in the poem. As I have argued, I consider the poem “Work without Hope” autobiographical and it is known that Coleridge, unlike the character Rukmani, was not a good spouse to his wife or a good father to his children.

I mention in my Introduction that the novels share many similarities. So do the poems. To an even larger extent than the novels they both express deep personal anguish and pain. They indeed exemplify that literature may be popularly defined as “compressed suffering.” I have chosen to read both poems autobiographically, and in the case of Coleridge I have even included his alleged mental disease bipolarity. I know that this is not common, but to me is seems quite natural since I know a lot about this illness. Modern medicine alleviates this disease today, but the prize that artists might have to pay is the loss of an immense creativity. Some of them therefore choose to live with their wild mood swings, for better or worse, one might say, depending on how one is to judge the quality of life, or one’s ambitions.

The poems, “Work without Hope” in particular, also allude to various religious texts and this is not surprising since religious works hold a prominent position and thus form a common frame of reference in all literate societies, this was especially so in the
past. Religious texts express great wisdom and one main religious thought is to show benevolence and love. This lesson might be said to be one main message underlying all the four works I have analyzed: “To a Mouse” teaches us to care for all vulnerable creatures, *Of Mice and Men* tragically depicts a society that holds no place for a mentally retarded, violently strong, character, who is thus killed in an act of mercy instead of being killed by an enemy. “Work without Hope” might be read indirectly as a cry for understanding for the desolate, dispirited soul, and finally, *Nectar in a Sieve* may easily be interpreted in terms of benevolence from the West represented by Dr. Kenny. The main character Rukmani, an unsophisticated village woman, has a firm religious belief and shows love and affection to her family, neighbors and friends. She may thus serve as a example for anyone to follow.

In sum it is as if the novels recreate central aspects of the respective on their own terms. They might thus be considered both as recreations and creations at the same time.
NOTES:

1. The list was found at Wikipedia 18.08.2010 on the following address: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_book_titles_taken_from...
2. The quotation was found at the following address 26.04.2010: http://www.bbc.co.uk/robertburns/works/to_a_mouse/
3. The History of Rasselas, Prince of Abissina is the full title of the novella about happiness by Samuel Johnson published in 1759. Its working title was The Choice of Life.
4. The page numbers I refer to are taken from the edition of the novel listed under Works cited.
5. This piece of information was found at Wikipedia 16.08.2011 on the following address: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Amaranth.
APPENDIX

“The Mouse’s Petition,” by Anna Barbauld*

*To Doctor Priestley

Found in the TRAP where he had been confin’d all Night

OH! hear a pensive captive’s prayer,
    For liberty that sighs;
And never let thine heart be shut
    Against the prisoner’s cries.

    For here forlorn and sad I sit,
    Within the wiry grate;
Andre tremble at th’ approaching morn,
    Which brings impending fate.

If e’er the breast with freedom glow’d,
    And spurn’d a tyrant’s chain,
Let not thy strong oppressive force
    A free-born mouse detain.

Oh! do not stain with guiltless blood
    Thy hospitable hearth;
Nor triumph that thy wiles betray’d
    A prize so little worth.

The scattere’d gleanings of a feast
    My scanty meals supply;
But if thine unrelenting heart
    That slender boon deny,

The cheerful light, the vital air,
    Are blessings widely given;
Let nature’s commoners enjoy
    The common gifts of heaven.

The well taught philosophic mind
    To all compassion gives;
Casts round the world an equal eye,
And feels for all that lives.

If mind, as ancient sages taught,
   A never dying flame,
Still shifts thro’ matter’s varying forms,
   In every form the same,

Beware, lest in the worm you crush
   A brother’s soul you find;
And tremble lest thy luckless hand
   Dislodge a kindred mind.

Or, if this transient gleam of day
   Be all of life we share,
Let pity plead within thy breast,
   That little all to spare.

So may thy hospitable board
   With health and peace be crown’d;
And every charm of heartfelt ease
   Beneath thy roof be found.

So when unseen destruction lurks,
   Which men like mice may share,
May some kind angel clear thy path,
   And break the hidden snare.

“Employment I” by George Herbert

If as a flower does spread and die,
   You would extend me to some good,
Before I were frosts extremity
   Nipt in the bud;

The sweetness and the praise were thine;
   But the extension and the room,
Which in your garland I should fill, were mine
   At your great doom.

For as you do impart your grace,
   The greater shall our glory be.
The measure of our joys is in this place,
   The stuff with thee.

Let me not languish then, and spend
A life as barren to your praise,
As is the dust, to which all life does tend,
But with delays.

All things are busy; only I
Neither bring honey with the bees,
Nor flowers to make that, nor the husbandry
To water these.

I am no link of your great chain,
But all my company is a weed.
Lord place me in your consort; give one strain
To my poor reed.

“Praise I” by George Herbert

To write a verse or two is all the praise,
That I can raise:
Mend my estate in any wayes,
Thou shalt have more.

I go to Church; help me to wings, and I
Will thither flie;
Or, if I mount unto the skie,
I will do more.

Man is all weaknesse; there is no such thing
As Prince or King:
His arm is short; yet with a sling
He may do more.

An herb distill’d, and drunk, may dwell next doore,
On the same floore,
To a brave soul: exalt the poore,
They can do more.

O raise me then! Poore bees, that work all day,
Sting my delay,
Who have a work, as well as they,
And much, much more.

“Thou art indeed just, Lord, if I contend” by Gerard Manley Hopkins

Justus quidem tu es, Domine, si disputem tecum; verumtamen
Justa loquar ad te: Quare via impiorum prosperatur? &c.
Thou art indeed just, Lord, if I contend
With thee; but, sir, so what I plead is just.
Why do sinners’ ways prosper? And why must
Disappointment all I endeavour end?
Wert thou my enemy, O thou my friend,
How wouldst thou worse, I wonder, than thou dost
Defeat, thwart me? Oh, the sots and thralls of lust
Do in spare hours more thrive than I that spend,
Sir, life upon thy cause. See, banks and brakes
Now, leaved how thick! Laced they are again
With pretty chervil, look, and fresh wind shakes
Them; birds build – but not I build; no, but strain
Time’s eunuch, and not breed one work that wakes.
Mine, O thou lord of life, send my roots rain.
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Owens, Louis. *John Steinbeck’s Re-vision of America*. Athens: The University of Georgia


