During the Great Depression, people were rethinking what success really meant in society. People were suffering financially and John Steinbeck critiqued mainstream success through his book, Cannery Row. ~~In the book~~ Cannery Row, ~~it~~ is a collection of vignettes about the people and the life of Cannery Row, a town by the sea near Monterey, California that’s known for canning seafood. The main characters are: Doc a marine biologist a “fountain of knowledge” to the community, Lee Chong, owns a grocery store that,”while not a model of neatness, was a miracle of supply” (5), Mack and the Boys a “little group of men who had in common no families, no money, and no ambitions beyond food, drink and contentment.” (9) While mainstream society believes that success has close ties to money, Steinbeck critiques that idea by arguing that success is actually avoiding the spiral of wanting wealth and that success is also about community.

In mainstream society, people think that success means having and getting large amounts of wealth, but Steinbeck challenges that idea. As a short vignette, Steinbeck describes a short scene of a tidepool that Doc is collecting from. ”The sea is very clear and the bottom becomes fantastic with hurrying, fighting, feeding, breeding animals...Than the creeping murderer, the octopus, steals out, moving like a gray mist, pretending now to be a bit of weed, now a rock, now a lump of decaying meat..Then suddenly it leaps savagely on the crab [and] the octopus murders it.” Steinbeck describes the tidepool is a place full of life and death. The tidepool is a representation or metaphor of real life and everyone is fighting and trying hard to survive in this world. It’s a useless struggle for power and wealth. The octopus represents the really rich people, the top 1%, business people, the monopolists since they eat up everything and survive really well and have full control. Therefore, Steinbeck critiques mainstream success by creating a metaphor with the tidepool, claiming that everything is a useless struggle for wealth. Steinbeck also critiques the mainstream idea of success by saying that, “In the world ruled by tigers with ulcers, rutted by strictured bulls, scavenged by blind jackals, Mack and the Boys avoid the trap, walk around the poison, step over the noose while a generation of trapped, poisoned, and trussed-up men scream at them and call them no-goods, come-to-bad-ends, blots-on-the-town, thieves, rascal bums. What can it profit a man to gain the whole world and to come to his property with a gastric ulcer, a blown prostate, and bifocals?” When Mack and the Boys live in a world full of vicious creatures, Mack and the Boys ignore them, and not get affected by them, but the people who are affected call them bums. The tigers, bulls, jackals are similar to the octopus in the previous quote and are the people who control society and everyone is eaten up by them while they blindly fight each other. Mack and the Boys are completely immune and unaffected because they don’t care about money, or the amount of fame they have. In the eyes of mainstream society, they are the lowest of low, and are looked down upon, but the people who look down on them are the ones that are blindly fighting. The people who look down on them have the “gastric ulcer” or the “blown prostate.” Therefore, Steinbeck critiques mainstream society by saying that the people we call bums are really the people who are successful.

Steinbeck argues that success means to avoid the temptation and greed of mainstream success. After going and collecting many frogs, Mack and the Boys set up a deal with Lee Chong, a general store owner to use frogs as merchandise. Lee keeps raising the prices and also The poison of greed was already creeping into the innocent and laudable merchandising agreement. Bitterness was piling up..[Mack and the Boys were] not mercantile men. They did not measure their joy in goods sold, their egos in bank balances, nor their loves in what they cost.?” (17) As greed became a problem with Lee Chong, Mack and the Boys were unaffected even though they were ripped off. What the Steinbeck means by they didn’t measure their joy in goods sold is that Mack and the Boys don’t need wealth to be happy. Mack and the Boys are unaffected in a situation where greed is rampant. Consequently, Steinbeck critiques success by saying that Mack and the Boys are successful in their own way, in Steinbeck's eyes, even though society calls them bums and look down on them. One doesn't need huge sums of money to be happy, one needs to avoid the trap of mainstream success. When Doc, a marine biologist in Cannery, describes Mack and the Boys to a friends. “Look at them. There are your true philosophers. I think they survive in this particular world better then other people. In a time when people tear themselves to pieces with ambition and nervousness and covetousness, they are relaxed. All of our so-called successful men are sick men, with bad stomachs, and bad souls but mack and the boys are healthy and curiously clean. The can do what they want. They can satisfy their appetites without calling them something else.” Doc describes Mack and the Boys as people who do well in this world and have a true understanding the world. As people fall into the trap and temptation of mainstream success, Mack and the Boys stay away. They can thrive and live without being mainstream successful. They know that if they try to be mainstream successful, they’ll end up destroying themselves like the people who get the “gastric ulcer” or “bifocals”. They are truly successful in Steinbeck’s eyes because they can be happy without money, without wealth, without greed.

Steinbeck also argues that success has close ties to making good relationships with other people and benefitting the community, while mainstream success is based on an individual’s achievements. Doc, the marine biologist, had “dug himself into Cannery Row to an extent not even he expected. He became the fountain of philosophy and science and art. In the laboratory the girls from Dora’s heard the Plain Songs and Gregorian music for the first time..Henri the painter heard for the first time the Book of the Dead...Doc would listen to any kind of nonsense and change it for you to a kind of wisdom….And everyone who thought of him thought next, “I really must do something nice for Doc.”” (28-29) Doc has made his way into Cannery Row by being benevolent and kind to the other people in Cannery Row. When Doc was benevolent, kind, open to other people, and shared his knowledge, people accepted him into their community. The more he acted benevolently and kind, the more people would say, “I really must do something nice for Doc.” When Doc helps people out, he’s helping the community be more successful. To truly be successful, Steinbeck says that one needs to be kind and generous to the people around them if they can. Another person in the Cannery Row community who is benevolent is Lee Chong. “Lee’s position in the community surprised him as much as he could be surprised. Over the course of the ears everyone in Cannery Row owed him money. He never pressed his clients, but when the bill became too large, Lee cut off credit.” (6) Lee Chong has been nice and not greedy earning him a reputation in Cannery Row. When Lee Chong forgives people of their debt, he’s also helping out the community in a way. During the Great Depression, people were struggling to live, and Lee Chong helps people out. Again, like Doc, Lee Chong is really successful because he is kind and generous to other people. Steinbeck argues that not being selfish or greedy is a great thing and that’s how Steinbeck critiques mainstream success.

Critiquing the mainstream idea of success, gaining money, fame, power, Steinbeck suggests that true success is staying away from the negative spiral of mainstream success. Being successful in Steinbeck’s eyes is being kind and caring to the people around. In Mainstream society, people struggle and fight for power, but it’s a useless struggle. Also, to really be successful one has to avoid the temptation of of mainstream success and not be under the power of the jackals, the octopuses, the tigers of this world. Being successful, Steinbeck argues, is the ability to help the people in one’s community or neighbors especially during a time of hardship such as the Great Depression. In this world there is duality, good or bad, right or wrong. There is also Steinbeck success, avoiding the negative spiral of mainstream society, and to help one’s neighbors, but getting shunned or made fun of in society. There is also mainstream success, going after money in a dog-eat-dog world in a useless struggle, but getting power, success, fame, and respect. Learning which side to pick or finding an equilibrium is crucial. In today’s society, we look down on people who embrace Steinbeck success, like Mack and the Boys, but look up to people who strive after mainstream success, the people with the “blown prostate” or “gastric ulcer” who are controlled by the jackals, tigers, octopuses. Maybe we need to change how we see people in society. For example, or society would improve if a person who had the capability of improving the world, like donating money to charity, volunteering, etc., our world would become a better place.

# “Our Father who art in nature, who has given the gift of survival to the coyote, the common brown rat, the English sparrow, the house fly and the moth, must have a great and overwhelming love for no-goods and blots-on-the-town and bums, and Mack and the boys. Virtues and graces and laziness and zest. Our Father who art in nature.” (15)

― John Steinbeck, Cannery Row