

Original Article

Moral Decay and the Power of the Talisman in Steinbeck's *The Winter of Our Discontent*

SHIVANI LINGAMneni

Junior Research Project, India.

ABSTRACT: This article examines the moral, symbolic, and generational significance of the talisman in John Steinbeck's *The Winter of Our Discontent*, arguing that the small pink stone functions as a dynamic emblem of ethical instability rather than a fixed source of guidance. Although originally the talisman was presented as a symbol of innocence, continuity, and family love, it slowly gets intertwined with the process of Ethan Hawley getting sucked into the world of moral relapse. The more deceptive and self-serving Ethan becomes, the more the talisman becomes a mirror of his psychological distress and the decay of the inherited principles in a capitalistic world where corruption, rather than integrity, is the way of the day. By critically examining some of the central scenes, such as the sleepwalking episode involving Ellen and the talisman, as well as the near-suicidal crisis involving Ethan, the article demonstrates the object as a means of spreading guilt, unconscious desire, and generational weight. The study places Steinbeck in terms of the critical perspectives by Kocela, Lieber, Heavilin, Zheng, Simkins, and Bedford in larger contexts of material culture, adaptive mythmaking, and the social life of objects. Eventually, it turns out that the talisman is no moralistic resolution but a reflection of ethical confusion that prevails in the world of consumptive economics. The uncertainty of the end is presented by Steinbeck as demonstrating the limits of human agency and the weight of inherited responsibility, and as revealing how symbols can both enlighten and subvert moral identity.

KEYWORDS: Steinbeck, Talisman, Symbolism, Moral decay, Inherited guilt, Material culture, Capitalism, Mythmaking, Generational transmission, Narrative identity.

1. INTRODUCTION

Can a lifeless object carry the weight of a person's sins? Fiction is full of symbols that transcend their physical form, and these serve as silent witnesses to a character's downfall. [1,2] From the green light in *The Great Gatsby* to the scarlet letter on Hester Prynne, such objects become tokens of fate, guilt, and redemption. In *The Winter of Our Discontent*, John Steinbeck makes the talisman, a small pink rock given to Ethan Hawley by his daughter Ellen, a metaphor for fate, moral compromise, and inherited guilt. Initially, the talisman represents innocence and good luck, but as Ethan descends into a debased state, it becomes an implied burden, a metaphor for his moral depravity. But its presentation to Ellen at the end of the novel raises troubling questions as to whether she has subconsciously inherited his ethical faults. Steinbeck, in *The Talisman*, probes the meaning of moral decay, the possibility of guilt and sin being passed from generation to generation, and the possibility of resisting fate or of being caught in the acts of others.

2. BACKGROUND AND LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. STEINBECK, CAPITALISM, AND EARLY SYMBOLISM

Ethan Hawley's descent into moral darkness is shaped not only by his social environment but also by his shifting relationship to the talismanic objects that envelop him, particularly the small pink stone inherited from his ancestors. The object, a small, unassuming family heirloom [3-5], serves as a nexus of Ethan's inner struggle and Steinbeck's broader critique of American capitalism. Ethan describes the talisman as "a magic thing, a continuity thing that inflames and comforts and inspires from generation to generation" (Steinbeck 126), highlighting its role as a moral and spiritual touchstone. But rather than a stable guide, the talisman's meaning shifts according to Ethan's state of mind and the moral ambiguity of his world. Within the novel's broader thematic concerns, the talisman serves as an example of what Christopher Kocela describes as "magic materiality," a realm in which objects obliterate the distinction between capitalist fetishism and religious belief (Kocela 74). Ethan is embedded within consumerized relationships and hollow consumer values, and he clings to this object that holds some remnant of moral certainty. Yet the idea of a talisman of fixed moral guidance increasingly becomes dubious as Ethan's actions contradict the values the talisman is supposed to represent. He deceives his employer, manipulates his friends, and ultimately casts aside his moral values, all the while continuing to consult and reverence the stone. As Kocela argues, "Steinbeck's descriptive impulse to demystify human-object relations" is undercut by the novel's figuration of belief as objectified power, something Ethan suspects and complicates (Kocela 74).

2.2. STEINBECK'S SHIFT TOWARD SYMBOLIC COMPLEXITY

This paradox is not accidental. Rather, it reflects Steinbeck's shifting literary strategy. In his previous fiction, objects possess clear use-value as tools and come to symbolize collective labor or survival, as in *The Grapes of Wrath*, where "a wrench means only a wrench" (qtd. in Kocela 72). In *The Winter of Our Discontent*, Steinbeck deliberately inverts this realism. The talisman is not so much useful in a practical sense, but more of a projection of Ethan's confusion. Todd M. Lieber explains that Steinbeck's talismans in his work are "fulfill needs which often cannot be articulated and of which men may not even be consciously aware" (Lieber 263). Ethan's relationship with the talisman is deeply psychological; it's an object he uses to absorb his fear, guilt, and desperation, even when he can't consciously understand what it's meant to represent.

2.3. MYTH, TELEOLOGY, AND ETHICAL DISORIENTATION

The ambiguity of the talisman's meaning is a mirror for Ethan's disintegrating moral compass. He no longer believes in the principles he was raised with, but he has no viable alternative and thus clings to the stone in the hope it might still offer direction. This desperation is emblematic of what Simkins characterizes as "adaptive teleology," a modern longing for myth that is receptive to changing requirements rather than imposing fixed moral solutions (Simkins 13). Ethan's search is not a rejection of myth but a search for a myth that can be responsive in an ethically broken world.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

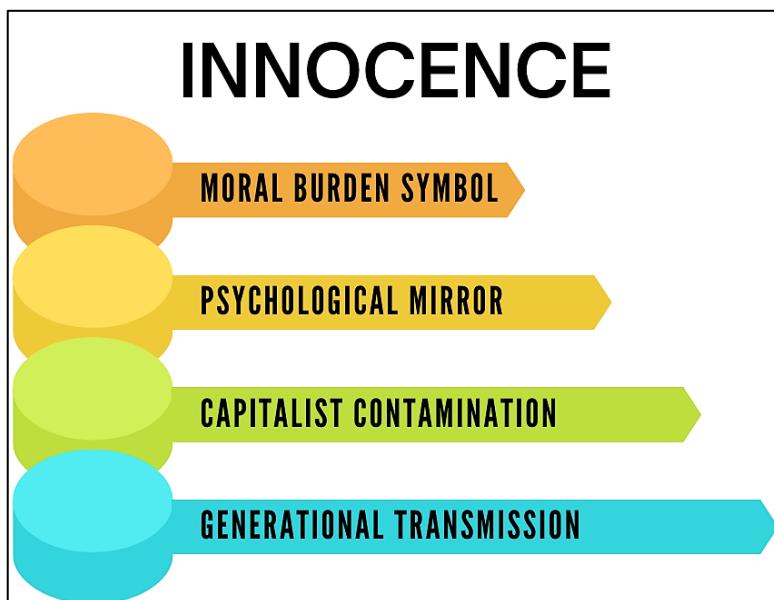


FIGURE 1 Conceptual layers of the talisman's moral and symbolic evolution

3.1. MATERIAL CULTURE, CAPITALIST FETISHISM, AND SPIRITUAL OBJECTS

Steinbeck reinforces this tension through a juxtaposition of the talisman with the cold, almost religious representations of capitalist space, as in the supermarket where Ethan works. [6-8] The rows of canned goods in the supermarket are "a library for the stomach" and lit by a "cathedral light" in one moment, as if the marketplace itself has taken on a spirituality (Winter 11). This figurative sacralization of consumer goods is concurrent with Ethan's confused idolization of his family's charm. Both the religious artifact and the market commodities exist in a sphere where spiritual value and capitalist significance converge. As Kocela suggests, Steinbeck's emphasis on these objects indicates how "the apparent 'social life' of commodities" is a lens through which human relationships are diffracted (Kocela 76). Ethan's soliloquies to the canned goods of the store, which he calls "gentlemen," are not so much eccentric as symptomatic of a world in which material goods have started to substitute for human relationships. To this extent, the talisman is less exempt from critique than implicated in the ideological confusion that drives Ethan's breakdown.

3.2. THE TALISMAN AS FLUID SYMBOL AND MORAL REFLECTION

Lastly, Steinbeck does not present the talisman as a moral solution but as a reflection of the dilemma itself. As Simkins implies, the talisman's "color and convolutions and textures changed as [Ethan's] needs changed," which suggests that it is not a strict moral authority but a fluid representation of the user's evolving conscience (Simkins 19). The talisman does not restore Ethan to integrity; it merely marks his moment of hesitation on the threshold of self-destruction. When he reaches out and takes it at the end of the novel and decides to live, the gesture is equivocal: it is not a triumphant return to morality, but a reluctant embracing of continuity, of passing something, anything on to the next generation. Steinbeck leaves us with a haunting image: the symbolism of the talisman, once sacrosanct, is now emptied by the very moral rot it was meant to oppose. In Ethan's relation to the talisman, Steinbeck dramatizes the crisis of faith in a culture where spiritual symbols have been appropriated by

capitalism and emptied of their initial meaning. In this way, the talisman is also a perfect metaphor for modern American identity, both powerful and illusory, desperately in search of something real.

4. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. ELLEN, INHERITANCE, AND THE REPRODUCTION OF MORAL BURDEN

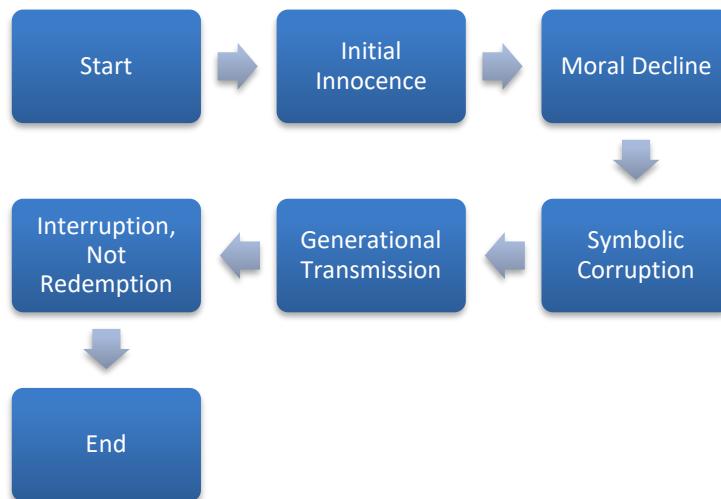


FIGURE 2 Process flow illustrating the transformation of innocence into moral collapse and generational transmission

Ethan's observation of Ellen's intimate relation with the talisman reveals not only his daughter's inherited fascination with the past, but the disquieting suggestion that she is silently assuming his guilt and moral confusion. In a surrealistic scene, [9-11] Ethan watches as Ellen sleepwalks to the family cabinet and removes the family talisman: "She held it against her unformed breast, held it on her cheek below her ear, nuzzled it like a suckling puppy, and she hummed a low song like a moan of pleasure and of longing" (Steinbeck 127). While this scene might seem to be innocuous, Ethan is filled with discomfort. He admits that while he loves Ellen, "sometimes she frightens me," describing her as jealous, secretive, and older than her years (127). The talisman, formerly a personal source of comfort to Ethan, is now a sign of generational inheritance not only of memory, but of unresolved moral ambiguity. As Ethan is characterized by Barbara Heavilin, he lives in an "existential vacuum," a condition where the absence of meaning and real value makes him morally directionless and inwardly collapsed (Heavilin 9). It is this vacuum that now threatens Ellen, who manipulates the talisman, unaware of its history, but still reflects Ethan's own guilt and longing in her unconscious behavior.

4.2. SHARED BURDEN, MYTHIC STRUCTURE, AND SYMBOLIC INSTINCT

The greater ethical framework is offered by Li Zheng, arguing that Steinbeck's later fiction illustrates "the destruction of primary potentiality," a breakdown of inherent goodness when one's world rewards dishonesty more than integrity (Zheng 165). Ellen, young as she is, seems mired in that dangerous landscape where symbols no longer yield meaning. Ethan then picks up the talisman and finds it "warm from Ellen's body," a small but loaded detail that joins them not only in love but in a shared burden (Steinbeck 127). Richard Bedford, in his close reading of the novel's mythic structure, links the talisman to Steinbeck's use of inherited symbols and "heritage lessons" that strain the boundaries of good and evil. Bedford portrays Ethan as being conflicted between the moral teachings of his ancestors and his own contemporary moral confusion, and he portrays the talisman as being "a continuity thing that inflames and comforts and inspires from generation to generation," even as it is simultaneously an "enigma" that "needs no answer to destroy it" (Bedford 289; Steinbeck 143). Ellen's interaction with this object complicated its symbolism even more: she is drawn to it not out of knowing, but from instinct; her actions are tender, yet also replicate Ethan's internal struggle. In this way, Steinbeck stages moral breakdown as not only lived but also inherited, embedded in the objects we love and the secrets we keep.

4.3. SUICIDE ATTEMPT, SYMBOLIC INTERVENTION, AND ETHICAL AWAKENING

In the final pages of *The Winter of Our Discontent*, Ethan Hawley's decision to continue living is not a forthright exercise of free will but an instant of personal encounter with the consequences of his action and with possible change. Having learned that his son copied a patriotic essay and echoed Ethan's own moral compromises, Ethan is horrified to realize that he has become what he dreaded: a man willing to sacrifice morals for social acceptability. Hopeless, he grabs razor blades and dashes out to "the Place," his sacred coastal grotto in boyhood days, to commit suicide. The environment is figurative: "The tide was on the rise. I waded into the warm bay water and clambered into the Place" (Steinbeck 275). This action, in Li Zheng's contention, is akin to ritual purification or baptism, a desperate attempt to purify them of shame and begin anew (Zheng 174). Ethan's transformation does not come from the sea, though. It results from the existence of the talisman, now warm against

Ellen's hand, that he finds in his pocket at the moment of the act: "Then in wonder I remembered the caressing, stroking hands of the light-bearer" (Steinbeck 276). The object, once symbolic of his heritage, now serves to remind him of another's trust in him. Its radiance does not bring salvation to him, yet it holds him for a moment in time until he can behold that something valuable exists not within himself but within the boy whom he failed yet could now protect.

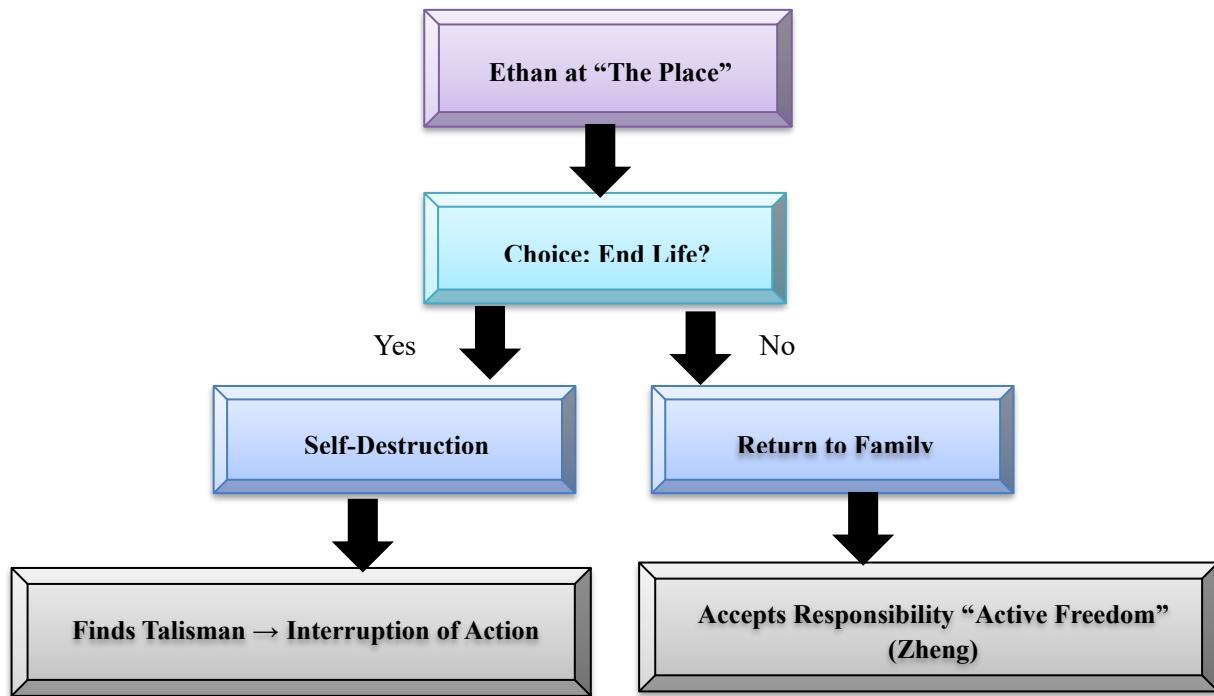


FIGURE 3 Ethical decision pathway in Ethan Hawley's suicide crisis and symbolic interruption by the talisman

4.4. STORYTELLING, NECESSITY, AND UNCERTAIN AGENCY

This break is a turning point, not because Ethan chooses redemption, but because he chooses not to extinguish another light. W. Scott Simkins is the one to highlight this distinction, adding that Ethan's new profession is that of a storyteller imparting meaning rather than clinging to it himself: "Taking on the role of the storyteller and giving his daughter the role of audience," Simkins writes, "redeems Ethan effectively" (27). His return is not triumphant, but extremely unsure: "I had to get back, had to return the talisman to its new owner. Else another light might go out" (Steinbeck 276). The tone of necessity, rather than will, suggests that his choice is not self-willed. Guilt, memory, and the emotional burden of inheritance drive him. But within this need lies a sort of agency, not the power to turn back the clock, but the power to act differently in the moment. Ethan arrives at "active freedom," Zheng asserts, an unstable moral awareness created not through victory, but through danger and humanity (Zheng 174).

4.5. THE DEATH SCENE AND THE TALISMAN AS CATALYST FOR INTERRUPTION

The moment when Ethan almost commits suicide can be regarded as the most dramatic point in the novel, where the moral fall and the slightest chance to be revived collide. After retreating to his childhood grotto, which has been turned into a place of desperation and hopelessness, the rising tide and warm bay water create the background of what is being discussed by Li Zheng as a symbolic ritual purification, a frantic effort to cleanse the shame and start afresh. However, Ethan is not saved by the sea; rather, it is the talisman that he finds in his pocket, still warm after Ellen had died. This affection turns into a figurative intrusion, a statement that it is not he who is worthy, but that someone believes in him. The presence of the talisman compels Ethan to a moment of realization, halting the self-destruction process sufficiently to allow him to understand the relational connections he will be destroying.

By means of this scene, the talisman activates the transformation of Ethan, who is in a passive state of despair, into the type of active freedom Zheng characterizes as such, based on a precarious moral awareness that is caused not by success but by threat and susceptibility. The fact that Ethan decides to go back home is not a sign of redemption or regained virtue, but it is an understanding that his deeds have an implication that goes beyond him. The talisman is therefore not a magic remedy, but rather an agent, an agent that disrupts destruction by reviving the sense of responsibility, by reminding how even the tainted symbols can temporarily stop the fall of morality, even point to the possibility of doing otherwise.

5. SYNTHESIS

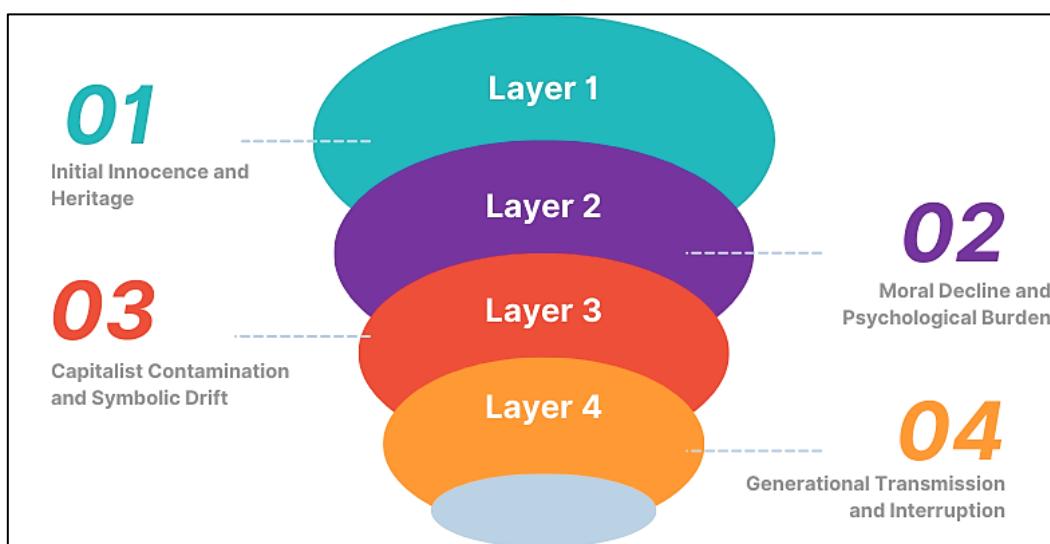


FIGURE 4 Funnel model of symbolic drift from innocence to generational moral burden

5.1. MATERIAL SYMBOL, MORAL COLLAPSE, AND CULTURAL CRITIQUE

The transformation of the talisman in *The Winter of Our Discontent* illustrates how an object that appears to be extremely minor can be a carrier of both personal and international identity crises. [12-15] In the case of Ethan, the stone is first used symbolically as a symbol of heritage, continuity, and family goodness that is tied to an older moral order that was founded on honor and society. However, the talisman is a silent account of that decay as he slowly corrupts these inherited values. As he degrades morally, its meaning changes to become a valued heirloom and turns into a symbolic inventory of guilt, confusion, and yearning. Steinbeck does not merely apply the object to mirror the inner decay of Ethan, but to reveal the forces of a larger culture where material success is valued more than integrity, and that spiritual symbols can easily be turned into the rationality of the capitalistic system.

The talisman is also a cultural commentary in the sense that it brings out the unsteadiness of moral identity in postwar America. The moral fall of Ethan is not a singular event; it is only a reflection of the national anxieties about authenticity, purpose, and the loss of communal values. Steinbeck exaggerates the emotional view of commodifying spiritual significance and the promotion of the emptying of ethical principles by putting the talisman in conflict with the commodified cathedral of the supermarket. This way, the talisman turns out to be a microcosm of a fragmented national conscience, a material object that both maintains and reveals the absence of moral integrity in American life.

5.2. OBJECT AS MIRROR, NOT SOLUTION

The talisman turns out to be not a healing power but like a mirror showing the moral flaws of Ethan without providing any evident way of its correction. Throughout the novel, Ethan uses the stone to seek advice during moments of confusion, whether to derive some form of guidance. However, as his actions become more and more tainted, the talisman does not offer any moral guidance, but instead it acts as a mirror of his personality, in which the hypocrisy of his character is reflected. It does not bring the clarity of morality, even at the moment of the great climax of the novel, when Ethan cannot commit suicide because of the stone. It is not able to make Ethan go straight, but address the consequences of his actions and decisions, in addition to which he has already become a symbol of his fear and his guilt.

This ambiguity is emphasized by Steinbeck as it highlights his greater criticism of the symbolic mode of thought in a morally unstable world. The talisman is not magic or meaningless; rather, it is a thing whose meaning is solely shaped by the broken human mind that grips onto it. When Steinbeck denies its redemptive power, he resists that urge to put a clean moral arc on the story of Ethan. Rather, he does show a world where symbols shed light on ethical corruption and cannot correct it, exposing the inadequacy of passed-down artifacts to mend the harm caused by ethical hypocrisy. The talisman turns into a symbol of the contemporary state of affairs in that way: it is strong enough to reveal some truth inside, but it is not strong enough to bring salvation.

6. CONCLUSION

The Winter of Our Discontent by Steinbeck does not want a moral answer, and even the talisman as such is an expression of denial of the answer. Instead of being a symbol of redemption or a dependable compass, the talisman, on the contrary, reveals the weakness of the moral identity of Ethan Hawley as well as the culture-conflicting elements that condition this identity. His near-suicide and his eventual resurrection are not portrayed as evidence of re-integrity, but as instances between despair and

moments of obligation that demonstrate the intricate interplay of received values and personal failure and dim chances of rejuvenation. Steinbeck does not make the choice of Ethan a victory or a change; he puts it in a precarious position between guilt and hope, a choice made by guilt as much as by hope. The fact that the talisman eventually goes to Ellen hammers home the fear of the novel of continuity across generations and the disturbing means in which moral vagueness can be passed on both symbolically and through deed. The fact that Ethan is scared of another light going off is no sign of recovered moral certainty, but rather that he has realized the moral vulnerability that has become his family. The talisman, warm of body, radiant with the weight of his blood, is the talisman of his blood. Its symbolism is not solved, and it reflects the same aspect of Steinbeck not being able to provide certain moral appraisals in a world where capitalism, myth, memory, and desperation are competing. In such a manner, it turns the talisman into an ultimate image of human fragile agency as a reminder that ethical identity is not fixed in the objects that we inherit, but is constantly renegotiated by the decisions that we make. Steinbeck does not give his readers redemption, but a call to address the grayness of contemporary life, in which symbols shine a light of ethical incompleteness but promise no chance of healing. The end of the novel is therefore a small recognition of persistence: imperfect, weak, and overweight, but still able to make a decision not to have one more spark terminated.

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