

26 CRITICS DISCUSS

John Steinbeck

(1902-1968)

“He is primarily a masculine writer....He has proved himself an original and highly individualistic force. His books provoke the masculine mind because of his fearless grappling with ideas and human passions as well as sacred taboos. The dry rot of gentility has never touched him and neither sex nor a woman's honor nor romantic love loom large as a man's serious problems in his view.”

Edmond C. Richards
North American Review
(June 1937) 409

“Steinbeck abhors and abjures the tag ‘mystic’ which some critics have used in describing him. He is deeply concerned with the problem of Good and Evil, not in any conventional, moral, or philosophical sense but as phenomena in life and as animating principles in life. I have heard him used no word indicating the nature of his beliefs and intimations; but I should vaguely describe them as comprising a curious, very modern Manicheanism, derived perhaps in part from the Indians of the West Coast he has known since boyhood, from acute observation of cause and effect operating among primitive or untutored men, and from a frank facing of the evidences of his own hidden resources of mind and will.”

Burton Rascoe
English Journal
(March 1938) 213-14

“Surely no one writes lovelier stories, yielding a purer pleasure. Here are tragedy and suffering and violence, to be sure, but with all that is sharp and harsh distilled to a golden honey, ripe and mellow. Even cruelty and murder grow somehow pastoral, idyllic, seen through this amber light, as one might watch the struggles of fish and water snakes in the depths of a mountain pool. Beyond question, Steinbeck has a magic to take the sting out of reality and yet leave it all there except the sting. Perhaps it is partly the carefulness of his art, with endless pains devising and arranging every detail until all fits perfectly and smooth and suave as polished ivory. But probably it is more the enchantment of his style, of that liquid melody which flows on and on.”

T. K. Whipple
New Republic
(12 October 1938) 274

“The variability of the form itself is probably an indication that Mr. Steinbeck has never yet found the right artistic medium for what he wants to say. But there is in his fiction a whole substratum which does remain constant and which gives it a certain basic seriousness that that of the mere performer does not have. What is constant in Mr. Steinbeck is his preoccupation with biology. He is a biologist in the literal sense that he interests himself in biological research....Mr. Steinbeck almost always in his fiction is dealing either with the lower animals or with human beings so rudimentary that they are almost on the animal level; and the close relationship of the people with the animals equals even the zoophilia of D.H. Lawrence and David Garnett...The chief suspect of Mr. Steinbeck's fiction has been thus not those aspects of humanity in which it is most thoughtful, imaginative, constructive, but rather the processes of life itself.”

Edmund Wilson
New Republic
(9 December 1940) 785-86

“Steinbeck's fiction combines realism and romance, but not always harmoniously. His settings are often rural areas, where people live most happily when close to nature, but where malevolent forces, such as

drought or labor and market conditions or human greed, destroy this vital relationship. In dealing with the consequent problems Steinbeck's approach is sometimes lyric and mystical, sometimes realistic and sociological. Although he suffered a long period of adverse criticism, particularly in the United States, he remained popular and esteemed in Europe, and in the year when he published his account of a tour of 40 states, accompanied by his poodle, as *Travels with Charley in Search of America* (1962), he became the seventh American-born author to win a Nobel Prize."

James D. Hart
The Oxford Companion to American Literature, 5th edition
(Oxford 1941-83) 722

"The San Joaquin Valley (rather like Steinbeck's Salinas) is Eden [in *The Octopus* by Norris]...There were a few social realists in the period who did promise something different from the automatism of contemporary naturalism and the cult of the hard-boiled, notably John Steinbeck; but his case has always been a curious one. Steinbeck's approach to the novel was interesting because he seemed to stand apart at a time when Naturalism had divided writers into two mutually exclusive groups, since negation of its stunted spirit came more and more from writers who often had no sympathy with realism at all, and were being steadily pulled in the direction of surrealism and abstractionism. Naturalism had made for so dreadfully uniform a conception of reality that it was not strange to find many young writers revolting entirely against Realism....

Steinbeck, standing apart from both the contemporary naturalists and the new novel of sensibility that one finds in Faulkner and Wolfe, brought a fresh note into contemporary fiction because he promised a realism less terror-ridden than the depression novel, yet one mindful of the spiritual stupor of the time; a realism equal in some measure, if only in its aspiration, to the humanity and wholeness of realism in a more stable period. Yet it cannot be said that Steinbeck's work, which has become more and more tenuous and even sentimental, has really answered to that need....Steinbeck's moral advantage as a realist in the depression era was to be so different in his region—the Salinas Valley in California—his subject, as to seem different in kind. It was his famous 'versatility' that first earned him his reputation—his ability to follow a *Tortilla Flat* with *In Dubious Battle*, *Of Mice and Men* with *The Grapes of Wrath*...

His great possession as a writer was not an interest in craft or an experimental spirit; it was an unusual simplicity, a natural tenderness and ease in his relation to his California world. Artistically, notably in early works like *To a God Unknown* and *The Pastures of Heaven*, these appeared as shyly artful primitivism reminiscent of Sherwood Anderson, and in its boyish California mysticism, of Frank Norris. But at bottom Steinbeck's gift was not so much a literary resource as a distinctively harmonious and pacific view of life. In a period when so many better writers exhausted themselves, he had welded himself into the life of the Salinas Valley and enjoyed stability by wedding himself to the life cycles of the valley gardeners and mystics and adventurers, by steeping himself in its growth processes out of a close interest in the biology of human affairs. Steinbeck's absorption in the life of his native valley gave him a sympathetic perspective on the animal nature of human life, a means of reconciliation with people as people. The depression naturalists saw life as one vast Chicago slaughterhouse, a guerilla war, a perpetual bombing raid. Steinbeck had picked up a refreshing belief in human fellowship; he had learned to accept the rhythm of life....

It was this 'unpanicky questioning of life'...that gave Steinbeck's work its unusual tenderness, gave his valley-bred simplicity an advantageous perspective on contemporary social problems. With his deep amateur interest in biology, it gave him the necessary detachment and slow curiosity to approach the modern social struggle as a tragicomedy of animal instincts, which, as the best things in *The Grapes of Wrath* and *In Dubious Battle* testify, meant an aroused compassion, an understanding of the pain that the human animal can suffer and the mistakes he can make. The Doctor in *In Dubious Battle*, speaking for Steinbeck, disputes the Communist organizer's instinctive terrorism."

Alfred Kazin
On Native Grounds
(Doubleday 1942, 1956) 77, 304-07

"Handling complex material rather too easily, he has been marked by the popularizing gift—this indigenous American blessing which has, however, in the case of so many literary figures...become a

blessing not altogether unmixed. In Steinbeck's work the false starts and turns, the thwarting problems of material and of the artist in the process of penetrating it, which usually mark the effort to portray truth, these are singularly lacking. In Steinbeck has reminded us of a Thomas Wolfe, rejoicing in the mournful questioning of youth which wants no answers, he has never, like Wolfe, found himself disturbed by the final enigma of existence itself. For Steinbeck, Wolfe's famous stone is a stone, a leaf a leaf, and the door is sure to be found."

Maxwell Geismar
Writers in Crisis
(Houghton 1942) 260

"John Steinbeck moved from the primitive folk and the mystics of *To a God Unknown* (1933) and *Tortilla Flat* (1935) to the labor organizers of *In Dubious Battle* (1936). As the early tales, collected in *The Long Valley* (1938), had suggested, he was the most gifted of the writers surrounding Wolfe, and *Grapes of Wrath*, in 1939, confirmed his position in the new decade. It was chiefly an emotional facility and simplification of experience that kept Steinbeck's whole achievement from being as impressive as it was arresting. Nevertheless the story of the Okies' westward trek toward a New World—recalling as it did the historical meaning of the frontier in times of social crisis, even though the frontier was not an economic one—was a big and life-giving book."

Maxwell Geismar
Literary History of the United States, 3rd edition
(Macmillan 1946-63) 1312

"Much of Steinbeck's basic position is essentially religious, though not in any orthodox sense of the word. In his very love of Nature he assumes an attitude characteristic of mystics. He is religious in that he contemplates man's relation to the cosmos and attempts, although perhaps fumblingly, to understand it. He is religious in that he attempts to transcend scientific explanations based upon sense experience. He is religious in that from time to time he explicitly attests the holiness of Nature....Nineteenth century fears that the development of Naturalism meant the end of reverence, of worship, and of 'august sentiments' are not warranted in the case of Steinbeck....Steinbeck is, I think, the first significant novelist to begin to build a mystical religion upon a naturalistic basis."

Woodburn O. Ross
College English
(May 1949) 436-37

"Steinbeck illustrates vividly the kind of moral impasse to which the idea of relativity applied to the field of cultural investigation has brought us while at the same time widening the grounds of tolerance in a way we can only approve. Since what is good in terms of our culture may be a positive bad in another, we can safely apply the term 'good' only to those motives which appear in common at the most primitive level. This is precisely what Steinbeck does. His paisanos in *Tortilla Flat*, Mack and the boys in *Cannery Row* and most of the characters in *The Wayward Bus* gain a certain vitality (which his less earthy characters do not have) as a result of their uninhibited response to organic drives; but this involves their almost complete emancipation from social responsibility and a disregard of everything which culture has added to human life."

Blake Nevius
Pacific Spectator
(Summer 1949) 307-08

"We have been right all along in suspecting that there are nearly two Steinbecks. There is the Steinbeck of *Grapes of Wrath*, of *In Dubious Battle*, and of a number of short stories, an angry man whose anger has put a real tension in his work; and there is also the Steinbeck who seems at times to be only a distant relative of the first one, the warmhearted and amused author of *Tortilla Flat*, *Cannery Row*, *The Wayward Bus*, *The Pearl*, capable of short stretches of some really dazzling stuff but, over the length of the book, increasingly soft and often downright mushy. In other words, Steinbeck has achieved his success by working within the limitations which are perhaps self-imposed on him by his temperament. They tie him down to an exclusive preference for one type of character, which recurs with surprising consistency

throughout his work, and to a maximum of two emotional attitudes, one compounded of some delight and much compassion toward the people he writes about, the other of compassion and wrath.”

W. M. Frohock
The Novel of Violence in America
(Southern Methodist 1950) 147

“Sartre, who is not a great artist, is certainly a first-rate journalist. He and Steinbeck and the Italian Moravia and the Soviet writer Leonov all seem to me to represent more or less the same sort of thing. They mostly depend on ideas and devices provided by other people, and they do not produce great literature, but they are able reporters on their period and worth reading for this reason.”

Edmund Wilson
Letter to John Dos Passos (21 July 1950)
Letters on Literature and Politics 1912-1972
(Farrar, Straus 1957-77) 487

“Of the novels Mr. Steinbeck has published since *The Grapes of Wrath* suddenly catapulted him toward the leadership of American fiction, only *Cannery Row* (1945) seems to have please many readers, and *Cannery Row* is merely a reworking of the kind of material he had used earlier in his career in *The Pastures of Heaven* (1932) and *Tortilla Flat*. *The Moon Is Down* (1942), which is based upon the Nazi invasion of Norway but does not actually portray it, was widely condemned, though often for the wrong reasons, and when *The Wayward Bus* came along in 1947 the reviewers were unable to make up their minds about whether it was to be taken literally or allegorically, or about anything else, for that matter, except that it was a *Grand Hotel* kind of hotel [bus?], definitely oversexed....

There has...been much head-shaking over the fact that the author of *The Grapes of Wrath* should have begun his career, in *Cup of Gold*, by glorifying the ruthless individualism of the pirate Henry Morgan. Now there are many differences between *Cup of Gold* and Steinbeck's later work. But *Cup of Gold* does not glorify the ruthless individualism of Henry Morgan. On the contrary, it shows very clearly that that kind of ruthless individualism does not work....He does not humanize his animals in the manner of Kipling and other writers; rather he shows a tendency to drop human beings to the animal level. Some writers attribute his preoccupation with such things to his training in biology. He seems to try to apply an optimistic theory of naturalistic determinism to all human affairs—a sort of notion that everything works for the best, however wasteful the process may seem....

Personally I gravely doubt that if he were to slough off his mysticism, as some of his critics advise him, it would help him to solve his problems, but he may very well need to be rescued from certain confusing elements of primitivism and irrationality.”

Edward Wagenknecht
Cavalcade of the American Novel:
From the Birth of the Nation to the Middle of the Twentieth Century
(Holt 1952) 444-47

“Those who have written about Steinbeck have disagreed far more widely—and deeply—that they have about any other important writer of our time....There is at least one notable characteristic of Steinbeck's writing on which otherwise conflicting critics agree: he is a man in whom the faculty of pity is strong and close to the surface....It may turn out...that the essence of Steinbeck-man and Steinbeck-writer lies in these two quite uncomplicated truths: he earnestly wishes to make people understand one another and he is able, like Blake, to ‘seek love in the pity of others’ woe’.”

Joseph Henry Jackson
Introduction, *The Short Novels of John Steinbeck*
(Viking 1953) vii-viii

“The foremost young American novelist of the Great Depression, which is to say of the decade between 1930 and 1940, was a Californian, John Steinbeck. What he had to say, basically, was that life goes on, is indestructible, although its forms may change and vast numbers of individual lives may be snuffed out by the catastrophic and inscrutable forces of nature. The world of Steinbeck, like that of Robinson Jeffers, is

cruelly impersonal, but the conclusions of the two writers are almost diametrically opposed. Jeffers finds the human race little short of contemptible; Steinbeck, fully aware of the meanness and impotence of humanity, is temperamentally hopeful, an admirer of the infinite manifestations of adaptability in living organisms. It is not surprising that Steinbeck found an eager audience in an era everywhere darkened by bankruptcy, unemployment, and a sense of possible failure in the struggle for survival. He was called 'Communist' and 'left-wing visionary' by men angered by his tenderness for the victims of change and his broad hint of social revolution, but time has made it clear that Steinbeck is something more than a 'proletarian' novelist. He is as close to being a philosopher as any popular living writer....

Because he deals often in symbols and abstract ideas, he is sometimes a puzzle to the critics. Most often, perhaps, Steinbeck has been called a primitivist, and it is true that he tends to glorify rudimentary folk, people who, as he said in 1937 in a foreword to *Tortilla Flat*, 'merge successfully with their habitat.' Yet Steinbeck combines...several of the great skeins of American thought: the mystical monism which gave Emerson his trust in the essential goodness of the common man; the sense of the mass or the social democracy with which Whitman tempered Emersonian individualism; and that recognition of the necessity of effective action which is the core of pragmatism, sometimes called the most characteristic of American philosophical positions. A sensitive and intelligent man, fully aware of the enormity of human failure, Steinbeck still finds a core of goodness in men and women, a zest in living which is perhaps more essential for survival than an understanding of life."

Theodore Hornberger
The Literature of the United States 2
(Scott, Foresman 1953, 1961, 1966) 1280-82

"I think we have been wrong about Steinbeck. We have let his social indignation, his verisimilitude of language, his interest in marine biology to lead us to judge him as a naturalist. Judged by the standards of logical consistency which naturalism demands, his best books are weak and his poorer books are hopeless. Steinbeck is more nearly a twentieth-century Dickens of California, a social critic with more sentiment than science or system, warm, human, inconsistent, occasionally angry but more often delighted with the joys that life on his lowest levels presents."

Hugh Holman
New Republic
(7 June 1954) 20

"The world of reality begins to recede in the novels of John Steinbeck. Perhaps one reason is that the scene moves to the California coast where the impossible seems to thrive in the literary products of the Salinas Valley, as well as in its fantastic orchards, vineyards, and religious sects. Another reason may have been the mingling of Irish and German blood which produced the romantic tale *Cup of Gold* (1929) and the pseudo-realistic studies of the people of an isolated valley, *The Pastures of Heaven* (1932).

Steinbeck's own basic attitude was a comic detachment which allowed him to mingle social concern with good-humored laughter at the irresponsibility of his paisanos. Even the lilt of Irish-English prose is in the tales of the carefree inhabitants of *Tortilla Flat* (1935), followed almost immediately by the plight of migratory workers in the orchards, *In Dubious Battle* (1936); and the two elements of fantasy and reality were mingled inseparably in *Of Mice and Men* (1937), a short novel written with an eye to both stage and movie adaptation. So far, Steinbeck had refused to be typed; his study of the friendship of the lumpish Lennie and his faithful George is believable as a revelation of warped personality at the same time that it is symbolic of man's eternal longing to return to the land.

The level on which Steinbeck's art finally settled was that of the primitive; in this he proved to be in the richest American literary tradition. He was interested in the animal motivation underlying human conduct, and with its aid he created a world of unreality with which he could offset that of the ugly world he knew. He was at his best when he succeeded in maintaining a contrapuntal interplay between these two worlds by the use of a larger symbolism, in the fashion of O'Neill rather than of Eliot. The balance between these worlds was so precarious that failure followed success, and success failure, throughout his literary career, sometimes even in the same work."

Robert E. Spiller

“Steinbeck’s accomplishment has been called uneven, but his least work is alive with human interest, and his best work seems to have the durability of the classic. In two decades ending in 1952 he wrote sixteen long works of fiction, widely varied in form and substance, all memorable, some master works (*The Pastures of Heaven*, *Tortilla Flat*, *Of Mice and Men*, *The Red Pony*, *Grapes of Wrath*, his masterpiece, *The Pearl*, and *East of Eden*). His distinctive and lyric prose sustains good character drawing, an interesting and honest if not always an accepted view of life, and a good story—for he is always a superb storyteller. In addition, Steinbeck has been among the most effective protagonists of social justice; as a California regionalist, he has portrayed the local scene, speech, character, and legend in a richly primitive manner; and he is a genuine artist of folk comedy and humor....With *The Grapes of Wrath*, *The Red Pony*, *The Long Valley*, and some magical short stories and sketches, it substantiates Steinbeck’s claim to highest consideration.”

Sculley Bradley, Richmond Croom Beatty, E. Hudson Long, eds.
The American Tradition in Literature, 3rd edition
(Norton 1956-67) 1506-07

“If Steinbeck’s characters seldom achieve true novelistic reality, it is precisely because they are so little individualized, so little individuals and finally so little human. Their emotions always remain obscure and somewhat opaque, situated, it seems, under the diaphragm or around the solar plexus; it is hard to picture them, even in a distant time, reading a clear consciousness of themselves....We may say that there is something false and suspicious, at any rate monstrous, in the very innocence of Steinbeck’s heroes.... Because of this very amputation, Steinbeck’s universe and the artistic domain in which he can succeed will be perforce very limited....One cannot help wondering whether there are very great possibilities open to a ‘novelist of animality,’ however perfect his art may be and however deep the bond of sympathy between his subject and himself.”

Claude-Edmonde Magny
Steinbeck and His Critics
eds. F. W. Tedlock and C. V. Wicker
(New Mexico 1957) 225-27

“Steinbeck is a model example of the modern American nostalgia for the primitive, the counter-reaction to the triumphant urbanization of American culture which took place in the first half of the twentieth century. He stands at the opposite extreme from the Horatio Alger myth, for he admires everything that is not a material success: the have-nots, the misfits, the racial minorities unjustly deprived of their civil and economic rights, the simple, the poor, and the oppressed. His rural heroes, illiterate and sometimes weak-minded, are nevertheless essentially noble; far from realistically described, they are actually poetized rustics in the traditional romantic manner.

It is true that Steinbeck is a naturalist, and that his novels are based on first-hand research, carefully documented, and essentially faithful to the facts. But everything is transformed: the creative process simplifies character, idealizes qualities, and casts over the whole a web of significance so that what might have been mere documentary reporting becomes a form of art comparable to the Greek tragedy or the Homeric epic. Steinbeck is a regionalist as well as a naturalist; his region is the Salinas Valley in central California and the nearby Monterey coast....Monterey and Salinas counties are as much imaginary realms as Yoknapatawpha County of Faulkner....Here live his poetic Mexicans, his sentimental cannery workers, his eccentric and colorful fishermen; here his rural tragedies unfold in the atmosphere of the Naturalistic novel mingled with that of the Greek pastoral.

Like Willa Cather, Steinbeck is fascinated with the foreign elements in the American population; and like most regionalists he believes the elemental life of the country infinitely superior to that of the city. When his characters are established securely on the land they are hard-working and good-hearted, if somewhat inclined to drink and argumentation. When their agricultural activities are dislocated—when the Joads are driven from Oklahoma, or when a seductive woman intrudes her way into the agrarian dream of Lennie and George in *Of Mice and Men*—tragedy and bitterness result.

Steinbeck, like many naturalists, presents scenes of great cruelty and passion in his novels. *The Grapes of Wrath*, upon its appearance in 1939, excited a torrent of puritanical indignation almost equal to that which greeted Dreiser's *Sister Carrie*. Steinbeck is not interested in mere frankness for shock effect, however. His characters use profanity because they know no other way of speaking; it is a sort of tic or mannerism with them. This is the reason profanity is so frequent in the speech of illiterate people; foul language is as conventional in some groups as polite formulae are in cultured society. Actually Steinbeck's characters are seldom deliberately cruel, and are more likely to be gentle. When they commit crimes it is usually through accident (*The Grapes of Wrath*) or out of sheer stupidity (*Of Mice and Men*), and they generally regret such acts as soon as they realize their full implications.

In politics Steinbeck during the Thirties was a consistent independent liberal. Some of his novels are mere allegory or folklore, devoid of any social content (*The Wayward Bus*, *The Pearl*, *Of Mice and Men*). *The Grapes of Wrath* is compassionate toward the plight of migrant Okies, but offers little as a solution but the organized philanthropy of the New Deal. *In Dubious Battle* is a strike story which ostensibly glorifies the left-wing labor movement, but violence is tacitly condemned, and official Communism found the 'line' of the novel unacceptable. During the Second World War Steinbeck wrote outright war propaganda in *Bombs Away* (1942) and something very close to it in *The Moon Is Down* (1942). Steinbeck is generally sympathetic to the proletariat and to the rural laborer. He has not, however, adhered consistently to the platform of any one party or movement.

Steinbeck is more conscious of style than most naturalists; there is a certain poetic quality to his prose. Several of his novels represent attempts to create a synthetic folklore, utilizing the traditional stylistic devices of the folk-tale. He makes strong use of rhythm and repetition: Lennie's theme of 'George...are we gonna have rabbits, George?' is woven into *Of Mice and Men* like the recurring motif of a sonata. His descriptions of nature are terse but highly charged with imagery. Sometimes he feels the same tenderness toward the sea or the hills that he does toward his rural folk-heroes. Occasionally, especially in *Of Mice and Men*, he consciously creates the classic tragedy; the catastrophe of George and Lennie proceeds inevitably out of their tragic flaws in the same manner as the catastrophe of Agamemnon. The figures are drawn on a smaller scale, it is true, but it is precisely Steinbeck's point that humble and illiterate people may have their tragedies too.

Steinbeck's fiction technique is 'dramatic' in another sense; it is based largely on dialogue, connected together with brief descriptive passages, and is almost barren of formal exposition. The situation of the characters and their previous history are explained through conversation rather than through explicit exposition by the author, just as they must on the stage. For this reason Steinbeck's novels and stories are easily dramatized; several of them have been converted into successful plays and films. At least two of them, *The Moon Is Down* and *Burning Bright*, were deliberately written as 'dramatic stories' which can be converted into dramas with a minimum of adaptation; the consist entirely of dialogue interspersed with brief passages of action which are really nothing but stage directions. The others among his novels which are most dramatic in style are *Of Mice and Men*, *In Dubious Battle*, *The Grapes of Wrath*, and *The Pearl*. The group of his works which are not easily convertible into dramas includes especially the semi-humorous Monterey stories: *Tortilla Flat*, and *Sweet Thursday*. Here there is much exposition, usually ironic or whimsical, written from the abstract point of view of public opinion or rumor in the Monterey community.

Steinbeck's work is diverse not only in style but in quality. His styles may be roughly classified under four headings: (1) Naturalistic tragedies (*Of Mice and Men*, *The Grapes of Wrath*, *In Dubious Battle*, etc.), (2) the whimsical Monterey idylls (*Tortilla Flat*, etc.), (3) pastorals (*The Red Pony* and similar lyrical-sentimental works) and (4) miscellaneous adventure stories laid outside the Salinas-Monterey region (*The Moon is Down*, *Bombs Away*, etc.) Of these, groups (1) and (3) are superior in quality, although *In Dubious Battle* is not usually considered the literary equal of the others. The stories in group (2) are considered well done but of lesser importance; Steinbeck is here writing for a popular audience and seeking frankly to amuse. Group (4) is consistently inferior; the two works cited are little more than propaganda, and Steinbeck's lack of intimate personal contact with his material produces a quality of abstraction that destroys their effectiveness. A fifth group of minor works might be cited: the symbolic parables, including *Burning Bright* (1950) and *The Pearl* (1948). Steinbeck, the artist of primitives, is no primitive himself; he

is a competent professional writer who is always conscious of formal literary technique and of literary history, and who can work in a diversity of styles to suit his material.” [Heiney here overlooks *East of Eden* (1952), which probably belongs in his Group 1).

Donald Heiney
Recent American Fiction 4
(Barron’s Educational Series 1958) 227-30

“In seeing his native Salinas Valley in California as a new Eden, the scene of a new chance for man and for men, and in transporting his heroes thither from the exhausted East, Steinbeck is not only continuing in an American tradition, enacting again an old American dream. He is also suggesting that the dream itself has moved west and has settled there, that it is now California which stimulates in its inhabitants the intoxicating sense of fresh beginnings and untroubled potentialities which the eastern scene once stimulated in Emerson, in Thoreau, in Whitman. This is the point and purpose of the prefatory incantations of *East of Eden*, where the local California countryside is observed and named as though by the first man at the dawn of time....Innocent are these early writings, and he who wrote them; innocent in the manner of Emerson and Thoreau, innocent in the manner of Whitman, detecting or claiming to detect beauty and purity amidst the lowliest squalor....

In the longer novels (*To a God Unknown*, 1933, *In Dubious Battle*, 1936, *The Grapes of Wrath*, 1939, and *East of Eden*) we come upon electrifying passages, sudden and tragically short-lived moments of vision, little spurts of verbal energy; momentary manifestations, as if were, of a trapped and imprisoned daemon struggling to get out and on to the page...It is partly Steinbeck’s habit of oversimplifying both life and art that has kept him from seeing and taking hold of the complex entirety....It should be remembered here that by communicating...joy Steinbeck has given very many people a great deal of pleasure, revived in them perhaps some lost sense of the sheer excitement of being alive. And I cannot resist adding personally that behind his stories I detect a figure who is to me altogether sympathetic; a person of zest and humour and nervous anger, and with an uncommonly large fund of humanity.”

R. W. B. Lewis
“John Steinbeck: The Fitful Daemon”
The Young Rebel in American Literature, ed. Carl Bode
(Heinemann & Praeger 1959)

“In 1939 Steinbeck published *The Grapes of Wrath*, sometimes described as ‘the 20th-century *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*.’ In its depiction of the Joad family fleeing the disastrous dust bowl of Oklahoma, this book summed up the despair of the early 1930’s. Possibly it was as effective as Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle* (1906) had been in crystallizing public opinion against allowing such conditions to continue.... Steinbeck’s shorter fiction is humorous, warm sometimes to the point of being sentimental, and concerned with the small tragedies in the lives of simple people; it implicitly contrasts the ‘good life’ of the natural man close to the soil with the depersonalization and dehumanization of the commercial world. His longer fiction is often subject to a philosophic tendentiousness, but is primarily concerned with the growth and development of men to whom it is necessary to be good ‘group-men’ in order to be good individuals.... Joseph Henry Jackson...noted the frequent disagreements about Steinbeck among critics: ‘They have called him a naturalist, a mystic, and a primitive. They have described him as brilliant, perceptive, wise, and also as childlike. Some of his tenderest scenes have been called vile; many of his more subtle humors have been missed entirely’.”

Max J. Herzberg & staff
The Reader’s Encyclopedia of American Literature
(Crowell 1962) 1080

“One might say that Steinbeck’s theme is life and the processes of life at a certain place at a certain time. But the processes of life that interest him are those common to the...tiger and man. They are evolutionary processes, relatively undifferentiated; and this plainly presents him with difficult problems as a novelist, who is normally concerned with something diametrically opposed to Steinbeck’s view, namely individuation. Values, except the values that make for the animal survival of the species, are absent from Steinbeck’s work—or almost so; he has a generous indignation at the spectacle of human suffering. But apart from this, he is the celebrant of life, any kind of life, just because it is life; and against his passionate

sympathy with the Joads of this world must be set his woozy sentimentality over the bums and whores-with-hearts-of-gold he celebrates in *Tortilla Flat* and *Cannery Row*.”

Walter Allen
The Modern Novel in Britain and the United States
(Dutton 1965) 163

“Versatile almost to a fault, John Steinbeck has written of many different things. His earliest novel was a swashbuckling romance based upon the career of an English buccaneer. Later writings have ranged over such diverse themes as marine biology, the air force, the Nazi occupation of Norway, Mexican peasant life, and village politics on Long Island....Yet Steinbeck’s most memorable work has been focused on the section of California where he was born and spent his earliest years. The Steinbeck country, strictly defined, is the Salinas Valley, a long narrow depression lying to the south of Monterey Bay....

The earliest inhabitants had been Indians of a primitive culture who neither hunted nor tilled the soil but lived on grubs, grasshoppers, and shell fish. Then had come Spaniards, who accumulated huge ranches and raised cattle for hides and tallow. Finally the Americans pushed in, settling first in the fertile valley and then along the slopes of the foothills. After the Civil War, California’s masterful capitalists had thrust the Southern Pacific Railroad through the area and then promoted settlement with exuberant advertising. After reading this, says Steinbeck, ‘anyone who did not want to settle in the Salinas Valley was crazy.’

Improved transportation and modern miracles of refrigeration ultimately encouraged the inhabitants to specialize in growing lettuce and other perishables for the national market. Steinbeck’s own forbears had participated in these historic events....From the standpoint of the historian, Steinbeck’s greatest value lies in his feeling for the great transition in twentieth century agriculture. He remembers with nostalgia the comfortable agricultural society of his boyhood and youth; he understands the commercial forces that transformed agriculture after World War I; he shares the lot of the marginal farmers who lost their independence and became migrants during the Great Depression.”

Nelson Manfred Blake
Novelists’ America: Fiction as History, 1910-1940
(Syracuse U 1969) 133-34, 136

“Asked to rank the group who had come along and developed at about the same time he did, he named Wolfe, Dos Passos, Hemingway, Willa Cather, and John Steinbeck” (1947); “Faulkner criticized *The Grapes of Wrath*, implicitly associating [Budd] Schulberg with what he took to be Steinbeck’s attitudes. He said that the idea that man was improvable, that society could be improved, was a fallacy that softened Steinbeck’s view and made him a sentimental liberal” (1953); “Steinbeck was as little interested in literary talk as Faulkner, and the two men swapped hunting stories [agreeing] that the Springfield was the best kind of rifle there was.” (1956)

Joseph Blotner
Faulkner: A Biography
(Random House 1974) 1232, 1470, 1625

“All of Steinbeck’s major works, and especially the stories of *The Long Valley*, are populated by characters who—like those of his fellow-Californian predecessor Jack London—display severely reduced states of consciousness. Steinbeck is fond of portraying simpletons, idiots, illiterates, and animals. In fact, animal imagery and animal behavior...pervade Steinbeck’s books, from the Pirate in *Tortilla Flat*, who lives with his dogs in a kennel, to the famous description of a turtle crossing a highway in *The Grapes of Wrath*, a progress that prefigures the human journey. Even Steinbeck’s ‘group’ consciousness finds its equivalent in animal behavior. The westward migration in ‘The Leader of the People’ is described as ‘a whole bunch of people made into one big crawling beast....Every man wanted something for himself, but the big beast was all of them wanted only westering’....

Steinbeck’s greatest subject, the story of lowly, dispossessed people, of their indignant fear and their inherent dignity, had a poignancy during the Great Depression that it has since lost for some readers. Yet it is not a subject we can afford to lose....The desire to become a cohesive imagination and an articulate voice

for the broken dreams and lives of common people, lies at the heart of the work for which Steinbeck is now best remembered.”

David Minter
The Harper American Literature 2
(Harper & Row 1987) 1442

“Over his thirty-year writing career, Steinbeck wrote from three general perspectives. At first his subject was the individual struggling with his consciousness. Then in the mid-Thirties he began writing of the individual’s relationship with political, familial, or other groups he called phalanxes. In the third period his writing was highly autobiographical. Constant in all works is a catastrophic set of circumstances that destroy one’s illusion of reality; the reaction of characters to these circumstances is the focus of Steinbeck’s art....John Steinbeck’s enormous popularity derives in part from his gift as a storyteller. His style is that of the Symbolist. Usually he wrote with a theme in mind for which he created archetypal characters and a symbolic landscape. While his characters live in the present, they are linked to the past with a collective memory—of which he reminds us by alluding to parallels in classical works, to age-old rituals of sacrifice, death, and rebirth....Man is ultimately a pragmatic creature, Steinbeck’s fiction implies, who will do what is necessary to survive.”

Cliff Lewis
The Heath Anthology of American Literature 2
(D. C. Heath 1990) 1698

Michael Hollister (2015)