

INTRODUCTION



John Steinbeck

(1902-1968)

John Steinbeck is the best proletarian American novelist, a voice for the common people, especially the rural working class, immigrants, minorities and migrants—in the tradition of Cather. He excels all the proletarian novelists of the 1930s, including Dos Passos, because he is a fine artist rather than ideological. His great masterpiece is *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) dramatizing (1) the quest Myth of the Garden in the agrarian pastoral tradition of Jefferson; (2) extending the treatment of the westward movement by Cooper, Whitman, Twain, Norris, and Cather; (3) combining the objective Naturalism of a field biologist with the idealistic transcendentalism of Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman; and (4) raising the social reform genre into high art. In addition, Steinbeck wrote three distinguished novellas often taught in high schools: *Of Mice and Men* (1937), *The Red Pony* (1938), and the allegory *The Pearl* (1947). He also wrote the best American strike novel *In Dubious Battle* (1936) and several world class short stories: “The Snake,” “The Chrysanthemums,” and “Flight” (1938). In all, he published 27 books. His honesty and humility were evident when he said he did not think he deserved the Nobel Prize in 1962.

Steinbeck wrote for the common reader. He is such a good storyteller that many people, once they start reading him, keep reading book after book. Some critics have been disposed against his writing because: (1) he is *too* easy to read; (2) too popular with common people; (3) too versatile—writing in a variety of prose and dramatic forms; (4) too uneven in weight, ranging from casual journalism and war propaganda to the literary density and complexity of *The Grapes of Wrath* and his best stories; (5) his *Mice* and his *Pony* are young adult fiction; (6) his *Tortilla Flat* and his *Cannery Row* are light multicultural fables that idealize minority characters by oversimplifying them; (7) contrary to *Wikipedia* propaganda, though he did support Arthur Miller, who refused to name Communists to the House Un-American Activities Committee in 1956, Steinbeck was not a Marxist, he was a classical liberal advocating collective action within the democratic system, as in unions; (8) his powerful strike novel *In Dubious Battle* implicitly condemns inhumane Communist tactics; (9) he anticipates the communal hippies of the 1960s counterculture in his acceptance of unconventional behavior, intoxication, sexual liberation, and laziness; (10) however, he also supported the War in Vietnam against Communist tyranny; (11) he writes from the heart, making him seem sentimental to cynical Postmodernists; (12) his transcendentalism in the tradition of Emerson, Thoreau and Whitman is considered a fault by secular rationalists who dismiss all spiritual content as “mysticism”; (13) his *Grapes of Wrath* and *East of Eden* (1953) are full of Christian symbolism, motifs, parallels, and themes obnoxious to Atheists; and, worst of all to Feminists, (14) he is a “dead white male.”

BIOGRAPHY

John Steinbeck was born and grew up in the heart of the Salinas Valley, California, one of the most fertile places on earth, when it was a fresh agricultural paradise out West—before the founding of Hollywood. Steinbeck was an American Adam and the Salinas Valley was his Eden: “Every little boy thinks he invented sin.” His father was a miller and the treasurer of Monterey County, his mother was a schoolteacher who encouraged his love of reading and writing. John was their only son, the third of four children. “Thoughts are slow and deep and golden in the morning.”

EDUCATION

In 1919, Steinbeck graduated from Salinas High School, where he wrote for the school paper and was a track and basketball athlete, a good student, and president of his senior class. Then he attended Stanford University sporadically. He got a D in one English course. The only faculty member he respected wholeheartedly was a legendary English teacher named Edith Mirrieless. Like both Hemingway and Faulkner, Steinbeck never earned a college degree. He said, “I have come to believe that a great teacher is a great artist and that there are as few as there are any other great artists. Teaching might even be the greatest of the arts since the medium is the human mind and spirit.”

COMMON LABOR

John Steinbeck worked as a common laborer more than any other major American novelist—as a hand on farms and ranches, with migrants in the fields, on roadbuilding gangs and on a cattle boat. As a bricklayer, a surveyor, and a reporter. Like Whitman, he identified with the working class. “If you’re in trouble, or hurt or need—go to the poor people. They’re the ones that’ll help.” In 1925, at the peak of the Modernist movement—the year of *The Great Gatsby*—Steinbeck went to New York, worked briefly as a reporter for the *American* and then again as a laborer, while writing short stories that he could not get published. “In utter loneliness a writer tries to explain the inexplicable.” He got sick, returned to California and wrote more stories while working at odd jobs, including tour guide and caretaker of a fish hatchery at Lake Tahoe. “My whole work drive has been aimed at making people understand each other.”

EARLY WRITING

He wrote three unpublished novels, then finally succeeded with the Romantic adventure *Cup of Gold* (1929), a fictionalized biography of the pirate Henry Morgan, published a month before the stock market crash precipitated by financial pirates. It was also the year of *The Sound and the Fury*, the Modernist masterpiece by Faulkner, to whom Steinbeck, always more popular than Faulkner, would be subordinated by critics as a lesser writer throughout his career. In 1930 he married Carol Henning, who suggested the titles of several of his major works. “What a wonderful thing a woman is. I can admire what they do even if I don’t understand why.” The couple took up residence at Pacific Grove, then a bohemian community of aspiring writers and painters just outside the town of Monterey. They lived mostly on a very small allowance (25\$ per month) and loans from his parents while borrowing their seaside cottage.

There are more animal similes in Steinbeck’s work than in any American writer since Stephen Crane. In “The Leader of the People” he describes the westward movement as “a whole bunch of people made into one big crawling beast.” The main influence upon his thinking was Edward F. Ricketts, a marine biologist and naturalist he met in 1930, the model for Doc in *Tortilla Flat* and *Cannery Row*, and for characters in *In Dubious Battle* and *The Grapes of Wrath*. Ricketts introduced him to sociobiology, and to the theory that the essential biological difference between individuals and groups is *qualitative* rather than quantitative. As Steinbeck explains it, “When acting as a group, men do not partake of their ordinary natures at all. The group can change its nature...The greatest group unit, that is the whole race, has qualities which the individual lacks entirely...I have written this theme over and over and did not know what I was writing.” This biological theory is the foundation of Naturalism in Steinbeck, the primary deterministic force that his characters strive to *transcend*: “I hold that a writer who does not passionately believe in the perfectibility of man has no dedication nor any membership in literature.” Ricketts was also a Jungian psychologist and Steinbeck developed a belief in individuation from studying Jung.

Steinbeck's agrarian pastoralism is evident in *The Pastures of Heaven* (1932), a collection of stories about a California farming community, followed by *To a God Unknown* (1933), a mystical novel about a farmer's pagan fertility cult, influenced by his study of *The Golden Bough* by the anthropologist Sir James Frazer. In 1934 his story "The Murder" was chosen as an O. Henry Prize Story. "What some people find in religion a writer may find in his craft...a kind of breaking through to glory." He published his best work between 1935 and 1941. Rejected by nine publishers, *Tortilla Flat* (1935) is a pastoral celebration of the *paisanos* in the Salinas Valley, a humorous tale with mock heroic echoes of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table. Among the colorful characters is Pirate, who lives with his dogs in a kennel. This is the lighthearted book that first won him attention and popularity, as Steinbeck expresses his Romanticism with irony and humor. "I am happy to report that in the war between reality and romance, reality is not the stronger." In later works, however—*In Dubious Battle*, *Of Mice and Men*, *The Grapes of Wrath*, *East of Eden*—he is a Realist and a Naturalist, debunking Romance. "As an opal changes its colors and its fire to match the nature of the day, so do I."

In Dubious Battle (1936)

The best American strike novel grew out of Steinbeck's lifelong observation of labor strikes going on around him in the vast fields of the Salinas Valley. *In Dubious Battle* is proletarian Realism informed, darkened and intensified by Naturalism. Deterministic forces embodied in growers, vigilantes, and cops clash violently with strikers led by deterministic Communists. The strike of itinerant fruit pickers becomes a metaphor of all the many violent labor strikes of the 1930s led by Communists. Inverting the Bible story, these strikers picking apples in a Garden of Eden are *stopped* by a snake: Mac the cynical Communist organizer is a Marxist who welcomes bloodshed to provoke class warfare. He is glad when his protégé and other people are killed, glad even that the strike fails, because the longterm Communist plan for revolution is best served at this stage by martyrs and outrages that stir up hatred. His amoral tactics are more than "dubious." The title of the novel is a quotation from the Bible that implies the Communists are evil. Elsewhere Steinbeck added, "Except for the field organizers of strikes, who were pretty tough monkeys and devoted, most of the so-called Communists I met were middle-class, middle-aged people playing a game of dreams...I find out of long experience that I admire all nations and hate all governments." Unlike the Communists, Steinbeck loved America: "Do you know of any other nation that acts for ideals?"

Of Mice and Men (1937)

His dog ate the only manuscript copy of his novella *Of Mice and Men*. His setter pup Toby chewed half of the first draft into confetti. "Two months' work to do over again. I was pretty mad, but the poor little fellow may have been acting critically. I didn't want to ruin a good dog for a manuscript I'm not sure is good at all. He got only an ordinary spanking." Later, after some elite critics panned the book, Steinbeck added in a letter, "I'm not sure Toby didn't know what he was doing when he ate that first draft. I have promoted Toby-dog to be lieutenant-colonel in charge of literature. But as for the unpredictable literary enthusiasms of this country, I have little faith in them." Readers ignored the elite critics. *Of Mice and Men* got selected by the Book-of-the-Month Club and soon became a bestseller. The stage version also was a hit, playing to full houses on Broadway. Steinbeck said, "Time is the only critic without ambition"; "Give a critic an inch, he'll write a play"; "Unless a reviewer has the courage to give you unqualified praise, I say ignore the bastard." *Of Mice and Men* is a powerful tragedy because it is simple, realistic, appeals to the heart, and dramatizes the common pursuit of a dream that defines America. George and Lennie the farm hands split into two embodiments some traits that are common in almost every man.

The Grapes of Wrath (1939)

The Grapes of Wrath, the greatest novel of reform in American literature, provoked such an explosion of outrage, protest, counterattack and controversy during the Great Depression that it was reduced by most to a radical social tract and seen by many as propaganda by a Communist. Historians have compared the social impact of the book to that made by *Uncle Tom's Cabin* almost a century before. "The vilification of me out here from the large landowners and bankers is pretty bad. The latest is a rumor started by them that the Okies hate me and have threatened to kill me for lying about them. I'm frightened at the rolling might of this damned thing. It is completely out of hand; I mean a kind of hysteria about the book is growing that

is not healthy.” The deeply moving film directed by the legendary John Ford is one of the best adaptations of a classic ever made and swung the public behind Steinbeck.

At the literal level the Joad family, poor white farmers driven out of the Oklahoma Dust Bowl, represent all the people dispossessed in that region during the Great Depression of the 1930s. That is *social* Realism. Characteristics in the *aesthetic* tradition of REALISM include: (1) authentic detailed description of landscape, weather, buildings, people, clothing, machines, animals, etc.; (2) accurate “Okie” dialogue in dialect; (3) characters as social and human types; (4) story widely representative of a time and place; (5) universal truths of human nature; (6) debunking of Romantic illusions, in particular the myth of abundant jobs and good wages in California. Steinbeck enhances his Realism with techniques of IMPRESSIONISM in descriptions--frequent similes, symbolism and poetic style. Techniques and themes of NATURALISM include (1) omniscient narrator; (2) documentation; (3) portrayal of the underclass in misery; (4) characters limited by poverty, lack of education, and prejudice; (5) abundant comparisons of people to animals; (6) emphasis on determinism, especially socio-biological; (7) traps; (8) defeat. MODERNIST characteristics in *The Grapes of Wrath* have been overlooked: (1) innovative structure with interchapters that enlarge the context; (2) mythic method in paralleling the journey of the Joads with the journey of the Israelites to the Promised Land and in extending the American myth of the Garden of the West; (3) irony of the parallels; (4) less emphasis on plot than on meaning; (5) archetypal symbolism; (6) allegories, most famously the turtle crossing the highway; (7) spiritual transcendence.

You might think that Postmodern literature instructors today who claim to be teaching “social justice” would assign *The Grapes of Wrath*. Not so. This novel is Politically Incorrect: (1) too traditional, (2) affirms Christian values such as charity, (3) there are no militant women or gays in it, and (4) the final scene of a woman giving her breast to a man is repulsive to Feminists.

WORLD WAR II

In 1941 Steinbeck wrote *The Forgotten Village*, depicting Mexican village life, and *The Sea of Cortez* in collaboration with his friend the marine biologist Edward Ricketts, a journal of their research in the Gulf of California. Then he joined a group of writers organized to write books for the U.S. Foreign Information Service (forerunner of the CIA) that would counter the propaganda being disseminated worldwide by Nazi Germany. He interviewed refugees in Washington D.C. from Nazi-occupied countries and set out to write a play about the occupation of an American town by the army of a totalitarian state. He said later that his draft got turned down by the government because such a warning could be interpreted as “an admission that we might be defeated.” Within a month, Pearl Harbor was attacked.

Steinbeck changed the setting to occupied Norway and published a novel version in 1942. *The Moon Is Down* became controversial when the stage version opened on Broadway a month later, followed by a movie. The story celebrates the people’s resistance to and eventual victory over the invading army. American critics, slouched in their armchairs, were unimpressed. Most thought it was unconvincing and complained that Steinbeck had made the invaders human rather than demonizing them. In contrast, the book was extremely popular in occupied countries, where members of resistance movements were inspired by it. “The little book was smuggled into the occupied countries,” Steinbeck later said. “It was copied, mimeographed, printed on hand presses in cellars, and I have seen a copy laboriously hand written...and tied together with twine. The Germans did not consider it unrealistic optimism. They made it a capital crime to possess it.” In 1946 Norway awarded Steinbeck a Liberty Cross for writing *The Moon Is Down*. Asked by former resistance fighters how he had found out about their secret activities, Steinbeck replied, “I just put myself in your place and thought what I would do.”

Also in support of the war effort, Steinbeck wrote *Bombs Away: The Story of a Bomber Team*, then in 1943 he became a war correspondent for the *New York Herald Tribune*. He served with a special operations unit that engaged in diversionary tactics to confuse the Nazis about where the invasion of Italy was going to take place. He joined the invasion with American troops and fought in combat as Hemingway was doing in France. Then he participated in commando raids on Mediterranean islands held by the Nazis, led by Lt. Douglas Fairbanks, Jr., the actor, who was awarded a silver star for bravery. In 1944 Steinbeck got wounded in an explosion in North Africa. He returned home to recover and helped write the platform of

President Franklin Roosevelt, calling for civil rights at home and human rights abroad, backed if necessary by military power.

LATER CAREER

Beginning with *Of Mice and Men*, Steinbeck's ability to write stories that worked both as fiction and as plays led to numerous movie adaptations of his works and to many screenwriting assignments. He was a far more successful screenwriter than either Fitzgerald or Faulkner. In 1944 he published *Cannery Row*, set on the Monterey docks and based on the work of his mentor in sociobiology Dr. Edward Ricketts—Doc. In 1947 he visited the Soviet Union and published a *Russian Journal*. That same year some 5,000 copies of his next novel *The Wayward Bus* got destroyed by a wayward bus when the truck carrying them to the bindery collided with a bus traveling on the wrong side of the road and the books went up in flames. *Bus* is about a microcosmic group of stranded travelers, a prototype of many television dramas and movies.

In 1947 he divorced his second wife Gwyndolyn Conger, with whom he had two sons, and the following year married the divorced wife of the actor Zachary Scott. *The Pearl* (1948) is a simple parable about a poor Mexican fisherman who finds a great pearl, but his wealth brings only misery to his community. *East of Eden* (1952), set mostly in the Salinas Valley, is an ambitious family saga patterned after the tale of Cain and Abel in the Bible, a tragedy comparable in tone, intensity and atmosphere to *Desire under the Elms* (1925) by O'Neill. It became a bestseller and a successful movie, though most critics found it uneven in quality. Steinbeck's last notable books are *The Winter of Our Discontent* (1961), a story of corruption set in New England that he called "part Kafka and part Booth Tarkington," and his easygoing pastoral tour through forty states *Travels with Charlie in Search of America* (1962), a fitting finale.

NOBEL PRIZE (1962)

"In my heart there may be doubt that I deserve the Nobel award over other men of letters whom I hold in respect and reverence—but there is no question of my pleasure and pride in having it for myself....Such is the prestige of the Nobel award and of this place where I stand that I am impelled, not to squeak like a grateful and apologetic mouse, but to roar like a lion out of pride in my profession and in the great and good men who have practiced it through the ages." Asked by reporters who were his favorite writers, he replied, "Hemingway's short stories and nearly everything Faulkner wrote."

VIETNAM WAR

"This I believe," wrote Steinbeck. "That the free, exploring mind of the individual human is the most valuable thing in the world. And this I would fight for: the freedom of the mind to take any direction it wishes, undirected. And this I must fight against: any idea, religion, or government which limits or destroys the individual." As President John F. Kennedy declared: "Let every nation know, whether it wishes us well or ill, that we shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe to assure the survival and the success of liberty." (Inaugural 1961)

Steinbeck wrote the Great Society platform of 1964 for the Democratic Party. In 1966 he wrote to his friend Lyndon Johnson expressing gratitude to the President for explaining to his (Steinbeck's) son his responsibility as a young man in uniform and the moral validity of the war against Communist tyranny in Vietnam, consistent with the late President Kennedy's pledge to pay any price in the defense of liberty. Ultimately both of his sons served in Vietnam. Steinbeck reported on the war for *Newsday* and identified with the American troops as he had in World War II. However, this war became *very* politically incorrect. Just as the critical stature of Willa Cather suffered because she did not oppose World War I, Steinbeck likewise got punished by liberal critics, journalists and academics for loyalty to his country. He started his career identified with the Left and ended it condemned as a conservative. The war hurt him physically as well. Always trying to be of help, while traveling through the Far East as a correspondent he injured himself in Hong Kong. He was helping a Chinese man push a hand truck loaded with beer when he ruptured a spinal disk. He had to be hospitalized and underwent five hours of surgery in 1967.

DEATH

Steinbeck enjoyed telling friends about a letter he got once from an angry reader that ended, “Beware. You will never get out of this world alive.” Convalescing at his home in Sag Harbor, New York in 1968 he suffered a stroke, then a series of heart failures. He was a lifelong smoker. Awakening from a coma, he declared, “I seemed to hear the sound of distant drums.” Then, after a moment, he murmured his last words, “Maybe it’s just Shirley [family friend] playing the bagpipes.”

Michael Hollister (2013)

REASONS FOR WRITING

“My basic rationale might be that I like to write. I feel good when I am doing it—better than when I am not. I find joy in the texture and tone and rhythms of words and sentences, and when these happily combine in a ‘thing’ that has texture and tone and emotion and design and architecture, there comes a fine feeling—a satisfaction like that which follows good and shared love. If there have been difficulties and failures overcome, these may even add to the satisfaction...In writing, perhaps we hope to achieve companionship. What some people find in religion, a writer may find in his craft or whatever it is—absorption of the small and frightened and lonely into the whole and complete, a kind of breaking through to glory.” (“Rationale,” *Steinbeck and His Critics*, eds. Tedlock and Wicker, U New Mexico 1957)

CRITICS

“My experience in writing has followed an almost invariable pattern. Since by the process of writing a book I have outgrown that book, and since I like to write, I have not written two books alike. Where would be the interest in that? The result has been (and I can prove it with old reviews) that every book has been attacked by a large section of the critical family. I can also prove by old notices that the preceding book is compared favorably over the current one and the one before over the preceding one. To a sensitive reader this would indicate that starting nowhere I have consistently gone down. Or perhaps, having made up their minds what the next book would be like, the critics experienced anger when it was different...If my books, almost without exception, could have been killed by initial criticism, as a play is, they would have been killed and my work would be very largely unknown.” (Steinbeck, “Critics, Critics, Burning Bright,” *Saturday Review of Literature*, 11 November 1950)

Michael Hollister (2018)

