

132 QUOTATIONS



John Steinbeck

(1902-1968)

John Steinbeck wrote *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), one of the great works in American literature. In that novel and in *East of Eden* (1953) he continued where James Fenimore Cooper and Willa Cather left off in dramatizing the westward movement and the myth of the Garden of the West. Steinbeck also wrote the popular novella *Of Mice and Men* (1937), widely taught in high schools, and “The Snake,” a psychological allegory as complex as those of Hawthorne. His other distinguished stories include “Flight” and “The Chrysanthemums.” He began in the 1930s as a proletarian writer identified with the working class and ended as a conservative supporter of the Vietnam War. Steinbeck is primarily a Realist whose humanism and agrarian pastoralism incline to sentimentality—the main complaint of his critics. And yet, as a biological scientist, he excels at objective detail and his themes and techniques are often Naturalistic. At the same time his affirmation of transcendence is Modernist. His prose style in *The Grapes of Wrath* is biblical. As in the cases of Wharton and Cather, his critical stature was diminished by his weaker books. Steinbeck wrote for the common reader. He achieved greatness in a few works while Hemingway and Faulkner achieved it in many, but Steinbeck is consistently easy to read—simpler and more heartfelt than intellectual—like Sherwood Anderson. His Nobel Prize in 1962 surprised him.

ORDER OF TOPICS: youth, autobiographical, freedom, human nature, human glory, perfectibility, God, religion, woman, sex, society, City and Garden, suffering, proletarianism, pastoralism, environmentalism, Eden in the West, America, Europe, government, Socialism, Communism, Postmodernism, Political Correctness, censoring literature, writing, Realism and Romance, dreams, the writer, dog eats draft, Faulkner, teaching, critics, Nobel Prize, fame, death:

YOUTH

Every little boy thinks he invented sin.

AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL

As an opal changes its colors and its fire to match the nature of the day, so do I.

My whole work drive has been aimed at making people understand each other.

FREEDOM

This I believe: 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.

HUMAN NATURE

A sad soul can kill quicker than a germ.

No one wants advice—only corroboration.

One can find so many pains when the rain is falling.

Men can get used to anything, but it takes time.

All war is a symptom of man's failure as a thinking animal.

Man is the only kind of varmint sets his own trap, baits it, then steps in it.

It is one of the triumphs of the human that he can know a thing and still not believe it.

We are lonesome animals. We spend all our life trying to be less lonesome.

When a man says he does not want to speak of something he usually means he can think of nothing else.

No man really knows about other human beings. The best he can do is to suppose that they are like himself.

We value virtue but do not discuss it. The honest bookkeeper, the faithful wife, the earnest scholar get little of our attention compared to the embezzler, the tramp, the cheat.

I've seen a look in dogs' eyes, a quickly vanishing look of amazed contempt, and I am convinced that basically dogs think humans are nuts.

HUMAN GLORY

Man, unlike any other thing organic or inorganic in the universe, grows beyond his work, walks up the stairs of his concepts, emerges ahead of his accomplishments.

What some people find in religion a writer may find in his craft...a kind of breaking through to glory.

Sometimes a kind of glory lights up the mind of man. It happens to nearly everyone.

PERFECTABILITY

I hold that a writer who does not passionately believe in the perfectibility of man has no dedication nor any membership in literature. [tradition of Thomas Jefferson]

GOD

The proofs that God does not exist are very strong, but in lots of people they are not as strong as the feeling that He does.

You got a God. Don't make no difference if you don't know what he looks like.

Only God sees the sparrow fall, but even God doesn't do anything about it.

RELIGION

Like most modern people, I don't believe in prophecy or magic and then spend half my time practicing it.

It would be absurd if we did not understand both angels and devils, since we invented them.

The candle aimed its spark of light at heaven, like an artist who consumes himself to become divine.

My imagination will get me a passport to hell one day.

WOMAN

A guy goes nuts if he ain't got nobody.

A journey is like marriage. The certain way to be wrong is to think you control it.

What a wonderful thing a woman is. I can admire what they do even if I don't understand why.

Women, it's all one flow, like a stream, little eddies, little waterfalls, but the river it goes right on.

In poverty she is envious. In riches she may be a snob. Money does not change the sickness, only the symptoms.

My father said she was a strong woman, and I believe a strong woman may be stronger than a man, particularly if she happens to have love in her heart. I guess a loving woman is almost indestructible.

"Women can change better'n a man," Ma said soothingly. "Woman got all her life in her arms. Man got it all in his head."

SEX

What freedom men and women could have, were they not constantly tricked and trapped and enslaved and tortured by their sexuality!

SOCIETY

We spend our time searching for security and hate it when we get it.

The things we admire in men, kindness and generosity, openness, honesty, understanding and feeling, are the concomitants of failure in our system. And those traits we detest, sharpness, greed, acquisitiveness, meanness, egotism and self-interest, are the traits of success. And while men admire the quality of the first they love the produce of the second.

CITY AND GARDEN

The new American finds his challenge and his love in the traffic-choked streets, skies nested in smog, choking with the acids of industry, the screech of rubber and houses leashed in against one another while the townlets wither a time and die...as all pendulums reverse their swing, so eventually will the swollen cities rupture like dehiscent wombs and disperse their children back to the countryside.

SUFFERING

To be alive at all is to have scars.

The death of children by starvation in our valleys is simply staggering... I'll do what I can.... Funny how mean and little books become in the face of such tragedies.

There are five thousand families starving to death over there, not just hungry but actually starving.

PROLETARIANISM

If you're in trouble, or hurt or need—go to the poor people. They're the only ones that'll help.

He learned that when people are very poor they still have something to give and the impulse to give it.

Okie use' ta mean you was from Oklahoma. Now it means you're scum. Don't mean nothing itself, it's the way they say it.

And since our race admires gallantry, the writer must deal with it where he finds it. He finds it in the struggling poor now.

The bank is something more than men, I tell you. It's the monster. Men made it, but they can't control it.

In the souls of the people the grapes of wrath are filling and growing heavy, growing heavy for the vintage.

PASTORALISM

The memory of odors is very rich.

Thoughts are slow and deep and golden in the morning.

The redwoods, once seen, leave a mark or create a vision that stays with you always. No one had ever successfully painted or photographed a redwood tree. The feeling they produce is not transferable. From them comes silence and awe.

You've seen the sun flatten and take strange shapes just before it sinks into the ocean. Do you have to tell yourself every time that it's an illusion caused by atmospheric dust and light distorted by the sea, or do you simply enjoy the beauty of it?

She had a dour Presbyterian mind and a code of morals that pinned down and beat the brains out of nearly everything that was pleasant to do.

Try to understand men. If you understand each other you will be kind to each other. Knowing a man well never leads to hate and almost always to love.

Men do change, and change comes like a little wind that ruffles the curtains at dawn, and it comes like the stealthy perfume of wildflowers hidden in the grass.

Once Charlie fell in love with a dachshund, a romance racially unsuitable, physically ridiculous, and mechanically impossible. But all these problems Charlie ignored. He loved deeply and tried dogfully.

Sometimes being silly breaks the even pace and lets you get a new start.

ENVIRONMENTALISM

I wonder why progress looks so much like destruction.

Trouble with mice is, you always kill 'em.

The Japanese shrimp boats are dredging with overlapping scoops, bringing up tons of shrimps, rapidly destroying the species so that it may never come back...destroying the ecological balance of the whole region.

EDEN IN THE WEST

You're too young a man to be panning memories, Adam.

The fields were fruitful, and starving men moved on the roads.

Why don't you go on west to California? There's work there, and it never gets cold. Why, you can reach out anywhere and pick an orange.

The Mojave is a big desert and a frightening one. It's as though nature tested a man for endurance and constancy to prove whether he was good enough to get to California.

AMERICA

Do you know of any other nation that acts for ideals?

This monster of a land, this mightiest of nations, this spawn of the future, turns out to be the macrocosm of microcosm me.

I am in love with Montana.

A Texan outside of Texas is a foreigner.

EUROPE

A dying people tolerates the present, rejects the future, and finds its satisfactions in past greatness and half-remembered glory.

GOVERNMENT

I find out of long experience that I admire all nations and hate all governments.

Power does not corrupt. Fear corrupts...perhaps the fear of a loss of power.

I guess this is why I hate governments. It is always the rule, the fine print, carried out by the fine print men. There's nothing to fight, no wall to hammer with frustrated fists.

The government is trying to feed them and get medical attention to them, with the Fascist group of utilities and banks and huge growers sabotaging the thing all along the line, and yelling for a balanced budget.

I have never smuggled anything in my life. Why, then, do I feel an uneasy sense of guilt on approaching a customs barrier?

SOCIALISM

Socialism never took root in America because the poor see themselves not as an exploited proletariat, but as temporarily embarrassed millionaires. [Disputed quotation]

COMMUNISM

Maybe the Communists so closely questioned by the investigation committees were a danger to America, but the ones I knew—at least they claimed to be Communists—couldn't have disrupted a Sunday-school picnic. Besides they were too busy fighting among themselves.

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 remember a woman in easy circumstances saying to another even more affluent: "After the revolution even we will have more, won't we, dear?" [Disputed quotation]

POSTMODERNISM

How will we know it's us without our past?

If I wanted to destroy a nation, I would give it too much.

Humanity has been passing through a gray and desolate time of confusion.

If there is no God, no devil, no heaven, no hell—then...there are no rules.

We have no taste, no sense of proportion.... In the old lands they say of us that we go from barbarism to decadence without an intervening culture.

For the world was changing, and sweetness was gone, and virtue too. Worry had crept on a corroding world, and what was lost—good manners, ease and beauty? Ladies were not ladies anymore, and you couldn't trust a gentleman's word.

I have named the destroyers of nations: comfort, plenty, and security—out of which grow a bored and slothful cynicism, in which rebellion against the world as it is, and myself as I am, are submerged in listless self-satisfaction.

To a man born without a conscience, a soul-stricken man must seem ridiculous. To a criminal, honesty is foolish. You must not forget that a monster is only a variation, and that to a monster the norm is monstrous.

She stayed close enough to the truth so that one could never be sure. She knew two other methods also—either to interlard her lies with truth or to tell a truth as though it were a lie. If one is accused of a lie and it turns out to be the truth, there is a backlog that will last a long time and protect a number of untruths.

We have usurped many of the powers we once ascribed to God. Fearful and unprepared, we have assumed lordship over the life or death of the whole world—of all living things.... Having taken Godlike power, we must seek in ourselves for the responsibility and the wisdom we once prayed some deity might have. Man himself has become our greatest hazard and our only hope.

Because they [religious people] trusted themselves and respected themselves as individuals, because they knew beyond doubt that they were valuable and...moral...because of this they could give God their own courage and dignity and then receive it back. Such things have disappeared perhaps because men do not trust themselves anymore, and when that happens there is nothing left except perhaps to find some strong sure man, even though he may be wrong, and to dangle from his coat-tails.

POLITICAL CORRECTNESS

If you find yourself in a fair fight, your tactics suck.

It's too easy to excuse yourself because of your ancestry.

They's times when how you feel got to be kep' to yourself.

It takes great courage to back truth unacceptable to our times. There's a punishment for it and it's usually crucifixion.

Once in awhile there is a man who won't do what is demanded of him, and do you know what happens? The whole machine devotes itself to the destruction of his difference.

And now the forces marshaled around the concept of the group have declared a war of extermination on that preciousness, the mind of man. By disparagement, by starvation, by repressions, forced direction, and

the stunning blows of conditioning, the free, roving mind is being pursued, roped, blunted, drugged. It is a sad suicidal course our species seems to have taken.

CENSORING LITERATURE

I think today if we forbade our illiterate children to touch the wonderful things of our literature, perhaps they might steal them and find secret joy.

And the little screaming fact that sounds through all history: repression works only to strengthen and knit the repressed.

WRITING

A man without words is a man without thought.

Literature is as old as speech. It grew out of human need for it, and it has not changed except to become more needed.

We only have one story. All novels, all poetry are built on the never-ending contest in ourselves of good and evil.

It is a common experience that a problem difficult at night is resolved in the morning after the committee of sleep has worked on it.

Ideas are like rabbits. You get a couple and learn how to handle them, and pretty soon you have a dozen.

REALISM AND ROMANCE

A great lasting story is about everyone or it will not last.

No story has power, not will last, unless we feel in ourselves that it is true and true of us.

People are interested only in themselves. If a story is not about the hearer he will not listen.

Maybe the hardest thing in writing is simply to tell the truth about things as we see them.

I am happy to report that in the war between reality and romance, reality is not the stronger.

Cannery Row in Monterey in California is a poem, a stink, a grating noise, a quality of light, a tone, a habit, a nostalgia, a dream.

DREAMS

People who are most afraid of their dreams convince themselves they don't dream at all.

My dreams are the problems of the day stepped up to absurdity, a little like men dancing, wearing the horns and masks of animals.

An ocean without unnamed monsters would be like sleep without dreams.

THE WRITER

In utter loneliness a writer tries to explain the inexplicable.

The discipline of the written word punishes both stupidity and dishonesty.

The profession of book-writing makes horse racing seem like a solid, stable business.

In every bit of honest writing in the world...there is a base theme. Try to understand men.

The writer must believe that what he is doing is the most important thing in the world. And he must hold to this illusion even when he knows it is not true.

DOG EATS DRAFT

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. [Then, after *Of Mice and Men* got some poor reviews]: 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.

FAULKNER

Bill [Faulkner] said he only read Homer and Cervantes, never his contemporaries, and then, by God, in answer to the next question he stole a paragraph from an article I wrote for the *Saturday Review* eight months ago.

Faulkner, more than most men, was aware of human strength as well as of human weakness.

TEACHING

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.

CRITICS

Time is the only critic without ambition.

Give a critic an inch, he'll write a play.

If they can get a horn into me, that's a little triumph.

Unless a reviewer has the courage to give you unqualified praise, I say ignore the bastard.

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.

FAME

I hate cameras. They are so much more sure than I am about everything.

There are no ugly questions except those clothed in condescension.

A question is a trap, and an answer your foot in it.

Many are the stories I have heard about myself. I have mistresses I have never met.

DEATH

Death was a friend.

We should remember our dying and try so to live that our death brings no pleasure to the world.

Many a trip continues long after movement in time and space have ceased.

I seemed to hear the sound of distant drums.

