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The Literary Sociologist--John Steinbeck

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THE LITERARY SOCIOLOGIST--JOHN STEINBECK

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THE LITERARY SOCIOLOGIST--JOHN STEINBECK

John Steinbeck was born on February 27, 1902, in the town of Salinas, California. He lived most of his first forty years in the Salinas Vallêy, and it is generally agreed that the most significant biographical link between Steinbeck and his writings is this fact of his birth and growth to maturity in the valley. Here is the source of knowledge, love of nature and many of his characters, whether paisanos or migrant workers of Tortilla Flat and Grapes of Wrath, took form.

He was educated in the public schools of Salinas, California, and attended Stanford University intermittently between 1920 and 1926, but did not take a degree. For a time he lived in New York City and helped in the construction of the Madison Square Garden, as well as being a newspaper reporter. He has been married twice: to Carol Henning in 1930, and after a divorce, to Gwyn Conger in 1943.

The California novelist began his literary career with Cup of Gold (1929), and later came the novels, Pastures of Heaven (1932) and To A God Unknown (1935). Tortilla Flat (1935) drew popular attention with its sympathetic portraits of the Monterey "paisanos". Then came In Dubious Battle (1936) and Of Mice and Men (1937). It was Of Mice and Men which brought Steinbeck first considerable attention from critics and a wide reading public. In addition to

its success as a novel, the book became a Drama Critics Play and later a popular motion picture, as did many of his books. His Pulitzer Prize winning novel, The Grapes of Wrath (1939) remains to be his best known work. This story of the Joad family and their struggle across the California Dust Bowl caught the sympathies of readers throughout the world and brought Steinbeck the reputation of being the voice of the American proletariat. This is also where he was recognized as having one of the clearest and most distinctive styles in modern literature.¹

During World War II Steinbeck wrote some effective pieces of propaganda, among them The Moon is Down (1942), the story of a Nazi-occupied country, and Bombs Away (1943). He also served as a war correspondent for the New York Herald Tribune. His immediate post war works--Cannery Row (1945), The Pearl (1945,1947), The Wayward Bus (1947)--depicted the bitterness he had against the greedy elements of society that caused the war. His later books turned away from this naturalism of the nineteen-thirties and turned toward the idea that all men are keepers of one another as seen in Burning Bright (1950) and East of Eden (1952). His remaining books are rather light works of entertainment. These are Sweet Thursday (1954), The Short reign of Pippin IV (1957), The Winter of Our Discontent (1961), which treated the moral collapse of a descendant of an old New England family and a man of high integrity, under the pressures of the mid-twentieth century, and Travels With Charley (1962).

¹"John Steinbeck," The Encyclopedia Americana, XXV,611.

Steinbeck was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1962, honored, according to the official wording, for his "realistic and imaginative writing, distinguished as they are by a sympathetic humor and a social perception."²

"Steinbeck's early reputation as a proletarian, naturalistic writer of sociological penetration, and his constant experimentation with material and technique, tended to obscure other facets of his writing, but under subsequent scrutiny, much of his work has revealed itself rich in symbolic structures and mythopoeic qualities."³ His fiction combines realism and romance, but not always harmoniously. His settings are quite 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 and has received little encouragement from the literary critics except for a brief period in the late nineteen-thirties, Steinbeck is still one of America's best known and best-loved novelist.

Steinbeck introduced a new kind of literature, a popular, socialist, genuinely sympathetic treatment of ordinary life. His democratic spirit was always evident and his popular sympathies grew stronger as it followed the course made by the Depression.

²John Steinbeck, The Grapes of Wrath (New York: Monarch Press, 1965), p. 8.

³Peter Lisca, "John Steinbeck" Encyclopedia Britannica, XXII, 202-203.

As for his essential gentleness, his sympathy, his ready understanding of any kind of human being, those things are a natural to him as breathing.⁴

A large public reads him because of the wide variety of moods he represents--angry, gay, tender, erotic, thoughtful, sad, whimsical--and because of this power to communicate sympathically and refreshingly an awareness of common humanity. Despite the considerable variety in his writing, Steinbeck has remained at his best a regional novelist. Of his seventeen books of fiction, a dozen are set in a geographical area between the towering Sierra Nevada mountains to the east, and the Pacific Ocean to the west, keeping south of San Francisco and north of Los Angeles.⁵ It was this Pacific Grove, Salinas Valley, on the shore of Monterey Bay, that gave Steinbeck his key to the public's heart.

Steinbeck wrote not to inspire, nor to provoke or to condemn, but he wrote to understand and portray honestly an aspect of life he found fascinating and perhaps bewildering. Although it may be unfortunate for Steinbeck's total literary reputation that many of his novels which received serious critical attention were sociologically oriented, which caused many critics to read social criticism into all his works, it is nevertheless true that social consciousness represents a basic element in writings. "...what Steinbeck means is a way of thinking about life that, by con-

⁴John Steinbeck, Of Mice and Men (New York: Random House, 1937), vi.

⁵F.W. Walt, Steinbeck (London: Oliver and Boyd, 1962), 2.

cerning itself with what is, not with the questions of why or what should be, avoids the false judgments and exclusions of a squeamish and snobbish morality and achieves love of life through acceptance." (E. W. Tedlock, Jr. and C. V. Wicker, Steinbeck and His Critics.) This is where Steinbeck is considered a pragmatist.

Steinbeck delighted in combining the practicality and vitality or just plain stubbornness, which makes some men and women seem indestructible, or unable to adjust to the most forbidding environments. This is what he seems to admire in the triumphant social outcast as the paisanos of Tortilla Flat. He also appeared to read this characteristic into Ma Joad and her determination to keeping the family together. But in keeping with his view of human society, most of Steinbeck's sympathetic characters are social failures; they may survive, but they do not succeed. ⁶

There is an element in Steinbeck's fiction which seems to contradict his realism; it^{is} the element that depicts the fanciful or dream world rather than the real everyday world. Sometimes this element manifests itself in the author's choice of protagonists like the castoffs of society and the feebleminded as seen in Tortilla Flat. This is the reason for much criticism of Steinbeck's intention and the successful realizism of them. Danny and his friends live what by ordinary standards is certainly an unreal existence, surviving more through chance than any calculation. ⁷

⁶ibid., 17.

⁷ibid., 45.

Tortilla Flat, in its own way, held an unflattering mirror up to society. To a society sunk in the economic and political traits of the Depression, the immediate appeal of the book was its spirit in the guise of poverty. The Paisanos, illiterate peasants of mixed Spanish, Indian, Mexican, and other blood, loved their lives on the outskirts of Monterey and were, in a sense, beneath the social pressures of the times. "The paisanos are clean of commercialism, free of the complicated systems of American business, and, having nothing that can be stolen, exploited, or mortgaged, that system has not attacked them very vigorously."⁸ These inhabitants of the valley are portrayed with an attention to social and psychological realism and almost to the point of being over-emphasized. However, they made a remarkably varied and vivid community. Having dealt with such people, Steinbeck has placed himself in a position of double advantage: he can exploit the carefree, irresponsible world of the paisanos while at the same time criticize the aspects of respectable society.

Tortilla Flat was welcomed warmly in part because it was the best kind of antidote to mid-Depression gloom and also because of its unleavened exploration of this ugly central social phenomenon of the mid-nineteen-thirties.⁹

When The Grapes of Wrath appeared in 1939, it electrified an America still recovering from the Depression. It coincided with a period of drought in the central prairies that bankrupted and drove thousands of farmers from their farms to join the millions

⁸Ibid., 38.

⁹Ibid., 51.

of urban unemployed in a desperate struggle for survival. It is a powerful indictment of our capitalistic economy and a sharp criticism of the southwestern farmer for his impudence in the care of his land.¹⁰ The outstanding feature of The Grapes of Wrath is its photographically detailed and occasionally sentimentalized, description of the American farmers of the Dust Bowl in the mid-thirties of the twentieth century.¹¹

The opening of Steinbeck's The Grapes of Wrath is a most vivid natural description. In this book the author showed a world in which both man and nature, the society, and the land were crippled and dying. However, the land is not so much sick as is the system that is supposed to distribute the land's fruitfulness has been broken down, and so in the midst of plenty, men were starving. Produce was being destroyed because it would not bring the price of market, while the starving watch. Martin Staples Shockley concluded that "properly speaking, The Grapes of Wrath is not a regional novel; but it has regional significance; it raises regional problems. Economic collapse, farm tenantry, migratory labor are not regional problems; they are national or international in scope, and can never be solved through state or regional action."¹²

The startled, even outraged reception of The Grapes of Wrath at its publication in 1939 is fairly well-known. As Peter Lisca describes it, "The Grapes of Wrath was a phenomenon on the scale

¹⁰John Steinbeck, The Grapes of Wrath (New York: Viking Press, 1939), xi.

¹¹John Steinbeck, The Grapes of Wrath (New York: Monarch Press, 1965), p. 12.

¹²ibid., 16.

of a national event. It was publicly banned and burned by citizens; it was debated on national radio hook-ups; but above all it was read. Those who didn't read it ~~way~~ it as a motion picture. It brought Steinbeck the Pulitzer prize and got him elected to the National Institute of Arts and Letters."¹³ It was a very timely and authentic book and it stepped on a lot of toes, particularly regional ones in Oklahoma and California. Lisca records one isolated response which especially pleased Steinbeck: "A group of migrant laborers sent him a patchwork dog sewn from pieces of their shirt-tails and dresses and bearing around its neck a tag with the inscription 'Migrant John!'"¹⁴

The Winter of Our Discontent is one of Steinbeck'd most ambitious novels; it uses awkward and obtrusive symbolism, resolved mixture of moods and unconvincing plot blending fantasy and realism. ¹⁵ This novel will probably surprise even his warmest admirers. Instead of being set in the Far West, the scene of most of his books, this one takes place on the northeastern seaboard; instead of depicting simple, uneducated people, this deals chiefly with a well-born, well-to-do society with long traditions behind it. Steinbeck's diversity is showing again. Through the lives of one family and their friends, he has taken society apart, shown its frightening shams and shortcomings, and measured it against true human decency. Disturbing, fascinating, The Winter of Our Discontent attacks the careless ways of honesty, loyalty,

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵Walt, op. cit., 102.

the moral slackness that is prominent in the country today. "This theme of the loss of integrity in our world--the decline in our standards of personal, business, and political morality--has been waiting for a novelist worthy of it. It is fortunate that Steinbeck, with his warm humanity, was the one to choose it."¹⁶

John Steinbeck is a single, natural individual, not given to pose of any kind, impatient--his only impatience-- of pretense anywhere. There is no mystery at all about him, which is why he has been made to seem mysterious by those who cannot understand his simplicity. He does not like publicity, does not feel that it helps him to write, helps his books, does him or anyone else any good.¹⁷

Nothing could be more challenging to writer and critic, and more typical of Steinbeck in its appeal to our common humanity, than his own simple creed:

"A man's writing is himself.

A kind man writes kindly.

A mean man writes meanly.

A sick man writes sickly.

And a wise man writes wisely.

There is no reason to suppose that this rule does not apply to critics as well as to other writers."¹⁸

¹⁶John Steinbeck, The Winter of Our Discontent (New York: Viking Press, 1961),

¹⁷John Steinbeck, Of Mice and Men (New York: Random House, 1937), xiv.

¹⁸Walt, op. cit., 113.

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