

PAL: Perspectives in American Literature - A Research and Reference Guide - An Ongoing Project

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Chapter 7: John Steinbeck (1902-1968)

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"[The writer's first duty was to] set down his time as nearly as he can understand it [and serve as] the watch-dog of society ... to satirize its silliness, to attack its injustices, to stigmatize its faults." "What we have always wanted is an *unchangeable*, and we have found that only a compass point, a thought, an individual ideal, does not change." - JS

(These quotes appear in the headnote to the Steinbeck selection in George McMichael, *Anthology of American Literature*, Vol. II (Macmillan Press). The specific source for the first sentence is not given; the second sentence is from *The Sea of Cortez*, 1941.)

Considered the foremost novelist of the American Depression of the 1930s, Steinbeck was the 1962 winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature. He studied firsthand the struggles of the migrant workers; he celebrates their labor in ritualistic terms and shows the downtrodden overcoming their many adversities through courage and dignity, and through their compassion for fellow sufferers. His prose is considered lyrical in its ability to capture the native speech, folktales and humor of a particular region.

Primary Works

Tortilla Flat, 1935; *Cup of Gold, a Life of Sir Henry Morgan, Buccaneer, with Occasional Reference to History*, 1936; *Of Mice and Men*, 1937; *In Dubious Battle*, 1939; *The Grapes of Wrath*, 1939; *Sea of Cortez*, 1941; *Cannery Row*, 1945; *The Red Pony*, 1945; *The Pearl*, 1945; *Cannery Row*, 1945; *Sweet Thursday*, 1954; *The Wayward Bus*, 1947; *East of Eden*, 1952; *The Pastures of Heaven*, 1956; *The Long Valley*, 1956; *The Winter of Our Discontent*, 1961; *Travels with Charley; in Search of America*, 1962.

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A Student Project by Linda Stubbs

When John Steinbeck died in 1968, he was one of America's most popular novelist. His works had a profound effect on the American people. Today, he is still a popular and powerful author in America as well as a worldwide literary figure. Jay Parini has written that "the author remains unflinchingly attractive to readers of all ages and levels of sophistication" (23).

John Ernst Steinbeck was born in 1902 in the Salinas Valley. He was the third of four children and the only boy. His family was a close, middle class unit living in a small community. The Salinas Valley would later prove to be the location of many of his books and short stories. Both of his parents believed in exposing their children to culture and they often traveled to San Francisco to attend the theater. They also had a wide variety of novels and literature available in the home. At the age of nine, Steinbeck received a copy of Malory's Morte d'Arthur which proved to be one of the biggest influences in his literary career. He attended Stanford University where he majored in English, but never received a degree. He married three times, the last being to Elaine Scott in 1950 which lasted until his death. He fathered two boys. He died in 1968 in New York where he had lived from time to time since 1944. His ashes were buried in Salinas, California.

His interest in writing and reading literature developed at a young age. He was the associate editor of his high school's newspaper, *El Gabilan*. He also wrote many articles and short stories for the newspaper, where his talent was

recognized by many of his teachers. He once remarked to a classmate "You know, I write the purest English of anyone in the world" (McCarthy 8). He continued his career in college by writing articles which appeared in *The Stanford Spectator*.

After high school, Steinbeck worked off and on in many different jobs including a laborer in a sugar factory in Salinas, a laborer in mills, and a ranch hand. He also traveled throughout the Salinas Valley and studied marine life in Monterey Bay. He used many of his experiences for material in his later novels. He continued his writing throughout his dabbles in ordinary labor jobs. In 1927, he had his first professionally published article in *The Smoker's Companion*. It is said that he used the pseudonym of John Stern because he did not want to be associated with a magazine by that name (McCarthy 11). In 1929, he published his first novel, *Cup of Gold*. However, he did not gain financial independence through writing until 1935 when he published *Tortilla Flat*, a novel which was initially rejected by several publishers. *Tortilla Flat* is a novel about the lives of paisanos—Mexican, Indian and Caucasian mixed people—who lived in Monterey. In 1937, he published *Of Mice and Men*, one of three novels which Steinbeck referred to as a "play-novelette". He wrote "Simply stated, *Of Mice and Men* was an attempt to write a novel that could be played from the lines, or a play that could be read" (MacNicholas 272). This proved to be a successful play which ran in the New York theater Music Box for 207 performances.

Steinbeck was a restless soul and he traveled the world to appease his restlessness. He used his travels as a basis for many novels and wrote many non-fictional journals. Some of these journals were *Sea of Cortez* (1942), *Travels With Charley in Search of America* (1962) and *A Russian Journal* (1948). However, the most widely known trip, the journey in 1937 with Oklahoma migrants across the country on Highway 66 to California, did not occur. He did travel this road, but with his wife, Carol, and not with Oklahoma migrants. Carol claims that this trip was purely for enjoyment and that Steinbeck did not even take notes. This trip combined with a four week journey from Bakersfield to Needles in which he lived and worked with Depression migrants supposedly started the inspiration for the critically acclaimed *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) for which he received a Pulitzer Prize.

During World War II, Steinbeck served as a correspondent for the *New York Herald Tribune*. He wrote several articles and two novels which dealt with war and were not considered among his best works. However, after his return from his wartime travels, he wrote *Cannery Row* in just six weeks. This was said to be his only powerful novel from that era. It is ironic that it is not about war but it is about the residents of the Row in Monterey during the peaceful 1930's.

Steinbeck continued his political involvement and in the 1950's, his writings turned towards a strong, direct expression. He helped in writing speeches for the presidential campaigns in 1952 and 1954. In 1964, he was appointed as an advisor to President Johnson. He was an active supporter of Viet Nam until he visited the ravaged country. He then encouraged Johnson to pull troops out of the country.

John Steinbeck was a versatile writer. He has been described as a social-protest writer, a realist, a naturalist, a journalist, and a playwright. He has many strong themes running through his works. The most notable are the strengths of the family, the effects of the environment on man, and social protests. He experimented with many different writing styles and points of views. All of these factors combine to explain why Steinbeck is still a literary force today. His presence on the World Wide Web is great and he is the subject of many high school and college courses. Steinbeck had described his duty as a novelist in his acceptance Nobel Prize acceptance speech:

The ancient commission of the writer has not changed. He is charged with exposing our many grievous faults and failures, with the dredging up to the light our dark and dangerous dreams for the purpose of improvement. Furthermore, the writer is delegated to declare and to celebrate man's proven capacity for greatness of heart and spirit—for gallantry in defeat, for courage, compassion and love (MacNicholas 272).

Lists of Awards, etc.

1937 Won New York Drama Critics Award

1940 Pulitzer Prize for *The Grapes of Wrath*

1946 King Haakon Liberty Cross, a Norwegian award

1948 Elected to American Academy of Arts of Letters

1962 Receives Nobel Prize for Literature

1964 Awarded United States Medal of Freedom by President Johnson

1966 John Steinbeck Society organized

1974 Steinbeck's boyhood opened as a museum

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Study Questions

1. Discuss the claim that "Flight" is a "naturalistic tragedy." To what degree is Pepe doomed from the beginning of his flight? Is his death inevitable?
2. Discuss the significance of nature in the story. Note Steinbeck's selection of details. Do the animals have a symbolic function, helping the reader to understand the human characters? What similarities exist between Pepe and the animals?

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