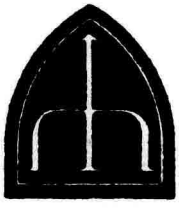
The Novels of
JOHN STEINBECK
A FIRST CRITICAL STUDY

By

Harry Thornton Moore



NORMANDIE HOUSE · CHICAGO

MCMXXXIX

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TELEGRAPH BOOKS
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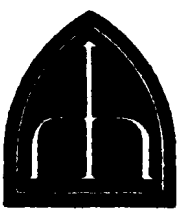

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FOREWORD

THIS STUDY was from the first intended as an explanation and a commentary rather than abstract criticism. A somewhat different and shorter version of it is to appear in England, where it will attempt to present John Steinbeck to a reading public that as yet knows little about him.

It is undoubtedly too early in Steinbeck's career for assured generalizations about his work. Yet it must not be forgotten that he is the author of seven novels, a play and a volume of short stories, and that he is one of the most widely read American writers of today. There is enough material available to present a rather fully detailed picture of his career up to now, and to provide a basis for the understanding of his future work. This study has no pretensions beyond that. It will deal largely in particulars.

The biographical sketch, the check-list of first editions and the map of the "Steinbeck country" should help make the book a depositary of Steinbeck information. The critical and biographical sections occasionally overlap: this was done knowingly, so each could stand up as a separate entity.

The problem presented by the biographical sketch was the biggest in the book. I have been working with the material for more than four years, and have drawn information from many sources. Reluctant as he is to discuss

the biographical side of his life, John Steinbeck has from time to time generously provided me with necessary "physical facts," as he calls them, which have helped put the puzzle together. But he is not responsible for the bulk of the biography, which he will probably dislike intensely.

I have borrowed a little from the biographical sketches by Burton Rascoe, Joseph Henry Jackson, Lewis Gannett and Martin Bidwell, all of which appeared in magazine or pamphlet form after most of my biographical data had been assembled. I owe one or two important facts to Mr. Rascoe and Mr. Jackson, minutiae to the others.

Acknowledgments are due to the Viking Press, American publishers of Steinbeck's work, to quote from it; to Random House, Inc., whose Modern Library edition contains the only printing of Steinbeck's own foreword to *Tortilla Flat*, and to Charles Scribner's Sons for permission to quote at length from Ernest Hemingway's *Death in the Afternoon* and Thomas Wolfe's *Of Time and the River*.

I should like to thank several persons for their encouragement and help: Mr. Herbert Read, who first suggested this study; Mr. A. S. Frere-Reeves, who further encouraged its beginnings; Dr. Lawrence Clark Powell, pioneer bibliographer of Steinbeck, for permission to use what he has published (biographically and bibliographically) about Steinbeck; Mr. C. A. Sheffield, for invaluable information about the California backgrounds of Steinbeck's work, and — not least — Mr. George M. Dashe, whose interest and energy have made the publication of this edition possible.

H. T. M.

Glencoe, Illinois
March 29, 1939

A FIRST STUDY: THE NOVELS OF JOHN STEINBECK

THE world of John Steinbeck's novels is a beautiful warm valley with disaster hanging over it. This is the essential feature of story after story. Steinbeck may change his outlook, as he has from the lyric to the sociological, or he may change his technical approach, as he has from romantic to dramatic narrative, but the valley-microcosm remains as the setting of his work, and his people continue to be foredoomed with an almost calvinistic regularity.

The lyric and romantic were the most noticeable ingredients in Steinbeck's first novel, *Cup of Gold* This book appeared quietly in 1929, just two months before the stock-market crash that helped change the present direction of American literature. Steinbeck has not written another romance.

Cup of Gold is a fictionized life of the pirate Henry Morgan. Most of the action is laid in the West Indies and Panama, though a long introductory section tells of Morgan's departure from the Welsh valley where he had spent his childhood. The book is patently the work of a young man, an eager and romantic young man who was not afraid to let himself go. But if it suffers at times from overwriting, the book nevertheless gains a certain strength because of the lack of self-consciousness. Some-

times the prose is strained and artificial: " . . . so deeply was she laved in a revery of the silver past" is a phrase that may be taken as a sample of the weaker kind of writing to be found in *Cup of Gold*. Yet the book contains many passages which may be set against these; there are enough successful experiments of the picturesque kind Steinbeck was working on: "But again the sun arose, like a white, fevered ulcer in the sky" is forceful enough to take the reader into a living tropical day, and there is effective suggestion of setting and movement in such a sentence as: "While the dark was down, the pirate scouts were ranging over the plain like werewolves." The young author testing his strength sometimes looked awkward when he slipped, but when he didn't fail his efforts gave promise of remarkable power.

Cup of Gold was adopted from an earlier story, "A Lady in Infra-Red," which Steinbeck had written in college. The novel was completely re-written six times. Steinbeck, who has always been susceptible to music and often plays it as a preparation for writing, has explained that *Cup of Gold* was worked out—with the various parts built up of parallel tempos—after the pattern of Dvorak's *Symphony from the New World*.

Another point of construction to be noted in this first novel is the recurrence of symbols of concavity and roundness. The image in the title is repeated at different symbolic levels throughout the story. If a list of these usages were made, it could give some psychoanalyst a stimulating afternoon. There are enough of such images to be noticeable; some of them are apparently deliberate, others are doubtless used unconsciously.

The golden cup is first of all the moon mentioned by the old Welsh bard which the boy Henry Morgan

wanted "to drink from as a golden cup." It is also one of the names given to Panama City, that smaller moon Henry Morgan drank from without quenching his thirst. And there is an actual cup of gold that Morgan finds among the loot at Panama. It has four gamboling lambs as a decoration on the outside—"inside, on the bottom a naked girl lifted her arms in sensual ecstasy." Morgan, who has come to Panama in quest of a beautiful woman he has heard about, hurls the cup away.

Some of the other uses of images of rondure and concavity include: the imagined hands cupped to shield a firefly in the bard's parable about the moon; "the wind, blowing out of a black, dreadful sky, was a cup of wine to him, and a challenge, and a passionate caress"; Morgan fondles the wheel "with a lover's fingers" as he guides the ship; Maracaibo is seen to have a "bottle harbor," and Morgan says of Ysobel "This woman is the harbor of all my questing"; Morgan, musing upon money, says "It could be cut in no more charming shape, either. A square would not answer, nor an ellipse"; the cheeks of the pirates are "shallow cups under their cheek bones"; and the dying Morgan has a vision of a grotto with his first love coming through it. This last is obviously a repetition of the motif of the cup Morgan found at Panama.

Not all these uses may be of equal importance, but a representative list was drawn up to show the frequency of recurrence and because the unconscious is so difficult to chart that anyone who wishes to make deductions about its manifestations must have as much evidence as possible. Such a list as this would be pedantic nonsense but for the fact that so much of Steinbeck's work is moulded around that image of concavity. It is never again used in this multiple way, with the central symbol

reflected in so many small mirrors — it is minimized and subtilized in the later books. This symbol appears most consistently as a valley; it so figures in most of Steinbeck's short stories and in all his subsequent novels to date except *Tortilla Flat*. The valley symbol undoubtedly comes out of Steinbeck's early environment, the Salinas Valley in California. It is apparent in all his writings how the shape of the land has given shape to his thoughts: this valley symbol is most truly Steinbeck's Figure in the Carpet. We shall see, in considering *To A God Unknown*, how Steinbeck gives us some Freudian clues as to his feelings about valley contours. In his later books, which are more realistic than the earlier ones, the valley tends to have less obvious implications, though its symbolic value has not been destroyed. It is seen more objectively now, and has less of the pathetic fallacy in it as it plays a smaller active part in the stories: the valley has become the universe itself, and humanity assumes a more important role than it had in the earlier volumes.

The first time the valley setting appears in Steinbeck's work is in those passages about Morgan's leaving the place where he had grown up. This is the best sustained and most smoothly written part of the book. Steinbeck could reconstruct a boy's life in a valley because he knew essentially what such a life was like; and although he had not been to Wales, he had a feeling that he knew what it was like too. Because his mother's family came from Ireland, he felt a romantic kinship with Celtic lands and modes of thought. He researched extensively in the subjects of Welsh folk-lore and topography for *Cup of Gold*. One of the preparatory books he read with gusto was Borrow's *Wild Wales*. Steinbeck had visited Panama briefly, but the tropical setting is not so skillfully projected as the Welsh. An essay might be

written on the value of a writer's visiting or not visiting the locale of an imaginative work about the past; the city known as Old Panama has nothing left but a broken tower, two or three fragments of buildings and a stone bridge—no other hints of the bright thronging life the place once knew: can a ruin seen out of the rhythm of its own time impart anything more than a dubious and sentimental value?

In every discussion of a Steinbeck story a good deal of space may safely be devoted to examining the author's power of evoking that quality we have no satisfactory word for—it is what the Germans call "*Stimmung*," and what we try to approximate with the word "atmosphere." Steinbeck is perhaps more interested than any writer since D. H. Lawrence in what Lawrence called the Spirit of Place. But this is only the lyric side of novel-writing. Lawrence, weary of humanity's blundering, came to loathe the traditional idea of "development of character in the novel," and the people appearing in his stories cannot be estimated according to traditional standards. Steinbeck on the contrary has worked within the established borders of novel-writing, so we may fairly use the customary methods of judgment when scrutinizing his characters and their problems.

Steinbeck was twenty-seven when *Cup of Gold* was published. He had not yet reached the stage where he could bring all his people fully to life. The woman in *Cup of Gold*, Ysobel (or, as she is known on the Spanish Main, "La Santa Roja"—the Red Saint) is a stock romantic figure. So is Morgan's friend, Coeur de Gris, who like Morgan is drawn to Panama by the fame of this woman's beauty. The speech of Coeur de Gris when he is dying shows how remote he is even from the plausibilities of a romantic novel: "My mother . . .

do not tell her. Make some gleaming lie. Build my poor life up to a golden minaret. Do not let it stop like a half-fashioned tower. But no—you need only build a foundation. She will continue the structure of heroic memory. She will make for me a tomb of white, inaccurate thoughts . . . " the situations coming out of such flushed language, and inspiring it, have something of its quality. For example, when Morgan finally seems to have Ysobel in his power, she draws a pin from her bodice, assumes the position of a fencer, and stabs him in the throat and checks. Morgan starts to kill her with his sword, but leaves abruptly, picking up a little monkey and stroking it as he goes out. There is more than one episode like this in the latter part of the book—they are situations pitched at melodrama but often falling into almost hysterical comedy. Yet Morgan is in some ways a living character, interestingly conceived and presented. Morgan of course has an advantage over the other people in the book because he is first set in motion in that magnificent Welsh valley. Further, Morgan is the only person in the story who in any way develops. Steinbeck showed that he could understand a nature like Morgan's, divided between dream and action. Morgan is a man of heroic energy who for a time holds all the Caribbean world in thralldom: but the dream is always ahead of the deed. The portrait is not done without humor, and Morgan is seen as an amusingly romantic liar. In later years he speaks of his first sweetheart, Elizabeth, as if she had been a great lady instead of a country girl, and he falsifies the story of La Santa Roja and magnifies the amount of her ransom. Morgan spends his last days in Jamaica, settled down amid honors, but he dies with his deepest longings unfulfilled. Not long before the end he makes an observation that