JOHN STEINBECK

The Short Novels of JOHN STEINBECK

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY JOSEPH HENRY JACKSON

Tortilla Flat
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The Moon Is Down
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The Pearl

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INTRODUCTION

For something like twenty years now critical lightning has been playing around the head of John Steinbeck, and the thunder of the pundits has echoed in the literary quarterlies. Something definite should have come of it by this time; some reasonably clear, identifiable crystallization of the man and his work ought to have been precipitated long since.

Curiously this has not happened. Those who have written about Steinbeck have disagreed far more widely—and deeply—than they have about any other important writer of our time. They have called him a naturalist, a mystic, and a primitive. They have described him as brilliant, perceptive, wise, and also as childlike. Some of his tenderest scenes have been called "vile"; many of his more subtle humors have been missed entirely. Case-hardened conservatives have muttered about his Leftism, and tough-minded party-liners have written him off as an incurable bourgeois not worth the expenditure of doctrine to waft him to Moscow. By turns he has been defined as a man of symbols and a man of simplicities; he has been scolded for being a neopagan, a sadist, an adolescent, for failing to get the most out of his material and for loading it with more significance than it could carry, for thinking too much and for thinking too little. He has been accused of obscuring the meaning of his fiction under a cloak of romantic serenity, but he has also been found guilty of writing "repressed realism," whatever that may mean. And much more.

Manifestly a great deal of this labeling is at odds with itself. No good creative artist is transparently simple by nature, but it would be difficult for any imaginable writer to be quite as complex as all this. Clearly there is something about Steinbeck and his work that confuses people. One able and sensible critic has indeed acknowledged this, and in so doing has made a significant point. After observing at some length the various aspects of Steinbeck's writing he remarks shrewdly, "The traits in him which fluster the critic are those which endear him to mankind."

Here, I think, we come close to the truth. Extended discussion of the

full Steinbeck *corpus* is not indicated here; this is a collection of his short novels only, and in general it is not these that have occasioned the flusters. But the six examples herein presented do clarify, because they are short and therefore sharper and more economical in effect than full-length novels, certain things about Steinbeck's writing that his readers find endearing. They are not difficult to point out. Moreover, whatever else the analyst may find in Steinbeck, these relatively simple things may furnish useful handles by which to take hold of both the man and his writing.

In a letter written to his publisher fifteen years ago, while he was at work on *The Grapes of Wrath,* Steinbeck made a clear statement of the purpose that animated his writings. He said, "My whole work drive has been aimed at making people understand each other."

I know of no reason why so open and so simple a declaration of intent should not be believed quite literally, as it stands.

Further, there is at least one notable characteristic of Steinbeck's writing on which otherwise conflicting critics agree: he is a man in whom the faculty of pity is strong and close to the surface. Steinbeck is always aware of mankind's weaknesses, frustrations, failures, grotesqueries. But he is also always the artist, by Conrad's noble definition, the man who "speaks to our capacity for delight and wonder, to the sense of mystery surrounding our lives; to our sense of pity, and beauty, and pain." I suggest that if one is willing for a moment to give over examining Steinbeck from the viewpoint of the doctrinaire (Is he a Man of the Thirties? Or the Forties? Is his Social Purpose what it should be, or should have been, by fashionable critical criteria at this time or that?), and look at him as man and artist—if one is willing to do this, it may turn out that Steinbeck puzzles chiefly those whose specialty is to go in search of puzzles, and that the essence of Steinbeck-man and Steinbeck-writer lies in these two quite uncomplicated truths: he earnestly wishes to make people understand one another, and he is able, like Blake, to "seek Love in the pity of others' woe." If this is so, as I think it is, then it should surprise no one to find in him traits which endear him to mankind.

Steinbeck's first success in any popular sense was *Tortilla Flat,* a group of seventeen episodes centering on some California *paisanos* who live on the fringe of the coastal town of Monterey.

This was Steinbeck's fourth published book in half a dozen years of writing. If you wish to take it that way, it was also the first to suggest his specific interest in the world's dispossessed. Here was a handful of men

detached from the tight systems of the life around them, owning nothing and therefore relatively free men, at any rate not exploited. Around Danny as their leader, these *paisanos* move from day to day in their independent comradeship, almost untouched by the commercially based world, knights errant in their way, as Steinbeck meant to show them; he constructed *Tortilla Flat* deliberately on the framework of Malory's retelling of the Arthurian legend. Like that knightly saga, this group-tale of the *paisanos* has its beginning, middle, and ending; it comes full circle with Danny's mystical translation, the whistle of his table-leg Excalibur through the air, and the consuming fire that destroys the little house, symbol of the Lord of the Table Round who held the band together.

Perhaps this is romantic; Steinbeck has been taken to task for failing to draw a proper social moral in *Tortilla Flat*. But those who complained of this forgot something: the artist chooses his purpose, his time and place and manner. His *paisanos* were people Steinbeck loved for many good reasons; if he did not boldly underline his pity, perhaps it was because he chose to come at these men through his affection for them. And that affection is transmitted to the reader, which is one way, and a wise one, to go about helping people to understand their fellow men.

As it happened, those who were so eager for Steinbeck to point a social moral were to see him do it soon enough.

Steinbeck's strike novel, *In Dubious Battle,* appeared the next year. In it he tried to make a meaningful pattern out of the behavior of exploited men who were not able to speak for themselves. If the socially minded wanted a moral drawn, now they had it—if they were willing to look at it straight. The interesting thing is that, in the special climate of the mid-thirties, many of his critics were not content with what Steinbeck gave them. Here was the point, said some who wrote out of special political rather than literary convictions, at which Steinbeck should have picked up the banner of the Left and carried it sturdily forward. He was not out to carry banners—anybody's banners. He was even explicit about it. He said that he had tried to write the book without looking through "the narrow glass of political or economic preconception." He had seen certain groups of men badly hurt by the system in which they lived and worked. As an artist concerned with understanding among all men, and as a man in whom pity was strong, he wished others to see what he saw.

In Dubious Battle led Steinbeck to his next short novel, *Of Mice and Men.*

Only the writer himself knows his motives, and sometimes he is not aware of all of them. *Of Mice and Men,* at any rate, followed *In Dubious*

Battle in a wholly natural way. One motive behind its writing was a desire to experiment; Steinbeck wanted to write a novel as nearly like a play as he could. He wanted also to say some of what he had said in the strike novel, but to say it more sharply, as a thing is said within the restricted frame of the theater. *Of Mice and Men,* a book-club choice in the spring of 1937, did admirably what he planned it to do; it was transferred to the Broadway stage almost intact, and, under exceptionally sensitive direction, came almost as directly to the screen. Later Steinbeck spoke of the book as "thin and brittle," though it is no thinner than any play has to be. Once more it was a statement of Steinbeck's drive to help one sort of man to understand another sort. It also signaled something. Now Steinbeck was beginning to champion, not just to interpret with affection, the man-without, the dispossessed, who nevertheless cherished The Dream. But something else should be noted. Because he was the artist, Steinbeck also saw that the reasons The Dream failed, would always fail, lay with Man himself. It would have been simpler to declare that Man's frustrations might all be laid at the door of an evil social system. This was precisely what some socio-politico-economic critics were eager for him to say. Steinbeck knew it was not as simple as that, and by implication said so, wherefore he was attacked again, according to pattern. This is not to say that faults may not be found with *Of Mice and Men;* the perfect work of art has yet to be accomplished. The point is that the attacks were made for other reasons; certain of the critics were indeed flustered.

Looking back, one can see that, like *In Dubious Battle,* the shorter *Of Mice and Men* pointed straight to *The Grapes of Wrath.* But the development of any artist's purpose is frequently a spiral. And for a year or two what was to be Steinbeck's biggest book germinated and took shape while he did other things.

One of the few magazines that would consider his short fiction was the *North American Review.* Its editor printed two Steinbeck stories, poetic evocations of the countryside he had known from boyhood and, against this background, a statement of certain truths he had always felt in his bones—that there is no fulfillment without sacrifice, that fulfillment and frustration go hand in hand, and that, even though it would be pleasant to believe it, there is no natural law which assures Man of a reward fitly matched to his endeavor. These two stories, "The Gift" and "The Great Mountains," together with a third, "The Promise," which had appeared in *Harper's Magazine,* were now published as *The Red Pony.* Shortly afterward, in *The Long Valley,* a volume of Steinbeck's

collected shorter works, a fourth story, "The Leader of the People," was printed for the first time, and this became the final part of *The Red Pony* as that short novel now stands and is included here.

One of the curious things about the body of writing on Steinbeck is the way in which the politically oriented critics avoid *The Red Pony*. They grant that it is sensitive, lyrical, beautiful; one or two suggest some of its symbolisms, but generally they let it go at that. The fact is that, although in the four related stories which go to make the short book Steinbeck may indeed have been experimenting with symbols (doesn't the artist always experiment?), *The Red Pony* possesses in a greater degree than almost any of his stories the qualities that endear Steinbeck—to make the point once more—to his readers. To be sure, there are those who cannot bear what seems to them the wanton cruelty with which the boy Jody has the gift snatched from him; there are others who find only brutality in "The Promise," in which Jody is granted his colt, but only through bloody sacrifice. So with some aspects of the other parts of *The Red Pony;* there are readers, of naïve and simple mind and emotions, for whom beauty resides only in what they are conditioned to believe "good," which is to say, by their definition, happy. But there are also the perceptive readers who see the basic truths in that most beautifully done of all Steinbeck's shorter fictions, and who, shock or no shock, are willing to accept them. The reader of this volume will make up his own mind. If *The Red Pony* does not concern matters so topical (or so touchy) as some of Steinbeck's full-length novels, it remains in the hearts of many as one of his most tender, most lyrical, and wisest fables.

The Moon Is Down, which comes after *The Grapes of Wrath* and *The Sea of Cortez* (the latter written with his friend Ed Ricketts and, aside from Steinbeck's newspaper letters on the transient-worker camps, his first exercise in self-orienting non-fiction), was another novel-play, or play-novel. It appeared early in World War II, and again Steinbeck was violently attacked. Once more the difficulty was his refusal to take the extreme position which to some minds the climate of the moment required. Outraged readers demanded to know what Steinbeck meant. Was he actually suggesting that a Nazi could be a human being? Did he mean to say that The Enemy could possess a conscience that might be troubled by the course of conduct to which he was committed? If this was the artist's view, then what business had he to remain an artist at all when the times called for a propagandist? There were other criticisms, but this was at the root of them. Now, a decade later and in another emotional climate, the reader may decide about that too. A period piece

in some ways, *The Moon Is Down* will still contribute much to a knowledge of Steinbeck and his basic urge to help men understand other men and so understand life, which is lived, after all, by men.

To return to Steinbeck's interest in the waifs and strays of our social system, this has shown itself in both the long and short novels in widely different ways.

Cannery Row, which one reviewer described as "a nostalgic return to the moods of *Tortilla Flat* days," though it is indeed about some of the dispossessed and is in this degree a "return," is not quite in the *Tortilla Flat* mood. It is doubtful if the author will ever return to that mood; in an introductory note to one edition of that book he said he would not, for several reasons, some of which he made plain. But *Cannery Row* does concern a group of men living, as did Steinbeck's earlier *paisanos,* on the fringes of society. (It should be noted, by the way, that a man may deliberately "dispossess" himself; he may do this, too, for a variety of reasons, many of them sound enough.) Wherefore, if you like to label and pigeonhole books—sometimes a useful way of considering them—*Cannery Row* belongs somewhere near *Tortilla Flat* in the Steinbeck scheme and has a kind of cross-kinship with *Of Mice and Men.* Surrounding the lonely figure of Doc (who is based on the same Ed Ricketts with whom Steinbeck had sailed the Sea of Cortez some years earlier) is a handful of men who have more or less deliberately detached themselves from society. These economic orphans of the storm get along on their wits, their ability to adapt, and their instinct to cohere when it is plain that an enterprise jointly undertaken will be to their advantage. They express their love of life, which is robust and inclusive, by big beautiful parties when they can rustle up wine money. Like the girls in the nearby house called the Bear Flag, they are fond of Doc. He will buy live specimens for experimental purposes when they are moved to do that much work, or lend them money when they are not. Perhaps best of all, he never censures or advises them. Expressing fondness means giving a party, and much of *Cannery Row* develops around just such parties, particularly one that failed and another that succeeded beyond all belief.

On this framework, then, Steinbeck hangs dozens of sharp little scenes, a good deal of between-the-lines kidding of one sort or another, usually of social pretensions he is amused to puncture, and some episodes which are, magnificently, the kind of thing in which he always shows himself in his most attaching aspect—that of the storyteller who has the great

gift of wild yet plausible exaggeration done absolutely deadpan. This, of course, is one of the notable American yarn-spinning talents, and a Western-American one at that. A typical example from *Cannery Row* is the frog-hunt, which has been separately reprinted more than once and is thus better known than the rest of the book.

There are other examples in plenty, however, and also much else in this little novel which the reader will discover for himself. He will be happy in the finding too. If he is now and then faintly puzzled by a symbolical or mystical bit, well, Steinbeck frequently puzzles his readers a little, as has been noted. And the story more than makes up for its brief oddities by its comedy, sometimes broad and often delicate, by the affectionate and gentle humanity with which the author regards his people, and by the straight-out storytelling that Steinbeck may always be relied upon to provide.

Last of these six short novels is *The Pearl,* first worked out in 1945 as a motion-picture script in Mexico, redone as a long magazine story and then published in book form.

The Pearl climaxed a long preoccupation with motion-picture techniques, and after Steinbeck had rewritten it he hinted that he would not return to the field. "It isn't my kind of work—this moving a camera around from place to place." He did go back to motion pictures briefly, and—a guess only—he may well do so again. He is deeply interested in the theater and in its ways of presenting a story, and the connection is close enough so that it would not be surprising to find him writing again for the screen.

In *The Pearl* (when you have finished it, read the short story "Flight," which you'll find in *The Long Valley* or in the *Portable Steinbeck,* for an interesting parallel), Steinbeck went further than he had yet gone in the direction of the pure folk tale. Of the story he once said that it was "a strange piece of work, full of curious methods and figures. A folk tale, I hope. A black and white story like a parable." *The Pearl* is a folk tale; indeed it is The Steinbeck Folk Tale. Here is a man doing what seems to him best in his world; here is that man frustrated in his desire; here he is, faced with evil unaccountably born of what seemed good. And here again is sacrifice. Yet, in spite of the "curious methods and figures," Steinbeck comes closer than he commonly does to making his parable, as he said, a matter of blacks and whites. As in all folk tales, the moral—a moral, at any rate—is easily drawn; as the good folk tale always does, this one communicates emotion directly, clearly, power-

fully. In the end, however, it should be remembered that, like all artists, when he is speaking in parables Steinbeck may be taken on as many levels as those upon which his readers are prepared to meet him.

In these short novels, then, those who prefer to leave the esoterics of special criticism to the special critics will discover, perhaps, a Steinbeck who is closer to them than they may have been led to think, the Steinbeck who, although he has indeed flustered the critics, has also for so long endeared himself to so many readers.

More plainly than in the longer novels, in which so many strands of emotion and symbol are interwoven, these show the author's declared purpose to further understanding between man and man, and to accomplish this in whatever degree he can, not angrily, not by exhortation or dialectic, but with pity and the warmth which has its source in the knowledge that all men, however weak or small or warped, are men still and a part of mankind.

What it comes down to, of course, is the artist's task, which is to interpret life as he sees it and to relate its parts to a coherent whole. If you go back to the early novel *The Pastures of Heaven,* you will find this stated as directly as a novelist can put it into words. Here, at the very end of that beautiful and symbolic book, is a character speaking for all men, and for John Steinbeck as clearly as though the author himself were saying it:

"The old man stared into the valley with his eager eyes, and in his deafened ears the silence surged like a little wind blowing in a cypress tree. The farther hills were blurred to him, but he could see the golden light and the purple dark. His breathing choked and tears came into his eyes. He beat his hands helplessly against his hips. 'I've never had time to think. I've been too busy with troubles ever to think anything out. If I could go down there and live down there for a little while—why, I'd think over all the things that ever happened to me, and maybe I could make something out of them, something all in one piece that had a meaning, instead of all these trailing ends.'"

No writer yet has fully succeeded in bringing life together all in one piece. The good writer never stops trying, and he will be discovered, as Steinbeck has been, by the readers for whom he is writing, by those who recognize that he has carried, further than they have been able to carry, some of their own efforts to make life into an orderly pattern. This is what you will find in these short novels, along with much else—beauty (and ugliness), questions (and some answers), and always the high

drama, the urgent flow, of fine storytelling. Which is to say you will see Steinbeck plain, and maybe your world, too, a little more plainly than you had before.

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TORTILLA FLAT

To Susan Gregory of Monterey

PREFACE

This is the story of Danny and of Danny's friends and of Danny's house. It is a story of how these three became one thing, so that in Tortilla Flat if you speak of Danny's house you do not mean a structure of wood flaked with old whitewash, overgrown with an ancient untrimmed rose of Castile. No, when you speak of Danny's house you are understood to mean a unit of which the parts are men, from which came sweetness and joy, philanthropy and, in the end, a mystic sorrow. For Danny's house was not unlike the Round Table, and Danny's friends were not unlike the knights of it. And this is the story of how that group came into being, of how it flourished and grew to be an organization beautiful and wise. This story deals with the adventuring of Danny's friends, with the good they did, with their thoughts and their endeavors. In the end, this story tells how the talisman was lost and how the group disintegrated.

In Monterey, that old city on the coast of California, these things are well known, and they are repeated and sometimes elaborated. It is well that this cycle be put down on paper so that in a future time scholars, hearing the legends, may not say as they say of Arthur and of Roland and of Robin Hood—"There was no Danny nor any group of Danny's friends, nor any house. Danny is a nature god and his friends primitive symbols of the wind, the sky, the sun." This history is designed now and ever to keep the sneers from the lips of sour scholars.

Monterey sits on the slope of a hill, with a blue bay below it and with a forest of tall dark pine trees at its back. The lower parts of the town are inhabited by Americans, Italians, catchers and canners of fish. But on the hill where the forest and the town intermingle, where the streets are innocent of asphalt and the corners free of street lights, the old inhabitants of Monterey are embattled as the Ancient Britons are embattled in Wales. These are the paisanos.

They live in old wooden houses set in weedy yards, and the pine trees from the forest are about the houses. The paisanos are clean of com-