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John Steinbeck's THE GRAPES OF WRATH

Charlotte Alexander

约翰·斯坦贝克的

愤怒的葡萄



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INTRODUCTION

A BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH: John Steinbeck was born in 1902 in the town of Salinas, California. 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 Salinas Valley: here is the source of his knowledge and love of nature, his biological view of life (explained below), and many of his characters, whether paisanos and bums of *Tortilla Flat*, *Cannery Row* and *Sweet Thursday* or migrant workers of *In Dubious Battle*, *Of Mice and Men* and *The Grapes of Wrath*.

STEINBECK'S BOYHOOD: Steinbeck lived most of his first forty years in the Salinas Valley, where his mother taught in the public schools of the area and his father was for many years treasurer of Monterey County. (It is said that the author's early novels were written in discarded double-entry ledgers.) Steinbeck's boyhood was probably much like that of Jody in one of his most popular stories, "The Red Pony." At that time the "long valley" was a series of small farms devoted to cattle raising and the growing of fruit and vegetables, among which were interspersed little towns where the farmers brought their produce to market; young Steinbeck worked during school vacations for the neighboring farmers and ranchers. Surely these early years of life close to nature form the background from which Steinbeck draws his detailed—and often beautiful—descriptions of natural phenomena. That he attaches importance to these youthful experiences in nature can be seen in the following anecdote: at the request of a publisher for early biographical facts

Steinbeck replied that the most important items would probably be of little significance to others; for example, “. . . the way the sparrows hopped about on the mud street early in the morning when I was little. . . . the most tremendous morning in the world when my pony had a colt.”

EARLY LITERARY INFLUENCES AND EFFORTS: At the same time, in addition to living close to nature as a youth, it is clear that Steinbeck read widely, probably through the influence of his schoolteacher mother. Through his fictional characters and other channels (such as correspondence) he has indicated a wide range of reading interests; Walter Scott, Jack London, Robert Louis Stevenson; Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, Hardy's *The Return of the Native*. And it is interesting that he has commented of such reading, “certain books . . . were realer than experience. . . . I read all of these books when I was very young and I remember them not at all as books but as things that happened to me.” Such remarks reveal Steinbeck's constant emphasis in his writings upon the concrete and experiential rather than the abstract and theoretical. Steinbeck has also manifested an interest in non-fictional universally great books, such as the Bible, philosophical literature of ancient India, and Greek historians.

HIS ENVIRONMENT AS SOURCE MATERIAL: Although he contributed to literary publications both in high school and college (he attended Stanford University for five years as an English major, without taking a degree), the entire period of his young adulthood was intermixed with many experiences in the laboring world. Before beginning courses at Stanford he worked as an assistant chemist in a sugar-beet factory nearby. During the intervals of attendance at Stanford he was employed on ranches and road-building gangs. All

of this experience provided firsthand observation of the attitudes, manners and language of the working man, as well as the foundation of his sympathy with the situation of such laborers. Even during a brief stay in New York City (1925-1927), at which point he seems definitely to have decided on a career of writing, since he made unsuccessful attempts to publish stories, he worked both as a newspaper reporter and a laborer, and he financed his return to California by shipping as a deck hand via the Panama Canal. All in all, it is clear that environment, whether the accident of his birth and growth in the Salinas Valley of California or his own selection of various laboring jobs, figures largely in the source material of Steinbeck's writings.

YEARS OF SOCIAL UNREST: It should be pointed out that Steinbeck's long residence in the Salinas Valley covered years of both regional and national unrest, changes which he observed and later utilized especially in his three most sociologically oriented novels; *In Dubious Battle* (1936), *Of Mice and Men* (1937), and *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939). The economic structure of the Salinas Valley itself altered, as small farms were replaced by larger ones and the financial picture enlarged to include corporations, large investments and amassing fortunes. As the gap lengthened between the little man working for the big man, discontent also increased, with unemployment and threatened strikes. It was all part of the generalized national situation which culminated in the stock market crash of 1929 and the depression period following. Steinbeck's first published novel (*Cup of Gold*), in fact, appeared two months after the crash. The next few years were especially lean ones for him, as they were for many Americans, although he married, continued writing partly through a small subsidy and house provided by his father, and made the acquaintance of a man who was to exert significant influ-

ence on his life for many years to come—Edward Ricketts.

STEINBECK'S FRIENDSHIP WITH ED RICKETTS: A word or two should be said about Steinbeck's friendship with Ed Ricketts, the marine biologist, which lasted from their acquaintance in the 1930's until Ricketts' death in 1948. Ricketts had a commercial laboratory specializing in marine invertebrates in Pacific Grove, California; and he, along with his profession, apparently elicited and guided Steinbeck's similar interests in marine biology to specific expression in a work called the *Sea of Cortez* (a record of their joint expedition to the Gulf of California) and toward the general "biological view of life" which pervades much of his writing. (Steinbeck pays especial tribute to his friend in the preface to *Sea of Cortez*, in "About Ed Ricketts" .) Ricketts is clearly the figure behind some of Steinbeck's most sympathetic portrayals of character (Dr. Phillips in "The Snake," Doc Burton of *In Dubious Battle*, Doc of *Cannery Row* and *Sweet Thursday*), presumably the spokesman for ideas the two men jointly held. Theirs was an intellectual relationship in which Steinbeck was able to air his views and to arrive at some of his central artistic tenets.

STEINBECK IN RECENT YEARS: Steinbeck has of course written prolifically and variously over the years since 1929. One of the major changes in his life, however, has been his shift of residence from California to New York in 1950, where he has since lived. (The decision is often attributed in part to his deep sense of personal loss at the death of his friend Ricketts in 1948.) Significantly, a recent work, *The Winter of Our Discontent* (1961), was set in New England. Also, an account of travels throughout the United States, published in 1962 as *Travels with Charley*, seems to reflect the author's urge in the 1960's toward a revitalization of his creative

powers. Steinbeck was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1962, honored, according to the official wording, for his "realistic and imaginative writings, distinguished as they are by a sympathetic humor and a social perception." He continues to comment, through fiction and non-fiction, in current periodicals.

LIST OF MAJOR WORKS: Steinbeck's major works to date are as follows: *Cup of Gold*, 1929; *The Pastures of Heaven*, 1932; *To a God Unknown*, 1933; *Tortilla Flat*, 1935; *In Dubious Battle*, 1936; *The Red Pony*, 1937; *Of Mice and Men*, 1937; *The Long Valley*, 1938; *The Grapes of Wrath*, 1939; *Sea of Cortez*, 1941; *Bombs Away*, 1942; *The Moon Is Down*, 1942 (this work and *Of Mice and Men* also appear as plays); *Cannery Row*, 1945; *The Pearl*, 1947; *The Wayward Bus*, 1947; *East of Eden*, 1952; *Sweet Thursday*, 1954; *The Short Reign of Pippin IV*, 1957; *The Winter of Our Discontent*, 1961; *Travels with Charley*, 1962. (It should be noted that it is a second version of the Sea of Cortez expedition, published as *The Log from the Sea of Cortez*, 1951, and containing only the "Introduction" and "Narrative" from *Sea of Cortez*, which contains the memorial sketch of Ed Ricketts referred to above.)

STEINBECK'S MAJOR ATTITUDES AND THEMES, BIOLOGICAL

THEORY OF MAN: Since certain attitudes and themes on the part of Steinbeck are commonly referred to by critics and recur in most of his writings, including *The Grapes of Wrath*, it is worthwhile to review them briefly before turning to a detailed consideration of the novel at hand. One such attitude has been referred to above as a biological view of man, developed at least in part through Steinbeck's close association with his friend the marine biologist. A simple statement of this view is sufficient for the present (saving the contradic-

tions of critics for a discussion under "Critical Summary"). Steinbeck relates human beings—his fictional characters—to plants and animals; he seems to see analogies of man in nature, in a manner not so unlike the American Transcendentalists as represented especially by Emerson and Thoreau, who maintained a mystical reverence for all forms of natural life. His emphasis of course is on the natural over the supernatural; but nature in its phenomena and cycles offers even more than simple analogy, Steinbeck seems to suggest. It offers an almost spiritual comfort and encourages an earth-founded optimism.

PHILOSOPHY OF THE NON-TELEOLOGICAL: The above term—non-teleological—is often linked with Steinbeck's biological view of man. Steinbeck himself has referred to this "philosophy"—perhaps because of his constantly refreshing urge to communicate to readers by making ideas as concrete as possible—as "is" thinking. As certain critics have explained it, "is" thinking represents "Steinbeck's own attempt to make the technical term *non-teleological* more meaningful to his readers. Broadly what Steinbeck means is a way of thinking about life that, by concerning 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*.) Such an attitude is very much in the spirit of what the famous American psychologist and philosopher William James termed "pragmatism," for pragmatism suggests that a man's thought and his action go hand in hand and requires that men reason about and judge events as they are experiencing them, instead of applying facilely to their experiences preconceived "why's" and "what should be's." "Is" thinking, or pragmatic thinking, then, recognizes that theoretical or abstract thought does not always fit reality, the way life really happens; to form such a way of think-

ing into a kind of philosophy, as Steinbeck seems to do, is to express one's belief in a human world of realizable goals rather than a dream world of impossible ideals.

STEINBECK'S SOCIAL CONSCIOUSNESS: Although it is perhaps unfortunate for Steinbeck's total literary reputation that the first three of his novels which received serious critical attention were sociologically oriented, since this has caused many critics to read social criticism forcibly into all his works, it is nevertheless certainly true that social consciousness represents a basic element in his writings, and especially in *In Dubious Battle* (1936), *Of Mice and Men* (1937), and *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), all of which were post-depression novels and dealt with proletarian matter. The first-mentioned novel is concerned with specific social problems of the period—violence, particularly of strikes and strikebreaking, and the ineffectuality of both “left” and “right,” politically speaking, in bringing about more humane conditions and equitable solutions to labor conflicts. The second novel is more involved with men—little men—and their struggles than with generalized social problems. Of this story, about a feeble-minded character Lennie and his friend George who dream of owning a farm in California, Steinbeck wrote that he was dealing with “the earth longings of a Lennie who was not to represent insanity at all but the inarticulate and powerful yearning of all men.” At another time he declared that *Of Mice and Men* was “a study of the dreams and pleasures of everyone in the world,” an indication of the continuing emphasis in his writings on individual man and his strivings rather than stark social criticism. *The Grapes of Wrath*, to be treated below, is of course his epic masterpiece of social consciousness in its picture of helpless people crushed by drought and depression. Even here, though, as in all his works to follow, Steinbeck's focus is upon man, the nature of man and his

successes and failures, rather than upon the mere detached picture of an indifferent society (in contrast, for example, to some of Steinbeck's immediate forerunners in American fiction, such as Frank Norris and Theodore Dreiser, who depicted man simply as a wisp in the wind of giant American industrialism and stampeding capitalism).

DREAM AND REALITY, A FANTASY WORLD: There is an element in Steinbeck's fiction which belongs more to a fantasy or dream world than it does to the real everyday world; sometimes this element manifests itself in the author's choice of protagonists from among the feeble-minded, the castoffs of society, the antisocial; in other instances it is seen in his descriptions, which often open chapters, and conjure up a dreamlike atmosphere (this descriptive quality is especially evident in *Tortilla Flat*, *Cannery Row* and *Sweet Thursday*). Steinbeck's choice of central characters, in particular, has caused much controversy among critics as to his intentions and the successful realization of them. He has been accused of "glorifying idiocy," (for example, in Lennie, *Of Mice and Men*), or of "deifying the drunk, canonizing the castoff" —the major figures in *Cannery Row*, for instance, by his own stipulation, are society's "no-goods and blots-on-the-town and bums." Similarly, Danny and his friends (in *Tortilla Flat*) live what by ordinary standards is certainly an unreal existence, surviving more through chance than any calculation and "experiencing" in a most random way. Or, the characters in *The Wayward Bus* seem selected by the author more for some separate point he wishes to probe about each of them than for the likelihood that they could have in reality been thrust together for the rambling bus ride.

We have seen that of Lennie the halfwit (*Of Mice and Men*) Stein-

beck stated he was to represent "the inarticulate and powerful yearning of all men . . . the dreams and pleasures of everyone in the world." It is likewise clear from Steinbeck's numerous statements on the book *Tortilla Flat*, which is episodic (that is, it seems to be a series of episodes strung together, often by dreamlike descriptions), that he intended it to be a kind of modern Arthurian cycle, a story of 20th century knights of the Round Table, although related in a mock-epic or humorous tone. (The author has spoken, for example, as late as 1957—*Tortilla Flat* is dated 1935—of his continuing interest in Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur* and his desire to travel to England to study the manuscript and discuss it with an Arthurian scholar.) Similar objectives outside realistic narrative along the lines of allegorical symbolic meanings, can be detected in, say, *The Wayward Bus*, which Steinbeck concludes with an epigraph quoting from a well-known Medieval "morality" play called *Everyman*, a drama which chronicled (somewhat like the familiar *Pilgrim's Progress* of John Bunyan) the cycle of *every man's* life from birth to death. These few examples indicate that however critics may judge his efforts or however his goals are actually realized, in much of his work Steinbeck is striving beyond realistic narrative or mere social protest, attempting to chronicle, in near-epic form, the struggles of individual men. Those critics who have gotten especially close to Steinbeck's work in all its stages (for example, Peter Lisca, E. W. Tedlock, Jr. , C. V. Wicker, Warren French) attest to the comprehensiveness and complexity of his plan and approach for each novel.

A final example of Steinbeck's concern with good and evil in human experience and with the possibility of choice may be cited. In the dedication to his novel *East of Eden* he indicated that he had struggled considerably with the problem of good and evil in human exist-

tence; he chose to symbolize this struggle by placing the Hebrew word *timshel* on the cover, which is interpreted "thou mayest," and stands for the question of ethical choice in the novel. In both the American Standard Bible and the King James version the expression reads "Do thou rule over him," or "and thou shalt rule over him"; but as one of the characters in the book points out, "Don't you see?" he cried. 'The American Standard translation *orders* men to triumph over sin. But the Hebrew word, the word *timshel*—"Thou mayest"—that gives a choice. It might be the most important word in the world.'

Going back for a moment to that world which Steinbeck evokes through vivid descriptions, which often prelude or are interspersed among his dialogues and actions, we recall that he fixed upon visual sensations of nature (the hopping sparrows) or feelings elicited by nature's events (the birth of a colt) as significant biographical material. Before beginning "The Red Pony" (which is seen by most commentators to be very close to Steinbeck's own boyhood), he remarked: "I want to recreate a child's world, not of fairies and giants but of colors more clear than they are to adults, of tastes more sharp and of queer heartbreaking feelings that overwhelm children in a moment. I want to put down the way 'afternoon felt'—and the feeling about a bird that sang in a tree in the evening." It would seem then that in his fantasy or dream worlds, in his "unreal" characters, all focused on the sphere of nature, he is striving to reproduce a child-like state of existence, from which can be derived philosophical, even mystical implications. This has led his more serious critics to describe him as "the first significant novelist to begin to build a mystical religion upon a naturalistic base."

STEINBECK'S ATTITUDES TOWARD POPULARITY AND CRITI-

CISM: Because Steinbeck is a contemporary writer whose comments may appear regularly on the printed page—and because some of his past remarks, or defenses, regarding his own work and the critics reveal a sense of the ironic and the absurd which is also a key to some of his fictional effects—it is worth devoting a word or two here to his attitudes toward popular success and critics. At least up until the more recent years of his residence in the East, Steinbeck has been noted for his resistance to invasions upon his personal life as well as for his refusal to respond to the baiting of critics who choose to interpret him in flatly contradicting terms. Asked, for example, in 1951 by the American Humanist Association to classify himself in one of six categories of humanism, he replied that his approach to philosophy was “on tiptoe ready to run at the first growl” ; he further disclaimed on that occasion an awareness of what his own philosophy was about, even questioning whether or not he had a philosophy. Another example of “Steinbeck and the Critics” is his recent reply to the invitation of *The Colorado Quarterly* to comment on a critical controversy raging between Bernard Bowron and Warren G. French over the merits of *The Grapes of Wrath* ; in “A Letter on Criticism” Steinbeck smoothly refused to become involved, even on the side of his defender, Warren G. French, and indulged in some biting wit against criticism in general, remarking, for example, that he is not against criticism so long as it is understood to be “a kind of ill tempered parlour game in which nobody gets kissed.” He added wryly that “recently a critic proved by parallel passages that I had taken my whole philosophy from a 17th century Frenchman of whom I had never heard.” His real point—or most worthwhile point—in the letter, perhaps, is that “the writing of books is a lonely and difficult job. . . .”

It does appear that, for whatever reasons, Steinbeck maintains a

deep-seated mistrust of literary critics, at least when they seem to him to stand for intellectualism gone on a sterile rampage; it would certainly seem that such expressions as the letter quoted above display a hostility represented by a kind of Trumanesque hauling-off at the critics with sweeping generalizations ("In less criticism terms, I think it is a bunch of crap") which are hardly less childish than the pedantic pickings of cloistered scholars. It is interesting to note that at the same time Steinbeck, especially from about 1930 to 1945, had a great fear of popular success, or at least of being labelled as a "regional" writer or a "primitive" writer or a "humorist." The partial result of this wish to avoid popular success may have been his shifting about from social protest to pastoral-like tales to allegorical/symbolic devices. In recent years, however, the writer has seemed more friendly or tolerant toward the reading public and his critics.

THE GRAPES OF WRATH, BACKGROUND: The background upon which John Steinbeck drew to write *The Grapes of Wrath* is impressive. We have already reviewed the record of his youth among the small farms in the Salinas Valley of California, as well as his early, varied employment and travel experiences. His novel *In Dubious Battle* (1936) called attention to him as social critic and spokesman for California migrants. During that same year he wrote a series of articles for the *San Francisco News* depicting the miserable conditions of the migrant camps near Salinas and Bakersfield. In the fall of 1937, after working in New York on the project of turning *Of Mice and Men* into a play, he bought a car and drove to Oklahoma to join the migrant workers, traveling with them, camping alongside the road with them, accompanying them to California. At one point he was so disturbed by their impoverished conditions that he wanted to accept a Hollywood contract of \$1000 a week for six weeks, on *Of Mice and Men*, in order to give two dollars apiece to

3000 migrant workers. (His agent flew to the coast to talk him out of it.) On another occasion he refused to go into the field with a photographer and observe the migrants for a paid article for *Life* magazine, saying "I'm sorry but I simply can't make money on these people . . . the suffering is too great for me to cash in on it." Steinbeck's experiences with the migrant workers have been related in two ways, one graphic and reportorial, the other artistic and creative. In 1938 he recorded these experiences in what has been until recently a little-known and out-of-print pamphlet titled *Their Blood Is Strong*, published by an organization in California called the Lubin Society which had been formed, with the backing of the governor at that time (Culbert L. Olson) and other political and social leaders, "to educate public opinion to an understanding of the problems of the working farmer and the condition of agricultural laborers, and the need of them both for progressive organization to better their conditions." It should be emphasized that there is a vast distinction to be made between Steinbeck's newspaper report of the migrants' plight and his now-famous novel *The Grapes of Wrath*; there is some value in knowing, however, the actual background of experience from which the author worked on his novel, just as there is interesting "extra" information contained in the pamphlet, such as Steinbeck's ideas of what might have been immediate solutions to the migrants' problems.

THE GRAPES OF WRATH, RECEPTION: 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 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 saw it as a motion picture. It brought Steinbeck the Pulitzer prize

and got him elected to the National Institute of Arts and Letters." In short, the book was timely and authentic, and it stepped on a lot of toes, particularly regional ones in Oklahoma and California. (One recalls an earlier, if less vehement and far-reaching, protest of the citizens of Monterey, California against Steinbeck's *Tortilla Flat*; fearful that the novel would damage their tourist trade, they exclaimed that Monterey wasn't like that, full of "no-goods and bums.") 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. '"

There is no mistaking the fact that in absorbing his material for the novel firsthand, Steinbeck was practicing what we have referred to as his pragmatic view of life, life as it is, in this case unfortunately, "is." At the same time he was reminding a good many hitherto rather silent Americans of the "why's" and the "what should be's"—hence the troubled and hugely publicized reaction. The honest attempt of one critic to assess this reaction to the novel, soon after its publication, in 1944, is worth entering here, especially since it implies part of the modern social validity of the novel. 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." Artistically speaking, Steinbeck himself has perhaps best expressed how he hoped to metamorphose social fact into art in the novel; he says that he was "simply listening to men talk and watching them act, hoping that the projection of the microcosm will define the outlines of the macrocosm." In other words, Steinbeck is making here almost a