

John Steinbeck

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Awards:

General Literature Gold Medal, Commonwealth Club of California, 1936, for *Tortilla Flat*, 1937, for *Of Mice and Men*, and 1940, for *The Grapes of Wrath*; New York Drama Critics Circle Award, 1938, for play, *Of Mice and Men*; Pulitzer Prize, 1940, for *The Grapes of Wrath*; Academy Award nomination for best original story, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, 1944, for "*Lifeboat*," and 1945, for "*A Medal for Benny*"; Nobel Prize for literature, 1962; Paperback of the Year Award, Best Sellers, 1964, for *Travels with Charley: In Search of America*.

Personal Information:

Family: Born February 27, 1902, in Salinas, CA; died of heart disease December 20, 1968 in New York, NY; buried in Salinas, CA; son of John Ernst (a county treasurer) and Olive (a schoolteacher; maiden name, Hamilton) Steinbeck; married Carol Henning, 1930 (divorced, 1943); married Gwyn Conger (a writer, singer, and composer), March 29, 1943 (divorced, 1948); married Elaine Scott, December 29, 1950; children: (second marriage) Tom, John. Education: Stanford University, special student, 1919-25.

Career Information:

Variously employed as hod-carrier, fruit-picker, apprentice painter, laboratory assistant, caretaker, surveyor, and reporter; writer. Foreign correspondent in North Africa and Italy for *New York Herald Tribune*, 1943; correspondent in Vietnam for *Newsday*, 1966-67. Special writer for U.S. Army Air Forces, during World War II.

Writings:

NOVELS

- *Cup of Gold: A Life of Henry Morgan, Buccaneer*, Robert McBride, 1929, reprinted, Penguin, 1976.
- *The Pastures of Heaven*, Viking, 1932, new edition, 1963, reprinted, Penguin, 1982.
- *To a God Unknown*, Viking, 1933, reprinted, Penguin, 1976.
- *Tortilla Flat*, Viking, 1935, illustrated edition, 1947, reprinted, Penguin, 1977.
- *In Dubious Battle*, Viking, 1936, new edition, 1971.
- *Of Mice and Men* (also see below; Book-of-the-Month Club selection), Viking, 1937, reprinted, Bantam, 1970.
- *The Red Pony* (also see below), Covici, Friede, 1937, reprinted, Penguin, 1989.
- *The Grapes of Wrath*, Viking, 1939, published with introduction by Carl Van Doren, World Publishing, 1947, revised edition, edited by Peter Lisca, 1972, reprinted, Penguin, 1989, 2nd edition, updated by Kevin Hearle, Penguin Books (New York), 1996, edited by Peter Lisca, with criticism,

Penguin, 1997.

- *The Forgotten Village* (also see below), Viking, 1941.
- *The Moon Is Down* (also see below), Viking, 1942, reprinted, Penguin, 1982.
- *Cannery Row*, Viking, 1945, new edition, 1963, published with manuscript, corrected typescript, corrected galleys, and first edition, Stanford Publications Service, 1975.
- *The Wayward Bus* (Book-of-the-Month Club selection), Viking, 1947, reprinted, Penguin, 1979.
- *The Pearl* (also see below), Viking, 1947, reprinted, Bantam, 1986.
- *Burning Bright: A Play in Story Form* (also see below), Viking, 1950, reprinted, Penguin, 1979.
- *East of Eden*, Viking, 1952, reprinted, Penguin, 1979.
- *Sweet Thursday*, Viking, 1954, reprinted, Penguin, 1979.
- *The Short Reign of Pippin IV: A Fabrication* (Book-of-the-Month Club selection), Viking, 1957, reprinted, Penguin, 1977.
- *The Winter of Our Discontent*, Viking, 1961, reprinted, Penguin, 1982.

SHORT STORIES

- *Saint Katy the Virgin* (also see below), Covici, Friede, 1936.
- *Nothing So Monstrous*, Pynson Printers, 1936, reprinted, Porter, 1979.
- *The Long Valley* (contains fourteen short stories, including "The Red Pony," "Saint Katy the Virgin," Johnny Bear, and The Harness), Viking, 1938, reprinted, Penguin, 1986, published as *Thirteen Great Short Stories from the Long Valley*, Avon, 1943, published as *Fourteen Great Short Stories from the Long Valley*, Avon, 1947.
- *How Edith McGillicuddy Met R. L. S.*, Rowfant Club (Cleveland), 1943.
- *The Crapshooter*, Mercury Publications (New York), 1957.

PLAYS

- (With George S. Kaufman) *Of Mice and Men: A Play in Three Acts* (based on novel of same title; first produced on Broadway at The Music Box Theatre, November 23, 1937), Viking, 1937, reprinted, Dramatists Play Service, 1964, published in *Famous American Plays of the Nineteen Thirties*, edited by Harold Clurman, Dell, 1980.
- *The Moon Is Down: Play in Two Parts* (based on novel of same title; first produced on Broadway at Martin Beck Theatre, April 7, 1942), Dramatists Play Service, 1942.
- *Burning Bright: Play in Three Acts* (based on novel of same title; first produced on Broadway at Broadhurst Theatre, October 18, 1950), acting edition, Dramatists Play Service, 1951, reprinted, Penguin, 1979.

SCREENPLAYS

- *Forgotten Village* (based on novel of same title), independently produced, 1939.
- *Lifeboat*, Twentieth Century-Fox, 1944.
- *A Medal for Benny*, Paramount, 1945 (published in *Best Film Plays--1945*, edited by John Gassner and Dudley Nichols, Crown, 1946).
- *The Pearl* (based on novel of same title), RKO, 1948.
- *The Red Pony* (based on novel of same title), Republic, 1949.

- *Viva Zapata!* (produced by Twentieth Century-Fox, 1952), edited by Robert E. Morsberger, Viking, 1975.

OMNIBUS VOLUMES

- *Steinbeck*, edited by Pascal Covici, Viking, 1943, enlarged edition published as *The Portable Steinbeck*, 1946, revised edition, 1971, reprinted, Crown, 1986 (published in Australia as *Steinbeck Omnibus*, Oxford University Press, 1946).
- *Short Novels: Tortilla Flat, The Red Pony, Of Mice and Men, The Moon Is Down, Cannery Row, The Pearl*, Viking, 1953, new edition, 1963.
- *East of Eden* [and] *The Wayward Bus*, Viking, 1962.
- *The Red Pony, Part I: The Gift* [and] *The Pearl*, Macmillan (Toronto), 1963.
- *The Pearl* [and] *The Red Pony*, Viking, 1967.
- *Cannery Row* [and] *Sweet Thursday*, Heron Books, 1971.
- *To a God Unknown* [and] *The Pearl*, Heron Books, 1971.
- *Of Mice and Men* [and] *Cannery Row*, Penguin (Harmondsworth, England), 1973, Penguin (New York), 1978.
- *The Grapes of Wrath* [and] *The Moon Is Down* [and] *Cannery Row* [and] *East of Eden* [and] *Of Mice and Men*, Heinemann, 1976.
- *John Steinbeck, 1902-1968* (contains *Tortilla Flat*, *Of Mice and Men*, and *Cannery Row*), limited edition, Franklin Library, 1977.
- *The Short Novels of John Steinbeck* (contains *Tortilla Flat*, *The Red Pony*, *Of Mice and Men*, *The Moon Is Down*, *Cannery Row*, and *The Pearl*), introduction by Joseph Henry Jackson, Viking, 1981.
- *Novels and Stories, 1932 -1937*, Library of America (New York), 1994.
- *The Grapes of Wrath & Other Writings, 1938-1941* (contains *The Long Valley*, *The Grapes of Wrath*, *The Log from the Sea of Cortez*, and *The Harvest Gypsies*), Library of America (New York), 1996.

OTHER

- *Their Blood Is Strong* (factual story of migratory workers), Simon J. Lubin Society of California, 1938; published as *The Harvest Gypsies: On the Road to the Grapes of Wrath*, Heyday, 1988.
- *A Letter to the Friends of Democracy*, Overbrook Press, 1940.
- (With Edward F. Ricketts) *Sea of Cortez* (description of expedition to Gulf of California), Viking, 1941, published as *Sea of Cortez: A Leisurely Journal of Travel*, Appel, 1971, revised edition published as *The Log from the "Sea of Cortez": The Narrative Portion of the Book, "Sea of Cortez,"* Viking, 1951, reprinted, Penguin, 1977.
- *Bombs Away: The Story of a Bomber Team* (account of life and training in U.S. Army Air Forces), Viking, 1942.
- *A Russian Journal* (description of tour to Russia), photographs by Robert Capa, Viking, 1948.
- *Once There Was a War* (collection of dispatches and anecdotes from World War II), Viking, 1958, reprinted, Penguin, 1977.
- *Travels with Charley: In Search of America*, Viking, 1962, reprinted, Penguin, 1980.
- *Letters to Alicia* (collection of newspaper columns written as a correspondent in

- Vietnam), [Garden City, NJ], 1965.
- *America and Americans* (description of travels in United States), Viking, 1966.
 - *Journal of a Novel: The "East of Eden" Letters*, Viking, 1969.
 - *Steinbeck: A Life in Letters* (collection of correspondence), edited by wife, Elaine Steinbeck, and Robert Wallsten, Viking, 1975.
 - *The Acts of King Arthur and His Noble Knights: From the Winchester Manuscripts of Thomas Malory and Other Sources*, edited by Chase Horton, Farrar, Straus, 1976.
 - *The Collected Poems of Amnesia Glasscock* (poems published by Steinbeck under pseudonym Amnesia Glasscock in *Monterey Beacon*, January-February, 1935), Manroot Books (San Francisco), 1976.
 - *Letters to Elizabeth: A Selection of Letters from John Steinbeck to Elizabeth Otis*, edited by Florian J. Shasky and Susan F. Kiggs, Book Club of California (San Francisco), 1978.
 - *Working Days: The Journals of the Grapes of Wrath*, edited by Robert DeMott, Penguin, 1989.
 - *America and Americans and Selected Nonfiction*, Viking, 2002.

Short stories and short novels have appeared in numerous anthologies. Author of syndicated column written during tour of Vietnam, 1966-67. Contributor of numerous short stories, essays, and articles to popular magazines and periodicals.

Media Adaptions:

Several of Steinbeck's works have been adapted for films, the stage, and television. *The Grapes of Wrath*, with Henry Fonda, was filmed by Twentieth Century-Fox in 1940. A film version of *Of Mice and Men*, starring Burgess Meredith and Lon Cheney, was produced by United Artists in 1939; in 1970 it premiered as an opera, adapted by Carlisle Floyd, at the Seattle Opera House, and was also adapted as a teleplay by E. Nick Alexander; in 1981 it was again adapted as a teleplay, directed by Reza Badiyi; and in 1992 it was remade as a MGM film and starred Gary Sinise and John Malkovich. *Tortilla Flat*, featuring Spencer Tracy, was filmed by Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer in 1942. *The Moon is Down*, produced by Twentieth Century-Fox in 1943, starred Sir Cedric Hardwicke and Lee J. Cobb. *East of Eden*, with James Dean and Jo Van Fleet, who won an Oscar for her performance, was filmed by Warner Brothers in 1954, and was later made into a television mini-series; it was also adapted into a musical, "Here's Where I Belong," which opened at the Billy Rose Theatre, in 1968. "Pipe Dream," a 1955 musical adapted by Oscar Hammerstein II, with music by Richard Rogers, was based on Steinbeck's *Sweet Thursday*. Twentieth Century-Fox produced *The Wayward Bus* in 1957. The National Broadcasting Co. has produced the following works for television: *America and Americans*, 1967, and *Travels with Charley*, 1968, both narrated by Henry Fonda; "The Harness," a story from *The Pastures of Heaven*, was televised in 1971 and featured Lorne Greene; *The Red Pony*, starring Henry Fonda and Maureen O'Hara, was shown in 1973. *Cannery Row* was adapted as a film starring Nick Nolte and Debra

Winger by Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1982. *Of Mice and Men* was adapted as CD-Rom by Byron Preiss Multimedia and Penguin USA (New York), 1995. It includes critical commentary by Steinbeck scholars, period music, video clips, scenes from the 1992 film version, and interviews with the author's widow.

Sidelights:

Throughout his long and controversial career, John Steinbeck extolled the virtues of the American dream while he warned against what he believed to be the evils of an increasingly materialistic American society. Although his subject and style varied with each book, the themes of human dignity and compassion, and the sense of what a *Time* critic called "Steinbeck's vision of America," remained constant. Steinbeck was a uniquely American novelist, the critics contended, whose distrust and anger at society was offset by his faith and love for the land and its people. Of his seventeen novels, *The Grapes of Wrath* is perhaps the best example of Steinbeck's philosophy, perception, and impact. It is Steinbeck's "strongest and most durable novel," the *Time* reviewer commented, "a concentration of Steinbeck's artistic and moral vision." It was also the only one of Steinbeck's many novels to win the prestigious Pulitzer Prize, in 1940.

Published in 1939, *The Grapes of Wrath* is a novel of social protest that caused a furor of both praise and denunciation. Although many protest novels appeared during the 1930s, none was as widely read nor as effective as Steinbeck's.

According to Daniel Aaron, Steinbeck possessed a "special combination of marketable literary talent, sense of historical timing, eye for the significant subject, and power of identification," that made the book "the first of the Thirties protest novels to be read on a comparable scale with ... best-selling novels." Peter Lisca recalled the impact of this combination: "*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." Written during the Depression, *The Grapes of Wrath* concerns the Joad family and their forced migration from the Dust Bowl of Oklahoma to what they had been told was "the land of promise," California. What they find, however, is a land of waste, corruption, and poverty. Expecting to find work, decent wages, and a chance to someday acquire their own land, they are instead introduced to a system of degrading migrant labor camps, menial wages, and near starvation. F. W. Watt commented: "The Paradise in front of them is a fallen world, ... the place they have reached is as filled with suffering as the place from which they have fled. The subtle but relentless stages by which the realisation comes makes the irony all the more intense--to hear and gradually understand the term 'Okies' and to know that they are Okies; to realise that 'Hooverville'--any and every rough camp on a town's outskirts or garbage dump, named as an ironical tribute to the President who saw prosperity just around the corner--Hooverville was their home; to discover that the rich lands all around them are owned and controlled by large impersonal companies; to be hired for daily wages that barely cover the day's food, then to have those wages cut, and finally to be beaten and driven off at a sign of protest."

Shortly after the publication of his first major success, *Of Mice and Men* and prior to penning *The Grapes of Wrath*, Steinbeck left for Oklahoma. There he joined a

group of farmers embarking for California. For two years Steinbeck lived and worked with the migrants, seeking to lend authenticity to his account and to deepen his understanding of their plight. Steinbeck originally wrote about the plight of the migrant workers in a series of seven articles commissioned by *The San Francisco News* and published between October 5 and 12, 1936. These were brought together in an activist pamphlet, noted Jack Miles in the *Los Angeles Times Book Review*, published by the Simon J. Lubin Society of California in 1938 and republished more recently under Steinbeck's original title as *The Harvest Gypsies: On the Road to the Grapes of Wrath*.

According to Nicolaus Mills in his article for *The Nation*, in order to find material for his articles "Steinbeck traveled the California back roads in an old bakery truck." He was guided by the manager of a Federal Resettlement Administration's migrant labor camp whom he later used as the model for the manager of the Weedpatch camp in *The Grapes of Wrath*. Mills remarked that *The Harvest Gypsies* "contains some of Steinbeck's best journalism.... Unlike Agee and Orwell, Steinbeck did not make himself a central character in his writing. Rather...[he] was content to remain in the background and be a filter for his material. And what a filter! We may forget Steinbeck's presence...but we don't forget the sights the stark modesty of his prose conveys." William Kennedy, in his review for the *New York Times Book Review*, called the effort "a straightaway documentary: flat, narration of dismally depressing detail on the lives of immigrants, coupled to Steinbeck's informed and sensitive plea for change." "Even then," noted a *Bloomsbury Review* critic "it was evident that the last of these articles was only the beginning of a much larger battle."

At the end of 1937, Steinbeck first attempted to gain broader support and sympathy for the migrants' condition in a novel entitled *The Oklahomans*, which he abandoned early on. He followed that attempt with *L'Affaire Lettuceberg*, a satire that Steinbeck destroyed because he felt that it failed to promote understanding and came dangerously close to ridiculing the very people he wanted to help. "To make their story convincing, he had to report their lives with fidelity," Aaron explained, and Watt noted that Steinbeck's "personal involvement was intimate and his sympathies were strongly aroused by the suffering and injustice he saw at first hand." Critics contended that this combination of concern, first-hand knowledge, and commitment produced what a reviewer for the *London Times* termed "one of the most arresting [novels] of its time."

Steinbeck's journals, kept while maintaining the 2,000 words per day goal he had set for himself over the five month period in which he wrote *The Grapes of Wrath*, were published under the title *Working Days: The Journals of the Grapes of Wrath*. They "contain almost no meditations on the process of conceiving and embodying characters and themes but confine themselves largely to the actual working days and hours of a novel': what time [Steinbeck] sits down to write, how much he hopes to accomplish, and sometimes whether or not he did it," stated Robert Murray Davis in *World Literature Today*. "However, the journals do reveal a good deal about Steinbeck's cast of mind and working habits." In this sense, Davis commented, "*Working Days* should prove consoling to all writers who have similar problems and doubts." A reviewer for *Time* wrote, "the fascination of this

document rests in its portrait of an artist at the peak of his skills." Despite his tremendous daily output--"enormous...for any writer and ultimately a daily tour de force" noted Kennedy---Steinbeck was plagued by self-doubt and berated himself for laziness. Kennedy added that "[*The Grapes of Wrath*] would be [Steinbeck's] ninth work of fiction in 10 years, and he would be 37 years old at its publication." One of the most prevalent themes in *The Grapes of Wrath* is the misuse and waste of lives and land. "The real power of *The Grapes of Wrath* is the savage anger at the impersonal process that uproots men from the land and rapes it, substituting rattletraps and highways for place and kindred," Nancy L. McWilliams and Wilson C. McWilliams wrote. Steinbeck was appalled at an economic system that, having collapsed, bankrupted and forced thousands of farmers from work on their own land to work on massive and impersonal farms concerned only with profit. On these highly productive "agricultural `factories,'" Aaron contended, the migrants "slaved and starved." Watt elaborated: "Here the land is not sick, but the system that is supposed to distribute the land's fruitfulness has broken down, and so in the midst of plenty men are starving: produce is being destroyed because it will not fetch the price of marketing, while the starving watch." Steinbeck saw this "large-scale commercial and industrial exploitation of the land" as the end of "pioneer ideals," Watt commented. He opposed the continued growth of powerful private interest groups, such as "the growers and their ... financial allies," Aaron explained, at the expense of individual rights and dignity. "The Okies have had their ramshackle but cherished homes snatched away from them by the insatiable behemoth of big-scale agriculture," John S. Kennedy wrote. "What is wrong with this, it is suggested, is not the pooling of hundreds of family-farms, but the fact of the alien ownership of the amalgam." Steinbeck advocated what Aaron described as a "cooperative commonwealth" attitude, a return to "neighborly interdependence."

Certain groups, however, misinterpreted this message and charged Steinbeck with writing a Communist tract. "Publicists for the big California growers and the right-wing press denounced [*The Grapes of Wrath*] as a pack of lies," Aaron reported. "Spokesmen for the Association Farmers, incorporated in 1934 to combat unionism and other `subversive activities,' accused Steinbeck of writing a brief for Communism."

In reality, Steinbeck "was a conservative, a man who valued and even clung to the old America," McWilliams and McWilliams noted. What he wrote, Aaron remarked, was "the insider's plea to the popular conscience, not a call for revolution." While Steinbeck criticized what he believed were evil and immoral institutions, he offered what critics contended was an optimistic picture of the American ideal. He presented the migrants as the "preservers of the old American verities, innocent of bourgeois proprieties, perhaps, but courteous, trusting, friendly, and generous," Aaron commented. "What preserved them in the end, and what would preserve all America, was a recovery of a neighborly interdependence that an acquisitive society had almost destroyed." Although Steinbeck recorded "the symptoms of his sick society," Aaron continued, "[he] did not regard himself as one of its gravediggers."

In *The Grapes of Wrath*, as well as in his other novels, Steinbeck took a

"biological view" towards man. He did not look for the causes or motives behind a given situation. Instead, he sought to objectively observe the actuality of a situation rather than what that situation could or should have been. Frederick Bracher described this as "a way of looking at things characteristic of a biologist." Because he held a biological view of man, Steinbeck believed that the evolutionary concepts of adaption and "survival of the fittest" applied to men as well as animals. "The ability to adapt to new conditions is one of man's most valuable biological attributes, and the loss of it might well lead to man's extinction," is an important concept in Steinbeck's work, according to Bracher. Although Steinbeck is sympathetic toward the migrants in *The Grapes of Wrath*, "he is not blind to [their] defects," Warren French noted. "He shows clearly that he writes about a group of thoughtless, impetuous, suspicious, ignorant people." As such, French suggested, they too are bound by the laws of nature and "must also change if they are to survive." Thus, French described the book as "a dynamic novel about people who learn that survival depends upon their adaptability to new conditions." Jackson L. Benson noticed an example of this evolutionary concept in *Of Mice and Men*, a short novel concerning two itinerant farm hands, George and Lennie. George, the "fittest" of the two, is compelled to shoot the strong but feeble-minded Lennie after the latter inadvertently kills their employer's daughter-in-law: "Lennie kills without malice--animals and people die simply because of his strength. Lennie himself must die simply because within the society of man he is an anomaly and weak."

The concept of "group-man" was another aspect of Steinbeck's biological view. This idea was later outlined in *Sea of Cortez*, Steinbeck's and marine biologist Ed Ricketts' account of their expedition to the Gulf of California. According to Peter Shaw: "The book took each day's observations of sea life as an occasion for the drawing of biological parallels with human society. The most striking parallel for Steinbeck was the seeming existence of a group instinct in man similar to that found in schools of fish and colonies of marine fauna. Man, Steinbeck suggested, ... could be regarded as a group phenomenon as well as an individual one. Accordingly, it might be possible to discover more about an individual by studying his behavior as it related to the group than by studying him in isolation."

Steinbeck took this premise one step further by suggesting that man as an individual has no identity and that mankind as a whole is the only reality. This idea is expressed by Doc Burton in Steinbeck's novel about a fruit picker's strike, *In Dubious Battle*: "I want to watch these group men, for they seem to me to be a new individual, not at all like single men. A man in a group isn't himself at all; he's a cell in an organism that isn't like him any more than the cells in your body are like you." Kennedy found the concept of group-man to be "the central point in Steinbeck's concept of life." He added: "Permeating his works is this idea, which is the very heart of his philosophy of life: that the concrete person is in himself virtually nothing, whereas the abstraction 'humanity' is all."

Throughout his work, Steinbeck maintains what R. W. B. Lewis called "a celebrational sense of *life*." This quality, critics have remarked, set him apart from his contemporaries and accounted for much of his popular appeal. "He has a generous indignation at the spectacle of human suffering," Walter Allen noted.

"But apart from this, he is the celebrant of life, any kind of life, just because it is life." Alfred Kazin claimed that while other Depression era authors "saw life as one vast Chicago slaughterhouse, a guerrilla war, a perpetual bomb raid," Steinbeck displayed "a refreshing belief in human fellowship and courage; he had learned to accept the rhythm of life." This is not to suggest, however, that Steinbeck held any unrealistically optimistic illusions. Kennedy noted: "He depicts human existence as conflict, unremitting and often savage battle. But he suggests that life is worth living, flagellant and baffling though it may be.... In a time when the prevalent note in creative literature is that of despondency and abandonment to malign fate, ... Steinbeck's assertion of the resiliency and tough durability of life has set him off from the generality."

Although Steinbeck possessed a "moving approach to human life," as Kazin described it, he was generally unsuccessful at bringing his characters to life. Reviewers frequently criticized his people for appearing to be manipulated, stage-like creations. "Nothing in his books is so dim, significantly enough, as the human beings who live in them," Kazin wrote, "and few of them are intensely imagined as human beings at all." Edmund Wilson found that the characters in *The Grapes of Wrath* "are animated and put through their paces rather than brought to life." He added: "They are like excellent character actors giving very conscientious performances in a fairly well-written play. Their dialect is well managed, but they always sound a little stagy."

Steinbeck's descriptive ability, on the other hand, has been widely praised. The *Time* critic contended that Steinbeck wrote with "cinematic clarity." Aaron compared the effects of the images and descriptions in *The Grapes of Wrath* to those rendered by a "camera eye." He found that the novel "unfolds cinematically almost as if Steinbeck had conceived of it as a documentary film."

Critics have suggested that Steinbeck's best novels are those set in his birthplace, northern California's Salinas Valley. "He was a Californian," McWilliams and McWilliams remarked, "and his writings never succeeded very well when he tried to walk alien soil." They defined his California as "a very special one, ... sleepy California that time passed by." Bruce Cook noted that while Steinbeck was "a writer of international reputation, he was almost a regionalist in his close concentration on the 50 miles or so of California that surrounded his birthplace. The farming towns up and down the Salinas Valley," Cook continued, "and the commercial fishing port of Monterey just a few miles across the mountains provided the settings for most of his best books."

Steinbeck often used this setting to stress his theme of the importance of the "relationship between man and his environment," Shaw claimed. "The features of the valley at once determined the physical fate of his characters and made symbolic comment on them." Moreover, while Steinbeck dwelled on the beauty and "fruitfulness" of the valley, he "did not make it a fanciful Eden," Shaw commented. "The river brought destructive floods as well as fertility, and the summer wind could blow hot for months without let-up." Thus, "Man struggled within a closed system that both formed and limited him; there he was responsible for his acts and yet unable to control the larger forces."

After *The Grapes of Wrath*, Steinbeck's reputation as a novelist began to decline.

Although his later works, such as *The Moon Is Down*, *East of Eden*, and *The Winter of Our Discontent*, have been public favorites and best sellers, they have also been considered critical disappointments. Too often, the reviewers contended, Steinbeck's later work is flawed by sentimentality, obvious symbolism, and the inability to achieve the power and statement of *The Grapes of Wrath*.

The first such novel to have provoked critical attack is *The Moon Is Down*. Published in 1942, it deals with a mythical European town and its invasion by what Watt described as a "totalitarian and inhumane power which arouses, instead of crushing, the desire of the conquered for freedom." The novel, most critics have agreed, is a thinly disguised account of Germany's occupation of Norway. It was written, according to Watt, "in the interest of the Office of Strategic Services in helping resistance movements in Occupied Europe. Steinbeck wrote the novel with the same sense of objectivity that had characterized his earlier work. He tried to present the Nazi-like characters as fully as possible; they are good as well as evil, strong as well as weak. In this instance, however, Steinbeck's objectivity worked against him. Kennedy explained: "His Nazi characters emerged as something like human beings, by no means admirable, but by no means demoniac either. For not making them intrinsically and uniformly monstrous, at a time when some of our most celebrated writers were trying to whip Americans up to a frenzy of indiscriminate hatred, Steinbeck was pilloried." Although at the novel's end the Europeans triumph over their enemy, Steinbeck was nevertheless accused, as French recalled, of being "soft toward the Nazis." Later critics, however, detached from the immediate tensions aroused by the war, found more serious fault with what French regarded as the novel's "artificiality."

East of Eden and *The Winter of Our Discontent* similarly fell short of critical expectations. The former, a biblical allegory of the Cain and Abel story, is considered Steinbeck's most ambitious novel. Yet the *Time* critic claimed that "the Biblical parallels of Cain and Abel are so relentlessly stenciled upon the plot that symbolized meaning threatens to overwhelm the narrative surface." *The Winter of Our Discontent*, Steinbeck's last novel, "is spoilt by sentimentality and the consequent evasion of the moral issues raised," the reviewer for the *London Times* remarked. "Steinbeck was unable in any of his later work to master the problems he seems to have set himself, and though several of his books were widely popular, they appeared too small an achievement to be worthy of the author of *The Grapes of Wrath*." Max Westbrook echoed this claim when he wrote: "The general feeling is that novels like *East of Eden* ... and *The Winter of Our Discontent* ... ought to be like *The Grapes of Wrath* but are not.... Neither novel comes to grips with the problems handled so courageously in *The Grapes of Wrath*."

French blamed these later failures on the popular and critical reaction to *Cannery Row*. Written after the war, the novel is a satire "on contemporary American life with its commercialised values, its ruthless creed of property and status, and its relentlessly accelerating pace," according to Watt. For the most part, however, the novel has been misread as lighthearted, escapist fare. French commented:

"Another letter of advice to an erring world; but, as had happened before, the advice went not only unheeded but unperceived. After this, Steinbeck was to strain to make his points clear to the reader; and as he belabored his points, the quality of his fiction suffered."

In 1962, Steinbeck was awarded the Nobel Prize, an honor that many believed "had been earned by his early work," noted the London *Times* critic, rather than for his later efforts. Several reviewers, however, thought this attitude was unjust. Watt, for example, offered this assessment: "Like America itself, his work is a vast, fascinating, paradoxical universe: a brash experiment in democracy; a naive quest for understanding at the level of the common man; a celebration of goodness and innocence; a display of chaos, violence, corruption and decadence. It is no neatly-shaped and carefully-cultivated garden of artistic perfections, but a sprawling continent of discordant extremes." Shaw was seemingly in agreement when he wrote: "When one begins to talk about the shape of a career rather than about single books, one is talking about a major writer. Steinbeck used to complain that reviewers said each new book of his showed a falling-off from his previous one, yet they never specified the height from which his apparently steady decline had begun. What he was noticing was the special kind of concern for a grand design that readers feel when they pick up the book of a writer whose career seems in itself to be a comment on the times."

Steinbeck's books have appeared in translations around the world.

Obituary and Other Sources: **PERIODICALS**

- *Antiquarian Bookman*, January 6-8, 1969.
- *Books Abroad*, spring, 1969.
- *Current Biography*, February, 1969.
- *Newsweek*, December 30, 1968.
- *New York Times*, December 21, 1968.
- *Publishers Weekly*, December 30, 1968.
- *Time*, December 27, 1968.
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Introduction

A Nobel Prize laureate and widely popular novelist, [John Steinbeck](#) is

among the most enduring American authors of the twentieth century. Best known for *Of Men and Mice* (1937), *East of Eden* (1952), and his Pulitzer prize-winning masterpiece *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), Steinbeck is distinguished for his lucid prose, engaging naturalistic descriptions, forceful symbolism, and examination of the myth of America as Edenic paradise. Sympathetic to the plight of the impoverished and downtrodden, his Depression-era fiction offers poignant depiction of socioeconomic conditions and human realities in the American West during the 1930s. Though controversial for the overt socialist views evinced in much of his work, he continues to receive critical acclaim for his best-selling novels, several of which were adapted into successful motion pictures and plays. The distinctly American perspective and journalistic realism of Steinbeck's social protest novels struck an emotional chord with the reading public and exerted an important influence on contemporary literature.

Biographical Information

Born in California's Salinas Valley, which serves as the backdrop for much of his work, Steinbeck was one of four children of Olive Hamilton Steinbeck, a teacher, and John Ernst Steinbeck II, the treasurer of Monterey County. Steinbeck intermittently attended Stanford University for five years but never received a degree. During and after college he worked variously as a reporter, bricklayer, surveyor, store clerk, ranch hand, and laborer. These jobs, particularly the time spent working for the Spreckels Sugar Company during a period of worker unrest, served as the crucible in which Steinbeck formed his pro-labor views. In 1930 Steinbeck met Edward F. Ricketts, a marine biologist whose theories influenced Steinbeck's developing "biological" world view of mankind. After seven rejections, Steinbeck published his first book, *Cup of Gold* (1929), a historical novel based on the life of Henry Morgan, a seventeenth-century buccaneer. He followed with *The Pastures of Heaven* (1932) and *To a God Unknown* (1933). From 1933 to 1936, Steinbeck and his first wife, Carol Henning, lived in Pacific Grove, California. During this time, Steinbeck often visited Ricketts at his laboratory on Cannery Row in Monterey and later fictionalized the experience in *Cannery*

Row (1945). Steinbeck became known to the American public in 1935 with the publication of *Tortilla Flat* (1935), which was a best-seller. His meeting with two union organizers in 1934 led to *In Dubious Battle* (1936), a novel about labor unrest in a California orchard. Soon afterward Steinbeck wrote a series of articles for the *San Francisco News* about the mass exodus of thousands of migrants from the Dust Bowl to California. This experience led to *The Grapes of Wrath*, for which he was awarded the Pulitzer Prize the next year. In 1943, he married his second wife, Gwyndolyn Conger, with whom he had two children. During the Second World War, Steinbeck went overseas as a war correspondent for the *New York Herald-Tribune* and wrote propaganda pieces for the United States government, including the novel *The Moon is Down* (1942), which he adapted as a play, and *Bombs Away* (1942), a non-fiction work about the U.S. Air Force. In 1948 Steinbeck suffered a double loss--his friend Ricketts was killed and his second wife left him. The emotional strain affected his work and he published nothing until two years later, when he married Elaine Scott and produced *Burning Bright* (1950), a study of a troubled marriage, followed by *East of Eden*. Steinbeck received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1962. He died of a heart attack in New York City in 1968.

Major Works

Noted for his descriptions of the search for the American dream and sympathy for the plight of the working class, Steinbeck's works typically describe ordinary **men** and women who come close to achieving greatness only when faced with a trial that requires them to join with others for the greater good. Steinbeck's brand of literature, mixed with social commentary, was influenced by his teleological view of people as parts of a larger whole who must work in concert to improve the lot of humanity. In *Tortilla Flat*, the first of many novels set in the Salinas Valley, a group of paisanos form an Arthurian round table and experience several serio-comic adventures. They attempt to escape a materialistic society but in the end their pursuits are not enough to hold the brotherhood together and it dissolves. "*The Red Pony*," (1937) a group of four stories in the short-story collection *The*

Long Valley (1938), is a coming-of-age story about Jody, a boy who learns about birth, life, and death through his experiences with a colt given to him by his father which sickens and dies; his contact with an old man who lives on his father's ranch and leaves in order to die in the mountains; the death of a mare who dies while giving birth to a colt; and his interaction with his aging grandfather. Another initiation story, "Flight," involves a boy who commits murder in a fit of rage and achieves manhood in an aborted attempt to escape the law in the mountains. *Of Mice and Men*, which Steinbeck later made into a highly successful play, involves George and Lennie, two ranch hands who hope to escape the ranch for a place of their own where they can live an idyllic existence. George watches out for the simple-minded Lennie, a grown-up child who doesn't understand his own strength and cuddles mice and puppies to death. Their dreams of escape are destroyed when Lennie accidentally kills the ranch owner's wife and George must shoot him to prevent an angry mob from brutally murdering him. *The Grapes of Wrath*, Steinbeck's most famous work, chronicles the exodus of the Joad family, led by the matriarch Ma Joad, from the Dust Bowl to the supposed Eden of California. They are joined by Jim Casy, a Christ archetype who sparks their evolution from a self-contained, self-involved family unit to a part of the migrant community which must work together for the greater good. Steinbeck alternates the Joads's story with intercalary chapters illustrating the conditions faced by the migrant group during their forced flight. During the course of their travels, the family's grandmother and grandfather die and Rose of Sharon, the Joads's married and pregnant daughter, is deserted by her husband. The Joads make their way to California only to become exploited workers in a migrant camp. Casy tries to organize the workers and is murdered by thugs who work for the farm owners. Finally, the migrants face a disastrous flood, during which Rose of Sharon's baby is stillborn. In the ultimate affirmation of the Joads's recognition of their membership in the human family, Rose of Sharon gives her breast milk to a starving migrant man in order to save his life. Steinbeck intended *East of Eden*, an epic retelling of the Cain and Abel story, to be his masterpiece. It chronicles the stories of the Trask family and his real-life mother's family, the Hamiltons. Adam Trask marries Cathy Ames, a cold, malevolent woman who deserts Adam and her twin sons, Cal and Aron, who grapple for their father's favor and attention. When Aron, the innocent son, discovers his mother's true nature it destroys

him, while Cal realizes he is free to choose between good and evil. Steinbeck's last novel, *The Winter of Our Discontent* (1961), indicts American society for its focus on materialism and individual's disregard for the family of man. Shortly afterwards he published *Travels With Charley* (1962), an account of his cross-country peregrinations with his poodle, Charley.

Critical Reception

Critical assessment of Steinbeck's work varied widely throughout his career and was often influenced by its political content. Some critics expressed surprise when the Nobel Prize Committee honored Steinbeck in 1962, many years after his literary star had fallen. While many reviewers praised Steinbeck's optimistic view of humanity and its quest for improvement and redemption, others claimed that his characters, especially women, were largely one-dimensional and symbolic. Steinbeck is renowned for the clarity of his natural descriptions, especially those of his native California, which pervade his most effective work. Much critical attention is directed at the prominent sociological concerns, allegorical motifs, themes of initiation, and Christian archetypes in his novels. His most successful fiction, particularly *Of Mice and Men* and *The Grapes of Wrath*, is praised by most for its universality, though faulted by others for excessive sentimentalism and melodrama. Reception of *The Grapes of Wrath* was distorted because the book caused a maelstrom of political controversy due to its castigation of agribusiness and the governmental system that contributed to the Dust Bowl predicament. The press and politicians attempted to discredit Steinbeck's book, accusing him of socialist sympathies. As a result *The Grapes of Wrath* became one of the most commonly banned books in America. Critics were disappointed with his post-*Grapes of Wrath* work, particularly after the publication of *East of Eden*. Most considered Steinbeck's attempts to experiment with the literary form in *East of Eden* to be a failure. They denounced the uneven structure, obvious symbolism, and flat characterization. Though Steinbeck's reputation was in decline when he died, he remains one of the most widely read and anthologized American writers of the twentieth century.

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- *Nothing So Monstrous* (short stories) 1936
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- *Of **Mice** and **Men*** (novel) 1937
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FURTHER READINGS ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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