Steinbeck Essay, Research Paper

John Ernst Steinbeck was an American author, famous for his novels concerning the poor and the oppressed Californian farmers and laborers of the 1930’s and 1940’s, who were victimized by industry and finance. His most famous novel, The Grapes of Wrath, won the 1940 Pulitzer Prize. His main themes involved the struggles of the poor and the oppressed to survive in modern society, and the confrontation between man and his destiny.1 Steinbeck wrote 17 novels, numerous short stories, several plays, and some nonfiction . He won the Nobel prize for literature in 1962.2

John Steinbeck was born February 27, 1902, in Salinas, California. Salinas is in a fertile agricultural valley about 25 miles from the Pacific Coast. His childhood was spent in California near Monterey. The Salinas area provided the setting for most of his fiction. He was an intelligent, sensitive boy and spent much time exploring nature.3 His parents were of German and Irish parentage. They were neither rich not poor, but lived a comfortable existence in Salinas.4 His father, John Ernst, a county treasurer, was sympathetic to his son’s wanting to become a writer.5 His mother, Olive Ernst (nee Hamilton), was a schoolteacher and did much to encourage him to read. He was provided with an extensive library at home1 and spent much of his time reading when he was not outside exploring nature.

All his childhood schooling was in the Salinas area. He graduated from Salinas High School in 1919.2 He had been president of his senior class, active on both the track and basketball teams, and had wrote for the El Gabilan, the Salinas High School paper. 3 After graduation, he attended Stanford University in California. He was a special student from 1919-1925. Steinbeck off and on took courses in literature and courses in writing, but he earned less than half the required credits,4 and did not receive a degree from Stanford. He left school in November of 1925 for New York City. He hoped to become a writer but was he was soon back in California.5

Steinbeck was a very private person and his married life seems sketchy in most profiles. He married Carol Henning in 1930 and they were divorced in 1943. He next married Gwyn Conger, who was a writer, singer, and composer, on March 29, 1943, but they were divorced in 1948. He had two children, Tom and John, in this marriage. He married one more time, this time to Elaine Scott on December 29, 1950. He stayed married til he died on December 20, 1968, in New York City.1

John Steinbeck had a very varied job description by the time he made it as a writer. Constantly doing various odd, occasional jobs to support himself, he managed to be a rancher, road worker, deck hand, cotton picker,2 hod-carrier, fruit-picker, apprentice painter, laboratory assistant, caretaker, surveyor, reporter, and writer. 3 These various odd jobs supplied him with much of the material for his early novels and his observations lent authenticity and realism to the working men and their women in his stories.

Aside from being a writer of books, Steinbeck held other writing jobs during his career as a writer. These writing jobs include that of a Foreign correspondent in North Africa and Italy for the New York Herald Tribune, in 1943. He was also a special writer for the United States Army Air Forces, during World War II. He later became a correspondent in Vietnam for Newday from 1966-1967. Over the years he was also a contributor of numerous short stories, essays, and articles to popular magazines and periodicals. 4

John Steinbeck received many awards, honors and recognition for his work. He received the General Literature Gold Medal from the Commonwealth Club of California three times: in 1936, for Tortilla Flat, in 1937, for Of Mice and Men, and in 1940, for Grapes of Wrath. The New York Drama critics Circle Award was awarded to him in 1938, for the play, "Of Mice and Men". The coveted and prestigious Pulitzer Prize in novel was given to him in 1940, for The Grapes of Wrath. He got Academy Award (Oscar) nominations for best original story, Academy of Motion picture Arts and Sciences in 1944 , for "Lifeboat" and in 1945, for "A Medal for Benny". The Nobel Prize for literature was awarded to Steinbeck in 1962. And the Paperback of the Year Award, Best Sellers , was awarded to him in 1964, for Travels with Charley: In Search of America.1

Steinbeck’s first novel, Cup of Gold, was published in 1929. The story was about the pirate Sir Henry Morgan and had a Faustian theme. Steinbeck believed it was the only book of his that could be filmed (later proved wrong, of course) because it had all the elements of a Hollywood historical extravaganza.2 This novel attracted little attention. Today it is not widely read. It is not considered one of his good works.

His next venture was Pastures of Heaven, published in 1932.

It was a collection of related stories of loosely interlocked episodes in the life of a small rural community. It portrays people of a farm community near Salinas and shows their love of the land. He begins to show a preoccupation with ordinary people of his area. This book was followed by To a God Unknown in 1933. This was a symbolic novel about man’s mystic relationship to the universe. He dealt with man’s need for rituals and man’s need to find meaning somehow to the many and various situations that he has no control.1

It wasn’t until he published Tortilla Flat in 1935 that he gained a wide audience. This novel is an account of an unconventional Spanish community in Monterey, California. It was about the colorful and unique Spanish-speaking "paisanos" in Monterey, and was a humorous depiction of life among the raffish idlers who later reappeared in Cannery Row, 1945, The Wayward Bus, 1947, and Sweet Thursday, 1954. These people create their own distinct community, in rebellion against the commercial and materialistic values of society. Steinbeck vividly describes the life of the migrants and the poor farmers. Finally the critics gave this work serious attention. This piece of work brought him popular success and financial security.2 This was followed by Dubious Battle, published in1936. This story deals with the violent labor strikes in California during the 1930’s, of the clashes between the California fruit growers and the migrant workers. Steinbeck shows his liberal political views expressing sympathy for the plight and treatment of the strikers. This

book was a study of the way in which the compulsive behavior of a group may threaten its own survival.1 Steinbeck tried to make a meaningful pattern out of the behavior of exploited men who were not able to speak for themselves. Some critics believe this to be the finest strike novel written in America.2

In 1937, Steinbeck published Of Mice and Men. He wanted to write a novel as nearly like a play as he could….it was transformed to Broadway stage almost intact, as well as to the screen. This novel/play tells of the tragic friendship between two migrant farm workers. He created an allegory of self-determination and need…. a parable…no life is unworthy of reverence…"life must be sacred even to a man who is obliged to destroy in order to save".3 It was a compact and deceptively simple novelette about a tragic friendship. It was a work full of symbolism. Of Mice and Men was an immediate popular success with great financial rewards for Steinbeck. It appeared on best-seller lists, it was a Book-of-the-Month Club selection, and it was sold to Hollywood. Of Mice and Men opened on the New York stage on November 23, 1937 and won great critical and popular acclaim. Steinbeck won the Drama Critics’ Circle Award for

stage drama.1

This was followed by The Red Pony, which was published in 1937. The critics considered this novella to be a sensitive, beautiful fable, written in a lyrical style. It also was sold to Hollywood. The next book he published was The Long Valley in 1938. This was a collection of short stories including those published separately in 1937 as The Red Pony. The best was yet to come.2

The Grapes of Wrath was published in 1939, and became Steinbecks most famous novel and won Steinbeck the Pulitzer prize in 1940. This was a novel of social protest that caused a furor of both praise and denunciation. It was inspired by his accompanying of several migrant workers to California and then living in the camps and experiencing what the workers were experiencing. Steinbeck got very close to his subject at hand. The Grapes of Wrath was about the poor Oklahoma farmers, Okies, from the Dust Bowl region of the Midwest, who migrated to California during the Great Depression of the 1930’s. The novel tells how the Joad family loses its farm through a bank foreclosure. The family then makes the difficult journey to California to start a new life in the land of promise. They find instead 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.1 The novel tells how they and other migrant families are mistreated by the police and various employers in California. It has the inevitability of a classic tragedy. It was at first thought to be about the economic crisis of the 1930’s, it was later thought that it portrays everyone’s search for human dignity. It became symbolic of the hardships of every victim of the Dust bowl or of hard times and summed up the bitterness of the Depression decade. This novel provoked a wide and shocked reaction.

"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 was read." 2

His later books, during World War II, while on assignments in Europe, were Bombs Away, 1942 and The Moon is Down, 1942.

The Moon is Down describes the military occupation of a fictional country in Europe. This novelette about the resistance movement in an occupied country was a thinly disguised account of Germany’s occupation of Norway. It was a controversial play-novelette, said to be a better play than novel.3

Cannery Row was published in 1945. Its structure was loose and episodic. It dealt with the materialism of modern civilization.

and was very critical of the greed and shortsighted materialistic morality underlying modern civilization today, as he saw it.

Cannery Row was criticized for its sentimental and inadequate philosophy, glorifying the weakness of mind and the degeneration of character that the critics saw in his work.1

The Pearl was published in 1947. It started out as a motion-picture script in Mexico in 1945. It was later redone as a long magazine story and then later published into book form. Again, Steinbeck was critical of the materialism of modern civilization. He does this with an elaboration of a Mexican fable – a parable…. good and evil, black and white….with no in-between. He creates a touching story of good in desperate struggle with evil.2

The Wayward Bus was published in 1947. It was a satire on the modern business man. It affirmed a man’s inherent goodness and faith in his triumphs over evil.3

In 1952, he published East of Eden. This was a realistic and symbolic story about the need for love and understanding among people. It stressed the ability man has to choose between good and evil. It was parable poem, and tale of action all in one. It finds a meeting ground for physical and spiritual adventure, exploring each one.1 In 1954, he returned to the world of Cannery Row with Sweet Thursday and in 1957 he did a political satire on modern French politics called, The Short Reign of Pippin IV. 2

The Winter of Our Discontent was published in 1961, and led to his winning of the Nobel Prize in 1962. This was a realistic story about morality in a suburban community. It was a novel of social protest, presenting,"a crisis in the life of a man of sensibility, intelligence, and humor who undertakes willfully to live by the code of a modern buccaneer."3 Steinbeck is trying to show how false the values of society may be.4

Steinbeck followed this with Travels with Charley in 1962. This book is autobiographical and describes a trip across America in a pickup truck with his pet poodle, named Charley. It was an experiment in self-discovery and an effort to rediscover America.5

The Acts of King Arthur and His Noble Knights was posthumously published in 1976. It is a retelling of the King Arthur stories by Sir Thomas Mallory. This was something he had always wanted to do, making the tales available in present-day speech for all to read and understand, and to love as much as he did.1

Many of his books have bee written as screenplays and become movies: Grapes of Wrath, with Henry Fonda, filmed by Twentieth century-Fox Film Corp. 1940; Of Mice and Men, starring burgess Meredith and Lon Chaney, was produced by United Artists in 1939; Tortilla Flat, featuring Spencer Tracy, was filmed by Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer in 1942; The Moon is Down, starred Sir Cedric Hardwicke and Lee J. Cobb, produced by Twentieth Century-Fox Film Corp, in 1943; East of Eden, starring James Dean and Jo Van Fleet, who won an Oscar for her performance, was filmed by Warner Bros. in 1954; The Red Pony, starring Henry Fonda and Maureen O’Harra, 1973; The Pearl; The Forgotten Village;

and Viva Zapata! 2

Over the years, critic have had much to say about his work. Many believe his earlier work (in the 1930’s) was better than his later work. Many saw his work loaded with liberal views and sympathy for the downtrodden. Many felt that the naturalism and sociological preoccupation of much of his early work gave way in his mature years to a deeper view of human life, and renewed critical interest revealed elements of allegory in his finest work. Some saw his work as having a lyric quality. Others felt that his best work came out of his indignation at injustice and his admiration for the poor.

"His performance from the start was accomplished and professional: his books were carefully designed according to artistic principles of his own. The results were often moving, always disturbing, and in several instances strikingly impressive." 1

He seemed always to begin anew, indicating a lack of direction.2 He was a storyteller of persuasive power, always creating new worlds, fitting no particular genre.

" His best work dramatizes the plight of man – now tragically, now humorously, with the aid of challenge, irony, homely eloquence, as subtle insight – as he indomitably struggles to make his environment a protective garment, not a hair-cloth shirt."3

Some of his early critics saw him as a naive natural genius with limited resources and skill who occasionally did good work; while others saw him as " a stylist of originality and grace, disciplined, with figurative language using his own metaphors."4

Some do not like Steinbeck because he does not see the world as they see it and does not tell them what they wish to hear. His novels are easy to read and one often misses what is beneath the surface.5 But on one thing they have all agreed: he was always aware of mankind’s weakness, frustrations, failures, etc…but was always the artist.

Steinbeck was called many things: naturalist, a mystic, a primitive, a leftist, an incurable bourgeois, man of symbols and man of simplicities, a sadist, an adolescent. He was criticized for not getting enough out of his material, for loading it with too much significance; for thinking too much, for thinking too little. Obviously John Steinbeck work is complex and does not fit well into a neat little mold.

Steinbeck saw the world as having problems. He liked to depict these problems in his stories. He had a realistic concept of society and he reflected the quality of contemporary American life in his works.1 He dramatized the plight of man as they worked out their problems with the environment. He felt that man should be the beneficiary of his institutions, and not its victim.

Steinbeck did not seem to enjoy public attention and he hated to speak.2 On the subject of public attention, he said:

"Everything the people admires, it destroys, it imposes a personality on him(the artist) it thinks he should have."3

On the subject of best sellers he had very strong opinions:

"I hope that doesn"t happen to me. A single best-seller can ruin a writer forever," and "I simply can’t write books if a consciousness of self is thrust upon me." 3

On popularity:

"It has ruined everyone I know."1

Among the people who have read his works, most seem to agree that his best works were written in the 1930’s and 1940’s. Many critics say that Steinbeck was a unique American novelist who had a fascination for the land and it’s people. Throughout his career, he wrote about the virtues of the American dream and warned off the evils of American society. "My whole work drive has been aimed at making people understand each other."2 John Ernst Steinbeck was one of the most renowned American authors to have lived, and his stories still live with us today.

John Steinbeck

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JOHN STEINBECK

AN AMERICAN AUTHOR

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