

Friday, Dec. 27, 1968

Books: John Steinbeck, 1902-1968

THIS monster of a land," he wrote in 1962, "this mightiest of nations, this spawn of the future, turns out to be the macrocosm of microcosm me."

John Ernst Steinbeck always did have a talent for enlargement. Yet when he died of heart disease in Manhattan last week at 66, Steinbeck left behind a body of novels, short stories, plays and film scripts that were less a spawn of the future than a moral—and often moralizing—record from his special compartment in the nation's past.

Those who lived through the late '30s retain a particular fondness for the books that he wrote then. But the generation of the '60s knows Steinbeck's works less readily as the celebrations of the land and the common folk that his contemporaries once found them. Perhaps appropriately—for he wrote with a cinematic clarity—Steinbeck's vision of America is most frequently glimpsed today in late-show reruns of *The Grapes of Wrath* or *East of Eden*. His literary heritage has been to summon up a sort of vivid, brittle nostalgia, and one tends to read his books now with the same bemused affection with which one watches the old Henry Fonda version of *Grapes*. It was precisely this quality of painful and wistful tenderness that Bonnie and Clyde conjured up in its visions, shot through gauze, of migrant Okies offering brief help to the murderers.

Critic Alfred Kazin suggests that "at bottom Steinbeck's gift was not so much a literary resource as a distinctively harmonious and pacific view of life. The Depression naturalists saw life as one vast Chicago slaughterhouse, a guerrilla war, a perpetual bombing raid. Steinbeck had picked up a refreshing belief in human fellowship and courage: he had learned to accept the rhythm of life."

When Steinbeck in 1962 became the sixth American author to win the Nobel Prize,* he was well past the crest of his powers, even though the committee in Stockholm professed to admire especially *The Winter of Our Discontent*, published in 1961. The novel was a 311-page allegory, set on Long Island, an unaccustomed territory for Steinbeck, and was written to portray the contamination of the nation's moral standards and beliefs.

Urbanity of Psyche. The critical derision that greeted the award from many quarters was rather unjust. When he was asked if he thought that he deserved the honor, Steinbeck replied: "Frankly, no." Yet, as Edmund Wilson observed in an otherwise critical essay: "There remains behind the journalism, the theatricalism and the tricks, a mind which does seem first-rate in its unpanicky scrutiny of life."

Of Steinbeck's 16 novels, *The Grapes of Wrath* was the strongest and most durable. It suffered from the flaws that Critic Maxwell Geismar found in much of his writing: "Simplification has been the source of his inspiration. Handling complex material rather too easily, he has been marked by the popularizing gift. Here is an urbanity of psyche bought a little easily." His eighth novel, the book was published in 1939, after Steinbeck made the westward pilgrimage with a caravan of Oklahoma farmers. Part exposé, part tract, *Grapes* was a concentration of Steinbeck's artistic and moral vision.

National Verities. Like Norman Thomas and Upton Sinclair, Steinbeck rebelled against injustices precisely because of a profound faith in man's perfectibility. The epic journey of the Joads was a warning against the evils existing within the American system, but the migrants were presented as the actual guardians of all of the national verities: family loyalty, trust of neighbor, devotion to the land. Steinbeck's dogma was uncommonly wholesome for a radical of the '30s. Avoiding customary Communist clichés, he affirmed children, home, mother and young love. "Nothin' but us," says Ma Joad, "nothin' but the folks."

He was a superbly professional storyteller, but his work was at times flawed by facile allegorizing. In the preface to 1935's *Tortilla Flat*, an otherwise sharp and accurate novel of the innocent gaiety of the paisanos in Monterey, he wrote: "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." In 1952's *East of Eden*, the Biblical parallels of Cain and Abel are so relentlessly stenciled upon the plot that symbolized meaning threatens to overwhelm the narrative surface.

Allegorical Tendencies. Steinbeck was an emotional, sentimental, yet extraordinarily powerful writer who frequently mined his personal experiences for the material of his fiction. He was born in Salinas, Calif. The region figures in his novels and stories, including *East of Eden*, *Cannery Row* and *Of Mice and Men*. The son of a miller and a Salinas Valley schoolteacher, he played basketball as a youth and read such works as Malory's *Morte d'Arthur*, Milton's *Paradise Lost* and the Bible—tastes that accounted perhaps for his allegorical tendencies. He entered Stanford in 1920, but left after five years of intermittent attendance and no degree. In New York, he worked briefly for the American and was fired because he seemed incapable of recording facts without rhapsodizing or sermonizing. He then worked for a time as a hod carrier, returned to California and became a caretaker of a lodge in the Sierras. There he completed his first novel, *Cup of Gold*, which appeared in 1929.

Steinbeck published two other novels —*The Pastures of Heaven*, *To a God Unknown*—before *Tortilla Flat*, in 1935, became a bestseller. In *Dubious Battle*, dealing with an apple pickers' strike in California and the workers' exploitation by both capitalists and Communist organizers, further established his reputation, and *Of Mice and Men*, his fable of strength and weakness, solidified it. After 1940, however, Steinbeck produced only two major works —*East of Eden* and *The Winter of Our Discontent*—and neither equaled in power his work during the '30s.

He remained, nonetheless, a prolific writer, publishing *The Moon Is Down*, *Cannery Row*, *The Wayward Bus* and *A Russian Journal*. In 1962, feeling that he had perhaps lost touch with his nation, Steinbeck undertook a crosscountry trip in a camper, accompanied by his poodle named Charley. *Travels with Charley* became a bestseller, but it was, in the '60s of Norman Mailer, a somewhat bloodless travelogue. It reflected Steinbeck's traditional love of the land and anger at the society, but the criticism was mellow.

Edmund Wilson has observed that Steinbeck tended to diminish humans to the condition of animals, to reduce his characters to their simple biological needs and desires. His people were often stage Americans and cartooned folk. Yet if his stories "animalized" characters, they also animated them with the elemental life of their time and condition. The preacher in *The Grapes of Wrath* mumbles over Grandpa Joad's grave: "He was alive, an' that's what matters. An' now he's dead, an' that don't matter. Heard a fella tell a poem one time, an' he says, 'All that lives is holy.' "

* The others: Sinclair Lewis, Pearl S. Buck, William Faulkner, Eugene O'Neill, Ernest Hemingway.

Steinbeck Intro Article

Name: _____

1. When/where/why was this article written & published?
2. What type of source is it?
3. Read the 1st 3 sentences of the article. Explain them:

4. According to the text, the later generations [1960's and later] viewed Steinbeck differently than earlier generations. In your own words, explain why that might be the case.

5. What does Edmund Wilson give Steinbeck credit for in his writing? (You will have to decide your opinion on this as we read the novel.)

6. What is perceived as one of Steinbeck's literary flaws? Based on what it is, do you perceive that as a flaw in good literature? Why or why not?

7. What morals and/or values are at the core of Steinbeck's work? Can you relate to any of them or are they unique to the time period/s during which he wrote? Explain your response.

8. What is allegory/allegorizing? How might it help a piece of literature? How can it hinder a piece of literature and why do some scholars argue that this is, in fact, the case with Steinbeck?

9. Based on careful reading of the article text, what are some themes you think might emerge from *Of Mice and Men*? What are some problems we might encounter with the text?