

John Steinbeck's portrayal of alcoholics



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Lila L. Anastas has said of John Steinbeck: “ Steinbeck the person wanted ... to experience everything and then write about it. He was the versatile author of over thirty full-length books and short story collections, as well as plays, filmscripts, numerous articles, and volumes of letters. He received the Nobel Prize in literature in 1962.

In my view, he is one of the top ten American novelists, not just because he was a great storyteller but because he dealt with important concepts and universal themes” (150).

Steinbeck's reputation as both a person and a writer has been considered on the negative side of perfection.

Considered a very private person, not impressed by his own or others acquisition of wealth, he is rumored to have had a

His was not a success story that followed the normal pattern for writers of his day and caliber. A few of his books were banned at the time of publication (including

Grapes Of Wrath) because of their language and rebellious spirit. His depiction of certain components of society have been met with disbelief and anger. However, Steinbeck is, without a doubt, one of the greatest writers of American fiction. Like most writers, he uses those he knows and studies, as well as his own personal experiences, to draw on to create realistic and memorable characters. Many writers use archetypes or draw from different aspects of themselves in order to give a character depth and meaning in context.

John Steinbeck was known to draw his characters and settings from either mythical, archetypal and, or, personal

“ Later in life, Steinbeck wrote to a friend: “ Long ago,

I knew perhaps that mine was not a truly first-rate talent.

I had then two choices only—to throw it over or to use what

I had to the best of my ability. I chose the second, and I

have tried to keep it clean.” ... Steinbeck based many of

the characters on his real-life Salinas neighbors (and

embellished things as he saw fit). This did not sit well with the neighbors” (Anastas 153). He also used a lot of his own memories and experiences in his writing.

“ As a writer and a man, Steinbeck did have strikes against him. He never graduated from college. He suffered through two failed marriages before finding bliss with his third wife, Elaine. Furthermore, he never achieved critical acclaim after his early work, despite the popularity of *The Grapes of Wrath* and *Of Mice and Men*. He suffered from the judgment of critics who believed his work should not be accepted as real art, and that Steinbeck lacked the fictive imagination of Hemingway or Faulkner” (Allison 245). His opinion of himself was rather low and demeaning. He fit the profile of an alcoholic, even if he wasn't truly limited by He grew up in Salinas and attended Stanford University.

“ Steinbeck, however, did not fit in with the Stanford scene and attended classes only sporadically. He preferred

working as a hired hand in various ranches in Monterey County or working in a variety of other jobs, including one with the Big Sur highway project and one at Spreckels Sugar Company near Salinas. In 1925, Steinbeck left Stanford permanently and went to New York City to seek his fame and fortune as a writer. He returned to California in a year.

These were difficult times for the young writer, as he collected rejection slips and watched his early novels bomb”

(Anastas 153). If he was to have had a problem with alcohol, this time in his life certainly reflects the

If it is true that he was an alcoholic, it is not seen

in his work ethics as they apply to writing – however, it

may be seen in his sporadic and time limited employment as a

young man, before his writing career took off. Where it

could be seen in his writing is in the portrayal of some of

his characters. The people who populate Steinbeck’s novels

are portrayed as real within time and context and so must,

surely, be somewhat modeled after people that were known to the author. It cannot be denied that his books almost always had a character that was closer to the darker aspects of life. In Steinbeck's most famous work, *Grapes of Wrath*, the character of Uncle John can be compared to the accepted view of Steinbeck. Uncle John can be regarded as the black sheep of the Joad family. He was an eccentric loner, and a lonely guilt-ridden man. He is a man who has a history of sadness that follows him like a shadow he can no longer see as it lengthens in the view of others. Long ago, his young wife, who was pregnant, had told him one night that she had a stomach-ache, which he ignored to the extent that he suggested she take some medicine. She died that night of a burst appendix. The pattern of Uncle John's life alternates between periods of severe abstinence and brief binges, the evil side taking over when he's drinking and the warm-hearted man who gives candy to children appearing in his

sober moments. In many ways, Uncle John shows signs of a classic case of alcoholism: the cyclic nature of his bingeing and 'going sober'; the self-centered attitude that would not see that his wife was in real and mortal danger; and the self-pitying stance that guilt was his by right and could only be assuaged by alcohol. The fact that Steinbeck gave him his own name could be coincidence, or it could point to the fact that Steinbeck based Uncle John on those The Palace Flophouse Boys in Cannery Row are certainly portrayed as drifters who care more for their next drink than their next shower and hot meal – although they are given a certain amount of character strength, they are mostly seen as vagabonds and idlers. Theirs is the occupation of the drunk on the street, the man who chooses to be free within the bounds of his deviance.

Danny Taylor, a character in *Winter Of Our Discontent*, is a man who has been destroyed by failure in his last year

at school, and is now left with only the drunk's sense of danger crowding in. He is a victim in the struggle for success within the American culture; a man who has fallen but is aware of the distance he must re-tread in order to get his life back. At least one person – Margie – believes him to be a kind and decent person and this gives the reader

Whether it is true or not that John Steinbeck had a problem with alcohol, it can be said that he fits some of the patterns of an alcoholic and that he portrayed the alcoholic in one of his novels in a realistic and understanding manner. Not all realism must come from personal experience, however, the patterns in his own life as well as his knowledge to portray the lifestyle and thinking of the alcoholic certainly lends validity to the rumor.

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