

# John Steinbeck: his life and his works



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### Introduction:

John Steinbeck is arguably the most prominent litterateur of his generation to have adopted the cause of working class America. His most famous work *The Grapes of Wrath* depicts the everyday travails of a westward migrating white American family in search of better economic opportunities. *Of Mice and Men*, another prominent work, is a much smaller novel both in terms of the number of characters as well as the social situations they find themselves in. Steinbeck started his career as a journalist before taking up novels and poetry as his primary avenue of writing. Steinbeck's books generally deal with the desperation and resilience of poor Americans in the early decades of the twentieth century. His works also serve the purpose of a social documentary and present a picture of systemic injustices in the United States. His outstanding literary life culminated with the conferring of Nobel Prize for Literature in 1962, four years before his demise (Palmer, 2001, p. 479).

### Prominent Themes in Steinbeck's Works:

It is fashionable with the new breed of novelists to separate literary art from political themes. But in the case of John Steinbeck, this distinction is not evident. The author, in the process of creating a work of art had also taken upon himself to ask questions of social injustices in general and economic disparities in particular. Hence, Steinbeck's body of work is in essence full of his own perspective on the state of rural American society; the medium of the novel is chosen in only as far as it gives the author requisite scope and opportunity to fulfill his role as a social commentator. To understand this

social activist trait in Steinbeck's character one has to look at the experiences and circumstances that shaped his vision of America. Firstly, his years as an adolescent in Salinas, where he got a firsthand experience of his parents' struggle for survival is a formative influence. It is the next phase of his life however, that will prove more important – his long-time relationship with the radical social worker Carol Henning. The influence of Carol Henning cannot be underestimated, for her socialist views on life had clearly rubbed off on Steinbeck, which is evident from the earliest journalistic assignments that Steinbeck undertook. His years as a novice journalist also had a key role in the shaping of his character, for these early writing assignments were the foundations for his later literary pursuits (Palmer, 2001, p. 479). In works such as *The Grapes of Wrath* and *Of Mice and Men*, the influences of these formative stages of his early life are quite obvious. While Steinbeck never really espoused a particular political ideology, the socialist themes of economic justice that are at the heart of *The Grapes of Wrath* can trace their origins to his association with Carol Henning. The central socialist principle of workers owning the means of production is brought forth in the following powerful passage from the novel,

“ Is the power (tractors) that turns the long furrows wrong? If this tractor were ours, it would be good – not mine, but ours. We could love that tractor then as we have loved this land when it was ours. But this tractor does two things – it turns the land and turns us off the land. There is little difference between this tractor and a tank. The people were driven, intimidated, hurt by both. We must think about this...Okie use' ta mean you was from Oklahoma.

Now it means you're a dirty son-of-a-bitch. Okie means you're scum. Don't mean nothing itself, it's the way they say it." (The Grapes of Wrath, p. 175)

The rise of John Steinbeck as a novelist and social commentator coincided with the economic turmoil of the years of Great Depression. Although Steinbeck, in his interviews and essays, stated that he does not espouse any particular economic system, yet his novels have a socialist, if not Marxist orientation. As a variation, Steinbeck claimed to have only exposed the darker realities of the then working class America. Without impinging his social critique on a particular ideology, he rather considered his novels as open-ended projects, with the reader supplementing necessary rectification of economic injustices as he/she sees fit (Coers, 1991, p. 251). To illustrate this point, we only need to scrutinize his novels a little closely. While his earlier works, including *The Grapes of Wrath* and *Of Mice and Men* had a strong element of social realism, his later works were less focused on the rural working class. This implies that these two novels were the result of temporal social conditions than any perennial economic and political ideologies. Moreover, the novels act as suitable political platforms for the author to raise important questions of human pathos without being ideologically self-indulgent. His earlier works stand independent of the fact that Steinbeck attended a few Communist Party meetings during the time of writing these masterpieces. (Zirakzadeh, 2004, p. 598)

Criticism:

An aspect of the author's works is the interweaving of his own experiences into the fabric of the novel. For instance, Steinbeck's father was a hard-

working yet financially unsuccessful man who ran a small store. In spite of his hard work he lost his store and consequently became reclusive and depressed, before finding a job as a manager in a sugar factory.

Nevertheless, his father was deeply affected by the failure of his small store and this made a strong impression on his son. Steinbeck was also quite close to his grandparents, who as first generation immigrants would tell fascinating tales about exotic wildlife, crossing the Atlantic in a ship, etc. This translates into admiration for simple things and their beauty in the novels (Burkhead, 2002, p. 121). The author assumes the role of an Epicurean philosopher apart from the more obvious role of a social commentator in these two works. The following lines from *Of Mice and Men* capture the author's sense of fascination with nature and a simple way of life that were essential ingredients of his own childhood environment,

“ Whatever we ain't got, that's what you want. God a'mighty, if I was alone I could live so easy. I could go get a job an' work, an no trouble. No mess at all, and when the end of the month come I could take my fifty bucks and go into town and get whatever I want ...George, on the worker's dream: “ All kin's a vegetables in the garden, and if we want a little whisky we can sell a few eggs or something, or some milk. We'd jus' live there. We'd belong there. There wouldn't be no more runnin' round the country and gettin' fed by a Jap cook. No, sir, we'd have our own place where we belonged and not sleep in no bunk house” (*Of Mice and Men*, p. 63).

The *Grapes of Wrath*, while finding favor with most readers, was severely condemned by the ruling classes. The capitalist classes, who then had a monopoly stranglehold on the American economy, saw a threat to their way

of life in this book. Hence, a campaign of banishing the book began which continues to this day. The remarkable success of the novel should be seen in light of these attempts at censorship and control. The battle for free publication and access to the book even reached the floor of the House of Representatives, where reactionary politicians heaped abuse on the book and its author and suggested severe punishment for the latter. But fortunately, the novel survived mainly because of support from the then President and the First lady, who were more sympathetic to the plight of the working classes. Despite the vitriolic attempts to abolish the book, *The Grapes of Wrath* not only survived but had risen to become one of the greatest novels of the Twentieth century. Alongside *Of Mice and Men*, it continues to define the author and his milieu. (Burkhead, 2002, p. 132)

#### Evaluation and Conclusion:

Hence, John Steinbeck's recognition as one of the greatest American novelists is based on his artistic skill with the pen as well as his empathy for his poor compatriot that manifests itself as social commentary in his works (Gladstein, 2006, p. 82). It can even be asserted that Steinbeck was first and foremost a social commentator and he chose the medium of the novel to fulfill this primary urge in him. The fact that novels such as *The Grapes of Wrath* and *Of Mice and Men* continue to be read widely by young and elderly Americans alike is a testimony to the novels' qualities of universality and expose on perennial problems afflicting humanity. In this regard, the awards and honors conferred on the author, including the most coveted Nobel Prize, are truly well deserved.

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