John Steinbeck

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Born: February 27, 1902 in Salinas, California, United States
Died: December 20, 1968 in New York, New York, United States
Other Names: Steinbeck, John Ernst, Jr.; Glasscock, Amnesia
Nationality: American
Occupation: Writer


General Literature Gold Medal, Commonwealth Club of California, 1936, for Tortilla Flat, 1937, for novel Of Mice and Men, and 1940, for The Grapes of Wrath; New York Drama Critics Circle Award, 1938, for play Of Mice and Men; 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, Marketing Bestsellers, 1964, for Travels with Charley: In Search of America.

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"I hold that a writer who does not passionately believe in the perfectibility of man has no dedication nor any membership in literature." With this declaration, John Steinbeck accepted the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1962, becoming only the fifth American to receive one of the most prestigious awards in writing. In announcing the award, Nobel committee chair Anders Osterling, quoted in the Dictionary of Literary Biography Documentary Series, described Steinbeck as "an independent expounder of the truth with an unbiased instinct for what is genuinely American, be it good or ill." This was a reputation the author had earned in a long and distinguished career that produced some of the twentieth century's most acclaimed and popular novels. Steinbeck's Nobel acceptance speech, also quoted in the Dictionary of Literary Biography Documentary Series, spoke not of his accomplishments, however, but of a writer's duty to his fellow man. "The ancient commission of the writer has not changed," Steinbeck said. "He is charged with exposing our many grievous faults and failures, with dredging up to the light our dark and dangerous dreams, for the purpose of improvement." Steinbeck believed that those services were in high demand in 1962. "Humanity," he said, "has been passing through a gray and desolate time of confusion."

Some twenty-four years earlier, the author had faced another desolate time. In the winter of 1938, the rains were falling in California, and Steinbeck was a worried and angry man. Since the mid-1930s, Steinbeck's home state had seen the arrival of hundreds of thousands of poor farmers, refugees from the "dust bowl"--the farmlands of Oklahoma and other parts of the Midwest that had been devastated by drought. Steinbeck had been interested in these migrant farmers for several years, concerned about their lack of food and sanitary housing as they searched for work in California's farmlands. He had visited migrant camps throughout the state and written newspaper articles that documented the
hardships he found there. Despite these efforts, conditions had grown worse for the farm workers. By 1938 Steinbeck was convinced that the state's large produce growers were harming the migrants by refusing to pay them satisfactory wages.

When the rains came, the migrants were soon threatened by flood waters in several parts of the state. Observing these events, Steinbeck's anger reached the boiling point, and he told his literary agent, Elizabeth Otis, that it was time to take further action. "I must go over to the interior valleys," Steinbeck wrote in his letter that was later published in Steinbeck: A Life in Letters. "There are about five thousand families starving to death over there, not just hungry but actually starving. The government is trying to feed them and get medical attention to them with the fascist group of utilities and banks and huge growers sabotaging the thing all along the line.... I must get down there and see it and see if I can't do something to help knock these murderers on the heads."

At the flooded encampment in Visalia, California, Steinbeck came face to face with the tragedy of the migrants. "I saw people starve to death," Steinbeck later told an interviewer for the London Daily Mail. "That's not just a resounding phrase. They starved to death. They dropped dead." Finding himself in the midst of the suffering, the author's first effort to "do something" about the situation was direct and immediate. "Steinbeck worked day and night for nearly two weeks (sometimes dropping to sleep in the mud from exhaustion) to help relieve the misery," wrote Robert DeMott in his introduction to Working Days. Steinbeck's second effort to aid the migrants was somewhat delayed, but its impact would prove more lasting. Four months after his visit to the migrant camps, Steinbeck began a novel that would not only publicize the plight of the dust bowl migrants, but also become one of the hallmarks of American literature in the twentieth century: The Grapes of Wrath.

Steinbeck's compassion for the downtrodden was exemplified throughout his literary career. As critics have noted, he perceived a materialistic trend in America, an unhealthy increase in greed and a corresponding lack of traditional values. As a result, he concentrated on the victims of this change, ordinary men and women struggling against destructive social and economic conditions. While his characters were sometimes faced by seemingly inhuman forces--technology, progress, natural disasters--Steinbeck also paid great attention to people and human relationships. His work analyzed the way people behave as part of a larger group, and he also featured characters who struggled with personal conflicts, attempting to overcome the destructive elements of their own personalities.

In the Beginning

The third of four children, Steinbeck was born in Salinas, California, in 1902. Steinbeck explored the surrounding area thoroughly as he grew up, and his later work often incorporated this landscape. Of Mice and Men and The Grapes of Wrath were set in farmlands much like those that surrounded Salinas, and the books Tortilla Flat and Cannery Row take place in the coastal town of Monterey, a favorite location of Steinbeck's boyhood rambles. After graduating from Salinas High School in 1919, Steinbeck attended college at nearby Stanford University. He remained at Stanford until 1925, but his attendance was frequently interrupted because of illness and indecision regarding a field of study. When not enrolled at the university, Steinbeck took temporary jobs in order to earn money.

His occupations in these years were varied, including store clerk, surveyor, and painter. He also held several positions that provided background material for his writing. Working as a ranch hand near King
City, California, Steinbeck experienced the characters and surroundings later featured in *Of Mice and Men*. Likewise, his job with Spreckels Sugar Company introduced him to labor disputes, a topic that would figure in both *The Grapes of Wrath* and *In Dubious Battle*. Steinbeck's sporadic studies were also preparing him for his future as a writer. A summer course in marine biology laid the foundation for his later explorations into the biological nature of man's behavior, a theme that pervades much of his work. And finally, Steinbeck's college years allowed him to develop the craft of writing. He began by producing short fiction, and in 1924 two Steinbeck stories appeared in the Stanford *Spectator*, a newspaper at the college.

After leaving Stanford for good in 1925, Steinbeck thought that his prospects of becoming a successful writer might improve if he relocated to New York City, the publishing capital of the United States. After working his way to the city as a hand on a freighter, he took a job as a laborer. He later became a newspaper reporter for the *New York American*, but his journalism career proved as temporary as his other occupations. After being fired from the paper, he signed onto another freighter and returned to California. Throughout this time, Steinbeck worked on short stories and on his first novel, *Cup of Gold: A Life of Henry Morgan, Buccaneer*, which he completed in 1928. A second novel was soon underway, but Steinbeck still had no publisher for his work. As a result, he was writing books that no one was reading, and he had yet to earn his first dollar by writing fiction. On a personal level, however, his life was changing. He met Carol Henning, his future wife, in the summer of 1928, and their romance continued after he moved to San Francisco later that year. Steinbeck continued to work on his fiction after arriving in the city, and he hoped that his status as an unpublished author would soon change. In January, 1929, he got his wish.

The good news came from Amassa Miller, a friend of Steinbeck's who had been attempting to sell *Cup of Gold* to publishers in New York City. Miller finally convinced Robert M. McBride and Company that the book was worthwhile, and the first Steinbeck novel was published. The contract awarded a degree of financial security that the author hadn't known in his years of travel and temporary jobs. In a letter to his friend A. Grove Day, later published in *Steinbeck: A Life in Letters*, the author noted that the money he received from Robert M. McBride and Company allowed him "to live quietly and with a good deal of comfort." The only problem with the book's publication was that Steinbeck was no longer pleased with *Cup of Gold*. In a later letter to Day written shortly after the novel's debut, the author described *Cup of Gold* as "an immature experiment," suggesting that the book he had finished more than a year earlier now seemed inferior to his present work. His uncertainty about the quality of his first novel would grow with the passing years. In 1932 Steinbeck dismissed *Cup of Gold* by saying, "I've outgrown it and it embarrasses me."

As several critics have noted, *Cup of Gold* is quite different from Steinbeck's later work. A large reason for the disparity is that the book is a historical novel, creating a fictionalized story about Henry Morgan, an infamous English pirate of the 1600s. In creating this type of historical saga, Steinbeck was influenced by several authors whom he had once admired: James Stephens, James Branch Cabell, and Donn Byrne, who had all specialized in a similar type of adventure novel featuring historical figures. By 1929, however, Steinbeck felt that his literary abilities had surpassed those of his mentors. "I seem to have outgrown Cabell," Steinbeck wrote in his letter to Grove, also noting that "I have not the slightest desire to step into Donn Byrne's shoes." Steinbeck further realized that his future work was going to move in a different direction, proclaiming that "I have swept the Cabellyo-Byrneish preciousness out for good."
Two weeks after *Cup of Gold* was released, the stock market plummeted, and the Great Depression had begun. As the 1920s came to a close, Steinbeck had become a published author, but he had yet to achieve a literary voice that pleased him. As he grappled with his direction as a writer, he also paid increasing attention to the explosion of unemployment and misery caused by the Depression. In the following ten years these social concerns would become a vital source of material and inspiration for his work.

**Looking Homeward**

Seeking a more original means of literary expression, Steinbeck turned his attention away from the distant history in *Cup of Gold* and began to focus on material that was more familiar. One result of this shift in material was that Steinbeck began to utilize the landscape of his native state. His second novel, *To a God Unknown*, concerns a farmer who leaves Vermont and comes to California, eventually establishing a farm with his three brothers. *The Pastures of Heaven*, Steinbeck's next book, also drew on his western locale, relating various loosely connected tales about the inhabitants of a single California community. Steinbeck's model for the town was Corral de Tierra, a community between Monterey and Salinas that he had known since his childhood. Along with these familiar settings, Steinbeck began to feature characters who were also drawn from his own experience. The two books focus on farmers, schoolteachers, prostitutes—a cast of common people far removed from the swashbuckling pirates in *Cup of Gold*.

As *New Yorker* critic Robert M. Coates noted in his review of *The Pastures of Heaven*, Steinbeck's everyday characters gave the book "an effect as of real life." Other authorities on Steinbeck have commented on the simple, middle-class existence of the characters, but as Richard Astro pointed out in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, a great deal of frustration and failure is found in the author's common folks. "Steinbeck shows compassion, even affection for the plight of ordinary people who strive but cannot achieve happiness," Astro wrote. The reason for their failure, the critic maintained, is their inability to escape from the larger society. In *The Pastures of Heaven* they have withdrawn to the idyllic valley community, but this refuge proves short-lived. The characters soon face further dissatisfaction as a result of their shortcomings. "Steinbeck never condemns their innocence," Astro wrote, "but he portrays their self-destructive tendencies toward illusion and self-deception."

By the time *To a God Unknown* appeared in 1933, Steinbeck's work was receiving increased critical attention. The novel failed to sell any better than his previous works had, however, and Steinbeck's agents were forced to search for yet another publishing contract. Throughout his early years, Steinbeck's tenure with publishing companies tended to be short. Each of his first three books was issued by a different press, and after *To a God Unknown* failed to sell Steinbeck was in danger of having no publisher at all. He was rescued by Pascal Covici of the Covici, Friede publishing house, a man who would continue to work with Steinbeck throughout his career.

The author's first novel for Covici, Friede was *Tortilla Flat*, which again illustrated his fascination with the simple inhabitants of central California. In this case, Steinbeck depicted the slums of Monterey and a group of good-natured idlers of mixed Mexican and American heritage—the *paisanos*. Led by Danny, in whose house they all live, the *paisanos* are Steinbeck's version of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table. The knights' primary quest, in this case, is to acquire a regular supply of red wine and to avoid any responsibilities that might come their way. While the book extended several
of Steinbeck's familiar themes and settings, its gentle humor was a departure for the author. "Mr. Steinbeck knows the humorous side of his Paisanos," wrote New Republic reviewer Jerre Mangione, adding that the author "rarely fails to be amusing." Whether it was due to Steinbeck's humorous treatment or some other aspect of the book, Tortilla Flat soon found an audience that his previous novels had missed. The book became a bestseller, and Steinbeck had to contend with an unfamiliar role: he was a popular author.

Despite the success of Tortilla Flat, Steinbeck quickly moved on to new material. His next novel, In Dubious Battle, avoided the humor of Tortilla Flat and instead presented a study of a serious subject—a labor strike in a California apple orchard. One reason for Steinbeck's varied writing styles during this period, according to Astro, was that the ideas that drove the author's fiction were still evolving. In 1930 he had become a friend of Ed Ricketts, a man Steinbeck would later characterize as "the greatest man I have known and the best teacher," as quoted by Thomas Kiernan in The Intricate Music: A Biography of John Steinbeck. Ricketts was a marine biologist who lived in Monterey, and Steinbeck, who had been interested in the study of sea life since his days as a student, was intrigued by Ricketts's biological analysis of ocean creatures. Ricketts's studies went beyond sea life, however. He had evolved a theory of nature that saw all creatures—including humans—belonging to a single, interconnected system. This idea supported and fleshed out some of Steinbeck's own beliefs, and it was soon reflected in the author's work. As critics have noted, Steinbeck's writings after 1930 often emphasize the biological aspects of his character's behavior—how, for instance, they must adapt to changing conditions in order to survive. He also began to consider the individual's role in a larger group and the ways that people gain power by organizing with others. These ideas, when applied to some of the prominent social issues of the Depression years, gave Steinbeck a source of fresh fictional material. He soon used it to create the acclaimed novels he published between 1936 and 1939.

The Hot Streak

In Dubious Battle was Steinbeck's first exploration of the labor unrest that marked the 1930s. The book got its start when the author had the opportunity to interview two farm-labor organizers who were active in the movement to unionize migrant workers. Drawing on their accounts, Steinbeck's novel follows two members of the Communist party as they organize a strike against a wealthy California apple grower who has drastically cut wages. The two men, Mac, a longtime party organizer, and Jim, a committed newcomer, successfully recruit the help of a local farmer and establish a camp for the strikers on his property. Doc Burton, who looks after the sanitary conditions in the strikers camp, is another outsider sympathetic to the fruit pickers' cause. He can do little to help them, however, when the walkout turns violent. In the end, Jim is killed but Mac struggles on, attempting to use Jim's death as a means of rallying the strikers.

In approaching the volatile topic of radical labor movements, In Dubious Battle roused controversy. Some, claiming that Steinbeck had sided too heavily with the strikers, labeled the book pro-communist. In assessing the book's literary merits, however, many critics praised Steinbeck's realistic portrayal of class conflict. William Rose Benet, reviewing the novel in Saturday Review, stated that "this is a book one respects. Mr. Steinbeck writes most graphic prose and conveys the thought and speech of ordinary laborers with great ability." Benet also found the book an even-handed account of the dispute, with both sides sharing responsibility for the conflict and the resulting violence. "The battle between those in authority and the strikers has plenty of bloody moments," Benet wrote. "In that
In his next work, *Of Mice and Men*, Steinbeck produced one of his most popular novels, and its sudden success—the book sold over one hundred thousand copies in its first month—made him a celebrity. The story is set in the rough-hewn surroundings of a California ranch and focuses on two hired hands, Lennie, immensely strong but mentally retarded, and George, an older hand who takes care of Lennie. The two men dream of gaining their own house and land and giving up their roving life. These plans are frustrated, however, through the cruelty of Curley, the son of the ranch boss, and finally, through the flirtations of Curley's wife. When the woman cuddles up to Lennie, he is unable to control his strength and inadvertently breaks her neck. Lennie then turns to his friend for help, and George must find a way to save Lennie from a hostile mob that seeks revenge for the murder.

Coming between *In Dubious Battle* and *The Grapes of Wrath*, *Of Mice and Men* steps away from the farm labor politics of the other two novels. As Astro pointed out, however, *Of Mice and Men* remains "a memorable parable about man's voluntary acceptance of responsibility for his fellow man." As such, the book continues to illustrate Steinbeck's concern for the weak and unfortunate. Critically, the novel received numerous enthusiastic reviews upon its release. Henry Seidel Canby, writing in *Saturday Review*, judged the novel "superb in its understatements.... Its style is right for its subject matter, and that subject matter is deeply felt, richly conceived, and perfectly ordered." This warm reception was soon echoed by theatre critics after Steinbeck adapted the novel into a play with the help of George S. Kaufman. The play had a successful run on Broadway and later played throughout the United States on a national tour. The appeal of the story would be illustrated for years after its release; the play has been repeatedly performed, and the novel has also been adapted into an opera, a television drama, and two major motion pictures.

Steinbeck's progressive success in the 1930s was measured by a change in residences. He and his wife, Carol, had lived in a small house in Pacific Grove, California, early in his career, moving to a larger residence in Los Gatos after the success of *Tortilla Flat*. The income from *Of Mice and Men* allowed them to build a house on a large tract of land in Los Gatos known as the Biddle Ranch, into which they moved in 1939. Steinbeck's fame also introduced him to the company of other celebrities, and he soon became friends with movie stars Charlie Chaplin and Wallace Ford. The trappings of success were not always welcome, however. The increased demands on Steinbeck's time frequently interrupted his writing schedule, and he made reference to these problems in the journal he kept while writing *The Grapes of Wrath*, later published in *Working Days*. "The wants, the demands, the dissatisfactions. They're breaking me down," Steinbeck confessed, speculating that "this success will ruin me as sure as hell."

One of the largest demands Steinbeck had to deal with during this time came from groups who requested his support for various causes. Since the publication of *In Dubious Battle* and the appearance of his newspaper articles on the dust bowl refugees, many looked to Steinbeck as an influential authority on migrant living conditions. There was even talk in 1938 that he would consult with President Franklin Roosevelt in regard to California's farm workers. Though this meeting never developed, Steinbeck did, on occasion, lend his name in aid of certain causes and organizations. His real interest was literature, however, and Steinbeck was committed to documenting the migrant's plight in a work of fiction. It was a project that proved far from easy.
His first attempt, a novel entitled *The Oklahomans*, was abandoned after several months of work. His next effort was *L'Affaire Lettuceburg*, which he took up immediately after his experiences at the flooded migrant camp at Visalia. The book was intended to be a satirical jab at those Steinbeck saw as responsible for the migrant's problems, but his anger threatened to overwhelm the novel. Writing to his agent, Annie Laurie Williams, Steinbeck confessed the problems that he was having with *L'Affaire Lettuceburg*. "It is a vicious book," DeMott quoted Steinbeck in the introduction to *Working Days*, "a mean book. I don't know whether it will be any good at all." After three months of work, Steinbeck decided the novel wasn't good enough. He destroyed the nearly-completed manuscript, declaring in a letter to Elizabeth Otis, quoted by Lewis Gannett in the introduction to *The Portable Steinbeck*, that *L'Affaire* "is a bad book and I must get rid of it. It can't be printed. It is bad because it isn't honest." Within days Steinbeck began a much different book about the migrants. This time he had better luck.

**The Grapes of Wrath**

In his third attempt to write about migrants, Steinbeck turned away from the broad satire he had attempted in *L'Affaire Lettuceburg*, centering instead on the intimate story of the Joads, a family of sharecroppers in Oklahoma. When drought makes the Joad farm unprofitable, they are forced off the land they have worked for generations but do not own. They then depart for California like thousands of similar families, expecting to find a promised land of fruit orchards and steady employment. Among the eleven members of the family are Tom, a grown son who has just served a prison term for killing a man in self-defense, and Ma, whose resilient spirit helps keep the family together during their travels. They are also accompanied by a former preacher, Jim Casy, who is intent on getting to the West Coast to observe the migration of families from Oklahoma.

After a troubled journey in which the grandparents die, the Joads find more trouble in California. They are frequently harassed by vigilantes and policemen and are often forced to live in unsanitary camps. Most importantly, the promise of steady, well-paid work proves empty. With so many people desperate for jobs, the farm owners are able to pay very low wages to the migrants, and the Joads barely make enough to survive. Beset by hunger, sickness, and floods, the family responds in two ways. Casy and Tom take up the cause of organized labor, promoting strikes against the growers. Their philosophy is voiced by Tom, who states that "a fella ain't got a soul of his own, but on'y a piece of a big one." By uniting in mass action, he reasons, the workers will be able to "throw out the cops that ain't our people. All work together for our own thing--all farm our own land." The family's other response is to adopt Ma's determination to carry on despite the disasters that confront them. "We're the people that live," Ma says. "They ain't gonna wipe us out. Why-- we're the people. We go on."

In addition to the narrative incidents concerning the Joads, *The Grapes of Wrath* features alternate chapters that render a broader view of the migrants' situation. These chapters sometimes focus on nameless individuals, sometimes on the mechanics of economic or natural forces, sometimes on small, symbolic incidents such as a turtle's determination to get to its destination. Paul McCarthy, in his book *John Steinbeck*, noted that "craftsmanship in *The Grapes of Wrath* is generally excellent," and he emphasized the book's use of varying points of view and varying levels of language. "The most characteristic qualities of the written language," McCarthy wrote, "are precision, natural and sometimes biblical rhythms, and imagery customarily based on elements of the land or daily life." Comparing Steinbeck to other literary innovators of the 1930s, including William Faulkner and John Dos Passos, McCarthy judged *The Grapes of Wrath* as "one of the period's brilliant innovative works."
Steinbeck also commented on the multileveled structure he created in the novel, writing in a letter to Pascal Covici quoted in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography Documentary Series* that "there are five layers in this book, a reader will find as many as he can and he won't find more than he has in himself."

Creating such a complex and lengthy work proved a difficult undertaking for the author. Though the book was written in only a five-month period, Steinbeck's journal in *Working Days* records his many difficulties and the physical exhaustion that resulted from the work. "If I am not careful, I will crash," he wrote at one point. "I feel the weariness creeping up on me again as it did that day when I was really in danger of collapse. But I can't now. Must finish this book." Even as he drove himself onward, Steinbeck often feared that he wasn't up to the task. "I'm not a writer," he wrote at a particularly low moment in the process. "I've been fooling myself and other people. I wish I were." When he completed the final page of the book on October 26, 1938, Steinbeck was indeed close to collapse, being "so dizzy I can hardly see the page." After finishing the final sentence of the novel, he recorded his thoughts in the journal. "Finished this day--and I hope to God it's good."

"*The Grapes of Wrath* is, without question, Steinbeck's most ambitious as well as his most successful novel," according to Astro. This lavish praise has been echoed by other critics in the years since the novel's release. A reviewer in *Time* considered *The Grapes of Wrath* the author's "strongest and most durable novel," and called it "a concentration of Steinbeck's artistic and moral vision." In summing up what this vision entails, Joseph Warren Beach, writing in *American Fiction: 1920-1940*, found that *The Grapes of Wrath* made two strident points about the American economy: "that our system of production and finance involves innumerable instances of cruel hardship and injustice; that it needs constant adjustment and control by people in authority." This dire warning, as critics such as Alfred Kazin have noted, is balanced by Steinbeck's "refreshing belief in human fellowship and courage." As Beach put it, *The Grapes of Wrath* marked Steinbeck as "one who feels strongly on the subject of man's essential dignity of spirit and his unexhausted possibilities for modification and improvement."

Popular reaction to *The Grapes of Wrath* was overwhelmingly positive, with sales far surpassing any of Steinbeck's previous works, including *Of Mice and Men*. The book topped bestseller lists through most of 1939 and continued to sell steadily thereafter. After receiving an early royalty payment for the novel, Steinbeck wrote in a letter--later published in *Steinbeck: A Life in Letters*--that it was "an awful lot of money.... I don't think I've ever seen so much in one place before." Success had its drawbacks, however. A backlash of negative publicity was directed at Steinbeck, stemming largely from the agriculture industry that *The Grapes of Wrath* had criticized. Daniel Aaron, quoted in *World Literature Criticism*, noted that these groups "accused Steinbeck of writing a brief for Communism." Other groups in the United States also found the book objectionable. *The Grapes of Wrath* was criticized on the floor of the U.S. Congress and banned from some school libraries.

As the novel became a national sensation, Steinbeck's fame grew far beyond its previous boundaries, and he soon came to regret the hysteria and hoopla that surrounded him. Besieged by requests for money and public appearances, the calm privacy Steinbeck craved became harder and harder to achieve. In the journal he had kept while writing *The Grapes of Wrath*, Steinbeck had a premonition of the changes that would ensue after he completed the novel. "When this is finished," he wrote, "a goodly part of my life will be finished with it. A part I will never get back to." By 1940 these words had come true. *The Grapes of Wrath* had established him as both a major writer and a celebrity, and
Steinbeck found that both his life and his work were going to be very different in the coming years.

**Falling from Grace**

One of the changes Steinbeck underwent was a personal one. In 1941 he and his wife, Carol, separated. They were later divorced and Steinbeck married Gwyndolyn Conger, a woman he had met shortly after the completion of *The Grapes of Wrath*. The United States's involvement in World War II also changed the author's work habits. He undertook a writing project, *Bombs Away: The Story of a Bomber Team*, for the U.S. Army Air Force and later covered the war in North Africa and Italy as a journalist. These writing projects demonstrated Steinbeck's increasing devotion to genres other than fiction. One of his most highly acclaimed books of the 1940s was, in fact, not a novel but an account of a research expedition that he cowrote with Ed Ricketts. The book, *Sea of Cortez*, contained a catalog of their research findings and also incorporated geography, history, and philosophy into one diverse book. With these nonfiction projects consuming his time, Steinbeck's productivity as a novelist slowed in the early 1940s. When he did return to fiction with *The Moon is Down* in 1943, the critical response was far cooler than that which had greeted *The Grapes of Wrath* four years earlier.

Published in the midst of World War II, *The Moon is Down* concerns the invasion of an unidentified European town by an unidentified enemy, a situation that was very similar to the Nazi occupation of Norway during the war. Initial assessments of the novel sometimes criticized Steinbeck's balanced portrayal of the German invaders, insisting that Steinbeck was "soft toward Nazis," as Warren French recalled in *John Steinbeck*. Once the war with Germany concluded, such patriotic criticism was given less emphasis, but other faults in *The Moon is Down* have been noted. "It is a failure as art not because Steinbeck failed to write a polemic against the horrors of Nazism," Astro wrote, "but rather because he was unable to relate abstract philosophical visions to concrete reality." One reason for this failure, Astro maintained, is that a novel about wartime Europe is too far removed from Steinbeck's personal experience, from the "feelings and insights" that had given substance to his California-based novels.

On a personal level, Steinbeck had moved farther away from California. After his second marriage, he resided in New York City for a period of time, returning to California on occasion to work on specific writing projects. This practice continued through the birth of his two sons and through the breakup of his second marriage in 1948. After marrying for a third time, Steinbeck became a more or less permanent resident of New York City, though he departed frequently for extended trips around the world. His literary home, however, was firmly established in California, and he continued to make the region a foundation of his writing.

For his novel *Cannery Row*, Steinbeck returned to the waterfront locale of Monterey, a setting he had first portrayed in *Tortilla Flat*. Like its predecessor, *Cannery Row* tells a seemingly lighthearted tale, focusing on the adventures of Doc, a marine biologist who is Steinbeck's fictional recreation of his friend Ed Ricketts. And like *Tortilla Flat*, *Cannery Row* proved popular with readers, becoming another best seller. F. W. Watt, quoted in *World Literature Criticism*, found that beneath the humorous surface of the novel Steinbeck had created a satire on contemporary American life, criticizing "its commercialized values, its ruthless creed of property and status, and its relentlessly accelerated pace." Other reviews were less kind, however. Astro, in *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, reported that "many critics, disturbed by the suddenness with which Steinbeck cut himself off from social and political concerns, attacked *Cannery Row*, charging that Steinbeck's plot ... is sentimental and its
philosophy trivial." In describing his novel, Steinbeck, quoted in Dictionary of Literary Biography Documentary Series, admitted that Cannery Row was "a kind of nostalgic thing," written to entertain soldiers returning from World War II. This explanation did little to satisfy those reviewers who criticized the lack of serious content in Steinbeck's more recent work.

In attempting to explain the sudden change in Steinbeck's novels after The Grapes of Wrath, several critics maintained that Steinbeck's theories of human behavior had been profoundly altered. While his earlier novels had championed the goodness of the common man and the positive effects of group action, his work in the 1940s and afterward didn't seem as sure as these ideas. According to Astro's essay, John Ditsky found an early indication of this change in Bombs Away. Ditsky said the book's inability to muster enthusiasm for the combined efforts of the bomber squadron contains evidence of Steinbeck's "collapsing theory" regarding group efforts. Without a clear-cut theory to guide them, the critic suggests, Steinbeck's novels became less forceful. A similar view was expressed by DeMott in Working Days. "With the publication of In Dubious Battle, Of Mice and Men, and The Grapes of Wrath," DeMott wrote, "Steinbeck concluded an integrated body of work about his native California, a trilogy of desire and illusion based on a notion of relatively fixed social reality." The key difference, according to DeMott, is that after The Grapes of Wrath Steinbeck "no longer believed" in this reality.

Whatever the reason for the change, the final novels of Steinbeck's career avoid the broad social issues that had been at the center of his earlier works. As Joseph Fontenrose noted in his study of Steinbeck, these later works show the author "clearly turning his principal interest from biology and sociology to individual ethics." One of the books that focuses on moral issues is East of Eden, published in 1952. The novel was viewed by Steinbeck as one of his most important books, and it is certainly his longest, an epic tale that follows the fortunes of two families over three generations. In a letter to Pascal Covici quoted in Steinbeck: A Life in Letters, the author declared that the novel contains "everything I have been able to learn about my art or craft or profession in all these years." Steinbeck also described East of Eden as "a book about morality." In order to tell this story of good and evil, he drew heavily on the biblical tale of Cain and Abel. Like the siblings in the book of Genesis, each generation of the Trask family has two brothers who come into conflict. And like the Bible story, the antagonism for each generation begins when the father favors one son over the other. In playing out this archetypal story, the novel also presents a history of the Salinas valley where both the Trasks and the Hamiltons--the second family in the novel--settle after the Civil War. The novel then traces the families' histories through 1918, concluding after one of the Trask brothers is killed in World War I.

Despite the author's high hopes for East of Eden, critical reaction to the novel was mixed. Critic Joseph Wood Krutch wrote a generally appreciative assessment of the book in the New York Herald Tribune Book Review. "Here is one of those occasions," Krutch asserted, "when a writer has aimed high and then summoned every ounce of energy, talent, seriousness and passion of which he was capable." This acclaim, however, did not prevent Krutch from questioning the book's use of symbolic characters who seem less than realistic. "What is most likely to disturb a reader," Krutch said, "at least during the first third of the book, is the tendency of the characters to turn suddenly at certain moments into obviously symbolic figures as abstract almost as the dramatis personae in a morality play." The critic also found a distinctive difference between the morality put forth in novels such as The Grapes of Wrath and that which is espoused in East of Eden. In The Grapes of Wrath, Casy states that "there ain't no sin and there ain't no virtue. There's just stuff people do." East of Eden, in contrast, shows Steinbeck as a "moralist," according to Krutch, who believed that "Good and Evil are absolute and not
Fontenrose, in his analysis of the novel, also emphasized Steinbeck's treatment of morality. "For a novel on good and evil," Fontenrose noted, "East of Eden strangely lacks ethical insight." Due to this lack of insight, the critic found the characterization of a key character, Adam Trask, to be inadequate. "If Steinbeck had delved further into a father's ambivalent feelings for his sons," Fontenrose wrote, "then East of Eden might have been a great novel. As it is, we do not understand Adam's actions." In summarizing his opinion of East of Eden, Fontenrose declared that "few Steinbeck readers will place it higher than The Grapes of Wrath; the majority may see it as a second peak in his career, but not nearly so high as the first." The negative reviews of East of Eden were discouraging for Steinbeck, and according to Kiernan the author never recovered from the blow. "Although not his last book," Kiernan noted, "East of Eden was the climax of Steinbeck's artistic life, and a sad climax it was indeed."

**Final Acclaim**

Steinbeck published three more books of fiction after East of Eden, concluding his career as a novelist with The Winter of Our Discontent in 1961. As with most of his later novels, these books sold well but fared poorly in reviews. When he was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1962, some, such as one London Times obituary writer, contended that the award "had been earned by his earlier work," but the prize still represented a crowning achievement in Steinbeck's long career. Thereafter the author concentrated on nonfiction works, convinced, according to Kiernan, that "he was finished with fiction." The author continued to contribute articles to magazines and newspapers in the 1960s, and he also produced the popular Travels with Charley and America and Americans, two books about his travels in the United States.

After completing a 1967 trip to cover the Vietnam War, Steinbeck, with his health suffering, felt he had little left to write about. "I have nothing I can or want to communicate," he wrote Elizabeth Otis in a letter published in Steinbeck: A Life in Letters, "--a dry-as-dust, worked-out feeling." He was hospitalized later that year and again in 1968, surviving a series of heart attacks but never regaining his health. He died of heart disease on December 20, 1968, at the age of sixty-six. In assessing Steinbeck's status in American literature, critics have had to judge a large and widely varying body of work. Despite the disappointments of his later novels, many authorities believe Steinbeck has had a significant impact not only on American literature, but on the American society as a whole. Astro stressed the importance of Steinbeck's "great novels of the American Depression," stating that the caliber of these works "affirm that he is among the most important writers of our time." McCarthy also proclaimed the value of Steinbeck's books, pointing out the most significant qualities in the author's work: "Steinbeck's strongest convictions and passions appear in his fundamental belief in humanity in his expectation that man will endure, and that the creative forces of the human spirit will prevail."

**NOVELS**

- *To a God Unknown* (also see below), Ballou, 1933.
- *Tortilla Flat* (also see below), Covici, Friede, 1935.
- *Of Mice and Men* (also see below), Covici, Friede, 1937.
- *The Red Pony* (also see below), Covici, Friede, 1937.
- *The Forgotten Village* (also see below), Viking, 1941.
- *The Moon Is Down* (also see below), Viking, 1942.
- *The Wayward Bus* (also see below), Viking, 1947.
- *The Pearl* (also see below), Viking, 1947.
- *Burning Bright: A Play in Story Form* (based on Steinbeck's play; also see below), Viking, 1950.
- *East of Eden* (also see below), Viking, 1952.
- *Sweet Thursday* (also see below), Viking, 1954.

**SHORT STORIES**
- *Saint Katy the Virgin* (also see below), Covici, Friede, 1936.

Steinbeck's short stories and short novels have appeared in numerous anthologies. Contributor of short stories to periodicals.

**PLAYS**
- *The Moon Is Down: Play in Two Parts* (based on Steinbeck's novel; first produced on Broadway at Martin Beck Theater, April 7, 1942), Dramatist's Play Service, 1942.

**NONFICTION**
- *America and Americans* (travelogue), Viking, 1966.
- Also author of *Letters to Alicia*, a collection of newspaper columns written as a

SCREENPLAYS
- The Forgotten Village (based on Steinbeck's novel), independently produced, 1939.
- Lifeboat, Twentieth Century-Fox, 1944.
- The Pearl (based on Steinbeck’s novel), RKO, 1948.

OMNIBUS VOLUMES

OTHER
- A Letter to the Friends of Democracy, Overbrook Press, 1940.

Other Works
- Steinbeck's writing has been translated into numerous languages.
• ADAPTATIONS: *Of Mice and Men* was first adapted for film by Eugene Solow and released by United Artists, 1939; a second film version was released in 1992; the novel was also adapted as an opera by Carlisle Floyd, premiering at the Seattle Opera House, 1970, and adapted as a teleplay by E. Nick Alexander. *The Grapes of Wrath* was adapted for film by Nunnally Johnson and released by Twentieth Century-Fox, 1940; *Tortilla Flat* was adapted for film by John Lee Mahin and Benjamin Glaser, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1942; *The Moon Is Down* was adapted for film by Johnson, Twentieth Century-Fox, 1943. *East of Eden* was adapted for film by Paul Osborn, Twentieth Century-Fox, 1954; the novel was also adapted as a television miniseries and as a musical, *Here's Where I Belong*, opening at the Billy Rose Theatre, 1968. *Sweet Thursday* was adapted into a musical, *Pipe Dream*, by Oscar Hammerstein II, with music by Richard Rogers, 1955; *The Wayward Bus* was adapted for film by Ivan Moffat and released by Twentieth Century-Fox, 1957; *America and Americans*, 1967, and *Travels with Charley*, 1968, were adapted for television and broadcast by NBC; "The Harness" was adapted for television and broadcast in 1971; *The Red Pony* was adapted for television and broadcast in 1973; *Cannery Row* and *Sweet Thursday* were both adapted by David S. Ward for the film *Cannery Row*, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1982; *The Winter of Our Discontent* was adapted for television by Michael de Guzman and broadcast in 1983.

**Further Readings**


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