SOCIAL CRITICISM IN THE WORKS

OF JOHN STEINBECK

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OF JOHN STEINBECK

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

This thesis is a study of John Steinbeck's observations and opinions during twenty-eight years of writing about the relationships between people of different economic and social classes.

John Ernst Steinbeck was born and came to maturity in the Salinas Valley, one of the smaller valleys of central California's farming region. It is necessary to have some knowledge of this and surrounding areas in order to understand Steinbeck's works, for it was in the Salinas Valley and the nearby towns of Salinas, Monterey, and Pacific Grove that he came to admire the bums of Tortilla Flat, Cannery Row, and Sweet Thursday; to champion the migrant laborers of In Dubious Battle, Of Mice and Men, and The Grapes of Wrath; and to understand the diverse characters of The Long Valley, The Pastures of Heaven, The Red Pony, The Wayward Bus, and East of Eden.

For most of its one hundred and twenty miles, the Salinas Valley parallels the coast about thirty miles
inland. It has been an important cattle raising region since the days of Spanish conquistadores, and, even though vegetable raising has outranked livestock in importance for some time, there are still many men who wear traditional western clothing and recount tales of a more rugged California. Steinbeck's association with this early western tradition provided backgrounds for stories in The Pastures of Heaven and To a God Unknown.

The gigantic process of cultivating, harvesting, and packing the fruits and vegetables of this fertile valley surrounded John Steinbeck until he was nineteen years old. At that time he enrolled in Stanford University; he attended classes for five years but selected courses according to his own interests and never received a degree. During vacations from school, he worked with farm hands and road gang laborers. These experiences, coupled with his pre-college remembrances, gave Steinbeck that intimate knowledge of the speech, habits, and attitudes of the American working man which permitted him to produce the realistic characters of In Dubious Battle, Of Mice and Men, and The Grapes of Wrath.
In the early nineteen thirties, Steinbeck married and moved to Pacific Grove on the Monterey Peninsula. From a close observation of the marine life which abounds in the bay area, he derived much of his biological view of life. It was during this period that Steinbeck met Ed Ricketts, who ran a small commercial laboratory specializing in marine invertebrates and who would prove to be Steinbeck's life-long friend. Ricketts influenced Steinbeck's biological view of life and became the prototype for Dr. Phillips of "The Snake," Doc Burton of In Dubious Battle, Doc of Cannery Row, and Doc of Sweet Thursday.

The shore surrounding the Monterey Peninsula is solidly lined with canny industries (Cannery Row) which receive and process the marine life brought in by purse-seiners and the sardine fleet. The laborers who catch the fish and work in the canneries are a conglomeration of Italian, Portuguese, Japanese, Chinese, and paisano - "... a mixture of Spanish, Indian, Mexican and assorted Caucasian bloods."¹ From his association with these men, and from stories told to him by Susan Gregory,

a long-time resident of Monterey, Steinbeck created the mischievous rogues of *Tortilla Flat*, *Cannery Row*, and *Sweet Thursday*.

His associations with the laboring classes of the Salinas Valley and the Monterey Peninsula were not always during what might be called "normal" economic periods. The late nineteen twenties and the early thirties was an era of violence, strife, and hatred between the upper and lower classes seldom equaled in American history. Freeman Champney describes central California during that period:

The exploitation of labor has exceeded anything known in western civilization since the early mill towns of England. The operators of this paradise have usually been able to use or usurp the sovereign powers of local or state government whenever necessary to wipe out a threat of their absolutism.

Economically, socially, and culturally it has been an ugly state of affairs. In its extremes of wealth and destitution, in the absence or impotence of any middle group representing the public interest, and in the domination of the organs of civil life by irresponsible private greed, it has been one of the few areas of American life that has closely approximated the Marxian predictions about capitalist society. The proletariat was kept homeless, voteless, and close to or below the starvation point, with the gulf between it and the dominant group widened by racial differences.²

²Freeman Champney, "John Steinbeck, Californian," *Antioch Review*, VIII (September, 1947), 348.
Exposure to the violence of this class struggle left a mark on John Steinbeck that has been evident throughout his literary career. He has said of his work, "My experience in writing has followed an almost invariable pattern. Since by the process of writing a book I have outgrown that book, and since I like to write, I have not written two books alike." Indeed, his works display many diversities of tone and characterization.

It is the purpose of this thesis, however, to demonstrate that Steinbeck has consistently championed the cause of the underdog while ridiculing the hypocrisy of the middle class and denouncing the avarice of the upper class, regardless of the subject matter of his material. This alliance with the lower class is not restricted to the labor-management conflict novels, In Dubious Battle and The Grapes of Wrath, but prevails throughout his works—from his earliest published novel, Cup of Gold, "A Life of Sir Henry Morgan, Buccaneer, with Occasional Reference to History," through his latest novel, The Short Reign of Pippin IV, an imaginary account of twentieth century France's return to monarchial government.

CHAPTER II

THE UPPER CLASS

Royalty

Although the majority of Steinbeck's criticism of the upper class is concerned with non-monarchial societies, The Short Reign of Pippin IV satirizes British royalty and the imaginary twentieth century French nobility of the novel. The exasperated Pippin, who has received through a series of fantastic circumstances a monarchy he does not want, exclaims to his confidant-uncle:

Uncle Charlie, I am sure that somewhere in France there must be aristocrats who are solvent, but not among my guests. The word has gone out, under the bridges and under the barrows and to the subway gratings. I am surrounded by what, if they were not so high-born, would be called bums, but stately bums. They stroll majestically in the gardens. They touch their lips with bits of lace. They speak words directly out of Corneille. And they aren't honest, Uncle Charlie. They steal.

My uncle, there isn't a hen coop nor a rabbit hutch within ten miles that is safe from them.

. . . Every department store in Paris has set up a Nobility Detail to protect its counters. I'm afraid, Uncle Charlie; I am told the peasants are beginning to sharpen their scythes.¹

Uncle Charlie replies, "Maybe you'll have to modernize the throne, my dear nephew; you may have to take a stand. You understand, of course, that what to ordinary people is simple theft, to the nobility is their ancient right."\(^2\)

The functions of British royalty are made to appear ludicrous: "England's monarchs lay cornerstones and take unequivocal positions on the kind of hat to wear to a race track."\(^3\) The customs of the French court are described with equal levity: "In Paris schools sprang up to revivify lost arts or graces - Schools of the Walk (with or without staff), Schools of the Bow, of the Curtsy, the Hand Kiss; Schools of the Fan, Schools of the Insult, Schools of Honor."\(^4\)

In his earlier play-novelette, *Burning Bright*, Steinbeck debunks the whole theory of superiority of regal and upper-class ancestral bloodlines through the voice of Joe Saul, a circus acrobat, who speaks of his grandfather:

> Old Joe Saul said then in Greece we wore high shoes and wooden masks and we were gods. He said in Rome we tumbled in the red sand of the arena after the

\(^2\)Ibid., p. 78.
\(^3\)Ibid., p. 47.
\(^4\)Ibid., p. 62.
blood had run, and we juggled burning sticks in front of the set-up crosses and their burdens. . . . Kings, he'd say, princes, counts, Astors, Vanderbilts, or Tudors, Plantagenets, Pendragons for that matter—who knows their great-granddads with any certainty? . . . Two ancient families there are . . . known and sure and recognized—the only two. Clowns and acrobats. The rest are newcomers.⁵

The Wealthy

Steinbeck's comments about the regal closely parallel his comments about the very wealthy. Neither approaches the volume of his statements about the middle class or the poor, for, as he states in "About Ed Ricketts," the fore-piece to The Log from the Sea of Cortez, "We did not know any rich people, and for that reason we did not like them and were proud and glad we didn't live that way."⁶ A writer must primarily concern himself with things he knows intimately; he need not, however, be intimate with the newsworthy wealthy to form an "outsider's" opinion of them. Horton of The Wayward Bus says: "I read in the papers about our best men. They must be our best men 'cause they got the biggest jobs. I read what they way


and do, and I got lots of friends that you might call bums, and there's awful little difference between them." A parallel to this attitude is found in *Once There Was a War*, a collection of notes made while Steinbeck was a correspondent during World War II: ". . . black markets are flourishing and the operators are not little crooks, but the best of people." Ernest Horton, the traveling salesman of *The Wayward Bus*, similarly recalls:

My old man had two faiths. One was that honesty got rewarded in some way or other. He thought that if a man was honest he somehow got along, and he thought if a man worked hard and saved he could pile up a little money and feel safe. Teapot Dome and a lot of stuff like that fixed him on the first, and nineteen-thirty fixed him on the other. He found out that the most admired people weren't honest at all. 

Steinbeck attempts at least a cursory analysis of the sort of persons who are destined to secure great wealth or power. In his first published novel, *Cup of Gold*, he states: "If great men were not fools, the world would have been destroyed long ago. How could it be otherwise?"

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Folly and distorted vision are the foundations of greatness."\(^{10}\) The father of Henry Morgan (the protagonist of Cup of Gold) says of his son:

But I do know and I say to you, without pleasure, that this son of ours will be a great man, because--well--because he is not very intelligent. He can only see one desire at a time. I said he tested his dreams; he will murder every dream with the implacable arrows of his will. This boy will win to every goal of his aiming; for he can realize no thought, no reason, but his own.\(^{11}\)

In East of Eden, Steinbeck ascribes financial success to luck and the favor of the gods rather than to an implacable will:

Certain individuals, not by any means always deserving, are truly beloved of the gods. Things come to them without their effort or planning. Will Hamilton was one of these. And the gifts he received were the ones he could appreciate. As a growing boy Will was lucky. Just as his father could not make money, Will could not help making it.\(^{12}\)

In The Log from the Sea of Cortez, wealth seems to be concomitant with desire. The narrative concerns an incident in La Paz, Mexico, where Steinbeck and crew had docked for a period of time. Their fishing boat had been besieged by

\(^{10}\) John E. Steinbeck, Cup of Gold (New York, 1929), p. 250.

\(^{11}\) Ibid., p. 17.

a swarm of small boys who had heard "that there were crazy people in port who gave money for things a boy could pick up on the rocks." One boy, however, particularly stands out in the author's mind:

He was not like the others. His shoulders were not slender, but broad, and there was a hint about his face and expression that seemed Germanic or perhaps Anglo-Saxon. Whereas the other little boys lived for the job and the payment, this boy created jobs and looked ahead. He did errands that were not necessary, he made himself indispensable. Late at night he waited, and the first dawn saw him on our deck. Further, the other little boys seemed a little afraid of him, and gradually they faded into the background and left him in charge.

Some day this boy will be very rich, and La Paz will be proud of him, for he will own the things that people must buy or rent. He has the look and the method of success. Even the first day success went to his head, and he began to cheat us a little. We did not mind, for it is a good thing to be cheated a little. . . . He wasn't a very brave little boy, but he will be a rich one because he wants to. The others only wanted sweets or a new handkerchief, but the aggressive little boy wishes to be rich, and they will not be able to compete with him.\(^\text{13}\)

Regardless of the motives that drive men to the dream of boundless material wealth, the realization of that dream holds little happiness. In The Log from the Sea of Cortez Steinbeck compares the simple life of Mexican peasants with that of affluent American tourists:

\[^{13}\text{Steinbeck, Sea of Cortez, p. 113.}\]
It is often said and in such ignorance that Mexicans are contented, happy people. "They don't want anything." This, of course, is not a description of the happiness of the Mexicans, but of the unhappiness of the person who says it. For Americans, and probably all northern peoples, are all masses of wants growing out of inner insecurity.\textsuperscript{14}

Steinbeck bitterly satirizes the modern world by viewing it as it might appear to the primitive Indians of the Gulf coast above Santa Rosalia:

It would be interesting to try to explain to one of these Indians our tremendous projects, our great drives, the fantastic production of goods that can't be sold, the clutter of possessions which enslave whole populations with debt, the worry and neuroses that go into the rearing and educating of neurotic children who find no place for themselves in this complicated world; the defence of the nation against a frantic nation of conquerors, and the necessity for becoming frantic to do it; the spoilage and wastage and death necessary for the retention of the crazy thing; the science which labors to acquire knowledge, and the movement of people and goods contrary to the knowledge obtained. How could one make an Indian understand the medicine which labors to save a syphilitic, and the gas and bomb to kill him when he is well, the armies which build health so that death will be more active and violent. It is quite possible that to an ignorant Indian these might not be evidences of a great civilization, but rather of inconceivable nonsense.\textsuperscript{15}

Steinbeck's most concentrated attack on the evils of riches is \textit{The Pearl}. Professor Peter Lisca says of it:

\textsuperscript{14}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 98.

\textsuperscript{15}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 208.
His great accomplishment in *The Pearl* is that he has been able to give this materialistic level of meaning an archetypal reference, making of this simple story a parable of man's constant spiritual struggle to adjust himself to an essentially materialistic world.  

Four years before the publication of *The Pearl*, Steinbeck gave a preview of the theme of the story: "Humans are not much wanted on the Peninsula. But at La Paz the pearl oysters drew men from all over the world. And, as in all concentrations of natural wealth, the terrors of greed were let loose on the city again and again."  

When Kino, the impoverished young father of the novelette, discovered the "Pearl of the World," "All of the neighbors hoped that sudden wealth would not turn Kino's head, would not make a rich man of him, would not graft onto him the evil limbs of greed and hatred and coldness." 

Their fears were not unwarranted, for after the second attack by his "dark" assailants, Kino says, "This pearl has

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become my soul. If I give it up, I shall lose my soul."  

His wife Juana says of the pearl:

This thing is evil. This pearl is like sin! It will destroy us. Throw it away, Kino. Let us break it between stones. Let us bury it and forget the place. Let us throw it back in the sea. It has brought evil. Kino, my husband, it will destroy us.  

Indeed it almost does. Before the pearl is returned to the sea, it causes strife between husband and wife, destroys their home and means of livelihood, and results in the violent death of their only child.

**Tortilla Flat**, in lauding the primitive life of Danny and his friends, is, like *The Pearl*, a denunciation of materialism. The chapter headings indicate as much: "How Pilon was lured by greed of position to forsake Danny's hospitality," and "How the poison of possession wrought with Pilon and how evil temporarily triumphed in him." Steinbeck is able to produce a poignant bit of social satire in the incident of Sweets Ramirez and her status symbol, a sweeping machine. The vacuum-cleaner, it turns out, has no motor; and, of course, there is no electricity in Tortilla Flat anyway, but, "Through its

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possession sweets climbed to the peak of the social scale in Tortilla Flat. People who did not remember her name referred to her as 'that one with the sweeping machine.' \[21\] Here is the reductio ad absurdum of status symbols; and the implications are not limited to the village of Tortilla Flat.

The two houses Danny inherits from his grandfather symbolize possession and are used throughout the book to demonstrate the evils of ownership. Danny's reaction to the burning of the first of the two houses reveals an underlying theme of the book:

He had indulged in a little conventional anger against careless friends, had mourned over that transitory quality of earthly property which made spiritual property so much more valuable. He had thought over the ruin of his status as a man with a house to rent; and, all this clutter of necessary and decent emotion having been satisfied and swept away, he finally slipped into his true emotion, one of relief that at least one of his burdens was removed. \[22\]

Again, riches are not a blessing, but a burden.

Wealthy men do not appear as major characters in the works of John Steinbeck, but scattered statements about them permit the construction of an archetype. A "Richard

\[21\] Steinbeck, Tortilla Flat, p. 75.

\[22\] Ibid., p. 50.
"Cory" type is described in *East of Eden*:

And Samuel could remember hearing of a cousin of his mother's in Ireland, a knight and rich and handsome, and anyway shot himself on a silken couch, sitting beside the most beautiful woman in the world who loved him.\(^{23}\)

The wealthy man has no warmth: "... some of them were cold because they had long ago found that one could not be an owner unless one were cold."\(^{24}\) He has no friends:

"When one is poor, one thinks, 'if I had money I would share it with my good friends.' But let that money come and charity flies away. So it is with thee, my once-friend. Thou art lifted above thy friends. Thou art a man of property."\(^{25}\) He is irrevocably alone: "For the quality of owning freezes you forever into 'I,' and cuts you off forever from the 'we.'"\(^{26}\) He has little love: "And all their love was thinned with money. ..."\(^{27}\) His health is bad: "... no one under twenty-five thousand dollars a

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\(^{25}\)Steinbeck, *Tortilla Flat*, p. 15.


\(^{27}\)Ibid., p. 206.
year got an ulcer. It was a symptom of a bank account.\textsuperscript{28}

But most important, he is not rich at all, but the poorest of the poor in spirit:

They's a fella, newspaper fella near the coast got a million acres. . . . Got guards ever' place to keep folks out. Rides aroun' in a bullet-proof car. . . . Scait he's gonna die. Got a million acres an' scared of dyin'. . . . Don't seem like he's havin' no fun. . . . Fella havin' fun, he don't give a damn; but a fella mean an' lonely an' disappointed--he's scared of dyin'. . . . 'If he needs a million acres to make him feel rich, seems to me he needs it 'cause he feels awful poor inside hisself, and if he's poor in hisself, there ain't no million acres gonna make him feel rich, an' maybe he's disappointed that nothin' he can do'll make him feel rich--not rich like Mis' Wilson was when she give her tent when Grandpa died.\textsuperscript{29}

Neither can they be rich like Sam Hamilton of \textit{East of Eden}:

He thought of Sam Hamilton. He had knocked on so many doors. He had the most schemes and plans, and no one would give him any money. But of course--he had so much, he was so rich. You couldn't give him any more. Riches seem to come to the poor in spirit, the poor in interest and joy. To put it straight--the very rich are a poor bunch of bastards. He wondered if that was true. They acted that way sometimes.\textsuperscript{30}

Steinbeck finds no redemptive qualities even in the belated philanthropy of the rich:

\textsuperscript{28}Steinbeck, \textit{The Wayward Bus}, p. 273.

\textsuperscript{29}Steinbeck, \textit{The Grapes of Wrath}, p. 183.

\textsuperscript{30}Steinbeck, \textit{East of Eden}, p. 516.
Nearly always, giving is a selfish pleasure, and in many cases it is a downright destructive and evil thing. One has only to remember some of our wolfish financiers who spend two-thirds of their lives clawing fortunes out of the guts of society and the latter third pushing it back. It is not enough to suppose that their philanthropy is a kind of frightened restitution, or that their natures change when they have had enough. Such a nature never has enough and natures do not change that readily. I think that the impulse is the same in both cases. For giving can bring the same sense of superiority that getting does, and philanthropy may be another kind of spiritual avarice.  

The only wealthy person who even approaches wholesomeness in the works of Steinbeck is Old Jingleballicks of *Sweet Thursday*. The question of inconsistency raised by his presence is explained by the fact that he appears in one of the trilogy of romantic utopias—*Tortilla Flat*, *Cannery Row*, and *Sweet Thursday*—in which an unpleasant character is never permitted to corrupt the prevailing mood of romantic isolation.

Old Jingleballicks is depicted as a lovable, cantankerous eccentric:

Old Jay was born so rich that he didn't know he was rich at all. He thought everybody was that way. He was a scientist, but whether brilliant or a screwball nobody ever knew, and since he had contributed to so many learned foundations and financed so many projects

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and served on so many boards of trustees, nobody dared openly to wonder. He gave away millions but he was likely to sponge on a friend.\footnote{32}{John E. Steinbeck, \textit{Sweet Thursday} (New York, 1954), p. 163.}  

It is possible for Old Jay to be an admirable wealthy man because he was born rich; that fact relieves him of the stigma of being a member of that group of ". . . wolfish financiers who spend two-thirds of their lives clawing fortunes out of the guts of society. . . ." Steinbeck supplies him with an insatiable thirst for alcohol and a fondness for consorting with prostitutes, two traits which typify most male characters in the romantic utopias. Old Jay is no more than a romantic creation for a romantic book and is not paralleled elsewhere in either the serious or the romantic works of Steinbeck.  

Throughout his works, Steinbeck tends to regard those people who have an excessive desire for wealth and power as suffering from a type of mental and spiritual illness. By subjecting their lives to the domination of a single passion, they become cursed with a distorted vision which leads them to believe that things, not people, are of more importance. Laboring under this delusion, they surround
themselves with possessions and thereby isolate themselves from the rest of humanity. In the end, their efforts leave them lonely, unloved, and unhappy, for, implies Steinbeck, true wealth lies not in material possessions but in the internal condition of man's soul.
CHAPTER III

THE MIDDLE CLASS

Lodge Members

Portions of Steinbeck's criticism are quite mild and seem to be no more than the amused contempt of one who senses a great deal of bigotry and falsity in middle class morality. These portions include his comments about men who join lodges and secret orders, stuffy pedants, and the "proper" women who join temperance and decency leagues.

In The Short Reign of Pippin IV men's lodges are seen as a throwback to the pompous ritualisms of antiquity:

And in America, Sire, the most irascibly democratic of nations, where panoply in government is forbidden and where the chief of state is required to be the worst dressed of all—even there, I am told, the ordinary people, feeling robbed, join secret organizations, where regularly they wear crowns and robes of ermine, and speak in rituals of antiquity which give them solace even though they do not understand the words.¹

In Cannery Row, a flagpole skater was pestered by someone's shooting him with an air gun, and it was discovered

¹Steinbeck, The Short Reign of Pippin IV, p. 159.
that, "It was old Doctor Merrivale hiding behind the curtains of his office, plugging away with a Daisy air rifle. They didn't denounce him and he promised to stop. He was very prominent in the Masonic Lodge."² Peter Randall, of The Long Valley, is described as "... one of the most highly respected farmers of Monterey County. Once, before he was to make a speech at a Masonic convention, the brother who introduced him referred to him as an example for young Masons of California to emulate."³ Actually, he had led a miserable existence, enduring the daily suffering of a posture-forming harness his wife forced him to wear under his clothes.

Criticism becomes more caustic in The Wayward Bus. The cantankerous Van Brunt had gone through the Chairs of the Blue Lodge and had been Worshipful Master of the San Ysidro Lodge. He was senile and near death, but, "He had suddenly reacquainted powerful desires. He was pantingly drawn toward young women, even little girls."⁴


Mr. Pritchard, also of The Wayward Bus, is given a Babbitt-like personality:

Mr. Pritchard was a businessman, president of a medium-sized corporation. He was never alone. His business was conducted by groups of men who worked alike, thought alike, and even looked alike. His lunches were with men like himself who joined together in clubs so that no foreign element or idea could enter. His religious life was again his lodge and his church, both of which were screened and protected. . . . Wherever he went he was not one man but a unit in a corporation, a unit in a club, in a lodge, in a church, in a political party. His thoughts and ideas were never subjected to criticism since he willingly associated only with people like himself. He read a newspaper written by and for his group. The books that came into his house were chosen by a committee which deleted material that might irritate him. He hated foreign countries and foreigners because it was difficult to find his counterpart in them. . . . At occasional stags where naked girls danced on tables and sat in great glasses of wine, Mr. Pritchard howled with laughter and drank the wine, but five hundred Mr. Pritchards were there with him.5

Pedants

Steinbeck has no more admiration for scientists, pedants, and dilettantes than he has for men who join secret lodges, unless, that is, they share the same love for "teeming, boisterous life" that he does. He finds little difference between scholars who protect themselves with

5Ibid., pp. 39-40.
degrees and emblems and the members of secret lodges who create a world apart with rituals and robes:

It has seemed sometimes that the little men in scientific work assumed the awe-fullness of a priesthood to hide their deficiencies, as the witch-doctor does with his stilts and high masks, as the priesthoods of all cults have, with secret or unfamiliar languages or symbols. . . . We have not known a single great scientist who could not discourse freely and interestingly with a child. Can it be that the haters of clarity have nothing to say, have observed nothing, have no clear picture of even their own fields? A dull man seems to be a dull man no matter what his field, and of course it is the right of the dull scientist to protect himself with feathers and robes, emblems and degrees, as do other dull men who are potentates and grand imperial rulers of lodges of dull men.5

In the sequel to Cannery Row, Sweet Thursday, Steinbeck throws a few light-hearted, disparaging remarks at the Left-Bank, dilettante, would-be author: "Joe Elegant was a pale young man with bangs. He smoked foreign cigarettes in a long ebony holder. . . . He sneered most of the time. . . ."7 We are given a description of Elegant's forthcoming novel:

His hero had been born in a state of shock and nothing subsequent had reassured him. When a symbol wasn't slapping him in the mouth, a myth was kicking his feet out from under him. It was a book of moods, of

6 Steinbeck, Sea of Cortez, p. 73.

7 Steinbeck, Sweet Thursday, p. 81.
dank rooms with cryptic wallpaper, of pale odors, of decaying dreams. There wasn't a character in the whole of The Pi Root of Oedipus who wouldn't have made the observation ward.  

An avant-garde painter is described in Cannery Row:

Henri the painter was not French and his name was not Henri. Also he was not really a painter. Henri had been so steeped in stories of the Left Bank in Paris that he lived there although he had never been there. . . . Regularly he revolted against outworn techniques and materials. One season he threw out perspective. Another year he abandoned red, even as the mother of purple. Finally he gave up paint entirely. It is not known whether Henri was a good painter or not for he threw himself so violently into movements that he had very little time left for painting of any kind.

Etymologists are debunked in The Short Reign of Pippin IV: "The only people who try to find out what slang means are the ones who can't use it."  

And in Of Mice and Men, Slim the mule-skinner says, "Guy don't need no sense to be a nice fella. Seems to me sometimes it jus' works the other way around. Take a real smart guy and he ain't hardly ever a nice fella."  

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8 Ibid., p. 240.

9 Steinbeck, Cannery Row, p. 140.


In the preface to *Tortilla Flat*, Steinbeck expresses the hope that his recording of the history of Danny and his friends will protect them forever from "sour scholars":

It is well that this cycle be put down on paper so that in a future time scholars, hearing the legends, may not say as they say of Arthur and of Roland and of Robin Hood—"There was no Danny nor any group of Danny's friends, nor any house. Danny is a nature god and his friends primitive symbols of the wind, the sky, the sun." This history is designed now and ever to keep the sneers from the lips of sour scholars. 12

Steinbeck describes the type of scholars he does admire, and contrasts them with their foils, the "dry-balls":

We . . . thought what good men most biologists are, the tenors of the scientific world—temperamental, moody, lecherous, loud-laughing, and healthy. Once in a while one comes on the other kind—what used in the university to be called a "dry-ball"—but such men are not really biologists. They are the embalmers of the field, the picklers who see only the preserved form of life without any of its principle. . . . The true biologist deals with life, with teeming boisterous life, and learns something from it, learns that the first rule of life is living. . . . Your true biologist will sing you a song as loud and off-key as will a blacksmith, for he knows that morals are too often diagnostic of prostatitis and stomach ulcers. Sometimes he may proliferate a little too much in all directions, but . . . at least he does not confuse a low hormone productivity with moral ethics. 13


13 Steinbeck, *Sea of Cortez*, p. 29.
At another point, Steinbeck praises a biologist named John Xantus who had been a tidal observer in Cape San Lucas in the eighteen sixties and had left a "whole tribe of Xantuses" among the Indian population:

We wonder what modern biologist, worried about titles and preferment and the gossip of the Faculty Club, would have the warmth and breadth, or even the fecundity for that matter, to leave a "whole tribe of Xantuses." We honor this man for his activities. He at least was one who literally did proliferate in all directions.\(^{14}\)

Steinbeck's criticism of lodge members, pedants, and dilettantes partially defines the qualities he considers essential in an admirable man. The heroes of his fiction are noticeably devoid of the hypocrisy of lodge members, the stuffiness of pedants, and the affectations of dilettantes. They are honest, warm, unpretentious, and, more often than not, as fecund as biologist Xantus.

Women's Temperance and Moral Leagues

Another group whom Steinbeck severely criticizes are the respectable civic-minded women who attempt to oversee community morals. His animosity for these women is occasionally expressed in "indecent" language which

\(^{14}\textit{Ibid.}, \ p. \ 62.$
Professor Lincoln R. Gibbs suggests should be condoned for the sake of the understanding that Steinbeck provides:

One suspects that Steinbeck would cheerfully plead guilty to the charge of deliberately shocking the respectables. Convinced as he is that many of them are Pharisees, and deeply impressed by the graces and virtues and wrongs of the proletarians, he would be somewhat less than human if he did not now and then delight in ruffling the composure of prudes and making them squirm.

Steinbeck overdoes the matter, but his license of speech does not spring from a vile mind; it springs from the heart of a rebel who hates cant and injustice. Many years ago Dr. Holmes, apostle of decorum and consummate flower of the genteel tradition, told us that there are many swearing saints and praying devils in the world. At the very worst, Steinbeck's indecencies should be condoned for the sake of the art and understanding he provides.\(^{15}\)

In *Tortilla Flat* and *Sweet Thursday* Steinbeck uses two neighboring towns to represent respectability, on the one hand, and "natural" society on the other. Pacific Grove fosters women's temperance leagues and morality committees, while Monterey shelters Danny and his friends and Mack and the boys. Steinbeck describes the towns:

Pacific Grove and Monterey sit side by side on a hill bordering the bay. The two towns touch shoulders but they are not alike. Whereas Monterey was founded a long time ago by foreigners, Indians and Spaniards and such, and the town grew up higgledy-piggledy without plan or purpose, Pacific Grove sprang full blown.

\(^{15}\) Lincoln R. Gibbs, "John Steinbeck: Moralist," *Antioch Review*, II (June, 1942), 175.
from the iron heart of a psycho-ideo-legal religion.

... On the town's statute books a deed is void if liquor is ever brought on the property. As a result, the sale of iron-and-wine tonic is fantastic. Pacific Grove has a law that requires you to pull your shades down after sundown and forbids you to pull them down before.\textsuperscript{16}

In \textit{Tortilla Flat} he depicts two typical concurring scenes:

All Monterey began to make gradual instinctive preparations against the night. ... A little group of men who had spent the afternoon in front of the post office, greeting their friends, moved toward the station to see the Del Monte Express from San Francisco come in. On the purse-seine fishing boats the Italian men folded their nets over big rollers. Little Miss Alma Alvarez, who was ninety years old, took her daily bouquet of pink geraniums to the Virgin on the outer wall of the church of San Carlos. In the neighboring and Methodist village of Pacific Grove, the W.C.T.U. met for tea and discussion, listened while a little lady described the vice and prostitution of Monterey with energy and color. She thought a committee should visit these resorts to see exactly how terrible these conditions really were. They had gone over the situation so often and they needed new facts.\textsuperscript{17}

The same repugnance for morality-policing organizations appears in \textit{Once There Was a War}: "There were citizens' groups helping with tactics and logistics; there were organizations of mothers to oversee morals, and by morals I do not only mean sexual morals but also such things as

\textsuperscript{16} Steinbeck, \textit{Sweet Thursday}, p. 54.

\textsuperscript{17} Steinbeck, \textit{Tortilla Flat}, pp. 34-35.
gambling and helling around in general." An insinuating remark about church workers is made in The Wayward Bus:

"Why are so many choir singers and organists murdered?

... There seems to be a high occupational hazard about choir singing. Choristers are always being found choked behind the organ." 19

The only "respectable" woman to appear as a major character in a Steinbeck novel is Mrs. Pritchard of The Wayward Bus. She is portrayed as being sexually frigid and incapable of understanding life as it exists outside her social circle:

She herself was handicapped by what is known as a nun's hood, which prevented her experiencing any sexual elation from her marriage; and she suffered from an acid condition which kept her from conceiving children without first artificially neutralizing her body acids. Both of these conditions she considered normal, and any variation of them abnormal and in bad taste. Women of lusty appetites she spoke of as "that kind of woman," and she was a little sorry for them as she was for dope fiends and alcoholics.

Her husband's beginning libido she had accepted and then gradually by faint but constant reluctance had first molded and then controlled and gradually strangulated. ... She had never really been ill nor badly hurt, and consequently she had no measuring rod

18 Steinbeck, Once There Was a War, p. vii.

of pain. . . . Having few actual perceptions, she lived by rules. Education is good. Self-control is necessary. Everything in its time and place. Travel is broadening. 20

Camille Oaks, whom Mrs. Pritchard classified as "that kind of woman," suggests that women like Mrs. Pritchard are hypocritical: "... everybody's a tramp some time or other. Everybody. And the worst tramps of all are the ones that call it something else." 21

It should be pointed out that there are several respectable women in Steinbeck's works whom the author deeply admires, but these women are not members of the "watchdogs of public morals" group. Examples are Ma Joad, Samuel Hamilton's wife, and Kino's wife, who will be discussed in chapter five.

Businessmen

The men who marry the W.C.T.U. women and join the protective lodges are frequently members of another group which damns them still further into Steinbeck's purgatory: businessmen. These are not the million-acre landowners or the financial tycoons, but ordinary middle-class merchants.

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20 Ibid., pp. 63-64.

21 Ibid., p. 302.
With one exception, the members of the merchant class are portrayed as a cowardly, thieving lot. The tone is set in Steinbeck's first novel:

But when the peoples of Nicaragua and Peru and Darien had become gangs of whimpering slaves, when there was no danger any more, a different breed of men came to live in Panama. These were the merchants, keenly decisive when there was a farm to be wrested by law from its owner, or when the price of food was raised for outland colonists, but fearful and cowardly when steel was rattling about on steel.

... The merchants combined so that all might charge the same high price for food, and with the profits they built their cedar houses roofed with rosy tiles; they dressed their women in foreign silks and were followed about in the streets by bands of retaining slaves.22

When Panama was besieged by the pirate Morgan, "The merchants of Panama thought only of their possessions, their lives, and their souls--in the order named. They never considered belting on swords or toiling at the disintegrated walls."23

Some of his most vehement attacks on business practices appear in The Grapes of Wrath. There are used car salesmen with "Neat, deadly, small intent eyes watching for weaknesses." Their selling tactics are described:

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23Ibid., p. 158.
Watch the woman's face. If the woman likes it we can screw the old man. Start 'em on the Cad'.
Then you can work 'em down to that '26 Buick. ...
Get 'em under obligation. Make 'em take up your time. Don't let 'em forget they're takin' your time.
People are nice, mostly. They hate to put you out.
Make 'em put you out, an' then sock it to 'em.²⁴

Businessmen seem to have two sets of morals:

Fella in business got to lie an' cheat, but he calls it somepin else. That's what's important. You go steal that tire an' yo're a thief, but he tried to steal your four dollars for a busted tire. They call that sound business.²⁵

Such merchants must retreat to secret lodges for reassurance:

In their lapels the insignia of lodges and service clubs, places where they can go, and, by a weight of numbers of little worried men, reassure themselves that business is noble and not the ritualized thievery they know it is; that businessmen are intelligent in spite of the records of their stupidity; that they are kind and charitable in spite of the principles of sound business; that their lives are rich instead of the thin tiresome routine they know; and that a time is coming when they will not be afraid anymore.²⁶

The communal utopias, Tortilla Flat, Cannery Row, and Sweet Thursday, are remarkably similar in tone, setting, and characterization. Each contains a group of six

²⁴Steinbeck, The Grapes of Wrath, p. 53.
²⁵Ibid., p. 106.
²⁶Ibid., p. 136.
unmarried men whose lives together are primitively hedonistic. Each book also contains a storekeeper from whom these men obtain beer, wine, and food. The personalities of the heroes are rather similar in the three books, but the storekeepers are quite distinct.

The storekeeper of Tortilla Flat, Torrelli, is portrayed as a pawn who endures a thousand injustices at the hands of Danny and his friends. They steal wine from him; they trade him wine for clothes and then steal back the clothes; they kick his dog, spank his baby, and seduce his wife. And all of Torrelli's efforts to combat them are in vain. Torrelli is not a merchant at all, but a romantic convenience for a romantic tale.

Joseph and Mary, the storekeeper of Sweet Thursday, had formerly been engaged in larceny and fraud, marijuana sales, and at the time of the story was importing illegal Mexican labor:

That's why he bought out Lee Chong. He figured to make the grocery a kind of labor center, where he could rest up his men and sell them stuff at the same time. And what he's doing ain't very against the law.27

Clearly, Joseph and Mary is more closely akin to Mack and

27 Steinbeck, Sweet Thursday, p. 17.
the boys than to Steinbeck's typical businessman. He is neither commended nor denounced; he is simply a small time crook running a grocery store and is treated as a minor character.

Such is not the case with Lee Chong, the shrewd but amiable grocery owner of Cannery Row. He is not denounced as the Grapes of Wrath businessmen are; he is not the pawn of his customers as Torrelli of Tortilla Flat is; he is not an insignificant character as is Joseph and Mary; he is as important as some of the men living with Mack. He is the only clear-cut example in Steinbeck's works of what an admirable businessman should be:

The grocery opened at dawn and did not close until the last wandering vagrant dime had been spent or retired for the night. Not that Lee Chong was avaricious. He wasn't, but if one wanted to spend money, he was available. Lee's position in the community surprised him as much as he could be surprised. Over the course of the years everyone in Cannery Row owed him money. He never pressed his clients, but when the bill became too large, Lee cut off credit. Rather than walk into the town up the hill, the client usually paid or tried to.

He trusted his clients until further trust became ridiculous.

Lee's mouth was full and benevolent and the flash of gold when he smiled was rich and warm. 28

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28 Steinbeck, Cannery Row, pp. 5-7.
Lee's actions throughout the book corroborate this description. He is shrewd but not avaricious, trusting but not gullible; he enjoys his life and is respected by his community. He displays all the qualities so noticeably lacking in Steinbeck's other middle class businessmen.

The characters of the middle class are obviously no less miserable and dishonorable than those of the upper class. Members of secret lodges are seen as men wearing harnesses, sexually perverted in senility, and as incapable of individuality, as in the case of Mr. Pritchard who needed the constant companionship of other men like himself in order to maintain his pretense of self respect. Many middle class scientists, scholars, and pedants share in common with the lodge members a lack of love for "teeming, boisterous, life." They protect themselves with emblems and degrees as do "other dull men who are potentates and grand imperial rulers of lodges of dull men."

The W.C.T.U. women are the female equivalents of the lodge and faculty club members. Like Mrs. Pritchard, they are sexless and incapable of understanding the vitality of life that exists outside their own social circle.
Steinbeck has reserved a particular portion of purgatory for middle class businessmen. With one exception, they are portrayed as a thieving, cowardly lot. Lee Chong of Cannery Row is Steinbeck's only good merchant. He is lenient with his customers but not to the point of being gullible; he is shrewd in his dealings and yet is not crazed with avarice. His example seems to point the way for those middle class businessmen who would save themselves from the purgatory of their own existence.
CHAPTER IV

THE GOVERNMENT

The government of the United States is said to be "of, by, and for the people." Steinbeck poses the question: "Which people is it of, by, and for?" The answer to that question seems to be that those people are seldom if ever the ones who represent the heroes and heroines of his fiction. He contends that wealth is very influential in forming government policy, that laws on all levels of government favor certain groups over others, and that, finally, there is often stupidity and dishonesty among the government officials themselves.

Steinbeck is pleading the case of the common man, and he sets that case before us: "The Four Freedoms define what he wants but unless some machinery, some foundation, some clear method is shown, he is likely to believe only in that freedom which Anatole France defined --the equal freedom of rich and poor to sleep under bridges."1

1 Steinbeck, Once There Was a War, p. 57.
In *The Log from the Sea of Cortez* Steinbeck theorizes that "successful" laws are not attempts to stimulate or inhibit action; they are simply descriptions of the actions of the majority of a people:

It is often considered, particularly by reformers and legislators, that law is a stimulant to action or an inhibitor of action, when actually the reverse is true. Successful law is simply the publication of the practice of the majority of units of a society, and by it the inevitable variable units are either driven to conform or are eliminated. We have had many examples of law trying to be the well-spring of action; our prohibition laws showed how completely fallacious that theory is.²

The implication is that laws which do not represent the actions and desires of the majority of a society, but which are created by only a few legislators to inhibit or stimulate the actions of the many will not long survive. This does not preclude the fact that they will enjoy a short survival, for, certainly, there were many "unsuccessful" laws in operation in *In Dubious Battle* and *The Grapes of Wrath*, and the heroes of those novels (who, it would seem, represented the majority in each case) found themselves in the position of "the inevitable variable units" who are either driven to conform or are eliminated.

It is with this period of survival of "unsuccessful" laws that Steinbeck is concerned. The time of "the best of all possible worlds" is only in the future, for in the present, power is more often controlled by the few than by the many. The labor strike leader, London, of In Dubious Battle finds that one judge can be omnipotent in interpreting the law: "Don't be a fool, London. You know as well as I do what the vagrancy laws are. You know vagrancy's anything the judge doesn't want you to do. And if you don't know it, the judge here's named Hunter."³

The minority group of the wealthy, rather than conforming or being eliminated, mold the laws to their own advantage:

If those oil and cattle boys can rig the tax laws and the utility laws, they aren't going to have any trouble with a little old law against titles.⁴

The taxation laws, like the prohibition laws, are another instance of an attempt to stimulate or inhibit the actions of the majority, which only results in widespread


dishonesty among the people. Old Jay of *Sweet Thursday* observes:

> The tax laws are creating a whole new kind of man—a psyche rather than a psychosis. . . .
> . . . Two men fight over a luncheon check when both of them are going to deduct it anyway—a whole nation conditioned to dishonesty by its laws, because honesty is penalized.

> The only creative thing we have is the individual, but the law doesn't permit me to give money to an individual. I must give it to a group, an organization—and the only thing a group has ever created is bookkeeping. . . . I don't mind taxes, God knows! But I do mind the kind of law that makes of charity not the full warmness of sharing but a stinking expediency.5

Both villains and heroes of Steinbeck find the ponderous machinery of legality too slow at times in answering the immediacy of their needs. "Citizen's committees" readily circumvent normal legal channels in combating strikers:

> This isn't the law: this is a citizen's committee. If you think you God-damned reds can come in here and raise hell, you're crazy. You get out of here in your tin can or you'll go out in a box. Get it?6

When Jim Nolan of *In Dubious Battle* questions Mac concerning the character of these vigilantes and legionnaires, he finds that they are even more cruel and unjust in dealing


6Steinbeck, *In Dubious Battle*, p. 117.
with labor strikers than are official law enforcement agencies:

Mac, who in the hell are these vigilantes, anyway? What kind of guys are they? Why, they're the dirtiest guys in any town. They're the same ones that burned the houses of old German people during the war. They're the same ones that lynch Negroes. They like to be cruel. They like to hurt people and they always give it a nice name, patriotism or protecting the constitution. But they're just the same old nigger torturers working. . . . I guess they're about the worst scum in the world.

You don't know when a bunch of American Legioners all full of whisky and drum-corps music may come down and beat the hell out of you. There's no veteran like the man who got drafted into the army and served six months in a training camp punching a bayonet into a sack of sawdust. The men who were in the trenches are mostly different; but for pure incendiarism and brass knuckle patriotism, give me twenty training camp soldiers. Why, twenty of 'em will protect their country from five kids any dark night when they can get a little whisky.8

The injustice of vigilantes and even of some official law enforcement officers prompts Pa Joad to conclude: "Sometimes the law can't be foller'd no way. Not in decency, anyways. They's lots of times you can't. . . . Sometimes a fella got to sif the law."9

7Ibid., p. 166.
9Steinbeck, The Grapes of Wrath, p. 123.
In his more tolerant moods, Steinbeck almost approaches jocularity in criticizing the duplicity of the national government. Even these lighter moments, however, are not without an undercurrent of seriousness. In *Sweet Thursday* government loyalty oaths are made to look ridiculous when a group of country club members suddenly becomes patriotic and dismisses a simple-minded caddy named Whitey because he refuses to take the oath. There is a serious side to the issue, however, for Whitey believes that the fighting he did for the country as a Marine should entitle him to certain rights:

> Say, Doc, did you hear? The whole country club took a loyalty oath on the eighteen green. Whitey No. 2 was caddying. Them members all took off their hats and swore they would not destroy the U. S. government.

> I'm glad. I was worried. Did the caddies take the oath too?

> Some of them did, but not Whitey. He's kind of an idealist, you might say. He says if he gets an idea to burn down the Capitol he don't want no perjury rap to stand in his way. They won't let him caddy no more.

> Does he want to burn down the Capitol?

> Well, no. He says he don't want to now, but he don't know what he'll want to do next month. He give us quite a talk about it. Says he was a Marine, went through a lot of fighting for the country, figures he's got kind of a personal interest. He don't want nobody to tell him what to do.

> So he can't carry golf clubs any more because of his ideals?
They say he's a security risk. Whitey claims he ain't got a good enough memory to be a security risk. Besides, they don't talk about nothing out there on the golf course except money and dames.  

A similar tone prevails in an accusation that big business and government consort in dishonest agreements:

19-- was a monster year for American advertising. BBD&O was up to its ears rewriting the Constitution of the United States and at the same time marketing a new golf-mobile with pontoons.

Merchison Associates was busy with a trans-Atlantic pipeline, called in the public press, "Tapal," a twenty-four-inch main which ran under the sea from Saudi Arabia to New Jersey with floating pumping stations every fifty miles. The matter would not have been so difficult but for the constant meddling of Senator Banger, Democrat, New Mexico, with his nuisance questioning as to why Army and Navy personnel and material were being used by a privately owned corporation.

The classic example of Steinbeck's lighter governmental criticism is the portrayal of Danny, a disgruntled citizen in the Monterey jail, expressing his total contempt for a mayor and city council who would permit such a corrupt government to exist:

He started playing a satiric game. He caught a bedbug, squashed it against the wall, drew a circle around it with a pencil and named it "Mayor Clough." Then he caught others and named them after the City Council. In a little while he had one wall decorated

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with squashed bedbugs, each named for a local dignitary. He drew ears and tails on them, gave them big noses and mustaches. Tio Ralph, the jailer, was scandalized; but he made no complaint because Danny had not included either the justice of the peace who had sentenced him, nor any of the police force. He had a vast respect for the law.12

The serious Steinbeck finds no stomach for such light-hearted criticism, however. When gross injustices produce suffering among the poor, his attacks are vehement:

... There is a war now which no one wants to fight, in which no one can see a gain. ... Some time ago a congress of honest men refused an appropriation of several hundreds of millions of dollars to feed our people. They said, and meant it, that the economic structure of the country would collapse under the pressure of such an expenditure. And now the same men, just as honestly, are devoting many billions to the manufacture, transportation, and detonation of explosives to protect the people they would not feed.13

The Grapes of Wrath is bitter. There is no scoffing at loyalty oaths or big business deals with government. There is no humorous Danny in a city jail. There are destitute people, angry, with starving children watching surplus food being destroyed in order to maintain profits. There is a sorrow that "weeping cannot symbolize":

12Steinbeck, Tortilla Flat, p. 12.
13Steinbeck, Sea of Cortez, p. 88.
The decay spreads over the State, and the sweet smell is a great sorrow on the land. Men who can graft the trees and make the seed fertile and big can find no way to let the hungry people eat their produce. . . . And the failure hangs over the State like a great sorrow.

The works of the roots of the vines, of the trees, must be destroyed to keep up the price, and this is the saddest, bitterest thing of all. Car-loads of oranges dumped on the ground. The people came for miles to take the fruit, but this could not be. . . . And men with hoses squirt kerosene on the oranges, and they are angry at the crime, angry at the people who came to take the fruit. A million people hungry, needing fruit—and kerosene sprayed over the golden mountains.

There is a crime here that goes beyond denuncia-
tion. There is a sorrow here that weeping cannot symbolize. There is failure here that topples all our success. The fertile earth, the straight tree rows, the sturdy trunks, and the ripe fruit. And children dying of pellagra must die because a profit cannot be taken from an orange. And coroners must fill in the certificate—died of malnutrition—because the food must rot, must be forced to rot.

. . . And they stand still and watch the potatoes float by, listen to the screaming pigs being killed in a ditch and covered with quicklime, watch the mountains of oranges slop down to a putrefying ooze; and in the eyes of the people there is the failure; and in the eyes of the hungry there is a growing wrath. In the souls of the people the grapes of wrath are filling and growing heavy, grow-
ing heavy for vintage.14

Steinbeck's attacks on the corruption and injustice of government have not gone unchallenged. In "The Reception of The Grapes of Wrath in Oklahoma," Professor Martin

14Steinbeck, The Grapes of Wrath, p. 311.
Staples Shockley recorded one Congressman's reply to the charges of that book:

Mr. Speaker, my colleagues, considerable has been said in the cloakrooms, in the press and in various reviews about a book entitled The Grapes of Wrath. I cannot find it possible to let this dirty, lying filthy manuscript go heralded before the public without a word of challenge or protest. . . .

Today, I stand before this body as a son of a tenant farmer, labeled by John Steinbeck as an "Okie." For myself, for my dad and my mother, whose hair is silvery in the service of building the state of Oklahoma, I say to you, and to every honest, square-minded reader in America, that the painting Steinbeck made in his book is a lie, a black infernal creation of a twisted, distorted mind.  

Against such obstinate blindness to the sufferings of the destitute, Steinbeck is waging his battle. Part of the hope for the success of this fight lies in the wisdom which the common man has acquired through experiencing the tragedies of a depression:

Common people have learned a great deal in the last twenty-five years, and the old magical words do not fool them any more. They do not believe the golden future made of words. . . .

They remember the foreclosed farms, the slaughtered pigs to keep prices up, the plowing under of crops, because there was not intelligence enough in the leaders to devise a means of distributing an

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oversupply of food. They remember that every plan for general good life is dashed to pieces on the wall of necessary profits.  

It is Steinbeck's belief that some future day will see the disappearance of those laws made by the few to stimulate or inhibit the actions of the many, and that a time will come when proper legal enforcement will curtail savage activities of "citizen's committees" and "vigilantes." The future holds the promise of an end to government corruption and oppression of the lower classes by the wealthy few, because there is an indestructible spirit within the oppressed which may permit them to be beaten, but never defeated:

... and they were curt with the people and the people were curt with them, and gradually a little fear began to grow in the conquerers [sic], a fear that it would never be over, that they could never relax or go home, a fear that one day they would crack and be hunted through the mountains like rabbits, for the conquered never relax their hatred.  

16 Steinbeck, Once There Was a War, p. 57.  
CHAPTER V

THE LOWER CLASS

Bum-Heroes

Steinbeck champions the poor, the underdog, and the outcast. His writings do not go so far as to say that poverty is always accompanied by goodness, and riches by evil, but they come very near it. They come much nearer saying that, than suggesting that different classes contain equivalent proportions of good and bad men. Lincoln R. Gibbs defends Steinbeck's obviously one-sided moralizing from the standpoint of aesthetic license:

The obligation of the novelist to morality is precisely that of the scientist to truth: objectivity and impartiality. Since the writer of fiction has to do with human values, he must needs possess sympathies and antipathies, so that the achievement of objectivity and impartiality is far more difficult for him than for the chemist or physicist. Appreciation of human nature in all its variety has never been achieved—not even by Browning or Chaucer, not even by Shakespeare. If we applaud the scientist for restricting his field, we should permit the novelist to select his province and have his favorite types. We should insist only that he tell us the whole truth within the limits he chooses.

Steinbeck's selection includes mainly the rebels, the outcasts, the underdogs of our society—ranch-hands, Okies, fruit-pickers, cotton pickers,
small farmers in California. He represents these as victims of injustice, the special forms of injustice being chiefly results of the mechanization of agriculture. In California the conditions of land tenure and the character of the product cause and magnify all the evils that industrialism had brought earlier to factory towns: poverty and extreme wealth, overproduction, bad housing and sanitation, strikes, armed conflict, perversion of justice in the interest of the owners, destruction of property and life, danger of violent revolution.

This is Steinbeck's theme in *In Dubious Battle*. Mainly, he treats with impartiality, despite the strength of his sympathy with the laborers and small farmers. To be sure, the owners and their minions—police, checkers, vigilantes, even judges and clergymen—get short shrift in his pages; but why should they not? The technique of the art of fiction precludes everything else. This story is told from the angle of the leaders of the strike—Mac, Jim Nolan, and others. From their point of view their opponents showed nothing but cruelty, chicanery, cant, and tyrannical power, whatever private virtues they may have had.¹

His defense of the underdog is not restricted to the labor-management conflict novels, *In Dubious Battle* and *The Grapes of Wrath*; the same affinity for outcasts prevails in the trilogy of romantic utopias. Perhaps the reason for Steinbeck's point of view in these books is revealed in an autobiographical note:

We did not think of ourselves as poor then. We simply had no money. Our food was fairly plentiful, what with fishing and planning and minimum

of theft. Entertainment had to be improvised without benefit of currency. Our pleasures consisted in conversation, walks, games, and parties with people of our own financial nonexistence. A real party was dressed with a gallon of thirty-nine-cent wine, and we could have a hell of a time on that.\(^2\)

Nothing could be closer to the portrayals of Danny and his friends and Mack and the boys than this description of Steinbeck's own life. In *The Log from the Sea of Cortez*, with a type of economic determinism, Steinbeck supports the struggles of those who fight in vain against poverty and, also, the withdrawal of those who reject the complexities of society and live in carefree itineracy:

> During the depression there were, and still are, not only destitute but thriftless and uncareful families, and we have often heard it said that the country had to support them because they were shiftless and negligent. If they would only perk up and be somebody everything would be all right. Even Henry Ford in the depth of the depression gave as his solution to that problem, "Everybody ought to roll up his sleeves and get to work."

> This view may be correct as far as it goes, but we wonder what would happen to those with whom the shiftless would exchange places in the large pattern — those whose jobs would be usurped, since at that time there was work for only about seventy percent of the total employable population, leaving the remainder as government wards.

> This attitude has no bearing on what might be or what could be if so-and-so happened. It merely considers conditions "as is." No matter what the

ability or aggressiveness of the separate units of society, at that time there were, and still are, great numbers necessarily out of work, and the fact that those numbers comprised the incompetent or maladjusted or unlucky units is in one sense beside the point. No causality is involved in that; collectively it's just "so"; collectively it's related to the fact that animals produce more offspring than the world can support. The units may be blamed as individuals, but as members of society they cannot be blamed.³

A microcosmic analogy more directly applicable to the search for freedom of the Danny and Mack types is found in another statement:

An interesting parallel to these two types of thinking is afforded by the microcosm with its freedom of indeterminacy, as contrasted with the morphologically inviolable pattern of the macrocosm. Statistically, the electron is free to go where it will. But the destiny pattern of any aggregate, comprising uncountable billions of these same units, is fixed and certain, however much that inevitability may be slowed down. The eventual disintegration of a stick of wood or a piece of iron through the departure of the presumably immoral electrons is assured, even though it may be delayed by such operation of the second law of thermodynamics as is afforded by painting and rustproofing.⁴

A preview of the "presumably immoral" Tortilla Flat type appears in Steinbeck's first novel, Cup of Gold, in the character of the rakish Coeur de Gris. He prophesies

³Ibid., p. 132.

⁴Ibid., p. 135.
some of the characteristics: disdain of wealth, fondness of drink, prowess in love, and indifference to death. His personality is revealed in a tete-a-tete with Henry Morgan following their capture of Panama in which the ambitious Morgan shoots and kills him:

A draggled, unkept figure came through the doorway. It was Coeur de Gris with blood of battle still on his face. He looked at the heap of treasure.

"We are rich," he said without enthusiasm.

"Where have you been, Coeur de Gris?"

"Been? Why, I have been drunk. It is good to be drunk after fighting. It is not so good to stop being drunk. That is like child-birth--necessary, but unpleasant and unornamental." [More conversation ensues, and Morgan shoots him.]

His fingers frantically explored his breast and followed a trickle of blood to its source, a small hole in his lung. The little finger edged into the hole. Coeur de Gris smiled again. He was not afraid of certain things. Now that he knew, he was not frightened any more. [Near death, de Gris says:]

"It is a legend that dying men think of their deeds done. No--No--I think of what I have not done--of what I might have done with the years that are dying with me. I think of the lips of women I have never seen--of the wine that is sleeping in a grape seed--of the quick, warm caress of my mother in Goaves. But mostly I think I shall never walk about again--never, never stroll in the sunshine nor smell the rich essences the full moon conjures out of the earth..."

A character suggesting the further development of those lovable rogues who dominate Tortilla Flat appears in

5Steinbeck, Cup of Gold, p. 209.
Steinbeck's second novel, To a God Unknown. Again, drunken-
ness and prowess at love making are admired traits:

Benjamin, the youngest of the four, was a charge
upon his brothers. He was dissolute and undependable;
given a chance, he drank himself into a romantic haze
and walked about the country, singing gloriously.
He looked so young, so helpless and so lost that many
women pitied him, and for this reason Benjamin was
nearly always in trouble with some woman or other.
... It always surprised those who mothered Benjamin
when he seduced them. ...

Benjy was a happy man, and he brought happiness
and pain to everyone who knew him. He lied, stole a
little, cheated, broke his word and imposed upon
kindnesses; and everyone loved Benjy and excused and
guarded him.6

Benjy will "get a knife in the neck someday," but this
does not preclude the virtues of his way of life: "He'll
have more fun than a dozen sober men, and he'll have lived
longer than Methuselah."7

The only wholly admirable character in Steinbeck's
first book of short stories, The Pastures of Heaven, is
Junius Maltby. Junius does not display the drunkenness
and prowess at love making that typify Coeur de Gris and
Benjy; the qualities which Steinbeck praises in him are
laziness and the capacity to enjoy an idle life: two

6 John E. Steinbeck, To a God Unknown (New York, 1933),

7 Ibid., p. 49.
essential characteristics of the Danny and Mack types. When a lung condition forced Junius to quit his clerking job in the city and move to the country, he found that, "He had five hundred dollars, not that he ever saved any money; he had simply forgotten to spend it."\(^8\) The move changed his whole personality: "He was quiet and happy on the farm, and what pleased him more, he had thrown out ten years of the office and had grown superbly lazy."\(^9\) But laziness is not a trait universally admired:

Here in the fertile valley he lived in fearful poverty. While other families built small fortunes, bought Fords and radios, put in electricity and went twice a week to the moving pictures in Monterey or Salinas, Junius degenerated and became a ragged savage. The men of the valley resented his good bottom land, all overgrown with weeds. . . . The women thought with loathing of his unclean house with its littered dooryard and dirty windows. Both men and women hated him for his idleness and complete lack of pride. . . .

Junius knew nothing about the dislike of his neighbors. He was still gloriously happy. His life was as unreal, as romantic and as unimportant as his thinking. He was content to sit in the sun and to dangle his feet in the stream. If he had no good clothes, at least he had no place to go which required good clothes.\(^{10}\)

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\(^9\) Ibid., p. 75.

\(^{10}\) Ibid., pp. 81-82.
In *The Log from the Sea of Cortez* Steinbeck specifically applauds such laziness:

We know a lady who is obsessed with the idea of ashes in an ashtray. She is not lazy. She spends a good half of her waking time making sure that no ashes remain in any ashtray, and to make sure of keeping busy she has a great many ashtrays. Another acquaintance, a man, straightens rugs and pictures and arranges books and magazines in neat piles. He is not lazy either; he is very busy. To what end?

... Only in laziness can one achieve a state of contemplation which is a balancing of virtues, a weighing of oneself against the world and the world against itself. A busy man cannot find time for such balancing. We do not think a lazy man can commit murders, nor great thefts, nor lead a mob. He would be more likely to think about it and laugh. A nation of lazy contemplative men would be incapable of fighting a war unless their very laziness were attacked. Wars are the activities of busy-ness.\(^{11}\)

Coeur de Gris, Benjy, and Junius Maltby are the predecessors of the heroes of *Tortilla Flat*. Danny and his friends present a composite of the virtues of their forefathers. They are gloriously lazy, athletic in their drunkenness, passionate lovers of the beauties of nature and all the female population of *Tortilla Flat*, thieves only when necessary, and courageous in the face of death. The unhurried life at Danny's house is praised:

Clocks and watches were not used by the *paisans* of *Tortilla Flat*. Now and then one of the friends

\(^{11}\)Steinbeck, *Sea of Cortez*, pp. 182-183.
acquired a watch in some extraordinary manner, but he kept it only long enough to trade it for something he really wanted. Watches were in good repute at Danny's house, but only as a medium of exchange. For practical purposes, there was the great golden watch of the sun. It was better than a watch, and safer, for there was no way of diverting it to Torrelli.

In the summer, while the hands of a clock point to seven, it is a nice time to get up, but in the winter the same time is of no value whatever. How much better is the sun! When he clears the pine tops and clings to the front porch, be it summer or winter, that is the sensible time to get up. That is a time when one's hands do not quiver nor one's belly quake with emptiness.

No curtains covered the windows, but a generous Nature had obscured the glass with cobwebs, with dust and with the neat marks of raindrops.12

The men who reside in this blissful repose are the angels of Steinbeck's heaven. Jesus Maria is described: "Jesus Maria was a humanitarian, and kindness was always in him."13 Professor Martin Staples Shockley analyzes the Pirate: "The Pirate in Tortilla Flat exemplifies a Steinbeck character type, pure in heart, simple in mind, rejected of men, clearly of the kingdom of heaven."14

The hero, Danny, is almost damned to the hell of

12 Steinbeck, Tortilla Flat, pp. 109-110.

13 Ibid., p. 29.

conventionalism through the burden of ownership which appears in the form of two dilapidated houses:

... Danny began to dream of the days of his freedom. He had slept in the woods in summer, and in the warm hay barns when the winter cold was in. The weight of property was not upon him. He remembered that the name of Danny was a name of storm. Oh, the flights! The flights through the woods with an outraged chicken under his arm! The hiding places in the gulch when an outraged husband proclaimed feud! Storm and violence, sweet violence! When Danny thought of the old lost time, he could taste again how good the stolen food was, and he longed for that old time again. Since his inheritance had lifted him, he had not fought often. He had been drunk, but not adventurously so. Always the weight of the house was upon him; always the responsibility to his friends.\textsuperscript{15}

The constant wavering between good and evil in the natures of these men is fully demonstrated in Pilon, one of Danny's non-paying boarders:

Pilon was a lover of beauty and a mystic. He raised his face into the sky and his soul arose out of him into the sun's afterglow. That not too perfect Pilon, who plotted and fought, who drank and cursed, trudged slowly on; but a wistful and shining Pilon went up to the sea gulls where they bathed on sensitive wings in the evening. That Pilon was beautiful, and his thoughts were unstained with selfishness and lust. And his thoughts are good to know.

"Our Father is in the evening," he thought. "These birds are flying across the forehead of the Father. Dear birds, dear sea gulls, how I love you

\textsuperscript{15} Steinbeck, \textit{Tortilla Flat}, p. 120.
all. Your slow wings stroke my heart as the hand of a gentle master strokes the full stomach of a sleeping dog, as the hand of Christ stroked the heads of little children. Dear birds," he thought, "fly to our Lady of Sweet Sorrows with my open heart." And then he said the loveliest words he knew, "Ave Maria, gratia plena---"

The feet of the bad Pilon had stopped moving. In truth he had stopped moving. (Hear this, recording angel!) There was, nor is, nor ever has been a purer soul than Pilon's at that moment. . . . 16

The purity of Pilon's soul is not to be long-lived, however:

A soul washed and saved is a soul doubly in danger, for everything in the world conspires against such a soul. . . .

Pilon's soul was not even proof against his own memories; for, as he watched the birds, he remembered that Mrs. Pastano used sea gulls sometimes in her tamales, and that memory made him hungry, and hunger tumbled his soul out of the sky. . . .

It is a fact verified and recorded in many histories that the soul capable of the greatest good is also capable of the greatest evil. Who is there more impious than a backsliding priest? Who is more carnal than a recent virgin? This, however, may be a matter of appearance. 17

The fact that Steinbeck's poor are capable of the greatest good and the greatest evil does not in any way lessen their virtue in his eyes. For the fact remains that they

16 Ibid., p. 22.

17 Ibid., p. 22.
are capable of the greatest good, and that is much more than he is willing to concede to the upper and middle classes.

At another point, Steinbeck discusses the deceptive nature of appearances, reveals why Pilon could never become a saint, and defines what the just reward for good deeds should be:

It is astounding to find that the belly of every black and evil thing is as white as snow. And it is saddening to discover how the concealed parts of angels are leprous. Honor and peace to Pilon, for he had discovered how to uncover and disclose to the world the good that lay in every evil thing. Nor was he blind, as so many saints are, to the evil of good things. It must be admitted with sadness that Pilon had neither the stupidity, the self-righteousness nor the greediness for reward to ever become a saint. Enough for Pilon to do good and to be rewarded by the glow of human brotherhood accomplished.18

The "glow of human brotherhood accomplished" is precisely what the men with a thousand acres, the avaricious merchants, and the W. C. T. U. women lack; and it is precisely what all of Steinbeck's heroes and heroines share in common.

A set of characters and circumstances quite similar to those of Tortilla Flat was to appear ten years later in

18 Ibid., p. 48.
Cannery Row. Again the writer created a group of six men living in a communal utopia of bachelorhood. But the ten years had put Steinbeck through a depression and a war, and there was a distinguishable difference in tone.

Professor Peter Lisca comments on that difference:

Although many critics saw a great similarity, Cannery Row was in no sense a repetition of Tortilla Flat. In the intervening ten years Steinbeck had written In Dubious Battle, Of Mice and Men, The Grapes of Wrath, Sea of Cortez, The Moon is Down, and had spent six months as a war correspondent. The experience of these years is in Cannery Row and accounts for the difference in tone between the two books. The detached, amused acceptance of the paisanos of Tortilla Flat gives way in Cannery Row to an active championing of Mack and the boys. . . .19

Despite the difference in tone, the ten years did little in changing the personalities of the heroes. There still are men who are withdrawn from society, who display great love of the sensual—drink and sex, who steal occasionally, and who have "the glow of human brotherhood accomplished." The only significant addition is "Doc," a man who retains the virtues of the older order and yet maintains a steady occupation.

Intimations of the "active championing" which Professor Lisca mentions are to be found four years earlier in

The Log from the Sea of Cortez:

... They were a fairly ragged set of men, their clothing of blue denim almost white at the knees and buttocks from pure erosion. They were, as Ed said, the Lotus Eaters of our era, successful in their resistance against the nervousness and angers and frustrations of our time.

Ed regarded these men with the admiration he had for any animal, family, or species that was successful in survival and happiness factors.

"Consider now," he would say, "if you look superficially, you would say that the local banker or the owner of the cannery or even the mayor of Monterey is the successful and surviving individual. But consider their ulcers, consider the heart trouble, the blood pressure in that group. And then consider the bums over there--cirrhosis of the liver I will grant will have its toll, but not the other things." He would cluck his tongue in admiration. "It is a rule in Palentology," he would say, "that over-armor, and/or over-ornamentation are symptoms of extinction in a species. You have only to consider the great reptiles, the mammoth, etc. Now those bums have no armor and practically no ornament. ... In our whole pattern those men may be the ones who will deliver our species from the enemies within and without which attack it." 20

The first page of Cannery Row indicates that Mack and the boys are successful in more than happiness and survival factors. They are deities:

Cannery Row in Monterey in California is a poem, a stink, a grating noise, a quality of light, a tone, 20 Steinbeck, Sea of Cortez, p. xxxiii.
a habit, a nostalgia, a dream. . . . Its inhabitants are, as the man once said, "whores, pimps, gamblers, and sons of bitches," by which he meant Everybody. Had the man looked through another peephole he might have said, "Saints and angels and martyrs and holy men," and he would have meant the same thing.²¹

Steinbeck chooses to look through the second "peephole" and thereby resurrects the holy order of Tortilla Flat.

The familiar tie that binds Mack and the boys together is defined:

Mack was the elder, leader, mentor, and to a small extent the exploiter of a little group of men who had in common no families, no money, and no ambitions beyond food, drink, and contentment. But whereas most men in their search for comfort destroy themselves and fall wearily short of their targets, Mack and his friends approached contentment casually, quietly, and absorbed it gently.²²

The "active championing" which Professor Lisca mentioned reaches its most intensive level early in chapter two:

Mack and the boys, too, spinning in their orbits. They are the Virtues, the Graces, the Beauties of the hurried mangled craziness of Monterey and the cosmic Monterey where men in fear and hunger destroy their stomachs in the fight to secure certain food, where men hungering for love destroy everything lovable about them. Mack and the boys are the Beauties, the Virtues, the Graces. In the world ruled by savage tigers with ulcers, rutted by stricatured bulls,

²¹Steinbeck, Cannery Row, p. 1.

²²Ibid., p. 10.
scavenged by blind jackals, Mack and the boys dine delicately with the tigers, fondle the frantic heifers, and wrap up the crumbs to feed to the sea gulls of Cannery Row. What can it profit a man to gain the whole world and lose his property with a gastric ulcer, a blown prostate, and bifocals? Mack and the boys avoid the trap, walk around the poison, step over the noose while a generation of trapped, poisoned, and trussed-up men scream at them and call them no-goods, come-to-bad-ends, blots-on-the-earth, thieves, rascals, bums. Our Father who art in nature, who has given the gift of survival to the coyote, the common brown rat, the English sparrow, the house fly and the moth, must have a great and overwhelming love for no-goods and blots-on-the-town and bums, and Mack and the boys. Virtues and graces and laziness and zest. Our Father who art in nature.  

The central theme, that blots-on-the-town are the ones most successful in happiness and survival factors is of primary importance to both Steinbeck and Ed Ricketts. For this reason, deity resides not in heaven but in nature. Steinbeck has often been criticized for observing man as an animal. He defends his viewpoint in a postscript to Steinbeck and His Critics:

> It is interesting to me that so many critics, instead of making observations, are led to bring charges. It is not observed that I find it valid to understand man as an animal before I am prepared to know him as a man. It is charged that I have somehow outraged members of my species by considering them part of a species at all. 

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23Tbid., p. 15.

Excepting the three utopian novels, the majority of his work deals with mankind on the level of Man as Man rather than Man as Animal. Notable examples are: *Of Mice and Men*, *The Grapes of Wrath*, *The Pearl*, and *East of Eden*.

In *Cannery Row*, however, laudation of bums and denunciation of middle and upper classes from the standpoint of animal survival are apparently the main themes.

In the nine-year interim between *Cannery Row* and *Sweet Thursday* the blots-on-the-earth characters are mentioned only incidentally. Once in *The Pearl* the wisdom of beggars is touched upon:

> The four beggars in front of the church knew everything in town. They were students of the expressions of young women as they went into confession, and they saw them as they came out and read the nature of the sin. They knew every little scandal and some very big crimes. . . . they followed the procession, these endless searchers after perfect knowledge of their fellow men.  

*In East of Eden* the philosophical nature of bums is discussed:

> Such men are rare now, but in the nineties there were many of them, wandering men, lonely men, who wanted it that way. Some of them ran from responsibilities and some felt driven out of society by injustice. They worked a little, but not for long. They stole a little, but only food and occasionally

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needed garments from a wash line. . . . They were brothers to the coyote which, being wild, lives close to man and his chickenyards. . . .

Around the fires where communal stew bubbled there was all manner of talk, and only the personal was unmentionable. Adam heard of the development of the I.W.W. with its angry angels. He listened to philosophic discussions, to metaphysics, to esthetics, to impersonal experience.26

Although Sweet Thursday is a sequel to Cannery Row, it is basically no more than a reshuffling of the old adventures, characters, and philosophies. One significant shift in attitude takes place, however. Marriage achieves preference over the promiscuity of the heroes of Tortilla Flat and Cannery Row. There is no condemnation of promiscuity; rather, the change in attitude is simply the concession that some good could come of a marital union. The character who exchanges carnality for marriage is Doc of Cannery Row.

It will be necessary at this point to insert some biographical background material. Ed Ricketts was the real life counterpart of Doc of Cannery Row. Steinbeck states in the preface to The Log from the Sea of Cortez, "I used the laboratory and Ed himself in a book called

26Steinbeck, East of Eden, p. 48.
Cannery Row." He was Steinbeck's closest friend for eighteen years:

Knowing Ed Ricketts was instant. After the first moment I knew him, and for the next eighteen years I knew him better than I knew anyone, and perhaps I did not know him at all. Maybe it was that way with all of his friends. He was different from anyone, and yet so like that everyone found himself in Ed, and that might be one of the reasons his death had such an impact. It wasn't Ed who had died but a large and important part of oneself.  

Ed Ricketts died in April, 1948, three years after the publication of Cannery Row. Six years after his death, we find Mack of Cannery Row saying in the prologue to Sweet Thursday, "I ain't never been satisfied with that book Cannery Row. I would have went about it different."  

Apparently, Steinbeck was no longer satisfied with certain aspects of the book either, for the solution to man's struggle for happiness given in Sweet Thursday is quite different from that which appears in Cannery Row.

The Doc of Cannery Row engages only in promiscuous affairs; he corresponds to Steinbeck's biographical description of Ed Ricketts:

27 Steinbeck, Sea of Cortez, p. xiii.
28 Ibid., p. xiii.
29 Steinbeck, Sweet Thursday, p. vii.
To begin with, he was a hyper-thyroid. ... He was during the time I knew him, and, I gather, from the very beginning, as concupiscent as a bull terrier. His sexual output and preoccupation was or purported to be prodigious. I do not know beyond doubt about the actual output. This is hearsay but well authenticated; but certainly his preoccupation with sexual matters was very great. 30

The women who satisfy the needs of the Cannery Row Doc do not actually enter the novel; they are only spoken of:

He's got three or four dames. You can always tell--when he pulls them front curtains closed and when he plays that kind of church music on the phonograph. 31

Steinbeck's post mortem biography indicates a lack of happiness in this promiscuous Doc, however:

But for all Ed's pleasures and honesties there was a transcendent sadness in his love--something he missed or wanted, a searching that sometimes approached panic. I don't know what it was he wanted that was never there, but I know that he always looked for it and never found it. He sought for it and listened for it and looked for it and smelled for it in love. ... It was like a deep and endless nostalgia--a thirst and passion for "going home." 32

This transcendent sadness of Doc's which is subdued in the rollicking Cannery Row becomes, without apologies, the underlying theme of Sweet Thursday:

30 Steinbeck, Sea of Cortez, p. xlviii.

31 Steinbeck, Cannery Row, p. 44.

32 Steinbeck, Sea of Cortez, p. liii.
Doc was changing in spite of himself, in spite of the prayers of his friends, in spite of his own knowledge. And why not? Men do change. . . . Change may be announced by a small ache, so that you think you're catching cold. Or you may feel a faint disgust for something you loved yesterday. 33

By now the worm of discontent was gnawing at him. Maybe it was the beginning of Doc's middle age that caused it—glands slackening their flow, skin losing its bloom, taste buds weakening, eyes not so penetrating and hearing deluded a little. . . . And so Doc threw himself into his work, hoping, the way a man will, to smother the unease with weariness.

But the discontent was still there. The pains that came to Doc were like a stir of uneasiness or the flick of a skipped heartbeat. Whisky lost its sharp delight and the first long pull of beer from a frosty glass was not the joy it had been. 34

The lower voice of his feeling mind would be singing, "What are you looking for, little man? Is it yourself you're trying to identify? Are you looking at little things to avoid big things?" And the third voice, which came from his marrow, would sing, "Lonesome! Lonesome! What good is it? Who benefits? Thought is the evasion of feeling. You're only walling up the leaking loneliness." 35

The type of woman that Steinbeck selects in Sweet Thursday to banish this deep and endless nostalgia is important. For his late, beloved Ed Ricketts, who never found the happiness he searched for in love, Steinbeck chose not a woman with the artistic and scientific

33Steinbeck, *Sweet Thursday*, p. 20.

34Ibid., pp. 23-24.

35Ibid., p. 25.
sensitivity that characterized Doc, but, rather, a former prostitute, Suzy, who had become a waitress living in an abandoned boiler.

The vast differences in the personalities, educations, and backgrounds of Doc and Suzy are not overlooked. They are revealed in Doc's debates with himself:

I am a reasonable man, a comparatively intelligent man--IQ one hundred and eighty-two, University of Chicago, Master's and Ph.D. An informed man in his own field and not ignorant in some other fields. 36

Suzy is the direct antithesis:

The girl--what is she? Let's suppose every good thing should come of a relationship with her. It would still be no good. There is no possible way for this girl and me to be successful--no way under the sun. Not only is she illiterate, but she has a violent temper. She has all the convictions of the uninformed. She is sure of things she has not investigated, not only sure for herself, but sure for everyone. 37

Despite the differences, Doc decides to marry her: "I weighed education, experience, and even probable blood lines. Some of the worst people I ever knew had the best of all of those." 38

36 Ibid., p. 243.
37 Ibid., p. 236.
38 Ibid., p. 231.
It is natural that Steinbeck should offer a social outcast to the memory of his best friend; there are no people he loves more.

It has been pointed out that the Danny and Mack types, the bums, the blots-on-the-earth, those who reject worldly struggle, have their origin in the first three published works of Steinbeck. In *Cup of Gold* there is Coeur de Gris; in *The Pastures of Heaven*, Junius Maltby; and in *To a God Unknown*, Benjy. The offspring of these predecessors have in common the antipathy of the upper and middle classes, disdain of steady employment, the ability to enjoy idleness, constant poverty, love of drunkenness and sex, and success in happiness and survival factors. The lives of these outcast heroes are not unlike a period of Steinbeck's own life, and he defends such idleness with analogies from nature.

The first work to present bum-heroes as major characters was *Tortilla Flat*; it applauded the simplicity, honesty, and happiness of paisanos. *Cannery Row* followed ten years later, again applauding those who were rejected of men, simple of mind, and pure in heart, and adding to the applause a poignant condemnation of upper and middle
classes. The last work of this type which has appeared is *Sweet Thursday*. It reshuffles the adventures, characters, and philosophies of *Cannery Row*, but it also introduces a favorable attitude toward marriage through the union of Doc (whose employment excludes him from the bum-hero class) with Suzy, a former prostitute.

Prostitutes

Prostitutes, as a Steinbeck group, grace approximately the same social sphere as bum-heroes. Lincoln R. Gibbs comments on Steinbeck's moral fiber: "Concerning Steinbeck as a moralist one has some misgivings. . . . For example, he treats prostitution as a merry jest. . . ."\(^{39}\) "Merry jest" is certainly a misnomer; awed reverence would be more accurate. For, with only two exceptions, the prostitutes in Steinbeck's works are wholly admirable. That Steinbeck's feelings for prostitutes goes much deeper than merry jesting is apparent in the early *Cup of Gold*. The mother of the courageous Coeur de Gris is a prostitute. When Henry Morgan suggests that de Gris is making enough money from pirating for his mother to leave prostitution,

de Gris replies:

I know I am, but she continues. I do not mention it, for why should I interfere with what she considers a serious work. She is proud of her position, proud that her callers are the best people in port. And it pleases her that, although she is nearly forty, she can more than compete with the young, unseasoned squabs who come in every year. Why should I change the gentle course of her ways, even if I could? No, she is a dear, lovely woman, and she has been a good mother to me. Her only fault is that she is filled with over-many little scruples. ... She is dreadfully afraid that I may find some woman who may do me harm.  

When Morgan suggests that such a nature seems strange in a prostitute, de Gris replies:

Why is it strange? Must they have a different brain in that ancient profession? No, sir; I assure you that her life is immaculate--prayers thrice a day, and there is no finer house in all Goaves than hers.  

The collection of short stories following Cup of Gold, The Pastures of Heaven, expresses sympathy for two Mexican women who, though unchaste and in business, are not really full-fledged prostitutes. Poverty drives Maria and Rosa Lopez to convert their home into an enchilada restaurant, but, try as they may, ends simply do not meet. One day when a "wealthy" customer boosts sales by buying three

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40 Steinbeck, Cup of Gold, p. 129.
41 Ibid., p. 130.
enchiladas, Rosa is so overcome with gratitude that she gives herself to him. There is no taint of financial compensation, however: "Do not make a mistake. I did not take money. The man had eaten three enchiladas--three!" 42 Rosa and Maria decide to revise their policies in the interest of sound business: "It is necessary to encourage our customers if we are to succeed." 43 Business booms, and satisfied customers assure Rosa and Maria of a continued solvency until the spectre of scandal shadows their doorway:

Inevitably, in the valley of the Pastures of Heaven, the whisper went about that the Lopez sisters were bad women. Ladies of the valley spoke coldly to them when they passed. It is impossible to say how these ladies knew. Certainly their husbands did not tell them, but nevertheless they knew; they always know. 44

Even in this early book, which is not primarily concerned with social criticism, "proper" women are established as villains and improper women as heroines. The ladies of the valley force the Lopez sisters to desert the comparative innocence of "encouraging" enchilada customers and to take jobs as full-time prostitutes in the big city.

43 Ibid., p. 99.
44 Ibid., p. 102.
Promiscuity is presented in a favorable light in *Tortilla Flat*, but prostitution as a commercial venture is not represented, probably because the central characters could not have afforded it. The first indication of "good" and "bad" professional whorehouses appears in *Of Mice and Men*. A ranch hand says:

> We go in to old Susy's place. Hell of a nice place. Old Susy's a laugh--always crackin' jokes. . . . She never talks dirty, neither. . . .

> Susy got nice chairs to set in, too. If a guy don't want a flop, why he can just set in the chairs and have a couple or three shots and just pass the time of day and Susy don't give a damn. She ain't rushin' guys through and kickin' 'em out if they don't want a flop.  

Characteristics of the "bad" whorehouse are excessive commerciality, dishonesty in dealing with customers, and lack of cordiality. Susy compares her house with that of her competitor, Clara:

> I've knew people that if they got a rag rug on the floor an' a kewpie doll lamp on the phonograph they think they're running a parlor house. I know what you boys want. My girls is clean, an' there ain't no water in my whisky. If you guys want to look at a kewpie doll lamp an' take your own chance gettin' burned, why you know where to go. There's guys around here walkin' bow-legged 'cause they like to look at a kewpie doll lamp.  

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One of Susy's customers says of Clara's house:

    We don't never go there. Clara gets three bucks a crack and thirty-five cents a shot, and she don't crack no jokes. But Susy's place is clean and she got nice chairs. Don't let no goo-goos in, neither.\textsuperscript{47}

The "good" madams of Cannery Row and Sweet Thursday are admired for more than mere honesty and cordiality; they are also community philanthropists and, in times of disaster, angels of mercy. The real life counterpart of Dora, of Cannery Row, is described in The Log from the Sea of Cortez:

    Life on Cannery Row was curious and dear and outrageous. Across the street from Pacific Biologica was Monterey's largest, most genteel, and respected whorehouse. It was owned and operated by a very great woman who was beloved and trusted by all who came in contact with her except those few whose judgment was twisted by a limited virtue. She was a large-hearted woman and a law-abiding citizen in every way except one--she did violate the nebulous laws against prostitution. But since the police didn't seem to care, she felt all right about it and even made little presents in various directions.

    During the depression Madam paid the grocery bills for most of the destitute families on Cannery Row. When the Chamber of Commerce collected money for any cause and businessmen were assessed ten dollars, Madam was always nicked for a hundred. The same was true for any mendicant charity. She half-way paid for the widows and orphans of policemen and firemen. She was expected to and did contribute ten times the ordinary amount toward any civic brainstorm of citizens who pretended she did not exist.\textsuperscript{48}

\textsuperscript{47}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 58.

\textsuperscript{48}\textbf{Steinbeck, Sea of Cortez}, pp. xxv-xxvi.
Steinbeck quotes Ed Ricketts as saying, "She's one hell of a woman. I wish good people could be as good." 49

The following description of Dora's house praises its honesty and decency and wholesomeness, and adds a scorching attack on the married women who do not admire prostitutes and their business:

But on the left hand boundary of the lot is the stern and stately whorehouse of Dora Flood; a decent, clean, honest, old-fashioned sporting house where a man can take a glass of beer among friends. This is no fly-by-night cheap clip-joint but a sturdy, virtuous club, built, maintained, and disciplined by Dora who, madam and girl for fifty years, has through the exercise of special gifts of tact and honesty, charity and a certain realism, made herself respected by the intelligent, the learned, and the kind. And by the same token she is hated by the twisted and lascivious sisterhood of married spinsters whose husbands respect the home but don't like it very much. 50

The same feeling runs through Sweet Thursday, but the vehemence is reduced to satire of a milder nature. Dora is replaced by her sister, Fauna, who had been running a mission:

The Bear Flag was taken over by Dora's next of kin, an older sister who came down from San Francisco, where for some years she had been running a Midnight Mission on Howard Street, running it at a profit. . . . She didn't find her new profession very different

49Ibid., p. xxvii.
50Steinbeck, Cannery Row, p. 16.
from her old, and she thought of both as a public service. 51

Steinbeck carries the joke farther as Fauna reveals another of her former occupations in a conversation with the Patron:

"Once I went missionary down in South America."
"Why?" asked the Patron.
"Can't remember right off."
"What did you do?"
"Taught them to love one another."
"What did they do?"
"Taught me to shrink heads." 52

Fauna's work, like Dora's is not based entirely upon the profit system. Her plan of reintegrating prostitutes into society through marriage to respectable husbands echoes Steinbeck's persistent theme that respectable women possess no qualities which are not native to most prostitutes. Fauna explains the success of her system:

Every one of them stars represents a young lady from the Bear Flag that married, and married well. That first star's got four kids and her husband's manager of an A and P. Third from end is president of the Salinas Forward and Upward Club and held the tree on Arbor Day. Next star is high up in the Watch and Ward, sings alto in the Episcopal church in San Jose. My young ladies go places. 53

51 Steinbeck, Cannery Row, p. 16.
52 Ibid., p. 47.
53 Ibid., p. 94.
The praise of this final ecological graduation of prostitutes seems a bit inconsistent with Steinbeck's attitude at other points. There are repeated instances of condemnation of middle class wives, the Mrs. Pritchards, the church workers. And yet, a change from the usually admirable position of prostitution to the usually condemned position of respectability is now seen as social advancement.

Steinbeck's most extensive and objective discussion of prostitution appears in *East of Eden*. The heartfelt praise of the wise, kind madam is abundant, but there is also an observation that the majority of prostitutes drift into their profession through laziness and stupidity; there is a relatively unbiased comparison of early western churches and brothels; and, finally, Steinbeck attempts an analysis of the "bad" prostitute, who is avaricious, unkind, unloving.

Despite their differences in appearance and approach, Steinbeck sees the early churches and brothels as institutions of great functional similarity:

The church and the whorehouse arrived in the Far West simultaneously. And each would have been horrified to think it was a different facet of the same thing. But surely they were both intended to
accomplish the same thing: the singing, the devotion, the poetry of the churches took a man out of his bleakness for a time, and so did the brothels. The sectarian churches came in swinging, cocky and loud and confident. . . . The sects fought evil, true enough, but they also fought each other with a fine lustiness. They fought at the turn of a doctrine. Each happily believed all the others were bound for hell in a basket. And each for all its bumptiousness brought with it the same thing: the Scripture on which our ethics, our art and poetry, and our relationships are built. It took a smart man to know where the difference lay between the sects, but anyone could see what they had in common. And they brought music—maybe not the best, but the form and sense of it. And they brought conscience, or, rather, nudged the dozing conscience. They were not pure, but they had the potential of purity, like a soiled white shirt. And any man could make something pretty fine of it within himself. . . . The honest preachers had energy and go. They fought the devil, no holds barred, boots and eye-gouging permitted. You might get the idea that they howled truth and beauty the way a seal bites out the National Anthem on a row of circus horns. But some of the truth and beauty remained, and the anthem was recognizable.

While the churches, bringing the sweet smell of piety for the soul, came in prancing and farting like brewery horses in bock-beer time, the sister evangelism, with release and joy for the body, crept in silently and grayly, with its head bowed and its face covered.

You may have seen the spangled palaces of sin and fancy dancing in the false West of the movies, and maybe some of them existed, but not in the Salinas Valley. The brothels were quiet, orderly, and circumspect. Indeed, if after hearing the ecstatic shrieks of climactic conversion against the thumping beat of the melodeon you had stood under the window of a whorehouse and listened to low decorous voices, you would have been likely to
confuse the identities of the two ministries. The brothel was accepted while it was not admitted. 54

This ascription of potential purity to sectarian churches is certainly a far cry from the Steinbeck of Tortilla Flat, Cannery Row, and The Wayward Bus who indiscriminately condemned Protestantism at every opportunity. A further disalliance with his former position is seen in the latter part of an objective discussion of the merits of the whorehouse as an institution and the sort of women who became prostitutes:

At the present time the institution of the whorehouse seems to a certain extent to be dying out. Scholars have various reasons to give. Some say that the decay of morality among girls has dealt the whorehouse its deathblow. Others, perhaps more idealistic, maintain that police supervision on an increased scale is driving the houses out of existence. In the late days of the last century and in the early part of this one, the whorehouse was an accepted if not openly discussed institution. It was said that its existence protected decent women. An unmarried man could go to one of these houses and evacuate the sexual energy which was making him uneasy and at the same time maintain the popular attitudes about the purity and loveliness of women. It was a mystery, but then there are many mysterious things in our social thinking.

These houses ranged from palaces filled with gold and velvet to the crummiest cribs where the stench would drive a pig away. Every once in a while a story would start about how young girls were stolen and enslaved by the controllers of the industry,

54 Steinbeck, East of Eden, pp. 191-192.
and perhaps many of the stories were true. But the
great majority of whores drifted into their profes-
sion through laziness and stupidity. In the houses
they had no responsibility. They were fed and clothed
and taken care of until they were too old, and then
they were kicked out. This ending was no deterrent.
No one who is young is ever going to be old.\textsuperscript{55}

Asserting the value of the whorehouse to society is typi-
cal of Steinbeck, but labeling prostitutes as stupid and
lazy is clearly out of harmony with his other works, par-
ticularly the three utopian novels.

One aspect of prostitution which Steinbeck does not
choose to revise is the behovent madam. A madam who
could very well have been taken from the same woman who
inspired Dora of \textit{Cannery Row} is Faye of \textit{East of Eden}.
Faye possesses all the kindness, simplicity, and philan-
thropy of the earlier Dora:

\begin{quote}
Every town has its celebrated madams, eternal
women to be sentimentalized down the years. There
is something very attractive to men about a madam.
She combines the brains of a businessman, the tough-
ness of a prize fighter, the warmth of a companion,
the humor of a tragedian. Myths collect around her,
and, oddly enough, not voluptuous myths. The stories
remembered and repeated about a madam cover every
field but the bedroom. Remembering, her old custo-
mers picture her as a philanthropist, medical
authority, bouncer, and postess of the bodily emo-
tions without being involved with them.
Faye was the motherly type, big-breasted,
big-hipped, and warm. She was a bosom to cry on,
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{55}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 80.
a soother and a stroker. . . . Her house became the refuge of young men pining in their puberty, mourning over lost virtue, and aching to lose some more. Faye was the reassurer of misbegotten husbands. Her house took up the slack for frigid wives. . . . Her house led the youths of Salinas into the thorny path of sex in the pinkest, smoothest way. Faye was a nice woman, not very bright, highly moral, and easily shocked. People trusted her and she trusted everyone. No one could want to hurt Faye once he knew her.

. . . All in all, she ran a hell of a fine house, as the constable and sheriff knew. Faye contributed heavily to every charity. Having a revulsion against disease, she paid for regular inspection of her girls. You had less chance of contracting a difficulty at Faye's than with your Sunday School teacher. Faye soon became a solid and desirable citizen of the growing town of Salinas.56

The woman responsible for the cruel murder of the lovable, motherly Faye is Kate (Cathy Ames), a woman whom Faye loved as her own daughter. Kate is something of a paradox in Steinbeck; she is undoubtedly the most wholly evil character in his works (even the wealthy owners of In Dubious Battle and The Grapes of Wrath possess some good qualities), yet she is a member of his usually beloved prostitute group.

Steinbeck points out that Kate is, indeed, a freak:

And just as there are physical monsters, can there not be mental or psychic monsters born? The face and the body may be perfect, but if a twisted

56 Ibid., pp. 193-195.
gene or a malformed egg can produce physical monsters, may not the same process produce a malformed soul?

It is my belief that Cathy Ames was born with the tendencies, or lack of them, which drove and forced her all of her life. Some balance wheel was misweighted, some gear out of ratio. She was not like other people, never was from birth. . . .

There was a time when a girl like Cathy would have been called possessed by the devil. She would have been exorcised to cast out the evil spirit, and if after many trials that did not work, she would have been burned as a witch for the good of the community. 57

Kate has one fault which would damn her in Steinbeck's eyes regardless of the normality of the rest of her character; she has no comprehension of enjoyment of the sexual, and she uses her physical attractiveness to gain power over people who are sexually normal:

Cathy learned when she was very young that sexuality with all its attendant yearnings and pains, jealousies and taboos, is the most disturbing impulse humans have. And in that day it was even more disturbing than it is now, because the subject was unmentionable and unmentioned. . . . Cathy learned that by the manipulation and use of this one part of people she could gain and keep power over nearly anyone. . . . And since the blind helplessness seems never to have fallen on Cathy, it is probable that she had very little of the impulse herself and indeed felt a contempt for those who did. 58

It would seem that such a fault would be beyond the

57 Ibid., pp. 62-63.

58 Ibid., p. 65.
forgiveness of the Steinbeck philosophy, for there are no heroes or heroines in either his romantic or his realistic novels who are not both active in and appreciative of the sexual act. But *East of Eden* is Steinbeck's most objective fictional achievement, and even for the frigid murderess of the benevolent Faye, he attempts understanding:

> It does not matter that Cathy was what I have called a monster. Perhaps we can't understand Cathy, but on the other hand we are capable of many things in all directions, of great virtues and great sins. And who in his mind has not probed the black water? Maybe we all have in us a secret pond where evil and ugly things germinate and grow strong. But this culture is fenced, and the swimming brood crawls up only to fall back. Might it not be that in the dark pools of some men the evil grows strong enough to wriggle over the fence and swim free? Would not such a man be our monster, and are we not related to him in our hidden water? It would be absurd if we did not understand both angels and devils, since we invented them.\(^{59}\)

Such tolerance is rare in Steinbeck, for, as we have seen, he is more consistently an observer of blacks and whites, with little forgiveness for the blacks and even less criticism for the whites.

The paradox of the "bad" prostitute arises from Steinbeck's "occasional" objectivity. With the three

\(^{59}\)Ibid., p. 114.
utopian novels as a frame of reference, there is no reason to suppose that there could ever be a "bad" prostitute, for prostitutes have all the characteristics of the bum-heroes: they are outcasts, honest in spite of their vices, fond of drink, and sexually active; furthermore, there are no "bad" bum-heroes in any of Steinbeck's fiction.

The solution to this paradox lies in the fact that, as a creative artist, Steinbeck has at least two distinct personalities. There is a romantic Steinbeck and a serious Steinbeck. When he is romantic, as in Tortilla Flat, Cannery Row, and Sweet Thursday, he is completely romantic, and no major "bad" character is even permitted to enter the book. He rejects, denies, and escapes from active society just as successfully as his heroes do. When he is serious, however; when there is something that angers or perplexes him, the bliss of romanticism is pushed away, and all the realism, violence, and injustice of life engulfs him. There are no contented bum-heroes in In Dubious Battle, Of Mice and Men, The Grapes of Wrath, and East of Eden. There are poor people, but there are no lazy and contented poor people.
A note from *The Log from the Sea of Cortez* indicates that, had Steinbeck chosen to include bum-heroes in a serious work as he did prostitutes, they too would probably have been represented as containing both good and bad characters. The comment comes from Ed Ricketts who had just observed the bums of Cannery Row (the district) cruelly ostracizing the lonely pander of the whorehouse:

I don't know why I thought they would be better. Of course, being bums does give them advantages, but why should I expect them to be above all smallness just because they are bums? I guess it was just romantic hopefulness. I knew a man who believed all whores were honest just because they were whores. Time and again he got rolled--once a girl even stole his clothes, but he would not give up his conviction. It had become an article of faith, and you can't give such a thing up because it is yourself. I must re-examine my feeling about the boys.60

Steinbeck, however, did not choose to re-examine his bum-heroes in a serious work of fiction as he did the prostitutes. Consequently, there are only favorable examples of the male outcasts, while in serious as opposed to romantic fiction both the good and bad qualities of female outcasts are dealt with on an objective basis.

60 Steinbeck, *Sea of Cortez*, p. xxxiv.
It has been shown that many prostitutes possess the characteristics of their male philosophical equivalents; they are outcast, lazy, and sensual. In his earliest published works Steinbeck revealed an interest in and sympathy for these outcast women. The mother of Coeur de Gris is spoken of with respect and reverence in *Cup of Gold*, and the Lopez sisters of *The Pastures of Heaven* are seen as victims of an intolerant social morality.

*Of Mice and Men* departs from the romantic vein and establishes the criterion for distinguishing between "good" and "bad" madams. Good madams are cordial, warm, and honest in their dealings, while bad madams are avaricious, impersonal, and dishonest. The good madams of *Cannery Row* and *Sweet Thursday* exhibit more than cordiality and honesty; they are also philanthropic and merciful when needs arise in the community.

*East of Eden* contains Steinbeck's most extensive and objective analysis of prostitution. He compares early western churches and brothels and concludes that they were very similar in that both lifted man above his bleak existence. He also contends that whorehouses were socially expedient since they permitted the male population
to maintain a Victorian faith in the purity of womanhood and, at the same time, satisfy their natural physical needs.

_East of Eden_ is the only book which presents both a good and a bad madam as major characters. Faye is as warm, kind, and honest as the earlier Dora. Kate, however, presents something of a paradox in that she is wholly evil, frigid sexually, and yet is a member of the usually favored prostitute group. Steinbeck contends that her kind are freaks of nature, monsters of the soul, and that we all possess some of that monster in us but are more capable of controlling it. The paradoxical existence of the "bad" prostitute in the sometimes romantic Steinbeck, as contrasted with the non-existence of "bad" bum-heroes, is explained by the fact that in some of his more serious works Steinbeck dealt with prostitution on an objective basis, whereas his treatment of the bum-hero is limited to the utopian novels.

_Saviors_

Foregoing chapters have illustrated Steinbeck's deep distrust of the very wealthy and his sometimes violent repugnance for the respectability and solvency of the
middle class. This hatred of the genteel and the solvent has at times been transformed into a romanticizing of the outcasts of society, bums and prostitutes. It has been noted that such romanticizing usually tends to ignore or deny the complexities and consequences of real life for the sake of literary mood. There are portions of Steinbeck's writing, however, which deal honestly and objectively with the numerous problems mankind faces as an active member of society, and there is a strong indication of hope for man's success and survival in attempting to solve those problems. In a journal he kept while writing *East of Eden* Steinbeck states:

> The writers of today, even I, have a tendency to celebrate the destruction of the spirit and God knows it is destroyed often enough. It is the duty of the writer to lift up, to extend, to encourage. If the written word has contributed anything at all to our developing species and our half-developed culture, it is this--great writing has been a staff to lean on, a mother to consult, a wisdom to pick up stumbling folly, a strength in weakness and a courage to support weak cowardice. And how any despairing or negative approach can pretend to be literature I do not know. It is true that we are weak and sick and ugly and quarrelsome but if that is all we ever were, we would, milleniums ago have disappeared from the face of the earth and a few remnants of fossilized jaw bones, a few teeth in a strata of limestone
would be the only mark our species would have left on the earth.61

Steinbeck's solution to man's woes lies not in the usurpation of the upper and middle classes by Danny and Mack and the boys, or in the election of the simple-minded Hazel to the presidency as is suggested in Sweet Thursday. Successful society is not founded upon men who have in common "no families, no money, and no ambitions beyond food, drink and contentment." It is perpetuated by men who develop and utilize their abilities for the betterment of themselves and their fellow men.

Such men are not satisfied with the companionship of prostitutes; they seek to establish unions upon which families may be built. An illustration of Steinbeck's replacing the old sexual hedonism with marital responsibility is seen in the development of The Pearl. In The Log from the Sea of Cortez the original plans for the story are stated:

An Indian boy by accident found a pearl of great size, an unbelievable pearl. He knew its value was so great that he need never work again. In this one pearl he had the ability to be drunk as long as he

wished, to marry any one of a number of girls, and to make many more a little happy, too.\textsuperscript{62}

The published story, however, indicates a revision. The value of the pearl to the Indian, Kino, lies not in "the ability to be drunk as long as he wished," but in making possible the education of his son, his wife, and himself:

My son will read and open the books, and my son will write and will know writing. And my son will make numbers, and these things will make us free because he will know--he will know and through him we will know.\textsuperscript{63}

Neither is it the purpose of the pearl to permit Kino to "marry any one of a number of girls and to make many more a little happy, too," for Kino already has a wife, Juana, whose strength of character is essential to the survival of the family. She heard Kino say, "I am a man," and the words have a particular meaning for her:

It meant that Kino would drive his strength against a mountain and plunge his strength against the sea. Juana, in her woman's soul, knew that the mountain would stand while the man broke himself; that the sea would surge while the man drowned in it. And yet it was this thing that made him a man, half insane and half god. . . . Sometimes the quality of woman, the reason, the caution, the sense of preservation, could cut through Kino's manness and save them all.\textsuperscript{64}

\textsuperscript{62} Steinbeck, \textit{Sea of Cortez}, p. 102.

\textsuperscript{63} Steinbeck, \textit{The Pearl}, p. 33.

\textsuperscript{64} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 77.
A woman whose family is perhaps even more dependent upon her strength is Ma Joad of *The Grapes of Wrath*:

She seemed to know, to accept, to welcome her position, the citadel of the family, the strong place that could not be taken. And since old Tom and the children could not know hurt or fear unless she acknowledged hurt and fear, she had practiced denying them in herself. And since, when a joyful thing happened, they looked to see whether joy was on her, it was her habit to build up laughter out of inadequate materials. But better than joy was calm. Imperturbability could be depended upon. And from her great and humble position in the family she had taken dignity and a clean calm beauty. From her position as healer, her hands had grown sure and cool and quiet; from her position as arbiter she had become as remote and faultless in judgment as a goddess. She seemed to know that if she swayed the family shook, and if she ever really deeply wavered or despaired the family would fall, the family will to function would be gone.65

Characterization of Ma Joad as a wife and mother is not equaled elsewhere in the works of John Steinbeck.

Sam Hamilton's wife, Liza, shares some of Ma Joad's qualities, but does not have her warmth:

Liza enjoyed universal respect because she was a good woman and raised good children. Her husband and her children and her grandchildren respected her. There was a nail-hard strength in her, a lack of any compromise, a rightness in the face of all opposing wrongness, which made you hold her in a kind of awe but not in warmth.66

65 Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath*, p. 64.

Juana, Ma Joad, and Liza Hamilton share at least two characteristics in common: they have great strength of character and are necessary for the survival of the family. A woman whose role in the family is the antithesis of those cited above is Alice, the wife of Juan Chicoy of *The Wayward Bus*. She has little strength of character, is petty, insensitive, and a periodic alcoholic. Her limited vision is contrasted with Juan's perception:

> But Juan . . . could shut everything out and look at each thing in relation to the other. Things of various size and importance. He could see and judge and consider and enjoy. Juan could enjoy people. Alice could only love, like, dislike, and hate. She saw and felt no shading whatever.67

The ability to love is the one saving quality which Alice has. It is this quality which causes Juan, after becoming disgusted with Alice's many shortcomings, to reject his decision to leave and return to her:

> But there was another reason too. She loved him. She really did. And he knew it. And you can't leave a thing like that. It's a structure and it has an architecture, and you can't leave it without tearing off a piece of yourself. So if you want to remain whole you stay no matter how much you dislike staying. Juan was not a man who fooled himself very much.68

67*Steinbeck, The Wayward Bus*, p. 35.

This is in one sense Steinbeck's strongest vote of confidence for marriage. The dream of running away from Alice which Juan rejects would clearly have been a return to the life of Danny and Mack:

He chuckled to himself. Why in God's name had he stuck to this as long as he had? He was free. He could do whatever he wanted to. . . . Alice would raise hell for a while. It would give her a great sense of importance. Plenty of people could cook beans in Mexico. He might lay up with one of those American women in Mexico City who lived down there to beat the taxes. With a few good suits of clothes Juan knew he was presentable enough. Why in hell hadn't he gone back before?^69

Juan's decision to return to Alice is an unmistakable renunciation of the self-centered philosophy of Danny and Mack. In the first section of this chapter we have seen that a similar renunciation was implied in the marriage of Doc and Suzy. The story of Juan and Alice is Steinbeck's strongest support of marriage, for, although Alice lacks the strength of character of Ma Joad, Liza, and Juana, or even the honesty of Suzy, Juan is required to return to her because she loves him and is his wife.

The men whom Steinbeck applauds as the backbone of the nation are essentially those who do honest labor with

^69 Ibid., p. 235.
their hands. Professor Lincoln R. Gibbs identifies these men:

We Americans worship with elaborate rites at the shrine of efficiency. It is profitable to compare the icons of that religion that most of us carry in our minds with those of Steinbeck. What picture forms in our minds when we pronounce that dear polysyllabic efficiency? Is it not that of a corporation executive or a superbanker, seated behind an imposing desk in a luxurious office, with a battery of telephones in front of him and a row of push buttons under his hand? . . . This is not Steinbeck's picture of efficiency. He thinks of a small thrifty hard-working farmer or ranch-owner, of his employee, the ranch-hand, expert in horses, of the old "top-faller"—a lumberman who had spent a long life of labor, danger, and skill. . . . Steinbeck might take Slim, the crack mule skinner, as the type of efficiency. . . .

Steinbeck's characterization of Slim bears out Professor Gibbs' statements:

A tall man stood in the doorway. . . . He moved with a majesty only achieved by royalty and master craftsmen. He was a jerkline skinner, the prince of the ranch. . . . There was a gravity in his manner and a quiet so profound that all talk stopped when he spoke. . . . This was Slim, the jerkline skinner. . . . His ear heard more than was said to him, and his slow speech had overtones not of thought, but of understanding beyond thought.

Billy Buck of The Red Pony is a similar character:

Jody listened carefully, for he knew and the whole country knew that Billy Buck was a fine hand

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71Steinbeck, Of Mice and Men, p. 37.
with horses. Billy's own horse was a stringy cayuse with a hammer head, but he nearly always won the first prizes at the stock trials. Lennie lacks mental ability, but George says of him, "He's a good skinner. He can rassel grain bags, drive a cultivator. He can do anything. Just give him a try."

These men who work with their hands are not necessarily common laborers. The biologist-hero is a notable exception: "Doc has the hands of a brain surgeon, and a cool warm mind." Steinbeck also praises tree surgeons:

The men who graft the young trees, the little vines, are the cleverest of all, for theirs is a surgeon's job, as tender and delicate; these men must have surgeon's hands and surgeon's hearts to slit the bark, to place the grafts, to bind the wounds and cover them from air. These are great men.

Steinbeck's heroes are more interested in their work and their self-respect than in monetary returns. Juanito of To a God Unknown prefers work without pay to employers who insult him: "Before now senor, I have been a vaquero, a good one. Those men paid me thirty dollars every month,

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73 Steinbeck, Of Mice and Men, p. 24.
74 Steinbeck, Cannery Row, p. 28.
75 Steinbeck, The Grapes of Wrath, p. 309.
and they said I was Indio. I wish to be your friend, señor, and have no pay. "76

Samuel Hamilton is an expert craftsman, but he has no talent for making money:

His hands were clever. He was a good blacksmith and carpenter and woodcarver, and he could improvise anything with bits of wood and metal. He was forever inventing a new way of doing an old thing and doing it better and quicker, but he never in his whole life had any talent for making money. Other men who had the talent took Samuel's tricks and sold them and grew rich, but Samuel barely made wages all his life. 77

It is not enough, however, merely to reject the laziness of Danny and Mack and utilize one's abilities. In Sweet Thursday, Steinbeck specifies the individual's obligation to society:

Men seem to be born with a debt they can never pay no matter how hard they try. It piles up ahead of them. Man owes something to man. If he ignores the debt it poisons him, and if he tries to make payment the debt only increases, and the quality of the gift is the measure of the man. 78

Professor W. O. Ross contrasts this theory of the debt of mankind to man with the naturalistic philosophy of the utopian novels:

76 Steinbeck, To a God Unknown, p. 28.

77 Steinbeck, East of Eden, p. 6.

78 Steinbeck, Sweet Thursday, pp. 22-23.
Steinbeck's ethical system, which, as we have thus far seen it, finds ultimate virtue only in obedience to the natural law which demands reproduction and survival, is in reality complicated by the introduction of a second major virtue, whose demands must be expected at times to be contrary to those of the former. It is altruism. . . . Indeed, I believe that throughout the entire body of Steinbeck's work he excites admiration for characters who in some fashion love their brothers as constantly as he does for those who prove that they can be natural. 79

The people who try hardest to repay this debt are, naturally, the ones poorest in material wealth. Ma Joad says:

I'm learnin' one good thing. Learnin' it all a time, ever' day. If you're in trouble or hurt or need--go to poor people. They're the only ones that'll help --the only ones. 80

Steinbeck liked the idea so well that he repeated it in East of Eden: "... he learned that when people are very poor they still have something to give and the impulse to give it. He developed a love for poor people he could not have conceived if he had not been poor himself." 81

Steinbeck's preoccupation with this unifying altruism among the poor which he believes is the key to their


80Steinbeck, The Grapes of Wrath, p. 335.

81Steinbeck, East of Eden, p. 41.
strength has given rise to the political criticism that labels him socialistic. The criticism is not unfounded. He champions socialism when he believes it to be the solution to extreme suffering of families who are eager to work if only work will be shown them. This alliance with socialism is most succinctly stated not in the strike-novel *In Dubious Battle*, but in *The Grapes of Wrath*:

One man, one family driven from the land; this rusty car creaking along the highway to the west. I lost my land, a single tractor took my land. I am alone and bewildered. And in the night one family camps in a ditch and another family pulls in and the tents come out. The two men squat on their hams and the women and children listen. Here is the node, you who hate change and fear revolution. Keep these two squatting men apart; make them hate, fear, and suspect each other. Here is the anlage of the thing you fear. This is the zygote. For here "I lost my land" is changed; a cell is split and from its splitting grows the thing you hate—"We lost our land." The danger is here, for two men are not as lonely and perplexed as one. And from this first "we" there grows a still more dangerous thing: "I have a little food" plus "I have none." If from this problem the sum is "We have a little food," the thing is on its way, the movement has direction. . . . This is the thing to bomb. This is the beginning—from "I" to "we."

If you who own the things people must have could understand this, you might preserve yourself. If you could separate causes from results, if you could know that Paine, Marx, Jefferson, Lenin, were results, not causes, you might survive. But that you cannot know. For the quality of owning freezes you forever into "I," and cuts you off forever from the "we."

This community unity is the same thing George and Lennie share on the microcosmic scale. They compare themselves with others who lack such companionship:

George went on. "With us it ain't like that. We got a future. We got somebody to talk to that gives a damn about us. We don't have to sit in no bar room blowin' our jack jus' because we got no place else to go. If them other guys gets in jail they can rot for all anybody gives a damn. But not us."

Lennie broke in. "But not us! An' why? Because . . . because I got you to look after me, and you got me to look after you, and that's why."83

George's position requires more altruism than that of the helpless Lennie; consequently, he is occasionally moved to question the wisdom of that position. His relationship with Lennie, however, is somewhat similar to that of Juan Chicoy with Alice, and, despite the disadvantages of the situation, he cannot bring himself to the cruelty of destroying it:

"An' whatta I got," George went on furiously. "I got you! You can't keep a job and you lose me ever' job I get. Jus' keep me shovin' over the country all the time. . . . I wisht I could put you in a cage with about a million mice an' let you have fun." His anger left him suddenly. He looked across the fire at Lennie's anguished face, and then he looked ashamedly at the flames.84

83 Steinbeck, Of Mice and Men, p. 15.

84 Ibid., p. 12.
Despite the insistence of Mac in *In Dubious Battle* that "This guy didn't want nothing for himself," there is definitely a spiritual return for this altruism. A battered protege tells his weathered Communist mentor, "It didn't hurt, Dick. It was funny. I felt all full up -- and good."  

Not all of the men who assist in this struggle against poverty are of the lower class. Certain members of the medical profession devote their time and their talents without concern for financial reward. Steinbeck expresses admiration for the poverty-stricken Indians of Mexico and the men who labor to help them:

"We liked them and felt at peace with them. . . . We thought of the spirits of kindness which periodically cause them to be fed, a little before they are dropped back to hunger. And we thought of the good men who labor to cure them of disease and poverty."  

The doctor of *In Dubious Battle* adheres to Steinbeck's theory that the relationship of poverty to ambition is beside the point:

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87 Steinbeck, *Sea of Cortez*, p. 117.
Maybe if I went into a kennel and the dogs were hungry and sick and dirty, and maybe if I could help those dogs, I would. Wouldn't be their fault they were that way. You couldn't say, "Those dogs are that way because they haven't any ambition. They don't save their bones. Dogs always are that way." No, you'd try to clean them up and feed them. I guess that's the way it is with me. I have some skill in helping men, and when I see some who need help, I just do it. I don't think about it much. If a painter saw a piece of canvas, and he had colors, well, he'd want to paint on it. He wouldn't figure why he wanted to.  

In *The Pearl*, Steinbeck depicts a physician who is completely devoid of mercy. When asked to cure Kino's son, he implies that Indians are no more important than animals: "Have I nothing better to do than cure insect bites for 'little Indians'? I am a doctor, not a veterinarian." It is natural that at least one evil man should appear in the physician class, for their extensive educations exclude them from the more reliable ranks of the ignorant and the poor.

*The Wayward Bus* is an allegorical tribute to the men who are, for Steinbeck, the saviors of the human race. The epigraph of the book indicates that it is to have meaning on more than one level:

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I pray you all gyve audyence,  
And here this mater with reverence,  
By fygure a morall playe;  
The somonynge of Everyman called it is,  
That of our lyves and endyng e shewes  
How transytory we be all daye.  

- Everyman

The Mexican-Irish Juan Chicoy (whose initials, like Jim Casey's, are significant) has all the characteristics of a Steinbeck hero. He is self-reliant, honest with himself and others, and is a skilled mechanic. Steinbeck describes his manual dexterity. Unlike Mr. Pritchard who constantly fumbles with a nail clipper,

His movements were sure even when he was not doing anything that required sureness. . . . His hands moved with speed and precision and never fiddled with matches or with nails.\footnote{Steinbeck, \textit{The Wayward Bus}, p. 15.}

Juan is more than a skilled mechanic, however. Peter Lisca quotes from a letter Steinbeck sent to his publisher, Pascal Covici, in which he said Juan Chicoy was to be, "... all the god the fathers you ever saw driving a six cylinder, broken down battered world through time and space."\footnote{Steinbeck, unpublished letter to Pascal Covici, New York, circa 1946, cited in Peter Lisca, \textit{"The Wayward Bug--A Modern Pilgrimage," Steinbeck and His Critics}, p. 282.}
The "six cylinder, broken down battered world" which Juan drives is a bus inherited from an unnamed former owner. The inscription which the first owner had painted on the bumpers of the bus, "el Gran Poder de Jesus," is still "barely readable"; but "Now the simple word 'Sweetheart' was boldly lettered on the front and rear bumpers."

Inside the bus there was a "small metal Virgin of Guadalupe painted in brilliant colors," but the symbols of other gods are needed in this "battered world":

Hanging from the top of the windshield were the penates: a baby's shoe—that's for protection, for the stumbling feet of a baby require the constant caution and aid of God; and a tiny boxing glove—and that's for power. . . . There hung also on the windshield a little plastic kewpie doll with a cerise and green ostrich-feather headdress and a provocative sarong. And this was for pleasures of the flesh. . . .

The world for which Juan Chicoy is responsible requires assurance beyond the Virgin and the penates:

Below the Virgin was a kind of coveted glove box, and in it were a Smith and Wesson 45-caliber revolver, a roll of bandage, a bottle of iodine, a vial of lavender smelling salts, and an unopened pint of whisky.

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93 Ibid., p. 20.

94 Ibid., p. 21.
It is Juan's job to deliver seven passengers, including Mr. and Mrs. Pritchard and their daughter, to San Juan de la Cruz. Heavy rains have made a bridge unsafe and the alternate roads almost impassable, and one passenger named Van Brunt prophesies throughout the trip, "I don't think we're going to make it."\(^{95}\) Van Brunt represents the faithless of the world or possibly even the devil. Juan, in disgust, explains his plight to the small metal Virgin:

I am on this road not of my own volition. I have been forced here by the wills of these people who do not care anything for me or for my safety or happiness, but only for their own plans. I think they have not even seen me. I'm an engine to get them where they are going.\(^{96}\)

Juan asks the Virgin for a sign indicating that she approves his forsaking the six cylinder cross he is bearing, but when none appears he takes the decision upon himself and purposely lodges the bus in the muddy road. He leaves the passengers, fully intending to forget about them and his wife, and starts to return to the life of Danny and Mack. The cynical Van Brunt's prophesy is not to come


true, however. After a period of rest and thought, Juan returns to his battered world, digs them out of the mud and continues on the journey. The story ends on the encouraging note, "That's San Juan up ahead."  

Professor Peter Lisca interprets the meaning of the allegory:

Steinbeck seems to be saying that in a world in which el gran poder de Jesus is barely visible, where both the Virgin of Guadalupe and pagan idols must be backed up by a roll of bandage and a revolver, a world populated by artificial and dishonest Pritchards, deluded Normas, cynical Van Brunts, self centered Alices, and vulgar Louies, there are also realistic and objective people like Juan Chicoy, without whom the world would founder, who always return to dig it out of the mud. . . .

Juan Chicoy is what Danny and Mack could have been had they utilized their abilities. Juan returns to dig the bus out of the mud because he is aware of his debt to mankind and realizes that running away will give him neither freedom nor happiness.

The Grapes of Wrath is considered by most critics to be Steinbeck's greatest work. It is a story of a people who, like the other characters discussed in this section,

97 Ibid., p. 312.

are actively engaged in the struggles of society. Professor Freeman Champney believes that the responsible nature of these people and Steinbeck's comparatively positive point of view account for the book's greatness:

For all its sprawling asides and extravagances, The Grapes of Wrath is a big book, a great book, and one of maybe two or three American novels in a class with Huckleberry Finn.

I think it is significant that The Grapes of Wrath is about folks who have the cement of settled society in them. For all their exile and destitution, they are a people, and they act as a people to an extent that is unique in Steinbeck's writing and in the California life which he knows best. I suggest that it is this social integration—which Steinbeck has felt and reproduced amazingly well—which is the greatness of this book. Further, this social integration provides the answers to the dichotomies and oversimplifications which torture so much of Steinbeck's other writing. Against it as a frame of reference, being a responsible citizen and a jobholder becomes merely playing an honest and dignified part in the common life—rather than the mean abdication of freedom and vitality that is implied by the glorification of Mack and the boys.99

The heroes of The Grapes of Wrath possess the qualities which typify other characters discussed in this section; they work skillfully with their hands and practice altruism. The Joads and other Okies know and love the land; when their handiwork is withdrawn, the land withers and dies:

And when that crop grew, and was harvested, no man had crumbled a hot clod in his fingers and let the earth sift past his fingertips. No man had touched the seed, or lusted for the growth. Men ate what they had not raised, had no connection with bread. The land bore under iron, and under iron gradually died; for it was not loved or hated, it had no prayers or curses.\textsuperscript{100}

The men who rule the iron are also headed for tragic endings, for they cannot control the monster of mercantilism they have created:

\begin{quote}
The bank is something else than men. It happens that every man in a bank hates what a bank does, and yet the bank does it. The bank is something more than men, I tell you. It's a monster. Men made it, but they can't control it.\textsuperscript{101}
\end{quote}

But the common people will grow and endure, for they are all part of the spirit which Muley Graves defines early in the book:

\begin{quote}
Muley fidgeted in embarrassment. "I ain't got no choice in the matter." He stopped on the ungracious sound of his words. "That ain't like I mean it. That ain't"--he stumbled--"what I mean, if a fella's got somepin to eat an' another fella's hungry--why, the first fella ain't got no choice."\textsuperscript{102}
\end{quote}

This is the spirit that Ma Joad shares when she leaves money she cannot spare under a rock near the road because

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{100} Steinbeck, \textit{The Grapes of Wrath}, p. 30. \\
\textsuperscript{101} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 28. \\
\textsuperscript{102} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 41.
\end{flushright}
the father of a destitute family is too ashamed to take it from her hand; this is the spirit that Jim Casy knows when he gives himself up to the deputies for a crime committed by a fellow Okie; and this is the spirit that Rose of Sharon feels when she gives the milk of her breasts to a dying man. These people will fight for the lives of themselves and their fellows; and they will endure.

The savior of this modern exodus is Jim Casy. His world, like Juan Chicoy's, is one in which el gran poder de Jesus is barely visible. In contrast to the "Jesus lovers" who condemn a government camp dance as sin, Casy says,

What's this call, this spirit? . . . It's love. I love people so much I'm fit to bust, sometimes. An' I says, "Don't you love Jesus?" Well, I thought an' thought, an' finally I says, "No, I don't know nobody name' Jesus. I know a bunch of stories, but I only love people. An' sometimes I love 'em fit to bust, an' I want to make 'em happy, so I been preachin' somepin I thought would make 'em happy. I figgered, "Why do we got to hang it on God or Jesus? Maybe," I figgered, "maybe it's all men an' all women we love; maybe that's the Holy Sperit--the human sperit--the whole shebang."104

From the time Casy discovered the "human sperit" until the

103 Ibid., p. 298.

104 Ibid., p. 20.
moment he told his crucifiers, "You fellas don' know what you're doin'. You're helpin' to starve kids," he labored tirelessly for his homeless people.

The spirit of Casy's work lived on after him in his disciple, Tom Joad, who said:

I'll be ever'where--wherever you look. Wherever they's a fight so hungry people can eat, I'll be there. Wherever they's a cop beatin' up a guy, I'll be there. If Casy knewed, why, I'll be in the way guys yell when they're mad an'--I'll be in the way kids laugh when they're hungry an' know supper's ready. An' when our folks eat the stuff they raise an' live in the houses they build--why, I'll be there.106

There is an indication of hope in Steinbeck, hope which is in and for the common people. The strength of the Ma Joads, the Liza Hamiltons, and the Juanas will produce families wherein children may grow to adulthood with a minimum of fear and hatred, where husbands can find the reassurance they seek and need. The strength of a nation lies in the men who labor with their hands: farmers, mule skinners, ranch hands, lumberjacks, mechanics, tree surgeons, and doctors. Without their efforts, society could not exist, and their efforts deserve recognition.

105 Ibid., p. 344.

106 Ibid., p. 374.
There is a debt which every man owes his fellow man, and the people who are most prompt in paying it are, ironically, the poorest in material wealth. Their acceptance of responsibility for those in need is a quality not so frequently found in the upper and middle classes. George must care for Lennie, Rose of Sharon must give the milk of her breasts to a dying old man, and Juan Chicoy will return to dig out of the mud people who do not even care for him. In these people is strength, courage, generosity, and persistence which will make them endure. In Ma Joad's words, "Why, Tom--us people will go on livin' when all them people is gone. Why, Tom, we're the people that live. They ain't gonna wipe us out. Why, we're the people--we go on."107

107 Ibid., p. 250.
CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

John Steinbeck has written about many kinds of people: pirates, bums, prostitutes, millionaires, laborers, half-wits, and kings. His concern and sympathy has tended to rest with people who, in the over-all picture, are seemingly insignificant—the Dannys, Lennies, Juans, Casys, Doras and Ma Joads. If questioned as to why he dealt with people of such little apparent consequence rather than the leaders of society, he might reply that the proposition of social importance is in itself a very dubious and relative concept:

And if we seem a small factor in a huge pattern, nevertheless it is of relative importance. We take a tiny colony of soft corals from a rock in a little water world. And that isn't terribly important to the tide pool. Fifty miles away the Japanese shrimp boats are dredging with overlapping scoops, bringing up tons of shrimps, rapidly destroying the species so that it may never come back, and with the species destroying the ecological balance of the whole region. That isn't very important in the world. And thousands of miles away the great bombs are falling and the stars are not moved thereby. None of it is important or all of it is.¹

¹Steinbeck, *Sea of Cortez*, pp. 3-4.
The economic and social climate of the Salinas Valley during John Steinbeck's formative years presented a storm of violence, strife, and hatred between upper and lower classes that has seldom been equaled in American history. Exposure to the injustices which typified that struggle, and an early companionship with the laboring class caused Steinbeck to place his allegiance with the underdogs. The tragedies of the depression years confirmed his earlier beliefs. These experiences have resulted in a social organization in his fiction which is the inverse of the customary hierarchy of respectability.

The very wealthy are portrayed as a miserable, miserly group of people whose passion for gathering money leads them to lives of cruelty and dishonesty. Realization of their gilded dream does not bring happiness. They are irrevocably alone; men with so much property to guard must necessarily be suspicious of the motives of those who would befriend and love them. The very wealthy can never know the unruffled contentment of Danny and Mack who have nothing to lose but themselves. Worst of all, the rich are not rich at all, not in the sense that George and Casy and Ma Joad are rich in the spirit of giving to their
fellow man. The wealthy cannot find redemption even in belated philanthropy, for that kind of giving is only another indication of spiritual avarice.

The middle class are rebuked for the bigotry of their morality. Men who band together in secret lodges are hobbled by spiritual harnesses just as are the faculty members who adorn themselves with emblems and degrees while failing to grasp the teeming vitality of life. The W.C.T.U. women are the female equivalents of the lodge and faculty club members; they are more interested in policing community morals than in making constructive contributions of their own lives. Businessmen are the most severely criticized of the middle-class group. Their interests lie in "their possessions, their lives, and their souls—in the order named." This point is confirmed by the commercial thievery which so plagued the Okies of The Grapes of Wrath. Steinbeck demonstrates how one may deal in business and yet be an honorable man through the character of Lee Chong. Lee is shrewd, but not to the point of avarice; he is trusting but not gullible; he enjoys his life and is respected by his community.
From the standpoint of Steinbeck and his heroes, national, state, and local governments do not fulfill the promise of being "of, by, and for the people." Wealth and political favoritism influence legislation to favor certain groups over others. Adequate enforcement is not provided to prevent vicious attacks by "citizen's committees" upon strikers. During the depression, children were permitted to starve while food was being destroyed to keep up a market price, because there was not intelligence enough among the leaders to devise a plan of distribution. Such injustices explain Steinbeck's many vehement attacks on government.

An extension of Steinbeck's revulsion for upper class avarice and middle class bigotry is seen in his romanticizing of bums and prostitutes. The Dannys and Macks step over the traps of society. They live lusty, independent lives, and care nothing for the amassing of fortunes or the approval of W.C.T.U. women. They are the "Virtues, the Graces, the Beauties," and have the approval of "Our Father who art in nature" because they are successful in happiness and survival factors. Prostitutes are subjected to a more objective analysis than are the
bum-heroes. The incomparable charity, wisdom, and goodness of Dora and Faye are never questioned, but it is finally concluded that the majority of prostitutes drift into their profession through laziness and stupidity. The marriage of Doc and Suzy in the final volume of the utopian trilogy, *Sweet Thursday*, indicates a rejection of the earlier philosophy. The promiscuous hedonism of *Tortilla Flat* and *Cannery Row* is finally presented as a lonely way of life which cannot provide the wholeness found in marriage.

The saviors of the lower class and of the world are people who contribute to society by making use of their abilities and establishing stable families. There are no prostitutes in this group; there are Ma Joads, Liza Hamiltons, and Juanas who possess a strength and honesty their husbands and children can depend on. Dannys and Macks are not found among the farmers, ranch hands, mechanics, and laborers upon whom the nation must rely for much of its strength. These people have a capacity for giving of themselves which is not found among the upper and middle classes. It is exemplified in Casy's Christ-like love of his fellow man, in George's assuming responsibility for
Lennie, and in Juan Chicoy's returning to dig a "six cylinder world" out of the mud. Such people are the "Virtues, the Graces, the Beauties," and they will prevail, for within them is a spirit and a soul capable of compassion and sacrifice and endurance.

Pre-eminently, Steinbeck's writings create democracy. He has revealed the hopes, dreams, and potential strength of a class of people who had too long remained anonymous in the public mind. Only through such human understanding can stronger nations and better men be developed.
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