

John Steinbeck's Place within American Literature

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John Steinbeck's Place within American Literature

Stephen K. George

I am very, very pleased to be invited to speak to you today about my favorite author, John Steinbeck, and his place within American literature. However, before I begin, let me take a few minutes and introduce myself and my university to you.

You may hear an accent as I speak; I hope this will not keep you from understanding my English! I am originally from the state of Kentucky, in the southeastern region of the United States. Kentucky is known for its horse racing, especially the Kentucky Derby; its beautiful hills, lakes, and Bluegrass country; and its basketball, which is like another religion to most Kentuckians. For the past seven years I have lived in the western state of Idaho, which borders Canada on the north and Utah on the south. I am slowly getting used to Idaho's desert country, which is very dry and open, and its mountains, which are much higher and rugged than the Appalachian Mountains in Kentucky. My wife's name is Rebecca, and we have six children, four girls and two boys, ages 2 to 13 years old. An interesting fact is that we named all of our children—Louisa, Emma, Margaret, Henry, Charles, and Elizabeth—after characters in the novels of the British writer, Jane Austen.

Idaho is most famous for its potatoes—it is the largest producer of potatoes in the United States. The town where I live is called Rexburg. It has about 25,000 people while the whole state has just over a million residents. I'm sure there are cities in Japan with more people than the whole state of Idaho. But more people are moving into Idaho each year, largely because of jobs in technology in Boise, our state capital, and also because of the state's natural beauty. Although the town of Rexburg is on the edge of the desert, Yellowstone National Park and Grand Teton National Parks are just 90 miles away.

The school where I teach is called Brigham Young University-Idaho. We changed from a two-year junior college called Ricks College to a four-year university just two years ago. The school is a private, religious institution with an enrollment of about 12,000 full-time students. Our sponsoring religion, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (or Mormon church as we're commonly known), also has branches of Brigham Young University in Utah and Hawaii. The LDS Church is known world-wide for its missionaries, mostly 19-year-old young men who ride bicycles and wear white shirts and ties. We are also known for our building of temples and we have two temples in this country, the Tokyo and the Fukuoka Japan temples.

About 98% of the students at BYU-Idaho are LDS or Mormon. Most come from Idaho, Utah, or other western states, but we also have over 500 international students, some from Japan. We also

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have academic and cultural societies on campus, including the Japanese Cultural Association, which plans social and other events for our Japanese students. Almost all of these students decide to come to a religious school so they can learn their academic subjects within a religious atmosphere. Our students are required to take 14 credit hours of religious courses along with their major and minor coursework. The campus is located on gently sloped hill above much of the town and is truly a beautiful place to work.

My interest in John Steinbeck began as a high school student. I remember reading his short novel, *Of Mice and Men*, and being touched by the writer's compassion for the characters Lennie and George and his simple yet beautiful prose style. Later, as an undergraduate student at BYU-Provo, I read Steinbeck's most famous novel, *The Grapes of Wrath*, for a class on the American novel. This book, as some of you may know, is a large book—over 500 pages. But I was so caught up in the story of the Joad family and their journey to California to make a new life for themselves that I could not put the book down. I read all through the night until the sun came up the next morning. It was my most powerful reading experience as a college student.

What I'd like to present for the rest of my time is a brief introduction to John Steinbeck—who he was, what he wrote about, why he is an important American writer. I'd also like to offer some ideas about why Steinbeck is so popular in other countries around the world, particularly the country of Japan. And at the end I'd like to offer you the chance to ask me questions about myself, America, John Steinbeck, or anything else you would be interested in.

An Introduction to John Steinbeck

John Steinbeck was born on February 27, 1902, in the small farming town of Salinas, California. He grew up in a large Victorian house which the local children referred to as the "castle." From an early age, John had romantic tendencies and appreciated the beauty of the natural world. Clearly the natural beauty and mystery of central California's valleys, rivers, forests, and coastline influenced his fiction, with many of his novels—*Of Mice and Men*, *Grapes of Wrath*, *East of Eden*—beginning with detailed descriptions of their settings—the flowers, the animals, the gray and red earth. As Steinbeck grew up he was also surrounded by the migrant workers and outcasts of his region: the Chinese fisherman and Mexican-Indians and hobos and factory workers in Monterey. For this reason many of his works show an attention to people of other cultures that is not shown by many other American writers of the same period.

Steinbeck's first literary success was a work that depicted such outcasts from society. The book, published in 1935, was called *Tortilla Flat* and focused on the adventures of Danny and his Paisano friends (Paisanos were people of mixed Spanish and Indian descent). From 1936 to 1939 Steinbeck published the works for which he is most famous: *In Dubious Battle* (a study of a labor strike in California), *Of Mice and Men*, *The Red Pony* (often viewed as a children's book), and his epic novel, *The Grapes of Wrath*. Much of the writing of this time period was in the realistic and naturalistic traditions, with Steinbeck using dialogue that captured the patterns of natural speech

and with plots that showed how social and natural forces, such as the Dust Bowl and Great Depression, often hurt people from the lower levels of society. In all of these works, Steinbeck's compassion for the suffering of others is clear.

After winning the Pulitzer Prize for *The Grapes of Wrath* but also being condemned in America for how he portrayed farmers and businesses in that work, John Steinbeck sought to break away from the realistic tradition and to experiment in other literary styles and forms. In the 1940s he wrote, with his closest friend Ed Ricketts, a non-fiction work of philosophy and ecology called *Sea of Cortez*. He also wrote the screenplay for a film investigating the treatment of disease in Mexico called *The Forgotten Village* and a parable-like work called *The Pearl* about a Mexican family trying to survive in a racist and greedy society. Perhaps his most daring work was the novel *Cannery Row*, in which Steinbeck tried to capture the flavor and feel of one of America's most famous locations—Monterey, California—during its peak as the sardine canning capitol of the world. Rejecting the traditional narrative structure of realistic novels, this book's thirty-two chapters are linked more in tone and thought than in plot, with the central character, Doc, patterned after Ed Ricketts.

With the death of Ed Ricketts in 1948 and the divorce from his second wife, Gwyn, John Steinbeck's life was essentially turned upside down. Fortunately, he met his third wife, Elaine Scott, in 1949. Elaine, an attractive, witty southerner from Texas, was the perfect companion for John, who was generally shy and less open. During his marriage to Elaine, Steinbeck wrote some of his most memorable works, including *East of Eden*, his longest and most ambitious novel; *Travels with Charley in Search of America*; and my personal favorite, his last novel, *The Winter of Our Discontent*. In these later works Steinbeck turns from the objective, scientific, non-judgmental viewpoint to a more personal and moralistic perspective. I see a shift in Steinbeck's literature from social criticism that attempts to understand things as they are to a more mature Steinbeck who now wants to explore moral character, evil, and the causes for society's ills. Yet from the beginning to the end of his career, Steinbeck's search for truth, compassion for people, and appreciation of natural beauty remained constant.

In 1962 John Steinbeck was awarded the Noble Prize for Literature, the highest award for literary achievement. Although he has been unpopular with many American literary critics, many of whom thought the award should have been given to another writer, the four decades since the award have shown that Steinbeck truly deserved this honor. As Luchen Li writes in his just published book, *John Steinbeck: A Documentary Volume*:

John Steinbeck was one of the most accomplished and widely read authors of the twentieth century. Today his books continue to sell millions of copies every year, both in and outside the United States. His themes cover a broad range of issues—social, political, cultural, moral, global, and environmental.... Contrary to the prediction of many influential critics that his popularity would decline after his death,...[i]n the

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centenary of his birth, there were almost two hundred events in thirty-eight states [in America] honoring Steinbeck. (xix, xxii)

Steinbeck's Place within American Literature

Next year I will be directing a literary conference in Sun Valley, Idaho, the vacation home of American author Ernest Hemingway. The title of the conference is "Steinbeck and His Contemporaries." The purpose of the conference will be to explore John Steinbeck's place within American literature, including how his writings measure up to the work of authors such as Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, William Faulkner, and other famous writers of the American Modern period (roughly 1910 to 1950). American playwright Terrence McNally states that when he went to college at Columbia decades ago, he was "forbidden to utter the words 'John Steinbeck.' American literature stopped with William Faulkner" (George, *Centennial Tribute* 81). Although this attitude still exists among some university professors today, particularly in institutions on the East Coast of the United States, I believe the critical tide is shifting today so that John Steinbeck is being viewed in a much more favorable light. Our conference next year hopes to encourage a more positive assessment of one of the most widely read authors in public schools, colleges, and universities around the world.

Locating John Steinbeck's position among his literary peers is not easy; how can one judge the worth or influence of one writer over another? Perhaps one of the surest methods is to ask other writers—novelists, playwrights, poets—about Steinbeck and to listen to their estimate of his place within American literature. Pulitzer Prize winning dramatist Arthur Miller, most famous for his 1949 play *Death of a Salesman*, argues that no other American writer "so deeply penetrated the political life of the country" as Steinbeck did with *The Grapes of Wrath* in 1939 (56). American novelist Harper Lee, most famous for her classic novel, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, notes that Steinbeck had "a profound influence on American writing and culture," and she wishes that many contemporary writers acknowledged that "their debt to John is enormous" (54). Novelist and poet Jay Parini, editor of *The Oxford Encyclopedia of American Literature*, predicts "that Steinbeck will continue to fascinate readers throughout the coming century," particularly with "his natural gift for shaping the raw materials of life into fiction." In contrast, Parini writes, "Hemingway seems... quite thin," with only a few stories and two early novels worth rereading (76-77).

Finally, novelist and long-time Steinbeck critic Louis Owens pays tribute to Steinbeck's literary legacy by telling the following story:

Once at a Steinbeck Festival in Salinas, California, I made a slightly disparaging remark about Steinbeck's stereotyping of Mexican-Americans in *Tortilla Flat* and other works. One after another two men stood up in the audience to take exception to what I'd said. Both men were middle-aged Latinos dressed in jeans and work shirts, and both introduced themselves as farm workers. They liked what Steinbeck wrote, they said,

and they liked seeing reflections of themselves, however altered or distorted, in his writing. I was wrong, they said. Now what other American writer would draw two dark-skinned men from the fields to a literary conference and compel those men to stand and contradict the professor behind the podium? What other American writer would those men have read? John Steinbeck is a great writer. (72)

However, in recognizing Steinbeck's place as one of America's greatest authors, we do not need to elevate him at the expense of his contemporary writers. As his son Thom notes, "[T]he first person that turned me on to Hemingway was Steinbeck, before he even turned me on to Steinbeck. And he turned me on to Joseph Heller. You know, he loved other authors too much to take too much credit on his own shoulders for anything" (12).

As I have concluded before, "If judged by his intended audience—as all writers should be—John Steinbeck stands" as one of the great writers in all of American literature. "Steinbeck is one of a handful of writers"—including Walt Whitman, Mark Twain, William Faulkner, and Toni Morrison—"who actually represent America in some significant way to the rest of the world," including Japan (George, "John Steinbeck" 88). Steinbeck's best work is comparable in quality and moral significance to that of any of his contemporary writers. As current biases pass away and new scholars point out the strengths of the author for future readers, John Steinbeck's place within American literature remains secure.

Steinbeck and Japan

Let me conclude with a few words about John Steinbeck and Japan. Outside of the United States, perhaps no other country has a greater love for Steinbeck than the people of Japan. It is in this country that the longest running Steinbeck publication, the John Steinbeck Society of Japan's *Steinbeck Studies*, exists. This journal is now in its 28th volume and appears each May with a report on the annual Steinbeck conference held by the society, which numbers over 150 members in Japan and around the world. Indeed, the reason I am here today is because of The Sixth International Steinbeck Congress, an international Steinbeck conference held this year in Kyoto from June 6–9. A love for Steinbeck and his work has, like the cherry trees, blossomed in Japan over the past three decades.

Steinbeck himself visited Japan on two occasions: in 1957 as a guest speaker at the 29th International Pen Congress in Tokyo and ten years later in a brief visit to Kyoto on the way home from seeing his son in Vietnam. Staying at the Miyako Hotel with his wife Elaine, Steinbeck spent the "night sitting on a bench in the garden" viewing and smelling the cherry blossoms (Nakayama 162). Later, Steinbeck wrote that the experience was one of the "most beautiful things" he had "ever seen, things to stare at for storing, to remember later" (qtd. in Nakayama 162). Clearly the beauty, hospitality, and rich culture of Japan held a deep attraction to the writer.

In the same way, Steinbeck's works—*Of Mice and Men*, *The Grapes of Wrath*, *East of Eden*

—have long held an attraction for the Japanese. I believe this attraction exists for many reasons. First, Steinbeck's worldview has always included other countries and cultures: he writes about Americans and non-Americans, he applies Western and Eastern philosophies, and he genuinely wants us to understand each other. Critics Stephen George and Luchen Li write that "contrary to most of the contemporary depictions of these groups, the author's many Oriental, Paisano, and Mexican characters (Lee of *East of Eden*, Danny of *Tortilla Flat*, Kino and Juana of *The Pearl*) are strong and stereo-type defying" (xiii). In much of Steinbeck's work the author tries to bring together people of all races and cultures so they can better understand each other.

Second, according to Kiyoshi Nakayama, President of the John Steinbeck Society of Japan, Steinbeck holds a special appeal to the Japanese people because "he deals with universal themes, depicts beautiful California landscapes, and portrays the ordinary people with sympathy and compassion." Nakayama continues, "What he [Steinbeck] writes about—friendship, courage, and altruism, among other things—seems based on his positive acceptance of the goodness of man" (163). These values are shared by both Steinbeck and the Japanese people.

I believe that John Steinbeck's popularity will only increase in the 21st century. As Steinbeck's place within the readership of countries around the world continues to grow, literary critics within his own country will be forced to look at their previously negative judgments of Steinbeck as a simple, sentimental writer with limited talents and ideas. Instead, they will find a man who has influenced whole generations of new writers, who remains as relevant today as in the 1930s, and who continues to touch readers from Kentucky to Kyoto.

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