R.W. Reinhardt Chit Chat Club of San Francisco November 13, 2006

A REUNION WITH STEINBECK

In 1962, at age 60, the novelist John Steinbeck, whose most important work of fiction had been published more than twenty years earlier, and whose current best-seller, the delightful *Travels with Charley*, would never be considered a classic, was awarded the world's most prestigious recognition for a writer, the Nobel Prize in Literature.

A spokesman for the Swedish Royal Academy of Science, addressing the presentation banquet in Stockholm, said of Steinbeck: "In your writings, crowned with popular success in many countries, you have been a bold observer of human behavior in both tragic and comic situations...Thanks to your instinct for what is genuinely American you stand out as a true representative of American life."

It was true then --- and it is true today --- that Steinbeck's novels were known to literate people throughout the world. His fame as an American writer probably is second only to that of Jack London. But, for that reason or any other, did Steinbeck merit the coveted Nobel Prize? He was the sixth American (not counting the displaced T.S. Eliot) to be elected a Nobel laureate. Others before him had been controversial. The award to Sinclair Lewis in 1930 was deeply resented by people who had felt the venom of his satire. The award to Pearl Buck in 1938 was widely considered ---- well, simply a mistake.

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But the award to Steinbeck occasioned an unusual outburst of anger, contempt and disbelief. The *New York Times*, whose reviewer had called *Travels with Charley* "pure delight," published an editorial suggesting that the Nobel committee was out of touch with the main currents of American writing. If they were alert to the literature of the present, why did they give their laurel wreath to a writer who had produced his main body of work more than two decades ago?

To rub it in, just before the awards banquet in Stockholm, the *Times* published a denunciatory piece by Arthur Mizener, of the critical left, titled "Does a Moral Vision of the Thirties Deserve a Nobel Prize?" Mizener said no "serious readers" had paid any attention to Steinbeck after *The Grapes of Wrath*, which was published way back in 1940. All Steinbeck's work since then was corrupted by 'sentimentality," a word of major dispraise among critics at that time. It was a code word for a writer who had abandoned the hard line of proletarian writing for something soothing and, perhaps, optimistic.

CUT FROM READING: (The American Nobel laureates are Sinclair Lewis (1930), Eugene O'Neill (1936), Pearl Buck (1938), William Faulkner (1949), Ernest Hemingway (1954), Saul Bellow (1976), and Toni Morrison (1993)

Why so much negation? Steinbeck was not an obscure, difficult writer like Thomas Mann or T.S. Eliot. Nor was Steinbeck one of those forgotten heroes muttering his stories in some obscure language spoken by a handful of people in some inaccessible corner of the earth. True, his current work was mostly journalism or non-fiction, and his most recent novel, *The Winter of Our Discontent*, had proved tiresome to his most loyal readers. But shouldn't some diminution of power be expected and forgiven in the aging of a great writer? Hemingway isn't valued for *Across the River and Into the Trees*. Faulkner's reputation does not rest on *A Fable*. Conrad is not measured by *Arrow of Gold*. Dickens is not remembered for *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*.

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If a writer's success rests on his creation of a personal landscape, then Steinbeck belongs among the best, along with Thomas Hardy in Devonshire; Willa Cather in Nebraska.; Rudyard Kipling in India; Gustave Flaubert in Normandy. No one who approaches Monterey County, California, is allowed to forget he is entering "Steinbeck Country."

Outside the United States, Steinbeck gets even more recognition than in his native literary turf. Of Mice and Men has been made into a movie not only three times in English but also in Swedish, French, Italian and Turkish. The Grapes of Wrath is read in many countries as an important account of a historic moment in American history.

Yet, the critical knocking continues. A few years ago, David Kipen, who was then the book critic of the *San Francisco Chronicle*, published a perceptive, well-documented article on the problem. Under the headline "Steinbeck Undervalued." Kipen attempted to analyze why Steinbeck continues to create controversy and to displease a significant number of literary critics --- while his name, his books and the imaginary landscape he created continue to enjoy wide if uneven popularity. To illustrate Steinbeck's continued recognition, Kipen cited a survey he had made, in which some 600 readers gave their choices of the 100 top books, fiction and non-fiction, written in or about the Western United States. Steinbeck made both lists – for fiction with *The Grapes of Wrath*, which showed number two after Wallace Stegner's *Angle of Repose*, and for non-fiction, *The Sea of Cortez*, which Steinbeck wrote with his close friend Edward F. Ricketts, the marine biologist of Cannery Row.

Kipen says: "The knock on Steinbeck has always been that he's too emotional, too sentimental, his symbolism is so apparent that – heaven forfend! -- even a high school student can appreciate it. Many would agree. "Monty" Montgomery of the *Boston Globe*, in reviewing Jackson Benson's heavy-weight, biography of Steinbeck (published in 1984) commented:: "The Grapes of Wrath is hard to read today. Casey the preacher is all dither, and Tom Joad – well he is thinner than the celluloid image of Henry Fonda ... Steinbeck is a marvelous writer, he's just a lousy novelist and a writer of mostly trivial short stories."

Outside the United States, Stainbeck uses even more recognision that on the previous states and only the previous states and the not only three pares in English out also in Swedish, Franco, traiter and Enthish. The Comes or Frate is read in many countries as an important pareount of a risable moment in American history.

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Not long ago, the London *Observer* carried a review signed by one Peter Conrad, who was suffering a severe attack of anti-American frenzy occasioned by the publication in Britain of a collection of Steinbeck's non-fiction writings, edited by the aforesaid Jackson Benson, a distinguished biographer of Steinbeck and a professor at San Diego State, and Susan Shillinglaw, who heads the Center for Steinbeck Studies quartered at California State University in San Jose.

The reviewer did not have much to say about the book, itself – but he used his space to take a few birthday swats at Steinbeck and to let fly at American literature, American politics and American culture, in general.

Example: "America imposes a bardic rule on its writers: they must interpret their brawling, contradictory land, which nowadays means making Americans feel good about themselves in return for an endorsement from Oprah's book club. The rewards are huge, as are the risks."

(I'm not at all sure what is meant by this convoluted and badly constructed sentence, but I do wonder if many of our current novelists feel bound by the bardic law to make American's feel good about themselves. I thought the only rule for aspiring writers is to try to wheedle a publisher into printing your book.)

The reviewer went on to deplore what he saw as current revival of interest in Steinbeck's writing, which was occasioned, in fact, by the hundredth anniversary of the author's birth in Salinas, California, in 1902. Our reviewer was of the opinion that Steinbeck's journalism, as he puts it, derived "more from Bob Hope than from the Bible."

"Who," he asked rhetorically, "does the bard now address with his megaphonic tones?"

My Spellcheck did not recognize the word "megaphonic," nor did my Webster's Unabridged Dictionary, probably because both sources are hopelessly American. But the reviewer helped by suggesting the answer was that the bard's megaphonic tones were addressed only to "the doctoral toilers in Steinbeck studies at their intellectually somewhat marginal centre." (namely, Ms Shillinglaw and Mr. Benson.)

Not long ago, the London Observer carried a review signed by one letter Couract, who was suffering a severe attack of ann-American frenzy occasioned by he publication in Britain of a collection of Stembeck's along their wirtings edited by the aforesaid Jackson Bertson, a distinguished mogrepher of Stembeck and a necessor at San Diego Standard Susan Shilling law, who heads the Center of Stembeck Standard Standard Standard in oan lose.

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I came to be reading stuff like this because I was asked several years ago to be the moderator of a panel on Steinbeck, one of more than twenty public programs sponsored by the National Endowment for the Humanities at two dozen college campuses and private libraries on the hundredth anniversary of Steinbeck's birth. Our panel convened one evening at the library of the Mechanics' Institute, and I was pleased to be sitting among a group that included Ms Shillinglaw, the doctoral toiler from the intellectually marginal Steinbeck Center in San Jose, and several published authors who had harked for many years to the bard's megaphonic tones without hearing the call to make America feel good about itself..

I prepared for the occasion by reading or re-reading some of Steinbeck's best-regarded novels. Among them were several I had known and loved and a few I had missed.

Revisiting Steinbeck, whose work I had not looked at for many years, was like a reunion with my own early life. The name Steinbeck came into our family when I was too young to be allowed to read his raunchy books and remained with us while Steinbeck's fame endured. My father was born in Salinas and had lived a few doors from John Steinbeck, who was eight years younger.

"We knew the Steinbecks," my father said. "They had a butcher shop."

Steinbeck's father, in fact, was an unsuccessful businessman who found

his place as a county official. John Steinbeck was about four years old when my father's family fled Salinas after the 1906 earthquake. (They moved to Los Angles. Appointment in Samarra.) So my father never knew John Steinbeck. I came closer than my father did to meeting the master, because two nieces of Steinbeck, daughters of his sister, Mary Steinbeck Dekker, were fellow-students at Stanford, but they never introduced me to their uncle.

Before our panel at the Mechanics' library, I went to several standard encyclopedias and web sites, where I found Steinbeck repeatedly described as a "proletarian" writer. Was this true? It certainly did not sound like the Steinbeck of the comic novels of Monterey. The narrow definition, which was applied to a number of American novelists and playwright in the Depression years, seemed

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too easy, too vague to be true of a prolific writer like Steinbeck. Fortunately, Steinbeck has been favored by several diligent biographers (including Benson and Shillinglaw) and Jay Parini, a professor at Middlebury College, whose compendious biography was a readable and reliable source and cleared up some of the reasons for this rather inaccurate characterization.

In our family, the Salinas Connection was not enough to pique my father's interest in reading *The Grapes of Wrath* when it was published in 1939, even though it won the Pulitzer Prize the next year. In my family, it was my mother who read best-selling novels like *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, *Anthony Adverse* and *The Yearling*. My father was our guardian against the pernicious influence of dirty-minded authors. He avoided reading novels whenever possible.

My mother was the only domesticated member – the only one whose marriage and husband survived– in a small group of middle-aged women – doctors, teachers, political activists – who were all reading *The Grapes of Wrath* in those years of depression and war. Some of the women held the essentially Marxist view that the proper function of literature is to be didactic – to promulgate a point of view, to preach a doctrine.. They saw *The Grapes of Wrath* as propaganda to focus attention of the needs and aspirations of the underclass in America..

Overhearing their conversations, I knew this was a book I ought to read, but it was several years before I actually did read any Steinbeck and many years before I knew anything about his life except that he came from Salinas – and was hated there for writing *The Grapes of Wrath*.

Steinbeck always wanted to be a writer, but like many aspiring writers he did not have a personal story bursting to be told. He needed to find and focus on material. For a couple of years he went to Stanford, where he took courses in English literature and composition – not in marine biology, as several encyclopedias mistakenly state.

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TO CUT FROM READING: He wrote articles and short stories for campus publications, belonged to the English Club, read and argued and took on the airs and aspirations of a writer waiting to be discovered.

Steinbeck's interest in sea life did not begin at Stanford University but in a summer course at the Hopkins Marine Station, a Stanford research and teaching institute located near Pacific Grove. A few years later, he met the marine biologist Ed Ricketts in a dentist's waiting room. Ricketts became Steinbeck's long-time drinking buddy, philosophical advisor, literary collaborator advisor and data base, and the model for character called "Doc," who appears in three of Steinbeck's Monterey novels --- *In Dubious Battle, Cannery Row* and *Sweet Thursday.*)

For about seven years, Steinbeck struggled along with a small subsidy from his parents, several odd, short-term jobs, and the wages of his first wife, Carol, while writing stories that were rejected again and again by editors and publishers of books and magazines. Steinbeck's first book, bought by a small publishing house in New York in 1932, when Steinbeck was thirty, is a historical novel called *Cup of Gold*, a romantic history of piracy in the Caribbean. You can find it in used book shops today, but don't bother. Steinbeck was still searching for saleable material and thought he had found it in a tale of piracy in the Caribbean. His real interest was in working and re-working a dense, pseudophilosophical novel based on a play by a friend he'd met at Stanford. This was eventually published as *To a God Unknown*. It's even harder to find than *Cup of Gold* and even less rewarding.

Meanwhile, he was working on short stories. At that time, dozens of magazines like *Colliers* and the *Saturday Evening Post* published literally thousands of short stories, the bread-and-butter of professional writers. Steinbeck finally sold one story to a magazine called the *North American Review* for ninety dollars.

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There is a tale, perhaps apocryphal, that it was his close friend Ed Ricketts who drew Steinbeck's attention to a small a farm community called Corrales de Tierra in the hills southeast of Monterey and suggested it might provide material for a multi-family story. Steinbeck saw in it the possibility of bringing together his unsold stories into a linked association.

Steinbeck did have an aunt who once had lived in that sheltered little valley, and her life there may have fueled his imagination. But the model for his work was not personal recollections of the area he called Pastures of Heaven but Sherwood Anderson's *Winesberg, Ohio*, which all aspiring American writers read at that time – and which many of them slavishly imitated.

[TO BE CUT FROM READING]

Winesberg, Ohio, (published in 1919.) was patterned on Sherwood Anderson's home town of Clyde, a rural community of about 3000 population in Sandusky County in northern Ohio. Anderson had grown up in Clyde, spent most of his childhood there. The characters in the twenty-five inter-related stories are people from his home town – or, in a few cases, people whom Anderson had glimpsed in Chicago, people who suggested stories to him. The eyes-and-ears of these stories is George Willard, a young newspaper reporter. He is, of course, Anderson, himself. Anderson wrote Winesberg when he was 40 years old, after many years in business Chicago, and after he had published a couple of rather unsuccessful novels.

Anderson's scheme of inter-linked tales (a form which the critic Malcolm Cowley calls "a cycle of stories with several unifying elements, including a single background, a prevailing tone, and a central character) has inspired many such fictional clusters as William Faulkner's *Go Down, Moses,* Erskine Caldwell's *Georgia Boy*; Christopher Isherwood's *Berlin Stories*; and John Horn Burns' *The Gallery.* Long before *Winesberg, Ohio*, was published (in 1919) Edgar Lee Masters's *Spoon River Anthology* – a poem-cycle about the secret lives and nature

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of the people of a small Midwestern town – created the pattern for numerous plot less, multi-character novels.

TO BE CUT FROM READING: Other examples: John Dos Passos's USA, William March's Company K, Glenway Wescott's Goodbye, Wisconsin.

Steinbeck found the pattern so comfortable that he used it to some extent in three of his later books, the ones that gave the name Steinbeck Country to Monterey County ---: *Tortilla Flat, Cannery Row* and *Sweet Thursday*.

This is how Steinbeck described his planned book in a letter to his literary agent, Mavis McIntosh, in New York City:

"There is, about twelve miles from Monterey, a valley in the hills called Corral de Tierra. Because I am using its people I have named it Las Pasturas del Cielo. The valley was known for years as the happy valley because of the unique harmony which existed among its twenty families. About ten years ago a new family moved in on one of the ranches. They were ordinary people, ill-educated but honest and as kindly as any...But about the Morans there was a flavor of evil. Everyone they came in contact with was injured...."

Steinbeck's pitch to his agent probably represented what he intended to write, or what he thought sounded most saleable. But *The Pastures of Heaven*, as it turned out, is by no means as tragic as this suggests – nor as well-knit together as Steinbeck may have hoped. But it was published -- Steinbeck's second book – by a small publishing house, the New York twig of a British publisher in the early 1930's, just as the Great Depression was clamping down on the book business – and on Steinbeck's own tenuous livelihood. It sold few copies and received a scattering of reviews, mostly favorable.

When I read *The Pastures of Heaven* as a callow youth, about a sophomore or junior at Stanford, I liked it for all the wrong reasons. The heavily plotted stories reminded me of French writers like Maupassant and Balzac. I especially enjoyed the story of two penniless sisters who got their start in

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prostitution by giving their bodies in gratitude to men who bought their homemade enchiladas. Obviously, I missed the point of Steinbeck's linked cycle of stories of simple lives destroyed by an evil intrusion into the heavenly valley. I thought the ugly fate of Rosa and Marin Lopez was funny. Fortunately, I've outgrown that adolescent taste.

Steinbeck's scheme of using a simple, harmonious society or a simple-minded person to contrast with a more advanced or complicated society is a well-known literary device. When the story concerns a simple individual who is destroyed by the cruelty or indifference of society, it is a tragedy. When technology or capitalism is the villain, you have a utopian or proletarian story.

The first of Steinbeck's truly simple-minded, tragic characters appears in *Pastures of Heaven*. He is a Mexican foundling called Tularecito who attacks a man who inadvertently interferes in the boy's attempt to communicate with gnomes. Tularecito is promptly committed to a hospital for the criminally insane. One can see here the genesis of both the story of the moron Lenny in *Of Mice and Men* and the playful yarns about a band of scofflaws in *Tortilla Flat*, who are saved from prosecution by banding together.

The idea of people banding together, forming a strategic and philosophical "phalanx" against a common enemy, is Steinbeck's formula for human survival. This phalanx – a Greek term for the cutting edge of the infantry and for the formative leadership in certain utopian literature – pervades Steinbeck's writing. It dominates his next published novel, *In Dubious Battle*, which is set during a bloody strike by apple pickers in a place Steinbeck calls Torgas, presumably the Pajaro Valley near Watsonville.

In Dubious Battle escaped much critical attention when it was first published in 1936. It was "discovered" after the success of The Grapes of Wrath and taken as evidence by friends and enemies alike that Steinbeck had left-wing or communist leanings. Some readers mistakenly read it as a proletarian novel, like James Farrell's Studs Lonigan or John Dos Passos' USA. It is frequently described, rather haphazardly, as left-wing because it concerns the strike.

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In Publicus Saule escaped much critical attention when it was first published in 1936, it was "discovered" cliet he success of The Chimer of Whith and taken as evidence by iriends and onemics wike that Stembeckhad left wing as communist leanings: Some readers inistatently read it as a professional newly like intress Farrell's Study Louington John Dos Passos" USA: It is irequently devicted, rether happarendly, as left wing beganse it dinocras the suffice.

In truth. John Steinbeck, although he always sympathized with the poor, the disabled, the mentally handicapped, did not have strong political convictions. His idea of utopia lay in the past, in simpler, kindlier times. The Salinas Valley of his favorite novel, his would-be masterpiece *East of Eden*, is his ideal. Although he sympathizes with the striking apple pickers against their stubborn employers, he is less interested in justifying the strike than he is in the issue of leadership --- who shall march in the phalanx of society.

The hero of *In Dubious Battle* is an angry and restless young man named Jim Nolan, who joins The Party – obviously the Communist Party – and is assigned to turn the workers' grievances into a class-conscious rebellion against the orchard owners, who are cast in a Marxist dialectic as the bourgeois oppressors of the underclass. That Jim does not succeed and is killed in the effort is not the tragedy, but that he does not discern the futility of his mission.

Late in the story, there is a sort of ideological debate between Jim Nolan and Doc Burton, a volunteer medic who ministers to the pickers. (This Doc is the first appearance of Ed Ricketts in Steinbeck's fiction, and he brings Ricketts' idealistic mysticism into the story.)

Doc, who had been a field doctor in Europe in the Great War, is disillusioned about the purposes of warfare. He senses that the strikers are, in effect, at war with the growers, and he does not feel the need of this militant and fatally dangerous confrontation.

Doc says: "In my little experience the end is never very different in its nature from the means. Damn it, Jim, you can only build a violent thing with violence."

Jim gives the standard argument of revolutionists: "All great things have violent beginnings."

Doc replies: "There aren't any beginnings. Nor any ends. It seems to me that man has engaged in a blind and fearful struggle out of a past he can't remember, into a future he can't foresee nor understand. And man has met and defeated every obstacle., every enemy except one. He cannot win over himself. How mankind hates itself."

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Jim, trying out his newly learned Marxist rhetoric, replies: "We don't hate ourselves, we hate the invested capital that keeps us down."

And Doc, the voice of humanism, says: "The other side is made of men, Jim, men like you."

The argument is never resolved. Doc admits to a gnawing loneliness; Jim counters with the comfort of belonging to a movement; and, in the end, Doc slips away, never to return. It is uncertain whether he's been kidnapped by strike-breakers and used to decoy Jim to his death -- or whether Doc has defected to the enemy – that is, the growers, for whom read Capitalists.

While Steinbeck was struggling to shape the recalcitrant, conflicting ideological messages of *In Dubious Battle* into a publishable novel, he was at work on a radically different story set in his home turf on the Monterey Peninsula. This was to be *Tortilla Flat*, a rowdy collection of linked stories entirely different from the somber tone of his supposedly serious novels, as are his later comedies set in Monterey ---*Cannery Row* and *Sweet Thursday*.

In search of material, Steinbeck became a curious visitor to a strange town that he had known all his life, a diligent journalist gathering color, texture, ideas. He spent hours wandering among the sardine canneries, watching the fishing boats coming into dock, eating lunch among the cannery workers, the fishermen and the whores, taking it in. An old timer recalled: "Steinbeck kind of held himself aloof sometimes, would sit in the corner and kind of listen and smoke cigarettes. But sometimes he joined in and you could talk with him easy. He wasn't stuck-up. He'd buy cheap wine from a bootlegger named Mike who sold the stuff from the back of the restaurant and he share it around . You could go to him for a drink.'

Books like *Tortilla Flat* and *Cannery Row* delighted me as a late adolescent, a sort of retarded adult, vacationing from Stanford in Easter Week, reading Steinbeck's books while lying in the warm white sand on the beach at Carmel, hanging out in the bars on Alvarado Street, and behaving as much as possible like a Steinbeck character, drinking a lot of beer, stealing artichokes from

Jun, trying out his newly learned Marxist encouragiles. We don't hat
ourselves, we have the revealed capital that keeps as down."

And 1900, the voice of numarism, says: "(the other side is made of men, him men like you."

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the fields at the mouth of the Carmel Valley and imagining that I, too, was some sort of primitive saint, living with nature in the beautiful pine woods.

Some reviewers dismissed *Tortilla Flat* as trivial, but it became

Steinbeck's first best-seller, his first national and international success, a standard item in school curricula, a favorite with the adolescent audience that is nowadays called "young adult." To me, it was a charming evocation of Monterey, a place I loved, with its fleet of little fishing boats, its abalone restaurants, its single main street with the soldiers and fishermen's bars down by the crumbly old Mexican customs house, and the little adobe cottages with their gardens of cactus and geraniums scattered up the slope. No one could describe the look and feel of that wonderful, unique landscape better than Steinbeck – "the fog that hangs like limp gauze among the black pines" in *Tortilla Flat* or dawn on Cannery Row: when "cats drip over the fences and slither like syrup over the ground to look for fish heads [and] silent early morning dogs parade majestically picking and choosing judiciously whereon to pee. The sea gulls come flapping in to sit on the cannery roofs to await the day of refuse. They sit on the roof peaks shoulder to shoulder..."

"Tortilla Flat" was the name Steinbeck gave a place he made up for the Mexican slum of Monterey. From the beginning, he intended his book to be read as a fantasy. Many readers, however, including local patriots at the Monterey Chamber of Commerce – thought Steinbeck was writing a realistic – if comical – novel about real human beings living in a real place called Tortilla Flat in a real town called Monterey in a real part of the United States called California, and the Chamber of Commerce put out a brochure disclaiming Tortilla Flat..

It was never Steinbeck's intention to write a realistic novel. He intended the book to be a modern fantasy on Mallory's Morte d'Arthur, the legend of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table. In a letter to his literary agent, Steinbeck said he wanted to depict "the strong but different philosophical-moral system" of the inhabitants of Tortilla Flat.

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The returning king, in Steinbeck's round table, is an unemployed sardine fisherman, named Danny, who has recently been mustered out of the Army and immediately learns that he has inherited a couple of run-down shacks in his old neighborhood on the hill above Monterey. Danny's hospitality, which usually consists in sharing a gallon of red wine filched from Torrelli's market, attracts to his houses a following of his fellow *paisanos* -- a mélange of Mexicans, Spaniards, Indians and Anglo-Americans. A lot a lot of happy comradeship ensues, sustained by trickery, petty larceny, and occasional acts of Robin Hoodstyle generosity to needy neighbors.

Steinbeck signals his myth-making intention at the head of every chapter with an archaic preface: "How Danny, home from the wars, found himself an heir, and how he swore to protect the helpless." "How Jesus Maria Corcoran. A good man, became an unwilling vehicle of evil." And so forth. And, lest there be any residual incomprehension, Steinbeck tells his readers: "When you speak of Danny's house, you are understood [in Tortilla Flat] you do not mean a structure of wood flaked with old whitewash, overgrown with an ancient untrimmed Rode of Castille. No – you are understood to mean a unit of which the parts are men, from which came sweetness and joy, philanthropy and, in the end, a mystic sorrow..."

Then, to emphasize the mythic quality, Steinbeck (like Hemingway in *For Whom the Bell Tolls* and *The Old Man and the Sea*) sets the main characters talking in pseudo-Spanglish.

"How knowest thou that I had a bottle of brandy under my coat?" says Danny's friend Pilon.

And Danny, faking surprise, says: "Thou hast brandy?...Perhaps thou keepest it for our Lord Jesus when He comes again."

Unlike Hemingway, Steinbeck quickly abandons this style of discourse and goes into the sort of guarded, raunchy dialogue that convulsed me and other people of my mental age when the novel was published in 1935. (I didn't read it then, of course. Too young, and the librarians kept it under the counter.)

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In one scene, Pablo, speaking acidly, says: "These women, there is no virtue in them any more."

"It is dangerous to lie with them," said Pilon. "I have heard there is one young Portagee girl here on the Flat who can give a man something to remember her by, if he goes to the trouble to get it."

Pablo made disapproving clucking noises with his tongue. He spread his hands in front of him. "What is a man to do?" he asked. "Is there no one to trust?"

They watched Danny's face and saw no alarm appear there.

"This girl's name is Rosa," said Pilon. "I would not say her last name."

"Oh, you mean Rosa Martin," Danny observed with very little interest.

"Well, what can you expect of a Portagee?"

Tortilla brought Steinbeck an immediate royalty check for \$300, the largest he had ever seen. In seven years of writing, he had collected a total income of \$870. The movie rights for *Tortilla Flat* sold to Paramount pictures for \$4000, a prodigious sum for Steinbeck and his then-wife Carol. But *Tortilla Flat* lay around the studio for several years, and, finally, in one of those classic Hollywood reversals, Paramount fired the script editor who'd bought it. The editor bought the rights himself for \$4000 and re-sold the rights to MGM for \$90,000. *The Grapes of Wrath*, written and published almost four years later, became a movie two year before *Tortilla Flat*, which finally reached the screen in 1942.

Many of us remember that fanciful story – not as gamy as the book, given the standards, the censorship of those days, but prettier to look at. The director was Victor Fleming, who is better remembered for *Gone with the Wind*, and the cast included some of the top stars under contract to MGM. John Garfield was Danny; Spencer Tracy was Pilon, the wily, drunken, opportunistic leader of the pack of free-loaders who live in Danny's house; Hedy Lamar was "Sweets" Ramirez, an accommodating widow whose heart is won by the gift of a vacuum cleaner without a motor. (She doesn't mind the lack of a motor because there's no electricity in her house, anyway.) Akim Tamiroff was Pablo, who is Pilon's conscience; and, memorably, Frank Morgan, a marvelous actor, was The Pirate,

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an old man with seven dogs, who is saving the quarters he makes selling firewood in Monterey to buy a golden candlestick for Saint Francis of Assisi.

(Steinbeck pattered The Pirate after one "Crazy Monte" Shortridge, who helped himself to other people tree, cut and hauled them away and sold the firewood in Monterey.)

An English professor whom I admired once commented that Steinbeck's reputation would endure on his comedies. Not many people have shared that opinion. Most others would name the tightly focused tragedy *Of Mice and Men*, or the great American epic romance, *The Grapes of Wrath*, published in 1939, as Steinbeck's best – perhaps his only important – books..

The Grapes of Wrath delighted the critics who had been confused or irritated by Steinbeck's sudden retreat into pastoral comedies, his apparent abandonment of the ideological issues of *In Dubious Battle*. Here, at a propitious moment in American history, he seemed to be returning to something resembling the literature of social and political protest.

But, in re-reading and re-considering this powerful novel, one of the most widely read of all American literature, one finds that the apparent shift was only a feint, a jab at proletarian realism. Proletarian realism was a style that suited the times but it was really not the outlook of John Steinbeck. It was as a journalist, not as a political activist, that Steinbeck became aware of the desperate condition of the migrant farm workers —whole families that had migrated to California from impoverished farms in Oklahoma and Arkansas in search of work

Steinbeck had gone to the San Joaquin Valley, where most of the Okies, were living in squalid tent camps, literally starving, to write a series of articles that ran in the San Francisco *News*. With his gift for finding and shaping a good story, Steinbeck saw the social and economic problem of the Okies, their hardship, their obstacles and their heroic struggle for survival, as an epic tale of human migration. When he decided to turn his articles into a novel, he saw the story not as an illustration of the Marxist dialectic of class struggle but as an *epic*,

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a classic saga of human migration, comparable more to Virgil's *Aenead* than to the typical protest novel of class struggle.

Steinbeck was steeped in Jungian ideas of collective consciousness, inherited relationships. He had read the literature, talked the nights with Ed Ricketts and with Joseph Campbell, who was beginning his classic studies of mythology when he became a friend of Steinbeck's in the early thirties (and had a short-term romance with Steinbeck's then-wife Carol. With this stimulating intellectual influence, Steinbeck perceived the historic dimensions, the legendary scope of the migration of a single family out of the dust bowl to a promised Eden.

The opening pages of *The Grapes of Wrath* are written in a style - a language, in fact - that immediately signals that the author is telling a story of epic proportions, the story of a people driven into exile, uprooted and driven into a wilderness by the force of implacable nature. He describes the onset of the withering drought, the rising dust, the choking dust storms, in rolling, Biblical sentences like these:

"To the red country and part of the gray country of Oklahoma, the last rains came gently, and they did not cut the scarred earth...In the roads where the teams moved, where the wheels milled the ground and the hooves of the horses beat the ground, the dirt crust broke and the dust formed...The dawn came, but no day. In the gray sky a red sun appeared, a dim red circle that gave little light, like dusk; and as that day advanced, the dusk slipped back toward darkness, and the wind cried and whimpered over the fallen corn."

This tone is not sustained. The author shifts his perspective, his focus, from panorama to close-up, alternating set pieces like the opening poem with chapters of earthy, anecdotal narrative, spiced occasionally with rustic humor that people of my grandmother's generation considered shocking and quite unnecessary. In a famous example of Steinbeck's skill at delivering a joke, Tom Joad tells his friend the Preacher, Jim Casy, a tale about a young fellow named Willy Feeley, who was "bashful, awful bashful."

"Well, one day he takes a heifer over to Graves' bull. Ever'body was out but Elsie Graves, and Elsie wasn't bashful at all. Willy, he stood there turnin' red a classic saun of human migracon, demparable more to Virgil submedul than to the regions correct novel of class struggle.

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an' he couldn't even talk. Elsie says, 'I know what you come for; the bull's out in back in the barn.' Well, they took the heifer out there an' Willy an' Elsie sat on the fence to watch. Purty soon Willy got feelin' purty fly. Elsie looks over an' says, like she didn't know, 'What's a matter, Willy?' Willy's so randy he can't hardly set still. 'By God,' he says, 'by God I wisht I was a-doin' that!' Elsie says, 'Why not, Willy? It's your heifer.'"

The language returns from time to time to the classic mode – little interstitial chapters like the scene-setting moments of a leisurely movie script. The tone-poems are indistinct, forgettable. But, in the end, Steinbeck's genius as a story-teller overcomes his inadequacies as an epic poet, and we get such scenes as the famous finale, when the Joad's daughter, Rose of Sharon, nurses a starving man from her breasts.

TO CUT FROM READING: This scene was too ambiguous – and certainly too strong – for the movies. The film ends with an evocation by Ma Joad of the family's power to endure because they are "the people." She does not say, could have said, they are the PHALANX of the people.

Once again, after the Grapes of Wrath, Steinbeck changed mood. He went back to journalism, covering subjects and places of World War II. And, once again, to the consternation of his fans on the left, he seemed to abandon the class struggle. We have no time tonight to deal with his next widely popular novel, *Cannery Row*, except to say that anyone who thought this would be another *Grapes of Wrath*, another *In Dubious Battle*, another naturalistic novel about farm workers or strikers, was disappointed. It raised some critics to a froth of fury. They found it inconsequential, sentimental, unconvincing.

CUT FROM READING

Steinbeck signals with the first words – a swaggering, exaggerated, wildly imprecise word-picture of the fish canneries of Monterey---that this will be a burlesque, not a tragic masque.

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"Cannery Row in Monterey in California is a poem, a stink, a grating noise, a quality of light, a tone, a habit, a nostalgia, a dream. Cannery Row is the gathered and scattered, tin and iron and rust and splintered wood, chipped pavement and weedy lots and junk heaps, sardine canneries of corrugated iron, honky tonks, restaurants and whore houses, and little crowded groceries, and laboratories and flophouses. 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 angles and martyrs and holy men," and he would have meant the same thing."

. Right away, we meet the first of the comic characters – the local shopkeeper, a Chinese named Lee Chong, who is beloved by all denizens of Cannery Row for his generous credit policies and his blind-eye to petty thievery. We learn that one of Lee Chong's his most overdrawn debtors – a man named Horace Abbeville, who has two wives and six children and no income – has come in and offered his sole possession, a nearby storehouse, in settlement of his debt. When Lee Chong accepts this offer, although he doesn't really want or need the warehouse, Horace Abbeville goes back to the warehouse and blows his brains out.

Then Doc, the focal character – another philosopher, scientist and idealist by the same name as the doctor of *In Dubious Battle* — takes over as the observer, victim and philosopher of the gang of bon vivants and picaresque saints of Tortilla Flat, still lolling drunkenly in the shade of the spreading oaks of Monterey county, but under different names. The leader now is Mack; the enemy is bourgeois conformity; and the normative observer is Doc — good old Ed Ricketts, Steinbeck's close friend for many years, his fishing and plant-gathering companion in the Gulf of Mexico, co-author of *The Sea of Cortez*, and stimulator-of-ideas-and plots.

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Figure 10c, the focal contractor—another philosopher, scientist and idealist by the same name as the doctor of In Dullous Bayle—takes or or as the observer, victim and philosopher of the gang or bon vivality and picturesque sames of Tortida Elat, will lather directionly in the shade of the spreading only of bioriers, country, but ander different names. The leader now is Market file enemy is boarded and and the mornature observer is the —good old Ed Ricketts, Steinbeck's close friend for many veges, his fishing and plant-gathering companion in the Staff of Nexico, co-

Steinbeck only damaged his waning reputation with a sequel to *Cannery Row* called *Sweet Thursday*, published in 1954. Although a few kindly critics have argued that this self-parody is a charming *pastoral*, most readers, including me, wonder why Steinbeck felt a need to write and publish such weak stuff..

When *Sweet Thursday* was followed by more journalism – and then the Nobel prize – the critics cut loose.

Dwight MacDonald, in a famous essay in the *Partisan Review* consigned John Steinbeck permanently to the ranks of second-rate novelists, along with John P. Marquand, Herman Wouk, John Dos Passos, Irwin Shaw, John Hersey and Thomas Wolf.

The novelist James Gould Cozzens, who is, himself, largely forgotten, said in a *Time* Magazine cover-story (which was occasioned by his finally breaking into the best-seller ranks with a pretentious novel called *By Love Possessed* – another of those best-sellers that no one reads any more): "I can't read ten pages of Steinbeck without throwing up."

Alfred Kazin, in a *New York Times* book review published in 1958, wrote one of the most penetrating and painful commentaries on the body of Steinbeck's work. Steinbeck, he said, essentially had no roots, no grand theme. He had "flitted uneasily from book to book, from theme to theme, for the very good reason that he lacks the intellectual resources, the fertilizing tradition behind him, that would have allowed him to work out solidly his one subject: the transformation of the great Salinas Valley in California."

Kazin thought that *East of Eden*, which he called "Steinbeck's most ambitious effort of recent years," displayed Steinbeck's confusion, and fuzzy mysticism and showed that the "lovingness that has been the root of his work has never been accompanied by the intellectual ands creative resources with which to face up to the present world."

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Some of this criticism certainly reflects a misunderstanding or a fixed hostility to Steinbeck's purposes. He deliberately avoided being put into a pigeonhole. His message, as it were, seemed to change, as did his writing style and his setting. His ultimate subject was NOT, as Kazin proposed, was not the transformation of the Salinas Valley, but the conflict within John Steinbeck between grandiose ideals and grubby realities.

Was he a leftist? Or was he an ultra-conservative? Was he, perhaps, even a fascist in his sympathies, without really realizing the implications of some of his pseudo-philosophical meanderings? Or was he simply lacking in taste?

His heroes are scoff-laws, outsiders, rule-breakers, delinquents. One can be sure that they do not pay taxes. They are drunk and disorderly as often as possible. And they have probably been known to smack their wives.

Yet, in their freedom – or their apparent freedom – from a domineering, female-dominated society, they appeal to Steinbeck. He sees them with an aura of sanctity.

Doc, Steinbeck's voice in *Cannery Row*, looks out his window at Mack and his misbehaving gang. He has every reason to dislike and avoid them. They have nothing in common, and they have trashed Doc's laboratory by throwing an enormous, out of hand party that destroyed a lot of Doc's property. But Doc is not only forgiving, compassionate, understanding – but even admiring. He says:

"Look at them. There are your true philosophers. I think that Mack and the boys know everything that has ever happened in the world and possibly everything that will happen. I think they survive in this particular world better than other people. In a time when people tear themselves to pieces with ambition and nervousness and covetousness, they are relaxed. All our so-called successful men are sick men, with bad stomachs and bad souls, but Mack and the boys are healthy and curiously clean. They can do what they want. They can satisfy their appetites without calling them something else."

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Here is Steinbeck being grossly sentimental. He calls the men "boys," in tolerant recognition of their refusal to grow up, to become rational, responsible adults. It is hard to believe that Steinbeck really admires them as much as he pretends to do. One does not trust Steinbeck to speak the truth – and that is the most damaging position for an author, to lose the readers' confidence.

But there is another, sounder reason to fault Steinbeck. This is in the way he depicts women in *Tortilla Flat* and *Cannery Row*. As elsewhere in Steinbeck's novels, the women are either moralizing spoil-sports, lunatics or good-hearted sex-pots who give or sell the comfort of their bodies to the ne'er-do-well men who are always so relaxed and always get to do whatever they want. Women are on the side of law and order. They are the true oppressors.

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In one of the episodes, or anecdotal stories, in *Cannery Row*, Mack and his friends from the Palace Flophouse go out to gather frogs for "Doc's" biological supply. They're poaching on a farmer's land and he threatens to drive them off – but Mack charms the farmer into inviting them into his house, instead, where they all get roaring drunk on the farmer's keg of corn whiskey. The farmer's wife, clearly a bossy, interfering, mother-superior fortunately is absent. So much for the civilizing influence of females! If only women would leave men alone, there would be no more squabbling over property, no turf wars, no bomb squads, no hatred.

When an epidemic of influenza strikes Cannery Row, the female residents of the local whore house all pitch in to make soup and take it around to the neighbors, sort of like the delivery folk at "Open Hand." Ministering to the dependent and infirm is clearly the area in which women of all walks of life excel. They're good in the kitchen, the nursery and in bed.

The Noble Prostitutes, who inhabit a whore house called the Bear Flag (It's headed by a woman, the successor to Flora, who calls herself

But there is another, southful read to that Swinger Williams in Standard and deplots, women in Lord full read to the entire of Standard and deplots, women are entire inquisitive shorts, the women of the foundation boards with the end of the foundation of the following southers are so that and always for to so windered that want. Women at one of the land orders I have making the coping time.

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Fauna) make a patchwork quilt of old underclothes as a present for Doc. As for "Sweets" Ramirez, the beloved Jezebel of Tortilla Flat, she takes on a down-and-out lover because of he gives her a vacuum cleaner. The vacuum cleaner has no motor, but, no matter --- Sweets' little shanty doesn't have electricity. There's another ditsy, loveable housewife on Cannery Row who loves to entertain so much that she gives tea parties for the neighborhood cats. Most of the other women in the Monterey area rent the use of their bodies for little or no payment, like the two warm-hearted Mexican spinsters in *The Pastures of Heaven* who lavish their favors on men who purchase and eat their enchilada-with-beans-and-rice platillo combinacion. And in the detestable *Sweet Thursday*, one of the inhabitants of the Bear Flag escape by going to live in a culvert, from which she is rescued by getting married to Doc.

The view of human nature, sexuality and social behavior that pervades Steinbeck's Monterey novels is recognizably that of most adolescent American males. I think that explains why books like *Tortilla Flat* and *Cannery Row* delighted so many adolescent boys in the repressive decades of the 1940s and 50s, but it does not excuse a writer of Steinbeck's power from a chronic lack of empathy for the subjects of his tales.

Nowadays, re-reading Doc's sentimental defense of Mack ad his pals reminds me of a famous interchange between James Baldwin and Norman Mailer. Mailer had written what he thought was an admiring essay suggesting that African Americans were more relaxed and natural about sex than whites are. Mailer didn't use the word "primitive," of course. Nor did he say dark-skinned people were child-like. But Baldwin, who was black, intellectual and sexually complicated, correctly objected that Mailer's admiring view of blacks was an outsider's wishful opinion of a people whom he did not really understand and whose problems he did not share. In other words, Mailer, like Steinbeck, was well-meaning, but he was patronizing and essentially demeaning to the people he purported to envy.

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I believe the same misgiving applies to all of Steinbeck's Monterey comic novels. There is much that is likable about these novels. They are, in places, very funny, and they are generally kind and cheerful. Steinbeck's prose is sharp and clean and clear, and the passages describing the scent of the pine woods, the waves and tide pools, the little town, are as beautiful as anything I've ever read about California. But they do not hold up as the best writings of a great writer. Like Mark Twain, one of the writers he liked best, Steinbeck was a prolific journalist, a bold experimenter in subject and style, and a very uneven novelist.

One of the soundest evaluations I found of Steinbeck's position in American letters is in a note by James K. Folsom in Howard Lamar's Readers' Encyclopedia of the American West.

"Critics in the 1940s expected a thematic sequel to *The Grapes of Wrath*, and when none was forthcoming they accused Steinbeck of backing away from those social issues which, in the dark days of the Great Depression, were often assumed to offer the only possible themes for serious literature. Today, with all of his literary career before us, a different assessment seems more just. For Steinbeck was par excellence, a story teller, closer to Mark Twain and the tradition of often bitter folk humor than to John Dos Passos, James T. Farrell and the tradition of the proletarian novel."

Professor Shepherd of English 201 and I would agree. Steinbeck is best when he's most like Twain. That is not a bad recommendation.

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