THE SPIRIT OF THE THIRTIES IN THE MAJOR FICTION OF JOHN STEINBECK

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Suman Charak Jamwal

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To
My Daughter
Utkarshini Singh

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Preface

The twentieth century literature is an expression of identity crises and difficult existence since the Twenties were a period of literary creativity especially in the novel as a genre. The works of several notable authors appeared during this period triumphantly such as James Joyce's *Ulysses* published in 1922 in Paris, being the most important achievement of literary modernism.

The English novel is an important genre of English literature. To mention a few Henry James, Ernest Hemingway and Theodore Dreiser are some of the notable figures whose novels appeared with a revolutionary force in the History of American frictions featuring American Dream and the success syndrome.

The American 1930s depict a literary history bounded by the traumas of the Wall Street Crash and the attack on the Pearl Harbor, the period that historians refer to as the long decade of thirties, is a narrative anchored in the economic and political emergency of those years.

Steinbeck's, *Cup of Gold: A life of Sir Henry Morgan, Buccaneer, with Occasional Reference to History* (1929) is first novel, a work of historical fiction based loosely on the life and death of 17th century pirate Henry Morgan. A work of 1920s, it depicts the hopes, aspiration, illusions and a Dream compared to the dream of early voyagers and settlers in the Virgin Islands of the sea shores in the discovery of America, the succeeding years retrospectively portray the desperation, depression and the trauma due to the crash of 1929 followed by haunts and disillusionment.

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Steinbeck is best known for his works set during the Great Depression particularly those that focused on migrant workers. *The Grapes of Wrath,* a Winner of the National Book Award and Pulitzer, and of *Mice and Men* are two of his well-known works that are set during the highly stressful period.

Steinbeck had a middle-class upbringing in Salinas, California, struggled as a writer and a champion of the downtrodden and the repressed who gave voice to the overlooked.

John Steinbeck mirrors at the Heart of Depression Era. From 1920-1930 America was suffering from a terrible economic downturn – The Great Depression, The Great Crash. It was a boom period of literature creation and many well-known writers emerged in that special problems and issues. The right philosophical outlook can instruct writers to find a proper way of learning about life: then writers can present a true picture of life in their work.

Steinbeck lived through the Great Depression, the Dust Bowl and the W.W. II. He could understand the horrendous outcome on America. He deals with proletarian theme, symbolic structure, plight and migration of the disposed farmers. He has been a live witness to the economic hardships, agricultural industry and the quest for a new life.

Published in 1935 *Tortilla Flat* portrays the adventures of a group of homeless young men in ironic comparison to mythic knights – rejecting all the standards of American life in their dissolute quest for wine, women and comraderic and petty theft.

His 1937 play of *Mice and Men,* a tragic story about the itinerant farm hands, one of whom was mentally childlike, but physically strong produced in New York and published as a novel. The 1930s were the decade of Steinbeck's 'Dustbowl Trilogy' which exposed the desolation with which America's rural poor had been thrown by the Crash. The 'Dust bowl Trilogy' was profoundly realistic – its political radicalism reflecting an American society which clearly needed urgent reforms.

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The Grapes of Wrath (1939) focused on the Joad family displaced from their farm by the fierce droughts which created the thirties 'Dustbowl' Anders Osterling, a member of the Committee which awarded Steinbeck his 1962 Nobel Prize for literature, said of him:

> His position as a social truth teller is fully equal to his predecessors Sinclair Lewis and Ernest Hemingway".

But telling social truths in 1930s America was not an easy thing.

Then, as now, the country's one percent knew that the thirties Wall Street Crash and subsequent global economic crises, their system of runaway capitalism had failed catastrophically.

The great Depression started in August 1929 when the economy began to decline rapidly, and things continued to deteriorate when the stock market erased in October of the same year. People lost their jobs and homes in addition to business as profits fell dramatically. The terrible drought, the Midwest experienced, and things only got worse as the decade progressed. Years of drought combined with increased farming caused the land in the area – Oklahoma, Texas and Kensas in particular to erode. This natural disaster combined with the banks repossessing land and homes, left people with no choice but to bane and find opportunities elsewhere. "When the monster stops growing, it dies, it cann't stay one size," writes Steinbeck referring banks as monsters which are meant to have profit all the times.

Distressed, the dislocated people left in search of greater pastures for fulfillments, dreaming for better days ahead. In the new land of California, they felt afraid of the 'unknown'. Living conditions became more horrible. Steinbeck himself lived in Salinas in close affinity to the migrant workers. In mid-thirties he began writing series for San Francisco News called "Harvest Gypsies" from which *The Grapes of Wrath* was developed. He visited the camps and saw the horrible conditions in which the workers lived – with no homes, no bed and no equipment and no toilets even, it all; looked as a "city dump".

The conditions worsened more with no life, no hope and difficult survival. It was quite late that the federal Govt. started making camps for these desperate people who had fled from their homes driven by compelled circumstances. Steinbeck's biography intersects with American social life at a period of great historical significance. It was an age marked by one of the most profound crises of capitalism in America. Lenin has shown that imperialism is the highest stage of capitalism which gives rise, "to a number of very acute, intense antagonism, frictions and conflicts. America entered upon the career of imperialism in the twentieth century and became its leader after the Second World War The writing career of Steinbeck corresponds to this phase of American history and one must study Steinbeck's fiction against this background.

East of Eden an epic dramatizes the perpetual conflict between good and evil in the society of the Salinas valley as a whole and within the individuals of the Trask and Hamilton families in particular. The, main character of the novel, generation after generation, wrestle with the problem of evil. *The Winter of Our Discontent* is the last major novel of Steinbeck, in which he recreates the myth of American Dream in the sixties and shows how the myth is not only false but extremely dangerous for those who are engrossed in it.

The wide popularity of Steinbeck as a novelist rests upon the unique attempt to deal with serious problems of the human conditions. He is regarded at present as an author concerned with social consciousness of his age, His technique, style, themes; reflect his social concern and a compulsive desire to depict the social realities have given an estimate of Steinbeck's as a novelist. According to Richard Astro.

It is impossible to predict the final fate of John Steinbeck's reputation, but it seems likely that his lasting fame will rest largely on his great novels of the American Depression. He was a product of his time and milieu. As a novelist short story writer, journalist and author of travel literature, "he travelled light, unencumbered by the kinds of pre-occupations which are implications to clear vision.

The present work is a contribution in the debate that is still going on. It is hoped that it would help in elucidating, by relating his narrative of socio-economic condition in a capitalistic regime in the post-depression era of the United States to its philosophic moorings and social preoccupations.

In the completion of this book, I have received help, guidance, inspiration and encouragement from many quarters all of which is not practically feasible to mention here. There are, however, a few particular obligations which I find it my moral duty to acknowledge. This work was submitted as a thesis for the degree of Ph. D in the University of Jammu under the supervision of the late Prof. D.K. Rampal, the then Prof. and Head of the Department of English. Prof. Rampal's inspiring guidance helped me frame the ideas and to clothe them in an appropriate language. A man of vast acumen Prof. D.K. Rampal was a brilliant scholar and a very kind and generous man; to me a mobile encyclopedia. My debt to him goes beyond the normal obligations of a scholar to her supervisor. I owe to him more than a quarter century of kindness, guidance and hospitality. May his noble soul rest in peace! Most of the ideas expressed in this work formulated and developed in the course of my discussion with fellow scholars, in the classroom and in the seminars and conference and in particular with Dr. Sucheta Pathania, Prof & Head Department of English, University of Jammu.

I am extremely indebted to my brother late Dr. B.S. Charak (May his soul rest in Peace!) whose particular interest and desire proved through his perpetual blessings and good wishes and tremendous help rendered to me by sending a complete set of the texts of John Steinbeck and study material on the author from U.S.A and a constant enquiry of my performance through letters and telephones. My special gratitude to my parents (May their souls rest in peace, too!) whose silent blessings and unceasing encouragement and farsightedness enabled me to complete this work.

My special thanks to American Studies Research centre, Hyderabad and American Centre, New Delhi which have been a valuable source of material.

Finally, I acknowledge the support of my husband Sh. Daleep Singh Jamwal and especially to my little princess Utkarshini Singh who bore with me through the period that I was engaged in writing and rewriting this book and whose persistent 'nagging' made it imperative for me to make an adequate response.

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List of Abbreviations

CW	Cup of Gold
EE	East of Eden
GW	Grapes of Wrath
PH	Pastures of Heaven
TF	Tortilla Flat
WD	The Winter of Our Discontent

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Introduction

John Steinbeck (1902-1968) is one of the most prominent American writers of the twentieth century. Some of his novels have become significant features of the inheritance of modern America. It would not be out of the way to mention that the *Grapes of Wrath* has taken its place as a part of the intellectual furniture of the modern man. Steinbeck has cleared many misconceptions and superstitions of the American society in his work and depicted it with truth and a deep sense of understanding. However, he has not always been properly understood and his art has suffered neglect on account of the clearness and sincerity of his message. As Peter Lisca has said that his fiction has been "both accepted and rejected on sociological rather than aesthetic term" *(The Wide World 3)*.

John Ernest Steinbeck was born on Feb. 27, 1902 in the town of Salinas, a county seat of Monterey. His father John Ernest Steinbeck was the son of Johannes Adolph Grossteinbeck, a cabinet maker from the region of Germany near Dortmund. He married an American from Massachusetts, Almira Ann Dickson and migrated to the United States and settled in Florida. He changed his name to John Adolph Steinbeck and found employment as a joiner and carpenter.

In 1863 Almira Steinbeck gave birth to her third son who was named John Ernest Second. Shortly afterwards her husband, John Adolph, was drafted into the Confederate army and sent to fight in the civil war. After the war, the family migrated to California in the

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spring of 1876. There John Adolph opened a grain and flour mill. In California, John Adolph prospered, and the family was soon living in comfortable circumstances.

His son John Ernest moved to King City and acquired a job as bookkeeper. There he met Olive Hamilton, a twenty four year old school teacher who had taught at various one room school houses in remote parts of Monterey County.

Olive Hamilton's parents were from northern part of Ireland near Londonderry. Her father, Samuel, had emigrated from Ireland to California in 1851. They eventually settled at the foot of San Francisco bay, where Olive was born in 1866. Thereafter they moved to a ranch near King City where Samuel took up farming and worked as a blacksmith and well digger in addition to his farming. As time went on, he gained a reputation as an inventor and a clever fabricator of farming implements which he sold to his neighbours. He also became celebrated as a spinner of tales; John Steinbeck inherited his narrative gift from his maternal grandfather Samuel Hamilton.

Olive Hamilton and John Ernest Steinbeck Senior were married in King City in 1891. In the spring of 1894, they moved to Salinas where John Ernest became the manager of a large flour mill and then opened his own grain and feed store which was operating successfully at the time when his son John Steinbeck, the author, was born in 1902, eight years after the birth of his second daughter. Steinbeck's parents were fairly prosperous, middle-class, upward mobile Americans during the early years of Steinbeck's life. He lived in an atmosphere of genteel affluence with high expectations from his inherited prosperity. The father occupied prominent positions in the social and political establishment, and his mother's academic and cultural background provided him with a stable stake in the intellectual and spiritual life of America. However, by a quirk of the American economic system, Steinbeck's family fell into straitened circumstances by the time John Steinbeck was of school-going age. This was the first major shock that made him sensitive to the realities of the American social life.

Between his graduation from school and his admission to the Stanford University, he was compelled to work as a labourer in a sugar factory where he came in contact with the labourers of various ethnic origins who had to work in sub-human conditions and whose life was reduced to an animal level with no moral and spiritual content. It was here that the young future author saw the face of poverty that stalked the length and breadth of the affluent American society. His university career was constantly interrupted by the need for earning money as a labourer in between his academic pursuits. He became acquainted with labourers of Mexican, Irish and Slovac origin who led life of extreme penury on the agricultural estates of rich Californians. They had no cultural and spiritual elevation, but Steinbeck found them to be real men and women who were to people his fiction in subsequent years. It was in these circumstances that Steinbeck discovered the great gulf between the Dream and the reality of America.

At the time of Steinbeck's birth, his father was a Monterey County treasure. From the very childhood the future author had keen interest in literal writing. From 1926 onwards he became more ambitious. He started reading various subjects in literature such as classical literature, Greek historians and Plato's dialogues. He also studied version of Malory's *Le Morte D'Arthur* and Stevenson. By 1925, he started reading widely in English, American and European literatures and enjoyed Milton, Browning, George Eliot, Hardy, Thackeray, D.H. Lawrence and Dostoevsky etc.

While working on ranches and road gangs Steinbeck acquired a lot of knowledge of the lower strata of the people and became acquainted with various sorts of persons and their genuine human qualities. He started writing during this academic period. His writing style underwent several changes with the changing conditions of American society. The valley of Salinas, its natural beauty, birds, animals, trees, and flowers have left a lasting impact on Steinbeck's personality. The Monterey county and its surroundings have also played a peculiar role in constructing his social outlook. He has introduced most of his boyhood experiences in some of his short novels such as *Tortilla Flat, Cup of Gold, Of Mice and Men, The*

Pastures of Heaven, and so on. Steinbeck's critics have felt that the interest in plants and animal life had a pernicious influence on Steinbeck's works.

The Depression in America has influenced Steinbeck very strongly. His whole writing career shows consequently the unchallengeable impact of the Great Crash and the conditions of the people, their feelings, frustrations, hopes, dreams, illusion and finally the disillusionment from the Thirties onward. His frequent shifting from one place to another plays a pivotal role in his writings. The impact of Monterey County, Salinas valley and California particularly has inspired him to adumbrate his experiences into his fiction.

A specific aspect of Steinbeck's fiction is the use of myth. He has interwoven mythical references with radical situations in his novels of the thirties. He has used myth as a structure in some of his novel affecting their form and content profoundly. Charles Moorman has expressed it in his study of three contemporary poets, Arthurian triptych: "the myth brings stature, order and meaning to the modern writer's attempts to order the chaotic world of his own times" (Qtd in Fontenrose, *An Introduction and Interpretation* 6).

Indirectly, Steinbeck has attacked the Puritan religion and its preaching in the modern American capitalism. He has parodied the materialistic attitude of the twentieth century civilization. Steinbeck has satirized the whole society. His satire is more or less compared to that of Mark Twain and Jonathan Swift. His allegorical method is quite opposite to that of Bunyan's *The Pilgrim Progress*. He has described the myth of American success generally known as American Dream. His fiction deals with the material values of the society which have been allegorized in a humorous manner. His description of American mannerism, social conventions and capitalistic concerns is a keynote of his writing career. Moreover, his use of inter chapter is a sort of generalization of the society, politically and economically deprived whereas the main chapters stress the particular problems. His fiction portrays a kind of violence and social protest particularly of the proletariats against the bourgeoisie and partly of bourgeoisie's leading apparently towards

the class-conflict. It may be going too far to translate the conflict between the working class and the capitalists. But it goes without saying that a writers' projection in a work of art are deeply influenced by the social values in the environment of the writer's and the patterns of conflict between those social values.

California is the end of the western pilgrimage of the American adventurer who wants to find a new Garden of Eden on the earth which has not suffered any post-lapsarian fall. Steinbeck's greatness lies in the fact that with the integrity of the writer, he stuck to truth and refused to make a compromise in his artistic vision. The literary establishment was shocked and indignant over his refusal to accept the conventional image of America as a land where everyone was free to live a life of affluence amid equality of opportunity. He was the literary successor of great realists of American literature like Herman Melville, Hawthorne, Mark Twain and Theodore Dreiser. In approaching his work one has to correctly understand the tradition of realism which includes the great masters of literature like the Greek dramatists, Shakespeare, Swift and mainly the great nineteenth century novelists who depicted the evolution of modern Europe.

Steinbeck is one of the pioneers of realist novel in America. His realism was the cause of truthfulness which started and antagonized the critics. Claude E. Jones found that:

> Even his first novel, the romantic *Cup of God* (1929), reflected a social consciousness an unsympathetic, in some places, excoriating treatment of middle-class morality and ideals. (452)

However, a preoccupation with thematic concern of John Steinbeck has led to a complete misunderstanding about the form and structure of his novels. He has repeatedly been blamed for his failure to contain his material in an artistic structure. In order to understand Steinbeck's structural principles, we have to evolve a methodology that conceptualizes structure in terms of the social vision that the novelist tries to depict in his works.

Steinbeck's art calls for a redefinition of the concept of realism in literature. Realism is a term of likely ambiguity and abuse.

Some tend to confuse it with naturalism whereas it is the antithesis of the same. Naturalism aims at the reproduction of the surface of reality whereas realism tries to see human beings in the context of life as a whole. Emile Zola or Flaubert is the representatives of the naturalistic school whereas Balzac is the realist. Some readers think that the characteristic feature of realism is the depiction of the lower classes of society or a preoccupation with the intimate details of physical relationships. Whereas many realist writers do include the lower classes in the depiction of their society, it is not a necessary feature of realistic literature. On the other hand, the preoccupation with the sexual and the physical is more concerned with naturalism.

Realism in the sphere of aesthetics comprises the classical heritage which consists in the great arts which depict man as a whole in the whole of society. It strives to unearth the human personality in the context of the hidden laws governing all human relationships. The ancient Greeks, Dante, Shakespeare, Goethe, Balzac, Tolstoy, all give adequate pictures of great periods of human development and at the same time serve as signposts in ideological battles fought for the restoration and high position in the march of realistic literature.

Realism is antithetical to both the pseudo-objectivism of the naturalistic school and the mirage subjectivism of psychologist or abstract formalist school. The realistic writer rejects the lifeless average as the basis of literature which the naturalists portray, and simultaneously rejects the abstract individual of the pure psychologist:

> The central category and criterion of realist literature is the type, a peculiar synthesis which organically binds together the general and the particular both in characters and situations. What makes a type is not its average quality, and its mere individual beings, however profoundly conceived; what makes it a type is that in it all the humanly and socially essential determinants are present on their highest level of development, in the ultimate unfolding of the possibilities latent in them, in

> extreme presentation of their extreme, rendering concrete the peaks and limits of men and epochs. (Lukacs, 6)

Early in life Steinbeck had been influenced by the novels of Melville and Dreiser who were the great realists of the nineteenth and early twentieth century. Art, particularly the literary art, is saturated with social and moral humanistic problems:

> The demand for a realistic creation of types is in opposition both to the trends in which the biological being of man, the physiological aspects of self-preservation and procreation are dominant (Zola and his disciples) and to the trends which sublimate man into purely mental, psychological processes. (Lukacs, 7)

True art must see man in concrete living with the moral and social conflicts which his predicament generates. What makes Steinbeck a great novelist is the inexorable veracity with which he depicts reality even if that reality ran counter to the cherished opinions, hopes and wishes of the predominant sections in his own culture. He had to stick to his vision of life even at the cost of personal sacrifices, fear of failure and grinding poverty. Had Steinbeck accepted the Utopian fantasies that passed as facts in the American novels of his time, he would have been as deservedly forgotten, unwept and unsung, as the innumerable pamphleteers and glorifiers of the American success myth who had been his contemporaries.

Steinbeck drew realistic portraits of life and thus became the spokesman of his age. He depicted life as he saw it and not as the novelists were conventionally expected to see it. Since late nineteenth century the reader of novels had been fed on a picture of American life that satisfied the fictitious goals that the purveyors of American success myth had been doling out through mass-media. Horatio Alger had provided the paradigm of such success stories. In these a poor but virtuous man overcame all difficulties through hard work and virtuous action and finally reached the top of ladder culminating usually in his marriage to the daughter of the chairman of the powerful corporation where he had started his career at the lowest level. They depicted America as a land of unlimited oppor-

tunity where every man had the right to rise from rags to riches through personal initiative and hard work. Steinbeck had too much integrity to be seduced by such false promises. He discovered that the American success myth veiled the unseemly truth that American society had been so organized that poverty, want and deprivation for the majority was the condition for a microscope minority to enjoy all the benefits of affluence Steinbeck's novel are a narration of his encounters with the American Dream.

The American Dream is a picture of a society where every individual has access to all material and spiritual values which make for a happy life. It is, in fact, the realization of the ancient Dream of humanity for a society free from unhappiness, war and want. "As a state of mind and a Dream, America had existed long before its discovery" (Spiller & Johnson, 192). In the European civilization such utopias have been created since antiquity. Plato's the republic is an early version of an idealized society. During the Middle Ages, the Christians were promised a kingdom of heaven but only in the eternal life after death. The miseries of their mundane existence clashed harshly with the promised bliss. The human sufferings were ascribed to the fall of man as a result of the Original Sin and the Kingdom of God was consequently shifted to the other world. With the progress of science, the hope for the achievement of a more prosperous society on earth became brighter in the sixteenth century. Sir Thomas More sketched the blueprint of the ideally realized world in his Utopia. The literature of the time abounds in the pictures of such a society and Shakespeare in The Tempest bodies forth a similar Dream through the mouth of Gonzalo.

The discovery of American gave substance to this ideal. Columbus and his compeers landed on the shores of a new world which appeared to have escaped the consequences of man's Original Sin. The early explorers had landed on:

> Islands swept by balmy breezes, inhabited by natives of peaceful dispositions, living without toil or industry on the natural productions of a generous soil. Their disconcerting absence of shame, their simplicity seemed to indicate that in some