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From the tide pool to the stars : a study of the evolution of John Steinbeck's attitude towards good and evil

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LOMA LINDA UNIVERSITY

Graduate School

FROM THE TIDE POOL TO THE STARS:

A STUDY OF THE EVOLUTION OF JOHN STEINBECK'S ATTITUDE
TOWARDS GOOD AND EVIL


by

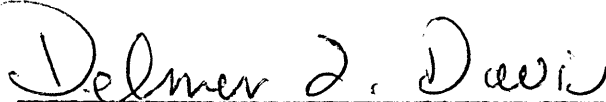
Karen Wallace Bondonno

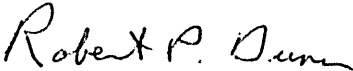
A Thesis in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree Master of Arts
in the Field of English

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Each person whose signature appears below certifies that this thesis in his opinion is adequate, in scope and quality, as a thesis for the degree Master of Arts.


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I. A CRITICAL BACKGROUND

Probably one of the most widely criticized of all novelists, Steinbeck lends himself to diverse critical reaction in many areas. His books are both liked and disliked for their emphasis on social issues, their bent towards naturalism, mysticism, sentimentality, and moralizing. They are praised or attacked for their themes, their forms, and their underlying philosophies. Reviewers and critics with special interests to promote or protect have had a field day with In Dubious Battle, Grapes of Wrath, East of Eden, and Cannery Row. This diversity of critical response is, to a certain degree, universal and natural; everyone responds differently from background or, perhaps, from temperament. Steinbeck himself recognized this latter possibility in a humorous note in his article, "Critics--From a Writer's Viewpoint." "Here is a thing we are most likely to forget," he says after having looked at the "anarchy" represented by the total disagreement among the critics of one of his books.

4 "A man's writing is himself. A kind man writes kindly. A mean man writes meanly. A sick man writes sickly. And a wise man writes wisely. There is no reason to suppose that this rule does not apply to critics as well as to other writers."

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John Steinbeck, "Critics--From a Writer's Viewpoint," in Steinbeck and His Critics: a Record of Twenty-five Years, eds. E. W. Tedlock, Jr. and C. V. Wicker (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1957), p. 49.

Beyond this natural critical diversity, however, three Steinbeck traits have added to the range of opinion. The first is his reticence to discuss his books, his personal life, or his philosophies with other than a few friends. He felt requests for this kind of information to be an encroachment upon himself as an artist. Lewis Gannett, who was granted permission by Steinbeck's agents to read correspondence between them, says, "He was leery of the conventional publishers' publicity.... He told his agents, 'I do not believe in mixing personality with work. It is customary, I guess, but I should like to break the custom.'²" In another letter answering a request for personal information he wrote, "I simply can't write books if a consciousness of self is thrust on me.... Unless I can stand in a crowd without self-consciousness and watch things from an uneditorialized point of view, I'm going to have a hell of a hard time.'³" This attitude of privacy is evident from a bibliographical point of view; there is, to date, no biography of Steinbeck. Full-length Steinbeck studies are long on analysis of his work and short on related background. Lisca, the most serious of Steinbeck students, includes a fair amount of biography in his book, The Wide World of John Steinbeck. French and Watt,

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Lewis Gannett, "John Steinbeck's Way of Writing," Introduction to The Portable Steinbeck, 2nd ed. (New York: Viking Press, 1946), pp. xiv, xv.

3

Ibid., p. xv.

the two other Steinbeck students with full-length studies to their credit, devote about ninety percent of their studies to textual analysis. The letters Gannett quotes plus two works of non-fiction, Sea of Cortez (1941) and Travels with Charley (1962), together with the posthumously published notes made during the writing of East of Eden called Journal of a Novel (1969) and his Nobel Prize acceptance speech (1962), are all the published material any critic has to go on outside the novels themselves to understand Steinbeck. Clearly, he meant for his books to speak for him. Perhaps part of the critical diversity on him is due to the fact that the ideas in them, unsupported by biographical fact, were not always clearly stated.

The second confusing trait is just this lack of clarity. Steinbeck is often so subtle that critics miss a point or misinterpret a character. Of Tortilla Flat he wrote his agents, puzzled at the critical misinterpretation of the book, "I want to write something about Tortilla Flat. The book has a very definite theme. I thought it was clear enough."⁴ Cannery Row was called a cream puff by a critic, whereupon Malcolm Cowley said that if it was a cream puff, it was a poisoned one. Steinbeck, happy that some critic had seen the sharp social criticism the others had missed, told a friend that if Cowley had read the book again, "he

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Gannett, p. xiii.

would have found out how very poisoned it was."⁵ It would be difficult to establish how much of the critical misinterpretation is the fault of the critics and how much is Steinbeck's, and in any case, the task is not within the scope of this paper. Says Gannett, "Critics have had a holiday detecting exotic symbolisms in John Steinbeck's work. Maybe they are there. He would be the last man to affirm or to deny it. To inquirers... he has been known to reply, 'Please feel free to make up your own facts about me as you need them.'"⁶ It is safe to conclude that writer/critic relations were not good as a result of interpretation problems. Steinbeck was moved to answer critics in print in defense of his badly mauled play-novelette, Burning Bright. He once said to his editor and friend, Pascal Covici, pointing out a "key" in a passage in East of Eden, "If you miss this, you will miss a great deal of this book.... And I suppose the subtleties are sooner or later picked out but never by critics."⁷

The third trait causing critical diversity is simply one of evolution, on Steinbeck's part, of both style and

⁵ Peter Lisca, The Wide World of John Steinbeck (New Brunswick, N. J.: Rutgers University Press, 1958), p. 198.

⁶ Gannett, p. vii.

⁷ John Steinbeck, Journal of a Novel: The East of Eden Letters (New York: Viking Press, 1969), p. 28.

philosophy. Steinbeck published thirty-one books, seventeen of them novels, and wrote numerous movie scripts, plays, short stories, and articles over a period of about thirty-five years, always refusing to pick a style and stay with it as Hemingway did, choosing rather deliberately to experiment with finding the perfect vehicle for the theme of each new book. Influencing his change in philosophy was his conviction that man, as an animal, must be willing and striving to evolve with circumstances in order to survive, a concept made clear in the Sea of Cortez journal which I will discuss more fully later.

This third trait of a gradual change in both style and philosophy seems to be worthy of much more study than has been given it. The evolution in style has, in fact, been charted fairly well by Lisca in his definitive The Wide World of John Steinbeck, but the tracing of philosophical changes and their influences on his style are largely ignored by Lisca and other writers of Steinbeck studies. There are, however, critical essays and reviews which touch upon Steinbeck's philosophical evolution at different points in his career, and these opinions vary interestingly according to the depth of the authors' knowledge of Steinbeck. To my knowledge there has been no attempt either trace the effect of Steinbeck's non-fictional ideas upon fictional plots and characters written at the same time, or to trace the effect of idea changes upon his style.

In this study I intend to trace a philosophical development in Steinbeck's attitude towards man's great problem of the choice between good and evil, as stated in his non-fictional Sea of Cortez (1941), his Journal of a Novel (posthumously published in 1969 but written in 1951), and his Nobel Prize acceptance speech (1962), and as evidenced in his major fictional works, The Grapes of Wrath (1939), East of Eden (1952), and The Winter of Our Discontent (1961). I intend to show that his attitude towards this major human problem changed from his early to his late years from chiefly Darwinist to essentially Christian, and that Grapes of Wrath parallels Sea of Cortez; the transitional East of Eden, the Journal; and The Winter of Our Discontent, the acceptance speech.

II. THE CHRISTIANITY DEBATE

For no concept did Steinbeck have more angry detractors--or more loyal defenders--than for his very unorthodox attitude towards Christianity. Two critical quotations will make this point clear. John S. Kennedy, a Catholic writer collected in Steinbeck and His Critics, says,

Steinbeck may justly be said to belong to that populous group of contemporary novelists who, rejecting as proscrucean and unlivable a peculiar diluted blend of Calvinism and Lutheranism, think that, in exposing such freakishness, they are refuting authentic Christianity....

Steinbeck, therefore, nowhere comes to grips with the basic, pristine Christian religion. Hence he never takes into account what it has to say about human nature, human life, human destiny. He is not conversant with its moral code as a whole. He is not familiar with its bearing upon the human predicament, the light it casts upon it and the resources it brings to mortals for managing and solving it.⁸

John Clark Pratt, in an essay on Steinbeck written just for the series, Contemporary Writers in Christian Perspective, does not agree. He says,

It is obvious that Steinbeck's attitude toward evil is not really incompatible with what he believes to be the fundamental meaning of Scripture. As such, and many may disagree here, I think that even from the perspective of general Christianity, his interpretation is unassailable except on linguistic grounds. And is it not ironic that not only between the world's religions but even among Christians themselves, many of the basic disparities and disagreements, hence the differing institutions, have often resulted from

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John S. Kennedy, "John Steinbeck: Life Affirmed and Dissolved," Fifty Years of the American Novel, ed. Harold C. Gardiner (New York: Chas. Scribner's Sons, 1951), rpt. in Steinbeck and His Critics, p. 131.

just such a semantic paradox?...

By understanding Steinbeck's individual view of Christianity, one cannot help concluding that for the modern world it is an extremely important perspective indeed.⁹

It must be granted that Mr. Kennedy had a right to detract. In context, he was protecting his special interest against Steinbeck's very real attacks on the Catholic Church, his personal definition of Christianity, and certainly not the Christianity Steinbeck did, indeed, refute--the "peculiar diluted blend of Calvinism and Lutheranism" of his childhood. Catholicism comes under fire with it, however, and is central in the organized poverty of all Steinbeck's California novels.

The Catholic Church is in large part responsible for Kino's monumental troubles in The Pearl. Jim Nolan, a Communist agitator of In Dubious Battle, detests organized religion on the basis of his knowledge of the Catholic brand of it. The Mexicans and Mexican Indians in The Pastures of Heaven, The Long Valley, Tortilla Flat, the non-fictional Sea of Cortez, East of Eden, Cannery Row, Sweet Thursday, and especially the movie script, The Forgotten Village, seem almost always either to cling blindly to their inherited faith, remaining, as a result, in ignorance and poverty, or

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John Clark Pratt, John Steinbeck: A Critical Essay, Contemporary Writers in Christian Perspective series (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 1970), pp. 44, 46.

to rebel against the system of saints and penance in a flash of insight and self-reliance, becoming better human beings in proportion to the degree of the rebellion. "St. Katy the Virgin," a short story included in The Long Valley, is a direct satire on the Church; Katy is the wicked murderess of several offspring. She is converted and later sainted, her virginity established on the grounds that she had meant to be a virgin. The fact that St. Katy is a pig makes the story very funny to anyone but a Catholic reader, to whom it must be a very personal affront.

Mr. Kennedy can certainly be understood, then, for being angry about Steinbeck's treatment of his chosen faith. This anger cannot, however, account for his statements that "He is not conversant with its [Christianity's] moral code as a whole," and that "He is not familiar with its bearing upon the human predicament, the light it casts upon it and the resources it brings to mortals for managing and solving it," unless Christianity can be equated with the Calvinism/Lutheranism Kennedy mentions. A quick rereading of the Kennedy quotation will reveal that not only does the critic imply that because Steinbeck is not Catholic, he cannot possibly understand "the basic, pristine Christian religion," but that he does not relate Christianity to "the human predicament" at all--something that Mr. Pratt feels that the author does better than "the world's religions," who are busy differing "on linguistic grounds."

How Christian, then, is John Steinbeck? Evidence from his personal life is sparse. From the semi-autobiographical East of Eden we learn that his people, at least on his mother's side, were devout Presbyterians. Steinbeck nowhere gives a time for the leaving of his inherited faith, but it is fairly certain that he was not a regular churchgoer of any denomination. In Travels With Charley, written very late, he says he "went to church on Sundays, a different denomination every week" ¹⁰ during his cross-country trip, but by the general tone of the passage it is fairly obvious that the practice was only part of the book's get-reacquainted-with-America experiment. Steinbeck's youth in heavily Catholic central California would likely account for his attitude towards the Church, or at least for his use of the particular examples of its influence.

Evidence of Biblical knowledge is very heavy, however, in all his work. Pratt notes that the following book titles show a religious influence: To a God Unknown, Pastures of Heaven, St. Katy the Virgin, The Grapes of Wrath, East of Eden, and that the following deal directly with major religious themes: The Pearl, Sea of Cortez, Burning Bright, and The Wayward Bus. ¹¹ Further, he says that Steinbeck uses a

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John Steinbeck, Travels With Charley in Search of America (New York: Viking Press, 1962), p. 79.

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Pratt, p. 6.

"plethora of characters, places, comments and events that consider or derive from religious subjects," demonstrating "his continuing concern with the doctrines and the practices of twentieth-century Christianity."¹²

It is faulty logic, however, to say that since Steinbeck was concerned with twentieth-century Christianity, he was therefore a Christian. It is difficult to define "a Christian" in any case. Steinbeck was not a theologian but a novelist--his concern was not for man's relationship to God, but for his relationship to his predicament--a matter of perspective.

There is probably little literary value, then, in any dubious proof or disproof of the Christianity of John Steinbeck, although a valid study could be made of his attitudes towards it as evidenced in his works. There is particular value in the discussion of his attitude towards good and evil, a wider concern than that of his Christianity--a major concern of the human race and of literature itself. Does he address himself to the conflict between the two forces? Does he define good and evil? Does he offer a method for living within this conflict? Does he offer a design for triumph over evil? Does he predict the results of succumbing to that evil? Is he, to put the question another way (assuming that the choice between good and evil is a major Christian concern), "not familiar with its [Christianity's] bearing upon the human predicament," as Mr. Kennedy would have it,

or is it "obvious that Steinbeck's attitude towards evil is not really incompatible with... the fundamental meaning of Scripture," as Mr. Pratt says?

He does deal with the human problem of good and evil, but in vastly different ways throughout his writing career. In East of Eden, a mid-career novel, he stated, unequivocally, "All novels, all poetry, are built on the never-ending con-¹³test of good and evil."

I intend to trace the evolution of Steinbeck's view, in his non-fiction, of what the conflict between good and evil consists, along with the development of this concern, and its related stylistic influence, on his fiction in order to show that Steinbeck's major concern was for man's relationship to this conflict.

III. STEINBECK'S ATTITUDE TOWARDS GOOD AND EVIL:
A MATTER OF SURVIVAL/THE DARWINIST STAGE (1940'S)

Of Steinbeck's few non-fictional works, Sea of Cortez (1941) is the earliest and probably the most carefully studied by critics as the definitive statement of Steinbeck's philosophy of life. "It comprises," says Frederick Bracher, in a discussion of Steinbeck's biological view of man, "Steinbeck's typical attitude toward the characters in his novels and also the attitudes of some of the characters themselves. In particular, it appears as the typical values and virtues of Steinbeck's 'heroes'--not necessarily the protagonists of the novels, but the characters with whom the reader is obviously intended to sympathize."¹⁴ Evidently Steinbeck himself meant the book to be a statement of his work. He wrote his agents while writing the book, "When this work is done, I will have finished a cycle of work that has been biting me for many years and it is simply the careful statement of the thesis of work to be done in the future."¹⁵

The work, titled, in its entirety, Sea of Cortez: A leisurely Journal of Travel and Research, with a Scientific Appendix comprising Materials for a Source Book on the Marine Animals of the Panamic Faunal Province, was the result of a six-week marine animal collecting trip made with Steinbeck's

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Frederick Bracher, "Steinbeck and the Biological View of Man," The Pacific Spectator, (Winter, 1948), rpt. in E. W. Tedlock, Jr. and C. V. Wicker, eds, Steinbeck and His Critics (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1957), p. 184.

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Lisca, Wide World, p. 183.

biologist friend, Ed Ricketts. The first half of the book consists of Steinbeck's journal of the trip; mixed generously through it are speculations upon "creation, sin, organized religion, and the existence of God."¹⁶ The extent of biologist Ricketts' influence is cited in the 1951 introduction to the reissue of Sea--The Log from the Sea of Cortez. "Very many conclusions Ed and I worked out together through endless discussion and reading and observation and experiment. We worked together, and so closely that I do not now know in some cases who started which line of speculation since the end thought was the product of both minds. I do not know whose thought it was."¹⁷

The "careful statement of the thesis of work to be done" is considered by Sea critics to be Steinbeck's "nonteleological" view of life as expressed directly in his Easter Sunday entry, the now somewhat famous chapter fourteen, and obliquely in his "tide pool" metaphor for life in the rest of the book. (According to the glossary of Sea of Cortez, teleology is "the assumption of predetermined design, purpose or ends in Nature by which an explanation of phenomenon is postulated." According to Webster, it is "the fact or the character of being directed toward an end or shaped by a purpose--used of

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Pratt, p. 8.

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Steinbeck, Log from the Sea of Cortez (New York: Viking Press, 1951), p. xiv.

natural processes or of nature as a whole conceived as determined by final causes or by the design of a divine Providence and opposed to purely mechanical determinism or causation exclusively by what is temporarily antecedent." ¹⁸ A working definition of non-teleology for the purposes of this paper, then, would be "a purely mechanical causation determined exclusively by what is temporarily antecedent.")

Non-teleological thinking, Steinbeck says in chapter fourteen, is a technique through which "a kind of purity of approach might be consciously achieved.... Non-teleological or 'is' thinking might be substituted in part for the usual cause-effect methods." This "pure" kind of thinking would concern itself "not with what should be, or could be, or might be, but rather with what actually 'is'--attempting to answer at most the already sufficiently difficult questions what or how, instead of why." Teleological thinking, then, "is most frequently associated with evaluating of causes and effects, the purposiveness of events. This kind of thinking considers and cures--what 'should be' in the terms of an end pattern (which is often a subjective or an anthropomorphic projection); it presumes the bettering of conditions, often, unfortunately, without achieving more than a most superficial understanding of those conditions," Steinbeck explains some-

what obscurely (Steinbeck, Sea, pp. 134, 135). He explains further that, "In their sometimes intolerant refusal to face facts as they are, teleological notions may substitute a fierce but ineffectual attempt to change conditions which are assumed to be undesirable, in place of understanding acceptance which would pave the way for a more sensible attempt at any change which might still be indicated (Steinbeck, Sea, p. 135)."

Critic Watt charges, "There is obviously a good deal of mystical quietism or moral fatalism in the notion of a viewer surveying the 'all-truth' of the human scene from a vantage point of scientific or God-like detachment...." ²¹ Steinbeck evidently saw this charge coming, because he added, "Many people are unwilling to chance the sometimes ruthless-appearing notions which may arise through non-teleological treatments. They fear even to use them in that they may be left dangling out in space, deprived of such emotional support as had been afforded them by an unthinking belief in... the institutions of tradition; religion;... in the security of the home or the family; or in a comfortable bank account." Steinbeck warned, further, that "this type of thinking unfortunately annoys many people. It may especially arouse the anger of women, who regard it as cold, brutal, although actually

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F. W. Watt, John Steinbeck (New York: Grove Press, 1962), p. 12.

it would seem to be more tender and understanding, certainly more real and less illusionary and even less blaming, than the conventional methods of consideration (one can sense here a scene of some interest with Steinbeck's first and estranged wife).... Non-teleological methods more than any other seem capable of great tenderness, of an all-embracingness which is rare otherwise," he has decided. (Sea, p. 133) Steinbeck's 'is' thinkers are ideally, then, in the position of emulating an all-seeing, all-accepting God, eliminating, in their relations with all, any prejudice, snobbery, or even, as one critic put it, "conventional pieties."²²

"Non-teleological thinking" becomes, in Steinbeck's definition, then, much more than an abstraction invented by friends over specimen pans in a boat off Baja California. He culminates his Easter Sunday journal entry with, "Strictly, the term non-teleological thinking ought not to be applied to what we have in mind. Because it involves more than thinking, that term is inadequate. 'Modus operandi' might be better-- a method of handling data of any sort.... The method extends beyond thinking even to living itself; in fact, by inferred definition it transcends the realm of thinking possibilities, it postulates 'living into.'" (Sea, p. 147)

Does non-teleological thinking turn out to be the "thesis of work" Steinbeck says it is? Says Watt, "How far Steinbeck himself was able to apply this theory in his practice as a

novelist is a question of some interest. It is arguable that throughout his career he has oscillated between the poles of scientific or God-like detachment ('dangling out in space') and all-too-human involvement; between ruthless vision of things as they are, and sentimental reconstruction of things as they ought to be if a man is to bear them.²³ Decidedly one of the most criticized writing habits of Steinbeck is just this inconsistency of viewpoint. Probably the most obvious examples of the "poles" Watt mentions are Cannery Row (1945) and Sweet Thursday (1954). The two books use Ed Ricketts as their prototype for the protagonist, Doc. In Cannery Row Doc is a proponent of "is" thinking, "living into" the attitude. He accepts and loves his neighbors on the Row, who happen to be social misfits, on the whole, and the love and acceptance are returned. In Steinbeck's words, "Over a period of years Doc dug himself into Cannery Row to an extent not even he suspected. He became the fountain of philosophy and science and art. In the laboratory the girls from Dora's heard the Plain Songs and Gregorian music for the first time. Lee Chong listened while Li Po was read to him in English. Henri the painter heard for the first time the Book of the Dead and was so moved that he changed his medium.... Doc would listen to any kind of nonsense and change it for you to a kind of wisdom. His mind had no horizon--and his sympathy had no warp. He could talk to children, telling them

very profound things so that they understood.... Everyone who knew him was indebted to him. And everyone who thought of him thought next, ' really must do something nice for Doc.'"²⁴ And Doc is lonely in his practice of non-teleology, having no tradition, religion, security of family, or bank account to his favor. "In spite of his friendliness and his friends Doc was a lonely and a set-apart man. Mack probably noticed it more than anybody. In a group, Doc seemed always alone. When the lights were on and the curtains drawn, and the Gregorian music played on the great phonograph, Mack used to look down on the laboratory from the Palace Flophouse. He knew Doc had a girl in there, but Mack used to get a dreadful feeling of loneliness out of it. Even in the dear close contact with a girl Mack felt that Doc would be lonely (Cannery Row, p. 35)."

In a beautifully written and much-quoted passage, Mack and the boys are described, as seen by Doc, in an illustration of non-teleological attitudes as opposed to the more-practiced teleological ones.

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

blind jackals, Mack and the boys dine delicately with the tigers, fondle the frantic heifers, and wrap up the crumbs to feed the sea gulls of Cannery Row. What can it profit a man to gain the whole world and to come to his property with a gastric ulcer, a blown prostate, and bifocals? Mack and the boys avoid the trap, walk around the poison, step over the noose while a generation of trapped, poisoned, and trussed-up men scream at them and call them no-goods, come-to-bad-ends, blots-on-the-town, thieves, rascals, bums. Our Father who art in nature, who has given the gift of survival to the coyote, the common brown rat, the English sparrow, the house fly and the moth, must have a great and overwhelming love for no-goods and blots-on-the-town and bums, and Mack and the boys. Virtues and graces and laziness and zest. Our Father who art in nature. (Cannery Row, p. 5).

In Sweet Thursday, written after Ricketts' death, Doc forgets to "is" think. He forsakes his aloofness for the love of one of the prostitutes and accepts a paying teaching job to support them, thus "selling out" to teleology. He prefers, in Sweet Thursday, the "emotional support" of "the institutions of tradition, religion,..." and "the security of the home" and "a comfortable bank account." Steinbeck falls into hopeless sentimentality for the duration of the book, probably in an effort to lay his friend happily to rest.

Why Steinbeck hit such poles, from "ruthless vision of things as they ought to be" (and even with the same hero), is a corollary concern of this paper. A drastic change in his definition of good and evil is central to such a change in his attitude towards man.

Besides Steinbeck's "quasi-scientific theory of artistic objectivity" evident in his attitude towards Mack and the

boys, there is still the other aspect of Sea of Cortez relevant to the understanding of his fiction. This idea was also a product of the marine biology emphasis of the Steinbeck-Ricketts friendship and of the trip itself. It was his "tide pool" analogy of life. Based upon Darwin's theory of the origin of the species, Steinbeck's analogy has man teeming with his brothers in life's tide pool, surviving. Watching tide pools in which the "survival quotient" was high gave the collectors pleasure, and Steinbeck an idea. Those organisms, and those species, which had "fighting, crawling, resisting qualities (Sea, p. 58)" were the ones whose survival was assured. Therefore, in the microcosm of the tide pool, the strong were the ones who survived. He called the tide pool "a world under a rock" and could not help but consider it the macrocosm of life--the animals seeming "to represent all existence itself."²⁷ Steinbeck delights in the qualities of vitality and practicality which make certain men and women indestructible. His paisanos of Tortilla Flat, his bums and whores of Cannery Row, Mac, the agitator in Dubious Battle, Tom Joad in Grapes of Wrath, non-teleological people in each early book survive in the tide pool. Rather than simply to endorse the animal struggle for survival in man's lot, however, as many a critic complains that he does, Steinbeck, in Watt's words, "recognized the 'ethical paradox' of man which is

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pointed up by the biological analogy." The qualities of virtue such as generosity, humility and tolerance are "good," but are "invariably" considered, by teleologists, to be failure-producing in a sociological sense. Social success, then, would require such "bad" qualities as cruelty, greed, and selfishness to survive. "In an animal other than man, we would replace the term 'good' with 'weak survival quotient,'" Steinbeck admits, in recognition of the fact that the mechanics of survival are exactly those qualities which he deplores in corrupt society (Sea, p. 96). In Steinbeck's recognition of this paradox of behavior between the tide pool types and man lies the shady area of his metaphor for life, and, therefore, his ethics. Is it that, because his heroes always survive, but never succeed, he is criticizing the society which rejects these heroes for having built a way of life that makes success impossible for the non-teleologist? Or is survival all that is required of man anyway since he is ascended through evolution from the tide pool organisms of Baja California? How and where has man gained the knowledge of good and evil which sets him counter to other animals in method of survival? It troubles Steinbeck that he cannot solve this "ethical paradox." He tries, in Sea of Cortez to do so, but escapes, vaguely, into universality and relativity made appealing through lovely metaphors. "It is a strange thing that

most of the feeling we call religious, most of the mystical outcrying of our species, is really the attempt to say that man is related to the whole thing.... This is a simple thing to say, but the profound feeling of it made a Jesus, a St. Augustine, a St. Francis, a Roger Bacon, a Charles Darwin, and an Einstein." Then, without pause, after this interesting lumping together of "greats," he says, "Each of them in his own tempo and with his own voice discovered and reaffirmed with astonishment the knowledge that all things are one thing and that one thing is all things--plankton, a shimmering phosphorescence on the sea and the spinning planets and an expanding universe, all bound together by the elastic string of time. It is advisable to look from the tide pool to the stars and then back to the tide pool again (Sea, p. 217)."

This look is difficult for traditional Christianity to follow. A critic, speaking, I believe, for Christianity in general, says that Steinbeck does not reflect "the intimacy of the creational relationship which God Himself cannot deny" in his characterizations, although he shows a humanitarian affection. "This defect," he insists, "is no fault of Steinbeck's. He has built well with the materials available to him. But the twentieth century--the era of the great disillusionment--is bearing testimony on the literary as well as the political level that banishing God does not make man God-like--that to exalt disordered human nature is to drama-

tize the insufficiency of man unto himself."

How is Sea of Cortez, then, Steinbeck's finishing of "a cycle of work that had been "biting" him and his "careful statement of the thesis of work to be done in the future," as of 1941? It can be taken as his credo for the Forties, I believe, with the understanding that it will be subject to the non-teleological variable of his willingness to let it evolve with circumstances in order that his writing survive. That fact that his attitude towards good and evil did evolve drastically is evident in later non-fiction and traceable in later fiction, and is the point of the rest of this paper. For now, however, let us attempt to define a Steinbeck attitude towards good and evil for the Sea of Cortez or early period. Says Pratt, "For Steinbeck, evil does not exist independently in a Manichean sense; neither does it result from such teleological explanations as original sin, Satan, or the natural depravity of man. To the contrary, he believes that the continuing prevalence of evil is caused by man's tendency to misunderstand his heritage and to approach his environment selfishly." ³⁰ Nowhere in Sea of Cortez does Steinbeck define evil. He does define sin, however, and it is not the Biblical absolute of "the transgression of the law." He says that "morals are too often diagnostic of prostatitis or sto-

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M. F. Moloney, "Half-Faiths in Modern Fiction," Catholic World, CLXXI (1950), p. 350.

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Pratt, p. 32.

mach ulcers," and adds that "if the laws of thinking are the laws of things, then morals are relative too, and in the laws of things, then morals are relative too, and in the matter of sin--that's relative too in a relative universe (Sea, p. 216)." In other words, since it is the duty and the instinct of man to survive, and "Christian sin" (such as stealing food in Cannery Row; prostitution in Tortilla Flat, Cannery Row, and several other books and short stories, this being Steinbeck's favorite sin; and even murder in Burning Bright) committed in the line of this duty to survive is not evil. And any taint to this sort of act is cancelled by the fact that the society against which it is committed is more evil (that is, it is not surviving) than the individual "sinning." In a world "where men in fear and hunger destroy their stomachs in the fight to secure certain food," and "where men hungering for love destroy everything lovable about them," man's selfish approach to his environment and to each other has spawned evil and a false standard for sin. No one is condemned; no one is perfectible. I agree with Pratt's statement that "No one, Steinbeck believes, is or ever has been immune from sin, and he considers it ultimately silly, often tragic, to assume that man is a perfectible animal. Such false optimism, he thinks, leads to hypocrisy, to him perhaps the worst conscious sin of all." ³¹ It follows

that man can sin unconsciously because sin is a natural human act, and an unconscious sin does not count as evil in itself. Steinbeck's concern is with our species as it is, not as it could or ought to be. He says, "We are products of disease and sorrow and alcoholism.... We are the products of our... suffering. These are factors as powerful as other genetic factors. To cure and feed would be to change the species, and the result would be another animal entirely (Sea. p. 260)."

Steinbeck expert Peter Lisca agrees with me in my theory of a change in Steinbeck's attitudes--although Lisca calls it an "image of man" change, and I call it a "good and evil attitude" change. He is concerned with the effects of the "tide pool" image upon Steinbeck's view of man. Part of a 1965 article in Modern Fiction Studies is worth repeating here.

In his novels up to Burning Bright (1950) Steinbeck's physical image of man is of an animal capable of reason, but otherwise not clearly distinguishable except in the denotations of his genus and species. Man may pursue goals a little more abstract than those pursued by other species, but the motivations for such pursuits are not essentially different....

Steinbeck's metaphysical image of man is the logical dependent of this physical image. Having accepted man as animal, he refuses, in those novels prior to Burning Bright, to subject him to some special 'bearded, interstellar dictator.' Instead, he posits a 'psycho-physiological warp' in which are related the vestigial gill slits of the human foetus and the preponderantly aquatic symbols of the unconscious. Contemplating the awesome physical order of nature does not lead to positing some anthropomorphic intelligence

behind it, but only to a reverence of the order itself.³²

Although not so certain of a precise point of departure from the early survivalism as Lisca, I agree that this attitude lasted through the 1940's. Cannery Row (1945) has been cited earlier as indicative of this attitude, especially in its illustration of Steinbeck's non-teleology. To a God Unknown (1933) features a protagonist, Joseph Wayne, who makes offerings to an oak tree and sacrifices himself for the drought in the end in a highly pantheistic ritual--a result, it would seem, of "contemplating the awesome physical order of things." This early book seems to have re-created "on a sophisticated level the primitive myths of animism and biological pantheism,"³³ as Mr. Lisca charges. It would seem that the corresponding view of man's moral nature to a Darwinian view of his physical nature would naturally be a pantheistic one. In Tortilla Flat (1935) Pilon sees some birds flying across "the forehead of God" and prays to "Our Father who art in Nature." Casey, in Grapes of Wrath (1939), says, "All that lives is holy."

The trouble with attempting to label Steinbeck (besides the slipperiness of attaching and defining labels in the first place) is that Steinbeck was highly inconsistent in his attitude towards good and evil, based on his view of man.

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Peter Lisca, "Steinbeck's Image of Man and His Decline as a Writer," Modern Fiction Studies, XI, 1 (Spring 1965), p. 4.

33

Ibid., p. 5.

Neither Pratt nor Kennedy recognized a progression. An attempt to show a progression in attitude, such as this paper does, must be full of overlappings or zigzaggings, depending upon the linear metaphor used. If his attitude during the Thirties and Forties was predominantly Darwinist, that is showing evidence of a belief that man's greatest task, as a species, is to survive (Webster, p. 368), it was also pantheistic, or showing evidence of a belief that God is everything, and everything is God (Webster, p. 1043). It was transcendentalist, or based upon a search for reality through spiritual intuition and a belief in God as an Over-soul (Webster, p. 1504). His attitude was also in part Christian, in that it was based, in a sense, on the teachings of Jesus Christ (Webster, p. 262), and socialist, or showing a belief in communal sharing of work under central ownership (Webster, p. 1351). If these labels sound contradictory, they certainly are, in their pure sense. They can all be used of Steinbeck, however, and were, solely in Grapes of Wrath criticism, along with more exotic and hybrid labels such as biological naturalist, scientific humanist, or social propagandist. How it is possible for critics to call a man by any or all these and other labels, then proceed to prove him that kind of person from his work, can best be explained, I think, by the realization that Steinbeck was with his generation in his inconsistency. The best help for understanding this inconsistency came to me from a critical source---a chapter on Steinbeck from Edwin Moseley's book, Pseudonyms of Christ in

the Modern Novel, reprinted in a Grapes of Wrath casebook. Moseley tries to explain Steinbeck partly in the light of the upheaval of his times, pointing out "the post-war disillusionment which dominated the literature of the 1920's," and particularly by pointing to "the social consciousness of the 1930's as something else again, as a kind of chorus of survival after the chorus of despair."³⁴

The thinking of the first part of the 1900's was certainly not shaped wholly by the First World War, by most markedly by Charles Darwin. Joseph Wood Krutch, in his 1929 "historically important Modern Temper says that humanism, or an emphasis on human interests rather than on the natural world or religion (Webster, p. 691), and naturalism, or the belief that the natural world is the whole of reality and that there is no supernatural or spiritual creation not explainable by natural phenomena (Webster, p. 953), were³⁵ "fundamentally antithetical." Krutch sadly concludes, speaking of the effects upon man's view of man resultant of Darwinism, "If we no longer believe in either our infinite capacities or our importance to the universe, we know at least

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Edwin M. Moseley, Pseudonyms of Christ in the Modern Novel (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1962), rpt. in part as "Christ as the Brother of Man: Steinbeck's Grapes of Wrath" in Donohue, ed., A Casebook on The Grapes of Wrath (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1968), p. 212.

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Moseley, p. 211.

that we have discovered the trick which has been played upon us and that whatever else we may be we are no longer dupes." Later Krutch says, "Ours is a lost cause, and there is no place for us in the natural universe, but we are not, for all that, sorry to be human. We should rather die as men than live as animals."³⁶ Commenting on Mr. Krutch, Moseley says, "He speaks very clearly as the nineteenth-century liberal who knows too much; he is conditioned to... a belief in the Reasoning Man who has a choice and will choose for the public good, but he sees these very values denied by the new science on which the intellectual cannot turn his back."³⁷ Steinbeck grew up in a climate of, and was a voice in, this struggle to justify the humanity of a mere species. The juxtaposition of a dismal and a hopeful picture of man was common in the literature of the early 1900; in his article Moseley quotes examples from Frank Norris, Theodore Dreiser, and Upton Sinclair, who said of socialism that it was "the new religion of humanity--or you might say it was the fulfillment of the old religion, since it implied the literal application of all the teachings of Christ."³⁸

Moseley's point is that these authors "feel no need to relate logically their intense naturalism and the accompanying optimism, whether it is Emersonian transcendentalism,

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Moseley, p. 211.

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Ibid.

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Ibid., p. 213.

Christian socialism, or a belief in tragedy. As novelists, they are concerned not with logic, but with social realism and psychological probability." So, although he sympathizes with Krutch's reluctance to believe, intellectually, in "Darwin, Freud, and other nineteenth-and twentieth-century forces and at the same time to believe emotionally in the goodness of man,"³⁹ Moseley is drawing attention to the fact that the "social realism" of dealing with the dichotomy was the concern of the novelists of the day--finding man his place in the universe.

To put the problem of that period, and specifically, of Steinbeck, into the simplest possible terms, then, man had been, until the late 1800's, a creature of reason, created in the image of God, and capable, through Him, of perfection. Darwin seemed to have proven, scientifically, that he was ascended from the ape rather than descended from God, and Freud, that he acted from emotion rather than reason. With the whole rug of self-worth pulled out from under him, man set about, during the first three decades of the nineteenth century, restoring his image of himself based upon the new premises for his existence. Therefore Steinbeck started out with a philosophical struggle in Sea of Cortez, a built in ethical paradox.

Steinbeck shows this struggle of restoration clearly, and with heavy use of Biblical symbolism, ironically, in The Grapes of Wrath through the character of Casy, his preacher turned amoralist, turned activist. Casy's changing attitude towards good and evil speaks for Steinbeck's of that period of his life. Before the book opens Casy has been a preacher, defining good and evil to his congregations in a truly hellfire and damnation manner. He has recognized, however, the gap between what he says to do and what he himself does, and rather than counting on the grace he preaches to make up the difference, has resigned the pulpit, saying, "I was a damned ol' hypocrite. But I didn't mean to be." Early in the book, then, Casy is amoral and natural in the strict sense of the terms. Speaking of fornication, he says, "Maybe it ain't a sin. Maybe it's just the way folks is. Maybe we been whippin' the hell out of ourselves for nothin'." At this point Casy has, as Moseley succinctly states it, "substituted for the absolute morality of institutional religion the relative morality of naturalism."⁴⁰

It becomes evident to Casy, however, as it did to the floundering victims of Darwin and Freud, that naturalism lacked the dignity and faith essential to a view of man worthy of justifying his existence. In his famous "transcendental" speech Casy says, "Maybe it's all men and women we love;

maybe that's the Holy Spirit--the human spirit--the whole shebang. Maybe all men got one big soul everybody's a part of."⁴¹ Then he works, in this human spirit, for the dignity of the migrants he has identified with, even to the giving of his life. Says Moseley of the characterization of Casy, "Steinbeck has richly dramatized Casy's throwing off of the false Christianity and, via the road of naturalism, his arrival at the true religion which consists of strong transcendental and Marxist elements, perhaps even Christianity before its corruption. The development of Casy makes him a walking history of ideas for the first three decades of twentieth-century America, and implicitly a symbol for that part of it which we call literary history."⁴² Moseley's view of Steinbeck here resemble Pratt's that his attitude is "not really incompatible with what he believes to be the fundamental meaning of Scripture." And it is also in agreement with my concept of him as a Darwinist. There are two halves to the statement.

The seeming contradiction of a protagonist who forsakes his ministerial post for an essentially socialist life, couched in rich Biblical metaphor, gave Grapes a good deal of critical trouble. There is an interesting struggle, known to Steinbeck students as "the College English controversy," which appeared in that periodical during a period

⁴¹ John Steinbeck, Grapes of Wrath (New York: Viking Press, 1939), p. 254.

⁴² Moseley, pp. 210, 211.

from 1956 to 1963. The critics were trying to isolate the meaning of Grapes by reducing its Biblical symbolism to an allegorical key. A reading of the series was helpful to my understanding of Steinbeck's attitude towards Christianity at that point in his life by producing a myriad of ways to look at the symbolism.

Martin Shockley, the first in the series of critics, contends that the various "Christian symbols" in the book make the meaning "essentially and thoroughly Christian."⁴³ Symbols cited are ones such as Tom Joad as the Prodigal Son, the Joads' journey being like the Israelites', the title of the book itself being a Biblical derivative, and Casy as a Christ figure--going off into the wilderness and dying at the hands of the oppressors of his people. Mr. Shockley also argues that Casy's famous "transcendental" line, "all that lives is holy," is not the "Emerson-Whitman-Unitarian pantheism" noted by some critics (particularly Frederick Carpenter in "The Philosophical Joads," a 1941 College English article also collected in the Grapes casebook), but in actuality, "comes close to the doctrine of one of the most distinguished Christian theologians of our time, Albert Schweitzer, whose famous and familiar phrasing of the same concept is known to us as 'reverence for

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Martin Shockley, "Christian Symbolism in The Grapes of Wrath," College English, XVIII, 2 (November 1956), rpt. in Donohue, ed., A Casebook on The Grapes of Wrath (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1968) p. 92.

44
life.'" "

The man who "answered" Shockley, Eric Carlson, came to a very different conclusion about the symbolism, and hence the book itself. He said that "in The Grapes of Wrath a few loose Biblical analogies may identified, but these are not primary to the structure and theme of the novel, and to contend that they give it an 'essentially and thoroughly Christian' meaning is to distort Steinbeck's intention and its primary framework of non-Christian symbolism." ⁴⁵ He went on to show that Tom Joad was certainly not a properly repentant type of prodigal son, that the Joads' trek to California was more a "journey" convention than an Exodus, that the "grapes of wrath" title represented "man's indomitable spirit" rather than any Christian attitude, and that Casy's creed was so obviously that of a social activist, he could not be labeled a Christ figure. In three sentences Mr. Carlson sets Casy's creed of the holiness of man and his unity with nature as proof of Steinbeck's essential naturalism and early humanism up against both Shockley's Christianity and Carpenter's transcendentalism: "Like Emerson's Brahma," he says, this [Casy's God] is not the God of Christ--at least not to Casy and Stein-

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Shockley, p. 92.

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Eric W. Carlson, "Symbolism in The Grapes of Wrath," College English, XIX, 2 (January, 1958), rpt. in Donohue, ed., A Casebook on The Grapes of Wrath (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1968), p. 99.

beck; and it is dubious semantics to insist on labeling "Christian" so unorthodox a creed. Christianity without Christ is hardly Christianity. And although Carpenter concludes that 'a new kind of Christianity--not otherworldly and passive, but earthly and active'--is developed from Steinbeck's integration of 'three great skeins of American thought' (Emersonianism, Whitman's democratic religion, and pragmatism), that integration is less a product and characteristic of Christianity than it is of the humanist tendency and character of the American experience and the modern climate of opinion.⁴⁶"

The succeeding articles of the series do not attempt to speak to Steinbeck's attitude towards Christianity as much as these first two do, but concentrate, mainly, upon the glossing of the various symbols. Charles Dougherty, fourth critic of the eight, does put his vote with Carlson on the matter of Steinbeck's view of man, as I do. He says, "The difficulty with a Christ identification with Casy is not dramatic, but theological. "No Christian can be satisfied with a Christ-figure who does not reflect the divine nature of Christ. It is true that during the 1930's many devout Christians emphasized in a special way the human nature of Christ.... It is also true that to non-believers Christ remains an attractive natural figure, but it is a mistake to confuse innocence,

compassion, love, and self-immolation with a divine nature."

Casy, the Joads, the thematic faith in the basic goodness of human nature, all fight the Christian concept of meekness and surrender to the will of God. Steinbeck may well use abundant Biblical symbolism, but it is employed all the better to enrich his story for those whose knowledge of the Bible allows such enrichment. I agree with Carlson and Dougherty; Steinbeck uses his Biblical knowledge, supplied by his Christian background (Lisca quotes him as having said the King James Version had affected him stylistically more than any other book read during his Presbyterian upbringing), along with his knowledge of archetypal and mythic symbols, to write better.

My having used criticism against his Christianity to support my contention that he is a Darwinist is a result of the negative approach he forced upon critics by his confusing use of Biblical symbolism. The fact remains that he never professed any of the absolutes of Christianity during this early stage. His standard of good and evil, then, is necessarily relative because it is subject to human definition and human attainment.

Says B. R. McElderry, Jr., writer of the last in the

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Charles T. Dougherty, "The Christ-Figure in The Grapes of Wrath," College English, XXIV, 3 (December, 1962), rpt. in Donohue, ed., A Casebook on The Grapes of Wrath (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1968), p. 116.

College English controversy, "It is undeniable that The Grapes of Wrath does embody a strong faith in the natural goodness of man...." ⁴⁸

(It is fascinating to note that Mrs. Donohue, after having collected the series in her casebook, could state that Steinbeck, as an "inheritor of the Puritan tradition," viewed his Joad family as "fallen man" in "his doomed search for an earthly paradise"--in the writing tradition of Hawthorne. ⁴⁹

This view of the Joads would almost have to assume Steinbeck's Christianity. She may not have read Sea of Cortez; she may have wished to round out the collection of Grapes interpretation. She surely was taking Grapes out of the context of all surrounding fiction and non-fiction to say that "much of the power and greatness of The Grapes of Wrath in all its tragic overtones comes not from a simple presentation of good and evil, nor of the good and the evil [*italics Mrs. Donohue's*], but from a picture of the debased alloys who are his foolish Okies...." ⁵⁰) Mr. McElderry, I believe, describes Steinbeck's relation to his Joad family correctly, in the light of the naturalism and dawning humanism evident in his other characterizations of that period and in Sea of Cortez. "In Steinbeck's

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B. R. McElderry, Jr., "The Grapes of Wrath: In the Light of Modern Critical Theory," College English, V (March 1944), rpt. in Donohue, ed., A Casebook on The Grapes of Wrath (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1968), p. 130.

49

Agnes McNeill Donohue, ed., A Casebook on The Grapes of Wrath (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1968) p. 3.

50

Ibid.

eyes the Joads are all good people. They may be weakly good, like Pa or Rosaharn; or they may strongly good, like Ma Joad and Tom. But their ill fortune is never represented as due to their own tragic flaws. Conversely, all persons in power or authority--with the exception of the director of the government camp--are represented as evil. Greed creates fear, and fear creates injustice. As Steinbeck himself puts it: 'The quality of owning freezes you forever into I, and cuts you off forever from the We.'" Significantly, Mr. McElderry concedes to doubt over the validity of this sliding standard. "One may admit much truth in this simple formula of good and evil and still feel that it is inadequate," he says. "The clear implication in the novel that the formula is complete, is disquieting. It arouses a suspicion that the character--⁵¹ vivid as they are are only half-truths too."

The stylistic effects of Steinbeck's too-simple formula for good and evil are significant. If they can make Mr. McElderry doubt the validity of the author's characters, do these effects also cast doubt upon elements of plot? In other words, do Steinbeck's plots qualify as fit vehicles for his philosophy of survivalism? The answer to this self-posed question is that as long as the action and outcome of a Steinbeck story of this early period are a result of the struggle of his main characters for survival, then a too-simple formula for good and evil does not affect the artistic

integrity of that work. I think that Steinbeck is aware of the stylistic limitations of his survivalism, and in the survivalist stage, conforms admirably to them. In Grapes, for instance, even though troubles endured by the Joads are not a result of any tragic flaw (for how can there be tragedy without absolutes of good and evil), they are a result of environment and society relating wrongly to that environment. Furthermore, even the "intercalary chapters" devoted to the typical Steinbeckian editorializing are organic in nature, in that they depict a natural counterpoint to the main plot. For example, the famous turtle journey which parallels the Joads' journey is integrated into the main plot; Tom Joad picks up the struggling turtle from the Joad road.

Somehow, then, in the spirit of the times, in "social realism," Steinbeck can draw together the strings of Darwinism, naturalism, humanism, transcendentalism, socialism, and Biblical analogy--in the absence of Christianity--as his view of man. Because of his ability to show, in the spirit of non-teleology, great tenderness, an allembicingness (remember Sea), towards his characters, he is often interpreted as a Christian in intent rather than as the Darwinist with that great faith in the goodness of man (those strange bedfellows of the early 1900's) that he really is. Sin, in Steinbeck's world of the 1930's and 1940's, is relative to the standards of good and evil set by the individual for himself, and this standard is corrupted by society's false Christianity, Chris-

tianity not being wrong, but invalid for man's survival. Man, being naturally inclined to good, then, is not to be concerned with the personal goals and rewards of perfectibility, that being an impossibility, but with his role, collectively and in an ecological sense, in the human tide pool of survival.

IV. STEINBECK'S ATTITUDE TOWARDS GOOD AND EVIL:
A MATTER OF CHOICE/THE HUMANIST STAGE (1950'S)

Much had happened to Steinbeck between Grapes of Wrath and East of Eden--that is, during the Forties--that might have had to do with his changes of attitude towards a good many things, and most certainly towards a definition for and philosophy of living with good and evil. Very soon after the publication of Sea of Cortez in 1941, Steinbeck was divorced by his first wife for having virtually deserted her for his writing and travels. His marriage to his second wife, in 1943, lasted only five years, and resulted in the birth of two sons. His marriage to his third wife, in 1950, just before the start of work on Eden, is hailed in his Journal of a Novel as a calming, happy marriage in contrast to the first two. Certainly the personal pain of two divorces in the space of ten years was a catalyst to much philosophizing about the nature and attainment of happiness. During this decade also, Steinbeck's beloved biologist friend, Ed Ricketts, was killed in a train accident. Steinbeck's portion of Sea was reissued with a long and very personal preface which eulogizes Ricketts in a highly teleological manner, giving the Steinbeck student an idea of how heavily influenced Steinbeck had been by the biological view of life Ricketts had held. The removal, in such a tragic way, of this influence was certainly another catalyst to a good deal of philosophical review. Of course, the Second World War was also taking place during the first half of the decade,

and Steinbeck became very much involved, indirectly, because he had just turned too old to be drafted, in the form of the writing of the propagandistic Bombs Away, the play-novelette of passive resistance, The Moon is Down, and the war correspondence from Europe. Lisca says of the war period's effect upon Steinbeck that "although Steinbeck was shocked at this new evidence that wars are a biological trait of man, he was also eager to participate in the struggle."⁵² The author was evidently becoming more interest in being part of a cause to obtain a desired effect than he had appeared to be in Sea.

It is true, of course, that the effects of the above events on Steinbeck's life in the Forties cannot be proved. I mean only to point out their having happened and to suggest that, teleologically speaking, they might have been partially instrumental in causing Steinbeck to change his thinking on the nature of good and evil. The change is evident, in any case, in his Journal and, gradually, in his fiction.

Peter Lisca, in his previously mentioned article for the 1965 Steinbeck issue of Modern Fiction Studies on the author's view of man, has some interesting things to say about Burning Bright, the 1950 play-novelette which he cites as the turning point from Steinbeck's previously naturalistic view of man to his more moralistic view. Burning Bright is a three-act play about a sterile husband whose wife determines to give a baby to him, and whose character changes identity from acrobat to

farmer to sailor in a convention designed to create an air of universality. Lisca is not happy with the play, and neither were most reviewers and later critics. He is more specific in his complaints than most, and his chief one is important in the light of this study, for it casts light on Steinbeck's changing view of man.

In his next book, the play-novelette Burning Bright, Steinbeck tries to "universalize" the theme that all men are brothers to each other and fathers to every child by shifting the scene and circumstantial identity of the characters in each act, which simply has the effect of a gimmick.... Perhaps more telling than this aspect of arbitrary form in Burning Bright is the terrible fate of Victor. After being used as a stud by Mordeen to provide herself with a child to present to her sterile husband as his own, he is hit "a crunching blow on the head" by Friend Ed and dumped overboard to drown, so that he cannot tell her husband the truth. In a novel oriented toward Steinbeck's earlier, biological image of man, such a shocking incident might very well have been absorbed. In many species of insects and some vertebrates the female destroys the male after copulation. Steinbeck might have linked such an incident into his great biological chain of being, perhaps as evidence of the ubiquitous female drive to procreate and protect at all cost her offspring. But in the predominantly Christian image of man which actually tries to inform Burning Bright such an incident becomes a horror with no artistic function and actually works to destroy the image of man which is everywhere else being asserted.⁵³

Steinbeck was evidently aware of his changing attitude. When his editors asked him, in 1950, if he wanted to make a play out of the 1945 Cannery Row, he replied, "I'm not going to do it,... I have finished that whole phase." ⁵⁴ How finished

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Lisca, Wide World, p. 7.

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Ibid., p. 9

he was with the phase was made evident in the earlier mentioned Sweet Thursday, published as a sequel to Cannery Row in 1954. Sweet Thursday is introduced by Mack from Cannery Row: "I ain't never been satisfied with that book Cannery Row. I would have went about it different." Lisca says, "In the earlier book, his biological orientation had provided some powerful images of inexorable Time...and Fate.... Such images were used contrapuntally to enforce the themes of mutability and carpe diem.... Thus Cannery Row achieves, in addition to its broad comedy, a genuine sense of pathos, though not tragedy." He does not give Sweet Thursday even grudging admiration. "But the new humanistic image of man in Sweet Thursday, operating on essentially the same characters and kinds of situations generates only the slickest kind of slapstick, out of which was produced with fair success on Broadway a musical comedy called Pipe Dream. What had before remained sentiment, stiffened by the underlying biological metaphor, when exposed to the new image of man melted into sentimentality, whether of character, situation, or language."

Lisca has hit upon a reason for the disturbing fact that Steinbeck was not seeming to write as well in the 1950's as

55
John Steinbeck, Sweet Thursday (New York: Viking Press, 1954), p. 1.

56
Lisca, Modern Fiction Studies, pp. 7, 8.

he once had, a fact recognized but not understood by most other Steinbeck critics. Steinbeck was, in the Forties, becoming less a Darwinist and more a humanist. He was forsaking his non-teleology slowly for modified teleology (that is, he was beginning to recognize and follow through causes for effects, but was still fighting against the concept of predetermined design). He was forsaking the tide pool amorality of survivalism, but was still unwilling to admit to and illustrate a need for absolute standards of good and evil. Hence, he was in a limbo of conviction which did his fiction artistic harm. He was, during this period, in a humanist stage, characterized, according to the aforementioned Webster, by "an emphasis on human interest rather than on the natural world or religion."

The best fiction and non-fiction of the period for the further study of this humanist theory of mine were written, during the period of about a year, in 1951 and were written simultaneously. These are the novel of epic proportions, East of Eden, and its accompanying Journal of a Novel: The East of Eden Letters. Except for Steinbeck's collection of war pieces done in Europe in 1943 and left uncollected until 1958, there is no other non-fiction by Steinbeck published during the period between Grapes and East of Eden but the Journal. The book consists of a series of notes written to Steinbeck's editor and friend, Pascal Covici, during the construction of East of Eden. The publisher's note says, "The

letter was primarily a method of warming up, flexing the author's muscles both physical and mental. He sometimes used it to adumbrate the problems and purposes of the passage on which he was about to embark: 'a kind of arguing ground for the story,' as he says once.... And "the letters were also full of serious thinking about this novel, his longest and most ambitious; about novel-writing in general; and about some of Steinbeck's deepest convictions.... It is autobiographical material of the first order. In a sense this is Steinbeck's Testament."⁵⁷ The collection of notes, written on the left hand side of whatever page of Eden Steinbeck was ready to write, in longhand on a lined tablet, was not intended for publication and, in fact, did not get published until 1969, after the author's death (a fact unfortunate for Steinbeck critics before that date). The fact that the notes were intended only for a friend makes them more purely autobiographical in that they are full of rough drafts for philosophizing to appear in Eden, of confessions of inadequacies, of inconsistencies, and of fears for the fate of the novel that all might have been screened out of non-fiction meant for publication such as Sea or for oral delivery such as the later Nobel Prize acceptance speech.

A reading of the Journal reveals that the novel, East of Eden, was originally intended to be not only dedicated, but

written to, Steinbeck's two sons who were six and four at the time. He was explaining to Covici the book's importance in the light of this dedication when he said, "I will tell them of one of the greatest, perhaps the greatest story of all--the story of good and evil, of strength and weakness, of love and hate, of beauty and ugliness. I shall try to demonstrate to them how these doubles are inseparable--how neither can exist without the other and how out of their groupings creativeness is born (Steinbeck, Journal, p. 4)." It is notable that Steinbeck is here, for the first time, acknowledging the existence of absolute poles, and more notable that he is also clinging to his Sea theory that the knowledge of both good and evil is necessary to the care and feeding of our species, to its perpetuation as it exists. In the Journal he acknowledges his former lack of emphasis on the indomitability of the human spirit in its struggle against evil. The passage was incorporated into East of Eden as one of his "philosophizing passages." He says,

The writers of today, even I have a tendency to celebrate the destruction of the spirit and god [sic] knows it is destroyed often enough. But the beacon thing is that sometimes it is not. And I think I can take time right now to say that. There will be great sneers from the neurosis belt of the south, from the hard-boiled writers, but I believe that the great ones, Plato, Lao Tze, Bhdh [sic] how the hell do you spell Bhudda, Christ, Paul, and the great Hebrew prophets are

not remembered for negation or denial. Not that it is necessary to be remembered but there is one purpose in writing that I can see, beyond simply doing it interestingly. It is the duty of the writer to lift up, to extend, to encourage. If the written word has contributed anything at all to our developing species and our half developed culture, it is this: Great writing has been a staff to lean on, a mother to consult, a wisdom to pick up stumbling folly, a strength in weakness and a courage to support sick cowardice. And how any negative or despairing approach can pretend to be literature I do not know. It is true that we are weak and sick and ugly and quarrelsome but if that is all we ever were, we would milleniums ago have disappeared from the face of the earth, and a few remnants of fossilized jaw bones, a few teeth in strata of limestone would be the only mark our species would have left on the earth. Now this I must say and say right here and so sharply and so memorably that it will not be forgotten in the rather terrible and disheartening things which are to come in this book; so that although East of Eden is not Eden, it is not insuperably far away (Steinbeck, Journal, pp. 115, 116)."

There it is, in some of Steinbeck's most uplifting prose. An admission that man has more of a purpose than simply to survive, or he would not have. A giant step towards the solving of the "ethical paradox" created by the Sea of Cortez philosophy. A resolution to be a part of the effect of his being closer to the perfection of Eden. In contrast to the similar listing of the "greats" in Sea, the Journal list emphasizes the men's "beacon thing" rather than their "oneness thing." There is a shift in viewpoint towards what makes a man great here that speaks for an increased concern for the attainment of perfection.

Since East of Eden, the novel with which the Journal was written, is probably less read than Grapes, it might be advantageous to the understanding of its relationship to this study to discuss the plot and theme more fully than was done for Grapes. As mentioned earlier, Steinbeck meant for it to deal with "perhaps the greatest story of all--the story of good and evil." The vehicle for this theme is the Cain and Abel story of Genesis 4:1-16, told through three generations of the Trask family. Verse seven, which contains the Lord's words to Cain after the rejection of his sacrifice, is the key, according to Steinbeck, to the human condition. "If thou doest well, shalt thou not be accepted? and if thou doest not well, sin lieth at the door. And unto thee shall be his desire, and thou shalt rule over him."⁵⁸

Steinbeck wanted to use the story as his vehicle, but early in the writing of the book was perplexed with its meaning. In the Journal he said, "Its framework roots from that powerful profound and perplexing story in Genesis of Cain and Abel. There is much of it that I don't understand. Furthermore, it is very short, but this story with its implications has made a deeper mark in people than any other save possibly the story of the Tree of Life and original sin (Steinbeck,

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The Holy Bible, King James Version, Genesis 4:7.

Journal, p. 90)." Some weeks later Steinbeck had researched the story sufficiently to have an answer to his perplexity. "I have finally I think found a key to the story.... I think I know about the story finally after all this time.... It should interest scholars and it should interest psychiatrists. Anyway at the risk of being boring I'm going to put it all in today. And it will only be boring to people who want to get on with the plot. The reader I want will find the whole book illuminated by the discussion: just as I am. And if this were just a discussion of Biblical lore, I would throw it out but it is not. It is using the Biblical story as a measure of ourselves (Steinbeck, Journal, pp. 104, 105)."

His key is the translation of the Hebrew verb "timshel" which appears in the last sentence of verse seven. Steinbeck's explanation: "The King James says of sin crouching at the door, 'Thou shalt rule over it.' The American Standard says, 'Do thou rule over it.' Now this new translation says, 'Thou mayest rule over it.' This is the most vital difference. The first two are 1, a prophecy and 2, an order, but 3 is the offering of free will. Here is individual responsibility and the invention of conscience. You can if you will but it is up to you (Steinbeck, Journal, pp. 106, 107)." Therefore, the verb "timshel," translated in its "true" form, gives man the responsibility of his individual moral choice between good and evil.

The discussion of the verb is done, in the novel, by a member of the Trask family, Adam; by a member of the autobiographical Hamilton family, Samuel; and by Lee, the Chinese servant-philosopher. The discussion is one of the few events in the plot which bring together the Trask and the Hamilton families. This dichotomy in plot evidently stems from the fact that, according to the Journal, the book was first going to be a family story (Hamilton is Steinbeck's mother's maiden name), and was entered, somewhere along the way, by the Trasks, carriers of the good and evil theme. This plot patch caused critical concern such as Lisca's complaint that "his efforts to keep the two stories abreast result in many awkward flash-backs and lacunae,"⁶⁴ and Joseph Wood Krutch's graver complaint about the results of the dichotomy. In an unanswered question quoted in Lisca's study, Krutch asked, "On the highest level the question is this: Does the fable really carry the thesis; is the moral implicit in or merely imposed upon the story: has the author created a myth or merely moralized a tale?"⁶⁵ Some background to the way in which Steinbeck set out to carry the thesis with his story is necessary here.

The Trasks are all divided into C and A, Cain and Abel, types. First there is Cyrus Trask (whose wife's name is Alice), who has two sons, Adam and Charles. Adam marries Cathy and they have two sons, Aaron and Caleb, who are unidentical twins

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Lisca, Wide World, p. 266.

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Ibid., p. 264.

and whose parentage is somewhat in doubt because of Cathy's earlier friendliness with her husband's brother, Charles. All the Trasks whose names begin with A are Abel figures, fortunate and seemingly blessed. The Trasks whose names begin with C are the seemingly marked Cain figures. Caleb, the third in the Trask generations of Cains, is the one who, in the climax of the novel, takes his own fate in his hands and, using his freedom of choice, breaks his heritage and begs forgiveness of his father after the death of his brother Aaron (of which he was a cause). There are many more links between the Trasks and the Cain and Abel story, such as the rejection by Adam of his son Caleb's gifts twice during the story, and the visible marks in the foreheads of Cyrus, Charles, and Cathy (the victorious Caleb does not have "the mark of Cain"). Cathy, the erstwhile wife of Adam, is the strongest evil force in the book. Steinbeck seems to have been fascinated with her whore character. He also felt the need to defend the extent of her evil. "She is a tremendously powerful force in the book," he said in the Journal, and later, "Cathy... is a monster--don't think they do not exist. If one can be born with a twisted and deformed face or body, one can surely also come into the world with a malformed soul.... Cathy is important for two reasons. If she were simply a monster, that would not bring her in. But since she had the most powerful impact on Adam and transmitted her blood to her sons and influenced the generation--certainly she

belongs in this book and with some time given to her (Steinbeck, Journal, p. 97)." Steinbeck had another reason for incorporating such a purely evil force (Cathy's sins include, among other things, the killing of her parents, the attempted killing of her husband, and the desertion of her boys for the pleasures of being a "madam"). In the Journal he said to Covici, "I think you will find that Cathy...fascinates people though. People are always interested in evil even when they pretend their interest is clinical. They will forget I said she was bad. And they will hate her because while she is a monster, she is a little piece of the monster in all of us (Steinbeck, Journal, p. 97)."

Lisca is disturbed by the apparent paradox posed by the monster quality of Cathy, arguing that if Cathy was born a mental monster, she had no choice but to be evil--she was denied her free will. Lisca also cites a paradox between the fact that the Oriental Lee leads out in the explication of the freedom of choice clause in the Cain and Abel story, and then says, several hundred pages later, to Caleb while trying to comfort him over the rejection by his father of his gift, "He couldn't help it, Cal. That's his nature. It was the only way he knew. He didn't have any choice (Steinbeck, East of Eden, p. 586)." Pratt, in his Steinbeck essay for the Contemporary Writers in Christian Perspective series, tries to explain Steinbeck's paradox between theme and plot here

by calling his use of Biblical allusion "inverted syncretic allegory," or the ironical twisting of Biblical stories to effect a combination or reconciliation of differing religious beliefs. He uses most of a forty-six page pamphlet to attempt a proof of his theory, finishing with a somewhat lame "Steinbeck does not deny divinity; what he does deny is Christianity's absolute position at the apex of man's attempts to define and control man's relationship to his God.... Nevertheless, Steinbeck does present an interestingly Christian philosophy while at the same time he attacks some of the formal religious traditions...."⁶⁶

It is hard to say whether or not Steinbeck denies divinity or not at this point of his philosophy, but it is evident that he had not yet solved his "ethical paradox." Lisca, in a valuable collection of Eden criticism included with his own comments, quotes several critics who were happy about Steinbeck's new-found emphasis on morality. In a review for the Christian Science Monitor, Robert Brunn said happily, "John Steinbeck wrestles with a moral theme for the first time in his career...." Another critic, Harvey Webster, writing for Saturday Review, thought he observed in Eden "a definite advance in Steinbeck's thinking which has been defined by Edmund Wilson as too barely naturalistic." Joseph Jackson, in a review for the San Francisco Chronicle, wrote that "East

of Eden reflects a Steinbeck who has now put past him... his biological view of man," and adds, "He has been thinking more deeply than ever before about life and the human beings that live in it."⁶⁷

Lisca says that "the only important dissenting voice in this chorus exalting moral theme over art was that of Arthur Mizener who, also perceiving the new departure in East of Eden, went directly to the heart of the matter." Mizener had said in a New Republic review, "There is evidence even in East of Eden of what is quite clear from Steinbeck's earlier work, that so long as he sticks to animals and children and to situations he can see some purpose to from the point of view of his almost biological feeling for the continuity of life he can release the considerable talent and sensitivity which are naturally his. As soon as he tries to see... experience in the usual way and to find the familiar kind of moral in it, the insight and talent cease to work and he writes like the author of any third-rate best seller."⁶⁸ Although Lisca seems (as do I) to think Mizener is overstating his case, he says something very similar in a later article, that "when Steinbeck abandons his earlier viewpoint and attempts to project an image of man based on such more conventional notions as

⁶⁷ Lisca, Wide World, p. 274.

⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 275.

Christian morality and ethical integrity he cannot seem to say anything significant. And, deprived of pervasive naturalistic metaphor, the formal qualities of that fiction become no better, and in some ways inferior, to those of many writers whose endowments are not nearly so formidable as his own."⁶⁸

Also in Wide World of John Steinbeck is a brief quotation from Mark Schorer's review of the novel for the New York Times Book Review which, I believe, comes the closest of any of the reviewers Lisca cites to the basic problem of East of Eden and of Steinbeck's philosophy at that time. Mr. Schorer says that he feels the book suggests "a kind of eclectic irresolution of view"⁶⁹ that disturbs him. Steinbeck was in transit, philosophically, between the very different attitudes towards good and evil of essentially survivalist to essentially Christian, and in East of Eden the yet unresolved questions concerning the definition of good and of evil, of perfection, of divinity, of sin, of salvation, were causing problems in theme and form recognizable even by those who could not discern the root of them. But Steinbeck was developing in the Forties and into the Fifties, into a writer who dealt with real human problems. Even Catholic critic, Harold Gardiner, was encouraged, in his chapter on Eden in the book In All Conscience. Part of the

⁶⁸
Lisca, Modern Fiction Studies, p. 10.

⁶⁹
Lisca, Wide World, p. 264.

chapter is well worth recording here; it coincides quite closely with my view of Steinbeck's position of good and evil (evidently Mr. Gardiner was not so enraged as Rev. Kennedy by Steinbeck's early anti-Catholicism).

What is vastly more important than the plot is precisely that sermonizing tone which Steinbeck is beginning to employ. It is an artistic blemish, to be sure, for the reader is baffled trying to keep Steinbeck the novelist apart from Steinbeck the... preacher.... But the very blemish marks a total change in Steinbeck the philosopher. As Reverend John S. Kennedy has pointed out in Fifty Years of the American Novel, Steinbeck had never been able to see the value and the dignity of the individual; man had some sort of worth only as he was part of the collectivity, of "Manself."

Here Steinbeck has changed his tune, though he pipes a little uncertainly. Now we hear that "there is only one story in the world... humans are caught... in a net of good and evil," and so on. Steinbeck is still not quite clear just what this good and evil are or how humans get caught in their net. A little streamlined psychiatric jargon is introduced to explain that wrong-doing is somehow a result of everyone's having been rejected sometime--Cain was, and so are the two Cains of this story. Such rejection results in anger and a rage to justify oneself, and that results in a deed that brings guilt--and this, it is implied, is the history of the race.

Steinbeck's change is to be praised, but he still has a long philosophical and religious way to go before he comes to the fundamental truth that we are "caught in the net" not because we have been rejected but because we did the rejecting....

East of Eden is not everybody's dish. Its frequent coarseness will repel many; its diffuseness will alienate others. But it is the work of a born storyteller who seems to be realizing, at last just where the best stories must be found.⁷⁰

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Harold C. Gardiner, In All Conscience: Reflections on Books and Culture (Garden City, N. Y.: Hanover House, 1959), pp. 136, 137.

V. STEINBECK'S ATTITUDE TOWARDS GOOD AND EVIL:
A MATTER OF DUTY/THE NEO-CHRISTIAN STAGE (1960'S)

John Steinbeck's 1962 Nobel Prize acceptance speech is, along with Faulkner's, one of the few which do not concern themselves with "personal or scholarly comment on the nature and the direction of literature," but rather with "the high duties and responsibilities of the makers of literature."⁷¹ This announcement of his responsibilities set up Steinbeck's acceptance speech as a sort of yardstick for his work. Such a statement of intent invites analysis of his work in the light of the statement. I hereby quote that part of his speech which defines "the high duties and responsibilities of the makers of literature" along with the duties of man himself, as Steinbeck sees them. Underlinings are mine, for emphasis important to the question I wish to pose: was Steinbeck's concern with the conflict between good and evil increasing during the latter part of his career, and if so, how did he then see man's role in that conflict?

Humanity has been passing through a gray and desolate time of confusion. My great predecessor, William Faulkner, speaking here, referred to it as a tragedy of universal fear so long sustained that there were no longer problems of the spirit, so that only the human heart in conflict with itself seemed worth writing about.

Faulkner, more than most men, was aware of human strength as well as of human weakness. He knew that the understanding and the resolution of

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John Steinbeck, "Acceptance Speech," Nobel Prize Library: William Faulkner, Eugene O'Neill, John Steinbeck (New York: Alexis Gregory, 1971) p. 205.

fear are a large part of the writer's reason for being.

This is not new. The ancient commission of the writer has not changed.

He is charged with exposing our many grievous faults and failures, with dredging up to the light our dark and dangerous dreams for the purpose of improvement.

Furthermore, the writer is delegate to declare and to celebrate man's proven capacity for greatness of heart and spirit--for gallantry in defeat--for courage, compassion, and love. In the endless war against weakness and despair, these are the bright rally-flags of hope and of emulation.

I hold that a writer who does not passionately believe in the perfectibility of man, has no dedication nor any membership in literature.

The present universal fear has been the result of a forward surge in our knowledge and manipulation of certain dangerous factors in the physical world....

With humanity's long proud history of standing firm against natural enemies, sometimes in the face of almost certain defeat and extinctions, we would be cowardly and stupid to leave the field on the eve of our greatest potential victory.

[Because of the discovery of the atom bomb] the door of nature was unlocked and we were offered the dreadful burden of choice.

We have usurped many of the powers we once ascribed to God.

Fearful and unprepared, we have assumed lordship over the life or death of the whole world--of all living things.

The danger and the glory and the choice rest finally in man. The test of his perfectibility is at hand.

Having taken Godlike power, we must seek in ourselves for the responsibility and the wisdom we once prayed some deity might have.

Man himself has become our greatest hazard and our only hope.

So that today, St. John the Apostle may well be paraphrased: In the end is the Word, and the Word is Man--and the Word is with Men (Steinbeck, "Acceptance Speech," pp. 206, 207)."

Steinbeck's acceptance speech reveals some attitudes that have changed in the ten years since the Journal and some that

have not. Looking at the underlined portions carefully, we can draw several conclusions. First, although Steinbeck is now certain that some sort of salvation is required of mankind, he does not believe in redemption--salvation bought for man by the death of Christ. Man must work out his own salvation. Since man's discovery of the atom bomb, with which he can destroy all living things on earth, the power of salvation is indeed his own. Grace is neither offered nor required. Second, although man is now believed to have propensities towards evil stronger than those towards good (as he had had in the Sea days), he is capable, ironically, of perfection in the face of the continual presence of this evil. In fact, it is his highest duty to shun evil for good in this struggle for perfection, and it is the writer's responsibility to keep this struggle before him and to emphasize the possibility of victory in it.

Steinbeck's rather daring paraphrase of John 1:1 ("In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.") brings these two points out very succinctly. "In the end is the Word, and the Word is Man--and the Word is with Man." Not only is Man's salvation usurped from Christ by man, there is a pun on the meaning of Word which identifies the tool for man's salvation to be communication. Therefore, man's power over evil lies in his (and

especially, then, the writer's) skill in the use of this tool, the Word. Man is now striving on his own for perfectibility in human terms. He is simply trying to resist evil enough not to blow himself up. Steinbeck's expectations for man are infinitely higher now than they had been in the Sea days, but still lowered, in Christian terms, to a point feasible without Divine aid, there being no Divine aid. Since the days of the Journal for East of Eden, the choice between good and evil has been up to us. Now, Steinbeck says, so is the power and the duty.

The fiction Steinbeck wrote between Eden (1952) and Winter of Our Discontent (1961) was inauspicious, to use a kinder word than critics generally do. The ineffectuality of Sweet Thursday (1954) has already been mentioned for its failure to mesh in theme (a new concern with morality) and form (the tide pool metaphor of life from Sea days). The Short Reign of Pippin IV (1957), a satire on the French and American political and social situations, was billed by Steinbeck's publishers as a "frothy extravaganza." Lisca complains that "Steinbeck's own disclaimer of serious intent does not really justify" its
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 "sophomoric chaos." Aside from these two short novels Steinbeck wrote no other original fiction. In 1953 a collection of his shorter, popular novels was published, with "looking back" notes by the author, and in 1958 his World War II pieces were

collected and published as Once There Was a War. Steinbeck was busy supervising movie scripts of his earlier works, supporting and writing speeches for Adlai Stevenson, and, according to many critics, busy deteriorating as a novelist. He was also thinking carefully about his view of man and revising his concept of good and evil, as is evident in the aforementioned acceptance speech and, as I hope to show, in his last novel, The Winter of Our Discontent.

Winter was the novel for which Steinbeck received the Nobel Prize in 1962, although critics usually add, "and his earlier naturalistic work" because they fail to see why Winter would be worthy when Grapes was not. Winter's plot concerns the moral corruption of Ethan Hawley, a man with an impressive Puritan background. The action takes place on the Eastern seaboard, a relatively unfamiliar Steinbeck locale (although the author had been living in New York for almost twenty years by then), and during the Easter season, a highly Christian time span (although the author had used a Biblical vehicle for theme as early as Eden). Criticism of Winter in book-length studies is unavailable because these were all published before Winter was. Reviewers, less familiar with the whole of Steinbeck than critics, were hard put to relate to a Steinbeck who was so intensely interested in the struggle between good and evil. The book was variously interpreted as "a bitter book in which there is no representative of goodness to offset the dishonest and the [overly]

naive,"⁷⁴ as "a contrived melodrama,"⁷⁵ and "a portrayal of the moral wasteland of contemporary American existence."⁷⁶

Winter is all of these: it is bitter, it is melodramatic, and it is concerned with the state of American society. It is, however, primarily a study of one man's battle, almost lost, but in the end won, against evil.

Ethan Hawley is a poor man, a clerk in a store which his father had once owned but lost to an Italian immigrant, Marullo. Ethan's wife and two children are unhappy about their poverty. Mary and Ethan discuss it early in the book. Mary opens with,

"Do I love money? No, I don't love money. But I don't love worry either. I'd like to be able to hold up my head in this town. I don't like the children to be hangdog because they can't dress as good---as well--as some others. I'd love to hold up my head."

"And money would prop up your head?"

"It would wipe the sneers off the faces of your holy la-de-das."

"No one sneers at Hawley."

"Maybe because I don't look for it."

"Are you throwing your holy Hawleys up at me?"

"No, my darling. It's not much of a weapon any more."

"Well, I'm glad you found it out. In this town or any other town a Hawley grocery clerk is still a

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Pratt, p. 41.

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Warren French, "Steinbeck's Winter Tale," Modern Fiction Studies, XI 1 (Spring, 1965), p. 67.

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Donna Gerstenberger, "Steinbeck's American Wasteland," Modern Fiction Studies, XI, 1 (Spring, 1965), p. 54.

grocery clerk."

"Do you blame me for my failure?"

"No. Of course I don't. But I do blame you for sitting wallowing in it. You could climb out of it...."77

This early in the book Ethan is pictured as an Innocent among the wolves of American society, but the yearnings of his wife to be able to "hold up my head in this town" start him speculating upon the nature of business. One of Ethan's frequent soliloquies (often delivered to the shelves of the store) should serve to illustrate the breakdown in morality that Steinbeck achieves in the space of two weeks.

The structure of my change was feeling pressures from without, Mary's wish, Allen's desires, Ellen's anger, Mr. Baker's help. Only at the last when the move is mounted and prepared does thought place a roof on the building and bring in words to explain and to justify. Suppose my humble and interminable clerkship was not virtue at all but a moral laziness? For any success, boldness is required. Perhaps I was simply timid, fearful of consequences--in a word, lazy. Successful business in our town is not complicated or obscure and it is not widely successful, either, because its practitioners have set artificial limits for their activities. Their crimes are little crimes and so their success is small success.... They abolished part of the Decalogue and kept the rest. And when one of our successful men had what he needed or wanted, he reassumed his virtue as easily as changing his shirt, and for all one could see, he took no hurt from his derelictions, always assuming that he didn't get caught.... And if small crimes could be condoned by self, why not a quick, harsh, brave one? Is murder by slow, steady pressure any less murder than a quick and merciful knife-thrust?... Suppose for a limited time I abolished all the rules, not just some of them. Once the objective was reached, could they not all be reassumed? There is no doubt that business is a kind of war. Why not, then, make it

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John Steinbeck, The Winter of Our Discontent (New York: Viking Press, 1961), p. 33.

all-out war in pursuit of peace?

And if I should put the rules aside for a time, I know I would wear scars but would they be worse than the scars of failure I was wearing?

All this wondering was the weather vane on top of the building of unrest and of discontent. It could be done because it had been done. But if I opened up that door, could I ever get it closed again? I did not know. I could not know until I had opened it.... (Steinbeck, Winter, pp. 91, 92) "

The direction of Ethan's musings and the extent of his rationalizations, in the face of his very real fears for his loss of innocence are carefully charted. He knew exactly what he was doing, abolishing the Decalogue. He knew why he wanted to, to alleviate pressures to become successful. He knew what his chances of coming out of a "business war" morally unscathed were, he would wear scars, and worse, might never be able to "get the door closed again." He took this chance. The rest of the book charts his careful plan to play the "successful business" game and the resolution of that plan, at the cost of the life of his friend, Danny, the loss, by Marullo, of the store (ironically, Marullo gave it to Ethan), and primarily of his own self-respect. One hundred pages after the initial rationalization quoted above, Ethan is terrified at the way everything in his plan has seemed to fall into place. "Perhaps," he cries, "I had no choice (Steinbeck, Winter, p. 185)."

I had thought I could put a process in motion and control it at every turn--even stop it when I wanted to. And now the frightening conviction grew in me that such a process may become a thing in itself, a person almost, having its own ends and means and quite independent of its creator. And another troublesome thought came in. Did I really start it,

or did I simply not resist it? I may have been the mover, but was I not also the moved? Once on the long street, there seemed to be no crossroads, no forked paths, no choice.

The choice was in the first evaluation. What are morals? Are they simply words?... I could not call this a struggle with my conscience. Once I perceived the pattern and accepted it, the path was clearly marked and the dangers apparent (Steinbeck, Winter, p. 185)."

By this time Ethan has realized that evil, once allowed birth, respawns on its own. It was easier to face the success of his plan if he doubted once having been morally frightened by the thought of it. The rationalizing away of the efficacy of a belief in God completes Ethan's moral breakdown. In a conversation with Mary, Ethan shows proof of having taken this step. "Do you know whether you believe... or not, Ethan?" Mary asks.

"Do I believe? What a question! Do I lift out each shining phrase from the Nicene creed, loaded like a shotgun shell, and inspect it? No. It isn't necessary. It's a singular thing, Mary. If my mind and soul and body were as dry of faith as a navy bean, the words, 'The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures,' would still make my stomach turn over and put a flutter in my chest and light a fire in my brain.

"I don't understand."

"Good girl. Neither do I. Let's say that when I was a little baby, and all my bones soft and malleable, I was put in a small Episcopal cruciform box and so took my shape. Then, when I broke out of the box, the way a baby chick escapes an egg, is it strange that I had the shape of a cross? Have you ever noticed that chickens are roughly egg-shaped? (Steinbeck, Winter, p. 101)"

Mary cannot see through Ethan's bravado and cleverness with words to Ethan's fear of himself as an evil person; the reader

can because he has heard Ethan's soliloquies to the shelves. Ethan's fear of himself as an evil person, which is obvious above, comes out in his simultaneous kidding about and mourning for the loss of his "cross shape." As a sort of symbolic replacement he forms an emotional attachment to the smooth pink talisman stone that he keeps in a cupboard at home and which, he has instructed his children must never be taken out. When his daughter Ellen misses the stone (she also has a strange attachment to the talisman), she asks her father why he is carrying it around. He replies that it is for luck, but puts it back.

The discovery that his son Allen has plagiarized his prize-winning Hearst essay, "I Love America," coupled with the realization that his daughter, Ellen, was the one who had turned him in for the cheating, is the event that pulls him bodily off his "long street."

When the public relations man who has brought Ethan the news offers a scholarship for Allen to atone for the loss of the prize money, Ethan cries out, "Has sin gone on strike for a wage raise? No, just go away now--please! (Steinbeck, Winter, p. 277)" When he confronts his son, the boy says defensively, "Who cares? Everbody does it.... Don't you read the papers? Everybody right up to the top--just read the papers. You get to feeling holy, just read the papers. I bet you took some in your time, because they all do. I'm not going to take the rap for everybody. (Steinbeck, Winter, p. 277)." Unable to

bear the dual realization of the sins of the fathers having been visited upon his children, Ethan walks out of the house, with razor blades in his pocket, towards his Place, a culvert facing the sea where he often has gone to think. On his way out Ellen flings herself against him, pleading, "Take me with you. You're not coming back." When refused, she slips the talisman into her father's pocket without his realizing it.

In the Place, Ethan is thinking about his moral disintegration in terms of a light. "My light is out. There's nothing blacker than a wick. Inward I said, I want to go home--no not home, to the other side of home where the lights are given. It's so much darker when a light goes out than it would have been if it had never shone," he muses. Ready for suicide, he reaches for the razor blades and discovers, instead, the talisman. In the dark it seems to glow red, and he thought, "I had to get back--had to return the talisman to its new owner. Else another light might go out (Steinbeck, Winter, pp. 290, 291)."

The only critic I have found who mentions the talisman is a reviewer for a Catholic weekly who calls the stone hocus-pocus. I believe he has missed the importance of the talisman to Ethan's decision not to commit suicide, and perhaps a subtle symbolism Steinbeck could have meant by the use of it. Perhaps the talisman was the closest Darwinist-humanist-and only now new-Christian Steinbeck would ever get to a cross symbol. Ethan saved himself from the tide pool and went home to redeem

his daughter. Steinbeck would never get any closer to a belief in Divine redemption, what I like to call redemption with a capital "R," but he had realized, now, that evil was an absolute which carried foreseeable results for a man who sold himself to it, and that it was his duty not only to resist evil himself but to guide others by being, in himself, a "bright rally-flag of hope," in acceptance speech words.

The symbolism of the Easter weekend setting also supports the redemption theme of Winter. As the Easter weekend is the central Christian celebration of redemption, Hawley's return home is easily interpreted as a redeeming act. Perhaps, by looking into the family structure, one could consider Hawley's wife being named Mary, his daughter being relatively pure, and his son having evil tendencies seemingly beyond consideration, to be significantly allegorical. Hawley feels constrained to rise from the culvert-tomb to preserve what is left of goodness. Because Hawley cannot come to grips with the evil in his own life, he does not even consider the correction of the evil in his son's life. (It is encouraging that he wishes to help in the redemption of his daughter.) If Hawley had been able to correct as well as recognize his own evil, he would have been completely Christian, and, in turn, a savior for his son.

The last paragraph of Miss Gerstenberger's article on Winter for the Steinbeck issue of Modern Fiction Studies is not hopeful for Steinbeck or for man. "Hawley's experience

of evil is complete," she said. "His quest has led him into the heart of corruption, which daily affords the inhabitants of his New England wasteland their portion of hypocritical reality. The way out is not as clear as the way in, however, and the novel ends as does the poem 'The Wasteland,' with the arid plain much in evidence, the quest having altered little except the individual's own knowledge of the meaning of experience--past and present. The solutions are no easier, it would seem, in 1961 than they were in 1922."⁷⁸

I believe she missed the significance of Ethan's dramatic return from his tide pool Place as well as his talisman. Steinbeck is telling us, with this ending, that there is hope for humanity, that there is much more to living than surviving, and that evil can be conquered, if not always resisted. The fact that Ethan probably will not ask forgiveness for his sins against Danny, Marullo, and several others, is evidence of the continuing gap between Steinbeck's (and most of America's) neo-Christianity and the evangelical Christianity which assumes repentance as the requisite for forgiveness. But the fact that he will return to his daughter and most probably will not return to his "long road" is evidence that our author has come a long way from the tide pool--almost to the stars.

VI CONCLUSIONS

The fact that Winter of Our Discontent was the last of Steinbeck's novels is regrettable. His attitude towards good and evil was evolving Christianward; he might have written increasingly more helpful fiction about the manner of triumphing over evil. The fact that Winter did earn the Nobel Prize is evidence that at least the committee in Stockholm considered him to be making a comeback in artistic integrity. In keeping with the views of this paper, I believe Winter's success to be due to a coming back together of theme and form. The only vestige of the tide pool metaphor for life is a culvert where the protagonist goes to commit suicide; Steinbeck has realized that an internalized struggle against evil is more effective than either an externalized journey or the repudiation of a tainted birthright to convey his concern for man.

Over a period of thirty years Steinbeck had learned these things about good and evil: He had started out believing that they existed only in the minds of men and were relative to individual standards which were not as important as the business of survival. He had progressed to the belief that good and evil were indeed real and absolute, but were a function of an inheritance which could be repudiated through individual choice. He moved last to a belief that not only were good and evil absolute, but it was also the duty of mankind and especially of the writer to point out the path towards

goodness.

Over the same period he had learned these things about perfection: He had begun his career by believing that there was no such thing as perfectibility. He had moved, then, to an untenable concept of perfection which denied the attainment of it while demanding the striving for it. In the end he subtly reversed his position, believing that perfection, in human terms, was attainable through the power of knowledge of one's environment and communication with mankind.

In that period he learned these things about the nature of sin: First, he believed it to be a function of society's corrupted Christian morals. Next, he defined it as a function of humanity's misunderstood inheritance, and finally he believed it to be a result of the choice for evil.

Might the next natural step for Steinbeck in his understanding of morality have been Christianity? He might have moved on to realize a necessity for good and evil as absolutes defined by the law of God. The choice for good, and finally, perfection, would be, then the natural and foreseeable result of the choice against evil.

It will never be known whether Steinbeck personally reached this last step in his philosophy or whether he could have written more and better fiction if he had. Except for the journal Travels With Charley, written immediately after Winter, and the publication of a few miscellaneous articles afterwards, Winter of Our Discontent was his last effort, and,

in my estimation, his best because he came closest to the perfect conveyance of his lifelong concern: to help mankind to deal effectively with the conflict between good and evil.

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ABSTRACT

It was the purpose of my thesis to trace the evolution of Steinbeck's view, in his non-fiction, of what the conflict between good and evil consists, along with the development of this concern, and its related stylistic influence, on his fiction, in order to show that Steinbeck's major concern was for man's relationship to this conflict.

I was alerted to the existence of an evolution in view in Steinbeck by the chance reading of his last novel, The Winter of Our Discontent, in juxtaposition with several early novels. In order best to follow this change, then, I read all of Steinbeck's works in the order of their publication, and then as near to all as possible of the Steinbeck criticism available at the U. C. Berkeley library. The lack of a thorough study of any of Steinbeck's philosophical changes became apparent as a result of my systematic reading.

In my thesis, I first noted difficulties critics have had due to the author's reticence to discuss his books or personal life, his sometime lack of clarity, and his gradual change in both philosophy and style which affected author-critic relations during his lifetime. I stated a wish to explore further the third Steinbeckian trait, that of his gradual change in philosophy and style, especially in terms of his attitude towards the great human problem of the conflict between good and evil.

I then cited two highly diverse comments upon Steinbeck's relationship to Christianity, one saying that he was absolutely opposed to all that is Christian in his writings, and the other saying that he was a highly moral, scriptural, and (somewhat unorthodox) Christian writer. I purposed to show that both critics were extreme, but that both were right: about different times in the author's life.

The bulk of the paper consists of a study of Steinbeck's development in attitude towards the problem of the choice between good and evil, as stated in his non-fictional Sea of Cortez (1941), his Journal of a Novel: The East of Eden Letters (posthumously published in 1969 but written in 1951), and his Nobel Prize acceptance speech (1962); and as evidenced in his major fictional works, The Grapes of Wrath (1939), East of Eden (1952), and The Winter of Our Discontent (1961). I showed that his attitude towards good and evil changed from his early to his late years from chiefly Darwinist to humanist to essentially Christian, and that Grapes of Wrath parallels Sea of Cortez; the transitional East of Eden, the Journal of a Novel; and The Winter of Our Discontent, the acceptance speech.