

A STUDY OF JOHN STEINBECK'S
TREATMENTS OF PROPERTY

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PREFACE

My first reading of The Grapes of Wrath stimulated a great interest in it and its author. Subsequent rereadings of the novel revealed that Steinbeck is deeply concerned with man's relationship to his property. Further readings in his other novels indicated that his writing is by no means confined to one novel or to one approach. This study grew from my admiration of Steinbeck and personal interest in his treatment of property.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
Introduction	1
Chapter	
I. The Bohemian Life	6
II. The Stable Eras	24
III. The Unstable Era	46
IV. Conclusion	71
Bibliography	76

INTRODUCTION

Reading in the short stories and novels of John Steinbeck, I noticed that problems concerning possessions and property occur repeatedly. Several critics have commented on Steinbeck's treatment of property. Joseph Fontenrose has noted that "Man's longing for land ... [appears] in some form in nearly every novel" ¹ Warren French maintains that Steinbeck " ... definitely advocates private ownership of property." ² Of the novels that deal with social conditions in the distressed Thirties, Joseph Henry Jackson observed that "Steinbeck thinks in terms of the dispossessed." ³ Another aspect has been noted by Warren French, who says,

The point of Tortilla Flat is partially that the way of life these "bums" is in some ways superior to the average Americans and that we might learn something from them; but it is also partially a warning that the simple, close-to-nature life that some men think they long for is not the answer to society's problems either. ⁴

Furthermore, French notes that chapters thirteen and fourteen of Cannery Row recapitulate " ... the theme of Tortilla

¹Joseph Fontenrose, John Steinbeck (New York, 1963), p. 68.

²Warren French, John Steinbeck (New York, 1961), p. 110.

³Joseph Henry Jackson, Why Steinbeck Wrote THE GRAPES OF WRATH (New York, 1940), p. 4.

⁴French, Steinbeck, p. 57.

Flat: possessions take the fun out of life."⁵ Although critics do recognize Steinbeck's emphasis of various aspects of property and possessions, this attention has not resulted in any systematic study of this aspect of Steinbeck's works.

Although, as Warren French has noted, the theme of one of Steinbeck's works centers on possessions, it would be erroneous to assume that Steinbeck treats the various aspects of property ownership as a major theme in the novels as a whole. The converse is true; property and possessions are treated only as they relate to the particular themes of the separate novels and short stories. However, in at least sixteen works over the thirty-year period from 1932 to 1962, Steinbeck's interest in property is conspicuous. One may assume from the volume of works dealing with property in one way or another that, even though it may not constitute a major theme of Steinbeck, its frequent occurrence indicates that it should be examined as an important aspect of a major twentieth-century author's works.

From the critical references noted above, it may be readily observed that Steinbeck's treatment of possessions is by no means simple or superficial. The differing statements of Warren French above suggest Steinbeck's approach to the subject of possessions. On the one hand, in The Pastures of Heaven (1932) and The Grapes of Wrath (1939), property affords owners middle-class respectability and the possibility of establishing roots; to the dispossessed, property promises restoration of self-respect, confidence, and security. On the

other hand, in such novels as Tortilla Flat (1935) and Cannery Row (1945), ownership of property threatens freedom, mobility, friendship, and aesthetic appreciation of nature. As shown by the dates cited above, these two apparently contradictory views run concurrently through Steinbeck's works rather than being confined to separate periods of his writing.

The wide range of subjects with which Steinbeck deals in his treatment of property indicates further the complexity of his approach to man and his possessions. A transcendental view of man's spiritual relationship to property is shown in To a God Unknown and The Pastures of Heaven. Vivid sexual imagery is used in To a God Unknown and The Grapes of Wrath, employing both cohabitation and rape as symbols of man's physical relationship to the earth. In a number of the novels attention is given to the methods of establishing ownership, the necessity of love for the land one owns, the social elevation made possible through the ownership of property, and the tendency of man to evaluate an individual by his property instead of his personal merits.

Since chronology of publication does not offer a key to this complex cluster of ideas, the subject may be profitably examined by placing the writings in categories of similar emphasis. The first division contains the novels whose characters favor the unconventional Bohemian life; because they are unpropertied, they are happy, free, mobile, and perhaps a little cavalier. The writings in this divi-

sion are Tortilla Flat, Cannery Row, Sweet Thursday, and Travels with Charley. These works will be examined first because they seem to introduce the second division and furnish a striking contrast to both the second and third divisions. The second group will deal with propertied, middle-class owners who are tranquil, happy, and satisfied with being land owners. The novels and short stories in this division are The Pastures of Heaven, To a God Unknown, The Red Pony, "The Quail," "The Chrysanthemums," Burning Bright, and East of Eden. Although attitudes both favorable and unfavorable towards the ownership of property are exhibited in this division, the main emphasis is placed on the favorable aspects of ownership. The novels of the third group are set in a period of social and economic unrest. They deal with both the propertied and the unpropertied classes. The unpropertied in this group are dispossessed; rather than choosing a carefree existence, they are people who have been deprived of the privilege of owning property. They are engaged in a struggle to acquire property from which they expect to gain economic and psychological benefits. The property owners in these novels are portrayed as being both financially and psychologically insecure. Novels of this group are In Dubious Battle, Of Mice and Men, The Grapes of Wrath, and The Winter of Our Discontent. Although this arrangement of the novels is suggested by the subject matter, the divisions are not absolute; it will be

necessary to cross divisional lines in order to examine this subject and attempt resolution of the paradox involved.

CHAPTER I

THE BOHEMIAN LIFE

Although Tortilla Flat,⁶ set among the paisanos of Monterey, is the first of the group of novels favoring the Bohemian mode of life, it is not a clear, consistent statement of that point of view; contrasts are found throughout the novel. The preface contains the statement that

This is the story of Danny and of Danny's friends and of Danny's house. It is a story of how these three became one thing, so that in Tortilla Flat if you speak of Danny's house you do not mean a structure of wood flaked with old whitewash, overgrown with an ancient untrimmed rose of Castile. No, when you speak of Danny's house you are understood to mean a unit of which the parts are men, from which came sweetness and joy, philanthropy and, in the end, a mystic sorrow. ... In the end, this story tells how the talisman [the house] was lost and how the group disintegrated. (p. 3)

One might infer from this introduction that Steinbeck is contending that possession of property is necessary to unify friends and that substantial benefits are derived from such a bond. However, three paragraphs later, where a description of the paisanos is given, they are declared " ... clean of commercialism, free of the complicated systems of American business, and, having nothing that can be stolen, exploited,

⁶The Short Novels of John Steinbeck (New York, 1953). Further references to Tortilla Flat will be from this edition, and the pages cited will be inserted parenthetically in the text.

or mortgaged, that system has not attacked them very vigorously." (p. 3) The benefits of ownership seem to be cancelled by the threat of exploitation.

The fact that Danny was "clean of commercialism" and not concerned with accumulating treasures is illustrated by his actions upon hearing that he had inherited his deceased grandfather's two small houses in Tortilla Flat. Danny's first action was to relieve himself of the new weight of responsibility by getting drunk; his second was to get himself thrown in jail where he promptly forgot all about his possessions. Danny had been saddened by his inheritance, but upon escaping jail he mourned with his friend, Pilon, that they had no shelter. When he suddenly remembered his two houses, he became excited. The contrast now comes from Danny's friend:

Pilon sat silent and absorbed. His face grew mournful. ... For a long time he looked into Danny's face with deep anxiety, and Pilon sighed noisily, and again he sighed. 'Now it is over,' he said sadly. 'Now the great times are done. Thy friends will mourn, but nothing will come of their mourning.' ... 'Thou art lifted above thy friends. Thou art a man of property. Thou wilt forget thy friends who shared everything with thee, even their brandy.' (p. 8)

One of the effects of acquiring property is the elevation of an individual in the social scale. Ironically, this advantage of ownership is accompanied by the alienation of old friends. Pilon's lamentation serves as a parody on social climbing in a more complex society because the difference is so slight between being the unemployed owner of

two ramshackle houses in an impoverished area and having no property at all.

When the two friends examined the property the next day, a pronounced reversal of attitudes took place: Pilon forecast future happiness in the house, but he noticed a marked change in Danny:

... the worry of property was settling on Danny's face. No more in life would that face be free of care. No more would Danny break windows now that he had windows of his own to break. Pilon had been right--he had been raised among his fellows. His shoulders had straightened to withstand the complexity of life. But one cry of pain escaped him before he left for all time his old and simple existence.

'Pilon,' he said sadly, 'I wish you owned it and I could come to live with you.' (p. 9)

It is here that Warren French's comment that the theme of Tortilla Flat is that "possession of property takes the fun out of life" fits. One might assume that to Danny and his friends fun included those things which are classified as unconventional by the propertied middle class--such as breaking windows and brawling. The above observation on Danny's emotional change reinforces the belief that Steinbeck feels the responsibility imposed by property is unfortunate.

Pilon and Danny settled comfortably in the house; however, the bliss was to be short-lived, for when Danny ordered Pilon to obtain their dinner, Pilon " ... thought this unfair. 'I am getting in debt to him,' he thought bitterly. 'My freedom will be cut off. Soon I shall be a slave because of this Jew's house.'" (p. 9) Another phase in the paisanos'

education had been accomplished: property owners have the power to extract obedience from non-owners who are dependent in any way on them.

Perhaps because Pilon was poignantly aware of the elevation and power property had given his friend, he suggested that Danny rent the other house to him. Danny agreed, and an argument ensued over the amount of rent to be charged. At last Pilon agreed to fifteen dollars a month. "But he would have agreed to much more, for he saw the elevation that came to a man who lived in his own house; and Pilon longed to feel that elevation." (p. 10)

For a time things went well for the two friends; because Danny had a house to rent, he "became a great man," and through renting a house Pilon also "... went up the social scale" (p. 11) All was not to rest well with Pilon, however. Chapter three indicates this in the title where it states "How the poison of possessions wrought with Pilon" (p. 11) The rented house resulted in a burden for Pilon because he had no money to pay the rent. In order to alleviate his indebtedness and perhaps to regain a measure of freedom, Pilon earned two dollars which he intended to present to Danny. Instead, he bought two gallons of wine, reasoning that entertaining his landlord with the wine would be better token than impersonal money. Perhaps the wine seemed a better choice to Pilon since it marked him as a friend instead of a debtor. An even better solution suggested itself, for with the wine Pilon was able to

entice his friend, Pablo Sanchez, into renting part of the house. Ironically, Pilon relieved part of his burden by extolling the virtues and pleasures of property. Two things were accomplished by this transaction: presenting the money or wine to Danny would merely have reminded him of Pilon's indebtedness and would have called for additional payments; by renting the property to Pablo, Pilon was able to transfer the responsibility for rent to him, and was also in the position of power for having someone in debt to him.

In spite of the transferral of responsibility, the problem of paying the rent remained with Pilon. Danny had become closely acquainted with his neighbor, Mrs. Morales, and wished to present her a gift. Therefore, he approached his tenants with a demand for partial payment. Attempting to ward off the demand, Pilon suggested that Danny earn the money by cutting squids for half a day. "Danny spoke pointedly. 'It would not look well for a man who owns two houses to cut squids.'" (p. 17) One of the propertied may not go beneath his class for fear of jeopardizing his position.

Joseph Fontenrose has observed that, "That income property may damage human relations is an important thesis of Tortilla Flat."⁷ Danny's demand for rent in order to purchase a present disrupted the tranquil relationship between tenant and landlord. Pilon accused Danny of forcing his tenants "into the gutters" while enjoying the comforts of

⁷Fontenrose, p. 33.

his own house, and for the second time called his landlord a "Jew."

As Pilon and Pablo pondered over the question of obtaining money, they met an old acquaintance, Jesus Maria Corcoran, to whom they quite naturally rented their house for fifteen dollars a month with immediate partial payment required. The three companions later gathered at the house, drank themselves insensible, neglected a burning candle, and burned the house down. It might be thought that Danny, as any normal man, would have bitterly regretted his property loss. But for Danny, knowing the weight of responsibility, this was not the case:

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

'If it were still there, I would be covetous of the rent,' he thought. 'My friends have been cool toward me because they owed me money. Now we can be free and happy again.' (p. 26)

Almost all of the objections to the ownership of property previously mentioned are evident in the above statements: first, property constitutes a responsibility and burden; second, owning property causes one to desire to increase his wealth; and third, property damages human relationships.

It is at this point that the house of Danny actually became the talisman mentioned in the preface of the novel.

The friends decided to share the remaining house. Danny asserted the right of ownership by reserving the only bed for his exclusive use. The strain of the landlord-tenant relationship was lifted from Danny and Pilon's friendship, leaving them free and equal. The rapport established by the communal life is evidenced by Pilon's second forecast of happiness; "We will all be happy In the evenings we will sit by the fire and our friends will come in to visit, and sometimes maybe we will have a glass of wine to drink for friendship's sake." (p. 28)

Although Danny's relationship with Mrs. Morales cooled noticeably when he became the owner of only one house, other women in Tortilla Flat were interested in available, propertied bachelors, and Sweets Ramirez was one of these. In order to speed the course of romance, Danny found it expedient to give Sweets a present. Sweets displayed the present, "a sweeping-machine," to her friends and excited much envy:

But their envy could do nothing against the vacuum. Through its possession Sweets climbed to the peak of the social scale of Tortilla Flat. ... She excited envy in many houses. Her manner became dignified and gracious and she held her chin high as befitted one who had a sweeping-machine. (p. 51)

Once more Steinbeck has introduced the theme of social elevation brought by possessions. As Peter Lisca comments, the vacuum cleaner episode " ... is a satire on the conventional prestige value of possessions--on 'conspicuous consumption.'"⁸

⁸Peter Lisca, The Wide World of John Steinbeck (New Brunswick, New Jersey, 1958) p. 85.

The satire is particularly delightful because of the absence of electricity with which to power the sweeper which, as it was later learned, had no motor. The social esteem Sweets acquired constituted a certain danger for Danny because it might, as Danny's friends maintained, have created the desire for electricity to operate it. And that would have cost Danny money and involved an interminable responsibility. To avert this danger, the friends relieved Sweets of the machine and philosophized on the incident.⁹ Paralleling Danny's covetousness of rent, Pilon stated that "... a present, especially to a lady, should have no quality that will require a further present. ... it is sinful to give presents of too great value, for they may excite greed." (p. 54)

In spite of the agreeable brotherhood existing in his house, time weighed heavy on Danny's hands.

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

⁹The paisanos' lack of conscience in relieving Sweets of her machine indicates their disrespect of property rights concerning movable possessions. Peter Lisca has examined this particular aspect quite thoroughly in The Wide World in pages 84-89.

Always the weight of the house was upon him;
always the responsibility of his friends. (p. 83)

The memory of his freedom in the days when he was not fettered with property caused Danny to forsake his house in search of the passions and adventures of the propertyless man. Steinbeck seems to suggest that property necessarily commits one to the conventional actions of the middle-class and forbids those actions which will provide man's primeval enjoyments. Perhaps he is implying that only the unpropertied can remain mobile and savor life naturally.

Danny's attempt to recapture his former pleasures took the form of stealing food and cooking utensils from his friends, fighting with soldiers, and committing partial rape. Of Danny's various misadventures, Pilon reported, "In a few weeks Danny has piled up more sins than Old Ruiz did in a lifetime." (p. 85) Danny's disrespect for his property and his desire for the carefree, hedonistic life grew to such a degree that he sold his house to the bootlegger, Torrelli, for twenty-five dollars. But the title of the house was not a thing to be lightly transferred, for Danny's friends took the paper from Torrelli and burned it, thereby giving evidence to the evanescent quality of titles and bills of sale.

The possession of the house was to be reserved as a symbol of the friendship it had sponsored. After Danny's death, the friends gathered in the house and accidentally set it a fire; no attempt was made to put it out. The burning of the house served to consecrate it to the "holy friendship," "love

and comfort" it had furnished. When the house was completely destroyed, "Danny's friends ... stood looking at the smoking ruin. They looked at one another strangely, and then back to the burned house. And after a while they turned and walked slowly away, and no two walked together." (p. 101) The final paragraph of the novel corresponds to the beginning paragraph in that it speaks favorably of the bond the "talisman" established. It also furnishes the final contrast; the house had placed restrictions on Danny's freedom, and he had sought to escape them. But the final paragraph concentrates on the friendship the house furnished, not the restrictions its possession involved.

The connection between Tortilla Flat and Cannery Row is provided by Peter Lisca, who comments,

Although Steinbeck had not considered the paisanos "quaint, dispossessed or under-doggish," neither had he considered them models of human conduct. They were people "who merge successfully with their habitat." Ten years later, in Cannery Row, Steinbeck's detached, amused, tongue-in-cheek acceptance of such a group changes to an active championing of their way of life.¹⁰

Cannery Row¹¹ is a good deal less concerned with property ownership and contains practically no favorable references to property ownership as did Tortilla Flat. The group of men in Cannery Row are already bound in friendship--nothing further is necessary to bring them together. As in Tortilla Flat,

¹⁰Peter Lisca, p. 200.

¹¹The Short Novels. Further references to Cannery Row will be from this edition, and the pages cited will be inserted parenthetically in the text.

a house is bestowed on Mack and the boys; however, the structure promises no aid to happiness, nor does it involve a curtailment of freedom. To the boys the house merely meant more room than they had in the abandoned pipes in the vacant lot on Cannery Row. The owner of the house, Lee Chong, was to benefit most from the boys "renting" the Palace Flophouse: the windows were not broken, the house did not burn down, and most important, the tenet was established that "you cannot steal from your benefactor." (p. 277) Mack and the boys, now tenants of Lee Chong, could no longer remove small items from his store, and the savings to Lee more than paid any rent due.

Steinbeck accepts wholeheartedly the unconcern of Mack and the boys for material aggregation, for he makes the comment,

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. (p.278)

The irony of the situation is that Mack and the boys have the proper perspective on enjoyment of life while being deprecated by physically and spiritually defeated men who are concerned with property and assiduity. Steinbeck had made an even more pointed observation on the futility of "laying up treasures" in The Log from the Sea of Cortez, which was written four years before Cannery Row; man, with all of his con-

struction of houses and great buildings, has created "nothing that the trees and creeping plants, ice and erosion, cannot remove in a fairly short time."¹²

The Palace Flophouse boys had what might be called, at least humorously, a socialistic attitude toward possessions. Most urban dwellers undertaking an expedition to the country will more than adequately supply themselves with food; but Mack and the boys assumed that the country was the place to obtain their food, and they were able to pick up a nice rooster "without running too far off the road" to hit him. Paralleling this attitude, Steinbeck comments, "With the Model T, part of the concept of private property disappeared. Pliers ceased to be privately owned and a tire pump belonged to the last man who had picked it up." (p. 302) Thus, Mack experienced no twinges of conscience when he found it expedient to take an entire carburetor in order to repair a single needle valve.

The boys' unorthodox conception of movable property extended also to land. In the same way they felt justified in picking up those things they needed, they felt free to trespass on any private property they wished. In undertaking a journey to find frogs, they sought out a place of beauty where they could relax and be happy as well as catch frogs. However, the tranquil enjoyment of the beauty of nature was interrupted by the owner of the property ordering the boys

¹²John Steinbeck, The Log from the Sea of Cortez (New York, 1951), p. 88. The pages hereafter cited will be inserted parenthetically in the text.

off his land. Juxtaposed to this incident is the interchapter fourteen in which two soldiers and their girls terminate a night's celebration by walking and resting on a private beach. When the watchman ordered them off the place, one of the soldiers made a derisive comment, and the watchman left them alone. Preceding each incident, detailed descriptions of the beauty of the scenery are given. The intruders in both instances seem to be entranced by the beauty of the scenery, but no evidence is given that those who are directly associated with the land are really aware of or appreciate it. One might infer that the owner possesses the land, but only a detached viewer can claim the landscape.¹³

Steinbeck uses the interchapter method to introduce significant observations on property ownership. The chapter containing the beach scene has been discussed. In chapter eight the theme of social elevation and its dangers reap-

¹³It is interesting to note here the parallel observation of Ralph Waldo Emerson: "The charming landscape which I saw this morning, is indubitably made up of some twenty or thirty farms. Miller owns this field, Locke that, and Manning the woodland beyond. But not of them owns the landscape. There is a property in the horizon which no man has but he whose eye can integrate all the parts, that is, the poet. This is the best part of these men's farms, yet to this their land-deeds give them no title." Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Nature," ed. Kenneth W. Cameron (New York, 1940), p. 11.

A more recent work which says much of the same thing is Robert Frost's "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening." Of the relationship of the traveller to the woods, Elizabeth Isaacs says, "... this traveller knows these woods much better than their city owner--not as a financial but as a spiritual investment. Actually, he is their owner in spirit, recalling with familiarity their many past temptations and delights." Elizabeth Isaacs, An Introduction to Robert Frost (Denver, 1962), p. 111.

pears. After Mack and the boys moved into the Palace Flophouse, Mr. and Mrs. Sam Malloy moved into the empty boiler on the vacant lot. Living in the boiler gave Malloy both possession and ownership and established his right to rent the boiler pipes as sleeping quarters to single men. Up to this point, Mrs. Malloy had been happy and contented. However, "she began to change. First it was a rug, then a wash-tub, then a lamp with a colored silk shade." (p. 293) Finally a request came for curtains for the windowless boiler because she liked "things nice." Warren French remarks that Mrs. Malloy's desire for respectability, that "enslaver of persons," manifests itself in the curtains.¹⁴ Even more significant is the observation that Steinbeck seems to be implying that property ownership establishes false values and desires.

The interchapter thirty-one concerns a "well-grown gopher" who found the "perfect place to live" in the vacant lot on Cannery Row. Food grew in abundance; the soil had the right texture; and the cats were sated with refuse from the canneries. The gopher constructed a magnificent burrow and called and waited for a female gopher; but no lady gopher came. The gopher was forced to a different area where the danger of traps existed in order to fulfill his need. The story of the gopher is allegorical. Perhaps its meaning is relevant to the middle-class owner whose security is in

¹⁴French, Steinbeck, p. 126.

places and things. The lesson to be learned is that there is no perfect place to love. The poison and traps to which the gopher returned correspond to the uncertain existence of Mack and the boys.

The last novel in this group, Sweet Thursday, is again concerned with the Palace Flophouse boys.¹⁵ Even though nine years elapsed between the writing of the two novels, Steinbeck preserved the essential philosophy of Mack and the boys. In Sweet Thursday, the problem of property ownership centers on the Palace Flophouse proper. The grocery of Lee Chong had passed into the hands of Joseph and Mary Rivas. Mack did not know whether the Palace Flophouse had gone with the grocery. When he discovered the existence of property tax assessments, two things became clear to Mack; the taxation of property was one more thing in favor of the Bohemian life. Furthermore, if Joseph and Mary did not know he possessed the Palace and he received a tax bill, he would learn he was entitled to either collect rent along with back rent or to dispossess the boys.

To solve the problem, the boys decided to hold a raffle on the house--ostensibly to get enough money to buy a microscope for Doc but in reality to transfer the supposed ownership of the Flophouse from Joseph and Mary to Doc, who the boys knew would allow them to remain in it gratis. Mack

¹⁵John Steinbeck, Sweet Thursday (New York, 1954). The pages hereafter cited will be inserted parenthetically in the text.

"nearly cried with relief" upon discovering that Joseph and Mary was unaware of any supposed ownership. And because the residents of Cannery Row thought they were outsmarting a "sharper" and wanted to see his face when he found out he had helped to raffle off his own property, they bought more tickets from Joseph and Mary than anyone else.

That Mack was completely free of any obsession with property is seen in his reaction upon learning that Lee Chong had deeded the Flophouse to him and the boys. Doc had refrained from revealing the deed to the boys because both he and Chong were afraid that they might mortgage or sell it and not have a home. Mack agreed, "Chong was right. I wouldn't trust the boys not to sell her sometime when they need a buck. I wouldn't trust myself." (p. 196) The fact that the boys could sell their home anytime they felt like it indicates that while they were immediately concerned with having a place to live, they had no great dependence on any one place. The obsession with property had not touched the pristine nature of the Palace Flophouse group.

When at last the Flophouse boys presented their present to Doc, made possible by the raffle, it was "... a telescope strong enough to bring the moon to his lap" instead of the microscope necessary to complete his study of cephalopods. The reaction of Doc--" .. I guess it doesn't matter whether you look down or up--as long as you look" (p. 272)--is an indication of Doc's disregard for possessions. It would perhaps be more exact to say that it was Ed Ricketts' dis-

regard for possessions since this close friend of Steinbeck's was the prototype for the character, Doc.¹⁶ John Steinbeck had great admiration and respect for Ed Ricketts, and it is not inconceivable that Steinbeck may have taken part of his philosophy regarding property and possessions from his friend. In commenting on Ricketts in The Log from the Sea of Cortez, Steinbeck observed that if you gave him something, it did not mean that he kept it "as property." (p. lxvi) Of Ricketts' willingness to part with his money and possessions, Steinbeck related that

When you had something from him it was not something that was his that he tore away from himself. When you had a thought from him or a piece of music or twenty dollars or a steak dinner, it was not his--it was yours already, and his was only the head and hand that steadied it in position toward you. For this reason no one was ever cut off from him. (p. lxvi)

The fact that possessions carry with them the possibility of alienation of friends constituted no danger to Ed Ricketts. Apparently Steinbeck feels that Ed Ricketts had the proper philosophy concerning possessions, for in Sweet Thursday Doc observed to the Seer who had no job or possessions, "The doctrine of our time is that man can't get along without a whole hell of a lot of stuff. You may not be preaching it, but you're living treason." (pp. 71-72)

Because these are light, humorous novels, one might think that Steinbeck was only superficially interested in these characters and their philosophies; however, this is

¹⁶French, Steinbeck, p. 125.

not the case. He was deeply concerned with his characters and knew prototypes for them.¹⁷ That Steinbeck was sympathetic with his characters' desire for freedom and mobility and remained so is seen in his most recent major work, the first-person travelogue, Travels with Charley. In giving an explanation of his desire to tour the United States, Steinbeck says,

When I was very young and the urge to be someplace else was on me, I was assured by mature people that maturity would cure this itch. When years described me as mature, the remedy prescribed was middle age. In middle age I was assured that greater age would calm my fever and now that I am fifty-eight perhaps senility will do the job. Nothing has worked. Four hoarse blasts of a ship's whistle still raise the hair on my neck and set my feet to tapping. The sound of a jet, an engine warming up, even the clapping of shod hooves on pavement brings on the ancient shudder, the dry mouth and vacant eye, the hot palms and the churn of stomach high up under the rib cage. In other words, I don't improve; in further words, once a bum always a bum.¹⁸

As Steinbeck prepared for his journey, he noticed the same characteristic in other people.

I saw in their [neighbor's] eyes something I was to see over and over and over in every part of the nation--a burning desire to go, to move, to get under way, anyplace, away from any Here. They spoke quietly of how they wanted to go someday, to move about, free and unanchored (p. 10)

It is evident that Steinbeck became aware that the desire of people to be free of encumbering jobs and property is not limited to select minor groups but is universally true.

¹⁷Fontenrose, pp. 30-31.

¹⁸John Steinbeck, Travels with Charley (New York, 1962), p. 3. The pages cited hereafter will be placed parenthetically in the text.

CHAPTER II

THE STABLE ERAS

In presenting characters leading their lives at the subsistence level, Steinbeck wrote persuasively about the carefree Bohemian life. One is perhaps surprised to find him writing with equal persuasive force about prosperous middle-class landowners.

The Pastures of Heaven, a novel of the second group, takes place during the period following the first world war.¹⁹ Its setting is a rural community in central California, a valley which had been named "The Pastures of Heaven" by a Spanish corporal struck by its serene beauty. Years later the Pastures was invaded by squatters who built fences and "squabbled a great deal over its possession." (p. 3) The actual plot begins with the arrival of Bert Munroe, a man who was accursed and who, by buying reputedly accursed land, released adversity over the entire valley. The novel is composed of short stories about the various families in the valley and how they were affected by the curses released.

Perhaps the only truly happy owner in the Pastures of Heaven was Junius Maltby. He did not allow the pride of

¹⁹John Steinbeck, The Pastures of Heaven (New York, 1963). The pages cited hereafter will be placed parenthetically in the text.

ownership to undermine his values: his farm held neither practical nor monetary values for him. "He liked the valley and the farm, but he liked them as they were; he didn't want to plant new things, nor to tear out old." (p. 87) Maltby seemed to have that particular quality which is necessary for aesthetic appreciation: he was emotionally distant from his property with the result that his vision was not restricted to own sphere. Of his attitude Junius commented,

'It's a strange thing, this knowing. It is nothing but an awareness of details. There are long--visioned minds and short--visioned. I've never been able to see things that are close to me. For instance, I am much more aware of the Parthenon than of my own house' (p. 91)

A twofold view is manifested here; Maltby is neither conscious of his property nor tied down to it. In spite of Maltby's apparent contentment, he became a problem to the other landowners of the valley. While others became prosperous and enjoyed the benefits of Fords, radios, and electricity, Junius neglected his land and became a happy savage. "The men of the valley resented his good bottom land, all overgrown with weeds, his untrimmed fruit trees and his fallen fences." (p. 95) A controversy appears, between the industrious landed people and the lazy landed people over the proper use of land. The prosperous people of the valley disliked the idleness and freedom of Junius, and they disliked even more the apparent lack of pride which kept him from being socially acceptable. Although he was censured on account of the neglect of his land, Junius was unaware

of life's feverishness and was, for a time, "gloriously happy."

Eventually the pressures of the prosperous owners of the valley devastated Maltby's and his son's sense of self-respect. Through the officious presentation of clothes to Robbie, Junius came to realize what his neighbors thought of his manner of life, and the father-son relationship was damaged. Robbie discovered that the life he had did not measure up to the standards established by the middleclass. When they left the valley a week later, Robbie appeared as "sullen and unhappy." Junius no longer looked young but old and bewildered. Before coming to The Pastures of Heaven, Junius had been an accountant, and he announced his intention of taking up his old profession in San Francisco in order to give Robbie "things he never had." Joseph Fontenrose maintains that Steinbeck favored Maltby's method of living by reason of the ending of the Maltby story in "Nothing so Monstrous"²⁰ where

he [Steinbeck] imagines that Junius and Robbie returned to the Pastures, occupied a cave in the outlying wilderness, and resumed their old way of life; 'I don't know that this is true. I only hope to God it is.'²¹

This early novel show Steinbeck's recognition that people are unable to accept others without evaluating them along with their possessions. The complexity of Steinbeck

²⁰The Maltby story was later published separately with a slightly different ending, under the title, "Nothing so Monstrous."

²¹Fontenrose, p. 24.

is indicated by the different approaches to this theme. In the Maltby story he seems to express a judgment against the people, but in the Banks episode, he casually observes this tendency. When Raymond Banks complimented Bert Munroe on his fine property, it was a compliment to the man as well as to the land. This exchange stands in sharp contrast to the people's treatment of Maltby where the man received no respect because, according to their standards, his property commanded none; where men of similar circumstances were involved, mutual respect was given.

The opinion of people concerning one's property figures prominently in another of the narratives of this novel, the Pat Humbert story. Before he overheard Mae Munroe's compliment to his quaint house with the huge Banksia rose covering it, Pat Humbert had "... loved the farm for itself, but he also loved it because it kept him from fear in the daytime." (p. 188) And he had hated his house because of the fear it aroused. Upon hearing Mae's compliment to his house, Pat's pride of ownership was awakened, and his introversion was overcome to the degree that he centered his thoughts on the project of remodeling his house instead of on his fear. The actual purpose for remodeling the house was to show it to Mae Munroe in hopes of winning her, but when he learned that Mae was to be married soon, that purpose was destroyed, with the result that Pat again became estranged from his house.

The ownership of a house meant quite a different thing

to Richard Whiteside. . Arriving in California in 1850, because he desired a dynasty and had a sense of responsibility toward his descendants, he had "the definite intention of founding a house for children not yet born and for their children." (p. 202) Whiteside's attraction to the land and his desire for an enduring prominent family line were so strong that he built for the future, constructing a house with a tradition attached to it so that neither he nor his descendants would desire to move away. The building of the house was equal to building a family and a dynasty; it was built of redwood, a wood that does not decay. This use of redwood later became ironic when the family was cursed with single births in each generation and the grandson finally moved away from the house altogether because of a lack of identification with it.

The house came to mean more than just a dynasty; it not only became the "symbol of the family," but it signified "authority and culture and judgment and manners." Because of its excellence, it was placed above all other houses in the valley. Steinbeck returned to his theme of the evaluation of persons in terms of their property:

The neighbors could tell by looking at his house that Richard Whiteside was a gentleman who would do no mean nor cruel nor unwise thing. . . . It was primarily because of his house that Richard became the valley's arbiter of manners, and, after that, a kind of extra-legal judge over small disputes. (pp. 214-215)

In the case of Richard Whiteside, the judgment was more or less accurate; such had not been the case with Junius Maltby.

When Alicia assured Richard that the family would continue because of the well-being of their only son, Richard replied that the house itself was safe. Originally the house had existed for the family, but the family came to exist for the house.²² Perhaps the house had come to mean to Richard what it meant to all of the children of the valley. When the children came to visit the son, John, they " ... wandered on tip-toe through the big house" The children "could not run and shout in the Whiteside house. They might as well have shouted in church." (p. 217) John was later to remember "how his father felt about the house--how it was a symbol of the family, a temple built around the hearth." (p. 218)

With the birth of his son, John Whiteside became more concerned for generation; he previously had been a casual farmer. Obsessed with the idea of his duty to his future generations, he "waited covetously" each year for his crops to grow and mature. When his son manifested little interest in the things the father held dear, John's diligence toward the land flagged. But the house became more and more important. John loved it more than his father had; "It was the outer shell of his body." (p. 220)

²²This same concern for continuing the family line and retaining the property is evident in Burning Bright, which was written eighteen years after The Pastures of Heaven. The main concern of Joe Saul in the second act, "The Farm," was to have a son who would continue the family line on the farm. With the news that he was to become a father, Joe Saul no longer feared that his land might be allowed to go fallow and revert to wilderness or that strangers might get his land and not know how to care for it.

The house was John's personality solidified. When the people of the valley thought of him, it was never of the man alone in a field or a in a wagon, or at the store. A mental picture of him was incomplete unless it included his house. (p. 227)

The hope for a long family line continuing in the traditional Whiteside house was shattered when Bill Whiteside announced his intention to marry Mae Munroe and move into town. John insisted, "Some day you'll get a homesickness you can't resist. This place is in your blood. When you have children you'll know that they can't grow up any place but here." (pp. 230-231) The realization that Bill cared nothing for continuing the dynasty so devastated John that when the great house later caught fire, no attempt was made to save any part of it.

The last chapter of the novel concerns a group of tourists observing the Pastures of Heaven from an overlooking hill. Each of the observers seems to think of the valley in terms of his own personality. The business man thought of the monetary value of the Pastures if it were subdivided. The young couple were attracted by the tranquillity but refused to allow themselves to think of settling there because they had a name and place to make for themselves. The priest desired the peacefulness below him but knew he would be shirking his duty to the church if he were actually to attain the place he desired. The old man reviewed the feverishness of life and indicated his growing inclination toward philosophy. Finally the bus driver summed up the desires of the middleclass when he evinced his desire to have a small

piece of property which would enable him to earn the few necessities of life and live easily and quietly. Harry Thornton Moore, in his pioneering work on Steinbeck, has noted that it is ironic that the observers of the valley below desire the valley but are ignorant of the true circumstances of the landowners below.²³ The irony is strengthened particularly when one compares the promise of the valley at beginning of the novel with the favorable observations of the tourists at the end.

The novel immediately following the publication of The Pastures of Heaven, To a God Unknown,²⁴ has much in common with its predecessor. The "dynasty" theme is prominent. Joseph Fontenrose has noted that To a God Unknown "... is plainly a mythical narrative told in terms of a California farmer's struggle to build an enduring family community in a treacherous land" ²⁵

To a God Unknown also shares with The Pastures of Heaven emphasis on the owner's identification with property. However, its language is more broadly figurative in the sense of identification with the whole earth rather than one specific plot of property.

²³Harry Thornton Moore, John Steinbeck, (Chicago, 1939), p. 19.

²⁴John Steinbeck, To a God Unknown, (New York, 1944). The pages cited hereafter will be inserted parenthetically in the text.

²⁵Fontenrose, p. 19.

Peter Lisca has observed,

The main action of the novel concerns Joseph's growing mystic and ritualistic relationship to the land. Before he leaves for California, his hunger for land of his own is such as any farmer might feel. As soon, however, as he arrives in the lush valley, his feeling for land begins to take on a symbolic meaning.²⁶

This symbolic meaning may be observed mechanically in Joseph's reference to his land. Early in his possession, he referred to the land as his land. But when the four homesteads were combined to make one ranch, he referred to the property thereafter as the land. The identification with the land may relate Steinbeck to transcendentalism; Warren French has noted: "Steinbeck's enthusiasm for ... [transcendental] ideas ... gives him a place in the development of a distinctive and distinguished American tradition."²⁷ Just as in The Pastures of Heaven where the feelings for the Whiteside house had been passed from father to son, the authority of the father had passed to the son, Joseph, in To a God Unknown: "... in Vermont his father had merged with the land until he became the living symbol of the unit, land and its inhabitants." (p. 29) After Joseph's brothers had joined him on the farm in California, he was recognized as the head of the unit. "He spoke with the sanction of the grass, the soil, the beasts wild and domesticated; he was the father of the farm." (p. 29)

The theme of transcendental unity is evident throughout

²⁶Lisca, p. 44.

²⁷French, Steinbeck, p. 10.

the entire novel. When Joseph first entered the new land, his feeling for the land was such that he feared that

This land might possess all of him if he were not careful. To combat the land a little, he thought of his father, of the calm and peace, the strength and eternal rightness of his father, and then in his thought the difference ended and he knew that there was no quarrel, for his father and this new land were one. (p. 7)

Later, when he received news of his father's death, Joseph identified his father's spirit with an oak tree by his house. In the middle of the novel, Joseph universalized the oneness of man and the land when he told his new bride, "... there are times when the people and the hills and the earth, all, are one" (pp. 76-77) At the end of the novel when Joseph felt he had failed to protect his land and desire for rain overcame his concern for all else, including his own soul, he discovered upon his approaching death that "I am the rain. ... I am the land ... , and I am the rain. The grass will grow out of me in a little while." (p. 244)

Besides man's spiritual relationship to the land, Steinbeck also shows a mystical, physical approach to property. Sexual imagery is repeatedly associated with the land. When Joseph first entered the new country, he noticed, "... a curious femaleness about the interlacing boughs and twigs, about the long green cavern cut by the river through the trees and the brilliant underbrush." (p. 6) Later when he saw the valley that was to become his, Joseph

... felt his body flushing with a hot fluid of love. 'This is mine,' he said simply, and his eyes sparkled with tears and his brain was filled

wonder that this should be his. There was pity in him for the grass and the flowers; he felt that the trees were his children and the land his child. (pp. 9-10)

This association of Joseph's of the land as a productive female whose produce could symbolize children resulted in his symbolic cohabitation with the land. Joseph's possessiveness of his land

... became a passion. 'It's mine,' he chanted. 'Down deep it's mine, right to the center of the world.' He stamped his feet into the soft earth. Then the exultance grew to be a sharp pain of desire that ran through his body in a hot river. He flung himself face down-ward on the grass and pressed his cheek against the wet stems. His fingers gripped the wet grass and tore it out, and gripped again. His thighs beat heavily on the earth. ... For a moment the land had been his wife. (p. 6)

Later, when the farm was stocked with animals and the land brought into production, Joseph became obsessed with the fertility and increase of his herds as John Whiteside had desired his crops to grow. Joseph wanted his land "to swarm with life." Steinbeck comments that "Joseph did not think these things in his mind, but in his chest and in the corded muscles of legs. It was the heritage of a race which for a million years had sucked at the breasts of the soil and cohabited with the earth." (p. 30)

Steinbeck further associates sexual imagery with the land in the symbolic consumation of Joseph and Elizabeth's marriage when he brought her to the valley on their wedding night. The pass to the valley itself signifies the act:

The mountain was split. Two naked shoulders

of smooth limestone dropped cleanly down, verging a little together, and at the bottom there was only room for the river bed. ... Midway in the pass where the constrained river flowed swift and deep and silently, a rough monolith rose out of the water, cutting and mangling the current. (pp. 69-70)

Joseph interpreted their entrance to the pass as follows:

'Here is a boundary. Yesterday we were married and it was no marriage. This is our marriage--through the pass--entering the passage like sperm and egg that have become a single unit of pregnancy. ... this is all marriage has ever been, contained in our moment.' (p. 71)

As observed above, Joseph had felt that the trees of the land were his children; when he learned that Elizabeth was to have a child, he seems to have regarded the child as a product of the earth:

' ... the child is precious, but not so precious as the bearing of it. That is as real as a mountain. That is a tie to the earth.' He stopped, thinking of words for the feeling. 'It is a proof that we belong here The only proof that we are not strangers.' (p. 127)

Not only is the exchange of products completed here, but the child furthers the bond of possession of the land.

Another tie between the people and the land was cemented by the death of Joseph's younger brother, Benjy. Joseph said of his death, "The first grave. Now we're getting someplace. Houses and children and graves, that's home, Tom. Those are the things to hold a man down." (p. 92)

Steinbeck shows that in this bond of possession, the land can own the man rather than the man owning the land. During the dry years with which the novel ends, the land exacted from Joseph a tremendous toll of suffering. He lost his

wife, relinquished his infant son, elected to stay with the land when the family left, and finally gave up his life in an effort to restore the productivity of the land.

The symbolism in To a God Unknown is not readily comprehended. Critics have repeatedly deprecated this early novel because of that fact. Warren French has commented that "To a God Unknown is an overwrought allegory in which Steinbeck fails--as he does again in East of Eden--to fuse effectively realistic and symbolic elements."²⁸ One of the most difficult problems in critically examining this novel is discovering the symbolic meaning or use of the land. It was suggested earlier that the reference to the land had become something more than a thing to be individually possessed. Steinbeck changed the identification of Joseph with a small plot to the entire earth. In describing Joseph to Elizabeth, Rama said, "He is ... a repository for a little piece of each man's soul, and more than that that, a symbol of the earth's soul." (p. 90)

Perhaps Steinbeck meant to fuse this aspect of Joseph with the dark rock and its spring on his land. When Joseph first observed the rock, he sensed its occult nature. His ranch hand told him of the Indian legend that the spring came from the "center of the world."

Joseph was strangely drawn to the rock, as was his wife who died in trying to "tame it." When the drought was at its

²⁸French, Steinbeck, p. 47.

worst, Joseph went to the rock and its spring because he felt that it was "the heart of the land" and that it would "stay alive" until the rains came again. (p. 217) No rain came, however, until Joseph gave up his life on the rock. Then it rained as it had when Elizabeth had died there. The fusing of Joseph's soul with the earth's soul symbolized by his death on the rock resulted in the end of the drought. It would seem as if the land, or earth becomes the "Unknown God" and symbolizes an exacting religion of nature.

The demand of possession is important in another novel, The Red Pony.²⁹ Critics have noted that the maturity of the main character, Jody, is effected by an education in the violence and suffering of life.³⁰ However, the development of Jody may be approached in another manner. The violence and suffering he experienced contributed to his maturity, but the genesis of his education was the possession of a red pony. With the gift of the pony Jody received the responsibility of feeding and cleaning him with the threat of forfeiture of possession if his duties were neglected. But Jody willingly undertook his duties because owning the pony gave him something he could not have enjoyed while he was possessionless: elevation above his friends.

... they [boys] looked at Jody with eyes in which there was a new admiration and a new respect. Before today Jody had been a boy, dressed in overalls and a blue shirt--quieter than most,

²⁹The Short Novels. The pages cited hereafter will be inserted parenthetically in the text.

³⁰Fontenrose, p. 63. Lisca, p. 103.

even suspected of being a little cowardly. And now he was different. . . . They knew that Jody had been miraculously lifted out of equality with them, and had been placed over them. (p. 110)

After the red pony died, Jody was promised a new colt if he worked for it and cared for the mare during her period of gestation. Once again Jody assumed the responsibility which possession brings: "The five dollars his father had advanced reduced Jody to peonage for the whole late spring and summer." (p. 135) When the colt was born at last, it was necessary to kill the mare in order to fulfill the promise of a colt for Jody. Possession in The Red Pony came to mean the tragic cost of life and experience.

In To a God Unknown, the birth of a child had meant a claim to the land; in The Red Pony it is seen that the land claims those who are about to die. Harry Thornton Moore has noted that Steinbeck deals with the concept of private property differently in the story of Gitano than he had dealt with it beforehand.³¹ Old Gitano arrived at the Tiflin ranch and announced that he had come back to his birthplace. When he was told to join his relatives, he merely answered that he was born on the ranch. Gitano seems to have had an intrinsic claim to the land by virtue of his birth on it. Furthermore, because of his return to the land in his old age, it may be surmised that the land claims its dead and completes the possession as did the first grave in To a God Unknown.

³¹Moore, p. 34.

The publication of The Long Valley followed The Red Pony by one year.³² Joseph Fontenrose feels that Steinbeck " ... intentionally juxtaposed "The Chrysanthemems" and "The White Quail,"³³ two of the stories from this collection. The two women in the stories both had beautiful gardens, but their reactions to their property resulted in opposite situations. Elisa identified with the soil and especially with those things which grow in the soil. Her "planter's hands" gave her a feeling of strength which served at the same time as a weakness by which she could be exploited. When Elisa, responding to the tinker's feigned interest in her flowers, attempted to explain the special feeling she had for growing plants, she identified it with the feeling which she thought the tinker must have as a rover:

'I've never lived as you do, but I know what you mean. When the night is dark--why, the stars are sharp-pointed, and there's quiet. Why, you rise up and up! Every pointed star gets driven into your body. It's like that. Hot and sharp and--lovely.' (p. 18)

Fontenrose explains that "Elisa, although contented enough with home and husband and garden, still could feel the attraction of the itinerant tinker's uncertain roving life. ... she felt like breaking away from her secure domesticity and taking to the open road."³⁴ Here Steinbeck emphasizes the desire for mobility even among those who are economi-

³²John Steinbeck, The Long Valley (Garden City, New York, 1941). The pages cited hereafter will be inserted parenthetically in the text.

³³Fontenrose, p. 61.

³⁴Ibid., p. 62.

cally secure and relatively happy.

Mary Teller's relationship to her garden differs greatly from that of Elisa for she could never have left her tranquil garden in favor of an uncertain life. Mary refused marriage until she found a man who could afford to buy the home and garden of her dreams. Furthermore, she insisted that her prospective husband "match" the garden. She allowed her husband to have nothing to do with the garden beyond purchasing it. For instance, "It really wouldn't have been nice if ... Harry had wanted some flowers that didn't go with the garden." (p. 29) Mary's obsession with herself and her garden distorted her values and subsequently disrupted the conjugal relationship. When Harry rushed home with the news that he was to become the owner of a puppy, Mary refused to allow him to have the puppy because of possible damage to her garden. Gradually Harry came to realize that the garden constituted a barrier between him and his wife: in describing his wife, Harry said, "You're kind of untouchable. ... You're kind of like your own garden--fixed, and just so. I'm afraid to move around. I might disturb some of your plants." (p. 30) The estrangement caused by Mary's obsession with her garden was so acute as to cause Harry's outcry at the end of the story: "I'm lonely Oh, Lord, I'm so lonely." (p. 42)

Fontenrose notes that the essential differences between Mary and Elisa are that Mary uses her garden as an escape from the cosmic world or the human world of experience,

whereas Elisa seeks to escape her domestic security by going to " ... the outside world of human beings." ³⁵

Mary's concern for order in her garden contrasts sharply with the attitude of Junius Maltby. In The Pastures of Heaven, Junius had been happy with things as they were and had made no attempt to clear his farm of the weeds or of the encroaching wilderness. On the other hand, Mary identified the unorderly wilderness as an enemy that wanted to enter her garden and destroy her calculated order. Nothing could upset Junius, but the slightest threat to Mary's garden resulted in hysteria. Maltby, in his carefree days, is shown as a happy figure; the characters in "The White Quail" are shown as tragic figures.

The last novel in this division, East of Eden, recalls many of the themes of property in previous novels.³⁶ When Adam Trask moved to California, one of his considerations in buying a farm was related to the dynastical theme: "'If I'm going to settle here I need to know about how and what will be,' said Adam. 'My children, when I have them, will be on it [the land].'" (p. 45)

Another of the sub-themes, the proper use of land, recalls the Maltby story in The Pastures of Heaven. After Cathy had shown her lack of love for Adam and their twin boys, Adam forgot his desire for establishing a profitable

³⁵Ibid., p. 63

³⁶John Steinbeck, East of Eden (New York, 1952). The pages cited hereafter will be inserted parenthetically in the text.

farm for his descendants. He gave up all thoughts of drilling wells for irrigation, and the land was allowed to stand untilled. Samuel Hamilton charged Adam about leaving his land fallow, and when Adam complained of Samuel's lecturing him and asked why, Samuel replied,

'To see whether I can raise a little anger in you. I'm a nosy man. But there's all that fallow land, and here beside me is all that fallow man. It seems a waste. And I have a bad feeling about waste because I could never afford it. Is it a good feeling to let your life lie fallow?' (p. 295)

The situation is ironical, for the Hamilton ranch was very poor, but its owners were quite happy while the Trask ranch was one of the most fertile in the valley; and its owner was quite morose.

Seeing the property and the man as one and the same thing is involved in Samuel's criticism of Adam. The sin of wastefulness recalls the people's criticism of Junius Maltby in The Pastures of Heaven. However, there is an essential difference between Adam and Junius. Junius had been quite contented and seemed to realize significant benefits from allowing his land to be fallow; furthermore, Junius was quite close to his son, Robbie. On the other hand, Adam merely stagnated and was barely aware of the existence of his sons.

As noted above, Steinbeck is very interested in the tendency of people to judge themselves and others by their property. An example of this occurs in East of Eden when the Bacons forgave Adam for not tilling his land because he was wealthy. Had Adam been indigent, his lack of industry

would have been roundly condemned by people for reasons other than those of Samuel Hamilton.

Another of Steinbeck's themes on property which occurs in East of Eden is that of the identification an owner feels with his land. Like Joseph, in To a God Unknown, staying with his unproductive land because he loved it, Samuel was reluctant to leave his ranch:

'I love that dust heap I love it the way a bitch loves her runty pup. I love every flint, the plow-breaking outcroppings, the thin and barren topsoil, the waterless heart of her. Somewhere in my dust heap there's a richness.'
(p. 197)

Because he worked his land and invested something of himself in it, Samuel found a richness in his land despite its unproductiveness. Trask was so remote from his land that its fertility was wasted, and he drew no sense of richness from the land.

The interchapter about the gopher in Cannery Row may be compared with Adam's brother Charles' reply to Adam's suggestion that they move to California to escape the stony land of New England: " ... there's [not] any farm without anything wrong with it. Out in the Middle West it's locusts, someplace else it's tornadoes." (p. 121) As it turned out, the valley where Adam settled had a curse. In describing the valley, Samuel said,

'There's a thing I don't understand. There's a blackness on this valley. I don't know what it is, but I can feel it. Sometimes on a white blinding day I can feel it cutting off the sun and squeezing the light out of it like a sponge. ... There's a black violence on the valley. I

don't know--I don't know. It's as though some old ghost haunted it out of the dead ocean below and troubled the air with unhappiness. It is as secret as hidden sorrow. ... I see it and feel it in the people here.' (p. 146)

That land may be cursed seems to be a favorite theme of Steinbeck's. In The Pastures of Heaven Munroe's curse, in uniting with the curse on his farm, released many curses to spread over the entire valley. Joseph, in To a God Unknown, seems to have sensed a curse on his land for when the drought killed all the vegetation, he mused, "I wonder why the land seems vindictive, now it is dead." ... "The land would come in and ... drink my blood if it could." (p. 217)

Of the thing which cut "off the sun," Peter Lisca observes that " ... Samuel ... associates the buried meteorite (falling star, hence Lucifer) which wrecks his well drill with Cathy" ³⁷ If the meteorite may be correctly associated with the monstrous Cathy, then the comment may be made, in connection with the curses noted in the other two novels, that Steinbeck associates accursed land directly with people; man blights the land he possesses.

The title of this novel, East of Eden, compares the setting to the mythical land of Eden. And indeed the farm which Adam purchased in California was meant to become a second "Eden"; it was the richest farm in the valley and furnished the best site for a new garden. Adam directly associated his name with his land: " ... I mean to make a garden of my

³⁷Lisca, p. 269.

land. Remember my name is Adam. So far I've had no Eden, let alone been driven out." (p. 169) Had Adam foreseen the course of events, he would have recognized the ominous portents of his comment. His "Eve," Cathy, brought an end to his Eden, leaving her husband and newborn sons. With Cathy's desertion Adam's desire to create a new Garden of Eden subsided. He withdrew into himself, and his land reflected his lack of determination and energy. When Samuel mentioned the garden plans after the sons were named, Adam said he had no plans because he had no one to show a garden to.

In the materials discussed in the first chapter, Steinbeck wrote that possessions spoil the fun in life. But in this second group of novels and short stories, he takes another stance: possessions are worth what they cost although their cost is great.

CHAPTER III

THE UNSTABLE ERAS

The novels dealt with up to this point are representative of Steinbeck's normal philosophy. The plots have centered on people who were relatively free from social, economic, and political stresses. The first three novels to be examined in this chapter are the only ones that can be specifically designated as being written during and treating a specific chronological period. The particular events during the latter part of the 1930's demanded Steinbeck's attention to such a degree that he became known as the most prominent social novelist of the twentieth century.³⁸

The first novel of this group, In Dubious Battle,³⁹ published in 1936, treats the attempts of two "reds" to organize migrant harvesters in order to obtain higher wages. Quite early in the novel, the evils of capitalism are criticized by the novice organizer, Jim Nolan:

'Did you ever work at a job where, when you got enough skill to get a raise in pay, you were fired and a new man put in? Did you ever work in a

³⁸Warren French, A Companion to THE GRAPES OF WRATH (New York, 1963), p. ix.

³⁹John Steinbeck, In Dubious Battle (New York, 1963). The pages hereafter cited will be placed parenthetically in the text.

place where they talked about loyalty to the firm, and loyalty meant spying on the people around you?' (p. 9)

In some ways, the man who is bound to wages for his living faces a more uncertain existence than the man who takes his living directly from his land.

The social evil attacked in this novel is the exploitation of the workers and small owners by the great, powerful owners. The greed of the large owners in the Torgas Valley was such that they were taking the land of all the small owners. Anderson, the owner of a small apple farm, was being slowly foreclosed by the large growers. Mac and Jim persuaded him to allow strikers to camp on his land by reminding of the mortgage on his property. They succeeded because the farmer shared the strikers' grievances against the large growers and stood to benefit by their loss of power.

That people sympathized with the migrant harvesters is evidenced by the comment of Anderson's son, Al: "'I'd be along with you, ... if I didn't have a business, and if my old man didn't own land. I guess I'd get this joint wrecked if anybody ever found out.'" (p. 41) The small owner was reluctant to join the strikers because of the pressures of the large owners. Later, the exploitation and inhumanity of the large growers was strikingly displayed when Al's lunch wagon was burned and he was physically injured because his father had allowed the strikers to camp on his farm. The anger of the large owners culminated in the burning of Anderson's

barn full of apples. The result was twofold: they avenged the sheltering of the strikers, and more important, they confiscated Anderson's property because without the crop he was unable to meet his mortgage payment.

In retaliation for burning Anderson's barn, one of the strikers burned the property of a large grower in the valley. The owners could comprehend this type of protest. The two burnings resulted in Mac and Jim's being blamed for causing trouble by the exploiters and the exploited, while the great owners, largely responsible for the atrocities, were exonerated.

Although Anderson would soon have lost his farm even if there had been no strike, he nevertheless furiously attacked Mac and Jim:

'What th' hell do I care who burned it? It's burned, the crop's burned. What do you damn bums know about it? I'll lose the place sure, now. ... You bastards never owned nothing. You never planted trees an' seen 'em grow an' felt 'em with your hands. You never owned a thing, never went out an' touched your own apple trees with your hands. What do you know?' (p. 301)

Mac's reply--"We never had a chance to own anything. ... We'd like to own something and plant trees." (p. 301)--is part of an important aspect of American growth, the American dream, which Steinbeck dealt with more completely in his next novel, Of Mice and Men.

Through the observations by Mac and Jim concerning Anderson's lamentation over his barn, Steinbeck makes a significant comment on owning property: "If I can give up my

whole life, he ought to be able to give up a barn." "Well, to some of those guys, property's more important than their lives." (p. 302) The owner was so involved in his property that he was unable to sacrifice it to a group effort.

The large owners sought to gain control of all of the property in order to establish control over prices and wages. Wages could be cut lower and lower while prices rose higher and higher. Mac was fully aware of what the large owners were capable of doing:

'A lot of the guys've been believing this crap about the noble American working man, an' the partnership of capital and labor. A lot of 'em are straight now. They know how much capital thinks of 'em, and how quick capital would poison 'em like a bunch of ants.' (pp. 292-293)

The growers had tried to persuade the migrant fruit harvesters to work for lower wages by appealing to their sense of "Americanism." They also tried to turn the strikers away from their leaders by calling them "reds." Because in this novel, "red" strikers confront landowners, it was the first of a group to bring the charge that Steinbeck was championing the communistic cause in the United States. Freeman Champney feels that it was "... not surprising that ... [Steinbeck explored] communist answers in In Dubious Battle because of the gap between the wealthy owners and the propertyless, voteless, and hungry proletariat.⁴⁰ Even though it was felt by many that Steinbeck favored Communism, one

⁴⁰Freeman Champney, "John Steinbeck, Californian," Antioch Review, Fall (1947), cited in Steinbeck and His Critics, eds. E. W. Tedlock and C. V. Wicker (Albuquerque, New Mexico, 1957), p. 138.

critic notes that Communists distrusted him.⁴¹

Joseph Henry Jackson has observed that "Of Mice and Men ... followed In Dubious Battle in a wholly natural way."⁴²

Indeed, the novel was simply the second step in Steinbeck's championing " ... the man-without, the dispossessed, who nevertheless cherished The Dream."⁴³ According to Joseph Fontenrose, the central image in Of Mice and Men is the

earthly paradise, visible in nearly every Steinbeck novel. ... It is part of the American dream It is a vision of Eden, a land of peace, harmony, prosperity; it includes both individual independence and fellowship. And in Steinbeck's world you aren't likely to get there⁴⁴

Of Mice and Men⁴⁵ is the story of two farm laborers, George and Lennie, and their desire for a place of their own. The recital of the dream becomes a chorus which occurs throughout the novel:

'Guys like us, that work on ranches, are the loneliest guys in the world. They got no fam-

⁴¹John S. Kennedy, "John Steinbeck: Life and Affirmed and Dissolved," Fifty Years of the American Novel, ed. Harold C. Gardiner (New York, 1951), cited in Steinbeck and His Critics, p. 123. Steinbeck's proletarianism is treated quite thoroughly by Claude E. Jones, who disproves any Communistic leanings in Steinbeck's novels. Claude E. Jones, "Proletarian Writing and John Steinbeck," Sewanee Review, XLVIII, iv, 445-456.

⁴²Joseph Henry Jackson, "Introduction to THE SHORT NOVELS OF JOHN STEINBECK" (New York, 1953), p. ix.

⁴³Ibid., p. ix.

⁴⁴Fontenrose, p. 59.

⁴⁵The Short Novels. The pages cited hereafter will be placed parenthetically in the text.

bly. They don't belong no place. ... They ain't got nothing to look ahead to. ... With us it ain't like that. We got a future. ... Someday we're gonna get the jack together and we're gonna have a little house and a couple of acres an' a cow and some pigs' (p. 163)

When Candy, an old, one-handed swamper who would soon no longer be useful to his employer, heard George and Lennie talking over their dream place, he desired the place also and made it possible for the dream to come true by offering the use of his savings. Candy voiced the need of all propertyless men:

'Everybody wants a little bit of land, not much. Jus' som'thin' that was his. Som'thin' he could live on and there couldn't nobody throw him off of it. I never had none. I planted crops for damn near ever'body in this state, but they wasn't my crops, and when I harvested 'em, it wasn't none of my harvest.' (p. 193)

Ownership of land furnishes both independence and pride in the husbandry of it. John S. Kennedy's comment is pertinent: "Steinbeck emphasizes the natural bond between life and productive property" ⁴⁶

George cautioned Lennie and Candy not to mention their plans to anyone else because "they li'ble to can us so we can't make no stake." (p. 186) The men were afraid that the propertied class would jealously guard their ranks. But Lennie was unable to keep the secret, and Crooks, the stable buck, learned of "the dream." At first Crooks scoffed at the plans:

⁴⁶Kennedy, p. 123.

'I seen hunderds of men come by on the road an' on the ranches, with their bindles on their backs an' that same damn thing in their heads. Hunderds of them. They come, an' they quit an' go on; an' every damn one of 'em's got a little piece of land in his head. An' never a God damn one of 'em ever gets it. Just like heaven. Ever'body wants a little piece of lan'. ... Nobody ever gets to heaven, and nobody gets no land. It's just in their head.' (p..192)

Crooks, at first, doubted the "American Dream," but when he learned that the men had most of the money necessary to buy their place, his pessimism fell away:

'I seen guys nearly crazy with loneliness for land, but ever' time a whore house or a black-jack game took what it takes.' He hesitated. ' ... If you ... guys would want a hand to work for nothing--just his keep, why I'd come and lend a hand.' (p. 193)

The dream of the men was not fulfilled.⁴⁷ Because of the murder committed by Lennie, the group disintegrated, and their plans came to nothing.

Of Mice and Men is similar to In Dubious Battle and The Grapes of Wrath in that the characters desire land and hope to gain freedom and independence by its possession. However, the characters furnish an essential difference in the novel. In the other two novels, the characters were exploited and kept from obtaining land. In Of Mice and Men, the men had jobs and an assured amount of pay. No outside force kept the men from obtaining land; their lack of land was a direct result of their own personalities. Without George, Lennie would have had no concept of possession of

⁴⁷Steinbeck did not abandon the idea of collective effort; later he used it extensively in The Grapes of Wrath.

land. For George, Lennie furnished the incentive for obtaining their own land. By getting their own land, the men may have removed the constant threat of trouble brought on by the subnormal Lennie. Although his friendship with Lennie inspired the "Dream," George experienced many difficulties because of the relationship. George described the physical pleasures he could have enjoyed with his "fifty and found" if he had not had the responsibility of Lennie. After Lennie was killed, the "Dream" could have been realized, but the prime reason for it was removed. One might infer that despite his complaints George needed Lennie as much as Lennie needed him. With the friendship and the dream it inspired George was a better man. Without it he was just one more lonely "bindlestiff" who took his pay, bought whiskey, and visited "cat houses."

Soon after he had written In Dubious Battle, John Steinbeck toured the migrant harvesters' camps in central California and observed their living and working conditions. The result was a series of articles in the San Francisco News under the title, "The Harvest Gypsies," which were later published together as "Their Blood Is Strong."⁴⁸ Steinbeck's concern for the distressed migrants was so strong that he traveled from Oklahoma to California with a group of them in order to gain first-hand information on their problems. His first attempt at a fictional portrayal of the migrants'

⁴⁸Fontenrose, p. 67.

plight, "L'Affaire Lettuceberg," was not satisfactory to him.⁴⁹ A second attempt resulted in what is, perhaps, the greatest social protest novel of the twentieth century, The Grapes of Wrath.⁵⁰ In this novel Steinbeck made some of his most pointed observations on the dispossessed and the wealthy property owners.

Steinbeck had used the interchapter technique in Tortilla Flat, and in The Grapes of Wrath he used it even more effectively. Both the narrative parts and the interchapters stress the same points with the dramatic reinforcing and illustrating the abstract passages. In chapters five and nineteen, he carefully noted the methods used in possessing land in both Oklahoma and California. In Oklahoma, "Grampa took up the land, and he had to kill the Indians and drive them away." (p. 45) Similarly,

Once California belonged to Mexico and its land to Mexicans; and a horde of tattered feverish Americans poured in. And such was their hunger for land that they took the land--stole Sutter's land, Guerrero's land, took the grants and broke them up and growled and quarreled over them, those frantic hungry men; and they guarded with guns the land they had stolen. They put up houses and barns, they turned the earth and planted crops. And these things were possession, and possession was ownership. (p. 315)

An even more moving definition of ownership is found in the Oklahoma sharecroppers' protest when threatened with dispossession:

⁴⁹Ibid., p. 67.

⁵⁰John Steinbeck, The Grapes of Wrath (New York, 1962). The pages cited hereafter will be placed parenthetically in the text.

' ... it's our land. We measured it and broke it up. We were born on it, and we got killed on it, died on it. Even if it's no good, it's still ours. That's what makes it ours--being born on it, working it, dying on it. That makes ownership, not a paper with numbers on it.'⁵¹ (p. 45)

Ironically, the "paper with numbers on it" did establish possession. Despite the intrinsic possession of the sharecroppers, a legal system must recognize titular possession.

Steinbeck shows the great owners to be uneasy in their legal ownership; they relieved themselves of responsibility by sending others to dispossess the people or by shifting the blame to the bank or finance company as an impersonal thing. It would seem that being a large owner is necessarily dehumanizing for " ... some of them were cold because they had long ago found that one could not be an owner unless one were cold." (p. 42)

When the sharecroppers threatened to keep their land as had their forbears, by fighting, they were told they would be thieves if they tried to stay and murderers if they killed to stay. When the dispossessed sharecroppers later tried to procure land in California in order to establish homes, they encountered hatred and restrictions:

... the owners hated them because the owners knew they were soft and the Okies strong And perhaps the owners had heard from their grandfathers how easy it is to steal land from a soft man if you are fierce and hungry and armed. (p. 318)

⁵¹A strikingly similar comment on ownership is found in the novel, To a God Unknown, where Joseph Wayne says, "The first grave. Now we're getting someplace. Houses and children and graves, that's home, Tom. Those are the things to hold a man down." (p. 92)

The Okies were denied access to the land; they were not allowed to plant little garden patches in vacant spaces to relieve their hunger for fear they might try to establish ownership by possession and gain the right to vote, receive relief, or organize.

Steinbeck shows an essential difference between the small owners and the large owners:

If a man owns a little property, that property is him, it's part of him, and it's like him. If he owns property only so he can walk on it and handle it and be sad when it isn't doing well, and feel fine when the rain falls on it, that property is him, and some way he's bigger because he owns it. Even if he isn't successful he's big with his property.

... But let a man get property he doesn't see, or can't take time to get his fingers in, or can't be there to walk on it--why, then the property is the man. He can't do what he wants, he can't think what he wants. The property is the man, stronger than he is. And he is small, not big. Only his possessions are big--and he's the servant of his property. (pp. 50-51)

This passage is in the van of the Jefferson philosophy.

Jefferson held that one should occupy the land he possesses or else relinquish it.⁵² The small owner who takes his living directly from the soil loves his land, and the land makes its owner more than he is. This love is not attributed to the owner who does not till his land himself.

George Bluestone has noted that The Grapes of Wrath is "obsessed with love of the earth." Tom expressed this love quite early: he

⁵²"The Invention of Elevators," The Complete Jefferson, ed. S. K. Padover (New York, 1943), p. 1015.

makes the sexual connection when ... he idly, but quite naturally, draws the torso of a woman in the dirt, 'breasts, hips, pelvis.' The attachment of the men to the land is often so intense that it borders on sexual love.⁵³

This sexual aspect of The Grapes of Wrath is reminiscent of To a God Unknown, where Joseph symbolically united with his land. A very different metaphor is employed in connection with the impersonal owners and their machines. The tilling of the soil amounts to a violation of the land:

Behind the tractor rolled the shining discs, cutting the earth with blades--not plowing but surgery, pushing the cut earth to the right where the second row of discs cut it and pushed it to the left; slicing blades shining, polished by the cut earth. And pulled behind the disks, the harrows combing with iron teeth so that the little clods broke up and the earth lay smooth. Behind the harrows, the long seeders--twelve curved iron penes erected in the foundry, orgasms set by gears, raping methodically, raping without passion. (p. 47)

The result of this impersonal relationship was that

when that crop grew, and was harvested, no man had crumbled a hot clod in his fingers and let the earth sift past his fingertips. No man had touched the seed, or lusted for the growth. Men ate what they had not raised, had no connection with the bread. The land bore under iron, and under iron gradually died; for it was not loved or hated, it had no prayers or curses. (p. 49)

To be fruitful, the land requires attention and understanding because it is "so much more than its analysis." (p. 150)

Steinbeck recognized of course, that it was necessary for the the farmer to realize a profit and to be able to

⁵³George Bluestone, "Novel into Film: THE GRAPES OF WRATH," Novels into Film (Baltimore, 1957), cited in A Companion, pp. 172-173.

manage this capital. (p. 316) Those who did so successfully endured and bought out those who failed. However, in becoming large owners, they lost their love of the land and became absorbed primarily in capital and land valued by "principal plus interest."

And all their love was thinned with money, and all their fierceness dribbled away in interest until they were no longer farmers at all, but ... little manufacturers who must sell before they can make. ... And it came about that owners no longer worked on their farms. They farmed on paper; and they forgot the land, the smell, the feel of it, and remembered only that they owned it, remembered only what they gained and lost by it. (pp. 316-317)

As farming became an industry instead of a family concern, it was necessary for the large growers to hire large numbers of workers to harvest the crops. " ... [The] owners followed Rome, although they did know it. They imported slaves, although they did not call them slaves: Chinese, Japanese, Mexicans, Filipinos." (p. 316) Later the owners found it profitable to hire the dispossessed from the Dust Bowl; because of their need, they worked for even lower wages than the Orientals. Steinbeck's most important social novel attacked this exploitation of migrant workers through low wages. He also felt that the large farms robbed the workers of their dignity:

A man may stand to use a scythe, a plow, a pitchfork; but he must crawl like a bug between the rows of lettuce, he must bend his back and pull his long bag between the cotton rows, he must go on his knees like a penitent across a cauliflower patch. (p. 316)

The sharecroppers fled the impersonal system of mortgages,

finance companies, and large company-owned farms in the Dust Bowl. They sought relief in California, but upon arrival, found themselves living in dirty shack towns and working for meager wages or not working at all.

The families found it difficult to leave their homes. When they sorted thier possessions in preparation for the trip to California, they asked,

How can we live without our lives? How will we know it's us without our past? ... How'll it be not to know what land's outside the door? How if you wake up in the night and know--and know the willow tree's not there? Can you live without the willow tree? Well, no, you can't. The willow tree is you. (pp. 120-121)

The need to identify with something was so strong that when the Joads were finally ready to leave their farm, they transferred their thoughts to the truck: " ... this was the new hearth, the living center of the family: half passenger car and half truck" (p. 136)

Some of the people were unable to accomplish this transfer. Like Joseph Wayne in To a God Unknown, who broke up his family to fight the forces destroying his land, Muley Graves sent his family to California and stayed to harass the finance company. Grampa Joad, who, like Muley, refused to leave, made a comment reminiscent of Samuel Hamilton's in East of Eden: "This here's my country. I b'long here. ... I ain't a-goin'. This country ain't no good, but it's my country." (p. 152) Grampa's love for his land was so strong that the forced separation hastened his death. The preacher Casey made the association: "He was that place, an' he knowed

it. ... He died the minute you took 'im off the place." (p. 199.)

On the road to California, the Joads learned that ownership meant primarily power and the right to manipulate others as objects. The proprietor of an overnight camp charged the Joads fifty cents for camping space. When Tom refused to pay and mentioned his intention to sleep by the roadside, the camp owner warned of the deputy who enforced the state law against sleeping out or vagrancy.

The large owners in California were able to deny the migrants their desire for land and to offer minimum wages; ownership meant the power to refuse another his needs.

The attitudes of the migrants to each other and the small owners' manner toward them contrast with and highlight the brutality of the large owners. In the camps, the migrants shared the little they had. The Joads received sympathy from a small farmer whose situation was close to their own, for he was in the power of the large combines. "The Association sets the rate, and we got to mind. If we don't--we ain't got no farm." (p. 574)

According to one critic, The Grapes of Wrath was intended to reform the exploitative economic system.⁵⁴ Bluestone points out the unstable conditions among Steinbeck's migrants:

After half a continent of hardship, Ma articulates her deepest feelings. She tells Tom, 'They was a time when we was on the lan'. They

⁵⁴French, Steinbeck, p. 97.

was a boundary to us then. Ol' folks died off, an' little fellas came, an' we was always one thing--we was the fambly--kinda whole and clear. An' now we ain't clear no more.' The deprivation of the native land, and the alienation of the new, become more than economic disasters; they threaten the only social organization upon which Ma Joad can depend.⁵⁵

This instability constituted a threat to the wealthy landowners.

... the Californians wanted many things, accumulation, social success, amusement, luxury, and a curious banking security; the new barbarians wanted only two things--land and food: and to them the two were one. And whereas the wants of the Californians were nebulous and undefined, the wants of the Okies were beside the roads
(p. 318)

The danger to the property owners was the uniting of the dispossessed and the change from "I lost my land" to "We lost our land." (p. 206)

If you who own things people must have could understand this the change from "I" to "we", you might preserve yourself. If you could separate causes from results, if you could know that Paine, Marx, Jefferson, Lenin, were results, not causes, you might survive. But that you cannot know. For the quality of owning freezes you forever in- to "I" and cuts you off forever from the "we."⁵⁶

⁵⁵Bluestone, p. 174.

⁵⁶Thomas Jefferson, too, had noted the wretchedness caused by the concentration of property in too few hands and proposed a partial solution. "The property of this country Europe and especially France is absolutely concentrated in a very few hands I asked myself what could be the reason that so many should be permitted to beg who are willing to work, in a country where there is a very considerable proportion of uncultivated lands? ... I am conscious that an equal division of property is impracticable. But the consequences of this enormous inequality producing much misery to the bulk of mankind, legislators cannot invent too many devices for subdividing property The earth is given as a common stock for man to labour and live

Disaster for the large land holders seemed imminent because they ignored the needs of the workers:

And the great owners, who must lose their land in an upheaval, the great owners with access to history, with eyes to read history and to know the great fact: when property accumulates in too few hands it is taken away. And that companion fact: when a majority of the people are hungry and cold they will take by force what they need. And the little screaming fact sounds through all history: repression works only to strengthen and knit the repressed. The great owners ignored the three cries of history. The land fell into fewer hands, the number of the dispossessed increased, every effort of the great owners was directed at repression. ... And the great owners, who had become through their holdings both more and less than men, ran to their destruction (pp. 324-325)

Steinbeck seems to attribute the large accumulations of holdings by the Californians to insecurity. Commenting on the "newspaper fella" who owned a million acres on the coast, Casey, the preacher, said, "If he needs a million acres to make him feel rich, seems to me he needs it 'cause he feels awful poor inside hisself, and if he's poor in hisself, there ain't no million acres gonna make him feel rich (p. 282)

Steinbeck retained this idea in The Log from the Sea of Cortez, which was published two years later in 1941.

Physiological man does not require this paraphernalia to exist, but the whole man does. He is the only animal who lives outside of himself, whose drive is in external things--property, houses But having projected himself

on It is not too soon to provide by every possible means that as few as possible shall be without a little portion of land. The small land holders are the most precious part of a state. Jefferson to Madison, Thomas Jefferson on Democracy, ed. Saul K. Padover (New York, 1939), pp. 214-215.

into these external complexities, he is them. His house, his automobile are a part of him and a large part of him. This is beautifully demonstrated by a thing doctors know--that when a man loses his possessions a very common result is sexual impotence. (p. 87)

Steinbeck's friend, Ed Ricketts, correlated the over-armorment of the great reptiles and the over-accumulation of the great owners. Just as the reptiles became extinct, the great owners would become extinct. (p. xxxiii) Steinbeck also noted that the mutations among men have often had "destructive, rather than survival value." Man, too, has mutations, and "our mutation, of which ... the collective farm ... and the mass production of food are evidences or even symptoms, might well correspond to the thickening armor of the great reptiles--a tendency that can end only in extinction." (p.88)

Ricketts and Steinbeck both believed the propertyless would survive. Ricketts, referring to the Cannery Row bums, predicted they would survive because they were not owned by property. Likewise, Steinbeck felt that to be propertyless or insecure was to be strong and enduring while to be secure was to become weak and defenseless:

One can think of the attached and dominant human who has captured the place, the property, and the security. He dominates his area. ... One would say that he is safe, that he would have many children, and that his seed would in a short time litter the world. But in his fight for dominance he has pushed out others of his species who were not so fit to dominate, and perhaps these have become wanderers, improperly clothed, ill fed, having no security and no fixed base. These should really perish, but the reverse seems true. The dominant human, in security, grows soft and

fearful. ... The lean and hungry grow strong, and the strongest of them are selected out. Having nothing to lose and all to gain, these selected hungry and rapacious ones develop attack rather than defense techniques, and become strong in them, so that one day the dominant man is eliminated and the strong and hungry wanderer takes his place. (Cortez, p. 95)

Steinbeck had dealt with the same idea in The Grapes of Wrath. Ma Joad said, "Rich fellas come up an' they die, an' their kids ain't no good, an' they die out. But, Tom, we keep on comin'." (p. 383)

Ma Joad believed that her stock would continue, but she also realized that an effort had to be made in order to endure. Joseph Fontenrose contends that while they were property owners, Ma Joad was concerned only with her family; but the loss of the property forced her to be concerned with other people and their needs. She became aware of the collective need of the people.⁵⁷ Tom Joad came to the same realization of the need for cooperation; he knew that the wealthy owners would not voluntarily correct their injustices, so he advocated that the people join together and "Throw out the cops that ain't our people. All work together for our own thing--all farm our own lan'." (p. 571) Of this group cooperation, John S. Kennedy comments:

The social character of property, the legitimacy and desirability of social ownership of what is indispensable to the common good, the incomparable value and profoundly Christian character of voluntary cooperation and joint endeavor--these are not being called into question. But Steinbeck means something more,

⁵⁷Fontenrose; pp. 73-74.

something different. Just here we are coming to grips with the central point in Steinbeck's concept of life: namely that its fullness is found only in the group and never in the individual.⁵⁸

Kennedy's conclusion concerning Steinbeck's concept of life is essentially correct; however, he may be in error to say that the fullness of life is never found in the individual. One of Steinbeck's primary characters, Danny in Tortilla Flat, found the group life oppressive and fled its confining atmosphere in an effort to find his freedom again.

The appearance of The Grapes of Wrath in the latter part of the depression elicited many charges that it was Communist propaganda. The editor of Collier's said, "... we ... think that The Grapes of Wrath, as charged by many critics, is propaganda for the idea that we ought to trade our system for the Russian system."⁵⁹ Harry Thornton Moore recognized leftist tendencies, but did not accuse Steinbeck of favoring Communism: "... it [the novel] is in the van of the proletarian movement in literature without officially being a part of that movement."⁶⁰ Of the many critics of Steinbeck at least one recognized recognized the Jeffersonian or Jacksonian overtones.⁶¹ Margaret Marshall perhaps comes

⁵⁸Kennedy, p. 124.

⁵⁹"THE GRAPES OF WRATH," Collier's, September 2, 1939, p. 54.

⁶⁰Moore, p. 66.

⁶¹The Jeffersonian trait in The Grapes of Wrath has been investigated quite thoroughly by Chester E. Misinger, "Jeffersonian Agrarianism in THE GRAPES OF WRATH," University of Kansas City Review, XIV (Autumn, 1947), 149-154.

closer than other critics to understanding Steinbeck's purpose in writing the novel: "What the Okies and, one suspects, what Steinbeck wants for them--a little white house and a piece of land of their own--sounds more like the old formula of forty acres and a mule than 'bolshevik collectives.'"⁶²

Indeed, what Steinbeck and been criticizing were the collectives which capitalism had established. This reader receives the impression that Steinbeck was attacking not the concept of private ownership but the selfish misuse of property.

The novels discussed in this third group have dealt with one particular period which called for treatment by social critics. The Winter of Our Discontent⁶³ was written twelve years after The Grapes of Wrath and was set in a more prosperous period. However, in it Steinbeck examined a similar theme: the efforts of a middle-class man to regain the position which he had lost with the deterioration of his estate.

Part of the Hawley estate had been lost because of bad advice, and Ethan Hawley had lost his grocery market through inexperience in business. The only thing remaining of the former possessions was his house, which Ethan refused to let go on any terms. The loss of the property was accompanied by a decline of social prestige. Mary, his wife, first

⁶²Margaret Marshall, "Writers in the Wilderness," The Nation, November 25, 1939, p. 379.

⁶³John Steinbeck, The Winter of Our Discontent (New York, 1961), The pages cited hereafter will be placed parenthetically in the text.

showed dissatisfaction when she said, "... 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." (p. 39)

The importance of owning property is established early in the novel. When Ethan met his derelict friend, Danny, he suggested that Danny sell his country property in order to obtain money for a new start. However, Danny refused because

'... it's the property me. It's Daniel Taylor. Long as I have it no Christy sons of bitches can tell me what to do and no bastards can lock me up for my own good. ... I'm better off than you are. I'm not a clerk.' (p. 57)

When Ethan later reflected on Danny's comments and on Baker the banker's offer to re-establish the Hawley fortunes, he concluded that Baker's friendship was made possible by his ownership of the house:

'I understood the house of Baker and the house of Hawley, the dark walls and curtains, the funereal rubber plants unacquainted with sun; the portraits and prints and remembrances of other times in pottery and scrimshaw, in fabrics and wood which bolt it to reality and to permanence. Chairs change with style and comfort but chests and tables, bookcases and desks, relate to a solid past. Hawley was more than a family. It was a house. And that was why poor Danny held onto Taylor Meadow. Without it, no family--and soon not a even a name. ... It may be that some men require a house and a history to assure themselves that they exist--it's a slim enough connection at most. In the store I was a failure and a clerk, in my house I was Hawley Baker could offer a hand to Hawley. Without my house, I too would have been canceled. It was not man to man but house to house.' (p. 122)

In the novel one may see the advantages of property ownership, but the deceitful practices property promotes are present also. Baker had advised Ethan's father to in-

vest in contracts which were certain to fail and had loaned the elder Hawley money on his property. When the investments failed, Baker easily foreclosed the mortgaged and obtained the property while maintaining an appearance of honesty.

While Danny's property was important to him, it was also important to the town because it was perfectly level making it the only place suitable for an airfield. Baker knew that the town was being considered as a place for an airfield and resolved to obtain the meadow for his own profit. However, his attempt to get Danny to sign the title over to him by presenting an expensive bottle of whiskey failed. When Danny found out about the airport, he felt that he had acquired power to force his will upon the city officials. Ethan pointed out that his attempts would fail:

'A man of property is a precious vessel. Already I've heard that the kindest thing would be to put you in an institution where you would get the care you need. ... The judge, you know him, would rule you incompetent to handle property. He would appoint a guardian, and I can guess which one. And all this would be expensive, so of course your property would have to be sold to pay the costs, and guess who would be there to buy it.' (p. 134)

With the avowed intent of preventing the theft of Danny's land, Ethan offered to lend him the money to effect his cure. Ethan was fairly sure of the results of the loan: Danny would drink himself to death leaving Ethan as the sole owner of Taylor Meadow.

'I knew Danny was gone. ... I knew what I done, and Danny knew it too. ... Maybe it's only the first time that's miserable. It has to be faced. In business and in politics a man must carve and

maul his way through men to get to be King of the Mountain. Once there, he can be great and kind-- but he must get there first.' (p. 173)

Ethan's attempts "to get there" included a plan to regain the store in which he clerked. Ethan discovered that his employer, Marullo, had entered the United States illegally; by reporting Marullo to the immigration bureau, Ethan thought to put himself in the position to repurchase his store at a low price. Ironically, Marullo gave the store to Ethan because he felt that Ethan was the one man who would not try to cheat him; the store was a reward for honesty.

The acquisition of the store resulted in the elevation of both Ethan and Mary. Baker, needing subservient town politicians to carry out his program of progress, suggested that Ethan become the town manager because he was of good family, reliable, respected, and was also a property owner and business man. The effect on Mary was more personal:

' ... she was different, would always be different. She didn't have to say it. The set of her neck said it. She could hold up her head. We were gentlefolks again. ... I think she was no more "poor Mary Hawley, she works so hard." She had become Mrs. Ethan Allen Hawley and would ever be. And I had to keep her that.' (pp. 269-270)

In the first three novels examined in this chapter, Steinbeck dealt with characters who attempted to obtain or regain their positions in a straight forward manner and through collective efforts. Those attempts failed. Hawley, in The Winter of Our Discontent, carried out his devious actions alone and in secret. He, alone, was successful. This

last novel shows pessimism. Perhaps this 1961 novel with its dishonest protagonist gives us a realistic instead of a crusading Steinbeck.

CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSION

This study set out to examine three main themes on property in the novels of John Steinbeck. The first of these positions was that of the carefree Bohemian life where owning property meant a loss of freedom and happiness. Upon losing one of his houses, Danny, in Tortilla Flat, said, "My friends have been cool to me because they owed me money. Now we can be free and happy again." (p. 26) Juxtaposed to this theme was a different idea in Chapter Two. In the second group of writings examined, the owners usually loved their land and homes which served as centers of the families. This attachment was typified by the Whiteside story in The Pastures of Heaven where an attempt was made to establish roots for the family. A third prominent position taken by Steinbeck is that there exists among men a universal hunger land. In In Dubious Battle, this hunger was voiced by Mac: "We never had a chance to own anything We'd like to own something and plant trees." (p. 301)

The presentation of these different attitudes points to one question: does Steinbeck's different treatments of the

subject indicate an inconsistency, or does it reveal the complexity and depth of his thought and artistry? I would suggest that there is no major inconsistency in Steinbeck's writings, but that the paradox arises from the very nature of property ownership. This view may be seen in the presentation of the character Elisa in "The Chrysanthemums." She was quite satisfied with her status as a property owner, but at the same time, she felt confined and restricted. Tortilla Flat supports this view even more strongly. For every advantage of property ownership there was a disadvantage. The house cemented a fine friendship, but its ownership was a great weight upon Danny.

I would further suggest that the different views arise partly from Steinbeck's treating the different needs of different people. The boys in Cannery Row could have worked anytime they wished: "Everyone of us keeps a job for a month or more when we take one. That's why we can always get a job when we need one." (p. 292) In the three social novels of the late 1930's, Steinbeck was describing the needs of that period and universalized the desire for property in an attempt to correct the injustices of the time. The latest work of Steinbeck, Travels with Charley, supports the view that he attempted to show the needs of the people. In the travelogue, he noted that some people now purchase mobile trailers instead of permanent houses and lots because

If a plant or a factory closes down, you're not trapped with property you can't sell. Suppose the husband has a job and is buying a house and

there's a layoff. The value goes out of his house. But if he has a mobile home he rents a trucking service and moves on and he hasn't lost anything. (p. 88)

The purchase of mobile homes has the added attraction of no real estate taxes. Steinbeck observes that an increasing number of people are enjoying the benefits of property tax assessments while not paying any themselves.

The concept of real property is deeply implanted in us as the source and symbol of wealth. And now a vast number of people have found a way to bypass it. This might be applauded since we generally admire those who can escape taxes, were it not that the burden of this freedom falls with increasing weight of others. It is obvious that within a very short time a whole method of taxation will have to be devised, else the burden on real estate will be so great that no one will be able to afford it; far from being a source of profit, ownership will be a penalty, and this will be the apex of a pyramid of paradoxes. (p. 175)

This position of Steinbeck's may be faulty because he does not take into account the personal property taxes which most states levy.

Recalling the Whiteside story in The Pastures of Heaven, Steinbeck noticed that the mobile home owners care nothing for permanence or for buying property for future generations. In one interview, Steinbeck questioned a mobile home owner and his wife as to how they felt about the lack of "roots."

'How many people today have what you are talking about? What roots are there in an apartment twelve floors up? What roots are in a housing development of hundreds and thousands of small dwellings almost alike? My father came from Italy He grew up in Tuscany in a house where his family had lived maybe a thousand years. That's roots for you, no running water, no toilet, and they cooked with charcoal or vine clippings.' ...

'Who's got permanence? Factory closes down ... you move on where it's better. You got roots you sit and starve.' (pp. 91-92)

Steinbeck seems to resolve his theories of property ownership when he recounts the history of man:

In the pattern-thinking about roots I and most other people have left two things out of consideration. Could it be that Americans are a restless people, a mobile people, never satisfied with where they are as a matter of selection? The pioneers, the immigrants who peopled the continent, were the restless ones in Europe. The steady ones stayed home and are still there. But every one of us, except the Negroes forced here as slaves, are descended from the restless ones, the wayward ones who were not content to stay at home. Wouldn't it be unusual if we had not inherited this tendency? And the fact is we have. But that's the short view. What are roots and how long have we had them? If our species has existed for a couple of million years, what is its history? Our remote ancestors followed the game, moved with the food supply, and fled from evil weather, from ice and the changing seasons. Then after millennia beyond thinking they lived with their food supply. Then of necessity they followed the grass that fed their flocks in endless wanderings. Only when agriculture came into practice--and that's not very long ago in terms of the whole history--did a place achieve meaning and value and permanence. But land is a tangible, and tangibles have a way of getting into few hands. Thus it was that one man wanted ownership of land and at the same time wanted servitude because someone had to work it. Roots were in ownership of land, intangible and immovable possessions. In this view we are a restless species with a very short history of roots, and those not widely distributed. Perhaps we have overrated roots as a psychic need. Maybe the greater urge, the deeper and more ancient is the need, the will, the hunger to be somewhere else. (pp. 93-94)

Steinbeck notes in passing that tangibles concentrate in a few hands; he accepts it as a natural trend and at this point does not seem to condemn the tendency toward "collec-

tives." In recognizing man's rootless nature, Steinbeck has identified his own wanderlust with man at large. This is a new word for a new age, and it marks Steinbeck as an artist who is able to grow and change with the time he lives in.

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