



Image from: [From 1934–39, some 500,000 or more farmers and... in Encyclopedia of Environment and Society](#)

Summary Article: **Steinbeck, John (1902-1968)**

From *Encyclopedia of the Environment in American Literature*

Novelist, short story writer, journalist and Nobel Prize winner, John Steinbeck chronicled the struggles and aspirations of ordinary people with compassion and an abiding commitment to social justice. His subjects were migrant workers and striking fruit pickers, bus drivers, peasants, farmers, scientists and prostitutes, the homeless and dispossessed. Yet, although his 1939 masterpiece, *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), would redefine the nation's moral and political compass as few works of fiction have, Steinbeck's novels are more than sociological studies or political tracts. Deeply ecological, his narratives seamlessly connect the social and biological landscapes of what has come to be called "Steinbeck Country," the hills, valleys, mountains, rivers, and coastlines of Central California. "Man," Steinbeck writes in *The Log from the Sea of Cortez*, "is related to the whole thing, related inextricably to all reality, known and unknowable" (217).

Born in Salinas, California, in 1902, the son of the County Treasurer and a former schoolteacher, Steinbeck rapidly developed an intimate knowledge of the coast and hill country of Central California. He supported himself from boyhood, working summers and weekends on nearby ranches. After graduating from Salinas High School in 1919, he attended Stanford University sporadically for six years, studying English, history, and biology, before leaving in 1925 to pursue a writing career in New York. Returning to California a year later, he struggled for a decade to master his craft with little artistic or financial recognition. *Tortilla Flat* (1935), a comic novel of life among the paisanos of Monterey, marked his first popular and critical success. It was rapidly followed, however, by *In Dubious Battle*, *Of Mice and Men*, *The Long Valley*, and *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), a series of powerful fictions drawn from his first hand experience of the lives and struggles of agricultural laborers in the fields and orchards of California. While these novels remain his greatest achievement, Steinbeck continued for another three decades to be one of the most important chroniclers of the American scene, writing fiction (*Cannery Row*, *The Pearl*, *East of Eden*), journalism (*Once There Was a War*, *A Russian Journal*, *Travels with Charley*), and natural history (*The Log from the Sea of Cortez*). He was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1962.

In 1930 Steinbeck met marine biologist Ed Ricketts, beginning a close friendship and intellectual collaboration that would last until Ricketts's death in 1948. Ricketts's biological laboratory, located on Monterey's Cannery Row, was a magnet for artists, writers, scientists, and the area's bohemian population, a place where friends gathered for food, drink, music, and the pursuit of intellectual passions that ranged from marine biology to poetry and Asian philosophy. Ricketts had done his undergraduate work at the University of Chicago under W. C. Allee, a pioneer ecologist who studied the effects of environmental stimuli on cooperative group behavior among invertebrates. As Steinbeck and Ricketts surveyed the tide pools of the California coast in the early 1930s, they theorized about similar socio-biological patterns in humans, and together explored what they came to call "non-teleological thinking," which replaces traditional cause-effect logic with a Zen-like acceptance of "is." Their wide-ranging discussions profoundly influenced the young novelist. In the spring of 1940, using royalties from the recently published *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), Steinbeck and Ricketts rented a

boat, hired a crew, and explored the intertidal habitats of the Gulf of California, resulting in *The Log from the Sea of Cortez* (1951). Ricketts himself became the inspiration for some of Steinbeck's most memorable characters: Doc in *Cannery Row* (1945) and *Sweet Thursday* (1954), Doc Burton in *In Dubious Battle* (1936), and Casy in *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), whose connection to nature is drawn heavily from Ricketts's holistic philosophy. "There was the hills, an' there was me, an we wasn't separate no more," Casy tells Tom Joad. "We was one thing. An' there was me an' the hills an' there was the stars an' the black sky, an we was all one thing. An' that one thing was holy" (*Grapes of Wrath* 83).

Throughout his career, Steinbeck's novels would examine the interconnectedness of human culture and the natural world. In *The Pearl* (1956) the small Mexican fishing community that serves as the novel's setting is an organic whole, coexisting with other communities in the natural world and subject to the same natural laws. It is "a thing like a colonial animal," with its own nervous system and its own emotional life (*Pearl* 27). Like any living organism, the town's "pulse and vibrating nerves" (27) react to external stimuli, and its interconnected ganglia transmit information. In *Cannery Row* (1945) the community of marginalized outcasts and eccentrics is introduced by a prayer to "Our Father who art in Nature" (15), and framed by a detailed description of life in the Great Tide Pool off Pacific Grove. In *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) the Joad's westward journey is equally patterned on biological models.

Beyond their ecological emphasis on human communities as interconnected habitats, Steinbeck's narratives exhibit a strong land ethic and environmental awareness. *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) chronicles an environmental disaster. It begins in drought and ends in flood, in between exploring the impact of a largely man-made catastrophe in ways that anticipate our current political and environmental concerns. *The Log from the Sea of Cortez* warned of the coming environmental impact of increased development and industrialized fishing practices on the Gulf of California; and in his last book, *America and Americans* (1966), Steinbeck decries how "our rivers are poisoned by reckless dumping of sewage and toxic wastes, the air of our cities is filthy and dangerous to breathe from the belching of coal, coke, oil, and gasoline" (144). He finds hope, nevertheless, in his sense of America's increased outrage over continued environmental mismanagement. By his death in December 1968, a new ecological and environmental consciousness was emerging in America, and few writers contributed more to that spiritual and scientific evolution than Steinbeck himself.

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