

How to Organize a Steinbeck
Book or Film Discussion Group

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Introduction

The centennial of the birth of John Steinbeck provides an opportunity to re-assess the work of a great American writer. With such titles as *Of Mice and Men*, *The Grapes of Wrath*, and *Cannery Row*, Steinbeck is one of the most widely read authors around the world, by people of all ages.

In 2001, the Mercantile Library of New York, the Center for Steinbeck Studies at San Jose State University in California, and the National Steinbeck Center in Salinas, California, received a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) to organize, present and support public programs during the centennial year of his birth on the life and work of the author who, in his lifetime, was awarded the O. Henry Prize for Short Story, the Pulitzer Prize, and the Nobel Prize for Literature.

As part of this effort, through The Steinbeck Centennial Library Project, NEH provided grants to 100 libraries across the country; each library committed to hosting Steinbeck programs for the public. Interest was high, and grants were limited only by the funds available. Indeed, six additional libraries were privately funded.

In addition, the NEH Steinbeck Centennial grant has also supported the development of materials that will help libraries (and other literary-minded organizations, such as bookstores, literary centers, and private book discussion groups) to organize their own study of Steinbeck's work using this booklet and a traveling photographic exhibition from the Center for Steinbeck Studies.

The following booklet is not meant to be a guide on how to run a general interest book discussion group. There are several books on the market that can assist with the mechanics of the group (for instance, *The Book Group Book*, edited by Ellen Slezak, Chicago Review Press, 2000). Nor is it meant to be a comprehensive look at Steinbeck's life and work.

Instead, it is meant for readers in book discussion groups who wish to reach their own conclusions about the world created by John Steinbeck and his interpreters. Through it, we hope that readers will develop their own relationship with John Steinbeck's works and a deeper appreciation for his artistry and engagement.

This guide could not have been developed without the finan-

cial support of the National Endowment for the Humanities, and the enthusiastic support of the Steinbeck Centennial project from NEH program officers Thomas Phelps and David Martz. Our special thanks to Anne Keisman and Katie Rodger, Centennial Coordinators, for their help in making sure the Centennial achieves its goals; Michael Millman of Penguin Putnam, publisher of John Steinbeck's work; Gene Winick, Sam Pinkus, Elizabeth Winick, and Evva Pryor of McIntosh & Otis, the Steinbeck estate's literary agents; Amanda Holder of the National Steinbeck Center; and family members Thom Steinbeck, Jean Boone, and, last but surely not least, Elaine Steinbeck.

The Steinbeck Discussion Group

Book discussion groups generally have their own personalities, culture and approach to the works they discuss, depending on the length of time they have existed, the personalities of the people involved, and the venues in which they take place. The following paragraphs outline one approach to these discussion groups. We recommend that, in using this guide, you adapt it to your own circumstances and look at it, more or less, as a case study of the groups we have run at The Mercantile Library of New York over the past twenty years.

Though the impetus for developing this guide was the centennial of John Steinbeck's birth, Steinbeck actually makes a particularly attractive subject for a discussion group, in part because of his involvement in film, which makes a wonderful adjunct to the book discussions. Many of the films based on his novels, stories and screenplays are available in library collections or may be rented from video stores. Viewing them as one interpretation of Steinbeck's work can spark lively discussions of the literary work itself.

John Steinbeck and the Single Author Discussion Series

Focusing on a single author rather than ranging widely in world literature both poses different problems for a discussion group and allows for opportunities to delve deeply into how that author saw the world, and how he or she expresses this in a body of work. Across the United States, successful discussion groups have focused on single authors, most of which have grown out of fan "clubs." These have ranged from those who follow the popular mystery writer Harry Stephen Keeler to the French aesthete Marcel Proust.

John Steinbeck provides an interesting case for a discussion group. Though one can characterize his body of work as, in the main, socially engaged and focused on the common man (and woman), it also roamed from the local to the international, from the quietly heroic to the greatly heroic. In regard to film, Steinbeck was often closely involved in the development of the film itself or worked with the film's writers and producers in the adaptation of his prose. To focus on Steinbeck alone is to discover the essential humanity of the writer, and to re-visit the questions that held the nation in thrall from the 1930s to the 1960s, and are still

valid as we enter a new century: the Depression, World War II, the Cold War, and Vietnam. Steinbeck was a writer fully engaged in his times.

The Size of Your Group

At The Mercantile Library of New York, we have had discussion groups that ranged in size from 12 to, believe it or not, 70. The former generally results in a good discussion if most of the people participate, the latter if most of the people don't. Over time we have become comfortable with registering about thirty people for a group, which means that about twenty will attend any given session. However, one should realize that The Mercantile Library offers an institutional setting, with one room that, in particular, lends itself to having as many as 50 at a discussion and still allows everyone to be involved. Other venues will allow for groups of different sizes. A living room might make it impossible to have more than ten, for example.

In any of our groups, we make it clear to people that, although they are not required to participate in the discussions—we don't want to scare shy people away—we would prefer that they do so. This, and the fact that group members will be focusing on a single author for an extended period of time, helps build camaraderie.

Who Should Lead the Group

What makes a single-author discussion group different from those that range more widely is that it allows for an intimacy with the author's work. In such a case, the choice of a group leader is an interesting one. In many cases, in a library, a librarian is the first, but not always the best, choice. In some cases, the librarian may not be available or would not feel qualified to lead a series on a single author. A local college or university scholar may be a good choice, or a high school teacher, which may be particularly appropriate in the case of Steinbeck because his work is so widely read and taught in American high schools. Another approach might be to have a rotating leader, in which a group member is asked to prepare questions for discussion for each book to be discussed. One thing is certain: The choice of the group leader will have a major impact on the type of discussions you will have. An expert in the topic will only be a good leader if he or she elicits comments from the participants, not if the discussion devolves into a lecture or a

meeting dominated by a single person.

At The Mercantile Library of New York, we have taken several approaches, but the approach that works best for us is to have either a librarian or an American literature scholar lead the group. Either leader should come prepared with a list of between six and twenty questions about the book (for Steinbeck, these are already provided for you later in this booklet). Some will be broad and others specific, and often relate to such topics as society, morality, artistic approaches, etc. In the case of Steinbeck, such broad categories will generally work, perhaps because, though he was interested in narrative structure, Steinbeck's appeal is often in the content of his work, and less obviously in narrative structure and aesthetics. For more information on approaches to discussing Steinbeck, see the chapters "Introduction to Steinbeck's Major Literary Works" and "Basic Themes and Discussion Questions."

Having academic scholars may indeed be appropriate for your discussions, as they might not be for discussions on, for example, Joyce and Proust, which can often end up in arcane discussions of cultural references or narrative style. In fact, retired university faculty or graduate students might make an attractive alternative if librarians are either unavailable or do not feel comfortable or qualified to lead such a focused discussion.

If you do not have an ongoing relationship with a local university English department, it can sometimes seem daunting to establish one. A good first step is to call the English department at the local college or university and ask if there is a professor who teaches Steinbeck or, if not, American literature courses, and then speak to that person. If that person is not available to work with you, it is a good idea to ask him or her for suggestions. These may lead you to good graduate students or high school teachers in your area who are enthusiastic about Steinbeck and his work. One should be aware, however, that enthusiasm, though it is important, may lead discussion leaders into dominating a discussion. A good book discussion leader draws comments from participants by using key points at key moments of intervention, not by lecturing. When seeking a discussion leader among scholars, this should be made clear.

A third approach to group leadership is to have a different member of the group lead each discussion. In such a case, it is a good idea to ask each person to prepare discussion questions beforehand. She or he can then either distribute them him- or herself at the beginning of the session or use them as a discussion guide.

An important element in organizing any book discussion is to make sure that the participants stick to the discussion of the book and not wander into the sharing of personal experience. Prepared questions can often help avoid this situation.

Where and When Should the Sessions Be Held

At The Mercantile Library, we have sessions both in the middle of the day and the evening. Our long-time novels discussion group (founded in 1969) meets on the second Thursday of every month throughout the year from 12:15 to about 1:45 p.m. and participants were once encouraged to bring their lunch (but no one does anymore; it's too much of a distraction). Daytime participants are generally retired, since retirement allows them the time to follow this schedule. Our evening book groups on Proust, Shakespeare, French literature, great books, and the opera have a broader constituency. We hold them from 5:30 to 7 p.m., just after work but before the dinner hour. Some of our participants have taken to continuing their discussions over dinner.

We designate a quiet room for the discussions and generally hold them in the round. This keeps people from having to crane their necks, especially when replying to what is said by another participant. It means moving furniture around, but it provides a more conversational atmosphere than auditorium or classroom layouts. The group leader sits among the group, with no designated spot each month, which we believe helps keep the group from creating a "primus inter pares" situation of "first among equals."

An interesting aspect about Steinbeck and his appeal to younger readers is that a mid-afternoon or an after-school session might be very appealing. If the local high school can convince its students to attend a library-based book discussion, the value of mixing teenagers with retirees in a book discussion can be enormous, especially with Steinbeck, whose work was very popular during a time that many of today's retirees were coming of age. The difference in perspective might be enlightening for everyone involved.

To do this, one should contact the Head of the English Department of the local high school and propose a cross-generational approach, using the aforementioned reasons. Imagine someone who came of age in the 1930s or 1940s explaining *Tortilla Flat* or *The Moon is Down* to a teenager from the twenty-first century!

How Much Reading is Appropriate Between Sessions and What Editions To Use

The amount of text to be read will depend on how often you have your sessions and the type of work being read. Minimums are rarely required (even in the case of a close-reading group of the works of Marcel Proust, which averages about 10 pages a month) but setting a maximum may be necessary.

Steinbeck's prose tends to be strong, clear and accessible, so daily reading is not a particularly difficult assignment, and is, in fact, usually a pleasure. If your group meets monthly, it is not unreasonable to expect the group to read a full novel or collection of short stories for each session. If the group meets weekly or bi-weekly, one can expect to read between 100 and 150 pages a week. The group itself should decide as it takes up each book, so that all members are comfortable.

As for which edition to use, Steinbeck and Viking Penguin have had a continuous relationship since 1936, one of the longest tenures between an author and publishing house in American history (Hemingway and Fitzgerald with Scribners are other such instances). Older Viking editions are perfectly acceptable and are often available in libraries. Newer Penguin editions are available in most bookstores or on-line from the National Steinbeck Center in Salinas (www.steinbeckstore.org) or other on-line bookstores. Penguin and the Steinbeck estate have also licensed the venerable Library of America to publish some of Steinbeck's work. These may also be available at libraries or for purchase at bookstores or on-line.

If at all possible, it can be beneficial to the group to read the same edition. A discussion of the work often leads people to quote or refer to specific passages and it is easier if all the books have the same pagination. Penguin's Twentieth Century Classics often include solid introductions to the work at hand.

The question of how many of Steinbeck's books are appropriate for discussion is an interesting one. In a later section, there will be suggested discussion questions for eight of Steinbeck's books, all fiction. However, other Steinbeck works may be appropriate. The Monterey novels—*Tortilla Flat*, *Cannery Row*, and *Sweet Thursday*—might be read all as a piece, over several sessions. Steinbeck's Mexican works—*The Pearl*, *The Forgotten Village*, and the screenplay for *Viva Zapata!*—might also engender

interesting discussion, especially for those interested in Mexico and its history.

Allowing the Use of Outside Criticism and Biography

Many book discussion groups have members who enjoy reading the author's biography and criticism of his work before coming to the session, which has the advantage of providing information about the work that might not be available simply by reading the text. Sometimes participants will have read other works by Steinbeck that illuminate the text being read (e.g., there is a very illuminating passage in Steinbeck's *Sweet Thursday* that can have an impact on the discussion of *Of Mice and Men*). Such helpmeets can be valuable; they may also interfere with the reader's personal interpretation of the book by introducing an "expert" reading that can intimidate other readers. There has long been a controversy about the use of biography in particular and a question about whether studying the author's life helps or hurts the reader in understanding the work of art; this critical approach was championed in the nineteenth century by the great French literary scholar Saint-Beuve and picked up in twentieth-century America by Edmund Wilson. One thing to remember in discussing fiction, however, is that the only "wrong" reading is the one that cannot be justified by pointing to something that occurs in the text.

A possible compromise when group members disagree about whether to use biography and criticism in discussing Steinbeck's works is to allow use of the former at the end of the session, as a review or re-cap, or as a sounding board to any conclusion reached. It can also be helpful to have one person in the group read Steinbeck's excellent letters, published in *John Steinbeck: A Life in Letters* (see bibliography). One thing to remember about the use of outside criticism is that discussion participants should feel perfectly free to disagree with the critic's conclusions or opinions.

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Introduction to Steinbeck's Major Literary Works

The following section provides a brief outline and guide to John Steinbeck's work and intellectual and artistic development. For additional discussions of these books, see the introductions to most individual works, published by Penguin Twentieth Century Classics.

THE APPRENTICE YEARS

Although John Steinbeck, rather like Faulkner, had an amazingly productive several years from the mid-1930s to the early 1940s, he did not spring forth as a major writer without years of practice. He decided that he wanted to be a writer at age 14, and he never abandoned his dream from high school on. He wrote daily most of his life—letters, diaries, stories, novels, plays, nonfiction. The title of Jackson Benson's splendid biography is particularly appropriate: *The True Adventures of John Steinbeck, Writer* (cited as Benson throughout this booklet).

CUP OF GOLD (1929)

While living in the Sierra Nevada mountains at Lake Tahoe, Steinbeck spent two years working on his first novel. It is a romantic tale about a seventeenth-century Welsh pirate, Henry Morgan, who leaves home to seek his dream vision, his grail. As a young boy he feels separate from his countrymen: "Silly, spineless creatures, he thought them, with no dream and no will to leave their sodden, dumpy huts." Henry, like many other of Steinbeck's central characters, seeks to realize a dream apart from the commonplace, the ordinary. The novel is written in an ornate style.

THE PASTURES OF HEAVEN (1932)

The Pastures of Heaven—third written of Steinbeck's apprentice works, but second published—is a series of short stories, framed by two episodes that convey the possibilities inherent in the California landscape. The stories themselves are about the denizens of a valley who are, in some way, cut off or lonely or rejected by the majority. The linking device throughout these stories is the Monroe family, newcomers to the valley who disrupt others' lives, of-

ten unwittingly. Steinbeck based these stories, as he did so many others, on people he knew; he wrote a friend that "There is, about twelve miles from Monterey, a valley in the hills called Corral de Tierra. Because I am using its people I have named it Las Pasturas del Cielo. The valley was for years known as the happy valley because of the unique harmony which existed among its twenty families. About ten years ago a new family moved in on one of the ranches. They were ordinary people, ill-educated but honest and as kindly as any. In fact, in their whole history I cannot find that they have committed a really malicious act nor an act which was not dictated by honorable expediency or out-and-out altruism. But about the Morans there was a flavor of evil. Everyone they came in contact with was injured. Every place they went dissension sprang up" (*John Steinbeck: A Life in Letters*, 42-43; cited subsequently as *SLL*).

TO A GOD UNKNOWN (1933)

This novel is one of Steinbeck's most ambitious, a stew of philosophical and religious ideas, of pantheistic visions. "The story is a parable," Steinbeck wrote to his college roommate. "The story of a race, growth and death. Each figure is a population, and the stones, the trees, the muscled mountains are the world—but not the world apart from man—the world and man—the one inseparable unit man plus his environment." That statement goes a long way to explain the concerns not only of this novel but also of Steinbeck's entire oeuvre. He envisions man as intimately connected with place, with the inhabitants of that place. Joseph Wayne, the central figure of this novel, is so determined to fuse his person with the land he homesteads that he, eventually, becomes nearly synonymous with the land itself.

The story line is simple, one that Steinbeck will use again—a family moving West to settle and bring their dreams to fruition. Joseph Wayne and his brothers represent different philosophic and religious visions, however, and in their various responses to Joseph, the land, and the drought that blasts the land, Steinbeck explores a variety of approaches to spiritual truths and environmental ethics.

THE LONG VALLEY (1938)

This is a collection of Steinbeck's short stories, some representing his finest work. Included in this volume are "The Chrysanthemums," "Flight," "Johnny Bear" and "The Red Pony," as well as other strong stories. Most are set in the Salinas Valley, and they are about ordinary people, often lonely, isolated, uncommunicative. Many stories are about marriage or the tension between sexes. A few are initiation tales. Several treat the theme of artistic intention, the meaning of creativity and what it demands of the artist ("The White Quail" and "Johnny Bear" in particular). Steinbeck's strong sense of place, especially the beauty of the Salinas Valley, is clearly evoked in each tale. Though the collection was published in 1938, the stories were written earlier, most in 1934 when Steinbeck was poor, discouraged, and desperate to get published. Magazines paid about \$50 for stories, which seemed like a lot to the struggling writer.

THE LABOR TRILOGY

For the past sixty years, John Steinbeck's reputation has rested primarily on his socially engaged novels of the 1930s, what might be called his labor trilogy: *In Dubious Battle* (1936), *Of Mice and Men* (1937), and *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), the latter awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 1940. Each is a searing examination of powerlessness, homelessness, gender dynamics and male friendship—and, in varying degrees in each novel—of group behavior, ecological holism, regionalism, and the dynamics of power. Any discussion of John Steinbeck probably begins with one of these texts.

IN DUBIOUS BATTLE (1936)

This novel was Steinbeck's first to focus on political upheaval and was, in its inception, an accident. Goaded by his feisty wife, Carol, and muckraking journalist Lincoln Steffens—then living in Carmel—John attended a few meetings of the John Reed Club in Carmel. He didn't like the meetings—he wasn't a joiner by nature and didn't much like the Communist Party—but he was awakened to the reality of the political situation in California. Steinbeck decided to interview two labor organizers, Cicil McKiddy and Carl Williams, who were being secreted in nearby Seaside, another hamlet on Monterey Bay. Their stories about 1933 labor strikes in

California were so intriguing, however, that Steinbeck decided to buy their material and turn it not into the biography of a strike organizer, his first idea, but into a novel. It is one of his finest.

The novel examines the various groups vying for power and place in California: the large landowners, the Communist Party (which moved into the state in the early 1930s to organize farmworkers, excluded from unions), and, of course, the workers themselves, who mostly wanted a self-sufficient existence. Steinbeck's sympathies were clearly with the last of these, and he saw the other two groups—communist organizers and powerful landed interests in California (the Associated Farmers)—as equally responsible for manipulating the workers for their own ends. Both organizers in the novel, Jim and Mac, are sympathetic characters in many ways—at different points in the novel—but both tend to place more emphasis on the end to be achieved than the toll their work takes on human lives, as the Growers Association wreaks havoc on the workers when they strike for better wages. The novel clearly reflects the tensions between the marginalized and the powerful, tensions that were apparent throughout Depression-era California.

OF MICE AND MEN (1937)

The title of *In Dubious Battle* was taken from Milton's *Paradise Lost*; his next book is a far more focused study of powerlessness, a novella about friends George Milton and Lennie Small (or a microcosm of *Battle*, Milton writ Small). *Of Mice and Men* is a gem, one of Steinbeck's most endearing texts because, in part, it charts the unlikely friendship of two men of the road (like Natty Bumppo and Chingachgook, Huck and Jim, Ishmael and Queequeg—migrants all). It is the quality of that friendship that may first attract readers, as it is fully evoked in the first chapter. The two depend on one another rather like husband and wife, father and son—or ego and id, brain and brawn. The interpretations are many. Clearly George has the words and plans, and Lennie has the heart and affection and devotion. Theirs can be seen as a sentimental story—and has been by some critics—but for most readers the bonds of friendship resonate throughout the text.

The characters assembled around these two represent either power or powerlessness. The ranch owner, Curley, and Curley's wife have varying degrees of power. The men in the bunkhouse, on the other hand, have little control over their lives—they are liv-

ing from job to job, and some cling desperately to their jobs—like old Candy or, exiled to the barn, the black man Crooks. One of the reasons that Lennie and George's relationship is so unusual to the other characters in the novel is that each is in his/her way a loner; and the book is as much about loneliness and isolation as it is about the power of friendship to cut against those conditions.

Of Mice and Men is also about a dream—"livin' off the fatta the land," as Lennie articulates repeatedly. It's a dream of male self-sufficiency, of land ownership, of independence, of a home, of a family re-envisioned. The book suggests the possibilities that have always been inherent in the American experience, and that is one reason for its long popularity.

That and the fact that Steinbeck wrote this novel as a play-novelette or a novel that could be read as such and the dialogue used as a script for a play. As such it was a "failure," Steinbeck believed, because the script had to be changed for the stage. George Kaufman, with Steinbeck's help, prepared a script, and *Of Mice and Men* opened on Broadway at the Music Box Theater in November 1937. The play won the Drama Critics Circle Award for best drama.

THE GRAPES OF WRATH (1939)

Even as Steinbeck was making corrections on the *Of Mice and Men* script, he was planning his next novel, *The Grapes of Wrath*. The idea for the book came to him on his first journalistic assignment in the fall of 1936. The liberal *San Francisco News* sent Steinbeck to cover the migrant situation in California; he went to the Arvin Encampment in Bakersfield, California to talk to Tom Collins, manager of one of the first of the government camps set up in California to alleviate housing problems for the Southwest migrants pouring into the state from the Dust Bowl regions. Steinbeck interviewed Collins and migrants, and studied the situation first hand, after which he wrote a series of articles on the migrants' plight, published as "The Harvest Gypsies." By December 1936 Steinbeck knew that his next "big book" would be the migrants' story.

The Grapes of Wrath is said by many to be Steinbeck's masterpiece. Its power lies not only in its searing portrait of Dust Bowl poverty—if it were merely an historical tract about homelessness in the 1930s it would not sell over 150,000 copies a year. It is also the story of the migration of a people. It echoes Exodus. And it is

the story of a family disintegrating; of how power shifts from patriarchy to matriarchy; of what freedom means to a man just released from jail—as well as to all who must test the limits of their freedoms in a new state. It is about two key relationships. One is between Tom Joad and Jim Casy, the preacher who, leaving his Christian calling, looks for spiritual meaning outside the church. Tom is his pupil, and Casy guides Tom in his own rebirth into social commitment. But equally important is the relationship between Ma Joad and her self-absorbed daughter, Rose of Sharon. Like Tom, she must learn to look beyond herself and her needs to embrace the needs of others. The novel is thus a plea for empathy and understanding, as well as an indictment of a system that left so many destitute in a land where excess oranges were dumped in rivers in order to keep prices inflated: “There is a crime here that goes beyond denunciation.” The words have new relevance in this sadly altered world.

STEINBECK’S ENVIRONMENTAL VISION

“I don’t like Yosemite at all,” Steinbeck wrote his godmother in 1935. “Came out of there with a rush. I don’t know what it was but I was miserable there. Much happier sailing on the bay.” A few years earlier, he had written to a friend, “Modern sanity and religion are a curious delusion. Yesterday I went out in a fishing boat—out in the ocean. By looking over the side into the blue water, I could quite easily see the shell of the turtle who supports the world” (*SLL*). Steinbeck was never a mere realist. For him, as for any watergazer—to borrow Herman Melville’s term—the sea is more than a place; the sea—unlike the majestically enclosed Yosemite Valley—is unbounded, full of meaning and symbols, as a reading of “The Snake” or *Cannery Row*, *The Winter of Our Discontent*, or—most importantly—*Sea of Cortez* clearly reveals. Steinbeck, like Melville and his Ishmael, was both a sailor and a seeker. First and foremost, he liked living near the sea, where he’d gone regularly since he was a child. When a student at Stanford University, he spent the summer of 1923 in Pacific Grove taking a class in Marine Biology at Hopkins Marine Station. When he moved permanently to New York in 1950, it took him only three years to buy a house near the sea, in Sag Harbor. He built a small boat and sailed boats in the estuary around his point. He went fishing, “which I consider the last of the truly civilized pursuits.

Surely I find it a most restful thing. And if you don't bait the hook, even fish will not disturb you" (April 1966). Undoubtedly much of his fishing time was spent in contemplation, "looking over the side into the blue water," where, for Steinbeck, there would always be something more than fish. Man's "spirit and the tendrils of his feeling are so deep in a boat that the identification" between man and boat "is complete," he writes in *Sea of Cortez*. Throughout this book and beyond, contemplation of water brought forth musings on things larger. Indeed, his writing on the sea is a kind of touchstone for appreciating the nature of Steinbeck's thinking about physical and metaphysical reality.

SEA OF CORTEZ (1941)

Undoubtedly the most significant product of John Steinbeck's ecological vision is the book he co-authored with marine biologist Edward F. Ricketts, *Sea of Cortez* (1941). It is the account of a 1940 trip to the Gulf of California cataloguing marine life—a hybrid text that is part essay, part journal, part humorous anecdote, part scientific catalogue, part philosophical insight. The trip itself was Steinbeck's way of escaping the pressures expended in writing *The Grapes of Wrath* and the agony caused by the subsequent storm of protest. Financed by Steinbeck, the trip was also his way of helping his closest friend escape a failed love affair. Together they would move from a place of pain to a place of wholeness, grounded in the clarity of science: "This whole trip is doing what we had hoped it might, given us a world picture not dominated by Hitler and Moscow but something more vital and surviving than either. From the simple good Indians on the shore to the invertebrates there is a truer thing than ideologies" (*SLL*). Indeed, the interconnectedness of the human species on shore, the marine life of the littoral, and the predators threatening both—tourists, Japanese fishermen, sharks—is precisely his subject. That, and the equally important connection between "the tide pool and the stars," between physical reality and spiritual insight.

THE LOG FROM THE SEA OF CORTEZ (1951)

This volume is the "Log" portion of the earlier text, and includes a fine essay "About Ed Ricketts," which Steinbeck wrote after his friend's death. During the years he lived on the Monterey Penin-

sula, from 1930-36, Steinbeck forged a close bond with Edward Flanders Ricketts. What happened at Ricketts's lab is perhaps best articulated in this impressionistic memoir. What Steinbeck doesn't fully explore in that essay equally important—the quality of Ed's scientific endeavors and the scope of his interest in marine biology, both key to Steinbeck's own thinking. Ricketts was Steinbeck's mentor in matters of the sea and ecological holism. Steinbeck writes in his essay, "Everyone found himself in Ed," and that everyone is largely Steinbeck himself, who embraced, with Ricketts, a world view that saw man not at the center of the universe, but as another species struggling to survive in an environment—sometimes alone, often in a group.

John Steinbeck saw from a scientist's perspective all his life. It is apparent in the detachment he so often achieves, especially in the nonfiction about the migrants and in his World War II journalism, where he assumes the role of a recording consciousness. Steinbeck and Ricketts called this approach "nonteleological" or "is" thinking: to study and accept the world in as unbiased a way as possible, to accept what is rather than what should be. From the 1930s onward he is also fascinated with the human capacity to form groups capable of humane action, like the Joads; of finding happiness, like the paisanos in *Tortilla Flat* or the "westerling" pioneers in "The Red Pony;" or, at the opposite extreme, of mindless totalitarianism, as in the "herd animal" of *The Moon Is Down*. Steinbeck was acutely aware of the way humans coalesce into groups capable of effective action. A man who read scientific texts all his life, Steinbeck was a man for whom science was integral to the texture of life. His was a wide ranging curiosity about the way things work and with how humans relate to, and often destroy, environments.

In 1940, responding to Steinbeck's script for *A Forgotten Village*, a film about a cholera epidemic in a Mexican village, Ricketts wrote that he and Steinbeck had long sought to articulate "larger relationships between human society and the given individual, between man and the land, and between man and his feeling of supra-personal participation from within" ("Thesis and Materials for a Script on Mexico"). It must be kept in mind that Steinbeck's science was never limited to physical, observable connections. Connectedness meant also to be attuned to some kind of higher law, a sense of a greater whole—something Casy in *The Grapes of Wrath* articulates—or a fleeting spiritual sense. "Man is related to the whole thing, related inextricable to all reality, known as well as

unknowable," he writes in *Sea of Cortez*. Steinbeck, like Melville, was a watergazer because the world had meaning, both in substance and in those things often elusive, sometimes inexplicable.

THE MONTEREY NOVELS

Unlike Steinbeck's "serious" work, these three novels are often, not quite accurately, seen as carefree, charming, funny, engaging. Each is about a group of misfits who cling to the margins of society—quite happily. They survive through elaborate systems of barter, scorning work for the most part, and spending most of their time simply enjoying themselves. Parties figure prominently in the plots of all three. But to label each novel as mere froth is to do each a disservice. Each has a serious intent, other "layers," as Steinbeck liked to say of his books, beneath the dazzling surface.

TORTILLA FLAT (1935)

This novel was written in 1933 as Steinbeck's mother was dying, an attempt, in part, to alleviate some of the unhappiness he felt over her sickness in a "house of gloom and melancholy." The book, he said, was "light and I think amusing but true, although no one who doesn't know paisanos would ever believe it." The stories are based on those he heard from Mexican workers while he worked with them; others are based on stories told him by Susan Gregory, a Monterey High School English teacher who was also head of the Spanish Club. The second edition of the novel is dedicated to her.

Loosely based on the Arthurian cycle, as Steinbeck informs his readers in the opening paragraphs, *Tortilla Flat* is about the rise and fall of Danny's house, how the paisanos came together to form a "unit" and how that unit dispersed. Steinbeck's point here, as in other books where he is considering the dynamics of "group man," as he called it, is to see the potential of humans acting in concert. The paisanos are not knights, of course, but they are loyal to one another, they are friends, they have certain codes that bind them together. Although certainly enjoying alcohol and freedom and no responsibilities, Danny and his friends are not deadbeats. Steinbeck means them to be positive figures because they enjoy life and nature and one another, as many in the dominant culture do not.

CANNERY ROW (1945)

Of Steinbeck's Monterey novels, this is perhaps the best, and certainly the most serious and complex. Biographer Jackson Benson has said that it is Steinbeck's war novel without ever mentioning the war. It certainly reveals that life is both exhilarating—parties and good fun punctuate the book—and full of despair—suicides and deaths occur with some frequency. Steinbeck's point here is that the enclave of Cannery Row, like the tide pool he compares it to, is a place where organisms struggle to survive. Some make it, some don't. As in *The Grapes of Wrath*, Steinbeck structures this novel with alternating chapters of "plot"—how to throw a party for Doc—and "interchapters" that seem to have little relation to the main thrust of the book. He wishes readers to stretch their perceptions of community beyond the tight enclave of Cannery Row. What happens in Monterey or to other characters on Cannery Row is also relevant thematically, as several of the stories examine issues of isolation, loneliness, defeat. In addition, Steinbeck asks readers in a few of these "interchapters" to see that a whole includes a sense of the ineffable, the spiritual. Looked at in one way, Mack and the boys are bums, but they are also "the virtues and the graces," as Steinbeck says, because in many ways they are also extraordinary, gifted, and loving. To see holistically, as Steinbeck wants his readers to see, is to embrace "the tidepool and the stars," a phrase he uses in *Sea of Cortez*. To put it another way, he wants his readers to see with Doc's fullness of vision: see closely as a scientist (the first we see of Doc is him peering in a tide pool) and see abstractly as a poet (the book concludes with Doc's reading of the poem, "Black Marigolds").

SWEET THURSDAY (1954)

Steinbeck came back to the Cannery Row material. After the novel was published, Burgess Meredith was interested in playing Doc on stage, and, according to Meredith, in 1947 "they started to make a play version of *Cannery*...with Bogart...standing by." In January 1948 Steinbeck came to California to scout locations for a film version that, he told reporter Ritch Lovejoy, "will be an entirely new enterprise in the field." The play was abandoned, the film got tied up in lawsuits, Ed Ricketts died, and John Steinbeck was separated from his second wife, Gwyn, in 1948. It was not the

time to work on any material. But marriage to Elaine Scott in 1950 brought peace and the leisure to write *East of Eden*—published in 1952. He wrote to Stanford roommate Dook Sheffield in 1952, two years after marrying Elaine:

[I'm] changed in some ways, more calm, maybe more adult, perhaps more tolerant. But still restless. I'll never get over that I guess—still nervous, still going from my high ups to very low downs—just short of a manic depressive, I guess. I have more confidence in myself now, which makes me less arrogant. And Elaine has taught me not to be afraid of people (strangers) so that I am kinder and better mannered I think. (October 16, 1952)

So in this ruminative stage, early 1953, Steinbeck started trying once again to turn *Cannery Row* into material for the stage, this time attempting to write a musical play version. The treatment wouldn't come together, as one writer close to him wrote:

The story of *Cannery Row per se* wouldn't make a show. It needed more. So we asked John to see if he could develop for us the basis of a musical play or actually write a libretto based on the characters of the Row, built around the character of Doc... We had sort of a vague theme, but the form that we had in mind was to be a story about Doc and some woman—I mean there would have to be a love story in it, and then the rest of the people would be the bums and whores of CR, those that existed prior in the book and any others that he might want to invent. (Benson 740)

Since Steinbeck couldn't write a musical comedy treatment, he turned to the novel form and named it "Bear Flag." He wrote this novel, of course, with the idea of musical comedy in the back of his mind. When finished, he had some doubts about his new book:

Bear Flag may not be much good but for what it is, I think it is all right. Also I think it makes a nice balance for the weight of Eden. It is kind of light and gay and astringent. I think that right now it is kind of healthy. Practically nothing funny is being written and I think B.F. is funny. The New Yorker humor (practically the only humor today) is bitter, smart and despairing. At least B.F. is none of these. It may even say

some good things. (to Elizabeth Otis, September 14, 1953)

There are some very good things in *Sweet Thursday* ("Bear Flag"'s ultimate title), a book that is most often dismissed by critics. It is funny, it's very much about the power of creativity itself to transform experience, and it ends—as do many films, comic books, and masquerades that the book mimics—with the hero and heroine riding into the sunset.

PIPE DREAM (1955)

But as a musical, *Sweet Thursday* was doomed. Elaine's notes tell of Steinbeck's efforts:

The summer John was to work on the script, John and I drove around looking for a house. Rented a little house in Sag Harbor; John was 54 (sic), and he sat down and wrote. Ernest Martin and Furor were the producers. They took finished copy and called Steinbeck, "Guess who wants to produce it—Rodgers and Hammerstein." Of course we were thrilled. I worshipped Oscar—funny and amusing man. Only later did we realize that they just weren't the right ones to do it.

The musical "Pipe Dream" opened at the Shubert Theater on November 30, 1955 and ran to the end of June 1956, 246 disappointing performances.

What went wrong? Harold Klurman, a great director of the classics, "couldn't have been a worse director," said Elaine. "And Helen Trauble couldn't have been a worse Fauna. Rudolf Bing had fired her from the Met but he, being a gentleman, said it was a difference of opinion over her contract. No one asked her to sing full voice until the first dress rehearsal in New Haven...She couldn't project over the orchestra. Had to be amplified. Why they didn't fire her..."

Steinbeck also knew it was off track, noted Elaine. "He always thought the song, 'Suzy is a good girl' the wrong kind of song." He pleaded with the producers to make changes, for what they had done made him angry. "You turned my whore into a visiting nurse," he told them. Or, as he wrote to Elia Kazan later, "What really is the trouble is that R. and H. seem to be attracted to my kind of writing and they are temperamentally incapable of doing

it" (Benson 781). And he wrote Hammerstein as the work was still in production:

What emerges now is an old-fashioned love story. And that is not good enough to people who have looked forward to this show based on you and me and Dick. When *Oklahoma* came out it violated every conventional rule of Musical Comedy. You were out on a limb. They loved it and were for you. *South Pacific* made a great jump. And even more you were ordered to go ahead. But Oscar, time has moved. The form has moved. You can't stand still. That's the price you have to pay for being Rodgers and Hammerstein. (Jay Parini, *John Steinbeck*, p. 385)

"Bear Flag" as Steinbeck wrote it, was, according to Elaine, "To be the story of an intellectual like Doc falling in love with a whore." The musical did not convey that mismatch with any level of seriousness.

AFTER CALIFORNIA

John Steinbeck had left California during World War II, but he tried to come back to live in Pacific Grove with his second wife. He returned to California again after their divorce in 1948. When he married Elaine, he left for good. Many have said—and still say—that after Steinbeck abandoned his native soil his novels were not as powerful as the work up through *Cannery Row*. More recently, critics have focused on the experimental nature of his fiction—something he himself always insisted upon—and see that he was, in effect, writing novels that owed much to what would come to be called metafiction, fiction that self-consciously examined the process and contours of writing.

THE PEARL (1947)

The Pearl is a parable, as Steinbeck tells his readers in the beginning. This novella reminds us that the writer was never a realist. As early as 1933 he wrote a friend, "I don't think you will like my late work. It leaves realism farther and farther behind. I never had much ability for nor faith nor belief in realism. It is just a form of fantasy as nearly as I could figure. Boileau was a wiser man than Mencken...There are streams in man more profound and dark and strong than the libido of Freud. Jung's libido is closer but still in-

adequate" (SLL). *The Pearl* examines what happens when a man succumbs to greed—although it is equally true that Kino wants what many want, education for his son, a better life for himself. This is another of Steinbeck's stories of dreamers and the high price paid for dreams unrealized. Steinbeck also explores the connection between music and prose—another constant for a man who considered himself "a minstrel rather than a scrivener."

EAST OF EDEN (1952)

Throughout the 1940s, Steinbeck talked about the "big novel" that he wanted to write—and that critics, who wanted him to compose another *The Grapes of Wrath*, expected him to write. In 1948 he started the book that he'd had in the back of his mind since the early 1930s, called in manuscript "The Salinas Valley." He intended it to be a record of his home place, but as the book developed it became much more. Work on the novel broke off after he divorced Gwyn, and his misery over the loss of his marriage and his two sons kept him from writing. When he returned to the work after his marriage to Elaine, he wrote a novel that was to be both an account of his mother's family's history in the Salinas Valley, as well as a retelling of the Cain and Abel story. The Trasks were his "symbol people," he insisted, and their story was one about how one lives with human suffering.

THE WINTER OF OUR DISCONTENT (1961)

After this novel was published, a book that warned Americans about their crumbling morality, Steinbeck was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. Following is part of an article on the novel that Susan Shillinglaw recently published in the *Steinbeck Yearbook*:

"what a mess of draggel-tail impulses a man is"
Voices in *The Winter of Our Discontent*

Reviewing *The Winter of Our Discontent* for the *New York Times*, Carlos Baker notes his dissatisfaction with Steinbeck's last novel:

This is a problem novel whose central problem is never fully solved, an internal conflict novel in which the central

issue between nobility and expediency, while it is joined, is never satisfactorily resolved. For this reason, despite its obvious powers, *The Winter of Our Discontent* cannot rightly stand in the forefront of Steinbeck's fiction.

Far from being the source of the novel's creative failure, its lack of resolution is, in fact, central to the message. The absence of narrational authority or a privileged perspective, the text's resistance to synthesis and closure convey a profound unease with what he saw as a dissolute American culture. Throughout the 1960s, Steinbeck expressed disillusionment with both America and Americans—the title of his last book, published in 1966, a jeremiad that scrutinizes the country's frayed ethical fiber. In the final chapter of *America and Americans*, he has difficulty finding words to describe an irresolute nation: "A dying people," he concludes, "tolerates the present, rejects the future, and finds its satisfactions in past greatness and half-remembered glory" (177). *The Winter of Our Discontent* dramatizes the poignancy of that assessment for John Steinbeck, the plight of a nation that can find no clear path, forge no guiding resolutions.

The novel's mix of languages, styles, and "voices" expresses that cultural instability. What one reviewer calls an "overworked style that always seems to be asking the reader to finger the rich material of the prose" and another a style "embarrassingly out of touch" (DeMott) is, in fact, consciously ornate and insistently many-voiced; the verbal "polyphony" and complexity mirrors Ethan Allen Hawley's and the nation's shifting course and imperiled morals. In *The Winter of Our Discontent* the central "voice," Ethan Allen Hawley's, is in continual dialogue with voices from his ancestral and national past, from his morally unsteady present, from a tentatively promising future in his daughter. Each verbal exchange is loaded with an array of social attitudes and nuances: "I've thought so often," Ethan muses, "how telling changes with the nature of the listener. Much of my talk is addressed to people who are dead, like my little Plymouth Rock Aunt Deborah or old Cap'n" (61). Other talk, so often full of silliness or half-truths, is addressed to his wife, Mary. And "For pure telling," he reflects, "my mute and articulate canned and bottled goods in the grocery serve very well...They don't argue and they don't repeat" (61). At other times he speaks to no one, believing that "the only confidant to trust [is] Anderson's Well" (106), a phrase he links to a fairy-tale about a king who "told his secrets down a well, and his secrets

were safe" (80). Ethan's varied dialogues and nuanced utterances convey his genuine perplexity and anguish about the morality of "looking out for number one." At the heart of this novel about an unhappy "Good Man" (100) who turns in his immigrant boss to the Immigration and Naturalization Service for illegal entry, who knowingly helps his best friend drink himself to death, and who carefully plans a bank robbery is a moral ambiguity that is conveyed "dialogically," through Ethan's "ideologically saturated" (Bakhtin 273) conversations.

To discuss "polyphony" and "dialogism" in *The Winter of Our Discontent* is to borrow terms from Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of discourse in the novel. For Bakhtin, the novel is characterized by a "social diversity of speech types and by...differing individual voices." The novel's basic feature, he asserts, is "movement of the theme through different languages and speech types, its dispersion into...social heteroglossia, its dialogization" (Bakhtin 263). Further, all speech "is in dialogue with prior discourses on the same subject...A single voice can make itself heard only by blending into the complex choir of other voices already in place" (Todorov). Dialogue is multilayered because words and phrases not only mean something in and of themselves but are colored by various social and historical contexts and speakers. Language in the novel, Bakhtin asserts, is "drawn into the battle between points of view, value judgments and emphases that the characters introduce into it"; language is "infected by mutually contradictory intentions and stratifications; words, sayings, expressions, definitions and epithets are scattered throughout, infected with others' intentions with which the author is to some extent at odds" (Bakhtin 315-16). In this novel of multiple conversations, parodic inversions, comedy and irony, Steinbeck's chief concern is dialogic. When Ethan speaks to his many listeners, the dialogue shifts tones and contexts and meaning, often with dizzying speed as he moves from voice to voice, his own and others. The resulting "problem novel" plays out Ethan's moral realignment through speech that often seems fragmented and inauthentic, in conflict with itself. In *The Winter of Our Discontent*, language, hero, and country are similarly conflicted. Voices in dialogue don't blend in this novel—they collide.

Basic Themes and Discussion Questions for Steinbeck's Major Works

IN DUBIOUS BATTLE

1. "I'm not interested in a strike as a means of raising men's wages, and I'm not interested in ranting about justice and oppression...I wanted to be merely a recording consciousness, judging nothing, merely putting down the thing," Steinbeck said about *In Dubious Battle*. What does he mean here? Elsewhere he talked about a "detached quality" to his prose that he very much wanted to be there. He also said of the novel, "I guess it is a brutal book, more brutal because there is no author's moral point of view" (*SLL*).
2. At the beginning of the novel, Jim is introduced as a neophyte, a man about to be reborn. Consider the ways that he seems innocent, untried, undefined.
3. Consider the importance of setting at the beginning of the novel, of the mood struck in the opening chapters.
4. In his Introduction to the Twentieth Century Classics edition of this novel, Warren French discusses the importance of the San Francisco longshoremen's strike to this novel. Other important influences were undoubtedly the 1933 cotton strike and peach strike in California. Steinbeck himself said the book was a "composite," but undoubtedly it reflects the increasing labor unrest in California in the early 1930s (see Jack Benson and Anne Loftis, "John Steinbeck and Farm Labor Unionization: The Background of *In Dubious Battle*," *American Literature*, Vol 52, 1980. 194-223 or Anne Loftis *Witnesses to the Struggle: Imaging the 1930s California Labor Movement*, University of Nevada Press, 1998). "In this book I was making nothing up," Steinbeck told his editor. Consider how knowledge of cultural history enriches an appreciation of this novel.
5. Characterize Mac, who seems ruthless. Does he change in the course of the book? Look at the scene with Lisa's birth. What is the purpose of having the men work together to help her?
6. Why is Dan the first man Jim talks to on the job?

7. Consider the importance of Dakin and London. Are they fully realized characters? Why or why not?
8. What does Steinbeck mean when he says: "I have used a small strike...as the symbol of man's eternal, bitter warfare with himself"?
9. "I still think that most 'realistic' writing is farther from the real than the most honest fantasy. The Battle with its tricks to make a semblance of reality wasn't very close." Steinbeck was never a "mere realist" and didn't see himself as a realistic writer. The title of *In Dubious Battle* is taken from Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Consider the implications of the title.
10. Doc Burton is a very important character, one of Steinbeck's "self" characters (according to Warren French, a prominent Steinbeck critic) or one of his detached observers modeled on Ed Ricketts (a Merlin character, argues Jack Benson, a figure who appears in much of Steinbeck's fiction—the one who comments, observes, sees broadly and wisely). Comment on the role of Doc Burton in the novel. What happens to him and what is the significance of his disappearance?
11. Why is Jim drawn to Lisa at the end of the novel? What values does she signify?
12. Comment on the ending and Jim's facelessness. Do Jim and Mac seem to be different characters by the end of the book?
13. What is the role of Joy in the book? Is he doomed from the beginning, much like Lennie in *Of Mice and Men*? If so, why?
14. Consider the importance and meaning of property in the novel.
15. Some readers are troubled by the fact that all workers are white, while this was not the case historically. Mexicans, African Americans and other ethnic workers also picked California's crops. Why would Steinbeck not make his workers reflect this diversity?

1. Note the titles, many of which are suggestive. There is the sense in many of these stories that Steinbeck is finding an image, an objective correlative for an idea. Comment.
2. Respectability was, for Steinbeck, often a mask, a role, a "harness." Stripped of respectability, characters flounder. Discuss their plights.
3. Several stories are about marriage: "The Chrysanthemums," "The White Quail," "The Harness," and "The Murder" in particular. Discuss the issue of men and women's relationships, the tensions of marriage, and the apparent lack of communication in the various stories.
4. Sexuality is important to several stories, especially a kind of sexual tension that separates or charges characters. Consider the ways that a kind of sexual encounter structures several stories: "The Chrysanthemums," "The White Quail," "The Snake," and "Johnny Bear."
5. Steinbeck is also interested here, as he is throughout his career, in the nature of creativity. Both "The White Quail" and "Johnny Bear" can be read as meditations on the nature of creativity. Mary Teller and her garden may suggest the dark possibilities of artistic creativity— isolation, obsession with perfection, detachment from life. And "Johnny Bear" is about artistic freedom and how far the artist can go in imitating or recording life as it is. Discuss.
6. "Flight," "The Vigilante" and "The Red Pony" may all be seen as initiation stories—although what that really means differs in each story. In "Flight," the issue of Pepe's "manhood" and when he really achieves is central to the story. In "The Vigilante," the central character has a revelation about what it meant to be part of a group. And "The Red Pony" traces a young boy's various encounters with death. Discuss.
7. Steinbeck said of "The Chrysanthemums" that he wanted the story to "strike without the reader's awareness." What do you suppose he meant?
8. What do the Dark Watchers mean in "Flight"?

9. What do the cypress tree and the tub suggest in "The Red Pony"?
10. Steinbeck probably wrote "St. Katy the Virgin" when he was at Stanford University. Does this story belong in the collection? He was fond of it because it was satiric and fun.

OF MICE AND MEN

1. A jungle is a roadside hobo camp; the first recorded reference to the term was to "Hobos Jungles," used in 1908. Why do Lennie and George first stop at a jungle rather than go directly to work? Why is it here, and only here, that the entire dream that Lennie and George share is articulated?
2. Look closely at the opening paragraph, and the contrast between the distant mountains and the pool that shelters tramps and boys. It's a safe and protected spot, whereas the distant mountains are powerful and remote—like the voices and noises suggesting power and authority throughout the novel. This is, in many ways, a claustrophobic novel; tight enclosures that seem to protect the tramps—the pool, the bunkhouse, the barn. Throughout the novel, inside and outside are contrasted. Also, the tight enclosures suggest the nature of the workers' world. Discuss.
3. Several characters are identified through their hands and what they do with their hands. Comment.
4. In the opening scene of the 1939 Lewis Milestone film of *Of Mice and Men*, Lennie carries a dead bird, not a mouse. The studio thought that a mouse would be too unsettling for the audience, particularly a female audience. Why is a mouse a more appropriate image? Either Steinbeck's friend, Edward Ricketts, or his wife, Carol Steinbeck, came up with the title for *Of Mice and Men*; one read the Burns poem to Steinbeck as an illustration of naturalistic and biological determinism.
5. Virginia Scardigli, a friend of the Steinbecks, has noted that when Steinbeck was writing the novel, he repeatedly asked acquaintances for the word for someone who swept out a bunkhouse; finally he remembered "swamper." This anecdote illustrates Steinbeck's desire to use the precise language of

workers. Find other examples of Steinbeck's facility with language.

6. About one third of the way through composition of this novel, Steinbeck left the manuscript at home one evening with a new puppy, Toby. Toby ate the manuscript. In the archives of the Center for Steinbeck Studies at San Jose State University, a first edition of *Of Mice and Men* is inscribed by the author: "Toby ate the real first edition of this novel." And in Carol Steinbeck's papers there was a fragment of the novel tucked in an envelope, with her words on the outside: "This is the famous fragment! all that was left of the first hand-written ms. of *Of Mice and Men* when the puppy finished his criticism. An English Setter." Steinbeck had to begin the novel again. But rewriting may not have been as difficult as it seems for a writer who composed books in his head before committing them to paper. Biographer Jackson Benson recounts this story about the composition of "The Red Pony": "Shortly after completing 'The Red Pony,' John had set down the manuscript on something, forgot where he had put it, and then couldn't find it. He and Carol had torn the house apart trying to find it. Finally Carol told him that he would just have to forget it and write the story again...As they were moving [to Los Gatos], they found the original manuscript, which had fallen down behind an old Spanish trunk, and out of curiosity, they stopped to compare it with the second version that John had written. They found that it differed by only seven words." Does this knowledge about Steinbeck's writing habits—he seems to have had his novels firmly in mind before he started writing—influence your reading of *Of Mice and Men*?
7. Claire Luce, playing Curley's wife in the Broadway play, asked Steinbeck to give her more information on the character she was playing. He responded with a compelling character sketch that is included in *John Steinbeck: A Life in Letters*. Discuss the men's reactions to Curley's wife. Why doesn't she have a name? Does a reader's impressions of her differ when she finally speaks of her past to Lennie? When she threatens Crooks, she seems at her worst; why does she say what she says to him?
8. Does Lennie need George more or does George need Lennie more?

9. Did George have to kill Lennie? Often in high school classrooms, mock trials are set up to try George for first or second degree murder—or to pardon him. What would your response be to the killing?
10. Why is a Lugar, a German gun, mentioned twice? Does it seem an odd weapon for a ranch hand to own? Is it significant, as Louis Owens maintains, that Steinbeck mentions this gun?
11. This novel is one of America's most compelling books about friendship. Compare to other texts whose appeal may also be due in large part to the quality of the friendships evoked. Is Lennie and George's dream possible? Why are others attracted to them?

THE GRAPES OF WRATH

1. Look closely at the opening paragraphs. Steinbeck notes details as well as the wide angle shot. He was influenced by film—Pare Lorentz's documentaries "The Plow that Broke the Plains" and "The River"—and his description of place is cinematic here. The structure of these paragraphs mirrors the structure of the book, as it moves back and forth from the detailed Joad chapters to the interchapters that cover a wider perspective.
2. The end of this opening chapter focuses on the people on the land, men vs. women. Note the ways that the book contrasts men's "figuring" to women's methods of coping.
3. Why does Steinbeck first introduce Tom Joad leaving jail? What thematic concerns are thus introduced?
4. The turtle chapter is justly famous. Early reviewers often focused only on the historical accuracy of the novel, whereas Steinbeck insisted that he was not writing merely social history. His vision was also highly suggestive, symbolic, mythic. The book, he said, had four layers—readers could take out of the novel what they could, based on their sensitivity and sophistication as readers. The turtle symbolizes the migrants in several ways. Discuss.
5. The meaning of home is important throughout this book. Dis-

- cuss what home means initially to Muley, to Tom, to Ma and the other migrants. Does the definition of home shift throughout the novel?
- Muley and Casy each offer an alternative life to Tom, and show him two ways to respond to crisis. Examine the central ideas and beliefs of each.
 - Steinbeck often read his books aloud to friends. Note how each of the Joads is initially introduced—through stories. Note the passages where Ma talks to Tom, to Rose of Sharon and discuss the quality of those speeches.
 - Why do granma and granpa die before the family reaches California? Why does Noah leave?
 - Uncle John is called the “Lonest goddamn man in the world.” What is his role in the book? How important a character is he?
 - Steinbeck includes a number of characters who work and have jobs. Indeed, if Fitzgerald is the American novelist who writes most convincingly about money, Steinbeck may well be the novelist who writes most convincingly about people who work. Cite examples.
 - The interchapters serve a number of purposes: stylistic variety, pace changers, historical overview, repositories of Steinbeck’s social and political ideas. Find examples of each. Note how his prose often echoes the King James Bible. Why would Steinbeck have included these echoes?
 - What is the role of the Wilsons and other migrants that the Joads meet? How is the family redefined as the journey progresses?
 - An early and thoughtful essay called “The Philosophical Joads” by Frederic I. Carpenter (1941), ends with this comment: “For the first time in history, *The Grapes of Wrath* brings together and makes real three great skeins of American thought. It begins with the transcendental oversoul, Emerson’s faith in the common man, and his Protestant self-reliance. To this it joins Whitman’s religion of the love of all men and his mass democracy. And it combines these mystical and poetic ideas with the realistic philosophy of pragmatism and its em-

phasis on effective action. From this it develops a new kind of Christianity—not otherworldly and passive, but earthly and active.” Trace these threads.

14. Consider the implications of the title, taken from “The Battle Hymn of the Republic,” whose lyrics Steinbeck had printed in the endpapers of the first edition. (“He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored.”) The title also refers to Revelation: “And the angel thrust in his sickle into the earth, and gathered the vine of the earth, and cast it into the great winepress of the wrath of God” (xiv.19). Comment on references to grapes—as representing both want and plenty.
15. References to water are equally abundant in this novel. Consider why water is such a powerful referent.
16. Compare the ending of John Ford’s film—which ends with Ma Joad declaring that “we’re the people”—to Steinbeck’s ending. Why would Ford change the end? Why would he shift the placement of the government camp section?
17. Consider the importance of the Casy/Tom relationship as compared to the Ma/Rose of Sharon relationship. Both Tom and Rose of Sharon are being mentored; what is the significance of the growth of each character?

EAST OF EDEN

1. Steinbeck began working on the book in 1948, calling it “Salinas Valley.” He wrote that he “would like to stop everything to do a long novel that I have been working on the notes for a long time.” In 1949—somewhat recovered from a painful divorce—he was still thinking of the novel as “Salinas Valley.” But in 1951 he was calling it *East of Eden*. The book was published in 1952. Why would “Salinas Valley” be an apt title for the book? And why might *East of Eden* be a better title?
2. Note how Chapter 1 depends on a number of contrasts. Cite several and discuss what such contrasts suggest. Steinbeck wrote in *Journal of a Novel*, the journal he kept while writing the novel, for example, that this was to be a story “of good and evil, of strength and weakness, of love and hate, of beauty and ugliness—the inseparable mutually dependent pairings out of

which 'creativity' is born." How does this opening chapter suggest the epic scope of the novel? And why might readers resist his language about the history of California? What might be his purpose in telling the state's history thus?

3. In *Journal of a Novel*, Steinbeck writes that "I want to make this book so simple in its difficulty that a child can understand it." What does he mean by that? It's certainly not a child's story. But he said something similar about *The Red Pony* and *Of Mice and Men*—that he wanted these books to have a similar clarity of outline and expression.
4. In his journal Steinbeck wrote: "I have purged myself of the bitterness that made me suspicious of the self, the 'I'; you see before you the composite of a real past (a history of limited, imaginative Hamiltons) and a fictional present (fable of Trasks). I am whole and free and know that art and life depend on the lonely, anguished, solitary effort." Some significant information is conveyed in that quote: that his is a double-stranded narrative, with one strand biographical, one symbolic (the C and A characters that suggest the Cain and Abel story from the Bible). And he admits that a character "Steinbeck" will be a part of the story—the I that frequently interrupts the narrative. Comment on the impact of that "I" and why Steinbeck chooses to place "a character Steinbeck," who expresses uncertainties and doubts, in the novel.
5. The Trasks are, as he said, his "symbol people." As Steinbeck re-envisions the story of Cain and Abel, it seems that he is sketching "A" people who are good and "C" people who are evil. But even in the beginning of the novel, is that pattern entirely fixed? Is Cyrus a bad father? Is Charles completely evil? Is Adam a convincing character? An admirable one? Is his goodness believable? In his journal, Steinbeck wrote: "I think you will recognise that the Hamilton sections are much more difficult than the Trask sections. For the Trask chapters flow along in chronological story while the Hamilton chapters which play counterpoint are put together with millions of little pieces, matched and discarded. Also I am playing all around in time with the Hamilton sections. By this method I hope to get over a kind of veracity which would be impossible with straight-line narrative."
6. Steinbeck had two sons by his second wife, Gwyn, and he was

separated from those sons by his 1948 divorce. This book was written for them, and it is a novel about fathers and sons. Discuss.

7. In *Journal of a Novel*, Steinbeck wrote this about the letter from Charles to Adam: "The letter written by Charles to Adam is a very tricky one and it has in it, concealed but certainly there, a number of keys. I recommend that you read it very carefully—very carefully because if you miss this, you will miss a great deal of this book and maybe will not pick it up until much later..." What did he mean by that comment?
8. In contrast to the Trasks, what values are important in the Hamilton stories? What kinds of contrasts is he setting up with the two stories? Is Sam Hamilton—based on Steinbeck's own grandfather (a man whom the author did not know well, since he died when Steinbeck was a toddler)—a good father? In what ways is he an admirable man? What is his role in the novel?
9. Cathy is, of course, the character in the book who is perhaps the most fascinating and horrifying. Note the ways that Steinbeck as "I" narrator introduces her in early chapters—first as a monster and then, rereading the "text" of her, revising his opinion. Why does he do so? What point is he making when he asks the reader to shift his/her judgment of Cathy? ("It doesn't matter that Cathy is a monster...")
10. Look up the meaning of "metafiction." This may be the first novel of metafiction in twentieth century American literature. Discuss qualities of the self-reflexive, self-conscious novel. Note the number of texts in the novel. It's a book about the nature of the creative process. Discuss.
11. Why is Cathy suspicious of Lee, of Samuel and of his wife? Explain.
12. What are Lee's roles in the novel? Why does Steinbeck include the story about his mother?
13. Does Cathy change in the course of the novel? In the last section, the book becomes Cal's story, as he struggles with his own "badness." Is he to blame for telling his brother about his mother? Why is Kate fascinated with Aron? Why does she

leave him money? Discuss the various money-giving scenes in the novel and what they mean.

14. What is the significance of Kate's story? Why does Steinbeck tell her history in such depth?
15. What is the significance of Abra and her background. Why can't she tolerate Aron? Why is she attracted to Cal? To Lee? To Adam?
16. What is the meaning of the ending, of the insistence of the words spoken. Several critics have noted that Steinbeck may not have had his translation "thou mayest" correct. Does it matter? Must the phrase be "thou mayest" in this rendition of the Cain and Abel story?

CANNERY ROW

1. This novel begins with a chapter that defines the kind of book Steinbeck wrote—a book about a human tide pool. Note the structure of the first chapter, as it moves from the "high tide" of human activity on the Row to the "low tide" of twilight, when the denizens of Cannery Row appear. Read the last sentences of this chapter carefully—this is Steinbeck's method, to lift out his characters as a marine biologist might lift a sea creature from its tide pool. Discuss.
2. Why does the novel begin with Lee Chong's grocery—an actual place on Cannery Row that Steinbeck knew well? Why is there one suicide in this chapter, one account of survivors? Steinbeck had read Darwin. An excellent book to read in conjunction with *Cannery Row* is *Sea of Cortez*, an account of his and Ricketts's 1940 trip to the Sea of Cortez to collect and catalogue marine life.
3. The structure of this book is similar to that of *The Grapes of Wrath*, with a "plot" of sorts telling how Mack and the boys try to throw a party for Doc and interchapters that sketch other characters' actions. Some of these interchapters—which connect thematically—are puzzling. (Think about the scene with Doc and the drowned girl.) What is he getting at in the chapter about "The Word"? He's saying something about the nature of fiction here—about the pattern that he, as novelist, creates. His

is the “fantastic pattern” of fiction.

4. Why does Steinbeck include the vision of the Chinaman’s eyes? It may be that he is suggesting another level of reality here, as he does elsewhere in the book. This novel is full of eyes, of references to seeing. It is also very much about how we see, what we should see, what is possible to see and appreciate.
5. The “Doc” of *Cannery Row* is based on Steinbeck’s closest friend, Edward Ricketts. Ricketts was a marine biologist living on Cannery Row, and the two met in 1930. Ricketts was an impressive man—a man who appreciated music, the art of Asia and Europe, Whitman and Li Po. He was a scientist and a philosopher. His mind, as Steinbeck wrote in an essay, “About Ed Ricketts,” knew no horizons. (The essay is the preface for a reissued Log portion of *Sea of Cortez*, published in 1951 after Ricketts’s death.) *Cannery Row* is, in many ways, Steinbeck’s fictional tribute to his friend. The Doc character enters the book collecting specimens in the tide pools; and he is last seen reciting a love poem. Scientist and poet—Ricketts’s awareness fully embraced both. Discuss the portrait of Doc as a scientist and a cultured man.
6. Steinbeck wrote this novel in 1944-45, immediately after he returned from a stint as a war correspondent. It often seems to be a light-hearted text about bums and their ways of coping, but it is also a serious and profound book in many ways. Jackson Benson, one of Steinbeck’s biographers, says that *Cannery Row* is Steinbeck’s war novel without ever mentioning the war. Read the scene of the frog hunt with World War II in mind, and discuss whether or not it suggests something far more serious than hunting frogs.
7. Critics have sometimes accused Steinbeck of being sentimental. If there is one overtly sentimental tale in this book it is probably Frankie’s story. Discuss the nature of sentimentality, its effectiveness, its excesses. Why is Frankie’s story important to the narrative?
8. The gopher chapter, one of the little parables that Steinbeck loved to recount (think of the turtle chapter in *Grapes*) tells readers something important about the book. Why must the

gopher move to survive? To thrive? In the book, is life full of dangers that cannot be avoided by creating a gopher paradise?

9. What is the mood of the final chapter? Why? What do the snake's eyes suggest at the end? Why is this the final image? Does a reading of "The Snake," a story that Steinbeck wrote in the early 1930s, help explain the final image?
10. *Cannery Row* is an ecological novel. From all that has been said above, explain what that means.

SWEET THURSDAY AND CANNERY ROW

1. Comment on references to popular culture in the book, movies, show business, etc. What is the importance of these references? How do they establish the tone of the book?
2. Compare Mack in *Sweet Thursday* with Mack in *Cannery Row*. Does he seem more convincing in one book or the other?
3. Compare the beginning of the two books—the introductory chapter of *Cannery Row* with that of *Sweet Thursday*. How does the fictional terrain differ? Are the intentions the same?
4. Comment on the significance of these chapters: "The Great Roque War" and "There's a Hole in Reality through which We Can Look if We Wish." Select the two chapters in *Cannery Row* which seem most similar. Then comment on significant differences in the chapters selected and their purposes in the respective books.
5. Select a passage in each book that represents the best of Steinbeck's writing. Cite chapters. Discuss strengths of the prose, identifying characteristics. Do you think that the writing is better in one book or another?
6. Why is Joseph and Mary such an important character, more so than Lee Chong. Comment.
7. Compare Doc's character in *Sweet Thursday* with his character in *Cannery Row*. Which seems more convincing? Which do you like better? Comment on the significance of Doc's struggle to write.

8. Compare the humor in this book with that in *Cannery Row* and *Tortilla Flat*. Are there different qualities to the humor here? What best characterizes Steinbeck's humor here? In other books?
9. Discuss Suzy's role, her believability, her "roundness" (in literary terms). Does she in any way develop your understanding of Steinbeck's female characters?

THE WINTER OF OUR DISCONTENT

1. The title is taken from Shakespeare's *Richard III*:

Now is the winter of our discontent
Made glorious summer by this sun of York;
And all the clouds that lour'd upon our house
In the deep bosom of the ocean buried.
Now are our brows bound with victorious wreaths;
Our bruised arms hung up for monuments;
Our stern alarums changed to merry meetings,
Our dreadful marches to delightful measures.

Comment on the significance of the lines to Steinbeck's book.

2. The first two chapters are in the third person, and then the book shifts to the first person. Explain reasons for this shift in point of view. Why is this switch duplicated later in the book?
3. In the "Steinbeck's Major Works" section of this pamphlet, there is a short discussion of the "voices" in *Winter*. Rereading that section, explain what effect Ethan's conversations have: with his wife, his dog, Joey, canned goods, Mr. Baker, Margie, Mr. Marullo, Mr. Biggers—as well as with his ancestors. Is there a consistent voice here? Do you feel you know Ethan?
4. In the first chapter, Ethan is "tempted" three times. And the novel is set on Easter weekend. Explain the significance of the biblical parallels.
5. The betrayal motif is central to this text. Explain.
6. "Ethan is a Christ figure who metamorphoses through Good Friday weekend to evolve into Judas, the betrayer." Agree or

disagree with this statement and clarify what it means.

7. If this novel is a fable about contemporary America (Steinbeck was determined to write a novel set in the present), why would he choose the fable to convey his ideas?
8. As several critics have pointed out, the novel echoes T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* in several important ways. Reread that poem and consider the importance of Margie and her Tarot cards, the Fisher King waiting for rain, the image of a wasteland, the talisman, the importance of voices in the poem and in the novel.
9. In the first *Steinbeck Yearbook*, which focuses on this novel, Robert Morsberger writes about the impact of the 1950s quiz show scandal on the writing of this novel. You might look at that Yearbook or call the Steinbeck Center at San Jose State University (408-924-4588) for a copy of the article (\$.25 a page). Also, readers might look at the film *Quiz Show* and consider its subject and the subject of Steinbeck's novel
10. Comment on the meaning of the last scene.

John Steinbeck, American Writer

John Steinbeck was born in the farming town of Salinas, California on February 27, 1902. His father, John Ernst Steinbeck, was not a terribly successful man; at one time or another he was the manager of a Sperry flour plant, the owner of a feed and grain store; the treasurer of Monterey County. His mother, the strong-willed Olive Hamilton Steinbeck, was a former teacher. As a child growing up in the fertile Salinas Valley—called the “Salad Bowl of the Nation”—Steinbeck formed a deep appreciation of his environment, not only the rich fields and hills surrounding Salinas, but also the nearby Pacific coast where his family spent summer weekends. “I remember my childhood names for grasses and secret flowers,” he wrote in the opening chapter of *East of Eden*. “I remember where a toad may live and what time the birds awaken in the summer—and what trees and seasons smelled like.” The observant, shy but often mischievous only son had, for the most part, a happy childhood growing up with two older sisters, Beth and Esther, and a much-adored younger sister, Mary. Never wealthy, the family was nonetheless prominent in the small town of 3000, for both parents engaged in community activities. Mr. Steinbeck was a Mason, Mrs. Steinbeck a member of Eastern Star and founder of The Wanderers, a women’s club that traveled vicariously through monthly reports. While the elder Steinbecks established their identities by sending deep roots in the community, however, their son was something of a rebel. Respectable Salinas circumscribed the restless and imaginative young John Steinbeck and he defined himself against “Salinas thinking.” At age fourteen he decided to be a writer and spent hours as a teenager living in a world of his own making, writing stories and poems in his upstairs bedroom.

To please his parents, in 1919 he enrolled at Stanford University; to please himself he signed on only for those courses that interested him—classical and British literature, writing courses, and a smattering of science. The President of the English Club said that Steinbeck, who regularly attended meetings to read his stories aloud, “had no other interests or talents that I could make out. He was a writer, but he was that and nothing else” (Benson 69). Writing was, indeed, his passion, not only during the Stanford years but throughout his life. From 1919 to 1925, when he finally left Stanford without taking a degree, Steinbeck dropped in and out of

the University, sometimes to work closely with migrants and bindlestiffs on California ranches. Those relationships, coupled with an early sympathy for the weak and defenseless, deepened his empathy for workers, the disenfranchised, the lonely and dislocated—an empathy that is characteristic in his work. After leaving Stanford, he briefly tried construction work and newspaper reporting in New York City, and then returned to his native state in order to hone his craft. In the late 1920s, during a three-year stint as a caretaker for a Lake Tahoe estate, he wrote several drafts of his first novel, *Cup of Gold* (1929) about the pirate Henry Morgan, and met the woman who would become his first wife, Carol Henning, a San Jose native. After their marriage in 1930, he and Carol settled, rent-free, into the Steinbeck family's summer cottage in Pacific Grove, she to search for jobs to support them, he to continue writing.

During the decade of the 1930s Steinbeck wrote most of his best California fiction: *The Pastures of Heaven* (1932), *To a God Unknown* (1933), *Tortilla Flat* (1935), *In Dubious Battle* (1936), *Of Mice and Men* (1937), *The Long Valley* (1938) and *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939). *To a God Unknown*, second written and third published, tells of patriarch Joseph Wayne's domination of and obsession with the land. Mystical and powerful, the novel testifies to Steinbeck's awareness of an essential bond between humans and the environments they inhabit. In a journal entry kept while working on this novel—a practice he continued all his life—the young author wrote: “the trees and the muscled mountains are the world—but not the world apart from man—the world and man—the one inseparable unit man and his environment. Why they should ever have been understood as being separate I do not know.” His conviction that characters must be seen in the context of their environments remained constant throughout his career. His was not a man-dominated universe, but an interrelated whole, where species and the environment were seen to interact, where commensal bonds between people, among families, with nature were acknowledged. By 1933, Steinbeck had found his terrain; had chiseled a prose style that was more naturalistic, and far less strained than in his earliest novels; and had claimed his people—not the respectable, smug Salinas burghers, but those on the edges of polite society. Steinbeck's California fiction, from *To a God Unknown* to *East of Eden* (1952) envisions the dreams and defeats of common people shaped by the environments they inhabit.

Undoubtedly his ecological, holistic vision was determined

both by his early years roaming the Salinas hills and by his long and deep friendship with the remarkable Edward Flanders Ricketts, a marine biologist. Founder of Pacific Biological, a marine lab eventually housed on Cannery Row in Monterey, Ed was a careful observer of intertidal life: "I grew to depend on his knowledge and on his patience in research," Steinbeck writes in "About Ed Ricketts," an essay composed after his friend's death in 1948 and published with *The Log from the Sea of Cortez* (1951). Ed Ricketts's influence on Steinbeck, however, struck far deeper than the common chord of detached observation. Ed was a lover of Gregorian chants and Bach; Spengler and Krishnamurti; Whitman and Li Po. His mind "knew no horizons," writes Steinbeck. In addition, Ricketts was remarkable for a quality of acceptance; he accepted people as they were and he embraced life as he found it. This quality he called non-teleological or "is" thinking, a perspective that Steinbeck also assumed in much of his fiction during the 1930s. He wrote with a "detached quality," simply recording what "is." The working title for *Of Mice and Men*, for example, was "Something That Happened"—this is simply the way life is. Furthermore, in most of his fiction Steinbeck includes a "Doc" figure, a wise observer of life who epitomizes the idealized stance of the nonteleological thinker: Doc Burton in *In Dubious Battle*, Slim in *Of Mice and Men*, Casy in *The Grapes of Wrath*, Lee in *East of Eden*, and of course "Doc" himself in *Cannery Row* (1945) and the sequel, the rollicking *Sweet Thursday* (1954). All see broadly and truly and empathetically. Ed Ricketts, patient and thoughtful, a poet and a scientist, helped ground the author's ideas. He was Steinbeck's mentor, his alter ego, and his soul mate. Considering the depth of his eighteen-year friendship with Ricketts, it is hardly surprising that the bond acknowledged most frequently in Steinbeck's oeuvre is friendship between and among men.

Steinbeck's writing style as well as his social consciousness of the 1930s was also shaped by an equally compelling figure in his life, his wife Carol. She helped edit his prose, urged him to cut the Latinate phrases, typed his manuscripts, suggested titles, and offered ways to restructure. In 1935, having finally published his first popular success with tales of Monterey's paisanos, *Tortilla Flat*, Steinbeck, goaded by Carol, attended a few meetings of nearby Carmel's John Reed Club. Although he found the group's zealotry distasteful, he, like so many intellectuals of the 1930s, was drawn to the communists' sympathy for the working man. Farm workers in California suffered. He set out to write a

"biography of a strikebreaker," but from his interviews with a hounded organizer hiding out in nearby Seaside, he turned from biography to fiction, writing one of the best strike novels of the twentieth century, *In Dubious Battle*. Never a partisan novel, it dissects with a steady hand both the ruthlessness of the strike organizers and the rapaciousness of the greedy landowners. What the author sees as dubious about the struggle between organizers and farmers is not who will win but how profound is the effect on the workers trapped in between, manipulated by both interests.

At the height of his powers, Steinbeck followed this large canvas with two books that round out what might be called his labor trilogy. The tightly-focused *Of Mice and Men* was one of the first in a long line of "experiments," a word he often used to identify a forthcoming project. This "play-novelette," intended to be both a novella and a script for a play, is a tightly-drafted study of bindlestiffs through whose dreams he wanted to represent the universal longings for a home. Both the text and the critically-acclaimed 1937 Broadway play (which won the Drama Critics Circle Award for best play that year) made Steinbeck a household name, assuring his popularity and, for some, his infamy. His next novel intensified popular debate about Steinbeck's gritty subjects, his uncompromising sympathy for the disenfranchised, and his "crass" language. *The Grapes of Wrath* sold out an advance edition of 19,804 by mid-April, 1939; was selling 10,000 copies a week by early May; and won the Pulitzer Prize for the year (1940). Published at the apex of the Depression, the book about dispossessed farmers captured the decade's angst as well as the nation's legacy of fierce individualism, visionary prosperity, and determined westward movement. It was, like the best of Steinbeck's novels, informed in part by documentary zeal, in part by Steinbeck's ability to trace mythic and biblical patterns. Lauded by critics nationwide for its scope and intensity, *The Grapes of Wrath* attracted an equally vociferous minority opinion. Oklahomans said that the dispossessed Joads's story was a "dirty, lying, filthy manuscript" in the words of Congressman Lyle Boren. Californians claimed the novel was a scourge on the state's munificence, and an indignant Kern County, its migrant population burgeoning, banned the book well into World War II. The righteous attacked the book's language or its crass gestures: Granpa's struggle to keep his fly buttoned was not, it seemed to some, fit for print. *The Grapes of Wrath* was a *cause célèbre*.

The author abandoned the field, exhausted from two years of

research trips and personal commitment to the migrants' woes, from the five-month push to write the final version, from a deteriorating marriage to Carol, and from an unnamed physical malady. He retreated to Ed Ricketts and science, announcing his intention to study seriously marine biology and to plan a collecting trip to the Sea of Cortez. The text Steinbeck and Ricketts published in 1941, *Sea of Cortez* (reissued in 1951 without Ed Ricketts's catalogue of species as *The Log from the Sea of Cortez*), tells the story of that expedition. It does more, however. The *Log* portion that Steinbeck wrote (from Ed's notes) in 1940—at the same time working on a film in Mexico, *The Forgotten Village*—contains his and Ed's philosophical musings, his ecological perspective, as well as keen observations on Mexican peasantry, hermit crabs, and "dryball" scientists. Quipped Lewis Gannett, there is, in *Sea of Cortez*, more "of the whole man, John Steinbeck, than any of his novels": Steinbeck the keen observer of life, Steinbeck the scientist, the seeker of truth, the historian and journalist, the writer.

Steinbeck was determined to participate in World War II, first doing patriotic work (*The Moon Is Down*, 1942, a play-novelette about an occupied Northern European country, and *Bombs Away*, 1942, a portrait of bomber trainees) and then going overseas for the New York *Herald Tribune* as a war correspondent. In his war dispatches he wrote about the neglected corners of war that many journalists missed—life at a British bomber station, the allure of Bob Hope, the song "Lili Marlene," and a diversionary mission off the Italian coast. These columns were later collected in *Once There Was a War* (1958). Immediately after returning to the States, a shattered Steinbeck wrote a nostalgic and lively account of his days on Cannery Row, *Cannery Row* (1945). In 1945, however, few reviewers recognized that the book's central metaphor, the tide pool, suggested a way to read this non-teleological novel that examined the "specimens" who lived on Monterey's Cannery Row, the street Steinbeck knew so well.

Steinbeck often felt misunderstood by book reviewers and critics, and their barbs rankled the sensitive writer, and would throughout his career. A book resulting from a post-war trip to Russia with Robert Capa in 1947, *A Russian Journal* (1948), seemed to many superficial. Reviewers seemed doggedly either to misunderstand his biological naturalism or to expect him to compose another strident social critique like *The Grapes of Wrath*. Commonplace phrases echoed in reviews of books of the 1940s and other "experimental" books of the 1950s and 1960s:

"complete departure," "unexpected." A humorous text like *Cannery Row* seemed fluff to many. Set in La Paz, Mexico, *The Pearl* (1947), a "folk tale...a black-white story like a parable" as he wrote his agent, tells of a young man who finds an astounding pearl, loses his freedom in protecting his wealth, and finally throws back into the sea the cause of his woes. Reviews noted this as another slim volume by a major author—of whom more was expected. *The Wayward Bus* (1947), a "cosmic Bus," sputtered as well.

Steinbeck faltered both professionally and personally in the 1940s. He divorced the loyal but volatile Carol in 1943. That same year he moved east with his second wife, Gwyndolyn Conger, a lovely and talented woman nearly twenty years his junior who ultimately came to resent his growing stature and feel that her own creativity—she was a singer—had been stifled. With Gwyn, Steinbeck had two sons, Thom and John, but the marriage started falling apart shortly after the second son's birth, ending in divorce in 1948. That same year Steinbeck was numbed by Ed Ricketts's death. Only with concentrated work on a filmscript on the life of Emiliano Zapata for Elia Kazan's film *Viva Zapata!* (1952) would Steinbeck gradually chart a new course. In 1949 he met and in 1950 married his third wife, Elaine Scott, and with her he moved again to New York City, where he lived for the rest of his life. Much of the pain and reconciliation of those late years of the 1940s were worked out in two subsequent novels: his third play-novelette *Burning Bright* (1950), a boldly experimental parable about a man's acceptance of his wife's child fathered by another man, and in the largely autobiographical work he'd contemplated since the early 1930s, *East of Eden* (1952).

"It is what I have been practicing to write all of my life," he wrote to painter Bo Beskow early in 1948, when he first began research for a novel about his native valley and his people; three years later when he finished the manuscript he wrote his friend again, "This is 'the book'...Always I had this book waiting to be written." With *Viva Zapata!*, *East of Eden*, *Burning Bright* and later *The Winter of Our Discontent* (1961), Steinbeck's fiction becomes less concerned with the behavior of groups—what he called in the 1930s "group man"—and more focused on an individual's moral responsibility to self and community. The detached perspective of the scientist gives way to a certain warmth; the ubiquitous "self-character" that he claimed appeared in all his novels to comment and observe is modeled less on Ed Ricketts, more on John

himself. Certainly with his divorce from Gwyn, Steinbecker endured dark nights of the soul, and *East of Eden* conveys turbulent emotions surrounding the subject of wife, family, and fatherhood. "In a sense it will be two books," he wrote in his journal (posthumously published in 1969 as *Journal: The East of Eden Letters*) as he began the final volume, "the story of my country and the story of me. And I will tell these two separate." Early critics dismissed as incoherent the tangled story of the Hamiltons, his mother's family, and the "symbol people" representing the story of Cain and Abel. "More recently critics have come to recognize that the novel is an early example of metafiction, exploring the role of the author, a concern, in fact, in many of his books.

Grapes of Wrath, *East of Eden* is a defining point in Steinbecker's writing the 1950s and 1960s the perpetually "restless" novel. "With her, he became more social. Perhaps his writing was a result; some claim that even *East of Eden*, his most ambitious novel, cannot stand shoulder to shoulder with the social novels of the 1930s. In the fiction of his last years, however, Steinbecker never ceased to take risks, to experiment with the form of the novel's structure, to experiment with the form of language. *Sweet Thursday*, sequel to *Cannery Row*, written as a musical comedy that would resolve Ed Steinbecker's business by sending him off into the sunset with a true American dream, with a gilded heart. The musical version by Stephen Sondheim, *Pipe Dream*, was one of the team's last. In 1957 he published the satiric *The Short Reign of Pippin IV*, about the French Monarchy gaining ascendancy. Steinbecker published his last work of fiction, the ambitious

But the writer John Steinbeck was not silenced. As always, he wrote reams of letters to his many friends and associates. In the 1950s and 1960s he published scores of journalistic pieces: "Making of a New Yorker," "I Go Back to Ireland," columns

about the 1956 national political conventions, and "Letters to Alicia," a controversial series about a 1966 White House-approved trip to Vietnam where his sons were stationed. In the late 1950s—and intermittently for the rest of his life—he worked diligently on a modern English translation of a book he had loved since childhood, Sir Thomas Malory's *Morte d'Arthur*; the unfinished project was published posthumously as *The Acts of King Arthur and His Noble Knights* (1976). Immediately after completing *Winter, the Fourth Deadly Sin*, Steinbecker proposed "not a little trip of reporting," he wrote to his agent Elizabeth Otis, "but a frantic last attempt to save my life and the integrity of my creativity pulse." In 1960, he toured America in a camper truck designed to his specifications, and on his return published the highly praised *Travels with Charley in Search of America* (1962), another book that both celebrates American individuals and decries American hypocrisy; the climax of his journey is his visit to the New Orleans "cheerleaders" who daily taunted black children newly registered in white schools. His disenchantment with American waste, greed, immorality and racism ran deep. His last published book, *America and Americans* (1966), reconsiders the American character, the land, the racial crisis, and the seemingly crumbling morality of the American people.

In these late years, in fact since his final move to New York in 1950, many accused John Steinbeck of increasing conservatism. True enough that with greater wealth came the chance to spend money more freely. And with status came political opportunities that seemed out of step for a "radical" of the 1930s: he initially

on Democrat in the 1950s. Even in the 1930s, he was communist, and after three trips to Russia (1937, 1947, 1948), he was deported. He was a man who was hated with increasing intensity Soviet repression of the

1950s, neither during his life nor after has the paradoxical been an easy author to pigeonhole personally, politically. As a man, he was an introvert and at the same romantic streak, was impulsive, garrulous, a lover of word play and practical jokes. As an artist, he was a experimenter with words and form, and often critics did quite what he was up to. He claimed his books had that many claimed his symbolic touch was cumbersome, humor and warmth, but some said he slopped over into nihilism. He was, and is now recognized as, an environmentalist. He was an intellectual, passionately interested in his range from an author sometimes labeled simplistic by the public. As I said, Steinbeck remains one of America's most significant twentieth-century writers, whose popularity spans the entire range is impressive, whose output was prodigious: a collection of short stories, 4 screenplays (*The Forgotten Red Pony*, *Viva Zapata!*, *Lifeboat*), a sheaf of essays—including four collections (*Bombs Away*, *Was a War, America and Americans*, *The Harvest*), three travel narratives (*Sea of Cortez*, *A Russian Journey with Charley*), a translation and two published journal (main unpublished). Three "play-novelettes" ran on the radio (*Mice and Men*, *The Moon Is Down*, and *Burning*), and the musical *Pipe Dream*. Whatever his "experiment" in naturalistic prose, he wrote with empathy, clarity, and a very bit of honest writing in the style of the

Why read John Steinbeck?

John Steinbeck brings together the human heart and the land.

That phrase, written by environmentalist and writer Barry Lopez, has resonance for today's readers of John Steinbeck. Lopez urges us to consider two primal landscapes: external landscapes—our relations to the land, to oaks, to the whir of night frogs—and interior landscapes, often shaped by the places where we live.

John Steinbeck's work brings together both these landscapes in extraordinary ways, ways that may deeply affect those of us living at the cusp of a new century.

Steinbeck loved the burnished Salinas hills and the churning Pacific. Like some of America's greatest writers—Thoreau, Faulkner, Cather—Steinbeck made his childhood haunts vividly real. In book after book, he charted his course in the letters or journals he wrote as "warmups" to the day's writing. Steinbeck wanted his prose to recapture a child's vision "of colors more clear than they are to adults, of tastes more sharp...I want to put down the way 'afternoon felt' and of the feeling about a bird that sang in a tree in the evening."

He asks that readers pay respectful attention to an external landscape. He invites us to look: "Orange and speckled and fluted nudibranchs slide gracefully over the rocks, their skirts waving like the dresses of Spanish dancers." Passages of stark beauty are found in every Steinbeck novel, sentences that record the rapt attention he paid to the natural world.

And then he asks that we shift perspective. American literature is full of conquest narratives—John Smith as Virginia cavalier, Natty Bumppo as pathfinder, Ernest Hemingway as marksman.

ley. Steinbeck's is a vision of ecological cooperation, man's interdependence with nature and one another. Important to Steinbeck is the internal landscape, often one of isolation, loneliness, failure. I always ask my students fully at the first paragraphs of Steinbeck's novels, internal and characters' internal landscapes coalesce, *Of Mice and Men* in particular. The "strong and rocky" Gabilan range is in the distance. George and Lennie take shelter in a s nurtured tramps, boys, and deer. That scene evokes status—throughout the book these lonely men seek the "strong" in the bunkhouse or the barn. Steinbeck ch desolate interiors. But his is never the language of empathy. George and Lennie are great friends—of each reader.

reaches out a fictional hand. Emotional bonds are in book and reader. Pauline Pearson, who spent s interviewing Steinbeck's Salinas associates for the ary's oral history project, told me once: "John d me. I was suffering, and in his work I found sol- d laughter and commitment are what many readers nbeck's work. "In every bit of honest writing in the e in the late 1930s, "there is a base theme. Try to ."

these Steinbeck landscapes, external and internal, new century? We live in an imperiled world, k and California chefs have agreed to take the en- fish off menus. Mining rugged interiors poses a environment. Steinbeck's voice, curiously con- and fifty and sixty years later, urges us to take te that external world and our bonds to it. k's ghostly voice of understanding and

Good and evil face off in this book and others. They live. Recently, a class spent 50 minutes discussing whether George needed Lennie as much as Lennie needed George.

Readers return to books that are, like close friends, reliable, accessible, entertaining, and—let Steinbeck never again be pilloried by the old complaint that he's a writer only for adolescent readers—challenging and perplexing.

The Japanese have a vigorous Steinbeck Society, over 150 strong. Why are his books so popular there? For many international readers, Steinbeck's work captures the elusive American psyche: bonds to land, the need for a place. Many of Steinbeck's stories are archetypal—restless migrants moving west to begin anew.

Some Steinbeck characters are, like Fitzgerald's Gatsby, unflinching American visionaries—Jim Casy, Joseph Wayne, Adam Trask. Others are ordinary people, workers, migrants, a few homeless—the Americans celebrated in Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself."

At the 1997 Fourth International Steinbeck Congress held in San Jose and Monterey, Asian and other participants read papers that noted Steinbeck's affinity for Buddhist or Taoist ideals—acceptance of what is, not grappling for solutions. Indeed, few twentieth-century American writers seem as relevant, as representative.

Finally, reading Steinbeck may provoke essential dialogue about ethnicity. Early on he wrestled with the issue of California's diversity. At Stanford University in 1924, he published his first story, "Fingers of Cloud," about the marriage of a white girl and a Filipino worker, Pedro. It's an emblematic tale, for much of his work is about cultural tensions. He ended his career with *America*

als? Steinbeck wrote: "...they want the thing wine
re not drunkards at all. They like the love and fights
th wine, rather than the wine itself."
e life.

k endures because he does not permit readers to com-
in, like the hermit crab. He embraces the fullness of
mpassion, tolerance, and humility, he surveys land-
ce, of spirit, of a nation.

inbeck? was written by Susan Shillinglaw and origi-
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John Steinbeck Selected Bibliography

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Bracken Library, Ball State University, Muncie, Indiana.
Center for Steinbeck Studies, San Jose State University, California.
Columbia University, New York, New York.
Humanities Research Center, University of Texas, Austin, Texas.
National Steinbeck Center, Salinas, California.
Pierpont Morgan Library, New York, New York.
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Stanford University Library, Stanford, California.
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The Celluloid Steinbeck

Perhaps more than any other twentieth-century writer, John Steinbeck is associated with good films. His imagination was visual, as the power of place in the opening paragraphs of his stories or novels fully attests. He was fortunate when his books were adapted by others as well as when he worked on films himself.

Among the outstanding movies with Steinbeck's name attached are *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940), *East of Eden* (1955), *Of Mice and Men* (1939), and *Viva Zapata!* (1952). Of these, he wrote the story for *Viva Zapata!* and assisted Lewis Milestone with the final script for *Of Mice and Men*. In addition, after completing the novel *The Grapes of Wrath* in 1939, he turned to filmmaking and marine biology, declaring that "the novel as we know it is dead." Both became significant creative outlets for this highly visual, immensely curious writer. Indeed, the structure of *The Grapes of Wrath*—relying on the interplay between panoramic inter-chapters and close-up accounts of the Joads' trek—had been influenced by Pare Lorentz's documentary films, *The River* and *The Plow that Broke the Plains*. In 1939 Steinbeck worked briefly with Lorentz on filming another documentary about a maternity ward in Chicago, *A Fight for Life*, and then, in 1940, went to Mexico to work with Herbert Kline on a documentary about a Mexican village confronting a cholera epidemic, *The Forgotten Village* (1941). Steinbeck wrote the screenplay for this compelling account of traditional village beliefs clashing with the realities of modern medical practices.

Steinbeck also worked on films during World War II: he wrote the stories for both Alfred Hitchcock's *Lifeboat* (1944)—about a survivor stranded on a lifeboat—and for *A Medal for Benny*

Anthony Quinn, remains one of Steinbeck's finest
 k worked again with Kazan on *East of Eden*, James
 vie, in which he played the brooding Cal Trask.
 hn Steinbeck had unusually close bonds to both a
 nd a popular film tradition—even though Holly-
 ce he frequently disparaged. What intrigued him
 the way in which the medium reached a broad au-
 s genres was to speak more directly to the people.

A Steinbeck Filmography

Movies for Theatrical Release

- 1939 *Of Mice and Men*, directed by Lewis Milestone, featuring Burgess Meredith, Lon Chaney, Jr., and Betty Field
- 1940 *The Grapes of Wrath*, directed by John Ford, featuring Henry Fonda, Jane Darwell and John Carradine
- 1941 *The Forgotten Village*, directed by Herbert Kline, narrated by Burgess Meredith
- 1942 *Tortilla Flat*, directed by Victor Fleming, featuring Spencer Tracy, Hedy Lamarr and John Garfield
- 1943 *The Moon is Down*, directed by Irving Pichel, featuring Lee J. Cobb and Sir Cedric Hardwicke
- 1944 *Lifeboat*, directed by Alfred Hitchcock, featuring Tallulah Bankhead, Hume Cronyn, and John Hodiak
- 1944 *A Medal for Benny*, directed by Irving Pichel, featuring Dorothy Lamour and Arturo de Cordova
- 1947 *The Pearl (La Perla)*, directed by Emilio Fernández, featuring Pedro Armendariz and María Elena Marqués
- 1949 *The Red Pony*, directed by Lewis Milestone, featuring Myrna Loy, Robert Mitchum, and Louis Calhern
- 1952 *Viva Zapata!*, directed by Elia Kazan, featuring Marlon Brando, Anthony Quinn and Jean Peters

television

Myriam's Full House, narrated by John Steinbeck
Myriam's Fool, featuring Barbara Bel Geddes
So Monstrous, featuring Thomas Mitchell
Myriam, featuring Buddy Ebsen and Mabel Page
Myriam for Benny, featuring J. Carroll Naish and Anne
Myriam's Light, featuring John Butler Dancers
Myriam and Americans, narrated by Henry Fonda
Myriam and Men, featuring George Segal, Nicol Williamson,
Joey Heatherton
Myriam with Charley, narrated by Henry Fonda
Myriam's, featuring Lorne Green
Myriam's Pony, featuring Henry Fonda and Maureen O'Hara
Myriam's Eden, featuring Jane Seymour (mini-series)
Myriam and Men, featuring Robert Blake and Randy Quaid
Myriam's, featuring Teri Garr
Myriam's, featuring Gary Sinise and Lois Smith

ee films were produced by a small company in
nia, and may be available for school or library

anthemums

Questions for Discussion of Three Major Films

Of Mice and Men (1939, 1992)

1. Lewis Milestone's *Of Mice and Men* is, for many, the best adaptation of a Steinbeck text. "Throughout my career," declared Milestone (whose important films include adaptations of the texts *All Quiet on the Western Front* and, in 1949, *The Red Pony*), "I've tried not so much to express a philosophy as to restate in filmic terms my agreement with whatever the author of a story I like is trying to say." Look at the opening scene of the film and comment. Compare to the 1992 version, which opens up the landscape and, with the appearance of the girl in the red dress, makes vivid Lennie's immediate past.
2. The publicity for the 1939 film featured Curley's wife: "Unwanted, she fought for the one thing which is every woman's birthright," declared posters. Her role was expanded for both the film and the play, which George Kaufman adapted for Broadway in 1937. Kaufman said that she was the "motivating force" for the action of the story, and that's why he wished to expand her role. Comment on the effectiveness of this expanded part. The scene with Curley's wife at dinner with Curley and the boss is particularly effective in conveying her situation on the ranch. Does her expanded role elicit more sympathy for this woman? Compare the depiction of her in both films.
3. The 1939 film was shot on location at the Aguora Ranch in the San Fernando Valley. A crew built the ranch in 8 days, erecting buildings, sinking a well, constructing stockades. The

5. When *Of Mice and Men* opened in New York in December, 1939, John Steinbeck wrote his agent that it was “a beautiful job...a curious lyrical thing. It hangs together and is underplayed.” What might he have meant by “underplayed?” Is George’s essential loneliness captured by Burgess Meredith? Compare this to Gary Sinese’s portrayal of George in the 1992 version—note the effectiveness of the opening shot, where George is alone.
6. The role of Slim is expanded in the film. Comment. At the end, does Slim seem to replace Lennie as George’s companion? Is this also true in the novel? What does the end of Steinbeck’s novel suggest?
7. In the film, there is a scene where George is seen putting the money in the post box—clearly the down payment on the ranch is made. Is this scene necessary? What are the implications of this scene?
8. Is there more humor in the 1939 film than in the book? In the 1992 film, John Malkovich, playing Lennie, conveys Lennie’s playfulness, his child-like qualities. Compare this performance to Chaney’s depiction of Lennie in the 1939 film.
9. At the end of the 1939 film, a sheriff comes on the scene—implying that whatever happens to George, justice will be done. Does this change the impact of the ending? Compare this to the ending of the 1992 film—where there was no need to introduce a sheriff in order to have the film pass censors. Is the 1992 ending more effective? Does it happen too quickly?

The Grapes of Wrath

1. The notoriety of *The Grapes of Wrath*, coupled with the popularity of *Of Mice and Men* as novel (1937), successful Broadway play (1937), and film (1939), made Steinbeck a “household name” by 1940, as announced in the publicity for John Ford’s film, *The Grapes of Wrath*. To insure the film’s popular success, artist Thomas Hart Benton was asked to draw the main characters for the film publicity campaign; his art was firmly “in the American grain” and an accessible artist like Benton would help make the film seem less inflammatory. Ford was taking on “raw” and controversial subject matter in

The Grapes of Wrath, and he publicly sought ways to make the material more palatable for the audience. Discuss how this populist appeal that the filmmakers are attempting to convey is translated into visual imagery. What makes the opening scenes accessible?

2. Playing Tom Joad was a career breakthrough for Henry Fonda. Note the ways in which Fonda captures Tom Joad's isolation, his anger, his attachment to family, his restlessness.
3. In initial filming along Route 66, the film, produced by Darryl Zanuck, was called "Highway 66" to protect the film crew from potential harm—the material was still very controversial in the press, particularly in Oklahoma and California. Note the effectiveness of the landscape shots in the beginning; compare this to the opening of the book, which is cinematic in its approach.
4. Discuss how the film contrasts an agrarian culture and the industrial culture that threatens it: the new economy is efficient, often inhumane, machine—not man—centered. Note the dark cars that bring eviction notices.
5. As film scholar John Engel, San Jose State University, and others have noted, an extraordinary number of speeches in the book are incorporated into the film. In *Grapes*, Steinbeck was trying to capture the sound of the migrants' speech, the musicality of their dialect. Note which speeches are particularly effective in the film.
6. Examine the scene where Ma, played by Jane Darwell, throws her mementos into the fire. It's a highly charged scene. Compare it to the novel for effectiveness and meaning of both. Ma's central concern in the film—as in the book—is to keep the family together. What is happening to this family, and why does the film highlight the role of Ma? Publicity for the film announced, "Women's Opinion Wanted on Family Problem!" The publicity urged theaters to emphasize Ma's role, quoting from the novel "...if she swayed the family shook, and if she ever deeply wavered or despaired, the family would fall..." Prizes were offered for this assignment:

Every woman can appreciate the great human problem

that faced Ma Joad. [An award will be made] for the best 200-word letters on the subject, 'How can a mother help keep a family together in the face of all adversity.'

7. Discuss how violence is handled in the film. *The Grapes of Wrath* came out on January 24, 1940; *Gone with the Wind* was released on December 15, 1939. Consider the ways that the films differ and some underlying similarities.
8. Compare scenes of community life in the film and the novel. Why are these group scenes important to the book? To the meaning of both film and novel?
9. In the book, the government camp sections occur midway through the novel; in the film the Joads are in the camp near the end. How do you account for this shift in perspective? What is the effect?
10. Compare the ending of the book and the film. Obviously the ending of the book would not pass censors. But the film radically reorganizes the material to suggest a far more upbeat ending. Ma says:

Rich fellas come up an' they die, an' their kids ain't no good, an' they die out. But we keep a coming. We're the people that live. Can't nobody wipe us out. Can't nobody lick us. We'll go on forever, Pa. We're the people.

That speech was visually highlighted by a sign along the road they traveled, "No Help Wanted," as indicated in Nunnally Johnson's script. But Zanuck eliminated the sign, and what is left is the open road. Comment.

11. Why would this film be popular at the end of the Depression?

The Pearl

1. Steinbeck found his material for *The Pearl* on his 1940 trip to the Sea of Cortez. When in La Paz, he hears a story about a Mexican boy with a pearl, and he retells it in that narrative:

This seems to be a true story, but it is so much like a parable that it almost can't be. This Indian boy is too heroic, too wise. He knows too much and acts on his knowledge.

In every way, he goes contrary to human direction. The story is probably true, but we don't believe it; it is far too reasonable to be true." (*Sea of Cortez*)

Comment on the ways that the film captures the parable of the book.

2. Steinbeck wrote over one-third of his books about Mexico. In *America and Americans*, his last book, he comments:

From the first we have treated our minorities abominably, the way the old boys do the new kids in school. All that was required to release this mechanism of oppression and sadism was that the newcomers be meek, poor, weak in numbers, and unprotected...

He hated bullies, and developed a quick sympathy for outcasts; growing up in Salinas he knew and worked with many Mexican immigrants. He spoke Spanish with a local family. He visited Mexico often from 1935-1949. Steinbeck was also interested in ethnics because of a deeper interest in spirituality he found in many encounters with Indians. He wrote in *America and Americans*:

Many white people, after association with the tribesmen, have been struck with the dual life—the reality and super-reality—that the Indians seem to be able to penetrate at will. The stories of travelers in the early days are filled with these incidents of another life separated from this one by a penetrable veil; and such is the power of the Indians' belief in this other life that the traveler usually comes out believing in it too and only fearing that he won't be believed.

Comment on references to religion and spirituality in the film compared to the novel.

3. After his stint as a war correspondent, he came home to New York both emotionally and mentally spent. He started writing *Cannery Row* out of homesickness for the lab. There is darkness in that book—dreams and nightmares and suicides. It is, as one reviewer noted, "a poisoned creampuff." His experiences during World War II may account for some of darkness

of *The Pearl* as well—Gwyn said that when he returned from the war, he was a changed man for a year. He started *The Pearl* in the same year that he finished *Cannery Row*. In December 1944 he wrote:

I've gone into a slump on the Pearl and that bothers me even remembering that I always go into two or three slumps on every book. But it always worries me... You know I can inspect my slumps pretty well. I go grey in the head and then I begin to worry about not working. Then I get disgusted with myself and when this disgust grows big enough the whole thing turns over like an iceberg and I go to work again. It's always the same and it's always new. I never get used to it. (to Pat Covici, December 29, 1944)

Is there darkness in this film?

4. The inspiration for *The Pearl* was visual. After he returned from the war, Steinbeck went to Mexico. He said at one point that there was "an illogic there that I need."

While there, I came on a curious combination. Indio Fernandez, an ex-cowboy actor, ex-revolutionary leader started directing pictures. He had taken Delores del Rio, between us a passé actress who was never terrific, stripped the make-up, head dress, and eye lashes from her and made a good emotional actress of her. A Mexican camera man named Figueroa was doing remarkable things for them. There was a flavor about this work like some of the French people, like Renoir, etc. I told them a folklorish tale I picked up in La Paz about the Indian and the Pearl and we decided to make it—to make it straight without any concessions to Hollywood...

Comment on the roles played by each in the film's development.

5. Steinbeck's wife, Gwyn, worked on the music for the film. Is it seamlessly integrated into the action? How are references to music in the book worked into the film?
6. The theme of dangers of wealth is important to both the novella and the film. This theme had personal ramifications for Steinbeck who feared that fame would rob him of the ability to

write. If he were wealthy and famous, he imagined, he might not be able to write about the material that meant the most to him. Comment.

7. One critic says that the film has confusion of purpose: "part artistic documentary, part musical, part Western, part allegory." Comment.
8. Reviewing *The Forgotten Village*, the author's good friend, fellow traveler to Mexico in 1935, novelist and book reviewer, Joseph Henry Jackson, found troubling Steinbeck's implied superiority to the peasants: "Some day a critic will take time to analyze the curious, fatherly-godlike love that Steinbeck manifests for his characters, to examine the chastiseth-whom-he-loveth attitude implicit in so much of Steinbeck's work, the insistent diminishment of his human characters (no not his turtles) by which the author-creator unconsciously magnifies himself in relation to them" (17). Comment on this viewpoint as it relates to *The Pearl*.