

Steinbeck and Censorship

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In 2002, Steinbeck's centennial year, everyone in California was urged to read *The Grapes of Wrath*, libraries throughout the state were having programs on Steinbeck, and there was an enormous Steinbeck conference at Hofstra University. But when *The Grapes of Wrath* was published in 1939, there was an intense effort to ban the novel and its film version and to vilify, discredit, and damage the author. Steinbeck is still one of the chief targets of censors, but in addition to attacks for political and allegedly moral reasons, he is also discredited by part of the literary establishment that wants to eliminate him from canonical literature.

The Grapes of Wrath became the best seller of 1939 and '40 and won the Pulitzer Prize, but it was also widely condemned, outraging some who considered it unAmerican in its refutation of the American Dream that anyone can become a success, in its criticism of cutthroat capitalism, the banks, the agribusiness of the Associated Farmers, the venality of used car dealers and buyers of household goods from the desperate. There were also protests about some of the coarse dialogue and details in the novel, which Congressman Lyle Boren of Oklahoma denounced before the House of Representatives as "a lie, a black, infernal creation of a twisted, distorted mind."

In America, when injustice was exposed, the messenger got blamed. The Associated Farmers, the banks, the agribusinessmen, the vested interests slandered Steinbeck with every distortion they could think up. Steinbeck wrote, "The Associated Farmers have begun an hysterical personal attack on me both in the papers and a whispering campaign. I'm a Jew, a pervert, a drunk, a dope fiend." Some even blamed him for coining the term "Okies."

Charges of filth and obscenity bothered Steinbeck less than the political aspects of attacks, though he was sure that some of the former were actually politically inspired. "Few novelists have been the recipient of so much personally directed hatred . . ." wrote Jackson Benson, Steinbeck's biographer. Swamped with hate mail, even death threats, Steinbeck wrote to his agent that "The Associated Farmers are really working up a campaign. . . . I have made powerful enemies with the Grapes. They will not kill me, I think, but they will destroy me if and when they can." The undersheriff of Santa Clara County, a friend of Steinbeck's, warned the author, "don't stay in a hotel room alone . . . [because] . . . the boys got a rape case set for you. You get alone in a hotel and a dame will come in, tear off her clothes, scratch her face and scream and you try to talk yourself out of that one. They won't touch your book but there's easier ways."

Steinbeck informed his agent, "The articles written against me are all by people who admit they haven't read *Grapes*, indeed wouldn't dirty their minds with it." A whispering campaign was not subject to libel laws. One libel was that "Steinbeck was a Jew acting for Zionist-communist interests in deliberately trying to undermine the economy." When the national director of Friends of Democracy, opposed to pro-Nazi and anti-Semitic propaganda, asked if he was Jewish, Steinbeck replied, "It happens that I am not Jewish and have no Jewish blood but it only happens that way. I find that I do not experience any pride that it is so"

Specifically to denounce *The Grapes of Wrath* and vilify its author, a luncheon was held at the Palace Hotel in San Francisco, decorated for the occasion in red, white, and blue. Presiding over it was Ruth Comfort Mitchell, the socialite wife of a State Senator; Mitchell, the author of treakly poetry and fiction from "a woman's point of view," tried to rebut *The Grapes*

of *Wrath* with a novel called *Of Human Kindness*, full of sentimental schlock about how wonderful California's farm families were. It ignored the Dust Bowl migrants altogether. The Associated Farmers also promised to produce *Plums of Plenty* but failed to do so. But a pamphleteer named George Thomas Miron distributed *The Truth about John Steinbeck and the Migrants*, which argued that "the energetic, the higher-grade citizens were making their way" while "The migrant families were decidedly low-grade and illiterate." In another pamphlet by M. V. Hartranft, called *Grapes of Gladness: California's Refreshing and Inspiring Answer to John Steinbeck's "The Grapes of Wrath,"* Ma and Pa Hoag come to California, where they have a wonderful time at a development called Shore Acres. Speaking of the "communistic implications" of Steinbeck's "notoriously inaccurate" novel, Hartranft finds it natural that "The richer a nation becomes, the deeper becomes its strata of poverty and the wider the disparity between riches and poverty."

In Nov. 1939, Frank J. Taylor, a former reporter for the Associated Press, published an article in *Forum* written in a seemingly objective manner, trying to discredit Steinbeck's novel, but he wrote as a stooge for the Associated Farmers, whom he completely exonerated from any brutality or cruelty; instead, he claimed that they had been nothing but kind and compassionate but received only ingratitude from the Okies. Yet because of his dispassionate style and the fact that he wrote in *Forum*, his distortions were copied widely by the press in a conspiracy to damn Steinbeck's novel. They repeatedly published a phony letter from a fictional migrant denying everything in the novel and testifying to the unflinching kindness and consideration of the grower, decent housing, clean sanitary facilities, and jobs available for all who want them. Some letters, supposedly written by Okies, blamed other Okies for preferring welfare to jobs. The lying rumors that hurt Steinbeck the worst were those in the papers that the Okies really hated him and wanted to kill him for lying about them. But Steinbeck liked and admired these people, worked with them as Migrant John, cared about them, spent 48 hours without food or sleep helping them fight the flood at Visalia. He wrote, "I grew to love and admire the people who are so much stronger and braver and purer than I am." A migrant from Kentucky named Peggy Terry, who had only a fifth-grade education, read a beat-up paperback of Steinbeck's novel and said, ". . . when I read *Grapes of Wrath*, that was like reliving my whole life. I was never so proud of poor people before as I was after I read this book."

Then Cary McWilliams' nonfiction *Factories in the Field* was published, providing documentary corroboration for *The Grapes of Wrath*, particularly in the chapter "Fascism on the Farm." Horace Bristol's photographs that he took when he went with Steinbeck to flooded-out Visalia were published in *Life* and provided further corroboration. Pearl Buck spoke to the League of American Writers in praise of the novel, and Eleanor Roosevelt said repeatedly that she had visited the migrant camps and never found *The Grapes of Wrath* exaggerated. Then the La Follette Senate Committee on Education and Labor, which examined conditions among the migrants in 1939 and 1940, reported the "shocking degree of human misery" among farm workers and exposed the oppressive tactics used by Associated Farmers, taking the law into its own hands, "the most flagrant and violent infringement of civil liberties" through use of blacklisting, espionage, strikebreaking, brutality and "sheer vigilantism" and concluded, "The civil rights of strikers, unions, union organizers, outsiders and many of the agricultural laborers in California to speak, assemble, organize into unions and bargain are repeatedly and flagrantly violated."

Darryl F. Zanuck instantly ran into protests against filming *The Grapes of Wrath*, on the grounds that "it would be inflammatory and widely censored." Dan Ford, the director's grandson, observed that "The Steinbeck novel was much more than the story of one uprooted farm family; it was a scathing indictment of American society, and many conservatives (including most of Fox's board of directors) considered it a radical text, subversive material not

suitable to put on the screen. The California Chamber of Commerce condemned the film project, and the Agricultural Council of California, headed by C. C. Teague, who was also an official of the Associated Farmers of California, conducted in rural newspapers a campaign against the filming of the novel, calling even for a boycott of all Twentieth Century-Fox releases."

On the other hand, wrote Dan Ford, "many liberals . . . saw *The Grapes of Wrath* as holy writ, and if Zanuck muted the book's tone of moral outrage they were ready to pounce on him." Some liberals assumed that when Zanuck bought the screen rights to the novel, it was to take it off the market. The Chase National Bank, which controlled Twentieth Century-Fox, tried to suppress the production, but Zanuck insisted the novel was "a stirring indictment of conditions which I think are a disgrace and ought to be remedied." In fact, Zanuck sent out investigators into the field who were sickened by what they saw and returned to say the actual conditions were even worse than Steinbeck showed. And indeed, bad though conditions are in *The Grapes of Wrath*, Steinbeck portrayed them as considerably worse in his investigative documentary articles for the *San Francisco News* in October 1936, later published in book form as *Their Blood Is Strong (The Harvest Gypsies)*.

When he sold *The Grapes of Wrath* to Fox, Steinbeck demanded and received a clause in his contract that the film "fairly and reasonably retain the main action and social intent of said literary property." To write the screenplay, Zanuck chose Nunnally Johnson, who the year before had written the screenplay for *Jesse James*, Fox's most successful film of 1939, and to direct it, he chose John Ford, then at the peak of his powers. Paradoxically, all three men were moderate conservatives. Hard-hitting though it is, the movie softens Steinbeck's harsh criticism, generalizes the oppressors, omitting specific names, leaves out the dialogue about reds, deletes the novel's tragic ending, reverses the sequences of the benevolent government camp and the vicious Hooper ranch, and ends on an upbeat note, leaving the impression that everything may be "awright" and that nothing needs to be done. Later, Zanuck told the press, "They said I couldn't show *Grapes of Wrath* in Oklahoma and Texas, and I got scared as hell. All I won with that was an Oscar and a fortune."

Meanwhile, Steinbeck discovered that the FBI was keeping a file on him. The FBI had dossiers on hundreds American writers, including any who signed civil rights and/or antiwar protests during the 1960's. All it took to get in the files was any mildly liberal activity. The 139-page file on Steinbeck was started in 1936 because he participated in a western writers conference and contributed to *Pacific Weekly*, which the FBI labeled "Red." By 1942, Steinbeck had found out about the file and wrote a letter of protest to Attorney General Francis Biddle, requesting J. Edgar Hoover's "boys to stop stepping on my heels. They think I'm an enemy alien." Biddle forwarded it to Hoover, who lied in his reply that Steinbeck had never been investigated by the FBI. In fact, Hoover claimed that there was "substantial doubt as to the loyalty" of the writer and recommended that he not get a commission in the Army in 1943. By contrast, in 1940, when Eleanor Roosevelt inspected the migrant camps, she vouched for the accuracy of *The Grapes of Wrath*. Steinbeck responded, ". . . thank you for your words. I have been called a liar so constantly . . ."

He still is; the number one book under attack by censors in the 1990's was *Of Mice and Men*, and high on the list is *The Grapes of Wrath*. The argument given is dirty language, but Steinbeck never uses the f—word, and the few profanities that he does use are less than you can hear any night on prime-time television, and in GP-rated movies. The real reason is probably political; Steinbeck stated, "I am completely partisan on the idea of working people to the end that they may eat what they raise, wear what they weave, use what they produce, and share in the work of their hands and heads."

Accused of being atheistic and communistic, Steinbeck was neither. The new religion that Casy embraces after losing the "spirit" is not atheism but American transcendentalism derived from Emerson and Whitman. Politically, Steinbeck defends the small family farm. Between 1940 and 1980, American farms declined from 6 million to two and a four million, and have declined a lot more since. In 1980, the school board of Kanawha, Iowa voted unanimously to ban *Grapes* from classrooms, because of a complaint by one parent, who was vice-president of the local bank, at a time when in the 14 northwestern counties of Iowa, 77% of the land was held by absentee owners. In 1990, elementary school officials in San Diego ordered a children's mural to be painted over because it showed banned books, including *Grapes*, as a stairway to the wonders of the universe.

Besides political and religious censorship, there has been a sort of censorship from the literary world. Probably at the instigation of Henry Luce, *Time* magazine consistently treated Steinbeck with the sort of hostility that Hearst did Orson Welles. At the same time, ever since the snide Mary McCarthy expressed contempt in 1936 for *In Dubious Battle*, there has been a clique against Steinbeck in *New Republic*, *The New York Times Book Review*, and the literary establishment. McCarthy's one-time husband Edmund Wilson, along with Alfred Kazin, dismissed Steinbeck's ideas as "not even worth bothering with," nor in their view is "the California experience rich enough to support any sort of 'class A' literature," observed Jackson Benson. Edmund Wilson, in *The Boys in the Back Room*, wrote condescendingly that "Mr. Steinbeck almost always in his fiction is dealing either with the lower animals or with human beings so rudimentary that they are almost on the animal level." In this statement, Wilson sounds like the filling station attendants and cops in California who label the migrants filthy, stupid animals.

When Steinbeck won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1962, the highest literary prize in the world, Arthur Mizener published an editorial the next day in the *New York Times* claiming that Steinbeck did not deserve it, that the laurel should have been "awarded to a writer—perhaps a poet or critic or historian—whose significance . . . made a more profound impression on the literature of our age," and that Steinbeck's selection raises "questions about the mechanics of selection and how close the Nobel committee is to the main currents of American writing." His comments, wrote Mizener hypocritically, were not meant to detract "in the least from Mr. Steinbeck's accomplishments . . ." Mizener is entitled to his opinion, but it was extraordinarily unsportsmanlike of him and of the *Times* to try to torpedo Steinbeck's award in this fashion. How do you think John and Elaine Steinbeck felt? Jackson Benson observes that "by the time of the Nobel Prize, it had become de rigueur in order to certify one's intellectual credentials to show as much contempt for Steinbeck as possible."

The book that the Nobel Committee said tipped the scales in Steinbeck's honor was his final novel, *The Winter of Our Discontent*. But Stanley Edgar Hyman (Who remembers him?), called the novel "too trivial and dishonest a book to waste space on." He was incredulous that the Nobel Committee could decide to give the prize in part because of what Hyman calls "a work of almost inconceivable badness," though he never gives a reason why; it is simply awful because he thinks so. When Hyman read that Arthur Miller and Saul Bellow praised it, he responded that "to assume their honesty I must disparage their intelligence." In other words, because Hyman knew that the novel was rotten, Miller and Bellow were either stupid or lying. This is the height of intellectual arrogance.

This sort of name calling and superficial judgment of Steinbeck has become all too common. In an article on John Ford and *The Grapes of Wrath* in *Great Film Directors*, Parker Tyler says he is "only vaguely familiar" with Steinbeck's novel but calls it "second-rate literature." Reviewing for the *Washington Post Book Review* the first volume of Steinbeck in The Library of America as "Dregs of Wrath," Jonathan Yardly claimed that the Library of America was entering a new phase by including "the author's first five books, not one of which

can be said to possess genuine literary interest." These are not, in fact, Steinbeck's first five books: Yardly seems unaware of *Cup of Gold*, which was not included, and he misnames *To a God Unknown* as *To an Unknown God*. The works that he claims have no genuine literary interest include *In Dubious Battle*, *Tortilla Flat*, and *Of Mice and Men*. He claims that "At best they are curiosities, the apprentice work of a writer whose mature fiction itself fell considerably short of literary distinction." Yardly gives no analysis to support this attack but asks whether the editors of The Library of America should "call a halt to expansion of the library until more work of indisputable quality is available for publication." His only excuse for *The Grapes of Wrath* is its historical, antiquarian interest. In effect, Yardly's argument that Steinbeck should have not been included in The Library of America, which had not yet included *The Grapes of Wrath* (it appeared in the second volume) and should in fact suspend adding any more authors is a form of censorship. But the Library went on to publish two more collections of Steinbeck, who has been one of the series' most popular authors.

Yet on February 7, 2002, Martin Arnold wrote in the *New York Times* (E3) that Steinbeck "has never been too popular among the higher academics of literature, his work considered too sentimental for great art, his writing simply not good enough." This is snobbish disdain, pure and simple. Although Arnold concedes that "Steinbeck had perfect pitch for an era, the Depression," he goes on to observe that "Harold Bloom, who is a sort of chancellor of the Western literary canon, doesn't even include this Nobel winner in the canon's American division," and he quotes Bloom, "You can't read three paragraphs of Steinbeck without thinking of a poorer Hemingway, with characterizations that are contrived." These attacks are not analysis but simple name calling. One might very well challenge any canon, let alone one decreed for all the rest of us by Harold Bloom, who, says John Ditsky, "seems to feel licensed to speak out on all writers everywhere and of whatever era." Bloom, however, did include *The Grapes of Wrath* in an earlier version of his canon, along with such quirky choices as *Myra Breckenridge* and wrote brief introductions to two collections of articles on Steinbeck, using the same introduction (half of its slightly over four pages being quotations from Emerson and Hemingway) for each book, patronizing Steinbeck and claiming, on no basis but his own say-so, that none of Steinbeck's work after 1939 bears rereading, that he is not an adequate stylist and lacks skill in plot and character. One wonders whether Bloom read all of Steinbeck's post-1939 novels and why he bothered to write the introductions, except that they are among the 200 or so volumes for which he has done so. Clearly, Bloom disagrees with most of the essays he has anthologized, whose authors analyze in detail the artistic strengths of Steinbeck, in whose work, says Martin Arnold, Bloom "doesn't even see many small excellences."

By contrast, Studs Terkel finds *The Grapes of Wrath* symphonic, "constructed more like a piece of music rather than mere prose. It is not unlike Frank Lloyd Wright's approach to architecture." Terkel calls the novel "an anthem in praise of human community. And thus survival." "When asked 'What is the best novel you read in 1988?'," said Terkel, "the reply comes easy: *The Grapes of Wrath*. The third time around merely adds to its dimension." Dorothy Parker, at the time of its publication in 1939, called it 'the greatest American novel I have ever read.' She'll get no argument in these quarters," adds Terkel.

But Parker and Terkel are not part of the academic establishment. All too often literature professors are afraid to teach authors who are not canonical or trendy in academe. The author remembers 46 years ago hearing a young Ph.D. exclaim, "Thank heavens the eighteenth century is respectable again; now I can teach Pope." A friend of the author in the Berkeley English department volunteered that he doesn't think any of his colleagues teach Steinbeck, that they don't consider him difficult enough. But there is enough complexity and density to Steinbeck's work to have produced a sizeable library of solid criticism. In *John Steinbeck and the Critics*, John Ditsky includes 104 books between 1939 and 1998, not to mention articles in journals, and there have been more since. Though they are not invariably favorable towards all aspects of Steinbeck's work, they do not indulge in the superficiality of a charge like

sentimentality unsupported by examples or analysis. Just how sentimental is *The Grapes of Wrath*? I can think of perhaps three sentimental passages in the entire grim and gritty realistic novel. There is far more sentimentality in Dickens, who remains one of the world's greatest novelists. As for Steinbeck's sentimentality, when he was asked in Poland in 1963 what virtues he most appreciated in people, he answered, "Gallantry."

"Chivalry? Courage?"

"Yes, but this is not all, I also mean kindness, heartfelt kindness besides chivalry and courage; and all that is genuine, individual and unique in men." This is not the view of an ideologue or a dogmatic theorist, which may be part of the reason so much of the literary establishment rejects Steinbeck. But there are academic Steinbeck scholars like Robert DeMott, Louis Owens, Jackson Benson, John Ditsky, Susan Shillinglaw, Warren French, Peter Lisca, those who attended the huge Steinbeck centennial conference at Hofstra University, participate in the annual Steinbeck conference at Salinas, and contribute to the numerous university press volumes on Steinbeck. Still, the pressure to exclude Steinbeck from the American literary canon and not to publish him in the Library of America constitutes a sort of censorship.

Unlike Mizener, Bloom, and other denigrators of Steinbeck, Mark Van Doren called *The Grapes of Wrath* "a mighty social document and an amazing work of art." Alexander Woollcott wrote that "The Grapes of Wrath is as great a book as has yet come out of America." Like George Orwell, Steinbeck was driven by a passion for justice, by a disgust for all forms of bullying and oppression. Orwell wrote, "I wanted to submerge myself, to get right down among the oppressed, to be one of them and on their side against their tyrants." This is what Steinbeck did with the migrant farm workers.

Anatole France's conclusion to his eulogy at the funeral of Emile Zola could apply as well to Steinbeck for writing *The Grapes of Wrath*, "Let us envy him, for his destiny and his heart have earned him the highest distinction of all. He was a moment in the history of human conscience."

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