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MYSTICISM IN SELECTED EARLY NOVELS OF JOHN STEINBECK

By

Tom E. Kakonis

A thesis submitted
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree Master of Science at South Dakota
State College of Agriculture
and Mechanic Arts

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**MYSTICISM IN SELECTED EARLY NOVELS
OF JOHN STEINBECK**

This thesis is approved as a creditable, independent investigation by a candidate for the degree, Master of Science, and acceptable as meeting the thesis requirements for this degree; but without implying that the conclusions reached by the candidate are necessarily the conclusions of the major department.

Report

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this essay is to trace the development of the concept of mysticism from selected early works of John Steinbeck to its culmination in the novel The Grapes of Wrath. The novels to be discussed are the following: The Pastures of Heaven, To a God Unknown, In Dubious Battle, Of Mice and Men, The Red Pony, and The Grapes of Wrath. The non-fiction travel account, Sea of Cortez, will also be considered.

Such a study requires, a basic, historical knowledge in two other areas. The first of these involves a familiarity with Oriental specifically Hindu, mystical beliefs; the second, the early backgrounds of mysticism in American literature as expressed in the transcendentalist movement. It is beyond the scope of this paper to determine the extent of these influences on Steinbeck himself; indeed, that is not the purpose of the essay; rather, such reference as will be made in this study concerning similarities, differences, and influences will, of necessity, be critical assumptions based on the reading and comparison of the pertinent texts.

Finally, since it is generally agreed that application in a classroom situation lends a practical value to a work of this sort, the material gathered will be used in the teaching of the novel The Grapes of Wrath to two sections of freshman English, and the results of this endeavor will constitute the final goal of this project.

This essay will be divided into three chapters: backgrounds of mysticism; the development of the concept of mysticism in the early Steinbeck novels; a lesson plan for the teaching of the novel The Grapes of Wrath, and the results of such a teaching approach.

CHAPTER I

BACKGROUNDS OF MYSTICISM

1

In this chapter two world-views, variant in time and geography but similar in belief, will be discussed for the purpose of determining how they may shed light on the philosophical outlook of John Steinbeck. These two historical views are the Hindu faith and the American philosophy of transcendentalism. Both of these are primarily mystical in attitude, and both share a strong kinship with the mystical views of Steinbeck. As was mentioned in the introduction, it is not the purpose of this study to determine the extent of these influences on Steinbeck but rather to demonstrate the common ground of belief shared by this author with his historical predecessors.

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Some thirty-five to forty centuries ago a race of people who called themselves Aryans appeared in the northwestern corner of India. Where they came from is not known, and the effect they were to have on people living today could certainly not have been anticipated. It is said that they were a proud people--proud of their race, proud of their livelihood (the name Arya meant plowman or worker on the land) and proud of their differences from the barbarian tribes they were conquering. As they swept down into southern India, their culture became more and more firmly established. Written records were, of course, unknown at so early a date, and all knowledge was passed on either orally or on palm leaves which,

naturally, soon perished. Scholars estimate that it was about the twelfth or thirteenth century B.C. when the first permanent documents appeared. These documents were in the form of the Vedas--the earliest source books for the Hindu faith. Hinduism developed through three stages: the Vedas, the Upanishads, and the Bhagavada-Gita.

The word Veda in Sanskrit means knowledge, and refers to knowledge that comes from eternal energy or God. The Vedas are divided into four books: The Rig-Veda, The Sama-Veda, The Yajur-Veda, and The Atharva-Veda. The type of religion these books celebrate is concerned with the worship of gods which represent personifications of the powers of nature. There is much that is highly primitive in these books, much that deals with magic and demonic beings, and this is a result of the influence of the barbarian tribes, which apparently was considerable.

The earliest of the four Vedas, The Rig-Veda, composed of nearly eleven thousand stanzas, propounds a mingled pantheism and polytheism. The other three books reflect the unfortunate tendency of most organized religions to become formalized into chants and litanies designed for use in special ceremonies. The rituals described in the three later books were further formalized in the Sutras, textbooks which condensed and systematized the religious observances.

The advent of the Upanishads, the second stage of development to be considered, brought about an entirely new approach to religious belief in India. These philosophical treatises appeared sometime between the eighth and sixth centuries before the time of Christ. Like the Judeo-Christian Bible, they have no single author, but rather are the fruit of thought of numberless anonymous Hindu thinkers who, in these texts, proposed answers

to the mental and spiritual mysteries of the universe. The doctrines they professed were in strong opposition to many of those found in the Vedas. Pure pantheism combined with a belief in metempsychosis (a belief unknown to the Vedas) dominated the Upanishads, and for the first time a world-soul (over-soul if you like) became the major object of speculation and worship.

One of the meanings of the word Upanishad is sitting near devotedly, referring to the manner in which such sacred knowledge was passed on. The pupil or disciple sat respectfully at the feet of his teacher and listened as he spoke the secret knowledge, another meaning of the term Upanishad.

It is not known for certain how many Upanishads there originally were. Some scholars have estimated slightly over one hundred, but the later teacher and mystic, Shankara, writing in the fourteenth century A.D., recognized as authentic only sixteen. They are written in prose and verse, narrative and dialogue.

With the belief in soul transmigration, there also came the system of castes, the curse of India these many centuries. And further, the philosophic principle of world and life negation found its inception in these same sacred texts.

The Hindu world, like the Greek, has its great historical epic poem, the Mahabharata, and from it comes the little volume probably best known to the western world as representative of Indian faith, the Bhagavad-Gita, the Song of the Blessed. The Mahabharata is said to be the longest poem in the world. Originally it consisted of about twenty-four thousand verses, but revisions and additions have swelled it to nearly one hundred thousand. Its theme or plot deals with the lives of the descendants of an ancient ruler, King Bharata. The Gita, which is only a small part of

the overall poem, was probably written sometime between the fifth and second centuries before our era. It is not regarded as divine teaching by the Hindus (divine teaching implied direct revelation from god) but merely as the wisdom of saints and prophets. This has in no way detracted from the popularity of the book, however, for it is even yet the most widely read religious text in India.

It is not feasible in a work of this sort to review the plot of the entire poem. Indeed, this is not vital to the information sought here. Rather, we are interested in the philosophic concepts propounded by the book as they are explained through the dialogues between a warrior, Arjuna, and his charioteer, Krishna, who is in reality an incarnation of the god Brahma. Arjuna is about to do battle with his cousins, and he is troubled by the fact that he will be called upon to spill the blood of those related to him. He expresses this feeling to Krishna, and this inner conflict precipitates the lengthy discussion that comprises the Gita.

If these three works, then, the Vedas, the Upanishads, and the Bhagavad-Gita provide the background for our study, can a unifying thread of doctrine be distilled from them that will offer us insight into just what comprises the Hindu faith? At the risk of over-simplifying, perhaps four main points can be cited.¹ The first of these asserts that the phenomenal world, the world of matter, of things, of men, is the manifestation of a divine power within which all of these partial realities have their being. This divine power is called Brahman, which, like the Christian god, separates itself into a trinity--Brahma, the creator, Vishnu, the preserver, and Shiva, the dissolver. The similarity of this

Hindu idea of a god existing both in transcendent and yet in three-fold form, with the Christian religious idea has not escaped the eyes of that astute student of religions, Aldous Huxley, who, in the introduction to a modern translation of the Gita, has written: "Similar conceptions are perfectly compatible with Christianity and have in fact been ascertained, explicitly or implicitly, by many Catholic and Protestant mystics.... Thus, for Eckhart and Ruysbroeck there is an abyss of Godhead underlying the trinity, just as Brahman underlies Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva."² However, Huxley neglects to comment on the numberless lesser gods of the Hindus and the possible relations (if any at all might be determined) these could have to the Christian or, for that matter, the other major faiths.

The second doctrine states that man may come to know Brahman through a direct intuition that goes beyond mere intellectual reasoning. This intuited knowledge comes from the practice of yoga or meditation on the divine self that lies dormant within each individual; explicit directions for such practice may be found in both the Upanishads and the Gita.

The belief in an indwelling god that permeates each individual soul leads to a consideration of the third doctrine. Man is possessed of what appears to be a double nature, though in reality he is identical with or one with the Brahman. However, his experience leads him to believe that his soul is individual and separate from all others. But the Hindus believe differently. Since the Brahman is omniscient and omnipresent, it cannot exist in parts, cannot be subject to change; hence it follows that the individual soul is not an emanation from the Brahman but is rather, identical with and a part of Brahman. But how can the individual soul come to know of its kinship with Brahman? Knowledge of the god within comes through self-abnegation, chastity, charity, in a word, through a rigorous ethics.

By clearing away the delusions of ignorance and evil, the Hindu tells us we may attain to the Brahman latent in each of us.

Lastly, it is taught that the final end of man is the discovery of Brahman, or, more explicitly, discovery of the "unitive knowledge of the godhead," to again quote Huxley.³ The method of attaining such knowledge of the way of the Yogis has previously been mentioned, and it is only through the constant practice of such austerities and meditations that the Brahman may be reached.

In summary, then, it may be said that the Hindu concept of Brahman embraces the idea of a deity that pervades all things material, and that is amenable to spiritual approach through the practice of certain rigorous rites. This deity, though it appears to resemble the pantheistic conception of god, differs in that consciousness is attributed to it, though mortal ethics are not. The similarity of this concept with the transcendentalist over-soul view will be the subject of the next section.

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In his excellent study, Emerson and Asia, Frederic Carpenter discusses the influences of Oriental thought on the leading spokesman for the American transcendentalist movement. Carpenter says that Emerson formed his system before he was ever acquainted with the Oriental texts, and so his ideas cannot be considered mere secondhand borrowings from the sages of the East. Because Emerson was systematic enough to keep a list of all his reading, Carpenter is able to demonstrate the plausibility of his thesis by the simple process of comparing the dates of the major essays with the time of reading of the Oriental books. To retrace such influences

would be repetitious; instead, the purpose here will be to point up the close relationship of these two philosophic systems and to note later their closeness with Steinbeck's point of view.

Emerson agreed essentially with the Hindu thinkers (though, as was mentioned, he was for some time oblivious of them) in believing that the phenomenal world or nature was the outward appearance, the thought of God. While discussing the quality of beauty in the early essay, "Nature," he writes: "But beauty in nature is not ultimate. It is the herald of inward and eternal beauty, and is not alone a solid and satisfactory good. It must stand as a part, and not as yet the last or highest expression of the final cause of Nature."⁴ And if nature's beauty serves to reveal God to us, in what form may we know this God? In the same essay, in a somewhat equivocal passage, he hints at the way to this knowledge and, at the same time, demonstrates the nearness of his belief with the Hindu approach: "The unity of nature--the unity in variety...meets us everywhere. All the endless variety of things makes an identical impression. Xenophanes complained in his old age, that, look where he would, all things hastened back to Unity."⁵

But even more clear than these quotations is the following taken from the same essay: "The world proceeds from the same spirit as the body of man. It is a remoter and inferior incarnation of God, a projection of God in the unconscious.... Its serene order is inviolable by us. It is, therefore, to us, the present expositor of the divine mind."⁶ Two years later, his thoughts on the subject apparently crystalizing in his own mind, Emerson wrote: "These facts have always suggested to man the sublime creed that the world is not the product of manifold power, but of one will,

of one mind; and that one mind is everywhere active, in each ray of the star, in each wavelet of the pool--- All things proceed out of the same spirit, and all things conspire with it."⁷ In his essay "The Oversoul"

he says, in a passage which sounds almost Hindu-like in its style:

"within man is the soul of the whole; the wise silence; the universal beauty, to which every part and particle is equally related; the eternal One. And this deep power in which we exist and whose beatitude is all accessible to us, is not only self-sufficing and perfect in every hour, but the act of seeing and the thing seen, the seer and the spectacle, the subject and the object, are one."⁸

This last quoted statement is reminiscent of Emerson's poem "Brahma". Frederic Carpenter says of this poem: "it probably expresses the central idea of Hindu philosophy more clearly and concisely than any other writing in the English language."⁹ The subject of the poem is, of course, the same much-discussed unity mentioned above--the unity of man and nature under the appearance of reality. Carpenter traces what he believes to be the evolution of the poem in relation to Emerson's reading in Hindu thought. But his conjectures, while cleverly and painstakingly formulated, must remain for always only conjecture; all that can be said for certain is that parts of Emerson's poem appear to be paraphrases of writing found in the Upanishads. For example, consider the first stanza of "Brahma".

If the red slayer think he slays,
Or if the slain think he is slain,
They know not well the subtle ways
I keep, and pass, and turn again

These lines show a remarkable similarity with lines from the Katha Upanishad:

If the slayer think that he slays,
If the slain think that he is slain,

Neither of them knows the truth.
 The Self slays not, nor is he slain.
 Smaller than the smallest,
 Greater than the greatest,
 This Self forever dwells within the hearts of all.

The comparison is not intended to belittle Emerson's achievement.

It is presented here merely to substantiate the theory of the kinship that existed between the Hindus and the transcendentalists.

What, finally, can be said of the transcendentalist version of the first of the Hindu doctrines? The Hindus called their pervasive, life-giving energy Brahman; the transcendentalists, the oversoul; this writer cannot help feel that they were referring to an identical concept. How may this concept be described? The Hindus say: "The Self is to be described as not this, not that. It is incomprehensible, for it cannot be comprehended; undecaying, for it never decays, unattached, for it never attaches itself, unfettered, for it is never bound."¹⁰ Emerson says: "the soul in man is not an organ, but animates and exercises all the organs; is not a function, like the power of memory...but uses these as hands and feet; is not a faculty but a light, is not the intellect or the will, but the master of the intellect and the will; is the background of our being, in which they lie--an immensity not possessed and that cannot be possessed."¹¹ Certainly there was much in common between these two beliefs.

It has been noted how the Hindus believed that the Brahman was attainable through a direct, mystic experience. Emerson while less insistent on this sort of experience, espoused a tempered mysticism in his reliance on individual intuition, and he never failed to exalt the value of this individual intuition over intellectualism. In advising the student of Harvard, he says; "He [the scholar]...learns that in

going down into the secrets of his own mind he has descended into the secrets of all minds."¹² And in "Self-Reliance" he writes: "A man should learn to detect and watch that gleam of light which flashes across his mind from within...."¹³ Later, in the same essay, he adds; "Nothing is at least sacred but the integrity of your own mind."¹⁴ But the most explicit words of Emerson on this subject are to found in "The Oversoul." There he writes, in phrases similar to the Hindu:

We distinguish the announcements of the soul, its manifestations of its own nature, by the term Revelations. These are always attended by the emotions of the sublime. For this communication is an influx of the Divine mind into our mind. It is an ebb of the individual rivulet before the flowing surges of the sea of life.¹⁵

Emerson's attitude toward the place of ethics in a world encompassed by an over-soul is somewhat more difficult to determine. Too often in his unfortunate exclamation, "Are they my poor?" quoted as being representative of a negative view of social responsibility. It appears, however, that his attitude is more subtle than this quotation would imply. Ethics and morality were, for Emerson, steps on the pathway to union with the over-soul. They were steps that each man must take alone--the individual could not attain knowledge of that bit of the perfect god within himself unless he first approached moral perfection. Union with the over-soul is the highest state, but it cannot be realized without adherence to certain standards. Emerson writes: "The soul requires purity, but purity is not it; requires justice, but justice is not that; requires beneficence, but is somewhat better; so that there is a kind of descent and accommodation felt when we leave speaking of moral nature to urge a virtue which it

enjoins.¹⁶ Thus it seems that Emerson's god, while not primarily a moral and ethical being, embraced such principles and required them of its followers.

Emerson, while not explicit in the statement of the final and most important goal of man, seems to agree with the fourth of the Hindu doctrines which states that the unitive state is or should be the primary goal of each individual. There seems to be the tacit assumption underlying most of his essays (Particularly "The Over-Soul") that such a state of identification with the over-soul is the dominant quest of any thinking man.

From the foregoing discussion it can be seen how closely related are the philosophic concepts of transcendentalism and Hinduism. The next phase to be considered is the philosophy of John Steinbeck as stated in his non-fiction travel account, Sea of Cortez.

iv

In 1941 John Steinbeck and Edward Ricketts chartered a small fishing vessel for the purpose of collecting specimens of marine life in the Gulf of California. Growing out of the trip was a very large volume entitled, Sea of Cortez, A Leisurely Journal of Travel and Research. The book was, purportedly, a collaboration, but it is apparent that there was a very clear-cut division of labor in the writing of the text. Ricketts, a professional scientist, obviously handled the technical chapters dealing with marine biology, and Steinbeck, just as obviously, wrote the account of the trip. The reason for this obviousness is, for one thing, the characteristic style of the author, and for another the mingling of philosophy with biology that is also characteristic of Steinbeck. Nowhere in his

writing does the author state his philosophy more explicitly than in this book, and it is this statement that is to be compared here with the two previously noted beliefs.

Steinbeck always begins with a view of the specific and moves, from this view, to the general. Though he is a biologist, he is ever the amateur who uses the study to further his philosophic concept of the world around him. Steinbeck can truly see "a world in a grain of sand" or, in his case, a starfish. In the animals of the sea, in their beauty, their cruelty, their instinct for survival, he sees a parallel with the human species. And as these inhabitants of the sea all exist within the larger framework of the ocean (of which they can know only their minute corner), so man exists within a larger framework of soul which pervades the universe and which is unknowable in its totality. As there is to be found what men term cruelty and beauty in the overall structure of the sea, so is there in the species of man to be found also the acts termed good and evil. But Steinbeck's larger framework, which he often refers to as group-man, transcends such ideas of conventional morality; like the Hindus and Emerson before him, he adopts a world-view that embraces all narrower ethical theories.

A noteworthy example of Steinbeck's feeling for the group-man concept can be found in his discussion of the species of fishes that travel in schools:

There must be some fallacy in our thinking of these fish as individuals. Their functions in the school are in some as yet unknown way as controlled as though the school were one unit. We cannot conceive of this intricacy until we are able to think of the school as an animal itself, reacting with all its cells to stimuli which perhaps might not influence one fish at all. And this larger animal, the school, seems to have a nature and drive and ends of its own. It is more than and different from the sum of its units. If we can think in this way, it will not seem so unbelievable that every fish heads in the same direction, that the water interval between fish and fish is identical with all units, and that it seems

to be directed by a school intelligence. If it is a unit animal itself, why should it not so react? ...And perhaps this unit of survival may key into the larger animal which is the life of all the sea, and this into the larger of the world.¹⁷

Stylistically, this selection is characteristic of Steinbeck's propensity for drawing analogies from his hobby. This device may be seen further in what is the author's most explicit statement of his philosophy:

Our own interest lay in relationships of animals to animal. If one observes in this relational sense, it seems apparent that species are only commas in a sentence, that each species is at once the point and the base of a pyramid, that all life is relational to the point where an Einsteinian relativity seems to emerge. And then not only the meaning but the feeling about species grows misty. One merges into another, groups melt into ecological groups until the time when what we know as life meets and enters what we think of as non-life: barnacle and rock, rock and earth, earth and tree, tree and rain and air. And the units nestle into the whole and are inseparable from it.... And it is a strange thing that most of the feeling we call religious, most of the mystical outcrying which is one of the most prized and used and desired reactions of our species, is really the understanding and the attempt to say that man is related to the whole thing, related inextricably to all reality, known and unknowable. This is a simple thing to say, but the profound feeling of it made a Jesus, a St. Augustine, a St. Francis, a Roger Bacon, a Charles Darwin, and an Einstein. Each of them in his own tempo and with his own voice discovered and reaffirmed with astonishment the knowledge that all things are one thing and that one thing is all things.¹⁸

.....

If the basis of belief for these three philosophies were to be distilled into a single word, that word would be oneness. This feeling for unity that lies at the foundation of each view is mysticism in its purest form. How Steinbeck molded his mystical world-view into his fiction, and how he reconciled it with his sense of social responsibility will be discussed in the next chapter.

FOOTNOTES

1. I am indebted to Aldous Huxley who, in the introduction to the New American Library text The Bhagavad-Gita, first formulated these four doctrines as the basis of what he terms fundamental tenets of the Hindu faith, regardless of what other creeds they may also embrace.
2. Aldous Huxley in the introduction to The Bhagavad-Gita, trans. Swami Prabhavananda and Christopher Isherwood (New York, 1944), p. 14.
3. Ibid., p. 16.
4. Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Nature," in The Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson, ed., Brooks Atkinson (New York, 1940), p. 14.
5. Ibid., p. 24.
6. Ibid., p. 36.
7. Emerson, "An Address," in The Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson, ed., Brooks Atkinson (New York, 1940), p. 69.
8. Emerson, "The Oversoul", in The Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson, ed., Brooks Atkinson (New York, 1940), p. 262.
9. Frederic Carpenter, Emerson and Asia, (Cambridge, Mass., 1930), p. 111.
10. The Upanishads, trans. Swami Prabhavananda and Frederick Manchester (New York, 1948), p. 111.
11. Emerson, "The Oversoul," p. 262.
12. Emerson, "the American Scholar", in The Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson, ed., Brooks Atkinson (New York, 1940), p. 56.
13. Emerson, "Self-Reliance," in The Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson, ed., Brooks Atkinson (New York, 1940), p. 145.
14. Ibid., p. 148
15. Emerson, "The Oversoul", p. 269.
16. Ibid., p. 266.
17. John Steinbeck, Sea of Cortez, (New York, 1941), p. 240.
18. Ibid., p. 216.

CHAPTER II

MYSTICISM IN THE EARLY NOVELS

1

The preceding chapter has dealt with two approaches to mysticism-- approaches that originate from widely variant environments, but which bear a remarkable similarity to each other in attitude and belief. Since the Hindu is chronologically the first, there is the temptation to surmise that the transcendentalist is an outgrowth of it, though perhaps the similarity is not this great. Suffice it to say that the transcendentalists translated Hindu mysticism into American terms--terms meaningful to the western mind--and this mysticism has had a far-reaching effect on certain contemporary American writers, one of whom is John Steinbeck. Whether Steinbeck was influenced by the actual reading of either the transcendentalists or the Hindus (though it will be noted later that it is highly probable that he did consult the latter) is a problem that is not within the scope of this paper to solve. Instead, what will be discussed here is the latest stage of this mystical ideal--the contemporary stage as seen through the eyes of a serious modern novelist. John Steinbeck was chosen because many of his works seem representative of this mystic ideal on the American scene.

In the introduction to this paper the novels to be examined were named, but to reiterate, they are The Pastures of Heaven (1932), To a God Unknown (1933), In Dubious Battle (1936), Of Mice and Men (1927), The Red Pony (1937), and The Grapes of Wrath (1939). They will be discussed in the order of their publication. How the concept of mysticism grew and evolved

from the first of these novels through the last, and how this concept mirrored the thought of its predecessors will be the primary concern of this chapter.

Before going any further, perhaps it would be well to know just what is meant by this term "mystic ideal." In the first chapter there were noted four basic tenets of the early Hindu faith which appeared to coincide with the doctrines and beliefs of the transcendentalists. They were briefly:

1. The phenomenal world is the manifestation of a divine ground.
2. Man may come to know this divine power through direct, intuitive knowledge.
3. The individual soul is a part of and identical with a greater, all-inclusive soul which reveals itself to the individual who subscribes to an ethical code.
4. The ultimate end of man is unity with the divine.

Emerson and Thoreau, though they preferred their own terminology, agreed essentially with these four doctrines.

Now the first three of these principles appear to be pointing the way to the fourth; that is to say, the individual must first be cognizant of them before he moves on to the final, the ultimate goal. Unity, then, is the "mystic ideal"; unity of the individual with the transcendent power of the divine (Brahman or the oversoul). The first three are the pillars, the fourth is the structure itself.

Did any of Steinbeck's characters ever attain the mystic ideal? Or perhaps it should be asked, did any of them strive for it in its purest form? These are a few of the questions which must be answered in this

analysis. With them in mind, the first novel, The Pastures of Heaven, will be considered at this point.

ii

In his book Writers in Crisis, Maxwell Geismar describes The Pastures of Heaven as Steinbeck's finest novel. I cannot help feeling that this appraisal is correct; Steinbeck never again reached the quality of this portrayal of the lyric beauty of nature juxtaposed with a background of evil, frustrated mankind. Structurally, the book is very tightly knit; the setting for all of its action is the little valley known to its Spanish discoverers as Las Pasturas del Cielo, and each of the short sketches relates to one of the members of a certain family who came to live in the valley.

Burt Munroe, after a series of business failures, buys a farm in the valley that is purportedly cursed. Diligent work on his part seems to remove the curse from this particular farm, but, as another character observes: "your curse and the farm's curse has mated and gone into a gopher hole like a pair of rattlesnakes. Maybe there'll be a lot of baby curses crawling around the Pastures the first thing we know."¹ And so there are, for in each of the succeeding tales there is a tragedy potential in each individual character who suffers, but directly precipitated by Munroe or some member of his family. Now at first glance this would appear a cheap device, more at home in a Saturday Evening Post serial. Indeed, the technique of this novel is certainly not laudable in itself. What is meritorious is Steinbeck's ability to rise above his device to produce a novel of such worth.

But the concern here is with mysticism, not critical praise or censure. Mysticism is not black magic; it has nothing to do with curses. Now, then can it be related to this early novel? The answer is, of course, that there is only the beginning of a feeling for mysticism in this book, but a definite beginning there is. Steinbeck, the young writer, seemed to be groping for a means of expressing his sense of awe and wonderment at the goodness and purity of nature, and the contrasting evil of man. Stanley Ryman, sensing this quest for an ideal, remarks: "The Pastures of Heaven... tries the viewpoint that nature and the "natural" life are worthwhile, and only man is vile."²

Steinbeck's introduction sets the stage for the theme he is to develop in the short stories to follow. A Spanish corporal, pursuing a small group of Indians who had strayed from "the bosom of Mother Church" (the first of a series of jibes at formal religion) finds them fast asleep in the valley wherein the story has its setting. The corporal is overwhelmed at the beauty of the valley: "he stopped, stricken with wonder at what he saw--a long valley floored with green pasturage on which a herd of deer browsed." Seeing it he utters: "Holy Mother! Here are the green pastures of Heaven to which our Lord leadeth us." The corporal was tempted to forget his tasks and join the fugitives, but duty prevailed and he returned with his prisoners, always intending to some day return to the idyllic valley. Eventually settlers arrive, and the incidents in their lives form the stories that contrast the virginal beauty of nature, as represented by the untainted valley, with the corruption of man.

There are some men, however, who approach to the beatific state of nature. These are simple, ingenuous people, people who have thrown off

the shackles of conformity to society. They are always innocent, often they are feeble-minded, and always they must lose. Such a man is Junius Maltby. Having left his job as an accountant to come to live the simple life in the valley, he reverts to a life attuned to nature. He leaves off shaving and wearing shoes and working. Eventually he marries, is widowed, and raises a son in the same manner as he has lived. And here is the point that Steinbeck makes: the closer Junius comes to the natural life, the happier he is, and the better and finer man he becomes. But the flaw in his Eden is his neighbors: "The people of the valley told many stories about Junius. Sometimes they hated him with the loathing busy people have for lazy ones, and sometimes they envied his laziness; but often they pitied him because he blundered so. No one in the valley ever realized that he was happy."³ Finally Junius' presence in the valley becomes too much of an affront to his neighbors and they must destroy his way of life. He is best attacked through his son, Robbie, who is to learn very cruelly the meaning of poverty, and Junius' idyll comes to an end with his return to accounting in the city.

What is there of the mystic here? Very little, in the technical sense of the term, although Junius does show some familiarity with certain concepts associated with mysticism. He says: "water is the seed of life. Of the three elements water is the sperm, earth the womb and sunshine the mould of growth."⁴ This metaphorical representation of nature is reminiscent of certain Hindu pronouncements on the same subject, but to stress the similarity might be to place undue emphasis on a single detail.

It remains for another short sketch to further substantiate this feeling for the mystical which is so noteworthy throughout the novel, and

this is the story of the idiot boy Tularecito.

Tularecito, unlike Junius, was no idealist trapped by society--he was born with the strength of an ox and the mind of a child. Even the events of his birth were shrouded in mystery, for Tularecito was found on the road by a drunken farmer who became his guardian. Now Steinbeck portrays his half-wit as having an affinity for the animals of the earth--as being capable of carving perfect replicas of these animals from sandstone. And Tularecito, as he grows older comes to recognize that his difference with other men is more than one of intellectual ability. He senses a kinship with "the people who dwell in the earth." He tells his guardian: "I am not like the others at the school or here. I know that. I have loneliness for my people who live deep in the cool earth. When I pass a squirrel hole, I wish to crawl into it and hide myself. My own people are like me, and they have called me."⁵ Tularecito's tragedy is simply that he is born into a "civilized" culture, one that has strayed so far from identification with nature it cannot comprehend primitive instincts. Tularecito, more than any other character in the novel, expresses the author's preoccupation with and involvement in mysticism. This treatment foreshadows the importance that the mystic ideal will assume in Steinbeck's later novels.

Steinbeck ends his novel on a note of cynicism. A group of sight-seers, overlooking the valley, form individual dreams of how their lives might take on an ideal character if only they could come to live in this place of great natural beauty, and, of course, their dreams are scarcely different from the illusions of the Spanish corporal who was the first "civilized" man to know of the valley. After the numerous tragedies that

intervene between these two idealistic views of the valley, the reader can only assume that Steinbeck felt that whenever man--the man of civilization and of society--came into contact with nature he would taint it, and until man returned to a primitive state, like that of the simpleminded Junius and the idiot Tularecito, salvation through nature was not possible.

Of the mystic view as defined and limited by the four doctrines cited above, there is little to be found in The Pastures of Heaven. There is a Thoreau-like idealization of nature and the simple life coupled with the natural outgrowth of aversion and disdain for the complexities and bonds and hypocrisies of civilization, but unless we construe Steinbeck to identify God with nature (and so far there is insufficient evidence for such an assumption) there can be little religious mysticism discernible here. All that can be said of the book is that the beginnings of the concept of mysticism are to be found here. Shy uncertain beginnings they are, but a starting point nevertheless, and in the next novel to be considered it will be noted just how far Steinbeck chooses to go in his flirtation with the purely mystic.

111

This book is To a God Unknown, which appeared a year after The Pastures of Heaven. It is doubtful if any critics have taken upon themselves the task of analyzing completely the mysticism found in this novel; for the most part, they have been content to ascribe it to the same love of the earth found in The Pastures of Heaven, though combined, this time, with pagan blood rites and sacrifices. For example, Joseph Warren Besch feels that the book is a synthesis of Steinbeck's nature love and his intellectual pursuits. "Steinbeck's subject here is one suggested in part

by his deep feeling for the land, especially in its virgin phase, and for the life of the early settlers in this lovely wilderness, partly by the more intellectual interest in primitive psychology and religion."⁶ This is the key to the interpretation of the novel--Steinbeck's passion for primitive religion and all that it embodies.

Perhaps the first thing to be considered should be the poem from which the title is taken:

He is the river of breath, and strength is his gift.
The high Gods revere his commandments.
His shadow is life, his shadow is death;
Who is He to whom we shall offer our sacrifice?

From His strength the mountains-take being, and
The sea, they say,
And the distant river;
And these are his body and his two arms.
Who is He to whom we shall offer our sacrifice?

These verses come from the Vedas, and the importance of the Vedas in the Hindu faith has already been noted. An examination of the first of the verses reveals the pantheistic-transcendentalist nature of the god under discussion, who is, of course, Brahma. The Vedas, which preceded the Upanishads and the Bhagavad-Gita, espoused essentially the same faith as these later texts, but the closer proximity, both in time and place, of the Veda's authors to the savage native tribes that first inhabited India, with their background of belief in black magic, sacrifice, and blood rites, is evidenced by the final line of the verse. The second of the quoted verses is even more explicit in its expression of a pervasive, all-embracing god, though here too there is emphasis on the necessity of sacrifice to placate this god.

These verses are ample evidence (and well they might be, coming as they do from the Vedas) of the first of the four essential doctrines cited

earlier--that the phenomenal world is the manifestation of divine ground within which all partial realities (the river, the mountains, the sea, mankind) have their being. They further lead us to assume that Steinbeck possessed some acquaintance with Hindu religious literature. Finally they serve to set the tone for the book; to quote Professor Beach again: "To a God Unknown belongs to the world of dreams rather than that of urgent realities."⁷ There is to be found in the book, as in the opening verse, a sense of mystery, awe, and reverence for the earth as one of the manifestations of the divine, combined with an obsession with the pagan rite of sacrifice.

The people of the novel are certainly not people in the sense that they are the well rounded characters generally sought for by writers of fiction. They are little more than puppets in the author's hands, and they function simply to portray certain types that are relevant to Steinbeck's philosophy as propounded in this tale. The brothers of Joseph are exemplary of this device; each has his single aspect to portray: one represents formal, stultifying religion, another the primitive, animal level of existence, and a third the life of waste and revelry. These minor characters have no function other than to serve as representatives of their special types, and their words and actions never stray outside the limits of this function. The main characters are no different in this respect. Joseph Wayne, particularly, speaks like a god, and this is in keeping with the point of the story. C.E. Jones recognized this point when he observed: "It [the novel] is, in part at least, allegorical; the allegory is of the land, and parallels the older myths personified in the Indian scenes."⁸ He might have said further that the novel is all allegory; there are no real people in it;

there are only abstract ideas and philosophies to be expounded.

Steinbeck could never be accused of tardiness in developing his theme in this novel, for on the second page of the book, in a bit of dialogue between Joseph and his father, the reader learns of the father's mystical bent. Joseph is anxious to leave his native Vermont to homestead land of his own in California. His ailing father, seeking to detain him, says: "In a year, not more than two, why I'll go with you. I'm an old man, Joseph. I'll go right along with you, over your head, in the air."⁹ And go he does, for when Joseph arrives in California and claims his land, he shortly receives a letter informing him of his father's death, and immediately he perceives the presence of his father's spirit in a great tree under which he builds his home. The presence is more than simply an obscure, intuited feeling; Joseph begins addressing the tree as though it were his father, and to a sympathetic Mexican he says: "My father is in that tree. My father is that tree!" And he follows this speech with words that are especially pertinent to this study: "Ghosts are weak shadows of reality. What lives here is more real than we are. We are like ghosts of its reality." The father is, of course, the great force of nature that pervades the universe. Joseph recognizes that his own physical life is nothing--"we are like ghosts of its reality"--and that the spirit of his father, the great father of all things, is the true reality.¹⁰

In relation to the Hindus, Joseph's deification and subsequent worship of the tree is simply a manifestation of the first two doctrines cited at the beginning of this chapter. The phenomenal world--in this case the tree--has come to represent god, and the true god for Joseph is

the spirit known as his father. Joseph comes to know of the presence of this spirit intuitively; he senses that his father is in the tree, as the tree, or nature, is the outward appearance of god for Joseph, so was nature in its broader aspect for the American transcendentalists. Such a kinship, especially with the homegrown mysticism of Thoreau, needs no elaboration.

In addition to addressing the tree, Joseph later begins to make offerings to it. During a fiesta on his ranch he pours wine on the bark of the tree, and when his child is born he places the baby in the crook of a branch for the father spirit to know him. Joseph's brother, the brother representative of formal religion, learns of his pagan offerings, is offended by them, and eventually destroys the tree by severing its roots. It is this symbolic severance of the father spirit from the earth that precipitates the drought and disaster which are to follow.

But in the meantime there are other aspects of the mystic that are pertinent and worthy of consideration. There is a certain glade enclosing a rock from which flows a stream whose source is forever hidden. Joseph early discovers this place. The rock is described as "covered with green moss" and "something like an altar," and Joseph feels at home here; he says of it: "Somewhere, perhaps in an old dream, I have seen this place, or perhaps felt the feeling of this place. This is holy--and this is old. This is ancient and holy." This glade is another outer manifestation of the spirit that pervades the universe. Its stream originates in the center of the earth, and it flows out onto the land, refreshing and replenishing it. Its holiness is associated with its life-giving qualities--it

feeds the earth, it promotes fertility. And more, it is a haven from all harm. Joseph, foreshadowing the misfortune soon to befall his land, says of it: "It would be a place to run to, away from pain or sorrow or disappointment or fear. If ever there's need to lose some plaguing thing, that will be the place to go." This succoring abode, so much like the abyss of Brahman for the Hindus and the totality of nature for the transcendentalists appears to be confused either in Steinbeck's mind or in the mind of this writer with the tree which houses the image of the father. Both are symbolic of a divine spirit resting within them, both are phenomena of nature, but which of the two is to be considered as the divine manifestation is never made clear. More is made of the rock and the stream, however, and they figure importantly in the climax of the story, so perhaps this is meant to be some indication of their relative importance.

Elizabeth, Joseph's wife, also makes her way to the glade, and there she undergoes a sort of hypnotic trance wherein she equates the rock with her own fertile womb, and breaking the spell, comes to fear the place and the uncomfortable, ancient memories it arouses in her. In explaining her sensations at the rock, she says later to Joseph: "While I sat there I went into the rock. The little stream was flowing out of me and I was the rock, and the rock was...the strongest, dearest thing in the world."

Now Elizabeth's pregnant condition serves to explain her reaction. Like the rock and the stream, symbols of all of nature's fertility, Elizabeth is also fertile, she too gives forth life; this is why she identifies herself with the nature symbol--man is a part of nature, and fertility, reproduction, is his instinctive aim. There is more to be said of Elizabeth's association with the glade, but this must be discussed in

connection with the somewhat startling climax of the story.

Before taking up the central character, Joseph, it is in keeping with this study to mention a minor character, a wife of one of the brothers, named Rama. Now the choice of such a name is most interesting, for Rama was also the name of a legendary figure from an Indian epic poem, a figure who was, according to this romantic epic, an incarnation of the god Vishnu, and such a choice leads us to believe that Steinbeck possessed a certain knowledge of Indian literature. In the epic, Rama was born the son of a king, but underwent a Homeric-like odyssey before he gained his throne. Rama's exploits made him a national hero, and, as is often the case in Indian folklore, before many centuries passed he was regarded as a deity. Just why Steinbeck should choose to associate Rama with one of his female characters is not entirely clear. We can guess, however, that since the Indians believed Rama to be an incarnation of the god Vishnu, who is, significantly, the preserver, Steinbeck meant her to be symbolic of the preservation of the continuous flow of life--human life in this case. Further evidence for this theory may be gleaned from the fact that he so often shows her in this light--as the woman who minds the children, who performs the heavy labor necessary for survival, and who is ever present at times of birth. And when Rama gives herself to Joseph, in a purely symbolic sexual act, she takes to herself the seeds of his god-like nature; she becomes, literally, the preserver.

More than any other character, more so than Joseph's wife, does Rama know him. To Elizabeth she says of him: "You cannot think of Joseph dying. He is eternal. His father died and it was not a death.... I tell you this man is not a man, unless he is all men. He is...a repository for a

little piece of each man's soul, and more than that, a symbol of the earth's soul." And if this were not plain enough, she spells out her understanding even more explicitly when, after Elizabeth's death, she says to Joseph: "You aren't aware of persons, Joseph, only people. You can't see units, Joseph; only the whole."

Rama's evaluation of Joseph leads us to a consideration of him. Unquestionably, he is the focal character of the book, and whatever function Steinbeck chooses him to fulfill will be at the core of the philosophy expounded in the novel. Joseph is full of reverence for the earth; his desire for land is not linked with a desire for material gain; he is beyond cupidity. He can sense the unity of nature and his place in it, and this perspective enables him to observe: "with wonder that this [the land] should be his. There was pity in him for the grass and the flowers; he felt that the trees were his children and the land his child. For a moment he seemed to float high in the air and look down upon it." A moment later he can say impersonally, and without a trace of greed: "It's mine. Deep down it's mine, right to the center of the world" and so observing he flings himself on his land and symbolically mates with it. By means of this act he identifies himself with the earth; thus Steinbeck makes clear Joseph's preoccupation with the fecundity of the earth, later to play an important part in Joseph's character.

This preoccupation is developed early. Joseph is described as having a passion for fertility: "He watched the heavy, ceaseless lust of his bulls, and the patient, untiring fertility of his cows. He guided the great stallion to the mares, crying, 'There, boy, drive in!' This place [his ranch]...was one, and he was the father. When he walked bareheaded

through the fields, feeling the wind in his beard, his eyes smouldered with lust. All things about him, the soil, the cattle and the people were fertile, and Joseph was the source, the root of their fertility; he was the motivating lust." But his brother, he of the formal religion, cannot fathom his feelings; he views Joseph's passion with loathing and disgust. Joseph is compelled to explain his attitude: "You don't understand it Burton. I want increase. I want the land to swarm with life. Everywhere I want things growing up."

Joseph, realizing that only he is not reproducing, takes for himself a wife, and remedies this lack in himself. His relationship with Elizabeth, like that with the land, is purely primitive. As he never thinks of just his land, but of all land; so he never considers the child he has sired, but only the act of childbirth. Of pregnancy he observes: "Women in this condition have a strong warmth of God in them. They must know things no one else know."

With such a character established, Steinbeck proceeds to his violent, symbolic ending. Burton, the religious brother, severs the roots of the tree housing the great father spirit, and the tree dies. Joseph is at the same time remorseful and fearful for the consequences, and though no disaster immediately overtakes him, he allows Elizabeth to return to the rock in the glade and stands by calmly as she falls from it to her death. Though he only barely realizes it, he has, unwittingly, sacrificed her to the earth spirit: "He wanted to cry out once in personal pain before he was cut off and unable to feel sorrow or resentment," and he is rewarded, in turn, by a light rainfall that begins at once. But this sacrifice is not enough, a terrible drouth descends on the land, and the earth itself

seems to dry up and die, even as though the father spirit, angered with his sons, were taking his vengeance upon them. Everything dies, slowly and painfully, while those remaining living things are forced to leave the land.

Only Joseph remains, seeking a clue to the means for restoring the land to life. In his search he travels over the mountains to the coast, where he meets a strange old man who worships the sun, and who lives at the farthest westerly point in the hemisphere so as to be the last man in the western world to see the sun go down. Each night, as it passes under the horizon, the old man sacrifices some animal to it, in honor of its life-giving qualities of warmth and strength. Through this acquaintance Joseph comes to realize what he must do. He returns to the glade, whose stream is almost dry now, and sacrifices himself. Before his death, in an exultant moment, he feels the rain return to the land, and he realizes, completely, the unity of himself with nature--he realizes that he is god. He says: "I should have known. I am the rain. I am the land and I am the rain. The grass will grow out of me in a little while."

But the question arises--is this true religious mysticism? Woodburn Rosa, in discussing this problem, seems to feel that it is:

How much of Steinbeck's basic position is essentially religious, though not in any orthodox sense of the word. In his very love of nature he assumes an attitude characteristic of mystics. He is religious in that he contemplates man's relation to the cosmos and attempts, although perhaps fumblingly, to understand it. He is religious in that he seeks to transcend scientific explanations based on sense experience. He is religious in that from time to time he explicitly attests the holiness of nature. 11

To a God Unknown is precisely this--a testament of the holiness of nature. Steinbeck has turned nature into god, and has gone a step beyond

transcendentalism into what appears, at first glance, to be pantheism. But it must be remembered that To a God Unknown has enough of the pagan in it to ascribe a consciousness to the earth spirit, for the spirit is amenable at last to Joseph's sacrifice and relents and causes the rain.

Certainly, it must be agreed that the book is religious. If it is believed then the Vedas, from which it surely springs, are religious, the same character in this fictional interpretation of the same philosophy cannot be denied. It has been noted how the spirit of Joseph's father conforms to the first of the two important Hindu doctrines: the divine knowledge may be intuited. Steinbeck demonstrates even more clearly his belief in the first of these when, in the course of the book, he states: "High up on a tremendous peak, towering over the ranges and the valleys, the brain of the world was set, and the eyes looked down on the earth's body." The similarity in thought of this statement with the verses quoted from the Vedic poems needs no further comment. Joseph's final realization of unity with the earth spirit makes him the first Steinbeck character to arrive at the fourth and final Hindu doctrine--identity with, or unitive knowledge of, the divine.

Only the third doctrine remains unfulfilled. Joseph has acted not out of ethical zeal, but, seemingly, more from personal motives. His desire to renew the land and his subsequent sacrifices stem from no noble, philanthropic sense of duty. His relationship with the land is purely mystical; he has gone beyond involvement in good and evil actions and this "divine detachment" (a state which is, as we have seen, much admired by the Hindu mystics) enables him to perform deeds which direct him on the path to his own unitive state.

Is Steinbeck, then, advocating human sacrifice? No, no more than the Hindus (not the savage tribes who first populated India). Joseph, like all true believers, comes to know that his single life is nothing, and with this knowledge he is prepared for death. With the Hindus, recognizing death as only transformation, he faces it as an unavoidable necessity. This is not to say that the pagan element is not to be discerned in his sacrifice--even as it crept into the Vedic writings. It is there, to be sure, but it is not the focal point of the point of the story, as some critics would lead us to believe.

The Freudians would, of course, find in Joseph's sacrifice the seeds of a guilt feeling that they claim is so often mingled with the worship of a father deity. If we accept the Freudian myth of the primal father, there is ample psychoanalytic explanation for Joseph's sacrifice. Love, and later, fear are both evident in Joseph, and of such an attitude Patrick Mullaney, in his interpretation of the Freudian theories, says: "The ambivalence attached to the father complex has not been resolved and continues...in religions in general. Freud thinks that all later religions express attempts to solve the same problem of palliating guilt and conciliating the father through obedience."¹² Certainly, this is what Joseph finally does.

As a point of further interest, it seems that Mr. Mullaney may have had the old man who worships the sun in mind when he wrote:

This notion of the early demise of the strong...god became associated with certain striking processes of nature, such as the setting of the sun..., thereby adding a motive or theme for the need for regular repetition of cultistic acts [the animal sacrifice]. Thus, although in symbolic fashion, a comparison between individual fate and cosmic processes is effected.

This has been a rather extended discussion of a novel that has received but little critical attention. It has been important for the purposes of this study, however, because of its predominant mystical bent, and because of its foreshadowing of the type of mysticism to come in the later novels. Edmund Wilson sums up the book thus:

The story, although absurd, has a certain interest, and it evidently represents...an honorably sincere attempt to find expression for his [Steinbeck's] view of the world and his conception of the powers that move it. When you husk away the mawkish verbiage from the people of his later novels, you get down to a similar conception of a humanity not of 'units' but lumped in a 'whole'....¹⁴

It is this sense of the "whole" that we shall continue to search for in the later novels.

iv

In the year 1936 Steinbeck published a book that appeared to be so radically different from any of its predecessors that one could scarcely believe that it was written by the same man. In Dubious Battle differed so much from the two novels that have been considered that the critics were at a loss to explain it. In Dubious Battle was a strike novel, and so it was assumed that it belonged in the class of literature labeled proletarian. Now at the time In Dubious Battle was written the proletarian novel was not held in particularly high repute by some critics; Harold Strauss, for example, said of it: "the proletarian novel was confined in the strait jacket of a dogmatic philosophy. Instead of finding itself free to examine behavior qualitatively in the crux of a strike, it was forced to report quantitatively upon a mass of sensory experience to which was ascribed the ultimate power of determining the action."¹⁵ Other critics attacked this novel specifically, and tended to lump it with all the lesser strike

novels that appeared during that decade. Barker Fairly said of it: "his characters speak more like mouth-pieces than men."¹⁶ And Alfred Kazin: "for all his moral serenity, the sympathetic understanding of men under strain that makes a strike novel like In Dubious Battle so notable in the social fiction of the period, Steinbeck's people are always on the verge of becoming human, but never do."¹⁷ But perhaps Percy Boynton missed the essence of the book most completely when he wrote of the novel: "The author turned completely away from...fantasy, as also from mysticism--so far away that one cannot reconstruct from his earlier books even an ex post facto explanation for what he wrote next."¹⁸ From what has been observed in Steinbeck's work prior to this book, and from what may be discerned in the characters of In Dubious Battle, it is difficult to see how Mr. Boynton could arrive at such a conclusion.

From the point of view of this study, two characters in this novel appear to carry on the tradition of mysticism that was established in The Pastures of Heaven and To a God Unknown, and these are not minor, secondary characters, but rather, central figures around whom the action of the novel revolves. Jim Nolan is primarily an "action" character. A young misfit, hounded everywhere by a pitiless society, he takes refuge in the ranks of the Communist party, and accompanies a hardened strike leader to a scene of labor unrest in a nearby valley. Jim is different from his cynical companion, Mac, both in his background and in goals. He urges Mac to "use" him; he wants to be a part of the strike, and as they arrive on the scene he observes: "I never felt so good before. I'm all swelled up with a good feeling." Steinbeck pointing out the difference in attitudes, has Mac reply that he is "too damn busy to know how I feel."

As the action progresses, however, Mac comes more and more to rely on the calm yet untiring zeal of Jim. He says: "You never change, Jim. You're always here, You give me strength." But the perceptive Doc Burton senses the gradual change in Jim who, though wounded, continues to spark the inopportune strike. Steinbeck explains this in a bit of dialogue between the two:

"You've got something in your eyes, Jim, something religious. I've seen it in you boys before."

Jim flared, "Well, it isn't religious. I've got no use for religion."

"No, I guess you haven't. Don't let me bother you, Jim. Don't let me confuse you with terms. You're living the good life, whatever you want to call it."

"I'm happy," said Jim. "And happy for the first time. I'm full up."

But Doc Burton has sensed correctly; Jim's enthusiasm is religious in character, though certainly not in any orthodox Christian understanding of the term. The strike has been an initiation for him, and near the end he comes to fulfill the purpose his author has planned for him. For Jim, unlike the other strikers, has been chosen to represent the force latent in those aware of the mystic ideal. Jim is the precursor of Casey and Tom in The Grapes of Wrath. He does not attain, nor does he seek identity with the divine, but he does, through ethical action, transcend the bonds of this strike to reach a certain knowledge of unity that is unknown to all the others save one. Eventually, novice though he is, he leaves off taking orders from the experienced Mac, and in a moment of lucidity takes over the direction of the strike. He demonstrates his power by telling Mac:

"I'm stronger than you, Mac. I'm stronger than anything in the world, because I'm going in a straight line. You and all the rest have to think of women and tobacco and liquor and keeping warm and fed. I wanted to be used. Now I'll use you, Mac. I'll use myself and you. I tell you, I feel there's strength in me."

With the failure of the strike imminent, there is only one road for Jim's fate to take. As William Probeck observes: "[Jim's] self-subordinating, single-mindedness has become a sort of radical sainthood. And as a holy man who has attained true saintliness is ready for death, so Jim is ready to die."¹⁹ Probeck's words are more meaningful than he intended, for the same mystic zeal that motivated Joseph Wayne in To a God Unknown inspires Jim, and, like Joseph, he too comes to sacrifice himself for a belief--in this case for a social and ethical cause. Fleeing from a group of vigilantes, Jim is shot to death, and Mac, grief-stricken but uncomprehending to the end, uses his body to further incite the flagging strikers.

The other figure who carries on the tradition of mysticism is the author's mouth-piece, Doc Burton. Unlike Jim, Burton is possessed of no great zeal or enthusiasm for a cause. Burton is an observer who develops a more comprehensive point of view; he does not limit his view to his particular strike. Burton is not so naive as Jim; he alone can see beyond, can transcend in knowledge to see life in terms of "wholes." In a dialogue between Burton and Mac, Steinbeck explains his own position through Burton:

"I want to see," Burton said. "When you cut your finger, and streptococci get in the wound, there's a swelling and a soreness. That swelling is the fight your body puts up, the pain is the battle. You can't tell which one is going to win, but the wound is the first battleground. If the cells lose the first fight the streptococci invade, and the fight goes on up the arm. Mac, these little strikes are like the infection. Something has got into the men; a little fever has started and the lymphatic glands are shooting in reinforcements. I want to see, so I go to the seat of the wound?"

"You figure the strike is a wound?"

"Yes. Group-men are always getting some kind of infection. This seems to be a bad one. I want to see, Mac. I want to watch these group-men, for they seem to me to be a new individual, not at all like single men. A man in a group isn't himself at all, he's a cell in an organism that isn't like him any more than the cells in your body are like you. I want to watch the group, and see what it's like. People have said, 'mobs are crazy, you can't tell what they'll do.' Why don't people look

at mobs not as men, but as they are? A mob nearly always seems to act reasonably, for a mob."

"Well, what's this got to do with the cause?"

"It might be like this Mac: When group-man wants to move, he makes a standard. 'God wills that we re-capture the Holy land'.... But the group doesn't care about the Holy land or, Democracy, or Communism. Maybe the group simply wants to move, to fight, and uses these words simply to reassure the brain of individual men."

This conception of group-man, so obviously Steinbeck's own belief, makes it impossible for us to agree with Mr. Boynton's statement that there is nothing of the mystical in the book. What is group-man, after all, but another term for Brahman or Oversoul. True, the degree of mysticism found in To a God Unknown is not present here, but the essential nature of that mysticism is summed up by Burton in the long passage quoted above. Men are a part of one, all-embracing, transcendent being who is unconcerned with individual man's rules and ethics and codes. It is interesting to note the similarity in idea between these words of Steinbeck in To a God Unknown, and the words of Doc Burton in In Dubious Battle: "The world-brain sorrowed a little, for it knew that some time it would have to move, and then the life would be shaken and destroyed and the long work of tillage would be gone, and the houses in the valleys would crumble. The brain was sorry, but it could change nothing.... The towering earth was tired of sitting in one position. It moved, suddenly, and the houses crumbled, the mountains heaved horribly, and all the work of a million years was lost."²⁰ Burton says: "Yes, it might be worth while to know more about group-man, to know his nature, his ends, his desires. They're not the same as ours. The pleasure we get in scratching an itch causes death to a great number of cells. Maybe group-man gets pleasure when individual men are wiped out in war."²¹

In recognizing this non-ethical facet of the group-man, Burton shows greater insight than Jim, who, though he attains to a degree of mystic awareness in going beyond himself, still is unable to see past simple "units"; and this particular strike, as Burton knows full well, is simply one of those "units".

But the tangent of mysticism evident in the character of Jim is to become increasingly important to Steinbeck in the novels to come. It is as if Steinbeck's mind were one with the mind of Doc Burton, although his heart was with the work of Jim. There is no denying the fact that Steinbeck shows increasing concern with the plight of the downtrodden, and though the basis for his view of man could lead him to say, with Emerson, "Are they my poor?" his overwhelming concern with and regard for humanity keep him from this strict and chilly position. Such an attitude of "divine detachment" is the gift (or curse) of only the most confirmed mystic, only of the Hindu adept who has retired from life in his pursuit of the Brahman. This preoccupation with social injustice was to take Steinbeck temporarily off the track of the mystic ideal, as will be seen in the next novel to be discussed. Now he finally wedded the two divergent attitudes--practical behavior and the unitive state--in a compromise designed to embrace them both will be analyzed in a discussion of The Grapes of Wrath.

v

Perhaps Steinbeck's most startling and unexpected success came in the form of the novel and the subsequent dramatization of his little tale, Of Mice and Men. Though the book met with almost universal critical disapproval, it was an instant popular success, and the play produced from the text had a long and prosperous run on Broadway. The serious critics condemned it

because of its sentimentality, and because it appeared too contrived, too neat and pat. Alfred Kazin, for example, censured it because, as he said: "It is the cunning behind the poignant situation in Of Mice and Men, a certain Woolcott-like ambush of the heartstrings, that makes his little fable meretricious in its pathos...."²² Edmund Wilson concurred with this opinion; he wrote: "Of Mice and Men was a compact little drama, contrived with almost too much cleverness...."²³

The story deals with two itinerant laborers, Lennie, a throwback to the idiot boy Tularecito of The Pastures of Heaven, and George, a protector and guardian of his slow-witted friend. Their goal is "a place of their own" and the economic security that would go with such an acquisition. Chance situations lead them to the near realization of their goal, but other factors intervene to finally and tragically thwart them.

There were some critics who viewed the book as pure social protest. Stanley Ryan, for example, felt that the book was symbolic of the struggle of the masses towards a utopia.²⁴ Lennie is, of course, representative of the masses, and George, like Mac of In Dubious Battle, is representative of the radicals who seek to lead these masses to their utopia.

Such an interpretation as that of Mr. Ryan seems to be guilty of reading too much of a single theme into the novel. To be sure, the tragedy of Lennie is precipitated by social conditions, but the aspirations of the pair, their feeling for identity with the land, while never so strongly stated as in the earlier novels, is exemplary of the ideal of mysticism that obsessed the author. Lennie symbolises not only the struggle of the masses for the satisfaction of social needs, but also their quest for spiritual values. Lennie is the unthinking mob of humanity groping for a

spiritual home. The "place of their own" so constantly referred to is this home; here there is security and freedom and the all-important mystical earth identification so characteristic of Steinbeck. George is a radical leader in the sense that he too searches for this "home" which is, socially, out of reach of his class. But more important to George than the ease and economic security that he believes would go with the possession of land is the sense of belonging, of having roots.

This need for identification or belonging transcends the physical wants of the pair and leads to their quest mystical and religious overtones. The little piece of land that they search for is symbolic of man's search for his bit of the world-soul. The tragedy arises not only from the bumbling inability of the masses to attain their goal, but also from the dominant social forces in the modern world which tend to negate spiritual values and frustrate all those who seek after them. There is evidence here of the growing concern of Steinbeck with these same social forces; indeed, the theme of mysticism is, at best, only introduced as an undertone in the structure of the novel. The problem of social evil had been growing in Steinbeck's works from the early Pastures of Heaven, where these evils combined with a sort of mystic determinism to precipitate a number of the tragedies, to In Dubious Battle, where the author's philosophy is set completely in a frame work of social protest. In the next work to be discussed, the four short stories grouped under the title The Red Pony, the theme of protest is temporarily laid aside, and the author's feeling for mysticism once again reasserts itself.

The Red Pony is the story of the gradual maturing of the young boy, Jody, who lives in close touch with nature on his father's ranch. The four short stories deal with, as Walter Gierasch has observed the basic life processes: "Birth, youth, maturity, copulation, disease, old age, and death."²⁵ These are the essential experiences that Jody is to undergo, and in doing so he learns a sort of Schweitzer-like reverence for life.

Jody's father, a strict and sometimes obtuse man, gives him a pony, the red pony of the title, in the opening story, "The Gift." Billy Buck, the hired man who carries on the tradition of strong, self-reliant characters such as Dan, the top-faller in In Doubtful Battle, and Slim, the mule-skinner in Of Mice and Men, is Jody's idol, and Billy comes to be his unofficial advisor and tutor in the care of the animal. Billy, however, makes a fatal miscalculation, and the pony dies from over-exposure. Such an error causes him to fall in the esteem of the youth, and such an encounter with death is the first step in the maturing process of the boy.

"The Great Mountains" is an excursion by the author into the realm of pure symbolism. The old man, Gitano, who is, to Jody, mysterious like the mountains, returns to them with an old horse who is, like the man, worn out and useless. The mountains are, of course, symbolic of death. No one ever goes into them and returns; no one can tell the boy what is there. Only the old man, rejected cruelly by Jody's father and ready for death, can go, but Jody senses the calmness and serenity to be found in the mountains: "Jody knew something was there, something very wonderful because it wasn't known, something secret and mysterious. He could feel within himself that this was so."

Billy Buck has not forgotten his failure, and when Jody's father offers him an unborn colt, Billy promises to see that it is delivered safely. But the birth is not normal, and to save the colt, Billy must sacrifice the mare, and this he does unhesitatingly in order to keep his promise. Unhesitatingly he does it, but not without remorse. He says after the birth: "There's your colt. I promised. And there it is. I had to do it--had to."

Billy, on the level of the animal world, has recreated Joseph Wayne's sacrifice for the land. Billy had promised to deliver the colt--to wipe out the guilt of his earlier failure, and to preserve and continue the life process in the shape of the animals. Again Jody has come into close contact with violent death, but this time coupled with the phenomena of death is that of the survival of life.

Jody reaches a peak of maturity and understanding in his sympathy with the garrulous old grandfather of "The Leader of the People". The grandfather, with his interminable and repetitious stories of his leading the covered wagon train across the plains to California, is apparently oblivious of his effect on his listeners until he overhears his son-in-law complaining. The old man feels wretched and unhappy, not so much because of the affront as because he has been unable to express completely what he felt during the crossing. Through him Steinbeck renews his faith in the mystical group-man concept, as he realizes, finally, what is was that was important to him as the leader:

"It wasn't Indians that were important, nor adventures, nor even getting out here. It was a whole bunch of people made into one big crawling beast. And I was the head. It was westering and westering. Every man wanted

something for himself, but the big beast that was all of them wanted only westering.... But it wasn't getting here that mattered, it was the movement and westering. ...That's what I should be telling instead of stories."

Quote
p. 93

Now such an observation by the grandfather, coming as it does at the climax of the four stories, is an important reaffirmation of the author's belief in the "whole" picture. To be sure, the story is primarily concerned with the growing up of Jody, but this observation of the grandfather comes as a sort of climax for all the lessons he has learned in the previous episodes. Through it he learns, like grandfather has learned, to see more than the single unit; to see in terms of unity. The preservation of life, as seen in the birth of the colt and the death of the mare, may be important, but it is subordinate to the larger view, the view that embraces such appearances as life and death and that goes a step beyond them.

vii

Martin Shockley, writing on the attitude of the people of Oklahoma toward the novel The Grapes of Wrath, quoted a certain minister who protested against Steinbeck's supposed attitude towards religion:

"The projection of the preacher of the book into a role of hypocrisy and sexuality discounts the holy calling of God-called preachers.... The book is 100% false to Christianity. We protest with all our hearts against the Communistic base of the story.... Should any...preachers attend the show which advertises this infamous book, his flock should put him on the spot, give him his walking papera, and ask God to forgive his poor soul."²⁶

The good reverend has voiced here a typical layman's reaction to the novel. The apparent coarseness and vulgarity of the Joads was often too much for the gentle readers' stomach, but if such was the reaction, this same reader might be accused of lack of perception along with his vaunted

gentility. As Percy Bysshe Shelley observed: "Ugly words and ugly facts can be printed in these later years, and for the most part only ugly minds resent them."²⁷

It was not only the layman who might have misinterpreted this novel; there were also numerous critics who felt it to be nothing more than an impassioned plea for social justice in the same vein as Of Mice and Men and In Dubious Battle which preceded it. For example, William Phillips described the book as "a novel about the exploitation of the migratory farm worker, which I think has been much overrated both for its literary qualities and its social vision--perhaps because at the time of its appearance the public was receptive to any writing that celebrated the cause of the downtrodden."²⁸ Clearly, the meaning of the novel has eluded Mr. Phillips and all those who have shared his view. From a certain point of view, the realism and the social protest are of secondary importance. What Steinbeck has composed is a romantic novel, a novel that praises the unconquerable spirit or will to live of the human species. And more than this, it is the final welding of his mystic worldview with the typically western attitude of world and life affirmation. Frederic Carpenter did an excellent job of relating the basic philosophical tenets of The Grapes of Wrath to the beliefs of the American transcendentalists.²⁹ It has already been noted how so many of the foundations of the transcendentalist doctrine grew out of similar Hindu beliefs. Now it will be shown just how far Steinbeck chose to go in adopting the Hindu-transcendentalist mystic ideal, and how he shaped and molded it to fit his twentieth century characters.

The action on the plot level all belongs to the Joads, and there are, in the family, representative characters for many variant attitudes. Indeed,

sometimes the characters become too representative, and tend to lose their individuality. This bothered Edmund Wilson, who said of the Joads: "The characters of The Grapes of Wrath, are animated and put through their paces rather than brought to life; they are like excellent character actors giving very conscientious performances in a fairly well-written play."³⁰ Alfred Kazin agreed with him, terming the characters of the novel "stage creations." But if at times they are less than real, they nevertheless serve well to point up various phases of the philosophy the author had nurtured and developed over a dozen years.

Among the minor figures of the family there is Grampa--crude, obscene, stubborn, and warm-hearted--the archetypal primitive or natural man, rooted to the land of his birth, and lost and doomed to death as soon as he is torn from it. There is Noah, the older brother, one of Steinbeck's bewildered innocents. Lost and unhappy in the world of men, his only recourse, like that of so many Steinbeck characters, is in symbolic womb regression as he deserts the family to find a cave near a stream. There is Al, the typical "individual" man, the man unable to see beyond the "units." Ma realizes this defect in Al's character when she observes that Al "ain't nothin' but a guy after a girl," and it is in this inability to see in larger focus that he differs from Tom. Uncle John is the product of formal religion, ridden by a sense of guilt and sin until his life loses all significance. Rose of Sharon, after her miscarriage, becomes the symbolic "mother of the world."

All of these minor characters are limited by their individual functions. But three characters--the three main characters of the novel achieve the Steinbeck ideal; they see "wholes" not "units," and these are,

of course, Ma, Tom, and Casey. From the point of view of this study, we are forced to conclude that Ma is the least significant of the three, though perhaps she is the most memorable figure in the book. The author intended her to be the foundation for the family and, later, the guiding spirit of her son, Tom: "From her position as healer, her hands had grown sure and cool and quiet; from her position as arbiter she had become as remote and faultless in judgment as a goddess. She seemed to know that if she swayed the family shook, and if she ever really deeply wavered or despaired the family would fall, the family will to function would be gone."

That she sparks the family with her indomitable courage may be discerned from her words on the advisability of taking Jim Casey with them: "It ain't kin we? It's will we? As far as 'kin', we can't do nothin', not go to California or nothin'; but as far as 'will', why, we'll do what we will." Eventually she is recognized by all, even Pa, as the head of the family.

Ma's loyalties lie, during the bulk of the book, solely with the family. Her dominant motive is to keep the family together as a unit, and she is to see, tragically, one circumstance after another arise to thwart her. But at the end, as the misery and hopelessness of her family become increasingly worse, she comes to realize that there is a greater whole than even her precious "family." She says to a fellow-sufferer; "Use' ta be the family was fust. It ain't so now. It's anybody. Worse off we git, the more we got to do."

Ma's vision, though it lacks the religious overtones of Jim Casey, is almost the equal of the preacher's. For all her devotion to her single "unit", she is not misled into forgetting the all-important "wholes", and

she tells a discouraged Tom: "Why, Tom--us people will go on livin' when all them people is gone. Why, Tom, we're the people that live. They ain't gonna wipe us out. Why, we're the people--we go on."

But the focal character for the purposes of the study must of necessity be Jim Casey. Martin Shockley read much Christian symbolism into this character,³¹ but, in view of the words Steinbeck puts into his mouth, and, further, in view of what has already been noted of religious mysticism, it is difficult to see where the author intended to limit Casey's beliefs to the Christian faith. In the first place, Casey has come to transcend the notion of sin. He tells Tom: "Got a lot of sinful idears--but they seem kinda sensible," and later he tells the sin-obsessed Uncle John: "if you think it was a sin--then it's a sin. A fella builds his own sins right up from the groun'." And finally, again to Tom: "Maybe we been whippin' the hell out of ourselves for nothin'. There ain't no sin and there ain't no virtue." It has been brought out in the first chapter how integral a part of the Hindu faith this same concept of the indivisible unity of life is, and how, in a varied but similar form it manifested itself in the transcendentalist doctrine.

Casey is not done with this insight into sin. He has found the ability to see beyond sectarian religion to what the Hindus call Brahman, the transcendentalists the Oversoul:

"I says 'What's this call, this sperit?' an' I says, 'It's love. I love people so much I'm fit to bust, sometimes.' An' I says, 'Don't you love Jesus?' Well, 'I thought an' thought, an' finally I says, 'No, I don't know nobody name' Jesus. I know a bunch of stories, but I only love people,"

"I figgered about the Holy Sperit and the Jesus road. I figgered, 'Why do we got to hand it on God or Jesus? Maybe,' I figgered, 'Maybe it's all men an' all women we love; maybe that's the Holy Sperit--the human sperit--the whole shebang. Maybe all men got one big soul ever'body's a part of.'"

Casey must first go through the mystic rites of purification, and he tells of his experience in a grace spoken at the Joad table:

"I ain't sayin' I'm like Jesus," the preacher went on. "But I got tired like Him, an' I got mized up like Him, an' I went into the wilderness like Him, without no campin' stuff. Night-time I'd lay on my back an' look up at the stars; morning I'd set an' watch the sun come up; midday I'd foller the sun down. Sometimes I'd pray like I always done. Only I couldn't figure what I was prayin' to or for. There was the hills, an' there was me, an' we wasn't separate no more. We was one thing. An' that one thing was holy."

Obviously, Casey has attained the pure unitive state, and like his predecessors in mysticism, he is unable to reconcile the problem of ethics with his new situation. But for the non-intellectual Casey there is no racking problem; indeed, it is doubtful if he considers any course other than the one he adopts. His obligation now is to help, not only his own people, but all people--people in the larger sense of the term. He unites his mystical knowledge with his feeling for social and ethical responsibility:

"I got thinkin' how we was holy when we was one thin' an' makin' was holy when it was one thing. An' it on'y got unholy when one mis'able little fella got the bit in his teeth an' run off his own way, kickin' and draggin' an' fightin'. Fella like that bust the holiness. But when they're all workin' together, not one fella for another fella, but one fella kind of harnessed to the whole shebang--that's right, that's holy."

In the beginning he is unclear as to just how he will go about his work, but his stay in jail gives him insight into the path he must take, and he realizes that as a labor agitator he can best help the people he "loves fit ta bust." In a moment of transcendentalist-like optimism, he tells Tom: "the on'y thing you got to look at is that ever' time they's a little step fo'ward, she may slip back a little, but she never slips clear

back. You can prove that..., an' that makes the whole thing right. An' that means that wasn't no waste even if it seemed like they was." It is in keeping with the tragic tone of the novel that he is killed a few moments later, shouting to the end his protest against social justice.

For all the bleak and grim tragedy that the Joads and Casey are to endure, there remains the redeeming qualities of Tom's and Rose of Sharon's dedication. Tom, like Jim Nolan of In Dubious Battle, began as an individualist, preoccupied with his own immediate concerns. He needs tobacco and liquor and women--but only in the beginning. Soon however, the influence of Casey's words and deeds and the misery and injustice the family is subjected to have a profound effect upon him. Eventually, his loyalties are to transcend his narrower family unit and include all of suffering humanity. With Casey's death, he is to take up the Preacher's cause; he becomes his disciple:

"I been all day an' all night hidin' alone. Guess who I been thinkin' about? Casey! He talked a lot. Used ta bother me. But now I been thinkin' what he said, an' I can remember--all of it. Says one time he went out in the wilderness to find his own soul, an' he foun' he just got a little piece of a great big soul. Says a wilderness ain't no good, 'cause his little piece of a soul wasn't no good 'less it was with the rest, an' was whole. Funny how I remember. Didn't think I was even listenin'. But I know now a fella ain't no good alone."

Ma cannot fully comprehend his plans. She voices her concern for him, and his reply indicates the extent of his understanding of Casey's faith:

"Well, maybe like Casey says, a fella ain't got a soul of his own, but on'y a piece of a big one.... Then it don't matter. Then I'll be all aroun' in the dark. I'll be ever'where--wherever you look. Wherever they's a fight so hungry people can eat, I'll be there.

Wherever they's a cop beatin' up a guy, I'll be there. If Casey knowed, why, I'll be in the way guys yell when they're mad an'--I'll be in the way kids laugh when they're hungry an' they know supper's ready. An' when our folks eat the stuff they raise an' live in the houses they build--why, I'll be there. See? God, I'm talkin' like Casey. Comes of thinkin' about him so much. Seems like I can see him sometimes."

Finally, there is Rose of Sharon's giving of her breast to a starving man. Joseph Warren Beach has summarized the symbolic importance of this incident:

This final episode is symbolic in its way of what is, I should say, the leading theme of the book. It is a type of the life-instinct, the vital persistence of the common people who are represented by the Joads. Their sufferings and humiliations are overwhelming; but these people are never entirely overwhelmed. They have something in them that is more than stoical endurance. It is the will to live, and the faith in life. ³²

The loss of her own child is not so important now to Rose of Sharon, for in her act she becomes the symbolic "mother of mankind." She too comes to think in terms of "wholes," no longer simply "units."

Percy Boynton said: "The Grapes of Wrath became a culmination and a compendium of Steinbeck. All it contains was clearly indicated in his earlier works: the primitive passions, love, reverence, loyalty, benevolence, attachment to the soil...." ³³ He might have added mysticism, for the dominant theme of The Grapes of Wrath is to be found in the words of the preacher Casey which were quoted earlier. The Joad family is a single part of the larger group of migratory workers, but even this larger group is not the final consideration of the author. Steinbeck, speaking through Casey, tells us of his larger concern for the totality of mankind. It is the "one great big soul" that he is interested in, and this could not surprise the reader familiar with his early novels. It is certainly not new for Steinbeck; it is, perhaps, resolved more completely than ever before with

his feeling for social injustice.

How necessary is it to reiterate the ~~common~~ ground of Casey's faith with, say, the Hindu? Did he realize that all partial realities have their being within a single divine ground? He tells us as much. Was he aware that men could know of this divine power through direct intuition? His sojourn in the wilderness answers this. Did he know the importance of ethical action? The manner of his death speaks for his ethics. Finally, did he achieve unity with the divine? He said in answer to this question: "There was the hills, and there was me, an' we wasn't separate any more." These are the four tenets of the Hindu faith, and Casey has fulfilled them all. There, in Casey, is the first Steinbeck character who has arrived completely at the goal of the mystic ideal, a goal only potentially suggested in the characters of the earlier novels, but one which always seemed to elude them.

viii

The purpose of this chapter has been to trace the development of the mystical concept through six early novels of John Steinbeck. It would be worthwhile to summarize, briefly, the stages of this development. The Pastures of Heaven contains the seeds of mysticism. Traces of mysticism may be found in this work, but the mystical thought is not well formulated. Steinbeck was unsure of his directions, unwilling to go too far with this highly abstract thing he was dealing with. To a God Unknown is felt by most critics to be the author's deepest excursion into the realm of mysticism. In a sense this is true; the book is built around a single, predominant mystical belief. But in another sense it is not true, for

Steinbeck has failed to round out and complete his mystical theories. The book may be considered the herald of things to come, but like The Pastures of Heaven before it, it misses the total view expressed later. In In Dubious Battle it appears on the surface that Steinbeck has deserted his mystical bent, but it has been noted how this is not entirely correct. It is framed by a growing concern for social injustice, but it is still there, if in a somewhat subdued form. Of Mice and Men carried on the tradition of In Dubious Battle by juxtaposing mystical symbolism with a protest of social evil. The Red Pony, particularly in the story, "The Leader of the People," is the first attempt at a combination of the author's "reverence for life" with a mystical view of "group-man" or "whole." And, at last, The Grapes of Wrath has fulfilled all the promise of its predecessors and joined successfully social protest in the larger framework of religious mysticism.

There can be little doubt that Steinbeck's basic outlook may be safely classified as mystical. Like his forerunners in the world of mysticism, the Hindus and the transcendentalists, he was beset by the problem of reconciling ethical action with the unitive life. Unlike them, however, he was able, in his own way, to transcend this problem through his characters Casey and Tom in The Grapes of Wrath. Though perhaps this answer to the problem is no real answer at all for those students of the subtle refinements of belief, it is sufficient for Steinbeck. Love for humanity, for both the individual and the larger "group," is his reply to the problem; for him this love is enough.

FOOTNOTES

1. John Steinbeck, The Pastures of Heaven (New York: Bantam Books, 1956), p. 15.
2. Stanley Hyman, "Some Notes on John Steinbeck," Antioch Review II (Summer, 1942), p. 189.
3. The Pastures of Heaven, p. 68.
4. Ibid., p. 72.
5. Ibid., p. 45.
6. Joseph Warren Beach, American Fiction (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1941), p. 315.
7. Ibid., p. 316.
8. C.E. Jones, "Proletarian Writing and John Steinbeck," Sewanee Review XLVIII (October 1940), p. 449.
9. John Steinbeck, To a God Unknown (New York: Bantam Books, 1955), p. 2.
10. It is interesting to note the parallel that this concept affords with the Freudian view of the father image is so striking as to deserve mention. Freud's research into myth led him to believe that religion was an extension of the dependence of the child upon the strong father; that as the child grew into manhood he found himself still helpless in the vast, unfriendly universe, and from this feeling of fear he constructed an image of the protective father, an image that some call god, some Brahman, some the Oversoul. Freud says of this process: "when the child grows up and finds that he is destined to remain a child forever, and that he can never do without protection against unknown and mighty powers, he invests these with the traits of the father-figure; he creates for himself the gods, of whom he is afraid, whom he seeks to appropriate, and to whom he nevertheless entrusts the task of protecting him."
11. Woodburn Ross, "John Steinbeck: Naturalism's Priest," College English X (May 1949), p. 434.
12. Patrick Mullahy, Oedipus, Myth and Complex (New York: Grove Press, 1955), p. 100
13. Ibid., p. 68.
14. Edmund Wilson, Classics and Commercial (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Company, 1955), p. 43.

FOOTNOTES (CONT.)

15. Harold Strauss, "Realism in the Proletarian Novel," Yale Review XXVIII (December 1938), p. 368.
16. Barker Fairly, "John Steinbeck and the Coming Literature," Sewanee Review L (April 1942), p. 49.
17. Alfred Kazin, On Native Grounds (New York: Overseas Editions, Inc., 1942), p. 324.
18. Percy Boynton, American in Contemporary Fiction (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1940), p. 247.
19. William Frohock, "John Steinbeck's Men of Wrath," Southwestern Review XXXI (September 1946), p. 151.
20. To a God Unknown, p. 133.
21. John Steinbeck, In Dubious Battle (New York: Random House, 1936), p. 146.
22. On Native Grounds, p. 328.
23. Classics and Commercials, p. 35.
24. "Some Notes on John Steinbeck," p. 192.
25. Walter Gierasch, "Steinbeck's The Red Pony II, The Great Mountains" Explicator IV (March 1946), p. 39.
26. Martin Shockley, "The Reception of The Grapes of Wrath in Oklahoma," American Literature XV (January 1944), p. 359.
27. American in Contemporary Fiction, p. 255.
28. William Phillips, "Male-ism and Moralism," American Mercury LXXV. (October 1955), p. 96.
29. Frederick Carpenter, "The Philosophical Joals," College English II (January 1941), p. 315-325.
30. Classics and Commercials, p. 42.
31. Martin Shockley, "Christian Symbolism in The Grapes of Wrath," College English XVIII (November 1956), p. 88.
32. American Fiction, p. 332.
33. American in Contemporary Fiction, p. 256.

CHAPTER III

TEACHING THE NOVEL THE GRAPES OF WRATH

The purpose of this chapter is to explain the approach employed in the teaching of the novel The Grapes of Wrath, and the results of such an endeavor. The Grapes of Wrath was chosen because it appeared to be the most representative of Steinbeck's works, both in regard to the special subject of this essay, mysticism, and in regard to style, subject matter, and point of view. The novel was taught to two sections (approximately fifty students) of upper level college freshmen and was completed in the course of eight class periods. The teaching plan was written with the assumption that the past reading of most of the students was limited; consequently, the bulk of the exercises and questions tended to direct the student back to the novel itself. These questions required a close and careful reading of the parts of the text that this writer felt to be especially significant, and they required of the student only a minimum knowledge of trends and currents of ideas in literature. The lesson plan, broken down into the eight individual periods, was as follows:

Period I:

The students came to this period having read through page 156 of the Harpers Modern Classic edition of the text. This took them through chapter ten and to the point in the novel where the Joad family was about to begin the journey to California. To be certain that the students were keeping up in their reading, a short answer objective test, as follows, was given:

1. Tom Joad has been in prison for what crime?--homicide.
2. What was the profession of Jim Casey?--preacher.

3. In what state does the Joad family live?--Oklahoma.
4. Which member of the family seems obsessed by the idea of sin?--Uncle John.
5. What is Rose of Sharon's condition?--she is pregnant.
6. Where is the Joad family going?--to California.
7. What has happened to their farm?--they have lost it to the land company.
8. What does Muley Craves decide to do about his own, personal situation?--he decides to stay on the land.
9. What does the Joad family decide about Casey's request?--they decide to take him with them.
10. Which of Tom's brothers is adept at fixing cars?--Al.

A quiz of this nature, emphasizing plot level details, tended to insure continued reading on the part of the students.

The remainder of this period was spent in a lecture type discussion of symbolism. Symbolism was explained in its simplest form: something that stands for something else. A simple illustration, the striped red and white pole standing for a barbership, was presented and the students were asked to submit further examples. Reference was made to symbols used in various stories read in the text Short Story Masterpieces. Examples such as the grotesque bottled chickens in 'The Egg'; the native who adopted the white man's name in "An Outpost of Progress"; the dressing for dinner of Mr. Warburton in "The Outstation" were cited and the students were asked to contribute further examples from their reading of these and other short stories. Little reference to the novel being studied was made. The assignment was to read through page 314 and to look for and be prepared to explain any examples of symbolism noted thus far in the book.

Period II:

No objective test was given this period; rather, a discussion based on the student's examples of symbols was implemented. In addition to the students' examples, further discussion of symbolism was induced through the following questions:

1. How does Muley Graves' hiding place (the cave) relate to his decision to remain behind when the others leave? suggested answer--Muley's identification with and attachment to the earth and the land, his unwillingness to leave the familiar, the pleasant, causes him to seek out a place to live that is symbolic of a womb--the warm, dark cave. Muley says, page 82, "I like it in here, I feel like nobody can come at me."
2. Does Uncle John's attitude toward sin serve as more than merely character development? suggested answer--it portrays a certain sort of obsession with the ideas of guilt and sin and is indicative of the background and training of individuals like Uncle John.
3. Can you relate Uncle John's attitude to Casey's quest or inner conflict? suggested answer--both Casey and Uncle John search for an answer to the problems of evil and sin. Casey sees through and beyond sin; Uncle John becomes immersed in masochistic feelings of guilt.

The assignment for the next period was to read through page 472 of the text.

Period III:

This period was devoted to a discussion of the sociological implications of the novel. The students, who were, of course, unfamiliar with the economic conditions of the time of the novel, were asked to explain just what social and economic forces the author is protesting in his work. Sample question: In Chapter five Steinbeck protests, specifically, two economic elements that contribute to the tenant farmer's situation. Tell what they are by reference to the text. Suggested answer--the cold impersonality of the corporate system, pp. 45-26; and the system of absentee landlords, pp. 50-51.

For further questions and discussion the students were directed to the chapters in which the author voices his protest (chapters 9, 12, 14, 17, 19, 21, etc.). Analysis of the means the author uses and the effectiveness of his methods (is he too sentimental, too overt, etc.) were stressed.

The assignment for the next period was to finish the book.

Period IV:

A short, objective answer quiz was given at the beginning of the period to, again, insure completion of the reading of the novel and to emphasize close reading on the plot level:

1. What happens to Noah on the trip to California?--he decides to stay by a river and not to continue.
2. Who appears to take over the control and direction of the Joad family as the trip progresses?--Ma.
3. What happens to Casey when the family first arrives in California?--he goes to jail.
4. What happens to Connie Rivers when the family arrives in California?--he deserts Rose of Sharon.
5. What is Casey trying to do when he is killed?--incite the migrant workers to strike for higher wages.
6. What does Tom do when Casey is killed?--he kills Casey's assailant.
7. What happens to Rose of Sharon's baby?--it is born dead.
8. What does Uncle John do with the corpse of the baby?--he floats it toward town.
9. Where is the family living at the end of the novel?--in a boxcar.
10. Who does Tom, now an outlaw, decide to emulate in the future?--Casey.

The remainder of this period was taken up with a discussion of the philosophical or ideological approach to the novel. In this discussion the words and the life of the preacher, Jim Casy, were paramount. Casey's original religious conflict, as depicted on pages 31-33; his growing awareness of social and religious responsibility; and his final crystallization of his social and religious ideals were presented in a lecture-discussion period.

At this point the students were finished with the reading of the

novel. They had been guided to a certain understanding of the symbolic, the sociological, and the philosophical significance of the book. But only four periods remained, and two of these were to be devoted to examinations. Therefore, to continue in the pattern of close reference to the text, the next two periods were given over to written exercises that were based on each of the three previously mentioned levels of reading and that took the student back to the book itself to discern a proper answer. The first group of exercises, which were assigned for the subsequent period (period V), included the following questions:

A. Symbolic Level:

1. What is the significance of the description of the turtle in chapter three? Suggested answer--the turtle, like the people, struggles, often blindly, but always indomitably against the dispassionate forces of nature, i.e., the steep embankment, the red ant; and against the cruel and pointless evil of other creatures, i.e., the truck driver who tries to run over it. The turtle, like the family, will not be deterred.
2. What the meaning of Ma's many references to Pretty Boy Floyd? Suggested answer--Floyd, like the family, and especially like Tom, was not basically bad, but environment drove him to hatred and murder. Tom finds himself driven in a similar way beyond his capacity to endure and finally reverts again to violence. The environment is to be stressed here, not the violence--see page 501, 'He wasn't a bad boy. Jus' got drove in a corner.'

B. Sociological level:

3. Chapter 22 is devoted to a description of the government camp. Is this description so elaborate for any purpose? Suggested answer--to show that by working together, for themselves but also for the group, the

people can attain a measure of happiness.

4. On page 326 the author says, "Pray God some day kind people won't all be poor. Pray God some day a kid can eat. And the association of owners knew that some day the praying would stop. And there's the end." What answer to social injustice is Steinbeck implying here? Suggested answer--that the people, if driven far enough, will rise in armed revolt against the leaders of the system that causes their misery.

C. Philosophical level:

5. Casey's problem, after he gives up preaching, appears to be to reconcile his religious feelings with his instinctual drives. How does he seem to resolve this problem? Suggested answer--this question may be answered by direct reference to the text. On pages 32-33 Casey says, of his instinctual drives, "There ain't no sin and there ain't no virtue. There's just stuff people do." And of his religious beliefs he says, "Maybe all men got one big soul ever 'body is a part of."

6. Explain the philosophical significance of Casey's grace at the Joad table, pages 109-111. Suggested answer--Casey discerns the religious ideal of a larger soul that embraces all men, but he is aware of the evil in the world that is caused by those few who disrupt the harmony of this greater life. Specific reference to passages in the prayer should be given to point up Casey's growing social awareness.

Period V:

This period was devoted to a classroom discussion of the above questions. Students read their answers aloud and compared them with the ideas of the others and with those of the instructor.

For the next period the following questions were assigned:

A. Symbolic level:

1. Throughout the novel there are many references to Rose of Sharon's condition, i.e., "And the world was pregnant to her; she thought only in terms of reproduction and of motherhood." How can you relate statements of this nature to her loss of the child and the final scene in the novel? Suggested answer--Rose of Sharon, like the others, had thought in terms of the individual, the single child in her case. At the close of the novel, in the face of the loss of her child and the misery of the family's situation, Rose of Sharon gives her breast to a starving man and, symbolically, to all of suffering humanity. She transcends the individual; she thinks in terms of the group, just as the other major characters, Tom, Casey, and Ma have come to do.

B. Sociological level:

2. In chapter 14 Steinbeck says, "For the quality of owning freezes you forever into "I" and cuts you off forever from the "we". Do you take this to be a Communistic sort of protest? If so, how do you reconcile it with the words of the preacher Cassy, "But when they're all workin' together, not one fella for another folla, but one fella kind of harnessed to the whole shebang--that's right, that's a holy?" Suggested answer--Steinbeck does not advocate communal ownership; rather, he decries the preying of one man on another that he observed in the capitalistic system of the 1930's. He suggests that the solution lies in a humanitarian approach to labor and economy.

C. Philosophical level:

3. On pages 570-572 Tom explains his interpretation of Casey's philosophy and outlines his plans for the future. How does his speech on these pages both unite and transcend the symbolic and the sociological levels to form the core of the author's ideology? Suggested answer--reference to the text of Tom's speech will indicate both symbolism, i.e., "if two lie together they have heat; but how can one be warm alone," and also social protest, i.e., "I been thinkin' a hell of a lot, thinkin' about our people living like pigs, an' the good rich lan' layin' fallow, or maybe one fella with a million acres, while a hundred thousan' good farmers is starvin'." But Tom has adopted the philosophical views of Casey: "(Casey) says one time he went out in the wilderness to find his own soul, an' he foun' he didn' have no soul that was his'n. Says he foun' he jus' got a little piece of a big soul," and he is able to carry Casey's beliefs into positive action by his dedication to the cause of the people and of humanity.

Period VI:

This period, like the one before it, was devoted to the reading and discussion of the above questions.

Period VII:

During this, the first of the two examination periods, an objective answer test consisting of fifty questions was administered. The test was, as follows:

Match the quotation with the speaker:

A. Tom Joad
B. Pa Joad

C. Jim Casey
D. Uncle John

E. Pa Joad

1. "If he needs a million acres to make him feel rich, seems to me he needs it 'cause he feels awful poor inside hisself."

2. "They's a time of change, an' when that comes, dyin' is a piece of all dyin'."
3. "A man got to do what he got to do"
4. "I knowed there was gonna come a time when I got to get drunk, when I'd get to hurtin' inside so I got to get drunk."
5. "Us people will go on livin' when all them people is gone. They ain't gonna wipe us out."
6. "Wanta die so bad. Wanta die awful. Die a little bit."
7. "A pick is a nice tool if you don' fight it. You an' the pick workin together."
8. "We're Joads. We don't look up to nobody."
9. "You're scairt to talk it out. Ever' night you jus' eat, and then you get wanderin' sway. Can't bear to talk it out."
10. "It's 'cause we'er all a-workin' together. Depity can't pick on one fella in this camp. He'e pickin' on the whole daw camp."
11. "I'm learnin' one thing good. If you're in trouble or hurt or need--go to the poor people. They're the only ones that'll help."
12. "They was nice fellas, ya see. What made 'em bad was they needed atuff."
13. "They's change a-comin'. I don' know what, maybe we won't live to see her, but she's a-comin'."
14. "That's right, he's goin' someplace. Me--I don't know where I'm goin'!"
15. "Jumpin' an' yellin'. That's what folks like. Makes 'em feel awful."
16. "We gotta go. We didn' wants go. It's nice here, an' folks is nice here."
17. "Go down and tell 'em. Go down in the street an' rot an' tell 'em that way."
18. "Ever'time they'a a little step forward, she may slip back a little, but she never slips clear back."
19. "They'a a whole lot I don' un'erstan." ~~But~~ goin' away ain't gonna ease us, it's gonna bear us down."
20. "Says one time he went out in the wilderness to find his own soul, an' he foun' he didn' have no soul that was his'n. Says he foun' he jus' got a little piece of a great big soul."

21. "What's to keep every'thing from stoppin'; all the folks from jus' gittin tired an' layin' down?"
22. "You can't sin none. You ain't got no money."
23. "Woman got all her life in her arms. Man got it all in his head."
24. "You fellas don' know what you're doin'."
25. "We don't joke no more. When they's a joke, it is a mean bitter joke, an' they ain't no fun in it."
26. "Then I'll be aroun' in the dark. I'll be ever'where--whenever you look."
27. "Use' ta be the fambly was fust. It ain't so now. It's anybody."
28. "I been thinkin' a hell of a lot, thinkin' about our people livin' like pigs----."
29. "I got a feelin' I'm bringin' bad luck to my own folks. I got a feelin' I oughta go away an' let 'em be."
30. "Goddam it! How'd I know." I'm jus' puttin' one foot in front a the other."

Match the underlined pronoun with the character to whom it refers:

- | | | |
|--------------|-------------|-------------------|
| A. Jim Cssey | C. Tom Joad | E. Rose of Sharon |
| B. Al Joad | D. Ma Joad | |

31. "You wasn't a preacher. A girl was just a girl to you. They wasn't nothin' to you."
32. "You give her a goin'-over. You figured her out."
33. "I ain't gonna sleep in no cave. I'm gonna sleep right here."
34. "Her full face was not soft; it was controlled, kindly. Her hazel eyes seemed to have experienced all possible tragedy----."
35. "He worked for a company. Drove truck last year. He knows quite a little."
36. "I'm gonna work in the fiel'a, in the green fiel's an' I'm gonna be near my folks."
37. "She accepted it nobly, smiling her wise, self-satisfied smile."
38. "Always he had stood behind with the woman before, now he made his report gravely."
39. "The preacher said, 'She looks tar'd."

40. "She looked up and across the barn, and her lips came together & smiled mysteriously."
41. "She turned about--took three steps back toward the mound of vines; & then she turned quickly & went back toward the boxcar camp."
42. "Now'm I gonna know about you? They might kill ya an' I wouldn' know."
43. "What you wanna pick cotton for? Is it 'cause of Al and Aggie."
44. "He's jus' a young fella after a girl. You warn't never like that."
45. "Ever'place we stopped I seen it. Folks hungry fer side-seat, an' when they get it, they ain't fed."
46. "On his lips there was a faint smile and on his face a curious look of conquest."
47. "You don't want me to crawl around like a beat bitch--do you?"
48. "On'y way you gonna get me to go is whip me. An' I'll shame you, Pa."
49. "I'm still layin my dogs down one at a time."
50. "I ain't acared while we're all here, all that's alive, but I ain't gonna see us bust up."

Period VIII:

This period was given over to an essay type of examination consisting of a single question, as follows:

1. Last quarter you read the Greek epic The Odyasey. Over the yeare the term odyssey has come to mean a long wandering or series of travels or, in a sense, a search or quest. According to this definition it would, perhaps, be safe to say that several of the characters in The Grapes of Wrath are participants in a sort of odyssey. Keeping in mind each of the three levels of reading that we have considered, what do you feel is the search or quest or odyssey of Ma Joad? Of Casey? Of Tom?

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The results of this teaching experiment could be termed satisfactory if not outstandingly successful. The written answers to the discussion questions prepared for periods V and VI tended to repeat, a parrot-like, points made by the instructor in earlier lectures. The final objective examination was, apparently, a bit too difficult, for even the better students performed quite poorly, and only two "A" grades were registered out of the approximately fifty students who took the exam. It was felt that the final question would require of the students a certain amount of original thinking to properly discuss the quests of the three principal characters in the novel. Unfortunately, except for a few isolated cases, the typical answers given were repetitious of ideas previously expressed in the discussion questions or in class lectures.

However, despite this lack of original thinking, it is the feeling of this writer that the majority of students did assimilate some of the ideas concerning symbolism, social protest, and religious mysticism, and consequently the experiment was at least partly a success.

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