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NO TIME FOR TEARS: A LOOK AT DEATH  
IN THE SALINAS VALLEY NOVELS OF JOHN STEINBECK

BY

BILL ANDERSON

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree  
Master of Arts  
major in English  
South Dakota State University  
1988

NO TIME FOR TEARS: A LOOK AT DEATH  
IN THE SALINAS VALLEY NOVELS OF JOHN STEINBECK

This thesis is approved as a creditable and independent investigation by a candidate for the degree, Master of Arts, and is acceptable for meeting the thesis requirements for this degree. Acceptance of his thesis does not imply that the conclusions reached by the candidate are necessarily the conclusions of the major department

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Date

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Date

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## INTRODUCTION

Robert F. Weir, in Death In Literature, begins his study by writing about "a Buddhist parable which nicely illustrates the inevitability of death and the perennial problem of accepting death as a fact of human existence". A Buddhist woman, distraught over the death of her child, seeks help from Buddha, who instructs her to collect mustard seeds from any house where death has not occurred. Full of hope because she thinks she will find such a house, she embarks on her task only to learn that death strikes every family; finally she accepts the death of her son (1). Weir then suggests that by using literature as a reflective device, "Novelists often succeed in focusing our attention on that part of nature we most want to ignore: the inevitability of death" (3).

Death - sometimes through natural and accidental causes, but primarily through the violent causes of suicide and murder - permeates the novels that John Steinbeck wrote during the decade of the depression. Steinbeck's contemporaries, Hemingway and Faulkner, also focused on violent themes. In fact, Frohock, in The Novel of Violence in America, writes that most novelists of that period wrote books that "run to violence". However, Frohock differentiates between two types of novels of violence. In

one book like The Sun Also Rises action takes place over a period of time, "characters tend to be passive victims who change and evolve according to the will of time, and who act less than they undergo". On the other hand, in For Whom The Bell Tolls, the hero, Robert Jordan "has four days to work out his destiny" (6). All the action in the novel takes place in those four days. Frohock states that when "time appears as a limitation ... it provides a sense of urgency" and he calls this kind of novel the "novel of destiny" (6). Furthermore, he writes that in the

Novel of destiny violence assumes a (specific) ... aesthetic function. The hero finds himself in a predicament such that the only possible exit is through inflicting harm on some other human being. ...He accepts the way of violence because life, as he sees life, is like that: violence is man's fate. (6-7)

With the exception of To A God Unknown, the action in Steinbeck's novels under study takes place in a relatively short time and his characters are actors and not victims.

Gorer, writing in 1955, observed a phenomenon which he called "the pornography of death" (192). He writes "in the twentieth century ... death, has become more and more unmentionable as a natural process". Although death scenes were a common Victorian theme, Gorer writes that he does not recall a major character in books written after

1935, whose death occurred by natural causes (195). Yet he notes, in agreement with the observation of Frohock, that "violent deaths" abound in those same books (197). Although Steinbeck primarily concentrated on "violent deaths", the natural death of Gramma and Grampa in the Grapes of Wrath shows his ability to write tenderly and sensitively about death as well.

The Salinas Valley novels of John Steinbeck reflect what Weir states about murder: "literature depicts the harsh realities of death by killing" (182). Steinbeck, the realist, does not shrink from "death by killing". Murders occur frequently; he writes about them forcefully and graphically. In fact, several of his primary characters commit murder.

Weir also reports that suicide is a frequent theme in literature. He adds, however, that most suicides in the real world are committed by people over the age of sixty-five and that they are usually prompted by "poor health, economic problems, the loss of meaningful work, and the persistent feelings of rejection and uselessness" (225). But Steinbeck does not follow this pattern closely; the two suicides in Cannery Row are committed by men who are not old; Willie Romas in To A God Unknown, is a young man and Danny in Tortilla Flat is about thirty.

Weir also observes how writers deal with the aftermath of death.

When death occurs, there is a human need for some kind of service or ritual act which will give official recognition that a life has come to an end, a family and/or a community circle has become smaller. (269)

Steinbeck does this with his treatment of Grampa Joad in Grapes of Wrath, Danny in Tortilla Flat, and to a lesser extent Gramma Joad in Grapes of Wrath. He treats the death of Joy in In Dubious Battle extensively but for a different purpose. Furthermore, Weir thinks so much of Steinbeck's treatment of grampa's funeral that he inserts most of chapter ten from The Grapes of Wrath into his chapter entitled "Funeral And Burial Customs" (286). Jonathan Ripley, in his unpublished doctoral dissertation "The Treatment Of Burial Rituals in The Modern American Novel" writes an entire chapter describing the burial rites of the Joad grandparents and Rose of Sharon's stillborn baby (89).

Although Weir notes that writers occasionally deal with bereavement (314), John Steinbeck does not. In the Journal of a Novel Steinbeck tells about a strange dream that he had while writing East of Eden: "last night I dreamed a long dream of my own paralysis and death. It was objective and not at all sad, only interesting" (106).

Death in his novels is accompanied by the same lack of emotion and grief.

From 1933, when To a God Unknown was published, until 1939 with the publication of Grapes of Wrath, John Steinbeck wrote prolifically about the people he knew best: the farmers, ranchers, laborers, Paisanos, bindlestiffs, migrant workers, labor organizers, and bums of the fertile Salinas valley just south of Monterey, California where he grew up. Most of the people Steinbeck wrote about experienced violence as a part of their lives.

John Steinbeck, born in 1902 to a middle-class family in Salinas, California, was the third child and only son. After graduating from high school, he attended Stanford University from 1919 to 1925. Along with many English courses, he also took several courses in science, especially biology which reflected his early interest in the physical aspects of man and animal. Although he attended college for six years, he never completed enough courses to earn a degree. Throughout his college career, though he received some income from his parents, he also worked as a laborer at a sugar beet plant to help support himself.

From 1925 to 1933 he continued working as a laborer while he wrote his first two novels, Cup of Gold and Pastures of Heaven. They did not sell well; in fact, he did not publish his first successful book, Tortilla Flat, until 1935. However, after his first success, all the books that

he wrote during the thirties proved to be very popular. His greatest achievement, The Grapes of Wrath, published in 1939, earned him critical acclaim, the Pulitzer Prize and widespread popularity.

This study examines the novels and some short stories that Steinbeck wrote during this period. The focus is on Steinbeck's treatment of death: animal death, natural and accidental death, suicide and murder. Following is a brief introduction of the "death theme" as it is reflected in these stories.

Steinbeck's third novel, To A God Unknown, was published in 1933. It is the story of Joseph Wayne, loosely based on the old testament account of Jacob and Joseph. Joseph, born in Vermont, travels to California to claim farmland; his brothers soon join him. They successfully develop their land until a drought overcomes the area. Other family members leave to seek a better place but Joseph remains at the farm until he offers himself as a sacrifice to the Unknown God.

The Red Pony, Steinbeck's important initiation story, that teaches the young Jody Tiflin about death, was published in sections at various times. "The Gift" and "The Great Mountains," the first two parts of The Red Pony, were originally published as short stories in 1933 in the North American Review (Hughes 92). The third part, "The Promise," was published by Harper's in 1937 (Lisca, World 93). These

three parts were combined that year and released under the title, The Red Pony. Although Lisca believes that the fourth part, "The Leader Of The People," was written prior to 1937, it first appeared in the 1938 edition of The Long Valley, a collection of Steinbeck's short stories (World 93). Finally, the four parts were combined to form the 1945 edition of The Red Pony.

Steinbeck wrote his fourth novel, Tortilla Flat, during the summer of 1933, a difficult time for him, because his parents were quite sick from disabling illnesses (Benson 276). In a letter to a friend, Steinbeck described his difficult circumstances while he wrote Tortilla Flat and called the book "a very jolly one about Monterey paisanos. Its tone ... is a direct rebellion against all the sorrow of our house" (Steinbeck and Wallsten 89). Benson notes ironically that the casually written book, which proved to be Steinbeck's first success, was not published until 1935 because no publisher wanted it (276).

Tortilla Flat, the delightful story of Danny, his house, and his friends, tells how they come together, flourish as a group, and then break up at the end. In the preface, Steinbeck describes the house and the group: "Danny's house was not unlike the Round Table, and Danny's friends were not unlike the knights of it" (1). However, the "jolly" book ends with Danny, despairing of his new



found respectability and loss of individuality, killing himself.

Steinbeck then wrote In Dubious Battle, his first book to deal with a labor strike. As Frohock writes, "A strike is material for literature, by definition only when it involves suffering and violence"; In Dubious Battle, published in 1936, meets this definition (134). According to Astro, Steinbeck said, "I guess it is a brutal book, more brutal because there is no author's moral point of view" (20). An atmosphere of violence, beatings, shootings, murders and destruction permeates the book. Owens comments: "The theme of blood sacrifice is woven through the novel and underscored by the sacrifices of Joy, old man Anderson, and finally Jim (91). Fontenrose believes that In Dubious Battle is "a masterpiece of realistic and naturalistic fiction: realistic in its completely objective narrative and accurately reported dialogue, and naturalistic in its content" (43).

The book is about a strike in an orchard in California. Mac, a labor leader, and his new recruit, Jim, organize migrant workers to strike for higher wages. The strike gets violent; the strikers fight a losing battle against large land-owners and the book ends with Jim getting killed.

In his next book, Of Mice And Men, published in 1937, Steinbeck moves from the strike battle ground to the



landscape and farm yard of The Red Pony. Of Mice And Men, begins with a scene where George and Lennie are hiding because Lennie has killed a woman. George and Lennie, two migrant field workers, have a dream that someday they will own property and live "off the fatta the lan'." However, Lennie, big and simple minded, has an unfortunate habit of killing most animals that he touches. He also accidentally kills women. George and Lennie find work on a ranch but in just a few days their world falls apart. Lennie gets into a fight with the owner's son. When the wife of the owner's son befriends Lennie, he accidentally strangles her. The story ends with George killing Lennie before a vigilante group can get to him.

According to Peter Lisca, The Grapes Of Wrath, John Steinbeck's next novel, is his "finest achievement, a work of literary genius" (myth 88). Lisca also notes the biblical parallels between the Old Testament story of the exodus and The Grapes Of Wrath (MYTH 87-100). The captivity of the Jews in Egypt corresponds with the economic slavery of the Oklahoma farmers. The exodus of the Jews from Egypt to the promised land matches the journey of the Oklahoma farmers to California, the new promised land. But the analogy weakens when the migrants enter California; they do not find the land of "milk and honey" that the Jews found.

The Joads, poor, southern farmers lose their Oklahoma land due to the dust storms in the drought of the late 1930's. Packing up a few possessions, they get into their old truck to make the long, arduous journey to California. Hoping to find a promised land, where all the men could work and earn enough to support their families, they instead find migrant camps, poor wages, unemployment and violence. The fruit growers exploit the migrants, wanting them to work for practically nothing. As owners lower wages, the workers would strike. The deputies threaten the strikers; strike-breakers join the battle fanning the blaze and causing more violence.

Cannery Row, the last novel considered in this study was written by Steinbeck in 1944 and published the next year. It is the story of another group of people in Monterey: Doc, a marine biologist, Mack and the boys, and Dora Flood and the girls of the Bear Flag Restaurant. Just as Danny and the Paisanos in Tortilla Flat drop out of society and live by their wits and reliance on each other, so do Mack and the boys. However, their lives are colored by the suicides of Horace Abbeville and William the Pimp, as well as the presence of the dead girl in the tide-pool.

Just as the Buddhist woman learned that death strikes every house, the reader finds death in every one of Steinbeck's Salinas Valley novels. Steinbeck wrote violent books that reflected the real life of the lower-class

workers, migrant workers and the unemployed. His strike novels highlight the violent nature of the clash between the groups of striking laborers and the groups of vigilantes who protect the interests of the fruit growers. The touching and tender story of the deaths of the elder Joads emphasize the inevitability of death for all humankind, even those who have removed themselves from the cycle of violence emphasized in the other Steinbeck novels. Even Jody Tiflin sees the reality of death in the cycle of life and death on the farm. This study will analyze the deaths in Steinbeck's Salinas Valley novels and attempt to develop an ethic of death for Steinbeck during this period of his writing.

## CHAPTER ONE

### Animal Death

John Steinbeck, interested in a wide variety of subjects, persuaded his college advisor to allow him to take a "course in the medical school on the dissection of cadavers". Although the medical school denied his request, his request illustrates "Steinbeck's early concern with people as physical organisms" (Benson 48). A few years later Steinbeck attended the summer session at Stanford's Hopkins Marine Station, taking a class in General Zoology. According to Benson, Steinbeck's selection of science classes reflected his "deep interest in nature and natural processes" (63).

The pacific tide-pool and its marine life especially fascinated John Steinbeck and later formed the basis of his friendship with his best friend, the marine biologist, Ed Ricketts. Astro, in The Shaping Of A Novelist, quotes Ricketts: "the laws of animals must be the laws of men" (5). Astro also adds that "life in the tide-pool affords the observer an unmasked replica of man's social structure" (Shaping 11). The tide-pool, as a metaphor for human life, is reflected in the novels being studied.

In his early books, Steinbeck uses the death of animals for a variety of purposes: one, to show man

offering animals as a sacrifice to some deity; two, to teach a young boy lessons about life and death; and three, to prefigure what will happen to a character later in the novel.

In To a God Unknown, Steinbeck writes about an old man who tries to synchronize the sacrifice of an animal with the sunset each evening. Joseph Wayne, the novel's hero, observes the sacrifice: "He saw the old man's joyful eyes, saw how in the moment of death he became straight and dignified and large" (215). Joseph questions the old man about his sacrifice and the old man responds "I have made up my reasons, but they aren't true" ... I make a symbol of the sun's death". Joseph's response, "These were words to clothe a naked thing, and the thing is ridiculous in clothes", shows that he understands that the truth of the old man's sacrifice cannot be put into words (216). Joseph knows that the old man has found a truth. Joseph's later sacrifice of his own life, according to Fontenrose, "was prefigured in the daily sacrifice made to the setting sun by a strange old man on the coast" (17).

Near the end of the novel, as Joseph Wayne is riding to his citadel in the glen, he hears coyotes howling in the distance. He investigates and finds a dead cow and a skinny calf surrounded by predators. (This juxtaposition of life and death, a frequent Steinbeck theme, will be developed

further in The Red Pony. Joseph places the calf before him on his saddle, carrying it to the glen. Then Joseph remembers the old man; he ritualistically sacrifices the calf, "cut [(ting)] its throat with his pocket knife" (260). But the old man's truth does not work for Joseph. Whereas the old man found some intuitive meaning and satisfaction from the act of animal sacrifice, Joseph did not. Joseph said "His secret was for him ... It won't work for me" (260).

In The Red Pony, Steinbeck uses the life and death of animals to teach Jody lessons about life. Images of death permeate The Red Pony. The cypress tree stands tall and grim over the farm (6). From a limb of the tree hangs a single bar (10) which bears the weight of a hanging, soon to be butchered hog. Beneath the "sleeping" cyprus tree sits a huge black cauldron (6) in which the hog will be scalded. The omnipresent malevolent looking tree stands guard above the ranch as large black buzzards also maintain their vigils, swooping through the sky in their endless search for carrion. Over this dreadful landscape "clouds swept down and hung all day" as Jody dreaded what might happen (20). Owens observes "Jody lives in a world in which death is an omnipresent reality. Jody's world is permeated by the presence of death" (48).

In the first chapter, "The Gift", Jody receives a red pony from his father. It fills him with excitement for

now he is set apart from his school friends. But the dark clouds come and frighten him. Although he and Billy Buck, the ranch foreman and horse expert, do not expect rain on the day they are away from the ranch, the rain comes and the pony, Gabilan, left in the corral, gets sick. Billy Buck uses every trick he knows to try to save the pony. Jody, confident and trusting in Billy's knowledge, soon learns that Billy will fail.

Early the next morning Gabilan escapes from the barn to find a place to die. When Jody discovers Gabilan missing, he follows the pony's tracks. As he runs along a ridge he sees the pony lying in a clearing below surrounded by buzzards. He runs down the hill and attacks a buzzard sitting on Gabilan's head:

As it hopped along to take off, Jody caught its wing tip and pulled it down. . . the free wing crashed into his face with the force of a club, but he hung on. The claws fastened on his leg and the wing elbows battered his head on either side. Jody groped blindly with his free hand. His fingers found the neck of the struggling bird. (35)

Jody's brutal introduction to death causes him to strike out violently and kill the nearest living thing. His father berates him for his action but Billy Buck understands; Billy yells at Jody's father "Jesus Christ! man, can't you see how



he'd feel about it" [the pony's death] (35). Jody's dad does not understand Jody's feelings of sadness and anger; his father coldly observes the event and chastises Jody for taking his anger out on the buzzard. However, Fontenrose observes that Jody learns an important lesson through this event, "that chance events often thwart men's plans and that death is inevitable and final" (64).

Steinbeck, in the second chapter, "The Great Mountains," moves from violent death at the hands of nature, to an old man and an old horse at the end of their lives. Gitano, an old paisano, returns to the ranch of his birth, presumably to die. But Carl Tiflin, Jody's father, has no room for him. Carl suggests that Gitano and Easter, an old horse have very much in common, that they can no longer earn their keep. Carl said, "It's a shame not to shoot Easter, ... It'd save him a lot of pains and rheumatism" (45). When Gitano and Easter head out to the Santa Lucia mountains to the west the next morning, Metzger comments that Gitano manages to retain his dignity in spite of the unkind remarks of Carl Tiflin (150). Fontenrose observes that "Jody not only learned that all life inevitably ends in death, but that even the aged who have led a useful life have no other resource" (64).

The third chapter, "The Promise" introduces a new idea: that life comes out of death. Carl promises his son a pony if Jody will pay for Nellie's trip to a stud horse.



After some months new life shows in the mare's belly but the images of the cypress tree and the kettle loom large again in the story darkening the mood. However, when Billy Buck notes the blossoming mare and predicts a healthy colt, Jody is thrilled. But as the mare begins delivery, the rain clouds appear signifying trouble; they realize the pony lies twisted in the sac. Billy, midwifing the colt, shouts "It's wrong. I can't turn it. It's very wrong. It's all turned around wrong" (71-72). Then, after killing the mare with a hammer blow to the head, "Billy jumped to the swollen stomach; his big pocket-knife was in his hand. He lifted the skin and drove the knife in. He sawed and ripped out the tough belly" (72). The mare dies but the colt lives. Lisca notes that Jody learns that sometimes "death (is) ... the price of life" (Myth 199).

Fontenrose suggests that along with knowledge of the "natural rhythms of life and death" in the animal world Jody sees the "inevitability" of death for even the good old man Gitano (64). Lisca adds that in "The Promise" Jody is again confronted with death, that of the mare Nellie; but also with the mysteries of life - copulation, gestation, birth; and furthermore, with the relationship between the two - death as the price of life. (Myth 199)

It is also interesting to note, as Owens quotes Steinbeck in the article "My Short Novels": Steinbeck wrote The Red Pony

"when there was desolation in my family. The first death had occurred .... it was an attempt ... to set down this experience and growth" (47).

The fullest treatment of death in Steinbeck's writing occurs in In Dubious Battle. The death of Joy, a labor organizer will be discussed in a later section of the essay but the sacrifice of animals that follow it will be considered here. As Joy is buried a friend of the strikers notifies them that a farmer will donate two old cows and a bull calf to the striker's camp. Jim, the novel's hero, goes hurriedly to the farm and directs the slaughter. They first attack the calf. The artery is cut open and its blood spurts out.

The calf leaped, and then settled slowly down. Its chin rested flat on the ground, and its legs folded up. The thick, carmine blood pool spread out on the wet ground. (172)

The ritualistic, sacrificial killing of the animals provides food for the strikers and emphasizes the sacrificial nature of Joy's death.

There is an incident in Of Mice and Men where the killing of a dog prefigures what will happen to Lennie, the big and dumb friend of George, the hero. One of the ranch hands, Candy, has an old, tired, blind, rheumatic and smelly dog that bothers the other men in the bunk-house. One of them wants to kill the dog to put it out of its misery just

as Carl Tiflin wanted to shoot the old horse, Easter. But Candy seems powerless to act. Slim, the leader of the group, says that he would rather die than be useless in old age. Taking this as a cue one of the men takes Candy's dog out and mercifully puts it out of its misery with one shot.

In the scene in the barn, before Curly's wife enters, Lennie plays roughly with a puppy, accidentally killing it. Looking gently at the dead puppy Lennie said "Why do you got to get killed? You ain't so little as mice. I didn't bounce you hard" (93). In just a short time Curly's wife will enter the barn also to be killed accidentally by the gentle but dangerous Lennie.

In The Red Pony, Steinbeck uses animal death to make observations about human mortality. Jody learns that death may strike unexpectedly and violently; he also learns that death is the inevitable end for all men and the paradoxical truth that death may be the price of new life for someone else. But most importantly, Jody learns that death is as natural as any other event that befalls men.

In other early books, Steinbeck's characters sacrifice animals to placate a deity or they ritualistically kill animals to emphasize the sacrificial death of a character. Steinbeck also uses the death of an animal to foreshadow the death of a character.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Natural And Accidental Death

John Steinbeck's mother, Olive Hamilton Steinbeck, died in 1934 after a long illness. One year later, his father, John Ernst Steinbeck, also died after suffering poor health and physical debilitation. Their deaths profoundly affected John Steinbeck. In a letter to a friend, Steinbeck revealed how he felt about his father's illness and death:

He is like an engine that isn't moored tightly and that just shakes itself to pieces. ... Death

I can understand but not this slow torture wherein a good and strong man tears off little shreds of himself and throws them away. (Life

And Letters 88-89)

John Steinbeck wrote frequently and convincingly about natural death; in the works under study eight people die from natural causes and two from accidents. Their ages range from Rosasharn's still-born baby and the caporal's infant son to Grandpa and Gramma Joad. Although Aries writes that during the 1930s most deaths in America occurred in hospitals, Steinbeck's characters die either at home or on the road since they could neither afford hospitals nor had access to them (149).

Steinbeck frequently begins a novel or short story with the death of a father or grandfather. In To A God Unknown, John Wayne's love for the land is bequeathed to Joseph Wayne. John Wayne, a Vermont farmer and father of four grown sons, is close to death after a long illness. He hopes that his sons will marry and raise their families on his land. However, one son, Joseph, believes that his father's farm is too small. Eager to go west to find rich farmland Joseph seeks his father's approval and blessing for the trip. Reluctantly, the father gives his son permission and Joseph leaves for California. Shortly thereafter John Wayne dies and a brother sends Joseph the news.

Steinbeck also uses John Wayne's death to develop a pantheistic strain in To A God Unknown. Joseph Wayne, in a letter from one of his brothers, learns of a mystical message that his father uttered before he died. Their father said: "I don't know whether Joseph can pick good land ... I'll have to go out there and see" and then he talked mysteriously about his spirit flying to California to be with his son Joseph (24).

After reading the letter Joseph senses the presence of his father. His father's spirit seems to fly over him, alighting in the tree at the center of his property. Joseph then worships the tree and centers his life around it. The presence of his father seems to permeate Joseph's being. He feels a oneness with his father; he feels not sad but

peaceful. He greets his father: "I'm glad you've come here, sir. I didn't know until now how lonely I've been for you" (25). As he later recounted the story to his brother Thomas, Joseph said "he (father) was kind of a last resort, a thing you could tie to, that would never change" (42).

Joseph Wayne is a very strange character; at times he hardly seems like a human being. He inherits his father's mysticism and love for the land. When his father dies, Joseph becomes obsessed with his father's death. Although Joseph develops a successful farm, marries, and fathers a child, he does not seem to have his feet on the ground. He sees supernatural significance in everyday events. His obsessions grow to such an extent that he seems to be going insane.

Joseph's brother Burton, a devout but narrow-minded Christian fears Joseph's mystical worship of the tree. After a time the tree appears to be dying; unknown to Joseph, Burton has uncovered and cut the roots of the tree just as Joseph would later cut his own veins. As the tree gradually dies a drought descends upon the land. Joseph, who increasingly identifies with earth, feels responsible for the drought.

Earlier in the novel Joseph and his brothers find a unique place in the forest:

They had come to an open glade, nearly circular, and as flat as a pool. The dark trees grew about it, straight as pillars ... In the center of the clearing stood a rock as big as a house, mysterious and huge ... A short, heavy green moss covered the rock with soft pile. The edifice was something like an altar that had melted and run down over itself. In one side of the rock there was a small black cave ... and from the cave a little stream flowed silently ... [Joseph said] This is holy - and this is old. This is ancient - and holy. (44-45)

Joseph finds a mystical significance to the clearing and predicts that later it will become a place of sustenance for him. After the tree dies, Joseph remembers this place in the forest and makes it his new place of worship.

Joseph takes his wife Elizabeth there to show her the new source of meaning for his life. But a bizarre accident occurs; while climbing the rock she slips and falls breaking her neck.

He sat stolidly on the ground beside her, and mechanically picked up her hand and opened the fingers clenched full of pine needles ... He said, "Goodbye Elizabeth," ... he stroked the rock tenderly. "Now you are two, and you are here. Now I will know where I must come. (189-190).



Astro suggests that hereafter Joseph lives his life dedicated "to the preservation of the land into which his wife had passed" (87). Beach adds that Elizabeth's death is "... a sacrifice to the unknown god of the earth" (315).

Joseph Wayne gives these instructions about her grave: "Don't put a little fence around. I want it to sink and be lost as soon as it can" (194). Elizabeth's accidental death combines the pantheistic concept of oneness with the earth and the Old Testament idea of sacrifice. After her death Joseph Wayne is more committed to the preservation of land and the removal of the drought.

The short story, "Flight", also begins with the death of a father, though this death occurs before the story begins. Pepe Torres' father, a poor farmer, "tripped over a stone in the field one day and fell full length on a rattle snake" (26). The death leaves young Pepe without a father figure (this idea will be further developed later) and adds economic pressure to the impoverished Torres family.

This story illustrates John Steinbeck's concern about the individual and his environment. According to Timmerman,

The large picture of humanity in Steinbeck's fiction remains a naturalistic one in which people struggle within and against natural forces and are partly victims of them. (26)



However, nature is not malevolent in Steinbeck's thinking. Nature is simply the neutral environment in which man lives; Steinbeck is concerned about what happens to men, not why it happens.

The next person to die from natural causes is Gitano, an old Paisano, who appears in the second chapter of The Red Pony, entitled "The Great Mountains". Gitano, anticipating death, returns to the place of his birth which has now become the Tiflin ranch. Jody's dad, Carl Tiflin does not welcome Gitano; Carl makes fun of Gitano calling him an old man who is useless just like the old horse Easter who has been put out to pasture. The next day Gitano rides off on Easter to the Santa Lucia Mountains.

According to Peterson,

All that remains in life for Gitano is the quiet acceptance of physical death ... Within his naturalistic role as a wanderer, he apparently desires to understand his approaching death as the completion of a journey rather than the running down and expiration of the physical man.

(91)

From Gitano Jody learns the profound lesson that death is the inevitable end for every man.

Steinbeck also begins Tortilla Flat with the death of a father figure; Danny's Grandfather dies, again before the story begins, as Pepe's father died in "Flight". Danny

not only inherits two houses, he also gains the respectability of property ownership which Danny ultimately rejects. This gift of respectability shatters Danny's lifelong commitment to indigence.

The next natural death happens to an infant son in Tortilla Flat. Danny and the boys meet a young Mexican caporal and his infant son. Because of the coincidental meeting of a "capitan" and the caporal's wife, the mother runs away from the child and her husband. The distraught father and the sick infant wander disconsolately and eventually meet one of Danny's friends. Danny and his friends offer help but they know that the baby is quite sick. After a short time Big Joe Portagee cries:

"Look! This baby is moving funny". The friends crowded around. The spasm had already started. The little feet kicked down and then drew up . . . While they watched, the baby stiffened and the struggle ended. The mouth dropped open, and the baby was dead. In kindness Danny covered the apple box with a piece of blanket. (86)

After the baby's death Danny and the boys expect the caporal to scream for vengeance against the capitan but he doesn't. Pilon, one of Danny's friends, says to the caporal: "Now you yourself must kill the capitan" (87). But the caporal does not want revenge. He had hoped that

his son would become a general so that his son could not only do what the capitan had done to him, but even more.

... if that capitan, with the little epaulets and the little sash, could take my wife, imagine what a general with a big sash and a gold sword could take. (87)

This humorous exchange contrasts the boys' noble thinking with the pragmatic, selfish view of the caporal.

Four deaths by natural causes occur in The Grapes Of Wrath. The death of Mrs. John Joad, for the first time, introduces guilt for the survivor. Uncle John Joad, who joins the Joads on their trip to California, seems to be one of the few Steinbeck characters that feels terribly guilty about the death of another person. Many years before the trip Uncle John's young, pregnant wife became sick with flu-like symptoms. He does not send for a doctor and the next morning she dies. From that time forward a terrible cloud of guilt follows him. Uncle John continually does good works for orphans and widows but he cannot escape the heavy weight of the cloud that pursues him. The death is significant in the book because it is Uncle John's guilt which serves as a remarkable contrast to Tom Joad's lack of regret for the murders he commits.

Both Grampa and Gramma Joad die on the journey to California. The death and burial of Grampa Joad receives a much fuller treatment than other natural deaths. Grampa

Joad, titular head of the Joad clan in Oklahoma, senile and certainly near the end of his life, vigorously fights his family's decision to take him with them. After he relents and they start, but are not very far along the road, he has a stroke and soon dies. His death confronts the Joad family with a host of issues including their legal responsibility to report his death. "Pa said, "We got to figger what to do. They's laws you got to report a death ... (then) they either take forty dollars for the undertaker or they take him for a pauper" (190). But they have little money and decide to bury him themselves at the road side. Ripley writes that "to preserve the dignity of the burial ritual, (the Joads)... are forced to operate outside the law" (90). Ma Joad "lays him out". She places two half dollars over his eyes and wraps him in a quilt. All the men dig his grave and Tom writes the following note:

This here is William James Joad, dyed of a stroke, old old man. His fokes buried him because they got no money to pay for funrls. Nobody kilt him. Jus' a stroke an' he dyed. (194)

With his mother's urging Tom adds the following Bible verse to the note: "Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered" (195). Tom places the note on grampa Joad's chest and then the family buries Pa. Ripley suggests that "the Joads manage to invent a ritual that softens their sense of guilt and builds a sense of shared experience" (92).

After the Joads bury Grampa they cover up the grave hoping that his body will not be found since they are afraid of being prosecuted for illegally burying him. They feel guilty because they forced Grampa to accompany them; rather than being buried in an unmarked grave he could have been buried on his farm. As they question their decision to leave the homestead Rev. Casey reassures them when he says

Grampa didn' die tonight. He died the minute you took 'im off the place. ... you couldn' a done nothin'. Your way was fixed an' Grampa didn' have no part in it. ... He's just stayin' with the lan'. He couldn' leave it." (199)

Grampa's death served many purposes. One consequence was that "the family became a unit" (189). When they left the farm they were individuals but the death drew them together. The Joads, proud of their self-sufficiency, even accepted help from strangers, the Wilsons who helped them bury Grampa Joad. The death also represents the passing of leadership from Grampa Joad to Ma Joad and the family's movement from the east to the west; it foreshadows many more deaths to come. Ironically, in the light of all this movement, the Joads would move from poverty only to more poverty.

Then as the Joads cross the California border Gramma Joad dies. Ma Joad lies beside Gramma on a mattress in the back of the truck but Ma cannot say anything or the border



guard will stop the truck. So Ma pretends Gramma is just sick; then the Joads cross the border and the desert at night before Ma tells anyone. Ironically, as Gramma dies, Connie and Rosasharn have intercourse in the back of the truck. Again Steinbeck juxtaposes life and death as he did with the death of the mare and the birth of the pony in The Red Pony.

Gramma's death highlights Ma Joad's courage and the sacrifice she makes for the family. When their truck comes to a stop after they pass through the desert Tom notices how pale she looks. Tom says, "My God, Ma, you sick" (310). Ma replies "I wisht I could wait an' not tell you. I wisht it could be all - nice. ... Gramma's dead" (311). Ma Joad endured that horrible night riding through the desert with her mother lying dead at her side for the sake of her family.

At the Coroner's office in Bakersfield the Joads endure more indignity. Faced again with death and no funds to properly bury their dead they must now rely on charity. Pa Joad says "We jus' didn' have it; embalming, an' a coffin an' a preacher, an' a plot in the grave yard ... We done the bes' we could" (320). Ma accepts what happens and says "I jus' can't get it outa my head what store she set by a nice funeral. Got to forget it" (328). Ripley writes that

The burial foreshadows what the family will find in California; the government offers charity but

not a real opportunity to make a living, establish a home and preserve dignity. (94)

The Grapes of Wrath ends with the still birth of Rose of Sharon's baby. The death has many biblical references. Just before Rose of Sharon gives birth a huge flood fills the bottomland where their home, a railroad box car they share with another family, is located. The flood foreshadows the birth of a new but uncertain age for the migrants. All the old (their meager possessions) passes away but what will come next is uncertain.

When the baby is still-born the family puts the tiny body in a wood apple-box and instruct Uncle John to bury it.

Holding the box in front of him, he edged through the brush until he came to the edge of the swift stream. ... "Go down an' tell 'em. Go down in the street an' rot" ... He guided the box gently into the current and let it go. (609)

The reference obviously is to the baby Moses whose mother put him in a reed basket and floated him down the Nile to be discovered by Pharoah's daughter. But the biblical parallel does not fit exactly. Whereas Moses survived and eventually led the Jews out of captivity, this baby is still-born after the "Okies" reach their promised land. Ripley writes that "the third funeral is closely tied to the growing communal consciousness of the surviving Joads" (94).

The book ends with the gentle, haunting scene in an old barn during a rainstorm. A young boy is also there with his dying, starving father. The boy had already sacrificed the food he begged when he gives it to his father who can not digest it. Rose of Sharon, filled with milk, offers her breasts to the old man. In the midst of death new life is offered by the suffering mother to a dying man.

John Steinbeck had a reverence for all life whether it was the desperate life and death of Mr. Torres or the fulfilled journey of Gitano. Yet Steinbeck was not religious in a traditional Christian sense. Four years before Steinbeck died, he sent a letter to his physician clarifying his view

Now finally, I am not religious so I have no apprehension of a hereafter ... It is what I feel to be true from experience, observation and simple tissue feeling. (Life And Letters 857)

After death man did not go to a place of judgement. "As far as Steinbeck was concerned (life) was largely a matter of learning" (Benson 251).

Furthermore, the unfortunate accidents that ended the lives of Elizabeth Wayne, Mr. Torres and Muley's Pa were not orchestrated by an angry God or the result of living in a malevolent universe; the accidents just happened.

While he [Steinbeck] did not deny the existence of God and the psychological profundity of the



myth that endures, the deity in Steinbeck's conception is so impossibly remote as to have no practical effect on the affairs of humanity.

(Timmerman 16)

Both Erich Fromm's *The Psychology of the Masses* and Sigmund Freud's *Group Psychology and the Ego* define suicide as the act of self-destructively taking one's own life or the life of others. Fromm distinguishes between three types of suicide: the first, which he calls "egoistic" suicide, occurs when "individuals, isolated in their isolation... When man has become detached from society, he encounters less resistance to suicide" (117). Durkheim refers to a second type of suicide as "altruistic suicide" (117). In this system, "suicide is a result of social conditions" (117). The third type of suicide Durkheim calls "anomic suicide" which occurs when "sudden catastrophic change overwhelms a person" (117). Durkheim also writes "Each victim of suicide gives the world a personal stamp which expresses his temperament, his special conditions in which he is involved" (117).

Alvarez, in *The Savage God: A Study of Suicide*, writes that "The great effect of Durkheim's masterpiece was to insist that suicide was not an irreducible moral crime but a fact of society" (117). Durkheim also did not judge

CHAPTER THREE

Suicides

Ruth Shonle Cavan, a contemporary of John Steinbeck, defines suicide as the act of "intentionally taking of one's own life or the failure when possible to save one's self when death threatens" (3). Durkheim differentiates between three types of suicide. The first which he calls "egoistic" occurs when "excessive individuation leads to suicide ... When man has become detached from society, he encounters less resistance to suicide in himself" (217). Durkheim refers to a second type of suicide as "altruistic suicide" (217). In this instance "insufficient individuation" makes one susceptible to suicide if the social group teaches suicide (217). The third type of suicide Durkheim calls "anomic suicide" which occurs when sudden catastrophic change overwhelms a person (24). Durkheim also writes "Each victim of suicide gives his act a personal stamp which expresses his temperament, the special conditions in which he is involved" (277).

Alvarez, in The Savage God: A Study of Suicide, writes that "The broad effect of Durkheim's masterpiece was to insist that suicide was not an irredeemable moral crime but a fact of society" (93). Steinbeck also did not judge

suicide; he was concerned "not with what should be, or could be, or might be, but rather with what actually is" (Watt 11). Alvarez also states the prime characteristic of identified suicides is the presence of "an unequivocal note or a setting so unambiguous as to leave the survivors no alternative" but to recognize the death as a suicide (87).

Many of Steinbeck's characters commit suicide: two novels end when the protagonists commit suicide; five other characters kill themselves and the narrator in Tortilla Flat reports three tall tales of suicide. Each occurrence clearly meets Alvarez's standard of a clear setting so there can be no misinterpretation but none of his characters leaves a note. Steinbeck simply reports the deaths; he does not judge them.

Willie Romas, a minor character in To A God Unknown, a troubled boy beset by terrible nightmares, dreams of a horrible drought that will over-come the land. One night, near the end of the book, Willie goes to a carnival, looks through a telescope and sees a vision of a barren land burned by drought. That night Willie hangs himself. Later, his father explains to Joseph Wayne that "It had been all right when he (Willie) thought it was a dream, but when he saw the place was really there, and not a dream, he couldn't stand it to live" (242). Fontenrose writes that Willie's dream prefigured the coming drought. Furthermore, Fontenrose notes ironically that "Willie's dreams were truer

to nature than Joseph's plans" (19). Benson also suggests that "there is a natural selection in his (Steinbeck's) work. The weak, the deformed, the deficient ... do not survive" (243).

In To A God Unknown, after Joseph Wayne's wife dies a drought falls upon the land and threatens his crops. As the drought deepens other family members plan to leave to find water for their cattle but Joseph won't consider moving. Joseph tells his brother:

I'll have to stay ... If I went with you, I'd be wanting to start back at every moment to see if the rain had fallen yet, or if there was any water in the river. (220)

Just as his father merged with the land in Vermont and became its living symbol so Joseph represents the new land. Joseph stays at the ranch by himself; his life is crumbling. In the pine grove even the creek under the rock begins to dry. Joseph makes a last visit to the priest but he does not find solace. He neither sleeps nor eats; he becomes more depressed. He makes a sacrifice of a small calf but the old man's secret discussed in chapter one does not work for him. He offers himself as the final sacrifice when he cuts his wrists. His blood pours into the dry creek bed as he dies. And the rains come. Joseph's obsessions finally overcome him. As he sacrifices his life to the unknown deity, Joseph becomes one with nature.

Steinbeck writes about another suicide in the short story "Johnny Bear", appearing in The Long Valley published in 1938. The story is about two sisters, symbols of culture and correctness in their community, and a freak named Johny Bear. Amy, one of the sisters has an affair with a Chinese tenant farmer and becomes pregnant. Her sister discovers the pregnancy and tries to shame Amy. In the meantime, Johny Bear, a grotesque figure who eavesdrops on people, innocently (because he reports what he hears without understanding it) repeats the story at a bar for a shot of whiskey.

Then Amy, after learning that she is pregnant, hangs herself, much to the consternation of the townspeople. Owens suggests that the town idealized her and the weight of the towns expectations forced her to kill herself (119). Jain notices the correlation between Johny Bear and Lennie; she suggests the former destroys reputations as the latter kills people (44). Webster Street, a close friend of John Steinbeck, remembers that they were at a bar and saw a deaf mute man. Steinbeck said "You know he could do a lot of harm, that guy" (40).

Although suicide is the unlikely subject of a humorous story, the narrator in Tortilla Flat tells three "tall-tales" about men who attempt suicide: Tall Bob Smoke, Petey Ravanno and old man Ravanno. Tall Bob Smoke, a tall, drinkin'...

thin man, craves attention. He concocts a plan whereby he will pretend to want to end his life but will do it in such a way as to enable someone to talk him out of it. But his plan goes awry and he succeeds only in shooting half his nose off which makes him a laughing stock.

Petey Ravanno was much more successful. Distraught over a young girl's lack of attention he hangs himself. His father discovers him before it's too late and the girl repents and marries Petey. Old man Ravanno, a dirty old man who wants Petey's wife's sister, took note of what his son had done and tried the same strategy but failed; no one discovered him until it was too late. Although the tales are humorous, each one involved an individual who wanted the affection of others. The tales were about men who did not fit into a group. Apparently they were also based on actual experience; Steinbeck wrote to a friend that he heard the stories about the Ravannos while he worked at a sugar mill (Steinbeck and Wallsten 68). Owens writes that "in both stories, the victims were hurt or killed while trying to force some kind of commitment from others" (171).

Danny, the hero of Tortilla Flat, survives by his wits and satisfies all his instincts. But burdened by property (his houses), increasing respectability, and conformity, he finds himself frustrated and depressed. He runs away from his friends and enjoys a wild time of drinking, stealing and fighting. His friends worry about

him and want Danny to return to them. They organize a party to welcome Danny back. Danny attends but he gets drunk and wants to fight everyone. When his friends become frightened Danny yells

Will no one fight with me? ... Then I will go out to The One who can fight. I will find the Enemy who is worthy of Danny! (144)

Danny runs to the top of a gulch behind his house. His friends "heard Danny charge to the fray. They heard his last shrill cry of defiance, and then a thump" (144). Soon after that Danny dies. Jain notes that Danny "prefers to defy a world that denies him his individuality" (24). Owens adds the observation that Danny's rage came from his struggle "to break free of the encroaching complacency that has settled over the paisanos and to overcome the subtle capitalism that they are sliding into" (173).

In his preface to Tortilla Flat Steinbeck writes

For Danny's house was not unlike the Round Table, and Danny's friends were not unlike the knights of it. And this is the story of how that group came into being, of how it flourished and grew to be an organization beautiful and wise. (1)

After Danny dies, his house burns, signalling the end of the wonderful Round Table of Danny and his friends.

Steinbeck begins the final anti-climatic chapter with these words: "Death is a personal matter, arousing"



sorrow, despair, fervor or dry-hearted philosophy. Funerals, on the other hand are social functions" (145). In a humorous fashion Steinbeck criticizes the social convention of the funeral but interestingly, the boys follow Danny's funeral procession and watch from afar. After Danny's burial and the destruction of his house the group organism was dissolved; Danny's friends "walked slowly away, and no two walked together" (151).

In Cannery Row, Steinbeck's "poisoned creampuff," two men commit suicide at the beginning of the book. The first, a "worried gentleman named Horace Abbeville" ... had two wives and six children" and owed Lee Chong, the grocer, a large sum of money (7). Horace and his families lived in a large fishmeal warehouse. Horace asked Lee if he would consider the bill paid in exchange for the building Horace lived in. The grocer accepts Horace's offer cancelling his debt. Then Horace walks across the street and shoots himself. The narrator reports that it was said of Lee Chong:

It was deeply a part of Lee's kindness and understanding that a man's right to kill himself is inviolable but sometimes a friend can make it unnecessary. (9)

But Lee Chong felt responsible in some way for Horace's death so he paid for the funeral and food. After the funeral the two wives separated, and never saw each other



again, much like the break-up of Danny's group when the men parted forever.

In a letter several years later to his new physician, Steinbeck expressed a similar view on suicide but added a qualification:

The chief protagonist should have the right to judge his exit, taking into consideration his survivors who are after all, the only ones who matter. (Steinbeck and Wallsten 857)

The second suicide, William's, was another death suggested by an actual incident; Steinbeck writes in The Log From The Sea Of Cortez that William is based on a Cannery Row pimp named George who killed himself (xxxviii). William, "a dark and lonesome looking man" works as the night watchman at the Bear Flag Restaurant (18). He wants to be one of the boys but they reject him. Although they will drink William's wine they still consider him a pimp. After William overhears their derogatory remarks he threatens to kill himself to several employees at the Bear Flag. They think he is joking so they laugh at him, but William was not kidding; he shoves an ice pick into his heart. Jones notes that William "manifest(s) a separation from the community" (Fabulist 19), and Benton observes that "William ... could not adjust" (136).

The most mysterious death that Steinbeck writes about in Cannery Row is that of the girl in the tide-pool.

Steinbeck tells us nothing about her except a brief description of her face. Doc discovers her accidentally as he searches for sea life in the tide-pool, at the bottom of which lives a whole ecological community. The discovery occurs on a day when Doc has "good hunting. He got twenty-two little octopi. And he picked off several hundred sea cradles" (113). Then amidst the "beauty, grace, and virtue" Doc finds "viciousnes" in the discovery of a dead girl.

As Doc searches the tide pool he sees a flash of white under a rock.

Then he grew rigid. A girl's face looked up at him, a pretty, pale girl with dark hair. The eyes were open and clear and the face was firm and the hair washed gently about her head. The body was out of sight, caught in the crevice. The lips were slightly parted and the teeth showed and on the face was only comfort and rest. Just under water it was and the clear water made it very beautiful. It seemed to Doc that he looked at it for many minutes, and the face burned into his picture memory. (114)

The discovery of the girl's body overwhelms Doc. "Music sounded in Doc's ears, a high thin piercingly sweet flute carrying a melody he could never remember"(115). A man interrupts Doc's thoughts. When Doc tells the stranger about the body, the stranger is only concerned about the

bounty for finding a body. Lisca suggests that the following interchapter about the Holman Department Store flag-pole skater contrasts the great interest people have in the bathroom activity of a flag pole skater with the lack of interest that the stranger had about the girl in the tide pool (World 209).

In the works studied, seven characters kill themselves. Although none leaves a note of explanation, there is no question of their intent to end their lives. Four of the deaths fit Durkheim's classification of "egoistic" suicide; Willie Romas, Joseph Wayne, Horace Abbeville, and William the Pimp, are cut off from meaningful relationships with other people at the time of their death. In addition, Joseph Wayne was also motivated by his belief system that encouraged suicide.

Both Amy and Danny can be classified as "anomic" suicides, that is, "sudden catastrophic change" preceded their death; for Amy, it was the realization that she had become pregnant and for Danny, it was the awareness of his undesired respectability. But the death of the girl in the tide-pool cannot be classified since Steinbeck does not provide details of her death.

The three "tall-tales" of suicide, involving Bob Smoke, Petey Ravanno and old man Ravanno, are accounts of three men who threatened suicide in order to manipulate acceptance by other people. Of the three only Petey was



## CHAPTER 4

### Murder

During the time that Steinbeck wrote the Salinas Valley novels Lunde reports that the United States murder rate was growing and by the early 1930s reached approximately ten murders per one hundred thousand persons (1). Lunde also argues against the popular myths that murders "are committed by a relatively homogeneous segment of the population" and that murders are carefully conceived. Lunde believes that the statistics show that "few murderers fit common stereotypes", and "most murders are committed with common weapons - guns, knives - and with little planning" (2-3).

Lunde defines murder as "the unlawful killing of a human being with malice aforethought" (3). He then differentiates between unlawful and justifiable homicide. "An unlawful homicide in which malice is absent is called manslaughter" while "justifiable homicide, which is not punishable, includes killing in self-defense" (4). Lunde also observes that murders are mostly committed by young adult males under the age of thirty-five.

Murder is a frequent occurrence in the works under study. Steinbeck's heroes often are killers and are

frequently killed. The heroes always are men, with the exception of Ma Joad in Grapes Of Wrath; but women are always victims and never killers. The men sometimes kill because killing is an instinctual response to a perceived insult or injury. War also kills men as well as nature's freaks, such as Lennie in Of Mice and Men. There is also a murder of kindness that takes place when George kills Lennie in Of Mice and Men. But the predominant reason that men kill is because once they are involved in a group, they lose their individuality and the new organism, which takes on a life of its own, is violent.

Steinbeck explained this concept of the new organism in a letter to a friend in 1933:

But there have been mysterious things which could not be explained if man is the final unit.

He also arranges himself into larger units, which I have called the phalanx. The phalanx

has its own memory ... And the phalanx has emotions of which the unit man is incapable.

Emotions, of hatred, of fear. (Steinbeck and

Wallsten 79-80)

St. Pierre writes that in Steinbeck's theory "a group [or phalanx] has a soul, a drive, an intent, ... a reaction ... which in no way resembles the same things possessed by the men who make up the group". Groups are not

"individuals multiplied ... They are beings in themselves, entities" (58).

However, in Steinbeck's earliest works, murders are individual acts. In To A God Unknown each of Joseph's three brothers seem to represent a different type of man. The youngest, Benjy, represents, according to Jain, the man of unbridled natural appetites (13). Benjy drinks too much and sleeps with every available woman. One night, Benjy seduces the wife of a ranch hand and is discovered by the woman's husband, Juanito, who kills him. After the murder Juanito confesses quickly to Joseph, expecting to be killed in return, that is, an eye for an eye. But Joseph refuses to kill Juanito; Joseph not only expected Benjy to be killed because of his behavior, he sees the killing as justified. Joseph tells Juanito "You did what your nature demanded. It is natural and - it is finished" (106). Benjy's murder, the instinctual response of Juanito to a sudden situation, is a type of death that Steinbeck frequently writes about; for example, Tom Joad in Grapes of Wrath was jailed because he murdered a man in a fight.

The next murder also involves a husband, wife, and her lover. In "The Murder", published in The Long Valley in 1938, Steinbeck writes about Jim Moore, a farmer, who marries quiet, demure Jelka Sepic, a Jugo-Slav girl. On their wedding day Jim receives strange advice from her

father which Jim does not understand. "Jelka is Slav girl. He's not like American girl. If he is bad, beat him. If he's good too long, beat him too" (116).

Jim and Jelka soon drift apart presumably because he does not beat her. Jim finds love in town and she finds love with a cousin. One day Jim goes on an overnight trip but returns unexpectedly that night and finds Jelka in bed with her cousin. After realizing that his wife is not alone in bed, Jim goes back outside:

He cried a few dry, hard, smothered sobs ...

His thought turned to the way his mother used

to hold a bucket to catch the throat blood

when his father killed a pig. (124)

Then after this act of premeditation, which is usually absent in Steinbeck's murders, Jim returns to the bedroom and shoots his wife's lover.

The response of the community absolves Jim of guilt; he does not even have to go in to the coroner's inquest. The sheriff tells him "of course there's a technical charge of murder against you, but it'll be dismissed. Always is in this part of the country" (126). After the investigation Jim remembers his father-in-law's advice and beats Jelka. Then the strange story ends with a happy Jelka fixing breakfast for her husband.

"Flight", another short story of murder was also published in The Long Valley in 1938. Fontenrose



describes "Flight" as "a grim narrative of suffering and death" (60). Owens states that "the theme of death is woven on a thread of blackness through the story" (30). This maturation story is similar to The Red Pony, but the much darker mood reflects the greater cost of young Pepe's lesson. Whereas Jody Tiflin had two living parents, a comfortable ranch to live on, and a kind willing teacher in Billy Buck, Pepe lives on a barren farm with his mother and two siblings but he does not have a father figure; the tragic death of his father leaves Pepe without someone to teach him how to be a man.

When his mother sends him on his first trip alone to town she lets him wear Papa's headband and take Papa's green handkerchief. When Pepe leaves he cries: "I will come back soon. You may send me often alone. I am a man" (29). But while Pepe is in town he gets in a quarrel with an older man whom he kills with a knife. Then Pepe races home on horseback and tells Mama Torres the story. She gives him Papa's black coat and rifle. "Go now, she said. Do not wait to be caught like a chicken" (33).

Pepe runs from his pursuers into the Santa Lucia mountains. Hunted like an animal he loses all touch with himself. Lisca observes that Pepe gradually loses all trappings of manhood as he climbs higher up the mountains (MYTH 194). Although the hunt seems to reduce him to an animal fighting for his last breath, such an observation

would miss the point of his death. Astro addresses this point when he writes "Facing his inevitable death with firm conviction ... Pepe displays a quality of understanding which Steinbeck has never attributed to animals in the tide-pools" (53). Lisca states that Pepe arrives at death "with a dignity and purposeful courage" (Myth 194-195). Owens notes "man's ultimate triumph is to stand and accept a nameless, faceless, and inexorable death" (29).

The next murder discussed also happens in a fight. The Grapes of Wrath begins with Tom Joad returning home from prison. Tom had killed a man and had served four years in jail. He was released three years early because of good behavior. Throughout the first seventy-four pages Tom talks with several different persons about his crime. When Tom tells the trucker who gave him a ride the story of his incarceration Tom gives just a few facts but discloses that he got out early because he did not fight the system.

He tells his friend, Rev. Casy more details.

I'd do what I done-again ... I killed a guy in a fight. We was drunk at a dance. He got a knife in me, an' I killed him with shovel that was layin' there. Knocked his head plumb to squash. (35)

Tom also tells another friend, Muley Graves, about the fight. From Muley the reader learns that the man killed was Herb Turnbull and "ol' man Turnbull" was out to get Tom. However, after a long drunk with Tom's pa, ol' man Turnbull was no longer angry. Tom tells Muley that the murder was self-defense and he would do it again; he felt no remorse or guilt.

The next death discussed happens on the battlefield and is Steinbeck's only reference to the first world war in his novels. In Tortilla Flat Steinbeck writes, "And after a time a loneliness fell upon Danny ... Danny thought of his lost friends. 'Where is Arthur Morales?' Danny asked ... 'Dead in France ... Dead for his country. Dead in a foreign land. Strangers walk near his grave and they do not know Arthur Morales lies there'". (8) Although nothing else is said about Morales, Danny's thoughts stress the senselessness of lives lost in the war.

All of Steinbeck's murder victims are men except for the two women killed in Of Mice And Men, which is a story about the friendship of two lonely men who share a dream. Lennie, large, strong and retarded, kills two women. Of the first, Steinbeck tells very little but he tells much more about the second, Curly's wife, although he does not name her. She recently married Curly but

she also feels very lonely; she thinks that she is trapped on the ranch and wants to get away to the big city as soon as possible. In regard to characterization, Matsumoto suggests the following judgments: "He (John Steinbeck) sees women in a subordinate relation to men ... his female characters are so simply described that their simplicity makes them appear less than human" (53).

However, Sandra Beatty, in an article entitled "Steinbeck's Women" suggests a different perspective on Curly's wife. According to Beatty, Curly's wife and Lennie actually share their dreams with each other; ironically, her kind invitation to Lennie to stroke her hair because he likes to touch soft things results in her death (10). A letter that Steinbeck wrote to Clare Luce, the actress who played Curly's wife in the stage production of Of Mice and Men gives credence to what Beatty wrote. Steinbeck described Curly's wife as a young girl who grew up a frightened child in a rigid moral atmosphere but had an external toughness that hid her inner insecurities. However, she is hungry for affection; "she is a nice, kind girl and not a floozy" (Steinbeck & Wallsten 154).

Owens describes Lennie

(he) ... is not a loner, it is, in fact, the opposite, overwhelming and uncontrollable urge, for contact that brings about Lennie's

destruction and the destruction of living things

he comes into contact with. (104)

When Lennie would touch soft objects, whether a mouse, puppy, or a woman, he would invariably press too hard; then the object would get frightened and try to get away; in response, Lennie also would get frightened and press harder.

In a poignant scene in the barn Lennie and Curly's wife, two lonely people, are lying comfortably on the hay and talking. She shares her dream about Hollywood and Lennie says, "I like to pet nice things with my fingers, sof' things" (98). She offers her hair: "Feel right aroun' there and see how soft it is" (99). Lennie petted her hair but too roughly.

Let go, she cried. You let go. Lennie was in a panic. His face was contorted. She screamed then, and Lennie's other hand closed over her mouth. (99)

As she struggles Lennie gets angry, shakes her harder and breaks her neck.

After killing Curly's wife, Lennie runs to the safe hiding place where he agreed to meet George if there was any trouble. George, after seeing Curly form a posse to go after Lennie, also goes to the meeting place. In a tender scene, George stands behind Lennie reciting the litany of the dream they shared. As the posse noisily

approaches them, George gently pulls the trigger and kills Lennie with one bullet to the back of his neck.

Astro suggests that George "shoots him (Lennie) in an act of kindness" (105). Owens contrasts George's act of taking responsibility for killing Lennie with Candy's refusing to shoot his dog (104). Lisca states the importance of Slim, the foreman, at this time and compares the death of Candy's dog with Lennie's death. Slim not only gave approval for the killing of Candy's dog, he tells George that he did the right thing (Myth 82). Owens also notes the reasonableness of George's act and goes further to state the positive outcome when he contrasts "the death of a dream" and "the birth of a new commitment out of that dream" because George and Slim walk away together at the end of the book (177).

The next murders involve men as a part of a group. In the short story, "Vigilante", also published in the 1938 edition of The Long Valley, Steinbeck introduces a man named Mike who becomes part of a lynch mob. The mob breaks into a jail to pull out a prisoner who is identified only as the "black fiend". The over-powered and unconcerned sheriff merely instructs them to take the right prisoner. While still in the cell, mob members pound the "fiend" and crash his head against the concrete floor. Then they hang him from a tree and burn his body. Nothing is told about the victim. An angry mob hates and

soon the hatred of the whole takes on a life of its own, illustrating Steinbeck's phalanx or group man theory. The mob must kill, and hang, and burn the black man. No excuse is given, justification is not needed. Mike loses control of himself and the will of the mob takes over.

Astro observes that Mike joined but later was sickened by what the mob did (70). Owens gives a different interpretation; he states that after the lynching, Mike experiences isolation when he left the group (127). Lisca writes that the story concerns itself with the psychological state of a man after he has helped lynch a Negro ... (he) fully lives for that time when he is part of a group, and when that group disappears the single man is left a hulk. (Wide World 97)

Although murder does not occur in the next short story covered in this essay, "The Raid", it is included because of Steinbeck's introduction of labor strife as a theme. "The Raid" is also important because Steinbeck again uses his group man theory and creates characters who sacrifice themselves and transcend the angry mob, two themes which Steinbeck develops more fully in his first proletarian novel In Dubious Battle.

In "The Raid", two strike organizers, Dick and Root, talk about mobs and death. Just before they are attacked, Dick, the old professional agitator, tells the



young recruit, Root, about the necessity of violence: "The men of the little spirit must have an example of steadfastness. The people at large must have an example of injustice" (69). Dick also tells Root that the battles are not between people; they are between the "System" and the "principle" (69). After the mob attacks and severely beats them, Root lies in his hospital bed, heavily bandaged and broken. Dick then gives him a generous Christ-like admonition that sets the theme of the story: "You don't want to hate them. They don't know any better" (73). Owens also notes this theme of commitment through sacrifice (126). Lisca agrees when he writes about the sacrificial nature of the acts (The Man 81).

In In Dubious Battle, Steinbeck introduces the mad man Joy to the reader. Much like a slap-happy old boxer who responds automatically to the ringing of a bell, Joy, the street fighter for the labor movement, manages to find violence wherever he goes. Joy amazes labor leaders Mac and Jim with his durability; however, Jim predicts that Joy will eventually be locked up permanently or will lose his wits.

After Mac and Joy organize a fruit pickers' strike, the orchard owners counter by sending for a train load of strike-breakers. But when the train arrives, from out of a crowd of strike-breakers squeezed into several box-cars, Joy emerges triumphantly to join the strikers.

As he runs toward the strikers, deputies fire three shots killing him.

Joy had stopped, his eyes wide. His mouth flew open and a jet of blood rolled down his chin, and down his shirt. His eyes ranged widely over the crowd of men. He fell on his face and clawed outward with his fingers. The guards stared unbelievably at the squirming figure on the ground. Suddenly the steam [of the locomotive] stopped; and the quietness fell on the men like a wave of sound. Joy lifted himself up with his arms, like a lizard, and then dropped again. (117)

Not only is Joy's death predictable, it is described in graphic detail; Joy dies like a wild animal scratching for a last moment of breath. A quietness occurs at his death, just like the quiet that overtakes the barn when Lennie kills Curly's wife. The description of Joy's death is much like the one of Pepe in "Flight", except Joy dies in the midst of a crowd while Pepe dies alone on a mountain.

The news of Joy's death excites Mac. Mac claims with certainty that Joy, by dying for the cause, finally did something important. Just as group-man does not appear to be diminished by his death, group-man will be fortified and strengthened by Joy's death. Mac sees that the bloody death will rile up the strikers and bring them

closer together. So, in a sense, Joy will lead the people in death as he never did in life.

Benson compares Joy with Lennie in Of Mice and Men, suggesting that in Steinbeck's world "The weak, the deformed, the deficient ... do not survive" (243). Benson also notes that the killing of Joy and Steinbeck's subsequent treatment of his funeral are "two of the most important narrative segments in In Dubious Battle" (308). In fact, the segments occupy fifty one pages of the book.

As John Steinbeck memorialized Danny in his "proper" funeral, he handles Joy's funeral in a bizarre and strange fashion. Mac hopes to arouse the strikers to a fever pitch much as evangelists stir up the spirit of their congregations. He preaches to the strikers:

The guy's name was Joy. He was a radical! Get it? A radical. He wanted guys like you to have enough to eat and a place to sleep where you wouldn't get wet. He didn't want nothing for himself. (164)

Beach notes that martyrdom - Joy giving himself for the group - is the main characteristic of a proletarian novel (329). Mac challenges the strikers and they hungrily, madly join the mob spirit. In a pragmatic way, Mac also tells Jim that the more dead bodies they have the more converts or believers they will find among observers.

Joy's funeral procession, also only reported in Danny's death, is a planned public relations spectacle. Joy's coffin is hoisted onto a pick-up for the journey to the cemetery on the other side of town. Mac plans the trip at noon to ensure maximum exposure of the coffin and the most disruption to town traffic. The mourners walk behind the pick-up while guards and town people observe them. Then they reach the cemetery and lower the coffin into the ground.

After the funeral Mac, the leader of the organizing group continues to train Jim. Hirose notes Mac's complexity as a character; he is "strong and weak, and often wavers and suffers inside" whereas Jim grows very hard (7). In one instance a school-boy joins the strikers to spy for the fruit growers. When Mac spots him, Mac coolly, with detachment pounds the boy's face to a pulp so that he will be a lesson to other neighborhood people.

Doc Burton, a physician and health consultant to the strikers' camp, is part of the group but yet distant. At a great price, he gives his time and support to the strikers. But Hirose contrasts him with Casy of The Grapes of Wrath. Hirose sees Doc Burton as "a doctor scientist who becomes a lonely and detached observer" while he sees Casy as "an ex-preacher who grows into a

sense of commitment and becomes a leader of the people" (6). Although Doc is also important as a philosopher when he talks about group-man with Mac and Jim, he ends up mysteriously disappearing, and presumably murdered at the end of the novel.

Jim, the hero of In Dubious Battle, is introduced to the reader as a lonely, isolated, dis-enfranchised man living by himself in a solitary room in a boarding house. He wants to join a cause, to find something bigger than himself that he can commit himself to. He applies for membership in a labor-organizing group and begins his training. Within a short time he becomes one with the group. Astro observes that once Jim became part of the "strike phalanx" everything changed for him (125). Astro also refers to a paper "Argument of Phalanx" that Steinbeck wrote between 1934 and 1936. Astro quotes the main point:

"congruent with the fundamental precepts of organismal biology; ... group-man, like any other superorganism made up of smaller units, has a will and direction of its own" (63).

Jim is also a Christ figure. Owens lists several comparisons to Christ: one, a rooster crows before Jim is killed; two, he sees Mary in the face of Lisa; three, he is bowing on his knees when Mac discovers him with his face shot off (91). Astro also notes that Steinbeck

"endows Jim with Christian attitudes through the theme of conversion and salvation" (75). Astro notes that Jim began the novel by being alone, then he converted to the cause of the laborers and was saved (75). Furthermore, Astro observes that Jim gave himself as a sacrifice in death (76).

Jim gets his wish "not to get nibbled to death" (28). As he and Mac search for Doc who has disappeared, Jim hurries through the woods and in an instant gets his face blown off by a shotgun blast. Not losing a step, Mac picks him up "and slung him over his shoulder, like a sack; and the dripping head hung down behind". When he confronts the crowd he starts his familiar litany: "This guy didn't want nothing for himself" (250).

In The Grapes of Wrath, another Christ figure, Rev. Jim Casy gets killed. Jim, a former itinerant preacher, introduces himself to Tom Joad who then remembers Jim from the past.

I was a preacher ... Reverend Jim Casy - was a Burning Busher. Used to howl out the name of Jesus to glory, and used to get an irrigation ditch so squirmin' full of repented sinners half of 'em like to drowned. But no more ... Just Jim Casy now. Ain't got the call no more. Got a lot of sinful idears - but they seem kinda sensible. (27)

Jim gives up his traditional Christian beliefs and narrow sectarian values. He becomes an observer, not a judge of people; "There ain't no sin and there ain't no virtue. There's just stuff people do. It's all part of the same thing" (32).

Instead of worshipping the trinity, Jim tells Tom:

Maybe it's all men an' all women we love; maybe that's the Holy Speret. The human sperit - the whole shebang. Maybe all men got one big soul ever'body's a part of. (33)

Rev. Jim Casey travels to California with the Joads and becomes part of their family. After they arrive at a migrant camp, a labor contractor and an unnamed deputy, provoke a fight with an angry migrant worker in front of them. Jim and Tom intervene, knocking the deputy unconscious. Jim chases Tom away (since Tom was on parole he would be sent back to jail if arrested) and takes the blame himself. Jim is taken into custody and disappears.

Sometime later Jim and Tom are reunited at a strike breakers' camp. Jim, who had a transformational experience tells Tom what happened.

Well, one day they give us some beans that was sour. One fella started yellin', an' nothin' happened. He yelled his head off. Trusty come along and' looked in an' went on. Then another fella yelled. Well, sir, then we all



got yellin'. And we all got on the same tone,  
an' I tell ya, it jus' seemed like that tank  
bulged an' give and swelled up. By God! Then  
somepin happened! They come a-runnin', and they  
give us some other stuff to eat - give it to us.  
Ya see? (183)

Although Tom does not immediately understand, Rev.  
Jim has completed his metamorphosis from a back-woods'  
preacher to a philosophical group organizer grounded in  
the sanctity of all life and the brotherhood of all men.  
Then Jim and Tom are confronted by two nameless deputies  
who are instruments of the orchard owners. Jim cries out  
to them: "You fellas don' know what you're doin'. You're  
helpin' to starve kids" (527). Again Jim repeats the  
litany as a deputy swings a heavy pick and crushes his  
skull. Just as Christ gave his life as a sacrifice and  
forgave his tormentors, so does Jim. Furthermore, Astro  
notes that Casy's death "serves as a catalyst to unite the  
Joads with the entire migrant family in the fight for  
human dignity" (Shaping 131).

Tom responds instinctively to Casy's murder.

Tom leaped silently. He wrenched the club free.  
The first time he knew he had missed and struck  
a shoulder, but the second time his crushing  
blow found the head, and as the heavy man sank  
down, three more blows found his head. (527)

Whereas Jim transcends the violence of strikers and the owners, Tom still meets violence with violence.

After a while, Tom hides in a cave. When his mother brings him food Tom tells her that he had been thinking about the things that Casy said. Tom decides to give himself to the migrant worker: "a fella ain't got a soul of his own, but on'y a piece of a big one" (572). With his new understanding, Tom's life isn't important to himself. He gently prophesies to his mother:

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 ... I'll be in the way guys yell when they're mad an' - I'll be in the way kids laugh when thy're hungry an' they know supper's ready.

In The Log From The Sea Of Cortez Steinbeck writes that just as a marine biologist analyzes and describes the behavior of marine life in the tide pool, he observes the behavior of human beings and makes the following conclusion about murder: "the murder trait of our species is as regular and observable as our various sexual habits" (19-20). Steinbeck reports murder in the Salinas Valley novels and short stories with the same detachment of the marine biologist.

Murders occur frequently and generally vary in circumstances and consequences although some patterns

emerge. Two victims, Benjy and Jelka's cousin, slept with other men's wives. Two unnamed women are killed by Lennie. But mob killings emerge the most frequently. On a large scale, Arthur Morales, is the victim of nations at war. Joy is killed by three rifle bullets shot anonymously from a crowd; a powerful shotgun blast from an unseen vigilante kills Jim; and an unnamed deputy brutally crushes Rev. Jim Casy's skull with a club. The fact that the murderers are anonymous is significant; in a sense, the murderers are also victims in that they lose their individuality in a mob and are merely pawns of the mob's hunger for violence. Yet two of the murdered victims, Jim and Rev. Jim Casy, transcend the labor battle field and give their lives in the hope that some day all men will have jobs and be able to support themselves and their families.

## CONCLUSION

The major influence in Steinbeck's thinking about death is his interest in biology. From his early days as a student taking biology and zoology classes at Stanford to his long friendship with marine biologist, Ed Ricketts, Steinbeck studied and philosophized about marine life. During the early Spring of 1940, Steinbeck and Ricketts spent six weeks collecting and studying marine life in the Sea of Cortez. While on the trip, Steinbeck wrote a log which recorded their thinking on the tide-pool as a metaphor for human life.

In The Log From The Sea Of Cortez, Steinbeck writes about an experience he and Ricketts had on a brief sojourn in San Lucas, Mexico. When they came upon a cross stuck into the ground with a candle in a can reflecting light upon the cross, a native told them the story behind the symbols. A weary, tired, and sick fisherman left his boat and tried crawling home, but died at that spot. Later his family placed the cross there to identify the location where he died. At this point Steinbeck makes two compelling observations about death. First, he writes that death is a man's "one's whole lonely act in all his life" and that the light from the candle is "almost a reflection of the last piercing loneliness that comes into

a dying man's eyes" (81). All of Steinbeck's characters in the works studied exhibit this same loneliness. Second, Steinbeck observes that the dying fisherman's struggle to get home is a "slow painful symbol and a pattern of a whole species ... which struggles to get home but never quite makes it" (81). With the exception of a few Steinbeck heroes who transcend their death, most of his heroes show this same lack of fulfillment.

In an extended discussion of the tide-pool in The Log From The Sea Of Cortez, Steinbeck makes the following observation:

We have looked into the tide-pools and seen the little animals feeding and reproducing and killing for food. We name them and describe them and out of long watching arrive at some conclusion about their habits. (19)

Then Steinbeck concludes that if we would use the same technique of observation and diagnosis on the human species we would note that men in groups occasionally "turn and destroy, not only their own kind, but the works of their own kind" (19-20). However, Steinbeck does not explain why this behavior occurs; he simply notes the behavior and calls it murder.

In another passage Steinbeck writes about the relationship between individuals and a group:

There are colonies of pelagic tunicates which have taken a shape like the finger of a glove. Each member of the colony is an individual animal, but the colony is another individual animal, not at all like the sum of the individuals. (196)

Each member of the group has a different function. Some may have a food gathering function while others may have a protecting function. According to Steinbeck, "there are two animals, and yet the same thing - something that the church would have been forced to call a mystery" (196).

Steinbeck writes more about this mystery in another passage. One evening in the Sea of Cortez Steinbeck and Ricketts saw many large schools of fish which Steinbeck described in the following way:

The schools swam, marshaled and patrolled.  
They turned as a unit and dived as a unit.  
In their millions they followed a pattern minute as to direction and depth and speed.  
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.  
(286)

Then Steinbeck observes that the school of fish or unit seeks survival above all else. "There would seem to be

only one commandment for living things: Survive! ... Life has one final end, to be alive" (287). The unit or group not only has a life of its own, it has a will to survive at any cost to individual members.

Another important concept for Steinbeck is non-teleological thinking which he differentiates from teleological causal thinking in The Log From The Sea Of Cortez. Steinbeck writes that "teleological thinking ... considers changes and cures - what 'should be' in the

terms of an end pattern" (159). On the other hand,

Non-teleological thinking concerns itself

primarily not with what should be, or could be,

or might be, but rather with what actually 'is'

- attempting at most to answer the already

sufficiently difficult questions what or how,

instead of why. (160)

This differentiation is vitally important to understanding Steinbeck the novelist; he wrote about what he saw or imagined; he was an observer of human behavior, not a moralist.

Steinbeck wrote forcefully, graphically, frequently, and at times sensitively about death. Yet there is little time for bereavement in Steinbeck's biological view of man: "life is process; death is part of life; neither life nor death means anything - they simply are" (Benson 55). Death is the end for everyone,



whether it is the caporal's infant son or the proud Gitano who rides to the western mountain to complete his journey. Death sometimes happens suddenly and violently as it did to the young Pepe Torres, or death may become an obsession as it did for Joseph Wayne.

Although Steinbeck thought much about death and often wrote about it, a systematic philosophy of death cannot be constructed from his books and short stories; however, certain themes can be discovered. In his fiction, the most complete treatment of death can be found in his deceptively simple little book, The Red Pony. The lessons that Jody learns about the animal world apply also to people: just as the seasons follow each other in a natural rhythm so death occurs to everyone; chance circumstances intervene so death is not always predictable or reasonable; life and death are so interrelated that life even comes out of death.

In the other books one also learns that man has the capacity to end other people's lives as well as his own. Sometimes out of fear or threat or perceived insult or injury, man commits murder and may go unpunished. Man, out of desperation and loneliness, may even end his own life. But most murders occur when men give themselves to groups; the group or phalanx is violent in nature, and its will is stronger and different than that of individual men. How else can one explain deputies killing strikers

and strikers killing deputies. Yet man is different qualitatively from the group; he may arise and face death boldly. In fact, man may even transcend death by voluntarily offering his life as a sacrifice for a noble cause.

Steinbeck also believes that ideally every man has the right to live or to end his life. During his last major illness Steinbeck occasionally joked about ending his own life and even hid a number of pills for that purpose (Benson 1032). The desire to control some aspect of his approaching death affected him so much that he decided to spend his last days at home. During his last afternoon Steinbeck managed to retain his sense of humor

He tried to say something, and Elaine leaned over and asked, "What is it?" "I seemed to hear the sound of distant drums." Then he appeared to realize that was a little corny, and so he looked up at Elaine and said, "Maybe it's just Shirley (a friend) playing the bagpipes" ... At five-thirty p.m., December 20, 1968, a few hours before the onset of winter, John Steinbeck was dead. (Benson 1036)

Although Steinbeck was not religious in the traditional Protestant sense, he still wanted a religious funeral service. At the "Church of England funeral service," his friend, Henry Fonda, read the following

lines from Robert Louis Stevenson's "Songs of Travel and Other Verses":

Bright is the ring of words

When the right man rings them

Fair the fall of songs

When the singer sings them

Still they are carolled and said

On wings they are carried

After the singer is dead

And the maker is buried. (Benson 1038)

His words in the Salinas Valley novels still ring.

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