Chapter II

Social and Literary Milieu
It was the Age of Depression that gave an impetus to the young writer Steinbeck, who wrote with an individuality of his own. What he lacked is the technical skill of fiction writing. Pressured by his parents, he applied for re-admission and returned to Stanford. Again November 1920 to January 1923 he worked as a salesman, a straw boss and a bench chemist. During the winter and spring seasons of 1921-22 he worked as a labourer with the dredging crew, cutting slough from Salinas to Castroville. This period taught him about the people around him. It also helped him to look at himself. Not only this he became more independent, traveled a lot and started living all by himself. Though he moved from job to job, he never deviated from his ultimate goal of becoming a writer. On his sojourn to San Francisco and Oregon, he came across many young unemployed men. His contacts and deliberations with them gave him data and materials which were needed for him as a writer.
His last visit to Stanford, made Steinbeck mature in many ways. He returned, however, with more confidence and clearer sense of direction. However, he still maintained the same defensive posture of superiority to the University students. He tried to get the grade necessary to stay in the University, but he was going to take only those courses which would help him to do what he wanted. The areas of study in which Steinbeck was interested were best described in the words of Jackson J. Benson:

What interested him could be anything—from elementary Greek, to a course in the medical school on the dissection of cadavers.¹

The medical school did not admit him on the special study programme, but the incident shows ‘Steinbeck’s early concern with people as ‘physical organisms’. The incident also suggests that in spite of all his ‘romanticism’, Steinbeck developed a naturalistic philosophy of man, on his own, many years prior to the influence of the marine biologist, Edward Ricketts.

During the period of his second enrolment in the University, there was a small group of students and teachers who were members to the University literary magazine and the English Club. Incidentally there was a humorous comment made by a professor named McClellan at the English Club who said:

Stay away. A fellow named Steinbeck comes every meeting and insists on reading his stuff to everyone.²
As a matter of fact, the club consisted of an informal group of students and faculty who were devoted to reading and deliberations on literature beyond the classroom. A large number of students in the club got themselves also enrolled in the creative writing classes. With time, over a period of two to three quarters, Steinbeck became a dominant personality in the club; partly because of his opinions and ideas, and partly because several faculty members came to recognize his talent. The recognition gave him ample confidence and status, which supported his single-minded devotion to writing. Steinbeck did not confine his reading to the club. It all began in high school and continued throughout his life. At times, he seemed almost compelled to read his works to anyone willing to listen, whether it was his fellow writers, friends and girls of acquaintance.

Again the early background of Steinbeck in his creative writing training was best described in the words of Jackson J. Benson. Steinbeck was one of the very few important writers of his generation to receive a significant amount of training in a college creative-writing programme. Although Stanford did not offer degree course in creative writing, it did offer a series of courses in the writing of poetry, drama and fiction within English curriculum, and there were also courses available in advanced composition and journalism. In the field of poetry he lacked seriousness. Unlike Hemmingway and Faulkner, Steinbeck did not consider the possibility of working hard on poetry. Mentally, his mind was set on humor and satire. He loved and enjoyed amusing or upsetting the people around him. In this regard he can be compared to Mark Twain. A close study of
his temperament reveals strikingly similar traits with that of Mark Twain who experienced:

lapses of taste, lack of firm control of materials, and a tendency to over-value the trivial and over-emphasize the obvious.⁴

In 1923 John and his sister Mary enrolled for the summer quarters at Hopkins Marine Station located near the Steinbeck summer cottage in Pacific Grove. This was actually an extended campus of Stanford University, offering a graduate facility for the study of marine biology and some courses of humanities. The courses had a great impact on Steinbeck who was already primed, by previous experiences and inheritance, with a deep interest in nature and natural process.

Richard Astro in his book on the relationship of Steinbeck and Ricketts, has explored these matters in some details and pointed out that it was Ritter’s conclusion:

that it is the duty of the true naturalist to take as his life’s work the task of understanding the organismal basis of living nature.⁵

Most of his fictional works reflect, to some degree “the essential principle of organismal unity of life”.⁶ This important feature found in his works made him different from that of his contemporaries. This was also one of the main sources of confusion concerning his works, because humanistically trained critics attempted to judge his works as ecological
parables. Throughout his career, Steinbeck wondered why writers of fiction seemed to be unable to deal with man not as isolated individuals but as part of the human general ecology. Edmond Wilson, the famous critic, referred to the theme for a generation of critics, when he perceived what Steinbeck was doing, without fully understanding what it meant. Wilson described Steinbeck’s biological view of man as a weakness in his conception of characters. He wrote:

Mr. Steinbeck almost always in his fiction is dealing either with the lower animals or with human beings so rudimentary that they are almost on the animal level... Mr. Steinbeck does not have the effect, as Lawrence or Kipling does, of romantically raising the animals to the stature of human beings, but rather of assimilating the human beings to animals... This animalizing tendency of Mr. Steinbeck’s is, I believe, at the bottom of his relative unsuccess at representing human beings.  

The underlying ideas of Wilson’s comments lead to a question ‘What is a man?’ The answer of Steinbeck was quite complicated. He had more than one answer. His answers changed in various ways as life changed. But his ideas of man as a part of nature remained constant. Throughout his life, from time to time, his sense of man’s place in nature received support on instructions from various quarters. His relationship with his father and the marine biologist, Edward Ricketts reinforced this sense derived from his contact with nature as a child, a teenager and a young man of his college days. In the meanwhile Steinbeck was also conditioned to accept the traditional view of man as expressed by Edmund
Wilson which dominated the literature that inspired him to become a writer. Whether religious or humanistic, with the view that man is the centre of the universe, has led one to concern oneself only with man’s spiritual and moral situation. Industrialization has been rapping the environment and leads one to worry that how the materialist outlook may spoil man, and at the same time material goods spoiled nature. Man may have a biological fate depending on the physical ecology which seems to have not been noticed by any one. Man’s morality may have more to do with biological consequences of his actions. The irony of human situation is that the origins of religion can be found in the efforts by man to deal with the mysteries of nature. Nature is no longer as mysterious as in the pre-historic days. It is reality itself, wherein one’s own life like birth, illness, decay and death are on the same basis. In addition to this, human language, from myth and ritual, to literature and history, described realities and ends up becoming a reality itself. Caught between the realities of nature and language, Steinbeck found it very difficult to find a solution. As a matter of fact, this problem has been presented in different ways in his novels. Every basic relationship of man to earth, and its creatures is explored in his novels.

With this frame of mind Steinbeck left Stanford for good in 1925 for New York where he worked for a newspaper for a short span of time. As his ambition was to be a writer, he spent a long time preparing himself to be a writer. So the period from 1920 to 1925 is an important record of the social and cultural milieu in which Steinbeck spent the formative years of
his life. In other words, his formative years, corresponded with the Age of Depression.

One has to analyze the growth of John Steinbeck as a mature writer to explore his art of writing. In the early stages the family was responsible, specially his mother who imbibed in him the love for literature and writing. From his childhood he was an ardent reader of story books and magazines. His mother encouraged her children to use the town library near their house. In the family itself there was an atmosphere of telling stories and listening to it. Beyond the usual tales from such writers as Robert Louis Stevenson, Alexander Dumas and Sir Walter Scott, there were readings from John Bunyan’s *Pilgrims’ Progress*, Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, and *The Bible*. The strongest influence on young Steinbeck’s imagination appears to have been fairy tales, myths, Greek myths and legends. Esther, his sister remembers reading Greek Myths to him as a child. He himself read then Christian Andersen and Malory which shows that the Steinbecks had a well equipped library in the household. His experience of reading, listening to stories and fiction of great writers, has been portrayed in *The Pastures of Heaven* (1932) through his characters. One of them being Molly Morgan, who read to her pupils novels of Scott and Jack London. Another being Junius Maltby, a clerk reading to the boys from Stevenson’s *The Treasure Island*. There was a split in his imaginative make-up; on the one hand, there was a deep attachment to romance, the fantastic, the magical, and the adventures, on the other hand, there was a deep feeling for the harshness of the fundamentalists. The cause of the split was the image of a stern grand father reading solemnly from the bible, and from the implications of
*Pilgrims Progress* which was very real to him which, he declared, was 'a curious mixture of Irish fairies and Old Testament's Jehovah'. The split also reflected his mother's view on theology.

Apart from this, his relationship with the marine biologist Edward Ricketts influenced him to understand the thesis of biological naturalism which he subsequently explored in his novels.

Naturalism is not only like realism, a selection of subject matter and a special way of rendering those materials; it is a mode of fiction that was developed by a school of writers in accordance with a particular philosophical thesis. This thesis, a product of post Darwinian biology of the nineteenth century, held that human being exists entirely in the order of nature which puts him on a 'higher order' whose character and behavior are wholly determined by two kinds of forces-hereditary and environment.

These ideas and his relationship with the marine biologist Ed. Ricketts, for over 18 years, had already embossed in his mind. Steinbeck had already thought over various issues of human life. He had been probing into a bundle of ideas which attract his serious attention. Steinbeck developed a habit from his father, who used to have long walks in the open country side. Steinbeck used to go out in the open land, mountain sides and the sea-shore. His life and mind were open to nature.

Nevertheless, the popular image of Steinbeck and his novels seemed to discourage the possibilities of his being a man of ideas. Critics never
thought of him as an intellectual but as a rather large good hearted man, perhaps a bit gruffly at times. As a man he wrote humorous accounts of the simple folks, rustics and the struggles of the working people. He felt for the common working people. Critics and academics frequently concerned with Steinbeck's emphasis on the physical nature of man, his 'animalism' and 'materialism'. His love for simple minded and mentally retarded characters is evident of the fact that he himself was simple minded.

Steinbeck had a very poor opinion about intellectuals. He hated them most in the society, as, they were conscious of their dresses, speeches, snobbishness and for status. His role and vision of life was that of a writer. Throughout his career as a writer, he kept his thoughts as a secret because he felt that art should be a mystery. And this mystery, should not be diluted or dissipated by intellectual discussion and explanation.

Steinbeck never wanted to be pronounced as an intellectual in the public, though in many ways he was an intellectual. He was really a scholar. He spent a good part of his life to study, and research of truth and facts. This bent of mind, headed towards the fact that fiction needs not to be realistic but it must be true.

This philosophy of his, made him remarkable among the fiction writers in his country of his time. The idea of reading philosophy was Steinbeck's private matter which he did not like to deliberate with his friends. It is really dicey for a writer to walk backwards from fiction to a modernized philosophy.
In this context, the writer could be familiar with those who shared his thoughts like Jefferson, Emerson, Thoreau and even Whitman. Their influences framed the background for many of his works specifically *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939). Steinbeck’s ideas about man and his social and environment was the impetus of the ancient Greeks which one found both in his fictional and non-fictional works.

He developed an intuitive relationship with nature, stimulated by the sense of ‘real’ rather than the professed Christian attitude. It will be proper to mention here, that as a boy, he had the Greek myths read to him, as a teenager he read about ancient Greeks and as a student he studied Greek civilization. He always saw nature in an intimate relationship with man, through which he presented a reflection of man’s emotions and desires. This idea precisely was akin to the Greek concept of nature. His thoughts were often inductive and scientific, there was something deductive in his acceptance of nature on its own terms - a part of the Greek-world-view. All these views, again, were due to a cause he took on the history of ‘philosophy’ at Stanford, under the able guidance of a teacher, Herold Chapman Brown.

According to Brown modern philosophy and science walk hand in hand. Science discovers and describes the physical universe which is fitted as a large canvas by philosophy. In this context the role of science is more relevant to the human condition. Everything that exists is subject to discovery by science.
There is no separate world of the mind, of the spirit or of the ideal. In an essay *This Material World* (1925), Brown argued for ‘scientific materialism’ wherein there is a clear distinction between organic and inorganic matters. These ideas became important to Steinbeck’s philosophical perception of the universe. His early exposure to scientific materialism was the beginning of a life-long philosophical attachment to science. This attachment was due to the relationship between Steinbeck and Ed Ricketts. Jackson J Benson wrote:

> While Steinbeck, the artist, constantly looked toward science for enlightenment, Ricketts, the scientist, was more inclined to look toward art.⁸

In a sense Steinbeck developed a scientific temperament in his outlook towards life and nature. Steinbeck was also influenced by William Emerson Ritter’s concept of super-organism in his vision of nature as a whole. His contact with Ritter started after his joining an elementary zoology classes at Hopkins Marine Station in the summer of 1923 when he was a college student where Ritter was an important philosophical force in the department. The essence of Ritter’s ideas was described in one of his articles jointly authored with Edna W. Bailey entitled – ‘The Organismal Conception: Its Place in Science and Its Bearing on Philosophy’ (1928) wherein there is a reconciliation of science, particularly Darwinism, with religion and humanities:

> The idea of unification and unifiedness with its concomitant idea of wholeness was never more alive and potent than it is to-day. So far as human society is
concerned, the most explicit and influential manifestation of the conception has been the theory of society as an organism, as set forth by Herbert Spencer and others . . . This idea of wholeness involves the recognition that a unit exists and is possible only through the existence of parts, or elements . . . A natural whole stands in such relation to its parts as to make it and its parts mutually constitutive of each other. Structurally, functionally, and generatively, they are reciprocals of one another.9

This article shows the essential ideas that Steinbeck got directly or indirectly from Ritter. This perception was modified and refined in a series of discussions later on with Ricketts, which helped him to develop, an organismic conception of nature. This was Steinbeck's interest on non-teleological thinking. The word 'teleology' comes from the Greek- 'telos' which means 'end' or 'purpose'. The word had been used in reference to the purpose in nature and the existence of 'God's plan':

Teleological thinking is goal-oriented, (often linked with the idea of progress), usually associated with religious interpretations of the universe, and frequently tied to the idea of free-will. Non-teleological thinking, in the traditional sense, is thinking that is mechanistic. One event leads to another, and what happens is dictated by physical laws.10

One's culture, literature and language has also teleological implication. It is a problem to speak non-teleologically. Because of this complication, there has been great difficulty in using the term 'non-teleological'. Again the problem becomes complicated in the case of
Steinbeck because the term "non-teleological" had been used by Ricketts while having an interaction with Steinbeck:

But it is a major word in his vocabulary, it involves a concept much under discussion by the two-men, and has become a key term in Steinbeck criticism of recent years. It also marks the place where Richard Astro, the most informed writer on Steinbeck's philosophy, sees the most significant conflict of ideas between Steinbeck and Ricketts. 

If one goes down the memory lane, one will recollect that, in the early years of Steinbeck's life he was in his own way, some what a kind of a non-teleological thinker. It was the result of a mixture of influences and events, his rejection of Christianity because it represented the middle-class, his admiration for such great writers like Mark Twain and Jack London, his conversations with man in the fields who advocated a socialist atheist point of view and his exposure to the materialistic philosophy of Herold Chapman Brown, all these give a great impetus in this direction.

The most important fact of Steinbeck's world of writing was on the independence of man and presence of God. People who act according to their dreams and keep changing, are usually unsuccessful and defeated. The teleological value system is found duping the middle class. They become easy prey to the natural jungle or the social jungle. Herold Chapman Brown thought:

In religion we hold to our dogma, extol the humble and praise the unworldly, yet, in practice, the humble
are trampled upon, and the unworldly are neglected or merely the objects of a somewhat cynical wit.\textsuperscript{13}

William Emerson Ritter's organismal theory also contains the idea that 'the whole depends on the orderly co-operation and interdependence of its parts'.\textsuperscript{14}

This shows clearly that something like a machine is in operation. The important fact is that man can never really change the operation of the machine created by the Great Mechanic. All he can do is to try to understand what aspects of the machine may be available to him for examination. For the author, looking and understanding are always the keys. It is presumed that man is supposed to be a scientist or some sort. One of the most important facts is that, Steinbeck was not the only American author presenting man as a small speck in an indifferent universe. Mark Twain, Stephen Crane, Sinclair Lewis, Jack London and Theodore Dreiser were the American writers who depicted the similar human situation. The anthropocentric view of life towards which Steinbeck moved is unique. He was the only major writer within the American tradition of naturalism who reacted to science in a positive way and embraced a more or less scientific perception of the universe.

It was because of Steinbeck's interest on science that his attitude to things and happenings around him was more neutral. He kept himself away from irony and disillusionment. His involvement in realism – naturalism led him in a different direction. Writers of that tradition rejected traditional and personal projections of reality. An individual who assumes a non-
teleological point of view, the problem for him is different. He will reject traditional projections so that he can face the truth. The novelists like Crane, Norris and Dreiser suggest- ‘that the dream is better than the reality, ... ’. But to speak the truth that dream is impossible to cling on to, and, thus there is the disillusionment. Steinbeck’s uniqueness lies in his non-teleological perception which leads to the writing of the novel where things are simply as they are. If there is any disappointment or bitterness, it grows out of man’s separation from nature and to conceal or avoid reality. In the works of Steinbeck the values of a man-centered universe helps in responding to life in a more comprehensive manner. It was his lack of ego which made it easier for him to accept a calm and joyful realization of man’s interdependence with the whole of nature and life. This response is quite different from that of Dreiser, a naturalistic writer with full of ego. This attitude of Dreiser was influenced by the ideas of Thomas Huxley and Herbert Spenser. Steinbeck was just the reverse. His non-teleological approach to life and nature is most apparent in his novels of the mid-thirties and beyond, beginning with In Dubious Battle (1936).

The astonishing fact is that, he had already a mental make-up of a non-teleological observer much before he met Ricketts, as his novels before these dealt with.

The early novels of a writer are the signals of his later major accomplishments however, it is possible to focus a writer’s future achievement from his first novel. It is easy enough to look back to the past career of a successful novelist and find that in the early novels of the writer
the seeds of his or her future works is sown. Fortuitously, John Steinbeck is such a writer and his *Cup of Gold* (1929) is such a novel. The world of John Steinbeck's novels, is beautiful, with the warm valley of Salinas in the background, with its dissenters always hanging over it. Whatever his outlook or his change in technical approach may be, the microcosm of the warm valley of the novels remains the same setting of his works. To be precise, Steinbeck is one of the best known novelists of America who had received little or no encouragement from literary critics of his time except in the late nineteen thirties. This general hostile attitude made him to conclude the life long criticism in 'a kind of ill-tampered parlour game in where nobody gets kissed'.

The general reaction of the critics made the author capable of writing such a powerful criticism of life as *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) and some frivolous works like *Sweet Thursday* (1954) and *The Short Reign of Pipin IV. A Fabrication* (1957). Various critics argued over the ages, that writing of novels is a serious business. Certain critics are of the view that the maturity, intelligence and the dedication of the genuine artists was lacking, or vitiated in Steinbeck, perhaps, because of his popularity and commercial success.

The outstanding thing in the literary career of Steinbeck is that, he had, for a long time decided to be a writer that in spite of all the troubles he continued to write. A large public read him because of the range of moods he presented with a power to communicate the experiences of life of the men around him. Foreigners read his works because of his unique
American quality, where he presents ‘a vast, fascinating and paradoxical universe’.\textsuperscript{17} He tried to understand the life of men in that part of America where he lived.

It was a sprawling world of discordant extremes with warmth, tender, crudity tastelessness, brilliant comedy mixed with jokes and intense human charity and magnanimity with loose and shallow morality. All these traits showed that Steinbeck had ravenous appetite for life. With all the varieties in his writing, Steinbeck remained at his best a regional novelist not a peculiar American but a typical Californian. As one goes in his fictional writings, a dozen out of seventeen books of fiction, are set in the geographical region between the Pacific Ocean in the west and the towering Sierra Nevada mountains in the east. Of course, his main centre of focus, has always been Salinas, a small valley of California.

All his works described the beauty of what he called “\textit{The Long Valley}”\textsuperscript{18} with its social history, animal life, its seasonal cycle. As he was involved in the life and atmosphere of Salinas Valley, Steinbeck presented very vividly the intimate and mysterious relationship of man and nature with a mythopoetic connection.

This aspect can be found in his \textit{To a God Unknown}. Salinas Valley was a great inspiration for him. From the valley he learnt to use archetypal themes which he used throughout his works, with oldest dreams of finding and re-entering \textit{The Garden of Eden}. To explore and reach the findings of
his traits, the first three works will take one into the world of John Steinbeck’s Salinas Valley and the Age of Depression.

The economic structure of Salinas valley itself altered as small farms were replaced by larger ones and the picture enlarged to include corporations, large investments and amassing fortunes as the gap lengthened between the little man working for the big man. Discontent also increased, with unemployment and threatened strikes. It was all part of the generalized national situation which culminated in the stock market crash of 1929 and ‘depression period’ following. Steinbeck’s first published novel, *Cup of Gold* appeared, two months after the crash.
Notes


