Chapter V

Conclusion
John Steinbeck is a famous American writer of rural and small-town Californian origin rising to fame and fortune in the thirties of the twentieth century which was otherwise known as the Age of Depression. Critical opinion on his writing are various and divided. He received little encouragement from many American critics and intellectuals for a long time. There was some kind of general negligence of his novels. However, he went on writing as he pleased, and in course of time a large public continued reading his writings with great interest. This was because of the range of moods he presented – angry, gay, tender, erotic, whimsical, sad and thoughtful. Foreign readers found a unique quality in his writings. Like America where he was born and of which he wrote, his works depicted a vast, fascinating and paradoxical universe. In fact he worked on a large canvas. It can be said that with a native quest for understanding of life in general and the American life in particular, his works celebrated goodness
and innocence, along with a display of chaos, violence, corruption and decadence. With a voracious appetite for life, and with an energetic and versatile genius, he carved out a permanent place in the American literary tradition which took him to the heights in the world of fiction.

Starting with *Cup of Gold* (1929), his novels of the 1930s like *To A God Unknown* (1933), *The Pastures of Heaven* (1932), *Tortilla Flat* (1935), *In Dubious Battle* (1936) and *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), Steinbeck gained national recognition. The later novels like *Of Mice and Men* (1937), *The Moon is Down* (1942), *Cannery Row* (1945), *The Pearl* (1947), *The Wayward Bus* (1947) were written with the second world war in the background. The social and political crisis of the twenties and the thirties gave rise to waves of social consciousness, and the important novels of Steinbeck reflected developing awareness of social and moral problems. It was a time of painful failure, social, political and moral, and the novels of Steinbeck have given expression to that failure with a deep sense of understanding and sympathy. Steinbeck died in 1968, and by that time his later works had gained some degree of critical appreciation. His works of the nineteen thirties and the nineteen forties represent the high points of a literary career that spanned nearly a third of the twentieth century.

It is well known that Steinbeck has been more or less reticent about his personal life. Occasionally he has been found writing semi-autobiographical sketches, relating to the origin and intention of his works. In this connection, it is important to remember that at his best Steinbeck
remained a regional novelist with a peculiar American, more precisely, Californian sensibility. Nearly a dozen of his important books are set in a geographical area, with the Salinas Valley at the centre. As a school boy, working on a farm in the neighborhood, he developed an intimate knowledge and love of the lush green valleys and brown-grassed hills of Central California, which was his spiritual home. Again and again, evoking the beauty of what he called 'the long valley' his writing recorded its social history, its animal life and its diurnal and seasonal cycles. Along with this, his writing has recorded the intimate and mysterious, perhaps, a mythopoeic relation of man and nature. From this arose a profound archetypal theme or plot that recurs throughout his works – the theme of the oldest human dream of finding the Garden of Eden.

After graduating from school, where science was his early interest, he entered Stanford University in which he followed the course that he chose, including science courses, withdrawing when necessary, to work on ranches or with a gang or in a factory. He left the university without any degree. But he had a strong sense of understanding of the life of working men and women whose labours, deprivations and amusements he shared. On the Monterey Peninsula he met the marine biologist Edward F. Ricketts, who was a very powerful influence on him. The majority of critics and scholars on Steinbeck are interested in the philosophy implicit in some of his novels.

The influence of Ed. Ricketts in the Gulf of California, was primarily concerned with the experience as a whole, its events, moods,
feelings and speculations. However, that gave rise to a quasi – scientific theory of objectivity, generally called “non-teleological or ‘is’ thinking”. This thinking arose out of the interplay of two minds. It is neither consistent nor profound enough to become a philosophy, but it becomes a key to Steinbeck’s approach to writing in almost the same way as Negative Capability which becomes the key concept in the writing of the odes of Keats. Steinbeck was looking for a kind of purity in thinking which would be concerned not with what should be, or could be, or might be, but rather with what actually “is”. It suggests a good deal of mystical quietism or moral fatalism in the notion of a viewer surveying the truth of the human scene from a vantage point of scientific or God-like detachment. This, however, does not mean that a non-teleological thinker has lost all feelings and emotions. This suggests an immense expansion.

Now, looking back to his early life, one cannot ignore Steinbeck’s interest in the mystery and the beauty of nature, with animals, birds, trees and flowers which were abundant in and around the Salinas Valley. Even as a school boy, chosen to be the associate editor of the school newspaper, *El Gabilon*, Steinbeck started harboring literary ambitions. His confidence in his writing ability was usually strong and sometimes exuberant. English and literature courses were natural favorites for the young Steinbeck. Along with this his reading at home of novels by Gustav Flaubert, George Eliot, Thomas Hardy, Charles Dickens, the Bible and Mythology, supplemented by dedicated reading of Shakespeare, Milton, Chaucer, the English Romantic poets and other classics, made him a more widely read man at his age than William Faulkner, Ernest Hemmingway and Scotts F.
Fitzgerald, have been in comparable years. Other favorite courses included Latin and biology.

In June 1925, after more than five years of interrupted but often beneficial study of various courses chosen by him, Steinbeck left Stanford without a degree because of the fact that he was committed to a career of writing. At first he did not realize the literary possibilities of the life and places that he knew very well because of the fact that most of his important novels were based on the Salinas Valley, one of the smaller coastal valleys of California, where he was born, lived and grew up.

As a matter of fact, the summing up of all his works will lead my thesis to the exact ends and findings. Steinbeck's first novel, *Cup of Gold* (1929) is an historical romance based on some kind of a Grail Quest in the Seventeenth-Century. This novel was the work of a restless young man in his mid-twenties and search of a career and a way of life. However, the romantic posturings of Henry Morgan are not there for their own sakes. They are the paraphernalia of a serious theme. The theme is that of great exploits. The novel is not a eulogy of romantic adventure, but a serious examination of the motives, methods, and consequences of great romantic adventures. What is remarkable is the fusion of simple indulgence and disenchanted analysis, which will characterize the later works of Steinbeck. A lyric quality, grandiose-archaism, and restlessness are seen, but they turn out to be spurious and undirected nervous energy. It can be said that *Cup of Gold* is a novel written to explore and illustrate an idea, not very seriously concerned to be realistic, but the form and content fail to fuse as a
single thing. Evidently Steinbeck himself could not take the details of his historical trappings seriously.

In *To a God Unknown* (1933) Steinbeck found the world he could take seriously and in every detail. Instead of going to a land across the high seas, or in the legendary past, Steinbeck has focused on his own Californian Valley, which is the heart of Steinbeck’s world, both biographical and fictional. This novel also is not limited by the compulsion of realism. Like *Cup of Gold*, this is also written to explore and express an idea, and is romantic in tendency. It is a strange story of struggle for physical and spiritual fulfillment of Joseph Wayne. Characterizations are done in depth, and the descriptions of family and ranch life are quite convincing. But, instead of its passionate and haunting quality, the visionary preoccupation of Joseph Wayne has shown the failure to unify the visionary and transcendental with the cannons of realism. *To a God Unknown* is a novel of somber and passionate mood.

The next novel, *The Pastures of Heaven* (1932) has introduced, for the first time, the earthly irony and humour, which will be found in plenty in the later works of Steinbeck. In this novel the writer has disengaged himself from the romantic material of *Cup of Gold* and the cumbersome mythical paraphernalia of *To a God Unknown*. It has shown Steinbeck’s preoccupation with fresh material much closer at hand, choosing quite rigorously to accommodate his insights and expression to the way ordinary people of ‘The Long Valley’ act and speak. It is important to note that in *The Pastures of Heaven* and the next novel *Tortilla Flat* (1935),
Steinbeck’s focus widens to encompass the whole communities and the structures of these two novels are sprawling and episodic. The novel *The Pastures of Heaven*, which is like a collection of stories unified by a common local and certain recurrent features of characters, starts with a prologue and ends with an epilogue, and the place belie the human experience. With a prevalent tone of irony Steinbeck has shown the way in which the action intended in one direction has unexpected and contradictory consequences, which may strike the readers as more important than the influence of the “evil cloud” that appears in the book. In this connection, Peter Lisca has stated that *The Pastures of Heaven* is a type of Eden, and the novel has affirmed the Christian view of man as laboring under original sin.

In the next novel *Tortilla Flat* (1935) Steinbeck has again shown his interest in the life of a community and his technique is that of structuring the life on a mythical framework. The structure is quite episodic but a majority of the episodes are manipulated so as to achieve an organic design having its own natural rise, climax and denouement. In this novel the pervasive irony of *The Pastures of Heaven* has become much broader and more comical, and the whole thing seems to have been governed by an amused and benevolent perspective, which is, nevertheless, quite acute. To a society sunk in the economic and political toils of the ‘Great Depression’, the holiday spirit of the book appeals to the readers. Using the carefree, gay and irresponsible world of the ‘paisanos’ Steinbeck has criticized certain aspects of the respectable society of America. It does not mean that he was romanticizing the life of the paisanos. There is no indication that the life
depicted in the pages of the novel is the idea for which man should strive. Although *Tortilla Flat* refers to certain advantages of the paisanos' moral and philosophical system. Steinbeck has his reservations and these reservations never intrude in the novel. They are implicit in his artistic and structural strategy of the burlesque of epic language and action. With a tone weighing in favour of colour, warmth, humour, and even quaintness, Steinbeck has kept his characters an aesthetic distance through its refreshing humour which makes the readers fully conscious of the paisanos' short-comings as moral human beings, at the same time allowing us to appreciate what is good and noble in them.

The humour, warmth, gaiety and the sentimentalism of *Tortilla Flat* will be replaced by the harshness, detachment and austerity of *In Dubious Battle* (1936), which Steinbeck himself called 'a brutal book'. Under the political pressures of the 1930s in America, Steinbeck has shown his continued interest in the underdogs of a predatory, commercialized society. With a deep sense of objectivity permeating every aspects of the book, from action, scene, and character to a prose style and symbiolic structure, Steinbeck has admirably exhibited how those to whom all other means of struggle are denied, are led, even forced into perfidy, injustice and resolute cruelty, and how the most noble and generous characters find themselves corrupted. From this grows the great anguish which breaths cruelties throughout the beautiful book. It is, indeed, remarkable that tenderness, royalty, love and simplicity, and feelings which are close to sentimentality, have been controlled by some fears of non-teleological discipline. Steinbeck has been frequently identified as a proletarian writer of the
1930s, dealing with social and political problems of the 'Great Depression'. Many critics have noted the growth of the methods of radical ideology, in the war between the have and the have-nots, and in the half-articulate yearnings of the dispossessed for some kind of stable and fruitful life rooted in the land. The long-term social and technological changes, breaking down the simple relations between man and nature, which to some degree still persisted, in rural areas, coinciding with a period of drought in the central part of California, led to the writing of such novels like *In Dubious Battle*, *The Grapes of Wrath* and *Of Mice and Men*.

*The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) has particularly been regarded as a culminating work in Steinbeck's career as a novelist. Frederic I. Carpenter has observed that this novel has brought together the three skeins of American thought – the transcendental oversoul, Emerson’s faith in the common man and self-reliance, and Whitman’s religion of love of all men and his mass democracy. Another critic, Chester E. Ensinger has added another skein of American thought that is the agrarianism of Jefferson. All these are combined with mystical and poetic ideas and the realistic philosophy of pragmatism, emphasizing effective action. As a matter of fact, *The Grapes of Wrath*, which directly and powerfully dealt with contemporary events, became an important part of those events, “debated in public forums, banned, burned, denounced from pulpits, attacked in pamphlets, and even debated on the floor of ‘Congress’. The important point to be noted is that *The Grapes of Wrath* continues to be read even today, not as a piece of literary or social history, but with a sense of emotional involvement and aesthetic discovery. More than any other
American novel, it successfully embodies a contemporary social problem of national scope in an artistically viable expression. Throughout the novel runs a persistent generalizing force, so that the personal saga of the Joads has taken on a broad vision of the truth of humanity, and this has been proven again and again in the hearts of the readers. Again, the novel along with *In Dubious Battle* has been regarded as example of proletarian novel dealing with the life of working classes or with social or industrial problems from the point of view of the labourers. A considerable element of propaganda may be found in them. But they are works of art carrying philosophical breath, imaginative power and undeniable skill in narrative, which cannot be found in any writing inspired by the spirit of propaganda.

*Of Mice and Men* (1937) was the first of Steinbeck’s attempt in the play-novelette form, the beginning of which could be seen in some chapters of *In Dubious Battle*. Again *In Dubious Battle* explores the dynamic vast social forces but *Of Mice and Men* addressed itself to what Steinbeck called ‘the microcosm’. The book is mainly concerned with the reciprocal nature of the relationship between Lennie and George which is sometimes considered to be sentimental. Steinbeck, who himself felt that the book was a ‘thin’ and ‘brittle’, intended it to be simple and significant, ‘a study of the dreams and pleasures of everyone’ in microcosm. Lennie (Lennie Small, one of the characters of the book) was supposed to be a symbolic figure with ‘earthly longings’, the inarticulate and powerful yearnings of all men. The sentimentality of the relationship between the two friends (George and Lennie) has, however, been washed away by the non-teleological or mechanistic view of life which was clearly projected in
In Dubious Battle. Again, experimenting in the play-novelette form or a play ‘in the physical technique of a novel’, and using motifs of symbol, action, and the language, the novel comes to a powerful and moving climax when Lennie, the dumb and the powerful giant with the mind of a child, is shot by his intelligent and self-conscious friend, George, with the chanting of the ritual phrases invoking the peaceful promised land, now lost to both of them.

The Moon is Down(1042), is Steinbeck’s second play-novelette, based on his interest in the Strategic Services in helping resistance movements in Occupied Europe. It is intended to be a novel celebrating ‘the durability of democracy’. However, the work is not so good a play-novelette as Of Mice and Men. It is a better play than it is a novel. As a novel it has carried stylization beyond the limit where it emotionally concerns us, to the point of de-humanizing his materials. The survival of democracy is too assured and there is not enough non-teleological ruthlessness. And looking back to Tortilla Flat, In Dubious Battle, The Grapes of Wrath and Of Mice and Men, one sees that Steinbeck has not successfully struggled with the problem of stylization in this particular play-novelette, even though the mood of heroism and the dignity of humanism are valid enough in their own way.

Cannery Row (1945) is a novel exploring some reactions to a world whose basic value had plunged from the suffering of severe ‘economic depression’ into the massive aggression and destruction of a cold war. The novel is not merely a work suggesting escape into a counterculture, a
ramification of *Tortilla Flat*. The novel’s mood and temper have a more complex relation to the facts of life in the nineteen forties. A re-examination of the works like *In Dubious Battle, Tortilla Flat, Of Mice and Men* and *The Grapes of Wrath*, will make one realize how much Steinbeck was committed to the *Cannery Row*’s world and its significance. The discrepancy between surface gaiety and the underlying moods in the novel made Malcolm Cowley remark that if the book was supposed to be a cream-puff, it must be ‘a very poisoned cream-puff’. Steinbeck, who replied that the amount of poison should not be underestimated, intending *Cannery Row* to be neither a detailed anatomy of society’s mangled craziness nor a programme for changing it. The novel is meant to suggest a new world to be a world not of a whole cloth, but of bits and pieces, varying in chronology, recollected in nostalgia and assembled lovingly.

*The Pearl* (1947) is a highly simplified fable which suggests that it originated in the same crucible as *Cannery Row*. It shows a revulsion against modern industrial and commercial society, and it embodies a strong critical attack on the ways and values of American civilization. Building up a type of structure, a parallel plan of meaning moves together with the invincibility of fate. With a prose style, which is poetic but objective and realistic in many ways, the little novel offers lyrical beauty and a simple action leading to a somber and pathetic conclusion. Kino’s disaster was the result of his attempt to enter and compete in a society in which he was like the outcast of *Cannery Row*. Disillusion and bitterness underlie both *Cannery Row* and *The Pearl*. In the first novel the conflict is resolved in a catharsis of pathos.
The Wayward Bus (1974) may also be regarded as a continuation of Steinbeck’s mastery and virtuosity in the fabulous forms of literature. However, quite direct and intimate in both language and detail, it lacks immediate suggestiveness associated with parables and allegories. Presenting a modern Canterbury Pilgrims, the novel presents a group of recalcitrant characters in a non-teleological fashion. The novel depicts the self-knowledge of the passengers, providing critical moments for all so that they may reveal the strength of their honesty or their hypocrisy and self-decepcion.

Incidentally, literary historians have some difficulty in categorizing John Steinbeck and his works because neither belongs convincingly to a recognized group or trend. Writing at almost the same time as Scotts F. Fitzgerald, John Dos Passos, William Faulkner and Ernest Hemmingway, Steinbeck appears quite different from them in various ways. Along with writers like John Dos Passos, and James T. Farrel, Steinbeck has sometimes been considered ‘a social-protest writer of the nineteen thirties’ yet the generic hallmarks of social protest fiction with revolutionary messages and characters and actions designed to express that message, are rarely seen in his works. In his works, he has been described as ‘realistic or naturalistic’. However, one has seen that in The Grapes of Wrath the realism is enriched by a poetic language and by a concern with the mystical aspects of the biological nature of man. Again, in Of Mica and Men the naturalistic features are seen to be moderated by down-to-earth humour and compassion.
Steinbeck's subject matters are quite simple, but his fictional modes are varied and in some ways, ambitious. One can find historical romance in *Cup of Gold*, myth in *To a God Unknown*, ironic realism in *The Pastures of Heaven*, mock-heroic in *Tortilla Flat*, a kind of folk-epic in *The Grapes of Wrath* and parable in *The Pearl*. In none of these he could not be regarded as an innovator. And in technical matters of plot-development, time-scheme and point of view, he has remained comparatively straightforward and traditional. On the other hand, he has made no writer his master, and has continued to travel along a strange orbit of his choice.

No one has denied Steinbeck's brilliance in the handling of individual scenes, the creation of memorable characters, and in the possession of a superb and varied colloquial style. But, critics have found that there is something essential which is missing, noticeable before 1940 and quite pronounced after 1940. That something missing is nothing but his continuing difficulty in fusing structure and specific materials into a harmonious unity. This has been thoroughly discussed by Howard Levent in his book *The Novels of John Steinbeck: A Critical Study*. Because of this problem, a Steinbeck novel tends to have either a panoramic or a dramatic structure. Steinbeck uses a fairly relaxed style with a panoramic structure, but his dramatic structure has a tenser and more patterned style. The problem is that he rarely combines panoramic and dramatic structure into a single whole, especially when he uses allegorical elements or an allegorical scheme. He, however, uses a number of formal devices like an allegorical frame, repetition of significant initials in the use of names, inter-chapters within the novel, moral fable woven into the novel, pairs of
characters suggesting moral opposite, etc. to intensify the ordinary effects of a structure or to achieve the external appearance of an operative form.

Sometimes the nature and direction of Steinbeck’s fiction may be understood more clearly if one approaches them through characteristic symbols or themes like the tide-pool image, and the family. Sometimes territory and social protest are the identifying marks of instrument in gathering the various elements and shaping them in the world of his fiction. There is Steinbeck’s moral vision which has been variously described, interpreted, praised and questioned throughout these years. For example, Steinbeck’s pervasive compassion for human beings appears most characteristically in his portrayal of the native, handicapped, and disenfranchised, like the paisanos in Tortilla Flat, George and Lennie in *Of Mice and Men*. Strong idealistic and intuitive elements in his vision are seen in the portrayal of characters like Danny in *Tortilla Flat*, Jim Nolan in *In Dubious Battle*, Tom Joad in *The Grapes of Wrath*. The literary craftsmanship and skill with which the themes, symbols and moral vision are expressed, place Steinbeck definitely among the best writers of his generation. With them he shared a ceaseless dedication to exploring and mastering the art of fiction. Steinbeck’s views on writing, of his principles and goals as a writer, can very well serve to clarify the status of the man and his works. In his Nobel Prize acceptance speech in 1962, he elaborated on what he described as ‘the high duties and the responsibilities of the makers of literature’. Steinbeck stated that literature was not written by the few for the few. He said that through the ages literature had been created
by writers who strove to deepen understanding and to resolve fears of the heart and spirit. He said:

This is not new. The ancient commission of the writer has not changed. He is charged with exposing our many grievous faults and failures, with dredging up to the light our dark and dangerous dreams, for the purpose of improvement. Furthermore, the writer is dedicated to declare and to celebrate man’s proven capacity for greatness of heart and spirit, for gallantry in defeat, for courage, compassion and love.²

Steinbeck’s best works brilliantly expose of mankind’s grievous faults and failures, alert us to social and economic dangers, and remind us of one’s forgotten commitments and dreams. Steinbeck’s strongest convictions and passions appear in his fundamental belief in humanity, in his expectation that man will endure, and that the creative forces of the human spirit will prevail.

Thus, on an elaborate analysis, there exists a balance between the worlds of failure and success. Failure was precariously followed by success. It was Steinbeck, an American who could culminate the expression of the power of the human spirit to overcome difficulties amidst the chaotic conditions due to the Age of Depression.
In an over-all analysis of Steinbeck’s seven novels and four novelettes, it has been found that Steinbeck’s portrayal of the American life in the Great Depression is complete. However, there is still enough avenues for researchers to carry out further research in the works of John Steinbeck in future particularly the various un-ex-plored areas.
Notes
