CHAPTER V

ROUND UP
Obviously, then, much of Steinbeck’s humour is folk comedy, ranging from grotesquerie and obscenity to satire, a rustic and masculine humour, frequently bawdy, sometimes cruel, macabre and grim, often ironic and satiric. Basically a novelist, and not a humorist as Longstreet Harris and others had been, Steinbeck showed from the very first of his novel that he was just as interested in comic effects as in tragic. Equally varied are his comic modes: melodrama (Cup of God), realistic ironies with almost tragic overtones of any humour (The Pastures of Heaven), mock-heroic (Tortilla Flat), blending of fantasy and satire (Saint Katy the Virgin, and The Short Reign of Pippin IV), satire (In Dubious Battle, The Grapes of Wrath, Cannery Row). Nevertheless, he is no innovator in this field.

Humour cannot be practised in a vacuum, for it needs the raw material of actions and experiences to work upon in order to perfect it into the finished product, that is comedy. Whether Steinbeck ever read any of the sketches of August Baldwin Longstreet, Johnson Jones Hooper, Joseph Baldwin, George Washington Harris, Thomas Bange Thorpe, William Tappen Thompson, or any of the other Southwestern humorists, very little is known. Possible influences on Steinbeck notably of the Bible and Malory (which he read during his childhood) and of the writers like Maupassant, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy.
Flaubert, Milton, Browning, George Eliot, Hardy and Jeffers have been suggested by various critics. He greatly admired Hemingway, James Branch Cabell, Willa Cather and Sherwood Anderson, Thackeray, Lawrence, Normal Douglas and Carl Van Vechten were his favourite reading. His realistic and naturalistic technique brings him closer to Crane, Garland, Dreiser, London, Morris and Sinclair. Farrell's Stud Lonigan is reported to have been with him during his Sea of Cortez expedition.

Many a great critic, in discussing how he developed his own unique style, frankly confessed his debt in terms of material, theme, characters and style to the authors he had studied in the early stages of his career. Comparisons have been made between Steinbeck and Dickens, between Steinbeck and Faulkner, and between Steinbeck and Hemingway [though he did not read him until 1954 for the fear of being influenced by him.]. Sydney J. Krause has detected some penetrative parallels between Steinbeck and Mark Twain. Points of likenesses between his Jim Nolan of In Dubious Battle and Milton's Satan have been noticed. His The Grapes of Wrath has been compared with Sandburg's "The People, Yes." Similarity between the last notorious image of Rose of Sharon in The Grapes of Wrath and the nurse's breast feeding in the moving train in Guy de Maupassant's short story "L'Idylle" has been discussed. The list hardly includes the
mention of any of the Southwestern humorists whom Steinbeck
might have possibly read with perceptible borrowings. Yet
the echoes of even greater significance and depth do exist
between the works, characters, and comic modes of Steinbeck
and the Southwestern humorists like Longstreet, Harris,
Melville, Twain, Faulkner and others even without his having
read any of them.

From where, then could he have got the raw material for
his comedy? Not necessarily from books, but from real life.
Inevitably, in such a critical study like the present one, only
the characters, language, and comic devices serve as direct
evidence.

For the proper understanding of this brand of humour
in general, it should, however, be borne in mind that
Steinbeck was basically a labourer, never known for his
deep scholarship and never interested in scholastic pursuits.
His upbringing has much to do with the Southwestern comic
tradition in the works. He was born in a small but a thriving
country town of Salinas, a county seat and a trading and
shipping centre with cattle-raising and vegetable cultivation
as the main occupation of most of the people of the valley.
His father was an ordinary Treasurer of Monterey County and
his mother, a simple school teacher. As a boy during his
school holidays, he worked on neighbouring farms and he thus,
in his boyhood, imbibed many rural images which he later
turned to fiction. His twelve out of seventeen books of fiction are set in and around Salinas; they are the poetic and creative evocation of Salinas Valley—she generically called “the long valley”—its life and people. Although he went to New York in later years, bought a house and settled there, he was rarely out of sight of green fields and hills of California when he wrote in *East of Eden*:

I remember my childhood names for grasses and secret flowers. I remember where a toad may live and what time the birds awaken in the summer—and what trees and season smelled like—how people looked and walked and smelled even. The memory of odours is very rich.

Thus from the impressionable years he was brought up in close contact with the ordinary poor Americans. The heterogeneous population of Monterey made up of Italian, Chinese and Mexican, Indian, sardinefishermen, cannery-workers, and hangers-on and loafers provided him an opportunity to see humanity in all its varieties. And also afterwards, during his youth, his contact with them remained unbroken when he worked as a bricklayer, ranch-hand, deck-hand, chemist, watchman, fisherman, newspaper reporter and lastly as a caretaker of an estate until he became a writer.

This fact is important for it was largely responsible for his outlook on life. It is quite interesting to note how Steinbeck during this period learned low and masculine humour and assimilated some of the strikingly peculiar ideas and crude concepts of the southwestern comedy from the real life
of men, and, not from any book. His was intimate participation in the everyday life of poor people—in their dances and weddings, in their everyday joys and sorrows, in their religious meetings and cultural social life—that provided him an opportunity of almost thoroughly knowing their modus vivendi, their language and manners, their queer habits and quaint ideas of the country folk whom he later sketched so amazingly well in down-to-earth manner in his short stories and novels.

If watching the life of poor white people around him offered Longstreet and his contemporaries necessary raw material for their writings and, if listening to the other people talking could make Faulkner a great writer, or if the men and women of the waterside town of Hannibal could serve as the model and boiler deck could provide a great deal of material for Twain’s writings, naturally enough, Steinbeck would have equally been benefited with the life and company of the poor migrant workers and bums, he had loved, worked and stayed with. Steinbeck is doing as much as they did; he had utilized the material available at hand. It should not be, therefore, surprising at all that his works should contain the characters and the devices reminiscent of the country humour with which the youth from Salinas was familiar. Not that Steinbeck is
imitating Longstreet, Harris, Twain and Faulkner, but born in a region almost as rich and fascinating as Faulkner's South, he learned to exploit the comic possibilities of the life and places he knew best. Like them all, he is also a true American rather a strictly regional writer with typically American sensibilities and he wrote out of the same kind of sensibility specifically developed by the conditions of the American frontier. Although, Steinbeck's life was unsettled and precarious for quite a long time, nonetheless, his experiences coupled with his temperament provided him with the foundation responsible for his distinctive humour. He would not have been probably what he is today, had he missed their rude existence. He is, indeed, like all the Southwestern humorists, a true son of the American subsoil and in addition to that, something quite phenomenal.
NOTES


3 Peter Lisca, The Wide World, p.51; Moore, Novels of Steinbeck, p.92.

4 Peter Lisca, "John Steinbeck: A Literary Biography," Steinbeck and His Critics, p.5; Moore, p.92.

5 F.W. Watt, John Steinbeck, p.106.

6 Ibid., p.106.


12 F.W. Watt, John Steinbeck, p. 106; Steinbeck and His Critics, p. 254.


