CHAPTER III

CELEBRITY
From Cup of Gold to Tortilla Flat are actually the works of Steinbeck's apprenticeship as a writer who was still groping for a career as a fictionist. With the publication of Tortilla Flat, which is in a mold quite different from anything he had done before, came a surprising turn in his development. Marking the end of his apprenticeship, it too demarcated a complete departure in style, tone, form, ideas. The first thing to go was his early melancholy and it exhibited for the first time his large gift for comic writing. Also, it opened new possibilities if he continued writing in the same light vein. But Steinbeck reacted quite unexpectedly differently and published subsequently some of his most successful proletarian novels—In Dubious Battle, Of Mice And Men, The Grapes of Wrath and Cannery Row—which later culminated in his Nobel Prize for literature. Since all these novels were rooted in contemporary socio-economic problems, more attention was focussed on Steinbeck's social philosophy and critics, in their attempts to identify these books which the proletarian movement of the thirties, have quite surprisingly ignored the most endearing quality of humour of these works.

Another reason for Steinbeck's humour having gone unnoticed seems to be his denial of his being identified as a humorist: "It [Tortilla Flat] has ruined everyone I know. That's one of the reasons I would like [Dubious]
Battle printed next. Myths form quickly and I want no
tag of humorist on me, nor any other kind."1

The remark is, indeed, characteristic of his attitude
to fiction and essentially refers to a paradox in his works.
Besides exhibiting his keen interest in the novel both as
a tradition and form, it also shows that he was basically
a novelist with a serious purpose, and not a humorist.
Quite ironically, most of his works—*Tortilla Flat*,
*Cannery Row*—suffer from the lack of a definite plot and
coherent structure; *The Pastures of Heaven* and *The Red Pony*
being the most obvious early examples.

But Steinbeck is at his best and seems to be very at
home in his comic portraits and in the creation of some of
the most unforgettable comic characters in American
literature. Looking to the variety of these comic
characters, the imperfect and loose structure becomes
relatively less important than the wonderful characters,
who inhabit his novels.

No wonder, his early comedy of physical deformity
still persists in these novels in his more individualized
and localized thumb-nail portraits of the poor American
whites. Here also, they are equally grotesque and
curiously strange in their appearance. See the description
of "the poor little half-formed" Pirate in *Tortilla Flat*
whom "God did not give him all the brain he should have":
He was a huge, broad man, with a tremendous black and bushy beard. He wore jeans and a blue shirt, and he had no hat. In town he wore shoes. There was a shrinking in the Pirate's eyes when he confronted any grown person, the secret look of an animal that would like to run away if it dared turn its back long enough. Because of this expression, the paolians of Monterey knew that his head had not grown up with the rest of his body. They called him The Pirate because of his beard. Every day people saw him wheeling his barrow of pitchwood about the streets until he sold the load. And always in a cluster at his heels walked his five dogs. ( TF, p.59 ).

The crazy radical Joy in In Dubious Battle with "no more sense than a bull dog" who "never learned to keep his mouth shut" had a "wizened and battered face" with "nose crushed flat against his face." He never shakes hands with anyone, for his "crushed and scarred" hands cause him pain.

The inarticulate giant Lennie of Of Mice and Men and the dreamy and torpid Noah Joad in The Grapes of Wrath belong to the early group of John Steinbeck's comic sketches, Johnny Bear and Tularacito of his early stories.

About Lennie writes Steinbeck:

Behind him walked his opposite, a huge man, shapeless of face, with large, pale eyes, with wide, sloping shoulders, and he walked heavily, dragging his feet a little, the way a bear drags his paws. His arms did not swing at his sides, but hung loosely and only moved because the heavy hands were pendula.

Similar comedy of physical deformity is again well brought out by Steinbeck in his description of the lumberman in The Grapes of Wrath. Behind the door of the shed:
A spectre of a man came through the dark shed. Thin, dirty, oily skin tight against stringy muscles. One eye was gone, and the raw, uncovered socket squirmed with eye muscles when his good eye moved. His jeans and shirt were thick and shiny with old grease, and his hands cracked and lined and cut. His heavy, pouting underlip hung out sullenly.

The most odd-looking and the strangest of them all is Noah Joed in *The Grapes of Wrath*. He is

the first-born, tall and strange, walking always with a wondering look on his face, calm and puzzled. He had never been angry in his life. He looked in wonder at angry people, wonder and uneasiness, as normal people look at the insane. Noah moved slowly, spoke seldom, and then so slowly that people who did not know him often thought him stupid. He was not stupid, but he was strange. He had little pride, no sexual urges. He worked and slept in a curious rhythm that nevertheless sufficed him. He was fond of his folks, but never showed it in any way. Although an observer could not have told why, Noah left the impression of being misshapen, his head or his body or his legs or his mind, but no misshapen member could be recalled. Pa thought he knew why Noah was strange, but Pa was ashamed, and never told. For on the night when Noah was born, Pa, frightened at the spreading thighs, alone in the house, and horrified at the screaming wretch his wife had become, went mad with apprehension. Using his hands, his strong fingers for forceps, he had pulled and twisted the baby. The midwife, arriving late, had found the baby’s head pulled out of shape, its neck stretched, its body warped; and she had pushed the head back and moulded the body with her hands. But Pa always remembered, and was ashamed, and he was kinder to Noah than to the others. In Noah’s broad face, eyes too far apart, and long fragile jaw Pa thought he saw the twisted warped skull of the baby. Noah could do all that was required of him, could read and write, could work and figure, but he didn’t seem to care; there was a listlessness in him toward things people wanted and needed. He lived in a strange silent house and looked out of it through calm eyes. He was a stranger to all the world, but he was not lonely. (GW, pp. 72-73.)
Steinbeck has used the word 'strange' five times in the above extract to emphasize and reassure that Noah was the strangest of all his comic sketches. The number of such comic sketches which could, however, be cited from the pages of Steinbeck's works is almost endless. Those cited thus far, suggest, indeed, his keen interest in the portrayal of his characters in comic terms. Frankie in *Cannery Row* is another example of both physically and mentally grotesque character. These individualized and localized comic portrayals bear, of course, some relation to those derisive portraits of poor whites which had already had American flavour.

This kind of comic *reductio ad absurdum* besides making his characters look absurd, also provides Steinbeck, in spite of his sympathies with them, that element of detachment from his material which is so typical of Southern and Southwestern humorists. He could achieve it through language and can further be evidenced in the narrator's use of high flown poetic diction when he describes the rough activities of the paisanos: they are "stupendously drunk," "spend riotous nights," have really "fine fights," or short but "glorious fights," and receive "glorious cuts and bruises," in "roaring battles that raged through whole clots of men." Even stealing food for Teresina is described as a "glorious game" and Danny's death as "one last glorious, helpless assault on the Gods."
But for major protagonists Steinbeck has again chosen in these works types recurrent throughout American comedy. His leading characters are lower class whites; the social outcasts, shiftless, vulgar, undignified, immodest, ne'er-do-wells, rapscallions, liars, scalawags, quirkky, imposters, rogues, scoundrels, rascals, and spendthrifts of time, money and love. Nothing has been said about the external appearance of the paisanos of Tortilla Flat, or the Joads of The Grapes of Wrath, or Mack and the boys of Cannery Row, or Mac and Jim of In Dubious Battle. Very little is known about what they look like, they often reveal themselves only through their talks, and behaviour; through their relations to other characters.

With their uncouth manners, shabbily dressed paisanos swaggering down the Monterey street in Tortilla Flat are unmistakably the very picture of the Southwestern prototypes already created by Hooper and Harris. The mode of living of these paisanos—Danny, Pilon, Pablo, Jesus Maria and Big Joe Portagee—is much the same as that of Simon Suggs and Sut Lovingood. They "live in old wooden houses out in infertile forest set in weedy yards, and the pine trees from the forest are about the houses." (TF, p.10). Their window panes have been obscured: with cobwebs, with dust and with the neat marks of raindrops. Through it the
sunlight can hardly penetrate even during midday. None except for Danny has a bed. Pablo sleeps on the mat of three sheepskins stitched together, Jesus Maria having nothing to spread under him on the floor uses one of old overcoats through the sleeves of which he puts his arms and his legs through the sleeves of another. Pilon sleeps wrapped in a big piece of carpet, whereas Big Joe sleeps simply in his clothes.

Paisanos are lazy and careless; without culture, refinement, ambition or wealth. More surprising is that they hardly realize the importance of these things in life. They are seldom seen working; they have nothing of their own in the world; but if they get something by miracle or inherit a house they spoil it by their careless handling. Aversion to work being their chief pleasure, they usually depend for their subsistence upon chance and accept and are usually content with what they procure with least possible efforts. Though they advise Pirate to live a decent life and not to eat the cast out food, they themselves, much contradictory to their advice, depend upon the cast out pickings which the Pirate collects at the backdoors of the restaurants. Their very existence is without motive and life, a kind of enigma. No one knows how they can live so happily without basic necessities.
These not-a-care-in-the-world sort of boys are
the pleasant rogues whose roguery chiefly consists in
manipulating a free dinner for themselves, in stealing
a chicken, pine sticks, hand sandwiches, wine, food and
getting drunk all their lives at the cost of others.
They lie outrageously, steal whatever they can lay their
hands on and cheat everyone whoever they happen to
encounter and thus coolly betray the trust reposed in them.
Their activities centre around good wine and women.

They usually do not have money but if it is incidentally
obtained, somehow or the other, through trickery or miracle,
they squander it frivolously either on wine or on purchasing
presents for women, which too, they often steal back and
trade to Torreilli for some measure of wine. In drinking
they know little restraint and can empty gallons of wine
at a time.

Again, in their lack of shame and modesty and family
feeling, paisanos proclaim their identity with the
Southwestern legendary heroes. None of them is very moral;
hence they have no revulsion for amorality. They consider
little love affair right and healthy. Uninhibited as they
are, nothing can restrain their actions. They are lecherous
who like to look at the naked legs of the girls, and
unhesitatingly go to whores, shawes and harpies to commit
adultery and satisfy their carnal urges. They take improper
liberties with Torrelli's wife and impregnate Senora Teresina Cortes whom they help in distress.

Rough and dirty, dressed in jeans and open shirt, Mac and Jim in *In Dubious Battle*, in their gung-ho and single principle: "We've got to use everything," belong to the long line of genius rogues and especially resemble Hooper's Simon Suggs whose maxim is "it is good to be shifty in a new country." They are shrewd scoundrels and sanguine imposters who dupe successfully everyone whom they happen to meet. In order to befoul others they use everything, every means at hand. To win the strikers' confidence, Mac helps deliver a child to Lisa without any training and knowledge of delivery endangering the life of both mother and the child; they take full advantage of old Dan's falling from the tree and his broken hip as a means to initiate the strike, the dead and beaten body of their crazed radical comrade, Joy, is put on the public funeral to rekindle the slowed down spirit of the strikers to continue the strike, Jim's mangled body is also used for the similar purpose. Instead of helping the poor workers they are all the time seen exploiting them. Mac teaches London the trick not only how to make strikers simply vote but to vote in his own favour. Harsh, brutal, manipulating and dangerous they are immune to love and affection. Jim is admonished for his liking for Anderson: "Don't go on people liking Jim."
We can't waste time liking people." They are so shrewd that they do not reveal their true identity until the end is reached and make very carefully the plan for their clandestine escape after having ruined everyone.

Steinbeck's choice of a lanky and uncouth, savage and brute Lennie in Of Mice and Men is once again in keeping with the older comic tradition of the Southwest. Most of the characters in American literature in general and Southwestern humorous literature in particular—down from the boy Quixote of "Georgia Theatrics" to Sut Lovingood and from Huck Finn to Nick Adams and Haulden Caufield—were either infant themselves or infant-like. Even William Byrd II depicted lubbers as childish in his History of the Dividing Line. Jim Boggett is called a child of the woods by Porter in his "The Big Bear of Arkansas," and Faulding's Nimrod Wildfire is an "overgrown boy." Benjy, in Faulkner's The Sound and Fury, is an idiot boy. In short, the clown in Southwestern literature was funny merely for his being "unselfconsciously infantile, even when he was technically an adult." 5

Lennie has equally nicely been portrayed with almost all the possible traditional vestiges of the Southwestern comedy. Slow-witted as an overgrown boy, he is equally "unselfconsciously infantile" both in spirit and behaviour. Unable to act independently, he is looked after by his friend,
George. His existence without George is rather impossible. If left alone, he would unwittingly crush Curley’s hand, break his wife’s neck or molest a lonely girl. Unconscious of his enormous physical strength, he often kills the things he likes most—puppy, rabbit, mouse, or any soft and furry objects—in his attempts to pet them. Hence, though simple and kind, innocent and gentle, he is not allowed by George to touch any soft and furry thing like a woman’s dress or hair.

Steinbeck has so much dehumanized Lennie that one hardly feels compassion for him. He is quite incapable of any recognizable human response; his response to every situation is alike even when it demands compassion or grief; his behaviour is quite unpredictable. He is so fearsome a figure that he can do any damn thing any time. Even he has been deprived of sexual urge that hardly qualifies him what to speak of the human world, but for an animal kingdom too. George, having shot Lennie moves away with Slim for a drink; he too feels no sense of grief for Lennie, experiences no strong emotion or remorse, as if Lennie was merely a vermin. The only thing that sets Lennie apart from all other animals and qualifies him as a human being is his agrarian dream of owning a piece of land and of raising rabbits and cows and pigs and chickens, which he shares with George and, which more than anything
else in life, keeps them both bound together. But
that is too, in the general context of their present
shiftlessness, seems to be out of place and meaningless,
although they have been joined by others in it and
have 300 bucks at their disposal, the dream is never
realized.

Like Steinbeck's early works, The Grapes of Wrath
too is about the poor whites of the South, who are in
no way well off than the paupers of Tortilla Flat and
Steinbeck's other prototypes. In his shambling gait
and with his "little bright eyes" and "a lean excitable"
and "cantankerous, complaining, mischievous, laughing
face" Grampa appears to be a direct descendent of the
eyearly heroes of the Southwest. What Steinbeck writes
about him may very well be applied to all other Joads:

He fought and argued, told dirty stories. He was
as lecherous as always. Vicious and cruel and
impatient, like a frantic child, and the whole
structure overlaid with amusement. He drank too
much when he could get it, ate too much when it
was there, talked too much all the time. (GW, p.72).

Like the degenerate prototypes of Southwestern
writings, honest, wise and courageous Joads are lazy,
ignorant, sloven, untidy, immoral, child-like, impulsive,
lecherous and natural. The exhibit no inhibitions and
move about with their pants unbuttoned and scratching
contentedly under their testicles with the women folk
moving around. Gossiping, gluttony, drinking, loving and chitchatting are their chief pleasures. Like pa'ansos they drink and eat too much whenever they get a chance, like to tell and listen to dirty stories.

Keenly interested in sex, the Joads like pa'ansos and other Southwestern prototypes, hardly exhibit any normative sexual inhibition. Whenever and wherever sex activity is in prospect, the Joads watch it unmindful of the passerby. Tom Joad and Casy, one-time preacher, stop and observe, like Mark Twain's loafers of Bricksville in Huckleberry Finn, a dog mounting over a bitch in the market place, and Willy took a heifer over to Graves' bull and both Graves and Willy watched their copulation sitting on the fence.

Controlling sexual urge is quite contrary to the mode of living of the poor peasants of Oklahoma; they go and freely enjoy sex with a whore if they feel like that. Once Uncle John, raven with lust visited Shamoo in Sallisaw and "hired three whores in one bed and snorted and rutted on their unresponsive bodies for an hour." (GW, p.89). Joad also, just after his release from the Mc Alester prison, where life without a woman for him, had been tedious and miserable, went to a whore.
No less irresponsible and parasitic, gay and
carefree than the paisanos of Tortilla Flat are the
indolent bums of Cannery Row—Mack and the boys. Much
like paisanos, they too live in an old dilapidated and
badly smelling Abbeville shed whose windows are small
and the walls unpainted which they call the Palace
Flaphouse Grill, which can hardly be called home.
Carefully demarcated portions of the Palace Flaphouse,
five oblong lines, each seven feet long and five feet
wide, drawn by Mac on the floor with a piece of chalk,
serve as their simulated beds.

The rough activities of these ne'er-do-wells and
their mode of living not only liken them to paisanos
but to the heroes of the Southwestern comic literature.
They make a mess of everything, like Harris's Sut
Lovingood, may it be a party thrown in honour of Doc
or a frog-hunt for Doc's cancer research. In their
laziness and zest, in their habit of loafing, they seem
to have directly descended from Mark Twain's loafers of
Arkansas village. The pursuit of industry seems remote
in their world and chitchatting and loafing fill the
vacant hours of their meagre existence. As for their
amusement Steinbeck writes:

Through the windows he [William, the watchman]
could see Mack and the boys sitting on the pipes
in the vacant lot, dangling their feet in the
mellow weeds and take the sun while they discoursed
slowly and philosophically of matters of interest
but of no importance.6
It recalls to mind the loafing activities of Mark Twain's shiftless loafers of Arkansas village in *Huckleberry Finn*:

There couldn't anything wake them up all over, and make them happy all over, like a dog-fight—unless it might be putting turpentine on a stray dog and setting fire to him, or tying a tine pan to his tail and see him run himself to death. (*HF*, p.367).

None of these American bums of *Cannery Row* has a family, or money, or ambition and are normally content with food and drink. But they are all very shrewd and clever if they want something. They threaten Lee Chong with dire consequences if he does not let them use his storage shed:

"... Kids might knock out the windows, you know..." Mack suggested. "Place might burn down if somebody don't keep an eye on it." (*CR*, p.107).

And though they have hired Palace Flaphouse from Lee Chong for five dollars a week, the rent as much has hardly been paid to him; although most of their money usually goes to his grocery for wine. Equally shrewd and cunning they are when they need wine or furniture for the house or a can of red paint or a present for Doc or money for the pary or a truck for the frog-hunt or frogs for Doc's laboratory.

They are the talkers *par excellence* whose gift of the gab, Mack's admiration of the captain's bitch, like Sam Slick's pleasing the hostess by kissing and admiring her kids and Mac's prevailing over Anderson by praising his pointer in *In Dubious Battle*, helps them prevail upon the captain to allow them to catch the frogs from his pond.
'You know, I've got a pond up by the house that's so full of frogs I can't sleep nights. Why don't you look up there? They bellow all night. I'd be glad to get rid of them.' (CR, p.163).

Dealing with such people often lacking in culture and refinement, Steinbeck made them reveal themselves through a speech which is often rough and vulgar and which unmistakably betrays their true identity. Their talk carries a familiar conversational tone, abounding in local accents and in racy and pithy sayings, ungrammatical phrases and everyday ribald expressions: 'You damn squirts,' 'lazy bastard,' 'the poor damn rates,' 'dirty son-of-a-bitch,' 'cold blooded bastard,' 'the bunch of lice,' 'dung-heap chicken,' 'thy mothers were udderless cows,' and 'sinful ol' goat'.

Though natural, the language of In Dubious Battle which many including Steinbeck's agent considered profane and offending. The Grapes of Wrath too posed the same problem of the profane and 'printable language.' Longstreet, if not very much ashamed of his authorship of Georgia Scapes, was not very happy of the profanity which his historical truthfulness made obligatory for him to record and which later made him describe his sketches as "literary bagatelles, the amusement of idle hours."
But Steinbeck's reply to his agent in respect of the changes suggested in the *In Dubious Battle* manuscript instead of expressing his shame strongly voices, on the other hand, his justification of his deliberate profanity:

I should like the speech of the man to remain intact if that is possible. A working man bereft of his profanity is a silent man. I've used only those expressions that are commonly used. I hope it won't be necessary to remove them. To try to reproduce the speech of these people and to clean it up, is to make it sound stiff, unnatural and emasculated. I think it is vulgar only in the Latin sense.

He was equally adamant about the language of *The Grapes of Wrath*.

Steinbeck was a conscious writer and nothing that he wrote can be called accidental. Explaining this use of common speech he once wrote to his literary agent:

The speech of working men may seem a little bit racy to ladies' clubs, but, since ladies' clubs won't believe that such things go on anyway, it doesn't matter. I know this speech and I'm sick of working men being gilded of their natural expression until they talk with a fine Oxonian flavor.

There are curious things about the language of working men. I do not mean the local idioms, but the speech which is universal in this country among traveling workers. Nearly every man uses it individually, but it has universal rules. It is not grammatical error but a highly developed speech form. The use of the final "g" in "ing" is tricky, too. The "g" is put on for emphasis and often to finish a short hard sentence. It is sometimes used for purpose of elision but not always. Certain words like "something" rarely lose the final "g" or if they do, the word becomes "somepin" or "somepa." A man who says "thinkin'"
will say "morning" if it comes on the end of a sentence. I tell you these things so you will understand why, in one sentence having two present participles, one "g" will be there and the other left off. This is a pretty carefully done mess. If you will read such a sentence over, aloud, you will see that it naturally falls that way.9

Steinbeck was not unaware of the importance of language in society and his attitude toward a language is better expressed when he has Mac say in In Dubious Battle:

"No," said Mac. "I'm not an actor at all. Speech has a kind of feel about it. I get the feel, and it comes out, perfectly naturally. I don't try to do it. I don't think I could help doing it. You know, Doc, men are suspicious of a man who doesn't talk their way. You can insult a man pretty badly by using a word he doesn't understand." Maybe he won't say anything, but he'll hate you for it." (IBD, p.142).

It was probably this urge of talking their way and never to be hated that Steinbeck, like most of the Southwestern humorists, put in the mouths of his characters a language most suited to them. He has, indeed, very carefully and commendably well recaptured the ordinary speech of semiliterate and uncultivated migrant workers.

Nevertheless, his characters occasionally become rhetoric in their speech. See Mac in In Dubious Battle delivering his lecture using the dead body of his friend, Joy, to stir the strikers to continue their strike:
"Sure I'll 'em," he cried passionately. "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. He was a radical!" Mac cried. "D'ye see what he was? A dirty bastard, a danger to the government. I don't know if you saw his face, all beat to rags. The cops done that because he was a radical. His hands were broke, an' his jaw was broke. One time he got that jaw broke in a picket line. They put him in the can. Then a doctor come an' looked at him. 'I won't treat a God-damned red,' the doctor says. So Joy lies there with a busted jaw. He was dangerous—he wanted guys like you to get enough to eat."... "I knew him."... "What are you going to do about it? Dump him in a mud-hole, cover him with slush. Forget him."... "He was fightin' for you." Mac shouted. "You goin' to forget it?"...

Mac hammered on, "Goin' to let him get killed, while you lie down and take it?"...

Mac's voice dropped into a sing-song. "Goin' to dump him in the mud?"

"O.K.," Mac said shortly. "We're going to throw the dirty radical in the mud, but he's going to stay with us, too. God help anybody that tried to stop us." (IDB, pp. 225-227).

This eulogy according to the dead Joy is a kind of trick, a claptrap to get the responses of the audiences recorded in his favour and Mac did "get a hell of a lot of people" on his side thus by putting Joy on a public funeral.

Tom Joad, too, in *The Grapes of Wrath*, becomes eloquent when he talks philosophically to Ma in his last farewell:
Ma said: 'How'm I gonna know 'bout you? They might kill ya an' I wouldn't know. They might hurt ya. How'm I gonna know?'

Tom laughed uneasily. 'Well, maybe like Casy says, a fellah ain't got a soul of his own, but on'y a piece of a big one—an' then—'

'Then what, Tom?'

'Then it don' matter. Then I'll be around in the dark. I'll be ever'where—wherever you look. Wherever they's a fight so hungry people can eat, I'll be there. Wherever they's a cop beatin' up a guy, I'll be there. If Casy knewed, why, I'll be in the way guys yell when they're mad an'—I'll be in the way kids laugh when they're hungry an' they know supper's ready. An' when our folks eat the stuff they raise an' live in the houses they build—why, I'll be there. See? — — — (GM, p. 385).

They all seen, indeed, to have possessed an unfailing native passion for virile eloquence; they are often seen going into rhapsodies over the things of their chief interest and their speech often attaining that earthy eloquence which belongs to the West. Lennie's rhapsody in Of Mice and Men is nowhere more evident than in his strong agrarian desire. When George narrates the ritualistic dream of owning a piece of land of their own, Lennie, too, reacts with the equal earthy eloquence:

'An' live off the fatta the lan', Lennie shouted. 'An' have rabbits. Go on, George! Tell about what we're gonna have in the garden and about the rabbits in the cages and about the rain in the winter and the stove, and how thick the cream is on the milk like you can hardly cut it. Tell about that, George.' (GMH, p. 18).
This tone of inflation, the verbiage appears to be at its fullest display again in the following extract from *The Grapes of Wrath* when Grampa talks about the plenty of grapes in California:

"Well, sir," he said, "we'll be a-strain' 'fore long now. An', by God, they's grapes out there, just a-hangin' over into the road. Know what I'm a-gonna do? I'm gonna pick me a wash tub full a grapes, an' I'm gonna set in en, an' scrooge around, an' let the juice run down my pants." (GW, p. 85).

Passages of this sort where the humour of exaggeration of the Western tall talk attains highly fantastic heights, may endlessly be cited from the works of Steinbeck.

The language which the paisanos speak in *Tortilla Flat* is remarkably distinct from the racy common speech of the uncivilized folk of *In Dubious Battle*, *Of Mice and Men* and *The Grapes of Wrath*. Deliberately based on Malory's Arthurian legends, Steinbeck has purposefully put a poetic and more formalized English into the mouths of his characters:

"'Now that great times are done. Thy friends will mourn, but nothing will come of their mourning.' . . . 'When one is poor, one thinks, 'If I had money I would share it with my good friends.' But let that money come and charity flies away. So it is with thee, my once-friend. Thou art lifted above thy friends. Thou art a man of property. Thou wilt forget thy friends who shared everything with thee, even their brandy." (TF, p. 16).
The tone of the speaker has consciously been elevated and Steinbeck seems here to be burlesquing the language of civilized people. All the obvious comic elements and necessary tactics of burlesque have properly been employed by the author.Laughable things have been seriously presented and silly absurdities have equally been raised to the level of dignity. Noble feelings and heroic deeds of the King Arthur and his knights are attributed here to the paisanos of low birth.

The tone of burlesque is more evident in the chapter headings: "How Danny's Friends threw themselves to the aid of a distressed lady? "How Danny was Translated" and "How Danny's Friends sought Mystic Treasure."

But even more influences of the older humour of the Southwest are clearly evident in his fictional technique of reporting the anecdotes. Exaggeration is again better represented in the following anecdote which Tom Joad in The Grapes of Wrath narrated to the depressed one-eyed lumberman to show the proper advantage of his missing eye which he regrets for he can not "see stuff the way other fellas can."

To which Tom retorts:

'Ya full a crap. Why, I knewed a one-legged whore one time. Think she was takin' two-bits in a alley? No, by God! She's gettin' half a dollar extra. She says: "How many one-legged women you sleep with?
None!" she says. "O.K."
"You got somespin pretty special here an' it's gonna cos' ya half a buck extra." An' by God, she was gettin' 'em, too, an' the fellas comin' out thinkin' they're pretty lucky. She says she's good luck..." (GW, pp. 164-165).

Here the masculinity of tone and spirit is highly reminiscent of the mock oral tales popularized by the Spirit of the Times and so is the manner quite unmistakable. Making capital of the grotesque humour known typically American, Steinbeck takes his imagination to the unimagined heights rarely excelled by any other writer in America. Told in toothsome veracular the anecdote swiftly moves along in a racy narrative and re-echoes early campfire talk.

It would not, however, be wrong to say that much of Steinbeck's humour is oral and has the flavour of frontier oral humour. Many of his jokes, incidents and anecdotes have the plots similar to the tales told around the fireside of the Southwest. Tom Joad's joke about a hump-back man in The Grapes of Wrath is a good plot for tall tale.

The entire chapter fourteen of Tortilla Flat consists of such charming interludes—of how Tall Bob having been fully fed up of the public laugh attempts to commit suicide and becomes an object of even greater laughter when his suicide results in getting the end of his nose shot off, of how the old Viejo Ravanno unexpectedly dies by hanging
himself in attempting a reluctant suicide in order to
win the love of Tina, and of how Cornelia gets all her
furniture broken and dishes smashed when the big sow
enters her house to take her young pig.

These are, indeed, some of the best anecdotes to
have come out from the pen of a Californian writer.
Done in splastic tradition of the native humour, these
tales are told with some of the flourishes of the
western tall tale.

The following scene from the story of Cornelia and
her gift pig is probably the most amusing:

'Some ladies came in to see her, then, and
Cornelia let them hold the little pig and pet it.
After a while Sweets Ramirez stepped on that
pig's tail. Oh! It squealed like a steam whistle.
The front door was open. That big sow she came in
for her little pig again. All the tables and all
the dishes were smashed. All the chairs, they were
broken. And that big sow bit Sweets Ramirez, and
pulled off Cornelia's skirt, and then, when those
ladies were in the kitchen and the door locked, the
sow went away, and that little pig went
too...'

(TE, pp. 146-147)

In its savagery and the havoc caused by the sow, the
scene is highly reminiscent of breaking of Sicily Burns's
wedding by a blinded bull in Harris's Sut Lovingood Yarns
cited above.
Not only in spirit but in manner too, his works are equally well in the long established tradition of American humour. *Tortilla Flat* is episodic in structure. These sketches about the paisanos are provided a physical link by its central characters, Danny. Here, again, Steinbeck's early technique of thinking of his material in terms of episode invariably growing into novels seems to be at work. The tales of Longstreet, Harris and Hooper are too loosely linked together for oral narrative usually favoured and developed "episodes and anecdotes rather than thoroughly integrated plots." The use of 'interchapters' in *Cannery Row* and *The Grapes of Wrath* serve such the same purpose and hinder the smooth narrative; incidents and events are brought at a halt.

Although Steinbeck surely has used the forms and materials of the older tradition, he need not have read them. Longstreet mentioned the sources of his masterpiece sketches "The Gander Pulling," "The Wax Works," and "The Fight," in his preface to *Georgia Scenes*:

"The Gander Pulling" actually occurred at the very place where I locate it. The names of the persons who figure in it are such as were well known in Richmond County at that time, and the language which I put in the mouths of my actors was just such as was common at such exhibitions. . . . Again, take "The Wax Works." The exhibition actually came off in Waynesboro, Burke County, Ga. Every character introduced actually existed . . . performing precisely the part ascribed to him. . . . "The Fight" . . . is a description of a combat which was not uncommon in almost every county in Georgia, at almost every one of which there was a Ranay Sniffle, a little more ludicrous in form and figure, and made rather more
conspicuous in this flight than the real Ransays were. In person, however, he answered very well to many of the poor class whom all Georgians have seen in the sterile pine woods of that State. These may serve as examples of how far the sketches were actually true and how far fanciful.11

The preface asserts that his sketches are based on real incidents and characters. And quite interestingly, Steinbeck's writings too, like that of Longstreet's, had a similar sense of locality and authenticity when he mentioned the germ anecdotes of two of his Tortilla Flat stories—of Corporal and his son whom Jesus Maria rescues from the policeman and brings to paisanos and, of the thwarted love of the Viejo Ravanno:

I think that when this is sent off (To A God Unknown ) I shall do some short stories. I always think I will and they invariably grow into novels but I'll try anyway. There are some fine little things that happened in a big sugar mill where I was assistant chief chemist and Majordomo of about sixty Mexicans and Yuhis taken from the jails of northern Mexico. . . .

There was the ex-corporal of Mexican cavalry, whose wife had been stolen by a captain and who was training his baby to be a general so he could get even better woman. . . . There is the saga of the C—-family. The son hanged himself for the love of a chippy and was cut down and married to the girl. His father aged sixty-five fell in love with a fourteen year old girl and tried the same thing, but a door with a spring lock fell shut and he didn't cut down. . . . These are a few as they really happened. I could make some little stories of them I think.12

And he did.
Steinbeck's works are thus usually based on factual incidents and information. In *Dubious Battle* has the Fresno strike at its back, and the Salinas lettuce strike of 1936 is much in the background of the composition of *The Grapes of Wrath*. In order to collect the factual material for *The Grapes of Wrath* he had been to Oklahoma, joined westward migrant workers, stayed with them in their hutsments and worked and moved with them. Explaining his method of writing *The Grapes of Wrath* Steinbeck once wrote to his publisher: "I have tried to write this book the way lives are lived, not the way books are written." In another letter to his agent he described that his motivation behind writing of *Tortilla Flat* was "to present a little and, to me delightful peoples" echoe almost the same and which Southwestern humorists, Longstreet and his contemporaries, had in mind a century earlier.

But there is much more to his work than their seeming comic exuberance and playfulness. Beneath this youthful atmosphere marked by gaiety, laughter and sprightliness, there are sporadic subdued overtones of satire. His poor whites are free and careless people whose entire existence revolves round about do's and don'ts, loafing and indolence; they exchange gossip and enjoy life *ad libitum*. Interwined with their existence is another world, one of commercialised people and businessmen who are bad and destructive while these uncivilized folks are good and kind-hearted.
Tortilla Flat is a study in degeneration.

Through the streets of the town, fat ladies, in whose eyes lay the weakness and the wisdom one sees so often in the eyes of pigs, were trundled in overpowered motor cars towards tea and gin fizzes at the Hotel Del Monte. (TF, p. 43).

The details, of course, build up a picture of degeneration. The comparison of fat ladies to the pigs provides Steinbeck ample scope to express his contempt, to poke fun at the contemporary bourgeois society—its false conventions and indiosyncrasies, its vanity and pretensions, its false values and morality.

Unaffected by the life around them, "having nothing that can be stolen, exploited or mortgaged" (TF, p. 10), the paisanos are a free and happy lot. This is better exemplified in their attitude toward property. For them material possessions actually hold no charm, no fascination and whatever is forced upon them is rather burdensome. Modern amenities and convenient living actually have no meaning for them. With the two inherited houses Filon notices the worry of property settling on Danny’s face and the heavy burden pressing hard upon his slender shoulders. Setting one of the houses to fire not only relieves Danny from such responsibility, it also suggests society’s undue over-valuation of the material possessions.
Paisanos are the people with their own values, with their own code of conduct. Grown up in natural freedom, they dare not deviate from their traditional path. In their world there is a strict code of discipline. Although they are among thieves, it is against their principle to steal Pirate’s bag when he himself offers it to them for safe keeping. Such acts of indiscipline are strictly dealt with and the doer is vigorously punished. Even they do not approve very much of Danny’s act of stealing Pilon’s tethered shoes in his madness:

'This is crime. They were not very good shoes, but it is a crime against friendship to take them. And that is the worst kind of crime. If Danny will steal the shoes of his friends, there is no crime he will stop at.' (TF, p.162).

Generous, altruistic and charitable as they are, paisanos offer shelter to the Mexican corporal who is training his baby to be a general. Also, they readily offer their help to Senora Teresina Cortez and save her eight children in distress by stealing but making the food available to them during the bean crop failure. They also assist the Pirate by offering him clothes to attend Mass.

Steinbeck has thus for the purpose of satire contrasted the contemporary morality with paisanos’ natural goodness. Ironically, *The Design of Tortilla Flat* was misapprehended
like that of Longstreet’s *Georgia Scenes*. It was received as a mere collection of sketches about paianos with no higher object than sheer entertainment and fun. It was greatly enjoyed and read for its quaintness and fun of paianos’ irresponsible behaviour. In doing so, the socio-economic implications of the book were often missed. This lack of proper recognition and its evaluation in its true spirit and perspective was greatly regretted by Steinbeck. He wrote to his literary agent that he wished to explore “the strong but different philosophico-moral system” of these paianos. Also, he strongly registered his remonstrance against the literary critics in his foreward to the Modern Library edition by calling them ‘literary slummers,’ much in the manner Longstreet did in the preface to his *Georgia Scenes*:

The design of *Georgia Scenes* has been wholly misapprehended by the public. It has been invariably received as a mere collection of fancy sketches, with no higher object than . . . entertainment . . . whereas the aim of the author was to supply a chasm in history which has always been overlooked—the manners, customs, amusements, wit dialect, as they appear in all grades of society to an ear and eye witness to them.16

Steinbeck’s letter to his agents:

The book has a very definite theme. I thought it was clear enough. I had expected that the plan of the Arthurian cycle would be recognized,
that my Gawaine and Launcelot that my Arthur and Galahad would be recognised. Even the incident of the Sangreal in the search of the forest is not clear enough I guess. ** However, I seem not to have made any of this clear. The main issue was to present a little known and, to me delightful people. Is not this cycle story or theme enough? Perhaps it is not enough because I have not made it clear enough.**

The letter echoes the spirit of Longstreet's above quoted extract.

**In Dubious Battle** was the first novel to type Steinbeck as a proletarian writer. It is an open and bitter onslaught on both the communist party workers and the rich ranchers. Its brutality can be perceived in its socio-economic implications, in the depiction of the poor migrant workers' plight and the subdued satirical overtones.

Steinbeck directs his anger here at the rich harvesters who exploit and make the poor and gullible workers their dupe. The Torgas Valley is fully organised, with the working conditions amazingly unsatisfactory and horrible. The workers brought over here on false promises are soon disillusioned to find themselves to have been caught in the net of their lousy tricks when they are not fully paid. Their protests against the cruelty and injustice often result in violence. The rich ranchers misinterpret their good intentions, bribe the strikers, break the strike, kill workers and cause damages to their sympathisers, until they succeed in imposing their whims upon the workers.
Compounded of the same material, Of Mice and Men deals with the agricultural labour in California, the rich employers and bunkhouse workers; it is not as bitter as In Dubious Battle was. Here the workers are not troubled and killed, there are no wage cuts, no Growers' Association, still, however, the workers are not better off. They are paid less. Steinbeck's antipathy towards the middle-class society is revealed through his compassion for George and Lennie and his deep concern with the contemporary social issues in bindlestiffs' strong agrarian dream to be their own master ultimately remains unrealized, in spite of their possessing 300 bucks for it.

As people more loyal and honest, chaste and celibate, George and Lennie are superior beings. They are deliberately set in sharp contrast to the civilized class of society represented by Curley and his wife who get married the same night they meet. Steinbeck appears here to be cynically equating the best and the worst of society as he had done earlier in Tortilla Flat, and which reaches culmination in Cannery Row. What makes them better is their belief in certain proprieties of behaviour. George does not very much approve of Curley's loose talk about having his gloves always vaseline-smeared to keep his hands soft and delicate for his wife. Also he declines to join the night trip to a nearby whore house.
Equally honest and simple are the migrant workers, the Joads, in *The Grapes of Wrath*. Hardly touched by the traits of American sophistication, with no sense of propriety and decorum usually associated with the superior white class, these poor southern peasants are true to themselves. They are not hypocrites; there is a kind of candour, a sense of honesty in their speech and behaviour, in the expression of their elemental passions.

*The Grapes of Wrath* is a more bitter and pessimistic book, a slap in the face of ideal America as a land of opportunity. Steinbeck, once again, directs his anger against the middle class society, its ambition and money values. Like *In Dubious Battle* and *Of Mice and Men*, it is a straightforward record of the poor migrant workers' living conditions which for its socio-economic implications raised instant hue and cry.

Once again, ranch owners are portrayed as villains, inhuman and cruel who cheat the workers and treat them shabbily. Their salaries are cut, they are hated, ridiculed and made to feel alienated when they are referred as Okies. They create the shortage of every commodity and while the poor stand, they silently watch standing. Nothing is wrong with the land; Chapter XXIV describes land's fertility in eloquent terms.
The spring is beautiful in California Valleys in which the fruit blossoms are fragrant pink and white flowers in a shallow sea. Then the first tendrils of the grapes, swelling from the old gnarled vines, cascade down to cover the trunks. The full green hills are round and soft as breasts. And on the level vegetable lands are the mile-long rows of pale green lettuce and the spindly little cauliflowers, the grey-green unearthly artichoke plants (GW, p.317).

Here and at many other places like the concluding scene with Rose of Sharon feeding an old man on her breast, with which the novel closes, is not the "symbolism gone sentimental" as Bernard De Voto thinks, but the whole society seems to have gone berserk which is evident from the incident that Tom Joad relates to Casy that happened in McAlester jail:

"How they treat you in McAlester?" Casy asked.

"Oh, awright. You eat regular, an' get clean clothes, and there's places to take a bath. It's pretty nice some ways. Makes it hard not havin' no women." Suddenly he laughed. "They was a guy paroled," he said. "But a month he's back for breakin' parole. A guy ask him why he bust his parole. "Hell, hell," he says. "They got no conveniences at my old man's place. Got no 'lectric lights, got no shower baths. There ain't no books, an' the food's lousy." Says he come back where they got a few conveniences an' he eats regular. He says it makes him feel lonesome out there in the open havin' to think what to do next. So he stole a car an' come back." (CG, p.26).

Business community—its vanity, its pretensions, its illusions, its hypocrisy and its relation with other fellows—had always been the target of Steinbeck's satire.
In *Tortilla Flat*, Torrelli was introduced as a shrewd businessman. Here again, Steinbeck directs his satire at the shrewd dishonesty of the business community. When Tom Joad asks the price of a con-rod and piston, the servant of the shop replies:

"Well, sir, I jus' dunno. If the boss was here, he'd go to a parts books an' he'd find out how much is a new one, an' while you was workin', he'd be findin' out how bad you're hung up, and' how much jack ya got, an' then he'd—well, say it's eight bucks in the part book—he'd make a price a five bucks. An' if you put up a squawk, you'd get it for three. You say it's all me, but, by God, he's a son-of-a-bitch. Figgers how bad ya need it. I seen him git more for a ring gear than he give for the whole car." (CG, p.166).

Lee Chong in *Cannery Row* represents the whole business class. Equally shrewd, rather more shrewd than others, he never considers the renting out of his shed to the bums as a loss from whom he never expects rent. But he knows it very well that the bums though will not pay him the rent, yet if they "ever had any money, and quite often they did have, it never occured to them to spend it anywhere except at Lee Chong's grocery." (CR, p.108).

Written for a group of soldiers with a view to relieving their post-war tension, *Cannery Row* is his funniest book. It is, nevertheless, his grimest book, which Steinbeck himself agreeing with Malcolm Cowley's remark, considered it something more than 'very poisoned cream-puff.' There are many sly and bitter thrusts against businessmen and politicized women; bourgeois society, its relaxed morality and false values, its hypocrisy and pretensions, are still the central concern of the book.
There is Mrs. Malloy whose hypocrisy is reflected in her desire to have curtains for her windowless boilers as much as of Senora Ramires's regularly pushing a motorless vacuum cleaner in her house with no electricity just in an action to show herself off cleaning the floor in *Tortilla Flat*.

Directly opposed to this sort of life deeply rooted in hypocrisy and affection, arrogance and vanity, is the simple and natural life of the depraved American bums—Mack and his companions—who in spite of their poverty are true to themselves. Like Steinbeck's other protagonists—paissano, Joads and George and Lennie—they too succeed in enlisting the sympathy of the readers in their favour for their natural goodness, simplicity and innocence. What makes them all the more attractive is their reverence for life. While most of the people talk about honesty, about decency and loyalty, about honour and gratitude, Mack and the boys do not talk about all these things; they live them. Although clever enough, quite capable of doing anything if they want something, they are still healthy and curiously clean in their dealings. Others may desert one in adversity but they will not, if once befriended. It is better exemplified in their relationship with Lee Chong. Once they are allowed to use Palace Flaphouse by Lee Chong, it was safe from every damage—safe from fire, and from windows being broken. In addition to it, they were
always ready to rush to their benefactor’s aid if a drunk caused some trouble in the grocery; Lee Chong is not further cheated, his things are not stolen, for it is against their principle to deceive their benefactor.

It is this moral goodness of these bums, their belief in certain propitiations of behaviour and discipline which forbids them to accept temporary jobs:

"No," said Mack quickly. "We got good reputations and we don’t want to spoil them. Every one of us keeps a job for a month or more when we take one. That’s why we can always get a job when we need one. Suppose we take a job for a day or so—why we’ll lose our reputation for sticking. Then if we needed a job there wouldn’t nobody have us." (CR, p. 133).

It is in this respect that the indolent loafers of Cannery Row often referred as "no-goods, come-to-bad-ends, blots-on-the-town, thieves, rascals, bums" (CR, p.110), by the more civilized folks become superior beings, "the Virtues, the Graces, the Beauties of the hurried mangled craziness of Monterey" (CR, p.110).

This shows that good clothes and serious mien do not guarantee affluence and civilization; that intelligence and reason are no check on the innate evil. The duality of bourgeois life is what Steinbeck attempts to project through his 'ethical paradox' in the following extracts.
The things we admire in men, kindness and generosity, openness, honesty, understanding and feeling are the concomitants of failure in our system. And those traits we detest, sharpness, greed, acquisitiveness, meanness, egotism and self-interest are the trait of success. And while men admire the quality of the first they love the produce of the second. (CR, p. 209).

The attitude is an obvious presentation of a similar thought already projected in the Sea of Cortez:

of the good, we think always of wisdom, tolerance, kindness, generosity, humility, and the qualities of cruelty, greed, self-interest, graspingness, and rapacity are universally considered undesirable. And yet in our structure of society, the so-called and considered good qualities are invariable concomitants of failure, while the bad ones are the cornerstones of success. A man— a viewing-point man—while he will love the abstract good qualities and detest the abstract bad, will nevertheless envy and admire the person who through possessing the bad qualities has succeeded economically and socially, and will hold in contempt that person whose good qualities have caused failure.

And if the hypothesis of Steinbeck's cynical 'ethical paradox' is correct, then, his humour has significant flavour of contemporary humour. Besides, the Joad family's sufferings in California, the notorious last image with which The Grapes of Wrath closes, George and Lennie's failure
in realising the rituality of dream of having a piece of
land of their own, in spite of their having sufficient
amount for it in Of Mice and Men; Danny's unexpected and
untimely death in Tortilla Flat are the tragic incidents
that arouse readers' pity rather than amusement. The
laughter naturally becomes wry and bitter and thus make
Steinbeck's humour of this period all the more black.

Whereas his animal-like characters with no ambition,
no higher objects in life, capable of theft, violence and
sin, who are like some fabled beast-man together with other
technical any stylistic devices—the common folks' speech,
loose and episodic structure, masculinity of tone of these
novels—all go a long way to fit his works possibly well
into the highly influential comic tradition of the Southwest.
Steinbeck never surpassed these works in humour for in them
he not only created myth but presented the best possible
comedy of his literary career.
NOTES


5 Kenneth S. Lynn, Mark Twain and the Southwestern Humor, p.133.

6 Cannery Row, p.113.

7 Quoted by Walter Blair, Native American Humor, p.108, footnote,3.


9 Ibid., pp.110-111.

10 Walter Blair, Native American Humor, p.68.

11 Quoted by Walter Blair, Native American Humor, pp.65-66.


15 Ibid., p.82.


