CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

The foregoing discussion reveals how Steinbeck visualizes human drama as a manifestation of the perennial conflict between good and evil, a conflict which constitutes his entire narrative discourse and assumes a dimension of great coherence. In his novels, he seems to have a deep concern for the problem of evil. Taken together the entire corpus of Steinbeck's work reflects prominently the aspect of evil manifested in different forms at different times right from the Great Depression of the 1930s to the moral anarchy of the 1950s.

In the novels of the thirties, Steinbeck is concerned with the disastrous effects of capitalism revealed through the injustice of the ranch-owners and cruel corporations like Shawnee Land and Cattle company which uproot and dislodge the tenant farmers. Man's longing for land is probably his strongest motive for action which constitutes the crux of Jeffersonian agrarianism. Steinbeck probes into the cruelties and misdeeds inflicted by the owners on the workers
who are perpetually exploited on the farm and no season ever brings them sufficient money so as to translate the long cherished dream into their dream and aspiration. Because of this, Steinbeck advocates agrarian humanism to be infused among workers. He exposes inhumanity of the Agricultural corporations and Banks working as the perpetrator of economic evil that evicts the starved and ill-fed Joads from their lands in their possession for generations. They migrate westward enticed by misleading assurances of abundance and full employment. It is a devastating picture of the workers' world ever painted by Steinbeck in understanding the species involved in a tremendous socio-economic upheaval of the 1930s. The flux and flow of life towards the west is Joads' education to activate their hidden impulses and motivations to progress from a limited concern for their own family welfare to a wider vision of identification with all families placed similarly. The individual families, by the stress and strain of unexpected vicissitudes, merge in the bigger group with communal unity, spiritual brotherhood that impregnant a consciousness of their own strength to survive in contempt of capitalism.

The problem of evil assumes a new dimension when it makes a clear shift from capitalism to totalitarianism. Steinbeck concentrates his focus on totalitarianism manifested in radical groups of men--Communism and Nazism. He
treats these groups as political evil so far they, like capitalism, exploit politico-economic principles, and castrate individualistic freedom to ruining humanitarian Weltanschauung. He alters the stream of his consciousness to probe into the volcanic role of group-man. Agreement of Mac to the violence itself stands against enlightenment of Joads acknowledging Emerson's oversoul. The communism is shown as group-man formed of violence by violating individualistic freedom. It invariably generates only destructive passions in man. Evil on political level is exposed to condemn the dictatorial drive of Nazi, and to idolize the spirit of democracy. Steinbeck brings about the contrast between the voluntary association of individuals in a democratic society and in a regimented society controlled by their leaders. He verbalizes his contempt for totalitarianism abusing its individuals as well as others for its self-centred success which is quite adverse to democratic spirit. He demonstrates how free men can exercise their right to have the right types of leadership when required and succeed in their struggle to sustain their individuality, whereas herd men cannot activate the very spirit because their leadership puts its yoke on their will, and they constantly fail to sustain their individualistic stance of life. He recapitulates the distinction between democracy and totalitarianism.

Free men cannot start war, but once it is started,
they can fight on in defeat. Herd men, followers of a leader, cannot do that, and so it is always the herd men who win battles and the free men who win wars.

Steinbeck's treatment of the problem of evil keeps on fluctuating from group-man to individualism and individualistic freedom to the necessity of group dynamism again. Since man is a social animal, Steinbeck thinks that man cannot cast off group for his real advancement and improvements. His fiction of the forties tears the mask of various social evils in modern civilization. It dismasks the predatory proceedings of narcissistic men like doctor, pearl buyers, and priest who prosper and survive at the cost of have nots. But Steinbeck treats predatory proceedings as challenge also because man can constantly struggle against it to make his fortune. He necessiates the social bondage as an ultimate answer to the problem of various social evils arising out of socio-cultural complexities. He emphasizes the need of social bond for the improvement of mankind though it obstructs its course of life for a while. Therefore, Camile Oak responds to the old calling notwithstanding its baseness. Steinbeck celebrates the holiness of all life to fathom the problem of social evil of egoistic masculinity springing from traditionalism. He proposes a new universal approach to be followed in order to root out evil of the very egoism. Joe Saul's overcoming his striking pride and small
integrity, and becoming a truly great man with courage and courtesy, is Stainbeckian universalism in which life is sacred and valuable in every form.

The decadent morality of the post-war period finally poses a serious problem of metaphysical evil which can be assailed only at the personal level. It reflects over the tragedy of a man who has to face the ongoing struggle between good and evil due to which he cannot materialize the desired end of his life. Steinbeck accepts it as a legacy of human condition after the loss of paradise. But his quest to regain the paradise in the fallen world has always inspired him to endure his struggle and triumph over sin by exercising the power of free will—"Thou Mayest". He also broods over the problem of evil emerging from the desire of modern materialistic mold. And he proposes that a man who is muddled by the corrupted present can also be saved by activating the moral conscience of the past, "Talisman". It is the very "Talisman" that enlightens Ethan to make him realize the worth of human life, and to go back home at least to shield the existence of his daughter from the corrupting influence of the age.

A recapitulation of comparative study of Steinbeck with his predecessors like Hawthorne and Melville, and his contemporary writers like Faulkner and Hemingway calculates the value of Steinbeck's art. Hawthorne and Steinbeck
disqualify the belief in the perfectibility of man. They reject the transcendental denial of evil. For both, it is a factuality of life which can never be wished away. They perceive that to obtain maturity in life or to reach the centre of moral experience one needs to undergo the calamities and disgrace. Similar as they are in their response to the transcendental evasion of evil and in their reiteration on evil as an avoidable part of reality, Steinbeck differs much in his scope and treatment of the problem of evil. One of the most important differences in their approach to the very problem can be attributed to the circumstances of their early life. Melville experiences life, Hawthorne merely contemplates it but Steinbeck does experience and contemplate it to find solution to the problem of evil. Steinbeck, having been involved in all the complexities of modern age: the Great Depression; the World Wars; and moral anarchy of the post-war period, perceives every aspect of life very closely. But Hawthorne, having been remained as an objective observer, cannot touch the depth of multidimensional life of his age. Melville's work discloses a range of experience and involvement but it is also limited to sea life. Steinbeck observes and experiences the inhumanity of man to man and makes an attempt to find out its causation to fathom the problem of evil in modern time. Melville and Hawthorne, like Steinbeck, do not accept the
doctrine of the fall of man. Steinbeck's Christian belief in the moral growth that cannot occur without confrontation of sin, suffering, appear in Hawthorne but it is absent in Melville.

The fictional zones of Hawthorne and Melville expose the toxicity of the dichotomy of the head and the heart. Both of them agree that exaltation of one over the other results in dehumanization of the individual. Yet their fiction is devoid of Steinbeckian make of "Timshel" or "Talisman" that spiritualizes man to overcome the very dichotomy. The development of science and technology, promising a greater independence and more material comforts, is observed by Melville and Hawthorne to focus on the culmination of pride and isolation like Ahab's or Pierre's or Bonnadonna's or like that of Ethan Brand or Rapaccini or Aylmer. But they would not portray a hero, like Steinbeck's Joe Saul to overcome pride in order to celebrate the "Holiness of all Human life." It does not find even a small room in the fiction of Hawthorne and Melville to control the pride and triumph over sin. Their protagonists are always haunted by ego. They constantly combat with evil to destroy it and sustain their egoistic existence. But it eventually dislodges their lives. Steinbeck unfolds this craze but it does not play the same role with his protagonists. His heroes, too, constantly struggle against evil. But they do not try to destroy it and
triumph over it. Because they know the crux of human life—a
dichotomy of good and evil is unending. On this count,
Steinbeck emerges as the more satisfying amongst his
predecessors. He definitely scores over Hawthorne who
perceives pride, sin, egoism, and passion as the causes
of evil. Hawthorne's characters do not rise to the heroic
heights of Steinbeckian characters triumphing over evil.
Most of them are victimized by the power of evil. Melville's
treatment of evil, like Steinbeck's, embraces nearly every
aspect of human life—economic, political, social, and
metaphysical. Dealing with the aspect of evil at metaphysical
level, Melville parallels Steinbeck only when Ishmael and Ahab
perceive the white whale to be the emblem of good and evil as
Adam and Charles find out good and evil in Cathy. But like
Ahab, who runs after the white whale to destroy it thinking
to be evil that has broken his leg, Adam does not chase Cathy
who also fractures his shoulder with bullets. Both Hawthorne
and Melville realize freedom of individualistic will but not
like "Timshel" to exercise it in positive manner to prevail
over evil.

The realistic pattern of evil in the novels of
Steinbeck tremendously contrasts with Henry James' realistic
aspect of evil. To quote J.A.Ward:

Henry James is a realistic in fiction, one who
conceives of his art as an end, not as a means, and
whose effort is to dramatize life, to depict
life, and to give form to life, not to present a religious or philosophic system. Evil is present in his fiction as it is embodied in concrete characters and situations and as the characters reflect upon these. James' concern with evil is a concern with an aspect of reality, and therefore it is dealt with imaginatively rather than theologically or moralistically.

Steinbeck also presents evil grounded in social situations and concrete characters. But he deals with evil not only imaginatively but practically and moralistically as well. Evil in Jamesian fiction is not so much a problem but an inexorable, ubiquitous reality causing pain, suffering and destruction. It is present at the base of every human situation, and is at least latent in everyman. In this regard Steinbeck differs from James. James has a "sense of evil" rather than an "idea of evil" or "concept of evil". For James it is just "obscure and definite". On the other hand, Steinbeck clearly unfolds various destructive forces of evil at work in the functional design of modern age. Both of them, of course, treat evil as an avoidable force. They do not characterize Ahab to deny the existence of evil along with good. "Though (Jamesian) villains are usually active, evil to Henry James is a negative reality. In this respect James, more in the tradition of Emerson than that of Hawthorne and Melville, deviates from the modified Manicheanism prevalent in much American literature." A Jamesian character, who injures others, does so through the
pursuit of good just as Steinbeck's Mordeen does by deviating from social norms to suffice her husband's longing for a child. Evil is active principle in Steinbeckian fictional world.

Steinbeck designs a timeless phenomenon of evil manifested in the radical party leaders like Mac or London who exploit group-man and hurl it into the pit of tragedy. Unlike James, Steinbeck does not know evil by sheer contemplation and curiosity, as something outside of himself but through his personal experience of school life when he used to work on ranch, and observe the hopeless migrants dreaming of sweet home which was devasted by the dash of the lopsided socio-economic system, mismanagement, and maladministration in the complex modern age.

Like Steinbeck's treatment of evil, Hemingway's treatment of evil looms large in the texture of his writings. Hemingway, like Steinbeck's multidimensional treatment of evil, exposes the evils of the Great Depression, War, politics, and metaphysics as well. But the problem of evil in the world delineated by Hemingway is not at all resolved. His literary horizon is void of Steinbeckian vision to be seen beyond the tower of tragedy. There is no creative hope in his protagonists to survive in a world rendered sterile by furore. He does not perceive an irrepressible optimism in life. His is a basically disillusioned attitude bordering on
nihilism, whereas Steinbeck's aptitude is constantly brimming with optimism. In the context of modern complicated age Steinbeck's optimism remains more valuable than Hemingway's pessimism.

Steinbeck's strong women too surpass Hemingway's stereotype female characters. Hemingway's women like Maria, Renata are rarely pictured as wives placating love as frequently as the heroes desire, and demanding nothing whatsoever in return. The sanctity of matrimony is unknown to Hemingway's diseased woman like Brett Ashley. They are neither as good as Juana to cooperate with husband to solve the problems nor as bad as Cathy to uproot the Edenic garden of Adam. But are simply meant either to keep the heroes' time filled with pleasure and free from the tedium of existence or to keep the male under their thumb. Neither Mordeeen, sleeping with others; nor Rose of Sharon, offering breast milk to unknown dying man, to break the barriers of all evil and perpetuate life beyond evil, can be seen in Hemingway's literary world.

Hemingway mainly concentrates on professional groundlings—a bull-fighter, prize-fighter, soldiers, fisherman and prototype dull woman. But Steinbeck's fiction has a wide variety of workers, migrants, professionals, universal parents stoutly struggling to survive in life against the forces of evil. John Peal Bishop also
trenchantly attacks the limited range of Hemingway's characters who accept challenge but eventually end "not with a bang but a whimper." He criticizes:

...in Hemingway, the will is lost to action. There are actions, no lack of them but...they have only the significance of chance. Their violence does not make up for their futility ...they are not incredible; but they are quite without meaning. There is no destiny but death. It is because they have no will and not because they are without intelligence that the men and women in Hemingway are devoid of spiritual things.

Faulknerian fiction discloses an awareness of the problem of evil. But it is fundamentally centralized to social evil. Steinbeck's exposition of evil represents every aspect of existence. Its economic, political, social and metaphysical phrases differ qualitatively from faulknerian treatment of evil. Faulknerian heroes attempt to confront the fact of evil. But they are depressed with their lot and distorted and destroyed as well due to the lack of courage, compassion, comprehensiveness of life, and love. On the contrary, compassion, courage, and love are the infrastructures of Steinbeck's writings. And therefore they successfully survive and glorify their actuality. No doubt, Faulkner in his Nobel Prize Acceptance speech optimistically argues:

I decline to accept the end of man....I believe that man will not merely endure : he will prevail. He is immortal...because he has a soul, a spirit capable of compassion and sacrifice and endurance. The poet's, the writer's duty is to write about
these things. It is his privilege to help man endure by lifting his heart, by reminding him of the courage and honour and hope and pride and compassion and pity and sacrifice....

However, a tone of pessimism is often being echoed in its shattering and disillusioning form in his work. Horace Benbow does not only discover the existence of evil but also experience it. But he does not have a bold step to discover a ray of hope to face it for the rest of life. A kind of nihilism pervades the air. Lack of compassion authorizes evil to register total disorder in his fictional families. On the day of suicide, Quentine's bitter cry, "If I only had a mother," highlights Faulkner's pessimism. Even helpless and hopeless idiots can shape the tower of dream in Steinbeck's fictional phenomenon, whereas Faulkner's handicapped persons like Benjoy invariably sense life just in death. His women like young Caddy consume sex not to perpetuate generation but to escape from an unsatisfactory home. Steinbeck's treatment of sex is procreative whereas sex is death in a loveless world of Faulkner.

Steinbeck's biblical power of "Thou mayest" encourages everybody to triumph over evil. But Faulkner's Calvinistic Protestantism saddens his protagonists to sigh pessimistically: "...perhaps it is upon the instant that we realize, admit, that there is logical pattern to evil, that we die." Steinbeck's adaptation of the very biblical power
equips a man with capacity to survive happily by facing the problem of evil in any sphere of life. But Faulknerian Christianity cannot equip him with capacity to survive in the horror of the post-war period. Steinbeck's faith of non-teleology to solve the problem of evil exceeds Faulknerian faith in the power of church. Therefore, Faulkner's portrait of Dilsey, despite her love; compassion; and commitment to Compson dynasty, cannot exorcise evil to protect Compson's castle from its fall.

Faulkner often insinuates doubts of all values, and a kind of nihilism pervades the air. But it is Steinbeck who cleverly adjusts his focus to face the new problems confronting mankind. Steinbeck does not hesitate even to go beyond evil either by killing a person if it helps in the betterment of human life or by exploiting sex if it contributes to the survival of human species. The burden of past in Faulkner's world is so much that he cannot grant free will to his protagonists to go beyond the present to hope better life in the future. Though Steinbeck accepts the fall of man--since we are the progeny of Adam--he generates creative hope for mankind to survive and prosper by looking beyond evil through the lense of "Timshel" which is framed with the screw of free will at the bottom of non-teleological view.

Steinbeck accepts the factuality of evil as an
indispensable element of life. He believes that Christian virtues like honesty, justice, integrity, and brotherhood reinforce man to make him survive in a selfish world. His early belief in a stern and inflexible adversary prolongs to find expression in his work till the end. But as an artist and moralist, and as a humanist too, he spins out his belief in man's capacity to stand up against the adversaries both within and without. Man's defense against evil, suggests Steinbeck, lies within his own self, not as an isolated monomaniac but as an active member of his socio-group. Reason alone proves insufficient in tackling the ambiguities and mysteries of life. It has to work in collaboration with intuition. Steinbeck's justification for murder as well as Mordeen's infidelity and Ma Joad's universal attitude to treat family compassionately, and Rose of Sharon's commitment to dying person are the specimens of his all inclusive understanding which is sufficient to breath in the atmosphere of the harsh realities of life.

Steinbeck, in his pragmatic ideology to solve the problem of evil, considerably outlines the teaching of the nineteenth century German philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche who insists that "the moralities ought to be understood and assessed in the perspective of life." When Friedrich Nietzsche proposes to go beyond evil, he means to go beyond resentment and lust for revenge. He further argues:
...no single morality can be appropriate to all men, although every individual, and even more obviously every society, requires some code. All worthwhile achievements depend on discipline, but one should not force a single code on all men. It would be folly to expect Saint Francis to try to live like Goethe, and equally misguided to want to impose the saint’s code on the poet.

Steinbeck does not theorize evil as evil insofar as it engages interest in the struggle to sustain the validity of living. Like his contemporaries, he does not doubt moral values to permit nihilism in the orbit of his fiction. Being optimistic, he destigmatizes Mordeen’s infidelity and Victor’s murder to have a great mind to celebrate life. Earthlings like Victor, having no broader vision of life, cannot extend their existence for Nirvana. They are deemed to perish. Goundlings like Aron, having no capacity to face the harsh realities, also cannot sustain their actuality for Moksha in the dismay of modern civilization.

Steinbeck alters the Cain and Abel story to present the humanitarian notion that good and evil are intermixed in men in order to force individual choice between any specific good or evil. Aristotle admires choice because it is a voluntary act, although he cautions that not all voluntary acts are choice (we might include Cathy’s action). Rather, for Aristotle choice is an act of voluntary will preceded by deliberation and it involves reasoning through alternatives and relative consequences. This is the free will that Milton
celebrates and Steinbeck counsels as the way to rule over sin. Steinbeck, in his novels, reveals the factuality of homo faber that it is neither positively nor negatively theocentric, but dialectic. He rationalizes that it rests upon a conflict between good and evil. Those who expose this duality can survive and prosper in the fallen world because of "Thou Mayest." The germ of "Thou Mayest" does exist in his non-teleological thinking, for such thinking emphasizes the necessity of confronting the total reality of life and of making personal choice in the context of that reality. It determines his subject as well his philosophy to know the ropes of our species. He assures: "Having stepped forward, he [man] may slip back, but only half a step, never the full step back."¹⁰

What makes Steinbeck's treatment of evil so unique is that he grapples with evil in modern social and democratic setting and yet makes it an inexorable force at once physical and metaphysical. Confronted with the problem of evil, Steinbeck's characters do not have the trappings of royal heroes or religious saints. Rather they are ordinary folks chosen from amongst the common ranks of mankind. The durability of his art lies in the fact that he dares to offer realistic studies of life of the depressed economy and moral disintegration of the post-war period when the novelists like Hemingway and Faulkner attempt to novelize a negative strain
in modern American civilization. None of the American authors examines evil so comprehensively to encompass mortal life as Steinbeck. He shows that evil abides in the noblest as it does in the most depraved human beings, and that it can spring up in various forms. It can spring up in a growers' mismanagement. It can take the form of sophisticated intellectuality of German invaders or Communist party organizers. It can assume the grab of selfish and parasitic society. It can even appear in the lust of man for materialistic prosperity. Similarly, Steinbeck offers variety and comprehensiveness in his portrayal of the approaches to evil. His employment of will to triumph over sin distinguishes him in his search for meaning in the chaotic world. His love for human species, compassion, glow of human brotherhood, commitment, universal outlook of parenthood, the message of "Timshel", the power of "Talisman", non-teleological view of human life, and his dynamism of seeing beyond evil to fathom the power of evil, place him in the canon of the more significant writers of the world.


3 Ibid., p. 10.


