

San José State University
Humanities and the Arts/Department of English
English 167, Steinbeck, Spring 2021

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Office Hours: T: 1-2, online and by appointment
Class Days/Time: T/TH 9:00-10:15 on Zoom

Course Description

The inaugural poet, Amanda Gorman, reminded us how literature and social engagement can be united. John Steinbeck achieved something similar in his long career, a man with a searing social conscience. Throughout this course, I want to stress Steinbeck's relevance today.

His was a literature of place. Born in Salinas in 1902, he grew up in the fertile Salinas Valley, later called the "Salad Bowl of the Nation." On the shores of the nearby Pacific his family had a summer retreat in Pacific Grove, and throughout his life he yearned to be near the sea. In his fiction, Steinbeck made Central California his own territory--"Steinbeck Country" today.

Steinbeck knew he wanted to be a writer by age 14, and he spent a lifetime writing about humans living in place-- about the connections between and among humans, animals, environment, and region. His vision was profoundly ecological, a tribute to humans living in nature, not dominating it.

As well as considering Steinbeck and region, we will also discuss Steinbeck's social engagement, his searing books about poverty, migration and homelessness, written in the late 1930s. In short, this course will consider John Steinbeck's continuing relevance as ecologist, social critic, and engaged writer--both in the U.S. and around the world.

This class will begin by considering Steinbeck's finely honed sense of place, discussing two books about the Salinas Valley--*To a God Unknown* (1933) and the short stories collected in *The Long Valley* (1938)--and one about Monterey, *Tortilla Flat* (1935). We will then turn to Steinbeck's stance as socially engaged writer, reading two novels that many consider his greatest, *Of Mice and Men* (1937) and *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939). We will then examine Steinbeck's ecological vision, which was enriched by his friendship with marine biologist Edward F. Ricketts, reading passages from *Sea of Cortez* [PDFs] as well as *Cannery Row*. We will finish the semester with his most autobiographical novel, *East of Eden* (1952) and his most winsome travelogue, *Travels with Charley* (1962).

Course Format: online

1. The class will be conducted synchronously, meaning that students are expected to reserve the allotted class time for online Zoom sessions.
2. Please leave your video camera on during class and mute your microphone when you are not speaking. Be prepared to engage in class discussions and respond if called on. "*Humankind has not woven the web of life. We are but one thread within it. Whatever we do to the web, we do to ourselves. All things are bound together. All things connect.*"
If you wish to select an appropriate virtual background, that is an excellent option. Please contact me after the first class with any individual challenges.
3. Please focus camera at eye level so all students can engage with one another.
4. Please turn off all notifications, close or minimize apps, turn off cell phones.
5. If the class wishes, I will record the seminars and post on zoom; we'll discuss the first day. Please note that University policy requires that students agree to the recording in advance of recording/posting on Canvas.
6. If anyone wishes to record sessions, you need to obtain instructor's permission in advance. And all recordings must be used for private, study purposes only—not shared with other individuals.
7. All students are required to have an electronic device (laptop, desktop, or tablet) with a camera and built-in microphone. SJSU has a free equipment loan program.

MYSJSU

Course materials will be available on Canvas. Please check messaging system through MySJSU. Also, feel free to email me at any time with questions.

Course Learning Outcomes:

- To appreciate the historical and contemporary significance of John Steinbeck's work
- To appreciate the continuing relevance of Steinbeck's social engagement. of a
- To understand Steinbeck's ecological vision and its relevance today
- To consider how his works enhance our understanding of place, region, movement in the U.S
- To appreciate Steinbeck's language and style, as well as his appeal as a regional writer

Student Learning Outcomes (CLO), Department of English and Comparative Literature:

In the Department of English and Comparative Literature, students will demonstrate the ability to:

read closely in a variety of forms, styles, structures, and modes, and articulate the value of close reading in the study of literature, creative writing, and/or rhetoric;

show familiarity with major literary works, genres, periods, and critical approaches to British, American and World Literature;

write clearly, effectively, and creatively, and adjust writing style appropriately to the content, the context, and the nature of the subject;

develop and carry out research projects, and locate, evaluate, organize, and incorporate information effectively;

articulate the relations among culture, history, and texts.

Required Texts/Readings

To a God Unknown (1933)

The Long Valley (1938)

Tortilla Flat (1935)

Of Mice and Men (1937)

The Grapes of Wrath (1939)

Excerpts from Log from *Sea of Cortez* (PDF)

Cannery Row (1945)

East of Eden (1952)

Travels with Charley (1962)

Recommended: *Journal of a Novel: The East of Eden Letters*

Optional: *On Reading The Grapes of Wrath*, Shillinglaw (2014)

Course Requirements and Assignments

Because this is a 4-unit course, students can expect to spend 5-8 hours per week preparing for classes (reading texts) and completing course assignments (group prep for *Grapes*, notebook, films). This course includes the following 1-unit enhancement:

After viewing the entire film outside class, please write a response to three films: *Of Mice and Men* (1939 or 1992); *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940); *Tortilla Flat* (1942); *The Forgotten Village* (1940); *Cannery Row* (1982); *Viva Zapata!* (1952); *East of Eden* (1955) By the end of March, before spring break, please turn in commentary **on at least 2** of the three films. The final film commentary will be turned in with final notebook.

Optional but highly recommended, reading all of *Journal of a Novel: The East of Eden letters*.

I. Book groups, *The Grapes of Wrath*: 20% (book group daily participation, group presentation, 2 page essay) Our reading of *The Grapes of Wrath*—Steinbeck’s seminal novel and one of the most significant texts of the 20th century—will be enhanced by small group discussions. The class will be divided into book groups of 4 students each. Each group will consider 5-7 chapters per session as noted on the syllabus, reading the text closely, asking questions in small groups (about 30 minutes at the beginning of class). Each group will then bring key points to the class discussion that follows (45 minutes). Students will be given a participation grade of 1-5 points for each *Grapes* class (20 points possible). In addition, after completing the novel, each group will present to the class a 10-15 minute creative response to the text—photographs, film, YouTube, or blog--linking *Grapes* to specific and significant contemporary issues (60 points). Finally, each student will submit a 2 page response to the book: most significant character or scene for you and why (20 points).

II. Reading Notebook, 11 entries, 500 words each: 40% of grade. I will check reading notebooks as indicated in the syllabus. Your final notebook will include the following:

a. Reading log, (5 entries posted on Canvas, up to 7 points each=up to 35 points) Close reading from 5 *different* texts in the class (LV counts as one book). These entries focus on issues in the texts that puzzle or intrigue you or cause you to think in a new way. Don't try to discuss a major character in two pages, for example, but you might consider that character's actions in one scene. Or discuss the importance of a minor character. Or a setting. Or the ending. Or select an image that you noticed. You might focus on word choice, or sentence structure or style—or gender, race, class, ecology. Write about what interests you. But remember to narrow, narrow, narrow.

Please do not discuss the same scenes we covered in class discussions—thus echoing those discussions in your notebook. But come up with related ideas, perhaps, or expand an idea from discussion—comparing to other scenes, texts.

In addition, each student will comment on 3 responses by your peers. (2+ points each = 6 points)

Total: 41 points possible

b. Enrichment (3 entries, 10 points each) Certainly the value of a single author course is the time to focus on one writer's career. Material will be posted on Canvas and you may select from the following:

--20 pp of *Working Days*, the *Grapes* journal

--20 pp of *Journal of a Novel*, the *East of Eden* journal. Note: Extra credit for reading and commenting on all of the Journal in your notebook.

--20 pp of *Steinbeck: A Life in Letters*

--2 episodes from Western Flyer YouTube channel

--The Great Tidepool: <https://thegreattidepool.org/>

--Monterey Public Library website, Cannery Row Days, any presentations

--Additional Steinbeck Films (in addition to the three assigned)

Total: 30 points possible

c. **Films (3 entries from list, 10 points each).** Please select three films based on Steinbeck's works from the list below, view outside class, and compare book to film in your entries. Select among the following: *Of Mice and Men* (1939 or 1992); *The Grapes of Wrath*; *The Red Pony*, *Tortilla Flat*, *The Forgotten Village*, *Cannery Row*, *East of Eden*.

Total: 30 points possible

Notebook total, 101 possible points.

III. Midterm (15%) and Final Exam (15%).

The midterm includes short answer responses (3-5 sentences) and one essay. The final exam is a creative project, presented on the final day of class (essay, PowerPoint, film, personal essay, etc.)

IV. Participation: 10%

Grading information

Essay, notebook, and exams are graded on clarity, originality, specificity (do not include long quoted passages, but refer to specific scenes in texts), and precision. Major grammatical errors will lower your final grade (comma splices, incomplete sentences, misuse of subordination, subject/verb agreement).

A and A-: A superior piece of writing. The topic focused, the language sharp, and the writing free of grammatical errors. The piece has originality and style, is elegant, thoughtful and persuasive. If research is included, it is relevant and clearly cited.

B+ and B: A good piece of writing, solid and clear. But it may lack the innovation and sharpness of the top category. The point is clear but could be supported with additional details. There may be minor spelling, typographic, and/or grammatical errors. But it is interesting enough to hold a reader's attention. If research is included, it is mostly solid and the paper draws from the research.

B- and C+: This response may be too broad or unsupported. Examples may be general rather than specific. There may be grammatical errors. The central idea

may not be fresh. The writing may be wordy and vague. If research is included, scholarship might not be relevant, fresh or focused on the topic and hand. Citations may be infrequent, general.

C and below: These essays are unfocused, without a sharp thesis. Examples are general or the essay lacks examples. Research is not thorough. There may be serious grammatical errors. If research is included, sources may be general, unfocused, not cited properly.

Determination of final grade includes completion of work noted under “Course Requirements and Assignments”—i.e., reading group projects, notebook, exams and participation. Note breakdown in number of points possible. Failure to complete any of the assignments will result in a 0 earned for that part of the course, thus significantly lowering the final grade.

The Department of English reaffirms its commitment to the differential grading scale as defined by the SJSU Catalog (Grades-Letter Grading). Grades issued must represent a full range of student performance: *A+/A/A-* = excellent; *B+/B/B-* = above average; *C+/C/C-* = average; *D+/D/D-* = below average; F = failure. *Within any of the letter grade ranges (e.g. B+/B/B-), the assignment of a + or - grade will reflect stronger (+) or weaker (-) completion of the goals of the assignment.*

Classroom Protocol

Students are expected to attend each class and engage actively in discussions and to read assigned texts carefully.

University Policies

Please see syllabus information web page at <http://www.sjsu.edu/gup/syllabusinfo>

SCHEDULE, SPRING 2020

WEEK 1

Jan. 28: Introduction to course. Presentation: Who is John Steinbeck and why read him in 2020?

WEEK 2

Feb. 2: *To a God Unknown*, Chapters 1-13.

Feb. 4: *To a God Unknown*, Chapters 14-20.

WEEK 3

Feb. 9: *To a God Unknown*, complete.

Feb. 11: Steinbeck and the short story: "The Kittens and the Curtain" (PDF). *The Long Valley*, "The Chrysanthemums" "The White Quail."

"I am writing many stories now. Because I should like to sell some of them, I am making my characters as nearly as I can in the likeness of men. The stream underneath and the meanings I am interested in can be ignored"(LL 94)

WEEK 4

Feb. 16: *The Long Valley*, "The Snake" "The Murder" "Johnny Bear," "The Harness"

Feb. 18: *The Long Valley*: "The Vigilante" and "Flight"

WEEK 5

Feb. 23: *The Long Valley*: *The Red Pony*: "The Gift" and "The Great Mountains"

Feb. 25: *The Long Valley*: *The Red Pony*, last two stories.

Notebooks due #1, posted on Canvas: Three entries (one on *TAGU*; one on *LV*; one film).

Feb. 27: STEINBECK'S 119TH BIRTHDAY!!!

WEEK 6

March 2: *Tortilla Flat*, 1/2.

March 4: *Tortilla Flat*, complete.

WEEK 7

March 9: *Of Mice and Men*, chapter 1-3.

March 11: *Of Mice and Men*, complete. *Discussion of Of Mice and Men film/book (either 1939 or 1992 film—the class will divide into groups to discuss). “Supreme Court to Consider Legal Standard Drawn from ‘Of Mice and Men’* <http://nyti.ms/2bzukPZ>.

WEEK 8

March 16: 1st 30 minutes of class: **BOOKGROUPS on *The Grapes of Wrath*, Ch. 1-10**

March 18: 1st 30 minutes of class: **BOOKGROUPS on *Grapes of Wrath*, 11-18**
“Throughout I’ve tried to make the reader participate in the actuality, what he takes from it will be scaled entirely on his own depth or hollowness. There are 5 layers in this book, a reader will find as many as he can and he won’t find more than he has in himself.” (JS).

WEEK 9

March 23: 1st 30 minutes of class: **BOOKGROUPS on *Grapes of Wrath*, 19-23.**

March 25: 1st 30 minutes of class: **BOOKGROUPS on *Grapes of Wrath*, complete.**

*“For it is through struggle and sorrow that people are able to participate in one another--the heartlessness of the healthy, well-fed, and unsorrowful person has in it an infinite smugness.” (JS, *Sea of Cortez*.)*

WEEK 10

March 30: SPRING BREAK

April 2: SPRING BREAK

WEEK 11

April 6: YouTube: John Steinbeck: Voice of America (BBC4, 2011)
Grapes presentations: Why is the book relevant in 2021?

April 8: **MIDTERM EXAM** + *Log from Sea of Cortez*: excerpts.

WEEK 12

April 13: *Log from Sea of Cortez*: excerpts and films on Western Flyer restoration.

April 15: *Cannery Row*, ½. See Monterey Public Library session on film, CR.

WEEK 13

April 20: *Cannery Row*, complete. See Monterey Public Library sessions.

April 22: *East of Eden* Part I "*I have purged myself of the bitterness that made me suspicious of the self, the "I"; you see before you the composite of a real past (a history of limited, imaginative Hamiltons) and a fictional present (fable of Trasks). I am whole and free and know that art and life depend on the lonely, anguished, solitary effort.*"

WEEK 14

April 27: *East of Eden*, Part II.

April 29: *East of Eden*, Part III

WEEK 15

May 4: *East of Eden*, Part IV.

May 6: *East of Eden* film discussion.

WEEK 16

May 11: *Travels with Charley*

May 13: film, *Travels with Charley*

THURSDAY MAY 20: FINAL EXAM PROJECT PRESENTATIONS