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HORRIFYING CONCLUSIONS: MAKING SENSE OF ENDINGS IN STEINBECK'S FICTION

STEINBECK REVIEW

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JOHN STEINBECK, LIKE MANY OTHER AUTHORS, had his difficulties bringing fictions to a fitting end. Most notoriously, his masterwork, *The Grapes of Wrath*, attempts a method of closure which many readers just cannot swallow, and *East of Eden* also configures a final scene which is likely to leave readers baffled. From the first, there has been a chorus of critics objecting to the loose ends left by Steinbeck, but there have also been antiphonal loyalists eager to show how these knotty endings actually constitute beautiful bows. Rather than attempt once more to prove the perfection of these endings as written, or the lack thereof, I want to step back a bit from these perennial problems with individual works and examine the problematics of closure in Steinbeck's work. Using the principles of narrative theory, one can effectively investigate some of the constraints on fictive resolution in Steinbeck's world. So, rather than emphasizing convincing interpretations of the endings of particular works of fiction, I will first provide a broad survey¹ of the narratological categories influencing closure in the fictional works of John Steinbeck and then evaluate significant concerns of the implied author, text, and reader which determine resolution.

As a young writer Steinbeck studied the short story form intensively, particularly during his time at Stanford under the guidance of Edith Mirrieles and in the years soon afterward. This early apprenticeship in short fiction seems to shape the choice of narrative techniques throughout Steinbeck's career, even when he experimented with various other fictional formats. Typically, early 20th-century short stories published in American magazines

depended on ironic plot reversals or unanticipated events to bring things to a close, and such twists or surprises can be seen in many of Steinbeck's works. For instance, "The Murder" in *The Long Valley* closes with a killing and a brutal assault, and in *The Pastures of Heaven* such stories as that of Shark Wicks are resolved by sudden, unexpected events, followed by brief supplementary commentary which invites readers to contemplate the significance of these sudden final developments.

It is clear that many of the early stories can be seen operating under the influence of the local color tradition, as exemplified by earlier works such as *Winesburg, Ohio* or *The Country of the Pointed Firs*. These conventions of regionalist fiction also continued to direct his narrative structuring later in his career. Specifically, the stories often depend on detailed depiction of a rural setting, and the stories are likely to have a primary focus on eccentric characters, figures who are outsiders or who are deformed or flawed in some way. Closure in such stories is most often achieved by sudden violence and/or death (as in the story of Helen Van Deventer) or by exile from the community (as in the stories of Junius Maltby or the Lopez sisters). Occasionally, though, local color fiction proffers a continuing status quo, which has, however, been steeped in an evident aura of irony or sentiment. This last method, seen for instance in stories such as "The Chrysanthemums" or that of Pat Humbert, is analogous to the local color sketch in that it declines to use dramatic events to effect plot development or resolution. In short, these prominent narrative patterns of closure can be easily found in many of Steinbeck's subsequent works of fiction.

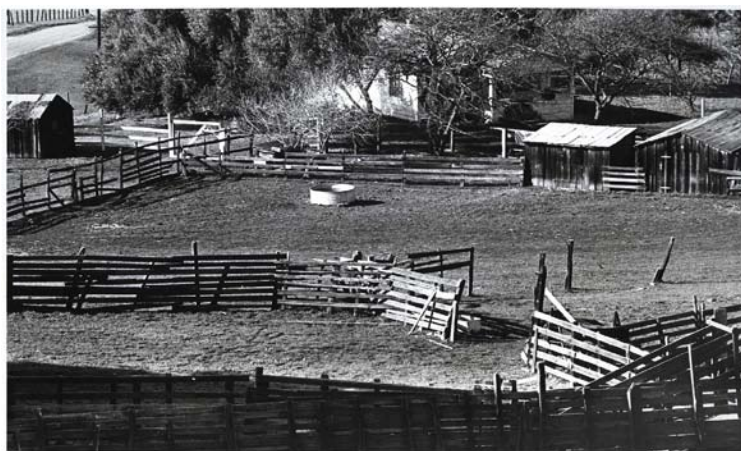
Although a majority of Steinbeck critics would probably go along with this broad assessment, it would be too simplistic to overemphasize the importance of the closure conventions of local color writing or magazine short fiction or Naturalism or other such categories, because from the beginning Steinbeck was a dedicated experimenter, continually varying or combining genre conventions. For instance, in the story of the Lopez sisters the narrative structure is that of the so-called "dirty joke" or risqué story in the beginning, but then after presenting its punch line about "encouraging" the customers, the tale turns into an ironic, comic, and rather condescending portrayal of two prostitutes with hearts of gold. At the end of the story the foolish, pious sisters make an exit for the big city to earn the wages of sin, so that after a bit of questionable comedy readers are left to wonder what

less humorous realities await these women. Another example of genre experimentation would be “Saint Katy the Virgin,” which starts as a saint’s life but quickly becomes a parody, a sort of Chaucerian tale. After the sow Katy’s demise and sanctification, the final sardonic commentary points to an eternal status quo in which pig bones become holy relics capable of curing female troubles, ringworm, and hair moles.

Generally speaking, it can be said that whatever genre influences are at work, character study is a primary narrative emphasis for Steinbeck, and he often chose to depict eccentric characters from some unique locale, or ordinary men and women dealing with the difficulties any of us might expect to face in life. True, Henry Morgan and Zapata and a few other figures may be exceptions to this generalization, but it might also be argued that they are not as successfully depicted by Steinbeck, and in any case even these heroic figures are typically shown struggling to overcome humble circumstances. Steinbeck effectively combined such character studies into larger structures, and three of these overarching frameworks are particularly important: the short story collection/cycle, the family saga, and journey or quest narratives. In addition, Steinbeck also counter-pointed the character studies in these narrative structures with essay-like exposition used to deepen thematic interest. A well-known example of this technique would be the “intercalary” chapters in *The Grapes of Wrath*, but elsewhere thematic development is often incorporated through freewheeling philosophical dialogues like those seen in *East of Eden*, *The Grapes of Wrath*, *Cannery Row*, and many other works.

Significant implications for closure are evident in the adoption of each of these three major narrative strategies. To begin with, the distinction between a short story collection and a short story cycle is extremely useful here. The former implies a largely independent status for each included story so that no strong, overall sense of closure seems absolutely necessary. However, the ordering of the stories and the thematic emphases of the later stories can present an implied sense of resolution for the work taken as a whole in some cases. The short story cycle, on the other hand, has various definite interrelationships between stories, such as shared characters, setting, and theme,² so closure for the entire work becomes a more pressing need. Even so, with stories sharing a particular setting, overall closure can be achieved comparatively simply merely by leaving the locale presented and looking back on

it, that is, distancing the reader's perspective in a quite literal way. We see this method at work in the final chapter of *The Pastures of Heaven*, when passengers on a bus trip look down on the valley and share their projected illusions with readers. Dealing with the structural interrelationships of the short stories to be brought together in a longer volume, Steinbeck would naturally be forced to deal with important issues of structural unity and narrative closure, issues that would vex him in his later works.



A SCENE FROM *PASTURES OF HEAVEN*.

It is a critical commonplace that *The Grapes of Wrath* and *East of Eden* present generational histories of the Joads and of the Trasks and Hamiltons, respectively. But we should note in passing that in *The Pastures of Heaven* and other works this narrative template was already at work. Interestingly, the family saga sometimes appeared within short stories, as a sort of mini-saga in which we find brief delineations of generational change. Examples from *The Pastures of Heaven* would include the Battle family, the Van Deventers, the Maltbys, and—most significantly perhaps—the Whitesides. Particularly in this last case, we see foregrounded the hubris of men wishing to found dynastic seats, and this motif remained a part of Steinbeck's thematic and structural repertoire until the end of his career.

Another important structuring device for Steinbeck, as many critics have suggested, is the quest or journey. These quests are often directed toward some obsessive ideal which turns out, ironically,

to have been a misleading or impossible goal. The Arthurian legends, the Quixotic escapades, the expulsion from Eden, the Okies' migration, the opening of the American West: these and many other journeys found their way into Steinbeck's fiction as apt means to provide overall structure for the narratives.

A major narratological point to be made is that the short story cycle, the family saga, and the journey motif are all open-ended; that is, they can be continued indefinitely just by appending something appropriate to the final section. This extensible structuration is perhaps significantly related to Steinbeck's interest in non-teleological thinking, although the issue is certainly complex. Closure in the novel, at least before the era of postmodern fiction, has been identified as the sense of a story being resolved satisfactorily, in terms of both plot developments and thematization. Extensible forms, it could be argued, allow a controlled but more arbitrary narrative sequencing, which could be called non-teleological in the sense that there is no predetermined end. On the other hand, it might seem that quests are quite clearly

goal-directed, a search for something or someplace, and building an undying dynasty might be seen as the guiding purpose of many family sagas. However, in Steinbeck's works dynasty builders typically falter and quests are continually extended, despite the best-laid plans of the characters depicted.

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Another major influence on Steinbeck's narrative structuring in general and on closure in particular is his interest in mythic thinking. Probably any literary artist working in the 20th century would have felt the influence of James Frazer, Joseph Campbell, Jung, Joyce, Eliot, Pound and uncountable others who emphasized the role of myth in our comprehension of the world. At any rate, Steinbeck's early novel *To a God Unknown* undeniably deals with the mythic forces at work in the lives of ordinary modern people. Implicitly, this novel and other fictions show how human beings

structure their worldviews according to narrative templates in the form of often-repeated stories. These “myths” are seen not as mere dead letters from an ancient tradition, but rather as dynamic shapers of consciousness, more like what these days might be called a “master narrative” or a “masterplot.”³

Fictive resolution then becomes closely connected to a sense of “naturalness” that corresponds to the version of reality promoted by accepted myths or masterplots. Some of the most prominent masterplots in Steinbeck’s work pointed out by critics are the Journey to the Promised Land, the Search for the Holy Grail, and the Exile from Eden. However, it is clear that in Steinbeck’s work masterplots are not merely presented to readers so that they can offer unquestioning approval. Steinbeckian works often alter these masterplots in interesting and provocative ways. An obvious example would be ironic inversions of Christian masterplots in the story of Saint Katy, or in various well-known segments of *The Pastures of Heaven*, *The Grapes of Wrath*, and *East of Eden*. In addition, competing, alternative masterplots may be juxtaposed in a work, provoking readers to select among them, or reconcile or renegotiate the mythic templates used to establish dominant themes and patterns of closure.

In constructing a sense of closure in *The Grapes of Wrath*, for instance, it will be necessary to take into consideration and perhaps reconcile such mythic templates as the Madonna, the Pieta, the Flood, the exile from the Garden, Christ’s sacrifice, John the Baptist’s prophecy, and Moses leading his people. Furthermore, many of these familiar stories are, in the novel, ironically contextualized rewrites of Biblical mythology. Analogously, closure in *East of Eden* depends on such masterplots as the Prodigal Son, the re-creation of Eden, the reunification of the family, the deathbed blessing of a patriarch, the sanctity of last words, initiation into knowledge of a secret magical word, and so on. And, once again, there are generally ironic contextualizations and revisions of these narratives so familiar to Western readers in the Judeo-Christian tradition. In summary, closure is dependent upon—among other things—a complex network or “lattice” of alternative mythic variations which must be renegotiated (Abbott 142-44).

In this brief survey of influences on closure about which there is some critical consensus, I have emphasized narrative strategies and constraints which can, I believe, sensibly be linked to an

implied author's textual constructs. These tentative observations are not meant to carve out new territory in interpreting Steinbeck's works. Rather, I have selected some unquestionably important narrative strategies and surveyed some of the resulting narratological implications for analyzing closure. Exceptions to these generalizations abound, of course, since nearly everyone who has ever written on Steinbeck's work has discussed issues of closure. Furthermore, I have simply ignored the important, interesting, and difficult issues of dramatic strategies in Steinbeck's works and how these are related to narrative. But perhaps even such a truncated survey will prove sufficient as a first approximation for analyzing closure effects in Steinbeck's fiction.

It is important to recognize, however, that not only such structural devices affect how Steinbeck's stories find resolution. Some of the most powerful of closure determinants operate more particularly on readers themselves, and perhaps the most important of all are the institutional incentives and constraints on interpreting literary works. Borrowing an idea made famous by Stanley Fish, we can say that "interpretive communities" are groups of readers with shared assumptions and objectives about reading and, often, about life. Such a situation will often lead to largely unquestioned and perhaps unobserved tendencies and a more limited range of interpretive possibilities. Shared religious or nationalistic affiliations; membership in specialized scholarly organizations, particularly single-author research groups; research standards and guidelines for conformity established by dominant scholarly societies; credentialism and its relation to employment prospects; relationships with publishers; the need for sponsorship or grants; promotional activities such as festivals and tours by national or regional foundations; these and other sociological factors may go unrecognized in their influence on the way critics talk about books. Studies by Gerald Graff, Pierre Bourdieu, Michel Foucault, Jonathan Culler, and many others have documented and critiqued some of the major constraints and incentives affecting professional readers. Clearly no critic in today's world starts with a blank slate and offers an unadulterated individual reader's account of resolution in a work by John Steinbeck.

The concept of intertextuality must also be kept in mind when we try to understand how readers' experiences of a particular text are shaped. Simply put, intertextuality can be

defined as the “web of relationships that causes the reader to have certain expectations about both the content and the form” of a certain work (Childers and Hentzi 159). Interestingly, however, intertextuality is constrained in practice by the interpretive community. For instance, it seems quite clear that a majority of today’s published Steinbeck critics, when they are considering closure in *The Grapes of Wrath* or *East of Eden*, are content with an intertextual linkage to the author’s letters and journals and to a select set of academic commentary on the novels. Though, to be sure, numerous comparative and functionalist studies have also been undertaken, the currently dominant interpretive community predisposes critics to offer intentionalist and often moralizing interpretations which privilege a handful of well-worn tag phrases such as “non-teleological,” “group man,” “tide pool,” and “timshel.”

Over the last fifty years, for instance, countless critics have repeated interpretive comments about the ending of *East of Eden* which emphasize the moral glory of the Judeo-Christian tradition in general and of a Christian humanist variant of the doctrine of free will in particular. Given the fact that most critics agree that texts allow multiple, perhaps infinite, interpretations, it is surprising how narrow a range of readings of this ending actually materializes. One might imagine some reader, for instance, who would look at the ending in terms of the death of God in twentieth century philosophy and literature. Then the resolution of the novel might be taken to suggest that God is not dead yet, but that He might as well be, since the patriarch is comatose and mumbling incoherently a phrase from a dead language which is not understood by Him or His listeners, who include a loyal servant from the colonialist tradition, a young guilt-ridden master of bean futures, and a compliant neighborhood girl with nothing much else to do. Interestingly, the allowable range of closure possibilities actually realized seems startlingly small. This surprising fact suggests that interpretive communities can severely limit the intertextual ties considered, and thereby promote a consensus of interpretations stressing social and moral platitudes acceptable to the group members themselves.

Looking more closely at the reading process itself, we can borrow two more critical concepts from narratology and say that as the text unrolls before a reader, an ongoing interplay of overreading and underreading takes place. These terms, unfortunately, may at first suggest readers are making errors at

every turn in the reading process, but this is not the intended emphasis. Rather, overreading indicates that readers inevitably will put more into their constructed readings than is on the page. This is unavoidable since all texts are mottled with gaps and indeterminacies which must be filled in provisionally. Yet at the same time readers will also repress or deemphasize other elements; this complementary process has been called underreading. Overreading, for instance, might lead a given reader to the conclusion that Rose of Sharon is a Madonna figure resolving the narrative quest of *The Grapes of Wrath* with a glorious emblem of Christian charity toward strangers. But to do so would involve underreading, too. Christian hypocrisy is scorned elsewhere in the novel; the would-be Madonna's baby is dead, and she is force-feeding a middle-aged man; the Pieta, the Flood, and other contrasting mythic echoes are also there to be heard if the reader is listening carefully. Wolfgang Iser, Roman Ingarden, Umberto Eco, and many others have dealt with the issues of overreading and underreading in the general case, and application to *The Grapes of Wrath*, *East of Eden*, and other works is tantalizing, at the very least.

Speaking generally and simply, we can say that in today's world there are powerful incentives and constraints inducing readers, professional and amateur, to look for messages in fiction, primarily uplifting moral messages which are purported to be from the author. This kind of intentionalist reading is likely to emphasize what Stanley Fish has called "rhetorical" texts--works which reinforce opinions already held by readers (Abbott 175). In contrast, there is another kind of reading, another kind of text, which Fish calls "dialectical." This kind of textual encounter denies complacency and disturbs the deepest beliefs of readers, encouraging reexamination of assumptions and renewal of intellectual search.

Also relevant here is the provocative and interesting work of Mikhail Bakhtin, which provides methods for seeing dynamic counterpoised tendencies in texts rather than terminal monoliths. Borrowing a definition from the *Encyclopedia of Contemporary Literary and Cultural Criticism*, we can posit a polyphonic novel as a "textual space where several voices are literally heard, where they converse, answer one another, and yet where no voice dominates the others (Makaryk 609-10)." To consider this issue in a more concrete way, we might ask whether we should read

East of Eden as a monologic text dominated by the figure of Adam Trask? Or should we attend concurrently to the voices of Cathy, Samuel, Cal, Lee, and others as well?

Against the backdrop of this broad survey of narrative strategies and closure constraints, we should take a renewed look at the final scene of *The Grapes of Wrath*. Critical reaction is said to be widely and famously split on this ending, ranging from claims that it is “rank sentimentality” (Fadiman) to declarations that it presents “symbolic hope and unity and spiritual nourishment” (Timmerman).⁴ Interestingly, dissatisfaction with the closing scene was often expressed in contemporary book reviews, while loyal defenses are more often seen in later single-author studies, perhaps showing us a contrast in institutional influences. In an oft-quoted jab, Ernest Hemingway pointed out that although Rose of Sharon’s generosity might help one or even a few of those in the barn, it would prove inadequate to the solution of hunger as a national social problem during the Depression. Steinbeck said in his own defense that the joke was funny but that it missed the point. Narrative theory can be said to side with Hemingway, I think, and for good reasons.

On the level of questions (what Roland Barthes called the hermeneutic code), the level at which thematic resolution is attempted, perhaps this gift by Rose of Sharon generates sufficient satisfaction in many readers, who can rest content in an interpretation extolling shared humanity. But on the level of expectations (what Barthes called the proairetic code), the level at which reader anticipations about plot development are dealt with, some serious problems develop in the final scene of *The Grapes of Wrath*. For instance, Rose of Sharon’s gesture is palpably inadequate to deal with the hunger of the others. In addition, the implausibility of the act and the implausibility of its effectiveness in even this one case disrupt the flow of a realistic narrative that has been up to this point consistently believable. Furthermore, the refusal of Rose of Sharon to respect a dying man’s own wishes, her forcing him to break social taboos and adopt an infantile and publicly humiliating position, runs counter to any claim of pure maternal or human compassion. And, lastly, the final scene lacks any consideration of more plausible alternative ways to help this man. Instead, readers are implicitly urged to stand in awe it seems, but some readers have had trouble suspending that much disbelief. In short, narrative theory gives us the tools to see what is happening as readers negotiate closure in the last scene

of this novel, and narrative theory might even encourage us to think twice about the drive toward single-minded interpretations in general.

Using this same pair of concepts, we can see that in the last scene of *East of Eden* readers encounter analogous difficulties. On the level of expectations (or plot resolution) all goes well for many readers. There is a conventional tableau offered to promote resolution, a group of loved ones gathered about the bed of a dying patriarch, each hoping for his blessing. If one accepts the premise that the utterance “Timshel” is a blessing or a gift meant to enlighten, then we have a closed ending, a resounding finale to a troubled family saga in which the declaration of the doctrine of free will settles everything. Or settles nothing. On the level of questions, the utterance “Timshel” is grossly suspect. An ancient Hebrew word analyzed scrupulously by Steinbeck himself or Pascal Covici or a fictive group of 20th century Chinese scholars who quickly mastered Hebrew for the occasion, this word miraculously matches in moral import the contextless early Modern English phrase “thou mayest,” which in turn becomes a philosophical nut to be cracked in several protracted and sometimes tipsy discussions in the novel.



STEINBECK'S *EAST OF EDEN* BOX,
HAND-CARVED BY J.S.
WITH THE HEBREW
CHARACTERS SPELLING
OUT "TIMSHEL," AND
GIVEN TO COVICI TO
HOLD THE LETTERS
STEINBECK WROTE HIM
DAILY WHILE WRITING
THE NOVEL.

On a fundamental linguistic level, too, the final scene is mired in ambiguities and non sequiturs, as we can see by analyzing the pragmatics of this deathbed discourse.⁵ Lee desperately and repeatedly urges Adam to speak Cal's name, even to the point of saying, "Make your lips form his name." Lee, based on a doctor's evaluation, has already said that Adam is brain-damaged and possibly has a totally altered personality, but he insistently demands this freedom-granting blessing in the form of Cal's name. Putting aside the dubiousness of an illocutionary act which demands that someone freely give a blessing, readers may still be left scratching their heads when Adam replies, "Timshel." He has not adhered to the cooperative principle; more specifically, he seems to have violated the Gricean maxim of relevance by not responding appropriately to Lee's last utterance. Furthermore, if Adam has actually granted freedom in this one-word utterance, conversational implicature would suggest that Cal has not in fact been free heretofore and that, even though impaired, Adam has the power to confer freedom on him. In short, the symbolic ending presents at best a paradoxical decision: should one thank an enslaving divine patriarch for finally, under duress, granting one's freedom? And shouldn't Cal be well aware of his freedom on his own terms anyway, since his earlier recalcitrant moral choices are the primary instigation of this terminal ruckus? Lee is hardly the one to depend on for advice here, since it is clear that he does not really understand illocutionary force: he has told Cal that "Adam will forgive you. I promise."

Not to belabor the point, the linguistic, logical, historical, cultural, philosophical, and theological gaps in the novel's presentation of the Timshel motif are huge, to say the least. Only readers who are carried along by the presentation at the level of expectations are likely to applaud and adopt this word as a mantra. Perhaps it is even accurate to say, using a specialized term borrowed from Steinbeck himself, that the word "Timshel" can be equated with "hooptedoodle," meaning glorious nonsense dreamed up by men carried away with their own speculations. In summary, we can see in the search for closure in *The Grapes of Wrath* and *East of Eden* textbook examples of the dynamic interplay of overreading and underreading. These two interpretive cruxes bring into focus in interesting ways many of the key processes of narrative negotiation.

Narrative theory, then, sees the imposition of single interpretations, however persuasive they may be, not as a worthy

goal but as an end product of a certain kind of conventionalized reading. Fictional narratives generate a multiplicity of meanings, but not an infinite chaos of possibilities and not a single reductive totalization, hard as we may try to impose one. The process of narrative negotiation, the complex interplay of ongoing, mutating interpretations of a work of fiction as it is read, is a complex and interesting topic of study. Perhaps it is not really so horrifying a conclusion to suggest that the analysis of narrative strategies is a more productive endeavor than merely reiterating interpretations held to be desirable for us one and all.

NOTES

¹ Although I include several of the major narratological reference works in the bibliography, I have relied primarily on H. Porter Abbott's *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative*, a recent handbook which provides a sensible and thorough survey of key principles with a minimum of neologism and formalistic paraphernalia.

² See James Nagel's brief but very helpful discussion in the Introduction to *The Pastures of Heaven* (New York: Penguin, 1995) xvi-xix.

³ Abbott provides convincing arguments for the use of "masterplot" and discusses numerous examples as well. See especially p. 192.

⁴ Cited in Ariki's discussion of the final scenes of *The Grapes of Wrath* and *East of Eden*, pages 19 and 24.

⁵ A detailed explanation of relevant concepts from pragmatics is beyond the scope of this paper, but George Yule's introduction to the subject is a model of clarity and conciseness.

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