Critics' Views on the Female Characters in John Steinbeck's Works

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Abstract

For many years male novelists worldwide have been criticized and censured owing to the many failures in their depiction of women. Without exception John Steinbeck has also been accused even though the number of critics focusing on his depiction of women has been few. In 1977 the Steinbeck Society held a conference on "Steinbeck's Women" for the first time, in which six essays generally categorized his female characters as alienated, frustrated, lonely, strong-willed, masculine, powerful, and indestructible. One year later, Peter Lisca bluntly probed into Carol Henning's contribution to John Steinbeck's writings. Since 1984 Steinbeck's popularity in academic circles has increased dramatically and critics have done a series of extraordinary in-depth research projects into the writer's personal life as well as the influence the women close to him had on his writings.

Critics' heated views on Steinbeck's portrayal of women, whether for or against the author, point to the necessity and urgency of more serious and unbiased studies of the progress of female characters' reticent quest for their fulfillment in Steinbeck-oriented works.
For many years male novelists worldwide have been criticized and censured owing to the many failures in their depiction of women. One of the most general accusations is their "negative" stereotyping of women and girls in the male-oriented novels and their refusal to allow full humanity to women. For example, Charles Dickens embellished a woman as if she were "The Angel in the House" who is in the pure--"asexual"--marital status; Nathaniel Hawthorne explored traditional female figures as creatures who were endowed with natural goodness but did not have the intellectual capacity to understand good and evil; Ernest Hemingway's early women were depicted as frustrated or thwarted or dead in their relationship with men, while their symbolic or ritualistic function was nothing but "the service of the artist and the service of man." William Faulkner, on the other hand, was labeled as an obsessive misogynist; though he wrote about minority, the symbol of the southern ego of chivalry was perverted.1

Without exception, John Steinbeck has also been criticized for having a lack of "normal" women and an abundance of prostitutes in his works. The women in his novels were said to be inadequately developed. Peter Lisca pointed out that male relationships, not women, were the focus: "[Steinbeck's] women's allurements are overshadowed by the more solid attraction of male companionship" (WWJS 206). He also contended that in all of Steinbeck's works there were only a half dozen unmarried women who were not professional whores: "In the world of his fiction women do have a place, but they seem compelled to choose between home-making and whoredom" (WWJS 207). Claude-Edmonde Magny also shared Lisca's viewpoint on the scarcity of women and abundance of prostitutes in Steinbeck's works (147). During this period even Steinbeck's either literally or figeratively innocent whores with a heart of gold were criticized by many critics. Sandra Falkenberg, the very one who examined the female characters in Steinbeck's works as a whole around two decades ago, however, found another path. By examining Steinbeck's "noble women" [Peter Lisca's term], Falkenberg roughly defined the perfect wife as an intelligent person or a philosopher who was endowed with a lot of knowledge and insights, and the perfect mother as "family figurehead, healer, arbiter and stronghold" (54) who help their husbands and families with the will to go on. In addition, he also tried to explain away Steinbeck's sweeping depiction of his female characters by relating the females' innate insightful knowledge to their being "part of cycle of Nature itself" (56) and it follows that this oneness with Nature made "the need to comprehend their implications and complexities unnecessary" (56). In short, his traditional housewives were, more often than not, faceless and characters whose fiscal future prospects were always uncertain.

Throughout history women generally have not been recognized as important
or interesting because of a common belief that men’s activities and accomplishments are more valuable to society than those of women. Therefore, male writers’ sweeping depiction of females are not at all surprising. Understandably, before 1977 only a few scholars, such as Angela Patterson and Mimi Reisel Gladstein, examined Steinbeck’s female characters in a more positive light. Not until the first conference focusing specifically on Steinbeck’s women was sponsored by the Steinbeck Society at the 1977 convention of the Modern Language Association were all of the six essays on “Steinbeck’s Women” collected and published in monograph form. Even though some critics considered Steinbeck’s female characters a controversial and provocative topic, TetsuMaro Hayashi, the editor of the monograph, insisted that “the study of Steinbeck’s works from the perspectives of his female characters has just begun” (vi). The essays in the collection generally characterize women as alienated, frustrated, lonely, strong-willed, masculine, powerful, and indestructible. Though Steinbeck had for years labored in the shadows of other literary giants, critics have by and large followed Hayashi’s direction of study since 1977.

The year 1984, above all, was a turning point, because his popularity in academic circles has since then increased dramatically and there have been several critics who have done a series of extraordinary in-depth studies into the writer’s personal life. Their research has shed light on the influence the women close to him had on his writings. To begin with, Jackson J. Benson’s magnificent authorized biography, The True Adventures of John Steinbeck (1984), is a resource rich in details and interpretations. Benson showed his sensitivity to the question of Steinbeck’s relationships with women, a topic which had been lacking, in varying degrees, in previous biographical studies. Almost simultaneously, Gene Detro also made public Carol’s positive influence on Steinbeck’s writing in his two articles. In “Carol--The Woman behind the Man,” Detro quoted Thom Steinbeck, Steinbeck’s son, as saying “Manuscripts would never have gotten to New York without her [Carol].” In Detro’s second article, “The Truth about Steinbeck (Carol & John),” Ed Ricketts, Jr. remembered that his father considered Carol to be the “backbone” of Steinbeck’s writing. Two years later, Mimi Reisel Gladstein revised her 1973 dissertation. The Indestructible Women in the Works of Faulkner, Hemingway, and Steinbeck (1986). By studying quite a few female characters through biological fecundity of natural femininity, she concluded that most of Steinbeck’s female characters symbolize either Mother Earth, Lady Bountiful or the Demeter/Persephone myth. She pointed out that the normal women outnumbered the whore types, yet the whore with a heart of gold was not the only category. In addition, she also made positive comments concerning Carol
Later, Benson’s other authorized biography, Looking for Steinbeck’s Ghost (1988), which appeared in the form of a collection of sketches, nonfiction stories and essays, also contributed to the study on Steinbeck’s intimate relations with women. Benson felt pleased that he “had given Carol Steinbeck her due” (200). In the same year, Beth Everest and Judy Wedeles in “The Neglected Rib: Women in East of Eden” made a convincing argument for the centrality of the female characters in East of Eden though they excuse Steinbeck’s restricting of women’s activities by explaining that “Steinbeck was limited in the roles he could assign them” (23) because of “the historical realities of the times of both the writing and the setting” (23). Charlotte Hadella’s dissertation Women in Gardens in American Short Fiction (1989) also focused on the limitation of female characters. By examining the female characters in the idyllic, pastoral setting in The Pastures of Heaven and The Long Valley, the valley of the world which was often guarded, fenced, and repressed, Hadella stated that “Steinbeck presents the quest for a romantically sterile Eden, where women are cloistered to prevent the human race from falling into sin, as a major factor in the disturbed lives of his valley characters” (178). R. S. Hughes also attributes Steinbeck’s best-known stories to “Steinbeck Country,” a ruggedly beautiful stretch of central California coastline and inland valleys with which typically conventional female characters; even though some of them are “strong women,” they all “transcend the stereotypes of mother, wife, and homemaker” (118). Besides, the strong garden-mother figures Steinbeck created in East of Eden either committed suicide, died of consumption, were burned to death, or were poisoned, according to Mimi R. Gladstein in “The Strong Female Principle of Good—or Evil: The Women of East of Eden.” Furthermore, strong-willed Cathy/Kate, the dominant female and also an incarnation of Lilith who escaped Adam and the Garden, abandoned her husband and her new-born twin babies as she had planned for so long.

Paul Hintz, on the other hand, took note of the power of language, both verbal and written, and concluded, in referring to Steinbeck’s Cannery Row, that “The Male Voice, in Steinbeck as elsewhere in the culture, creates a world of silent object [i.e. female]. And the silence returns to claim its own” (82). In “Missing Women: The Implicable Disparity between Women in Steinbeck’s Life and Those in His Fiction.” Mimi Reisel Gladstein compared these literary and fictional women and argued that because the proficiency and social status between them were a world of difference, Steinbeck created and controlled his female characters rather than objectively “reflecting the society of his time, portraying the women of his world” (85). She stated resolutely and decisively that “Steinbeck was not restricted by ‘a historical reality of the times’ in the ‘roles he could assign’ women.”
Steinbeck himself, nevertheless, believed that based on the women he had known he could portray fictional characters more accurately as well as evidently than any other male writer of his generation. In a letter to his Stanford classmate, Katherine Beswick, he defended his ability to discern the inner thoughts of a woman:

Most of our literature was written by men, and I am inclined to believe that they have given us other men a highly erroneous idea of sex.... At least [.] Katherine, I play safe. I use only the outward manifestations of some I have known. I make no attempt to enter their minds except where their thoughts have been obvious to me in some given experience (TAJS 125-26).

Indeed, John Steinbeck was safe because he was brought up, shown warmth, and civilized by women. He was the only boy among three sisters and he married three times. The people who must encourage him in his writing were female schoolmates and teachers at Stanford; the agents who counseled him, represented him, and attended to his financial benefits were also female. Steinbeck's dependence upon women touched many facets of his life.

In fact, he had good reason to be proud of his insightful understanding of women. For one thing, his life spanned more than half a dozen decades, and his travels took him far beyond California. After the termination of his first marriage with Carol Henning, he and Gwendolyn Conger, who later became his second wife, moved to New York. In addition, he was not a stranger to places like Mexico, Europe, North Africa, etc. As a journalist and special correspondent during the war, Steinbeck experienced a colorful life. He not only survived the Great Depression and World War II, but also experienced the warfare of progressive women in their struggle against a patriarchal society, both publicly and privately. Moreover, Steinbeck also struggled with depression in his own life. In view of the fact that human beings are creatures of their environment, an author's writing is inevitably colored and shaped by his or her interactions with others.

In retrospect, Angela Patterson was the first person to do a comprehensive survey of Steinbeck's works in 1974 for self-actualized female characters: for her, Steinbeck's women were persons of worth in their own right. Finding only a few, she nevertheless contented herself with the explanation that Steinbeck could not be held accountable for this deficiency simply because he was reflecting the society of his time and portraying the women of his world. It was a pity that Mimi Reisel
Gladstein, in her comparably integrated book, did not go any further into a more
detailed analysis of the exceptional types of mother and whore, Terrible Mother
and the whore with a wicked mind. And critics like Charotte Hadella dealt with
the woman-in-the-garden motif only through two of Steinbeck’s eighteen published
fictional works. Generally speaking, a single image cannot contain the female
character in any writer’s work, as far as the majority of his work is concerned.
Though the two works mentioned above contain a gross of short stories, Hadella
appeared to be of the persuasion that they were a fair representation of Steinbeck’s
depiction of women.

Historically speaking, women have been considered symbolic objects of use
in a masculine structure and linguistic tokens, rather than wielders of words in
their own right. Deleted or distorted by male-manipulated language, the female’s
quest for self-respect and fulfillment has been lost from culture and even conscious­
ness for centuries. In the works of a writer like Steinbeck, who had strong
confidence in his thorough understanding of “women’s heart of hearts,” one
might encode indices of a forgotten language, decipherable hieroglyphs.

In addition to the criticism which has heated up because of the availability
of new information, new controversies have appeared as well because of recent
critical analyses. Reviews and reinterpretations of Steinbeck’s novels and short
stories, of the phases of his career, of his personal relationships, and above all,
of his female characters in terms of the process their achievements in the patriarchial
society for many decades, are urgently needed and eagerly awaited. The above
discussion about critics’ views on Steinbeck’s portrayal of women, whether for or
against the author, points to the necessity and urgency of more serious and unbiased
studies of his female characters in days to come.
Notes


Bibliography


---. "The Truth about Steinbeck (Carol & John)." Creative States Quarterly 2: 12-16.


