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Ms. Lopez

John Steinbeck 1902 - 1968

John Ernst Steinbeck, Jr. was born in Salinas, California, on February 27, 1902. Salinas lies near the north end of the "long valley" whose farms produce lettuce, cauliflower, beets, fruit and grain.

He was a somewhat solemn child; he himself remarked that children are wise rather than gay. From his mother, a teacher, Steinbeck learned to love books. Among his early favorites were Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, and *Le Morte d'Arthur*.

During his high school years, Steinbeck from time-to-time worked around ranches. The varied jobs that came his way helped him to absorb background material and to know at first hand what it was like to be an agricultural laborer. He had always been sympathetic to the common man and his problems, and he was never bored with simple illiterate people. He worked on a ranch in King City, which is near Soledad, the setting for *Of Mice and Men*.

Steinbeck himself campaigned on behalf of workers and their families who were suffering at the hands of banks and employers who were sabotaging efforts made to improve their conditions. In February 1938, he wrote:

"Do you know what they're afraid of? They think that, if these people are allowed to live in camps with proper sanitary facilities, they will organize and that is the bugbear of the large landowner and corporation farmer. The states and countries will give them nothing because they are outsiders. The crops of any part of this state could not be harvested without these outsiders."

For Steinbeck, the final rebel is the artist. In America, the good writer is the watchdog of society whose job it is to attack its injustices.

Steinbeck has a cynical view of human society, spurred largely by his experiences living through the Great Depression. Most of his sympathetic characters are social failures. They may *survive*, but they do not *succeed*.

America was a "new world" to the people from the "old world" of Europe; America was a land in which to make a fresh start. It was a land in which everyone would be successful and equal. It also provided an opportunity to get away from religions and political intolerance, and the stale ideas of Europe.

America was viewed as a new Eden, where there was the chance for individual effort to receive its just reward, for a car in every garage, a chicken in every pot, a five cent cigar in every mouth that wanted it; where honesty and charity combined with energy and private initiative to create what would in the fullness of time truly be "God's country."

People sincerely believed in the ideal of the American Dream, a glorious belief in freedom and equality for the people of America. Unfortunately, life was to turn out very differently for the majority of Americans, hence the failure of the American Dream.

Throughout his life John Steinbeck remained a private person who shunned publicity. He died December 20, 1968, in New York City. John Steinbeck lived almost half of his life in New York, many of those in Sag Harbor, Long Island—where, he claimed, he was happiest. His ashes were placed in the Garden of Memories Cemetery in Salinas.