

BELIEVERS IN SPITE OF THEMSELVES:
SPIRITUALITY AND THE CALIFORNIA LITERARY NATURALISTS
(NORRIS, LONDON, AND STEINBECK)

Stephen K. George—Department of English

Spirituality and naturalism: the terms go together, if you'll pardon the cliché, like oil and water. How can naturalists, such as Frank Norris or Jack London, have any degree of spiritual insight or proclivity in their grim and unsparing works of fiction? How can John Steinbeck, who in his best work saw the world through non-teleological spectacles (Astro 106), envision anything other than a brutal tide pool ruled by survival of the fittest? This is the central paradox of our panel discussion today for *Spiritual Frontiers 2000: Beliefs and Values in the Literary West*. It's almost like (to use our current Utah setting) asking for the concepts of Mormonism and hedonism to meld into one: they simply won't fit.

Or will they? Is there an element of spiritual yearning and transcendence even within the work of these naturalistic, scientific, atheistic writers? Can naturalism, which is by definition "a-spiritual," have a religious or supernatural component? A presence beyond London's pacing dog? A teleology beyond Steinbeck's tide pool?

We on this panel believe it can: that somehow a philosophy as cold and brutal as naturalism can nonetheless portray—or perhaps betray—an aspect of living and being which can only be termed spiritual. Obviously, this spirituality may take many forms and be regarded as heretical in the traditional religious sense. But speaking here for myself, I wonder if naturalism's insistence on viewing the world solely in terms of "objects, actions, and forces" (Holman and Harmon 309) is fundamentally flawed; if it is indeed impossible to reduce all human experience to a physics text, human passion and poetry to a mere chemistry experiment, in a work of fiction.

Jackson Benson, the eminent Steinbeck biographer, notes that naturalism conflicts aesthetically with the aims of all fiction, which by its very nature assumes "that man can act, that he has a measure of free will, and that the choices he makes are made from genuine alternatives;" this is what we call a "story." According to Benson, a purely naturalist work would more resemble "a computer printout" than a novel (106-7). Thus, if naturalism cannot fulfill or withstand the most basic demands of literature, how can it suffice for the real thing? In the naturalist paradigm, is God or spirituality merely replaced by nature or a divine brotherhood of men because—and this is key—life demands some meaning beyond the random interplay of elemental forces? Can even the most pure of

**Naturalism conflicts
aesthetically
with the aims of
all fiction.**

naturalistic writers consistently sustain such a posture in his art? I don't see how he or she can.

Granted, there are some works of these authors which seem to be quintessentially naturalistic, where life is indeed a Hobbesian nightmare in which forces beyond our ken or control take a frightful toll on both human dignity and sanity. In London's "To Build a Fire," our arrogant protagonist receives the full brunt of "cold of space" (105) and freezes to death, not supplicating the Creator of that universe, but muttering to a brute animal which survives by instinctively adhering to nature's laws. In Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*, George and Lennie's fate is sealed the moment they arrive at their new ranch, and perhaps before. Both are powerless to stop Lennie, a character of "great strength" but little "mental control," from killing "the things he loves" even the worldly, disciplined George "is helpless in the hands of an indifferent, imperfect nature;" (French 89-91). In these works and others, I find no ray of religion, no spark of spirituality, no tinge of the transcendent. Instead, "life...is a vicious trap and human beings [merely]...animals driven by fundamental urges" for which they can assume no moral responsibility (Holman and Harmon 310). As Steinbeck's original title for *Of Mice and Men* suggests, these works are merely examining "Something that Happened."

**Most human
beings seem
innately driven
to find a higher
purpose for
their existence.**

The point of our panel today is that living your life as "something that happens" just isn't good enough—not for most human beings, who seem innately driven to find a higher purpose for their existence, and not for these novelists, whose naturalistic works nonetheless evince their own struggles to find or create some ultimate meaning. Flannery O'Connor once wrote that despite our living "in an age which doubts both fact and value, which is swept this way and that by momentary convictions," the modern reader still demands a story that offers spiritual redemption (382)—an access to a dimension of living that rises above the contest of brute survival.

This spiritual impulse, while evident to some degree in all three of our writers, is most clearly seen in John Steinbeck. Warren French, in his classic work examining Steinbeck and naturalism, argues convincingly that the author moved from naturalistic characters in his depression era novels (*The Red Pony*, *In Dubious Battle*, *Of Mice and Men*) to characters who manifest an "awakening of...consciousness that coincides with the awakening of... conscience" (92). Despite the social, economic, and biological forces which move beyond their control, these literary figures portray "the endless story of the strivings of a life-force to endure and triumph over" any obstacle (102). As the triumphant passage in *The Grapes of Wrath* attests:

For man, unlike any other thing organic or inorganic in the universe, grows beyond his work, walks up the stairs of his concepts, emerges ahead of his accomplishments...[W]hen theories change and crash, when schools, philosophies...national, religious, economic, grow and disintegrate, man reaches, stumbles forward, painfully, mistakenly sometimes. Having stepped forward, he may slip back, but only half a step, never the full step...And this you can know fear the time when Manself will not suffer and die for a concept, for this one quality is...man, distinctive in the universe (164).

Has Steinbeck here denied the forces of nature which buffet humanity? Of course not. The condition of the Joad family, at this point in the novel, will only worsen. Has he abandoned the basic tenet of naturalism: that man is a pawn to forces which he can neither comprehend or control? I think he has—or at least he has found a spiritual dimension to this battle which leaves what he terms “Manself” as unique and dignified for at least being conscious of the limited choices. If nothing else, man can choose to never give up. As Tom Joad later relates, in an echo of Emerson, he can also choose to become a part of the whole and live beyond his own identity and circumstances: “maybe...a fella ain’t got a soul of his own, but ony a piece of a big one... Then it don’ matter. Then I’ll be all aroun’ in the dark. I’ll be everywhere...” (463).

It is our contention that, regardless of the commitment of these authors to science and natural law, Frank Norris, Jack London, and John Steinbeck were believers in spite of themselves. Their spirituality may have been unconventional, even heretical, but it was there in their writings, whether they intended it to be or not. Such aspirations from some of the most religiously skeptical writers of our time only serve to confirm the fundamental spiritual longings within all of us. As philosophers of religion have long noted, even the atheist depends upon God to give meaning to his existence, for how can one be an atheist without some notion of God? The same can be said of our literary naturalists—behind the Chicago grain speculations, the frozen Yukon, and the California labor strikes, there is a fundamental Force which gives meaning to it all. ☺

**Norris, London, and
Steinbeck were
believers in spite of
themselves.**

SOURCES

Astro, Richard. *John Steinbeck and Edward F. Ricketts: The Shaping of a Novelist*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota Press, 1973.

- Benson, Jackson J. John Steinbeck: Novelist as Scientist. *Modern Critical Views: John Steinbeck*. Ed. Harold Bloom. New York: Chelsea, 1987. 103-23.
- French, Warren. *John Steinbeck*. 2nd ed. Boston: Twayne, 1975.
- Holman, Hugh C., and William Harmon. *A Handbook to Literature*. 6th ed. New York: MacMillan, 1992.
- Kennedy, X. J., and Dana Gioia. *Literature*. 7th ed. New York: Longman, 1999.
- London, Jack. *To Build a Fire*. Kennedy and Gioia 100-11.
- O'Connor, Flannery. The Serious Writer and the Tired Reader. Kennedy and Gioia 382-3.
- Steinbeck, John. *The Grapes of Wrath*. New York: Penguin, 1986.