

THE CONTEMPORARY NATURE OF  
STEINBECK'S *WINTER*:  
ARTISTRY, INTEGRITY, AND SEPTEMBER 11TH

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The father of Steinbeck studies, Peter Lisca, once wrote that *The Winter of Our Discontent* was undeniable evidence of the aesthetic and philosophical failure of the writer's later fiction, that "when Steinbeck abandons his earlier [naturalistic and biological] viewpoint and attempts to project an image of man based on such conventional notions as Christian morality and ethical integrity he cannot seem to say anything significant" (10). Most of the leading Steinbeck scholars of that day concurred, condemning Steinbeck's last novel "for its lack of realism, Ethan for his implausibility, the language as silly, pretentious, and unnatural, . . . Steinbeck's treatment of American moral decline as superficial, and its setting as unrealized" (Kaspareck 31). As Joseph Fontenrose pithily put it, "Ethan Hawley is improbable, and so is his story" (137). What were Saul Bellow, Edward Weeks, and Lewis Gannett thinking when they proclaimed on the dustjacket that *The Winter of Our Discontent* is "The finest thing Steinbeck has written since *The Grapes of Wrath*" and "One of his best"?

What they were thinking, if I may be so bold, is the truth about this marvelous little book. My presentation today does not allow for a careful review of the back-peddling of critics concerning *Winter*; as with Peter Lisca, most have recovered from their first impressions and have gone on to laud the novel's rich allusions to the Bible, Jungian psychology, Shakespeare, Arthurian legend, and American history; its extraordinary narrative risk-taking; its prescience for the times. I will quote but one critic, Relyo Garcia, because his reassessment is so brutally honest:

Several years ago I had the pleasure of writing an essay on . . . *The Winter of Our Discontent* for inclusion in *A Study Guide to Steinbeck: A Handbook to His Major Works*. . . . In preparation for this brief introduction [to a *Study Guide (Part II)*] I re-read that book, in the process immodestly reviewing my own theme. Reality is a harsh mistress, and I would write that essay differently today. . . . The book I then so impetuously criticized as somewhat thin, now strikes me as a deeply penetrating study of the American condition. I did not realize, at the time, that we had a condition. . . . [Steinbeck's] work thus rewards a returning reader, its seemingly amplified by our own enriched experience. (4)

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Today I would like to offer some reasons for why Bellow, Weeks, and Gannett were dead on the mark in 1961 and why Steinbeck scholarship since has had to play catch up. With these authors I would contend that, given its multi-layered complexity, intriguing artistry, and clear moral purpose, *The Winter of Our Discontent* ranks in the upper echelon of Steinbeck's fiction, alongside *Of Mice and Men*, *Cannery Row*, *East of Eden*, and, of course, *The Grapes of Wrath*. I also believe that Steinbeck, in the guise of his alter-ego Ethan Hawley, is in effect "pulling a frog" (3) face at all those critics who thought him artistically dead at the ripe old age of 59, that though their myopic reviews of the novel left him depressed, it is the author who has the last laugh today. Put simply, *The Winter of Our Discontent* is one of his finest literary creations.

As seen from our panel today, there are many means by which to support such a claim. I would like to conclude by focusing on the contemporary nature of the novel, both in terms of the artistic process by which it was created and the immediate social context to which it is responding. Steinbeck epigraphically warns that those "seeking to identify the fictional people and places here described would do better to inspect their own communities and search their own hearts, for this book is about a large part of America today." No other Steinbeck novel, with the possible exception of *The Grapes of Wrath*, is so connected to the world beyond its covers. *Winter*, Steinbeck's most "contemporary" novel, is inextricably bound to the national scandals of the 1950s and the author's increasing concerns over the moral direction and integrity of the nation. Given the recent terrorist attacks just a short distance from today's conference site, Steinbeck's concerns continue to find resonance today.

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John Steinbeck was always ahead of his time. He was environmental before the Sierra Club opened its first office; he was encouraging new forms of literature, such as the "play-novelette," when most were content to mimic Hemingway. The same is true of the artistic process by which *The Winter of Our Discontent* was created—at an age when many authors compile their memoirs, Steinbeck engaged in a writing process that personified the idea of "contemporariness." Putting aside his work on the Arthurian Cycle (which would later be posthumously published as *The Acts of King Arthur and His Noble Knights*), the writer began a novel exploring the same themes of national and individual corruption. In order to tie *Winter*'s theme of the loss of moral integrity to its immediate context, John Steinbeck wrote the novel during the same period of time as its setting—from Good Friday to July 4th—a strikingly original thing to do and, as the writer admits, something "I... [had] never done... before" (*Life in Letters* 633). Moreover, Steinbeck unabashedly makes its location the area in which he was then living, with New Baytown a thinly veiled Sag Harbor. Steinbeck's *The Winter of Our Discontent* could not be more

immediate if it had been a transcript from the downtown diner where Steinbeck regularly breakfasted; for all we know, it was.

The writer's artistry is also contemporary in its deliberate use of post-modern techniques, primarily with narrative voice, which corresponded with the cutting edge fiction of the 1950s and 60s. Most critics condemned such experimentation at the time; Warren French, in "Steinbeck's Winter Tale," argues that the mixed use of first- and third-person narration results in "the destruction of any consistent identification between Hawley and the reader" (74). However, later scholars disagree. John Ditsky argues that *Winter* is "a novel about mirrors," with the "double narrational voice" bringing "a sort of objectivity in [Ethan's]... moral vision of himself" (25). Further, after the third-person perspective of the first two chapters of Part One and Two, the primary narration of first person takes over, thus allowing the juxtaposition of the outer Ethan (what everyone sees) with what Bob DeMott calls "Hawley's inner life" (94). Such inside/outside perspectives of Ethan Hawley allow the creation of what is perhaps Steinbeck's richest literary character—an American "Everyman" as well as a nobody grocery clerk in a "wop store" (4), a symbol of integrity to his boss Marullo co-existing as a fragmented and fallen Lancelot to his friend Danny and daughter Ellen. Significantly, this depiction of the "disintegration of a man" (258) would be impossible without the writer's contemporary experimentation with narrative voice. John Steinbeck remained artistically alive and kicking to the very end.

Even more compelling, however, are the contemporary ties of *The Winter of Our Discontent* to the immediate social scandals of the late 1950s. Clearly *Winter* is an exploration of the condition that Reloy Garcia initially failed to notice and to which many Americans still remain oblivious. Steinbeck most fully describes this condition in an intimate letter to the head of the United Nations, Dag Hammarskjöld, in 1959:

I arrived at home for the culmination of the TV scandal. Except as a sad and dusty episode, I am not deeply moved by the little earnest, cheating people involved, except insofar as they are symptoms of a general immorality which pervades every level of our national life and perhaps the life of the whole world. It is very hard to raise boys to love and respect virtue and learning when the tools of success are chicanery, treachery, self-interest, laziness and cynicism or when charity is deductible, the courts venal, the highest public official placid, vain, slothful and illiterate. How can I teach my boys the value and beauty of language and thus communication when the President himself reads westerns exclusively and cannot put together a simple English sentence? (*Life in Letters* 612)

The specific incident of "general immorality" to which Steinbeck refers is, of course, the national scandal involving Charles Van Doren on the quiz show *Twenty-One*. A detailed comparison of *Winter* with

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this incident (as portrayed in the play *Night and Her Stars* and film *Quiz Show*) is given in Robert and Katharine Morsberger’s fascinating essay, “Falling Stars,” in the *Steinbeck Yearbook*. But to summarize, Van Doren, the son of Columbia professor and Pulitzer prize-winning poet Mark Van Doren, agreed to accept answers in advance and become the show’s reigning champion in order (as he rationalized) to encourage learning across the nation. A charming, handsome young elite, Van Doren indeed becomes an American celebrity and role model, encouraging “by example... scholarship, literature, and intellectuality” (Morsberger 55). He eventually earns a sum of \$129,000 on *Twenty-One*, graces the cover of *Time* magazine, and accepts a paid position as a cultural correspondent on the *Today Show*, all while continuing to teach at Columbia (Morsberger 55-56). For an entire nation Van Doren becomes a symbol of all that is right with America.

Then in 1958 the bottom fell out. After the discovery of fraud on the period’s most popular program, *Dotto*, other quiz shows come under heightened scrutiny. Herbert Stempel, the chubby World War II veteran with bad teeth and an IQ of 170 who had been replaced by Van Doren, eventually comes forward with charges that the show was rigged. Then James Snodgrass, another contestant, turns over three sealed, registered letters mailed to himself which contained the questions and answers to a future *Twenty-One* program. Finally, a congressional subcommittee brings Charles Van Doren in to testify concerning the show. Van Doren, having already committed perjury in lying about his innocence and the show’s fairness, appears before the committee on November 2, 1959, and makes a complete and public confession concerning his deception. He and eighteen others are “arrested, convicted of perjury, and given suspended sentences” (Morsberger 57). And his life is never the same.

The episode with Van Doren echoes throughout *The Winter of Our Discontent*. Like Charles Van Doren, Ethan Hawley is of aristocratic heritage, his descendants springing from the Pilgrims, patriots, and shipping captains of early American history and wielding great wealth and influence until his father lost the family fortune. Like Van Doren, Ethan is highly educated and a gentleman (albeit wearing a clerk’s apron) with high moral ideals that his wife Mary derides as “old fashioned fancy-pants ideas” (34). And like Charles Van Doren, Ethan succumbs to pressures both internal and external to shed his moral scruples in order to expand his influence. In the movie the barrage of rationalizations aimed at Van Doren is nearly overwhelming—in machine gun fashion television executives Dan Enright and Albert Freedman explain how receiving the questions ahead of time is not cheating, how he will be a role model for children around the nation, how it’s just entertainment. Even though Charles initially rejects their arguments, the slick and focused sophistry

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eventually carries the day when he chooses, on live television, to answer a previously asked question on the Civil War. From this point on Charlie's moral descent is rapid.

In much the same way, Ethan Hawley is persuaded to forsake his principles in order to be a success. Echoing Van Doren's obvious desire to please his own father, Ethan feels an intense shame as a man, father, provider, and Hawley for being nothing more than a "cat... catching Marullo's mice" (4). His rationalizations for turning his boss over to immigration, robbing Mr. Baker's bank, and facilitating Danny Taylor's drinking himself to death are, however, much more ruthless. With the first person narrative allowing direct access to his moral and psychological fragmentation, we see the thought processes of Ethan at work: his analogy of business to war, where you're a hero for killing (101); his use of natural selection and survival of the fittest to justify murder, for in the end "the eaters [are no] more immoral than the eaten" (46); and his underlying shift to a belief that morality is a relative concept—as Ethan puts it, "If the laws of thinking are the laws of things, then morals are relative too, and manner and sin—that's relative too in a relative universe. Has to be. No getting away from it" (56-7). Like Van Doren, Ethan Hawley rationalizes his way to the destruction of what matters most: his own sense of self-respect. And like Van Doren, Ethan suffers a loss of moral integrity, which is ultimately a personal virtue, a struggle of the lonely individual with his or her conscience amid intense pressures to rationalize for self gain. As both Van Doren and Hawley painfully learn, self-respect is impossible without adherence to your innermost values and beliefs.

Yet Ethan Hawley also represents the principled father, Mark Van Doren, in his devastation at his own son's plagiarized "I Love America" essay. Again, the contemporary ties of the quiz show scandal to the novel are unmistakable; in discussing the plagiarism with the public relations executive from NBC—the same network for *Twenty-One*—the "well-tailored man" from "Dunscombe, Brock and Schwin" gushes, "Thank Christ we caught it in time—after all the quiz troubles and Van Doren and all" (270-71). Earlier in the novel Ethan slips and calls his designing son "Charles," as in "Charles Van Doren," to which the petulant teenager replies, "How do you mean, Charles?" (72). Ethan's own reaction to Allen's callous dishonesty mirrors that of the senior Van Doren, who in a dramatic climax of the film exclaims to his son, "Your name is mine!" It is at this moment—when the ethical becomes the personal—that Charlie finally accepts responsibility for what he has done and decides to testify before the subcommittee. However, in Hawley's case there is no moral foundation to allow him to judge his son for betraying his own moral standards; Ethan stands self-condemned with Allen's "Who

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cares? Everybody does it.... I bet you took some in your time, because they all do" (273).

Just as the contemporariness of *The Winter of Our Discontent* cannot be appreciated apart from its artistry and social context, so does the book's immediacy continue with the current concern over our nation's character. Since the terrorist attacks upon the World Trade Center last September, America has experienced an outpouring of patriotic zeal—flags once thought passé are now sported on homes from Maine to California; the national anthem has become the feature attraction at athletic events; and writing contests across the country now focus on topics such as "patriotism," "freedom," "democracy," and our "American ideals." Again, Steinbeck's *Winter* rings with a contemporary note, even in the plagiarized "I Love America" essay, which ends in the novel with the words: "Let us look to our country, elevate ourselves to the dignity of pure and disinterested patriots, and save our country from all impending dangers. What are we—what is any man—worth who is not ready and willing to sacrifice himself for his country?" (271).

In the aftermath of the terrorist attack of September 11, we have seen men and women who indeed were "willing to sacrifice" themselves for their country. The final redemptive act at the novel's end, when Ethan rejects suicide and struggles out of the sea to return the family talisman to its new owner, his daughter Ellen, has been played out again in the sacrifice of firefighters, police, rescue workers, and even civilians aboard a plane over Pennsylvania, all of whom gave their lives—some figuratively, some literally—in reaffirming what is best about America. Yet we must also remember that this essay calling us to "the dignity of... disinterested" patriotism was, ironically, mailed in by a teenager morally disconnected from its application in his own life; for Allen Hawley, Ethan's future namesake, such "patriotic jazz" is for "squares" (71, 261). If *The Winter of Our Discontent* is indeed contemporary, a book "about a large part of America" even in 2002, we might do well to question our own professions of patriotism, commitments to political causes, and honesty in dealing with those around us.

I have considered such questions personally as I was preparing for this conference celebrating the centennial anniversary of John Steinbeck's birth. In particular, on a cold January morning I was coaxed awake at 5:00 AM by my own son, Charles, an eight-month-old who refused to go back to sleep. I went downstairs with this blue-eyed, glowing little fellow, found a comfortable spot on our futon, and put on Redford's *Quiz Show*. I think we often make moral excuses in the dark that we would shrink from in the light; in the early morning hours this movie's images of corruption were more disturbing that I had ever remembered. Watching another Charles in a game show booth struggle with his conscience brought to

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my mind several sets of fathers and sons: Van Doran and his father Mark; Steinbeck and his boys Thom and Johnny; Ethan Hawley and a cynical, streetwise Allen; and me with my own Charles slumbering on my chest. As I looked down at my son's tassled hair and complete inner peace, I thought of the film's morning scene with Charles and his dad, and Charlie's aching desire, after his duplicity, for those morally simple days of coming home to a glass of ice-cold milk and chocolate cake. As with all these fathers, I wondered if my own son would be true to his family name, honor the promptings of his conscience, and understand that there are moments of moral clarity—despite all the shades of gray—when we do know what is the right thing to do.

*The Winter of Our Discontent*, one of Steinbeck's finest novels, speaks directly to these core issues. It not only explores the depths of individual and societal corruption, it offers insight into the means for our redemption. *Winter*—like *Hamlet*, the Bible, and Dante's *Inferno*—is a work whose message is for the ages. A contemporary audience would be wise to listen lest its final words prove true and another light goes out. ☾

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