

Robbie Zimbhoff

Wreden Prize Essay Submission

Steinbeck's Scarf

John Steinbeck's scarf (or so I believed) came to live with and inspire me several years ago. Informed of my unsatisfied desire for a Burberry scarf, a family friend sent me one, embellished with the added magical possibility of its once having been in the possession of John Steinbeck. I was thrilled at the "story-value" of owning something worn by someone so famous, yet the scarf's presence troubled and confused me. I believed I was supposed to derive meaning and direction from my new possession, yet I had no clue as to what that meaning and direction could be. I was soon to find out.

That winter, I was engaged to do some research for the Elaine Steinbeck Estate. Initially my job was to search through archived materials and documents to track ownership paths of certain estate possessions. I felt like a CSI detective, as my search took me from the Steinbeck apartment in New York to the Stanford Special Collections to the Steinbeck Center archives. To the dismay of typically subdued researchers in the Green Library Special Collections, I shouted and nearly turned over my chair when I discovered my first real "find," an obscure reference to the authenticity of a Picasso drawing whose origins the attorneys had been trying to trace. I began to feel the humanness of Steinbeck, particularly in the New York apartment, as I gingerly touched the journals in which he had written, scrutinized the texts *he* had collected and valued, and observed the very artwork *he* must have enjoyed. While visiting the Steinbeck apartment – my scarf's original home, as I imagined, -- I sat at Steinbeck's desk, napped

on the couch on which he had rested, and craved even more exposure. I wanted to possess just about everything by and about the author. Thus my collection began.

Starting with Steinbeck biographies and biographical articles, I went on to the works themselves (excitedly acquiring a first edition after a summer job allowed this luxury), and, ultimately dove into the primary source documents. After numerous literature classes that spanned a breadth of literary works, it was a novel experience to immerse myself so fully in the life and works and thoughts of one single author. There were brief moments when I imagined myself inside the author's mind; my slowly growing collection provided a tangible closeness to Steinbeck that paralleled my mental explorations. The scarf was draped in a gingerly fashion atop the slowly-filling bookshelves.

I initiated my own research to find out about the man that had worn the scarf and how he transformed his own and his ancestors' experiences into creative masterpieces. Reading letters, in particular, I was able to experience the uncertain Steinbeck, the whimsical Steinbeck, the racy Steinbeck, the mundanely-detailed Steinbeck, and other aspects of the author's personality so freely opened to me, simply by exploring primary sources. Through these letters, Steinbeck came alive for me.

A true "ah-ha" moment came when a connection about which no one had previously written, became apparent. I had been fascinated by my research on Steinbeck's earliest works, particularly *Cup of Gold*, a first novel often dismissed as immature. Prior versions of the novel, more crudely written, were reminiscent of something I had once read but could not place . . . until I remembered an obscure journal written by Steinbeck's paternal grandfather about his dramatic adventures as a missionary

in Palestine in the 1860's. Stylistically transformed and historically placed in a different era, *Cup of Gold*, nevertheless, conveyed powerful elements of the grandfather's odyssey. Moreover, it contained autobiographical elements discoverable in Steinbeck's letters of the time, as well as elements foreshadowing future works. Needless to say, I was spellbound! The scarf and my research had, indeed, worked their magic on me.

Initially, my collecting and investigation focused on the Steinbeck's often-neglected early works; my research resulted in a conference presentation, yet the exploratory process and the spirit of the scarf went further still. In performing archive research, I realized that a valuable resource was absent from many literature classrooms. Archives, used meaningfully, could allow students – as they had allowed me – to step into an author's world and allow the author to step into the classroom as a vibrant human being, not so different from his student readers. Via primary sources, students could become detectives and researchers. To put this to the test, I designed a curriculum for teaching literature through archived materials, one that my high school allowed me to teach to sophomores. The proposal for this curriculum was presented at the California Association for Independent Schools conference and published in *English Journal*, whose editors joked that I was their only author whose mother had to sign his publication permission form. I was thrilled and frightened about the teaching process, but the students were as surprised and engaged as I ever could have hoped. They were particularly fascinated by the copies of letters I showed them (with library permission), awed that they could be privy to Steinbeck's thoughts, as written in his own hand. I would like, in the future, to acquire a background in education and curriculum design, to further play a role in adolescents' exposure to literature. My goal is to help others

become as stimulated as I have been in using primary sources as applied to published works to open doors to hidden meanings in literature.

I had always imagined that sometime in the future I would visit the Steinbeck apartment again and return the scarf to its rightful home. I was recently informed, however, that the scarf was actually one of unknown and far more mundane origins than originally portrayed. The tale woven around its history was meant to be inspiring, and that it was. In reality, I no longer need either the scarf or the fantasy; my collection remains, and I have felt the Steinbeck spirit come alive through his works and his words alone.

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Annotated Bibliography

Beegel, Susan, F., Susan Shillinglaw, and Wesley N. Teffney, Jr. *Steinbeck and the Environment*. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1997.

Especially interesting in this collection of articles depicting one of Steinbeck's key themes (i.e., that humans and their environment form an inextricable entity) are the writings of environmentalists, marine biologists, and other physical scientists. What emerges is a view of Steinbeck that recognizes that he was not simply an author who well-utilized his landscapes, but a true student of the natural world.

Benson, Jackson J. *John Steinbeck, Writer*. New York: Penguin, 1984.

Quoting liberally from Steinbeck letters and other primary source documents, this biography is very personal and makes Steinbeck come alive. It is considered by many to be the definitive biography of Steinbeck. It tries to be very fair in weighing the several sides of controversial issues. Interestingly, when I contacted Benson for some guidance with my own research, the author indicated a willingness if I could travel to him; however, he indicated, he was much past that topic in his professional life and had gone onto other research.

------. *Looking for Steinbeck's Ghost*. Reno: University of Nevada Press, 2002.

The inspiring nature of this work goes beyond the additional glimpses it provides into Steinbeck's life. It reveals the process of immersion undergone by the researcher, who involves himself fully with the life of his subject. As revealing about Benson as it is about Steinbeck, this book is recommended for any person starting out on the research path. It documents failures and frustrations (more often encountered than successes) on the road (perhaps, never fully completed) to the finished product.

Byrne, Donn. Messer Marco Polo. 1921. *Project Gutenberg E-Text*.
<<http://www.gutenberg.org/dirs/etext00/mpolo10.txt>.

While not generally acknowledged to be influential, this work (perhaps more significant than the pirate stories or biographical facts regarding Henry Morgan that are generally acknowledged) was mentioned by Steinbeck as being influential in his writing of *Cup of Gold*. Interestingly, this analogous tale of the quest for an idealized woman results in success, fulfillment, validation, and welcome in a foreign land.

Gannett, Lewis. *John Steinbeck, Personal and Bibliographical Notes*. 1st Ed. New York: Viking, 1939.

As I could not afford a first edition Steinbeck, I was excited to purchase a first edition *commentary* on Steinbeck by the then book critic of the Herald Tribune who knew the author personally. It is uniquely insightful about Steinbeck's typically-ignored early works and intersperses charming vignettes about the author along with his interpretations.

George, Stephen K., ed. *John Steinbeck, A Centennial Tribute*. Westport, Connecticut:

Praeger, 2002.

A collection of essays about the author, this book combines writings by analysts and critics of his writing with those by friends and family members. The latter are far more engaging and insightful, often presenting unrevealed tidbits and idiosyncrasies about the author. Noteworthy are the contributions by his son and ex-wives.

McPherson, William. *John Steinbeck, From Salinas to Stockholm*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Libraries, 2000.

This catalog of the Wells Fargo Steinbeck Collection donated to the Stanford Libraries provides descriptions of the pieces included in the 2000 exhibit interspersed with biographical information matching the collection.

Parini, Jay. *John Steinbeck, A Biography*. New York: Henry Holt, 1995.

This very comprehensive biography is interesting but somewhat uneven and speculative. Parini draws some interesting conclusions about Steinbeck – ones rarely noted by others – but sometimes fails to note that these are based on his *interpretations* of the available facts and cannot be stated with complete certainty. Footnotes are sometimes comprehensive, but, at other times, fail to tie the material to the primary sources from which it has been derived.

Perry, Yaron. “John Steinbeck’s Roots in Nineteenth-Century Palestine.” *Steinbeck Studies* 15.1 (2004): 46-72.

This is an article written by a historian who is most interested in Christian attempts to settle Palestine with agricultural movements under the Ottoman rule. Steinbeck’s paternal grandfather, an important figure in the author’s life, was a Lutheran missionary in Palestine on such an agricultural settlement; there existed diaries and court documents regarding his stay. A dramatic series of events was reported, with a violent attack on the grandfather’s settlement resulting in rapes and murders of family members. The story was well known in the Steinbeck family. While Perry speculates on its influence on John Steinbeck’s writing, he barely addresses the specific works that may have been based on these events.

Steinbeck, Elaine and Robert Wallstein, eds. *Steinbeck: A Life in Letters*. New York: Penguin, 1975.

This is an amazingly revealing book, offering an incredible amount of insight into Steinbeck, the man. Steinbeck was a prolific letter writer, penning multiple letters each day to friends and family, often before he started on his fiction writing for the day. He expressed his views on the world, fiction, and everyday interactions in his letters, letters which ranged from exceedingly serious to excited to humorous to despairing. Matching these with the time periods in which he was creating particular works provides in-depth understanding of his mental states as related to his publications. This book is a must for any student of Steinbeck who wants a glimpse into what he might really have been thinking.

Steinbeck, John. *The Portable Steinbeck*. 2nd ed. New York: Viking, 1946.

My first acquisition of monetary value, this book of selected works of Steinbeck (selections chosen by his publisher, Pascal Covici) was published first in 1943 in small book size, so as to be available to troops to carry with them in the war. The psychologically interpretive introduction by Lewis Gannett is well known as a detailed commentary on Steinbeck's earliest works, particularly his first three novels. I was particularly excited to be able to afford this Second Edition work.

----- . *Cup of Gold*. New York: Penguin, 1957

Steinbeck's first novel, based on a fictionalized account of the life of Henry Morgan, was one of the main focuses of my own research. It contains elements stimulated by a fascinating family history (particularly that of Steinbeck's paternal grandfather's adventures in Palestine), as well as Steinbeck's own lifelong redefinition and exploration of the concept of the quest. Here Steinbeck explores the notion that men are on a constant quest that often ends in disillusionment and despair, and this theme will reappear in his later works and in his own commentaries about himself as revealed in his letters.

----- . *Of Mice and Men*. New York: Penguin, 1965.

Expressing a growing interest in migrant farm workers of the Central Valley, Steinbeck took an interesting turn in his writing, expressing the wish to write this novel to be more accessible to the tastes of the working man. Supposedly it was inspired by a period of work experience after taking a leave from Stanford; while working on a ranch, he observed a ranch hand murder a foreman with a pitchfork because the boss had fired his friend. In numerous ways, Steinbeck's early life experiences were stimuli to his fiction.

----- . *Cannery Row*. New York: Penguin, 1973.

One of Steinbeck's most famous works, this novel links landscape to character. Interesting to me about Steinbeck has always been the key influence of friends on his thinking and processing; marine biologist Edward Ricketts, Steinbeck's close friend of eighteen years, was central in his influence on *Cannery Row* via the character of Doc. Also meaningful is Steinbeck's constant fascination with exploration, with immersion in nature; with empathy toward the isolated, diminishing, and failing; with separateness and interconnection; and with the inevitability of despair.

----- . *The Acts of King Arthur and his Noble Knights*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1976.

Published after Steinbeck's death, this unfinished work reflects Steinbeck's lifelong fascination with the legendary tales of King Arthur; it was his goal to keep Malory alive in modern day language. However the compilation of stories also demonstrates the vibrant notion of the quest, an idea with which Steinbeck was obsessed his entire life.

----- . *East of Eden*. New York: Penguin, 1980.

Written so his young sons could fully absorb the nature and reality of the Salinas Valley, this novel is a grand family saga of identity, love, and individual freedom. It is

believed to be based upon the lives of his maternal grandparents, but it also contains elements (typically unaddressed) of the rapes and murders experienced by his maternal grandparents while missionaries in Palestine.

----- . *Travels with Charley*. New York: Penguin, 1990.

Naming his van Rocinante, Steinbeck, in a period of self-examination, set out on a road trip alone with his dog, Charley. His letters home formed the basis of a book that observes – often critically – the various views of America he encounters. While it is travel writing and editorial in form, it also reflects Steinbeck’s view of himself at his stage in life.

----- . *The Pastures of Heaven*. New York: Penguin, 1995

Written in the naturalist style, this early novel exemplifies Steinbeck’s ties to his Salinas Valley roots and his psychological awareness of the mental depths of seemingly ordinary people. There is an openness by Steinbeck to explore themes that have been extrapolated to have dominated his own life, but that certainly have been central in his later works (e.g. false values and conformity; self delusion; impending failure).

----- . *America and Americans and Selected Nonfiction*. New York: Penguin, 2002.

The product of Steinbeck’s nonfiction writing, this volume includes selections of the author’s journalistic essays from as far back as the 1950’s. The most famous piece, *America and Americans*, is its own collection of essays based upon a trip Steinbeck took in the mid-1960’s. The odyssey itself was undertaken at a time when the author was discouraged about his fiction writing and was engaged by his publisher to take a tour of the country for his work, *Travels with Charley*. Not only reflecting Steinbeck’s views of America and the American identity, this work also reveals some of the deeply held values found in the author’s fictional works.

Steinbeck, Thomas. *Down to a Soundless Sea*. New York: Ballantine, 2003.

Attempting to write in the style of his father, Thomas Steinbeck produces a work with the outward structure of characters whose lives are inextricably tied to the California coast. It comes across, however, as rather dry and lifeless. Thomas Steinbeck is an interesting figure – intermittently looming large in his father’s life, then seeming to disappear. He is still quite actively engaged in litigation concerning rights to his father’s works. Meeting him at a conference, I found him to be quite invested in his father’s reputation and legacy.

----- . “Montalvo, Myths and Dreams of Home.” *My California*. Ed. Donna Wares. Santa Monica: Angel City Press, 2004. 61-68.

Speaking relatively briefly about his upbringing, the author’s son, nevertheless, conveys the love of and enmeshment with the environment, important to both him and his father.

Shillinglaw, Susan and Kevin Hearle, eds. *Beyond Boundaries: Rereading John Steinbeck*. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2002.

A collection of literary criticism dealing with common Steinbeck themes, this is helpful in terms of thematic and structural analyses of the author's more well-known works, but it is otherwise not noteworthy.

Shillinglaw, Susan. *A Journey into Steinbeck's California*. Berkeley: Roaring Forties Press, 2006.

A beautifully photographed work with text by one of the foremost Steinbeck scholars in the world, this book underscores Steinbeck's powerful connections to the land, as well as the artful inclusion of California landscapes in his work. This detailed account recaps the nuances of Steinbeck's life at different stages in different physical settings. Shillinglaw's work is particularly meaningful to me, since she was constantly available for consultation and guidance as I was pursuing my own research.

The following primary sources -- letters and literary pieces -- were photocopied from the Department of Special Collections of the Stanford University Libraries:

Steinbeck, John. "A Lady in Infra-Red Being the Sad Story of Piracy Unrequited." TS carbon. [ca. 1926]. 23 pages. Pencil notes by author. Wells Fargo Collection. Department of Special Collections. Stanford University Lib., Stanford, CA.

This precursor to *Cup of Gold* exhibits violence and raw sexuality. Aggression toward men and women is celebrated. It clearly passed through many refining stages until emerging as a first novel.

----- "To Esther Steinbeck." Date Unknown (likely mid 1920's). Department of Special Collections. Stanford University Lib., Stanford, CA.

This very open letter to his older sister demonstrates a state of mind that Steinbeck described as a "mental stomach ache." He feels he has never felt a part of anything or anyone and is always on a quest [my wording] that ends up finding things just the same as ever. There is a sense of failure, lack of trust, and unreality. This letter seems reflective, early on, of the states of despair into which Steinbeck was prone to slip.

----- "To Folks." Date Unknown (likely 1926-8 in Lake Tahoe period). Wells Fargo Collection. Department of Special Collections. Stanford University Lib., Stanford, CA.

In contrast to his more ambivalent, struggling, self-critical, often depressed letters to his friends and sister, Steinbeck's general, open letters to his entire family are more upbeat and cheerful, speaking of mundane daily events.

----- "Tahoe Epic." 26 September, 1926. Wells Fargo Collection. Department of Special Collections. Stanford University Lib., Stanford, CA.

This bawdy, irreverent, funny poem shows a lighter whimsical side of Steinbeck, much in contrast to some of the depressing, self-doubting letters written later. It ends with an Epilogue couplet: "A thing that every farmer ought to know -- / Coetus is a form of quid pro quo."

----- *Cup of Gold*. TS. ND [ca. 1926-27]. 102 pages. Wells Fargo Collection. Department of Special Collections. Stanford University Lib., Stanford, CA

This is an early draft of only part of the text, part original and part carbon. Corrections were made in ink. It is fascinating to see Steinbeck's early product, which was dramatically revised for final publication. The draft is far more abrupt, violent, and unidimensional, particularly in its character portrayal – resembling a comic book or cheap adventure tale more than a novel. It is full of grammatical and typographical errors.

----- “To Dook Sheffield.” February 25, 1928. Wells Fargo Collection. Department of Special Collections. Stanford University Lib., Stanford, CA.

Writing to his dear friend from college days, Steinbeck reveals his view of Henry Morgan, protagonist of *Cup of Gold*, as a boy who “captured his dreams and saw them die in his arms. Who struggled toward unbelievable beauty. Who found himself sick with a disease [sic] called mediocrity, who married boredom . . . who is a monument to my own lack of ability. We will pack him in Limbo balls for an unending winter.” If there is any doubt he is referring to his own state of mind, he goes on to say, “My wings have dropped as Merlin’s dropped and as Robert’s dropped and as Henry’s finally dropped . . . I ride Pegasus with a saddle and bucking pads . . . I do not take joy in the unmanageable horse any more. I want a hackney of tried steadiness.”

----- “To Kate Beswick.” Late February/Early March, 1928. Wells Fargo Collection. Department of Special Collections. Stanford University Lib., Stanford, CA.

Steinbeck has sent part of his manuscript of *Cup of Gold* for Beswick to type and edit. When she compliments it, he responds by denigrating it – saying its structural flaws will not lead to its getting published. It is unclear if he is genuinely critical (also saying if it were to be published, it probably would not sell) or looking for reassurance.

----- “To Kate Beswick.” 10 March 1928. Wells Fargo Collection.

Department of Special Collections. Stanford University Lib., Stanford, CA.
Kate Beswick, perhaps in love with Steinbeck, would retype his manuscripts, editing for grammar and punctuation. In this letter, Steinbeck reveals that his dark heroine of *Cup of Gold*, La Santa Roja, is not meant to represent all women but only to be an individual woman, perhaps, with only the outward manifestations of women he has known. (This counters critics who state she is a prototype of women as Steinbeck sees them). It also contains his famous quote that though he knows *Cup of Gold* “is a bad book, yet on its shoulders I shall climb to good books.” He further reveals a period of drunken depression, from which he is attempting to emerge.

----- “To Robert Cathcart.” March 13, 1928. Wells Fargo Collection. Department of Special Collections. Stanford University Lib., Stanford, CA.

Writing to his actor friend from Stanford, Steinbeck continues to berate his first novel, claiming all first novels should be burned. At the same time, he offers to send it to Cathcart for criticism (acknowledging he has sent it to others already to critique). It has the feeling of needing to criticize himself before others can jump to do so. Steinbeck also talks about his drinking.

----- "To Kate Beswick." Early Spring 1928. Wells Fargo Collection. Department of Special Collections. Stanford University Lib., Stanford, CA.

In a reversal of roles, John Steinbeck seems to be comforting and encouraging Kate Beswick, who is depressed and, perhaps, even suicidal. He tells her to be loyal and to gain strength from him. However, he responds (to what must have been her question about his feelings) that he does not love her, as he lacks the capacity for love.

----- "To Kate Beswick." April 1928. Wells Fargo Collection. Department of Special Collections. Stanford University Lib., Stanford, CA.

In this letter, the author insists that *Cup of Gold* is not a self-portrait, though his earlier letter to Dook Sheffield had indicated the contrary. Beswick (like many readers viewing the obvious) has assumed that Henry Morgan is autobiographical for Steinbeck, particularly his desires and disillusionments. Steinbeck is insulted that she assumes he cannot write separately from expressing elements of his own character. He also discusses how his work suffers when he is drinking, making it emotional and pornographic (perhaps the explanation for earlier drafts of *Cup of Gold*). In seriousness (and indicating some of the primitiveness of his *Cup of Gold* draft), Steinbeck asks Beswick why she needed to edit out the descriptive phrase, "Titanic Testes."

----- "To Robert Cathcart." 28 May 1928. Wells Fargo Collection. Department of Special Collections. Stanford University Lib., Stanford, CA.

----- "To Robert Cathcart." Before June, 1929. Wells Fargo Collection. Department of Special Collections. Stanford University Lib., Stanford, CA.

Steinbeck's first novel has been criticized by those he asked to critique it; they commented that it had no climax. While he explains that he thinks it is vain and useless for a novelist to explain his own work, he goes on to do just that. Steinbeck claims that he does not believe in climaxes, as "the great events of a man's life come about casually." This is certainly not the case in *Cup of Gold*, nor in other primary source revelations in which Steinbeck claims he wants to live dramatically. In both the above letters, Steinbeck continues to depreciate *Cup of Gold*.

----- "To Kate Beswick." Mid-September, 1928. Wells Fargo Collection. Department of Special Collections. Stanford University Lib., Stanford, CA.

Steinbeck admits feeling alone and abandoned by his friends, though he acknowledges it may be *he* who has abandoned *them*. He writes of suicide, but it is hard to tell with what degree of seriousness. Also, he acknowledges he loves Kate in a strange way, which is curious, as he previously told her he lacked the capacity; this seems rather insensitive, as she previously told him she loved him, and he could not respond. Steinbeck talks freely of his orgasms and his attempts to increase sexual potency. Yet, he admits he must remain celibate to write.

----- "To Jules Buck." 13 March, 1953. Department of Special Collections. Stanford University Lib., Stanford, CA.

This rather mundane letter to friend and producer (with whom Steinbeck had worked) Jules Buck is particularly meaningful to me as my first assignment for the Elaine Steinbeck estate was to trace the origins of the Picasso mentioned here. This discovery was the precipitant for my nearly falling out of my seat at Green Library.

----- "To Harry Guggenheim." 5 August, 1966. Wells Fargo Collection. Department of Special Collections. Stanford University Lib., Stanford, CA.

-----"To Harry Guggenheim." 22 August, 1966. Wells Fargo Collection. Department of Special Collections. Stanford University Lib., Stanford, CA.

-----"To Harry Guggenheim." 4 January 1967. Wells Fargo Collection. Department of Special Collections. Stanford University Lib., Stanford, CA

-----"To Harry Guggenheim." 18 March 1967. Wells Fargo Collection. Department of Special Collections. Stanford University Lib., Stanford, CA.

-----"To Harry Guggenheim." 10 April, 1967. Wells Fargo Collection. Department of] Special Collections. Stanford University Lib., Stanford, CA.

The above five letters all deal with Steinbeck's view of the Vietnam War. Lyndon Johnson, concerned over growing antiwar sentiment, had hoped to garner support from Steinbeck, who had expressed some pro-Vietnam War sentiments, particularly after his son John was sent to Vietnam. Steinbeck, realizing he held complex opinions about the war, did not want to visit as Johnson's emissary and potential supporter. However, he agreed to go as a correspondent for *Newsday*, upon Harry Guggenheim's request. He and Elaine entered war torn areas few journalists visited, and he seemed to recognize the ambiguities of the war. Steinbeck appreciated the dedication and hard work of the soldiers, but he also realized the impossibility of victory and the sinking into desperation, as well as the horror of all the dead Vietnamese civilians and young American men. He became the target of the anti-war left, however. Steinbeck wishes to convey some of his private thoughts to the President alone. It is noteworthy that some of his "solutions" were rather simplistic and failed to comprehend the complexities of war, despite his first-hand experiences. In the end, he tends more to write about the experiences of the men fighting than the politics of it, except in his private letters.

----- Untitled "family saga" poem. Read by Beth Steinbeck Ainsworth at the Steinbeck Family Reunion Held June 17, 1981.

John Steinbeck wrote poems for family events. This one traces a family history back to his paternal grandfather, whose life and adventures were so influential on him.

Additionally,

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