

Dr. Audry L. Lynch
20774 Meadow Oak Rd.
Saratoga CA 95070-3017
~~glynch0001@comcast.net~~
408-725-1898

*audryalynch9926
@sbcglobal.net*

Essay

Steinbeck and His Women

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It may not be a great literary question - but at least it's human - to wonder about the effects of a great author's love life on his writing. In the case of John Steinbeck the love life was extremely varied and turbulent. It included early experimentation, college sweethearts, three wives and several Hollywood "stars".

Interest in sex started precociously early in the young Steinbeck if we are to believe one of his biographers. A Stanford classmate and close friend from, the late 30's, Nelson Valjean, wrote an important biography called *John Steinbeck - The Errant Knight*. In this book, Valjean, a dedicated journalist, records that Steinbeck lost his virginity to a one-legged baby-sitter at the age of nine and began drinking at the age of ten. Wine and women were to remain lifelong interests.

Subsequent biographers did not record any further sexual activity until his college days at Stanford University. Instead, another group of women began to influence his life and work. They were not lovers. Surprisingly, they were all schoolteachers.

In later life he could not remember the name of the high school teacher whom he immortalized in an article called "Captured Fireflies":

"She was fired and perhaps rightly so, for failing to teach the fundamentals.

Such things must be learned. But she left a passion in us for the pure knowable world and me she inflamed with a curiosity, which has never left me. I could not do simple arithmetic but through her I sensed that abstract mathematics was very like music. When she was removed, a sadness came over us but the light did not go out. She left her signature, the literature of the teacher who writes on minds. I

have had many teachers who told me soon forgotten facts but only three who created in me a new thing, a new attitude and a new hunger. I suppose that to a large extent I am the unsigned manuscript of that high school teacher. What deathless power lies in the hands of such a person. " (California Teachers Association Journal, November, 1955.)

The next most important teacher to enter Steinbeck's life was Miss Edith Mirrielees. She had earned a renowned reputation as one of Stanford's most beloved English teachers. She was also perceptive and one of the first persons to recognize the nascent literary talent in young Steinbeck. She allowed him to drop into her house at any hour of the day and night and willingly read his first literary efforts. Although his academic career at Stanford was erratic, Miss Mirrielees was the one constant factor. Later, as an established writer, Steinbeck would send back his manuscripts to her for criticism. Her book, *Short Story Writing*, is still a classic for aspiring writers. John Steinbeck wrote the foreword! As a young husband in Monterey, Steinbeck's first wife, Carol, introduced him to a local high school Spanish teacher, Susan Gregory. Miss Gregory knew all the local stories and she gladly recounted them to Steinbeck. These became the basis for *The Pastures of Heaven* and the book was dedicated to her.

Why all this influence from schoolteachers? Some of this influence may be traced to Steinbeck's mother, Olive Hamilton, a schoolteacher who plied her trade in a one-room California schoolhouse. John had been the third child in a family, which included three sisters: Esther, Beth and Mary. He got along well with his sisters and had an especially close relationship to his mother. It was she who exposed him to books and journeyed to

San Francisco with him to see plays. Doubtless she is the model for the schoolteacher in his short story, "Molly Morgan". During her last illness, despite having three daughters, it was John and his wife, Carol, who moved into the family home in Salinas to care for her. When he selected a family as a model for *East of Eden*, he chose his mother's family, the Hamiltons. The Hamilton family tombstone in the Garden of Memories Cemetery in Salinas, California lists a group of names that replicates the cast of characters in what Steinbeck considered to be his masterpiece.

In contrast to his male characters, the female characters in Steinbeck novels are not memorable. The one exception is Ma Joad, the strong, compassionate heroine of *The Grapes of Wrath*. One can't help but wonder if the marvelous dialogues between Ma and Tom were based on the relationship between Steinbeck and his mother.

Most of the other female characters in Steinbeck's fiction are easily forgotten. Part of the reason focuses on the fact that Steinbeck's fictional women are glimpsed through the eyes of men - mostly as housewives or happy hookers. The reader is apt to remember Jim in *In Dubious Battle*, Danny and Pilon in *Tortilla Flat*, Lennie and George, rather than Curley's wife in *Of Mice and Men*, Kino rather than Juana in *The Pearl*, and Doc rather than Suzy in *Sweet Thursday*.

During his lifetime Steinbeck was a voluminous letter-writer so we have a permanent record of his early love affairs. In the past couple of years two of his college sweethearts have offered their love letters for sale so we have unusual and intimate glimpses of the young Steinbeck in love. One of these was a Stanford classmate in an English class, Margaret Gemmell. Steinbeck's biographer, Professor Jackson Benson, describes Gemmell as "Steinbeck's co-ed on a pedestal." (Jackson Benson, *The True Adventures of*

John Steinbeck, Writer, (p. 23 5)

Margaret married another man but she did keep and treasure Steinbeck's letters all her life. Perhaps the romance never became serious because of Steinbeck's urgent sexuality. Another Stanford classmate, Carlton "Dook" Sheffield recalls: "They lived on different planes in moral terms, and I don't think they were ever intimate." (Carlton Sheffield, *Steinbeck: The Good Companion*).

In his last year at college Steinbeck experienced a more intense, sexual relationship with a Katherine ("Kate") Beswick. They, too, had met at the English Club and discovered a mutual attraction because they shared independent spirits and a future vision of themselves as successful writers. After graduation Kate moved to Greenwich Village and Steinbeck went to Lake Tahoe to write his first novel, *Cup of Gold*.

Kate, an aspiring poetess, continued an active correspondence with Steinbeck over a four-year period. During that time she offered editorial criticism, typed his first manuscript, sent him money, and proposed that he father her children. After reading his first novel she noticed that his female characters were one-dimensional and mentioned it to him. Steinbeck admitted this writing deficiency:

"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 obnoxious to me in some given experience." (Stanford Magazine, Spring, 1985.)

Even though Steinbeck traveled to New York during this period, they did not meet during a mix-up over addresses. Eventually, he met Carol Henning who would be his first

wife and he confessed to Kate this new love affair in a letter. The ever-tolerant Kate replied:

"I should be infinitely disappointed in you, I think, if you failed to go on from one love affair into the next so long as the power is on you. It's one of those things which just must be, and which is wholly delightful and desirable –
(*Stanford Magazine*, Spring 1985)

Unlike Steinbeck, Miss Beswick never married and never achieved literary fame. She kept his letters, now in the Stanford Collection, and died in the 70's. Even at an early age Kate foresaw this destiny and wrote, "I am afraid I can never again be capable of a violent and romantic love affair - and it is very sad ", (*Stanford Magazine*, Spring, 1985.) Steinbeck's first wife, Carol Henning, followed this early pattern of emotional/financial support established by the ill-fated Kate. She met Steinbeck at Lake Tahoe while he was completing his first novel, *Cup of Gold*. They were married for thirteen years and most critics agree that Steinbeck produced his greatest works during that time.

They lived in the family cottage in Pacific Grove and, with the exception of a small monthly allowance from Steinbeck's father; Carol worked at a variety of jobs to support Steinbeck while he wrote. When she came home at night, she corrected his manuscripts - spelling, grammar, sequencing - and then typed them and made sure they were mailed to New York publishers.

When it came time to research the plight of the migrant workers, Carol joined Steinbeck's trek to the Arvin Camp in Bakersfield, California. She was such a vital part of this

expedition that resulted in the classic, *The Grapes of Wrath* that the dedication reads "To Carol who willed it." She is also credited with choosing the title from the "Battle Hymn of the Republic."

A few years ago I had the opportunity of visiting Carol in her Carmel, California home where she was living with her third husband, William Brown. I asked her if she thought she had inspired any of the characters in Steinbeck's fiction. "I always felt watched," she answered, "but I was no Zelda. The only character that I recognized myself in was that of Elisa Allen in "The Chrysanthemums." (Personal interview with Carol Henning Brown, Carmel, 1973).

This character portrayed a strong, sensual, bisexual creative heroine. In fact these are the same ways that many of Carol's friends describe her. She was an active participant in the trip to the Sea of Cortez but she is the only passenger never mentioned in the book. Part of the reason may be that the Steinbeck marriage was disintegrating at the time.

The divorce from Steinbeck was torturous and there were many allusions to his adulterous behavior with Gwyn Conger who was to become the second Mrs. Steinbeck. When I met Carol near the end of her life, she was well advanced in bitterness and alcoholism. During the Steinbeck marriage she had discovered she was pregnant but John had urged her to go to Mexico for an abortion. The job was botched, led to an infection and a hysterectomy, and no hope for motherhood. Carol said sadly, "John decided early in our marriage that we would have books instead of babies. When he left, he had the books and I didn't have the babies." (Same interview).

His second wife, Gwyn, had the babies - the only Steinbeck offspring, Thom and John the fourth. At the time he met her, Gwyn was a beautiful, red-haired singer on her way to

success in Hollywood. Instead she opted for marriage to Steinbeck. Shortly after the marriage, Steinbeck left for Europe to cover World War Two for The Herald Tribune. The marriage was short, six years, and stormy and filled with accusations of extracurricular affairs on both sides.

When I met her, Gwyn was in her sixties, overweight and alcoholic but still charming and one could see the faded beauty that had been hers. She was most gracious to me when she was the honored guest and I was a participant in a weekend conference honoring Steinbeck. Gwyn had not been featured in any Steinbeck book except the dedication to *The Wayward Bus*. This meeting gave me the chance to ask her what it had been like to be married to a famous author and she replied, "My function was to take care of the house, answer the phone and keep the kids quiet while John stayed locked in his room writing. (Personal Interview, Steinbeck Conference sponsored by San Jose State University, 1971.)

Another secret collection of letters, written in 1948-49, to a New York friend, Wanda Van Brunt, has recently come to light. After forty years of keeping the letters that were written to her a secret, Mrs. Van Brunt sold the collection to San Jose State University. They reveal the dark night of Steinbeck's soul after this painful divorce and show that Steinbeck was examining some of his attitudes towards women. He wrote:

"I seem to do dreadful things to women, Wanda. They go to pieces and suffer greatly and finally I can't stand it anymore ... I was thinking of this recently and wondering whether I would ever get the confidence to try again ... It's a shyness like the reluctance to walk into a third punch in the nose." (Van

Brunt Letters, 1949).

In order to avoid that third punch, Steinbeck cut a swath through the Hollywood scene. His name was linked romantically to such well-known stars as Ingrid Bergman, Paulette Goddard, and Anne Southern. I talked to a friend of his and Ricketts, George Robinson who told me a story about this period. Robinson said, "He kept a pair of black lace panties hanging on the wall of his den with a sign that said, "Won in the field of battle - and not a very big one at that. "' (Personal Interview with George Robinson, Monterey, 1980).

His antipathy to women was freely expressed in a letter to his friend, an artist, Bo Beskow:

"I think I could love a European woman or a Negress or a Chinese but not the breed of American woman - part man, part politician – they have the minds of whores and vaginas of Presbyterians. They are trained by their mothers in a contempt for men and so they compete with men and when they don't win, they whimper and go to psychoanalysts. The American girl makes a servant of her husband and then finds him contemptible for being a servant – Eventually they will succeed in creating a race of homosexuals – The impulse of the American woman to geld her husband and castrate her sons is very strong." (Ciene Detro, Creative States Quarterly)

These are bitter words and their tone was repeated in letters to many of Steinbeck's friends during this period. In one letter he complained to an old friend, A. Grove Day, that he would never become involved with another actress. He didn't find another actress but his third wife did come from the film colony - Elaine, who was married to the actor, Zachary Scott, at the time. Women were marching through his bedroom but not his books. Like Steinbeck's other wives, Elaine was a bright, talented woman in her own right. She had a career as a set designer until she married Steinbeck and they moved to New York where they had a brownstone on Fifth Avenue and a cottage in Sag Harbor. This last marriage endured for twenty years and was the one where, reportedly, Steinbeck finally found marital happiness. Ironically, this time of domestic peace did not produce his greatest literary output. Instead he became a national and international figure, the friend of such luminaries as President and Mrs. Johnson, the Kennedys, and Adlai Stevenson. Again ironically he won the Nobel Prize during this time and produced a backlash among critics who dubbed him a "has-been" writer. The Swedish body defended its choice on the grounds that they had made the selection not just for *Winter of Our Discontent* but on the entire body of his works.

Like Gwyn, Elaine did not figure in Steinbeck's literary efforts. After his death, she made her own contribution to the Steinbeck literary legend. He was always a prodigious letter-writer (Steinbeck used to get his daily writing stint started by penning a letter to a friend or to his editor, Pascal Covici), Elaine collected these letters from all over the world, sorted them and selected the ones that would present a good chronology of his life. She worked on this with a young writer and Steinbeck protégé, Robert Wallsten. The project produced a book called *Steinbeck: A Life in Letters*.

I was privileged to meet Steinbeck's widow, Elaine, in 1975 at the opening of the Steinbeck Collection at Stanford. She was small, dark, charming and gracious to all the guests. Whenever anyone asked about him, she would say with great feeling, "Remember him." (Personal meeting with Elaine Steinbeck, Stanford University, 1975).

Even though this marriage was happy, it also had its trouble spots. Once in a newspaper interview Elaine reminisced: "He was a manic-depressive, like many artists. He was selfish and jealous. I may have wanted to kill him at times but I was never bored." (Women's Wear Daily, Sept. 2, 1975).

Steinbeck's relationships with women show us a very complex man. It would be hard to judge him but some interesting questions come to mind: Does domestic felicity breed mediocrity in art? Can we compare a writer's life to 9 to 5 workers? Does the absorption demanded for writing preclude successful human relationships? Or, conversely, do writers turn to writing because of a lack of fulfillment in human relationships? Perhaps, Steinbeck, himself, answers this enigma the best. Once while ill in a San Francisco Hospital, he passed the time by writing down some aphorisms. After his death, his old friend and noted columnist, Herb Caen, quoted them as a form of eulogy. One stands out: "Art is a scream of loneliness." (Herb Caen, San Francisco Chronicle, 1968).