Violence in John Steinbeck

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Abstract

Suicides; domestic violence; lynching; botched abortions; fraternal beatings; heroes who boast about knocking people's heads "plumb to squash" (The Grapes of Wrath, 28) merely a cursory glance at Steinbeck's writing reveals the central presence of violence. Brutal force is never far from the surface of a Steinbeck story. Here I want to argue that there exists a deep tension between two different "presentations" of violence. One which naturalizes violence. The other according to which violence remains aberration, absolute wrong, that which should not be. These two presentations are in competition, vying with each other for control of his texts. You may share the academy's historic disdain for Steinbeck's style. Or you may agree with Kurt Vonnegut that "Holy smokes! Could he ever write!" (John Steinbeck: Centennial Reflections by American Writers 96). Either way, what is certain is that violence evokes some of his best writing.

Here is how Steinbeck describes Adam being beaten by his half-brother Charles at the beginning of East of Eden: Adam "felt the square fists whipping nausea into his stomach" (East of Eden 33; italics mine). The preposition is interesting. Pain imagined as an extrinsic power transferred from one individual to another, like electricity. "Adam felt the punches on temples, cheeks, eyes. He felt his lip split apart and tatter over his teeth, but his skin seemed thickened and dull, as though he were encased in heavy rubber" (East of Eden 33). Very good.

Numbness now, pain to follow.

Later in East of Eden, Mr. Edwards, the whoremaster, takes to drumming Cathy who, we are told, "tried to duck his threshing fists or at least make them ineffective" (East of Eden 100). The adjective is expansive and superb. An image of pervasive destruction. Edwards' fists are separating out blood from flesh rather than grain from chaff. Then there is the boy Mac and Jim find spying on the strikers' camp in In Dubious Battle. "The nose cracked flat, the other eye closed, and the dark bruises formed on the cheeks" (In Dubious Battle 278). Nice work.
Steinbeck is as fascinated by killings as beatings. In *Dubious Battle* Old Joy is picked off by a posse. He “lifted himself up with his arms, like a lizard, and then dropped again” (*In Dubious Battle* 168). In *Of Mice and Men* the body of Curley’s wife, when strangled by Lennie, “flopped like a fish. And then was still” (*Of Mice and Men* 91). Lennie’s body, when he is shot in the back of the head, “jarred, and then settled slowly forward to the sand, and he lay without quivering” (*Of Mice and Men* 106). A formulation Steinbeck had used a year earlier to describe the calf’s killing in *In Dubious Battle*: “The calf leapt, and then settled slowly down” (*In Dubious Battle* 241).

In April 1952 Pat Covici, Steinbeck’s longstanding editor, explained to Steinbeck why *East of Eden* would not be considered for a Book-of-the-Month club selection: “The doing of Katie in the whore house, I am afraid frightened them. Life still frightens them” (*Steinbeck and Covici: The Story of a Friendship* 176). We will only be frightened by his descriptions of a woman attempting to stab her fetus with a knitting needle to the extent that we are frightened by life. And not the life of the rich. Steinbeck is no Fitzgerald and Joad no Gatsby. If you are writing about strikes and migrants and working people, violence becomes by default a preoccupation.

Steinbeck was fascinated by violence. And he was fascinated by people fascinated by violence. In his early collection of short stories, *The Pastures of Heaven* (1932), he tells of an impeccable farmer, Raymond, who has a secret penchant for executions. Making use of a longstanding friendship with a prison warden, two or three times a year Raymond goes up to San Quentin to watch men die—the only vacations he takes, we are told. What does he get out of it? “The slow march of the condemned aroused his dramatic sense and moved him to thrilling emotion” (*The Pastures of Heaven* 136).

Similarly, it is the deeply repressed member of a lynch mob upon whom Steinbeck focuses, “The Vigilante” from *The Long Valley*. We meet Mike just after the dark deed has been completed. “Half an hour before,” we are told, “when he had been howling with the mob and fighting for a chance to help pull on the rope, then his chest had been so full that he found he was crying” (“The Vigilante” in *The Long Valley* 94).

Steinbeck is riveted by these moments, sufficiently in fact to try and imagine his way into the psyches of one of the perpetrators of this appalling act. Whether violence in a work of art can be said to be gratuitous is interesting. One thing is clear: gratuitous is not the same as graphic; excessive not the same as explicit. Imagine *Schindler’s List* without the graphic violence. The story, let alone the history on which it is based, demands that cold-blooded murders are
shown in explicit fashion. (For example, the murder of a young female architect who, rightly, corrects flawed Nazi building plans and has her head blown apart, bits of her head broken off like pieces of cardboard and the snow sodden with dark blood.) While James Bond's harpooning an adversary and then dropping a sardonic punch-line may constitute gratuitous violence even if far less explicit. No, whether violence is excessive is decided by context. And the most immediate context a novel provides is the voice of its narrator.

Steinbeck's fiction from *Cannery Row* in 1945 to *East of Eden* seven years later is defined by the rise of the narrator. Laconic and sardonic, coldly evaluative, wry and withering "at intervals Salinas suffered from a mild eructation of morality" (*East of Eden*, 450) satirical about society and skeptical about religion. And it is in the hands of this narrator that outbursts of violence are presented as merely part and parcel of human experience. Compare the two suicides at the beginning of those novels. Here's what happens after Horace Abbeville uses his property on Cannery Row, the Palace Flophouse, to pay off a debt to friendly grocer Lee Chong:

They finished the deal with dignity and Lee Chong threw in a quarter pint of (whisky). And then Horace Abbeville walking very straight went across the lot and past the cypress tree and across the track and up the chicken walk and into the building that had been his, and he shot himself on a heap of fish meal. And although it has nothing to do with this story, no Abbeville child, no matter who its mother was, knew the lack of a stick of spearmint ever afterward. (*Cannery Row* 12)

And in *Eden* this is how Cyrus Trask's first wife meets her end:

Dressed in a secretly made shroud, she went out on a moonlight night and drowned herself in a pond so shallow that she had to get down on her knees in the mud and hold her head under water. This required great will power. As the warm unconsciousness finally crept over her, she was thinking with some irritation of how her white lawn shroud would have mud down the front when they pulled her out in the morning. And it did. (*East of Eden* 18)

The detached, casual way in which Steinbeck's two narrators report the completion of violent acts signals a fatalistic acceptance of the violent. Heavy with bathos and short on sentiment, both accounts work to naturalize violence.
In his essay, "A Hanging," George Orwell writes of the condemned Burmese prisoner who, on the way to the gallows, steps out of his way to avoid a puddle. By contrast, any poignancy in the detail of Mrs. Trask soiling her shroud is quickly cancelled out by the context: the mocking, vicious voice of the narrator, a narrator who has just described Mrs. Trask as a "pale, inside-herself woman" who "used religion as a therapy for all the ills of the world and of herself, and she changed the religion to fit the ill" (*East of Eden* 18).

Much has been made of the ecological Steinbeck, insistently "non-teleological," trying to imitate in fiction the work of his marine biologist friend Ed Rickets, investigating the tide pool of human existence, holding up for inspection life as it is rather than as it is meant to be. Critics have seen that this implies the rejection of a human-centered universe. What they have ignored is the consequence of Steinbeck's strategy at an artistic level: a narrator who presents suicides as merely nature's dross, who must leave human losses unlamented.

"We're a violent people, Cal" (*East of Eden* 569). There is the ecological Steinbeck, and then there is the historical Steinbeck. And the historical Steinbeck is just as amoral. Lee continues at the climax of *Eden*: "Maybe it's true that we are all descended from the restless, the nervous, the criminals, the arguers and brawlers, but also the brave and independent and generous. If our ancestors had not been that, they would have stayed in their home plots in the other world and starved over the squeezed-out soil" (*East of Eden* 569). Lee is speaking as the novel's hero and sage, whose values and vision

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**FIG. 1** One of eight strikers shot by Farmer's Protective Association members in front of the union hall during the Pixley Cotton Strike of 1933, which furnished background for *In Dubious Battle*. Two of the strikers were killed.
Steinbeck endorses throughout. And his picture of American history is one in which progress is built upon the exercise of pernicious capacities; where bravery is the flipside of brawling. A picture of history where, as T. S. Eliot puts it in “Gerontion”:

Unnatural vices  
Are fathered by our heroism. Virtues  
Are forced upon us by our impudent crimes.  
*(Complete Poems and Plays 38)*

Steinbeck thus naturalizes violence, justifying it as historical necessity.

Alongside this presentation of violence, however, lies a different set of depictions.

Context is all-important. And if the narrator provides the novel’s immediate context, then plot provides the ultimate one. Here’s where the writer can frame his story, send out his loudest messages. In *Of Mice and Men* Lennie’s death is tragic not simply on account of our investment in his character—our sympathy for his dreams and our fondness for his manner. The tragedy is set up by his death’s being prefigured by the shooting of Curley’s dog. Framing it this way allows Steinbeck to present Lennie’s killing very differently from Mrs. Trask’s. The world may reduce his status to an animal’s—as Slim puts it, “lock[ed] up and strap[ped] in a cage” (*Of Mice and Men* 97). But Steinbeck doesn’t let us run that risk.

It has been well recorded from Steinbeck’s correspondence in the late thirties that he was deeply intimidated by the subject matter with which he was wrestling: “I’m trying to write history while it is happening and I don’t want to be wrong,” he commented on an aborted first attempt at *The Grapes of Wrath* (*Steinbeck: A Life in Letters* 162). The California labor situation and the condition in which dust bowl migrants found themselves were so appalling and Steinbeck’s vantage point so immediate (in the winter of 1938 he was knee deep in a sewer, as he wrote to his agent), that he felt he must write as accurately as he could. Steinbeck knew that *The Grapes of Wrath* would be shocking. He knew it would be questioned from all corners. And he wanted nothing to detract from the force of it. There must be no exaggeration, no inaccuracy and, in terms of violence, *no excess.* “I want to rip a reader’s nerves to rags. I won’t have him satisfied” (*Steinbeck: A Life in Letters* 178). For this goal to be achieved, Steinbeck’s heroes can’t put a foot wrong.

Hence, the novel opens with Tom Joad’s release from prison on a charge of homicide. But we are soon informed that Tom had been acting in self-defense,
and that the assailant he killed had already “got a knife in me”—he even says, “I’d do what I done—again” (The Grapes of Wrath 28]). When a young labor organizer later flees arrest and a sheriff takes aim to shoot him, the heroic Reverend Casey acts preemptively but also proportionately, leaping forward to kick the sheriff in the neck. And finally, Tom is enticed back into physical conflict only when Casey, his closest friend, is murdered before his very eyes by a ruthless mob. “They killed “im. Busted his head. I was standin” there. I went nuts,” he tells his mother (The Grapes of Wrath 408).

In Grapes of Wrath, then, Steinbeck’s political commitment hinges upon a presentation of violence as aberration. The characters do not rejoice in the perpetration of force. They act because they have to and in constrained ways. Otherwise, if there were the slightest trace of excess, Steinbeck would struggle to portray the characters as essentially innocent and their fate as fundamentally unjust.

Any treatment of violence in Steinbeck must of course mention his taking of the Cain and Abel story as the basis for East of Eden. We have seen the way violence is naturalized by his detached, amoral narrator, as well as through Lee’s philosophy of history. And the plot on the one hand compounds this, with the story of a father’s rejection of his son’s gift leading to the son’s persecution of his brother and the story repeated down through a generation, creating a sense of violence as fate. On the other hand, however, Steinbeck’s centering, although clumsily at times, upon the central concept of “timshel” (which he translates “thou mayst”) opens up the possibility of resisting fate and thus of laying down arms (East of Eden 305).

Two visions of violence, then, struggle for mastery, and Steinbeck keeps quiet about their contradiction. Almost. Here he is in the Sea of Cortez,

We take a tiny colony of soft corals from a rock in a little water world. And that isn’t terribly important to the tide pool. Fifty miles away the Japanese shrimp boats are dredging with overlapping scoops, bringing up tons of shrimps, rapidly destroying the species so that it may never come back, and with the species destroying the ecological balance of the whole region. That isn’t very important in the world. And thousands of miles away the great bombs are falling and the stars are not moved thereby. None of it is important or all of it is. (The Log from the Sea of Cortez 3; emphasis added)

The passage, intentionally or not, recalls W. H. Auden’s poem about Breughel’s painting of The Fall of Icarus,”“Musée des Beaux Arts” (Selected Poems 87). What
Auden found interesting was Breughel’s depiction of the extraordinary event of Icarus’ plummeting to earth: “something amazing, a boy falling out of the sky,” just one tiny little detail in his landscape. Life continues unabated was the take-home message for Auden. Worse, nature’s callous indifference to human suffering—the fact that the stones don’t cry out at the most terrible of tragedies, that the sun simply “shone on as it had to”—functions as awful authorization for an identical human response. “The ploughman,” Auden writes, “may have heard the splash, the forsaken cry, but for him it was not an important failure.”

In an uncannily similar way, even emphasizing the same word “important,” in *The Log* Steinbeck presses the analogy between natural and human catastrophe, between humanity’s destruction of species of shrimp and humanity’s destruction of itself (“thousands of miles away the great bombs are falling”). Steinbeck, like Auden, toys with the idea that neither eventuality is “very important in the world.” For just as Auden’s sun shone on as it had to, so Steinbeck’s stars “are not moved thereby.” Yet there is a crucial difference. For while, like Auden, Steinbeck writes that “none of it is important,” thus naturalizing violence. Unlike Auden, Steinbeck feels compelled to add, “or all of it is.” The American writer, unlike the English one, cannot rid himself of the intuition that violence is aberration—that it *matters*. Thus, there is tremendous tension in Steinbeck’s presentation of violence.

**Works Cited**


