

the Church. Certainly some of these (cf. the anti-sex attitude of Monnica) are foreshadowed in the *Confessions*. Has Western Christendom been living out this man's neurosis imagining that it was interpreting his vision?

For when he abdicated from the use of his own interior guidance through exhaustion or failure or hopelessness, did he appreciate the remembered comfort of Mother Monnica in the background so much that he wished to fix Mother Church in the same paradigm to tend all exhausted men of all time? If so, his motive was wholly compassionate though wholly misplaced for a species that was beginning to struggle through into adulthood.

And now that so many structures are bursting at the seams it is interesting in this particular area that we might be able to dissect out exactly what it is that we are in the process of outgrowing—and then be able to do it with a better sense of direction. For did Mother Monnica always know best?

This Side of Paradise **Old Testament themes in** **John Steinbeck's fiction**

by Isobel Murray and Jim Merrilees

Many weird and outrageous accusations have been levelled at John Steinbeck, but no one has gone so far as to accuse him of being a Christian, nor do we intend to overstep this mark. But interesting light is cast on his fiction by consideration of his use of biblical themes and images. This has become a critical truism in the notorious 'Christ-figure' of Jim Casy in *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), whether this portrayal is seen as perfection or parody. We think that a profitable and sane perspective on Steinbeck can be achieved by attention to these biblical themes, and propose to demonstrate this by a brief examination of Old Testament references only, in one early and one late novel, *To a God Unknown* (1933) and *East of Eden* (1952).

Briefly, we would claim that in *To a God Unknown* Steinbeck was presenting and exploring in his hero, Joseph Wayne, a powerful and strange personality who becomes a devotee of the land and of fertility, and eventually carries his devotion to his 'God Unknown' to crazy as well as to gigantic lengths, when he kills himself upon his 'sacred' rock as a sacrifice to bring rain. But it is clear from close reading of the book that Steinbeck employs a number of techniques,

which have been largely ignored, to distance Joseph Wayne from the author's or the reader's whole-hearted admiration. The reader is constantly kept alert and suspicious of the truth of Joseph's visions by several means: these include the exaggeration and frenzy of his approach to the land; the close parallel to Joseph of the demented Willie who ends his nightmares of a desert landscape with suicide; the loyalty and worry of his Indian friend, Juanito, who is closer to the Catholic Church *and* to the ancient native religion than is Joseph; the rather feeble but carefully presented figure of the priest, Father Angelo; and, most of all, the never obtruded but constantly present incomplete parallel between Joseph Wayne and the biblical patriarch, which points most clearly where Wayne moves away both from rationality and from the kind of Providential guidance vouchsafed to the biblical Joseph.

When we come to discuss *East of Eden* in the second of these articles, we shall suggest that Steinbeck set out to relate all the most basic aspects of human life to the story of Cain and Abel in Genesis 4, vv. 1-16. He also attempted to eliminate God from the story, making the father in each generation rather than God the receptor of his sons' gifts, so that the arbitrary rejection of one son can be seen as a human and a psychological one of rejection breeding violence and jealousy. We shall suggest that Steinbeck's thesis is not found fully satisfactory, and that he gives to some good characters and to the operation of law some of the functions traditionally given to recipients of grace, and finally that his conception of the stature of the human soul, as formulated by the Chinese, Lee, implies some kind of acceptance, in the fiction, of some form of Divine Providence.

To a God Unknown

Joseph Wayne persuades his patriarchal father to allow him to leave the family homestead in Vermont and gain his own land by homesteading in California. He makes his first disciple, Juanito, and builds his house under a tree which he comes to regard as housing his father's spirit and then gradually comes to worship. His brothers with their families come to join him after his father's death, and Joseph is the inevitable leader, an object almost of worship—'the unquestioned lord of the clan' (27)¹ Fertility becomes an obsession for him, particularly with regard to the mating of animals. He then woos and marries Elizabeth McGreggor, school-teacher, with an attitude as clinical as his attitude to cattle breeding: 'Our blood is clean' (41) is his self-recommendation to her. After a strange wedding, they return to the Valley of Nuestra Señora, to be greeted with the news that Juanito has stabbed Joseph's younger brother in the act of intercourse with his wife. Joseph refuses to mete out punishment, but Juanito leaves for temporary exile. The com-

¹Page numbers incorporated in the text are from the following editions: *To a God Unknown*, Heinemann, London, 1970; *Cup of Gold*, Heinemann, London, 1937.

munity settles; they hold a fiesta, then Elizabeth becomes pregnant by Joseph, which is, for him, an immense fulfilment. When her time comes, Joseph acts as high priest of fertility and increase by delivering the child himself. The family eventually breaks up because brother Burton, an evangelical Christian, cannot stand Joseph's worship of the tree, and leaves, having first destroyed the tree. Things now begin to go wrong, and prolonged drought threatens. Elizabeth and Joseph visit an ancient 'holy place', a grove in which are a rock and a stream. Elizabeth dies suddenly and violently, falling from this rock. In the convulsion of grief that follows, Joseph gives his child into his sister-in-law's care, and accepts her midnight, worshipful visit to have fierce, consoling intercourse with him. More and more they all realize that the drought will last and they must drive the cattle over the mountains if any are to survive. Just before the cattle drive, Joseph and his brother Thomas go west to the sea and meet a mad old man who daily sacrifices an animal to the sun as it sets. Joseph is very intrigued by this ritual. When the families leave, Joseph feels he must stay with the land. At last he camps in the grove where Elizabeth died, desperately wetting the moss on the rock with water from the stream below, the last water in the area. Juanito returns to help him, and persuades him to see the priest. Joseph, however, finds no help there, and at last goes back to the rock, seeing that he must sacrifice himself upon it to bring rain. He dies, and the rains come.

From this summary of a totally unrealistic plot, the wonder is that Steinbeck managed to achieve any sympathy or suspension of disbelief either for his hero or his tale. But Steinbeck writes with power and persuasion. He can see right into Joseph and the narrator seems often so close to his hero that even the best critics¹ can say 'Steinbeck says' when they mean 'Joseph thinks'. Steinbeck has presented stranger and more fragmented people than Joseph Wayne with sympathy and love (e.g. Lennie in *Of Mice and Men*). The problem of making the life and views of Joseph Wayne credible is also less difficult because Joseph's main opponent, his brother Burton of the camp revivals and the self-saving Christianity, is such a pitifully little man in comparison to his brother. Thus it is clear that, paradoxically, the problem of the novel's reception has not been that critics and readers have not accepted the improbable figure and development of Joseph Wayne, but that they have accepted these far too uncritically and have equated him with Steinbeck.

Our point is this: that this reading, the most generally accepted one, does no justice to the author. Even at the age of thirty he had a greater maturity and balance of vision than he has been given credit for. The novel does not constitute *Steinbeck's* search for a

¹E.g. F. W. Watt, *Steinbeck*, Oliver and Boyd, 1966, p. 31.

religion of the land, but *Joseph's*, and this is made clear again and again. It is made clear first in the violence and extravagance of Joseph's reaction to the land. Early in the novel we are given clear indication of this: Joseph's eyes are 'feverish with the hunger' for the land (3); his eyes 'glittered with excitement' when he saw the Valley of Our Lady and he 'sniffed at' it 'hungrily' (4); he finds 'curious femaleness' in the forest and himself wonders if it is 'delirium and fever' (5); 'This land might possess all of him if he were not careful' (6). He contrasts his feelings with 'the calm and peace, the strength and eternal rightness of his father' (6). Eventually, 'The hunger in his eyes became rapaciousness. . . . His possessiveness became a passion', and his 'exultance' becomes a sexual passion for the land which he consummates (9), and which frightens even him. This kind of frenzy is described again and again, as when he becomes engrossed in the procreation of animals, to brother Burton's dismay (28-9), and when he brings Elizabeth home ceremonially through the long womb-like entrance to the valley:

'This is our marriage—through the pass—entering the passage like sperm and egg that have become a single unit of pregnancy. This is a symbol of the undistorted real' (63, chapter 10 *passim*).

Joseph's 'religious' searches form again a worrying series if we list them. There is, first, the tree that 'is' his father, on which he places Elizabeth and his baby son. This the canting Burton hates, and the patient Fr Angelo, worn down with years of combating the native ancient rites, warns Joseph against these practices at the fiesta—'Be careful of the groves, my son. Jesus is a better saviour than a hamadryad' (104). Then there is the grove with ancient rock and stream which Joseph, without Juanito telling him, recognizes as '“holy—and this is old. This is ancient—and holy”' (36). Our suspicions of Joseph's attitude to the grove are heightened when it is feared not by the self-righteous Burton, but by Joseph's brother Thomas, who is in great sympathy with all animals (37). Elizabeth also feels something strange about the grove which she visits in pregnancy and which eventually kills her. After the grove, there is, fairly irrelevantly but adding to Joseph's eclecticism, his vision of the goat:

A black cloud sailed in from the ocean and rested on the ridge, and Joseph's thought made it a black goat's head. . . . He thought, 'I know that it is really there, the goat resting his chin on a mountain range and staring in on the valley. He should be there. Something I've read or something I've been told makes it a fitting thing that a goat should come out of the ocean.' He was endowed with the power to create things as substantial as the earth. 'If I will admit the goat is there, it will be there. And I will have made it. This goat is important', he thought (68).

Neither the significance of the goat nor Joseph's seeing himself as creator really needs further comment.

The process of making Joseph into a god or demi-god is continued in Chapter 12, when his sister-in-law, Rama, rhapsodizes about him to Elizabeth on her lonely and tragic wedding night:

'You can worship him without fear of being sacrificed. . . . I do not know whether there are men born outside humanity. . . . Perhaps a godling lives on earth now and then. . . . I tell you this man is not a man, unless he is all men. . . . He is all these, a repository for a little piece of each man's soul, and more than that, a symbol of the earth's soul. . . . I do not love him . . . I worship him' (78-80).

Rama's husband, Thomas, the instinctive lover of animals and hater of ritual, is even more put out by Joseph's visit to the old man who sacrifices animals to the sun than by the grove (Chapter 22). Joseph is fascinated, Thomas innately suspicious. Joseph watches the loving sacrifice of a pig almost enviously: "'This man has discovered a secret. . . . He must tell me if he can'" (174); and with characteristically glittering eyes, the old man does his best to explain: "'In the moment, I am the sun. Do you see? I, through the beast, am the sun. I burn in the death'" (175). He then foresees the ultimate step in his ritual, the moment when he will sacrifice himself. Thomas only becomes reconciled to the idea of the old man after they have parted and Joseph has lied to him about the old man keeping the beasts to eat: "'If I'd known that, I wouldn't have walked away. I was afraid there was some ceremony'" (180). Thomas sees any kind of ceremony as "'a kind of little trap".'

Just after this, and presumably inspired by it, Joseph gives his own child to his sister-in-law as a sacrifice (182), because:

'The land is not dead, but it is sinking under a force too strong for it. And I am staying to protect the land. . . . It might help, to give the child to you. It seems to me a thing that might help the land' (183).

A further example of Joseph's imitation of the old man is his fruitless sacrifice of a calf to renew the stream (210-1). This temporarily discourages him: "'His secret was for him", he said. "It won't work for me".'

Joseph's final suicide, as sacrifice to the Unknown God for rain, bears a significant resemblance to the clearly egocentric death of Henry Morgan in the earlier *Cup of Gold* (1929), since Morgan sees himself as an early, crude version of Pincher Martin: 'I am fixed. I am the centre of all things and cannot move. I am as heavy as the universe. Perhaps I am the universe' (*Cup of Gold*, 265-7). So Joseph gives himself up to a final messianic dream. As he dies he whispers, "'I should have known. . . . I am the rain. . . . I am the land and I am the rain"' (212). And, of course, the rain does come, with storm and flood, on his death, but it is the reader who attributes this to Joseph. Steinbeck leaves it open. It may be the God who sends his rain upon the just and the unjust alike; it may be Joseph's sacrifice; it may be meteorological, or it may be an answer to Fr Angelo's prayers.

Joseph's Indian disciple, Juanito, also has a part to play in indicating indirectly that Joseph is misguided. Juanito's mother was Indian, and he understands much about the old ways. He is also a Catholic, and sees the possible importance of the priest and of *Nuestra Señora*, the name of the valley, in a different way from Joseph. Because of his Indian blood, Juanito is sympathetic and not scornful of Joseph's belief that his father's spirit is in the tree:

'The dead, they never go away. . . . My mother was Indian and she taught me things. . . . My mother said how the earth is our mother, and how everything that lives has life from the mother and goes back into the mother' (21).

Juanito understands that a conflict in his upbringing causes a conflict of beliefs. Again, it is Juanito who first takes Joseph and Thomas to the forest grove which so deeply affects Joseph and Elizabeth later: '“when I was so close the Indian in me made me come, señor”' (37). Joseph is fascinated, and Thomas, characteristically, afraid. After the murder of Benjy, Juanito instinctively chooses to meet Joseph at the grove for his expected death in vengeance (71), and, as instinctively, he finds Joseph there when he finally returns (194). He understands a great deal about Joseph, but has more balance than Joseph, for all his devoted admiration, and sees the situation more clearly at the end: '“Come with me out of this country, señor”' (186); then again,

'There are things you do not know. . . . I have seen it many times, señor', he said in compassion. 'Before a spring goes dry it grows a little. . . . Unless God interferes, the spring will stop' (200).

He realizes Joseph's helplessness and sends him to the priest:

' . . . he is a wise man and a priest. . . . He said you were a wise man, too. He said, “One time that man will come knocking at my door. . . . One time he will come. . . . In his wisdom he will need strength.” . . . His prayer is through the Virgin. He can get what he prays for' (197).

Juanito's other role in the novel also forms a curious parallel to Joseph. He is first encountered taking care of the tormented Willie, whose dreams are destroying him:

Willie's eyes were furtive and frightened, for no one believed in the pains which shook his body in the night and no one believed the dark dreams which tortured him while he slept (11).

But Juanito holds Willie's arm in his trouble: '“He dreams. . . . Sometimes he cannot awaken unless I help him. . . . He calls to me, señor”' (15). It is significant that Juanito alternates in the novel between caring for Willie and for Joseph. He returns to Willie in his self-imposed exile, and while Joseph is tormented by the drought, Willie's dry-earth dreams come to a climax, so that Juanito finally returns to Joseph only when Willie has seen the deserts of the moon through a telescope and finally despaired:

'He dreamed he was on a hard dusty land which shone. . . . It was a dream. . . . Willie was very sick. . . . But Willie couldn't stand it, and he hanged himself from a tree limb with a riata that night' (195).

It is Willie's suicide which frees Juanito to return to Joseph, who can be seen, in this light, as about to do something very similar, to reject human friendship, accept the dream and kill himself.

The Catholic Church forms the most pervasive Christian influence in the novel and we see it in the place names, in the valley Steinbeck re-christened *Nuestra Señora* and the river *San Francisquito*. We have seen it in Juanito, but most of all it is present in the quiet, rather ineffective background figure of the priest, Fr Angelo. He is used to the endless battle with the semi-pagan nature of the Indians, and, although he can be fierce in interrupting the pagan orgies celebrating the coming of rain, he is basically tolerant, attempting to Christianize what is there. Thus, for example, he comes to celebrate Mass at Joseph's fiesta. At this point, with his ingenious collapsible figures of the Virgin and the Crucifixion (102), he is slightly comic, but his insight is sharp when he finds Joseph pouring wine on 'his' tree: ' "Be careful of the groves, my son. Jesus is a better saviour than a hamadryad." And his smile became tender, for Father Angelo was a wise as well as a learned man' (104). He goes on to show the grounds for his tolerance:

'It is this way: The Devil has owned this country for many thousands of years, Christ for a very few. And as in a newly conquered nation, the old customs are practised a long time, sometimes secretly and sometimes changing slightly to comply with the tenor of the new rule, so here, my son, some of the old habits persist, even under the dominion of Christ.'

The priest has little part in the novel, but he is brought in by Juanito near the end to try to help Joseph. Joseph has an abortive conversation with him, when the priest thinks he has turned to the Church: ' "Did the tree fail you, finally? . . . I'm priest enough to recognise a priest" ' (202). Although the priest is unsuccessful, it is Joseph's deficiency rather than Fr Angelo's that most clearly emerges from the confrontation, when the priest insists that prayers for Joseph's soul have an enormous priority over prayer for rain. Again Steinbeck's presentation suggests how he is using the priest to criticize Joseph:

Joseph leaped up and stood furiously before him. 'My soul? To Hell with my soul! I tell you the land is dying. Pray for the land!'

The priest looked into his glaring eyes and felt the frantic fluid of his emotion. 'The principal business of God has to do with men', he said, 'and their progress toward heaven, and their punishment in Hell' (203).

Fr Angelo was 'shaken by the force of the man', and saw his potential as a religious leader, even, if he had a message, another Christ. And he quietly re-establishes his equanimity by praying first for Joseph's

soul, secondly for forgiveness for his heresy, and finally for rain.

Steinbeck has rarely been given credit for the careful artistry indicated above. Indeed, to the careful reader, the details already described should indicate a separation of the writer from his hero. However, the one single most important qualifier of Joseph Wayne is the constant implied comparison with the Joseph of Genesis.

The Old Testament parallel is suitable because so many situations, themes, and interests we find in the novel with ambivalent meanings, Christian, pagan, and Vedic, are clearly present in Genesis. There is a clear value placed on fertility in Genesis. Barrenness is a reproach from Abraham's wife Sarah onwards, and refusal to propagate, as in the case of Onan, is condemned. The patriarchs generally were shown to be blessed by the multiplication of their children and of their livestock. The Old Testament parallels imply that Joseph Wayne is not wrong from beginning to end, but in his priorities and self-dependency. Again, the image of the grove with water flowing from a rock can quite clearly be linked to the miracles of Moses.

The Wayne family has clear similarities with the patriarchs in general. Joseph and his father are compared to gods or godlings. Joseph becomes 'unquestioned lord of the clan' because he has received the blessing from his patriarchal father who 'had merged with the land until he became the living symbol of the unit, land and its inhabitants'. And Joseph 'felt the joy that Abraham must have felt when the huge promise bore fruit, when his tribesmen and his goats began to increase' (27). Like Isaac and Jacob, John Wayne bestows the blessing on a younger son, and the blessing gives authority.

Then there are more specific parallels between *To a God Unknown* and the Genesis story of Joseph. John and Joseph Wayne correspond to Jacob and Joseph. In each story the father loves his youngest sons, Joseph and Benjamin, most. In each, Joseph becomes the leader, and Benjamin a central concern to the family, although in the novel he is dissolute, apparently helpless, and destructive to women. The parallel is never overstretched. There is no attempt in the novel to re-draw all of Jacob's sons, and John Wayne's other two sons, Thomas and Burton, are new and individual creations. Joseph, in each case, leaves home, but in *To a God Unknown* this is not because of the malice and betrayal of his brothers, although John Wayne at first suspects it—'Have you an anger for your brothers, Joseph? Is there some quarrel I haven't heard about?' (2).

It is clear when Joseph comes to California that he sees it as his 'Promised Land', and the family therefore joins him there, whereas in Genesis, although Joseph's settling in Egypt is Providential, it is geographically a move away from the 'Promised Land' as part of the chronological progress towards it. The Genesis Joseph, therefore, has no specific commitment to Egypt which could parallel Joseph Wayne's land-mania.