Penelope Moraitis

Exploring women's alienation in works of John Steinbeck
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EXPLORING WOMEN’S ALIENATION IN WORKS OF JOHN STEINBECK

Penelope Moraitis

A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Department of English Studies
September 2000
To my husband and my daughter Maria
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I am deeply indebted to Professor Robert Crist, The Head of my Doctoral Committee, for his encouragement and understanding. His invaluable advice, continuous support and willingness to help at every stage of this work contributed to the completion of my thesis.

I am also indebted to the other members of my Doctoral Committee, Professor L. Sakellou – Schultz, and Associate Professor D. Tsibouki, for their helpful criticism, insightful comments and useful corrections that helped me improve my work.

I am grateful to Dr. Susan Shillinglaw, Director of the Steinbeck Research Centre and Professor of English at San Jose State University, for her providing valuable, out of print material on John Steinbeck.

Finally, I owe a special debt of gratitude to my husband, George Moraitis. This thesis would probably never have become a reality without his love and unfailing support over the years.
ABSTRACT

This study focuses on the theme of the alienated woman in John Steinbeck’s canon. The novelist, consistent in his depiction of his female characters as stereotypes from the beginning of his career as a writer until the end, reveals the alienation they experience in the predetermined roles they assume in life-mothers, wives, sexual objects. The term alienation is applied to describe a certain condition Steinbeck’s women figures experience, as this is defined in the context of Socialist Feminist thought, particularly Alison Jaggar’s reinterpretation of the Marxist concept of alienation. Despite their ostensible differences, female characters in Steinbeck’s writing share a common characteristic; they are alienated from the product upon which they “work”. As prostitutes, when their role and motif is erotic, Steinbeck’s female figures are—in the same way a factory worker is alienated from his product—alienated from themselves and their body which becomes an object for men. In turn, wives are not seen as entities who feel, suffer, think to act independently, but confined within the boundaries of their domesticity are objectified to the extreme and are relentlessly exploited. Depicting his female characters in the role of mother are stereotypes of a socially accepted model, the author not only attempts to render the reality of his time, and to understand motherhood as one of the facets of woman’s polymorphic existence, but also to reveal the alienation woman experience, obliged to act in such a stereotyped mother role. The perpetuation of mothering in its existing form is also sharply depicted by Steinbeck in the mother/daughter pattern. Despite his being labeled as a “masculine” writer John Steinbeck dares to present through his works, moreover, tabooed subjects such as surrogate parenting and male sterility. What is more, his heroines are not mere stereotypes but vivid portrayals of women in anguish.
ABBREVIATIONS

The abbreviations of John Steinbeck’s works cited in the text refer to the following editions:

GW: The Grapes of Wrath
EOE: East of Eden
WD: The Winter of Our Discontent
WB: The Wayward Bus
P: The Pearl
CHR: The Chrysanthemums
INTRODUCTION
EXPLORING WOMEN'S ALIENATION IN
WORKS OF JOHN STEINBECK

Female characters in Steinbeck’s works have been considered, until very recently, as studies in failure with some critics suggesting that this state of affairs might reflect the author’s personal relationships with women.

At the Third international Steinbeck Congress, held in Honolulu in My, 1990, John Ditsky’s keynote address was entitled “Steinbeck’s Elusive Woman.” Ditsky suggested that the author “…made a lifelong quest to understand that elusive thing called Woman—and perhaps failed.” (qtd. In Gladstein 1991:38) The last part of this statement can be related to a comment by Mimi Gladstein: “It may be said that—as in East of Eden—when Steinbeck handles the translation of the real women in his life to the pages of his fiction, this follows a well established pattern: he deletes them.” (1991:32) Comments and interpretations such as these, both from critics and from Steinbeck’s own explanations of his works, abound.

So far, critics have traced two distinctive narrative views of female characters in the works of John Steinbeck. In the first one, in novels such as The Grapes of Wrath, a positive image is mostly associated with the role of mother or wife, offering room for a symbolic interpretation of Ma Joad’s character as Mother Earth and its equation with the American Land as described by feminist critics such as Annete Kolodny. (qtd. In Mckay 1990:49-50) In novels such as East of Eden, Tortilla Flat, Wayward Bus and some of his short stories, the image is a negative one. It presents most of the women as tramps, or prostitutes. Peter Lisca, in The Wide World of John Steinbeck, points out that these female characters seem to have no other option: “they seem compelled to choose between homemaking and whoredom.” (qtd. in Beatty 1979:1) Such a depiction of women characters in John Steinbeck’s writing provides a clear example of the phenomenon Josephine Donovan identifies as Female Stereotypes in the Western Canon. According to Donovan, women characters in Western Literature fall into categories:

Much of our literature in fact depends upon a series of fixed images of women, stereotypes. These reified forms, surprisingly few in number, are repeated over and over again through much of Western literature. The objectified images have one thing in common, however, they define the woman insofar as she relates to, serves or thwarts the interests of men. In Western tradition, these stereotypes tend to fall into two categories reflecting the endemic Manicheistic dualism in the Western world-view. Female stereotypes symbolise either the spiritual or the material good or evil. Under the category of the good-woman stereotypes, that is those who serve the interests of the hero, are the patient wife, the mother/martyr and the lady. In the bad or evil category are…the madam, the witch, the shrew or domineering wife. (1997:211-215)
Discover John Steinbeck famous and rare quotes. Share John Steinbeck quotations about writing, literature and books. "It has always seemed strange to me the..."

The short novels of John Steinbeck: Tortilla Flat, The red pony, Of mice and men, The moon is down, Cannery Row, The pearl. The free exploring mind of the individual human is the most valuable thing in the world. John Steinbeck. Freedom, I Hate You, Eden. The term alienation is applied to describe a certain condition Steinbeck's women figures experience, as this is defined in the context of Socialist Feminist thought, particularly Alison Jaggar's reinterpretation of the Marxist concept of alienation. Despite their ostensible differences, female characters in Steinbeck's writing share a common characteristic; they are alienated from the product upon which they "work". As prostitutes, when their role and motif is erotic, Steinbeck's female figures are "in the same way a factory worker is alienated from his product". John Steinbeck grew up in Salinas, California. This area had an important meaning to him; this is proven by the fact, that more than half of his 29 novels are based in this area. In 1850 his grandfather moved here from the East coast. When John Steinbeck grew up in Salinas, the area was economically well developed. There were droughts and deserts too, but most of the country was fertile, the "Salad Bowl of the Nation", as it was later called. He worked as a bricklayer, fruit picker and marine biologist and he worked with union members and migrants. These people accepted Steinbeck; they did not worry about his middle class background and his education. Exploring women's alienation in w Anglistik - Literatur. Die Maschinenmetapher in John Steinbe