

A Minstrel and a Scrivener: Steinbeck, the Protest Novel, and Modernism_____

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At the start of his career, not yet having published a novel, John Steinbeck wrote a letter to a Stanford classmate in which he laid out his emerging manifesto: “I have no interest in the printed word. . . . I put my words down for a matter of memory. They are more to be spoken than read. I have the instincts of a minstrel rather than those of a scrivener” (*Letters* 19). The twenty-seven-year-old Steinbeck made this declaration in 1929, the last year of the decade in which modernism reached its apex. Steinbeck was launching his literary career in the wake of T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* (1922), James Joyce’s *Ulysses* (1922), F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* (1925), Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) and *To the Lighthouse* (1927), Ernest Hemingway’s *The Sun Also Rises* (1926) and *A Farewell to Arms* (1929), and William Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury* (1929). Given such predecessors, it is no wonder that the novice author chose to distance himself from “the printed word.” With such a declaration, Steinbeck attempted to clear the ground for his own work by allying himself with oral and folk traditions rather than with the literary traditions out of which the formidable novels of 1920s modernism had grown. As a self-proclaimed minstrel, he sought to draw on the language and culture of the common people and thereby remain uninfluenced by the work of his immediate predecessors. Steinbeck’s relationship to modernism is more complex than he would have it appear, however, for whether he is courting or rejecting comparisons between his own work and that of the great modernists, these authors never seem to be far from his mind.

Nowhere is Steinbeck’s conflicted relationship with modernism more apparent than in *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), his undisputed masterpiece. The novel draws on two literary traditions, the long-standing one of the American protest novel and the emerging one of the

modernist novel. At his best, Steinbeck manages to synthesize the two strands, putting modernist themes, techniques, and tropes to work for a social cause.

One might study *The Grapes of Wrath* by first locating it solidly in the tradition of the social protest novel, identifying those aspects of it that are most calculated to advance a social or political position. Steinbeck's readiness to sacrifice characterization in favor of argumentation, as well as his moments of didacticism and oratory, make *The Grapes of Wrath* an inheritor to Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* (1906), and other socially engaged novels. Other aspects of the novel, however, show Steinbeck grappling with the legacy of modernism. His experimentation with form and language can seem positively Joycean, while his interest in contrasting literary and vernacular language is reminiscent of Faulkner. After establishing some of these broad connections to modernism, one might focus on the author's bravura use of a single word across the opening chapters of *The Grapes of Wrath*. Through his obsessive repetition of the word "dust"—which appears some two dozen times in the first one hundred pages of the novel—Steinbeck not only establishes his setting and dramatizes the plight of the Oklahoma farmers but also engages in a subtle competition with Eliot, Fitzgerald, Hemingway, and other great modernists. In weaving this word so tightly into the fabric of his novel, Steinbeck appropriates and redeploys a modernist trope that figures in so many of the important novels and poems of the 1920s. To borrow the title of an early Faulkner novel, Steinbeck plants his own "flags in the dust," as if to announce that he is both a social critic and a literary innovator, both a minstrel and a modernist.

Upton Sinclair, whose 1906 novel *The Jungle* exposed the deplorable working conditions of the Chicago slaughterhouses, was tremendously impressed by *The Grapes of Wrath*. Soon after the novel was released, Sinclair declared: "I have come to the age where I know I won't be writing forever. I remember reading how Elijah put his mantle on the shoulders of Elisha. John Steinbeck can have my old mantle if he