

John Steinbeck's America

David Wrobel

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ENGL 4013: Major Figures

Class Time: MW, 3:00-4:15

Class Location: DAHT 0105

HIST 3430: Special Topics, U.S.

Office Hours: T, 1-4PM

Office: DAHT 419; (Ph.) 325-6024

COURSE DESCRIPTION

"John Steinbeck's America" is a 3-credit cross-listed course that can be taken for ENGL or HIST credit. While working on his Pulitzer Prize-winning study *The Grapes of Wrath* in 1938, Steinbeck communicated to a friend, "I'm trying to write history while it is happening, and I don't want to be wrong." The course examines the intersections of history and literature from the Great Depression and World War II to the early Cold War years and the 1960s. Steinbeck's "years of greatness," 1936-1939—which featured his strike novel, *In Dubious Battle*, "The Harvest Gypsies" (1936), a series of newspaper articles on migrant labor conditions, the novella *Of Mice and Men* (1937), the short-story collection *The Long Valley* (1938), and *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939)—receive special attention. Steinbeck emerged as the most influential and controversial chronicler of the conditions endured by the working poor during the Depression era.

However, the story of Steinbeck's centrality to American history and letters does not end with the 1930s. He served as a government propagandist during World War II, writing *Bombs Away: The Story of a Bomber Team* (1942) and *The Moon Is Down* (1942), traveled to England, North Africa, and Italy as a war correspondent (June-December 1943), and wrote what might be considered the first novel of the American Counterculture, *Cannery Row* (1945). Then, as the nation entered the Cold War, Steinbeck traveled to the Soviet Union with photographer Robert Capa and crafted an insightful account of the lives of ordinary people there, *A Russian Journal* (1948). He also wrote his second "big" novel and perhaps his greatest one, *East of Eden* (1952), a work that reflected some of the major shifts taking place in American thought and culture. Later in his career Steinbeck produced one of the classics of the American travel-writing genre, *Travels With Charley in Search of America* (1962); received the Nobel Prize for Literature (1962); and served briefly as a war correspondent in Vietnam (1966-1967).

While Steinbeck (1902-1968) is perhaps less significant as an innovator in literary form than his contemporaries William Faulkner (1897-1962), Ernest Hemingway (1899-1961) and F. Scott Fitzgerald (1896-1940), he was the most important chronicler of the common strivings of Americans during the middle third of the twentieth century. We will use Steinbeck as a guide to American cultural history, combining close textual analysis with historical contextualization and research. We will also employ some digital humanities approaches during the semester, including the software annotation package Hypothes.is, and Omeka-based website building.

COURSE OBJECTIVES

The course is designed to provide a detailed introduction to the writings of John Steinbeck, and to the larger backdrop of American thought and culture during the Depression, WWII, and early Cold War years. In addition, “John Steinbeck’s America” is intended to underscore the significance of literary sources for students of history and the parallel significance of historical context for students of literature. The course is also designed to enhance writing, critical thinking, and research skills, and to introduce you to digital humanities approaches.

REQUIRED BOOKS*

John Steinbeck, *Novels and Stories, 1932-1937* (New York: Library of America, 1994);
 John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath and Other Writings, 1936-1941* (New York: Library of America, 1996);
 John Steinbeck, *Novels, 1942-1952* (New York: Library of America, 2002).

*Please purchase these editions of Steinbeck’s works rather than copies of the individual works we are reading, since we literally need to be on the same page.

COURSE GRADING

Class Participation/Annotations:	25%
Short Essay (2 essays, approx. 1200 words each)	25%
Group Research Project (including Omeka website):	25%
Individual Research Paper (3,000-3,500 words/10-12 pages):	25%

*The +/- grading system will be used for all assignments (though not for final grades of course). The scale is as follows:

A	93-100	B+	87-89	C+	77-79	D+	67-69
A-	90-92	B	83-86	C	73-76	D	60-66
		B-	80-82	C-	70-72	F	0-59

ASSIGNMENTS

All four graded components of the course delineated above (under “Course Grading”) are weighted equally and are interconnected. For example, class participation includes contributions to our regular and digital discussions/annotation of readings. The two short essays, in turn, are designed to elicit your responses to core themes and issues related to the course readings, and should develop partly out of your annotations and class discussion contributions. The group research project provides an opportunity for you to work together with several peers to create a high-quality, content-rich, visually appealing Omeka-based website that will showcase the related research of each group member. The individual research essay assignment dovetails closely with your individual contributions to the group project.

COURSE POLICIES

Academic Integrity: *Webster’s New World Dictionary of the American Language* (Cleveland, 1964) states that plagiarism is “to take and pass off as one’s own the ideas, writings, etc. of another.” Plagiarism is easy to spot; more importantly, it is

ethically unsound. Plagiarism on written work (including turning in work that is not your own or that has been previously submitted for another class), or cheating on the exam will result in an “F” for the assignment, notification of the Student Conduct Office, possibly an “F” for the class and further disciplinary action. Please visit <http://integrity.ou.edu> and sign the integrity pledge for your essays.

Attendance: Attendance is expected, and required, too. If you are unable to attend class please let me know in advance if possible. Attendance is factored into your grade for class discussion/participation. Any student who misses the equivalent of two or more weeks of class (4 class sessions) without excused absences will be administratively dropped from the class.

Disabilities: If you have a disability that may prevent you from fully demonstrating your abilities, please contact me personally as soon as possible so we can discuss accommodations necessary to ensure full participation and facilitate your educational opportunities. The Disability Resource Center provides support services to students with disabilities: see www.ou.edu/drc, or please contact Director Chelle’ Guttery at drc@ou.edu, 325-3852 voice, or 325-4173 TDD.

Etiquette: Please come to class on time and prepared to discuss the assigned reading. Be respectful of and gracious towards your peers. If you need to leave class early because of extenuating circumstances, then leave quietly and inconspicuously and let me know in advance if possible. Please, during class time, do not text, take phone calls, or use laptops, I-pads, tablets, or other electronic devices for anything other than class related purposes. Laptops, etc., may, of course, be used for note taking, text annotation, etc.

Extra-Curricular Activities: Students involved in official OU extra-curricular activities should inform me at the beginning of the semester of any known scheduling conflicts.

Religious Accommodations: It is the policy of the University to excuse absences of students that result from religious observances and to provide without penalty for the rescheduling of examinations and additional required class work that may fall on religious holidays.

COURSE SCHEDULE

Week 1: W, Jan. 18: Introduction: Steinbeck & America, 1930-1935

PART ONE: THE DEPRESSION YEARS

Week 2: M, Jan. 23: *In Dubious Battle* (Ch. 1-6)
W, Jan. 25: *In Dubious Battle* (Ch. 7-12)

Week 3: M, Jan. 30: *In Dubious Battle* (Ch. 13-15)
W, Feb. 1: Hypothesis Session 1: *In Dubious Battle*

Week 4: M, Feb. 6: "The Harvest Gypsies," "Starvation," "Leader," "Breakfast"
W, Feb. 8: *Of Mice and Men* **Paper 1 Due**

Week 5: M, Feb. 13: *The Grapes of Wrath* (Ch. 1-6)
W, Feb. 15: *The Grapes of Wrath* (Ch. 7-10)

Week 6: M, Feb. 20: Hypothes.is Session 2: *The Grapes of Wrath* (Ch. 11-15)
W, Feb. 22: *The Grapes of Wrath* (Ch. 16-18)

Week 7: M, Feb. 27: *The Grapes of Wrath* (Ch. 19-21)
W, Mar. 1: *The Grapes of Wrath* (Ch. 22-24)

Week 8: M, Mar. 6: Hypothes.is Session 3: *The Grapes of Wrath* (Ch. 25-27)
W, Mar. 8: *The Grapes of Wrath*: Endings Ch. 28-30 **Paper 2 Due**

Spring Break M, Mar. 13 & W, Mar. 15: NO CLASS

PART TWO: THE WORLD WAR II AND COLD WAR YEARS

Week 9: M, Mar. 20: Website Building + *The Log from the Sea of Cortez*, selections
W, Mar. 22: *The Moon Is Down* (Ch. 1-4)

Week 10: M, Mar 27: *The Moon Is Down* (Ch. 5-9)
W, Mar 29: *Bombs Away* and *Once There Was a War*, selections (PDF)

Week 11: M, Apr. 3: Steinbeck in the Archives (WHC and CAC)
W, Apr. 5: *Cannery Row* (Ch. 1-17)

Week 12: M, Apr. 10: *Cannery Row* (Ch. 18-32)
W, Apr. 12: *A Russian Journal*, selections (PDF):

Week 13: M, Apr. 17: *East of Eden*, selections
W, Apr. 19: *East of Eden*, selections: **Research Paper Due**

Week 14: M, Apr. 24: *Travels with Charley*, selections (PDF), Nobel Prize Speech (PDF)
W, Apr. 26: *Steinbeck in Vietnam, America and Americans*, selections (PDF)
Group Website Initial Upload

Week 15: M, May 1: Omeka Website Presentations, Groups 1-3
W, May 3: Omeka Website Presentations, Groups 4-6

Finals Week: T, May 9: 5:00PM: **Websites Go Live**