John Steinbeck – Biography

John Steinbeck was born on February 27th, 1902, in Salinas, California (also called the “salad bowl of the nation” due to its incredibly fertile land), and lived the early part of his life in Monterey Bay County, California, which proved to be the setting for most of his fiction. The region is geographically beautiful with rolling hills, and a peaceful atmosphere. He was the third of four children, though the only son. Steinbeck’s father was the county treasurer; the manager of a flour plant; and the owner of a feed and grain store. His mother was a teacher, from whom he inherited a love of books. At fourteen, he decided to be a writer, and would spend countless hours in his room writing stories and poems.

Steinbeck attended high school and worked on farms and ranches during his vacations. From 1920 to 1926, he studied Marine Biology at Stanford University, but did not take a degree–his plan was to be a writer. He dropped in and out of University, sometimes to work closely with migrants and bindle stiffs on California ranches. Those relationships, coupled with an early sympathy for the weak and defenceless, deepened his empathy for workers, the lonely and dislocated–an empathy that is characteristic in his written work. After leaving University, he moved to New York, where he was a journalist for a paper called, The American. He continued to work on his writing, but was unsuccessful in getting it published and finally returned to California. While he continued to work on his writing, he took work at various odd jobs. Some of these include being an apprentice painter, a surveyor, a caretaker of an estate, and a fruit-picker. Finally in 1929, his first novel, Cup of Gold, was published, though it received little critical attention.

He married his first wife, Carol Henning in 1930, and they moved into the Steinbeck’s family cottage in Pacific Grove, California. Steinbeck’s first three novels went unnoticed, but in 1935 appeared his humorous tale of pleasure-loving Mexican-Americans, Tortilla Flat, which brought him wider recognition. It was a story that revolved around the theme of King Arthur and the forming of the Round Table. Although the novel was immensely popular, this fact remained hidden from the critics at the time.

His financial situation significantly better, Steinbeck was able to write full-time and produced several novels, including The Red Pony (1937), which was later made into a film. The 1930s turned out to be a time of great success for Steinbeck. Of Mice and Men (1936) was among several novels written in that time. He termed the book an “experiment,” as he intended the novel to also be a drama. He eventually adapted the book into a three-act play, which was produced in 1937. In 1937, he wrote The Grapes of Wrath, which earned him a Pulitzer prize. In order to gather research for the novel, Steinbeck travelled around California migrant camps and spent time with the workers.

In 1942, he divorced from his wife, Carol, and moved out East in 1943 with his second wife Gwen. They had two children, but divorced in 1948. In 1949, he married for the third time, a woman named Elaine Scott, and moved to New York with her, where he lived out the rest of his life.

During World War II, Steinbeck was a war correspondent for the New York Herald Tribune. He was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1962 “...for his realistic as well as
imaginative writings, distinguished by a sympathetic humour and a keen social perception.” Much of Steinbeck’s writing focusses on social issues such as labour strikes; workers and their conditions; and the theme that all people are bonded to the environment which they inhabit.

Throughout his life, John Steinbeck remained a private person who shunned publicity. He died on December 20th, 1968, in New York City. His ashes were placed in the Garden of Memories Cemetery in Salinas.

Questions:

1. When and where was Steinbeck born? When did he die?

2. List some of the jobs Steinbeck had in his lifetime.

3. What did Steinbeck originally call the novel, *Of Mice and Men*? Why?

4. Many of Steinbeck’s novels take place in natural settings with characters who are labourers. What elements of Steinbeck’s life may have contributed to this pattern?

5. Steinbeck has been described as having “a keen social perception”. What do you think this means?