



Modern Classics Winter Of Our Discontent (Penguin Modern Classics)

By John Steinbeck

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Ethan Allen Hawley has lost the acquisitive spirit of his wealthy and enterprising forebears, a long line of proud New England sea captains and Pilgrims. Scarred by failure, Ethan works as a grocery clerk in a store his family once owned. But his wife is restless and his teenage children troubled and hungry for the material comforts he cannot provide. Then a series of unusual events reignites Ethan's ambition, and he is pitched on to a bold course, where all scruples are put aside. Steinbeck's searing examination of the evil influences of money, immorality, greed and ambition on America drew acclaim from the Nobel Committee who hailed him as an 'independent expounder of the truth'. 'Returns to the high standards of The Grapes of Wrath and to the social themes that made his early work ... so powerful' Saul Bellow, author of Herzog

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Editorial Review

About the Author

John Steinbeck (1902-68) is remembered as one of the greatest and best-loved American writers of the twentieth century. During the 1930s, his works included *The Red Pony*, *Pastures of Heaven*, *Tortilla Flat*, *In Dubious Battle*, and *Of Mice and Men*. *The Grapes of Wrath*, published in 1939, earned him a Pulitzer Prize. In 1962, he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature.

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THE WINTER OF OUR DISCONTENT

JOHN STEINBECK (1902-68) was born in Salinas, California, in 1902 and grew up in a fertile agricultural valley about twenty-five miles from the Pacific Coast—and both valley and coast would serve as settings for some of his best fiction. In 1919 he went to Stanford University, where he intermittently enrolled in literature and writing courses until he left in 1925 without a degree. During the next five years, he supported himself as a laborer and journalist in New York City and then as a caretaker for a Lake Tahoe estate, all the time working on his first novel, *Cup of Gold* (1929). After marriage and a move to Pacific Grove, he published two California fictions, *The Pastures of Heaven* (1932) and *To a God Unknown* (1933), and worked on short stories later collected in *The Long Valley* (1938). Popular success and financial security came only with *Tortilla Flat* (1935), stories about Monterey's *paisanos*. A ceaseless experimenter throughout his career, Steinbeck changed courses regularly. The powerful novels of the late 1930s focused on the California laboring class: *In Dubious Battle* (1936), *Of Mice and Men* (1937), and the book considered by many his finest, *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939). Early in the 1940s, Steinbeck became a filmmaker with *The Forgotten Village* (1941) and a serious student of marine biology with *Sea of Cortez* (1941). He devoted his services to the war, writing *Bombs Away* (1942) and the controversial play-novelette *The Moon Is Down* (1942). *Cannery Row* (1945); *The Wayward Bus* (1947); *The Pearl* (1947); *A Russian Journal* (1948); another experimental drama, *Burning Bright* (1950); and *The Log from the "Sea of Cortez"* (1951) preceded

publication of the monumental *East of Eden* (1952), an ambitious saga of the Salinas Valley and his own family's history. The last decades of his life were spent in New York City and Sag Harbor with his third wife, with whom he traveled widely. Later books include *Sweet Thursday* (1954), *The Short Reign of Pippin IV: A Fabrication* (1957), *Once There Was a War* (1958), *The Winter of Our Discontent* (1961), *Travels with Charley in Search of America* (1962), *America and Americans* (1966), and the posthumously published *Journal of a Novel: The "East of Eden" Letters* (1969), *Viva Zapata!* (1975), *The Acts of King Arthur and His Noble Knights* (1976), and *Working Days: The Journals of "The Grapes of Wrath"* (1989). He died in 1968, having won a Nobel Prize in 1962.

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Introduction

The Winter of Our Discontent is John Steinbeck's last novel, the book that occasioned his 1962 Nobel Prize for Literature. On the eve of the ceremony, the *New York Times* published an editorial by Arthur Mizener questioning the wisdom of the Swedish Academy's decision: "Does a Moral Vision of the Thirties Deserve a Nobel Prize?" The article seared Steinbeck's soul, no doubt, and placed once again before his American readers the enigma of his reputation. How to define this most American of writers, the engaged artist of 1930s California? And how to describe this last novel, certainly not a howl of social protest in the vein of his 1939 classic, *The Grapes of Wrath*, but neither the twilight reflections of an aging writer. For many readers *The Winter of Our Discontent* is a dark morality tale about the fall of a blue-blooded American hero, Ethan Allen Hawley, who succumbs to the temptations of wealth, power, and prestige. But this final novel defies categories. If it's a parable of corruption and redemption, as Steinbeck suggests in his epigraph, it's also a lesson in Darwinian survival. The novel insists on a symbolic and highly ironic framework—the first half takes place on Easter weekend in April 1960 and the second on the Fourth of July weekend that same year. Yet the book is also realistic, set in Steinbeck's own Sag Harbor, New York—New Baytown in the novel—and influenced by the moral quagmires of contemporary America. And while the work tips its hat to Steinbeck's love of the Arthurian saga, with Ethan a latter-day Lancelot, it's also true that Ethan's voice seems almost postmodern, speaking a language that is highly wrought, artificial, self-reflective. *The Winter of Our Discontent* is, seemingly, a patchwork of intentions, all meant to shake a reader's complacency.

Since its publication in April 1961, this "curious" novel has baffled many readers. Carlos Baker's review for the *New York Times* sounds a characteristic note of dissatisfaction:

This is a problem novel whose central problem is never fully solved, an internal conflict novel in which the central issue between nobility and expediency, while it is joined, is never satisfactorily resolved. For this reason, despite its obvious powers, *The Winter of Our Discontent* cannot rightly stand in the forefront of Steinbeck's fiction.

Far from being the source of the novel's creative failure, its irresolution and allusiveness are, in fact, central to its meaning. "If this is a time of confusion," Steinbeck had written a few years earlier, "might it be best to set that down?" That was his challenge in *The Winter of Our Discontent*. Ambiguous threads and ethical knots are woven into each page of the narrative—and apparent in the first pages, starting with the perplexities of Ethan's ancestral heritage, part pirate, part Puritan, and his own name, Ethan Allen, both a Revolutionary War patriot and a man charged with treason. After two chapters in each section of the novel's two sections, point of view switches from third to first person.

Indeed, the text's evasive strategies and perplexing characters suggest Steinbeck's profound unease with Cold War America, where his real fear for his country centered not on Sputnik and Russian armament but on "a creeping, all-pervading, nerve-gas of immorality which starts in the nursery and does not stop before it reaches the highest offices, both corporate and governmental." Steinbeck sent that observation to his close friend, politician Adlai Stevenson, in November 1959, and the letter was subsequently published in *Newsday*, sparking a national discussion: The question "Are We Morally Flabby?" was debated by four educators and writers in a February 1960 issue of the *New Republic*, and the next month *Newsday* published "Steinbeck Replies." Steinbeck's answer was a resounding yes, and more than anything else *The Winter of Our*

Discontent explores the contours of that affirmative response. From 1960, when he composed this novel, to the end of his life eight years later, Steinbeck stood as America's moral compass, pointing to Americans' virtues and lapses in three unflinching books: *The Winter of Our Discontent*, *Travels with Charley* (1962), and *America and Americans* (1966).

The freedom to critique one's country, he felt with increasing urgency, was the role of the artist in a free nation. Trips to the Soviet Union in 1937, 1947, and 1963 as well as charges made by Communist writers that he had moved politically to the right crystallized his independent stance—Steinbeck's Cold War was a "Duel Without Pistols" (a 1952 article he wrote in Italy after being attacked in a Communist newspaper for not objecting to the "degeneracy and brutality of American soldiers" in Korea). While American citizens and artists could voice opinions freely, he wrote, Communist artists were constrained by orthodoxy. Speak as an American critic he would, to the end of his days. That defiant patriotism informs *The Winter of Our Discontent*. In effect, Ethan Allen Hawley, his central character, asserts his own freedom to speak out and, in the process, replaces a hollow self with a more authentic self, however morally imperiled. What makes it such a quirky and important book is that it suggests, through Ethan's voice, the simmering discontent of its time, the cacophony and dislocation of Cold War America, overtly a superpower, internally super powerless.

I. UNDERSTANDING JOHN STEINBECK'S DISCONTENT

"A novel may be said to be the man who writes it."

(John Steinbeck to Elizabeth Otis and Chase Horton, April 1957)

With a particular man in mind, Thomas Malory, John Steinbeck wrote this in 1957, one year into his three-year investigation of this fifteenth-century author of *Le Morte d'Arthur*, his era, Arthur's Camelot, and Middle English manuscripts. Such layered understanding was essential, he thought, before attempting his own translation of Malory's *Arthur* into modern English. But the same sentence might be written about Steinbeck himself: *The Winter of Our Discontent* is the restless man who wrote it. A decade-long winter of discontent is, in several senses, his own. And the project he put aside in the fall of 1959, his modern translation of Malory, informs the background of his final novel.

Steinbeck's discontent, however, was artistic and cultural, not personal. The year 1950 was a watershed; he moved permanently from California, his birthplace, to New York City in December 1949, and a year later he married his third wife, Elaine Scott. This marriage gave him far more stability than the first two—certainty of love shared with a self-confident woman. Once an assistant stage manager on Broadway (for *Oklahoma!* when it opened), Elaine stepped into her new marriage with style, energy, wit, and steady love. For their eighteen years of marriage, she kept much of the world at bay. Some qualities of Steinbeck's happy marriage to Elaine make their way into *The Winter of Our Discontent*—certainly the solidity of the union (this is, in fact, the only Steinbeck book that opens with a bedroom scene). Ethan's rather cloying nicknames for Mary are close to Steinbeck's own for his beloved Elaine, who was "*moglie*" when they traveled and "Lily Maid" at home. Most important, the steady light that Mary casts for Ethan is Elaine's for John: "No one in the world can rise to a party or a plateau of celebration like my Mary," Ethan muses. "With Mary in the doorway of a party everyone feels more attractive and clever than he was, and so he actually becomes." The marriage of Ethan and Mary is Steinbeck's most fully drawn portrait of marriage and home life—at least in part an index of his own contentment.

With an equal sense of renewal, this displaced Californian embraced his and Elaine's new home, New York City, and made it his own: "As far as homes go," he wrote in a 1953 essay, "Autobiography: Making of a New Yorker," "there is only a small California town and New York. . . . All of everything is concentrated

here, population, theater, art, writing, publishing, importing, business, murder, mugging, luxury, poverty. It is all of everything. It goes all night. It is tireless and its air is charged with energy. I can work longer and harder without weariness in New York than anyplace else.” There is a kind of steely determination expressed in that essay about his new terrain. Steinbeck needed and staked personal stability. His stance as an East Coaster was solidified further when he and Elaine purchased a small house in Sag Harbor in the spring of 1955: “We have a little shack on the sea out on the tip of Long Island at Sag Harbor,” he wrote to his old friend Carlton Sheffield. “It’s a whaling town or was and we have a small boat and lots of oak trees and the phone never rings. We run there whenever we need a rest—no neighbors, and fish and clams and crabs and mussels right at the door step.” Sag Harbor was Steinbeck’s haven and the setting for New Baytown, the village where Ethan lives in one of the old whalers’ houses that, in fact, line Sag Harbor’s Main Street and beyond. Schiavoni’s Grocery, the model for Ethan’s store, has been in that family since the 1950s and still operates in Sag Harbor’s tiny downtown.

But personal and territorial contentment was stirred first by the restlessness that was always his (and Elaine’s, who would pack a suitcase willingly) and second by artistic indirection. Ethan as store clerk, nibbled by small defeats, is, in some respects, Steinbeck as compromised writer once he left his native soil of California. In a 1955 interview with Art Buchwald, Steinbeck admitted that he was “tired of my own technique. . . . I’ve been highly discontented with my own work for some time. In *East of Eden* I used all my tricks and used them consciously and with finality.” It would not be his only admission of artistic frustration in the 1950s. By the end of the decade, he felt he’d written only “bits and pieces” for fifteen years and during that time had “brought the writing outside.” It was a harsh self-assessment for a decade that included *East of Eden*; the marvelous essay about his best friend, marine biologist Edward Flanders Ricketts, “About Ed Ricketts” (1951); as well as the frothy bits of fun *Sweet Thursday* (1954) and *The Short Reign of Pippin IV: A Fabrication* (1957). But it is also true that his writing of the 1950s was characterized, for the most part, by a deep split in sensibility: He wavered imaginatively between his own journalistic urge to tap into the present—writing a number of articles about contemporary culture, political conventions, and European travel—and his deep emotional ties to California that took him back to his Salinas birthplace and Monterey’s Cannery Row, where he’d spent most of the 1930s. Ethan’s internal dance between past and present is a dark form of Steinbeck’s own.

Like Ethan’s, Steinbeck’s past was a siren call, voices not easily silenced. Shortly after moving to New York City with Elaine, Steinbeck wrote his epitaph for Ricketts, who was killed in 1948. He then considered and abandoned the idea of turning *Cannery Row* (1945) into a play: “I have finished that whole phase. . . . I’m not going to go over old things any more.” That was written by a man who was about to start *East of Eden*, a man who would contemplate and begin writing in Paris in 1954 a short-story cycle about Salinas, and a man who would, that same year, turn *Cannery Row* into *Sweet Thursday*, a book whose characters seethe with discontent. And having finally laid to rest the Cannery Row material and Ed Ricketts’s ghost with the 1955 Rodgers and Hammerstein musical *Pipe Dream*, he turned the next year to King Arthur, hero of a beloved childhood saga.

But in fact those Arthurian tales shadowed all his work of the late 1940s and 1950s. Again and again in his search for order and meaning in a postwar world, he was drawn to figures who embodied the gallantry that was Arthur’s, heroic individuals like Sam Hamilton in *East of Eden*—characters who took a moral stand, born out of justified anger, and found creative solutions: Emiliano Zapata, central figure in the film script he wrote for Elia Kazan’s *Viva Zapata!* (1952); or Don Quixote, a book he reread and in 1958 recast in an abandoned manuscript, a western, called “Don Keehan,” written with Henry Fonda in mind. In 1947 he wrote a play-novelette about Joan of Arc, “The Last Joan.” He began one about Columbus. He considered writing one about Jesus. “Wyatt Earp, King Arthur, Apollo, Quetzalcoatl, St. George all seem to me to be the same figure,” he wrote in a 1958 letter, “ready to give aid without intelligence to people distressed when the skeins of their existence get bollixed up.” For Steinbeck, gallantry countered Cold War complacency, graft,

and mind-numbing materialism. “The western world and its so called culture have invented very few things,” he wrote in 1953. “But there is one thing that we invented and for which there is no counterpart in the east and that is gallantry. . . . It means that a person, all alone, will take on odds that by their very natures are insurmountable, will attack enemies which are unbeatable. And the crazy thing is that we win often enough to make it a workable thing. And also this same gallantry gives a dignity to the individual that nothing else ever has. . . .” The questions facing Steinbeck—and Ethan—are whether gallantry is an outmoded virtue in America, 1960, or whether entering the fray, as Ethan does, might well be a quixotic kind of gallantry.

Ethan’s anguished status in the contemporary world is thus in part Steinbeck’s own. Both are deeply committed to blood-lines, to the meaning of place, home, old friendships—and to probity as an ancestral inheritance. But looking back doesn’t suffice, for a writer, for Ethan Allen Hawley—or for New Baytown itself, a place “whose whole living force had been in square-rigged ships and whales.” And the old Hawley whaling ship, suggestively, has sunk to the bottom of the sea. Memories do not nourish creative action.

One aspect of Ethan’s nostalgia in particular lends poignancy to *The Winter of Our Discontent*: his betrayal of his childhood friend Danny, now a drunkard. In offering a thousand dollars to “help” Danny dry out at a sanatorium, Ethan also betrays him by giving money that might cure but might also allow Danny to drink himself to death. Giving money to friends had been one way that Steinbeck tried to connect with those whose lives seemed less bountiful than his own—and his efforts to nurture *Monterey Herald* journalist and would-be novelist Ritchie Lovejoy (to whom he gave his 1940 Pulitzer Prize money from *The Grapes of Wrath* so that Lovejoy could complete his own novel, which he never finished), to help his Stanford University roommate Carlton Sheffield earn a Ph.D. (which he never earned), and to support Ricketts’s marine-biology supply business (which was always precarious) had not ended particularly well. Lovejoy resented Steinbeck’s gesture, Sheffield and he were estranged for years, and Ricketts simply bowed out in death. The love and guilt associated with these close friends was part of Steinbeck’s psyche—that and a suspicion that somehow they had retained in poverty an integrity he’d sacrificed with success. “You drift toward peace and contemplation,” he wrote Sheffield, “and I drift toward restlessness and violence.” And Danny tells Ethan that he is “better off” than Ethan, a mere clerk. Possibly Steinbeck’s discomfort over removing Ricketts’s name from the 1951 publication of *The Log from the “Sea of Cortez”* (published as *Sea of Cortez* in 1941) found its way into Ethan’s guilty treatment of Danny. But even if that reading seems a stretch, it’s certainly true that the Steinbeck-Ricketts friendship is echoed in the brotherly bond between Danny and Ethan and in the question that Ethan articulates: Is he his brother’s keeper? Danny knows Ethan to the core; Danny is shrewd and lonely; Danny haunts Ethan’s dreams—and in one dream Danny and Ethan embrace with a kiss of betrayal. All of these can be traced back to Steinbeck and Ricketts’s deep and complex friendship.

Looking to his California past increasingly chafed Steinbeck the writer, however. The first of at least three identifiable “shocks” that propelled him toward writing *Winter* came by way of a French journalist’s query in 1953: “Isn’t it true that American writers are abandoning the present for the past?” The question came as “a shock of recognition,” Steinbeck admitted. “It has occurred to me that we may be so confused about the present that we avoid it because it is not clear to us,” he wrote to his agent, Elizabeth Otis, while on vacation in Paris. “But why should that be a deterrent? If this is a time of confusion, then that should be the subject of a good writer if he is to set down his time. For instance, the effect on young people of the McCarthy hearing is going to be with them all their lives. The responses to this spectacle, whatever they are, are going to be one of the keys to our future attitudes toward everything. If such things are not written as fiction, a whole pattern of presentday thinking and feeling will be lost.” Although he would not “try” for another six years, the problem of how to confront American issues in fiction niggled at him. A few months later, now in Italy, he told an Italian reporter that “the novel in America is on a plateau. Outside of the neurotic crowd, none of us are digging into or writing about our present life or trying to look into the future. Instead, we are seeking refuge elsewhere than America or going into the past. I don’t know exactly why this is. It might be laziness, since it’s easier to go to historical sources for your material. It might be terror or fear of some to call the

shots as they see them. And it might be a listlessness before a big event . . . a revolution of the human mind against collective pressure.” His immediate solution, he declared, was to write about what was most exciting in the postwar world: outer space. That project never saw fruition.

In the late 1950s, not outer but inner space engaged his full attention, one last siren call from his past—this the most compelling—Arthurian gallantry. He had cherished a copy of *The Boy’s King Arthur* since he was nine. Arthur was Steinbeck’s Rosebud: “The Bible and Shakespeare and *Pilgrim’s Progress* belonged to everyone. But this was mine,” he wrote in an introduction to the manuscript (published posthumously). “It was a cut version of the Caxton *Morte d’Arthur* of Thomas Malory. I loved the old spelling of the words—and the words no longer used. Perhaps a passionate love for the English language opened to me from this one book.” In 1956 the embroidered language and “remembered music” of this “magic book” brought him back to his childhood passion and the lovely and fertile Salinas Valley, where he grew up; to the shale cliffs that soar above the Valley’s Corral de Tierra—Arthur’s keep in the eyes of a dreamy lad; to archaic words and the cadence of language; and to his admiration and love for his little sister, Mary, once his very own squire. Before he translated a word of text, he wrote the dedication to Mary, lines that bring both brother and sister back home: “from this hour she shall be called Sir Marie Steinbeck of Salinas Valley—God give her worship without peril John Steinbeck of Monterey Knight.”

In many ways Sir John Steinbeck’s three-year immersion in the Arthurian matter, from late 1956 to 1959, was his way to remain tucked away from the present, something he admitted. But in fact the project insistently drew him to his own times. As his understanding of Malory’s world increased, so did his awareness that the Middle Ages were not so very different from contemporary angst: “My subject gets huger and more difficult all the time,” he wrote to Malory scholar Eugene Vinaver in 1959, when he was living in Somerset trying to complete his manuscript called “The Acts of King Arthur.” “It isn’t fairy stories. It has to do with morals. Arthur must awaken not by any means only to repel the enemy from without, but particularly the enemy inside. Immorality is what is destroying us, public immorality. The failure of man toward men, the selfishness that puts making a buck more important than the common weal.” The letter itself moves seamlessly from his struggle to understand the Middle Ages to his present dismay, the nagging sense that he, like Malory, lives in a world where the center will not hold: “we are as unconsciously savage and as realistically self-seeking as the people of the Middle Ages.” Perhaps one reason he could not finish the Malory project, which he reluctantly shelved in late 1959, was that he could not hold back the tidal wave of his own time.

Certainly he could not after his return to America in October 1959, following an eight-month sojourn in Arthur’s territory of Somerset, England. Two additional “shocks” awaited him and turned him from Malory’s dilemmas to America’s in 1960. One was psychic and physical—his failure to complete the Malory translation. He had to face the fact that he was “not good enough nor wise enough to do this work.” Being able to write only scattered “acts” nearly brought on his own *morte*. In November 1959 he landed in a New York City hospital with, he said, the porthole open to the other side. But the gravely ill writer was not quite ready to “break his brushes.” The “shock therapy” of illness made him, he said, “take back command.” That meant, for this writer, to launch other “experiments,” as he called each book throughout his long career. In the first few months of 1960, he would write *The Winter of Our Discontent*; plan his trip around America with Charley, “Operation America”; and drive his camper truck out of Sag Harbor in September to take the pulse of his country.

Indeed, America itself, the country’s plight and its potential, was the final shock that centered Steinbeck. In Somerset, wrestling each day with his writing, tramping over land that Arthur’s foot may have trodden, Steinbeck lived imaginatively and physically in another era. Discove Cottage had walls two feet thick and had “sheltered 60 generations,” Steinbeck wrote his editor, Pascal Covici. In his garden he found shards of ancient pottery. He plucked dandelion greens to cook. He wrote with a quill pen. “I feel that I belong here,”

he told Covici. His deep contentment in a rural simplicity was doused by the icy bath of America, October 1959. Like a latter-day Crevecoeur, seeing America for the first time, Steinbeck took the measure of his country upon his return: "For a long time I had not been reading any papers, even English newspapers," he wrote in March 1960, well into writing *Winter*. "And then suddenly, every morning, the front pages of the American papers with the breakfast coffee. The front pages and much of the insides were reports of rigging, cheating meat inspectors, fuel oil cheats, payola, charges of false advertising, false representation, drug company jet-propelled markups, government and state contract thefts, and this against what used to be called crimes—rape, mugging, murder, burglary, delinquency. It was staggering after the lapse of time."

In the background of *Winter* are those headlines and more—the drawn-out proceedings of the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), for example, that he felt had deeply tainted the country. In a 1957 essay, "The Trial of Arthur Miller," he takes Congress to task for ignoring a man's private morality. A few years earlier, in 1952, he had stood by filmmaker Elia Kazan when he named names before HUAC; even though Steinbeck despised the committee's actions, he defended Kazan's "courage" in acting according to his conscience. As the critic Clifford Lewis notes, Ethan as "betrayal and informer" may owe something to Kazan's clouded stance.

In addition, the quiz-show scandal that wound to its grim conclusion in November 1959 haunts the pages of *Winter*, as scholars Robert and Katherine Morsberger have convincingly shown. For fourteen weeks in late 1956 and 1957, literate and well-connected Charles Van Doren dazzled America with his brilliance on the quiz show *Twenty-One*, one of the most popular programs of the late 1950s. Van Doren "kept on winning," notes Eric Goldman in *The Crucial Decade—and After: America, 1945-1960*, "downing corporation lawyers or ex-college presidents with equal ease on questions ranging from naming the four islands of the Balearic Islands to explaining the process of photosynthesis to naming the three baseball players who each amassed more than 3,500 hits." But Van Doren had been coached, fed answers—a charge he denied for months under growing pressure in 1959. On November 2, 1959, however, the "new All-American boy," as magazines had crowed earlier, appeared before the Special Subcommittee on Legislative Oversight in the House of Representatives and confessed to cheating on the show and lying to cover up his deception. "I was winning more money than I had ever had or even dreamed of having," he said under oath. "I was able to convince myself that I could make up for it after it was over." His response anticipates Ethan's own duplicity: "my objective was limited," declares Ethan, "and, once achieved, I could take back my habit of conduct. I knew I could."

For Steinbeck it was a shabby little episode that reflected "symptoms of a general immorality which pervades every level of our national life and perhaps the life of the whole world. It is very hard to raise boys to love and respect virtue and learning when the tools of success are chicanery, treachery, self-interest, laziness and cynicism or when charity is deductible, the courts venal, the highest public official placid, vain, slothful and illiterate." It would seem, however, that Steinbeck's outrage was not shared by a majority of fellow Americans. Although Van Doren was fired both from NBC and from his position as lecturer at Columbia University, others refused to denounce his actions. At the end of 1959, *Look* magazine surveyed Americans' values, and the editor concluded that "a new American code of ethics seems to be evolving. Its terms are seldom stated in so many words, but it adds up to this: Whatever you do is all right if it's legal or if you disapprove of the law. It's all right if it doesn't hurt anybody. And it's all right if it's part of accepted business practice." This is a survey that Steinbeck may well have read.

Nor did politics in 1960 offer much solace. Steinbeck's friend Adlai Stevenson was not running for president—although Steinbeck would start a petition urging him to do so. Instead the 1960 presidential campaign was taking shape between the relatively unknown and vigorous John F. Kennedy and the positively unscrupulous Richard Nixon, whom both Steinbeck and Stevenson agreed two years before was the "greatest danger to the Republic." Midway through *Winter*, Steinbeck wrote to Stevenson that "I rather

liked Nixon when he was a mug. You knew to protect yourself in a dark alley. It's his respectability that scares the hell out of me." With McCarthy, Van Doren, and Nixon in his mind as he wrote, it's hardly surprising that New Baytown affluence is represented by a smug banker, Mr. Baker, whose superficiality, greed, and duplicity are foils to Ethan's integrity at the beginning of the book. Mr. Baker epitomizes values of *The Affluent Society*, a 1958 book written by another of Steinbeck's friends, economist John Kenneth Galbraith. Baker's plan to line his own and friends' pockets with the wealth brought by a New Baytown airport serves as a microcosm for many Americans' heedless pursuit of affluence, to the exclusion of the needs of undernourished citizens like Danny Taylor—or like impoverished Ethan himself in the opening chapters. This text peels back layers of economic exploitation, historical and contemporary.

Triple shocks administered by ghosts of past, present, and future, then, brought Steinbeck to the book that would chart the "time of confusion" to the day—*Winter* is set in 1960, and the time sequence in the second part of the novel precisely reflects his own writing schedule in that summer. But if Steinbeck lunged into the present as he began his novel in early 1960, it is also true that *The Winter of Our Discontent* is deeply tinged by the mighty project that preceded it, the aborted *Arthur*. Certainly one way to consider *The Winter of Our Discontent* is as an ironic Malorian-Steinbeckian "act," featuring a knight of Steinbeck's own invention, the impeccably credentialed Ethan Allen Hawley. But this American Lancelot is lonely, unsuccessful, cornered—initially unprepared to tilt lances, for his own Knight Templar sword is packed away. Sir Ethan's military career has concluded, his lady has been won, the grail of life's possibilities evaporated. Ethan is now simply a clerk in a grocery store, a squire at best.

Detached, always the observer, ironic and self-contained, Ethan is a modern everyman. "The Alone Generation," read a headline from the late 1950s, assessing postwar temperament. But for Steinbeck, humanity's lot was always something other than gritty individuality. "I believe that man is a double thing," he wrote in "Some Thoughts on Juvenile Delinquency," a 1955 essay, "a group animal and at the same time an individual. And it occurs to me that he cannot successfully be the second until he has fulfilled the first." Old Cap'n Hawley echoes that sentiment. *The Winter of Our Discontent* is Ethan's quest to assert his individuality, however ruthlessly pursued, and then to find the double thing in himself, his deep connection to a group, family and community and friends—an Arthurian circle intact. By the end of his quest, the thread of connection is a frail one at best, but it is there. The talisman in his pocket sends him back to his daughter's light.

II. INTERTEXTUALITY: COMPOSING *THE WINTER OF OUR DISCONTENT*

*"I don't know any book save only the Bible and perhaps
Shakespeare which has had more effect on our morals,
our ethics and our mores than this same Malory."
(John Steinbeck to Mr. and Mrs. David Heyler Jr.,
November 1956)*

He would wrap all three and more into his novel: Arthur's gallantry, Christ's temptations, the Cain and Abel story, Richard III's wiliness. Add to that mix *Moby-Dick*, mentioned in the opening pages: Ethan is Ishmael, teasing out meanings from each strand of his story, diving deeper. And to that add "part Kafka and part Booth Tarkington with a soup-song of me," his description of the novel sent in a letter to a friend. (Indeed, a copy of Kafka's *Penal Colony* sat on his study shelf, and he was reading Kafka's stories as he wrote the novel.) The novel's structure, he said, "is conceived in the sonnet form," a Shakespearean sonnet with two quatrains and a closing couplet at the end. And in mood and impulse, the book owes much to T. S. Eliot's

“The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” and *The Waste Land*, where a fortune-teller’s voice directs action. (Even the physical manuscript is a mongrel document, written partly in pen and partly in pencil on his beloved yellow legal pads.)

This energetic borrowing from literary sources, all rubbing together, suggests on one hand cultural dislocation—verbal fragments thrown up like flotsam and jetsam on America’s sterile shores, a veritable wasteland. But there is cultural resonance in this richly allusive novel as well. Drawing repeatedly from Shakespeare and company, Ethan interlards his story with textual referents and thus traces parallels and reversals, paradoxes and adaptations. The title of the novel comes from the first speech in Shakespeare’s *Richard III*, where Richard, at this point Duke of Gloucester, growls that he will plot to darken any “glorious summer” that is possible “now” that the Wars of the Roses have concluded: Ethan is wily Richard, a puppeteer holding the threads of each character’s destiny. The book begins on Good Friday, and Ethan’s temptations are an ironic inversion of the story of the Passion. As John Ditsky has noted, Ethan is both Christ the redeemer and Judas the betrayer. He is also Cain, killer of brother Abel/Danny.

Indeed, Ethan’s tendency to self-consciously invoke biblical, heroic, patriotic, historic, or mythical referents suggests the complexity of his moral choices, layered as they are by references to other texts. Insistently Steinbeck connects Ethan’s tale to literary and cultural contexts, a copious connectivity not unlike his environmental consciousness of two decades earlier. The ecological holism of *Sea of Cortez* (“None of it is important or all of it is”) becomes the cultural holism of this last novel: The choices made by a grocery clerk in New Baytown, Long Island, matter within the textual pageant of human anguish—or else nothing matters.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

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People live in this new day of lifestyle always aim to and must have the free time or they will get wide range of stress from both everyday life and work. So , if we ask do people have time, we will say absolutely without a doubt. People is human not only a robot. Then we ask again, what kind of activity do you have when the spare time coming to a person of course your answer will probably unlimited right. Then do you ever try this one, reading publications. It can be your alternative inside spending your spare time, the actual book you have read is actually Modern Classics Winter Of Our Discontent (Penguin Modern Classics).

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