

STEINBECK'S FUNCTIONAL USE OF SETTING

by

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C.2 In 1960, John Steinbeck undertook a journey across America that was to lead him from New York, to the western states, and back to New York. With only a French poodle named Charley for company, Steinbeck drove along the backroads of the United States in a three-quarter-ton pickup truck to rediscover the land that had always been such a vital part of his writing.¹ The record of that journey was to become one of Steinbeck's last books, Travels With Charley (1962).

One of the most poignant of Steinbeck's recollections of that trip occurred when the writer returned to the Salinas Valley of California. As the site of Steinbeck's boyhood years and also the setting of many of his works of fiction, the valley had always meant a great deal to the writer. In Travels With Charley Steinbeck reveals some of the changes, even disappointments, which had taken place in his absence. And yet the valley still attracted him. Shortly before leaving the area, Steinbeck drove to nearby Fremont's Peak from which he could look over the countryside. Steinbeck tells us of that stop: "This solitary stone peak overlooks the whole of my childhood and youth, the great Salinas Valley stretching south for nearly a hundred miles, the town of Salinas where I was born now spreading like crab grass toward the foothills . . . I felt and smelled and heard the wind blow up from the long valley. It smelled of the brown hills of wild oats."²

As Steinbeck stood looking down over the valley, he recalled old memories. Steinbeck voiced those memories to his dog, Charley, as the two companions stood together: "In the spring, Charley, when the valley is carpeted with blue lupines like a flowery sea, there's the smell of heaven up here, the smell of heaven."³ For Steinbeck it was a deeply moving

moment: "I printed it [the valley] once more on my eyes, south, west, and north, and then we hurried away from the permanent and changeless past where my mother is always shooting a wildcat and my father is always burning his name with his love."⁴ Truly Steinbeck had had close emotional ties with the valley.

And those ties were not merely the fond remembrances of an older man. A much younger Steinbeck had written to a friend about that same valley. In a 1933 letter addressed to George Albee, Steinbeck wrote: "I think I would like to write the story of this whole valley, of all the little towns and all the farms and the ranches in the wilder hills. I can see how I would like to do it so it would be the valley of the world. But that will have to be sometime in the future."⁵

Did Steinbeck fulfill that dream? One need only look at the settings of his works of fiction to see that Steinbeck frequently used the valley and its surrounding territory for his background. The Long Valley (1938) and East of Eden (1952) have the Salinas Valley as their settings. Tortilla Flat (1935) and Cannery Row (1945) take place in nearby Monterey. And The Pastures of Heaven (1932) occurs near Carmel in a valley which the Spanish people called the "Corral de Tierra."⁶ Other of his fictional works, notably To a God Unknown (1933), In Dubious Battle (1936), Of Mice and Men (1937), and Grapes of Wrath (1939) are based, at least in part, on the lives of characters who live in that same California coastal region. Clearly Steinbeck used the rich resources of the valley and did indeed "write the story of this whole valley."

Many other writers, of course, have used their native surroundings as settings for fictional works, but Steinbeck's employment of his is

exceptional. Freeman Champney, in an article entitled "John Steinbeck, Californian," writes that "even a casual direct contact with this country [California] and its people suggests that this background is the most important thing to know about Steinbeck and that it explains much of his writing better than any amount of remote analysis."⁷ Champney, perhaps, overstates the point. I would put it more simply: the Salinas Valley setting is an integral part of much of Steinbeck's fiction.

The purpose of this paper is to analyze Steinbeck's functional use of setting in his short fiction. The first section of this study will focus on elements of setting that help to reveal and underscore conflict; the second section will examine how setting enriches the depiction of character. In all, eleven works of short fiction will be discussed, stories selected from The Pastures of Heaven (1932) and The Long Valley (1938).

I

Steinbeck skillfully uses elements of setting, natural as well as man-made, to reveal or intensify the conflicts that are central to his works of short fiction. Inner conflicts, conflicts between characters, and conflicts between characters and their environments are frequently brought to light or underscored by Steinbeck's description of, and emphasis on, the setting. The following discussions of "The Chrysanthemums," "The White Quail," "The Harness," "The Red Pony," and "Flight," from The Long Valley, and "Richard Whiteside" (Chapter 11) and "Pat Humbert" (Chapter 10) from The Pastures of Heaven⁸ will serve to illustrate this point.

Elisa Allen ("The Chrysanthemums") suffers a serious marital conflict. The childless wife of a Salinas Valley rancher, she is very devoted to her

garden. The garden setting is a first clue to her conflict.

In the beginning of the story, we see Elisa at work cutting away old chrysanthemum stems. Her husband, whom she can see from her garden, is speaking with two other men near the tractor shed, "each man with one foot on the side of the little Fordson."⁹ Already we see that Elisa is isolated from what would seem to be a man's world. And the isolation soon becomes clearer.

When Elisa's husband, Henry, concludes his man's business (sale of cattle), he walks toward the garden to speak to her. It is important to note that Henry does not enter the garden. Instead, he "leaned over the wire fence that protected her flower garden" (LV, p. 2). At this point, the fence has become a physical barrier between Elisa and Henry, a separation between his farm world and her garden world.

There is evidence even at this early stage in the story that Elisa would like to overcome this barrier. When Henry jokingly urges Elisa to "'work out in the orchard and raise some apples'" (LV, p. 2), Elisa responds: "'Maybe I could do it, too. I've a gift with things, all right'" (LV, pp. 2-3). But Henry does not follow up on his original suggestion, but rather switches the conversation back to flowers.

The nature of the conflict is a difficult one to describe. There is something quite wrong with this marriage, something which Steinbeck hints at but never makes obvious. The rift between Elisa and Henry could be caused by their inability to produce children, by some type of sexual frustration that Elisa suffers, or even by some long misunderstanding that remains unidentified. At any rate, Elisa feels separate from Henry's world.

Further evidence of the rift can be found in Elisa's encounter with the pot fixer. The tinker approaches Elisa's garden, asks directions, and

carelessly draws "a big finger down the chicken wire fence and made it sing" (LV, p. 5). Already, the stranger stands on the threshold of Elisa's private world. Soon the man "leaned farther over the fence," and finally, Elisa invites him into her garden.

Responding to the man's poetic description of mums ("a quick puff of colored smoke") and to his offer to take some of her cuttings to a woman who has always wanted some chrysanthemums for her own garden, Elisa has invited the man to close familiarity (LV, pp. 6,7). His words have reached Elisa in a way that Henry's "'strong new crop coming'" (LV, p. 2) compliment never could, and the tinker has penetrated the barrier of the fence.

The conflict--and the separation of their worlds--is once again revealed by Steinbeck's use of setting near the story's end. The scene takes place inside her fence. Eager to appear pretty for the dinner trip to town, Elisa has put on her "newest underclothing . . . , her nicest stockings and the dress which was the symbol of her prettiness" (LV, p. 10). Instead of complimenting her on her beauty, Henry tells Elisa that she "'looks so nice,'" then he blunders on to tell her that she looks "'strong and happy'" (LV, p. 11). The truth is that Elisa is quite lovely, and Henry tries to tell her this, but fails miserably. It is probable that his inability to do so widens the rift that separates the two. Unconsciously, perhaps, Henry retreats to his world. In the midst of his blundering, he glances "toward the tractor shed" and when "he brought his eyes back to her, they were his own again" (LV, p. 11). He has retreated to his own world to regain composure. As long as he must do so, there will be no closeness in this marriage. And it is highly likely that the gap between Elisa and Henry will never be bridged. Like the old bay horse and the little grey-and-white burro that pull the tinker's wagon, they are a "mismatched team" (LV, p. 12).

"The White Quail" shows us yet another marriage in crisis, though in this case the conflict is the result of the selfishness of the wife. A garden setting is once again employed by Steinbeck to help reveal the tremendous rift in the marriage.

In the opening lines, Steinbeck shows us just how carefully a setting can be used as a visual representation of a conflict. He tells us that there is a beautifully tended garden with trees surrounded by cinerarias which are so heavily loaded with flowers that the stems are bent over. To add to the beauty of the garden is a line of fuchsias which stands like "little symbolic trees."¹⁰ And there is also a beautiful shallow pool for birds.

That lovely description is broken, however, by the hillside beyond. Right outside the garden are wild bushes and poison oak (all "very wild"), and we realize that the garden conceals the fact that this home is on the edge of town. The peaceful illusion of the garden attempts to ward off the reality of the hill. "'That's the enemy,' Mary said one time. 'That's the world that wants to get in, all rough and tangled and unkempt. But it can't get in because the fuchsias won't let it'" (LV, p. 17).

That illusion is one which is carefully nourished by the wife, Mary. She mentally planned out her garden, and decided to marry only after Harry Teller seemed to fit into such a plan. She did not ask herself if her husband would like such a garden; rather she asked, "'Would the garden like such a man?'" (LV, p. 13). And she consented to marry him only after she was certain that Harry would accept her garden.

Once the home and garden are finished, Mary offers to allow Harry to plant some flowers in her garden, yet she is relieved when he refuses to interrupt her plan. Thus he allows her the fulfillment of a dream that will

always be an obstacle between them. Unfortunately, Harry does not realize that the exclusion of himself from Mary's vision has already begun. Not until later will he learn that his place is not beside Mary. He will eventually be relegated (in Mary's mind) to the "very wild" things on the hillside. In the meantime, Mary "allows" Harry to kiss her whenever he helps put her plan into effect (LV, p. 16).

Ironically, the only involvement that Harry has with the garden (besides the financing of it) is in the elimination of creatures that threaten it. Whenever Mary finds snails or slugs or cats threatening her picture-perfect retreat, she calls on Harry to kill the pests (LV, p. 16). Harry admires her skill, her drive, never realizing that such a beautiful garden symbolizes the destruction of his marriage.

Mary views the hillside as a threat to her garden. Unrealistically, she sees the fuchsias as sentinels to protect her interests and keep out the dangers. Harry also comes to be ranked among the enemies: he works for a loan company, in the "dark thickets" of the commercial world; he would not understand, she believes, her vision of herself sitting in the picture window. She repels his affection just as surely as she fights off the hillside. She does not even consider his wish to have one of Joe Adams' Irish Terrier puppies when she realizes what such a wild creature could do to her garden (LV, p. 20). And she has no concept of the pain that she has caused Harry by the end of the story. He knows that the killing of the quail is wrong, but Mary's rigidity, her constructing of a barrier (the garden), is much worse. Mary's blind selfishness has brought the conflict between the couple to a deadly intensity.

Joseph Fontenrose, in his book entitled John Steinbeck, An Introduction and Interpretation, calls Mary's garden an eternal, changeless

heaven, and he sees the hillside as the world, especially human society.¹¹ Because Mary sees Harry as a part of that threatening, intruding world, I believe that Fontenrose's interpretation is a good one. But Fontenrose goes too far when he compares Harry to the devil who intrudes into Mary's Eden.¹² Mary, though she wilfully manipulates Harry, does not perceive him as a devil. Rather, she uses him as a tool to carry out her plan, and is merely annoyed when he threatens to disrupt her scheme. She is definitely the more powerful, the more devil-like of the two characters.

Another story in which Steinbeck makes use of the setting to underscore a conflict is "The Harness." The conflict in the story is one of wills, the desires of Peter Randall versus the overpowering determination of his wife, Emma. While it seems that Peter bends to the will of his wife, we realize (after the woman's death) that Peter suffers from a self-imposed restriction. Thus Peter's conflict is an intense psychological one.

The opening paragraph of the story mentions the control that is so visible in Peter Randall's life. We are told that Peter's manner is "grave and restrained," and that even his beard is "carefully tended."¹³ Steinbeck even hints at the significance of the title when he tells us that Peter's shoulders are carried as "though they were braced" (LV, p. 74). Hence we are introduced to a man who is carefully controlled, though seemingly not by his own will.

An extension of that control is found in the setting of Peter's ranch. The Randall house is tidy: "The white farmhouse was as neat and restrained as its owners. The immediate yard was fenced, and in the garden, under Emma's direction, Peter raised button dahlias and immortelles, carnations and pinks" (LV, p. 75). And the land itself fits into the scheme.

The crops are chosen and are "carefully tended" (LV, p. 75), so that the couple will be assured of a reasonable living. All seems to be carefully kept within bounds, just as Peter himself is kept within bounds.

Nor is the house any exception. Though the furnishings are good ones, Steinbeck tells us of the "framed pictures" and the "books of a sturdy type" (LV, p. 76). All is in its place, and, since the marriage produced no children, the house remains "unscarred, uncarved, unchalked" (LV, p. 76). Even the footscrapers and mats which are placed outside the doorways contribute to the control motif; they keep the dirt outside the house.

Evidence of the conflict, of Peter's rebellion, is found in the San Francisco setting. Always openly bowing to Emma's will, Peter takes annual, short trips to the city, ostensibly for business purposes. Actually, he tells Ed Chappell that these trips consist of drinking binges which include nightly visits to "fancy houses" (LV, p. 80). And Peter also tells Ed that, had it not been for these trips, he would have "busted" (LV, p. 80). In Peter's own mind, the trips are a necessary escape from the control of his wife. San Francisco represents a life filled with uninhibited sensual pleasure; the ranch, on the other hand, represents a life of restraint and propriety.

But Peter is not happy with his temporary escapes. When he returns to the ranch, he feels a sense of guilt, evidenced in his new interest in the home. As some type of penance, Peter has always made home repairs after his trips. Steinbeck tells us that the furniture and woodwork were annually varnished, thus suggesting that Peter can cope with his guilt only by restoring the setting which represents Emma's control.

With Emma's death, it would seem that Peter has been freed of that tight control that for so long has bound him. Again, elements of setting

would encourage us to believe so. Shortly after Emma's funeral, Peter allows the mantel clock, which had always been a part of the control within the house, to run down. Disliking that familiar reminder with its mournful tolling, Peter opts for a small, fast-ticking alarm clock. And Peter also fetches the whiskey so that he and Ed may drink in the home. Always before, the whiskey had been hidden in the barn, another small indication of Peter's rebellion.

Perhaps the best evidence of Peter's rebellion is the change in the outdoor setting, the change in the farmland. Instead of resorting to the production of the more reliable crops, Peter secretly sows the whole flat in sweet peas, "forty acres of color and smell" (LV, p. 82). This indicates that he is attempting to bring the sensual life of San Francisco, the delight of smell and touch, to the country setting that has been so rigidly controlled for so many years. With the success of that new crop, it would seem that Peter has made a very satisfactory transition.

But that change is not to be. Through Ed's eyes, we discover that Peter is unable to give up the trips to San Francisco. He still journeys to the city for one week each year so that he may revel in drinking. He still must resort to these annual escapes. And he still suffers tremendous guilt feelings and forces himself to do penance for his "sins." When Ed meets the drunken Peter, he learns that Peter plans to install electric lights in his home, something which "Emma always wanted" (LV, p. 88). Thus Peter will never be able to break from what we now discover is a self-imposed harness. Peter will always flee to the city for brief escapes from himself. And he will always maintain at the ranch the strictness, the control, that existed during Emma's lifetime. San Francisco and the Salinas Valley ranch

are opposites, two contrasting worlds that reveal this conservative, inhibited man's inner struggle.

One of the most touching of the selections from The Long Valley is John Steinbeck's "The Red Pony." Like many young boys who live on farms or ranches, Jody Tiflin yearns for the pony which will signify his adulthood and give him new responsibility. His first pony, Gabilan, is a gift from his father, but the boy loses the pony when it contracts distemper. When Jody is later promised a second pony, the boy receives the gift at the cost of the life of the mare, Nellie. For a second time, Jody has been made aware of the cruelty that nature can deal.

Jody feels torn between the reality and responsibilities that maturity brings and the joys and safety of childhood. That conflict, like others which have been examined in this paper, is made concrete through a visual representation of setting. Jody, for example, has mixed feelings about the mountain ranges. The Gabilans to the east, which are "jolly mountains," fill Jody with a sense of light, peace, and visions of heroic past battles. These happy feelings are reminders of childhood. In contrast, the Santa Lucias to the west harbor "purple-like despair," which causes Jody to be afraid.¹⁴ Steinbeck tells us that those mountains "went piling back, growing darker and more savage until they finished with one jagged ridge, high up against the west. Curious secret mountains . . ." (LV, p. 167), thought Jody. Clearly the mountains symbolize the mystery, and possible threat of adulthood. Like the rising jagged ridge, the climb to maturity will be an imposing, difficult journey. Their impersonality, their aloofness, are characteristics that Jody sees in nature and in the growing up that he must face.

Steve Crouch, in a book entitled Steinbeck Country, describes the differences between the two mountain ranges. The Gabilans, Crouch informs us, are "lesser mountains than the Santa Lucias, lower, less steep, and much drier . . . the dried, yellow grasses . . . have a warm welcoming air about them, and the light on their slopes is bright and golden. By contrast, the Santa Lucias, because of their heavier vegetation and some incredible violet quality of the light, are cool and blue and dark." Thus Jody's impressions of the mountains are not absurd.

Yet another vivid reminder of the conflict is Jody's associations with particular spots on the ranch. Despite the fact that much of the land is at times quite dry, the grass around the tub is "deep and sweet and moist" (LV, p. 166). Since the spring-pipe fills the tub and the water spills over, the surrounding area is always covered with lush grass. When Jody kills a thrush with his slingshot and mutilates the body of the bird, he feels guilty. He knows that if adults were to see what he had done, they would chastise him. He quickly discards the pieces of the bird, and goes to the spot near the spring pipe.

His actions at the site are a further indication of the pleasant associations that he has with the spot. When he arrives, Jody drinks from the tub and then washes "the bird's blood from his hands in the cold water" (LV, p. 166). He uses the spot to remove the reminder of the death which he has just caused: "the mean little pain in his stomach" that he feels (LV, p. 166). This spot allows him to forget death and also allows him to return to the pleasures of childhood. After he washes away the blood, Jody lies in the grass (surrounded by the lush green growth) and looks above at the "dumpling summer clouds" (LV, p. 166). He even allows his imagination

to run freely, feeling that he can help the clouds clear the mountain rims. This imaginative act, aided by the green surroundings, reminds us that Jody, too, would like to be helped across the mountain range (that climb to maturity). By coming to this particular haven, Jody can forget that pain and death that he realizes he must face as he matures. By imagining that he can push clouds along in the sky, he clings to the pleasures of childhood.

Steinbeck calls this spot Jody's "center-point" (LV, p. 188). He tells us that the grass soothes Jody, and the singing tones of the water rushing through the trough soothes the boy. The "biting acid of meanness" (like that which the boy felt when he killed the bird) leaves Jody when he comes to the trough (LV, p. 189). And barriers, be those of approaching maturity, or recollections of "stern" days, are no longer terrifying.

The black cypress tree, however, which stands near the bunkhouse poses problems for Jody. This tree, because of the pig slaughters which always occur there, remind Jody of violent, bloody death. The spot upsets the boy so much that his "heart beat so fast that it hurt him" (LV, p. 189). The boy recovers his composure only by going back to the water-tub. Clearly Jody views the spring and the cypress tree as enemies, as opposites.

One day as Jody wanders about the ranch thinking of Nellie and the colt that she is to bear, he finds himself beneath the tree. He feels that this is an unlucky place to be when thinking of the impending birth, and he quickly walks to the water-tub. This, he thinks, will "counteract any evil result of that bad conjunction" (LV, p. 189). And the associations with that lush spot obliterate the premonitions about the colt. Soon Jody is able to visualize the "black, long-legged colt, butting against Nellie's flanks, demanding milk" (LV, p. 189). All of his fears vanish in this perpetually green setting that he loves.

Jody's fears about the Santa Lucia mountains parallel those that he has about the black cypress tree. And, his feelings of joy, of happiness, which are prompted by the Gabilan Mountains, parallel those that he has when he is near the water-tub. Jody does not yet fully realize that life and death, joy and terror, are often interrelated. For now, he feels pulled between the elements of the setting. He knows that he must face the pain that accompanies adulthood, yet he still seeks the retreat of childhood. The mountains and the areas of the ranch serve as reminders of Jody's conflict as he approaches the threshold of maturity.

"Flight" is a story in which physical conflict and psychological conflict are both very important. Pepé Torres, a young man who yearns for adulthood, travels to Monterey on an errand for his mother. At the kitchen of Mrs. Rodriguez he drinks too much wine, takes another man's insults to heart, and kills the man with his treasured black knife. The story is that of Pepé's journey to the mountains to avoid capture.

The major conflict, one that Pepé has scant chance of winning, is that of himself against society. Pepé has always lived on the wild coast, fifteen miles below Monterey, above a cliff that drops to the ocean.¹⁶ He is happy in this remote setting, playing with his knife to the amusement of the "two undersized black ones" (LV, p. 26), and bantering with his mother. The country farm represents Pepé's innocence. But, to Pepé, Monterey symbolizes the manhood that he is eager to claim. When asked to make the journey, he eagerly consents, assuring his mother several times that he will be careful and that he is a man (LV, p. 28).

In leaving the wild sea terrain, Pepé leaves behind the security and the innocence of the life he has always known. Monterey becomes a violent

contact with a society that Pepé does not understand and, being inexperienced and alone, cannot cope with.

The psychological conflict is also made important through setting. At the beginning of the story, Pepé believes that the trip to Monterey will prove that he is already a man. The reader, however, can see that he is bragging as a child would do. At this point in his life, Pepé knows nothing about what real maturity entails.

But Monterey symbolizes the beginning of his education. In a way that he could never have anticipated, Pepé takes a giant step towards adulthood. His journey from the city to his coastal home marks the beginning, the first stage, of his journey toward the serious responsibility of manhood.

When Pepé flees to the mountains, he is journeying toward adulthood. Like the first stages of life, the first steps into the mountains are fairly easy. Steinbeck tells us that the trail is a "well-worn path, dark soft leaf-mould earth strewn with broken pieces of sandstone" (LV, p. 34). Thus those first steps, like the boastings that Pepé made to his mother, are easily accomplished. But the trail cannot remain so easy. As Pepé climbs, he has more difficulties. The trail becomes steep, the trees more scarce. No longer can Pepé find the protection, the security, that the foothills offered.

And the terrain, like Pepé's quest for manhood, grows rougher. When his horse is shot, Pepé is forced to make that trip afoot. He struggles onward plagued by the loss of his rifle, the loss of his hat, and the wound in his hand. He is forced to crawl through the brush, seeking shelter as best he can.

Pepé's goal is to reach the peak, the "sharp ridge . . . littered with broken granite" (LV, p. 45). He must crawl to reach it, just as he

must struggle for his manhood. By reaching that peak, he gains, though only momentarily, the adulthood that he so badly wants.

The black coloring of the setting is also important. The "dark watching men" who live in the mountains, are probably fugitives just as Pepé is a fugitive. They are also, however, reminders of death. Mama reminded Pepé, before he fled to the mountains, that he was to have nothing to do with such men. As part of the setting, they remind us of the hopelessness of Pepé's struggle against a society that he cannot understand. And they also remind us of death.

Other elements of setting are also noted for their blackness. As Pepé nears death, a black bird circles over his head. This vulture, like the watchers, reminds us of death. And Pepé, too, is described as "black against the morning sky" (LV, p. 45). In accepting his fate, Pepé has joined the dark watchers; he has become a part of the alienation they feel. And he has also accepted the death, the darkness, that Mama feared.

Peter Lisca, in The Wide World of John Steinbeck, maintains that Pepé reacts to his pursuit, his inevitable death, with the "calm and stoicism required by the highest conception of manhood."¹⁷ At the end, Pepé does indeed become a man, and the mountains are the appropriate setting for such an important occurrence. The fact that Pepé is physically above his hunters at the time of his death (and manhood) indicates that he has risen above mere animal responses.

The stories from The Pastures of Heaven also use setting to reveal or intensify conflict. "Pat Humbert," for example, is a story filled with tension heightened by setting.

Pat was raised by a set of parents who were well advanced in age before Pat reached maturity. Because the Humberts envied Pat his youth and

vitality, they were "spiteful before he was twenty."¹⁸ They belittled all that the boy did, telling him that he would see things differently when he reached old age. As a result of this constant harping, Pat grew up in a house without love. His parents' possessions were cruel reminders of the coldness that Pat had to cope with.

A constant reminder of the coldness of Pat's parents is the Humberts' locked parlor. Steinbeck describes it as "cold and awful as doom," a room matched in distaste only by the "stuffy sitting room, smelling always of pungent salves and patent medicines" (PH, p. 178). And the objects in the parlor are no less foreboding. The huge family Bible, the vases of everlasting flowers, the stiff family portraits, the picture of the corpse of Elaine and the stuffed orioles are all reminders of death. Pat is horrified by the grisly funeral-like keepsakes.

When Pat's parents die, he resolves to avoid the roomful of reminders. He resolves never to enter the room, and then "plucked out the key [from the locked door] and threw it into the tall weeds behind the house" (PH, p. 185). He even closes all the shutters on the windows (except for those in the kitchen) and nails the shutters with spikes. Pat thereby attempts to lock up his past.

A change in the setting for which Pat is not responsible is the branching out of the white Banksia rose. Pat allows the home to fall into neglect, but the rose comes "suddenly to life" and climbs up the front of the house (PH, p. 188). Steinbeck tells us that the rose covered the house, making it seem like a "huge mound of roses" (PH, p. 188). Thus the rose is a sharp contrast with the boarded up memories of Pat's parents; it is a brilliant reminder of life which conceals the dusty mementoes of death.

Mae Munroe unwittingly helps Pat take even more important steps away from the horror of his parents. Seeing the rose-covered house one day, she remarks that the house reminds her of a lovely Vermont home that she once saw on a postcard. Pat overhears the conversation and resolves that he will make the interior of his house like that of a lovely Vermont home.

Pat, of course, has no idea as to what the inside of such a home should look like. He therefore goes to the Salinas library, and locates magazine pictures of the interior he desires. He is startled by the contrast between such pictures and the home that his parents had built. He notices that everything in pictures of well-designed homes is related. The lamps with frosted globes, the open-faced cupboard, and the pictorial bone-china are quite a contrast with the "mail order house lamp" and ill-matched furnishings that his parents had bought (PH, p. 191).

Pat's burning of the family articles is a purification ceremony. By destroying the Bible, the furniture, the stuffed orioles, Pat tries to burn out the memory of his parents' bitterness. And Pat enjoys the bonfire. It is as though he has finally gotten the chance to tell his parents what he really thinks of them. His feeling that he presides "at the death of his enemy" is the exorcism of remembered hate (PH, p. 194).

Pat's re-furbished room is filled with objects which convey warmth and welcome. The glowing pewter, tiger rug, chintz curtains and highly polished floors dispel the coldness of the old parlor and sitting room. Pat feels that he has successfully overcome the unhappiness that his parents forced on him. But Pat's joy is shortlived. When he learns that Mae Munroe is already engaged to another man, he realizes that he fixed up the home only because of his fantasized relationship with her. He knows that no amount of

dreaming will give a home warmth unless there is shared love. He returns to his new dream home, but is afraid to enter it. He is afraid that "he might lock up the door again" (PH, p. 201). The two puzzled spirits that he sees gazing into his fire are Mae and himself, as he had pictured the scene in his dream. Pat knows now that love will always remain beyond his reach. The lovely room is destined only for ghosts.

Pat is clearly a pathetic figure. We have seen how his parents abused him and how their belongings were unhealthy reminders of unhappy lives. Pat tried to overcome the problem with new surroundings, but at last realizes that belongings will not create happiness. He will be tortured by loneliness for the rest of his life. No one else will ever know of the warmth and love that he wants to share.

"Richard Whiteside" of The Pastures of Heaven is the story of a dream. Determined to found a family dynasty, Richard builds his home of redwood because he knows that such a home will not decay. He also adds such features as a wide veranda and a slate roof. He gives his full attention to the details of construction, for he is bent on building a long-lasting, sturdy house. The slate roof, in particular, symbolizes Richard's dream to become "founder and patriarch of a family."¹⁹

When Richard acquires his wife, Alicia, his dynasty plan seems to be going smoothly. As Steinbeck says: "The farm prospered, the sheep and cows increased, and in the garden, bachelor buttons, sweet william, carnations, hollyhocks settled down to a yearly blooming" (PH, p. 207). The fruitfulness that Richard had envisioned is most evident in this setting.

Richard's first and only son is born in an ordeal which almost kills his wife. When he learns that there will be no more children for him,

Richard's dream of a houseful of children fades. Thus the narrow limits that his fate imposes contrast with the roomy, family home that he has built.

A tenth birthday party for his son, John, further demonstrates the thwarting of Richard's dream. Determined to have the great house filled with the noise of children, Richard anticipates the party. But the children cannot enjoy the house; "they might as well have shouted in church" (PH, p. 117). Richard's dream is not to be fulfilled, and the children flee to the barn for their games.

When Richard nears death, he dreams of children who run through the house and pull at the quilts of his bed. He is a frustrated man, one who has yearned for the fulfillment of a large family and has even supplied the necessary setting for them. But reality has not permitted that dream to come true. The quiet house serves as a constant reminder of Richard's disappointment. The only hope he has left, one last futile dream, is that his son will beget generations of children. Richard dies, believing that one day his grandchildren will overflow the steps of the house.

Richard's son, John, loves the great house even more than had his father. He feels as though it were "the outer shell of his body" (PH, p. 220). And he takes excellent care of the home, repainting the house and caring for the garden.

The most important section of the house for John is the sitting room. The leather chairs, the pictures of Swiss Alpine climbers, the red brick fireplace, and the meerschaum pipe are not mere objects, but are "pieces of him" (PH, p. 222). Steinbeck tells us that the loss of any of those beloved objects would have been like an amputation for John. He just couldn't bear to part with any of those belongings.

John, like his father, yearns for children. When he learns that his wife is to bear a child, John is determined that the same fruitfulness will appear in the land. He plunges the seeds into the earth and waits "covetously for the green crops to appear" (PH, p. 224), just as he waited for the birth of his son.

John's house becomes his personality. Gradually the neighbors find that they are unable to think of the house without thinking of John. And his dreams of his son continuing the generations are the foundation for his hopes. When he learns that his son and the son's wife-to-be have no intention of remaining at the family home, John realizes that the dream that he shared with his father will never be realized. When he sees the fire devour the beloved leather chairs which "shrank like live things from the heat," the glass on the pictures shatter, and the slate roof fall into the ruin of the house, John is watching the destruction of his and his father's dream.

II

Steinbeck often uses the settings in his short stories to enrich his depiction of character, a point which was touched upon in Part I. But, as the following discussion will make clearer, setting is a significant key to our better understanding of Steinbeck's people. "The Chrysanthemums," "The White Quail," "The Snake," and "Breakfast" from The Long Valley and "Helen Van Deventer" (Chapter 5) of The Pastures of Heaven will be dealt with in this section.

Elisa Allen of "The Chrysanthemums" is a woman who is isolated because of a rift in her marriage. As we have seen, her garden and the

barrier of the fence intensify Steinbeck's portrayal of that marital conflict. But the setting also gives us a clearer picture of Elisa's character.

The Salinas Valley is waiting; "it was a time of quiet and waiting."²⁰ Even the orchards are waiting, waiting for the inevitable winter rains that will insure summer production. As the land waits for fulfillment, so does Elisa. She and her husband enjoy no real closeness in their marriage. This lack of fulfillment has put Elisa in a constant state of expectancy, an expectancy that will hopefully lead to her happiness. But that happiness is not to be found. Like the "yellow" stubble fields which "seem" to be bathed in sunshine (LV, p. 1), there is a falseness in Elisa's long-awaited happiness. Like the yellow frosted leaves that "seem" to be bands of sunshine (LV, p. 11), Elisa appears to be happy and content, but we soon discern that her happiness is like the promise of sunshine: a delusion.

Elisa's yellow flowers do much to enhance her character. Despite the dead appearance of the countryside, the flowers are strong. We can hardly miss the similarities between the strong, vibrant flowers and Elisa's "eager face," "over-powerful" hands, and her abundance of energy (LV, p. 2). Even her husband, who makes so many wrong observations, remarks on Elisa's strength.

And the strength and the brightness are not the only features which Elisa shares with the flowers. Elizabeth E. McMahan, in an article entitled "'The Chrysanthemums': Study of a Woman's Sexuality," makes particular note of the fullness, the suggestiveness of the blooms.²¹ McMahan sees those blooms as a clue to Elisa's lack of sexual satisfaction. I feel that this interpretation is accurate. Elisa dresses in masculine clothing (a man's black hat and clod-hopper shoes) and works so energetically that Henry fails

to notice her femininity. When the tinker arrives and begins talking to Elisa, she takes off the battered man's hat and shakes out her pretty hair. While Henry does not notice her femininity, the tinker does so very quickly. And Elisa responds to him, becoming sexually aroused by the man's presence. She even reaches toward the man's legs, and then crouches "like a fawning dog" (LV, p. 8).

One should not overlook the importance of the chrysanthemums in the encounter with the pot-fixer. The man discovers what the flowers mean to Elisa, and realizes that he can use her passion for flowers to get work. Through flattery he manages to get shoots from her treasured plants, and even obtains advice about the care of them. It is as if, by getting the chrysanthemum shoots, the man has procured something of Elisa herself. Though he pretends to appreciate the beauty of her flowers (for selfish motives), Elisa responds gratefully to him, perhaps even suggesting some slight unfaithfulness to her husband.

Elisa's flowers are very important to her. At the end of the story, when she sees "a dark speck" that is her discarded plants, she is desolated (LV, p. 11). Something very dear to her, something which was generously offered to a stranger, has been cruelly discarded. And the discarding seems to end her hope for understanding, for sexual fulfillment. "Like an old woman" she cries, knowing that whatever it is that she lacks cannot be granted to her (LV, p. 12).

There are also elements of setting which characterize Mary Teller in "The White Quail." The most important feature, the white quail itself, symbolizes the strangeness, the freakishness of Mary. And the rigidly controlled garden reveals to us Mary's selfishness.

When Mary discovers the quail in her garden, she is completely awed. Seeing herself in the quail, she describes it as an essence of herself, "an essence boiled down to utter purity."²² She even calls the bird the "queen of the quail" (LV, p. 22). Obviously she sees the quail as the ultimate addition, the crowning perfection of her garden. It is, as she perceives it, the "beautiful center" of herself (LV, p. 23).

Mary tries to explain her feelings regarding the quail to her husband, but without success. He first suggests that her precious bird is a pigeon, and then tells her that it is an albino. Mary cannot, however, accept his explanation that the quail is a freak. To her, it is a special, beautiful creature, just as beautiful and special as she and her garden are.

It is interesting that Steinbeck chose an albino quail. Indeed such creatures are rarities, and yet it is difficult to see how one should perceive them. Often such creatures are shunned by others of their species, and Steinbeck's "dainty little white hen quail went to the other side of the pool, away from the ordinary quail" (LV, p. 22).

I believe that Steinbeck meant for the reader to see that Mary's bird is a freak. Mary, too, is a kind of freak. Totally bound up in her garden and its ornamentation, she selfishly and cruelly destroys her marriage. Her rigid landscaping of the garden, and the maintenance of it, show us a woman totally enthralled by an unhealthy plan.

Mary's perception of the cat as a threat to herself is closely linked to her thoughts of the quail, and also marks her as a freak. Clearly the cat is another of those "wild" creatures from the hillside that threatens the perfection of the garden. But this cat is the ultimate threat. Because Mary sees the quail as herself, the cat causes her to react hysterically.

And she is not calmed until Harry assures her that the intruder will be vanquished.

The garden symbolizes Mary's childish illusion that she can keep out all that is wild or dangerous. Like the fuchsias that stand guard, Mary rigidly banishes any intruder into her garden. And, like the strictly lined up trees and plants, Mary tries to exclude the chaos of the world. Her private garden, like her locked bedroom door, stands as a barrier to her husband and reveals her deep-seated selfishness and immaturity.

"The Snake" is yet another story which uses setting to give a clearer picture of character. Dr. Phillips, the most important character in the story, is a man balanced between the primitive and the civilized. On one hand, he is described as having a "short blond beard," a feature that would seem to make him something of a primitive. On the other hand, he has "the preoccupied eyes of one [a civilized man - a scientist] who looks through a microscope a great deal."²³ His home (the laboratory) also adds to this sense of paradox. The laboratory, which stands "partly on piers over the bay water and partly on the land" (LV, p. 47), is also balanced between two worlds. The setting, too, strikes a balance between primitive life, which emerged from the sea, and civilized life, which developed on the land.

The doctor has little to do with other human beings. He lives alone, in a bedroom that contains only an army cot, some books, a reading light, and an "uncomfortable" wooden chair (LV, p. 48). His furniture indicates that he is unaccustomed to entertaining guests.

While the doctor is a paradoxical figure, the woman who visits him is even more intriguing.

She resembles in many ways the grey rattlesnake, one of the elements of setting within the biological laboratory. She speaks in "a soft throaty

voice" (LV, p. 49), which reminds the reader of the sound a snake would make. Her dark eyes, which are described as seemingly "veiled with dust," also add to her reptilian appearance. The doctor notes that she has some form of low metabolic rate. "He noticed how short her chin was between lower lip and point. She seemed to awaken slowly, to come up out of some deep pool of consciousness" (LV, p. 51).

The woman's fascination with the snake's eating terrifies Dr. Phillips. He notices the similarities between woman and snake, and at one point even fears that he will turn around to discover that she is working her jaws just as the snake does while devouring the rat. The doctor loses his scientific composure, ruins one set of his experiments, and briefly becomes more primitive. He becomes emotionally caught up in the scene when the snake prepares to kill the rat in the cage. "'It's the most beautiful thing in the world,'" he says. "'It's the most terrible thing in the world'" (LV, p. 55). And the doctor's veins are throbbing even as he speaks. This incident has truly unnerved him.

Steinbeck's use of the woman-snake parallels is difficult to analyze. Because of her enthusiasm, because of her imitation of the snake's movements, it would seem that the woman gains some kind of perverse, sexual thrill from her observance. But the nature of that thrill is concealed. We can only remain puzzled by the incident and wonder, as did Charles E. May in an article entitled "Myth and Mystery in Steinbeck's 'The Snake': a Jungian View," just what goes on in the story. May informs us that, when asked about the story, Steinbeck said that he wrote it "just as it happened." He claimed that he did not know what it meant.²⁴

The narrator of Steinbeck's "Breakfast" is also puzzled. He does not know why his experience at the out-of-doors breakfast fills him with

pleasure. Steinbeck, of course, reveals the answer, and part of that answer lies in the setting, which once again tells us much about the character.

Steinbeck uses the setting to enhance the warmth of the family that welcomes the narrator. When the newcomer first arrives, he observes the "lavender grey of dawn."²⁵ By the time he leaves, after sharing the family's hospitality, there is a warm reddish gleam in the sky. The faces of the two men are "lighted by the dawn," and the light coming over the mountain is reflected in the older man's eyes (LV, p. 60). The description of the rising sun reflects the warmth, the love, that the family extends to a nameless stranger who has come to their home (a canvas tent).

Other elements of setting demonstrate the family's handsome generosity as well as their warm compassion. The "warmest, pleasantest odors" of the cooking breakfast have a special appeal to the narrator. And once that shared breakfast is finished, there remains the memory of that outdoor kitchen: the tin cups on a big packing box, the tin plates and knives and forks, the big platter of fried bacon, and the pan of big biscuits which was pulled from an old rusty oven. All of these elements of setting provide comment on this noble family.

The narrator is unable to pinpoint the joy of that particular encounter. He can only remark on the "element of great beauty that makes the rush of warmth when he thinks of it" (LV, p. 61). The reader, however, can see the trust and generosity and appreciate them as a rarity. The setting--the colors, the sun imagery, the odors, the outdoor kitchen, the canvas home--enhance a story that is already beautiful.

"Helen Van Deventer" of The Pastures of Heaven is the story of a woman who has devoted her life to mourning. In the very first paragraph

of the story, Steinbeck tells us that Helen took on a widow's expression at the age of fifteen when her Persian kitten had died.²⁶ That dead kitten allowed Helen to enjoy six months of solemn mourning. Thus begins the chief employment of a woman that Steinbeck describes as having a hunger for "tragedy, and life had lavishly heaped it upon her" (PH, p. 64).

There are several elements of setting which function to intensify the total devotion to grief that Helen enjoys. The first of those emerges when Helen's husband, Hubert, is killed in a hunting mishap. Instead of expressing her grief and then trying to cope with it, Helen makes it the chief occupation of her life. Hubert has replaced her father as the object of grief. She makes Hubert's drawing room a temple dedicated to the man's memory. People are expected to speak softly when they enter, and the curtains remain drawn in the room.

Helen's daughter, Hilda, provides the mother even more reason to mourn. From an early age, Hilda suffers from some severe form of mental illness characterized by wild fantasies. Helen's family doctor advises the woman to have the child placed in an institution, but Helen refuses to do so. Helen has resolved to endure whatever pain the child may cause her, though the doctor warns her that the child will grow more uncontrollable. When Hilda's behavior causes public scenes, Helen builds a house in Christmas Canyon. A beautiful house of weathered logs with lovely gardens of cinerarias surrounding it, the cabin would seem to be a peaceful haven. But still Helen clings to her grief. It would seem that time would have dulled Helen's remembrances of a husband that she loved for only three months, but that is not to be. Instead, Helen has created a lavish memorial to her husband. The living room of the cabin holds Hubert's mounted

trophies, a torn French battle flag that her husband had prized, and his guns. "Helen felt that she would not completely lose her husband as long as she had a room like this to sit in" (PH, p. 76). And Helen sits in this room of the dead, dreaming of Hubert's appearance and his mannerisms, resurrecting memories of the past.

By this time Hilda has become so violent that bars must be placed on the windows of her bedroom. But these bars can also signify the self-imprisonment that Helen forces onto herself. She uses the log house to force herself to recall painful experiences.

Much to Helen's surprise, her memories of Hubert gradually fade. The image of his postures and his phrases fade away to nothingness. At first Helen feels a great sense of relief. This relief is apparent when she urges a wild rabbit to eat the carefully planted foliage at the house, thus signifying her desire to destroy the memorial. The desire to be rid of grief is also shown when Helen fumbles with the windows, opening the bolts which have been a part of her imprisonment (PH, p. 82). It would seem that Helen is well on her way to recovery.

But this new sense of peace is not to be. When Hilda escapes from the cabin, Helen kills her with one of Hubert's hunting rifles. Helen destroys her own daughter and calmly accepts the coroner's judgment that the girl committed suicide. Helen has used Hubert (through his gun) to restore grief which she lost when Hubert's memory faded. At the end of the story she looks, "in her severe, her almost savage mourning . . . as enduring as a sea-washed stone" (PH, p. 83). Her new grief will probably last a lifetime. Undoubtedly she will create new memorials to the memory of her daughter.

Joseph Fontenrose calls the story one of final defeat for Helen Van Deventer because she failed at rearing an insane daughter.²⁷ This, I feel, is a misinterpretation. I believe that Helen is quite satisfied with her life. I think that she could not cope with the absence of grief, and so was looking for another occasion for mourning. The Helen of the final lines is a woman totally content. No doubt she will nurture her new-found grief in whatever setting she finds herself.

Throughout his short fiction Steinbeck's use of setting is finely detailed. The houses of characters, their possessions, and their natural settings are invaluable clues to both their personalities and their relationships with other people. Without such crafted use of detail, the stories of The Pastures of Heaven and The Long Valley would lose much of their rich meanings.

NOTES

- ¹John Steinbeck, Travels With Charley (New York: 1962), overleaf.
- ²Ibid., p. 183.
- ³Ibid., p. 184.
- ⁴Ibid.
- ⁵Elaine Steinbeck and Robert Wallsten, eds., Steinbeck A Life in Letters (New York: 1975), p. 73.
- ⁶Steve Crouch, Steinbeck Country (Palo Alto, California: 1973), p. 46.
- ⁷Freeman Champney, "John Steinbeck, Californian," Antioch Review, 7 (September 1947), 345.
- ⁸The individual stories (chapters) in The Pastures of Heaven are not titled. However, for convenience of reference, I plan to use as a title the name of the central character of that chapter.
- ⁹John Steinbeck, The Long Valley (1938; rpt. New York: 1967), p. 1.
- ¹⁰Ibid., p. 13.
- ¹¹Joseph Fontenrose, John Steinbeck, An Introduction and Interpretation (New York: 1963), p. 63.
- ¹²Ibid.
- ¹³The Long Valley, p. 74.
- ¹⁴Ibid., p. 168.
- ¹⁵Crouch, pp. 21-2.
- ¹⁶The Long Valley, p. 26.
- ¹⁷Peter Lisca, The Wide World of John Steinbeck (New Brunswick, New Jersey: 1958), p. 100.
- ¹⁸John Steinbeck, The Pastures of Heaven (1932; rpt. New York: 1960), p. 177.
- ¹⁹Ibid., p. 206.
- ²⁰The Long Valley, p. 1.

²¹Elizabeth E. McMahan, "'The Chrysanthemums': Study of a Woman's Sexuality," Modern Fiction Studies, 14 (Winter 1968-69), 455.

²²The Long Valley, p. 22.

²³Ibid., p. 47.

²⁴Charles E. May, "Myth and Mystery in Steinbeck's 'The Snake': A Jungian View," Criticism, 15 (Fall 1973), 322.

²⁵The Long Valley, p. 58.

²⁶The Pastures of Heaven, p. 64.

²⁷Fontenrose, p. 26.

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STEINBECK'S FUNCTIONAL USE OF SETTING

by

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John Steinbeck used setting as more than a backdrop for his short fiction. The houses of characters, their possessions, and their natural settings are invaluable clues to both their personalities and their relationships with other people. The chief purpose of this study is to explore the functional use of Steinbeck's setting.

The first part of the study is an analysis of elements of setting that help reveal and underscore the conflict in seven Steinbeck stories. Specific elements, such as the fence in "The Chrysanthemums" (The Long Valley) and the home furnishings from "Pat Humbert" (The Pastures of Heaven), are examined to determine how they intensify individual psychological conflicts and conflicts between characters.

The second section of the study examines character enrichment that is provided by setting. The garden from "The White Quail" (The Long Valley) and the drawing room of "Helen Van Deventer" (The Pastures of Heaven) are examples of specific settings that enhance character portrayal. Five short stories are examined in this section.

Steinbeck wrote in 1933 that he wanted to write the story of "the whole valley" [the Salinas Valley]. That he attached great importance to setting in his fiction can be seen most vividly in The Pastures of Heaven (1932) and The Long Valley (1938).