

Steinbeck's Paradoxical World in *The Winter of Our Discontent*

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In his 1962 Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech, John Steinbeck said, "Man is our greatest hazard and our only hope" (2). This statement reflects Steinbeck's perpetual optimism and faith in man. It also reflects Steinbeck's paradoxical view of the world. Humans are supposed to be enlightened beings in a moral universe, yet they revert to an animalistic nature in a relative world. In order to be a content being, one must accept man's incongruities in a paradoxical world, where man must be aware of his imperfectability and yet strive for perfection. In Steinbeck's *The Winter of Our Discontent*, Ethan Hawley is representative of a man struggling to find the place of an individual in an increasingly self-interested, immoral world.

The Winter of Our Discontent immediately depicts a town that is moving out with the old in order to make room for the new. As Ethan is walking to work, he stops to observe the old Bay Hotel that is being torn down and replaced with a Woolworth's (9). This change is significant because the Bay Hotel was probably a privately owned business, where as Woolworth's is a chain store. The group is now being more glorified than the individual. He says that the bulldozer and crane "were silent like waiting predators in the early morning" (9). This depiction presents the modern world with its corporations and technology as predatory, and the old ways are falling prey to the new. If the old does not adapt, then it will be destroyed. This idea seems to reflect Darwin's "survival of the fittest." The Hawleys themselves seem to be in the process of being pushed out by the new as well. They used

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to be considered one of the select families, owning half of New Baytown, but through financial mistakes made by Ethan's father and Ethan himself, they are becoming a common lot. Instead of looking to the future, Ethan has been concentrating on what the Hawleys once were, and he has therefore been unable to adapt. As Mr. Baker tells Ethan, "You're brooding on something past" (15).

One gets a foreshadowing of the events to come when Joey, Mr. Baker's right-hand man at the bank, says, "If I wanted to stick up a bank, I'd do it just before a long weekend" (8). This idea becomes more and more of a reality to Ethan as time progresses. Furthermore, everyone around Ethan seems to be pressuring him to join in the worship of "the Great God Currency" (132). Ironically, on Good Friday, the anniversary of Christ's crucifixion, Ethan's temptation is initiated. He is visited by a series of people who encourage him to do whatever it takes in order to get rich. Margie Young-Hunt, the town "witch," tells Ethan that she is going to make his fortune read that he will be a rich man. However, Ethan is not yet aware that her aims are not sincere; she only wants to ensure her own financial security. Consequently, she is described as "a predator" and "a huntress" (16). When Ethan's boss Marullo comes into the store, he tells Ethan that he must "look after number one" and "learn the tricks" of the business (21). He says, "Business is money [, and] [m]oney is not friendly" (23). Next, a drummer, Mr. Biggers, wants Ethan to give his wholesale company the grocery's patronage in exchange for a bribe (25). Mr. Biggers says, "Everybody does it[;] [d]on't be a fool" (25). Ethan's mind is being planted with the seeds of temptation. The town wants Ethan to join in "the only meaningful business in the present world: making money" (Gerstenberger 60).

Throughout these visits, Ethan is overcome with darkness. He feels "darkness [fall] on the store" after Margie leaves, and Ethan "felt darkness on the world," after Marullo leaves (19, 23). And while Ethan is talking to Mr. Biggers, he proclaims, "It's a dark day" (25). These references to darkness seem to signify that Ethan is feeling pressure to go against his own values and morals and conform to the moral conduct of his fellow associates. When Ethan returns home, he contemplates Margie's role in the events of the day and says, "A certain woman...has

surrounded me with traps, for reasons known only to herself. I am in danger of falling into one or more of them” (33). Margie has essentially offered Ethan a bite of the apple in order to gain wealth and success, and he is afraid he may take it. However, the paradox is that as Ethan gains wealth and success outwardly, he will become morally depraved within his self. Ethan also wonders whether “a man can think out his life, or must he just tag along?” (36). Richard Hart seems to answer this question when he states, “For Steinbeck, to be a human person is tantamount to being caught in a paradox, to be engaged, sometimes unwittingly, in living with and working through the dilemma of being at once both a determined unit of nature and a free, value-articulating individual forever called upon to act” (48). Nature may present obstacles that one has no control over, but as a human being, one still has a choice once that obstacle has been presented. Man may be in an “epic struggle with nature” or with his own “uncontrollable passions and instincts,” but he is still a free being with the ability to make choices (Hart 48).

On the night of Good Friday, Ethan cannot sleep and goes to his familiar “Place” at Old Harbor where the Hawley dock once was. The past is always a comfort to Ethan because it brings him security and stability in a world that is constantly changing. Ethan remarks, “It’s big changes take me there – big changes” (43). These past changes that have brought Ethan to “the Place” include the night before he went in the service, the night before he became a husband, and the night before he became a father (43). This statement therefore signifies that Ethan is about to step into another new, unfamiliar role. One gets a glimpse of the changes Ethan is about to make when he says, “Are the eaters more immoral than the eaten? In the end all are eaten – all – gobbled up by the earth, even the fiercest and the most crafty” (46). Basically, Ethan is questioning what one gains by being a morally conscious individual when all share the same fate. However, when Ethan is talking to his deceased grandfather, Old Cap’n, at “the Place,” he is presented with another option. Old Cap’n believed that Cap’n Baker, his partner, had burnt their whaling boat in order to collect the insurance money after business became no longer lucrative. Ethan asks, “Then it’s no different now,” to which Old Cap’n replies, “No

different" (48). Ethan says, "There must be some difference," and Old Cap'n replies, "Only in a single man alone – only in one man alone. There's the only power – one man alone. Can't depend on anything else" (48). Ethan has therefore been presented with Steinbeck's paradox; he can simply become one of the "eaters" who simply fulfill their needs and urges, or he can try to make a difference as a moral, conscious individual.

Steinbeck's philosophy seems to stem from the view of naturalism that "has its origins not only in the late nineteenth-century but also in an earlier nineteenth-century transcendental faith in the spirit and in free will" (Pizer 3). This idea is shown in Old Cap'n's belief that man should be self-reliant in a world that respects the group and encourages conformity. However, Ethan does not heed Emerson's advice and takes the lower road. He continues to reflect on the naturalistic world in which he is not held to any sort of standards. Ethan states, "If the laws of thinking are the laws of things, then morals are relative too, and manner and sin – that's relative too in a relative universe" (57). If there is no right or wrong, then Ethan is not to be held accountable for his actions. Ethan begins to feel "some deep-down underwater change going on" inside of him (62). The fact that Ethan feels something surfacing from within himself seems to signify that it is a part of him that has always been there and simply needs to be rediscovered in order to emerge, much like the old books in Ethan's attic which are never thrown out but "sit comfortably on their shelves waiting to be rediscovered" (69). After Ethan begins to accept the way the modern world does business and imitate its shrewd business practices, he says, "[Mr. Biggers] began to look at me with respect and I liked it. I loved it. The bugger thought I was like him, only better at it" (64). Ethan has essentially taken a bite of the apple, and it tastes sweet to him. After that experience, Ethan remarks, "And I remember thinking what a hell of a man a man could become" (65). However, Ethan is not referring to the power of the individual in the sense that Old Cap'n meant or that of the transcendental philosophers, but the power man has over people as a predator, an "eater."

When Margie comes over to the Hawleys' for dinner and reads Ethan's fortune again, she gets a vision of a snake "changing its skin,

part dusty and ragged and part fresh and new” (84). The snake symbolizes both Ethan and the world and the paradox that Ethan is fighting in a paradoxical world. Ethan lives in a world that is both old and new, as reflected by his home New Baytown, “an old town” (37). He is himself both old and new, caught in the middle of a transformation. To carry it even further, every man is both old and new, part of a long history and part of a new generation. The snake’s meaning itself is also paradoxical. The snake may symbolize evil and destruction as in the Garden of Eden, and it may also symbolize hope and regeneration, shedding its skin and starting afresh. As Hassell Simpson notes, Ethan has been “restrained by his old habit of obedience to custom, law, and social expectations,” but he is now returning to “the primitive, natural, aggressive state of man” (314).

While Ethan is talking about the “dark and desolate caves of the mind,” he describes his own as a “secret and sleepless area” of “black, deep, waveless water, a spawning place from which only a few forms ever rise to the surface” (86). Ethan seems to be talking of his animalistic nature, which never wholly disappears but stays buried in the recesses of one’s dark soul. However, Ethan believes that sometimes “hideous,” “strange” things “thrust up to the surface as though a sea serpent or a kraken emerged from the great depths” (86). Ethan experienced this “monster” once before when his brother-in-law was dying in the Hawley house from a thyroid infection that was causing him to be violent (86). Ethan says, “I wanted to kill him, to bite his throat out[;] [m]y jaw muscles tightened and I think my lips fleered back like a wolf’s at the kill” (87). After Ethan told the doctor about this desire, he asked what causes such feelings, and the doctor replied, “Maybe a return to the time of the pack when a sick or hurt member was a danger. Some animals and most fish tear down and eat a weakened brother” (87). Ethan proclaimed, “But I’m not an animal or fish” (87). Ethan as a moral human being found his own thoughts to be appalling.

However, this event becomes ironic in the present because Ethan no longer seems to be distancing himself from these animal urges and desires. He is about to “tear down” a “weakened brother” himself. Ethan’s childhood friend Danny Taylor, whom he lovingly refers to as brother, has become the town drunk. The Taylors are one

of the original families of New Baytown, like the Bakers and the Hawleys, and can essentially be considered part of "the pack." Danny owns the only flat land that would be appropriate for an airport, which would bring more business to New Baytown, and he intends to hold on to it. He is therefore essentially holding "the pack" back from progress. Consequently, Ethan is going to sacrifice him in order to advance financially. He gives Danny money for a rehabilitation program knowing that Danny will spend it on alcohol and most likely drink himself to death. Then, Ethan will receive his property as collateral, and Mr. Baker will have to buy it from him at a high cost in order to get his airport. Therefore, Ethan becomes more like a wolf than his previous moralistic standards would have ever allowed him to conceive of being. And not only has Ethan planned to destroy Danny's life, but also he has informed Immigration Services that his boss Marullo is in the United States illegally. Ethan wants Marullo to be deported so that he can buy the grocery store from him. He plans to keep it running with the money he intends to steal from the bank. It is only appropriate that when Ethan returns to the store, the gray cat bothers him so much. A cat is a domesticated predator, which is basically what Ethan has become. As Michael Meyer's notes, "mixtures of gray tones are more frequent...than stark black and stark white[,] resulting in an outlook that is tantamount to dual duality" (197). Steinbeck could have just as easily chosen a black cat to represent the evil in man or a white cat to represent man's innocence. However, for Steinbeck, gray best represents man, who is neither wholly evil nor wholly innocent but somewhere in between. He is both subject to animalistic urges and needs but yet capable of moral reasoning.

Ironically, as Ethan is hatching his plans, his fourteen-year-old son has also chosen to exploit the practices of the world in order to gain money. The irony of the situation is that Ethan justifies the immorality within himself because he lives in a naturalistic world where right and wrong are relative, yet he finds his son's immorality detestable. It is quite fitting that when Ethan comes home from work one night, he discovers Allen wearing his Knight Templar's hat with its yellowing plume. As Gerstenberger notes, "the white plume of honor would be inappropriate [for Ethan] as he seeks corruption in the moral wasteland

of a small New England town” (59). Ethan’s son has inherited this immorality as signified by his putting on the hat. While Allen is advocating the current “get rich schemes” and contests of the modern world, Ethan questions him about the moral aspects and whether he does not find these schemes dishonest (169). All the while, Ethan is in fact contriving a “get rich quick” scheme of his own. When Ethan’s wife reprimands him for being so hard on Allen, Ethan replies, “I gave him a quick glimpse of the real world. He was building a false one” (171). This statement is ironic because Ethan is building the same world, a world in which one is not to be held accountable for his/her actions, which can be justified by the fact that “everybody does it.”

Ethan continues to drive forward with his plan to rob the bank. He justifies his actions with ideas such as “strength and success – they are above morality, above criticism,” and “[i]n effect no crime is committed unless a criminal is caught” (187). These thoughts reflect the completely relative universe in which Ethan has become a part and parcel. Ethan depicts himself as merely a bystander, saying the path “seemed to plan itself[;]” he “watched it grow and only guided it with the lightest touch” (187). Ethan seems to be showing that such plans come very easily for man once they have been initially conceived. However, Ethan is not without guilt, saying “I did not need or want to be a citizen of this gray and dangerous country. I had nothing to do with the coming tragedy of July 7. It was not my process, but I could anticipate and I could use it” (187). The tragedy that Ethan is referring to is the uncovering of scandalous governmental practices in New Baytown that Mr. Baker has underhandedly exposed. Ethan is presenting himself as a man who has been swept up by circumstances beyond his control. He is ignoring the fact that a morally righteous individual does have a choice in some circumstances despite his inability to prevent them from happening.

As Ethan is walking to work on the day before he intends to rob the bank, he notices the flag and describes it as “slumped limp as a hanged man” (203). This image is not one that can be associated with pride and respect for one’s country. It recalls an image in which honor and morality are dead. Ethan seems to become aware of where he has failed in respect to his role in this immorality. On this same evening,

the bribes and scandals that have been going on in New Baytown are announced on the radio. Ethan begins to feel that he is also to be held guilty for these crimes. He says, "I was thinking maybe it is – everybody's crime" (212). Ethan briefly slips back into a moralistic code in which people are accountable for their actions. As Warren French states, "[. . .] [T]he trouble lies not with one generation or another, but in the dark mysteries of the human heart" (73). Therefore, each man shares the crimes of his neighbors because the human heart is flawed in all men. As Steinbeck said, "Man is our greatest hazard and our only hope" (3). Therefore, each individual must take it upon himself to better the world.

However, this brief illumination does not deter Ethan's plans to rob the bank. Ethan once again justifies the crime to himself, saying, "And as for dishonesty, the crime – it was not a crime against men, only against money" (214). Ethan seems to be ignoring the same fact that he brought to Allen's attention, which is: "It doesn't hurt the money to get it that way but it hurts the one who gets it" (72). Despite Ethan's full intent to go through with the bank robbery, chance intercedes, and a man from the Department of Justice interrupts Ethan just as he is about to cross the street to the bank. He has come to tell Ethan that Marullo is going to be deported and wants to give Ethan the store. Marullo had come to the United States with high hopes and expectations but soon learned that in this dishonest world he must look out for number one (225). Marullo saw Ethan as the one honest person who had not tried to cheat him (225). The man says, "You're his down payment, kind of, so the light won't go out" (226). Ethan is able to accept this change in his plan without too much consideration. However, when Danny is discovered dead in his cellar, Ethan cannot so easily dismiss the role that he played in his destruction. He pulls down the shades in his store and sits in the "dim green darkness" (225). The "green darkness" is significant because it reflects the darkness that money has brought on Ethan's soul. Ethan still has one more card to play, though, and when he walks over to the bank, Mr. Baker calls him in to discuss the bind he is in regarding the airfield. When Baker discovers that Ethan has control over Danny's land, he becomes angry simply because his own effort of gaining it had failed. Ethan tells Baker

that he will have to get used to the idea that he is not “a pleasant fool” (258). Ethan has now received everything he had intended without having to commit a crime and guilt begins to crawl in. Ethan is now realizing that even in a relative universe, there are still acceptable and unacceptable standards for oneself.

It is not until Ethan discovers that his own son has hatched a plan of self-advancement through dishonesty and exploitation, plagiarizing his “I Love America” essay, that all life’s events become too much to bear. Ethan has acted “in a manner opposed to his moral center” and is therefore unable to continue living a life that has become untrue to himself (Meyer 201). Furthermore, Allen represents what hope there is for the future, and he has proven that there is none in an immoral, dishonest world. Ethan retreats to his “Place,” where he has been “truest to himself and to the idealized Past” (Levant 300). He says, “[T]here comes a time for decent, honorable retirement, not dramatic, not punishment of self or family – just good-by, a warm bath and an opened vein, a warm sea and a razor blade” (276). The word “good-by” in itself becomes significant because Ethan has previously said what it signifies to him. It is “a word with teeth sharp to bite through the string that ties past to the future” (202). Ethan no longer wants to be a part of a hopeless future, and Ethan believes that he no longer has anything to offer as an individual. He remarks, “It isn’t true that there’s a community of light, a bonfire of the world. Everyone carries his own, his lonely own...my light is out. There’s nothing blacker than a wick” (275).

It is not until Ethan reaches in his pocket for the razor blades that he discovers that there is some hope for the future. Ethan’s daughter Ellen, sensing her father’s despondency, had shoved Ethan’s treasured talisman into his pocket, sharing the same belief as him in its power of comfort. For Ethan, the talisman seems to justify and give meaning to his life. It helps him make sense of a seemingly contradictory existence. Carved on the talisman’s surface is an “endless interweaving shape that seem[s] to move and yet [goes] no place. It [is] living but [has] no head or tail, nor beginning or end... You [can] see into it and yet not through it” (126). The talisman is therefore a bundle of contradictions, much like man and the world he inhabits. It represents life and its never-

ending progression, connecting the past, present, and future. It gives hope to Ethan and represents something greater than himself. The talisman connects "the historical with the contemporary, personal with the universal, and temporary with the cosmic" (Chadha 148). It gives Ethan importance as an individual within the universe. As Hart states, "For Steinbeck, man is not just a cultural or political or economic animal but fundamentally a species in nature, a unique and hopeful part of the whole and never detached from it" (52). It is because of the talisman that Ethan suddenly realizes that the hope for the future lies not in his son, but in his daughter. Ethan says, "I had to get back – had to return the talisman to its new owner... Else another light might go out" (276). Philbrick correctly notes that "Ethan's sudden determination to live is made possible by his realization that humanity's only hope rests not with a group but with the individual" (237). Philbrick goes on to say:

Only after he has connected this insight with his own daughter... does Ethan find the will and the strength to emerge from the tide pool's carnivorous waters, an almost evolutionary progression in which his self-centered obsessions with the past and present give way to one truly altruistic act directed toward the future. (238)

Ethan has now fully realized his potential as an individual in a never-ending cosmic battle. He has reverted from seeing man as a hazard and being one himself, to seeing the hope that each individual provides for the future. The forces of nature may push Ethan around and trap him in situations that he has no control over, yet as a free, moralistic being, he is always capable of pushing forward. As Steinbeck proclaimed in his Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech, "The danger and the glory and the choice rest finally in man" (2). Steinbeck's never-ending faith and optimism in man's ability to persevere and bring about change as an individual is reflected in the struggle of Ethan Hawley. In the end, Ethan sacrifices his own needs and desires in order to provide hope for the next generation.

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