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Standards Focus: Exploring Expository Writing

Author Biography: John Steinbeck

John Ernst Steinbeck Jr. is considered one of the greatest American authors of all time. Famous for such works as *Tortilla Flat*, *Cannery Row*, *The Grapes of Wrath*, *East of Eden*, and *Of Mice and Men*, Steinbeck artfully created believable characters living real life, and in doing so, brilliantly captured the strength and determination of the human spirit.

Steinbeck was born February 27, 1902 in Salinas, California, the only son of John Ernst Steinbeck Sr. and Olive (Hamilton) Steinbeck. His father was the treasurer of Monterey County, and his mother was a public school teacher. He grew up in the vast agricultural heart of the Salinas Valley, about 25 miles off the Pacific Coast, which later became the setting for many of his novels.

Growing up an avid reader, Steinbeck was captivated by adventure stories such as Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur* (The Death of King Arthur). At age 14, he decided to become a writer, and spent hours in his bedroom writing stories and poems, and even attempting his own translation of Malory's famous novel.

Steinbeck entered Stanford University in 1919, enrolling in writing, literature and a few science courses. Never fully committed to the idea of college, Steinbeck occasionally took classes which interested him, but left in 1925 without ever receiving a degree. He then moved to New York, and worked several odd jobs, from newspaper reporter to construction worker. He returned to his native California two years later, where he worked as a caretaker for an estate and completed his first novel, *Cup of Gold*, in 1929.

While the novel *Cup of Gold* was never a significant financial or critical success, Steinbeck was able to afford to marry his first wife, Carol, in 1930. Finally settled, Steinbeck concentrated on his writing, and in 1935, published the very successful novel, *Tortilla Flat*. Based on the lives of California *paisanos* (people of Indian and Spanish descent), Steinbeck was able to capture the often bleak, yet painfully realistic side of human life—a side of life he was able to witness firsthand.

Of Mice and Men, published in 1937, and *The Grapes of Wrath*, published in 1939, were arguably Steinbeck's most famous and controversial novels. *Of Mice and Men* was originally conceived as a play, and after Steinbeck rewrote the novelette for the stage, it received the Drama Critics Circle Award in 1937, and was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize. *The Grapes of Wrath*, a gritty, candid illustration of the lives of farmers during the Depression, received harsh criticism. This criticism did not deter people from buying the book, however, and the novel eventually became a huge success, winning the Pulitzer Prize in 1940.

After his marriage began to crumble, Steinbeck decided to travel with respected friend Ed Ricketts, a marine biologist. *Sea of Cortez* (1941), and *The Forgotten*

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Village (1941) were said to have been inspired by Ricketts and their travels together. He divorced Carol in 1943, and married his second wife, Gwendolyn, with whom he had two sons, Thomas and John. After another rocky marriage, they divorced in 1948, and in 1950 he married his third wife, Elaine Scott.

Severely criticized and equally celebrated, Steinbeck wrote 28 novels in all. His later works, *Cannery Row* (1945), *East of Eden* (1951), a semi-autobiographical piece, and *The Winter of Our Discontent* (1961), were a few of the most acclaimed novels of his later years. After receiving numerous nominations throughout the 1950s and 1960s, Steinbeck was finally awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1962. Steinbeck died in New York, December 20, 1968, at the age of 66.

Steinbeck's empathy with life during the Depression and his ability to capture human existence in all of its harsh cruelty and captivating glory, made his novels a powerful platform for social and political issues and established Steinbeck as one of the most effective and brilliant writers of his time.

Comprehension Check: Author Biography

Directions: After reading the article on John Steinbeck, answer the following questions using complete sentences on a separate sheet of paper.

1. Steinbeck wrote 28 novels in all. In the order in which they were published, list the names of the novels mentioned in the article.
2. Compare and contrast *Of Mice and Men* and *The Grapes of Wrath*, according to the information you are given in the article.
3. In one or two paragraphs, summarize Steinbeck's personal life, from his childhood to his death.
4. In your own words, describe the general qualities of Steinbeck's novels, according to the article. Why do you think his novels are still popular today?
5. If you were completing a research project on Steinbeck, what two research questions would you want to investigate further? Form two questions for your research. Why did you choose to find out more about these ideas?
6. Referring to the information in the article, draw a timeline of **ten** important milestones in Steinbeck's life. Be sure to include a brief description and dates for each event.