Olli, Fall, 2023, Classic American Novels on Film: The Grapes of Wrath, 1940

John Steinbeck (1902-1968) was born in California. He attended Stanford University, on and off, from 1919 to 1925. From his earlier writings on, his favorite settings have been the towns and rural areas of California. His earliest success came with “Tortilla Flat” (1935), a novel about Monterey paisanos. “In Dubious Battle” (1936), he wrote about the problems of migratory fruit pickers, and labor problems were to remain one of his major subjects. “Of Mice and Men” (1937) tells the tragic story of two iterant farmhands who yearn for a home of which they are always deprived.

The peak of Steinbeck’s career was reached in 1939 with the novel “The Grapes of Wrath,” for which he received the Pulitzer Prize. This epic treatment of dispossessed farmers from Oklahoma, journeying to California as a promised land was a huge success in novel form, and an even greater success as a film in 1940, directed by John Ford.

Steinbeck’s writings of the WWII and post war period were diverse, and showed a falling off in quality. His first major novel since “The Grapes of Wrath” was “East of Eden” (1952). Partly set in the Salinas valley, it was a family saga, covering the period from the Civil War to WWI. Steinbeck used the biblical theme of Cain and Abel to symbolize the struggle of good and evil. Critics have claimed that his fiction combines realism and romance, but not always harmoniously. In his books, folks live happily close to nature, but their lives are disrupted by natural disasters or social and economic problems.

Critics and scholars frequently have written negatively about his novels, but they are widely read. Steinbeck has long been valued more highly in Europe than this country. In 1962, he won the Nobel Prize, much to the dismay of American litterateurs.

Many of his novels, both major and minor, have been filmed with success.

Steinbeck was a restless man, frequently changing residences, a factor leading to the failure of his first two marriages. With his third wife, Elaine Scott, he settled down, finally, in Sag Harbor, Long Island.

John Ford (1895-1973) was born in Cape Elizabeth , Maine, the 13th child of Irish immigrants. His father owned a saloon in Portland. His original name was Sean O’Feeney. After high school, he went to Hollywood, to join his brother, Francis Ford. He began working in the film studios at the bottom, but he began directing in 1917. He made many films in the silent era, and in the sound era he directed a long series of films, ranging from well-crafted films to masterpieces. Ford’s touch on a film is unmistakable. He won Oscars for “The Informer,” “The Grapes of Wrath,” “How Green Was My Valley,” and “The Quiet Man.” When Orson Welles was asked what American directors appealed most to him, he replied, “The old masters, by which I mean John Ford, John Ford, and John Ford.” Of the novel, “The Grapes of Wrath,” Ford said, “I never read the book.”