



CHAPTER I

THE IMPORTANCE OF A "WHY"

He who has a "why" to live for, can bear with almost any "how".⁵

Nietzsche

The quotation from Nietzsche suggests, and the writer agrees with the point of view, that a "why" to live for is important to human life and raises a man above the state of animalism, making it possible for him to relate to something beyond mere necessity for existence. A "why" gives a man a belief above and beyond himself. It gives a goal, a direction for living. When a man has an aim or purpose in life, he can bear almost any hardship no matter how difficult it may be. Without a purpose in life, a man becomes empty, lost and his suffering is pointless. Each individual's "why" will vary according to self and the time. Hope is also related to "why". Without hope man is dead in life. Henry David Thoreau referred to this condition as being dead and alive at the same time. The old saying "While I breathe, I hope" indicates that hope is important to life because it gives a promise of a future, a goal, a tomorrow, something to live for. A "why" also relates to self-identification or the search for self which is one of the common themes in modern literature. It can provide an answer to the question "Who am I?" Self-identification and

⁵Viktor E. Frankl, Man's Search for Meaning (New York: Washington Square Press, 1968), p.121.

a purpose for living are foundations for healthy lives without which the individual will be alienated and perhaps destroyed.

Steinbeck agrees with Nietzsche in the above quotation. His ideas about the necessity of "why" can be seen in many of his novels from the very beginning of his career. In his non-fiction writing such as Sea of Cortez, America and Americans, and A Russian Journal, Steinbeck sometimes states directly that hope is necessary for life. In Sea of Cortez, he expresses his personal philosophy:

It was said that hope is a diagnostic human trait... For hope implies a change from a present bad condition to a future better one. The slave hopes for freedom, the weary man for rest, the hungry for food....Man grows toward perfection.... Probably when our species developed the trick of memory and with it the counter balancing projection called the "future", this shock-absorber, hope had to be included in the series, else the species would have destroyed itself in despair. For if ever any man were deeply and unconsciously sure that his future would be no better than his past, he might deeply wish to cease to live. 6



Hope for a better future has forced man to action which has resulted in what we call modern progress. Without hope, man will not try to work toward perfection.

A further example of the importance of hope is given by Steinbeck in his A Russian Journal, an account of his trip through Russia in 1948. He indicates that contemporary

⁶John Steinbeck, The Log from the Sea of Cortez (London: Pan Books, Ltd., 1969), p.147.

Russian society is prepared to bear any hardship as a result of its belief that tomorrow will make it all worthwhile.

In Russia it is always the future that is thought of. It is the crops next year, it is the comfort that will come in ten years... If ever a people took its energy from hope, it is the Russian people. ⁷

In To A God Unknown, the main character, Joseph is paganistic. He adores the tree which he believes embodies his father's spirit and he believes in the power of nature as men in ancient times did. His brother tries to persuade him not to be a pagan but is unsuccessful. When he asks Joseph why he worships the tree, Joseph replies, "I just do things I do, I don't know why except it makes me happy to do them... a man has to have something to tie to, something he can trust to be there in the morning."⁸ Steinbeck seems to suggest that although Joseph's belief appears to be nonsense to many people it is not for Joseph because it is his "why" in life. Steinbeck does not condemn any faith or belief as long as it gives direction to life and does not crush others.

In Dubious Battle, Steinbeck's novel about social injustice which preceded The Grapes of Wrath is about a strike of migrant apple pickers. Jim Nolan, a main character

⁷John Steinbeck, A Russian Journal (New York: Bantam Books, Ltd., 1970), p.63.

⁸John Steinbeck, To A God Unknown (New York: Bantam Books, Ltd., 1968), p.28.

in the novel joins the Communist Party and the strikers. When we first see him, he is weary of poverty and hopelessness, and he wants to join the Party because he needs a "why" in his life. When Jim is interviewed by Party leaders, he expresses his desire for membership this way. "In jail there were some Party men. They talked to me. Everything's been a mess; all my life. Their lives were not messes. They were working toward something. I want to work toward something. I feel dead. I thought I might get alive again."⁹ It is the "why" of the Party men that makes Jim join them. He joins the Party not only because he wants to fight against social injustice but because he noticed "... The hopelessness wasn't in them... in the back of every mind there was a conviction that sooner or later they would win their way out of the system they hated."¹⁰ When Jim has a goal, a why to live for, he can sacrifice for the group. The strikers rise up against the big owners of the orchards and Jim is wounded but still he does not care much about his pain. The goal for the Party makes Jim's pain and ultimate death meaningful, because he has become larger than himself.

Another of Steinbeck's characters, Mac, also has a strong belief in the goal of the Party. When he sees that

⁹John Steinbeck, In Dubious Battle (New York: Bantam Books, Ltd., 1966), p.6.

¹⁰Ibid., p.16.

the strike will be a failure because the owners have great power, Mac ^{still has} ~~is not~~ hopeless. He clings to his "why" and does not care about the approaching failure. He says to Jim, when he sees no chance to win, that "...the thing will carry on and on. It'll spread, and some day it'll work... Someday we'll win. We've got to believe that... If we didn't believe that we wouldn't be here."¹¹ Steinbeck does not pass judgement on the right or wrong of Party membership. He seems to suggest that these men can bear any difficulty in life because they have a goal to fulfill.

In The Short Reign of Pippin IV, Pippin is chosen to be king of France not for the benefit of the country but to be a patsy. Pippin wants to be a good king. He once goes outside the palace into the countryside where he meets an old man who is trying to pull a statue out of the water. When Pippin asks him why he is doing this, the old man tells him that he does not know; he removes the statue from the water because he wants to. Steinbeck may be saying that those who throw "statues" into the water symbolize the destroyers, and the old man represents the builder in society. Without this kind of man, the social order would be in chaos. Helping the situation is the old man's "why" to live. This "why" is also realized later by Pippin himself when he refuses to be a patsy for the political parties who backed him for

¹¹Ibid., p.111.

narrow selfish reasons. He prefers a valuable death to *being* a patsy with a meaningless life.

In East of Eden, Steinbeck seems to indicate that man will stop being lonely only when he has a purpose in life. When Adam lives with Charles after his return from the army, his life is empty and lonely but it ceases to be so when he intends to marry Cathy, to build a family. Steinbeck calls this feeling of having a sense of purpose in life "the glory". "Adam Trask grew up in greyness, and the curtains of his life were like dusty cobwebs...and then, through Cathy, the glory came to him."¹² The whole meaning of life is revealed to Adam. Cathy becomes a projection into the future. His life now has meaning and Cathy becomes his "why".¹³ There is a tomorrow, a direction which ends his loneliness. Later when Cathy goes away, Adam is like a dead man again. The light in him goes out. He pays attention to nothing, not even his sons for many years. He becomes lonely and passive again when his purpose is gone.

In Of Mice and Men, George and Lennie, the two main characters, live with the hope of having a farm of their own one day. They have a will to live even though they are misfits, outsiders in society. Lennie is helpless and cannot manage without George, his friend. Although Lennie is

¹²John Steinbeck, East of Eden (New York: Bantam Books, Ltd., 1962), p.114.

useless in the eyes of society, he has much meaning to George. George often swears that he would live more happily without Lennie, but he does not mean it. Lennie is an important part of his life. With Lennie, George has hope and a dream of a security they may share in the future. Lennie and the dream are tied up together. Together, George and Lennie have a sense of belonging which alone neither would feel. Lennie's dependence satisfies George's basic need for self-respect and belonging and gives him a sense of purpose or a "why" to live. Lennie makes George's life more worthwhile by giving him a role to play and by increasing his sense of self-importance. The reader sees this from their dream that George repeats to Lennie.

Guys like us, that works on ranches, are the loneliest guys in the world ... They ain't got nothing to look ahead to ... with us it ain't like that ... because (Lennie broke in) I got you to look after me and you got me to look after you, and that's why.¹³

Warren French points out that the dream not only gives a direction to their lives, but also makes them feel different from other people. Together, with their dream, they have individuality, hope and a goal. Though this sense of difference can mean little to Lennie, for George, it provides a sense of superiority and a sense of ultimate achievement.

Lennie's inability to reason makes him fail to understand

¹³John Steinbeck, *Of Mice and Men* (London: Penguin Books, Ltd., 1967), pp.16 - 17.

the rules of society and the law. He kills Curley's wife, not in anger or with attention, but because he does not realize his own physical strength and he cannot control his desire to stroke her soft hair. Her failure to recognize his desperate need for affection leads to her destruction. In the end, George kills Lennie to save him from the punishment of a society that has no understanding or sympathy. Warren French in John Steinbeck points out "... what George is actually trying to kill is not Lennie who is only a shell and a doomed one at that, but something in himself."¹⁴ This could be interpreted to mean that George kills Lennie because he realizes that with Lennie their hope for the farm will never come true. There can only be trouble, more running away. When George shoots Lennie, he is not only destroying the dream but also his purpose in life. Without a "why" for which to live, there is no longer a hope, a bright tomorrow for George. From a man who dreamed of the future, he becomes an aimless wanderer looking neither ahead nor back. His love and sense of responsibility died with Lennie. George says to Candy, another character who shares his hope:

I'll work my month an' I'll take my fifty bucks an' I'll stay all night in some lousy cat-house. Or I'll set in some pool-room till ever'body goes home. An' then I'll come back an' work another month an' I'll have fifty bucks more.¹⁵

¹⁵John Steinbeck, Of Mice and Men (London: Penguin Books, Ltd., 1967), p.79.

Life is empty without a purpose or security or responsibility following Lennie's death.

In The Pearl, Steinbeck presents a man who finds a "why" to live but the negative forces of greed and social conflict destroy his "why" leaving him without hope or purpose. Society in The Pearl is portrayed as callous, indifferent, and biased against those who are different, who are the less privileged. There is no communication among groups or individuals, just a "Berlin wall" of prejudice. As a poor Mexican oyster fisherman, Kino represents a community of people without hope. When Kino finds the pearl, it is described as "the Pearl of the World" - the pearl of great price. The pearl becomes a symbol of hope. It is expected to provide the education for his son who could then free his people from ignorance and social inequality. It represents that bright tomorrow which makes today tolerable. Having the pearl with him, he is often attacked by those who want to steal it. His dilemma is clear when, having killed his enemy in a fight, Kino does not understand what or why it happened. He can do nothing but escape. When he returns home he finds his property has been destroyed. He is not prepared to face such a situation so he has no solution and no one offers any sympathy or understanding. He now realizes no one cares. He is utterly alone but still will not give up the pearl. He tells his brother, "This pearl has become my soul. If I give it up I

shall lose my soul."¹⁶ The reader now grasps the extent of Kino's loss when he finally disposes of the pearl. The desperate choice of George in losing Lennie is repeated.

Kino is a sympathetic character who is trapped by a situation he can neither control nor understand, and is finally driven into a corner by society. Steinbeck, in making Kino hold on to his hope as long as possible, pursues his theme that man must have hope if his life is to have purpose. It does not matter whether one's hope is fulfilled; what matters is its existence. If a man loses his hope something within him dies and he leads an empty life. The pearl also symbolizes Kino's dream for fulfillment in life, but when his child is killed his purpose in life is destroyed too. He throws the pearl into the sea because it no longer has a purpose, just as Kino's life is without a "why." His desire was not so much for himself as for his child.

In The Grapes of Wrath, the Joad family can bear any suffering because Ma Joad's faith in humanity provides a powerful "why" to live. This will to live is clearly expressed by Ma Joad to her son, Tom, when he is insulted by the deputy.

You got to have patience. Why, Tom - us people will go on living when all them people is gone. Why, Tom we're the people that live. They ain't gonna wipe us out. Why, we're people - we go on.¹⁷

¹⁶John Steinbeck, The Pearl (New York: Bantam Books, Ltd., 1964), p.87.

¹⁷John Steinbeck, The Grapes of Wrath (New York: The Viking Press, 1968), p.383.

Ma Joad has faith in life - that the common, the little known man is not easily vanquished. This faith makes her strong and gives her a will to live. Steinbeck is sympathetic with the small, the beaten people. He admires their will to live. This admiration is related to his interest in biology in which he often tries to find human parallels. In Sea of Cortez, he draws this parallel:

... the dominant human is protected by good clothing, good houses and good food ... in his security grows soft and fearful... The lean and hungry grow strong and the strongest of them are selected out. Having nothing to lose and all to gain, these selected hungry... develop attack rather than defense techniques... so that one day the dominant man is eliminated and the strong and hungry wanderer takes his place.¹⁸

The lean, the hungry will win one day because they have a will to live. The will to live is strong in small people because they must fight much harder for survival than the rich. Ma Joad is one of the lean, the hungry and she does survive. Mac and Jim in In Dubious Battle find strength and a will to live through the Party's survival.

Steinbeck feels that even trained animals need a purpose in life. In America and Americans, he gives this example.

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It does remind me of something. Have you ever seen a kennel of beautiful, highly bred and trained and specialized bird dogs? and have

¹⁸John Steinbeck, The Log from the Sea of Cortez (London: Pan Books, Ltd., 1969), p.155.

you seen those same dogs when they are no longer used? In a short time their skills and certainties and usefulness are gone. They become quarrelsome, fat, lazy, cowardly, dirty, and utterly disreputable and worthless, and all because their purpose is gone and with it the rules and disciplines that made them beautiful and good.¹⁹

Steinbeck seems to imply that it is the same for man when the purpose is gone. He also gives his idea about the cause of the lost "why" in modern times. It is because "...the primary purpose of mankind has always been to survive... In our written, remembered, and sensed history, there has always been more work to do than we could do. Our needs were greater than their possible fulfillment. Our dreams were so improbable that we moved their reality into heaven."²⁰ Today the will to survive has decreased and man seems almost lost in the plenty of his own success. The progress of science makes man's dream for a long time ago come true. We have many material conveniences which in the past were merely fables. Steinbeck says in America and Americans, "I believe it's because we have reached the end of a road and have no new path to take, no duty to carry out, and no purpose to fulfill."²¹ He expresses his concern for

¹⁹John Steinbeck, America and Americans (New York, Bantam Books, Ltd., 1968), p.171.

²⁰Ibid., p.174.

²¹Loc.cit.

the survival of mankind; "Now we face the danger which in the past has been most destructive to the human success - plenty, comfort, and ever increasing leisure, no dynamic people has ever survived these dangers."²²

Too much plenty, comfort and even increasing leisure can lead to the feeling of emptiness and boredom which come primarily from the lack of a "why." Boredom is a problem nowadays that comes from the lack of meaning in one's life. Dr. Viktor E. Frankl, a professor of psychiatry and neurology at the University of Vienna called this lack of meaning an "existential vacuum." Moreover, he discovered that modern problems such as juvenile delinquency, the increasing rate of suicide, alcoholism have as their underlying cause of this sense of emptiness. "The existential vacuum is a widespread phenomena of the twentieth century.... It manifests itself mainly in a state of boredom."²³ These are related problems of our times which are growing increasingly crucial. Steinbeck gives the example of this feeling in America and Americans when the children open packages on Christmas day and say "Is that all?" "...the child having got into trouble, explains, 'I didn't have anything to do.' And he means exactly that nothing to do, nowhere to go, no direction,

²²Ibid., p.221.

²³Viktor E. Frankl, op.cit., p.167.

no purpose, and worst of all no needs. Wants he has, yes, but for more bright and breakable things."²⁴

In Tortilla Flat, Steinbeck deals with Danny and his friends who live in what society calls "a shiftless manner". They do not care about modernization. They live quite happily without worrying about money, work or the things that society accepts as important in daily life. They live from day to day enjoying life. Their purpose in life is as stated by Pilon, one of Danny's friends, "Love, fighting and a little wine, then you are always young, always happy."²⁵ Steinbeck tells the story with humour and shows both the good qualities and the defects of the characters without passing judgement. They are frank, honest, helpful but they are also lazy and by modern standards might be called hippies. Danny, the main character, has never been burdened by goals or a purpose but when he is suddenly faced with the inheritance of two houses, he begins to question both his own motives for friendship and those of his comrades. His friends can see that "... the worry of property was setting on Danny's face."²⁶ Danny longs for the "good old days" when the weight

²⁴John Steinbeck, America and Americans (New York, Bantam Books, Ltd., 1968), p.172.

²⁵John Steinbeck, Tortilla Flat (New York: The Viking Press, 1968); p.383.

²⁶Ibid.; p.28.

of property was not upon him. He has a conflict within himself: he wants to own a house but at the same time he wants to be free from the responsibility of ownership. Janny disappears one day into the woods in an effort to regain his sense of freedom and peace of mind. Somewhere he senses an enemy destroying his individuality. He challenges his enemy to fight with him but Steinbeck never tells who the enemy is. Danny shouts, "Then I will go out to the One who can fight. I will find the Enemy who is worthy of Danny."²⁷ Danny goes out to fight with the enemy "...and then, behind the house, in the gulch, they heard an answering challenge so fearful and so chill that their spines wilted like nasturtium stems under frost... They heard Janny charge to the fray. They heard his last shrill cry of defiance, and then a thump and then silence."²⁸

Danny possesses many of the characteristics of modern man who wants personal freedom but at the same time is caught in the web of modernization. Danny cannot compromise between his desire for ownership and his desire for freedom. Like so many others, he does not understand his dilemma but he feels it strongly. He is searching for a "why", an escape

²⁷Loc.cit.

²⁸Ibid., p.301.

from the vacuum of a meaningless life, but in vain. The problems of the misfit, adjustment and loneliness, suddenly hit him. He finds he cannot cope with the new way of living.

Although Tortilla Flat is humourously written, it shows the tragedy of a man whose "why" to live is not clear and whose life, therefore, lacks direction. Steinbeck seems to suggest that Danny's life and those of his friends are empty. They do not know what to hold on to. The group fails finally because it lacks a positive purpose beyond self.

Self-destruction represents the ultimate loss of a "why." Many modern men feel they cannot escape the world of lostness. They are lonely, alienated and non-communicative. In modern times many factors, such as the concern for things rather than persons, destroy the "why." The loss of communication and the impersonality of an increasingly urban and industrialized world destroy human relationships which for Steinbeck is the only worthwhile "why."