

ECOLOGY AND LITERARY CREATION: AN EXAMINATION IN JOHN STEINBECK'S THE LOG FROM THE SEA OF CORTEZ

Author

Mrs. J. Christy Lydia Jancy,

Ph.D. Research Scholar & Assistant Professor of English

Reg no (21122144012010)

PG & Research Department of English

Nazareth Margoschis College at Pillaiyanmanai Nazareth-628617

(Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University-Tirunelveli)&

Co-Author

Dr. J. Mary Stella,

Assistant Professor of English Research Guide & Supervisor,

PG & Research Department of English

Nazareth Margoschis College at Pillaiyanmanai Nazareth-628617

(Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University-Tirunelveli)

Abstract

Literature reflects life and nature. This paper deals with analyzing the ecological themes in John Steinbeck's *The Log from the Sea of Cortez* and can be a fascinating endeavor. This work, co-authored with marine biologist Edward Ricketts, combines Steinbeck's literary prowess with a scientific exploration of the Gulf of California's marine life. It delves into the interconnectedness of nature and human existence. The book emphasizes the importance of ecological understanding and conservation. It showcases Steinbeck's keen observations of the natural world, highlighting how literature can contribute to ecological awareness and preservation. By examining this work, one can explore the intersection of literature and ecology, demonstrating how author like Steinbeck can raise ecological consciousness through his writing.

Keywords: Ecology, Marine Biology, Travelogue, Nature philosophy, Literature.

Literature serves as a reflection of life, encapsulating elements of history, culture, and the environment. John Steinbeck, a dedicated student of ecology, delves deeply into marine biology in his novel *The Log from the Sea of Cortez*. Ecology, a scientific discipline, explores the intricate relationships between organisms and their surroundings. In *The Log from the Sea of Cortez*, Steinbeck offers readers an immersive experience into marine expeditions and emerging literary, cultural, and environmental perspectives. This non-fiction work throws light on how the renowned American author, John Steinbeck, passionately engaged in environmental exploration and oceanology alongside his friend Edward Ricketts. Steinbeck's motivation for crafting this novel lies in his profound love for nature and his philosophical connection to it.

This literary work falls into the genre of Maritime Literature, encompassing outdoor literature, travel guides, and travel memoirs. It allows us to delve into the underwater world, explore its ecosystem, and witness how the author seamlessly intertwines it with literature. The

research paper aims to challenge prevailing notions about life in the marine environment and the individuals whose livelihoods depend on the sea and nature. It centers on a close examination of *The Log from the Sea of Cortez* through the lens of ecology and literary creation. Specifically, the paper seeks to elucidate the marine expedition and the author's sensitive portrayal of humans as integral parts of the natural world and their environment within the literary context.

In 1593, *The Sea of Cortez* earned its name in honor of the Spanish Conquistador Hernan Cortes, who discovered this relatively youthful body of water, formed just five million years ago. Despite its youthful origins, the Sea of Cortez boasts an astonishing diversity, with over 900 distinct fish species alone. In 1995, a diverse group of Californians, mostly in their mid-seventies, embarked on a memorable sea voyage alongside John Steinbeck and his close friend Edward Ricketts to explore the wonders of the Sea of Cortez. This body of water, also known as the Gulf of California, offers a captivating narrative and a magnificent marine environment providing invaluable ecosystem services to its inhabitants.

The Sea of Cortez plays a pivotal role in Mexico's fish production, contributing to a significant 70% of the nation's fish farming. It's renowned as a hub for both commercial and recreational fishing. Furthermore, the Sea of Cortez stands as a prominent tourist destination, often referred to as the "World's Aquarium," where efforts are made to preserve its natural wonders. The body of water known as the Sea of Cortez goes by different names, including the Spanish "Golfo de California," "Mar de Cortes," and even the less common "Vermilion Sea." Geographically, it encompasses a vast bay on the Pacific Ocean's eastern side and stretches along the Mexican coastline in the northwest. To the east, it is bordered by the Mexican mainland, while to the west, it is flanked by the mountainous Baja California Peninsula.

This environmental perspective aligns with the principles of ecocriticism. In his book *Ecology and Literature*, Moore provides an explanation of ecocriticism, which can be summarized as follows: "Basic to ecocriticism, short for the theory of ecosystem-centered ethics, is the sympathetic recognition and observance that all members of land community exist for their own sake and not for what they can do for humans" (5). The symposium on *The Log from the Sea of Cortez*, which focused on oceanology, received support from both the Cannery Row Foundation and the Steinbeck Research Center located at San Jose State University. This financial backing was provided to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the publication of John Steinbeck's non-fictional work, *The Log from the Sea of Cortez*.

Within this novel, Steinbeck not only delves into the field of oceanology but also elaborates on his personal ideology and life philosophy. Additionally, it highlights the unique and the profound friendship that existed between the literary figure Steinbeck and the marine biologist Ricketts within the realm of American literature. Steinbeck provides a vivid and detailed depiction of *The Log from the Sea of Cortez*, emphasizing that man "might be described fairly adequately, if simple, as a two-legged paradox. He has never become accustomed to the tragic miracle of consciousness. Perhaps, as has been suggested, his species is not set, has not jellied, but is still in a state of becoming, bound by his physical memories to a past of struggle and survival, limited in his future by the uneasiness of thought and consciousness." (12 & 13)

Steinbeck achieved the pinnacle of his career by vividly portraying humanity's profound struggles and remarkable compassion. His protagonists were deeply sentimental and driven by a strong sense of social responsibility. This dedication to his craft earned Steinbeck the Nobel Prize in 1962, and in his acceptance speech, he echoed a biblical sentiment attributed to John the Apostle, stating, "In the end, there is the Word, and the Word is Man, and the Word is with Man." The thematic breadth of Steinbeck's work encompasses not only "The Sea of Cortez" but also reaches millions of readers in California, the United States, Poland, Mexico, Moldova, India, and across the globe. Steinbeck remains one of the most revered and beloved American writers. As noted by William Howarth in his essay "Some Principles of Ecocriticism", depicts the nature of Ecocriticism, he points out that, "As an interdisciplinary science, ecology describes the relations between nature and culture" (71). Hence, it becomes apparent that a link exists between the natural world and human culture.

The celebrated American author John Steinbeck and his colleague in the field of Marine Biology, Edward Ricketts, first crossed paths in 1930. Steinbeck, originally from Salinas, a region known for its rich agriculture and significant food processing industry, spent part of his childhood near Monterey Bay. In 1930, he married Carol Henning, and the couple settled close to the Pacific Grove in San Jose. During this time, Carol Henning took on the role of secretary at Ricketts's Biological Laboratory, where they produced and sold prepared microscope slides to local high schools as a means to cope with the challenges of the Great Depression. This unique collaboration between the novelist and Ricketts laid the foundation for their work together in the intertidal zone.

In 1923, John Steinbeck developed a deep interest in Marine Biology and enrolled in the Zoology program at the Hopkins Marine Station. His instructor, C.V. Taylor had been a student of Charles Kofoid at Berkeley and shared a passion for the ideas of William Emerson Ritter. Ritter's notion of the organismal view of life was the prevailing philosophy at Berkeley's Biological Sciences faculty during that era. Steinbeck introduced Ritter's concept of the "Superorganism" to Professor Rolph Bolin at Hopkins. The Superorganism concept suggests that individual organisms cannot thrive independently for extended periods but instead rely on each other for specialized labor and exhibit eusocial behavior, contributing to collective phenomena. According to Ritter's Organismal Conception, "the whole is more than the sum of its parts and that these parts arise from a differentiation of the whole, is different from a complementary to Allee's thesis that organisms cooperate with one another to ensure their own survival" (15).

Steinbeck and Ed Ricketts engaged in discussions regarding the ideas and works of Allee and Ritter. While Steinbeck focused on his literary pursuits, Ricketts conducted research on various practical marine organisms, specifically the aquatic invertebrates along Central California's coast within his laboratory. Steinbeck achieved success in his literary career, while Ricketts explored tidepool life and was involved in the creation of prepared microscope slides until 1939. Together, Ricketts and Jack Calvin co-authored *Between Pacific Tides*, a book subsequently published by Stanford University. Calvin improved the readability of Ricketts's writing, describing the rocky tidepools and various aquatic ecosystems along the

Pacific coast's intertidal zone, including those unique pools formed during low tides. The third edition of *Between Pacific Tides* was authored by Steinbeck, sparking curiosity about the wonders of tidepools and the idea that the world holds new beauty, patterns, and enriched thoughts waiting to be discovered. This book became a valuable guide for oceanography students in Southern California and British Columbia. Remarkably, in the same year of 1939, Steinbeck's highly acclaimed work, *The Grapes of Wrath*, and the indispensable handbook for oceanology students, *Between Pacific Tides*, were both published. This work is characterized by its ecocritical themes. According to Greg's definition in her book *Ecocriticism: Reader*, ecocriticism can be described as follows: "Ecocriticism is unique amongst contemporary literary and cultural theories because of its close relationship with the science of ecology. Ecocritics may not be qualified to contribute to debates about problems in ecology, but they must nevertheless transgress disciplinary boundaries and develop their own ecological literacy as far as possible." (5).

Ricketts and Steinbeck had a joint vision of creating a concise handbook for the general public and coastal enthusiasts interested in exploring the wildlife and marine organisms of San Francisco Bay. Ricketts outlined the project, providing a 5000-word draft, with John Steinbeck as the primary author responsible for writing a 3000-word Preface for this work, which they tentatively titled *The Bay Area Handbook*. Their collaborative efforts extended to researching the ocean, collecting marine specimens, and studying different species. Their shared experiences during this marine expedition culminated in a book titled *Sea of Cortez: A Leisurely Journal of Travel and Research*. The crew consisted of Steinbeck, his wife Carol, Ricketts, and four other members, all aboard the *Western Flyer*. Their voyage commenced on March 11th from Monterey Bay, where they collected specimens at approximately 25 to 30 different stations over the course of six remarkable weeks of exploration. They returned from their expedition on April 20th.

For a year, Ricketts meticulously cataloged specimens and compiled a collection of prominent species photographs. Subsequently, he underwent a thorough revision process, incorporating constructive criticism. With the assistance of the Viking Press, Edward Ricketts organized and assembled these materials. In December 1941, *The Log from the Sea of Cortez* was published under the editorial guidance of Pascal Covici, who suggested the title page should read "The Sea of Cortez by John Steinbeck with a scientific supplement." This format aimed to condense information from a foundational document on the marine species of the Panama faunal province authored by Edward F. Ricketts. Rolf Bolin, an ichthyologist from Hopkins and a longtime friend of Steinbeck and Ricketts, recognized the book's value as a practical guide for those collecting species in that region. This work not only offered scientific insights but also encapsulated Steinbeck's perspectives and beliefs regarding humanity and the world. Their discussions spanned topics such as the biological economy, birth, death, survival, navigation, history, and scientific methodologies. The authors critiqued the isolation of science from human understanding, emphasizing the importance of making scientific knowledge accessible to all.

In Lawrence Buell's work, *The Future of Environmental Criticism*, he reflects on these themes and their significance."As to the former, even designedly realistic texts cannot avoid

being heavily mediated refractions of the palpable world” (43). Steinbeck, known as a realist writer, has explored the connection between ecology and literature. During their expedition, Steinbeck and Ricketts gathered specimens in numerous small harbors and along desolate coastlines. They carefully preserved the marine invertebrates found in these coastal areas, meticulously observing and documenting the different types and quantities of these creatures. Their documentation extended to studying the interrelationships among these invertebrates, including their diets and the reproduction processes of various species. Steinbeck fondly remembers his collaborative efforts with Ed, describing their partnership as characterized by continuous discussions, extensive reading, careful observations, and various experiments. “We playfully called speculative Metaphysics. It was a sport of lopping off a piece of observation reality and letting it move up through the speculative process like a tree growing tall and bushy. We observed with pleasure how the branches of thought grew away from the trunk of reality... We worked together so closely that I do not know in some cases who started which line of speculation. Since the end thought was the product of both minds. I do not know whose thought it was.” (20)

Ricketts possessed a broad and profound knowledge base, yet his perspective was characterized by a mystical and limited worldview. Ricketts introduced the concept of “breaking through,” which meant gaining insight and understanding, and he advocated for “non-teleological” thinking, which involved a non-causal approach to reasoning. Ricketts authored an entire chapter that was both comprehensive and contentious, driven by his non-teleological perspective, and it turned their journey into what Steinbeck perceived as a futile endeavor. Steinbeck conveyed his comprehension of this approach in the following manner:

It’s so because it is so. But exactly the same word can also express the hasty and superficial attitude. There seems to be no explicit method for differentiating the deep and participating understanding of all the truth which admits infinite change or expansion as added relations become apparent, from the shallow dismissed and implied lack of further interest which may be coined in the very same words(113).

“Non-teleological” thinking is characterized by the idea that we determine the meaning of life based on our feelings and experiences, or sometimes these meanings are assigned to us by others. According to this philosophy, the future of our existence is not solely determined by destiny. It might seem unusual for a man of science, but John Steinbeck embraced this philosophy. In contrast, Ricketts sought to perceive and embrace the world through the lens of breakthroughs. Ricketts is credited as the pioneering explorer in the field of intertidal ecology. The narrator of their journey describes the creation, organisms, and people without passing harsh judgment. Steinbeck vividly describes the ebb and flow of tides and recounts a memorable collecting expedition undertaken by Ricketts and Jack Calvin during their sea voyage.

Steinbeck comprehended the profound concept of a monistic approach, which emphasizes the fundamental interconnectedness of all life for survival. In Steinbeck’s perspective, he finds contentment in perceiving the world with understanding and acceptance. This implies that humans are inherently part of the world, with imperfections, rather than being

on a spiritual pilgrimage to paradise. Steinbeck's protagonists, shaped by this viewpoint, approach life holistically, guided by their understanding and the aspiration to make breakthroughs and lead meaningful, socially beneficial lives. Consequently, he conveys his ecological concerns in his literary works by portraying the environment and its intricacies, integrating them into his narratives.

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