**Steinbeck’s ‘To A God Unknown’**

“He lay on his side with his wrists outstretched and looked down the long black mountain range of his body. Then his body grew huge and light. It arose into the sky, and out of it came the streaking rain. ‘I should have known,’ he whispered. ‘I am the rain.’ …He saw his hills grow dark with moisture. Then a lancing pain shot through the heart of the world. ‘I am the land,’ he said, ‘and I am the rain. The grass will grow out of me in a little while.’

And the storm thickened, and covered the world with darkness, and with the rush of waters.” (To A God Unknown, Steinbeck. 1935)

Dear Footnotes Reader,

Not to be confused with ‘To a Garden Gnome’, this novel is one of Steinbeck’s earliest and most distinct. There is something biblical about this poetic tale that unfolds in this surreal and almost pagan Californian valley. The irony kicks in beautifully when we realise that this is a story that analyses how mankind – and our enigmatic faith – respond to being shaken to the core. Joseph Wayne, a brooding young man with eyes that thirst after his old father’s dream in the distant west, sets off with a blessing to build a ranch on the lush Californian pastures. Soon after he settles down, his father dies, and Joseph comes to believe that a great oak on his land embodies his late father’s spirit. In his loneliness, he finds comfort in his old father’s presence and invites his brothers and their families to join him in the valley. Drought descends on them, and fear and restlessness grate against each other in the dust and heat. Joseph is desperate: the oak tree becomes an icon for him, a silent glade becomes a sacred place of worship, and he scatters sacrifices of game across the land, all in hopes that the rain will come. From an external perspective, we as readers know that ancient mythology, pagan beliefs, and the Bible all inform the ambiguous mysticism present within Joseph and his perception of the land and their conjoined fate. In a way, Joseph and the land are one, which makes his battle against drought a personal battle for his own survival. In his agitation, he begins to delve deeper into this mysticism, coming across to his brothers as pagan and possessed. In an intervention, one of his brothers hacks down the great oak, and symbolically destroys the root of Joseph’s mysterious faith. What follows is a feverish struggle to combat what he sees as the consequences of the death of the oak: a punishment upon him, his family, and his land.

This is a novel about man’s relationship with nature and his destiny, which isn’t uncommon from Steinbeck at all. But what is unique in his earlier work (1933-1935), is that he defines reality to “include seen and unseen, physical and metaphysical, quotidian and psychological elements.” (DeMott, 1995) I struggle to find the words to describe the remarkable style that this novel is written in. The statement I’m most satisfied with (but still hesitate on) is that it wavers between what we now call gothic western and magical realism. But amidst my awe-induced indecisiveness, what is certain is that this novel experiments beautifully with the fusion of fact and fable – perhaps this is done through some seriously great metaphors and vivid personifications. The fact that I am unable to describe the poetry of ‘To a God Unknown’ is probably the clearest indicator of its success – something that escapes the realm of language and communicable emotion. Weak as it may be from a book reviewer to be at a loss for words, Steinbeck has left me no choice but to put his own words before you. Take a look at these random sentences selected by me:

*“But the leaves at the ends of the horrible limbs were bright green and shiny. Pitiless and terrible trees, the madrones. They cried with pain when they burned.”*

*“One woman had been beautiful, another ugly and fat, but that was changing. The dancers lost identity…each person became a part of the dancing body, and the soul of the body was the rhythm. The guitars sat like demons, slitted eyes glittering, conscious of their power yet dreaming of greater power.”*

*“He arrived back at the glade in the false dawn…A little tattered fragment of cloud, high in the air, caught fire from the hidden sun, and Joseph fell asleep while he watched it.”*

My biggest takeaway from this phenomenal book was to never underestimate these lesser-known works of great authors. In short, I highly recommend this novel to any lover of Steinbeck lurking out there. (I may even venture to say that I prefer this over East of Eden.)

Happy reading,

Sophie Shen.