

# Ricketts-like Characters and Wise Old Man in Myth

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2011/01/10

Most critics have thought that a series of unique characters appear in Steinbeck's novels; Jim Casy in *The Grapes of Wrath*, Doc in *Cannery Row*, and so on. The characters' model has been generally believed to be Edward Ricketts, Steinbeck's close friend. Lester Jay Marks called these characters "Steinbeck's heroes." He maintained that they are protagonists in Steinbeck's novels, while the other characters not. On the other hand, many other critics, who have pointed out an archetype of hero-myth in his many novels, have generally looked upon the other characters like Tom in *The Grapes of Wrath* as protagonists. The former view seems to be in conflict with the latter. The purpose of this study is to try to clear up this disagreement and to explain the origin of the Ricketts-like characters. It is true that, as most critics have believed, Steinbeck projected an image of Ricketts onto the characters. This opinion is only partially true, however, because a similar type of character appears even in his first novel, *Cup of Gold*, published in 1929 before he met Ricketts. The similar person is Merlin. He plays an important role as an adviser to Henry Morgan. This indicates that there is a prototype of Ricketts-like characters in his works before Ricketts influenced Steinbeck. As a child he liked to read various books: the Bible, Arthurian Legends, myths, and folklore. These gave him an idealistic vision in his literature. What is more, his meeting with Joseph Campbell, mythologist, made it embodied in *To a God Unknown*, in which 'an old man' suggests that Joseph makes a heroic self-sacrifice for saving his land. Mythologically, Merlin and 'an old man' are called Wise Old Man, an adviser or helper. It is generally accepted that Ricketts had so much influence on Steinbeck that he described his friend in his novels not only as advisers but also instructors, because Ricketts gave him scientific and philosophical knowledge. To give an example, in *The Grapes of Wrath*, Casy instructs Tom to understand his worldview: "Maybe all men got one big soul ever'body's a part of." This shows that the archetype of Wise Old Man found in his early novel developed eventually into Ricketts-like characters through Ricketts' influence. *In Dubious Battle* has a strange pattern of hero-myth. Indeed, Doc Burton is a Ricketts-like character, but Jim Nolan doesn't understand his philosophy and dies tragically in the ending. This offers an example that a hero doesn't take his helper's advices and the story has an unhappy ending. The Ricketts-like character is so attractive for Steinbeck that he wrote a novel in which the protagonist is a Ricketts-like character, Doc in *Cannery Row*. Therefore we can see from the above that a series of Ricketts-like characters is derived from the "Wise Old Man" in myth, and the two viewpoints are not in conflict.

## 1

Most critics have thought that a series of unique characters appear in Steinbeck's novels; Doc Burton in *In Dubious Battle*, Jim Casy in *The Grapes of Wrath*, and Lee in *East of Eden*. The characters' model has been generally believed to be Edward Ricketts, Steinbeck's close friend. However, the idea that the characters are completely equal with Ricketts cannot easily be accepted. Because, generally speaking, a character in a novel differs essentially from a real person. In view of this, it would not be appropriate to regard it as only one reason for their creation. The characters have to be considered as created characters. Few scholars have done research from this point of view. Lester Jay Marks is only one critic who systematically analyzed them from this standpoint<sup>1</sup>. He called them "Steinbeck's ultimate heroes," and concluded that he is Steinbeck's prototypical biologist-philosopher, viewing group with detached compassion. He regarded them as protagonists in Steinbeck's novels, while the other characters not<sup>2</sup>. Marks' view is very unique and suggestive, however his view is unsatisfactory in the following two points. First, he tended to understand Steinbeck's novels only from the viewpoint of non-teleological thinking. He believed that non-teleological thinking is Steinbeck's basic philosophy, and that the writer embodied the worldview in his novels. However literature differs essentially from philosophy. It would hardly be appropriate to adopt the philosophical approach to the interpretation of literature. Secondly, there has been controversy about whether or not non-teleological thinking is Steinbeck's philosophy. When Marks wrote his book, *Thematic Design in the Novels of John Steinbeck* in 1969, this problem was not raised. Richard Astro proved in 1973 that the philosophy belonged originally to Ricketts, not to Steinbeck<sup>3</sup>. Astro's view has been generally accepted. His view undermines Marks' one. That is why Marks' view cannot be accepted. The characters have to be reconsidered. The purpose of this presentation is to try to trace the origin of Ricketts-like characters in Steinbeck's novels, and to study, by a process of pursuit of the origin, the nature of the characters.

## 2

If all Steinbeck's novels are comprehensively surveyed, a pattern of the plot could be found in several novels. The pattern is the following; a young man makes a journey to the West, recognizes something there, and tells it to others. For example, In *To a God Unknown*, Joseph Wayne goes to the West to own his farm, and recognizes that he is a part of the world when he sacrifices himself to save his land from a drought, and the rain starts, which makes people happy. In *The Grapes of Wrath*, Tom Joad goes with his family to the West, and recognizes in a cave that a piece of a soul is not good unless it was with the rest, and goes away from his family to spreads the philosophy. In *East of Eden*, Adam Trask goes to the West, understands the meaning of a key word "timshel," and passes the idea on to Cal by granting his son a pardon. It is not easy to interpret the pattern, because it can be interpreted in several ways. At the Steinbeck's personal level, it means frontier spirit. It is one of the most favorite motifs for him. His grandparent moved from the East to the West. It is concretely described in "The Leader of the People" in *The Red Pony*. However it would not be

proper to accept this interpretation, because this interpretation of the pattern is too superficial. At the higher level or at the American cultural level, the pattern means a kind of “road novel.” It is based on the tradition of American Literature. However this interpretation cannot be completely accepted, because there is not so close relation between Steinbeck and other “road novels.” At the much higher level, or at the mythological level, it means a pattern of myth. Robert DeMott reported that Steinbeck read various kinds of mythological book<sup>4</sup>, and that analyzed *To a God Unknown* from the viewpoint of mythology<sup>5</sup>. Steinbeck wrote in his letter that he described a hero in this novel<sup>6</sup>. Other critics remarked the influence of myth on his other works<sup>7</sup>. What is more, DeMott referred to the influence of Joseph Campbell, a mythologist, on Steinbeck<sup>8</sup>. Campbell asserted that there is a single pattern of heroic journey that is shared by all cultures in their heroic myths. The pattern has three parts; “separation,” “initiation,” and “return”<sup>9</sup>. In addition to this, as a lot of critics have mentioned, Carl. G. Jung, a psychologist, deeply influenced Steinbeck<sup>10</sup>. DeMott reported that Steinbeck read a lot of his books<sup>11</sup>. According to Jung, human mind has three layers; conscious, personal unconscious, and collective unconscious. The personal unconscious is repressed feelings and thoughts developed during an individual’s life, while the collective unconscious is inherited feelings, thoughts, memories shared by all humanity. The collective unconscious has several archetypes in it: “anima,” “animus,” “great mother,” and “wise old man.” They often appear in dream. Jung’s psychology is to pursue the integration and unification of the self through the resolution of psychological conflict. He noticed that the process of the story in hero-myth closely paralleled the one of development of human mind. It goes without saying that the former two interpretations are important respectively, but it is more appropriate to accept the third interpretation of the pattern, because it is clear that a close relationship existed between Steinbeck and mythology. In view of this, the pattern of the plot in Steinbeck’s novels is hero-myth, and the protagonists in *To a God Unknown*, in *The Grapes of Wrath*, and in *East of Eden* are respectively Joseph, Tom, and Adam.

## 3

In the story of the hero-myth, a helper or a giver often appears<sup>12</sup>. The helper helps a hero who faces troubles, and the giver gives a hero some magical tools. They often lead the hero to succeed in achieving his task. He is mythologically called a “helper” or a “giver.” In addition to this, an adviser often appears in myth. He gives a hero very useful information to pursue his quest. He is often an old man or a woman. He is called a “wise old man.” In *To a God Unknown*, ‘an old man’ appears near the scene of the ending. He sacrifices an animal to revive the sun. The scene shows that he suggests to Joseph the only way to save his own land. Joseph understands what he has to do, and sacrifices himself for his land. And then the rain begins to start. In *The Grapes of Wrath*, Tom appears as a hero. He is strongly influenced by a preacher, Casy. He teaches Tom that “Maybe all men got one big soul ever’body’s a part of.”<sup>13</sup> Tom cannot first understand what he says. It is not until Casy is killed that he recognizes his worldview. And then he goes away to spread his philosophy. In *East of Eden*, Adam’s life is described in detail. At the turning point in his life, he knows an important word, “timshel.” It means “a choice.” Lee, a Chinese servant, teaches him the meaning of the word. He

strongly influences on Adam. It is clear from their roles that “an old man” in *To a God Unknown*, Casy in *The Grapes of Wrath*, Lee in *East of Eden* are “wise old men.” However, Casy and Lee are subtly different from “an old man.” Casy drastically changes Tom’s way of thinking. Lee also does Adam’s way of it. In view of this, they are not only advisers, but also teachers. Their roles are basically “wise old men” in the novels, however they are developed characters from “wise old man.”

## 4

Next, it has to be considered whether or not the idea of the “wise old man” was given by Ricketts. To examine this, the novels written before Steinbeck met Ricketts have to be analyzed, because it is not influenced by the philosophy of Ricketts. Steinbeck met Ricketts first in October 1930. Before that year, only one novel had been written; *The Cup of Gold*. It is imperfect novel. Nevertheless, it is important, because it indicates several of Steinbeck’s developing themes<sup>14</sup>. It describes Henry Mogan’s adventure and his life. Mogan, dreaming of becoming a great man, leaves his fatherland. He becomes famous pirates, and he orders to attack Panama, searching for a beautiful woman and wealth. However he can’t get it, which bitterly disappoints him. He grows old in a disappointment, and he dies. An important character appears in this novel: Merlin. Though he does not appear so many times, he plays an important role in this story, because he predicts truly at the scene of the opening of the novel that Mogan feels great disappointment in the future. From the viewpoint of mythology, it is clear that Henry Morgan is described as a hero and Merlin as a “wise old man.” Marlin in *The Cup of Gold* is derived from Marlyn in *Le Morte d’Arthur*, because Steinbeck liked to read *Le Morte d’Arthur* as a child, and he remarked the relationship between Merlin in *The Cup of Gold* and Merlin of Arthurian Legend in this novel<sup>15</sup>. This shows that Steinbeck knew the concept of “wise old man” before Ricketts told it to him. When he was a child, he liked to read various books: the Bible, Arthurian Legends, myths, and folklore. These gave him an idealistic vision in his literature.

## 5

If Steinbeck and his works are considered from the viewpoint of Jungian psychology, the other side of this case can be found. According to Jung, as we have seen from above, the human mind is composed of conscious, personal unconscious, and collective unconscious. Collective unconscious is inherited feelings, thoughts, memories shared by all humanity, and has several archetypes in it. If all humanity share them, it is possible that Steinbeck also had the inherited feelings, thoughts, memories, common images, and archetypes. One of these archetypes is “wise old man.” In view of Jungian psychology, Steinbeck unconsciously had the image of “wise old man” before he knew Ricketts, Campbell, Jung, even *Le Morte d’Arthur*, because it is the archetype all humanity have. As a result, the origin of Ricketts-like characters is of “wise old man,” which Steinbeck consciously and unconsciously had had in his mind before he met Ricketts. After Steinbeck met Ricketts, he was deeply influenced by him, and Steinbeck added the image of Ricketts and the knowledge of myth and psychology instructed by him to his archetypal image of “wise old

man.” The Ricketts-like characters were developed by it from advisers into teachers.

## 6

In *In Dubious Battle*, a kind of Ricketts-like character appears. It is Doc Burton. However, this novel is very different from other novels. Jim Nolan joins the Communist Party. Doc preaches his belief to Jim, however Jim can never understand his worldview. In view of myth, this story shows that a hero does not follow his adviser. In this case, the bad things often happen to him. In *In Dubious Battle*, Jim tragically dies at the ending. This offers an example that a hero doesn't take his helper's advices and the story has an unhappy ending. The novel has a broken pattern of hero-myth.

## 7

The Ricketts-like characters are described in other novels: *Cannery Row* and *Sweet Thursday*. Doc appears in both works. However, he is depicted not as an adviser, but as a protagonist. Doc can be recognized as a hero, while no one as “wise old man.” Even the plot of them is not straightly developed. In both works, the pattern of hero-myth cannot be found in the story. The nature of the Ricketts-like characters is completely changed. Doc in *Cannery Row* and *Sweet Thursday* are a developed character from the Ricketts-like character based on “wise old man” in his previous works. The Ricketts-like character is so attractive for Steinbeck that he wrote them as protagonists in the two novels.

## 8

Therefore we can see from the above that the origin of Ricketts-like characters is of “wise old man” which Steinbeck consciously and unconsciously had had in his mind before he met Ricketts, and that the characters were developed from advisers into teachers by Ricketts' influence on Steinbeck, and that they were so attractive for him that he described them as protagonists.

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<sup>1</sup> Marks, Lester Jay. *Thematic Design in the Novels of John Steinbeck*. The Hague: Mouton, 1969.

<sup>2</sup> Marks : 18.

<sup>3</sup> Astro, Richard. *John Steinbeck and Edward F. Ricketts: the Shaping of a Novelist*. Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1973.

<sup>4</sup> DeMott, Robert. *Steinbeck's Reading: A Catalogue of Books Owned and Borrowed*. New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1984 : 138.

<sup>5</sup> DeMott, Robert. “Steinbeck's *To a God Unknown*.” In Tetsumaro Hayashi, ed. *A Study Guide to Steinbeck*. Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1974.

<sup>6</sup> Steinbeck, Elaine A., and Robert Wallsten, eds. *A Life in Letters*. New York: The Viking Press, 1975 : 89.

<sup>7</sup> Kasperek, Carol Ann. *Ethan's Quest within a Mythic Interpretation of John Steinbeck's "The Winter of Our Discontent"*. Diss. Ball State University, 1983. Ann Arbor: UMI, DA8401282; 163.

<sup>8</sup> DeMott, *Steinbeck's Reading*:138.

<sup>9</sup> Campbell, Joseph. *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. New York: Princeton University Press, 1973 : 30.

<sup>10</sup> From the viewpoint of Jungian psychology, Steinbeck's novels were analyzed in the following articles:  
DeMott, Robert. "Steinbeck and the Creative Process: First Manifesto to End the Bringdown Against *Sweet Saturday*." In Richard Astro and Tetsumaro Hayashi, eds. *Steinbeck: The Man and His Work*. Corvallis: Oregon State University Press, 1971 : 57-178.

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<sup>11</sup> DeMott reports that Steinbeck had or rent the following books:

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Jung, Carl. *Modern Man in Search of a Soul*. Translated by W.S. Dell and Cary F. Baynes. New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1933.

Jung, Carl. *Psychological Reflections*. Edited by Jolande Jacobi. New York: Pantheon, 1953.

Jung, Carl. *Psychological Types*. Translated by H.G. Baynes. New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1923.

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*The Secret of the Golden Flower: A Chinese Book of Life*. Translated by Richard Wilhelm. Foreword and Commentary by C.G. Jung. New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1938.

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<sup>12</sup> Campbell : 69-77.

<sup>13</sup> *The Grapes of Wrath*, in *The Complete Works of John Steinbeck*. Vol.VIII. ed. by Yasuo Hashiguchi. Kyoto: Rinsen Book Co, 1990 : 33.

<sup>14</sup> Marks : 29.

<sup>15</sup> *The Cup of Gold*, in *The Complete Works of John Steinbeck*. Vol.I. : 26.

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*The Portable Steinbeck*. Ed. Lewis Gannett. New York: The Viking Press, 1946.

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