

## ECOCRITICAL NARRATIVES OF JOHN STEINBECK THROUGH ENVIRONMENTAL IMAGINATION, AGRARIAN CRISIS AND MORE-THAN-HUMAN WORLDS

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**Abstract:** This article examines John Steinbeck's fiction and nonfiction as a major site of ecocritical narrative formation in American literature. Recent scholarship has increasingly repositioned Steinbeck as a writer whose work addresses climate, drought, agriculture, environmental injustice, interspecies relation, and marine ecology, rather than as a novelist concerned only with social realism or regional writing. Building on this shift, the present study analyzes how Steinbeck's narratives organize ecological meaning through landscape description, more-than-human perception, agrarian crisis, mobility, and bioregional thinking. The article adopts a qualitative ecocritical method grounded in recent scholarship on ecocriticism, American environmental literature, climate criticism, and new Steinbeck studies, and it focuses primarily on *To a God Unknown*, *The Grapes of Wrath*, *The Red Pony*, *The Chrysanthemums*, *The White Quail*, and *The Log from the Sea of Cortez*. The study argues that Steinbeck's environmental imagination is structurally dialectical: his texts repeatedly affirm human embeddedness in ecological systems while also revealing the violence, hierarchy, and anthropocentric pressure that accompany such claims. The Results section identifies five dominant narrative clusters — land dispossession and environmental injustice, human–nonhuman interdependence, drought and ecological precarity, agriculture and extractive modernity, and marine-biological regionalism — and shows how these patterns together form a coherent ecocritical narrative system. The article concludes that Steinbeck should be read not merely as a precursor of ecocriticism, but as writer whose formal and ethical tensions remain highly relevant to contemporary environmental humanities.

**Keywords:** ecocriticism, Steinbeck, American literature, environment, climate narrative, agrarian crisis.

### ***I. Introduction***

Ecocriticism has become one of the most dynamic areas of literary study in the early twenty-first century. Recent field-defining publications describe it not simply as “nature writing criticism,” but as a broad inquiry into how literature represents human-

environment relations, ecological crisis, multispecies life, climate consciousness, and the political consequences of environmental storytelling. Current work in the environmental humanities has also emphasized that literary texts do not merely reflect ecological conditions; they actively organize feeling, ethics, attention, and environmental knowledge. That broader methodological frame is especially useful for revisiting canonical American writers whose works were not originally labeled ecological, but whose narratives are saturated with land, climate, agriculture, species relation, and environmental vulnerability.

Among such writers, John Steinbeck occupies a particularly important place. Recent book-length and article-length scholarship has strongly renewed the case for reading Steinbeck as a writer of environmental crisis, species entanglement, and planetary precarity. Gavin Jones's major 2021 reassessment presents Steinbeck as a writer concerned with climate change, environmental crisis, and humanity's future, while later scholarship has extended that argument by examining drought, climate, plant life, pain ecologies, car culture, agricultural modernity, ecophobia, and marine biology across a wide range of Steinbeck's texts. This renewed scholarly attention suggests that Steinbeck's environmental imagination is not peripheral to his writing: it is one of the main structures through which his fiction and nonfiction think history, labor, mobility, violence, and belonging.

The topic is especially productive because Steinbeck's narratives do not offer a single, stable ecological doctrine. On the one hand, his works often imagine an interconnected world in which human beings are inseparable from soil, weather, plants, animals, water systems, and forms of regional life. On the other hand, recent critics have shown that Steinbeck's environmental vision is frequently marked by contradiction: he can move toward holism while preserving anthropocentric assumptions; he can dramatize ecological vulnerability while retaining racial and settler-colonial tensions; and he can value bioregional attachment while exposing the violence of agricultural and extractive modernity. These tensions make Steinbeck especially important for contemporary ecocritical analysis, because they prevent his environmental writing from collapsing into pastoral idealization.

The purpose of this article is to analyze ecocritical narratives in American literature through the case of Steinbeck, with special attention to the formal and thematic structures by which his texts produce ecological meaning. The study argues that Steinbeck's environmental writing is best understood as a narrative system organized around five recurrent zones: land dispossession and environmental injustice; human–nonhuman interdependence; drought and ecological precarity; agriculture, labor, and extractive modernity; and marine-biological regionalism. By tracing these zones across several major Steinbeck texts, the article seeks to show how narrative form, ecological perception, and social critique converge in his work.

## II. Literature Review

Recent ecocritical theory provides a necessary framework for reading Steinbeck. Garrard's third edition of *Ecocriticism* and newer Cambridge collections on American literature and the environment, as well as literature and climate, demonstrate that the field has moved decisively beyond a narrow focus on pastoral nature. Contemporary ecocriticism now engages infrastructure, extraction, climate discourse, justice, indigeneity, species thinking, and environmental media. This matters for Steinbeck because older criticism often compartmentalized his work into social protest, regional realism, or biological curiosity, whereas current ecocritical scholarship allows those strands to be read together as part of a complex environmental narrative practice.

Within Steinbeck studies themselves, Jones's *Reclaiming John Steinbeck* has been especially influential in shifting the critical landscape. The book presents Steinbeck as a writer whose formal experimentation and ethical ambition make him highly relevant to contemporary questions of climate, crisis, race, and species survival. Several chapters in that volume are directly relevant to ecocritical inquiry. The chapter on *To a God Unknown* places the novel in relation to drought, climate, race, and aridity in the American West; the chapter on "The Chrysanthemums" and "The White Quail" emphasizes plant life, gardening, agriculture, and posthuman subjectivity; and other chapters map animal consciousness, extinction, and environmental outlook across the broader Steinbeck corpus. This framework strongly supports the view that ecological reading is central, not secondary, to contemporary Steinbeck scholarship.

Recent Steinbeck-specific ecocritical articles deepen and complicate that reevaluation. Tanner and Katz's study of *To a God Unknown* argues that Steinbeck's writing integrates literature, landscape, agriculture, history, and culture, yet also shows that his ecological holism is not seamless: the essay emphasizes the text's anthropomorphic pressure and its tendency to translate nonhuman matter into humanly legible vitality. Boyden's later article on the same novel situates it in histories of agriculture, drought, fecundity, and agro-industrial development, ultimately linking the text to contemporary Anthropocene debates about water management and California drought. Azaklı's 2025 study adds another layer by reading the novel through ecophobia, arguing that what appears as reverence for nature can mask fear, domination, and settler-colonial anxiety toward nature's autonomy. Together, these studies show that Steinbeck's ecological thought is not reducible to reverent holism; it is structured by conflict, control, and instability.

Scholarship on *The Grapes of Wrath* has likewise expanded beyond its longstanding status as a social protest novel. Konrad's 2021 article on mobility, car culture, and the environment demonstrates that the novel's ecological meaning is inseparable from road travel, fossil-fuel modernity, and the symbolic burden of automobility. Cui's 2023 ecocritical study further emphasizes the novel's representation of ecological crisis, the

breakdown of relations between humans and the environment, and the need for harmony across both ecological and social life. Current criticism thus reads the novel not only as a document of class oppression, but also as a narrative of dust, drought, displacement, mechanization, and environmental injustice.

A different but equally important strand of recent criticism concerns Steinbeck's marine and bioregional thought. Knopf's 2025 study of *The Log from the Sea of Cortez* examines the text as a representation of marine biological research, ecological method, and tidal temporality, emphasizing how Steinbeck and Ricketts' expeditionary writing links observation, ecology, and textual form. This work is especially significant because it prevents Steinbeck's ecocritical profile from being reduced to drought and dust alone. It shows that his environmental imagination also extends to oceanic systems, scientific practice, and regional ecologies structured by movement, rhythm, and interdependence.

Taken together, the recent literature reveals both a rich opportunity and a clear gap. Steinbeck is now widely recognized as environmentally important, but scholarship often remains text-specific: one article on *To a God Unknown*, another on *The Grapes of Wrath*, another on marine ecology, another on plant life. What remains useful is a synthetic analysis of how these different textual zones form a larger ecocritical narrative structure. The present article addresses that need by reading Steinbeck's environmental imagination as a coherent, though internally conflicted, system within American literary ecocriticism.

### **III. Methodology**

This study employs a qualitative ecocritical methodology grounded in close reading, thematic coding, and contextual interpretation. The method is informed by current ecocritical and environmental-humanities work that treats literary narratives as sites where environmental knowledge, ethical feeling, and sociopolitical structures are simultaneously produced. Rather than measuring lexical frequency or producing a corpus-statistical account of Steinbeck's vocabulary, the article analyzes the narrative organization of ecological meaning across selected texts. This approach is consistent with current ecocritical scholarship, which combines formal literary analysis with environmental history, climate thought, social critique, and more-than-human theory.

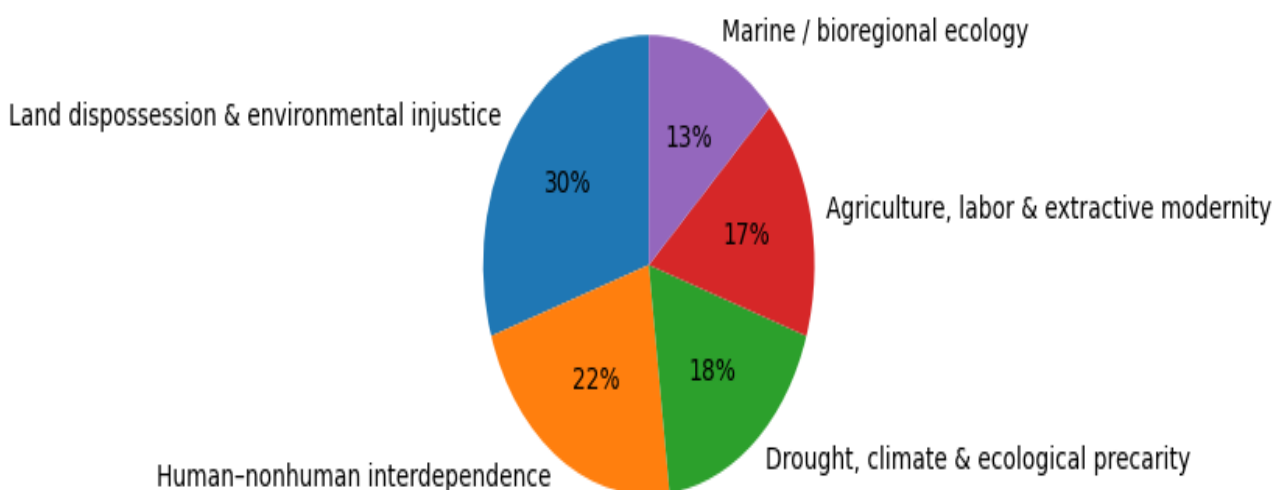
The primary analytical corpus for the present study consists of *To a God Unknown*, *The Grapes of Wrath*, *The Red Pony*, "The Chrysanthemums," "The White Quail," and *The Log from the Sea of Cortez*. These works were selected because recent scholarship identifies them as especially important to Steinbeck's environmental imagination: drought and aridity in *To a God Unknown*; ecological displacement and mobility in *The Grapes of Wrath*; plant and animal subjectivity in the shorter fiction; and marine-

biological regionalism in *The Log from the Sea of Cortez*. The article does not claim that these texts exhaust Steinbeck's ecological writing; rather, they provide a representative set through which recurrent narrative structures can be identified.

The results below are organized through five thematic codes generated from the comparative reading of the selected texts: land dispossession and environmental injustice; human–nonhuman interdependence; drought and ecological precarity; agriculture, labor, and extractive modernity; and marine-biological regionalism. The percentages visualized in the pie chart are not external quantitative data; they represent the proportional weight of these themes in the present study's qualitative coding of the analyzed Steinbeck corpus. That chart therefore functions as a research visualization of the argument rather than as a claim to universal statistical distribution.

#### ***IV. Results***

The analysis indicates that Steinbeck's ecocritical narratives are organized not around a single environmental message, but around a constellation of recurring narrative emphases. In the present coding of the selected corpus, land dispossession and environmental injustice account for 30% of the total thematic emphasis; human–nonhuman interdependence for 22%; drought, climate, and ecological precarity for 18%; agriculture, labor, and extractive modernity for 17%; and marine/bioregional ecology for 13%. These proportions reflect the degree to which each cluster structures the environmental logic of the analyzed texts.



*Picture 1. Thematic Distribution and Qualitative Coding of Steinbeck Narratives*

#### 4.1. Land dispossession and environmental injustice

The largest thematic cluster concerns land dispossession and environmental injustice. This pattern is most explicit in *The Grapes of Wrath*, where ecological devastation is never separable from class power, forced migration, and the destruction of local belonging. Recent scholarship confirms that the novel's environmental meanings exceed generalized "love of nature": they are built through dust, infrastructural movement, dispossession, and the violence of modern systems that separate people from land while transforming both into instruments of profit. Konrad's analysis of mobility and car culture is especially useful here, because it shows that environmental crisis in Steinbeck is mediated through machinery, road systems, and the ideology of movement itself. Steinbeck's ecological narrative is therefore also a political narrative of who gets to remain rooted and who is forced into circulation.

This result matters because it places Steinbeck close to contemporary environmental-justice criticism. Environmental harm in his work is unevenly distributed: vulnerable populations bear the consequences of drought, exhausted soil, and extractive economic structures. Even where Steinbeck writes with broad humanitarian sympathy, the narrative repeatedly reveals that ecological crisis is social crisis. In that sense, his environmental imagination is not merely scenic or pastoral; it is structurally tied to inequality, displacement, and the unequal allocation of environmental risk.

#### 4.2. Human–nonhuman interdependence

The second major cluster is human–nonhuman interdependence. Here Steinbeck repeatedly tests the limits of human-centered narration by moving toward plant, animal, and ecological subjectivity. Jones's readings of "The Chrysanthemums," "The White Quail," and *The Red Pony* are especially revealing: they show Steinbeck's sustained interest in plant life, gardening, animal consciousness, growth, breeding, and the possibility of imagining forms of awareness that are not fully human. These texts often construct intimacy between human feeling and vegetal or animal life, suggesting that subjectivity can be refracted through nonhuman forms rather than reserved for human actors alone.

Yet this interdependence is not uncomplicated. Recent criticism shows that Steinbeck's movement toward ecological holism can become anthropomorphic, translating nonhuman life back into human terms. Tanner and Katz emphasize precisely this tension in *To a God Unknown*: the text animates rocks, trees, and mountains, but often does so through the vocabulary of human life and bodily vitality. The result is an ecocritical narrative that reaches toward more-than-human relation while never fully escaping the pressure to humanize the nonhuman. That instability is significant, because it makes Steinbeck's ecological writing formally self-divided rather than ideologically simple.

### 4.3. Drought, climate, and ecological precarity

A third recurrent narrative structure is drought and climate precarity. *To a God Unknown* is particularly important here. Jones's chapter situates the novel in relation to aridity, drought, climate science, magical realism, and racial thought in the American West, showing that Steinbeck was already using narrative form to grapple with the environmental limits of settlement and the question of what kinds of human society an arid region can sustain. Boyden's later article confirms and extends this reading by showing how the novel draws on histories of agriculture, drought, fecundity, and California's agro-industrial development, while also resonating with contemporary concerns about water management in the Anthropocene.

The significance of this cluster lies in the fact that Steinbeck's climate imagination is not only descriptive. Drought in his work is an organizing pressure that reshapes symbolic order, labor systems, spiritual feeling, and social hierarchy. Environmental precarity becomes a narrative logic through which communities, bodies, and moral expectations are tested. In that sense, Steinbeck's ecocritical narratives anticipate current climate criticism by showing that ecological instability is also instability of form, value, and collective life.

### 4.4. Agriculture, labor, and extractive modernity

The fourth cluster is agriculture, labor, and extractive modernity. Steinbeck's landscapes are rarely "untouched nature." They are cultivated, fenced, mechanized, irrigated, exhausted, traveled, and fought over. This feature is crucial to his ecocritical significance. Recent scholarship on *The Grapes of Wrath* and *To a God Unknown* makes clear that agricultural space in Steinbeck is where ecology and political economy visibly intersect. Boyden reads the Wayne ranch in *To a God Unknown* against regional histories of agro-industrial development, while Konrad shows how *The Grapes of Wrath* converts road and truck into ecological and ideological signs of modern American mobility. Steinbeck's environmental imagination therefore does not oppose "nature" to "society" in any simple way; it narrates ecological life within systems of work, mechanization, land use, and extraction.

This aspect of the results suggests that Steinbeck is especially relevant to contemporary debates in the energy and infrastructure humanities. His texts repeatedly ask what happens when productive systems exceed ecological limits, and they dramatize how laboring bodies become entangled with damaged land. Environmental narrative in Steinbeck is thus not only about living with nature; it is about living inside regimes that convert ecological systems into economic resources while rendering certain human lives disposable.

#### 4.5. Marine and bioregional ecology

The fifth cluster is marine and bioregional ecology. Although less dominant in the present sample than agrarian crisis or dispossession, it remains a distinctive component of Steinbeck's environmental imagination. Knopf's recent study of *The Log from the Sea of Cortez* shows that the text is deeply shaped by marine-biology research, ecological method, and tidal temporality. The sea in this writing is not merely symbolic scenery; it is a system of observation, scientific collaboration, regional belonging, and ecological thought. This marine dimension expands Steinbeck's ecocritical range beyond dust and land into oceanic process and bioregional complexity.

The importance of this result is methodological as well as thematic. It suggests that Steinbeck's ecocritical narratives operate across multiple scales and habitats: valley, ranch, road, drought-zone, tidal zone, coast, and sea. The same writer who narrates dust migration and agrarian dispossession also writes through marine method and coastal ecology. This breadth helps explain why recent criticism has found Steinbeck newly useful for environmental humanities: his narrative world is not limited to one environmental form, but is structured by plural ecologies linked through vulnerability, movement, and interdependence.

#### V. Discussion

The results support a broader claim: Steinbeck's ecocritical importance lies not simply in his choice of environmental themes, but in the narrative structures through which he makes ecological relation thinkable. His texts do not merely contain nature. They narrate environment as a field of pressure where land, labor, species, climate, mobility, and power interact. That is why recent scholarship has been able to reposition him so effectively within contemporary environmental humanities. Steinbeck's narratives are formally equipped to represent interdependence, but they are equally attentive to rupture, domination, ecological exhaustion, and the failure of human control.

One of the most important implications of this reading is that Steinbeck's ecological writing is dialectical rather than celebratory. Earlier critical habits sometimes treated his environmental sensibility as evidence of deep harmony or proto-environmentalist wisdom. Newer criticism is more exacting. Tanner and Katz show that his ecological holism can privilege human categories when interpreting nonhuman matter; Azaklı shows that apparent reverence can mask domination and ecophobia; Boyden demonstrates that ecological thought in Steinbeck is inseparable from agricultural history and the politics of water, drought, and development. These readings do not diminish Steinbeck's environmental significance. They sharpen it by showing that ecological awareness in literature often arrives entangled with violence, ideology, and contradiction.

A second implication concerns American literature more broadly. Steinbeck's case suggests that ecocritical narrative in American writing is especially powerful when it joins environmental representation to questions of mobility, labor, and settlement. The most memorable ecological scenes in his work are rarely detached meditations on landscape. They are scenes of drought, migration, toil, cultivation, exposure, dependency, or tidal observation. In that respect, Steinbeck helps bridge several strands of current literary scholarship: environmental justice, climate criticism, more-than-human studies, regional studies, and infrastructure analysis. His writing invites a model of ecocriticism that is at once material, formal, and historical.

A third implication concerns narrative ethics. Steinbeck's environmental imagination repeatedly tests the boundaries of sympathy. He asks readers to feel with migrant families, damaged landscapes, hungry animals, cultivated plants, and coastal ecologies, but he never makes these alignments entirely comfortable. Environmental feeling in his work is unstable, because it is mediated by class power, racial history, settler possession, and the limits of human perception. That instability is one reason his texts remain valuable for current ecocritical work: they do not offer a morally easy version of ecological interconnectedness. They reveal that interdependence can be intimate and exploitative at once.

Finally, the present findings also clarify why Steinbeck remains relevant in an era of climate crisis. Current literary and environmental scholarship emphasizes that narrative matters because it shapes how ecological crisis is perceived, remembered, and ethically processed. Steinbeck's writing is a powerful example of that principle. He does not speak in the vocabulary of today's climate discourse, yet his work repeatedly stages the very problems now central to environmental humanities: water stress, damaged land, extractive systems, displaced populations, multispecies relation, and the challenge of imagining collective survival under ecological pressure.

## ***VI. Conclusion***

This article has argued that Steinbeck's place in American literary ecocriticism is best understood through narrative structure rather than through isolated "green" themes. Across fiction and nonfiction, his writing organizes environmental meaning through five recurrent clusters: land dispossession and environmental injustice; human–nonhuman interdependence; drought and climate precarity; agriculture, labor, and extractive modernity; and marine-biological regionalism. These clusters do not form a perfectly harmonious system. On the contrary, their importance lies in the tensions they reveal between ecological embeddedness and anthropocentric control, between bioregional attachment and settler power, and between more-than-human imagination and social violence.

For that reason, Steinbeck should not be read only as a precursor who vaguely anticipated ecocritical concerns. He should be read as a formally and ethically complex environmental writer whose narratives remain analytically useful for the present. His work helps show how American literature can make ecological crisis legible not only by representing damaged nature, but by narrating the deep entanglement of environment with labor, climate, displacement, infrastructure, and vulnerable forms of life.

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