



## **The Paradox Between Darkness And Light – A Critical Study of John Steinbeck’s *The Winter of Our Discontent***

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### **Abstract**

The Present paper deals with an inward quest for liberation from materialistic possession. ‘*The Winter of Our Discontent*’ is the work we have selected in which the main character, Ethan Hawley as a common man in modern American society experiences an epiphany realizing the importance of love and freedom. He demonstrates great power of introspection, self-analysis and psychological probing as the darkness in human soul is complete.

As the protagonist, he is a character of discipline and ambition, but with a mixture of desire and disgust, he proceeds to achieve prosperity through evil ways in already social, moral, political and economic decadent order of the world.

Ethan takes to the path of darkness (materialism) goaded by his family which leads to sinful life as selflessness and spiritual light departs from his soul. As the story unfolds where his acquaintance with employer, land owner, banker and councilor propels him to search contentment, but he reaches the point of death which fails to bring him redemption.

As Ethan chocks in between light and darkness, his conscious mind seeks spiritual discipline and selfness-ness. This turning point signifies his inward quest for liberation from materialistic possession.

It partakes moral awakening as the prerequisite of spiritual awakening, the truth behind ‘light’ leaving his life. The paradox of spiritual heavenly joy as the conquest of selfless-ness, renunciation and contentment as ‘light’ and material world full of miseries and sufferings as ‘darkness’ is the crux of John Steinbeck’s novel.

The emphasis of winter associated with misery, discontent and ambition is laid out for all as it envelops human soul signifying lack of holistic vision to life. To thrive in spiritually barren world, Ethan’s has to renounce his selfless quest to self-love and happiness akin to darkness and the forces of discontent affects him to the point of suicide. The moral awakening, the distinction

between good and bad redeems his soul to seek light, as the panoramic view of humans see themselves as a paradox between light and darkness.

**Key Words:** Discontent, Winter, Spiritual, Materialism, Awakening, Paradox

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## **Introduction**

John Steinbeck’s *The Winter of Our Discontent* is the story of a modern man, Ethan Hawley. As a common man working in a grocery store, his fall and salvation are described in psychological terms rather than biblical or theological terms. The common man is shorn of glory or high status. His family is simple as Adam and Eve in Eden. Their ‘Eden’ is essentially, a fallen state, a kind of wasteland peopled by selfish men and women.

In the late 30’s in USA, Americans were accommodated by wartime followed by cold war jobs. Ethan Hawley as the protagonist is projected as a character with a mixture of desire and disgust, of acquiescence and self-loathing.

John Steinbeck, the author determines, novel plot with a twisting melodrama. Hawley is forced to act and at the same time hates his actions. Hence forth, it is a ‘realistic symbol’ of a corrupt society and measure of ‘acquiescence’ to decadent social values.

The story begins on Good Friday with references to Christ’s resurrection-‘light’. The day’s value makes them half-believers incapable of redeeming themselves. Their disbelief in resurrection is the belief in ‘Death of Christ’, a state of moral chaos and spiritual degradation-‘darkness’. Ethan demonstrates great power of introspection, self-analysis and psychological probing. Good Friday troubles him. The agony of crucifixion, the loneliness makes him think about forces of temptation as strong, He accepts them and resists with some deliberation to see ‘Good Friday’ as a part of his story.<sup>1</sup>

## **Knowledge of Evil**

Ethan remains passive and while he is unwilling to immerse in ways of the world or its expectations, his family, friends and wife force him to play different roles. Ethan Hawley’s ‘Denial of the New England (where he resides) Ethic’ shows his maturity to gain worldly power and wealth, for the apparent reason to please his family.

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<sup>1</sup>Li Zheng (Fall 2017), “The Human Struggle Between Darkness And Light: A Virtue Ethic Study of John Steinbeck’s *The Winter of Our Discontent*” *The Steinbeck Review*, Vol. 14, No. 2, pp. 164-176, Penn state University Press, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5325/steinbeckreview.14.2.0164>

He views of himself and his family as continuity of evil in social, moral, political and economic orders in the society. He also believes, as passive victim of age, the injustices played over by society.<sup>2</sup>

Ethan is morally passive with both family and business, as Mary his wife, considers him as an economic failure by the measure of his inability to take either legal or illegal profits. As a tortured woman, she wishes him to make more money to satisfy her pride and that of her two children but he is never serious about her wishes.

Mr. Baker changes the psyche of Ethan to embody moral depravity of the modern world. As master of the **'Knowledge of Evil'** ways, he tempts Ethan to invest his wife's money in business and to grab Danny Taylor's (Ethan's childhood friend) land. He makes insistent psychological raids into doing such actions. Ethan initially refrains from such ideas though he is interested in Baker's stories. Baker's constant hammering and his wife's over-powering desire for wealth impacts him.

### **'Voice of Conscience'**

Ethan works as a clerk in Marullo's Grocery store honestly, earning his living, as Mary prods him to achieve prosperity and a high social status. Mary flames the fire of his ambition, tempting as 'Devotee of Mammon'. She is cut off from spiritual 'light' but Ethan loves her and cannot reject her propositions.<sup>3</sup>

Ethan's son Allen prefers modern life and high class living but is incapable of working honestly. He is a Machiavellian young man who plagiarizes to win a prize in essay-writing contest. When Ethan objects, he advocates a godless, morally and spiritually decadent world suggesting him to follow the same way as old values had died a certain death.

Ethan's ancestry has 'Pilgrim Fathers and Whaling Captains right in one family', but 'to know they produced a god dam grocery clerk (Ethan) in a god dam store in a town they used to own', is the seeds of discontent that lie dormant until watered, nourished and fertilized by his wife, son, Mr. Baker and others.

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<sup>2</sup>Christopher Kocela (Winter 2008), "From Object Realism to Magic Materiality : The End (S) of Social Critique in Steinbeck's The Winter of Our Discontent", South Atlantic Review, Vol.73, No. 1, pp. 68-8, South Atlantic Modern Language Association, <https://www.Jstor.org/stable/27784761>

<sup>3</sup>Rajni Chadha (1990), "Social Realism in the Novels of John Steinbeck", Harman Publishing house, New Delhi, ISBN: 8185151318, pp.172

According to Fromm, “Man must know the difference between good and evil; he must learn to listen to the ‘Voice of Conscience’ and to be able to follow it”. But contentment, love, compassion and selflessness depart from his soul as the light departs and darkness brings the horrors and tortures of sinful life. He realizes that death cannot bring redemption.<sup>4</sup>

### **Regeneration and Salvation**

Ethan is surrounded by ‘*The Winter of Discontent*’ from within chocking in his consciousness. He walks materialistic path searching contentment but reaches the point of steep fall, less travelled, tedious and tough path of spiritual discipline and selfness-ness, a struggle between light and dark, good and evil.

Outwardly he is closer to family and society but inwardly he is distanced from those values cherished in life. Hence he goes to a cave on the seashore to put an end to his life. It marks a turning point to signify an inward quest for liberation from materialistic possession and worldly people.

Robert Demott observes, “Ethan retreats to a cave to discover his inner awareness to get a holistic vision, a secret place to reveal the moment of prim-ordeal rhythm of the rising tide to save himself and pass on to his daughter a family heirloom, a talisman to symbolize light and life, an extension of family, home, continuity”. It is his ‘**regeneration and salvation**’.<sup>5</sup>

But before Ethan ‘breaks into a moment of holistic vision aka ‘light’, he passes through a torturous journey of private hell as part of larger hell, where men are selfish and wicked. He feels ‘New Baytown’ was asleep for a long time.

“The men who govern it, politically, morally, economically, continue their ways. The town manager, the council, the judges and the police consider themselves as eternal. They do not consider it as immoral. All men are moral. Only their neighbors are not”.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>Li Zheng (Fall 2017), “The Human Struggle Between Darkness And Light: A Virtue Ethic Study of John Steinbeck’s *The Winter of Our Discontent*” *The Steinbeck Review*, Vol. 14, No. 2, pp. 164-176, Penn state University Press, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5325/steinbeckreview.14.2.0164>

<sup>5</sup>Rajni Chadha (1990), “Social Realism in the Novels of John Steinbeck”, Harman Publishing House, New Delhi, ISBN: 8185151318, pp.176

<sup>6</sup>Li Zheng (Fall 2017), “The Human Struggle Between Darkness And Light: A Virtue Ethic Study of John Steinbeck’s *The Winter of Our Discontent*” *The Steinbeck Review*, Vol. 14, No. 2, pp. 164-176, Penn state University Press, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5325/steinbeckreview.14.2.0164>

This statement contains the truth of moral awakening as a prerequisite to spiritual life. Ethan recognizes the infernal world where he willingly becomes a part, as it is a quest to emancipate from the inferno.

He confesses to Mary, his wife by imploring her, "Guard me against evil from without me and from harm without...for a man has a strange and wind-troubled need and the ache of the ages is on him to spread his seeds everywhere". The 'darkness' in '*The winter of our discontent*' is almost total with no sustained idealism.<sup>7</sup>

**Biblical Parallels:** The egoistic tendencies melt in Ethan helping him prepare for spiritual journey. He dreams transported to different places and situations, cleansing his mind and heart. The dreams serve as a kind of sublimation of images, memories and impressions tainted with sin, selfishness and corruption.

Ethan as the protagonist is caught in a world surrounded by tempting forces. Resisting the onslaught of these forces, persons and continuous association with these waste-landers, he unconsciously imbibes their ways to represent the common man's fate in a fallen world.

John Steinbeck states men's eternal condition, caught between two ways of life, 'spiritual (light) and material (darkness)'. While spiritual, heavenly joy is the inward conquest of selflessness, renunciation and contentment, material world is full of miseries and sufferings involving selfishness, covetousness and mental tension.

One leads to Christ, his crucifixion, his resurrection and the other to Lucifer and seven deadly sins. Good Friday is spiritual awakening, a reward to good life (light). But human life is pulled by the forces of good and evil.

Often Mary's, Allen's, Baker's and Danny's of this world serve to 'retard' spiritual awakening (darkness). They lie dormant in the eternal '*Winter of our Discontent*'.

Winter and discontent cannot be dissociated. The winter of misery, the winter of insatiable desires, the winter of ambition envelops human soul. It signifies lack of holy water of life. It grows and thrives in spiritually barren and morally sterile earth. Ethan's world is one such affecting him through the 'Forces of Discontent'.

Ethan feels refreshed in sleep to break his consciousness with the world, his daughter Ellen helps to recognize spiritual and moral strength. He regains 'An awareness of inner depth (light)',

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<sup>7</sup>Rajni Chadha (1990), "Social Realism in the Novels of John Steinbeck", Harman Publishing House, New Delhi, ISBN: 8185151318, pp.177

accepting the path to heaven, the way to Christ. Though the author does not state it in purely religious or theological terms, the pattern and book structure refers to, ‘stuff men do’, ‘the stuff men have always done in all ages’.<sup>8</sup>

**Spiritual Decline of the West:** Ethan’s fall parallels the spiritual and moral fall of the modern world. Tetsumaro Hayashi says, “Frequent allusions, especially to Macbeth and Richard seem to reinforce not only Steinbeck’s tragic and prophetic vision, but his conscious effort to project an image of moral wasteland through the picture of New Baytown, the long island, as a warning of further spiritual decline of the west”.<sup>9</sup>

Steinbeck, the artist goes out of his way to become the moralist. To portray his concern of America’s moral disintegration, he employs his protagonist, a Harvard Graduate to work as a grocery store clerk.

He tries to live a puritan life in a spiritually depraved world, where gold is the new god. The banker performs priestly rituals, the business centers and banks serve as new church. By placing the fictional community of New Baytown in this ‘darkened’ perspective, the ‘light’ is gone. The author further enhances the “Impact of darkness as a symbol of spiritual decline of the West”.<sup>10</sup>

## Conclusion

‘*Winter of our Discontent*’ is a continuation of Christian theme of man’s fall and redemption which Steinbeck makes use of to tell universal and timeless story by reworking the biblical theme. The Tarot card and the Talisman uses realistic techniques to mark man’s attempt to know his destiny and hold onto something which can save him from being totally lost.

The split of Ethan’s conscious and unconscious selves is realistic and dramatized in a narrative scene where he steps out of himself and as a stranger, watches his movements and that of his

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<sup>8</sup>Meyer, Michael J. “Steinbeck’s *The Winter of Our Discontent* (1961).” *A New Study Guide to Steinbeck’s Major Works*. Ed. Tetsumaro Hayashi. Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1993, 240–273, Print.

<sup>9</sup>Meyer, Michael J. “Steinbeck’s *The Winter of Our Discontent* (1961).” *A New Study Guide to Steinbeck’s Major Works*. Ed. Tetsumaro Hayashi. Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1993, 240–273, Print.

<sup>10</sup>Li Zheng (Fall 2017), “The Human Struggle Between Darkness And Light: A Virtue Ethic Study of John Steinbeck’s *The Winter of Our Discontent*” *The Steinbeck Review*, Vol. 14, No. 2, pp. 164-176, Penn state University Press, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5325/steinbeckreview.14.2.0164>

mind. Steinbeck's vision is strong to visualize the essential living in a 'confused mixture of essential and the inessential of the present'.

Hence Ethan like Adam, is the hero of this essentially repetitive story of 'Man on Earth'. The Biblical parallels, scenes and references help to highlight as the eternal theme of man's life. It also explains how 'Ethan' becomes a variation in human figures and characters, the paradox between 'light and darkness'.

The author elaborates Ethan with great openness and carefully traces his journey from initial innocence, then temptation, moral death and ultimate resurrection. He manages to put his impressions of contemporary moral disintegration and spiritual chaos in words.

Steinbeck gives real and convincing picture of America as a spiritual wasteland (darkness) and a land of plenty where money determines the value of everything. Purity is impossible to obtain in such an environment.

While he presents the modern man with all his biases, desires, inner conflicts and awareness, he also talks about the discontentment of his times, "When a condition or a problem becomes too great, humans have the protection of not thinking about it. But it goes inward and minces up with a lot of other things already there".<sup>11</sup>

Ethan's discontentment with the confused society leads to constant struggle in his soul. It alienates him from himself. It is best expressed by the use of 'third person' by the author to express him in the novel. As Ethan gradually strives towards realization, Steinbeck shifts to mention him in first person.<sup>12</sup>

In his struggle with the 'darkness' of the soul, Ethan visits the cave of his unconscious and emerges a new man (light). A 'man's' place and his predicament in the hostile world, is the reality of his existence, thus, the paradox between 'light and darkness'. It is vividly portrayed in

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<sup>11</sup>MukhtorovaMaftunaIhomovna (December 2020), John Steinbeck's "The Winter of Our Discontent: Interpretation of the Character and Image of the Writer", a lecture at Department of Translation Studies and Languages Education, Bukhara state University, Uzbekistan, Vol. 1, No. 4, Dec 2020, ISSN: 2660-5562, <https://www.scholarzest.com>

<sup>12</sup>MukhtorovaMaftunaIhomovna (December 2020), John Steinbeck's "The Winter of Our Discontent: Interpretation of the Character and Image of the Writer", a lecture at Department of Translation Studies and Languages Education, Bukhara state University, Uzbekistan, Vol. 1, No. 4, Dec 2020, ISSN: 2660-5562, <https://www.scholarzest.com>

this novel using 'Symbolism', 'Mythology' and 'Techniques of Psychological Naturalism' rather artistically.