

# THE WINTER OF OUR DISCONTENT

by John Steinbeck



## THE AUTHOR

John Steinbeck (1902-1968) was born in Salinas, California, and grew up in the region made so memorable in the greatest of his novels. He entered Stanford University in 1919, but never graduated, supporting himself through the decade of the twenties with odd jobs, including writing for a newspaper. In 1929, he published his first novel, *Cup of Gold*. Two novels about migrant workers in California, *The Pastures of Heaven* (1932) and *To a God Unknown* (1933) followed.

He finally achieved commercial success with the publication in 1935 of *Tortilla Flat*. The late thirties witnessed the release of what many consider his finest fiction, including *Of Mice and Men* (1937) and *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939). A ceaseless experimenter with writing techniques and genres, he tried his hand at movie scripts, comedies, plays, travelogues, and a non-fiction work on marine biology. After the Second World War, he returned to long fiction with the semi-autobiographical *East of Eden* (1952). He received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1962, despite the scoffing of critics who considered him a populist rather than a serious writer. He died in 1968.

Steinbeck always considered himself a man of the people, and he identified much more readily with the migrants about whom he wrote so frequently than with the intelligentsia who criticized his writings as too elementary in structure and language. He was a convinced supporter of democracy and an enemy of fascism, though conservatives thought him too much of a socialist and leftists argued that he should be more vociferous in his condemnation of the evils of the capitalist system. He did admit that he had probably been insufficiently outspoken during the McCarthy era, but he was never able to satisfy those who wished to force his politics into their mold.

*The Winter of Our Discontent* (1961) is the last of Steinbeck's novels. Its negative portrayal of American society was taken by some as proof that he by that time had become a crotchety old man, but the cultural critique contained in the novel is no harsher than that found in other great twentieth-century works such as *The Great Gatsby*. While most of Steinbeck's work is set in California, this one takes place in New York, possibly on Long Island, and contrasts the old families whose ancestors had made their living by whaling with the newer immigrants from Italy and Ireland. Unlike *Of Mice and Men* and *The Grapes of Wrath*, which give their primary attention to the lives of the poor and outcasts, this novel looks at members of the middle class who aspire to the wealth

their families had previously known and they see in the homes around them. At its heart, the book is a critique of the moral corruption caused by materialism and illustrates Paul's comment that "the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils" (II Timothy 6:10).

## **PLOT SUMMARY**

### Chapter 1

The story begins in 1960 on Good Friday morning as Ethan Hawley and his wife Mary awake after a good night's sleep. Ethan plans to open the store where he works for the morning, then close it from noon to three. On the way to work he meets Joey Morphy, a bank teller, who describes to him how he would go about robbing a bank so he would never get caught. As Ethan opens the store and sweeps the sidewalk, Baker, the banker, walks by and tries to convince him to invest the money his wife recently inherited, but Ethan insists that he should keep it for security in case of emergencies, especially since he almost went bankrupt when his father made bad investments while he was away at war, then he lost ownership of the store in which he now works within two years after he got back. Baker reminds him about his grandfather, who was the captain of a whaling ship, and encourages him to be a risk-taker like his forebears. The first customer to enter the store is Margie Young-Hunt, a twice-married woman with a reputation for having a roving eye, and she soon makes a pass at him. She reads fortunes on the side and plans to read Mary Hawley's fortune later that day; she tells Ethan that he will be a big man someday. When the bank opens at ten, crowds of people get their money and come into the grocery store to spend it, keeping Ethan busy until noon. After he closes the store, his boss comes in and starts criticizing him for cutting off too much when he trims the cauliflower, not keeping the lettuce wet enough, not ordering cheaper cuts of meat while advertising high-quality ones, allowing people to buy on credit for too long a period of time, and not weighing the meat before he trims off the fat. Ethan finally blows up at him and tells him that he refuses to deal sharply with his neighbors. Marullo tells him that nice doesn't work in business, that only money matters, then leaves the store. After Marullo leaves, a traveling salesman named Biggers, who had slept with Margie the night before, comes in and tries to get Ethan to buy from him rather than his current supplier. He offers Ethan a kickback if he does so without telling his boss, then leaves a billfold containing twenty dollars on his way out the door. When Joey comes in the back door for a Coke, Ethan tells him about the drummer's offer and Joey advises him to take it. At three o'clock he reopens the store, having spent much of the day meditating on the meaning of Good Friday.

### Chapter 2

When Ethan gets home, Allen and Ellen are all excited about entering the National I Love America Contest. Entrants must write an essay, and the winners get a trip to Washington to meet the President. Ethan suggests that they check out his grandfather's books in the attic, which contain a lot of information about American history. When the kids go upstairs, Mary tells Ethan the results of getting her fortune told by Margie Young-Hunt. Apparently the cards said that he was going to become very rich and very important because of an investment he was going to make. He scoffs at the idea, but she defends her friend Margie, who she claims is troubled because men keep making passes at her. Finally her frustration bubbles over at never seeming to have enough money, and all Ethan can do is make jokes about sleeping with Margie and robbing a bank.

### Chapter 3

The narrative now switches to first person, with Ethan telling the story. He talks about how easily Mary falls asleep and how much trouble he has at night. Good Friday is always hard for him because he identifies with the loneliness of Christ on the cross. He considers the events of the day - Margie's offer, Marullo's lecture, Biggers' bribe. Unable to sleep, he goes out for a walk in the middle of the night. He thinks about his ancestors, whose history was drummed into his head by his father, an amateur genealogist. Next he remembers how he met Mary, just before he went off to war. She wrote to him faithfully and he married her when the war was over. In the same way she patiently waited for him to come home from the war, she has waited for him to make a success of himself, which has never happened, and now she is tired of waiting. He then goes on to think of his childhood best friend, Danny Taylor. The two had grown up together, but while Ethan was at Harvard, Danny had gone to the Naval Academy, where he had been expelled in his senior year. He was now the town drunk, and Ethan felt guilty because he had been unable to help him. When he gets to the Old Harbor, he remembers his grandfather and the way he taught him everything about ships. In a small alcove in the ruined dock that he calls the Place, he takes stock of his life. Does Mary really want money, or does she want to be proud of her husband and children? Was Marullo right about business and Biggers and Joey right about how to get ahead? Why had Margie rigged the tarot cards? As sunrise approaches he runs home, stopping on the way to give the panhandling Danny Taylor a dollar for booze. When he offers to help him, the drunk turns on him and tells him that he is better off as a drunk than Ethan is as a clerk. After he gets back home, Mary comes down and they exchange their usual playful banter, but Ethan realizes that he doesn't really know his wife at all.

### Chapter 4

As Ethan gets up to open the store on Saturday morning, he remembers how his aunt would read the Bible to him and tell him that Jesus would rise from the dead on the next day. Then he thinks of his wife and how the two rarely really communicate with one another. As he stocks the shelves, he muses about money and moral relativism. Margie is his first customer, and he asks her whether using the tarot cards blindfolded would yield different results. Later Baker, the banker, comes in and arranges to meet with Ethan the next day after church. When Marullo arrives, his arthritis is really bothering him and Ethan suggests that he visit his relatives in Sicily, where the sun might ease his pain. After Marullo leaves, Biggers comes in and Ethan rejects his bribe, though the drummer is convinced that he is merely negotiating for a better deal. When Mary calls, she tells him that she has invited Margie to join them for dinner.

### Chapter 5

When he gets home from work, Ethan dresses for dinner, talking to his son as he does so. Allen asks him to come up to the attic, and this starts Ethan on a train of thought about the books stored there, secrets, and the nature of reality. In the attic, Allen wants books to research some patriotic topic for his essay. Soon, however, they are discussing money, which Allen wants to win by entering essay contests like a friend of his who lied about his family to gain sympathy from the judges. He wants money so he can get a motorbike like his friends. When Ethan goes downstairs, Ellen asks him when he is going to be rich. Before he has a chance to read the paper, Margie arrives.

After commonplace conversation during dinner, the children do the dishes and then go out to a movie. Eventually Margie gets out her tarot cards, but something she sees disturbs her and she puts them away and quickly leaves the house.

## Chapter 6

Ethan muses about his decision-making process; he usually puts things off, then returns to them later only to find them solved. As he lies awake in bed, he thinks about the successful men in town, who always cut corners and get away with it, and realizes that his decision to pursue riches has already been made, but he wonders about its consequences and whether or not he can ever again return to being a good man.

## Chapter 7

Ethan wakes on Easter morning to the smell of bacon, eggs, and pancakes. In the kitchen, Mary asks him what Mr. Baker wants to talk to them about, and he suspects it has to do with investing her brother's legacy, which Ethan doesn't want to do; he wants it left safely in the bank. To his surprise, Marullo shows up at the front door, thanks him for not taking the kickback when it was offered to him, and leaves a bag of candy Easter eggs for the children. He wonders how Marullo found out about the bribe and suspects he heard it from Margie. They go to church, and Ethan remembers all of his childhood experiences in that sacred edifice. After the service, the children go their separate ways and Ethan and Mary return home. Ethan is still full from breakfast, so he takes a nap instead of eating lunch and dreams about Danny Taylor.

Later they go to the Bakers for tea. After some small talk, Ethan asks Baker to explain how his father had lost the family money through bad investments while he had been away at war. Baker knew about the investments, though he had not advised Ethan's father against them, then his bank foreclosed on the family property when the investments failed. When Ethan says he wants Baker's help to revive the family fortunes, the ladies go upstairs to choose wallpaper. Baker tells Ethan that he needs money to make money, and can get it by mortgaging his house, using Mary's inheritance, or waiting for his mother-in-law to die. None of these approaches appeals to Ethan. Baker then makes some vague statements about future growth for the town and offers to let Ethan in on the ground floor if he can find some money to invest. On the way home, Mary tells Ethan she wants him to invest her inheritance in Baker's scheme.

## Chapter 8

Later that afternoon, Ethan shoots a pair of rabbits that had been eating the flowers in Mary's garden and buries them, but feels terrible afterwards. He decides to salve his conscience by trying to help Danny Taylor, so he visits him in his tumbledown shack. He offers to raise the money to get treatment for Danny, but his old friend refuses, knowing that it would do no good. Ethan soon finds that Baker had brought Danny a bottle of expensive whiskey in order to get him to sign over the family homestead, which is still in Danny's name despite the fact that it is in a ruinous condition. Baker wants it to build an airport and is willing to have Danny declared incompetent in order to get it. Ethan again begs Danny to get treatment for his own protection. Danny finally agrees to take a thousand dollars from Ethan to get treatment, but warns him that he will probably lose his money. When Ethan returns to his bed, he ponders the changes in Marullo and Margie, wondering what they

want from him. Then he hears Ellen sleepwalking, which she does frequently. He gets up and follows her and sees her opening the family's treasure cabinet, which contains various artifacts brought back from the voyages of the whalers. She picks up a translucent mound of stone with strange carvings, holds it close to her, then replaces it, locks the cabinet, and goes back to bed.

## Chapter 9

Monday morning dawns rainy and windy. Joey Morphy suggests that they stop for a cup of coffee on the way to work. As they imbibe, Joey speculates about why Marullo has never visited his home in Sicily; he wonders if he's an illegal immigrant who can't get a passport. As Ethan prepares the store for opening, he remembers Joey's comments earlier about how to rob a bank successfully; he actually imagines himself doing it and runs through the steps in his mind, timing himself to make sure he can pull it off. The store is busy all morning, and when Marullo stops in for his usual brief check, he surprisingly takes time to help out. Later Mary stops by and gives Ethan an envelope containing a thousand dollars in cash for Danny Taylor, though she doesn't know what it is for. During a pause in business at lunchtime, Marullo thanks Ethan for being such an honest employee and suggests that he buy into the business as a partner. Ethan has no money for such a move, but Marullo says maybe they can work something out. Then he tells Ethan to take the kickback so he can buy a partnership in the store. Later Baker comes in and asks Ethan why Mary withdrew a thousand dollars. He tells him it was for new furniture, and Baker again presses on him the value of investing in his sure thing. After work, Ethan drops the money off in Danny's shack and buys some flounder from a local fisherman. That night, Margie Young-Hunt invited them out for dinner at a restaurant. Margie has a date with her, a man named Herzog who is a financial mover and shaker. Ethan's mind wanders during dinner conversation and he realizes that Danny will use the thousand dollars to drink himself into oblivion.

## Chapter 10

That night Ethan is awakened by jets flying over from the nearby airport and thinks of the potential for massive death they represent. Mary is feeling sick, but she gets up anyway. When Ethan gets to work, he finds Danny's will and a note promising to repay the thousand dollars stuffed under the door. As he cleans the store, he remembers the opening lines of Shakespeare's *Richard III* - "Now is the winter of our discontent made glorious summer by this sun of York."

## Chapter 11

The chapter, which is the beginning of Part Two of the novel, starts with a description of New Baytown in June. Ethan is still clerking in the grocery store, though Joey continues to prod him to quit and strike out on his own. After the store closes, Ethan looks up the number of the Immigration and Naturalization Service in New York and calls them on the phone. He comes home from work in a bad mood and tells Allen he will have to work at the store during the summer if he wants to go to camp.

## Chapter 12

Margie Young-Hunt is getting older and she knows it. She does everything possible to retain her youthful appearance, but she finds that dates are fewer and knows that her chances of finding a third husband are getting increasingly slim. Her secret affairs are with men she could never marry, including Danny Taylor, Marullo, and the chief of police, but her friendship with them keeps her from using what she knows for her own benefit. Her next target is Ethan; she wants to help him by freeing him from the bondage of home and work that so troubles him. After taking twenty dollars out of her checking account and flirting with Joey in the process, she goes into the grocery store and asks Ethan about the stranger she saw in the bank. Ethan tells her the man is a federal agent who was asking all kinds of questions about Marullo. She offers to sleep with him, but he brushes it off as a joke. Then Baker comes in and tells Ethan that the state government in Albany and the feds are looking into something going on in New Baytown, and that Marullo might be involved. He also wants to know the whereabouts of Danny Taylor because he lent him money at the same time Ethan gave him a thousand dollars.

## Chapter 13

Ethan is concerned that the path he has decided to follow in order to change himself and become rich is getting beyond his control. As he wonders about what is happening in his life and thinking of the changes being plotted by the town's movers and shakers, Marullo comes in and, much to Ethan's surprise, gives him sixty dollars and tells him to take his Pontiac and go away with the wife and kids for the Fourth of July weekend. On Thursday morning, Ethan lies in bed thinking of each of his family members one by one, then wakes Mary and tells her about their coming weekend excursion, the destination of which she is to choose. He stops in the bank and asks to see Baker, then seeks his advice about using Mary's money to buy the grocery store from Marullo, whom he hints is about to be deported for shady financial dealings. Baker advises him to be careful so he doesn't get cheated.

## Chapter 14

Friday, July 1 arrives and Ethan knows he has taken a path from which there is no turning back. He derives comfort from assuring himself that once the thing has been done, he can once again return to being a good man, just like he stopped being a killer after the war was over. He leaves home early and takes with him the carved stone from the cabinet, believing it to be a talisman of value on this special day. Before going to the store, he walks down to the harbor, then stops at the post office to pick up his junk mail. The store is unusually busy that morning as people stock up on the holiday weekend. Late in the morning, Baker comes in with the money Ethan had requested and gives him advice about how to bargain with Marullo to buy the store. At the end of the day the chief of police comes in and makes some vague statements about having to betray his friends to save himself. Then Joey shows up and tells Ethan that Baker has been behaving strangely. When Ethan gets home, he finds that Mary has planned their trip - to a dude ranch near Montauk. Neither of the children likes the idea. Suddenly Allen's annoying music is interrupted by an announcement to the effect that all the leaders of New Baytown had been called to appear before a grand jury to answer charges involving various forms of corruption. That night in bed, Ethan and Mary alternate between discussing the grand jury trial and trying to figure out a way to get out of the house without bringing

the children. He hopes that Mary can't see into his mind and discern that he intends to rob the bank the next day to get money to buy the grocery store.

## Chapter 15

On Saturday morning, Ethan is ready to put his plan in motion. He makes a point of saying hello to passersby so they will remember that he was in the store. He is just about to leave by the back way when a man from the Justice Department stops by and ruins the timing of his plan. The man is on his day off, but tells Ethan that Marullo has pleaded guilty to illegal entry and is going to be deported. Soon the store is filled with customers. Between waiting on people, the man from Justice informs Ethan that Marullo wants to give him the store; he goes out to his car to get the papers that Ethan needs to sign. What really upsets Ethan is that Marullo decided to give him the store because he was the only honest man he knew.

## Chapter 16

At the end of the business day Joey Morphy comes into the store and he and Ethan have a few beers. Joey tells Ethan that he had a premonition that the bank was going to be robbed that day, so he set all of the alarm buttons to make them easy to activate. Ethan closes up and goes home, prepared to take Mary on the trip she so badly wants.

## Chapter 17

When Ethan gets home, Mary says she has a surprise for him. Margie has volunteered to take the kids to New York for the weekend to see the Fourth of July parade, leaving Ethan and Mary to enjoy the next two days in Montauk by themselves. Ellen informs him that the pink talisman is missing, but Ethan takes it out of his pocket and tells her to put it back. When Mary asks why he took it with him, he tells her he did it for luck, and it worked.

## Chapter 18

They leave for Montauk Sunday morning, and the weather is rainy and the traffic heavy. When they get to the cottage, they dine on lobster and white wine and make love. After breakfast in bed, Ethan tells Mary that Marullo, about to be deported, sold him the store for Mary's three thousand dollars. During lunch, Margie calls to tell them that Allen won honorable mention in the I Love America essay contest. Only five boys won honorable mention in the entire country, and Allen gets a watch and a chance to appear on television. Ethan plans to buy a television and Mary promises to bake a cake, and on the way home they buy a hundred sparklers to celebrate.

## Chapter 19

That night they celebrate Allen's honorable mention with a party. Margie leaves early because she is tired and Allen stays up late to take advantage of his celebrity. He has recently decided that he is an atheist. On Tuesday morning, Ethan prepares the store for opening. He plans to take Mary's three thousand dollars and use it to stabilize the store's finances, then return the money to her account as soon as he is able to do so. An hour before the store opens, Baker comes

in thoroughly upset. He has found out about the arrest of the town's leading citizens just before the election and tells Ethan that something must be done to find new candidates. Baker even suggests that Ethan run for town manager. Ethan then tells him that he intends to raise the keel of his grandfather's ship from where it sank off the coast. When Biggers comes in, Ethan agrees to accept his offered kickbacks if he raises the take to six percent. Around noon, the chief of police comes in to tell Ethan that Danny has been found dead in the cellar of his old homestead. He took a large number of sleeping pills and washed them down with copious amounts of alcohol, and the chief wants Ethan to identify the body.

## Chapter 20

That afternoon Ethan goes to the bank to make a deposit and Baker calls him into his office. Danny's death throws a monkey wrench into Baker's plans to buy the old estate and turn it into an airfield. Ethan pulls out Danny's will, which leaves the estate to Ethan, and tells Baker he will sell it to him for fifty-one percent of the profits from the new corporation Baker intends to form. Ethan admits that he knew that Danny would drink himself to death when he gave him Mary's thousand dollars; he also knows that Baker's father burned his grandfather's ship for the insurance money, so he has no qualms of conscience about taking Baker for all he can get. He decides that, because he is now a rich businessman, he can't run for town manager because it would be a conflict of interest - the same problem that got the present members of council arrested.

## Chapter 21

Allen's honorable mention in the essay contest is going to his head. He tells his father that he can't work in the store because he'll be too busy with television appearances and such, and this is only the beginning. Apparently someone from NBC has been trying to reach Ethan on the phone, but Allen assumes the call is about him. That night Ethan takes a walk, intending to go to his special place at the harbor, but is interrupted by Margie. She steers him toward her place and takes him upstairs, after which she changes into something more comfortable and gets him a drink. She intends to seduce him, but winds up telling him a little of her personal history; her first husband, who still pays her alimony, is about to die and she needs a new source of income, and she hopes that Ethan can fill the gap. She warns him that his ancestors won't let him sleep soundly with the things he has done and offers to be the only person he can talk to - because she knows the chicanery in which he has been engaged - for "a small percentage." After he leaves Margie's place, he gets word that a man in a big Chrysler has been looking for him. When he gets home, the big car is waiting for him. The man inside, who is from the television network, tells him that Allen's essay was plagiarized from a speech given by Henry Clay in 1850 interspersed with excerpts from Jefferson, Lincoln, and Daniel Webster. They discovered the plagiarism because they had received an anonymous postcard. The man and Ethan agree that neither will say anything about what happened. When Ethan goes upstairs, he finds Ellen cringing under the sheets; she is the one who wrote the postcard. Allen is sitting on his bed, furious at what his sister has done. He defends himself by saying that everybody cheats and cuts corners. Ethan decides to go out for another walk and takes a pack of razor blades with him. Before he leaves, Ellen hugs him desperately.

## Chapter 22

Ethan goes to his special place, intending to slit his wrists as the tide comes in. When he reaches into his pocket for the razor blades, however, he finds the talisman instead; Ellen had put it into his pocket when she embraced him. He quickly scrambles through the water to escape the rising tide, desperate to return the talisman to its new owner.

### MAJOR CHARACTERS

- Ethan Allen Hawley - A clerk at Marullo's Fruit and Fancy Groceries in the village of New Baytown in New York, he is an honest and upright man who is descended from generations of prominent sea captains. By the end of the novel, his honesty is sorely challenged by his greed and that of those around him.
- Mary Hawley - Ethan's wife, she is dissatisfied because the family lacks the money and respect she thinks they should have.
- Allen Hawley - Ethan's teenage son, he wins an essay contest by plagiarizing from famous authors and orators but feels no guilt about it because he claims that everybody cheats.
- Ellen Hawley - Ethan's teenage daughter, she anonymously reports her brother's plagiarism. She also is drawn to a pink rock in the family curio cabinet they call the talisman. When she puts it into her father's pocket near the end of the book, it prevents him from committing suicide.
- Joey Morphy - A teller at the First National Bank and Ethan's friend. He shares with Ethan a foolproof way of robbing a bank and getting away with it.
- Baker - The president of the First National Bank, he wants Ethan to invest his wife's inheritance in his scheme for the growth of the town. Ethan believes that Baker's family was responsible for the loss of Ethan's family's fortune.
- Margie Young-Hunt - The local man-eater, twice married but now again on the prowl. She claims to be a fortune-teller and tells Ethan that he is going to be rich and powerful.
- Alfio Marullo - The owner of the grocery store and Ethan's boss, he wants Ethan to cut corners in order to improve profits. When Ethan finds out that he is an illegal immigrant, he reports him to the authorities and he is deported back to Sicily. Before he leaves, he gives the store to Ethan because he considers him to be honest and worthy.
- Hugh Biggers - A traveling salesman who offers Ethan a kickback to send business his way. When Ethan is given the store, he negotiates for a higher kickback than Biggers is offering.
- Danny Taylor - Ethan's childhood friend, now the town drunk. When Ethan gives him money to go for treatment, he buys liquor and drinks himself to death, but before he dies he writes a will leaving his family property to Ethan.

## NOTABLE QUOTATIONS

“Men don’t get knocked out, or I mean they can fight back against big things. What kills them is erosion; they get nudged into failure. They get slowly scared.” (Ethan, ch.1)

“They successfully combined piracy and puritanism, which aren’t so unlike when you come right down to it. Both had a strong dislike for opposition and both had a roving eye for other people’s property.” (Ethan, ch.3)

“No man really knows about other human beings. The best he can do is to suppose that they are like himself.” (Ethan, ch.3)

“If the laws of thinking are the laws of things, then morals are relative too, and manner and sin - that’s relative too in a relative universe.” (Ethan, ch.4)

“Money not only has no heart but no honor nor any memory. Money is respectable automatically if you keep it a while.” (Ethan, ch.4)

“I guess we’re all, or most of us, the wards of that nineteenth-century science which denied existence to anything it could not measure or explain. The things we couldn’t explain went right on but surely not with our blessing. We did not see what we couldn’t explain, and meanwhile a great part of the world was abandoned to children, insane people, fools, and mystics, who were more interested in what is than in why it is.” (Ethan, ch.5)

“And if I should put the rules aside for a time, I knew I would wear scars but would they be worse than the scars of failure I was wearing? To be alive at all is to have scars.” (Ethan, ch.6)

“My darling, it isn’t that. It’s a despairing unhappiness I’m afraid of, the panic money brings, the protectiveness and the envy.” (Ethan, ch.7)

“All men are moral. Only their neighbors are not.” (ch.11)

“To most of the world success is never bad.” (Ethan, ch.13)

“Sometimes I think a do-gooder is the most dangerous thing in the world.” (Baker, ch.20)

“Maybe he hated you. Maybe his trick was the disintegration of a man.” (Baker, ch.20)

“You’ll feel better, sir, when you have got used to the fact that I am not a pleasant fool.” (Ethan, ch.20)

“It’s so much darker when a light goes out than it would have been if it had never shone.” (Ethan, ch.22)

## ESSAY QUESTIONS

Discuss the following in a five-paragraph essay:

1. The title of John Steinbeck's *The Winter of Our Discontent* is taken from the opening lines of William Shakespeare's *Richard III*. Why do you think Steinbeck chose this title, especially since the story does not take place during the winter? Does he intend to suggest a relationship between Ethan Hawley and the villainous title character of Shakespeare's play? If so, what is it? If not, what connection does he intend to make?
2. The story in John Steinbeck's *The Winter of Our Discontent* takes place between Good Friday and the Fourth of July weekend in the year 1960. Why are these two holidays important to the plot? What significance do they have for the themes the author is seeking to convey in the novel?
3. One of the petitions in the prayer given by Jesus to His disciples is "Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil." Discuss the ways in which John Steinbeck's *The Winter of Our Discontent* demonstrates how hard temptation is to resist and why we should seek to avoid it if at all possible. What were the main sources of temptation faced by the protagonist of the novel and why did he find them so difficult to resist?
4. One of the major themes of John Steinbeck's *The Winter of Our Discontent* is the corrupting power of materialism. Discuss how he develops this theme, both on the individual and societal levels, throughout the novel. Use specific examples to support your analysis.
5. In John Steinbeck's *The Winter of Our Discontent*, does the protagonist take uncharacteristic actions largely on his own initiative or primarily because of the pressure he feels from others? How does the story illustrate the dangers of living one's life in order to fulfill the expectations of other people? How is Ethan's life almost destroyed by peer pressure?
6. Assess the strength or weakness of the protagonist in John Steinbeck's *The Winter of Our Discontent*. Would you characterize him as weak or strong? Why? Does he change over the course of the novel, or does he remain basically the same? Support your arguments with details from the story.
7. Discuss the extent to which the protagonist of John Steinbeck's *The Winter of Our Discontent* changes over the course of the novel. Other characters notice changes in him and he certainly sees changes in himself, but how real are these changes? If he does change, of what do these changes consist? If not, in what fundamental ways does he remain the same?
8. A small pinkish rock referred to as the talisman is a significant symbol in John Steinbeck's *The Winter of Our Discontent*. What is its meaning? Does it mean different things to different characters? Why is it particularly associated with Ethan's teenage daughter Ellen?

9. Discuss the symbolism of Ethan Hawley's special place in a cave at the harbor in John Steinbeck's *The Winter of Our Discontent*. When and why does Ethan visit this special place? What is its significance in the plot of the novel?
10. What is the symbolic significance of the gray cat that hangs out in the alley behind the grocery store where Ethan Hawley works in John Steinbeck's *The Winter of Our Discontent*? In your analysis, consider the importance of its color as well as the ways in which Ethan responds to it at different points in the novel.
11. Discuss the author's use of light and darkness as symbols in John Steinbeck's *The Winter of Our Discontent*. To what extent do these symbols reflect the inner state of the protagonist at different points in the story? Support your argument with specifics from the novel.
12. In John Steinbeck's *The Winter of Our Discontent*, to what extent do Mary Hawley and Margie Young-Hunt serve as foils, with the contrasts between the two bringing the character of each into sharper focus? Be sure to use specifics from the novel in your analysis.
13. Both John Steinbeck's *The Winter of Our Discontent* and Arthur Miller's *All My Sons* take place in the years following the Second World War, and both illustrate the emptiness and destructiveness of the quest for wealth that is so central to the American Dream. Compare the protagonists of the two stories and discuss how they are brought to grief through their desire for wealth and social standing. What do the two endings tell you about the differing perspectives of the two authors?
14. Both John Steinbeck's *The Winter of Our Discontent* and F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* portray the emptiness of the American Dream of social advancement and material prosperity, and both do so in the context of recently-ended world wars. What roles do the wars play in the social attitudes the authors criticize? How do they affect the protagonists and their search for fulfillment?
15. Both John Steinbeck's *The Winter of Our Discontent* and F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* portray the emptiness of the American Dream of social advancement and material prosperity, and both novels are set on Long Island, though they take place a generation apart. How does the setting help to shape the authors' critiques in the two novels? Would the stories have looked different had they taken place in the Midwest or California, the setting for much of Steinbeck's fiction?
16. Both John Steinbeck's *The Winter of Our Discontent* and F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* portray the emptiness of the American Dream of social advancement and material prosperity. The earlier work ends in the death of the protagonist, while in the later novel the protagonist steps back from the verge of death at the last moment. Do the different endings tell you something about the hope or lack thereof with which the authors viewed American society?

17. Both John Steinbeck's *The Winter of Our Discontent* and Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* deal with the moral consequences of the desire for wealth and a position in society. In both cases, the failure of the quest leads ultimately to redemptive consequences. Compare and contrast the pictures of the search for wealth and its consequences in the lives of Ethan Hawley and Walter Lee Younger.
18. Two novels by John Steinbeck, *The Winter of Our Discontent* and *The Pearl*, deal with the harm that wealth or the desire for it can do in the lives of simple, decent people. The stories take place in very different settings, yet the moral dimensions of the tales are in some ways similar. Compare and contrast the views of wealth and its dangers as presented in the two novels.
19. In I Timothy 6:10, Paul warns his young friend that "the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils." In what ways does John Steinbeck's *The Winter of Our Discontent* illustrate the truth of Paul's assertion? Choose three characters who are influenced negatively by the love of money and discuss how their lives are harmed by it.
20. Hebrews 4:13 says, "No creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account." In John Steinbeck's *The Winter of Our Discontent*, however, Ethan Hawley gradually convinces himself that nothing is wrong in and of itself, but an action is wrong only if one gets caught. How does the novel demonstrate that the author of Hebrews was right and Ethan was wrong?
21. In the Second Commandment (Exodus 20:5), God speaks of "visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children." Without going into detail on the meaning of this phrase, we can see clearly from it that sin has generational consequences. Discuss how John Steinbeck's *The Winter of Our Discontent* illustrates this truth. Choose three examples of fathers and children from the story and discuss how the sins of the older generation affected the lives of their offspring.
22. In I Samuel 25, David is on the verge of carrying out his murderous intentions against the boorish Nabal when Nabal's wife Abigail intervenes and prevents the slaughter. Both David and Abigail praise the Lord for keeping him from sin, not by activating his conscience, but by providential circumstances that removed the opportunity. How does John Steinbeck's *The Winter of Our Discontent* illustrate the truth that God sometimes prevents sin by intervening in circumstances rather than through pangs of conscience. Was Ethan Hawley's conscience, like that of David, activated after the fact, leading to thankfulness on his part that he was kept from sin? Why or why not?
23. In chapter three of John Steinbeck's *The Winter of Our Discontent*, Ethan Hawley says, in reference to his forebears, "They successfully combined piracy and puritanism, which aren't so unlike when you come right down to it. Both had a strong dislike for opposition and both had a roving eye for other people's property." Analyze the assessment of the American Puritans contained in this quotation. In what ways is it true and in what ways false? Does the comparison to pirates have any validity? If so, how? If not, why not?

24. In chapter three of John Steinbeck's *The Winter of Our Discontent*, Ethan Hawley says, "No man really knows about other human beings. The best he can do is to suppose that they are like himself." Discuss the truth or falsehood of this statement. How well can people really know others? Does knowledge of ourselves help us to know others better or hinder such knowledge? Illustrate your arguments with specific quotations or incidents from the novel.
25. In chapter four of John Steinbeck's *The Winter of Our Discontent*, Ethan Hawley says, "If the laws of thinking are the laws of things, then morals are relative too, and manner and sin - that's relative too in a relative universe." Does Ethan really believe that morals are relative, or is he trying to convince himself in order to justify what he is being pressured to do by others? What does the ending of the story tell you about the morals of the protagonist?
26. In chapter five of John Steinbeck's *The Winter of Our Discontent*, Ethan Hawley says, "I guess we're all, or most of us, the wards of that nineteenth-century science which denied existence to anything it could not measure or explain. The things we couldn't explain went right on but surely not with our blessing. We did not see what we couldn't explain, and meanwhile a great part of the world was abandoned to children, insane people, fools, and mystics, who were more interested in what is than in why it is." Analyze this critique of empiricism, including in your discussion relevant passages of Scripture. How does the novel illustrate Steinbeck's doubts about an empirical view of the world?
27. In chapter six of John Steinbeck's *The Winter of Our Discontent*, Ethan Hawley says, "And if I should put the rules aside for a time, I knew I would wear scars but would they be worse than the scars of failure I was wearing? To be alive at all is to have scars." Discuss his comparison of the "scars" of sin and those of failure that the protagonist is using to justify his intended sin. How would a Christian respond to his question from Scripture?
28. In chapter eleven of John Steinbeck's *The Winter of Our Discontent*, the narrator says, "All men are moral. Only their neighbors are not." To what extent is this an accurate assessment of how people view themselves and others? What does the Word of God have to say about such an attitude? Consider Jesus' words in Matthew 7:1-5 among other passages.
29. In chapter twenty of John Steinbeck's *The Winter of Our Discontent*, the banker Baker says, "Sometimes I think a do-gooder is the most dangerous thing in the world." Why does he say this? What does he mean? How does Ethan's failed attempt to help Danny illustrate the danger of misguided benevolence? How do we see examples of this in contemporary society?
30. In chapter twenty of John Steinbeck's *The Winter of Our Discontent*, the banker Baker, speaking to Ethan about Danny, says, "Maybe he hated you. Maybe his trick was the disintegration of a man." Trace the steps by which Danny's request led to Ethan's "disintegration."

31. John Steinbeck's *The Winter of Our Discontent* almost ends in the death of the protagonist, but Ethan Hawley steps back from the precipice at the last second and returns to his family. Does the ending of the novel show that the author entertained some hope for the renewal of American society? Why or why not? Support your answer with specifics from the novel.
32. John Steinbeck's *The Winter of Our Discontent* deals with Americans' fear and hatred of immigrants - a theme that has considerable currency in today's society. Are the reasons for this hatred the same now as they were when the novel was written? Why or why not? Use specifics from the novel and from today's news to support your arguments.
33. John Steinbeck's *The Winter of Our Discontent* portrays an America rife with corruption and greed. Though he effectively communicates the nature of the problem, does he present a solution for it? Does the book end in hope, or simply present the reader with the necessity of living as best one can in a degraded society for which no hope can be found?
34. In the book of Ephesians, Paul tells his readers that husbands should love their wives and bring up their children in the discipline and instruction of the Lord. In Luke 14:26, Jesus says, "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple." John Steinbeck's *The Winter of Our Discontent* illustrates both the value of family and the problems that can be caused when family becomes an idol. In what ways did Ethan Hawley fail to follow the Bible's teaching on how he should relate to his family, and in the process cause trouble both for himself and for those he loved?
35. In John Steinbeck's *The Winter of Our Discontent*, the author presents Ethan Hawley as an innocent who, like Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, is faced with a tempter offering a fruit that will make his life better. In the novel, who is the tempter and what is the fruit (note that more than one character may fit the role)? What are the consequences in Ethan's life when he takes a bite from the proffered offering?
36. Some critics have argued that Ethan Hawley's descent into vice in John Steinbeck's *The Winter of Our Discontent* lacks credibility. Would you agree or disagree? Support your arguments with details and quotations from the novel.