

***To a God Unknown* (1933)**

John Steinbeck

OVERVIEW

To a God Unknown is a vivid account of man's profound relationship to his land. The story pursues Joseph Wayne's arduous quest for a land of his own in the early 1900s. He leaves his farm near Pittsford Vermont, and establishes his homestead in the valley of Our Lady (or, Nuestra Señora) in central California. Joseph has a very deep connection with his chosen plot, especially with an imposing oak tree under which he decides to build his house.

After their father's death, Joseph's brothers also join him and establish their homesteads there. Later on, Joseph meets Elizabeth, a young schoolteacher from Monterrey, and after several failed courting attempts, he manages to win her heart and marry her. The farm flourishes for some time, Joseph and Elizabeth have a son together, but when the first signs of drought appear, Joseph's life takes a dramatic turn. Elizabeth slips on a mossy rock in the pine tree forest near their land and dies. Burton girdles the oak tree that Joseph worships and leaves the farm as he is convinced that Joseph's pagan rituals will doom the family to ruin. As the drought worsens, Thomas and his family also leave the farm in search of a less hostile place for themselves and their cows. However, Joseph refuses to leave, and eventually, slits his wrists on the mossy rock, as a form of self-sacrifice meant to make rain come again and revive his dying land.

LITERARY/HISTORICAL NOTES

John Steinbeck grew up in Salinas, a town near the end of a narrow valley in California, a detail that is important for understanding the vital role that nature plays in *To a God Unknown*, and also much of his later fiction. The enclosed valley represents the microcosm in which the characters' lives unfold with both joyful and dramatic moments. Steinbeck's personal experience with the natural environment, the physical farm work and sacrifice that the maintenance of such place requires, led to his strong connection to nature. This attachment is reflected in the obsessive passion and "feverish hunger" that Joseph Wayne, the main protagonist of the novel, feels for his land.

Written at an early stage of his writing career, Steinbeck drew his inspiration for the novel from a play written by one of his Stanford University friends for a creative writing class. After roughly five years of revisions, Steinbeck finished *To a God Unknown*, which he describes as "a novel about the world" with "new seeing". Regardless of the negative reviews at the time, the novel prefigures many of the themes, character typology, locations and narrative techniques) that he perfected in his later works.

The title of the novel reflects Steinbeck's intellectual preoccupation with the mystical and the philosophical as well as with scenes and stories from the bible. With respect to the story, refers to the main protagonist's relation with an "unknown" force, beyond his control and understanding.

MAIN CHARACTERS

Joseph	The hero at the heart of the story.
Elizabeth	A young teacher who becomes his wife.
Burton	Joseph's elder brother, is a religious bigot.
Thomas	Also Joseph's elder brother.
Benjamin	Benjamin, or Benjy, the young brother of the Wayne family.
Rama	Thomas's wife.
Juanito	Joseph's farm foreman.

PLOT

Westward Ho The story begins with Joseph's approaching his father to ask for permission to go to the West where the land is very cheap. Joseph justifies his decision by expressing his concern about the fact that the land they have will not suffice for the growing family now that Burton and Thomas, the older brothers are married, and Benjamin, the youngest has engaged in courting. The father reluctantly gives him his blessing.

Hunger for land Joseph establishes his homestead in the valley of Our Lady which happens to be flourishing at the time of his arrival. Joseph feels exultant and feverish because of the "sharp pain of desire" to possess it. He has a moment of passionate physical contact with the land if it were "his wife". As he roams around, he comes across a big oak tree. He feels inexplicably attracted to the tree and decides to build his house under it.

The dry years story When Joseph receives the lumber for his house, and wonders why other people have not chosen to live there, he finds out about the "dry years", which have made the place unpopular. He also hears the story of the fiesta that local Mexicans and other locals organise to celebrate the coming of rain after ten years of severe drought. Their wild behaviour has made Father Angelo "put penances on everybody". Joseph dismisses the thought that a dry period like that will possibly occur again in the green valley.

Building a house Joseph accepts Juanito's unconditional friendship and offer to help finish building the house and become his foreman. Joseph builds his house under the "protective arm" of the "great lone" oak tree on his land. Joseph's mysterious attraction to the tree turns into a deep connection after his father's death. He thinks that his father's spirit has entered this "venerable" tree.

New patriarch After receiving Joseph's letter confirming that there is still land available next to his plot, the other three brothers come with their families to settle down here. Joseph is the son who has received the father's blessing, so he becomes the "unquestioned lord of the clan". He keeps an untiring watch on what he hopes to be a rapid growth of both nature and animals on his farm. With everything growing and multiplying around him, Joseph feels it is time he found a wife, too.

The mossy rock While on the lookout for their cows, Joseph, Juanito and Thomas arrive in a pine forest. Juanito takes them on a path he remembers, and they stop by a "mysterious and huge" rock. While Thomas is terrified and seeks to get out of there quickly, Joseph is drawn towards this "ancient and holy" place.

Marriage A young teacher named Elizabeth moves to the village of Our Lady. Joseph hears about the pretty teacher's arrival, and enters the circle close to her. After several awkward conversations, Joseph bluntly proposes to her. On a riding 'date' Elizabeth is impressed with his strength and attitude to the natural environment, and accepts his proposal and becomes his wife.

Murder Joseph discovers that Benjy was killed by Juanito in a moment of blind rage as he returned home and found him together with his wife. Joseph meets Juanito in the pine tree forest, but refuses to revenge his brother's death. Feeling confused by Joseph's calm attitude, Juanito decides to go away and return only after he feels he has completed his self-punishment.

Time of worry Joseph becomes restless as he awaits the rain. He pours a pig's blood on the bark of the tree, and the rain comes. At Old Juan's instigation, Joseph decides to have a fiesta on New Year's Day. Father Angelo sees Joseph pouring some wine on the bark of the tree, and warns him that such old habits relate to the Devil rather than Christ. At the sight of his brother's "devil-worship" act, Burton gets into an argument with him.

Birth of a son Elizabeth is pregnant and enters the pine forest. Sitting by the "huge, misshapen green rock", she has frightening visions. Later on, Joseph assists with his son's birth and wants to sit the baby in the tree. In a fit of anger caused by brother's ritual, Burton takes his family and leaves the house.

Death of a wife Joseph realises that Burton has girdled and killed his tree before he left. As Joseph's worry about his estate deepens, Elizabeth finds tasks to "keep him busy. One day Joseph and Elizabeth go to the mysterious rock in the pine forest. While climbing the rock, she slips and dies.

The family falls apart Rama offers herself to Joseph as a way of relieving his grief over Elizabeth's death. The drought intensifies even further, menacing to starve to death both nature and animals. Thomas decides to take his family and cattle to a less hostile land while Joseph gives his son to Rama, promising that he will never claim him back.

Desolation Left all alone, Joseph goes to the pine tree to check the state of the rock. He regularly pours water on it in an attempt to keep the land alive. Juanito returns but he cannot convince Joseph to leave his land. He advises him to talk to Father Angelo. After talking with Father Angelo, Joseph goes to the pine forest and sees that the stream by the rock has dried up. He slits his wrist on the rock and dies.

Conclusion Understanding Joseph's plight, Father Angelo prays for his soul, and for the rain. When the rain comes, Father Angelo thinks that Joseph must be pleased, unaware of Joseph's death.

THEMES

Man and nature The close relation between people and the land is the underlying theme of the novel. Nature has personified characteristics and wields great influence over the characters. The naturalistic descriptions in the novel often reflect characters' emotions, thoughts, and even destiny. If at the beginning of the novel, both man and nature are presented in their glory, the final part highlights the unbalanced rapport between them. Nature emerges as a place of nurturing, which provides food, but also as a destructive place, with devastating consequences for itself and humans.

Cyclical pattern The natural world follows a cyclical pattern, as exemplified by the returning "dry years". The cyclical pattern also marks the human world. Joseph's obsessive relationship with the land is a continuation of his father's way of relating to it. Towards the end of the novel, Thomas takes over the remnants of the Wayne family. The difference lies in the individual attitude to the natural world: Joseph vainly tries to possess and control the land whereas Thomas, with his primitive instinct of survival, takes the herd and migrates to a less hostile environment, which ensures a new beginning for the family.

Faith Another major theme at the core of the story is religious faith. Steinbeck uses syncretic allegory to point to the world as a place where a variety of religious faiths and cultures have merged and influenced one another. This narrative technique is aimed at suggesting that the attempt to establish one absolute truth about God is a daunting enterprise. Whether that faith relates to a Protestant (Burton), a Catholic (Father Angelo), a holy rock (Juanito and his Mexican Indian heritage) or an oak tree (Joseph), it is ultimately a personal experience and choice. As different as the characters' perspectives on God may be, there is an aspect that unifies them all: faith provides them with the strength to face the challenges of life. Another striking similarity is reflected in the characters' behaviour: they all religiously follow what they believe in.

Good and Evil The good – evil dualism pervading the story suggests that faith may take various forms. It is the blind pursuit of faith that leads to the destruction of self or others. For example, after Burton's merciless act of killing Joseph's tree, the entire Wayne family falls apart. Father Angelo, however, develops a more tolerant view of sin by the end of the story. On his final encounter with Joseph, he is "shaken" by his inner force and realises there are things beyond his knowledge and understanding.

Family The theme of family is also explored in the novel. Steinbeck's representation of the American family did not conform to stereotypes perpetuated at the time. Steinbeck portrays the patriarch of the family as absorbed in chasing an impossible dream, which makes him weak and unable to solve the problems of the family. The wife, on the other hand, is strong and knowledgeable. Although Joseph is perceived by everyone around him as a strong man, his actions and obsessive pursuit of his ambition result in his family's disintegration. Lacking the wisdom, leadership spirit and the ability to reach a compromise in conflict situations, Joseph fails to keep his family united. By contrast, Elizabeth and Rama, both strong-willed and intelligent, play crucial roles in Joseph's life. Without men acknowledging it, it is their hard domestic work that largely contributes to the successful functioning of

the family. Elizabeth's sudden death destabilises Joseph completely, and he cannot find the strength to save either the rest of the family or himself. In the end, Rama is the one who looks after the family.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Joseph A man of few words, Joseph works with single-minded and obsessive determination to possess his own land and make it multiply. His inner power is remarked by everyone around him. Although he seems to have a tough unemotional manner to tackle the events in his life, his relationship with Elizabeth brings out his tender and sensitive streak. When Joseph becomes the patriarch of the family, he first shows a great sense of responsibility. But when times get extremely difficult, he cannot find the strength to move away from his dream. This causes many delusions, inner conflicts, and eventually, the ruin of his family. He also stands by his practices and decisions irrespective of the consequences.

Obsessive From the discussion with his father at the beginning of the story to his ritualistic death at the end of the novel, Joseph shows a compulsive relation with his land. He constantly checks the good state of his homestead, and ignores any warnings and stories about the past dry years. Joseph faithfully follows his dream and continues to perform his rituals at all costs. His goal of creating a prosperous farm alone keeps him alert day and night. Elizabeth remarks that "he seemed never to sleep completely". Joseph displays the same single-minded commitment when it comes to his beliefs about what the oak tree represents. Whenever he finds himself in need of advice, he talks to the tree, and performs pagan rituals. An example that illustrates his extreme obsessive behaviour is at the moment the drought has taken over all the land, except for the rock in the pine forest. As he believes the mossy rock is the "heart" of his land, he carries water to keep it "dripping with moisture" every morning and evening. When the stream near the rock dries up, he sacrifices a starving calf. As the rain still does not come, he uses a knife to open "the vessels of his wrist" and water the rock with his own blood. The rain comes, and in his final moments, Joseph's thoughts go to his land yet again.

Delusional Joseph's unshakable and visceral connection with his land does not allow him to make sensible decisions when "the dry years" threaten to strike again. A relevant example of his recklessness and psychotic delusion occurs when Thomas senses the looming critical time that the lack of rain will bring about, and tries to reason with him. Thomas cannot convince his brother to leave the farm together and save what they can. Joseph justifies his refusal to join the rest of the family by saying that he is "staying to protect the land." He believes there is a "strong force" that keeps his land captive. When Rama asks him about his decision to stay even when there is "nothing left" to look after, Joseph holds on to his hope that there is still something to be saved.

Patriarchal As leader of the Wayne family, Joseph fails miserably and is unable to lead the family through the difficult times. At first he comes across as a strong man who is determined to achieve his goal. The old patriarch dies, and the entire family accepts him as the "unquestioned lord of the clan". For a while, Joseph appears to succeed in his new role since both farm and family are thriving. An illustrative example of his failure to fulfil his responsibilities as head of the family occurs when the severe drought starts settling in. His family has gradually fallen apart (Benjy gets killed, Burton leaves the farm, Elizabeth dies). Now that the land has dried up, threatening the livestock with starvation, Joseph feels disappointed that he has "failed to protect the land" rather than his family. He gives his son to Rama, and admits that he "wouldn't know how to care for it".

Elizabeth The daughter of a harness-maker and saddler, Elizabeth is a seventeen-year-old, educated school teacher. She is a "very determined" young woman ahead of her time. For her, the profession of teaching is both a means of embarking on new adventures and gaining a respectable status in the community. Elizabeth is well-aware that her "social" and "educational importance" gives her "an intellectual and cultural tone to her district." Despite her young age and lack of life experience, Elizabeth is very perceptive about people, especially Joseph and Rama, and learns fast how to adapt to situations. She is also open-minded and sympathetic when Joseph explains to her the kind of "game" he plays with the oak tree. Not only does Elizabeth "bring social elevation to a man" but, as is the case with Joseph, she also manages to bring out the "human" side of his personality.

Strong-willed Elizabeth shows great determination to achieve her goal of becoming a teacher in spite of her young age and her father's counterarguments. Her strong-willed character comes out during the conversation with Rama on the night of Benjy's death. Elizabeth feels "lonely" and "very

weak before Rama's strength" at first, but she speaks up for herself. She tells Rama that she needs food and rest after the long journey she and Joseph have made to get to the farm. Rama apologises and invites her to the kitchen for tea and food. Rama remarks Elizabeth's beauty and expresses her surprise at Joseph's choice of "pretty wife", and at his being "more human" than she thought. But Elizabeth reacts promptly: "of course, he's human". Throughout their conversation, Elizabeth does not gullibly accept Rama's version of the kind of man Joseph is. On the contrary, she shows no hesitation to take his side and establish her position in the Wayne's household as his wife: "he married me. You are trying to make a stranger of him."

Perceptive When she first arrives at the Valley of Our Lady, Elizabeth feels under scrutiny, especially by men, but she can sense that none of them is worthy of her attention. She feels, however, Joseph's special inner force despite his inability to join intellectual conversations or express his emotions. As his wife, Elizabeth observes how badly the constant torment and sleepless nights affect her husband physically and mentally. One evening, she suggests that Joseph should take her to the pine forest. Joseph becomes "more animated" and tells Elizabeth that he has thought of going there as well. Sensing his attachment to the pine forest, Elizabeth starts telling him about the one time she has gone there during her pregnancy. Joseph listens to her story eagerly, holding her hand in a firm grip. She thinks that he is also afraid of the place, but Joseph denies it. He keeps Juanito's stories about the place to himself for fear that he might scare, and promises to take her to the forest the next day. As he goes out to check the barn, Elizabeth knows that "he was concealing something from her".

Understanding Although initially frightened by Joseph's stare and bluntness, Elizabeth comes to understand her husband's behaviour and deep connection with his land and tree. The climbing tree scene at the beginning of their relationship illustrates her sympathetic and perceptive nature. Joseph shows her around the farm, and points to the oak tree. As if sensing Joseph's special connection with the tree, Elizabeth "strokes" its trunk and asks for permission to climb it. She realises that her interest in the tree has triggered a "strange intensity" in the way he looks at her. He helps her climb the tree, and he is happy to see that she fits in the "crotch from which the great limbs grew". Elizabeth asks about the reason of his sudden happiness, and he confesses to her that he thinks that the tree "loved" and approved of her. She reacts naturally, and even joins in "the game," saying that she can finally feel at home now that she has spotted the pine forest.

Rama Rama is a remarkable woman with an instinctive and deep understanding of others' needs. She runs the household with a firm hand and keeps everything neat. Her expressed opinion of men may make her a misandrist, but her high regard of Joseph shows the opposite. She can be very affectionate with the children who behave according to her standards of good, but is very tough on the "evildoing" ones. She has an intuitive understanding of people and offers them unconditional comfort and support when they are distressed.

Strong Rama has a robust physique, as well as a strong and independent character. She is "nearly always contemptuous of everything men thought or did", but speaks very highly of Joseph. In one of her conversations with Elizabeth, she describes Joseph as "not a man" but "all men". Her efficient way of running the household gains her a position of female authority in the Wayne family. Her strength mostly resides in her non-emotional response to distressful situations. For example, on the night that Benjy gets killed, Rama takes charge of Elizabeth and keeps her away from the scene. Elizabeth starts crying, but Rama urges her to stop since there is no point in crying over a man she has never met before. As readers come to find out in a later conversation between the two women, Rama once comforted Benjy. But now that he is dead, Rama shows no moment of weakness in front of Elizabeth. She helps Elizabeth settle in and leads the way through the house with confidence and calmness as if nothing had happened.

Tactful Rama duly looks after her household and family, and she instinctively knows how to treat each of them. When she first meets Elizabeth, for example, she comes across as strong and confident, but she also makes her feel safe around her. Rama shows a great deal of strength and tact as she appreciates Elizabeth's outspoken personality. She softens her attitude to make her feel more comfortable in the new house. As the two women's relationship evolves, Rama becomes "the teacher" and explains to Elizabeth what she should know about marriage and life in general. When for example, Elizabeth starts redecorating the house, Rama tactfully guides her and shows her "methods of doing things" without being critical of hers.

Matriarchal Her life experience and strong character make Rama the female leader of the Wayne family. Her motherly attitude towards children, weak people like Benjy and inexperienced ones like Elizabeth highlights her authority and sense of responsibility. She also instinctively knows how to handle strong people like Joseph or “animal-like” ones like her husband, Thomas. The most illustrative moment of her representing the matriarchal figure of the Wayne family is when she and Thomas leave the farm. During her final conversation with Joseph, she realises his manic delusion and thoughtlessness about the fate of the family. She now feels the urge to “hurry away” from the “poor lonely man” that Joseph has become. On the morning of their departure, Rama organises everything, feeds the children and makes sure that they are in a “secure seat on top of the load”. With Thomas by her side, Rama is the one who “puts her foot out on the brake” and drives the wagon away in order to save her family from an imminent disaster.