

Thumbs Down on Steinbeck's Novel

[Comment by Samuel Sillen on the following letters appears on page 22.]

TO NEW MASSES: To enter objections to something which, though even in a limited way, serves the immediate cause of unity against fascism is hard. But I think it must be done.

It is good that the popular author of the great book *The Grapes of Wrath* should have devoted his talents to a book meant to serve our war effort; and it is good that the Book-of-the-Month Club is circulating it, thereby assuring that more than 300,000 copies will promptly be in readers' hands. But I think the book is not good enough. I think it is as harmful to be contented with too little in our writing as in our fighting. And I think it is important not to justify or rationalize the thinness of the narrative and the characterization, as I think Mr. Sillen and Miss Buck have done (NM, March 24), but analyze it and explain it.

I will not go into such weaknesses of the book as its sentimentality because that, like the thinness of action and character, derives from the same thing, Steinbeck's recent pseudo-scientific, pseudo-philosophic view of man and Fate, with human beings as the continuing victims of a growing mechanization of life, etc., etc., and no better than the poor fish of the sea.

That was the human picture projected philosophically in his previous book *Sea of Cortez*; and that is the picture we have, again, in *The Moon Is Down*. Men have gone a long way since Aesop; and modern attempts to read human life into frogs and lizards have not been very valuable. Neither, today, is it very valuable to put human beings in terms of animals. Unfortunately the human beings in *The Moon Is Down* are reduced to an animal-like simplicity, astoundingly different from the virile people of *Grapes of Wrath*.

I used to know an anarchist long ago named Hippolyte Havell. For all his anarchist's insistence on the independence of the individual, Hippolyte always had one inevitable phrase of sympathy, "poor little doggie!" To him, human beings were all "poor little doggies."

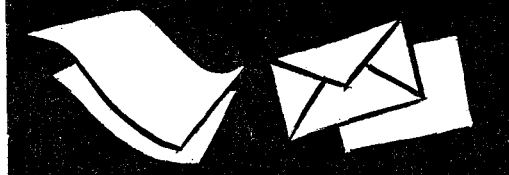
In Steinbeck's book everybody, both the conquered and the conquerors, are poor fish—or poor doggies—the conquerors all the more so because they have conceived themselves as something superior, only to learn in the lovelessness of their conqueror's role that they are only poor fish after all.

As long as Steinbeck sticks to this reduced, fish-eye view of human beings, he will produce, in his writing, poor fish instead of human beings.

The poor-fish conquerors in *The Moon Is Down* are shown as the victims of over-organization who, as soon as they are cold-shouldered in the conquered country, go to pieces. Nonsense. All the evidence points to the effectiveness of the Nazi conditioning by which all that is brutal in a man has been developed. The Nazis have been systematically calloused by their education. They do not go to pieces until they are shot to pieces. That is the lesson of their actions and the Steinbeck treatment is no help in learning it. Let us keep in mind that the Nazis have been trained to carry out known, formulated plans for the extermination of several of the peoples of Europe to which they are applying their scientific knowledge and their organizational apparatus and their soldiery. To keep them from carrying out that terrible plan calls for bloody action, for the gun not the cold shoulder.

The poor fish conquered are shown as going into opposition not by organization, but merely by get-

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ting steadily angrier and refusing to love the conquerors. They are made to seem so effective that the dynamiting they begin to do at the end seems scarcely more necessary than to serve as a symbol.

The town where all this occurs is a port and mining town. The invaders have come in, in order to control the output of its coal mines. In such a town there must have been some organization. But not in the book. There is no organization. There is no political party. There is no trade union. The local Quisling is of no class or party. The mayor is of no class or party. Everybody is on his own. But somehow, mysteriously, the conquered poor fish who are sullen begin to triumph over the conquering poor fish who want to be loved.

It is this view of the situation that constitutes the chief disappointment of *The Moon Is Down*. Even assuming that Steinbeck's way might be preferable, that unity could be achieved by osmosis and effective action by everybody's individual improvisation, there is nothing in history to give us any confidence that it will, or can happen that way. . . .

Poor little doggies may not be able to organize, but human beings can and have. It is because of the presence and immediate functioning of their *strong organizations* that the people of the Soviet Union were able to achieve something much better than the moony resistance of Steinbeck's poor, little unorganized doggies.

With this kept clear, we can express our limited satisfaction with Mr. Steinbeck's contribution. But we can, and should make it known that we expect something more.

ISIDOR SCHNEIDER.

TO NEW MASSES: Mr. Steinbeck's new novel, *The Moon Is Down*, reads too much like an apology for the fascist mentality. . . . I believe that the principal fallacy of *The Moon Is Down* lies in its fatalism and its naive philosophical idealism that flatly contradict the lessons that have been learned by the victims of fascist aggression.

. . . It is *because* Steinbeck portrays the Nazi conquerors as victims of inexorable, mechanical forces in life that make of them cynical, cruel, and really inhuman people in their savagery, but nonetheless human beings enjoying the commonplace things as other men do; *because* Steinbeck pictures the diabolically clever, ruthless, and barbaric Nazi system in terms of this *duality*, that *The Moon Is Down* leaves me with the feeling that Steinbeck has become ensnared in the web of his own humanist thinking. Thus, what purports to be an anti-fascist book is *in effect* an apologia.

I believe that we must not differentiate between the system of Nazism and its active and leading proponents. We must learn that once these Nazi leaders participate in the cruelties of military aggression, that whatever is decent and human in them must become transmogrified. I contend that it is impossible for these conquerors to retain their humanness and yet commit the barbarities that the whole world has come to experience. To the contrary, I believe that we must learn to *identify* the fascist character with the rape, plunder, and devas-

tation that is visited upon the peoples by Wehrmacht aggression. We must learn how the process of Nazification dehumanizes the individual to such an extent that he will fight until death for that which he believes in.

The final effect of such a book is to weaken the singleness of purpose that must animate the anti-fascist struggle. The fight against the invaders must be waged not with pity and human "understanding"—but with bitter, intense hatred.

JOEL SHAW.

TO NEW MASSES: I find myself in sharp disagreement with Pearl Buck and Samuel Sillen on Steinbeck's book; it seemed to me a hasty and imperfect piece of ersatz. . . . Its superficiality is no doubt the result of haste. For the book is an obvious "quickie"; its style, though direct and smooth enough, betrays a search for easy effects. The Nazis are presented in hurried thumbnail sketches. They do not reveal themselves through speech or action; instead, you are told about them in bright generalities—one loves the English, one loves dark women, one loves mathematics. . . . How inferior this characterization is to Steinbeck's best may be seen through the portrait of Corell, the one completely realized character in the book. . . .

Haste cannot explain the book's perverted characterization; only foggy thinking can be blamed for that. Steinbeck has, quite correctly, avoided the prevailing temptation of making his Nazis inhuman monsters. Unfortunately he has leaned over backward so far as to make them Rover Boys. A Nazi is a human being who has been warped by a frightful social system, a frightful ideology, a frightful example, and a frightful education. But the sweet and simple lads who talk about "girls" in sugary phrases in *The Moon Is Down* are not only no Nazis; they are no men. These German officers—it is significant that no privates appear, Steinbeck restricts himself wherever possible to "gentlemen"—these officers conduct a war in terms of embarrassed apology, never use a naughty word or tell a dirty joke, moan softly to themselves when compelled to shoot somebody. Like Hemingway's Robert Jordan, they are disintegrating intellectuals forced by their authors into positions they would never occupy in life. Nor has Steinbeck made the slightest effort to show how years of Nazism affect human psychology; his Germans might never have listened to a Hitler speech, they hate no one. To reduce this omission to its last absurdity: can anyone imagine a good Nazi youth to whom mysterious dark women represent a romantic ideal? Steinbeck has overlooked the "Aryan" myth, along with all the other horrors which make Nazis what they are. Yet one glance at the reports from any invaded country should have been enough to awaken him.

For some reason, Steinbeck has shown the enslaved people, his real heroes, much less sympathy than he has shown the Nazis. Although much is said in general terms about the people's fighting spirit, the actual anti-Nazi struggle is carried on mainly by a doctor and a mayor, two middle class intellectuals. When workers do appear they are usually presented with a sneer. . . .

That the book is neat and slick and competent in many ways cannot be denied; Steinbeck is an adroit craftsman. That it is a genuine contribution to anti-Nazi literature, or, indeed, anything more than a cynical attempt to cash in on the headlines, no one undazzled by Steinbeck's previous well earned prestige can believe for long. In its technical shoddiness and lack of human understanding, *The Moon Is Down* seems to me the work of a man who has mislaid his literary conscience.

JOY DAVIDMAN.



THUMBS UP ON "THE MOON IS DOWN"

[The three letters discussed here are on page 21.]

NOR since *Native Son* has a book aroused so much controversy. Wright's novel and Steinbeck's *The Moon Is Down* are of course altogether different books and provoke altogether different questions of detail. At bottom, however, there is a similar problem of evaluation. Does Steinbeck's book make a genuine contribution to the anti-fascist fight? Or does it, despite Steinbeck's obvious intention, furnish aid and comfort to the enemy? These were also the basic questions involved in the Wright controversy. Readers may differ on matters of degree. They may be conscious of specific limitations. But in the long run discussion boils down to a clearcut disagreement over whether the book merits a positive or negative response. This is the paramount issue, and our answer to it provides the context within which any reservations and qualifications are made.

While Isidor Schneider expresses his "limited satisfaction" with the book, he builds up a case which, if true, can give us room only for unlimited dissatisfaction with it. For if it is true that Steinbeck has a "fish-eye" view of human beings and produces "poor fish" and "poor doggies"; if it is true that Steinbeck asks us to give fascism the "cold shoulder" rather than active opposition—then Steinbeck has written a fascist and not an anti-fascist book, however limited. This view is stated quite explicitly by Joel Shaw, who believes that the book is "in effect an apologia" for fascism. Similarly Joy Davidman finds the book "cynical" and distinctly not a contribution to anti-Nazi literature. And this attitude I have heard expressed, with as much heat as sincerity, by several anti-fascist writers in the past few weeks.

On this central issue I agree emphatically with Miss Buck's judgment. I welcome *The Moon Is Down* as an effective contribution to our world-wide fight for freedom. To be sure, this is not by a long shot the greatest book of our time, nor is it the greatest of Steinbeck's books. Nobody in his right senses has made such a claim. But before we examine the book's limitations, let us be sure that we have properly judged its positive accomplishment.

1. The "poor fish" argument. Actually, the whole burden of the book is that, contrary to the Nazi view, people are not fish or animals or anything of the sort. "To break man's spirit permanently," says Mayor Orden of the invaded town, is "the one impossible job in the world." His people, he says elsewhere, don't like to have others think

for them. The commanding Nazi officer, Colonel Lanser, replies impatiently: "Always the people! the people are disarmed. The people have no say." But Orden shakes his head and tells the colonel that he just doesn't know what he is talking about. When the miner Alex Morden is about to be executed by the invaders, Orden tells him: "Alex, go, knowing that these men will have no rest at all until they are gone, or dead. You will make the people one. No rest at all." This is no fish-eye view of humanity. The story emphasizes, in the words of the mayor's friend, Dr. Winter, that the unconquered have as many heads as they have people; in time of need leaders pop up like mushrooms. And the dignity, strength, will of the people are reflected not only in words but in action—which leads us to:

2. The "cold shoulder" argument. The fact is that the technique of cold contempt and passive resistance is not of itself to be dismissed as a weapon. I quote not from Steinbeck's book but from an appeal issued by the Norwegian opposition: "Never look at Germans, never show them any friendliness if you must have dealings with them." This is an effective form of resistance. Indeed, the strategy of the Nazis for a period in Norway and elsewhere was to give the appearance of "friendly collaboration," and their failure to achieve this was a genuine defeat. In any case, the whole point of *The Moon Is Down* is that passive resistance is not enough. Remember that this is an isolated, small town on the coast. The wires, we are told, have been cut. The town's few soldiers are away with the main force. This is a land, we learn, that has had no war for 100 years. And yet, as the action develops, the invading officer Bentick is killed. The engineer Hunter is forced to build the same siding four times. Machinery breaks down. When the English planes come over, there is always a light near the coal mine to guide them; the Nazis shoot a man with a lantern and a girl with a flashlight. The dynamo is constantly short-circuited and the officers have to work by candlelight. Colonel Lanser is forced to call for reinforcements. Lieutenant Tonder is stabbed to death. And so on.

And this systematic sabotage is still not enough. Dr. Winter says: "We are disarmed; our spirits and bodies aren't enough." So Winter and Orden tell the Anders boys who are secretly sailing for England: tell them the invaders are using hunger on us now, "Tell them from us—from a small town—to give us weapons." They ask for grenades, poison, explosives. Let the British

bombers drop big bombs on the works, they say, but urge them also to send weapons for us. Then Tom Anders says that he has heard there are still men in England "who do not dare to put weapons in the hands of the common people." But Orden says we must continue to appeal; if we get help we will help ourselves; we will blow up the enemy's supplies. Finally the help does come, in the form of dynamite dropped by small parachutes. And in the final scene, as Orden is sentenced to death, we hear the sound of explosions rolling through the hills; we hear the splintering of wood, the shattering of glass. Orden can die knowing the truth of the Socratean words that "punishment far heavier than you have inflicted on me will surely await you." And all of that does not strike me as a cold-shoulder plea.

3. The apologia argument. Objection is raised to the picture of the invaders' disintegrating morale. Steinbeck shows, for example, the psychological breakdown of the Nazi Lieutenant Tonder, the mystical romantic who had longed to die on the battlefield with weeping parents and a sad Leader in the background. He had even composed his dying words. But the war so far, as we are told, had been against unarmed, planless enemies. Here it was different. The pressure of resistance was increasing. No soldier could relax. The invaders know that with the slightest misstep, the slightest crackup, "These people will not spare us. They will kill us all." The news from home says that everywhere the conqueror goes he is greeted by kisses and flowers. But then the thought occurs: Won't they be telling men elsewhere the same thing about us? What happened to Tonder once the doubt and terror entered? I quote from Curt Reiss' account of Norway in his forthcoming *Underground Europe*: "Many soldiers fell a prey to depression, and depression caused a succession of suicides. Officers shot themselves, and private soldiers hanged themselves." What happens to Tonder does not happen to all the invaders: Captain Loft shouts fiercely, "We can beat them off the face of the earth." The corporal and private, parroting their Leader, say the people are fools, "They can't plan the way we can"—at the very moment, ironically, when plans for their destruction are under way.

Orders from the Nazi capital are to shoot the leaders, shoot hostages, shoot more hostages. Lanser obeys, though he sees the hatred growing deeper. And Lanser, who has followed what he believes to be the "sensible" strategy, is superseded by the openly brutal Quisling, Corell. The bloody reprisals that have already led to the shooting of Alex Morden and the sentence on the mayor will now increase in savagery.

I for one do not get the impression of sympathy with Tonder and his fellows to the point where I want to forgive and forget