

Steinbeck's Magical World  
in  
"Saint Katy the Virgin"

「聖処女ケイティ」に於ける  
スタインベックの魔界の世界

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There is much truth in the fact that Steinbeck's magical world in "Saint Katy the Virgin" attracted some<sup>1</sup>, and was abhorred by the others. Focusing on the arguments of detractors among the first generation of Steinbeck critics on "Saint Katy," (1938) we find the target of criticisms of Lewis Gannet and Joseph Henry Jackson is that the story is "ribald," and "blasphemous" (136,143), and *Booklist's* anonymous reviewer says that it may "offend Roman Catholics" (143). Generally speaking, critics are all united in their belief that "Saint Katy" is a fable satire. However, our interpretation of this fable satire on one detestable level may miss the point that what Steinbeck really aimed at in the story.

Thomas M. Tammara, one of the second generation of Steinbeck critics, points out that Steinbeck's commitment to "Saint Katy" was strong enough to make its first debut possible to the literary scene as a Christmas gift book in 1936, two years earlier before *The Long Valley* was compiled (73). Steinbeck's particular emotional attachment was shown in his letter written to McIntosh-Otis on May 17, 1932. Peter Lisca notes Steinbeck stating that "As for St. Katy . . . she was a pleasant afternoon to me" (93). Here, we wonder what to make of his suggestive calling of her as he referred to; and that is a legitimate question. This is a part of Steinbeck's hidden truth of his secret heart to be discussed further at the end of this paper.

Followed by Tammara, Sanford E. Marovitz suggests the symbolic numbers, "13—" as 1931, in which the two initial digits are reversed and indicated as the probable year that the story was written (110). He also suggests the symbolic letter M—, as Monterey. His possible indication of the year, however, does not make a definite statement that Steinbeck was unlikely to set the

story in the 14th century straightforwardly.

This paper is intended as an investigation to solve the hidden puzzles of Steinbeck's magical world. His choosing the century might have something to do with the peculiar historical incidents happened in the very 14th century, hinted somewhere in the fable. I would like to explore what concern they are of the fable's as well.

According to the survey of Europe in the 14th century, the peasants' revolt occurred in 1358 in northern France as one of the three major upheavals from 1323 to 1381 in western Europe (Hay 35). What most irritated the peasants was a deep-rooted antagonism to authority of the lords of land and churches on the "survival of serfdom alongside liberty" (35). In short, they were tied into semi-slavery to state and church. Accordingly, peasants' anticlerical hostile operations led to the "dislike of paying tithes<sup>2</sup>" (37) of the crop to the church which eventually doubled the cost of their burden (Fossier 150).

Katy's story opens with the description of her master peasant, Roark as a bad man who "didn't pay his tithes and got himself talked about for excommunication" ("St. Katy" 135). Roark's stinginess can be taken for his mean personality, but when the new light is shed on story by the history of the hostile peasant society of the 14th century, we can see his rebellion in a different perspective.

Added to the peasant uprisings, the serious and prolonged famine of 1315-17 and widespread plague of Black Death of 1348-53 deteriorated the tone of economic life (Hay 31). The state of a monastery finance directly affected recruitment, and some monasteries were "unwilling to admit new members" and limited recruitment "by charging heavy entrance fees" (55-56). No wonder Abbot Benedict was furious saying that "there are plenty of Christians" in the monastery already, and he deliberately ignored Katy the pig, and condemned the two brothers who brought a Christian pig to M—, though a crowd of monks had welcomed Katy's arrival. In a sense, abbot's harsh words were not sarcastic at all, but a stark truth. Thus, a Christian pig killed the expectation of their coveted hams and bacons. The aftermath of natural calamities inevitably resulted in the abbot's lamenting comment on a "great shortage of pigs" this year (142).

One may notice that the name of Abbot Benedict of M— is derived from Saint Benedictus in the 6th century whose motto had been rigorously practiced in all of the monasteries since then. It is this: Pray and work first and all else will follow (Kinoshita 178). What is more, a new note of realism of suffering Jesus Christ comes to the front along with the motto of imitating Christ in the 13th century (Ikegami 68). This leads to make monk's body firm and rocky, just as we see Brother Paul is described as a "thin, strong man, with a thin strong face and sharp eye and

unconditional piety written all over him". On the other hand, Steinbeck is sarcastic illustrating Brother Colin's "wide round face" of his round body ("St. Katy" 137), being an awkward presence in M— when the persistence of famine is an oppressive danger to the monastery's kitchen.

We should not overlook the remark of Robert M. Benton on the fable of Katy the pig that it was written "in the beast-epic tradition" of the Middle Ages (79), because, in the strict sense, there are only foxes, wolves, and lions active in the fables of political satire laid in villages of western Europe in the medieval period (Kinoshita 216). To put it more concretely, there appear many epics in the medieval literature after the 12th century in which a man transforms into various beasts, such as a horse, a deer, a wolf, a swan, a hawk, a stork, a snake, a cat, a goat, a goose, a bear, and a fox, but never into a pig (Ikegami 138).

Then what triggers Steinbeck to choose a pig as a protagonist in a satirical fable? This is another puzzle of the story we have to solve.

In our modern times the sense of smell is regarded to be inferior to other important senses in our organs, yet in the Middle Ages there lie fragrant smells in heaven, while hell gives out bad smells. The holiness of the fragrant smells to expel the fatal diseases seems to have reached the height during the period of the prevailing Black Death in the middle of the 14th century. On the contrary, the bad smells of devils and witches were considered contagious to men and beasts and they were thought of the signs of heretic (238-41).

The stinking sow, Katy who was considered to be an incarnation of the devil by the medieval people, was just a normal pig who had had several litters. Most readers only understand the parody of Virgin Mary, as Katy becomes a good pig and then becomes a Christian, then a saint, as a perfect heroine. However, there is a dual satire; Steinbeck is also parodying readers' ignorance not to classify stinks with evil. Viewed in light of the juxtaposition of heretic Katy and Saint Katy, one counter image intensifies the other even more so in the medieval times.

Thus, it is especially noteworthy in the case of "two great tears" ("St. Katy" 141) out of the eyes of Katy showing her sincere repentance. It has been presumed that tears of penitence mean the clear sacramental, sign of repentance, and have an extremely significant meaning for Christianity since the late date of antiquity. All has its origin in the Bible. The Gospel of Luke records the name of Mary from Magdala who washes Jesus' feet with her tears (*Holy Bible* Luke 7:36-50). She is often identified as a fallen woman saved by Jesus (*Encyclopedia* 850).

Tears shed from Katy's devilish yellow eyes are derived from a holy fountain in her heart filled with the grace of God and they purify her in every respect. Hence, her tears remind us of

the holy water at the rite of baptism. Accordingly, as a matter of course, they lead her to a little font beside the chapel door of M— and to dip her right hoof in holy water and “cross herself” (“St. Katy” 142).

Along with the shedding tears Katy’s hostile yellow eyes turned to “golden with repentance . . .” (141), and “her dear golden eyes brought relief to the sufferers” (142) when she visited the thousands of sick beds later on.

From the beginning Katy actually had a “wicked face with evil yellow eyes,” (136) and when her master Roark found Katy unmanageable, “his eyes seemed to turn yellow” (138) in his contriving to offer Katy to the brothers as tithes to M—monastery.

Turning now to the hierarchy of the value of color spectra, we find that it was established in the 13th century as the social code, and the blue color was prized highly for the color of the Holy Mother, while red and yellow, once valued highly among the people were discriminated and debased for the colors of heretics, fools, and the signs of chaos of insanity in the Dark Ages. Regarding to the golden color, or so-called a good yellow, it drastically gained power between the end of the 13th century and the end of the Medieval Ages (Ikegami 217-18).

By giving detailed attention to the social code of the color in the 14th century, Steinbeck beautifully illustrates Katy’s inner changes from evilness to the utmost goodness in the most colorful way.

A miracle is, in its broadest definition, a personal, yet a social happening in life. A person who is to be called a saint sometimes redeems his sins suddenly, and leads a well regulated religious life (Gurevich 440), just as Katy left her “long record of good deeds” being made exemplary (“St. Katy” 142). Katy traveled the country curing the sick, and eventually became a saint, and a “virgin by intent” (144) just fifty years later after her death. Katy deserved to be called Saint Katy the Virgin, however, the most likely phenomena of Katy’s miracles were admitted by her holy relic.

According to the hagiography collection completed in the 13th century, it lay emphasis on saints’ holy relics galore: nothing displays a miracle phenomenon of a sainthood more fully than the body, that is, the flesh and bones of the deceased saint himself. Therefore, there was an array of recorded cases of dismemberment of saints’ holy relics in the collection. The saint’s body could be dismembered and divided into as many parts as possible, such as a head, a trunk, hands, feet, fingers, a nose, ears, and flesh and bones to provide as many chances of miracle healings as possible to people who touch the holy reliquary in as many chapels as possible (Ikegami 70).

Following the tradition of dismembered saints’ relics in medieval times, Steinbeck could

have given suggestions of the whereabouts of Katy's tail bone in a jeweled reliquary, but he possibly put an end to the matter just by depicting "the bones of the Saint" ("St.Katy" 144) after due consideration of the culture-clash experience of us moderns.

In conclusion, we are now in a position to say that Steinbeck's fable-like way of fixing the year of "13—" becomes the most important historical backbone supported the story. Hence, an old cliché of "Once upon a time . . ." at the beginning of his fable does not work here.

Having got this point firmly established, we must now turn the topic of Steinbeck's referring to a "pleasant afternoon" cited on the first page of this paper. I would like to get to the heart of the matter.

Jackson J. Benson revealed that Steinbeck's motivation to write the fable was defined by his interest in medieval people's life, learnt, and inspired by professor Hulme's witty and sardonic lectures in his Stanford University days (qtd. in Benson 253). Given Steinbeck's broad knowledge of Middle Ages, it is not surprising that he freely released his own emotional inhibition in good faith against the tide of inhibition on the subject of "Saint Katy." Professor Hulme's sentiment was clearly endorsed by Steinbeck. It is only natural that his description of a "pleasant afternoon" in the abstract should have faithfully reflected his gloating over his would-be detractors' cynical comments on Katy in a convoluted style. He tried to play his game to have his fun and he put a sardonic spin on his approach to his fable satire. The logical conclusion is that Steinbeck believed playing without his hidden tricks would take the competitive edge off the game; hence, there was a legitimate joy on his part. It would be better to say that part of the game is to show how much creativity he had and how he gave himself credit. Accordingly, it is precisely on such grounds that I would claim that the phrase delivers nothing but Steinbeck's clear meta message to the reader. Steinbeck knew that Katy was a pig in purity, which had been dead for fifty years, then canonized, but would be cannonaded six hundred years later.

After all, there is nothing more applicable and deserved expression than a "pleasant afternoon" which also shows his close emotional involvement in his dear pig, Katy, who has sentimental value for him, but for some, "Saint Katy the Virgin" might be too close for comfort.

## Notes

1. See some protectors' criticisms: Stanley Young points out the author's capacity to tell a fine, humorous, and mocking fable saying that "the imaginative doings of Katy the pig" is no match for the Elizabethan mirth suggested in *Tortilla Flat*, and "Voltaire would have loved Katy . . ." ("The Short Stories of John Steinbeck." *New York Times Book Review*. 88. 25 September 1938: 7). Thomas Moulton finds "Saint Katy the Virgin" a "sardonically humorous relief . . ." ("Short Stories." Manchester *Guardian*. 14 February 1939: 7). Rpt. in *John Steinbeck: The Contemporary Review*. Ed. Joseph R. McElrath Jr., Jesse S. Crisler, and Susan Shillinglaw. New York: Cambridge UP, 1996. 140-41, 147-48.
2. tithes: The ten percent of income that people owed to the church.

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【Abstract】

「聖処女ケイティ」に於ける  
スタインベックの魔界の世界

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スタインベックの14世紀の出来事として創作された「聖処女ケイティ」は1938年ヴァイキング社より出版された直後より誹謗者からは不敬でカトリック教徒に対する冒瀆であると言われてきた経緯がある。しかし拙論は子持ちの性悪な豚ケイティが後に改宗しキリスト教徒の聖人として人々に崇められる存在になるという、寓話的風刺文学を単なる嫌悪すべき作品というレベルで解釈すべきではないことを、14世紀の社会的な出来事を参照、検討することにより証明したものである。

同時にスタインベックがこの作品に対する執着心からこの作品自身を、“pleasant afternoon”であると手紙で述べていることに注目し、その理由が現在に至るまで古今東西のスタインベック研究学者により解明されてこなかった、その彼の心情の謎解きを試みたものである。中世の文化、風習、信仰に対するスタインベックの学識を基に、彼の風刺が元来学者達により考えられていたような単純なものではないことを示唆した。筆者としても長いスタインベック研究のうちで一番楽しい会心のいく研究課題結果となった。