

# Navigating Discontent: Postmodern Interpretations of Steinbeck's *The Winter of Our Discontent*

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<p>Received: 18 Apr 2024; Received in revised form: 21 May 2024; Accepted: 01 Jun 2024; Available online: 09 Jun 2024</p> <p>©2024 The Author(s). Published by International Journal of English Language, Education and Literature Studies (IJEEL). This is an open access article under the CC BY license (<a href="https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/">https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/</a>).</p> <p><b>Keywords –</b> <i>Discontent, Postmodernism, Interpretations, Deconstruction, Identity, Ambiguity</i></p>	<p><i>“Navigating Discontent: Postmodern Interpretations of Steinbeck's 'The Winter of Our Discontent'” presents a comprehensive examination of John Steinbeck's classic novel through the lens of postmodern theory. This paper delves into the multifaceted layers of discontent depicted in the novel and explores how postmodern perspectives shed new light on its themes, characters, and narrative structure. This study examines the fluidity of meaning and the disintegration of identity within the text, drawing on many postmodern frameworks, including deconstruction, poststructuralism, and metafiction. It investigates how Steinbeck's portrayal of disillusionment, moral decay, and economic struggles resonates with postmodern critiques of societal constructs and power dynamics. Furthermore, this paper examines the role of language, narrative techniques, and intertextuality in shaping the reader's experience of discontent in the novel. By engaging with postmodern concepts of simulation, hyperreality, and the absence of stable truths, it explores the ways in which Steinbeck challenges traditional modes of storytelling and invites readers to navigate through a complex landscape of uncertainty and ambiguity. Through this postmodern interpretation, “Navigating Discontent” seeks to illuminate the enduring relevance of Steinbeck's work in contemporary discourse and invites readers to reconsider the novel's themes in the context of postmodern thought.</i></p>

Postmodernism influenced a shift in Western culture. Unstable turning points bring about many changes. The intricacies of identity have always fascinated postmodern critics. At that instant, both subjectivity and identity crumble. Economic and technical progress has negatively impacted this shift,

undermining postmodern identity. The rise of capitalism and materialism brought forth by these shifts altered people's outlooks, vocabulary, and interpersonal dynamics. Robert G. Dunn observed, “The instability of identity in Western nations has its deepest roots in the shift and increased volatility of

cultural patterns related to massive economic and technological upheaval on a global scale" (108).

In the United States, the era of capitalism and consumerism defined the 1950s and 1960s. The United States of America became a materialistic culture after WWII. American supermarkets and shopping centres showcase the booming economy of the 1950s and 1960s. Following World War II, a consumerist civilization came to rule the world. This dehumanization reduces people to consumers, who face tremendous material pressures and risk losing their identity as a result. Steinbeck's *Winter* explores the theme of consumer society and the individual's struggle to conform to its expectations. In the early 1960s, in the New England village of New Baytown, Ethan Allen Hawley, a former aristocrat from Long Island, had a hard time adjusting to modern life. This is the story that *Winter* follows. He was a slavish follower of his family's strict customs. Being the heir to a rich family that controlled half of New Baytown allowed Ethan to live comfortably. Dangerous investments made during WWII caused Ethan's father to lose a lot of money. It was devastating to Ethan's family financially and socially. After the war, Ethan's family business needed someone to serve as a checkout clerk.

Ethan's stability has been broken, and he lives in a period of "fragmentation, disintegration, sadness, meaninglessness, an ambiguity or even absence of moral constraints and social unrest" (Rosenau 15). Postmodernist principles endanger his subjectivity and self-image, which in turn impedes his identity development. A new era begins with *Winter*. Capitalism has won in the once-whaling community of New Baytown. In the early chapters of the book, during *Winter* 9, Ethan observes the Bay Hotel "now being destroyed to make place for the new Woolworths" as he walks to work. These wrecking ball cranes and bulldozers are like "waiting for predators in the early dawn" (TWOD 9), according to Ethan. Steinbeck's first portrayal of capitalist society is pessimistic.

In this view, capitalism is a dangerous outsider who disturbs the peace and safety of the neighbourhood. This artwork threatens tragedy, like the apocalyptic line, "If the old does not adapt, then it will be destroyed" (Patton 180). Ethan likens the quick postwar societal transition to a "great ship" being

"turned and bunted, pushed around, and hauled about by innumerable small pulls." After being diverted by the tide and tugboats, the ship must proceed. The planning hub—the bridge—must say, "All right, I know where I want to go." Where are the hazardous rocks? What is the forecast? 1993–94 (*Winter*) The ship may represent postmodernism's shift towards a global perspective. The postmodernist, who has a firm grasp on his views, lacks confidence in today's uncertain and chaotic reality. Many postmodern crises undermine human subjectivity and stability. The book attributes identity difficulties to money and materialism. Mary, Ethan, and their two teenagers, Allen and Ellen, are dissatisfied with their family's poverty.

Consumption has become a top priority in modern society. In this post-war period, Ethan is unable to provide his family with such material amenities. Because he is unable to adjust, these new regulations threaten both his stability and his identity. Ethan confides in the novel's banker, Mr. Baker, in the prologue that his family's financial woes have left him feeling like a failure and deteriorating. Clothes are a necessity for my wife. Some shoes and some playtime are in order for my children. What if they are unable to learn? What if I become sick and cannot clean this goddamn pavement? What about rent, mortgage, utilities, food, dentistry, tonsillectomy, and everything else? I despise my job even more after the layoffs.

Season fourteen. Since everything is monetary here, postmodern Ethan is unhappy and insecure. Postmodern New Baytown believes that financial capital drives societal change. Ethan, his wife, and their daughter discuss money in *Winter*, and the father places a high importance on money. Mary assures Ethan she will read cards and "everything you touch will turn to gold" (18). If Mary's middle-aged fortune teller Margie Young-Hunt is correct, Ethan will amass more wealth and power than anybody else in town: "Her deck kept revealing dollar signs and more cash. You will be rich" (31). If he does not get rich, he is afraid Ethan's wife will think he failed. As a result of her family's prosperity and security, Mary is a socialite. Money dominates her thoughts: "I want to respect if I live here. I do not want the kids to feel terrible about not dressing well. I want to be positive" (34). Mary attributes her husband's downfall to his

incapacity to adapt to the capitalist system. "You might escape if you gave up your outdated, arrogant ideas. You are mocked. Beautiful men without money are bums" (34). Ellen, who looks a lot like him, is curious about when he will be wealthy. "Please do not keep me waiting. I want out of poverty." (57). All of the protagonist's interactions with the supporting cast must centre around financial matters. The story revolves around business and money; the phrase "money gets money" appears three times. (TWOD55, 271).

Ethan learned business fundamentals from Mr. Baker's advice and Joey Morphy, the local playboy and bank teller. Ethan receives a message from Mr. Baker stating, "Your only admission is money" and that his reputation, experience, and business ethics are useless. (144). In a capitalist world, money is essential for survival, and monetary prosperity often overrides morality. Postmodernism critics argue that capitalism hinders identity-building and disrupts self-concepts. Consumption dominates worldviews, replacing traditional social engagement with media and entertainment. Allen, Ethan's son, shows a fall in self-esteem by avoiding family interactions and pursuing his entertainment business. He expresses his desire for a car and TV, arguing that he will avoid feeling left out when others have access to these necessities.

Whether he realizes it or not, Allen's words puncture Ethan's skull, harm his sense of self and undermine his sense of identity as a parent. Postmodern history is for sale, as Steinbeck's *Winter* demonstrates. Early on in American history, Ethan and Allen argue. Allen longs for "pirate ships... pots of wealth and beauties in silk skirts and jewellery" (TWOD71). The son uses artefacts from the past to create gold and jewels. One other instance of the commercialization of national history is the national essay contest that Allen and Ellen host. The "I Love America" theme of the tournament promotes patriotism. The market has commercialized the competition.

Allen does not write the contest essay to show his patriotism; he writes it to win the watch, the vacation, and the TV appearance. It is more challenging to establish strong identities in this setting based on commonalities in beliefs and social circles. It is a testament to Allen's devotion as an American kid that his victory goes unnoticed. The monetary benefits

of the competition are the primary concern of Allen and others around him, including his father. "Newspapers and TV shows are interviewing him. Famous family member! Ethan, get a TV." (242). In a culture that is always evolving in response to production and consumption, Ethan, as a postmodern man, finds it difficult to establish his position. Mimi Gladstein thinks that *Winter* is not the greatest season. The novel portrays a family of three characterized by disintegration, alienation, and lack of communication. Ethan's disintegration is revealed through his inability to listen to his wife and estranged wife, Mary. As a result, Ethan seeks refuge in other communities, both real and virtual, to find new relationships and personal happiness. This leads him to create two interconnected villages, restoring his pre-war grandeur and ecological community. Revivalism's facets highlight the postmodern era's inability to meet individual and communal needs. According to this study, revivalism is defined as "a need for a personal past, particularly in the family... an interest in family trees and histories". (Dunn 155)

Ethan brings up his history at every turn. Because he is so lost and confused by postmodernism, he creates a small community that spans many eras. At this point, Ethan's statements show that he is still attempting to adhere to the norms that established his identity, and he is not sure of anything. Ethan wears his 'father's big silver Hamilton railway watch' to reject the present and resuscitate his lost past. (134). "Most people live 90% in the past, 7% in the present, and that only leaves 3% for the future," Ethan argues, dismissing the present (166).

He "engages with the history of his family and his community through habits of imaginative projection which force the past into a direct engagement with the living present". At the same time, he struggles to "find stable reference points in the present" (Kocela 75). Miss Elgar, a former acquaintance of Ethan's father, represents his resistance to living in the here and now. Every time Ethan goes to the market, Miss Elgar wants to know about his dad. In spite of her unstable presence, Ethan never tries to make her doubt his father's existence or anger her. He understands that she needs a stable, authentic past. Miss Elgar, who was once a little girl who met Ethan's father, adds, "Give him my welcomes. That is a wonderful child." (TWOD139).

Ethan's mistake is that he depends on former concepts to "run for a secure anchorage in the past"(116).

He finds it more challenging to transfer and integrate. Hard on Ethan's mind is a moral conundrum. Ethics, according to critics, are at the heart of postmodernism. "[t]he attacks conventional social structures gave birth to a person called on to build his (but seldom her) own identity independently of the assigned qualities inhering to one's station in tradition and nature," according to Dunn (53). For Ethan, the only way out of his capitalist materialist society was to forge his own identity. He seems content in his role while also criticizing the town's widespread corruption at the beginning of the story. He stands up to his contemporaries and the moral decline of that era. He resorts to stealing in a Machiavellian fashion when he is unable to provide for his family. Social desirability is an important postmodern psychological quality, and Ethan actively works to improve it. He combines immoral and exploitative practices to fit in with mainstream consumption and achieve financial success. The individual "deliberately modified their actions and identity to match a given environment" in order to "control the image which others have of them"(Hamouda 104).

In order to win over his loved ones and coworkers, he will need to make some changes. Ultimately, he comes to the same conclusion as Marullo: "Where money is involved, the customary rules of conduct take a vacation."(TWOD58). Ethan says, "If the norms of thought are the laws of things, then morality and sin are relative too, and that, too, in a relative universe," s. (57). Ethan understands that morality is meaningless in a chaotic, divided society. New standards for evaluation: "Success and power are inviolable moral principles. Therefore, the label and the execution matter more than the action."(187). Ethan accepts the money from Mr. Biggers, defrauds his friend Danny of his belongings, and plots a bank heist. Ethan adds to the deceit, "It was simply against money, not a crime against men." (215). In order to run the shop by himself, he also intends to transfer his boss to Sicily. According to Patton, Ethan "becomes more like a wolf than his former moral standards would have ever permitted him to think of."(185). The lowest point of Ethan's moral decline occurs when he learns that his kid plagiarised material for the essay

competition. In order to win the election, Allen stole from Abraham Lincoln, Daniel Webster, Henry Clay, and Thomas Jefferson. Allen's plagiarism refers to writer and thinker Charles Van Doren of the United States, who cheated on *Twenty-One* with the show's writers in the late 1950s. (Gladstein '49, Kocela '69, George'12, 7') Allen, like Doren, rose to notoriety via immorality. Allen, like his father, defends his misdeeds using Machiavellian thinking. He supports cheating since "[e] everybody does it" (Winter 276). This postmodern, fluid society considers ethics and identity formation to be "irreconcilable with a culture of surface and multiplicity playfully displayed and pushed for their own sake"(Dunn 65).

In Steinbeck's *Winter*, Ethan struggles to find a sense of connection and belonging amid a corrupt world. The novel explores the concept of ecological community, emphasizing the connection between a person and nature as a significant force. The research suggests that postmodernism and ecocriticism intersect in *Winter*, a novel that explores the environmental influence of literature and creative endeavours. The novel ends with a hopeful proposal to restore morals and ethics by relying on nature's strength and purity. From an ecological perspective, the environment and its inhabitants become friends, challenging the idea that nature is a passive non-human background. This dynamic autonomy allows man to become a tool that helps nature stay steady, ending the logocentric relationship between man and nature. The novel's natural surroundings shape Ethan's personality and provide him with the satisfaction he desires. The protagonist's journey through nature converges at his "Place," a historic harbour-like site that he frequents "the Place" when in need.

It is interesting rather than concerning that Ethan retreats to his "Place" in nature to make life-altering choices. Ethan spent much time there before entering the military, marrying, and having their first child. He understands how his surroundings affect him. His words are: "I needed the chair. I will adapt wherever you go " (44). Once again, it is as if he is embarrassed by his postmodern self since he does not return to his apartment before robbing the bank or asking his closest friend to sell his estate. As a kind of psychological protection, Ethan desperately clings to this haven. The "Place" gives Ethan a chance to start

again in a rural area, far from the overbearing crowds that would otherwise suffocate him. "The formation of an attitude of reverence for nature is vital to human psychological growth and self-realization," Steinbeck said. (Eckersley 162). Here, Ethan's American values and nature coexist together. "Reconstructing Old Harbour for [his] mind's pleasure" is something that Ethan looks forward to doing every time he visits (TWOD47). For his connection to work in this place, he needs everyone's help. As stated: "I pondered whether all men need a Place, desire one, or have none. I have seen a wild animal look in people's eyes — like they need to go someplace quiet and secluded to settle down and take stock of their life." (44)

In Steinbeck's "Winter," Ethan finds his true friends at a supermarket, where he establishes an ecological community to heal his postmodern identity psychologically. Ethan treats the store's goods like people, seeking acceptance and calm in nature. He avoids materialistic neighbours and pursues exemplary human behaviour, establishing a connection to Old Harbor. Ethan's talisman, a stone with an unknown form, symbolizes stability and helps him relate to the store's "green" staff. The stone's snake-like engraving may be interpreted as a symbol of the past, but it also represents American idealism against postmodern, materialist, and capitalist ideas. The talisman becomes a ritual for overcoming cosmic alienation and asserting the oneness of creation. The stone talisman symbolizes nature, which is fundamental to the narrative and links to history, nationalism, and the past. Winter ecocritical chronicles Ethan's journey to a new existence in time and space, defining re-inhabitation as learning to live in a place in an ecosystem disrupted and damaged from past exploitation.

As a consequence of his temporal "re-inhabitation" with the postmodern period, Ethan's moral compass moves from idealism to pessimism. He lives in the past because it is the only thing that will keep him alive, but then he wants to rule and embrace postmodern principles as he steps out of a time warp. At the story's end, he finds a middle ground between his social environment's postmodern ideals and his family's ethical traditions, which is the genuine re-inhabitation of time. Ethan has addressed the present and recovered from his moral breakdown in the social realm. His natural-textualized sea infuses every

element of his mentality. In a spatial re-inhabitation, "becoming native" is "becoming mindful of the specific ecological dynamics that operate within and around that region" (Berg and Dasmann 217).

Ethan Steinbeck's novel explores the concept of ecological continuity and the connection between humans and their environment. The protagonist abandons other sites and settles in a place that consumes him, leading him to return to dissolve with its natural components. The novel's green ideology is reflected in the protagonist's connection to his canned goods and the earth, which gathers all life, including humans. The title "Winter" links the death of nature to the term "discontent" and establishes a structural relationship between nature and the human mind. The novel's title suggests an evolving relationship between postmodernism and ecocriticism, offering a solution by connecting with nature. The sun rising in nature, symbolized in the "Place" as a hostess, symbolizes the return of morality after postmodernism's suppression. The novel's sale of Danny's green meadow to an airport highlights the importance of transportation in development.

We must sacrifice nature in order to progress. Here, we see the domination of modern civilization, which has expanded by devouring and endangering nature. When Ethan approaches Danny about buying his meadow based on Mr. Baker's knowledge of the airport, Danny refuses, drawing a difference between capitalists and environmentalists. In a time where "[a]nybody with money has kin" (259), the novella vividly portrays the contemporary man's sadness over the loss of community and family. Danny, who was very inebriated and flat-out, refused to sell his field. I am who I am. Dan Taylor "(49)". Even if Steinbeck tried, Danny's family would never learn to value the land. There is no structure or monetary value, just a patch of grass.

There are a number of postmodern readings of Winter's uncertain finale, but when seen through Steinbeck's ecological lens, it all makes more sense. By showing man's defeat at the hands of nature, Steinbeck's ambiguous denouement critiques anthropocentrism. When Ethan gives in to the materialistic attractions of society, he compromises his principles and commits blunders. With the words "I reached the river," he goes back to his spot to dedicate himself. Describe farewell. I really do not know. High

tide had buried the place in dark depths, which prevented me from visiting there (TWOD203). Even though he and his razors end up in the water, he manages to save himself by using his lucky charm. Ethan seems to be trying to find a way to make amends instead of ending his life. The scenario suggests that Ethan will face consequences for his moral betrayal of nature. The only way out of contemporary man's moral and ethical predicament is to go back to nature, as water represents rebirth and purity. Ethan's involvement with nature exemplifies yet another ecological mode of communication. "Everyone's pleasure is interconnected. Instead, then accepting our destiny as passive onlookers, this proves our ecological significance" (Eckersley 53).

### Conclusion

Tragically, Ethan tried to end his life in the wilderness. He has no intention of giving up on himself; rather, he hopes to find redemption from his moral decline by being one with nature. In summary, Last but not least, Steinbeck's *Winter* urges community while criticizing postmodernism's moral deterioration, fragmentation, and alienation. Ego disintegration, subjectivity loss, and identity crises are the results of capitalism's consumerist ethic, which Steinbeck despises. Ethan, like many other postmodern men, struggles with issues related to his masculinity on a daily basis as a result of the shifting social and economic landscape. Ethan had an identity dilemma as a child growing up in this materialistic age. He faces two alternatives: either he alters his public perception, or he gets ostracised. His cultural background becomes an integral part of who he is. Nature intervenes in solving the postmodern man's identity crisis. Nature may provide a guy with a sense of belonging and community that he cannot find in a postmodern capitalist society. Even if her anthropocentric perspective has changed, Steinbeck is still an environmentally conscious author. To convey the indescribable nature of man's place in this interconnected universe, Steinbeck makes use of exquisite patterns in *Winter*. Finally, by applying postmodern ecocritical principles to *Winter*, we can see Steinbeck's green philosophy at work. This philosophy advocates for a mutually beneficial connection between humans and the natural world via an interconnected moral, geographical, and historical sense of place. The moral of the narrative is

to live in harmony with nature while minimizing negative impacts on it. There is a reciprocal relationship between the postmodernist conceptual frameworks and ecocriticism's multidisciplinary approaches.

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