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JOHN STEINBECK'S HISPANIC CHARACTER NAMES

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Within the Californian and Mexican landscape depicted by John Steinbeck in many of his novels and short stories, there appear an array of Hispanic characters, both major and minor, who bear Spanish names. John Steinbeck's use of Hispanic proper names for many of his fictional characters demonstrates not only his affinity to Hispanic culture and his knowledge of the Spanish language, but his onomastic interests as well.

To determine to what extent Steinbeck's Hispanic onomastic interests influenced his selection of particular Hispanic proper names is the purpose of this study.

John Steinbeck spoke Spanish and, consequently, his knowledge and awareness of the meaning of a Spanish proper name clearly enabled him to relate the name to certain physical qualities manifested by the character.

In his first novel Cup of Gold<sup>1</sup> (published in 1929), the full name of the character La Santa Roja (called at other times by her English equivalent 'The Red Saint') is very long, as most Spanish names are, and explains her noble rank: "Doña Ysobel [sic] Espinoza, Valdez y los Gabilanes" (CG, p. 156). Ysobel is the equivalent of Elizabeth and the correct Spanish form is actually Isabel. Steinbeck's use of "Gabilanes" [sic] which as "gavilanes" means "hawks" in Spanish is quite deliberate; for in his description of La Santa Roja's face, he says that it "was sharp, almost hawk-like" (CG, p. 140).

The governor of Panama is Don Juan Perez de Guzman and his captain is Rodriguez. The title "don" indicates the character's higher station and noble rank. The fact that the captain does not have this title shows Steinbeck's knowledge of its proper usage. No other characters bear this title either in this novel or in any of Steinbeck's other works.<sup>2</sup>

Steinbeck describes Don Juan Perez de Guzman as "a quiet nobleman whose life was devoted to being a complete gentleman and nothing else. . . . He had been a soldier all his life--not a good campaigner, perhaps, but an extremely gallant officer. . . . The people loved their Governor" (CG, p. 115).

Steinbeck continues his onomastic depiction of the physical attributes of his characters in his second work, The Pastures of Heaven<sup>3</sup> (published in 1932). Tularecito, a strange creature found one night at the side of a road, had a strange face and peculiar body which caused him to be called "Little Frog" (PH, p. 36). His master preferred calling him Coyote, for "'there is in this boy's face that ancient wisdom one finds in the face of a Coyote'" (PH, p. 36).

Many of Steinbeck's Hispanic characters have first names only and occasionally, as in the case of Tularecito, it is indicative of uncertainty of origin.

The key paisano, Juanito, in John Steinbeck's third novel To A God Unknown<sup>4</sup> (1933), does not have a surname either and, indeed, his parentage is always in doubt. His wife, who can claim true Castilian blood, does have two names: Alice Garcia.

Occasionally Juanito will admit that he is "Indio" (TGU, p. 18) and not Castilian. At other times he points to his blue eyes and the whiteness of his arms as proof of his Spanish origin, yet he is very proud of his marriage to Alice and pleased that the Garcias "could prove at least one true Spanish ancestor" (TGU, p. 25).

In "The Great Mountains" episode of The Red Pony<sup>5</sup> (1945), Gitano, whose name means Gypsy in Spanish and

who has had a life that resembles a "wandering gypsy-like existence" (RP, p. 363), is currently on his way back to the home of his ancestors. He steals a horse named Easter, which is also old and ready to be put out to pasture, and together they take off across the great mountains to end their days in oblivion.

Many of Steinbeck's Mexican Indians have first names only, such as Pancho, Old Juan, Manuel, Juan Diego, Maria Lucia, Juan Bernardino, Trini, Paco, Maria, Esperanza and Ventura (the latter two meaning hope and good fortune in Spanish).

The characters in The Pearl,<sup>6</sup> which is a short novel published in 1947 dealing with the Mexican Indians from La Paz (Lower California), also bear first names only, such as Kino, Juana, Coyotito, Juan Tomás, and Apolonia. According to Peter Lisca, a noted Steinbeck scholar, "Kino is named after a late seventeenth-century Jesuit, Eusebius Kino, who was a missionary in the Gulf region and a great explorer, the first to prove that Lower California was a peninsula, not an island. The name of Kino's wife, Juana, means simply 'woman!'"<sup>7</sup>

Kino lives up to the name of his predecessor in that he explores the ocean bed in search of a pearl great enough to take him and his family out of the poverty in which they and their ancestors have been forced, by

circumstances, to reside for over four hundred years. He will do anything to protect his family and, indeed, he is even forced to kill. Juana is depicted as strong, courageous, understanding, deeply in love with her husband--all woman--independent and yet ultimately subservient to her husband's wishes. He is, after all,--according to her upbringing--the man of the house, although in many ways she is the stronger and even Kino knows that to be true.

Their little son's name is Coyotito and, indeed, he is described as a little coyote. An unfortunate child who first suffers a scorpion bite, he later loses his life when the trackers, hearing what appeared to be a "coyote pup cry like a baby" (Pearl, p. 133), shoot and kill him.

Although very few of the principal characters in Steinbeck's Tortilla Flat<sup>8</sup> (1935) have last names, e.g., Danny and Pilon (whose name means boot in Mexican), Pablo Sanchez and Jesus Maria Concoran differ. Jesus' name is very melodic and befits his characterization as a benevolent and humanitarian person--(note the name Jesús).

Pilon also means a favor or gratuity, equivalent to a small gift given free after a transaction has been made.<sup>9</sup> Steinbeck, himself aware of its significance, describes it in the Preface to Tortilla Flat as "something



thrown in when a trade is concluded--a boot" (TF, unpaginated). Pilon is, in fact, always making some kind of a bargain--either for wine or for the promotion of his own self-interests. Thus Steinbeck shows his keen awareness of the significance of a name and uses it to depict the traits and characteristics of such a personage.

Steinbeck will often use a double name rather than a single one if it better suits his purpose. In Sweet Thursday (1954), Joseph and Mary Rivas, a character of Mexican appearance, bears a double name of symbolic combination. His other name is The Patrón--the boss. His own nephew, however, has a most prosaic name, Cacahuete Rivas, signifying "peanut," and he is not a very dominating character--certainly not of the stature of his uncle Joseph and Mary Rivas. Joseph and Mary unwittingly formed a group of musicians composed of wet-backs, which earned the name "Las Espaldas Mojadas" [emphasis added], a literal translation.

Among the females in Tortilla Flat, Dolores Engracia Ramirez and Señora Teresina Cortez bear full names, while La vieja Angelica and Tia Ignacia do not. Steinbeck takes great pains to point out that hardly anyone remembered that Teresina's mother's name was Angelica (TF, p. 123). Angelica is not always angelic--especially in her thoughts regarding the Virgin birth. When the

rains come and ruin the bean crop upon which her daughter and the children depend, la vieja Angelica sacrilegiously remarks: "sometimes Teresina can't remember either" (TF, p. 128). On the other hand, Señora Teresina Cortez was not so pure either. "When she was sixteen, Mr. Alfred Cortez married her and gave her his name and the two foundations of her family, Alfredo and Ernie" (TF, p. 124). After that she became so prolific, she began to think that "no lover was necessary" (TF, p. 124).

Steinbeck's first paisanas were Rosa and Maria Lopez (PH, p. 87), whose father is referred to as Old Guiermo [sic] Lopez, although he is never seen. Guiermo is Spanish for William. In Cup of Gold, this name appears with a slight variation in spelling: Guiermo. Linguistic abuses such as these are due to variations in pronunciation or ignorance of the correct forms.<sup>10</sup>

Other characters bearing full names are Mama, Pepé [sic], Emilio and Rosy Torres;<sup>11</sup> Tonio Alvarez, Jose Alvarez, Manuel Gomez, Franklin Gomez, to name but a few. Numerous Spanish-named characters are mentioned but hardly ever seen, including Mrs. Soto, Mrs. Morales, Mrs. Gutierrez [sic], Miss Alma Alvarez, Rosa Martin, Angelina Vasquez, Susie Francisco, Hugo Machado, Charlie Guzman, and Joe Ortiz. Those characters who are portrayed in various anecdotes seem, particularly, to come alive,



allowing us to almost believe that we have actually met them. Witness Cornelia Ruiz and Emilio Murietta; the Viejo Ravanno, Petey Ravanno, Gracie and 'Tonia Montez;<sup>12</sup> and the bandit Vasquez.

Even some of the animals appearing in several works receive Spanish nomenclature. Lindo, Maria and Rosa's decrepit old nag, who had been with the girls for thirty years, is so like Rocinante, Don Quijote's horse, that he is almost human. He fears and loathes his various trips to Monterey and back, and must constantly be convinced by his mistress to continue the journey. She entreats him: "Have courage, my friend, the way is short now" (PH, p. 96). The name Lindo, which means "pretty," ironically contrasts the nag's current condition. The Pirate in Tortilla Flat named two of his dogs: "Enrique" and "Pajarito" (little bird), while a third is given the title "Señor Alec Thompson." The boy Jody, in The Red Pony (1945), named his newly acquired colt "Gabilan" (which, as previously mentioned, means "hawk") and refers to the Gabilan Mountains of Steinbeck's native region.

In his Travels with Charley in Search of America (1962),<sup>13</sup> Steinbeck proudly names the camper/truck in which he makes his cross-country journey "Rocinante." The fact that his friends felt it to be a somewhat quixotic journey gave rise to the name, which he had

"painted on the side of" his "truck in sixteenth-century Spanish script" (TC, p. 7). What makes it doubly interesting is that each time Steinbeck speaks of the vehicle, he refers to it exclusively as "Rocinante." By journey's end, "Rocinante" has acquired a personality equal to that of his dog and traveling companion, Charley.

As we have attempted to show, Steinbeck's continued interest in the Hispanic heritage of his native California and neighboring Mexico has manifested itself in the names he has given to the vast array of Hispanic characters that appear (physically or in name only) in his fictional world. Often the names are significant unto themselves in that their very meaning has been used to qualify certain characteristics or traits dominant in the characters themselves.

Sometimes Steinbeck's use of a single name or first name only, rather than both a first (personal name) and surname, depicts qualities of unrootedness or uncertainty of origin, e.g., Juanito in To A God Unknown, Tularecito in Pastures of Heaven and Gitano in The Red Pony.

The use of two names, i.e. first and last names, may show the characters' more decisive position in the story or may just have been so used because people in real life, as well as in fiction, generally have two or more names. Spanish naming can get quite complicated.

Whatever John Steinbeck's reasons were for using Spanish proper names for his Hispanic characters, one can see that he was most definitely aware of the meanings of the names he used. It seems clear, therefore, that his onomastic interests played a significant role in the (name) selection process.

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NOTES

<sup>1</sup> John Steinbeck, Cup of Gold (New York: Bantam Books, 1953). Hereafter incorporated into the text and abbreviated as CG.

<sup>2</sup> For a listing and description of John Steinbeck's characters, see: Tetsumaro Hayashi, ed. John Steinbeck: A Dictionary of his Fictional Characters (Metuchen, New Jersey: Scarecrow Press, 1976).

<sup>3</sup> John Steinbeck, The Pastures of Heaven (New York: Bantam Books, 1952). Hereafter incorporated into the text and abbreviated as PH.

<sup>4</sup> John Steinbeck, To A God Unknown (New York: Bantam Books, 1955). All subsequent references will be abbreviated TGU and incorporated into the text.

<sup>5</sup> John Steinbeck, The Red Pony in The Portable Steinbeck, ed. Pascal Covici. Enlarged edition (New York: Viking, 1954), pp. 359-375. Abbreviated hereafter as RP.

<sup>6</sup> John Steinbeck, The Pearl (New York: Bantam Books, 1947). Hereafter incorporated into the text as Pearl.

<sup>7</sup> Peter Lisca, "Steinbeck's Fable of The Pearl," in Steinbeck and His Critics: A Record of Twenty-Five Years, ed. Ernest W. Tedlock, Jr., and C.V. Wicker (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1957), p. 293.

<sup>8</sup> John Steinbeck, Tortilla Flat (New York: Signet Books, 1952). Hereafter incorporated into the text and abbreviated as TF.

<sup>9</sup> See Harold W. Bentley's Dictionary of Spanish Terms in English (New York: Columbia University Press, 1932), p. 180. A pilon is something thrown in for good measure.

<sup>10</sup> Leo Spitzer, "Perspectivismo lingüístico en El Quijote," Lingüística e Historia Literaria (Madrid, 1955), pp. 161-225. "Linguistic Perspectivism in the Don Quijote," in Linguistic and Literary History (1948; rpt. New York: Russell and Russell, 1962), pp. 41-83.

<sup>11</sup> See John Steinbeck's story "Flight" in The Long Valley (Cleveland: World Publishing Co., 1945).

<sup>12</sup> The majority of these characters are spoken about in Tortilla Flat. Steinbeck does not always place accent marks on his Spanish proper names.

<sup>13</sup> John Steinbeck, Travels with Charley in Search of America (New York: Viking, 1962). Hereafter incorporated into the text and abbreviated as TC.