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Additional Comments on "Steinbeck and de Maupassant: A Parallel Occurrence"

Ray Lewis White has noted that the short story "L'Idyll" by Guy de Maupassant contains a scene resembling the famous ending of *The Grapes of Wrath* in which Rose of Sharon offers the milk of her breasts to an unknown starving man.¹ Although the occurrence of this similar imagery is interesting, its significance in the interpretation of Steinbeck's intentions must remain unclear until it can be determined whether Steinbeck was familiar with de Maupassant's story. White, apparently, has no information on the matter, as he concludes his essay with the observation, "I do not suggest that Steinbeck was familiar with de Maupassant's story, but I do point out how these quite dissimilar writers use the same circumstance" (White, pp. 28-29).

Luckily, however, an exchange of letters [quoted in *Steinbeck: A Life in Letters*, eds. Elaine Steinbeck and Robert Wallsten (New York: Viking Press, 1975)] between Pascal Covici and Steinbeck provides the answer. On January 9, 1939, Covici wrote to Steinbeck, "Marshall [Best, Managing Editor of The Viking Press] has just called my attention to the fact that de Maupassant in one of his short stories 'Mid Summer Idyll' has a woman give her breast to a starving man in a railway train. Is it important?" (*SLL*, p. 177). Steinbeck replied on January 16th, "As for the Maupassant story, I've never read it but I can't see that it makes much difference. There are no new stories and I wouldn't like them if there were. The incident of the earth mother feeding by the breast is older than literature" (*SLL*, p. 178).

Since Steinbeck has disavowed, in response to a direct query, any prior knowledge of de Maupassant's story, it appears that the only significance of this parallel occurrence is, as White has pointed out, the use of similar imagery by dissimilar authors.

¹Ray Lewis White, "Steinbeck and de Maupassant: A Parallel Occurrence," *Steinbeck Quarterly*, 12 (Winter-Spring 1979), 27-29.