

Meredith Lannan

Roadside America

Professor Bednar

19 October 2021

Rediscovering America

Many Americans would be confident in answering that they proudly could describe the diverse cultures and landscapes seen throughout their beloved country, when in reality, they would be proudly telling of the stories and stereotypes they simply believe in. This is because they don't know the depths and truths of the place they call their own. This is a concept that author John Steinbeck recognized and sought to improve on when he embarked on a journey across America. In Steinbeck's novel, *Travels With Charley In Search of America*, he explores the people, landscapes and cultures of the country while experiencing self-discovery and the changes made over time and distance.

The first aspect of this journey is found before it even begins, as Steinbeck introduces his motive for planning his trip in the first place. He describes his many years of traveling and living in different places across the country, but transitions to discuss how he had "not felt the country for twenty-five years", thus introducing his issue of feeling as though he did not truly know it. Another contribution to Steinbeck's urge to hit the road is a more subtle reason that he only implies throughout the novel, but is confirmed in Barbara B. Reitt's article in *Southwest Review*. Reitt introduces different perspectives on John Steinbeck's life as she discusses his thoughts and feelings found in personal letters he wrote during the times of his travels. It was known that

Steinbeck had declining health and, of course, was getting older, therefore he saw his trip as “a frantic last attempt to save [his] life and the integrity of [his] creative pulse” as a form of self rediscovery (Reitt 6). As seen in any good road story, Steinbeck is just one of many travelers who is running from or even towards something, whether that something be tangible or conceptual.

As Steinbeck proceeds with his journey, he does indeed make many discoveries, one of which being how much of the country has changed and evolved since he last saw it up close. Steinbeck is initially left in awe at the great amounts of waste Americans are now producing compared to when he last traveled, as he describes how “American cities are like badger holes, ringed with trash, . . . surrounded by piles of wrecked and rusting automobiles, and almost smothered with rubbish” from industrial uses (Steinbeck 782). Another one of the changes Steinbeck stumbled across was not only a change in American lifestyles but also a change in mobility. At one of the rest points in which he stopped at, he discovered the upcoming popularity of the mobile home, deeming it a “revolution” in present times (Steinbeck 831). Steinbeck discusses the many advantages of living in a mobile home, including the ability to move at any point and to escape town taxes. He also emphasizes how the occupants of these homes “were not only willing but glad and proud to show their homes”, which gave insight to how they felt towards their new way of living (Steinbeck 831). Steinbeck was also met with change when entering into the states off the West Coast, as he saw a major population increase accompanied by a surge in urbanization. He describes how “along what had been country lanes rich with berries”, there were now “high wire fences and mile-long factories”, as well as highways paved for transportation (Steinbeck 887). It is perceived in this section of the novel that Steinbeck feels rather strongly about this topic, as he claims that, in some sense, “progress looks so much like

destruction” when it comes to the urban sprawl of America (Steinbeck 887). This supports the ideas represented in the critical reception from San José State University, as it is expressed that Steinbeck seemed, in fact, quite disappointed in some of his findings along his travels, as he bravely addresses “America destroying itself from within” in result from the changes made over time (SJSU). While he does feel disappointment at these findings, he also understands that “it is the nature of humans to protest against change”, and so he digresses to accept the fact that the country is advancing (Christen). He knew when embarking in this journey that he had set out to find the true, raw America, which includes the rougher parts as well. This being said,

Not all of this change is bad however, as it leads to an important turning point of the novel when Steinbeck begins to make realizations about himself and what exactly he set out to find. Changes found among the landscapes across regions showcase how there is actually some stability with the relationship between the land and the people living on it. For example, Steinbeck describes his travels through Montana, claiming that “the frantic bustle of America was not in Montana”, for “the calm of the mountains and the rolling grasslands had got into the inhabitants” in order to create a relaxed, subtle people (Steinbeck 872). This expresses how connected Americans can be with their land and their surroundings. Another interesting example of change throughout the region appears in the road signs across states, where Steinbeck discusses how “each individual state had its own prose style” when it comes to the words on these signs (Steinbeck 819). He identifies that New England road signs are “wasting no words and few letters”, New York ones “[shout] at you the whole time”, and in Ohio, the signs “offer friendly advice and are more like suggestions” rather than commands (Steinbeck 819). This is a very interesting concept, as it shows that the culture and language of even individual states can find its way into the ways of the road through signs.

The final aspect of Steinbeck's findings in trekking across America is seen within the culture of the people and the relationship between people. Although this has some positive sides to it, unfortunately there is racism and segregation as negatives as well. Steinbeck makes his way through the southern portion of the country and is deeply concerned with what he finds, which is a people who value segregation from the Black community. He depicts an unflattering scene in which there is outrage over a desegregated school in New Orleans, with "inconspicuous women screaming racial slurs at the black children attempting to enter the school", which is enough to leave Steinbeck feeling uneasy for a while (*The Book Habit*). Steinbeck chooses to include this aspect of American life into his novel in order to inform the readers of such happenings. Whereas there are plenty of "thoughtful, gentle people" in these same areas in which he could have included, "we don't see them" because it's not the message Steinbeck wants to portray (*Olasky 10*). After experiencing this event, Steinbeck decides to talk to some local people, but when talking to an older black man, he quickly notices how uncomfortable the man has become, simply because a white man is probing his opinions on the matter at hand. Steinbeck's second encounter was not so successful either, as the man happened to have very different views and opinions to those of Steinbeck's, therefore the conversation resulted in the men dispersing angrily.

Though Steinbeck does not find every grand thing he was looking to find within the vast country, he was able to gain a better understanding of himself. Steinbeck was "trying to recapture his youth" in his journey, and in searching for America, he found truths about himself that he was able to accept, one of which being he has always been lost in his own way without wanting to be found. Steinbeck touches base on multiple aspects of the American visual as a whole, from language and speech, to relationships, to landscapes and lifestyles. In doing so, he puts into

perspective all of the different characteristics that many people never think about when discussing this diverse country.

Work Cited

Olasky, Marvin. “‘All Come to Look for America’: Four Classics from

Authors Who Tried to Find Meaning in Their Traveling.” *World*

(0888157X), vol. 35, no. 12, June 2020, pp. 1–18. EBSCOhost,

<https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=143836601&site=ehost-live&scope=site&custid=s9010241>.

Martha Heasley Cox Center for Steinbeck Studies (Ed.). (n.d.). *Steinbeck in the schools*. Travels

With Charley - Critical Reception | Steinbeck in the Schools | San Jose State University.

Retrieved October 19, 2021, from

<https://sits.sjsu.edu/curriculum-resources/travels-with-charley/critical-reception/index.html>.

REITT, BARBARA B. “‘I Never Returned as I Went In’: Steinbeck’s Travels with Charley.”

Southwest Review, vol. 66, no. 2, Southern Methodist University, 1981, pp. 186–202,

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/43469343>.

Christen, L. (n.d.). *Lessons from Literature: Travels with Charley*. - Teaching John

Steinbeck's Travels with Charley. Retrieved October 19, 2021, from

<https://georgetownvoice.com/2016/09/29/lessons-from-literature-travels-with-charley/>.

The Book Habit . (n.d.). Travels with Charley In Search of America [web log]. Retrieved

October 19, 2021, from

<https://thebookhabit.co.uk/2019/07/20/review-travels-with-charley-in-search-of-america-by-john-steinbeck/>.

Steinbeck, J., & Vrana., P. by E. (2021, September 9). *Travels with charley in search of america - john steinbeck*. The Examined Life. Retrieved October 19, 2021, from <https://www.theexaminedlife.org/library/1172/>.

McGrath, Charles New York Times

<https://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/04/books/steinbecks-travels-with-charley-gets-a-fact-checking.html?smid=url-share>

