Travels with Charley: In Search of America Study Guide

Travels with Charley: In Search of America by John Steinbeck

Contents

Plot Summary

John Steinbeck (Feb. 27, 1902 - December 20, 1968) embarks on a journey to discover America in the fall of 1960. He drives a brand new three-quarter ton pickup camper truck and travels with his dog Charley. His purpose is to learn something about the vast United States and write a book about his experiences.

His route takes him through Vermont, where he discusses politics with a farmer, and up to the northernmost part of Maine. There he meets a clan of Canadian migrant workers who help with the potato harvest. He shares a bottle of fine cognac with the workers who appreciate the gift very much due to their French ancestry. After a disturbing encounter with an empty restaurant, Steinbeck attempts to cross the border into Canada. The Canadians warn him about the US requirement for a certificate that Charley has had his rabies vaccination, so Steinbeck turns back only to be detained by the US Customs officer. The officer finally lets the author back into the US even though Steinbeck had never actually crossed over into Canada.

Wisconsin dairy farms and the Wisconsin Dells impress Steinbeck. He tries to see the Twin Cities but becomes lost in the heavy traffic. At the Maple River in North Dakota, the author meets an interesting traveling Shakespearean performer. Steinbeck spends a night in the Bad Lands of South Dakota, where he discovers that the area is much more friendly and beautiful at night than in the daytime. He also discovers that Montana is his favorite state except that it has no seacoast. The development of Seattle gives the author a feeling that the nature of building up a place seems like destruction too. He visits the giant sequoia trees along the coast, sensing that they have a kind of consciousness and communication that humans cannot understand and therefore fear.

In California where Steinbeck had grown up, he learns that a person cannot go home. Home changes, people die and nothing can ever be the same. He leaves California as quickly as he can and spends Thanksgiving in Texas with his wife on a friend's ranch. Steinbeck thinks that Texans make up a unique kind of American. He then goes to New Orleans and witnesses a nasty demonstration against school desegregation. The impact of this affects him very deeply, but he cannot take sides in the civil rights struggle. He has no understanding of it.

The journey ends for the writer while in the South. He moves through the remaining states back to his home without seeing or sensing much of anything. He then becomes lost in New York City, but a kindly police officer guides the author back to his home on Long Island. What Steinbeck discovers is that every journey is unique to time, place, person and mood.

Part 1: Chapter 1

Part 1: Chapter 1 Summary and Analysis

John Steinbeck writes about the nature of the journey he is about to take, which is much the same as all journeys that anyone takes or has taken. He has felt an urge to be somewhere else all his life, as a very young boy through adulthood, middle age and even now at fifty-eight years of age. Those older than him have always advised him that he would grow out of the wanderlust over time. Steinbeck has decided that rather than waiting for old age to make travel impossible—and in that way grow out of it—he would give in to the urge to roam.

Referring to this state of journeying as bumdom, he ticks off the prerequisites. A traveler needs a reason for traveling, and for bums this reason can be anything whatsoever. Then the traveler needs to plan the trip in time and space, which is required since one lives in time and space. Finally the traveler must decide upon directions and destinations. The author lists these obvious things just in case the reader might think she or he invented them. They are timeless characteristics of bums on the move from the ancients to the moderns.

Every journey has its own personality, Steinbeck observes. The same person going over the same route twice experiences two distinctly different journeys. He suggests not trying to control this fact of life because it is a mistake, one just as big as trying to control a marriage, so he reasons. He also warns that although it feels good to write this out, he understands that only those who know about the nature of journeys will understand.

Readers familiar with other Steinbeck works will recognize his tight prose style that is neither journalistic in nature nor completely poetic. The author wastes no words and depends heavily on creating scenes with impressions, tongue-in-cheek commentary, metaphors and similes that turn out much greater than the sum of their parts. He has no problem with coining words such as bumdom and mixing imagery in unique but appropriate ways. For example:

"We find after years of struggle that we do not take a trip; a trip takes us. Tour masters, schedulers, reservations, brass-bound and inevitable, dash themselves to wreckage on the personality of the trip" (p. 4).

The imagery shifts from people to things and to something like a ship on the ocean being wrecked upon rocks or a reef. Personality shifts from the usual abstract meaning to something solid enough to sink a ship, or to smash something else bound in brass, perhaps a carriage or antique horseless carriage. The particular reader's mind will fill in the appropriate images that are merely suggested, not named, by the author. This technique in turn makes the story more personal to each reader.

In the next sentence the author refers to a traveler as a blown-in-the-glass bum, which is an intriguing reference on how hand-blown glass sculptures are completely unique even when following a set pattern. Another implication is that the traveler is as fragile as glass.

Overall a Steinbeck novel, and in this case a travel memoir, needs to be read carefully and more than once to fully grasp what the author has done. The prose may not be as demanding as good poetry, but as good prose goes, this author requires more from the reader than most. Yet his style is very approachable. The book can also be read in a lighter way for pure enjoyment.

Part 1: Chapter 2

Part 1: Chapter 2 Summary and Analysis

Steinbeck describes himself as an American writer known for writing about Americans, but he does not know the country. He lives in New York City and often flies to Chicago and San Francisco, but none of this is the great expanse of what is the whole United States of America. Twenty-five years earlier he had traveled the country in an old bakery truck with a mattress on the floor, but many changes have since come over the country. His purpose in taking this trip is to revisit the country he once knew better in order to reacquaint himself with its people and countryside.

Over the years the name John Steinbeck had become a commonly known identity, a famous and popular contemporary writer. His friends express to him a concern that he will never be able to travel incognito, but as he reports, this never becomes a problem while on the road. People expect authors to be on television, in bookstores, New York City restaurants, bars and coffeehouses. They don't expect to see famous authors traveling around in a camper truck with a big poodle named Charley. Context, according to Steinbeck, is the greater part of recognition. Another consideration is whether to take a traveling companion, but the author understands that another person changes the whole experience from one of observation to interactivity. Thus only the dog Charley, a standard poodle trained in France and that responds more quickly to commands in French than the corresponding English words, comes along as companionship. Charley is a gentle dog with a huge bark that Steinbeck terms a roar.

Friends also warn about the dangers of the open road. From his other experience with this, Steinbeck knows that the dangers are grossly overstated. Sometimes bad things happen to good people while on the road, but usually not. More often people are more than eager to help out, especially when the traveler claims to be lost. The author refers to the many locals willing to give wrong directions in this case. Loneliness and feelings of desolation are the worst dangers of traveling alone, and thus the company of Charley.

Having the resources to do so this time around, Steinbeck orders up a custom-built brand new camper truck. The camper is the most customized, the truck being a standard-issue three-quarter ton model with a few upgrades to support the camper and to handle rough roads. He names the truck Rocinante, the name of Don Quixote's horse in the 16th century novel by Miguel de Cervantes. Steinbeck has the name of the truck stenciled on the side in 16th century Spanish script, which his friends warn will attract attention and possibly identify the driver. However, nobody ever asks about the name of the truck through the entire trip. Another possible giveaway is the New York license plate, but the only comments about this refer to someone visiting New York and never wanting to go back.

Part 1: Chapter 3

Part 1: Chapter 3 Summary and Analysis

Steinbeck prepares for his journey with Rocinante parked beneath big oak trees at his house on the tip of Long Island. He reflects on the strong desire in nearly everyone to do what he is about to do, just pick up and take off to somewhere else. A boy of thirteen years comes by often to watch as the author packs the truck full of more things than he will every need, anticipating every sort of emergency situation, truck breakdown and tires stuck in mud or rocks. The boy never says a word until toward the end of the packing. He then begs Steinbeck to take him along, promising to do anything the author needs. Steinbeck gently says no, that the boy's parents and the authorities would not like the idea. The boy leaves crestfallen.

The packing process takes on a bit of a writer's obsessive-compulsive disorder. He packs a hundred and fifty pounds of books that he has never gotten around to reading, none of which are destined to be cracked while on his journey. A typewriter and enough paper, carbons and notepads to write ten novels go into the truck. He carries food rations to keep writing for a full week if stranded in the approaching winter snows. But as it turns out and as he now knows, Steinbeck never writes from notes taken while experiencing something as all-encompassing as traveling alone but for a dog named Charley. The dog takes to sneaking into the camper truck while all this loading goes on and finding inconspicuous places to lay down and watch.

Steinbeck has decided to begin his journey the day after Labor Day, when all the families will be back to doing their regular work routines, the children back in school and the roads uncluttered with tourists. However, Hurricane Donna approaches from the south, and it is sure to hit the tip of Long Island. Steinbeck worries about a tree falling on top of Rocinante, so he moves the camper truck away from the big oaks. He then worries about Donna ripping out a tree and sending it fifty feet through the high winds and destroying the truck. His next worry concerns his twenty-two foot cabin cruiser, the Fayre Eleyne, named after his wife and tied to his high pier.

After making storm preparations to the house, Steinbeck takes the Fayre Eleyne out into the somewhat protected bay and rigs her with two special anchors and chains, designed to hold the boat in winds up to one hundred and fifty miles per hour. Just before the storm hits, two other boats tied bow-to-stern enter the bay and lower a single anchor. Steinbeck protests to the people on the boats that their amateurish preparation for the storm endangers his boat, but they do not listen.

Donna strikes with great force, washing waves into the second story windows of houses down by the bay. Steinbeck and his wife do better in their house built thirty feet above sea level, yet a large tree branch glances against an outer wall and the wind forces in a window. The author struggles to push the window back into its framing and reinforces it. He then sees that the two boats of concern have indeed broken away from their single

anchor and have folded against his boat, forcing it against a pier. Steinbeck throws on storm clothing and heads out to free his boat from the others, while his wife shouts after him to stop.

Steinbeck scrambles onto his boat and cuts the line holding the other two boats together. The wind blows them onto a mud bank. He starts the engine of Fayre Eleyne and with one hand hoists the anchors up. The eye of the storm has passed and now the wind whips back up from the opposite direction. Without a moment to waste, Steinbeck shoots out a hundred yards into the bay and reestablishes his double-anchor storm rigging. He then jumps into the water. The high winds quickly blow him ashore.

Unhurt but for his strained arm from yanking the anchors up with one hand, a feat he is unable to do under normal circumstances, the author calms down with a big glass of whiskey. Hurricane Donna passes without causing any further damage or incident. Both the Fayre Eleyne and Rocinante come out of the ordeal with nothing more than light scratches.

Part 2: Chapter 1

Part 2: Chapter 1 Summary and Analysis

As the day for departing approaches to begin his three-month trip across the United States, Steinbeck goes through a period of doubt. He thinks something will probably happen to delay or cancel the trip. He also wonders why he would want to leave his comfortable home and loving wife for the desolation he expects to feel while on the road. An unspoken but understood motivation is that the author is growing older. He may not have another shot at this kind of adventure again.

After an illness the year before, the doctors warn him to slow down, watch his diet, stop drinking so much—all of which Steinbeck ignores as the canned advice from the medical community, a routine given to all aging men. He suspects this is meant to turn men into dependents in order to stretch a lifetime a few more years, and he rejects the notion out of hand. He wants quality in his life, not quantity of years.

The morning for starting his trip finally arrives. Steinbeck's wife drives her car away toward New York City. He takes three ferries to the Connecticut coast in order to avoid the New York City traffic. Along the way he meets a young sailor, a submariner. They see a nuclear submarine, which gives Steinbeck a bad feeling. He knows the submarine carries nuclear weapons as part of the Cold War's mutual annihilation strategy. The young sailor sees his service to the country as promising a good future for him, which makes the author feel better about the whole idea of nuclear submarines.

Steinbeck drives Rocinante northeastward through the small towns along his way toward Maine. Charley lets his master know that he wants something by making a "Ftt" sound through his teeth, which either means to stop and let Charley out or to feed him. Realizing that he neglected to pack liquor and beer, Steinbeck stops at a country package store and stocks up. The store operator expresses a desire to take a trip like the author is doing, even though the store operator is satisfied with his life the way it is.

As he travels onward through the villages and small towns, Steinberg notices that each is surrounded by garbage dumps and junk yards. He wonders what will come of all this trash as it builds up. Everything comes in packaging and boxes, and although in Europe the people would find uses for all the junk, that is not how Americans behave in 1960. He stops at roadside markets and buys apples and aged hard apple cider, observing that every store seems to carry moccasins and deerskin gloves.

He drops by a farmhouse with a sign that announces the sale of fresh eggs and buys some. The farmer gives Steinbeck permission to park his camper truck by a creek and comes by that evening to visit. They drink the hard cider with coffee and talk about politics. The farmer comments that people are afraid to express strong opinions on anything, possibly due to the threat of nuclear war hanging over everyone's head. Nikita Khrushchev, Chairman of the Council of Ministers for the now defunct USSR, had just

slammed his shoe on a table to get attention in the United Nations. The farmer thinks that the US should take action rather than constantly defending itself. He is not sure just what this action should be.

The farmer leaves Steinbeck to his supper of canned corned beef. The author tries to read but thoughts about how quickly humans have moved from the discovery of fire to the blast furnaces of Detroit keep him awake. Things change too quickly for humans to keep up, so it seems. He finally falls asleep with the feeling that his journey has finally begun. Up until then, he had still been attached to his old ways of life.

Steinbeck reflects on how the best way to hear the voices of a region is to listen to them in bars, churches and roadside restaurants. The trouble with the New England voices is that they are very clipped. People do not engage in lengthy conversations, if at all. Single words or short phrases are exchanged, leaving Steinbeck with a vague feeling that communication has occurred, but he is never sure. He thinks about the changing weather and how he prefers the changes rather than a steady-state climate.

Stopping at a rest area near a stream, he drinks strong coffee and reads "The Spectator" by Joseph Addison, edited by Henry Morley. An gaudily dressed and aging woman drives a luxury car into the rest area. She lets her Pomeranian dog out. Charley detects that the Pomeranian is female and starts sniffing around, much to the distress of the woman. She slaps Charley across the nose, and a scene ensues that results in a nip at her hand from Charley and a solid bite to Steinbeck's hand from the Pomeranian. The incident ruins the mood for the day. A gray rain begins to fall. The author drives on, expressing annoyance with the speed limit changes upon crossing state lines although on the same road going through similar terrain.

Part 2: Chapter 2

Part 2: Chapter 2 Summary and Analysis

Steinbeck sees many antique shops along his route north and east. He wonders where all the antiques come from, speculating that most of it is junk. He likes junk and is an avid collector himself of worthless items that may someday prove to be just what he needs to fix something. Idly pondering this, he wonders what would happen if people of the present day kept all their junk for generations until a period toaster would be worth significant money.

He takes a room in a motel outside Bangor. Everything except the bedding and curtains is made of plastic. He goes to the attached diner, and everything in there is made of plastic too, including the waitress' apron. She strikes him as a sad soul capable of sucking all the joy from life within her range. Depressed and discouraged, he takes a bath that gives no comfort, takes Charley for a walk, sees the Aurora Borealis out in the starry night and ends up sleeping in his camper.

The next morning Steinbeck heads for Deer Isle, a kind of resort that an associate of his recommends and makes reservations for him, whether he likes it or not. To keep the peace in New York City, he stumbles his way toward the destination, most of the time not having the vaguest idea where he might be. Upon asking a highway patrolman for directions, Steinbeck discovers that he is right across from the island. All he needs to do is cross two bridges, and according to his written directions, take every right-hand turn from there. The directions prove accurate in this case, and he meets Miss Eleanor Brace, the owner of Deer Isle.

Miss Brace owns a cat named George. George does not like anyone and emanates pure evil all around. The whole area reminds Steinbeck of a coastal region in England, and the people seem to have the same kind of accent in their speech. He wonders if the whole of Deer Isle disappears into mists once he departs, like the island of Avalon in the King Arthur legends. Not feeling comfortable in the house, the author once again spends the night in his camper.

After completing the coast of Maine, Steinbeck heads inland where the deer hunting season is well underway. He ties red tissue paper around Charley's tail to protect him from the amateur hunters who shoot at anything that moves, including cows and people. Steinbeck is not particularly against hunting, but he does not care for the taste of wild game and he wished that the hunters would be more careful. He does not want to end up losing his head while trying to blow his nose with a white handkerchief. Remembering a Chinese cook, Steinbeck tells of how the cook notices hunters firing at a log. The cook attaches antlers to the log to attract more shots, then harvests the lead for scrap metal at the end of the hunting season. The haul amounts to several pounds, not a fortune but not a bad amount to sell either. The cook later uses sandbags, an innovation that makes the lead harvest much easier.

Part 2: Chapter 3

Part 2: Chapter 3 Summary and Analysis

The destination is the northernmost county of Maine, where Canadians migrate over the border every season to pick up potatoes in the fields and put them into barrels. Trucks then take the barrels away to storage. The Canadians have a French heritage and move together in family units. Steinbeck camps near one of the families. He lets out Charley as an emissary of good will. He then follows the dog down to the camp and meets the family.

The spokesman for the family treats Steinbeck cordially and politely. He shows interest in Charley and the dog's training in France. Steinbeck invites the whole family to his camper truck, as they are interested in such things. Some of the Canadians use similar rigs to camp near the potato fields. Others such as this family use large canvas tents.

The adults cram into the camper while the children look in from the open door. Steinbeck gives the adults cans of beer and the children cans of soda. He then breaks out a bottle of rare old cognac. The family spokesman, impressed by the fine liquor, passes the bottle around for everyone to see. Using whatever is available for glasses—paper cups, a shaving mug, empty medicine containers—the author divvies up the cognac until the bottle is empty. As darkness descends, the Canadian family walks back to their camp in good spirits with the spokesman leading the way by kerosene lantern light.

The next morning Steinbeck breaks camp at the first hint of dawn and leaves the empty cognac bottle for the Canadian family to find as a keepsake. He drives down the western side of Maine and sees many deer bounding into the woods from the roadway. Rocinante is equipped with a trick horn that can emulate the sound of cows and bulls in various moods. He toys with four cows by sending out the call of a bull in heat, and the cows come toward him at a trot. This spooks Steinbeck. He puts the truck in gear and shoots away as quickly as he can.

Intent on spending the night on the Connecticut River, Steinbeck drives with purpose without taking many breaks for Charley's needs. He finds an inn made up of several white cabins near the river and a restaurant/office with neon signs announcing that the place is open and has vacancies. Steinbeck walks into the empty restaurant and asks in a loud voice if anyone is there. He gets no answer. After waiting until dark and seeing no management for the inn, he spends the night in his camper. The inn leaves him with a disturbed feeling that something is not right, but he does not know what.

On Sunday, his last day in New England, Steinbeck finds himself in a small Vermont town. He decides to take in a church service. Cleaned up and dressed in a suit, he enters the white wood-framed church and hears the preacher call upon all his sinners to straighten out their ways or suffer the fires of hell. This impresses Steinbeck. He gives

five dollars to the church and feels that he is an authentic sinner worthy of God's attention and wrath, as opposed to the more vague feelings he has at other church services that do not emphasize fire and brimstone.

While heading toward Niagara Falls along the coast of Lake Ontario, Steinbeck becomes lost in a sprawling town. He has left the highway because the traffic sends sheets of rainwater onto his windshield, and this bothers him. The author parks to check his maps, and while doing so, a local man enters his truck cab to give directions. The local man smells of whiskey. Steinbeck half listens to the convoluted route that the man describes, thanks him, and after the man leaves, turns around as if following the advice. Somehow Steinbeck finds the highway again.

Part 2: Chapter 4 - 5

Part 2: Chapter 4 - 5 Summary and Analysis

While trying to cross the border into Canada, Steinbeck runs into trouble. The US side lets him through with no problem, but the Canadian side warns him about having rabies vaccination documentation for Charley. The problem is not that the Canadians require this, but if they let Steinbeck through and he subsequently tries to reenter the US, the US side will not let Charley through without the documentation.

Steinbeck turns around and is stopped at the US side. The US Customs officer does not understand the situation and orders the author into the office. Steinbeck tries to explain that he was not in Canada at all and has simply turned around. The officer looks over Steinbeck's passport and nitpicks about a phone number penciled on a page, informing the author that he has broken the law by doing this. Steinbeck apologizes for his crime and promises never to do such a thing again. The officer lets him go.

The author reflects on how he loves countries but hates governments. He especially hates governments that make silly laws and employ sillier officers to enforce those laws. His anarchy goes no further than this, and he continues his journey after wasting as much time as he had hoped to save by going partway through Canada. The only things he gains from this leg of the trip is seeing Niagara Falls and the knowledge that the bureaucracy at border crossings is not worth the trouble.

Trying to accelerate his trip, Steinbeck takes to one of the multi-lane highways that has well-developed rest stops for cars and trucks. The vending machines at these stops impress him for the variety of goods sold, from fingernail care kits to a wide selection of soups, although none of them very good. He finds more interest in the truckers who stop for coffee and conversation with other truckers. He sits with some of them and listens to their conversations. Steinbeck realizes that the truckers know little about the land over which they travel and have developed a transient society of their own, somewhat like sailors.

Steinbeck notices that trailer parks have sprung up near urban centers. He stops at one to spend the night. He learns that many people have taken to the house trailers for several good reasons. The first two involve cost and mobility. The trailers sell new from about $10,000 to $20,000 in 1960 dollars ($68,000 to $134,000 in 2006 dollars), which is not exactly cheap but affordable for most middle-class workers. A healthy used market exists that brings the trailer house within the reach of lower incomes too. The mobility of the trailers allow families to follow jobs around the country instead of being stuck with unsellable permanent houses if a factory or other major employer shuts down.

Farmers see value in the mobile homes too. Prior to this development, when a son or daughter marries, the tradition called for building another room onto the existing

farmhouse. Now the family can simply bring in a trailer house for the new couple, which is an easier solution and gives everyone more privacy.

The author thinks about how humans are naturally nomadic and that putting down roots is a fairly recent idea. He talks to people who either remember their roots in Europe or know someone who does. The living conditions in Europe were rooted but also uncomfortably cramped. These people favor their trailers over an entire family sharing a single bedroom.

While going through the upper Midwest, Steinbeck stops by a lake in northern Michigan. A man comes by to shoe him off the private land, but Steinbeck offers the man coffee and whiskey. They soon become friendly, the man showing where Steinbeck can park for the night and both agreeing to do some fishing the next day. Their fishing proves fruitless, but they enjoy each other's company. The man does not know what he wants out of life, but his wife is strongly directed to move away from the country to a city somewhere. Steinbeck feels sorry for the man.

Chicago is the next destination, where Steinbeck is to meet up with his wife in a fancy downtown hotel. When he arrives the hotel management is not thrilled with a man seasoned by the road hanging around their lobby, and his hotel room is not yet ready. The management finds a room where he can stay, but it has not yet been cleaned. Steinbeck agrees to sit there until his room is ready.

He finds evidence about the previous guest's life and refers to him as Lonesome Harry. Lonesome Harry is on a business trip, has a wife back east, had a possibly professional surrogate girlfriend come to visit, drank too much Jack Daniels and is not sure of himself. This Steinbeck discovers from the trash left behind and a few other clues.

Part 3: Chapter 1 - 3

Part 3: Chapter 1 - 3 Summary and Analysis

The Chicago reunion with his wife being out of context for the story, Steinbeck skips these city experiences and picks up with the journey from Illinois to Wisconsin. Charley looks good from his stay in the hotel kennel, where he received a professional poodle grooming. Illinois slips away to the rolling Wisconsin countryside with its many dairy farms. Steinbeck thinks that the farms must be subsidized in some way because they look too good to be self-sustaining.

The Wisconsin Dells impress him with the strange and fantasy-like rock formations. He sees something strange when stopped for a rest, an area below him that seems to be alive. Upon closer examination, he discovers a big collection of turkeys, a "reservoir for Thanksgiving" (p. 128).

Steinbeck wants to see the Twin Cities in Minnesota, but the heavy traffic confuses him. True to his self-characterization, the author becomes lost. He follows a road marked "Evacuation Route" and eventually ends up going north and east rather than his intended north and west. He stops at a restaurant for directions so he can drive to Sauk Centre, the birthplace of Sinclair Lewis. Steinbeck had known Lewis before his death in 1951. The author thinks about how Lewis had been rejected by his hometown for writing Main Street, but now that Lewis is dead and safe, the town takes pride in being the birthplace. Signs announce this fact at the primary entries.

For reasons unknown to himself, Steinbeck drives straight through town without stopping. He moves onward to Fargo, North Dakota. He had always envisioned Fargo as having the worst weather of the country, whether cold or hot. Seeing the town during a pleasant autumn day does not disturb his visions. He parks by the Maple River and makes diner while Charley slops around in the water, pretty much destroying the effect of the professional grooming.

Deciding to spend the rest of the day and night in this spot, Steinbeck reviews what he has learned about America during his trip so far. He has noticed regional differences but also a homogenizing of the nation into a bland oneness. He credits this to the effects of the television and radio stations that deliver the same entertainment in the same accent. He sees big city papers on the newsstands next to the local papers and cheap novels full of sex and violence in the paperback racks. His take on this is that people living in a bland world crave sex and violence in their fiction more than otherwise. Remembering back to a conversation with a shopkeeper in Minnesota, Steinbeck also thinks that people need the threat from the Russians for something on which to blame all their troubles. The shopkeeper agrees.

Another traveler occupies the spot by the Maple River. Both Steinbeck and the traveler observe each other on the sly until finally they walk toward each other and meet without

giving names. The traveler is in the theater business, a Shakespearian performer who emulates Sir John Gielgud. The traveler produces a letter from Gielgud that expresses appreciation for the traveler's mimicking act as a high form of flattery. He talks with Steinbeck over coffee and whiskey, mostly about himself, then makes a theatrical exit that leaves Steinbeck with whetted curiosity, as the performer says, good theater should leave an audience.

Part 3: Chapter 4 - 6

Part 3: Chapter 4 - 6 Summary and Analysis

The night turns windy with false threats of snow at the Maple River. Steinbeck considers leaving but decides to stay and see how the weather turns out. No snow comes, so he departs the next morning while the Shakespearean performer is still asleep in his small trailer.

Steinbeck feels that the river crossing at Bismark is the true demarcation between east and west. The eastern side of the river supports the familiar landscape that he has experienced through much of his journey. On the western side are the features most think about when envisioning the west—brown grass, rock outcroppings and dry creek beds. He heads into the Bad Lands. The desolation strikes him during the day, but at night he experiences the beauty of a sunset that brings out the colors of the rock layers. This leads the way into a crisp, clear moonless night full of stars. Steinbeck talks to only two people, a hunter of very few words and a woman who seems afraid of the area. The author feels that fear too during the day, but at night the Bad Lands transform into a benign and breathtaking world.

Montana impresses Steinbeck so much that he would move there if it only had an ocean. The people have a distinctive regional accent, unlike the homogenizing accents back East, and are easy going. The towns have none of the frantic rush that confuses Steinbeck into losing his way. He drops by the Little Big Horn battlefield to pay his respects to both the soldiers and Native Americans who died there and elsewhere.

On a lark Steinbeck visits Yellowstone National Park, although he thinks the national parks are inferior to the surrounding countryside due to the fenced-off nature and everything being the biggest, tallest or deepest. The park ranger at the gate warns him about bears, but Steinbeck has no worries that Charley will either cause trouble or walk into it. To Steinbeck's surprise, Charley reacts violently to the first bear they see along the road. The dog wants to attack the bear and either kill it or be killed. This happens so often that the author must turn back. He wonders why Charley has such a reaction to bears and notices that the dog is listless for a few days afterward, suffering from something like an emotional hangover.

Part 3: Chapter 7 - 9

Part 3: Chapter 7 - 9 Summary and Analysis

His high expectations of crossing the Continental Divide in Montana far outshine the pass he takes, probably Rogers Pass that is only 5,610 feet above sea level. But the fact that it is the Continental Divide causes Steinbeck to think about the Lewis and Clark expedition that started in 1804 and ended in 1806. He believes that those men had been properly impressed with the new country that they explored.

Idaho provides snow-capped mountains for his viewing pleasure. He must stop for Charley more often because the dog is having trouble urinating, which makes the stops longer. During this time, the author contemplates if he is doing the trip as it should be done. A political reporter friend had asked that if Steinbeck comes across any honest men along the way, to bring them back East. Ten would do to bring the country back in line. Steinbeck told his friend that the real men for whom the reporter craves always lived at least two generations back.

Steinbeck stops at a combination rental cabins, gas station, lunch room and repair shop shortly after driving over a pass. A gruff and burly man rents him a cabin and says that the food for that night will be ham, beans and ice cream. Steinbeck asks for a reading light, and the gruff man gives him a coal oil lantern.

During supper, which they take in the back room of the lunch building, Steinbeck meets the gruff man's son, a twenty-year old young man who would like to leave this place and go somewhere else that has culture and opportunity, like New York City. The son has noticed Steinbeck's license plates. The father brings up the son's recent night classes in hair dressing, which builds tension in the room. Steinbeck must try to keep neutral on this touchy family subject, so he describes how he has studied hair dressers in big cities. His theory is that the hair dressers have great power because the women who go to them feel at ease talking about subjects that they would not bring up with anyone else. This impresses the father, spares the son from another family argument and actually raises his status with his father. The son later thanks Steinbeck for the hand up.

Charley's bladder problem becomes worse in the night. The author gives him human sleeping powder with the idea that relaxing the muscles will make urination easier for Charley. This works to relieve the built up pressure, and with great concern about Charley's health, Steinbeck heads towards Spokane as quickly as he can. He finds a veterinarian, an old man who does not seem to care about Charley at all. Steinbeck insists on medicine for the dog, and the old man finally sells him pills for flushing out the kidneys. The author thinks that the old veterinarian feels self-contempt and projects the contempt onto people and animals.

While approaching Seattle along the Columbia River, Steinbeck remembers what this area was like when he was a child living along the Pacific coast. The landscape has

remained the same except for additional dams and power lines. Seattle shocks him. He remembers a small city and rolling bluffs, but the city has grown by leaps and bounds, and the bluff tops have been flattened for more growth. He sees much construction going on but feels that it resembles destruction. He visits the old center of town, which has greatly deteriorated, and the wharf area, which has stayed much the same with its fish markets and vegetable stands.

In order to give Charley time to heal, Steinbeck stays in Seattle for a few days and then drives down the coast. In Oregon on a rainy Sunday, one of the rear tires on Rocinante blows while driving in eight inches of muddy water. Steinbeck struggles for an hour to change the tire, during which time he notices that the other tire has developed bubbles in the sidewall and is about to burst too.

Farther down the road he comes to a small town with an open service station. The owner, a very large man with a white eye that seems evil, tells Steinbeck that he needs heavier duty tires, but the shop does not carry the required size. The owner makes several phone calls and uses his influence to bring in two tires of the right size and design. Four hours later Steinbeck is back on the road. He is extremely grateful for the service station owner's help. The author had given the owner a respectable bonus on top of the charge for parts and service.

Steinbeck decides to show Charley a giant sequoia tree. He searches among the groves until he finds the perfect 300-foot tall tree. Upon letting Charley out of the camper, the dog completely ignores the tree. Miffed, Steinbeck tries to make the dog take notice, but to no avail. Charley cares only for the smells in the forest, not the size of the trees. Steinbeck does succeed in coaxing Charley to leave his mark on the sequoia. The author then reflects on the ancient trees and how they had been common before the last Ice Age. A memory of a man close to where the author had lived as a child comes to mind. The man had bought a grove of giant sequoias and clear-cut the entire stand for lumber. The townspeople had thought that this was a sacrilege, and so had Steinbeck even though the man had been fully within his legal rights.

Part 3: Chapter 10 - 13

Part 3: Chapter 10 - 13 Summary and Analysis

After spending the night among the giant sequoias and drinking in all the majesty, ancient mystery and quiet solitude that he can contain, Steinbeck heads down the coast to his hometown. The place has changed tremendously. The population has boomed and areas that had at one time been wild are now suburbs. Out of obligation and a hope for a simple, quiet visit with family, he goes to his sister's house. Steinbeck's hope evaporates away in the heat of political arguments. His sister is Republican and he is Democratic. Barbs shoot from the right and left of the political opinion spectrum until both combatants are too exhausted to continue.

Steinbeck explains that he had grown up in a Republican household, and his conversion to the Democratic Party is seen as some kind of insult, no matter what logical reasons he has to offer. Realizing that the family conflict is irresolvable, he drives through a once familiar part of Monterey, now almost completely transformed into the new California, and visits Johnny Garcia's bar, a familiar old haunt. Johnny and Steinbeck reminisce about old times and come to realize that all their friends have already died. Johnny wants Steinbeck to come back to his home, but the author replies that the old home is dead too. New York City is home now, and as Thomas Wolfe once wrote, you can never go back home. The sadness of it all overwhelms both men.

While away from the bar and the ultimately painful visit, Steinbeck gives some credit to the development on the Monterey Peninsula. The stench of the fish canning plants is gone, which makes the area more pleasant. New homes do look attractive from a distance. The area has lost its wildness but also the rough edges of industrialization. He realizes that by showing up, he confused both his sister and Johnny. Their memories of him are of a younger Steinbeck, and they have their memories enshrined for all time. Presenting the older Steinbeck brought in unnecessary interference and disturbance.

He visits Fremont's Peak where as a child Steinbeck had searched for old cannon balls and bayonets from an historic battle. Memories of his childhood well up. He takes one last look around before leaving California by the fastest possible route.

While approaching the Mojave Desert, Steinbeck reflects on what he has learned about the American character. Over the past two hundred years the diverse peoples of Europe and Africa, plus other parts of the world, had come to the US and settled. Over the generations a uniquely American culture developed, now evidenced by high productivity and growth. A homogenization continues, but this in itself is unique within the world. Most other countries retain fairly strong differences within much smaller geographies. He uses Great Britain as an example, where even in Scotland the highlanders are very different from the lowlanders.

Yet the author realizes that this is not quite an accurate portrait of the United States. No canvas exists large enough to contain it all. The people and the land defy generalizations, and the best anyone can hope to do is either a rough sketch or a much narrower perspective.

Charley becomes overheated while crossing the desert. Steinbeck stops to wet the dog down from the camper's thirty-gallon water tank. He looks over the sun-baked terrain where little can survive and spots two coyotes. Easing down a rifle with a scope, Steinbeck puts one of the coyotes into the cross hairs. A voice inside the author demands that he shoot and kill the vermin, but he considers what the coyotes must live upon in this harsh environment. They must eat rabbits, which are considered vermin too. So it's vermin surviving on vermin, and who are they hurting? The desert has no farms, no chicken coops, no young cattle. Steinbeck lowers the rifle. He opens two cans of dog food and leaves them for the coyotes as a little treat in a harsh land.

While going back through the Rockies by way of Arizona and New Mexico, Steinbeck loses his ability to observe like a writer. He is weary of the road. Avoiding any conversation with people and just passing by without really seeing anything, both he and Charley enter an apathetic mood. The mood lightens during the night when Steinbeck sees something reflect his flashlight beam on a hillside. Upon investigation, it is just a piece of rock with a large amount of mica in it. He takes the rock as a keepsake.

Part 4: Chapter 1 - 3

Part 4: Chapter 1 - 3 Summary and Analysis

Steinbeck visits Texas not because he wants to see the sights but because he has half his family and several friends in his wife's home state. He comments on how Texas is not so much a place as a state of mind that has crossed the state boarders and entered into the nation's consciousness on one level or another. Although his wife has lost her accent in New York, it comes back immediately when she talks with another Texan. Some of her vocal habits come through at odd times as well.

The Texans that Steinbeck know are, underneath the bluster and brag, actually very sensitive people, and thus the bluster and brag when out of their home environment. He and his wife have often hosted friends and family from Texas. They go to Broadway shows, fine restaurants and jazz clubs. The Texans wonder how New Yorkers can live this way, and Steinbeck assures them that New Yorkers do not, only when entertaining guests. In the same manner, Texans pull out all the stops when visitors like Steinbeck arrive. The time is Thanksgiving, and with his wife, Steinbeck joins in with what he calls the orgy of food, drink, hunting, fishing and looking at cattle.

But Steinbeck admires the energy of the Texans. They have gone from conquering for territory to conquering for ownership, as in buying business all through the United States and the rest of the world. Money from oil and ranching fuels this energy. A common sight for the time is a cowboy in an expensive department store buying something expensive while wearing what he does on his horse.

The author stays in Amarillo three extra days while a good veterinarian takes care of Charley's health problem. The treatment is successful, and now with a cheerful and energetic dog companion, Steinbeck commences the long drive out of Texas and to Louisiana. He has a good friend whom he could visit along the way, but the Texan orgy has taken too much out of his spirit. However, he knows that the South in 1960 is not a kind place for anyone sporting New York license plates. The dangers are real, yet he feels strongly that his journey to discover something about the United States would not be complete without traveling through at least some of the South and experiencing it close up.

The long miles pass by as the author remembers the only Black family whom he had known in California while growing up. They were the Coopers, and when Steinbeck first hears that Blacks are supposed to be inferior to Whites, he cannot understand. The Coopers were hard working, the sons all smart and talented, and the wife kept an immaculate house. When someone asks Steinbeck if he would like a Cooper to marry his sister, Steinbeck replies that he does not think any Cooper would want his sister in the first place.

Arriving in New Orleans where a great commotion surrounds the desegregation of a grade school, Steinbeck takes the cautions of parking away from the school and wearing his seafaring cap, pretending to be a Liverpool sailor in the port town. He takes a cab to the school. A crowd gathers, angry and shouting. They await the arrival of the Cheerleaders, a group of hefty unmarried women who denounce the desegregation through practiced and disturbing speeches. A tiny Black girl arrives with a police escort. The crowd jeers and shouts insults at her as she enters the school. Steinbeck feels very sorry for her and extremely sick about the crowd's behavior. Next comes a little White boy and his father. The father stares ahead, teeth clenched, as he leads his son into the school. No violence breaks out other than the disgusting verbal taunts, insults and abuse that Steinbeck likens to a demonic chorus.

Steinbeck wonders where the good people of New Orleans are in this fracas. Surely the crowd will go home excited to see themselves on the nightly news. The author decides that his friends who would be against this insanity have opted to stay away. Their presence might prompt violence, but their absence does leave the city without full representation.

Part 4: Chapter 4 - 5

Part 4: Chapter 4 - 5 Summary and Analysis

After witnessing what amounted to a theatrical performance, Steinbeck has no desire to stay in New Orleans for its famously excellent restaurants. He instead buys a simple poor-boy sandwich, drives out to a spot along the Mississippi River and begins eating his lunch.

A tall, well-groomed elderly White man strolls by and Steinbeck invites him to have coffee. The author makes the coffee very strong with egg shell and egg white, a method he had learned from friends in New Orleans. The elderly man appreciates the coffee and comments on its authentic Southern character. The conversation turns to the old man's family and how long it has lived in the South. He tells Steinbeck that it is a very long time except for those in St. Louis classified under ci-git, which is an old way of starting out the epitaph on gravestones. ci-git means "here lies." Steinbeck refers to the old man as Monsieur Ci Git. The author asks the man about the Cheerleaders and how he feels about the changes going on in the South. Monsieur Ci Git feelings run deep because he understands the dark history of slavery and the struggles that have occurred up to the present. He also does not want to talk about all this. He considers himself too old to care and is willing to leave the situation to younger generations. Monsieur Ci Git then excuses himself and walks back toward his house.

Farther down the road Steinbeck gives a ride to an old Black man. The man tries not to make conversation, but Steinbeck asks questions. This frightens the man and he huddles against his door, trying to make himself as small as possible. The author realizes his mistake and goes silent. A little while later the old man asks to be dropped off just to get away from the discomfort.

Steinbeck meets a middle-aged White man at a lunch counter and gives him a ride. The man talks about the Cheerleaders as if they are cultural heroes for all White people in the South. He declares that his children will never attend school with Black children, even though the man has no children at the present. Steinbeck makes the mistake of questioning the White man in a way that angers him. The man starts to shout at Steinbeck. The author stops his truck and tells the man to get out. While driving away, Steinbeck can see the man shouting at him in the rear view mirror.

The last ride that the author gives is to a young Black college student, an activist for civil rights. The student wants change to happen quickly, not slowly like Martin Luther King preaches. He understands passive resistance, but he also wants to see significant change within his lifetime. After dropping the student off, Steinbeck thinks about all the changes that need to happen and feels anxiety for the future. The rest of his journey back home becomes an unseen, unheard and unfelt passage. He finally makes it to New York City and becomes lost. A friendly police officer directs him to his home, and the journey ends.

Steinbeck has complete recall of the trip except for the last leg from the South to New York City. He knows a person who had traveled to Hawaii, his only journey, and relives that experience throughout the rest of his life. Steinbeck believes that each journey is unique and that the traveling pulls the traveler rather than the traveler directing the journey, reiterating the idea that opens the book.

Characters

John Steinbeck

In the fall of 1960 when John Steinbeck is 58 years old, he decides that if he is going to take a cross-country tour of the United States, he had better do it now before he grows too old to do it at all. A successful writer, he loads his camper truck with the materials of his trade—typewriter, reams of typing paper and carbons, reference books and many of the books he has always intended to read, most of which he never opens. Along with his dog Charley, the author takes off on his trip after Hurricane Dona moves through his home on the tip of Long Island.

His travels take him upwards into the northernmost county of Maine, across to Niagara Falls, over to Wisconsin, Minnesota and North Dakota, down to the Bad Lands of South Dakota, into Montana, Idaho, Washington, Oregon and California. Of all the states, he loves Montana with its wilds and its relaxed population. The thing that holds him back from making Montana his home is the lack of ocean coastline. Steinbeck loves the sea more than he does Montana.

In California Steinbeck attempts to go home, that is, revisit his hometown. But the hometown has changed significantly, and to Steinbeck's eye, for the worse. Development has sprawled the town outward to where the surrounding area is no longer recognizable. He visits with his sister, which turns into a session of fighting about politics. In a neighborhood bar he reminisces with an old friend, but that takes a very melancholy turn. Steinbeck decides to get away quickly and heads into the Mojave Desert. From there he goes to Texas, spends some time there with his wife and has a huge Thanksgiving feast, then to New Orleans and the racial problems of the South.

The trip nearly over, Steinbeck travels through the states to his Long Island home without seeing anything but the road ahead. The journey of the writer ends in the South, but the journey of the man must be physically completed before he can again feel comfortable enough to remember the details and write his book. Some of the memories were uncomfortable and are equally uncomfortable to write about.

Charley

Charley is Steinbeck's dog, a standard male poodle with a color known as blue and trained in France. Charley enjoys most of the traveling and has a unique way of signaling that he wants something. His crooked front teeth, which keep him out of the dog show circuit, allow him to make a "Ftt" sound. Charley is comfortable being a good dog and dislikes humans who are second rate, such as an alcoholic veterinarian in Spokane and anybody who talks baby talk to him. He can also detect good people and warms up to them, including a man in northern Michigan and a competent veterinarian in Texas.

Charley has urinary problems while on the road. Steinbeck goes to an incompetent veterinarian in Washington, which gives the dog some relief. However, it takes a young and competent veterinarian in Texas to completely cure the problem.

The giant sequoias of the West Coast do not impress Charley, although he finally leaves his mark on one. While visiting with his wife in Chicago, Steinbeck has Charley groomed into the traditional poodle cut, and the dog enjoys his grooming like a man with a new suit. This only holds for a few days, and then Charley goes back to his pure dog ways.

Elaine Steinbeck

Elaine Steinbeck is John Steinbeck's wife. She hollers after him to stop when John goes out into the bay to secure his cabin cruiser against Hurricane Donna, which happens before the trip. While John heads out on his long trip, Elaine roars off in her car to New York City. She hooks up with him in Chicago, where they do urban things not related to the travel story. Elaine also goes to Texas to have Thanksgiving with John. She is a native Texan and has the qualities that John sees in all Texans, although while in New York she sheds the accent.

Friends

Steinbeck's friends are full of advice before he starts out on his journey. They warn him of all the dangers of the road, which Steinbeck knows to be mostly illusionary, having taken a similar journey many years before. The friends caution him that his fame will cause people to behave strangely wherever he shows up. Steinbeck's experiences prove this idea completely false. Nobody recognizes him as a famous author. The final caution is about his New York license plates. This does cause some comment, but nothing linking the author to the state or city. In the South, the license plates attract attention and animosity because some residents blame New York Jews on the South's racial problems.

Vermont Farmer

The Vermont farmer is the first person with whom Steinbeck invites to visit in his camper truck. They have a lengthy conversation, by New England standards, about politics. The farmer thinks that people are less outspoken now than before, but he also believes that people still hold strong opinions. They simply do not feel comfortable in political discussions any longer, probably because of the tensions of the Cold War. The discussion is civil and friendly as the farmer enjoys coffee spiked with whiskey in Steinbeck's camper.

Canadian Migrant Workers

In the northernmost county of Maine, Steinbeck invites a whole family of Canadian migrant workers to his camper. The workers pick up potatoes and put them into barrels during the harvest season. Steinbeck speculates to himself what might happen if all manual labor in the United States is handled by migrant workers. Meanwhile, he shares beer with the adults and sodas with the children. He then breaks out a bottle of rare cognac and shares the whole thing with the adults, which they greatly appreciate because their heritage is French. In the morning Steinbeck leaves the empty bottle to be found by the family as a keepsake.

US Customs Officer

The US Customs officer gives Steinbeck a hard time. Steinbeck had tried to cross over into Canada to save time, but the Canadian side warns him that he needs rabies vaccination papers for Charley. This is a US requirement, not Canadian. The warning is that Steinbeck might not be able to get back into the US, so the author turns around without ever having crossed the border. The US officer assumes that Steinbeck had been in Canada, and thus the difficulty. The officer eventually lets the author back into the US, but this leaves Steinbeck with a reminder why he hates all governments. The mindless bureaucracy irritates him to no end.

Truckers

Truckers have their own unique culture in the United States, so Steinbeck discovers. He first meets them at a truck stop along a superhighway, where the author queues up for gas with them. He thinks his camper truck is technically in the same category as the semi trucks. Steinbeck mostly listens as the truckers talk among themselves. Their concerns revolve around schedules and routes, not the country. They, like sailors, know little about the world through which they move.

Northern Michigan Man

The northern Michigan man attempts to chase Steinbeck off private land near a lake. Steinbeck treats the man cordially, and they become friendly to the point that the man shows a picture of his wife, directs Steinbeck to park his camper truck where it cannot be seen from the road, and fishes with the author the next day. Charley allows the man to scratch the dog's head and ears, a rare thing for Charley to permit. Steinbeck learns that the man's wife hates living in the country. She is directed toward the city life, while the man has no particular direction at all. Steinbeck thinks that the man wants something and his pretty wife, but he cannot have both.

Lonesome Harry

Steinbeck finds evidence about the life of Lonesome Harry, an anonymous man whom Steinbeck names during his snooping, when the author takes an uncleaned hotel room while waiting for his room to be prepared in Chicago. Lonesome Harry is unsure of himself, lives on the East Coast, is married, drinks too much Jack Daniels, and has a probable extramarital affair with a possible professional girlfriend, a paid one-night stand. Steinbeck thinks that Lonesome Harry is miserable in his professional and private life. He is alone while surrounded by humanity.

Shakespearian Performer

The Shakespearian performer shows up at the Maple River campsite in North Dakota just outside of Fargo. The performer has a small trailer house and a dog, and in this way resembles Steinbeck. The two introduce themselves and sit in Steinbeck's camper while drinking whiskey. The performer is an aging actor who travels about and does performances wherever he can and for whatever fee he can garner. In the tradition of the grand theatrical exit, the performer leaves Steinbeck wanting to know more.

Idaho Man and Son

Steinbeck takes a cabin in Idaho run by a burly man and his son. The cabin is less comfortable than the author's camper, but he stays in it anyway. Diner for that evening consists of baked canned ham, beans and ice cream, which the man and son share with Steinbeck. The son wants to become a hair dresser for women, something that the father finds irritating and is a primary source of conflict with his son. Steinbeck defends the hair dresser's place in society, building the role up as knowing more about what goes on than anyone else due to the customer's willingness to talk while being groomed. This builds up the son's status in his father's eyes, and the son thanks Steinbeck before he leaves.

Oregonian Service Station Owner

The Oregonian service station owner helps Steinbeck out when he is in trouble. The rear tires on the camper truck have developed bubbles in the sidewalls due to being overloaded. One tire goes flat while Steinbeck drives in a rainstorm. He changes the tire in muddy water and makes it to a service station that is in a small town and open on Sunday. The owner calls around and locates the correct tires for Steinbeck, installs them and has the author back on the road in four hours. Steinbeck thanks the man profusely and gives him a big bonus for the exceptionally good service.

Johnny Garcia

Johnny Garcia owns a bar in Steinbeck's hometown. Garcia and Steinbeck reminisce in the bar and come to realize that all the old gang is now dead. This leads to a very melancholy time that Steinbeck finds intolerable. He leaves the bar with the realization that a person can never go back home. Home changes, and in California it has changed drastically and permanently.

Texans

Texans are unique among Americans, Steinbeck observes. Although the landscape of Texas varies significantly, all Texans consider themselves of the same overall clan. An insult to one Texan is an insult to all. Politically at this time, Texas tends to be conservative on the national level and locally liberal. Steinbeck notices that his wife, a native Texan, drops the accent unless talking to another Texan, at which time it comes back immediately. Steinbeck admires the energy of Texans but has reservations about the displays of wealth. He notes that Texas is the only state in the Union that has joined as a sovereign nation. Texas could legally secede at any time, and although this is sometimes threatened, Texans would not like the rest of the Union to ask for the state to secede.

Cooper Family

Steinbeck grows up with the Cooper children, a Black family consisting of a hard-working father, an immaculate housekeeping mother, a son of Steinbeck's age and two other sons, one a year older and one a year younger. Steinbeck's only experience with Black people while growing up consists of his interactions with the Cooper family. The author is surprised to hear that many Whites consider Blacks to be an inferior race of humans. The Cooper sons were all very intelligent and talented. Due to this, Steinbeck excuses himself from taking sides in the racial struggles of the South. He cannot possibly imagine why people in the South think and feel the way they do.

The Cheerleaders

The Cheerleaders is a group of aging, portly women that Steinbeck observes in New Orleans as they heckle, taunt and throw nasty insults at a small Black girl and White boy as they enter a desegregated school. Steinbeck notices that non of the Cheerleaders appear married, do not seem to have had children, wear layers of makeup and are generally disgusting creatures with demonic messages. This whole episode makes Steinbeck feel sick.

Monsieur Ci Git

Monsieur Ci Git is an elderly White man whom Steinbeck meets while eating his lunch at an overlook of the Mississippi River. The name of the elderly man is a play on the word ci-git, an old way of expressing "here lies" on grave markers. The old man expects death to come soon. He gives his perspective on the racial upheavals in the South, which boils down to him not caring. This is a problem for the younger generations to handle. Whether a real encounter or imagined, Monsieur Ci Git represents the Old South.

Old Black Man

The old Black man that Steinbeck gives a ride to also represents the Old South from the Black perspective. Cowering against his door in the truck, the old Black man tries to make himself as small and unnoticeable as possible while Steinbeck asks questions that make the old man extremely uncomfortable. The old man finally asks to be dropped off, supposedly because his destination has been reached. Steinbeck notices the old man walking along the road and suspects the real reason was to get away from the uncomfortable White man driving the truck.

Middle-aged White Man

Steinbeck meets the middle-aged White man at a lunch counter. The man symbolizes the White side of the dying Old South. He detects sympathy for the civil rights movement from Steinbeck and starts to shout similar things that the author had heard from the Cheerleaders and the angry mob in New Orleans. Steinbeck finally orders the White man out of the truck. The White man at first challenges Steinbeck's ability to force the issue, and the author reaches for an imaginary pistol. The White man leaves, but Steinbeck can see him shouting invectives toward the truck in the rear view mirror as the author drives away.

Young Black College Student

The final symbol of the South that Steinbeck gives a ride to is a young Black college student. He represents what the civil rights movement is all about—change, and change now. The younger generations are impatient with passive resistance. It is not enough to do sit-ins and civil rights marches. The young Black man represents what might come to pass in the next few years. He desperately wants to see significant change in his own lifetime and might decide to force the issues.

Objects/Places

Long Island

The tip of Long Island is Steinbeck's home. He has a house by the shore, thirty feet above sea level, and lives there with his wife. They weather Hurricane Donna together just before Steinbeck leaves on his journey.

New York City

Steinbeck knows New York City as a center of literature and other arts. His wife goes to the city when Steinbeck leaves on his trip. Steinbeck becomes lost in the city upon his return, and a kindly policeman directs the author home.

Bangor

Steinbeck takes his first motel in Bangor, Maine. The place seems made entirely out of plastic, including the restaurant. The waitress there has a knack of sucking the joy out of life.

Deer Isle

Steinbeck visits Deer Isle upon the insistence of a colleague. The place reminds the author of an English coastal region, from the climate to the people and architecture. He decides to spend the night in his camper due to a nasty old cat that lives in the house.

Empty Restaurant

In Connecticut on his way from Maine, Steinbeck encounters a mysteriously empty restaurant. He wants to rent a cabin, but even though the neon signs announce that the place is open and has vacancies, nobody comes by all night long. This disturbs Steinbeck even while writing about the experience.

Northern Michigan

Steinbeck camps by a lake on private land in northern Michigan. He meets a married man who has no direction but will likely end up in the city because his wife wants to live there. The author feels sorry for the man.

Chicago

Steinbeck stops in Chicago to spend time with his wife. He does not include any details other than his encounter with the evidence of a man he calls Lonesome Harry, a man who had occupied a hotel room that Steinbeck stays in while his room is prepared.

Wisconsin

Wisconsin impresses Steinbeck with its well maintained dairy farms, its broad selection of cheese products, and the Wisconsin Dells. He sees a large flock of turkeys which he calls a reservoir for Thanksgiving.

Twin Cities

Steinbeck wants to see the Twin Cities, but the traffic is too heavy to see anything. He becomes lost and ends up on the wrong side of the Mississippi River. People running a German restaurant with remarkably bad food give him directions.

Sauk Centre

Sauk Centre interests Steinbeck because it is the birthplace of Sinclair Lewis, who Steinbeck had known and admired as a great American author. Steinbeck thinks about how the people in Sauk Centre had hated Lewis while he was alive but now advertise the town as the author's birthplace.

Maple River

At a campsite beside the Maple River in North Dakota, Steinbeck meets a traveling Shakespearean performer. They have an interesting talk together while drinking whiskey.

Bismark

Steinbeck thinks that the Missouri River crossing at Bismark, North Dakota, is the real demarcation line between the eastern and western portions of the United States. The terrain and flora on either side of the river is distinctly east or west.

Bad Lands

The Bad Lands of South Dakota strike Steinbeck as being very inhospitable during the daytime. He talks to only two people, one a man of very few words and the other a

frightened woman who feels she does not belong in the Bad Lands. However, at night the area takes on a friendlier and beautiful character.

Montana

Of all the states that Steinbeck visits, Montana is his favorite. He likes the people and country. The only thing that keeps him from making Montana his home is the lack of seacoast.

Continental Divide

Steinbeck has a childhood vision of the Continental Divide that the reality of crossing it in Montana does not coincide. He goes over a low pass and thinks that the experience is quite a bit less than impressive.

Spokane

Charley becomes sick with a urinary problem. This causes Steinbeck to hightail it over to Spokane, the closest city that has veterinarians. Charley becomes better but not cured due to the incompetent veterinarian.

Seattle

The author remembers Seattle as a small fishing port town. The degree to which it has grown shocks him. He does like it that the wharf area is mostly the same as it was when he was a child.

Oregon

In Oregon Steinbeck has a blowout and must change the tire during a rainstorm in the mud. He finds a service station open, and the owner arranges for heavier duty tires to be installed on the truck, for which Steinbeck is very grateful.

Fremont's Peak

Steinbeck visits Fremont's Peak near his hometown before leaving California as quickly as he can. He remembers his hometown as it was before all the development and knows that he will never return again.

Mojave Desert

In the Mojave Desert, Steinbeck almost shoots two coyotes with one of his rifles. He reconsiders upon thinking about the coyotes and their tough lives in the desert, and the fact that no humans live for many miles around. Instead of killing them, he leaves two open cans of dog food as a tribute.

Texas

Charley is treated by a competent young veterinarian in Texas, which cures the dog's urinary problem. Steinbeck spends Thanksgiving with his wife at a friend's ranch. He thinks of Texas as being a very unique part of the United States.

New Orleans

Steinbeck encounters the racial troubles of the South in New Orleans. He parks his truck with the New York license plates far away from the desegregated school and dresses like an inconspicuous sailor before attending the big show of racism at the school

Hurricane Donna

Hurricane Donna is a storm that hits Long Island just before Steinbeck leaves on his journey. He must fight the elements to save his cabin cruiser from destruction.

Rocinante

Rocinante is what Steinbeck calls his brand new camper truck. He has the name, which is that of Don Quixote's horse, stenciled on the side in 16th century Spanish script.

Fayre Eleyne

The Fayre Eleyne is Steinbecks cabin cruiser, named after his wife. He anchors it properly against Hurricane Donna but has to free it from other drifting boats as the hurricane blows hard.

Submarine

Steinbeck sees nuclear submarines as he takes a ferry from Long Island to Connecticut. The sight disturbs him because he remembers fearing submarines during World War II, and he also knows they carry nuclear weapons.

Garbage Dumps and Junk Yards

The author sees garbage dumps and junk yards surrounding the towns he goes through on his journey. This makes him think that we have more garbage than goods.

Mobile Homes

Mobile homes attract Steinbeck's attention. He discovers that the mobile home is a big trend in the United States because they allow workers to follow jobs around the country. The mobile home frees people from the artificial roots of owning a home they cannot sell.

Giant Sequoia Trees

Steinbeck revers the giant sequoia trees of the Pacific coast. He feels that the trees have some kind of consciousness and communication that humans cannot understand and therefore fear.

Themes

Discovering America

The subtitle of the book indicates a search for America, which is often a theme in travel literature for the United States. Steinbeck makes the logical case for each journey being unique to time, place, person and mood. What might be beautiful to one person could be ugly and fearful or even disgusting to another. But just what is America? What defines it, what makes it something unique? This is what Steinbeck seeks and sometimes he finds it, understands it and can write about it.

The United States is a huge country made up of regions with their unique qualities. Of this Steinbeck is sure. Certain stereotypes hold, such as the country farm he had once seen as a child in a viewing Easter egg. He knows this because he encounters a similar place in New England. In Wisconsin he sees dairy farms that seem too neat and orderly to be anything but hobby farms, but he is not sure. This is his impression of the area and could be completely wrong. Nevertheless, his observation has validity if not objectivity. He is a man passing through, not a part of the local and culture.

Steinbeck knows how to get close as a visitor. He knows that stopping at bars, restaurants and churches is the way to quickly determine the nature of the people who inhabit the environments through which he passes. A fundamentalist church service does not push him away. Rather, he feels closer to a vengeful God who cares enough about his soul and his grand sinning ways to want hellfire and damnation for his wretched spirit. Steinbeck expects to get a whipping and feels more important in creation for it, which lasts a few days.

At best the author can paint a picture in words that represents America. It is a picture populated by a diverse crowd. He meets a farmer, migrant workers, a very depressing waitress in a depressing place, a difficult US Customs officer, a young man in Idaho who needs a boost up, which Steinbeck delivers. He meets bad men and good men, and he knows no substitute for a good man. Mostly people are helpful, even to being annoying by giving complex and wrong directions. Oftentimes Steinbeck is lost, a weakness he attributes to planning a route out too carefully. He always becomes confused if he plans too much.

In the end he cannot find a definitive America, only the subjective. However, nobody can define a country of this size and with this amount of diversity from coast to coast. All views must, by the nature of the thing, be subjective and confined to the time, place, person and mood.

Wanderlust

Everybody in the United States wants to be somewhere else, or at least be on their way around the country and back home again, as Steinbeck does it. Travel equates to

adventure, and adventure always promises change from the daily grind, the routine, the seemingly unchanging movement toward a grim destiny. The mobile home reflects this need to move for many Americans. Of cultural traits, Steinbeck thinks this is a universally American one.

A young school boy hangs around Steinbeck and his truck while he prepares for the journey. The boy finally begs to go along, claiming that he will do anything he can to be helpful. Steinbeck also detects this yearning as people ask about his camper truck and express their desires to be free on the open road. Steinbeck wonders if this is not so much American as human. The human race had been nomadic for most of its existence. It was not until the Agricultural Revolution that humans began to grow roots, but even then climate would cause major human migrations throughout history.

People yearn to be someplace other than where they are, and by association, somebody other than who they are. Steinbeck refers to his wife as the Texan who got away, which is how she refers to herself as well. Yet Steinbeck respects the Texans and his wife's heritage. He also respects the heritage of the South even though he has no possibility of ever understanding it. Only those who grow up in the South can understand it. He cannot do much more than describe what he encounters, and one of these encounters is an impatient young Black college student. The student wants to be someplace else and somebody else, albeit without leaving the South. The wanderlust of Americans and humans in general does not absolutely need to be satisfied by travel. It can be a journey of the heart and mind while remaining in one place.

Returning Home

The author finds in California a confirmation of Thomas Wolfe's idea that nobody can ever return home. This is in reference to Steinbeck's hometown in California. The changes there disturb him. Housing developments crowd what was once wilderness. The little streets he remembers are now lined by businesses and neon signs. One thing remains the same—his political conflicts with his sister, although this arose after childhood. Steinbeck has his reasons for switching from the Republican to the Democratic party, yet his childhood family remains Republican. The conflict will never be resolved.

He seeks out comfort from Johnny Garcia, but this just intensifies the pain of growing older and losing many friends to death. Garcia almost becomes violent with the memories of past good times, past injustices and the passing of life. Nothing comes of this, but Steinbeck realizes that he must leave and quickly. His very presence upsets whatever equilibrium people have made with their lives. It was a mistake to have made contact again. He presents himself as the aging author, where people remember him younger and at the peak of his career, probably with pride. His presence takes this away, disturbing the people he remembers and loves.

Almost in a panic Steinbeck leaves California for the Mojave Desert, but before he goes he stops at Fremont's Peak, a hill that overlooks his hometown. He thinks about the

good times of searching for canon balls and bayonets from the historic battle that took place on the hill. He remembers his father and his mother, and looks around at the changes. He takes in the views for one last time, preserving the memories as times gone by never to return. Nor should they. Nobody can return home but in the heart and the memory. Trying to do so physically is a mistake.

Racial Struggles

Steinbeck knows about the racial struggles in the South and almost avoids the area altogether. However, in order to cover the major regions of the United States, he must visit at least part of the South. Steinbeck also realizes that in this part of the country he must conceal his identity even more. His New York license plates will invite conflict and possibly violence. As a disguise he uses his sailor's cap in New Orleans, just a nobody from Liverpool on shore leave. This fools the taxicab driver who takes him from the parking garage in which he leaves the camper truck with the incriminating New York license tags to the desegregated school where the Cheerleaders put on a daily show of racism.

The spectacle of young children and parents being verbally attacked disgusts and sickens Steinbeck. He has no understanding of how this could happen in America. Intellectually he knows about slavery, the Civil War, the Reconstruction and the roots of the civil rights movement. Yet his only personal contact with Black people consists of a single family with whom he grows up in California. The family defies the stereotypes of the Southern Black family. Steinbeck can see how the environment in the South reinforces the stereotypes, but take the same people and put them into California, they might become model citizens, bright and talented like the Cooper sons.

Steinbeck either meets or invents four people who symbolize the different sides of the South. Three represent the Old South—an old White man, an old Black man and a middle-aged White man. The old White man feels this is not his struggle. His time is almost up, and he gets along with Black people near to his own age well enough. The old Black man cowers under Steinbecks questions, which the author thinks are nonthreatening. The middle-aged White man expresses the same anger and hatred of the Cheerleaders. Representing the New South, a young Black college student and civil rights activist complains about the slowness of change. He wants to see significant change now, in his own lifetime.

Steinbeck excuses himself from taking sides in the racial struggles of the South. He only sees the surface and cannot fathom the depths that spawned such hatred. This part of America is more foreign to him than the most distant of foreign countries. All he knows is that the experience leaves him sick in his soul. He must return home to Long Island and quickly. The journey ends for Steinbeck in the South. He can no longer see America nor listen to the country's voice. He has had enough.

Style

Perspective

John Steinbeck has two qualities that enable him to writer the book. He is an established writer of fiction with a distinctive style, and he actually takes the three-month long trip across a good portion of the United States. Since he is a professional writer but not a journalist, he approaches the places, events and people from a more artistic viewpoint. Much of what he feels comes out in the writing, which is not objective journalism but also more interesting than simply reporting the facts.

Steinbeck admits to this subjectivity. He also supposes that any journey has a life of its own, which is defined by place, time and personality. His journey is very different from what Lewis and Clark experienced in the early 19th century. It is different from what he might experience following the same route at a different time.

This story is written for anybody wanting to know something about the author and the Untied States. Steinbeck observes that just about everybody wants to travel like he does, with a good portion of time, a solid camping rig, and a general idea of destination. The author speculates that this urge is something deeply human and perhaps unique to a population made up of immigrants and the children of immigrants.

Steinbeck has no intention of definitively surveying the United States and its diverse regions. A three-month journey, although encompassing more than the typical vacation, is not nearly enough time. A single person's lifetime may not be enough, and by the fluid nature of the cultures, the task may be impossible to accomplish. Once the subject is nailed down, it has already changed into something different. What Steinbeck offers is his experiences and impressions. They stand for what they are and what they cannot be, a representation but not the object itself.

Tone

Steinbeck's tone changes with his moods. Overall he strives to keep the tone approachable, neither overly bloated nor condescendingly simple. He assumes a level of literary experience in his readers or at least a curiosity about images and language that oftentimes resembles poetry.

Establishing mood takes subtle approaches as well. Steinbeck tends to use the language and imagery of the sea when he misses his home on Long Island the most. While fully engrossed in the immediate surroundings, the language and imagery stays true to the moment, such as describing the giant sequoia grove in which he camps.

The author freely anthropomorphizes places, things and animals. The most striking of these include the camper truck, named Rocinante after the horse in the novel Don Quixote, and Charley his dog. Landscapes take on personalities—inspiring, depressing,

frightening, joyful and so on. The giant redwoods are not only alive but ancient beings with consciousness of their own kind, too mysterious and foreign for most people to feel comfortable in their presence. The weather also takes on personalities which the author describes with various impacts. This all points to an unstated philosophy that the whole world, whether science considers the parts to be animate or inanimate, is alive.

Structure

The book consists of four parts with unnumbered and untitled chapters separated by page breaks. Parts One and Four represent the beginning and end of the journey. The journey itself is bisected through a time in Chicago that the author shares with his wife. What they do during this time is not important to the story but does interrupt the flow, and thus the separation of the journey into two parts.

Each chapter tells a story as if Steinbeck were relating his journey to friends afterwards. Some stories are longer than others, as is to be expected, and occasionally an expansion of the theme follows a story. Time stays generally to the chronological flow of the journey, but Steinbeck does jump ahead or backward where the jumps fit into the storytelling.

The overall sense of the journey moves from dread that it might not happen to actually hitting the road and becoming comfortable with the nomadic lifestyle. At the end of the journey, Steinbeck loses all sense of place. His primary goal is to return to his comfortable and familiar home after experiencing what he has while on the road.

The journey is a roughly circular path rather than a one-way situation such as emigrating from the Old World to the New World. The book structure follows this circular path, tying the beginning to the end with a single idea—all journeys are unique and take on lives of their own. People might have similar experiences if they take the same general route over the same amount of time, but the possibilities are still limitless.

Quotes

"The techniques of opening conversation are universal. I knew long ago and rediscovered that the best way to attract attention, help, and conversation is to be lost. A man who seeing his mother starving to death on a path kicks her in the stomach to clear the way, will cheerfully devote several hours of his time giving wrong directions to a total stranger who claims to be lost" (p. 9).

"The wind struck on the moment we were told it would, and ripped the water like a black sheet. It hammered like a fist. The whole top of an oak tree crashed down, grazing the cottage where we watched . The next gust stove one of the big windows in. I forced it back and drove wedges in top and bottom with a hand ax. Electric power and telephones went out with the first blast, as we knew they must. And eight-foot tides were predicted. We watched the wind rip at earth and sea like a surging pack of terriers. The trees plunged and bent like grasses, and the whipped water raised a cream of foam. A boat broke loose and tobogganed up on the shore, then another" (pp. 13-14).

"On the ferry deck the sun was sharp and the coast of the mainland only an hour away. A lovely sloop stood away from us, her genoa set like a curving scarf, and all the coastal craft trudged up the Sound or wallowed heavily toward New York. Then a submarine slipped to the surface half a mile away, and the day lost part of its brightness. Farther away another dark creature slashed through the water, and another; of course they are based in New London, and this is their home. And perhaps they are keeping the world's peace with this venom. I wish I could like submarines, for then I might find them beautiful, but they are designed for destruction, and while they may explore and chart the sea bottom, and draw new trade lines under the Arctic ice, their main purpose is threat. And I remember too well crossing the Atlantic on a troop ship and knowing that somewhere on the way the dark things lurked searching for us with their single-stalk eyes. Somehow the light goes bleak for me when I see them and remember burned men pulled from the oil-slicked sea. And now submarines are armed with mass murder, our silly, only way of deterring mass murder" (p. 21).

"I soon discovered that if a wayfaring stranger wishes to eavesdrop on a local population the places for him to slip in and hold his peace are bars and churches. But some New England towns don't have bars, and church is only on Sunday. A good alternative is the roadside restaurant where men gather for breakfast before going to work or going hunting. To find these places inhabited, one must get up very early. And there is a drawback even to this. Early-rising men not only do not talk much to strangers, they barely talk to one another. Breakfast conversation is limited to a series of laconic grunts. They natural New England taciturnity reaches its glorious perfection at breakfast" (pp. 33-34).

"Strange how one person can saturate a room with vitality, with excitement. Then there are others, and this dame was one of them, who can drain off energy and joy, can suck pleasure dry and get no sustenance from it. Such people spread a grayness in the air about them" (pp. 46-47).

"In establishing contact with strange people, Charley is my ambassador. I release him, and he drifts toward the objective, or rather to whatever the objective may be preparing for diner. I retrieve him so that he will not be a nuisance to my neighbors—et voila! A child can do the same thing, but a dog is better" (p. 65).

"But this Vermont God cared enough about me to go to a lot of trouble kicking the hell out of me. He put my sins in a new perspective. Whereas they had been small and mean and nasty and best forgotten, this minister gave them some size and bloom and dignity. I hadn't been thinking very well of myself for some years, but if my sins had this dimension there was some pride left. I wasn't a naughty child but a first rate sinner, and I was going to catch it" (pp. 78-79).

"The guardian of the lake was a lonely man, the more so because he had a wife. He showed me her picture in a plastic shield in his wallet, a prettyish blond girl trying her best to live up to the pictures in the magazines, a girl of products, home permanents, shampoos, rinses, skin conditioners. She hated being out in what she called the Sticks, longed for the great and gracious life in Toledo or South Bend. Her only company was found in the shiny pages of Charm and Glamour. Eventually she would sulk her way to success. Her husband would get a job in some great clanging organism of progress, and they would live happily ever after. All this came through in small, oblique spurts in his conversation. She knew exactly what she wanted and he didn't, but his want would ache in him all his life. After he drove away in his jeep I lived his life for him and it put a mist of despair on me. He wanted his pretty little wife and he wanted something else and he couldn't have both" (p. 112).

"I know it is a shame that I had never seen the noble twin cities of St. Paul and Minneapolis, but how much greater a disgrace that I still haven't, although I went through them. As I approached, a great surf of traffic engulfed me, waves of station wagons, rip tides of roaring trucks. I wonder why it is that when I plan a route too carefully it goes to pieces, whereas if I blunder along in blissful ignorance aimed in a fancied direction I get through with no trouble. In the early morning I had studied maps, drawn a careful line along the way I wished to go. I still have that arrogant plan—into St. Paul on Highway 10, then gently across the Mississippi. The S-curve in the Mississippi here would give me three crossings of the river. After this pleasant jaunt I meant to go through Golden Valley, drawn by its name. That seems simple enough, and perhaps it can be done, but not by me" (pp. 128-129).

"I had parked well away from the road and from any traffic for my time of rest and recount. I am serious about this. I did not put aside my sloth for the sake of a few amusing anecdotes. I came with the wish to learn what America is like. And I wasn't sure I was learning anything. I found I was talking aloud to Charley. He likes the idea but the practice makes him sleepy" (p. 140).

"I went into a state of flight, running to get away from the unearthly landscape. And then the late afternoon changed everything. As the sun angled, the buttes and coulees, the cliffs and sculptured hills and ravines lost their burned and dreadful look and glowed with yellow and rich browns and a hundred variations of red and silver gray, all picked

out by streaks of coal black. Is was so beautiful that I stopped near a thicket of dwarfed and wind-warped cedars and junipers, and once stopped I was caught, trapped in color and dazzled by the clarity of the light. Against the descending sun the battlements were dark and clean-lined, while to the east, where the uninhibited light poured slantwise, the strange landscape shouted with color. And the night, far from being frightful, was lovely beyond thought, for the stars were close, and although there was no moon the starlight made a silver glow in the sky. The air cut the nostrils with dry frost. And for pure pleasure I collected a pile of dry dead cedar branches and built a small fire just to smell the perfume of the burning wood and to hear the excited crackle of the branches. My fire made a dome of yellow light over me, and nearby I heard the screech owl hunting and a barking of coyotes, not howling but the short chuckling bark of the dark of the moon. This is one of the few places I have every seen where the night was friendlier than the day. And I can easily see how people are driven back to the Bad Lands" (pp. 156-157).

"I took the little pills and paid my bill and got out of there. It wasn't that this veterinary didn't like animals. I think he didn't like himself, and when that is so the subject usually must find an area for dislike outside himself. Else he would have to admit his self-contempt.
"On the other hand, I yield to no one in my distaste for the self-styled dog-lover, the kind who heaps up his frustrations and makes a dog carry them around. Such a dog-lover talks baby talk to mature and thoughtful animals, and attributes his own sloppy characteristics to them until the dog becomes in his mind an alter ego. Such people, it seems to me, in what they imagine to be kindness, are capable of inflicting long and lasting tortures on an animal, denying it any of its natural desires and fulfillments until a dog of weak character breaks down and becomes the fat, asthmatic, befurred bundle of neurosis. When a stranger addresses Charley in baby talk, Charley avoids him. For Charley is not a human; he's a dog, and he likes it that way. He feels that he is a first-rate dog and has no wish to be a second-rate human. When the alcoholic vet touched him with his unsteady, inept hand, I saw the look of veiled contempt in Charley's eyes. He knew about the man, I thought, and perhaps the doctor knew he knew. And maybe that was the man's trouble. It would be very painful to know that your patients had no faith in you" (p. 179).

"At night, the darkness is black—only stright up a patch of gray and an occasional star. And there's a breathing in the black, for these huge things that control the day and inhabit the night are living things and have presence, and perhaps feeling, and, somewhere in deep-down perception, perhaps communication. I have had lifelong association with these things. (Odd that the word 'trees' does not apply.) I can accept them and their power and their age because I was early exposed to them. On the other hand, people lacking such experience begin to have a feeling of uneasiness here, of danger, of being shut in, enclosed and overwhelmed. It is not only the size of these redwoods but their strangeness that frightens them. And why not? For these are the last remaining members of a race that flourished over four continents as far back in geologic time as the upper Jurassic period. Fossils of these ancients have been found dating from the Cretaceous era while in the Eocene and Miocene they were spread over England and Europe and America. And then the glaciers moved down and wiped the

Titans out beyond recovery. And only these few are left—a stunning memory of what the world was like once long ago. Can it be that we do not love to be reminded that we are very young and callow in a world that was old when we came into it? And could there be a strong resistance to the certainty that a living world will continue its stately way when we no longer inhabit it?" (p. 193).

"This journey had been like a full dinner of many courses, set before a starving man. At first he tries to eat all of everything, but as the meal progresses he finds he must forgo some things to keep his appetite and his taste buds functioning" (p. 211).

"He lifted Charley in his arms and carried him out and laid him in the front seat of the convertible, and the tufted tail twittered against the leather. He was content and confident, and so was I. And that is how I happened to stay around Amarillo for a while. To complete the episode, I picked up Charley four days later, completely well. The doctor gave me pills to give at intervals while traveling so that the ailment never came back. There's absolutely nothing to take the place of a good man" (p. 235).

"Thus it remains that I am basically unfitted to take sides in the racial conflict. I must admit that cruelty and force exerted against weakness turns me sick with rage, but this would be equally true in the treatment of any weak by the strong" (p. 247).

Topics for Discussion

What does Steinbeck learn about America during his trip?

Describe one good person and one bad person Steinbeck meets during his journey.

What are the warnings that Steinbeck's friends offer before his trip?

Why do people want to go on a journey like Steinbeck's?

List and describe the moods that the author goes through during his journey.

Of what importance is Charley during the trip?

How does Steinbeck feel about the Cheerleaders?

Why does the author not shoot the coyotes in the Mojave Desert?

What does Steinbeck find unique about Texans?

Compare and contrast the America that Steinbeck experiences in 1960 to what America is today.