

It is Grandeur and Warmth:

Steinbeck, the American

by

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For Annie, with love.

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Even in the vacuum of writing, visible are the thoughtful breadcrumbs of others, littered throughout my words. I want to follow each of those breadcrumbs. Recognized here are the considerations of those who kept me from getting lost in my own forest. For patience: Professor Scotti Parrish, the thorough; Professor Scott Lyons, whose attitude and kindness I wish to emulate; Professor Cathy Sanok too, for her careful planning. My cohort as well, a composition of individuals all smarter than myself who challenged me so often on my assumptions. For presence: Issa the cat, who likes windowsills. I think of, too, the many relationships that have dissolved over the course of this past year: I know that we are distant, but you are here, too. To Abigail, for her kindness. To Megan, for listening. To DeVante, for having all the heart. To Annie, for more than you understand. Amidst a personal unravelling of my life in the most graceful implosion possible – both pandemic and intimate – I recognize the abstractions that kept me thoughtful and sane. Ink staining my hands. A cabin in Onaway. Black coffee. The color blue. Forget-me-nots. Gypsy grass. Books unfinished. Many objects which maintained the sluggish revolve of my life. This chapter of my life has ended, and it will be at the ink of my pen. When the lights go out, the only thing we can spare is love. We are all mythic.

## ABSTRACT

In this thesis, I will analyze the three novels of John Steinbeck's "American" trilogy -- The Winter of Our Discontent, Travels with Charley: In Search of America, and America & Americans -- to understand how Steinbeck reaffirms ideas of the American spirit, dream, and identity, and perpetuates a specific national myth. As a paramount writer of the American canon -- itself, creating a kind of American myth -- it is worth understanding Steinbeck's conception of what an American is. Likewise, it also gives a very interesting framework for understanding and reflecting on how an ever-diversifying America fits into, subverts, or engages with national myth in eras of discontentment. I assert that the American trilogy is a kind of thesis of Steinbeck's conception of the American. Winter explores the presence of a problem, the perversion of the American Dream as it becomes materialistic, greedy, and dependent on rootedness, all of which defy the old, true American Dream, of completing the highest achievement according to one's own innate ability. The novel follows Ethan Allen Hawley, a grocery clerk and descendent of a long-gone east coast aristocracy. Ethan ruins the lives of friends and family in order to achieve wealth, thereby failing to participate in any dream at all. Consequently, Travels is the data-collecting for the problem that Winter had established. In Travels, Steinbeck's fictional travelogue memoir, he rediscovers the true American spirit by participating in it. This American spirit is the frontier, the active pursuit of the unknown. Frederick Jackson Turner's "Frontier" thesis is used for the basis of this, providing an elastic definition, as well as an assertion of the interwovenness of America and the frontier, which is a fundamental principle for Steinbeck. Steinbeck examines and observes "types" of Americans, asserting that Americans are animals whose mannerisms and particularities are dependent on both the region and the country. Ultimately, Steinbeck will come to the conclusion that the true American spirit is one of movement, where people are one with both nature and civilization, seeking out their own unknown. Americans is the organization and presentation of the findings in Travels. In the book, Steinbeck writes a series of essays, fully and thoroughly describing the ailments of the American spirit and how Americans may fix this. Steinbeck asserts that America suffers from having too much, by wasting, and by having lost touch with the American Dream. He says Americans are controlled by corporations, whose lives are full of waste, and the only thing they care about is status. These wants are all a false American dream because it is against the American spirit he witnessed in Travels. Emerging from the hard-won struggle of the Great Depression and World War II, Americans created leisure over equality, something for which they don't yet have the proper national maturity. Steinbeck believes Americans have wants, but no needs, nothing to struggle for. As a result, Americans have become greedy, materialistic, and wasteful. The way Americans solve this is by returning to the true American spirit, and participating in the frontier. Americans should give up their roots and material, seeking out instead the unknown and being one with nature and civilization. The photographs in Americans detail the America Steinbeck hopes for: a diverse, hopeful, and frontier-driven America. Collectively, I believe the trilogy argues for a return to the frontier myth as a national identity, adopting it for our own era. I also believe this does not go far enough, turning to an analysis of Woody Guthrie's "This Land is Your Land" as the basis for an assertion that Steinbeck fails to realize the true enemy is Capitalism.

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## INTRODUCTION

In nothing are we so paradoxical as in our passionate belief in our own myths (Americans and Americans 33).

So writes John Steinbeck in the final installment of his American trilogy. This quote comes early on in Steinbeck's book-length essay collection, entitled America and Americans. In this essay, titled, "Paradox and the Dream," Steinbeck ruminates on how what Americans believe they are contradicts what they actually do. By virtue of the American mythology -- coupled with our passionate belief in that mythology -- Americans think themselves handy, real go-getters, hunters, capable, and unique. But Steinbeck believes Americans aren't any of that, neither capable nor handy. Notice how Steinbeck uses "we" and "our" here, indicting all Americans in on his own observations and understanding of the innate American nature -- we are all passionate about our myths. Steinbeck's tendency to attribute widespread generalities is an unstable, troubling viewpoint. Yet, it is also the very cornerstone for his understanding of the American spirit, the theme at the heart of his entire body of work, from Grapes of Wrath to East of Eden. The trouble is not that Steinbeck believes Americans aspire to myths that they fall short of. It's that he believes Americans have to reclaim and return to those myths.

Steinbeck's infatuation with the frontier is a thin thread some scholars have traced through his earlier, better-known works, such those written during the Great Depression. "In a writing career spanning forty years," Christopher Busch writes, "Steinbeck tells and retells the narrative of America's continual encounter with its frontier heritage" (Busch 304). Indeed, this is a view shared and built on by many other Steinbeck scholars. There are facts, of course, that contribute to the themes of Steinbeck's early work. First, there

is the American. Writing during the Great Depression, Steinbeck wrote about struggling, working Americans. Examples of these are found easily in Steinbeck's most notable works -- for example, the wayward Okies of The Grapes of Wrath and the two desolate ranchers in Of Mice and Men. The former novel has widely been accepted into the American canon. Even as Steinbeck was writing, scholars were aware of the importance and impact of Steinbeck's notion of the American. In 1941, Frederic I. Carpenter published a then-contemporary look at the American author's dealings with the American spirit. Carpenter wrote that "chronologically, his stories describe the pageant of the American West" (Carpenter 454), but goes further to suggest that that chronology, at the same time, follows the logical development of the "successive phases of the American dream" (Carpenter 455). Which is to say that Steinbeck's body of work details the various intricacies of the American spirit. The American dream is connected to the pageantry of the West, which is itself an encounter with frontier heritage.

The American Dream is a difficult concept to nail down, but it too is connected to the frontier, especially for Steinbeck. Historian James Truslow Adams coined the American Dream in his 1931 book, The Epic of America. He called it a dream

of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement.

[...] It is not a dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable (Adams 404).

Adams's American Dream is a simple one, in which Americans have the opportunity to -- and a structure through which -- they may succeed. Likewise, Adams's Dream is quite an individualistic one, where individuals may succeed only so

far as they are innately capable of doing so. This is important because it reinforces individualism, echoing the frontier. These frontier characters, coupled with Adams's resistance to material wealth, fit well within Steinbeck's methodological framework, and this definition will be used in this thesis.

The scholars who trace the frontier through Steinbeck's works also draw from Philip J. West's essay, "Steinbeck's 'The Leader of the People': A Crisis in Style." The essay goes deeper into Steinbeck's frontier musings, connecting it not only to Steinbeck's subject matter and narrative technique, but to the tone of his writing. "Steinbeck's style and tone are not," West writes, "controlled so much by a sense of genre as by the theme: the passing of the frontier and with it the American heroic age" (West 137). In a way, this repositions Steinbeck's relationship with frontier heritage into the personal, something woven into his writing style. Of course, more often than not, critics who trace this frontier thread in Steinbeck's work "either disparage the presence of frontier mythology in Steinbeck's work or strive to demonstrate his distance from traditional historical-mythological approaches to the westward movement" (Busch 14-15). There are some complexities to this idea. The frontier is a fraught idea, with complications that push it into racist territory. This work seeks not to analyze the morality of Steinbeck's infatuation with frontier heritage, but rather considers the implications of Steinbeck's conception of the American spirit, as well as the methods and ramifications of the way he may encourage kinds of national myths.

Instead of looking to Steinbeck's earlier, landmark works, this thesis will instead focus on the American trilogy, published at the very end of Steinbeck's life: The Winter of Our Discontent, Travels with Charley: In Search of America, and America and Americans. Each of these three books are different genres; novel, travelogue, and essay collection, respectively. Likewise, all

three books are written by a Steinbeck who is much different from the Steinbeck of youth. Steinbeck was, to use his own word, discontented with the America around him. As Douglas Downland puts it,

The issues he had confronted during the Great Depression and the Second World War seemed easier to grasp than the issues of the Cold War and the Vietnam War that followed. His vision of America lurched toward extremes, becoming both pessimistic and patriotic, both cynical and idealistic.

This quote is a captivating one, and truly captures the scope of Steinbeck's confusion. His best works were written under desperation, under the pressure of deep poverty. World War II united Americans against an identifiable, common enemy, one they could -- and still do -- collectively understand as truly horrifying. The 50s and 60s in which Steinbeck found himself confused were wildly different. Instead of poverty, Americans now had the option of leisure. Instead of Nazis, Americans were fighting a hidden, ideological enemy that looked so much like the workers Steinbeck wrote about in his earlier novels.

Steinbeck's discontentment matters. It matters because Steinbeck's position in the American canon means that not only are his novels important in the building of a national identity, but his personal ideas and reasonings are, too. Steinbeck's American trilogy is ultimately a foundational series on the American spirit, advocating for the true American, much the way Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics offers a way of living given his limited understanding of the human condition. Steinbeck offers an analysis of his present, American condition. He sees it as ailing, and only by reclaiming and reconnecting with frontier heritage can we fix these problems.

This brings us to the question of the frontier -- what it is and what it says about the American spirit. The landmark work on the frontier is Frederick Jackson Turner's "Frontier Thesis," "The Significance of the Frontier in

American History" written in 1893, following the U.S. Census Bureau's declaration that the frontier was closed. Turner boldly proclaimed that "the existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward, explain American development" (Frontier 1). These words are reiterated in more detail throughout the essay, but what Turner means is that Americans and the Frontier were created at the same time, that "the frontier promoted the formation of a composite nationality for the American people" (Turner 22). Further, Turner connected the frontier to qualities he believed were distinctly American: the "restless, nervous energy"; the "dominant individualism"; the "buoyancy and exuberance which comes with freedom" (Frontier 37). Turner's work had a profound impact on the American consciousness and produced many scholars who analyzed aspects of American life and history through Turner's frontier lens.

However, there are many problems with Turner's view, and since its publication, many scholars have come forward to refute Turner's thesis, or to propose an alternative history. Critics argued that Turner and his frontier analysis "ignores the destruction the westering process brought to the landscape and to the native peoples, as well as the violence inherent in Wild West and Indian War mythology" (Busch 14). Frankly, I am in agreement with the criticism of Turner, as I feel his view is insufficient and racially divisive.

Yet, Steinbeck's frontier is a different kind of frontier, one more eco-centered and inclusive. "Steinbeck depicts the frontier experience," Busch writes, "as a collage of mythic effort and achievement, rampant materialism and cruel injustice" (Busch 21). It is not Turner's frontier, which he unfortunately calls "the meeting point between savagery and civilization" (Frontier 3). Because of the racist complications of Turner's definition, it will be forfeited here, in favor of defining the frontier as the unknown. This

is a more accurate definition that not only captures the original meaning of Turner's analysis -- tracing how colonist's interactions with an unknown land contributed to the American identity -- as well as allows the term to have a more elastic definition, one that can be applied to more kinds of people, the way Steinbeck will attribute his own conceptions of the American spirit. This definition can be found in Turner's writing too, as he calls the term "an elastic one, and for our purposes does not need sharp definition" (Frontier 3). Because the frontier created Americans -- and likewise, Americans created the frontier, as it wouldn't have existed were there not an unknown in which they could traverse -- the two are concurrent. At the closing of the frontier, the frontier continues on, transcended from a physical space into an idea, becoming the qualities Turner said were distinctly American.

Steinbeck himself is an interesting, but quiet and introspective, individual, whose upbringing and thoughts are worth considering, as it contributes to an overall Steinbeck, which further contributes to the composite conception American spirit. Raised in Salinas, California, the frontier heritage was something Steinbeck participated in, even as a boy. His father, John Steinbeck Sr., was a man with a hard look to him, but was, in fact, "a gentle, quiet man whose kindness came less from religiousness than from his nature" (Benson 443). Indeed, "the Steinbecks lived in town, but the father was a farmer at heart, usually keeping a cow [...], pigs, and horses, and he always had a large garden" (Benson 443). In all likelihood, as Benson argues, this atmosphere likely contributed to Steinbeck's understanding of the world around him and what he believed his country was:

Not only did [Steinbeck Sr.] grow vegetables, but it was his pride to be able to have flowers all year long to place on the dining room table. He taught all his children how to garden and brought them up to have love

and respect for animals. He also taught them, out of his old-country, German heritage, respect for the land and a sense of conservation -- nothing should be wasted (Benson 443).

There are a few different kinds of frontier heritage seen in Steinbeck's childhood. The first worth noting is the presence of nature. Even though the family lived in town, animals coexisted in that space, as well. Likewise, foliage filled their home, reinforcing the presence and importance of nature throughout the entire year. The conservation aspect is something that crops up quite a few times in Steinbeck's own writing. As will be understood, the analysis of both Travels and Americans demonstrate Steinbeck's passion for nature and its beauty. However, there is a bigger frontier myth at play here, which is the agrarian myth. Busch traces this myth throughout some of Steinbeck's early works, writing that the myth

idealizes self-sufficient farming in a second stage "middle region" which mediates between the wilderness and the city (Smith 123-4). The agrarian myth celebrates a simple, virtuous life close to beneficent nature (Busch 9).

The agrarian myth is quite present in Steinbeck's childhood, as his home exists in that middle region between nature and the city. Likewise, the agrarian myth champions self-sufficiency and reliance on nature, two foundational components of frontier mythology. In this way, the frontier myth is built not only into American culture, but into Steinbeck as well.

Following the Great Depression and Second World War, Steinbeck began to become concerned with a kind of cultural degradation. Many of his letters from the 50s and 60s express a significant amount of anxiety and frustration over the state of the American spirit. In one letter, the author wrote that there was

a general immorality which pervades every level of our national life and perhaps the life of the whole world. It is very hard to raise boys to love and respect virtue and learning when the tools of success are chicanery, treachery, self-interest, laziness and cynicism or when charity is deductible, the courts venal, the highest public official placid, vain, slothful and illiterate (Letters 653).

Steinbeck also believes he is not the only one suffering from this discontentedness, saying "I am far from alone in my worry. My mail is full of it -- letters of anxiety. The newspapers splash so much of it that perhaps we have stopped seeing" (Americans 171).

As mentioned before, the work of previous critics who traced the frontier through Steinbeck's work have focused on his earlier works, but this thesis is heavily interested in the Steinbeck of later years. The anxious, jaded Steinbeck of the above quotes is not the same as the author who crafted heroes from desperation. Steinbeck himself knew this, writing, "I'm not the young writer of promise any more" (Letters 802). This version of Steinbeck is one who is reflecting on his long career, his position within American culture, and his idea of what this country is. Through that discontentment and nervousness, Steinbeck writes a new, solidified American chapter, one that capstones his body of work. At the same time, Steinbeck's thorough, thoughtful, and individual exploration of the American spirit provides a new framework through which Americans as people -- not just scholars -- can understand, participate in, and build on both the American canon and their own myths.

This thesis will argue that John Steinbeck's American trilogy acts as a thesis, where Winter is the problem, Travels collects data, and Americans is the organization of Steinbeck's observations. I will argue that Steinbeck uses his thesis to perpetuate the idea that America is in an era of both moral and

identity crises, arguing that the only way to fix these problems are by reconnecting with Steinbeck's conception of true Americanness -- which is driven by the frontier -- based on innately American qualities. I argue that Steinbeck repurposes the frontier myth as a way to begin a kind of cultural regeneration, hoping to create a morally prosperous America where all Americans can participate and reclaim national myths.

This will first begin by analyzing Winter, specifically in relation to the American Dream. Using Adams's idea of the original American Dream, I will argue that Steinbeck uses the novel to demonstrate that the American Dream has become perverted by material greed and immorality. I will demonstrate that the novel, which follows Ethan Allen Hawley as he attempts to reclaim status and fortune, argues that immorality and greed like that of Ethan is objectively against the American Dream, per Steinbeck's conception of it.

Following this, I will analyze Travels, focusing on how Steinbeck analyzes Americans. I argue that Steinbeck understands Americans as a species, of which there are different types, or breeds, all relative to their region. The animalistic lens Steinbeck uses may be reductive and shortsighted, but it does allow him to make broad claims about large swaths of people. Likewise, it plays into the notion of survival, which is a cornerstone of Steinbeck's understanding of the frontier myth. Over the course of his travels, Steinbeck sees both true Americanness and immorality, ultimately arguing that the American spirit is one that exists concurrently with nature and civilization, but expending neither of these.

Finally, I will arrive at Americans, which I argue aims to both find the root of what Steinbeck understands the problem with America is, as well as solidifies his advocacy for the frontier myth. In this section, I will demonstrate the ways Steinbeck reinforces frontier heritage. First, Steinbeck

details what ails his present America: greed, immorality, waste. I will connect these things to the immorality of Ethan in Winter. I will also illustrate how Steinbeck's belief in the necessity of struggle, and belief that Americans perfected leisure before equality, harkens back to the frontier traced through his earlier work. This survival also references the animalistic Americans from Travels. Here, I will point to where Steinbeck prescribes his treatment: an America more in touch with the frontier, by channeling their innately American qualities to be one of both civilization and of nature, pursuing an unknown. This leads into an analysis of some photos included in Americans, which I argue represent an inclusive, frontier-driven American -- Steinbeck's dream.

With a country that is ever-changing -- and is right now, as I write this, in a moment of immense struggle with a crippling pandemic -- questions of national identity must arise. If there is a canon that Americans agree represents them, it is worth considering the ways in which those contributing authors understand their subjects and their culture. It is a study of the reinforcement of national myths. The relationship Americans have with their myths, their national identity, and with how they're represented will be in fluctuation. The America in which Steinbeck was reared, found himself confused in, and the one in which I write now are all different. But even against the evolving backdrop of progressive dissent and the terror of an enigmatic virus, one thing is certain: we are Americans. It's worth understanding what that means. Steinbeck will lead us on a journey into the forever unknown that is the true Americanness, if such a thing exists. But he leaves us with something like a map.

CHAPTER I

## THE DREAM

My great-grandfather decided to skip town before the soldiers came and annihilated everyone. He was raising a lot of hell around the house about the soldiers coming, making small escape plans, preparing his family for their imminent destruction. He was a man who read the news for chrissake, he listened to the goddamn radio. This was inevitable, he could feel it. He was having dreams of his family's home caught up in a smoldering blaze, the whole town filled with fire where once there was quiet.

His family didn't agree with his predictions. He was really starting to come off as only paranoid, like his mushy brain was being weighed down by doomsday thoughts. But to him, the soldiers weren't getting any farther away. He had to leave. It looked like it was just going to be him.

My great-grandfather packed the essentials: a change of clothes, some lunch, and a pitchfork. He walked along the side of the road, pitchfork over his shoulder. Just as he predicted, the soldiers did in fact come. They often stopped him, too. They'd ask him what his business was. He'd tell them, "I'm going to tend that field over there," and motion in the direction of the nearest field. He walked along the side of the road, motioning to every field in sight to any soldiers who asked, all the way to a border where he met some more soldiers. They asked him what his business was, and he said something about tending a field. They also asked him what his citizenship was, and he might have said something about being "German" instead of "Polish."

Somehow, he found himself in Langenburg, Germany. Somehow, he found himself married to a woman with a child. Somehow, he had to figure out how to tell her who he actually was, which was a bit tough because her uncle was an SS

officer. But she understood and she loved him. He packed a bag and worked on a boat that took him to Canada. He bounced around Nova Scotia and New Brunswick for a while, until his wife and stepson got on the Queen Elizabeth II one October. They docked in New York Harbor and took a train together to Detroit. His whole family got their American citizenship. His stepson retired from Cadillac with a generous retirement package. By all standards, he successfully fulfilled the American Dream. And, of course, just as he predicted, his entire family was slaughtered by the Nazis in Poland.

To dream is to acknowledge the possibility of an idea never being fully realized. Yet, for Americans, the notion of a dream is embedded deeply within their cultural identity. To be an American is to be inherently participating in the American Dream, even despite the dispute over its existence or plausibility. This American Dream has meant many different things to many different Americans. But in the early 1960s, when Steinbeck finds himself travelling across the country to understand it -- and when my great-grandfather was working in an automotive factory in Detroit -- Steinbeck believed the American Dream was in jeopardy, weighed down by materialistic desires and the yearning for attention. At its heart, this is the premise of Steinbeck's The Winter of Our Discontent. The discontent of the title is a discontentedness with the perversion of the American Dream, with the loss of an intrinsic frontier. This loss is the cause of a dependency on rootedness, on status, on social capital.

First, before any of Ethan Hawley's all-too-American plight is addressed, we must first define the dream he spends the novel chasing. When the American Dream is mentioned, images of an almost nuclear paradise come to mind: the two-story house with the two-car garage; two kids and a labradoodle. You might also picture white people, and that adds a sigh-filled layer of dull

resignation. Perhaps it is partially because of this that it seems so closely related to the idea of the frontier. It is a defined arena of historic white-success, canonized forever in the American myth, hands clean of the help of the forgotten (non-white) others.

What we find is that Steinbeck is very concerned about the American Dream, just as much as he's concerned about Americans. To him, the state of the Dream is a diagnosis of the American soul. Amid the backdrop of nonstop socio-political turbulence that was the 1960s, Steinbeck predicts a grave diagnosis. The Dream is in shambles. We as Americans are in shambles. We have lost something -- that something being our internal frontier spirit -- that which makes us deeply American.

If the American Dream is a constant, something consistently and permanently within Americans, then Steinbeck's writing concerning Americans and the idea of an American-ness would inherently be speaking to and in conversation with the omnipresence of the American Dream. Therefore, taking the Introduction's definition of the American Dream -- loosely defined as the highest achievement per one's natural capability -- it's worth considering what dream and what myth is being reinforced.

Frederic I. Carpenter presents some possibilities in his essay "John Steinbeck: American Dreamer". Interestingly enough, Carpenter's essay was published in 1941, an easy twenty years before Steinbeck released The Winter of Our Discontent. Carpenter presents the interesting theory that Steinbeck's body of work "illustrates the logical development of an idea: they describe successive phases of the American dream" (455). However, Carpenter feels that Steinbeck's early novels failed to fully realize that dream, instead presenting failures of the American Dream. A notable example, The Pastures of Heaven, features characters who find themselves at odds with nature. Only one character

"seems wholly admirable" because "he is child both of nature and of civilization" (Carpenter 495). The frontier is, in a limited sense, the meeting between man and nature. Because of this, it presents one of the many ways the American Dream is tangled up with the frontier.

The importance of the above observation is that Steinbeck's work advocates for and "describes the individualistic survival of the old American dream" (Carpenter 463). Steinbeck's American Dream is also the frontier. "Security, independence, a piece of land, the pioneer's dream and once almost the American reality," Carpenter writes, "but now it's 'just in their head.' This is the American tragedy" (464). This is Carpenter's most explicit description of Steinbeck's vision of the American Dream. Again, it sounds much like the frontier. Carpenter even mentions pioneers in his description. This is the "old" American Dream that Carpenter mentioned, the one whose survival Steinbeck means to ensure. Another thing worth understanding about Steinbeck's American Dream is the relationship between an "old" American Dream and the fluidity of that dream. If this is the old dream, then it seems fair to say that the American Dream at a different point and time would not look like that dream. In fact, one can likely come to the conclusion that the American Dream of the 1940s in which Carpenter was writing -- an era dominated by the Greatest Generation, an era of deep poverty, triumph, and reinforcement of an American spirit -- is likely not at all recognizable when the social upheaval of the 1960s comes into focus. By the 40s, the dream Steinbeck was advocating for was already an old one, and one that obviously gets older by the time Steinbeck finds himself discontented.

One of the things Carpenter makes a point of expressing is that a hero in a Steinbeck novel is fundamentally different than the protagonist. A hero is someone who submits fully to the American Dream -- and upholds it -- while a

protagonist could easily be one who fails at that dream. "These 'heroes' achieve significance because they give expression to the American dream in its simplest form," Carpenter writes on 464. "They become heroic because they refuse to deny their dream." For Carpenter, the most heroic Steinbeck character (of the time, that is) is Tom Joad of The Grapes of Wrath. Tom Joad is a hero because he fully upholds the old American Dream, and brings it to fruition. Carpenter builds on this, saying

Tom Joad leads a new westward migration. He rediscovers America, and recognizes that its land is not being used nor its opportunities kept open. He becomes a leader of the new pioneers, spiritually as well as physically (466).

Tom Joad's a real American because he is a pioneer, leading the people to an unknown land. He is a man of both nature and people. Therefore, he is a hero, if only an American (and Steinbeckian) one.

This brings us to Steinbeck's The Winter of Our Discontent. Published in 1961, the novel follows Ethan Allen Hawley: a father, a lover, a grocer. Most importantly, though, he's the descendent of a once-powerful family in New Baytown, where Ethan lives. Only, the Hawleys are not as powerful as they once were. In fact, the last thing they used to own -- the town grocery store -- went bankrupt, and they had to sell it to an immigrant. Now Ethan works at that same grocery store, but as a meager grocery clerk. This is a thorn in Ethan's side. This is a thorn in the side of his wife, and even his children. Ethan feels an intense amount of shame at having this incredible legacy, and yet nothing to show for it. He feels like a failure, and he's certain his family sees him as one. With his back seemingly against the wall, Ethan takes matters into his own hands to elevate both his status and his wealth. He does away with the integrity and morality he attempted to instill in his children. With the

help of others, Ethan quickly learns how to accept bribes, to be more ruthless. In a matter of time, Ethan quickly comes to control the underground marketplace. Ethan gets his boss deported, he even manages to convince his childhood friend to drink himself to death, but still Ethan isn't happy, having corrupted his own family. In the end, Ethan strongly considers killing himself. This is the basic plot of the novel, but it isn't the whole story.

Ethan's struggles are rooted in the fact that he ignores the old American Dream for the new one, focusing instead on material and status, and forgoing morality to obtain them, which leads to his downfall. If these were ideas in Ethan's own head, one could fault the individual. But instead, Ethan's notions of success are ideas that come from other people, fully demonstrating not only how influential society is overall, but how Ethan is a model of the American, whose society and environment is perpetuating the perversion of the American Dream. It is reasonable to say that Ethan is middle class. Working as a grocer does not afford him a life of luxury. This of course bothers him, as he mentions to Mr. Baker, a local banker, that "it's the first time in history a Hawley was ever a clerk in a guinea grocery" (Winter 13). This is evocative of the American symptom. Ethan is frustrated. He feels like he is owed something, and he was robbed that by this immigrant that now owns his family's grocery store.

It's clear that if anything matters to all characters in this novel, it's money. The conversations Ethan has with his neighbors, his boss, customers -- many of these revolve around money, as if the townspeople are putting ideas in his head, reminding him that he is lower than them. For example, early on, Mr. Baker comes to Ethan and says of some money that Ethan's wife, Mary, inherited, "Well, it's just lying in the bank. Ought to be invested. Like to talk to you about that. Your money should be working" (Winter 13). Of course, Ethan

protests. He can't invest that money, his family needs it in case they go under like he did after he came out of the war, as Ethan tells Mr. Baker on page 13. But this bug in Ethan's head has taken root. This isn't the only time that Mr. Baker brings up the importance of money. Much later on, Ethan's friend Joey Morphy, another banker, tells Ethan "we all bow down to the Great God Currency" (Winter 132). Not longer after, Mr. Baker tells Ethan, "your only entrance is money" (Winter 144). In this way, the importance of money is reiterated, maintaining money's presence as a consistent antagonist against Ethan.

The antagonism of wealth is certainly wreaking havoc in Ethan's own mind. As Mr. Baker tries to convince Ethan that he ought to invest Mary's money, Ethan seethes, telling Mr. Baker,

suppose I get sick and can't sweep this goddam sidewalk? Course you don't understand. It's slow. It rots out your guts. I can't think beyond next month's payment on the refrigerator. I hate my job and I'm scared I'll lose it. How could you understand that (Winter 14).

In this scene, Steinbeck juxtaposes Ethan against Mr. Baker, each as archetypes. Ethan is the American spirit -- weak, confused, he "is the microcosm to his macrocosm America, grotesque and shrunken in on itself" (Heavilin 103). Indeed, he "represents the psychically wounded Every American in this novel, which Steinbeck's opening address to readers<sup>1</sup> maintains 'is about a large part of America today'" (Heavilin 103). Mr. Baker is the temptation of material and money, preying on the anxieties Ethan carries, a parallel made especially obvious by Mr. Baker's profession. Mr. Baker presses Ethan, attempting to sway him to invest the money rather than sit on it. But Ethan is working to survive. Losing the money would be dangerous to his family, and the

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<sup>1</sup> "Readers seeking to identify the fictional people and places here described would do better to inspect their own communities and search their own hearts, for this book is about a large part of America today."

temptation is a cruel one.

Ethan gets near constant reinforcement of the meagerness of his class and finances even at home. Rushing into the house, Mary tells Ethan that she has "so much to tell [him]. Can't wait" (Winter 29). Mary's own enthusiasm gets Ethan excited. But when she returns, she tells him that Margie Young-Hunt, a local woman, read her fortune, which

was all about you. You're going to be one of the most important men in this town -- that's what I said, most important. And it's not going to be long either. It's very soon. Every card she turned showed money and more money. You're going to be a rich man (Winter 31).

Mary's enthusiasm, coupled with Ethan's understanding that the fortune is fake, sends Ethan into a fit. Margie had told Ethan just that morning, "Know what I'm going to do? I'm going to read one hell of a fortune this morning. You're going to be a big shot, did you know? Everything you touch will turn to gold -- a leader of men" (Winter 18), essentially solidifying his "fortune." There's something slightly insidious with Mary's infatuation with the fortune. She's clearly infatuated with the prospect of more money. Her enthusiasm to tell Ethan her fortune indicates she's excited about the wealth and status that the fortune predicts. This suggests that money is what Mary cares about. At the same time, it solidifies what Mr. Baker and Morph had been saying. Money is what rules Ethan's world. However, Mary's infatuation hints at something else, too. The fact that Mary mentions, and reiterates, that Ethan will be one of the "most important" men in town demonstrates that Mary is dissatisfied with their class standing. She would prefer if he were one of the more important men in town -- just like his ancestors were -- rather than a mere grocery clerk.

Ethan's confrontation with Mary about her love of money reinforces not just the sense of desperation, but also how Ethan is seen in town. Ethan asks

her squarely if she loves money. Mary tries to hold herself at a distance, but explodes saying,

You said it! You started it. I'm not going to let you hide in your words. Do I love money? No, I don't love money. But I don't love worry either. I'd like to be able to hold up my head in this town. I don't like the children to be hang-dog because they can't dress as good -- as well -- as some others. I'd love to hold up my head (Winter 34).

Mary represents the damage yearning for class and status does to the American soul. Of course Mary loves money. She loves status, and with status, she associates money. The irony of this exchange is that Mary slips, allowing the fact of her own lower class to appear in her speech. This demonstrates that her dissatisfaction is a personal one, an internal one. She hates the class in which she was born, as denoted by her improper English. However, she directs this dissatisfaction at Ethan, acting as one of the societal pressures. "Everybody's laughing at you," she tells him. "A grand gentleman without money is a bum" (Winter 34).

These are Ethan's antagonists: money and status. They antagonize by being constant pressures -- pressures on every aspect of his life, from his home life to his social life. He is a failure in all eyes, including his own and his wife's. Therefore, to alleviate this dissatisfaction, these things become Ethan's American Dream. Per the previously mentioned definition of the American Dream, Ethan needs to complete the highest achievement he can concerning both wealth and status, pertaining to his own ability. However, there's a twist. The twist is that these pressures are so intense, so influential, that they corrupt the dreamer. One's ability is akin to "whatever means necessary." In trying to capture this perverted American Dream, Ethan is failing at more than the old American Dream. By focusing on money and status, by ignoring the original

dream, Ethan isn't even a hero in Steinbeck's eyes. He is a model of the corruption and perversion of American culture.

But there is more than money and status at stake. One of the biggest components of Ethan's American Dream -- as well as Steinbeck's critique of it all -- is the Hawley family name. That is, the roots that are connecting Ethan to New Baytown. In fact, "Ethan depends on his family house and name to give him that sense of worth -- a means, he believes, to both identity and meaning. So deep is his attachment to his house that he fears that its loss may lead to his being 'canceled,' or being removed 'from real'" (Heavilin 111). This is to say that a large part of Ethan's discontentedness stems from his family, his rootedness to New Baytown, which creates a very false sense of responsibility and ownership. Ethan ruminates on this rootedness in relation to his childhood friend, Danny Taylor. Reflecting on Danny's own troubles with his family name, Mr. Baker tells Ethan what "a fine family the Taylors were. It makes [him] sick to see [Danny] this way. [...] He'd probably drink himself to death" (Winter 106). In many ways, Danny is not a minor foil to Ethan, but a reflection. Danny and Ethan both come from prominent New Baytown families, and both are failures to that name. Only, Danny's an impoverished drunk on the brink of death and Ethan's just not as well off as he hoped. In this way, Danny is a sort of premonition into Ethan's future, demonstrating the consequences of failing to chase the American Dream. Ethan could end up like Danny: destitute. Further, Ethan knows how similar he and Danny are, and compares their struggles, saying, Hawley was more than a family. It was a house. And that was why poor Danny held onto Taylor Meadow. Without it, no family -- and soon not even a name. By tone and inflection and desire, the three sitting there had canceled him. It may be that some men require a house and a history to reassure themselves that they exist -- it's a slim enough connection, at

most. In the store I was a failure and a clerk, in my house I was Hawley, so I too must be unsure. [...] Without my house, I too would have been canceled. It was not man to man but house to house (Winter 107).

Ethan is measuring his worth -- as well as Danny's -- not by their individual successes as the old American Dream would have him do, but rather by their house. This house is not only the physical house Ethan lives in, but also "house" as in clan, name, tribe. Ethan is evaluating both him and Danny in terms of their successes relative to house Hawley and house Taylor, weighing their achievement against history.

Because Ethan has achieved so very little, he is discontented by virtue of his measurements. In the above quote, Ethan admits that he is one of the men who need "a house and a history to reassure themselves that they exist." Were it not for the Hawley name, Ethan would be nothing. Without Ethan's home, without his family, without that family's history, he isn't real. "Without it, no family," Ethan says, "and soon not even a name." At the same time, living in New Baytown exacerbates this misery that Ethan feels because he sizes up so small to the Hawley name. After all, Hawleys have been in New Baytown since its founding -- their mark is everywhere and Ethan cannot escape that. Of the church the Hawleys spend their Easter in, Ethan says, "Hawleys have sat for God knows how long, and that is no figure of speech. [...] I remember every desecration, and there were plenty of them. I think I can go to every place where my initials are scratched with a nail" (Winter 99). This place that Ethan cares so deeply for, that he and his family are embedded in, does not even hold entirely positive memories. Part of being in the church where Ethan's ancestors worshipped is a reminder of "every desecration" he'd committed. I imagine one of those desecrations is what he'd done to the family name.

It's important to be mindful that Steinbeck is not suggesting we feel bad

for Ethan. Yes, Ethan is America, and yes Ethan is being preyed upon by the temptations of the material, but that doesn't mean he's a good person.

Steinbeck means to make explicit that Ethan is no hero. The problem with Ethan is that everything he cares about, everything that matters to him, is connected to material. The people he loves, what he wants out of life, and the town that he wants so deeply to be important in -- all of these things are material. The status, the blood, the history, none of this ought to matter, but it does.

Ethan seethes inside about all this. He says,

You can't know people like the Bakers unless you are born knowing them. Acquaintance, even friendship, is a different matter. I know them because Hawleys and Bakers were alike in blood, place of origin, experience, and past fortune. This makes for a kind of nucleus walled and moated against outsiders. When my father lost our money, I was not edged completely out. I am still acceptable as a Hawley to Bakers for perhaps my lifetime because they feel related to me. But I am a poor relation. Gentry without money gradually cease to be gentry. Without money, Allen, my son, will not know Bakers and his son will be an outsider, no matter what his name and antecedents. We have become ranchers without land, commanders without troops, horsemen on foot. We can't survive. Perhaps that is one reason why the change was taking place in me. I do not want, never have wanted, money for itself. But money is necessary to keep my place in a category I am used to and comfortable in. All this must have worked itself out in the dark place below my thinking level. It emerged not as a thought but as a conviction (Winter 104).

These are Ethans most serious ruminations on status. Clearly, status is just as important to him as it is to his wife. Even though his father lost their money, Ethan is "still acceptable as a Hawley." Acceptable, but not welcomed. This is

what frustrates Ethan. He is a ghost in a world he no longer belongs in. He cares about status, and by association money, as its "necessary to keep [his] place in a category [he is] used to". But Ethan isn't used to being a part of this category. Ethan thinks he belongs in this category, and is comfortable in it, because historically, his family has belonged to it. But he never has. Ethan is asserting something his wishes to be true, much the same way his wife slipped up on her grammar; both are frantically trying to convince the other, and themselves that their status is a matter of accident, that they belong and are owed something more. Yet they aren't. His admittance to not even being a part of the "gentry" implies that Ethan understands this already. Ethan wants to be a part of this category. It is his desire, his dream. To achieve it, he needs money. Thus, his dream is material.

Ethan is not a Steinbeckian hero, as he is not a man of both nature and civilization the way Tom Joad was. Ethan cares about status and money. He's a man whose environment and person is dominated by social status. Ethan has no integrity for his dream. Recalling from Carpenter earlier<sup>2</sup>, Ethan doesn't refuse to deny his dream, because he does make a point of attempting to achieve it. But his American Dream is a false one because it is only for material, and at the sacrifice of others. Further, Ethan feels this so strongly that "all this must have worked itself out in the dark place below [his] thinking level" (Winter 104). Ethan is honest about how immoral his desires are. He knows they come from a dark place, somewhere so honest that he wasn't even consciously thinking about it. And yet these desires burst from him as "conviction" (Winter 104), as imperatives, something that must be carried out. Therefore, because Ethan is aware that his desires are wrong, but feels so deeply for them that he means to pursue them anyway at whatever cost demonstrates how corrupted Ethan

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<sup>2</sup> "They become heroic because they refuse to deny their dream" (464).

is. Further, because Ethan is a symbol for the American spirit, it demonstrates America's own state of corruption.

But is this all for nothing? Certainly, if Ethan is following his desires, attempting to ensure they are fulfilled, then he must be accomplishing something, even if he is chasing a false dream. Unfortunately not. Ethan fails to express any kind of potential whatsoever. Not because he's chasing a false dream, but because his desires are at the expense of other people's lives. Other characters are forced to unknowingly put themselves at risk, all for Ethan to decide that none of it was worth it. Ethan is not just failing to participate in the American Dream. He's failing to participate at all.

First, there's the business with Ethan's boss, Marullo. Admittedly, Marullo did not enter the country legally, but Marullo has made something of himself. As an immigrant, Marullo came to own his own business in town and become an important man. Given that he is an illegal immigrant whose status, if known, would be subject to legal action, one can reasonably come to the conclusion that, given the circumstances, Marullo has achieved the American Dream. He has produced the highest achievement according to his own innate abilities and circumstances. Marullo truly is the embodiment of the true American dream; "he knew the words on the bottom of the Statue of Liberty. He'd memorized the Declaration of Independence in dialect. The Bill of Rights was words of fire. And then he couldn't get in. So he came anyway" (Winter 227). Marullo is even sympathetic to the help he'd been given over the years. In Chapter 9, Marullo helps Ethan out in the store during a big rush. Over and over, Marullo praises Ethan, almost the way a father would. "You're a good friend;" "You're smart, kid;" "You're honest, kid" (Winter 140-141). Each time, Ethan rebuffs him, joking, "Honest is a racket with me" (Winter 140). Marullo, the actual American Dreamer, tries to think the best of Ethan, but Ethan, in a

strangely honest moment, can't manage to be serious about it. He knows he's a bad person, chasing something wildly different from the dream Marullo so successfully brought to fruition.

The deportation of Ethan's boss is truly a turning point for Ethan, one in which the American Dream becomes utterly destroyed. Ethan's friend Joey Morphey puts the idea in his head first, after some federal agents come around asking about goings around town. Morph tells Ethan that the first emergency immigration law was passed in 1921. Morph explains that Marullo might never go back to visit his home country because "he came in after 1921 by the back door. So he can't go home because he can't get a passport to get back" (Winter 132). Marullo essentially confirms this when he talks about his family. But despite Marullo's praises, Ethan goes to a dusty phonebook and looks up "'Immigration & Naturalization Svce, 20 W Bway, BA 7-0300, Nights Sat Sun & Holidays OL 6-5888. [...] If everything's proper and aboveboard, nobody gets hurt'" (Winter 167). The last thing Ethan utters must be for himself, to reassure himself that he's a good person. He knows that everything isn't proper and aboveboard. During their conversation, Ethan narrates, "Morph seemed to have hit it on the nose. Maybe bankers and cops and customs men get an instinct" (Winter 138). So Ethan knows about Marullo. He's calling immigration on purpose, deliberately, knowing what will happen. When Marullo does get deported he sells the store to Ethan for a remarkably low price. Yet this makes Ethan feel sick, because "for a long time [Ethan] scared [Marullo]. He tried to figure out [Ethan's] racket, and he discovered [Ethan's] racket was honesty" (Winter 227). He gave Ethan the store because he was honest. Ethan deported the American dream out of the country, taking everything from it, metaphorically but effectively killing it.

On the other hand, Ethan almost literally kills Danny Taylor. A better term is inadvertently, because the implications are equal to murder and

pillaging. Ethan gives Danny Taylor \$1,000 to get treatment to take care of Danny's alcoholism. Earlier, Mr. Baker and Mary were so horrified at the idea of giving Danny even a dollar because "no one would dare do that, [...] that would be after killing him" (Winter 106), which Mr. Baker agrees. Even when Ethan does give Danny the money -- which he wants to do so that Mr. Baker won't get Taylor Meadow for the airport he wants to build -- Danny tells Ethan that he "hope[s he's] convinced [Ethan] what a drunk's promise is worth" (Winter 120). Danny means he'll likely lose the money or drink it away. Ethan knows this, too. He ruminates on it, narrating, "I knew better. Danny was gone. I knew Danny was gone. [...] I knew what I had done, and Danny knew it too" (Winter 153). Ethan's honest about this with Mr. Baker, too, using Danny's death as leverage to take the majority of Baker's profits. Ethan tells this to Baker, saying,

"Danny was fond of my Mary. [...] He gave me these." I pulled the two pieces of ruled paper from my inside pocket, where I had put them, knowing I would have to draw them out like this. [...] When the son of a bitch looked at me there was fear in him. He saw someone he hadn't known existed" (Winter 259).

Baker is scared of Ethan because, the whole time, Ethan walks around the streets of New Baytown pretending to be the down-and-out American everyman. But really, he's out for gain, for profit, doing so at the expense of others. What Ethan pulls out is Danny's will, which gives Ethan ownership of Taylor Meadows. Ethan gives Danny the money to drink himself to death (which came with a healthy serving of sleeping pills) and uses his friend's death as an intimidation tactic. He is not the disenfranchised American everyman. He is the sickly, demented, twisted American Dream.

Ethan doesn't really suffer any consequences for this. Ethan sometimes

beats himself up over this. He is aware that his actions are wrong, saying time and time again that he "did not ever draw virtue down to hide what [he] was doing from [himself]. No one made [him] take the course [he] had chosen" (Winter 201). But he does these things anyway. Even still, his "objective was limited and, once achieved, [he] could take back [his] habit of conduct. [He] knew [he] could. War did not make a killer of [him], although for a time [he] killed men" (Winter 201). Ethan sees himself as an American hero, someone who had to kill people for the greater good, equating killing Nazis with his own pursuit.

In the end, what strikes Ethan most is the world that drove him to do those things. Reflecting on what he'd done -- and what he means to do -- Ethan says,

"I want to go home -- no not home, to the other side of home where the lights are given. [...] It's so much darker when a light goes out than it would have been if it had never shone. The world is full of dark derelicts. [...] there comes a time for decent, honorable retirement, not dramatic, not punishment of self or family -- just good-by, a warm bath and an opened vein, a warm sea and a razor blade" (Winter 279).

Suicide is Ethan's "honorable retirement," as if he were being discharged from the military rather than taking his own life because he had become a bad person who corrupted his family. What strikes me is the way he blames the world, this dark place. He curses it for being unfair, for giving him light and then snuffing it out. But that light is one he imagined. It was his Hawley's and grocery store and New Baytown. Steinbeck writes these all down to illustrate that, if he had just let all that go, gotten rid of all those roots tying him to this miserable town, maybe he would have never caught a glimpse of those false lights. Maybe he wouldn't be so discontented.



CHAPTER II

## THE COUNTRY

Where I'm from matters. I am a Midwestern American. I was born in Detroit and I spent my early years living on the south side of 8 Mile Rd and Van Dyke Ave. My father's a mechanic; he always has been. Like his father, like his brothers, he made car parts for the Big Three. This was Detroit, after all. He was a union man. These were jobs you could rely on. Midwesterners drove cars. Detroiters drove cars. We don't have public transportation in Detroit. If you want public transportation, you go to Chicago. If one plant closed down, there were plenty of others. Then when I was three, planes crashed into the Twin Towers in New York City. It wasn't much longer that unemployment crashed into my house.

Plants started to close. My father would spend two months laid off. That was the deal with the union: He could only be laid off for two months at a time, and then he had to be put back to work for at least one month before they could lay him off again. In a given year, he might only get four months of work. You can't feed a family on four months of work.

We became industrial nomads. First to Kentucky, where I lived for six months in the mountains while my father worked at a shop there. Then I moved back to Detroit with my mother. My father got another job in northeastern Ohio, at the rusty edges of the Appalachian mountains. I have lived in thirteen houses, evicted from half of them. My childhood home in Detroit has been boarded up, blending into the rest of the houses around it.

But that was no excuse. Evictions were no excuse. Empty pantries weren't a good excuse. We were Midwesterners. We worked for what we had. If we didn't have it, we must not have worked hard enough. The rust, the pot-hole filled

concrete, the boarded-up houses and stores that fill up Detroit's East Side: this is who I am. Of all the American animals, this is my bread. Midwestern. Scrappy. Rusty. Strong. Tired. I wonder what Steinbeck would have thought of my father if he was one of the Detroiters he had met in the 1960s when he was ambling down the freshly-paved American highways.

At around 3,000 miles wide, America is plenty of country. To traverse across it would be a hell of an undertaking. But it's a journey that John Steinbeck undertakes for himself. From Long Island, New York to Salinas, California and back, Steinbeck drove across the country in his green GMC with his dog, Charley. Steinbeck is trying to understand America on an intimate, physical level. He expresses this desire a little clearer in some of his letters, where he writes,

In the fall -- right after Labor Day -- I'm going to learn about my own country. I've lost the flavor and taste and sound of it. It's been years since I have seen it. Sooo! I'm buying a pick-up truck [...] I'm going alone, out toward the west [...] I just want to look and listen. What I'll get I need badly -- a re-knowledge of my own country, of its speeches, its views, its attitudes and its changes. It's long overdue -- very long. New York is not America (Letters 666-667).

The deeply personal aspect of this journey can be read in every word here. He's looking for America's physical taste, for the flavor of it, as if it has one flavor. That attitude harkens back to Steinbeck's belief that there is such a thing as an identifiably American quality that exists in the American spirit. What's also interesting is the way Steinbeck says that no matter what portrait of America he gets, it's one he needs badly. It's as if going on this trip will tell Steinbeck just as much about himself as it will America. Steinbeck opens Travels with a passage that expresses a similar sentiment.

I discovered that I did not know my own country. I, an American writer, writing about America, was working from memory, and the memory is at best a faulty, warpy reservoir. I had not heard the speech of America, smelled the grass and trees and sewage, seen its hills and water, its color and quality of light. I knew the changes only from books and newspapers. But more than this, I had not felt the country for twenty-five years. In short, I was writing of something I did not know about (Travels 5).

Steinbeck's use of the word "discovers" here is interesting. He discovers that he doesn't know something. Steinbeck, in evoking the "pioneers" as he begins his journey, is at the same time evoking the colonists, who entered into a strange land -- even if they did, unfortunately, colonize it. They came to own America. In much the same way, Steinbeck is going out to own America, referring to it as "my own country" above. Further, he "did not know about" America. That's to say, it is the unknown -- much the way the frontier was for those brave white folk who ventured into it, as well as what the notion of a frontier came to symbolize.

Steinbeck's idea that he needs to travel to understand America is a pretty significant one. In the newspapers, he reads a violent, confused America, and it isn't one he recognizes. He has to experience it for himself. On one hand, it's kind of a participation in the frontier. Frontier details an experience that is deeply individualistic. Of the individualistic component of the frontier, Turner writes,

"The frontier is the line of most rapid and effective Americanization. The wilderness masters the colonist. [...] In short, at the frontier the environment is at first too strong for the man. He must accept the conditions which it furnishes, or perish [...] Little by little he

transforms the wilderness"<sup>3</sup> (Frontier 3-4).

The individual is littered throughout this quote. Look at Turner's use of the direct article. The colonist. The man. He must accept the harshness of the frontier. Turner isn't talking about one particular colonist. Any of those colonists are the colonist. Because so much of the frontier was unknown to all of the colonists, every experience was as significant as each other colonist's experience. Therefore, every colonist is the colonist.

To pivot around back to Steinbeck, he is participating in the frontier not just by physically traveling and traversing an unknown, but because his journey is individualistic. The data-collecting that is traveling the country is just as much part of the solution as it is the question. In westering -- movement and our inclination towards movement -- around America, Steinbeck is advocating for reclaiming the frontier heritage of the American identity. He believes we can do this because there is such a thing as an innate Americanness: the frontier. Steinbeck wants Americans to reconnect with their environment, to be people of civilization and nature. Likewise, he wants to understand Americans. In his formulation, as I will show, Americans end up almost animalistic, kinds of breeds specific to a certain biome. He does this in order to observe the Americans, to understand them and how they relate to the environment. In a couple ways, the inclination toward animal qualities is a test to see how successful that particular breed of American is in satisfying the old American Dream<sup>4</sup>. Yet, it is also a rumination on what Steinbeck believes is necessary for morality: struggle and survival.

The verb "wester" is an interesting one, mostly because it seems incredibly American. This suggestion is kind of deceitful, I admit. As an

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<sup>3</sup> I just want it to be known that this was heavily edited due to racism. Not cool, Turner.

<sup>4</sup> "The highest achievement per one's natural capability".

American, the amount of times I have used "wester" has been almost exclusively in this paragraph. Likewise, I can't say I've heard many other Americans use this word in their day-to-day speech. Although, the fact that we never use it at all may say more about Americans than one realizes. There was a point in American history when the word "wester" was not only more prevalent<sup>5</sup>, but something a person could physically do, attempt, or believe in. We don't have to use "westering" anymore because we don't have to. Steinbeck would say that it's because Americans don't need a word for something they're predisposed to.

Understanding how deeply intertwined westering, the frontier, and the American spirit are is crucial to understanding Steinbeck's journey across America. The Oxford English Dictionary says, "to move (further) west; in later use esp. with reference to migration westward across North America,"<sup>6</sup> might interest you. This definition seems obvious enough. "West" is a part of the word, and if it means to move, then one would probably assume it meant move west. But there's a little more to this definition. Consider the second part of it, when it says it would later particularly reference the American westward expansion. That's not just a direction, that the West with a capital "W." Because of that, "wester" becomes even more entwined with the frontier, which was once the American west. Turner actually says as much in *Frontier*, when he writes, "movement has been [the frontier's] dominant fact, and, unless this training has no effect upon a people, the American energy will continually demand a wider field for its exercise" (37). For Turner, movement is absolutely a part of the frontier, and movement is also a part of the American energy.

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<sup>5</sup> A graph made using Google Ngram Viewer -- which shows how frequently a word is used over time -- for the word "wester" shows peak usage in 1872. This is around twenty-six years after Americans took ownership of California. This is important because the frontier ended once Americans had settled coast to coast, from New York to California. Which means, once we had California, we no longer needed to wester. Following this peak in 1872, there is a sharp decline of its usage. (<https://books.google.com/ngrams>)

<sup>6</sup> "wester, v." [OED Online](https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/227900), Oxford University Press, September 2019, [www.oed.com/view/Entry/227900](https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/227900). Accessed 10 November 2019.

Something interesting worth noting is how the word came to be. The OED states it "likely formed within English, by conversion." I find this to be interesting because it meant that American pioneers were discussing this. When they were participating in the frontier together, they were developing terms for what they were doing, for how they were doing it. This is kind of democratic, or individualistic. "The fact is, that here is a new product that is American" (Frontier 4), which means that, again, the frontier created the American.

If Americans and the frontier coexist at the same time -- one didn't create the other, but they occur at the same time and are connected, like the Big Bang creating spacetime -- then the frontier is the (white) American spirit. It is inside Americans always, it is what is innately American. If westering is a crucial component of the frontier, then that means that westering is also within Americans. That is, they are inclined towards movement. This is what Steinbeck believes. This is why he feels that traveling through the country to experience is necessary, because he is acting towards his natural inclination. This is what Steinbeck hopes to find out there in America.

In some ways, Steinbeck's journey across America does the work of Frontier, only backwards. Where Turner examined the frontier as it built the American identity, Steinbeck's journey examines the American identity as he reclaims the frontier for himself. In order to understand the American identity, Steinbeck ventures out into his unknown. A key way he does this is by examining and understanding the different breeds (kinds) of Americans in relation to their habitat (region). Of course, it isn't a good representative sample, and it's a little reductive, which is to say nothing of what examining humans as if they were animals does to their humanity. Douglas Downland speaks

to this a good amount in his essay on Americans, in which he describes Steinbeck's tendency to equate the parts to the whole, writing, "if synecdoche allows the part to speak for the whole, it also allows the personal to speak for the national" (Downland 47). By speaking directly to Americans, by observing them, Steinbeck believes he will understand America and its Americans. But that doesn't make a whole lot of sense, because he would absolutely miss out on certain kinds of people, just due to the sheer breadth of this project. This is probably where viewing Americans as creatures and describing them like animals comes in handy.

Consider this: When you study a habit, you might make certain assumptions based on its characteristics. By viewing Americans with the same attitude, it allows Steinbeck to cover a lot of space -- to really engage with a small number of people -- without actually having to do too much work. Yuji Kami builds on this idea in the essay "Steinbeck's View of Man and Nature in Travels with Charley: In Search of America" Kami claims that "Steinbeck's interest in biology leads him to pursue the underlying analogies between humanity and other living beings, maintaining in [Travels] and other works that the first rule of life is survival, the 'magic formula' without which nothing could exist" (Kami 75). If survival is a part of the American Dream, something Steinbeck is advocating for, then he is also advocating for survival. Likewise, Steinbeck often juxtaposes his critiques of modern American against the original need for survival. Further, Steinbeck does often think about humans as a species, writing at one point that "now the pressure comes from our biologic success as a species. We have overcome all enemies but ourselves" (Travels 175). All together, this does seem to point to Steinbeck having an interest in biology, and that interest being influential in his thinking and approach to this project. Given that so much of Steinbeck's journey focuses on Americans as a

kind of people with a shared, innate quality, then the biological/species approach that Kami suggests fits well into Steinbeck's observation of people as animals.

The first leg of his journey takes him northeast of his home in New York, through New England. When he gets to Maine, Steinbeck wants to get down to people watching as quick as he can, writing,

"I soon discovered that if a wayfaring stranger wishes to eavesdrop on a local population the places for him to slip in [...] 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. The natural New England taciturnity reaches its glorious perfection at breakfast"

(Travels 32)

There's so much animal to this passage. Steinbeck is ready to observe these people; he wants a nice spot where he can properly eavesdrop, as if he were listening for a specific bird call that would tell him exactly what kind of Americans these people were. Further, he talks about attempting to find this place "inhabited." To me, this sounds a lot like the way researchers observe groups of animals to understand their habits, their manners. There's also something to the way Steinbeck describes the restaurant as a place where men gather before work or hunting. There's something so rustic, so rugged and animalistic in this view, as if this diner were the den of a pack of wolves, preparing for the hunt. These New Englanders don't even talk. They just grunt at each other. They participate in the "taciturnity" that is characteristic, apparently, of New England. What we gather from all this is a very clear view

of the New Englanders as animals. As far as the Genus Americanus is concerned, this particular breed of American is a silent, early-rising sort. They grunt and don't talk. They have "taciturnity" that is characteristic of other New Englanders. He seems committed to the idea that this is specific to inhabitants of this area of America. Of course, he only does this because he understands Americans as animals.

Steinbeck is understanding these Americans he meets as animals because he wants to broaden his scope of understanding, to be able to make the various parts he meets stand in for the whole (as Downland suggested earlier, reflecting on Steinbeck's penchant for synecdoche in Americans, which he is also doing in Travels). But this is also because Steinbeck's American Dream is connected to his biological interests, his belief in survival, and how the frontier spirit is necessary to maintain that sense of survival. I'd like to direct your attention to a passage from Americans, in which Steinbeck writes,

This [inventiveness and sense of survival] is not lost; American kids are still doing it. The dreams of a people either create folk literature or find their way into it; and folk literature, again, is always based on something that happened. [...] All our children play cowboy and Indian; the brave and honest sheriff who with courage and a six-gun brings law and order and civic virtue to a Western community [...] And in these moral tales, so deepset in us, virtue does not arise out of reason or orderly process of law -- it is imposed and maintained by violence (40).

There is so much to this quote that fits into everything Steinbeck is trying to get at with this American trilogy. First, there's the connection of the "honest sheriff" with "courage" who controls "law and order and civic virtue." This is America's "passionate belief in our own myths" (Americans 33). Those myths continue, they're passed on. That's evident enough in the fact that kids are

playing Cowboys & Outlaws. But, Steinbeck also connects that particular myth, which is based on survival. In Americans, Steinbeck writes,

"Because of our predatory nature, the hive or the herd were always beyond us but the pack and the crowd were open to us. When two humans get together rules are required to keep them from stripping or killing each other. These rules are simply pragmatic brakes on our less than fraternal instincts" (Americans 169).

From this, it's clear that he sees Americans as animals. They have a predatory nature. They are violent. Americans have laws to stop us from killing each other. Humans don't have fraternal instincts. Steinbeck thinks humans are a violent, animal species who create laws and mythologize those laws and their defenders (like sheriffs).

Let's remind ourselves that Steinbeck believes people are characteristic of a region, that it contributes to breeds of Americans. At one point, Steinbeck says,

"There is no question in my mind that places in America mark their natives not only in their speech patterns but physically -- in build, in stance, in conformation. Climate may have something to do with this, as well as food supply and techniques of living; in any case, it seems to be true that people living close together tend to look alike. Why not? If a man and his dog become the same in appearance, why not a man and his neighbor" (Americans 16).

This confirms a lot of what's been. Steinbeck believes a region physically alters Americans. It literally makes them, in their person, mannerism, and look. And they can even look like animals. All of this is similar to the way, say, a Saint Bernard might be just fine tromping through the Alaskan snow. But that isn't necessarily always such a good thing.

Take the Badlands in South Dakota: a prairie expanse with rosy, jagged mountain range. The Badlands and its inhabitants strike Steinbeck a little differently. When he gets there, it seems to be a place of the darkness, and its "inhabitants" are just as dark. Steinbeck doesn't like the Badlands at first, saying they are "like the work of an evil child [...], sharp, desolate and dangerous, and for me filled with foreboding" (Travels 138-139). He even "felt unwanted in this land" (Travels 139). Then he meets the Americans who live there. These Americans are much more animal. To Steinbeck, the Badlands do "not like or welcome humans" and is better suited "for a colony of troglodytes" (Travels 139). There's something disturbing in this description, something feral and savage, where humans are not allowed, where they'd be better off living in caves than houses. All of these unsettling feelings, the foreboding, it lingers as Steinbeck begins to meet the Badlanders.

Steinbeck meets a man dressed all in dark whose "pale eyes were frosted with sun glare and his lips scaly as snakeskin" (Travels 139). There is a heap of animal carcasses next to the man. Steinbeck sees his "eyes wash over Rocinante, sweep up the details, and then retire into their sockets. And [he] found [he] had nothing to say to him" (Travels 139). The way Steinbeck describes the man's eyes is disturbing and inhuman, almost reptilian. For Steinbeck to have nothing to say -- after driving hundreds of miles through Ohio, Wisconsin, Chicago, and Minnesota, literally never shutting up and talking when unwanted -- is both weird and disquieting. In a way, it reinforces the eeriness of the Badlands. As Steinbeck leaves, the strange man watches him. Steinbeck remarks to himself that the man "may not be a typical Badlander, but he's one of the few [Steinbeck] caught" (Travels 140). When talking to someone, we don't say we "caught" them, unless we see them as they're leaving. Steinbeck sees this man as an animal, yet another American he's trapped and studied. Only

this one was more dangerous and peculiar than the rest. He's reptilian and dark. It's because he's a Badlander. The Badlands are dangerous. They shaped this man. He is physically a product of his region.

Steinbeck happens upon another Badlander. He stops at a small house to ask for a glass of water. Steinbeck describes the house in generously unsettling detail, as he says it was

a section of war-surplus barracks, it looked, but painted white with yellow trim, and with the dying vestiges of a garden, frosted-down geraniums and a few clusters of chrysanthemums, little button things yellow and red-brown. I walked up the path with the certainty that I was being regarded from behind the white window curtains (Travels 140).

The yellow is a kind of misplaced brightness when the rest of the Badlands are so dark to Steinbeck. It draws attention to itself in a discomfoting way. But then it's surrounded by things dying; the sign that things were once alive. And all the while, he's being watched. Then the door's answered by an old woman (another thing dying), who gives him the water and "nearly talked [his] arm off" (Travels 140). He describes their interaction, saying,

"She was hungry to talk, frantic to talk, about her relatives, her friends, and how she wasn't used to this. For she was not a native and she didn't rightly belong here. Her native climate was a land of milk and honey and had its share of apes and ivory and peacocks. Her voice rattled on as though she was terrified of the silence that would settle when I was gone. As she talked it came to me that she was afraid of this place and, further, that so was I. I felt I wouldn't like to have the night catch me here" (Travels 140).

This Badlander is not a native one, but she is already being influenced by her environment, being physically changed by it the way Steinbeck believes a place

does to a person. And she's being terrified. It's evident in the way she speaks, in her franticness to talk. Her voice rattles, like a snake that feels threatened. She has to assure Steinbeck she doesn't belong here, as if reassuring herself. She belongs to a land sweeter than this one, filled with ivory and peacocks; a sharp colorful contrast to the darkness of the Badlands.

But this description of the woman is just as animal as the other ones. In highlighting the effect of this terrifying region on a non-native, Steinbeck signals the adaptive nature of animals -- and of Americans. This animal is a hungry one, a frantic, scared one, as if he can sense this animal's fear. His noticing that "she was terrified of the silence that would settle when [he] was gone[; ...] it came to me that she was afraid of this place" (Travels 140), these descriptions are haunting. The woman's fear almost makes her seem almost like prey. Steinbeck believes she's afraid of the Badlands, reinforcing that adaptive animal quality. Given she's afraid of the Badlands, it makes the Badlands her predator, only strengthening our animal qualities and the land itself.

The southern United States produces yet another breed of American, also not one that Steinbeck likes too much. Steinbeck tells his readers that he "faced the South with dread," as it was "a limb of the nation, [whose] pain spreads out to all America" (Travels 216). Steinbeck understands southern Americans as the more violent and conflicted breed of American, especially given the openness of their racism. That violence isn't necessarily their fault, he thinks. It's the region's, even if he can't help but be disgusted. It's a recollection of America's violent past, of the maintaining of law and order with violence -- like the humble sheriff; like how Richard Slotkin claims our history is just a cycle of violence. Joseph Dewey makes the case that "Steinbeck fashions from the unpromising stuff of a travelogue a deliberate

fiction. Like Walden, this fiction centers on a persona/narrator and is concerned less by the dreary imperative of accuracy and more by the urgency of a less that is to be learned by that persona" (Dewey 22). This removes a lot of the pressure off Steinbeck. Dewey is reinforcing that, saying that Steinbeck means to observe America, to get to know it. He can't involve himself in this. His writing persona is an observer of the American animal in its natural habitat. It's important to note that while Steinbeck thinks of himself as the objective viewer, Dewey knows that this travelogue is really about Steinbeck himself, to recall earlier to Steinbeck's internal need to gain a re-knowledge of America. "Steinbeck does not mean to shame the South," Dewey writes. "He stays an outsider, as detached as he felt in Texas. Unwilling to involve himself with the complicated racial issues, he still cannot conceal his disgust over the Cheerleaders" (Dewey 27-28).

Steinbeck is aware of the racism that exists in the 1960s South. That's why he dreads it so much. And if we believe Dewey and Steinbeck, that the man means to be an observer, he may also dread it because he has to be objective. So he tells us a few anecdotes. For example, Steinbeck tells a story in which "the blue-fingered man who filled [his] gas tank looked in at Charley and said, 'Hey, it's a dog! I thought you had a n[--]<sup>7</sup> in there.' And he laughed delightedly. It was the first of many repetitions" (Travels 222). There's another conversation worth noting, in which he picks up a hitchhiker. The hitchhiker tells Steinbeck he sounds "like a n[--]lover" (Travels 239) and it proceed just as poorly as you think:

"You won't get away with it, mister. We got an eye on you Commie n[--]lovers."

"I just had a brave picture of you selling your life."

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<sup>7</sup> Censored.

"By God, I was right. You are a n[--]lover."

"No, I'm not. And I'm not a white-lover either, if it includes those Cheerleaders" (Travels 240)"

Steinbeck's time in the South is dogged by the danger of racism. He even takes a cab to see the Cheerleaders -- the women who shout obscenities at the African-American children escorted to desegregated schools -- because he knows he'd stand out with his New York license plate; a way to avoid the racism and to be an observer. However, this is where Steinbeck finds the animal that is the Southerner.

The Cheerleaders are predators. They're a completely heinous and cruel animal. The Cheerleaders are preying on kids. These middle-aged women "protested" the desegregation of schools in New Orleans. Steinbeck feels they're feral and vile, scavengers after weak prey. One of the things Steinbeck focuses on is the sounds and words of the Cheerleaders. Steinbeck calls them "bestial and filthy and degenerate" (Travels 227). Their voices were without a "spontaneous cry of anger, of insane rage", but instead spoke with an "insensate beastliness", with the "bellow of a bull, a deep and powerful shout with flat edges" (Travels 228). Surrounded by U.S. Marshalls, "the crowd behind the barrier roared and cheered and pounded one another with joy" (Travels 228). These descriptions Steinbeck gives, of bestiality -- of a wild, uncivilized depravity -- is within the animalistic lens that Steinbeck has kept throughout the book. The women sound like literal animals, and the crowd behind them cheers them on with noise, with roars, beating each other like a pack of apes. Of all the animals Steinbeck had "caught," these women were by far the worst examples of any breed. Watching them makes him sick, saying "My body churned with weary nausea, but I could not let an illness blind me after I had come so far to look and to hear" (Travels 229). Still he looks, keeping his detachment

safe. "I looked in the crowd for such faces of [kind] people," Steinbeck narrates, looking for the faces of the Americans he'd found all over the country. "They were not there," (Travels 229). All that's left are racists, animals of a special cruelty, the untamed and feral. This is his South. This is their beast.

Steinbeck finds America by going through towns, by talking to the settlers, and finally by becoming a pioneer. The final frontier in Travels is the land itself. "The next passage of my journey is a love affair" (Travels 142), Steinbeck writes. He loves physical America. He loves its rivers, its mountains, its natural majesty. But of any state, any mountain range or pasture, Steinbeck is "in love with Montana" (Travels 142). He says, "For other states I have admiration, respect, recognition, even some affection, but with Montana it is love" (Travels 142). The beauty of it had "a spell on [him]. It is grandeur and warmth" (Travels 143). His love for Montana is not for the American animals who inhabit it, but for the land. "It seems to me that Montana is a great splash of grandeur," Steinbeck writes. "The scale is huge but not overpowering. The land is rich with grass and color" (Travels 142). Keeping with the feeling that a place makes its people, he says, "Its people did not seem afraid of shadows [...] The calm of the mountains and the rolling grasslands had got into the inhabitants" (Travels 142). The beauty of Montana is personified. It has a stillness that can be passed on, and is, into its people. The people and their land are one and the same. Looking back at Winter, Ethan Hawley was so depressed by material, by trying to make something of himself in a town because of his roots. Montana and its animals are beautiful because they are one with nature and their people, like a true Steinbeckian hero.

But Steinbeck also enjoys Wisconsin, which he calls "a noble land of good

fields and magnificent trees, a gentleman's countryside" (Travels 113).

Steinbeck reflects on the beauty of Wisconsin after visiting Chicago, saying,

"when I saw it for the first and only time in early October, the air was rich with butter-colored sunlight, not fuzzy but crisp and clear so that every frost-gay tree was set off, the rising hills were not compounded, but alone and separate. There was a penetration of the light into solid substance so that I seemed to see into things, deep in, and I've seen that kind of light elsewhere only in Greece [...] The land dripped with richness, the fat cows and pigs gleaming against green, and, in the smaller holdings, corn standing in little tents as corn should, and pumpkins all about" (Travels 113-114).

Even his description of the Dairy State is beautiful. In opposition to the hustle and bustle of Chicago, Wisconsin is rich in nature. Steinbeck's awe at these various natural splendors is really important. People have frustrated him. The frustrations had overwhelmed Steinbeck so much that he

"had forgotten how rich and beautiful is the countryside -- the deep topsoil, the wealth of great trees, the lake country of Michigan handsome as a well-made woman, and dressed and jeweled. It seemed to me that the earth was generous and outgoing here in the heartland, and perhaps the people took a cue from it" (Travels 95).

It isn't coincidence that the Heartland -- Michigan, Wisconsin, Montana -- are the places Steinbeck finds so beautiful. These flat, natural places have long stretches where nature is abundant. The nature is extravagant and bright, a deep contrast to the dark Badlands. Steinbeck's equation of nature's generosity and the Midwestern temperament is a reiteration of the idea that the place makes its people.

Steinbeck is participating in the spirit of the frontier in order to

understand America, to find the American spirit out there in the world, what's the point? The point is movement. "Nearly every American hungers to move," Steinbeck writes (Travels 10). He didn't just want to understand America, but "the urge to be someplace else was on [him]" (Travels 3). This isn't just an itch. It's the frontier. Once the frontier had moved from a physical space, it became a metaphorical space, an internal drive, the psychological mindset of Genus Americanus. Turner wrote that "Movement has been [the frontier's] dominant fact, and, unless this training has no effect upon a people, the American energy will continually demand a wider field for its exercise" (Frontier 37). If movement is the frontier's dominant fact, then it's also America's.

Steinbeck believes the American spirit is the frontier, to chase down their unknown. But they can't exhaust that unknown. We can't exhaust our land. We must be one of nature and civilization, remember. Ethan Hawley depended on roots, on exhausting his surroundings, detached from them. Steinbeck writes, "Roots were in ownership of land, in tangible and immovable possessions. In this view we are a restless species with a very short history of roots, and those not widely distributed. Perhaps we have overrated roots as a psychic need! Maybe the greater the urge, the deeper and more ancient is the need, the will, the hunger to be somewhere else" (Travels 94)

The hunger to be somewhere else is deep inside Americans. It's a will, an imperative, something Americans are always subject to. The focus on "immovable possessions" on owning the land that Steinbeck has so much respect for, is wrong. Americans are a "restless species," calling back to their animal nature. Americans have overrated roots and must get rid of them. They have to move. It's in their nature. It's what makes them American.

CHAPTER III

## THE AMERICAN

In Americans, Steinbeck begins the chapter entitled "Paradox and Dream" by saying that "one of the generalities most often noted about Americans is that we are a restless, a dissatisfied, a searching people" (32). Steinbeck has reason to believe this. After all, he himself is one of these people, one who restlessly ventured across America. For Steinbeck, Americans are a people built by myth, by the frontier. "We believe implicitly that we are the heirs of pioneers; that we have inherited the ability to take care of ourselves, particularly in relation to nature" (33), Steinbeck writes. He believes the problem is that Americans have let go of these things; they believe that they have inherited these abilities, this self-sufficiency, when they are actually deeply materialistic. Recall Ethan Hawley from Winter. For what did he go searching for, if not for riches and gains? Where was his self-sufficiency in nature? Ethan believed he was entitled to owning New Baytown by virtue of being an heir to it. Steinbeck's claim, that Americans believe they're heirs, also harkens back to the frontier. They believe they have these abilities because the frontier myth is so deeply ingrained in their national identity. Steinbeck is aware of this, admitting "in nothing are we so paradoxical as in our passionate belief in our own myths" (Americans 33). I will demonstrate that Steinbeck believes Americans's reliance on these myths, and the satisfaction of having survived the Great Depression, encouraged Americans toward materialism and waste, away from the American Dream.

Steinbeck first begins with their dream. He says, "One of the characteristics most puzzling to a foreign observer is the strong and imperishable dream the American carries" (Steinbeck 34). At the moment

Steinbeck writes, he observes that the dream is "either in a small town or in a suburban area where grass and trees simulate the country. This dream home is a permanent seat, not rented but owned" (35). There's a lot of distance from the old American Dream. The grass and trees are to "simulate the country." They are false, idealized versions of what they poorly attempt to emulate. The home is also included here. Nowhere in the old Dream does it mention anything about homes, as it objected to material. Home here is "permanent," it's someplace where generations will continue on. More and more, this dream begins to sound like the experiences of Ethan in Winter. The focus on being rooted to a place. If the ending to Winter is anything to reflect on in light of this dream, rootedness is nothing to strive for. Lineage, rootedness: these things are ruinous. "The dream of home [...] persists," Steinbeck writes, "in a time when home is neither required nor wanted" (38). It's neither required nor wanted because it's a false version of the dream he wishes to reinstill in Americans. "A national dream need not, indeed may not be clear-cut and exact" (41), but the dream Americans have is a sick one.

One of the problems Steinbeck diagnoses is that the American is not the frontiersman any longer, but an American of capital, living in a capitalist society, whose life is dictated by capital and status, like Ethan. Steinbeck expands on this, with what he calls the Corporation Man:

In America we have developed the Corporation Man. His life, his family, his future -- as well as his loyalty -- lie with his corporation. His training, his social life, the kind of car he drives, the clothes he and his wife wear, the neighborhood he lives in, and the kind and cost of his house and furniture, are all dictated by his corporate status. [...] The pressures toward conformity are subtle but inexorable (Americans 87).

This is the American as Steinbeck sees him (note the "him"). This is a very

bleak view of the American, one consumed by corporations. Even his family is subject to the corporation. Loyalty, something one might call an admirable quality, is for the corporation. The corporation dictates the materials the American has. In fact, material looks to be a big part of what the American is now. The corporation dictates the American's status. If one's inclination toward achievement is measured through success for a corporation, as well as the material one gets based on their position within that corporation, then the dream isn't dependent on one's innate ability. Both the dream and the identity is dictated by corporations.

The importance of lineage comes back in children. Steinbeck thinks that Americans have a kind of "child sickness." Much the same way the parents, grandparents, and back and back passed along the frontier myth onto their lineages and country, the parents of Steinbeck's 1960s are passing along anxieties, even disillusionment. This sickness is something that "runs parallel, it would seem, with increasing material plenty" (Americans 113). Steinbeck builds on the ills of material wants, suggesting that by making this the new dream, Americans are destroying their future. "No longer was it even acceptable that the child should be like his parents and live as they did," Steinbeck writes. Here, the false dream is forced onto young Americans by their parents. Steinbeck goes on, suggesting that "since the parents were and are no better than [their children] are, the rules they propounded were based not on their experience but on their wishes and hopes" (113). Which is to say that this dream doesn't really exist because it's not a justifiable experience. Their parents didn't experience it. Much like Ethan Hawley's pursuit for something he never ever had, these children are being set up for failure. Steinbeck makes the bold accusation that "if it is indeed the result of the parent's dissatisfaction with his own life, of his passionate desire to give

his children something better or at least different, it is doubly apparent that he has failed at both" (115). Steinbeck feels this is because Americans no longer offer children the option of being children. American parents don't offer children the experience of traversing their own unknown.

The physical environment is deeply important to Steinbeck. Recall from Travels, the awe he felt at the pastoral beauty of America. Steinbeck writes in "Americans and the Land" that he often wonders about "the savagery and thoughtlessness with which our early settlers approached this rich continent" (144). In much this same vein, Steinbeck talks about the historical treatment Americans have given the land that is America with a kind of violence. Of the settlers, he says that "when they had cropped out a piece [of land,] they moved on, raping the country like invaders" (146). "Rape" is a horribly strong word. He continues with this history, recounting how "they came at [nature] as though it were an enemy [...] They burned the forests and changed the rainfall; they swept the buffalo from the plains, blasted the streams, set fire to the grass, and ran a reckless scythe through the virgin and noble timber" (Steinbeck 144). These images are filled with violent verbs: raped, burned, blasted. His vivid and passionate depiction feels almost personal, accusatory. For all this violence, he feels similarly toward his contemporary Americans, writing,

This tendency toward irresponsibility persists in very many of us today; our rivers are poisoned by reckless dumping of sewage and toxic industrial wastes, the air of our cities is filthy and dangerous to breathe from the belching of uncontrolled products from combustion of coal, coke, oil, and gasoline. Our towns are girdled with wreckage and the debris of our toys (144).

Again, there is an incredible amount of violence in the descriptions of this passage. The environment is poisoned, the air is filthy, our towns are girdled.

It's the sewage and toxic industrial waste. It's the "belching," the combustion. The environment he sees around America is a dirty one, a filthy, ruined one. It's something for which Steinbeck feels both "horrified and ashamed" (149). How can we possibly chase the American Dream -- how can we be both of civilization and of nature -- if nature is wasted, stripped, and gone? Ultimately, all of this is a cry for conservation. Steinbeck writes that "all these evils can and must be overcome if America and Americans are to survive" (144). Without overcoming these evils, we will lose the environment. With it, too, the American Dream.

The truth of the matter is that we have too much. Steinbeck says the reason for all of this is because "we are also poisoned with things. Having many things seems to create a desire for more things, more clothes, houses, automobiles" (Americans 172). He calls American "a national kennel of animals with no purpose and no direction" (172), echoing his animalistic sentiments from Travels. Before, we had to work to survive. Americans were born of struggle, of trying to survive in a land that was dominated more heavily by the environment. Now we live in a land of plenty; we survive easily now. Effectively, "we have food and shelter and transportation and the more terrible hazard of leisure" (Americans 172). Steinbeck cherishes struggle. He built his career mythologizing the struggles of working class Americans searching for the American Dream. In a letter to Jackie Kennedy, he says, "the greatness of our country resides in the fact that we have not made it and are still trying. No -- I do believe that strength and purity lie almost exclusively in the struggle -- the becoming" (Letters 795). He believes not only strength, but also purity lies in struggle. If morality can only come from struggle, it does, in some ways, diminish or fetishize the struggle.

Steinbeck believes we have nothing to work for. We aren't struggling; we

have nothing worth struggling for. Steinbeck says we have "nothing to do, nowhere to go, no direction, no purpose, and worst of all no needs. Wants [we have], yes, but for more bright and breakable 'things.' We are trapped and entangled in things" (Americans 173). Without struggle for our needs, we have become selfish through the

Almost unlimited new power took the place of straining muscles and bent backs. Machinery took the heavy burden from our shoulders. Medicine and hygiene cut down infant mortality almost to the vanishing point, and at the same time extended our life span. Automation began to replace our workers. Where once the majority of our people worked the land, machines, chemistry, and a precious few produced more food than we needed or could possibly use. Leisure, which again had been the property of heaven, came to us before we knew what to do with it, and all these good things falling on us unprepared constitute calamity (Americans 174).

We struggled and automated until we created leisure. Steinbeck seems to think we aren't mature enough for it, as if we haven't reached our biological maturity to have the right to these kinds of opportunities. We are a confused, young country, whose equality is a false one and whose system is imperfect. Yet, we managed to perfect leisure before equality. In the vacuum of having to work for these things, we become selfish, sedated. Steinbeck expands on this further, saying,

We have the things and we have not had time to develop a way of thinking about them. We struggle with our lives in the present and our practices in the long and well-learned past. We have had a million years to get used to the idea of fire and only twenty to prepare ourselves for the productive-destructive tidal wave of atomic fission. [...] To allow ourselves the illusion of usefulness we have standby crews for functions

which no longer exist. We manufacture things we do not need and try by false and vicious advertising to create a feeling of need for them. [...] we have not had time to learn inside ourselves the things that have happened to us (Americans 174-175).

Here, Steinbeck is "asserting that a discovery of oneself is the necessary beginning point for the knowledge of other places, other people, and the world" (Heavilin 46)<sup>8</sup>. Which is to say that we don't understand ourselves. We don't have a way of thinking about Americans in a situation where all these things are possible because we have not found ourselves. Much the same way the frontier prioritizes individualism, we must understand ourselves to understand our country. We have nothing to work for, no desires or goals. We're after material only.

Steinbeck now turns to morals, which is where he becomes the most pessimistic he's been ever. "Perhaps one can judge the health of a society by the nature as well as the incidence of crimes committed against it" (Americans 175), Steinbeck writes. If this is the case, then we are truly sick:

"There are of course the many crimes against property, but increasingly these are destructive rather than for gain. But the greatest increase is in crimes against people, against the physical bodies of people. The rapes have little to do with sexuality and much to do with destructive murder. The mugging in the streets and the violence which has turned our parks into jungles have little to do with robbery, although, as in the modern rape the ritual of sex is added, so in mugging there is robbery but its purpose and its drive seem to be destructive, the desire to hurt, to maim, to kill. Where need for money is the motive of the violence, the

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<sup>8</sup> Heavilin, Barbara A. "'A Love for Joseph Addison': Wit, Style, and Truth in Steinbeck's America and Americans." The Steinbeck Review, vol. 6, no. 2, 2009, pp. 38-54. JSTOR, [www.jstor.org/stable/41582114](http://www.jstor.org/stable/41582114). Accessed 11 Dec. 2019.

reason is again sad and sick and destructive, this time self-destructive, the need for drugs to abolish consciousness or stimulants to give shape and substance to a schizoid twin, hallucinatory aids in the creation of another world to take the place of this hated one. This too is a kind of murder" (Americans 175-176).

This quote is very dark. Steinbeck's suggesting that all crime is meant to destroy, to hurt. Americans aren't after gain. We want to destroy, we want to hurt. Even bystanders are complicit. You are silent in the face of violence. "If our will to survive is weakened," (Americans 176), "if our love of life and our memories of a gallant past and faith in a shining future are removed -- what need is there for morals or for rules" These are our ailments. In response to a lack of needs, we have been consumed by wants, and the need to destroy. Steinbeck concludes this in saying "we have succeeded in what our fathers prayed for and it is our success that is destroying us" (Americans 177).

Steinbeck calls Americans "a dying people [who] tolerates the present, rejects the future, and finds its satisfactions in past greatness and half-remembered glory" (Americans 177). In a brief moment of self-reflection, Steinbeck almost admits that the frontier is an incomplete idea. It is an idea of white success. Americans only half-remember this myth, cherishing the rugged individualism, the democracy, the idea of a "wild" and won America. But we forget those to whom the frontier didn't apply. We wallow in that half-remembered glory instead of pushing forward with it.

But after all this bleakness, there's a light at the end of the tunnel. Steinbeck turns to the future, and he looks to it with a little hope. Steinbeck writes that it is "in the American negation of these symptoms of extinction that my hope and confidence lie. We are not satisfied. Our restlessness [...] is still with us" (Americans 177). Naturally, Americans are restless. They are

inclined toward movement, toward progress, towards seeking the unknown. The upshot of all this is that "Americans do not lack places to go and new things to find. [...] Far larger experiences are open to our restlessness -- the fascinating unknown is everywhere" (Americans 178). Which is how the frontier continues to exist within Americans. The unknown is everywhere. Because the individual is so important to the frontier myth, anything unknown is worth seeking. Steinbeck has some optimistic words, writing,

We have not lost our way at all. The roads of the past have come to an end and we have not yet discovered a path to the future. I think we will find one, but its direction may be unthinkable to us now. When it does appear, however, and we move on, the path must have direction, it must have purpose and the journey must be filled with a joy of anticipation (Americans 176-177).

Because there is always an unknown, because of the frontier spirit that exists within Americans, we can survive. We can find our way out of the dark. What might be the most interesting about all this, though, is the image of the road in Steinbeck's advice. Steinbeck found his own road, and took that road all the way across the country, suggesting Americans do the same now. He's telling them to give up the material, to let go of the false roots, and to wester, to move, to go into the unknown. In order to escape this discontentedness, in order to leave behind the violence, we must embrace our the true American spirit: the old American Dream, to be one of nature and of civilization, to let go of roots, to move and to seek out the unknowns.

But there are many other kinds of Americans, those outside the mythically white bubble of the Frontier. There are Americans who came here yesterday. Some maybe snuck in. Others have waited for a long time to be here. Others might not know how they got here at all. None of this makes any of these types of people

more American than the other. Steinbeck believes in these Americans, writing, "our land is of every kind geologically and climatically, and our people are of every kind also—of every race, of every ethnic category -- and yet our land is one nation, and our people are Americans" (Americans 12). The problem with the frontier is that this doesn't apply to everyone. The frontier was a space in which certain kinds of people were not allowed to exist or prosper. It's because of this that I cannot help but think that there is a piece missing from all of this.

Steinbeck absolutely wants the frontier spirit to apply to everyone. He wants everyone to succeed by chasing after their own unknown, by forgoing rootedness and material. He seems cognizant of the shortcomings within the American system. Steinbeck is aware that it is much more difficult to be successful in America if you are a minority or an immigrant, writing,

The national dream of Americans is a whole pattern of thinking and feeling and may well be a historic memory surprisingly little distorted. Furthermore, the participators in the dream need not have descended physically from the people to whom the reality happened. This pattern of thought and conduct which is the national character is absorbed even by the children of immigrants born in America, but it never comes to the immigrants themselves, no matter how they may wish it; birth on American soil seems to be required (Americans 38).

Truthfully, if you're an American, born here on U.S. soil, then you probably have certain advantages over those who aren't. But he believes the dream is still within all Americans, somehow, something absorbed into the national character. Concerning the struggles of minorities, Steinbeck writes,

From the first we have treated our minorities abominably [...] All that was required to release this mechanism of oppression and sadism was that the

newcomers be meek, poor, weak in numbers, and unprotected -- although it helped if their skin, hair, eyes were different and if they spoke some language other than English or worshiped in some church other than Protestant (Americans 14-15).

It's good of Steinbeck to be aware of this sort of thing. He's at least conscious that non-white people are at a strong disadvantage. However, I think the use of the term "our minorities" is discomforting. While he probably means "our" as in "America's minorities," but it comes off like "white people's minorities."

The reason I bring any of this up at all is due to the photographs that are featured in Americans. There's a relationship between the Americanness Steinbeck is writing about and the photographs littered between essays and sections. It's not like they're random or anything, either. Steinbeck begins his Foreword by saying, "In text and pictures, this is a book of opinions, unashamed and individual" (Americans 8). Steinbeck calling the book one of "opinions" feels more like deflection than complete truth. Steinbeck makes clear proclamations about the American spirit. These are assertions. To shy from them and call them opinions seems like Steinbeck's playing coy.

In the Afterword, Steinbeck says, "The pictures in this book are of our land, wide open, fruitful, and incredibly dear and beautiful. It is ours and we will make of it what we are -- no more, no less" (Americans 221). There's a lot to this quote. One of the things that's interesting is the change in tone. If you remember from the opening pages of Travels, Steinbeck said, "I discovered that I did not know my own country" (Travels 5). But here, Steinbeck's come to the end of the road with that journey. Now he knows his country. Only now, he knows it isn't his. The photos are of "our land." He reiterates that twice.

Which brings the discussion round to the photographs. The very first

photograph appears before any of Steinbeck's essays. It's of a Native American woman, profile, taken by Emil Schulthess. I think about this photo a lot, actually. I think about this photo a lot, actually. The woman's elderly, with soft wrinkles that curve up her cheekbones. She has braids, a head wrap, an earring. She's also smiling at something out-of-frame. I'm appreciative that this photo is the one that comes first, before anything else. Before even Steinbeck. It is a kind of acknowledgement of the presence of Native Americans. Her age, the placement of the photo, it's all nodding to the fact that they're a people who were here first, a people with a long history. But she's also looking to the right, towards the end of the book, as if she's looking at the future. I can't help but think maybe she's looking forward to the future, to a future where Americans are connected. But I also think -- if she is first, if she is excited for the future -- why Steinbeck talks of Americans in a masculine sense. I wonder why he doesn't ever talk to any Native Americans on his travels.

The only time Steinbeck ever deals with Native issues is in Americans. But he has a kind of shortsightedness that bothers me. He says,

"For a time it looked as though the Indians might completely disappear, but then about fifty years ago something -- or perhaps a series of things -- happened. The Indians developed an immunity to extinction. [...] at the same time it ceased to be a hidden disgrace to have Indian blood, and people began boasting of grandparents who were Cheyenne or Cherokee, even if it wasn't true. [...] The Indians survived our open intention of wiping them out, and since the tide turned they have even weathered our good intentions toward them, which can be much more deadly. The myth of the Indian as a savage, untrustworthy, dangerous animal, wily, clever, and self-sufficient as an opponent, gave way to the myth of the Indian as

a child, incapable of learning and of taking care of himself" (Americans 19).

He's certainly right about the way white folks have developed myths about Native Americans, and even white folks lying about having Native blood in them. But I don't like his statement that they "developed an immunity to extinction." Yes, they are a strong people. But this statement doesn't do Native issues justice. Some reservations were not, and still aren't, providing basic human rights, such as clean water. Steinbeck's writing during two eras of Indian policy, called Termination (1945-1961) and Self-Determination (1961-Present)<sup>9</sup>, respectively. During Termination, the U.S. government pulled out of a significant number of programs governing Native American reservations, the "termination" of their involvement, per se. But they also passed Public Law 280 in 1952, which allowed local law enforcement to take over reservation legal affairs, ultimately contributing to a decrease in Native sovereignty. However, from 1961 on, the U.S. the era of Self-Determination, which ultimately increased Native sovereignty significantly. The U.N. recognized the rights of indigenous peoples, Public Law 280 was repealed, and states were increasingly forced to get the consent of tribal governments. The Self-Determination era also saw an softening to the image of the Indian on behalf of the public, as it saw the rise of Indian activist groups, like AIM, which won over public support. It seems like Steinbeck is talking within this view, appreciating Native Americans, but not necessarily acknowledging their current state, which was not the best.

Now I'd like to turn to the photos of children, and there's a bunch of them. But there are two that strike me the most are ones that are in a museum.

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<sup>9</sup> These are given a brief overview, but for a more in-depth exploration (and my source), see: Deloria, Vine, and Lytle, Clifford M. "American Indians in Historical Perspective." American Indians, American Justice, University of Texas Press, 1983, pp. 1-24.

The first one appears on page 59, and is taken by Alfred Eisenstaedt (See "Two Girl Scouts Looking Up at Marble," 61). It features two young Girl Scouts. They look upwards, up-up at a statue of Abraham Lincoln, who looks down at them, motioning toward them. The second photo is on page 128, photographed by James Drake (See "Children in the Museum," 62). This one features a small girl accompanied by a toddler. They both are alone in a museum, looking off at something toward the right, their mouths open in awe. These photos feel really symbolic. In the second photo, the kids are surrounded by history, by knowledge. And they're in awe of it. They look to the right, to the end, to the future. One kid is even disappearing at the edge of the photo, as if they're already moving towards that future, being imbedded with the history that surrounds them. The first almost speaks for itself. She looks up to history, to the moral code of Lincoln, and yet he motions to her. Another thing that's wonderful about these photos is that all the children appear to be women. For talking a lot about American men, these photos are signaling a feminine future, one where these young girls will surpass history. Steinbeck's essays had a testy relationship with children, if you remember his anger about parents passing on ridiculous, materialistic goals. He thought we were ruining children, setting them up to fail. These photos show perhaps the perfect example of what kids ought to be: surrounded with knowledge, with the recognition of history, of struggle, and taking that into the future, the past giving up its firm grip on the national myth.

There's one more photo I'd like to look at. There are roughly 116 pages of photos in Americans, but only four photos show African-Americans. Likewise, they show only one African-American apiece. But the one that strikes me most is on page 68, photographed by Declan Haun (see "Black child at Civil Rights protest march, North Carolina, 1961," 63). It's of a young African-American



"Two Girl Scouts Looking Up at Marble"



"Children at the Museum"



"Black child at Civil Rights protest march, North Carolina, 1961"

girl in a sort of raincoat, holding an American flag. It obscures the lower half of her face, and she peers over the blurry stripes with big eyes and a serious expression. There's something powerful in the photo. Behind her, we can kind of see shapes of people moving around, telling us she's in a crowd. But she's separate from that. All of that's blurry. It's intensely focused on her, and some of her is obscured by the American flag. It's almost like her face, her identity is being covered by America. But she holds it, reclaiming the flag, looking over it. It's a very striking image.

John Steinbeck supports rights for African-Americans. He makes this clear in Americans, when he writes, "The force of Negro pressure, backed by a majority of white Americans, will not allow us to retire civil rights to the limbo in which the Constitutional amendments hid their heads for a hundred years" (Americans 50). However, he has a very insensitive way of talking about it. First, he uses the word "negro," which is real unpleasant. Then there's the fact that here, he almost minimizes the power of African-Americans. Congress could succumb to pressure by the African-American community -- but only with backing of a white majority. The wording is really off-putting. He says other things that are inappropriate. For example, Steinbeck writes,

"In the antebellum South, it was generally known that the Negroes were, by and large, physically strong and virile, and that, as with most physically strong people, they were sexually potent and active. This made for one more stage in the tower of fear; it was generally considered that Negroes were just that way -- strong and sexy -- and the fact that this strong, resistant breed had been developed by selection never occurred to the Southern whites" (Americans 72).

What Steinbeck seems to be saying is that slavery produced a paradox where a group of people was enslaved, only to be made quite physically strong. But his

sexualization and fetishization of the bodies of slaves is quite disturbing.

More than what I've said above, I think Steinbeck has a very narrow, almost gullible understanding of the struggles of African-Americans. This is expressed here:

"There is no question that Negroes will get their equality -- at law; not as soon as they should, but sooner than pessimists believe. But legal equality is only the smallest part of being equal. It is one of the less attractive of human traits that everyone wants to look down on someone, to be better than someone else; and, since this is symptomatic of insecurity, humans in general do not seem to be very secure. The hurt in the Negro and the deep-seated suspicion of the white is matched only by the fear and suspicion of the white toward the Negro; and while there remains any vestige of such feeling, true equality cannot be achieved" (Americans 77).

While I appreciate Steinbeck's optimism of the direction of minority rights, it clearly hasn't gone this way, so what he says lands flatly. But there's also his understanding of why minorities don't have rights, which doesn't make a lot of sense. He chalks it up to human insecurity -- not even a white, racialized insecurity, which makes more sense. This seems completely unfair and impractical. It's as if he doesn't understand that the reason for African-American discomfort -- a gross generalization in itself -- is systemic oppression. Instead, he thinks it's because white folks are suspicious of African-Americans and vice versa. It seems to completely ignore history. It is both reductive and narrow-minded.

In one fell swoop, the image of the girl holding the American flag loses much of its power. No longer does it look like an image of control, but one in which she's obscured. Her identity hidden by the big American flag taking over

the frame, swinging wildly, telling itself that it's just a suspicion that stands between her and equality. I will give Steinbeck credit for saying that "legal equality is only the smallest part of being equal," though. That much, at least, is true, as evidenced by Steinbeck's own tactlessness. In Travels, the only minorities Steinbeck encounters are African-Americans and it doesn't go over very well. He picks up a hitchhiker, whom he makes really uncomfortable. When Steinbeck mentions the Cheerleaders, "a weight and a darkness fell" on the man (Travels 232). Steinbeck asks if there's an end. "Oh, certainly an end," he says, "It's the means -- it's the means. But you're from the North. This isn't your problem" (Travels 232). His response is kind of haunting. The means. The means are violence, are systematic laws meant to smother them out. But Steinbeck doesn't understand this. He makes another hitchhiker uncomfortable, too. Steinbeck interrogates the man, who tries to answer, "but he squirmed with restlessness" (Travels 236). The man begs to be let out, that he lives just down the road, but "he took up his trudging beside the road. He didn't live nearby at all, but walking was safer than riding with me" (Travels 237). It's as if Steinbeck has an awareness of his privilege, of the notion that there's such a thing as African-American struggles. But he can't come to grips with his own position in the problem.

It's because of this view that Steinbeck is held back. The photographs in Americans show mostly all kinds of Americans. Most of them are white, but all of these Americans are doing different things. They're moving. They're in cities, in small towns. They're out in the wild, surrounded by people, alone. But all of them are individual. Every photo has a single focus. The individual. Even the nature shots -- and there's only a handful or so, all stuffed in at the end -- show nature as individual. It reminds me of the hills in Wisconsin that Steinbeck was such a fan of. The one thing these Americans aren't doing is

destroying. They aren't buying things or tearing apart. Some of them are actually making things. But what they're all doing is participating in a frontier. Seeking unknown, forgoing the roots. They're participating in the American Dream, one with nature, with civilization. These photographs show Steinbeck's America the way he sees it. Even minorities are singled out, hidden, telling of his own biases and blindness. In Americans, Steinbeck has diagnosed the American spirit as a corrupted thing, one weighed down by wants, by a lack of struggle and need. Following his speculative Winter, and his inquisitive Travels, Steinbeck concludes by suggesting the only way we can save ourselves is by reconnecting with the old American Dream, by chasing our own frontiers.

### CONCLUSION

From this spindly, often speculative, active thesis that Steinbeck has produced over the course of the American trilogy, a pattern emerges. Here, we have the space to ponder this thesis, to consider how Steinbeck came to his ideas and conclusions, tracing the map he developed over three books; why any of this matters and what it means for Americans.

Steinbeck's letters, recalling the Introduction, presented a confused, scared man. Steinbeck was concerned about the state of the American spirit. Certain events of the time -- such as the TV scandal involving Van Doren -- seemed to point to what Steinbeck was sensing was becoming normal throughout the country; immorality and a lack of integrity. But what did this mean for Americans? To Steinbeck, it was a sign that Americans had lost touch with the American spirit, with that special intrinsic, uniquely American quality that makes them Americans. He felt that we had gained this immorality by reversing the American Dream, trading the deeply heartfelt old dream for a new, materialistic one.

Steinbeck explored this perversion of the American Dream in The Winter of Our Discontent, while also demonstrating the consequences of this. In the novel, Steinbeck explores the life and actions of his character, Ethan Allen Hawley. Ethan, a grocery clerk in a store his family used to own, craves the status and money that his family name no longer holds. The Hawleys had built New Baytown, and the Great Depression robbed them of it. To get this status and money back, Ethan commits a number of pretty terrible acts. Ethan has his boss, an illegal immigrant, deported, and acquires the grocery store in the process. At one point, Ethan considers robbing a bank. Ethan gives his former best-friend, Danny Taylor, the tools with which to kill himself, and gaining a

large and valuable plot of land in the process. He uses this to blackmail a prominent businessman to maintain his wealth. All the while, Ethan is assuring himself he deserves these things because his roots, his family name, meant he did. But Steinbeck highlights these acts in a specific way. I demonstrated how Steinbeck portrayal of Ethan's fixation on wealth and status, on roots, is a corrupted version of the American Dream, as Steinbeck understands the concept. The true American Dream is a connection with the land -- of being one with civilization and with people -- while also completing the highest achievement one can do with their innate capability. Ethan's actions were ones that were dishonest, wasteful; he connected with material and rootedness, not with the land or people. In fact, Ethan failed to participate in the dream at all.

The kind of immorality Steinbeck writes about in Winter is the primary drive behind his American trilogy. Being the first part, it is the diagnosis of an illness within the American body. Travels with Charley: In Search of America is a field study of Americans -- to discern what truly is that innate Americanness he believes exists within all Americans -- so that he can fully explain the problem and treatment in America and Americans.

In Travels, Steinbeck builds on Winter, taking a personal journey across America, to talk to Americans so he may re-understand it and discern the innate Americanness, which he believes is the frontier. The frontier, which is movement (westering) to seek out the unknown, is described in Frederick Jackson Turner's The Significance of the Frontier in American History, a landmark, but controversial, thesis in America culture. The frontier transitioned from a physical space (the West), into an intrinsic drive that pushed Americans forward. Steinbeck understands Americans from a biological sense, seeing them as a species with different breeds. This allows him to make those big claims about the innate Americanness. Steinbeck goes through his journey, meeting

Americans and coming to conclusions about the different kinds of Americans. But Steinbeck also appreciates the natural beauty of America, and comes to the conclusion that a region or environment does have an effect on its people, much how animals are suited to a different climate. On his journey, Steinbeck comes to the understanding that the innate Americanness is the frontier. It is being in connection with nature and people, by seeking out the unknown, doing away with roots and material, and by westering -- just as he did.

Americans, then, is Steinbeck's journalistic conclusion to the trilogy, making bold assertions that the ailments of the American spirit were material and waste, and how they can fix it by reclaiming the frontier. In the book, Steinbeck analyzes the state of America today. He comes to suggest the existence of something called the Corporation Man, indicating that the American was becoming subject to corporations. Corporations dictate status, wealth, what one could own, and the necessity for all these things. These false anxieties are also passed along to children, the way the frontier myth was passed on to generations. Finally, Steinbeck asserted that after struggling to survive, we managed to perfect leisure. However, we aren't mature enough to deal with it when there are still injustices in our own society. The photographs littered throughout the book point to a more diverse, hopeful America; a progressive America. These photos show the America Steinbeck hopes for, focused on the individual, one who is always participating in the frontier.

The writings on the American spirit by a celebrated American author -- whose work contributes to the American cannon and consciousness -- is worth taking seriously. It's a trilogy whose tone and view deviate heavily from Steinbeck's earlier, more celebrated work. That work, which was written under the survivalist pressures of the Great Depression, was patriotic, championed traditionally American values. The America trilogy is written in the shadow of

that, in the air of the Cold War. It is by a writer confused about the America that had emerged a product of the Great Depression and the Second World War. It is by a jaded progressive, who said "I'm not the young writer of promise any more" (Letters 802). Yet, this is the John Steinbeck who won the Nobel Prize for his portrayal of America, who wrote this trilogy. More that, it's also a framework for a method on how to reconsider the nationalist myths that are woven into the American body, which is both conflicting and ever-diversifying. It's also a framework for reconsidering our national identity in eras of discontentment and confusion. With this, I would like to go forth and evaluate the success of the American trilogy.

In a way, some of what Steinbeck has hinted at sounds like Woody Guthrie's "This Land is Your Land," a song deeply woven into the fabric of American culture, which is where Steinbeck fails to connect and where his trilogy falters. When Steinbeck wrote, "our land is of every kind geologically and climatically, and our people are of every kind also—of every race, of every ethnic category -- and yet our land is one nation, and our people are Americans" (Americans 12), I was instantly reminded of the song by Steinbeck reiteration of "our land." Deeper consideration of the song and its themes point to a different, more progressive conclusion than the one Steinbeck draws. The problem with the frontier is that this doesn't apply to everyone. The frontier was a space in which certain kinds of people were not allowed to exist or prosper. It's because of these borders that I cannot help but think that there is a piece missing from all of this.

Guthrie's folk song has saturated American media since he recorded it in 1944. It's probably America's greatest known folk song. For a while, it was taught in schools and kids had to memorize it. However, there were a couple of verses omitted, specifically ones that talk about private property. The song

itself is a complete and heartfelt celebration of America. The song begins with the chorus, which is a gentle verse:

This land is your land, this land is my land  
 From California, to the New York Island  
 From the Redwood Forest, to the Gulf Stream waters  
 This land was made for you and me (1-4).

This verse is beautiful and uplifting, wholesome and kind. I especially like the way Guthrie begins by affirming that the land is "your's" not just his. The idea of the collective America, the country, the identity, the land belonging to all of us together. It's similar to the way Steinbeck is reaffirming the idea of America for everyone. The land is ours, it's what we make of it. Note, also the similarities between Guthrie's lyrical journey -- from New York to California -- and Steinbeck's own journey across the country. Steinbeck even made a stop at the Redwoods (his dog, Charley, was very unimpressed). It's also important to note Guthrie's focus on nature, which is so endearing. For him, America is its land, and that makes America beautiful. Guthrie admires the American landscape in other ways, like "the sparkling sands of her diamond deserts" (10), when "the sun comes shining as I was strolling / The wheat fields waving and the dust clouds rolling" (13-14).

If you remember from Travels, this sounds a lot like Steinbeck's experience with traveling America. It recalls his infatuation with Montana, Wisconsin, and Michigan. The nature of America is something he cherishes deeply. The abuse of it infuriated him in Americans. But Guthrie's song shares more similarities, notably the presence of a journey, or westering. Guthrie narrates "As [he] was walking that ribbon of highway / [and] saw above [him] that endless skyway" (5-6). As well as how he "roamed and rambled and [he] followed [his] footsteps" (9). It's been well documented that Guthrie was a

wanderer. On trailcars or foot, sleeping on stoops, in cars, on porches. Woody Guthrie was a nomad who'd spend a night in jail if he needed a roof. Guthrie is a kindred spirit with Steinbeck who once said, "I was born lost and take no pleasure in being found" (Travels 64). The two share the same sense of pride in the rambling, roaming America. Guthrie is one of those "restless people" Steinbeck made such a fuss about. Guthrie westers the way Steinbeck said we ought to if we're to survive. Further, Guthrie is participating in the frontier, with the American spirit as Steinbeck saw it, by wandering and being with nature and the people of America. Guthrie notoriously refused to have any more money than he needed, playing songs for spare cash here and there. He literally refused all capital. If anything, Guthrie and his life are the perfection of Steinbeck's vision.

Brian K. Garman has a great book that looks at the most paramount of American folk heroes -- Walt Whitman, Woody Guthrie, and Bruce Springsteen. One of the things he touches on is how individual the experience of singing their songs and saying their words is. Garman writes,

Much like a Whitman poem, "This Land," at least as it is sung in a vast majority of the tributes, represents things not as they are but as the author thinks they should be. And also like a Whitman poem, its romantic vision, which tries to realize the promise of freedom and equality, is often mistaken as an assessment of current social realities rather than an interrogation of them. To be sure few people know that Guthrie intended the song to serve as a Marxist corrective to Irving Berlin's "God Bless America," and although biographer Joe Klein, Harold Leventhal, and Arlo Guthrie have publicized the fact since 1980, the song is so widely known and so widely sung that their efforts have had little impact on public perceptions of it. Because very few artists sing "This Land" in

its entirety, it is virtually impossible to distinguish its patriotism from Berlin's or even from more recent jingoistic songs such as Lee Greenwood's "God Bless the U.S.A." Like any other nationalistic anthem, it uncritically proclaims the United States the land of freedom and equality and lends credence to Guthrie's reputation, in the words of Stewart Udall, as a legendary artist who expressed "the sense of identification that each citizen of our country feels toward this land and the wonders which it holds" (186).

Guthrie is singing about America as he wishes it would be, not as it is. When people sing "This Land is Your Land," they're participating in that vision, in believing in it. The song is steeped in this idealistic patriotism with a Marxist twist. Guthrie is both praising an America, while confronting the one he sees.

When Guthrie roamed America, it was both during the Depression and World War II, the same circumstances under which Steinbeck wrote his most celebrated works and the foundation for his sense of patriotism. Guthrie wrote the song in 1940, at the cusp of these two monumental moments. In a later verse, Guthrie sings,

In the shadow of the steeple I saw my people,  
 By the relief office I seen my people;  
 As they stood there hungry, I stood there asking  
 Is this land made for you and me? (Guthrie 20-24).

The doubt in his voice is startling. This is the moment when Guthrie challenges his present, not his dream. How can this land be ours, when people are in line, starving from an economic depression? Guthrie's speaking to the war-soaked world around him. But this was an era when the country's national mentality was arguably the farthest left it's ever been. Guthrie was experiencing both

collective starvation and patriotic effort, bolstered by the widespread use of public land and the numerous social programs. From this, Guthrie envisions an even better America, one where these private property is eliminated, where all Americans are equal and taken care of. This reminds me of Steinbeck's own infatuation with the struggling Americans of the '30s, the "real poverty" (Letters 701), he had called it. Even more, it reminds me of when Steinbeck said how "during the deep Depression, the federal government assumed responsibility for the health and well-being of all citizens. This was a true second revolution" (Americans 49). For all his emphasis on struggle being the source of purity, he commends the government for taking the welfare of its people into its hands. When the government does that, Americans are connected, working together, acting together to ensure their survival. In fact, this "second revolution" sounds very Communist.

Like Garman said, Guthrie was a Communist. "Like Whitman," Garner writes, "Guthrie's radicalism was often created and contained by his faith in American democracy" (187). It's interesting that during the Red Scare '50s and counterculture-driven '60s, Steinbeck -- who has lost so much of his hopeful, social eye -- is echoing Communist sentiment. It's even more interesting that this sentiment is so deeply woven into a culture that claims to reject it. One of the verses that often gets omitted from "This Land" is the fifth one, in which Guthrie sings,

As I went walking I saw a sign there,  
 And on the sign it said "No Trespassing."  
 But on the other side it didn't say nothing.

That side was made for you and me" (Guthrie 17-20).

The side that doesn't say "No Trespassing," the free, open side, is the side that's made for you and me, for Americans. Americans deserve freedom -- to

roam, to collectivize, to work together. Is that not how Steinbeck undertook his journey across America? Squatting in public lands, in people's yards, talking with them to understand America?

Steinbeck himself can't be identified as a Communist. He did dabble though. In 1963, the Cultural Attacheé to the American Embassy in Moscow "invited Steinbeck to visit the Soviet Union under the auspices of the Cultural Exchange Program" (Letters 768). He went excitedly. What Steinbeck doesn't mention in his letters, though, is that "he and his wife spent as much time as they could with dissent writers' groups in small clandestine meetings, often late at night" (Letters 785). Nonetheless, the FBI never tagged him for Communism, even though he kept in contact with these writers through his letters. Steinbeck's heroes were everyone, from ranchers, to Communists, to wanderers. His writings never leaned to a specific political identity -- save for socially mindful -- because "Steinbeck was not interested in philosophical theory divorced from lived experience" (Hart 32). Morality was important, but it didn't have a single face for Steinbeck. But therein lies the problem. Steinbeck's conclusions for, while hopeful, falls flat as it fails to logically follow its argument. The frontier is almost the answer. But Steinbeck maintains a naïveté concerning the experiences of minorities that simply restrains his conclusions from going far enough.

Steinbeck places his hope in the hands of young people while never directly capitalism as the true enemy of both America's progress and minorities. The frontier cannot be the answer because of its exclusionary nature. American capitalism is a derivative of the frontier, which was a place and idea of white success and the abuse of minorities. Native Americans, African Americans, and those understood to be "darker" on the racial scale -- such as Germans, Italians, Greeks, etc -- suffered in the frontier. Because

Capitalism is sourced from an exclusionary, it cannot be the answer, as it also excludes and abuses minorities. Steinbeck fails where Guthrie succeeds. Guthrie carried the argument, the westering, the American spirit, to its natural conclusion. Guthrie's Marxist view is a patriotic one. He wants an America in which everyone is taken care of, without the existence of equality, where our natural splendor can exist for everyone to use, but not exhaust. Guthrie's vision of America sounds like the perfected version of Steinbeck's frontier. Guthrie's vision allows people to roam, to be one with the land and civilization. Steinbeck's vision will never come true so long as he maintains a Capitalist attitude toward it, so long as his frontier is exclusionary. Therefore, Steinbeck is just as he saw his own country: Mistaken, but on the right path, so long as we wander it.

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