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“Writers on the Road:
Perception of and Perspectives on the United States
in John Steinbeck’s *Travels with Charley* and Bill
Bryson’s *The Lost Continent*.”

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for my parents

Preface

In 2006, when I went to America for a lengthy stay, a friend gave me Bill Bryson's *The Lost Continent*. In the following twelve months I read every single book Bill Bryson has ever written, some of them twice, *The Lost Continent* uncountable times. Wherever I went, I had Bryson in my pocket for he would tell me what the guidebook would not. When at the end of my stay I had seen most of the East and from previous journeys had seen all of the West, I felt the sudden urge to see what's in the middle, to "stand on two phone books in Iowa" and enjoy the view¹, to see the lofty meadows and waving buttercups of the Rocky Mountains, and to fall into a shopping spree at Wall Drug in South Dakota, the home of the jackalope.

So, on June 30, 2007, I packed my bags and my dear friend Silli and hit the road. Let's just say I didn't do all I wanted to do, I didn't see all I wanted to see, but more. Thirteen days and twenty hours later I was back in Washington D.C. having driven 13,000 miles to Los Angeles and back again. We saw Foamhenge, walked in Memphis, paid our respects to The Big Texan, crossed the Continental Divide (twice), were in four states at once in Four Corners, drove the Moki Dug Way, rode through Monument Valley, gaped at the Grand Canyon, spent a sleepless night in Vegas and took a dip in the Pacific Ocean. We drove Highway #1, had salt water toffee in San Francisco, sped by the Bonneville Race Track, climbed the Rocky Mountains, saluted Washington & Co. at Mount Rushmore, rode a jackalope in Wall, saw the Badlands turn into Goodlands, and blew through the windy city. And then we were back. But our trip continues "long after movement in time and space have ceased."²

Why it took me another ten months to realize that this was what I should be writing about - I cannot tell. It only occurred to me, when the ants in my pants were coming back and I felt like road tripping, that when writing my thesis I should write about something I love. In the course of writing I discovered not only many facts about America, Americans and poodles, but also about myself. Like Steinbeck³ I had a slight problem with keeping my notes, which seemed to become undiscoverable once written down and put aside for further consideration. They

¹ Bryson, Bill. *The Lost Continent: Travels in Small Town America*. London: Black Swan Books, 1999. p. 25. "I had forgotten just how flat and empty it is. Stand on two phone books almost anywhere in Iowa and you get a view."

² Steinbeck, John. *Travels with Charley. In Search of America*. New York: Penguin Books, 1986. p. 279.

³ Steinbeck, John. *Travels with Charley*. p. 137. "And I made some notes on a sheet of yellow paper on the nature and quality of being alone. These notes would in the normal course of events have been lost as notes are always lost, but these particular notes turned up long afterward wrapped around a bottle of ketchup and secured with a rubber band."

tended to sometimes pop up in a side pocket of a purse when I looked for some paper to scribble down more notes, giving me a moment of, “Ah, that’s what I wanted to add in chapter three,” only then to disappear the moment I sat down with my laptop to do so.

Also, in Brysonian tradition⁴, I often caught myself musing over my thesis when driving the short but impressively boring distance to my parents’ house in the country side, often looking for pieces of paper on the backseat to scribble down notes, not able to remember the last four-and-a-half miles of the unimaginably straight and tree-lined road and how I managed to survive them not paying attention to the world around me because I was actually on Highway 67 with Bill Bryson.

But most of all I learned that without the support and help of many people none of this would have been possible. Most of all I have to thank my parents, who have always supported me in every possible way, encouraged me to follow my dreams and more than once also funded them. Their patience is tireless, their love is wordless and my gratefulness is endless.

Then, I want to thank my supervisor, Prof. Margarete Rubik, who showed the same amount of interest and enthusiasm in this topic as in the two previous ones I had suggested over the years, for her support and her helpful and fast feedback and for not calling me insane for exceeding the maximum page number by a good fifty percent.

I also need to thank my dear friend, Edith, who hung in there with me, patiently listening to me babbling on about my writer’s block for the seventeenth time, enduring my temporary obsession with Steinbeck and the resultant nonstop-quoting from *Travels with Charley*, and holding on to my personal belongings when in a state of sudden enlightenment I had the most brilliant idea for chapter 3.2.1.1. in the middle of rush hour, on the subway, dropping my bags and frantically looking for a slip of paper to scribble down some notes.

Then, I need to thank all the people who kept me company on many sunny days at the library – well, at least *outside* it was sunny – rather staying in with me to study for their exams than abandoning my poor outlet-dependent self for the benefit of some sunlight and fresh air. Rattler, you hang in there!

And last but not least, Silli, thanks for being spontaneous and crazy enough to come with me and helping me find the way – out of Gallup and to this thesis.

So, when’s the next road trip?

⁴ Bryson, Bill. *The Lost Continent: Travels in Small Town America*. London: Black Swan Books, 1999. p. 60. “It is certainly quite easy to forget that you are in charge of two tons of speeding metal, and it is only when you start to scatter emergency cones at roadworks sites or a truck honks at you as you drift into its path that you are jolted back to reality and you realize that henceforth you probably shouldn’t leave your seat to search for snack food.”

INTRODUCTION

Travel literature is as old as travel itself and yet it remains a well-discussed problem what it actually is and how it can be defined. It is by no means my aim in this thesis to solve the problem and provide solutions but it is a necessary part of it to look into the matter and define some distinctive features of travel literature in regard to my case studies. With the theory in mind, I will then look at two well known road trip accounts, one by Bill Bryson and one by John Steinbeck, and see how the various features of travel literature are applied when an author is traveling and describing his home country. Apart from their individual perceptions and backgrounds, their journeys are twenty-nine years apart, which adds a historic aspect to the analysis of the two books.

The first chapter will provide a very selective overview of the development of travel writing and travel writing theory, and it will shed some light on the many aspects that have to be considered when dealing with travel literature. Travel writing itself is as old as traveling and tales about stranded sailors and far away lands were already told in ancient Egyptian, Greek and Roman times. In later medieval times it was mainly pilgrims to the Holy Land who brought home stories. But also early merchants like Marco Polo contributed greatly to early travel writing and introduced some of the still typical motifs of travelogues. When the great explorers set out to conquer the world, detailed reports of their journeys and findings were requested by their kings and queens. For centuries, scientists set out to find other cultures, discover exotic flora and fauna, and to describe and study them in full detail. But at the same time also fictional travelogues started to appear.

When in the late 19th century the exotic world of Africa, America and Asia had been explored, adventurers turned to the Arctic to revive the image of the tough conqueror of hostile lands. But there was also a new group of travel writers emerging, no longer explorers but writers who paved the way for travel writing to become a literary genre.

But then, what is travel writing? I will show that despite many indisputable characteristics ascribed to travel literature and many attempts to define it as a genre there is still no consensus over what travel writing really is. One of the major problems of travel writing theory is to place travelogues between fact and fiction, between the guidebook and the novel. Travel writing seems to be an amalgam of

many different genres, drawing on their stylistic features and combining them into a whole new thing. There has, however, been some consensus on the characteristics of travel writing. The obvious – travelogues are about journeys – is amended by explanations such as travelogues being stories following a narrative framework or travelogues being fictional means to interpret facts. But there is also another level of organizing travel literature apart from the structure. This other approach that Hulme suggests deals with content and style and defines travelogues along five strands – the comic, the analytical, the wilderness, the spiritual, and the experimental.

When we look at travel writing and try to define it we must not forget its long history and tradition. For many centuries travelogues have dealt with unknown exotic lands, “noble savages”, “Cannibals” and “monsters” and now that these have ceased to exist, travel writing has lost its role as an instrument for colonial expansion and colonial rule. For some, travel writing has left its past behind and has established a new tradition, a cosmopolitan vision, in which writers refrain from judging and differentiating themselves from other civilizations but praise the advantages of globalization and the similarities between the self and *the other*. However noble the idea, the colonial tradition seems to be flourishing within the cosmopolitan vision, disguised as tolerance and the celebration of equality while secretly reinstalling the hierarchical attitudes of colonial times.

Initially, traveling – especially to far away places – was mostly confined to the elite, as the Grand Tour suggests. However, gradually people started to find interest in their home countries and began to inspect their surroundings. It is then that the path of the traveler and the tourist part, and their rivalry lasts up until today. The industrial revolution allowed people to move about and to retrace the travel writers’ steps and stories, and with mass tourism setting in after World War II the traveler writer would soon not have much of what was still unknown to report. Therefore, travel writers have taken to identifying themselves as travelers in contrast to the mass tourist who is shooed from sight to sight without actually getting to know the country or city he is visiting. Only travelers acquire the intimate knowledge which gives them access to the authentic experience.

This takes us to the dichotomies of the genre. Travel writing is primarily about difference and to write successfully about *the other* the travel writer has to constantly re-establish his identity. Home and abroad are two important features

when it comes to establishing identity. I will discuss *the other*, foreign cultures, colonial traditions and unexplored lands, but how do these theories apply when a travel writer explores his home country?

In the land the travel writer calls home identity cannot be achieved by setting oneself off from the exotic other. A different entity has to be found from which the travel writer can set himself apart. This is where the tourist and traveler dichotomy comes into play. The travel writer sees himself as a traveler, someone whose journey takes him away to the road less traveled where he can experience the authentic. The tourist, on the other hand, is following preset routes, traveling in a herd-like manner and enjoying the artificial.

When the tourist is not different enough from the traveler to establish the latter's identity, there is another way to differentiate oneself from *the other* by escaping into subjectivity. Instead of giving an objective description against the cultural background of the travel writers, the writers themselves become the background, constructing themselves as public figures and taking on roles and catering to the expectations of their audience.

Apart from these dichotomies there are two stylistic features in travels at home. The first one is nostalgia. In our ever-changing world the travel writer sets out to rediscover his home country only to discover that many things have changed and others have been lost. The mythicized past no longer exists, and in this age of mass tourism the golden days of the traveler are over. Often the home country is idealized and romanticized to a point that is utopian; mourning the loss of a world once known becomes a leitmotif. The second important feature in travel writing is humor. With globalization, readers have lost interest in serious, colonial travel writing. As a result a new breed of travel writer has emerged: the joker. Instead of informing and instructing, the joker applies self-deprecation to entertain the reader. This does not mean, however, that serious topics are left aside. Instead, this style is a new approach playing with the colonial past of travel writing and breaking with conventions.

Travel writing consists of many sub genres, among them the road genre, which is particularly relevant for this thesis. The road genre was established in the early 20th century when automobile manufacturers sent their vehicles on tours of the United States to show their reliability and endurance. The pamphlets that were published for marketing purposes can be seen as the first road narratives. Linked with the road

genre are also specific characteristics. Some narratives focus on the road and the events along it, others pay more attention to cultural and regional traditions and differences, while still others resemble journeys down memory lane and take the reader to places of the author's past. Other theories divide the road genre into categories such as pastoral, passage narratives or narratives in search for a national identity. These correlate with the earlier subdivisions and we will see that there are no clear lines between these categories.

The second chapter is dedicated to the background information and critical explication of *The Lost Continent* and *Travels with Charley*. The biographical background of both authors, as well as the historical background is crucial to their motives and reasons for traveling. The 1950s and 1960s were a time full of change with the peak of the Cold War, the Vietnam War, the anti-racism movement, and the race to the moon. The 1980s in contrast, saw the end of the Cold War, the fall of the Iron Curtain, and the Challenger disaster. This historical overview provides the background against which we have to examine and compare the perceptions and perspectives of Bryson and Steinbeck.

Also, I will provide a brief insight into the authors' lives and motives for taking the journey. While Steinbeck was an aging writer, suffering from heart disease, Bryson took the trip in his mid thirties, standing at the beginning of his career as a writer. However, their motives are not as different as one might suspect. Both had neglected their home country for some time and set out not only to explore the present, but also to discover the past, or rather what was left of it. They both also had personal reasons and I will compare and illustrate how these influence their perception and perspectives of the vast country they were traveling.

The second chapter will also give a plot summary of both books and provide a closer look at structure, style and organization. We will see that both narratives are closely linked to the journey itself but also provide passages of inner monologue, *penseés* and dialogue which break up the continuity of the road. The amount of thoughts and therefore words and pages dedicated to a topic, a region, a state or a person will let us draw conclusions as to its importance in picturing the land, presenting the people, and describing a country. While Steinbeck and Bryson set out from different cities, they both end up visiting many of the same states. Steinbeck set out from Sag Harbor and stuck to a traditional coast-to-coast-to-coast route, meaning he crossed the continent from East to West and back again, sticking

to the northern route on his way west and to a southern route on his way east. Bryson, on the other hand, started out in his hometown in Iowa and split up his trip into two separate journeys, one exploring the American West and the other exploring the East. Their journeys took them to exciting cities and sleepy hamlets all over the country. They visited nature's most spectacular creations and drove across dull plains. And they also meet many people along the way leading different lives and having different opinions.

In the third chapter I will take a closer look at their impressions and findings, looking not only at landscape and urban life, but also on the people they meet. My aim is to examine if these people are in any way prototypes of the American character, sharing characteristics and therefore creating the picture of one unified character, or if they are individuals who make it impossible to draw inferences about *the* American character. It will also be part of my investigation to present the impact the landscape has on Bryson's and Steinbeck's perception, and to analyze which features and developments of their home country they welcome and praise and which ones they condemn and wish away.

In the conclusion it will then be my aim to examine how the descriptions of the places visited and the things seen differ from each other and what they have in common. I will be looking for traces of nostalgia in Bryson and compare it to Steinbeck's perception thirty years earlier. I will also look for a nostalgic vision of the future in Steinbeck on the one hand, but also search for prophecies of a dark future on the other hand, and compare those to Bryson's perception of America almost thirty years later. I will show their different reactions to the same sites and sights when applicable and I will try to identify similar reaction to different sites and sights.

Apart from characterizing and analyzing the people they meet and describing the landscape and cities they travel in, I will also analyze their style and compare their writing strategies, place their narratives within the various categories of the road genre but most of all I want to put together the image of the United States both authors create through their perceptions and perspectives of this vast country.

1. TRAVEL WRITING IN THEORY

1.1. THE DEVELOPMENT OF TRAVEL WRITING

“Writing and travel have always been intimately connected. The traveller’s tale is as old as fiction itself.”⁵

In *The Cambridge Companion of Travel Writing* Peter Hulme and Tim Youngs give an extensive overview of travel writing from the earliest times on. Even before the *Odyssey*, ancient Egyptian stories of shipwrecked sailors on exotic islands and the biblical Exodus can to some extent be classified as travel writings. Later in the Christian tradition the pilgrimage became a new kind of journey with the pilgrims being the “ancestors of modern tourists: a catering industry grew up to look after them, they followed set routes, and the sites they visited were packaged for them.”⁶

In later medieval times, apart from the pilgrims, one well known traveler and his stories of far away lands greatly influenced travel writing: Marco Polo. It was his narrative – though it was not written by him personally but by a romance writer named Rustichello –, which already included many themes and motifs often assigned to modern travel writing, among them the discovery of and curiosity about *the other*.⁷

Especially in the sixteenth century, documentation and factual correctness were the highest aim of travel writing as kings and queens and other sponsors requested detailed reports of their subjects’ journeys and discoveries. These reports were the basis for further investments and future settlements and needed to be as accurate as possible. However, there were already books such as Thomas More’s *Utopia* (1516) and Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* (1726) which were fully fictional travel reports. Richard Hakluyt, geographer and writer, was the first to differentiate fact and fiction in his *The principal navigations, voyages and discoveries of the English nation etc.* (1589), in which he only included eyewitness accounts.

In the eighteenth century the “fictional literature of the age ‘is full of travelling heroes enmeshed in journey plots’, and ‘almost every author of consequence [...]”

⁵ see Hulme, Peter, and Youngs, Tim (Ed.). Introduction. *The Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002. p. 2

⁶ Hulme and Youngs, p. 2

⁷ see Hulme and Youngs, p. 3

produced one overt travel book.’”⁸ James Buzard goes on to claim that “writers seemed to be travelling, in reality or in their imaginations, just about everywhere.”⁹ The most famous and most popular journey among the privileged young Britons of this time was the Grand Tour. Its purpose was the “education of young men of the ruling classes by exposing them to the treasured artifacts and ennobling society of the continent.”¹⁰ The Tour would last between one to five years and was often undertaken immediately after completing one’s studies. However, it has to be said that any travel writing concerning the tour was mostly private and remained unpublished.

During the Renaissance the focus of travel writing shifted towards observing and describing the strange and unknown. Roy Bridges suggests that during this period

“travel writing became increasingly identified with the interests and preoccupations of those in European societies who wished to bring the non-European world into a position where it could be influenced, exploited or, in some cases, directly controlled.”¹¹

In contrast to the traditional Grand Tour, philosophers now suggested that the young men leave the predetermined route of the Grand Tour and explore the people of the newly discovered continents. It were the accounts of these young men that philosophers and scientists had to rely on as they were usually not very well traveled themselves. As a result, they supplied the travelers with a large amount of instructions “about how to observe and how to write down their observations, and the history of such instructions runs unbroken into the early twentieth century and the foundations of anthropology.”¹²

The early stages of modern travel writing were already present in seventeenth century travel literature. Hulme and Youngs suggest Thomas Coryate’s *Crudities* (1611) as already containing a combination of extravagance, self-irony and adventure.¹³ Also parody, in combination with forgery, dates back to early works, the best example probably being Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* (1726).

⁸ Buzard, James. “The Grand Tour and after (1660-1840).” *The Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing*. Ed. Hulme, Peter, and Youngs, Tim. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002. p. 37

⁹ Buzard, p. 37

¹⁰ Buzard, p. 38

¹¹ Bridges, Roy. “Exploration and travel outside Europe (1720-1914).” *The Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing*. Ed. Hulme, Peter, and Youngs, Tim. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002. p. 53

¹² Hulme and Youngs, p. 4

¹³ see Hulme and Youngs, p. 5. The full title of Coryate’s work is *Hastly gobled up in five Monethes travels in France, Savoy, Italy, Rhetia commonly called the Grisons country, Helvetia alias Switzerland, some parts of high Germany and the Netherlands; Newly digested in the hungry aire of Somerset, and now dispersed to the nourishment of the travelling Members of this Kingdome*.

In Britain especially, after its rise to being a “truly global power”, a constantly rising number of travelers and explorers undertook journey to report on the wider world. Precise, detailed and accurate information was required in regard to economic strategies, plant collectors were sent out around the globe and associations were founded to publish new discoveries.¹⁴

Apart from the novelists’ fictional travel accounts and the explorers’ factual accounts of the foreign and the unknown, some writers during this period turned towards the known and started to explore and write about their home countries. In a time when travel was still reserved for the privileged, these writers were in search of picturesque and romantic landscapes at home and were the first to define today’s tourist sites.¹⁵

Dating back to the days of 19th century travel writing is the distinction between the traveler and the tourist. The early travelers saw themselves as some kind of “flâneures”, an aristocratic figure free to move about and enjoy, as compared to the new figure of the tourist starting to appear with Thomas Cook’s first tour in 1841, when he arranged train tickets and food for 570 temperance campaigners to take them to their rally.¹⁶

At this point in travel writing the borders between fact and fiction, between travel narratives and travel novels are starting to blur. Travel accounts of far away places hardly visited by anyone before were the perfect opportunity for the lone travel writer to add a few invented details here and there to spice up his story. On the other hand, early modern European novelists loved the traveling protagonist, whose adventures were influenced by the factual accounts of travelers. Hulme and Youngs suggest, “[t]ravel writing and the novel, especially in its first-person form, have often shared a focus on the centrality of the self, a concern with empirical detail, and a movement through time and place which is simply sequential,” but despite those similarities “the relationship between the genres remains close and often troubling.”¹⁷

In the twentieth century most of the Americas and Africa had been explored and explorers were heading for the poles and the Arctic to bring back travel accounts of hardship, danger and endurance. According to Hulme and Youngs, “polar writing

¹⁴ see Bridges, p. 55

¹⁵ see Hulme and Youngs, p. 6

¹⁶ see Hulme and Youngs, p. 7

¹⁷ Hulme and Youngs, p. 6

reinforced travel writing's growth in popularity, already evident in the late nineteenth century".¹⁸ Until then predominantly scientists and explorers had been the ones writing travel accounts. Slowly they were being joined by literary writers who did not put content before form, as their scientist colleagues did, but devoted a lot of time to the art of traveling and the art of writing.¹⁹

"There was a move [...] from the detailed, realist text, often with an overtly didactic or at any rate moral purpose, to a more impressionistic style with the interest focused as much on the travellers' responses or consciousness as their travels."²⁰

In the period from 1880 to 1940 a change took place and travel writing emerged "as the more literary and autonomous genre that we understand it to be today."²¹ While earlier travel writing had always been a result of a journey for a reason – traders, soldiers, missionaries, scientists to name but a few –, in the twentieth century writing about journeys and traveling became more and more the dominant reason. "They travel in order to write, they travel while writing, because for them, travel is writing".²²

Carr identifies three stages during this period of travel writing. The first one, roughly from 1880 to 1900 was dominated by the "realist" texts – not to be confused with "realistic" texts – stories about heroic explorers and their adventures in far away lands. By the time of World War I, travel writing had become less didactic and more subjective, with a shift in focus towards literary texts. The third stage took place in the years between World War I and World War II, when the literary travel book managed to leave the instructive realist texts behind and became the dominant form of travel literature.²³

In the history of travel writing there has long been a tendency toward either detailed factional writing or entertaining fictional writing, travel writing always leaning towards the extremes. In the course of the last century this separation between fact and fiction has started to vanish and fictional aspects are more and more to be found in travel accounts. Nonetheless, scientific or scholarly travel

¹⁸ Hulme and Youngs, p. 7

¹⁹ see Hulme and Youngs, p. 7

²⁰ Carr, Helen. "Modernism and travel (1880-1949)." *The Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing*. Ed. Hulme, Peter, and Youngs, Tim. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002. p. 74

²¹ Carr, p. 74

²² Butor, Michel. "Travel and Writing." Kowalewski, Michael. *Temperamental Journeys: Essays on the Modern Literature of Travel*. Athens: U of Georgia P, 1992. p. 67

²³ Carr, p. 75

writing has not vanished from literature; however its readership has shifted to fellow scientists and academics.

1.2. DEFINING TRAVEL WRITING

1.2.1. *Travel Fact and Travel Fiction*

While people have always been telling and writing the stories of their journeys, travel writing itself has recently become a well-discussed topic even though “[c]riticism has never quite known what to call books like these.”²⁴ Efforts have been made not only to give these stories about travels and adventure a proper name – travel literature, travelogues, travel books and travel writing are all names that come up in the critical discussion – but to place them among the genres. While travel literature, travel writing and travelogue have become widely accepted terms for what is to be discussed here, the placement of travel literature between fact and fiction remains a widely discussed topic among disciplines such as literature, history, geography and anthropology.²⁵

Wanting to take a closer look at what travel writing really is we encounter the first difficulties because – as Debbie Lisle in *The Global Politics of Contemporary Travel Writing* sums up quite nicely – there seems to be “no consensus over how to define travel writing or its structural elements.”²⁶ Kristi Siegel, in her introduction to *Issues in Travel Writing*, sees travel writing in a position of struggling “for its place as a distinct (and respected) genre,”²⁷ as “travelogues must negotiate the contradictory authorities of fact and fiction [and are therefore] best understood as a strange collection of other genres (fiction, autobiography, memoir and history).”²⁸ Holland and Huggan, however, have a different point of view and argue that “travel writing [...] deserves to develop as a genre; after all, it is a significant and, at its best, effective medium for the global circulation of (trans)cultural information.”²⁹

Within this discourse of where to place travel writing at least some consensus has been achieved on the fact that travel writing draws on many different genres and

²⁴ Fussell, Paul. *Abroad: British Literary Traveling Between the Wars*. New York, Oxford: Oxford UP, 1980. p. 202

²⁵ Hulme and Youngs, p. 1

²⁶ Lisle, Debbie. *The Global Politics of Contemporary Travel Writing*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2006. p. 29

²⁷ Siegel, Kristi (Ed.) Introduction. *Issues in Travel Writing: Empire, Spectacle, and Displacement*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2002. p. 1

²⁸ Lisle, p. 23

²⁹ Holland, Patrick, and Huggan, Graham. *Tourists with Typewriters: Critical Reflection on Contemporary Travel Writing*. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan Press, 2001. p. xi

their stylistic features and can be located anywhere between the novel and the guidebook.³⁰

Traditionally the novel is seen as more prestigious than the travelogue, while the guidebook is inferior and ranks below both, travel writing and novel.³¹ A very good example for this theory is John Steinbeck's *Travels with Charley*, which seems to suffer the fate of a stepchild and is hardly every dealt with to the same extent as Steinbeck's other works, his non-travelogues.

According to Caesar a shift within the last thirty to forty years has taken place, as travel writing was closer to the guidebook from the end of the war to the 1970s and has been moving towards the novel since then.³² Despite this shift it remains impossible even nowadays to place travel writing on a virtual scale between guidebook and novel and mark it with an X as it also depends on the author's intention and his tendency towards one or the other pole where a travelogue can be placed. While some authors want to give a detailed account of their adventures, hardship and explorations, others are more interested in entertaining the readership, focusing less on the account of road conditions and dangers but more on their encounters and cultural differences.

However, finding the balance between the two is not an easy task for writers as travel books that lean too much toward the guidebook tend to become a boring collection of facts, while leaning towards the novel and losing touch with the facts turns them into a "lie".³³ As Hulme and Youngs mention, "many readers still hope for a literal truthfulness from travel writing that they would not expect to find in the novel."³⁴

It seems we cannot exactly define what travel writing and travel literature is, and neither can we assign it an uncontroversial place among the many genres of literature. However, we can at least have a look at specific features that may not be unique to travel writing but have a strong tendency to appear in it.

Lisle offers a variety of generic criteria. According to her "a journey can include a mixture of leaving home, finding oneself, going through a rite of passage, seeking

³⁰ see Lisle, p. 30

³¹ see Lisle, p. 30

³² see Caesar, Terry. *Forgiving the Boundaries: Home as Abroad in American Travel Writing*. Athens, Ga: U of Georgia P, 1995. p. 125

³³ see Lisle, p. 30

³⁴ Hulme and Youngs, p.6

one's fortune, experiencing a dangerous adventure or simply getting away from it all."³⁵

Following these criteria, Lisle discusses the five different functions of travel writing. The first approach is *travelogues are about journeys*, based on "a journey metaphor that expresses the common affliction of wanderlust – the need to go elsewhere."³⁶ This point includes physical as well as inner journeys and has been the central motif of travel writing since its earliest days. The second point is *travelogues are stories*, i.e. they have "a narrative framework that follows the linear passage of beginning, middle and end."³⁷ In the case of travel writing this narrative framework is strongly linked to the journey itself, leaving home, being away and returning home. Her third approach is *travelogues are classified as non-fiction*. Although they are not classified as guidebooks, travelogues often offer a variety of facts about foreign places and people, include statistics and up-to-date studies, and give historical background information to further inform the reader and support the observations the writer has made. Connected to this statement is point number four, *travelogues use fictional means to interpret facts*. While travel writing often includes facts it also draws on fictional devices. The use of metaphors, symbolism and personification separates the travelogue from the guidebook and makes facts and figures easier to digest for the readership. The last point of the generic criteria that Lisle presents is *travelogues are primarily about difference*. "All travelogues pursue an engagement with difference, with something other than the usual, everyday experiences of home," and this engagement with difference can best be achieved by introducing subjectivity, an observer, an *I* in contrast to *the other*.³⁸

Hulme offers a different approach and discusses "five broad and overlapping strands that can be detected within travel writing of the last twenty-five years – the comic, the analytical, the wilderness, the spiritual, and the experimental."³⁹

The comic strand is, according to Hulme, the most popular one among the readership as the success of books by Bill Bryson or Tony Hawks's *Round Ireland with a Fridge* (1998) show. Analytical travel writing dates back to the very beginning and the roots of travel literature and still has its place in a world that is

³⁵ Lisle, p. 35

³⁶ Lisle, p. 36

³⁷ Lisle, p. 37

³⁸ see Lisle, p. 40

³⁹ Hulme, Peter. "Travelling to write (1940-2000)." *The Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002. p. 93

ever changing. Also wilderness is still a favorite topic among travel writers, their adventures – though limited by the degree of discovery of the last two centuries – still take them into jungles and deserts and the few remaining wildernesses of our planet. In addition to physical journeys, inner journeys have become more prominent in travel writing, some taking the readers on journeys back in history, some inviting them to join the author on a quest into childhood memories. The last strand Hulme offers is the experimental journey that “pushes the genre in a variety of new directions, actively continuing the generic hybridisation which as periodically reinvigorated travel writing throughout its history, but by definition difficult to categorise or even recognise.”⁴⁰

The keyword here is hybridization. While scholars are trying to define travel writing, to place it between other genres, to draw lines and assign borders, travel writing is a hybrid of many different genres and just as many different disciplines, feeding on the novel, on the guidebook, sometimes even on poetry, and on the other hand including aspects of history, geography, anthropology and literature among others. In her argumentation Lisle refers to Todorov’s claim that genres are obsolete, “that despite the clear birth of modern literary genres in the eighteenth century, it is no longer possible to organise texts into distinct generic categories.”⁴¹

Travel writing in its constant fluctuation between genres, crossing borders and sometimes belonging more to one than to the other, seems to be on its very own journey through the genres. Just like a traveler it ventures for other places to gather and absorb *the other*, only to then return home improved and more open minded.

1.2.2. Colonial and Cosmopolitan Visions

Writing about *the other*, the unknown, the exotic has been shaping travel writing since its earliest days when people like Lewis and Clark headed out into the unknown North American continent and other early explorers ventured out to discover Africa and the Orient. According to Sara Mills, back in those days “travel writing [was] essentially an instrument within colonial expansion and served to reinforce colonial rule once in place.”⁴² In a strong colonial tradition, travelers, explorers and writers from dominant Western civilizations documented and collected exotic plants and beings, always making sure to “secure their privileged

⁴⁰ Hulme, p. 95

⁴¹ Lisle, p. 34

⁴² Mills, Sara. *Discourses of Difference: An analysis of women’s travel writing and colonialism*. London, New York: Routledge, 1993. p. 2

position by categorising, critiquing and passing judgement on less-civilised areas of the world.”⁴³

By the 1980s, however, there was a notable change in travel writing as various young authors “showed how a genre long associated with colonial and imperial attitudes could be freed from some of that heritage.”⁴⁴ Lisle contradicts this theory and argues that the colonial tradition is in fact experiencing a revival among travel writers today who are reproducing colonial and imperial attitudes in their travel writing through a colonial vision to “maintain their relevance in a globalised world.”⁴⁵ In contrast to this colonial vision stands the cosmopolitan vision, an effort made by travel writers to embrace *the other* and unknown, to find similarities and to “jettison their colonial heritage by focusing on the harmonising effects of globalisation.”⁴⁶

These two visions are connected by a strong relationship that, Lisle argues, sometimes is antagonistic, sometimes symbiotic, sometimes ambiguous. She claims that the colonial vision is not the opposite but the same as the cosmopolitan vision, which in disguise produces new forms of power mimicking the old logic of the Empire. According to Lisle it is to be discussed whether “the cosmopolitan vision is merely a blander mutation of the colonial vision, or if it really does allow for difference, heterogeneity and contingency in the global realm.”⁴⁷ She supports her own argument by claiming that “embedded in the cosmopolitan vision of many travel writers is a reconstructed framework of colonialism and patriarchy.”⁴⁸

Writers in a strongly colonial tradition do not hesitate to “[revive] cultural difference through colonial and patriarchal binaries.”⁴⁹ They celebrate the difference between their own culture and the cultures observed in a negative way, projecting the image of savages and uncivilized people in contrast to their Western supremacy. In this context Lisle refers to Todorov, who claims that the colonial vision is still popular among the Western readership who has yet to stop “believing

⁴³ Lisle, p. 3

⁴⁴ Hulme, p. 91

⁴⁵ Lisle, p. 3

⁴⁶ Lisle, p. 4

⁴⁷ Lisle, p. 5

⁴⁸ Lisle, p. 70

⁴⁹ Lisle, p. 76

in the superiority of our civilization over ‘theirs’; and why would we, since they all seem to want to imitate us and dream of coming to work in our countries.”⁵⁰

On the other hand, writers in a cosmopolitan tradition “go to great lengths to avoid the imperial and patriarchal attitudes” innate to the colonial vision by applying humor and self-deprecation.⁵¹ Humor, however, bears the danger of playing with stereotypes and therefore only emphasizing idiosyncrasies and quirks of foreign cultures, strengthening the image of otherness and the colonial vision. Therefore we can say that “the cosmopolitan vision in travel writing does not necessarily contradict or escape its colonial and patriarchal heritage.”⁵²

Lisle’s point is that by absorbing certain features of political correctness, “travel writing actually perpetuates an unreconstructed colonial vision while claiming to celebrate equality, tolerance and cultural diversity.”⁵³ According to this logic, colonial and cosmopolitan visions in contemporary travel writing are a unity due to their reproduction of modern subjectivity.⁵⁴

Holland and Huggan, who are the basis for Lisle studies, present a similar point of view. “Travel writing”, they state, “frequently provides an effective alibi for the perpetuation or reinstallation of ethnocentrically superior attitudes to ‘other’ cultures, peoples, and places.”⁵⁵ However, they are not only concerned with the negative outcome of globalization and the cosmopolitan vision but rather also with its positive outcome, when globalization acts as a catalyst for the democratization of travel writing. According to Holland and Huggan, “travelogues can be a positive influence when writers and readers use images of otherness to reflect on their privileged cultural assumptions.”⁵⁶ The democratization of travel writing inspired a wide variety of writers from all sorts of social and cultural backgrounds and previously marginalized groups. People who were once written about are taking up the pen and now have a voice in our globalized world that is being heard.⁵⁷ In the cosmopolitan tradition the important factor is “who is doing the writing, especially when it comes to resisting the colonial heritage of the genre.”⁵⁸

⁵⁰ Lisle, p. 71 referring to Todorov. “The Journey and its Narrative”. *The Morals of History*. trans. Alyson Waters. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1995. p. 60-70.

⁵¹ Lisle, p. 70

⁵² Lisle, pp. 70-71

⁵³ Lisle, p. 15

⁵⁴ Lisle, p. 71

⁵⁵ Holland and Huggan, p. viii

⁵⁶ Lisle, p. 20

⁵⁷ see Lisle, p. 70

⁵⁸ Lisle, p. 87

A keyword in this discussion that cannot be left aside is *the other*, or the production of identity and difference in modern travel writing. As already mentioned in the previous chapter, travelogues – no matter if they are written in a colonial or a cosmopolitan vision – are primarily about difference, written in a first person narrative, describing and observing subjects and objects of otherness. To create a superior Western colonial vision or to embrace a cosmopolitan vision the travel writer first has to become aware of the self and *the other*.

The self/other is joined by the home/away structure of travel writing.

“However, the distinction between self/other in travel writing is not just about subjectivity – others are made foreign to the extent that they are physically located elsewhere.”⁵⁹

Not only are the people different in the sense of culture, but they are also different in a sense of place, they are there, away, while the writer is here, at home.⁶⁰ The third structure in this context is the temporal difference. Not only are the objects of observation located somewhere else but also in a different time, the past, not meaning the past when the journey was taken but the past of our Western civilization, when it was simpler and more primitive.⁶¹

Both, the colonial as well as the cosmopolitan vision have been presented as being dangerous in the sense of continuing the traditionally dominant Western arrogance of the Empire. Cosmopolitan travel writers may try to disguise their vision of otherness with humor and self-deprecation, embrace similarities and admire *the other*, but the outcome according to Lisle is the same: the strengthening of differences and the judging of other cultures from a position of traditional Western superiority, “ultimately eras[ing] cultural difference [...] while claiming to base [their] judgements on universal criteria.”⁶²

However, we cannot condemn these texts merely as overbearing heirs of a tradition thousands of years old, but we have to be aware of this dilemma. As Lisle argues by citing Todorov, “we can enjoy travel writing as long as we know we are different from writers in the colonial tradition.”⁶³

⁵⁹ Lisle, p. 41

⁶⁰ see Lisle, p. 42

⁶¹ see Lisle, p. 43

⁶² Lisle, p. 120

⁶³ Lisle, p. 67

1.3. TRAVEL WRITING DICHOTOMIES

1.3.1. *Home and Abroad*

We have already seen that identity and difference play a major role in the context of colonial and cosmopolitan visions of travel writing. Following Lisle's argumentation, travelogues are primarily about difference, not only about subjectivity but also about locality, placing *the other* elsewhere. The third feature mentioned before is the temporal difference, where the foreign cultures are assigned a spot behind us in the historical queue, being less evolved and less civilized and therefore back in time.⁶⁴

"In other words, the logic of identity/difference enables the modern subject to know itself and acquire a stable identity by locating others through visible signs of difference. Thus we can say that modern identity and selfhood develop according to the logic of the 'I' and the 'not-I'."⁶⁵

To satisfy the reader and create the impression of something far away and foreign, the author has to make a clear distinction between the familiar and the exotic.⁶⁶

But how do these theories apply when a travel writer is exploring his home country? Due to the lack of secondary literature on this topic I have come up with my own theory how these traditions apply in home travel literature and I will try to illustrate my point when analyzing and comparing the case studies. It is next to impossible to apply the colonial and cosmopolitan tradition to journeys in the home country because there is no exotic other, no far away land. One could argue that the United States is such a vast and diverse country that some parts of it might seem exotic. Also there are many different regional cultures that can easily serve as the exotic *other* in comparison to the *self*. My theory is that the colonial and cosmopolitan visions function on a social level when a writer is traveling at home. Instead of taking on a superior because more civilized role, I argue that a writer applying a colonial tradition at home will take on a superior role because of better education and of a higher social status. Likewise, an author writing in a cosmopolitan tradition will not see himself superior because of his social status but will argue that he is dealing with individuals unable to be classified in social terms.

Another theory for the creation of identity and difference in home travel is inspired by Lisle. According to Lisle "the logic of identity/difference is so powerful that it regulates us even when we are tempted by the possibility of becoming

⁶⁴ Lisle, p. 41

⁶⁵ Lisle, p. 72

⁶⁶ see Lisle, p. 71

someone else when travelling.”⁶⁷ She goes on to explain that even in the most remote places the travel writer has to retain a coherent sense of self. By referring to Todorov and his theory that modern texts are more and more turning inward and becoming more and more subjective, Lisle suggests that, while universal standards have been lost and travel writers have no more places to discover in our globalized world, they have escaped into subjectivity and personal criteria rather than cultural standards.⁶⁸ She counters, however, that by this shift from the objective description to the subjective perception travel literature did not turn into a collection of “personal anecdotes” but travel writers “construct themselves as ‘public’ figures that form impressions about a place by revealing only selected and strategic aspects of their ‘private’ self.”⁶⁹

The same forces are at work when a travel writer has to establish his identity in his home country. Like actors they take on roles and cater to the expectations of their audience by explicitly pretending to be, for example, the English Gentleman traveler, or the slightly “out-of-date flâneur” using these mask to describe the world around them.⁷⁰ By this, they separate themselves from their fellow citizens and create the necessary difference between the *I* and the *other*.

There is also another very common way to establish identity when the exotic *other* is absent. While it has been shown that difference can be established by falling back on social status and by taking on a role, there is another way to separate oneself from the fellow citizens. The abhorrent tourist and the responsible lonely traveler is a basic concept to create subjectivity for the travel writer. “The more difference there is between the travel writer and the tourists he encounters, the more his subject position is secured.”⁷¹

1.3.2. Traveler and Tourist

“‘The easier it becomes to travel,’ John Julius Norwich notes, ‘the harder it is to be a traveller.’”⁷² Norwich’s wise words exactly hit the zeitgeist of what travel writers have to deal with today. In the olden days of traveling and travel writing, journeys were reserved for a small group of explorers, adventurers and aristocrats,

⁶⁷ Lisle, p. 90

⁶⁸ see Lisle, p. 90

⁶⁹ Lisle, p. 90

⁷⁰ Lisle, p. 102

⁷¹ see Lisle, p. 83

⁷² Kowalewski, Michael. Introduction. *Temperamental Journeys: Essays on the Modern Literature of Travel*. Athens: U of Georgia P, 1992. p. 4

whose travel reports could be fact, fiction or a bit of both without ever being questioned by their contemporaries, whose journeys were mostly limited to traveling to church on Sunday.

With the industrial revolution, the introduction of trains, cars, and airplanes the world began to shrink and so did the freedom of the travel writers. Now people could follow their traces, verify their every step and explore and experience foreign cultures themselves. The possibility to be the first to encounter, the first to explore, the first to discover was ruined by globalization and also the travel writers' until then unchallenged position as the ones who bring news from far away places started to crumble. Anyone who could afford a plane ticket could bring home stories, so why would anyone need travel writers anymore? Fussell sums it up when he claims that "with the emergence of post-1945 mass tourism, the age of 'real' travel – and thus 'real' travel writing – had ended."⁷³ However, Hulme argues that

"travel writing involves the experience of foreign cultures and languages, and some travel writers practice a kind of deep immersion in the cultures they are visiting, acquiring the sort of intimate knowledge which gives them access to people and places unknown to short-stay travelers, let alone tourists."⁷⁴

From his point of view the travel writer is anything but outdated and obsolete. Even if anyone can travel anywhere, most people do not have the time and the means to discover remote places and some travelers and tourists simply prefer visiting developed areas. This is where the travel writer steps in to fill those empty spots on the map.

The species of the travel writer managed to survive and the genre of travel literature is even experiencing a revival. The travel writers' ability to take what is already known and to transform it into something new, to create "new and original ways to make the familiar world seem strange" has secured their existence and income up until today.⁷⁵

The keyword is 'tourist'; travel writers are not alone out there. Masses of tourists accompany their journeys and interfere with their explorations while the traveler goes to great lengths to avoid the crowds. The 'threat' of the tourist remains omnipresent.

"Because the tourist can go anywhere the travel writer can, the travel writer now secures his/her subject position by producing an *other* that is easy to hate: the tourist. The traveller/tourist binary is an explicit formation of the identity/difference

⁷³ Fussell, p. vii

⁷⁴ Hulme, p. 97

⁷⁵ see Lisle, p. 19

logic – the former installed as the hero of the text, and the latter disdained as an unfortunate by-product of globalisation.”⁷⁶

In the logic of identity/difference the tourist may go on the same journeys as the traveler or travel writer, but in such a repellent way that one can only detest him. According to Lisle the travel writer is in search of a more authentic way to encounter cultural difference than the pathetic tourists in their shorts and sandals, gaping at staged Luaus and Powwows.⁷⁷ It is essential to the identity formation of the travel writer to illustrate “how tourists allow themselves to be fooled by the ‘fake’ displays of cultural difference.”⁷⁸ In this context Urry notes that “[i]solated from the host environment and the local people, the mass tourist travels in guided groups and finds pleasure in inauthentic contrived attractions, gullibly enjoying ‘pseudo-events’ and disregarding the ‘real’ world outside.”⁷⁹

Apart from the ignorance, what disgusts travelers most when it comes to tourists is their “herd-like mentality – their constant need for affiliation with other tourists.”⁸⁰ With tourists inhabiting every possible and impossible space on this planet, depriving the traveler of the last bastions of wilderness and the authentic experience of other culture, the travel writer has to find a way to stand out from the crowds of tourists.

“The much-touted distinction between travelers and tourists is symptomatic – as if contemporary travel writers, always likely to pride themselves on being individualists, were still (ironically?) conscious of separating themselves from the vulgar herd.”⁸¹

The embarrassment the traveler experiences when coming too close to a herd of tourists is even enforced when the herd happens to originate from his home country, forcing the travel writers to “differentiate themselves from the awkward behaviour of their fellow citizens.”⁸²

What further distinguishes the traveler from the tourist is the kind of journey. While the tourists’ routes are imposed by their travel agent, the travelers “insist that they are involved in journeys of their own making – their itineraries are prepared so

⁷⁶ Lisle, p. 77

⁷⁷ Lisle, p. 78

⁷⁸ Lisle, p. 80

⁷⁹ Urry, John. *The Tourist Gaze: Leisure and Travel in Contemporary Societies*. London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 1990. p. 7

⁸⁰ see Lisle, p. 78

⁸¹ Holland and Huggan, p. viii

⁸² Lisle, p. 79

as *not* to participate in common tourist practices.”⁸³ Therefore the traveler tries to stay off the beaten track and avoid any accumulations of tourists, staying outside the artificially fabricated tourist traps, deliberately moving alone and thus believing to engage in “a much more genuine reality than the one constructed through the tourist gaze.”⁸⁴ Only the individual traveler, accepting hardships and embracing endeavors, has the ability to see the real difference while tourists, unwilling to give up their comfort, are deprived of the ‘real thing’.⁸⁵

According to Lisle this is the key to the tourist/traveler logic and to claiming the identity of a travel writer. By separating oneself from the crowds and becoming a modern adventurer, who may not be able to explore and discover anything new but who can at least stay off the tourist track, the traveler defines his identity and justifies his existence. Only the traveler has a chance to experience the authentic other.

“It allows them to take comfort in their moral superiority, and continue to believe that they, alone, are intrepid explorers experiencing authentic encounters with other cultures.”⁸⁶

However, there is also another small group of travel writers, including Bill Bryson, who have accepted mass tourism as a result of globalization, no longer trying to stay away from the masses but joining them, nevertheless being aware of the dangers of mass tourism for the ‘other’ nature and culture.⁸⁷ As a result a new logic is forming, one that separates the responsible and aware tourist from the ignorant and reckless one. The good tourist/bad tourist logic is very prominent in Bryson’s works and presents a shift in the identity/difference logic towards the claim to be an *ethical* tourist.⁸⁸ By Lisle’s definition these ethical tourists care about the environment, are interested in learning about the difference and behave respectfully towards the cultural heritage of the places they visit. In Bryson’s world anyone acting according to the good tourist rules is part of the community, but anyone acting against them becomes a victim of his sharp humor.⁸⁹

Increasingly, travelers have defined themselves against the figure of the tourist, and where this is no longer possible, the travel writer creates a new logic, one that

⁸³ Lisle, p. 79

⁸⁴ Lisle, p. 79

⁸⁵ see Lisle, p. 79

⁸⁶ Lisle, p. 80

⁸⁷ see Lisle, p. 81

⁸⁸ see Lisle, p. 82

⁸⁹ The role of humor in contemporary travel writing will be discussed at length in Chapter 1.3.2.

differentiates between the good and the bad tourist. The important difference that is being emphasized and is crucial for the survival of the travel writer is the fact that while everyone nowadays can travel and experience *the other*, not everyone can experience the authentic other and write about.

1.4. SELECTED STYLISTIC FEATURES OF TRAVEL WRITING

1.4.1. *Nostalgia*

In her introduction to *The Global Politics of Contemporary Travel Writing* Lisle notes the following:

“The discourse of nostalgia is crucial in travel writing because it provides a retreat into an air-brushed past which allows both readers and writers to avoid the anxieties and difficulties of a post-colonial and globalised present.”⁹⁰

According to Holland and Huggan travel writers have to deal with various sources of anxiety, “their personal confessions masks for motivational doubts and fears.”⁹¹ One source of anxiety is the constant confrontation with the tourist industry the travel writer is trying to avoid while – in a broader sense – actually working in it. Another one according to Holland and Huggan is the “awareness of belatedness”, when a travel writer realizes that the golden days of being a traveler are over, that he can no longer go where the wind will take him but that he has to engage in a rat-race with the omni-present tourist, avoiding the herds and finding the last untouched spot of wilderness where no tourist has gone before.⁹²

In a desperate attempt to restore the past, the English Gentleman has started to form in travel writing. He is “a rhetorical device used, mostly ironically, by several contemporary British travel writers as means of reinstalling a mythicized imperial past.”⁹³ Hulme suggests that the English Gentleman is by no means a modern invention but a colonial figure and successful survivor of the great wars, who is “still able to travel the world and to write with witty nonchalance about what [he] encountered.”⁹⁴

The nostalgic English Gentleman can be seen as an agent for the British Empire, which “was itself a nostalgic institution.”⁹⁵ For the English traveler the isles were home, though far away, but for the colonies the homeland was an idealized and

⁹⁰ Lisle, p. 25

⁹¹ Holland and Huggan, p. xi

⁹² see Holland and Huggan, p. xi

⁹³ Holland and Huggan, p. xi

⁹⁴ Hulme, p. 87

⁹⁵ Lisle, p. 205

romanticized construct that most of the colony's native inhabitants would never get to see.⁹⁶ Nostalgia in travel writing is inseparably linked to the colonial and cosmopolitan dichotomy previously discussed. Holland and Huggan argue that travelogues have remained "a refuge for complacent, even nostalgically retrograde, middle-class values."⁹⁷

However, not only the colonial vision and the heritage of the Empire account for the presence of nostalgia in travel writing, but also the limitations caused by globalization. In today's world where all mountains have been climbed, all deserts have been crossed and all jungles have been explored, a travel writer cannot but follow someone else's footsteps. No matter where the writer goes, someone has been there and done that. Therefore new ways have to be found to experience, reflect and recount the familiar and already known. Lisle notes that

"the more the world is discovered – not just by travel writers but also by tourists – the more travel writing provides an opportunity to escape the forces of modernity and globalisation and retreat back into a Golden Age of discovery, exploration and Empire. In other words, one can avoid the anxieties of a modern cosmopolitan global order by withdrawing into an imagined past where everyone knew their place within the hierarchies of the Empire."⁹⁸

She continues to argue that "in depicting foreign space as past and domestic space as both present and forward looking, contemporary travel writers are able to replay the adventures of colonial exploration that the forces of globalisation have nullified."⁹⁹ This allows travel writers to revisit and rediscover foreign cultures over and over again that seem to be "'stuck' in the past and untouched by modernity".¹⁰⁰ The historical queue, with the civilized Westerners at its very front and the less civilized countries in line behind them, enables the travel writer to watch the evolution of the people who are in line behind him and gives him something new to explore.¹⁰¹

"In this way, backward destinations are framed by a powerful discourse of nostalgia that convinces us there was a Golden Age when things were simpler, when conflicts were fewer, when needs were basic and when everybody knew their place."¹⁰²

In contrast to the nostalgia dealing with the past, Lisle suggests a counterpart, namely a nostalgia longing for the future and a multicultural utopia. This "utopian

⁹⁶ see Lisle, p. 205

⁹⁷ Holland and Huggan, p. viii

⁹⁸ Lisle, p. 204

⁹⁹ Lisle, p. 209

¹⁰⁰ Lisle, p. 209

¹⁰¹ Lisle, p. 209

¹⁰² Lisle, p. 209

vision of a cosmopolitan future” can be best understood when linked to the nostalgia for the past, an innocent time before conflicts and wars, religious and racial crises, when everything had its clearly defined place thanks to the Empire.¹⁰³ While the longing for this utopia might seem cosmopolitan with its multicultural ideal, these “nostalgic longing and utopian fantasies cover over the colonial legacy embedded in [this] vision of a cosmopolitan future.”¹⁰⁴ In this sense “contemporary travel writing is shaped by a temporal framework of a ‘present-yet-to-come’ and a ‘past-as-it-never-happened.’”¹⁰⁵

Considering all the obstacles travel writers have to deal with, the loss of undiscovered grounds, the pressure to come up with something new, critics looking down on travel writing and not even accepting it as a genre of its own and last but not least the tourist, always following the traveler’s tracks, it becomes understandable that travel writers are “seeking solace for a troubled present in nostalgic cultural myths.”¹⁰⁶

1.4.2. *Humor*

So far travel writing has been presented as the serious business of Western white males in a strongly colonial tradition. Nonetheless, in the last decades the English Gentleman traveler has had to make room for a new species of male travel writers: ‘the new man’, as Lisle calls him.¹⁰⁷

“Reared on feminism and notions of racial equality, comfortable with the claims of identity politics, progressive in their political affiliations and keen to redress the historical exclusions enacted through colonialism and patriarchy, new men are proving that travel writers are not necessarily chauvinist, racist snobs writing the world through a privileged lens.”¹⁰⁸

However, the new man is a wily figure as one can never be sure “how far the commitment to gender and racial equality extends.”¹⁰⁹ According to Lisle the new man is happy as long as his social, economic and political standards are met and not being threatened. But the moment he feels insecure and destabilized his “commitment to equality wavers.” We must not deny the possibility that the new

¹⁰³ Lisle, p. 207

¹⁰⁴ Lisle, p. 207

¹⁰⁵ Lisle, p. 210

¹⁰⁶ Holland and Huggan, p. xi

¹⁰⁷ Lisle, p. 99

¹⁰⁸ Lisle, p. 99

¹⁰⁹ Lisle, p. 99

man is the devil in disguise, “simply another version of the same masculine, colonial subject position” that has dominated the genre for so long.¹¹⁰

In contrast to the new man Lisle presents another recent development among travel writers: the joker. His calling is to entertain rather than to inform and educate, to make his readership laugh rather than to deal with political issues of race and gender.¹¹¹ According to Holland and Huggan many travelogues are farcical nowadays, with writers becoming aware that the English Gentleman traveler and his colonial vision are outdated and are rejected by the audience.¹¹² But instead of giving up the obsolete vision of imperialism the jokers among the travel writers use humor and irony to revive exactly the same colonial and imperial judgments. They are aware of the fact that their attempts to restore the Empire’s former glories are belated and “the result in their narratives is a turn to comedy – particularly farce.”¹¹³

The main characteristic of the joker is his tendency to laugh at himself just as much as he laughs at – or should we say – with *the other*. It is the joker’s way of dealing with identity and difference that – rather than analyzing and depreciating differences in a colonial manner – he laughs at these quirks and is not reluctant to add a nice amount of self-irony. In Lisle words, the joker recognizes “that the travel narrative has become ‘superficial’ in the age of tourism, and deliberate attempts to undercut the mythological role of the ‘English Gentleman Abroad’” are seen as sources for entertainment.¹¹⁴

The gentleman traveler has become a tourist, the “trappings of an imperial past [are] now converted in to touristic items”, and the only way for the travel writer to maintain his status as a gentleman traveler is to apply self-deprecation and self-parody.¹¹⁵ In other words, “the figure of the gentleman abroad starts to look rather less endearing, and rather more like a strategy designed to protect the travel-writer from further harm,” and it is exactly this strategy that gives the travel writer his “licence to perform.”¹¹⁶

Writers like Bryson deliberately “‘play the fool’ in order to poke fun at the sense of superiority enjoyed by their colonial predecessors”, using their humor to “present

¹¹⁰ Lisle, p. 99

¹¹¹ Lisle, p. 100

¹¹² Holland and Huggan, pp. 29-40

¹¹³ Holland and Huggan, p. 30

¹¹⁴ Lisle, pp. 100-101

¹¹⁵ Holland and Huggan, p. 31

¹¹⁶ Holland and Huggan, p. 31

a more hopeful, future-oriented word view” so we may all laugh together rather than being afraid of our differences, celebrate and respect our idiosyncrasies rather than finding them threatening.¹¹⁷

One way of achieving this shift from threatening to entertaining is the use of exaggeration and hyperbole. By hopelessly exaggerating idiosyncrasies and differences the foreign and the familiar become ridiculous, an attempt by the travel writer to rather celebrate cultural difference then denigrating it “because he is not concerned with securing his own superiority.”¹¹⁸

“The key shift with humorous narratives is that the subject position of the travel writer is opened up – they laugh at themselves as they laugh at others. By actively and self-consciously poking fun at himself, [the joker] avoids reproducing the superiority, arrogance and misanthropy of [...] his colonial predecessors”.¹¹⁹

By exaggerating stereotypes to the point of absurdity the joker teaches his readership not to fear the differences but to laugh at themselves and their own behavior that might seem just as different to a foreigner as his strange behavior might seem to us.

In Lisle opinion the prototype of the joker is Bill Bryson, and on this I fully agree with her. She characterizes him as behaving “in a childish manner – full of wonder and empty responsibility” and being “silly” and “irreverent”.¹²⁰ Bryson’s use of humor and self-deprecation will be discussed later in this thesis, however it is important to introduce him in this context as a prototype for the joker and as a writer who – in Lisle words, which she uses for Michael Palin but I think are just as true for Bryson – seems to have understood that “cultural encounters are best translated through a sense of humour rather than a serious polemic.”¹²¹

Lisle continues by questioning the effects of humor, self-deprecation and parody on the audience. As previously demonstrated, she sees the cosmopolitan travel writer as a sort of devil in disguise, conveying an imperialistic and colonial vision under the cloak of cultural equality and cosmopolitan vision. She now asks if the reader adopts these hidden views by reading humorous travel literature, if “a shared sense of humour extend[s] to a shared set of values.”¹²² In her argumentation she admits that humor allows travel writers “to achieve their ultimate goal – to

¹¹⁷ Lisle, p. 101

¹¹⁸ Lisle, pp. 101-102

¹¹⁹ Lisle, p. 101

¹²⁰ Lisle, p. 102

¹²¹ Lisle, p. 103

¹²² Lisle, p. 105

overcome deep cultural differences and reveal shared cultural values.”¹²³ However, she notes that any form of sharing that happens in this context is only taking place between the author and his readership, not including the others written about. Humor functions as a “secret code” between the author and the audience, highlighting and smirking about the differences but excluding the source of their entertainment, the “cultural others”.¹²⁴ “In the end,” she concludes that these

“worthy efforts and self-deprecating manner are not enough to avoid being tainted by the colonial and patriarchal heritage [the travel writers] are trying to overcome. In effect, these travelogues are particularly conservative in their efforts to frame difference in a more ethical manner, for they fail to question the dominant order within which certain subject positions are valued by projecting difference onto less-valued others.”¹²⁵

It will be interesting to see how this theory applies to the travel literature discussed in the course of this thesis, when travel writers set out not to discover the foreign and far away but their home countries and fellow citizens. Unfortunately, neither Lisle nor Holland and Huggan offer guidelines to applying humor and irony in literature that combines the two figures mentioned earlier on into one, the audience and *the other* being written about becoming one and the same.

1.5. THE ROAD GENRE

In 1903 Winton Automobiles sent Horatio Nelson Jackson and his chauffeur on a sixty-three day journey from San Francisco to New York. The trip was a marketing campaign and resulted in a pamphlet describing their journey and the reliability of their two-seater. *From Ocean to Ocean in a Winton* (1903) can therefore be seen as the first American road narrative. Others followed soon: Lester L. Whitman’s *From Coast to Coast in a [Franklin] Motor-Car* in 1905, Jacob Murdock’s *A Family Tour from Ocean to Ocean* (1908) advertised the Packard, and the first female account *A Girl, a Record and an Oldsmobile* by Amanda Preuss was published in 1915. According to Lackey, one-fourth of the road narratives before World War II were written by women, seven of those fifteen female writers traveling without a male companion, only joined by another woman or even alone.¹²⁶ The road genre was born.

The genre of American road narratives includes fiction as well as nonfiction, and consists of stories about a protagonist getting in a car, hitting the road and traveling

¹²³ Lisle, p. 105

¹²⁴ Lisle, p. 105

¹²⁵ Lisle, p. 106 Referring to Critchley, Simon. *On Humour*. London: Routledge, 2002. p. 82

¹²⁶ Lackey, Kris. *RoadFrames: The American Highway Narrative*. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1997. p. 28

through the country, either on a quest or simply to get away.¹²⁷ For most of its existence the road genre has been neglected, critics attempting to “isolate a genre from the cultural and social times it expresses”, and only recently have scholars started to see it as “an artistic vision developed within a specific time and place.”¹²⁸ No matter whether fiction or fact, the most common narrative structure is closely linked to the journey itself, preparation including decisions about routing and mode of transport, the journey itself, the return and finally the writing of the account.

Just eight years after Preuss and a mere twenty years after Jackson’s road trip the first transcontinental national highway was finished: *Route 30*. While the first road narratives served marketing purposes, as early as the 1930s writers headed out on these new roads to “eulogize the frontier and measure the cost of its conquest.”¹²⁹ In 1890 the frontier had been declared closed and already it was becoming a myth. Often following township gridlines, the routes crossed the still largely untouched West with its “forbidding terrain” still intact and its human stereotypes still very prominent.¹³⁰ Not even one hundred years after Lewis and Clark had set out on their famous expedition, the first transcontinental road trip started a reenactment of discovery and possession, pioneer hardships and the search for an “innocent country”.¹³¹ These early writers liked to see themselves as innocent passers-by, “free-floating, disinterested, and untarnished by history”, like Winifred Dixon in her 1922 *Westward Hoboes*.¹³²

While most genres underwent innovation over the course of time, the road genre seems to be stuck in time, not being bothered with having to be “original and fresh” but rather content with being “old-fashioned.”¹³³ The appeal of road literature seems unchanged since Jackson and Whitman crossed the continent, maybe because of its tendency to “capture time, place, and culture in simple and popular stories.”¹³⁴ This assumption leads us to some closer engagement with the question of the readership.

Primeau suggests that the “audience includes the academically trained as well as ordinary bookstore clients, ‘mass readers’ who might be anywhere on the political

¹²⁷ Primeau, Ronald. *Romance of the Road: The Literature of the American Highway*. Bowling Green: Bowling Green State U Popular P, 1996. p. 1

¹²⁸ Primeau, p. 2

¹²⁹ Lackey, p. 2

¹³⁰ Lackey, p. 3

¹³¹ Lackey, pp. 4-5

¹³² Lackey, p. 3

¹³³ Primeau, p. 12

¹³⁴ Primeau, p. 3

spectrum from the far left to far right.”¹³⁵ He further suggests that road writers often write for an imaginary audience, people Wolfgang Iser calls “implied readers”, assuming that the typical road genre reader does not exist but is being created by reading road narratives. Readers warm up to the topic, they get used to the conventions and eventually become part of the community.¹³⁶

So, eventually the implied reader becomes a “competent” reader, a shift which requires the recognition of the genre conventions. Sometimes the competent reader evolves into the “superreader”, whose brain is packed with background information and who has read all the books and can “synthesize all background allusions”.¹³⁷ This “genre memory” as Primeau calls it, enables the reader to become part of the community and gives “authors and readers a base on which to build on.”¹³⁸ Knowing the conventions and rules gives the author the freedom to bend them and experiment with them, while the reader is still able to understand. In Primeau this is described as “enabling conditions”, not so much limiting but rather liberating the author and the genre to take these conventions as a starting point for further exploration and experimentation.¹³⁹

In *RoadFrames*, Lackey suggests various rubrics under which road narratives could be categorized, including “literary mode (naturalism, pastoral, picaresque, satire); theme (self-discovery, escape from bourgeois confinement, racial identity); literary genre (autobiography, fiction, nonfiction, travelogue); persona (picaro, curmudgeon, social critic, troubadour); and tone (nostalgic, bitter, beat, euphoric)” but then decides to group the road narrative into three broader designs, the first including books focusing on “regional manners, speech, architecture, customs, history, myths, culture and so forth,” the second dealing with the “events and landscapes of the road” and connecting them with a “sustained philosophical discussion,” and the third and in his opinion largest group, narratives of “authors who return home or to a place where many relations live after years of expatriation”.¹⁴⁰

Out of the large number of possible categories Lackey suggest, I want to choose several approaches which seem the most interesting with regard to this thesis.

¹³⁵ Primeau, p. 11

¹³⁶ Primeau, p. 11. Referring to Iser, Wolfgang. *The Implied Reader. Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett*. Baltimore: John Hopkins U P, 1974.

¹³⁷ Primeau, p. 11

¹³⁸ Primeau, p. 14

¹³⁹ Primeau, p. 14

¹⁴⁰ Lackey, pp. 24-26

In connection with the second category mentioned, the one dealing with events and landscapes of the road, Lackey also mentions the affinity of the road genre with the Transcendental. “More philosophical writers,” Lackey notes,

“fleshed out the Transcendental implications of motoring, discoursing at length on the benefits of shunning routine, observing nature close up, following impulse and the less-traveled road, living frugally and simply, exulting in the variety of American landscape and pursuits, and provisionally rejecting bourgeois respectability.”¹⁴¹

Primeau supports this theory about the rejection of bourgeois respectability by quoting Andrew Ross, who claims that “the popular, resistant appeal of disrespect” is a central motif in the road narrative.¹⁴² Similarly, Lackey claims that the Transcendental is the common feature of many road narratives, “affirming the power of individual subjectivity and imagination to create many worlds out of one.”¹⁴³

Another category of the road narrative, Lackey suggests, is closely connected to the picaresque novel. This approach, which can be applied to both fiction and nonfiction in travel writing, creates the storyline around the adventures of a protagonist, a “sometimes even hapless vagabond living on the edge.”¹⁴⁴ Writers coming from a more privileged background also adopted this style to prove that their adventures and exploration “set them against mainstream American ideology”, as for example John Steinbeck, who decided to travel in a camper named *Rocinante* rather than staying in five-star resorts and enjoying the good life.¹⁴⁵

The third literary tradition I want to include here is the pastoral. Set away from the hectic modern cities, the pastoral depicts peaceful and rural America, the simple life and a healthy style of living. At first it was the railroad, cutting across the landscape through bison tracks and Indian reservations, which took the traveler to those remote places. Ironically, later it is the car which enables the writer to reach these places, the automobile becoming some kind of green machine, “unlike the steam shovel, smelter furnace, combine, or cattle car that exploited Western resources. The reenactment of exploration and the willed illusion of discovery and conquest were not smudged by manufacture.”¹⁴⁶

¹⁴¹ Lackey, p. 5

¹⁴² Primeau, p. 13. Referring to Ross, Andrew. *No Respect: Intellectuals in Popular Culture*. New York: Routledge, 1989.

¹⁴³ Lackey, p. 6

¹⁴⁴ Lackey, p. 8

¹⁴⁵ Lackey, p. 8

¹⁴⁶ Lackey, p. 5

The car serves as an “existentialist’s machine”, helping us to overcome our biological limitations and enabling us to escape our responsibilities and duties at home.¹⁴⁷

“The traveler obeys the Transcendental call to step outside routine, rediscover the roots of intellect in nature, and expand the imagination with images from the American wilderness. Yet one Transcendental chore modern road writers generally shun is denaturalizing both the automobile and the infrastructure creating and sustaining it.”¹⁴⁸

Many early road writers and their successors in the pastoral tradition who mourn the loss of rural tranquility see the landscape, sometimes untouched and unchanged, sometimes shaken up by modern civilization, as a symbol for the times of the great explorers and as a source for historical nostalgia.¹⁴⁹ However, few of them look behind the façade and overcome their nostalgia by accepting the “real historical consequences of western settlement”, the killing of the Native Americans, slavery and itinerant labor.¹⁵⁰

Lackey then suggests – apart from the pastoral, the Transcendental and the picaresque approach – several other kinds of road narrative, among them one which deals primarily with cultural criticism and comparison. He traces back this tradition to the “French observer’s theories about the effects of democracy on character” which have become a natural element of these narratives and are “often mentioned without attribution.”¹⁵¹ Especially in modern road trip literature this tradition is often paired with satire and used to express the writer’s discontent with his own culture.¹⁵² This shift took place in the late eighties when according to Lackey “the familiar postures and conventions of the camper trek were ripe for satire and inversion.”¹⁵³

The last kind of road narrative suggested by Lackey I want to mention here is the passage narrative, “in which the driver-author is trying to move from one stage of life to another.”¹⁵⁴ Often the author is on a quest for new opinions and options for his future, rethinking his values and sometimes even experiencing an “emotional and intellectual crisis.”¹⁵⁵

¹⁴⁷ Lackey, p. 12

¹⁴⁸ Lackey, p. 16

¹⁴⁹ see Lackey, p. 20

¹⁵⁰ Lackey, p. 20

¹⁵¹ Lackey, p. 12

¹⁵² see Lackey, p. 13

¹⁵³ Lackey, p. 18

¹⁵⁴ Lackey, p. 18

¹⁵⁵ Lackey, p. 18

The passage narrative can also be found among the four subgenres Primeau suggests. He divides the road genre into those stories that emphasize protest, the ones in search of a national identity, the narratives about self-discovery and last but not least accounts focusing on experimentation or parody. The passage narrative Lackey describes best resembles in Primeau's subgenre of self-discovery, in which "many road travelers take to the road for the freedom to explore or redefine themselves."¹⁵⁶ Social and political protest and the call for change are best seen in the first subgenre, which makes the writer hit the road out of some sort of dissatisfaction. Subgenre number three is, as Primeau suggests, the most uncommon one. The experimental narrative stretches "conventions into the radically discontinuous, the futuristic or the parodic."¹⁵⁷

As a cousin of the pastoral Lackey describes, but also correlating with one of his three broader designs, narratives of "authors who return home or to a place where many relations live after years of expatriation", I would consider Primeau's subgenre that focuses on the search for a national identity.¹⁵⁸ With the United States having only a short – indeed post-colonial – history compared to most nations especially in Europe, many writers feel the need to define a national identity, to travel the roads in search of their own country, their culture and traditions, to retrace the tracks of great explorers and to study their own people. Often these travelers are "overwhelmed still by the expanse and magnitude of the country on the whole" and "as a result, they both celebrate and bemoan the slow disappearance of distinctive regional characteristics."¹⁵⁹

All of these forms have a tendency to be repeated by later travel writers, even if they have not read their predecessors' works.¹⁶⁰ One could argue that these forms of road narrative are naturally linked to the experience of driving across a vast continent, crossing landscapes that astonish us and reliving the spirit of adventure our forefathers had. "The form is circulating, but there may be no direct influence."¹⁶¹

Above all we must not forget the most important feature of the road narrative, the companion without whom the road cannot be conquered and the stories cannot be

¹⁵⁶ Primeau, p. 15

¹⁵⁷ Primeau, p. 15

¹⁵⁸ Lackey, pp. 24-26

¹⁵⁹ Primeau, p. 15

¹⁶⁰ Lackey, p. 17

¹⁶¹ Lackey, p. 17

written: the car. Concluding, Lackey claims that “for many nonfiction writers the automobile grants intellectual license to ignore these complexities and to exercise instead a kind of glib eclecticism that passes for induction.”¹⁶²

“The American car”, Primeau writes, “has always been more than just transportation: it is status, success, dreams, adventure, mystery and sex”.¹⁶³ In the same manner I hope to have shown that the road narrative is a lot more than just the story of a protagonist traveling from point A to point B, but includes – to name but a few – aspects of self-discovery, the search for identity, the escape from responsibilities and regulations, nostalgia and a sense of exploration that has otherwise long been lost in today’s travel industry.

¹⁶² Lackey, p. 24

¹⁶³ Primeau, p. 5

2. CASE STUDIES

2.1. JOHN STEINBECK'S *TRAVELS WITH CHARLEY*



"It would be pleasant to be able to say of my travels with Charley, 'I went out to find the truth about my country and I found it.' And then it would be such a simple matter to set down my findings and lean back comfortable with a fine sense of having discovered truths and taught them to my readers. I wish it were that easy."(209)

Caption 1: Steinbeck and Charley Dog

2.1.1. *Background*

2.1.1.1. Historical and Cultural Background

When John Steinbeck and Charley dog went on their road trip it was a time full of change. The 1950s were not quite over and the 1960s had not quite yet begun.

Politically, the 1950s were dominated by the United States fighting the Cold War against the Soviet Union primarily in Latin America, orchestrating the overthrow of the Guatemalan government in 1954 and of the Venezuelan government in 1957. The 1950s had begun with the Korean War, lasting from 1950 to 1953, which had initially started as a civil war but had soon developed into another way for the United States and the Soviet Union to engage in their Cold War. In 1959 Fidel Castro overthrew Fulgencio Batista's regime in Cuba and America's opposition lead to Cuba moving closer to the Soviet Union.

The 1950s had also been a decade of high moral standards and conservative thinking which had earned them the name *The Fabulous Fifties*, defined by a strong focus on family life and the clear definition of male and female roles. However, they had also been the time of the Kinsey Reports and the beginning of the anti-segregation movement. After the law had been changed and segregation ruled illegal in 1954 the doors were open for people like Martin Luther King, Malcolm X and Rosa Parks.

The Fabulous Fifties also saw the beginning of the race to the moon. With the Soviet Satellite Sputnik and Laika as the first living animal in orbit in 1957, the Soviets were getting ahead of the United States until NASA was founded in 1958.

1959 was the year the Vietnam War in Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia started and the world would have to wait until 1975 for the fighting to cease.

The 1960s began with the historic presidential elections on November 8, 1960, when a young catholic Senator named John F. Kennedy defeated the Republican Richard Nixon by a mere 0.1%. It was during these months that Steinbeck and Charley traveled most of the United States in search of an opinion, a tendency or at least some political conviction but seemed to find none. In 1961 the Bay of Pigs Invasion failed and led to the Cuban Missile Crisis in October 1962, probably the closest the world would ever get to an atomic war. Also in 1962, Steinbeck received the Nobel Prize in Literature for his realistic and imaginative writing, and the way he combines humor and social perception.

In 1963 Martin Luther King delivered his famous speech *I have a dream...* and only three months later President Kennedy was shot. 1965 saw the assassination of Malcolm X, 1968 the assassination of Martin Luther King, Robert Kennedy and the death of John Steinbeck on December 20, 1968. Therefore Steinbeck did not live to see the first man on the moon on July 20, 1969, which was the last major event in the 1960s.

The 1960s had been the age of revolution against the materialism of the 1950s, the strict social norms and morals and the segregation of the races. Apart from the sexual revolution with the release of the pill in 1960, the hippies peacefully fought for more rights and equality not only of women but also of homosexuals and minorities.

2.1.1.2. Biographical Background

“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. [...] 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. [...] It will be a kind of rebirth.”¹⁶⁴

John Steinbeck was fifty-eight years old when he wrote these lines. Back then, he had been working on *The Winter of Our Discontent* but was already looking forward to his journey that would take him and his poodle Charley through the United States. On September 23, 1960 he set out on “Operation America”¹⁶⁵ or

¹⁶⁴ Steinbeck, Elaine, and Wallsten, Robert (Ed.). *Steinbeck: A Life in Letters*. New York: Viking Press, 1975. p. 665. To avoid confusion I will from now on refer to this book as *SLL*

¹⁶⁵ *SLL*, p. 668

“Operation Windmills”¹⁶⁶ with his truck *Rocinante* to explore his home country on a three-month-and-10,000-miles trip.

According to Steinbeck himself he had various motives to embark on his journey. Tetsumaro Hayashi outlines them and comes up with a total number of six reasons, including “to research and rediscover America and Americans”, “to rediscover his own identity”, “to satisfy his ‘burning desire to go on, to move, to get under way, any place, away from any HERE’”, “to share his own assessment of America and Americans”, “to verify what he had already sensed about his country and people with their new situation ethics” and to “find what moral, ecological, and social criticisms he could share with his fellow Americans.”¹⁶⁷ However, from Steinbeck’s letters, interviews with his family members and most of all from *Travels with Charley* we can learn some more reasons apart from those that meet the eye.

After having spent a lot of his life traveling the world, he returned to his home country from several months in England and noticed how much it changed. Faced with the Cold War and at the verge of an atomic World War III Steinbeck had realized that he knew nothing about this “new” America he had returned to. “Thus I discovered that I did not know my own country. I [...] was working from memory [...]”¹⁶⁸

However, there were also more personal reasons that are revealed in the course of *Travels with Charley*. His health had given him reasons to rethink his style of living and his existence in general. After an illness and being taken care of for some time he felt the urge to prove to the world he was still a man capable of taking care of himself, not old enough yet to “bow out”.¹⁶⁹

As his mode of transport Steinbeck chose a rather uncommon vehicle. “I’m buying a pick-up truck with a small apartment on it, kind of like the cabin of a small boat, bed, stove, desk, ice-box, toilet – not a trailer – what’s called a coach.”¹⁷⁰ His choice caused some discomfort for his wife Elaine and his agent Elizabeth Otis. They were worried about his initial plan to go alone and to go unknown.¹⁷¹

¹⁶⁶ SLL, p. 668

¹⁶⁷ Hayashi, Tetsumaro. „Steinbeck’s America in *Travels With Charley*“. *Steinbeck Quarterly*. Volume 23, Number 3 and 4. Summer-Fall 1990. p. 89

¹⁶⁸ Steinbeck, John. *Travels with Charley: In search of America*. New York; Penguin Books, 1986. p. 5.

¹⁶⁹ SLL, p. 668

¹⁷⁰ SLL, p. 666

¹⁷¹ SLL, p. 667

Steinbeck tried to calm Elizabeth Otis in a letter in June 1960 by explaining to her why it was necessary to travel incognito and in a truck rather than by bus.

“Let me start with your statement that people travel by bus and talk to each other. That they stay in motels. So many of them do but while they are so traveling they are not what I am looking for. They are not home and they are not themselves. There is a change that takes place in a man or a woman in transit.”¹⁷²

This statement supports his initial motif, his search for the *real* America, for the *true* Americans, the way they live, work, think. He was not out on a quest to interview these people on their vacations or journeys, but it was necessary for him to visit them in their own homes, to see their daily life. Instead of having them come to him it was important for his search to have them have him – in their homes and lives, unmasked and authentic.

He continued to explain to Elizabeth Otis that by traveling by bus he would be limited to the main highways and could not leave to explore the back roads. Also his anonymity could not be sustained if he had to check into motels, forced to tell his name at registration.

“At a motel or tourist house you have made an inroad – your coming is noted – your name registered, your intentions and plans subject to question or curiosity. [...] Now my reason for wanting to be self-contained is that I also will be at home [when traveling in Rocinante]. I can invite a man to have a beer in my home, thereby forcing an invitation from him.”¹⁷³

Therefore a truck seemed the perfect instrument for his exploration. He would be free to move about the country like a traveler who is free to go where the road takes him and not like a tourist with a predetermined schedule or a Greyhound timetable, forced to stay on major roads and in motels around bus stops.

“I chose a truck for several reasons. First, a truck is a respectable and respected working instrument as apart from a station wagon or an automobile or a trailer. Second – in a truck I can get into a countryside not crossed by buses. I can see people not in movement but at home in their own places. This is very important to me.”¹⁷⁴

Also the truck would provide a perfect cover for his true intentions. Stocked with several guns and a few fishing rods Steinbeck hoped not to draw any attention and to prevent people asking questions about the purpose of his trip.

“Any stranger in a rural community is suspect until his purpose is understood. There is one purpose that is never questioned, never inspected and that causes instant recognition and sympathy – that is hunting and fishing.”¹⁷⁵

¹⁷² SLL, p. 668

¹⁷³ SLL, p. 669

¹⁷⁴ SLL, p. 669

¹⁷⁵ SLL, p. 669

What Steinbeck also had to consider when planning his trip was his widely known name. His intention was not to travel as “J.S. novelist” but as “J.S. American”, or better even as “nobody, as a wandering ear and eye.”¹⁷⁶ He wanted to avoid being recognized by the people he met by actually avoiding the kind of people who might recognize him. He intended to stay away from large cities and well-educated people like “the high school principal” or “the Chamber of Commerce” and instead wanted to look for “the man in a field who isn’t likely to know my name even if he heard it [...]. By the very mobility I could be gone before my name caught up with me.”¹⁷⁷

But what might have been Steinbeck’s most important reason for going on the trip was the search for himself and the need not only for recovery but rediscovery. Behind Steinbeck lay a long career which – according to some critics – was starting to slow down and suffer from his declining creativity. “An image of me is being created which is a humbling, dull, stupid, lazy oaf who must be protected, led, instructed and hospitalized.”¹⁷⁸

Joseph Dewey also casts some light onto Steinbeck’s most personal reasons for his trip in his article “*There Was a Seedy Grandeur about the Man*”: *Rebirth and Recovery in Travels with Charley*.¹⁷⁹ Dewey sees the trip around the country as a journey inward. He argues that the at first most important reason - the search for America - is abandoned in the course of the road trip and is replaced by Steinbeck’s attempts to recover not only the man he once was but the man he had become.

There is a lost/found dichotomy in *Travels with Charley* that becomes evident more than once. When the book was published Steinbeck had already been a public figure for the better part of his life. The public had discovered him, had found him, and therefore had transformed him into the writer John Steinbeck. He had become an “artificially imposed identity”.¹⁸⁰ Steinbeck was no longer the man John Steinbeck and felt the need to travel anonymously to become himself. Dewey argues that Steinbeck had to go on the journey to lose the writer and find the man. “I was born lost and take no pleasure in being found [...].”¹⁸¹ In the very end of *Travels with Charley* Steinbeck returns to New York and gets lost in his home

¹⁷⁶ SLL, p. 669

¹⁷⁷ SLL, p. 669

¹⁷⁸ SSL, p. 670

¹⁷⁹ Dewey, Joseph. “‘There Was a Seedy Grandeur about the Man’: Rebirth and Recovery in *Travels with Charley*.” *Steinbeck Quarterly*. Volume 24, Number 1 and 2. Winter-Spring 1991. pp 22-29

¹⁸⁰ Dewey, pp. 22-24.

¹⁸¹ TwC, p. 70.

town. "Suddenly I pulled to the curb in a non-parking area, cut my motor, and leaned back in the seat and laughed, and I couldn't stop."¹⁸² But there is nothing tragic in this, for Steinbeck has finally found what he had lost by becoming lost.

Even though he had the Nobel Prize still ahead of him to prove his qualities as a writer, he questioned his existence as an aging writer and a sick man. There is a certain undertone in the words he writes to Elizabeth Otis explaining, or rather confessing to her, what his real reasons are. It might seem he was focusing on his career and his life as a writer but if we look at the obvious he was talking about nothing else but his life. "Between us – what I am proposing is not a little trip or reporting, but a frantic last attempt to save my life and the integrity of my creative pulse."¹⁸³

In *Travels with Charley* these words appear again in a slightly different form.

"I knew that ten or twelve thousand miles driving a truck, alone and unattended, over every kind of road, would be hard work, but to me it represented the antidote for the poison of the professional sick man. [...] If this projected journey should prove too much then it was time to go anyway."¹⁸⁴

His heart disease would sooner or later kill him and in these lines we can read what his oldest son Thom suggests: His father – fully aware of his fate – wanted to see his home country one last time. "He went out to say goodbye."¹⁸⁵

Steinbeck did not worry about the price he might have to pay for his journey. "And in my own life I am not willing to trade quality for quantity. If this projected journey should prove too much then it was time to go anyway."¹⁸⁶ In this context, *Travels with Charley* "becomes something of a valediction forbidding mourning, the steady testimony of a novelist closing the book at career's end."¹⁸⁷

2.1.2. Plot

2.1.2.1. Part One

At the beginning of *Travels with Charley* Steinbeck shares his thoughts on traveling, how the urge to be somewhere else is like a virus, "the virus of restlessness", that gets to us and makes us come up with "a garden of reasons to choose from" to justify our journey.(3-4) He describes himself as a bum, "once a

¹⁸² TwC, p. 277.

¹⁸³ SLL, p. 669.

¹⁸⁴ TwC, p. 20.

¹⁸⁵ "Steinbeck knew he was dying," September 13, 2006. Audio interview with Thom Steinbeck.

Common Ties www.commonities.com/blog/2006/09/13/steinbeck-knew-he-was-dying/

¹⁸⁶ TwC, p. 20.

¹⁸⁷ Dewey, p. 23.

bum always a bum”(3), a wayward man with an incurable disease who will never improve.

“When I was very young and the urge to be someplace else was on me, I was assured by mature people that maturity would cure this itch. When years described me as mature, the remedy prescribed was middle age. In middle age I was assured that greater age would calm my fever and now that I am fifty-eight perhaps senility will do the job.” (3-4)

Steinbeck dedicates some general words to the preparations required for a journey. It is always the same: one has to plan the “trip in time and space, choose a direction and a destination”, and finally “implement the journey”. (4) “This part of the process is invariable and immortal.” (4) Then one reaches the moment when the traveler loses control over the journey, where “a trip takes us.”(4) Every journey has its own character, “personality, temperament, individuality, uniqueness.”(4) However, these are not instructions Steinbeck gives, but he writes this down “only so that newcomers to bumdom, like teen-agers in new-hatched skin, will not think they invented it”.(4) “I set this matter down not to instruct others but to inform myself.”(3)

Then we learn about Steinbeck’s “garden of reasons”. After traveling abroad for many years he had discovered that he knew nothing about his home country. “I, an American writer, writing about America, was working from memory, and the memory is at best a faulty, warpy reservoir.”(5) When he had been young he had traveled the country “in an old bakery wagon” and now that he had been gone for much of the past twenty-five years he was determined to “look again”(6) after he “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.”(5)

There is one problem, however, he has to consider. It is his name that has become widely known. “This being so, my trip demanded that I leave my name and my identity at home.”(6) He seems to have been successful in leaving his identity behind because as he explains in “over ten thousand miles, in thirty-four states” he was not recognized even once.(7)

Steinbeck also shares his excitement about the truck *Rocinante*, from the moment of contacting the truck building company, receiving the specifications and the day *Rocinante* finally arrives in Sag Harbor, his little fishing place. But the truck is not his only companion. After realizing that traveling alone, “open to attack, robbery, assault”(8) will not be the smartest thing, Steinbeck decides to take another companion on board – “an old French gentleman poodle known as Charley, [...]

Charles le Chien.”(8-9) While Charley “is a born diplomat” who “prefers negotiation to fighting”, he is “a good watch dog – has a roar like a lion”.(9)

With *Rocinante* stocked with way too many supplies, Charley excited to go and taking “to hiding in the truck, creeping in and trying to make himself look small”(12), and Steinbeck ready to set out right after Labor day, his trip is delayed by Hurricane Donna.

Donna hit every State on the East Coast and Steinbeck is most concerned about a tree hitting *Rocinante*. But the truck remains unharmed and also his boat, the *Fayre Eleyne*, survives the storm due to Steinbeck’s suicidal mission of wading out into the ocean and freeing his *Eleyne* from two boats pushing her against the peer and then drifting back to the shore hanging onto a piece of branch – all in the middle of a Hurricane’s eye.

Even before embarking on his journey he proves what his major concerns at the beginning of part two are. With sickness lying behind him and death lurking over him, he is afraid of “a kind of second childhood” falling on him, his life packed “in cotton wool” and gradually retiring from his “manhood into a kind of spiritual and physical semi-invalidism. [...] My wife married a man; I saw no reason why she should inherit a baby.”(19-20)

2.1.2.2. Part Two

“In long-range planning for a trip, I think there is a private conviction that it won’t happen. As the day approached, my warm bed and comfortable house grew increasingly desirable and my dear wife incalculably precious. [...] I didn’t want to go. Something had to happen to forbid my going, but it didn’t. I could get sick, of course, but that was one of my main but secret reasons for going at all.”(19)

The day has finally come and Steinbeck sets out on his journey on September 23, 1960. He says a quick goodbye to his wife and gets on the Shelter Island Ferry to take him to Connecticut. On the ferry he meets a young sailor and over coffee discusses the pros and cons of submarines.

Back on solid ground in Connecticut, Steinbeck pulls over to pull out his maps “[a]nd suddenly the United States became huge beyond belief and impossible ever to cross.”(23) His first destination is his youngest son whom he had promised he would stop by to say farewell. The boys, “two hundred teen-age prisoners of education just settling down to serve their winter sentence”, are magically drawn to *Rocinante*, all wanting to come, and after his departure Steinbeck stops “to make sure there were no stowaways.”(27)

Steinbeck continues north into Vermont and on to New Hampshire and the White Mountains. He describes the glorious fall colors and the white-painted villages along the way. He spends the night on a farmer's grounds and has a long discussion with the man about Krushchev at the United Nations, the upcoming election and the speed with which mankind is developing. In the morning, they continue north through Maine to start with the actual adventure from "the roof" of America. In Bangor he rents a room and finds himself in a world of plastic, "the floors, the curtain, table tops of stainless burnless plastic"(45). He goes out to dinner, where he is served by a waitress who "wasn't anything" and who has drained "off energy and joy" from the room and also from Steinbeck. He returns to his plastic room, fed up with the sterile world around him and pulls out a bottle of vodka. "Everyone was protecting me and it was horrible."(47) In these artificial surroundings nature bestows one of the most beautiful shows on Steinbeck: aurora borealis.

"And the Aurora Borealis was out. I've seen it only a few times in my life. It hung and moved with majesty in folds like an infinite traveler upstage in an infinite theatre. In colors of rose and lavender and purple it moved and pulsed against the night, and the frost-shaped stars shone through. What a thing to see at the time when I needed it so badly!"(48)

The spectacle immediately cures Steinbeck's sadness, which is paired with a hint of homesickness, and after a good night's rest he heads out to Deer Island the next day. His agent and friend Elizabeth Otis has left him no choice and made arrangements for him. On the way to Deer Island he gets lost, spending the whole day driving into wrong directions. "I was lost almost all day," (49) and so he approaches "a majestic Maine state trooper" to ask for directions.(49) With his help Steinbeck finally arrives on the island only to find that Miss Brace's cat George has no liking for any other person than Miss Brace. "If the bomb should fall and wipe out every living thing except Miss Brace, George would be happy."(51)

Steinbeck spends two nights on Deer Island and then continues to northern Maine. On the way he notices that the hunting season has begun. Afraid for Charley dog's life, Steinbeck ties a red Kleenex around his tail and "every morning [...] renewed his flag".(58)

"They shoot at anything that moves or looks as though it might, and their success in killing one another may well prevent a population explosion. If casualties were limited to their own kind there would be not problem, but the slaughter of cows, pigs, farmers, dogs, and highway signs makes autumn a dangerous season in which to travel."(57)

Steinbeck and Charley make it through open season and finally arrive in Aroostook County, Maine's potato country. There he encounters Canucks, migrant

French Canadian laborers working on the fields every year during harvest season and then returning to Canada. Steinbeck settles with *Rocinante* at the edge of the worker's camp and sends out Charley, the diplomat dog, to establish contact. After filling us in on Charley dog's secret purpose Steinbeck makes contact with the Canadians and invites his neighbors in for drinks.

Then it is time for Steinbeck to start heading south again and he notices that many of the small New England towns seem abandoned and how sad it is that people are preferring the city life to the rural life. Through New Hampshire he returns to Vermont and continues on to New York State, where he stops at Niagara Falls, which he has never seen before. On his way he gets lost again. "I was then hopelessly lost in the streets of a small but endless town in the neighborhood of Medina, I think. [...] But to find where you are going, you must know where you are, and I didn't." (82) Eventually he finds his way back to Highway 104 and makes it to Niagara Falls.

His attempt to avoid the big cities of Pennsylvania and Ohio, "to creep across the neck of Ontario, bypassing not only Erie but Cleveland and Toledo" fails because Steinbeck forgot to bring Charley's vaccination certification. Steinbeck has to turn around at the Canadian border, not because Canada refuses to let him in but because the United States would not let him return without the certification.

Steinbeck is now forced to get on the big 'thruways' or 'super-highways', which he has been trying to avoid. "These great roads are wonderful for moving goods but not for inspection of a countryside." (89) But now he is speeding along "this wide, eventless way called U.S. 90 which bypassed Buffalo and Erie to Madison, Ohio" (95), and because of lack of landscape he directs his attention toward mobile homes pulled by specially designed trucks. His observations lead to a conversation with Charley about roots. "Could it be that Americans are a restless people?" he asks. (103)

Looking for a place for the night, Steinbeck camps alone beside a lake in northern Michigan. There he meets a young – as Steinbeck calls him - guardian who informs Steinbeck that he is camping on private property but refrains from sending him off. The men spend the next morning trying to catch some fish and around noon Steinbeck hurries on to get to Chicago where his wife Elaine is going to meet him for a couple of days. He does confess that although he has left his identity behind in New York,

“[t]hree times a week from some bar, supermarket, or tire-and-tool cluttered service station, I put calls through to New York and re-established my identity in time and space. For three or four minutes I had a name, and the duties and joys and frustrations a man carries with him like a comet’s tail.”(114)

He spends his last night without Elaine outside Chicago and heads into the city the next morning long before daylight out of fear of getting lost in morning traffic. He arrives at the hotel way too early for his room to be ready, dirty, unshaved and in wrinkled clothes. The hotel manager, who does not want Steinbeck to linger in the lobby until the room is ready, offers him the room of another guest that has not been cleaned yet, so Steinbeck can have a bath and rest before Elaine arrives.

2.1.2.3. Part Three

“Chicago was a break in my journey, a resumption of my name, identity, and happy marital status. [...] Chicago broke my continuity.”(123) He tells us nothing other about Chicago than “it was pleasant and good” and hits the road again, having “to go through the same lost loneliness all over again, and it was no less painful than at first.”(123)

From Illinois, a freshly “groomed and clipped and washed” Charley and Steinbeck head for Wisconsin, where both of them have never been before. Steinbeck is very fond of the beauty of Wisconsin and compares the “butter-colored sunlight” with a kind of light he has so far only seen in Greece.(126) In length he comments on Wisconsin cheese and cheese products and finds it sad that he “didn’t stop to sample Swiss Cheese Candy.”(126)

Moving on to Minnesota, Steinbeck becomes completely lost in an attempt to cross over the Mississippi. The plan “seems simple enough, and perhaps it can be done, but not by me.”(129) He is washed away by traffic, frantically trying to get to the other side of the river, finding himself on an “Evacuation Route” in case the bomb should be dropped, gets so completely lost he finds himself somehow back on the wrong side of the river, and finally pulls over exhaustedly at a roadside restaurant.

After getting directions to Sauk Centre, where Sinclair Lewis was born, he decides not to stop there and moves on to Detroit Lakes. In the morning he drives on to Fargo, North Dakota, which is almost exactly in the middle of the United States. “If you will take a map of the United States and fold it in the middle, eastern edge against western, and crease it sharply, right in the crease will be Fargo. On

double-page maps sometimes Fargo gets lost in the binding.”(135) A place that gets lost? The perfect destination for Steinbeck!

“[...] Fargo to me is brother to the fabulous places of the earth [...]. From my earliest memory, if it was a cold day, Fargo was the coldest place on the continent. If heat was the subject, then at that time the papers listed Fargo as hotter than any place else, or wetter or drier, or deeper in snow.”(135)

But the place is not what he expects. “It’s bad to have one’s myth shaken up like that.”(136) Disappointed, Steinbeck drives on to Alice, “124 [inhabitants] in the last census” and settles next to the Maple River.(136) Still fighting the aftermath of a few happy days with his wife, there at the river “the gift was coming back” and Steinbeck learns to be alone again.(136) Steinbeck likes the place so much they decide to stay the night even though it is only noon. Their tranquility is disturbed by a man, “not old, but with a jaunty springy step,” an actor traveling the country with his dog. They engage in an interesting conversation before Steinbeck continues on his journey early morning.

Steinbeck and Charley visit the North Dakota Badlands along the way but Steinbeck at first does not share much information about the landscape. “Just as I felt unwanted in this land, so do I feel reluctance in writing about it.”(154) So he decides to move on quickly and “went into a state of flight, running to get away from the unearthly landscape.” But then as the light changes as the sun goes down Steinbeck is amazed by the colors and decides to spend the night. Impressed by the changed landscape Steinbeck realizes that any conclusions based on his observations he has drawn so far have been proved wrong by following experience. “And I thought how every safe generality I gathered in my travels was canceled by another. In the night the Bad Lands had become Good Lands. I can’t explain it. That’s how it was.”(157)

“The next passage in my journey is a love affair. I am in love with Montana.”(158) Steinbeck had never been to Montana before and was blown away by its beauty. He takes his time to travel this state, not rushing through the towns, and stopping in Billings to buy a hat, in Livingston a jacket and in Butte a rifle. “If Montana had a seacoast, or if I could live away from the sea, I would instantly move there and petition for admission.”

But Steinbeck has to move on and so he heads west to finally arrive at Yellowstone National Park. Their stay there is short because Charley discovers his roots as a carnivore, throws overboard his French diplomacy and wants to go bear-hunting. “His lips flared, showing wicked teeth that have some trouble with a log

biscuit. He screeched insults at the bear, [...] raved and ranted beside me, describing in detail what he would do to the bear if he could get at him.”(163) Steinbeck has to leave the park because “[b]ears simply brought out the Hyde in [his] Jekyll-headed dog.”(164) They leave the park and drive to get as far away from Yellowstone as possible “for fear there might be some unofficial non-government bears about.”(164)

On their way west, Steinbeck and Charley cross the Continental Divide, “the upraised thumb of Idaho” and the mountains to Washington State, where Charley suffers from an attack of prostatitis. Steinbeck spends the night in a cabin and overhears a quarrel between the two men running the place. It turns out they are father and son and are discussing the young man’s improper choice of profession: he wants to be a hairdresser. Charley is not getting better, so Steinbeck has to take him to see a veterinarian in Spokane, who turns out to be an alcoholic.

Finally the two arrive at the Pacific Ocean. “The Pacific is my home ocean; I knew it first, grew up on its shore, collected marine animals along the coast. I know its moods, its color, its nature. It was very far inland that I caught the first smell of the Pacific.”(180) As Steinbeck approaches Seattle he notices the same change he already saw in the great eastern cities. “The highways eight lanes wide cut like glaciers through the uneasy land. This Seattle had no relation to the one I remembered.”(181)

With Charley’s condition slightly improving they start moving south. Somewhere in Oregon it is *Rocinante* who falls ill and leaves Steinbeck stranded in the rain, in the middle of nowhere, on a Sunday, with a blown tire. Steinbeck is rescued by the owner of a small service station in a nameless village who makes the impossible possible and finds Steinbeck two tires. With two brand new rear tires Steinbeck drives on to surprise Charley dog with the tree of trees, so big and so old that it is “out of time and out of our ordinary thinking”.

The redwoods and giant sequoias “might [...] set [Charley] apart from other dogs.”(188) But it is not Charley who is stunned by the redwoods but Steinbeck, who has known these trees since he was a child. “The redwoods, once seen, leave a mark or create a vision that stays with you always.”(188) They stay for two days among the redwoods, Steinbeck musing about the trees, their age and eternity, before they move south towards Steinbeck’s hometown.

“I find it difficult to write about my native place, northern California. It should be the easiest, because I knew that strip angled against the Pacific better than any

place in the world. But I find it not one thing but many – one printed over another until the whole thing blurs.” (194)

Charley and Steinbeck approach San Francisco, which “put on a show” for the two.(197) Steinbeck is enchanted by the city’s beauty. “I’ve never seen her more lovely. [...] I might have stayed indefinitely, but I had to go to Monterey to send off my absentee ballot.”(198)

Steinbeck’s hometown Salinas has changed up to a point where he hardly recognizes it. He engages in a fervid political discussion with his relations, who are all Republican. “It was awful. A stranger hearing us would have called the police to prevent bloodshed.”(199) He returns to the places of his youth and is so crushed by his own legacy, feeling like a ghost, people talking about his grave, that he takes flight. “The place of my origin had changed, and having gone away I had not changed with it.[...] When I went away I had died, and so became fixed and unchangeable.[...] Tom Wolfe was right. You can’t go home again because home has ceased to exist except in the mothballs of memory.”(205-206)

One last time Steinbeck drives up to Fremont’s Peak and takes a good look around his changed home.

“I remember how once, in that part of youth that is deeply concerned with death, I wanted to be buried on this peak where without eyes I could see everything I knew and loved, for in those days there was no world beyond the mountains. [...] Here on these high rocks my memory myth repaired itself.”(207)

And so Steinbeck and Charley leave Steinbeck’s home behind and drive on to their next destination. “I bucketed *Rocinante* out of California by the shortest possible route – one I knew well from the old days of the 1930s.”(211) Their journey brings them to the Mojave Desert, which Steinbeck characterizes as big and frightening. He pulls over to give Charley dog some water and rests with a beer in *Rocinante*’s shade. He is tempted to shoot two coyotes in the distance but decides to value life more than being a good citizen. “‘Kill them,’ my training said. ‘Everyone kills them. It’s a public service.’[...] I guess I am too old and too lazy to be a good citizen.”(213) Instead he leaves two cans of dog food and drives on.

Charley and Steinbeck practically fly through Arizona, cross into New Mexico and rush past Gallup to spend the night on the Continental Divide. Both, Charley and Steinbeck suddenly suffer from the “mullygrubs”(223) and Steinbeck has to admit that his quest to hear and see is over. “And I sat in the seat and faced what I

had concealed from myself. I was driving myself, pounding out the miles because I was no longer hearing or seeing. I had passed my limit of taking in".(221)

2.1.2.4. Part Four

"When I started this narrative, I knew that sooner or later I would have to have a go at Texas, and I dreaded it. I could have bypassed Texas about as easily as a space traveler can avoid the Milky Way."(227) So, with no other choice, Steinbeck and Charley take their chances with Texas. They have to spend three days in Amarillo to get *Rocinante*'s large front window replaced and also Charley dog's health needs attention. His prostatitis has worsened and Steinbeck leaves his poodle in the hands of a young veterinarian. Both, *Rocinante* and Charley are in an almost brand new condition when they are returned to Steinbeck, and the three of them move on. They are about to meet Elaine for a Thanksgiving orgy with friends in Texas.

After the Thanksgiving feast, followed up by hunting and fishing, Charley and Steinbeck continue on their journey. While still in Texas a newspaper article catches Steinbeck's attention and he decides to head for New Orleans. They drive "relentlessly", bypass Houston, only stopping for coffee and pie. (250)

"Night did not stop us, and when my eyes ached and burned from peering too long and my shoulders were side hills of pain, I pulled into a turnout and crawled like a mole into my bed, only to see the highway writhe along behind my closed lids."(250)

It is winter already, ice on the road and the country is "froze up". Steinbeck is entering a racist, hostile world, where Charley – sitting high in the seat beside Steinbeck - is repeatedly mistaken for a "Nigger or rather Niggah. That word seemed terribly important, a kind of safety word to cling to lest some structure collapse."(251) Steinbeck heads on to New Orleans to see with his own eyes what he has so far only read in the newspapers:

"the matriculation of a couple of tiny Negro children in a New Orleans school. [...] What made the newsmen love the story was a group of stout middle-aged women who, by some curious definition of the word 'mother,' gathered every day to scream invectives at children. Further, a small group of them had become so expert that they were known as the Cheerleaders, and a crowd gathered every day to enjoy and to applaud their performance."(249)

He is sickened about what he sees. Pretending to be an English sailor he witnesses the spectacle and is disgusted by the behavior of his fellow Americans. "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."(259)

Again he takes flight and while resting outside town he is approached by a man. "He was a neatly dressed man well along in years, with a Greco face and fine wind-lifted white hair and a clipped white mustache." (261) They exchange thoughts on the Cheerleaders, problems in the South and the lack of reason in mankind. Steinbeck feels a "sweetness like music" (266) caused by the man not being "what the North thinks of as a Southerner." (265)

Moving along, Steinbeck offers a ride to an "old Negro who trudged with heavy heels in the grass-grown verge beside the concrete road". (266) The man is not very talkative and feels increasingly uncomfortable in *Rocinante*. Steinbeck stops to let him get off on his demand and continues on towards New York.

The next day Steinbeck feels generous again and picks up a hitchhiker at a diner. As it turns out the man is a racist par excellence and Steinbeck does not hesitate to kick him off *Rocinante*. He picks up "one more passenger between Jackson and Montgomery, a young Negro student with a sharp face and the look and feel of impatient fierceness." (272) They talk of many things, among them Martin Luther King and the young man's doubts that the way of passive but unrelenting resistance is too slow. "He was a passionate and articulate young man with anxiety and fierceness just below the surface." (273) When their ways separate, Steinbeck is done seeing and hearing.

He hurries through Virginia, impatient to finally get back to New York. And as so many times before on his journey he manages to get lost in his hometown, suffering from road jitters and breaking out into a fit of laughter. "And that's how the traveler came home again." (277)

2.1.3. Critical Explication

Travels with Charley is written essentially in private discourse. "I set this matter down not to instruct others but to inform myself." (3) Steinbeck wants to inform himself about his own country and his fellow Americans, he wants to hear and see and rediscover America. This quest for the true America and the true Americans is the leitmotif running through the book.

Steinbeck uses his faithful companion Charley dog to discuss his observations and findings in monologues, which are also private discourse. "I came with the wish to learn what America is like. And I wasn't sure I was learning anything. I found I was talking aloud to Charley. He likes the idea but the practice makes him sleepy." (140) Only once do we hear Charley's voice, neither in the form of the wag of his tail or

the look in his eyes, nor in form of the famous “ftt” he uses to communicate with Steinbeck, but in words.

Sitting at the Continental Divide somewhere in New Mexico, Steinbeck’s spirits are low and he decides to celebrate Charley le Chien’s unknown birthday that very day with a pancake gateau.

“Charley watched the operation with some interest. His silly tail made delicate conversation. ‘Anybody saw you make a birthday cake for a dog that he don’t even know when’s his birthday would think you were nuts.’

‘If you can’t manage any better grammar than that with your tail, maybe it’s a good thing you can’t talk.’”(223)

However, not only the obvious reason of exploring the country, but also the “main but secret reasons for going at all”(19), getting sick, becoming packed in “cotton wool”(19) and finding the man within writer, are reasons harmonizing with the private discourse of the book. Although Steinbeck’s aim is to observe and describe, he is well aware of the fact that giving an objective opinion is simply not possible for an individual.

“For this reason I cannot comment this account as an America that you will find. So much there is to see, but our morning eyes describe a different world than do our afternoon eyes, and surely our wearied evening eyes can report only a weary evening world.”(77)

From time to time, he tries, however, to come up with generalities, like many writers “find[ing] themselves floundering in generalities,”(228) but they are *his* generalities, not universally appropriate truths but conclusions drawn from his own observations. “I feel that there are too many realities. What I set down here is true until someone else passes that way and rearranges the world in his own style.”(76) His observations also depend on his emotional state. “What I found was closely intermeshed with how I felt at the moment [...]. External reality has a way of being not so external after all. This monster of a land, this mightiest of nations, this spawn of the future, turns out to be the macrocosm of microcosm me.”(209) The private discourse ties in nicely with Steinbeck’s thoughts and insights he shares about America, Americans but most of all about himself.

Travels with Charley is written in a first person narrative, describing the journey of the writer and his dog in a first hand account. Steinbeck’s strategies are various and brilliantly applied. To break up the story of a three-month road trip he uses vignettes, character sketches, anecdotes, rhetorical questions and dialogues with Charley dog.

For the description of landscape and nature he mostly uses vignettes. As Barbara Heavilin suggests, “On occasion these vignettes reveal Steinbeck as a Romantic, a mystic who sees beyond the physical into the metaphysical, into the essence of things.”¹⁸⁸ She lists Wisconsin as an example.

“I never saw a country that changed so rapidly, and because I had not expected it everything I saw brought a delight. I don’t know how it is in other seasons, the summers may reek and rock with heat, the winters may groan with dismal cold, but when I saw it for the first and only time in early October, the air was rich with butter-colored sunlight [...]. There was a penetration of the light into solid substance so that I seemed to see into things, deep in [...].”(126)

The “butter-colored” light enables Steinbeck to not only see things, but to “see into things”. It is part of his reasons for traveling to not only observe, but to see behind the obvious and learn for himself what his country is like.

Steinbeck’s character sketches paint a brilliant picture not only of the people he encounters but also of his friend Charley dog. Especially the latter add wit and humor to the story and often make the reader smile.

“For this reason I took one companion on my journey – an old French gentleman poodle known as Charley. Actually his name is Charles le Chien. He was born in Bercy on the outskirts of Paris and trained in France, and while he knows a little poodle-English, he responds quickly only to commands in French. Otherwise he has to translate, and that slows him down. [...] Charley is a born diplomat. He prefers negotiating to fighting, and probably so, since he is very bad at fighting.”(8-9)

Charley “keeps the performance simple. He picks it up when it goes stale” and when melancholy is about to take over.(151) Steinbeck’s devoted descriptions of his French companion are a recurrent interruption of this nostalgic journey. It is Charley’s constant back and forth between human and canine that keeps the reader entertained, his alternately being the wiser of the two, thinking “humans are nuts”(269) when it comes to racism and violence, but then simply being a spoiled French poodle who “wet on the garbage can for the twentieth time and called it a day.”(41)

Apart from Charley’s many faces we also learn about America’s many faces, human, canine, and feline. With sharp humor Steinbeck describes George, the cat.

“I let Charley out, and suddenly an angry streak of gray burned across the clearing in the pines and bucketed into the house. That was George. He didn’t welcome me and he particularly didn’t welcome Charley. [...] For George is an old gray cat who has accumulated a hatred of people and things so intense that even hidden upstairs he communicates his prayer that you will go away. If the bomb

¹⁸⁸ Heavilin, Barbara: ‘Travels with Charley (1962)’. Hayashi, Tetsumaro(Ed.): *A New Study Guide to Steinbeck’s Major Works, with Critical Explanations*. Metuchen: The Scarecrow Press Inc, 1993. p. 224

should fall and wipe out every living thing except Miss Brace, George would be happy. [...] 'And do you want to know something? George is a girl.'"(50-51)

Truckers, sailors, farmers, and guardians among many others come to life thanks to Steinbeck's careful choice of words. Often, irony and cynicism can be sensed in his characterizations: "a lonely man, the more so because he had a wife"(112), a state trooper who is "a candidate for Mount Rushmore"(50) and a "bull bitch of a woman" making "the welkin ring" when Charley tries to make friends with a Pomeranian lady dog.(41) Also the waitress with the "vacant eye, listless hand, this damask cheek dusted like a doughnut with plastic powder"(46) or the young African-American student "with a sharp face and the look and feel of impatient fierceness" who does not want to wait for change but wants "action now" come to life through his wonderful wordings.(272-3)

Steinbeck also uses his dialogues with strangers to draw a picture of the American character. Some of these strangers turn into Steinbeck's generalities, becoming stereotypes of occupation groups, representatives of States or symbols of their time. These dialogues provide the reader with a sense of immediacy, as though the reader is right there, that very moment, on this journey with Steinbeck and Charley dog.

In contrast, Steinbeck also includes anecdotes in his travelogue, not holding back with self-deprecation. Some of these are recounts of recent events, others go back to Steinbeck's roots and various stages of his life, and yet others become humorous threads in the book: Steinbeck's talent to become lost wherever he goes, his dislike of big roads and big cities, and his panic attacks when he hits traffic.

"As usual I panicked and got lost. [...] I drove for hours, never able to take my eyes from the surrounding mammoths. I must have crossed the river but I couldn't see it. I never did see it. I never saw St. Paul or Minneapolis. All I saw was a river of trucks; all I heard was a roar of motors. [...] My head was spinning. I had lost all sense of direction."(129)

By means of these anecdotes, "the past and the far past thus mingle"¹⁸⁹ with the present, enriching it and helping to create a complete picture of the present in which he is traveling and the people he is meeting.

Another stylistic feature Steinbeck uses throughout the book are *penseés*. In his *penseés* we can almost hear his thoughts wandering off. Among many things he thinks about language, history, nature, the development of mankind, and of course the nature and character of Americans.

¹⁸⁹ Heavilin, p. 228.

“In the pattern-thinking about roots I and most other people have left two things out of consideration. Could it be that Americans are restless people, a mobile people, never satisfied with where they are as a matter of selection? The pioneers, the immigrants who peopled the continent, were the restless ones in Europe. The steady rooted ones stayed home and are still there. But every one of us, except the Negroes forced here as slaves, are descended from the restless ones, the wayward ones who were not content to stay home.” (103-4)

Some of these *penseés* are also dedicated to historical background information. When Steinbeck for the first time crosses the Continental Divide his thoughts turn to the first European explorers in this part of the country.

“It is impossible to be in this high spinal country without giving thought to the first men who crossed it, the French explorers, the Lewis and Clark men. We fly it in five hours, drive it in a week. Dawdle it as I was doing in a month or six weeks. But Lewis and Clark and their party started in St. Louis in 1804 and returned in 1806. And if we get to thinking we are men, we might remember that in the two and a half years of pushing through wild and unknown country to the Pacific Ocean and then back, only one man died and only two deserted. And we get sick if the milk delivery is late and nearly die of heart failure if there is an elevator strike.”(166-7)

Through these *penseés* we learn more about the country than we would by reading Steinbeck’s mere observations. They add to the descriptions and dialogues, brief us on background and historical development, and most of all they enable us to take a little glimpse into Steinbeck’s thoughts.

Catalogs can occasionally be found in Steinbeck’s *penseés*. We learn about the American identity, that “Americans are much more American than they are Northerners, Southerners, Westerners, or Easterners. And descendants of English, Irish, Italian, Jewish, German, Polish are essentially American.”(210) Often they are accompanied by parallels, as when Steinbeck goes on to compare. “It is a fact that Americans from all sections of all racial extractions are more alike than the Welsh are like the English, the Lancashireman like the Cockney, or for that matter the Lowland Scot like the Highlander.”(210) Heavilin argues that these catalogs “add a poetic quality to the book”.¹⁹⁰

Analogies and similes are also wide spread in *Travels with Charley*. We learn about the aurora borealis that “hug and moved with majesty in folds like an infinite traveler upstage in an infinite theater”(48), the customers of a New England roadside restaurant who “were folded over their coffee cups like ferns”(34), a waitress with a “damask cheek dusted like a doughnut with plastic powder”(46), and American cities which “are like badger holes, ringed with trash – all of them –

¹⁹⁰ Heavilin, p. 232.

surrounded by piles of wrecked and rusting automobiles, and almost smothered with rubbish.”(26). Steinbeck also enriches his *pensees* with analogies.

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

These analogies serve “to portray and to highlight a peculiar characteristic, a confused emotional state, a typically human frailty, the intractableness of problems like prejudice.”¹⁹¹

Another stylistic feature are epigrammatic statements, which can stand alone and can function as “generalities” that need no more interpretation and explanation. When getting lost Steinbeck comments that “to find where you are going, you must know where you are”(82), about the appeal of Florida he notes “what good is warmth without cold to give it sweetness”(36), and about change he says that “[s]ometimes the view of change is distorted by a change in oneself.”(195)

Enlightened by an evening with French Canadian migrant workers, who gave *Rocinante* “a glow it never quite lost”(69), Steinbeck notes that “[t]here are times that one treasures for all one’s life, and such times are burned clearly and sharply on the material of total recall.”(70)

Often these statements are packed in rhetorical questions. Steinbeck thinks about the metaphysical world and inexplicable experiences. “How many people have seen or heard or felt something which so outraged their senses of what should be that the whole thing was brushed quickly away like dirt under a rug?”(152) “Can it be that we do not love to be reminded that we are very young and callow in a world that was old when we came into it?”(193) But many of his rhetorical questions focus on America and Americans. “Could it be that Americans are a restless people, a mobile people, never satisfied with where they are as a matter of selection?” (103)

“Can I say that the America I saw has put cleanliness first, at the expense of taste? [...] If this people has so atrophied its taste buds as to find tasteless food not only acceptable but desirable, what of the emotional of the nation? Do they find their emotional fare so bland that it must be spiced with sex and sadism through the medium of paperback? And if this is so, why are there no condiments save ketchup and mustard to enhance their foods?”(141-142)

Steinbeck does not claim to have the answers to his questions. Rather they serve as starting points for further consideration, as initiators for deeper thoughts, and as guidelines for his own search for America.

¹⁹¹ Heavilin, p. 231.

Last but not least we must not forget to mention literary, geographical, and historical allusions. The most obvious of course is Steinbeck's truck, named after Don Quixote's horse. "And because my planned trip had aroused some satiric remarks among my friends, I named it Rocinante, which you will remember was the name of Don Quixote's horse." (7) There are even more parallels than *Rocinante*. With his faithful companion Charley/Sancho Pansa a middle-aged man sets out on an eccentric journey fighting age and illness/windmills, on a mythical quest that appears insane to objective observers.

Steinbeck also spends not only some time reading and musing about Joseph Addison, but also some pages writing like him.

"Sunday, January 29, 1961. Yes, Joseph Addison I hear and I will obey within Reason, for it appears that the Curiosity you speak of has in no Way abated. [...] Among the generality of men I am tall – six feet even – although among the males of my family I am considered a dwarf. [...] My legs are long in proportion to my trunk and are said to be shapely. My hair is grizzled gray, my eyes blue and my cheeks ruddy, a complexion inherited from my Irish mother. My face has not ignored the passage of time, but recorded it with scars, lines, furrows, and erosions. I wear a beard and moustache but shave my cheeks." (39)

Steinbeck continues to describe his beard and "playfully molds his own observations into long, coruscating sentences modeled after the style of Addison."¹⁹² He then returns to the story, "thus far with Addison's injunction, but my Reader has me back in that New Hampshire picnic place." (40) By paying tribute to Addison, Steinbeck places himself among the famous writers of this world and shows "himself at ease as a writer among writers."¹⁹³

One of the main characteristics of *Travels with Charley* is a melancholic undertone, a nostalgia that accompanies Steinbeck wherever he goes. Sometimes his nostalgia is of a personal form, longing for his days as a young man, full of energy and drive, but sometimes his nostalgia shows in regard to his country, the changing of the landscape, the growing cities and the loss of localness, especially in language. "Localness is not gone but it is going." (107) He admits that "[w]hat [he is] mourning is perhaps not worth saving, but [he] regret[s] its loss nevertheless." (107) In Steinbeck's opinion, this kind of nostalgia is innate to older men and therefore not even he is spared. "It is the nature of a man as he grows older, a small bridge in time, to protest against change, particularly change for the better." (107)

¹⁹² Heavilin, p. 233.

¹⁹³ Heavilin, p. 233.

He also longs for the time when he was a young man who “traveled about in an old bakery wagon, double-doored rattler with a mattress on its floor.”(5) Having realized that he does not know his own country anymore, he feels the urge to explore it. “Thus 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.”(5) But everywhere he looks he is disturbed by the immense growth, industrialization, and sterility. Restaurants have “put cleanliness first”(141), cities have turned into “badger holes ringed with trash”(26) and his own hometown Salinas that once “proudly announced four thousand citizens”(195-6) has grown to be the home of eighty thousand.

Steinbeck also makes use of self-deprecation and humor, especially when it comes to his lack of talent in finding his way. He gets lost in New England when trying to get to Deer Isle, upon his return to New York, and on his way to Sauk Centre in the Twin Cities.

“I still have that arrogant plan – into St. Paul on Highway 10, then gently across the Mississippi. The S-curve in the Mississippi her would give me three crossings of the river. After this pleasant jaunt I meant to go through Golden Valley, drawn by its name. That seems simple enough, and perhaps it can be done, but not by me.”(129)

The descriptions of his Americans are infused with ironic remarks and side blows, especially when it comes to those people Steinbeck does not have pleasant encounters with. In New Hampshire Charley’s “French blood flared up” upon the sight of a “rather stout and bedizened Pomeranian of the female persuasion,” but Charley’s romantic attempts are mistaken for a carnivore’s attack and the Pomeranian’s owner, “mademoiselle mistress”, hurries to her rescue. In Steinbeck’s cynical words it reads as follows.(41)

“This creature let out a shriek like a wounded rabbit, emerged from the car with an explosive ooze, and would have snatched her darling to her bosom if she could have bent down that far. [...] I didn’t know what a welkin was. I looked it up later. And that bull bitch of a woman sure as hell made it ring.”(41)

Steinbeck’s style is diverse and rich and his strategies are applied thoughtfully. His anecdotes sometimes enlighten the reader, sometimes make the reader reflect, his penseés are wise and elaborate, and his allegories are beautiful and flowery. In his description people come to life, mountains raise before our inner eye and the road forms in front of us. His style makes America come to life.

Travels with Charley is organized along the tracks of Steinbeck’s and Charley dog’s journey. The storyline follows their movement through the “incredibly huge

America”(55), through thirty-four states and over the time span of three months. Their observations and experiences along the road are spiced up with anecdotes, penseés and allusions that take the reader to a different place for sometimes a few lines, sometimes a few pages, before dropping him back on the road into *Rocinante*’s cab somewhere on a back road in 1960s Northern America.

The four parts of the book might be unequal in page numbers, but they contribute to the course of the journey. The journey, however, is not only physical but also metaphysical, the quest of an aging artist to find himself by getting lost and to learn and inform himself about his home country, which he has lost connection with. The various motifs and reasons for traveling give the story organic unity.¹⁹⁴

Steinbeck’s attempts to see and to hear are threads running through the whole book, just like his repeated conversations with Charley about the American character or his – for such a journey - very insufficient sense of direction and contempt traffic. These recurring motifs are like friends we are happy to see again in course of the story, becoming old friends as we continuously learn more and more about them and eventually giving us a warm feeling of being part of the journey as compared to mere readers of a travelogue.

¹⁹⁴ Heavilin, p. 234.

2.2. BILL BRYSON'S THE LOST CONTINENT



Caption 2: Bill Bryson

“One of the things I was looking for on this trip was the perfect town. I’ve always felt certain that somewhere out there in America it must exist.”(22) “The place I was looking for would be an amalgam of all those towns I had encountered in fiction. Indeed, that might well be its name – Amalgam, Ohio, or Amalgam, North Dakota. It could exist almost anywhere, but it had to exist. And on this trip, I intended to find it.”(54)

2.2.1. *Background*

2.2.1.1. Historical and Cultural Background

The 1980s are a decade shaped by the end of the Cold war, the fall of the Iron Curtain and the intensification of the environmental consciousness.

In the United States the 1980s started off with the eruption of Mount St. Helens on May 18, 1980, killing fifty-seven people, and the assassination of John Lennon in the same year. Ronald Reagan was president from 1981 to 1989, followed by George Bush Senior in 1989. Reagan pushed the Cold War to another peak by pursuing a hard line policy against communism and building up U.S. military power. But with the end of his presidency the Cold War also came to an end when the USSR under Mikhail Gorbachev announced the end of hostility towards the western world.

Several disasters shocked the world in the 1980s. In 1986, the Space Shuttle *Challenger* exploded less than two minutes after take-off, killing seven crew members and leaving the rest of the space shuttle fleet grounded for the following two and a half years. In the same year, the Chernobyl disaster dominated the world news. The nuclear meltdown in the Ukraine killed forty-seven people immediately, but sent a large amount of radioactive material all over Europe, and caused innumerable cases of radiation-related cancer in the area surrounding the catastrophe. In 1989 the Exxon Valdez oil spill opened the eyes of the public for environmental issues. It was not the largest oil spill ever but it affected such a delicate and remote natural area that it became the ecologically most devastating disaster ever.

In the Middle East the Iran-Iraq War lasted for most of the decade, from 1980 to 1988, with the United States backing Iraq. Also, in 1980 the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan in an effort, as the Union claimed, of “pacifying” the country. The

invasion, however, fueled the rebellion within the country and the diplomatic reaction to the Soviet intervention was severe, including the US boycott of the 1980 Olympic Games in Moscow.

The 1980s are a time of economic wealth and general upheaval. The economy was booming as many western companies worldwide relocated to second world countries and expanded to Eastern Europe, especially after the fall of the Iron Curtain. It was the time of neon colors, ripped jeans and teased hair, of the synthesizer and Michael Jackson. People were becoming more aware of the dangers of smoking but on the other hand drug abuse was on the rise. The 1980s were also the time when AIDS found its way into the minds of the people. After writing HIV off as an epidemic of homosexuals, people were becoming aware of the fact that HIV could infect anyone, even famous actor Rock Hudson, who died of AIDS in 1985 aged fifty-nine. This also led to a wider acceptance of homosexuality as more and more public figures outed themselves.

The 1980s were almost over when Bill Bryson embarked on his search for Amalgam, the perfect American small town in 1987/88. However, these last couple of years saw many important events, such as the fall of the Berlin Wall and the Tiananmen Square protests in Beijing and the beginning collapse of the Eastern Block.

2.2.1.2. Biographical Background

Bill Bryson was born in Des Moines, Iowa, in 1951. His father, Bill Senior, was a rather well known sports reporter in Iowa and sometimes took Bill Junior on his trips to ball games outside the state. While in college, Bryson set out on a journey to Europe from which he was not to return as planned. In 1973 he met his wife in Britain and after a short return to finish his studies, he stayed on the Island until he moved back to New Hampshire with his wife and by then four children in 1995. In 2003 the family moved back to Norfolk, Great Britain.

Bryson started working as a journalist and later became editor at *The Times* and *The Independent*. In 1987, Bryson quit journalism and started to write freelance, with *The Lost Continent* being his second book published. Soon after his father's death, Bryson flew to the United States to set out on the journey that was to become *The Lost Continent*.

"I wanted to go back to the magic places of my youth – to Mackinac Island, the Rocky Mountains, Gettysburg – and see if they were as good as I remembered

them.[...] I wanted to look for Ne-Hi Pop and Burma Shave signs and go to a ball game and sit at the marble-topped soda-fountain and drive through the kind of small towns the Deanna Durbin and Mickey Rooney used to inhabit in the movies. I wanted to travel around. I wanted to see America. I wanted to come home.”(22)

Bryson is looking for the perfect small town as it existed in 1950s TV-shows, a “middle-class Elysium”(53) he also knew from billboards and advertisements from his childhood. As a boy he would read Franklin W. Dixon’s stories about the Hardy Boys for the description of their hometown, “a place inexpressibly picturesque, where houses with porch swings and picket fences peeked out on a blue sweep of bay full of sail-boats and skimming launches.”(53) When on the road as a child with his family he would be looking for this town all over the country, unable to find it because his father only took them through places “hot and dusty and full of scrawny dogs, closed-down movie theatres, grubby diners and gas stations that looked as if they would be grateful to get two customers a week.”(54) It bothered him as a child that he could never find this perfect picturesque town, and now that he is old enough to decide on the roads to be taken he sets out to finally find this place.

“But I felt sure that it must exist somewhere. It was inconceivable that a nation so firmly attached to small-town ideals, so dedicated in its fantasies to small-town notions, could not have somewhere built one perfect place – a place of harmony and industry, a place without shopping malls and oceanic parking lots, without factories and drive-in churches, without Kwik-Kraps and Jiffi-Shits and commercial squalor from one end to the other.”(54)

So, this is the place Bryson is looking for. The idyllic, idealistic, innocent little town, “an amalgam of all those towns [he] had encountered in fiction. Indeed, that might well be its name – Amalgam, Ohio, or Amalgam, North Dakota. It could exist almost anywhere, but it had to exist. And on this trip, I intended to find it.”(54)

After having lived in England with his family for almost a decade, Bryson gets the feeling he has neglected his country and his home. Even though he “never felt altogether at home there”(15) it remains his birthplace and more important, it is the place where his father spent all his life, actually liking it there. Nostalgia has taken possession of the middle-aged Bryson and his journey seems like an attempt to relive his childhood adventures with his father. By retracing their vacations Bryson wants to refresh his childhood memories before they start fading, he wants to bring back forgotten moments by visiting the old places of his early days and take one last journey with his father – with Bill Senior this time not in the driver’s seat but in Bryson’s heart.

“On another continent, 4,000 miles away, I became quietly seized with that nostalgia that overcomes you when you have reached the middle of your life and your father has recently died and it dawns on you that when he went he took some of you with him.”(22)

The book is packed with anecdotes from his childhood. “It didn’t occur to me that it was a travel book – it was more of a memoir, about growing up in America and looking at how America had changed and how I had changed in the years since I moved away.”¹⁹⁵ As he goes down memory lane we learn a lot about America in the *Fabulous Fifties*, but even more about his father. Bryson’s true main reason is not the rediscovery of the land he has left behind so many years before, and it is not the search for the perfect small town Amalgam, but it is the urge to “go back to the magic places of [his] youth”, to retrace the journeys he had taken with his father as a child and to one last time spend some road-time with his Dad.(22)

2.2.2. Plot

2.2.2.1. Part One

In the first chapter we meet Bill Bryson, the man who comes from De Moines because “[s]omebody had to.”(11) He introduces us to his home town, to Iowa and Iowans, and we also get to meet his father as he lives in Bryson’s memories. And we learn that he “flew to Des Moines and acquired a sheaf of road maps” and “one September dawn [...] slid behind the wheel of an aging Chevrolet Chevette lent by [his] sainted and trusting mother” and set out to cruise down the empty freeway out of Des Moines.(12)

In the second chapter we accompany Bryson on a nostalgic journey into his childhood memories. “My intention was to retrace the route my father always took to my grandparents’ house in Winfield [...]”(24) But Bryson’s destination is a disastrous disappointment. His grandparents’ house is merely a shack, the barn has been torn down and the whole place is a mess. “I cannot describe the sense of loss. Half my memories were inside that house.”(33) Disillusioned Bryson drives on only to find the little town to be just as neglected as his grandparents’ house.

“It was the first time in my life that I had turned my back on a place knowing that I would never see it again. [...] As I always used to tell Thomas Wolfe, there are three things you just can’t do in life. You can’t beat the phone company, you can’t make a waiter see you until he’s ready to see you, and you can’t go home again.”(34)

¹⁹⁵ Shapiro, p. 134.

Chapter three takes us out of Iowa and into Illinois. Bryson's intention is to go to Missouri but he gets lost and finds himself on a bridge going to Illinois. Bored by Illinois, which "was flat and full of corn", Bryson comes up with an alternative plan of how to get to Missouri.(39) He continues on a road that is completely unsignposted and eventually gets lost even more. "You are left to rely on your own sense of direction to find your way – which in my case, let us not forget, had only recently delivered me to the wrong state."(40) When the highway turns into gravel, Bryson for the first time feels like in the middle of nowhere. By mere luck he makes it off the gravel road onto a paved highway and into the direction of Quincy. A little down the road he finds an uncharming little town where he decides to spend the night in an overpriced room and pays a visit to the town tavern. That night he falls asleep with a six-pack of beer in his belly and a talk show on TV.

In chapter four Bryson finally crosses the Mississippi and arrives in Quincy. He is disappointed by its sight because he remembers it as more majestic. "Missouri looked precisely the same as Illinois, which had looked precisely the same as Iowa."(47) He leaves Quincy behind and stops for breakfast near Palmyra. The place is packed with farmers missing body parts, assumingly due to their work with dangerous machinery. After a short discourse about Iowa's farmers, Bryson drives on to Hannibal to see Mark Twain's boyhood home. The place is disappointing and shabby, with the same vinyl on the floor as in his mother's kitchen. It leaves him without any appetite and he decides to drive back to Illinois.

His destination is "Springfield, the state capital, and New Salem, a restored village where Abraham Lincoln lived as a young man. My dad had taken us there when I was about five and I thought it was wonderful."(52) The two inches between Hannibal and Springfield on the map are misleading and Bryson spends hours driving through "flat farming country and little towns devoid of life".(54) "Springfield was a disappointment," and so Bryson drives on to New Salem, the reconstructed little town where Abraham Lincoln lived from 1831 to 1837.(54) After a short and rather boring visit Bryson spends the night in Carbondale, a town that has lost its heart. He continues the next day driving south and realizes that he has left the Midwest behind and has entered the Bible Belt. He crosses Kentucky and arrives in Tennessee, which is "an odd looking state, shaped like a Dutch brick".(72) There he stops for lunch at a local Burger King. "A girl at the counter said, 'Kin I hep yew?' I had entered another country."(72)

He leaves Tennessee as quickly as he got there, and crosses the state line into Mississippi. His destination is Oxford, the home of William Faulkner, but the museum is closed by the time he gets there so he explores the campus of the University of Mississippi before deciding on impulse to visit Elvis Presley's hometown, Tupelo.

Chapter seven takes us to Elvis's childhood home, which turns out to be a pleasant experience due to the lack of over-merchandising, and after a brief stop Bryson continues to Columbus. On the way he finally sees his first cotton fields, but also many shacks and the poverty among the African American population. Columbus comes as a surprise in Bryson's journey, a splendid little town where racial prejudices seem to have been overcome. Delighted, he crosses into Alabama to visit Selma, a town where "Martin Luther King led hundreds of blacks on forty-mile marches from there to Montgomery, the state capital, to register to vote." (89) The town is shady and captivating, boasting its black heritage. "Altogether, it seemed a much more relaxed atmosphere than in Mississippi." (89) Bryson leaves Selma behind and stops at two college towns which could not be more different. One is Tuskegee, home of America's premier college for blacks, the other is Auburn, a college town for rich, white kids. The first, Tuskegee, is situated in one of the poorest counties of the country, and Bryson is shocked by the fact that almost a third of the inhabitants still does not have indoor plumbing. "Not having running water in the house is something beyond the realms of the imaginable to most Americans." (90) Auburn, on the other hand, is full of rich kids whose "principal concerns seem to be sex and keeping their clothes looking nice." (91) Moreover, the place does not even have a decent bookstore and Bryson wonders how in a town of 20,000 students and 800 to 1,000 professors not a single decent bookstore can be found.

Chapter eight starts with bright early-morning sunshine. Bryson drives through dense pine forests and past holiday cabins before descending into Warm Springs, the town where President Roosevelt died. He stops to visit his cabin, racing a group of senior citizens to the Little White House to avoid having to share the experience with old people who "were noisy and excited, like schoolchildren." (95) They push in front of him at the ticket booth, but he beats them to the white bungalow and enjoys a few quiet minutes looking at Roosevelt's personal effects. Pleased with his early morning experience, Bryson gets on the way to Savannah. "It was a 173-mile

drive of unspeakable tedium across the red-clay plain of Georgia. It took me five hot and unrewarding hours to reach Savannah.”(99) Savannah turns out to be worth every minute of the ride. Impressed by Savannah’s beauty, Bryson drives on to Charleston and is surprised when this town is even more beautiful than Savannah. But he is also a bit saddened because from now on things can only go downhill.

Chapter nine takes us into the Great Smoky Mountains and the most popular national park in the US. There, Bryson has his first encounter with tourists and tourist herds, who block the roads with their mobile homes. There are no commercial activities allowed in the park, but around the park towns like Gatlinburg make up for that. They are a conglomeration of fast food places, wax museums, souvenir stores, mini golf and more fast food places. Despite the tourists, Bryson enjoys Gatlinburg like a child because his father always avoided places like that and rather took the family to educational and – more importantly – free sights.

Chapter ten is a brief excursion into early white American history. Being not far from Jamestowne and Roanoke, Bryson recounts how the first settlers of Virginia mysteriously disappeared and were never to be found again. There are myths, however, that they pushed inland and their offspring is still living in the hills of Appalachia, in form of people referred to as Melungeons. Asked by a friend to do some exploration concerning the Melungeon mystery, Bryson climbs up into the hills and mountains of Tennessee and deep into “real hillbilly country.”(127) But instead of the Melungeons, Bryson encounters poverty, not the kind he saw in the Deep South among the African Americans, but white poverty, which is entirely different. He feels utterly uncomfortable in the hills and leaves Tennessee behind.

His next destination is the Booker T. Washington National Memorial but, ignoring the fact that back roads never cut any distance off your trip but add a couple of hours during which one is lost, he never gets there. He is lost all day and, finally capitulating, finds his way back onto the highway just a few hundred feet from where he left it. The next day seems to be more promising – at least Bryson finds his way to Colonial Williamsburg and its parking lot. He spends the day walking around the reconstructed colonial town and its tourist herds and he notes how lovely American towns could be if they had all just had a little more sense and had restored their historic buildings instead of replacing them with malls. After this town full of “Disneyesque embellishment”(137), Bryson heads for Mount Vernon, the home of George Washington. Finally he has found a place that is more or less

authentic, devoid of entertainment facilities but “genuine, interesting, instructive.”(138) Then it is time to head for the capital.

Chapter twelve is dedicated to Washington D.C. and the childhood memories Bryson has of the town. We learn that it was there he encountered racism for the first time, and also that he saw a man who had been shot dead lying in the street. Now, roughly thirty years later, the world has changed and Washington D.C. seems like a small city to him. He visits the White House - “It’s smaller than you expect. Everybody says that.”(143) – and the museums along the Mall. He mourns the expansion of the Smithsonian and the loss of the attic-like feeling in the Smithsonian castle. He leaves Washington behind crossing the bridge over Chesapeake Bay and is bound for Philadelphia. But he takes his time to explore the charming little towns of the peninsula and comes up with a theory. While local people are constantly complaining that outsiders ruin the peninsula, “it still looked pretty unspoiled [...], and [Bryson’s] guess is that it’s the outsiders who have kept it that way.”(148)

In chapter thirteen it is time for Bryson to visit Philadelphia. For him it is a revisit and he shares his childhood memories of a poor, dirty and dangerous place. Bryson wanders off the freeway in search of a gas station and is immediately back to one of the ghettos he remembers from his childhood. Only this time it is worse. He hurries to make his way out of there and is relieved when he reaches downtown. He strolls around “center city” and visits the historic buildings until, in the late afternoon, he meets up with a friend, at whose home he spends the night. The next day Bryson drives to Gettysburg to take a good look at the countryside – “The battlefield had the great deficiency common to all historic battlefields. It was just countryside.”(160) – and then he moves on to visit the home of Ike and Mamie Eisenhower, which is situated close by.

He truly enjoys his visit and from there heads north to spend some time with his brother and family. It is the weekend and they decide to take a day-trip to Lancaster County, the home of the Amish, the Pennsylvania Dutch and the Mennonites. The county is a tourist magnet, drawing hundreds of thousands of visitors each year, and Bryson does not like the idea of people gawping at other people at all.

The next day Bryson is off to New York City by bus. The idea is to leave the car behind to avoid traffic and parking trouble and spend a day or two in the city. The bus ride turns out to be less than pleasurable and the city itself is more frightening

than enjoyable. For two days Bryson “walked and stared and mumbled in amazement,”(174) tempted to hand out cards saying “‘Thank you for not killing me’.”(173) What is most memorable about his stay in New York, however, are the many homeless people and panhandlers. After all, New York City turns out to be a very lonely place and Bryson is glad when he can head for New England.

In chapter fifteen Bryson explores the southern New England states. He drives across Connecticut which consists more or less of Hartford and its suburbs, explores tiny Rhode Island and on the next day visits Cape Cod. The cape is packed with tourists, and stuck in heavy traffic Bryson makes his way to Provincetown, the place where the Pilgrim Fathers first landed but decided to push inland. Everywhere there is sand and tourists and he gives up his initial plan to visit Hyannis Port, where the Kennedys had their summer home. Before he knows it, Bryson is on the interstate, in Boston, out of Boston and almost in New Hampshire, what he considers “the start of the real New England. Things could only get better.”(187)

In chapter sixteen Bryson explores New Hampshire, Vermont and Maine. But things are not looking as if they are getting any better. The coastal landscape in Maine is dull and he decides to drive inland to the White Mountains. Indian Summer has passed already and the land has the flair of winter. He stops in Littleton along the way, a small picturesque town, but the town is trying too hard to be picturesque and has no charm, and the people are trying too hard to be friendly and seem like aliens. Vermont finally presents itself in the fall colors Bryson has been looking for. The Green Mountains are painted in colors of mustard and rust and the meadows are green. The towns, however, seem poor and shabby until Bryson reaches the town of Stowe, full of “chichi boutiques and expensive ski lodges.”(199) This town also suffers from the same illness the other ones in New England are suffering from. It is simply too perfect and picturesque. “But this looked as if it had been designed in Manhattan and brought in by a truck.”(200)

Bryson’s next stop is Cooperstown, the home of the Baseball Hall of Fame. He spends hours there, savoring every exhibit and longing for the days of his childhood, before his parents threw out his \$8,000-baseballcard-collection. He is even tempted to buy baseball memorabilia, but reconsiders his decision because he doubts his wife would like St Louis Cardinals pillowcases. He continues to Susquehanna Valley with its picturesque scenery and stops on the outskirts of Elmira. He goes out to dinner at a restaurant attached to a bowling alley because all

other places are closed. It turns out he is the only guest and – even worse – the only thing “standing between the waitresses and their going home.”(205) The bad service makes him feel better about not leaving a tip and the experience causes him to add a seventh rule to Bryson’s rules of dining in a strange town, “never go in a restaurant ten minutes before closing time.”(206)

The next day is “a day without even the tiniest of pleasures”.(206) Bryson is driving across Ohio. We learn about Lake Erie and how it was declared dead just twenty-five years before Bryson’s journey. All the large towns around the lake had been pouring their industrial garbage into the lake up to the point where it turned “from a bowl of blue water into a large toilet.”(207) He passes through Cleveland, the worst contaminator, and notes that the city is a “dirty, ugly, boring city” just as its reputation suggests.(208) The drive is boring and the rain is dull and so Bryson decides to switch on the radio “[t]o relieve the tedium”.(209) But the commercials are annoying, the music entertainment is limited to the constant repetition of a song by the Eagles and the news consist of nothing but local events. He happens to catch a few words on Wall Street and that “shares suffered their biggest one-day fall in history” but has to turn to a Canadian radio station to get some more detailed news on the American economy.(212) It is October 19th, 1987. He heads for Dearborn, a suburb of Detroit, to spend the night because he is reluctant to sleep in the city with the highest murder rate in the country.

Dearborn also offers the possibility for Bryson to go back to his childhood. It is the home of the Henry Ford Museum, another place he remembers from a childhood vacation. The museum is not a car museum, as one might suspect, but a collection of “important Americana” Ford gathered during his later years.(214) The collection is housed in a great hangar that is filled with all sorts of machinery and memorabilia of American history. “This was the way the Smithsonian once was and still should be – a cross between an attic and a junk shop.”(215) Delighted, Bryson drives across Michigan and eventually reaches Mackinaw City, a town located on the coast where Lake Michigan and Lake Huron meet.

It is October and most of the places are boarded up. He finds a room at a small motel that is just about to close for the winter and a restaurant and a bar that are still open but empty and spends his evening reading and getting “fairly well lit”.(220) His reason for driving to Mackinaw is his plan to take the ferry to Mackinac Island. His father took him to the island when he was about four and he has fond memories

of the place. There are no cars allowed, so the only way of getting around is by foot or by horse carriage. We learn that the rich people from Chicago and Detroit built their summer homes, or rather residences, on the island and Bryson wanders off through the town to explore the Victorian homes and cottages. The beauty of the place is enhanced by its remoteness and the lack of tourists. Bryson is all by himself on his exploration and he feels like a child again imagining how much fun it would be to explore these homes and drive bicycles around their verandas.

He leaves the island on the afternoon ferry and continues west towards Iowa. But before he reaches home he has to cross Wisconsin, “America’s premier dairy state”.(231) Bryson drives across the pastoral landscape and is about to reach Iowa when he feels the longing for his trip not to be over yet. On impulse he stops at Iowa City to visit an old friend of his, John Horner, pharmacist and family father but in the olden days “one of the most committed drug-takers in the community.”(235) Iowa City is a college town and the place is packed with drunk students celebrating homecoming. The two men in their mid-thirties feel a little out of place in the bar where they meet, and so they retreat to John Horner’s home. They are surprised about the appearance of the young college students, about their behavior and their way of thinking. Bryson and Horner complain that these youngsters are no longer interested in politics and world affairs, are no longer smoking pot and are not radical thinkers like Bryson and Horner used to be. Instead these young people are getting “an *education*” – obviously one that does not require them to concern themselves with politics and environment, and “where the world was going.”(237)

The next morning it is time for Bryson to say good-bye to his friend and finally drive the little more than one hundred miles home to Des Moines. Entering his hometown he notes how wonderful it looks in the morning light and that despite his long absence he still feels at home in the town where his mother drives around with the blinker on and his father is “working his way through eternity”.(18)

2.2.2.2. Part Two

The second part of Bryson’s journey starts one April morning in 1988 and takes him westwards. He plunges around Iowa because he cannot face Nebraska this early in the morning. Everywhere in western Iowa he encounters poor looking little towns with peeling paint and does not find a single thing worth stopping for. So, before he

notices it, he crosses the Missouri river into Nebraska, which he describes as “monotonous” above all.(247) The most exciting thing about Nebraska turns out to be the fact that it is the geographical center of the United States, the last stand if America ever was to be invaded. And with this in mind he leaves the place undefended and drives on to Kansas.

Kansas turns out to be very agreeable. It is a state full of sunshine and prosperous little towns. At Great Bend he stops to look around and the place seems not to have changed since 1965. He feels like on a trip to “The Twilight Zone“, the whole setting is “unreal” and so he gets in the car and out of Great Bend.(250) He is heading west and somewhere between Great Bend and Dodge City the Midwest ends and the West begins. The people are looking different, and Bryson stops in Dodge City to follow the footsteps of Wyatt Earp and Bat Masterson. There, Bryson proudly mentions that Wyatt Earp is actually from Pella, Iowa, a small, charming town he visited early in his journey and has fond childhood memories of.

His next stop in Kansas is Holcomb, “which gained a small notoriety as the scene of the murders described with lavish detail in the Truman Capote book *In Cold Blood*.”(253) Bryson tries to interview some teenagers, but none of them seem to have heard of the book. He ends up talking to a young social sciences teacher who was just as surprised no-one knew the book when he moved to Holcomb eight years earlier. They agree on the fact that this generation of teenagers shows no enthusiasm for learning and some of them cannot even read properly. The only notable thing that remains for Bryson to mention about the West of Kansas is the high number of senior citizen drivers “wearing cowboy hat[s] three sizes too large”.(257)

Chapter twenty-one takes us to Colorado, home of the Rocky Mountains and John Denver. Colorado presents itself as flat and brown and Bryson is disappointed because he expects “snow-tipped” mountains and “waving buttercups” the moment he enters the state.(258) He decides to take Highway 67 north to visit the two old gold-mining towns Victor and Cripple Creek (now, that is a name Bryson could have come up with!) but the highway is a disaster. It is unpaved and only as wide as one car, with boulders hanging off the steep walls of the canyon. A rotten wooden bridge over a deep chasm is the highlight of the day up until the moment Bryson stops the car to clean his windshield. When the car refuses to start up again, Bryson is faced with the possibility of a lonely death in the wilderness. Eventually, the car

cooperates and takes Bryson safely to Victor, once a town of 100,000 inhabitants mining gold, but now a hamlet of a mere thousand. Most of the little antique stores and craft shops are closed and so he decides to drive on to Cripple Creek. There, most stores are open and the whole town is obviously catering to nothing but the needs of tourism.

Pushing on, Bryson drives through lands of “rolling meadows” and “glittering streams”.(262) Finally he gets into sight of the Rockies and decides to take the highway to Aspen to spend the night there. But the road is closed and spontaneously he drives in the direction of New Mexico to visit his niece in Santa Fe. He spends the night in Leadville, a place he has never heard of, and is amazed at how outstanding the town is. “Like Cripple Creek and Victor, it now caters to tourists [...] but it had a much more genuine feel to it.”(263)

The next morning Bryson follows the Continental Divide south via US 285. The landscape is changing again, becoming more and more barren and dry. Towns are rare in this area and roads are unbelievably straight. He leaves Colorado behind and crosses into New Mexico, which turns out to be just as uneventful. Only when he gets onto Highway 64 to Taos does the scenery start to improve. The sky is “vivid and blue, so liquid” but Taos, what Bryson expects to be a little artist colony, turns out to be nothing but a tourist trap.(266) So he drives on to Santa Fe and is pleased to find out that the city has “trees and grass and shade and cool plazas full of flowers and plants”.(267) He spends the next morning with his niece, who shows him around town and takes him to the sights of the city.

When he leaves Santa Fe he has to get on Interstate 40. “This used to be route 66.”(271) But the old route became too narrow to handle all the traffic crossing the continent so it was replaced by I-40. The landscape is “impoverished”, towns are more like “scatterings of trailer homes” and much of this bleak land was given over to Indian reservations. The weather is worsening as Bryson is pushing for Flagstaff, gateway to the Grand Canyon. He passes Gallup and enters Arizona but the storm turns worse and so he has to spend the night in Winslow, fifty miles short of Flagstaff.

Bryson is excited to see the Grand Canyon. When he was a child – “a particularly talkative and obnoxious child”(275) – the sight of the Grand Canyon had silenced even him. Now he is back and excited like a little boy. But the weather is against him. He is working his way through the park and through more and more snow,

stopping at viewpoints but seeing nothing but clouds as dense as white cotton balls. He lingers around the visitors' center, has an overpriced coffee and decides on the spur of the moment to take a stroll half a mile down a path to a look-out point. He is standing there with a middle-aged couple chatting along when suddenly the fog parts and they see they are standing "on the edge of a sheer, giddy drop of at least a thousand feet." (277) For half a minute there is silence along the rim and people are watching the spectacle in amazement. Then, the clouds close in again and it is time for Bryson to continue with his journey.

He heads north into Utah and the colors of the landscape are a welcome diversion after the drabness of Colorado and New Mexico. He drives and drives, noting that "[t]he distances are almost inconceivable." (279) On his way he crosses the Navajo reservation and the area where Hollywood used to shoot its Western movies. After a night in Cedar City he heads for Bryce Canyon but is disappointed when he has the same cotton-ball view he had at Grand Canyon. Alternatively, he decides to drive the forty miles to Zion National Park. There, the weather is brilliant and the park is "incredibly beautiful." (281) Bryson truly enjoys the view of waterfalls, checkerboard mesa and lush vegetation and in the evening continues to St George, a city close to the state line with Nevada.

Chapter twenty-four takes us to Nevada and the city that never sleeps. Bryson's expectations of Vegas are of a nasty town full of crime and prostitution. Upon his arrival he is "dazzled." (286) He does not expect the place to be full of happy vacationers, "ordinary folks like you and me, people who wear a lot of nylon and Velcro," instead of the expected "hookers and high rollers". (286) Bryson checks into a hotel room, easily loses thirty dollars at Caesar's Palace but recoups most of his loss at the all you can eat buffet. Overeaten, he returns to his hotel room to watch the news which are full of crime reports and murder scenes. Las Vegas is becoming too much for him and in the morning he leaves the city on Interstate 15, heading for Los Angeles. For a moment he is tempted to drive into downtown Los Angeles but he decides against it and instead heads north to the fertile San Joaquin Valley.

Bryson wakes up excited because it is the day he finally gets to visit Sequoia National Park. From his early childhood on he has been dreaming of seeing the sequoiadendron giganteum and driving through one of these gigantic trees. But his visit turns out to be a disappointment. There was never a road through General

Sherman - the “tour-thru tree” is in Klamath, CA - and it is not as tall and as fat as he has imagined. Bryson is disappointed to see that Redwood National Park and the tour-thru tree are another 500 miles north and due to the lack of time to go there he continues to Yosemite National Park. “And what a disappointment that proved to be.”(302)

Yosemite is beautiful beyond measure, but mass tourism has spoiled the beauty – beyond measure. Bryson pulls the National Parks Service into pieces and denounces it for its mismanagement. The whole park is hopelessly crowded and it is next to impossible to find one’s way around it. He leaves the park behind and drives on to Sonora just to spend the night in an overpriced motel. He continues north the next morning, driving through rolling hills and little towns where the California Gold Rush took place. Finally, at Jackson, he finds an open passage through the Sierras via Highway 88 and enjoys the pleasant drive through “pine-forested scenery”.(306)

It is time to reenter Nevada. Bryson avoids Tahoe and only zips through Carson City because he cannot stand another town full of casinos and tourists. Bryson pushes on to Silver Springs. “This was more or less the spot where the map used to burst into flames on *Bonanza*.”(308) He drives across Nevada only to realize how empty this state is. There are hardly any towns and the roads are empty as well. He stops at Winnemucca for some coffee and to call his mom and continues to Wells, where he spends the night. He is forced to have a horrible dinner at a truck stop as everything else in town is closed. The next day he finally leaves Nevada behind and enters Idaho, home of the famous potatoes. He is on his way to the Sawtooth Mountains with the famous skiing resort Sun Valley and the town of Ketchum, where Ernest Hemingway spent the last year of his life. The resort is “agreeable” and full of rich people’s homes built in Bavarian style.

Idaho is a big state and it takes Bryson all day to cross it and arrive in Idaho Falls, near the border with Wyoming. Idaho Falls turns out to be “an agreeable little city”.(317) Other than in Wells, he has an excellent dinner at a Chinese restaurant and muses over the fact that Americans tend to assume everybody wants to live in the US rather than anywhere else. The next morning Bryson drives to Wyoming to visit Jackson Hole, “a scenic valley that runs from north to south through the Grand Tetons”.(320) The town of Jackson is a small hamlet in the valley that caters to the rich and beautiful who come during the winter to ski. From there he continues to Grand Teton National Park, which together with Yellowstone National Park forms

“one enormous area of wilderness stretching over a hundred miles from north to south.”(322)

Yellowstone National Park is the oldest national park in the world and Bryson takes his time to explore Geyser Basin with its steams and vents. We learn that herds of buffalo are spread all over the park but Bryson does not get the chance to see a black bear or a grizzly. Bryson witnesses a small eruption of Steamboat Geyser and, stunned, drives on to Mammoth Hot Springs to walk around the visitors’ center and empty his bladder. He has just entered a new state, Montana, and spends the night in Livingston.

Chapter twenty-seven starts with Bryson being torn between driving back to Wyoming to visit the town of Cody, and staying in Montana a little longer to visit the Custer National Battlefield. He opts for the second option and drives to the battlefield. There, Bryson strolls around the visitors’ center and the small museum and we learn about the events of the battle and its outcome. Custer wanted to slaughter the Cheyenne and Sioux men, women and children but they were much more numerous and defeated the General. Bryson walks around the battlefield taking in the views and imagining what it must have been like to die in this remote part of the land.

His journey then takes him through the open spaces of Montana and Bryson is impressed by how big the sky of the Big Sky country actually is. He feels dwarfed. He drives for miles and miles without even passing the smallest hamlet before crossing back into Wyoming. Gradually, the number of dwellings increases until Bryson reaches Buffalo, which is “such a little dumpy town” that he decides to drive on to Gillette to spend the night.(331) But Gillette is even worse and so Bryson ends up in Sundance, a good hundred miles from Buffalo.

Sundance lent its name to Sundance Kid, who had no other affiliation with the town than spending some time there in jail. The town has not much to offer, but the room is OK and he finds a restaurant that looks acceptable. Unfortunately the restaurant is closed for a private event and Bryson has no other choice than stuffing his empty stomach with chocolate bars and potato chips for dinner. Still hungry, he leaves Sundance early in the morning and heads for Devils Tower, “the mountain used by Steven Spielberg in *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*”.(336) Bryson pushes on in search of a lavish Sunday breakfast to fill his stomach after last night’s dinner disaster.

The landscape is changing from ranching country to farming country and he is certain there must be a roadside restaurant soon, because farmers cannot live without them. He passes hamlet after hamlet, but all the towns are still asleep and there is no place to even get coffee. Bryson stops in Deadwood, “a town that, if nothing else, lived up to its first syllable.”(338) The souvenir stores are open but not the cafés and so he decides to drive another forty miles to Mount Rushmore. Finally, he arrives in Keystone, a little town next to Mount Rushmore, consisting of nothing but souvenir stores and a few restaurants that – thank God – are open.

After breakfast, Bryson visits Mount Rushmore. It looks smaller than he expects even though it is actually enormous. After a short but informative visit he continues east across South Dakota, passing by Badland National Park because of the wet and cold weather. He does, however, stop at Wall, the gateway to the National Park, to pay a visit to the most famous drugstore of the West. Signs for Wall Drugstore start well over fifty miles before you reach the town and come every hundred or so yards. Hypnotized, Bryson is drawn to the store, “an awful place, one of the world’s biggest tourist traps,” but he loves it.(342) The place is a wonderful disruption of the boredom that comes from driving across the great plains of South Dakota. The name is misleading, however, because it is neither a single store nor a drugstore, but rather a mini shopping mall with souvenirs of all kinds. And it is also the last souvenir store Bryson will encounter because his journey has almost come to an end.

Chapter twenty-eight takes us across South Dakota. Bryson spends the time flipping through his Mobil guides rather than keeping his eyes on the road because the landscape is unexciting. He stops for the night in a small town called Murdo. The next morning, still in South Dakota, Bryson pushes on and feels a little uneasy due to a tornado warning on the radio. In the afternoon he finally leaves South Dakota behind and passes into Minnesota. He enjoys the views and the landscape of the Midwest. Beyond Worthington, he passes back into Iowa. The fields are lush, the skies are blue and the clouds are white. The whole scene is very picturesque and Bryson sees his home state’s beauty through different eyes.

His last destination is Storm Lake, a small college town, that turns out to be so charming and wonderful it sounds as if he has found Amalgam. He does not want the trip to be over and suddenly he has the wish to see a baseball game. But no team is in the vicinity and so he has no other choice but to leave Storm Lake behind and

drive on to Des Moines. His hometown welcomes him with bright afternoon sunshine. “I could live here, I thought, and turned the car for home. It was the strangest thing, but for the first time in a long time I almost felt serene.”(350)

2.2.3. Critical Explication

The Lost Continent is the account of Bill Bryson’s journey through his home country, written in a first person narrative and in private discourse. Along the way, Bryson not only shares his observations with us, but also his thoughts and his memories, which further confirm the private nature of his discourse. The obvious reason for his journey is the contract for a book about the rediscovery of his home country after having lived in England for over a decade. “A British publisher picked up on the idea of me coming back to America and traveling around the country and that became *The Lost Continent*.”¹⁹⁶ But he also has more private reasons, the death of his father and his longing to retrace the journeys of his childhood tie in nicely with the private discourse.

The book is filled with many different stylistic features that add greatly to the wit of Bryson’s accounts and stories. Apart from the very prominent use of colloquialism and anecdotes, the careful reader will find rhetorical questions, similes and hyperbole but also use of brackets on a structural level.

One of the two most prominent features of Bryson’s writing style is his use of colloquialism. His style is very casual, not only in the short dialogues he shares with us, but also when addressing the reader. This feature creates the impression that we are not so much reading a book but listening to an old friend over a couple of beers, telling us anecdotes about his last vacation. Bryson always includes the reader into his story by directly addressing his audience, asking questions and giving answers to questions forming in the readers’ minds. Talking about Playboy and how “Hugh Hefner has always struck [him] as a kind of an asshole,” Bryson quite nicely sums up Hefner’s life. “Would you want to come downstairs of an evening and find Buddy Hackett, Sammy Davis Jr and Joey Bishop standing around the piano in your living room? Do I hear a chorus of ‘Shit, no’s’ out there?”

Most of the time he calls things by their name and refrains from using euphemisms, but when he does use them it creates a comic effect. We learn about Newport, where “some fine old sea captain’s homes were fighting a losing ballet

¹⁹⁶ Shapiro, p. 134.

with litter and dog shit”(181). And we also hear the story of Bryson’s first visit to Mackinac Island when he was aged four and repeatedly stepping into “horse manure”. There his mother turns out to be a saint, “especially where horse shit is concerned.”(223) Quite often do we find so called four-letter words placed strategically within seemingly objective descriptions as when Bryson wonders how so many bridges, buildings and roads are named after

“some local worthy [...]. Imagine working all your life, clawing your way to the top, putting in long hours, neglecting your family, stabbing people in the back and generally being thought a shit by everyone you came in contact with, just to have a highway bridge over the Tallapoosa River named after you.”(98-99)

Bryson also uses four-letter words to emphasize his point and enforce his opinion about cities and landscapes. In Savannah, a town he finds beautiful and charming, he is annoyed by the architecture of the large hotels and how they spoil the place.

“Massive and made of shaped concrete, it was from the Fuck You school of architecture so favoured by the big American hotel chains. There was nothing about it in scale or appearance even remotely sympathetic to the old buildings around it. It just said, ‘Fuck you, Savannah.’”(102)

Apart from colloquialism, anecdotes make up a large part of the story. Most of the time these anecdotes are stories from Bryson’s childhood and allow us to get to know Bill Bryson, the boy, and the times in which he grew up. He does not hold back with self-deprecation and applies humor and irony whenever possible. When visiting the grandparents’ farm the Bryson children liked to explore an old Victorian mansion in which, in the bedroom - according to Bryson’s older brother -

“lay the shriveled body of the last occupant, a woman who had died of heartbreak after being abandoned at the altar. We never went in there, though once, when I was about four, my brother peered through the keyhole, let out a howl, cried ‘She’s coming!’ and ran headlong down the stairs. Whimpering, I followed, squirting urine at every step.”(30)

Bryson not only makes fun of his young self but also of his mother and father, always, however, in a tone that shows his deep affection for his parents.

“My dad was the most honest man I ever met, but vacations blinded him to his principles. When I had pimples scattered across my face and stubble on my chin he was still swearing at ticket booths that I was eight years old. He was so cheap on vacations that it always surprised me he didn’t make us sift in litter bins for our lunch.”(120)

Very often Bryson uses brackets to add remarks and give the reader the feeling of listening in on his thoughts. When visiting a Ripley’s Believe It or Not Museum he lists all the exhibits.

“And how can you possibly put a price on seeing an eight-foot-long model of the Circus Maximus constructed of sugar cubes, or the death-mask of John Dillinger, or a room made entirely of matchsticks by one Reg Pollard of Manchester, England (well done, Reg; Britain is proud of you)?”(121)

We also hear about Bryson's sister getting car-sick on one of their vacations and how the family had to stop at various places to let her throw up, "including a gas station at Martinsburg where she tumbled out of the car and was lavishly sick in the direction of a pump attendant's ankles (boy did that guy dance!)"(29) And Bryson does not even refrain from mocking a sign in the Bible belt. "A sign in the yard of a church next door said CHRIST IS THE ANSWER. (The question, of course, is: What do you say when you strike your thumb with a hammer?)"(72)

Finally, Bryson also uses brackets to add short comments about the places he visits and sights he inspects, as for example in Santa Fe. "St Francis's Cathedral (very beautiful), the Palace of the Governors (very boring, full of documents about territorial governors) and the famous staircase at the Loretto Chapel."(270) Some of these comments are answers to notional questions of the reader. When visiting the Henry Ford Museum, Bryson notes that the building is full with "the most indescribable assortment of stuff – machinery, railway trains, refrigerators, Abraham Lincoln's rocking chair, the limousine in which John F. Kennedy was killed (nope, no bits of brain on the floor)".(215)

When it comes to the cultural aspects of America, Bryson often uses *pensees* to discuss topics like eating habits, TV, radio, health care or crime. In Wisconsin, he visits an old family friend who is in hospital with ovarian cancer. This visit is the starting point of a lengthy discussion of the American health care system. "Health care in America is now a monolithic industry and it is completely out of control."(229) Bryson compares the American and British system and only then gets back to the account of his journey. "I was supposed to be guiding you across Wisconsin, telling you interesting facts about America's premier dairy state, and instead I go off and make unconstructive remarks about British and American health care. This was unwarranted."(231)

Other ways we learn about American culture are rhetorical questions. In Michigan he stops for a Cornish pasty along the way, something he knows well from England, and digs in because he is starving.

"It was awful. There wasn't anything wrong with it exactly – it was a genuine pasty, accurate in every detail – it was just that after more than a month of eating American junk food it tasted indescribably bland and insipid, liked warmed cardboard. 'Where's the grease?' I thought. 'Where's the melted cheese patty and pan-fried chicken gravy? Where, above all, is the chocolate fudge frosting?' This was just meat and potatoes, just natural unenhanced flavour."(228)

We also hear Bryson wonder how the visit to the home of young Abraham Lincoln had been such a pleasant experience for him as a child but bored the hell out of him as a grown up. His own son “would drop to the ground and start hyperventilating at the discovery that he had spent a day and a half sealed in a car only to come and see a bunch of boring log cabins.”(59) So, what has changed? What was it that had fascinated him about the place as a small boy? “Were childhoods so boring back then?”(59)

One of Bryson’s strategies to add humor is the paraphrasing of signs he encounters.

“The giant General Sherman is not only the biggest tree in the world, but also the biggest living thing. It is at least 2,500 years old, and thus also one of the oldest living things. Even so, it is surprisingly boring, isn’t it? That is because it isn’t all that tall and all that fat. [...] Incidentally, we’ve erected a fence around the base of the tree to keep you well back from it and intensify your disappointment. As if that were not enough, there is a party of noisy young Germans coming up the path behind you. Isn’t life shitty?”

As you will appreciate, this is somewhat paraphrased, but that was the gist of it.”(301)

This sign is by no means the only one he paraphrases. Mississippi welcomes him with a sign that says “WELCOME TO MISSISSIPPI. WE SHOOT TO KILL.”(73) and on the fringe of his hometown Des Moines stands a sign with the words “WELCOME TO DES MOINES. THIS IS WHAT DEATH IS LIKE.”(11) The welcome sign in Illinois is particularly memorable to Bryson because it contains a punctuation error. So when he reenters Illinois, it welcomes him back with the words “BUCKLE UP. ITS THE LAW IN ILLINOIS. Just beyond it another said AND WE STILL CAN’T PUNCTUATE.”(51) It is pretty obvious that these signs are products of Bryson’s imagination, but many times when he quotes these fictitious signs he adds a remark to clarify he made them up. “There isn’t really. I just made that up.”(11) But the point is, that with these very few words, Bryson gets across his impressions and perception of a place, not only effectively but also efficiently. And above that, these signs are certainly more entertaining than the original ones, as in the case of the historic marker of which Bryson says, “What am I saying? They were never as good as that.”(130)

“For centuries this land, known as the Valley of the Singing Trees, was a sacred burial site for the Blackbutt Indians. In recognition of this the US Government gave the land to the tribe in perpetuity in 1880. However, in 1882, oil was discovered beneath the singing trees and, after a series of skirmishes in which 27,413 Blackbutts perished, the tribe was relocated to a reservation at Cyanide Springs, New Mexico.”(130)

Bryson also paraphrases and invents place names and the names of stores. When he talks about “Kwik-Kraps and Jiffi-Shits”(54) and the “Fuck You school of architecture”(102) we need no further explanation of what Bryson thinks of these places. Especially powerful are the fictitious names of cities he mentions, turning these places into stereotypes and making them all interchangeable. “Fudd County”(26) and “Fuddville”(55) make clear what Bryson thinks of small Midwestern towns, “Dullard”(41) leaves no doubt about its lack of charm, “Spigot or Urinal” become the prototypical “six-house town” in Iowa and the places he remembers from his childhood vacations, from hours and hours in the back of a car in the middle of nowhere, receive names like “Draino, Indiana, or Tapwater, Missouri”(21), “Dog Water or Duncceville”(13). Bryson calls these places “towns with nowhere names like Coleslaw, Indiana, Dead Squaw, Oklahoma, Frigid, Minnesota, Dry Heaves, New Mexico, Colostomy, Montana.”(84) Many of these names are one-word references, even characterizations, of their states, for example Minnesota being known for its cold winters, New Mexico being particularly dry and Oklahoma, formed from government-sanctioned Indian territory.

Often Bryson turns to exaggeration to emphasize his point and entertain. “When I’m being comical I’ll take an awful lot of license. I make no secret of it – I think the reader can tell that I’m exaggerating for comic effect.”¹⁹⁷ When driving through Ohio in a state of utter boredom, he switches on the radio of which we learned earlier that it is “designed for people who have already lost their minds.”(60) He has been switching the radio on and off all day. “Unless you have lived through it, you cannot conceive of the sense of hopelessness that comes with hearing *Hotel California* by the Eagles for the fourteenth time in three hours. You can feel your brain cells disappearing with little popping sounds.”(209) We can doubt he actually heard the song fourteen times, but even hearing the same song twice within an hour and on different radio stations can sometimes feel like fourteen times; and that is exactly the point Bryson wants to make.

When talking about his fellow Americans, Bryson turns to character sketches and descriptions which are often reproductions of clichés and stereotypes. We learn that all Iowa men wear baseball caps, all Iowa women are massively overweight and that they have a “geographical obsession” coming from the lack of landmarks in Iowa.(25) The state trooper in Mississippi is characterized as a “dangerously stupid

¹⁹⁷ Shapiro, p. 139.

person [with] a gun and a squad car,” and from Bryson’s description we can tell that this is not an uncommon combination in America.(75) “He was sweaty and overweight and sat low in his seat. I assume he was descended from the apes like all the rest of us, but clearly in his case it had been a fairly gentle slope.”(75)

When describing people, Bryson also falls back on stylistic features such as similes. The choice of words in these similes caters to the humorous description, sometimes naïvely and sounding as if coming from a child. This does not surprise as many similes appear in anecdotes that recount the impressions of Bill Bryson, the boy. The women in his father’s men’s magazines had “breasts like deflated footballs”(79) and the service man at a Tennessee gas station has “an abundance of fleshy warts [...] scattered across his face like button mushrooms.”(125) Bryson also applies similes in his description of landscape. “By five the sun had dropped out of the clouds and was slotting into the distant hills, like a coin going into a piggy bank.”(232) At the Grand Canyon snow and fog are blocking the view, but for a few moments something miraculous happens. “The fog parted. It just silently drew back, like a set of theatre curtains being opened”.(277)

Bryson’s story of his search for the perfect American small town is organized into two parts, the first one describing his journey to the East and South, the second part the journey to the West. With Des Moines as a starting point, the book actually recounts two separate journeys about half a year apart. The story is separated into twenty-eight chapters of approximately ten to fifteen pages each, with the first nineteen chapters covering the East, and the last nine covering the journey to the West.

The story is organized along the route Bryson takes, which is partly determined by his point of origin. As his starting point is situated in the heart of the United States Bryson opts for two separate journeys, exploring the two halves, rather than a coast-to-coast round trip. The route is additionally influenced by Bryson’s travels as a child and often follows the traces of routes his father chose.

Various red threads are running through the whole book. One is, as mentioned above, the retracing of earlier journeys. Another one is the search for the perfect American small town Bryson has decided to name Amalgam. He travels back roads and remote corners to look for the town he knows only from fiction. Early in the journey, however, he realizes that Amalgam does not exist and he starts building it in his imagination, collecting bits and pieces, buildings and streets, names and

newspapers from the different towns he encounters. But Amalgam becomes less and less important the longer the journey lasts.

In general, it can be said that Bryson's style, though very diverse, is strongly shaped by humor, and most of the stylistic features applied add to the funny and ironic tone of the book. The text is rich with anecdotes from his childhood, and in parts of the book these anecdotes become so dominant that the actual journey seems like a mere background for his childhood memories. The anecdotes add a second level to the physical journey, and his similes and choice of words often let Bill Bryson, the boy, seep through. His colloquial style generates an instant connection between him and the reader, giving the latter the feeling of listening to a friend rather than reading a travelogue.

3. AMERICA AND AMERICANS

3.1. AMERICANS

3.1.1. *John Steinbeck's Americans*

3.1.1.1. Generalities

Throughout *Travels with Charley*, Steinbeck offers what he calls “generalities.”(95) These are observations he believes are universally true and can be applied to most Americans and most of America. Like many writers who “find themselves floundering in generalities,”(228) he is no exception, but we must not forget that they are *his* generalities, not universally appropriate truths but conclusions drawn from his own observations, depending also on his emotional state. These generalities are his perception of a vast country and the people inhabiting it.

A major recurring theme in his generalities is wanderlust and restlessness. Early in *Travels with Charley* he introduces his theory: “Nearly every American hungers to move.”(10) He wonders if this longing for motion might be innate to the American character. It seems that wherever he goes he encounters people with a longing in their looks that they could join him. “I saw in their eyes something I was to see over and over in every part of the nation – burning desire to go, to move, to get under way, anyplace, away from any Here.”(10) One small boy offers Steinbeck to “wash all the dishes, and do all the work”(11) if only he could come, and after visiting his son’s school Steinbeck “stopped to make sure there were no stowaways”(27).

Another generality Steinbeck comes up with is America becoming a big country void of individualism, a hodgepodge that has lost any of its regional character traits. “Localness is not gone but it is going.”(107) What worries him most here, naturally as a writer, is the change in language.

“One of my purposes was to listen, to hear speech, accent, speech rhythms, overtones and emphasis. For speech is so much more than words and sentences. I did listen everywhere. It seemed to me that regional speech is in the process of disappearing, not gone but going.”(106)

He is worried about radio and TV English replacing the charming accents of his country. Only in Montana does he hear what he has been longing for. But he is also relieved that he hears anything at all. His journey in the east was not very promising when it came to talking and listening to people.

"I don't think for a second that the people I had seen and talked to in New England were either unfriendly or discourteous, but they spoke tersely and usually waited for the newcomer to open communication. Almost on crossing the Ohio line it seemed to me that people were more open and outgoing."(105)

Steinbeck's hopes rest on the truckers he meets early in his journey. These people travel the continent, they are constantly on the road and must see and hear many things on their way, in diners, in rest areas, on local radio stations. But it turns out that these men's journeys are confined to the world of the super highway. They do not see or hear anything other than what is happening on the road with the exception of the radio. "The men had little commerce with local people, but being avid radio listeners they could report news and politics from all parts of the nation."(92)

There is also Steinbeck's theory on the lack of "guts". In regard to this generality Steinbeck continuously complains that people have no political opinions, are not aware of the historic election ahead of them, and the growing threat of the Cold War. "'If anywhere in your travels you come on a man with guts, mark the place. I want to go to see him. I haven't seen anything but cowardice and expediency.'"(168)"And it is true I didn't hear many convictions."(169)

But what seems to bother him most is the feeling of not seeing and not hearing. "What was I doing wrong? Was it going as I wished? Before I left, I was briefed, instructed, directed, and brain-washed by many of my friends." (168) "I sat on the bed and stared in to gray dreariness. Why had I thought I could learn anything about the land? For the last hundreds of miles I had avoided people."(222) He is frustrated and muses over the use of his journey if he does not see and hear. The country seems to refuse to talk to him. But in the end he accepts the facts and moves on to complete his journey. It turns out the country has spoken to him but he was so focused on listening that he didn't hear. "Maybe understanding is only possible after."(109)

Over the course of his trip Steinbeck encounters a variety of people he dedicates some attention to. Several out of these are worth mentioning here as Steinbeck dedicates more than just a few lines to them. We can assume that Steinbeck chose these characters as – from his point of view - typical representatives of the American character. However, Robert Hughes quotes the *New York Times Book Review* that said of *Travels with Charley*:

“This is a book about Steinbeck’s America and for all the fascination of the volume, that America is hardly coincident with the United States in the Sixties.”¹⁹⁸

Steinbeck does not claim to have found and described the prototypical American citizen. On the contrary, he admits that “[...] there are too many realities. What I set down here is true until someone else passes that way and rearranges the world in his own style. [...] For this reason I cannot comment this account as an America that you will find.”(76-77)

3.1.1.2. The Sailor

At the very beginning of the journey Steinbeck meets a young sailor on leave serving on a submarine. Before he starts talking to the young man Steinbeck is standing on deck, enjoying the view until “a submarine slipped to the surface half a mile away, and the day lost part of its brightness.”(21) Steinbeck, who had lived through both World Wars - having experienced one first hand – the Korean War, and the Vietnam War that had just started a year before, could not find any beauty in the submarines. “I wish I could like submarines, for then I might find them beautiful, but they are designed for destruction, and while they may explore and chart the sea bottom, and draw new trade lines under the Arctic ice, their main purpose is threat.”(21)

In the course of Steinbeck’s chat with the sailor the latter keeps mentioning what a great future submarines offer, but the only future Steinbeck sees is destruction. With the country in the middle of the Cold War and atomic weapons being built into submarines Steinbeck doubts the bright future the sailor sees in his profession. “[...] [S]ubmarines are armed with mass murder, our silly, only way of deterring mass murder.”(21)

The sailor represents a new generation, one that has not experienced the cruelties of war, the destruction and has not seen “burned men pulled from the oil-slicked sea.”(21) This new generation is only able to see the present and the future, with good pay and “all kinds of – future”, but what this future exactly is going to be not even the sailor is able to answer. “Nice thing about it is if there’s a storm you can submerge, and it’s quiet. Sleep like a baby and all hell busting loose up above,”(23) the sailor notes. For the innocent youngster the storm is merely a meteorological phenomenon, but for the experienced Steinbeck this storm symbolizes the next

¹⁹⁸ Hughes, p. 79.

World War his country was heading for. “And could be he’s right and I’m wrong. It’s his world, not mine any more. There’s no anger in his delphinium eyes and no fear and no hatred either, so maybe it’s all right. It’s just a job with good pay and a future.”(23) The alienation between Steinbeck and his home country, the one he is trying to overcome, seems larger than ever in this encounter with the sailor. “I must not put my memories and my fear on him. Maybe it won’t be true again, but that’s his lookout. It’s his world now. Perhaps he understands things I will never learn.”(23) The young man is a symbol of the new country, he is representing the new America Steinbeck is trying to find and to understand. But we hear doubt in Steinbeck’s words. It is a new world Steinbeck finds himself in and the issues of the Cold War would come up again in the course of his journey.

3.1.1.3. The Farmer

In the White Mountains Steinbeck asks for permission to camp on a farmer’s lands and invites him in for coffee. “The farmer was a spare man, with what we think of as a Yankee face and the flat vowels we consider Yankee pronunciation.”(28)

It is October 10, 1960, the day when Krushchev was at the United Nations, took off his shoe and pounded the table. They discuss the upcoming presidential elections and how nobody in the country seems to have an opinion. It was an historic election, Alaska and Hawaii being included in the election for the first time, and Richard Nixon running against a young Catholic named John F. Kennedy. But people were silent. “‘People aren’t talking. I think this might be the secretest election we ever had. People just won’t put out an opinion.’ [...] And that’s what I found all over the country – no arguments, no discussion.”(31)

Again the Cold War between the United States and the USSR becomes a topic. Other than the sailor, a representative of the young generation, the farmer is skeptical about the ongoing events. “‘Seems to me we’re always defending ourselves.’[...] ‘I think we should at least take the ball sometimes.’”(31) To him the future seems not as bright, suggesting that the people do not have opinions because they do not know what to do, do not know what might happen.

“‘Nobody knows. What good’s an opinion if you don’t know? My grandfather knew the number of whiskers in the Almighty’s beard. I don’t even know what happened yesterday, let alone tomorrow.[...] We’ve got nothing to go on – got no way to think about things.’”(32)

These words stay with Steinbeck and keep him up all night. “The conversation of the farmer stayed with me – a thoughtful, articulate man he was. I couldn’t hope to find many like him.”(32) Steinbeck’s thoughts keep wandering and he notes how fast mankind has developed in the past hundred years, how many innovations and inventions have been made and at what speed. In regard to the atomic threat he draws a parallel to the earliest days of mankind.

“Humans had perhaps a million years to get used to fire as a thing and as an idea. Between the time a man got his fingers burned on a lightning-struck tree until another man carried some inside a cave and found it kept him warm, maybe a hundred thousand years, and from there to the blast furnaces of Detroit – how long?”(32-33)

Steinbeck paints a picture of a world out of control, mankind out of control, and a danger way greater than fire.

“And now a force was in hand how much more strong, and we hadn’t had the time to develop the means to think, for man has to have feelings then words before he can come close to thought and, in the past at least, that has taken a long time.”(33)

Not only the Americans, but mankind is developing too fast. The speed with which mankind is discovering, developing and destroying is too fast for an old man to grasp, and he is afraid it will be too fast for the planet as well.

3.1.1.4. The Waitress

In his Bangor hotel, Maine, Steinbeck enters a world of plastic. But also the small restaurant where he goes for dinner is part of the artificial and sterile world. Unsurprisingly “[i]t was all plastic too – the table linen, the butter dish. The sugar and crackers were wrapped in cellophane. [...] Even the waitress wore a sponge-off apron.”(45-46)

It is this waitress that gets to Steinbeck, in a very negative way. “She wasn’t happy, but then she wasn’t unhappy. She wasn’t anything.”(46) Traveling in a country without opinions, Steinbeck encounters another form of nothingness: a woman without joy and without anger, without happiness and without sadness, a hull without emotions, thoughts or dreams. This woman seems to be made of plastic just like her surroundings. Steinbeck tries to contradict his observation and starts a conversation with her. He fails.

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

She seems like the country Steinbeck has encountered so far. The waitress is a product of her time and country, a country void of opinions which at this stage of the journey still seems like an empty hull to Steinbeck. “There has to be something inside, if only to keep the skin from collapsing.”(46) What if there is not enough inside the country to keep it from collapsing?

With the Russians, according to the farmer, taking “the ball” (31), the people not uttering, or maybe even worse, not having a political opinion, and the atomic bomb ready for use before mankind has had time to get used to the idea of this sort of fire, Steinbeck is afraid of an imminent atomic war, aware of the threat of communism and worried about the future of his country.

3.1.1.5. The Actor

The actor Steinbeck meets in North Dakota is difficult to place between fact and fiction. However, too many parallels between him and Steinbeck suggest that he is at least strongly altered by Steinbeck’s imagination in a way that makes it possible to deal with his own role as an aging writer. Their conversation brings to light analogies in their lives, and enables to Steinbeck to comment on his own life without actually having to comment on himself.

The parallels start in the way of traveling. The actor pulls up next to Steinbeck’s spot in “a vintage sedan pulling a short coupled trailer” and causes Steinbeck to feel “annoyance at this invasion of [his] privacy.”(144) After they both attend to their daily duties, successfully ignoring the other, they both finally decide it is time to speak to the neighbor. The close resemblance of their style, clothing and beard is another parallel between the two.

“I saw a man, not young, not old, but with a jaunty springy step. He was dressed in olive-drab trousers and a leather jacket, and he wore a cowboy hat but with a flat crown and the brim curled and held to a peak by the chin strap. He had a classic profile, and even in the distance I could see that he wore a beard that tied into his sideburns and so found his hair.” (145)

Just when Steinbeck decides to speak to the stranger, the latter approaches him. “He moved with a strange gait reminiscent to me of something I couldn’t place.”(145) Steinbeck’s careful choice of words suggests that the stranger reminds him of himself, something strangely familiar in a stranger, something known in an unknown person, *the other* showing resemblance to the self. Sitting down in *Rocinante* Steinbeck realizes that the stranger is not as young as he had assumed,

“his movements were pure youth but there was that about his skin texture and edges of his lips that was middle-aged or past it.”

Steinbeck tries to drown the initial conversation about his time writing for the theater, his “flops”, by offering coffee and whiskey. Even though the topic of flops is dropped, a reaction to the mentioning of flops on the side of the actor cannot be denied. “It seemed to me a mist of tears came into his eyes, but it might be that they were mine.”(146)

The undertone of their conversation is strongly influenced by a certain nostalgia for the days when they were younger, more successful and their lives were still ahead of them. After having given the initial prompt for their conversation, Steinbeck retreats and becomes the audience. Spellbound he listens to the actor’s stories, eager to ask questions and learn more. But the actor is selective about what he recounts and towards the end of their conversation speaks the probably most important words between the two. “I learned long ago that the most important and valuable of acting techniques is the exit.”

At the very beginning of *Travels with Charley* we read very similar words by Steinbeck himself that echo in this scene. “I see too many men delay their exits with a sickly, slow reluctance to leave the stage. It’s bad theatre as well as bad living.”(20)

Steinbeck is talking about his own career which – even though he has the Nobel Price still ahead of him – lies behind him. *Travels with Charley* will be his last novel, only followed by a collection of essays in *America and Americans*. Considering the words of Thom Steinbeck that his father knew he was dying and went out to say goodbye to his country, it is probable that Steinbeck, expecting his death rather sooner than later, wrote *Travels with Charley* assuming it would be his last book and therefore his exit. But the actor gives Steinbeck the advice to keep asking questions and “exit clean and sharp.”(151) His advice can be understood as a reflection of Steinbeck’s will not to give up but continue on the journey of life and on the search for himself, the search for the man he once was and to find the man he has become.

Steinbeck is surprised by the abrupt end of their conversation and the fact that the actor is not willing to reveal any more information about himself. But one last question does not remain unanswered.

“What does the dog do?”

'Oh, a couple of silly tricks,' he said. 'He keeps the performance simple. He picks it up when it goes stale.' And he continued on to his home." (151)

The obvious parallel here is the actor as well as Steinbeck traveling with a canine companion who seems to have the same function in both cases, adding some light humor to the otherwise melancholic story of an aging man, lost in his life and trying to keep up his career. Charley's "ftt" commentaries throughout the book, his way to deal with strangers and his noble French character traits serve as little interruptions. Robert Hughes suggests three major roles Charley plays in the course of Steinbeck's journey. First, the French poodle "functions as a social ambassador, helping Steinbeck to establish contact with strangers who will subsequently become the subjects of his book."¹⁹⁹ Second, Charley serves as Steinbeck's dialogue partner and gives him an opportunity to talk about his impressions and view of the United States. And last but not least, Charley functions "as an example of a living creature who is both reasonable and sane."²⁰⁰

Joseph Dewey calls the actor a "critical allegorical figure"²⁰¹. No matter to what degree he is right, to what degree the actor actually existed in reality or only in Steinbeck's mind, he is a tool for Steinbeck to shine some light onto himself. Some have argued that this is as close as we would ever get to autobiographical insights into Steinbeck's life and while it remains to be discussed how much of a typical American character Steinbeck was, it is evident that the actor enabled Steinbeck to recount his perception and perspectives on John Steinbeck, writer and part of American culture.

3.1.1.6. The Hairdresser

Along the way, close to Spokane, Steinbeck stops for the night

"in a little put-together, do-it-yourself group of cabins, square boxes, each with a stoop, a door, and one window [...]. The small combined store, repair shop, and lunch room behind the gas pumps was as unprepossessing as any I have ever seen." (170)

Steinbeck and Charley have not only moved west, but also back in time. Electricity comes from a generator which is turned off at night, the definition of a bath is warm water in a "crusted galvanized bucket" and the lunch room seems to

¹⁹⁹ Hughes, Robert S.. "*Steinbeck's Travels with Charley and America and Americans: ,We have never slipped back – never.*" "Steinbeck Review. Volume 20: Number 2, Spring 1975. p.78

²⁰⁰ Hughes, p. 79.

²⁰¹ Dewey, p. 24.

call out “‘We don’t look in your mouth. Don’t look in our kitchen.’”(170-172) The obsession with plastic and sterility he encountered in the East has not yet

reached the outposts of Idaho. Here the toilet seats would not be sterilized, “there would be no cellophane on the food here”(170) and waitresses would for sure not be made of plastic.

There, Steinbeck encounters a young man who does not fit into this world.

“There was a knock on the door, and I admitted a young man of about twenty, dressed in gray flannel slacks, two-tone shoes, a polka-dotted ascot, and a blazer with the badge of a Spokane high school. His dark, shining hair was a masterpiece of overcombing, the top hair laid back and criss-crossed with long side strand that just cleared the ears. He was a shock to me after the ogre of the lunch counter.”(171)

It turns out there is a reason for the young man’s perfectly styled hair: he wants to become a hairdresser and has even taken a class. His father, who likes nothing but “fishing and hunting and drinking”, is less than pleased with his son’s choice of profession. But the young man, ambitious and interested in theater and music wins Steinbeck’s sympathies when he mentions he is subscribing to *The New Yorker* and *Time* magazine.

Out here, in the middle of nowhere between Idaho and Washington State, there is a young man who is not afraid to stand up to his father and to live a totally unfitting life in the latter’s eyes. Could it be that Steinbeck has finally found a man with guts, a man with an opinion not afraid to utter it? Steinbeck, amazed by this courage and the hunger to “get ahead in the world”(172), comes up with a very impressive theory about the hairdresser being the most influential man in a woman’s life. He argues so well that “Papa”(174) is almost speechless. With a few well chosen words Steinbeck manages to overthrow the father’s set opinion and gives the son a little help on the way to fulfilling his dreams.

3.1.1.7. The Veterinarians

Due to Charley dog’s recurring prostatitis, Steinbeck is forced to see two veterinarians, who could not be more different.

The first doctor is an elderly man, “pushing his luck”(178), who is obviously an alcoholic. He shows the greatest amount of indifference and lack of interest. “‘Look here. He’s an old dog. Old dogs get aches and pains. That’s just the way it is.’”(178) Steinbeck is not content with this answer. He is a fighter and so is Charley, and giving up and accepting one’s age, that is, capitulating, is just not an option.

It seems, however, that the veterinarian has done exactly that. He has given up, and has lost his will to make his life worth living. He is reluctant to give Steinbeck some medication for Charley, because he is an old dog. In his opinion age does not entitle one to sufficient medical treatment. "It wasn't that this veterinary didn't like animals. I think he didn't like himself, and when that is so the subject usually must find an area for dislike outside himself. Else he would have to admit his self-contempt."(179)

And Charley knows, too. Earlier we learn that Charley "dislikes neurotics and [...] detests drunks"(41), so the "mind-reading dog"(12) "knew about the man [...] and perhaps the doctor knew he knew. And maybe that was the man's trouble. It would be very painful to know that your patients had no faith in you."(179) Steinbeck knows about the matter of faith. Having recently suffered from a heart disease, he had to convince friends and families to have faith in him, to let him go on this journey, on his quest.

When Charley's prostatitis returns in Texas, Steinbeck has to see a veterinarian in Amarillo. "I remembered the poor incompetent veterinary in the Northwest, who did not know and did not care. And I remembered how Charley had looked at him with pained wonder and contempt."(234) Their experience in Texas will be different. In Amarillo, in the Lone Star State, Steinbeck finds a Lone Star among veterinarians. "Then the young vet's hands went down and moved over hips and distended abdomen – trained and knowing hands. Charley sighed a great sigh and his tail wagged slowly up from the floor and down again. Charley put himself in this man's care, completely confident." (235) We know that Charley does not like to be touched by strangers (110), but this is a competent man who knows what he is doing. He treats the "little old boy"(235) well and Charley is content with his treatment. "He feels that he is a first-rate dog and has no wish to be a second-rate human."(179) Charley stays with the veterinarian for four days and returns completely well. This positive experience adds to the positive picture Steinbeck paints of Texas. "There's absolutely nothing to take the place of a good man."(235) And the young veterinarian will remain one of the few good men Steinbeck meets.

3.1.1.8. The Cheerleaders

"I faced the South with dread. Here, I knew, were pain and confusion and all the manic results of bewilderment and fear. "(244-245) But Steinbeck has no other choice than driving through the South and he admits that he is drawn to witness the

racist show of the Cheerleaders, as such behavior is beyond his comprehension. When it comes to discussions concerning race between friends of his, he remains an outsider. "I have seen and felt them go into a room of experience into which I cannot enter."(245) His own experiences growing up have left him without any color prejudices and "unfitted to take sides in the racial conflict. I must admit that cruelty and force exerted against weakness turn me sick with rage, but this would be equally true in the treatment of any weak by any strong."(247) As a young man he is ill-prepared "for the great world" and he remembers his first contact with racism. "When I heard, for example, that Negroes were an inferior race, I thought the authority was misinformed."(246) Racism is a construct that is simply beyond the grasp of Steinbeck as a child and still as an elderly man. To emphasize his standpoint Steinbeck draws parallels to Charley dog.

"Once Charley fell in love with a dachshund, a romance racially unsuitable, physically ridiculous, and mechanically impossible. But all these problems Charley ignored. [...] It would be difficult to explain to a dog the good and moral purpose of a thousand humans gathered to curse one tiny human. I've seen a look in dogs' eyes, a quickly vanishing look of amazed contempt, and I am convinced that basically dogs think humans are nuts."(269)

In this discourse about race and racism Steinbeck introduces the Coopers, an African-American family he grew up with in Salinas. From his account we can draw a picture of a perfectly integrated African-American family in an all-white 1920s California small town. Steinbeck argues that

"[b]ecause they were not hurt or insulted, they were not defensive or combative. Because their dignity was intact, they had no need to be overbearing, and because the Cooper boys had never heard that they were inferior, their minds could grow to their true limits."(247)

If we follow his argument, any prejudices against African-Americans that are proven to be true are a product of white suppression, caused by constant maltreatment. "I have seen Negro children who really cannot learn, particularly those who in their gelatin place of babyness have been told that they were inferior."(247) For Steinbeck the roots of racism, suppression and "violence set loose by the desegregation movements" lie in the school system, "because it seems to [him] that the blight can disappear only when there are millions of Coopers."(248)

Steinbeck also introduces the idea of "Equal but Separate" in his account as it was explained to him by a Southern friend. In this theory African-Americans are provided with everything that is available to white Americans, but separated from them. Because all these commodities for the African-Americans had to be built

from scratch, they would be better and superior. In other cultures this theory is well known as Apartheid. Steinbeck counters this idea with his own theory, which he does not only present in *Travels with Charley*, but also in an untitled piece probably written in early 1960.²⁰² “Now wouldn’t you think they would be satisfied with that?”, Steinbeck’s friend asks. Steinbeck’s solution is simple. “I said, ‘Maybe it’s a matter of ignorance. You could solve it and really put them in their places if you switched schools and toilets. The moment they realized that your schools weren’t as good as theirs, they would realize their error.’”(248)

So, despite his “failings as a racist”, Steinbeck heads for New Orleans to witness the spectacle newspapers have been writing about so vigorously.

“This strange drama seemed so improbable that I felt I had to see it. [...] The show opened on time. Sound of sirens. Motorcycle cops. Then two big black cars filled with big men in blond felt hats pulled up in front of the school. The crowd seemed to hold its breath. Four big marshals got out of each car and from somewhere in the automobiles they extracted the littlest Negro girl you every saw, dressed in shining starchy white, with new white shoes on feet so little they were almost round. Her face and little legs were very black against the white.”(249-250)

The Cheerleaders shouted obscenities and insults at the little girl as she was escorted into the building. It is finally here, in New Orleans, that Steinbeck seems to have found what he had been looking for throughout the journey: people with an opinion, people with “a conviction, an idea, or an opinion in the unpopular field.”(169) But what he finds makes him sick. “My body churned with weary nausea, but I could not let an illness blind me after I had come so far to look and hear.”(259)

Overwhelmed by the situation, Steinbeck analyzes the cheerleaders and their chants.

“There was something far worse here than dirt, a kind of frightening witches’ Sabbath. Here was not spontaneous cry of anger, of insane rage. Perhaps that is what made me sick with weary nausea. Here was no principle good or bad, no direction. These blowzy women with their little hats and clippings hungered for attention. They wanted to be admired.”(258)

After all, that these women are not what he had been looking for, although they had seemed like the courageous persons he had been searching for at first glance. But at a second glance their motives were different. “They simpered in happy, almost innocent triumph when they were applauded. Theirs was the demented

²⁰² Steinbeck, John: Untitled Piece. Project Muse:
http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/steinbeck_studies/v015/15.1steinbeck02.html

cruelty of egocentric children, and somehow this made their insensate beastliness much more heartbreaking.”(258)

However, the cruelty toward the little girl is “not the big show.”(257) What really upsets the Cheerleaders is “the white man who dared to bring his white child to school. [...] This is what they had come to see and hear.”(257) It is not a little black girl attending a white school that upset the public, it is a white man who does not care.

“And here he came along the guarded walk, a tall man dressed in light gray, leading his frightened child by the hand. His body was tensed as a strong leaf spring drawn to the breaking strain; his face was grave and gray, and his eyes were on the ground immediately ahead of him.”(257)

The white man who refused to comply with segregation, who saw no disadvantage for his child to be taught together with an African-American girl, to play with her and grow up with her, is the true enemy. He is the personification of Steinbeck’s childhood, a childhood without racial prejudices but instead with friends like the Cooper boys.

This is the spot Steinbeck should have marked. “If anywhere in your travels you come on a man with guts, mark the place,” a friend had told him. Steinbeck has found what he has been looking for throughout the country. He has found a “gray” man, someone caught between black and white, who reacts against the strict borders of segregation. He has finally encountered a man who has the guts to not only utter, but to live his opinion, to have “a conviction, an idea, or an opinion in the unpopular field.”(169)

3.1.1.9. The Enlightened Southerner

Steinbeck is disappointed by his visit to New Orleans. It is not the city he knew in his youth, and he does not see any of the fine people he knows that live there. What he encounters, what is broadcasted out into the world, is not the picture he would have liked to paint of the city. “But where were the others – the ones who would be proud they were of a species with the gray man – the ones whose arms would ache to gather up the small, scared black mite? I don’t know where they were.”(259) What Steinbeck does not know is that he is about to encounter one of them.

On the flight from the cheerleaders, Steinbeck finds a pleasant resting place and stops to contemplate and eat his sandwich. Charley, who was spared the show, keeps close to Steinbeck and presses against his knee as he always does when Steinbeck is ill.

"I lost track of time, but a while after the sun had passed top a man came walking and we exchanged good afternoons. He was a neatly dressed man well along in years, with a Greco face and fine wind-lifted white hair and a clipped white mustache."(261)

Quickly their chat turns to the Cheerleaders. Steinbeck sees "a weight and a darkness" fall on the man upon his mentioning of the Cheerleaders, and he is eager to learn more. "Would you have another cup of coffee and talk to me about it? I don't have a position. I mean I want to hear."(262)

The enlightened Southerner gives Steinbeck some insight into the past and the future of the racial troubles. In his opinion the problem is not only the white racists, but also the ones among the African-Americans who are never content with what they achieve, never satisfied with what they have. Not only the white man has to change his attitude towards the African-Americans but also the other way around. "I am only telling you how hard it is to change a feeling about things. And will you believe that it will be just as hard for Negroes to change their feeling about us as it is for us to change about them?"(263) The Southerner confirms that African-Americans have come to be who they are because the white man made them, and he also explains how in the course of history people like the Cheerleaders could have come into existence.

"If by force you make a creature live and work like a beast, you must think of him as a beast, else empathy would drive you mad. Once you have classified him in your mind, your feelings are safe.[...] And if your heart has human vestiges of courage and anger, which in a man are virtues, then you have fear of a dangerous beast, and since your heart has intelligence and inventiveness and the ability to conceal them, you live with terror. Then you must crush his manlike tendencies and make of him the docile beast you want."(265)

The Southerner shows that there are always two sides to a story and while nothing can excuse the events, it is necessary to understand where the roots lie to effectively fight them and change the South. He continues drawing a picture of a future where there will be no white and no black, where "both will disappear into something new."(264) The scary part is what will happen in the meantime.

Steinbeck has met a man who is aware of what is to come, a man who calls himself a "new-born hybrid", who dares to predict "what will happen over the ages."(263) In the future he paints not one race will absorb the other, but they will "disappear into something new."(264) While the man claims he is too old to change, he is actually the future, caught in the present.

"I have an old Negro couple as old as I am to take care of me. And sometimes in the evening we forget. They forget to envy me and I forget they might, and we are just three pleasant...things living together and smelling the flowers.'

'Things,' I repeated. 'That's interesting – not man and beast, not black and white, but pleasant things.'"(264)

And so the enlightened Southerner bids him farewell, "to go along to [his] pleasant things now", and leaves Steinbeck with "sweetness like music, if music could pleasure the skin with a little chill."(266)

3.1.1.10. The Hitchhikers

Steinbeck continues on his journey to New York and makes acquaintance with three more representatives of the South. His first "customer"(269) is an old African-American man he offers a ride just after his conversation with the Southerner. The next day his passenger seat is taken by an openly racist middle aged man Steinbeck eventually kicks off *Rocinante*. The third hitchhiker is a young African-American student impatient to see change.

"I was very tired, but sometimes fatigue can be a stimulant and a compulsion. It forced me to fill my gas tank and compelled me to stop and offer a ride to an old Negro who trudged with heavy heels in the grass-grown verge beside the concrete road."(266)

Steinbeck feels the urge to strike up a conversation with the man, to question him on the events, to learn his side of the story, to simply hear and see. But it turns out the old man is too afraid of Steinbeck. He has retreated into the last corner of *Rocinante*. "After all, why should you trust me? A question is a trap and an answer is your foot in it."(267) A lifetime in the South has shaped the old man, it has obviously taught him not to trust strangers especially when they are white. Eventually he feels so uncomfortable next to Steinbeck that he asks to be dropped off. "I let him down and saw in the mirror how he took up his trudging beside the road. He didn't live nearby at all, but walking was safer than riding with me."(268) The old man is a representative of the old South, before the African-Americans started to rise and "want[ed] to be people."(263) In contrast to the enlightened Southerner, who represents the future, he is a representative of the past, convinced of his inferiority and trying to attract as little attention as possible. He has obviously "been practicing to be a Negro a long time."(268)

"I didn't choose my first customer the next day. He picked me."(269) And this man stands in sharp contrast to the old man Steinbeck had offered a ride the day before. Like the old man, this hitchhiker is a representative of the past, but he represents the other side. "He sat on a stool next to me eating a hamburger whose

twin I held in my hand. [...] His speech was the deepest south I had heard so far. [...] When he saw Charley he thought at first I had a nigger in there. It had got to be a pattern.”(270) The tranquility between the two men does not last long. “I think I was responsible for what happened. If I could have kept my mouth shut I might have learned something of value.”(270) But it turns out that there is nothing of value one can learn from a racist. Steinbeck has no other choice but to contradict the man. Anything else would not have been compatible with his high standards of morality and his repeated complaints about the loss of exactly those standards. When the racist tries to explain to Steinbeck that the Cheerleaders are acting out of duty, “a nasty little worm of anger began to stir in [him].”(270) Steinbeck becomes more than upset with the hitchhiker and his openly racist views. When the man threatens Steinbeck – “we got an eye on you Commie nigger-lovers”(271) – the latter does not hesitate: he pulls *Rocinante* off the road and kicks the racist off his truck.

This man is a representative of exactly what Steinbeck has been afraid of when going to the South. He is a representative of the past when white suppressed blacks, with an added pinch of hate, anger and fear. It is this fear of the unknown, of *the other*, fear of what is to come, that causes people to hate and discriminate.

The third hitchhiker is a child of the future, impatient and wanting change rather yesterday than tomorrow. He is a young African-American student “with a sharp face and the look and feel of impatient fierceness. [...] He was alert. License plate and speech relaxed him as much as he is ever likely to relax. We discussed the sit-ins. He had taken part in them, and in the bus boycott.”(272) The young man is the counterpart to the old man Steinbeck picked up the day before. He is eager to talk and share his opinions, feeling safe enough in the company of a Northerner. But he is also impatient. “Finally we spoke of Martin Luther King and his teaching of passive but unrelenting resistance. ‘It’s too slow,’ he said. ‘It will take too long.’”(272) The young man cannot wait for things to change.

But Steinbeck knows how dangerous speed is. The speed with which mankind is evolving, without having time to get used to the new – “[t]hat might defeat the whole thing.”(273) As the enlightened Southerner said, “I am only telling you how hard it is to change a feeling about things.”(263) Permanent peace can only be achieved when there is no anger, no violence involved. “‘There’s improvement,

there's constant improvement. Gandhi proved it's the only weapon that can win against violence.”(272)

The young student, however, is not willing to wait. After hundreds of years of slavery and suppression he wants “action”(272), he wants to see change before he is too old. “I might be an old man before I'm a man at all. I might be dead before.”(273) He is emotionally upset, full of the fierceness, impatience and zest for action, innate to the youth, full of untamed longing for change. Let us hope he had the chance to become a man and see how the world has changed, how his country has voted for *CHANGE*.

3.1.1.11. Migrating People

“I've known quite a few migrant people over the years – Okies and Mexican wetbacks, and the Negroes who move into New Jersey and Long Island.”(67) Up north in Maine, Steinbeck comes across “French Canadians who came across the border for the harvest season.”(64) Steinbeck, who has long been fascinated with working class and working people, settles in their vicinity. He is very fond of these people and highly respects their labor. “I hope we may not be overwhelmed one day by peoples not too proud or too lazy or too soft to bend to the earth and pick up the things we eat.”(64) This is a harsh criticism of his fellow Americans in regard to their unwillingness to take up hard work to sustain themselves. Slavery was over, now they make the Canadians work.

He sends out Charley, the ambassador-dog. “I release him, and he drifts toward the objective, or rather what the objective may be preparing for dinner. I retrieve him so that he will not be a nuisance to my neighbors – *et voilà!* A child can do the same thing, but a dog is better.”(65) To relieve them of his “miserable cur”(65) Steinbeck strolls closer and takes a better look at the “Canucks”(64).

“These Canucks were a hardy people. They traveled and camped by families and groups of families, perhaps even clans[...]. They were nice-looking people, a dozen of them, not counting children [...]. The dog had caused no trouble, the [operating chieftain] said. The truth was that they had remarked that he was a handsome dog.”(64-66)

Steinbeck invites them in for drinks, “beer for the big ones” and sodas for the children gawping in from outside. He learns about their yearly rhythm, their coming over the border every year for the potato harvest, hears about the rules at the border relaxing during harvest season, and their affiliation with a contractor who collected a small amount of their pay to smooth their way. He also learns that over the winter

they “put their own small farm to bed” to come “over the line to make a small nest egg.”(68) “These were a hardy and self-sufficient people, quite capable of taking care of themselves.”(68)

This evening with the Canucks is one of the most memorable ones on Steinbeck’s journey. “I felt very fortunate [...]”(70) He describes the Canucks as proud, quiet and respectful people, “nice people but quite formal”(67), “warm, friendly but cautious people” who made *Rocinante* take “on a glow it never quite lost.”(68-9) We learn about their work and motivation, about their families and homes, and the general situation of migrant workers in the United States in the 1960s.

3.1.2. Bill Bryson’s *Americans*

3.1.2.1. Generalities

When it comes to interacting with strangers Bryson confesses he does not have a talent for that. “When I read someone like Paul Theroux, who’s very good at bringing people out and getting conversations going [...] I wish I could do that but I cannot interact with people; it’s against my nature, and so what I do is spy.”²⁰³ Bryson is an observer, he draws his conclusions about people from closely watching them, their behavior and their surroundings. Then he likes to put all his impressions and perceptions together and turn them into stereotypes and clichés. We have to keep in mind when discussing Bryson’s characterization of his fellow Americans that he often uses exaggeration and clichés for comic effect. In the course of his journey he notes a few characteristics about Americans that can be found all over the country.

One of those recurring generalities about Americans is closely linked to the disappearance of the American small town. In Bryson’s ideal Amalgam people are strolling down the streets, walking to the town center to do their shopping in various little and specialized stores. This ideal place is “one of those rare American places where you wouldn’t need a car.”(163) But these places are disappearing because the shopping habits of the Americans have changed.

“People, it appeared, didn’t want to stroll to do their shopping. They actually wanted to get in their cars and drive to the edge of town, where they could then park and walk a similar distance across a flat, treeless parking lot. That is how America goes shopping”.(164)

²⁰³ Shapiro, p. 144.

And how they shop! In Philadelphia Bryson spends the night in the home of two old friends from Iowa who have recently settled in the Germantown section of the city. Staying at the comfortable middle class home, Bryson notices the abundance in every room. Anything that makes life more comfortable is there.

“[I] felt a sap for ever having left America. Life was so abundant here, so easy, so convenient. Suddenly I wanted a refrigerator that made its own ice-cubes and a waterproof radio for the shower. I wanted an electric orange juicer and a room ionizer and a wristwatch that would keep me in touch with my biorhythms. I wanted it all.”(157)

The children’s rooms are filled with toys and the closets are bursting with “yesterday’s enthusiasms”.(158) “Life was so abundant here, so easy, so convenient.”(157) And yet, all this is normal for American middle class standards.

“That is the great, seductive thing about America – the people always get what they want, right now, whether it is good for them or not. There is something deeply worrying, and awesomely irresponsible, about this endless self-gratification, this constant appeal to the baser instincts.”(158)

On the other hand, Bryson also describes the people who are not living on the bright side of life. Poverty in America is just as much a topic he discusses as abundance and wealth. Philadelphia happens to not only charm Bryson with comfortable middle class homes but also scares him with unbelievable poverty, but this will be discussed in more detail later. Therefore, let us start at the beginning of the journey by taking a look at poverty in Alabama.

Tuskegee is not only the home of America’s premier African American college, but it is also the heart of one of America’s poorest counties. “Eighty-two per cent of the county population is black. More than half the country residents live below the poverty level.”(90) Bryson goes a bit into detail and we learn what being poor in Tuskegee means. “Almost a third of them still don’t have indoor plumbing. That is really poor. [...] Not having running water in the house is something beyond the realms of the imaginable to most Americans.”(90) Bryson reflects on his image of poverty and comes to the conclusion that where he comes from “you are poor if you can’t afford a refrigerator that makes its own ice-cubes and your car doesn’t have automatic windows.”(90) There is a discrepancy forming here, just an idea at the beginning that becomes clearer when Bryson explores Tennessee’s mountains.

He is en route to Sneedville to look for the Melungeon people. “This was the seventh poorest county in the nation and it looked it. Litter was adrift and the ditches and most of the farmhouses were small and unadorned.”(125) But other than

in Tuskegee the people here are white. We are surprised to hear that despite the poverty “[i]n every driveway there stood a pickup truck with a gun rack in the back window”.(125) Bryson pushes on into the mountains.

“Many of the shacks looked like something out of *Li'l Abner*, with sagging porches and tilting chimneys. [...] Many appeared to have been handmade, with rambling extensions that had clearly been fashioned from scraps of plundered wood.”(127)

All the way up in the mountains Bryson sees shacks, housing America's poorest people – excuse me, America's poorest *white* people. “It was strange, too, to see white people living in poverty. In America, to be white and impoverished really takes some doing.”(128) This poverty is different from what Bryson has seen in the South. “Of course this was American poverty, this was white people's poverty, which isn't like poverty elsewhere.”(128) Obviously there are different standards against which poverty is measured.

To further illustrate this theory, Bryson explains how in 1964 his father-in-law in England was years away from owning a car and still has never owned a brand new one. The point Bryson is trying to make becomes clear when we look at American history. President Johnson started his great War on Poverty in 1964, which focused on Appalachia because it was white. A study from the same year showed, however, that in this area forty percent of the people owned a car and that a third of those cars had been bought new. We learn that white poverty in the United States is a lot different not only from black poverty in the same country but also miles from the standards of Europe.

“Still, I can't deny that by American standards the scattered shacks around me were decidedly modest. They had no satellite dishes in the yard, no Weber barbecues, no station wagons standing in the drive. And I daresay they had not microwaves in the kitchen, poor devils, and by American standards that is pretty damn deprived.”(129)

There is another standard by which poverty in America is measured: the way of traveling. We have already seen that even poor people in America can afford a car. But there are also the poorest who cannot.

“You only go on a long-distance bus in the United States because either you cannot afford to fly or – and this is really licking the bottom of the barrel in America – you cannot afford a car. Being unable to afford a car in America is the last step before living out of a plastic sack.”(169)

Bryson gains this insight when he is waiting for the bus to take him into New York City. The idea itself is undeniably not a bad one – by leaving the car behind

he does not have to look for parking, can avoid all the stress traffic brings with it and will not get lost – but Bryson has failed to consider what kind of people are forced to take long-distance buses in America.

“As a result, most of the people on long-distance buses are one of the following: actively schizoid, armed and dangerous, in a drugged stupor, just released from prison, or nuns. [...] But by and large a ride on a long-distance bus in America combines most of the shortcomings of prison life with those of an ocean crossing in a troop-ship.”(169)

When it comes to traveling, there is another observation Bryson makes. Early on his journey he comes across tourists in mobile homes. In the Great Smoky Mountains he notes the absence of hikers and bikers and instead the presence of motor homes.

“What slowed the traffic here were the massive motor homes lumbering up and down the mountain passes. Some of them, amazingly, had cars tethered to their rear bumpers, like dinghies. [...] That, alas, is the way of vacationing nowadays for many people.”(117)

This idea is new to Bryson. When he was a child in the 1950s people were traveling by car and then spending the night at motels or hotels. Few people had trailers back then. Now, everything is combined into one giant house on wheels.

“The whole idea is not to expose yourself to a moment of discomfort or inconvenience – indeed, not to breathe fresh air if possible. When the urge to travel seizes you, you pile into your thirteen-ton tin place and drive 400 miles across the country, hermetically sealed against the elements, and stop at a campground where you dash to plug into their water supply and electricity so that you don’t have to go a single moment without air-conditioning or dishwasher and microwave facilities.”(117-118)

With this in mind we can have a closer look at how Americans in various parts of the country differ.

3.1.2.2. The Midwesterners

“Des Moines is a Mecca of cosmopolitanism, a dynamic hub of wealth and education, where people wear three-piece suites and dark socks, often simultaneously.”(13) But these people are not the prototypical Iowans. The ones who are not lucky enough to live in Des Moines live in places like “Dog Water or Duncesville or some such improbable spot – the kind of place where if a dog gets run over by a truck everybody goes out to have a look at it.”(13)

The country Bryson returns to has become foreign to him and full of strangers, and he returns to a land where “a personable old fart [...] was president” for most of the 1980s.(16)

"My mother knew that personable old fart when he was a sports caster called Dutch Reagan at WHO Radio in Des Moines. 'He was just a nice, friendly, kind of dopey guy,' my mother says. Which, come to that, is a pretty fair description of most Iowans."(16)

But by no means does Bryson want to suggest that Iowans are "mentally deficient. They are a decidedly intelligent and sensible people who, despite their natural conservatism, have always been prepared to elect a conscientious, clear-thinking liberal in preference to some cretinous conservative."(16) With "dopey" Bryson actually wants to say that "they are trusting and amiable and open."(17) In his general description of the Iowan character he continues to explain that

"[a]bove all, Iowans are friendly" even if they occasionally seem "a tad slow, certainly – when you tell an Iowan a joke, you can see a kind of race going on between his brain and his expression – but it's not because they're incapable of high-speed mental activity, it's only that there's not much call for it."(17)

We also learn that "[d]irections are very important to them."(25) Bryson's father would spend hours covering "the dining-room table with maps and consider[ing] at length possible routings."(25) This need for orientation seems to come from the lack of landmarks throughout the Midwest. "You can always tell a Midwestern couple in Europe because they will be standing on a traffic island in the middle of a busy intersection looking at a windblown map and arguing over which way is west."(25) This does not surprise Bryson, who "had forgotten just how flat and empty [Iowa] is".(25)

However, when it comes to describing individuals, Bryson is not as complaisant as he is in his general description of Americans. We learn that Iowa's women are "almost always sensationally overweight", "clammy and meaty in their shorts and halter tops, looking a little like elephants dressed in children's clothes", a fact that is beyond Bryson's understanding as these women's teenage daughters are "always utterly delectable, as soft and gloriously rounded and naturally fresh-smelling as a basket of fruit."(14-15)

Iowa's men, on the other hand, have various other distinctive features, such as "a baseball cap advertising John Deere or a feed company" or the back of their necks which have been "lasered into deep crevasses by years of driving a John Deere tractor back and forth in a blazing sun."(14) In general, all Iowan men seem to be farmers, with a distinctive tan line that leaves their arms and necks chocolate brown, while the rest of their body shines in the purest snow white. "In Iowa it is called a farmer's tan and it is, I believe, a badge of distinction."(14) Additionally to

the farmer's tan and the John Deere cap, most Iowa men seem to be missing a few fingers or more.

As a child Bryson would explain this with the fact that farmers had to handle a lot of dangerous machinery. Later he learned that many people deal with dangerous machinery, and only a few of them are missing body parts, while "there is scarcely a farmer in the Midwest over the age of twenty who has not at some time or other had a limb or digit yanked off and thrown into the next field by some noisy farmyard implement." (48) And Bryson even offers an explanation for that. "To tell you the absolute truth, I think farmers do it on purpose." (48) He claims that by being exposed to grinding gears and flapping fan belts day after day "they get a little hypnotized by all the noise and motion" and in consequence start thinking "'I wonder what would happen if I just stuck my finger in there a little bit.'" (48)

Bryson continues to explain. "I know that sounds crazy. But you have to realize that farmers don't have a whole lot of sense in these matters because they feel no pain." (48) So, here we have sunburned, baseball cap wearing, John Deere driving, hypnotized men who stick their fingers in heavy machinery out of curiosity and lack of pain. This *generality*, as Steinbeck would call it, does not seem to comply with the friendly people Bryson initially described. But when we read on we slowly get the impression he was thinking of a specific Iowa farmer when writing these lines. "There are only three things that can kill a farmer: lightning, rolling over in a tractor, and old age. It was old age that got my grandfather." (49) With these lines in mind, the description of the Iowa farmer suddenly becomes charming and nostalgic. What we have just read are mostly the observations of a small Iowa boy, spending the summers on his grandfather's farm, now being recapitulated by a thirty-six year old Iowa boy who longs for those days and the sunburned, John Deere driving, baseball cap wearing old man.

3.1.2.3. The Southerners

"A sign beside the highway said Welcome to Mississippi. We shoot to kill. It didn't really. I just made that up. This was only the second time I had ever been to the Deep South and I entered it with a sense of foreboding." (73) Bryson has a clear image on his mind of what the Deep South is like and what to expect.

"It is surely no coincidence that all those films you have ever seen about the South – *Easy Rider*, *In the Heat of the Night*, *Cool Hand Luke*, *Brubaker*, *Deliverance* – depict Southerners as murderous, incestuous, shitty-shoed rednecks." (73)

Powerful words, but Bryson already made his experiences in the Deep South when he was a college student. With some friends he drove from Des Moines to the Florida Keys, taking a shortcut through Georgia's back roads and stopping for a burger. "[W]hen we took your seats at the counter the place fell silent. Fourteen people just stopped eating, their food resting in their mouths, and stared at us. It was so quiet in there you could have heard a fly fart. [...] To them, out here in the middle of nowhere, we were at once a curiosity –some of them had clearly never seen no long-haired, nigger-loving, Northern, college-edjicated, commie hippies in the flesh before – and yet unspeakably loathsome." (73) Bryson feels "deeply hated" and afraid for his life considering the murder of three freedom riders in Mississippi only five years prior to his spring break trip. Bryson mentions the three young victims by name, "James Chaney, [...] Andrew Goodman, [...] and Michael Schwerner [...]. I give their names because they deserve to be remembered." (74) The three young man were lynched after being arrested for speeding and their bodies ended up in a swamp. The people who did this were never prosecuted. They had done things to the boys "that a child wouldn't do to an insect." (74) This picture is cruel and disgusting. The Southerners Bryson describes, are no individuals but a herd of barbarous beasts, uneducated and hence full of hatred. "To me this was and always would be the South." (74)

But then Bryson visits the campus of the University of Mississippi and observes a young black student sitting with white fellow students. Only twenty-five years earlier, we learn, there was a riot when a young African-American enrolled - escorted by five hundred marshals – at the very same university. "The people of Oxford were so inflamed at the thought of having to share their campus with a 'Niggra boy' that they wounded thirty of the marshals and killed two journalists." (81) Bryson doubts that the South could have changed so quickly, in just one generation. To him "[i]t seemed unlikely." (81)

On his way to Tupelo, though, he makes another interesting observation. He sees shacks along the way, "large numbers of black youngsters in the yard", and also "nicer houses – white people's houses" sitting right next to each other. (81) It surprises Bryson that, considering the racial tensions in the South, they would be living so peacefully next to each other. "You would never see that in the North. It struck me as notably ironic that Southerners could despise blacks so bitterly and yet

live comfortably alongside them, while in the North people by and large did not mind blacks, even respected them as humans and wished them every success, just so long as they didn't have to mingle with them too freely.”(81) Now that is rather paradoxical.

There is another paradox. While the people Bryson meets are speaking a language he does not understand, the people on the radio and on TV all sound as if they come from Ohio. The Southerners do not want to sound Southern anymore. Bryson seeks council with a young man at a gas station, who himself sounds as if he came from Ohio. It turns out he does and he offers an explanation for the phenomenon.

“He explained that Southerners had become so sensitive about their reputation for being shit-squishing rednecks that all the presenters on TV and radio tried to sound as if they came from the North and had never in their whole lives nibbled a hush puppy or sniffed a grit.”(88)

While the people in the South seem to live a life different from the rest of the United States, being cautious and suspicious – sometimes even hostile – about strangers entering their part of the country, they obviously *do* care what the rest of this country thinks about them.

While in the South, Bryson has several encounters with his fellow, but to him foreign, Americans. Most of these encounters are brief, but some are worth mentioning for they depict prototypes and prejudices, stereotypes and suppositions. In Mississippi, Bryson sits in his car at a red traffic light when a state trooper pulls up next to him.

“The prospect [of visiting a town named Senatobia] enlivened me, but I had to calm down because a state trooper pulled up alongside me at a traffic light and began looking me over with that sort of casual disdain you often get when you give a dangerously stupid person a gun and a squad car.”(75)

Bryson perceives this man with his apelike appearance as the direct successor of the sheriff who watched the three freedom riders being lynched. This man combines all the characteristics of a white, racist cop as Bryson sees him in his biased imagination. But as so many things in the South turn out to be other than expected, the trooper engages Bryson in a conversation about “Miss Hippy” and – for a cop – is actually friendly.(76) But this one encounter does not change Bryson's opinion. He is still very cautious when he talks to locals, most of all because he simply does not understand their slang.

3.1.2.4. The Middle Atlantic Americans

As we have already heard, Bryson is not a man who has a way with people. In the course of the book his focus shifts more and more towards landscape, towns and attractions and we hear less and less about the people. Only here and there does he comment on a few – in one way or another – “remarkable” individuals, but we hardly find any general descriptions or characterizations of America’s inhabitants.

In the Middle Atlantic states Bryson dedicates most of this attention to the Amish. The Amish are an oddity among the Americans. We learn that they came to the country 250 years ago and ever since have stayed in their community, refusing the American way of life. “[T]he thing that they all have in common is that they wear simple clothes and shun modern contrivances.”(165) In a modern America, obsessed with the latest technical inventions and “people who rush to buy new gadgets”(282), the Amish, Mennonites and all the other subdivisions with their simple life style are spectacle.

“Many people are so fascinated by the Amish way of life, by the idea of people living 200 years in the past, that they come quite literally by the millions to gawk.”(165) They do not only gawk, but they also come to shop and eat. Souvenir stores, wax museums and gift shops have replaced the small stores where the Amish buy their supplies. The tourists clog the roads forming mile-long traffic jams and many Amish, we learn, have already moved away to quieter parts of the United States, such as Iowa or Michigan.

In between Bryson’s complaints about the tourists we learn a little more about the Amish. Their beliefs do not allow them to let modern appliances into their homes because they are considered “ungodly”. “Every time anybody invents something they argue about whether it is ungodly or not, and the ones who don’t like it go off and form a new sect.”(165) Bryson’s tone suggests he does not approve of this way of dealing with controversy.

“First, they argued over whether they should have steel rims or rubber rims on their buggies, then whether they should have tractors, then electricity and television. Now presumably they argue over whether they should have a frost-free refrigerator and whether their instant coffee should be powdered or freeze-dried.”(165)

So, obviously, the “ungodly” things and the modern way of life do find their way into the Amish world. Despite his critical tone, Bryson also notes “[t]he most splendid thing about the Amish [which] is the names they give their towns.”(165)

Bryson is a big fan of place names. Often he comes up with his own inventions and I will later discuss Bryson's place names in greater detail. In Lancaster County he finds many unusual names.

"Everywhere else in America towns are named either after the first white person to get there or the last Indian to leave. But the Amish obviously gave the matter of town names some thought and graced their communities with intriguing, not to say provocative, appellations: Blue Ball, Bird in Hand, and Intercourse, to name but three."(165)

Of course, places with names like that attract even more visitors who want to send postcards from Intercourse to all their relatives, scribbling such *Virginia might be for lovers, but Pennsylvania has Intercourse* on the back. Bryson is reasonably disgusted with the way the Amish are treated, like animals in a zoo, people driving for miles to stare at them and by that taking away their dignity as human beings. "I wouldn't be surprised if a decade from now there isn't a real Amish person left in the county. It is an unspeakable shame. They should be left in peace."(166)

3.1.2.5. The Westerners

Somewhere in Kansas Bryson crosses the invisible border between the Midwest and the West. People are instantly looking different and also their behavior seems strange to Bryson.

"The people in the towns along the way stop wearing baseball caps and shuffling along with that amiable dopeyness characteristic of the Midwest and instead start wearing cowboy hats and cowboy boots, walking with a lope and looking vaguely suspicious and squinty, as if they think they might have to shoot you in a minute. People in the West like to shoot things."(251)

He uses this occasion to inform the reader about the killings of the buffalo when the West was settled. In Bryson's opinion not much has changed.

"When they first got to the West they shot buffalo. Once there were 70 million buffalo on the plains and then the people of the West started blasting away at them. [...] By 1895 there were only 800 buffalo left, mostly in zoos and touring Wild West shows. With no buffalo left to kill, Westerners started shooting Indians."(252)

As with the buffalo, the number of Native Americans in the West decreased immensely. All throughout his exploration of the West there is a tone when it comes to people that shows Bryson's dislike for the once buffalo- and Indian-killing Westerners. He finally utters his discontent with these people when he is on his way home from the West and is stranded in Wyoming, close to starving, but the only restaurant is closed for a private party. While a waitress in the Midwest would at least have packed him some sandwiches to go, the waitress in Wyoming shows no

sign of pity or helpfulness. This leads Bryson to one of the few generalities about the people in the West. “And there you have the difference between the Midwest and the West, ladies and gentlemen. People in the Midwest are nice.”(334)

3.1.2.6. The Tourists

Bryson naturally encounters other people on the road, most of them tourists. His first encounter with the latter is in Cherokee, the gateway to the Great Smoky Mountains.

“I don’t think I had ever been to a place quite so ugly, and it was jammed with tourists, almost all of them ugly also – fat people in noisy clothes with cameras dangling on their bellies. Why is it, I wondered idly as I nosed the car through the throngs, that tourists are always fat and dress like morons?”(115)

Bryson is out of Cherokee and into the national park before he can “give the question the consideration it deserved” and so we are left with this statement about the appearance of tourists in Cherokee. (115) But we do not need any explanation to get an idea of Bryson’s opinion of tourists.

From this point on, here and there Bryson comes across tourists. They are always the same kind of people he described earlier and they are often getting in his way, standing between him and the sights he wants to visit. We meet the tourists again in Colonial Williamsburg. This time they appear herd-like, a river of people streaming into the visitors center, buying the overpriced ticket and then climbing on a bus, not questioning for a single moment why they are doing this. None of them stops to take a step back to reconsider their decision to spend \$24.50 on a Patriot’s Pass that is not required to explore the town.

In Pennsylvania’s Dutch Country the tourists are choking the roads in the desperate attempt to catch a glimpse of an Amish man working in the fields or an Amish horse carriage, and on Cape Cod they are clogging the roads with their motor homes. “Boy, do I hate motor homes! Especially on crowded peninsulas like Cape Cod where they clog the streets and block the views”.(183) Blocking the views is one of the worst things someone can do to him. Bryson is an observer, he pays attention to the little details along the road and if he cannot see he cannot write. “[A]nd all so that some guy and his dumpy wife can eat lunch and empty their bladders without stopping.”(183)

The tourists in Fort Adams State Park take on a different role than so far and give him some malicious satisfaction. While he dislikes tourists, he dislikes disgustingly rich people even more. The Vanderbilt summer house is “a mountain with

windows”, built with the intention to show off the wealth of the family. Bryson gleefully watches the people visiting the house from a path in the distance.

“On the other side of the fence, the lawns and terraces were full of pudgy tourists in Bermuda shorts and silly hats, wandering in and out of the house, taking pictures of each other and trampling the begonias, and I wondered what Cornelius Vanderbilt would make of that, the dog-faced old prick.”(183)

But where does Bryson belong? On the one hand he does not follow preset routes and is on his own schedule. He avoids the big freeways and stays on back roads as much as possible to get to know the country sites and landscape. But on the other hand he is drawn to touristy places, visits national parks, museums and presidents’ homes, explores big cities like Washington D.C. and New York and does not avoid the vacationing villages in New England. There he wanders alone, annoyed by the other tourists, while he is just as much one of the crowd as any other tourist out there.

I want to argue here that he is a hybrid between the two, a traveler who indulges in tourist attractions and activities. For Bryson this journey is a chance to relive the vacationing days of his childhood, only this time he can visit all the touristy places his father despised. The little boy Bill Bryson, whose father never took him to tourist traps but educational exhibits, does not share the dislike for tourist attractions with the writer Bill Bryson. The little boy is free to be a tourist, to finally realize his dreams of visiting a glittering world of tourist entertainment. For the writer and the traveler it is important to visit all these places to be able to discuss and - most of the time condemn – them. While Bryson the writer is a traveler, the little boy inside him is the tourist. So the little boy comes in handy as a justification for the excursions into the world of tourists.

3.2. AMERICA

3.2.1. *John Steinbeck's America*

3.2.1.1. Generalities

As with the people Steinbeck encounters, he likes to come up with generalities about the landscape, the cities, the housing, the states, and the roads. "The separateness of the states, which has been bitterly called Balkanization, creates many problems. Rarely do two states have the same gasoline tax, and these taxes largely support the building and maintenance of highways."(220)

Of most of these roads Steinbeck is not very fond. He avoids the "thruways" or "superhighways"(89), which are "wonderful for moving goods but not for inspection of a countryside."(89) In his opinion they are "great wide traffic slashes which promote the self by fostering daydreams."(95) And he is afraid that once "we get these thruways across the whole country [...] it will be possible to drive from New York to California without seeing a single thing."(90)

Among all these standardized multi-lane ways, one day Steinbeck finds himself on something different, a road that stands out. It is an "Evacuation Route"(129). This simple sign, somewhere in the Midwest, is a reminder of one of the main themes in the book: the Cold War. "Of course it is a planned escape route from the bomb that hasn't been dropped [...], a road designed by fear."(129) What makes Steinbeck's head spin though is not the fear of the future but the pictures of the past. "In my mind I could see it because I have seen people running away - the roads clogged to a standstill and the stampede over the cliff of our own designing."(129) And thus a simple road becomes the constant reminder of the fact that we are a "race that could build a thing it had to escape from."(130)

As Steinbeck is an attentive observer, he pays attention to every detail along the road as he crosses from one state in to another. Landscape, speed limits and gasoline tax are among many things he notices. But there is one thing that he as a writer is most aware of. "But now for the first time I became aware that each state had also its individual prose style, made sharply evident in its highway signs. Crossing state lines one is aware of this change of language."(79) Steinbeck, who calls himself an "avid reader of all signs"(80), is fascinated by the various road signs in the individual states. Right from the moment of entry the traveler gets a

notion of what to expect from the state and is sometimes politely asked, sometimes given guidance, and sometimes threatened concerning his behavior during his visit.

“The New England states use a terse form of instruction, a tight-lipped, laconic style sheet, wasting no words and few letters. New York State shouts at you the whole time. Do this. Do that. Squeeze left. Squeeze right. Every few feet an imperious command. In Ohio the signs are more benign. They offer friendly advice, and are more like suggestions. [...] Nearly all have abandoned the adverb for the adjective. Drive Slow. Drive Safe.”(80)

Other signs along the way of Charley and Steinbeck are historical markers. This is where “the prose of statehood reaches its glorious best, and most lyric.”(80) In this young nation, with a history only as old as a couple of hundred years, many states proudly propagate every event that ever happened within their borders. “I have further established, at least to my own satisfaction, that those states with the shortest histories and the least world-shaking events have the most historical markers.”(80) Therefore, the further west Steinbeck moves, the more historical markers he encounters. “Some Western states even find glory in half-forgotten murders and bank robberies.” This practice gives us insight into a young nation trying to justify its place in the world among so many older ones. “We, as a nation, are as hungry for history as was England when Geoffrey of Monmouth concocted his History of the British Kings[...]. And as in states and communities, so in individual Americans this hunger for decent association with the past.”(80-81) Steinbeck, however, sees the danger when cities suddenly celebrate those sons they wanted to tar and feather a hundred years earlier or towns celebrating “Spanish dons and rose-eating señoritas who have in public memory wiped out the small, desolate tribe of grub- and grasshopper-eating Indians” who were the true first settlers.(80-81) This tradition “does make for suspicion of history as a record of reality”(81). This even happened to him and his hometown in California, which has turned him into the “suffering child who rises to glory”.(81)

On his journey visiting thirty-eight individual states, some of these states become individuals or are like old friends Steinbeck has visited before, some are all new and leave a good – or not so good – first impression.

“We know, of course, that each of our states is an individual and proud of it. Not content with their names, they take descriptive titles also – the Empire State, the Garden State, the Granite State – titles proudly borne and little given to understatement.”(79)

He feels sorry for Maine losing its inhabitants, falls in love with Montana for showing him so much of its natural beauty and is afraid of Texas and its exuberant

personality. Some states Steinbeck visits with full intention, others he barely mentions as he only drives across them to get someplace else. But all of these states and landscapes create the image of one vast country.

3.2.1.2. New England

Apart from listening to people, Steinbeck also dedicates his time to describing the natural beauty and the urban dwellings of his country. He does admit, however, that his main interest is the natural beauty.

“And this is why, on my journey which was designed for observation, I stayed as much as possible on secondary roads where there was much to see and hear and smell, and avoided the great wide traffic slashes which promote the self by fostering daydreams.”(94)

When he starts his journey in late September his first encounter with natural beauty is the Indian Summer in New England.

“I can’t even imagine the forest colors when I am not seeing them. I wondered whether constant association could cause inattention, and asked a native New Hampshire woman about it. She said the autumn never failed to amaze her; to elate. ‘It is a glory,’ she said, ‘and can’t be remembered, so that it always comes as a surprise.’”(37)

Steinbeck is blown away by the colors. He remembers seeing pictures of Vermont fall when he was a child and now realized the colors were inaccurate. “To find not only that this bedlam of color was true but that the pictures were pale and inaccurate translations, was to me startling.”(37) Steinbeck’s New England seems just like in the pictures, no, better than that. He describes the villages, the little farms, the road side stands as picture perfect places in a picture perfect Indian summer. “The villages are the prettiest, I guess, in the whole nation, neat and white-painted, and – not counting the motels and tourist courts – unchanged for a hundred years except for traffic and paved streets.”(27) He idealizes this part of the country and there is a potential danger that it cannot get any better than this. No matter where Steinbeck will go, it will be difficult to top the idyllic landscape in New England. Everything he sees from now on will be – even if not explicitly – measured against the picturesque vision of Vermont and New Hampshire, where “[t]he roadside stands were piled with golden pumpkins and russet squashes and baskets of red apples so crisp and sweet that they seemed to explode with juice when I bit into them.”(27)

It is Maine where Steinbeck notices the rural exodus for the first time. “The big towns are getting bigger and the villages smaller.”(71) He is worried by the loss of rural culture and regional features. What he saw and loved in Vermont and New

Hampshire is on the verge of disappearing. "Our treasured and nostalgic picture of the village store, the cracker-barrel store where an informed yeomanry gather to express opinion and formulate the national character, is very rapidly disappearing." (71-72) Land that was once made inhabitable by the hard work of pioneers and explorers is now being abandoned. "And always I remember that this huge area had once been much more settled and was now abandoned to the creeping forest, the animals, the lumber camps and the cold." (71)

Along the Connecticut River Steinbeck has a strange experience that "disturbed [him] deeply [then], and, come to think of it, it still does [when he writes the book]." (76) He pulls over at a small lunch room which advertises vacant rooms. There are cakes under plastic covers, dishes in the sink, a humming fridge, but no management. Steinbeck spends the night in Rocinante and checks again the next morning, but there is still no one around. The rural exodus seems to have become immediate reality here, people simply disappearing, leaving everything behind.

But there is also a second foreboding hidden in this episode. Thinking of the evacuation route and the bomb that has not been dropped, we are peeping into a possible future: the day after. This is the image of a country where the atomic threat has become reality. People hurrying to get to their cars, hitting the evacuation routes, speeding away from the danger - no time to take down the "open" and "vacancy" signs, no time to wash the dishes, no time to pack the cakes and donuts. The only thing alive in this still life is a "new-born, heavy-winged fat fly" (76) that still sits on a plastic pie cover when Steinbeck leaves. Insects inhabited this planet long before us, and in this picture they will do so long after us.

Charley dog and Steinbeck have one more destination before they cross the threshold into the Midwest: Niagara Falls. As many times before and after, they get lost in the labyrinth of town neighborhoods and traffic. This, and the pouring rain in New York State, seem to have blurred Steinbeck's memory about their trip to Niagara Falls. We do not learn much, only that he had never been there before and that it looked like the pictures he had seen.

"Niagara Falls is very nice. It's like a large version of the old Bond sign on Times Square. I'm very glad I saw it, because from now on if I am asked whether I have ever seen Niagara Falls I can say yes, and be telling the truth for once." (84)

We can only speculate why Steinbeck did not dedicate more thoughts and pages to Niagara Falls. With the boom of automobiles and tourism in the 1950s Niagara Falls had become a very popular vacation spot. Maybe Steinbeck did not have to

say much about a spot many people new already and had seen with their own eyes. Then, yet maybe it might have seemed to him that Niagara Falls as a prime vacation destination would not greatly contribute to his quest to find the true nature of his country. Or maybe his stop at Niagara falls was a simple act of been-there-done-that. "I'm very glad I saw it, because from now on if I am asked whether I have ever seen Niagara Falls I can say yes, and be telling the truth for once." (84)

Steinbeck wants to avoid the big cities of the lake area by crossing into Canada. But the lack of Charley's vaccination certificate causes trouble at the border – not at the Canadian though, but at the American.

"I find out of long experience that I admire all nations and hate all governments, and nowhere is my natural anarchism more aroused than at national borders where patient and efficient public servants carry out their duties in matters on immigration and customs." (85)

He is no fan of governments, no supporter of bureaucracy and Steinbeck finds himself "hating the rule and all governments that made rules." (85) The Canadian customs officers treat him to a cup of tea and spoil Charley with half a dozen cookies additionally to informing him that without the certificate Charley will not be able to return to the United States. "It was not the shots but the certificate that was important. And it is usually so with governments – not a fact but a small slip of paper." (85-86) Steinbeck vents his discontent with his own government, which at this point was a Republican government and a Republican president lasting for two terms already. As a declared Democrat he has a hard time accepting that this Republican government now forced him to go to Erie, and even the Canadian officers "seemed genuinely sorry that [he] had to go to Erie, Pennsylvania, for the lack of a paper." (86) Upset by his own government, Steinbeck is forced to take the longer way to Chicago, but even worse, forced to take U.S.90, "a wide gash of super-highway, multiple-lane carrier of the nation's good." (89)

It is here, along the freeway, that Steinbeck notes: "I had neglected my own country too long. Civilization had made great strides in my absence." (90) For the first time he comes across the big rest areas which have grown out of a necessity to feed and fuel the many travelers on the freeways. They are new to him and he observes them with amazement.

"It is life at a peak of some kind of civilization. The restaurant accommodations, great scallops of counters with simulated leather stools, are as spotless as and not unlike the lavatories. Everything that can be captured and held down is sealed in clear plastic." (91)

The question he will be asking a bit later into his journey is already forming in his head. After his encounter with the plastic waitress, this experience at the spotless rest area adds to the generality he will come up somewhere in North Dakota. “Can I say that the America I saw has put cleanliness first, at the expense of taste?”(141)

Around the big cities Steinbeck comes across another innovation: mobile homes.

“On these roads out of the manufacturing centers there moved many mobile homes, pulled by specially designed trucks, and since these mobile homes comprise one of my generalities, I may as well get to them now. Early in my travels I had become aware of these new things under the sun, of their great numbers, and since they occur in increasing numbers all over the nation, observation of them and perhaps some speculation is in order.”(95)

It is obvious that the mobile homes are another manifestation of America’s restlessness. But before Steinbeck falls into speculation, he shares his observation.

“They are wonderfully built homes, aluminum skins, double walled, with insulation, and often paneled with veneer or hardwood. Sometimes as much as forty feet long, they have two to five rooms, and are complete with air-conditioners, toilets, baths, and invariably television.”(96)

These mobile homes are so big they need to be pulled by specially designed trucks. Their final destination are trailer parks, “landscaped and equipped with every facility,” where park managers “charge a small ground rent plus fees for water and electricity.”(96) Steinbeck remarks, though, that the name “mobile home” is misleading. “The fact that these homes can be moved does not mean that they do move.”(96) People stay in one place for years, just as if they were living in regular houses.

Obviously it is not the actual movement that attracts people to live in mobile homes, but the *idea* of movement. If they wanted to move, they could. “If a plant or a factory closes down, you’re not trapped with property you can’t sell.”(97) If you come from Maine and you are tired of “the wind whistling through” your barn, you can have a “warm and cozy” winter and “in the summer the air-conditioner keeps” you cool. (97) And if that does not keep you satisfied, you can just move to Florida and take your house with you. (35-36)

The advantages are obvious. Apart from mobility, a mobile home “was comfortable, compact, easy to keep clean, easy to heat.”(97) But this is not it. Steinbeck talks to many mobile home owners, most of them proud to show off their homes and share the details.

“And then I discovered the greatest selling appeal of all – one that crawls through nearly all American life. Improvements are made on these mobile homes every

year. If you are doing well you turn yours in on a new model just as you do with an automobile if you can possibly afford it. There's status to that.”(97)

Steinbeck has just described one of the main characteristics of American culture. Why have something old, if you can have something new? As with their cars, Americans are always aiming for the newest model, trading in their once expensive but now outdated model for a newer, better one. This way there is no need to move to a different neighborhood, street, or maybe just down the street. You stay where you are but the house you used to live in moves.

“The first impression forced on me was that permanence is neither achieved nor desired by mobile people. They do not buy for generations, but only until a new model they can afford comes out.”(99) But there are also mobile homes sitting next to farms instead of an additional building for the grown-up children, or mobile homes sitting on top of hills or nesting under trees with loners living in them. And this is where Steinbeck considerations return to one of his recurring generalities about the restlessness of Americans.

3.2.1.3. The Midwest

Leaving idyllic and picturesque New England, Steinbeck slowly makes his way into the Midwest.

“Since I hadn't seen the Middle West for a long time many impressions crowded in on me as I drove through Ohio and Michigan and Illinois. The first was the enormous increase in population. Villages had become towns, and towns had grown to cities. The roads squirmed with traffic; the cities were so dense with people that all attention had to be devoted to not hitting anyone or being hit.”(105)

It is obvious that this is not a place Steinbeck could have liked. Anything squirming with traffic bears the potential danger of his getting lost. Any town grown into a city has become too big for Steinbeck to successfully navigate it. Steinbeck passes “through or near the great hives of production”, his “eyes and mind [...] battered by the fantastic hugeness and energy of production, a complication that resembles chaos and cannot be.”(108) He admits that the place is full of “electric energy”, “vitality”, “a force” (105) and that the people are more open compared to the ones in New England, more eager to communicate.

However, crossing in and out of the big cities he observes a development he does not approve of. The sight of trash worries him deeply and he remembers how in Europe everything was being stored and reused in some way or another before it

was thrown out. The fast moving American society, having put cleanliness first, did not have time to reuse and recycle. “[...]I do wonder whether there will come a time when we can no longer afford our wastefulness – chemical wastes in the rivers, metal wastes everywhere, and atomic wastes buried deep in the earth or sunk in sea.”(26) Steinbeck’s foresight is commendable at a time of booming economies and affluence. But no matter how noble his intention, even Steinbeck is not immune to single-serving life. “There are so many modern designs for easy living. On my boat I had discovered the aluminum, disposable cooking utensils, frying pans and deep dishes. You fry a fish and throw the pan overboard.”(29) It might not be atomic wastes Steinbeck sinks in the sea but it is for sure a bunch of aluminum disposable cooking utensils.

He stays in Chicago for a few days but does not share his impressions with us. Instead, he moves on to Wisconsin as quickly as possible. Steinbeck had never been to Wisconsin but he had heard about it and “had eaten its cheeses, some of them as good as any in the world.”(125) But everything he had heard, pictures he had seen, did not prepare him “for the beauty of this region, for its variety of field and hill, forest, lake”. (125) His description of Wisconsin makes you want to get on the next plane.

“I never saw a country that changed so rapidly, and because I had not expected it everything I saw brought a delight. I don’t know how it is in other seasons [...], but 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. [...] I remembered now that I had been told Wisconsin is a lovely state, but the telling had not prepared me.”(126)

This is the perfect pastoral setting, with “fat cows and pigs gleaming against the green”, and Steinbeck’s heart jumps with joy because he has found a place untouched by the rural exodus. But there is more to see.

“I had heard of the Wisconsin Dells but was not prepared for the weird country sculptured by the Ice Age, a strange, gleaming country of water and carved rock, black and green. To awaken here might make one believe it a dream of some other planet “.(127)

This truly is another planet. After the humming, buzzing, squirming cities around the Great Lakes, this is another world. One can sense the relief in Steinbeck’s words when he describes Wisconsin, a relief that New England was not the last bastion of picturesque landscapes and pastoral culture.

Steinbeck drives on to Fargo but is disappointed by the place that is sharply in the crease if you fold a U.S. map in the middle. He decides to move on and reaches the place

“where the map *should* [emphasize!] fold. Here is the boundary between east and west. On the Bismarck side it is eastern landscape, eastern grass, with the look and smell of eastern America. Across the Missouri on the Mandan side, it is pure west, with brown grass and water scorings and small outcrops.”(154)

What he sees next he is not prepared for: The North Dakota Badlands.

“They deserve this name. They are like the work of an evil child. Such a place the Fallen Angels might have built as a spite to Heaven, dry and sharp, desolate and dangerous, and for me filled with foreboding.”(154) Even though Steinbeck does not feel comfortable in this land, he pulls off the road and drives among the buttes. “Just as I felt unwanted in this land, so do I feel a reluctance writing about it.”(154) However, as it always happens with his generalities when they are contradicted by something new he encounters and experiences, the Badlands change. At first he is trying to run away, get out of this land before it get dark so he does not have to spend the night.

“And then the late afternoon changed everything. As the sun angled, the buttes and coulees, the cliffs and sculptured hills and ravines lost their burned and dreadful look and glowed with yellow and rich browns and a hundred variations of red and silver gray, all picked out by streaks of coal black.”(156)

Literally, Steinbeck has to see things in another light to realize their true beauty. The same is true for his whole journey and the vast country he is traveling. First impressions are easily made, but it takes the willingness to linger and invest more time to see the truth behind. “Maybe understanding is only possible after.”(109) And this is the story how “in the night the Bad Lands had become Good Lands.”(157)

“The next passage in my journey is a love affair. I am in love with Montana. For other states I have admiration, respect, recognition, even some affection, but with Montana it is love, and it’s difficult to analyze love when you’re in it.”(158) Montana has it all. “The scale is huge but not overpowering. The land is rich with grass and color, and the mountains are the kind I would create if mountains were ever put on my agenda.”(158) But most important of all, Montana had a distinct regional accent. “Here for the first time I heard definite regional accent unaffected by TV-ese, a slow-paced warm speech.”(158) Steinbeck takes his time to talk to people, lingers in various stores and soaks up every single moment he is exposed to

Montana speech. “Then I found a telescope sight I had to have, and waited while it was mounted on the rifle, and in the process got to know everyone in the shop and any customer who entered.”(159)

But this intermezzo of regional character and distinctive speech does not last very long.

“Traveling west along the northern routes I did not hear a truly local speech until I reached Montana. This is one of the reasons I fell in love again with Montana. The West Coast went back to packaged English. The Southwest kept a grasp but a slipping grasp of localness.”(107)

It is not only the speech and the landscape that makes Steinbeck fall in love with Montana but also the towns and cities. Even though they are big, he finds them charming as the “the frantic bustle of America” seemed to have spared Montana.(158) “Again my attitude may be informed by love, but it seemed to me that the towns were places to live in rather than nervous hives.”(159) Also the people are more relaxed, find time to stop and linger and “to pause in their occupations to undertake the passing art of neighborliness.”(159)

Steinbeck also pays his respects to General Custer and Sitting Bull in Little Big Horn. We learn a little bit about the history and “Remington’s painting of the last defense of the center column of the 7th Cavalry”.(159-160) Interestingly, Steinbeck does not differentiate between the Native American fighters and the US soldiers. “I removed my hat in memory of brave men, and Charley saluted in his own manner but I thought with great respect.”(160) Steinbeck neither condemns Custer’s actions nor praises them, does not glorify the Native Americans or discredit them. He neutrally pays his respect to brave men, no matter what side they had been on.

Then, however, he goes into detail and we learn about his neighbor Charles Erskine Scott Wood, author of *Heavenly Discourse*. As a young man he had fought in the Chief Joseph campaign, hunting the Nez Percés who were retreating for over a thousand miles trying to get to Canada. But eventually the Native Americans were surrounded by General Miles and his cavalry and a large part of them was wiped out. It is important to mention that they had been traveling with squaws and children, which – according to Wood - was the only reason General Miles could have caught them. “It was the saddest duty he had ever performed, Wood said, and he never lost his respect for the fighting qualities of the Nez Percés.”(160) Steinbeck brilliantly navigates through this dark and controversial area of his country’s history, paying his respects to all brave fighters on both sides, but not

without shedding some light onto the cruelties and injustices that had taken place against the Native Americans.

Steinbeck likes Montana very much, but eventually he has to move on. His next destination in the West is his first national park on the journey: Yellowstone National Park. He is not even sure why he decides to pay the park a visit. "Perhaps it was the fear of my neighbors. I could hear them say, 'You mean you were that near to Yellowstone and didn't go? You must be crazy.'"(160) But then he comes up with a short but interesting generality about the American character. "Again it might have been the American tendency in travel. One goes, not so much to see but to tell afterward."(160) In Steinbeck's case this is not completely true. Even though he is going to see, observe, hear, and listen, for his own purpose and not to impress his neighbors however, he can not deny his intention to telling his story afterwards in a book. His stay in Yellowstone is rather short and exciting when Charley discovers his hatred of bears and turns into a predator poodle. This behavior is just a synonym for Steinbeck's natural attitude towards national parks.

"I must confess to a laxness in the matter of National Parks. I haven't visited many of them. Perhaps this is because they enclose the unique, the spectacular, the astounding – the greatest waterfall, the deepest canyon, the highest cliff, the most stupendous works of man or nature. [...] [I]t is my opinion that we enclose and celebrate the freaks of our nation and of our civilization."(161)

He is right when he talks about freaks. Nowhere else in the United States do we find spouting geysers, sizzling pools and steaming vents all in one spot. "Yellowstone National Park is no more representative of America than is Disneyland."(161) Steinbeck does not share much information about the park with us as his attention is distracted by his "Jeekyll-headed dog."(164) Steinbeck passes bear after bear, the park is almost squirming with bears, and Charley becomes more and more upset with every black bear and grizzly bear he sees. "Was it a pre-breed memory of a time when the wolf was in him? [...] I am certain that if he were released he would have charged every bear we passed and found victory or death."(164)

But Charley is not so much different from Steinbeck. Of course, Steinbeck does not go out hunting bears, but just as Charley would like to set out on an adventure to take his chances with a Yellowstone bear, to achieve either "victory or death", Steinbeck is willing to risk his life in the course of the hunt for his lost self, *his* Yellowstone bear.

Charley and Steinbeck continue on towards the Pacific Ocean, crossing the Continental Divide. Steinbeck refers to it as “The Great Divide” and is looking forward to it with excitement. “I saw in my mind escarpments rising in to the clouds, a kind of natural Great Wall of China. [...] I passed it as I saw the sign, but stopped and backed up and got out and straddled it.”(166) The place is not what Steinbeck had expected, but the *idea* gets to him.

“As I stood over it facing south it had a strange impact on me that rain falling on my right foot must fall into the Pacific Ocean, while that on my left foot would eventually find its way after uncountable miles to the Atlantic. The place wasn't impressive enough to carry a stupendous fact like that.”(166)

This is a sharp contrast to the national park Steinbeck has just left. The idea of two drops of water falling within one square foot, one ending up in the Pacific Ocean and the other in the Atlantic Ocean, leaves more impact on Steinbeck than nature's freak show in Yellowstone. And yet, the divide is acknowledged only with a small sign along the road while Yellowstone is fenced off, promoted, marketed and visited by 1,443,288 tourists, among them an American writer with his poodle.²⁰⁴ Paradoxical. And with this idea in mind Steinbeck and Charley drive on, not into the sunset but on to the West.

3.2.1.4. The Pacific States

“The Pacific is my home ocean; I knew it first, grew up on its shore, collected marine animals along the coast. I know its moods, its color, its nature. It was very far inland that I caught the first smell of the Pacific.”(180)

Steinbeck and Charley make their way through Washington State towards Seattle. Steinbeck describes the landscape as “lush and lovely”, a few new dams and power lines have been built, but nothing dramatic that would have changed the landscape drastically. But the closer they get to Seattle, the more Steinbeck has to accept the fact that also the cities in the west have been infected with the virus of growth.

“It was here in Washington that I saw it first. I remembered Seattle as a town sitting on hills beside a matchless harborage – a little city of space and trees and gardens, its houses matched to such a background. It is no longer so. [...] The highways eight lanes wide cut like glaciers through the uneasy land. This Seattle had no relation to the one I remembered.”(181)

Nostalgia is back. Gone are the days when “country lanes rich with berries” spread in every direction. They are now replaced by “high wire fences and mile-long factories” and “yellow smoke of progress”. (181) Steinbeck looks for signs of

²⁰⁴ Number of Visitors in 1960 according to the National Park Service, US Department of Interior
<https://www.nps.gov/yell/parkmgmt/historicstats.htm>

the long gone city he knew but he does not find any. "This Seattle was not something changed that I once knew. It was a new thing. "(181) The total change of Seattle must have hurt even more than the growth of the cities in the east. This was Steinbeck's home coast, this was where he had grown up, the strip of land he knew better than any other, and it had changed to an extent that it had become unrecognizable.

"This sounds as though I bemoan an older time, which is the preoccupation of the old, or cultivate an opposition to change, which is the currency of the rich and stupid. It is not so."(181) Steinbeck is not opposed to change and progress, but he doubts the positive outcome. "I wonder why progress looks so much like destruction."(181)

The sight of Seattle, paired with his observations in the East, finally inspire Steinbeck to come up with a generality about the growth of American cities.

"And here a generality concerning the growth of American cities, seemingly true of all of them I know. When a city begins to grow and spread outward, from the edges, the center which was once its glory is in a sense abandoned to time. Then the buildings grow dark and a kind of decay sets in; poorer people move in as the rents fall, and small fringe businesses take the place of once flowering establishments. The district is still too good to tear down and too outmoded to be desirable. Besides, all the energy has flowed out to the new developments, to the semi-rural supermarkets, the outdoor movies, new houses with wide lawns and stucco schools where children are confirmed their illiteracy. The old port with narrow streets and cobbled surfaces, smoke-grimed, goes into a period of desolation inhabited at night by the vague ruins of men, the lotus eaters who struggle daily toward unconsciousness by way of raw alcohol. Nearly every city I know has such a dying mother of violence and despair where at night the brightness of the street lamps is sucked away and policemen walk in pairs."(182)

This is not a pretty picture Steinbeck is painting here and we can see why he avoids big cities as much as possible. Considering the rural exodus, this is the world these people chose to live in, away from Steinbeck's beloved pastoral world into a badger hole. But Steinbeck also tries to offer an outlook into the future, more of a wish than anything else. "And then one day perhaps the city returns and rips out the sore and builds a monument to its past."(182)

He stays in Seattle only for a day before starting to move south towards his hometown.

"Quite naturally, as we moved down the beautiful coast my method of travel was changed. Each evening I found a pleasant auto court to rest in, beautiful new places that have sprung up in recent years. Now I began to experience a tendency in the West that perhaps I am too old to accept. It is the principle of do it yourself."(183)

Steinbeck is back to mourning a loss, this time it is the loss of service. He is forced to make his own toast at breakfast, to get his own paper, and if he wants ice for his drinks he simply has to walk down the hallway to the machine. This is not what Steinbeck came to do. He is traveling to meet people, to talk to them, get to know them, and eventually write about them. But in this new world of traveling human contact has been replaced with lonesome luxury. But then, on the other hand, what Steinbeck is mourning now is what helps him stay anonymous: hardly any contact with the management, other guests coming and going silently, no questions asked about his purpose or origins. The invention of the self-catering holiday had made human contact unnecessary and obsolete and that is too much for Steinbeck, man of people.

After the tire-incident in Oregon, Charley and Steinbeck cross the border into California and Steinbeck is very much looking forward to seeing his old friends again, the sequoias sempervirens.

“The redwoods, once seen, leave a mark or create a vision that stays with you always. No one has ever successfully painted or photographed a redwood tree. The feeling they produce is not transferable. From them comes silence and awe.”(189)

These trees, easily over three hundred feet high and over two thousand years old, do not suffer the same fate as “nature’s freaks” in Yellowstone National Park. They are protected, but they are not enclosed and gaped at. Not yet, at least, but by 1968 Redwood National Park was created and how interesting it would have been to hear Steinbeck’s opinion on his “holy” trees being turned into exhibits.

“Of course, many of the ancient groves have been lumbered off, but many of the stately monuments remain and will remain, for a good and interesting reason. States and governments could not buy and protect these holy trees. This being so, clubs, organizations, even individuals, bought them and dedicated them to the future.” (189-190)

But maybe I am wronging him here. He was obviously interested in protecting the sempervirens and at a time when ninety percent of the groves had been lumbered, maybe he would have accepted the establishment of the national park as the only way to protect these giants and to pay them “respect”. (189)

After the shock of seeing Seattle so changed, the redwoods are a sacred garden of tranquility, and a place to recharge and to be brought back down to earth. Steinbeck and Charley spend two days among the coastal redwoods. “To me there’s a remote and cloistered feeling here.”(192) Steinbeck spends the time pondering over earth’s history and the sequoias’ place in it. They had once populated most of Northern

America and Europe, but when the glaciers started moving south, they wiped them out almost everywhere but here. "It's not only their unbelievable stature, nor the color which seems to shift and vary under your eyes, no, they are not like any trees we know, they are ambassadors from another time."(189) These trees have seen a large part of human history, the way too fast development of the past hundred years, and their offspring will probably still live to see the next two thousand years.

"Can it be that we do not love to be reminded that we are very young and callow in a world that was old when we came into it? And could there be a strong resistance to the certainty that a living world will continue its stately way when we no longer inhabit it?"(193)

The recurring motif of transience is present here again, this time not so much the mortality of an American writer but of the human race. The forefathers of these sempervirens had seen the dinosaurs rule the earth, and for them so far we were not much more than the blink of an eye, a new species standing on the verge of destroying itself in an atomic war.

Steinbeck is headed for Salinas, the town where he grew up and where his family still lives. On the way he is overwhelmed by the sheer amount of mobile homes, a number so large compared to the Middle West that "they bring with them a new problem. These people partake of all the local facilities, the hospitals, the schools, police protection, welfare programs, and so far they do not pay taxes."(196) The concept of owning a house but not a property was new. It was something that contradicted the American character. "The concept of real property is deeply implanted in us as the source and symbol of wealth. And now a vast number of people have found a way to bypass it."(196) Now, bypassing taxes was another feature of the American character, or rather the tendency to "generally admire those who can escape taxes", but here it was becoming a serious problem. (196-7) The tax weight was resting on the property owners who would soon no longer be able to afford the taxes on their land, and "ownership will become a penalty, and this will be the apex of a pyramid of paradoxes. [...] We have overcome all enemies but ourselves."(197)

Before reaching his home town Steinbeck has to cross the Golden Gate Bridge and pass through San Francisco. The city where he spent his days as a young man "while others were being a lost generation in Paris" welcomes back her son with a "show".(197) San Francisco has not changed. "It remained the city I remembered, so confident of its greatness that it can afford to be kind. It had been kind to me in

the days of my poverty and it did not resent my temporary solvency.”(198) Finally, after crossing the whole continent, Steinbeck has found a city not infected with the growth virus, a place he left behind many decades ago just to find it unchanged and as beautiful as in his memories.

Reconciled and relieved after the disappointment of seeing Seattle so utterly changed, San Francisco has lifted Steinbeck’s spirits and sends him off southward to his hometown Salinas. “I remember Salinas, the town of my birth, when it proudly announced four thousand citizens.”(195-6) These days are over. Salinas has caught the growth virus, now has eighty thousand citizens and is still growing. “I find it difficult to write about my native place, northern California.”(194) He is not sure what to expect and what to find, and is concerned that he will not be able to see clearly. His memories of the place where he grew up are diverse, “one printed over another until the whole thing blurs. What it is is warped with memory of what it was and that with what happened there to me, the whole bundle wracked until objectiveness is nigh impossible. “(194) The people of Salinas are strangers and Steinbeck feels some sort of resentment towards them that dates back to his childhood.

“[...] I felt resentment towards the strangers swamping what I thought of as my country [...]. And of course these new people will resent the newer people. I remember when I was a child we responded to the natural dislike of the stranger.”(195)

With the redwoods still on his mind he wonders if they are the true natives of California, “[c]ould that be why the sequoias make folks nervous?”(195) Either way, Steinbeck is back to his birthplace and has to deal with change, not only Salinas’s but also his own.

Steinbeck’s first accounts of his visit are dedicated to his family and friends, in the course of which he gets lost in nostalgia.

“In my flurry of nostalgic spite, I have done the Monterey Peninsula a disservice. It is a beautiful place, clean, well run, and progressive. The beaches are clean where once they festered with fish guts and flies. The canneries which once put up a sickening stench are gone, their places filled with restaurants, antique shops, and the like. They fish for tourists now, not pilchards, and that species they are not likely to wipe out.”(205)

Memories and new impressions are mingling and Steinbeck only gradually realizes that his hometown has changed and having lived away he has not changed with it. “In my memory it stood as it once did and its outward appearance confused and angered me.”(205) And this seems to be a generality concerning America.

“What I am about to tell must be the experience of very many in this nation where a many wander and come back. [...] Tom Wolfe was right. You can’t go home again because home has ceased to exist except in the mothballs of memory.”(206)

Steinbeck is ready to leave the Pacific coast behind. He has shared his fear and frustration about the growth of Seattle and cities in general, has vented his disregard for the DIY-culture of motels, and praised the mythical and impressive redwoods. His love for San Francisco remains unchanged but what was once his hometown is now a place full of strangers. But before he leaves Salinas for the last time, he takes Charley up to Fremont’s peak and “[h]ere on these high rocks [his] memory myth repaired itself.”(207) This is the spot where Steinbeck wants his remains to be buried. From up here he can look down onto the valley and see the places where he spent his childhood. “In the spring, [...], when the valley is carpeted with blue lupines like a flowery sea, there’s the smell of heaven up here, the smell of heaven,” Steinbeck’s heaven.(207)

3.2.1.5. The South

“Starting on my return journey, I realized by now that I could not see everything. My impressionable gelatin plate was getting muddled. I determined to inspect two more sections and then call it a day – Texas and a sampling of the Deep South.”(210)

At this point, the quest has ended even though the journey is not over. Steinbeck has spoken to many people, has seen the changing landscapes of the East and the West and has said his good-byes to his hometown. But he has to continue if only to get Charley, *Rocinante* and himself back to New York. Texas is impossible to avoid on his way home and as a sample from the Deep South he ends up choosing New Orleans, a city he has been to before, as we will hear later. He has stopped seeing and hearing and therefore we do not learn even nearly as much about the Southern landscape and cities as we learned about the North and the Middle West. Bound to the road and making miles, Steinbeck does not pay very much attention to his surroundings but instead uses the time on the road to think about many general topics concerning mankind and life, with the exception of a long description of Texas and his perception of the Louisiana cheerleaders.

However, before Steinbeck gets to Texas, he first has to get out of California and across Arizona and New Mexico. To successfully achieve this he has to navigate through the Mojave. “The Mojave is a big desert and a frightening one. It’s as

though nature tested a man for endurance and constancy to prove whether he was good enough to get to California.”(211) Resting in *Rocinante’s* shade somewhere in the desert, Steinbeck ponders on the mythical desert and its inhabitants. “I have driven through the Southwest many times, and even more often have flown over it – a great and mysterious wasteland, a sun-punished place.”(214) But the place is by no means void of life. Apart from two coyotes, there are also people to be found there.

“Follow the double line of wheel tracks through sand and rock and you will find a habitation somewhere huddled in a protected place, with a few trees pointing their roots at under-earth water, a patch of starveling corn and squash, and strips of jerky hanging on a string. There is breed of desert men, not hiding exactly but gone to sanctuary from the sins of confusion.”(214)

But more interesting than the people fighting the dangers of the desert are the animals and plants who have come up with brilliant ways of “finding or creating shade” and techniques to “protect [their] inward small moistness.”(216) Many animals only come out at night and turn the desert into a place bursting with life. And then Steinbeck takes us back to the very beginning of life. The Mojave has inspired him to think about the earliest life forms on this planet.

“When, very late in the history of our planet, the incredible accident of life occurred, a balance of chemical factors, combined with temperature, in quantities and in kinds so delicate as to be unlikely, all came together in the retort of time and a new thing emerged, soft and helpless and unprotected in the savage world of unlife.”(217)

From that very moment on, this new thing had the most important ingredient any life can have on this planet “- the factor of survival.” (217) This is life’s “first quality, its duty, preoccupation, direction, and end”, to go on living, to survive and to adapt.

“Life could not change the sun or water the desert, so it changed itself. The desert, being an unwanted place, might well be the last stand of life against unlife. For in the rich and moist and wanted areas of the world, life pyramids against itself and in its confusion has finally allied itself with the enemy non-life.”(217)

This ingredient of life is very strong in the American character. Explorers and settlers have fought hardships to get through the Mojave, and they *have* proven they are willing to survive, willing to fight hardships to settle this continent. But with this willingness to survive seems to come a blindness for the dangers of the means mankind has chosen, means that are intended to protect life when actually being built to destroy.

There is a greater danger, much larger than nature can handle. "If the most versatile of living forms, the human, now fights for survival as it always has, it can eliminate not only itself but all other life." (218) The vision of an atomic war comes back when Steinbeck presents his theory: if the bomb should fall it will be life forms coming from the desert which are the fittest to populate the planet. "For the inhabitants of the desert are well trained and well armed against desolation." (218) But it is not only the rattlesnake, the jackrabbit, and the coyote, but the "lone man and his sun-toughened wife who cling to the shade" who will "re-emerge from the desert" and be the "last hope of life against non-life." (218)

Steinbeck leaves the desert behind, physically and mentally. When he crosses the state lines he encounters state police. "Like most Americans I am no lover of cops, and the consistent investigation of city forces for bribery, brutality, and a long and picturesque list of malfeasances is not designed to reassure me." (220) This hostility, however, is not directed against the state police Steinbeck meets along the state lines.

"By simple expedient of recruiting intelligent and educated men, paying them adequately, and setting them beyond political coercion, many states have succeeded in creating elite corps of men, secure in their dignity and proud of their service." (220)

The problem with the police force in the cities lies, according to Steinbeck, with the political organizations. As long as these "retain the slightest power to reward or punish" the cities will not find it necessary to reorganize their police. This is just another drawback in the cities, just another motivation for Steinbeck to avoid them on his journey, and just another reason why he mourns the loss of rural culture and the picturesque countryside. By the time he reaches the Continental Divide he has to admit that he has stopped seeing

"When I started this narrative, I knew that sooner or later I would have to have a go at Texas, and I dreaded it.[...] Let me say in the beginning that even if I wanted to avoid Texas I could not, for I am wived in Texas and mother-in-lawed and uncled and aunted and cousined with an inch of my life." (228)

Apart from California, Texas is the only State on Steinbeck's journey where he has relations. His wife Elaine is from Texas and not only for this reason, but many others we are about to learn that Texas and Texans are. (227-228)

"By its nature and its size Texas invites generalities, and the generalities usually end up as a paradox," but Steinbeck dabbles in generalities anyways. (232)

“And there's an opening covey of generalities. A Texan outside of Texas is a foreigner. My wife refers to herself as the Texan that got away, but that is only partly true. She has virtually no accent until she talks to a Texan, when she instantly reverts. [...] I've studied the Texas problem from many angles and for many years. And of course one of my truths is inevitably canceled by another. Outside their state I think Texans are a little frightened and very tender in their feelings, and these qualities cause boasting, arrogance, and noisy complacency – the outlets of shy children. At home Texans are none of these things. The ones I know are gracious, friendly, generous, and quiet.”(228)

Apart from this detailed generality on the Texan character, Steinbeck senses the tradition of “tough and versatile frontiersmen”(229) in the Texan state of mind. “Texas is [emphasize!] a state of mind. Texas is obsession. Above all, Texas is a nation in every sense of the word.”(228)

“The tradition of the land is deep fixed in the Texas psyche.”(230) Owning a ranch is basically obligatory for anyone who can afford it and the dream of running cattle is innate to a Texan. Being Texan is more than a state of mind; being Texan is like a religion. “And it is true to the extent that people either passionately love Texas or passionately hate it”.(230)

There is one characteristic, however, that is more Texan than any heeled boot, Stetson hat or ranch cattle.

“Texas is one thing. For all its enormous range of space, climate, and physical appearance, and for all the internal squabbles, contentions, and strivings, Texas has a tight cohesiveness perhaps stronger than any other section of America. Rich, poor, Panhandle, Gulf, city, country, Texas is the obsession, the proper study and the passionate possession of all Texans.”(230)

This obsession with the state creates energy, “boundless and explosive” energy, that connects the people with the land and grounds them, roots them. (231) Even though Texas is one thing, Steinbeck notes that “there is no physical or geographical unity in Texas.” The landscapes are diverse and ever changing, hills and lakes, orchards and sagebrush grazing, humidity and crystal clear air are so different but do not affect the Texan spirit of unity, because the “unity lies in the mind.”(233)

Steinbeck's perceptions show a diverse state with natural beauty and generous people, who are deeply rooted in their land and take pride in it like no other. But Steinbeck is careful when it comes to his own perspectives, does not take sides and avoids criticism. “In the first place I knew the countryside, and in the second I had friends and relatives by marriage, and such a situation makes objectivity practically impossible, for I know no place where hospitality is practiced so fervently as in Texas.”(234) Naturally, as a good guest, Steinbeck does not want to be disrespectful

to the host and therefore shares the sum of all the positive impressions and pleasurable experiences. He spends a wonderful Thanksgiving with rich Texan acquaintances but makes it clear that these days were extraordinary and by no means daily routine.

When Steinbeck finally reaches his last destination, the Deep South, he is just as careful about his perceptions as he was in Texas.

“I faced the south with dread. Here, I knew, were pain and confusion and all the maniac results of bewilderment and fear. [...] I knew, as everyone knows, that true but incomplete statement of the problem – that an original sin of the fathers was being visited on the children of succeeding generations.”(245)

He sees the underlying problem and claims to know the reasons for the violent situation in the South, but he does not understand it. When Southern friends of his, African-American and white, start discussing this topic, Steinbeck is left outside. “[...] I have seen and felt them go into a room of experience into which I cannot enter.”(245) Rather than giving his opinion in general about the South, he attaches it to his observations and encounters, this way disguising it as a mere reaction to the people he meets and events he witnesses. “Thus it remains that I am basically unfitted to take sides in the racial conflict.”(247)

We do not learn much about the landscape of Louisiana, or any of the other southern states Steinbeck crosses. His visit to the Deep South is dominated by his experiences and encounters and his accounts focus on the people he meets. Here, in these surroundings, he does not dare to come up with a generality. He is an outsider who came to witness and not to judge and can therefore only observe and recount.

“[...] I want to be very clear about one thing. I have not intended to present, nor do I think I have presented, any kind of cross section so that the reader can say, ‘He thinks he has presented a true picture of the South.’ I don’t. I’ve only told what a few people said to me and what I saw.” (273)

And here, Steinbeck’s journey comes to an end: “many a trip continues long after movement in time and space have ceased. [...] My own journey started long before I left, and was over before I returned.”(274)

3.2.2. *Bill Bryson’s America*

3.2.2.1. Generalities

Bryson gives many details when describing the country and shares his observations on almost every little hamlet he passes through. No matter how interesting and amusing his descriptions are, the following chapters can only deal with a selective overview.

When two inches on a map turn out to amount to hours and hours of driving, one has to adjust one's definition of distance. Bryson learns this lesson early in his journey when he is crossing from Hannibal, Missouri, to Springfield, Illinois.

"I was only slowly adjusting to the continental scale of America, where states are the size of countries. [...] You go through a little place and the dinette looks crowded, so you think, 'Oh, I'll wait till I get to Fuddville before I stop for coffee,' [...] and then you get out on the highway and a sign says FUDDVILLE 102 MILES. And you realize that you are dealing with another scale of geography altogether." (55)

The continent is vast and having lived in Britain for so long, Bryson has lost his sense for distances.

When on a road trip the road is your best friend, or it becomes your worst enemy. Bryson is caught in a world between interstates and back roads, both of them posing dangers of their own. When dealing with back roads maps often indicate that they are shortcuts, while actually they are unsigned networks.

"And the system of roads is only cruelly hinted at. You look at the map and think you spy a short cut between, say, Weinerville and Bewilderment, a straight grey line of country road that promises to shave thirty minutes from your driving time. But when you leave the main highway, you find yourself in a network of unrecorded back roads, radiating out across the countryside like cracks in a pane of broken glass. The whole business of finding your way around becomes laden with frustration." (55)

Bryson manages to get lost more than once, just like his father would drive around amusement parks for hours before finding the right turn into the parking lot. The alternative, on the other hand, are the interstates. These roads are straight and wide and Bryson considers the speed limit of 55 mph way too low for such a road. "And there's no sense of driving. You need to put a hand to the wheel occasionally just to confirm your course," but the rest of the time you are free to do "the most intricate things – count your money, brush your hair, tidy up the car," and many more. (59) Of course, this bears the danger of getting so caught up in the activity that you can end up losing control over the two tons of steel you are steering with your pinkie on the wheel and your eyes on the backseat in search of snack food.

But there is another danger on these interstates, one that will not effect your physical well-being, but your mental health.

"The one thing that can be said is that it leaves you time to think, and to consider questions like why is it that the trees along highways never grow? [...] Why can't they make cereal boxes with pouring spouts? [...] And why is that when you clean a sink, no matter how long you let the water run or how much you wipe it with a cloth there's always a strand of hair and some bits of wet fluff left behind? And just what do the Spanish see in flamenco music?"

On such roads, cutting through uneventful landscape, the mind has a tendency to wander off and leave an empty hull behind in the car. "In a forlorn effort to keep from losing my mind, I switched on the radio," but it turns out that listening to local radio stations is just as uneventful as the landscape, with news not reaching beyond local city limits.(60) So Bryson does the only thing he can do to leave this uneventful world. "At Litchfield, I left the interstate vowing not to get on again if I could possibly help it".(61) Suddenly the world is changed. Apart from turns, back roads offer immediate stimulation to the eye and mind. "There were farms and houses and little towns to look at. [...] The landscape flashed past, more absorbing than before, more hilly and varied, and the foliage was a darker blur of green."(61)

Some of these back roads are marked as scenic roads, implying that the landscape there is exceptionally pretty and particularly worth seeing. But Bryson soon learns that the dotted orange line indicating scenic roads are scattered randomly over his maps. Early in his journey on the way to Keokuk, he follows a scenic route.

"This stretch of the road was marked on my map as a scenic route, though these things are decidedly relative. Talking about a scenic route in south-east Iowa is like talking about a good Barry Manilow album. You have to make certain allowances."(38)

It turns out these allowances are not limited to Iowa and Barry, but apply to most scenic routes on Bryson's map. After visiting Roosevelt's cabin in Warm Springs he follows a scenic road to Macon, "but there didn't seem to be a whole lot scenic about it. It wasn't unscenic particularly, it just wasn't scenic. I was beginning to suspect that the scenic route designations on my maps had been applied somewhat at random."(98) Scenery seems to be in the eye of the beholder, and Bryson's eye beholds the landscape essentially differently than the mapmaker's eye.

"I can imagine some guy who had never been south of Jersey City sitting in an office in New York and saying, 'Warm Springs to Macon? Ooh, that sounds nice,' and then carefully drawing in the orange dotted line that signifies a scenic route, his tongue sticking ever so slightly out of the corner of his mouth."(98)

Along these roads, scenic or not, Bryson is on the search of Amalgam, the perfect small town. It is the town he knows from fiction, from the books he read as a child and the TV shows he watched. This town is always a small, cheerful community with a lively town square, a few historic buildings, white fences and people strolling around. Early in his journey Bryson has to realize that this place does not exist. Many towns have lost their charm and character, their centers are empty and boarded up, the little stores and restaurants are closed down. People obviously

prefer to drive to the outskirts of their towns to do their shopping in impersonal crowded malls. Once these little towns all over America had a character of their own, but gradually they are becoming more and more alike: with their fast food restaurants, shopping malls and neglected city centers they have turned into *Anywhere*.

A recurring theme in *The Lost Continent* that is connected to Bryson's search for Amalgam is the preservation of the old. In Colonial Williamsburg Bryson notes for the first time, no matter how dubious the place is, that "it is at least a model town. It makes you realize what an immeasurably nice place much of America could be if only people possessed the same instinct for preservation as they do in Europe." (136) This is not the only time Bryson stumbles across a historic place that has almost been lost because nobody could see its value, and I am not talking about the financial value. Later, I will discuss Mount Vernon but let me add here that the home of George Washington was almost lost because neither the US government nor the State of Virginia were interested in buying it. And there are more places and events like that.

"Generally speaking – which is of course always a dangerous thing to do, generally speaking – Americans revere the past only as long as there is some money in it somewhere and it doesn't mean going without air-conditioning, free parking and other essential conveniences." (270)

Bryson comes up with this generality when he is visiting his niece in Santa Fe. She takes him to see the Loretto Chapel, famous for its wooden staircase. "The story is that the nuns of the chapel prayed for someone to build them a staircase and an anonymous carpenter turned up, worked on the staircase for six months and then disappeared without payment as mysteriously as he had arrived." (270) For a hundred years the nuns "milked this story" until one day they sold the Loretto Chapel with its famous spiral staircase to a private company which is now charging money if you want to visit it. (270) "Preserving the past for its own sake doesn't come into it much." (270) Bryson mourns the loss of large parts of the American history and tradition. Not only the nuns of Santa Fe, but also the State of Virginia and the American government behave in the same way. "They are simply behaving in the customary American way. I find that very sad. It is no wonder that so few things last for more than a generation in America." (271)

3.2.2.2. The Midwest

Iowa is the first state we are introduced to. It is Bryson's home state and the place he could not wait to leave behind.

"When you come from Des Moines you either accept the fact without question and settle down with a local girl named Bobbi and get a job at the Firestone factory and live there for ever and ever, or you spend your adolescence moaning at length about what dump it is and how you can't wait to get out, and then you settle down with a local girl named Bobbi and get a job at the Firestone factory and live there for ever and ever. Hardly anyone ever leaves."(11)

But Bryson did. In his memory Iowa is a place "[w]ith no natural features of note, no national parks, no battlefields or famous birthplaces"(15) and besides it is completely flat. "Stand on two phone books almost anywhere in Iowa and you get a view."(25) He is not very fond of his home state, even admits that when he was a child he was already not feeling at home and knew he "wanted to step outside [his] front door and *be* somewhere."(16) Now he has returned after almost a decade of living in England and it has not improved. No, it has worsened. "And now when I came home it was to a foreign country, full of serial murderers and sports teams in the wrong towns (the Indianapolis Colts? the Toronto Blue Jays?) and a personable old fart who was President."(16)

When Bryson sets out on his journey in September his home state seems suddenly changed. After having spent the summer at home in Britain, where the skies had been hung with clouds and life had seemed "like living inside Tupperware", Iowa shows off bright sunlight.(24) "Iowa was hysterical with colour and light. Roadside barns were a glossy red, the sky a deep, hypnotic blue; fields of mustard and green stretched out before me. Flecks of mica glittered in the rolling road. [...] Squinting in the unaccustomed brilliance, I followed the highway to Otley."(24) There might not be many landmarks in Iowa but the weather for sure is splendid.

It even becomes more splendid when Bryson rolls into "[t]he best country town in Iowa": Pella.(27) His description of the little town is very close to what we can imagine Amalgam to be like.

"So I was pleased to note, as I rolled into the town on this fine September morn, that there were still windmills whirling in many a front yard. [...] The square was thick with trees and flower-beds of blazing salvias and glowing marigolds. [...] The stores around the square were of the cereal box architecture favoured by small-town stores throughout the Midwest, but with gingerbread cornices and other cheery embellishments."(27)

But for Pella to become Amalgam, there is something missing: the people. Bryson wanders about and nowhere he looks does he see other people. He starts feeling a

little uncomfortable, worried that “perhaps everybody has been poisoned in the night by a leak of odorless gas” and imagines Pella becoming “a kind of Pompeii of the plains.”(28) But of course, there are people around, and while it was the lack of people first that prevented Pella from becoming Amalgam, it now is the presence of people. When suddenly a song by *Frankie Goes to Hollywood* blares through town, a rather uncharming voice can be heard. “IF YOU DON’T TURN THAT THING THE FUCK OFF RIGHT NOW I’M GONNA COME OVER THERE AND POUND YOUR HEAD IN!”(28-29) And that was the story how Pella almost became Amalgam.

Bryson’s next destination is Missouri. He visits Hannibal, the birth place of Mark Twain, and takes a look at his childhood home. The presentation is horrible but still it attracts 135,000 visitors a year. Hannibal itself is run down, with Hotels boarded up – “the whole place was sad an awful.”(51) This is about as much as we get to read about Missouri. There are some parallels here, however, between Twain and Bryson. Bryson criticizes the way the city makes money with the exploitation of Mark Twain to the point where you can order a Tom Sawyer burger at the Mark Twain Drive-In Restaurant. “It is worth remembering that Twain got the hell out of both Hannibal and Missouri as soon as he could, and was always disinclined to come back.”(50) Maybe one day an undiscovered piece by Mark Twain will appear beginning with the words ‘I come from Hannibal, Missouri. Somebody had to.’ But Twain’s rejection of his birthplace is even stronger than Bryson’s. “I began to understand why Clemens didn’t just leave town but also changed his name.”(50-51) And then it all falls into place when Bryson sees the parking lot packed with Missouri license plates saying ‘Missouri – The Show Me State’. “I wondered idly if this could be short for ‘Show Me the Way to Any Other State.’”(51)

And thus, Bryson heads for Illinois. He stops to visit New Salem, where Abraham Lincoln spent a few years as a young man. The town was completely reconstructed and has twenty log cabins on display to give an impression of what life was like in those days. “The historical research was impressively diligent. The only problem was that it became a little repetitive after a while.”(58) As a child Bryson had loved this place, but now he could not understand what exactly had held an appeal for a small boy. “I mused for a few moments on the question of which was worse, to lead a life so boring that you are easily enchanted or a life so full of stimulus that you are easily bored.”(59) This place was definitely better than Mark Twain’s home,

however, the city in this case had tried too hard and less would have been more. “Once you have looked through the windows of fourteen log cabins, you find yourself approaching number fifteen with a certain diminution of enthusiasm, and by the time you reach number twenty it is really only politeness that impels you onward.”(58)

The last glimpse we get of Illinois is the town Carbondale, where Bryson spends the night. He is looking forward to the town, bearing in mind that he is looking for his Amalgam. “It used to be that when you came to the outskirts of a town you would find a gas station and a Dairy Queen, maybe a motel or two if it was a busy road or the town had a college.”(62) But things have changed since the 1950s. There are miles and miles of fast food places, motels, shopping malls and parking lots lining the streets. “Carbondale appeared to have nothing else. I drove in on a road that became a two-mile strip of shopping centres, and gas stations, K-Marts, J.C. Penneys, Hardees and McDonald’s. And then, abruptly, I was in the country again.”(62) Bryson turns around, heads back into town on a different street and experiences the exact same thing. “The town had no centre. It had been eaten by shopping malls.”(62) This is not Amalgam, this is the exact opposite. The town has not only lost its center, it has lost its heart.

3.2.2.3. The South

Bryson has a clear image of the South on his mind.

“I followed Highway 7 south towards Oxford. It took me along the western edge of the Holly Springs National Forest, which seemed to be mostly swamp and scrubland. I was disappointed. I had half expected that as soon as I crossed into Mississippi there would be Spanish mosses hanging from the trees”.(74)

It takes another day for Bryson to finally see his first cotton fields. They were “dark and scrubby but with fluffs of real cotton poling out from every plant. The fields are surprisingly small.”(84) As a Midwesterner Bryson is used to fields that “sweep away to the horizon” but here they are only “the size of a few vegetable patches.”(84) Scattered along the highway are also shacks, like the ones Bryson has seen before. “Some of them look dangerously uninhabitable, with sagging roofs and walls that looked as if they had been cannon-balled.”(84) What he describes is a world of poverty, a *black* world of poverty, and he remarks that “[t]hat was the most arresting difference about the South – the number of black people everywhere.” We learn that in the 1980s thirty-five percent of the Mississippi population were African-American, and “[y]et until as recently as twenty-five years ago, in many of

those counties not a single black person was registered to vote.”(85) Just when Bryson’s picture of the Deep South is about to confirm itself – poverty, racial separation – he reaches Columbus, hometown of Tennessee Williams. “With so much poverty everywhere, Columbus came as a welcome surprise. It was a splendid little town”.(85) What surprises Bryson most is that the town seems to have been preserved and presents itself unchanged since about 1955. He finds many charming buildings and old-fashioned stores, and he comes to the conclusion, if he paired Columbus with Pella, he would almost have his “long-sought Amalgam.”(86) Only then, however, does he get the notion that Amalgam seems to be nonexistent after all, at least all in one spot. “I was beginning to realize that I was never going to find it in one place. I would have to collect it piecemeal - a courthouse here, a fire station there – and here I had found several pieces.”(86) He reads the local newspaper and is pleased to read about the low crime rate. Secretly renaming the paper *Amalgam Commercial Dispatch*, Bryson is almost falling in love with Columbus and even admits he could imagine to live here. Almost – until he wants to have lunch. “Yew honestly a breast menu, honey?” the waitress asks.(87) And this is when he has the second enlightenment that day. “I couldn’t understand a word these people said to me. [...] It isn’t just the indistinctness with which Southerners speak that makes it so difficult to follow, it’s also the slowness. [...] Living here would drive me crazy. Slowly.”(87)

The image Bryson has of the South is gradually changing as he travels around Missouri, Mississippi, Georgia and Alabama. He encounters charming little towns, well-managed places of interests and tranquil cities. In fact, traveling the South and visiting cities like Savannah and Charleston, raise his expectations of what his country has to offer to a point where they can only be disappointed. “I turned around and walked back to the car, the sun warm on my back, and had the sneaking feeling that after such perfection things were bound to be downhill from now on.”(106)

Savannah is the first real highlight in the South. “I stood agog Lafayette Square in Savannah, amid brick paths, trickling fountains and dark trees hung with Spanish moss. [...] I did not know that such perfection existed in America.”(99) The houses are old but well-kept and still inhabited, the squares are cool and quiet and people actually live downtown. This is not one of the horrible, heartless heaps of humans, but a wonderful world with a business district “frozen in a perpetual 1959”.(100)

What does disturb the perfect picture, however, are the large hotel chains and their horrible buildings. “Towards the end of the street stood a big new Hyatt Regency hotel, an instantly depressing sight,” designed by the “Fuck You school of architecture”.(102) Unfortunately for Savannah, hotels like this one are spread over the city. Bryson does not understand the tendency in American architecture and city planning to replace the beautiful old with something ugly and new. Not only buildings are affected, but as we have already seen, whole town centers are left to decay for the sake of shopping malls with food courts, drawing life away from the towns to the outskirts.

Bryson crosses the Savannah River into South Carolina and on to Charleston. “I drove along what appeared on my map to be a meandering coast road, but was in fact a meandering inland road.”(103) The maps have been misleading again. “This stretch of coast is littered with islands, inlets, bays, and beaches of rolling sand dunes, but I saw precious little of it.”(103) In Beaufort he spends a mere eighteen minutes after he realizes the town’s obsession with law and order. “The park was full of signs instructing you not to enjoy yourself or do anything impertinent.”(104) A town where Bryson is not allowed to enjoy himself is clearly not likely to become Amalgam and he drives on to Charleston.

“I had thought that Savannah was the most becoming American city I had ever seen, but it thumped into second place soon after my arrival in Charleston.”(104) This is so unlike what Bryson had expected the South to be like. Beautiful old homes stretch along the harbor, shady streets provide protection from the sunlight for the children playing in the streets and for the mothers, “all of them white, all of them young, all of them rich, gossip[ing] on the front steps.”(105) This is not suburbia, with houses that look alike, minivans in every driveway and people not engaging in any human contact. “It made me realize how much cars and suburbs – and indiscriminate wealth – have spoiled American life. Charleston had the climate and ambience of a Naples, but the wealth and style of a big American city. I was enchanted.”(105)

And so, Bryson leaves the Deep South behind to enter the Middle Atlantic States.

3.2.2.4. The Middle Atlantic States

His first encounter with the Middle Atlantic States is South Carolina, according to Bryson’s *Mobil Travel Guide*. But the heat and the look of the land remind Bryson

more of the South, and also the people sound Southern. But when he reaches the North Carolina border the landscape changes.

“At the North Carolina border, the dull landscape ended abruptly, as if by decree. Suddenly the countryside rose and fell in majestic undulations, full of creeping thickets and laurel, rhododendron and palmetto. At each hilltop the landscape opened out to reveal hazy views of the Blue Ridge Mountains, part of the Appalachian chain.”(108)

Bryson is headed for the Great Smoky Mountains, which are also a part of the chain. As Bryson always does, he offers some hard facts about the size of the national park and its yearly number of visitors. On the way to the park he has to drive through Cherokee, the biggest Indian reservation in the eastern United States.

“[I]t was packed from one end to the other with souvenir stores selling tawdry Indian trinkets, all of them with big signs on their roofs and sides saying Moccasins! Indian Jewelry! Tomahawks! Polished Gemstones! Crappy items of every description!”(115)

Bryson hates it. This town is not only ugly and full of likewise ugly tourists, but it reminds him of dark part of his country’s history. With no other means of income, the Native Americans have no other choice but to cater to the needs of the tourist industry by marketing their culture. This is not about the authentic experience and learning about native culture, but for the tourists the point is entertainment, for the Native Americans it is survival. The national park stands in sharp contrast to the experience in Cherokee, because American national parks are uninhabited. But in Bryson’s opinion this is not a good thing either.

“The Smoky Mountains were once full of hillbillies who lived in cabins up in the remote hollows, up among the clouds, but they were moved out and now the park is sterile as far as human activities.”(115) So, instead of preserving this old, traditional American way of living, it was eradicated and the people were forced out of the park. Now their culture has been lost as they live in the towns around the park trying to make their living in souvenirs and fast food instead of celebrating a bit of American heritage.

The landscape in the park is beautiful. “The Smoky Mountains themselves were a joy. It was a perfect October morning. The road led steeply up through broad-leaved forests of dappled sunshine, full of paths and streams, and then higher up, opened out to airy vistas.”(116) The hills are rolling to the horizon in shades of greens and blues and the look-out points along the way provide plenty of (parking-) space to admire the scenery. According to Bryson, there are nine million visitors to the park

each year and other than in Britain, where they would hike or bike, they come in their cars and mobile homes. This is a way of traveling Bryson cannot comprehend and it spoils his day among the rolling hills when he is stuck behind one of those mobile homes on his way to Gatlinburg.

Gatlinburg is the gateway to the park in Tennessee. Bryson is back into a world of extremes: after untouched nature he finds himself back in civilization.

“I was once more stuck by this strange compartmentalization that goes on in America- a belief that no commercial activities must be allowed inside the park, but permitting unrestrained development outside, even though the landscape there may be just as outstanding.”(119)

There seems to be a tendency in the US that shows not only in this case, but also when it comes to towns and villages. Anything that is not fenced off or explicitly protected is open to development and construction. A small town not protected and marketed like Colonial Williamsburg will lose its heart and historic buildings for the sake of drive-ups and take-outs. “America has never quite grasped that you can live in a place without making it ugly, that beauty doesn’t have to be confined behind fences, as if a national park were a sort of zoo of nature.”(119)

The beautiful landscape around the Smoky Mountains is paved with entertainment and amusement establishments.

“The ugliness intensified to fever pitch as I rolled into Gatlinburg, a community that had evidently dedicated itself to the endless quest of trying to redefine the lower limits of bad taste. It is the world capital of bad taste. It made Cherokee look decorous.”(119)

The place is packed with arcades, wax museums, exhibition centers and other “tourist clutter”. We begin to wonder why one needs all that when visiting a national park. Isn’t the whole point of going to the Smoky Mountains – or in fact any national park – to enjoy nature, its beauty and tranquility? To get some fresh air and take a stroll in the untouched natural surroundings? To spend some time away from civilization and all its amenities? Obviously not in the America Bryson depicts here. In this culture a weekend at a national park consists of a short tour of the park by car and then some entertainment in the gateway city with thousands of other tourists.

Bryson leaves the Great Smoky Mountains behind and heads for the Clinch Mountains in search of a mysterious group of people living in a remote corner of the Appalachians. The route takes him through the seventh poorest county in the nation. The landscape suggests that Bryson is entering an altogether different world.

Only months later, a reporter from *Time Magazine* would be shot in these surroundings.

“So you can perhaps imagine the sense of foreboding that seeped over me as I drove up Tennessee Highway 31 through a forgotten landscape of poor and scattered tobacco farms, through the valley of the twisting Clinch River, en route to Sneedville.”(125)

The landscape is as poor as the people who live there. The roads are narrow and winding and suggest that not many people come this way, and even less people from out of state. Set back from the steep road Bryson gets a glimpse of little shacks and he hopes to see some Melungeons. But the people are all white. “This was real hillbilly country.”(127) There are no villages up in the mountains, just shacks. But no matter how poor the landscape looks, the people have found a profitable source of income: they grow marijuana. “I read somewhere that whole mountain villages band together and can make \$100,000 a month from a couple of acres planted in some remote and lofty hollow.”(128) The landscape is favoring this development.

“Although I was clearly climbing high up into the mountains, the woods all around were so dense that I had no views. But at the summit the trees parted like curtains to provide a spectacular outlook over the top of the earth, like the view from an aeroplane. Steep green wooded hills with alpine meadows clinging to their sides stretched away for as far as the eye could see until at last they were consumed by a distant and colorful sunset.”(128)

The landscape seems heavenly, but it is more of a heaven for marijuana farmers than for nosy journalists and writers and so Bryson pushes on, wondering how it could be that this astonishingly beautiful area is inhabited by some of the poorest people of America. And even stranger, he wonders how this area could have remained hidden from “the urban professionals from the cities of the eastern seaboard” who will elsewhere colonize every handsome strip of land with their weekend cottages.(128)

Bryson’s next destination is Colonial Williamsburg. Williamsburg is sort of an oddity in the United States for its historical downtown has been preserved and is now run as an open air museum, while in most other towns the city centers have been killed by shopping malls. Williamsburg is packed with tourists who pay horrendous amounts of money to stand in line to get a glimpse into the restored buildings that you can easily get for free by simply looking through the window. To Bryson the whole place seems more like History Disney World. “All the ticket takers and street sweepers and information givers were dressed in period costumes,

the women in big aprons and muffin hats, the men in tri-cornered hats and breeches.”(135)

It turns out that most of the buildings are not genuine but were restored in the 1920s and 1930s. The Governor’s Palace is a reconstruction from 1933 as the original building burned down in 1781. The interesting part here is that “by 1930 [the building] had been gone for so long that nobody knew what it looked like.”(137) The exterior could be reconstructed only with the help of a drawing, so the reproduction of the palace is probably not accurate. This truly sounds like Disneyland. Williamsburg is a place that has not been preserved by the people who live in it but it has been reconstructed for people to stare at it. Only after it had been lost was it dug out from the ground and put back together with Rockefeller money.

From Williamsburg he moves on to Mount Vernon, a pleasant surprise after Williamsburg. “Mount Vernon was everything Williamsburg should have been and was not – genuine, interesting, instructive.”(138) The home of George Washington is being maintained by Mount Vernon Ladies’ Association, a private investment so to say, because when in 1853 the house was put up for sale no government institution, not even the state of Virginia, showed interest in the home of America’s first president. This is part of the pattern that has already been discussed earlier. It seems in the United States there is not much interest in preserving the old and keeping it for the future unless it pays off.

Then it is time to visit the great cities of the East. Washington D.C. is Bryson’s next destination. He remembers the city from his childhood as the first contact between him and violence on the one hand and racism on the other. As a boy he got a glimpse of a man who had been shot and noticed the racial separation in the restaurants. “I remembered Washington from my childhood as hot and dirty and full of the din of jackhammers.”(140) But he also has fond memories, especially about the Mall and the Smithsonian. Now, more than thirty years later, Bryson is back and exploring the town. We learn that “Washington feels like a small city.”(143) In contrast to many other American cities it can be explored on foot. He walks past the White House, which is smaller than he expects, and then spends some time on the Mall, “Washington’s most fetching feature”.(143) The Mall is an enormous green strip in the heart of the city and framed by the Smithsonian Museums. Bryson notes the massive change in the size of the Smithsonian Institution, which used to consist of only the Castle. But there are so many new acquisitions every year that new

buildings had to be erected and the Castle has lost its function as the attic of America, now serving as the administration building. Now, all the exhibits are arranged by themes, Air and Space, Natural History, American History, and many more. “There is no sense of discovery.[...] There’s no element of surprise anymore.”(146) Still, Bryson paints a rather beautiful picture of America’s capital with large areas of green, trees lining the streets and many pretty spots that invite the visitor to linger. He does not encounter any of the violence or racism he remembers from his childhood and it seems that in those thirty years Washington has truly changed.

It is then time for Bryson to move on to Philadelphia. The way Bryson describes Philadelphia conveys the idea of a dangerous, run down city, ruled by crime and incompetent politicians. When he visited the city as a child he perceived it as the poorest place he had ever seen. “Trash lay in the gutters and doorways, and whole buildings were derelict. It was like a foreign country, like Haiti or Panama.”(151) Thirty years have passed since then but large parts of Philadelphia seem unchanged.

“[...]I found myself sucked into a vortex of one-way streets that carried me into the most squalid and dangerous-looking neighbourhood I had ever seen. It may have been, for all I know, the very ghetto we passed through all those years before – the brownstone buildings looked much the same but it was many times worse than the one I remembered.”(152)

Bryson continues to describe the part of the city he is driving through and it sounds more like a war zone than the city which once was America’s capital.

“The place was just bleak and dangerous, like a war zone. Abandoned cars, old refrigerators, burnt-out sofas littered every vacant lot. Garbage cans looked as if they had been thrown to the street from the rooftops. There were no gas stations [...] and most of the storefronts were boarded with plywood. Every standing object had been spray-painted with graffiti.”(152)

He wonders how anybody can live like this, constantly faced with crime and violence. “[P]erhaps it is little wonder that people in American cities take violence as routine.”(153) They simply seem to be used to it.

There is more to Philadelphia, however, than ghettos and crime. Bryson visits the “centre city” and the Independence National Historical Park.(155) It turns out that “[...] for all its incompetence and criminality, Philadelphia is a likeable place.”(155) It has skyscrapers and a big city feel, but it also has preserved the historic buildings where the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution were signed. Other than in Williamsburg, these buildings have actually been preserved and have been standing there unchanged among the sky scrapers of Philadelphia’s

city center, for over two hundred years. And Philadelphia has another highlight to offer: Fairmount Park. It is the “most beautiful city park” Bryson has ever seen, “it is full of trees and fragrant shrubs and bosky glades of infinite charm. [...] It was perfection.”(156-157) Philadelphia is a microcosm in the macrocosm America; it has a bit of everything and is a city of sharp contrasts. In the ghettos people live in poverty beyond imagination, while wealthy Americans live conveniently in abundance on the other side of the city. Historic buildings have been preserved to save a bit of America’s history while around them sky scrapers are reaching for the clouds. The ghettos look like war zones with abandoned cars and burned-out sofas in the streets, while just on the other side of town America’s largest municipal park stretches for miles. Nowhere in Bryson’s descriptions can we find a town as diverse and ambivalent as Philadelphia.

Gettysburg is a brief stop on Bryson’s way to New York. It is one of only two battlefields he visits on his journey and from the description we can see why he is not particularly fond of battlefields. The battle of Gettysburg was the most important battle of the Civil War but as with most battles there is not much left to see after the bodies have been removed and the cannons withdrawn. “The battlefield had the great deficiency common to all historic battlefields. It was just countryside. There was nothing much to distinguish this stretch of empty fields from that one.”(160) In memoriam of his father Bryson tries to bring the place alive and imagines the marching and fighting troops. But the modern world repeatedly comes in his way.

“Through my dad’s old binoculars I could clearly see how Pickett’s troops had advanced from the direction of the town, a mile or so to the north, sweeping across the Burger King parking lot, skirting the Tastee Delite Drive-In and regrouping just outside the Crap-o-Rama Wax Museum and Gift Shop. It’s all very sad.”(161)

Just as in the Great Smoky Mountains, the national battlefield is undeveloped but around the protected area fast food places and souvenir stores line the borders of the park. “It is a pity, verging on the criminal, that so much of the town of Gettysburg has been spoiled with tourist tat and that it is so visible from the battlefield.”(161) Unable to come up with the same enthusiasm for the battlefield he had as a child, Bryson leaves Gettysburg behind to explore New York.

Bryson’s last visit to New York was twenty years ago but the city still frightens him. “I had never conceived of so many people gathered in one place. I couldn’t understand why in such a big, open country as America people would choose to live

like that.”(172) No matter how much he complains about Iowa, in comparison to New York it was heaven to grow up in Des Moines. Bryson feels sorry for all these people who will never have their own back yard, “never having a barbecue, never stepping out the back door at midnight to have a pee in the bushes and check out the stars. Their children would grow up thinking that supermarket trolleys grew wild. Like weeds.”(172)

Bryson sets out from his microscopic and overpriced hotel room to explore the city. At the beginning he is scared by the crime rate and the size of the city, and he is also afraid for his life. “I wanted to hand out cards that said ‘Thank you for not killing me’.”(173) But soon he learns the only thing he has to fear in New York’s streets are the panhandlers because they can drive a man to bankruptcy. “There are 36,000 vagrants in New York and in two days of walking around every one of them asked me for money.[...] People in New York go to Calcutta to get some relief from begging.”(173) This is one of the few cases where Bryson’s tone implies his self-perception as a gentleman traveler and lets some colonial nostalgia sound through. “I began to regret that I didn’t live in an age when a gentleman could hit such people with his cane.”(173) New York brings out the colonial side in Bryson.

We also hear about New York’s architecture. Times Square leaves Bryson very impressed by the lights and hustle, and he inspects the brand new Trump Tower on Fifth Avenue which already back in the late 1980s was an amalgam of tastelessness and tackiness. “For two days I walked and stared and mumbled in amazement” in the city where anything can happen.(174) But eventually after two days in “the most exciting and stimulating city in the world” we learn that New York is one thing above all: it is a lonely place.(177) “Indeed, all over this big, heartless city there were no doubt tens of thousands of people just as solitary and friendless as me. What a melancholy thought.”(177)

3.2.2.5. New England

“I had been looking forward to reaching New England because I wanted to see the autumn colour. In addition, the states would be small and varied and there wouldn’t be that awful rolling tedium that comes with all the other American states, even the attractive ones.”(179)

Bryson’s expectations are shaped by the movies from the 1940s where “people were always going to Connecticut for the weekend, and it always looked wonderfully green and rustic.”(179) Secretly, he is expecting to find Amalgam in

these surroundings. The New England he knows from fiction is predisposed for being the home of the perfectly idyllic American small town. “But I was wrong.”(179)

Driving through Connecticut, Bryson is disappointed to note that it is not full of stone cottages and leafy glades as expected but “just semi-suburban: ranch-houses with three-car garages and lawns with twirling sprinklers and shopping centres every six blocks.”(179) There is a brief interruption of the endless suburbs when Bryson stops in Litchfield, which turns out to be the quintessential New England town. It has all the features of the perfect American small town, a courthouse, pleasant shops and a white steepled church. Bryson continues east, through the suburbs of Hartford, Hartford itself and the suburbs again and before he realizes he is in Rhode Island. The distances in New England are obviously shorter than in the South and the Middle Atlantic States. Additionally to that, Bryson is surprised when he realizes that the Connecticut he knows from fiction only exists in fiction.

In Rhode Island Bryson visits Newport, “America’s premier yachting community”.(181) The old town center has recently been fixed up and shops with pretty wooden signs and nautical names line the streets. But on a second look the place loses its charm. Scattered across town are parking lots, graffiti and “spindly trees”.(181) The place has been neglected for too long and has become run down. “I walked up Thames Street, where some fine old sea captains’ homes were fighting a losing battle with litter and dog shit and the encroachment of gas stations and car transmission places. It was all very sad.”(181)

So far, New England has not even remotely lived up to Bryson’s expectations. But then he leaves Newport behind to drive out to Fort Adams State Park across the bay. Suddenly Bryson’s perception of the town changes.

“From there Newport looked another town altogether – a charming cut-out of needle-shaped church spires and Victorian roof-tops protruding from a parkland of trees. The bay glittered in the sunshine and its scores of sailboats bobbed on the gentle waves. It was captivating.”(182)

As with most things, Newport looks better from the distance while a closer look reveals the neglect the city is suffering from. “This was a place where the people didn’t seem to care, or perhaps just didn’t notice, how shabby they had let things grow.”(181) This especially surprises Bryson because the town lives off tourism and he expected it to be spotless.

Fort Adams State Park provides the spotlessness Bryson is looking for. This does not come as a surprise, however, because the park is home to America's grandest summer homes. "Between about 1890 and 1905, America's richest families – the Vanderbilts, the Astors, the Belmonts, dozens of others – tried to outdo each other by building magnificent homes".(182) Some of these houses are now open to the public and can be visited by tourists willing to pay. As often, Bryson finds another way to take a glimpse at the world of the abnormally rich people's homes. There is a foot path along the cliff that allows him to take a good look into the backyards. The houses are disgustingly lavish and screaming splendor. "You can't look at it without thinking that nobody, with the possible exception of oneself, deserves to be that rich."(183)

Cape Cod is Bryson's last destination before he enters New Hampshire and with that "the real New England."(187) But judging from what we learn about Cape Cod, Bryson would have been better off if he had avoided the place. His expectations are high.

"I drove to Cape Cod, another place I had never been and for which I had high expectations. It was very picturesque, with its old saltbox homes, its antique shops and wooden inns, its pretty villages with quaint names: Sagamore, Sandwich, Barnstable, Rock Harbor."(183)

The Cape Bryson visits, however, is anything but picturesque. The roads are clogged with tourists and motor homes, the towns are "devoted to sucking money out of tourists" and everywhere he looks there is sand – even on his hotdog.(185) This is definitely not what Bryson is looking for. He is in an artificial world designed for the one purpose of making money and emptying the tourists' pockets. There is nothing here for Bryson to discover other than greed and tackiness. Incidentally, Provincetown is the place where the Pilgrim Fathers initially landed when they immigrated to the new world. Obviously already back then the place consisted of nothing much but sand, so the Pilgrim Fathers "pushed on to mainland Massachusetts."(186) This is also what Bryson does. He is rushed through Boston in the "mobile hysteria" of rush-hour and washes onto the shores of New Hampshire. "Things could only get better."(187)

Bryson takes a few moments to reflect on his expectations and how New England has shown itself so far.

"I had always thought that New England was nothing but maple trees and white churches and old guys in checked shirts sitting around iron stoves in country general stores swapping tall tales and pitting in the cracker barrel. But if lower New Hampshire was anything to go by, clearly I had been misinformed."(188)

But wherever Bryson goes the land is dull and the views are sad.

“Every once in a while there would be a white church or clapboard inn standing incongruously in the mist of Burger Kings and Texacos. But far from mollifying the ugliness, it only intensified it, reminding you what had been thrown away for the sake of drive-thru burgers and cheap gasoline.”(188)

New England was Bryson’s last hope to find Amalgam. He pictured it as the last stand of traditional American small towns, of marvelous villages and lush landscape. Now, however, the whole adventure looks “ominously unpromising”.(189)

“I drove and drove, thinking that any moment now I would encounter the fabled Maine of lobster-pots and surf-battered shores and lonely lighthouses standing on rocks of granite, but the towns I passed through were just messy and drear, and the countryside was wooded and unmemorable.”(189)

In an attempt to raise his spirits Bryson heads for the White Mountains and the town of Littleton, which was referred to as picturesque in one of Bryson’s guide books. “In point of fact, if Littleton was characterized by anything it was a singular lack of picturesqueness.”(192) The only thing outstanding about Littleton is the friendliness of the people that reminded Bryson rather of aliens than of Americans. Strangers are smiling at him, people in the streets are greeting him and the attendant of the BP service station smiles at him “with the same strange, unsettling smile”(195) “Nobody, even in America, is *that* friendly. What did they want from me?”(195) It is not genuine friendliness Bryson finds in Littleton but the smiles – “curiously malevolent B-movie smile[s]”(195) - come from empty hulls.

What a disaster New England has turned out to be. Bryson had high hopes for the small states nestled into America’s north-east corner. Novels and TV shows always presented a charming and picturesque haven of Amalgams and now this.

Things are starting to look better when Bryson arrives in Vermont.

“Vermont presented an altogether greener, tidier prospect than New Hampshire. The hills were fat and soft, like a sleeping animal. The scattered farms looked more prosperous and the meadows climbed high up the rolling hillsides, giving the valleys and alpine air.”(196)

He happens upon a little place, Peacham, which was settled in 1776. The whole town is void of human life. “Presumably the people of Littleton had come in the night and taken them off to the planet Zog.”(196) Incidentally, the most outstanding thing about Peacham is the cemetery - what a suitable allegory in this town without inhabitants.

In the Green Mountains, finally, Bryson stumbles upon the Indian Summer.

“There was colour everywhere – trees the colour of mustard and rust, meadows of gold and green, colossal white barns, blue lakes. Here and there along the roadside, produce stands brimmed with pumpkins and squash and other autumn fruits. It was like a day trip to heaven.”(198)

Bryson explores the area driving around back roads and is surprised by the many small houses that almost look like shacks. Here he is again in one of the most beautiful areas he has seen so far on his journey, and it is inhabited by some of the poorest people. It looks like Bryson has discovered a generality about America.

“I drove on, thinking what an ironic thing it was that the really beautiful places in America – the Smoky Mountains, Appalachia, and now Vermont – were always inhabited by the poorest, most under-educated people. And then I hit Stowe and realized that when it comes to making shrewd generalizations, I am a cretin.”(199)

The town is a rich skiing resort, full of expensive little boutiques and ski lodges for the rich. He drives around the area and finds nothing but rich little towns, lavish homes and beautiful landscape. Bryson has found the other extreme. While his first impression of the real New England is shaped by dull, run-down and poor places it is now being revised by “too perfect, too rich, too yuppified” places.(200) “There was this air of twee artifice pushing in on everything.”(200)

Slowly we are getting the impression that there is no authentic beauty when it comes to America’s towns. Either they are artificial, tacky and serve as tourist traps or – if they have no feature remotely exploitable for tourism – they are run down, shabby and neglected.

Then, Bryson arrives in Cooperstown, a small resort on Lake Otsego. For a moment Bryson gets his hopes up to have finally found Amalgam.

“It was a handsome town, as handsome as any I had seen in New England, and more replete with autumn colour, with a main street of square-topped brick buildings, old banks, a movie theatre, family stores. [...] This was as nice a little town as I had seen on the trip; it was almost Amalgam.”(201)

But it is not Amalgam. “The only shortcoming with Cooperstown is that it is full of tourists”.(201)

New York State makes up for the recent disappointment and presents Bryson with a last glimpse of the idyllic and picturesque landscape he had expected before he explored New England. It seems like a fare well present.

“I drove on across New York State for several hours, through the Susquehanna Valley, which was very fetching, especially at this time of day and year in the soft light of an autumn afternoon: watermelon-shapes hills, golden trees, slumbering towns.”(204)

3.2.2.6. The Great Lakes

Before Bryson can conclude the first part of his exploration he has to inspect one more part of the United States: the Great Lakes area. And to get there he has to drive across Ohio. “[I]nstead of a normal day ahead of you, with its scatterings of simple gratifications, you are going to have a day without even the tiniest of pleasures; you are going to drive across Ohio.”(206)

While driving along Lake Erie Bryson informs us about the environmentally irresponsible behavior of the big cities along the lake. For years they had been dumping their chemical waste into the rivers and lakes up to the point when Lake Erie was declared dead. “Driving along its southern shore, gazing out at its flat grey immensity, this appeared to be a remarkable achievement. It hardly seemed possible that something as small as man could kills something as large as a Great Lake.”(207)

Cleveland is the biggest offender. We learn how Cleveland’s river is a “slow-moving sludge of chemicals and half-digested solids called the Cuyahoga, [that] once actually caught fire and burned out of control for four days. This also was a remarkable achievement”.(207-208) Bryson’s tone is full of dislike and criticism for the city that had killed the lake. “Cleveland has always had a reputation for being a dirty, ugly, boring city,” and in Bryson’s perception it still is and he is relieved when he leaves the city behind. However, Cleveland does not make it to the top Bryson’s ugliness list. The worst city he visits is Detroit and what we hear about this city makes Cleveland look like sea side resort.

Detroit is the city with the highest murder rate in the country.

“In 1987, there were 635 homicides in Detroit, a rate of 58.2 per 100,000 people, or eight times the national average. Just among children, there were 365 shootings in which both the victims and gunmen were under sixteen. We are talking about a touch city – and yet it is still a rich one. What it will become like as the American car industry collapses in upon itself doesn’t bear thinking about. People will have to start carrying bazookas for protection.”(214)

These words are almost prophetic. Bryson avoids Detroit and instead stays in its suburbs, one in particular: Dearborn. This is the home of the Henry Ford Museum, a conglomeration of important Americana and a place that makes Bryson proud to be American. The hangar is filled with America’s greatest inventions, strangest machines and the most “indescribably assortment of stuff”.(215) Here, in the city

with a sky-high crime rate, next to a dead lake, Bryson finds a place housing everything that defines America, everything the United States are.

“Outside [the hangar] there is a whole village – a little town – containing eighty homes of famous Americans. These are the actual homes, not replicas. Ford criss-crossed the country, acquiring the residences and workshops of the people he most admired – Thomas Edison, Harvey Firestone, Luther Burbank, the Wright brothers and of course himself.”(216)

Ford did what Bryson has been doing throughout his trip so far. He collected bits and pieces all over the country to put them together to build

“the quintessential American small town, a picturesque and timeless community where every structure houses a man of genius [...]. Above all, bringing these places together makes you realize just how incredibly inventive America has been in its time, what a genius it has had for practical commercial innovation [...]. It made me feel proud.”(216-217)

Then it is time to explore Michigan. Bryson’s destination is Mackinac Island, another oddity in modern America: it is a place without cars. “Mackinac Island is only small – about five miles long, a couple of miles wide – but like most islands it seems bigger when you are on it. Since 1901, no cars or motorized vehicles of any type have been allowed on the island”.(223) Bryson is on a journey back in time, but this time not back to his childhood but way before that. The only means of transport on the island are horse-drawn carriages or your feet. As Bryson is traveling outside tourist season he has the place to himself and wanders around in amazement, taking in the beautiful views and white Victorian homes. He has finally found a place that has been effectively preserved and saved from the destruction by fast food restaurants and wax museums. In the summer, however, things must look different. “I expect it’s awful there in the summer with all the thousands of day trippers. A brochure that I picked up by the harbour listed sixty gift shops alone”.(223) But now that the town was “on the brink of a six-month coma” it was charming and picturesque. (223)

Wisconsin is the last state Bryson has to cross before he is back home in Iowa. He is distracted, however, by giving information on the American health system and so we only learn a little about “America’s premier dairy state.”(231) The landscape is pleasant and cows are scattered everywhere he looks.

“This was quintessential Midwestern farming country, a study in browns, a landscape of low wooded hills, bare trees, faded pastures, tumbledown corn. It all had a kind of muted beauty. The farms were large, scattered and prosperous looking. Every half mile or so I would pass a snug-looking farmhouse, with a porch swing and a yard full of trees. Standing nearby would be a red barn with a rounded roof and a tall grain silo.”(231)

This is the world Bryson has been trying to get away from since his childhood, and now, having driven around half the country, he finds it “fetching and restful.”(232) So far he has not found Amalgam, but he has returned with something far more valuable: he crosses the Mississippi back into Iowa and suddenly has the feeling that he “belonged.”(232)

3.2.2.6. The West

One early April morning Bryson sets out to explore the West. He plunges around western Iowa before he heads for Nebraska. “Now there’s a sentence you don’t want to have to say too often if you can possibly help it.”(243) Obviously, Bryson does not consider Nebraska as a prime vacation destination. He is surprised, however, to find that “[t]he towns were more prosperous-looking and better maintained, and the roadsides everywhere were full of bushes from which sprang a profusion of creamy flowers.”(247) Embarrassed, he notes that Nebraska looks a lot better than western Iowa with its peeling paint and closed businesses. There is a catch, however. No matter how charming Nebraska might seem at first glance, it gets monotonous soon. “That is the problem with Nebraska. It just goes on and on, and even the good bits soon grow tedious.”(247) Bryson calls Nebraska “flat and brown and full of stubble and prairie-dogs”, “a bare patch” between fertile and green Iowa and fertile and green Colorado. Not even John Wayne’s hometown Winterset can save Nebraska’s reputation.

Kansas presents itself in an altogether different light.

“[...] Kansas was OK. The towns I went through all looked trim and prosperous and quintessentially American. But then Kansas is the most quintessential of American states. It is, after all, where Superman and Dorothy from the Wizard of Oz grew up, and all the towns I went through had a cosy, leafy, timeless air to them.” (250)

Bryson stops at Great Bend, which transfers him back to his early teenage days. He has arrived in a town that seems not to have changed since 1965. All the loss Bryson has been mourning throughout his journey so far – town centers slowly dying, people no longer strolling down the streets, stores closing down and being replaced with shopping malls – all this has not affected Great Bend. Suddenly his past has materialized right in front of him. He is stranded in an American small town of the 1960s, “a community that doesn’t exist in time and space” because it is

too unreal. "I was glad to get in the car and drive on to Dodge City, which at least was intentionally unreal."(251)

We can only speculate what made Bryson take flight. Maybe he was simply overwhelmed by all his teenage memories pouring in on him, maybe it was then he realized that the past *is* past and cannot be brought back for it would then not be authentic, or maybe he realizes right there that he is not really longing for America's past days but for his own. But no matter how hard he tries, no matter how perfect the town, these days cannot be brought back because the most important ingredient is missing: his father.

He heads west, still in Kansas, when he leaves the Midwest behind and enters the West. He visits Dodge City, which once was the "biggest cow town" in the West.(252) There, it is time for a little history and Bryson explores "Historic Front Street" which has been rebuilt to look like the historic frontier town Dodge City once was. Bryson has discovered yet another place that did not find its historic buildings worth preserving for their own sake but has not refrained from investing into the reconstruction when tourism and money come into play.

This is about as exiting as Kansas gets. "There is nothing much to be said for the far west of Kansas except that the towns are small and scattered and the highways mostly empty."(256) It is time for some impressive landscape and so Bryson continues to Colorado.

"I should have known better, but I had it in my mind that Colorado was nothing but mountains. Somehow I thought that the moment I left Kansas I would find myself amid the snow-tipped Rockies".(258) Bryson starts the ascent, the elevation rising from town to town but it takes him 150 miles to finally see some mountains. The views along State Highway 67 are spectacular. "Victor was a wonderful sight, a town of Western-style buildings perched incongruously in a high green valley of the most incredible beauty."(261) After the flatness of Iowa, Kansas and especially Nebraska the mountains are a welcome change. Bryson's intention is to drive to Aspen, but the roads are closed due to snow, which is still dominating the landscape in April. But the views make up for everything.

"The road led up and over the Wilkerson Pass and then down into a long valley of rolling meadows with glittering streams and log cabins set against a backdrop of muscular mountains. [...] It was glorious and I had it almost all to myself. Near Buena Vista the land dramatically dropped away to reveal a plain and beyond it the majestic Collegiate Peaks, the highest range in the United States, with sixteen peaks of over 14,000 feet along a thirty-mile stretch."(262)

Bryson's next destination could be defined at the exact opposite of sky high snow covered peaks: he is headed for the Grand Canyon. Along the Continental Divide "the most incredible beauty" surrounds Bryson, but human settlements of the sort he detests – "a collection of fast food places and gas stations, and all along the road for many miles stood signs the size of barns saying Campground, Motel, Rafting"(265) – spoil the area. "The further south I went the more barren the landscape grew."(265) The drive south is "unstimulating" until Bryson is way into New Mexico.(265)

The land is only scarcely populated, Interstate 40 is straight and boring and he has time to let his thoughts wander off. We learn that I-40 once was Route 66, the famous road "everybody loved" and "[p]eople used to write songs about".(271) As so many things that have been lost in America by being replaced with something new and more efficient, Route 66 is now often covered by four-lane superhighways and all the small towns along the road have perished. "They are taking away all the nice things there because they are impractical, as if that were reason enough".(271) With nostalgia on his mind and heart Bryson finally arrives at one of the most spectacular creations of nature.

"Nothing prepares you for the Grand Canyon. No matter how many times you read about it or see it pictured, it still takes your breath away."(275) These are the very powerful words Bryson uses to introduce us to one of the few things in America that – though constantly changing – does not change, does not disappear and is not replaced by something new and practical. If one thing he can be sure about, it is the certainty that the Grand Canyon is still where he left it as a child, in the same condition and unspoiled by fast food restaurants, gas stations and shopping malls. This is the reason Bryson speaks so highly of the canyon; because there is no way he will be disappointed he allows himself to get his hopes up higher than usual.

When he is standing at the edge and the fog parts he is stilled by the view just like the first time when he was seven years old. The canyon is so gigantic that "[e]verything is dwarfed by this mighty hole."(278) The Grand Canyon is the one constant on this vast continent Bryson can rely on for not having changed. It is too big for mankind to mess with it and for this he has nothing but words of admiration.

When he continues we learn about one of the most defining features of the West: distance. "The distances are almost inconceivable. There is often thirty miles

between houses and a hundred miles between towns.”(279) Bryson knows it is a vast country he is traveling, but nothing has prepared him for these distances.

“I drove and drove. That is what you do in the West. You drive and you drive and you drive, advancing from one scattered town to the next, creeping across a landscape like Neptune. For long, empty hours your one goal in life is to get to Dry Gulch or Cactus City or wherever.”(279)

He is glad when he passes into Utah and even more surprised when he notices the beauty of this state. Zion National Park is “incredibly beautiful” and reminds him a lot of Grand Canyon only “at Zion you are at the bottom looking up.”(281)

“It is just a long, lush canyon, dense with cottonwood trees along the valley floor, hemmed in by towering copper-coloured walls of rock [...]. Here and there long, thin waterfalls emerged from the rock face and fell a thousand feet or more down to the valley, where the water collected in pools or tumbled onward into the swirling Virgin River. [...] It was very picturesque and exotic.”(281)

Still in the after glow from all the natural beauty, Bryson plunges into the state he compares with a toilet. “What is the difference between Nevada and a toilet? Answer: You can flush a toilet.”(286) Bryson’s picture of Nevada is one of a state full of crime and criminals, rounded off with the second highest rate of gonorrhea. He expects Las Vegas to be a town of “hookers and high rollers” but his assumptions are disproved the moment he enters the city. He is dazzled by the lights and the wholesomeness, the colors and the movement. But Vegas, with its hundreds of thousands of inhabitants and even more tourists, is an exception in every sense. The rest of the state is almost empty.

“It would be difficult to conceive of a more remote and cheerless state than Nevada. It has a population of just 800,000 in an area about the size of Britain and Ireland combined. [...] There are only seventy towns in the entire state [...] and some of them are indescribably remote.”(308)

After Zion and Grand Canyon, Bryson decides to visit another national park, one he has been drawn to since his childhood: Sequoia National Park. But this time Bryson gets his expectations up too high. He visits the park assuming that he will be able to drive through a living tree. But he is mistaken and when he finds out, his enthusiasm for the park fades away and never returns. “This was a disappointment – name me something in life that isn’t”.(300)

Bryson is having a streak of bad luck. His next national park, Yosemite, turns out to be mismanaged and overrun by tourists. “Yosemite is a mess.”(302) While the landscape is “mouthgawpingly beautiful” the management of the park is chaotic and

the visitors' center is dull. This is the point where he voices all of his frustration with the National Parks Service.

"I don't know why it should be, but the National Parks Service has a long history of incompetence. [...] Mercifully, that plan [to build a Disney development in Sequoia National Park] was quashed. But others have succeeded, most notably in 1923 when, after a long fight between conservationists and businessmen, the Hetch Hetchy Valley in the northern part of Yosemite - which was said to be even more spectacularly beautiful than Yosemite valley itself - was flooded to create a reservoir[...] God help us if they ever find oil there".(303)

Bryson is clearly no fan of the Parks Service. As in the Great Smoky Mountains before, instead of the authorities preserving nature's beauty it is made accessible to mass tourism and developed to cater to the needs of spoiled and lazy visitors. This takes us directly to the next and last national park Bryson visits on his journey.

Yellowstone is the world's oldest national park and it is also very large, covering the same area as Connecticut. Despite its size, the park is hardly developed, the only stores, hotels and gas stations can be found in Grant Village and West Thumb while the rest of the park is mostly left to the animals. But other than bison Bryson does not get to see much of the fauna.

"The national parks are supposed to be there to preserve a chunk of America's wilderness, but in many of them the number of animals has actually fallen. Yellowstone has lost all its wolves, mountain lions and white-tailed deer, and the numbers of beaver and bighorn sheep are greatly depleted. These animals are thriving outside Yellowstone, but as far as the Parks Service is concerned they are extinct."(303)

When Bryson leaves Yellowstone behind, he finds himself in Montana. "I drove the sixty miles or so to Livingston through a landscape that was less wild but more beautiful than anything Yellowstone had offered."(325) Montana, we learn, is even emptier than Nevada and there are hardly any population centers.

"Yet it has a kind of haunting beauty with its endless empty plains and towering skies. Montana is called the Big Sky country and it really is true. I had always thought of the sky as something fixed and invariable, but here it seemed to have grown by a factor of at least ten."(330)

We can only speculate what it is that makes Montana's sky so memorable and big. Maybe it is the absence of large, industrial cities that elsewhere pollute the air. Bryson does not give an explanation for the phenomenon either, but he notes that "[e]verything was dwarfed by the stupendous sky."(330) But maybe it is simply the vast emptiness of Montana, where nothing distracts the view so the eyes can travel into the distance that creates the illusion of a sky larger than anywhere.

He decides to stop at Custer Battlefield National Monument for the lack of any other places of interest. The battlefield itself and also the visitors' center come as a pleasant surprise in comparison to the other historic parks and monuments Bryson has visited. There are no Burger Kings and Wax-o-Ramas that spoil the surroundings, and yet there is something wrong. The whole thing was built in memoriam of one of the cruelest Generals in American history. "Custer was an idiot and a brute and he deserved his fate." (329) Standing on a hilltop in this remote area void of trees Bryson imagines how Custer and his men were overrun by the much better equipped Cheyenne and Sioux. There are many uncertainties concerning that day in 1876. "All that is known for sure is that Custer screwed up in a mighty big way and got himself and 260 other men killed." (330) Clearly, in Bryson's opinion, this is not one of the glorious chapters in American history.

After this stop, Bryson visits Mount Rushmore, which he finds "an extraordinary achievement, one of America's glories." (341) It is the last stimulating input Bryson gets before he has to drive through South Dakota to get home.

"I drove on and on across South Dakota. God, what a flat and empty state. You can't believe how remote and lonely it feels out in the endless fields of yellow grass. It is like the world's first drive-through sensory deprivation chamber. [...] I was in a part of the world where you could drive hundreds of miles in any direction before you found civilization". (344)

There is not much to add to Bryson's opinion of South Dakota. After the exciting views of the American West – Grand Canyon, Utah, Yellowstone to name but a few – Bryson is back in the Midwest and back to complaining about the lack of stimulation and landscape. He visited "all but ten of the lower forty-eight states". (157)

"I saw pretty much everything I wanted to see and a good deal I didn't. I had much to be grateful for. I didn't get shot or mugged. The car didn't break down. I wasn't once approached by a Jehovah's Witness. I still had \$68 and a clean pair of underpants. Trips don't come much better than that." (350)

He stops one last time, this time in Storm Lake, Iowa. "And by golly, it was wonderful. [...] Maybe it was the time of year, the mild spring air, the fresh breeze, I don't know, but it seemed just perfect." (347) After driving 13,978 miles across the country looking for Amalgam, Bryson finds his perfect fictional town hidden in Iowa. How easy it could have been to find it right next door, but then we also have to ask if Bryson would be able to see it the way he sees it now without having crossed the continent. Maybe it is exactly those 13,978 miles that opened his eyes for the beauty of his home state and allowed him to discover Amalgam.

CONCLUSION

“I feel that there are too many realities. What I set down here is true until someone else passes that way and rearranges the world in his own style.”(Steinbeck, 76) Twenty-nine years after Steinbeck wrote these words, Bill Bryson passed the way to arrange the world in his style.

The two writers could not be in more different stages of their lives. Bryson is in his mid-thirties and just at the beginning of his career as a writer. *The Lost Continent* is his first major book and will be the start of a successful career. Steinbeck is in his early sixties and a well known writer in most parts of Europe and the United States. With most of his career lying behind him, *Travels with Charley* will be his last novel.

However, they also have a quite few things they have in common. Both writers cannot be categorized as travel writers even though Bill Bryson is often referred to as one. “I had no desire to become a travel writer, in fact it never occurred to me to think of myself as that.”²⁰⁵ Both have neglected their country for some time, Steinbeck traveling a lot and Bryson having lived in Britain for more than a decade. Not only do they feel the need to rediscover their home country, but they are also on a journey down memory lane, traveling through their childhood and times as young men. There is an interesting connection between the journeys. Steinbeck is traveling in late 1960, while Bryson’s physical journey takes place almost thirty years later in 1988 and 1989. However, Bryson also retraces his childhood vacations and recounts his memories of traveling the country as a child together with his father in the late 1950s and 1960s. Therefore we not only get an insight into how the land has changed in those thirty years between their journeys, but we also learn how both authors perceived the late 1950s. This is particularly interesting because of their age difference of more than fifty years. This way we get to know the 1950s from the point of view of an elderly man who notices change and development, and from the point of view of a small boy who is excited about anything as long as it means getting out of Iowa. Through their eyes we can see a country change, and while they sometimes give their opinions, they also provide descriptions for the readers to make up their own minds.

²⁰⁵ Bill Bryson in an interview with Michael Shapiro. Shapiro, Michael. *A Sense of Place: Great Travel Writers Talk About Their Craft, Lives, and Inspiration*. Berkeley: Publishers Group West, 2004. p. 134.

Though Steinbeck and Bryson use many of the same stylistic features, their styles differ. Bryson's intention is to inform the reader but also entertain him while Steinbeck's motivation is to inform himself. When classifying them as writers, Bryson is the prototypical joker. He is always up for a pun, never hesitating to use colloquial language, mock the people he encounters and add a large amount of self-deprecation. The use of exaggeration for comic purpose is probably the most important characteristic of Bryson's style as a writer. Concerning self-deprecation there is one parallel between Steinbeck and Bryson that is worth mentioning: it is the way they deal with their tendency to get lost.

Both authors find themselves on the road more than once, not knowing where they are, how they got there and how to get out of there. They both make fun of their inability to orientate themselves even when they have a map and follow the road signs. There are, however, underlying reasons for them being lost that differ. Steinbeck is not only lost in a physical sense, but also in a metaphorical one. He has lost himself and in order to get back in touch with John Steinbeck the man he has to lose John Steinbeck the writer. Bryson's tendency to get lost, on the other hand, has its roots in his childhood. It seems like a tribute to his father, who was a master of getting lost, refusing to ask for the way, circling their destinations but seemingly never reaching them.

Apart from that, Steinbeck's humor is more subtle and is mostly limited to his descriptions of Charley dog. As we have heard before, picking up the story when it goes stale is one of Charley's roles, apart from keeping Steinbeck company and establishing contact with strangers.

When applying his humor Bryson has the tendency to show traces of the colonial tradition. He might be from Iowa, but living in Great Britain for over a decade has shaped his way of thinking. Often in his observations and description do we hear a tone of superiority and get the sense that Bryson sees himself as an English gentleman traveler, a flâneur, exploring the country by strolling around and observing. "The amateurism of the English gentleman abroad – the man lacking in expertise, but schooled for all eventualities – is a fitting subject for parody."²⁰⁶ The people he encounters are often characterized by lack of intelligence and he does not even hesitate to refer to some of them as being plain "stupid", as for example the settlers of Nebraska, who passed through green and fertile land and then stopped

²⁰⁶ Holland and Huggan, p. 33.

right before another green and fertile land only to settle the bare patch in between. His comments in New York constitute the peak of his colonial behavior when he complains about the panhandlers. "I began to regret that I didn't live in an age when a gentleman could hit such people with his cane." (Bryson, 173)

But Bryson not only occasionally acts according to the traditional colonial vision, but he also falls back on two more ways to establish identity. The first one is his colonial behavior in a national context, meaning that he is fully aware of his social superiority to most Americans and makes no effort in hiding it. In his opinion it is his education and his travels that set him apart from the other Americans and put him in a position to judge them. The second way Bryson establishes his identity is by means of the tourist/traveler dichotomy. Earlier, I placed Bryson between the two, calling him a hybrid. Bryson might find himself among tourists very often throughout his journey but when he does he is a "good" tourist, respectful and thoughtful, critical and eager to learn, in contrast to the "bad" tourists who clog the roads, are noisy and loud, are more interested in entertainment than information and dress badly.

Steinbeck has to be placed on the other side and behaves according to the cosmopolitan tradition. Having spent a lot of time traveling abroad has widened Steinbeck's horizon and has "globalized" him. He does not differentiate between people, he is a man *of* people and when he describes his fellow Americans he makes sure not to judge them but to present them as individuals, equals with himself being just one among many.

"From start to finish I found no strangers. If I had, I might be able to report them more objectively. But there are my people and this is my country. If I found matters to criticize and to deplore, they were tendencies equally present in myself." (Steinbeck, 210)

But even Steinbeck needs some form of *the other* to establish his identity. In several cases he uses the tourist but not in such a stereotyped way as Bryson. Instead, Steinbeck takes on the role of John Steinbeck American, an anonymous face among millions, in contrast to John Steinbeck the writer. It is his intention by taking on a role not to stand out and be different but to blend in and be the same.

Despite these differences we can also find many parallels in their style. Both writers apply *pensees* to discuss topics concerned with cultural aspects of the United States, but also social and political themes. This way we learn about the American health care system in contrast to the British one, and we hear about the

political opinions in a country where only shortly after Steinbeck's journey a young Catholic would become president. We also learn about American history, how the land was settled and who these people were, what consequences this had for the Native Americans and how the latter and the buffalo became the favorite prey of Westerners.

Also, both writers make use of anecdotes in which we not only learn about their lives but also about the country. When Steinbeck shares memories of his childhood we not only read about what it was like growing up with the African American Cooper boys, but also about racism or rather the absence of it in early 20th century Salinas. And when Bryson recounts his first visit to Washington D.C. we not only hear about the cruelty of his bigger brother – "Then I rolled over and tried to sleep, but I couldn't [...] partly because earlier in the evening my brother had told me that he was going to come to my bed when I was asleep and wipe boogers on my face"(Bryson, 142) – but about what really kept him up that night, when he had seen African American people wait by a wall at the restaurant to take their food home instead of sitting down like the white people did. For both authors, then in their childhood and now in their grown-up lives, racism was a concept beyond understanding.

Furthermore, Steinbeck and Bryson both use their childhood memories as a basis for comparison for their findings along the way. Their knowledge of how it once was allows them to utter judgments and observations on change and development. While Bryson longs for the days of the 1950s and 1960s, exactly these days are the ones Steinbeck has difficulty understanding because he again longs for the days before World War II. They might mourn the loss of the American small town, of scenic back roads and the milkman, but deep inside it is the wish to be young again, to be a child again and to relive their lives. As Bryson says, progress took their world away and both find themselves in a new America, lost in a country that is no longer theirs. We can therefore say that the leitmotif in *Travels with Charley* as well as *The Lost Continent* is nostalgia.

"The road genre has expressed the mood of the country, the character of the people, and the sense of mission Americans feel so central to their national experience. Road stories in search of a nation are often told around a motif of loss – lost towns, highways, regions, and values – where narrators want to recover the old ways or to clean the lenses of perception to see again what is still there."²⁰⁷

²⁰⁷ Primeau, p. 51.

Especially Bryson repeatedly includes anecdotes before re-visiting a place on his physical journey. This way he always gives reasons for his return, a description of how he remembers the place and also the expectations he has of it. With this background knowledge the reader can better understand Bryson's reaction to a place, see why he might be disappointed and mourn the loss of something, or why he is surprised to find something unchanged and untouched by progress and development. However, most of the time it is a feeling of loss Bryson has to deal with. Sometimes it is a whole place that has changed for the worse, like his grandparents' hometown, at other times it is just a little thing, such as the milkman who no longer brings the Brysons their cottage cheese.

"So something else that was nice and pleasant is gone forever because it wasn't practical [...]. Forgive me. I don't mean to get upset. But you are taking my world away from me, piece by little piece, and sometimes it just pisses me off. Sorry."(Bryson, 271)

One of the major sources for both authors' sense of loss is the change in American towns and cities. Steinbeck repeatedly notes that he does not recognize the cities anymore. He mourns the loss but he seems to have accepted the fact that times change and cannot be stopped by an old man. He shows no effort to find the idyll of his childhood but instead is more interested in getting to know this new country, no matter if he likes it or not. So, he does not refrain from dedicating lengthy passages to describing the "badger holes" America's cities have become and the horrible circumstances people have chosen to live in.

"This new American finds his challenge and his love in traffic-choked streets, skies nested in smog, choking with the acids of industry, the screech of rubber and houses lashed against on another while the townlets wither a time and die. And this, as I found, is as true in Texas as in Maine. [...] This is not offered in criticism but only as observation."(Steinbeck, 72)

Thirty years later we hear the same complaints from Bryson. Ironically, the perfect times Bryson is longing for are those Steinbeck complains about. Steinbeck's horribly "modernized" towns and cities are Bryson's ideal model towns and serve as a rule for the search of Amalgam. Other than Steinbeck, Bryson does not want to explore the new America as much as he wants to rediscover the old America. He crosses the continent on back roads, stopping in little hamlets along the way hoping to find the place where people walk downtown to do their shopping, children play in the streets and houses look proper and well tended. There should be a diner and a café in the center and a gas station at the outskirts. This fictional town

he is looking for arises from the TV shows he watched and the books he read as a child and it resembles the idyllic ideal during exactly the time when Steinbeck is on the road.

“It used to be that when you came to the outskirts of a town you would find a gas station and a Dairy Queen, maybe a motel or two if it was a busy road or the town had a college. Now, every town, even a quite modest one, has a mile or more of fast food places, motor inns, discount cities, shopping malls – all with thirty-foot-high revolving signs and parking lots the size of Shropshire.”(Bryson, 62)

But there are also other experiences, pleasant ones, where the two authors come across places unchanged for many years, beautiful in every sense, unspoiled and protected. Bryson lists a few of those in an interview.

“One that leaps to mind is Mt. Rushmore. I was just knocked out. It was impressive, the scale, you sort of don't know what you're going to really see. You think maybe it will be kind of small and in fact it was really neat. [...] The Grand Canyon is another – you know you've seen it so many times. I saw it when I was a kid, so you know what to expect, but when you get back it's even more fabulous. [...] Zion National Park was another place that I was really knocked out by and I'd love to go back there and have a better look. If there's a part of the world that I haven't done justice, it's that little corner.”²⁰⁸

For Steinbeck it is Montana he falls in love with. He has never been to the state and has no comparison with former times, does not know how the state has changed or if it has been affected by the same growth virus many cities in other states have. Maybe this is exactly why he falls in love with it. Here he is not faced with any loss or change for the worse. Over and over again he confesses his love of Montana. The towns may be big, but they are charming, the mountains are of the kind he would create if it were up to him and most importantly people are speaking with a distinct regional accent.

Bryson also visits Montana towards the end of his journey. He does not so much fall in love with it like Steinbeck, but he does share his perception of the Big Sky country. It is especially the sky Bryson notes, a sky so big he feels dwarfed in this vast and open country. There is, however, a place both Steinbeck and Bryson visit while in Montana, a place full of controversy dealing with one of the darker chapters of American history.

The battlefield of Little Bighorn was one of the last efforts of the Northern Plains Indians to resist white settlement and preserve their way of life. When Steinbeck visits the national monument in late 1960 he seems to refrain from taking sides. He comes to pay his respects to both, General Custer and Sitting Bull, but when he tells

²⁰⁸ Shapiro, p. 141.

the story he does it through the eyes of the veteran Charles Erskine Scott Wood, who had fought in the Chief Joseph campaign. So it is not Steinbeck who says that killing the Native Americans was one of the saddest things in history, it is not him who says that the Indians were real men, it is Wood who says so and Steinbeck is merely repeating his words, thus staying a neutral observer, as he always points out.

Bryson is not concerned with staying neutral. He likes to observe but then he also likes to give his opinion. He also starts out with a neutral account of the events of the battle, how the soldiers moved down the hill before facing the large numbers of Native Americans and then retreated back to a hill where they were all killed. But once he is done with giving the facts he clearly states his opinion on Custer and his cruel undertaking.

Not far from the battlefield in Montana, both Steinbeck and Bryson pay a visit to Yellowstone National Park. They have different attitudes towards the concept of national parks. While Steinbeck sees these parks as the enclosed freak shows of nature and largely avoids them, Bryson is not really drawn to them but does not mind stopping and appreciates the protection of a landscape that is worth preserving. He does, however, presents hard facts about mismanagement and the waste of resources. Yellowstone National Park is one of the few sites visited by both authors. Here the change over time is very noticeable.

In the early 1960s Steinbeck encounters many bears in the park, even has to hastily leave Yellowstone because the bears are driving Charley insane. Thirty years later, Bryson is exploring the same national park, but apart from buffalo he does not get to see any animals innate to the park. What has changed? The most obvious reason is claiming that the number of bears has decreased. But when taking a closer look and doing some research, we learn that the number of Yellowstone grizzly bears has actually increased from around two hundred at the beginning of the 1970s to over six hundred in 2005.²⁰⁹ So despite the tripled number of grizzly bears – not including black bears – fewer bears can be seen. We can also exclude the season as a possible reason because Bryson is traveling in late April, a time

²⁰⁹ Robins, Jim. "As Population of Yellowstone Grizzlies Grows, Further Protection Is Up for Debate." *The New York Times* online, September 26, 2006. May 6, 2009.
<http://www.nytimes.com/2005/09/26/national/26bear.html>

when the bears are no longer hibernating. In *Yellowstone Science* we can find the answer.²¹⁰

An article published in 2008 about Yellowstone bears between 1959 and the 1970s sheds some light onto the development of their numbers. Prior to 1959, especially black bears were often attracted by cars and busses because people would feed them. Visitors were even encouraged to leave their trash out for the bears and public bear feedings were organized. Only when people started to complain about the large numbers of bears roaming the campgrounds and damaging their property the park management realized that things needed to change. A campaign was started to prevent visitors from feeding the bears, and a twelve-year study of Yellowstone's grizzlies was carried out to shed some light onto their behavior. Thirty years after Steinbeck encountered quite a few bears along the roads, Bryson does not get so see a single one, neither a grizzly nor a black bear, even though their numbers have risen. With the closure of dumps and the invention of bear proof trash cans, the bears were forced to return to natural resources for food.

This is one of the few examples of effective park management. But we also learn how the National Parks Service once had plans to allow Disney to build a development in Sequoia National Park, how they flooded a valley in Yosemite that was considered far more beautiful than the one we visit today and how they sell out national forests for lumber. It seems that the protection of the environment has only recently become a topic in America's national parks, while we can find traces of environmentalism in both books. This is especially remarkable in the case of Steinbeck as we know from the historical background that the 1950s and 1960s were concerned with anything but the environment.

When seeing the large cities along the Great Lakes, the industrial centers polluting the surrounding area, Steinbeck cannot but wonder where this will lead. In Bryson we find the answer. From him we learn how Lake Erie was declared dead only a few years after Steinbeck completed his journey. Cleveland and all the other cities had led their chemical and industrial waste into the lake, killing every single life form in this large ecosystem. We even hear that Cleveland managed to set its river on fire which then burned continuously for four days, quite an achievement if it was not so sad.

²¹⁰ Meagher, Mary. "Bears in Transition, 1959 – 1970s." *Yellowstone Science*, 16 (2008): 5-13. Online http://www.nrmssc.usgs.gov/files/norock/products/YS_ScienceSummer2008.pdf

In sharp contrast to this industrialized world along the Great Lakes stands New England, which is also on the schedule of both authors. Their expectations are very much alike, they hope to find an idyllic world with picturesque and towns nestled in forests bursting with color and inhabited by people who appreciate a pastoral life style. Unfortunately, this is not the case. The New England Steinbeck drives through is a collection of empty towns, run down and neglected, left behind by their inhabitants for the presumably better life in the cities. Thirty years later, Bryson's New England has not much changed. It is still run down with peeling paint but now the views were additionally spoiled by fast food chains and gas stations. In Bryson's words it is simply ugly. And then, both Bryson and Steinbeck happen upon a place void of people. In Steinbeck's case it is a motel/road side diner combination where he wants to spend the night but cannot check in because there is simply no-one there. He waits the whole evening and returns in the morning but still nobody has shown up. This symbolizes the migration to the cities in the hope for a better life. Here, Steinbeck shows some nostalgia concerning the future. "And I am sure that, as all pendulums reverse their swing, so eventually will the swollen cities rupture like dehiscent wombs and disperse their children back to the countryside."(Steinbeck, 72)

But Steinbeck seems to have been wrong. In Bryson's case it is a whole town that is void of human life. He strolls around but wherever he goes he is the only person about. Thirty years after Steinbeck, New England's inhabitants seem not to have returned. And not until both Steinbeck and Bryson reach Vermont do they find what they have been looking for. The Indian Summer is in full progress, the trees are bursting with color and roadside stands offer the freshest and most delicious produce. Bryson has to drive all the way to the Green Mountains to find the perfect picturesque setting Steinbeck describes.

Then, there is the South, a country within a country, which scares Bryson and which Steinbeck dreads. Both authors have a clear image of the South before they set out to discover it. Bryson does not notice he is in the Bible belt until he is addressed by a girl at a Burger King and does not understand a word. Steinbeck, on the other hand, is fully aware of the world he is driving into. For him, his journey into the South starts in Texas and he ventures far into the Deep South. His wife is from Texas, he has many relations there and he claims to know many fine people who live in the South. But when he arrives there he is shocked at the amount of

racism and hatred he finds in people's hearts. The cheerleaders are the most striking personification of racism Steinbeck has ever seen. Middle-aged women gather to shout insults at a little black girl attending a white school. But there is also hope in this country where Charley is repeatedly mistaken for a "Niggah" in the passenger seat. Steinbeck meets a young African American student unwilling to accept his fate as a second class person, willing to fight for his rights and equality.

Thirty years have passed when Bryson plunges into the South. Martin Luther King has held his famous speech, Malcom X has fought for African American unity and black and white children are going to school together. While Bryson does not encounter the same open and outspoken racism Steinbeck did, he still notices large differences between the white and the black world. He drives through some of the poorest – and mostly black – counties of the country, explores different-colored college towns and learns what it means to have different skin color from everyone around when he stops for lunch at an all-black fast food restaurant becoming strangely aware of himself. He is also not particularly fond of the white Southerners, whom he does not hesitate to call "shit-squishing hillbillies" and "shitty-shoed rednecks", among other things. In this context he tells the story of three freedom riders who were lynched in Mississippi in 1964, only shortly after Steinbeck's journey, for promoting registration to vote among the African American population. More than twenty years later Bryson still feels uneasy traveling this part of the country and he is relieved when he can leave the South behind, still alive.

Two different events trigger the same childhood memories in both authors. For Steinbeck it is the observation of the cheerleaders, while for Bryson it is his visit to Washington D.C. that evokes the memory of their first encounter with racism. In both cases the concept of racism was too much to grasp for their young minds and still as grown-ups both authors are unable to understand the motivation that fuels racists.

We have now seen where the two journeys overlap and how the perceptions of the places and events compare. There is also another way, however, to see how impressed, surprised, shocked or speechless Bryson and Steinbeck were at different occasions, namely by looking at structure and organization. Bryson seems to spread his words equally between the states, dedicating some information to each one he crosses and sharing his impressions and perceptions with us. Looking at the larger

picture, however, we see that the first part of the book about the eastern half of the United States is much longer than the second part dealing with the West. Also, while Bryson pays a visit to the great cities of the East, Washington D.C., New York and Philadelphia, he completely avoids the great cities of the West, San Diego, Los Angeles and San Francisco. I want to argue here that this distribution of pages and choice of places resembles Bryson's image of America. To him, the East is densely populated with many industrial and cultural centers while the West is vast and empty but defined by its natural beauty.

Then there is Steinbeck's organization of *Travels with Charley*. When he sets out he is full of enthusiasm to learn and hear. He is paying attention to many details, talks to many people and is eager to share his thoughts with the reader. However, once he arrives in Salinas his spirits sink and with them his ability to see and to hear. Maybe it is Salinas where he finally realizes on what a crazy adventure he finds himself, and faced with death only longs for his wife and his home and the fastest way to get there. Possibly his initial quest to see and to hear the country and to say good-bye was gradually reduced to the wish to see and hear Salinas and say good-bye to his hometown. So, once he stands on Freemont Peak and looks down into the valley, he has done what he came for and his journey suddenly has no longer any purpose.

Both authors are on a journey that is a rediscovery of their home country. Driven by the feeling that they have neglected the United States, and with a heart full of nostalgia, they set out to visit parts of their country they have never seen, explore areas off the beaten track and rediscover the places of their past. This is not always easy and comes with a lot of disappointment. "It's weird in the United States because it's all changed – three years later it's not recognizable. There's a mall there now and some big-box store. It's so hard in the States to find anything the way it used to be."²¹¹ Many times Bryson comes across places from his childhood that have changed so completely he hardly recognizes them.

In this context we also have to look at the categorization of both road narratives. At the beginning of this thesis I discussed three possible ways of categorizing road stories by means of their focus. While some writers set out to discover the landscape and natural beauty, others focus on culture and traditions, while others yet are on the road to rediscover the places and the people of their past. "In an effort

²¹¹ Shapiro, p. 139-140.

to define a national identity, therefore, road genre conventions develop in three basic patterns: a quest for the soul of the nation, retracing of earlier classic journeys, and studies of specific regions.”²¹²

In the cases of *The Lost Continent* and also *Travels with Charley* all three categories apply. Steinbeck’s main focus might be the exploration of the culture and the definition of the American character, and Bryson’s might be the rediscovery of his home country, but both books are a combination of all three categories. Apart from the search for a national identity, Steinbeck also comments on nature and developments, just as much as he looks back in nostalgia and remembers the country he grew up in. And so does Bryson, when he goes down memory lane, but also pay attention to the countryside and the people inhabiting it, to different ways of life and natural beauty of America.

When asked what strikes him most about a place, Bryson’s answer is simple. “Aesthetics, I guess.”²¹³ We can clearly see this in *The Lost Continent*. Every time Bryson visits a new town the first thing he notes is the appearance. We hear of peeling paint, boarded up shop fronts, but also little windmills in front yards and clean, tree lined streets. “I think what I’ve always been looking for and what I set out looking for in the beginning was a place that was better than Iowa, that wasn’t Des Moines.”²¹⁴

When we want to take a look at the American people we have to turn to Steinbeck. As we have already heard, Bryson’s nature does not allow him to interact freely with other people, so he is more of an observer coming up with generalities about appearance and behavior. The people he dedicates most time and pages to are the Iowans. As an Iowan himself, he spent most of his childhood observing them and coming up with all sorts of theories about their missing joints, sunburned necks and the massive weight gain of Iowa women. Although he plays with stereotypes and clichés there is always a tone in his writing that shows admiration for their beliefs and values, and envy of their simple and content lives. We also learn about the Americans that owning the latest technical equipment and constantly, instantly satisfying their needs is part of their culture. Apart from that they seem to like fast food a lot but walking not so much (which would explain the

²¹² Primeau, p. 51.

²¹³ Shapiro, p. 142.

²¹⁴ Shapiro, p. 142.

size of Iowa's women), and when they visit national parks they need a lot of entertainment around it.

Steinbeck, on the other hand, engages in lively conversations with several individuals, trying to explore their way of thinking and their opinion on various topics. His dialogues often stretch over several pages and shed some light on various aspects of life in America in the 1960s but also on Steinbeck himself. The most discussed character Steinbeck meets is the actor, who shows a clear resemblance to the aging writer. Through their conversation we learn about Steinbeck's fears of growing old and ending a successful career. But there are also others who are not so much individuals but personifications of issues Americans have to deal with in the 1960s. Thus, the young sailor Steinbeck meets at the beginning of his journey symbolizes the Cold War, the waitress without a soul stands for the obsession with our artificial world, and the hitchhikers in the South represent the various faces of a world shaped by racism. Only when we look at all these people Steinbeck meets do we get an idea of the complexity of the American character. There are basically only two generalities Steinbeck comes up with concerning the American character: one is the longing to move and the other one is the preference of city life. So, when Steinbeck claims to have found *the* American character we have to put individuality aside and see what the people have in common. Americans are not only people who hunger to move and like to live in cities, but they are also concerned with the Cold War, racism, progress and development and hygiene and health. But there is one more characteristic, one that unites them all no matter the background or social statuses.

"A nation only two hundred years old will understandably spend much time and energy trying to find its identity. By world standards, America is very young, restless, and less secure than older nations about its history and traditions."²¹⁵ And still, Steinbeck gets the impression that the American character is more unified than the European one. To his mind, Americans from all corners are more American than the English are like the Welsh or the Scots. Maybe this development did not happen despite the short American history but exactly because of it. People coming from all over the world had to work together to build a nation and thus find a national identity.

"Americans as I saw them and talked to them were indeed individuals, each one different from the others, but gradually I began to feel that the Americans exist, that

²¹⁵ Primeau, p. 51.

they really do have generalized characteristics regardless of their states, their social and financial status, their education, their religious and their political convictions.”(Steinbeck, 244)

More and more he comes to the conclusion that despite all their differences there is something that connects all of them. “If other Americans reading this account should feel it true, that agreement would only mean that we are alike in our Americanness.”(Steinbeck, 209) And finally, Steinbeck dares to come up with a generality.

“If I were to prepare one immaculately inspected generality it would be this: For all of our enormous geographic range, for all of our sectionalism, for all of our interwoven breeds drawn from every part of the ethnic world, we are a nation, a new breed. [...] The American identity is an exact and provable thing.”(Steinbeck 210)

Steinbeck, man of people, is on his journey to observe and listen to people, while Bryson’s focus is the rediscovery of the small-town America he remembers from his childhood and the description of the landscape he crosses. Steinbeck often engages in discussions with strangers about politics, racism, Russia, and many more topics. He has a way with people; they open up to him and share their thoughts. In Steinbeck we learn about the country through dialogues and interaction; in Bryson we learn through his observations and descriptions. Only when we combine the observations and experiences of both authors do we get a still incomplete but often detailed image of a country full of contrasts.

Before we can do so we briefly have to consider one last factor, namely how the personal reasons for the journey have influenced their accounts. Steinbeck sets out on his journey to say good-bye to his country. One last time he wants to take in as much as possible, open his mind to progress and change and collect as many new memories as possible in order to get to know this new America he is traveling through. Bryson, on the other hand, is on a journey through the past. He does claim at the beginning that he has neglected his home country, but deep down inside he is not on a quest to find what has changed but to discover what has remained unchanged. Whenever he encounters change it means that another piece of his world has been taken away from him, it means that another piece of the world that was his father’s has vanished and with that also another piece of his father has faded.

Still, both authors often give facts and objective descriptions and taking both accounts together we get an incomplete yet detailed picture of the land and people.

We get to know a land full of contrasts and paradoxes, with rough sea coasts, sky-high mountains, endless plains, mile-deep canyons, gigantic trees and massive streams. It is a land where simple people lead content lives, rich people reside in castle-like summer homes and the poor house in shacks the size of their pick-up trucks. It is a land rich with natural beauty but also bursting with productive energy, industrial centers as well as cultural ones, metropolises and hamlets.

Still, this is not all of America. It is merely a fraction of what defines this country and if you want to learn more there is only one way, as these travelogues suggest: Hit the road!

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CAPTIONS

Caption 1: John Steinbeck and Charley. *History Link*. May 6, 2009.

http://www.historylink.org/index.cfm?DisplayPage=output.cfm&file_id=2554

Caption 2: Bill Bryson. *ABC Sydney*. May 6, 2009.

<http://www.abc.net.au/local/stories/2008/05/09/2239938.htm>

ABSTRACT

John Steinbeck is indisputably one of America's greatest novelists, and also Bill Bryson has made a name for himself in the past twenty years. Both authors, however, cannot be categorized as traditional travel writers and still they set out on a quest to rediscover their country in two journeys almost thirty years apart. Incognito they travel the United States to rediscover the country they know from their childhood, but also to rediscover a part of themselves.

On the road they discover the American South, New England and the cities of the Great Lakes, they cross California, the Midwest and visit national parks along the way. John Steinbeck is particularly interested in the people. Often he gets involved in discussions with strangers, trying to find out what they think and how they live. Taking these conversations as a basis, Steinbeck attempts to sketch and describe *the* American character

Bill Bryson has according to himself no talent with people. Therefore, on his journey he pays more attention to the landscape and sights. With his humorous talent he describes towns and tourist attractions along the road, but also plays with stereotypes and clichés concerning the American character.

Keeping the theoretical aspects of travel writing in mind, the two travel accounts are compared in respect to the perception of and perspectives on the United States. There might be thirty years between the two accounts, but Bryson's extensive use of childhood anecdotes builds a bridge to connect both books.

In course of the comparison it turns out that the most important leitmotif in both books is nostalgia. Both authors are longing for the days of their childhood and mourn the loss of many of America's traditions. This creates an incomplete but none the less informative image of the development of the United States in the 20th century, starting in Steinbeck's childhood memories and concluding with Bryson's travel accounts in the late 1980s.

GERMAN SUMMARY

John Steinbeck zählt unbestritten zu Amerikas bekanntesten Autoren, und auch Bill Bryson hat sich in den letzten zwei Jahrzehnten einen Namen gemacht. Beide, jedoch, gehören nicht zur klassischen Kategorie des Reiseschriftstellers, und dennoch haben sie sich im Abstand von achtundzwanzig Jahren auf eine Reise durch ihr Heimatland begeben. Inkognito bereisten sie die Vereinigten Staaten von Amerika um das Land wieder zu entdecken, das sie aus ihrer Kindheit kannten, und auch um einen Teil von sich selbst zu finden.

Auf ihren Reisen entdecken sie den amerikanischen Süden, Neuengland und die Städte an den Great Lakes, sie durchqueren Kalifornien, den Mittleren Westen und besuchen Nationalpark entlang der Strecke. John Steinbeck ist besonders an den Menschen des Landes interessiert. Immer wieder führt er Gespräche mit Fremden, versucht herauszufinden was diese denken und wie sie leben. Auf der Basis dieser Erfahrungen versucht Steinbeck den amerikanischen Charakter zu definieren.

Bill Bryson hat, wie er selbst von sich sagt, kein Talent im Umgang mit Menschen. Deshalb konzentrieren sich seine Beobachtungen hauptsächlich auf das Land und die Sehenswürdigkeiten. Mit viel Witz beschreibt er die Städte und Sehenswürdigkeiten entlang der Strecke, aber er spielt auch mit Stereotypen und Klischees bezüglich des amerikanischen Charakters.

Vor dem Hintergrund der literaturwissenschaftlichen Theorie bezüglich Reiseliteratur werden die beiden Reiseberichte im Hinblick auf die Wahrnehmung und die Darstellung der Vereinigten Staaten verglichen. Die Reiseberichte mögen zwar fast dreißig Jahre auseinander liegen, jedoch stellt die Fülle von Kindheitsanekdoten in *The Lost Continent* eine Brücke dar, welche die beiden Bücher verbindet.

Im Laufe des Vergleichs stellt sich heraus, dass das wichtigste Leitmotiv in beiden Werken die Nostalgie ist. Beide Autoren sehnen sich zurück in die Zeit ihrer Jugend und bedauern den Verlust vieler amerikanischer Kulturgüter und Traditionen. Daraus entsteht ein, wenn auch lückenhaftes, Bild Amerikas und seiner Entwicklung, welches fast das gesamte 20. Jahrhundert umspannt, begonnen bei Steinbecks Kindheitserinnerung bis hin zu Brysons Wahrnehmung in den spätern 1980er Jahren.

CV

Kerstin Dobschak wurde am 15.7.1979 in Wien geboren. Nach der Volksschule besuchte sie den neusprachlichen Zweig des BG/BRG Bruck an der Leitha wo sie 1997 mit gutem Erfolg maturierte. Im selben Jahr begann sie mit dem Lehramtsstudium Englisch und Geschichte an der Universität, welches sie mit der vorliegenden Diplomarbeit 2009 abschloss.

Beruflich arbeitete sie zunächst bei der Firma Ikea, bevor sie als Teamassistentin zu Hyperion Software Solutions wechselte. Parallel arbeitet sie als Besucherbetreuerin in Archäologischen Park Carnuntum, bis sie 2004 als Projektassistentin zur MIS AG wechselte. Um mehr Zeit für ihr Studium zu haben, trat sie 2005 bei Ernst & Young als Rezeptionistin ein, wo sie bis zuletzt angestellt war. Parallel unterrichtete sie English im Kindergarten und leitete als Tutorin ein amerikanisches Sprachlabor an der Universität Wien.

Von 2006 bis 2007 verbrachte sie ein Jahr in Toronto und Washington D.C., wo sie als au pair für zwei Kinder zuständig war.