

BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY - IDAHO

Travels with Charley

A Reaction to Modernism

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3/30/2011

Students and critics have often examined the powerful topics and relationship to contemporary movements of John Steinbeck's novels. One such critic claims that Steinbeck embodies literary modernism in his writing (Evans 27). While Evans was in this instance talking about Steinbeck's earlier novel *Grapes of Wrath*, many readers describe *Travels with Charley* in similar modernist terms as Steinbeck's earlier novels. In a classroom literary discussion, several critics, including Josh Allen and Cat Conner, applied this same mindset to Steinbeck's later work because of his use of several popular modernist themes. While Steinbeck indeed incorporates modernist themes, however, these critics are wrong to assume that this labels *Travels with Charley* a traditional modernist work. Instead, Steinbeck incorporates modernist themes in his novel in order to support his reaction against modernism. By comparing John Steinbeck's writing to that of traditional modernist writers, as illustrated by the American poet Robert Frost, I will show Steinbeck's progress away from modernism through his incorporation and modification of the themes of urbanization, homogeny, and loss of genuine intimacy.

One of the first modernist issues modernist writers address is the distressing transition from pastoral life to urbanization. In traditional modernist works, authors and artists would depict either dark, smoky cities or, in the case of Robert Frost, painfully beautiful images of the beautiful, natural world that they had discarded. In one particular poem titled "Into My Own," Frost describes his desire to leave behind urban life through a never-ending wood. Frost also wrote "Rose Pogonias," a poem describing a meadow he and his companion found while walking. "There we bowed us in the burning, / As the sun's right worship is, / To pick where none could miss them / A thousand orchises" (Lathem 13). In this poem and several others, Frost ventures into nature, both physically and spiritually, in an attempt to return to the past.

At first, Steinbeck depicts a similar nostalgia for pastoral life in his novel *Travels with Charley*. The entire purpose of his expedition across America, in fact, was an attempt to learn about America, knowledge that he had lost while living in the city. “I discovered that I did not know my own country. I... was working from memory, and the memory is at best a faulty, warpy reservoir. I had not heard the speech of America, smelled the grass and trees and sewage seen its hills and water, its color and quality of light” (5). Just as Frost wrote about abandoning urban life for the long procession of dark trees in “Into My Own,” so did Steinbeck seek American truth by leaving his city home to travel along long, winding mountain roads and drive through forests and deserts all across the continental United States. In other words, Steinbeck relates to Frost’s yearning, after being mired for so long in urban life, to return to nature, to the ‘grass and trees’ and to the ‘hills and water’ of America. Steinbeck further stresses this connection by referring a few pages before to what Frost would have called an example of the general. “A number of years ago, a newcomer, a stranger... bought a grove of sempervirens... and then, as was his right by ownership, he cut them down and sold the lumber, and left on the ground the wreckage of his slaughter... This was not only murder but sacrilege” (189). Steinbeck very clearly illustrates traditional modernism by his discussion of the massacred semperviren trees, which recalls Frost’s hope in the last stanza of “Rose Pogonias” that the little grove may be spared from what he called a “general mowing,” if not forever, then at least until the flowers were gone.

As the novel progresses, however, Steinbeck turns gradually away from traditional modernism by depicting nature neither as an escape from urbanization or a depiction of what has been lost, but as a solution to the urban problem. As Steinbeck wrote concerning his state of mind before the trek, “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” (20). Americans of today, as Steinbeck suggests throughout his novel, are lost and sickened, and can only be healed by returning to nature. “The 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 leashed in against one another while the townlets wither a time and die” (72). Throughout his novel, Steinbeck depicts experiences where, time and time again, he is burdened down by the chaos and the choking qualities of the city, but he always eventually returns to nature and is healed, sometimes by enduring a drive down the highway until he finds a narrow mountain road, and other times simply by looking up at the night sky. In one instance, he is emotionally healed after viewing the Aurora Borealis. “It hung and moved with majesty in folds like an infinite traveler upstage in an infinite theater. In colors of rose and lavender and purple it moved and pulsed against the night, and the frost-sharpened stars shone through it. What a thing to see at a time when I needed it so badly!” (48). By contrasting these two images, Steinbeck suggests that, although urbanization cannot be completely stopped, nor the problems completely solved by any particular action, people can be individually healed from being emotionally lost by periodic returns to nature. Because there is a solution to the urban problem, Steinbeck diminishes the power and significance both of that problem and modernism in general.

Some critics would argue here that Steinbeck, like most other modernist writers, never actually provides any cure or solution to the problems of urban life. During a lecture, one such critic Josh Allen supported this counterargument by citing a statement Steinbeck makes in the final pages of the novel. “I’ve only told what a few people said to me and what I saw. I don’t know whether they were typical or whether any conclusion can be drawn” (273). Steinbeck

appears, from this passage, to be throwing his hands in the air and denying any direct opinion. But while making this argument, Allen failed to realize that this statement was read out of context, a mistake that could be remedied simply by examining the previous few lines: “I have not intended to present, nor do I think I have presented, any kind of cross-section so that a 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...” Thus, Steinbeck is not denying knowledge of a solution to urbanization, but rather a solution to problems of racism in the South.

Another important theme in traditional modernist literature is society’s conversion to homogeneity. Adhering to this traditional theme, Frost suggests that people lose the traits which define them as individual human beings and lose themselves within the mass. In “The Census-Taker,” he writes “I came as census-taker to the waste / To count the people in it and found none, / None in the hundred miles, none in the house, / Where I came last with some hope, but not much, / After hours’ overlooking from the cliffs / An emptiness flayed to the very stone” (174). The real power, and tragedy, of this poem comes from the realization that the world is not literally empty of people, but that the people themselves have become empty of everything making them truly human. Because everyone is exactly the same, their individuality destroyed, the city becomes an empty waste. Frost returns to this tragic view of homogenization in another poem titled “Gathering Leaves,” in which he describes the raking of autumn leaves from his lawn. “I may load and unload / Again and again / Till I fill the whole shed, / And what have I then? / Next to nothing for weight; / And since they grow duller / From contact with earth, / Next to nothing for color. / Next to nothing for use” (235). While Frost is literally talking about fallen leaves, those leaves represent the human race. Thus, as people maintain contact with the

urbanized world, they become dull, exchanging their vibrant colors for a mutual brownness, and become as worthless as a load of dead leaves.

When Steinbeck first sets out on his journey across America, he describes a similar fear of society's increasing homogenization. In one instance, Steinbeck illustrates this apparent move towards sameness in a political conversation with a farmer. After asking how the election was going in that area, the farmer replied that no one seems to be talking about it, possibly because they don't have an opinion or because they are too scared to have one (31). From this passage, Steinbeck suggests a tendency for Americans to try to discover the "right way" to think, rather than determining it for themselves. He continues alluding to this empty and worthless sameness in various sections of the novel. While at a lake, he learns about the tragic case of a woman who wanted to live the standard life. She was "a prettyish blond girl trying her best to live up to the pictures in the magazines, a girl of products, home permanents, shampoos, rinses, skin conditioners... Her only company was found in the shiny pages of *Charm* and *Glamour*. Eventually she would sulk her way to success" (112). Steinbeck also makes several references to uniform food, wrapped in plastic to ensure a completely sanitary eating experience. Because of cuisine standardization, however, the food tastes uniformly bland, supporting the modernist discomfort with modern sameness.

As his novel progresses, however, Steinbeck gradually moves away from the traditional modernist belief in, and concern over, widespread homogenization. The reader first begins to see Steinbeck's transformation during his trip on an island. Every pine tree "was itself and separate even if it was a part of a forest. Drawing a very long bow of relationships, could I say that the people have that same quality? Surely I never met such ardent individuals. I would hate to try to force them to do anything they didn't want to do" (54). Whereas Steinbeck began his trek

sharing a similar outlook with Frost and other traditional modernists, he gradually comes to believe that that homogenization was actually an illusion; trees that first appeared exactly the same as the next, in reality, each had subtle differences. Likewise, while some people willingly take on the illusion of homogeneity, many actually retain subtle marks of individuality. As Steinbeck later explains, “I early learned the difference between an American and the Americans... the Americans, the British are that faceless clot you don’t know, but a Frenchman or an Italian is your acquaintance and your friend. He has none of the qualities your ignorance causes you to hate” (243). Thus, homogeneity isn’t a mass problem facing the modern world, but an individual problem of perception. By making this observation, Steinbeck once more questions the relevance of modernism.

Finally, traditional modernist writers often focus on a third theme: social intimacy. Many of Frost’s poems focus on this theme. In “Mending Wall,” for example, Frost describes a process by which people begin to destroy their connections with others. “Before I built a wall I’d ask to know / What I was walling in or walling out, / And to whom I was like to give offense. / Something there is that doesn’t love a wall, / That wants it down. I could say ‘Elves’ to him, / But it’s not elves exactly, and I’d rather / He said it for himself” (34). Building walls between ourselves and others, Frost argues, is not only harmful, but against nature. But like his friend in the poem, many continue building up the walls just as their fathers have, unable to conceive another way. Frost continues to utilize this theme in his poem “Good Hours,” in which he writes of an experience walking through the town and glancing at windows. “I had a glimpse through curtain laces / Of youthful forms and youthful faces. / I had such company outward bound / I went till there were no cottages found. / I turned and repented, but coming back / I saw no window but that was black” (102). Whereas the speaker of the poem recalls a time, only a few

hours previous, when he heard violin music and interacted with others. By the final lines, however, those social joys have vanished, leaving behind a sense of dejection and loss.

As was the case with the previous two themes, Steinbeck begins his novel with an assumption of a widespread lack social intimacy. While visiting a New England town, Steinbeck describes his attempt to communicate with the local population by entering several roadside restaurants. To his dismay, however, the local population turns out to be rather silent and taciturn. “To find these places inhabited, one must get up very early. And there is a drawback even to this. Early-rising men not only do not talk much to strangers, they barely talk to one another. Breakfast conversation is limited to a series of laconic grunts” (34). From this perspective, humanity appears to have gone through a decline, resembling the repugnant ways of the animal. Steinbeck tries multiple other times to have meaningful conversations with the people he passes, only to achieve similar results. In an auto court just outside of Bangor, he talks with a lifeless waitress who’s morose demeanor greatly depresses him (46). Later, he asks directions from a Maine state trooper, but receives only physical gestures and a few limited sentences (50). By looking at these instances alone, it would be very easy for readers to see Steinbeck as a modernist writer.

As the novel progresses, however, Steinbeck once more moves away from traditional modernist assumptions as he develops strong human connections with the people he meets. One of the most vivid examples of this occurs when he discovers French Canadian crop-pickers in Maine. After sending out his dog Charley as an ice breaker and ambassador, Steinbeck invites the clan of workers over for a visit to his camper Rocinante for a drink. After they had talked a while and he had served them all a third drink, “there came into Rocinante a triumphant human magic that can bless a house, or a truck for that matter—nine people gathered in complete silence

and the nine parts making a whole as surely as my arms and legs are part of me, separate and inseparable. Rocinante took on a glow it never quite lost” (69). Even though he had only known them for a single evening, Steinbeck was able to form an intimate connection that would forever alter his life. Through the rest of the novel, Steinbeck recounts similar experiences. When a man came by to inform him that he was on private property, Steinbeck calmly agreed to go, but asked if the man would like a drink first. By his consistent friendliness, and the offer of a drink, “the whole pattern was broken. [The man] squatted crosslegged in the pine needles on the ground and sipped his coffee. Charley sniffed close and let himself be touched, and that’s a rare thing for Charley. He does not permit strangers to touch him” (110). By his sociable gestures, Steinbeck broke down the invisible wall between the two of them, once again moving away from modernist belief in the loss of intimacy.

After incorporating these three modernist themes, Steinbeck comes to a very different conclusion than traditional modernist writers. He first hints at that conclusion during his visit to the California Redwoods, during which he describes the great grandfather tree. “The branches with their flat, bright green leaves did not start below a hundred and fifty feet up. Under that was the straight, slightly tapering column with its red to purple to blue. Its top was noble and lightning-riven by some ancient storm” (190). By relating this image with modernist theory, one realizes that the “ancient storm” that blasted that tree so long ago reflects the great Industrial Revolution, from which sprung the modernist fears of the new urbanized life, homogenization, and loss of intimacy. Yet the tree lives on, with only the singed top showing any evidence of that great trauma. Thus, Steinbeck suggests that, like the grandfather, society will not only live through the trauma of modernization, but will thrive. Society and life itself, Steinbeck argues, has not been destroyed by world changes. The trauma is over; society needs only to move on. As

he declared in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech, “It is true that other phases of understanding have not yet caught up with this great step, but there is no reason to presume that they cannot or will not draw abreast. Indeed it is a part of the writer’s responsibility to make sure that they do,” (paragraph 14). Times must inevitably change, as must the roles of the writer. Through it all, life must and will go on, and so must we.

Works Cited

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