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## ACUTE CONSCIOUSNESS OF “PLACE”: JOHN STEINBECK’S DELINEATION OF AMERICAN LANDSCAPE

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*In John Steinbeck's select work, 'place' plays an indispensable role in shaping human character. This paper explores Steinbeck's ability as « writer to evoke artistically the American landscape. In his major works of art, Steinbeck has evoked the American Landscape as a part of human condition.*

John Steinbeck, an American writer, was born and grew up in that long, narrow strip of agricultural land called the Salinas Valley, which is bordered on the east by the Gabilon Mountains, on the west by the Santa Lucia range, and then Monterey Bay. He was the third of four children, and the only son, of John Ernst Steinbeck II, manager of a flour mill and treasurer of Monterey County, and Olive Hamilton Steinbeck, a former teacher. Years later Steinbeck said of his youth, “We were poor people with a hell of a lot of land which made us think we were rich people, even when we couldn't buy food and were patched.” As a boy he explored the valley, following the Salinas River to its mouth in Monterey Bay and visiting the towns along its shore: Monterey, Carmel, Seaside, and Pacific Grove. He loved the Corral de Tierra and was awed by Big Sur, with its sea cliffs and forests.

In the Salinas Valley, in the Corral de Tierra, and on the Monterey Peninsula and Big Sur Steinbeck found much of the material for his fiction. Of *Mice and Men*, *In Dubious Battle*, and *The Grapes of Wrath*, as well as many of the stories in *The Long Valley*, are set in California's agricultural valleys. The action in *Tortilla Flat*, *Cannery Row*, and *Sweet Thursday* takes place along the waterfront of Monterey Bay. *The Pastures of Heaven* is Steinbeck's name for the Corral de Tierra. The mystic quality of *To a God Unknown* owes much to the strange brooding nature of Big Sur. Later in life, Steinbeck became a New Yorker, and he summered in Sag Harbor rather than in Pacific Grove. Still, central California remained to Steinbeck what Yoknapatawpha was to Faulkner. There is an acute consciousness of place in Steinbeck's California fiction, a way of seeing which informs the thematic design of his most successful work.

He continued in his attempt to change the way Americans, in particular, viewed themselves in relation to their natural surroundings, especially in relation to the land. In 1962 he published a nonfiction work about his three month journey around the United States in 1960 with his French poodle, Charley. *Travels with Charley: In Search of America* presents Steinbeck's observations on the people he met on his journey as well as his reflections on America itself its natural, historical, and political landscape. The need for change rings throughout the chapters, especially for a change in the way Americans respond to their environment. Steinbeck keeps the environment in the foreground in *Travels with Charley* by juxtaposing vivid descriptions of the land with detailed discussions of its exploitation. While beginning his trip up

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through the woods of New Hampshire, he notes the “foliage of the White Mountains” and describes the falling leaves “rolling in dusky clouds, and the conifers on the slopes” all “crusted in snow.” Waking up weeks later in the trip to the chill of a Wisconsin morning, he recalls the “air ... rich with butter-colored sunlight,” this “land with richness,” and the “fat cows and pigs gleaming against green” and “corn standing in little tents as corn should, and pumpkins all about.” Still later in Montana, the state Steinbeck recalls most fondly, Steinbeck finds that the “calm of the mountains and the rolling grasslands had got into the inhabitants” and had made their towns “places to live in rather than nervous hives.” This ecological contact, however, is a rarity in Steinbeck’s experience of America. Even in the early days of his journey, Steinbeck counters his brightest observations with dark and ominous thoughts.

He warns how Americans threaten not only the beauty of the land with mounds of old “automobiles, machines,” and “wrecks of houses,” but their own lives as well by dumping deadly chemicals into rivers and lakes. Will there “come a time when we can no longer afford our wastefulness,” Steinbeck wonders, “our chemical wastes in the rivers, metal wastes everywhere, and atomic wastes buried deep in the earth or sunk in the sea”? Will Americans continue to accept “traffic” choked streets, skies nested in smog, choking with the acids of industry,” and a lifestyle carried forth by “the screech of rubber” Many of the Americans Steinbeck mentions in his travels seem willing to accept such conditions, but Steinbeck is not. With an optimism that defies his dire observations and perhaps is based on the hope that his book might move his readers, Steinbeck prophesies that Americans will change their habits as the historical pendulum reverses itself and they seek escape from their polluted cities. Steinbeck maintained that hope in light of his own belief in the human capacity to reform and his own reforming power as a writer. After warning his readers again in his

*America and Americans*, published in 1966. that they were permitting the “reckless dumping of sewage and toxic wastes” and breathing the “filthy and dangerous” fumes coming from the “belching of uncontrolled products from combustion of coal, coke, oil, and gasoline,” he relieves their consciences somewhat by drawing them as victims of a pervasive myth of unlimited resources and not as particularly responsible for their own polluting habits. Such a conclusion no doubt disturbed the more politically minded environmentalists that followed after Steinbeck, as Warren French notes in his essay “How Green Was John Steinbeck?” (*collected in Steinbeck and the Environment*), but his hope for a “green” awakening, in which “we no longer believe that a man by owning a piece of America is free to outrage it,” surely links Steinbeck’s early efforts to the environmental activists who followed him.

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