

JOHN STEINBECK: MORALIST AND MYTHMAKER IN EAST OF EDEN

---

A THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR  
THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS IN ENGLISH  
IN THE GRADUATE SCHOOL OF THE  
TEXAS WOMAN'S UNIVERSITY

COLLEGE OF  
ARTS AND SCIENCES

BY  
SUSAN M. BROWN, B. S.

---

DENTON, TEXAS

JULY 27, 1970

# Texas Woman's University

Denton, Texas

JULY 23, 19 70

We hereby recommend that the THESIS prepared under  
our supervision by SUSAN MARIE BROWN  
entitled JOHN STEINBECK: MORALIST AND MYTHMAKER  
IN EAST OF EDEN

be accepted as fulfilling this part of the requirements for the Degree of

## Committee:

Charles L. Bruce  
Chairman  
J. Dean Bishop  
Laron B. Fulwiler

Accepted: L. L. Morrison  
Dean of Graduate Studies



## PREFACE

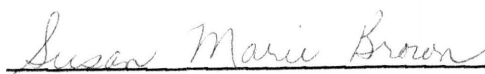
A year ago I encountered the Haggadah version of the story of Cain and Abel for the first time. The story intrigued me and caused me to wonder whether or not Steinbeck was aware of the Haggadah version of the Cain and Abel myth when he wrote East of Eden. After beginning the research for my thesis, I found that Steinbeck was not only familiar with the story in the Haggadah but was also familiar with many of the oriental myths dealing with the conflict between brothers. I decided, therefore, to research a thesis centering on the Cain and Abel myth in East of Eden. As my research progressed, I discovered that the myth of the fall of man is also important and that Steinbeck re-creates several other myths, legends, and stories of folklore in the novel.

In addition to the analysis of myth in East of Eden I have explored Steinbeck's moral philosophy contained within the mythological structure of the novel. I have concluded this study with an evaluation of Steinbeck's attempt to write a moralistic novel and to re-create myth.

I would like to thank several of the people who aided me while I was working on this thesis. First, I would like to thank Dr. Charles Bruce, the director of my thesis, for

his patience and his cooperation. In addition I extend my appreciation to Mrs. Lavon B. Fulwiler for serving on my thesis committee. To Dr. J. Dean Bishop I extend my thanks for serving on my thesis committee and for aiding me in the final arrangements concerning my thesis. I am also grateful to Dr. Autra Nell Wiley, Chairman of the Department of English, for her encouragement and her assistance.

A very special thanks goes to my husband, Stephen Brown, for his understanding and encouragement. Without his patience and sense of humor, this thesis never could have been written. Finally I would like to thank my parents, Mr. and Mrs. Clive Williams, for the encouragement they always have given me concerning any kind of educational endeavor.

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Susan Marie Brown", is written over a solid horizontal line.

Susan Marie Brown

## CONTENTS

PREFACE . . . . .	iii
CHAPTER . . . . .	PAGE
I. JOHN STEINBECK: THE DEVELOPMENT OF A WRITER . .	1
Lack of Critical Study on Steinbeck . . . . .	1
Interest in the philosophy of his fiction . .	1
Divided criticism concerning <u>East of Eden</u> . .	2
Steinbeck's California Days . . . . .	3
Birth . . . . .	3
Early childhood . . . . .	3
Interest in literature . . . . .	4
Influences on his writing . . . . .	4
Steinbeck's College Career . . . . .	5
Preparation for a Writing Career . . . . .	5
Beginning of his writing career in 1926 . . .	6
<u>The Red Pony</u> . . . . .	6
Influence of Ed Ricketts . . . . .	6
Influence of Pascal Covici . . . . .	7
Relationship of Steinbeck and Covici . . . . .	8
<u>In Dubious Battle</u> and <u>Of Mice and Men</u> . . . . .	8
<u>The Grapes of Wrath</u> . . . . .	9
Reception of the novel . . . . .	9
Success of the novel . . . . .	10

Work During World War II . . . . .	11
<u>Cannery Row</u> . . . . .	11
<u>The Pearl</u> . . . . .	12
Change in Philosophy with <u>The Wayward Bus</u> . . . . .	12
Trip to Russia . . . . .	12
Loss of Ed Ricketts . . . . .	13
New Philosophical Emphasis in Later Novels . . . . .	13
<u>East of Eden</u> . . . . .	14
Original plan for <u>East of Eden</u> . . . . .	14
Introduction of the Trask family . . . . .	15
Personal triumph . . . . .	15
Harvey Curtis Webster's evaluation . . . . .	16
Joseph Wood Krutch's evaluation . . . . .	16
Arthur Mizener's evaluation . . . . .	17
Peter Lisca's evaluation . . . . .	17
The culmination of Steinbeck's efforts . . . . .	17
Comparison of <u>East of Eden</u> and <u>The Grapes of Wrath</u> . . . . .	18
<u>Sweet Thursday</u> . . . . .	18
Disappointing reviews of <u>Sweet Thursday</u> . . . . .	19
Journalistic Work in the 1950's . . . . .	19
Nobel Prize for Literature . . . . .	20
Death of Steinbeck . . . . .	20
Analysis of the theme of <u>East of Eden</u> . . . . .	20
II. OUT OF THE GARDEN OF EDEN AND INTO THE LAND OF NOD . . . . .	22
Theme of East of Eden . . . . .	22
Change from interest in biology and sociology to ethics . . . . .	22

Christian mythology and oriental philosophy .	23
Struggle with the problem of good and evil .	23
Original Plan for <u>East of Eden</u> . . . . .	24
Change in the Theme of the Novel . . . . .	24
Departure from Earlier Novels . . . . .	25
Saga of American life . . . . .	25
Introduction of the Trasks . . . . .	26
Re-creation of myth . . . . .	27
Two Poles of His Work, Myth and Biology . . . . .	27
Allegory of good and evil . . . . .	28
Non-teleological thinking in the allegory . .	28
Biological knowledge . . . . .	29
New Emphasis on Character . . . . .	30
The Cain and Abel Myth . . . . .	31
Sibling rivalry as a symbol of conflict . . .	31
Birth of Cain . . . . .	32
Birth of Abel . . . . .	32
God's rejection of Cain's sacrifice . . . . .	32
Dispute between Cain and Abel . . . . .	33
Cain's desire for Abel's sister . . . . .	33
Killing of Abel . . . . .	33
Cain's punishment . . . . .	33
Just and merciful treatment of Cain . . .	34
Everlasting punishment of evil ones . . .	34
Steinbeck's Interpretation of the Cain and Abel Myth . . . . .	35
Trask Family and the Cain and Abel Myth . . . . .	35

Symbolic couple representing mankind . . . . .	36
Charles, symbol of Cain . . . . .	37
Combination of good and evil in Charles . . . . .	38
Adam, symbol of Abel . . . . .	39
Adam's preference for Aron . . . . .	39
Caleb, symbol of Cain . . . . .	40
Rejection of Cal's gift . . . . .	40
Adam's speech . . . . .	41
Caleb's revenge . . . . .	41
Results of Cal's revenge . . . . .	42
Aron, symbol of Abel . . . . .	42
Rivalry in Both Generations over a Woman . . . . .	43
Points of View in the Cain and Abel Story . . . . .	44
Discussion of the Cain and Abel Story in the Novel . . . . .	44
Translation of <u>timshol</u> . . . . .	44
Steinbeck's translation of <u>timshol</u> . . . . .	46
The Hamilton family . . . . .	46
The Myth of the Fall of Man . . . . .	47
Adam's Eden . . . . .	48
The Virgin Whore myth . . . . .	48
Cathy, more whore than virgin . . . . .	49
Cathy as a symbol of evil . . . . .	49
Cathy as Eve, the serpent, and Cain's wife . . . . .	49
Cathy as a psychic monster . . . . .	50
Comparison of Cathy to Rhoda in <u>The Bad Seed</u> . . . . .	50
Steinbeck's decision not to go into Cathy's mind . . . . .	52

Loss of Eden . . . . .	52
Adam's responsibility for the loss of Eden . .	52
Cathy's Life in Salinas . . . . .	53
Kate's waning power . . . . .	53
Caleb's conversation with his mother . . . . .	54
Kate's increasing paranoia . . . . .	55
Caleb, the Last Inhabitant of the Garden of Eden .	55
III. A CRITICAL EVALUATION OF <u>EAST OF EDEN</u> . . . . .	56
Attempt to Evaluate the Novel Objectively . . . .	56
Steinbeck's Plans for a Second Volume . . . . .	56
Levels of Meaning in the Novel . . . . .	57
Steinbeck's Concern for the Writing Craft . . . .	57
Central Issue Regarding the Merits of the Book . .	58
Change in Steinbeck's Writing after World War II .	58
The novel's similarity to eighteenth-century English novels . . . . .	59
Return to the past . . . . .	60
Structure of the Novel . . . . .	60
Lack of structural unity in <u>East of Eden</u> . . .	61
Similarity of structure to eighteenth-century novels . . . . .	61
Characterization . . . . .	62
Attempt to establish theme through characters	62
Refuge of innocence for the characters . . . .	63
Steinbeck's fear of failure . . . . .	64
Cathy's character . . . . .	64
Invalidity of the monster thesis . . . . .	65
Identification with her as a symbol of evil . . . . .	65

Inability to understand Cathy's motivation	66
Joe's motivation . . . . .	66
Confusion of the interpretation of her behavior . . . . .	67
Comparison of Cathy to Captain Ahab . . . . .	67
Motives of Cathy and Ahab . . . . .	67
Deaths of Cathy and Ahab . . . . .	68
Steinbeck's Moral Position . . . . .	68
Interpretation of Genesis 4:7 . . . . .	69
Analysis of the Theme . . . . .	69
No exploration of the father's feelings for his sons . . . . .	70
Emphasis on morality . . . . .	71
Lack of ethical insight . . . . .	71
Philosophical conflicts . . . . .	72
Identification of good and evil . . . . .	72
Treatment of sex . . . . .	73
Theme of good and evil . . . . .	73
Possibility of enjoying evil . . . . .	74
Refusal to make moral judgments . . . . .	75
Stereotypes of good and evil . . . . .	75
Analysis of Steinbeck's Emphasis on Morality . . . . .	75
Uncertain and unsatisfactory moralism . . . . .	76
Achievement of a good philosophy . . . . .	76
Psychological inconsistencies . . . . .	77
Evaluation of the Re-creation of Myth . . . . .	77
Unsuccessful allegory . . . . .	77
Insensitivity of the allegory . . . . .	78



Further analysis of allegory . . . . .	78
Failure of the Novel . . . . .	79
Faulty structure . . . . .	80
Faulty characterization . . . . .	80
Failure of the myth . . . . .	81
Primary reason for the failure of the novel .	81
Steinbeck's Accomplishments as an Author . . . .	82
Conclusion . . . . .	82
BIBLIOGRAPHY. . . . .	84

## CHAPTER I

### JOHN STEINBECK: THE DEVELOPMENT OF A WRITER

Until the late 1950's little criticism of John Steinbeck's work has been undertaken because most critics believed the material did not warrant it. When one of Steinbeck's novels has been considered good, the explanation of the success has been either the social attitudes expressed in the novel or the fact that Steinbeck was a Californian. If an aspect of good technique was discovered, it was always accompanied by surprise as if the good technique had to be an accident.<sup>1</sup>

In exploring criticism on Steinbeck one finds that the majority of the critics were interested in the philosophy implicit in his fiction and in the stated philosophy of the Sea of Cortez. Probably this philosophical analysis was inevitable for a writer who had a strong interest in biological naturalism and whose work often dealt with the social crises of the twenties and thirties. In Dubious Battle centered on the ideologies and the strike of depressed California agricultural workers while The Grapes of Wrath dealt with the dispossessed people of the Dust Bowl and the migration to a Promised Land that did not enthusiastically

---

<sup>1</sup>Peter Lisca, The Wide World of John Steinbeck (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1958), p. 19.

welcome them. Treatment of these subjects produced a tendency for critics to categorize on all sides--liberal, humanist, Marxist, Catholic, conservative. Once the categories were set, they were hard to avoid, and the labeling Steinbeck had always feared as an artist set in.<sup>2</sup>

When Steinbeck published East of Eden in 1952, the critics aligned on two sides in praising and condemning the novel. Some aligned with religious institutions in calling the novel cruel, lusty, and evil. Those who saw the novel as Steinbeck's wrestling with a moral theme for the first time in his career considered this wrestling hopeful, but they also felt that any beauty in the book was extinguished by an obsession with animality, violence, and wickedness. For the more sophisticated reviewer the novel betrayed improbabilities, sentimentality, and intellectual naiveté.<sup>3</sup> There were other reviewers, however, who felt that East of Eden was Steinbeck's crowning achievement. Despite the differences of opinion over the worth of East of Eden, Steinbeck himself felt that the book was a great personal triumph and the high point of his career. To understand why he believed the novel to be his masterpiece, a careful survey of Steinbeck's life, attitudes, and development as a writer

---

<sup>2</sup>Ernest Warnock Tedlock, "Perspectives in Steinbeck Criticism," in Steinbeck and His Critics: A Record of Twenty-five Years, ed. by Ernest Warnock Tedlock and C. V. Wicker (Albuquerque, New Mexico: University of New Mexico Press, 1957), p. xvi.

<sup>3</sup>Tedlock, p. xxxviii.

is necessary.

Steinbeck was born and came to maturity in the Salinas Valley of California, and it was from this area that he drew most of his material for his fiction. There he became acquainted with the bums and paisanos of Tortilla Flat, Cannery Row, and Sweet Thursday; there he worked with the migrant workers of In Dubious Battle, Of Mice and Men, and The Grapes of Wrath. There he came to know the people of The Long Valley, The Pastures of Heaven, The Red Pony, The Wayward Bus, and East of Eden. From the Salinas Valley Steinbeck developed an intimate knowledge and love of nature, both of which play a large role in all of his works. From the Pacific Ocean he developed his biological view of life which informs his observations of man and society.

On February 27, 1902, John Ernst Steinbeck was born in Salinas, the son of John Ernst Steinbeck, Sr., and Olive Hamilton Steinbeck. Steinbeck, Sr., came to California shortly after the Civil War, as did John Whiteside in The Pastures of Heaven, Joseph in To a God Unknown, and Adam Trask in East of Eden. Like Elizabeth in To a God Unknown, Molly Morgan in The Pastures of Heaven, and Olive Hamilton in East of Eden, Steinbeck's mother taught in the public schools of the Salinas Valley area for many years.

Like the boy in The Red Pony, Steinbeck loved the Gabilan Mountains to the east and feared the Santa Lucia range toward the ocean, as proved by his opening page of

East of Eden.<sup>4</sup> Steinbeck grew up a sensitive boy, and his sensitivity to childhood is revealed in some remarks he made in 1936 while contemplating The Red Pony:

I want to re-create a child's world, not of fairies and giants but of colors more clear than they are to adults, of tastes more sharp and of queer heart breaking feelings that overwhelm children in a moment (Jody's feelings at the end of 'The Great Mountains,' for example). I want to put down the way 'afternoon felt'--and the feeling about a bird that sang in a tree in the evening.<sup>5</sup>

Because of his mother's former position as a school teacher, there were many books around the house to interest a young boy. Once Steinbeck wrote that he remembered,

. . . certain books that were realer than experience--Crime and Punishment was like that and Madame Bovary and parts of Paradise Lost and things of George Eliot and The Return of the Native. I read all of these when I was very young and I remember them not at all as books but as things that happened to me.<sup>6</sup>

In addition to Steinbeck's reading, several authors influenced his later work. Beginning with To a God Unknown in 1933, his novels show that the greatest influence on his prose was that of Hemingway, who Steinbeck felt was in many ways the finest writer of the time. Other authors who influenced Steinbeck at various times were D. H. Lawrence,

---

<sup>4</sup>Peter Lisca, "John Steinbeck: A Literary Biography," in Steinbeck and His Critics: A Record of Twenty-five Years, ed. by Ernest Warnock Tedlock and C. V. Wicker (Albuquerque, New Mexico: University of New Mexico Press, 1957), p. xvi.

<sup>5</sup>Cited by Lisca, "John Steinbeck: A Literary Biography," p. 4.

<sup>6</sup>Cited by Lisca, "John Steinbeck: A Literary Biography," p. 5.

Willa Cather, Sherwood Anderson, and Thackeray. Steinbeck, however, was not an avid reader of fiction, and his steadiest interest was in the "Great Books," the Bible and Apocrypha, the literatures of ancient India, Goethe, Dante, the church fathers, and the Greeks--especially the historians Herodotus, Xenophon, and Thucydides.

During his high school years, Steinbeck continued to read, but he also became more familiar with the California countryside and its people by spending many holidays as a hired hand on nearby ranches. After graduation from high school, he entered into a rather sporadic career at Stanford. Although enrolled at Stanford over a five-year period, he did not take a degree. During his career at Stanford, he contributed a few literary pieces to The Stanford Spectator. His stories were an odd mixture of the realistic and the fantastic. His poetry revealed a comic satire that is carried into his mature work--Cannery Row, The Grapes of Wrath, and Sweet Thursday, but his humor is strategic in these novels and lacks the immaturity of his previous undergraduate satire. His mature humor is developed in terms of earthy realism or symbolic reference. By the time Steinbeck left Stanford, he had already decided on a career as a writer.

During the periods that Steinbeck was not attending Stanford, he worked on ranches and on a road gang. These experiences gave him an intimate knowledge of the working man, his attitudes, habits, and language. Later this knowledge would prove to be extremely valuable in his mature

work.<sup>7</sup>

After leaving Stanford in 1926, he went to New York to become a writer, but his stay in New York was plagued with failure, and he was forced to retreat to California. After returning to his home, he took a job as caretaker of an estate on Lake Tahoe, but was later discharged for letting a huge tree crash through the roof of the estate. After being discharged, he worked in a fish hatchery in the High Sierras. During the next two winters he completed his first novel, Cup of Gold. Despite the failure of the novel, he was still determined to be a writer, and in 1930 he revised To a God Unknown and began work on The Pastures of Heaven early in 1931. Besides the two novels, he was also writing short stories. Once again, however, his novels were not successful.

At the same time that Steinbeck was writing his first novels and short stories, he was also working at odd jobs to support himself and his wife. Eventually the North American Review did print the first two parts of The Red Pony and later printed three other short stories, but not until his success with Tortilla Flat and Of Mice and Men was Steinbeck able to devote himself entirely to his writing.

Probably the most important thing that happened to Steinbeck in the early 1930's was his meeting Ed Ricketts

---

<sup>7</sup>Lisca, "John Steinbeck: A Literary Biography," pp. 5-6.

in Pacific Grove. Ricketts ran a small commercial laboratory specializing in marine invertebrates. Ricketts' influence can be seen in the characters that Steinbeck patterned after him--Dr. Phillips of "The Snake," Doc Burton of In Dubious Battle, Doc of Cannery Row, and Doc of Sweet Thursday. Even more evident is Ricketts' influence on Steinbeck's biological view of life that underlies all of Steinbeck's mature works. Steinbeck was always interested in science, but through his friendship with Ricketts, his interest was guided and developed into a concrete expression in the Sea of Cortez, a journal of their scientific expedition to the Gulf of California. In his memorial sketch, "About Ed Ricketts," Steinbeck paid homage to his friend and the fifteen years of comradeship which was ended by Ricketts' accidental death in 1948.

Another great influence on Steinbeck's career was Pascal Covici, his publisher. After Tortilla Flat had been turned down by eleven publishers, Ben Abramson, who had a bookshop in Chicago, persuaded Covici to read The Pastures of Heaven and To a God Unknown by a new and promising young writer. When Covici returned to New York, he telephoned McIntosh and Otis, who passed on to him the manuscript for Tortilla Flat. In 1935, a year and a half after the novel was completed, Covici-Friede published the book. Ironically Tortilla Flat turned out to be the first of Steinbeck's books



to make money.<sup>8</sup>

Apparently Steinbeck and Covici were more than simply writer and publisher; they were friends. During Steinbeck's periods of unproductivity and depression, Covici bolstered his confidence. Also Covici encouraged him and reminded him to always follow his own artistic impulses.<sup>9</sup> When Steinbeck learned of Covici's death in 1964, he paid tribute to his publisher by stating:

Pat Covici was much more than my friend. He was my editor. Only a writer can understand how a great editor is father, mother, teacher, personal devil and personal god. For thirty years Pat was my collaborator and my conscience. He demanded of me more than I had, and thereby caused me to be more than I should have been without him.<sup>10</sup>

Following Tortilla Flat in 1936, Steinbeck wrote In Dubious Battle. It was the first strike novel written in America and was a critical success. In 1937 he published Of Mice and Men, a play novelette. Of the novelette he wrote that it was "a study of the dreams and pleasures of everyone."<sup>11</sup> The novelette was an immediate success, and the spotlight of national publicity shone on Steinbeck. Although the public attention focused on the young author following his success made him uncomfortable, it also facilitated his agents' placing some of his short stories. Following

<sup>8</sup>Lisca, "John Steinbeck: A Literary Biography," pp. 7-9.

<sup>9</sup>Charles A. Madison, "Covici: Steinbeck's Editor, Collaborator, and Conscience," Saturday Review, XLIX (June 25, 1966), 15-16.

<sup>10</sup>Cited by Madison, p. 16.

<sup>11</sup>Cited by Lisca, "John Steinbeck: A Literary Biography," p. 11.

a trip to Europe made possible by his financial success, he finished the final play version of Of Mice and Men. The play which opened on November 23, 1937, in New York, won great critical and popular acclaim and brought Steinbeck the Drama Critics' Circle Award.<sup>12</sup>

Without waiting for the laurels from the literary world for his success with Of Mice and Men, Steinbeck drove to Oklahoma and joined a band of migrant workers, worked with them when they reached California, and lived with them in their Hootervilles. Already he was writing The Grapes of Wrath. Also during this time Steinbeck planned to accept a Hollywood contract for one thousand dollars a week for six weeks' work on Of Mice and Men so that he could give two dollars apiece to three thousand migrants. Pascal Covici flew to the coast and managed to talk him out of this project. Later when Life offered to send him into the field with a photographer to write about the migrants Steinbeck told his agents that he could accept no money other than expenses-- "I'm sorry but I simply can't make money on these people . . . the suffering is too great for me to cash in on it."<sup>13</sup>

The reception of The Grapes of Wrath was a phenomenon on a national scale. The book was publicly banned and burned by citizens; it was debated all over the country; but more

---

<sup>12</sup>Lisca, "John Steinbeck: A Literary Biography," pp. 11-12.

<sup>13</sup>Cited by Lisca, "John Steinbeck: A Literary Biography," p. 13.

importantly, it was read. The novel brought Steinbeck the Pulitzer Prize, and he was elected to the National Institute of Arts and Letters. In spite of his critical success, the personal attacks on him continued. He was accused of being Jewish, and to this accusation he replied:

I'm sorry for a time when one must know a man's race before his work can be approved or disapproved. I cannot see how The Grapes of Wrath can be Jewish propaganda, but then I have heard it called communist propaganda also.<sup>14</sup>

One bit of attention, however, that he did welcome was from the migrant workers that he had traveled with. They sent him a patchwork dog sewn from scraps of shirt tails and dresses and wearing around its neck a tag with the inscription, "Migrant John."<sup>15</sup>

With the success of The Grapes of Wrath, Steinbeck became an established author, and his literary reputation has never been any higher than it was between 1936-1941.<sup>16</sup> Rather than dwelling in the light of his fame, though, Steinbeck decided to go on a scientific expedition to the Gulf of California with his friend Ed Ricketts. The result of their expedition was the Sea of Cortez. Whether the book is important as philosophy or as science, it is an important document for understanding Steinbeck and his writings. The book is much more than a travel journal; it is a record of

---

<sup>14</sup>Cited by Lisca, "John Steinbeck: A Literary Biography," p. 13.

<sup>15</sup>Lisca, "John Steinbeck: A Literary Biography," p. 13.

<sup>16</sup>Lisca, The Wide World of John Steinbeck, p. 4.

Steinbeck's beliefs and attitudes and stands to his work as Death in the Afternoon stands to that of Hemingway.<sup>17</sup>

During the World War II years, Steinbeck's work was primarily journalistic, but he did produce his second play novelette, The Moon Is Down. Three years earlier Steinbeck had been called a communist, but with the publication of his new play novelette, he was labeled a fascist, and for the same reason--his insistence on viewing conflict in human rather than political terms. Despite the controversy at home, the novel was published by the French underground press and became very popular among resistance movements throughout Nazi-occupied Europe. In fact, the King of Norway thought enough of the book to decorate Steinbeck.<sup>18</sup>

In 1944 Cannery Row was published, and although a number of critics saw a great similarity, Cannery Row was not a mere repetition of Tortilla Flat. Steinbeck's experiences as a war correspondent account for the differences in tone in the two books. While Steinbeck revealed an amused and detached acceptance of the paisanos in Tortilla Flat, in Cannery Row he champions Mac and the boys as "the Virtues, the Graces, the Beauties" of a mangled world ruled by "tigers with ulcers, rutted by strictured bulls and scavenged by blind jackals . . . ." <sup>19</sup> The book was instantly popular,

---

<sup>17</sup>Lisca, "John Steinbeck: A Literary Biography," pp. 14-15.

<sup>18</sup>Lisca, "John Steinbeck: A Literary Biography," p. 16.

<sup>19</sup>Cited by Lisca, "John Steinbeck: A Literary Biography," p. 17.

and Steinbeck remarked: " . . . people are rushing to send it overseas to soldiers. Apparently they think of it as a relief from war."<sup>20</sup>

In 1945 Steinbeck wrote "The Pearl of La Paz," which he later published in book form under the title of The Pearl. He used an incident that happened at La Paz--the discovery of a pearl, the persecution of the one who discovered the pearl, and the renunciation of the pearl. However, he added to the story human context, thereby making the story a parable of man's soul. Five years after its publication Steinbeck said: "I tried to write it as folklore, to give it that set-aside, raised-up feeling that all folk stories have."<sup>21</sup>

Whereas Cannery Row seemed to suggest a retreat from the world as man's only hope and The Pearl reflected a tragic resignation, his next novel, The Wayward Bus, holds out a little hope. In this novel Steinbeck seems to be saying that in spite of the corrupt, vulgar, and cynical people in the book, there are still those like Juan Chico who are realistic and objective and who always return to dig the floundering world out of the mud.

Although his next novel, Burning Bright, did not appear until four years after the affirmation of The Wayward Bus, those intervening years were busy ones. In the summer of 1947, Steinbeck left for Russia with photographer, Robert

---

<sup>20</sup>Cited by Lisca, "John Steinbeck: A Literary Biography," p. 17.

<sup>21</sup>Cited by Lisca, "John Steinbeck: A Literary Biography," p. 17.

Capa. When he returned, he published A Russian Journal, which was an interesting piece of journalism well received by reviewers even though its subject was controversial. As might be expected, Steinbeck found the common people of Russia as human as people anywhere else; however, he was depressed by the regimentation, bureaucracy, and lack of individual freedom. His experiences in Russia seemed to confirm his suspicions about a highly cooperative society which he had expressed earlier in the Sea of Cortez.

During the period between The Wayward Bus and Burning Bright, Steinbeck suffered the loss of his close friend Ed Ricketts. About the same time, he was busy doing research in the files of Salinas Valley newspapers and wrote a great deal of the material that went into East of Eden, at that time called "Salinas Valley."

Beginning with The Wayward Bus, a new emphasis on morality in Steinbeck's work was started and was sustained in his next two novels, Burning Bright and East of Eden. Unlike his previous play novelettes, Burning Bright lasted only two weeks on Broadway and was a miserable failure. The critics heaped a great deal of abuse upon the play, and although Steinbeck was puzzled at first, he later came to see the book's deficiencies and did not include it in The Short Novels of John Steinbeck (1953). Four years after the publication of Burning Bright, he admitted in a private conversation that the play was a failure in writing, that the play was too abstract and preached too much, and that

the audience was always a step ahead of it.<sup>22</sup>

Although he failed with Burning Bright, his failure did not stop him from plunging immediately into another novel. Fourteen years after The Grapes of Wrath he attempted another novel on the same grand scale, East of Eden. This was his all-out effort to do something really outstanding again. It is hard to determine whether the publication of this book was the natural conclusion of a long period of incubation, or a response to adverse criticism. Undoubtedly Steinbeck was aware of the criticism aimed at him, particularly criticism about the lack of adequate basis for moral action in his biologically grounded philosophy.<sup>23</sup>

Originally Steinbeck had planned to set down in story form a record of his ancestors from the time they moved westward to the Salinas Valley just after the Civil War. Much of his research for East of Eden consisted of extensive research in the files of the Salinas Valley newspapers and conversations with long-time residents of the area.<sup>24</sup> After beginning his work, Steinbeck wrote to Pascal Covici that "Salinas Valley" would be "two books--the story of my country and the story of me."<sup>25</sup> He began the work in 1947

<sup>22</sup>Lisca, "John Steinbeck: A Literary Biography," pp. 18-19.

<sup>23</sup>Tedlock, p. xxxvii.

<sup>24</sup>Lisca, The Wide World of John Steinbeck, p. 262.

<sup>25</sup>Cited by Lisca, "John Steinbeck: A Literary Biography," p. 19.

and as late as March, 1949, he was still thinking in terms of the "Salinas Valley." Two years later, however, the book's new theme, the Cain and Abel myth, was acknowledged and the title changed to East of Eden.<sup>26</sup> During this period Steinbeck frequently requested his publisher to supply him with materials on the Bible.<sup>27</sup>

In the early stages of what was still a family saga, Steinbeck introduced a fictional family, the Trasks. The importance of the Trask family grew until he became aware that he had created a novel far different from that originally planned, a novel that centered on the Trask family rather than the Hamiltons. Although the plan for the book had completely changed, he decided to leave it as it was with the two families entangled, but he reduced the story of his own family to its vestigial elements.<sup>28</sup>

After completing the novel, Steinbeck was convinced that this book was his crowning achievement. Of the book he said:

I feel a little numb about this book. I think everything else I have written has been, in a sense, practice for this. I'm fifty years old. If East of Eden isn't good, then I've been wasting my time. It has in it everything I have been able to learn about my craft or profession in all these years. Do you know, I want terribly for people to read it and to like it. I'll be miserable if they don't.<sup>29</sup>

---

<sup>26</sup>Lisca, "John Steinbeck: A Literary Biography," p. 19.

<sup>27</sup>Lisca, The Wide World of John Steinbeck, p. 263.

<sup>28</sup>Lisca, The Wide World of John Steinbeck, pp. 262-263.

<sup>29</sup>Cited by Bernard Kalb, "The Author," Saturday Review, XXXV (September 20, 1952), 11.



Undoubtedly Steinbeck believed that East of Eden represented his celebration of the soul of man. It is evident from what he himself said about the book that he passionately believed his new novel was his most important contribution to literature. Many of his critics agreed with him. Harvey Curtis Webster in the Saturday Review called East of Eden Steinbeck's best book since The Grapes of Wrath. In his article Webster continued by stating that East of Eden chronicles better than any other novel the American trek East to West to discover an Eden that always manages to escape us, but an Eden that people never cease to hope for and believe in. Webster even compares Steinbeck to Fielding and Thackeray, who wrote gangling novels, but novels full of vitality. Also Steinbeck never learned the lesson of Henry James, Webster said, but "that doesn't seem to matter as you are carried forward by a narrative flow that encompasses vulgarity, sensibility, hideousness, and beauty."<sup>30</sup>

In his article "John Steinbeck's Dramatic Tale of Three Generations," Joseph Wood Krutch calls East of Eden Steinbeck's most ambitious novel since The Grapes of Wrath. According to Krutch,

Here is one of those occasions when a writer has aimed high and then summoned every ounce of energy, talent, seriousness and passion of which he was capable. The most unfriendly critic could hardly fail to grant that East of Eden is the best

---

<sup>30</sup>"Out of the New Born Sun," Saturday Review, XXXV (September 30, 1952), 11.

as well as the most ambitious book Mr. Steinbeck could write at this moment.<sup>31</sup>

An opposing view, however, was asserted by Arthur Mizener in his article "In the Land of Nod." Far from seeing hope in Steinbeck's concern with a moral theme, Mizener advised that Steinbeck return to stories like The Long Valley and The Red Pony. According to Mizener,

There is evidence even in East of Eden of what is quite clear from Steinbeck's earlier work, that so long as he sticks to animals and children and to situations he can see to some purpose from the point of view of his almost biological feeling for the continuity of life, he can release the considerable talent and sensitivity which are naturally his. As soon as he tries to see adult experience in the usual way and to find the familiar kind of moral in it, the insight and talent cease to work, and he writes like the author of any third-rate best seller.<sup>32</sup>

In reply to Mizener's statement, Peter Lisca states:

Mr. Mizener's suggestion that Steinbeck return to The Long Valley and The Red Pony may be extreme, but it is certain that the new direction of Burning Bright and East of Eden had disastrous consequences for his art.<sup>33</sup>

In reviewing Steinbeck's literary career until 1952, it seems evident that in many ways East of Eden was the culmination of all that he had done. Although most of his novels have been analyzed from social and political points of view, they have nearly always been ignored from moral and

<sup>31</sup>In Steinbeck and His Critics: A Record of Twenty-five Years, ed. by Ernest Warnock Tedlock and C. V. Wicker (Albuquerque, New Mexico: University of New Mexico Press, 1957), p. 302.

<sup>32</sup>"In the Land of Nod," The New Republic, CXXVII (October 6, 1952), 23.

<sup>33</sup>The Wide World of John Steinbeck, p. 275.

ethical standpoints. The seemingly sudden interest in the moral theme of East of Eden was really nothing new in Steinbeck's works. Throughout his career he was interested in humanity and in an ethical morality, a morality that he later explicitly states bears the responsibility of uplifting mankind. A further review of Steinbeck's life also reveals a great sensitivity that has generally been ignored by the critics.

Probably the most appropriate comparison to East of Eden is The Grapes of Wrath because the novels, although different in subject matter, are alike in their grand plan. Both are concerned with the desperate plight of humanity. The Grapes of Wrath deals with the migrants' journey to California while East of Eden concentrates on man's power to choose between good and evil. From a moral standpoint Steinbeck is right in asserting that everything else he had done was preparation for East of Eden; however, artistically The Grapes of Wrath is a better novel. In East of Eden Steinbeck becomes so involved in asserting his moral position that he loses his objectivity and the detached point of view that he maintains so well in The Grapes of Wrath.

After the publication of East of Eden, Steinbeck journeyed to Europe. In September, he returned to New York and began work on Sweet Thursday. When the book appeared in 1954, the critics were confounded by the sudden change of pace. Sweet Thursday, however, had been in Steinbeck's plans while he was working on East of Eden. He had written Pascal

Covici that he wanted to do next a comedy, possibly in play form. In 1955 Sweet Thursday opened as a musical comedy, adapted by Rodgers and Hammerstein, and was an immediate popular success.

Coming after the moral affirmations of Burning Bright and East of Eden, Sweet Thursday greatly disappointed critics and reviewers. Several even foresaw Steinbeck's demise as a writer who should be taken seriously. Actually changing pace was characteristic of him as a writer. In Dubious Battle came after Tortilla Flat, The Moon Is Down after The Grapes of Wrath, The Wayward Bus after The Pearl, and Burning Bright after The Wayward Bus. As Steinbeck summed it up,

My experience in writing has followed an almost invariable pattern. Since by the process of writing a book I have outgrown that book, and since I like to write, I have not written two books alike. . . . If a writer likes to write, he will find satisfaction in endless experimentation with his medium . . . techniques, arrangement of scenes, rhythms of words, rhythms of thought.<sup>34</sup>

During the remainder of the 1950's Steinbeck wrote for a number of different magazines. In 1955 he wrote editorials for Saturday Review, but most of his work consisted of highly generalized statements which were not of the same quality as his earlier work. Two exceptions, however, are the short story "How Mr. Hogan Robbed a Bank" in Atlantic Monthly (March, 1956) and his novel The Short Reign of Pippin IV (1957),

---

<sup>34</sup>Cited by Lisca, "John Steinbeck: A Literary Biography," pp. 20-21.

works that are high in quality.<sup>35</sup>

In the 1960's Steinbeck's work continued to be mostly journalistic. He wrote two books, Travels with Charley and America and Americans, which are chronicles of American life and scenery. Both books are interesting, but neither is an exceptional work of art. In 1961 Steinbeck again published a book dealing with a moral theme, The Winter of Our Discontent. The following year Steinbeck received the Nobel Prize for Literature.

In 1968 Steinbeck died, and at his funeral Henry Fonda, the actor who played the leading role in the film version of The Grapes of Wrath, read some of Steinbeck's favorite poems and read passages from East of Eden.<sup>36</sup> Especially appropriate was the reading of the passages from East of Eden, since Steinbeck had so much faith in the novel.

Admittedly East of Eden fails structurally in many respects, but the purpose of this study is not to analyze the structure of the novel. Instead, I will attempt to analyze the theme of the novel, which Steinbeck illustrates through his use of the Cain and Abel myth and the myth of the fall of man. Little criticism of Steinbeck's theme

---

<sup>35</sup>Warren French, John Steinbeck (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1961), p. 30.

<sup>36</sup>Budd Schulberg, "John Steinbeck: a Lion in Winter," Tempo, March 9, 1969, p. 11.

exists, and in spite of the novel's other failures, the Cain and Abel myth and the myth of the fall of man merit close observation.

## CHAPTER II

### OUT OF THE GARDEN OF EDEN AND INTO THE LAND OF NOD

In East of Eden John Steinbeck creates a novel whose central theme is the struggle between good and evil. Around this theme he weaves two myths which explore the problem of good and evil--the Cain and Abel myth and the expulsion from the Garden of Eden. Since 1929, myth has profoundly affected the form and content of all of his novels because myth brings stature, order, and meaning to a modern writer in his attempt to find order in the chaotic world of his time.<sup>1</sup>

In addition to Steinbeck's interest in mythology, his main interest turned in the forties from biology and sociology to individual ethics. Perhaps this change was the result of his being one of the writers who became aware of the problem of evil after World War II. In an attempt to reconcile this problem of evil he deliberately attempted to write moralistic novels. In East of Eden he makes the transition from biological to moralistic novels, and creates a novel examining extensively man's capacity for good and evil.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup>Joseph Fontenrose, John Steinbeck: An Introduction and Interpretation (New York: Barnes & Noble, Inc., 1963), p. 6.

<sup>2</sup>Fontenrose, p. 118.

In order to achieve his theme of good and evil Steinbeck has relied heavily both on the early Christian concepts of the myths and on oriental philosophy. Steinbeck's interest in early Christian literature and oriental philosophy goes as far back as To a God Unknown; the theme refers to the Acts of the Apostles and the Vedic Hymns, and one character, the priest, reads La Vida del San Bartolomeo. In the Sea of Cortez Steinbeck demonstrates knowledge of the works of several Spanish Jesuits who wrote about Baja California. In The Wayward Bus Steinbeck shows his familiarity with St. John of the Cross, and in his letters and his fiction he occasionally refers to the Bhagavad-Gita, Buddhism, and oriental concepts of being. In Cannery Row Doc quotes from "Black Marigolds," and he reads Li Po.<sup>3</sup>

Despite Steinbeck's distrust of critics and the intellectualism the critics represent, despite his protests that his works were designed with modest intentions, and despite his claimed ignorance of ideas, he was a complex, well-read man. His stories are not merely fables told by a naive storyteller. His intellectualism can be best illustrated by an examination of the journal that he kept while writing East of Eden. As the dedication of the novel to Pascal Covici indicates, Steinbeck experienced an intense struggle with the problem of good and evil in human experience as well

---

<sup>3</sup>Lisca, The Wide World of John Steinbeck, p. 223.



as his experience in the delight in design and creation. He placed the record of that struggle in a box he had made, and on the cover of the box he carved the timshol symbol that stands at the center of ethical choice in the novel.<sup>4</sup>

Originally East of Eden was written for Steinbeck's sons. In a letter to Pascal Covici Steinbeck said that the novel would be written simply because his boys had no background in literature. He went on to say:

And so I will tell them one of the greatest, perhaps the greatest story of all--the story of good and evil, of strength and weakness, of love and hate, of beauty and ugliness. I shall try to demonstrate to them how these doubles are inseparable--how neither can exist without the other and how out of their groupings creativeness is born.<sup>5</sup>

In 1947 Steinbeck began the book, and his plans were to write a novel entitled Salinas Valley, a story of his country and of him. As late as 1949 he was still thinking in terms of Salinas Valley; however, two years later he acknowledged the book's new theme, the Cain and Abel myth, and the title changed to East of Eden. While working on the book, Steinbeck was moving around a great deal. He moved to a new home in New York and moved to Nantucket Island for the summer. Pascal Covici was kept busy sending Steinbeck materials, especially translations of the Bible and commentaries. The new theme resulted in several total revisions of the manuscript, including a reduction of the

<sup>4</sup>Tedlock, pp. xii-xiii.

<sup>5</sup>Journal of a Novel: The East of Eden Letters (New York: Viking Press, 1969), p. 4.

story of his family and the striking out of the special passages addressed to his sons.<sup>6</sup> In commenting on his struggle to write the novel, Steinbeck wrote:

This book will be the most difficult I have ever attempted. Whether I am good enough or gifted enough remains to be seen. I do have a good background. I have love and I have had pain. I still have anger but I can find no bitterness in myself. There may be some bitterness but if there is I don't know where it can be. I do not seem to have the kind of selfness any more that nourishes it.<sup>7</sup>

In many respects East of Eden is different from his earlier novels. It is less intent on singleness of theme and effect, and it is devoid of the regional emphasis of Tortilla Flat and Cannery Row. It also lacks the sociological emphasis of In Dubious Battle and The Grapes of Wrath. In addition it is devoid of the political emphasis that is found in The Moon is Down. Instead, East of Eden is closer to Of Mice and Men in the interest in the violence of irrationality, but the treatments and the effects of the two novels are different.<sup>8</sup>

Unlike earlier novels East of Eden is a saga of American life close to the genre of the historical novel.<sup>9</sup> For several years now some American writers have been interested

<sup>6</sup>Tedlock, pp. 9-10.

<sup>7</sup>Journal of a Novel, p. 5.

<sup>8</sup>Mark Schorer, "A Dark and Violent Steinbeck Novel," The New York Times Book Review, September 21, 1952, p. 1.

<sup>9</sup>William Phillips, "Male-ism and Moralism: Hemingway and Steinbeck," American Mercury, LXXV (October, 1952), 97.

in reinventing a past for our young nation. Steinbeck's plunge into the American past and its heroes is a technique employed by many European writers like Balzac and Zola, but it is a project seldom undertaken by serious American writers. Steinbeck's book represents this concern with history, but at the same time, it is also a continuation of his other works.<sup>10</sup> In East of Eden there is a combination of history, myth, allegory, moralism, and Steinbeck's concern for humanity.

Although the Cain and Abel story is the novel's primary theme, much of the book includes an accurate, factual account of Steinbeck's own maternal family, the Hamiltons, and the author himself appears occasionally in the novel as the narrator "I," as "me," and as "John." In the early stages of the novel, however, Steinbeck introduced a fictional family, the Trasks, and soon found that the Trask family dominated the novel. As the importance of the Trask family grew, Steinbeck realized that he had created a far different novel from what he had originally planned, a novel centering on the Trask family rather than the Hamiltons; however, he decided to leave the book as it was, with the two families entangled.<sup>11</sup>

---

<sup>10</sup> Claude-Edmonde Magny, "John Steinbeck's East of Eden," trans. by Louise Varese, Perspectives U.S.A., V (Fall, 1953), 147.

<sup>11</sup> Lisca, The Wide World of John Steinbeck, pp. 262-263.

Although Steinbeck was definitely concerned with writing a factual account of his family, the true nature of his novel is that it is not a story but a myth and a parable; this quality gives the book its incantatory power, as well as a special kind of coherence that is not in the least novelistic. Steinbeck tried to present lived or experienced time through the consciousness of individuals who are always changing themselves. He did not carry through this project, but in attempting to do so he achieved another effect that is possibly greater and certainly more original--the reconstruction of the myths of the expulsion from the Garden of Eden and the Cain and Abel myth retold in modern terms.<sup>12</sup>

As Steinbeck's later works reveal, the two poles of his work are biology and myth. Although earlier novels emphasize biology, his work represents a gradual change from biological emphasis to mythological emphasis or a move from the organic world to the imaginative and spiritual world.<sup>13</sup> In a study of the mythological emphasis in Steinbeck's works Joseph Fontenrose states:

The pleasantest part of this study has been to share Steinbeck's joy in myth and legend. He has relied principally on the Arthur cycle and Biblical tales, especially the Holy Grail and Fisher King, Garden of Eden, Cain and Abel, the Joseph story, Exodus, Leviathan, the Passion and Resurrection, the revolt of the angels.<sup>14</sup>

---

<sup>12</sup>Magny, pp. 149-150.

<sup>13</sup>Fontenrose, p. 139.

<sup>14</sup>P. 141.

In addition to reconstructing the myth in East of Eden, the novel also allegorizes good and evil. According to Warren French,

Allegory is, of course, the ancient art of discussing one thing, especially an unfamiliar or abstract concept, by talking about something familiar that stands for the unfamiliar.<sup>15</sup>

The twentieth century distrusts allegory, and a great deal of contemporary literature attempts to be simply unfocused reporting. The difference between the reporter and the allegorist is that the reporter tries only to collect facts, whereas the allegorist looks for a pattern in the event around which an account may be constructed.

Steinbeck is a contrast to most allegorists who work with an accepted theology, for Steinbeck is preoccupied with non-teleological thinking. Primarily non-teleological thinking concerns itself with what is, not with what should have been or could have been. Non-teleological thinking attempts to answer the question what or how rather than why. Even a non-teleological thinker, however, must choose a theology to give his work direction even if his choice is just consistent opposition to any other theology. Steinbeck's theology is quite similar to that of the nineteenth-century American transcendentalists, and his insistence on the primacy of human dignity is the force that kept him from committing himself to a cause.<sup>16</sup> For Steinbeck there is no

---

<sup>15</sup>P. 2.

<sup>16</sup>French, pp. 3-4.

one religion which will satisfy all religious instincts. He realizes that the desire to worship is a natural trait in man, and he wants to keep the ways to faith open and flexible. He distrusts people who think they have a monopoly on truth, and he distrusts people who are so intensely religious that they hurt their fellow man. Instead, he prefers religious beliefs that are adaptable to circumstances; therefore, Steinbeck believes that one never needs to be cruel in order to be right. Steinbeck reveals his attitude in Tortilla Flat when he writes of one of the characters: "It must be admitted with sadness that Pilon had neither the stupidity, the self-righteousness nor the greediness for reward ever to become a saint."<sup>17</sup>

Although morality is dominant in East of Eden, Steinbeck's biological knowledge still occasionally appears and is still an important source of simile and metaphor. Cathy Ames is described as a psychic monster produced by a twisted gene or malformed egg. The group organism evident in earlier novels is employed in only a few instances. The army is described as a group that tolerates no individual differences; Lee, as a spokesman for the author, says a family is hard to root out once it has dug into the earth and scratched out a home; and towns like Salinas are described as having an occasional surge of morality resulting in raids on gambling joints. Any other novelist might

---

<sup>17</sup> Cited by Daniel R. Brown, "A Monolith of Logic Against Waves of Nonsense," Renaissance, XVI (Fall, 1963), p. 51.

have made those statements and gone unnoticed; however, they are noticeable in Steinbeck because he had established the organismic theme in earlier novels. East of Eden does not deal with groups aside from the families. Instead, Steinbeck rejects the group because it is hostile to the free and exploring mind of the individual, and he lauds the individual intellect and spirit of man as the only "creative instrument."<sup>18</sup>

Besides Steinbeck's growing interest in myth and morality, East of Eden demonstrates a new emphasis on character that Steinbeck had not used since Cup of Gold.<sup>19</sup> During the first third of the novel there is a tendency for the characters to turn suddenly at certain moments into obviously symbolic characters almost as abstract as the dramatis personae in a morality play. This awkwardness, however, becomes less noticeable as the story continues.<sup>20</sup> About his characters Steinbeck wrote:

. . . since these people are essentially symbol people, I must make them doubly understandable as people apart from their symbols. A symbol is usually a kind of part of an equation--it is one part or facet chosen to illuminate as well as to illustrate the whole. The symbol is never the whole. It is a kind of psychological sign language. But in this book, which I want to have a semblance of real

<sup>18</sup>Fontenrose, p. 120.

<sup>19</sup>Lisca, The Wide World of John Steinbeck, p. 273.

<sup>20</sup>Krutch, p. 302.

experience both visual and emotional and finally intellectual, I want to clothe my symbol people in the trappings of experience so that the symbol is discernible but not overwhelming.<sup>21</sup>

To communicate the central moral ideas of his novel, Steinbeck employed the Cain and Abel myth, as the title of the book suggests.<sup>22</sup> In reference to the Cain and Abel story Steinbeck wrote:

What a strange story it is and how it haunts one. I have dreaded getting into this section because I knew what the complications were likely to be. And they weren't less but more because as I went into the story more deeply I began to realize that without this story--or rather a sense of it--psychiatrists would have nothing to do. In other words this one story is the basis of all human neurosis--and if you take the fall along with it, you have the total of the psychic troubles that can happen to a human.<sup>23</sup>

Just as common as brotherly love is sibling rivalry. The importance of the symbol of conflict between brothers is that it keeps harmony and conflict in balance. However bitter the conflict, though, it is impossible to disown one's own blood completely; therefore, in a number of mythologies the conflict between light and darkness, good and evil is represented by rivalry between brothers, sometimes unresolved, though occasionally resulting in the redemption of the brother who stands for the side of the shadow.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Journal of a Novel, p. 27.

<sup>22</sup> Fontenrose, p. 120.

<sup>23</sup> Journal of a Novel, p. 104.

<sup>24</sup> Alan Wilson Watts, The Two Hands of God: the Myths of Polarity (New York: George Braziller, 1963), p. 115.



To understand more fully the Cain and Abel story one must examine the story found in the Jewish Haggadah. The Haggadah relates the story of Cain and Abel in greater length than the King James version of the Bible. In the Haggadah wickedness came into the world with the birth of Cain, Adam's oldest son. Cain was a product of Eve impregnated by the devil. After Cain's birth, Adam took his son and Eve to his home in the east. It was there that the Angel Michael taught Cain to cultivate the ground.

Later a second son was born whom Eve called Abel because she said he was born to die. After Eve had a dream foretelling the killing of Abel by Cain, Adam separated the two boys. Cain became a tiller of the soil, and Abel, a keeper of sheep.

Cain's hostility to Abel arose when God accepted Abel's offering but rejected Cain's. Abel offered the best of his flock as a sacrifice, but Cain ate his meal first and then offered God what was left over, a few grains of flax seed. The sacrifice was not received with favor, and God chastized him.<sup>25</sup> Although Cain's face turned black, his disposition did not change even when God spoke to him thus:

If thou wilt amend thy ways, thy guilt will be forgiven thee; if not, thou wilt be delivered into the power of the evil inclination. It coucheth at the door of thy heart, yet it depends upon thee whether thou shalt be master over it, or it shall be master over thee.<sup>26</sup>

---

<sup>25</sup>Watts, pp. 134-136.

<sup>26</sup>Haggadah, cited by Watts, pp. 135-136.

Despite God's warning, a dispute later arose between Cain and Abel. Cain told Abel that God rules the world with arbitrary power, but Abel maintained that God rewards good deeds, without respect to persons. Abel contended that his sacrifice had been accepted by God and Cain's had not because his deeds were good and Cain's were wicked.

The dispute over the sacrifice was not the only reason Cain hated his brother. Twin girls were also born to Adam and Eve. The girls were destined to marry the brothers, thereby insuring the propagation of the human race. Cain desired Abel's twin sister; therefore, he constantly brooded over ways to rid himself of his brother.

Naturally the opportunity for revenge presented itself before long. One day one of Abel's sheep tramped over a field that Cain had planted, and a violent argument developed between the brothers. Having been angered by his brother, Cain threw himself on Abel. Abel was stronger, though, and could have slain Cain, but at the last moment Cain begged for mercy. The gentle Abel had scarcely released him when Cain turned and killed him.

When confronted by God, Cain pretended to be repentant. Although his penitence was but dissimulation, not true repentance, God granted Cain pardon and removed half of his chastisement from him. Originally God had condemned Cain to be a fugitive and a wanderer on earth. Now God ordered that Cain was no longer to roam forever but would remain a fugitive. So hated was Cain that all the animals and the

accursed serpent gathered together to devour Cain and avenge the blood of Abel. To protect him from beasts, God inscribed one letter of His holy name upon Cain's forehead. God then gave him the dog to protect him against wild beasts, and to mark him as a sinner, afflicted him with leprosy. There were other consequences of Cain's crime too. The earth that had once born the fruits of paradise now produced nothing but thorns and thistles. At the moment of Abel's death, the ground changed and deteriorated.

Although Cain was the offspring of Satan, a murderer and a deceiver, the Lord's treatment of him--both in the scriptural and the Haggadah versions of the story--was at once just and merciful. Cain had nerve enough to argue with the Lord, and the Lord had enough humor not to strike him dead or cast him into hell, for in His mythological form, God is still human. Only when the image of God becomes abstract, theological, and ethical does God begin to turn into a monster. From the human point of view, the purely good is as monstrous as the purely evil.<sup>27</sup> According to Alan Watts, "It is in this way that the human standpoint is the 'image' of the divine and transcendental standpoint, beyond the opposites."<sup>28</sup>

It is not until about 170 B. C. in the Book of Enoch in Judiac literature that one finds specific reference to

<sup>27</sup>Watts, pp. 136-139.

<sup>28</sup>P. 139.

the everlasting punishment of evil ones. In the canonical Hebrew and Christian scriptures some of the sayings of Jesus perhaps can be interpreted the same way, though Jesus' version of the two brothers in the parable of the Prodigal Son ends with reconciliation. In the Apocalypse of St. John, written about 100 A. D., Satan is clearly rejected for the first time with an enmity which is metaphysical, final, implacable, and eternal.<sup>29</sup>

Obviously Steinbeck has relied heavily on both the scriptural version of the Cain and Abel story and the Haggadah version. In addition to seeing the story through primitive religion, however, he also sees the story in terms of modern psychology. Cain was unhappy because his love was rejected; this rejection caused him to be mean and his meanness made him feel guilty. He became murderous and even more guilty. According to Steinbeck Cain's story is the story of all mankind, and the reason man is the only guilty animal.<sup>30</sup>

In East of Eden the action centers on the lives of three generations of two families. In each generation two brothers in the Trask family play leading roles, and in each case there is some sort of Cain and Abel relationship between them.<sup>31</sup> All the Cain characters' names begin with "C,"

---

<sup>29</sup>Watts, p. 139.

<sup>30</sup>Anthony West, "California Moonshine," New Yorker, XXVIII (September 20, 1952), 122.

<sup>31</sup>Krutch, p. 302.

Cyrus, Charles, Cathy, Caleb, and the Abel characters' names begin with "A," Alice, Adam, Aron, Abra. On their foreheads Cathy and Charles bear livid scars representing the mark of Cain. The rejection of Cain's offering is presented twice: the rejection of the pocket knife and later the rejection of \$15,000. The crime of Cain is presented five times in the novel, once with Cathy and her parents, twice with Charles and Adam, once with Cathy and Adam, and again with Caleb and Aron.<sup>32</sup>

Like most of Steinbeck's novels the book hinges on the relationship between man and man rather than man and woman. In East of Eden the symbolic couple who represent mankind are the two brothers who are opposed and united to each other like the two faces of Janus. Charles and Adam, half brothers, are even more opposed and united than the "half twins," Caleb and Aron. They were born to the same mother, but Cal is undoubtedly the son of Charles, the other of Adam.<sup>33</sup> The binding motif in the novel involves the father, a favorite son who grows up to be a good son, and another son who, hungry for his father's love and jealous of his brother, grows up under the curse of those who feel unloved.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>32</sup>Lisca, The Wide World of John Steinbeck, p. 268.

<sup>33</sup>Magny, p. 148.

<sup>34</sup>Charles Rolo, "Cain and Abel," Atlantic Monthly, CXC (October, 1952), 94.

In discussing Adam and Charles, the first generation of brothers representing the Cain and Abel myth, Leo Gurko writes that,

Adam is sensitive and good, Charles is muscular and bad. Naturally Charles tries to murder his brother out of envy and hatred because Adam is his father's favorite--just as Abel's offerings were preferred by God to Cain's.<sup>35</sup>

Although Gurko's analysis is partially correct, he has neglected several important points. Steinbeck created two characters, Adam and Charles, who both possessed the capacity for good and evil. It is true that Charles is by his very nature the violent brother, but it is also true that Charles is the son who really loves his father. When Adam wins at peewee, Charles attacks Adam. Also Cyrus tells Adam that Charles will not go into the army because,

Charles is not afraid so he could never learn anything about courage . . . To put him in the army would be to let loose things which in Charles must be chained down, not let loose.<sup>36</sup>

From the very beginning of the story, therefore, Charles demonstrates his capacity for evil and violence; however, as the novel progresses it is easier to understand Charles's attitude. He is the son who truly loves Cyrus, yet he feels Cyrus's rejection constantly. The final humiliating rejection occurs when Cyrus appreciates the mongrel pup that

<sup>35</sup>"Steinbeck's Later Fiction," Nation, CLXXV (September 20, 1952), 235.

<sup>36</sup>John Steinbeck, East of Eden (New York: Viking Press, 1968), p. 27. Subsequent quotations are from this edition and hereafter are cited in the text.

Adam gives him more than the pearl-handled knife that Charles has worked so hard to get. After his rejection Charles tries to kill Adam because he is jealous of his father's love for Adam and because he feels the rejection of his own love. Later Charles receives a long scar caused by an accident, and the scar is symbolic of the mark of Cain. Charles hates the scar and is ashamed of it. He tells Adam, "I don't know why it bothers me. I got plenty other scars. It just seems like I was marked" (p. 47). The fact that Charles recognizes his own guilt symbolized by the scar proves that Charles has undergone a moral struggle; therefore, he cannot be totally evil but instead a combination of both good and evil impulses.

In discussing the characters in East of Eden, Claude-Edmonde Magny states: "This mythicization of the characters, which magnifies them and gives them their meaning, is never simplified; therein lies the strength of Steinbeck's story."<sup>37</sup> Magny goes on to say that Steinbeck does not simply give us the good on one side and the bad on the other. Both Adam and Aron are at most relative victims. Although Charles tries to kill his brother in a fit of rage after Cyrus's rejection of his gift and the acceptance of Adam's, Charles is not really wicked. Moreover, Charles feels a genuine love for his brother. Like good and evil in each of us, hate and love can coexist in the same person.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>37</sup>P. 151.

<sup>38</sup>Magny, p. 151.

In contrast to Charles, Adam shrinks from violence.

Steinbeck writes of Adam:

The emotion of nonviolence was building in him until it became a prejudice like any other thought--stultifying prejudice. To inflict any hurt on anything for any purpose became inimical to him. (p. 35).

Although Adam is gentle, he is not good at the beginning of the novel as Leo Gurko suggests. Like the other characters, Adam must undergo a great deal of self-examination before he achieves good. At the beginning of the novel Adam can be best described as innocent rather than good. It is necessary for Adam to experience the expulsion from his Garden of Eden before he loses his innocence and becomes a real human being who can recognize both good and evil. Gurko's assertion that Adam is sensitive is invalid. Adam feels no love for his father even though Cyrus desperately needs Adam's love. Nor does Adam love Charles or feel any empathy or affection for him; he simply relies on Charles. After Cathy leaves Adam, he demonstrates his lack of sensitivity by ignoring the twins for over a year. Finally Adam callously rejects Cal's gift, an act that makes Cal feel the total force of rejection.

Following the pattern of the Cain and Abel story, Adam prefers Aron, the twin who raises Belgian hares to the less likable Cal who wanted to be a farmer, just as Cyrus had preferred Adam to Charles. The irony of each father's partiality is that neither Adam nor Aron really loves his father; however, Charles loves Cyrus just as Cal loves Adam,



and each tries hard to please his father.<sup>39</sup>

Parallel to the story of sibling rivalry between Charles and Adam is the story of rivalry between Caleb and Aron. Like Charles, Cal feels rejected, and he is a mixture of good and evil impulses.<sup>40</sup> In a description of Cal's character Steinbeck wrote:

Cal did not question the fact that people liked his brother better, but he had developed a means of making it all right with himself. He planned and waited until one time that admiring person exposed himself, and then something happened and the victim never knew how or why. Out of revenge Cal extracted a fluid of power, and out of power, joy. It was the strongest, purest emotion he knew. Far from disliking Aron, he loved him because he was usually the cause for Cal's feelings of triumph. He had forgotten--if he had ever known--that he punished because he wished he could be loved as Aron was loved. It had gone so far that he preferred what he had to what Aron had (p. 349).

After Cal learns that his mother is a prostitute, he undergoes a real moral struggle in attempting to suppress his evil inclination to tell his brother about their mother each time he gets angry. Finally in an attempt to win his father's love Cal goes into business with Will Hamilton and admits to Will that he is trying to buy Adam's love. The partnership proves successful, and Cal gives his father \$15,000 to make up for the unsuccessful business venture of Adam. Adam cruelly refuses Cal's gift claiming that the money is war profit, unfairly gained, and he compares the gift to Aron's success in entering Stanford one year

---

<sup>39</sup>Fontenrose, pp. 121-122.

<sup>40</sup>Orville Prescott, "The Book of the Times," New York Times, September 19, 1952, p. 21.

early:

I would have been so happy if you could have given me--well, what your brother has--pride in the thing he's doing, gladness in his progress. Money, even clean money, doesn't stack up with that (p. 544).

Adam's speech is comparable to Jehovah's speech in Genesis:<sup>41</sup>

"If thou doest well, shalt thou not be accepted? and if thou doest not well, sin lieth at the door. And unto thee shall be his desire, and thou shalt rule over him"(Genesis 4:7).

Samuel Hamilton interprets this speech to mean, "I don't like this. Try again. Bring me something I like and I'll set you up alongside your brother" (p. 269).

Another interesting aspect of Adam's speech is an idea developed by Claude-Edmonde Magny, who asserts that there is another theme in the novel. The theme concerns the secret and shameful hatred with which even the most loving fathers pursue their children, and always the most beloved children. This idea has been discussed at length by Gaston Bouthoul, a sociologist, who recently noted the existence of an Abraham complex in some fathers.<sup>42</sup>

To gain revenge, Cal takes Aron to see the "circus" at Kate's whorehouse and reveals to Aron that Kate is his mother, thereby shattering Aron's unreal image of an angelic mother who died in his infancy. The next morning Aron enlists in the infantry and is sent to France, where he is killed in action. On the day of Aron's enlistment, Adam

<sup>41</sup> Fontenrose, p. 121.

<sup>42</sup> P. 150.

asks Cal where his brother is and Cal replies, "Am I supposed to look after him?" (p. 564). As a sacrifice Cal burns the \$15,000 in atonement for his guilt, thinking that perhaps the sacrifice will bring Aron back, but, of course, it does not.

Even though Cal takes Aron to see his mother in the brothel out of revenge for his father's rejection and even though Aron enlists in the army and is killed and Adam suffers a stroke at the news of Aron's death, the very anger of Cain, or Caleb, is innocent because he never intends the deaths.<sup>43</sup> All Caleb wants to do is to strike out at his brother because Aron is Adam's favorite son. Moreover, Cal truly wants to be good, but he, like Charles, is a combination of both good and evil.

Although Cal is a much more important character than his brother, Aron is still important as a catalyst of Cal.<sup>44</sup> Like Adam, Aron is the brother who shrinks from violence, and like Adam, Aron is insensitive to the world around him. Aron lives in a world of illusion, and he wants to escape ugliness. Whenever the world becomes ugly, Aron retreats and refuses to accept the world. Abra says of Aron: "He couldn't stand to know about his mother because that's not how he wanted the story to go--and he wouldn't have any other story" (p. 578). Because of his inability to accept

<sup>43</sup>Magny, p. 151.

<sup>44</sup>Steinbeck, Journal of a Novel, p. 151.

ugliness, Aron is totally insensitive to those around him. Unlike Cal, who loves his father, Aron considers Adam a source of humiliation because of the lettuce failure. When Aron passes his examinations so that he can enter college a year earlier, he callously neglects to tell Adam. It is Cal who tells Adam about the examinations, and it is Cal who feels anger toward his brother because of Aron's thoughtlessness. Even Abra finally realizes that Aron is incapable of loving anyone but himself when she tells Lee, "He doesn't think about me. He's made someone up, and it's like he put my skin on her. I'm not like that--not like the made-up one" (p. 496). Because Aron refuses to accept anything but his world of illusion, he never reaches an understanding that evil is a necessary part of the world. Because he cannot accept evil, neither can he achieve good. He can only remain in his state of innocence.

In addition to the rivalry of brothers caused by the rejection of a gift, Steinbeck also introduces rivalry in both generations over a woman, just as a woman is the cause of rivalry between Cain and Abel in the Haggadah. The rivalry between Charles and Adam is more obscure because Charles dislikes Cathy, but he still admits her to his bed and leaves her half of his fortune when he dies. In the next generation Abra transfers her love from Aron to Cal after Aron enlists in the army.<sup>45</sup>

---

<sup>45</sup>Fontenrose, p. 122.

Despite the similarities between the stories of Adam and Charles, Caleb and Aron, the stories are presented from different points of view. In the first part of the book the story is seen through Adam's eyes and emotions. Charles is a dark principle. With Caleb and Aron, Steinbeck reverses the process. Caleb is the Cain principle, but the burden of experience and emotion is seen through Caleb's eyes. Steinbeck believed that every man had Cain in him and that therefore Caleb would be easily understood.<sup>46</sup>

In order that the meaning and the significance of the Cain and Abel story can be understood, the story is discussed by the characters of the novel at great length. Lee, the Chinese servant, used as a spokesman by Steinbeck, says that the Cain and Abel story is important because it is the story of rejection from which all evil flows, since rejection provokes anger and with anger a crime of revenge follows, after which comes guilt. Steinbeck sees this process as the story of mankind.<sup>47</sup> In Chapter 34 Steinbeck says his story is similar to all other stories ever told in that, "We have only one story. All novels, all poetry, are built on the never-ending contest in ourselves of good and evil" (p. 415).

Several long passages in the book discuss the Cain and Abel theme. Even four Chinese elders investigate the story and spend two years learning Hebrew so that they can translate

---

<sup>46</sup>Steinbeck, Journal of a Novel, p. 128.

<sup>47</sup>Fontenrose, p. 124.

one word, timshol, not timshel as Steinbeck spells it by accident. Samuel even reads the sixteen verses of Genesis aloud, and Lee interprets them just before the twins are born.<sup>48</sup> Lee also makes Steinbeck's universally religious point: Everyman is potentially Cain and Abel combined. It is impossible to live without guilt and impossible to live without feeling unjustly rejected and inadequately loved.<sup>49</sup> Lee continues by explaining that the Cain and Abel story is the best known story in the world because it is the symbolic story of man's soul and because it is everyone's story. Despite the discussion the three men find the story puzzling, and not until ten years later does Lee clear up the difficulties with the help of the four Chinese sages. They solve the problem of the exact meaning of timshol by translating the verb form as "thou mayest rule" rather than "thou shalt rule," and they assert that "sin" is the antecedent of the masculine pronouns. Lee concludes in triumph that the study was a success. The translation "thou shalt rule" indicates predestination; "do thou rule," in the American Standard version, orders man to master sin; but "thou mayest rule" gives man free choice, and he can rule over sin if he wants to.<sup>50</sup> According to Lee, "thou mayest" may be the most

---

<sup>48</sup>Lisca, The Wide World of John Steinbeck, p. 269.

<sup>49</sup>Webster, p. 12.

<sup>50</sup>Fontenrose, p. 123.

important word in the world, for "that makes a man great, . . . for in his weakness and his filth and his murder of his brother he has still the great choice" (p. 303).

As Lee's discussion indicates, Steinbeck does not stop with a chronicle of a myth but goes on to pronounce a further thesis. According to Joseph Wood Krutch.

Stated in the barest and most abstract terms this thesis is, first, that Good and Evil are absolute not relative things, and, second, that in making a choice between them man is a free agent, not the victim of his heredity, his environment, or anything else.<sup>51</sup>

In a letter to Covici on June 21, 1951, Steinbeck noted the difference in translations of the word timshol. The new translation was "Thou mayest rule over sin." Excitedly Steinbeck proclaimed:

This is the most vital difference. The first two are 1, a prophecy and 2, and order, but 3 is the offering of free will. Here is the individual responsibility and the invention of conscience.<sup>52</sup>

Although most of the ethical problems in the novel center on the Trask family, the Hamiltons also fit into Steinbeck's thesis. For example, Samuel is the patriarch of the Hamilton family and in many ways is like Jehovah, for it is he who influences so many people to follow the good. It is Samuel's offspring Tom, though, who best fits into Steinbeck's thesis of good and evil and of guilt. Tom is a combination of all human emotions:

<sup>51</sup> P. 304.

<sup>52</sup> Journal of a Novel, p. 108.

He was born in fury and he lived in lightning. . . . He was a giant in joy and enthusiasms. . . . He lived in a world shining and fresh and as uninspected as Eden on the sixth day. . . . And as he was capable of giant joy, so did he harbor huge sorrow, so that when his dog died the world ended (p. 40).

Tom represents everyman. He is a human being, full of good and evil and many other contradictions. His capacity for love and guilt causes him finally to end his life because he feels responsible for his sister's death. When Steinbeck began Tom's story he wrote:

I'm getting into Tom Hamilton today, and he is a strange man, shy and silent and good--very good and confused. I don't think he ever knew what was wrong with him. But he bears out the thesis of guilt--carries it to its logical conclusion so that he must sacrifice himself. And his sacrifice was strange and rather sweet.<sup>53</sup>

Besides the Cain and Abel theme, Steinbeck introduces the theme of the fall of man, which includes the establishment of Eden, the Cain and Abel story, and the loss of Eden. In the novel Adam returns to Connecticut after ten years in the army and several years of wandering to live with Charles on the Trask farm. When Adam discovers Cathy Ames, who has been badly beaten by the whoremaster Edwards, he nurses her, falls in love with her, and marries her, obstinately refusing to inquire into her past. Although Adam never wants to accept the fact, Cathy is an embodiment of pure evil. On the night of their wedding Cathy puts sleeping medicine into Adam's drink and then enters Charles's bed. Later she appears to have been impregnated by both brothers because she bears non-identical twins. One of the twins,

---

<sup>53</sup> Journal of a Novel, p. 106.



Caleb, resembles Charles and is more like Charles in nature. Contrary to the Biblical account, though, Adam not Charles leaves the family land and goes west to California with Cathy.<sup>54</sup>

After settling in California, Adam explicitly states to Samuel his purpose in founding a family seat on a ranch in the Salinas Valley: "Look, Samuel, I mean to make a garden of my land. Remember my name is Adam. So far I've had no Eden, let alone been driven out" (p. 169). Later Samuel asks: "Where will the orchard be? . . . Eves delight in apples" (p. 169). Both Adam and Samuel share the dreams of most of the settlers of the Salinas Valley; they want to realize an American earthly paradise. Despite their enthusiasm for reaching paradise, Samuel senses a sinister influence. Later when Samuel drills a well for Adam on the same day the twins are born, he strikes a meteorite, the fallen star of the fallen angel Lucifer, symbolizing the lurking evil in the valley where Cathy has come to live.<sup>55</sup>

Besides symbolizing evil, Cathy fits into the picture of the exclusively male couple and the picture of the woman as the source of all disasters and disagreements rooted not so much in the American past as they are in the oldest myths, the Virgin Whore. She is the one for whom men kill, die, burn, and pillage without her actually having a direct part in the crimes. She is "the face that launch'd a

<sup>54</sup>Fontenrose, p. 121.

<sup>55</sup>Fontenrose, p. 123.

thousand ships," the Helen of the Trojan War, the Giftmädchen of the Nordic sagas, and the Judith of the Bible.

In East of Eden the Whore in the myth seems to erase the Virgin, though Kate participates in the nature of the chaste Diana through the idyllic love she has inspired in Adam, as well as her hatred of men and her horror of maternity. She is, however, truly a whore without the image of the warm-hearted prostitute that Dostoevski and the French romantics liked so.

It is through Kate that evil enters the novel. The Helen of the Salinas Valley is a witch who is deliberately cruel, so cruel in fact that at times her creator is embarrassed and apologizes for her behavior.<sup>56</sup> Mark Schorer adds that she is the most vicious female in literature. Her story is like folklore centering on the abstract concept of the social threat of a witch.<sup>57</sup>

Cathy also seems to be a fusion of Eve, the Eden serpent, and Cain's wife. She bears the mark of Cain in the form of a scar left from the beating Edwards gave her. Steinbeck illustrates her serpent nature by describing her as having a heart-shaped face, an abnormally small mouth, a little pointed tongue that flicks around her mouth, small sharp teeth with the canine teeth longer and more pointed than the others, tiny ears without lobes, pressed close to her head, unblinking eyes, and narrow hips. When Samuel

---

<sup>56</sup> Magny, p. 149.

<sup>57</sup> p. 1.

Hamilton delivers the twins she bites his hand severely and so causes him to be sick for days. Steinbeck also represents her as a devil, a Christian symbol: "There was a time when a girl like Cathy would have been called possessed by the devil" (p. 78). Liquor is the one thing that can release the demon in her.<sup>58</sup>

In a letter to Covici Steinbeck explained Cathy's character the following way:

Cathy Ames is a monster--don't think they do not exist. If one can be born with a twisted and deformed face or body, one can surely also come into the world with a malformed soul. . . . Cathy is important for two reasons. If she were simply a monster that would not bring her in. But since she had the most powerful impact on Adam and transmitted her blood to her sons and influenced the generations--she certainly belongs in this book and with some time given to her. There is one thing I don't think any one has ever set down although it is true--to a monster, everyone else is a monster.<sup>59</sup>

Steinbeck further reveals Cathy's character in the novel when he describes her as a psychic monster and says, "You must not forget that a monster is only a variation, and to a monster the norm is monstrous" (p. 72).

As the symbol of absolute evil, Cathy is viewed as a baby-faced monster, a sexual degenerate, and a murderess.<sup>60</sup> In an interesting article Edmund Fuller compares Cathy in East of Eden to Rhoda in William March's novel, The Bad Seed.

<sup>58</sup>Fontenrose, p. 122.

<sup>59</sup>Journal of a Novel, pp. 41-42.

<sup>60</sup>Prescott, p. 21.

Cathy is a psychic monster who occurs at random, whereas Rhoda is a monster as a result of heredity. Fuller sees both Steinbeck and March as two American writers who are trying to find a reason for evil:

They are in that now disillusioned camp that had wished to see man as inherently good, but having been compelled by their own honesty and perceptiveness to perceive the reality of evil in their world, tried to improvise an explanation for it, rather than accept the classical doctrine.<sup>61</sup>

As a result Fuller asserts, the two authors have unwittingly revived the Calvinistic doctrine of total depravity.<sup>62</sup> Concerning East of Eden Fuller's assertion is unfounded since the main point of the novel is that man is not predestined nor is he inherently evil; man has free will to make a choice between good and evil. It is true that Cathy's total depravity at first glance would tend to destroy Steinbeck's thesis; however, Cathy serves to illustrate the complexities of any ethical situation. People like Cathy do exist, and even with modern psychology it is often hard to determine why they act as they do. Apparently Steinbeck thinks that most men have a choice; those that do not have the choice dwell in an unknown region that the norm cannot penetrate. This idea goes back to Steinbeck's non-teleological thinking, a method that does not try to find an explanation for everything but accepts the fact that some things just are.

---

<sup>61</sup> Man in Modern Fiction (New York: Random House, 1958), p. 25.

<sup>62</sup> P. 25.

In attempting to resolve the problem of why Cathy acts as she does, Steinbeck finally decided not to go into Cathy's mind. In a letter to Covici on March 30, 1951, he explained his decision:

Once you know that Cathy is a monster then nothing she does can be unusual in a monster. You can't go into the mind of a monster because what happens there is completely foreign and might be gibberish. It might only confuse because it would not be rational in an ordinary sense. Cathy has great power over people because she has simplified their weaknesses and has no feeling about their strengths and goodness.<sup>63</sup>

Because of Cathy's evil nature, Adam loses his Eden after she shoots him and leaves.<sup>64</sup> In reference to the loss of Eden, Harvey Curtis Webster writes that Adam "is seduced by his Eve, and comes out of a moral wilderness this sends him into to achieve belief in himself and in the world he must learn to live in."<sup>65</sup>

Although Cathy does seduce Adam and cause the loss of paradise, in a sense Adam is responsible for the fall too. Cathy tells Adam that she will leave him after the twins are born, but Adam refuses to believe her. Instead, he continues to live with the unreal image of her that he has created:

Burned in his mind was an image of beauty and tenderness, a sweet and holy girl, precious beyond thinking, clean and loving, and that image was Cathy to her husband, and nothing Cathy did or said could warp Adam's Cathy" (p. 133).

<sup>63</sup>Journal of a Novel, p. 44.

<sup>64</sup>Fontenrose, p. 121.

<sup>65</sup>P. 11.

Only after Adam is confronted with reality does he lose his Eden, but the loss of Eden represents a growth in Adam's character. Now he must become a complete human being, seeing beauty and ugliness and accepting both as a total picture of life. Although what Cathy does is monstrous, she is responsible for transforming Adam from an innocent, insensitive being into a real, alive human being.

After Cathy leaves Adam, she goes to Salinas where, having changed her name to Kate, she works in a brothel. Eventually she murders Faye, the owner of the brothel, and becomes the owner herself. Again Kate represents the myth of the Virgin Whore, but now she does not hold power over only Adam. Instead, she has power over many of the leading male citizens in California because she has photographs that could ruin each one. Kate viciously uses the power that she has, and she is never bothered by remorse because she has no conscience. One of the possible explanations for Kate's action can be found in Steinbeck's assessment of her:

Her life is one of revenge on other people because of a vague feeling of her own lack. A man born blind must in a sense hate eyes as well as envy them. A blind man might wish to remove all the eyes in the world.<sup>66</sup>

As Kate grows old, she feels her power waning. She develops crippling arthritis in her hands, arthritis that finally affects her entire body. When the disease is at its

---

<sup>66</sup> Journal of a Novel, p. 124.

worst, Kate resembles a crab or a twisted old witch. Her aging and loss of power are especially evident when after eleven years Adam visits her and their conversation involves a discussion of her. For the first time Adam sees Kate as she really is. He asks her if she sees only evil in the world, and she replies that she does. Kate shows Adam the pictures she has and says, "Do you think I want to be human? Look at those pictures! I'd rather be a dog than a human" (p. 323). A few years later Adam visits Kate again so that he can give her a copy of Charles's will. This time Adam confronts Kate with the idea that she is missing something, the lack of which makes her less than human. After he leaves, she shakes with rage and sorrow. Despite Kate's lack of conscience, the missing facet of her character is beginning to prey on her mind. In her desire for power and dominance she realizes that there are sides to the human character that she can never understand because she does not possess them; hence, if she cannot understand all, she will be unable to dominate all.

Two final incidents in the story contribute to Kate's eventual suicide. First, Cal tells his mother that he is free of her after she suggests that he has her blood. After observing his mother for a while, Cal tells her that he does not think light hurts her eyes. Instead, he thinks she is afraid. Also when Cal says he loves Adam, Kate feels a spasm of pain. No one loves Kate, and although

Kate also loves no one, she is still aware of a void in her life.

The second event that contributes to Kate's suicide is her increasing paranoia concerning Ethel. Ethel, Samuel, Charles, and all of her other enemies seem to surround her, threatening to find her out. Finally Kate reaches the inevitable conclusion that she must escape. She also realizes something about herself and her destiny:

They had something she lacked, and she didn't know what it was. Once she knew this, she was ready; and once ready, she knew she had been ready for a long time--perhaps all her life" (p. 553).

With Kate's death and with Adam's death, the only inhabitant of the original Garden of Eden left is Caleb. It is very interesting that Caleb is a murderer, having been indirectly responsible for Aron's death, and a man who has a tremendous tendency to be evil; however, he also has a tremendous capacity for good. Expulsion from the garden has left him with the huge responsibility of choosing between good and evil. It has also left mankind with a great hope. Caleb is the one who killed his brother, but it is Caleb who will survive and who will procreate the race, a race destined to have the power to choose between good and evil. Now mankind moves out of the Garden of Eden and into the land of Nod.



### CHAPTER III

#### A CRITICAL EVALUATION OF EAST OF EDEN

Since the criteria for literary criticism vary widely, it is with some reluctance that I undertake to evaluate East of Eden. Here, however, the specific evaluation explores to what extent Steinbeck is successful in communicating the moral of his story and to what extent he is successful in re-creating myth. Before this evaluation begins, though, it is appropriate that Steinbeck make his own position clear regarding critics:

One should be a reviewer or better a critic, these curious sucker fish who live with joyous vicariousness on other men's work and discipline with dreary words the thing which feeds them. I don't say that writers should not be disciplined, but I could wish that the people who appoint themselves to do it were not quite so much of a pattern both physically and mentally.<sup>1</sup>

In this analysis the evaluation of East of Eden is as objective as possible. Both sides of nearly every issue are present, as well as an attempt to resolve the two sides.

When Steinbeck was writing East of Eden, he had planned a second volume later because he really enjoyed writing the book.<sup>2</sup> He felt to letdown in his energy, and he considered

---

<sup>1</sup> Journal of a Novel, p. 165.

<sup>2</sup> Steinbeck, Journal of a Novel, p. 164.

this novel *The Book of his career*. He believed, moreover, that everything he had done previously was practice for this book.<sup>3</sup> According to Steinbeck,

This is my big book. And it has to be a big book, and because it is new in form although old in pace it has to be excellent in every detail. And I don't care how long it takes to make it that way and I mean this. You can't train for something all your life and then have it fall short because you are hurrying to get it finished.<sup>4</sup>

What Steinbeck has produced is a novel that is not only the story of certain families and the story of the frontier, but also a story of mankind.<sup>5</sup> According to Antonia Seixas, who was for a long time Steinbeck's secretary and who was married to Ed Ricketts, Steinbeck purposely wrote on several levels of meaning, and critical evaluation seldom explored all of the levels. First, he writes on the story level; second, the level of social protest; third, the symbolic level which was understood only by more thoughtful readers; and fourth, the philosophical level.<sup>6</sup>

As an artist Steinbeck was concerned with his craft and wrote of his art:

Writing is a very silly business at best. There is a certain ridiculousness about putting down a picture of life. And to add to the joke--one must withdraw for a time from life in order to set down that picture. And third one must distort one's own way of life in order in some sense to stimulate the normal in other lives. Having gone through

<sup>3</sup>Steinbeck, Journal of a Novel, p. 124.

<sup>4</sup>Journal of a Novel, p. 33.

<sup>5</sup>Krutch, p. 303.

<sup>6</sup>Tedlock, p. xxxvi.

all this nonsense, what emerges may well be the palest of reflections. Oh! it's a real horse's ass business. The mountain labors and groans and strains and the tiniest rodents comes out. And the greatest foolishness of all lies in the fact that to do it at all, the writer must believe that what he is doing is the most important thing in the world. And he must hold to this illusion even when he knows it is not true. If he does not, the work is not worth even what it might otherwise have been.<sup>7</sup>

Obviously, Steinbeck was a writer truly interested in his craft as well as a man who sincerely wanted East of Eden to be the best thing he had ever done. As Joseph Wood Krutch pointed out after the publication of the novel, the merits of the book would be hotly debated. He got to the central issue regarding the worth of the novel when he stated:

The final verdict will not, I think, depend upon the validity of the thesis which is a part of a debate almost as old as human thought or upon any possible doubt concerning the vividness of Mr. Steinbeck's storytelling. On the highest level the question is this: Does the fable really carry the thesis; is the moral implicit in or merely imposed upon the story; has the author re-created a myth or merely a moralized tale.<sup>8</sup>

After World War II there was a definite change in Steinbeck's writing, and he seemed more interested in creating moral tales and in re-creating myth. On January 29, 1951, Steinbeck confided to his editor, Pascal Covici, that "The last few years have been painful. I don't know whether have hurt permanently or not. Certainly they have changed

---

<sup>7</sup> Journal of a Novel, p. 155.

<sup>8</sup> P. 305.

me. I would have been stone if they had not."<sup>9</sup> Undoubtedly those last few years had changed the direction of his writing as well. Judging Steinbeck's later works, Warren French has stated:

Undeniably Steinbeck's novels since World War II have failed to live up to his earlier works. . . . I wish only here to point out that by "reverse reasoning" the weakness of these later books is supposed in some way to justify revising downward the estimates of the earlier. The talents of other authors, especially ones of a Romantic temperament, like Wordsworth and Emerson flagged; yet we do not find the vital works of their youth disregarded as literary landmarks. Like all books Steinbeck's great stories of the thirties must be judged on their own merits.<sup>10</sup>

Despite Steinbeck's flagging talents after World War II, East of Eden is worthy of critical evaluation. Steinbeck compared East of Eden, which was somewhat unlike his earlier works, to eighteenth-century English novels because of the leisurely pace of the book. Steinbeck, however, felt that East of Eden was far more intense. The eighteenth-century novels displayed people and ideas set apart from the reader for inspection, whereas East of Eden attempted to use both, the old and the new.<sup>11</sup> Further, Steinbeck stated that for many years he seemed to keep himself out of his novels, but he really was in them every minute. Of East of Eden Steinbeck said: " . . . in this book I am in it and I don't for a moment pretend not to be."<sup>12</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Journal of a Novel, p. 3.

<sup>10</sup> P. 1.

<sup>11</sup> Steinbeck, Journal of a Novel, pp. 123-124.

<sup>12</sup> Journal of a Novel, p. 24.

East of Eden attempts to evolve in Time and specifically in American Time. In To a God Unknown Steinbeck returns to the past, but the project is blurred by the neolithic pantheism that he indulges in in the novel. On the surface East of Eden is more realistic than To a God Unknown. It offers a formal narrative of a family during two generations with a hint that the isolation of the Salinas Valley makes it possible for the two generations to represent several others.<sup>13</sup>

Basically there are three stories in East of Eden: the stories of the Trask family, the Hamilton family, and Cathy Ames. Cathy's story really becomes involved with the Trasks only once; thereafter it goes its own way, a parallel strand that occasionally touches the Trask story again. The Hamilton story is subordinate and touches the other two only a few times. The Hamiltons have almost nothing to do with Cathy and little to do with the Trasks.<sup>14</sup> Only Samuel and Will of the Hamilton family become involved with the Trasks. Samuel is in the first half of the novel only, and he sees the Trasks only four times. Will's contact with the Trasks is in short scenes. In one scene Will sells the Trasks a Ford; in another he has a conversation with Adam in a lunch wagon; in a third he accepts Caleb as a short-term partner. Criticizing the structure of the novel, Peter Lisca states:

<sup>13</sup> Magny, p. 147.

<sup>14</sup> Fontenrose, pp. 118-119.

"Except for these contacts and a brief visit by Liza, Samuel's wife, the Trasks and Hamiltons pursue separate courses and nothing results from their juxtaposition."<sup>15</sup> Lisca goes on to say that an organic relationship between the part of the novel does not exist.

In The Grapes of Wrath there is an organic relationship between the panoramic and scenic sections. In Cannery Row, Tortilla Flat, and The Pastures of Heaven the contrasts and parallels give these novels a definite structure, but in East of Eden "Steinbeck simply shifts back and forth between the Trasks and the Hamiltons with no apparent purpose or method, and his efforts to keep the stories abreast results in many awkward flashbacks and lacunae."<sup>16</sup> Also the domestic problems of the Hamiltons and their children are given in detail. According to Lisca,

Some of these anecdotes, such as the death of Dessie, the suicide of Tom, and Olive's airplane ride, are interesting in themselves, but at no point do they contribute to some greater purpose, and they remain essentially distracting and unintegrated fragments.<sup>17</sup>

Although Lisca's assessment is perceptive, Steinbeck himself said that his novel would be like the eighteenth-century English novels, and indeed it is: big, sprawling, and at times hard to follow. Nonetheless, he has still created an interesting novel that tries to cover a broad expanse of time and experience. Not all of the scenes with

<sup>15</sup> The Wide World of John Steinbeck, p. 265.

<sup>16</sup> Lisca, The Wide World of John Steinbeck, p. 266.

<sup>17</sup> The Wide World of John Steinbeck, p. 266.

the Hamiltons are irrelevant. For instance, the death of Dessie and the suicide of Tom bear out Steinbeck's thesis of guilt; moreover, Samuel dies halfway through the novel, but references to Samuel are made throughout the novel. Besides references, Steinbeck also intended that Samuel have a kind of rebirth. In a letter to Covici on July 9, 1951, Steinbeck wrote: "I have repeated that good things do not die. Did you feel that Samuel had got into Adam and would live in him: Did you feel the rebirth in him?"<sup>18</sup>

In addition to criticism of the structure of the novel, much has been written regarding Steinbeck's characterization. In East of Eden Steinbeck's characters are combinations of good and evil who have the freedom of choice to change their moral categories.<sup>19</sup> His novel also shows that he has grown in his respect for humanity and has developed a good understanding of mankind. He has reached thoughtful, mature conclusions about mankind and has expressed his conclusions in a thought-provoking manner.<sup>20</sup>

Although Steinbeck's writings in the past have paid little attention to individual character, they have always revealed a sympathy for the poor and the outcast that is humane rather than political. His writings also reveal that he respects the free individual rather than the well-fed,

<sup>18</sup> Journal of a Novel, p. 124.

<sup>19</sup> Webster, p. 12.

<sup>20</sup> Prescott, p. 21.

well-clothed group in society. He has seldom relied on character, however, to illustrate or classify themes of his fiction. Rather, the characters are a part of a total design to which they are subordinated. Peter Lisca ascribes one of the failures of East of Eden to Steinbeck's attempt to establish his theme in terms of character rather than structure and style. For him Steinbeck has been successful in focusing on character only in his short stories.<sup>21</sup> Lisca adds that while lesser novelists have succeeded by focusing on character, Steinbeck fails because his characters are neither credible as individuals nor effective as types but are an incongruous mixture of credibility and typicalness. Samuel too closely resembles the Old Testament prophet for whom he was named to be effective as a human being, and is too much of a human being to be convincing as an Old Testament prophet. Lee is too scholarly to be a Chinese servant and too much of a stereotype of the Chinese servant to be the learned man he is. Cathy is too Satanic to be human, and too weak and pitiful to be properly Satanic. This same kind of ambivalence is discernible in most of Steinbeck's cast--Cyrus, Charles, Caleb, Adam, and Abra.<sup>22</sup>

Another vulnerable point of Steinbeck's characterizations is that his characters often take refuge in innocence

---

<sup>21</sup>"The Art of John Steinbeck: An Analysis and Interpretation of Its Development," Dissertation Abstracts, XVI, 965.

<sup>22</sup>The Wide World of John Steinbeck, p. 273.



as their shield and alibi; hence the book's title. If Steinbeck's characters make excuses, they do so for the purpose of abolishing guilt. For instance, when Adam accuses himself of being as bad a father as Cyrus, Caleb simply refuses to believe him. In Saison en Enfer Rimbaud's frantic boy insists with complete bad faith on his monstrous innocence--two words that would fit both Lennie and Kate, as well as Cyrus, Charles, and Caleb. According to Claude-Edmonde Magny,

At this point legend intervenes and the mythical patterning of characters and situations is used to endorse a fictitious Edenism by reminding us that the Garden is in the East and that we are not yet there, or are no longer there. The effect is not so much to justify the Edenism as to absolve it from all need of justification.<sup>23</sup>

Obviously, Steinbeck wanted to create both a myth and real live characters, but his fear of failure reveals itself in a letter to Covici: "Suddenly I feel lonely in a curious kind of way. I guess I am afraid. That always comes near the end of a book--the fear that you have not accomplished what you started to do."<sup>24</sup>

Of all the characters Cathy is the one criticized most. One of the frequent criticisms is that Cathy could have been one of the great women characters in literature. She is a brilliant notion, but in the execution, she is not sufficiently developed or motivated to come through as a great

<sup>23</sup>P. 151.

<sup>24</sup>Journal of a Novel, p. 151.

character.<sup>25</sup> Steinbeck's characters have a tendency to divide into symbols of good and evil and never achieve status as individuals. For instance, Sam Hamilton is an embodiment of everything good, sensitive, and true, whereas his polarized counterpart, Cathy, is a monster.<sup>26</sup>

Concerning Cathy, Edmund Fuller says that she is the faulty thread in the novel that seriously mars a book that is in many other respects a thoughtful and substantial book. The effect of the monster thesis is that it makes the lifelong portrait of Cathy meaningless. She has no moral significance or identification value if she is an accidental mutant or moral freak. By Steinbeck's own definition she is inhuman.<sup>27</sup> Orville Prescott adds that Cathy's crimes and evil are out of keeping with a novel so concerned with morality and ethics. Cathy seriously damages the novel because of her unreal personality and because of the disgusting details of her career.<sup>28</sup>

Although Cathy is hard to identify with as a character, it can be argued that she is not hard to identify with as a symbol of evil since evil is a part of everyone's character. Also, Cathy would be best described as inhumane rather than inhuman, since people like Cathy do exist. Finally, a novel

---

<sup>25</sup>Phillips, p. 97.

<sup>26</sup>Gurko, p. 235.

<sup>27</sup>P. 28.

<sup>28</sup>P. 21.

concerned with morality and ethics must be also realistic; hence, the introduction of Cathy. Good and evil are recognizable only by contrasting them.

Probably the best criticism of Cathy as a character is that the reader is unable to understand her motivations because she is seen entirely from the outside.<sup>29</sup> At first Steinbeck introduces her as a psychic monster; later, however, he expresses doubt that his original observations were true since we can never know what she wanted or if she ever found it.<sup>30</sup>

Steinbeck's treatment of the motivation of anti-social behavior is further confused by the introduction of Joe, another "criminal type." Joe is Cathy's assistant who hates the world because his mother neglected him and his father alternately beat him and cried over him. In his treatment of Joe, Steinbeck accepts the sociological position that environment, not heredity, determines the character of the child. It is difficult to understand why the same position does not apply to Cathy, especially since Joe is responsible for her defeat. Also in thinking over her past she realizes that the Joes of the world are after her<sup>31</sup> and that as a child "smarter and prettier than anyone else," she sometimes had "a lonely fear . . . that she seemed surrounded by a

---

<sup>29</sup>W. M. Frohock, The Novel of Violence in America (Dallas, Texas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1957), p. 141.

<sup>30</sup>French, p. 154.

<sup>31</sup>French, pp. 154-155.

tree tall forest of enemies" (p. 551).

To have achieved unity Steinbeck should have fixed on one interpretation of Cathy's behavior and stuck to it, or he should not have attempted an explanation, simply explaining non-teleologically what she did and how it affected other people. Referring to the inconsistencies of characterization, Warren French has stated:

What seems to have happened is that Steinbeck's inability to reconcile his propensity for detached scientific observation with his growing tendency to pontificate kept him from perceiving the inconsistencies in East of Eden.<sup>32</sup>

In an interesting discussion Warren French continues his analysis of Cathy by comparing East of Eden to Moby Dick. Although hesitating to predict that the same belated fame that Moby Dick received awaits East of Eden, French does see a definite similarity between the two novels. Both explore the self-destruction of a monomaniac. Both Captain Ahab and Cathy Trask are single-mindedly determined to exercise their will; both will destroy anything that gets in their way; both feel that any method is acceptable in order to achieve their ends. Both are clever manipulators of other people, and both eventually destroy themselves. Here the similarity ends because the focusing upon a monomaniac that crystallized Melville's vision shattered Steinbeck's.

The famous "strike through the mask speech" makes Ahab's motives clear; however, Cathy's motives are never

---

<sup>32</sup>P. 155.

clarified in East of Eden. The only time Cathy speaks for herself is in a conversation with Adam eleven years after their separation. Then she tells him that she sees only evil and folly in the world and that she would rather be a dog than human. It is clear that Cathy has sacrificed all human affections for her desire for power and revenge, but the events that drove her to this position are never clarified. In her conversation Cathy attributes her behavior to her treatment by the owner of the brothel who nearly beat her to death, but earlier the narrator told us that she behaved just as inhumanely before she met Edwards.<sup>33</sup>

Not only is Cathy's life inexplicable, but so is her death. When Captain Ahab is caught in his own toils, he goes down fighting and drags with him almost the whole shipful of allegorical symbols of naive philosophies. Cathy, on the other hand, kills herself after deciding that even if she does outwit Joe, the chances are that she will be outwitted by someone else later. Furthermore, she does not destroy anyone else by committing suicide. The photographs she has accumulated that could have destroyed several respectable citizens are destroyed by a wise and kindly sheriff. Unlike Ahab's death, a catastrophe, her death is a blessing to the community.<sup>34</sup>

While writing East of Eden Steinbeck made his moral

---

<sup>33</sup>French, p. 153.

<sup>34</sup>French, p. 155.

position explicit in the journal he kept:

The writers of today, even I, have a tendency to celebrate the destruction of the spirit and God knows it is destroyed often enough. . . . It is the duty of the writer to lift up, to extend, to encourage. If the written word has contributed anything at all to our developing species and our half developed culture, it is this--great writing has been a staff to lean on, a mother to consult, a wisdom to pick up stumbling folly, a strength in weakness and courage to support weak cowardice. And how any despairing or negative approach can pretend to be literature I do not know. It is true that we are weak and sick and ugly and quarrelsome but if that is all we ever were, we would, milleniums ago have disappeared from the face of the earth and a few remnants of fossilized jaw bones, a few teeth in a strata of limestone would be the only mark our species would have left on the earth.<sup>35</sup>

The message of East of Eden is that man does have a choice even though one must reject Lee's interpretation of Genesis 4:7. The verse obviously has a corrupt text, and the sentence in question seems to be out of place. The masculine pronouns cannot refer to "sin," which, translated, is a Hebrew feminine noun. Nor will timshol bear the meaning that Steinbeck gives it. Translated the line reads "you would rule" rather than the permissive "you may rule." Steinbeck also translates timshol as "thou mayest," omitting "rule," as if the Hebrew form were simply an auxiliary; however, many good sermons have been drawn from an incorrect text.<sup>36</sup>

According to Warren French most of the discussions in the novel center on the meaning of timshol and the Cain and Abel myth, but they are not dramatically convincing. Although the theological disposition is interesting as a

<sup>35</sup>Journal of a Novel, pp. 115-116.

<sup>36</sup>Fontenrose, pp. 123-124.

revelation of Steinbeck's ideas, the ideas lack consistency and might have been more appropriately discussed in an essay rather than a novel.<sup>37</sup> Furthermore, Steinbeck really does badger his theme until it becomes uninteresting. For example, all the Cain characters' names begin with "C" and the Abel characters' names begin with "A."<sup>38</sup> Also endless sermons are delivered by innumerable wise men hammering home the theme.<sup>39</sup> As Peter Lisca has stated, "Steinbeck keeps worrying his theme until there is nothing left for his reader's imagination."<sup>40</sup>

Another defect of the novel is that the father's feelings toward his sons are not explored. If Steinbeck had explored a father's ambivalent feelings toward his sons, his knowledge that he favored one son over the other, his fairness or unfairness to his sons, and the spiritual and moral problems arising from his relationship with his sons, then East of Eden would have been a better novel. As it is, though, the reader does not understand Adam's actions, and in this novel the reader cannot resort to non-teleological thinking and say they just happened.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>37</sup> p. 156.

<sup>38</sup> Lisca, The Wide World of John Steinbeck, p. 268.

<sup>39</sup> Arthur Mizener, "Does a Moral Vision of the Thirties Deserve a Nobel Prize," New York Times Book Review, December 9, 1962, p. 43.

<sup>40</sup> The Wide World of John Steinbeck, p. 269.

<sup>41</sup> Fontenrose, p. 126.

Perhaps the reason Steinbeck overworks his theme in East of Eden is that he wished to be regarded as a moralist rather than as a social critic or a mere writer of a sensational melodrama.<sup>42</sup> And in spite of some harsh criticism regarding his overworking the theme, other critics see his novel as a great step forward in morality and ethics. Even though Charles Rolo finds the novel somewhat disappointing, he feels that the guardians of morality who previously regarded Steinbeck as having a depraved moral outlook should now see Steinbeck on the side of the angels.<sup>43</sup> Mark Schorer, though, has an opposite view of Steinbeck's morality. He believes that Steinbeck's fascination for depravities caused much of his work to be melodramatic. Also he has always accepted certain noble abstractions about humanity that his melodrama fails to demonstrate; therefore, there is a gap between speculative statement and novelistic presentation resulting in sentimentalism.<sup>44</sup>

Joseph Fontenrose continues the discussion of morality by stating that although East of Eden is a novel of good and evil, it lacks ethical insight. Adam is honest and kind, but honesty and kindness are really negative virtues in him: "In truth virtue seems to be a function of lack of energy: pernicious anemia may account for George Hamilton's sinless

<sup>42</sup>Krutch, p. 305.

<sup>43</sup>P. 94.

<sup>44</sup>Pp. 1 and 22.



life, and Adam Trask was passive, inert, non resistant."<sup>45</sup>  
 The "good" characters often behave unpleasantly: Aron is unloving, selfish, and inconsiderate; Adam neglects his boys for twelve years, blindly refusing to love anyone but Cathy; and, Adam brutally rejects Cal's gift after he and Cal have established a good relationship.<sup>46</sup>

Besides the lack of ethical insight, the moral philosophy of the narrator is not very convincing and is at times in direct conflict with the action. Although Samuel and Lee discuss the Cain and Abel story as proof that man has free will and the power to choose between good and evil, Lee later denies free will to Adam Trask:<sup>47</sup> "He couldn't help it, Cal. That's his nature. It was the only way he knew. He didn't have any choice" (p. 544).

In the novel good is identified with admirable individual qualities such as kindness, generosity, courage, creativity, and self-respect and also with conventional moral goodness such as sexual purity and abstinence from carnal pleasures. On the other hand, evil is identified with bad individual qualities such as meanness, cruelty, violent temper, greed, selfishness, criminal acts, and carnal pleasures. Joseph Fontenrose further explains his analysis:

<sup>45</sup>Fontenrose, p. 126.

<sup>46</sup>Fontenrose, p. 126.

<sup>47</sup>Lisca, The Wide World of John Steinbeck, p. 267.

That is, the author appears to accept Cal's label of "bad" for his adolescent desires and impulses, and of "good" for Aron's self-indulgent purity and abstinence, and to accept Abra's use of "good" and "bad" when she says Aron is too good for her, that she herself is not good and that she loves Cal because he isn't good.<sup>48</sup>

In the novel Cal and Abra never reach a more enlightened view of "good" and "bad" because Steinbeck uses them to illustrate his thesis: that good and bad is in everyone, and some bad is necessary in order that there can be good.

Unlike earlier novels, East of Eden views sex as joyless, perverted, sordid, or mercenary. Although the good married couples have children, they have no love life as far as the novel is concerned. There is a slight hint of passion between Cal and Abra in Chapter 54, but the scene is not elaborated on. The old Steinbeck who celebrated sexuality is not present in this novel. Instead, Steinbeck writes within his mythical source and adopts the Mosaic view of good and evil. In this novel certain acts are good or bad within the framework of the Mosaic legal view, and they are good or bad regardless of the circumstances. The earlier Steinbeck judged acts in context and evaluated them, without regard of the religious idea of "sin."

Although Steinbeck has a definite thesis concerning good and evil, the relationship of good and evil is never clear, for it is presented in four inconsistent ways. First, good is opposed to evil. The good traits of Adam and Aron

---

<sup>48</sup>P. 125.

are opposed to the bad traits of Charles, Cathy, and Cal. According to the doctrine of "thou mayest," good can be chosen and evil rejected. Second, good and evil complement each other. Lee believes that the two might be so balanced that if one went too far either way balance is automatically restored. Third, the source of good is evil, and evil may be necessary so that there can be good. The evil in Cathy sets off the glory in Adam even though she never intends that it shall. The wealth that Cyrus accumulated dishonestly is left to Adam, an honest man who used his wealth to rear and educate his sons. Cathy-Kate is evil, but her son Aron is good, and she leaves her money to him. Fourth, both good and evil are used as relative terms. Lee tells Adam that in which Kate is involved is neither good nor bad, even though she operates the most perverted and depraved brothel in California. Lee's speech is reminiscent of Jim Casy's doctrine; in other words, Kate's business simply is not nice.<sup>49</sup>

What Steinbeck seems unable to face is the possibility that people like the invaders in The Moon is Down and the growers in The Grapes of Wrath and even Cathy in East of Eden may do what they do because they like to. According to H. H. Munro (Saki) in "Filboid Studge," there may be people who enjoy killing their neighbors now and then. Of course Saki may be wrong about human behavior, but if one is

---

<sup>49</sup>Fontenrose, pp. 125-126.

to be truly detached and objective in one's thinking, then every hypothesis must be entertained that might explain a phenomenon, no matter how repugnant that hypothesis is.<sup>50</sup>

In Hemingway and occasionally in Faulkner one sees the same ambiguity that one does in Steinbeck--the refusal to create precise abstract values by which to pass judgment. The refusal to make a judgment is disturbing because the novels present moral or social problems. The escape into the idyllic symbolized by Lee in East of Eden is a sign of the unstable position of American novelists. Their work might lead one to believe that the whole country refuses to achieve a true understanding of good and evil. As Claude-Edmonde Magny puts it, "Meeting with failure in their efforts to carry out their professional duty, they have no recourse but to lose themselves in legend."<sup>51</sup>

Another defect of the novel is that vague stereotypes emerge with good triumphing over evil. In the novel men are distinguished from animals by their moral sense, and free will exists. Although no one disputes the validity of this concept, it is only a verbalized cliché in the novel.<sup>52</sup>

On the other hand Harold Charles Gardiner feels that although Steinbeck's emphasis on morality is to be praised, he still has a long philosophical and religious way to go

<sup>50</sup>French, p. 164.

<sup>51</sup>P. 152.

<sup>52</sup>Gurko, p. 236.

before he realizes the fundamental truth that men are trapped not because they have been rejected but because they do the rejecting through original sin.<sup>53</sup>

Warren French concludes that Steinbeck saw the world more fully when he saw it biologically. There was a noticeable change in Steinbeck's writing after 1950. As if aware of something unsatisfactory in his point of view, Steinbeck drifted away from biology into a kind of uncertain moralism. This moralism proved unsatisfactory because it did not come from a penetrating study of men interacting in society. Had Steinbeck stayed with his biological view of life, his works would have probably been better.<sup>54</sup>

Although the majority of the criticism regarding East of Eden is negative, there were several critics who saw the novel as Steinbeck's greatest achievement. Orville Prescott, for instance, viewed the theme of good and evil and the mixture of the two as giving significance to all human life. According to Prescott, in the thirteen years after Steinbeck produced The Grapes of Wrath he squandered his talents on trivial books, desperately groping in his confused opinions about human life and character. East of Eden achieves a good philosophy. Men are no longer the weak and contemptible animals they were in Cannery Row and The Wayward Bus.

---

<sup>53</sup>In All Conscience: Reflections on Books and Culture (Garden City, New York: Hanover House, 1959), p. 137.

<sup>54</sup>p. 141.

In East of Eden they are people who are strong and weak, intelligent and stupid and sometimes vicious, but their lives receive meaning because they have a choice between good and evil.<sup>55</sup>

Although Steinbeck's thesis of free will is an appealing philosophy, it is impossible to agree with Prescott's assessment of the novel. Although Steinbeck wanted very much to instill this idea into his reader, there are too many psychological inconsistencies in the novel for the thesis to be credible. There is also too much confusion concerning what good and evil are for the novel to have the kind of impact that Steinbeck intended.

Besides the philosophy that man has a choice, Steinbeck also tried to re-create myth in his novel. Referring to Steinbeck as a mythmaker Joseph Fontenrose has said:

At the paradise extremity we see Steinbeck the mythmaker and mystic, "Naturalism's Priest," as Woodburn Ross has called him, dreamer of the American dream, which has traditionally taken the form of a vision of earthly paradise, a copy of the heavenly paradise.<sup>56</sup>

Combined with his myth Steinbeck has written an allegory of good and evil, but the allegory is unsuccessful. One of the reasons for the failure is that in books like The Pearl, The Wayward Bus, and Burning Bright, allegory engulfs experience and Steinbeck's flirtation with existentialism clashes with his satirical tendencies; therefore,

<sup>55</sup>Prescott, p. 21.

<sup>56</sup>p. 139.

when he wrote East of Eden, he no longer trusted his memories of his native California and overloaded a novel that might have been a moving pastoral with an elaborate and befuddled allegory.

Another reason that the allegory fails is that Steinbeck does not maintain a balance between science and sensitivity and between the demand of the pattern and the demand of emotions that the audience can share. Although Steinbeck has been charged with sentimentality or an overabundance of false emotion, Warren French believes that in reality the fault that has plagued most of his work since Cannery Row is his insensitivity--or his preoccupation with pattern rather than presentation of character. In East of Eden Steinbeck sacrifices what would be likely for what would be nice. Apparently Steinbeck did not realize that it is impossible to interest the audience in the fate of his characters when he appears interested in them only as symbols. Steinbeck's postwar books seem to contain a detachment from his characters which is really an escape from reality. Steinbeck sometimes takes refuge in his non-teleological thinking because he lacks the sophistication to ask "why" people behave in certain ways.<sup>57</sup>

In further analyzing Steinbeck's work Warren French states:

When his personal experience has provided him with engrossing material, his propensity for allegory has provided a plan,

---

<sup>57</sup>pp. 162-163.

his non-teleological thought a capacity for detachment, and his transcendental idealism a vigorous compassion that makes works like The Red Pony and The Grapes of Wrath both socially and artistically significant. On the other hand, when he has dealt with contrived material, the allegory clogs the narrative, the non-teleological effort at detachment seems merely carelessness or contempt, and the transcendental idealism becomes bombastic sentimentality.<sup>58</sup>

According to Joseph Fontenrose, Steinbeck fails to create a moral tale, and he fails to re-create a myth.<sup>59</sup> Steinbeck fails to create a moral tale because his story does not really carry the thesis. There are several reasons for the failure. One reason is that the psychological inconsistencies in the novel make almost impossible an understanding of Steinbeck's moral position that man does have a choice. Cathy has no choice, and in Adam's rejection of Cal, Lee says that Adam has no choice. It is impossible to reconcile these two facts with Steinbeck's assertion that man has a choice. He may be saying that some men have a choice and that people like Cathy may act as they do for no logical reason; however, this non-teleological thinking is out of place in a novel concerned primarily with exploring why man is either evil or good. In attempting to write a moral novel Steinbeck has provided explanations for some of his moral positions but has left the remainder of his moral assertions without any discernible explanation. Perhaps the novel would have been better if he had concentrated on explaining his moral position or if he had presented the novel non-teleologically.

---

<sup>58</sup>p. 4.

<sup>59</sup>p. 126.



Another reason for the failure of the novel to carry the thesis of morality is that the structure of the novel is so loose that the juxtaposition of the two families does not have the moral impact that it should. Since Steinbeck is primarily concerned with explaining his moral position through the re-creation of myth, it would seem that both families would somehow fit into the mythical patterning. The Hamiltons, however, have little identification with the myth. Tom Hamilton does bear out Steinbeck's thesis of guilt, but Tom is only a small part of the Hamilton's story. Samuel serves as a kind of Jehovah figure, but his relationship to the myth re-created in the story of the Trasks is vague and sporadic.

In addition to these defects the characterization in the novel is faulty. The characters have such a tendency to turn into symbols that the reader cannot identify with them as real human beings, and at the same time, the characters occasionally act so much like human beings that it is difficult to identify with them on an allegorical level. Of all the characters Cathy is the least believable because she is the character who really confuses Steinbeck's moral position. Although people like Cathy do exist and although most of the time it is impossible to understand why people like her act as they do, Cathy still fails as a character because the reader never understands her motivation. If her motivations had been made clear, the reader might have

understood her actions even if he did not understand why she acted in this way.

In analyzing the effectiveness of Steinbeck's re-creation of myth, the conclusion is slightly more favorable. By combining the Cain and Abel myth, the myth of the fall of man, and many old legends, Steinbeck has created an interesting tale; however, the total effect of the myth must be judged a failure. Because his moral philosophy is inconsistent, the myth fails to convey any concrete conclusions about mankind. In addition, Steinbeck's attempt to combine characterization and myth results in total confusion of his purpose. Because the characters do not always act within the structure of the myth or in accord with the moral philosophy implicit in the novel, the moral seems imposed on the story, and myth becomes an elaborate pattern resulting in chaos.

It is impossible, of course, to give one absolute reason for East of Eden's failure, but there is one condition that contributed heavily to the artistic failure of this novel. In previous novels like The Grapes of Wrath Steinbeck was able to present his social and moral position in a more objective and detached manner. Naturally Steinbeck was in The Grapes of Wrath, but he was able to maintain an illusion of detachment, an illusion that is not present in East of Eden. In attempting to assert his moral position in East of Eden Steinbeck became so involved in the novel that any semblance of objectivity was lost. Furthermore, Steinbeck's

constant insistence on explaining his thesis of morality in the novel is irritating.

Despite the failure of East of Eden it is ridiculous for certain critics to write Steinbeck off as a serious novelist. He is a great novelist because of books like The Grapes of Wrath. Also his winning the Nobel Prize in 1962 indicates that thoughtful critics do consider his works of import. Joseph Fontenrose reported that Steinbeck once made the statement that all of his work was designed to help people understand one another. He attempted to enlist sympathy for men of all kinds: the wise and the feeble-minded, the beggar and the king. His most consistent theme was the superiority of human virtue and pleasures to wealth and property, of kindness and justice to meanness and avarice, of living life to the fullest rather than denying life. Fontenrose adds:

In several ways he has asserted that all life is holy, every creature valuable. Herein lies his sentimentality, but also his strength. His great novels, like The Grapes of Wrath, will endure for their narrative power and strength of vision.<sup>60</sup>

Although East of Eden is an artistic failure, the book does have moments of greatness. In the novel Steinbeck writes with beauty and simplicity in many of the passages in which he celebrates the glory of the free individual. And as always, Steinbeck is an excellent storyteller. Even if the novel lacks unity, it is well worth reading for the

---

<sup>60</sup>P. 141.

many fine passages of prose-poetry and for the anecdotes that are related as only the master storyteller John Steinbeck can relate them.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Beebe, Maurice, and Bryer, Jackson R. "Criticism of John Steinbeck: a Selected Checklist." Modern Fiction Studies, XI (Spring, 1965), 90-103.
- Booklist, XLVII (July 15, 1952), 369.
- Booklist, XLIX (September 15, 1952), 33.
- Brown, Daniel R. "A Monolith of Logic Against Waves of Nonsense." Renascence, XVI (Fall, 1963), 48-51.
- Casimir, Louis John, Jr. "Human Emotion and the Early Novels of John Steinbeck." Dissertation Abstracts, XXVII, 472A.
- Chargnes, R. D. "Fiction." Spectator, CLXXXIX (November 28, 1952), 744.
- De Schweinitz, George. "Steinbeck and Christianity." College English, XIX (May, 1958), 369.
- Fontenrose, Joseph. John Steinbeck: An Introduction and Interpretation. New York: Barnes & Noble, Inc., 1963.
- French, Warren. John Steinbeck. New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1961.
- Frohock, W. M. The Novel of Violence in America. Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1957.
- Fuller, Edmund. Man in Modern Fiction. New York: Random House, 1958.
- Gardiner, Harold Charles. In All Conscience: Reflections on Books and Culture. Garden City, New York: Hanover House, 1959.
- Gurko, Leo. "Steinbeck's Later Fiction." Nation, CLXXV (September 20, 1952), 235-236.
- Hayashi, Tetsumaro. John Steinbeck: A Concise Bibliography. Metuchen, New Jersey: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1967.

- Hobson, L. Z. "Trade Winds." Saturday Review, XXV (August 30, 1952), 4.
- "It Started in a Garden." Time, LX (September 22, 1952), 110.
- "John Steinbeck." Time, December 27, 1968, pp. 61-62.
- Kalb, Bernard. "The Author." Saturday Review, XXXV (September 20, 1952), 11.
- Krutch, Joseph Wood. "John Steinbeck's Dramatic Tale of Three Generations." Steinbeck and His Critics: A Record of Twenty-Five Years. Edited by Ernest Warnock Tedlock and C. V. Wicker. Albuquerque, New Mexico: University of New Mexico Press, 1957.
- Leonard, Frank G. "Cozzens Without Sex: Steinbeck Without Sin." Antioch Review, XVIII (Summer, 1958), 209-218.
- "Letters from Steinbeck." Newsweek, LXVI (November 22, 1965), 68.
- Levant, Howard Stanley. "A Critical Study of the Longer Fiction of John Steinbeck." Dissertation Abstracts, XXIII, 633.
- Lewis, R. W. B. "John Steinbeck: The Fitful Daemon." The Young Rebel in American Literature. Edited by Carl Bode. New York: Frederick A. Praeger Publishers, 1959.
- Lisca, Peter. "The Art of John Steinbeck: An Analysis and Interpretation of Its Development." Dissertation Abstracts, XVI, 965.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "John Steinbeck: A Literary Biography." Steinbeck and His Critics: A Record of Twenty-Five Years. Edited by Ernest Warnock Tedlock and C. V. Wicker. Albuquerque, New Mexico: University of New Mexico Press, 1957.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Steinbeck's Image of Man and His Decline as a Writer." Modern Fiction Studies, IX (Spring, 1965), 3-10.
- \_\_\_\_\_. The Wide World of John Steinbeck. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1958.
- Madison, Charles A. "Covici: Steinbeck's Editor, Collaborator, and Conscience." Saturday Review, XLIX (June 25, 1966), 15-16.
- Magny, Claude-Edmonde. "John Steinbeck's East of Eden." Translated by Louise Varese. Perspectives U.S.A., V (Fall, 1953), 146-152.

- Mizener, Arthur. "Does a Moral Vision of the Thirties Deserve a Nobel Prize?" New York Times Book Review, December 9, 1962, pp. 4, 43-45.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "In the Land of Nod." The New Republic, CXXII (October 6, 1952), 23.
- Moore, Harry Thornton. The Novels of John Steinbeck. Chicago: Kennikat Press, 1938.
- Nichols, Lewis. "Talk with John Steinbeck." The New York Times Book Review, September 28, 1952, p. 30.
- Phillips, William. "Male-ism and Moralism: Hemingway and Steinbeck." American Mercury, LXXV (October, 1952), 93-98.
- Prescott, Orville. "Book of the Times." New York Times, September 19, 1952, p. 21.
- Rolo, Charles. "Cain and Abel." Atlantic Monthly, CXC (October, 1952), 94.
- Schorer, Mark. "A Dark and Violent Steinbeck Novel." The New York Times Book Review, September 21, 1952, p. 1.
- Schulberg, Budd. "John Steinbeck: A Lion in Winter." Tempo, March 9, 1969, pp. 7-11.
- Scott, J. D. New Statesman and Nation, XLIV (December 6, 1952), 698-699.
- Smith, Eleanor Touhey. "East of Eden." Library Journal, LXXVII (August, 1952), 1303.
- Steinbeck, John. East of Eden. New York: The Viking Press, 1952.
- \_\_\_\_\_. Journal of a Novel: The East of Eden Letters. New York: Viking Press, 1969.
- Taylor, Horace, Jr. "John Steinbeck--The Quest." McNeese Review, XVI, 33-45.
- Tedlock, Ernest Warnock. "Perspectives in Steinbeck Criticism." Steinbeck and His Critics: A Record of Twenty-Five Years. Edited by Ernest Warnock Tedlock and C. V. Wicker. Albuquerque, New Mexico: University of New Mexico Press, 1957.
- The Times (London) Literary Supplement, December 5, 1952, p. 789.

Vogel, Dan. "Steinbeck's Flight: The Myth of Manhood."  
College English, XXIII (December, 1961), 225-226.

Wallis, Prentiss, Jr. "John Steinbeck: The Symbolic Family."  
Dissertation Abstracts, XXVII, 1842A-1843A.

Watts, Alan Wison. The Two Hands of God: The Myths of  
Polarity. New York: George Braziller, 1961.

Webster, Harvey Curtis. "Out of the New Born Sun." Saturday  
Review, XXXV (September 20, 1952), 11.

West, Anthony. "California Moonshine." New Yorker, XXVIII  
(September 20, 1952), 121-125.