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Defending Steinbeck: Morality, Philosophy, and Sentimentality in *East of Eden*

Senior Paper

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For a Degree Bachelor of Arts with
A Major in Literature at
The University of North Carolina at Asheville
Spring 2015

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In 1952, John Steinbeck published *East of Eden*, a sprawling, ambitious work built upon both monumental Biblical elements and deeply human themes grounded in reality. Intended to be his magnum opus, the book which “everything else [he had written had been] in a sense, practice for,” *East of Eden* received largely negative reviews upon its release (Oudenkirk 232). The *New York Times* called it, “Clumsy in structure and defaced by excessive melodramatics and much cheap sensationalism,” and literary critic Arthur Mizener claimed that, with this novel, “[Steinbeck’s] insight and talent cease to work and he writes like the author of any third-rate best-seller” (McElrath 399). Steinbeck’s literary reputation has long-suffered from reviews such as these, as well as from the accusation that he is a sentimentalist with a penchant for moralizing ethos which endows his work with ephemeral value. However, much of the criticism that has been leveled at *East of Eden* rests upon the established view among literary academics that all deep human emotion in a serious work should be labeled sentimental; furthermore, it assumes that sentimentalism is an inherently detrimental quality to any work, one that should be avoided at all costs.

If there are elements of sentimentalism in Steinbeck’s work, they are not there by accident. There can be traced throughout Steinbeck’s oeuvre, but especially in *East of Eden*, a strongly objective, scientific perspective on humankind and its experiences, one that relies, not on romantic value, but on what critic Jackson J. Benson chooses to call “acceptance,” as “for Steinbeck, one can be detached in his observation on the one hand, while at the same time express compassion on the other” (17). Traces of such coldly logical thinking can be found in *East of Eden*, whose main, admittedly dramatic theme of the universal struggle between good and evil in the history of humankind is tempered by the idea of the freedom of choice that all people, Steinbeck asserts, possess. Steinbeck’s argument in favor of self-determination in

humankind is built, not upon an emotional idealization of the human race, but instead upon the philosophy of non-teleological thinking, which is concerned with reality, not causation (Ricketts 135). In this way, Steinbeck's moral philosophy— that “we have only one story . . . the never-ending contest in ourselves between good and evil”— as well as his capabilities as a writer, have been severely misunderstood by generations of critics and it is only recently that a shift to a greater understanding of his objectives in *East of Eden* has begun to occur (*EoE* 413).

Critics have also accused the novel of inconsistency and amateurishness in its structure. In particular, the character of Cathy Ames Trask, the novel's main antagonistic force, has been accused of being an inconsistent outlier to Steinbeck's careful assertion that humankind is distinguished by its ability to choose its own morality. Far from being a contradictory element, however, a closer analysis of Cathy, and the role that she plays in the novel, will reveal that Steinbeck's development of her character is very intentional, as is his structure for the novel as a whole. Moreover, it can be determined, through a closer reading, that neither Steinbeck's main theme for *East of Eden*, nor his development of Cathy, are melodramatic elements that sap his work of meaning. Rather, in combination with the logical philosophy of non-teleological thinking, it can be concluded that *East of Eden*, far from being a simple work of empty sentimentality, is instead a novel devoted to the exploration and championing of human nature. After the exploration of these weighty philosophies, and through a reevaluation of the meaning and value of sentimentalism, *East of Eden* (and Steinbeck's literary career in general) merits a reevaluation. It is a novel not built on a cheap and manipulative ethos, but on a deeper exploration of human nature and philosophy, and as such should be celebrated, not disregarded as disingenuous or unnecessary.

In 1963, nearly ten years after the publication of *East of Eden*, John Steinbeck was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature by the Swedish committee for his “realistic and imaginative writings, combining as they do sympathetic humour and keen social perception” (Parini 445). A day before the ceremony was held, an article entitled “Does a Moral Vision of the Thirties Deserve a Nobel Prize?” by literary critic Arthur Mizener appeared in the *New York Times*; this review was a damning piece of criticism in which Mizener argued that Steinbeck was ultimately undeserving of the prize because his entire body of work was inconsistent and ephemeral. Mizener analyzed Steinbeck’s literary output from the beginning of his career in the 1930s and concluded that his early success was in part due to “a generous and indiscriminating appetite for even bad proletarian novels in the thirties [by the reading public], not unlike the appetite of a hundred years earlier for abolitionist novels like ‘Uncle Tom’s Cabin’” (42).

Mizener also characterized Steinbeck as “sentimental” and argued that nostalgia for the era in which his novels were written accounted for his receipt of the Nobel Prize: “It is a fascinating, if somewhat melancholy task . . . to reread these books in the sixties, when our feelings are no longer under the special influences that affected them strongly in the thirties” (42). *East of Eden*, though not a novel of the thirties, was not spared from Mizener’s ire; rather, he used the book as an example of what he considered to be the cornerstone of Steinbeck’s literary weaknesses, namely, his inconsistent and pretentious philosophizing:

It is in *East of Eden* (1952) that this habit of reducing experience to ‘profound’ abstractions and then identifying them with some genuinely great image of our experiences reaches an appalling climax . . . [the novel’s main theme] is hammered home over and over again, to the almost complete destruction of the novel’s life, in endless sermons by innumerable wise men. (44)

Mizener concluded that the only possible explanation for Steinbeck's receipt of the Nobel Prize in Literature could be found in European attitudes on American writers. He accused European critics of having "a social democrat's inclination to place a very high value on sentimental humanitarianism, especially when it is displayed about the poor, especially when these poor exist in a society that is supposed by many of them to be the last stronghold of uncontrolled capitalist exploitation" (45).

Mizener was certainly not alone in his criticism of Steinbeck as a sentimentalist as, upon the novel's initial publication, much of the criticism aimed at it focused on what many critics perceived to be Steinbeck's emotional and moralistic tendencies. Riley Hughes in his 1952 review in *Catholic World* claimed that:

There have always been at least two John Steinbecks— one who writes feelingly of old men and young boys and natural beauty; the other, a strident and fatuous theorist, who explores the grotesque. The latter clearly has control in *East of Eden*, a huge mish-mash of a book. (McElrath 399)

R.D. Charques for *The Spectator* said that the novel's "dramatic passages seem to me preposterous, the philosophizing a tissue of platitude and tinsel rhetoric," and Mark Schorer for the *New York Times Book Review* stated that Steinbeck "has always accepted certain noble abstractions about human nature that his melodrama is hardly designed to demonstrate; hence the gap between speculative statement and novelistic presentation; or sentimentalism" (McElrath 400, 392). Reviews such as these, coupled with Mizener's overall indictment of Steinbeck's literary career, help set the tone for what has classically been noted to be Steinbeck's biggest literary deficiency: Sentimentalism, defined as "a concept standardly associated with tender,

comforting emotions and gentle feelings such as pity, affection, sympathy, fondness, caring, and compassion” (Knight 410).

The concept of sentimentality itself has played a large role in the way that Steinbeck’s literary reputation has fared; but so too has the standard view of how sentimentality is to be received. It is “so often viewed as a fault . . . that it is taken as a mark of decline (or worse) in moral or aesthetic sensibility. Indeed, it is taken as a mark of psychological decline: not merely a decline in our ability to make reasonable judgments, but ultimately a decline in ourselves as cognitive and moral agents” (Knight 410). This squeamishness in dealing with emotion in conjunction with human philosophy and nature, however, speaks more to highfalutin concepts of emotion than it does to Steinbeck himself. Indeed, the academic resistance to sentimentality in literary works seems automatic, rather than thoughtfully received. Because sentimentality has such a negative reputation among literary critics, any element of that concept that can be found in Steinbeck’s writings, particularly in *East of Eden* (which deals so strongly with humanity and human nature), is ground for academia to dismiss him as a “fatuous theorist” with little to contribute to literature as an art (Hughes). In this way, critics such as Mizener, Schorer, Charques, and Hughes,¹ have unfairly dismissed Steinbeck without giving proper credence to the value of his work, so colored are they by their academic perspective, which tells them that sentimentality is an excessive concept.

In contrast to the way that Steinbeck, and *East of Eden* itself, has been received by literary critics, public opinion of the writer and his most ambitious novel have been largely positive, even affectionate. In his introductory essay to the anthology *The Steinbeck Question*:

¹ It is worth noting that Mizener, Schorer, and Hughes have all held positions as tenured faculty members at various prestigious universities, including Cornell, Dartmouth, and Harvard (McElrath 399, 401, 405).

New Essays in Criticism, Jackson Benson explores the question of why Steinbeck has remained so enduringly popular with the reading public, but is so often dismissed by literary critics.

Although Benson does not outright deny Steinbeck's reputation as a sentimentalist (he even claims that "the term has stuck to Steinbeck . . . partly because he was, in fact, sentimental at times"), he also does not condemn him for this: "What saves this artist from constant excess is that his compassion is, in much of his writing, balanced and disciplined by a very objective view of the world and of man" (16). Furthermore, Benson claims that:

"perspective" is a key word here, for Steinbeck's fiction invariably asks us to step out of our traditional way of looking at things to take another point of view . . . For Steinbeck, one can be detached in his observations on the one hand, while at the same time express compassion on the other. This combination, which has been often mistaken by negative critics of Steinbeck for sentimentality, is really quite the opposite when examined closely. Detachment and compassion together are major components of an overall attitude toward the universe . . . which Steinbeck calls "acceptance." (17)

Benson's assertion that Steinbeck depends on the cold logic of scientific fact and study can most clearly be seen in evidence of the role that teleological and non-teleological thinking play in the development of the moral philosophy he posits in *East of Eden*. As defined by Ed Ricketts, Steinbeck's friend and frequent collaborator, in his "Essay on Non-Teleological Thinking" from *The Log from the Sea of Cortez*, teleology is the doctrine that final causes exist, and that phenomena are guided not only by mechanical forces, but that they also move toward certain goals of self-realization. In contrast, Ricketts defines non-teleological thinking as "'is' thinking. . . [which] concerns itself not with what should be, or could be, or might be, but rather what actually 'is'— attempting at most to answer the already sufficiently difficult question what

or how instead of why” (135). This idea of “is” thinking, concerned only with stark reality and not with possibilities, is akin to the idea that Steinbeck posits about the freedom of choice that appears as the main theme in *East of Eden*.

Ricketts does not simply end at providing the definitions of teleological and non-teleological thinking, but begins to build a philosophical interpretation around the two ideas. He supplies that “the greatest fallacy in, or rather the greatest objection to, teleological thinking is in connection with the emotional content, the belief . . . [that] the teleological method would try to understand [emotion] causally. But with non-teleological treatment, there is only . . . instant acceptance” (143-147). As *East of Eden* is concerned with the idea of self-determination as the true measure of man’s moral character, and his key to triumph in the eternal struggle between good and evil that takes place within him, teleology argues, conversely, in favor of the inherent nature and purpose of things. Thus, Steinbeck applies non-teleological thinking, which emphasizes the acceptance of things as they are, rather than what they could be, to further his point about choice being the ultimate deciding factor in a person’s life— a philosophy that runs counter to the more emotional and sentimental idea that predestination is found in our every thought and action.

This is not to say that Steinbeck’s novel is devoid of emotion, however; emotion, it can be argued, is a standard element of every novel, and in this way *East of Eden* does not differ from other literary works. Although Steinbeck builds his moral philosophy of the freedom of choice that humanity possesses on the coolly logical idea of non-teleological thinking (a hardened brand of philosophy in its own right), his application of this theory on the characters in his novel has an element of sentiment to it. His greatest profession for his love of mankind is expressed through Lee, the protagonist Adam’s Chinese housekeeper and friend, who acts in the

novel as Steinbeck's spokesman through whom he can discuss and disseminate the ideas of predestination and self-determination that are found in humanity's eternal moral struggles. Lee, in claiming that humanity has the ability to exercise free choice in its existence, goes on to state that:

I feel that a man is a very important thing— maybe more important than a star. This is not theology. I have no bent toward the gods. But I have a new love for that glittering instrument, the human soul. It is a lovely and unique thing in the universe. It is always attacked and never destroyed. (302)

Evidence of Steinbeck's love for humanity can be seen throughout *East of Eden*, which is a novel singularly concerned with the human condition. From the Hamilton storyline and its exploration of the value of family and its themes of love and grief, to Lee's story of his birth and the death of his mother, to Adam's crippling depression after his wife's departure, Steinbeck explores and celebrates human nature, struggle, and triumph at every turn. Moreover, Steinbeck clearly does not limit himself to the representation and exploration of the positive side of humanity alone, as evidenced by his inclusion of a character such as Cathy, the novel's main antagonist, and his intimate detailing of the finer points of her career. Indeed, what prevents Steinbeck's continual "celebration of the human spirit" from becoming too saccharine is the insistence he places on chronicling the uglier parts of mankind alongside the beauty; by doing so, he confronts the idea of evil that he believes exists in mankind, as well as continues his thematic rumination on man's capacity for both good and evil (*EoE* 356).

Lee's story of his birth is particularly emblematic of Steinbeck's chronicling of the duality of mankind's nature. Lee recounts to Adam his parents' passage to the United States to work on the construction of the transcontinental railroad (his mother disguised as a man), their

unexpected pregnancy, their careful planning for the birth, and finally, the discovery of Lee's mother's gender by the other workers. She is brutally gang-raped and left to die, though not before Lee's father is able to deliver his son. The story has a brief and startling horror to it, which is emphasized by the clinical way in which Lee tells it: "My father came to [my mother] on the pile of shale. She had not even eyes to see out of, but her mouth still moved and she gave him his instructions. My father clawed me out of the tattered meat of my mother with his fingernails" (*EoE* 357). Steinbeck, through Lee, enforces an objective tone on this particular story, one that works to its advantage rather than its detriment; the reader is never actively told that the situation is nightmarish and sickening, but instead relies on a steady recounting of the actual events, free from the coloring of perspective, to be impacted with its power.

Lee's objectivism also carries over from a simple matter of style to the more complex matter of theme. Lee is careful in the end to add a caveat to his story: "Before you hate those men you must know this. My father always told it at the last: No child ever had such care as I. The whole camp became my mother. It is a beauty— a dreadful kind of beauty" (357). In this way, Steinbeck speaks through Lee and emphasizes the theme at the heart of *East of Eden*: That man is composed of equal measures of good and bad, and that he has the capacity to choose to express both. The combination of Lee's objective storytelling and the reiteration of Steinbeck's belief in man's moral fluidity and choice together work against the accusation of sentimentality, which often relies on the enforcement of emotions— and, by extension, emotional reactions— on the audience, without giving them room to think or feel for themselves. In this way, Steinbeck's focus on humanity, including human nature and experience, is not a maudlin, sentimental indulgence on the part of the author and his interests, as critics such as Mizener have argued, but instead a true grappling with the question of human choice, philosophy, and

experience. In including in the narrative a story like Lee's— which is present in the text alongside other anecdotes about Steinbeck's mother Olive Hamilton, his various aunts and uncles from the Hamilton clan, and even moments from the childhood of Steinbeck himself— Steinbeck builds a chronicle of human experience in *East of Eden* and, moreover, emphasizes the universality of that experience. As such, his focus on humanity and human nature in a novel so deeply concerned with morality and Biblical symbolism is neither unnecessary or indulgent, but instead the foundation upon which Steinbeck builds his theme.

Steinbeck's interest and faith in humankind is best exemplified by the main themes that he explores in *East of Eden*, which provides the foundation of the novel's narrative: That of the timeless, universal story of good and evil that frames human history (and, from that story, the idea of collective guilt), and the ideas of free choice and self-determination which, Steinbeck argues, allow people to choose for themselves the kind of life they want to live— good or bad. Steinbeck builds *East of Eden* around these two main themes and explores their implications through the two storylines that compose the novel's narrative structure: That of the Hamilton family and the history of California's Salinas Valley, and an allegorical retelling of the Cain and Abel story through two generations of the Trask family. Through the various characters found in these two narratives, which run parallel and occasionally intersect with one another, Steinbeck is able to explore humanity's moral weaknesses and strengths, as well as the choice he believes it is able to exercise in regards to its own morality. Steinbeck in fact emphasizes this idea of free choice in *East of Eden* as the most valuable thing in the world, precisely because it places the onus of action and consequence on the individual. In this way, *East of Eden* is an exploration of humanity and humanistic philosophy.

Steinbeck structures and frames his exploration of good and evil, as well as the freedom of moral choice, with an allegorical retelling of the biblical story of Cain and Abel. This story is made the basis of interaction for two generations of the Trask family, first between Cyrus Trask and his two sons, Adam and Charles, and secondly between Adam Trask (the novel's protagonist) and his own two sons, Cal and Aron. Evil action is explored within these two cyclical generations. Additionally, Steinbeck uses the various translated versions of the Cain and Abel story as a way to analyze the idea of self-determination. He does so within the story itself, once again through the character of Lee, who concludes that the crux of the Cain and Abel story is contained in the sentence that God speaks to Cain after branding him for murdering his brother:

The American Standard translation *orders* men to triumph over sin, and you can call sin ignorance. The King James translation makes a promise in "Thou shalt," meaning that men will surely triumph over sin. But the Hebrew word, the word *timshel*—"Thou mayest"—that gives a choice. That says the way is open. That throws it right back on a man. For if "Thou mayest"—it is also true that "Thou mayest not." (301)

With this passage, Steinbeck deconstructs the dichotomy between good and evil that he had previously used to frame *East of Eden*, not by categorically stating that evil does not exist in the world, but instead by arguing that it is never inevitable.

In analyzing the language of the story of Cain and Abel and concluding that the ability to triumph over sin lies in a person's decisions, Steinbeck (through Lee) places the responsibility of both success and failure to live a good life on the individual, and not on predestination:

Now, there are many millions in their sects and churches who feel the order, "Do thou," and throw their weight into obedience. And there are millions more who feel

predestination in “Thou shalt.” Nothing they may do can interfere with what will be. But “Thou mayest!” Why, that makes a man great, that gives him stature with the gods, for in his weakness and his filth and his murder of his brother he still has the great choice. He can choose his course and fight it through and win. (301-302)

The application of this theory of self-determination is most clearly seen in two characters: Cal Trask and his mother, Cathy Ames Trask. Cal is tormented throughout the novel by the knowledge that Cathy is his mother, and fears his impulse to do “bad things” because of his genetic ties to her: “I hate her because I know why she went away. I know— because I’ve got her in me” (445). It is Cal’s struggle to overcome his natural impulse to succumb to what he perceives is his genetic predisposition that illustrates the novel’s theme of choice being the ultimate deciding factor in a person’s life. He is aided in this task by Lee, who urges him not to “take the lazy way. It’s too easy to excuse yourself because of your ancestry . . . Whatever you do, it will be you who do it— not your mother” (445). Through Lee’s words, Steinbeck illustrates his belief that humanity is neither predetermined in its morality nor influenced by any genetic ties it may possess, but instead may exercise the freedom to choose for itself the course of its life. By calling genetic determinism “the lazy way,” Steinbeck indicts the idea of predestination and original sin by rejecting the notion that evil (or morality in general) is passed down through the blood.

Ultimately, Cal’s struggle with his moral goodness is left unresolved by the novel’s conclusion. Although he has indirectly aided in the murder of his brother Aron by encouraging him to enlist in the army during World War I (where he is killed in battle), he is not left encumbered by the guilt of his action. This is in large part due to Lee’s encouragement of Adam to give Cal his blessing: “Your son is marked with guilt out of himself . . . Don’t crush him with

rejection . . . Adam, give him your blessing. Don't leave him alone with his guilt'" (600).

Adam, however, does not give Cal his blessing, or his forgiveness— instead, he gives to him the word "*timshel*"— "thou mayest"— which, true to Steinbeck's overarching theme of moral choice, places the onus of Cal's future on himself. By speaking to him this word, Adam helps Cal to recognize his freedom in determining his future, to realize that he is not set on an inevitable path to goodness or evil based on his previous actions, but that he is instead free to choose for himself what he will do with his life.

Cal's final recognition of his freedom to charter his own future is a contrast to the experience of his mother Cathy, who remains monstrous throughout the book because of her refusal to recognize her choice in the matter of her morality and actions. When, for example, Adam confronts her about her inability to identify goodness in other people, she rejects his hypothesis, asking instead whether, "If there are things I can't see, don't you think it's possible that they are dreams manufactured in your own sick mind?" (382). Cathy categorically rejects the possibility that she herself may lack something that others have, and thus her evil impulses come from her refusal to understand the parts of humanity that she lacks. Steinbeck counters this moral fatalism, once again, through Lee's analyses of the Hebrew word *timshel*, and the idea of self-determination that it communicates: "It is easy out of laziness, out of weakness, to throw oneself into the lap of deity, saying, 'I couldn't help it! The way was set.' But think of the glory of the choice! That makes a man a man" (302).

Numerous critics have called into question Steinbeck's theme of the universal story of good and evil and the liberating idea of free choice that he posits as a solution to this struggle. In particular, the character of Cathy Ames Trask, the novel's main antagonist, has been heavily criticized for both the development of her personality and for her role as the representative force

of evil in the novel. Cathy's absolute portrayal as a "monster" was found by *Time Magazine* to be "gamy, lurid, and told at tedious length . . . all but meaningless" (McElrath 110). Robert R. Brunn, writing for *Christian Science Monitor*, claimed that, "[Steinbeck's] portrayal of Catherine Ames alone, 'a monster' in his own words without a spark of humanity or sensibility, is so hopelessly evil as to make her incredible and the book a chamber of horrors" (396). Orville Prescott, for the *New York Times*, argued that, "since Cathy is a monster, she never seems human . . . Her crimes and her vile career as the madame of a brothel seem grossly out of keeping in a novel so seriously concerned with ethics and character as this . . . *East of Eden*, it seems to me, is seriously damaged by Cathy's unreal presence and by the disgusting details of her career" (384).

Criticisms such as these have perhaps helped to inform more recent assessments of the novel, such as Yuji Kami's essay "A Paradoxical World in *East of Eden*: The Theory of Free Will and the Heritage of Puritanism." In this essay, Kami argues that Steinbeck's handling of the main theme of free choice among human beings is paradoxical because, through the character of Cathy Ames Trask, he "consciously or unconsciously . . . implies that the moment we are born, some are blessed with free will, while others are not" (222). Kami frames his argument through the lens of teleological thinking, which, concurrent with Ricketts' own definition, Kami describes as encompassing a worldview that is "concerned with absolute fact"—that is, convinced that there is an absolute and inherent purpose to everything in the world. Similarly, he also discusses non-teleological thinking as "not [being] concerned with causation," and accepting things as they are, rather than imposing a deterministic philosophy on them (222, 223). In his essay, Kami applies both teleological and non-teleological thinking to several characters in *East of Eden*. The crux of his argument, however, that Steinbeck contradicts his theme of free choice with a fatalistic sense of predestination, rests upon his analyses of Cathy as a teleologist who has

been denied her free will as a result of her inherent nature. Kami points to the narrative in structuring his argument, citing that, “the narrator, retracing her life, continues to affirm that ‘Whatever she had done, she had been driven to do’ (*EoE* 551). In fact, the narrator, at this point, clarifies that she is completely controlled by her own nature, and eventually expresses a sort of genetic determinism here. This scenario, which invoked the denial of her free will, surely reminds us of the Puritan doctrine of predestination” (222). Kami also argues that Cathy’s teleological thinking shows itself in her inability to “see the goodness in people based on her belief that all mankind is inherently evil” (223). Because of her preoccupation with what she believes *is*, rather than what could be, Cathy is doomed to her evil nature and denied the glory of choice that others are given. Kami’s analyses of teleological thinking extends to Cathy’s son Aron as well, who, he argues, because he “fails to face cruel realities, cannot exercise ‘a great choice’ or ‘free will’. In other words, ‘free will’ exists eventually only in non-teleologists awakening to the evil in their own souls” (220).

Steinbeck’s introduction to Cathy is easy to read as a categorical indictment of her evil nature, as he frames her character with the following statement: “I believe there are monsters born into the world to human parents.” He proceeds to define the term— “Monsters are variations from the accepted normal to a greater or less degree . . . to a monster, the norm is monstrous. It is my belief that Cathy Ames was born with the tendencies, or lack of them, which drove and forced her all of her life . . . She was not like other people, never was from birth” (*EoE* 71-72). This stirring introduction to Cathy’s character is followed by a short sojourn into her deeds and misbehaviors during her childhood and adolescence, such as her sexual manipulation of two young boys, her petty theft and lying, her persuasion of a young priest to commit suicide, and her eventual murder of her parents, which leads her to begin a life as a prostitute in

Connecticut. But Cathy's character and her lack of morality are not left by Steinbeck to remain isolated anomalies throughout the rest of the novel, answerable only to themselves. Instead, Steinbeck questions the necessity for the existence of such cruelty in Cathy: "When I said [she] was a monster it seemed to me that it was so. Now I have bent close with a glass over the small print of her and reread the footnotes, and I wonder if it was true. The trouble is that since we cannot know what she wanted, we will never know whether or not she got it" (182). This lack of understanding— of both motive and nature— is a theme on the subject of moral goodness and evil in human nature that resurfaces later in the novel— specifically, in terms of Cathy, lacking the mechanism that allows humans to empathize with one another, not being able to understand the goodness that exists in humanity. In one passage, Adam levels the following accusations at her:

You know about the ugliness in people [. . .] You use all the sad, weak parts of a man, and God knows he has them [. . .] But. . . you don't know about the rest [. . .] And the men who come to you here with their ugliness, the men in the pictures— you don't believe those men could have any goodness and beauty in them. You see only one side, and you think— more than that, you're sure— that's all there is. (381-382)

Steinbeck evaluates evil in this instance, defining it not as a force built on the malicious intent of creating harm to put into the world, but instead as a way to cope with a conscious lack of a fundamental tenant of humanity— empathy, or simply the capacity to believe and recognize the goodness in others.

Not all criticism of *East of Eden* argues that Cathy is an inconsistency to Steinbeck's greater thematic narrative, however. In her essay "Mimesis, Desire, and Lack in John Steinbeck's *East of Eden*," Elisabeth Bayley provides a counter-argument to Kami's assertion

that Cathy, as a teleological thinker, is a contradiction to the idea of self-determination and free choice. Bayley instead argues here that “Steinbeck’s work points to a deeper mechanism than the simple duality of good and evil or of individual and community” (145). She does so by interpreting his theme through a Girardian framework, which, she argues, “works to reveal in his novel [how] the real choice to be made is how one is to deal with a lack of being, and, likewise, how one is to understand this lack within the constructs of the symbolic found in language” (147). In her essay, Bayley explains the Girardian framework by stating that it deals with “the concepts of desire, mimetic rivalry, scapegoating, and violence . . . in order to understand the conditions of social relations” (147). She applies this idea to *East of Eden* by arguing that the theme of the universal struggle between good and evil that Steinbeck explores in his novel, through characters such as Cathy Ames Trask and Cal Trask, can be explained through the concept of desire—that is, “each individual [is] bound by the desire to take over and possess the other’s desire” (148).

She also explains that, according to the Girardian framework, this desire is entirely due to “a lack” of something: “Once [an individual’s] basic needs are satisfied . . . man is subject to intense desires . . . The reason is that he desires *being*, something he himself lacks and which some other person seems to possess” (149). Bayley applies this to every instance of evil that is present in *East of Eden*, such as Cathy’s lack of empathy and understanding for all other humans; however, Bayley does not argue that the lack *itself* is what constitutes the baseline for evil in the human race. Rather, she contends that, “it is what an individual decides to do with the lack that might make them appear monstrous. When people choose whether or not to accept their lack this might be seen as the true choice that Steinbeck is addressing between good and evil” (152).

Kami's argument, that Cathy is dictated by her nature and is unable to exercise free choice because of her inherent status as a teleologist, stems from what seems to be a vague and shallow reading of the text. It is evident from a closer reading of the text that Cathy is in fact consistent and compliant with the work's greater theme of free choice and self-determination. Throughout the novel, Cathy exercises her choice to be bad at every turn: She makes the decision to murder her parents, the decision to sleep with Charles after marrying his brother Adam, the decision to shoot Adam and abandon their sons to become the madam of a brothel, and the decision to murder the madam who befriended her and take over her estate. Cathy's character, like all other characters in the novel, is littered with opportunities to make choices. In his defense of his argument, Kami cites Steinbeck's early indictment of Cathy's character as the definitive proof that "whatever she had done, she had been driven to do" (549). It is important to note, however, that it is Cathy herself who voices this fatalistic conclusion, and that Steinbeck does indeed retract his initial analyses of her character, stating instead that, "it is easy to say that she was bad, but there is little meaning unless we know why" (182).

In this way, it can be argued that the true crux of Cathy's character, what makes her monstrous, is not her inability to choose, but her choice itself— that is, her choice not to recognize in herself the lack of empathy she possesses for other people, and her choice not to do anything about it. When she does finally confront this lack in herself, and admits to herself that "They [other people] had something she lacked, and she didn't know what it was," her immediate recourse is suicide (550). In this way, Steinbeck demonstrates his authorial control in both the structure and theme of his novel by demonstrating that Cathy, like all other characters in the novel, was always endowed with the ability to choose. As such, and in keeping with Bayley's argument that evil arises as a response to the inability to recognize and confront a lack

of something, readers may understand that Cathy's evil nature is not derived from an inherent genetic flaw within her character, but from her choice not to recognize the empathy that she lacks.

In this way, Steinbeck builds his novel around the two main themes of the timeless, universal story of good and evil, and the ideas of free choice and self-determination that charter a person's morality. However, he does not simply lay the two themes out and allow them to contradict one another. Rather, he demonstrates through the struggles that all of his characters (but particularly Cathy and Cal) encounter with their own morality that the previously established dichotomy of a world divided into good and evil is false. Instead, he illustrates, through Lee's interpretation of the word *timshel*, that, although good and evil may exist in the world, no one is predestined to belong to either camp, and that the true measure of a person's morality is found in his or her choice. Additionally, Cathy's presence in the novel is not, as many critics have claimed, unnecessary, melodramatic, and contradictory, but an intentional element to the story. Cathy's inability to recognize the goodness in humanity, and her unwillingness to try to do so, is in many ways the point of her character; as Steinbeck's representative force of evil in the novel, Cathy embodies his belief that, as Bayley surmises, it is not an inherent genetic predisposition to evil that makes someone monstrous, but their choice not to confront that monstrousness within themselves.

The greater workings of Steinbeck's design for *East of Eden* are evident in that Cathy and her pessimism about humankind are easily juxtaposed with Lee, who unabashedly expresses both love for and faith in humanity. Lee's philosophy, that the human soul "is a lovely and unique thing in the universe," is emblematic of what Steinbeck himself wishes to communicate about humankind in *East of Eden*. In this way, Steinbeck not only builds humanity's struggle between

good and evil, and its ability to exercise free choice, as the novel's main theme, but uses it to encapsulates his overarching belief in the dynamic and admirable nature of humankind. In this way, Steinbeck thus places both faith and responsibility on the human race, both within the confines of his novel and in the real world. As such, *East of Eden*, far from being a contradictory work of simple sentimentality, contains a valuable lesson about each individual's duty in taking responsibility for themselves and their actions, and in determining for themselves the kind of moral life they will live.

East of Eden is more than simply a masterpiece of literary work and storytelling. It is also a valuable piece of writing, for precisely the reasons that critics have belittled and dismissed it for so long. Evident in Steinbeck's exploration of the theme of good and evil in human history is a greater exploration of (and simple regard for) humankind, human history, and human experience. In his inclusion and exploration of such a varied array of characters— from Samuel and the rest of the Hamilton family to Lee and his wise commentary, to Adam's simple goodness and, of course, Cathy's depravity— Steinbeck attempts to capture and represent the whole of humankind and human experience, both the good and the bad, in this novel. This magnified focus on humanity in *East of Eden* is not an isolated element in Steinbeck's works, but can be traced back to his proletarian novels of the 1930s. In such novels, like *The Grapes of Wrath* and *Of Mice and Men*, Steinbeck gives voice and visibility to humanity's struggle against both society and the weight of its own universal legacy. In these novels, there is a clear socialist focus, one that emphasizes the universality of humanity's plights.

In *East of Eden*, Steinbeck's focus shifts from the exploration of humankind's struggles as a collective to those same struggles as they are experienced by an individual. What did not change between Steinbeck's works of the 1930s and *East of Eden*, however, is the ubiquitous

nature of those struggles. Though in *East of Eden* they are presented on an individual basis, they still belong to the greater collective experience of humankind. Steinbeck's emphasis on humanity's moral struggles is, therefore, a recognition of humankind's complexity.

Furthermore, it is representative of Steinbeck's compassion for humanity, and the great empathy that he practices and urges others to practice, and which makes *East of Eden* more than simply a rumination on humankind, but a plea for compassion, and a manifesto of belief and faith in humanity's empathy, goodness, and strength. It is a novel largely concerned with the cyclical nature of humankind, its universal struggles, triumphs, and desires; to argue that it is a work of sentimentalism, manipulative in its ethos and heavy-handed in its application, is to argue that human experience is valueless. In this sense, a reconsideration of Steinbeck as a novelist, and his value as an author, is long overdue. His literary works, far from being composed of ephemeral, contradictory, and emotionally manipulative sermonizing, should instead be considered philosophical explorations on humanity— and on the faith that Steinbeck places on humankind in particular. As such, *East of Eden* is a major work of American literature, and a wise, panoramic exploration of the human condition.

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