

ANALYSIS

East of Eden (1953)

John Steinbeck

(1902-1968)

“In the late 1890s Adam Trask marries Cathy Ames, a beautiful but viciously evil former prostitute, and moves from his family farm in Connecticut to the Salinas Valley, California. There, aided by Sam Hamilton, a warm-hearted Irishman, he develops a large ranch, and Cathy gives birth to their twin sons. Hating her situation and her husband, Cathy shoots Adam when he tries to prevent her leaving, and under the name of Kate Albey joins a house in Salinas run by a madam whom she slowly poisons so as to get a place of her own to cater to men’s darkest and most perverted desires.

Adam, withdrawn and detached, has the help of kindly Sam and of his educated servant Lee, a Chinaman, in rearing his children, Caleb and Aron, whom he had considered naming Cain and Abel, particularly since Lee interpreted the Biblical story to show that although God exiled Cain to the land east of Eden, He said to him, ‘if thou doest well...thou mayest rule over sin.’ Hoping to jar Adam from his numbness by confronting him with reality, Sam reveals Cathy’s whereabouts, and Adam, after calling on Kate, discovers her inhumanity and her belief in evil, and at last is no longer in love with her.

The boys grow up, Aron as a naïve, open-hearted, and religious young man innocently loving a girl named Abra, while Caleb has a stormy adolescence, torn between desires for innocence and for adventures in evil, conceived by him to be a heritage from his mother, whom he comes to know. The relationship of the boys recalls those that as a young man Adam had with his brother Charles. To hurt Adam, who dotes on Aron, Caleb takes his brother to meet their mother, and Aron is so shocked by the experience that he gives up Abra and enlists in the army during World War I.

Kate commits suicide, bequeathing her wealth to Aron, whose own death in war leads to Adam’s paralysis by a stroke. Caleb is guilt-ridden by the sequence of events he set in motion, but Adam on his deathbed recalls Lee’s Biblical interpretation, and in forgiving Caleb he gives him the chance, like that given Cain, to make a moral choice and thus to create of his life what he will.”

James D. Hart

The Oxford Companion to American Literature, 5th edition
(Oxford 1941-83) 219-20

“This is the story of two families borne by the current that long ago brought settlers to California—and of a woman so evil, so depraved, that even her children must reenact the ancient drama that exiled mankind to the east of Eden.... Probably the best of John Steinbeck’s novels...a fantasia of history and of myth...a strange and original work of art.”

Mark Schorer

The New York Times Book Review (1953)

“Steinbeck’s only ambitious novel since *The Grapes of Wrath* is *East of Eden* (1952), a best seller which the critics justly found rambling and uneven, its main argument—that the individual can to some degree control his conduct—lost in a mass of irrelevant detail.”

Theodore Hornberger

The Literature of the United States 2, 3rd edition
(Scott, Foresman 1953,1961,1966) 1282

“In his massive work, *East of Eden*, Steinbeck used the same primitive base for his study of evil, to symbolize the regenerative power of earth in allowing a choice between good and evil to each of the furthest descendants of Adam. ‘Nearly everything I have is in it,’ Steinbeck wrote to his friend Covici, and, he might have added, nearly everything that America has as well. The daring mixtures of comedy and

tragedy, myth and reality, that crowd these pages give them a richness of texture which can excuse their inequalities of feeling and form.”

Robert E. Spiller
The Cycle of American Literature
(Free Press/Collier-Macmillan 1955) 216

“*East of Eden* is Steinbeck’s first major novel since *The Grapes of Wrath* and evidently represents an attempt to create a work of important literary and mythical significance. The theme is the conflict between good and evil as symbolized in the Biblical story of Cain and Abel, here recast in the setting of the Salinas Valley. Actually the novel relates two recurrences of the Cain-Abel situation in successive generations. Adam Trask (Abel) is the favorite son of his father, a Connecticut farmer; because of this he incurs the jealousy of his brother Charles (Cain). Charles, who basically loves his brother in spite of his contempt and jealousy for him, fights him, but the matter ends inconclusively.

Then, when Adam marries and has twin sons, the myth is reenacted on a ranch in the Salinas Valley. Caleb (Cain) worships his father and is jealous of Aaron, who without caring or deserving it wins Adam’s preference. Finally, in his rage, he finds a way to get even with his brother. Aaron venerates the memory of his mother, whom he imagines dead. The truth about her is that she had been a prostitute before she met Adam, and after the birth of her sons has returned to her old profession. Finding that she is still alive and now madam of a Salinas house, Caleb vindictively takes Aaron to see her. Shattered, Aaron flees and in irrational despair joins the army. When word comes that he has been killed Adam has a stroke; Cal feels the full weight of his own guilt. The old Chinese servant Lee serves as a philosophical commentator on the drama; he exhorts Adam to forgive Cal. But Adam leaves with his son only a single enigmatic word: *Timshel*. This Hebrew allusion is interpreted by Lee and others to mean ‘Thou *mayest* rule over sin;’ abandoning his son to evil, he nevertheless leaves him the possibility of redemption through his personal effort if he wishes to accept good.

Thus *East of Eden* treats mankind’s most basic enigma: the presence of evil in the universe, and the cause of man’s curse in the eyes of God. Steinbeck’s interpretation is in the end an optimistic one; mankind is abandoned by God in its struggle with evil, yet God, through Adam the father of humanity, holds out hope of rehabilitation through the gift of free will.”

Donald Heiney
Recent American Literature 4
(Barron’s Educational Series 1958) 237-38

“His longer and thicker writings may be differentiated by the moment and degree of wreckage, and they have culminated in *East of Eden* (1952), professedly Steinbeck’s most ambitious novel. ‘Nearly everything I have is in it,’ he said. I am afraid it is a very bad novel of a very special and revealing badness which can most quickly be described by saying that it would have been greatly admired by H. G. Wells, who referred to Steinbeck as ‘that amazing genius’....

This is a novel whose allegorical framework is indicated not only in its title but in its hero, whose Christian name is Adam. This is a novel which introduces us not only to a new Adam, but to a new Lilith and even to a new Cain and Abel—called Cal and Aron—with the former again responsible, if indirectly, for the death of the latter. And this is a novel whose characters spend many hours arguing the meaning of the Genesis story—‘the best-known story in the world’... There is no great image of human experience in *East of Eden* though a great one was intended, and not only because there is no sense of life but even more because there is no sense of death in it.... The fact is that Steinbeck does not really believe in his Biblical story. It is as though Emerson had written the book, and all that remains when the abstractions and monsters have been cleared away is the old Emersonian material and the old Emersonian tone....”

R. W. B. Lewis
“John Steinbeck: The Fitful Daemon”
The Young Rebel in American Literature, ed. Carl Bode
(Heinemann & Praeger 1959)

“The most ambitious of Steinbeck’s novels, *East of Eden* is based on a reconstruction of the Biblical story of Cain and Abel and centers around the lives of Adam Trask and his two sons, Cal and Aron. Both the ‘Adam’ and the ‘Abel’ of the story, Adam Trask fights with his brother Charles for the love of their father, then sets out from their New England farm on a series of journeys that finally bring him and his new wife, Cathy, to the Salinas valley in California. Cathy, an incarnation of pure evil, bears Adam twin sons and then deserts him to become a prostitute, leaving Adam emotionally crippled.

Thanks to the intervention of Lee, the Chinese servant, and the fatherly wisdom of Sam Hamilton, Adam partially recovers and is able to raise the children, but as the boys grow older it is apparent that they are reenacting the Cain and Abel drama in themselves. Adam favors Aron at the expense of Cal, and is unable to forgive Cal when he drives Aron to his death by telling him that their mother is a prostitute. The moral and philosophical import of the book lies in its long center section in which Lee and Adam discuss God’s admonition to Adam after the Fall, and the implications of the Hebrew word ‘timshel,’ which Steinbeck interprets to mean ‘thou mayest’ (rather than ‘thou shalt’) conquer over sin. Given a choice, man is free and can decide for himself; Adam’s final realization of this enables him to forgive Cal at the close of the book.”

Max J. Herzberg & staff
The Reader’s Encyclopedia of American Literature
(Crowell 1962) 296

Michael Hollister (2015)