

East of eden: the nature of human choice



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Circumstances can only shape a person's life to the extent that they allow them to. The truth is that people's lives are determined by their choices not their circumstances. This is not to say that circumstances like a tragedy that occurs in one's life does not play a role in shaping an individual.

However, an individual always has the ability to choose their response, despite not being able to choose their circumstances. The power of choice produces lessons and values that form people's overall characteristics. Over time, people realize that who they become is not determined by outside sources, but instead dependent on their responses to the outside influences they face. A simple example comes from a set of children being raised under similar conditions, yet they develop different types of characteristics due to the different life choices they make. Larger scale examples can be found in the texts used in this analysis.

Texts used to further dive into this analysis are the Bible and East of Eden by John Steinbeck. The main topics being discussed in this paper address man's nature versus man's nurture, and how nature plays a more significant role in a character being good or evil. These topics ultimately aim to show how man's nature of choice develops an individual's character more than the amount of nurture they receive during their life time. First is an overview at how the nature compares to the nurture of an individual. Next is an explanation of how free will is given to man by God and how the power free will is determined by choosing good or evil. Lastly, the focus shifts to how man's pursuit of good or evil choices shapes the individual's character. This break down highlights how every human being has the same nature, which includes choice and good and evil. Man can choose good or evil, because he

has the power to pursue the life he wants. An individual's character is dependent on man's nature of free will, which is man being able to choose good or evil more than people or circumstances that may play a role in his nurture.

The significance of a short introduction into both books is important as it shows the idea of human choice and good and evil. The Bible gives some of the very first accounts of God presenting man with having to make choices for himself. Looking at the story of Cain and Abel, found in the book of Genesis, each brother develops a character based on the choices they make. Cain and Abel are known for having a long-standing testimony of brother rivalry, focused on the idea of human free will. When God asked these men to bring forth the best of what they had to offer, Abel follows the instructions given to him by God and automatically wins favor with him. Abel gives what is asked of him to God gaining God's favor; The Lord looked with favor on Abel and his offering, but on Cain and his offering he did not look (NRSV, Genesis. 4: 4). God favors Abel because he gave what he had and more. Cain only gave half of what he had to God, causing God to look past Cain for not being true to his request. This irritates Cain for he does not understand (NRSV, Genesis. 4: 7). Cain grows jealous of his brother Abel because he holds a stronger relationship with God. An anger inside Cain grows and he develops a solution to the problem by killing his brother Abel; Listen! Your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground (NRSV, Genesis. 4: 10).

In East of Eden, Steinbeck devotes much of the plot to the exploration and championing of human nature. For in East of Eden also has a family of two generations, the Trask family, and its ultimate triumph is about overcoming

the forces of evil. The two brothers, Adam and Charles, have a jealous relationship fraught with tension and violence. Charles envies his brother Adam because he feels that their father Cyrus treats him with preference. The second generation of Trask boys Cal and Aron struggle with similar issues. Steinbeck mostly examines how the nature of man is developed through the concept of Timshel. The novel 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. It particularly celebrates the power of human beings to determine their own destiny through exercising free will. This novel shows the unique development of human potential and grants a power of action and responsibility to man. One of the major questions being addressed in this paper is how the development of the characters in the East of Eden connect to the nature of good and evil.

In the way that East of Eden depicts generations struggling with the choice between good and evil, it might be referencing a call to salvation. It comes as no surprise, that many say that the tale has close ties to the old testament story of Cain and Abel including how it mirrors Cain's offering being rejected, Cain murdering his own brother, Cain becoming guilty and Cain's punishment for his choice. Both the theme and structure of East of Eden come from biblical influence. A central biblical idea Steinbeck uses in East of Eden is the Hebrew word, Timshel, to demonstrate the idea of overcoming evil. Timshel is defined as the idea that human will is the strongest force on earth and can overcome anything. Steinbeck's novel tries to escape evil and do good by focusing on the end of the story of Cain and

Abel: thou mayest rule over sin (NRSV, Genesis. 4: 7). Steinbeck sees this in the Bible as a key term for men to remember. East of Eden was different from many of Steinbeck earlier novels they never rose to such a height of glory in their view of what human beings can be. East of Eden reveals the source of human evil, and its forms. Nothing compared to the word Timshel that says, the way is open (Steinbeck 303). This idea was completely new to Steinbeck's writing.

First of all, nature is more influential to one's character because an individual's nature gives them the power of making choices as passed down from one generation to the next. When Steinbeck introduces the characters of Adam and Charles Trask, he describes the two boys.

Adam is described as:

Young Adam was always an obedient child. Something in him shrank from violence, from contention, from the silent shrieking tension that can rip a house. He contributed to the quiet he wished for by offering no violence, no contention, and to do this he had to retire into secretness, since there is some violence in everyone. He covered his life with a veil of vagueness, while behind his quiet eyes a rich full life went on. This did not protect him from assault, but it allowed him an immunity (Steinbeck 20).

Charles on the other hand, is strong and closer to the perfect child that his father would want:

his half-brother Charles, only a little over a year younger, grew up with his father's assertiveness. Charles was a natural athlete, with instinctive timing

and coordination and the competitor's will to win over others, which makes for success in the world (Steinbeck 20).

The description of these two brothers is key because it plays a role in showing that physical and personal traits exist but are not the only things that shape the character. Further character development comes from the choices that they make between good and evil. Both of these men have the ability to choose between good and evil due to the fact that this is their nature. They have the same nature but not every man's nurture is the same. Since Adam Trask was the weak one, he always received more love and recognition from his father; whereas because Charles was the stronger brother, his father never felt the need to give him as much affection. Both these characters are developed by circumstances and relationships showing that man's nurture influences a piece of who they become. Although nurture has a slight influence on the way these characters develop, their nature forms a stronger foundation towards their overall character.

As previously stated, nature has to do with genetics, but more importantly nature has to do with free will. In the old testament, the story of Adam and Eve begins with God giving humanity free will , And the LORD God commanded the man, ' you may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall, not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die' (NRSV, Genesis. 2: 16-17). Free will was given to man in the form of choosing between good and evil, which can be translated as man's nature. If Adam and Eve were to make the choice to go against the one restriction that God had for them, they would be bringing sin into the world. Adam and Eve did bring sin into the world by later eating of

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the tree of knowledge, thus man is faced with having to overcome sin. Man's nature comes from God, which means that God gives all man free will. This gives man the opportunity to use free will to overcome sin.

Therefore, the key element to nature having more influence on an individual's character is free will. This being said man has control over whether or not he becomes good or evil because he has the ability to choose between good and evil. Man can never choose his circumstance, but he can choose how he is going to respond to things that are out of his control. He is able to do so because God has given every man free will. Even though Adam is favored over Charles, which leads to conflict between the two, both are able to make a choice on how to deal with the conflict. The same can be said for the conflict that Cain and Abel find themselves having to resolve. Each of these examples of character of dealing with conflict points back to the key concept of Timshel in Steinbeck's novel. When facing adversity, a character will be developed by his choosing of good or evil.