

Female characters in east of eden: a comparative essay on john steinbeck's novel

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The Fall of Eve

The Bible tells us that it was Eve that ate the fruit, and she condemned mankind to exile from the Garden of Eden. This can be seen in the title of *East of Eden* – Adam's land in Salinas is an Eden when he buys it with Cathy and it is fertile and ready to be planted. Yet when Kate leaves him, he lets it sit empty and unused and it is no longer a paradise. Cathy is Eve, and she has locked him out of his own Eden. It's interesting to compare Eve, or the idea of her, to the three main women in this novel.

Abra is an example of a perfect lady who exists merely to comfort Aron and, later in the book, lead Cal in the right direction. She does complain that Aron imagines her as perfect, but she never does anything in the book to prove him wrong and that's where the problem is. Abra can be compared to Eve before the snake and the fruit and the Fall. Abra is Eve as a young lady – she is still a girl, and she is seen as sweet and virginal. She says that she is “impure” and that Aron sees her as something that she is not, but maybe he only sees Eden, and the Fall is something we never had a chance to glimpse with Abra. Steinbeck is still stuck in the time of Genesis, where a woman can be compared to a garden. She is still growing; she is perfect and pure and her words don't speak loud enough.

His male characters are complex and sinful and real and are still considered good people, but Abra is described as “a straight, strong, fine-breasted woman, developed and ready and waiting to take her sacrament – but waiting” (494). In this description, she is reduced down to nothing more than “Aron's girl”. Steinbeck says that she is smart, but he never gives her any

ambitions. It's as though he saw that he should have allowed his female characters to have actual personalities but rather than doing that, he just said that they did.

The first time that Abra meets Cal and Aron is when she and her parents go to their house to avoid the rain, and I remember distinctly thinking that she seemed like a second Cathy. This was particularly obvious from the quote "... and while she knew the weaknesses of men, she still liked them, and, besides, she was a lady" (346). This suggested that she had a lot of hidden cruelty then, and yet none of that was brought up again later. It seemed odd, especially because Abra fits so easily into one of the categories of the two types of women that Steinbeck writes. He writes the good ones and the bad ones, and it's so simple. We never see any of his female characters struggle with moral dilemmas, and Abra is so good. Cal gets to struggle with being his own person and the choice to do good when he knows that it is "in his blood" to be a bad person, but Abra doesn't. She states so many times during the book that her father is a thief and that she could end up like him, but that never seems like a possibility.

The next of Steinbeck's females is Liza. She is such good woman, and yet all she does over the course of the book is hold her family together. She is like Eve after her story; she is no longer important and neither is Liza. She raised her children, like Eve raised Cain and Abel, and then the story wasn't about her anymore and there was no need for her to be a developed character. Liza doesn't even seem to have a personality – especially when compared to Samuel, who seems to have enough spunk for the both of them. Another

mother character in the book is Adam's mother, Mrs. Trask. Both Liza and Mrs. Trask are described similarly. For Liza, it is said that:

She had no sense of humor and only occasionally a blade of cutting wit. She frightened her grandchildren because she had no weakness. She suffered bravely and uncomplainingly through life, convinced that that was the way her God wanted everyone to live (11 – 12).

Adam's mother's character description reads as

Mrs. Trask was a pale, inside-herself woman. No heat of sun ever reddened her cheeks and no open laughter raised the corners of her mouth. She used religion as a therapy for the ills of the world and of herself, and she changed the religion to fit the ill (15).

They are both described as women who didn't laugh and who loved God. They are both good, but are more than anything just mothers for the male characters. Even Steinbeck's mother is portrayed as behaving a lot like these two, although she is in the book very briefly. All of the females in Samuel's family seemed to get the shorter end of the stick. In the chapter where Steinbeck describes each of Samuel's children, the sons each get about a page while the daughters got about a sentence each.

And then, of course, we get to Cathy, the female character with the most depth. Most of the people in our class say that she is their favorite character because here is a female character that has flaws and is complicated. She is Eve after the Fall; she is a woman who was not just tempted by the snake but is it. She is not quite human, and Steinbeck often says that she is

missing something – her compassion. Taken by herself, outside of the rest of
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East of Eden, there is nothing wrong with her character. There is nothing wrong with any of the women in this book.

When I told people what I was writing about Abra, Liza, and Cathy, they seemed offended because they liked one or more of the characters. And that's fine. I like Abra and Cathy a lot, although I do feel often bored by Liza, and it's not that they aren't enough as they are. Women can be innocent, and they can be sociopaths. The problem is that there aren't enough women in the book and that throughout the 600 pages, none of them change or grow. They never have a hardship that they can learn from. If they do, as Cathy does when she suspects that Ethel knows about her murder of Faye, then she just curls into herself and makes a man solve it, Joe in this case. Each of these women can be easily paired with a man from the book – Liza has Samuel, Cathy has Adam, and Abra has Aron (and later Cal). These women don't make it into the book because they have a story to tell; only because they happen to be in love with, or loved by, one of the leading men.

This is why, ultimately, his view of women is so bad. I wouldn't call him sexist, but I do believe that he doesn't try to write good women. He holds them to a higher standard than men and refuses to accept their flaws as who they are. He is like Adam and Aron in the books in that way. The whole creation of Cathy was likely to get back at his ex-wife, whom he had just divorced when he wrote this book. As the introduction of the book says, "the marriage fell apart in a way that allowed Steinbeck to project onto Adam and Cathy a sense that men are passive and women are angry" (xi). He was angry at her, and anger should never go unchecked in novels. It can be a

beautiful thing, yes, but it can also be ugly. Mostly, I think that Steinbeck was just lazy.

The time period was different than today, but the Bible is a timeless book and all Steinbeck did was re-envision Eve three different ways. And yet, Eve is more complicated than any of these three women because she is all of them. When he takes only the bits and pieces of her personality that he likes, Steinbeck truly does create female characters that are “inhuman”. Eve has a struggle with morality and at least some sort of story beyond Adam, but Abra and Liza are never given the chance and Cathy is condemned for trying to become something more than a wife and mother.