

East of eden – setting



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Intro John Steinbeck was born in 1902, in Salinas, California, the setting of this novel. From *The Grapes of Wrath* to *Cannery Row*, he has given American Ethos memorable portraits of the dispossessed- immigrants, farmers, rural underclass and the like. Though not in grinding poverty, Steinbeck did not manage to publish a commercially successful book until 1935, during which he observed how America responded to the Great Depression and labor unrest.

He grew incredibly fond of the proletariat, their compelling stories and concrete ethics, an admiration that would bring to the socially small and insignificant to fictional heroism, like Lennie of *Of Mice and Men* Samuel Hamilton of *East of Eden*. The fruit that the snake entices Eve to ingest is from the forbidden tree of knowledge of good and evil. The consequences of the Fall are that humans are no longer innocent and, as Satan appeals to them with lies and grandeur, will always be naturally inclined to do evil.

God punishes his disobedient children with a trying mortal life of suffering, and asks humans to use free will to eradicate the urges of sin completely, repent otherwise and be good by His authoritatively prescribed standards for salvation. This binary, absolute path to the Pearly Gates provides comfort and consistency in a radical world. It is also this very simplicity of the divine that Steinbeck rejects for the complexities of that glittering instrument, the human soul. (Steinbeck 32). To say Steinbeck is interested in the tension between man and God would be an understatement- all but one novel in his wide body of work contain overt references to neo-Christian ideas. An Episcopalian from childhood and conversant with traditions of the faith, he gradually distanced himself from organised religion and grew skeptical of its

role in American culture in his later years. If his previous work had the refrain to give polish and poise to his meditation on this dilemma, *East of Eden* makes no such effort to shield his intent evident in the primitivism in structure and hardheaded attitude. Coupled with his awareness that this should be his magnum opus- the work he has been preparing for all his life- this novel is the one where his authorial voice comes through the loudest, both in moral lesson and in artistic vision.

East of Eden takes two familiar biblical stories from the Book of Genesis- Adam and Eve and Cain and Abel- using the narrative framework of each to tell a multigenerational epic following the Trasks and the Hamiltons, that first and foremost pays tribute to the human spirit in all its good and evil. It explores what Steinbeck sees as the single most important question of existence- A man, after he has brushed off the dust and chips of his life, will have left only the hard, clean questions: Was it good or was it evil? Have I done well or ill? (Steinbeck, 317). Sprinkled in between those sweeping questions is Steinbeck's interrogation of the validity of these long-held moralities and the Judeo-Christian doctrines that defend- not only questioning its application outside of the Bible, but also whether it is realisable at all as a code of ethics. Both intentions manifest in inextricably intertwined ways- from the collapsed ruins of now obsolete scriptures, modern morality must rise in its place. What critique of evil present is so obvious and indisputable by nature that it has taken an ancillary role to the more revelatory study into good. Hence, in this essay, I will be examining the rich moral tapestry the characters must navigate to achieve Steinbeck's idea

of good. Goodness is traditionally unflinching and unwilling to capitulate to circumstances.

It, in its purity, stands in opposition to evil, and is forever in combat with it. To quote from Lee, Evil must constantly respawn, while good, while virtue, is immortal. While good is consistent and everlasting, it also necessarily means that good does not change, evolve or adapt, the harms of holding onto it like an anchor we see in each of these characters' undoing. A central idea of Steinbeck's characterisation is espoused in perhaps the most iconic line of the book: And now that you don't have to be perfect, you can be good.. This line implies that perfection stands as an obstruction to the pursuit of goodness, that the two are diametrically opposed in nature. When the novel states outright that the wretched are empty because they are incapable of love, the same can be said about an absolute good. Adam's romanticism disallows him from seeing the person as whole, leaving him unable to reciprocate love in any meaningful way. He still feels a general ambivalence towards his sons, despite his want to connect with and care for them.

Adam is good to his own detriment. During his interactions with his father and brother, and during his service in the army, he is continually exposed to brutality and betrayal, yet never develops the survival instinct of suspicion and measured cynicism. He has no comprehension of his wife Cathy's immense darkness, despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary. Burned in his mind was an image of beauty and tenderness, a sweet and holy girl... and that image was Cathy to her husband, and nothing Cathy did or said could warp Adam's Cathy Although Adam recognises darkness in his father and brother, he determines Cathy to be good without calling for

reaffirmation, blinded to her malevolence by a veneer of feminine vulnerability. This sightlessness is punished with a shot to the shoulder and consequently, a deep, lethargic depression as Adam feels his bedrocks of belief shaken. As no real human thought is without fault, Adam is thoughtless and grows to be hollow and inert, living in an internal world with no room for pride, ambition or desire. Later on, his cabbage importation business fails and he becomes a laughingstock due to his idealism and failure to consider the financial outcome of the project, one of many times Adam's lackadaisical thinking causes harm. He fails at being a good brother when he was not perceptive enough to respond to Charles' destructive cries for help.

He fails at being a good father to Abel when he rejects the gift he offers him , even after witnessing the immense sorrow and violence a similar refusal by his father imbued in his brother Charles, and at parenting Aron by being the same meddlesome, oblivious dad that he once resented Cyrus for being. He fails at being a good husband when he forces Cathy to behave in alignment with his idyllic vision of the future without considering her thoughts. When Adam would swell out in his stomach with a pressure of ecstasy that was close kin to grief, it is not real love, which is tempered with complexity and understanding, but a painful and volatile impression of love. Comparatively, those capable of hate are proven to be equally capable of love- the idea that love and can only thrive when one is familiar with the absence of it. Adam and Aron do not feel affection for their father, while Charles and Cal love their fathers fiercely. Cal, in particular, grew up a passionate love for his father and a wish to protect him and to make it up to him for the things he

had suffered after he learns about Cathy, because having been on both ends of hurt, he understands the sheer extent of evil Cathy must have possessed to unleash this enormity of pain unto his father.

This understanding escapes Aron, who acts out in confusion and selfish anger. The idea that a perfect being cannot empathise with the plights of the corruptible as explored here is also a prominent strand in anti-theology, which states God is an intrinsically problematic judge of character as he does not possess our marred agency. The biblical Adam story is about an uncorrupted man's arrival at humanity, and to a certain extent, Adam Trask manages to reach the same enlightenment, with his final labored utterance summing up the simultaneous gift and burden of free will: *Timshel*, or Thou mayest. His son, on the other hand, the closest adherent to the Christian ideal of morality, is never afforded the luxury of redemption or growth. In the same way that Abel dies before arriving at the promised Land of Canaan while Cain joins the rest of humanity in exile in the Land of Nod, Aron remains trapped in adolescence while his brother matured. Aron skews goodness into obsessive purity, taking on a much more sinister manifestation of perfect morality as a religious man bound by the rigid doctrines of his faith. Aron is perfect while Adam is good, and that makes all the difference. In maintaining the illusion that his father is categorically forthright and his absent mother an untainted saint, the revelation that people contradict his code of ethics by acting immorally breaks Aron completely. When he discovers Kate is the owner of a brothel, he is unable to comprehend it and rejects the notion.

Again, as with all perfect ideals, purity crumbles under the duress of complexity. Ultimately, the didactic lesson of the book is that everyone gets to choose between good and evil, yet complications with this rise in interpretation of Aron and Cathy. The ways in which Aron's characterisation may be problematic in a narrative all about self-will are immediately apparent. During Aron's life and his transformation from coddled golden child to devout theist to lost soul, he is so one-dimensionally depicted that his missteps seem inevitable by design. The fact that Cathy is introduced as a monster by birth, designed to make a painful and bewildering stir in her world (58), allows for very little room for postulation about the soul-stricken, innate nature of her evil. Crawling onto the Trasks brothers' porch, leaving a slick trail of blood behind her, her entrance in their legacy is not just sinuous—it is the original biblical sin, which seems an odd choice when considering how the point of Steinbeck's creation is to refute against the existence of any purely evil entity. Cathy did not have the agency to opt out of evil, as if the others knew something [she] didn't like a secret they wouldn't tell [her]" (355). When Cal confronts her about her deficiency she seems to be in genuine grief, agonising over the emptiness of her conniving life. While other characters are given a wealth of opportunities to change, Aron and Cathy seem logically predisposed to make a specific set of decisions for epitomising their respective extremes, so much so that they are cursed by Steinbeck from the start.

They seem out of keeping in the complex moral realm so delicately crafted by the novel, but in fact, the coexistence of these two diametrically opposed ideas is reconciled when considering the metafictional identity of these

characters as Christian-defined metrics which every other character compares themselves to. In the Bible, Jesus was sacrificed to allow the forgiveness of human sin, his infinite benevolence balancing out our infinite moral ruination. In *East of Eden*, grace has to be given by us to each other. In the same way Christ died for equilibrium, each symbolic character died to restore true free will into the world of *East of Eden*, with Adam's ending the novel. As Adam would not be able to react proportionately and forgive, his death spares Cal from fulfilling the looming fate of Cain, retreat from the edge of his predestined demise and is finally truly free to choose. In Steinbeck's words: The danger and the glory and the choice rest finally in man. (Steinbeck, Banquet speech) The caveat of Aron's tragic end is religion. He passively takes spiritual instructions from a clergyman and builds his moral framework according to the holy text without question. In usurping personal choice to divine intervention, he effectively denies himself the chance to choose between good and evil, becoming the perfectly good child of God without impure desires or any affinity to sin- men in Eden before being tempted by the snake.

The argument then seems to be that such a hypothetical being cannot survive outside of paradise and hence does not exist outside of the fictional vacuum. When Aron's preconception of his mother shatters, the first aberration from his sinless existence, he becomes liberated from Eden, and uses his newfound free will to recklessly enlist in the army, stranding himself in the most amoral, diseased landscape of human making. In such, Aron embodies another criticism on Christian conduct, in that the cynical assumption that humanity is all ugliness is a self-fulfilling prophecy. People

who look out for sinners to chastise will find an abundance. Those who do not accept the integral nature of vices along with virtue could run off and hide, but escapism may cost them their resilience and wisdom, and their insufficiencies will eventually catch up on them. The parallel evoked between the church and the whorehouse in Chapter 19, both having “arrived in the Far West simultaneously,” (Steinbeck, 166) and each “intended to accomplish the same thing: ... [to take] a man out of his bleakness for a time” (166), is similar to that drawn between Kate’s and Aron’s experiences, with the two mirroring each other despite being on opposite ends of the moral spectrum.

Aron considers himself above the common and sullied crowd, Kate too thinks of herself as an intellectual superior to everyone else, and both suffer from their self-imposed desolation- In the end, both characters puts an end to their miserable existence through suicide or self-inflicted danger. Kate’s fondness of Aron as a son she had never spoken to no doubt stems from a superficial level of physical resemblance, but it could also be attributed to her understanding that he is the only character with a psyche as detached as hers. In the curious case of Kate Trask, it would still be reductive to label her a serpentine madam. In her old age, Kate is riddled with crippling arthritis, becoming a sick ghost, crooked and in some way horrible (Steinbeck 425) having lost her sexual allure to age, and conveys a loneliness and paranoia readers can relate to. Her doting on a son she never got to know, frantic attempts to restore control over her brothel’s toppling hierarchy, and contemplation of and eventual suicide all establish a humanity that was absent prior.

As seen from Cathy's association with Alice in Wonderland since childhood, she feels bewildered and alone in a world too abstract and bizarre for her purely calculating mind. Alice... would put her arm around Cathy's waist, and Cathy would put her arm around Alice's waist, and they would walk away best friends (425) hints that she still desires companionship, and that the reason she so adamantly drives away everyone who ever got close to her may have been fear of true vulnerability or having a connection with someone that is not fictional. Even the verisimilitude of love abandons her in the end, as Alice doesn't know (425) of her final journey to grow smaller and smaller and then disappear (426). This subdued end to her gloriously twisted life is candid and melancholic. In engendering feelings of empathy for the truly irredeemable, who does not by any stretch of the imagination deserve any goodwill, our instincts as moralistic readers prove to be the antithesis for Kate's denouncement of humanity as nothing more than the gray slugs that come (180).

Much in the same way, the readers are able to identify narcissism and unflattering self-indulgence in Aron's perfection where Adam, in his naivete, is blind to. Steinbeck trusts the readers to be able to pick up on the nuances and minutiae, through attentiveness to complexity of psychological design, that makes them better humans than Adam and Cathy. In such, we see the characters compliant in the overarching theme. Steinbeck's disinterest in making these symbolic people believable is not a mistake. The storyteller in-universe being named John Steinbeck, the decision to publish all his letters documenting the creative process and his quote that reads The design of a book is the pattern of a reality controlled and shaped by the mind of the

writer.” (Steinbeck, *The Log from the Sea of Cortez* 1) all invite us to view the Trasks through metafictional critical lens, to read the story through a novelist’s mind and interpret it as such- a constructed story with a focused moral message. Considering that lens in application, conventions of storytelling dictates that if a novel where good triumphs implores us to be good.