

# East of eden: john fontenrose response

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East of Eden: John Fontenrose Response The basis for the story of good and evil is most often the Christian biblical stories in the book of Genesis. The classic battle of good and evil with good always triumphant over evil often stretches farther out and into our many cultures. This archaic tale is ever prevalent in all of mankind's greatest stories in many different variations. John Steinbeck often brings this struggle to different methods of thought especially on how we view evil, as well as good.

He brings this story to light using the everyday, common man in his books, *Grapes of Wrath*, *Of Mice and Men* and now *East of Eden* to portray the realistic side of the battle of good and evil. Many will argue that he does not have a very clear goal for presenting this idea including, John Fontenrose, in his literary criticism, "John Steinbeck: An Introduction and Interpretation" but it is quite the opposite. In John Steinbeck's book, *East of Eden*, The stories of the Hamilton and Trask families get intertwined along with many other people as the theme of good and evil unfolds on them on farmland in both Salinas, California and in Connecticut.

Towards the beginning of the book the good characters, Alice and Adam and the bad characters, Cyrus and Charles are clear to the reader but as the novel progresses the concept of "timshel" is introduced which redefines the concept of predestination versus free will and changes the course of each character's limitations for better and for worse. In *East of Eden* Steinbeck is not unclear on his position of good and evil, rather he puts forward the way this mindset has changed over time and gives his own methodology on how the struggle of good and evil should be thought of.

Often times Steinbeck shows the realism in this book with many archetypes that are not perfect and alter from time to time. This makes it hard for some people to understand his reasoning like, John Fontenrose, as he neglects this concept when he states that the author is, “ never clear about the relation of good to evil in this novel” (Fontenrose). Steinbeck purposefully creates this view so that the appearance of progression in his archetypes is shown when free will is added to his characters. In the late beginning of the book, Charles beats his brother, Adam, almost to death because of jealousy over his father’s love.

It is an almost perfect allusion to the biblical story of Cain and Abel which represents an ever occurring theme throughout the book. In fact this represents one of the first introductions towards realism in the novel because these horrible events are a part of life, that of which Steinbeck does not wish to cover up. Instead of hiding them Steinbeck shows them in detail to carry the notion that the concepts of good and evil are not concrete but are situational and objective. While Charles thought he was being just, Adam most certainly did not.

In part three of the book Steinbeck introduces the concept of “ timshel” as discovered by Adam’s servant Lee and its many different translations, “‘ Thou shalt,’ meaning that men will surely triumph over sin. But the Hebrew word timshel- ‘ Thou mayest’-that gives a choice. Why, that makes a man great, ... for in his weakness and his filth and his murder of his brother he still has the great choice” (Steinbeck 301-302) He attempts to convince Adam and Cal of the validity of timshel and ultimately succeeds, as Adam

gives Cal his blessing and Cal realizes he himself has the power to overcome his family's legacy of evil.

With the concept of Timshel, Steinbeck is not accurate, "translating the verb form timshol (not timshel as Steinbeck has it)" (Fontenrose). Steinbeck makes an almost unnoticeable symbol in the fact that the concept of "timshel or timshol" is not perfect, as shown with an incorrect translation. He proves this by having many things in the novel chosen and some not chosen, therefore not perfect free will. This is further proven by the fact that Charles in the beginning fills the Cain archetype but as timshel is introduced the archetype continues and Cal is given the freedom to break away from this destiny of Evil.

Although Cal breaks free he is still partly held down by his archetype and therefore achieves balance between both good and evil. Steinbeck continues with this enigma using Cal again, having a C in his name and his assault on his brother Aron, shows his connection to Cain. Although he was not a good person, he wanted to become better which makes him superior to his brother Aron in the eyes of Steinbeck. As John Fontenrose put it "Good is identified both with admirable individual qualities and with conventional moral goodness" and with Cal "the author appears to accept Cal's label of bad for his adolescent desires and impulses. (Fontenrose 4) Steinbeck presents progression by making the outcome of Cal and Aron less severe than that of Adam and Charles. Although characters in East of Eden, more often than not, are pushed to expel evil forces from themselves and pertain towards good traits, the line is much more blurred. This is most prominently seen in Cal, who, although fitting under the archetype of the biblical Cain, still strives

towards good character, as seen in this passage, where he offers Aron a business opportunity after college. ' I'll get started and lay the foundation. Then when you finish we can be partners. I'll have one kind of thing and you'll have another'" (Steinbeck 536). Cal does also stir towards negative characteristics, particularly when he expresses the truth of their mother to Aron. Aron slowly becomes more and more pure as the book continues which eventually becomes his fault of being too good and not being able to deal with the evils of the world.

Cal struggles with the human desires towards good and bad, growing out of the Cain archetype and fleshing out into perhaps the most equal character in the book, neither choosing to neither reject the bad completely nor embrace the good completely. Cal breaks the notion of inherent good or evil archetypes and brings forth the realism concept of *timshel*. The narrator sums this up with many concepts while waxing on the perceptiveness of forces. " Some forces seem evil to us, perhaps not in themselves but because their tendency is to eliminate the things we hold well" (Steinbeck 131).

The piece continues with the argument that " good and evil are relative terms", more specifically in that Steinbeck appears to show Cal as bad when his action are of an adolescent nature and sees Aron as good when his actions reflect extreme self-indulgences. The characters are by no means clear cut in their morals; in fact, nearly every character is obscured as to whether they are altogether good or bad. By no means was a fault of Steinbeck's, rather it was an intentional move meant to portray the diverse and human characters which inhabit the story.

Even when describing the changing scenery of the Salinas Valley, the character's muddled human condition is reflected. When discussing the new church and sects which are appearing, the narrator says, " They were not pure, but they had a potential of purity, like a soiled white shirt. And any man could make something pretty fine of it within himself" (Steinbeck 217). Although the object of discussion is actually a church, the resemblance of character to the morally conflicted characters that inhabit the novel is difficult to ignore.

Fontenrose's reasons follow similar patterns, with statements such as " Good and evil are complementary" and " evil is the source of good and may even be necessary to good" essentially coming down to evil and good being necessary for the other to exist (Fontenrose 4). Although Fontenrose is overall incorrect in his claim that good and bad have no relation in the novel, in this claim it is necessary to agree, if only because such broad terms are used. The claims which Fontenrose makes almost seem to undermine his own argument; as they do essentially prove that there are clear relations between good and evil within the novel.

Overall, Steinbeck is quite distinct in his defining of morality, in which the polar opposites of good and evil coexist in such a manner that each individual has a right of choosing their path, defined by the ever-present phrase, *timshel*. This gives some characters the ability to gain the ideal balanced morality, not all evil and not all good. As we look deeper into the novel we see that through the many different concepts and understandings of good versus evil, Steinbeck lays down his system of how good and evil are actually perceived.