

The battle between good and evil in east of eden

[Literature](#), [Books](#)



East of Eden, written by John Steinbeck, is a complicated retelling of the biblical story of Cain and Abel, focused around the overall struggle between evil and good. This was first seen in Adam and Charles Trask, followed by Adam's sons, Aron and Cal Trask. The absence of a mother figure in these two instances of brotherly disagreement enhances the need of acknowledgment and love from their parental figures. And yet, both mother figures in East of Eden choose to abandon their children, leading them to find this love elsewhere. Adam's mother killed herself when he was just a baby, Cal and Aron's mother, Cathy, immediately escapes the life of obligation and never thinks about her son's well being. Cathy never could have been a mother due to the fact she had no maternal instinct and believed to be evil. Although it is evident through her manipulative ways and wickedness that Cathy is the satanic 'Eve' of this retold religious story, by the end of the novel her monstrous nature is questioned and Steinbeck opens the possibility that Cathy is much more vulnerable than she originally appeared.

Ever since Cathy was a young child, she had taken advantage of anyone near through the use of her sexuality, believing herself to be smarter than everyone and fueling her anger with her hatred of the ignorant humankind. Living on a farm in Connecticut with her parents, Cathy was always getting into trouble, from being found tied down and naked with two boys, to torturing a local Latin teacher to the point of suicide. Overall, Cathy is able to exploit men with her seductiveness, "sexuality with all its attendant yearnings and pains, jealousies and taboos, is the most disturbing impulse humans have... Everyone concealed that little hell in himself, while publicly pretending it did not exist — and when he was caught up in it he was

completely helpless” (Steinbeck 75). Not only does Cathy use her erotic ways to get what she desires, but she also uses physical pain and eventually, murder. After fighting with her father about Cathy’s attempt at running away, Cathy had had enough. One night Cathy leaves an apron in the oven of her house, locks all the doors, steals her father’s money, and leaves her parents to die in her childhood home, erupting into flames. Enjoying every second of her act and not feeling any remorse, Cathy’s cheeks “ were bright with color and her eyes shone and her mouth turned up in its small childlike smile” (85). The murder of her parents is Cathy’s first real act of evil that Steinbeck shows in the book, showing how much hatred she is capable of and the extent to which she will go to get her way.

After not feeling the need to seek repentance for murdering her parents, Cathy moves on to other victims that she is easily able to seduce and take advantage of, ruining them in the process. Running from her crimes, Cathy tries to get a job as a prostitute, but instead becomes the mistress of Mr. Edwards, a pimp who falls in love with her. Cathy uses him only for protection, constantly stealing from him and making him feel insecure: “ Her method was to keep him continually off balance” (94). This goes on for months with Mr. Edwards being so rapt with Cathy that his own health begins to deplete. He is so enthralled that he does not care about anything other than making Cathy comfortable. Mr. Edwards is eventually able to see through Cathy’s facade when she becomes drunk on wine, saying vicious words that Mr. Edwards cannot forget, “ You fat slug. What do you know about me? Do you think I can’t read every rotten thought you ever had?” (96). Mr. Edward’s image of Cathy is now distorted and shatters completely

when he learns of the murder of her parents. He becomes so scared that he takes her to an alley, beats her, and leaves her to die. Adam Trask then finds Cathy and nurses her back to health only to fall in love with her against all wishes of his brother, Charles, “ She’s no damn good, I tell you. She’s a whore... Won’t you get rid of her? Please, Adam. Throw her out. She’ll tear you to pieces. She’ll destroy you, Adam, she’ll destroy you!” (123). Just like Mr. Edwards, Adam is completely blinded by the love Cathy allows him to have for her, leaving his brother and moving to California. Cathy soon learns she is pregnant, and tries multiple times to abort herself to no avail, becoming completely stuck. When she finally gives birth to twin boys, she shoots Adam in the arm and disappears, changing her name and never looking back to the seemingly meaningless point in her life. In her final words to Adam before she leaves, ‘ her voice was dead and metallic.” Cathy tells her husband that she does not “ give a damn” about him, and when he asks about their newborn babies, she responds, “ throw them in one of your wells’ (201). Most new mothers fall in love with their offspring immediately as a maternal instinct takes over their whole being. The complete opposite occurs within Cathy. Not only does she leave her children, but she also leaves Adam, her husband, who had taken her in when she was at her lowest. This leaves Adam soulless and desolate, a shell of a person with nothing inside. Steinbeck explains Adam’s thoughts and feelings by explaining how “ he saw the world through gray water. Now and then his mind fought its way upward, and when the light broke in it brought him only sickness of the mind, and he retired into the grayness again” (252). Adam stayed within himself and his gray world for years, completely ignoring the key moments in his own sons’

lives. By only being with Adam for a year or so, Cathy was able to shut him down completely when she left, taking an enormous emotional toll that wrecked the life of her husband and her own children. Cathy is able to be thoroughly toxic to those around her, destroying their humanity as well as her own, leaving the reader to constantly question if she is capable of empathy or kindness.

After years of sheltering herself within her own hateful schemes, Cathy begins to scrutinize her previous beliefs as to whether her motives were well judged. When Cathy set up a new life for herself as the owner of a whorehouse, Adam visits her the day his brother dies and is finally able to see her true self, ' I know what you hate. You hate something in them you can ' t understand. You don ' t hate their evil. You hate the good in them you can ' t get at. I wonder what you want, what final thing' (323). Adam can see that all of Cathy's plots are shielding what she is hiding deep within herself, something that she herself does not know yet. This refers back to when Steinbeck first introduced Cathy as a character, " I believe there are monsters born in the world to human parents. Some you can see, misshapen and horrible, with huge heads or tiny bodies. ... And just as there are physical monsters, can there not be mental or psychic monsters born? The face and body may be perfect, but if a twisted gene or a malformed egg can produce physical monsters, may not the same process produce a malformed soul?" (72). Cathy is born without having that little piece that is inside everyone else, the piece that makes you moral and capable of purity. Instead, Cathy is only filled with malevolence and fear. As Cathy gets older, her fear of the world builds, causing her to completely shut everything out

and hide within her self-built gray room. Just as Adam saw the world through gray water, Cathy sees the world from within her gray room. Steinbeck describes the gray room's importance saying, " She [Cathy] believed that the light pained her eyes, and also that the gray room was a cave to hide in, a dark burrow in the earth, a place where no eyes could stare at her" (474). Even though Steinbeck constantly refers to the little piece that Cathy is lacking, making her a person that is incapable of goodness due to the fear that consumes her, Cathy's final act before she dies leaves the reader to challenge this idea. After both of her sons come to visit her, she sees how much Aron is affected by seeing his supposed dead mother. She begins to feel guilty for the first time and shows a glimpse of protectiveness for her son, wishing that Aron had never met her. Cathy then decides to kill herself and make a will, " I leave everything I have to my son Aron Trask.' She dated the sheet and signed it ' Catherine Trask'" (553). This final act shows Cathy's remorse, trying to find a way to fix her mistakes, leaving everything to her son and actually using her legal name, acknowledging her past with Adam. Cathy is capable of goodness, she was just too afraid to let it show, hiding away in her gray world of hate.

The battle between good and evil is a universal struggle that has long been established in our lives. However, the way that Steinbeck portrays it through Cathy shows his belief that some people are born with the equal opportunity to choose between good and evil, while others have to struggle to find their humanity. For Cathy, she was finally able to attempt reconciliation for her sins once she accepted that she was putting up fronts to shield herself from the feeling of fear. Not only was this a journey for Cathy as a character, but it

was also a journey for Steinbeck as an author. He first speaks of evil monsters being born to human parents, referring to Cathy, but as the novel progresses Steinbeck allows for Cathy to change and become her own human self before she leaves the earth. Rather than being born evil, Steinbeck comes to the conclusion that being evil is a choice. At some point in a person's life they realize that anyone can diminish their past sins and work towards forgiveness and righteousness.