

"east of eden" by john steinbeck



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What about a novel where the purest of heart is ruthlessly punished? What version of morality is Steinbeck advocating for?

A clear extraction from all of his narrative decisions is the idea that goodness is only a virtue when it exists in tandem with bad, only when a man composed of equal measures of malice and benevolence wills himself to abide by the latter. When goodness manifests effortlessly, it is more of a vice than a virtue, as seen in our less rounded A- characters.

With that in mind, for Steinbeck's take on morally nuanced, irrepressibly good-willed men, we turn to Samuel Hamilton and Lee, two narratives not bound by namesake, running adjacent to the more archetypical Trask family. The two, through experience and wisdom of age, have developed the ability to accept in stride the paradoxical amalgamation of good and evil in themselves and actively find empowerment over their respective destinies.

Samuel Hamilton, Steinbeck's larger-than-life righteous man, is so rapidly aged from continuous familial tragedies and acting as the dutiful patriarch of a wholesome family that his unsatisfying, wrongful demise seems inappropriate. His son, Tom Hamilton, shoots himself in his farmhouse with his extended family miles away despite being a loving brother and a kind soul. This is contrasted with the implication that Cathy ' got what was coming to her', committing suicide by poison in the solitude of her office. The inconsistent degree of poetry justice Steinbeck dishes out stands to confuse rather than clarify.

The rationalisation of that is as follows. Steinbeck's good is defined as good entirely without conditions, not so much blind as it is selfless. The stories

from the fictional Trasks make narrative sense because they are written to convey an unambiguous moral lesson, but the Hamiltons are real people and hence their stories irregular. If the autobiographically inclined narrative following a conventional framework- our heroes get their well-earned happy endings and our villains eternal damnation- the decision to do good becomes a selfish one and much less free, as a choice between happiness and misery scarcely qualifies a choice. The consequences of our choices outside of Eden do not necessarily coincide with our intentions, good or bad. Adam's good is irrational, without proper motivation or justification, which explains why it eludes Cathy entirely, why she could not fathom Adam's immunity to her manipulation. Straining the qualifier further, Steinbeck offers that goodness arising from a fear of hellfire or a desire for heaven does not qualify as true goodness. It may also serve as a final condemnation of Aron's warped sense of entitlement, who wanted the story and he wanted it to come out his way. couldn't stand to know about his mother because that's not how he wanted the story to go and he wouldn't have any other story. So he tore up the world (Steinbeck 444).

East of Eden treads the careful line between fact and fiction, vacillating from an ancestral biography from the perspective of Samuel's grandson and an omniscient moralistic creator, specifically in-between the Trask and the Hamiltons. The Trasks lead a life dictated by mythical symbolism while the Hamiltons' legacy seem more or less grounded in reality. A moment that illuminated this diversion is during Cathy Trask's childbirth. Cathy Trask's physical descriptions are blatantly villainous, first likened to a reptile with Her ears were very little, without lobes, and they pressed so close to her

head that even with her hair combed up they made no silhouette (Steinbeck 58), and later morphs into the Sabbatic goat Satan, her feet small and round and stubby, with fat insteps almost like little hoofs. (59) Around the Hamilton, such outlandish character become comically antagonistic, borderline satirical, lashing out by biting Samuel Hamilton on the hand during childbirth, an injury that sent him into a feverish slumber, not unlike the symptoms of a venomous snakebite. Fantastical characters like these not only leave disbelief not only unsuspected, but also actively enforced.

Lee is, rather unambiguously, the mouthpiece by which Steinbeck underscores the story's theme. The moment he decides to is when he gives up his singular character motivation to open a bookshop is when he fully committed as a framing device, likewise when he was passed over from friendship with the somewhat truthful Hamiltons to the servitude of the completely fabricated Trasks. Hence his experience could be regarded as the same metafictional excessiveness as the Trask characters. His horrific birth in particular exemplifies the ugliness one has to suffer through to grapple with Timshel.

Amidst the maudlin revelations and impassioned journey of each character, Lee's story is a horrifically depersonalised, less delicate illustration of the ubiquitous truth. My father came to [my mother] on the pile of shale. She had not even eyes to see out of, but her mouth still moved and she gave him his instructions. My father clawed me out of the tattered meat of my mother with his fingernails (Steinbeck 276) Something so deeply personal accounted by Lee himself in such a clinical, coolly visceral way again enforces his role as a transcendent, objective overseer to the drama, even his own. The narrative <https://assignbuster.com/east-of-eden-by-john-steinbeck/>

fabricated has Lee's mother brutally raped then left to bleed out after the construction workers discovered she had lied about her gender and subsequently hidden her pregnancy to get work. That much is fully sufficient to establish the primal evil in man, but then we are told that Lee was cared for and brought up by the entire camp, the same people who murdered his mother, hence the capacity for penance even in the irredeemable. As extreme of a conclusion that might be, it shows how sure Steinbeck is in his convictions that humans are equal parts good and bad, so resolute that he is willing to take the ridiculous yet inevitable conclusion against the evidence of common sensibilities.

Despite all the pillage and misery, classifying Steinbeck's world as bleak and dreadful would be a grave misnomer. East of Eden is a jeremiad, but an infectiously hopeful one at that. And though not subtly put, Steinbeck's message is an important one. The title East of Eden alludes to the biblical passage where Cain went out from the presence of the Lord and dwelt in the land of Nod, east of Eden. (Genesis 4: 16, New International Version), where he transformed human culture from innocence to craftiness, the society that sprung from him Godless and independent. To live far from his influence was a punishment in the Bible, but to Steinbeck, a world rid of supernatural control, adherent to the fickle whims of humanity, is the only legitimate one.