

In His Image:
East of Eden, Genesis IV and Steinbeck's Philosophy of the "Human"

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[In a book] I am aware of a rational being, or a consciousness; the consciousness of another, no different from the one I automatically assume in every human being I encounter, except that in this case the consciousness is open to me, lets me look deep inside itself, and even allows me, with unheard license, to think what it thinks and feel what it feels. – Georges Poulet, “What is Literature?”

And I will tell them one of the greatest, perhaps the greatest story of all – the story of good and evil, of strength and weakness, of love and hate, of beauty and ugliness. I shall try to demonstrate to them how these doubles are inseparable – how neither can exist without the other, and how out of these groupings creativeness is born. – John Steinbeck, *Journal of a Novel: The East of Eden Letters*

If a story is not about the hearer, he will not listen...No story has power nor will it last, unless we feel in ourselves that it is true and true of us. – John Steinbeck, *East of Eden*

The most meaningful and fascinating commonality between all forms of literature is that everything tells the story of us – that is to say, novels, poetry drama or whatever form operates upon the profound notion that literature is about what it means to be human. John Steinbeck realizes this human nature of literature as he notes above in his *Journal of a Novel* (1969). In this collection of journal entries, Steinbeck discusses his daily experiences of writing what he declares to be the embodiment of his literary career - he explains, “there is only one book to a man,” and that “this is it” (5).¹ Composed near the end of his career and ten years before he received the Nobel Prize for Literature, Steinbeck considered his novel *East of Eden* (1952) to be his magnum opus before he even began writing it. This is because *East of Eden* is also Steinbeck’s own story.

¹ Steinbeck dedicates *East of Eden* to his best friend Pascal “Pat” Covici, in which he describes the novel as “a box,” and declares: “nearly everything I have is in it.”

Steinbeck addresses the novel to his two sons in hopes that when they gain enough experience to understand the “pains and joys” of life and grasp the depth of the subject matter, he may tell them “what they came from” (4). Steinbeck begins his semi-autobiography with the story of the Hamiltons, his own family and early frontiersmen of the Salinas Valley in northern California. The story opens with a natural description of the Salinas Valley, and in this mood, he transitions into a reconstruction of his family history, beginning with the novel’s most significant non-fictional character. Samuel Hamilton, Steinbeck’s grandfather, emigrated from Ireland with his wife in search of fertile land, but become rooted in a plot of acreage so arid and barren that it will never yield fruit. The author provides an entertaining account of Samuel’s vivacious approach to life, set against the milieu of his emblematic “dust heap,” and continues this depiction of his character throughout the novel.

The novel also tells the story of the fictional Trask family. Each major character from the Trask family represents a respective character from the story of Cain and Abel. Their story begins with Cyrus Trask who raises two sons, Charles and Adam (‘Cain’ and ‘Abel’) Early in the novel, Charles attempts to kill Adam, whom their father clearly favors. Despite this incident, the two grow older and stronger in affection. Their relationship is unstable, however, and when a battered woman arrives on their doorstep, it complicates matters further. The woman recovers and she reveals that her name is Cathy, but Charles and Adam know little else about her. Charles recognizes an indescribable darkness in her – one he identifies in himself, and though Adam falls deeply in love with her, we learn that Cathy only intends to use him until she becomes healthy again. Despite Charles’ outspoken hatred for her, he gives in to her seduction, but against her plans, she becomes pregnant. Cathy knows that the only way to remain under Adam’s protection from Charles is to marry him, and with

Cyrus' questionable fortune, they re-settle on a ranch in the Salinas Valley. At this point, the stories of the Trasks and the Hamiltons begin to intertwine. Adam hires Samuel Hamilton - a very respected, kind and inventive man - to dig for wells to irrigate his "garden" on the new ranch. He also hires a Chinese servant, Lee, to help take care of the house and the baby. Cathy gives birth to twin boys, who are later named Cal and Aron (also 'Cain' and 'Abel'), and soon after their birth, Cathy realizes her chance to leave Adam and abandon her babies in search of her own destructive and self-indulgent existence. She shoots Adam who attempts to stop her, and later she becomes a prostitute in the nearby town of Salinas.

The heart of the novel consists of the story of Cal and Aron. Adam favors Aron, the kind and sentimental brother, but Lee – arguably Steinbeck's philosophical voice – favors Cal, the dark, strong and witty brother. Though the two share a strong fraternal relationship, it often suffers from the same complications that led to Charles' and Adam's ultimate separation. Though Adam remains determined to hide the truth about Cathy to his children, Cal discovers that his mother actually works as a madam at a whorehouse in Salinas. What he also knows is that if fragile Aron ever discovers the truth, it could kill him.

Inherently, the novel consists of a medley of stories both true and fictional. Together, Steinbeck hopes to tell "the greatest story of all – the story of good and evil, of strength and weakness, of love and hate, of beauty and ugliness... and how out of their groupings, creativeness is born."² My paper will discuss how Steinbeck's *East of Eden* explores the core of human nature and experience through a correspondence with an ancient story about the Universe's first people and the original case of fratricide. Throughout *East of Eden*, Steinbeck portrays the stories of Adam and Eve, and Cain and Abel through an extensive process of Biblical exegesis, often engaging with the Book of Genesis to demonstrate his

² *Journal of a Novel*, p. 4.

own philosophies of what it means to be human. Moreover, what I will like to discuss is how Steinbeck juxtaposes and weaves these intertexts into a modern portrayal of Cain and Abel, employing characters who converse and debate a vast range of viewpoints and philosophical convictions, and how in doing so, he investigates the roots of human identity.

The Social Ethics of John Steinbeck

Many readers question Steinbeck's social ethics as they observe, particularly, his portrayals of women and Native Americans. This is a huge concern, considering the fact that *East of Eden* surrounds the subject of human identity – and if critics can effectively argue that Steinbeck was a sexist or racist, then why shouldn't we dismiss the validity of his work and the messages therein? How can we hope to derive any valuable truth or meaning from *East of Eden* if Steinbeck operates within a questionable moral framework? I argue that some of Steinbeck's work, from a contemporary viewpoint, may appear bigoted, but that his intentions are neither sexist nor racist. Rather the descriptive language and the character portrayals that do suggest an elitist undertone essentially operate as a function of the text. While Steinbeck would like to make every single character as human as possible, all of his characters, whether male, female, white, black, Native American or Chinese, are inherently literary devices - and all of them are, as Steinbeck calls "symbol people," not actual people.

Some more recent ethnic criticism suggests that Steinbeck's work often disregards the Native American because much of his work is void of Indian characters. Native American author and literary critic, Louis Owens discovers only one instance where an Indian character is not portrayed as an oversimplified symbol or as a synecdoche for the Native American condition. In his essay, "Reconsideration: 'Grandpa Killed Indians, Pa Killed Snakes': Steinbeck and the American Indian," Owens argues that "an abstract, romantic, and

somewhat clichéd concept of ‘Indianness’ permeates Steinbeck's writing, from *Cup of Gold*, his first novel, through nearly all of his major works” (85). Many times, Steinbeck failed to perform adequate research before attempting to present his Native American characters in an authentic fashion, often misrepresenting historical accounts and cultural characteristics.³

Steinbeck also presents a troubling section of narrative in the opening pages of *East of Eden* as he describes the history of his Salinas Valley:

At first there were Indians, an inferior breed without energy, inventiveness or culture, a people that lived on grubs and grasshoppers and shellfish, too lazy to hunt or fish. They ate what they picked up and planted nothing. They pounded acorns for flour. Even their warfare was a weary pantomime (2).

Very little evidence exists to present Steinbeck as a racially prejudiced author, so why would Steinbeck describe Native Americans in such a demeaning fashion? As Carrol Britch and Cliff Lewis note in their essay “The Shadow of the Indian in the Fiction of John Steinbeck,” “Steinbeck’s attitude toward his Indian characters and their struggles is literary, not sociological” (41). In other words, Steinbeck chooses to harness the power of the Native American as a nationalistic and naturalistic symbol, and in this particular example, Steinbeck draws the “shadow of the Indian” from the perspective of a Salinas Valley frontiersman. Here, the Indian also serves as a comparative tool for his biblical allusion. Whereas Genesis 1 describes the universe as it was before people – “In the beginning... the earth was waste and void” (*American Standard Version*, Gen. 1.1-2)⁴ – the onset of Steinbeck’s narrative describes (also from a primitive viewpoint) the Salinas Valley before Western influence.

³ Hadella, Paul and Charlotte. “Steinbeck’s Influence Upon Native American Writers,” *Beyond Boundaries*. Tuscaloosa, Alabama: U of Alabama P (2005), p. 88.

⁴ From this point forward, unless otherwise noted, any biblical citation will refer to The American Standard Version. My reasoning is that Steinbeck references this version of the Bible alongside The King James Version during the novel’s most significant instance of exegesis. It was also one of the most popular versions of the Bible during the production stages of the novel - and from a contemporary perspective, much more intelligible than the King James Version.

Furthermore, Steinbeck's influence on Native American literature is undeniable. During a period when Native American literature was virtually non-existent, Steinbeck spoke for the countryside laborers, the struggling, the lonely and the dispossessed, and this sympathy indeed resonates within the iconic works of authors such as Thomas King, Sherman Alexie and Pulitzer Prize winning author Scott Momaday.

Likewise, many feminist critics find Steinbeck's depiction of women troubling, as they often appear molded to their respective social stereotypes. Steinbeck tends to portray the image of a woman in two separate lights: the archetypal, sexless maternal figure, and those women who use beauty and seduction for their own personal benefit or self-gratification. Perhaps the most obvious example of the latter would be Curley's wife in *Of Mice and Men*; however, Steinbeck represents both figures and a combination of the two within *East of Eden*. While Liza Hamilton's character signifies the stern, humorless, sexless maternal figure, Cathy Ames/Trask abuses her deceptive appearance until her beauty fades into the grotesque. In her essay "Beyond the Boundaries of Sexism: The Archetypal Feminine versus Anima Women in Steinbeck's Novels," Lorelai Cederstrom asserts that "while these character types are often present, these categories fail to assess the depth of Steinbeck's presentation of the archetypal feminine and the philosophical premises which underlie his work" (189). At surface level, Steinbeck's female characters can at times, seem to propel negative female stereotypes; but their function in the novel always serves purposefully. For instance, *East of Eden*'s antagonist, Cathy, thrives through the projections of the males she encounters, and takes advantage of their self-centered intentions. The true victim of such projections is the male protagonist, Adam Trask. Though sexism permeated through 1930s American culture, Steinbeck remained devoted to the idea of the wholeness of feminine values within society and within the home. Femininity is, after all, a part of what makes us

human.

Steinbeck's Critical Reception

The fact that Steinbeck chooses such a prolific task highlights the reasons why his novel received such staunchly polarized critical reception from his contemporaries: those who proclaim that the novel achieves beyond its goals, and those who insist that Steinbeck's attempts were too ambitious and poorly executed. While most critics, such as Leo Gurko, assert that "the subject" of Steinbeck's *East of Eden* surrounds the oft-implemented dichotomies of "light and darkness – good and evil,"⁵ others, such as Paul Engle, recognize this technique as a simple symbolic tool that underscores a much more monumental portrait: that as humans, "we all live East of Eden."⁶

Written near the end of his acclaimed literary career, *East of Eden* was among Steinbeck's most highly anticipated novels - but as he discusses in his *Journal of a Novel*, those who expect this book to adhere to the styles and conventions of his previous works will be quite disappointed. Compared to his highly successful, succinct novels, such as *Of Mice and Men* (1937) and *The Pearl* (1947) (each containing less than 200 pages) *East of Eden* (601 pages) is intended to be a long and arduous read with simple language but philosophically complex subject matter. Steinbeck knew that the main critique of his novel would concern its slow pace and the oft-drifting focus of the narrative. But he explains his theory that this long novel will be much greater than his shorter ones:

⁵ Leo Gurko, "Steinbeck's Later Fiction." *John Steinbeck: The Contemporary Reviews*. John L. McElrath Jr., Ed. Cambridge: Cambridge U P (1996), p. 385.

⁶ Paul Engle, "Steinbeck's Theme is Struggle Between Good and Evil." *John Steinbeck: The Contemporary Reviews*. John L. McElrath Jr., Ed. Cambridge: Cambridge U P (1996), p. 390.

Now we must think of a book as a wedge driven into a man's personal life. A short book would be in and out quickly. And it is possible for such a wedge to be open to the mind and do its work before it is withdrawn leaving quivering nerves and cut tissue. A long book, on the other hand, drives in very slowly and if only in point of time remains for a while. Instead of cutting and leaving, it allows the mind to rearrange itself to fit around the wedge. Let's carry the analogy a little farther. When the quick wedge is withdrawn, the tendency of the mind is quickly to heal itself exactly as it was before the attack. With a long book perhaps the healing has been warped around the shape of the wedge so that when the wedge is finally withdrawn and the book set down, the mind cannot ever be quite what it was before. This is my theory and it may explain the greater importance of a long book. Living with it longer has given it greater force.⁷

Steinbeck's passage here highlights some critical approaches to consider regarding his narrative style. First, his 'theory' in this passage highly resembles his philosophical style found especially in *East of Eden*. The passage consists of Steinbeck's own voice as part of his correspondence with a friend. In *East of Eden*, Steinbeck also writes from his own voice and tells his own personal story. This highly symbolic prose resonates in many of his philosophical characters' voices, for example Samuel Hamilton and Lee. Second, Steinbeck's voice is very articulatory, as he often uses large sections of energy-charged text to explain – what may seem to some readers - less intriguing subject matter (such as the importance of a long book). Hence, some critics argue that Steinbeck's work is often “defaced by excessive melodramatics” and sentimentalism.⁸ Third, in an attempt to justify the extensive length of his new novel, Steinbeck here broadcasts an awareness of his critics and boldly predicts its future reception. *Time Magazine's* eventual review describes the novel as “a huge grab bag,”⁹ accentuating one of its most common critiques: that it is too bulky, long and drawn out; however, if this is Steinbeck's aforementioned intention, then what purpose motivates

⁷ *Journal of a Novel*, pp. 66-67.

⁸ Orville Prescott, “Books of the Times,” *John Steinbeck: The Contemporary Reviews*. John L. McElrath Jr., Ed. Cambridge: Cambridge U P (1996), p. 383.

⁹ “It Started in a Garden,” *John Steinbeck: The Contemporary Reviews*. John L. McElrath Jr., Ed. Cambridge: Cambridge U P (1996), p. 395.

this technique? One could easily argue that characteristics of *East of Eden* border loosely on the definition of a postmodern meta-fiction. Its clear authorial voice and its intention to avoid its audience's desires or expectations constantly discomforts the reader like "a wedge drawn into [him]." He writes the novel "so that a man can take from [it] as much as he can bring to it" (70); however, in order to do this, the reader must tolerate Steinbeck's authorial decisions and exercise patience when his narrative wanders.

Though some critics box Steinbeck's prose as either melodramatic or insufficiently complex, especially in regards to *East of Eden*, his work still emits an inquisitive and philosophical undertone – one that surrounds the nature of man.¹⁰ In his essay, "The Philosophical Mind of John Steinbeck," Stephen K. George argues that critics who overemphasize their distaste for Steinbeck's sentimentality completely miss the messages in his work. He also sheds light upon how Steinbeck uses virtue ethics to investigate human nature, and more specifically, man's struggle between good and evil.¹¹ Constantly aware of his critics, the author explains in his own defense that, because literature is the expression of a collective human experience, "a writer would either be blind or dishonest not to include [emotions] in his portrayal of that experience" (268). Steinbeck indeed reinvents and carries his tempestuous prose into *East of Eden* as he paints a portrait of the human condition.

Steinbeck and the Bible

Samuel and Liza Hamilton, Steinbeck's grandparents and major characters in *East of Eden*, seldom speak without making some reference towards their god or otherwise their Roman Catholic traditions, painting a vivid picture of Steinbeck's staunchly religious

¹⁰ As exemplified in the passage above, the most prevalent words in the novel involve various conjugations of the word "man."

¹¹ Or as I will also call it "virtue" and vice"

upbringing. He elaborates in the introduction of his unfinished novel, *The Acts of King Arthur and His Noble Knights*¹² (1976), “the Bible I absorbed through my skin,” but to him, these stories were “sounds, rhythms, figures... printed demons – the tongs and thumbscrews of outrageous prosecution” (xi), not unquestionable truths. Indeed, nearly every single one of his works contains some sort of biblical allusion. Nonetheless, Steinbeck never asserts any concrete establishment of Christian faith in any of his personal writing. Steinbeck’s work obviously conveys a huge sense of adoration towards biblical literature, but it never assumes a religious conviction in either the narrative voice or in the reader. Apparently, while the Hamilton’s could instill in him a love for the Bible, his faith in Christianity never developed significantly. As this paper will also explore, Steinbeck assumes that “any imposed institution,” including Christianity, is “not conducive to development of the two great foundations of art and science: curiosity and criticism.”¹³ Essentially, Steinbeck sees Christianity or any other religious establishment as a limitation on the human potential, and by shelving what his family members believed to be the ultimate *Truth*, Steinbeck feels he’s been able to approach the Bible more openly and with the intention of interpreting its meaning from every possible viewpoint.

Between John Steinbeck and William Faulkner, depression-age literature ran rampant with biblical allegory, and their allusions to the familiar symbols and themes within the Old Testament suited the time period and the temperament of their audiences. Kinareth Meyer notices a central motif in Steinbeck’s work, which not only alludes to the Bible, but which

¹² Steinbeck explains that his love for literature began when his aunt forced him to read Thomas Malory’s *Morte d’Artur*. He especially loves the combination of the romantic lingual style with magical realism and Biblical allegory.

¹³ *Journal of a Novel*, p. 15

also defines the zeitgeist of the Great Depression: the “promised lands.”¹⁴ Naturally, the image of the displaced striving boundlessly towards a fertile promised land coincides inseparably from the image of a migrant worker in pursuit of the American Dream, or the pioneer first encountering the Salinas Valley. In his essay “Biblical Inversion in *The Grapes of Wrath*,” Tamara Rombold argues that “Steinbeck’s use of the Bible is perhaps most uniform in his *The Grapes of Wrath*,” as this text contains the highest density of biblical allusions. She also accounts for the trouble of reading a text that rejects the religion behind the writing it’s founded upon, explaining that Steinbeck’s rejection of Christianity appears through the process in which he inverts biblical accounts in *The Grapes of Wrath*. Rombold describes how Steinbeck designs the novel so that the storyline and its biblical allusions run parallel, so that as the story progresses the references move from the Old Testament to the New Testament; however, instead of re-telling stories such as the Creation account, it inverts them – and instead of starting from creation, the story begins in a drought. I contend, however, that out of all Steinbeck novels, the most scripturally grounded story is *East of Eden*. Rather than consisting of a separate storyline and subversive biblical portrayals, *East of Eden* recreates biblical narrative into a modern retelling, only inverting certain details so as to demonstrate a new philosophy which he believes to be absent in Genesis IV.

Is *East of Eden* a Form of Midrash?

The Book of Genesis resonates within *East of Eden* from the very first page. The novel opens with a natural description, much akin to the opening of Genesis I.¹⁵ Both didactic in nature, the subject novel and Genesis contain small parables and other allegorical

¹⁴ Kinnareth Meyer, “John Steinbeck’s Promised Lands,” *Steinbeck Studies* 15.2 (2004), p. 75.

illustrations of the human condition to demonstrate certain truths about our nature. In his essay “*East of Eden* as Western Midrash: Steinbeck’s Re-Marking of Cain,” Terrence R. Wright argues that the novel functions as a Western equivalent of Hebrew midrashic literature: an ancient form of scriptural exegesis in which scholars recreate small sections of scripture into culturally relevant stories that illustrate its interpreted messages or meanings. Wright further illustrates the author’s midrashic engagement with Cain’s and Abel’s symbol story of the human soul, highlighting a section of Steinbeck’s *Journal of a Novel* in which the author reflects upon his consultations with a rabbinic scholar over the Hebrew word “timshel” in Genesis 4:7.¹⁶ Executed through the character of Lee, Steinbeck’s own philosophical voice, the author explains how the difference between King James Version’s interpretation of the word, “thou shalt,” and the American Standard Version’s interpretation, “thou mayest,” is “the one thing which separates us from the uncreative beasts” (138). There are many complications with equating *East of Eden* to a form of midrash, however. The most obvious reason is that the midrashic tradition consists mainly of short stories that function within a community of believers, whereas Steinbeck’s extensive novel is directed at the religiously diverse American cultural melting pot. Also Steinbeck, a non-practicing Episcopalian, has little authority amongst the assertions of Hebrew scholars and theologians. Most importantly, to designate *East of Eden* as a form of midrash would impose a particularly Hebrew nature on the novel. While the Book of Genesis also exists within the Christian faith as the first book of the Bible, I argue that Steinbeck privileges no form of god or religion, but that he simply utilizes a religious text to illustrate an approach towards understanding what is human. In light of these points, we can begin to re-consider Wright’s position as extremely insightful and audacious, because it allows us to understand midrash as

¹⁶ *Journal of a Novel*, pp. 121-122.

not only an “attractive way of approaching modern examples of intertextuality between literature and the Bible,” but also as a synecdoche for the relationship between scripture and fiction, especially in the case of Steinbeck’s *East of Eden*.¹⁷

The name ‘Genesis’ comes from the ancient Greek word ‘gevnesi,’ meaning ‘origins’ or ‘beginnings’ - and in the Hebrew Bible, the name “Bereshith” has the same sense¹⁸ as the Greek name. The story opens: “In the beginning,” and so does *East of Eden* begin in the dawn of Western settlement in the Salinas Valley’s. Though Genesis tells of the world’s very first people, all of the major characters in *East of Eden* are essentially frontiersmen – the first settlers of the Salinas Valley. I argue that, as consistent with Genesis, the subject novel operates upon the idea of origins, on creation, and on the most basic characteristics of the human identity.

¹⁷ Wright, p. 489.

¹⁸ Perceived meaning

PART I: ‘TIMSHEL’ (THOU MAYEST) AND VIRTUE VS. VICE

“The Hebrew word – the word *timshel* – ‘Thou mayest’ – that gives a choice. It might be the most important word in the world. That says the way is open. That throws it right back on a man” – Lee (301)

In the heart of the novel, Steinbeck didactically elaborates upon what he clearly believes to be the single most important philosophy of the novel: that our humanity depends upon the ability to choose a path for ourselves. The novel’s central motif revolves around each major character’s choices and the effects of those decisions upon themselves and those close to them – that is to say, the *human* characters have a choice.¹⁹ Popular Christian theological doctrine before the mid-1800s – Calvinism, for example – insists that, under God, all people live amongst predetermined circumstances. Theologians label this particular mode of doctrine as “predestination;” however, popular contemporary theology suggests that God has endowed his people with the freedom of choice – this mode labeled “The Free Will Argument.” While believers of either doctrine agree upon the central dogmas of Christianity (i.e. the divinity of Jesus Christ), their difference in opinion in regards to the existence of free will operates through discrepancies of scriptural interpretation - and most of those

¹⁹ I will soon explain that not all of the characters in *East of Eden* can be defined as “human” under Steinbeck’s philosophy of human nature.

discrepancies founded upon differences in translation. Steinbeck's draws his central motif from this classic theological debate through an exegesis of two versions of Genesis 4:7 in which God questions Cain and informs him about the nature of the moral universe:

If thou doest well, shalt thou not be accepted? and if thou doest not well, sin lieth at the door. And unto thee shall be his desire, and thou shalt rule over him. –KJV

If thou doest well, shall it not be lifted up? and if thou doest not well, sin croucheth at the door: and unto thee shall be its desire, but do thou rule over it. –ASV

During his research of Genesis, Steinbeck stumbles upon a very concerning difference of interpretation. The King James Version says, “*thou shalt* rule over him,” whereas the American Standard Version says “*do thou* rule over it;” however, another unnamed version he finds says “*thou mayest* rule over sin.” He explains in his *Journal of a Novel* how crucial these three different interpretations are towards the depiction of Cain's identity, and thus for the scriptural formation of the *human* identity. Steinbeck writes his correspondent and editor Pat Covici requesting an authoritative interpretation of the Hebrew words behind the English translations of *do thou*, *thou shalt*, and *thou mayest*. A response from Dr. Louis Ginzberg of the Jewish Theological Seminary appears as a fictional account²⁰ within the dialogue of Chapter 24. Lee regales Samuel Hamilton about his time spent in San Francisco, where in a scholarly discussion, he brought up the problem of interpreting Genesis 4:7. The scholars conclude that the word “*timsh'l*,” as written in this particular conjugation, translates directly to “*thou mayest*.” So what significance does this translation hold?

“Ah! ... I've wanted to tell you this for a long time. I even anticipated your questions and I am well prepared. Any writing which has influenced the thinking and the lives of innumerable people is important.²¹ Now, there are millions in their sects and

²⁰ Told as a non-fictional account in *Journal of a Novel*, pp. 120-122.

²¹ Here, Steinbeck highlights the significance of using scripture as a means of interpreting truth in human experience. As the title of the novel indicates, this re-telling of Cain and Abel continuously begs the reader to lend particular critical focus towards exegetical devices (such as *thou mayest*), to realize the immeasurable religious and cultural influence of Judeo-

churches who feel the order, “Do thou,” and throw their weight into obedience. And there are millions more who feel predestination in “Thou Shalt.” Nothing they may do can interfere with what will be. But “Thou mayest!” Why, that makes a man great, that gives him stature with the gods, for in his weakness and his filth and his murder of his brother he has still the great choice. He can choose his course and fight it through and win.” Lee’s voice was a chant of triumph. (301-302)

From what might seem a minor dispute in scriptural translation, Steinbeck philosophically deduces that everything about our humanity revolves around “the great choice,” because a predetermined destiny would destroy any sense of what it means to be an autonomous individual – it would shatter any sense of humanness within. *East of Eden* provides the reader with a looking glass into each of the characters’ lives as they choose what paths to tread. In Steinbeck’s world of good versus evil, choices – and thus, the choosers – loosely fit into two categorical definitions: the “virtuous” and the “vicious;” however, with what at first appears to be a gross generalization, we must question Steinbeck’s mode of definition – how can anyone authoritatively determine which kinds of choices fit into either moral category? According to Steinbeck’s ethical logic, behind every decision lies a motivation (or a reason for that decision) and these motivations define the choices and the decision-maker. In *East of Eden* some characters consistently choose out of love or kindness, while others frequently act out of hatred, jealousy or heated rage. Thus, Steinbeck argues, “a man’s importance in the world can be judged by the quality and number of his glories,” or the amount of times he has acted virtuously (130). Each character in *East of Eden* embodies at least part of this dichotomy - whereas some characters such as Samuel and Cathy represent complete virtue or vice (respectively), other characters such as Cal and Charles defy any attempt to categorize them entirely one way or another. Nonetheless, by the end of the novel, the reader absorbs

Christian scripture upon contemporary thought. This particular may shed light upon why Steinbeck chooses to base his magnum opus upon scripture, and also notes the urgency of intertextual analysis.

enough of Steinbeck's virtue ethics to place every character within some margin of the virtue-vice continuum. And so the question remains – what kinds of ethical pathways does each character travel? And more importantly, do Steinbeck's characters indeed possess free will? Though it may appear that Steinbeck creates completely autonomous characters with individual sets of morals, nearly every major character suffers from a predetermined fate. Half of his narrative is non-fictional, and therefore, the author must depict those characters accurately and to the best of his memory. The other half, a retelling of Cain and Abel, must also follow a particular formula, and the truth of the characters' situation on the page forces them somewhat into the confines of symbolic representation.

PART II: ON THE TOPIC OF FREE WILL

A Basic Understanding of the Free Will Argument

Though the free will argument remains the most popular of Christian doctrines (amongst Protestant sects), the theological debate between the theological positions on free will and predestination continues; however, like Steinbeck, many non-religious philosophers have also continued the discussion through the processes of deductive reasoning and the exploration of moral frameworks.

The philosophical platform for the free will argument draws from creationist accounts in Genesis, assuming the existence of an omnipotent, omni-benevolent god, but questioning

the existence of “evil” under such a deity. In his essay, “The Free Will Defense: Evil and the Moral Value of Free Will,” Kenneth Einar Himma presents two approaches towards the free will argument, each with different moral implications: the “Free Will Argument (FWA)” and the “Value Thesis (VT).” The FWA attempts to explain the possibility of evil under a perfect God – a circumstance in which God could create a moral fabric that allows evil in order to maintain a greater moral good. In consideration of God’s characteristics according to scripture, it could still be true that if God “cannot secure some more important moral value without allowing some evil, then he would be justified in allowing such evil,” and “accordingly, the occurrence of evil *per se* is [only] problematic for classical theism... [if] the occurrence of evil could not be justifiably allowed by an all-perfect God” (396). The construct of the Value Thesis is a lot simpler: if Universe A contains free people and Universe B does not, then Universe A is morally preferable to Universe B. In other words, no matter how much evil exists in either kind of universe, any circumstances that allow for the possibility for free will are always morally preferable to circumstances that do not. Himma’s essay ultimately argues that the Value Thesis bases itself upon extremely objective intuitions about the nature of morality, and therefore, it neither justifies its own moral framework, nor does it account for the existence of evil under God. In application to the novel at hand, Steinbeck creates a world void of any direct relationship with God, and therefore, the existence of evil becomes easier to justify. It exists as its own entity and operates through the unencumbered mind of the individuals and through their choices.

Free Will and Steinbeck’s Characters

The free, exploring mind of the individual is the most valuable thing in the world... [it is] the one thing that separates us from the uncreative beasts (*East of Eden* 138).

A surface-level reading of *East of Eden* might emanate the notion that man is completely autonomous and maintains the ability to choose his path at will; however, prevalent evidence within the novel suggests a much more complex understanding of free will – one that highlights a paradox within the human condition. Fundamentally, the human situation is a limiting one. Our environments or more generally, our situations, limit our options and force circumstantial decisions. Some characters - especially those who represent Cain - portray emotion as a substance void of morality, and as a force that often upstages ethics or clouds moral judgment during decision-making. While Steinbeck claims that the word “*timshel*” gives a man “the great choice,” very few of his characters successfully escape the paths set for them, and they all “exude their futures, good or bad” (209). Steinbeck admits difficulty involved in creating characters that seem human, because all “are essentially symbol people,” and as such, they are only a part that represents the whole. Recognizing this, Steinbeck crafts a “semblance of real experience, both visual and emotional and finally intellectual... cloth[ing] [his] symbol people in the trappings of experience so that the symbol is discernable but not overwhelming.”²² In accordance with Genesis, Cal suffers the same fate as Cain, and likewise Aron with Abel; however, Steinbeck dresses his own characters in human “clothing” – he re-creates Cain and Abel not only as characters that serve his own philosophical purposes, but also as characters that reflect a more contemporary ethos than do their corresponding characters in ancient Hebrew mythology.

These points raise some apparent contradictions with Steinbeck’s philosophy of free will. Besides their inherent limitation as “symbol people,” two significant factors infringe upon the autonomy of Steinbeck’s characters: the nature of their environments, and the emotional atmosphere of their situations.

²² *Journal of a Novel*, p. 27.

Emotion as a Motivator of Choice

It is all there – the start, the beginning. One child, refused the love he craves, kicks the cat and hides his secret guilt; and another steals so that money will make him loved; and the third conquers the world – and always the guilt, the revenge and more guilt. This old and terrible story is important because it is a chart of the soul – the secret, rejected, guilty soul (*East of Eden* 268-269).

Steinbeck's novel places a great deal of focus on the emotional development of each of his characters, especially the Trasks, and takes great care in detailing how emotions such as affection, anger, hatred or fear give way to more permanent character traits, such as honesty, naivety or cruelty. Notably, these emotions and characteristics rest on different moral planes, and thus Steinbeck recognizes that emotions affect decision-making both positively and negatively. Llona E. de Hooge argues in her collaborative essay, "What is Moral About Guilt? Acting 'Prosocially' at the Disadvantage of Others," that emotions such as guilt are multi-layered entities, developed over cognitive and motivational processes – amongst other things. Thus, emotions are not completely uncontrollable. They are founded upon personal convictions and are conditioned to motivate us in certain ways. Above, Steinbeck vividly describes the potential negative outcomes of this process.

Just as Steinbeck's objective in his retelling of Cain and Abel is to create a stronger sense of human experience, the author inserts a great deal of sophisticated emotional qualities within his characters. Genesis portrays little emotion in the characters of Cain and Abel, but

rather forces the reader to interpret their experience from a humanist perspective and assume the emotions behind their actions. Both characters submit an offering to God, yet for an unexplained reason, God accepts only Abel's offering:

Jehovah had respect unto Abel and to his offering: ⁵but unto Cain and to his offering he had not respect. And Cain was very wroth, and his countenance fell. ⁶And Jehovah said unto Cain, Why art thou wroth? and why is thy countenance fallen? ⁸...And it came to pass, when they were in the field, that Cain rose up against Abel his brother, and slew him (Gen. 4.4-8).

Resembling more of a historical account, the narrative in Genesis IV never explains why Cain slew his brother, only that he was "wroth." Even as God questions Cain "why art thou wroth?" Cain gives no response. Nor does Cain reveal any sense of guilt for his actions later in the passage, he only selfishly and weakly remarks that his "punishment is greater than [he] can bear" (Gen. 4.13). The author(s) of this myth force the reader to subjectively place human qualities on the characters, to assume that Cain killed his brother for personal gain, or (more convincingly) because he was jealous, angry, desperate, or all of the above. Biblical scholar Georgio Castellino observes how this passage depicts emotion as part of "the process of man's liability to sin," which can "pull him gradually down into the worst of crimes... thus described with a psychological insight that makes it valuable for all times, being true to man's nature" (445). Steinbeck recognizes the same value in Genesis, but rather, interprets it through allegory rather than pure criticism. His retelling of this single chapter of Genesis consists of the author's own subjective interpretation of the story, and of the truths found within the blank spaces between each verse.

Just as Steinbeck retells the story of Cain and Abel twice, he also interprets the original case of fratricide through two separate cases involving two different sets of murderers and victims. In both cases, it is clear that an extreme case of parental neglect

create a maelstrom of emotional confusion within the child figures. Throughout the novel, the children consistently strive for the affectionate attention they lack from their respective father figures, and usually do so in the form of an offering or a “present” (28). Afterwards, they debate amongst themselves how much their offerings have pleased their fathers. The first instance of fratricide occurs between Charles and Adam in Chapter 3, directly after such a debate. Just as Cain became “wroth,” and his “countenance fell,” Charles explodes with anger upon his gift’s rejection - “rage came first and then coldness, a possession; non-committal eyes and a pleased smile and no voice at all, only a whisper. When that happened, murder was on the way, but a cool, deft murder, and hands that worked delicately, precisely.” (29). Charles never actually kills his brother, because his murderous pursuit was to no avail. Adam hides in the woods and observes his brother in his rage as he attempts to find some sort of familiarity in the face of the brother that truly loves him. Adam “wondered how his brother felt, wondered whether now that his passion was chilling, he would feel panic or sorrow or a sick conscience or nothing. These things Adam felt for him. His conscience bridged him to his brother.” (31) Though the author establishes a loving relationship between the two brothers, Charles’ anger forces him into a state of fury in which he disregards any notion of affection and ventures to destroy what he loves rather than embrace it.

Adam eventually establishes the cause and effect relationship between with his brother’s emotional patterns and his resulting actions. When their father Cyrus dies, it removes the possibility for Charles’ jealousy of his brother, and in consequence, eliminates the source of Charles’ rage. Adam’s fear of his father and his brother dissolves, and “with the lack of fear, he knew he could say anything he wanted to... Adam knew his brother was no longer dangerous. There was no jealousy to drive him” (68). Steinbeck establishes a

relationship between these three characters that feeds upon negative emotions, and limits their potential to act morally.

The character of Adam is Steinbeck's ultimate victim of emotional misguidance. In the beginning of the narrative, Adam's afflictions are a result of his brother's issues with rage and jealousy, but because of his own emotional trauma, he rarely reveals any sense of sentimentality within himself. Though he exhibits a bond with his brother, he rarely acts lovingly towards Charles and Cyrus. Steinbeck explains that "a man afraid is a dangerous animal," suggesting that the fear that Adam grew up in removed much of his emotional capability, and that as a result, he has become less human (57).

Throughout the novel, Adam's character consistently lacks emotional stability, and his capability of connecting with others appears, disappears and reappears. The first twenty-five or so years of Adam's life is marked by emotional trauma as a result of his father's lack of affection, the fear of his brother, and his time spent serving in the military and in a chain gang. At this point, Adam's survival depends on some kind of epiphany that incites an emotional awakening. Adam "may have lived all his life in the grey, and the land and trees of him dark and somber. The events, even the important ones may have trooped by faceless and pale," but "sometimes a kind of glory lights up the mind of a man (130). That glory appears to Adam on his front porch in the form of a helpless and distressed girl named Cathy Ames. All of a sudden, Adam has someone who needs him. In the character of Adam, Steinbeck reveals how even positive emotional forces can cloud judgment. Because Adam has never really known love before, and because no one is capable of loving the true Cathy Ames, he effectively fabricates his own idea of her and grows in love with that idea. Adam receives multiple warnings about Cathy. Samuel tells him to "look closer until [he] can see how ugly [she] really is" (169). Charles repeatedly warns him about Cathy, and even she tells Adam

that she plans to leave. Nonetheless, Adam maintains this grandiose image of her and plans the rest of his life around serving her. She eventually gives birth to the twins and the pretty veil around her vanishes. Adam gets a glimpse of the monster within and he realizes that his love depends upon only an idea, not a real person. At this point, “Adam turn[s] like a zombie,” and again, his emotional capacities are lost. This leads to dire consequences for his newborn twins.

Inherited Limitations

From a human perspective, we all have physical and mental limitations - especially in changing environments – that restrict our choices and their possible outcomes. From a Darwinist perspective, humans alter their environments in order to eliminate that which hinders upon our comfort or survival; however, despite our attempts, environmental limitations are always present. Steinbeck often places these environmental limitations on those characters who seem most infallible. One such character is Samuel Hamilton.

Steinbeck portrays his grandfather as a man who has unlimited potential, but also as someone constantly plagued by the infirmity of his poor environmental circumstances, and thus experiences a great deal of these inherited limitations. The irony in Samuel Hamilton’s character is that he is essentially a frontiersman, but frontiersmen require the skill of mastering their untamed land. Unable to do so in his homeland of Ireland, Samuel and Liza emigrate to the Salinas Valley in search of fertile land. Samuel claims a plot of acreage, but finds that he’s settled in “a real godforsaken country” (138). Considering Samuel’s inventiveness, “if the land had been any good, the Hamilton’s would have been rich people” (9). Though Samuel’s character is the most resourceful and optimistic of all, his land eventually masters him, and he expresses his sense of defeat to Adam: “I can see myself

sitting on my dustheap making a world in my mind as surely as God created this one. But God saw his world. I'll never see mine – except this way” (145). Samuel recognizes that his environmental limitations have and always will halt his attempts to create a perfect home for his family.

Cathy's character constantly assesses her environment as she attempts to dominate it, because she discovers that her success depends upon her ability to eliminate anything that might remove her from the top of the food chain. Her character never has the ability to physically manipulate her environment, but only the capability of getting others to do this for her. Her intentions were “never innocent. Their purpose was to escape punishment, or work, or responsibility, and they were used for profit.” Cathy is successful because “she developed the most effective method of lying. She stayed close enough to the truth so that one could never be sure” (73). Her character is, however, physically limited. When she attempts to change her environment and abandon her manipulative affair with Mr. Edwards, he overcomes her physically and nearly beats her to death – but Cathy's unpreparedness is her only misstep (97). Until Part III of the novel, Cathy appears infallible as she acts according to her will and without limitation; but her beauty, and thus her ability to seduce and manipulate men diminishes. Her appearance, which had at once been an advantageous quality, eventually becomes a limitation. Despite her impression as a flawlessly autonomous individual, Cathy's only skills involve the arts of premeditation and manipulation – and when these techniques fail, she is left to the mercy of her environmental circumstances.

Steinbeck's thorough philosophical investigation of the implications for the free will argument portrays the human condition as a paradox between autonomy, natural limitation

and an obligation to act. In a moral universe, however, certain choices may come to define the chooser.

PART III: ORIGINAL SIN AND THE MARK ON HUMANKIND

I hope the incident of the scarred forehead does not throw you. It is going to be a kind of recurring symbol in various forms. And what does it mean? Oh I could tell you, the maimed, the marked, the guilty – all such things, the imperfect. It is a haunting thing.
– *Journal of a Novel* (35)

The Original Mark of Nakedness and Moral Development

The concept of the “mark” present throughout Genesis is the most common of human limitations as it humbles us, discomforts us, and makes us feel as if it encourages others to force judgment upon us, enabling them to observe what we wish to keep to ourselves – therefore, we resolve to cover or clothe our inherited marks to avoid shame. The story of the original sin in the Garden of Eden represents the Judeo-Christian understanding of the human discomfort of nakedness, portraying it as a kind of mark - one God’s punishments to humanity. Before sin, humanity was perfect and had no mark - “they were both naked, the man and his wife, and were not ashamed” (Gen. 2.25); but after they partook of the forbidden fruit:

the eyes of them both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig-leaves together, and made themselves aprons... And Jehovah God called unto the man, and said unto him, where art thou? And he said, I heard thy voice in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself (Gen. 3.7-10).

Here, mankind's original mark represents a fall from perfection, and as Steinbeck realizes, it symbolizes the embedded imperfections in the human identity. With this mark of imperfection carries a reminder of guilt that is passed down through every generation. For this reason, many readers of scripture consider the "mark" to be a defining human characteristic. Furthermore, the incident of the "Fall" submerges mankind into a world where good co-exists with evil. The story of Adam and Eve implies that, in order to gain an understanding of the moral universe, people must at times, fall into sin in order to gain an understanding of both positive and negative consequences. People are dependant upon that understanding to operate morally amongst the presence of evil. Immanuel Kant defines this understanding through the idea of "moral maxims" (7). In his essay "Moral Personality, Perversity and Original Sin," James Wetzel explains Kant's theory of moral maxims as a means of realizing our own subconscious understanding of where our ultimate choices lie on the moral spectrum. The scripture's symbolic representation of the "mark" through the concept of nakedness reveals the nature of human guilt and fallibility, and that we must always attempt to cover and restore ourselves in the clothing of virtue.

Cain's Mark of the "Other"

From an ancient Hebrew socio-cultural perspective, Cain has always been considered an outsider. When Genesis first introduces the two brothers, it explains "Abel was a keeper of the sheep" (Gen. 4.2) Common knowledge of the Hebrew "shepherd" motif reveals that the author of Genesis wishes to portray Abel as a noble figure. In his interpretive essay "The

Fratricide: The Cainite Civilization,” Biblical scholar William R. Harper explains that, in a nomadic culture, clans would often dispute and skirmish over the ownership of land and Hebrew settlements constantly relocated (266). Under these circumstances, the agricultural benefits of animal domestication far outweighed other methods of food production – “but *Cain* was a tiller of the ground” (Gen. 4.2). Harper also argues that this might shed light upon the reasons why God preferred Abel’s “firstlings of the flock and the fat thereof” over Cain’s offering of “the fruit of the ground” (Gen. 4.3-4). After the offering, God recognizes Cain’s inner anger and foreshadows the fratricide by warning Cain not to act out. Nevertheless, God gives Cain a fair ultimatum: “If thou doest well, shalt thou no be lifted up?” But he warns him: “if thou doest not well, sin croucheth at the door: and unto the shall be its desire.” Finally, he encourages him: “[thou mayest] rule over it” (Genesis 4.7). In disregard of God’s wisdom, Cain slays his brother and as a result, God seals his fate as an outsider and marks him:

“And now cursed art thou from the ground, a fugitive and a wanderer shalt thou be in the earth.”

And Cain said unto Jehovah, “My punishment is greater than I can bear. Behold, thou hast driven me out this day from the face of the ground; and from thy face shall I be hid; and I shall be a fugitive and a wanderer in the earth; and it will come to pass, that whosoever findeth me will slay me.”

And Jehovah said unto him, “Therefore whosoever slayeth Cain, vengeance shall be taken on him sevenfold.’ And Jehovah appointed a sign for Cain, lest any finding him should smite him (Gen. 4.11-15)

Alongside his occupational status, Cain now bears a *physical* mark of the “wanderer.” The mark is commonly misconceived as part of God’s curse, but as Steinbeck notes, the mark is actually “protective” - intended to warn those want to kill him (268). Even so, Cain’s newly acquired physical attribute comes to define him and his descendants as fallen from God’s presence. Furthermore, it reminds all others that this is the man who slew his brother, Abel.

Charles's Mark

Adam saw his half-brother Charles as a bright being of another species, gifted with muscle and bone, speed and alertness, quite on a different plane, to be admired as one admires the sleek lazy danger of a black leopard, and not by any chance to be compared with one's self (21).

Just as scripture describes Cain as an outsider, Steinbeck portrays the character of Charles as someone incomparable to the average person and as someone with dark inclinations. He receives his mark many years after his attempt to kill Adam, and though the two have since reconciled, the moral consequences behind Charles actions still exist and his punishment still warranted. At this point, Cyrus has relocated to Washington, Adam has joined the military and Charles is exiled to the confining solitude of the Trask farm in Connecticut. One day, as Charles tills the ground, his prying rod slips from underneath a rock and strikes him in the face. Afterwards, "there was a long torn welt on his forehead," and "his scar turned dark brown" (46). Steinbeck never indicates that this incident occurs for any reason in particular, or that like Cain's mark, Charles' is a sign of protection. Rather, Charles "conceived a shame for his scar; he hated his scar. He became restless when anyone looked at it, and fury rose in him if any question was asked about it" (46). There exists no evidence that concludes Charles' mark was an indication of any form of punishment at all. Instead, Charles justifies it accordingly, and further uses the mark as a form of shame and punishment upon himself.

Cathy's Mark

The first thing Steinbeck reveals about Cathy is that she is a "monster" (71), and that everything about her physical appearance effectively veils her inner grotesqueness.

Throughout her childhood, Cathy effectually manipulates every one of her male targets

because of her ability to conceal her virulent intentions. Her failed attempt to flee from her affair with Mr. Edwards leaves her viciously maimed and near death, and as she recovers in the Trask home, she notices something about Charles:

She saw that he touched the scar on his forehead very often, rubbed it and drew its outline with his fingers. Once he caught her watching. He looked guiltily at his fingers. Charles said brutally, 'Don't you worry. You're going to have one like it, maybe even a better one (114).

This occurrence somewhat enlightens Cathy as she learns that she is not alone in her darkness – that there are others in the world like her. More importantly, this instance demonstrates that she will not always maintain the ability use her appearance as a deceptive tool, and furthermore, it instigates the process of Cathy's physical deterioration throughout the novel.

Cathy's mark carries with it separate consequences than does Charles'. While Charles' mark functions more as an internal form of punishment, Cathy's mark is more external. Other than her unnoticeably sharp teeth, Cathy's mark is one of her only physical attributes that others can use to separate her from other women. During the investigation of Adam's shooting, the sheriff notes that Cathy's defining attribute is a scar on her forehead. For this reason, Cathy's mark highly resembles that of Cain in that the mark connects the individual to his or her specific crime.

PART IV: CATHY AMES AND THE 'ANTI-HUMAN'

I believe there are monsters born in the world to human parents (71).

It is almost impossible to believe that one of your acquaintances could murder someone. For that reason... it must be some dark stranger, some wanderer from the outside world where such things happen (87).

Cathy Ames – The Anti-Human in the Flesh

From her introduction until her death, Cathy appears to operate outside of the novel's over-arching theme of *timshel*. She denounces the classical binary oppositions that portray the universe as entangled in a moral battle between good and evil. The implications of this denial are that her character exists separately from the *timshel* theme and independent from the free universe. Instead, Cathy "was born with the tendencies, or lack of them, which drove and forced her all her life" – those tendencies being purely evil (72); however, Carol L. Hansen argues, in her essay "Beyond Evil: Cathy and Cal in *East of Eden*," that Cathy "emerges as a force beyond good and evil, a force of perverse freedom," and furthermore that "she is more alive than any other character in the novel" (223). Hansen's statements at first seem quite contradictory to the novel's description of Cathy, until the correlations between morality and freedom – especially in regards to Cathy's character – are reconsidered.

Let's first suggest that, in contrast to Hansen's argument, Cathy's character exists within the moral universe, and that her nature is purely evil, or as Emmanuel Kant defines, "radical evil." In the Kantian sense, "radical evil refers to the... tendency of human moral agents to subordinate moral imperatives to other, non-moral motives for acting."²³ This concept of evil describes the "chooser" (in this case, Cathy) as someone who operates within the moral universe, and recognizes virtue as superior to vice, but justifies morally bankrupt actions through means separate from any moral framework. Cathy, however, never senses the need to justify her actions, but simply explains that everything she does, she does out of her own accord, and by serving desire over morality, she operates as Hansen argues, completely outside any moral framework.

²³ Wetzell, 7.

If we are to adhere to Steinbeck's philosophy that the freer the individual, the more alive he is, we must also accept the truth in Hansen's second statement: indeed, Cathy's character is more alive than any other - just not in a human sense. Steinbeck portrays Cathy's character through many different symbolic devices. First, Steinbeck's narrative suggests she may be a monster. This supports Hansen's suggestion that Cathy exists outside morality, because "monsters are variations from the accepted normal to a greater or less degree. As a child may be born without an arm, so one might be born without kindness or the potential of conscience" (71). Later, Charles tells her that she's a "devil" (116), and Adam asserts she's "some twisted human - or no human at all" (320). In whichever way she is described, none of her characteristics are human. As a non-human, Cathy's character not only exists beyond the concept of evil, but it also removes any moral responsibility she may have. For example, killing a seal may seem immoral, but when a polar bear kills a seal, we view it from outside of any morally interpretive framework and through the survivalist lens. In the same way, *East of Eden* is a book for and about people, and thus every character criticizes Cathy through a moral lens; but whichever of Cathy's actions may seem purely evil to us, may involve a matter of survival for her.

While Cathy's depiction comes to define her character as non-human, it seems necessary that the author create a universe for her to operate within – a universe which not only functions under different behavioral imperatives from the human world, but also one which is *visually* different. In the beginning of the novel, Cathy's mother catches her reading Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*, and tells her that she is "too big for that" (75). In an attempt to escape the restrictions of control, Cathy symbolically enters an alter-universe - one outside the other characters' world of biblical symbolism, thus granting her an unrestricted license to operate within a separate, "perverse freedom" (223).

Throughout the novel, Steinbeck creates controversy between his preference to morality and Cathy Ames preference to anti-morality. While Steinbeck undoubtedly prefers the moral universe over Cathy's "Wonderland" universe, Cathy's character constantly appears more successful and more satisfied than do the characters that live within the biblically symbolic world. This is extremely troubling, because it seems to contradict the conviction that a moral universe is preferable to a universe such as Cathy's. Steinbeck effectively forces the reader to ask himself what the true benefits are to a moral universe. To Cathy, there is little benefit to being human: "I'd rather be a dog than a human. But I'm not a dog. I'm smarter than humans. Nobody can hurt me"; however, Adam soon rebuts on behalf of the humans: "I know what you hate. You hate something in [humans] you can't understand. You don't hate their evil. You hate the good in them that you can't get at (321). With the power of Steinbeck's authorial voice, Adam reveals that Cathy's world depends completely upon the human world. Cathy's survival as whore is contingent upon her ability to feed off of the evil within the moral universe, and in this sense she is both the antagonist and the *anti*-human. She hates good because it is the only progressive, restorative force, and she is incapable of accessing it. Thus, while the moral universe proves to be eternal, her "Wonderland" fades back into the oblivion from whence it came.²⁴

Human vs. Machine

A system built on a pattern must try to destroy the free mind, for that is the one thing which by inspection would destroy such a system" (131).

While Cathy Ames symbolically represents the anti-human through consideration of moral frameworks, Steinbeck revisits the transcendentalist opposition of human/machine in

²⁴ Steinbeck visually represents this through her process of physical deterioration, i.e. her deformed, arthritic hands.

order to represent those other forces which act against potential. Steinbeck set's his novel during the final stages of the Industrial Revolution, where new, mechanized inventions such as cars, trains and agricultural machinery changed the face of America and created new, previously inconceivable possibilities for human progress. The thirteenth chapter marks the eve of the 20th century, and Steinbeck notes "this is a time where monstrous changes are taking place in the world, forces shaping a future whose face we do not know. Some of these forces seem evil to us... because their tendency is to eliminate other things we hold good" (130). But surely such a progressive force as industrialization would yield significantly more benefits for mankind than it would dangers? Not according to Steinbeck.

The "nature" of machinery and industrialization is that they operate upon fixed systems. People design machines for one sole purpose: to carry out specific tasks in exactly the same manner every single time - and it is this characteristic of machinery that puts human liberty at jeopardy. In addition, machines lack every human quality as described in the novel: love, emotion, and the ability to choose. Steinbeck argues that "when our food and clothing and housing are born in the complication of mass production, mass method is bound to get into our thinking and eliminate all other thinking" (130-131). As he examines the consequences of the industrial revolution after the fact, he recognizes how a society that used to create things with its own hands, now has little idea where or how their own household items are produced – only that they are industrial products. People increasingly depend upon machines to create and provide, and as this happens, we begin to lose the world's "one creative instrument: the individual mind and spirit of men" (131); however, as he reflects (in pencil) in his *Journal of a Novel*, that even romantic functions such as writing, " must on daily contact become dull and usual and machine-like" (67). More dangerous than machines is the nature of repetition.

PART V: THE HUMAN NEED FOR INTERCONNECTEDNESS

I think everyone in the world to a large or small extent has felt rejection. And with rejection comes anger, and with anger some kind of crime in revenge for the rejection, and with the crime guilt – and there is the story of mankind. I think that if rejection could be amputated, the human would not be what he is... This is the best known story in the world because it is everybody's story. I think it is the symbol story of the human soul. – (*East of Eden* 268)

Above, Steinbeck reveals the overarching thematic connection between *East of Eden* and the story of Cain and Abel. While the *timshel* motif contributes significantly towards the novel's depiction of the human identity, this word Steinbeck argues, is not the focus of the original parable. Cain's character reveals the ultimate truth about the nature of man, that "underneath their topmost layers of frailty, men want to be good and want to be loved," and that a rejection or a refusal of this love leads to the ultimate deterioration of the human spirit (412). Nearly every conflict in the novel occurs between characters who are loved but will not love in return, and those characters who act lovingly but only receive rejection. Essentially, *East of Eden* tells a tale of the battle for human interconnectedness.

The novel's insistence of the human need for interconnectedness also recognizes that some people are born without the capacity for love, "just as a child may be born without an arm" (71). Cathy is the only character in novel, who throughout her entire story, is incapable of giving or receiving affection, "because she lacks kindness, morality and consideration for others, all of which are the products of love towards others."²⁵ Nonetheless, she recognizes this need in most other people. Her character mainly feed off of men's immoral sexual

²⁵ Kyoko Arika, "Cathy in *East of Eden*: Indispensable to the Thematic Design," *Beyond Boundaries*, 232.

desires, aware that “most of their vices are attempted shortcuts to love” (412). Examples of this behavior are seen in the seduction of her Latin teacher, Mr. Edwards, and most importantly, Adam Trask. Her seductive techniques coerce the male victims into fabricated notions of love, which to those characters capable of affective qualities, seem very real. When the victims realize that Cathy abused their love for her, they feel an irreparable sense of rejection, all of which cases follow the story of Cain and Abel and ultimately lead to drastic acts of violence.

The Trasks are described throughout the novel as a family that cannot foster a healthy and loving inter-relational framework – all characters starve for love in some form, yet some are unable to return affection. None of these characters are able to establish the loving relationships they seek, because the nature of such relationships requires the active, affectionate participation of both parties. Therefore, rejection remains the underlying cause of every major conflict within the novel.

The author creates a much more affectionate relationship between Cal and Aron than he does between Adam and Charles, and forms a more sophisticated emotional interaction between them.²⁶ In contrast to the novel’s first representation of Cain and Abel, Steinbeck uses the remaining 350 pages of the story to tell of the second pair of brothers. From birth, both twins are virtually parentless. In an attempt to leave, their mother Cathy shoots Adam (200), leaving him both physically and emotionally incapable of caring properly for his children, and because of this, Cathy is the first and primary cause of the Trasks’ dysfunction. Cal and Aron are born with an intrinsic bond to their father; however, Adam’s physical and emotional vacancy forces them to learn about him through their servant Lee. Throughout their lives, “Lee had not only managed to raise, feed, clothe and discipline the boys, but had

²⁶ See Appendix B

also given them a respect for their father. He was a mystery to the boys, and his word, his law, was carried down by Lee, who naturally made it up himself and ascribed it to Adam” (349). As a result, their unconditional love for their father encourages them to act in any way that might help earn the affectionate attention they hunger for, but all of their actions are based upon fabricated notions about what kind of person their father actually is.

Just as Cathy serves as the force that drives the Trask family away from love, Samuel Hamilton serves the Trask family as a catalyst for the possibility of love.²⁷ While Cathy Trask taught Adam the nature of counterfeit love, Samuel Hamilton exhibits the nature of true love in every way. In her essay “Cathy in *East of Eden*: Indispensable to the Thematic Design,” Kyoko Ariki argues that the Hamiltons “are so full of love and affection that the reader cannot but feel that Samuel is the leading figure who emits boundless love for his family” (233), and as a result, the Hamiltons seem to live in a “world shining and fresh and as uninspected as Eden on the sixth day” (*East of Eden* 39). Ariki also draws attention to how, as “the embodiment of love,” Samuel “can detect almost instinctively the evil of the loveless creature” (233). After the shooting, Samuel recognizes Adam’s complete loss of emotion, and thus his inability to provide the children with the loving attention they need to survive. Just as Samuel identified the lovelessness in Cathy, so does he discern the same potential for evil now instilled in Adam. Over a year after Adam’s incident, Samuel gathers the courage to forcefully confront Adam and make him aware that his “sons have no names,” and that he has “left them fatherless” (257). Soon Samuel comes to a conclusion, and tells Adam: “you have no love” – and in his selfish response, Adam reveals the root of his despair: once he had love, “enough to kill [him],” but his one experience with the power of love has left him emotionally incapacitated (257). Finally, Samuel reminds Adam of his responsibility

²⁷ See Appendix A

as a father: “You’re going to pass something on no matter what you do or if you do nothing. Even if you let yourself go fallow, the weeds will grow and the brambles. Something will grow” (213). If Adam doesn’t begin to foster a loving relationship with his children, Cal and Aron will soon mature into men who know not how to love others in return.

The author establishes a few significant changes in the relationships within the Trask family from the beginning of Part III.²⁸ He explains these changes as a result of Adam’s former neglect, and of the twins’ lifelong deficiency of motherly care and affection. In his book, *The Art of Loving*, psychoanalyst Erich Fromm asserts:

The desire for interpersonal fusion is the most powerful striving in man. It is the most fundamental passion, it is the force which keeps the human race together, the clan, the family, society. The failure to achieve it means insanity or destruction – self-destruction or the destruction of others. Without love, humanity could not exist a day (17).

We know that, in his time, Steinbeck kept up with all of the advancements in the science of the human mind as his philosophical character, Lee references William James’ *The Principles of Psychology* (186). This might clarify why Steinbeck and Fromm share very similar psychological perspectives about the relationship between happiness and human interconnectedness. Not only do Fromm’s observations explain the motivations for every character in the novel (besides Cathy), but also the potential results of what could occur if this love is denied. Steinbeck explains that, “once a boy has suffered rejection, he will find rejection even where it does not exist – or, worse, will draw it forth from people simply by expecting it (440). This is consistent with Fromm’s observation that “the idea of love is transformed from being loved into loving; into creating love” (36), and without being loved, he argues, it is impossible for one’s concept of love to ever mature. As a result of Adam’s former neglect, Aron rearranges the focus of his affection towards two other entities: Abra

²⁸ See Appendix B

and society.²⁹ Both Cal and Aron grew up with a love for the idea of their mother, because Adam leaves Cathy's memory to the freedom of their imagination – but with a lack of parental affection from either party, Aron's idea of love begins to change, and he therefore begins to shift his loving attention towards other things. The relationship with his girlfriend Abra - though at times seemingly juvenile – in fact represents a healthy loving relationship, whereas Aron's love for his mother transforms into a clouded and corrupted desire for the positive attention of society in Salinas. Eventually, Aron becomes completely consumed with concern for his image in society and for that of his family. All of his motivation originates in the need to re-establish the Trasks' positive appearance in Salinas. Steinbeck explains, “once a boy has suffered rejection, he will find rejection even where it does not exist – or, worse, will draw it forth from people simply by expecting it” (440). For example, when Aron hears from the other kids at school how Adam lost nearly all of his money in a failed business project, he feels shame for his family rather than a concern for their welfare and most importantly, the emotional security of his father. Aron's need for the loving attention he seeks is never satisfied, however, because in his confused concepts of the nature and importance of love direct him to seek that attention from entities which cannot return that affection.

After Adam awakes from his period of emotional vacancy, he realizes the devastating truth that he does not know his sons at all, and in an attempt to make up for lost time, he begins to fabricate his own idea of what his sons are like. In the midst of attempting to form relationships with his sons, he begins to show more favor towards his bright, attractive son Aron rather than the darker, more mysterious Cal, because “certain individuals, not by any

²⁹ As Fromm notes above, just as a person forms a loving relationship with someone else, so may they also seek the loving attention that society may provide (or appear to provide).

means deserving, are truly beloved” (38). Though he tries to learn more about Aron and attempts to return the loving affection that Aron used to seek, it seems his son no longer thirsts for that same kind of attention. Adam discovers that Aron has been working exceptionally hard to graduate high school and go to college early, and out of pride for his son, Adam buys him a gold watch as a congratulatory gift. In return, Aron never/ tells his father of what he has accomplished, and Adam never has to opportunity to give Aron his gift. Adam’s efforts to establish a loving relationship with his son Aron go unanswered, and thus, the grounds for a loving relationship between the two is lost.

In contrast to Adam and Aron, Cal represents everything optimistic about the possibility for love in the Trask family. As described in Appendix B, Cal has always loved his family members, and “from his first memory, [he] had craved warmth and affection, just as everyone does” (440). Cal’s knowledge of love is able to mature somewhat through his increased interaction with affectionate characters of Lee and Samuel, and thus, his love for Adam has also ripened:

A miracle once it is familiar is no longer a miracle; Cal had lost his wonder at the golden relationship with his father but the pleasure remained. The poison of loneliness and the gnawing envy of the unlonely had gone out of him, and his person was clean and sweet, and he knew it was. He dredged up an old hatred to test himself, and he found his hatred gone. He wanted to serve his father, to give him some great gift, to perform some huge task in honor of his father (453).

Though his idea of love has matured somewhat, his love and devotion to his father and his brother remained steadfast. The motivation for Cal’s every action originates in his love and his desire to serve – to give as much love as he can in whatever way he can. Aware that Adam would be overjoyed to hear the news of Aron’s early graduation, he plans to set up a surprise for his father by doing everything possible to keep the news from getting to Adam until Aron is able to tell his father himself; however, Aron never tells Adam his surprise and

the whole event is marked by rejection and disappointment. Cal decides to form his own plan to display his love for his father, and forms a business arrangement with Will Hamilton through which he plans to repay Adam all of the money that was lost in his failed entrepreneurial ventures. When he finally gifts his father the money, Adam refuses it and even insinuates that Cal stole the money or made it illegally. As a result, Cal never experiences the joy of love and acceptance he so desperately craves from his father, and in the pain of rejection, Cal effectively kills his beloved brother.

CONCLUSION: HUMAN ACCEPTANCE AND POTENTIAL OF THE FREE MIND

And this I would fight against: any idea, religion or government which limits or destroys the individual (132).

In an epic novel such as Steinbeck's *East of Eden*, the central messages can be lost in a work so clumsy in structure and so dense with philosophy, allegory and symbolism. Throughout *East of Eden*, Steinbeck adheres to certain plot-based formulas prescribed by his own family history and by the storyline of an ancient Hebrew myth. He uses these stories to vividly demonstrate his own philosophies of what it means to be human, but never reaches a point at which all of his reasoning amounts to a clear message – until the end.

In the final pages of the novel, Steinbeck creates the only major scriptural inversion within the entire story. Adam suffers a debilitating stroke after he learns that Cal's vengeful actions led to Aron's death. As Cal drowns in a suicidal sense of guilt, Lee convinces him to approach his father to ask for his forgiveness and for his acceptance. They enter the room, and because neither Cal, nor Adam is able to speak, Lee's dialogue fills the final pages:

“He did a thing in anger, Adam, because he thought you had rejected him. The result of his anger is that his brother and your son is dead.”

Cal said, “Lee – you can't.”

“I have to,” said Lee. “If it kills him, I have to. I have the choice... Your son is marked with guilt out of himself – out of himself – almost more than he can bear. Don't crush him with rejection... Give him your blessing!”

A terrible brightness shone in Adam's eyes and he closed them and kept them closed...

Lee said, “Help him, Adam – help him. Give him his chance. Let him be free. That's all a man has over beasts. Free him! Bless him!”...

Adam looked up with a sick weariness... His whispered word seemed to hang in the air:

“Timshel!”

Just as the narrative seems to culminate in accordance with Genesis, Steinbeck alters the ending. Instead of rejecting him and cursing Cal, Adam forgives him. Here, Steinbeck questions why God would mark his own son, and why he would essentially strip Cain of his human identity. In this blatant case of biblical inversion, Steinbeck revisits the concept of the mark and of the institution as entities that diminish the individual's potential. Rather than curse his son, Adam recognizes his son's humanity – that is, to say, he recognizes not only Cal's imperfection and fallibility, but also that “in his weakness and his filth and his murder of his brother he has still the great choice. He can choose his course and fight it through and win” (302). His message is a clear one: foster the potential for human progress and eliminate that which limits it. For Steinbeck, the concept of love and acceptance operates as the antithesis to that which limits human potential. The desire for human interconnectedness is

that which motivates us to hold the human identity as the most complex and valuable entity on earth.

Further insight into the novel's messages lie embedded within its narrative structure. While the storyline is teleologically linear and moves from one decade to another, the order of events revolves cyclically. The human experience is thus cyclical, but progressive. Scripture tells the story of the original case of fratricide, and Steinbeck retells that story in the beginning of the novel and then once more in the end; however, after each occurrence, some progress is made towards a more "Steinbeckian" philosophy. In the first account, Cain succeeds in killing his brother and God further rejects him by marking him. Cain wanders the earth in despair for the rest of his life, and no one benefits as a result. Next, Charles unsuccessfully attempts to kill his brother Adam. Cyrus curses him, but the brothers reach an unstable reconciliation, enough at least for Adam to continue his life in a state of purgatory. Finally, Cal succeeds in causing the death of his brother, and in consequence, the remaining Trask family is thrown into a destructive desperation - but in a profound and unexpected act of forgiveness, Adam wields the power of choice and decides to accept Cal as his own imperfect, yet incredibly loving son. Steinbeck's biblical inversion finally allows for a functioning, affectionate relationship.³⁰

The difficulty in determining the value of a book such as *East of Eden* is that it is impossible to avoid comparison between the prolific name of the author and what he considers to be the summary of his life's work. *East of Eden* is troubling in that it is so flawed - riddled with clumsy, and at times, seemingly contradictory philosophies, messages and motives, as noted by many of his critics. Why then, would Steinbeck characterize his

³⁰ See Appendix C

career with such a book? He reveals in his *Journal of a Novel* that his intention was to create a book characteristic of our own human identity:

A book is like a man – clever and dull, brave and cowardly, beautiful and ugly. For every flowering thought, there will be a page like a wet and mangy mongrel, and for every looping flight, a tap on the wing and a reminder that wax cannot hold the feathers too firm to the sun (*Journal of a Novel* 180)

Steinbeck uses his magnum opus as a introspective device. As he reflects upon his experiences in Salinas and with the Hamiltons, and upon his literary career as a whole, he discovers the divine truth about humanity, revealed through the story of Cain and Abel: that as humans, we are so perfectly imperfect – that amongst the infinite possibilities for human potential, we are nothing without our ability to carve our own destinies, and without each other, all of it is for naught.