



East of Eden : a novel

by John Steinbeck

New York, Viking Press

copyright 1952

602 pages

Summary

Set in the rich farmland of California's Salinas Valley, this sprawling and often brutal novel follows the intertwined destinies of two families -- the Trasks and the Hamiltons -- whose generations helplessly reenact the fall of Adam and Eve and the poisonous rivalry of Cain and Abel.

Description

In his journal, John Steinbeck called *East of Eden* "the first book," and indeed it has the primordial power and simplicity of myth. Adam Trask came to California from the East to farm and raise his family on the new, rich land. But the birth of his twins, Cal and Aron, brings his wife to the brink of madness, and Adam is left alone to raise his boys to manhood. One boy thrives, nurtured by the love of all those around him; the other grows up in loneliness, enveloped by a mysterious darkness.

First published in 1952, *East of Eden* is the work in which Steinbeck created his most mesmerizing characters and explored his most enduring themes: the mystery of identity, the inexplicability of love, and the murderous consequences of love's absence. A masterpiece of Steinbeck's later years, *East of Eden* is a powerful and vastly ambitious novel that is at once a family saga and a modern retelling of the Book of Genesis.

Reviews

New York Times (9/21/52)

Probably the best of John Steinbeck's novels, *East of Eden* is long but not "big," and anyone who, deceived by its spread in space and time (c. 1860-1920), says that it is "epical in its sweep," is merely in the usual grip of cliché. Its dramatic center is a narrow story of social horror that rests quite disarmingly on the proposition that "there are monsters born in the world to human parents." But through the exercise of a really rather remarkable freedom of his rights as a novelist, Mr. Steinbeck weaves in...this story of prostitution a fantasia of history and of myth that results in a strange and original work of art.

New York Herald Tribune

A novel planned on the grandest possible scale . . . One of those occasions when a writer has aimed high and then summoned every ounce of energy, talent, seriousness, and passion of which he was capable . . . It is an entirely interesting and impressive book.

Biography (1902-1968)



No writer is more quintessentially American than John Steinbeck. Born in 1902 in Salinas, California, Steinbeck attended Stanford University before working at a series of mostly blue-collar jobs and embarking on his literary career. Profoundly committed to social progress, he used his writing to raise issues of labor exploitation and the plight of the common man, penning some of the greatest American novels of the twentieth century.

He wrote the Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) and the novella *Of Mice and Men* (1937). He wrote a total of twenty-seven books, including sixteen novels, six non-fiction books and five collections of short stories. In

1962, Steinbeck received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1962, "for his realistic and imaginative writings, combining as they do sympathetic humor and keen social perception." Today, more than thirty years after his death, he remains one of America's greatest writers and cultural figures. *East of Eden*, the novel he called "the big one," was published in 1952.

About the Author (biography courtesy of the National Steinbeck Center)

- Birth—February 27, 1902
- Where—Salinas, California USA
- Death—December 20, 1968
- Where—New York, NY
- Education—Studied marine biology at Stanford University, 1919-25
- Awards—Pulitzer Prize and National Book Award, 1940; Nobel Prize, 1962.

John Ernst Steinbeck, Nobel and Pulitzer Prize winner, was born in Salinas, California February 27, 1902. His father, John Steinbeck, served as Monterey County Treasurer for many years. His mother, Olive Hamilton, was a former schoolteacher who developed in him a love of literature. Young Steinbeck came to know the Salinas Valley well, working as a hired hand on nearby ranches in Monterey County. In 1919, he graduated from Salinas High School as president of his class and entered Stanford University majoring in English. Stanford did not claim his undivided attention. During this time he attended only sporadically while working at a variety of jobs including on with the Big Sur highway project, and one at Spreckels Sugar Company near Salinas.

Steinbeck left Stanford permanently in 1925 to pursue a career in writing in New York City. He was unsuccessful and returned, disappointed, to California the following year. Though his first novel, *Cup of Gold*, was published in 1929, it attracted little literary attention. Two subsequent novels, *The Pastures of Heaven* and *To A God Unknown*, met the same fate.

After moving to the Monterey Peninsula in 1930, Steinbeck and his new wife, Carol Henning, made their home in Pacific Grove. Here, not far from famed Cannery Row, heart of the California sardine industry, Steinbeck found material he would later use for two more works, *Tortilla Flat* and *Cannery Row*.

With *Tortilla Flat* (1935), Steinbeck's career took a decidedly positive turn, receiving the California Commonwealth Club's Gold Medal. He felt encouraged to continue writing, relying on extensive research and personal observation of the human drama for his stories. In 1937, *Of Mice and Men* was published. Two years later, the novel was produced on Broadway and made into a movie. In 1940, Steinbeck won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction for *Grapes of Wrath*, bringing to public attention the plight of dispossessed farmers.

After Steinbeck and Henning divorced in 1942, he married Gwyndolyn Conger. The couple moved to New York City and had two sons, Thomas and two years later, John. During the war years, Steinbeck served as a war correspondent for the *New York Herald Tribune*. Some of his dispatches reappeared in *Once There Was A War*. In 1945, Steinbeck published *Cannery Row* and continued to write prolifically, producing plays, short stories and film scripts. In 1950, he married Elaine Anderson Scott and they remained together until his death.

Steinbeck received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1962 "...for his realistic as well as imaginative writings, distinguished by a sympathetic humor and keen social perception.." In his acceptance speech, Steinbeck summarized what he sought to achieve through his works:

"...Literature is as old as speech. It grew out of human need for it and it has not changed except to become more needed. The skalds, the bards, the writers are not separate and exclusive. From the beginning, their functions, their duties, their responsibilities have been decreed by our species... Further more, the writer is delegated to declare and to celebrate man's proven capacity of greatness of heart and spirit—gallantry in defeat, for courage, compassion and love. In the endless war against weakness and despair, these are the bright rally flags of hope and emulation. I hold that a writer who does not passionately believe in the perfectibility of man has no dedication nor any membership in literature..."

Steinbeck remained a private person, shunning publicity and moving frequently in his search for privacy. He died on December 20, 1968 in New York City, where he and his family made a home. But his final resting place was the valley he had written about with such passion. At his request, his ashes were interred in the Garden of Memories cemetery in Salinas. He is survived by his son, Thomas.

**Link to compilation of John Steinbeck's reflections on writing
The Art of Fiction (in Paris Review online pdf)**

http://www.theparisreview.org/media/4156_STEINBECK.pdf

Bibliography

Cup of Gold (1927)
The Pastures of Heaven (1932)
The Red Pony (1933)
To a God Unknown (1933)
Tortilla Flat (1935)
The Harvest Gypsies: On the Road to the Grapes of Wrath (1936)
In Dubious Battle (1936)
Of Mice and Men (1937)
The Long Valley (1938)
The Grapes of Wrath (1939)
Forgotten Village (1941)
Sea of Cortez: A Leisurely Journal of Travel and Research (1941)
The Moon Is Down (1942)
Bombs Away: The Story of a Bomber Team (1942)
Cannery Row (1945)
The Wayward Bus (1947)
The Pearl (1947)
A Russian Journal (1948)
Burning Bright (1950)
The Log from the Sea of Cortez (1951)
East of Eden (1952)
Sweet Thursday (1954)
The Short Reign of Pippin IV: A Fabrication (1957)
Once There Was A War (1958)
The Winter of Our Discontent (1961)
Travels with Charley: In Search of America (1962)
America and Americans (1966)
Journal of a Novel: The East of Eden Letters (1969)
Viva Zapata! (1975)
The Acts of King Arthur and His Noble Knights (1976)
Working Days: The Journals of The Grapes of Wrath (1989)

East of Eden

1954 film, PG, 118 mins. Warner Bros.

Directed by Elia Kazan

featuring James Dean, Julie Harris, Jo Van Fleet, and Raymond Massey

The saga of three generations of the Trask and Hamilton families in the early 1900's in Northern California.

Academy Award Best Supporting Actress Jo Van Fleet



Salinas Valley (from Oprah.com)



An Autobiography of Salinas Valley

Steinbeck called *East of Eden* "a sort of autobiography of the Salinas Valley." Early in the writing process, he considered both "My Valley" and "The Salinas Valley" as possible titles for his novel. For, as he wrote in *Journal of a Novel: The East of Eden Letters*, his book would be "the story of my country and the story of me." He was careful not to rely on dim recollections of his past; he thoroughly researched the place of his origins. He wanted to get the geography, animal and plant life, rhythms of nature and history just

right: the Salinas Valley would serve as a microcosm of the world where the major theme of his book would be enacted.

Thematic Tensions in the Setting

Steinbeck often opens books and stories with a description of the land, of place. These descriptions are not merely a backdrop to the action. They are rich with thematic associations. In *East of Eden*, for example, the land is described as a place of sharp contrasts. These oppositions underlie the central clash in the novel, between what we see as good and as evil. The oppositions suggested in the opening chapter establish the complex mood of the valley: the land is both inviting and unfriendly; light and dark; safe and dangerous. Other oppositions are night and day; birth and death; love and dread. The river of life, in which the struggle between good and evil takes place, runs between these opposing forces.

A New Eden?

Note that, in moving to Salinas, the characters—the Hamiltons and Adam Trask—have traveled west, which, in American literature, is generally associated with the search for a new Eden. But here, the "west" is both full of promise and described as ominous. The characters' idealism is bound to meet with trouble.

Character List (from Sparknotes.com)

Character List The Trask Family

Cyrus Trask - The patriarch of the Trask family and the father of Adam and Charles. The imposing Cyrus lies so convincingly about his military heroics during the Civil War that the government appoints him to a powerful position in the Army administration

Mrs. Trask - The first wife of Cyrus Trask and mother of Adam. Cyrus's wife, whose name we do not learn, is a deeply pious woman. She contracts syphilis from Cyrus after he sleeps with a black prostitute in the South during the Civil War. Mrs. Trask commits suicide

Alice Trask - Cyrus's second wife and the mother of Charles. Alice is a quiet, deferential woman who almost never shows emotion.. Alice dies while Adam is away in the Army

Adam Trask - The son of Cyrus Trask and the father of Aron and Cal. Adam is a goodhearted but somewhat impractical man, and his innocence leads him to fall in love with the novel's most evil character, Cathy Ames. In the novel's retelling of the biblical story of Cain and Abel, Adam plays the Abel role in the first generation of the Trask family; in the second generation, he plays the Adam role befitting his name

Charles Trask - The son of Cyrus Trask and the half-brother of Adam. Charles is a violent, cynical, manipulative man who works his father's farm and greedily amasses a large fortune. Charles plays the Cain role in the first generation of the Trasks.

Aron Trask - The son of Adam and Cathy and the twin brother of Cal. Aron is a goodhearted, trusting boy whose deep, innate morality makes it painful for him to hear about or witness evil. Aron plays the Abel role in the second generation of the Trask family. When Cal (the corresponding Cain) reveals to Aron that their mother, Cathy, is a prostitute, Aron is so devastated that he leaves Stanford and joins the army, and soon dies in World War I.

Caleb Trask - The son of Adam and Cathy and the twin brother of Aron. Cal is a manipulative, tempestuous boy who is fiercely jealous of his more likable brother, Aron. Ultimately, he accepts the idea of *timshel*, that every individual is free to choose his own moral path in life. At the end of the novel, Cal plays the Cain role in the second generation of the Trask family, indirectly killing Aron (the corresponding Abel) by revealing to Aron that their mother is a prostitute. When his father confronts him about Aron's whereabouts, Cal sneers, "Am I supposed to look after him?"—an echo of Cain's famous retort to God, "Am I my brother's keeper?"

The Hamilton Family

Samuel Hamilton - The patriarch of the Hamilton family. Samuel is a joyous, self-educated Irishman who moves his family to the Salinas Valley in California. Against the wishes of his wife, Liza, Samuel befriends Adam Trask. Samuel remains a youthful, vigorous man until the death of his daughter Una, which hurts him deeply.

Liza Hamilton - Samuel's wife and the mother of their nine children. The tiny Liza is a strict, moral woman who loves her husband and her family very much.

George Hamilton - The eldest son of Samuel and Liza. a very minor character in the novel.

Will Hamilton - The second son of Samuel and Liza. The practical and conservative Will has a Midas touch in business dealings.

Tom Hamilton - The third son of Samuel and Liza. Tom is ardent and passionate. After Tom indirectly causes the death of his sister Dessie by giving her stomach-soothing salts that aggravate her severe illness, he kills himself out of guilt and grief.

Joe Hamilton - The youngest son of Samuel and Liza. Joe, a dreamer and academic by nature, attends Stanford University and then moves to the east

Lizzie Hamilton - The eldest daughter of Samuel and Liza. Lizzie, a very minor character,

Una Hamilton - The second daughter of Samuel and Liza. The dark brooding Una marries, moves with her husband to the Oregon border, and dies not long after the move.

Dessie Hamilton - The third daughter of Samuel and Liza who runs a dressmaking shop in Salinas, is not beautiful but has a lovely personality that makes everyone enjoy her company

Olive Hamilton - The fourth daughter of Samuel and Liza. Olive becomes a teacher, which makes her family proud. She is the mother of the narrator of the novel (and indeed, in real life, the mother of John Steinbeck).

Mollie Hamilton - The youngest daughter of Samuel and Liza. Mollie is the lovely one, the sweetheart of the family. She marries and moves to an apartment in San Francisco.

Other Characters

Cathy Ames - A moral monster. As a young girl, she murders her parents by arson and then commences a life of prostitution. She marries and then shoots Adam Trask, abandoning her newborn twin sons to return to prostitution. After murdering the brothel owner, Faye, Cathy becomes the madam of the brothel, using drugs to control and manipulate her whores. Aron's discovery that Cathy is his mother shatters him and spurs the chain of events that leads to his death. Cathy represents Eve in the Cain and Abel story of the novel, introducing sin and evil into the world. She commits suicide after enduring Aron's response to her.

Lee - Adam Trask's dutiful cook and housekeeper, an educated man whose parents emigrated to America from China. A philosophical man, he frequently gives voice to the novel's themes, including the crucial idea of *timshel*.

Abra Bacon - is as goodhearted as Cathy is evil, offers compassion and common sense to the Trask family. Abra falls in love with Aron, but after his cowardly withdrawal into the church, she shifts her affections to Cal. Like Cal, Abra worries that her father's corruption will taint her.

Link to Oprah's Book Club background information on East of Eden

http://www.oprah.com/article/oprahsbookclub/eastofeden/eoe_book_synopsis

Discussion Questions (from Penguin Classics.com)

1. Steinbeck has a character refer to Americans as a "breed," and near the end of the book Lee says to a conflicted Cal that "We are all descended from the restless, the nervous, the criminals, the arguers and brawlers, but also the brave and independent and generous. If our ancestors had not been that, they would have stayed in their home plots in the other world and starved over the squeezed-out soil." What makes this a quintessentially American book? Can you identify archetypically American qualities-perhaps some of those listed above-in the characters?
2. Sam Hamilton-called a "shining man"-and his children are an immigrant family in the classic American model. What comes with Sam and his wife Liza from the "old country"? How does living in America change them and their children? What opportunities does America provide for the clan, and what challenges?
3. Adam Trask struggles to overcome the actions of others-his father, brother, and wife-and make his own life. What is the lesson that he learns that frees him from Kate and allows him to love his sons? He says to Cal near the end that "if you want to give me a present-give me a good life. That would be something I could value." Does Adam have a good life? What hinders him? Would you characterize his life as successful in the end?
4. Lee is one of the most remarkable characters in American literature, a philosopher trapped by the racial expectations of his time. He is the essence of compassion, erudition, and calm, serving the Trasks while retaining a complex interior and emotional life. Do you understand why he speaks in pidgin, as he explains it to Sam Hamilton? How does his character change-in dress, speech, and action-over the course of the book? And why do you think Lee stays with the Trasks, instead of living on his own in San Francisco and pursuing his dream?

5. Women in the novel are not always as fully realized as the main male characters. The great exception is Adam Trask's wife, Cathy, later Kate the brothel owner. Clearly Kate's evil is meant to be of biblical proportions. Can you understand what motivates her? Is she truly evil or does Steinbeck allow some traces of humanity in his characterization of her? What does her final act, for Aron Trask, indicate about her (well-hidden) emotions?

6. Sibling rivalry is a crushing reoccurrence in *East of Eden*. First Adam and his brother Charles, then Adam's sons Cal and Aron, act out a drama of jealousy and competition that seems fated: Lee calls the story of Cain and Abel the "symbol story of the human soul." Why do you think this is so, or do you disagree? Have you ever experienced or witnessed such a rivalry? Do all of the siblings in the book act out this drama or do some escape it? If so, how? If all of the "C" characters seem initially to embody evil and all the "A" characters good-in this novel that charts the course of good and evil in human experience-is it true that good and evil are truly separate? Are the C characters also good, the A characters capable of evil?

7. Abra, at first simply an object of sexual competition to Cal and Aron, becomes a more complex character in her relationships with the brothers but also with Lee and her own family. She rebels against Aron's insistence that she be a one-dimensional symbol of pure femininity. What is it that she's really looking for? Compare her to some of the other women in the book (Kate, Liza, Adam's stepmother) and try to identify some of the qualities that set her apart. Do you think she might embody the kind of "modern" woman that emerged in postwar America?

8. Some of Steinbeck's ethnic and racial characterizations are loaded with stereotype. Yet he also makes extremely prescient comments about the role that many races played in the building of America, and he takes the time to give dignity to all types of persons. Lee is one example of a character that constantly subverts expectations. Can you think of other scenes or characters that might have challenged conventional notions in Steinbeck's time? In ours? How unusual do you think it might have been to write about America as a multicultural haven in the 1950s? And do you agree that that is what Steinbeck does, or do you think he reveals a darker side to American diversity?

9. What constitutes true wealth in the book? The Hamiltons and the Trasks are most explicitly differentiated by their relationship to money: though Sam Hamilton works hard he accumulates little, while Adam Trask moons and mourns and lives off the money acquired by his father. Think of different times that money is sought after or rejected by characters (such as Will Hamilton and Cal Trask) and the role that it plays to help and hinder them in realizing their dreams. Does the quest for money ever obscure deeper desires?

10. During the naming of the twins, Lee, Sam, and Adam have a long conversation about a sentence from Genesis, disagreeing over whether God has said an act is ordered or predetermined. Lee continues to think about this conversation and enlists the help of a group of Chinese philosophers to come to a conclusion: that God has given humans choice by saying that they may (the Hebrew word for "may," *timshel*, becomes a key trope in the novel), that people can choose for themselves. What is Steinbeck trying to say about guilt and forgiveness? About family inheritance versus free will? Think of instances where this distinction is important in the novel, and in your own life.

11. The end of the novel and the future of the Trasks seems to rest with Cal, the son least liked and least understood by his father and the town. What does Cal come to understand about his relationship to his past and to each member of his family? The last scene between Adam and Cal is momentous; what exactly happens between them, and how hopeful a note is this profound ending? Why is Lee trying to force Cal to overturn the assumption that lives are

"all inherited"? What do you think Cal's future will be?

12. East of Eden is a combination novel/memoir; Steinbeck writes himself in as a minor character in the book, a member of the Hamilton family. What do you think he gained by morphing genres in this fashion? What distinguishes this from a typical autobiography? What do you think Steinbeck's extremely personal relationship to the material contributes to the novel?

More Discussion Questions

1. Although Steinbeck portrays Cathy as a near-inhuman creature of seemingly inherent evil, the idea of *timshel* implies that she has the power to choose her own path. Is Cathy born a moral monster, or does she become one of her own accord? What elements of Cathy's character or episodes from the novel lead you to your conclusion?

2. What symbolic values do characters' names hold in East of Eden? Discuss specifically the role of biblical names and the importance of the letters A and C.

3. What role do the Hamiltons play in the novel, given that the Steinbeck explores most of his moral concerns through his portrayal of the Trask family? What is the significance of the fact that the narrator is descended from the Hamiltons?

4. Is there any difference between the narrator of East of Eden and Steinbeck himself, or is the narrative voice essentially Steinbeck's own? How does this affect your reading of the novel?

5. There are several secondary echoes of the Cain and Abel story apart from the obvious parallels with Charles and Adam, Cal and Aron. What are some of these echoes, and what is their role in the novel? (Think about, for example, Dessie Hamilton's death and Abra's reaction to her father's corruption.)

6. What about all the tainted money inherited in this story ?

7. John Steinbeck has been accused of having only 2 roles for his female characters, mothers and whores. Is this a fair assessment of the novel?

8. Does Cathy change over the course of the novel? Is her will indicative of any change?

9. What is the significance of Will Hamilton?

Author Readalikes for Steinbeck (from Novelist database)

Kent Haruf

William Kennedy

T. Coraghessan Boyle

Wallace Stegner

Further Reading: (from Novelist)

Ernest Hemingway, *A Farewell to Arms* (1929). Hemingway's indictment of the policies that lead to World War I, *A Farewell to Arms* also depicts the love affair of ambulance driver Frederic Henry and English nurse Catherine Barker in Hemingway's spare, understated prose.

Isabel Allende, *Daughter of Fortune* (1999). Set during the California Gold Rush of 1848, Eliza Summers, orphaned and raised by an English couple in Chile, follows her lover to California only to lose him and find her soul-mate in a Chinese herbalist named Tao Chi'en. A historical novel with a fascinating depiction of diverse cultures and California, where they merge.

Herman Wouk, *The Caine Mutiny* (1951). A post-World War II story of war, the disillusionment of young men, and betrayal, *The Caine Mutiny* was also winner of the Pulitzer Prize in 1952. Aboard a naval warship and minesweeper, conflict between the paranoid Captain Queeg and his skittish crew leads to a mutiny, unleashing a series of events that ends in a dramatic court martial.

E. L. Doctorow, *Ragtime* (1975). *Ragtime* follows the fates of three different New Rochelle families in the period between 1900 and World War I as their paths intersect with historical figures of the time, from Harry Houdini to Henry Ford.

Milton Hatoum, *The Brothers* (2002). Identical twins Yaqub and Omar vie for their mother's attention and love in a Lebanese immigrant community in the Brazilian port of Manaus.