East of Eden, by John Steinbeck

The Author

John Steinbeck (1902-1968), born in Salinas, California, came from a family of moderate means. He worked his way through college at Stanford University but never graduated. In 1925 he went to New York, where he tried for a few years to establish himself as a free-lance writer, but he failed and returned to California. After publishing some novels and short stories, Steinbeck first became widely known with Tortilla Flat (1935), a series of humorous stories about Monterey paisanos.

Steinbeck’s novels can all be classified as social novels dealing with the economic problems of rural labor, but there is also a streak of worship of the soil in his books. East of Eden (1952) is one of his later books, and

Steinbeck says

“A sad soul can kill quicker than a germ”

“We spend our time searching for security and hate it when we get it”

“If you’re in trouble, or hurt or need—go to the poor people. They’re the only ones that’ll help—the only ones.”

The Work

John Steinbeck’s East of Eden was not well received by critics when it debuted in the 1950s, and although passing years have seen several re-evaluations it is still regarded as secondary to the likes of Grapes of Wrath and Of Mice and Men. It is true that the novel is flawed: it is a great big rambling thing crammed with obvious allegory, metaphor, and allusion, loosely structured to say the least. And yet, in an odd sort of way, the very rambling, the looseness, the obviousness of the work gives it a tremendous grandeur that Steinbeck’s more tightly structured work lacks. The novel is as broad and vulgar and lively and provocative as the America it describes--and it is my favorite of Steinbeck's fiction.

Anyone who comes to the novel from the famous film adaptation starring James Dean will be surprised, for the roots of the novel run much deeper than the film, which is based only on perhaps a third of the novel. This is not so much the story of brothers Aaron and Caleb Trask as it is the story of their parents, Adam Trask and Catherine Ames. And in "Cathy" Ames, Steinbeck creates one of the darkest characters in all of 20th Century American Literature, a creature devoid of virtually anything recognizable as human emotion. Fleeing from a past that includes murder, perversion, blackmail, and prostitution, Cathy assumes an angelic demeanor and lures the emotionally needy Adam Trask into love and marriage. And when she no longer requires his protection... she destroys him.
It is the stuff of classic melodrama, but in Steinbeck’s hands it becomes more than melodrama; it becomes a novel that alternately reads at leisurely pace and then suddenly reads with the speed of a whirlwind, a tale that forces us to consider the nature of good and evil and the legacies we may leave for later generations. For Adam and Cathy have two sons, and in the wake of their tragedy they will be left to fight out issues of moral choices, right and wrong, and love and hate in the sun-drenched Salinas Valley of California, the "golden west" of the "new world" as it rushes headlong into the modern age. It is a novel epic in history, geography, and morality.

Some will find the novel’s constant reference to the story of Cain and Able more than a little obvious; others will find it too meandering, filled with too many side-issues and minor subplots. Still others may be put off by the very slow way in which the novel gathers itself during its first hundred or so pages. But once the pieces are in place, Steinbeck suddenly pulls the threads together to create one of the most remarkable tapestries in American letters—a tapestry that has no clear cut boundaries and that, for all its simplistic tone, offers little in the way of simplistic answers to the issues it raises. Flawed, yes, but a great novel by a master of the form, so great that its flaws become intrinsic to its virtues.

**Discussion Questions**

1. What does this novel seem to suggest or say about being American?

2. 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?

3. 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?

4. 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?

5. 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 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?

6. 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?

7. 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?

8. 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 a kind of "modern" woman?

9. 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?

10. 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
11. 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.

12. 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?