

INSEPARABILITY OF GOOD AND EVIL AS A CHALLENGE IN STEINBECK'S 'EAST OF EDEN'

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Abstract

In the paper the central issues concerning the fight between the inseparable twosome good and evil in Steinbeck's 'East of Eden' have been discussed together with the findings of this research. The main concern is on the analysis of inseparability of good and evil by investigation of 'timshel' through the main characters with their allusion to the Genesis.

Through the positive and negative characters traits of the main heroes as well as through symbols Steinbeck expresses his opinion that every human being has the potential to defeat evil. He shows it on the generations of Trasks and Hamiltons through their own decisions which form their own histories.

Keywords: conscience, Genesis, power of choice, good and evil, timshel

1 Introduction

California born and Stanford educated, John Ernst Steinbeck (Fig. 1) acquired fame during the Great Depression of the 1930s as a novelist who combined themes of benign view of human nature with a social protest, a combination that gained him wide popularity and provided the basis for a career not only in fiction but also in journalism, the theatre, and films [1]. Steinbeck was born in the inland valley town of Salinas, California, on February, 27, 1902, of German, Irish and English ancestry.

The novel 'East of Eden' was written in 1952 and is considered Steinbeck's masterpiece. Although 'The Grapes of Wrath' is more famous and read, Steinbeck himself considered 'East of Eden' to be his greatest novel. He believed he had filled up this novel with his best skills in writing and with everything he learned about good and evil in the human condition. Although the story of the novel is not autobiographical, it searches deep in Steinbeck's childhood, including his remembrance of the Salinas Valley in the early 1910s and 1920s, his recollection of the war era, of his relatives, of whom several are secondary characters of the story [2]. For example, Samuel Hamilton was in truth Steinbeck's grandfather, Olive Hamilton was Steinbeck's mother, and Aron Trask's shadowy experience at Stanford University comes to some extent from Steinbeck's own unsatisfactory study. Pearson, P. [3] claims that this novel was inspired by a message Steinbeck wanted to send to his sons Tom and John IV. He wrote the story of good and evil, embracing love and hate, demonstrating their inseparability. He also wanted to portray Salinas Valley, the place in which he grew up. 'East of Eden' was located here not for its relevance to the story, but for its importance for his sons. He probably hoped that the novel would show them their roots.

According to Pearson, P. [3], Steinbeck calls 'East of Eden' the story of his country and of him. According to Pearson, the novel includes the history of America from the Civil War to World War I and tells the story of two American families, The Hamiltons, based on Steinbeck's maternal relatives, who are the "universal family". On the other hand there are the fictional Trasks as "universal neighbors". The novel is about a boy becoming a man after he overcomes rivalry and obtains self-esteem.

'East of Eden', which was one of the most read novels of Steinbeck's time, paradoxically was not a great critical success, because several critics considered Steinbeck's depiction of the struggle between good and evil so extensive, that in their view it took away from the detail and credibility of individual characters. In spite of various reviews, Steinbeck was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1962 for his contribution to 20th century fiction. In 1968 he died in New York City and was buried in his hometown of Salinas.



*Fig. 1 John Steinbeck (February 27, 1902 - December 20, 1968)
Photograph by Hans Namuth. Source: hofstra.edu*

The aim of the research presented in the article is to analyze the inseparability of good and evil as a challenge in Steinbeck's *East of Eden*.

In order to achieve the aim the following **objectives** have been set: to provide a background to the conflict between good and evil; to define the symbols in the novel which allude to the book of Genesis and deal with the conflict; to investigate Steinbeck's 'timshel' through the main characters of the novel by their allusion to the biblical characters and everyday man.

The **research method** applied is the analysis of theoretical sources, the method of comparison, induction and deduction.

2 A Background to the Timeless Conflict between Good and Evil

The stories of Adam and Eva and of their sons, Cain and Abel, which are situated in Genesis, the first book of the Bible, are the key part of Steinbeck's search of the conflict between good and evil in human life and they constitute the base of the tale of 'East of Eden'.

Even if the omniscient narrator in chapter 34 of the novel expresses his opinion that the struggle between good and evil is the one recurring narrative of human history, he also states that there doesn't exist another story. The tale written from the view of the Christian tradition indicates that every human being since Adam and Eve and Cain and Abel has encountered the choice between good and evil. The narrator writes that each person, when looking back on his or her life, "(...) will have left only the hard, clean questions: Was it good or was it evil? Have I done well - or ill?" [4: p. 413] Because the choice is a personal one, the narrator implies that no advancement is made through the generations. Thus every human being must act out the same "old" story and deal with the same conflict.

East of Eden dramatizes this eternal conflict between good and evil within the society of the Salinas Valley and especially within the persons of the Trask and Hamilton families.

Ancestors and descendants of the main characters of the novel, struggle with evil. Cathy decides for evil at every turn, she exploits and hurts others for her own benefit. She symbolizes darkness. Cal is troubled that he has inherited sinful character from his mother. He is probably the toughest fighter of all the characters. Cyrus, the elder of the Trask family, decides for evil when he steals money as a U.S. army administrator. Charles surrenders to jealousy of his brother, Adam. However, the novel is finished in a positive way, because Cal accepts the moral obligation of free will, of free choice between good and evil. The positive ending is clouded, however, by readers' knowledge that next generations will perpetually repeat the same fight that Cal and his ancestors/ancestresses have carried.

During writing of the first draft, Steinbeck wrote a series of letters to his friend and editor Pascal Covici which were published in 'Journal of a Novel: The "East of Eden" Letters' a year after Steinbeck's death, in 1969 [5]. These letters reveal that all the stories about the Hamilton family are true. In the letter he wrote to Covici on January 29, 1951 [6], he wrote that the opposites of good and evil are inseparable. He comments it further that out of the interaction of these opposites originality arises. This comment is essential, because even though the good and evil are mixed up together in most human beings, more important is that even those characters in the novel which are firmly in one or other of the opposing sides are drawn strictly together. According to B. Aubrey [7] each of them, good and evil, has a kind of magnetic pull for the other, which is beyond the control of either. So it is that the weird processes of life locate Charles (a representative of evil) in close propinquity to Adam (a representative of good). Through their boisterous interaction Adam is enforced to look for his own destiny, far away from his brother. However, then Adam cannot help and connect his life with Cathy (Kate), perhaps the strongest representative of evil within the novel.

In the novel there are several symbols alluding to Genesis which deal with the conflict between good and evil [similarly 8 and 9].

a) The Trask **family possession** symbolizes the idea of primal sin. According to Christian tradition this sin has been inherited by human generations since the decadence of the scriptural Adam and Eve. In the novel, Cyrus leaves his property, which he earned through dishonesty, to Charles and Adam. After Charles dies, he gives his property to Adam and Cathy. Adam wastes his part on a bankrupt business enterprise, whereas Cathy expands it by means of her work at the brothel and then she gives it on exclusively to Aron. In wasting the heritage on his bankrupt business, Adam basically avoids its moral dirtiness. Paradoxically it is Aron who is forced to carry the burden. This symbolic burden of sin confirms for Adam and leads to his death. Cal is in the meantime left out of the Trask heritage and escapes pure. Through this unforeseen development of events, Cal decides to escape his family's heritage of sin and evil by the freedom to choose his own moral path.

b) Another symbolic scene for the conflict between good and evil is **the valley**. Steinbeck constitutes valley as a symbolic scene for the fight between good and evil. The valley is surrounded by the delightful and sunlit Gabilan Mountains to the east, filled with beauty; and by the dusky, bleak Santa Lucia Mountains to the west. The Salinas Valley is the setting for several of Steinbeck's works, but the greatest significance it has in 'East of Eden'. The narrator opens 'East of Eden' with a romantic, lyrical description of the valley, recollecting the other reminiscences of his Salinas childhood.

c) And finally the last symbol connecting with the topic analyzed is **Charles Trask's scar**. In the first pages of the novel, Charles Trask explodes while trying to move a large rock from his yard. During the process he cuts his forehead with the wrecking bar which he is using to pry out the stone. The wound heals, however it leaves an ugly scar which is much darker than his skin. This might symbolize the "Cain Sign" from the story of Cain and Abel which God puts on him after He discovers Cain's murder of his brother Abel. In this respect, the sign is not a form of punishment, or a curse, but a form of protection. In the 'East of

Eden', Charles expresses it to emphasize this symbolic connection. In a letter to his brother Adam he writes about the scar: "I don't know why it bothers me. I got plenty other scars. It just seems like I was marked." [4: p. 53 - 54]. Charles's words make the symbolic connection obvious and intensify the relationship between Charles and Adam as a substitute for the relationship between Cain and Abel, which Cal and Aron repeat in the next generation.

3 Steinbeck's Investigation of Human Beings Able to Triumph over Evil

In the last scene of 'East of Eden', Steinbeck uses similar metaphor as in the final scene of 'The Grapes of Wrath', where Rose of Sharon breastfeeds a starving stranger, as the example of generosity, or humanity to aliens and outsiders that is diffused throughout the novel. In this scene Adam Trask is paralyzed by a stroke, with his friend Lee, his son Cal, and daughter Abra (she will finally marry Cal) standing around him. With Lee's advice and support, Adam focuses all his energy to speak word of mercy, teaching and motivation to Cal: the Hebrew word 'timshel' which can be interpreted as 'thou mayest'. He was inspired by God's promise to Cain in the book of Genesis that he has the potential to defeat evil.

The combination of characters in this scene, similarly as in 'The Grapes of Wrath', symbolizes, defines and confirms:

- That human beings can defeat evil;
- Steinbeck's own view of the nature of good and evil, a key theme of the novel;
- That the imorality and viciousness of Cathy cannot persist, because according to Steinbeck evil finally proves ineffective and temporary. Similarly as Cathy's life and suicide, evil misses stability and durability.
- In his final word Adam has convinced his and Cathy's son Cal that he has the strength to decide and choose what is good despite his mother's evil nature.

The everlasting strength of goodness lies in persistence, which is demonstrated on Chinese friend of Adam, Lee. According to B. Heavilin [10] he is worried about both the peace of Adam's soul and the future of his son Cal. He tells Adam that his son Cal will marry one day and his offsprings will be the only remainder left of Adam. Steinbeck shows the continuity of generations on Cal and Abra's marriage. Adam with his word 'timshel' blesses Cal and enables him to choose the good and advance the capacity and freedom of this transcendental choice to their children. Similarly as the final scene of 'The Grapes of Wrath', the final scene of 'East of Eden' rises to the domain of the mysterious, in the human power of transcendence. This scene is an award to the human enduring spirit and experience in the fight against the evil which they encounter. Because there is much greater power in goodness and every human being has the capacity to resist evil. This power of choice according Steinbeck is the choice of one's own way. This belief is articulated through dying Adam who whispers to Cal 'timshel' to support him that not his genetic origin, but his own decisions will form his destiny. "Thou mayest rule over sin (...)" [4: 303]. This sentence - thematic exploration is related to the novel's form from the beginning. The inseparability of good and evil are according to B. Heavilin [10] highlighted by the different attitudes and moods connected with the two opposed mountain ranges, the „light gay mountains“, to the east, indicating a birth, maternal welcome, love and morning; and the “dark and brooding peaks to the west“, which suggests the “unfriendly and dangerous“ sentiments, death and night [4: p. 10].

Thus developed in the centre of the novel, 'timshel' turns into Steinbeck's cryptograph for individual moral decision and responsibility. In the inner conflict between good and evil, which Steinbeck indicates is "the only story we have" (4: p. 411), human beings have a choice and where there is a choice there is freedom. And Lee was the first to understand its significance and that is a source of inspiration for him: "But think of the glory of the choice! That makes a man a man" (4: p. 304). The accuracy of Steinbeck's translation of the Hebrew word 'timshel' has been controversial. Technical term is 'timshol-bo' which means "you will

rule (timshol) in him (bo) (4: p. 377). Lee in the novel develops the interpretive possibilities of the term, but the translation of the word as 'thou mayest' was not the most accurate one. It was probably the most suitable for Steinbeck. Concerning the translation, which he underwent with the help of Pat Covici, Steinbeck wrote "(...) at least there is a difference of opinion and that is enough for me" (5: p. 122). The 'timshel' entry from 'A John Steinbeck Encyclopedia' [11] includes a discussion of the various critical reactions to this crucial interpretation.

Contrary this background, symbolic of these two „good and evil outlooks“ to which human beings are inclined, Steinbeck sets the history of Salinas Valley in Northern California at the turn of 20th century with a featureless tribe of Indians, Spaniards greedy for gold and God and Americans even more greedy of all, as several of them „took the lands remade the laws to make their titles good.“ [4: p. 12] In the east the narrator introduces “good“ Gabilan Mountains, filled with sunlight and in the west „bad“ Santa Lucias Mountains.

Moreover, there are several symbolic characters which influence Adam Trask, who are a personification of the „everyman“ who negotiates his „life's valley“ between light and dark in the form of Samuel Hamilton who embodies goodness and Cathy Ames the symbol of damnable evil.

The link between the novel and the biblical story of the Genesis is made clear by Steinbeck's choice of the first names of both generations of Trask family: Charles and Adam and the next one Cal and Aron. The other analog is in their jobs. In Genesis Abel is a keeper of sheep and Cain cultivates the land. In the novel, Charles is a farmer and Caleb invests in the bean harvest. In the Genesis Adam refuses Cain's gift from harvest and chose instead Abel's gift of a lamb. In the East of Eden, Cyrus refuses Charles's gift of a costly knife and prefers Adam's gift of a strayed pup. Charles perceives that his father loves Adam more. Cyrus Trask in the mind of Charles likes Adam's birthday gift more. The situation is repeated in the next generation when Adam Trask refuses Caleb's financial gift, money earned by investment in the bean crop, and prefers if he would lead a good life like his brother Aron. In the Genesis, Abel is murdered by his brother Cain when God rejected his offering and in the novel Charles attacks his brother Adam repeatedly with the bat, knocking him unconscious in a jealous anger after he was rejected by his father. Although he does not die, as Abel did, there is the indication that Charles had mortally wounded his brother. In the next generation there is a similar pattern, Caleb's jealousy indirectly murders his brother Aron, after he makes him confused over his mother that he decides to run away and enlist in the World War I. Cal in his dialogue with his dying father confesses that he is responsible for Aron's death and father's sickness by revealing the truth about their mother Cathy. Lee believes that the story of Cain and Abel is important as it is about the rejection which he considers the root from which all evil grows, because with rejection comes wrath, and with wrath comes crime as the form of revenge for the rejection and also guilty conscience. In this sense Lee considers this to be the story of mankind, an unavoidable cycle.

4 The Heart of Steinbeck's Philosophy – Timshel

In Genesis after killing his brother Abel, Cain is expelled to the land of Nod, east of Eden. In this land he receives God's blessing in the form of free will, for God it does not matter how deep the sin is. He advises Cain to choose to live a virtuous life which leads to hope for redemption. In the third part of the novel, chapters 23 – 33 [4], Steinbeck through the narrator expresses that choice is the most important natural human right. In one of the most intense statements in the novel, Lee expresses his own research of the sixteen verses he read together with Samuel Hamilton several years ago. Lee after he studied various translations of the Bible and learned Hebrew came up to the conclusion that the word timshel - 'thou mayest' - that gives a choice (...) might be the most important word in the world." [4: p. 246]. Steinbeck declares to the reader that it is up to each individual which path one takes, because 'timshel' is

always open to everyone. The power to choose between the two antipoles is seen in the character of Caleb Trask, who realizes his mistakes and feels deep regret after Aron's death. This finally brings Cal to maturity and he confesses to Adam: "I am responsible for Aron's death and for your sickness. I took him to Kate's. I showed him his mother. That's why he went away: "I don't want to do bad things – but I do them." [4: p. 482] Instead of being marked for his sin as Cain was, Cal realizes that there is 'timshel' and thus he no longer has to feel guilty because of his inner evil and sin.

In chapter 38 Steinbeck focuses the readers' attention to the conflict between good and evil, the biggest motif of the novel. Here the brothers Cal and Aron learn that their mother doesn't die, but runs a hostel in Salinas. Cal appears to be predestined for evil similarly like his mother "I hate her because I know why she went away. I know – because I've got her in me." [4: p. 364]. He told Lee that he inherited evil from her. Lee, on the other side, remarks that he has not only evil of his mother in you, but the other too. "Whatever you do, it will be you who do it, not your mother." [4: p. 364]. Steinbeck declares that 'timshel' is more potent than parental genes, because it provides the individual with the gift in the form of choice of his/her own path. Thus the evil of Cathy (symbolizing biblical Eve) and the good of Adam (symbolizing Adam) are both embodied in Cal.

'Timshel' indicates that despite individuals can have evil tendencies they do not need to follow them. The choice lies within us. During the discussion of The Genesis story about Cain and Abel, Lee explains to Samuel and Adam the significance of 'timshel' like following: "'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. For if Thou mayest' - it is also true that 'Thou mayest not.' (...) Now, there are millions in their sects and 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. [4: p. 301 - 303] The choice between good and evil given people through 'timshel' like Lee says offers that deliverance. A choice of evil is not inevitable and until the choice is made. The characters throughout the novel face with several possibilities to choose 'timshel' and overcome evil.

Finally dying Adam whispers 'timshel' to his son Cal, freeing him from his fear that he is predisposed to evil and enabling him to choose his own way. This scene is destruction, but of victory. In Adam's will and attentiveness to speak through his paralysis, in Lee's faithful support, Cal and Abra's love and for Adam and Lee, there is hidden the vision of Steinbeck. Love and goodness are inseparably intertwined and they endure.

At the heart of Steinbeck's 'timshel' principle there is the importance of individuality, a concept which the author advances. In the chapter that brings Adam to the Salinas Valley, Steinbeck says: „And this I believe: that the free, exploring mind of the individual human is the most valuable thing in the world. And this I would fight for: the freedom of the mind to take any direction it wishes, undirected. And this I must fight against: any idea, religion, or government which limits or destroys the individual. This is what I am and what I am about“ [4: p. 131]. What a paradoxical idea. It promotes individuality within the significant context of the other important Steinbeck theme, the broader human community [12].

5 Conclusions

The article focuses on the analysis of inseparability of good and evil as a challenge in Steinbeck's masterpiece 'East of Eden' by investigation of 'timshel' through the main characters with their allusion to the Genesis.

The review of scholarship and analysis of selected characters and symbols allow us to make the following conclusions:

- Through the characters of Trasks and Hamiltons Steinbeck shows that every generation will timelessly repeat the same fight to win over sin.
- The conflict between good and evil is expressed through the following symbols: **family possessions** symbolize the idea of primal sin; **the valley** as a symbol for the struggle between good and evil; and **Charles Trask's scar** as a "Cain sign" (the Bible, book Genesis).
- The combination of characters in the scene where Adam speaks word of mercy, teaching and motivation to Cal, 'timshel - thou mayest', symbolizes and verifies that human beings have the potential to defeat evil, because in goodness there is much greater power than in malice. Steinbeck shows on the two generations that every human being has the capacity to resist evil, as these are individual's own decisions which form his or her destiny.

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