THE EDENIC MYTH AND THE BIBLICAL THEME OF EXODUS WITH JOHN STEINBECK

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Abstract: *The aim of this paper is to emphasize the fact that American literature, with a case study on Steinbeck, has taken shape and developed as an original literature by enriching its fictional world with a great variety of religious themes and motifs mainly inspired to it by the very founders of the American nation, the Pilgrim fathers. We propose ourselves to approach the Biblical theme of Exodus and the Edenic myth as reflected in Steinbeck's most representative novels and short stories.*

Keywords*: *Edenic myth, Exodus, Heaven.

Since colonial times, the sense of encountering an unseen transcendental Presence within the natural world has been a characteristic motif in American literature and culture. American writers have repeatedly perceived in nature something beyond itself – and beyond themselves. Whatever their theology, American writers have perennially construed the nonhuman world to be a source of something that took them out of their selves.

Puritan thought was central to the nature of American writing in its beginnings. One reason for this was that it brought to the New World not only a Judaic sense of wonder and millenarian promise – the American "dream" that is still recalled in so much modern literature – but a vision of the task and nature of writing itself. For the Pilgrim Fathers the voyage to New England was an act of faith, derived from the reading of providential signs, and the "simple truth" was therefore nothing less than an account of the significant actions of God's Chosen People. (Ruland, Bradbury, 1991: 9-10)

Even as the earlier settlers set foot on the shores of America, one of the predominant goals that brought them to this new country was the belief that God had ordained a new Eden/ Jerusalem/ Canaan for his chosen people. The land, a fertile garden appeared to have all the requirements of the Biblical cities and countries that were associated with faith and rebirth, with innocence and sinlessness. Therefore, it was no surprise that the colonists, mostly devout Puritans, proclaimed America to be the Garden of Eden, a place to regain all that had been lost in Adam's fall.

America symbolized a new opportunity for the Christians to recreate the early mythology of their religion: however, unlike Adam, the Pilgrim Fathers were determined not to fall into temptation. Inspired by their brotherhood in Christ, they would form an idealistic Kingdom, a heaven on earth, as they awaited the second coming.

This initial idealistic concept of the Puritans would later become the archetypal vision which would be labelled the American dream. This dream consisted of a vision of peace, prosperity and loving acceptance that mirrored the original Eden of the distant Past.

American writers and critics took many generations to come to terms with the implications of Puritanism in American literature. In the 1920's fierce debates still raged about the destructive power of Puritan influence: it was frequently held responsible for all that was materialistic, commercial and anti-aesthetic in the American

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view of life. Critics blamed the Puritan heritage for much that seemed to limit American writing: its heavily allegorizing disposition, its failure to open out to experience or the ambiguity of the symbol. More recently, a revival of interest in the puritan heritage has grown to the point of arguing its centrality for the American imagination. (Ibid: 31-32)

During the second half of the twentieth century the attitude of the literary community in what the Bible is concerned underwent a marked change. Consequently, the Bible was recognized as the source and inspiration of many themes, symbols and types found in contemporary literature. In 1987, in a major work entitled *The Literary Guide to the Bible*, Robert Alert and Frank Kermode attempted to clarify and elaborate the allusive connections between the Bible and contemporary literature and culture. (Alert, Kermode, 1987: 3) Also, the literary approaches advocated by Northrop Frye highlighted the Biblical references and themes which are common in twentieth-century literature. (Bevan, 1993:79)

Of all the authors influenced by a desire to reclaim America's Edenic heritage and principles, John Steinbeck was perhaps foremost in shaping the myth of Eden into a wide variety of stories and novels, suggesting that the hope and idealism espoused in the Edenic myth and the theme of the Biblical Exodus were essential qualities that Americans of the 30's through the 60's need to recapture before real progress of the human race could occur. Steinbeck's more relevant novels and short stories in this respect are: *Of Mice and Men, The Grapes of Wrath, East of Eden, The Pastures of Heaven.*

Beginning with *The Pastures of Heaven* (1932), Steinbeck began to examine the pluses and minuses which would be encountered in reshaping a new Eden for his time. *The Pastures of Heaven* was a collection of short vignettes involving the Corral de Cielo, a lush valley that Steinbeck populated with characters who were speaking about the renewal of life and hope, in an isolated Edenic location in California. (Ibid: 96)

In Chapter one, the valley is discovered by a Spanish corporal who is stunned by "the green pasturage" (p.2). His exclamation of surprise, "Holy Mother! Here are the green pastures of Heaven to which our Lord leadeth us" (p.3), stuck as the name of the valley, although the corporal did not live to enjoy it. A hundred years later the place is lived prosperously and at peace by twenty families: "The fruits of their gardens were the finest produced in central California." (p.4)

The first "story" Steinbeck tells is of the Shark Wicks' family, whose Eden is imaginary, consisting of a fictional $ 50,000 bank account and of Alice, his beautiful daughter. The former makes him seem the perfect investor and earns him the respect of his neighbours who are unaware of the fantasy nature of his fortune, and the latter is described by Steinbeck in terms of a natural Eden. Yet, Alice's beauty is countered by her stupidity and dullness. Thus, Shark has to be concerned with avoiding his daughter's defloration. Her possible defloration is symbolically viewed as the religious loss of a human Edenic figure. Nonetheless, during a dance, Jimmie Monroe commits the fault of kissing her. The kiss is magnified in Shark's perception to the ultimate fall from purity. Like Adam's, Shark's symbolic Eden has been destroyed, in the first case after the tasting of an apple and in the latter after the stealing of a kiss.

A second story that illustrates Steinbeck's adherence to the Eden myth is the tale of Junius Maltby. He moved from San Francisco at his doctor's suggestion in Las Pasturas valley. His concept of Eden is that of laziness: reading books, dangling his feet in the stream, and ignoring reality. Robbie, his surviving son (after a smallpox epidemics), follows his example until he is six and is required to go to school, where he is the subject of pity. After some time of deliberations, they are given clothes, out of a

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drive of their neighbours. This gift proves counter-productive, as Junius is offended and goes back to the city. Like Adam, he leaves the Eden he had been created for, to attain what his selfish neighbours believe is important. In this way, Steinbeck is trying to illustrate the belief that the Edenic atmosphere is different for each individual, and he continues the idea in the tale of Pat Humbert, who also attempts to create an Eden, in Chapter Ten. (Ibid: 99-100)

The house Humbert has lived in with his parents becomes after their death an opposite of Eden. It is as though the house is infested with the ghosts of the past, of an Eden destroyed. Motivated by Mae Monroe, Pat envisions and transforms his residence into an Edenic garden. Modelling his Eden he dreams that the doom of his earlier years with his parents will be dispelled. But his vision is destroyed by the news of Mae's engagement. In despair, he abandons his former vision of an earthly paradise with no further notice. Again, Steinbeck seems to suggest that a literal Eden cannot be sustained against potential curses and falls, and yet America, like the residents of pastures persists in hoping to attain such a goal. (Ibid: 101)

Of Mice and Men (1937) is another Steinbeck title that continues to stress Edenic imagery and the theme of man's hope of regaining an earthly paradise. With its title inspired from Robert Burns' line "The best laid plans of mice and men", the novel continues Steinbeck's skepticism about the human ability to actually attain this goal. The book begins with an Edenic setting completed with green trees, water and animals that envision a peaceful Kingdom. Into that setting, Steinbeck places George Milton and Lenny Small. By the name Milton, Steinbeck prefigures his attachment to a recaptured Eden. The implication of a new *Paradise Lost* is implied in the specific naming. The two friends have a common dream which keeps them going. They seek a place where they are their own bosses, and where the fertile land provides them with all they need to survive. Like Eden, their description of that place is of a land of milk and honey, a promised land of Canaan, where those who have suffered are relieved from their labour. (Ibid: 103)

However, as in the Edenic myth, the woman is the destructive force. The peaceful garden is intruded by another Eve, whose sensual nature serves as the agent of evil and fall. Lenny, tempted by Curly's young wife, a seductive woman, unwittingly puts an end to her life and thus the dream of Eden must once again be discarded. As a result of the murder, George must reenact the Cain and Abel sacrifice while at the same time assuring Lenny that the little farm with the rabbits he had so desired is only "a second away". In death, Lenny finds his Eden, a world away from persecution, a world free from discrimination based on intellect and ownership.

Steinbeck's most famous novel *The Grapes of Wrath* also suggests that a new Eden may only be a fantasy, but the author persists in asserting that the goal is worth striving for even if it is elusive. In fact, *The Grapes of Wrath* indicates clearly that the Biblical underminings so valued by Steinbeck have not been rejected. The book begins with the fallen Eden of Oklahoma and the picture of a land which is dying from drought and heat. There is little happiness in the first few chapters of the novel, merely a sense of defeat and futility. But after Tom Joad's release from prison the hope of a new Eden begins with his meeting of Jim Casy, a failed preacher, who speaks of the spirit of the Okies. His spiritual philosophy denies the sin which caused the fall. Eventually, his idea of recapturing Eden through personal effort is put into practice when Tom and his family set out for California enticed by the lying flyers advertising the state of California as a land of plenty. Leaving the fallen world of Oklahoma behind, the Joads find that the price for attaining Eden involves loss. Like the Israelites who crossed the

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desert to reach Canaan, the older generation of the family dies on the way, Grandpa and Grandma, more precisely, along with Noah (the oldest son). In addition, those who return from the new Eden inform the Joads that the dream is far from ideal. But still Steinbeck asserts: "If we can only get to California where the oranges grow… 'f only we can." (p. 126)

Jim Casy (the acronym JC might stand for Jesus Christ), the symbolic Christ of their journey, who should be capable of restoring Eden, is killed in a battle. Tom assumes his friend's role, as leader of the search for a new life. Further on, the hopefulness in potential life is destroyed by Rose of Sharon's stillbirth and by the threatening floods caused by continuing rains. Surprisingly, however, hope is simultaneously maintained by the woman's sharing of her breast milk with a starving man. Thus the novel ends with the implied suggestion that an Eden of the mind is necessary even if the physical one cannot be restored.

On the other hand, a particularly rewarding experience awaits the reader who is prepared to compare Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) with the *exodus narratives* found in the Hebrew Scriptures.

The Biblical story of the Exodus is found in the forty chapters of the book of Exodus and the thirty-six chapters of the book of Numbers. Steinbeck quotes Biblical texts, subtly or significantly changes phrases, employs *direct* or *inverted* images, and consciously or unconsciously narrates a parallel story. So fundamental and so extensive is the Biblical imagery that it cannot be regarded as either accidental or incidental. (Ibid: p.80) By *direct* imagery is meant the invocation of a Biblical text or incident to have roughly the same significance in the novel as it has in the Bible. So in Exodus we read of the Ten Commandments and various laws without which the children of Israel would be moving in a state of anarchy; in *The Grapes of Wrath* we have a description of community rules worked out by the migrants. By *inverted* Biblical imagery we mean the use of part of a scriptural incident or narrative in an ironic manner or to make an opposite point in the novel. The most obvious example of inverted imagery is seen in the fact that the children of Israel wanted to escape from Egypt and begin their journey to the Promised Land, whereas the only thing the Joads and their neighbours wanted was to be left alone and not driven out by the obvious remote decision of bankers.

Among the suggestive parallels with the Biblical concepts and narratives found in *The Grapes of Wrath* is the title of the book itself. The title phrase has a Biblical meaning, but is not found in the Bible. However, it is to be found in Julia Ward Howe's hymn, written in 1861: "Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord,/ He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored." In the Bible the harvest is frequently used as an image of judgment and the hymn pictures God initiating judgment by beginning the process of making wine from the grapes of wrath.

Although *The Grapes of Wrath* examines the Eden myth at length, perhaps the fullest assessment of Steinbeck's fascination with the Biblical allusion is found in what he considered his masterpiece, *East of Eden* (1952). Steinbeck declared his subject was "the only one man has ever used as his theme – the existence, the balance, the battle and the victory in the permanent war between wisdom and ignorance, light and darkness, good and evil." Originally Steinbeck thought of entitling his work *Cain Sign*, yet another indication of his concern with "fallen Eden". For Steinbeck, in 1952, America had become a fallen Eden that he felt he must desperately try to restore.

East of Eden is another symbolic title with Biblical reference used by Steinbeck in order to designate the natural, spiritual and moral cosmos that he creates in the novel and which stands in fact for the earth as the new home of the human beings

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attributed by God after the first murder committed by Cain against his brother, Abel. The divine punishment is quoted faithfully by Steinbeck from *Genesis:* '[...] *And the Lord set a mark upon Cain, lest* f *any finding him should kill him. And Cain went out from the presence of the Lord and dwelt in the land of Nod on the* ***east of Eden.****'* This mark was not meant in fact to protect Cain, but to allow for the divine punishment to be carried out in the land of Nod, whose name actually comes from the Hebrew word which designates '*wandering*', that is the land indicated to Cain is not a fertile and welcoming land, on the contrary it is a wasted and bleak land which puts Cain at a trial for surviving on it. The symbol of the title is closely related to the symbol of the names of the characters and the mythical story of the eternal fight between good and evil. There are two generations in the Trask family which embody the Biblical characters of Cain and Abel: firstly, Adam and Charles, and then Aron and Caleb, the twin sons of Adam. Their physical appearance is in accordance with the moral values they stand for: '*Aron's eyes were very wide and he had a beautiful soft mouth. The width between his blue eyes gave him an expression of angelic innocence. His hair was fine and golden. [...] Cal looked more like Adam. His hair was dark-brown. He was bigger than his brother, bigger of bone, heavier in the shoulder, and his jaw had the square sternness of Adam's jaw. Cal's eyes were brown and watchful, and sometimes they sparkled as though they were black.* Their activities also correspond to the ones of their Biblical models: Adam likes gardening and Charles is a good farmer and hunter, whilst Aron loves animals and grows Belgian hares, and his brother is fond of agriculture and intends to become a good farmer in the future.

The biblical Cain and Abel story is central to the novel, as is the exegesis of the Hebrew word *timshel*. Although the novel is filled with the presence of evil, humans have the power to overcome it. A tragic destiny is decreed for no one; it is all a matter of human choice. Steinbeck forewarns his reader that the characters who will be presented are a microcosm of existence, who stand for the whole American nation and have Biblical counterparts. The Hamiltons, Steinbeck's ancestors, are followed as they settle the Salinas Valley. In typical Steinbeck technique the chapter in which they are presented is designed for the later counterpoint with the main story of the Trasks, whom Steinbeck unveils later on. (Ibid: 107) The two families presented, the Hamiltons and the Trasks, are designed to illustrate the two options mankind has in dealing with its fallen nature. The Hamiltons are in constant struggle to overcome it, while the pattern of the Trasks is to succumb to its demands.

Painting the simple unassuming life of Samuel Hamilton, Steinbeck not only honours his grandfather, but succeeds in portraying a common man: self-sufficient, inventive, friendly, easy to talk to, a confident and successful individual. Samuel's success is not typical in the "American" sense of the word since wealth has eluded him. He is the poor immigrant from Ireland who owns the unproductive land, and he is designed to be in direct contrast with Adam Trask whose background is heritage, money and good land.

To understand this new breed who arrived in California and settled the Salinas Valley along his grandfather, Steinbeck flashes back to the 1860s and he tells the story of Adam Trask, his brother Charles and their parents, Cyrus Trask, his unnamed first wife, and his second wife, Alice Trask. Symbolically, Steinbeck has also introduced his first fallen Eden through Cain and Abel symbols which have been established as the root of his tale. The Cain/Abel symbolic names fluctuate as the first Trask wife presents Cyrus with a first-born son, named Adam, who will eventually be in conflict with his half-brother Charles, the son of Cyrus' s second wife. (Ibid: 108)

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The boys are direct opposites, suggesting the fallen nature of mankind. Thus, Adam and Cyrus are obvious Cain/Abel parallels. Steinbeck even recreates the rejection of gifts on Genesis 4 as Adam's mongrel pup is valued more than Charles's expensive knife. In a fallen Eden, this is a major rejection as Charles says: *"I want to stay – I want to stay – I mean, I never understood – well, why our father did it. I mean why didn't he like that knife I bought for him on his birthday? Why didn't he? It was a good knife and he needed a good knife. If he had used it or even honed it, or took it out of his pocket and looked at it – that's all he had to do. If he'd liked it, I wouldn't have took out after you…Something didn't get done, I shouldn't be here. I ought to be wandering around the world instead of sitting here on a good farm looking for a wife…It's me should be here where you are and you here."* (38)

Several of the reversals in the story, however, suggest the fallen world is not so black and white. For example, the good Adam/Able character is exiled from home while Charles/Cain is left on the land, an indication that the human fallen nature need not be absolute. Steinbeck goes on to contrast Charles's deep identification with Cain but not all of the brood of Samuel Hamilton are associated with the goodness of Abel. For example, Hamilton's son George is described as "*polite and what they used to call no trouble. He was a sinless boy and grew to be a sinless man. No crime of commission was ever attributed to him, and his crimes of omission were only misdemeanours*." (37) Will Hamilton is also seen as an Abel when the author states that he "liked to live so that no one could find fault with him and to do that he had to live as nearly like other people (…)"

The original Cain/Abel distinction is also maintained through he twin brothers Cal and Aron, Adam's sons with the evil Cathy. Cal is a gardener and Aron raises rabbits. One day, when the Trask boys were hunting rabbits, their nature is revealed through their attitude and words: "Right through the heart," says the dark-haired Cal who always wants to fight. Oppositely, Aron is golden-haired and fights only when provoked. (299) Like a pattern one can notice another rejection of presents, similar to the biblical tradition: Adam's rejection of Cal's hard-earned gift parallels God the father's rejection of Cain's gift of grain in favour of Abel's gift of his fattest lamb, and Cain's subsequent jealousy and the vengeful murder of his brother. Similarly, Adam's rejection of his son's gift parallels his own father Cyrus' rejection of his brother Charles' gift at the beginning of the novel. Simply, God the father and Cyrus favour other sons. Cyrus favoured Adam over Charles and overlooked his gift of a valuable knife in favour of the stray puppy from Adam, yet Charles loved his father more. Similarly, Cal adores Adam and loves him wholeheartedly while Aron only feels shame. Adam's high moral standards forbid him accepting his son's ill-gained money, yet he fails to see the love behind the gesture.

In the manner of Cain, Cal becomes restless, wandering the streets at night. Cast as Cain, Cal often falters but struggles to be good. He loves his family, and standing up to Kate helps him realize he is not inherently evil. He displays considerable intuition in recognizing the fear that lies behind Cathy's façade. Indeed, he understands both good and evil. Later in the novel, Abra is the first character to recognize this struggling aspect of Cal's personality and it causes her to fall in love with him. Abra, mature from childhood, will state later on that Aron remained a child by continuing to live in a story. Nonetheless, Cal loses the battle between good and evil that rages within him when he selfishly takes his brother to his mother's brothel and in effect causes Aron to join the army where he is sure to die.

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In the centre of the novel, Steinbeck presents his ultimate statement about moral ambiguity, again relating it to the Eden myth. This is accomplished through Lee's more thorough examination of the original Biblical text which was discussed at the naming of the Aron and Cain twins. Along with several wise Chinese scholars and a Rabbi, he has compared the various translations of the Hebrew verb "timshel" and found three different meanings: "Thou shalt", implying promise; "Do thou", implying order or command; and "Thou mayest", implying choice. Perhaps fallen mankind does have options to select. (Ibid: 110)

Part III of the novel is a reversal of Part I. As Steinbeck says: *"In the first part the burden was with Adam who was Abel. Charles was the dark principle who remained dark. In Part III, I am going to try to do the opposite, Caleb is my Cain principle. I am going to put the burden of experience through his eyes and his emotions. And since every man has Cain in him, he will be fully well understood."*

The major thesis of *East of Eden* is that events in life occur and reoccur not because of fate, but due to the fact that man lets them reoccur. The paradox of the duality of opposites, of good mixed with evil and decay, serves to reinforce Steinbeck's picture of man's condition. In addition, the tasting of the apple may also suggest that finally the three protagonists of the novel have come to terms with what it means to have the knowledge of good and evil, just as their original parents, Adam and Eve, came to understand similar principles after their fall from grace.

In his final desperate act of visiting Cathy at the whorehouse Adam restores his Abel-like dream world of a good Cathy and finally is willing to accept her duality. Cathy, on the other hand, remains a adamant Cain figure, believing that evil is inherent and that nothing can ever change man's natural tendency toward sin. Thus a step toward a restored Eden at least for Adam and his sons is taken.

Adam feels that Samuel's truth, though harsh, has indeed set him free of Cathy. Through his belief in the new revelation, he too can exercise God's promise to Cain and choose to conquer over sin, instead of succumbing to evil. When Adam returns from the whorehouse, he drinks more ng'k-py with Lee, destroying the myth that the apple or fall of man must be destructive to all other men who have descended from the first Adam. Adam need not remain East of Eden, but may in someway recapture it in his mind.

However, somehow most men are trapped in the paradox of their own dual nature and in general seem preoccupied with the negative part of their beings. In fact, Cal ends chapter thirty with a prayer, since he fears that he to has been predestined to evil; his course has also been preplanned and can't be changed. His prayer is that of a rejected Cain: *"Dear Lord," he said, "let me be like Aron. Don't make me mean. I don't' want to be."* (289)

The repetitive Cain and Abel motif is complete when Aron dies. Cain (Cal) has, in effect, once again killed his brother Abel (Aron). The highly moralistic, albeit cowardly, Aron runs away from travail by enlisting in the Army while the recalcitrant Cal stands his ground, finds love, and learns to live a normal life in all its various shadings. Although it seemed at the beginning that the Trask family was doomed to repeat their dysfunctional family dynamics instigated by Cyrus' original sin, Lee's introduction of the concept of *timshel* into the family assures Cal that he doesn't have to repeat history and that choice is an option.

Steinbeck concludes that to remain east of Eden is not necessary. Edens can be restored, although perhaps not physically as the Puritans wished it. It is an integral part of the American Dream that will not under any circumstance give way to the despair which daily surrounds and depresses mankind.

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