# *THE IMAGINARY GARDEN OF EDEN IN STEINBECK'S NOVEL* – "EAST OF EDEN"

**Maria Roxana TUDOROIU**[*]

***Abstract:*** *Under the influence of his friend's thinking, Joseph Campbell, John Steinbeck came to value the power of ancient myths and their role in perceiving human existence. His way of looking at old biblical stories in "new ways" is best revealed in the novel East of Eden due to which the story of Cain and Abel seems to have meaning even in modern times. Concepts of determinism appear in the book as Steinbeck puts into light that, as descendants of Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, people inherited their fate and sins and ever since they have to struggle with the choice between good and evil. The writer makes use of the Cain and Abel especially for its moral message, all concentrated in the Hebrew word, Timshol.*

*Largely, this paper intends to underline that Steinbeck's birthplace, the Salinas Valley in northern California, the setting for several of the author's literary works, had its greatest role in East of Eden, being comparable from many aspects to the biblical Garden of Eden. Despite its astonishing beauty that reveals it as a paradise on Earth, the people who settle there bring with them not only friendship and love but also murder, jealousy and injustices of the outside world.*

***Keywords:*** *myth, good versus evil.*

John Steinbeck was one of the several writers deeply influenced by the Second World War and its aftermath. He himself a war correspondent, Steinbeck returned to the U.S.A. shocked by all that he had seen. Marked by this experience, his post-war writings started to be more sentimental: "Have we learned anything from the passage of time? Are we more mature, wiser, more perceptive, kinder?"(Steinbeck, 1970: 4) Thus, he turned his main interest from biology and sociology to individual ethics, to the problem of evil. The author is aware that the struggle between good and evil is a recurring theme in the history of humankind as, for thousands of years, man has been fighting beasts, nature and himself. It is a never-ending battle with two choices: good or evil.

Although the writer admitted publicly for several times that he was not a religious person, his work certainly reveals a deep reverence for the Bible probably inherited from his mother and grandmother on the Hamilton side of the family. Lester Marks claims that both Steinbeck and his characters show a deep yearning for religion[1] in spite of his beliefs and respect for science which he acquired at Stanford University.

Joseph Campbell was not only one of Steinbeck close friends; his thinking and his books *The Masks of God* and *The Power of Myth* had a certain influence on Steinbeck's understanding of religion. The writer came to value the power of ancient myths and their role in perceiving human existence and Campbell's way of looking at old biblical stories in "new ways" is also felt in Steinbeck's later writings, *East of Eden* and *The Winter of Our Discontent* where he managed to capture the perpetual theme of good and evil. Steinbeck himself states in *Journal of a Novel: The East of Eden Letters*:

> I believe there is one story in the world, and only one, that has inspired and frightened us. Humans are caught – in their lives, in their thoughts, in their hungers

[*] University of Craiova, roxanne_t82@yahoo.com

[1] Lester Marks, Thematic Design in the Novels of John Steinbeck (The Hague: Mouton, 1971), pp. 12-26.



BDD-A6052 © 2013 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:00:06 UTC)

> and ambitions, in their greediness and cruelty, and in their kindness and generosity too – in a net of good and evil. There is no other story. A man will have only one question left at the end of his life: was it good or was it evil? And all novels, all poetry, are built on the never ending contest in ourselves between good and evil (Steinbeck, 1970: 7).

Another source of inspiration for Steinbeck's *East of Eden* is Erich Fromm's *Psychoanalysis and Religion* (1950), which the author consulted before beginning the novel. In *Journal of a Novel* which is a detail account of Steinbeck's reading of Genesis and of the novel's own genesis, Steinbeck follows the same pattern as Fromm and makes reference to great figures like Plato, Buddha, Christ and Hebrew prophets who have the same ideal of 'striving for love, truth and justice'.[1] The writer sympathizes with Fromm's idea of 'humanistic religion' according to which God is a 'symbol of man's own powers' and not a 'symbol of force and domination having power over man.'[2] Thus, both Steinbeck and Fromm stress the importance of individual moral responsibility which is the result of the duality of good and evil and leads to moral growth.

As Steinbeck believes that every human being since Adam and Eve, and Cain and Abel has struggled with the choice between good and evil, he announced even from the very beginning the idea of inherited evil as he opens his novel with a biblical description of the land, the Salinas Valley in northern California, the author's birthplace, which became the setting for several of Steinbeck's literary works, but its greatest role was in *East of Eden*. He reveals the rich history of the valley and all the different people that lived there; thus we are reminded how the stories of people are woven together from the beginning of time. Steinbeck tells us that someone came before, just like the Spaniards came to the Salinas Valley before the Americans, and the Indians before the Spaniards. It is this way that we are rendered that people have to overcome what they have been born with from the first chapter of the book. The description of the land is made in contrast and sharp terms:

> The valley land was deep and rich, but the foothills wore only a skin of topsoil no deeper than the grass roots; and the farther up the hills you went, the thinner grew the soil, with flints sticking through, until at the brush line it was a kind of dry flinty gravel that reflected the hot sun blindingly […] I have spoken of the rich years when the rainfall was plentiful. But there were dry years too, and they put a terror on the valley. […] Then would come six or seven pretty good years of rain… And then the dry years would come (Steinbeck, 1990: 10).

These oppositions emphasize the central idea of the novel, good versus evil: the land is both inviting and unfriendly, light and dark, safe and dangerous. The valley also symbolizes the arena for the struggle between good and evil: the valley is bordered by the Gabilan Mountains to the east – "light gay mountains full of sun and loneliness" – and the "dark and brooding" (Steinbeck, 1990:10) Santa Lucia Mountains to the west. The way in which they are described reveals the human dilemma of choosing between light and darkness, goodness and evil. The river of the valley seen as the river of life runs between these two opposing forces. In some way the writer creates the setting for

[1] John Steinbeck, *Journal of a Novel*, p.115. The passage from which he is borrowing can be found in Erich Fromm, *Psychoanalysis and Religion* (London: Victor Gollanz, 1951), p. 70
[2] *Ibid*., pp. 42-5.



BDD-A6052 © 2013 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:00:06 UTC)

his symbolical family going back to a primordial time. Only by returning to origins one can grasp the fate of humankind as a whole and of the Trasks in particular.

Concepts of determinism appear in the book as Steinbeck puts into light that, as descendants of Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, people inherited their fate and sins. Because of Adam and Eve's disobedience, every human being has to struggle with the choice between good and evil. In *East of Eden*, Steinbeck succeeded in recreating the Fall of Man by imagining characters with the features, behaviors, attitudes and relationships of the Serpent, Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel. Cathy represents Eve, Charles and Adam have the same relationship as Cain and Abel had and Cal represents the relationship of Cain with God.

*The Fall of Man* starts in chapter three of Genesis, but the novel incorporates Genesis Four. When Earth was created, God planted a Garden and in the middle of the garden there was the Tree of Life or the Tree of Knowledge. Instead of preventing Adam and Eve from eating the Apple of the Knowledge of good and evil, God gave them the choice for right or wrong because without choice Adam and Eve would have been God's prisoners. Otherwise, they would have no obedience to show God because nothing could lead them astray. In the Garden of Eden, there were also beasts of the field including the Serpent who "was more crafty than any of the wild animals the Lord God had made" (Genesis 3:1) and deceived Eve into eating the apple of knowledge. The Christian legend tells us that Adam and Eve tried in vain to recover or reconstruct from paradise, but they were cursed to fail. This cycle of construction and deconstruction formed the pattern of human history. Every age, consciously or unconsciously, forms in its literature a certain paradigm of the *Fall*. John Steinbeck has a unique view on this matter. He believes that the struggle between good and evil is one recurring story in human history. He goes so far and states that "there is no other story"(Steinbeck, 1970: 8). Steinbeck writes from the perspective of the Christian tradition and believes that every human being since Adam and Eve, and Cain and Abel has struggled with the choice between good and evil. The author says that each person, when looking back on his or her life, "will have left only the hard, clean question: Was it good or was it evil? Have I done well – or ill?" (Steinbeck, 1970: 69). There is no progress through the generations since the struggle is an individual one and each person has to fight against the same ancient problems.

Steinbeck's novel *East of Eden* expresses the perpetual conflict between good and evil in the society of the Salinas Valley as well as within the individuals of the Trask and Hamilton families. As the Trasks are allegorical, it is no coincidence that the members of this family have names beginning with the letters "A" or "C", a pattern too schematic that surprises the reader and frustrates him at the same time. Generation after generation, the main characters of the novel encounters the same problem of evil. Cyrus, the patriarch of the Trask family, chooses evil by stealing money as a U.S. army administrator. Charles is jealous on his brother, Adam whom he tries to kill. In the first generation of the Trasks, Adam is a Cain figure, but, later on, in relation to Cathy, his symbolic role changes and becomes a parallel to the biblical Adam. His dreams of a paradise in the Salinas Valley are clearly rooted in the opening chapters of Genesis. Using their encoded Genesis terms, he tells Samuel Hamilton: "I mean to make a Garden of my land. Remember my name is Adam. So far I've had no Eden, let alone, been driven out. Samuel, in turn, makes jokes about apples, wondering whether his Eve will let him to make an orchard only to make Adam reply: "You don't know this Eve…I don't think anyone can know her goodness" (Steinbeck, 1990: 189).



BDD-A6052 © 2013 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:00:06 UTC)

But Catherine like Eve in the biblical story seems to be open to the serpent's temptation. She chooses to commit evil manipulating and wounding the others for her own benefit. The writer introduces her like a demon. Moreover, she is seen as a fusion of Eve and the Eden serpent. The writer introduces her like a demon and emphasizes her serpent nature by giving her a "heart-shaped face, an abnormally small mouth, a little pointed tongue that sometimes flicked around her lips, small sharp teeth with the canine teeth longer and more pointed than the others, tiny ears without lobes and pressed close to her head, unblinking eyes, narrow hips" (Steinbeck, 1990: 75). She liked the dark and shunned light. When Sam Hamilton helped her giving birth to twins, she snarled at him and bit his hand severely.

Like Eve, Cathy is associated with sin, but whereas Eve is deceived into committing sin, Cathy commits evil simply for its own sake. Cathy is further on associated with green, as she decorates her room at Faye's in apple-green. The fact that she uses the colour green in her arrangements and more than that, the apple-green shade strengthens the connection between Cathy and Eve, between Cathy and the forbidden fruit: "The walls were clad in saffron silk and the drapes were apple green. It was a silken room—deep chairs with silk-upholstered cushions, lamps with silken shades, cabinets of golden oak, a large safe, black with gold lettering, and a roll top desk with a green-hooded double lamp over it"(Steinbeck,1990: 460).

The theme of repentance seems to be central in *East of Eden* and it is at least likely that Steinbeck consulted *Genesis Rabbah*[1] that describes Adam reciting Psalm 92 and celebrating "the power of repentance" in the presence of Cain who claims to repent.[2] In the novel *East of Eden*, Cal struggles probably the hardest of all the characters and confesses his feelings to Adam, worried that he has inherited a legacy of sin from his mother. As a teenager he prays to God to be like Aron, his brother: "Don't make me mean. I don't want to be" (Steinbeck, 1990: 320). When he is older, Lee tries to convince him that just because he has inherited part of his mother's nature, he does not have to let it control him and that everyone must be responsible for its own actions: "Of course you may have that in you. Everybody has. But you've got the other too" (Steinbeck, 1990: 459). Lee also tells him: "Whatever you do, it will be you who do it – not your mother" (Steinbeck, 1990: 459). Caleb takes into account Lee's advice and puts it into practice when he confronts his mother in chapter 39. Caleb sticks to his beliefs even when Cathy pours scorn on him. Eventually, Cal accepts the possibility of free choice between good and evil and feels remorse for committing sins and hurting those around him. The choice lies in his own hands, not in his inherited genes. However, the future generations will have to endure the same struggle as his ancestors did.

In Steinbeck's novels free will and determinism coexist and, although the central idea of the novel *East of Eden* is that evil is innate, the writer claims that each human being has the power to choose good over evil. He even believes in the free mind of the individual as he says "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" (Steinbeck, 1990: 134). This idea of free will has its roots in the word *timshel* (Thou mayest conquer) that appears in the Biblical myth Cain and Abel in Genesis 4:7. Lee, the house keeper, even sees this word

[1] Neusner, Jacob, trans., *Genesis Rabbah: The Judaic Commentary to the Book of Genesis,* 3 vols (Atlanta, GA,Scholar's Press, 1985),I 254.
[2] Jay Parini, *John Steinbeck: A Biography* (London: Heinemann, 1994), p. 575.



BDD-A6052 © 2013 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:00:06 UTC)

as the most important word in the world, as crucial for human condition. Steinbeck found this powerful word and used it as a way of conveying the hope that people can make their life better by choosing the right way. A condemned life would offer no motivation to live. In order to get the right translation of this word, Steinbeck asked his editor Pascal Covici to consult Louis Ginzberg (Professor of Talmud at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York and author of *The Legends of the Jews*). This concern of a proper translation of the word and its symbolic meaning also appears in *The Journal of a Novel:*

> The King James says of sin crouching at the door, 'Thou shalt rule over it.' The Ameerican Standard says, 'Do thou rule over it.' Now this new translation [the Douai edition published in Manchester in 1812] says, 'Thou *mayest* rule over it.' This is the most vital difference. The first two are 1, a prophecy and 2, an order, but 3 is the offering of free will. You can if you will but it is up to you (Steinbeck, 1990: 108).

According to Jackson Benson, the writer carved for Covici the cover of a box with the letters of this word.[1] It is a word that appears in Genesis 4:7 when God tells Cain that the choice is in his hands and he can choose good over sin. Although he mistakenly wrote the word *timshel*, "he clearly understood the significance of the freedom and with it the moral responsibility with which it endows the human race" (Wright, 2007: 51).

The novel *East of Eden* certainly found "new ways" to look at an old story. The biblical stories of Adam and Eve, and Cain and Abel seem to have meaning even in modern times. Steinbeck wants to make the reader acknowledge the importance of the Biblical tales for our humankind and their crucial moral message: "Two stories have haunted us and followed us from our beginning,' Samuel said. 'We can carry them along with us like invisible tail – the story of original sin and the story of Cain and Abel…here it is – such a little story to have made so deep a wound (Steinebck, 1990: 296-297). It is a story that speaks about our human nature and in Lee's belief (which is also Steinbeck's) it has lasted "because it is everybody's story…the symbol story of the human soul" (Steinbeck, 1990: 297). The Bible itself, along with other mythologies, Campbell argues, holds out the hope that the divine unity once so tragically lost can eventually be recorded dissolving the walls of paradise and restoring the ancient wisdom.[2] Although Steinbeck is normally regarded as having much interest in science, it seems that he can only go beyond the Bible. In his acceptance speech on the award of the Nobel Prize for Literature, he paraphrases St. John's Gospel: "In the end is the word, and the word is man and the word is with man" (Parini, 1994: 532). In both novels, *East of Eden* and *The Winter of Our Discontent*, Steinbeck expresses his continuous optimism and faith in man as he believes in humans' moral responsibility towards themselves and the community where they live.

[1] Benson, Jackson, *The True Adventures of John Steinbeck, The Writer*, Heinemann, London, 1984. pp. 564.
[2] Wright, Terry R. *The Genesis of Fiction: Modern Novelists as Biblical Interpreters*, England: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2007, p. 51.



BDD-A6052 © 2013 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:00:06 UTC)

***References***

Benson, Jackson, *The True Adventures of John Steinbeck, The Writer*, Heinemann, London, 1984. Print.
Campbell, Joseph, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Princeton University Press, 1972.Print.
Fromm, Fromm, *Psychoanalysis and Religion*, London, Victor Gollanz, 1951. Print.
Marks, Lester, *Thematic Design in the Novels of John Steinbeck*, The Hague, Mouton, 1971. Print.
Neusner, Jacob, trans., *Genesis Rabbah: The Judaic Commentary to the Book of Genesis*, 3 vols (Atlanta, GA,Scholar's Press, 1985), I 254. Print.
Parini, Jay, *John Steinbeck: A Biography* , London: Heinemann, 1994. Print.
Steinbeck, John *East of Eden*, London, Mandarin, 1990. Print.
--- --- ---*Journal of a Novel* ,London, Heinemann, 1970. Print
Wright, Terry R. *The Genesis of Fiction: Modern Novelists as Biblical Interpreters*, England: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2007. Print.



**BDD-A6052 © 2013 Universitatea din Pitești**
**Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:00:06 UTC)**