ETHAN HAWLEY'S DOUBLE IDENTITY IN JOHN STEINBECK'S THE WINTER OF OUR DISCONTENT

Maria Roxana TUDOROIU[G]

***Abstract**: In The Winter of our Discontent, Steinbeck carries his own ideas about success and popularity showing how much influence other people's opinions might have on an individual. The influence of the people around proves to be destructive for the protagonist of the novel The Winter of Our Discontent, Ethan Hawley, who is capable of anything to get his family and friends' respect. Eventually, he accepts to renounce his principles and change at society's will. Steinbeck made use of Biblical patterns and managed to create a character that some critics believed bizarre due to his double identity.*

Largely, this aricle aims at revealing the author's intention for his readers to become aware that his desire was that of being part of what human improvement meant and by doing this he created a controversial character who embodies powerful biblical characters in order to show that human beings are subject both to determinism and free will.

***Keywords**: double identity, Biblical characters, determinism.*

The Second World War changed the perspective people had on life and the values of the new created society were completely altered and by picturing protagonists such as Cathy Ames and Ethan Hawley, Steinbeck showed disapproval towards the new morals in America and the rise of materialism. As a realist and a leftist, Steinbeck is aware that along history, the American people have developed a character with social implications, between two realities: the Christian morality on the one hand and the liberalism of the capitalist economy on the other.

Both *The Winter of Our Discontent* and *East of Eden* re-enact several Biblical stories. Although the author was more a believer in science than in God, he chose to explore the sufferings and emotions of people reffering to the Old Testament story of Cain and Abel, hinting at the idea that we are all their descendants and consequently we all carry around their fate. Ethan Hawley, the main character in the novel *The Winter of Our Discontent*, is the perfect example of someone trying to make good choices, but, after a while, becomes confused and somehow ends up losing all his principles and eventually his hope. Habermas states that Steinbeck's characters live, work and speak according to their social status and their actions become predictable in terms of social determinism (Habermas, 1973:40) In the beginning of the novel Ethan, who struggles to remain decent and honest in a society where corruption is normal and freely accepted, embodies the biblical character Abel. Unfortunately, he notices that the world around him is more interested in earning money and making profit than in doing good and being compassionate. Money comes first, no matter what, being more important than the people around, including family, friends, and neighbours, showing that everyone is defined by selfishness and greed; and thus, he is on his way of becoming a Cain figure. In "Citizen Cain:" Meyer states that the allusions to both Cain and Abel applied to Ethan Hawley made from him a very controversial individual. He goes on and writes that in the first part of the novel, Steinbeck "brings his protagonist, Hawley, to a confrontation between his two natures, natures embodied symbolically in the images of

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

BDD-A14568 © 2014 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:02:20 UTC)

a revengeful and aggressive Cain and a victimized, passive Abel."(Meyer, 1994:200). In "Transforming Evil to Good: The Image of Iscariot in *The Winter of Our Discontent*," Meyer declares once again that Ethan is presented in an ambiguous manner as a result of the Biblical allusions in conflict concerning Steinbeck's protagonist.

Whereas in the first part of the novel the image of Cain stands in contrast with that of Abel, in the second part the contrast is between Iscariot and Christ. Meyer states that "Ethan...becomes a composite Christ/Judas figure in the novel, vacillating between the supposed moral legacy of the past... while simultaneously struggling with the realization that the future belongs to those who use the corruption around them to their own benefit."(Meyer, 1993:103)

Just before his descent into the "cave" or "Place" he echoes the words of Christ on the Cross: "Iama sabach thani." Similar to Jesus Christ who went on the Mountain to prey and talk to his Father, Ethan goes to his familiar "Place" at old Harbor where the Hawley dock is situated. The protagonist seems to feel that he will step into another role, that of Judas': "It's big changes take me there – big changes"(Steinbeck, 2000:43)

Alone in the night, at the "Place," Ethan starts asking himself some existential questions which reveal his concern whether people have free will or their future is in fact predetermined: "What is the saying – 'The stars incline, they do not command'? […] Do the cards incline but not command? [...] Could they incline me to a business cleverness I never had, to acquisitiveness foreign to me? Could I incline to want what I didn't want?"(Ibidem: 30) He comes to the conclusion that "there are the eaters and the eaten. That's a good rule to start with."(*Idem*) He is questioning himself what one gains by being moral in contrast to the one that is corrupted, immoral but rich. The conclusion is that they share the same fate: "Are the eaters more immoral than the eaten? In the end all are eaten – all – gobbled up by the earth, even the fiercest and the most crafty."(*Idem)*

Steinbeck's intention, even if not entirely fortunate, is to transform Ethan Hawley into a Christ figure. On Good Friday, the anniversary of Christ's crucifixion, Ethan undergoes a change, as the author intends his readers to perceive the idea that his protagonist is subjected to many temptations just like Christ, but only in the beginning is he able to withstand them successfully. Many of his friends and acquaintances want to see him in order to encourage his giving up morals and getting rich by all means possible. He is visited by Margie Young-Hunt, the town "witch," who tells him that he is going to be a rich man. But her aims are not sincere, her only goals being to ensure her own financial security, as she is described as "a predator" and "a huntress."(*ibidem*: 16) Ethan's boss Alfio Marullo comes into the grocery store and tells him that he "must look after number one" and "learn the tricks"(*ibidem*: 23) of the business. Another temptation is initiated by Mr. Biggers who wants Ethan to give his wholesale company the grocery's patronage in exchange for a bribe: "Everybody does it [;] [d]ont be a fool."(*ibidem*: 25) The whole town tries to convince Ethan that "the only meaningful business in the present world is making money."(Gerstenberger, 1965:60)

For Steinbeck, to be a human person is "tantamount to being caught in a paradox, to be engaged, sometimes unwittingly, in living with and working through the dilemma of being at once both a determined unit of nature and a free, value-articulating individual forever called upon to act."(Hart, 1997:48) He goes on and writes that man may be in an "epic struggle with nature" or with his own "uncontrollable passions and instincts,"(Idem) but he is still a free being with the ability to make choices. The choices that Ethan makes are far from being honest or respectable and his personality changes from the worse as pervertion lurks into his heart and takes over his personality. If in the beginning Ethan may be regarded as the Abel in the Cain-Abel role, his attitude changes

BDD-A14568 © 2014 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:02:20 UTC)

and “eventual duality is foreshadowed by his polar ancestry: pirates on one side, Puritans on the other. At the beginning of the novel, we learn that his passivity and moral conscience have never made him much of a businessman in New Baytown, which was founded by his ancestors.”(Langione, 1994:92)

Ethan is also seen as a Cain figure in relation with his childhood friend, Danny Taylor who has become the town drunk after dropping out from the U.S. Naval Academy. Because he is the owner of a flat land appropriate for an airport, Ethan, just like Cain, is going to sacrifice his closest friend for money, although in the end he will actually regret his deed: “I am my brother’s keeper and I have not saved him.”(Steinbeck, 2000:48) Ethan is responsible for Danny’s death as he gives him money for a rehabilitation program knowing that he will definitely spend it on alcohol, as he did every time he had the chance. Ethan even confesses that he knew Danny would not be able to refrain himself. As the latter directly confronted him after seeing through his schemes:

> You’re betting I’ll put up my meadow as collateral. And you’re betting that a thousand dollars’ worth of booze will kill me, and there you’ll be with an airport in your lap. […] Do you think I don’t remember you? You’re the kid with the built-in judge. Okay. I’m getting dry. The bottle’s empty. I’m going out. My price is one thousand bucks.”(*ibidem:*120)

But Ethan does not stop at hurting just one individual and, the betrayal, the central motif of the novel, is once again evident when Ethan behaves as a Judas and informs the Immigration Services that his boss Marullo, an Italian immigrant, is living in the United States illegally. His goal is to gain the grocery store from himself and gain a huge amount of money, by trying to restore the name his ancestors had and so find the pride of his family in himself. But, he does not stop there. The intention of robbing the bank seems rather extreme and lacks any kind of moral. Ethan comforts himself believing that his crimes are not made against human beings but against money, and so he can go on with his plans. He feels that it is time for him to run for Town Manager as Mr Baker also encourages him “You’re the man. Good family, reliable, property-owner, businessman, respected. You don’t have an enemy in town. Of course you’re the man.”(*ibidem*:250) As Langione points out, the harsh criticism of society brought upon by the author is meant to understand how men can easily change due to inappropriate influence: “Steinbeck thus exposes the moral degradation of New Baytown, where the perfect way to achieve the American rags to-riches ideal (or worse yet, the rags-to-respectability ideal) is to steal, manipulate, and murder.”(Langione, 1994:32)

As time goes by and his actions change into more and more dangerous ones, the protagonist switches his perspective and becomes fully aware of his guilt, but tries to justify his actions and present himself as a man confronted with situations beyond his control as if his fate had been predestined: “I did not need or want to be a citizen of this gray and dangerous country. I had nothing to do with the coming tragedy of July 7. It was not my process, but I could anticipate and I could use it.”(Steinbeck, 2000:187) He starts feeling remorse and noticing the flag he describes it as “slumped limp as a hanged man.”(*ibidem,* 203) Ethan hears on the radio that the bribes and scandals in New Baytown are being disclosed and, as a modern Judas, he starts being afraid that he will be held responsible for his crimes: “I was thinking maybe it is – everybody’s crime.”(*ibidem:* 212) He becomes aware that people are accountable for their actions and he could have chosen to remain a poor man but a moral individual, instead of

BDD-A14568 © 2014 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:02:20 UTC)

betraying his values and chasing empty dreams. What strikes the protagonist the most is the changes he has undergone. If in the first half of the novel he had been "a paragon of scrupulous standards in a world polluted by sin,"(Langione, 1994:32) as time goes by Ethan then shifts to a Cain figure and ventures in all sort of morally reprehensible business.

The changes Ethan undergoes help him understand that people were more corrupted than he thought. His own son did not care about values. His examples were those of people giving up morality and principles every day, with no regret "Who cares? Everybody does it. […] Don't you read the papers? Everybody right up to the top – just read the papers. You get to feeling holy, just read the papers. I bet you took some in your time, because they all do."(Steinbeck, 2000:273)

However, he makes a proper choice when he decides to give up his suicidal thoughts. Looking for the razor blades, Ethan finds his treasured talisman that his daughter shoved in his pocket. This talisman helps him give meaning to his life and make sense of a contradictory existence as carved on its surface is an "endless interweaving shape that seem[s] to move and yet [goes] no place. It [is] living but [has] no head or tail, nor beginning or end… You [can] see into it and yet not through it."(Idem:126) Just like man and his world, the talisman is a bundle of contradictions. It connects "the historical with the contemporary, personal with the universal, and temporary with the cosmic."(Chadha, 1990:148) As Hart states, for Steinbeck, "man is not just a cultural or political or economic animal but fundamentally a species in nature, a unique and hopeful part of the whole and never detached from it."(Hart, 1997:52) As he realizes that hope lies in his daughter, he says "I had to get back – had to return the talisman to its new owner…Else another light might go out."(Steinbeck, 2000:276)

Eventually, Ethan understands that man must not give up while facing the uncontrolled forces of nature but believe that there is still hope for the next generations. In his Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech, the author stated: "The danger and the glory and the choice rest finally in man." In *The Winter of Our Discontent*, the author expresses his continuous optimism and faith in man as he believes in humans' moral responsibility towards themselves and the community where they live. The writer focused greatly on being a moral writer and he maintained his ethical views, and, while creating his paradoxical characters, his intentions were those of showing the difference between right and wrong and especially the consequences of the immoral choices. In Steinbeck's work, dealing with ethics also involves paradoxes and controversy and this is one of the main reasons his fiction is still *in fashion* nowadays: "When ethical contexts do occur they often come obliquely: the role of conflict and paradox, the relevance of biblical/religious allusions, individual freedom and cultural oppression."(Timmerman, 2005:33)

References

Chadha, Rajni. *Social Realism in the Novels of John Steinbeck*. New Delhi, York: Harman Publishing House, 1990, p. 148.

Gerstenberger, Donna. "Steinbeck's American Waste Land." in *Modern Fiction Studies*. 1965, 11:60

Habermas, Jurgen. *Theory and Practice*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1973.

Hart, Richard H. "Steinbeck on Man and Nature: A Philosophical Reflection" in Susan F. Beegel, Susan Shillinglaw and Wesley N. Tiffney, Jr. eds., *Steinbeck and the Environment*. University of Alabama Press, 1997.

Langione, Matthew. "John Steinbeck and the Perfectability of Man" in *Steinbeck Review*. 3(2): 92.

BDD-A14568 © 2014 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:02:20 UTC)

Meyer, Michael J. “Citizen Cain: Ethan Hawley’s Double Identity in *The Winter of Our Discontent*” in Donald V. Coers, Athens: Ohio UP, 1994.
Meyer, Michael J. “Tansforming Evil to Good, The Image of Iscariot in *The Winter of Our Discontent*” in *Steinbeck quarterly*. 1993, 26(3-4): 103.
Steinbeck, John. *The Winter of Our Discontent*. Barbara A. Heavilin ed. Edwin Mellen Press, 2000.
Timmerman, John H. “John Steinbeck: An Ethics of Fiction” in *The Moral Philosophy of John Steinbeck*. Stephen K. George ed. USA: Scarecrow Press, 2005.

Electronic resources

John Steinbeck's speech at the Nobel Banquet at the City Hall in Stockholm, December 10, 1962. Nobel Prizes and Laureates. Web. 10th June 2014

BDD-A14568 © 2014 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:02:20 UTC)