

\

Cleveland Novel Club
November 6, 2018
Submitted by Jill Korbin

John Steinbeck's *East of Eden*, originally published in 1952, has never been out of print. I will begin by saying that John Steinbeck is one of my favorite, if not my favorite, authors. I have read *East of Eden* many times, with these readings usually separated by at least a decade. It is always a book I want to revisit. In these many readings I have come to understand that the book, in the telling of this saga of three families across generations, leaves one with mixed messages, interpretations, and meanings. On one reading the outcome is perhaps not bright and sunny, not a neatly wrapped up happy ending, but holds promise that Cal may go on to lead a good life finally receiving his father's blessing even after destroying the son his father so dearly loved. On another read it is a dark book, full of foreboding about the bad things to come....and come they do, one after the other... with the final blow the beautiful and beloved Aron killed in war after his brother forces an introduction to their brothel madam mother..... what a price to extract from the story and the reader.

We will learn more about John Steinbeck from Whitney Lloyd's biographical paper tonight. *East of Eden* is considered the most autobiographical of Steinbeck's novels. *East of Eden* is a massive narrative, with multiple and complex characters peopling the story. It is a saga of three families, and draws out human conundrums of love and relationships, identity, good and evil, right and wrong, and free will. *East of Eden* is most obviously about good and evil, rooted in the biblical

story of Cain and Abel, even to the point that the brothers bear the first same initials Adam and Charles, Aaron and Cal. But it is much more.

While *East of Eden* is purported to be autobiographical, or at least the most autobiographical of his novels, is it really? We learn the names and lineage of his family on his maternal side. The deepest insight we have of John Steinbeck himself is his and his sister's bad behavior towards a German immigrant that continued to bring him shame. We get the sense of his and his family's deep love and reverence for Samuel Hamilton, his grandfather. Olive is named as his mother but we wait in vain to learn much about her. Other than his name appearing in the book, we really do not learn much about Steinbeck himself without pairing with biographical knowledge that will be presented by Whitney. How could he develop a character as base and evil as Cathy, who manipulated the attention of young boys to create the illusion that she had been molested, killed her parents in a fire and feigned her own death in that same fire, became a prostitute and the personal consort of the owner of a series of brothels, married Aaron but drugged him so she could sleep with his brother (allowing her to later further torment Adam by suggesting his boys were not biologically his), shot Adam, gained the confidence of the brothel owner only to precipitate her death. Steinbeck had a particularly unhappy second marriage to the mother of his two sons, and some speculate that this is where his creation of Cathy/Kate arose. Still, Steinbeck cannot completely erase the ideal of maternal love, and in all her evilness Steinbeck acknowledges the complexity by writing how Cathy (now Kate) has been secretly watching Aron.

East of Eden centers on good and evil and on free will. Steinbeck plumbs this universal story of sibling rivalry, set down in the biblical story of Cain and Abel, and running as a theme through the story of Adam's relationship with his own brother Charles, and then the naming of his two sons, Aaron and Cal. He explores of differential parental love, and the life-altering need of the less-loved child to seek the father's love. Adam's brother Charles' gift of an expensive knife was rebuffed in favor of a free puppy from Adam that their father cherished appeared again as Cal tried to gain his father's love by a business deal to earn back the money their father lost in an ill-fated attempt to ship frozen vegetables (lettuce) across the country. It was spurned just as Charles' knife had been, and Cal burned, or sacrificed, the gift (a great deal of money).

This dynamic is why *East of Eden* continues to compel? As Lee, the Chinese servant but likely the key character of the novel observes, "I think this is the best-known story in the world [of Cain and Abel] because it is everybody's story. I think it is the symbol story of the human soul....The greatest terror a child can have is that he is not loved, and rejection is the hell he fears." And Lee goes on to explain, "And with rejection comes anger, and with anger some kind of crime in revenge for the rejection, and with the crime guilt – and there is the story of mankind."

After years of study, Lee and a group of Confucian scholars he consulted felt they could comment on free will and evil from the fourth chapter of Genesis. "The American Standard translation [do thou] orders men to triumph over sin ... the King James translation makes a promise in "Thou shalt, meaning that men will surely triumph over sin. But the Hebrew word,

the word *timshel* – “Thou Mayest” – that gives a choice.” And it is this choice that Adam leaves with Cal after Cal destroys his brother.

Lee’s role is as the servant who is the rock of the household. He reveals himself to Samuel Hamilton who he sees as being able to separate perception (of Lee as Chinese) from the reality of human interaction. Lee speaks pidgin and wears a pigtail because it is expected of him, not because it is the reality of him. And it is through Lee that Steinbeck expresses such deep understanding of human nature and relationships. Lee points to the need to code switch such that he speaks pidgin almost everywhere though his English and scholarship is impeccable.

Steinbeck’s insights are given life through Lee and are scattered throughout the book and easy to miss in this massive narrative. This is part of the beauty of Steinbeck. For example, when Adam is ready to send the boys to bed early, Lee responds “Mr. Trask, do you tink the thoughts of people suddenly become important at a given age? Do you have sharper feelings or clearer thoughts now than when you were 10?” Who is this Lee who reviewers have critiqued as a maudlin amateur philosopher? Perhaps it is through Lee rather than through Adam that Steinbeck gives meaning to life and the narrative.

Steinbeck loved this book, saying it was the most difficult work he had ever done but that it was what he wanted to write all of his life, that it was for his sons. The book resonated with readers such that it became number one on the fiction bestseller list by November 1952, after its release in September. Literary critics, on the other hand, found much to criticize: that it was melodramatic and sensationalistic in its portray of brutality and sexuality (though by today’s

standards there was virtually no sexually explicit material); that its characters were not realistic (who could conceive someone as evil as Cathy/Kate); and that its structure was flawed in the awkwardness of Steinbeck as the narrator. It was also criticized for the oversimplified juxtaposition of good and evil even into the names of Adam and his brother Charles and his sons Aron and Caleb, an almost shameless calling out of the biblical Cain and Abel.

East of Eden was selected by Oprah for her book club in 2003, and 50 years after its publication soared to the second spot on the best seller list. One can dismiss this as the influence of Oprah, but it also speaks to the enduring meaning of this book to the reader. *East of Eden* is a massive narrative, with multiple and complex characters peopling the story.