

Discussion Questions for *East of Eden* by John Steinbeck

1. In the novel, Steinbeck develops certain themes that relate to the creation myth, and applies them to California in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These themes include the following (among others):

- The actual creation of the world (notice Steinbeck's treatment of the stages of California's settlement in chapters 1 [1] and 1[2])
- The animosity of the pair of brothers Adam/Charles; Aron/Cal
- The introduction of evil into the world, personified by Cathy

Does he do an effective job of conveying the meaning of the Genesis myths in each of the above examples, while at the same time developing an effective story of the Trask and the Hamiltons?

2. Which of the two brother pairs (Adam/Charles, Aron/Cal) is more effective in drawing a parallel to the Cain/Abel myth of the Bible? Which of the brother pairs is more effectively portrayed in the novel?
3. Is the character of Cathy sufficiently developed to be the personification of evil in the novel? (Steinbeck portrays her as committing a number of heinous acts, including murder, lying, covetousness, adultery and hatred of her parents. Steinbeck does not overtly attribute hatred towards God to Cathy (which would complete her evil qualities), but are we to assume this as part of her character)? Despite this list of terrible qualities, does she have sufficient "weight" to be the personification of evil?
4. The character of Lee is well-developed in the novel. He acts as a sounding board for Aron, Cal and Adam, and is Samuel Hamilton's friend. What is Lee's function in the novel (is it a stretch to describe him as an angel or semi-divine being who acts as helper to mankind)?
5. Samuel Hamilton is seen as a visionary in the novel. Is it a stretch to see him as a kind of prophet to continue the Biblical creation myth?
6. Apart from the questions about the Biblical creation myth, does the novel portray the development of the West in an effective manner?

1. Genesis – naming of animals “I remember my childhood names for grasses and secret flowers. I remember where a toad may live and what time the birds awaken in the summer—and what trees and seasons smelled like—how people looked and walked and smelled even;” page 3

Sweep of history and comparison to Genesis - “And that was the long Salinas Valley. Its history was like that of the rest of the state. First there were Indians, and inferior breed without energy, inventiveness, or culture, a people that lived on grubs and grasshoppers and shellfish, too lazy to hunt or fish. ...Then the hard, dry Spaniards came exploring through, greedy and realistic, and their greed was for gold or God. They collected souls as they collected jewels...” Page 7

“Adam made one desperate jump backward and raised his hands to guard his face. His brother moved precisely, each foot planted firmly. One fist lanced delicately to get his range, and then the bitter-frozen work—a hard blow in the stomach, and Adam’s hands dropped; then four punches to the head. Adam felt the bone and gristle of his nose crunch. He raised his hands again and Charles drove at his heart. And all this time Adam looked at his brother as the condemned look hopelessly and puzzled at the executioner.” Page 39

Cathy – “I believe there are monsters born in the world to human parents. Some you can see, misshapen and horrible, with huge heads or tiny bodies; some are born with no arms, no legs, some with three arms; some with tails or mouths in odd places. They are accidents and no one’s fault, as used to be thought. Once they were considered the visible punishments for concealed sins.

And just as there are physical monsters, can there not be mental or psychic monsters born? The face and body may be perfect, but if a twisted gene or a malformed egg can produce physical monsters, may not the same process produce a malformed soul?

Monsters are variations from the accepted normal to a greater or a less degree. As a child may be born without an arm, so one may be born without kindness or the potential of conscience. A man who loses his arms in an accident has a great struggle to adjust himself to the lack, but one born without arms suffers only from people who find him strange. Having never had arms, he cannot miss them. Sometimes when we are little we imagine how it would be to have wings, but there is no reason to suppose it is the same feeling birds have. No, to a monster the norm must seem monstrous, since everyone is normal to himself. To the inner monster it must be even more obscure, since he has no visible thing to compare with others. To a man born without conscience, a soul-stricken man must seem ridiculous. To a criminal, honesty is foolish. You must not forget that a monster is only a variation, and that to a monster the norm is monstrous.

It is my belief that Cathy Ames was born with the tendencies, or lack of them, which drove and forced her all of her life. Some balance wheel was mis-weighted, some gear out of ratio. She was not like other people, never was from birth. And just as a cripple may learn to utilize his lack so that he becomes more effective in a limited field than the uncrippled, so did Cathy, using her difference, make a painful and bewildering stir in her world.

There was a time when a girl like Cathy would have been called possessed by the devil. She would have been exorcized to cast out the evil spirit, and if after many trials that did not work, she would have been burned as a witch for the good of the community. The one thing that may not be forgiven a witch is her ability to distress people, to make them restless and uneasy and even envious." Pages 95-96

2. Adam/Charles – First sons of Cyrus. Charles tries to kill Adam because he believes that Cyrus loves Adam better, but that Adam does not return his love. Alice Trask loves Charles because she thinks that he has "hidden" reserves of good. She bases this belief on the fact that Charles has left her gifts, when in reality, it was Adam.

In Genesis, Cain is marked on the forehead by God as a sign that men should not kill him. In East of Eden, Charles is marked by a rock that struck him in the forehead (page 62).

In Genesis, Abel offers his lambs to God as a sacrifice; Cain is a farmer and his sacrifice is not acceptable to the Lord. Adam is first a soldier, then moves to California to raise animals and do a little farming. Charles is a farmer who ekes out his existence, despite being rich.

Adam to Samuel Hamilton " Look, Samuel, 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." Page 221.

Samuel to Adam about naming his sons – "Of course. Your first born—Cain and Abel." Adam said, "Oh no. No, we can't do that." Page 349

"Two stories have haunted us and followed us from our beginning," Samuel said. "We carry them along with us like invisible tails—the story of original sin and the story of Cain and Abel. And I don't understand either of them at all but I feel them." Page 350.

"Maybe he did," said Samuel. "But Cain lived and had children, and Abel lives only in the story. We are Cain's children. " Page 354.

"I think I can," Lee answered Samuel. "I think this is the best-known story in the world because it is everybody's story. I think it is the symbol story of the human soul. I'm feeling my way now—don't jump on me if I'm not clear. The greatest terror a child can have is that he is not loved, and rejection is the hell he fears. I think everyone in the world to a large or

small extent has felt rejection. 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. I think that if rejection could be amputated, the human would not be what he is. Maybe there would be fewer crazy people. I am sure in myself there would not be many jails. It is all there—the start, the beginning. One child, refused the love he craves, kicks the cat and hides his secret guilt; and another steals so that money will make him loved; and a third conquers the world—and always the guilt and revenge and more guilt. The human is the only guilty animal. Now wait! Therefore I think this old and terrible story is important because it is a chart of the soul—the secret, rejected, guilty soul. Mr. Trask, you said you did not kill your brother and then you remembered something. I don't want to know what it was, but was it very far apart from Cain and Abel?...” page 355.

Lee - “After two years we felt that we could approach your sixteen verses (Cain killing Abel and being reprimanded by the Lord) of the fourth chapter of Genesis. My old gentlemen felt that these words were very important too- ‘Thou shalt’ and ‘Do thou.’ And this was the gold from our mining: ‘thou mayest.’ ‘Thou mayest rule over sin.’ The old gentlemen smiled and nodded and felt the years were well spent. It brought them out of their Chinese shells too, and right now they are studying Greek.” Pages 397-8.

. . . “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.” Lee’s voice was a chant of triumph.”

Samuel to Lee: “‘Thou mayest rule over sin,’ Lee. That’s it. I do not believe all men are destroyed. I can name you a dozen who were not, and they are the ones the world lives by. It is true of the spirit as it is true of battles—only the winners are remembered. Surely most men are destroyed, but there are others who like pillars of fire guide (reference to God leading Israelites in the desert) guide frightened men through the darkness. Thou mayest, Thou mayest! What glory!. . .” page 405

Aron/Cal. Aron was named after Moses’ brother Aaron (first priest of Israel);who didn’t make it to the promised land. Cal is named after Caleb, who together with Joshua, was one of the two remaining members of Moses’ party to make it to the promised land. Aron dies in the war and Cal survives (not parallel to Aron not seeing the promised land).

Cal tells Lee that he fears that he has evil in him, and Lee tells him that he has good, too on page 584.

Cal survives and courts Abra (who says that she has evil in her); Cain survives and so does Cal (we are Cain’s children).

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“When I said Cathy was a monster it seemed to me that it was so. Now I have bent close with a glass over the small print of her and reread the footnotes, and I wonder if it was true. The trouble is that since we cannot know what she wanted, we will never know whether or not she got it. If rather than running toward something, she ran away from something, we can’t know whether she escaped. Who knows but that she tried to tell someone or everyone what she was like and could not, for lack of a common language. Her life may

have been her language, formal, developed, indecipherable. It is easy to say she was bad, but there is little meaning unless we know why." Page 242.

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Lee counsels Samuel, Adam, Aron, Cal and Abra. He works with the Rabbis and old Chinese men to decipher the meaning of the Genesis verses.

"Maybe you'll come to know that every man in every generation is refined. Does a craftsman, even in his old age, lose his hunger to make a perfect cup—thin, strong, and translucent? (reference to the concept of "thing" and maker and made)." He held his cup in the light. "All impurities burned out and ready for the glorious flux, and for that—more fire. And then either the slag heap, or perhaps what no one in the world ever quite gives up, perfection." He drained his cup and he said loudly, "Cal, listen to me. Can you think that whatever made us—would stop trying?" Page 775.