

## 摘要

许多评论家，如彼得·李斯卡和霍华德·雷文特，认为约翰·斯坦贝克的《伊甸之东》是成功的失败之作。这些评论家指出，尽管斯坦贝克的写作技法已经表现成熟，但在这部小说中仍然存在缺憾。在这些评论家的众多研究中，霍华德·雷文特的研究最为引人注目。这位评论家认为斯坦贝克在掌握结构与素材上仍有不足。他从《伊甸之东》的叙事方法、角色塑造、小说结构、主题设计以及小说基调等方面出发来证明这一观点。然而，雷文特的研究，相对而言，比较宽泛。而本文则集中探讨分析了《伊甸之东》这部小说的主题设计。

本文认为，《伊甸之东》的主题是颂扬人类的自由意志。斯坦贝克利用圣经里该隐和亚伯的故事来阐释人性。他认为人是善与恶的结合体。他指出，人类能够自由地选择从善或者从恶。斯坦贝克通过以下三种方法表达了这一主题：一是重新定义希伯来文“timshel”；二是借叙事者“我”进行声明；三是在主角及其原型之间进行对比。首先，斯坦贝克把“timshel”定义为“你能”。这种定义赋予了人类选择的权利。其次，通过叙事者“我”的声明，斯坦贝克向读者阐述了人类自由意志的重要性。再次，斯坦贝克用该隐和亚伯作为小说中主角的原型，来证明人类可以自由选择从善或者从恶，并且自我完善。

本文指出，《伊甸之东》的主题设计精确，处理巧妙。但是，本文认为在主题发展中，斯坦贝克也创造了一些前后矛盾之处。而这些矛盾之处阻碍了读者们对小说主题的发掘。这个结论是通过对小说的故事情节、人物性格的塑造以及小说基调的分析而得出的。本文认为，《伊甸之东》中的某些情节纯属无用之功。这些情节不但不能为主题服务，相反，他们延迟了主题的发展。而有些人物性格的塑造，则与主题产生了冲突。并且，斯坦贝克在小说中表达了两种对立的思想倾向：乐观主义和悲观主义。本文指出，《伊甸之东》的主题设计是为了创造出主流的乐观主义基调。然而，这部小说中体现的悲观思想根深蒂固，甚至在某些时候抑制了乐观主义。于是，乐观主义与悲观主义的对抗

形成了与主题对立的矛盾之处。

本文的引言部分着重介绍了目前相关于《伊甸之东》的评论，并提出自己的观点。第一章则侧重分析了小说的主题，第二章与第三章则主要分析了主题发展中的矛盾。结论则总结了文中观点，提出本文的创新之处与意义。同时，结论中也指出了本文的不足之处。

**关键词：**伊甸之东；主题设计；矛盾

## Synopsis

*East of Eden* is a novel of John Steinbeck, which has been widely regarded as a successful failure by many literary critics, such as Peter Lisca and Howard Levant. Those critics argue that despite Steinbeck's mature craftsmanship in this novel, he still has some problems. And among all the studies of those critics, Howard Levant's research is the most attractive. Levant thinks that Steinbeck has some problems in grasping the structure and materials. He proves his idea from many perspectives, such as the narration, the handling of the characters, the structure, the thematic design and the basic tone of the novel. However, Levant's research is too general. In order to give a much more detailed and specific research of this novel, this M.A. thesis focuses on analyzing the thematic design of *East of Eden*.

This thesis proposes that the theme of *East of Eden* is to celebrate human beings' free will. Steinbeck uses the biblical myth of "Cain and Abel" to explain human nature. He thinks that human is the combination of both good and evil. Also, he suggests that human beings have free will to choose between good and evil. Steinbeck expresses this dominant idea through three methods: the definition of the Hebrew word "timshel", the statement of the narrator "I" and the contrasts between the main characters and their archetypes. Steinbeck proposes that "timshel" means "thou mayest", which endows human beings with a sense of choice. Besides, through the narrator "I", Steinbeck expresses his opinions about the importance of human beings' free will to readers. Furthermore, he uses Cain and Abel as the archetypes of the protagonists in *East of Eden*, to show that human beings can choose between good and evil, to perfect themselves.

Steinbeck's thematic design is explicit and well-manipulated. Nonetheless, this thesis points out that during the thematic development, Steinbeck has also created some inconsistencies. Those inconsistencies, to some degree, have hindered readers' exploration of the theme. This conclusion is obtained by analyzing the plots, the characters and the tones of *East of Eden*. This thesis points out that some plots are episodic and useless. They do not serve but delay the development of the theme. And some characters contradict the theme. Moreover, Steinbeck expresses two

contradictory views in this novel: pessimism and optimism. The thesis argues that although the thematic design aims to create prevailing optimism in *East of Eden*, pessimism is too strong and sometimes it even overcomes optimism. The conflicts between the spontaneous pessimism and the imposed optimism create an inconsistency against the theme.

Introduction reviews the past criticism of *East of Eden* and proposes the argument of the thesis. Chapter One analyzes the thematic design of this novel. Chapter Two and Three analyze the inconsistencies which appear in the thematic development. And the last part is conclusion, in which the main idea of the thesis is concluded, and the originality and significance of the thesis are pointed out. Also, the deficiency of the thesis is pointed out in the last part.

**Key Words:** *East of Eden*; thematic design; inconsistencies

# 厦门大学学位论文著作权使用声明


本人完全了解厦门大学有关保留、使用学位论文的规定。厦门大学有权保留并向国家主管部门或其指定机构送交论文的纸质版和电子版，有权将学位论文用于非赢利目的的少量复制并允许论文进入学校图书馆被查阅，有权将学位论文的内容编入有关数据库进行检索，有权将学位论文的标题和摘要汇编出版。保密的学位论文在解密后适用本规定。


本学位论文属于

1、保密（ ），在          年解密后适用本授权书。

2、不保密（☒）          。

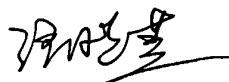
（请在以上相应括号内打“√”）

作者签名：  日期：2008年6月6日

导师签名：  日期：2008年6月6日

## 厦门大学学位论文原创性声明

兹呈交的学位论文，是本人在导师指导下独立完成的研究成果。本人在论文写作中参考的其他个人或集体的研究成果，均在文中以明确方式标明。本人依法享有和承担由此论文产生的权利和责任。

声明人（签名）：

2008年 6 月 6 日

## Introduction

*East of Eden* (E.E), an allegorical novel written by John Steinbeck, is based on the biblical myth of "Cain and Abel". In this novel, John Steinbeck proposes a new definition of the Hebrew word "timshel", suggesting that human is the combination of both good and evil. He argues that human beings have free will to choose between good and evil.

John Steinbeck believes that all novels and all poetry are built on the never-ending contest in people of good and evil. And *East of Eden* is an example to show his belief. Steinbeck is quite satisfied with this novel. He claims overtly that *East of Eden* is the most successful novel among all his works. He says: "I think everything else I have written has been, in a sense, practice for this...If *East of Eden* isn't good, then I've been wasting my time. It has in it everything I have been able to learn about my art or craft or profession in all these years" (qtd. in Kale 11).

After the publication of *East of Eden*, some critics have highly praised this novel. Bernard Kale, when reviewing *East of Eden*, says that "*East of Eden* in 1952 was to be the summation of a quarter-century's literary endeavors, the best fruit of Steinbeck's maturity" (11). Some French critics, including Claude-Edmonde Magny, Mark Schorer, and Joseph Wood Krutch, also compliment Steinbeck on the prose style of this novel. Magny finds in *East of Eden* a "special type of coherence, which is not in the least novelistic" (6), and Krutch thinks that never, "not even in *The Grapes of Wrath*," has Steinbeck "exhibited such a grasp upon himself and upon his materials" (1). Schorer, like Magny, finds a new kind of unity in *East of Eden*: ".....yet the tone of this book, the bold ease with which the 'I' takes over at the outset and appears and disappears and reappears throughout, both holds it together and gives it its originality, the relaxations of its freedom" (22). According to these critics, Steinbeck perfectly grasped the materials on which the plot of *East of Eden* is based and endeavored to make the structure of his novel harmonious and consistent.

Nonetheless, there are also some dissenting voices. For example, Arthur Mizener somewhat angrily debases Steinbeck as "an 'incurable amateur philosopher; whose real but limited talent is, in his best books, watered down by tenth-rate

philosophizing, and in his worst books, is overwhelmed by it" (qtd. in Fontenrose 1). And a reviewer of *Time* so briefly puts it, "perhaps Steinbeck should have stuck to his original idea of telling just the family history... *East of Eden* is a huge grab bag" ("It Started in a Garden" 110). Also, Paul McCarthy argues that *East of Eden* lacks the command of material and insights into American ideas and people. He says, "The apparent failure to relate the two families and the awkward mixture of allegory and romanticism weakened another wise impressive work—*East of Eden*" (19). When confronting such hostile words, Steinbeck still keeps his optimistic views about the value of this novel. In a letter to Barnaby Conrad, some sentences reveal Steinbeck's joy about readers' warm responses to *East of Eden*: "I am pleased that you like Eden. It is doing better than I had dared to hope. It is our tendency to think when critics do not like our work that they have a scanner. I guess I just don't bring out the best in critics...the pleasant thing is that people go right on reading the books" (*A Life in Letters* 464).

Besides the purely positive or negative comments, some critics' opinions appear to be neutral. Those critics see not only the merits of the descriptions of some characters in *East of Eden*, but also the shortcomings of the prose style in this novel. For example, F. W. Watt considers *East of Eden* a book of "anti-climax", a book with "a large, sprawling, discordant narrative, mixing realism, melodrama, semi-abstract philosophizing, and personal testament". He also declares that the novel is a failure which "captures interest and deserves respect and sympathy", since it "contains several memorable characters and a number of passages as fine as any Steinbeck has written" (Watt 9). In general, Watt suggests that *East of Eden* has three flaws: awkward and obtrusive symbolism, unsatisfactorily resolved mixture of morals and unconvincing plots blending fantasy and realism.

The three different kinds of attitudes towards *East of Eden* imply a fact that Steinbeck's status as a literary giant is still in question. Confronted by the divergence between critical and popular taste, one may be tempted to ignore the problem, to damn either or both extremes, or to relegate Steinbeck's stories to uninstructed readers and introductory literature courses where they can prepare students to read more complex and mature work. Or one may attempt to discover the causes of Steinbeck's popularity to see if the crowd has gone right. Thus, a balanced judgment



of *East of Eden* is quite helpful to common readers.

The critical controversy over the prose style of *East of Eden* has been going on. It is obvious that critics are mainly concentrating on whether the materials express what Steinbeck wanted to say. This controversy has caught many critics' attention. For example, Peter Lisca and Howard Levant both have researched the structure of *East of Eden*. And Howard Levant's research is especially comprehensive. Levant's research focuses on Steinbeck's effort to fuse structure and materials into a harmonious whole. He argues that *East of Eden* is a strangely unblended novel, an impressive, greatly flawed work. He thinks that although Steinbeck shows mature craftsmanship in *East of Eden*, Steinbeck still has problems in grasping the structure and materials. That is to say, Steinbeck has not created a harmonious unity of Structure and materials in this novel. In order to prove this, Levant examines the narrative ways, the handling of characters, the structure, the thematic design and the basic tone of *East of Eden*. Levant criticizes that all these aspects have flaws. Some particular aspects of the narration lack organic form; the handling of some characters disregards a harmonious relationship between structure and materials; the structure is schematic rather than organic; the thematic design is explicit but creates internal contradictions; and the basic tone of optimism is not fluently flowing in but imposed. These flaws make the whole novel as "fumbling as ever" (Levant 235).

Although Howard Levant offers a full-scale examination of the prose style of *East of Eden*, since he has analyzed too many aspects in a small chapter of a book, he cannot explain each aspect in great detail. Naturally, some comments are rough and not impressive. So, I decide to do a specific research on only one aspect—the thematic design of *East of Eden*. In this essay, I will focus on the exploration of the relationship between the theme and the literary components in *East of Eden*, such as characterization, plot-arrangement and tones. In my opinion, Steinbeck uses the biblical myth of "Cain and Abel" to explain the theme of this novel —human beings have free will to choose to do good or evil. However, during the thematic development, Steinbeck has created some inconsistencies which hinder readers' exploration of the theme.

In the first chapter, I will explore the theme of *East of Eden*. In my opinion, the theme of this novel is that human beings have free will to choose to do good or

evil. And this theme is developed by Steinbeck through three methods: the definition of “timshel”; the statements given by the narrator “I”; and the comparisons and contrasts among characters and their archetypes.

In Chapter Two, I will try to reveal the ambiguities in plot, characterization and thematic development. And I will also explain why these ambiguities occur. I find that Cathy Ames Trask’s image contradicts the theme of *East of Eden*. Moreover, there are also some internal contradictions within each of the characters, such as Lee and Samuel Hamilton. These contradictions, more or less, have hindered readers’ perception of the theme. Furthermore, I discover that some plots in this novel are irrelevant to and do not help to build up the theme. These ambiguities are due to different reasons. The influence of Steinbeck’s life experience is one of the reasons. Besides, Steinbeck’s original plan for this novel to write an autobiography of his family for his two sons is another one.

Chapter Three will move on to look for the inconsistencies between Steinbeck’s pessimism and the theme. In my opinion, Steinbeck intended *East of Eden* to be optimistic. However, a strong pessimism also occurs from the beginning of this novel. Compared with the imposed optimism, pessimism is more persistent. And this strong pessimism weakens the optimism shaped by “timshel”. Moreover, sometimes pessimism overcomes optimism. Thus, the conflict between two different tones occurs. And this conflict makes it hard for readers to perceive the theme.

This essay, generally, is based on textual analysis.

## Chapter One The Thematic Design of *East of Eden*

The theme of a work of literature is its central or dominant idea. This idea is seldom stated explicitly. Instead, it is conveyed through the selection and arrangement of details; through the emphasis of certain words, events or images; and through the actions and reactions of characters. *East of Eden* is no exception. Through three methods—the definition of the Hebrew word “timshel”, the statement of the narrator “I” and making contrasts between each of the characters and their archetypes—Steinbeck proposes that human beings have free will to choose to do good or evil. And this proposal, in my opinion, eventually becomes the theme of this novel. However, it is necessary to notice that the proposal is questionable in many critics’ eyes, since the foundation—the meaning of “timshel”—that the proposal grounds has not been publicly admitted correct yet. Some critics criticize the novel is over philosophizing. Steinbeck wrote in the journal he kept while writing *East of Eden*, “so many of the reviews of my work show a fear and a hatred of ideas and speculations[...] Any attempt to correlate in terms of thought is frightening” (“Journal of a Novel” 166-167). Steinbeck attempts to correlate “timshel” with every human being. But when he tries to prove the absoluteness of timshel’s significance for human beings, some exceptions appear. And those exceptions become the internal inconsistencies.

The definition of the Hebrew word “timshel” is the most important one to help readers perceive the theme. The Hebrew word “timshel” is an important motif in *East of Eden*. Motif, is a simple element that serves as a basis for expanded narrative; or less strictly, a conventional situation, device, interest, or incident employed in folklore, fiction, or drama...In literature, recurrent images, words, objects, phrases, or actions that tend to unify the work are called motives. At the same time, a motif “can be a theme which runs through a number of different works” (Benson, Ganz 129). As a recurrent word in *East of Eden*, the word “timshel” which makes its appearance for three times, acts as a motif to help form the theme. But how? In order to make clear the relationship between the motif “timshel” and the theme, we should grasp the originality of “timshel” first.

## 1.1 Steinbeck's New Definition of "Timshel"

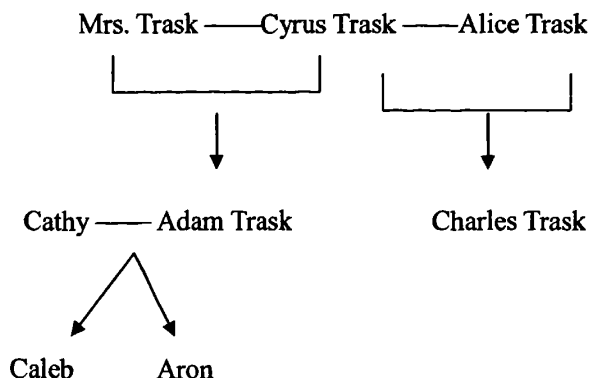
The motif "Timshel" is drawn from the biblical myth of "Cain and Abel". This biblical myth is closely related to *East of Eden*. It is the archetype of the story of the protagonists in this novel. Archetype, a term brought into literary criticism from the psychology of Carl Jung, who holds that behind individual's unconscious—"the blocked-off residue to the past"—lies the "collective unconscious" of the human race—the blocked-off memory of our racial past, even of our prehuman experiences. This unconscious racial memory makes powerful effective for us a group of "primordial images" shaped by the repeated experience of our ancestors and expressed in myths, religions, dreams, fantasies, and literature. T.S. Eliot proposes the "pre-logical mentality" (qtd. in Harmon 798) persists in civilized man, but becomes available only to or through the poet. The "primordial image" that taps this "pre-logical mentality" is called archetype.

Literary critics apply the term to an image, a descriptive detail, a plot pattern, or a character type that occurs frequently in literature, myth, religion, or folklore and is, therefore, believed to evoke profound emotions because it touches the unconscious memory and thus calls into play illogical but strong responses. And the archetypes found in myths are called mythic archetypes. Contemporary critics have found in the myth a useful device—archetypal imagination—for examining literature. Philip Wheelwright defines the term "archetype" in the following ways: "[...] archetypal symbols, or archetypes [are] symbols that have an identical or similar meaning for mankind generally or at least for a large part of it"; also, "[...] such symbols are found to be universal or nearly so, in their broadly human manifestations, are called archetypes" (qtd. in Allen 60). The possessors of such imagination arrange their works in archetypal patterns and present us with narratives that stir us as something at once familiar and strange. These possessors are represented by some modern writers in literary fields. Those writers insist on the necessity of myth as a material with which the artist works, and in varying ways and degrees have appropriated the old myths or created new ones as necessary substances to give order and a frame of meaning to their personal perceptions and images. *East of Eden* is an example of appropriating old myths to express something deeply felt by the individual artist John Steinbeck.

*East of Eden* is a story about two families: a family which is based on facts—the Hamiltons—and a family which is out of pure creation—the Trasks. Cyrus Trask had two sons: Adam Trask and Charles Trask. Cyrus favors Adam better than Charles. Due to jealousy, Charles beats Adam cruelly, nearly killing Adam. Later, Adam is sent to the army by his father Cyrus. He stays in the army for years. After Adam comes home, he saves a woman Cathy and marries her. In fact, Cathy is an evil woman. Adam leaves Charles and takes his wife Cathy to live in California. In hope of building a new Eden for Cathy, Adam starts to be acquainted with Samuel Hamilton. Soon Cathy delivers twin sons: Aron and Caleb. After the delivery, Cathy shoots Adam and goes away to resume prostitution in King City. Samuel and Lee who is the Chinese servant of the Trasks, guide Adam through the suffering of the betrayal of his wife. However, when the twin boys grow up, the tragedy happens again. Like his father Cyrus, Adam favors Aron better than Caleb. Caleb becomes very angry and tells his brother Aron the ugly truth of their mother Cathy. Aron cannot accept the truth and runs away to the battle and died there. Caleb “murders” his brother. Adam forgives Caleb with his last word “timshel” before his death.

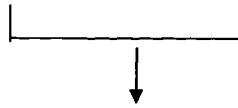
The several generations of the Trasks and the Hamiltons are so complicated that a genealogical chart and a supplement of important characters should be drawn to help readers understand the whole story.

#### I. The Trasks: From Connecticut — three generations



#### II. The Hamiltons: from Ireland — three generations

Samuel Hamilton — Liza Hamilton



Una, Lizzie, George, Dessie, Will, Olive (Steinbeck's mother), Tom, Mollie, Joe

### III. Other characters

Lee: the Chinese servant to Adam Trask

Abra Bacon: in love with Aron Trask first, later with Caleb Trask

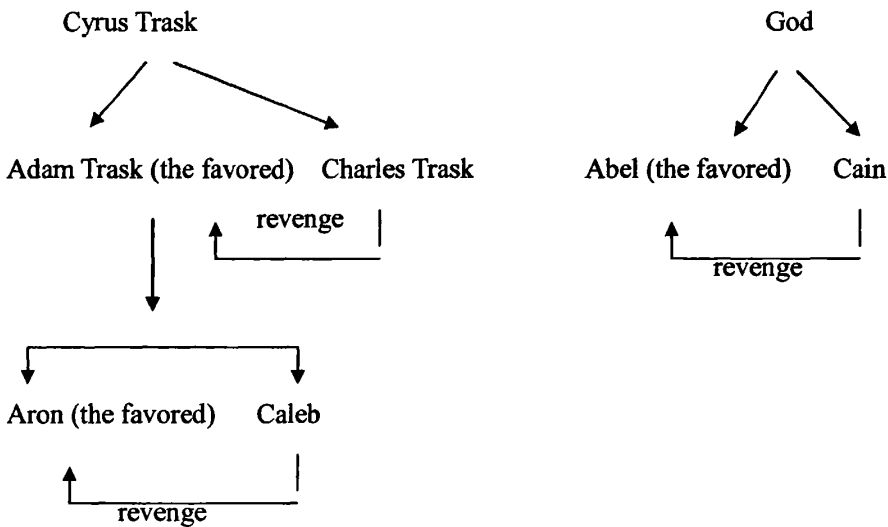
John Steinbeck: the third generation of the Hamiltons, the narrator "I" in this novel.

The members of the Trasks and the Hamiltons entangle with one another, especially Adam Trask and Samuel Hamilton. Samuel Hamilton and Lee are the witnesses of what happens to Adam, Caleb and Aron. And the story of the Trasks is the central subject of *East of Eden*. During the development of the story, the biblical myth of "Cain and Abel" plays a very important role in this novel. It helps form the framework of this novel, and it is a motif as well.

The importance of the biblical story of "Cain and Abel" first lies in its influence on the forming of the framework of *East of Eden*. Firstly, the subject of the biblical myth is the subject of this novel. The biblical myth of "Cain and Abel" tells about the first murder in the history of human beings. Abel and Cain are two brothers. Their father is Adam, the universal father; and their mother is Eve, the universal mother. Cain who is the tiller of the earth, brings the fruit of the ground to Lord while Abel who is the stock raiser consecrates with the first flock and the fat. God prefers Abel's sacrifice to that of Cain. Jealousy arises from Cain's heart and he kills his brother Abel as revenge. That Cain murders Abel is the first betrayal between brothers. And in *East of Eden*, the whole novel is composed of two parts: one of the Trask family and the other of the Hamilton family. The story of the Trasks is out of John Steinbeck's pure creation, while the story of the Hamiltons is based on Steinbeck's maternal family. Steinbeck stresses the part of the Trasks more than the part of the Hamiltons. Two revengeful tragedies happen between each of the two pairs of brothers. The first pair of brothers is Adam Trask and Charles Trask. And the second one is Caleb Trask and Aron Trask. What happens to these brothers are the

same as what happens in the biblical myth of “Cain and Abel”. And the story of the Trasks is another story of the betrayal between brothers.

Secondly, structurally the Trasks’ story resembles the biblical myth of “Cain and Abel”. I’d like to draw a family tree of the Trasks to make a clear comparison between the story of the Trasks and the biblical myth of “Cain and Abel”.



From the family tree of the Trask family above, we can see that the relationship among the Trasks is the same as that among the characters in the biblical myth of “Cain and Abel.” For example, in the biblical myth of “Cain and Abel”, the relations among Abel, Cain and God are that Abel is favored by God while Cain is not. And the relationship between Abel and Cain is that Abel is the revenged one while Cain is the revengeful one. The tragedy happening between Cain and Abel forms such a mold: there are three persons A, B, and C. A is favored by C while B is not. C is jealousy of A and takes revenge upon A. And in *East of Eden*, Adam Trask is favored by his father Cyrus Trask while Charles Trask is not. Then, out of jealousy, Charles Trask takes revenge upon Adam Trask. And the relationship among Aron, Caleb and Adam is the same with the one among Adam, Charles and Cyrus. Quite obviously, the story of the Trasks follows the developing mold shown in the biblical myth of “Cain and Abel”. Thus, we can see that the framework of the story of the Trasks resembles that of the biblical story of “Cain and Abel” very much. Since *East of*

*Eden* is mainly developed around the story of the Trask family, to some extent the biblical myth of “Cain and Abel” has shaped the framework of the development of the novel.

At the same time, the biblical myth of “Cain and Abel” has always been a motif in *East of Eden*. As we have said before, a motif can be a recurrent theme, character, or verbal pattern, but it may also be a family or associated cluster of literal or figurative references to a given class of concepts or objects, whether it be animal, machine, circles, music or whatever. A motif, generally, is “symbolic”; it “represents on the verbal level something characteristic of the structure of the work, the events, the characters, the emotional effects or the moral or cognitive contents”; also, it is “presented both as an object of description and more often, as part of the narrator’s imagery and descriptive vocabulary” (Freedman 128). In *East of Eden*, the biblical myth of “Cain and Abel” is a chatting topic for the Trasks and the Hamiltons. This myth begins from the fourth part of Chapter 22, when Samuel Hamilton tries to name Adam’s twin boys. And it is because of the discussion about the story that the twin boys are named Aron and Cal. Later, this topic appears several times in this novel. The repeated discussion about the biblical story is a discussion about the nature of Cain and Abel. Readers are constantly reminded of the myth and will readily relate the myth to the Trasks’ tragedy.

The symbolic meaning of the biblical myth is first revealed by the title of this novel. As we know, in the myth, God knows everything that happens between the two brothers. After Cain kills Abel, as a punishment, God drives Cain away to the land of Nod, the east of Eden. The phrase “east of Eden” is the originality of the title of this novel. In the beginning, this novel was named “Salinas Valley” (Steinbeck, *A Life in Letters* 408). It is a place in California. Steinbeck’s hometown—— Monterey County——is located in the valley. Also, it is the place where the main story of the Trasks and the Hamiltons took place. Steinbeck’s original plan for this novel was to “to set down in story form for his two small sons the full record of their ancestors from the time they moved westward to Salinas valley just after the Civil War” (Hobson 4). His first draft was developed around the story of the Hamiltons. However, when the draft was half written, Steinbeck changed his plan. He named the final draft “East of Eden”. Steinbeck points out that the title “comes from the 16<sup>th</sup>



verse" (*A Life in Letters* 425) from *Genesis*, which tells about the tragedy happening between Cain and Abel. We know that myth in the sophisticated literary sense, is hoped to help the individual artist express his perceptions which will prove to have universal responses. Steinbeck's use of the mythic elements of the biblical myth of "Cain and Abel" has enlarged the number of readers of this novel. This novel, which was originally designed for two readers (for Steinbeck's two sons), has attracted a large group of readers. The change of the title of this novel proves that Steinbeck has undergone a changing psychological pilgrimage: from the meditation of individual's life to the meditation of a group's lives, even to the lives of the whole mankind.

The second symbolic meaning of the biblical myth is revealed in the characters' discussion of "timshel". Steinbeck adopts the biblical myth as a motif for *East of Eden* for two purposes. One is to use it as the archetypal story of the protagonists—the Trasks. And the other is to express his perceptions of human nature. He proposes that "timshel" means "thou mayest", which gives human kind the free will to choose. To use Peter Lisca's summary of *East of Eden* to explain Steinbeck's interpretation of "timshel" is very convenient:

Steinbeck sees this story in *Genesis* as a true account of man's condition, especially as made clear in the Lord's words to Cain after rejecting his sacrifice....Steinbeck grounds his interpretation of the story on a new translation of the Hebrew word "timshel", which the King James version renders as "thou shalt". He proposes that the word is more meaningfully and truly rendered as "thou mayest," for this gives man responsible moral choice. <sup>1</sup> (*Wide World* 261)

The new meaning's significance is great. For John Steinbeck, "timshel" is a universal word for the whole mankind. Through the definition of "timshel", Steinbeck exposes the theme of *East of Eden*. But a problem also occurs. If "timshel" is for everybody, the behaviors of all the characters in this novel should conform with the meaning of the word. If not, inconsistencies will occur.

"Timshel" is from God's words to Cain. In the King James version of *Genesis*, in the face of Cain's anger and falling countenance after he rejects Cain's sacrifice,

---

<sup>1</sup> Lisca, pp. 261- 262. The ambition attempt to "to justify the ways of God to man," places *East of Eden* in a direct line of descent with *The Divine Comedy* and *Paradise Lost* as an authorial intention.

God says to Cain: “Why art thou wroth? And why is thy countenance fallen? If thou doest well, shalt thou not be accepted? And if thou doest not well, sin lieth at the door. And onto thee *shall* be his desire, and thou *shalt* rule over him” (Holy Bible, Gen. 4.1 -16). In these words, the italic word “shalt” is the former definition of the Hebrew word “timshel”. Here, the King James version defines “timshel” as “thou shalt”, which means “you should”. Nevertheless, John Steinbeck has proposed a different definition of “timshel” in *East of Eden*. He suggests that timshel means “thou mayest”. In modern English, it means “you may”.

Steinbeck’s new definition of “timshel” in this novel is through the words of Lee, the Chinese servant to Adam Trask. In *East of Eden*, Samuel Hamilton, Lee and Adam debate the true meaning of the biblical myth of “Cain and Abel” for many times. During their debate, they find that the key problem lies in the definition of the Hebrew word “timshel”. Through Lee, Steinbeck offers a new meaning of “timshel” in this novel.

“Don’t you see?” he cried. “The American Standard translation orders men to triumph over sin, and you can call sin ignorance. The King James translation makes a promise in “Thou shalt”, meaning men will surely triumph over sin. But the Hebrew word, the word timshel——‘Thou mayest’——that gives a choice. It might be the most important word in the world. That says the way is open. That throws it right back on a man. For if ‘Thou mayest’——it is also true that ‘Thou mayest not.’ Don’t you see?” (349)

Lee compares three different translations of “timshel”. In his opinion, the American Standard translation and the King James translation are neither appropriate. He thinks that the new translation “thou mayest” is the most suitable one. “Thou mayest” means that people have a chance of choice. It means that people can choose to redeem sin. Also, people can surrender to sin. And sin is closely connected with evil. That is to say, people have free will to choose to do good or evil. This is Lee’s idea, and if Lee speaks for Steinbeck, it is also Steinbeck’s life philosophy. And Steinbeck also says that “a novelist is each one of the characters in a greater or a less degree” (A Life in Letters 553). Thus, Lee speaks out Steinbeck’s ideas about human nature.

After Lee's definition of "timshel", Steinbeck moves on to strengthen the importance of the new meaning for human beings. In Steinbeck's eyes, human kind is very important. Because humankind has the choice to choose to do good or evil, human soul will never be destroyed despite various attacks. He expresses his ideas through Lee's phrases again: "...And I feel that a man is a very important thing—maybe more important than a star...It (the human soul) is a lovely and unique thing in the universe. It is always attacked and never destroyed—because 'thou mayest'" (350). Again and again, Steinbeck emphasizes the significance of 'thou mayest' for human beings.

Steinbeck's new definition, as a matter of fact, is also his worldviews about human beings. Not only in *East of Eden*, but also in some other places, has Steinbeck expressed the same idea to audiences. In 1962, when John Steinbeck received his Nobel Prize, he declared his strong belief in human beings' ability of self-perfection in his acceptance speech:

We have usurped many of the powers we once ascribed to God. Fearful and unprepared, we have assumed lordship over life or death of the whole world—of all living things. The danger and the glory and the choices rest finally in man. The test of his perfectibility is at hand. Having taken God like power, we must seek in ourselves for the responsibility and the wisdom we once prayed some deity might have. Man himself has become our greatest hazard and our only hope. ("Acceptance Speech" 207)

Steinbeck's words further confirm that the meaning of "timshel" in *East of Eden* is that people can choose to yield to or overcome sin. To choose, for John Steinbeck, is a "test of perfectibility" ("Acceptance Speech" 207). And also, Steinbeck believes that ignorance is one factor that causes sin, and wisdom can correct it. His opinion about "ignorance" is quite similar to Samuel Scoville's opinion. Samuel Scoville comments on evil that "evil, then, is a result of ignorance, occurring when man is unaware of his role in life, when man views his struggle in life as a means toward some goal, and when man's values are not in accordance with nature" (62). Samuel Scoville offers three conditions of the occurrence of evil. The first one is man's wrong recognition of his role in life; the second one is the pressure of some goals;

and the third one is the conflicts between man's values and nature. These conditions, in fact, are the representations of ignorance. Ignorance causes evil and evil leads to sin. From this point of view, Samuel Scoville agrees with Steinbeck on the relationship between ignorance and sin.

And in *East of Eden*, apparently, Adam Trask sinned because he was unaware of his role in his life. He thinks that he is a victim of the betrayal of his brother, but actually he plays the role of "Cain" in his life. So, at the end of this novel, when Adam Trask has a stroke and is dying, Lee urges Adam to forgive Caleb, and Adam tries his best and whispers "timshel" to Caleb at last. When Adam gives Caleb the free will to choose between good and evil, he gives himself a chance to be a good man, either. Steinbeck's repeating hallooing of "timshel" in this novel represents his optimistic hope of human beings. As he points out, because human kind has the ability to perfect himself, human kind becomes human beings' greatest hazard and only hope.

The definition the Hebrew word "timshel" is the first step that Steinbeck develops the theme of *East of Eden*: human beings can choose between good and evil. This definition directly exposes the theme of this novel. Furthermore, through two other methods—the statement of the narrator "I" and making contrasts among characters and their archetypes, Steinbeck further reveals his thematic design for this novel.

## 1.2 The Statement of the Narrator "I"

As we know, many aspects of a literary work can reveal a novel's theme. The title can often provide insight into the theme or themes of a story; sometimes a narrator's or a character's statement can reveal a theme; the arrangement of events can suggest a story's theme; a story's conflict can offer clues to its theme. In *East of Eden*, the statement of the narrator is an important way to reveal the theme that human beings have free will to choose between good and evil.

In this novel, John Steinbeck uses the first person "I" to tell the story of the Trask family and the Hamilton family. The narrator "I" acts as a story-teller and an objective observer of what happens to the Trasks and the Hamiltons. At the same time, the narrator's opinions also show the worldviews of Steinbeck. Through the

narrator's observation of the place, the events, Steinbeck indirectly expresses his perceptions of human beings' value to readers.

### 1.2.1 The Descriptions of Natural Scenery

As we have mentioned before, the narrator's observation can show Steinbeck's worldviews about human beings. The first observation is the narrator's descriptions of the natural scenery of Salinas Valley. In the first chapter the narrator "I" has hinted that the basic theme of *East of Eden*, is about the two aspects of one thing through the descriptions of the scenery of Salinas Valley, the place where the story mainly takes place:

I remember that the Gabilan Mountains to the east of the valley were light gay mountains full of sun and loveliness and a kind of invitation , so that you wanted to climb into their warm foothills almost as you want to climb into the lap of a beloved mother. They were beckoning mountains with a brown grass love. The Santa Lucias stood up against the sky to the west and kept the valley from the open sea, and they were dark and brooding—unfriendly and dangerous. I always found in myself a dread of west and a love of east. Where I ever got such an idea I cannot say, unless it could be that the morning came over the peaks of the Gabilans and the night drifted back from the ridges of the Santa Lucias. It may be that the birth and death of the day had some part in my feeling about the two ranges of mountains. (3)

Through the descriptions of the scenery of the Salinas Valley, Steinbeck hints that everything has two aspects: brightness and darkness. He uses the phrase "the birth and death" of the day to allude to what he actually wants to say in *East of Eden*. Karen S.H.Roggenkamp argues that in Steinbeck's eyes, there is a chronicle of the world: "Life is a cycle of birth and death, humanity is a part of the natural cycle [...]" (34). As a part of natural cycle, humanity also has the quality of nature. So, Steinbeck is able to turn to the topic of humanity easily. At the same time, he hints that there are also two sides of humanity: the brightness—good; and the darkness—evil. And he thinks that both of the two sides are indispensable for human beings. He wrote in one of his letters,

It seems very obvious that two sides of a mirror are required before we have a mirror, that two forces are necessary in man before he is a man. I asked Paul de Kruif once if he would like to cure all disease and he said yes. Then I suggested that the man he loved and wanted to cure was a product of all his filth and disease and meanness, his hunger and his cruelty. Cure those and you would have not man, but an entirely new species you wouldn't recognize and probably wouldn't like. (A Life in Letters 221)

In his letter, Steinbeck compares mankind to a mirror which has two sides. He thinks that "human beings should have some diseases". In other words, if we compare the diseases to evil, then the information can be obtained: human beings have the qualities of both good and evil, or they would not be them anymore. Thus, indirectly, the theme of good and evil appears naturally after the hint of two sides of one thing which is given by the narrator "I".

The description of the natural scenery of Salinas Valley, is the first hint that alludes to the theme. Later, Steinbeck moves on to develop the theme through the statement of the narrator. The narrator "I", who is the story-teller and an objective observer in this novel, gives his opinions about the story of the Trasks and the Hamiltons.

### **1.2.2 The Roles of the Narrator "I"**

The narrator "I" plays two roles in *East of Eden*. First of all, he is a story-teller. And secondly he is an observer of facts. These two roles have different functions in this novel. And the second role has a more important function than the first one. It is through the second role that Steinbeck has shown his life philosophy to readers.

In a letter to Elizabeth Otis on April 26, 1957, when talking about his own opinions about writing, Steinbeck discussed the relationship between his characters and Steinbeck himself:

A novel may be said to be the man who writes it. Now it is nearly always true that a novelist, perhaps unconsciously identifies himself with one chief or central character in his novel. In his character he puts not only what he thinks he is but what he hopes to be. We can call this

spokesman the self-character. You will find one in every one of my books and in the novels of everyone I can remember...I suppose my own symbol characters has my dream wish of wisdom and acceptance. (A Life in Letters 553)

In this letter, Steinbeck connects himself with the characters in his novels. he declares that he has a central character that represents himself in every one of his books. And he thinks that in this character, he expresses his wisdom and acceptance of faults. From this point of view, in *East of Eden*, we can also find a self-character which speaks for Steinbeck. This character should have the wisdom of Steinbeck. Apparently, the narrator "I" is the self-character, because it is through his statement that Steinbeck has exposed his opinions about human beings' values.

Firstly, the narrator "I" overtly declares that the story of the Hamiltons depends on hearsay, on old photographs, on stories told, and on memories which are hazy and mixed with fable. Thus, the narrator "I" here, sometimes is a representative of John Steinbeck, since he tells the story about his grandfather's family. Then, the credibility of the story of the Trasks is further proved. Later on, through the comparison between the story of the Trasks and the biblical myth of "Cain and Abel", Steinbeck makes the particular events become a representation of a universal discipline that human beings have free will to choose to do good or evil. And the Trasks become the representatives of the whole human beings, since Steinbeck sees the biblical myth of "Cain and Abel" as "a true account of man's condition" (Lisca, Wide World 261). Therefore, the Trasks' humanity is human beings' humanity; and their destinies are human beings' destinies.

And secondly, as an objective observer of the whole story of the Trasks and the Hamiltons, the narrator "I" gives his opinions about humanity occasionally, though sometimes somewhat sensitively and didactically. In chapter 8, the narrator "I" starts to tell readers his own opinions about the world. For example, the narrator "I" says that he believes that "there are monsters born in the world to human parents" (82). And in chapter 12, when discussing the current social situation of America, the narrator "I" again utters his feelings about human beings' ability of self-perfection: "To hell with that rotten century! Let's get it over and the door closed shut on it! Let's close it like a book and go on reading! New chapter, new life. A man will have

clean hands once we get the lid slammed shut on that stinking century”(148). Through the curse of the rotten century and the hope to start a new life, Steinbeck again praises human beings’ free will to choose. This compliment, as a matter of fact, has paved the way for the development of the theme. Since if a man can choose to desert the rotten life and start a new one, certainly he has the ability to choose to do good or evil.

Later on, in Chapter 13 the narrator “I” stresses the importance of the quality which differentiates a man from the other man. At first, he raises two questions to stimulate readers’ interest in the living significance of human beings: “What do I believe in? What must I fight for and what must I fight against?” (151) Later, he announces his discoveries about the uniqueness of human beings: “Our species is the only creative species, and it has only one creative instrument, the individual mind and spirit of a man...The preciousness lies in the lonely mind of man”(151). He suggests that human beings are unique because of the lonely mind of human kind. Furthermore, he goes on to declare his belief in human beings’ free will:

And this I believe: 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...Surely I can understand this, and I hate it and I will fight against it to preserve the one thing that separates us from the uncreative beasts. If the glory can be killed, we are lost. (151)

Obviously, the “glory” that the narrator “I” (Steinbeck) refers to in the passage is the “free, exploring mind of the individual human”. And that “the freedom of the mind to take any direction it wishes, undirected” refers to human beings’ free will to choose anything they like. The chapters, including chapter 8, chapter 12 and chapter 13, explain the importance of people’s free will. Then, during the following chapters, the narrator further analyzes the relationship between people’s free will and human nature.

In Chapter 19 the narrator “I” moves on to analyze humanity. Here he equates “good” with “purity”. He describes people coming to church:” And they brought conscience, or, rather, nudged the dozing conscience. They were not pure, but they



had a potential of purity, like a soiled white shirt. And any man could make something pretty fine of it within himself" (249-250). In these sentences, the "potential of purity" is another expression of the free will of human beings. However, this phrase puts more emphasis on people's free will to choose to do good. And that "any man could make something pretty fine of it within himself" is also a repetition of the belief in human beings' ability to perfect themselves. In a word, the narrator sings human beings' ability to choose to do good or evil. But he does not talk about it overtly, even though he means to tell such things.

At last, through the narrator "I" Steinbeck shows his real intention of narrating this novel. Again, he raises a question to the real meaning of this novel and answers it himself. The question is "what is the worlds' story about?" While answering this question, the narrator "I" suggests that human kind is a combination of both good and evil:

I believe that there is one story in the world, and only one, that has frightened and inspired us, so that we live in a Pearl White serial of continuing thought and wonder. Humans are caught ——in their lives, in their thoughts, in their hungers and ambitions, in their avarice and cruelty, and in their kindness and generosity too——in a net of good and evil...Virtue and vice were warp and woof of our first consciousness, and they will be the fabric of our last [...] (475)

In this announcement, the narrator "I" has overtly given his opinions about the subject of good and evil. In his opinion, there is only one story in the world. That is the story about good and evil. He argues that human beings are caught in a net of good and evil. And he proposes that virtue and vice will be parts of humanity. These ideas agree with the allusion which is drawn from the descriptions of the natural scenery of Salinas valley. Also, they are consistent with Steinbeck's philosophy of the two sides of a mirror. Though the expressing ways are different, they all mean one thing: human beings have two sides——good and evil.

Then, the narrator "I" lists three examples of the deaths of three man: the richest but evil man, the smart briber and the man who made many errors but whose effective life is devoted to making men brave and dignified. People are happy when they hear the death news of the first two men; but for the third man, people burst into

tears after heard his death news. Through the three examples, the narrator “I” concludes that a man’s value lies in their contribution to the society and their responsibility to the world. This value, in general, is represented by people’s free will to choose good and perfect themselves.

And the narrator “I” continues to reveal the theme of *East of Eden*:

We have only one story. All novels, all poetry, are built on the never-ending contest in ourselves of good and evil. And it occurs to me that evil must constantly respawn, while good, while virtue, is immortal. Vice has always a new fresh young face, while virtue is venerable as nothing else in the world. (477)

The narrator constantly emphasizes the contest between good and evil, vice and virtue. This emphasis prepares for the further explanation of human beings’ free will to choose.

The roles of the narrator “I” changes from a story-teller to an objective observer. And these two roles both are representations of John Steinbeck. In other words, the narrator “I” can be seen as the novelist himself. Through the narrator “I”, Steinbeck repeatedly emphasizes human beings’ two sides: good and evil. While he is stressing the immortality of good, he has also indirectly emphasized human beings’ ability to choose to do good or evil, and to perfect themselves. Nevertheless, during the narrator’s narration, due to some reasons, some inharmonious points also appear. For example, though the main part of the narration is useful to build up the theme, a small part of it is unnecessary. And that part becomes an internal inconsistency in terms of structure. And this point will be analyzed in next chapter.

### 1.3 Making Contrasts

Besides defining the Hebrew word “timshel” and the statement of the narrator “I”, Steinbeck, through making contrasts between the main characters and their archetypes, has further expressed the theme of *East of Eden*.

Abel and Cain in the biblical myth symbolize good and evil respectively. Abel represents good and innocence while Cain represents evil and sin. Since Cain is the real ancestor of us, his evil also is inherited by us. Only through Cain, we inherit good from Abel. Thus, we——human beings, are the combinations of good and evil.

Human kind is the battlefield of these two sides.

### 1.3.1 Contrast between Adam Trask and Abel

The biblical myth of “Cain and Abel” is endowed with symbolic meanings by John Steinbeck in this novel. The circle of God, Abel and Cain becomes an epitome of human society. And the conflict between Abel and Cain is regarded as the general conflict among human beings. Steinbeck adopts Abel and Cain as the archetypes of Adam, Charles, Caleb and Aron in this novel. He aims to evoke universal responses to the conflict between good and evil. However, the protagonists are not pure imitations of their archetypes. For example, Adam is an “Abel” superficially, but he is also a “Cain” in essence. In fact, in many aspects Adam is different from his archetype Abel, such as in their personalities, their needs and so on.

Generally speaking, Abel has always been defined as the representation of good. His behavior, either superficially or substantially, conforms with the definition of good. Compared with Abel, Adam cannot represent good absolutely. Of course, Steinbeck’s Adam Trask is born good. His good quality basically is descended from his dead mother, the crazy woman who cannot tolerate the evil society and drowns herself in a pool. However, his good nature has been suppressed due to the deficiency of his mother’s love and his father’s compelling requirement of obedience to fit the army life. He turns to be too obedient, passive, introverted and weak. In *East of Eden*, Steinbeck describes Adam Trask as

[...] always an obedient child. Something in him shrank from violence, from contention, from the silent shrieking tensions that can rip at a house. He contributed to the quiet he wished for by offering no violence, no contention, and to do this he had to retire into secretness, since there is some violence in everyone. He covered his life with a veil of vagueness, while behind his quiet eyes a rich full life went on. This did not protect him from assault but it allowed him an immunity. (22)

But Charles Trask, Adam’s only-one-year younger brother, is quite different from his brother Adam. He “grew up with his father’s assertiveness, (he) was a natural athlete, with instinctive timing and coordination and the competing will to win over others, which makes for success in the world” (22). Although Steinbeck declares that

Charles was born evil due to the heredity from his father Cyrus, his descriptions about the personalities of the two brothers show nothing to prove their differences in good and evil.

Moreover, some of Adam's behavior, to some extent, has no connection with good. Compared with Abel's innocence, Adam's indifference to his father and brother and his selfishness are more impressive. His behavior makes readers think that he deserves Charles's revenge. Although Cyrus treats Adam very strictly, he still favors him; although Charles is jealousy of Adam, he protects him when facing the challenge from the non-family members. However, for Adam, his father and brother are equal to anything in the world. They are not indispensable to him. It is because of this reason that he treats Charles as his personal property. He "was glad of Charles the way a woman is glad of a fat diamond, and he depended on his brother in the way that same woman depends on the diamond's glitter and the self-security tied up in its worth; but love, affection, empathy, were beyond conception" (23). It is because this reason that when he hears the death news of his father, he shows no sorrow but just cares about the validity of the money which is left by his father. Having no love, affection, and empathy proves that Adam, strictly speaking, can not simply represent good in this novel.

Furthermore, God has satisfied Abel's need for love. Abel's dream of gaining the love from God comes true, so he is satisfied with his situation. That means he needn't seek others' love anymore. On the contrary, Adam doesn't think that he has gained all the love he needs. So, when Alice—his stepmother—comes to his home, he sends flowers to her, hoping that she would love him. And later he asks love from Cathy, who becomes his wife at last. From this point of view, Adam resembles Cain in their desires for love from other people.

Adam's personality and his needs for love differentiate him from Abel. His image does not conform with the image of Abel. His resemblance with Abel is only superficial. As a matter of fact, he is also another "Cain" in *East of Eden*.

### **1.3.2 Adam Trask—Another "Cain" in Life**

According to the behavior of Charles, readers may have an impression that Charles's evil actually is because he is not loved. So, he takes revenge on his brother

Adam, who has deprived him of the love from his father. In this way he becomes a new Cain and Adam becomes a new Abel in the novel. Steinbeck has also explained the relation between love and evil. He uses the word “vice” to replace “evil” in his statement: “In uncertainty, I am certain that underneath their topmost layers of frailty men want to be good and want to be loved. Indeed, most of their vices are attempted short cuts to love” (477). But, apparently the word “vice” here is to describe some behavior, not people’s nature. In other words, often it is lacking in love that makes people convert subconscious evil to actual vicious actions. From this point of view, Adam Trask is possible to become a Cain, too. Cain, in the biblical myth, is a “secret, rejected, and guilty soul”. And Adam resembles him in this point. Adam sends a gift to Alice, in hope of gaining her love. However, his effort fails because Alice doesn’t know it is Adam that gives her the present. And later, Adam offers a future “Eden” to his wife Cathy, also hoping to gain her love. But because Cathy is a monster born with something lost, his effort also fails. Therefore, Adam’s soul is also a “rejected soul”.

Adam’s “rejected soul” makes him confine himself within his own spiritual world, rejecting the love offered by his brother Charles and his son Caleb. First of all, he rejects the love from his father, stirring up more jealousy and anger from Charles; and later he rejects the love from his brother Charles, deserting him and leaving him in the horror of solitude; at last he rejects the love from his own son Caleb by refusing his offer of money when Adam loses a large amount of money in business. When Adam rejects to be loved by others, he also rejects to love other people. And his rejections lead to the tragedies of people surrounding him. To his brother Charles, Adam not only destroys his hope and confidence of being loved by their father, but also deprives of his wish to have intimate brotherhood, letting him live and die in loneliness; to his son Caleb, Adam’s rejection of loving him arouses Caleb’s anger and jealousy and induces his revenge on his brother Aron. He tells Aron the real evil nature of their mother: Their mother Cathy shoots her husband and leaves them; and now she is a prostitute in the town. Aron, who cannot stand and accept the imperfection in his life, runs away to the army and dies in a battle. Thus, indirectly Caleb “kills” his brother. But Adam is also responsible for Caleb’s guilt. Because when he rejects the gift offered by “Caleb”, he ignores Caleb’s feelings and causes

the death of Aron. Furthermore, when Adam is rejected by Cathy, for a very long time he ignores the responsibility of taking care of his twin sons. His neglect also has brought bad influence on the form of the psychology of his sons. Aron becomes a person who wants everything to be perfect while Caleb secretly finds and believes in his evil nature when he is still a child. Thus, Adam actually once plays the role of Cain in his life. He also has a secret, rejected and guilty soul.

As a matter of fact, Adam has also found that he has hurt his brother Charles greatly. When debating the meaning of Cain-Abel story, Lee points out the significance about this story to Adam and Samuel. Lee thinks that this biblical story is about everyone. Adam instinctively responds: "I didn't kill my brother—" But "[s]uddenly he stopped and his mind went reeling back in time" (310). Clearly, Adam has been rethinking every thing which has happened between Charles and him. Then Lee continues, "...The greatest terror a child can have is that he is not loved, and rejection is the hell he fears...And with rejection comes anger, and with anger some kind of crime in revenge for the rejection, with the crime guilt..." (310). Lee's words enlighten Adam. Then Adam can understand why Charles beats him crazily. It is because at that time Charles was in terror. Adam feels that he has hurt Charles. So, when the death news of Charles comes, Adam feels sad about it.

Thus, Adam is not only a representative of "Abel", but also a representative of "Cain". From this point of view, Adam combines two features of them—good and evil. Through the descriptions about Adam, Steinbeck has proved that man is the combination of both good and evil. And Michael J. Meyer comments that "Steinbeck's message that men are both Cain and Abel simultaneously (cannibal/destructive, yet able/ possessive potential to control his Cain Sign by exercising his free will) is a legacy that deserves to be reassessed and reevaluated" (Meyer 17). Meyer comments upon human nature that human nature is unique. He thinks that men can be destructive. But through exercising men's free will, men can choose to be good and perfect themselves. Adam's change from being an "Abel" to a "Cain" proves man's duality in nature. Nonetheless, the universality of Steinbeck's individual perceptions cannot be proved only by one character. Therefore, Steinbeck tries to strengthen the theme through discussing the conflict between Aron and Caleb.

### 1.3.3 Contrast between Aron and Caleb

Aron and Caleb, obviously, is another pair of representations of Abel and Cain besides Adam and Charles. Aron symbolizes Abel while Caleb symbolizes Cain. When Caleb knows the truth of his mother, at first he does not mean to tell Aron who cannot tolerate any evil. And his love for his father Adam shows that his soul is not purely evil. He has something good in mind. But when his love is rejected by Adam Trask, his evil awakens and he kills his brother indirectly.

As a matter of fact, Caleb has also realized his evil himself. When talking with Will Hamilton, he admits his evil:

“My father is good,” he said. “I want to make it up to him because I am not good.”

“If you do that, wouldn’t you be good?”

“No,” said Cal. “I think bad.” (550)

The same as Adam Trask and Charles Trask, Caleb’s soul is a rejected and guilty soul. However, when Caleb realizes his evil aspect, he hopes to be good. And he proves his goodness through his love for his father. About Caleb, the symbol of Cain in the novel, Steinbeck says: “I hope——Cal is my baby. He is the Everyman, the battle ground between good and evil, the most human of all, the sorry man” (*A Life In Letters* 428). In Steinbeck’s eyes, Caleb is the representative of all human beings. When Lee exhorts Adam to bless Caleb by saying “timshel”, human beings’ ability to choose good and evil has been proved at last.

Steinbeck’s emphasis on human beings’ free will to choose between good and evil shows his faith in human beings’ ability of self-perfection. And his adoption of the biblical myth of “Cain and Abel” raises “important questions about popular fiction and about nonrealistic fictional modes, such as allegory and fable, that are returning to literary and popular favor” (Davis 4). However, because the biblical myth of “Cain and Abel” has been interpreted before Steinbeck’s interpretation (originally the myth is regarded as a story of sin), the former interpretation has influenced Steinbeck to some degree, especially the interpretation of Cain’s evil. Thus, when describing the relationship between good and evil, Steinbeck tends to stress the more powerful evil than people’s goodness. During the development of the theme, John Steinbeck’s effort to make his insight and the materials a harmonious

integrity should be approved, even though sometimes he makes some errors which weaken the theme of *East of Eden*.



## Chapter Two Ambiguity in Plot, Characterization and Thematic Development

*East of Eden* is dominated by an insistent archetypal myth: the story, repeats in generation after generation, of Cain's rejection of his father and the slaying of Abel. In this novel, Steinbeck takes as his subjects: the permanent war between wisdom and ignorance, light and darkness, good and evil. During the development of the theme, Steinbeck has made some errors, which hinder readers' exploration of the theme. In *East of Eden*, Steinbeck seems to have lost his former merit shown in *The Grapes of Wrath*. While in *The Grapes of Wrath*, he could make his characters and materials fit the theme perfectly. Peter Lisca praises *The Grapes of Wrath* that "the novel's thematic organization makes it possible for Steinbeck successfully to incorporate the widest variety of materials, and, with the exception of romantic love, to present the full scale of human emotions". Also, at the end of his analysis of *The Grapes of Wrath*, again he says: "Steinbeck's great achievement ...is that while minimizing what seem to be the most essential elements of fiction—plot and character—he was able to create a 'well-made' and emotionally compelling novel out of materials which in most other hands have resulted in sentimental propaganda" (*Wide World* 175-177). However, in *East of Eden*, some flaws appear when Steinbeck is modeling characters, arranging materials. And the flaws about the characters are generally represented by the contradictions between the characters and the theme, and the inconsistency within the characters themselves, which unfortunately weaken the development of the theme. Also, in this novel, Steinbeck has created some plots, which could not be considered necessary. These plots, in my opinion, are quite irrelevant with the theme. They seem to be Steinbeck's sudden interests in telling funny stories. Thus, *East of Eden* is failure to some degree.

### 2.1 Plots as Nonsense

Plot is an artificial rather than a natural ordering of events. Its function is to simplify life by imposing order thereon. Traditionally a plot, Aristotle maintains, the unity of the plot depends on the mythos, or plot, unfolding in a way that the incidents

of action come to be probably, or necessarily, rather than appearing as particular incidents or accidents with no relation to the whole.<sup>2</sup> If we use Aristotle's standard to evaluate the arrangement of the plots of *East of Eden*, we will find that many plots in this novel are nonsense. That is to say, they have nothing to do with the development of the theme of "timshel". On the contrary, those plots have weakened readers' impressions about the theme. There are many examples.

In the first part of *East of Eden*, the story of each family nearly takes one thirds of the space. When telling each story, Steinbeck gives a pretty detailed description about each family. For example, while describing the Hamiltons, Steinbeck introduces the family in particular details, including their ancestors, their economical condition, the reason of their immigration to America, even the personalities of each member of this family, especially the personalities of Samuel's eight children, such as George, Will, Tom, Joe, Una, Dessie, Olive, and Mollie. These characters, except Will who is related to Caleb Trask's success in business, have no communication with the members of the Trasks. These irrelevant plots mainly appear in the third part of *East of Eden*. In Chapter 23—the first chapter of Part Three—Steinbeck tells the tragic destinies of the Hamiltons, such as those of Una, Tom and Dessie, despite the fact that their fates have nothing to do with the theme. To cite a paragraph is a help to understand the uselessness of those plots. This is a description about Una and her husband Anderson.

Of all the children Una had the least humor. She met and married an intense dark man—a man whose fingers were stained with chemicals, mostly silver nitrate. He was one of those men who live in poverty so that their lines of questioning may continue. His question was about photography. He believed that the exterior world could be transferred to paper—not in the ghost shading of black and white but in the colors the human eye perceives. (317)

And later Steinbeck reveals Una's early death. Una and her husband only appear for a very short time, especially Anderson who only makes one appearance in this novel.

---

<sup>2</sup> *Mythos* has a double meaning. First, in the sense applied here where Aristotle uses it to mean the tragic plot as opposed to a particular incident. Second, *mythos* is used in the sense of legend, as opposed to logos, or true account.

The short paragraph to introduce Anderson is all that concerns him. Without the character of Anderson, the story of good and evil also will develop naturally. Steinbeck's detailed introduction of the Hamiltons makes the first part look like an autobiography of the history of his family.

Furthermore, the narrator "I" in this novel, from a child's perspective, has expressed his respect and love for the Hamilton family. Steinbeck gives detailed descriptions about the life of each member, especially that of his mother Olive. He uses one chapter to describe his mother Olive about her career, her achievement, and her first experience of a plane ride. Steinbeck appears to be proud of his mother very much. Since in that chapter, it takes him five pages to talk about Olive's funny plane-ride: how she contributes to the war against the Germans; how she wins the prize—a ride in an army airplane; and her funny experience on the plane. It is completely obvious that such a long narration has nothing to do with the theme, with the biblical story of "Abel and Cain" of this novel. Even though Steinbeck has changed his original intention of writing an autobiography of his family for his two sons, he seems to have not totally escaped the influence of his original intention.

Steinbeck unconsciously parallels the stories of the Trasks and the Hamiltons. These parallels of events, actually are episodic plots which are greatly disliked by Aristotle. Aristotle denounces that in the episodic plots the acts succeed one another without probable or necessary sequence. Aristotle's ideas of plot have induced debating among critics. Among those critics, the theories proposed by the Neo-Aristotelian critics appeal to me greatly. The Neo-Aristotelian critics, largely at the university of Chicago, have attempted to extend the meaning of plot to make it a function of a number of elements in the work of art. Ronald S. Crane thinks that the form of a given plot is a function of the particular correlation among three variables which the completed work is calculated to establish, consistently and progressively, in our minds. These variables are as follows: (1) the general estimate we are induced to form of the moral character and deserts of the hero; (2) the judgments we are led similarly to make about the nature of the events that actually befall the hero as having either painful or pleasurable consequences for him permanently or temporarily; and (3) the opinions we are made to entertain concerning the degree and

kind of his responsibility for what happens to him.<sup>3</sup> In such a definition, although much has been added to the simple idea of a structure of incidents, the basic view of plot as some large and controlling frame is still present. Moreover, the Neo-Aristotelian critics stress the relationship between plots and heroes. In their opinion, the plots should serve the development of the hero and the opinions which readers are made to entertain—the theme.

Aristotle and the Neo-Aristotelian critics have made strict requirements of the plots in a literary work. And those episodic plots in the examples, apparently, do not satisfy the requirements. The introductions of the family members of the Hamiltons cannot flesh out the personalities of the protagonists—the Trask brothers; they cannot stimulate readers' judgments about the experience of the protagonists; and neither can they help readers explore the theme of *East of Eden*. Therefore, these episodic plots are nonsense and have no use in this novel. The existence of many episodic plots is a flaw of *East of Eden*. It shows Steinbeck's problem of selecting and choosing materials. But, it is not the only flaw in this novel. At least the portraits of some characters have also exposed Steinbeck's problem of making his characters work for the theme.

## 2.2 Characters against the Theme

When reading *East of Eden*, I find that some characters, indeed, are very impressive. These characters include Cathy Ames Trask who represents pure evil, Lee, a humanist who never loses human dignity and reason and Samuel Hamilton, an inventive dreamer. Their personalities are so peculiar that readers cannot forget them. However, sometimes their existence does not seem to serve the theme. On the contrary, they hinder the exploration of the theme.

### 2.2.1 Contradictions between Cathy and the Theme

When talking about the relation between the characters and the theme of *East of Eden*, some critics have been troubled by some doubts about it. For example, in his article "The Mirror and the Vamp: Invention, Refection, and Bad, Bad Cathy Trask in *East of Eden*", Louis Owens has proposed a possibility that some characters don't

---

<sup>3</sup> See the book *Critics and Criticism* which is edited by Ronald. S. Crane (1952).

agree with Steinbeck's design of the theme of this novel. His original words are as this: "Why, if 'timshel' must apply to all of us, does it seem to apply to Cathy or Adam, or even Charles, who is incapable of feeling sorry?" ("Other Destinies" 253) Louis Owens' suggestion is put forward with the premise of the meaning of "timshel" in this novel. Publicly admitted, "timshel", proposed by Steinbeck, means "thou mayest" instead of "thou shalt". In other words, Steinbeck thinks that human beings have the ability to choose between good and evil as well as the ability to perfect themselves. This is Steinbeck's life philosophy and it is also the dominant theme of *East of Eden*. Frankly speaking, Owens's suggestion is only partially correct, because the behaviors of Adam and Charles show that they agree with the standard of human nature which is offered by the meaning of "timshel" completely. After all, although Adam has once strayed from the right direction of being good, he grasps the true meaning of "timshel" at last by recognizing his fault of rejecting others. And Charles's sincere welcome of Adam's home-back and the money that he leaves to Adam after his death all show that he has reconciled with his brother. His behavior proves his wish to be good and the ability of being good. However, I agree with Owens' s opinion that "timshel" does not apply to Cathy. This can be shown through two points: Cathy's physiological and psychological features and her behavior.

Cathy Ames Trask is a very queer character in *East of Eden*. She is like Alice in the story of *Alice in Wonderland*, who suddenly intrudes in a world that does not belong to her. Steinbeck describes her as a monster, a devil, not a human being. Physiologically and psychologically, Cathy is always the "other" in this novel.

Her appearance, since her childhood, has always been unusual. Her gold hair, wide-set hazel but sleepy eyes, her delicate and thin nose, her high and wide cheekbones, her heart-shaped face, her small mouth and her thin-flap-like ears, her sharp teeth and hoofs-like feet, and her occasional harsh voice, draw an outline of an animal-like being. She looks like a cat. Steinbeck describes her mysterious contradictions in *East of Eden*:

Cathy always had a child's figure even after she was grown, slender, delicate arms and hands—tiny hands. Her breasts never developed very much. Before her puberty the nipples turned inward. Her mother

had to manipulate them out when they became painful in Cathy's tenth year. Her body was a boy's body, narrow-hipped, straight-legged, but her ankles were thin and straight without being slender. Her feet were small and round and stubby, with fat insteps almost like little hoofs. Her voice was huskily soft...But there must have been some steel cord in her throat, for Cathy's voice could cut like a file when she wished. (83)

Everything of Cathy's appearance differentiates her from common people. Steinbeck uses a word to describe her—"foreign". She looks foreign. This is her special quality. Then, Steinbeck introduces her foreignness through the descriptions of her psychology.

In her childhood, Cathy does not abhor difference. Most children abhor difference. They want to look, talk, dress, and act exactly like the others. But she never conforms in dress or conduct. She never imitates other children and wears whatever she wants to. So, it can be said that her psychology is not like other children. Her different psychology sets her apart. Even the children sense the foreignness of her. Groups of boys and girls avoid her as though she carries a nameless danger.

Gradually, Cathy is prematurely grown up, psychologically. She often lies to other people. Her lies are never innocent. Her aim, unlike that of general children who lie most probably for fun, is for profit. She lies to escape punishment, or work, or responsibility. Maybe it is not quite abnormal for a child. But Cathy's lies are different, because she is always able to make her lies look like real. Usually, only the adults have such idea to do this. Moreover, Cathy proves that her psychology is more mature than that of some adults, although this maturity is proved to be premature badness. She can carefully plan a plot and win everybody's trust. She is psychologically abnormal.

Through the descriptions of Cathy's physiology and psychology, Steinbeck has vividly created an image of "the other" in this novel. But Cathy's foreignness cannot make her become the villain of this novel. So, Steinbeck continues to make her a monster, devil and the symbol of pure evil in this novel.

Cathy is an absolute evil person. At the age of ten, she lures some boys into sexual experimentation; at the age of sixteen, she drives her Latin teacher to commit suicide and then burns her parents to death; After her murder of her parents, she runs

away to become the mistress of a brothel owner and tries to leave him with his money; and later, after being brutally beaten by the brothel owner, she marries another person for protection; but soon, she shoots her husband and deserts her twin sons (one of whom is fathered by her husband's brother on her wedding night); then, she returns to prostitution by herself and murders the madam of the brothel where she stays, aiming to become the madam herself of the most infamous brothel in the west; in order to hide the truth of the death of the former madam, she cunningly kills two people who know her crime; moreover, she attempts to use money to attain one of her sons' purity; at last she commits suicide with poison. Thus, under Steinbeck's pen, Cathy symbolizes pure evil in *East of Eden*.

There are some critics who defend the role of Cathy that this character is Steinbeck's skillful design in this novel. For example, Kyoko Arika, argues that the role of Cathy is indispensable to the thematic design, because she plays three major roles in *East of Eden*: she connects the two Trask family and the Hamilton family; she serves as catalyst for change in the Trasks, after which she disappears; and she contributes greatly to the negative presentation of the theme of "timshel", just as Caleb Trask contributes positively<sup>4</sup>. However, in my opinion, this role has some serious flaws, which not only has bad influence on the consistency of the character itself but also make the character contradict the theme of *East of Eden*. And the inconsistency of the character partly is due to the incredibility of the role of Cathy, partly the design of her destiny.

Cathy's evil, to many readers, is unbelievable. Facing readers' question, Steinbeck defends the credibility of this role in his letter to Carlton A. Sheffield:

You won't believe her, many people don't. I don't know whether I believe her either but I know she exists. I don't believe in Napoleon, Joan of Arc, Jack the Ripper, the man who stands on one finger in the circus. I don't believe Jesus Christ, Alexander the Great, Leonardo. I don't believe them but they exist...You say you only believe her at the end...but that's when, through fear, she became like us. (*A Life in*

---

<sup>4</sup> See Kyoko Arika's "Cathy in *East of Eden*: Indispensable to the Thematic Design", from *Beyond Boundaries: Rereading John Steinbeck*, eds. Susan Shillinglaw and Kevin Hearle. Tuscaloosa and London: The University of Alabama Press, 2002. pp. 230 – 254.

Letters 458-459)

Steinbeck thinks that people like Cathy really exist in the world. Also, he thinks that at the end Cathy becomes like human by committing suicide. And in another letter to his friend Steinbeck also states his ideas about mankind: "It seems very obvious that two sides of a mirror are required before we have a mirror, that two forces are necessary in man before he is a man" (*A Life in Letters* 221). Apparently the two forces mean "good" and "evil". So, if Cathy became like human at last, she surely would have such two forces. And according to the theme of *East of Eden* that all men have the ability to choose to do good or evil, certainly Cathy should have such ability too. However, as a matter of fact, Cathy's suicide shows no signs of repentance and no will to become a good person. The battle between "good" and "evil" has never happened to her. She chooses death only because she doesn't know what to do. Steinbeck reasons that Cathy becomes like human through "fear". However, to fear something is not the special ability of human beings. Animals also have such an instinct. From this point view, we cannot say that Cathy becomes like human at the end. She is still a monster, devil, symbol of pure evil in the end. Then, her image, obviously does not agree with Steinbeck's opinion of the essence of human beings: human being is the combination of good and evil. Furthermore, even if Cathy becomes like human, she has no ability to choose to do good or evil, to perfect herself. And her incapability to choose, obviously contradicts the theme of *East of Eden* that human beings have free will to choose between good and evil, and to perfect themselves. Thus, "timshel" fails to apply to Cathy Ames Trask. And the effort of Steinbeck to show the universal significance of "timshel" for all human beings fails at last.

Why Steinbeck chooses to make Cathy a symbol of pure evil? I think there are two reasons. The first one is connected with his marital life. Steinbeck was married three times in all his life. And his second marriage was considered a disaster to him. According to the materials offered by Jackson J. Benson in his book *Looking for Steinbeck's Ghost*, many relatives and friends of Steinbeck have a very bad impression on Gwyn, Steinbeck's second wife. Some people even think that Gwyn is the prototype of Cathy in *East of Eden* (9). Virtually speaking, those who give the comments on the relationship between Gwyn and Steinbeck do say something true.



At least Steinbeck, though in hidden words, has revealed his feelings about Gwyn when he tries to soothe his friend Bo Beskow, "There are so many destructive relationships—or perhaps more, than there are creative ones. I have had two destructive ones [...]" (*A Life in Letters* 410). It is obvious that Steinbeck has some memories about his first two marriages, especially the one with Gwyn. There are some materials showing the economic conditions of Steinbeck after his second divorce. Since those materials are from the collection of Steinbeck's letters, they are authentic. Steinbeck says, "Gwyn has all my books and all the money and the house and the pictures—except for your portrait of me. And I have one little room and a tiny kitchen and a bed and a card table and that is all I need with yellows pads and boxes of pencils. But my new girl understands and likes it and so there we are" (*A Life in Letters* 398). The "your portrait of me" here refers to the portrait that Bo Beskow drew for Steinbeck. From the two phrases given by Steinbeck, we get two pieces of information about Gwyn—her avarice of material possessions and her destructive nature. And Cathy in *East of Eden* also has such bad qualities. She destroys several people's lives for her private desire for "freedom and money". Therefore, it is very possible that Steinbeck puts some bad qualities of Gwyn into the character of Cathy.

And another reason, I think, is that Steinbeck has been influenced by the characters in his former novels. Some characters in Steinbeck's former novels, have a tendency of "Escapism", as it is called by Peter Lisca. In his essay "Escape and Commitment: Two Poles of The Steinbeck Hero", Peter Lisca argues that Steinbeck always presents readers with characters who choose one of two extremes—either to reject society's demands and escape into individualism, or to reject individualism and commit themselves to goals and values which can be realized only in terms of society, which is contrary to Steinbeck's own idea that "man is a double thing—a group animal and at the same time an individual, and man cannot successfully be the second until he has fulfilled the first" (75). Peter Lisca gives some examples of each type of two extremes. For the type of "Escapism", he lists several characters, among whom are Henry Morgan in *Cup of Gold* and Lennie in *Of Mice and Men*. He thinks that Morgan's ambition and evil and Lennie's animal quality both show their tendency of escapism. He has not mentioned Cathy in *East of Eden*. However, in my

opinion, the character of Cathy has inherited something from Henry Morgan and Lennie, because she is also evil and animalized. Maybe Steinbeck does not mean to do that. But, Cathy, obviously, is a typical example of escaping from her responsibilities to the society. For her parents, she is not a good daughter. Instead, she sees them as enemies who stand on her way of seeking freedom and murders them. For her husband Adam Trask, she is not a faithful wife. She shows no love to her husband. Despite the fact that he saves her life, she shoots him for her own desires of so-called "freedom". For her sons, she is no mother at all. She deserts them and sees them as some threat. And for the society, she contributes nothing but destroys the peace and happiness of other people. She is a murderer of the former madam of the brothel; she opens the most vicious brothel in the world; and she searches for the privacy of her guests to blackmail them. She is a typical representative of escapism, although such kind of escapism is negative. Cathy's suicide is to choose neither good nor evil, but to escape her future destiny.

### **2.2.2 Lee and Samuel Hamilton**

Compared with Cathy Ames Trask, Lee and Samuel Hamilton are devoted to the society. Lee, functions to convince Adam Trask that Adam can choose to be good in *East of Eden*. Lee is a good man. Faithful to the Trask family, Lee, from the beginning to the end, has always been a spiritual supporter of the family. He cares about Adam Trask's spiritual world, always trying to pull Adam out of the influence of being shot and deserted by his wife Cathy; he loves and takes care of the twin sons of Adam Trask as his own children; even he loves the twin sons and cares about them better than their father Adam Trask. He is also wise. He has been to university and he loves books. He speaks academic English. He studies different editions of the Bible. It is he who proposes the significance of the story of "Abel and Cain": this story is for everybody; and it is he that compels Adam Trask to forgive his guilty son Caleb. Before Samuel Hamilton's death, he acts as an assistant of Samuel Hamilton to guide the Trask family through the tragedy, while after Samuel Hamilton's death, he takes responsibility from Samuel Hamilton and continues to be a moral guider of the Trask family. In a word, he is described as a sage by Steinbeck in this novel.

And Samuel Hamilton has many functions. At first, he exemplifies moral

success through economic failure, since he can make all man rich but himself; his joyous and total understanding of good and evil is an end to itself. Later on, Samuel becomes mainly a mystic, somewhat like the role of "Prophet". He can find water with a diving rod for other people. Moreover, through moral insight, he identifies Adam's Edenic valley as an evil place. He has perceived the "evil" of Cathy. Then, Samuel is elevated to the role similar to "God". He names Adam's sons when Adam cannot, and he insists that Adam should accept the biblical story of "Cain and Abel" as insight into permanent human experience. In the end, Samuel's role changes again. He is transformed into a kind of human divinity or an expression of the divine in man. When Lee sees Samuel and talks with him for the last time in this novel, Samuel realizes the divinity of his own life: "when the dizziness was over, a past was open, new and bright. And my life which is ending seems to be going on to an ending wonderful. And my music has a new last melody like a bird song in the night" (356) Apparently Steinbeck has realized his eternal influence on other people. Lee affirms it by showing his respect to Samuel:

Lee climbed down. "Samuel!" he said.

"Here am I." The old man chuckled. "Liza hates me to say that."

"Samuel, you've gone beyond me."

"It's time, Lee."

[...] (356)

Samuel's last phrases recall God's language in the Garden of Eden after the Fall of Adam and Eve ("Here I am"), and the visual imagery is consciously mystical. After saying goodbye to Samuel, Lee turns around and sees that "old Samuel [is] against the sky, his white hair [is] shinning with starlight" (356). From a morally successful man, to a mystical "prophet", to a "God", and at last to a "divine human", Samuel Hamilton becomes an almighty person in this novel. His role changes so fast that readers almost cannot catch with the developing pace of this character.

Lee and Samuel have always been moral guiders for Adam Trask and Caleb Trask. They are sages to expose the universal truth of "timshel". Steinbeck's portraits of them are quite vivid and impressive. However, there is a flaw about the portraits of them. This flaw, exactly speaking, lies in the contradictions within the characters themselves, especially within the character of Lee.

Lee has been described as a sage by Steinbeck in *East of Eden*. But, at the same time, he is described as an obedient servant of the Trasks in this novel. And he is a Chinese servant in particular. He must depend on the Trasks economically. Before he is acquainted with Samuel Hamilton, he speaks pidgin English; he prepares meals for the Trasks; he cleans the house; he takes care of the twin sons; even he makes clothes for them. In other words, Lee is a feminized Chinese man. Moreover, Lee has always been dreaming of having a book store of his own. In fact, he has once left the Trasks to seek his own dream. However, very soon he returns to the Trask family after his dream breaks up. Thus, Lee becomes the combination of “a servant” and “a sage”. Since Steinbeck has no explanation about why Lee holds such two very contradictory roles, it is a little impossible to believe the credibility of this role. Just as Levant comments, Lee “is convincing neither as servant nor sage” (241). The two different roles of a “sage” and a “servant” are two poles which contradict each other.

Obviously, Lee is a stereotyped character of Steinbeck. Steinbeck exposes his stereotypes about Chinese through Lee’s phrases. When Samuel knows that Lee is an American-born Chinese, he is surprised at his pidgin English:

“Lee, “ he (Samuel) said at last, “I mean no disrespect, but I’ve never been able to figure why you people still talk pidgin when an illiterate baboon from the black bogs of Ireland, with a head of Gaelic and a tongue like a potato, learns to talk a poor grade of English in ten years.”

Lee grinned. “Me talkee Chinese talk,” he said. (187)

Lee is quite similar to the Chinese characters in most of Western literary works during the twentieth century . They belong to the lowest class, and they are economically independent and feminized. From this point of view, Steinbeck apparently has been influenced by Orientalism. On the one hand, he realizes the influence of social environment on non-white people; and on the other hand, he keeps hopes of the mystic oriental culture. It is because of this that some contradictions appear within the character of Lee.

Nevertheless, Lee is not the only Chinese in this novel. Through Lee’s phrases, Steinbeck has also described some Chinese relatives of Lee. Those Chinese, while

smoking opium, are intellectuals as well. Lee calls them “sage”. They are very old. The youngest one among them is over ninety; they start to learn Hebrew from exercise books, grammar, vocabulary, simple sentences; and they write Hebrew in Chinese ink with a brush. Lee points out that the new definition of “timshel” comes from those old Chinese intellectuals. These descriptions seem to show that Steinbeck is trying to use Chinese philosophy to make up the shortcomings of western culture.

Lee represents Chinese philosophy and Samuel Hamilton represents western culture. The two people symbolize the combination of the two different cultures. Created to save Adam Trask and Caleb Trask, Lee and Samuel Hamilton have too many functions in this novel. The importance of the two people is over-exaggerated. In *East of Eden*, the awakening of Adam Trask is not through his experience in the society, but through the instructions given by Lee and Samuel Hamilton. Adam does not understand the true meaning of “timshel” until his death. Lee’s and Samuel’s influence on Adam Trask is so strong that it weakens the significance of “timshel” to people. The existence of Lee and Samuel, seem to prove the fact that without them, Adam cannot grasp the essence of human beings, and naturally he cannot save himself. In other words, Adam’s changes are mostly caused by the outside forces. And Steinbeck’s hallooing of “timshel”, as a matter of fact, is to praise human beings’ ability of self-perfection. Adam’s delayed changes apparently contradict the strong optimism which is implied in Steinbeck’s belief in human beings’ ability of self-perfection.

The casual arrangement of plots and the inconsistent portraits of characters expose two problems of Steinbeck. The first problem is his weakness of dealing with diverse materials. And the second problem is his weakness of dealing with the subjective intensity of an idea and the objective facts. These two weaknesses prevent *East of Eden* from forming a harmonious unity of structure. Also, they hinder the exploration of the theme. Nonetheless, the most visible inconsistency lies in Steinbeck’s contradictory views of human beings in this novel.

### Chapter Three Inconsistent Tones of *East of Eden*

Our fathers wrung their bread from stocks and stones  
And fenced their gardens with the Redman's bones;  
Embarking from the Nether Land of Holland,  
Pilgrims unhoused by Geneva' night,  
They planted here the Serpent's seed of light;  
And here the pivoting searchlights probe to shock  
The riotous glass houses built on rock,  
And candles gutter by an empty altar,  
And light is where the landless blood of Cain  
Is burning, burning the unburied grain.  
—— *Children of Light* by Robert Lowell

When Steinbeck is hallooing “timshel” in *East of Eden*, he aims to create prevailing optimism of human beings’ potential perfectibility. However, during the development of the stories of the Trasks and the Hamiltons, a strong sense of pessimism also arises and goes through the novel. This pessimism comes from Steinbeck’s descriptions about human nature and human destiny, as well as his disillusioned dream of a new Eden in the west, California. The optimism shown by “timshel” does not grow stronger and stronger gradually. As a matter of fact, it is shown by stiff repetitions. But pessimism has been developing step by step. Sometimes pessimism even overcomes the optimism contained in the thematic design. Thus, to some extent, pessimism weakens the power of the theme.

#### 3.1 The Tendency of Determinism against the Theme

The strong pessimism shown in the novel first is represented by Steinbeck’s tendency of determinism. As a matter of fact, Steinbeck’s novels have always contained a sense of determinism. As a naturalist, he often describes the influence of the material and economic environment on people’s behavior and how people’s destinies are determined by the environment. And this tendency can be found in his

works of 1930s, such as *To A God Unknown* and *The Grapes of Wrath*. And in *East of Eden*, this determinism centers on the determined effects of physical and hereditary factors in forming the individual personality and the destinies of the major characters in this novel. These characters include the Cs (Cathy, Charles and Caleb). When describing these three characters, Steinbeck seems to imply that evil is predetermined. Moreover, he implies that people's ability to choose between good and evil is also predetermined. And this determinism is against the meaning of "timshel" in this novel.

### 3.1.1 Evil, Descending from Cain

Steinbeck stresses that human nature is the combination of good and evil. But he also points out that human beings have inherited evil from Cain, because they are Cain's descendents. In order to prove this idea, Steinbeck creates some coincidences which form a mechanical unity among the characters of the Cs——Charles, Cathy, and Cain. These coincidences, are mainly represented by a signifying image —— a scar, the mark of evil and sin.

The scar, which symbolizes evil and sin in the Bible, has similar symbolic meaning in *East of Eden*. In the Bible, Cain is exiled to the place of Nod and began his new life there. Before his leaving, he tells his worry about his fate in future to God:

Behold, thou hast driven me out this day from the face of the earth; and from thy face shall be hid; and I shall be a fugitive and a vagabond in the earth; and it shall come to pass, that every one that findeth me shall slay me.

And Lord said unto him, therefore whosoever slayeth Cain, vengeance shall be taken on him sevenfold. And the Lord set a mark upon Cain, lest any finding him should kill him. ( Holy Bible, Gen. 4:1-16)

In the biblical myth of "Cain and Abel", God gives Cain the chance to change. God believes that Cain will make atonement and regret what he has done to his brother Abel. But, God also puts on Cain a mark which embodies evil and sin.

Similarly, in this novel, Charles and Cathy also have a mark on their

forehead—a scar. Their scars mark them as a sign of evil and sin. Charles's scar comes by accident. When he is digging out rocks and sledding to the stone wall, the bar slips and its upper end crashes against his forehead, leaving a long torn welt on his forehead, from hairline to a point between his eyebrows. Charles hates this scar, regarding it as a mark. In a letter to his brother, he puts down his feelings about it:

“It looks,” he wrote, “like somebody marked me like a cow. The damn thing gets darker. By the time you get home it will maybe black. All I need is one going the other way and I would look like a Papist on Ash Wednesday. I don't know why it bothers me. I got plenty other scars. It just seems like I was marked [...]” (54)

And Cathy, after she is badly hurt by Mr. Edwards, the owner of a brothel, also has a scar on her forehead. When describing the wounds in Cathy's body, Steinbeck specifically emphasizes the scar on her forehead. “Her left arm and three ribs were broken and her jaw was cracked. Her skull was cracked too, and the teeth on the left side were missing. Her scalp was ripped and torn and her forehead laid open to the skull” (128). And later, while Cathy grows better, Steinbeck still stresses the scar on her forehead: “The bandage was still on her forehead but the rest of her face was little marked except for the hollow cheek on the side where the teeth were missing” (133).

The scars on the foreheads of Charles and Cathy are marks of their evil. It is obvious that Steinbeck has tried to make a link between Cain and the two persons. “They are marked”. This connection seems to have made a unity of characters. However, Cain has been given a chance to choose between good and evil, why not they? In *East of Eden*, Charles dies in solitude and Cathy commits suicide, while Caleb, who has no scar, is given the chance to choose between good and evil. This fact seems to imply that some people can choose between good and evil but some cannot.

### 3.1.2 Evil, Determined by Blood

Steinbeck's emphasis on the mark, in fact, is an emphasis on evil. Unconsciously or not, he connects evil with hereditary factors. In *East of Eden*, the Cain sign has always been applied by Charles and Caleb. Steinbeck creates a link



between Charles and Caleb by suggesting that Caleb may be the son of Charles and Cathy. In the novel, Charles betrays his brother Adam and has sex with Cathy on her wedding night with Adam. And the appearance of Caleb is quite like Charles. Both of them are dark skinned and violent. And when Caleb talks with Lee, he shouts out his uneasiness of having Cathy's evil in him. "I hate her because I know why she went away. I know——because I've got her in me" (515). It seems that Caleb is evil because he has inherited the evil side from Charles and Cathy. And Aron, the son of Adam, grows up to be good because he has inherited the good side from Adam. Then, the physical and hereditary factors determine individual's personality. If that is so, then Aron has no need to choose between good and evil. Human kind's free will has been denied.

Steinbeck's emphasis on the determining influence of human nature, sometimes also becomes a denial of free will. For example, when Caleb's present of money is rejected by Adam Trask, Lee consoles him: "He couldn't help it, Cal. That's his nature. It was the only way he knew. He didn't have any choice" (623). Lee ascribes Adam's lacking of free will to his nature. The same thing has happened to Cathy, the devil-like woman in this novel. When describing Cathy, Steinbeck has also ascribed Cathy's lacking of free will to her nature——because she lacks something. These denials, apparently, contradicts the theme that human beings have free will to choose between good and evil.

### 3.2 Steinbeck's Pessimistic Prophecy of the Trasks

The implication of hereditary determinism of evil prophesies the tragic destinies of Charles and Cathy. Moreover, through the descriptions of the some particular images, Steinbeck has created a tragic atmosphere in *East of Eden*. And this tragic atmosphere has exposed Steinbeck's pessimistic prophecy of the destinies of the Trask brothers.

As is well known, environmental description is also an important component of literary works. In *Wasteland*, T.S.Eliot depicts the land as barren, and without vitality. The wasteland signifies the people who lost their fecundity. At the same time, it symbolizes the barren situation of people's spiritual lives in modern society. Similarly, Steinbeck's descriptions of the environment of Salinas Valley——the

place where the story of *East of Eden* happen—— also have similar symbolic meanings. One distinguishing example is his description of the mountains around Salinas Valley. while depicting the loveliness of the Gabilan Mountains, Steinbeck has also expressed his dread of the Santa Lucias and the sea. The parallels of the bright side and the dark side of the Gabilan Mountains and the Santa Lucias have been a tradition in the Steinbeck's works. In *The Red Pony*, on the one side are the sunny, rounded, reassuring Gabilans, while on the other are the taller, darker Santa Lucias. Once, the protagonist of *The Red Pony* Jody looks up at the taller range, up

at the great mountains where they went piling back, growing darker and more savage until they finished with one jagged ridge, high up against the west. Curious secret mountains...When the sun had gone over the edge in the evening and the mountains were a purple-like despair, then Jody was afraid of them. (*Red Pony* 42)

As we discussed in the first chapter of this essay, the descriptions of the mountains indicate the two sides of humanity——good and evil. However, it seems that the dark side has overcome the bright side. In *East of Eden*, it is often represented that evil is always more powerful than good. For example, Abel is good but he is killed by Cain; Cyrus is evil but he achieves political success. Faye is good and rich. But when she meets the evil Cathy, she is poisoned by Cathy; Aron is good but he cannot face the evil of his mother Cathy and he died. Compared with evil, good seems to be weak. A biographer of John Steinbeck Jackson J. Benson says in his memoir that Steinbeck's first wife Carol confides to him in low voice that Steinbeck really hates Salinas (*Looking for Steinbeck's Ghost* 49). Whether it is true or not, we don't know. But apparently, when describing the scenery of Salinas Valley, Steinbeck has prepared a sad tune for the tragedy in the novel.

The second image which implicates Steinbeck's pessimistic prophesy of the destinies of the characters is Steinbeck's rendering of water. Water is a very important image in mythos. The Israelites' disasters begin from the loss of the life tree and water and end after they regain those two things. Therefore, the deficiency of water, to some extent, is a symbol of tragedy. And the deficiency of water also has such tragic symbolic meanings in Steinbeck's novels. This deficiency is mainly represented by "drought". For example, in *To a God Unknown*, the protagonist

Joseph Wayne goes to California alone to build a farm. Soon he gets the news of his father's death. Joseph, then, transfers his love for his father to a pine tree on his farm. Later, Joseph's brothers move to this farm, too. They live happily together. During those happy days, Joseph finds a big mossy rock in the forest, and a spring. Joseph marries a girl Elizabeth and has a son. However, soon later, Joseph's brother a religion extremist, cuts off all the roots of the pine tree which is adored by Joseph as a symbol of his father and protector. Soon, disasters come. Elizabeth falls off the big mossy rock by accident and dies. Moreover, the drought only occurring in legend comes and the family of Joseph breaks up. At the end of that novel, Joseph cuts his wrist and dies in a heavy rain. When commenting *To A God Unknown*, Harry Thornton Moore suggests in his book, "The idea of drought is given a horrible emphasis by nightmares [...] and these nightmares are the first sign of a motif that will develop importantly in the later parts of *To A God Unknown*" (25). Then we can see that "drought", has been a motif that predicts the following tragedies. And in *The Grapes of Wrath*, drought is also the first image that forecasts the hard journey of the Joads. Therefore, drought is a symbol of tragedy for John Steinbeck.

And in *East of Eden*, drought appears frequently. Samuel Hamilton's ranch up on the hill is very dry. He and his family can seldom support themselves without worrying about food and clothes. Even Adam Trask, whose land is rich down in the valley, has to find other water resources, preparing for the dry years. And water is one factor which connects the Trasks with the Hamiltons, since Adam Trask asks Samuel Hamilton to dig a well for him. Therefore, drought has brought a tragic feeling to this novel. To some extent, it forecasts the following tragedies, including Cathy's shot on Adam and discarding home, Adam's decadence, Caleb's "murder" of his brother Aron, the deaths of Samuel Hamilton, his daughter Daisy and son Tom.

The tragic tone is strengthened to pessimism when Steinbeck uses the biblical myth of "Cain and Abel" to show a universal principle of the conflict between good and evil. Some critics think that the conflict between Cain and Abel is doomed to happen. Theodor H. Gaster explains the idea from the perspective of "competition of careers." Gaster thinks that due to the competition of careers and social status, the tragedy between Cain and Abel is doomed to happen. He says:

Cain means "smith", and Abel "Herdsman". Its original purpose,

therefore, was to account for the pariah status of the smith in a pastoral society. He is at once an outcast and a wanderer, but the very qualities which make him so endow him at the same time with a certain aura of mystery and awesomeness which render him sacrosanct and untouchable. To indicate this, he is sometimes marked or branded with a special sign. (1: 51)

Gaster lists many examples about “smith’s” alien status in several regions to testify his point of view. But in the Bible, Cain is a tiller of ground. Gaster does not try to explore the intention of the Bible’s unknown writer or writers. Instead, he offers some other examples to show the rivalry of professions between the farmer Cain and the Shepherd Abel. In a word, Gaster argues that considering the importance of “career” in human society, Cain’s and Abel’s conflict is unavoidable.

Steinbeck has expressed similar opinion in *East of Eden*. The image of Cain becomes a sign of evil and sin. Some characters have followed the pattern of Cain, including Cain’s career and personality. Charles and Caleb are two “Cains” in this novel. Charles, has always been a solitary farmer on his ranch; and Caleb, has shown his interest in his father Adam’s ranch when he was only seventeen. Charles and Caleb both earn money from the soil. From this point of view, they follow the professional patten of Cain. Nevertheless, they are both alien from other people. Charles lives alone on the ranch far away from the village. And Caleb, is much less loved than his brother Aron—the blond and innocent boy. Charles and Caleb both are not favored by their fathers and they have been two outcasts in the Trask family. Therefore, from the perspective of career and social status, Charles and Caleb are doomed to have conflicts with their brothers. Furthermore, Adam and Aron both are idealists. Adam dreams to build an Eden on his ranch and Aron dreams to purify himself. Compared with these two persons, Charles and Caleb are more rational. They pay more attention to material success. The illusions of Adam and Aron are contrary to Charles’s and Caleb’s rationalism. Thus, conflicts have long existed in the Trask family. In other words, Cain’s and Abel’s tragedy is doomed to happen between the Trask brothers.

Steinbeck’s pessimistic view about the destinies of the Trasks has been expanded to a much larger circle—the whole human beings. Steinbeck gives *East*

of *Eden* the “talismanic power” (Lieber 272) and upgrades it to the story of the mankind. Lee, the Chinese servant as well as a wise man in the Trask family, also says: “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” (271). Then, to some degree, the moral problems of the individuals in this novel become social problems. However, if Cain and Abel’s tragedy is doomed to happen in human society, what is the use of human beings’ free will? Steinbeck’s pessimistic prophesy of the destinies of the Trasks, apparently, contradict with his optimism of “timshel” and his insight that “despite the fall from grace caused by Adam and Eve, the human race need not to continue to emulate the Cain and Abel story, again experiencing rejection and pain” (Meyer 404).

### 3.3 From Optimism to Pessimism

Steinbeck’s pessimism in describing the stories of the Trasks and the Hamiltons has gone through the whole novel. This pessimism, strong and insistent, has weakened the optimism shown through the hallooing of “timshel”—thou mayest. Moreover, sometimes pessimism seems to have overcome optimism. And that can be seen from Steinbeck’s opinion of Eden or the promised land in this novel. At first, Steinbeck is optimistic to build a new Eden or a new promised land in the west, California. But later, gradually he changes his mind. He turns from optimism to pessimism.

In the United States, some writers have formed a group and their literature is called Californian literature. The term Californian literature is used to “imply subject rather than where or by whom the writing generated” (Cook 74). The subjects of the Californian literature are always about the Californian state, about its society and nature. As a member of the Californian literary group, Steinbeck pays much attention to the significance of California as a promised land or a new Eden. Or he wants it to be that in his mind.

As a matter of fact, in many of his former novels, Steinbeck has tried to suggest that California is a promised land or a new Eden for American people. At least he dreams about it. Steinbeck’s second novel, *To A God Unknown*, begins with the departure of Joseph Wayne, the novel’s indistinctly godlike hero, from the family

home in New England, near Pittsford, Vermont, to the green hills of California. California, in Joseph's eyes, has always been a land in his dreams. "I've been reading about the West and the good cheap land there," he tells his father, "I've a hunger for the land, sir." "It's not just restlessness," his father replies. "You may go to the West. You are finished here with me" (*To a God Unknown* 2). Steinbeck's masterpiece, *The Grapes of Wrath*, also shows people's dream of finding a new promised land in California after they have lost their own land. The Joads' journey to the west has been widely recognized as "the new Israelites led by the new Moses, sent to reclaim this new promised land from Satan" (Owens, "Grampa Killed Indians" 87). And in *East of Eden*, behind the theme of human beings' free will to choose to do good or evil, Steinbeck hides another intention that he wants to build a new Eden in Salinas Valley, California. The protagonist Adam Trask tells Cathy that they will leave for California. In his eyes, California is a nice place where there is "sun all the time and beautiful" (141). For Joseph Wayne, the Joads and Adam Trask, California has been a new land with a promise of happy life.

Steinbeck's protagonists go to California often after some material or spiritual crises. They have different purposes. Some come to seek their fortune, some want to change the environment and some intend to abandon their past and have a new life. At least the characters in *East of Eden*, have similar reasons. For example, the Hamiltons go to California probably for two reasons: religion and wealth. Under Steinbeck's pen, the Hamiltons are pious puritans, especially Hamilton's wife Liza. About her strict discipline Steinbeck has a very vivid description:

Liza had a finely developed sense of sin. Idleness was a sin, and card playing, which was a kind of idleness to her. She was suspicious of fun whether it involved dancing or singing or even laughter. She felt that people having a good time were wide open to the devil...She wore her hair always pulled tight back and bunned behind in a hard knot...She had no spark of humor and only occasionally a blade of cutting wit...She suffered bravely and uncomplainingly through life [...]. (13)

The qualities of hard working, austerity, and stoical philosophy, apparently belong to the puritans. In fact, when the first puritans came to America, they hoped to build a "city upon hill"—an ideal community. The migration of the Hamiltons to

California—the west in America—to some extent, has been an embodiment of the dream of building a promised land of the Puritans.

As to the Trask family, for Adam, to desert the blank life in Connecticut and seek happiness is his purpose to go to California. Steinbeck describes Adam's early life in his hometown and army and the aimless wondering across the continent. Obviously Adam hates his past life. So when he meets Cathy—a beautiful woman wounded by some evil men (he thought so), he makes her another Eve and the perfect woman for him. After they are married and move to Salinas Valley in California, Adam's most ambitious dream is to build a garden of Eden for Cathy. He dreams about living happily with his family in the new place. California is a new beginning in their lives and accordingly, it also becomes the promised land for the injured and the deserted. R. W. B. Lewis also agrees that Steinbeck has tried to make California a promised land or a new Eden in his essay *John Steinbeck: The Fitful Daemon*:

But in seeing his native Salinas Valley in California as a new Eden, the scene of a new chance for man and for men, and in transporting his heroes thither from the exhausted East, Steinbeck is not only continuing in an American tradition, enacting again an old American dream. He is also suggesting that the dream itself has moved west and has settled there, that it is now California which stimulates in its inhabitants the intoxicating sense of fresh beginnings and untroubled potentialities which the eastern scene once stimulated in Emerson, in Thoreau, in Whitman. This is the point and purpose of the prefatory incantations of *East of Eden*, where the local California countryside is observed and named as though by the first man at the dawn of time. (168)

California is not only a fresh beginning for people, but also a place that people can improve their morality and return to innocence. Steinbeck, while naming Caleb, has pointed out that Caleb is the one “who got to the promised land.” He puts emphasis on the meaning of the name, on the one hand, to predict the future of Caleb, and on the other hand, to show that people have free will to gain moral success and return to innocence. However, although in this novel Steinbeck has made effort to set up an image of a new Eden in California, he fails to do so at last.

Louis Owens argues in his essay that “Adam (Trask) represents the profound American need to believe in reclaimed innocence in starting over in the new Eden”, but “in holding to the myth of America as the new Eden and himself as an innocent reinhabiting the new-found garden, Adam brings about his own destruction and damage the lives of those around him” (“Grampa Killed Indians” 91). In other words, people haven’t regained their innocence in *East of Eden*. Steinbeck’s emphasis on human being’s free will to choose to do good or evil, in fact, is an appeal for moral perfection. But when he tries to build an Eden in Salinas Valley, his descriptions also suggest that his effort fails at last. His descriptions about Salinas Valley always contradict his dream of a new Eden or a promised land in California, the west.

In the Bible Canaan, the promised land is an unexplored wilderness. So, the promised land is closely related to nature. But due to the realistic descriptions of the natural environment in this novel, California is surely doomed to be no promised land and a new Eden. In Salinas Valley, it has floods and draughts, especially the latter. Except a few lands, most lands are so dry and barren that can hardly supply a family. Steinbeck has written about drought more than once in his works. Drought causes many economic problems in American society. While the critics are debating the social and economic problems which are presented in Steinbeck’s works, they seldom connect nature with people’s dream of the promised land and a new Eden.

Steinbeck’s dreaming of a promised land in California, on the one hand, shows his hope of a happy life; and on the other hand, shows his worry about human beings’ spiritual and moral crisis. In many literary works, nature also symbolizes people’s spiritual condition. Kenneth. W. Thompson says in “America: Promised Land or Wasteland”: “There is ample historical evidence that we have seen ourselves, and been seen, in turn, as the Promised Land and as a barren and materialistic Wasteland” (291). The natural environment of California, or exactly speaking, of Salinas Valley in *East of Eden*, to some extent represents the spiritual conditions of modern Americans. In the rainy seasons the fertile land represents people’s high morality and in the droughty seasons the barren land represents people’s neglect of morality. It is somewhat similar to the use in T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*. Adam Trask’s pursuit of a new Eden in Salinas Valley is a denial of his blank and dull past in the army as well as a hope of obtaining spiritual salvation in a new place. But



Samuel Hamilton points out that his Eden is an evil one. After his wife Cathy's leaving from him, Adam immerses himself into his own sadness and falls into spiritual degradation. Compared with the descriptions of the Fisher King in *The Waste Land*, Steinbeck's writing is different in approach but equally satisfactory in result in describing a man's spiritual condition. In a word, the barren land indicates people's spiritual and moral crisis while the prosperous land emblemizes the rise of moral consciousness. The change between barren and prosperity of land stands for the change between good and evil of human beings. Therefore, Salinas Valley is an epitome of American society and it is absolutely no "promised land" or "new Eden" for Americans.

The failure to make California the embodiment of a promised land and a new Eden for the sophisticated people lies not only in its history and reality, but also in people's false expectation of returning innocence. In *East of Eden*, along with the continuance of the Adam Trask's story, there are two persons who act as moral guiders of Adam's life journey. They are Samuel Hamilton and Lee. They are like Moses, directing people and teaching them what should be done or not. Nonetheless, Samuel and Lee also have their own problems. Samuel has a big family to support and Lee dreams about opening a bookstore of his own. But in the end, Samuel's life fades away after his daughter Una's early death while Lee, has to return to the Trask family after the failure of his dream. For all the characters in this novel, ideals are often colliding with rationality. And reality forces people to be complicated. All kinds of troubles come to people and people's hope of returning innocence as Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden certainly will fail. Eating the forbidden fruit symbolizes the beginning of human beings' civilization as well as the end of their states of innocence. Thus, to return to the promised land or the garden of Eden surely is impossible.

Steinbeck is an idealist and romanticist when he dreams about the existence of a promised land and a new Eden. However, gradually he turns to be realistic. In *East of Eden*, he has been trying to make contrast between morals and money. Samuel Hamilton is a morally successful man but without material success; Cyrus, Charles and Cathy are evil but they gain material success; and Adam rejects his son Caleb's money like rejecting something evil. From the novel's beginning to the end, morals

have been standing against money, against reality. Steinbeck has also realized the failure of establishing a promised land or a new Eden in Salinas Valley, California. He gives up the ideal California at last. When Webster Street asks the novelist why he doesn't go back to California and build a house for the rest of his life, Steinbeck answers sadly: "I feel about Monterey (his hometown) like Amy Lowell thought about Oakland." He goes on, "In the first place, the Monterey I knew isn't there anymore, the people aren't there anymore, they are all different" (qtd. in Street 41). And if you want to know what Amy Lowell said about Oakland, she says, "There is no there there" (qtd. in Street 41). Steinbeck's optimistic view of a new promised land or a new Eden in California has changed. Optimism disappears and pessimism arises. After all, Steinbeck names this novel eventually as "East of Eden", which means that people still have not arrived Eden.

Steinbeck's final denial of the existence of a promised land or a new Eden in Salinas Valley, to some extent, is also a denial of the optimism that he shows through the development of the theme. An inconsistency has been created when pessimism confronts with optimism. This inconsistency implies that although people have free will to choose to do good or evil, it does not mean that they can gain moral perfection. Or rather, human beings can never gain moral perfection. The contest between good and evil will go on forever. If that is so, Steinbeck's emphasis on people's free will has no significance at all.

## Conclusion

*East of Eden* is a novel in which John Steinbeck directly implies its connection with the biblical myth of "Cain and Abel". In this novel, Steinbeck takes the contest between good and evil as the subject. He continues his practice of using a myth as a motif in his novels. He recreates a myth of human beings through a new definition of the Hebrew word "timshel", suggesting that human beings are the combinations of both good and evil and they have free will to choose to do good or evil. And this suggestion becomes the theme of this novel. This optimistic announcement appeals to common readers greatly, because it implicates people's potential ability to perfect themselves. And this potential perfectibility means potential changes of one's life for the better. But the theme is developed through three methods: the definition of the Hebrew word "timshel"; the statement of the narrator "I"; and making contrasts among characters and their archetypes.

The thematic design expresses Steinbeck's expectation of human being's special ability of free will. However, as Howard Levant points out, Steinbeck also creates some inconsistencies when he tries to develop the theme. And these inconsistencies can be found in the organization of plots, in the handling of characters, and in the forming of two different tones. In my opinion, the plots of *East of Eden* are episodic. Some episodic plots are irrelevant with the main theme, such as the behavior of Steinbeck's family members. Those episodic plots, instead of serving the theme, have hindered readers' exploration of the theme. And when handling the characters, Steinbeck creates some contradictions among some characters and the theme. Those characters are Cathy Ames Trask, Lee and Samuel Hamilton. The portraits of these three characters, to some degree, contradict the theme that human beings have free will to choose to do good or evil. Furthermore, Steinbeck creates two different tones in this novel: optimism and pessimism. Optimism has been designed as the basic tone. However, compared with the gradually growing pessimism, optimism is imposed and stiff. And pessimism is so strong that sometimes it wins over optimism.

All these inconsistencies lead to a typical defect of the structure of *East of Eden*: the structure develops for its own sake, independent of the materials. Howard Levant

points out that the structure of any one of Steinbeck's novels tends to be either panoramic or dramatic. The panoramic aspect is usually represented by a series of episodes that are related to each other by little more than chronology; while the dramatic aspect is more tightly organized: events and characters are bound neatly into firm relationship by a brief or highly elective time sequence and often by a moral or philosophical motif. Apparently, *East of Eden* combines these two types of structure. However, Levant also indicates that the defect of the structure of *East of Eden* is evident in a majority of Steinbeck's novels. He continues in his book: "[...] it is especially evident when Steinbeck relies on allegorical elements or an allegorical scheme to shore up or stiffen either type of structure" (Levant 3). As an allegorical novel, *East of Eden*'s structure is inconsistent and stiff.

Nevertheless, the flawed structure of *East of Eden* does not mean that this novel is not a good novel. Paul McCarthy points out that "an unsuccessful work can sometimes be more illustrative of a major writer's approach, particularly its weaknesses, than a skillfully constructed and well-written novel" (107). The defects of *East of Eden* expose Steinbeck's transition among allegory, realism and romance after the Second World War. The combination of allegory, realism and romance is a typical feature of *East of Eden*. And this feature makes the novel impressive. It shows a largeness of vision and treatment evident previously only in *The Grapes of Wrath*. If the insights into good and evil reveal no unusual depths or subtlety, they do show a complexity seldom evident in Steinbeck's earlier works. Steinbeck compares the destinies of the characters in the biblical myth of "Cain and Abel" with those of human beings, looking for their similarities and differences and finding out the truth of humanity. The explanation of humanity endows human beings with hopes of better lives in future. Therefore, Steinbeck properly connects allegory with reality together.

The thesis analyzes the defects that appear in the thematic development of *East of Eden*. Although the thesis is inspired by Howard Levant's book *A Lapsed Allegory*, compared with Levant's analysis, the thesis is more convergent and specific. Besides the analysis of characters and plots, an emphasis has been put on the comparison between pessimism and optimism which are both shown in this novel. The comparison is original and significant. It helps readers understand not only the

features of Steinbeck's later works, but also Steinbeck's unconscious psychic struggle, which results from opposition or simultaneous functioning of mutually exclusive impulses, desires or tendencies. This psychic struggle can be seen as a symptom of a part of people in modern society.

The internal inconsistencies in *East of Eden* show Steinbeck's psychic struggle between faith in human kind and unconscious pessimism. And it is not difficult to find the traits of the struggle in Steinbeck's later works. After the publication of *East of Eden* in 1952, Steinbeck continued to write into the early 1960s but with uneven results. His later works include *Sweet Thursday*, *The Short Reign of Pippin IV*, *Once There Was a War*, *The Winter of Our Discontent*, and *Travels with Charley in Search of American*. During his later years, Steinbeck gradually put emphasis on the observation of American society. Inconsistencies continue in these works. For example, in *The Winter of Our Discontent*, Steinbeck includes mythical materials, which are usually inverted; and in Steinbeck's last assessment of America *America and Americans*, Steinbeck's dogged faith in Americans and his recognition of their strengths and weaknesses are demonstrated. Steinbeck's psychic struggle helps build his prose style. The literary craftsmanship and skill with which the themes, symbols, and moral vision are expressed would seem to identify most definitely Steinbeck's fiction and ensure his place with the best writers of his generation. So, to research the prose style of *East of Eden* is very useful.

Yet, since the analysis of the theme in this essay is based on the premise of myth-archetypal analysis, a problem appears as well. As we know, the critical method of myth-archetypal analysis stresses cognition but neglects judgment. To find and categorize the images, themes, persons of which the archetypes can be found in myths is a good way to study an individual work and discover the construction of literary works. But when comparing two works of the same writer on condition that both have used myths as motifs, it seems to lack a standard to distinguish the good one from the bad one. For example, we know Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* and *East of Eden* both use myths as motifs. Nevertheless, most critics think that the former is the peak of Steinbeck's works while the latter is a failure. So, what is the standard to justify the proper use of myths in literary works such as *East of Eden*? Furthermore, the essay, exactly speaking, is a textual analysis.

If *East of Eden* is analyzed under some specific context, maybe the inconsistency appearing in this novel has some other meanings. For example, what's the relationship between myth and reality? In a word, more research should be done to answer these two questions.

## Works Cited

- Allen, James Lovic. "The Road to Bizantium: Archetypal Criticism and Yeats." The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism 32:1 (Autumn 1973): 53-64.
- Beckson, Karl, and Arthur Ganz. A Readers' Guide to Literary Terms. New York: The Noonday Press, 1960.
- Benson, Jackson J. "John Steinbeck: Novelist as Scientist." NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction 10:3 (Spring 1977): 248-264.
- . Looking for Steinbeck's Ghost. Norman: U of Oklahoma P, 1988.
- Bernard, Kale. "The Author." The Saturday Review of Literature 35 (1952):11.
- Davis, Robert Murray. Introduction. Steinbeck: A Collection of Critical Essays. Ed. Robert Murray Davis. Englewood Cliffs, N.J: Prentice-Hall Inc, 1972. 1-17.
- Fontenrose. Introduction. Steinbeck: the Man and His Work. Eds. Richard Astro and Tetsumaro Hayashi. Corvallis: Oregon State University Press, 1971.1-16.
- Freedman, William. "The Literary Motif: A Definition and Evaluation." NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction 4:2 (Winter 1971): 123-131.
- Gaster, Theodor H. Myth, Legend, and Custom in the Old Testament. 2 vols. Gloucester, Mass: Peter Smith, 1981.
- Harmon, William. "T. S. Eliot, Anthropologist and Primitive." American Anthropologist 78:4 (Dec., 1976): 797-811.
- Hobson, Laura Z. "Trade winds." Saturday Review 35 (August 30, 1952): 4.
- "It Started in a Garden." Time 22 Sep. 1952, late ed. : 110.
- Krutch, Joseph Wood. "John Steinbeck's Dramatic Tale of Three Generations." New York Herald Tribune Weekly Book Review 21 Sep. 1952: 1.
- Kyoko Ariki. "Cathy in *East of Eden*: Indispensable to the Thematic Design." Beyond Boundaries: Rereading John Steinbeck. Eds. Susan Shillinglaw and Kevin Hearle. Tuscaloosa and London: The University of Alabama Press, 2002. 230 – 254.
- Levant, Howard. The Novels of John Steinbeck. Columbia, Missouri: U of Missouri P, 1974.
- Lewis, R. W. B. "John Steinbeck: The Fitful Daemon." Steinbeck: A Collection of

- Critical Essays. Ed. Robert Murray Davis. Englewood Cliffs, N.J: Prentice-Hall, Inc, 1972. 163-175.
- Lieber, Todd M. "Talismanic Patterns in the Novels of John Steinbeck." American Literature 44:2 (May 1972): 262-275.
- Lisca, Peter. "Escape and Commitment: Two Poles of the Steinbeck Hero." Steinbeck: The Man and His Work. Eds. Richard Astro, Tetsumaro Hayashi. Corvallis: Oregon State University Press, 1971. 75-88.
- . The Wide World of John Steinbeck. New York: Gordian Press, 1981.
- Magny, Mme. "East of Eden." Perspectives USA 5 (Fall 1953):6.
- McCarthy, Paul. John Steinbeck. New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1980.
- Meyer, Michael J. "Endless Possibilities: The Significance of Nomos in Steinbeck's *East of Eden*." The Betrayal of Brotherhood in the Work of John Steinbeck: Cain Sign. Ed. Michael J. Meyer. New York: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2000. 403-433.
- Moore, Harry Thornton. The Novels of John Steinbeck: A First Critical Study. Chicago: Normandie House, 1986.
- The Holy Bible: King James Version. Canada: World Bible Publishers.
- Owens, Louis. "'Grampa Killed Indians, Pa Killed Snakes': Steinbeck and the American Indian." MELUS 15:2 (Summer 1988): 85-92.
- . Other Destinies: Understanding the American Indian Novel. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1992.
- Roggenkamp, Karen S.H. "Long Live the Queen: Literature and Life Philosophy." The English Journal. 83:8 (Dec. 1994): 33-35.
- Schorer, Mark. "A Dark and Violent Steinbeck Novel." The New York Times Book Review 21 Sep. 1952: 22.
- Scoville, Samuel. "The 'Weltanschauung' of Steinbeck and Hemingway: An Analysis of Themes." The English Journal 56:1 (Jan., 1967): 60-63+66.
- Steinbeck, John. "Acceptance Speech." Nobel Prize Library. New York: Helvetica Press, Inc., 1971. 207-208.
- . East of Eden. New York: Penguin Books, 1979.
- . Journal of a Novel: The East of Eden Letters. New York: The Viking Press, 1969.
- . The Red Pony. New York: Penguin Books, 1992.
- . Steinbeck: A Life in Letters. Eds. Elaine Steinbeck and Robert Wallsten. New



York: Penguin Books, 1976.

---. To A God Unknown. London: William Heinemann Ltd, 1970.

Street, Webster. "John Steinbeck: A Reminiscence." Steinbeck: The Man and His Work. Eds. Richard Astro and Tetsumaro Hayashi. Corvallis: Oregon State University Press, 1971. 37-41.

Thompson, Michael, Richard Ellis and Aaron Wildavsky. Cultural Theory. Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1990.

Watt, F.W. Steinbeck. New York: Chip's Bookshop Inc., 1978.

## **Acknowledgements**

My sincere thanks go to my supervisor Professor Zhou Yubei, for her guidance and encouragement. She patiently went through my rough and disorganized drafts and helped to shape this thesis as it is today. She raised challenging questions which help me improve my work. She not only pointed out the stylistic problems but also proposed alternative wording. Her academic expertise, critical insights has contributed to the completion of the present thesis greatly.

Then, special thanks go to Professor Zhang Lilong, Professor Martin, for their unforgettable courses and lectures, which have given me precious knowledge and evoked my interest in literature.

Next, I am also grateful to my classmates and friends who helped me overcome a lot of difficulties.

Finally, the deepest gratitude should go to my parents for their never-failing support and encouragement. Without their love and understanding, the completion of this thesis would not be possible.