Good And Evil In The Novel East Of Eden

Good and evil remain to be incredibly difficult terms to define. The existence of both, however, often justifies or defends the human condition and its history. John Steinbeck, in his novel East of Eden, explores the everlasting concern of man's battle against sin. He manifests the idea that one co-exists within the other and compares two families to foreshadow the outcomes of this concept. The characters are introduced alongside the innocence that defines them in the early parts of the novel. Soon after, these same characters are plagued by problems that lead to the inevitable mystery of identity, and undergo their individual downfalls. Steinbeck presents the dramatic theme of the universal struggle between good and evil in East of Eden, and relies on several motifs, symbols, and explanatory narration to further his cause. Steinbeck, throughout the entire novel, verifies the idea that all humans possess a certain temptation to be vulnerable in experiencing this internal inexplicability.

The opening of the novel, set in the rich farmland of California's Salinas Valley, allows Steinbeck to symbolize the human struggle to navigate between the instincts of internal corruption. He paints the fictional Hamilton family in a very lifelike and positive light, but makes certain to acknowledge their economic distress when he narrates that "Samuel never went back to Ireland and gradually he forgot it entirely. He was a busy man… The Salinas Valley was the world" (Steinbeck 42). The characterization outlines the story of the warmhearted farmer and how the purchasing of his land by Adam Trask results in the following societal issues, and their corrosive effects on the characters. Adam's life is followed in a long, intricate flashback of his ruthless brother Charles, who acts on jealousy to severely beat Adam. The discussion of paternal rejection in East of Eden, is the first recurring motif that Steinbeck utilizes as a point of contrast for the following relationships. As Adam narrates, he claims that "[he] didn't feel right about cheating. [He] only cheated three days" (108). Here, the attitudes toward inheritance are combined with his father Cyrus' preference in Adam over Charles. While one is uninterested in the financial aspect of life, the other is consumed by the capacity of self-destruction. At this point in Steinbeck's writing, he introduces the protagonist, Cathy, who's background asks the universal question of whether or not there lies a predestination to evil ? yet another prevalent motif. The narrator asserts that "there are techniques of the human mind whereby, in its dark deep, problems are examined, rejected, or accepted" (324). The human desire and need for love and acceptance is a central principle and belief of humanists, and something that Steinbeck felt very strongly about in his life. To Steinbeck, love is not something that is given or taken, but something that has to be searched for and earned, and out of it, the strongest possible love would emerge ? the lacking baseline of Cathy and Adam's marriage.

The narrator in East of Eden is not omniscient, but offers commentary on the events of the novel, often pausing to make general, universal truth-type statements. Steinbeck shifts perspectives quite frequently, and the reader registers this change subconsciously. For instance, Steinbeck speaks for Grandpa Samuel when he observes that "as he rode through the light and dark of tree-shade and open his mind moved on. When had the Welshrats started crawling in his chest? He found it then—and it was Cathy, pretty, tiny, delicate Cathy. But what about her?" (362). The statement emphasizes the third-person thoughts that set the stage for the upcoming criticisms regarding Cathy's inhumane intents with her unborn twin boys. The transpose of narration questions Cathy's condition to a greater extent, as it may be believable

that she does not do these things simply as a selfish act, but as a way to escape her own past horrors: grief, mistakes, and humiliation. The narrative structure also reveals to the audience the direct source of Steinbeck's narration: his family and his environment. In the very beginning of the novel, he opens with the description of his home and his childhood in the valley itself:

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. (3)

Blatantly, the setting corresponds to the entirety of East of Eden and another huge topic that Steinbeck attempts to tackle: the idea of existence. To Steinbeck, disposition is not something that is set in stone; rather, it becomes something that could ebb and flow, that could be transferred from person to person. As seen in all of his novels, varying narrators and opinions create a difficult-to-follow story for the reader to interpret. Steinbeck presents the recurring narrative of human history and uses his characters as a means of communicating to the audience.

Throughout the novel, Steinbeck implements biblical references to clearly illustrate the conflict between opposing forces of good and evil. Much of the plot of East of Eden is centered upon the two sets of brothers, who represent Cain and Abel. An allusion to the biblical book of Genesis, Steinbeck expresses that "in human affairs of danger and delicacy successful conclusion is sharply limited by hurry" (238). As Steinbeck shifts the focus to the Trask family, two contrasting personalities allow the reader to visualize these biblical stories. He portrays the never-ending contest that lies within oneself to satisfy and develop traits that define a person as either good or evil, based on the way society has categorized both. This inevitable conflict is explored once again, when Samuel looks at the twins and proclaims that they are "going to pass something down no matter what [they] do or if [they] do nothing, something will grow" (213). Samuel advises the miserable Adam to not impede the journey of self-discovery within his sons, Aron and Cal, but rather to encourage means of expression that turn them away from questioning their mothers actions. Regardless of his resentment against Cathy, Adam remains to be a symbol of patriarch for the Hamilton family and he focuses primarily on their destiny and reputation throughout the novel. Overall, he allows the audience to infer that desire is deeply embedded within human nature. Another eminent feature of the novel turns out to be the way that death and failure is embodied. Steinbeck builds on the idea that everyone has the freedom to overcome evil when he asserts "to the stars, on the wings of a pig" (514). This statement manifests the idea that a rough road will still lead to the stars, and within humanity, some traits that may be used to define evil, are accepted nonetheless. Towards the end of the novel, this concept is visualized when Adron is killed in battle in the last year of the war, and Adam suffers a stroke upon hearing the news from Lee. Although one of the fundamental ideas in East of Eden is that evil remains to be an innate and inescapable human problem, the novel also sets forth hope that each individual is capable of overcoming this concept.

East of Eden dramatizes the perpetual conflict between good and evil in the society of the Salinas Valley as a whole and within the individuals of the Trask and Hamilton families in particular. The main characters of the novel, generation after generation, wrestle with the problem of evil. East of Eden, written by John Steinbeck, is a profound, complicated retelling of

the biblical story of Cain and Abel, focused around the overall struggle between good and evil and its compelling usage of illustrative symbolism, motifs, and multiple shifts in point-of-view.