

## Book Review:

# Timshel and choice: Conflict and Control in John Steinbeck's *East of Eden*

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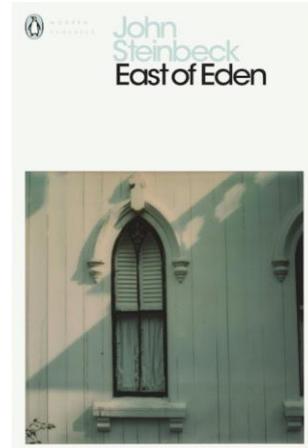
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John Steinbeck's *East of Eden* is his magnum opus, he believed it to be his greatest piece of work following its publication in 1952. The novel explores themes of generational trauma, redemption, choice and free will.

The novel follows the lives of two families, the Trasks and the Hamiltons as they live in California's Salinas Valley with a focus on the contrasting fates of Aron and Cal as they deal with the generational trauma from their father and deal with the identity of their mother, Cathy. Steinbeck explores public spaces as a domain in which the characters have to face their fates in public display.



One of the main themes and moral core of *East of Eden* is choice, supported by Adam's last word before he dies, "Timshel!"<sup>1</sup> meaning "Thou mayest" a redemptive word signifying that humans have a choice to overcome sin, in this case the two boys Aron and Cal have the choice to let their generational trauma control them or they can decide to take action and change into people that they want to become. One quote that encapsulates this idea:

"Thou Mayest! Why, that makes a man great. That gives him stature with the gods, for in his weakness in his filth and his murder of his brother he has still the

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<sup>1</sup> John Steinbeck, "East of Eden," (London: Penguin Classics, 2002), CH55.

great choice. He can choose his course and fight it through and win.”<sup>2</sup>

Steinbeck presents the extent of human nature. It suggests that our brilliance is not due to our perfection but our burden of free will, while despite our many flaws and “filth” we have the sovereign power to choose our own path, and that’s what makes us great.

East of Eden exemplifies public spaces as an arena of deceitful purity. This can be represented through the brothel that Cathy runs and its public knowledge that respectable men visit to sleep with the prostitutes.

”Her list was filling with the names of solid men-the business leaders, the officials, the family men, the pillars of the community.”<sup>3</sup>

The public spaces such as the street are filled with these men who present themselves in such a high and mighty manner while simultaneously hiding their sins in the brothel. Steinbeck showcases the hypocrisy in the town and how evil and good are intertwined within everyone.

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<sup>2</sup> Steinbeck, “East of Eden,” CH24.

Furthermore, Steinbeck imposes the idea of destructive power in truth. Aron has to deal with the conflicting views concerning Cathy as he deals with the reality that she is not the idealised person that he has built up in his head. As Aron is a very sensitive and emotional character much like his father when he was younger, he has been longing for a mothers love his entire life, especially as Adam was emotionally absent for much of his life. This revelation destroys him and his worldview, unable to cope, he runs away and joins the army as a means of escape, subsequently dying in battle. Truth is exemplified as a neutral force, reminiscent of “Timshel,” truth acts as a tool where you can use it to become stronger and resilient or you can let it break you. Steinbeck showcases how truth is not always aligned with liberation but can also break your spirit.

In my opinion East of Eden presents every character as extremely complicated, all of which contains so many layers to them. Each has their own personal story and reasons for their actions and personalities, though at times they can be insufferable as they seem unaware of the consequences of their actions. However, you cannot help but feel

<sup>3</sup> Steinbeck, “East of Eden,” CH34.

empathy towards their situation and the reasons why they turn out the way they are. Every character is inherently flawed which helps make them realistic, they are neither good or evil, they sit in this in between of purgatory. Steinbeck makes a point to acknowledge that everyone experiences trauma but it does not need to define you, it is up to you to change your path and that you are capable of ending that generational trauma and not repeat the cycle.

Daisy Paterson sums up the novel well stating that “the novel explored themes of love and ambition through using the traditional biblical stories of Adam and Eve and Cain and Abel, but creating a new

message to them portraying that sin can be overcome.”<sup>4</sup> East of Eden represents what lies in all of us, both good and evil. He explores this idea through the different characters such as Aron and Cathy and how they let their past determine their lives and reality. It showcases how our actions do have consequences on not only ourselves but the people around us and how that information can be controlling. However, Steinbeck offers a different approach through the main theme of “Timshel,” redemption and acceptance to move on in our lives and determine our own future.

**My rating: ★★★★★**

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<sup>4</sup> Daisy Paterson, ‘East of Eden-critical review,’ critical book reviews <<https://www.teenbookrecommendations.com/single-post/2020/02/01/east-of-eden-review>> [Accessed 20 December 2025].

-Photo taken by myself, Enricko Cabuga, showing East of Eden (Penguin paperback, 2004)