Universal Family, Universal Neighbor, Universal Human Experience? The Structuralist in John Steinbeck

by

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Several sources are referred to frequently and have the same author. Abbreviations are as follows:


“We come now to the book. It has been planned a long time. I planned it when I didn’t know what it was about. I developed a language for it that I will never use...All the experiment is over now. I either write the book or I do not. There can be no excuses.”

East of Eden has the unusual honor among the many works of John Steinbeck to be regarded as both his greatest triumph and his greatest failure. In the eyes of the author, it was obviously intended to be the former. Although missing the usual emphasis of capitalization or italics, East of Eden was, to John Steinbeck, the book: a work he had been preparing for all his life, consciously and unconsciously, a book that was to contain “everything that seemed to him to be true”. Steinbeck sought to tell the story of good and evil through what he considered perhaps the greatest story of all—the biblical Genesis tale of Cain and Abel. It was to be both the story of the world he knew and what he knew of himself in relation to that world.

Critics, on the other hand, disagreed. East of Eden was seen as pure of intention but poorly executed. Steinbeck was criticized for unrealistic characters, incoherency of argument, and disorganization of materials. Critics failed to see any connection between a modern-day retelling of the biblical Cain-and-Abel story through the Trask family and the semi-autobiographical anecdotes of the Hamilton family, Steinbeck’s maternal ancestors. Throughout most of the novel the two families are neighbors, occasionally crossing paths and interacting with one another. Steinbeck’s stated desire in combining the two elements rather than telling a story strictly about the Trasks or strictly about the Hamiltons was “to create a universal family living next to a universal neighbor”. Depending on a critic’s interpretation, this goal either translated to two equal representations of the world Steinbeck knew and his personal world in relation to it, or to a “huge grab-bag” (Lisca 264) of themes and subject matter with no clear concentration.

If East of Eden cannot be unanimously regarded as being a universal experience, it was certainly a personal experience for Steinbeck. The novel not only follows the Trasks, the symbolic Cain-and-Abel family, but also the fortunes of the Hamiltons. Steinbeck’s mother and father appear in the novel as characters, as well as Steinbeck himself briefly as a young boy. A major impetus for writing the novel was for the benefit

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of Steinbeck’s two young sons, Thom and John IV, who were six and four respectively at the time of composition. The parallels between the story of the world and Steinbeck’s own story have been explored—two sons, like the two sons Cain and Abel; a fallen Eve, like Steinbeck’s ex-wife Gwyndolyn Conger, the mother of the boys’; Steinbeck’s regard for the Salinas Valley and the West in general as a sort of unofficial U.S. Eden. If Steinbeck failed to make *East of Eden* universal, he cannot be blamed for believing it was based upon his own life experience.

What then, does *East of Eden* ultimately accomplish? The universality of the Cain-and-Abel story has been said by critics to be both augmented by the structure of the novel as well as rendered ineffective by it. While the biblical story itself as being universal is a matter of interpretation, Steinbeck’s structural combination of the Trasks and the Hamiltons is clearly not a random collection of episodes. The Trasks, as the mythic representation of Cain and Abel through three generations, represent the universal neighbor, the Cains and Abels that we encounter in the world. The Hamiltons, as the local force (homesteading in Steinbeck’s own Salinas Valley), represent the universal family, the personal history of Steinbeck as everyone else has their own personal family history. There are clear parallels between the families as well as stark contrasts that serve to emphasize what Steinbeck believed was the ultimate message of the Cain and Abel story: that elements of both good and evil are present in all human beings, and the meaning of being human is that we have the ability to choose between the two.
Chapter 1

“I am choosing to write this book to my sons. They are little boys now and they will never know what they came from through me, unless I tell them…I will tell them one of the greatest, perhaps the greatest story of all—the story of good and evil...” 1

Steinbeck’s first and foremost intended readers for East of Eden were always his two sons, Thom and John IV. He began actual work on the novel in the February of 1951, starting with a letter to his editor and long-time friend Pascal Covici on his reasons for writing East of Eden. 2 3 His intention, as he stated, was to impart to his sons the story of their inheritance. This was both literally, through their fraternal relatives the Hamitons, and spiritually, through what the human race inherited from Cain after he chose sin and slew his brother, Abel. At first, Steinbeck wrote his novel quite literally to his boys, beginning the novel and each following chapter as a letter to his two sons:

“Dear Tom and John: You are little boys now, when I am writing this. You, Tom are six and a half, and you John are four and a half. You are both going to school in New York City. Both of you are handsome and your eyes are grave, and the kind of life you lead is very different from the life your father led and your grandfather and your great grandfather. All of us came from a place in California called the Salinas Valley.” 4

By the time of publication, however, Steinbeck had abandoned this practice and omitted it during revision, possibly to cut down on the length of the novel and possibly to achieve a less personal and more universal feel.

Steinbeck’s personal feelings towards his sons and their mother were a driving force in the crafting of East of Eden. Throughout Journal of a Novel: The East of Eden Letters, Steinbeck continually refers to the difficult time the boys were having adjusting to his recent divorce from their mother, Gwyndolyn Conger. Of particular concern to Steinbeck was the elder son, Thom, who had trouble at school. Throughout his letters, he expresses consistent concerns about his eldest and rarely refers to the younger having any.


3 Steinbeck’s practice was to always do some sort of pre-writing, usually in the form of a letter, to prepare himself for actual literary work. In the writing of East of Eden, he kept a double-entry book; each daily letter to Covici written on the left side, the day’s work on the novel manuscript on the right. The “left side” of the book was later published under the title Journal of a Novel: The East of Eden Letters.

problems, though this may be due to a mere difference in age between the boys. As Steinbeck delved deeper into the writing of *East of Eden* and the conflict between brothers and Cain-and-Abel figures in the Trask family, he began to impose these themes upon his sons:

“The greatest terror a child can have is that he is not loved, and rejection is the hell he fears.” (EE 268)

“When the two of them stayed overnight with me last week I knew that Tom was in some deep emotional trouble, I could feel it. And I am pretty sure it is a simple feeling of rejection, of not being loved…” (JN 25)

When both boys were grown and old enough to read the novel their father had written for them, both began to wonder what roles they had been cast in. Which Steinbeck son was the Cain figure, and which the Abel? John IV, who was becoming a respected writer in his own right, expostulated on the idea during an address to the 1990 Steinbeck Festival in Salinas entitled “Adam’s Wound”. ¹ The title referred to the way in which Adam (both Adam Trask, the father of the Cain-and-Abel twins in *East of Eden* and the biblical Adam, father of Cain and Abel, representative of all fathers including John IV’s) had wounded his sons by casting them in these roles—one the sinning winner because he ultimately lives despite having been rejected, and one the innocent loser because he dies despite having been loved. Popular critical opinion has been that Thom was thought to be the Cain-like figure, despite the rocky personal life of John IV, who battled alcoholism and a struggling marriage until his death in 1991. ² The sons themselves seemed to differ in opinion:

“Int.: He [Steinbeck] said he wrote *East of Eden* for you and your brother.

**Thom:** Yeah, Cain and Abel! Typecasting too, it really was…I was really stunned when it came to the conflict within our own family, how close Steinbeck came to it in *East of

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² Thom as the Cain-figure is mostly attributed to a statement Steinbeck made in a letter to a friend about the boys’ differing personalities: “Catbird [nickname for John IV] is the one who might have the trouble. He is so gifted in charm and cleverness and beauty that he will not have to go through the fire for a long time if ever. Poor Thom has it early and will have it long. But he will be fired and there is no fire without heat.” Pg. 429, Steinbeck, Elaine, and Wallsten, Robert, Eds. *Steinbeck: A Life in Letters*. New York: The Viking Press, 1975.
Eden. My brother’s attitude about the family, he was the James Dean of the family if there ever was one.” (George 10)

The conflict within the family was not limited to sibling rivalry between Steinbeck’s two sons. Steinbeck and his ex-wife, Gwyndolyn Conger (the mother of the two boys) were still struggling in the aftermath of a painful divorce. Steinbeck attributed the relative ease of writing East of Eden to being free from his tumultuous relationship with her, but her influence on their sons remained a concern. The boys resided in New York with her, while Steinbeck and his wife Elaine had custody mostly during the summers and occasional visits. Besides harboring his own personal bias against Gwyn from their failed marriage, Steinbeck feared the possible ‘inheritance’ the boys could receive from her, whose parenting style apparently did not match his own. This concern that the boys weren’t seeing enough of their father or learning enough about the Steinbeck side of their roots was a major catalyst in Steinbeck’s decision to write East of Eden to his sons, to show them “what they came from” through him.

1 The actor James Dean played the role of Cal Trask, a Cain archetype, in the 1955 motion picture East of Eden.
3 The East of Eden character Cathy, who not only is the mother of Trask Cain-and-Abel twins Cal and Aron, but also a murdering whorehouse madam, is thought by many critics to be a demonized version of Gwyn, the real-life mother of Steinbeck’s own two sons: “If his [Steinbeck’s] sons are to identify with the sons in the novel, then their mother is Cathy Ames, an influence they must overcome. And when read from their perspective, it is a difficult association to discount, given the animosity in the relationship between their mother and father. This was not an amicable divorce. Jackson Benson writes of Gwyn’s habit of creating mocking caricatures for the boys of both John, their father, and Elaine, their stepmother. Steinbeck’s revulsion for Gwyn and her lifestyle, though he and Elaine tried not to be openly critical, must have been evident to his sons.” Pg. 388, Meyer, Michael J., Ed. The Betrayal of Brotherhood in the Work of John Steinbeck. Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2000.
4 In a 1950 letter to friend Toby Street, Steinbeck expressed his belief that the boys were suffering and being raised poorly under Gwyn as opposed to how they might be raised with him: “My boys have made such strides this summer...They were in pretty bad shape when I got them but they have responded like nothing you ever saw. Elaine has done a lot of that just by loving them. They have some kind of security now which is all they needed anyway. I hope we have given them enough to tide them over what I suspect is going to be a tough year for them. But I will see them often this winter. Thom is old enough now to telephone me if he needs me. That makes me feel better...” In a letter the next year to Elizabeth Otis, Steinbeck even likens the difference between households to a battle he intended on winning: “We have a revolt of the children. I guess we must have it every year with the big jump from Gwyn’s kind of life to our kind of life. But we’re right in the middle of it. I’ll let you know how it comes out because we must win. I’m afraid we’ve lost a child if we don’t.” Pgs. 409, 423, Steinbeck, Elaine, and Wallsten, Robert, Eds. Steinbeck: A Life in Letters. New York: The Viking Press, 1975.
As deeply personal as *East of Eden* is and can be interpreted to be, Steinbeck also always intended the novel to appeal to a mass audience and be relatable to every reader on a personal level. Steinbeck felt that the story of Cain and Abel was “a great story of the world”, the story of not only good and evil, but strength and weakness, love and hate, and beauty and ugliness. Steinbeck believed that these binary oppositions made up the world and all its contents, and without one’s opposite, the other could not exist.¹ Before he had even written the first page, Steinbeck stated his intent to give the novel a universal feeling:

> “But try to relate the reader to the book so that, while I talking to the boys actually, I am relating every reader to the story as though he were reading about his own background. If I can do that, it will be very helpful. Everyone wants to have a family. Maybe I can create a universal family living next to a universal neighbor. This should not be impossible.”

(JN 8)

In context, the background Steinbeck refers to is the background of his sons. In *East of Eden*, that translates to the Hamiltons, the universal family. The universal neighbor, therefore, is intended to be the Trasks: Cain and Abel archetypes that embody the good-evil, strong-weak, love-hate, and beautiful-ugly oppositions that Steinbeck believed made up the world. Steinbeck believed so much in the Cain-and-Abel story being eternally relevant and applicable, in fact, that he did not believe *East of Eden* worth writing if its central storyline could not have a universal quality.

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Chapter 2

“...And finally I want to mention the neighbors. I do not have the name yet. I think it might be Canable. No, that is a double or rather a triple meaning I don’t want. The name is so important that I want to think about it. I remember a friend of my father’s—a whaling master named Captian Trask. I have always loved the name. It meant great romance to me.”

Steinbeck set out to explore what he considered the timeless meaning of the Cain-and-Abel story by applying it to three different generations of one family, each shaped by the events of the world they were born into but ultimately playing out the same story of brother against brother with each generation. The Trask family serves as the bearer of this literary responsibility, from the beginning of the novel to its last pages. The reader follows each successive generation through their cycle of the Cain-and-Abel tale until finally watching the last Cain figure, Cal, break it at his father’s deathbed. To Steinbeck, this was the equivalent of a happy ending, not only for his story, but for the message he intended it to make to all his readers.

Plot-wise, Steinbeck followed the biblical Cain and Abel story closely. Each pair of brothers present some sort of gift to their father or father figure, and in each pair, one gift is rejected as inferior to the other. The first generation of Trask brothers, Adam and Charles Trask, begin this Cain-and-Abel cycle by presenting gifts to their father Cyrus on his birthday. The reader does not witness this event, but we hear of it from the point of view of Charles, the Cain-figure in the pairing:

“Look at his birthday!” Charles shouted. “I took six bits and I bought him a knife made in Germany—three blades and a corkscrew, pearl-handled. Where’s that knife? Do you ever see him use it? Did he give it to you? I never even saw him hone it... ’Thanks,’ he said, like that. And that’s the last I heard of a pearl-handled German knife that cost six bits... What did you do on his birthday? You think I didn’t see? Did you spend six bits or even four bits? You brough him a mongrel pup you picked up in the woodlot. You laughed like a fool and said it would make a good bird dog. That dog sleeps in his room. He plays with it while he’s reading. He’s got it all trained. And where’s the knife? ‘Thanks,’ he said, just ‘Thanks’.” (EE 29)

Just as in the biblical story, the gift of the Cain brother is rejected in favor of the Abel. Charles does not murder Adam, but he beats him brutally and leaves him wounded and bleeding in the woods. This echoes an earlier incident between the boys, where Adam

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beat his brother at a game of peewee and Charles, indignant, beat him over it. The Cain
caracter, then, is set up in the Trask family as the rejected one, the son who is inferior to
his brother both in the eyes of the father and simply when contrasted with the Abel
character’s traits or abilities. However, unlike the sometimes terse recitation various
translations of the Bible give us of the Cain and Abel story, Steinbeck delves into the
feelings behind this preference for one gift over the other. He first has Cyrus, the father of
the two boys playing both Adam (the physical father of Cain and Abel) and God (the
spiritual father and the one offered the gifts) blatantly express his thoughts towards his
two sons:

“You asked a question. I guess I’ll have to answer. Maybe it’s good and maybe it’s bad to
answer…I love you [Adam] better. I always have. This may be a bad thing to tell you, but
it’s true. I love you better.” (EE 27)

Rather than the ambiguous rejection of one gift over the other without any explanation,
Steinbeck makes the reason as simple as preference sometimes is: Cyrus simply loves
Adam better. He rejects Charles, and does not love him as much as he loves his other son.
The rejected son cannot understand why he has been rejected, and Steinbeck’s Cain
characters wonder in the absence of explanation:

“I want to say—I want to say—I mean, I never understood—well, why our father did it. I
mean, why didn’t he like that knife I bought for him on his birthday. Why didn’t he? It
was a good knife and he needed a good knife. If he has used it or even honed it, or took it
out of his pocket and looked at it—that’s all he had to do. If he’d liked it I wouldn’t’ have
took out after you. I had to take out after you.” (EE 36)

As Steinbeck stated in his Journal of a Novel: The East of Eden Letters, he felt that to be
rejected or to realize that one is unloved is the worst feeling anyone, especially a child,
can have. He believed this to be one of the keys to understanding the Cain and Abel
story: to understand why this preference of gifts drove Cain to murder. He told editor and
friend Pascal Covici that this letter from Charles to Adam pondering the rejection of
Charles’s gift was key, and to miss the feelings and ideas contained in it was to miss a
‘great deal’ of the book.

The next generation of Trasks seems to fare no better than the last. Adam Trask’s
twin boys Aron and Cal also present gifts to their father on the occasion of his birthday,
and like his father before him, Adam rejects one gift in favor of another:

“I like the idea of a present,” Adam went on. “I thank you for the thought—”
“I’ll put it away. I’ll keep it for you.” Cal broke in.

“No. I won’t want it ever. I would have been so happy if you could have given me—well, what your brother has—pride in the thing he’s doing, gladness in his progress. Money, even clean money, doesn’t stack up with that.” His eyes widened a little and he said, “Have I made you angry, son? Don’t be angry. If you want to give me a present—give me a good life. That would be something I could value.” (EE 541)

Like the conflict between his father and uncle, Cal chooses to take revenge on his brother Aron for being the favored one. He takes Aron to see their long-lost mother, Cathy (called Kate), who has become a depraved whorehouse mistress. The shock spurs Aron to join up with the army and enter World War I, where he is killed. However, unlike Cyrus, Adam makes clear the reasons for his preference. He values Aron getting a college education more than Cal’s gift of money earned in investments because of the nature of the gift. Aron’s gift is part of life, while Cal’s gift is material.¹ Another development in the relationship is that the Cain figure is aware of his father’s preferential love, whether the father realizes it himself or not. Cal makes this clear when he first begins investing to earn the gift money:

“...Only one more,” [Will] said, “and I won’t mind if you don’t answer it. I don’t think I would answer it. Here it is. Suppose you should get this money and give it to your father—would it cross your mind that you were trying to buy his love?”

“Yes, sir. It would. And it would be true.” (EE 477)

Cal is aware of the fact that, in his father’s eyes, he is inferior to his brother Aron. He wants to ‘make it up’ to his father and gain his love by presenting a gift that will not end in the feeling he has experienced his entire life: rejection. Cal is also aware of his own duality; unlike Charles, who wrote to Adam that he was provoked into beating him, that he ‘had to take after him’, Cal believes he is bad in comparison to his brother Aron. This recognition, however, does not prevent him from hurting Aron. Although Cal does not

¹ It is interesting to note that this seems to be the everlasting distinction between the gift of Abel and the gift of Cain. Abel presents God with lambs from his flock, while Cain presents crops from his harvest. While both presents live and grow, Abel requires no machinery or material items to tend his flock. Cain, on the other hand, must use tools and machines and careful planning to cultivate the land. Both of the Trask Cain-and-Abel pairs also have this distinction between their gifts to their father—Charles presents a knife, a machine, while Adam gives a puppy. Aron shows dedication to his learning, while Cal offers paper money.
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directly murder Aron, his actions are intended nonetheless to wound his brother and result in his death. While *East of Eden* functions as a modern-day retelling of the Cain and Abel story, Steinbeck still desired to stay close to the original biblical tale in plotline and character function.

Although Steinbeck did not desire the very blatant symbolism of giving a family of Cain-and-Abel archetypes the surname ‘Canable’, he nonetheless used naming as a deliberate indicator for which archetype a character was to represent in accordance with the original story. This method is employed from the very first in introducing the Trask family, with Alice and Cyrus Trask:

> “Adam’s father Cyrus was something of a devil—had always been wild—drove a two-wheeled cart too fast, and managed to make his wooden leg seem jaunty and desireable. He had enjoyed his military career, what there was of it. Being wild by nature, he had liked his brief period of training and the drinking and gambling and whoring that went with it.” (EE 14)

Cyrus Trask’s name begins with a C, as does Cain. He is presented as a wild pleasure-seeker, taking up activities such as drinking, gambling, and whoring, which are often thought of as sins. He is the first Cain archetype the reader encounters in the Trask family. These archetypes are always presented in pairs however, and Cyrus is contrasted by his wife, Alice:

> “Alice Trask had a number of admirable qualities. She was a deep scrubber and a corner-cleaner in the house. She was not very pretty, so there was no need to watch her. Her eyes were pale, her complexion sallow, and her teeth crooked, but she was extremely healthy and never complained during her pregnancy. Whether she liked children or not no one ever knew. She was not asked, and she never said anything unless she was asked.” (EE 16)

Alice is presented in stark contrast to Cyrus as a quiet, unassuming housewife who never makes any contrary remark or challenges her husband in any way. She is healthy as opposed to his amputated leg and drinking, and she works with her hands while Cyrus uses machines like guns in his army career. In this pair she is the Abel-figure; easily dominated by the Cain-figure.

Adam Trask, son of Cyrus and his first wife (who is named only Mrs. Trask, and commits suicide shortly after Adam’s birth), is the main Trask character throughout the
novel and is present in the tales of all three generations. He is presented as the Abel-figure:

“Young Adam was 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.” (EE 20)

Adam, like Alice Trask, is presented as obedient, nonconfrontational, and quiet. This is also in stark contrast to his half-brother, the Cain-figure, Charles Trask:

“Charles… grew up with his father’s assertiveness. Charles was a natural athlete, with instinctive timing and coordination and the competitor’s will to win over others, which makes for success in the world. Young Charles won all contests with Adam whether they involved skill, strength, or quick intelligence…Charles fought any boy who challenged or slurred Adam and usually won.” (EE 20)

Charles is strong, direct, and assertive against Adam’s quiet nature. Charles is competitive and takes on a fight at any opportunity, even if the slur is not against him. In this instance, as in the Cyrus/Alice relationship, the Cain-figure has dominance over the Abel-figure; Charles beating Adam in every contest, defending him where he cannot or does not defend himself, and so on. As the Cain-figure, he is also given a C-name, as Adam is given an A-name for Abel.¹

The sons of Adam Trask are the final pair to create a Cain/Abel pairing akin to Cyrus/Alice and Charles/Adam: Cal (short for Caleb) Trask and Aron Trask, twins. Aron, from his first introduction even before a general description, is immediately cast as the shepherd, the profession of the biblical Abel in the original Genesis story:

“I’ve got thirty-five Belgian hares, sir,” Aron said. “Would you like to see them, sir? The hutch is up by the spring. I’ve got eight newborns—just born yesterday.” (EE 297)

Cal, then, is immediately cast as the farmer, the biblical Cain’s profession:

“Cal, don’t tell my you’re a gardener?”…

Cal said, “Next year my father is going to let have an acre in the flat.” (EE 297)

Immediately the boys are cast into their roles: Aron as the Abel-figure, the shepherd and tender of animals, and Cal as the Cain-figure, the farmer and worker of the land.

¹ Steinbeck also physically marks Charles as a Cain-figure by giving him a scar, much like the biblical ‘mark’ God places upon Cain after his murder of Abel so that every man will know he is not to be revenged upon (Charles’s scar comes from an accident on his farm with a piece of equipment). This physical marking occurs later in the novel with another Cain-figure, Cathy Ames, who earns her scar after a beating from Mr. Edwards, a whoremaster she has seduced.
Steinbeck also applied this pattern loosely to the twins’ father and uncle, Adam and Charles Trask: Charles remains on the family farm alone, working the land, while Adam goes out into the world and interacts with people. Further in the novel, as Adam’s twin boys age and Steinbeck develops them as characters, we begin to see the binary oppositions he spoke of – beauty and ugliness, strength and weakness, love and hate – being set up as differing qualities of each boy’s personality, seemingly declaring a fate for Cal and Aron before their story has even had a chance to play out:

“Aron wandered slowly away, leaving the rabbit on the ground. His eyes were very wide and he had a beautiful soft mouth. The width between his blue eyes gave him an expression of angelic innocence. His hair was fine and golden. The sun seemed to light up the top of his head... Cal looked more like Adam. His hair was dark brown. He was bigger than his bother, bigger of bone, heavier in the shoulder, and his jaw had the square sternness of Adam’s jaw. Cal’s eyes were brown and watchful, and sometimes they sparkled as though they were black. But Cal’s hands were very small for the size of the rest of him... He never ventured with his hands, never touched an insect or carried a snake about. And in a fight he picked up a rock or a stick to fight with.” (EE 333)

Aron is presented as the more handsome of the two brothers, ‘beautiful’, ‘angelic’, ‘innocent’ and ‘golden’. Cal is, in contrast, said to be ‘heavier, bigger’, ‘stern’, ‘watchful’, and ‘dark’. The two brothers are opposites in appearance and in action. Like the difference between Cyrus (who used weapons) and Alice (who worked with her hands), Cal refuses to work with his hands and instead uses tools or weapons, while Aron cares for animals and has no qualms about using his hands. Cal is also said to be more of a loner character, spending his time alone while his more sociable brother interacts with others. ¹ However, interestingly enough, the boys resemble parents who are the opposite of the archetypes they represent. Cal, a Cain-figure, resembles Adam, an Abel-figure. Aron resembles his mother, Cathy Ames (later called Kate), the main ‘villainess’ of the novel and an extreme Cain-figure.

¹ This, too, is a characteristic of the Cain archetype that Steinbeck uses to differentiate them from their Abel counterparts. Cal wanders around the town of Salinas on his own late at night and even ends up in jail once for being present at a gambling house. He seeks out his mother, Cathy (turned Kate), follows her and eventually confronts her at her whorehouse. His uncle Charles Trask lives alone on the family farm until his death, never marrying or having any children. Cathy Ames herself is tight-lipped and deceptive, never confiding or trusting in anyone. This is meant symbolically to reflect the solitary wandering Cain undertook in the biblical story as penance following his murder of Abel.
Though the Trask family has several generations of clear Cain/Abel oppositions, the concept of characters with dual symbolism was not repellant to Steinbeck, and proved vital to his themes of man’s duality and the idea of choice between good and evil. Two of his most central characters have a mixture of both the Cain and Abel archetypes in their very names. Cathy Ames is a combination of the C for a Cain-figure and the A for an Abel-figure. In appearance, she is presented as a typical Abel:

“As though nature concealed a trap, Cathy had from the first a face of innocence. Her hair was gold and lovely; wide-set hazel eyes with upper lids that drooped made her look mysteriously sleepy. Her nose was delicate and thin, and her cheekbones high and wide, sweeping down to a small chin so that her face was heart-shaped. Her mouth was well shaped and well lipped but abnormally small—what used to be called a rosebud…She was a pretty child and she became a pretty woman. Her voice was huskily soft, and it could be so sweet as to be irresistible.” (EE 72)

It quickly becomes clear, however, that Cathy is no traditional Abel. At the age of sixteen, Cathy murders her parents in a house fire and runs away. The next we hear of her, she has become a prostitute under the support of a Mr. Edwards, whom she seduces. After the relationship goes sour and he beats her, Cathy crawls to the doorstep of brothers’ Adam and Charles Trask and enters in a disastrous marriage with Adam Trask. The marriage ends abruptly shortly after Cal and Aron are born, when Cathy shoots Adam and runs away to join a whorehouse, changing her name to Kate. Even before these cold-blooded and sometimes murderous acts of her adulthood, Cathy is described as different from other children, prone to falsehood and premeditated deception:

“Cathy’s lies were never innocent. Their purpose was to escape punishment, or work, or responsibility, and they were used for profit… Cathy learned that by the manipulation and use of this one part of people [sexuality] she could gain and keep power over nearly anyone. It was at once a weapon and a threat. It was irresistible.” (EE 73-74)

1 In addition, the description of Cathy’s adult body is somewhat fantastic and seemingly impossible. Steinbeck states that she “always had a child’s figure even after she was frown, slender, delicate arms and hands—tiny hands. Her breasts never developed very much. Before her puberty the nipples turned inward…Her body was a boy’s body, narrow—hipped, straight-legged, but her ankles were thin and straight without being slender.” (EE 72) In addition, she is given strange physical traits that make her sound like two traditional symbols of biblical sin: the snake (“Her ears were very little, without lobes, and they…were thin flaps against her head.”) and the devil (“Her feet were small and round and stubby, with fat insteps almost like little hoofs.”) Steinbeck makes her adult appearance both sex-less and reminiscent of these traditional symbols in order to prove a point; that the evil she represents is in everyone regardless of gender.
This description of Cathy as a child mirrors a later description of her son Cal, also a Cain-figure although he physically resembles his father, Adam:

“Cal said, “Where do you think our mother is?”

“She’s dead.”

“No, she isn’t…she ran away,” said Cal. “I heard some men talking.”…

“No,” [Aron] said. “The men were liars. Father said she’s in heaven…Through his gathering tears Aron could see his brother’s eyes, hard and reasonable. There were no tears in Cal’s eyes. Cal felt pleasantly excited. He had found another implement, another secret tool, to use for any purpose he needed. He studied Aron, saw his quivering lips…Cal put his new tool away. He could bring it out anytime, and he knew it was the sharpest weapon he had found. He would inspect it at his ease and judge just when and how much to use it.”

Cal too, finds weaknesses in people like his brother Aron and exploits them. He plots and plans acts in advance, much like Cathy. Cal’s name, like his mother Cathy Ames, is also a mixture of the Cain-figure and the Abel-figure. Cal is short for ‘Caleb’—the C for Cain, and the ‘aleb’, which can be easily rearranged into Abel.

What were Steinbeck’s reasons for creating characters with elements of both the Cain and Abel archetypes after so many clear cut pairs of either/or? What is the nature of the weaknesses that the dual characters seek out and try to exploit? In the case of East of Eden archetype pairs Cathy/Adam and Cal/Aron, it is the weakness of refusing to recognize that all human beings have elements of both the Cain and Abel archetypes. The refusal to recognize this fundamental truth ends up being the sometimes fatal downfall of both traditional Cain and Abel archetypes alike. Cathy, for example, is able to exert control over Adam because he fails to see the potential for evil in her character:

“Whatever Cathy may have been, she set off the glory in Adam…Perhaps Adam did not see Cathy at all, so lighted was she by his eyes. Burned in his mind was an image of beauty and tenderness, a sweet and holy girl, precious beyond thinking, clean and loving, and that image was Cathy to her husband, and nothing Cathy did or said could warp Adam’s Cathy. She said she did not want to go to California and he did not listen, because his Cathy took his arm and started first.” (EE 132)

Because of this disastrous appraisal of Cathy’s character, Adam is nearly killed. Shortly afterwards, Cathy attempts to abort the twins and later shoots Adam after giving birth to them. Adam’s inability to see Cathy’s potential for evil as well as good is his weakness, which Cathy exploits until she is healed enough to attack him and run away. Adam’s son
Aron is beset with the same kind of inability to see evil in others, especially in his relationships with women. The love interest of both Aron and Cal Trask, Abra Bacon, is subject to this skewed perception:

“I’m not being funny. He [Aron] doesn’t think about me. He’s made someone up, and it’s like he put my skin on her. I’m not like that—not like the made-up one.”

“What’s she like?”

“Pure!” said Abra. “Just absolutely pure. Nothing but pure—never a bad thing. I’m not like that. He doesn’t even know me. He doesn’t even want to know me. He wants that—white—ghost.” (EE 493)

Abra Bacon1 is put on the same pedestal Aron’s father Adam puts Cathy on. Aron believes Abra can do no wrong, and supports him in every inclination he has, even when he declares he wants to live a celibate life after being married. Aron applies this denial of the possibility of bad in those he loves not only to the rest of his family, but to his mother Cathy:

“Cal said, “Where do you think our mother is?”

“She’s dead.”

“No, she isn’t.”

“I don’t believe it,” said Aron. “Father said she was in Heaven…She’s in Heaven…Why would Father tell a lie?” He looked at his brother, begging him silently to agree. Cal didn’t answer him. “Don’t you think she’s in Heaven with the angels?...I asked Lee. Know what Lee said? Lee said, ‘Your mother loved you and she still does.’ And Lee gave me a star to look at. He said maybe that was our mother and she would love us as long as that light was there. Do you think Lee is a liar?” (EE 334-335)

Aron cannot accept the thought that either his father or their Chinese servant Lee, both of whom he loves, would lie to him. He also cannot accept the thought that his mother might not have loved him and might have willingly left him and was continuing to stay away from him out of her own free will. This inability to accept the idea of his mother as a two sided being, with the capacity for evil as well as good, is eventually Aron’s downfall. It enables his brother, Cal, to exploit his weakness. When Cal reveals to him the truth of

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1 Abra is another interesting naming choice, with an A for an Abel-figure name and yet the insistence that she is not all good, as the Abel archetypes are usually presented as believing people are. John Ditsky posited in his 1977 Essays on East of Eden that Abra Bacon as a name is a bridge between the Cain and Abel archetypes: with A for Abel and B as the stepping stone to C for Cain. The character herself is, for a time, romantically caught between the two brothers and always holds the affections of both.
Cathy’s existence by taking Aron to her whorehouse, Aron runs off to join the army and is killed in World War I.

The inability to recognize the potential for both good and evil in mankind is not limited only to the Abel archetypes. Cathy, a combination of extreme Cain-figure tendencies and Abel-figure appearance, refuses to accept the possibility of good in man:

“When I was a little girl I knew what stupid lying fools they were—my own mother and father pretending goodness. And they weren’t good. I knew them. I could make them go whatever I wanted. I could always make people do what I wanted…That’s what I hate, the liars, and they’re all liars. That’s what it is. I love to show them up. I love to rub their noses in their own nastiness.”

Adam’s brows went up. “Do you mean that in the whole world there’s only evil and folly?”

“That’s exactly what I mean.”...

“I’m beginning to think you’re a twisted human—or no human at all.”...

“Do you think I want to be human? Look at those pictures! I’d rather be a dog than a human. But I’m not a dog. I’m smarter than humans. Nobody can hurt me…” (EE 319-321)

Cathy believes everyone is only ‘pretending’ to be good, and underneath they are all as devious, pre-meditated, and cold as she herself is. Mankind’s inability to recognize their own complete wickedness is what Cathy wrongly considers humanity. She doesn’t consider herself human because she is smart enough to realize her own nature. Cathy believes this knowledge protects her from the world, but in the end she dies much like her son, Aron, running from a truth contrary to her own beliefs:

“Eat me,” she [Cathy] said and put the capsule in her mouth. She picked up the tea cup.

“Drink me,” she said and swallowed the bitter cold tea. She forced her mind to stay on Alice¹—so tiny and waiting. Other faces peered in from the sides of her eyes—her father and mother, and Charles, and Adam, and Samuel Hamilton, and then Aron, and she could see Cal smiling at her. He didn’t have to speak. The glint of his eyes said, “You missed something. They had something and you missed it.”…Her eyes closed and a dizzy nausea shook her…her heart beat solemnly and her breathing slowed as she grew smaller and smaller and then disappeared—and she had never been.” (EE 551)

¹ ‘Alice’ refers to the character of Alice in Lewis Carroll’s Alice in Wonderland. Cathy frequently dreams that she and Alice are friends skipping through Wonderland, and that she too can disappear down rabbit holes or consume a shrinking potion and vanish from the world she knows.
What Cathy ‘missed’, and what the other characters had all along was the capacity for good as well as evil. By denying the presence of this duality in herself and those around her, Cathy limits herself to only half of her nature and eventually spirals downward until finally committing suicide. This final half-admittance in her dying moments comes following a meeting with her other son, Aron, the Abel figure, brought to face her by his twin brother Cal, seeking to hurt him after his offered gift is rejected by their father Adam. Since Cathy believes herself to be capable only of producing evil, it may be that her downfall was precipitated by coming into contact with her son Aron, an archetype of the ‘good’ in man—good that Cathy believes she is incapable of.

Steinbeck’s themes of good and evil in man and the duality of human nature are, of course, centered on what he believes to be the central meaning of the Cain and Abel story: the idea that Cain chose to take revenge upon his brother Abel for being rejected. Steinbeck extrapolates and develops this idea in *East of Eden* by having the characters themselves debate the issue. In the Trask sections, this idea is cultivated and kept fresh in the mind of both the reader and characters alike by Lee, the Trask family’s Chinese servant. Lee functions as both a moral compass for the Trask family; reminding them at every turn of the choice they have between good and evil, and as an in-novel voice for Steinbeck himself, leaving the author free to ponder and philosophize on the issue without breaking the flow of the story. It is Lee who introduces the idea of *timshel*, the Hebrew word in the biblical Cain and Abel story which, when translated interpretively, backs up Steinbeck’s claim that Cain chose sin and is equally free to choose good:

“Do you remember when you read us the sixteen verses of the fourth chapter of Genesis and we argued about them?”…said Lee. “Well, the story bit deeply into me and I went into it word for word. The more I thought about the story, the more profound it became to me. Then I compared the translations we have…I wondered what the original word of the original writer had been that these very different translations could be made…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 that 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.’” (EE 299-301)¹

As the presenter of the idea of *timshel*, Lee delivers the message of ‘thou mayest’, or free
will to choose or not choose sin, to the Trask family in the same way that God delivers
the message to Cain in the original biblical story. In this sense, Lee functions as the voice
of God in *East of Eden* in accordance with the Cain-and-Abel tale. As the author is the
creator and essentially the ‘father’ of the story in the same way God is the creator and
‘father’ of Adam and his offspring, Cain and Abel, it is safe to equate Lee’s role to that of
the voice of the author as well. Lee serves as a direct conduit from Steinbeck to the
reader, through which Steinbeck is free to explore his themes openly. Lee is not subject
to the Cain-and-Abel naming scheme, nor is he part of any pattern between father and son
or brother and brother. He is, to some degree, an objective observer, able to offer counsel
and an unbiased view where other characters are unable to.² Lee is also an immensely
important figure in the novel, as he completes one half of a bridge between the Trask
family and the Hamilton family. The two sections of the novel are brought together by
the friendship between Lee, servant to the Trask family, and Samuel Hamilton, patriarch
of the Hamilton clan. The Hamiltons interact with the rest of the Trask family throughout
the novel as well, but most of the interaction in the novel is in conversations between Lee
and Samuel.

¹ Interestingly enough, not one of the nine English translations of the Bible have the phrase ‘thou mayest’
in this disputed line of the Cain and Abel story. See Appendix 1 for a translation which has ‘thou canst’, the
closest equivalent to Steinbeck’s translation.
² Lee as a character has been dismissed by many critics as unrealistic. He is a Chinese-American servant
who speaks English as an educated man, dreams of opening a bookstore, and speaks Chinese pidgin on
occasion because it’s “what people expect of him”. Critics dismissed this ability in Lee to see himself in
relation to the expectations of society as unrealistic for his circumstances and the time period. Other critics,
however, see Lee as an integral symbolic figure within Steinbeck’s tale, unrealistic traits notwithstanding.
Terence R. Wright’s scholarly article “*East of Eden* as Western Midrash”, which explores *East of Eden* as a
retelling of the original Hebrew Cain-and-Abel story, states that Lee’s introduction and interpretation of the
biblical story is essential to Steinbeck’s novel: “Lee brings his oriental wisdom to bear upon the sacred text,
and it is important that he doesn’t belong to a western religious tradition, emphasizing the universal nature
of the Bible’s moral truth.”
Chapter 3

“Today I got over the background and appearance and history of the Valley. And tomorrow I must start on the Hamiltons. I can tell all I want about them now because they are all dead and they won’t resent the truth about themselves… I must introduce Samuel Hamilton and his wife to the Salinas Valley.”

The Hamiltons fulfill one of Steinbeck’s original purposes in writing *East of Eden*: to tell his two sons about their ancestry. Though Steinbeck did not know all the members of the family intimately, he mixes truth with fiction in *East of Eden*, crafting members of his family into characters who help to tell the story. The Hamilton family consists of Steinbeck’s maternal grandparents, aunts and uncles, and his own mother. Even Steinbeck himself appears briefly as a character in the novel. As a fixture in the novel (they never leave the Salinas Valley), the Hamiltons serve as a local compliment to the wandering myth of the Trask family. The interaction between the two families and how each affects the other ties a typical American family together with what Steinbeck considered a universal story of humanity: the Cain and Abel tale.

The Hamiltons are introduced in the novel as typical immigrants settling out West, like the story of so many American ancestors. However, Steinbeck quickly establishes his family (whether based on historical anecdote or wishful fiction) as a cornerstone of the burgeoning Salinas Valley:

“Men from all over the district brought [Samuel Hamilton] tools to mend and to improve. Besides, they loved to hear Samuel talk of the world and its thinking, of the poetry and philosophy that were going on outside the Salinas Valley. He had a rich deep voice, good in both song and in speech, and while he had no brogue there was a rise and a lilt and a cadence to his talk that made it sound sweet in the ears of the taciturn farmers from the valley bottom… It was a bad day when three or four men were not standing around the forge, listening to Samuel’s hammer and his talk. They called him a comical genius and carried his stories carefully home, and they wondered at home to stories spilled out on the way, for they never sounded the same repeated in their own kitchens.” (EE 10)

Samuel Hamilton, Steinbeck’s maternal grandfather and patriarch of the Hamilton brood, is a larger-than-life figure within the valley. He attracts men to him for his personality and conversation, and he is frequently called upon for counsel and help. As a part of the Salinas Valley, Samuel Hamilton is described an indispensable resource for the people

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living there, as if the valley could not exist without him. Indeed, later in the novel when he nears death, there is a general sense of confusion and panic among his children:

“He can’t happen, they were saying. Father can’t be an old man. Samuel is as young as the dawn—the perpetual dawn. He might get as old as midday maybe, but sweet God! The evening cannot come, and the night—? Sweet God, no! It was natural that their minds leaped on and recoiled, and they would not speak of that, but their minds said, There can’t be any world without Samuel.” (EE 283)

For his children, and perhaps for all who know him, Samuel Hamilton functions as a foundation for life in the Salinas Valley and for lives that he has touched or altered in some way. ¹His children go on to scratch similar niches in the history of the valley: his daughter Dessie opens a beloved dressmaking shop and his son Will becomes a rich local banker and investor. While the Trask family does not have its origins in the Salinas Valley, and only moves there later when half their story has been told, the Hamiltons are established and rooted in the valley. Once the reader sees how firmly the Hamiltons are entrenched in the local Salinas culture, it seems not only inevitable but required that the mythic Trasks cross paths with them upon moving to the Valley.

The parallels between the lives of the Hamiltons and the plot of the biblical Genesis story are less clear-cut than the deliberately crafted Trasks. Samuel and Liza, for example, are model parents when contrasted with the father and mother figures in the Trask family. Samuel does not resemble the flawed Cyrus Trask in outwardly loving one child more than the other, or loving conflict and the atmosphere of war. Liza Hamilton is a stark opposite to Cathy Ames, tending home and family for years without a single complaint while Cathy abandons her sons after shooting her husband. Liza’s faith in God is never shaken, while Cathy has no faith at all. Their children are not named for deliberate archetypes of good or evil, and in fact represent the broadest range of human types among the nine siblings. This balanced representation, however, may make the few Cain-and-Abel parallels between them all the more relevant and relatable because they

¹It is interesting to note that, despite fathering nine children and being said to bring metaphoric life to the Valley and its inhabitants, Samuel Hamilton cannot coax life out of the actually Salinas Valley land that he owns and lives on: “If the land had been any good the Hamiltons would have been rich people. But the acres were harsh and dry. There were no springs, and the crust of topsoil was so thin that the flinty bones stuck through. Even the sagebrush struggled to exist, and the oaks were dwarfed from lack of moisture. Even in reasonably good years there was so little feed that the cattle kept thin running about looking for enough to eat. From their barren hills the Hamiltons could look down to the west and see the richness of the bottom land and the greenness around the Salinas River.” (EE 9-10)
are happening to characters who are not clearly Cain or Abel archetypes. That is not to say, however, that the Hamilton children are free of the rejection and fear of being unloved that plague the Cain archetypes in the Trask family. Will Hamilton, one of the sons of Samuel and Liza Hamilton and one of the few Hamilton children to succeed financially, feels the familiar string of rejection despite his best efforts:

“Nearly everyone has his box of secret pain, shared with no one. Will had concealed his well, laughed loud, exploited perverse virtues, and never let his jealousy go wandering. He thought of himself as slow, doltish, conservative, uninspired. No great dream lifted him high and no despair forced self destruction. He was always on the edge, trying to hold on to the rim of the family with what gift he had—care, and reason, application. He kept the books, hired the attorneys, called the undertaker, and eventually paid the bills. The others didn’t even know they needed him. He had the ability to get money and keep it. He thought the Hamiltons despised him for his one ability. He had loved them doggedly, had always been at hand with his money to pull them out of their errors. He thought they were ashamed of him, and he fought bitterly for their recognition. All of this was in the frozen wind that blew through him.” (EE 476)

Will makes no vindictive strike against his family despite his feelings of rejection, but his belief that he is unloved among his more talented siblings overshadows his life, and he carries it with him until confronted with Cal Trask’s similar feelings, and the reader is finally told his ‘secret pain’. Two of the Hamilton daughters as well are struck by the pain of rejection, though it is from lovers rather than parents. Dessie Hamilton is a warm-hearted, happy woman until a failed love affair drives her into despair:

“And then Dessie fell in love, I don’t know any details of her love affair—who the man was or what the circumstances, whether it was religion or a living wife, a disease or selfishness…All I do know is that it was a hopeless thing, gray and terrible. After a year of it the joy was all drained out of Dessie and the laughter had ceased…Dessie did not simply throw up her hands and give up. It was much worse than that. She went right on doing and being what she was—without the glow. The people who loved her ached for her, seeing her try…” (EE 281 and 387)

Dessie is never the same after her failed relationship, but she does not give up entirely on life or drift into depression and eventually suicide. Her siblings, however, are not so strong. Una Hamilton marries a morose, unhappy scientist who, it is believed, drives her to suicide:
“Una…had the loveliest hands and feet. Her ankles were as slender as grass and she moved like grass. Her fingers were long and the nails narrow and shaped like almonds. And Una had lovely skin too, translucent, even glowing…And then they brought her home. Her nails were broken to the quick and her fingers all cracked and all worn out. And her poor, dear feet…her feet were broken and gravel-cut and briar-cut. Her dear feet had not worn shoes for a long time. And her skin was rough as rawhide.”

“We think it was an accident,” [George Hamilton] said. “So many chemicals around. We think it was.”

But Samuel thought and mourned in the thought that the accident was pain and despair.

(EE 274)

Like Cathy Ames in the Trask storyline, Una runs from either the realization of sadness in the world, or the refusal to recognize the possibility of escaping from her situation and finding good. Although her father, Samuel Hamilton, is not as delusional as Adam Trask about the possibility of both good and evil in the world, Una’s death makes him age both physically and emotionally:

“Una’s death struck Samuel like a silent earthquake. He said no brave and reassuring words, he simply sat alone and rocked himself. He felt that it was his neglect had done it. And now his tissue, which had fought joyously against time, gave up a little. His young skin turned old, his clear eyes dulled, and a little stoop came to his great shoulders…Samuel has put up a laughing wall against natural laws, and Una’s death breached his battlements. He became an old man.” (EE 275)

Just as Adam Trask was unable to see the possibility for the pure love he saw between himself and Cathy turning sour, so was Samuel Hamilton unable to foresee inexplicable tragedy striking his family. Both these men are weakened for a time by not fully accepting the possibility for both sadness and happiness in the world, a lesser cousin to the binary opposition of good and evil in humanity. While suicide is not inherently evil, the forces surrounding it and leading up to it often are. Una’s ultimate failure is not that she committed suicide, but that she gave up under the weight of living in a world where she was unhappily married.

Una’s choice for suicide over resisting and overcoming her pain later proves a fatally attractive choice for another member of the Hamilton family. Tom Hamilton serves as the closest equivalent to a Cain-and-Abel archetype to be found within the Hamilton family. Like the Cain characters within the Trask family, Tom is a loner,
wandering around Salinas Valley by himself and keeping his thoughts inside. He struggles with the idea of choice between good and evil:

“Tom felt his darkness. His father was beautiful and clever, his mother was short and mathematically sure. Each of his brothers and sisters had looks or gifts or fortune. Tom loved all of them passionately, but he felt heavy and earth-bound. He climbed ecstatic mountains and floundered in the rocky darkness between the peaks. He had spurts of bravery but they were bracketed in battens of cowardice. Samuel said that Tom was quavering over greatness, trying to decide whether he could take the cold responsibility. Samuel knew his son’s quality and felt the potential of violence, and it frightened him…Tom got into a book, crawled and groveled between the covers, tunneled like a mole among the thoughts, and came up with the book all over his face and hands.” (EE 280)

Like the Cain archetypes, Tom is described as dark and socially shy at times. Much like his brother Will, Tom feels outcast from his family because he feels he possesses no special gift they might love him for. He is described fondly by Steinbeck as an affectionate and friendly uncle, and is a caring, concerned brother to his siblings. However, Tom chooses acts he feels are evil, and constantly punishes himself for these decisions. He visits prostitutes and feels guilty afterwards for giving in to sexual desires.¹ His ‘struggle with greatness’ finally comes to a head when his sister Dessie comes to live with him on the Hamilton farm and ends up dying from an unknown stomach ailment for which Tom gives her salts, an old-fashioned family remedy. Tom blames himself for her death, which he believes might have been avoided if he had withheld the home medicine or done something more. His guilt attacks him from all sides one night a week after Dessie’s funeral:

“[Tom] thought dawdling, protective thoughts, sitting under the lamp, but he knew that pretty soon his name would be called and he would have to go up before the bend with himself as judge and his own crimes as jurors. And his name was called, shrilly in his ears. His mind walked in to face the accusers: Vanity, which charged him with being ill

¹ Sexuality is employed throughout East of Eden as both a weapon and a gateway to the evil Steinbeck believes in inherent in all men. Cathy Ames employs sexuality as a weapon from childhood, seducing young boys, the schoolteacher James Grew (eventually driving him to suicide), the whoremaster Mr. Edwards, and later documents the sexual proclivities of the clients who visit her whorehouse in order to blackmail them. She also uses the fact that she had sex with Charles Trask to try and coax a negative reaction out of Adam when he visits to ascertain her true nature. Sexuality is felt by many of the characters to be the worst of their sins, and twice contributes to suicide: first in the case of the schoolteacher James Grew, and later with Tom Hamilton.
dressed and dirty and vulgar; and Lust, slipping him the money for his whoring; Dishonesty, to make him pretend to talent and thought he did not have; Laziness and Gluttony arm in arm. Tom felt comforted by these because they screened the great Gray One in the back seat, waiting—the gray and dreadful crime. He dredged up lesser things, used small sins almost like virtues to same himself. There were Covetousness of Will’s money, Treason towards his mother’s God, Theft of time and hope, sick Rejection of love…The Gray One shouldered up in front. It was too late to stall with baby sins. This Gray One was Murder.” (EE 405)

Tom personifies sin and gives it a life of its own, effectively rendering the translation of *timshel* meaningless. If man can choose sin, sin cannot force him into anything. It is this fatal misconception of the nature of sin that drives Tom to suicide, believing himself unworthy of living life any longer because of his inability to triumph over sin. The misconception is only confounded by the message he receives from his father, Samuel:

> “Samuel spoke softly but his voice filled the room. “Be good, be pure, be great, be Tom Hamilton.”

Tom ignored his father. He said, “I’m busy greeting my friends,” and he nodded to Discourtesy and Ugliness and Unfilial Conduct and Unkempt Fingernails. Then he started with Vanity again.” (EE 405)

Samuel’s directives imply that not being good, pure and great stem from an inability to achieve these traits, and render the human being unable to achieve them a failure. Being Tom Hamilton is a model that Tom feels unable to live up to. To be good is an order instead of a choice, and Tom crumbles under the weight of his orders. Like his sister Una before him, Tom cannot handle the responsibility of Cain’s descendants: the ability to choose between good and evil and knowing that he and all men are capable of both. He chooses suicide instead.

Although the parallels are not exact, the Hamiltons directly affect the Cain-and-Abel storyline of the Trask family. Though some of the secondary Hamilton family members interact with the Trasks (Will Hamilton and Cal’s bean futures investment, Will procuring the family a car, Adam Trask meeting briefly with Liza and other children at Samuel’s funeral, etc.), the majority of relations between the two families comes through Samuel Hamilton. Samuel Hamilton is present for most major events in the Trask family up to his death, and often serves as a catalyst for important events or realizations in Adam Trask’s life. Adam hires Samuel to bore wells into his newly-acquired land in the Salinas
Valley, and the meeting between the two is highly symbolic in terms of biblical parallels and the significance of Adam’s name:

“I have the money. I want the wells. Look, Mr. Hamilton—“

“‘Samuel’ would be easier.”

“Look, Samuel, I mean to make a garden of my land. Remember my name is Adam. So far I’ve had no Eden, let alone been driven out.”

“It’s the best reason I ever heard for making a garden,” Samuel exclaimed. He chuckled.

“Where will the orchard be?”

Adam’s said, “I won’t plant apples. That would be looking for accidents.”

“What does Eve say to that? She had a say, you remember. And Eves delight in apples.”

“Not this one.” Adam’s eyes were shining. “You don’t know this Eve. She’ll celebrate my choice. I don’t think anyone can know her goodness.” (EE 167)

Adam’s meeting with Samuel sets up his ill-conceived notion of Cathy’s true nature, and Samuel’s joke about Eve and apples, though meant lightly, foreshadows Cathy’s propensity for sin and the future havoc she will wreak on Adam’s life. Indeed, right before Cathy shoots Adam and abandons her newborn twins, Samuel Hamilton is called upon to help in the birthing process, and is the first to suspect her cruelty:

“[Samuel] put his hand on her forehead where her scar showed dark and angry. “How did you get the hurt on your head?” he asked. [Cathy’s] head jerked up and her sharp teeth fastened on his hand across the back and up into the palm near the little finger. He cried out in pain and tried to pull his hand away, but her jaw was set and her head twisted and turned, mangling his hand the way a terrier worries a sack. A shrill snarling came from her set teeth. He slapped her on the cheek and it had no effect. Automatically he did what he would have done to stop a dog fight. His left hand went to her throat and he cut off her wind. She struggled and tore at his hand before her jaws unclenched and he pulled his hand free. The flesh was torn and bleeding. He stepped back from the bed and looked at the damage her teeth had done. He looked at her with fear. And when he looked, her face was calm again and young and innocent.” (EE 190-191)

Cathy viciously attacks Samuel, and his suspicions about her as he leaves the Trask house after the birthing, nursing his injured hand, are soon confirmed when Cathy disappears and Adam Trask is found shot in his home. Samuel is aware, on some level, of Cathy’s true nature even before her own husband is. Her attack is animalistic, cruel, and unprovoked.¹ After she abandons the Trask family, Adam Trask falls into a kind of haze,

¹ Some scholars believe this encounter between Samuel Hamilton and Cathy Ames represents a skirmish between good and evil. Samuel Hamilton is set up as a wise, helpful, non-violent benefactor to everyone he
leaving his newborn sons to Lee’s care and not even taking the time to give them proper names. It is Samuel Hamilton who brings Adam out of his stupor and has a direct hand in the destiny of the Trask twins by forcing their father to notice them:

“Samuel struck him with a work-heavy fist, and Adam sprawled out in the dust. Samuel asked him to rise, and when Adam accepted struck him again, and this time Adam did not get up. He looked stonily at the menacing old man. The fire went out of Samuel’s eyes and he said quietly, “Your sons have no names.”…He stooped down and put his arms around Adam’s shoulders and helped him to his feet. “We’ll give them names,” he said. “We’ll think long and find good names to clothe them.” He whipped the dust from Adam’s shirt with his hands.”

By knocking sense into Adam (literally), Samuel forces him to look past Cathy’s abandonment and become a father to his sons. Adam awakens somewhat, but only awakens fully later in the novel, when Samuel notices his distance from the boys and tells Adam of Cathy’s new profession—madam of a depraved whorehouse in Salinas. Both of these incidents would not have occurred without Samuel Hamilton’s influence and actions. Samuel serves as a catalyst for important events and realizations in Adam Trask’s life, and the interaction between the two is vital for the development of the Trask story.

The majority of Hamilton-Trask interactions, however, are not between Adam and Samuel, but Samuel and Lee, the Trask’s Chinese servant. From the first encounter, there is a connection between the two men:

“Lee,” [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 full 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.
“Well, I guess you have your reasons. And it’s not my affair. I hope you’ll forgive me if I don’t believe it, Lee.”
Lee looked at him and the brown eyes under their rounded upper lids seemed to open and deepen until they weren’t foreign any more, but man’s eyes, warm with understanding.

meets, while Cathy is a clear-cut villain committing one unspeakable crime after another without any remorse. Samuel and Cathy have been thought from this encounter to represent a binary opposition in *East of Eden*, with Samuel being man’s capacity for good in the face of evil, and Cathy being man’s capacity for evil in the face of good.
Lee chuckled. “It’s more than a convenience,” he said. It’s even more than self-protection. Mostly we have to use it to be understood at all.” (EE 161)

Samuel not only sees through Lee’s act, but Lee trusts Samuel enough to drop his pidgin and confide in him. The friendship between the two men continues to grow, with Lee contacting Samuel whenever there is a problem in the Trask family that would benefit from his wisdom. Most importantly, however, it is through Samuel and Lee’s friendship that the topic of timshel, or the nature of the sin in the Cain-and-Abel story, is brought up. While Lee is the character who eventually serves as the sounding board for Steinbeck’s interpretation, ‘thou mayest’, it is Samuel who introduces the discussion and absorbs Lee’s conclusions:

“[Samuel] paused. “Have you thought of your own name?...Your first-born—Cain and Abel.”

Adam said, “Oh, no. No, we can’t do that.”

“I know we can’t. That would be tempting whatever fate there is. But isn’t it odd that Cain is maybe the best-known name in the whole world and as far as I know only one man has ever borne it?...Two stories have haunted us and followed us from our beginning.” Samuel said. “We carry them along with us like invisible tails—the story of original sin and the story of Cain and Abel. And I don’t understand either of them. I don’t understand them at all but I feel them.” (EE 264)

Like Lee expressing Steinbeck’s opinions on the meaning of choice in the Cain-and-Abel story, Samuel Hamilton serves as another voice for the author in setting up how important Steinbeck believes the biblical Genesis story to be. It is through Samuel and Lee that the discussion of timshel is fostered and developed to Lee’s eventual conclusion. Samuel’s closing remarks set the tone for the rest of the novel’s development of this theme:

“‘Thou mayest rule over sin,’ Lee. That’s it. I do not believe all men are destroyed. I can name you a dozen who were not, and they are the ones the world lives by. It is true of the spirit as it is true of battles—only the winners are remembered. Surely most men are destroyed, but there are others who like pillars of fire guide frightened men through the darkness. ‘Thou mayest, Thou mayest!’ What glory! It is true that we are weak and sick and quarrelsome, but if that is all we ever were, we would, millennia ago, have disappeared from the face of the earth...But the choice, Lee, the choice of winning! I have never understood or accepted it before..What is that word, Lee?”
“Timshel…” (EE 307)¹

By using the first person here rather than an entire recitation on the history of good and evil in humanity, Steinbeck makes the reader believe that Samuel Hamilton himself is truly affected by the realization of man’s ability to choose (or not choose) sin. A character so personally related to both the author and the Salinas Valley being altered by the mythos of the Cain and Abel story brings the local and the mythic of *East of Eden* together, showing how the larger tale of a fictional allegorical neighbor affects the fortunes and tales of a local, partly-autobiographical family.

¹ Samuel literally takes the words right out of Steinbeck’s mouth; in his *Journal of a Novel: The East of Eden Letters*, Steinbeck wrote: “It is true that we are weak and sick and ugly and quarrelsome but if that is all we ever were, we would millennia ago have disappeared from the face of the earth…” (116)
Chapter 4

“It is going to be one of the most constant criticisms of this book. People are insistent to get on with their lives too and not to think about them. It will also be said that I could well leave the Hamiltons out of the book because they do not contribute directly nor often to the Trask development. And I must be very willful about this, because this is not a story about the Trasks but about the whole Valley which I am using as a microcosm of the whole nation.”

Steinbeck made no secret of his intentions for *East of Eden*. In letter after letter to his friend and editor Pat Covici, Steinbeck stated his desire for the novel to depict not only a family’s personal struggles in the Salinas Valley, but the struggles of an entire nation to come to terms with their duality. Writing in an era that was only just beginning to recover from World War II, Steinbeck recognized the difficulty of attempting to return to a normal life after a period of such strife and discord, spread over several countries and continents and played out by men of all nationalities, religions, and creeds. In writing *East of Eden*, Steinbeck hoped to convince his reader (who might have been any of these men) that the nature of man included both the capacity for great good and great evil, and every man was free to choose between the two.

Steinbeck began his novel with allusions to man’s duality and the story of original sin in the description of the Salinas 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.” (*EE* 3)

Even in the Salinas Valley itself, there exist binary oppositions: light/dark, gay/brooding, inviting/unfriendly, etc. Even before introducing any characters with naming patterns or family history, Steinbeck has created a world that not only really exists, but has qualities of both light and dark, and good and evil. Also important is the compass position of the mountains—the dark Santa Lucias lie to the West, while the happier Gabilans are in the

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2 *East of Eden* was written over the course of a year, from January 29th through November 1st, 1951, and published in 1952.
East. The American West has been equated by some scholars to a sort of modern-day Eden.\footnote{Levant, Howard. \textit{The Novels of John Steinbeck: A Critical Study}. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1974.; Wright, Terence R. “East of Eden as Western Midrash: The Re-Marking of Cain”. \textit{Religion and the Arts; a journal from Boston College}. V. 2, Issue 4, 1998, p. 488-518} From Manifest Destiny to the flight of farmers depicted in Steinbeck’s earlier novel, \textit{The Grapes of Wrath}, the West is continually portrayed (sometimes inaccurately) as the closest to an Eden the United States has. Steinbeck’s presentation of the Gabilan mountains in the West being dark and unfriendly shows the author’s dislike for humanity still in Eden, humanity without choice, humanity pre-tree of knowledge. As for the East, the title of the novel, \textit{East of Eden}, is taken from the fate of Cain in the original Genesis story after he slew Abel. The biblical verse states that Cain went or went to dwell in the land ‘east of Eden’. As Cain is the brother that lived to continue the struggle of choice between good and evil, we are his descendants rather than Abel’s, and by setting up the East as the friendlier of directions, Steinbeck is showing his preference for mankind with duality, and mankind that is free to choose sin as well as good. The description of the Salinas Valley also corresponds with the biblical creation story, in which the elements of the world are introduced in roughly the order of: light and dark, sky and oceans, land and plant life, celestial bodies, animals, and human beings. By structuring the beginning of \textit{East of Eden} in the same manner as Genesis, Steinbeck builds a natural progression from the creation of the world into the themes of original sin and the legacy of Cain and Abel. He recreates both the ideas of Eden and the land East of Eden, and places both the Hamiltons and the Trasks within this world to deal with what was left to them.

The time period represented in \textit{East of Eden} is equally as important as the allegorical nature of the setting. Steinbeck not only presented the real Salinas Valley as his literary land East of Eden, but wrote the novel in between two historical events that are symbolic in terms of the novel’s themes. The novel introduces the Trask family with Adam Trask’s father, Cyrus Trask, a veteran of the American Civil War. Adam himself is born in 1862 in the midst of a war of ‘brother against brother’, a clear throwback to the literal brother-against-brother confrontation in the Cain and Abel story.\footnote{“...Cain myth is essentially an American “natural” since it reflects the event following a “Civil War” which pitted brother against brother.” Pg. iii, Meyer, Michael J., Ed. \textit{The Betrayal of Brotherhood in the Work of John Steinbeck}. Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2000.} The Abel archetypes in \textit{East of Eden} do not seek out war: rather, they are thrust into it. Adam Trask
is forced to join the army by his father, Cyrus Trask, who believes that putting his other son, Charles (a Cain archetype) into the military “would be to let loose things which in Charles must be chained down, not let loose” (EE 27). Adam’s son Aron Trask, another Abel archetype, also joins the army. The rest of the novel takes place over the decades following the Civil War, right up into the beginning of World War I, when Aron enlists in the army. Aron Trask is not only a war casualty because of his brother’s malicious actions which induce him to enlist, but he is also a casualty of World War I. By telling the story of the fictional, mythic Trasks over a span of history that includes both a Civil War and a World War, Steinbeck connects his themes of original sin and man’s duality to events that represented to him the great evil of which mankind was capable.\(^1\)

Although Steinbeck showed evidence of the temptations that surrounded America in the setting and timeline of *East of Eden*, his ultimate intention was to prove that man didn’t have to surrender to these temptations. Rather, man is free to choose between good and evil, between virtue and sin. The character Cal Trask serves as the fulfillment of this goal. Although a Cain archetype who takes revenge on his Abel archetype brother, Cal Trask is the only character in the mythic Trask family who receives the final message of the novel, *timshel*, or the knowledge that he is free to choose between good and evil. His father, Adam Trask, gives him this gift on his deathbed:

> Lee said, “Help [Cal]. Adam—help him. Give him his chance. Let him be free. That’s all a man has over the beasts. Free him! Bless him!”…Adam looked up with sick weariness.

> His lips parted and failed and tried again. Then his lungs filled. He expelled the air and his lips combed the rushing sigh. His whispered word seemed to hang in the air:

> “*Timshel!*” His eyes closed and he slept.

\(^1\) Steinbeck himself stated in his journal that *East of Eden*, or any other novel, would hardly be complete without a touch of authorial opinion: “…you will see in it the little blades of social criticism without which no book is worth a fart in hell.” (JN 40)

\(^2\) While Steinbeck thought war in general to be an example of mankind at its worst, he remains carefully neutral in retelling the events and sentiments surrounding World War I. The effect of this neutrality is that *East of Eden* alienates neither side in the war. John Ditsky wrote in his essay “The Internationalism of Steinbeck” that “the narrating voice, neither exposing nor denying identification with America, refutes any claims of American superiority while refusing to concede superiority to anyone else. In other words, the free-floating narratorial voice of *East of Eden* leaps past nationalism to embrace an equality with the other citizens of the world, a refusal of claims to inherent American invulnerability that embraces all humankind in its ability to do anything pro or con in its “capacity for peace”.” Pg. 176, Shillinglaw, Susan, and Hearle, Kevin, Eds. Beyond Boundaries: Rereading John Steinbeck. Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2002.
Cal Trask is the ultimate hero of *East of Eden*. Although the sins of his mother Cathy Ames loomed over him as an unavoidable hereditary destiny, Cal discovers that he does not have to be his mother or his father. He is free to choose between good and evil for himself, regardless of the sins of generations past, and regardless of his own past transgressions. Steinbeck believed this to be the ultimate message of the biblical Cain and Abel story. To his creator, Cal Trask represented the struggle of choice and duality in all mankind:

“As you are becoming aware, 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. In that battle the survivor is both.” (SLL 429)

Cal’s recognition of right and wrong by being ‘sorry’ make him a character willing to accept his own capacity for good and evil, and this is confirmed by his father Adam Trask’s final benediction of *timshel*. Neither good nor evil are vanquished here; they are forever inherent in Cal Trask just as Steinbeck believed them to be inherent in all men.
“For years the writer and his book have been together—friends or bitter enemies but very close as only love and fighting can accomplish. Then suddenly the book is done. It is a kind of death. This is the requiem.”

By the time *East of Eden* was completed in November of 1951, the work had evolved considerably. Steinbeck’s title underwent several changes, each successive change showing the author’s inclination more and more towards relating the book to a larger, more universal audience. Originally, the book was to be entitled *Salinas Valley*. This title, however limited him to a specific geographical location, and Steinbeck decided to expand with the title *My Valley*. Dissatisfied with this, he altered it again to *How Green Was My Valley?* While this title gave the first impression of Steinbeck’s goals for the novel, still he was dissatisfied. The Valley was still his, and the question was still personal. The title was changed again to *Valley to the Sea*. Upon reexamining his novel and what it was about, Steinbeck decided to change yet again and the title became *Cain Sign*. The title was described by Steinbeck as “short, harsh, and memorable, and nearly everyone in the world knows what it means” (JN 91). While the title certainly left no question as to what the book was ultimately about, still Steinbeck was dissatisfied. The answer came when Steinbeck began writing Samuel Hamilton and Lee’s biblical discussion, and the author placed the sixteen-verse Genesis story of Cain and Abel into the novel. The final title, *East of Eden*, is a phrase taken directly from the original biblical tale, being the place Cain went to after murdering his brother Abel and being marked for protection by God. The shifting title shows Steinbeck’s gradual move from the local towards the mythic, from personal to universal, all the while keeping the two intertwined and related.

The final draft of *East of Eden* had not only a new title, but a new structure. Steinbeck intended the novel not only to teach all his readers about the story of Cain and Abel, but also to teach his two young sons about their family roots. Steinbeck originally began each section of the novel as a personal letter to his sons, speaking to them in the

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2 This title was recommended to Steinbeck by an acquaintance of his wife’s. Described by Steinbeck as a “very rich Texan” who was “far from literary”, the acquaintance explained to the author upon hearing the original title that “nobody who doesn’t live there is interested in the Salinas Valley. You had the title yourself. Everybody is interested in my country. Call it that. Then they can connect it with their country.” (JN 81)
first person as if telling them an old family story. While the boys’ real life family remains in the novel, the letter-writing structure was omitted. Despite this change, the novel still remains personally and universally related to the children by way of their immediate family the Hamiltons and their spiritual family, the Trasks. By taking away a direct address to his sons, Steinbeck created a novel that was not so much tailored specifically for the boys, but intended for them as much as it was intended for all his readers. His sons, when they were grown, would read about their great-grandfather interacting with Abel and Cain archetypes alike. They would witness their great-aunts and uncles choosing good, choosing sin, and some making the fatal mistake of denying their own duality alongside the mythic, fictional characters of the Trask family.

*East of Eden* is a blend of both local, personal history and universal myth. It combines the real-life Hamilton family, ancestors of Steinbeck, with the fictional Trask family, seemingly doomed to follow the Cain and Abel tale for the rest of their lives. It is only when these two families meet that the cycle of the Trask family begins to break down. Their original story, sixteen verses in Genesis, is discussed and debated by characters within the novel until they arrive at Steinbeck’s ultimate conclusion: man is of a dual nature, capable of good and evil, and he may choose between both. Cal Trask and his family serve as the universal neighbor, representing the duality Steinbeck saw in mankind. The Hamiltons function as the universal family, living next to the Trasks and grounding the truth of their myth in the local reality of their autobiographical nature. Steinbeck’s ultimate achievement in writing *East of Eden* is not only a reaffirmation of our biblical legacies of original sin and *timshel*, but a carefully crafted connection between reality and fiction, local and mythic, personal and universal, and good and evil.
Appendix 1

This biblical excerpt is taken from the Knox translation of the Bible. In his book The Old Testament in Fiction and Film, Larry Kreitzer provides nine different translations of the Hebrew word ‘timshol’ (misspelled ‘timshel’ by Steinbeck). Of the nine different translations of the Bible he provided, only two were similar to Steinbeck’s translation of ‘thou mayest’. The Knox translation and the Good News translation were presented as ‘thou canst’ or ‘you can’, but the most recent edition of the Good News translation has ‘you must’ printed. Provided here is the full Knox translation of the Cain and Abel story.

1 And now Adam had knowledge of his wife, Eve, and she conceived. She called her son Cain, as if she would say, Cana, I have been enriched by the Lord with a man-child. Then she bore a second time; this child, his brother, she called Abel. Abel became a shepherd,
2 while Cain tilled the ground. Time passed, and Cain brought the
3 Lord an offering out of the crops the land had given him; Abel too, bought an offering, and his offering was out of the first-born of his flock, with their fat. On Abel, and his offering, the Lord looked
4 with favour, but not upon Cain, or his offering; so that Cain was much enraged, and his looks were lowering. But the Lord asked Cain,
5 What does this anger mean, this frowning face of thine? If thy actions are good, canst thou doubt they will be rewarded? If not, canst thou doubt that guilt, thenceforward, will lie at thy door? Meanwhile he is
6 at thy mercy, and thou canst have thy way with him. Then Cain said to his brother, Let us go out together; and while they were out in the open, Cain turned upon his brother Abel and killed him.
7 Then the Lord said to Cain, Where is thy brother Abel? I cannot
8 Tell, said he; is it for me to keep watch over my brother? But the answer came, What is this thou hast done? The blood of thy brother
9 has found a voice that cries out to me from the ground. Henceforward thou shalt be an outlaw from this ground, that has opened to drink in
10 thy brother’s blood, slain by thy hand. Till that ground, and it will yield thee its fruit no longer; thou shalt be a wanderer, a fugitive on
11 earth. Then Cain said to the Lord, Guilt like mine is too great to
12 find forgiveness. And now thou art robbing me of the ground, and I shall be cut off from thy protection, and wander over the earth, a
13 fugitive; anyone I meet will slay me. But the Lord told him, It shall not be so; whoever kills Cain shall pay for it sevenfold. And the Lord put a mark on Cain, to warn the chance-comer not to kill him.
14 So Cain was banished from God’s presence, and lived as a fugitive, east of Eden.

Genesis 4: 1-16

New York: Sheed & Ward, Inc., 1948
Bibliography


