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BEYOND EDEN: REVISING MYTH, REVISING ALLEGORY IN  
STEINBECK'S "BIG BOOK"

by

Jeremy S. Leatham

A thesis submitted to the faculty of

Brigham Young University

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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Department of English

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GRADUATE COMMITTEE APPROVAL

of a thesis submitted by

Jeremy S. Leatham

This thesis has been read by each member of the following graduate committee and by majority vote has been found to be satisfactory.

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As chair of the candidate's graduate committee, I have read the thesis of Jeremy S. Leatham in its final form and have found that (1) its format, citations, and bibliographical style are consistent and acceptable and fulfill university and department style requirements; (2) its illustrative materials including figures, tables, and charts are in place; and (3) the final manuscript is satisfactory to the graduate committee and is ready for submission to the university library.

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## ABSTRACT

### BEYOND EDEN: REVISING MYTH, REVISING ALLEGORY IN STEINBECK'S "BIG BOOK"

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Steinbeck's use of allegory in *East of Eden* has caused much critical resistance, but recent work in allegory theory offers ways of rereading the novel that help mediate much of this criticism. The approach to allegory forwarded here, which allows for multiple bodies of referents and fluidity between text and referents, empowers readers with greater autonomy and individual authorship. In the case of *East of Eden* such an approach moves the novel beyond a simple retelling of the Cain-Abel narrative to establish a flexible mythic framework for use in an ever-changing world. By challenging dualistic thinking, narrow vision, and cultural inheritance, this framework seeks to order the world in ways that allow for a greater range of humanity and agency. A consideration of early 1950s America demonstrates the relevance of such a framework in a given historical moment.

BEYOND EDEN: REVISING MYTH, REVISING ALLEGORY IN STEINBECK'S "BIG  
BOOK"

John Steinbeck wrote in *East of Eden* (1952), "I believe that there is one story in the world, and only one" (411). The claim that only a limited number of narratives exists was hardly original—in 1913, for example, Willa Cather wrote that "there are only two or three human stories, and they go on repeating themselves as fiercely as if they had never happened before" (60-61)—but neither was it widely accepted. Even when Steinbeck published *East of Eden*, arguing for a single story of humanity would have seemed exaggerated; today, it seems entirely naïve and narrow-minded. This may partially explain the book's general critical dismissal: it has been read as overly simple and reductively allegorical. Such criticism has been leveled at the novel since its publication: even Joseph Wood Krutch, who gave the novel a (rare) positive review after its initial publication, complains of "the tendency of the characters to turn suddenly at certain moments into obviously symbolic figures as abstract almost as the dramatis personae in a morality play" (394). Many subsequent critics have followed his lead.<sup>1</sup> Conversely, other critics take issue with the novel because it is not simple enough.<sup>2</sup> Howard Levant, for example, has apparently little issue with allegory itself, but charges Steinbeck with trying to force too much into the allegorical framework of *East of Eden*, resulting in a "strangely unblended novel, . . . a major summation of the various stresses between structure and materials which abound in Steinbeck's novels" (234). Either way, Steinbeck's particular use of allegory has caused much critical resistance.

Recent work in allegory theory, however, offers at least some resolution to the tensions which stem from traditional readings of the work's allegorical elements. Although allegory has largely been out of favor with literary critics since Romanticism, many contemporary critics such

as Deborah Madsen, Sayre Greenfield, and Jean Ellen Petrolle recently have challenged traditional approaches to allegory and argued for the place of allegory studies in literature. As David Jasper notes in his introduction to Madsen's 1996 *Allegory in America*, "allegory is very much on the agenda of literary and theological studies in our time" (vii). These critics respond to a traditional and still-popular conception of allegory: a narrative or an interpretation of narrative that seeks to create a "systematic analogy with some external discourse" (Madsen, *Rereading* 3), generally relying on "one-to-one correspondences" between text and referents (Petrolle 13). As they point out, such a conception of allegory strictly limits the potential interpretations of a text, often resulting in an unsatisfactory experience for readers, who are forced into predetermined patterns of reading and restricted from bringing their individual experiences, knowledge, and unique interpretive strategies to the text. The approach to allegory used here draws upon the work of these and other critics to challenge such a conception and demonstrates how allegorical elements within *East of Eden* and similar novels offer a wide range of interpretive possibilities that cannot be read as definitive or exclusive, thereby placing responsibility on readers to actively participate in the construction of meaning.

The freedom offered by such an approach and the range of interpretive possibilities it affords complement the novel's attempt to revise and reintroduce adaptable myth into an uncertain world looking for stability. Although most scholars agree that Steinbeck does not fit cleanly into any given movement or group, *East of Eden* displays much of the same anxiety that the moderns felt in the face of crumbling frameworks that had given order to the world in the past. As Susan Friedman notes, this anxiety arose over the "crisis of belief that [pervaded] twentieth-century western culture" and was marked by attacks on "the validity of traditional religious and artistic symbols" (97). This perceived failure of traditional systems of thought and

belief led many to seek new ways of ordering and making sense of their world. Rather than giving in to despair, many artists “refused finally to be satisfied with the seeming meaninglessness, chaos, and fragmentation of material reality” (Friedman 97) and used their art to find or offer some grounding amid the disorientation of early twentieth century. It is this artistic response to chaos that, for Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane, largely distinguishes Modernism (27), and it is easy to see how Steinbeck fits this definition. Like many of the moderns, he looked to myth for stability and answers.

However, while Steinbeck’s impulse to find some kind of stabilizing framework was certainly not unique, his method of recuperating myth through allegory was rare, and to read *East of Eden* strictly in terms of Modernism misses much. As Gloria Gaither points out, limiting Steinbeck’s writing to a Modernist aesthetic restricts his work in unfortunate ways. Referencing what she sees as two of the primary characteristics of Modernism, the search for definitive, objective knowledge and individualism, Gaither argues that Steinbeck was “[s]lapped around by critics with a Modern mindset,” who misunderstood his resistance to absolutes and his dedication to community (53-54). Those who persist in reading Steinbeck’s work as nothing more than an attempt to provide concrete and stable answers to the questions of a particular moment in history overlook what is really at stake in his fiction. While the modern crisis of the early twentieth century may certainly have driven Steinbeck and others like Northrop Frye to find stable structures in the 1950s, the frameworks of thought and belief that emerged during this time should not be confined to a specific historical context. Even as Steinbeck looked to myth for valid structures that would provide meaningful ways of encountering and interacting with the world, he recognized that no mythic pattern could simply be superimposed on it with any effectiveness. Rigid structures tend to shatter when confronted with changing circumstances, and

*East of Eden* works to find a structure that has the adaptability and flexibility to withstand the pressures of rapidly changing world. As W. Scott Simkins observes, “For Steinbeck this modern need for myth thus became not so much a search for a master narrative as for myth as an adaptive narrative” (13). Simkins’s claim initially seems hard to believe; traditional allegorical readings stress one-to-one correspondences that seek to establish master narratives, and it is easy to read *East of Eden* as engaged in the same type of project, as most critics do. Peter Lisca, for example, argues that “the story of Cain and Abel is the novel’s main theme, what it is intended to be essentially *about*” (262). However, the new approach to allegorical interpretation forwarded here suggests that the novel instead posits an adaptable mythic framework that does offer some degree of orientation but constantly restructures itself according to readers’ individual needs, inviting them to take part in the process of meaning making.

Steinbeck most certainly would have applauded the efforts to reread the novel from a variety of perspectives and historical contexts in an attempt to reveal the adaptability of the proposed mythic framework. After finishing the novel, he wrote to his editor about his imagined reader: “He’ll take from my book what he can bring to it. The dull witted will get dullness and the brilliant may find things in my book I didn’t know where there” (*Journal* 182). For Steinbeck, the process of meaning making and interpretation in his fiction relies on individual readers and the experiences, knowledge, and beliefs they bring to the text. What follows, then, is a demonstration of simply one way *East of Eden* can be productively reread according to this new allegorical model. A review of *East of Eden*’s traditional allegorical readings and an explanation of a new approach to allegory help frame that rereading and lay the groundwork for alternative readings for this and other novels. Then, an examination of the ways in which the novel both affirms and challenges biblical narrative reveals a framework (one of many possible) which

challenges dualistic thinking, narrow vision that refuses to acknowledge a complex reality, and the insistence on preserving a restrictive cultural inheritance. Finally, a brief look at a specific historical moment, early 1950s America in this case, demonstrates how that framework can speak to a concrete context. In addition to challenging the criticism that sees *East of Eden*'s use of allegory as restricting, this reading models a democratizing approach to allegory that grants readers greater individual authorship, empowering and requiring them to take personal ownership of the text's meaning as they consider multiple interpretations.

#### New Approach to Problems of Allegory

Those who have read *East of Eden* allegorically generally accept traditional approaches to allegory and overwhelmingly agree on the "proper" external referents for the novel. Virtually all agree that Steinbeck allegorizes the Cain-Abel narrative, particularly emphasizing that Charles and Cal serve as allegorical representations of Cain while Adam and Aron serve as allegorical representations of Abel. Some have moved beyond these four characters to explore ways in which Cyrus, Cathy, Abra, and others fit into this allegorical framework, but even these readings rarely extend beyond the Cain-Abel myth. As recently as 2006, critics have continued to read *East of Eden* as enveloped by the myth of the "first family of Western Judeo-Christian mythology and theology" (Gladstein 37), overlooking other possibilities.

It is not surprising that allegorical readings of *East of Eden* have followed this pattern. As Greenfield argues, "the course of thought [in allegorical readings] seeks the path of least resistance" (13), identifying the allegorical referents that most readily suggest themselves and only reluctantly considering others. Given the overt references to the Cain-Abel myth in *East of Eden*, the "path of least resistance" has been easy to find and follow, and critics have been encouraged further by Steinbeck himself. Referring to the novel, he wrote that "its framework

roots from that powerful, profound and perplexing story in Genesis of Cain and Abel” (*Journal* 90). The purpose here is not to discount such readings; however, it is important to note that many critics do not find such readings satisfying. On the one hand, those who resist *East of Eden* because of its simple allegorical structure follow a critical consensus that can be traced to Romanticism, when critics generally classified allegory as inferior to symbolism. Critics like Gay Clifford, Jon Whitman, and Morton W. Bloomfield often cite Samuel Taylor Coleridge for establishing the symbolism/allegory hierarchy (117; 13; v), but allegory’s dismissal was most likely inevitable anyway. Though widely used from antiquity through the Renaissance, allegory often tends to sacrifice character, thematic, and narrative complexity for the sake of dramatizing whatever is being allegorized. In other words, allegorists often focus too much on a particular body of referents rather than coming up with something new. Not only does this make for rather uninteresting narratives, but it also limits the interpretive possibilities of a text: when the text itself indicates the appropriate external referents, the critic, or the reader, has little left to do.

On the other hand, those who criticize the novel because of Steinbeck’s particular use of allegory argue that he essentially breaks the rules, undermining the allegorical structure as he goes. Levant, for example, notes that the novel’s “materials excite greater interest than the artificial structure—the people are more interesting than the story” (235), insisting that Steinbeck becomes so fascinated with his details and characters that he forgets they are supposed to be allegorical representations of an earlier narrative. The fact that he remembers at times and tries to maintain an allegorical structure leads to what Levant views as Steinbeck’s “major aesthetic problem, the [lack of] harmonious unity of structure and materials” (235). If Steinbeck had simply abandoned his artificial, allegorical structure, Levant intimates, *East of Eden* would be much less problematic and much more cohesive.

Whatever other problems critics may have with the novel, then, many agree that *East of Eden*'s insistent use of allegory reduces or limits the text; however, changing perceptions of allegory reveal that rather than reducing *East of Eden*, allegory is, in fact, essential to it. Renewed interest in allegory can be credited to Walter Benjamin, Paul de Man, Northrop Frye, and others, and allegory has made a minor comeback in literary criticism. Much of this shift results from a reinterpretation of allegory itself, an interpretation that recognizes the possibility of greater complexity within allegory and is prompted by an increasing skepticism of definitive or exclusive readings of any text. Petrolle, for example, recognizes that many critics dealing with allegory today move beyond the "one-to-one correspondences" that have traditionally characterized allegory to explore its multiplicity of interpretive possibilities (13). She, like many others working with allegory today, recognizes that "an allegorical element may have multiple referents, indeterminate referents, or no referents" (13). Like Petrolle, Greenfield challenges the notion that referents for allegory are always clearly indicated by the text itself. In fact, he notes "how little allegory inheres in the text itself and how much it depends upon the processes of reading" (15). Madsen agrees, stating that "the validity of any one interpretation is the responsibility of the individual" (*Allegory* 137). Accordingly, allegorical interpretations result more from readers and the knowledge they bring to a given text than from any demands the text places on them. Greenfield cautions, therefore, that however obvious an allegorical interpretation seems, based on the application of one's knowledge, "these applications should not fool us into thinking our allegorical readings are evident or in the majority" (15). Rather than arguing for a solid and proper connection between text and referent, these theorists see allegory as consisting of coherent but fluid correspondences between multiple texts, all of which are subject to new interpretations as readers interact with them.

One of the most promising reinterpretations of allegory for *East of Eden*, then, still sees allegory in terms of what Madsen calls a “systematic analogy with some external discourse” (*Rereading* 3), but challenges the notion of one-to-one correspondences between the text and its referents and argues against any final or definitive allegorical reading. This new approach invites flexible readings that expand the number of potential bodies of referents and allow for shifting interpretations depending on when and how readers encounter the text, allowing for a wider range of possible readings and diffusing some of the criticism that sees the novel’s use of allegory as reductive. Furthermore, this type of allegorical reading facilitates a reconsideration of texts’ referents themselves. Instead of seeking to equate a particular allegorical element with a stable referent, readers may consider how both text and referent change through the correspondence and recognize the ability of previously dismissed myths, upon revision, to speak to contemporary circumstances and offer direction. This new interpretation of allegory is particularly useful for *East of Eden*, for the book’s critical estimation seems greatly affected by how the allegorical elements within it are perceived to function. Steinbeck himself was very self-conscious about the use of allegory in *East of Eden*: many of his letters suggest that he felt the novel rested upon the allegorical connection between it and biblical narrative.<sup>3</sup> However, he was equally clear that *East of Eden* was to function as more than a simple retelling of the Cain-Abel myth in a modern context.<sup>4</sup> New allegorical approaches help to uncover how the novel moves beyond this simple retelling by inviting a reassessment of the relationship between text and referents. What emerges is an adaptable mythic framework (one of many possible) which seeks to order the world in ways that allow for a greater range of humanity and agency.

#### Establishing a Mythic Framework

*East of Eden* invites a reconsideration of the relationship between text and referents not by simply reintroducing myth through a retelling, but by challenging the original narrative through allegory, essentially revising the biblical *mythos*. In this way Steinbeck follows T. S. Eliot who maintains that the introduction of any new work of art into the existing body of literature effects a change on the whole. However, whereas Eliot contends that “the relations, proportions, values of each work of art toward the whole are readjusted” (50), *East of Eden* challenges interpretations of particular mythic patterns directly through its use of allegory. Many critics point to Steinbeck’s fascination with myth and archetypes; Jay Parini, for example, documents Carl Jung’s influence on Steinbeck through Joseph Campbell, whom Steinbeck knew well (118-19, 136-37), and Warren French suggests a connection between Steinbeck and Frye (75). Steinbeck wrote *East of Eden* just as Frye was beginning to forward a theory of literature that depends on a limited number of archetypes and myths which continually resurface (“Archetypes” 99-100; *Anatomy* 17). Whether Steinbeck read Frye cannot be known, but their simultaneous impulse to find some kind of stabilizing structure in the 1950s seems to reflect a general uneasiness of the time. Frye’s theory of a fixed and limited framework for literature has long since fallen out of favor with postmodern critics, but to take issue with the idea “that there might be One Meta-Meaning hiding behind some archetypes and image patterns which just had to be ordered and foregrounded to reveal that meaning,” as Graham Forst does (150), is to overlook in part the potentially fluid nature of this framework; it may not be fixed after all.

Certainly, Steinbeck is not the first to revisit the Cain-Abel myth, nor is he the first to challenge its standard interpretations. Tracing the presence of the Cain and Abel story in Western literature, Ricardo Quinones argues that this particular myth “stands apart for the extraordinary longevity and variousness of its appeal” and “has been present to the Western consciousness

since the biblical era as one of the defining myths of our culture” (4). His list of authors who invoke the myth includes Philo of Alexandria, Augustine of Hippo, Dante, Machiavelli, Shakespeare, Milton, Byron, Charles Dickens, Victor Hugo, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Thomas Hardy, Joseph Conrad, Herman Melville, James Joyce, Hermann Hesse, and others. The point here is not simply that this particular biblical narrative has a well-established history in Western literature, but also that the myth has undergone serious revision in response to the demands and shifting values of various historical moments. Quinones maintains that the way the story has been interpreted reflects “the dominant energies in various epochs” (13). To illustrate, he contrasts the Christian era with the Romantic. Whereas Augustine and others in the Christian era interpreted Abel as a heroic and spiritual sojourner seeking for transcendence in the secular, pagan world represented by Cain, Cain became the Romantic hero for Byron and his contemporaries, the brother with any moral and intellectual sophistication, the idealist opposed to Abel, the realist. In many ways, the Cain of Romanticism functions as the ultimate Byronic hero, with an entire work (Byron’s *Cain*) dedicated to a revision of the myth from his perspective. Frye notices this pattern as well, and points to this Romantic revision as evidence of “the change in outline of the mythological universe derived from the Bible by Western culture” (*Great* 182). As the myth is retold and reinterpreted, the entire mythic framework restructures itself, revitalizing old narratives for new functions and applications.

Steinbeck was surely aware of the literary tradition of the Cain-Abel myth. While trying to work out the extent to which he would openly emphasize the myth in *East of Eden*, he wrote to his editor, Pat Covici, that “this story with its implications has made a deeper mark in people than any other save possibly the story of the Tree of Life and original sin” (*Journal* 90). It is also clear that he wanted that tradition to play actively on readers’ minds as they engaged the novel.

As he later wrote to Covici, “There should never be any doubt in the reader’s mind what the title refers to” (*Journal* 107). The extent to which Steinbeck highlights the Cain-Abel myth, even transcribing the entire biblical account directly into the novel at one point, indicates its importance as a significant piece of the mythic framework being put forward, but *East of Eden* is not simply interested in retelling the narrative in a modern context. Steinbeck’s *Journal of a Novel* (1969) is full of statements such as, “My book is about everything” (116), “I’m trying to write the microcosm” (113), and “The story attempts to be a kind of key to living” (106). Only insofar as it can be adapted to the changing needs of a community could the Cain-Abel myth—or any narrative—have this kind of vitality for Steinbeck, who saw allegory as the most effective way to reintroduce myth into modernity with the flexibility it needs to survive. Knowing initially that the novel self-consciously refers to the Genesis narrative due to explicit allegorical elements, readers are immediately in a position to not only see what the two have in common (often a rather mundane exercise, which tends to restrict meaning), but also where they are different.

Clearly, *East of Eden* does more than simply comment on the myth or revise it for its own sake; it also responds to the subsequent interpretations that maintained a strict division between Cain and Abel in order to deconstruct binaries in an effort to free humans from a predetermined and limited set of options. The contrast of the Christian era and Romantic readings of the Cain-Abel narrative is instructive because it illustrates not only the potential of literature to restructure a mythic framework but also the level of dualism inherent in each interpretation. Early Christians defined Abel in contrast to Cain, and Romantics could not promote Cain without demoting Abel: “The reversal of parts is nearly total” (Quinones 87). While the Cain-Abel myth certainly has a long tradition of revision, one of its primary functions has been to act as a model of duality, and if “Cain and Abel represent the possibilities of grand dualisms” (Quinones 23), they also

represent the possibility to challenge dualistic thinking. While *East of Eden* clearly implies that the Cain-Abel myth holds fundamental truths essential to twentieth-century America (364-70), it also warns of the danger inherent in strict classifications that establish false dichotomies and deny individuals their full range of agency and humanity. Because of the tendency to deal in dualisms when considering the Cain-Abel myth Steinbeck “subverts the myth in his efforts to create a new mythology for America” (Burkhead 138).

Rereading *East of Eden* with these ideas of allegory in mind pushes readers beyond the obvious level and opens up multiple interpretations, thereby revealing the adaptability and flexibility of Steinbeck’s proposed mythic framework and encouraging readers to discover new and personal meanings in the text. It is evident, for example, that Charles and Cal can both function as allegorical representations of Cain, and because readers are supposed to know this, they can become attuned to ways *East of Eden* diverges from the biblical narrative. The differences are numerous, but foremost is the attitude that the novel holds toward the two characters in contrast to the Bible’s. Like the Romantics who recast certain biblical figures as tragic heroes, *East of Eden* challenges the unsympathetic tone taken in the Bible. Ultimately, neither Charles nor Cal personifies pure evil, each showing genuine signs of goodness. Charles “[protects] Adam from his father’s harshness with lies and even with blame-taking” (20) and loves his father deeply (63). Cal also defends his brother and loves his father, and he even offers to work the ranch to put Aron through college (454). But the two are not tragic heroes, either. They do not start out as admirable figures whose flaws ultimately lead to their downfall; in fact, each seems jealous and bitter and then moves toward a redemptive end—a clear and significant departure from the biblical narrative and its subsequent interpretations. After an uneasy reconciliation with Adam, Charles eventually leaves his wealth to him (369), and the novel ends

with Cal asking for—and receiving—forgiveness from his father. While they begin as allegorical representations of Cain, or pure evil, the novel emphasizes that neither is predestined to fall. The characterization alone helps establish the novel's theme of free will, but within the context of allegory, these contradictions invite readers to move beyond standard interpretations of biblical narrative as well. Thus, in *East of Eden* Steinbeck seeks to write more than modern fiction; he seeks to rewrite interpretations of foundational myth that place absolute labels on individuals.

Just as Steinbeck challenges an interpretation of the biblical *mythos* that views Cain as the embodiment of evil through Charles and Cal, so too does he challenge the interpretation that sees Abel as the embodiment of good through Adam and Aron, further subverting binaries that restrict human behavior and interactions. At times each is portrayed less sympathetically than his brother, especially in the case of Aron. Both Adam and Aron are presented as innocent children with a large capacity to feel for others (Adam toward Alice, Aron toward Abra), but as they grow, each has moments of pettiness and selfishness, including a great deal of indifference toward his father. Adam's experience in the army destroys much of his innocence, but it also reduces his capacity to genuinely see others or empathize with them. He recognizes his father's loneliness when he visits him in Washington, but he prefers returning to his regiment to accepting anything from his father and putting himself in a position where he would be closer to his father than would be comfortable. When Cyrus asks him if he's defying him, he responds, "Yes, sir," exhibiting a new confidence in front of his father. Adam disappoints Charles perhaps even more. After reenlisting, he must gather his courage to write an embarrassing letter informing Charles that he's not coming home. When he is discharged the second time, he writes, "'This time I'm coming home,'" which is "the last Charles heard of him for over three years" (54). The point here is not that Adam has selfishly abandoned his family—he is, of course, struggling with his

own identity, purpose, and past and not simply staying away out of spite—but he certainly has changed: while he remains a sympathetic character throughout the novel, he no longer figures as an allegorical representation of pure good. After Adam recounts some of his past to Charles, especially his time in prison, Charles “felt a warmth for his brother you can feel only for one who is not perfect and therefore no target for your hatred” (109). As the standard interpretations of Cain and Abel as static figures begin to break down, so do the dualism that separated Charles and Adam and the arbitrary and false divisions humans in general draw in order to categorize others and order their world.

*East of Eden* clearly emphasizes Aron’s inherent goodness and simplicity when he is eleven years old, but he becomes much less sympathetic as he grows up. Like his father’s, his childhood is marked by innocence and vulnerability as well as an impulse to make others happy. Each offers a gift or gifts to an important female in his life out of a sincere desire to see her happy—a significant contrast to Charles and Cal, who offer gifts to their fathers to win some measure of acceptance, even love. Additionally, the young Aron seems to embody an innocence and purity in that he cannot understand Cal’s deviant impulses. However, as Aron ages, he clearly does not function as an allegorical representation of pure good. In many ways, he is more self-centered than Adam. In a conversation with Cal about his future he reveals that he resents his father for causing him embarrassment and jeopardizing his future: “‘I’m not mad. But I didn’t lose the money. I didn’t have a crazy lettuce idea. But people laugh at me just the same. And I don’t know if there’s enough money for college.’ / ‘He didn’t mean to lose the money.’ / ‘But he lost it’” (472). As revealing as Cal’s defense of Adam is in contrasting the two sons’ levels of interest in and concern for their father, it fails to reduce Aron’s self-centeredness. Like Adam in many ways, Aron ignores reality and insists on viewing the world as he desires it to be. In the

same conversation with Cal, he reveals his lack of consideration for Abra and his expectation that she conform to his wishes: “Aron said, ‘I want to get out of this town. I don’t ever want to come back. They still call us Lettuce-heads. They laugh at us. / ‘How about Abra?’ / ‘Abra will do what’s best.’ / Cal asked, ‘Would she want you to go away?’ / ‘Abra’s going to do what I want her to do’” (472). While Steinbeck goes to great lengths to contrast Aron’s inherent goodness and naiveté with Cal’s calculating and devious impulses, and Aron can appropriately be interpreted as an allegorical representation of Abel, this passage discloses an egoism that complicates a simple one-to-one correspondence that equates Aron with Abel as representations of pure good. In fact each of these four characters resists being reduced to a pole within a dualistic system.

Many efforts to interpret any of *East of Eden*’s allegorical elements generally end with a similar conclusion: if Steinbeck’s allegorical framework does work on some level, its conscious departures from biblical narrative and its subsequent interpretations simply help establish the novel’s primary theme of freedom of choice (see Owens 74; Burkhead 137-38; and Heavilin 90-91). At that point, many critics tend to set allegory aside. Not all are willing to concede that allegory does work, though, arguing that allegorical comparisons are not necessary at all. According to Levant, *East of Eden*’s characters are compelling enough on their own that forcing them into a preexisting narrative framework only weakens the novel (235). Even Steinbeck himself seems to set the allegorical framework aside at points; occasionally, he prefers to challenge the biblical *mythos* directly, such as in Lee’s translation and explanation of the word *timshel* (“thou mayest”), which raises questions of why Steinbeck insisted on a “systematic analogy” between his own narrative and the Cain-Abel story in the first place. However, while dismissing the biblical narrative outright and simply writing a novel responding to a Calvinistic

idea of predestination would certainly have been possible, probably even easier, Steinbeck works within a preexisting narrative framework in an effort to validate it as much as challenge it. The biblical myth does not just help him make his point; to a large degree, reintroducing that myth into a world experiencing a crisis of belief is his point. And so, this allegorical treatment of the myth does more than imply that none of the characters of the novel is predetermined to goodness or evil; it posits a new mythic framework that challenges the very notion of dualism, and *East of Eden* becomes not simply a novel about individual will but also an insistence that mythic narratives still hold significant truths and therefore have a place in contemporary America.

Despite his Episcopalian upbringing, Steinbeck held a great deal of reservation and skepticism toward the Bible. *East of Eden* itself often calls the Bible into question, referring to “all of its paradoxes and its reverses” (290). Still, as Susan Shillinglaw comments, the Bible can be considered “Steinbeck’s ur-text” (82), and as Lee insists in the novel, “Any writing which has influenced the thinking and the lives of innumerable people is important” (301). So regardless of how Steinbeck conceived of the Bible, he felt that certain narratives or myths still held considerable power to help individuals make sense of their world. The discussion of the Cain-Abel story that Samuel, Lee, and Adam engage in as they name the twins suggest the reasons Steinbeck chose this particular narrative as a basis for a new mythic framework. After reading the account of Cain and Abel directly from the Bible, they consider why the story retains so much power. Lee states, “I think it is the symbol story of the human soul. . . . I think everyone in the world to a large or small extent has felt rejection. And with rejection comes anger, and with anger some kind of crime in revenge for the rejection, and with the crime guilt—and there is the story of mankind” (268). Although Lee’s summary of the “story of mankind” seems reductive, it is important to remember that Steinbeck was looking for a mythic pattern that

could simultaneously provide meaning and stability and also adapt itself to a wide range of circumstances. Whether this narrative really is “the best-known story in the world,” as Lee also suggests (268), hardly matters. For Steinbeck, it was the clearest and earliest example of the type of mythic framework for which he was looking.

Perhaps anticipating that readers might consider Lee’s interpretation and application of the story too narrow, Steinbeck later attempts to universalize the Cain-Abel myth beyond rejection, revenge, and guilt and emphasize its relevance in various conditions: “We have only one story. All novels, all poetry, are built on the never-ending contest in ourselves of good and evil” (413). In contrast to a myth that is too narrow to be applied universally, perhaps the simple model of good versus evil is too vague to accurately be called the “one story in the world” (412)—or maybe just too broad to do anyone any good—but however one conceives of good and evil, clearly Steinbeck does more than simply retell an old story. As noted, *East of Eden*’s allegorical treatment of the Cain-Abel narrative challenges any interpretation of the myth that sees either Cain or Abel as representative of pure good or pure evil, but it also affirms a mythic framework of opposing forces. In no way does *East of Eden* seek to discount the reality of good or evil; affirming their existence is just as important as breaking down the false divisions between the two. In essence, Steinbeck retains the primitive model “of good and evil, of strength and weakness, of love and hate, of beauty and ugliness” but simultaneously tries to “demonstrate to [his sons, for whom the novel was originally and primarily intended] how these doubles are inseparable” (*Journal* 4). To do so, he changes the location of the conflict from intra-familial to inner-personal. In other words, *East of Eden* does not see the conflict between opposing forces as playing out among various individuals, families, or communities predetermined to act in certain ways but as taking place within each individual: the “never-ending contest” takes place within

“ourselves.” Because Steinbeck viewed the struggle as perpetual, *East of Eden* works to present a mythology that confronts the reality of opposing forces and offers some way of dealing with that reality but does so within a framework that can be altered depending on the circumstances of the individuals encountering it.

As central as the Cain-Abel myth is to Steinbeck’s attempt to create a new mythic framework, it is important to consider ways in which his allegory extends beyond this particular biblical narrative in order to understand better how adaptable and far-reaching the proposed mythic framework can be. Recent approaches to allegory that allow for “multiple referents, indeterminate referents, or no referents” (Petrolle 13) open the door for interpretive possibilities that extend this biblical allegory past the first few chapters of Genesis. For one thing, the pattern of sibling conflict and competition for paternal acceptance continues throughout the Old Testament, reinforcing Steinbeck’s claim of a single story of humanity; other possibilities include Samuel as Old Testament prophet, America as post-Edenic promised land, and Lee as Israel in exile. In a discussion of how Steinbeck revises a mythic framework, however, it is especially useful to look at the allegorical correspondences between Adam and Old Testament patriarchs. Bruce Ouderkirk productively explores the father-son relationships in the novel, but even his treatment of the issue does not extend beyond the Cain-Abel framework. Clearly, additional correspondences exist, and Steinbeck extends his mythic framework by drawing not only upon the Cain-Abel narrative both to affirm the existence of opposing forces and challenge dualistic thinking but also upon the relationships between Old Testament patriarchs and their sons to caution against the danger in ignoring reality, refusing to recognize the coexistence of opposing forces within individuals, pressuring individuals to conform, and blindly accepting the inheritance of the past.

Just as Genesis establishes the pattern of patriarchs privileging one son over others (Isaac over Ishmael, Esau over Jacob, Joseph over his brothers, Ephraim over Manasseh), *East of Eden* presents two generations of arbitrary and devastating preference. Ouderkirk demonstrates the powerful effect that each case of arbitrary preference has on the subsequent generation in the novel—sibling rivalry, jealousy, and fratricide, as well as problems with identity, self-worth, guilt, and emotional emptiness (360-63, 366-67)—many of the same consequences that biblical commentators have noted in the Genesis sequence. The novel thus affirms the Genesis narrative by illustrating the powerful effect of human relationships on behavior, especially across generations, and the dangers of ignoring reality while insisting upon an imagined world. As it does with the Cain-Abel myth, however, *East of Eden* challenges this pattern when Adam is finally able to overcome his predetermined conception of Cal and truly see his son as an individual in the final scene. Adam is instructive in this regard because, like the patriarchs who cannot see well enough to distinguish their sons or adopted sons (Gen. 27:1, 21-23, 48:10), his entire adulthood is marked by an inability to see: he views others in terms of preconceived expectations and tries to force them to conform to those expectations. Unlike Charles, Lee, and Samuel, Adam refuses to see the potential for evil in Cathy. Furthermore, he ignores her many protests, insisting (both to himself and to her) that what he wants is also what she wants. Even when he is confronted violently with the truth, such as at Cathy's departure, he rejects it: "I'm going away now.' / 'Cathy, what do you mean?' / 'I told you before.' / 'You didn't.' / 'You didn't listen. It doesn't matter.' / 'I don't believe you'" (199). Because Adam has built up an imaginary world for himself, he has not even heard Cathy's explicit forewarnings, and even the gunshot he receives does little to break down his reluctance to confront or accept a reality he has not prepared for. Like Jacob in the Old Testament, who refuses to be comforted by his sons at the

supposed death of Joseph and enters into perpetual mourning, Adam essentially dies at the departure of Cathy, literally ignoring his sons for a decade, refusing to see them at all. Because Adam insists on his constructed reality, he jeopardizes the meaningful relationships he could have had if he had been willing to see matters as they actually were rather than as he had conceived them.

*East of Eden* emphasizes the importance of clear vision, of recognizing reality, in affording individuals their complete range of humanity and agency. When Adam learns where Cathy, now Kate, has gone and visits her, he finally admits his faulty way of seeing. “‘Might have been good if I had looked into you,’” he tells Kate, contrasting his vision of Cathy with Samuel’s (319). By the next time he visits her to explain Charles’s will, his ideas about the dangers of narrow thinking are more defined, and he tells her, “‘You don’t believe those men could have goodness and beauty in them. You see only one side, and you think—more than that, you’re sure—that’s all there is’” (382). This concept of seeing “only one side” becomes central to Steinbeck’s revision of Genesis in an effort to create a new mythic pattern, but, ironically, Adam continues to struggle with this same tendency, even after his confrontations with Kate. Although he has started to interact with his sons, clearly he still does not “look into them.” He imposes expectations on them in a way that denies their individuality and reduces them to his preconceived opinions of them, problematic especially since the way he sees his sons involves an imbalance of love. Just as he did with Cathy, Adam continues to see what he wants. As Thanksgiving approaches, Adam looks forward to Aron’s visit, and even though “Aron had been away such a short time Adam had forgotten him and changed him the way any man changes someone he loves” (520). And as Adam changes Aron into what he wants him to be, he refuses to see Cal as anything other than what he believes him to be. If *East of Eden* challenges the

validity of dualistic thinking, Adam epitomizes thinking in absolutes and bending the world to fit preconceived categories. As Lee explains to Samuel, contrasting him with Adam, ““You see what is, where most people see what they expect”” (161). Consistent with the novel’s theme of free will, though, Adam eventually overcomes his expectations and affirms Cal’s potential for good in the novel’s final scene. His invocation of “*timshel*” clearly has enormous significance for Cal, whose internal struggles with the free will-determinism question and the pressure to conform to his father’s expectations continue, but its significance for Adam, equally liberated, sometimes goes unacknowledged. Whereas a refusal to speak or even an attempt to absolve Cal’s guilt would have indicated Adam’s persistence in projecting his expectations onto others, his final word validates Cal’s subjectivity. Having finally learned to see, “[h]is eyes closed and he slept” (601). Terry Wright notes that this scene recalls similar blessing scenes in the Old Testament, particularly Jacob’s blessing of his children before his death (65). But where the Old Testament continues to affirm the importance of birthright and inheritance, often resulting in additional issues of rivalry, *East of Eden* displays a profound uneasiness with the deterministic potential of inheritance.

Part of the revised mythic framework the novel forwards relies on the premise that clinging blindly to the past often restricts one’s progress and potential in the future. In expressing a distrust of inheritance, the novel cites instances of both economic and biological inheritance. The money that Cyrus makes by capitalizing on his fictitious war record resurfaces throughout the narrative, causing problems more than achieving good and working as a curse rather than a blessing. When the money passes to Charles and Adam, Charles expresses a deep reluctance to accept it. He does eventually take it, but it seems clear that he never spends any of it, and it brings him more worry than pleasure. He tells Adam he is afraid “to spend a penny” of

the money because he might have to give it back (99). Conversely, Adam readily accepts the inheritance and spends it, but it makes him complacent and indolent. At his death, Charles passes his portion, along with what he added to it, to Adam and Cathy. Adam loses most of it on the lettuce scheme and Cathy makes it clear that she would use hers for revenge, though she never gets the chance. She leaves the money to Aron, who dies before he even learns about it; presumably, the entire inheritance eventually goes to Cal. While the novel does not indicate Cal's attitude toward the inheritance after the deaths of Aron and Adam—there is a great deal to suggest his attitude has changed since the moment he learns about Charles and asks if he had been rich (369)—it does imply that Cal has already triumphed over the negative inheritance in offering to replace some of the money Adam inherited and lost and eventually burning it.

This triumph over inheritance is far more explicit in the novel's treatment of Cal's biological inheritance. Cal constantly worries that he has his mother's blood, that he is determined by his parentage, and the novel's theme of free will is an obvious response to his concerns. When Cal returns home to confront his father, his guilt, and his past, Lee explains that individuals do not inherit the "scars" and "impurities" of the past but must pass through their own defining experiences (598). The novel's final scene and emphasis on *timshel* reemphasize escape from inherited traits. Significantly, the hopefulness of the scene coincides with Cal's final triumph over biological inheritance or his ties to a potentially determining past. As opposed to instances of inheritance in the Old Testament where individuals seemingly cannot break from the predetermining impositions of their fathers, Cal's inheritance does not ultimately seem to define or determine him.

#### The Framework at Work

*East of Eden* affirms the Genesis narrative by acknowledging the reality of opposing forces but insists that those forces coexist within individuals and warns against labeling any person or group as exclusively pertaining to any one. It also reemphasizes the powerful influence of father-son relationships but highlights the dangers in refusing to see individuals and pressuring them to conform. Finally, the novel recognizes the significance of cultural, biological, and economic inheritance but argues that a break from the past to some degree is necessary for progress. These elements combine to make up one possible mythic framework developed by a rereading of the novel that draws upon new theories of allegory, and looking at a specific historical moment helps illustrate how that framework might function on a concrete level. The potential readings of such a framework are open, as are the potential frameworks themselves, and as Greenfield cautions, it is inappropriate to propose that any reading of allegory is exclusive and correct (15); however, correspondences between the mythic framework proposed here and some dominant sensibilities of 1950s America help illustrate one way in which this new model of allegorical reading moves the novel beyond a simple retelling of the Cain-Abel narrative and invests readers with increased agency of interpretation.

If the early twentieth century was marked by a crisis of belief, 1950s America was marked by a frantic attempt to find clear-cut answers. After the horror of two world wars and the perceived failure of traditional systems and institutions, America was looking desperately for a valid societal framework, especially one that indicated a clear distinction between right and wrong, and this anxiety facilitated the dualistic thinking that marked this era. As Bradley Stephens observes, during the Cold War, America and the Soviet Union

became bound up in a distinctly binary mode of thinking that was tailored more to the polarities of the Cold War than it was to their own more intricate philosophies

of individual liberty and social responsibility. The pressure to take sides between communism and capitalism quickly closed off any middle way that could acknowledge the greater levels of complication involved in such a choice. (178)

The rejection of any “middle way” is not surprising. The fervor with which anti-communists preached appealed to many in 1950s America, and Joseph McCarthy’s rise signifies the need that lots of Americans felt for confident, uncompromising leadership and strict dichotomies of right and wrong. Stephen Whitfield argues that ultimately, individuals began to feel that “the fundamental problem presented by Communism was not political but spiritual” (10). The war against communism became the war against evil, and many seemed all too relieved to have found it again in light of the disorientation which followed the perceived breakdown of traditional systems of belief. Anxious for a simple division between right and wrong, America largely accepted the “rigid major premise that the world was divided into two monolithic camps, one dedicated to promoting the inextricable combination of capitalism, democracy, and (Judeo-Christian) religion, and one seeking to destroy that ideological amalgamation by any means” (Nadel 3). By dividing the world into these two camps, Americans felt they could achieve some order in the face of chaos.

Once Americans had properly identified the division between evil (communism) and good (capitalism/democracy/religion), they forced the world into those dualistic categories, feeling a great deal of pressure to conform and a desire to see others do so as well. As Alan Nadel notes, “It was a period . . . when ‘conformity’ became a positive value in and of itself” (4). In an atmosphere where anything out of the ordinary was perceived as a threat, such a celebration of conformity makes sense. According to Douglas Miller and Marion Nowak, “The daily reality of the cold war caused persons to fear international communism and, more

importantly, internal communist subversion. Such fears put a premium on conformity” (7). In such a frightening time, conformity gave people a sense of security and validated the artificial divisions that had been proposed. Anxious to justify the clear dichotomies they had established, individuals often bent the world to fit their preconceived categories, refusing to see complex realities. Just as destructive, many bent themselves to fit the right categories and expected others to do the same.

In addition to the dualistic thinking and conformity that help distinguish 1950s America and its search for stability, individuals clung to a largely constructed cultural inheritance. Influenced by the dualistic thinking of the time, many saw communism as entirely antithetical to American culture and made every effort to preserve America’s “true” cultural inheritance. For example, one of these efforts, as Frances FitzGerald points out, took place through history textbooks: “Inside their covers, America was perfect: the greatest nation in the world, and the embodiment of democracy, freedom, and technological progress. For them, the country never changed in any important way: its values and its political institutions remained constant from the time of the American Revolution” (10). As FitzGerald notes, these textbooks presented a nation so secure in its cultural past that it never needed to evaluate itself. Its strict and closed body of inherited “values and political institutions” offered absolute and complete instructions for the future, regardless of how radical historical changes might be. These inherited values and institutions, supposedly unchanged since the country’s founding, had to be perpetuated and firmly defended in this uncertain time, and “[t]here was, it seemed, no point in comparing these visions with reality, since they were the public truth and were thus quite irrelevant to what existed and to what anyone privately believed. They were—or so it seemed—the permanent expression of mass culture in America” (FitzGerald 10). Regardless of the accuracy of the

presentation of America's past, the writers of these textbooks considered it important that everyone agree on it. Just as Americans looked for conformity in individuals, Fitzgerald argues that so too did they look for uniformity in the nation's cultural past as a counterpoint to the perceived evils of its enemy. To secure its present and future, America clung to its past. And so, for Cold War America, a clear cultural inheritance, conformity, and dualisms offered orientation and security; however, the rereading of *East of Eden* suggested here illustrates the insufficiency of this response and indicates a mythic framework the novel posits in its place.

Steinbeck came under a great deal of criticism for his supposed communist sympathies earlier in his career, but the prejudiced thinking and distrust of liberalism that Steinbeck was exposed to in the 1930s was quite tame compared to the overwhelmingly dualistic thinking and pressure to conform that marked the Red Scare in the early 1950s. Given Steinbeck's heavy engagement with political issues in his previous fiction, it is difficult to imagine that he would not respond to "one of the blackest phases of modern American history," especially considering "how unhappy he was about the way the anticommunist right had accused him of being un-American after the publication of *The Grapes of Wrath*" (Parini 356). Surely, the panic and prejudice of the time inform *East of Eden*, and the novel's efforts to establish a new mythology that warns against dualistic thinking, limited vision, and the influence of the past take on added significance in this context. The same year he published the novel, Steinbeck learned that his friend Elia Kazan had testified for the House Committee on Un-American Activities, implicating supposed communist sympathizers. Despite Steinbeck's politics and ideology, he defended Kazan. However, he also came to the defense of Lillian Hellman, who opposed the committee (Parini 356-67). Explaining his position in what sounds like a partial summation of the mythic framework posited in *East of Eden*, he wrote, "I understand both Hellman and Kazan. Each one

is right in different ways” (Fensch 185). The idea that ostensibly opposing forces can simultaneously be “right in different ways” surfaces throughout *East of Eden* and indicates the relevance of the novel’s proposed framework in 1950s America.

In addition to the fraternal tensions in the novel—and in some cases, tied up with them—*East of Eden* presents strong tensions related to the competitive drive to acquire money and its subsequent effect on individuals, suggesting relevance for the proposed mythic framework in the economic and political systems of the 1950s. Each in his own way, Charles and Cal exemplify a spirit of capitalism, accumulating significant wealth either through hard work or cleverness but always through a competitive impulse. Charles dedicates himself to the farm, getting up at 4:30 every morning and working furiously throughout the day, and Cal shows impressive business savvy in his choice of associates and investments. Furthermore, as the narrator ironically comments of Charles (a description that could just as easily be applied to Cyrus, Cal, Will, or Cathy), he had “the competitor’s will to win over others, which makes for success in the world” (20). Charles’s early behavior toward Adam demonstrates this fierce competitiveness. When Adam, “by some accident of eye and timing,” excels over Charles at peewee, Charles is driven to fury and beats him unconscious with the bat, foreshadowing the later envy-driven murder attempt (23). This sense of competition that manifests itself as violence when Charles is young remains with him throughout his life, though it takes a different turn in his adulthood. After the brothers’ (uneasy) reconciliation at Adam’s return from the army, Charles insists on making the farm the finest and most productive in the area. When Adam suggests that they have plenty of money and should travel, Charles replies, ““We could stay right here and make some good use of our money””—meaning investing it in the farm for increased production— ““And we could get the hell out to work and make some use of the day”” (109). Charles has no need for more money,

but his competitive spirit drives him to increase the production of his farm. Cal, while apparently not as physically violent as Charles, displays the same level of competition. He practices with marbles until he gathers in “all the chalkies and immies, glasses and agates, in the schoolyard” and then displays a capitalist spirit by “trad[ing] them for tops just as marble season ended” and even using them “as legal tender” (419). Later, when Aron confesses that he just wants to get by in life, Cal replies, ““That’s not good enough for me. . . . I want a lot of money and I’m going to get it too”” (533). He reveals to Adam that he has “thought of a couple of things to really make [the ice factory] pay” (539). Certainly, many of these characters’ traits are not unique to any single system; however, their determination to succeed over others and accumulate wealth strongly implies an allegorical correspondence to capitalism.

But just as he had done early in his career in works like *In Dubious Battle* (1936) and *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), and consistent with his proposed mythic framework, Steinbeck also inserts a critique of capitalism as an inherently flawed, exploitive system in this novel. For one thing, both Charles and Cal evoke the image of Cain, who literally kills his brother out of a twisted sense of competition. But even though neither Charles nor Cal ever succeeds in literally (or at least directly) killing his brother, in each case the novel implies that their wealth comes at the expense of someone else and that it does not bring fulfillment. Charles dedicates himself to his farm and works hard to build his fortune, but the letter that Adam receives from Charles’s lawyers indicates his unwillingness to share his fortune even with those who may have had some claim to it. George Harvey writes, “Dear Adam: Forget not thy servants in the days of thy prosperity. Charles never spent a dime. He pinched a dollar until the eagle screamed” (369). Although he gains a certain amount of respect for the way he runs his farm, Charles does not know what to do with his money and lives in severe loneliness throughout the novel. That

Charles is more interested in the accumulation of wealth than in using it to better his life or that of others is made clear when Adam proposes that they build a new house with all their money. ““We don’t need a new house,” Charles responds, adding, ““You take your fancy ideas away”” (106). While it is true that Charles works hard and probably enjoys doing so, there is more to his attitude than simple thrift. His refusal to share his money or pay attention to anything other than increased production ostracizes him not only from Adam but also from anyone else who might bring him some happiness or fulfillment. As Adam points out, ““Neither one of us has got a chick or a child, let alone a wife. And the way we’re going it don’t look like we ever will”” (102). Refusing to take Adam’s advice, Charles continues to work the farm for no other reason than increasing production and dies ““a frightened man hiding in a fortress of money”” (374).

Similarly, Cal’s determination to accumulate wealth also ostracizes him from others and suggests the dangers of capitalism. With Will Hamilton’s advice, he invests in beans before demand skyrockets during the war. He makes a small fortune to offer to his father, but Adam is upset by the venture, insisting that Cal give the money back. When Cal tries to explain that he simply made a smart business move and there is nobody to give the money back to, Adam insists that he ““robbed”” farmers (540). Clearly, Adam and Cal think differently about this particular business deal, but the direct critique of capitalism in general becomes very apparent as their conversation continues. After Cal explains that farmers also benefited from the deal, Adam reveals his moral resistance to any form of exploitation: ““I send boys [soldiers] out,’ he said. ‘I sign my name and they go out. And some will die and some will lie helpless without arms and legs. Not one will come back untornd. Son, do you think I could take a profit from that?’” (540). The idea of profiting from someone else’s loss was a theme that Steinbeck never gave up, even when he was criticized for abandoning the political principles he had espoused early in his career.

As late as *East of Eden*, Steinbeck shows his reluctance to embrace capitalism wholeheartedly—or any one single economic system for that matter. But perhaps even more important than the critique of capitalism as an exploitive system is the poignant failure of the capitalist spirit and resulting wealth to satisfy basic human needs. Ironically, Cal's focus on money, which he thought would win love, leads to a division with Adam. Because Cal invests not only money in the venture but also all of his hopes of being accepted by his father, he is devastated by Adam's rejection of his gift. Similar comparisons can be made to both Will and Cathy, characters who also—probably even more explicitly—serve as allegorical representations of the capitalist spirit. Both succeed financially through a fierce sense of competition and a willingness to exploit others, but each is presented as corrupt or inhuman and unhappy. Though the idea is certainly not unique to the novel, *East of Eden* reemphasizes that the pursuit of wealth does not lead to fulfillment. To whatever extent Steinbeck ultimately supported a capitalist system, *East of Eden* demands a more complete vision of humanity and its economic and political systems than seemed to exist in Cold War America.

Though to argue that Adam, Aron, and Samuel serve as simple allegorical representations of communism or socialism would be difficult, they do offer clear contrasts to the symbols of capitalism in the novel. None is financially successful, none is particularly interested in the accumulation of wealth, and, most importantly, none is driven by an urge to succeed over others. As opposed to those characters who seem driven by a capitalistic sense of competition, these three do not measure themselves against others by standards of money. Despite Samuel's inventiveness and expertise in drilling wells, he never makes any money, partly because of his generosity, but mostly because he lacks a competitive spirit and a drive to make a profit. More interested in relationships than money, Samuel ““raised one fine crop—he had good children and

he raised them fine” (138). He develops friendships throughout the Valley, and his success is measured in terms outside a capitalist system, a concept Will, who exhibits the capitalist spirit perhaps more than any other character, cannot understand: “I’m the only one in my family, except my mother, who didn’t have ideas, and I’m the only one who ever made a dime. Tom had ideas about helping people, and some of it was pretty darn near socialism” (433). Will’s inability to measure his family’s success in any other terms than financial gain implies a narrowness of thought that *East of Eden* directly responds to. The same contrast is seen between Will and Adam. When Adam approaches Will for business advice, Will tries to convince him of the risks involved in his ice scheme. “And if you tell me you don’t care about making a profit, I’m going to throw that coffee pot right at your head,” Will tells him, to which Adam replies, “Well, I don’t care much” (433). This lack of interest in profit is confirmed when Will’s predictions come true and Adam loses most of his remaining money. He explains to his son, “I don’t want the money, Cal. And the lettuce—I don’t think I did that for a profit. It was a kind of game to see if I could get the lettuce there, and I lost. I don’t want the money” (541). Clearly, Adam is not trapped in the capitalistic pursuit of wealth that marks many of the novel’s characters, though he is certainly trapped by his unwillingness to accept reality. Like his father, Aron also displays a lack of interest in money and a lack of direction. The narrator explains that he “was content to be part of his world,” as opposed to Cal, who “must change” his (345). After giving up college, he tells Cal, “I don’t want much money. Just to get along” (533). His complacency toward money differs sharply from Cal’s attitudes. But just because these characters contrast with the capitalistic spirit of Charles, Cal, Cathy, and Will does not mean that there is necessarily something redemptive in their behavior either. Lee believes that Samuel achieves fulfillment—“He had the most schemes and plans, and no one would give him any

money. But of course—he had so much, he was so rich. You couldn't give him any more” (581)—but neither Adam nor Aron seems happier or more fulfilled for his passivity toward competition and money. As with Charles and Cal, Samuel's, Adam's, and Aron's greatest potential for fulfillment lies in recognizing the full reality surrounding them and the complexity of individuals instead of insisting upon a world built upon a narrow vision and dualistic thinking.

All of these contrasts indicate at least one way in which *East of Eden* posits a mythic framework that can be adapted to fit a wide range of historical contexts, 1950s America in this case. Without championing any particular economic or political system, the novel warns of the danger of applying definitive labels, blindly adhering to one system, and refusing to see the complexity and humanity within another. Just as Steinbeck rewrites a biblical myth to suggest that there is no purely evil nor purely good figure, his novel can be read in a way that rewrites the predominant mentality of Cold War culture that took sides and became entrenched. Just as Cain and Abel had become mythic symbols of evil and good, capitalism and communism were often perceived as opposing forces in fatal opposition. One could only survive through the destruction of the other. As Quinones recognizes with the Cain-Abel myth, even when particular generations had “transform[ed] basic character evaluations of the Cain-Abel theme,” they did not “challenge its essential dualistic structure” (215). *East of Eden* recognizes the dangers of this type of thinking and posits a mythology that embraces or at least validates opposition, asking for introspection and the recognition of multiple opposing forces inside every individual. However dangerous a particular force may be, a refusal to recognize that same force within oneself and opposing forces elsewhere may be even more dangerous. And just as Old Testament patriarchs are marked by an inability to see, Cold War mentalities tended to close off any possibility of a complex reality and demand conformity to the perceived reality. Whatever security this may

have offered, *East of Eden* implies that such security must inevitably prove false and that only through affirming individuality by sincerely looking into others can true security take place. Finally, just as Old Testament inheritances often had negative effects on patriarchs' sons, America was in a position to limit itself in the 1950s by clinging to and defending what it considered its own cultural inheritance. As Whitfield points out, this staunch defense of the nation's highest inherited values in the face of an enemy that represented the antithesis of those values "made democratic norms seem like luxuries that the crisis could not permit" (33).

Adamant that the past be protected and perpetuated, America was in danger of betraying its responsibility to individuals in the present and limiting its capacity to progress by adapting to changing circumstances. Although *East of Eden* absolutely affirms the ability of the past to affect the present in positive ways, it demands a constant evaluation of the relationship between the past and present in order to reveal the insufficiencies and determining influence of inheritances that restrict individuals' growth. While the proposed mythic framework of *East of Eden* can be adapted to any number of contexts, the reading here demonstrates its particular relevance for 1950s America, the Cold War, and the opposition between capitalism and communism.

And so, while Steinbeck did openly resist communism later in his career, *East of Eden* asks for tolerance and a balance between oppositional systems instead of unqualified allegiance which demonizes differences. Some feel that Steinbeck betrayed his dedication to oppressed groups, but, as Parini claims,

His sympathies still lay with ordinary people. . . . As far as politics went, he was, and continued to be, a New Deal Democrat with an independent streak. He had never turned communist, because communism was deeply anti-individualist and

contradicted his fundamental belief in the self as the origin of all human action and the seat of conscience and morality. (359)

To the extent that Steinbeck ultimately supported capitalism, he recognized its flaws and saw the advantages of communism, and *East of Eden* can be read as an effort to examine both systems in order to mediate some of the narrow-minded thinking that was emerging in the early stages of the Cold War and warn against absolute trust in an inherited past. Steinbeck felt that “communists, like all others, are only human beings and therefore ‘subject to the weaknesses of humans and to the greatness of humans’” (Parini 154-55). *East of Eden*’s proposed framework draws upon myths to emphasize individuality and humanity, and Steinbeck’s impulse to provide that mythic pattern reveals a desire that more of his contemporaries learn from foundational narratives without being tied to the past, especially not to any single interpretation of it.

Steinbeck’s vision of myth helps answer the question of why he was so determined to allegorize a biblical narrative when he himself anticipated the problems it could create. Through allegory, Steinbeck was able both to affirm a mythic framework and update it so that it could be flexible enough to withstand the pressures of an ever-changing world and still have relevance. Of course, some will still insist that Steinbeck could have accomplished similar goals without using allegory, or that his allegory could have been better blended with his own narrative, but looking at allegory in new ways allows modern critics to recognize the richness of *East of Eden*’s framework. Furthermore, new theories of allegory maintain that allegorical referents are not limited to the past: an allegorical framework can clearly have undetermined and unlimited referents and restructure itself through time. Accordingly, pointing to post 9/11 rhetoric and the “freezing [of] any fluidity of political movement into a static opposition across the ‘Axis of Evil,’” Stephens argues that Steinbeck’s mythic pattern and the allegory through which it is

established are just as relevant today as they ever have been (178). Still, though *East of Eden's* allegorical elements allow for substantial flexibility in interpretation and application, they do not simply suggest that "anything goes." There remains a grounding framework for humanity from the original myths that cannot be dismissed, no matter to what extent they are revised. Despite today's resistance to any absolutes, many recognize a need for the stability that Steinbeck sought in the 1950s. Resistance to the idea of "one story in the world" may be stronger than ever, but reread as an attempt to offer the stability a changing world lacks and the flexibility it requires, *East of Eden* still has much to offer, for, as Stephens notes, "Unsure of its future, this world continues to crave clear-cut answers" (178).

Notes

<sup>1</sup> Oukerkirk has noticed this trend. See 371, note 2 for examples of this criticism.

<sup>2</sup> In addition to Levant, see Lisca 263 and Parini 365.

<sup>3</sup> See *Journal of a Novel* 90, 107, and 180-81 for examples.

<sup>4</sup> See *Journal of a Novel* 106, 113, and 116 for examples.

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