

Nikkita Walker

Timshel: The Monomyth in *East of Eden*

Throughout 1951 the American author John Steinbeck was entrenched in writing what he considered was the book he had “been practicing for all of my life”(Letters 408). It was to be written as though addressed to his young sons, “so simple in its difficulty that a child can understand it”(Journal 6); a novel about what Steinbeck called “perhaps the greatest story of all - the story of good and evil, of strength and weakness... how neither can exist without the other and how out of their groupings creativeness is born”(Journal 4). In December of 1951 he delivered the manuscript of his novel, *East of Eden*, enclosed in a beautifully carved wooden box to his publisher and close friend Pascal Covici with a letter which said “here’s your box. Nearly everything I have is in it and it is not full. All pain and excitement is in it and feeling good or bad and evil thoughts and good thoughts – the pleasure of design and some despair and the indescribable joy of creation...And still the box is not full”(Letters 433). Steinbeck’s *East of Eden* utilizes mythical and Biblical stories to create an allegorical bridge to understanding what he considered “the basis of all human neurosis - and if you take the fall along with it, you have the total of the psychic troubles that can happen to a human” (Journal 104). Joseph Campbell, a literary theorist and contemporary with Steinbeck had elaborated on this same concept in 1949 in his work, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, wherein he posited that, universally, the story at the heart of mythology is an awareness of the human ability to consciously act, “the hero is the champion of things becoming, not of things become, because he *is*”(Campbell 225). Steinbeck’s *East of Eden* acts as a contemporary myth through which Steinbeck communicates the eternal myth he considered the “one story in the world”(Eden 371) – the journey of man to reach apotheosis and attain self-mastery over his individual and universal identities.

An integral part of Campbell's "hero's journey" is the hero's eventual apotheosis, the death and rebirth the hero undergoes whereby he is able to possess a complete understanding of himself as an individual and as a part of humanity. To obtain knowledge of the infinite, the hero's present consciousness must "die" in order to be "reborn" as a new, more knowledgeable being. "Only birth can conquer death - the birth, not of the old thing again, but of something new. Within the soul, within the body social, there must be - if we are to experience long survival - a continuous 'recurrence of birth'"(Campbell 15). In order to be reborn possessing a new awareness, the old consciousness of the hero must first die, a process which happens cyclically throughout the experience of a human life.

The hero who ventures toward apotheosis strives to understand his identity as both an individual and as a part of humanity; two distinctly separate identities. Steinbeck distinguishes the two identities in that as an individual, a human being possesses idiosyncratic memories of their experience, and as a member of the human race they have also inherited knowledge, "the whole race, has qualities which the individual lacks entirely. It remembers a time when the moon was close, when the tides were terrific...The human unit has none of these memories" (*Letters* 75). Campbell writes that dreaming is an individual expression of this universal awareness, that "dream is the personalized myth, myth the depersonalized dream; both myth and dream are symbolic in the same general way of the dynamics of the psyche. But in the dream the forms are quirked by the peculiar troubles of the dreamer, whereas in myth the problems and solutions shown are directly valid for all mankind"(Campbell 18). The hero who has undergone apotheosis is able to reconcile these dual identities, and understand his power of personal agency as well as recognize his humanity, and "herein lies the basic paradox of myth: the paradox of the 'dual focus' that to the whole universe destiny happens but at the individual perspective it is 'brought

about” (Campbell 267), which raises the question of which identity has more power over the other. This dichotomy arises during the naming of Adam Trask’s two sons, Caleb and Aron, when Samuel Hamilton, Adam, and Lee attempt to find names for the twins which will not overburden them with fate and expectation but at the same time “give them a high mark to shoot at – a name to live up to”(Eden 236). Initially Samuel – the patriarchal Abraham figure - is angry with Adam for not naming his sons and leaving them “untried, unnoticed, and undirected – and I say it quiet with my hands down – undiscovered” (Eden 231). By leaving them nameless, the twins have been denied their human inheritance and the ability of gaining self-knowledge because their father’s negligence. The debate which arises because of the naming of the twins leads to the retelling of the Biblical story of Cain and Abel and a discussion of the power of the guilt “absorbed in our ancestry”(Eden 240)- the universal identity - and the power of the individual identity to assert itself. They return a decade later to their discussion where Lee tells them his discovery; the translation of the original Hebrew version of the story which changes the essential word *timshel* from what “The American Standard translation *orders*...the King James translation makes a promise in...[and] the Hebrew word, the word *timshel* – ‘Thou mayest’ – that gives a choice...That throws it right back on a man”(Eden 272). *East of Eden* is therefore an allegory utilizing Biblical and mythical stories and symbolism to show the weight of the universal identity - the eternal myth of the group memory - on the hero and the ability which he possesses to have a choice and to *become* - to acknowledge the universal identity and choose to exist beyond it.

The loud presence of the story of Cain and Abel, the fall of Adam and Eve, and the folly of Pandora have earned *East of Eden* criticism for its lack of subtlety. This criticism may be valid if the novel was simply a retelling of the older myths, but it is not. Steinbeck uses allegory in his

novel to show the permanence and eternal nature of the “one story” – man’s journey toward knowledge and self-mastery. Campbell writes that the monomyth remains at the center of stories although “the key images hide like needles in great haystacks of secondary anecdote and rationalization....mythological symbols, however, have to be followed through all their implications before they open out the full system of correspondences through which they represent, by analogy, the millennial adventure of the soul”(Campbell 230-233). Steinbeck wanted to make the significance of the original myths obvious, but “if this were just a discussion of Biblical lore, I would throw it out but it is not. It is using the Biblical story as a measure of ourselves” (*Journal* 105). It is because of this that so many of Steinbeck’s characters can be read as representatives of different members of the original myth. Throughout the novel the battle between Cain and Abel is repeated, Abraham appears in male and female form, a pair of Pandoras muse over their boxes, and Adam and Eve leave the garden of innocence continually. Steinbeck’s characters reenact the same mistakes of their ancient, mythological counterparts but they also assert their individuality in their process of apotheosis, reflecting that what “we find in the end is such a series of standard metamorphoses as men and women have undergone in every quarter of the world, in all recorded centuries and under every odd disguise of civilization” (Campbell 12).

The first portion of the novel is told through the perspective of Adam Trask. Initially Adam is interpreted as the Abel figure because of the contrast with his “dangerous” brother Charles and the preference of his “wild” father Cyrus. Adam escapes the violence and dysfunction of his home life by covering “his life with a veil of vagueness, while behind his quiet eyes a rich full life went on”(Eden 18). Adam delays reaching apotheosis by denying the reality of his environment and imposing his own false perception. When his brother Charles warns him

not to trust Cathy, as Prometheus warned his brother Epimetheus not to trust Pandora, he ignores him, staunchly refusing to acknowledge a reality not his own making. He is forced past the threshold of his known consciousness when Cathy shoots him in the shoulder after giving birth and leaves him to work in a brothel. After a year Adam finally acknowledges that her leaving has changed him, that his misguided love for Cathy was “enough to kill me”(Eden 231). Adam makes the same mistake of projecting his own world view and resisting his journey by not acknowledging his responsibility as a father, ignoring his role as “the initiating priest through whom the young being passes on into the larger world”(Campbell 125). Samuel Hamilton’s angry visit brings the death of the mourning Adam, and awakens him to the knowledge of his responsibilities. The inability to acknowledge Cathy’s true nature and his responsibility is his death, and the naming of his twins marks his rebirth. After his apotheosis, he is reborn with the knowledge that his brother Charles had been right and he had not truly known Cathy, that he had been “content not to know”(Eden 234), and that he has a responsibility to his sons despite the abandonment of their mother.

The second part of the novel is told through the perspective of Adam’s son Caleb, representing the view of the “Cain” figure. Steinbeck considered Cal as his “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” (*Letters* 429). Cal, unlike his brother and father, has a greater awareness of his personal identity and the environment he has been born into. Where Aron and Adam balk at their journey and process of apotheosis, Cal strives to understand himself as the child of Adam, a man he loves completely, and his mother Cathy, whom he fears. Aron, the Abel figure, does not want to understand beyond his own conceived perception and so is stunted by his lack of a motherly figure and feels “kind of crippled – maybe unfinished, because he didn’t

have a mother.../Do you figure Cal is that way too?/No”(Eden 442). Cal is able to move past Cathy’s betrayal and frees himself from the implications of being her son. He tells Cathy, ““I was afraid I had you in me.’/ ‘You have,’ said Kate. / ‘No I haven’t. I’m my own. I don’t have to be you”(Eden 416). Stylistically, Cal’s epiphany echoes the same rhythm of Lee’s *timshel* discovery, “It might be the most important word in the world. That says the way is open. That throws it right back on a man”(Eden 272), to emphasize his realization of the strength of his individual identity free of his ancestry’s crimes.

Cal’s “murder” of his brother Aron occurs as a result of rejection from his father. He swiftly leaves the house where he is met by Lee who implores him not to respond to his father, who “couldn’t help it Cal. That’s his nature. It was the only way he knew. He didn’t have any choice. But you have. Don’t you hear me? You have a choice”(Eden 487). Cal’s revelation to Aron of the true identity of their mother defeats him because of his absolute refusal to endure spiritual death and rebirth, and Aron chooses to kill himself instead. Immediately after Cal reveals Cathy he feels remorse but there is no way to reverse what has been done, all that he can do is desperately beg his father’s forgiveness. “It is only after a stroke and Aron's death that Adam can be persuaded to bless his son Cal so that Cal can go on with his life”(Gladstein 43). As Cal had once visited his mother Cathy to understand the strength of his individual identity, so does the last word uttered by Adam, “*Timshel!*”(Eden 541), remind Cal of his ability to move past his crime. While Adam’s “*timshel*” is not necessarily a sign of forgiveness, it is a patriarchal blessing upon Cal that he does not have to be defined by his crime but that he can choose to progress. The open-ended nature of the novel allows for a “controlled but more arbitrary narrative sequencing, which could be called non-teleological in the sense that there is no predetermined end. On the other hand, it might seem that quests are quite clearly goal-directed, a

search for something or someplace” (Pugh 73). Although the hero’s journey is a quest, it is a never-ending one as the progressing hero is constantly in a state of death and rebirth. The novel ends ambiguously to represent the nature of Cal’s constant quest to master himself.

If Steinbeck uses symbolic references to Biblical and mythical stories to emphasize the eternal presence of the monomyth – the ability of man to choose his own identity in spite of his human inheritance - Cathy represents those who are deprived of their human inheritance and are incapable of *becoming*, of reaching apotheosis and gaining an awareness of their individual identities as part of the human race. Steinbeck introduces Cathy’s character as a “monster,” and “As a child may be born without an arm, so one may be born without kindness or the potential of conscience” (*Eden* 64). Cathy is unlike the other characters in the novel in that “her horror is her lack of human reaction” (*Journals* 97), she cannot empathize or love like those around her do, which she is acutely aware of, and thus she can never reconcile her dual identities and undergo spiritual death, rebirth, and change. Her horror is the awareness that others “had something she lacked,” but moreover that “she didn’t know what it was” (*Eden* 494). Steinbeck describes the awareness of *becoming* as a moment when “awareness takes place - not very often and always inexplicable...This is a secret not kept a secret but locked in wordlessness” (*Journal* 4). What Cathy lacks is something so intrinsic to humanity it can never be learned or taught and so Cathy’s lack of humanity makes her *other*, and is emphasized by animalistic descriptions, such as her “sharp white little teeth”(Eden 414).

Cathy’s lack of ability to achieve apotheosis prevents her from understanding her universal identity, and so she vilifies the people around her by only seeing their temporal, static state instead of their potential. She takes advantage of what Campbell describes as the human realization “that everything we think or do is necessarily tainted with odor of the flesh, then, not

uncommonly, there is experienced a moment of revulsion: life, the acts of life, the organs of life, woman in particular as the great symbol of life, become intolerable to the pure, the pure, pure soul”(Campbell 112). Because of Cathy’s limited perception of the nature of the people around her, she only knows how to control them through their physical, present selves. Steinbeck writes that “nearly everyone has his box of secret pain, shared with no one”(Eden 429), but Cathy, as the Pandora figure, searches for that box in everyone to take advantage of their most secret shame. In a moment of anger she shows Adam the pictures of customers in her brothel as proof that people “are all liars. That’s what it is. I love to show them up. I love to rub their noses in their own nastiness”(Eden 288). Cathy cannot understand humanity because she is not a part of it, “Do you think I want to be a human?...I’d rather be a dog than a human...I’m smarter than humans”(Eden 289). Because Cathy never has a moment of death and rebirth, she possesses the same unchanged consciousness from when she was a young child, and when Cathy acknowledges that she will never progress as those around her – “the glint of his eyes said, ‘You missed something. They had something and you missed it’”(Eden 495) – she commits suicide and undergoes death without the hope of gaining understanding through rebirth.

If Cathy is the symbolic Eve when contrasted with Adam, then so is Abra when contrasted with Cal, but where Cathy takes advantage of the “pure” image which Adam has constructed of her, Abra balks from Aron’s perception of her. Abra confides to Lee that “He doesn’t think about me. He’s made someone up...nothing but pure – never a bad thing. I’m not like that...I’d rather be myself”(Eden 443-444). Abra, the feminine derivation of the Hebrew name Abraham, is similar to Samuel Hamilton in that she helps others realize their potential, their ability to become. Adam says that Sam Hamilton “looked into me too, and he helped me”(Eden 287) and Abra does similarly for Cal. Abra recognizes Cal’s imperfection, “Abra –

do you hate me?’ / ‘No, Cal, but you hate me a little. Why is that?’ / ‘I – I’m afraid of you.’ / ‘No need to be’”(Eden 516) and assures him that she loves him because he recognizes what Aron would not, his flaws, and strives to change. Abra is also Pandora in that she sees Cal’s “box,” but unlike Cathy she does not seek to possess it, she wishes to open it and free Cal.

Steinbeck writes that “No story has power, nor will it last, unless we feel in ourselves that it is true and true of us”(Eden 239). Campbell’s monomyth is the story of human inheritance; that through man’s ability to consciously change men possess the ability to form their own identity and achieve total mastery over themselves.

Works Cited

Campbell, Joseph. *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004. Print.

Gladstein, Mimi. "Steinbeck's Dysfunctional Families: A Coast-to-coast Dilemma." *The Steinbeck Review*. 3.1 (2006): 35-52. Web.

Pugh, Scott. "Horrorifying Conclusions: Making Sense of Endings in Steinbeck's Fiction." *The Steinbeck Review*. 3.1 (2006): 69-83. Web.

Steinbeck, John. *East of Eden*. New York: The Viking Press, 1952. Print.

Steinbeck, John. *A Life in Letters*. Ed. Elaine Steinbeck, Robert Wallsten. New York: Penguin Group, 1989. Print.

Steinbeck, John. *Journal of a Novel*. New York: Penguin Group, 1990. Print.