



All Student Publications

2016-04-11

"Man's Greatness": Steinbeck's Evaluation of Nature and Nurture in his Epic Novel East of Eden

Courtney Smith

Brigham Young University - Provo, courtneysmith2014@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/studentpub>

 Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

Smith, Courtney, "'Man's Greatness': Steinbeck's Evaluation of Nature and Nurture in his Epic Novel East of Eden" (2016). *All Student Publications*. 154.

<https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/studentpub/154>

This Class Project or Paper is brought to you for free and open access by BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in All Student Publications by an authorized administrator of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.

Courtney Smith

Dr. Burton Gideon

English 295

April 11, 2016

“Man’s Greatness”:

Steinbeck’s Evaluation of Nature and Nurture in his Epic Novel *East of Eden*

Of his masterpiece *East of Eden*, Steinbeck once declared, “I think everything else I have written has been, in a sense, practice for this” (Ditsky 3). This epic novel is an adaptation of the Cain and Abel story from the Bible’s book of Genesis, and he uses this story to convey the most important things that he has learned in his life. He wrote this novel for his children so they could learn from his experiences in the world, and therefore he tried to capture the very heart of the most important lessons that one can learn. Steinbeck uses this novel, and especially the characters of Cathy and Cal, to show that every person has the power to make their own decisions, but that it is one’s nature rather than their nurture that more strongly influences one’s choices.

Set in the Salinas Valley, this novel follows the story of primarily one family: the Trasks. The later part of the book starts with Adam Trask, a farmer who is tricked into falling in love with Cathy Ames. Cathy is a woman who pretends to be innocent and sweet but is actually a selfish, manipulative sociopath, and the naïve Adam falls for her lies. He marries her and Cathy later gives birth to twin boys, named Aron and Caleb “Cal.” She abandons her little family soon after the delivery and takes control of a prostitution house where she blackmails her clients to keep her power. Back on the farm, the twin boys begin to grow up. As they get older, the darker, brooding Cal struggles to compete for attention with his sweet, “golden boy” brother Aron. Aron eventually goes to college while Cal finds success in a business where he sells low-priced beans

back at a higher price to foreign buyers. He offers his savings to his father, who rejects it on moral grounds. Cal retaliates by revealing to Aron the truth about their mother, who he sought out and found months earlier. The truth breaks the emotionally soft Aron, and he responds by joining the military. He goes to war and dies in battle. Cal feels responsible for the death as though he had been the one to kill him, thus completing the Cain and Abel story from the Bible.

The concept of “timshel” is very valid and well-supported in this epic novel. It is the character of Lee, the Chinese man who raises Adam’s twin boys Aron and Cal, who introduces this concept in the novel. During his years of research on the Bible, Lee discovers that in the original Hebrew, the word given with God’s commands is “timshel,” meaning “thou mayest.” Lee then states that “[this] might be the most important word in the world. That says the way is open. That throws it right back on a man” to choose his own actions rather than be forced to do anything (Steinbeck 301). This is an empowering idea, as this allows all people to act freely, but it is also a responsibility and accountability for one’s own actions. No one is forced to do anything, so they must live with the consequences of whatever they choose to do. This is shown very poignantly in the final meeting of Cathy, then Kate, and her husband Adam. When Adam finds her in her prostitution house, Kate believes that, just as before, she can use manipulation to gain power over her former husband. But Adam chose to confront her and his feelings of love for her, and in doing so, he saw her as she truly was. He could not be fooled anymore and he was free to act. He even “laughed because he knew that [she didn’t matter]” to him anymore (Steinbeck 323). Parallel to his choices are Kate’s very purposeful actions. She chose again and again to lash out and hurt Adam as much as she could with her blackmail, her lies and affair, and her sexuality. But Adam realizes and declares to her that she “hate[s] the good in [others] that [she] can’t get at,” which is “something [that she] can’t understand” (Steinbeck 321). Yet even

though she, as a sociopath, cannot understand goodness the way that others can, she still puts real effort into ruin others. That is not just her nature—it is her conscious decision. Her choices and their consequences came down to her alone. She becomes bound by her horrible, selfish choices when she loses power over Adam and therefore can no longer make choices for them both in the situation.

Cathy is shown as a truly villainous character not only because she uses her agency for evil but also because she strives so vehemently to control the actions of others. She actively attempts to twist and trick others into doing only what she wants them to do. Steinbeck clearly shows that this is dangerous and ultimately detrimental to everyone. To establish her evil character, Cathy is shown at an early age manipulating a man into killing himself. She continues this pattern of maliciously influencing others until she has her confrontation with Adam, and because he cannot be controlled by her any longer, she loses control of herself. She is filled with “uncontrollable hatred” and “she screamed, a long and shrill animal screech” while he walked out “smi[ing]” as he made a choice that was entirely his own (Steinbeck 323). So it is clear that each person can—and should—be able to make their own choices.

Yet there is a paradox, for even though every person has the ability to choose for themselves, they each have a unique drive that causes them to choose the things that they do. There is something that motivates each person and causes them to act differently from others, and this thing can be defining. Before he confronts her, Adam is at the mercy of Cathy and avoids everything about her. When Adam is forced to think about Cathy again, he must choose how to respond. Lee tells him that even though he is facing a choice, “[his] course is drawn. What [he] will do is written—written in every breath [he’s] ever taken” (Steinbeck 376). Human

thought and habits are both consistent and persistent. It is difficult to break free of our usual thoughts processes and perceptions.

Steinbeck seems to take this a step further as he suggests that our nurturing styles and interactions are influenced by our nature. This concept can be seen in relationships; for example, Adam and Cathy's marriage is heavily shaped by their differing natures. As Adam thinks back to his relationship with Cathy, he asks Samuel if she had truly even been beautiful like he had always thought. Samuel replies that "to [him] she was because [he] built her" (Steinbeck 260). Adam has a pure heart and a good soul, and he saw these qualities in Cathy even though they were not there at all. He reflected himself onto her. Cathy did the same with her customers at her prostitution house; she insisted on reducing every man into an animal by seeing and exploiting only their flaws. This also applies to parenting in both the giving of parental guidance and the receiving of it on the part of the child. In a 2012 twin study, it was found that "shared family environments have little effect on individual personality differences" between the twins (Segal 100). In other words, parenting styles influence their children depending on the personality of the child. This can be seen in the twins Cal and Aron, who interacted with their environments and although raised by the same people, they grew up to have different temperaments. This is influenced by the fact that Aron is revered by everyone that he knew, while Cal is largely ignored or treated with less affection. This contributes to Cal's destructive tendencies, which created a dilemma for him, as he is torn in two moral directions by both positive and negative traits.

This emphasis on nature is complicated by Steinbeck through his multi-faceted characters. It is especially clear through Cal that every person's nature is made up of both good and evil. Although he is naturally reserved and has the instinct to harm those around him, Cal

develops a genuine desire to be a good person. He comes to realize that he does not want to be like his mother, who has fully embraced her most evil side. He is “heartbroken” when he expresses to Lee that he “has her [evilness] in me” (Steinbeck 445). Cal reflects both of these sides of himself, first when he lashes out in hurt anger and causes his brother Aron to enlist and die at war, and then when he feels authentic guilt and resolves to change and find his own goodness. Cal is complicated and is therefore relatable for the reader because his nature has both positive and negative elements. Because of this complexity, “it is essential to reconsider the blanket labelling of characters as good or evil” and to instead recognize each person’s nature to be more fluid (Donogue 33). However, this does not eliminate the variety of the human species. Each person has more of a range of natural characteristics that are unique to them, and this is the heart of a person’s nature. This combination of instinctive thoughts and emotions is what Steinbeck shows to be most influential in one’s decision-making process.

Additionally, Steinbeck also shows throughout the novel that our instinctive characters and our external influences interact with each other. They are constantly affecting the other; for example, as seen in this novel, one’s nature can be improved upon or ruined by one’s nurture. The character Samuel argues that although “you can’t make a race horse of a pig,” a person “can make a very fast pig” (Steinbeck 260). He feels strongly that one’s children “will be what you expect of them.” There is a responsibility given to parents to encourage the very best in their children, if for no reason but to draw on the better parts of their nature.

However, there is meant to be a healthy balance between one’s natural instinct and one’s learned behaviors. Through Cathy’s character, Steinbeck cautions that when one does not accept their nurture, they become confined by their nature. Near the beginning of the story, the reader learns that Cathy began her rampage early in her life, when she realized that she took pleasure in

other's pain. When she was a teenager, she did many horrible things, including locking up her parents and burning down the house with them inside. This is symbolic of Cathy rejecting her nurture and only embracing her own nature. Her own nature, at its core, is extreme pride and selfishness. She follows the downward path that Pope Gregory I once described; he stated that when pride "fully possesses a human heart, she surrenders it immediately to seven principle sins, as if to some of her captains" (Dyson 10). Once Cathy embraced the most evil parts of herself, she became a slave to those consuming passions. Even worse, she blamed her actions on the very nature that she tried so hard to destroy. At the end of her life, she claimed that "whatever she had done, she had been driven to do" rather than take responsibility, and by doing so take control, of her life (Steinbeck 549). She is driven to suicide because of all the people in her life that she could not control. She could not even control herself because she was completely driven by her most evil instincts.

Steinbeck's second warning is that just as one must accept their nurture, one must also take the time and put in the effort to accept and embrace their nature. This is shown through the mistakes made by Adam and Cal. Later in the novel, Cal brings his father a gift for which he worked very hard—the money he had from his business venture. For Cal, this was a clever job opportunity that brought money and honor back to his family name, but for Adam, this was a sneaky hoax that tricked people out of their money. Their natures clash, so Adam rejects the offering. Cal is shattered, but Lee tries to assure him that "that's [your father's] nature... He didn't have any choice" (Steinbeck 542). Adam is as bound as Cathy is; Cathy rejected her nurture while Adam did not come to understand and accept his nature. Both became victims to their own worst selves. Cal is unable to resist Adam's poor example and also acts out of the worst part of his own nature. He shows his twin brother their mother, and Aron is not

emotionally able to handle this horrible truth. Like the others in his family, Aron isn't able to accept his own nature, and therefore goes to war and dies.

But Steinbeck shows through Cal that when these things are done—accepting one's nurture and embracing one's nature—then a person can begin to reach their best potential. Cal, like Cathy, was born without the full light of natural goodness that others had. He felt defined by his oddities and was confined by his flaws. But one day he meets his mother, who chose to snuff out any light that she could have had. When they realize that they are in many ways similar, Cathy insists that Cal must be like her and chose the worst parts of his nature. But Cal, recognizing that he has the power to choose, declares, "I don't have to be you" (Steinbeck 462). He sees everything that he is and can be, and he makes the choice to be good. He later makes mistakes that set back his progress, but hope is not lost. He is able to continue his progress when his father uses his last breath to both forgive and empower with "*timshel!*" In this way Steinbeck shows the reader the ideal path to follow.

In this novel, it is a person's right to choose their own course, whatever their reasoning, that Steinbeck so highly praises. He declares that he would "fight for" every person's right to make their own decisions because "the free, exploring mind of the individual human is the most valuable thing in the world." This is the thing that, above anything else, Steinbeck believes and wants others to know—that every person can and should make their own choices and should also rejoice in the fact that they can. Although he acknowledges the real impact of our natures, he seems to find strength in the idea that we make our choices regardless of outside influences, as this takes away the most precious "freedom of the mind to take any direction it wishes, undirected" (Steinbeck 47). In this way we come to rely more on ourselves and our personal progress as we journey through life rather than be shaped by the circumstances and factors

outside of our control or the whims of our own instincts. For Steinbeck, as shown in this epic novel, this is the crowning glory of mankind—to be one's own person and make their own decisions for themselves.

This great gift of choice, however, cannot come without a price. As Lee says in the novel, the ability to choose “carrie[s] a man's greatness if he want[s] to take advantage of it” (Steinbeck 519). No one is born at their fullest potential. Therefore, every person must change and learn from their nurture as they live and try to improve and expand their own nature. Steinbeck in the novel *East of Eden* lays out the way that he has discovered will best allow a person to achieve this great goal. Every person has the ability to choose their actions for themselves, and the best decisions are made when one has accepted their nurture and embraced their nature. The success of this idea is most poignantly seen in the character of Cal. Steinbeck's unique view of nature and nurture allows every reader the chance to choose for themselves—a privilege that he encouraged all to embrace whole-heartedly—to do as Cal did and pursue the best parts of their nature while also preserving a healthy sense of their positive nurture.

Works Cited

Ditsky, John. *Essays on East of Eden*. N.p.: John Steinbeck Society of America, 1977. 3. Ball State University. Web. 9 Apr. 2016.

Donogue, Cecilia. "'the Teller Would Be Opinionated' . . . And so Will the Reader: Opportunities for Response to John Steinbeck's Journal of a Novel and East of Eden". *The Steinbeck Review* 9.2 (2012): 26–38. Web. 9 Apr. 2016.

Dyson, Michael E. *Pride*. N.p.: Oxford University Press, 2006. 10. Web. 9 Apr. 2016.

Segal, Nancy L. *Born Together*. N.p.: Harvard University Press, 2012. Web. 21 Mar. 2016.

Steinbeck, John. *East of Eden*. New York: the Penguin Group, 2002. 47-549. Print.