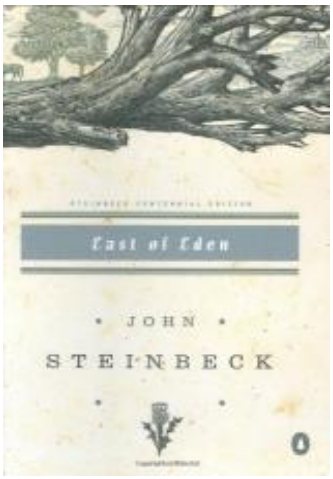
East of Eden

by John Steinbeck



About the Book

East of Eden, John Steinbeck's passionate and exhilarating epic, re-creates the seminal stories of Genesis through the intertwined lives of two American families. The result is a purely American saga set in Steinbeck's own childhood home, the Salinas Valley of northern California. The valley is a new world both idyllic and harsh, and Steinbeck sings to it with a personal nostalgia that is clouded by the knowledge that this valley-as all human dwellings-is the location for as much tragedy as triumph.

The first family whose story is told in this novel is the Hamiltons, led by the charismatic poet-patriarch Samuel Hamilton, an Irish immigrant who raises a large and boisterous family on a mean and unyielding plot of land through charm, ingenuity, and adaptability. The Hamiltons are penniless, but Samuel and Liza's strong and traditional marriage yields nine children of every type and talent who brim with affection and potential. The children act out the numerous possibilities of American life, some making money in business and advertising, some seeking love and home life, others failing utterly in their struggle to find meaning and clarity in the chaotic possibility of a new century.

The second family, the Trasks, is introduced to us as a Connecticut father-a false war hero with a fortune of mysterious origin-his used-up wives, and his two sons: the murderous Charles and the sensitive, searching Adam. After a stint in the army and aimless years as a hobo, Adam falls in love and migrates to Salinas, intending to create his own Garden of Eden. There he presides over a fractured home, raising twin sons Caleb and Aron alone after the dissolution of his marriage to the unfathomable, treacherous Catherine Ames. Catherine herself-later known as Kate-represents the potential for evil in the world. Her life in the valley is the antithesis of that which the Trasks and Hamiltons seek to achieve, as she sinks into a limited life of meanness.

The Trasks are what Steinbeck called his "symbol people," and their story reenacts the saga of Cain and Abel, for Steinbeck one of the world's greatest stories of love, rejection, jealousy, and redemption. But Adam and his sons are held together as a family by the Chinese-American philosopher-servant Lee, who offers wisdom in the face of painful

circumstances. Together the characters try to formulate personal paradises that can withstand the inevitable challenges of human existence, battling the contradiction between the desire to submit to God and tradition and the human need for self-realization and fulfillment. Much as the United States itself had to resolve its roots in Europe as it absorbed the labor of immigrants from around the world in the creation of a new nation, **East of Eden**'s path-breaking Americans seek to free themselves from the chains of the past and achieve personal freedom.

A brilliant novel of ideas, **East of Eden** is far-reaching in its effort to explicate the most fundamental trials of mankind. Brutally realistic-and sometimes fatalistic-about people's ability to harm themselves and those around them, it is also a celebration of perseverance, enduring love, and the noble yearning to better oneself. And it is a work of profound optimism about the capacity of humans to triumph over adversity and determine their own fates. In prose both evanescent and dignified, Steinbeck creates in these characters and for the reader "a new love for that glittering instrument, the human soul. It is a lovely and unique thing in the universe. It is always attacked and never destroyed."

Discussion Guide

1. Steinbeck has a character refer to Americans as a "breed," and near the end of the book Lee says to a conflicted Cal that "We are all descended from the restless, the nervous, the criminals, the arguers and brawlers, but also the brave and independent and generous. If our ancestors had not been that, they would have stayed in their home plots in the other world and starved over the squeezed-out soil." What makes this a quintessentially American book? Can you identify archetypically American qualities-perhaps some of those listed above-in the characters?

2. Sam Hamilton-called a "shining man"-and his children are an immigrant family in the classic American model. What comes with Sam and his wife Liza from the "old country"? How does living in America change them and their children? What opportunities does America provide for the clan, and what challenges?

3. Adam Trask struggles to overcome the actions of others-his father, brother, and wife-and make his own life. What is the lesson that he learns that frees him from Kate and allows him to love his sons? He says to Cal near the end that "if you want to give me a present-give me a good life. That would be something I could value." Does Adam have a good life? What hinders him? Would you characterize his life as successful in the end?

4. Lee is one of the most remarkable characters in American literature, a philosopher trapped by the racial expectations of his time. He is the essence of compassion, erudition, and calm, serving the Trasks while retaining a complex interior and emotional life. Do you understand why he speaks in pidgin, as he explains it to Sam Hamilton? How does his character change-in dress, speech, and action-over the course of the book? And why do you think Lee stays with the Trasks, instead of living on his own in San Francisco and pursuing his dream?

5. Women in the novel are not always as fully realized as the main male characters. The great exception is Adam Trask's wife, Cathy, later Kate the brothel owner. Clearly Kate's evil is meant to be of biblical proportions. Can you understand what motivates her? Is she truly evil or does Steinbeck allow some traces of humanity in his characterization of her? What does her final act, for Aron Trask, indicate about her (well-hidden) emotions?

6. Sibling rivalry is a crushing reoccurrence in **East of Eden**. First Adam and his brother Charles, then Adam's sons Cal and Aron, act out a drama of jealousy and competition that seems fated: Lee calls the story of Cain and Abel the "symbol

story of the human soul." Why do you think this is so, or do you disagree? Have you ever experienced or witnessed such a rivalry? Do all of the siblings in the book act out this drama or do some escape it? If so, how? If all of the "C" characters seem initially to embody evil and all the "A" characters good-in this novel that charts the course of good and evil in human experience-is it true that good and evil are truly separate? Are the C characters also good, the A characters capable of evil?

7. Abra, at first simply an object of sexual competition to Cal and Aron, becomes a more complex character in her relationships with the brothers but also with Lee and her own family. She rebels against Aron's insistence that she be a one-dimensional symbol of pure femininity. What is it that she's really looking for? Compare her to some of the other women in the book (Kate, Liza, Adam's stepmother) and try to identify some of the qualities that set her apart. Do you think she might embody the kind of "modern" woman that emerged in postwar America?

8. Some of Steinbeck's ethnic and racial characterizations are loaded with stereotype. Yet he also makes extremely prescient comments about the role that many races played in the building of America, and he takes the time to give dignity to all types of persons. Lee is one example of a character that constantly subverts expectations. Can you think of other scenes or characters that might have challenged conventional notions in Steinbeck's time? In ours? How unusual do you think it might have been to write about America as a multicultural haven in the 1950s? And do you agree that that is what Steinbeck does, or do you think he reveals a darker side to American diversity?

9. What constitutes true wealth in the book? The Hamiltons and the Trasks are most explicitly differentiated by their relationship to money: though Sam Hamilton works hard he accumulates little, while Adam Trask moons and mourns and lives off the money acquired by his father. Think of different times that money is sought after or rejected by characters (such as Will Hamilton and Cal Trask) and the role that it plays to help and hinder them in realizing their dreams. Does the quest for money ever obscure deeper desires?

10. During the naming of the twins, Lee, Sam, and Adam have a long conversation about a sentence from Genesis, disagreeing over whether God has said an act is ordered or predetermined. Lee continues to think about this conversation and enlists the help of a group of Chinese philosophers to come to a conclusion: that God has given humans choice by saying that they may (the Hebrew word for "may," timshel, becomes a key trope in the novel), that people can choose for themselves. What is Steinbeck trying to say about guilt and forgiveness? About family inheritance versus free will? Think of instances where this distinction is important in the novel, and in your own life.

11. The end of the novel and the future of the Trasks seems to rest with Cal, the son least liked and least understood by his father and the town. What does Cal come to understand about his relationship to his past and to each member of his family? The last scene between Adam and Cal is momentous; what exactly happens between them, and how hopeful a note is this profound ending? Why is Lee trying to force Cal to overturn the assumption that lives are "all inherited"? What do you think Cal's future will be?

12. East of Eden is a combination novel/memoir; Steinbeck writes himself in as a minor character in the book, a member of the Hamilton family. What do you think he gained by morphing genres in this fashion? What distinguishes this from a typical autobiography? What do you think Steinbeck's extremely personal relationship to the material contributes to the novel?

Author Bio

John Steinbeck was born in Salinas, and lived the early part of his life in Monterey County, California. It was here that Steinbeck developed a knowledge and love of the natural world and the diverse cultures that figure so prominently in his works.

In 1930, Steinbeck met marine naturalist Edward F. Ricketts, and a close friendship developed. During the early to mid 1930s, Steinbeck lived with his wife Carol in the family cottage on 11th Street in Pacific Grove. He produced works including THE RED PONY, PASTURES OF HEAVEN, TORTILLA FLAT, IN DUBIOUS BATTLE, and OF MICE AND MEN. They moved to Los Gatos in the later half of the decade. THE GRAPES OF WRATH earned Steinbeck a Pulitzer Prize.

In the 1940s, Steinbeck spent most of his time living in New York and traveling abroad. By then he was an internationally acclaimed author.

While he hobnobbed with the N.Y. elite, he wrote nostalgically of life on the Monterey waterfront. Steinbeck?s old friend Ed Ricketts became the inspiration for "Doc" of CANNERY ROW and SWEET THURSDAY. Although Steinbeck wrote CANNERY ROW in N.Y., he returned briefly to Monterey in 1944 with his second wife, Gwen, and son Thom --- living in the Lara-Soto adobe on Pierce Street.

In 1948, after his second marriage ended and the death of his friend Ed Ricketts, he returned to the family cottage on 11th Street in Pacific Grove for several months.

In the 1960s, Steinbeck briefly passed through the area several times, once while working on TRAVELS WITH CHARLEY. In 1962, he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature.

On December 20, 1968, Steinbeck died in Sag Harbor, N.Y. His ashes were returned to California by his widow, Elaine and his younger son, John. The ashes rested for two nights in the P.G. cottage garden before being buried in the family plot in Salinas.

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