

East of Eden (Steinbeck)

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East of Eden

John Steinbeck, 1952

Penguin Group USA

608 pp.

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Summary

In his journal, John Steinbeck called *East of Eden* "the first book," and indeed it has the primordial power and simplicity of myth. Set in the rich farmland of California's Salinas Valley, this sprawling and often brutal novel follows the intertwined destinies of two families—the Trasks and the Hamiltons—whose generations helplessly reenact the fall of Adam and Eve and the poisonous rivalry of Cain and Abel.

Adam Trask came to California from the East to farm and raise his family on the new, rich land. But the birth of his twins, Cal and Aron, brings his wife to the brink of madness, and Adam is left alone to raise his boys to manhood. One boy thrives, nurtured by the love of all those around him; the other grows up in loneliness, enveloped by a mysterious darkness.

First published in 1952, *East of Eden* is the work in which Steinbeck created his most mesmerizing characters and explored his most enduring themes: the mystery of identity, the inexplicability of love, and the murderous consequences of love's absence. A masterpiece of Steinbeck's later years, *East of Eden* is a powerful and vastly ambitious novel that is at once a family saga and a modern retelling of the Book of Genesis. (*From the publisher.*)

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Author Bio

- Birth—February 27, 1902
- Where—Salinas, California USA
- Death—December 20, 1968
- Where—New York, NY
- Education—Studied marine biology at Stanford University, 1919-25
- Awards—Pulitzer Prize and National Book Award, 1940; Nobel Prize, 1962.

John Ernst Steinbeck, Nobel and Pulitzer Prize winner, was born in Salinas, California February 27, 1902. His father, John Steinbeck, served as Monterey County Treasurer for many years. His mother, Olive Hamilton, was a former schoolteacher who developed in him a love of literature. Young Steinbeck came to know the Salinas Valley well, working as a hired hand on nearby ranches in Monterey County.

In 1919, he graduated from Salinas High School as president of his class and entered Stanford University majoring in English. Stanford did not claim his undivided attention. During this time he attended only sporadically while working at a variety jobs including on with the Big Sur highway project, and one at Spreckels Sugar Company near Salinas.

Steinbeck left Stanford permanently in 1925 to pursue a career in writing in New York City. He was unsuccessful and returned, disappointed, to California the following year. Though his first novel, *Cup of Gold*, was published in 1929, it attracted little literary attention. Two subsequent novels, *The Pastures of Heaven* and *To A God Unknown*, met the same fate.

After moving to the Monterey Peninsula in 1930, Steinbeck and his new wife, Carol Henning, made their home in Pacific Grove. Here, not far from famed Cannery Row, heart of the California sardine industry, Steinbeck found material he would later use for two more works, *Tortilla Flat* and *Cannery Row*.

With *Tortilla Flat* (1935), Steinbeck's career took a decidedly positive turn, receiving the California Commonwealth Club's Gold Medal. He felt encouraged to continue writing, relying on extensive research and personal observation of the human drama for his stories. In 1937, *Of Mice and Men* was published. Two years later, the novel was produced on Broadway and made into a movie. In 1940, Steinbeck won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction for *Grapes of Wrath*, bringing to public attention the plight of dispossessed farmers.

After Steinbeck and Henning divorced in 1942, he married Gwyndolyn Conger. The couple moved to New York City and had two sons, Thomas and two years later, John. During the war years, Steinbeck served as a war correspondent for the *New York Herald Tribune*. Some of his dispatches reappeared in *Once There Was A War*. In 1945, Steinbeck published *Cannery Row* and continued to write prolifically, producing plays, short stories and film scripts. In 1950, he married Elaine Anderson Scott and they remained together until his death.

Steinbeck received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1962 "for his realistic as well as imaginative writings, distinguished by a sympathetic humor and keen social perception." In his acceptance speech, Steinbeck summarized what he sought to achieve through his works:

Literature is as old as speech. It grew out of human need for it and it has not changed except to become more needed. The skalds, the bards, the writers are not separate and exclusive. From the beginning, their functions, their duties, their responsibilities have been decreed by our species.... Furthermore, the writer is delegated to declare and to celebrate man's proven capacity of greatness of heart and spirit—gallantry in defeat, for courage, compassion and love. In the endless war against weakness and despair, these are the bright rally flags of hope and emulation. I hold that a writer who does not passionately believe in the perfectibility of man has no dedication nor any membership in literature...

Steinbeck remained a private person, shunning publicity and moving frequently in his search for privacy. He died on December 20, 1968 in New York City, where he and his family made a home. But his final resting place was the valley he had written about with such passion. At his request, his ashes were interred in the Garden of Memories cemetery in Salinas. He is survived by his son, Thomas. (*Author bio from Barnes & Noble, courtesy of the National Steinbeck Center.*)

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John Steinbeck

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

John Ernst Steinbeck, Jr. (/ˈstaɪn.bək/; February 27, 1902 – December 20, 1968) was an American author who won the 1962 Nobel Prize in Literature "for his realistic and imaginative writings, combining as they do sympathetic humour and keen social perception".^[2] He has been called "a giant of American letters", and many of his works are considered classics of Western literature.^[3]

During his writing career, he authored 27 books, including 16 novels, six non-fiction books, and two collections of short stories. He is widely known for the comic novels *Tortilla Flat* (1935) and *Cannery Row* (1945), the multi-generation epic *East of Eden* (1952), and the novellas *Of Mice and Men* (1937) and *The Red Pony* (1937). The Pulitzer Prize-winning *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939)^[4] is considered Steinbeck's masterpiece and part of the American literary canon.^[5] In the first 75 years after it was published, it sold 14 million copies.^[6]

Most of Steinbeck's work is set in central California, particularly in the Salinas Valley and the California Coast Ranges region. His works frequently explored the themes of fate and injustice, especially as applied to downtrodden or everyman protagonists.

Early life

Steinbeck was born on February 27, 1902, in Salinas, California. He was of German, English, and Irish descent.^[7] Johann Adolf Großsteinbeck (1828–1913), Steinbeck's paternal grandfather, shortened the family name to Steinbeck when he immigrated to the United States. The family farm in Heiligenhaus, Mettmann, North Rhine-Westphalia, Germany, is still named "Großsteinbeck."

His father, John Ernst Steinbeck (1862–1935), served as Monterey County treasurer. John's mother, Olive Hamilton (1867–1934), a former school teacher, shared Steinbeck's passion for reading and writing.^[8] The Steinbecks were members of the Episcopal Church,^[9] although Steinbeck later became agnostic.^[10] Steinbeck lived in a small rural town, no more than a frontier settlement, set in some of the world's

John Steinbeck



Steinbeck in Sweden during his trip to accept the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1962

Born	John Ernst Steinbeck, Jr. <div>February 27, 1902</div> Salinas, California, U.S.
Died	December 20, 1968 (aged 66)
Occupation	Novelist, short story writer, war correspondent
Notable works	<i>Of Mice and Men</i> (1937) <i>The Grapes of Wrath</i> (1939) <i>East of Eden</i> (1952) ^[1]
Notable awards	Pulitzer Prize for Fiction (1940) Nobel Prize in Literature (1962)
Spouses	Carol Henning (m. 1930; div. 1943) Gwyn Conger (m. 1943; div. 1948) Elaine Scott (m. 1950)
Children	John Steinbeck IV (1946–1991) Thomas Steinbeck (1944–2016)

most fertile land.^[11] He spent his summers working on nearby ranches and later with migrant workers on Spreckels sugar beet farms. There he learned of the harsher aspects of the migrant life and the darker side of human nature, which supplied him with material expressed in such works as *Of*

Mice and Men.^[11] He explored his surroundings, walking across local forests, fields, and farms.^[11] While working at Spreckels Sugar Company, he sometimes worked in their laboratory, which gave him time to write.^[12] He had considerable mechanical aptitude and fondness for repairing things he owned.^[12]

Signature

John Steinbeck

Steinbeck graduated from Salinas High School in 1919 and went on to study English Literature at Stanford University near Palo Alto, leaving without a degree in 1925. He traveled to New York City where he took odd jobs while trying to write. When he failed to publish his work, he returned to California and worked in 1928 as a tour guide and caretaker^[12] at Lake Tahoe, where he met Carol Henning, his first wife.^{[8][12][13]} They married in January 1930 in Los Angeles, where, with friends, he attempted to make money by manufacturing plaster mannequins.^[12]



The Steinbeck House at 132 Central Avenue, Salinas, California, the Victorian home where Steinbeck spent his childhood.

When their money ran out six months later due to a slow market, Steinbeck and Carol moved back to Pacific Grove, California, to a cottage owned by his father, on the Monterey Peninsula a few blocks outside the Monterey city limits. The elder Steinbecks gave John free housing, paper for his manuscripts, and from 1928, loans that allowed him to write without looking for work. During the Great Depression, Steinbeck bought a small boat, and later claimed that he was able to live on the fish and crab that he gathered from the sea, and fresh vegetables from his garden and local farms. When those sources failed, Steinbeck and his wife accepted welfare, and on rare occasions, stole bacon from the local produce market.^[12] Whatever food they had, they shared with their friends.^[12] Carol became the model for Mary Talbot in Steinbeck's novel *Cannery Row*.^[12]

In 1930, Steinbeck met the marine biologist Ed Ricketts, who became a close friend and mentor to Steinbeck during the following decade, teaching him a great deal about philosophy and biology.^[12] Ricketts, usually very quiet, yet likable, with an inner self-sufficiency and an encyclopedic knowledge of diverse subjects, became a focus of Steinbeck's attention. Ricketts had taken a college class from Warder Clyde Allee, a biologist and ecological theorist, who would go on to write a classic early textbook on ecology. Ricketts became a proponent of ecological thinking, in which man was only one part of a great chain of being, caught in a web of life too large for him to control or understand.^[12] Meanwhile, Ricketts operated a biological lab on the coast of Monterey, selling biological samples of small animals, fish, rays, starfish, turtles, and other marine forms to schools and colleges.

Between 1930 and 1936, Steinbeck and Ricketts became close friends. Steinbeck's wife began working at the lab as secretary-bookkeeper.^[12] Steinbeck helped on an informal basis.^[14] They formed a common bond based on their love of music and art, and John learned biology and Ricketts' ecological philosophy.^[15] When Steinbeck became emotionally upset, Ricketts sometimes played music for him.^[16]

Career

Writing

Steinbeck's first novel, *Cup of Gold*, published in 1929, is loosely based on the life and death of privateer Henry Morgan. It centers on Morgan's assault and sacking of the city of Panama, sometimes referred to as the 'Cup of Gold', and on the women, fairer than the sun, who were said to be found there.^[17]

Between 1930 and 1933, Steinbeck produced three shorter works. *The Pastures of Heaven*, published in 1932, consists of twelve interconnected stories about a valley near Monterey, which was discovered by a Spanish corporal while chasing runaway Indian slaves. In 1933 Steinbeck published *The Red Pony*, a 100-page, four-chapter story weaving in memories of Steinbeck's childhood.^[17] *To a God Unknown*, named after a Vedic hymn,^[12] follows the life of a homesteader and his family in California, depicting a character with a primal and pagan worship of the land he works. Although he had not achieved the status of a well-known writer, he never doubted that he would achieve greatness.^[12]

Steinbeck achieved his first critical success with *Tortilla Flat* (1935), a novel set in post-war Monterey, California, that won the California Commonwealth Club's Gold Medal.^[17] It portrays the adventures of a group of classless and usually homeless young men in Monterey after World War I, just before U.S. prohibition. They are portrayed in ironic comparison to mythic knights on a quest and reject nearly all the standard mores of American society in enjoyment of a dissolute life devoted to wine, lust, camaraderie and petty theft. In presenting the 1962 Nobel Prize to Steinbeck, the Swedish Academy cited "spicy and comic tales about a gang of *paisanos*, asocial individuals who, in their wild revels, are almost caricatures of King Arthur's Knights of the Round Table. It has been said that in the United States this book came as a welcome antidote to the gloom of the then prevailing depression."^[1] *Tortilla Flat* was adapted as a 1942 film of the same name, starring Spencer Tracy, Hedy Lamarr and John Garfield, a friend of Steinbeck. With some of the proceeds, he built a summer ranch-home in Los Gatos.

Steinbeck began to write a series of "California novels" and Dust Bowl fiction, set among common people during the Great Depression. These included *In Dubious Battle*, *Of Mice and Men* and *The Grapes of Wrath*. He also wrote an article series called *The Harvest Gypsies* for the *San Francisco News* about the plight of the migrant worker.

Of Mice and Men was a drama about the dreams of two migrant agricultural laborers in California. It was critically acclaimed^[17] and Steinbeck's 1962 Nobel Prize citation called it a "little masterpiece".^[1] Its stage production was a hit, starring Wallace Ford as George and Broderick Crawford as George's companion, the mentally childlike, but physically powerful itinerant farmhand Lennie. Steinbeck refused to travel from his home in California to attend any performance of the play during its New York run, telling director George S. Kaufman that the play as it existed in his own mind was "perfect" and that anything presented on stage would only be a disappointment. Steinbeck wrote two more stage plays (*The Moon Is Down* and *Burning Bright*).

Of Mice and Men was also adapted as a 1939 Hollywood film, with Lon Chaney, Jr. as Lennie (he had filled the role in the Los Angeles stage production) and Burgess Meredith as George.^[18] Meredith and Steinbeck became close friends for the next two decades.^[12] Another film based on the novella was made in 1992 starring Gary Sinise as George and John Malkovich as Lennie.

Steinbeck followed this wave of success with *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), based on newspaper articles about migrant agricultural workers that he had written in San Francisco. It is commonly considered his greatest work. According to *The New York Times*, it was the best-selling book of 1939 and 430,000 copies

had been printed by February 1940. In that month, it won the National Book Award, favorite fiction book of 1939, voted by members of the American Booksellers Association.^[19] Later that year, it won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction^[20] and was adapted as a film directed by John Ford, starring Henry Fonda as Tom Joad; Fonda was nominated for the best actor Academy Award.

Grapes was controversial. Steinbeck's New Deal political views, negative portrayal of aspects of capitalism, and sympathy for the plight of workers, led to a backlash against the author, especially close to home.^[21] Claiming the book was both obscene and misrepresented conditions in the county, the Kern County Board of Supervisors banned the book from the county's publicly funded schools and libraries in August 1939. This ban lasted until January 1941.^[22]

Of the controversy, Steinbeck wrote, "The vilification of me out here from the large landowners and bankers is pretty bad. The latest is a rumor started by them that the Okies hate me and have threatened to kill me for lying about them. I'm frightened at the rolling might of this damned thing. It is completely out of hand; I mean a kind of hysteria about the book is growing that is not healthy."

The film versions of *The Grapes of Wrath* and *Of Mice and Men* (by two different movie studios) were in production simultaneously, allowing Steinbeck to spend a full day on the set of *The Grapes of Wrath* and the next day on the set of *Of Mice and Men*.

Ed Ricketts

In the 1930s and 1940s, Ed Ricketts strongly influenced Steinbeck's writing. Steinbeck frequently took small trips with Ricketts along the California coast to give himself time off from his writing^[23] and to collect biological specimens, which Ricketts sold for a living. Their joint book about a collecting expedition to the Gulf of California in 1940, which was part travelogue and part natural history, published just as the U.S. entered World War II, never found an audience and did not sell well.^[23] However, in 1951, Steinbeck republished the narrative portion of the book as *The Log from the Sea of Cortez*, under his name only (though Ricketts had written some of it). This work remains in print today.^[24]

Although Carol accompanied Steinbeck on the trip, their marriage was beginning to suffer, and ended a year later, in 1941, even as Steinbeck worked on the manuscript for the book.^[12] In 1942, after his divorce from Carol he married Gwyndolyn "Gwyn" Conger.^[25] With his second wife Steinbeck had two sons, Thomas ("Thom") Myles Steinbeck (1944–2016) and John Steinbeck IV (1946–1991).

Ricketts was Steinbeck's model for the character of "Doc" in *Cannery Row* (1945) and *Sweet Thursday* (1954), "Friend Ed" in *Burning Bright*, and characters in *In Dubious Battle* (1936) and *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939). Ecological themes recur in Steinbeck's novels of the period.^[26]

Steinbeck's close relations with Ricketts ended in 1941 when Steinbeck moved away from Pacific Grove and divorced his wife Carol.^[23] Ricketts' biographer Eric Enno Tamm notes that, except for *East of Eden* (1952), Steinbeck's writing declined after Ricketts' untimely death in 1948.^[26]

1940s–1960s work

Swedish Academy reopens controversy surrounding Steinbeck's Nobel prize

Archives reveal that John Steinbeck, who beat Robert Graves and Lawrence Durrell to the Nobel laureateship in 1962, was a compromise choice

Incurring the wrath ... John Steinbeck's Nobel prize was heavily criticised as 'one of the Academy's biggest mistakes'. Photograph: Popperfoto/Getty

Giant of American letters [John Steinbeck](#) beat the British authors Robert Graves and Lawrence Durrell to win the Nobel prize for literature in 1962, according to newly opened archives in Sweden – but he was not a popular choice.

The Swedish Academy keeps secret for 50 years all information about the authors nominated for the Nobel, only [releasing their shortlist for the 1962 prize yesterday](#). The names of 66 authors were put forward for the prize that year, with the shortlist consisting of Steinbeck, Graves, Durrell, French dramatist Jean Anouilh and Danish author Karen Blixen.

Although Steinbeck was praised by the committee "for his realistic and imaginative writings, combining as they do sympathetic humour and keen social perception" when his win was announced, the newly declassified documents show he was actually chosen as the best of a bad lot.

"There aren't any obvious candidates for the Nobel prize and the prize committee is in an unenviable situation," wrote committee member Henry Olsson, according to [a piece today by Swedish journalist Kaj Schueler in Svenska Dagbladet](#). Graves was rejected, reveals Schueler, because even though he had written several historical novels, he was still primarily seen as a poet. Olsson was reluctant to award any Anglo-Saxon poet the prize before the death of Ezra Pound, believing that other writers did not match up to his mastery; he further dismissed Pound in response to his political stance.

Blixen, author of [Out of Africa](#), rendered herself ineligible by dying that September, and it was decided that "Durrell was not to be given preference

this year" – probably, Schueler told the Guardian, because "they did not think that The Alexandria Quartet was enough, so they decided to keep him under observation for the future". Also a candidate in 1961, Durrell had in the previous year been ruled out because he "gives a dubious aftertaste ... because of [his] monomaniacal preoccupation with erotic complications".

It is not clear why Anouilh was passed over, but the French poet Saint-John Perse had taken the Nobel in 1960, meaning that France was well represented on the roster of winners, and Svenska Dagbladet reveals that Jean-Paul Sartre, who would win the prize in 1964, was starting to be seriously considered as a candidate.

Steinbeck, therefore, remained. Previously nominated eight times, it was widely felt that his best work was behind him; [Of Mice and Men](#) was published in 1937, [The Red Pony](#) in 1945, [The Grapes of Wrath](#) in 1939, [The Pearl](#) in 1947 and [East of Eden](#) in 1952. But the Academy's permanent secretary, Anders Österling, believed the release of his new novel [The Winter of Our Discontent](#) in 1961 showed that "after some signs of slowing down in recent years, [Steinbeck has] regained his position as a social truth-teller [and is an] authentic realist fully equal to his predecessors Sinclair Lewis and Ernest Hemingway", revealed Svenska Dagbladet.

"Between Graves and Steinbeck, I find the choice very difficult – Graves is the older, and at the same time less high profile, while Steinbeck's reputation is of course more popular," wrote Österling. "Since Steinbeck's candidacy nevertheless appears to me to have a larger chance of gathering unqualified support, I consider myself free to give it precedence."

The choice, however, was heavily criticised, and described as "one of the Academy's biggest mistakes" in one Swedish newspaper. The New York Times asked why the Nobel committee gave the award to an author whose ["limited talent is, in his best books, watered down by tenth-rate philosophising"](#), adding; "we think it interesting that the laurel was not awarded to a writer ... whose significance, influence and sheer body of work had already made a more profound impression on the literature of our age". Steinbeck himself, when asked if he deserved the Nobel, replied: "Frankly, no."

His win followed that of Yugoslavian writer Ivo Andrić in 1961, beating JRR Tolkien – ruled out because the Lord of the Rings "has not in any way measured up to storytelling of the highest quality".

Source: *The Guardian*, January 3, 2013.

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/jan/03/swedish-academy-controversy-steinbeck-nobel>

East of Eden (Steinbeck)

Summary	Author Bio	Book Reviews	Discussion Questions	Full Version	Print
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Discussion Questions

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?

(Questions issued by publisher.)

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East of Eden Discussion Questions

1. One character refers to Americans as a "breed," and near the end of the book Lee says to 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 archotypically American qualities-perhaps some of those listed above-in the characters?
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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? 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 differentiated by their relationship to money: though Sam Hamilton works hard he accumulates little, while Adam Trask easily 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) choose for themselves. What does Steinbeck say about guilt and forgiveness? About 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 past and his relationship to 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?

Source: Reading Group Guides,

<http://www.readinggroupguides.com/reviews/east-of-eden-0/guide>

East of Eden Study Questions & Essay Topics

1. *What symbolic roles do wealth and inheritance play in the novel? How is Adam able to sidestep the moral taint of Cyrus's fortune? How is Cal able to do so?*

There are three large inheritances in the Trask family in *East of Eden*, each worth about \$100,000: Cyrus's fortune, which he splits between Adam and Charles; Charles's fortune, which he splits between Adam and Cathy; and Cathy's fortune, which she gives solely to Aron. Each fortune is made up of part of the fortune before it: Cyrus's fortune is the core of Charles's, Charles's the core of Cathy's. All of this money is ill-gotten—earned through theft, blackmail, bad faith, and prostitution. In this light, it symbolizes the biblical idea of original sin, the inherently human evil that is passed down through the generations. Cyrus's evil afflicts Charles, and Charles's evil afflicts Cathy. Aron's psychological breakdown when he realizes the truth about his mother largely stems from his worry about this idea of inherited sin. Aron fears that Cathy's evil makes him inherently evil, and this fear is what shatters him. When Cathy leaves her entire fortune to Aron upon her death, an enormous symbolic burden is placed on his shoulders. Adam effectively sidesteps the taint of inheritance by losing the money in a poorly executed business venture. Ultimately, Steinbeck rejects the idea of inherited moral determinism by replacing it with the idea of *timshel*, that each individual is free to choose his own moral destiny. Because Cal is the character who finally comes to embody the idea of *timshel*, it is appropriate that he should not inherit a cent of Cathy's fortune.

2. *What role does the story of Cain and Abel play in East of Eden? What is the significance of the novel's title?*

The biblical story of Cain and Abel, the sons of Adam and Eve, provides the narrative framework of Steinbeck's novel. In the Bible, Cain, jealous that God approves of Abel's sacrificial offering over Cain's, kills Abel and then lies to God about it. *East of Eden* explores the fundamental conflict of good and evil in human life and essentially retells the story of Cain and Abel twice, once with Adam and Charles and once with

Aron and Cal. The latter is the more direct retelling, as Cal's revelation of the truth about their mother to Aron indirectly causes Aron's death. Furthermore, when Adam asks Cal where Aron has gone, Cal's snarling response—"Am I supposed to look out for him?"—mirrors Cain's famous retort to God, "Am I my brother's keeper?"

A discrepancy between two different translated versions of the story of Cain and Abel illuminates the idea of *timshel*, the notion that each individual is free to choose his or her own moral path. *Timshel* becomes the central thematic idea in *East of Eden*, as it enables Cal and Adam to be redeemed from guilt for Aron's death. The Cain and Abel story also gives the novel its title: after disobeying God, Cain is exiled to the land of Nod, which lies "on the east of Eden." Additionally, the title implies that the novel's characters, like the first biblical family, have been expelled from moral paradise and are forced to contend with the world of human evil and sin, embodied by Cathy.

3. *What role does Lee play in the novel? How would you characterize Steinbeck's portrayal of him?*

Though he may initially appear to be merely a secondary character, Lee is one of the most important figures in the novel. Despite his humorous introduction—of Chinese origin and American birth, he mimics a Chinese accent to play into the expectations of white Americans, outsmarting them all the while—Lee ultimately becomes the voice of wisdom and reason in the novel and often articulates some of the novel's most important themes. It is Lee who researches and explains the idea of *timshel* and discovers the true meaning of the word. Furthermore, it is Lee who reassures Cal that he is a normal, flawed human being, not a monstrous force of evil simply because his mother, Cathy, is evil. Throughout the novel, Lee proves to be a subtle, intelligent man who continually thwarts the expectations both we and the other characters hold for him. Acting as a force of stability and constancy within the Trask household, Lee exposes the racial prejudices of some of the other characters—the deputy who calls him "Ching Chong," for instance—in their ridiculousness and irrelevance.