

Rebirth of Human Nature in *East of Eden*

Yoshinobu SAITO

John Ernst Steinbeck was born in the city of Salinas, California and studied at Stanford University. His ancestors were German, Irish and English. Steinbeck writes about working class people who lived in the 1930s during the Great Depression, and human nature as well as complicated human problems. Most of his work is influenced by Christian thought.

East of Eden, set in Salinas Valley, the middle west of California, was published in 1952 and is based on the Cain and Abel parable in the Old Testament.¹ The time is early in the nineteenth century up to early in the First World War, about a fifty-year period. Although two different families appear in the novel, the Trasks and Hamiltons, the key supporting character Samuel Hamilton, is based on the real Steinbeck grandfather, and Olive Hamilton is based on Steinbeck's real mother. In the book, *Journal of a Novel / The East of Eden Letters* (1969), Steinbeck mentions the novel was meant as a message for his two sons, Tom and John. Steinbeck put into the novel his best expertise and his thought and the novel is considered his masterpiece. The novel's theme is everlasting competition between good and evil, overcoming evil and the pain of fatherly rejection.

Only three years after publication, this novel was made into film by Elia Kazan. There are many differences between the novel and the film. The novel has four parts, but the film has only one part: only part four. The film focuses on the Trask family, the brotherhood between Caleb and Aaron and affection between sons and their father Adam in the Trask family. Some important characters do not come up in the film, for example, Samuel Hamilton and Chinese servant Lee. In addition, Caleb and Aaron are twins in the novel, but they are not twins and not even the same age in the film. The film was a hit and most people thought that the film was Caleb's conflict with his father's rejection and family problems.

In the novel, the characters are split into the Cain and Abel types. Steinbeck call the 'C-A theme'. C represents characters of the Cain type: Cyrus, Charles, Cathy, Caleb and A includes those of the Abel type: Adam, Aaron, Abra, Alice. The novel has various motifs

¹ Genesis 4:1-16 Cain and Abel were the sons of Adam and Eve. Cain was a farmer and Abel was a shepherd. The day of sacrifice to God, Cain send crops, Abel send sheep. God rejected Cain's sacrifice and received Abel's sacrifice. Cain felt jealous to Abel and killed him. Then Cain was exiled for east of Eden by God

from the Cain and Abel parable in the Old Testament, for example, characters of the Cain type; Charles and Caleb, hurt characters of the Abel type: Adam and Aaron physically and psychologically. Charles, who is Adam's younger brother, badly beats up Adam and almost kills him with a hatchet and Caleb shows Aaron that their mother becomes the owner of a whore house. These happenings were the cause of the father's rejection. In such a case, Adam and Charles give presents on the father's birthday. Adam giving a stray dog and Charles giving a knife with decoration of pearl. Their father, Cyrus, receives Adam's present. On the other hand, Caleb and Aaron, Caleb gives money which he earns from raising beans, but Aaron does not give away material thing. Nonetheless, their father, Adam, likes Aaron and the fact that Aaron skipped a grade and he went to University. Adam receives Aaron's present. Another characteristic motif is seen in 'Cain's scar': Charles and Cathy have the scar: 'Charles' scar turned dark brown.' (Steinbeck, *East of Eden* 59), 'Oh, God, no. Yes – a scar on her [Cathy] forehead.' (255). Charles and Cathy have a scar like Cain, who is marked by God. Thus the novel can be seen as influenced by the Old Testament, the Cain and Abel parable. Characters of the Abel type represent purity and innocence.

This paper considers what is the Adam character's real nature and what does Adam represent. In the novel, Adam is an only child, and represents good. However, Adam is neither good nor evil, he is a hybrid of good and evil. At first, consider good and evil. Noboru Shimomura said 'Steinbeck's "good" seems to mean a negative goodness, that is, "not doing bad things positively." It smack of inertness, anemicness, and negativeness. [...] On the other hand, Steinbeck's "bad" means a positive badness, that is, "doing bad things positively."' (Shimomura, *A Study of John Steinbeck: Mysticism in His Novel* 165). How the Adam character is drawn is applicable to both though, because he does both actions unconsciously or deliberately. When Adam was a child, he experienced his father's rejection, but he did not reject his father. His younger brother, Charles, was rejected by his father, the case was that the father did not take Charles's gift. Charles felt jealous towards Adam, and Charles beats Adam and almost kills him with a hatchet. Adam faces the father's rejection, whatever he does is the same reaction to his own sons. Adam gets presents from his sons, Caleb and Aaron. Caleb gives money which he earns from agriculture, and Aaron does not give any thing material, but he lives a good life going to college, which is what Adam wanted. He receives present from Aaron, and therefore Caleb feels jealousy towards Aaron. After that Caleb, shows that their mother became a whore house owner. Then Aaron is shocked by his mother's situation, so he joins the army, lying about his age.

Second, Adam sees and understands people and what he wants to see and built his own image. Adam sees light in Cathy. 'Burn in his [Adam] mind was image of beauty and ten-

derness, a sweet and holy girl, precious beyond thinking, clean and loving, that image was Cathy to her husband, and nothing Cathy did or said could wrap Adam's Cathy.' (162). He does not realize Cathy is evil until Samuel Hamilton told him of her real nature. 'To you [Adam] she [Cathy] was because you built her. I [Samuel] don't think you ever saw her – only own creation.' (394). He built his image of who she was, which was not her real nature. After Aaron leaves Adam, Adam thinks of why Aaron joined the army. 'That's what I [Adam] can't understand. Why did he [Aaron] sneak away? Why doesn't he write? I thought I knew him better than that. [...]' (692). Thus Adam sees and understanding people and how to build his own image, mostly his image is opposition. For example, Adam has expectations for Aaron, but Aaron is dissatisfied with Adam's expectations. "'Oh, I [Adam] see. Well, you'll [Aaron] get good marks, all right. I'm sure you will.'" In spite of himself a grimace of impatience crossed Aaron's face.' (644). In this scene, Adam does not know Aaron's mind, because he has created his own image of Aaron. When Adam was a child, Adam experiences a similar situation. Adam was expected to act a certain way by his father, Cyrus, but he was dissatisfied with these expectations and he sees through to the Cyrus's identity. 'Adam found his [Cyrus] out. It wasn't that his father changed but that some new quality came to Adam [...] Who knows what causes this – a look in the eye, a lie found out, a moment of hesitation? – then god comes crashing down in child's [Adam] brain.' (27). Thus Adam sees through people's real nature and essence, but he does not use this ability or pretend innocence.

Third, Adam always depends on someone else. For example, when he was a child, he depended on his stepmother, Alice. '[...] And he ached toward her with a longing that was passionate and hot.' (29). After this scene, he watches Alice quietly. Although he depends on Cathy '[...] and then, through Cathy, the glory came to him.' (162), and he depends on Aaron, too. However, except for Alice, the two characters, Cathy and Aaron, leave Adam, and he fell down and behaves in a weak manner. When Cathy was leaving after shooting Adam's shoulder, he fell down and he stopped working his farm. Aaron leaves Adam, and he gets ill and makes a slow recovery.

Lastly, Adam considers that he is a not character of the Abel type. If Steinbeck is rewriting the Cain and Abel parable in the Old Testament, the novel is contradictory to the Cain and Abel parable. According to Christian thought, our ancestor is Cain, not Abel. However in the novel, the character of the Cain type, such as Caleb's father, is like Adam in the novel's ending. That is Adam blessed Caleb, but in different words he blesses Cain. This is the most important scene in the novel. Eva Králová said 'Steinbeck shows on the two generations that every human being has the capacity to resist evil, as these individual's own deci-

sions which from his or her destiny.' (Králová, *Inseparability of Good and Evil as a Challenge in Steinbeck's 'East of Eden'* 57). In fact, Adam has the capacity to resist evil, but he could not use the capacity and he pretends that he does not know evil. Although Eva Králová said 'Through the characters of Trasks and Hamiltons, Steinbeck shows that every generation will timelessly repeat the same fight to win over sin.' (57). Surely the Trask family has the same fights to overcome sin in two generations, but Adam and Aaron, character of the A types, do not fight to overcome sin. They always run away from their own sin. In spite of Adam seeing his father's real nature, he obeyed his father's expectation that he wanted to join the army. Aaron is dissatisfied with his father expectations, but he does not face the problem. According to Christian thought, Cain deserves the sin. In the novel, characters of the Cain type suffer pain from their own sin, but then characters of the Abel type, Adam, Aaron, suffer pain from the other's sin, that which is not overcome except by death.

Adam always runs away from his problems. For example, Adam found the father's real nature, Cathy does not do what he wanted and Aaron is unhappy with Adam's expectations. Adam does not represent the character of the Abel type, but he does not represent the character of the Cain type either; Steinbeck considered that Adam is actually human and a key character in the novel. If Steinbeck is trying to rewrite the Cain and Abel parable in the Old Testament, why does not Steinbeck kill off Adam, because if Adam was killed by Charles, he tries to overcome the sin, but that is the same situation in the Cain and Abel parable. Charles is an exile in his own city, is marked with pain for the sin, but Steinbeck does not write a parallel situation. He adds a different character, Adam. Adam takes Cain and Abel's nature that is pure, innocent, not doing bad things negatively but doing bad things positively. Adam is a hybrid of human nature and has a new nature of character.

Seeing the parent – child relationship of the Trask family with Adam, he realizes that he has too many expectations and too much affection from his father, but when he became a father, he did the same things to his sons. Even though his relationships with his sons should have been different, he could not break the established patterns of father – son behavior that he had inherited from his own father.

Work Cited

Králová, Eva. *Inseparability of Good and Evil as a Challenge in Steinbeck's 'East of Eden'*. University Review, Vol. 7, 2013, No. 2, 51-57.

- Noboru, Shimomura. *A Study of John Steinbeck: Mysticism in His Novel*. Tokyo: Hokuseido Press, 1982. Print.
- Steinbeck, John. *East of Eden*. London: Penguin, 2012. Print.
- . *Journal of a Novel / The East of Eden Letters*. New York: Viking Press, 1969.

Bibliography

- Davis, Murray, Robert. *Steinbeck: A Collection of Critical Essays*. New Jersey: A Spectrum Book, 1972. Print.
- Králová, Eva. *Inseparability of Good and Evil as a Challenge in Steinbeck's 'East of Eden'*.
University Review, Vol. 7, 2013, No. 2, 51-57.
- Lisca, Peter. *The Wide World of John Steinbeck*. New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1958. Print.