

John Steinbeck's East of Eden - The Gift of Free Will

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East of Eden - The Gift of Free Will

An excellent benefit of choosing to major in English is that it has allowed me four years to dig deeply into my love of the written word. This involves looking beyond the surface of literature and studying its effects in the course of my everyday life. Some books are easy to read quickly, enjoy, and forget, but others exert an influence that is not easily discarded or forgotten. In my mental library, the classic American novel *East of Eden*, by John [Steinbeck](#), falls into this category. I believe *East of Eden* has helped shape me morally by illustrating the power of free will in a world caught between a constant battle of good and evil.

I decided to read *East of Eden* after hearing a friend share a short passage from it in his valedictory address. Although I do not remember the contents of that particular passage anymore, I remember that it was the power of Steinbeck's simple, direct language that urged me to take it on as my next big foray into what my high school English teacher called "real literature."

The [Cain](#) and [Abel](#) story, possibly the most enigmatic story of good and evil in the Bible, is

the basis for East of Eden. Although allegorical elements are scattered throughout the whole novel, the most evident theme struck me as three of the main characters discussed the ramifications of God's words to Cain after Abel's death. Lee, a Chinese servant to one of the novel's main families, explained to his two companions a little-known conflict between the translations of Genesis 4:7 in two versions of the Bible. In one translation, God tells Cain that "thou shalt" rule over sin. In another, God says to Cain, "Do thou" rule over sin. The first is a promise, and the second is an order. Lee concluded that the ambiguity presented by the two translations is at the heart of the universal human story.

I agree. I know some people who surrender themselves to the fatalistic belief that everything in life has been mapped out by God. I also know people who believe that God is a harsh drillmaster who issues demands under the constant threat of damnation. Until I read this book, however, I never wondered where the dispute originated. As the characters in Steinbeck's novel discussed the discrepancy of Genesis 4:7, I also wondered at the intended meaning of the verse.

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