

# Steinbeck's *East of Eden*: Redefining the Evil within Cathy Ames

Bianca Saputra<sup>1,a\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>James B. Conant High School, Hoffman Estates, USA

<sup>a\*</sup>bsaputra132@gmail.com

**Keywords:** Archetypes, Feminism, *East of Eden*, Cathy Ames, John Steinbeck, Literary Theory

**Abstract.** *East of Eden*, published in 1952, has been criticized as both feminist and misogynistic in nature. This contrasting criticism can be attributed to the varied interpretations of female roles in the novel. This paper aims to examine *East of Eden* using feminist and archetypal theory. Archetypal theory studies roles characters play through fundamental and inherited symbols. These symbols are thematic associations that are common to humanity in general. Feminist theory analyzes texts based on how power is manipulated to establish the dominance or subordination of either gender. In particular, feminist theory studies how females claim, assert or subvert power for themselves. Coupled together, the theories seek to understand how established conventions influence the female experience. By analyzing the intersection between the roles portrayed by the women in the Salinas Valley and societal expectations, this paper intends to explore the influence of tradition on decision making.

## 1. Introduction

Children are taught from a young age to fear monsters; in fact, part of the reason monsters are so alarming is due to the fact that they represent inner darkness that no one wishes to acknowledge. Monsters are evil manifested in a physical form: evil that never goes away and never falters. In John Steinbeck's novel *East of Eden*, the complex struggle between good and evil is explored through the Trask and Hamilton families of the Salinas Valley. Both families struggle to reconcile their desire to do good with their instinctive habit to default to evil. Cathy Ames, however, is characterized as pure and undeniable evil. She is typically viewed as a misogynistic representation of a female antagonist, yet, archetypes embodied by other female characters actually amplify Cathy's nature to a monstrous level in a way that punishes atypical women. For Cathy, the struggle between good and evil is not a fight she fights alone; other factors propel the perception of her actions.

## 2. Cathy Ames

Cathy is the embodiment of evil, described as a "psychic monster [...] possessed by the devil" [1]. Her evil nature contributes to her role as a femme fatale, a seductive and often manipulative woman who lures men astray through stereotypical feminine qualities. Cathy's embodiment of other archetypes help further this claim. One of the archetypes Cathy embodies is of Pandora, a mortal woman who unleashed evil and chaos into the world. Like Pandora's released sins, the influence of Cathy's malevance spreads widely. One of the ways we can see the spread of Cathy's darkness is in the setting. The phrase 'home is where the heart is' can be applied very well to Cathy's living situation; the negativity in her heart is cast onto her home as "[Adam] finds [Cathy's] house a picture of an anti-Eden" [2]. It is clear that the "images of darkness, decay, and the chaos of neglect provide a fitting backdrop for Cathy's own psyche" [2].

Adding onto the chaos and destruction that follows Cathy is the Serpent archetype. The connection between the Serpent and Cathy is very clear; Steinbeck describes Cathy as having "lips with a little pointed tongue" [1]. Even Cathy's mannerisms are reptilian as she bites Samuel Hamilton shortly after giving birth. The association of serpents with trickery, sexual desire and dark knowledge dates to the Biblical story of Adam and Eve when the Serpent offers Eve the gift of knowledge. In this, the Serpent manipulates Eve to get what he wants. Similarly, Cathy manipulates

men into giving her bribe money by blackmailing them with sexual images. The secondary archetypes of Pandora and Serpent help further Cathy's status as a femme fatale.

While a female antagonist is not inherently problematic, Cathy's misogynistic representation of the female antagonist is detrimental to the feminist agenda. The women in *East of Eden* were molded in the images of women in Steinbeck's personal life; Cathy epitomized "the worst perceived faults of [Steinbeck's] first and second wives" [5]. Due to this, Cathy has few redeeming qualities in her youth alone: she fakes her own rape, drives her school teacher to suicide, and murders her parents by burning her house down. Cathy's lack of morality and empathy represents women as immoral. Indeed, Steinbeck uses Cathy as a vessel to vent his "animosity toward neurotic, dominating, manipulative, conscienceless women, terms that are indicative of much of his post-divorce attitude towards American women" [3]. Here, it is clear that Cathy is not intended to be an empowered woman accountable for her actions; instead, she is wanton and mindlessly psychopathic.

Perhaps the most detrimental aspect of Cathy is her defiance of the theme of timshel. Timshel, the book's central theme, centers on the duality of good and evil. When translated from Hebrew, Timshel means "thou mayest," indicating that a person has the innate ability to choose between good and evil. Yet, Cathy goes against this, failing to "fit into the novel's patriarchal structure postulating free will"; instead, she is "driven to defy 19th century conventions which involve binary oppositions between good and evil" [4]. Cathy's continual choices of evil highlight her irredeemable character. Despite the theme that accountability of action is sole responsibility of the actor, Cathy's actions are often described as thoughtless due to Steinbeck's continual mentions of how she was born a monster. Cathy contradicts timshel because she is unable to choose good. Even after her attempts to amend her wrongdoings in the past by signing her possessions to Aron, Cathy finds redemption overwhelming, choosing instead to end her life.

### 3. Positive Portrayals of Other Women in *East of Eden*

Unlike Cathy, archetypes portrayed by other women in *East of Eden* are stereotypically positive. Liza Hamilton portrays the archetype of a Good Mother. Liza is a deeply pious and disciplined woman; "it was well known that Liza Hamilton and the Lord God held similar convictions on nearly every subject" [1]. As a Good Mother, she continually puts her family and religious values as a priority. Her identity as a mother is integral to her characterization; Liza is first introduced wearing a pin spelling Mother clasped at her throat. This pin acts as a name-tag of sorts, labelling Liza a mother and little of anything else. While her strong mothering instinct helped her instill "good manners and iron morals" into all nine of her children, Liza's dedication to her family and her desire to make all her children feel loved and nurtured emphasizes her motherly persona [1].

While Liza Hamilton emulates a Good Mother, Alice Trask is the polar opposite, representing the archetype of a Destructive Mother. Although she tries to treat both her sons equally, Alice has a distinct fondness for her biological child, Charles. Unknowingly, she "contributes to the harmful home environment" through her preferences [5]. After witnessing her adopted son Adam's injuries after being assaulted by Charles, Alice makes excuses on Charles's behalf, mentioning how kind Charles actually is. Here, Alice shows her preference for Charles by not castigating him for his actions. Although Alice never acted harshly toward Adam, her willingness to overlook Charles's actions shows her true feelings. By rationalizing his actions, Alice does not admit that Charles did anything wrong, further polarizing the strained relationships within the Trask family. Adam's ill-placed affection for his apathetic stepmother continue to highlight an interesting dichotomy where "unpredictable and inappropriate responses in these family relationships [illustrate] hate returned for love and caring returned for hatred" [5]. The toxic Trask family environment is only cultivated further by Alice's destructive parenting style.

One of the most important archetypes in the novel is the Perfect Woman archetype embodied by Abra Bacon. It is clear that the novel is aligned closely with religious text; the entire plot is based upon the Cain and Abel biblical narrative. The Christian idea of a Perfect Woman is

delineated within the Book of Proverbs. Within the text, the speaker describes the role and mannerisms of a so-called “perfect wife” [9]. The idea of the perfect wife is significant due to the societal implications of gender expectations during Steinbeck’s time. Women were expected to become housewives, putting their family and marital duties above all else [6]. By being the perfect wife, a woman would become the perfect woman in the eyes of the community. Aron himself found perfection in Abra; Steinbeck comments that “of Abra [Aron] made his immaculate dream and, having created her, fell in love with her” [1]. Indeed, Abra represents many of the qualities of the perfect wife, fulfilling Steinbeck’s intent of making her “the strong female principle of good” [7]. One trait of a perfect wife is that “she dresses herself with strength and makes her arms strong” [9]. Likewise, Abra is described as having “bold muscular strength” [1]. Abra is perhaps the closest representation of the modern woman. Strength was typically a male descriptor, so the emphasis of strength as a positive characteristic of Abra elevates her power as a woman. Lee elaborates on this idea, praising Abra as a “woman from the moment [she was] born” [1] and holding her in high regards.

#### 4. Analysis

The use of these archetypes heightens Cathy’s contrasting characterization. Although Steinbeck calls Cathy a monster multiple times in the novel, Cathy’s role as a monster goes beyond her monstrous personality and actions. Monster theory examines the symbolic ramifications of cultural unease. J.J. Cohens, a monster theory specialist at George Washington University, elaborates saying that “the monster is difference made flesh, come to dwell among us” [8]. Ironically, the way that outsiders view Cathy is the same way she view others: “[Cathy] is a monster to those of conventional morals and mores, but, from her perspective, those who judge her are monsters” [4]. This moral chasm complicates the inherent depravity of Cathy’s characterization due to Cathy’s failure to recognize her actions as a violation of conventional morality. Consequently, the moral ambiguity caused by Cathy’s unconventional moral compass depicts her as a created monster instead of the born monster she is portrayed as such. It is clear that although Cathy’s actions are despicable, it is her role within the Salinas Valley that amplifies her character to a truly monstrous level.

The role Cathy plays further diverges from tradition when taking into account how other female archetypes fit into societal expectations. Specifically, “[Steinbeck’s] ideal woman was depicted as a domestic wife who devoted herself completely to the family” [6]. The Perfect Woman, Good Mother, and Destructive Mother archetypes all fulfill these expectations. Even Alice, the Destructive Mother, was a dutiful wife; Cyrus Trask describes her “greatest virtue” as her obedient and apathetic way of doing household tasks [1]. Yet, it is Cathy’s occupation that isolates her most from this representation of Steinbeck’s ideal woman. Cathy becomes Kate when she reinvents herself and becomes a prostitute and later, a madame at a brothel. The difference between the domestic wife and Cathy’s profession is stark. The transformation from Cathy to Kate is significant because it is the moment Cathy completely renounces her role as a mother and leaves her family behind to pursue her own goals. Cathy’s rebirth as Kate rejects the religious influences that other characters face: she does not experience redemption as a sinner and prostitute; instead, Cathy is condemned further.

Cathy’s rejection of gender roles is exemplified by her belief that she “forever wanders in a world which makes no sense by her own standards” [10]. Cathy has recognized the power of sex from a very young age. Yet, her failure to conform to the taboo on sex indicates how different she truly is. Unlike other sexually passive characters such as Alice Trask and Liza Hamilton, Cathy is sexually confident and uses sex for pleasure and manipulation instead of procreation. In short, sexuality becomes Cathy’s weapon against her confusion towards the world. “[Sex] was unmentionable and unmentioned” yet Cathy uses graphic images of sexual actions to blackmail prominent men [1]. Specifically, Cathy’s brothel was known for “the evil and ugly, the distorted and slimy, [and] the worst things humans can think up” [1]. Cathy revels in the sexual sadism present in her brothel as it gives her a sense of power and control she normally does not have.

Cathy's decision to work as a prostitute and madame further fulfills her archetype as a femme fatale because she is able to express her debauch lust for destruction and torment. While mothers care and nurture, Cathy wreaks havoc in the lives of others, seeking to please only herself.

In seeking self-fulfillment, Cathy wants agency for her future. Even from the start, Adam and Cathy's relationship was strained due to their differing life goals. While Adam wanted to settle down and raise a family, Cathy wanted nothing more than protection from a previous conquest gone awry. Despite her attempts to abort her pregnancy, Cathy is coerced into having children and forced into staying in Salinas even though she desired to leave and start anew. In a fit of rebellion, Cathy shoots Adam in the shoulder to flee from her room. It is evident that Cathy does what she feels is best for herself, regardless of the consequences for others. She refuses to play the part of an obedient wife, instead remaining fierce and opinionated. Cathy desires autonomy from her surroundings and will not let anything stand in her way.

The contrast created from the schism between Cathy and the other female characters punishes atypical women. In particular, this can be seen in Cathy's mental state. Even from her childhood, Cathy desired the control she derived from stability and manipulation. As she loses control over her life and lies, Cathy grows increasingly paranoid. Paranoia was a mental illness initially thought to be "an exclusively female disease" [11]. As a child, Cathy's paranoia manifested itself in her obsession in Lewis Carroll's novel *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. Cathy would fantasize about "being so little that [she] couldn't be [seen]," a reference to a scene in the novel where Alice drinks a vial of shrinking liquid [1]. Alice in Wonderland becomes a source of escape for Cathy; whenever she felt overwhelmed and vulnerable, she slipped into a character. Interestingly, whenever Cathy imagined herself as Alice, she never imagined herself growing in size, emphasizing the use of Alice as a method of escapism. Cathy's obsession with Alice shows her desire for innocence and naiveté. This alludes to Cathy's inner madness as the fantasy world of Wonderland in the story of Alice contains peculiar characters and inverted scenarios. Women in society were expected to be grounded and strong at all times; thus, Cathy is punished for her vulnerability through her unstable mental state.

When Cathy rebels, her identity is further stripped. After Cathy kills her parents, she flees and seduces Mr. Edwards, a brothel-keeper who becomes entranced with Cathy. However, Mr. Edwards, suspicious of Cathy's lies, soon finds out the truth and savagely beats Cathy for having the audacity to deceive him. The beating leaves Cathy disfigured to the extent that she becomes physically inhuman; at his first encounter with her, Adam sees a "dirty bundle of rags and mud," not a human [1]. The dehumanizing effect that the beating has on Cathy exemplifies the idea that a disobedient woman is less than a person. When Cathy acts in self-interest, everything that makes her who she is is taken away. Her vitality and confidence is replaced with fear and reluctance. Once confident in her abilities of exploitation, Cathy's hesitance towards falsehoods demonstrates the destruction of one of Cathy's trademark characteristics.

Yet, the greatest punishment exerted onto Cathy is seen in her last days when she is driven to suicide. Steinbeck narrates her death, describing how "she grew smaller and smaller and then disappeared - and she had never been" [1]. Cathy's imagined disappearance connects to the extent that her true identity is repressed. Society wants to forget unconventional women; indeed, perhaps Cathy's most conventional act was her final act. In acknowledging her abnormalities, Cathy's self-imposed destruction was her ultimate understanding of the world around her. Finally, she understood that to be different was to be punished.

## 5. Conclusion

*East of Eden* is intended to be a hopeful tale of redemption and acceptance, yet Cathy's narrative casts a shadow over the optimistic idealism of Timshel. Her experiences show how misguided concrete ideas of good and evil are. The multiple nuances of good and evil understate the idea that choosing between good and evil is a pivotal event, demonstrating instead that the accountability expected from Timshel is unfeasible due to the influence from the rest of the world. While principles of Timshel occur instinctively in theory, in practicality, choice is constrained by the

---

role that society expects a person to play, begging the question of whether acting good and evil is truly a choice. In Cathy, it is clear that the distinction between good and evil is unrealistically oversimplified. When female acceptance is juxtaposed with Cathy's rejection of her role, it is clear that the monster isn't hidden within Cathy Ames; instead, it is hidden within the society that shackles women to expectations.

### Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

### References

- [1] J. Steinbeck, *East of Eden*, Penguin, New York, 2002.
- [2] B.A. Heavilin, Steinbeck's Exploration of Good and Evil: Structural and Thematic Unity in East of Eden, in: *East of Eden - John Steinbeck*, Chelsea House, 2015.
- [3] M.R. Gladstein, The Strong Female Principle of Good—or Evil: The Women of East of Eden, *Steinbeck Quarterly*. 24(1-2) (1991) 30–40.
- [4] C.L. Hansen, Beyond Evil: Cathy and Cal in East of Eden, in: D.R. Noble (Ed.), *Critical Insights: John Steinbeck*, 1st ed., Salem Press, Pasadena, Calif., 2011, sec. 3, pp. 310–319.
- [5] M. Gladstein, Steinbeck's Dysfunctional Families: A Coast-to-Coast Dilemma, *The Steinbeck Review*. 3.(1) (2006) 35–52.
- [6] S. Mostafaei, E. Shabanirad, A Feminist Reading of *East of Eden* by John Steinbeck, *International Letters of Social and Humanistic Sciences*. 63 (2015) 145–150.
- [7] J. Steinbeck, *Journal of a Novel: The East of Eden Letters*, Penguin, London, England, 2001.
- [8] J.J. Cohen, Monster Culture (Seven Theses), in: *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, 1st ed. University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1997, ch. 1, sec. 1, pp. 3-25.
- [9] The Holy Bible: English Standard Version, Collins, 2012.
- [10] I. Murray, J. Merrilees, East of Eden, *New Blackfriars*. 53(622) (1972) 130–135.
- [11] C. Tasca et al., Women And Hysteria In The History Of Mental Health, *Clinical Practice and Epidemiology in Mental Health*. 8 (2012) 110–119.