The Struggle In East Of Eden

For in this story of a family's two generations and its eventual success in overcoming the forces of an inherited evil. Steinbeck the author presents the dramatic theme of the struggle between good and evil in the history of the human race and it being tempered by the idea of freedom of choice that everyone possess through the literary devices of juxtapositions and symbolism.

In East of Eden, Steinbeck has asserted the idea of a timeless conflict between good and evil through the use of juxtapositions. He does this by creating biblical references in the novel to further the notion of a timeless conflict between good and evil. In the novel, the stories of Adam and Eve and of their sons, Cain and Abel, intertwine with the lives of the characters in East of Eden. For example, when Samuel refers to Caleb and Aaron when talking to Lee, Samuel is actually referring to the biblical parable of Cain and Abel (Steinbeck 266). Another example, is in the Genesis Adam refuses Cain's gift from harvest and chose instead Abel's gift of a lamb, this event is reflected in the novel by the event of Cyrus refuses Charles's gift of a costly knife and prefered Adam's gift of a strayed pup. These events show the link between the novel and the biblical story made clear by Steinbeck by not only their names, but also their jobs. In another sense, the characters show a lot of the same actions that the biblical figures show. To show this the character Lee believes that the story of Cain and Abel is important due to it teaches rejection is where the root of all evil stems from. One of the literary critics states that " With rejection comes wrath, and with wrath comes crime as a form of revenge for the rejection and also a guilty conscience" (Kralova). That furthers the statement of the sense Lee had considered this to be the story in which mankind continues this unavoidable cycle of good and evil.

Also in the novel East of Eden the use of symbolism is a huge part of the book. To start in the novel's title, the word "Eden" is a symbol for both the biblical garden and the Salinas Valley in Northern California. Many parts of the valley are lush and fertile, but others, like the Hamilton farm, are virtual wastelands—dry and barren. Even the lush Trask ranch is a seen as an ambivalent Eden:Even though it's one of the most fertile properties in the county, the fields, orchards, and gardens have been allowed to go wild while the deteriorating old house crumbles to ruins. Also with the continuation of the idea of conflict between good and evil there is symbolism that expresses the idea. One being in an earlier time in the novel, Charles Trask loses his temper while struggling to move a large boulder from his yard, and in the process, cuts his forehead badly with the crowbar he is using to pry out the rock. The wound heals but leaves a large, ugly scar that, unlike most scars, is darker than the skin that surrounds it. Charles's scar corresponds to the "mark of Cain" in the biblical story of Cain and Abel. After God discovers Cain's murder of Abel, he banishes Cain to the lands east of Eden and puts a mark on Cain so that no one who encounters him will kill him. In this regard, the mark is not a curse but a form of protection. In East of Eden, Charles's own words highlight this symbolic connection. In a letter to his brother, Adam, Charles writes about the scar: "I don't know why it bothers me. I got plenty other scars. It just seems like I was marked"(46). Charles's words make the symbolic connection unmistakable and reinforce the relationship between Charles and Adam as a surrogate for the relationship between Cain and Abel—a relationship that both Cal and Aron repeat in their generation. Also Cathy one of the main characters symbolizes the opposite of good and therefore has to be an opposing character to Samuel Hamilton. She acts

as the “face” of pure evil as she sins without remorse and leads Adam who represents pure innocence, into a life of hardship. Through Cathy’s completely unredeemable character, Steinbeck strikes once again with the idea of there being a struggle between good and evil.

A number of critics have called into question Steinbeck’s idea about the continuous story of good and evil and the idea of free choice that he poses as a solution to this struggle. In particular, the character of Cathy Ames Trask, the novel’s main antagonist, has been heavily criticized for both the development of her personality and for her role as the “face” as the force of evil in the novel. Cathy’s absolute portrayal as a “monster” was found by Time Magazine to be “gamy, lurid, and told at tedious length . . . all but meaningless” (McElrath 110). Robert R. Brunn, writing for Christian Science Monitor, claimed that, “[Steinbeck’s] portrayal of Catherine Ames alone, ‘a monster’ in his own words without a spark of humanity or sensibility, is so hopelessly evil as to make her incredible and the book a chamber of horrors” (396). Orville Prescott, for the New York Times, argued that, “since Cathy is a monster, she never seems human . . . Her crimes and her vile career as the madame of a brothel seem grossly out of keeping in a novel so seriously concerned with ethics and character as this . . . East of Eden, it seems to me, is seriously damaged by Cathy’s unreal presence and by the disgusting details of her career” (384). Criticisms such as these have perhaps helped to inform more recent assessments of the novel, such as Yuji Kami’s essay “A Paradoxical World in East of Eden: The Theory of Free Will and the Heritage of Puritanism.” In this essay, Kami argues that Steinbeck’s handling of the main theme of free choice among human beings is paradoxical because, through the character of Cathy Ames Trask, he “consciously or unconsciously . . . implies that the moment we are born, some are blessed with free will, while others are not” (222). Kami shows his argument through the eyes of a teleological thinker, in which is concurrent with Ricketts’ own definition, Kami describes a worldview that is “concerned with absolute fact”— that is, convinced that there is an absolute and inherent purpose to everything in the world. Similarly, he also discusses non-teleological thinking as “not [being] concerned with causation,” and accepting things as they are, rather than imposing a deterministic philosophy on them (222, 223). In his essay, Kami applies both ideas of teleological and non-teleological thinking to several characters in East of Eden. The root of his argument, however, is that Steinbeck contradicts his theme of free choice with a fatalistic sense of predestination, rests upon his analyses of Cathy as a teleologist, the author has been denying her free will as a result of her sinful nature. Kami shows his readers the narrative in structuring his argument, citing that, “the narrator, retracing her life, continues to affirm that ‘Whatever she had done, she had been driven to do’ (EoE 551). In fact, the narrator, at this point, clarifies that she is completely controlled by her own nature, and eventually expresses a sort of genetic determinism here. This scenario, which invoked the denial of her free will, surely reminds us of the Puritan doctrine of predestination” (222). Kami also argues that Cathy’s teleological thinking shows itself in her inability to “see the goodness in people based on her belief that all mankind is inherently evil” (223). Because of her preoccupation with what she believes is, rather than what could be, Cathy is doomed to her evil nature and denied the glory of choice that others are given. Kami’s analyses of teleological thinking extends to Cathy’s son Aron as well, who, he argues, because he “fails to face cruel realities, cannot exercise ‘a great choice’ or ‘free will’. In other words, ‘free will’ exists eventually only in non-teleologists awakening to the evil in their own souls” (220). Bringing forth the continuous question of whether humankind has any type of free will.

In East of Eden, Steinbeck’s emphasis shifts from humankind’s struggles as a whole to those same struggles as they are experienced by an individual. What didn’t change between Steinbeck’s works of the 1930s and the novel East of Eden, however, is the universal nature of

those struggles. Though in the novel they are presented on an individual basis, they still belong to the greater collective experience of humankind. Steinbeck’s focus on humanity’s moral struggles is, therefore, an acknowledgment of humankind’s complexity. It’s a novel largely concerned with the endless cycle of the nature of humankind, its universal struggles, triumphs, and desires.