

PinkMonkey® Literature Notes on . . .

**SAMPLE EXCERPTS FROM THE MONKEYNOTES FOR
"East of Eden" by John Steinbeck.**

This does not represent the entire note or content of the sections within the note.

East of Eden
by
John Steinbeck



EDITED BY DIANE SAUDER

PinkMonkey.com, Inc. Copyright © 2000, All Rights Reserved

KEY LITERARY ELEMENTS

SETTING

The novel is set in the Salinas Valley of northern California and a farm in Connecticut. The time spans the.....

CHARACTERS

Major Characters

John Steinbeck - the first person narrator and grandson to Samuel Hamilton in the novel.

Samuel Hamilton - a native of Ireland. He is the first generation to arrive in the Salinas Valley from the home country. He makes his living as a blacksmith, well digger, and informal doctor.

Cyrus Trask - a man who created a brilliant military career out of his imagination and managed to become a high official in the military establishment. He loved his son Adam but not his son Charles.

Charles Trask - the son of Cyrus Trask. He dearly loves his father, who does not return the love. Although he loves his brother Adam, he also has an intense jealousy of him.

Adam Trask - the well loved son of Cyrus Trask, who does not

Minor Characters

Liza Hamilton – the wife of Samuel. She is humorless and morally strict – an opposite of her husband.

Alice Trask - the wife of Cyrus Trask and mother of Charles Trask. She lives quietly, content to serve others.

Will Hamilton – the oldest Hamilton son. He moves to the

CONFLICT

Protagonist

The protagonist of the entire novel is "goodness", represented by Adam Trask in the first generation and Caleb Trask in the second generation. In the first generation, Adam is the protagonist. He represents the good.....

Antagonist

The antagonist of the entire novel is "evil," represented primarily by Cathy Trask, who is later known as Kate, the madam of a brothel. She serves as a force of

Climax

The key climax of the plot occurs when goodness defeats.....

Outcome

Despite many tragic occurrences in the novel, the plot is resolved as a

PLOT (synopsis)

The narrator of the novel grew up in the Salinas valley in northern California. He remembers how the mountains to the east were always bright with light, while the mountains to the west were always dark and foreboding. The mountains foreshadow the story that will follow; it is a tale of good versus evil, the Cain and Abel story retold.

One of the narrator's relatives, Samuel Hamilton, came from Northern Ireland and settled with his wife Liza in the Salinas valley. Since the best land had been taken already, his land was rocky, rough, and unprofitable. In spite of their financial struggles, Liza and Samuel raised a large family that was very close. The sons became known for

their ambition, and the daughters were known for their beauty. Samuel accepted his plight and life and became the philosopher of the region.

Adam Trask, a rich landowner, was one of Samuel's neighbors. Adam grew up with his brother Charles on a farm in Connecticut. Their father, Cyrus Trask, loved Adam best, even though Charles loved his father best. As a result of his father's favoritism, Charles was jealous of Adam even though he loved him dearly. When Cyrus sent Adam to join the army, Charles wrote his brother long letters telling him he missed him and wanted him back on the farm.

When Adam was released from the army, he wrote that he was coming home, and Charles was delighted. He worked tirelessly to get the farm ready for Adam; but when Adam began his journey, he realized he did not want to live with his jealous brother. As a result, he stayed in the army. Charles was hurt and angry. For five years the brothers had little

THEMES

Main Theme

The main theme of the novel is stated directly at the opening of Part IV. It is the battle between good and evil. The narrator believes this conflict is the basis of every good story ever written. It is wonderfully illustrated in the Cain and Abel story, which becomes the basis of the novel. For two generations, the Trask family was divided between Cains and Abels. Adam was clearly an Abel, good to the core; in contrast, Charles, his jealous brother, was a Cain figure. Adam's twins also took on characteristics of good and evil. Aaron, the fair-haired child, was considered the good son through most of the novel. He was his father's.....

Minor Theme

The minor theme of the novel is that

MOOD

The main mood of the novel is dark and somber as the variations on the Cain and Abel story unfold. Kate, in particular, deepens the darkness, as she burns her

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

AUTHOR INFORMATION

Born on February 27, 1902, in Salinas, California, John Ernest Steinbeck was the third of four children. Though poor, Steinbeck had a normal childhood and attended public school, graduating from Salinas High School in 1919. As a student, he had an inclination towards reading and writing, which was encouraged by his mother, a schoolteacher herself. He was a frequent contributor to the school magazine.

Steinbeck studied at Stanford University from 1920 to 1925. Although he intended to become a marine biologist, he never completed a degree. The courses which attracted his attention most were zoology, English, and classical literature. While at Stanford, he wrote frequently and was often published in the college newspaper. After leaving the University, he worked at a variety of jobs. He went to

LITERARY/HISTORICAL INFORMATION

Steinbeck was the pre-eminent writer of the Great Depression. He often wrote protest fiction, which reached its height in the 1930s. Like much of the protest fiction, Steinbeck wrote in the tradition of Naturalism. Naturalism was a literary movement that was prominent in American fiction in the 1890s and in the 1930s. Naturalism was coined as a term in France and originally meant scientific. When it was adopted by.....

CHAPTER SUMMARIES WITH NOTES

CHAPTER 1

Part 1

The narrator remembers growing up in the Salinas Valley of northern California. He recalls the landscape in poetic and nostalgic terms and describes the rich beauty of the wildflowers that grew there. He also explains how he learned to recognize east from west in this valley. The east was represented by the Gabilan Mountains, always light

and lovely; and the west was represented by the Santa Lucia Mountains, which were dark and foreboding. He notes that the valley underwent a thirty-year cycle. The first five- to six-year period was always wet, with the valley receiving nineteen to twenty-five inches of rain. Then another six- or seven-year phase would commence, and the rain would lessen to twelve to sixteen inches a year. Next, the dry years would bring only seven or eight inches of annual rainfall. In the dry times, the people forgot there were ever lush times, and in the lush times they forgot the dry times.

Part 2

The history of Salinas Valley began with the Indians, whom the narrator denigrates as "an inferior breed without energy, inventiveness, or culture -- a people . . . too lazy to hunt or fish. . . . Even their warfare was a weary pantomime." Next came the greedy Spanish, who were searching for gold and trying to convert the Indians to their religion. They colonized the area, using land grant titles. They raised cattle and named everything in sight with Catholic holy names or Spanish place names. Next came the "Americans," who were greedier than the Spanish. They settled the land and added their own names to places.

Notes

Like most of his books, *East of Eden* is set in Steinbeck's native California. He begins the novel with a detailed description of the natural landscape and beauty of the Salinas Valley. He presents a cosmic view of the valley, noting its thirty-year cycles. Steinbeck's beautiful narration of the Salinas area is marred by his racist description of the Indians who settled the region. Calling them "an inferior breed," it is clear that he is prejudiced against native Americans, preferring the European Americans of non-Spanish descent, whom he calls simply "Americans."

CHAPTER 2

Part 1

The narrator pieces the story of his ancestors together from hearsay and photographs. Samuel and Liza Hamilton came to the Salinas Valley in 1870 from Ireland and settled on the worst land in the region because all the good land had already been taken. They did, however, wind up with 1760 acres on which Samuel built a house, a barn, and a blacksmith shop.

The Hamiltons had nine children. To support his large family, Samuel worked as a blacksmith and a well digger. He also acted as an amateur doctor for his own family and the families on surrounding farms. Samuel was appreciated for his services and well liked for his wit, humor, and moral uprightness. His wife, Liza, was Samuel's opposite in many ways. Although she also had a strict moral code, she had a humorless manner.

Part 2

The first European settlers to the Salinas Valley were land greedy and grabbed large parcels for themselves. The size of the land, however, did not guarantee wealth. Some people arrived in Salinas Valley with money and retained their wealth. Adam Trask was one of these. He planted wheat in the fertile land of the valley and made more money.

Notes

In presenting his characters in this chapter, their economic status is kept at the forefront. Steinbeck defines the working class family of the Hamiltons and sets up the contrast between them and the ruling class character of Adam Trask, who will be described in the next chapter. Samuel Hamilton had to accept the worst land in the valley, for he arrived after the best land had been grabbed by other settlers. He then had to work hard as a blacksmith and well digger to support his large family that included his wife and nine children.

Steinbeck's style is always realistic and sometimes naturalistic. His prose style is characterized by a spare exactitude. He uses surprising and yet mundane metaphors and similes. For example, he describes Liza Hamilton's ability to bear children with bluntness: "She must have had a pelvic arch of whalebone, for she had big children one after the other."

OVERALL ANALYSIS

CHARACTERS

Samuel Hamilton

Samuel is the patriarch of the Hamilton family and the embodiment of the American spirit, as Steinbeck conceives it. He is a man of all trades from carpentry to blacksmithing to well digging to midwifery. He is also a man of all ideas. He reads in his spare time, being sure to keep his reading from his anti-intellectual and Puritanical wife. Comfortable with emotions, Samuel tends toward the humorous, laughing at himself and playing the comic for others' amusement, but he can also exercise deeper feelings. When he meets Cathy Trask, he expresses great despair over her inhumanity. He recognizes the problem with Cathy intuitively even before she shows him her true colors when he is helping her give birth to her twins.

Samuel Hamilton is also a highly social person. He recognizes his place in the social world, building friendships with his fellow farmers with his humor and help. He is also a family man. He is tied by blood and duty to his family and recognizes his wife Liza's superior ability to

Charles Trask

Charles begins as a simplistic character, an ideologue for the Cain figure and the representative of evil or destruction in the family. He ends with the same mean-spiritedness, for in his will he forces Adam to share his inheritance with Cathy, his ex-wife turned prostitute.

At an early age, Charles realizes that his father does not love him. He tries to win the love of Cyrus by being totally devoted to his father; but Cyrus always loves Adam more. When Charles gives his father a pocketknife as a gift, Cyrus barely acknowledges it; but Cyrus loves the puppy that Adam gives him as a gift. Charles' response to his father's unequal love is to develop a jealousy and hatred of Adam. He wants to kill Adam, just as Cain killed Abel.

The complexity of Charles character comes in two aspects. Although he hates Adam, he also loves him and longs to be his friend. Had it not been for Cyrus' favoritism, the brothers probably would have had a normal sibling relationship. When Cyrus dies, Charles changes. He sinks into.....

PLOT

The plot of *East of Eden* is developed around the battle of good vs. evil. At the beginning, evil reigns because the father figure, Cyrus Trask, does nothing to foster good and temper evil. In fact, he contributes to the degeneration of his son Charles into jealousy and hatred by treating him with contempt while openly favoring Adam. When Cyrus dies, goodness begins to flourish. Charles settles down as a successful farmer, becomes a warmer person, and cares about his brother, Adam.

When Cathy enters the picture, evil flourishes once again. After killing her parents and being a prostitute, she arrives at the Trask place, where Adam and Charles are living, after being severely beaten and left for dead. The good Adam nurses her back to health, falls in love with her, and marries her. Charles, driven to evil in Cathy's presence, has sex with her on the night she marries Adam.

Charles forces Cathy to move to

THEME(S)

The main theme of the novel, which is stated directly at several points (most explicitly in the opening of Part IV) is the battle between good and evil. The narrator thinks this conflict is central to every good story ever written. The conflict was the basis for the story of Cain and Abel in the.....

THE TITLE

The title of the novel is a clear reference to the.....

• QUESTIONS

Trace the change in the character of Charles from his beginnings as the jealous brother to his life as a farmer

East of Eden by John Steinbeck - MonkeyNotes by PinkMonkey.com

who misses the company of his brother to his final act of vengeance when he writes his will.

Examine Lee as a member of the Trask household. What are the boundaries of his role there? Is he more servant or more family member?.....

Copyright 2000 PinkMonkey.com, Inc. www.pinkmonkey.com All Rights Reserved

END OF SAMPLE MONKEYNOTES FOR "EAST OF EDEN" BY JOHN STEINBECK