A Gender Study of John Steinbeck’s East of Eden: An Analysis of Cathy Ames, Sibling Rivalry, Marriage, Women, and Masculinity

By

Christopher James De La Mater

A Thesis Submitted to the Department of English
California State University, Bakersfield
In Partial Fulfillment for the Degree of
Masters of English

Spring 2019
A Gender Study of John Steinbeck’s East of Eden: An Analysis of Cathy Ames, Sibling Rivalry, Marriage, Women, and Masculinity

By Christopher James De La Mater

This thesis or project has been accepted on behalf of the Department of English by their supervisory committee:

Dr. Steven Frye
Committee Chair

Dr. Steven Frye
Committee Member

Dr. Monica Ayuso
Committee Member
Table of Contents

Acknowledgments

I. Introduction

II. Cathy Ames: An Analysis of Steinbeck’s Femme Fatale

III. Of Mice and Men: An Analysis of Masculinity as Defined by John Steinbeck in East of Eden

IV. Two Generations of Sibling Rivalry: The Trask Brothers and an Analysis of Their Cain and Abel Dynamic in Relation to Gender

V. East of Eve(n): Analysis of the Marriages and the Idea of an Ideal Woman in East of Eden

VI. Works Cited
I would like to take this opportunity to thank those individuals that offered me guidance and support in pursuit of my Master’s Degree in English and the culminating project of this thesis.

I would like to first give a number of thanks and extend the upmost appreciation to my committee members, Dr. Steven Frye and Dr. Monica Ayuso. Without their guidance, this thesis would not have come to fruition and I cannot imagine any other individuals I would have rather consulted during this process.

I would also like to thank my parents for their support during my academic endeavors. Both committing their lives to education, it was almost impossible for me to choose any other professional career than education. They are the models that I intend to mold the educator that I will ultimately become.
Introduction

“During the productive postwar years, Steinbeck expressed enthusiasm for a work that he believed would be his best. Originally this was a story of his mother’s people, the Hamiltons, who had left Ireland in the 1860s, lived briefly in Connecticut, and then settled in California. The account was to cover the 1860s to the early 1900s. What eventually became East of Eden was first entitled “Salinas Valley” (McCarthy 116)

John Steinbeck started working on what he believed would be his greatest literary work in January of 1951. Going in to this venture, Steinbeck wrote multiple letters throughout the creative process of East of Eden to his editor and longtime friend Pascal Covici. In one letter Steinbeck claimed that East of Eden might be his last creative work and that he “[had] written each book as an exercise, as practice for the one to come. And this is the one to come. There is nothing beyond this book--- nothing follows it” (Journal of a Novel 8). Steinbeck’s original intention behind the creation of the novel was to chronicle the history of his mother’s family, the Hamiltons, for his sons Thomas and John IV. The mindset of the author was to “establish the boys—what they are and what they are like. Then I would like to indicate my reason for writing this book to them. Then I would like in general terms to tell them what their blood is” (Journal of a Novel 7). Through either the editorial process or Steinbeck’s own creative process, the Hamilton family was delegated to a lesser role in the novel’s main plot because they did not contribute directly to the development of the plot and the Trask family, the family that would become the central focus of the novel. There is enough of the Hamilton family present in the novel to still be relevant and important for Steinbeck’s sons but also allows the reader room to read their own life experiences and family into the events of the novel’s plot. Like with all of his creative works of fiction, Steinbeck wanted the novel’s events and overall theme to be relatable enough to the reader that no matter what their background, gender, race, or social class was they
could relate to the novel. In order to make the novel relatable to his reader, Steinbeck decided to focus the overall theme and plot of the novel as a modern adaptation of Cain and Abel.

According to Steinbeck, the framework of the novel “roots from that powerful, profound and perplexing story in Genesis of Cain and Abel” (Journal of a Novel 90). Believing that a majority of his readers would be able to relate to sibling rivalry, the story of Cain and Abel is retold through three generations of the Trask family, although only through two pairings of Trask siblings. Adam and Charles Trask are the first generation of sibling rivals that vie for the acceptance and adoration of their father Cyrus Trask. Their competitive nature results in violence, on the part of Charles, and hostility after it is revealed by Cyrus that Adam is the favored of the two sons. Although they do develop love and affection for one another, it is only when Adam is serving in the army and is away that Charles feels able to express himself and allow himself to be vulnerable with his brother. Unfortunately, their relationship never recovers from the violence and hostility. Adam eventually becomes a father to twin boys Caleb and Aron and starts a new generation of sibling rivalry between two Trask siblings. Aron is arguably Adam’s favorite because he is develops an unhealthy dependence upon those around him and eventually develops a harmful dependence upon religion in an attempt to understand what is truly good and what is truly evil. Caleb is more independent than his brother but is also troubled by his belief that he has inherited evil from his mother, Cathy Ames. The story attempts to resolve this issue for Caleb, as well as the reader, with the emphasis on the various religious interpretations of the story of Cain and Abel.

Steinbeck ultimately settles on the Hebrew religious text and focuses on the Hebrew word timshel, although the actual word is timshol. According to Daniel Levin, timshol “suggests that human beings may resist evil” (190). Levin’s article “John Steinbeck and the Missing
Kamatz in East of Eden” explores the history of the word timshol, what may have led to the mistranslation by Steinbeck, and the effect the novel had on both the word timshol and timshel. Levin even argues that East of Eden’s effect upon his readers is represented in a “relatively trivial contemporary example of Steinbeck’s influence can be seen in a Google search of the word Timshel in late 2013 that resulted in 411,000 hits”, as opposed to their familiarity and understanding of timshol (194). Regardless of this mix-up, Steinbeck’s use of timshel in East of Eden argues that we are able to control our destinies and, while we may inherit certain traits, it is our responsibility to learn to take power over our actions, specifically harmful and sinful ones.

Steinbeck foresaw some of the negative criticisms the book would receive when he wrote to Pascal Covici that “the book is going to catch the same kind of hell that all the others did and for the same reasons. It will not be what anyone expects and so the expecters will not like it” (Journal of a Novel 26). Much like the initial negative criticism that The Grapes of Wrath received, East of Eden was not a success amongst critics but was a favorite amongst his readers. The sprawling and “expansiveness” of East of Eden’s plot is believed to resemble “the nineteenth-century romance Moby-Dick” (McCarthy 118). It was argued that the sporadic incorporation of true events in the life of the Hamilton at times seem out of place or disruptive to the events of the central plot. In regards to the novel’s six-hundred pages, Steinbeck argued that “a long book on the other hand drives in very slowly and if only in point of time remains for a while”, as opposed to writing a short novel that is forgettable (Journal of a Novel 66). In 2003, East of Eden received a resurgence of popularity after Oprah Winfrey chose the novel to be the first book for the revival of her book club after a fourteen-month hiatus. East of Eden does not receive as much academic praise and recognition as some of his shorter works like Of Mice and Men or Grapes of Wrath in that it is not incorporated into the assigned reading lists or the
curriculum of high school English courses; on the other hand, *East of Eden* is often recognized as one of Steinbeck’s greatest works of fiction. The most popular negative critique of Steinbeck’s literature is the lack of positive female figures and sometimes a total lack of recognition of females in his texts.

Steinbeck’s literature is often interpreted as misogynistic and sexist because of the oversexualized women in some of his works, along with some of his underdeveloped or barely present female characters. As flippantly as Mark Twain uses the n-word in *Huckleberry Finn*, the word whore is used throughout *East of Eden* to refer to those women that would now be referred to as simply sex workers. Susan Shillinglaw argues that the women in Steinbeck’s literature reflect society’s beliefs and perspectives about women and gender roles rather than them reflecting the author’s own beliefs. Shillinglaw states “many of [Steinbeck’s] fictional women are reflections of what males see in them--- hence they seem only silhouettes of women, silenced women, or […] superficial women” (176). Women like Liza Hamilton in *East of Eden* and Elisa Allen in *The Chrysanthemums* are often overshadowed by the negative female characters, like Cathy Ames or Curley’s wife from *Of Mice and Men*, that some critics find worthy of focusing their attention on in their analysis of Steinbeck’s literature. It is my personal belief that, like Shillinglaw argues, that Steinbeck’s women are reflections of society rather than a reflection of his beliefs and that the oversexualized women in his works are feminist figures that take control of their sexuality and use it to their advantage to gain power over men, although society has tried to subjugate and delegate them into powerless and lesser gender roles. *East of Eden* is another one of Steinbeck’s novels that is worthy of analytical exploration of its characters in a gender study.

The focus of this study is to explore *East of Eden* with a central focus on attempting to
gain an understanding of Cathy Ames, the sibling rivalry of Charles and Adam as well as Caleb and Aron in relation to the story of Cain and Abel, the women of *East of Eden* and Steinbeck’s presentation of marriages, and an exploration of masculinity as defined by Steinbeck through *East of Eden*. Cathy Ames will be analyzed and explored in regards to her role as a feminist figure in the novel and as a possible allusion to the mythological figure Lilith, Adam’s wife before Eve. The novel’s focus on sibling rivalry will be analyzed with focus on what the theme contributes to our understanding of masculinity, toxic masculinity, and what inspired Steinbeck to utilize and focus on sibling rivalry. An exploration of the other women in *East of Eden* and an analysis of the married couples in the novel will be attempted to gain an understanding of how Steinbeck presents his own views as well as the views of society about women and marriage. The final chapter of this study will focus on masculinity as presented in *East of Eden* through various characters and how their masculinity represents society’s perspective on masculinity in relation to how men display their maleness, as well as presenting Steinbeck’s own views and struggle with masculinity.
Cathy Ames:
An Analysis of Steinbeck’s Femme Fatale

“It is my belief that Cathy Ames was born with the tendencies, or the lack of them, which drove and forced her all of her life. Some balance wheel was misweighted, some gear out of ration. She was not like other people, never was from birth. And just as a cripple may learn to utilize his lack so that he becomes more effective in a limited field than the uncrippled, so did Cathy, using her difference, make a painful and bewildering stir in her world.”

*East of Eden* (72)

Considered his most ambitious novel, by critics and John Steinbeck himself, *East of Eden* is a six-hundred page endeavor that attempts to trace the history of John Steinbeck’s family (focusing solely on his mother’s lineage), the history of the Salinas valley, and provide a moral for his sons, Thomas and John IV. The central plot of the novel focuses heavily upon the story of Cain and Abel from Genesis. The biblical brothers are the quintessential portrayal of sibling rivalry but with a much more drastic and severe ending. After presenting gifts to God, Abel’s gift, “the firstlings of his flock”, is well-received and appreciated but Cain’s gift, “the fruit of the ground”, is not appreciated and causes Cain to feel “wroth, and his countenance fell” (KJV Genesis 4:3-5). Abel is slain by Cain out of a jealous rage and God, after discovering Cain’s crime, marks Cain’s forehead as an identifier to those that cross him while traveling. As the descendants of Cain, humankind has long suffered for the sins of our fathers, as the saying goes, and this is a charge that weighs heavily upon Caleb Trask. Caleb Trask, the son of Adam Trask, worries that he has inherited the malevolent and vicious behavior of his mother. Adam Trask is a biblical representation of both Adam and Abel but Caleb’s mother, Cathy Ames, is the extreme opposite of Eve. Joseph Wood Krutch’s “John Steinbeck’s Dramatic Tale of Three Generations” is a book review of *East of Eden* that hints towards Cathy’s contribution to the overall biblical theme and that Cathy plays the role of Lilith, Adam’s alleged first wife. Lilith is a Jewish
mythological figure that was “created equal to him, [and] for some unexplained reason she found that she could not live with him, and flew away” from Eden (Plaskow 30). Lilith refused to be treated as subservient to Adam and exiled herself from Eden out of frustration with God’s apparent favoritism towards Adam and the relationship that the two shared. In a similar fashion, Cathy Ames exiles herself from the Eden that Adam Trask wanted to provide for her. This chapter will focus on Cathy Ames’s role in *East of Eden* as the main antagonist with special interest to how she compares to Lilith, an analysis of the four identities that she adopts in the novel, and her actions and beliefs against men (and all humankind) reflects Steinbeck’s personal beliefs about women.

As Mary Shelley’s Creature has become understood to be a sympathetic and pitiable character, Steinbeck shows the same care and compassion to what can be considered his own monster. In one of the many letters that Steinbeck wrote to Pascal Covici during his writing process of the first draft of *East of Eden*, he describes a sequence that will be “even more terrible because it is without emotion” and determines that Cathy is “so frightening [because] she has no conscience” (*Journal of a Novel* 96). In all of Cathy’s acts of villainy, she shows no remorse and shows no sympathy towards the targets of her mischievous behavior. Unlike her father, she does not show any guilt towards wrongly convicting and persecuting the two young men she framed for her alleged rape, a crime that never occurred. Cathy’s ability to manipulate James Grew to the point of leading him to commit suicide shows how little consideration and value she places upon the life of other people. Cathy even boasts about James Grew’s death to Adam callously and finds comedy in the fact that “when [she] was half grown [she] made a man kill himself” (Steinbeck 319). She also does not show any regrets and is most likely proud of her ability to murder her parents and fake her own death. All of these incidents mean almost nothing to her
and the lives that she ruined and ended mean even less to her as though there were just playthings to a child.

Her role in the novel is that of a destructive entity that reveals the latent evil that lays dormant in all of humankind. Cathy/Kate is unable to understand that a person can embody both good and evil. Her motivation is to expose and bring out the evil in others and when she fails to she loathes and despises them externally, while she actually fears them internally. Adam, Lee, and Samuel Hamilton are a couple of the genuinely good men that she fails to draw out evil from. Although Lee and Samuel do fear her, they do not treat her any differently or mistreat her either. The narrator, Steinbeck, describes Cathy’s inability to understand how other people operate and whether or not genuine goodness exists when he explains that

“to a monster the norm must seem monstrous, since everyone is normal to himself. To the inner monster it must be even more obscure, since he has no visible thing to compare with others. To a man born without a conscience, a soul-stricken man must seem ridiculous. To a criminal, honesty is foolish” (Steinbeck 71).

Cathy’s outlook on life and those around her is a skewed and, unfortunately, pessimistic. In Journal of a Novel, Steinbeck refers to her life as “one of revenge on other people because of a vague feeling of her own lack” (124). Despite her horrendous acts of villainy, Steinbeck still refers to her in endearing terms in various letters such as sweet Cathy and other terms of endearment.

Cathy Ames is not as monstrous as she appears within the context of East of Eden. Steinbeck claims that most of his readers will not understand Cathy and he provides insight into her character in Journal of a Novel. At one point he compares her to a friend of his that lies
constantly but this friend remains a mystery as the name has been redacted from the published versions of the letters. Cathy is described as “a fascinating and horrible person” but Steinbeck adds that “there are plenty like her” in the world (Journal of a Novel 44). Although it calls for one to completely disregard her villainous behavior, Cathy becomes familiar and recognizable. She is the embodiment of the even that lays dormant within all human beings. She lacks compassion for others because she is simply born without it. As far as most people are concerned, we are able to understand what is right and what is wrong (or what society defines for us for appropriate, ethical, moral, and proper, as opposed to actions that society defines as inappropriate, unethical, immoral, and improper). Once again, Steinbeck argues and advocates for Cathy’s popularity amongst readers when he states that “people are always interested in evil even when they pretend their interest is clinical. And they will mull Kate over. They will forget I said she was bad. And they will hate her because while she is a monster, she is a little piece of the monster in all of us. It won’t be because she is foreign that people will be interested but because she is not” (Journal of a Novel 97).

In what reads like a faceoff between a hero and villain, Adam confronts Cathy in an attempt to get closure. Cathy reveals her perspective of the world to Adam, and the reader, when she confirms Adam’s suspicion that she believes that “in the whole world there’s only evil and folly” (Steinbeck 320). Adam finds Cathy in a much more unpleasant and horrid appearance than the Cathy that he had fallen so madly in love with. It is only after he bears witness to Cathy’s loss of beauty that Adam is able to free himself from her grasp. Although frighteningly misogynistic, the loss of beauty is the only punishment Cathy receives for her villainous acts. Partially reminiscent of Oscar Wilde’s The Picture of Dorian Gray, Cathy becomes all the more
disfigured and loses her beauty as she succumbs to the, as she sees it, uncontrollable evil that inhabits her.

There is one correct aspect to the argument that Cathy is a monster and that is her identification as specifically a mental or psychic monster. This does not mean that Cathy is telekinetic or a pyrokinetic, this simply means that Cathy is able to manipulate the people around her by a special interest and focus upon their emotions. According to the research of Rachel Grieve and her associates, Cathy shows signs of high emotional intelligence in the way that she is able to manipulate those around her by primarily focusing on their emotions and using those emotions to get them to act accordingly to what her intended goals are. Grieves states, by utilizing the work of Levenson, Kiehl, and Fitzpatrick that

“the relationship between psychopathy and the use of emotional manipulation for nefarious purposes is foreseeable, given than primary psychopathy is characterized by malevolence, callousness, and deception, and that secondary psychopathy relates conceptually to disagreeable and troublemaking behaviors” (157).

As Adam begins showing signs of Cathy losing her control over him, Cathy makes one last attempt to manipulate his emotions by trying to make him question whether or not he is the true father of Caleb and Aron. Cathy alludes to the idea that she and Charles shared a moment of intimacy on the same night that she and Adam got married. At first Adam does not want to believe what she is telling him but Cathy goads him on with an attempt to plant an idea in his subconscious. Cathy tells him “at first you will wonder, and then you’ll be unsure. You’ll think back about Charles--- all about him. I could have loved Charles. He was like me in a way” (Steinbeck 322). Ultimately, Adam leaves this confrontation with evil the victor and begins to
live life for the first time again after being able to let go of the Cathy that he had created in his imagination.

Lee, in a discussion with Caleb, almost advocates for Cathy’s monstrous behavior. In trying to console Caleb about his inability to control his impulsivity to cause pain in others, Lee explains that all of humankind are “violent people” and “we are all descended from the restless, the nervous, the criminals, the arguers and brawlers, but also from the brave and independent and generous” (Steinbeck 568). Caleb’s greatest fear and the focal point of his insecurity, besides not being loved equally to Aron, is that he inherits the evil of his mother. Humankind is often referred to as the descendants of Cain and thus we all have inherited the evil that drove Cain to the ultimate and unforgiveable sin of murdering his brother Abel. Cathy is this embodiment of evil to an extreme. She shows little to no remorse for her actions but it is because she does not know anything other than evil. She believes that the evil that lays dormant within us all is our true character and that motivates her to draw out the evil from those around her. Cathy takes photographs of politicians, lawyers, and other powerful men that enter her brothel to prove her beliefs that the world is filled with evil and what good there is fake. Cathy’s monstrous, devious, and malicious behavior can be contributed to her taking control of her own masculinity.

In an attempt to further our understanding of Cathy, or what little understanding we have of her, a reading of her perspective of the world and others will be read with a special interest in regards to how she actively participates in behavior that is defined as masculine. This calls for a consideration of masculinity outside of the typical patriarchal definition that is often related to all actions that are defined as masculine or “manly”. In “Recovering the Feminine Other: Masculinity, Femininity, and Gender Hegemony”, Mimi Schippers comes to the conclusion that masculinity, without an emphasis on maleness, is defined as “a social position, a set of practices,
and the effects of the collective embodiment of those practices on individuals, relationships, institutional structures, and global relations of domination” (86-87). This is a fitting definition for a consideration of Cathy’s masculinity seeing as domination and control is Cathy’s ultimate motivation. When Cathy’s character is taking outside of a feminine character or is applied to a genderless figure, it becomes easy to believe that a similar character with Cathy’s characteristics might not be so easily identified as a monster. Following Cathy’s supposition that she and Charles are similar and comparable, let us divert attention shortly to Charles’s character in comparison to Cathy’s “monstrous” characterization.

Charles is Adam’s half-brother from Cyrus Trask’s second marriage to a neighbor’s seventeen year old daughter. Alice Trask is Cyrus’s ideal embodiment of femininity in that “she never says anything unless asked and spends all her time diligently at housework” (Hayashi 188). Charles is closer to the definition of the more patriarchal definition of masculinity in that he is muscular, athletic, and is inclined to become physically abusive, sometimes to the point of committing murder. Adam is a victim of Charles wrath repeatedly throughout East of Eden. As children, Charles strikes Adam across the face with a bat after Adam is able to hit a baseball that Charles pitches towards him. Later, out of jealousy, Charles assaults Adam repeatedly and returns to murder Adam with a hatchet after becoming jealous of a private discussion that Adam has with their father that he believes is proof of Cyrus Trask’s favoritism of Adam over Charles. The characterization of Charles is not preemptively undermined by being identified as a monster as Cathy is. His aggressive and nefarious behavior is believed to be normal because his aggressive actions can be understood as an expression of his manliness and, following Schippers’s definition of masculinity, he will show extreme aggression towards those that threaten his masculinity by defeating him in athletic competitions or are favored over him.
Caleb is another figure that is comparable to Cathy. Due to his inability to control his evil, “he punished [others] because he wished he could be loved as Aron was loved” (Steinbeck 345). The pain that Caleb creates in others is more emotional pain rather than the physical pain of his uncle, possibly father, Charles does. Aron is a foil to Caleb in that he cannot control his emotions and is quick to become violent after he becomes upset and angry. Charles describes Aron’s ability to become upset and violent and will aggressively assault someone before he even realizes what he is doing. None of these flaws are held against the male characters in *East of Eden* as Cathy’s flaws are held against her. The question is raised whether or not Cathy is a monster simply because she is a woman that has masculine behavior.

Cathy’s most human and feminine behavior appears briefly before her death. After Caleb reveals to Aron that their mother is alive and is the modern Whore of Babylon, Cathy commits suicide after seeing Aron’s revulsion towards her. It is at this point in the novel that Cathy becomes, as Paul McCarthy argues, “more credible in Part Four; she deviates from her allegorical typing of evil by joining a church, developing a conscience, experiencing brief emotional reactions to Caleb and Aron, and, finally, by choosing to commit suicide” (123). She becomes something closer resembling a human that the reader can relate to and deviates away from the monstrous façade that she carries throughout the rest of the novel. Cathy experiences guilt and shame as she pictures “the face of the blond and beautiful boy, his eyes mad with shock. She heard his ugly words aimed not so much at her as at himself. And she saw his dark brother leaning against the door and laughing” (Steinbeck 545). The narrator humanizes Cathy when he provides a rare glimpse into Cathy’s childhood, outside of her nefarious deeds. Cathy reminisces on her childhood and how, during times of loneliness, she would convince herself that “every thought and word and look was aimed to hurt her, and she had no place to run and no
place to hide” (Steinbeck 549). This explains Cathy’s fascination with Lewis Carroll’s Alice in Wonderland in her childhood. Much like Caleb, Cathy’s acts of villainy appear to be explained as means of self-preservation and her way of protecting herself from other people hurting her, so she hurts them before they can hurt her. Cathy’s role as a monstrous figure and her masculine behavior is further understood when considering Cathy as a literary representation of the mythical figure Lilith, the alleged first wife of Adam.

To say that most religions have promoted and upheld the patriarchy, if not starting it, is not a condemnation of organized religion; at this point in humankind’s history, it is safe to say that it is a well-known fact. Elizabeth Cady Stanton and her associates argued that “the Bible had been appropriated by men for their own special interests” and “that it [is] itself the product of male authors who claimed a special relationship with God that they used to exploit their own power over women” (Gabel, et. al. 328). In Jewish mythology, Lilith is Adam’s first wife that is simultaneously created rather than made as an afterthought from Adam’s rib as Eve is. In The Coming of Lilith, Judith Plaskow and her associates create a Jewish creation myth that includes women in a positive and active role and incorporates Lilith as a feminist heroic figure of sorts. In her version, Plaskow describes Adam’s frustration with being equal to Lilith and how her refusal to be subservient to him upsets him. Lilith recognizes the “excluding closeness of the relationship between Adam and God” and how “Adam and God just seemed to have more in common, both being men”; unwilling to settle and be relegated to the role of a servant or housewife to Adam, she “uttered God’s holy name, and flew away” (Plaskow 31). God sent angels to retrieve Lilith and force her to return to Adam and, even after threatening her with punishment for refusing, Lilith chooses that her exile from Eden is better than living as Adam’s servant. Eve is created from the rib of Adam and welcomes the role of being his subservient
housewife. Adam manipulates Eve by telling her horrifying tales of Lilith and depicts her as a
demon “who threatens women in childbirth and steals children from their cradles in the middle
of the night” (Plaskow 31). It is not until later that Eve discovers that, much like herself, Lilith is
just a woman and they talk to one another and establish a relationship that rivals the relationship
that either women had with Adam. Plaskow’s creation myth ends with both God and Adam
looking on with concern about the day both women return to the Garden of Eden with the
intention to rebuild.

Considering the central theme of the Cain and Abel story, it is not a far stretch to consider
Cathy a modern portrayal of the mythological figure Lilith in *East of Eden*. When given the
chance, Cathy frees herself from Adam and exiles herself from the Garden of Eden that he
envisioned for them in their new California home. Another similarity that Cathy has with Lilith is
her unwillingness to conform to social norms, especially that of a housewife. Cathy’s
unwillingness to conform caught the attention of her peers as a child and disturbed the adults
around her to the point of causing them to be interested and intrigued by her. As an adult, she
does not settle into gender conforming roles that society defines as appropriate for a woman (i.e.
housewife, school teacher, dress maker). Cathy, as Kate, becomes the madam of a brothel but
only after developing a mother-daughter bond with Faye, the original madam, and poisons her
once it is revealed that Faye leaves everything to her in her will. Although she is a horribly
villainous figure, Cathy is a woman that finds herself, like a lot of women today, in a society that
defines what is feminine, what is appropriate behavior and attire for a woman to wear, and what
roles or jobs are better fit or expected for a woman to perform. Reading Cathy as a possible
attempt by Steinbeck to incorporate the mythological figure of Lilith creates a better appreciation
for her character, as opposed to just seeing her as a monster. Considering Cathy as a
representation of Lilith allows Cathy to be understood to be another strong feminist figure within Steinbeck’s literature.

It is difficult for the reader to develop their own opinion of Cathy because when she is introduced into the novel’s plot the narrator compares her to a monster and monstrous figures. In *Journal of a Novel*, Steinbeck conceptualizes Cathy’s character in the early stages of writing the first draft of *East of Eden* and calls her a “tremendously powerful force in the book” and she is “a hustler, perhaps born, perhaps caused by accident” (39). Although Cathy at times leaves the novels central plot, she still manages to play a pivotal role in the progression of the plot as well as the lives and actions of other characters. If Cathy were to be simplified down to one word she could be described as a non-conformist. As a child, the narrator describes how “she never conformed in dress or conduct. She wore whatever she wanted to” and the children around her would imitate her (Steinbeck 73). This trait continues as she matures into adulthood and she refuses to conform to the gender roles that society defines as acceptable for her and other women. A couple examples of the gender roles for women in *East of Eden* are housewife, dressmaker, and school teacher. Cathy seemingly takes part of a female masculinity that Judith Jack Halberstam, describes as “the rejected scraps of dominant masculinity in order that male masculinity may appear to be the real thing” and details how “the myths and fantasies about masculinity that have ensured that masculinity and maleness are profoundly difficult to pry apart” (2527). Cathy appears to reject the notions that exclude women from being able to be perceived as strong, empowered, and capable of achieving or participating in the same activities as males do simply because of socially constructed gender roles.

Steinbeck does not condemn nor does he shame the women that accept these gender roles but what he contributes to this discussion of gender roles is that Cathy is a woman who creates
her own path and creates her own power outside of what limited power society allows women at that time. *East of Eden* is set in the developing and revolutionary time of America that spans from the Civil War to the First World War (roughly 1860s to 1917 or 1918 when America entered the First World War). Cathy, as Catherine Amesbury and Kate, becomes involved in prostitution and uses her ability to manipulate the sexual impulses of humankind, especially men, to gain power over others. When she takes over management of the brothel after murdering Faye, Cathy, as Kate, changes the way business is run. Under Faye’s management, the brothel was a “refuge for young men puling into puberty, morning over lost virtue, and aching to lose some more” and “Faye was the reassurer of misbegotten husbands”; according to Faye, there was also a sense of respectability of the way she ran the business that transpired in the brothel (Steinbeck 218). Under Kate, the brothel becomes to be known to and referred to as the circus and becomes a much more ominous and shadier house of promiscuity. Kate, unbeknownst to her customers, takes photographs of all the powerful men that enter her establishment and it is believed that she utilizes these photographs to gain power through blackmailing these men. It is later revealed by Kate that she intends to release the images to the houses of each customer upon her death and furthers her chaotic path of destruction upon the world.

**Conclusion**

The intention of this section is to argue against *East of Eden*’s narrator that Cathy Ames is simply a monster. By exploring and utilizing Steinbeck’s religious framework for *East of Eden*, it is not a far reach to explore Cathy’s role in the novel as an allusion towards the mythological figure of Lilith, Adam’s alleged first wife. Before Eve was created from the rib of Adam, it is believed that Adam and Lilith were made simultaneously from the same dirt of the earth; this would cause Adam and Lilith to be equals. Lilith is often believed to be a demonic
figure that preys upon child-bearing women and young children. Cathy, being Steinbeck’s Adam’s first wife, it is not too far off to read her as another allusion utilized in *East of Eden*.

Steinbeck does refer to *East of Eden* as a “book which is more child and savage than God and that is a very good thing” (*Journal of a Novel* 126). The primary motivation for this advocacy of Cathy Ames is the introduction of her character that contaminates the reader’s perspective of her character. Cathy is first introduced after the narrator’s monologue of what different types of monsters there are and how we often identify monsters. The plot of the novel is intricately detailed down to the last word and it is not until the end of the novel and Cathy’s death that it is proven that she is not as monstrous as she first seems. Steinbeck explains to Pascal Covici that by the novel’s end the reader “will forget [he] said she was bad. And they will hate her because while she is a monster, she is a little piece of the monster in all of us. It won’t be because she is foreign that people will be interested but because she is not” (*Journal of a Novel* 97). Cathy becomes less of a monster and more of a human as she becomes more recognizable to the reader.

The last description of Cathy that the narrator provides depicts her as a scared and insecure girl/woman that causes pain in others before they are able to cause her pain. It is also worth considering how Cathy’s identification as a monster is a societal reaction to her masculinity. In *Carol and John: A Portrait of a Marriage*, Susan Shillinglaw argues that “many of [Steinbeck’s] fictional women are reflections of what males see in them--- hence they seem only silhouettes of women, silenced women, or […] superficial women” (176). Cathy is unlike the other women of Steinbeck’s literature in that she is not silenced, superficial, or a silhouette of a woman. She takes control of her own path and creates her own power through the emotional manipulation of others and especially the sexual impulses of men. Although Cathy is guilty of a number of crimes, her actions are arguably found to be less shocking and disturbing when committed by a
male character. It is my estimation that Cathy Ames is not a monster and is just another literary figure that suffers from a neurological disorder that is worthy of exploration at a later time.
Of Mice and Men: 
An Analysis of Masculinity as Defined by John Steinbeck in *East of Eden*

“Among the first terms, which certainly tricked down from antiquity, is virility. But what is it, this virility? Formal definitions trace the etymology to the Latin word *verilis*, meaning “of a man,” which in turn is derived from *vir*, the Roman word for both man and hero.” (Browning 91)

“She cackled at him derisively. ‘In sticks and stones. What a sweet dreamer is Mr. Mouse! Give me a sermon, Mr. Mouse.’” (Steinbeck 382)

There are various depictions and definitions of what it means to be masculine and a hero. You typically have the muscle-clad Arnold Schwarzenegger action-hero gracing the cover of movie posters or TV show ads and this is quite often where society develops what it means to be masculine, or manly. In *The Fate of Gender*, Frank Browning identifies “the hallmarks of manly virtue [as]: justice, courage, self-restraint, physical prowess, and wisdom” (89). These identifiers that Browning lists are often the qualities we look for in defining a role-model and we also apply this qualities towards what it means to be a hero. It was not until recently that society has started to include women in the discussion of role-models and heroes. Our patriarchal society has all but controlled our conceptions of what it means to be masculine and this is depicted in most, if not all, of our media. Movies and TV shows often show heroic men that are physically resilient and show enough resolve to save the day but, most importantly, also save the damsel in distress. The heroic men in these scenarios possess physical attributes that often are not representative of the average male.

For John Steinbeck, his literature was written with the intention of being able to captivate as wide an audience as possible and he attempted to achieve this goal by writing stories about personal experiences or stories that are believable enough to allow the reader to feel as if it is something they have or could experience in their lives. Steinbeck originally intended to dedicate
*East of Eden* to his sons Thomas and John IV; this intended dedication explains the limited presence of the Hamilton family. Samuel Hamilton and the rest of the Hamilton family were Steinbeck’s mother’s family and Steinbeck wanted to create a documentation of sorts through *East of Eden* for his sons to refer to or look back on after his passing. Steinbeck’s intention with *East of Eden* was to “relate the reader to the book so that, while [he is] talking to the boys actually, [he is] relating every reader to the story as though he were reading about his own background” (*Journal of a Novel* 8). This section will focus primarily on masculinity and how society has defined masculinity over time, what Steinbeck understood masculinity to be, and the masculinity, or lack thereof, of Adam Trask, Charles Trask, and Samuel Hamilton.

Depictions and definitions of masculinity and manliness inundate our everyday lives through various forms of media. Commercials, television shows, and movies infiltrate our subconscious and implant society’s definition of what masculinity means. Competition based reality shows, like Dwayne “The Rock” Johnson’s Titan Games, presents a cast of men and women that are pinnacles of physical fitness; after being eliminated, the contestants show signs of frustration and disappointment at being bested by the other competitor. In “Recovering the Feminine Other: Masculinity, Femininity, and Gender Hegemony”, Mimi Schippers is able to define masculinity, without emphasis on a specific gender, as “a social position, a set of practices, and the effects of the collective embodiment of those practices on individuals, relationships, institutional structures, and global relations of domination” (86-87). This definition excludes the long thought of exclusivity of masculinity being related to maleness or manliness to allow for women to participate in behavior defined as masculine without being inundated with malicious comments in regards to their sexuality. This female masculinity, as described by Judith Jack Halberstam, is “framed as the rejected scraps of dominant masculinity in order that male
masculinity may appear to be the real thing” and details “the myths and fantasies about masculinity that have ensured that masculinity and maleness are profoundly difficult to pry apart” (2527). This inseparable bond between what is masculine and what is male has endured for decades and, until recently, has begun to allow for all-inclusive forms of masculinity without specificity in regards to gender or body type.

In *East of Eden*, John Steinbeck reveals what his perception of masculinity was and how society formed his understanding. While his literature is renowned and is considered in high regard by most readers and academics, there is limited information about John Steinbeck outside of his creative works. *Journal of a Novel* is a collection of letters to Pascal Covici, Steinbeck’s friend and editor at The Viking Press, in which intimate details of Steinbeck are revealed as he documents his thought process while creating the first draft of *East of Eden*. In one letter, Steinbeck reveals what seems to be either his belief, the belief of those around him, or his anxiety and insecurities penetrating through when he states that “a writer is only half a man as far as a woman is concerned” (*Journal of a Novel* 47). Being the self-loathing artist that he was, it is difficult to gauge whether or not this was an opinion that he overheard or was told directly to him but it is apparent that Steinbeck was self-aware or concerned with how others viewed him in regards to his masculinity.

This condemning of the creative arts and creative artists is reflected through *East of Eden* in the characterization of Tom Hamilton. Tetsumaro Hayashi describes Tom as a manic depressive that is a “mixture of savagery and gentleness, fierceness and shyness”; he also “responds to books and the world around him with intense enthusiasm” (85). After his siblings leave the family farm, Tom is left behind with his parents and secretly writes poetry. The narrator further describes Tom and his secret poetry further and explains that “in those days it
was only sensible to keep [writing poetry a] secret. The poets were pale emasculates, and Western men held them in contempt. Poetry was a symptom of weakness, of degeneracy and decay” (280). Tom’s brother Will does not approve of this activity and discusses this with their sister Dessie. Will says that Tom has become “broody. He doesn’t talk. He goes walking alone in the hills at night. I went to see him and--- he’s been writing poetry--- pages of it all over the table” (389). It is apparent that the behavior that Will finds most disturbing is the act of writing poetry. Steinbeck personally describes Tom Hamilton as “a strange man, shy and silent, and good--- very good and confused. I don’t think he ever knew what was wrong with him” (Journal of a Novel 106). This is a reference to Tom’s mental illness, as well as Steinbeck’s struggle with his own mental health.

Much like Tom, Steinbeck was a manic depressive and he reveals this information to Pascal Covici in a number of letters in Journal of a Novel. Steinbeck seems to diminish insult himself, as well as women, when he describes one of his bouts with depression. Mental illness was first understood to be a “woman’s disease” and this is explained by Jerold J. Kreisma, MD, and Hal Straus in I Hate You--- Don’t Leave Me: Understanding the Borderline Personality. In their book, Kreisma and Straus detail how “women enter treatment more frequently” for mental illness and that the “severity of symptoms and disability are greater among women” (17). This early misrepresentation of mental illness being a strictly feminine epidemic is expressed through Steinbeck’s own struggle with his manic depressive behavior and mood swings. In a letter to Pascal Covici, Steinbeck begins with an apology for an awkward dinner that he and Covici had one with some friends and attempts to explain how his depression and anxiety caused him to act strangely; Steinbeck argues that “women get it and since they have physical symptoms, it is an excuse. When a man gets it, he has no defense. And so I will only say I was nervously sick all
over” (*Journal of a Novel* 140). The lack of compassion and understanding at that time for mental illnesses is reflected through Steinbeck’s struggle to understand his own struggle with his mental health, while also presenting the reader with society’s limited view on this topic. It is clear that Steinbeck’s struggle with seeing himself as masculine and his masculinity is threatened by his manic depressiveness and his partaking of the creative arts. Society’s gender roles and stereotypes, positive and negative, are put on display through Steinbeck’s writing.

Kate’s intentionally demeaning nickname for Adam, Mr. Mouse, is unfortunately a fitting name for the protagonist of *East of Eden*. Adam does not fit the stereotypical mold of what a hero is in regards to his actions and his physical appearance. In *John Steinbeck: A Dictionary of His Fictional Characters*, Tetsumaro Hayashi describes Adam’s childhood characteristics as “quiet and obedient, avoiding violence and contention by retiring into secretness” (187). Cyrus Trask, Adam’s father, tends to favor Adam over his brother Charles and this fuels their already complicated relationship with added animosity. Adam is enlisted in the army by Cyrus as a means of building strength and courage. Cyrus becomes frustrated with Adam’s refusal and reluctance to serve and furiously tells Adam what flaws he means to correct. Cyrus tells him “you’re not clever. You don’t know what you want. You have no proper fierceness. You let other people walk over you. Sometimes I think you’re a weakling who will never amount to a dog turd” (27). This insulting description is contradicted by Cyrus admitting to Adam that he loves him more than he does Charles.

As the novels plot progresses, Adam does not seem to make any positive development. When he believes he is falling in love, he is actually falling in love with his own imaginative representation of who he believes Cathy Ames is. He plays the role of a caretaker when he discovers her badly beaten on the porch of the house he shared with Charles and he quickly
shows signs of a Florence Nightingale effect developing with his patient. Even after Cathy tells Adam that she has no interest in moving to California, he relocates them across the country to California; once again, Adam refuses to listen to Cathy when she tells him that she has the intentions of leaving him once she gives birth but he insists that she will come around to the idea of being a mother and living in California on a farm. According to Steinbeck, a possible explanation for this foolishness in Adam is that “Men don’t listen to what they don’t want to hear” (Journal of a Novel 76). Unfortunately for Adam, after the birth of the twins Cathy escapes Adam’s captivity by shooting him in the shoulder and leaving the farm to the nearby city of Salinas.

Although Cathy’s relationship with Adam began as a means of self-preservation, Adam in-turn traps Cathy. Hopeless romantics will come to Adam’s defense and argue that he was tricked into the relationship due to Cathy’s manipulative ways; other people will argue that Adam developed an unhealthy dependence upon Cathy. Steinbeck was comparatively dependent upon his third wife Elaine; in a letter to Pascal Covici, Steinbeck shows his dependency when he writes that “Elaine has gone to the country to see her friend and I miss her already” (Journal of a Novel 56). Although it is not revealed how long Elaine had been gone, Steinbeck clearly was not comfortable enough to be alone, especially considering how self-deprecating his manic depressive mind might have terrorized himself. In East of Eden, Adam is never able to really let Cathy go because of the beautiful image of her that he has created in his mind. After Samuel Hamilton’s funeral, Adam visits Cathy and, after noticing her fading beauty, claims that he can forget her and walks away feeling victorious. Contrary to Adam’s victory over Cathy, he falls into a depression after it is revealed to him that she has committed suicide. Steinbeck goes into detail about Adam’s emotional response to the clearly upsetting news; the passage reads
“Adam’s face contorted and his eyes swelled and glistened with tears. He fought his mouth and then he gave up and put his face down in his hands and wept. “Oh, my poor darling!” he said” (561). This foolishness in Adam is an attempt by Steinbeck to further his relatability to the reader. Steinbeck states that “Adam never really gave Cathy up. I think he is living with the Cathy he invented” and explains that “the man who holds on to an impossibility is a frightening spectacle to many people and yet that is exactly what we all do more or less” (Journal of a Novel 112). Although Adam may not be the most stereotypically masculine man, he becomes relatable to the common man through his relationship with Cathy. At some point, it is argued, we have all experienced somebody in our lives that we have not been able to let go of and forget although it has been revealed that they are not who we imagined them to be; despite this shock, we cannot let go of this person.

Charles Trask is the more stereotypical representation of a male that partakes in behavior known as toxic masculinity. Although he is the younger brother, Charles is “assertive, athletic, muscular, and competitive” and “is subject to fits of violence and uncontrollable rage” when anyone beats him in competition (Hayashi 190). Adam is the target of this rage at two different stages in his childhood. The first time is when he is able to hit baseballs that Charles is pitching to him and Charles hits him across the face with a baseball bat as punishment; the other incident is when Charles viciously attacks him out of jealousy because of the relationship Adam has with their father. Cyrus Trask reveals to Adam that he does not believe that Charles is fit for the army. After stating that he believes that Charles would make the better soldier, Cyrus tells Adam that “Charles is not afraid so he could never learn anything about courage. He does not know anything outside himself so he could never gain the things I’ve tried to explain to you. To put
him in an army would be to let loose things which in Charles must be chained down, not let loose” (27).

It is quite interesting that the qualities described as Charles’s flaws are quite the opposite of the qualities that are defined as masculine. Frank Brown’s identifies “justice, courage, self-restraint, physical prowess, and wisdom” as masculine qualities (89). Charles knows no self-restraint and what might be interpreted as his bravery or courage is actually a lack of consideration of his own physical well-being and the well-being of others. During his time served in the army, Adam “develops an obsession with nonviolence and risks his life rescuing wounded men” (Hayashi 187). This leaves the reader to discover the polar opposites between Adam and Charles and realize that, as a soldier, Charles would not have shown compassion for the enemy and would have not risked his own life to save his wounded comrades. Steinbeck was able to make this claim about what an ideal soldier is due to his time served as a war correspondent. Paul McCarthy’s John Steinbeck provides insight into “the writer’s hatred of war”; McCarthy writes:

[Steinbeck] Regarded as inherently warlike, man possesses a trait ‘which causes the individual to turn on and destroy his own kind, not only his own kind, but the words of his own kind.’ Hope, which Steinbeck regards as ‘another species diagnostic trait,” cannot be of much help. If man is to eradicate or change war, a mutation must occur not in man but in outside things--- ‘property, houses, money, concepts of power . . . cities . . . factories . . . business’ (93).

Steinbeck seemingly condemns the necessity that humankind places upon war but does not condemn those that enlist to serve and protect their country. What Steinbeck does though is analyze how masculinity is tied to soldiers and violent males.
The amount of violence in a number of Steinbeck’s novels has been studied and the amount of violence in *East of Eden* is alarming if not disturbing to most readers. Mr. Edwards, a whoremaster that Cathy encounters, brutally assaults Cathy after she reveals to him the darkness that she hides within but he also discovers that she has been hiding away portions of her allowance to escape him. In his wrath, Mr. Edwards “[leapt] at her and brought her down, and by then his fists were not enough. His frantic hand found a stone on the ground and his cold control was burst through with a red roaring wave” (97). The result of this vicious assault is a broken arm, broken ribs, cracked jaw, missing teeth, and a laceration on her forehead that exposed her skull. In “Violence in John Steinbeck”, James Mumford describes how the narrator of *East of Eden* is able to detail violence in a “casual way” that “signals a fatalistic acceptance of the violent. Heavy with bathos and short on sentiment, [the account works] to naturalize violence” (147). Steinbeck comments on his obsession with violence and the violence that he knows lies within him in *Journal of a Novel*. In a letter to Pascal Covici, he says “there is so much violence in me. Sometimes I am horrified at the amount of it. It isn’t very well concealed either. It lies very close to the surface” (*Journal of a Novel* 47). Steinbeck’s violent tendencies are expressed through his novel because this is the only publicly acceptable receptacle that allows him to vent what rage he has pent up inside of him. While society depicts physical prowess and dominance over another person as a sign of masculinity, Steinbeck recognizes that not all forms of violence are acceptable. There are rarely times in which expressions of violence are tolerated and accepted by society and those are typically cases of self-defense, sports based competition, and times of war. Steinbeck, being the advocate for non-violence that he was, must have been confused, disgusted, and afraid of the violence that he possessed and learned to channel it through his literature.
Samuel Hamilton, John Steinbeck’s maternal grandfather, is characterized and immortalized through the events of *East of Eden*. He is the embodiment of all the qualities of Frank Browning’s definition of masculinity. Samuel Hamilton is a contributor to the philosophical discussion within the text of *East of Eden*. Much to the chagrin of his wife Liza, Samuel questions religion and asks to understand religion when Liza believes that it is not for us to understand, rather it is our duty to accept the scripture as is. Hayashi describes him as “a jack of all trades—blacksmith, carpenter, wood and metal worker, and a perpetual inventor” (84). Samuel digs wells for the local farmers and it is fair to assume that he is physically fit considering the requirements of his body that each job that he is tasked with calls for. He also plays the role of a mentor to Adam upon his arrival to California and quickly becomes a confidant as well as another person for Adam to depend on. Samuel can read people’s character and is able to recognize the flaws and weaknesses of Adam and also recognizes the evil within Cathy. He does not use any of this against people for his advantage, rather he uses this in an effort to provide guidance.

Although he is written by an arguably biased author, Steinbeck provides his reader with the ultimate definition and characterization of a truly masculine male through his grandfather Samuel Hamilton. Samuel does have the curse of the Hamilton’s in that he is far too imaginative and inventive, a curse that ruins the family’s finances, but it is his philosophical wisdom and consideration for others that makes him the most masculine and also one of the greatest characters in the entire novel. He does not cast judgement upon others out of scorn and he does not hold people accountable for mistakes or wrongdoings in their past. Samuel is the person that forces Adam out of his depression and gives him the task of naming the twins. Adam is given “philosophical and psychological guidance” from Samuel and, with the additional help of Lee,
they name Aron and Caleb (Hayashi 85). The death of Samuel takes a toll on Adam because, like most other people in his life, Adam grew dependent upon him for his guidance. Samuel Hamilton is one of the best-rounded characters in the novel and is arguably the best male characters in Steinbeck’s bibliography, alongside the famous Ed Ricketts inspired Doc from *Cannery Row*.

Although we are essentially twenty years into the new millennium, we are still struggling with a concrete and politically correct definition of what masculinity is. I believe Frank Browning comes the closest to an acceptable definition of masculinity in his book *The Fate of Gender* when he states that “the hallmarks of manly virtue [as]: justice, courage, self-restraint, physical prowess, and wisdom” (89). John Steinbeck’s *East of Eden* struggles with masculinity and provides various forms of masculinity through the male characters in the novel. The analysis of masculinity begins with Steinbeck himself and his own struggle in defining and understanding himself as a male and where he stands in regards to his own masculinity. Steinbeck chronicled his creative process of writing the first draft of *East of Eden* in the form of letters to his editor and friend Pascal Covici. After his passing, his family published these letters into what is now known as *Journal of a Novel: The East of Eden Letters*. In these letters, intimate details of Steinbeck’s family and himself are revealed; for instance, Steinbeck reveals his struggles with his manic depressiveness and how this in turn may have affected his understanding of his own masculinity. It was his belief that “women get it and since they have physical symptoms, it is an excuse. When a man gets it, he has no defense” (*Journal of a Novel* 140). This alludes to the possibility that Steinbeck believed himself to be an inferior male because of his struggle with his own mental health. This reflects a misinformed and sadly gender based definition of mental illness being a woman’s disease by society.
Within *East of Eden*, Adam Trask, Charles Trask, and Samuel Hamilton display various forms of masculine males. Adam Trask is not the typical male that we imagine when picturing somebody that is masculine but he is relatable to the common man in his inability to let go of Cathy despite the pain she has caused him. It is Adam’s persistence and infatuation with Cathy that makes him relatable because, even after all of the pain and misfortune that has been the result of Cathy’s evil, Adam is still emotionally responsive and upset at the news of Cathy’s death. Steinbeck claims that this is what makes Adam relatable because he believes that we all partake in a refusal to let go of a person or idea that we believe in; Adam also gains masculine qualities in his time served in the army. Charles, Adam’s half-brother, is the embodiment of the violence and physical prowess that is typically associated with masculinity. Through the discussion with Adam of what an ideal soldier is, Cyrus Trask reveals that Charles would not make a good soldier because he is not masculine enough. Charles is limited in his masculinity in that he cannot show courage or bravery because he does not have any concern for his well-being or the well-being of others. Adam’s service in the army is marked by non-violence through his resistance to take the lives of the enemies and his bravery in rescuing those wounded in battle. It is left to the reader to make the assumption that Charles would not have made the same decisions. Adam shows great bravery and courage in not taking the lives of the people identified as his enemies and his willingness to recover and save his fallen comrades. Paul McCarthy provides Steinbeck perspective that “man possesses a trait ‘which causes the individual to turn on and destroy his own kind’” and this in turn leaves us open and willing to enter warfare (93).

Samuel Hamilton is Steinbeck’s greatest embodiment of masculinity in *East of Eden* because he is the encapsulation of every positive quality of masculinity. He shows wisdom through his interaction with philosophy, he exhibits physical prowess through all the different labor intensive
jobs he does, and shows courage in the face of Cathy’s evil. Samuel is the great-grandfather of Steinbeck’s sons, Thomas and John IV, and it is not hard to assume that he was created to be the pinnacle of masculinity and a positive role model for his sons to look up to. All in all, *East of Eden* engages with the discussion of what the definition of true masculinity is and how society defined masculinity during Steinbeck’s authorship of *East of Eden* in 1951.
“Two stories have haunted us and followed us from our beginning,” Samuel said. “We carry them along with us like invisible trails--- the story of our original sin and the Story of Cain and Abel.” (264)

Most people are able to relate to *East of Eden’s* allusion to the sibling rivalry of Cain and Abel from Genesis. Unless you were born and raised as a single child, there is usually a sibling that is favored over a typically younger or older child; although most parents claim to not have a favorite, the other child or children typically pick up on actions and phrases that identify which child is the alleged favorite. This typically creates tension and hostility between the siblings and often leads to confrontations, either verbal, physical, or both. Although sibling rivalry for a majority of this analysis is exclusively brother to brother, it is important to note that there are also cases in which there are brother-sister and sister-sister siblings that contain sibling rivalry as well. The argument can be made that sibling rivalry is told most effectively or commonly through male siblings is because of the competitive nature of men to show dominance over another male through their masculinity and how certain behaviors feed into what is now referred to a toxic masculinity.

John Steinbeck tells the story of three generations of men in the Trask family in *East of Eden*. Originally intending for the novel to be used as a means of chronicling family history for his sons Thomas and John IV, Steinbeck started out with the narrative focus of detailing the history of the Hamilton family, his mother’s lineage. In *Journal of a Novel*, Steinbeck explains that through *East of Eden* he will “tell them one of the greatest, perhaps the greatest story of all-- the story of good and evil, of strength and weakness, of love and hate, of beauty and ugliness. I shall try to demonstrate to them how these doubles are inseparable--- how neither can exist
without the other and how out of their groupings creativeness is born” (4). Steinbeck chose the motif of Cain and Abel and their sibling rivalry for the central narrative of the novel so that his sons, as well as the other readers, would be able to relate and feel a connection with the story. In this analysis, there will be a focus on the thematic element of sibling rivalry as reflected through the story of Cain and Abel, as well as how Steinbeck seems to create his own retelling of this story using his characters from *East of Eden*, with special interest in the different types of masculinity in each relationship.

The story of Cain and Abel is well-known by most people even if they are not devoutly religious or do not subscribe to a religion at all. In Genesis, “Abel was a keeper of sheep, but Cain was a tiller of the ground” and when it came time to offer God the products of their labor as sacrifices, it was Abel’s gifts that were well received and Cain’s gifts were not received with respect (JKV Genesis 4:2). After feeling scorned and unappreciated, Cain murders his brother, buries the body, and then lies to God about not knowing the whereabouts of his brother. God tells Cain “the voice of thy brother’s blood crieth unto me from the ground” and curses Cain with the inability to raise crop to harvest (KJV Genesis 4:10). The Lord then marks Cain as a means of identifying him and preventing him from being murdered by anyone. Cain and Abel both partake in behaviors that represent different masculine identities. Cain displays his masculinity through the tilling of the earth and the crops that he tends. Abel’s masculinity is displayed through his ability to raise and control his livestock and then furthers his masculinity in sacrificing the best of his flock by butchering them and offering the best meat to the Lord.

Steinbeck recognized the value of this story and utilized it within *East of Eden*. In a letter to Pascal Covici, he says “the gifts of Cain and Abel to their father and his rejection of one and acceptance of the other will I think mean a great deal to you but I wonder if it will be generally
understood by other readers” (Journal of a Novel 25). Abel’s unfortunate demise at the hands of his brother marks their relationship as a rather dramatic and drastic example of sibling rivalry and male violence. Although most siblings can admit to feeling like they could cause physical and/or emotional harm to a rather annoying sibling, rarely do you find that siblings will admit to feeling like they could murder their sibling. This murderous form of sibling rivalry is explored in John Byron’s *Cain and Abel in Text Tradition: Jewish and Christian Interpretations of the First Sibling Rivalry*.

John Byron argues that “Cain was unwilling or unable to master sin and, having succumbed to the very thing God warned him against, committed the first act of violence” (64). He also provides further detail into the inadequacy of Cain’s sacrificial offering compared to his brother Abel’s. Byron states that “Cain is portrayed as a greedy individual who only offers second best to God” and “Abel represents those who believe that they should love and honor God. Cain represents those who are self-absorbed, have little or no regard for others and, by implication, are anti-God” (66). Abel’s offering was the freshest and the best of his flock, while Cain delayed his offering to God and kept the best product of his harvest for himself. Byron goes on to argue that “the reason for Cain’s violent act against his brother is connected to the offering, but it goes even further to make a general claim that, in contrast to Abel, none of Cain’s works can be viewed as good even prior to the offering” (67-68). It is then able to be argued that God knew Cain’s character before the sacrificial offering and before the horrendous murder of Abel and knew that the offering was not done out of respect; thus, He did not show respect to Cain for the offering. The argument can be made that God did show favorites in regards to Cain and Abel but only after each showed their attitudes, beliefs, and character towards God.
Cyrus Trask, the father of Adam and Charles Trask, makes it no secret who is his favorite and favoritism feeds into the contentious sibling rivalry between Adam and Charles. He favors Adam in the way that he seems to protect him and prepares him for life; Cyrus even admits to Adam “I love you better. I always have. This may be a bad thing to tell you, but it’s true. I love you better. Else why would I have given myself the trouble of hurting you?” (27). Adam is Cyrus Trask’s first son from his first marriage. Cyrus’s first wife, simply referred to as Mrs. Trask, contracts a sexually transmitted disease from her husband that he received from his service during the Civil War. Tetsumaro Hayashi identifies the disease as gonorrhea and “[Mrs. Trask] decides that the deity requires that she be punished for the erotic dreams she had during her husband’s absence” and decides that she will sacrifice herself (191). Although Cyrus does fall into a depression after the death of his first wife, it does not take him long to find a new wife to take care of his son Adam. The narrator details how it took Cyrus less than a month to find a new wife and this is Alice, “the daughter of a neighboring farmer” (16). It becomes clear that Cyrus was not looking for love and simply wanted somebody to take care of the house and raise Adam. It also does not take Cyrus long to act upon his sexual urges since it was “with two weeks [that] Cyrus wooed, wedded, bedded, and impregnated her” (16). This is when Charles Trask enters the story.

Charles Trask and Adam Trask are as far opposite from one another as can be. Charles is “assertive, athletic, muscular, and competitive. As a teenager, he is subject to fits of violence and uncontrollable rage. He cannot bear to lose and tries to kill anyone who wins over him” (Hayashi 190). On the other hand, Adam is a much quieter child that typically stays as far away from confrontations and altercations as he can. Tetsumaro Hayashi identifies Adam as “[the] Abel to his brother’s Cain; later he is Adam to his sons’ roles as Abel and Cain” (187). The Cain and
Abel dynamic between Charles and Adam culminates into a violent and furious climax that results in Charles assaulting Adam repeatedly and attempting to murder him with a hatchet because he witnesses Cyrus and Adam walking while discussing Cyrus’s intention to enlist Adam in the army. Charles believes and accepts this as proof of his suspicion that Adam is their father’s favorite. This hostility wanes after Adam is sent away on duty and the brothers write letters to one another, a medium that allows Charles to be honest with his brother and admit that he misses his presence. Adam, understandably traumatized from the abuse from his younger brother, does not develop much of a relationship as the story progresses. After Adam and Cathy move to California, there is little to no mention of Charles and he soon becomes a figure long forgotten and rarely alluded to. As the children grow and mature, Adam makes an attempt to contact Charles after Caleb and Aron have grown but is sadly informed that his brother has passed away.

Charles’s toxic masculinity is the most harmful component of his relationship with Adam. The Teaching Tolerance organization describes toxic masculinity as

“a narrow and repressive description of manhood, designating manhood as defined by violence, sex, status and aggression. It’s the cultural ideal of manliness, where strength is everything while emotions are a weakness; where sex and brutality are yardsticks by which men are measured, while supposedly “feminine” traits—which can range from emotional vulnerability to simply not being hypersexual—are the means by which your status as “man” can be taken away” (Clemens).

As children, Charles violently acts out after being bested in athletic competitions but Adam is the target of most of his aggression. After Adam is able to hit a few baseballs that Charles pitched to
him, his aggression is described in the following passage “Charles moved close and struck him in
the face with his bat. Adam covered his bleeding nose with his hands, and Charles swung his bat
and hit him in the ribs, knocked the wind out of him, swung at his head and knocked him out”
(23). Charles then kicks Adam in the stomach and walks away without any feelings of regret.
This violence within Charles makes it hard for Adam to ever feel close enough to trust and
confide in his brother and even as adults the two are never able to see understand one another or
agree on anything.

Charles and Adam contribute to the Cain and Abel allusion of *East of Eden* in Charles’s
frustration at his father’s lack of appreciation for a gift that he receives. When Charles is
viciously assaulting Adam he screams about how the knife that he bought for his father does not
seem to be appreciated, while the dog that Adam gave Cyrus becomes a companion to their
father. Charles screams at Adam

“you brought him a mongrel pup you picked up in the woodlot. You
laughed like a fool and said it would make a good bird dog. That dog
sleeps in his room. He plays with it while he’s reading. He’s got it all
trained. And where’s the knife? ‘Thanks,’ he said, just ‘Thanks’” (29).
Similar to the lack of appreciation that Cain feels, Charles’s frustration reaches a tipping point at
this stage as well and this is when he attacks Adam with the unintentional attempt on Adam’s
life. Their sibling rivalry, similar to Cain and Abel’s, culminates into violence but, luckily for
Adam, does not end in Adam’s murder. Adam is able to hide in a nearby river and escapes his
brother’s murderous wrath.

Much like Cyrus Trask, Adam makes it no secret which child it is that garners most of his
attention and his favor. Although Cain is the most independent of Adam’s sons, Aron is the child
that receives his favoritism because of his ability to learn things quickly in school and he believes that Aron is self-driven, when in reality it is Caleb that plants the ideas into his head. Aron is naïve and cannot fathom that the world is filled with both good and evil. He is quick to accept that his mother is dead and refuses to entertain the idea that she may not be in heaven as Adam has told Caleb and himself. Aron has “wide blue eyes, fine and golden hair, a beautiful soft mouth, and an expression of angelic innocence. His prettiness makes other boys at first consider him a sissy, but he proves himself a determined and fearless fighter” (Hayashi 189). Caleb believes that it is the physical resemblance of his mother Cathy that makes Adam favor his brother.

On the other hand, Caleb is physically reminiscent of Adam’s brother Charles. The paternity of the twins is called into question by the reader due to multiple incidents in the book that allude to the fact that Charles may be the father of Caleb and Aron. On the night of their wedding, Cathy tricks Adam into drinking some of her medication and after he falls asleep sneaks into Charles’s room and climbs into his bed; the chapter ends after an exchange of words between Charles and Cathy but it is left to the reader to decide whether or not a moment of intimacy is shared between the two. During the naming of the twins, Adam is appalled and cries out “these boys are not alike! They don’t look alike” and claims “that one looks like my brother. I just saw it” (261). This could arguably be the beginning of Adam’s disdain for Caleb. Cathy attempts to add fuel to the fire in her meeting with Adam at the brothel when she alludes to the night of their wedding. She attempts to plant the thought and image of her and Charles together in Adam’s mind when she says “at first you will wonder, and then you’ll be unsure. You’ll think back about Charles--- all about him. I could have loved Charles” (322). Adam never seems to fully appreciate Caleb, even after he offers him money that he earned from selling bean crops to
European farmers during a famine. His father refuses to accept the gift and this causes Caleb to feel spurned and he reveals to the truth about their mother to Aron out of spite; Aron enlists in the army and is killed in World War One, thus bringing their Cain and Abel relationship to a close.

It is interesting that Steinbeck shifts his narrative from the focus of an Abel character, Adam, to that of a representation of Cain through Caleb. This narrative shift allows the reader to gain perspective on both sides of the sibling rivalry. Steinbeck seems to summarize the cause of sibling rivalry perfectly when he states that “love is identification and embodies jealousy and suspicion” (Journal of a Novel 38).

In Journal of a Novel, John Steinbeck writes letters to Pascal Covici in which he details his writing process while writing his first draft of East of Eden. Steinbeck details the complications he experiences in writing the novel as well as complications he has as a parent with his two sons Thomas and John. At various stages, Steinbeck details incidents in which his son Tom is causing trouble. In one letter Steinbeck relays how Tom is refusing to go to school, fights to stay away, claims he misses the bus. When [John and Tom] stayed overnight with me last week I knew that Tom was in some deep emotion trouble, I could feel it. And I am pretty sure it is a simple feeling of rejection, of not being loved (Journal of a Novel 25).

This is a crucial component that cannot be dismissed or ignored because Thomas and John are the intended audience, besides Steinbeck’s readers, of East of Eden. The first draft of the novel was supposed to have the Hamilton family, Steinbeck’s maternal ancestors, play a much larger role in the plot. Steinbeck at one point decides that the Hamilton family can be left out of East of Eden “because they do not contribute directly nor often to the Trask development” (Journal of a
In the end, the Hamilton family is reduced to a smaller role with Samuel Hamilton, and arguably Liza, playing the larger roles to keep focus and track of the religious and moral theme of the novel.

Steinbeck’s focus on dedicating the novel to his sons helps keep *East of Eden* focused on the narrative allusion of the Cain and Abel story and, without dedicating it exclusively or directly to his sons, Steinbeck leaves the story open to be relatable to all of his readers. Steinbeck explains this decision in a letter to Pascal Covici and explains that he wants to “relate the reader to the book so that, while [he is] talking to the boys actually, [he is] relating every reader to the story as though he were reading about his own background” (*Journal of a Novel* 8). Although the novel speaks in very gender specific terms (mostly male in the form of he, him, his), the theme of sibling rivalry is relatable to all sets of siblings without any emphasis on specific genders. The emphasis and focus on sibling rivalry amongst males may be explained away as simply Steinbeck trying to make the relationship of siblings in the novel relatable to his sons but there is also reason to believe that sibling rivalry is less intense amongst brother-sister and sister-sister siblings.

John Steinbeck perfectly illustrates sibling rivalry through the plot of *East of Eden*. He models the novel’s main plot after humankind’s never-ending struggling between good and evil and utilizes the story of Cain and Abel to develop a story that his readers, primarily his sons, would be able to relate to. In *East of Eden*, Lee argues that the greatest terror a child can have is that he is not loved, and rejection is the hell he fears. I think everyone in the world to a large or small scale has felt rejection. And with rejection comes anger, and with anger some kind of crime in revenge for the rejection, and with the crime guilt--- and there is the story of mankind (268).
This philosophical approach to understanding Cain’s actions against his brother Abel perfectly illustrates the sibling rivalry that most of Steinbeck’s readers can relate to. There is often a sibling that is favored over another or other siblings and the parents will typically try to hide this fact or lie about it. For Cain and Abel, it comes down to Cain’s gift not being adequate enough to earn God’s respect, while Abel’s gift shows a selfless sacrifice to the Lord that in turn gains respect. John Byron argues that “Cain is portrayed as a greedy individual who only offers second best to God” and “Abel represents those who believe that they should love and honor God. Cain represents those who are self-absorbed, have little or no regard for others and, by implication, are anti-God” (66). This attempts to bring clarity to the world’s first account of sibling rivalry.

In *East of Eden*, Charles and Adam Trask and Caleb and Aron Trask continue the Cain and Abel story of sibling rivalry. Both pair of brothers offer their father a gift and one gift is received and given much respect, while the other gift is rejected or hardly acknowledged. This causes one brother to become jealous and furious with their sibling, although it is not their fault for the favoritism they receive. For Adam and Charles, Cyrus Trask shows admiration and favoritism towards Adam and treats the dog that Adam gifts him with love and respect; on the other hand, Cyrus responds to Charles’s gift of a knife with a simple thanks. Due to his toxic masculinity, Charles responds with great violence and almost murders Adam out of frustration and jealousy.

Adam continues this torturous pattern with Aron and Caleb. Adam shows much enthusiasm to Aron’s return from college for Thanksgiving but when Caleb attempts to gift him money as a means of making up for money that Adam lost in a business venture, Adam rejects the gift. Caleb becomes infuriated because most of his life other people have favored Aron over him and his father has always believed Aron to be the better of the two. Adam even credits Aron
for being self-driven for finishing high school early and starting college shortly after when it was actually Caleb that drove Aron to attend college early. Aron hides away from the imperfections and evil of the world by escaping and developing a dependence and safety he finds only in religion. He soon finds faults and flaws in everyone around him, even his own girlfriend. Upon their first meeting, he asks Abra to play the role of his mother, a role that she willingly accepts but grows tired of after they enter high school. It is Aron’s naivety that brings about his undoing. Unable to fathom the truth about their mother, he enlists in the army and ends up being killed. Caleb is a wonderful representation of a Cain figure because, through the omniscient narrator, the reader is able to relate to him through his feelings of inferiority.

It is also important to note that *East of Eden* was also intended originally to be something for John Steinbeck’s sons to read and understand their family’s history, as well as gain an understanding of one another. Throughout *Journal of a Novel*, Steinbeck provides details and intimate stories about his son Thomas and how he would act out to get out of going to school or for attention. After his sons spend the night with him, Steinbeck states that he believes that “[he] knew that Tom was in some deep emotion trouble, [he] could feel it. And [he was] pretty sure it is a simple feeling of rejection, of *not* being loved” (*Journal of a Novel* 25). Even though this novel only provides a brother-brother pairing of siblings for a discussion of sibling rivalry, this novel encapsulates sibling rivalry perfectly and makes it understandable and relatable for the reader.
East of Eve(n):
Analysis of the Marriages and the Idea of an Ideal Woman in *East of Eden*

“It is hardly accurate to describe John Steinbeck’s female characters as stereotypical. Many of his fictional women are reflections of what males see in them--- and hence they seem only silhouettes of women, silence women, or, like Curley’s wife, superficial women”

(Shillinglaw 176)

There is great resentment towards John Steinbeck’s work due to his lack of positive female characters and, at times, a total disregard for women entirely in his literature. Steinbeck is commonly regarded as a sexist and a misogynist for the limited role and gender roles that his female characters play in his fictional literature. The most popular of Steinbeck’s short stories is “The Chrysanthemums”. In “Out of the Fence into the Ring: Steinbeck’s Engagement with Public Issues in ‘The Chrysanthemums’”, Terrell Tebbetts describes how in this short story Steinbeck “examines the plight of women in a society that limits them to confined domestic spaces designed to protect them and their work” and also “suggests that women should enter those more challenging public spaces, as it also suggest that men have actually surrounded their competitive public spaces with invisible yet sufficient protections far less confining than those women experience” (55). In *East of Eden*, there is a notable absence of positive female characters throughout the novels plot and what few female characters do exist they present issues with society’s definition and ideas of women and the roles they should fill. Steinbeck’s work seems to actively participate in the discussion of gender roles and women equality, as well as reflects society’s beliefs about women. For the focus of this discussion, we will discuss and analyze the roles of Liza Hamilton and what contributions she brings to the Hamilton family and the concept of what an ideal wife is, Abra Bacon and what she represents in regards to the ideal woman, a discussion of Faye and the other women that are employed in the brothel and what their role represents in regards to an analysis of society’s views on women and the multiple
issues that are present with the representation of sex workers in *East of Eden*, and finally a
discussion of the other Hamilton women and what gender roles they fill.

Before exploring the marriages within *East of Eden*, it is worth exploring the marriages
of John Steinbeck and how the relationships with these three women must have influenced his
works. John Steinbeck was married three times during his lifetime and he was, at times, not the
perfect husband. Steinbeck’s first marriage to Carol Henning is credited for being a creative
partnership. This creative partnership would ultimately create marital strain between Carol and
John but the duo remained good friends throughout the rest of their lives. As a wife, Susan
Shillinglaw describes Carol as “plucky, loyal, intensely proud of her husband, [and] she tried to
protect him from critics” (2). The couple became married in 1930 and, as Steinbeck’s muse,
Carol helped him in the creation of a number of his literary classics, among them being *Of Mice
and Men* and *The Grapes of Wrath*. It is believed that with “[the publication of] Grapes finished
them, leaving them physically and emotionally drained and setting the stage for marital
problems” (Shillinglaw 202). The controversy and public outrage of *The Grapes of Wrath*
created distance, literal and figurative, between Carol and John. Although Carol is credited for
her role in the creation of *The Grapes of Wrath*, the public gave Steinbeck credit for the sole
authorship, causing Carol to feel spurned and ignored by the public as well as by her husband.
Carol Henning was a strong woman but it is believed that this caused Steinbeck “to feel castrated
by this strong woman” (Shillinglaw 211). Unfortunately, Steinbeck would blame Carol for the
negative reception of *The Grapes of Wrath* and Steinbeck left Carol to take the brunt of harassing
phone class and letters of outrage addressed to Steinbeck, leaving her to accept them as her fault.
In 1939, Steinbeck decided to leave Carol at their ranch as he headed to Hollywood to help in
Lewis Milestone’s film adaptation of *Of Mice and Men*. This physical distance would allow another woman to enter their marriage.

This woman was Gwendolyn Conger, or Gwyn as Steinbeck would prefer to call her, and she was “a younger woman unblemished by the years of struggle” (Shillinglaw 202). Gwen was twenty years old when she was introduced the thirty seven year old Steinbeck after an introduction by a childhood friend, Max Wagner. Gwen Conger “was lovely with golden hair, milky skin, and winsome ways” and played the role of Steinbeck’s caretaker during his time in Hollywood and would wash and bathe him when he fell ill (Shillinglaw 211). Although Gwen soon became the subject of John’s attention and affection, it is believed that Steinbeck remained faithful and committed to Carol despite Gwen’s presence at social outings in Carol’s place. In Shillinglaw’s chronical of Carol and John’s marriage, a quote from Lewis Milestone argues that “[Steinbeck] began to feel castrated by this strong woman. And the reason he fell for Gwen was because suddenly he found out that he was not impotent, it was just the woman who was making him like that. When he met Gwen, she restored his confidence and his masculinity” (Shillinglaw 212). Although their relationship started off lovingly, their relationship would prove to be anything but an ideal partnership.

In *My Life with John Steinbeck*, Gwyn Conger Steinbeck attempts to portray her relationship with John Steinbeck as one that was filled with love but was also riddled with hostility and animosity. Their relationship began in 1938 after John and Gwyn’s mutual friend Max Wagner invited her to the Aloha Arms hotel in Los Angeles where she made chicken noodle soup and “washed and bathed [Steinbeck]” and also “rubbed his back and his legs” (Conger Steinbeck 2). Although their relationship began during Steinbeck’s marriage to his first wife Carol, Gwyn states that their relationship was not immoral and, if anything, was more of an
emotional affair as opposed to a physical affair. The couples affair turned intimate one rainy weekend after John had a dispute with Carol and he escaped, as he often did, into the arms of his mistress. Gwyn became pregnant due to John Steinbeck’s refusal to use contraceptives claiming “they made him ‘impotent’” (Conger Steinbeck 16). Gwyn’s mother would later take her to a doctor that provided with a medication that “cured” the pregnancy.

After their marriage, Gwyn describes her life with John Steinbeck as “quite a combination of heaven and hell”, never knowing “where one started and the other left off” (Conger Steinbeck 34 & 35). Riddled with emotional abuse, Gwyn’s portrayal of their marriage alludes to John Steinbeck being quite the domineering figure and also quite the misogynist. One of the many examples of Steinbeck’s domineering and emotionally abusive behavior is a disastrous road trip to Las Vegas, Nevada that resulted in the couple driving to Las Vegas, New Mexico. Refusing any other way that was not “the Steinbeck way”, Gwyn describes how John insisted that he had read the map, knew what direction they were headed and, although the sun was in rising, insisted they were heading west towards Las Vegas, Nevada; Gwyn states, “there was never any arguing with John. He was right, and I and everyone else were wrong. That was all there was to it” (52 & 53). In 1948, after five years of marriage, Gwyn told John that she wanted a divorce; this decision would cause him to resent her for the rest of his life.

Some scholars have argued that Gwyn Conger Steinbeck was John’s inspiration for the devious Cathy Ames in *East of Eden*. The website for Gwyn’s book alludes to this argument from a quote out of Steinbeck’s *Journal of a Novel*. The quotation is from a letter to Pascal Covici, Steinbeck’s friend and editor, and Steinbeck details how he had to build a whole new person right from the ground. This is a woman and you must know her; know her completely because she is a tremendously
powerful force in the book. And her name is Catherine or Cathy – Does that give you any clue to her? (Journal of a Novel 39).

The allusion to a villainous female with a name that can be abbreviated is believed to be an act of spite from Steinbeck due to Gwyn’s decision to separate herself from him, rather than him from her. Gwyn Conger Steinbeck’s portrait of their marriage has been primarily well received by biographers and Steinbeck specialists that praise it for providing more insight into the mysterious private life of the literary giant.

Steinbeck would marry a third time in 1950 to Elain Scott and remained married until his death in 1968. Elain’s contribution to Steinbeck’s posthumous publications are mostly non-fiction publications and provide, albeit a biased and edited, portrait of John Steinbeck. Posthumous publications such as Journal of a Novel, Steinbeck: A Life in Letters, and The Acts of King Arthur and His Noble Knights were the result of editing and publishing letters and journals that Steinbeck kept to document his creative process. These non-fiction publications, including Susan Shillinglaw’s Carol and John Steinbeck: A Portrait of a Marriage and Gwyn’s My Life with John Steinbeck, prove to be important to many scholars in gaining an understanding of John Steinbeck outside of his literature. Ideally, these non-fiction narratives provide enough information about John Steinbeck to gain insight into what his beliefs were about the ideal marriage and ideal woman.

Most of the wives in East of Eden seem to be comfortable and complacent in their marriages even though it is clear that their husbands are guilty of infidelity and other immoral activities. These women are guilty of being the stereotypical wives that stand-by their men although they look foolish for turning a blind-eye on the immoral activities that their husbands partake in. For instance, Mrs. Edwards, the wife of the whoremaster Mr. Edwards, believes her
husband is “an importer” and sees her husband as “coldly thoughtful, neither warm nor cruel; and she is content with life, devoting herself to her sons, to housekeeping, and to the church” (Hayashi 68). The narrator of East of Eden alludes to the possibility that if Mrs. Edwards was aware of what business her husband was actually involved in she would not believe it anyway. Another faithful woman to an immoral man in East of Eden is Abra’s mother, simply named Mrs. Bacon. Abra is a girl wise beyond her years and quickly discovers that her father is feigning and illness and was actually trying to hide from something and “wondered whether her mother knew her father was not ill” (577). Mrs. Bacon plays the role of devoted wife and tries to protect their daughter from discovering the professional missteps of her father and outsiders from coming into contact with the allegedly ill Mr. Bacon to help protect him from any accusations of guilt. The indefatigable character of Abra keeps her determination strong to discover the secret of her father’s mysterious illness and learns that “he’s taken money from his company. He doesn’t know whether his partners are going to put him in jail or let him try to pay it back” (590).

The nameless Mrs. Edwards and Mrs. Bacon both play the role of devoted wives and protectors that feign ignorance and portray themselves as ignorant to any unethical business their husbands may be involved in. The role that these women fulfil is the devoted wife that takes care of her husband and allows her husband to walk all over her. This role is representative of the societal value that was placed on a woman, specifically wives. The other role that women seem to fulfil in East of Eden is that of sexual objects for the pleasure of men in the societal and professional role of sex workers, or whores as they are referred to in the novel.

Faye and the other sex workers (Steinbeck refers to them simply as whores) arguably represent another role that society found fitting for women, placing them as commodities and objects of sexual desire for men. One rather bothersome feature of East of Eden is Steinbeck’s
rather flippant use of the word “whore” and his discussion of those women that now would be identified politically correctly as sex workers. Chapter Nineteen of *East of Eden* begins with the introduction of churches and whorehouses simultaneously being constructed in Salinas. The narrator asserts that “surely they were both intended to accomplish the same thing: the singing, the devotion, the poetry of the churches took a man out of his bleakness for a time, and so did the brothels” (215). Faye, the original madam of the brothel that Kate inherits, manages her establishment with as much respectability as can be achieved in operating a brothel. Faye believes that her brothel as a “refuge for young men piling into puberty, morning over lost virtue, and aching to lose some more” and Faye acts as “the reassurer of misbegotten husbands”; Faye also runs the brothel with enough respectability to allow customers to believe that “if any sexual thing happened to [them] at Faye’s [they] felt it was an accident but forgivable” (218). As a madam, it is believed that she is an ideal woman because of her characteristics as a madam.

*East of Eden*’s narrator claims that madams are “eternal women to be sentimentalized down the years. There is something very attractive to men about a madam. She combines the brains of a businessman, the toughness of a prize fighter, the warmth of a companion, the humor of a tragedian” (217). This creates the idea that the role of a madam is worthy of more admiration and respect than that of the other sex workers in the brothel because they embody qualities that men can admire in other men but also have traits that they look for in an ideal woman.

The other sex workers of the brothel are dismissively regarded by some of the men and the narrator of *East of Eden* as whores and creates one of the most troubling aspects of the novel's text. In the development of Cathy’s character, Steinbeck states that “Cathy is by nature a whore. She also is by profession a whore” (*Journal of a Novel* 39). This forces us to focus on the definition “whore” as a verb and a noun. The Newbury House Dictionary of American English
defines whore as “a woman who takes money for sex” (1072). The more politically correct term in place of prostitute and other various forms of employment in the sex industry simply labels them as sex workers. Of course, the word has drawn criticism by some because it implies that everyone that works in the sex industry is employed by choice but for the women in *East of Eden* it is more appropriate to refer to them as sex workers. In *East of Eden*, there is a conversation that Caleb has with a gentleman named Rabbit that talks about Cathy, forgetting who Caleb is in a drunken stupor, and states that “she wasn’t no good as a wife but she’s sure as hell a good whore. Funny too--- you know how they say a whore makes a good wife? Ain’t nothing new for them to experiment with” (Steinbeck 442). This conversation is unfortunate for two reasons; one being that Caleb has to discover that his wife is not only alive but is a well-known madam and the other being the offhand reference to women as sexual objects. Steinbeck’s literature acts as a mirror to be held against society to reflect its flaws and that is what this discussion of Faye and the other women of the brothel does. In reading sexism and misogyny into *East of Eden*, what Steinbeck attempted to create is the realization that the views and beliefs about a woman’s role in society, especially when they are objectified and demeaned to being simply sexual beings for men’s gratification and consumption, are flawed and immoral. Steinbeck then moves on to gender roles as fulfilled specifically by the women of his own family in the daughters of Liza and Samuel Hamilton.

The daughters of Samuel and Liza Hamilton all partake in various roles in society that are determined and limited by their gender. Being Hamilton women, the daughters of Liza and Samuel partake in and fill gender roles in society but they take control of their roles and make it their own. For instance, Dessie Hamilton fills one of the many society defined gender roles for a woman and becomes a dressmaker. Dessie’s dress shop is described as “a woman’s world” and
the door was closed to men. It was a sanctuary where women could be themselves--- smelly, wanton, mystic, conceited, truthful, and interested.

The whalebone corsets came off at Dessie’s, the sacred corsets that molded and warped woman-flesh into goddess-flesh. At Dessie’s they were women who went to the toilet and overate and scratched and farted. And from this freedom came laughter, roars of laughter (281).

Although Dessie does become a dressmaker, a role defined by society as fitting for women, she allows a place of safety and comfort for other women to escape their restricted and confined lives. According to Steinbeck, the narrator of *East of Eden*, there is not much known about Lizzie Hamilton other than she “seems ashamed of her family, marries young, moves away and reappears only at funerals”; she also has “a capacity for hatred and bitterness” that makes her vastly different from the rest of the Hamilton family and “causes her to disown her son when he marries someone she disapproves of” (Hayashi 83). Lizzie’s feelings of contempt and shame come from her family’s inability to move out of poverty due to her father’s imaginative inventions that are constantly undermined and stolen from greedy patent companies he submits his inventions to. Mollie Hamilton’s gender role, like that of Lizzie, seems to be defined in her identity as a wife after she marries and moves to San Francisco in an apartment with “a bearskin rug, and smokes gold-tipped cigarettes” (Hayashi 84). Olive Hamilton, Steinbeck’s mother, becomes a school teacher but goes far beyond simply being identified as another female school teacher. As part of Steinbeck’s limited information for his son’s about his mother’s family, he provides information about his mother’s, their grandmother, life as a grade school teacher and her life outside that role. For instance, Olive Hamilton is credited for selling the most Liberty bonds during World War I and is rewarded by earning a seat in “an army open-cockpit biplane”,
although she feared flying (Hayashi 84). While some the daughters of Liza and Samuel Hamilton seem to fill gender roles that society defines as female, they also take these roles and make them their own outside of the feminist and misogynist roles that society restrict them to. Possibly drawing inspiration from their parents, the marriage of Samuel and Liza Hamilton is the closest to an ideal marriage and partnership in *East of Eden*.

Liza Hamilton, John Steinbeck’s grandmother, is seemingly one of the few positive and ideal models of a woman and wife in *East of Eden*. Liza is described as a rather devoutly religious and strict figure in the Hamilton household. She fits the mold of most of the wives in *East of Eden* and a number of Steinbeck’s other literature in that she does not allow for much joy in the house and anything fun is understood to be sinful. Tetsumaro Hayashi describes Liza as “Puritanical and constrained. She believes the idleness, card playing, fun and laughter are sinful” and “she has no sense of humor and thinks that life is not to be enjoyed but to be endured with uncomplaining fortitude” (83). The one positive credit Hayashi allows Liza is that, although she does not enjoy it, she does household chores and other work as a duty and is a good cook. Liza Hamilton appears to be what was once considered the ideal woman and wife in that she stays at home and tends to the chores and cooks meals for her husband to return to after a hard day of arduous labor. Her relationship with Samuel Hamilton is vastly different from the relationship of most spouses in *East of Eden*. Samuel and Liza often conflict in their ideologies but always come back to a common ground of their loving and supportive relationship. Samuel is a creator and imaginative and Liza is more realistic. Liza believes that the Bible should be read and accepted as it is written and Samuel struggles with the text of the Bible and frustrates Liza with questioning and analyzing the Bible. They have their disagreements and arguments but never allow themselves to remain hostile or upset with their partner. Samuel also shows great respect
and concern for Liza at various points in *East of Eden*. The relationship between Liza and Samuel is the closest to an ideal marriage in that, although the couple argue and do not always agree on certain things, they always come back together at the end of the day loving and caring for one another. Liza Hamilton and her daughters are just a couple of the strong women in *East of Eden*; the other is Abra Bacon.

Abra Bacon enters the story and quickly becomes the target of Aron’s obsessive affection. Although their relationship is delayed due to interference from Caleb, Aron and Abra begin dating when the Trask family moves to Salinas. As a child, Abra is a strong, intelligent, and independent girl that “wants to be an adult and even as a child simulates adult speech, attitudes, and emotions” (Hayashi 32). In her relationship with Aron, she is asked and willing adopts the role of a mother to Aron that develops into an unhealthy dependency. When Abra becomes a woman, “her features have a ‘bold muscular strength,’ and Lee feels strength, goodness and warmth in her. He praises her for her loveliness, courage, wisdom, and ability to know and accept things” (Hayashi 33). Abra’s maturity places her above Aron in that she is able to understand and accept the world for how it is, while Aron has to escape to the safety that he discovers and constructs in religion. One of Abra’s moments of maturity and wisdom is shown when she is able to see past what her parents want her to believe and discovers that her father is in trouble at work for embezzling money. She is able to see past the façade of her mother and overhears the truth being discussed in her parent’s room. Another moment of Abra’s greatness is shown when she responds to Caleb’s reference to her being Aron’s girl by saying that she does not belong to any man. Abra becomes a feminist figure in her strength and ability to create and forge her own path despite what others may expect from her.
John Steinbeck’s writing is intended to be available and relatable to the common person but a lot of critics and scholars believes that women are denigrated, belittled, and often ignored in his fictional novels. Part of the argument is that when women are present and incorporated into a Steinbeck novel they are often overly sexualized or just fill sexist and misogynistic gender roles. An evaluation of the marriages of John Steinbeck, as documented in various non-fiction narratives, depicts John Steinbeck as less than an ideal husband. Carol Steinbeck’s marriage to John has been described as a creative partnership and Carol is believed to have been John’s muse; this did not stop John from beginning an affair with Gwendoline “Gwyn” Conger. After the collapse of his marriage to Carol, Gwyn and John married in 1943 and, as detailed in My Life with John Steinbeck, Gwyn’s life with Steinbeck would become “quite a combination of heaven and hell” (Conger Steinbeck 34 & 35). Steinbeck’s marriages undoubtedly became source material for some of the less than perfect marriages in East of Eden as well as the apparent ideal marriage of Samuel and Liza Hamilton. The Hamilton family, Steinbeck’s maternal lineage and inspiration for East of Eden, play a lesser role than he had intended in the final manuscript of his text but what they contribute to the overall discussion of gender roles is important. For instance, Dessie’s dress shop and Olive’s selling of Liberty bonds during World War I are significant features of their characters that allow them a certain amount of masculinity outside of their feminine gender roles. Although somewhat biased, the marriage of Samuel and Liza Hamilton seems to express what an ideal marriage is to John Steinbeck, as well as what an ideal wife is through Liza’s behavior. The role that the sex workers, or whores, play in East of Eden is a continuation of the discussion of what society’s belief an ideal woman is, in regards to being submissive to men and sexual objects for the pleasure of men. Abra Bacon closes out the discussion of women in East of Eden by fulfilling the role of a strong feminine figure that defies
the patriarchy and refuses being owned or regarded to as any man’s girl. Abra also shows great
strength in her ability to create her own path despite what other people, and society, might expect
or confine her to. The overall presence of the female in *East of Eden* has a positive engagement
with the discussion of gender and gender roles in society in that Steinbeck’s magnum opus
presents the reader with women from different classes that fill various gender roles, negative and
positive, but progressively demonstrate the strength and fortitude of women.
Works Cited


