*East of Eden*

John Steinbeck, [*East of Eden*](http://www.amazon.com/East-Penguin-Twentieth-Century-Classics/dp/0140186395)(New York: Viking Press, 1952).

Summary:

Steinbeck, winner of the Pulitzer Prize, the National Book Award, and the Nobel Prize for Literature, wrote in his journal, “There is only one book to a man.” *East of Eden* was this book. An allegory written to and for his two sons, *East of Eden* is a book about good and evil, but perhaps it is more accurate to say between *grace* and evil. Set in Salinas Valley, California in the years just before and after the turn of the twentieth century, the story follows two families—the Trasks and the Hamiltons—and how they navigate the human condition. It would be accurate to call *East of Eden* a “big book” in that it deals with large themes and historical patterns, but the novel is also a character study, with some of the wittiest, wisest, and most tragic and evil characters in literature. The first half of the novel belongs to Adam Trask—both a biblical Adam and an Abel—while the second concerns Adam’s son Cal—the Cain figure. Steinbeck considered this to be his greatest novel, what he symbolically called his “first book.”

Themes & Symbols:

* Land/Place. The book was originally titled *The Salinas Valley*. The first page even uses mountains to symbolically place characters between the “light” of one direction versus the “dark” of the other.
* Free will. *Timshel*, translated as “thou mayest,” frames the story. Cal is given the option, like Cain, to choose whether to engage in evil actions or not.
* Fathers and sons. Each father-son relationship is fraught with pain, stemming from the father preferring one son over another.
* Genesis. The story of Cain and Abel is retold at least twice in the family history of the Trasks, with many characters living “east of Eden.” Charles’ scar is a modern version of the “mark of Cain.”
* Expectations. Appearances are pleasantly and frightfully deceiving, from Lee to Cathy.
* Good and evil. Steinbeck says, “We have only one story. All novels, all poetry, are built on the never-ending contest in ourselves of good and evil.”

Discussion Questions:

1. How do Cain and Abel overlap with Charles and Adam, or Cal and Aron, or even Cathy and Abra?
2. How does the transfer of the Trask family fortune—Cyrus to Adam and Charles; Charles to Adam and Cathy; and Cathy to Aron—comment on and mirror the concept of original sin?
3. Does *timshel* apply to Cathy? Steinbeck writes, “I believe there are monsters born in the world to human parents.”
4. Discuss the importance of names in the novel, the donning and changing of names.
5. In the final scene Adam says to Cal, “*Timshel.*” Is this redemption and grace? If so, who is redeemed?
6. Biblically evaluate the following phrase: *Humans can choose to overcome sinful decisions but not our sinful natures*. Is that a fair interpretation of the novel?