

## **EAST OF EDEN**

### **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

#### **Part One**

1. How do the contrasting values in the landscape affect a reader's sense of the valley?
2. There is an epic scope to the opening chapter, as if Steinbeck is announcing to the reader the grandness of his theme. Comment on how he suggests the grandness of his conception.
3. Steinbeck describes the inhabitants of the valley—Indians, Spanish, Americans—in rather unattractive terms, as if he's echoing an "official" history. Why would he do so?
4. How do the patriarchs, Samuel Hamilton and Cyrus Trask—and their respective families—differ? Compare their different moral environments.
5. How do Samuel and Cyrus contrast as storytellers? Why does storytelling play such a major role in this novel? What kind of storyteller is the character Steinbeck?
6. How are children in Part One influenced by perceived flaws in their fathers, and how do they respond? What are the consequences of parental love, neglect or rejection among the Hamiltons and Trasks?
7. Regardless of Charles's brutal beating of Adam and his infidelity with Adam's wife, does he love his brother? Why? Are the brothers close? Why might they be closer through letters? Why does Charles' handwriting change in the strange letter he writes to Adam at the end of Chapter 4? And why might Steinbeck say that this letter is a "key" to the novel?
8. Is Cathy Ames doomed by nature to be who she is, or does she have a choice? Cathy is introduced as a monster in Chapter 8; in Chapter 12 she's described slightly differently. Steinbeck seems to be assessing her character as he writes the book. Why might Steinbeck be asking the reader to assess Cathy carefully?
9. How might Cathy Ames be an Eve-like figure? Or is she like Lilith, a demon created from filth, who, according to some Jewish myths, was Adam's first wife? What role does human sexuality play in the lives of the characters?
10. How is Adam's good nature and inability to see through Cathy a weakness? If Adam is an "A" character and therefore "good," is he also an admirable character? Do you, as a reader, like all that he does?
11. Who is telling the story at any given moment? Steinbeck, Olive's son, a character in his own book? The all-knowing narrator who can even tell what others are thinking? Or is the philosopher-critic a third possibility? Why do you think that Steinbeck includes himself in this text? What might be his point in so doing?

12. Comment on gift-giving in the novel. Why is it so important?

13. As opposed to the Cain and Abel story in the Bible, it is the Abel figure in *East of Eden* (Adam) who seems condemned to be a wanderer. Why?

14. Steinbeck has been accused of creating only two types of female characters, mother figures (like the heroic Ma Joad) and prostitutes (like Cathy). While many female characters in this book are not as richly drawn as the male characters, he nonetheless creates fascinating characters in Alice, Liza and later Abra. Comment on the role of these women as nurturers, as mothers, as confidants. The thematic role of each differs.

15. Early reviewers complained about Cathy. If this is a novel about free will, why is Cathy, a monster seemingly without free will, a major character in the novel? Think about this question as you read the book.

16. Why might Cathy be compared to *Alice in Wonderland*?

## **Part Two**

1. In Chapter 13, Steinbeck celebrates "the freedom of the mind to take any direction it wishes, undirected." Both Adam and Faye create and harbor a childlike image of Cathy to their peril. They fall prey to their own creations. What traits do these two characters share? And what are some of the dangers inherent in "freedom of the mind"?

2. Is Adam's forgetfulness of his past in his new Eden convincing? Is his obliviousness a form of repression destined to wreak havoc?

3. From your reading of Chapter 14—about Olive Hamilton, Steinbeck's mother—do you think it is wildly intrusive and inappropriate, as some critics have claimed? Or, is the chapter consistent with other interjections throughout the book and with Steinbeck's ambition to write a novel for his sons in an unrestricted style?

4. Regarding Cathy, the narrator says: "Who knows but that she tried to tell someone or everyone what she was like, and could not for lack of a common language." Both Lee and Samuel know upon meeting her "what she is like." So does Charles. What qualities in Cathy are transparent to those who care to notice?

5. How does Steinbeck handle the issue of racial prejudice in his portrayal of Lee, Adam's Chinese servant, and "the Nigger," whorehouse madam? Both are dignified characters, yet both are subject to denigration. Clearly Lee is the more important character. Why does he speak English so readily with Samuel? How many roles does he play in this novel?

6. Both Mr. Edwards, the whoremaster in Part One, and Faye, the brothel madam, fall in love with Cathy. The narrator says that Cathy "was mistress of a technique which is the basis of good wrestling—that of letting your opponent do the heavy work toward his own defeat, or of guiding

his strength toward his weakness." How is this so, with respect to Mr. Edwards and Faye? How does Cathy play them? Does she play Adam in the same way?

7. Liza Hamilton is mother to Samuel's nine children, four boys and five girls. She "had a finely developed sense of sin. . . . She suffered bravely and uncomplainingly through life, convinced that that was the way her God wanted everyone to live. She felt that rewards came later."

Talk about her relationship with Samuel. Which of her characteristics are most admirable?

8. Is Adam's despondence after Cathy abandons him and the children authentic grief? Or does he derive masochistic pleasure from it, as Samuel Hamilton suggests? What does it say about Adam that he, too, rejects his infant sons for more than a year, ignoring them, not bothering even to name them? If Adam is an "A" character, and thus "good," is that goodness convincing? Appealing?

9. In discussing the Cain and Abel story with Samuel Hamilton and Adam, Lee says: "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 extent has felt rejection. And with rejection comes anger, and with anger some kind of crime in revenge for the rejection, and with crime guilt." To whom does this apply? Charles? Cathy? Adam?

10. Part Two concludes with an evocation of Biblical stories—of Aaron who did not make it to the Promised Land, and Caleb and Joshua who did. Is there a Moses figure in the book thus far, whose vision leads characters out of their spiritual wilderness?

11. Why do you suppose that Steinbeck includes so much about the Cain and Abel story in the novel, having Samuel read the text?

### **Part Three**

1. In Part Three, six characters die or their deaths are described—Una, Samuel, Charles, Lee's mother, Dessie and Tom. How does the omnipresence of death change the mood and atmosphere of the novel?

2. Samuel, Adam, Cal, Dessie and Tom all lie to protect the feelings of others in Part Three. Is their deception justifiable as a kindness, or is it ultimately a breach of trust? Compare their actions to that of Lee's father. Note also Lee's advice to Adam about telling the boys the truth about Cathy.

3. How are the twins, Cal and Aron, different? Look at the paragraph near the end of Chapter 27, where the difference in the two boys is described by their supposed responses to an anthill. How do Cal's actions accord with that description?

4. In many ways, Lee's mother is the opposite of Cathy. How so? Why is the story of her rape included in the novel? Is the way that Lee's father and then Lee tell the story important?

5. Consider the importance of the automobile and the advent of the ready-made dress. How is technical progress changing life in the Salinas Valley, and what affect does it have on characters such as Will?
  6. Some critics have derided Lee as stereotypical—the inscrutable, wise Oriental man. Especially during the discussion of *timshel*, do you find him convincing? Why does he play so many roles in the novel?
  7. What do you suppose Charles' motives were in equally dividing his inheritance between Adam and Cathy?
  8. In *Journal of a Novel: The East of Eden Letters*, Steinbeck wrote, "I think you will find that Cathy as Kate fascinates people. ... 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."
- Why does Cathy begin to show cracks in her façade during her confrontation with Adam? If she seems more recognizably human in her rage and sorrow, is she still a monster as first described? Why would Steinbeck wish to make his readers see Cathy in different ways? If the author is "rereading" Cathy with each encounter, is he also asking readers to reexamine her and their assumptions about evil? Or does she remain fixed throughout the novel—thoroughly evil, unsympathetic and a "monster"?
9. The scene when Adam first confronts Cathy is remarkable. Note how her body is described, her hands. How does Steinbeck convey Cathy's physical decline and Adam's response to her?
  10. Why does Abra tease the boys? Does she seem admirable?
  11. Why is Adam so uncomfortable with the Bacons? Why does he take their advice? In buying a car, does Adam seem suddenly a more resolute character?

#### **Part Four**

1. In Part One, the story of the Trask family unfolds in the shadows of the Civil War and fighting in the West against Native Americans. In Part Four, the lives of the next generation of Trasks are set against the backdrop of World War I. What is the relationship between the private and public conflicts evoked in *East of Eden*? What does the story of Cain and Abel have to do with war?
2. Much is made of the differences between Cal and Aron, but what traits do they share? How do they deal with their respective senses of inadequacy?
3. Both Adam in Part One and Aron in Part Four come to hate their fathers. Why? In what ways are Cyrus and Adam Trask alike in their ambitions for their sons?

4. How is Aron's imagination of Abra similar to Adam's inability to see nothing but what he wants to see in Cathy? What does their infatuation suggest about a state of innocence and purity?
5. Is Aron's obsession with goodness and purity a form of self-indulgence?
6. What is the nature of the despair that makes both Charles (in Part One) and Cal (in Part Four) restless, drawn to borders of respectability? If Charles and Cal—as opposed to Adam and Aron—are the sons who love their fathers, why do their fathers reject them?
7. By presenting Adam with a gift of \$15,000, is Cal really acting out of jealousy and trying to buy his father's affection, or is he motivated by virtuous impulses? Why does Adam reject his son's gift?
8. What in Aron does Cathy identify with? Why does she bequeath her ill-gotten fortune only to him? Why does she commit suicide?
9. Has Adam acted properly by not telling his sons the truth about their mother? Is Adam a good father?
10. How is Abra an agent of change in the novel? How is she different from other women in *East of Eden*?
11. Why does Abra cease to love Aron, and why does she burn his letters? Compare the three scenes of burning paper—Kate's pictures, Cal's money, Abra's letters.
12. What is the nature of the bond between Lee and Abra? Why does he give her a gift of his mother's treasured possession?
13. What is the novel's position on flawed humanity, as instanced by Cal and Abra?
14. How does inheritance—financial and moral—feature in the novel? What are its ramifications for the lives of Charles and Adam, Adam and Cathy, and Aron? What inheritance does Cal receive from the dying Adam that is unlike any other in the book?
15. What does Adam mean when he utters the word *timshel* at the novel's conclusion?
16. Why is Lee increasingly important in the novel? Why is the role of surrogate father given to a Chinese character?
17. Why is Samuel Hamilton's memory evoked so often? What does he come to represent in the novel? Does he represent more in death than he does when he's alive?