

DEFYING DOMESTICITY: STEINBECK'S CRITIQUE OF GENDER POLITICS OF
THE POSTWAR GENERATION IN EAST OF EDEN

Danielle Woods

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Approved By

Advisory Committee

Lewis Walker

Keith Newlin

Tiffany Gilbert

Chair

Accepted By

Dean, Graduate School

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ABSTRACT

By setting East of Eden approximately fifty years before its publishing date, John Steinbeck takes a retrospective approach to critiquing contemporary gender politics in the United States. While the nation was attempting to forget the chaos of its past and look forward to the future and its promise of progress, Steinbeck took a look backwards. By setting his novel in the past, Steinbeck disguises his critique of contemporary lifestyle, which makes his novel more acceptable to contemporary readers. This thesis explores the gender politics in America throughout the 1950s while paying particular attention to the roles of women during this time period. This examination of Cathy Trask, Liza Hamilton, and Abra Bacon reveals sexual tensions and cultural dynamics as well as how these particular tensions and dynamics affected women of the post-World War II era. While Liza Hamilton represents the traditional domestic figure, Cathy Trask represents a deviant woman who refuses to accept the roles of wife and mother. Ultimately, Cathy Trask, the woman who deviates from the cultural norm in East of Eden, is punished. Rather than illustrating the idea that women who stray from traditional gender roles deserve to suffer the consequences, Steinbeck is actually portraying the limitations of postwar American society. Steinbeck offers the character of Abra Bacon as an alternative type of female who defines a new idea of femininity. While Abra observes traditional gender roles and maintains a domestic profile, at the same time, she is assertive and does not allow her femininity to be defined by domesticity.

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DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this thesis to my parents, Hershell and Delores Woods. I would not have been able to attend and finish graduate school without the assistance, support, and love from both of them.

INTRODUCTION

Although John Steinbeck, American novelist and Nobel Prize Laureate, wrote and published over twenty-five literary works, he is most commonly recognized and admired for The Grapes of Wrath (1939), in which he depicts the challenges of an American family during the Great Depression. Though it has been argued that his second-most renowned and influential novel is East of Eden (1952), Steinbeck believed it was his greatest. In preparation for writing East of Eden, Steinbeck wrote, “I’ve been practicing for a book for 35 years and this is it” (qtd. in Wyatt vii). Published during a time of American progress and innovation, East of Eden, set in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, appears to be a bit outdated and not typical of its time. When one considers American novels of the fifties, one is likely to think of Sloan Wilson’s The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit (1955), which depicts the obstacles a post-World War II couple must overcome. Grace Metalious’s Peyton Place (1956) is also considered to be a revolutionary novel of the 1950s due to its exploration of sexual activity among men and women. Though set approximately fifty years before the fifties, East of Eden, in the view of David Wyatt, “finds ways to express a healthy sense of Cold War paranoia” (xviii). Steinbeck takes a retrospective approach to critiquing contemporary gender politics in the United States, particularly postwar domestic politics. While the nation was attempting to forget the chaos of its past and look forward to the future and its promise of progress, Steinbeck took a look backwards. Since Steinbeck did not hesitate to set The Grapes of Wrath during the time at which he wrote it (the American depression), one may ask why he failed to set East of Eden in the nineteen fifties. By placing his narrative in the past,

he disguises his critique of contemporary domesticity, thus making his novel more acceptable to his contemporary readers.

In the course of East of Eden, Steinbeck focuses on three generations of two separate families, the Trasks and the Hamiltons. Both Samuel Hamilton and Adam Trask relocate to Salinas Valley, California, in hopes of becoming prosperous farmers living the American dream. Through his narration of the everyday lives of the Trasks and Hamiltons, Steinbeck depicts the traditional roles of men and women while, at the same time, overturning the image of the nuclear family in order to reveal its flaws. When East of Eden was first released, Anthony West of The New Yorker renamed it “California Moonshine” (121) and Time argued that the novel was “too blundering and ill-defined to make its story point” (110). Despite the fact that the reviews of East of Eden were not favorable when it was released in September of 1952, it was number one on the fiction best-seller list by the following November. Despite these reviews, Steinbeck seemed to have hit a political, cultural, and/or personal nerve in the nation. Apparently, a large number of Americans could relate to the conflicts, restrictions, and unhappiness of the Trasks and Hamiltons. Even though the war had ended, many Americans still believed that they were in great danger. After the United States exploded the horrifying atomic bomb over Hiroshima and Nagasaki, ending World War II, the majority of Americans feared that they would soon become the target of a nuclear attack as well. According to Elaine Tyler May in Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era, this fear became even more prevalent when the U.S.S.R. proved it had manufactured an atomic bomb, exploding one in 1949. Once the Korean War broke out in 1950, many Americans believed that they would soon become victims of a nuclear-based World War III (16).

In reaction to the constant fear caused by the Cold War, many Americans attempted to create a safe environment of their own by having a stable family life. Once World War II ended, American men and women were eager to marry. As illustrated by the U.S. Bureau of the Census, more Americans were married in 1950 (66%) and 1960 (68%) than in any other time in American history (May 15). In other words, “Those who came of age during and after World War II were the most marrying generation on record: 96.4 percent of the women and 94.1 percent of the men” (May 15). Not only did the majority of twenty-something Americans seek safety in marriage during the Cold War, but both men and women assumed traditional gender roles of breadwinner and homemaker. Even though many women had entered the workforce during World War II, the majority of women relinquished their employment to become housewives, and their husbands became sole financial providers. In the eyes of the newlyweds, “successful breadwinners would provide economic support for professionalized homemakers, and together they would create the home of their dreams” (May 22). Facing the possibilities of national chaos and danger, this type of marriage was intended to provide a stable environment for many Americans.

Not only did Americans attempt to establish security through marriage, but they sought stability by having children as well, resulting in the creation of the nuclear family. Notwithstanding the availability of birth control, the average number of children in a household rose from two to four between 1940 and 1960 (May 137). As May explains, “At a time when the availability of contraceptive devices enabled couples to delay, space, and limit the arrival of offspring to suit their particular needs, this rising birthrate resulted from deliberate choices” (14). Although married couples had more of an opportunity

than ever before to use birth control methods and limit the number of children they had and at what age to have them, many couples chose to avoid using contraceptives and had numerous children, beginning at a younger age than their parents and grandparents. For the postwar couples, children ensured a future. As May explains, “A home filled with children would create a feeling of warmth and security against the cold forces of disruption and alienation. Children would also be a connection to the future and a means of replenishing a world depleted by war deaths” (17). While many Americans doubted their safety and feared a nuclear war was about to descend upon them during the Cold War, their children instilled them with hope for a secure future, not only for themselves and their families, but for the US as well.

Even though the nuclear family was originally designed to bring security and stability to Americans, it often failed. Results of such studies as the Kelly Longitudinal Study and the Kinsey Reports proved that many postwar Americans were discontent with their roles. Men often felt burdened with the responsibility of being the breadwinner, and women often felt trapped within the limiting domestic roles of wife and mother.

Within the text of East of Eden, Steinbeck reimagines the sexual tensions and cultural dynamics in America during the 1950s. Specifically, he critiques the constructions and limitations society imposes upon women by basing their identity and femininity on domesticity. According to Wyatt, “While busy fighting wars, both cold and hot, the 1950s invested its conscious energy in the domestic pursuit of happiness, and the structure of *Eden* reflects this” (xviii). Portraying female characters that can be interpreted as either the traditional, conservative domestic figure of wife and mother, or the unconventional woman who strays from domesticity completely, Steinbeck reveals

the restrictions that these norms of femininity place upon women and offers his readers a third type of woman who does not have to choose between the domestic/nondomestic extremes. Throughout the novel, Steinbeck focuses primarily on three women: Cathy Ames (Kate), Liza Hamilton, and Abra Bacon. Through his characterization of Liza Hamilton, a completely devoted wife, mother, and conventional Christian, Steinbeck demonstrates that the idea of the perfect domestic woman is only a façade. Though Liza appears to be the epitome of domesticity, Steinbeck illustrates that she is not a realistic or likable woman. In complete contrast to Liza, Cathy Ames, in an attempt to escape from the expectations of being a mother and a wife, refuses to live unhappily with her husband and two sons on their ranch, choosing instead to manage a brothel. In doing so, she symbolizes the deviant woman who strays from conformity. Ultimately, Cathy, the nonconformist, is punished and killed off by the end of the novel. Rather than illustrating the idea that women who stray from the traditional gender role are monsters and deserve to suffer the consequences, Steinbeck is actually portraying the limitations of American society. Trapped in the false projection of her parents and husband, Cathy is forced by society to rebel. Not only does the unconventional woman die in East of Eden, but Liza Hamilton also dies by the end of the novel. By killing off both the conventional and unconventional women, Steinbeck illustrates that although contemporary American society is not willing to accept women who completely rebel from living the traditional, domesticated lifestyle, the widespread idea that all women are completely satisfied in a domestic role is also unrealistic.

Steinbeck offers the character of Abra Bacon as an alternative model for women. Until East of Eden, critics often denounced Steinbeck's depictions of women as one-

dimensional—either his female characters were mothers and “angels” or they were whores. Beth Everest and Judy Wedeles explain in “The Neglected Rib: Women in East of Eden,” “His women are generally classified as mothers or whores; good women are intrinsically repelled by sex, and evil women use sex as an instrument of torment” (13). Unlike Cathy, who ultimately uses her intelligence and sexuality to gain power over others and cause them harm, Abra uses her wisdom for the good of others and her sexuality as a means to express her affection. Also, while she is strong, assertive, and domestic, like Liza, she is unlike Liza in that she is a warm woman who acknowledges her sexuality as being more than a means for reproduction. A departure from the mother/whore binary, Abra, who portrays both strength and domesticity while asserting her sexuality, defines Steinbeck’s idea of femininity.

Reviewing Steinbeck’s previous works, one can see how he was leading up to this ideal woman. Ma Joad, from The Grapes of Wrath, though not an especially feminine woman in the traditional sense, is an incredibly strong and domestic mother and wife who assumes leadership in her family and guides them in overcoming many harsh conditions. In his novella The Pearl (1947), Steinbeck depicts a woman who, though often submissive to her husband, exhibits both strength and loving maternal qualities. Noticing the limitations of women and an opportunity for change in postwar America, Steinbeck proposes a new ideal woman for American society in East of Eden. Unlike Cathy—who must resort to violence and cruelty in order to escape her entrapment and false identity, (through her unrestrictive relationship with Cal)—Abra has the opportunity to be assertive, sexual, and domestic. Abra chooses to be domesticated in some ways while, at the same time, she has the opportunity to express her ideas and her sexuality, which

ultimately allows her to develop her own identity. By portraying Abra as a female figure who observes the traditional role of women and maintains a domestic profile while also breaking the restrictions of domestic femininity, Steinbeck creates a new ideal feminine. Through his depiction of Cathy, Liza, and Abra, Steinbeck not only reveals, but also explores the restrictions imposed upon women by the society of which his contemporary readers were a part. According to Lorelei Cederstrom in “Beyond the Boundaries of Sexism: The Archetypal Feminine versus Anima Women in Steinbeck’s Novels,”

Steinbeck has become a Shaman, showing us the limitations of our current attitudes toward the feminine in both the natural world and in life. Above all, Steinbeck’s novels reveal his deep respect for the balance between masculine and feminine upon which not only every man/woman relationship but also the health of the earth itself depends. (204)

In the course of East of Eden, Steinbeck attempts to unveil the hidden inequalities among men and women to his contemporary readers as well as the constraints imposed upon women of the 1950s. Through his characterization of Cathy, Steinbeck cautions his contemporary readers. Cathy’s behavior exemplifies the effects of the limitations society imposes upon women forcing them into domesticity. Liza, who is an unlikable woman, proves that society’s idea of the domestic woman is only a façade. Through Abra’s emancipation and her liberating relationship with Cal, Steinbeck reveals the importance of equality among men and women and urges postwar society to review the domestic politics in place and remove the constraints placed upon women.

CATHY TRASK: THE DEVIANT DEMON

“She is a fascinating and horrible person to me. But there are plenty like her.”

-John Steinbeck, Journal of a Novel: East of Eden Letters

During the postwar era in which Steinbeck was writing East of Eden, the majority of women, in order to assist in the establishment of safe families in a time of national chaos, conformed to society's expectations by becoming domestic housewives. In an effort to help his contemporary readers acknowledge women's lack of desire to be merely figures of domesticity and suggest the possibility of change, Steinbeck, as he often does, addresses his readers directly: “For the world was changing, and sweetness was gone, and virtue too. Worry had crept on a corroding world, and what was lost—good manners, ease and beauty? Ladies were not ladies any more, and you couldn't trust a gentleman's word” (Eden129). He goes on to conclude the chapter with, “Let's get it over and the door closed shut on it! Let's close it like a book and go on reading! New chapter, new life” (130). Writing in the postwar era, Steinbeck recognizes the fact that the nation was feeling despair and a lack of innocence. He further argues that, in this time of chaos, changes should be welcomed as life continues, and that socially constructed roles that once seemed beautiful and virtuous, such as the domestic roles of women, are no longer satisfying to women and should not be forced on them.

Emerging in this postwar climate, East of Eden's Cathy Ames embodies the destructive behavior that is likely to result from American society's oppression of women of the fifties. Though arguably one of Steinbeck's most powerful figures throughout his works, Cathy Ames is the antithesis of the ideal fifties American woman. Despite Cathy's gender and her angelic appearance, she is able to resist social conformity by using her wits and sexuality. To escape the roles of both wife and mother and gain her

independence, Cathy becomes a prostitute and eventually a madam of a very successful brothel in Salinas, California. Since the novel was published in a time when the majority of women were expected to be pure and wholesome homemakers, Cathy's promiscuity and supervision of a whorehouse were considered scandalous. As David Wyatt contends, "Steinbeck certainly pathologizes Cathy as a deviant and hence invokes the fiction of reassuring norm" (xix). Through his depiction of Cathy's deviant behavior, Steinbeck suggests that society—by imposing the roles of virtuous wife and mother onto women who lack the desire to fulfill these roles—may be to blame for the abnormal behavior of women.

When he introduces her to the narrative, Steinbeck's narrator questions whether Cathy is a monster: "And just as there are physical monsters, can there not be mental or psychic monsters born? The face and body may be perfect, but if a twisted gene or a malformed egg can produce physical monsters, may not the same produce a malformed soul? (Eden 72). Ironically, at first glance, Cathy's physical appearance resembles that of an angel instead of a monster: "Cathy had from the first a face of innocence" (73). But if one examines her more closely, as Louis Owens explains in "The Mirror and the Vamp: Invention, Reflection, and Bad, Bad Cathy Trask in East of Eden," one can see that she resembles a serpent, which foreshadows her iniquitous behavior (254):

Her nose was delicate and thin, and her cheekbones high and wide, sweeping down to a small chin so that her face was heart-shaped. Her mouth was well shaped and well lipped but abnormally small [...]. Her ears were very little, without lobes [...]. They were thin flaps sealed against her head. (Steinbeck, Eden 73)

Cathy's appearance becomes even more perplexing due to Steinbeck's description of her body being similar to that of a male's: "Her breasts never developed very much. Before her puberty the nipples turned inward. [...] Her body was a boy's body, narrow-hipped, straight-legged [...]" (73). Lacking developed breasts and womanly curves, Cathy has physical features that appear to be masculine rather than feminine, which foreshadow her deviant and unconventional behavior.

Not only does Cathy challenge American society's traditional idea of femininity through her physical traits, but she also defies feminine associations through her malicious actions. Over the course of the novel, Cathy ruthlessly murders her parents, tries to abort her babies with a clothes hanger, shoots her husband, abandons him and her sons, and tortures and blackmails men of prominent social status who regularly visit her whorehouse. While these actions are shocking, Steinbeck, rather than merely leaving Cathy to be defined as an evil monster, questions whether society is actually the monster at fault:

If rather than running toward something, she ran away from something, we can't know whether she escaped. Who knows but that she tried to tell someone or everyone what she was like and could not, for lack of a common language. [...] It is easy to say she was bad, but there is little meaning unless we know why. (184)

At the age of fourteen, Cathy announces that she would like to be a teacher, "the one profession of dignity open to a girl of a good but not well-to-do family" (79). Two years later, to the dismay of her parents, Cathy decides that she no longer wants to continue her education or become a teacher. Since the Amesese are not wealthy, they know that Cathy

must be able to support herself financially, and one of the few respectable professions available to Cathy is teaching. In order to force Cathy to continue her education, Mr. Ames resorts to physical punishment. Despising her parents for forcing her to choose a career and lifestyle she does not want, Cathy rebels against her parents' authority by robbing and murdering them. Several years later, Cathy still does not regret killing her parents: "When I was a little girl I knew what stupid lying fools they were—my own mother and father pretending goodness. And they weren't good" (321). In Cathy's mind, instead of trying to do what was best for her, her parents were attempting to do what was best for them. She believes that they wanted her to be a teacher both to free themselves of the burden of supporting her, and to take pride in her respectability. Besides ridding herself of her authoritarian parents, Cathy also defies their expectations by becoming a prostitute.

Not only does Cathy refuse to be a virtuous daughter and young woman, but she also rejects the roles of wife and mother. Shortly after the death of her parents, Cathy becomes a mistress to Mr. Edwards, who eventually discovers her abnormal behavior and develops suspicions that she murdered her parents. In order to rid himself of her, Edwards beats Cathy, and although he leaves her for dead, she manages to drag herself to the doorstep of Adam's house. As Carol L. Hansen argues in "Beyond Evil: Cathy and Cal in East of Eden," while nursing Cathy to health, "Adam benevolently ministers to her every need and sees in Cathy the purpose for his life, a dream built upon the illusion of his own needs" (225). Only to secure the recovery of her health and to escape poverty, Cathy yields to Adam's request and marries him. She even complains that "Adam had a warmth toward her which she did not understand since she had none toward him, nor had

ever experienced it toward anyone” (Steinbeck, Eden 121). Despite Cathy’s obvious lack of love and compassion, Adam fails to notice her callousness. Losing his own mother as an infant and not being aware of Cathy’s past, Adam envisions Cathy to be a type of woman she clearly is not:

Perhaps Adam did not see Cathy at all, so lighted was she by his eyes. Burned in his mind was an image of beauty and tenderness, a sweet and holy girl, precious beyond thinking, clean and loving, and that image was Cathy to her husband, and nothing Cathy did or said could warp Adam’s Cathy. (133)

Being blinded by his own image of Cathy, “whatever Adam sees in Cathy has little to do with Cathy herself” (Cederstrom 200). Ultimately, Adam’s false projection of Cathy prevents him from recognizing what Cathy really wants and what type of person she actually is.

Pregnant and dependent on Adam’s mercy for financial survival, Cathy waits patiently for her departure, convincing Adam that she is happy being his wife and supporting his plans for their ranch: “It is probable that she did not even look at Adam’s new land or building house, or turn his towering plans to reality in her mind, because she did not intend to live here after her sickness was over, after her trap opened. But to his questions she gave proper answers” (Steinbeck, Eden 159). While Cathy is intelligent, she manipulates Adam’s expectations to ensure her survival. According to Hansen, although Cathy “shares all of the qualities of Steinbeck’s ideal wife—the realism, conviction, practicality, and resignation—[she] rejects the role of wife and uses her knowledge and understanding of her husband, Adam, to bring about his destruction” (4).

Even though Cathy blatantly avoids participating in normal wifely duties, such as when she declares, ““Adam, I can’t be a wife to you until I’m well,”” and neglects sewing clothes in preparation for their children, Adam fails to recognize her actions as warnings (Steinbeck, Eden 124). Even as Cathy tells Adam that she does not wish to move to California and run a ranch with him, “he did not listen, because *his* Cathy took his arm and started first” (133). Despite the fact that Cathy warns Adam that she will leave him shortly after she gives birth, he continues to ignore her and treats her as if she is a child: ““You’re like a child away from home for the first time,”” he tells her (175). Adam’s neglect of Cathy’s maturity and ability to make her own rational decisions results in her shooting him in order to escape. While writing the novel, Steinbeck wrote to his editor, Pascal Covici, “Why doesn’t Adam listen when Cathy says she will be going away? I don’t know. Men don’t listen to what they don’t want to hear” (Journal 76). In his letter, Steinbeck implied that in a patriarchal society, like the one in which he was living and writing in, men often failed to acknowledge women’s emotions and thoughts, forcing women to resort to drastic measures in order to be heard.

Just as Cathy does not want to be a wife, she also tries to avoid being a mother. When she first realizes she is pregnant, she unsuccessfully attempts to abort her twin fetuses with a clothes hanger. When a doctor threatens to report her illegal attempted abortion, Cathy cleverly lies and tells the doctor she fears her children will inherit epilepsy from her father and grandfather, drawing sympathy from the doctor rather than scorn (Steinbeck, Eden 135). Since Cathy’s attempt to abort the fetuses is unsuccessful, she is forced to live with Adam on the ranch and wait patiently until the babies are born. Directly after Aron and Cal are born, she repeatedly tells Samuel Hamilton, “I don’t want

them” and continues to neglect the boys until she shoots Adam and abandons all of them (194). During her pregnancy, Cathy’s physical body fails to develop for the arrival of the twins: “Shoulders, neck, arms, hands, face, were unaffected, slender and girlish. Her breasts did not grow [...]. There was no quickening of milk glands, no physical planning to feed the newborn” (184). Not only does Cathy know mentally and emotionally that she does not want to be a conventional mother, but in refusing to prepare itself for motherhood, her physical body is also aware that she is not fit to be a mother. Through Cathy’s lack of maternal qualities, Steinbeck suggests that all women may not be suitable to pursue a domestic life.

By his own testimony, Steinbeck attempts to create sympathy for Cathy by describing her as such: “I’ve built the image in my mind of Cathy, sitting quietly waiting for her pregnancy to be over, living on a farm she did not like, with a man she did not love” (Eden 184). This image of Cathy reinforces the idea that she has been forced into this unhappy life of marriage and pregnancy and that she reacts in what can be considered to be an evil manner only to escape her unhappiness. When she tries to explain to Adam and her father that she does not want to be the traditional virtuous daughter and domestic mother and wife, they fail to listen to her. Therefore, Cathy has no choice but to

def[y] classification in a male-dominated world. From her viewpoint, she is an observer of the true monsters of masculine control as seen in Mr. Ames, her father, Mr. Edwards, her master; and Adam Trask, her husband. Therefore, she is beyond the boundaries of conventional family life as exemplified by the roles of daughter, wife, and mother. (Hansen 223)

To Cathy, these men impose their ideas of what type of woman she is supposed to be and do not allow her to be anything else. In fact, Adam and Mr. Ames represent the society which Steinbeck is critiquing. By suppressing Cathy, they exemplify how postwar society restricts women's opportunities. When Cal finds and reunites with his mother for the first time, she tells him, "Adam thought he had me. When I was hurt, all broken up, he took me in and he waited on me, cooked for me. He tried to tie me down that way. Most people get tied down that way. [...] Nobody can trap me" (Steinbeck, Eden 465). In order to escape being controlled by the men in her life and gain her own power and independence, Cathy kills her parents, shoots Adam, and deserts her sons. Once she leaves Adam's ranch, she begins to work as a prostitute, under the alias Kate,¹ for madam Faye. Her new name signifies "an ever-shifting characterization—and a split personality" (Hansen 225). This new name represents a new identity and the duality between the domestic/nondomestic. While she conforms to society's expectations and is a wife and mother, she goes by her given name, Cathy. Once she leaves Adam and breaks free from those oppressing roles, her new name and identity signify the nondomestic.

In addition to Hansen's argument, it is not just the power of men that Cathy attempts to escape. After she and Faye become very close and Faye considers her to be her daughter, Faye begs Kate to quit working and to move to Europe with her. Once again Kate is faced with an authority figure imposing her ideas of how she should live; in order to escape Faye's authority and gain more power herself, Kate poisons Faye and becomes the owner of the brothel. Even though Faye manages a house of prostitution, she is still depicted as a mother-like figure. In fact, Steinbeck describes Faye's house as the "refuge of young men puling in puberty, mourning over lost virtue, and aching to lose

¹ I will refer to Cathy as her alias, Kate, in the context that Steinbeck does.

some more. Faye was the reassurer of misbegotten husbands. Her house took up the slack for frigid wives. It was the cinnamon-scented kitchen of one's grandmother (Eden 220). Rather than feeling comforted by Faye's maternal qualities, Kate is threatened. Not only does Faye directly threaten Kate's independence by trying to convince her to give up her career and move to Europe, but Faye represents a type of woman who threatens Kate's independence as a whole. By submitting to society's wishes and conventionally acting as a somewhat domestic and maternal woman, Faye and women like her assist in maintaining the conventional restraining norm that Kate so desperately tries to escape. Through his characterization of Faye, Steinbeck warns his female readers that by conforming to the norm, they are guilty of reinforcing their society's false identification of women through domesticity.

After murdering Faye and freeing herself from her authority, Kate inherits Faye's business. According to Wyatt, by basing her identity on managing her own business, Kate "refigures the realm of male fulfillment and reminds us that the "oldest profession," is, after all, female" (xxi). Kate finds success in something other than traditional domesticity and marriage. Learning "when she was very young that sexuality with all its attendant yearnings and pains, jealousies and taboos, is the most disturbing impulse humans have" (Steinbeck, Eden 75), Kate uses her sexuality to obtain power, particularly over men. As Steinbeck explains, "Cathy has great power over people because she has simplified their weaknesses and has no feeling about their strengths and goodness" (Journal 44). Not only does she torture her socially prominent male clients (Steinbeck, Eden 236), she also takes pictures of them in order to exploit their sexual behavior through blackmail. She explains to Adam when he visits her at her brothel, "I have a

hundred beautiful pictures in there, and those men know that if anything should happen to me—anything—one hundred letters, each with a picture, would be dropped in the mail [...]” (323). Kate even admits, ““In a few years I’ll be going away. And when I do—those envelopes will be dropped in the mail anyway”” (323). Everest reasons that the “work” committed at Kate’s house “presents an evil and corruption that far outweigh the ‘innocence’ of the three houses in Salinas” (15). While all brothels provide a similar service, Kate’s establishment has different objectives than other whorehouses. Unlike other brothels that exist to satisfy men in exchange for cash, Kate uses her house as a means to obtain the power to ruthlessly destroy the lives of numerous men. Whereas one can argue that most prostitutes are a commodity because they have been paid for and used solely to meet the needs of men,² Kate is not a commodity among men in that she is the one who is being brutal; though men are still paying for her services, she is actually the one with the advantage. By blackmailing her male clients, Kate gains control and uses the men to fulfill her needs of power, thus weakening the dominance of the patriarchy.

While Kate does use her practicality and sexuality to gain much more power than the majority of women of her era, she is unable to retain that control. By the conclusion of East of Eden, as Stephen George observes in “The Philosophical Mind of John Steinbeck: Virtue Ethics and His Later Fiction,” Kate “becomes an example of this insufficiency within the power dynamics of cruelty. Having lost her beauty, and hence much of her sexual power, she can no longer personally tempt men into her web of

² According to Luce Irigaray in *This Sex Which is Not One*, most prostitutes are considered to be a commodity in a patriarchal society. The qualities of a prostitute’s body “have ‘value’ only because they have already been appropriated by a man, and because they have the locus of relations—hidden ones—between men. Prostitution amounts to *usage that exchanged*” (Irigaray 186).

depravity” (271-72). After Adam visits Kate at her brothel, he is no longer disillusioned by his false angelic image of her. Instead, he now has a different image of her: one of evil. As Cederstrom explains, Adam “has merely withdrawn one projection, his view of Cathy as angel, only to replace it with another, his neighbor’s view of her as devil” (202). Although Cathy is no longer trapped in Adam’s angelic projected image of her, he now sees her as Samuel Hamilton sees her, as an evil woman. To his understanding, she does not contain the least bit of purity or decency. Now aging, Kate no longer appears young and angelic to him: “Adam looked down at her hand and saw it wrinkled as a pale monkey’s paw. He moved away in revulsion” (Steinbeck, Eden 324). Despite the fact that Kate’s face may appear to be young, her wrinkled and arthritic hands reveal her truly deformed nature, as well as the loss of her youth. Finally realizing what it is that Kate hates about him and all men in general, Adam confesses to her, ““You don’t believe I loved you. And the men who come to you here with their ugliness, the men in the pictures—you don’t believe those men could have goodness and beauty in them. You see only one side, and you think—more than that, you’re sure—that’s all there is”” (385). Unable to bear Adam’s new projected figure of her as well as his rejection of her, Kate tells him, ““I’ll have you begging in here. I’ll have you screaming at the moon.’ She tried to force her will on him, and she saw that he was detached and free. Her rage congealed to poison. ‘No one has ever escaped,’ she said softly” (322). Kate cannot tolerate the thought of not having control over an individual, especially the man who she believed to be the weakest of them all. After Adam leaves her alone in her office, her vision is “distorted by tears [...]” and “her body shook with something that felt like rage and also felt like sorrow” (385). Kate’s tears signify that her strength is beginning to

deteriorate, and though she thought that she had defeated Adam's authority over her, she realizes she failed.

After her confrontation with Adam, Kate begins to feel paranoid that other members of society are aware of her iniquity. In order to avoid being watched and scrutinized by others, she builds a windowless and completely gray lean-to, in which she spends the majority of her time: "She believed that the light pained her eyes, and also that the gray room was a cave to hide in, a dark burrow in the earth, a place where no eyes could stare at her" (474). Whereas Adam physically separated her from society while they were married by making her move to the ranch, he now mentally separates her from society by making her self-conscious and fearful of others' opinions of her. Though with words instead of force, Adam, once again strips Kate of her independence and makes her concerned about society's view of her. Kate's concern about being scrutinized by others for her rebellious behavior indicates that many women of the postwar era in which Steinbeck was writing were apprehensive of defying the norm. Steinbeck implies that for fear of being rejected by society, women of the fifties often conformed to domesticity and hid their discontent.

Not only does Adam come to realize the truth about Kate's character, but his son does as well. Knowing that Kate lacks goodness and questioning whether he inherited her evil tendencies, Cal finally comes to the realization and tells Kate, "I'm my own. I don't have to be you" (466). He continues to berate her and says, "I don't think the light hurts your eyes. I think you're afraid" (466). Unable to stomach the truth coming from her son, Kate screams, "Get out!" (466). Although Kate tries to convince Cal that he has inherited her immorality, he too is no longer blinded by her lies and realizes that

she hides in the lean-to because she is afraid others see her real self when they look at her. Like Adam, who figures out that Kate hates the good in people because she, lacking goodness, does not understand it (323), Cal asks her, “[D]id you ever have the feeling like you were missing something?” (465). Knowing that Cal and Adam are now aware of and disgusted by her immorality and corruption, Kate is unable to control their ideas of her, which in turn begins the diminishing of her power.

Unable to accept her loss of total control and suffering from paranoia about being discovered and judged by others, Cathy resorts to suicide. Imagining that she, like Alice from Alice in Wonderland, has a “Drink me” solution that can make her disappear, Kate ends her life by drinking bromide (554). Instead of freeing herself from the grasp of others, her suicide is “the ultimate act of surrender and loss of control” (George 272). By killing herself, Kate submissively forfeits the battle and allows herself to be defeated by the patriarchal society in which she lives.

Along with the loss of her power before she dies, Kate’s wickedness also diminishes. Steinbeck’s narrator explains, “She was almost glad when she learned that the pain in her hands was developing arthritis. An evil voice had whispered that it might be a punishment” (Steinbeck, Eden 473). Kate’s feeling of relief mirrors her guilt for her vicious actions in the past. Despite Adam’s rebuke that Kate is “no human at all,” with the demonstration of her feelings of guilt, Steinbeck reveals that, although not considered to be exactly a good person, Kate is actually human.

Much out of character, Kate also begins to display maternal qualities toward the end of the novel. After she commits suicide, the sheriff finds a copy of Adam and Kate’s marriage license in Kate’s safety deposit box, along with the pictures she planned to use

for blackmail. Even though Kate hates Adam and nearly kills him, one is left to speculate whether Kate kept the marriage license for business purposes only or if her marriage to Adam really had some type of sentimental value to her. Before she dies, Kate also imagines having a mother-son relationship with Aron. Although she is threatened by Cal, Kate feels that Aron “couldn’t protect himself” and that “she did not want Aron to know about her” (513). Believing that Aron could not bear to know of her impurity and sinfulness, Kate wants to protect him and keep him from discovering her real identity. She even fantasizes about closing her business and moving to New York to set up a nice house in which Aron can visit her: “She would take him to the theater, to the opera, and people would see them together and wonder at their loveliness, and recognize that they were either brother and sister or mother and son” (513). Despite the fact that she abandoned her boys as infants and never inquired about their welfare, Kate begins to long for a normal and safe relationship with Aron. Having the opinion that, unlike Cal, Aron is not “smart” (513), Kate can easily trick Aron into believing her to be good and earn his acceptance of her. Before committing suicide, Kate writes a will in which she leaves her possessions to Aron (553). The fact that Kate keeps her marriage license and wills her belongings to her son makes one wonder whether she has become domesticated. But as Hansen reminds us, “the aged Kate leaves a final shock of apparent conversion—until we remember the ugly photographs of her customers—and her determination to blackmail them” (227). Storing both the marriage certificate as well as the blackmailing photographs signifies the duality of Kate. Steinbeck thus leaves us to wonder if Kate is actually a monster or if she is forced to act atrociously by the monstrous society in which she lives.

Considering the fact that the novel was published in 1952, it is plausible that Steinbeck's contemporary readers may have been quite leery to accept a woman who strayed from conventionality so much so. By allowing Kate to show a hint of kindness and maternal feelings at the end of the novel, Steinbeck allows us to pity Kate and consider her to be misunderstood rather than hate her and see her as a monster. Through his depiction of Kate and her actions, Steinbeck reveals the limitations of women as a result of postwar society's outlook toward femininity. On account of Kate's extreme behavior, Steinbeck does cause his readers to question Kate's motives and reaction to conformity, thus drawing their attention to the influence and limitations of the society in which Kate lives as well as their own. Even though Kate is fairly successful in gaining her independence, Steinbeck's ultimate killing of her suggests that the "nuclear nation," the American society amidst the Cold War of the fifties, may not have been prepared to accept a woman of such atypical behavior. Given that American society of the 1950s depended heavily on conventionality in order to create a stable environment, women who rejected domesticity were likely to be snubbed by society. It appears then, that Steinbeck used Kate as a warning for the 1950s women not to be too hasty and demand total liberation from domesticity.

LIZA HAMILTON: THE DOMESTIC FAÇADE

“There was a nail-hard strength in her, a lack of any compromise, a rightness in the face of all opposing wrongness, which made you hold her in a kind of awe but not in warmth.”

-John Steinbeck, East of Eden

Even though Steinbeck cautioned his contemporary readers that the nation was not willing to accept a woman who completely rejected domesticity, he also sought to uncover that the postwar society had a false idea of femininity. Writing in a time in which conformity was admired, Steinbeck aimed to demonstrate that the lives of women, devoted to family and religion, were the products of social conformity. Whereas Cathy obtains her strength through her determination to defy the ordinary by refusing to be a conventional mother and wife and uses her intelligence to manipulate men, Liza Hamilton gains most of her strength through religion (Everest 17). While Liza is often considered to be one of Steinbeck’s strongest female characters among all of his works, she has been neglected by critics. In contrast to Cathy and Abra, Liza is often overlooked in discussions of Steinbeck’s female characters, even among discussions concentrating on East of Eden. In review of the female characters of East of Eden, Mimi Gladstein claims in “The Strong Female Principle of Good—or Evil: The Women of East of Eden,” “When the mothers are there, they tend to be colorless, weak characters who fade into the background” (31). Shown as merely a domestic figure, Liza suffers from lack of a distinguishable personality. Juxtaposed to the character of Cathy, Liza spends the majority of her time and energy caring for her family as well as developing and perfecting her spirituality. While the absence of her personality makes her a somewhat invisible character, it is exactly this lack of individuality that makes Liza a product of conformity. In displaying her morally good character and her unfailing domesticity, Liza represents the ideal compliant and domesticated woman that was epitomized and

considered a necessity in creating the “nuclear family” in the fifties. While Liza is a dedicated wife, mother, and Christian, her lack of affection makes her unlikeable: she seems to fulfill her duties only as mere performance in order to meet the expectations of society. Portraying Liza as lacking colorful characteristics, Steinbeck conveys that Liza is a façade, emphasizing that the domestic image in which the postwar generation epitomized is an unrealistic woman.

Liza’s faith helps define her as the traditional, wholesome domestic. Liza is one of Steinbeck’s morally strongest female characters, drawing her strength from her Christian faith. Unlike her questioning and philosophizing husband, Samuel Hamilton, Liza has no use for books. The one and only book she feels is worth reading and adhering to is the Bible: “In that one book she had her history and her poetry, her knowledge of people and things, her ethics, her morals, and her salvation” (Steinbeck, Eden 43). For Liza, her religion becomes the most important influence on her life, even surpassing the importance of her family: “Her total intellectual association was the Bible, except the talk of Samuel and her children, and to them she did not listen” (43). Though at one level it appears that Liza does care for her husband and children, she is willing to neglect them if they interfere with her living according to her interpretation of the Bible. Along with following the teachings of the Bible without questioning them, Liza is depicted as a harsh and severe woman who despises idleness and sees laughter as the devil’s work.

On the surface, Liza’s religious aspirations make her fulfill the wholesome requirements of the domestic. She is also portrayed as a devoted wife and mother who willingly assumes all of the familial duties often associated with a traditional homemaker.

Although she is described as being extremely petite, Liza bears eight children and raises them with her husband on their farm outside of Salinas: “Bearing her children did not hold her back very much—two weeks at the most she had to be careful. She must have had a pelvic arch of whalebone, for she had big children one after the other” (11). In order to exemplify her strength, Steinbeck avoids depicting Liza as a helpless, frail woman, even during her pregnancies.

Along with drawing her strength from religion, Liza has the ability to gain power, much like Cathy, through her wisdom. Although Liza never becomes well-acquainted with Cathy, she intuitively knows that Cathy is not a honorable person. Once Samuel returns from visiting Adam and Cathy Trask for the first time, Liza asks Samuel what Cathy was doing with her hands while she sat on the porch. Liza is dumbfounded that Cathy failed to be making any use of her hands such as sewing, mending, or knitting throughout Samuel’s visit. Despite Samuel’s description of Cathy as being young, pretty and quiet, as Beth Everest claims, “Liza distinctively knows that Cathy’s appearance is deceptive, mainly because Cathy does nothing with her hands” (19). In Liza’s opinion, idleness is the ‘devil’s tool’ and if Cathy were going to be a fit mother, she would be preparing for the arrival of her baby by knitting or sewing rather than sitting at leisure (Steinbeck, Eden 182). At Samuel’s request, Liza visits the Trask household to care for the twins soon after they are born. Once she returns home, she admits to Samuel, “I can find no real fault with her save perhaps a touch of laziness, and yet I don’t like her very much” (199). Though Liza is not able to justify her dislike and distrust of Cathy, she intuitively knows that Cathy is not a decent person. Despite her short visit with the Trasks, Liza even recognizes that Cathy has practically “put a spell on her husband”

(199). Though she cannot identify the cause, Liza, who can see individuals for who they truly are, is aware that Cathy's relationship with her husband and sons is not normal in the traditional sense and that Adam's judgment is dangerously impaired by his false vision of Cathy.

Liza's knowledge of people is not limited to the Trasks. She has a great understanding of her husband's nature as well. Although the Hamiltons live on a farm, Samuel is much more of a dreamer and an inventor than a farmer. After visiting Adam's extremely dry farm, Samuel agrees to build a watering system for him. Knowing that Samuel enjoys doing the work and is not concerned whether he gets paid or not for his labor, Liza warns Samuel, "It's my experience, Samuel, and should be yours, that if they don't pay presently they never pay at all. We could buy a valley farm with your promises" (182). Even though it is Samuel's responsibility to be the provider for his family, it is Liza who has the business sense. As Sandra Beatty contends in "A Study of Female Characterization in Steinbeck's Fiction," "In the case of Liza Hamilton, it is her complete realism, her practicality, efficiency, and unshakable convictions as opposed to Samuel's dreaming, his carefree and almost child-like idealism, which keep the Hamilton family from starving" (4). Being much more rational than Samuel, Liza must constantly prevent Samuel from following through with his unfeasible dreaming, and remind him of the importance of maintaining an income to ensure the care of their children and home.

Besides being aware of Samuel's impracticality, Liza also understands that Samuel has an overly kind and passive demeanor. Once Samuel hears that Adam's twin sons are still not named after they are a year old, he tells Liza that he must visit the Trask farm and help Adam name the boys. From the horror of finding out the Trask boys are so

neglected by their father that they do not even have names yet, Liza commands Samuel, ““If you do not get those boys named, there’ll be no warm place in this house for you”” (Steinbeck, Eden 256). Although Samuel swears to Liza that he will convince Adam to name the boys, even if he has to use physical force, Liza knows that Samuel often fails to be assertive in confrontation: ““You fall short in savagery, Samuel. I know you. You’ll give him sweet-sounding words and you’ll come dragging back and try to make me forget you ever went”” (256). While it appears that Liza lacks faith in Samuel getting the boys named, Everest argues that actually “her instructions to Samuel on the naming of the twins demonstrate her thorough, practical wisdom” (19). In order to prove Liza wrong, Samuel leaves for the Trask farm with a head-strong determination, and Liza’s cleverness ultimately results in the naming of the boys. By narrating the conflicts between Liza and Samuel, Beatty reasons that “Steinbeck is of the opinion, then, that it is these basic differences between man and woman which not only create the need in man for a woman but also determine [...] the specific nature of the role which the woman takes on” (4). Through Liza’s practicality and perseverance, Steinbeck stresses the importance women have on society as a whole.

Even though Liza is portrayed as being a conventional homemaker in the sense that she does the majority of the cooking, cleaning, and sewing for her husband and children, her uncompromising devotion to her faith and her household responsibilities prohibit her from being the typical loving wife and maternal figure. Though she and Samuel have eight children, Liza is never presented as being a sexual woman. Unlike Cathy and Abra who embrace their sexuality, Steinbeck never illustrates a scene between Samuel and Liza in which they show affection toward one another. The lack of physical

affection between Samuel and Liza insinuates that they participate in sexual intercourse merely as a means of procreation. Even Liza's physical description depicts her as being stern and callous rather than loving: "She wore her hair always pulled tight back and bunned behind in a hard knot. [...] She had no spark of humor and only occasionally a blade of cutting wit" (Steinbeck, Eden 11). As a result of her lack of womanly kindness, "There was a nail-hard strength in her, a lack of any compromise, a rightness in the face of all opposing wrongness, which made you hold her in a kind of awe but not in warmth" (43). Despite the fact that Liza is admired for her unwavering strength and commitment to living a faultless Christian lifestyle, her determination hinders her from having a loving and kind relationship with her family. In fact, her strong will even "frighten[s] her grandchildren because she ha[s] no weakness" (12). With Liza's lack of motherly and wifely kindness, Steinbeck undermines the maternal qualities of love and tenderness often connected with motherhood and demonstrates that the domestic image is not a realistic or desirable figure.

Liza is much more domestic than maternal when she visits Adam and Cathy Trask shortly after the Trask twins are born. As a result of Cathy's neglect of the housework and the caring of the twin boys, Liza "cleaned the Trask house from the top clear down into the grain of the wooden floors. [...] She put the babies on a working basis and noted with satisfaction that they howled most of the time and began to gain weight" (198-199). Rather than being truly concerned for the welfare of Cathy and the babies and attempting to become emotionally engaged with them during her week-long stay, Liza undertakes her task at the Trask house as if it is just another duty she must complete. She cleans the house and organizes a daily schedule for the caring of the babies in a mechanical fashion.

Once the Trask house is in order and the babies are healthy, she returns to her own home and, rather than spending time and socializing with her family, immediately gets to work: “She found her house a stable of filth and abomination and she set to cleaning it with the violence and disgust of a Hercules at labor” (199). Liza’s drive to keep order among the house interferes with her ability to be a loving and compassionate woman.

Liza’s lack of compassion is essentially demonstrated through her reactions, or rather lack thereof, to the loss of her loved ones. Unlike Samuel, who is struck “like a silent earthquake” when his and Liza’s daughter, Una, dies, Liza’s strength is not breached: “Liza with her acceptance could take care of tragedy; she had no real hope this side of Heaven” (276). Liza’s acceptance of tragedy and her lack of reaction toward her daughter’s untimely death reveal her cold character. Even after Samuel’s death, it is Liza who assumes the responsibility of making sure over a hundred people are fed after his funeral. In response to Adam’s disbelief of Liza’s actions so soon after Samuel’s death, Will replies, ““She’s practical. She knew they had to be fed and she fed them”” (329). Instead of grieving normally as expected of a widow, Liza does not reveal the slightest bit of pain from her loss and continues her domestic duties as if it were any other day, resulting in her having a mechanical appearance. Rather than making her seem righteous, Liza’s practicality and lack of emotion in response to both Samuel’s and Una’s death make her appear to be both callous and unloving. Although she is a much more ethical person than Cathy, Liza’s lack of compassion causes her to be an unlikable woman. While as readers we are drawn to have sympathy for Cathy in her confining circumstances and question why she acts wickedly, Steinbeck does not convince us to feel empathy for Liza and to understand the motives for her actions. By characterizing

Liza as an unlikable woman, Steinbeck conveys that the domestic women of the time in which he was writing have little emotional depth and that the ideal domesticated woman of the nineteen fifties is not a desirable woman at all.

In fact, Liza's unbending dedication to her faith as well as her familial responsibilities proves to be more harmful than beneficial. In reference to the females in East of Eden, Lorelei Cederstrom writes, "the feminine is almost totally repressed, irrelevant to the structured roles and relationships in the Christian lives of the settlers, but irrupting dangerously as a result of that repression" (200). As a result of striving to fulfill her religious and domestic duties, Liza's femininity is stifled; thus causing her determination and strength to resist repression. Over the course of their marriage, Liza's willpower is so overbearing that it emasculates Samuel. Liza does not approve of Samuel's friendship to Adam because she feels that Adam's situation only saddens Samuel and leaves him with a feeling of depression. Although Samuel knows he must visit Adam to help him and the twins, "it gave him a sad feeling in the stomach to think of disobeying his wife. He explained his purpose almost as though he were confessing" (Steinbeck, Eden 255). Even though Samuel only has good intentions of helping his neighbor, he does not want to disappoint his wife. Liza's self-righteousness causes her to become, for Samuel, a god-like figure whom he fears and must confess his disobedience to. Whereas Liza does not wish for Samuel to disobey her, she also ridicules him when he is compliant: "Don't agree with me all the time. It hints of insincerity. Speak up for yourself" (257). Though Liza claims that she wants Samuel to be assertive, she fails to give him the chance. Her aggressive behavior and stern attitude cause her to be the masculine figure, ultimately stripping Samuel of his power and emasculating him.

Although Liza's good morals and great strength make her a pious character, her lack of tenderness causes her to be a masculine figure rather than feminine. Through this characterization of Liza, "Steinbeck presents his readers with a formidable wife, but he moves beyond the stereotype to present a very human and not always likable woman" (Everest 20). By depicting Liza to be such a cold and stern wife and mother, Steinbeck is warning his readers that although it is admirable for women to be both physically strong and strong in faith, they must not allow their strength to cause the renunciation of their maternal qualities. Being published in a time when the majority of women were struggling with gaining independence and fighting the pressures of society to conform, East of Eden's Liza poses a warning for American society. While American culture urged women to be pure, wholesome, and domestic, Liza represents a woman who has taken her domestic and religious duties too far, and lacks the qualities of warmth and sexuality that often make women attractive. While Steinbeck draws us to have sympathy for Cathy in her confining circumstances and to analyze why she acts wickedly, we are not persuaded to feel empathy for Liza. Before the novel ends, "Liza Hamilton die[s] with a pinched little smile on her mouth, and her cheekbones [are] shockingly high when the red [is] gone from them" (Steinbeck, Eden 490). Liza's 'pinched little smile' and high cheekbones after her death bear witness to her smugness and pride, as well as her forced smile. Though she fulfills the household responsibilities expected of her, her obvious lack of affection toward her family proves that she performs the domestic acts only out of a sense of duty.

In contrast to Cathy—who illustrates the ability to change from a negligent mother who abandons her sons to a somewhat caring, mother-like figure for Aron—Liza

remains a constant, unyielding figure of piety. Liza's flat characterization represents the limitations of American women of the nineteen fifties and their lack of growth in similar situations. Through his account of Liza's death, Steinbeck shows that this type of female figure is a false ideal. In the depictions of Cathy and Liza then, East of Eden reveals the flaws of both ruthless and sexual women and of women who display piety and conformity. While on the surface Liza exemplifies positive qualities of duty and piety, Steinbeck very artfully presents her as a negative example, as he explores and discusses the repression of women, as well as their search for identity and meaning in the postwar era. Understanding the societal constraints of women as well as the desirable qualities of women, Steinbeck offers his readers an alternative female to admire—Abra.

ABRA BACON: THE NEW WOMAN

“Abra has the loveliness of woman, and the courage—and the strength—and the wisdom.”
-John Steinbeck, East of Eden

Steinbeck responds to postwar domestic politics most explicitly in the character Abra Bacon. Though Steinbeck kills off the unconventional woman, Cathy, and the traditional, domestic Liza, he does provide his contemporary readers with an alternative: Abra. In a letter to his editor, Covici, Steinbeck acknowledges that Abra is

the strong female principle of good as opposed to Cathy. Her strength will not be soft. Abra is a fighter and an effective human being. She will take active part in the battle. So—now are we about ready to go. We have a new kind of a world in the Salinas Valley and our timeless principles must face a new set of facts and react to them. (Journal 146)

According to Steinbeck, unlike Cathy whose strength is actually “softened” by her wickedness and lack of femininity, Abra is both strong and feminine. Instead of using her intelligence and sexuality to gain power and strength at the expense of others, Abra is “an effective human being” in that she uses her assertiveness, cleverness, and feminine qualities to enhance not only her own life, but the lives of others as well. She is also “effective” in that, unlike Liza, or traditional domestic women in general, Abra does not allow her femininity to be identified completely with domesticity; thus allowing her to redefine femininity and to be a role model.

For Steinbeck, the “new world,” the world in which he is writing and which he is addressing, is postwar America. Remembering the terror caused by the bombing of Pearl Harbor and being in the midst of the Cold War, the United States no longer appeared to be a place of security in the 1950s. The nation’s chaotic era made it a place vulnerable to

change. The “timeless principles” Steinbeck mentions refer to the conventional roles of men and women as breadwinners and homemakers that were commonly followed in the United States during this era. While acknowledging that these conventional principles have been openly accepted by American society in the past, Steinbeck warns his contemporary readers that these traditions are outdated and need to be addressed. In the late 1940s and the early 1950s, Steinbeck recognized the lack of satisfaction women felt as a result of the traditional roles assigned to them by the oppressing society in which they lived. Abra, though still described as exhibiting domestic characteristics, is willing to “take active part in the battle,” “the battle” being the fight against conformity that women who made an attempt to define their identities by something other than domesticity had to confront. Overall, Abra represents a new type of woman of the fifties, of the “new world,” who is assertive and ready to become an active participant in her life, rather than be traditionally submissive and conform to the expectations of society.

Introduced in the novel at the age of ten, Abra mesmerizes eleven-year-old Aron with her beauty and threatens Cal’s superiority with her keenness. From the very beginning, Abra is described as angelic: “Abra pushed her sunbonnet back. It framed her head like a halo. She was pretty, with dark hair in two braids. Her little forehead was round and domed, and her brows were level” (Steinbeck, Eden 345). Although Abra’s angelic features draw the attention of both Aron and Cal and cause her to appear to be gentle and sweet, her physical features are a bit deceptive. As Steinbeck’s narrator relates, “Her hazel eyes were sharp and intelligent and completely fearless. She looked straight into the faces of the boys, straight into their eyes, one after the other, and there was no hint of the shyness she had pretended inside the house” (345). In contrast to

Abra's timidity when she is under the supervision of her parents, Abra openly offers her opinions to Aron and Cal. She begins the conversation by confessing to the boys that she doubts that they are twins: "'I don't believe you're twins,' she said. 'You don't look alike'" (345). Abra's awareness of her parents' conventional expectations of her behavior causes her to camouflage her direct and questioning personality with a submissive demeanor in their presence.

Several years later, Abra and Aron reunite at school in Salinas and enter a relationship together. Following the traditional conventions that many of Steinbeck's postwar American readers also followed, Abra is eager to marry Aron and begin raising children at a very young age. Throughout their entire high school careers, Aron and Abra openly discuss and plan their marriage. Although Aron explores ministry and plans to attend college, Abra only desires to be Aron's wife. After Adam loses most of his fortune in a failed attempt to transfer frozen lettuce from the west to the east coast, Aron questions the feasibility of attending college. Abra mentions that she and Aron could always run his father's ranch, but Aron is not pleased with her resolution:

"I'm not going to be a farmer and you're not going to be a farmer's wife."

"I'm going to be Aron's wife, no matter what he is."

"I'm not going to give up college," he said.

"I'll help you," Abra said again. (441)

While Aron aspires to attend college and pursue a career, Abra, living in a society that fails to provide her any other option, pictures herself only as Aron's wife in her future. Unlike Aron, whose identity will be primarily based upon his career instead of only his

role as a husband, Abra's entire identity, if she conforms to the norm of the society in which she lives, will be based upon her role as a wife.

Rather than merely wishing to marry Aron in hopes of obtaining a financially secure future, Abra truly loves Aron and wants to be his companion. One afternoon in town, Abra tells Aron, "I do love you so" (442). In reaction to Abra's open declaration of love for Aron, "There was giggling from the stools in front of the soda fountain. Their voices had risen and they were overheard by their peers. Aron blushed and tears of anger started in his eyes. He ran out of the store and plunged away up the street" (442). Unlike Abra, who fails to be intimidated by the criticisms of others, Aron represents those individuals who are eager to conform to society's expectations. Instead of waiting for Aron to openly declare his love for her, Abra takes the initiative, straying from the norm to bring foreground her own emotions.

Although Abra deviates from convention and is much more aggressive in displaying her affection toward Aron, she does not completely rebel against domesticity and conformity as Cathy does. After Abra expresses her love for Aron in the shop and he flees from her, Steinbeck's narrator describes Abra's loneliness: "Abra walked up and down the streets of Salinas, hoping to catch sight of him. She was angry at him, but she was also bewilderingly lonely. Aron hadn't ever run away from her before. Abra had lost her gift for being alone" (442). While Abra's willingness to display her affections for Aron in public make her appear to be completely unconventional, her lack of independence from Aron illustrates her reliance on male authority and her lack of self-identity.

Along with deterring Abra's verbal expression of love, Aron's religious aspirations also result in him attempting to stifle Abra's sexuality. While walking home from school one day, Abra asks Aron to kiss her. He replies,

“Right here? Right in the street?”

“Why not?”

“Everybody'd see.”

“I want them to,” said Abra.

Aron said, “No. I don't like to make things public like that.”

She stepped around in front of him and stopped him. “You look here mister. You kiss me now” (440).

Unlike Liza, who merely uses her sexuality as a means of reproduction, and Cathy who uses her sexuality as a device for gaining power, Abra does not hide or exploit her sexuality. She is comfortable with her sexuality and only wants to use it as a means of expressing her affections. Acceding to Abra's request, Aron “gave her a quick embarrassed peck and then forced her beside him again” (440). Abra is proud to be Aron's girlfriend and is not ashamed of displaying her affection for him in public. In contrast to Abra, Aron wishes to keep his sexuality hidden.

Aron's desire to remain pure reaches far beyond not wanting to display affection for Abra in public. After deciding on pursuing a career in ministry, Aron believes that it is only right for him and Abra to practice celibacy. Still a virgin, Abra does not foresee the consequences of practicing abstinence for life and agrees to comply with Aron's wishes. Although Abra foresees marrying Aron and bearing his children in her future, she remains silent (451). After Aron tells Abra of his plan of celibacy, “Abra in her

wisdom agreed with him, feeling and hoping that this phase would pass” (451).

According to Mimi Gladstein in The Indestructible Women in Faulkner, Hemingway, and Steinbeck, Abra demonstrates women’s ability to acknowledge that the present is only temporary and she, possessing the ability to look past the here and now, realizes that changes will be made in the future (99). Although Abra is only fourteen, she realizes that Aron, also a teenager, is only acting in the moment and will likely change his mind. While one can argue that Abra’s silence symbolizes her wisdom and patience, one can also argue that Abra’s silence is a submissive act in which she relinquishes her own desires and future plans to support those of Aron. By remaining silent, Abra shows that her aspirations are inferior to those of Aron, and that in order to be an acceptable woman, she must conform to the patriarchal society.

As Abra ages, she becomes aware of the discrepancies in her relationship with Aron, and this causes their relationship to fail. Never having a mother against whom to measure other women, Aron replaces the real Abra with the fictional image of what he thinks a woman should be and imagines that Abra is “absolutely pure” (Steinbeck, Eden 497). From the very beginning of their relationship, Aron perceives Abra to be a “mother-like” figure to him. When they first begin dating, Aron asks of Abra, ““Maybe you could pretend like you’re my mother”” (424). Encouraged by Aron to fulfill the mother role, Abra replies, ““Come, my baby, put your head in Mother’s lap. Come, my little son”” (424). In the beginning of their relationship, Abra desires to be a conventional mother-like figure and takes the opportunity with the motherless Aron to do so. But as their relationship grows, Aron loses sight of the real Abra completely and just as his father did with Cathy, falls in love with a false image of her: “of Abra, he made his

immaculate dream and, having created her, fell in love with her” (524). Cathy’s reaction to the oppression of Adam foreshadows Abra’s rebellion against and rejection of Aron. As a result of demonstrating the domestic false projection Adam has of Cathy as well as the fabricated maternal projection Aron has of Abra, Cederstrom argues that “Steinbeck analyzes clearly the nature of the feminine and the way men will attempt to bind the feminine to suit their own desires” (201). By examining the lives of two women who are victims of oppression, Steinbeck reinforces the idea that the patriarchal society in which he is writing is guilty of oppressing women, thus making his readers aware that they are entertaining false images of femininity. Also, by making Abra and Cathy of different ages, Steinbeck emphasizes that women of all ages can be victims of oppression.

As she grows older, Abra realizes that the idea of being Aron’s wife is both unrealistic and unfulfilling: ““When we were children we lived in a story that we made up. But when I grew up the story wasn’t enough”” (Steinbeck, Eden 577). Once Abra becomes aware of Aron’s image of her, she feels pressured to fulfill Aron’s idea of her. While assisting Lee in the Trasks’ kitchen, Abra confesses, ““I’m always afraid he’ll see something in me that isn’t in the one he made up. I’ll get mad or I’ll smell bad—or something else. He’ll find out”” (497). Unlike Liza who attempts to maintain the façade of the perfect, domestic female figure, Abra is fully aware that she has flaws and fears the consequences once Aron discovers her imperfections. In response to Abra’s statement, Lee explains, ““But it must be hard living the Lily Maid, the Goddess-Virgin, and the other all at once. Humans just do smell bad sometimes”” (497). Steinbeck speaks through Lee to indicate to his readers how unrealistic it is for women to be expected to live solely as virtuous domestic beings without any imperfections or other desires.

Abra knows that the angelic view Aron has of her is an unrealistic ideal and that she will never be able to live up to the righteous and domesticated, “Goddess-Virgin” image, thus, making her and Aron’s relationship impractical. Lorelei Cederstrom argues that in order to separate herself from the fictional domestic angel, Abra, like Cathy, “must first rid herself of the projections of the male characters” (201). Ultimately, Abra makes the courageous decision to be herself, rather than live up to Aron’s projected angelic image of her even if that means she will lose Aron’s companionship. By asserting her own identity, Abra takes an “active part in the battle” to free herself from society’s expectations.

In contrast to the confining relationship Abra experiences with Aron, Abra and Cal form a relationship of equality, in which they have an understanding and appreciation of the importance of each other’s masculine and feminine traits. As Cederstrom explains, “Abra and Cal are free to form a real relationship, one based upon true knowledge and acceptance of each other as a mingling of good and evil, strength and weakness, masculine and feminine” (203). Unlike Aron, who will accept Abra only if she conforms to his notion of the ideal woman, Cal does not try to impose a false identity onto Abra. Rather than waiting for Cal to declare his love for her, Abra is unconventionally assertive and openly expresses her love for him first: “I think I love you, Cal” (Steinbeck, Eden 578). As their relationship progresses, Abra is also the first one to demonstrate physical affection: “She reached over and took his hand.” Cal replies that he was reluctant to make the first move: “I was afraid to” (591). Instead of reprimanding Abra as Aron did, Cal does not suppress Abra’s sexuality, thus, allowing Abra the opportunity to express her real identity rather than a projected image.

While Abra exemplifies strength by asserting herself and refusing to conform to Aron's idea of her, she also displays traits of domesticity. Although Abra is not happy living in her parents' home, she does assume the domestic role in the Trasks' household: "In the afternoons she sat in the kitchen with Lee and helped him to string beans or slip peas from their pods" (494). Abra often spends more time at the Trasks' household than at her own home. Mrs. Bacon, an overbearing domestic mother, strips Abra of her individuality: "Her mother did everything for her, insisted on it—planned for her, dressed her. Abra had long ago given up having any private thing in her room, even any personal thing" (579). Unlike in her own home, Lee and the Trask men offer Abra an accepting environment in which she can be comfortable with acting as herself and speaking her mind freely. The lack of a woman's presence within the Trasks' household creates an environment in which Abra is not constrained to act in the traditional sense, as she is in her own home. Not only does Mrs. Bacon perform all of the domestic household duties, but she tries to protect Mr. Bacon from being punished for embezzling in order to preserve the family's wholesome appearance. Abra "knew that her father was not ill. He was hiding from something. [...] She wondered whether her mother knew her father was not ill" (579). Although Abra is aware that her father is only pretending to be sick in order to avoid accepting punishment for his offense, she must take part in the "timeless principles"; she must not speak of this to anyone, and she must support her father as her mother does by being inactive. Just as many women of the nuclear era felt pressured to conceal their discontent during the fifties (May 172), Abra is forced to conform in order to preserve her family's image of the content and conservative American family, even if it is a false image.

Along with fulfilling domestic chores for the Trasks, Abra is an “effective human being,” by showing concern for Cal and Adam. Rather than use her femininity for bad, such as Cathy, Abra uses her femininity for good. Abra, once again revealing her great insight into human nature, explains to Cal that he can choose to be a moral person rather than an evil person. After Cal admits that his “mother was a whore,” Abra replies, “My father is a thief” (Steinbeck Eden 598). When Cal explains, “I’ve got her blood, Abra” he is implying that he has inherited his mother’s immorality (598). By admitting that she also has her father’s “blood,” Abra explains to Cal that although they each have a parent who is morally corrupt, they each have a choice of whether or not to act immorally, an option which Steinbeck refers to as *timshel*³ in the novel. According to Mimi Gladstein in “The Strong Female Principle of Good--or Evil: The Women of East of Eden,” Abra “is the personification of Steinbeck’s moral solution, “timshel” incarnate. Having acknowledged the bad in herself, she chooses good. Since she has grown up and come to terms with herself before Cal, she acts as an agent in his growth” (38). Although it is Lee, Adam, and Samuel Hamilton who theorize on *timshel*, it is actually Abra who embodies and enacts the philosophy in real life.

Besides helping Cal realize that he does not have to be bad and giving him the tools to forgive himself, Abra also is an effective human being in that she aids to the healing of the broken relationship between Cal and his father. Despite the fact that Cal, who originally blames himself for his brother’s death, plans on running away in order to avoid his father, Abra convinces Cal to return home to face Adam and make amends.

³ *Timshel* is a Hebrew word that translates into “Thou mayest.” Samuel Hamilton, Adam Trask, and Lee philosophize over a passage in Genesis in the Bible and whether humans can conquer sin or not. Taking the translation of *timshel* into consideration, they concur that humans have a choice of whether to act in an evil manner or not, a theme displayed throughout East of Eden (Steinbeck, Eden 301-304).

Soon after Cal returns home, Adam does give Cal his blessing, so Cal can continue to live free from guilt for his brother's death. Ultimately, as Cederstrom explains, "Abra's sympathetic understanding becomes the agent bringing about the restoration of the feminine necessary for their healing" (202). While Abra does exhibit great strength and willfulness through her actions and decisions, it is her womanly tenderness that is needed to encourage Cal to reunite with his father. Therefore, according to Cederstrom, the "novel concludes with a powerful image of the restoration of the balance between masculine and feminine as Adam's blessing unites with Abra's love to free Cal to be whole" (203). Without Abra's realization of *timshel* and her concern for the well-being of Cal and Adam, Adam would not have the opportunity to offer Cal forgiveness.

As a figure of both strength and femininity, Everest argues, Abra "unites foibles and strengths of other men and women to enhance the finale of the work: she is the recipient of a faith that moves beyond Liza's [...] although virginal, she does not deny the sexuality of her nature" (22). Whereas Liza Hamilton uses her faith to determine and justify her decisions and actions, Abra recognizes her right to free will and feels responsible for all of her actions. According to Gladstein, Abra's recognition that she has the ability to choose good over evil makes her a representation of a second Eve, "the mother for future generations" ("Strong" 37). Rather than representing a second Eve, critics have failed to recognize that East of Eden moves beyond the early Genesis stories of Adam and Eve and Cain and Able and that Abra is actually a female representation of Abraham. In Genesis, God promises Abraham that if Abraham leaves his father's house and moves to Canaan, that He will make a great nation for Abraham and all of the families of the Earth shall be blessed as a result of Abraham's obedience

(Holy Bible, Genesis 12:1-3). Like Abraham, Abra has the ability to lead future generations to a more promising life. At the end of East of Eden, Abra is left standing side by side Cal and Lee at the foot of Adam's bed (Steinbeck 602). Lee foreshadows the possibility that Abra and Cal will marry when he tells Adam, "But your son will live. He will marry and his children will be the only remnant of you" (602). The fact that Abra does live and Steinbeck avoids closing his novel with the marriage of Cal and Abra signifies that she and Cal have a choice. In this "new world," Cal and Abra's terms for marriage can diverge from that of conventional marriages. Instead of being a traditionally passive partner in their marriage, Abra, just as she stands equally by Cal's side at the end of the novel, has the opportunity to be an equally active participant in their marriage. By referring to Cal's children, Steinbeck gives his readers a sense of continuation; the "new" manner in which Abra and Cal live will be inherited and implemented by their children, and so on. By characterizing Abra as a representation of Abraham, Steinbeck implies that this "new" manner in which people can live is just as much a choice for women as for men. This idea gives Steinbeck's readers the impression that, like Abra and Cal, they too have the opportunity to change the terms of their marriages. Living in their "new world," the postwar American society, they can digress from the conformities of society and try to instill equality within their marriages. As a result, their children and the nation's future generations will ultimately adopt the idea of equality among men and women.

CONCLUSION

Although East of Eden's setting often causes the novel to be dismissed as something other than a fifties novel, Steinbeck was clearly responding to the domestic politics of the post-World War II era in which he was living through his exploration of Kate Trask, Liza Hamilton, and Abra Bacon's reactions to domesticity. As Beth Everest explains, "the historical realities of the times of both the writing and the setting must be taken into account. Women did not enjoy the freedom they do in today's society, but were corseted in the ways they could develop and express their character [...]" (22-23). Through his depictions of Kate, Liza, and Abra, Steinbeck communicates the limitations of contemporary society's idea of femininity. During the 1950s, American women—in an effort to establish the nuclear family and assist in stabilizing the nation during a time of chaos created by the Cold War—were expected to resume the role of homemaker. In order to escape this restrictive domestic role, East of Eden's Kate deviates from the norm and uses her sexuality to acquire independence and power. Juxtaposed to the characterization of Kate, Liza is portrayed as the domestic icon. Even as a maternal figure, Liza's lack of sexuality as well as her lack of tenderness discloses that the domestic idol, which the majority of women of the nuclear era were expected to live up to, was actually a façade.

Since Steinbeck was aware that the "nuclear nation" would not likely accept a woman who absolutely rejected her domestic and maternal obligations, Kate is ultimately killed off. While Kate's demise cautions postwar women from completely rebelling against familial responsibilities, Liza's death stresses that postwar women should not absolutely conform and allow domesticity to completely shape their identity. Through

his representation of Abra, Steinbeck portrays to his contemporary readers that women do not have to choose between being an extremely conservative mother, such as Liza, or a rebellious whore, such as Kate. In the new postwar America, Abra represents a new type of woman. Asserting her sexuality and wisdom, she, at the same time, maintains a domestic profile that does not define her identity, thus shaping a new idea of femininity for the postwar generation. As a result of Abra's assertiveness and femininity, she and Cal are able to have a relationship based upon equality. Through his portrayal of the egalitarianism within Cal and Abra's relationship, Steinbeck reinforces the importance of equality among men and women in general.

Even if Steinbeck was requesting that his contemporary society become aware of the severity of the restrictions it had imposed upon women and that this society establish a new, less oppressive idea of femininity that would allow for equality among men and women, one must wonder if his audience regarded his appeal. Three years after East of Eden was published, Elia Kazan directed a film version of the novel starring Julie Harris, James Dean, and Raymond Massey. Interestingly enough, the movie fails to portray Kate and Abra exactly as Steinbeck did and fails to include the character of Liza. Eliminating Liza from the film completely, the movie avoids addressing a key argument of Steinbeck's novel: the virtuous and wholesome domestic woman is only a façade. In the movie, Kate is, as an elderly, plump woman, nothing like the angelic, beautiful woman Steinbeck depicted. Often shown wearing dark clothing and tall hats, Kate resembles a witch. Without Liza, the audience does not perceive that the domestic figure is an unlikable woman, but rather that the woman who rebels from conformity and domesticity is despicable and rejected. Although portrayed in the film as the most likable and

acceptable woman, Abra is characterized as being submissive and much less assertive than she is in the novel. In the film, she often appears to be a naïve, helpless girl whose affection is the cause of Aron and Cal's rivalry. Also, at the end of the film, even though Abra replaces the character of Lee, she begs Adam to forgive Cal and repeatedly apologizes for doing so rather than demand Adam's forgiveness as Lee does in the novel. This interpretation of Abra makes her much more passive and weak in the film than she is in the novel. Characterizing Abra as a submissive woman indicates to the postwar society that, rather than being defined as assertive, warm and somewhat domestic, femininity is defined as being compliant and family oriented.

While the 1955 movie falls short of faithfully representing Steinbeck's vision of East of Eden, the US did— though not automatically—heed to the novel's call for change. Eleven years after Steinbeck published East of Eden, Betty Friedan published The Feminine Mystique, in which she discusses her findings on the restrictions post-World War II women experienced. Like Steinbeck, Friedan stresses that postwar women's identities and the significance of their lives were established predominantly on their marital and maternal roles. By examining East of Eden closely and considering the time period in which it was written, one can easily see that Steinbeck exposes the drawbacks postwar society caused for women by defining them through domesticity and give him credit for urging the nation to eradicate those restrictions in order to develop a society based on equality.

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