PROJECT MUSE®

Steinbeck's Dysfunctional Families: A Coast-to-Coast Dilemma

Mimi Reisel Gladstein

Steinbeck Review, Volume 3, Number 1, Spring 2006, pp. 35-52 (Article)

Published by Penn State University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/str.2007.0009>

➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/218349>

STEINBECK'S DYSFUNCTIONAL FAMILIES: A COAST-TO-COAST DILEMMA

MIMI GLADSTEIN, UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO

AT *THE BEGINNING OF A SEMESTER*, when I ask American Literature students to tell me what they know about the writings of John Steinbeck, his main themes and subject matter, their answers depend on which works they have read. More often than not, I will get responses that allude to his sympathy and support for the plight of farm workers and the dispossessed. Some mention his interest in the outcasts of society, in particular the retarded or the malformed. Rarely is there any mention of the family. These answers are to be expected. After all, Steinbeck's international reputation is based largely on *The Grapes of Wrath* and *Of Mice and Men*, the two works most likely to represent his presence in the canon, the former omnipresent on those lists of the one hundred most important novels in twentieth century American literature. And these works are primarily about the plight of migrant workers and the powerless and oppressed.

Initial investigation for this article confirmed what my students and my own rudimentary research and reading have suggested. I started with the MLA International Bibliography, the standard search engine for literary investigation. Inputting the words "Steinbeck" and "Family," I was disappointed but not surprised when only thirteen entries appeared, one in Spanish. Obviously, the subject of family is not often associated with Steinbeck's works. But, minimal as it sounds, thirteen still overstates the number of

. . . THE SUBJECT
OF FAMILY IS NOT
OFTEN ASSOCIATED
WITH STEINBECK'S
WORKS.

entries appeared, one in Spanish. Obviously, the subject of family is not often associated with Steinbeck's works. But, minimal as it sounds, thirteen still overstates the number of

possible sources. This did not actually mean that there was that number of full articles. One entry was for five pages in a book of readings on *The Pearl*, another not about his fiction, but a two page entry on "Freemasonry and the Steinbeck Family" that was published in the *Steinbeck Newsletter*. Of the remaining ten entries in English, the largest number were about *The Grapes of Wrath*, not unexpectedly as the plot of that novel does follow the trials and tribulations of a family, the beleaguered Joads. It tracks not only their journey from Oklahoma to California, but most especially their problems in dealing with the discrimination and hostility they meet in what they had expected to be the "Promised Land." Still, even that inconsequential number, now down to ten, is not accurate since Abby Werlock's "Poor Whites: Joads and Snopses," is listed twice, both in its original journal form in *San José Studies* and again in the Heavilin anthology of *The Critical Response to John Steinbeck's The Grapes of Wrath*. Steinbeck and the family is obviously not a topic of much critical interest.

Why have so few written about Steinbeck and the family? To be sure, it is not the locus of his major thematic concerns. He does not, like many of his contemporaries, choose family for his fictional explorations. William Faulkner comes to mind as the major surveyor of the destructive results of impaired familial kinships, which provide the theme and plot of many of his works, but most especially his three major masterpieces: *The Sound and the Fury*, *As I Lay Dying*, and *Absalom, Absalom*. Tennessee Williams and Eugene O'Neill chose the stage as the site for their painstaking and microscopic inspections of toxic family relationships, in such classics as *The Glass Menagerie* and *Long Day's Journey into Night*. Not only does Steinbeck avoid the family as a key subject matter, but he also steers clear of home and hearth as prime settings for his characters to interact in or as backdrop for major action. Quite often, his characters are homeless, from George and Lennie who long for their own little place to Mack and the boys who "con" Lee Chong into letting them occupy the Abbeville building. Steinbeck's numerous prostitutes may live in a house, but it is certainly not a home. And it is that very fact, the reality of the lack of critical attention to the topic of the family in Steinbeck's works, excluding *The Grapes of Wrath*, which occasions my subject. Perhaps, now, we can plow a field that has lain fallow, and explore Steinbeck's depiction of the dysfunctional family.

Two works will be the main foci of my discussion of Steinbeck's concern with problems of the American family both East

and West: *East of Eden* and *The Winter of Our Discontent*. Both books come late in his fictional output. The actual writing of *East of Eden* did not begin until he was close to fifty years old, although he had done much thinking and preparation earlier. *The Winter of Our Discontent* was the last novel he wrote, and it is only separated from *East of Eden* by two slight works: *Sweet Thursday* and *The Short Reign of Pippin IV*. This is not to suggest that Steinbeck had never written about harmful family dynamics earlier in his career. Some of the stories in *The Pastures of Heaven* are examples of that interest, but the focus on unhealthy family interactions is spotlighted in only a few of the chapters, such as the stories of Pat Humbert and Helen Van Deventer.

Before we launch into our analysis, let us define our terms. *Webster's Third New International Dictionary* informs us that the dysfunctional is that with impaired or abnormal functioning, or that which fails to serve a useful or adjustive purpose in society. The more specific text *Understanding Family Problems* applies the term to the family. It clarifies that there is no one way that families may be dysfunctional, just as there is no one way a person may be impaired. The term "dysfunctional family" does not refer to only one family type. And the dysfunctional families in Steinbeck's works are varied both in type and context, as I suggest in my title—"a coast-to-coast dilemma." It is also important to note that a family may be severely or minimally dysfunctional. Whereas functional families achieve a balance that allows for optimal operation, dysfunctional families break down for a variety of reasons. Tolstoy's oft-quoted opening sentence of *Anna Karenina* says it best: "All happy families are alike, but each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way." And the family impairments that Steinbeck explores are as distinct as they are disturbing.

East of Eden presents Steinbeck's most thoroughgoing and complete investigation of breakdown in the family unit. That his topic is dysfunction in the family is made obvious in numerous ways. To begin, there is the informing myth that envelops the novel. The title makes clear to us what Steinbeck's plot will allude to. We are dealing here, not just with any family, but with the first family of Western Judeo-Christian mythology and theology. And as the Bible demonstrates, family dysfunction began quite early in human history. No sooner had Adam and Eve started their household in their new home, east of Eden, than as extreme a disruption as can happen in a family occurs. Cain slays his brother Abel. I will not rehash here Steinbeck's reasons for choosing this

subject; it was the topic of my presentation "Fathering Failures: Steinbeck's *East of Eden*" at the 2000 John Steinbeck Society of Japan annual conference in Tokyo.¹ But, while in that address I explored the personal failure of Steinbeck's choice of myth for writing a book initially dedicated to his sons, a book to tell them what their blood is, here my thesis emerges

from not only the personal but also the world of fiction, replete with symbolic and national implications.

It might be appropriate at this point to make some biographical observations about influences that may have turned Steinbeck's fictional interest to writing about the family. As I noted earlier, the most thoroughgoing fictional explorations of the breakdown in the family occur late in Steinbeck's career. They occur after he has become a two-time divorcé, married for a third time, and become much more conservative in his political views. They occur once his perspective has enlarged beyond the valley that now is called "Steinbeck country" and has begun to encompass the whole of the country, from sea to shining sea. Accompanying this is a change in philosophy. Early works were concerned with groups, group man, the phalanx; in this period he became more interested in individual and personal as well as national matters. And if *East of Eden* is John Steinbeck's creative response to that question of what Americans are like today, then the answer is a decidedly pessimistic one. The family Steinbeck creates to represent "the story of my country and the story of me" (*Journal of a Novel* 2) is a sad representation of the domestic unit.

Cyrus Trask is the pater familias, symbolically the father of the first "Adam" in this saga of our country and the writer. The consistency of the symbolism is a bit murky. Logically, Cyrus, then, if he were the father of Adam, would be God. He does fulfill that role, as God does for Cain and Abel, in his choice of preference between the gifts (offerings) of his two sons, Charles and Adam. If Cyrus is symbolic of our country, then like it Cyrus's story begins on the Eastern Coast.² The novel itself, however,

... IF *EAST OF EDEN* IS JOHN STEINBECK'S CREATIVE RESPONSE TO THAT QUESTION OF WHAT AMERICANS ARE LIKE TODAY, THEN THE ANSWER IS A DECIDEDLY PESSIMISTIC ONE.

like Steinbeck's story, begins on the West coast. Cyrus is not introduced till Chapter Three. But, rather than introducing him as any kind of a godlike figure, the narrator informs us that "Cyrus was something of a devil" (15).

Cyrus is described as "wild," a man who liked "drinking and gambling and whoring" (15). And due to his nature, which is not modified by his married state, his first family is almost immediately rendered defunct. He brings home a dormant case of gonorrhea that he transmits to his religiously fanatic wife. Her malevolent theosophy leads her to suicide, leaving Cyrus with an infant son to care for. This he does in a manner that would cause modern day social workers to remove a child from its biological parent. He keeps the baby drunk for two and a half days.³ So, with the mother's death by suicide and an infant's drunkenness ends the story of the first dysfunctional family in *East of Eden*.

Steinbeck does not keep us waiting long to bring on stage his second example of unsuccessful family dynamics. Within a month of his first wife's death, Cyrus marries Alice, a seventeen-year-old neighbor. He marries her for practical reasons. He wants someone to take care of Adam, keep his house, and provide an outlet for what the narrator calls his "vigorous" nature. This she does, mutely but effectively, also providing Cyrus with another son. Alice treats both her son and her stepson equally in terms of minimal care, such as feeding and bathing. Beyond that, in her own passive/aggressive manner, she contributes to the harmful home environment by her sin of preference for her own son, Charles, and her willful blindness to Adam's thoughtfulness toward her and Charles' violent tendencies. The narrator makes clear that hers is not just preference, but probably something more malicious as she is described viewing the injured Adam out her window with a look that "might be hatred" (26). Not only does she project hatred in her look; her acts, or more explicitly her lack of action in Adam's behalf, clearly demonstrates the depth of her malevolence. Adam has been struck in the face with a bat by Charles, then struck in the ribs, kicked in the stomach and knocked out. Alice sees the result of this and does nothing. The brutal beating of one brother by another is not mentioned in the family, a telling quality of a dysfunctional family—sublimation of seminal information. Rather than deal with Charles' behavior directly, Cyrus begins showing Adam signs of preference, behaving gently toward him, punishing him no more. Eventually, he tells him directly: "I love you better" (31). Cyrus's obvious preference

incurs Charles's wrath to the point that he tries to kill his brother. After beating Adam unconscious, Charles goes back to the house to get a hatchet to finish the job. Fortunately, Adam has the instinct to hide. When Adam returns to the house, he "dragfoots" painstakingly up one stair at a time. Again, Alice makes no move to help him until Cyrus tells her "help Adam to bed. You'll have to cut his shirt off, I guess. Give him a hand"(36). Still, having seen this second example of Charles's murderous behavior, Alice rationalizes his actions and gives Adam no sympathy. Cyrus gets his shotgun and goes out with the intent to shoot his second son. He does not find him. Thus, the story line of this second Trask Family shows us first an attempted fratricide, which is followed by an attempted filicide. One could say that the behavior of the second Trask family defines the extremes of family dysfunction.

*EAST OF EDEN PRODUCTION OF ACTORS THEATRE OF
LOUISVILLE, 1996.*

*DONALD LI (LEFT) AND ROBERT MONTANO, WITH
PEGGY COWLES IN THE BACKGROUND.*

A parallel plot line involves Cyrus's plan for Adam to go into the military and for Charles to stay home. This would seem to be an ironical sin of preference. One would expect that a father would prefer to keep his favorite son out of harm's way. But Cyrus has determined that Charles is violent enough naturally and that Adam needs to be toughened up. This, he thinks, can be accomplished by making a soldier out of Adam. Cyrus uses his connections to enlist his son in the army. This he does while Adam is still recovering from Charles's attack. "Lying in his bed,

Adam was enlisted in the army as a private in the cavalry”(38). Though it may be that Cyrus’ plan for his son is, in the long run, successful—Adam does attain self-sufficiency—Adam never does develop into a proper soldier. He detests violence and killing. Further evidence of the short-circuited communication in this family is that though the brother who tried to kill him writes to Adam regularly during the five years he is in the army, the father who loves him dearly, does not. Home is such a negative memory in Adam’s mind that he re-enlists in the army he hates rather than return there. Even after his second five-year service, he takes another three years, wandering with other lonely men and serving time on a road gang before he can force himself to go back. All of these experiences in the army, wandering about the country and working on the road gang, teach him the coping devices and survival skills he had not learned at home. When Adam finally returns he muses to himself, “Why I’m not afraid of my brother! I used to be scared to death of him and I’m not any more”(71). Though Adam is no longer afraid of Charles, they never develop any kind of a healthy relationship. Tensions build and they are constantly on the verge of fighting. They squabble and bicker. After one quarrel about Charles’s putting a jam-stained knife into the butter, Adam leaves for eight months. When he returns, they try to create a workable relationship, but the suppressed hostility and irritation erupt. Another time Adam leaves for South America. When he is gone, Charles misses him, but when he returns the old unhealthy pattern recurs: Charles diagnoses it accurately: “You’ll stay around a year or so and then you’ll get restless and you’ll make me restless. We’ll get mad at each other and then we’ll get polite to each other—and that’s worse. Then we’ll blow up and you’ll go away again, and then you’ll come back and we’ll do it all over again”(122). When Cathy comes into the equation, Charles tries to alert Adam to the danger she represents, but, of course, Adam cannot hear him. Charles tells Adam that Cathy is a whore, a slut, and a bitch and that she will destroy him. However, Charles’ concern for his brother does not last long and does not extend beyond the verbal level. He does not care enough to refrain from responding to Cathy’s advances. And in a final betrayal, his parting gift to his brother is to cuckold him.

The dysfunction of the Trask family is further illustrated by the fact that although Cyrus Trask loved his son Adam more than he loved Charles, the feeling is not reciprocated. Adam admits to Charles: “Sometimes he scared me. Sometimes—yes, sometimes

I admired him, but most of the time I hated him”(72). Ironically, Adam’s feelings toward his stepmother, the one who cared so little for him that she would not even make a pretense of caring whether he lived or died, are more tender. Thinking of Alice after he has attained some age and perspective, Adam summarizes her situation: “as unloved as the farm, adequate, clean in her way, but no more wife than the farm was a home”(73). Steinbeck is obviously illustrating unpredictable and inappropriate responses in these family relationships: hate returned for love and caring returned for hatred.

Adam leaves his brother and the home he does not love to try to make a fresh start in the western part of the country. But though he puts a whole continent between himself and the site of his early unhappiness, he carries the seeds of family dysfunction to California with him. Maybe that is because he takes Cathy with him. The stage is thus set for another example of Steinbeck’s take on the toxic family. The Adam Trask family never does have a chance to be normal. Cathy tries to abort the twins before they are born and she never intends to be part of a family. She

**. . . IF CATHY/KATE
IS THE MOTHER FROM
HELL, ADAM IS NOT
A MUCH BETTER
FATHER.**

has only married Adam because he represented safety and protection at a time when she was vulnerable. Once Cathy has recuperated, she wants her freedom. She shoots her husband with what John IV referred to in his “Adam’s Wound”

speech as a “divorcing gun” and goes to work in a whorehouse.

But if Cathy/Kate is the mother from hell, Adam is not a much better father. His faults are manifold. He is so devastated by the loss of his wife that he does not even bother to name his sons. This is not accomplished until Sam Hamilton, egged on by his wife Liza, whose “jaw snapped shut and [her] teeth clicked” (293) when she hears about it, tells him not to come “whining back” until he gets those boys named. Samuel has to knock Adam down, choke him, and finally strike him with his fist until it is done. He tells him that his sons are “untried, unnoticed and undirected,” essentially left fatherless and motherless. But, giving them names under duress does not lead to much more attention for the boys from their father than they had before. Their needs are met by Lee, not Adam. Worse than that, rather than trying

to expand his children's horizons or teach them anything productive, Adam does not allow Lee to teach them Chinese"(339). He explains it as "just plain jealousy"(344). He did not want them to know something he did not know. A normal parent wants more for a child than he or she has. Nor does Adam model any kind of useful or productive behavior for them. The Edenic land he bought to settle on is allowed to lie fallow, so the boys learn no gardening or farming skills, although in keeping with the Cain and Abel paradigm, one is raising rabbits and the other wants to be allowed to plant an acre. It is not until the Bacons bring it up that Adam gives any thought to the twins' education, and by that time they are eleven, going on twelve. Later, when they move to Salinas and Cal grows into a restless and wandering boy, Adam has to get him out of jail. During the discussion that follows, Adam has a moment of epiphany. He realizes how he has failed Cal; he acknowledges that he has been responsible for much of the dysfunction in his family. Twice he remarks, "I'm as bad a father as my father was"(520) and then "I'm the same as my father was. He didn't allow me to be a person and I haven't seen my sons as people"(521). But Adam's move to conscientious fatherhood is short-lived. Shortly after the revelation about his shortcomings as a father, he commits the same sin of preference his father committed. Although he and Lee and Samuel have repeatedly discussed the Cain and Abel story and its meanings and implications, he drives his son Cal away by rejection, and in the hurt of that rejection Cal tells Aron the truth about their mother. It is only after a stroke and Aron's death, that Adam can be persuaded to bless his son Cal so that Cal can go on with his life.

Steinbeck achieved his goal of recreating the archetypal toxic family in the Trasks. In an article published in *The Washington Times* during the nationwide Steinbeck centennial celebration, Vincent D. Balitas identifies them as "one of the most dysfunctional families in fiction" (Bo8). The Trask family is the main target of Steinbeck's study of disjunctive family dynamics in *East of Eden*. But they are not the only representative of the type in the novel. Steinbeck creates other fictional families who demonstrate, to lesser and greater degrees, variations on the theme of damaging family dynamics. A case in point is the Ames Family. Though they can hardly be faulted—it is the rare family that gives birth to a monster, or so the narrator dubs Cathy at first—their main sin is that they are clueless. Cathy's father is "uneasy" about his daughter, but Mrs. Ames thinks all children are like hers. Still,

when she finds Cathy at age ten with two boys indulging in children's sex play, the mother become unhinged. As the narrator puts it, she settled down to a "steady hysteria" out of which "a sadistic devil peered" (88).

Mr. Ames represses his questions about the situation although it results in reform school for both of the boys. As Cathy grows, Mr. Ames continues to repress his questions about her and her behavior, thus allowing her free reign. The mother is "twisted in a cocoon of gauzy half-lies, warped truth" (90), and suggestions all planted in her mind by Cathy. Since Steinbeck styles Cathy as a monster born, the Ames family is never depicted as a functional one, except as Cathy's mother and father deceive themselves about her. When Cathy is sixteen, she stops even minimal attempts at normality. She quits going to school and runs away. Her father has her brought back and beats her with a whip to try to gain her submission. This time Cathy makes sure she will not be followed and brought back. She locks her parents in their room and sets fire to the house. The attempted fratricide and filicide in the Trask family pale by comparison. Those are attempts; Cathy accomplishes her goal.

When the reader meets the Bacon family, they seem the epitome of normalcy. Mr. Bacon is the county supervisor. Mrs. Bacon is dressed beautifully. To the Trask boys she appears to be all "black silk and lace" (391). Their daughter Abra gives the impression of an ideal little girl, dressed in story-book garb—a blue-checked sunbonnet with lace around it and a flowery dress with a little apron tied around her middle. The Bacons meet the family because they were almost caught in the rain, so they seek shelter at the Trask place. However, the thin veneer of normalcy is quickly stripped away. When Aron goes away to college, Abra begins to spend more time at the Trask home and she "finds that she trusted Adam more, and loved Lee more, than her own father" (564). Furthermore, Abra feels such a strong bond with Lee that she finds that there is no subject she cannot discuss with him. The narrator explains that the "few things she could talk about to her father and mother were thin and pale and tired and mostly not even true" (564). As Abra grows older, her alienation from her parents grows. Finally, she tells Lee that she wishes he was her father. When Cal reveals to her his feelings of guilt about his brother and his knowledge that his mother was a whore, she counters that her father is a thief. It turns out that the respectable Mr. Ames had been stealing from his partners.

Both the *Journal of a Novel* and Steinbeck's letters at the time corroborate that family problems were very much on Steinbeck's mind during the writing of *East of Eden*. Particularly, he was concerned about the negative effect the break up of his second marriage would have on his sons from that union. Maybe that is why in *East of Eden* the malevolent mother figure is not in the home, but her presence casts an ominous shadow over the development of her sons. A main category of the dysfunctional family could be the broken home—perhaps the ultimate impairment. Separation adds a factor of difficulty in maintaining a healthy environment for children. In 1949, shortly before he began writing, Steinbeck was on the West coast and his boys lived with their mother in New York, although they did spend two months in summer with him. It was during this same period that his relationship with Elaine Scott was brewing as her marriage to Zachary Scott was coming apart. Although he had had two failed marriages, Steinbeck maintained a traditional view about family structures. He believed that it is best to keep a marriage together for the sake of any children. Therefore, when the question of a divorce from her husband came up in a conversation, he writes Elaine: "If it will do Way (Waverly, Elaine's daughter with Zachary Scott) irreparable harm, you will have to stick" (*Life in Letters* 383). This he does even though he is very much in love with her. Furthermore, he explains, "It will be most difficult on you—even terrible but you will have to stick it out to the end for your own sake as well as Way's" (383).

The dysfunction that Steinbeck describes so vividly in *East of Eden* does not seem to stem from his own family memories. And although the story is set in the past, in part to tell the story of the Hamiltons and in part to tell his sons what their blood is, it would seem that he is projecting

possible problems between his two sons rather than using his own sibling experience as fodder for his plot. *East of Eden* centers on the issue of sibling rivalry. Steinbeck's relationship with his sisters was not one of enmity. First of all, he was an only son among three sisters, which may account for some of the lack

**THE DYSFUNCTION
THAT STEINBECK
DESCRIBES SO VIVIDLY IN *EAST OF EDEN*
DOES NOT SEEM TO
STEM FROM HIS OWN
FAMILY MEMORIES.**

of trouble. From all accounts he had good relations with all three sisters. Of course, there was the normal family squabbling and political differences, but they were all of the kind that fall well in the range of functional. Of his sister Beth he wrote: "She has incredible charm and an unbelievable energy" (371). Mary was his childhood companion and he dedicated his Malory translation to her, fancifully recalling that her six-year-old self had served him faithfully as a squire and therefore he raises his "fair and loyal sister" to knighthood, dubbing her Sir Marie Steinbeck of Salinas Valley. When he first met Elaine, he took her over to meet his sister Esther in Watsonville. He visited Esther when he traveled to California and they kept in contact by mail to the end of his life. Steinbeck was confident of his sisters' love and support, writing a worried Elaine before she had met them, "They will automatically go along with me and then they will love you on your own" (*Life in Letters* 390). Nor is there evidence that something in the Steinbeck household at the corner of Central Avenue and Stone Street stimulated the subject of blighted family interaction. About his parents Steinbeck wrote: "I think no one ever had more loyalty than I had from my parents" (457). This, then, would seem to corroborate the fact that during the final period of his career, his attention to the family is part of what Jack Bensons calls "the increasingly more personal direction of his writing" (874). By this, I assume that Benson means Steinbeck turned his literary attentions to the personal in his present life rather than the personal in his family history.

East of Eden may have been Steinbeck's most autobiographical work of fiction, a work initiated by his desire to communicate to his sons their heritage and a lesson about choice. But it did not end his fictional explorations of family dysfunction nor his personal projection in such situations. His final novel, *The Winter of Our Discontent*, continues the theme. Rather than using a Biblical archetype in this novel to undergird his theme, he turns to a more national perspective. His protagonist, Ethan Allen Hawley, whose name connects him to the founders of the nation, is confronted with the choice to remain true to his ethical and moral convictions or to participate in the corruption of the times—taking bribes, betraying his friend, cheating and stealing. The headlines of the day were full of examples of payola, greed, and dishonesty. Steinbeck was particularly troubled by the materialism he saw all about him, the need to have things. In the novel these translate into automobiles, television sets, and

a motorbike for the teenage son. The Hawley family, compared to the Trasks, seems the picture of family normalcy. Indeed, the intensity of the dysfunction is several levels below that in *East of Eden*. In *The Winter of Our Discontent*, the family is whole. A mother, a father, and two children live together in a town and are part of a community.

DONALD SUTHERLAND AS ETHAN AND TERI GARR
AS MARY IN THE 1983 TV PRODUCTION OF *THE
WINTER OF OUR DISCONTENT*, DIRECTED BY WARIS
HUSSEIN

Evidence of the personal turn of this novel is that Steinbeck gives his protagonist, Ethan, some of his own traits. One of them is what Orville Prescott in the *New York Times* called the “distracting habit of calling his wife by a whole series of dismaying pet names” (27). Steinbeck’s letters of the time period address Elaine as “Dear Bogworthy,” (677), “Dear Smya” (679), “Dear Whamfort” (683), “Dear Flouncefoot” (684), and so forth. In

the novel, Ethan calls his wife, Mary, “chicken-flower,” “rabbit-footling,” and “cottontail,” among other things. There is no evidence that she appreciates his humor; her standard response to this and other of his linguistic extravagances is to proclaim him “silly.” Her assessment of his two moods is that he is either silly or gloomy. They have been married long enough to have two teenage children, but she doesn’t know whether he is a believer or not. She asks him: “Do you know whether you believe in church or not, Ethan?” She also asks him why he calls her silly names (100). When he explains, she responds, “I don’t understand”(101). Obviously, there is trouble in their relationship. In another of the few serious moments between them, he asks her if she blames him for his failure. Her response is: “I do blame you for sitting wallowing in it” (34).

During this period of time, Steinbeck had written to several of his friends that he thought of himself as a “lousy husband” (*Life in Letters* 352), proclaiming that he was not very good at marriage. Neither is Ethan. He is most condescending to his wife, Mary, joking and teasing her but never sharing with her his deep concerns or feelings. That they have not established an intimate level of understanding is further verified by his thoughts as he watches her: “What are you like in there? Mary—do you hear? Who are you in there?” (51). Still, when Margie Young-Hunt tells him that he does not know his wife, he says that he knows she is “tender and sweet and kind of helpless” (266). Margie, his wife’s best friend, counters that Mary is “tough as a boot” and will go on long after he burns up. Ethan does not learn until his son’s plagiarism is exposed the true nature of his wife’s character, “like a rock, a great granite rock set in a tide race” (273).

Of course, much of their communication mirrors a problem in many otherwise functional families. They do not listen to each other. Ethan acknowledges, “I do not listen with complete attention . . . I do not listen at all” (52). Of her, he concludes: “She doesn’t listen to me because I am not talking to her, but to some dark listener within myself” (53). While sometimes not listening is perhaps natural in a marriage, Ethan’s not listening is key in one of the family’s most traumatic events. When his daughter, Ellen, tries to clue him in that Allen is plagiarizing, asking specific questions about how it is done and what the consequences are, he changes the subject. Exasperated she exclaims: “You never listen, really listen.” He claims he does, but she says, prophetically, “No, you don’t. You’ll be sorry”(149).

Obviously, there is a level of dysfunction in the husband and wife relationship, but the most egregious evidence of something gone terribly wrong in this family is that, though Ethan had, until the time of the action of the novel, maintained a high moral and ethical standard, he has not transmitted it to his son. That he does not understand this until it is too late testifies to his lack of involvement in family matters. When his son, Allen, speaks to him about writing an essay for a contest, he provides many clues to the corrupt state of his values. Ethan hears enough to call him "Charles," alluding to the contemporary quiz show scandal involving Charles Van Doren, who conspired with the producers of the quiz show "21" to fix the show's outcome (72). It is an allusion with reverberations. Like Allen Hawley, Van Doren was from an illustrious family; like Hawley, he conspires to cheat. If nothing else, Allen's obvious lack of association with the subject he is to write about should have alerted Ethan. He wants to "look up stuff" for the essay, "patriotic jazz" he calls it (71). When Ethan quotes Patrick Henry's "give me liberty or give me death" speech, Allen, not thinking at all about democracy or liberty, comments that he wished he had lived in those days because of the pirate ships, pots of gold and ladies in silk dresses and jewels" (71). When Ethan tries to correct Allen's immoral attitudes, his rationalizations of "everybody does it," to acquaint him with the "unchanging rules of conduct, of courtesy, of honesty," his wife becomes angry with him, accusing him of "crushing him like an insect" (169-171).

Following the archetypal pattern of deadly sibling relationships of *East of Eden*, Ethan also kills his brother. Though it is not his biological brother, it is his metaphorical brother, Danny Taylor, who has been his friend since childhood. Ethan does not do this with a hatchet or his bare hands, but he does knowingly give Danny money to drink himself to death. In this he more closely mirrors Charles Trask than Cal. At least Cal does not purposefully kill Aron. Although he does want him to see the unpleasant truth of their mother's existence, Cal cannot anticipate that Aron will join the Army, nor that he will be killed in action. Ethan's culpability is greater.

In *East of Eden* Steinbeck provides an ending that creates a ray of hope for the future. When Adam utters the word "tim-shel," he is saying that his son is not predestined to sin and that Cal may triumph over it. Cal and Abra have a relationship of honesty and trust. They "may" create a functional family. On the

other hand, *The Winter of Our Discontent* leaves the reader with an unsatisfied sense of the future of the Hawley family. Ethan is so sickened by his son's dishonesty and what he himself has done—to Danny, to Marullo—that he grabs some razor blades to commit suicide. His daughter, Ellen, who represents the “light” of the family, senses what he is about to do and begs him, “Take me with you, You’re not coming back” (274). Mary, his wife, in keeping with their impaired communication, is not even aware that her husband is troubled. Her main concern is that he take along a raincoat. When Ethan decides, after discovering the talisman that Ellen has put in his pocket, not to commit suicide, but to return the talisman to its new owner, that does little to resolve the dysfunction in the Hawley family.

Allen is not ready to assume any responsibility for having done wrong. He turns all of his wrath on his sister for turning him in, hitting her and calling her a “stinking sneak.” Allen will learn no lesson because the contest people will not expose him; in fact, Ethan is offered a reward for not revealing the incident and thus making the television people look bad. Among Allen's final words in the novel are: “Who cares? Everybody does it. It's the way the cooky crumbles” (273). Mary, his mother, who has feigned sleep throughout the whole incident of the revelation of Allen's crime, his hitting his sister, and Ethan's confrontation of Allen, is clearly avoiding the reality of the problem. Ethan cannot take back Danny's death or his betrayal of Marullo.

“Shakespeare was part of the fabric of life for the Steinbecks,” and both John and Elaine quoted and misquoted him in jest (Benson 879). They were both familiar not only with the plays, but also the sonnets, requiring the boys to learn a sonnet every few days while they traveled in Europe. *Richard III* provides the title for this novel, but in *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* there are lines that contain an appropriate epilog. In *Hamlet*, after Claudius proclaims “O, my offense is rank,” he asks, “May one be pardon'd and retain th'offense?” Ethan is in possession of Danny's land and Marullo's store. Having stood up to the accusations of both Baker and Margie Young-Hunt, he gives no indication that he is going to give up his ill-gotten gains. Maybe he feels like Macbeth: “‘I am in blood / Stepp'd in so far that, should I wade no more, / Returning were as tedious as go o'er.” Ethan may not commit suicide, but, like Macbeth, he is in blood stepped in too far. His fears about the negative effects of plenty on his family will probably come to pass. Early in the novel, Ethan explains to

Mary that there are only two measures for money: “‘No Money and Not Enough Money’” (112). He tells her that he is afraid of “‘the panic money brings, the protectiveness and the envy’” (113). The foreshadowing is obvious—Ethan’s new status will make the Hawleys not less, but more dysfunctional. Richard III’s winter of discontent may have been made summer, but it is a brief one. And we all know its tragic ending.

After these two “family” novels, Steinbeck did not return to the subject. Instead, he seems to purposefully avoid it. In the two non-fiction works of this late period of his life, *Travels with Charley* and *America and Americans*, he explicitly turns his gaze nationwide. He was enlarging his scope in this later period in his life, because before this he was mainly known as a Salinas valley chronicler. Whether it was time or distance, we cannot confirm, but as the titles suggest, he did begin to think in coast-to-coast perspectives. As he states in *Travels with Charley*, the ground plan of his trip was to answer the question, “What are Americans like today?” (241). However, it is telling that nowhere in the work does he address the question of the state of the American family. In *America and Americans*, his final study of the state of the country, he does consider “the dream of and the hunger for home” (31), exploring the discrepancy between the myth of the permanent family seat and the reality of family mobility. But that discussion is more about the home as part of an American dream or myth and does not include the people living in it. Another interesting observation is that among the dozens of wonderful photographs that are supposed to represent America and Americans, there is not one photograph of a family. Clearly, Steinbeck leaves his appraisal of the American family to his works of fiction, and he wrote no more fiction.

NOTES

¹ Slightly modified, this presentation was later published as “Friendly Fire: John Steinbeck’s *East of Eden*,” in *The Betrayal of Brotherhood in the Work of John Steinbeck: Cain Sign*, ed. Michael J. Meyer, Lewiston: the Edwin Mellen Press, 2000, 375-402.

² I am not insensitive to the fact that our country was settled in many other locations. However, here I refer to the thirteen colonies that were the genesis for the United States.

³ An ironical sidelight here is that John IV writes about his first drunken blackout, when at age five, one of his mother's friends gave him too much champagne. See *The Other Side of Eden*, p. 5.

WORKS CITED

Balitis, Vincent D. "Popular Nobel Laureate's Novels Collected, tied to Birth Centennial."

The Washington Times, February 24, 2002.

Benson, Jackson J. *The True Adventures of John Steinbeck, Writer*.

New York: Viking Press, 1984.

Frude, Neil. *Understanding Family Problems: A Psychological*

Approach. John Wiley & Sons: Chichester, 1991.

Gladstein, Mimi Reisel. "Friendly Fire: Steinbeck's *East of Eden*,"

The Betrayal Of Brotherhood in the Work of John Steinbeck:

Cain Sign, ed. Michael J. Meyer. Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 2000, 375-400.

Prescott, Orville. "Books of the Times," *New York Times*, 23 June 1961, 27.

Steinbeck: A Life in Letters. Elaine Steinbeck and Robert Wallsten, eds.

New York: The Viking Press, 1975.

Steinbeck, John. *East of Eden*. 1952. New York: Penguin, 1992.

—. *Journal of a Novel: the East of Eden letters*. New York: Viking P, 1969.

—. *Steinbeck: A Life in Letters*. New York: Viking P, 1975.

—. *The Winter of Our Discontent*. 1961. New York: Penguin, 1989.

Steinbeck, John IV. "Adam's Wound," *The Betrayal Of Brotherhood in the Work of John Steinbeck: Cain Sign*, ed. Michael J. Meyer.

Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 2000, 99-110.

—, & Nancy Steinbeck. *The Other Side of Eden: Life with John Steinbeck*. Amherst, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 2001.