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Retranslating *East of Eden*: Lee, *Timshel*, and Buddhist Interpretations

**Introduction**

John Steinbeck's characters often express undeniable truths with honesty and grace. Such has always been my impression of Steinbeck's writing, as if he himself did not realize the magnitude of truth he speaks. In my study, I have been in awe of the character Lee. I had originally read *East of Eden* for pleasure and found myself entranced by Lee's commitment to knowledge and his serving heart. He is kind, witty, and deeply philosophic. In the novel, Lee expresses interest in the Genesis narrative's story of Cain and Abel he hears from Adam Trask and Samuel Hamilton, two Christians whom Lee serves throughout his life. The majority of the title and content of my study can be summed up in Lee's discussion of Genesis 3-7. The King James Version translates the story as such:

“(3) And in process of time it came to pass, that Cain brought of the fruit of the ground an offering unto the Lord. (4) And Abel, he also brought of the firstlings of his flock and of the fat thereof. And the Lord had respect unto Abel and to his offering: (5) But unto Cain and to his offering he had not respect. And Cain was very wroth, and his countenance fell. (6) And the Lord said unto Cain, Why art thou wroth? and why is thy countenance fallen? (7) If thou doest well, shalt thou not be accepted? and if thou doest not well, sin lieth at the door. And unto thee shall be his desire, and thou shalt rule over him.” (King James Bible, Gen. 4:3-7)

The American Standard Version, as Lee points out [describe where this occurs], holds a key difference in the translation of verse seven from the King James Version. Verse seven presents of a personified, masculine sin, whom Cain is destined to rule over. The American Standard version depicts sin with the same masculine personhood, but instead of prophesying success over sin, the ASV's God *commands* Cain to triumph over sin, saying "do thou rule over it", or in other words, one *must* rule over sin, or else (*American Standard Bible*, Gen. 4:7). Lee felt these two translations trapped Cain, and those who are inspired by the story, between rigid predestination and an angry, demanding monarch God. Therefore, he decides to consult elders within his family about the translations, which gets a whole group of elder Chinese men interested in the translation. They ultimately learned Hebrew and spent two years retranslating the Hebrew word *timshel*, which Lee reveals means "thou mayest" rule over sin. This creates a choice, where we may rule over sin, or we may not. *Timshel* appears during several turning points in the novel's plot, and drives the growth and development of the young Cal and Aron Trask.

*East of Eden* is an intergenerational Judeo-Christian narrative that further mirrors the Genesis account in Salinas, California, through the Trask family. The Trask family consists of Adam and Cathy, and their twin sons Cal and Aron, much like Adam and Eve parented Cain and Abel. But their servant Lee is the firm foundation of the family. Lee, an Asian immigrant, sacrifices his dream of opening a bookstore to be a servant for the Trask family and help raise Cal and Aron. He receives very little praise and does not ask for any, which could reinforce "obedient" action for minorities. However, my own conception is that Lee is actually elevated [define] because he introduces the philosophic and linguistic themes throughout the novel.

## Thesis

The ultimate goal of this study is to suggest that Lee's character, likely unintentionally, presents many ideas found in Buddhism to *East of Eden*, despite mirroring Genesis 4 in name and content. Lee's significance is further heightened by his generous actions and philosophical thoughts while engaging with the Trask family. Lee retranslates the realization and translation of suffering in Buddhist philosophy to his Salinas context as a servant to the Trask family, and his experiences in *East of Eden* bridge the gap between many Eastern and Western perspectives.

### 1. John Steinbeck and the Construction of His *Magnum Opus*

Published in September of 1952, *East of Eden* serves as a fascinating work of narrative art, a brilliant dive into John Steinbeck's interests in the history of Salinas County, California, and an honest reflection on the human condition. Steinbeck began writing *East of Eden* in January of 1951. The 600-page manuscript was finished by November 1951 and published not a year later. Steinbeck's writing method for the novel is simply iconic. The method he undertakes is marked by letters sent to his longtime friend and editor, Pat Covici: "I intend to keep a double-entry book - manuscript on the right-hand page and work diary on the left...We will have to see whether the practicing through the years has prepared me for the writing of a book. For this is the book I have always wanted and have worked and prayed to be able to write" (Steinbeck, *Journals* 5). This quote is pulled from the second letter included in *Journals of A Novel*, the collection of all letters written on the left-hand side of his double-entry book. This is an incredible resource for biographical information, but also gives us a great deal of Steinbeck's own words regarding his intentions for the novel.

As the previous quote hints, this novel was self-identified by Steinbeck as his *magnum opus*. After a great deal of wrestling with titles like *Salinas Valley* and *Cain Sign*, Steinbeck finally decided on the title *East of Eden* in a letter to Covici on June 11, 1951. The primary story he analyzes in this letter is the Bible's Cain and Abel story from Genesis 4: "What a strange story it is and how it haunts one...I began to realize that without this story - or rather a sense of it - psychiatrists would have nothing to do. In other words this one story is the basis of all human neurosis - and if you take the fall (Adam and Eve's "fall" in Genesis 3) along with it, you have the total of the psychic troubles that can happen to a human" (Steinbeck, *Journals* 104). The reason this paper exists at all is this bold claim, that every human's neurosis stems from Genesis 3 and 4. Steinbeck substantiates his statement by retelling the Cain and Abel narrative through his own characters, and uses another character to "mediate" the conversation between his own narrative and his statement of human neurosis. Lee is a Chinese servant who does not come from any traditional Christian, or Western background for that matter, yet is able to masterfully communicate the importance of the messages in *East of Eden* through an "Eastern" perspective, or the perspective of an Chinese immigrant in 1930s Salinas.

Before sitting down to write the first pencil strokes of *East of Eden* in January of 1951, Steinbeck writes with great aspirations for his novel in a letter to his editor, Pat Covici: "The form will not be startling, the writing will be spare and lean, the concepts hard, the philosophy old and yet new born. In a sense it will be two books--the story of my county and the story of me" (Steinbeck, *Journals* 3). Therefore, it should come as no surprise that the earliest conceived title for *East of Eden* was *Salinas Valley*.

After writing for several months, Steinbeck was inspired to change the name from *Salinas Valley* to *Cain Sign* after evaluating the more universal significance of the Cain and Abel

story. From his letters, his demeanor gives the impression that he believes his novel to be an exemplary retelling of Genesis 4 in modern contexts and begins to move away from the idea of only telling the story of his county and the story of Steinbeck himself. On May 22, four months into writing the novel, Steinbeck wrote to Pat Covici about his decision and the subsequent creative shift in meaning for *East of Eden*: “It is not primarily about the Salinas Valley nor local people...Now--its framework roots from that powerful, profound and perplexing story in Genesis of Cain and Abel” (Steinbeck, *Journals* 90). In this letter, Steinbeck appears to be entranced by the nature of Cain’s role, which helps determine why Cal Trask is a more prominent character than Aron. “Cain invented murder and he is punished by life and protection. The mark put on him is not placed there to punish him but to protect him. Have you ever thought of that?” (Steinbeck, *Journals* 91). Steinbeck further cemented the Cain and Abel narrative into his novel when he decided the name *East of Eden* after reevaluating Genesis 4:16, in which Cain is sent away with his protective Cain sign: “But the LORD said to him, ‘Not so; anyone who kills Cain will suffer vengeance seven times over.’ Then the LORD put a mark on Cain so that no one who found him would kill him. So Cain went out from the LORD’s presence and lived in the land of Nod, east of Eden” (*New International Version*, Gen. 4: 15-16).

One of the biggest questions surrounding the honest study of *East of Eden* lies in how one interprets the role of Christianity and overall theology in the novel. Steinbeck answers this question most wholly when he writes, “as I went into the story more deeply I began to realize that without [the Cain and Abel] story--or rather a sense of it--psychiatrists would have nothing to do. In other words this one story is the basis of all human neurosis--and if you take the fall along with it, you have the total of psychic troubles that can happen to a human” (Steinbeck, *Journals*, 104). Naturally, this is an overstatement, but this quote is exemplary of the grandiose

standards that Steinbeck held for *East of Eden*. His interpretation of the verse plays out in perhaps the most iconic takeaway of the novel, which is the philosophical interpretation of the phrase “*timshel*,” a Hebrew word meaning “thou mayest” from Genesis 4. The way that Lee approaches the meaning of the word *timshel* is one of the primary theological pillars which *East of Eden* stands upon, and allows for much more applicable interpretation of the story of Cain and Abel because the novel both tells and shows how *timshel* may be applied in everyday life.

## **2. Lee’s Impact on the Narrative**

Whether the reader is looking at *East of Eden* from a scholastic perspective or from a lens of entertainment, readers can unify around one truth about the novel: John Steinbeck wrestles tirelessly with the Cain and Abel story in his writing. He does so first by engaging with the story by creating a clear parallel between Cal and Aron. By telling the violent story of Adam and Charles, Steinbeck reminds the reader of the expectation of a retelling of a Cain and Abel story.

The story of *East of Eden* ends hundreds of pages after the *clearest* imitation of Genesis 4 in terms of plot. In both Genesis 4 and the story of Adam and Charles, two brothers toil for the favor of their father. Only one son receives the favor of the father, resulting in the defeated brother committing an act of jealous violence against the favored brother. The father then reproaches and damns the defeated brother. The next generation’s story, acted out by Aron and Cal, is characteristically different from both stories, and involves more parties who influence the actions of the brothers. Lee, the positive influence, and Cathy, the negative influence, are the primary external influences. Lee is often represented as a respected motherly figure for Aron and Cal. The brothers’ biological mother, Cathy, is absent and serves exclusively as a source of emotional (and often physical) pain for the Trasks. Lee’s significance in the novel is immutable and is perhaps the reason why philosophic and theological arguments are so relevant in the

scholarship of *East of Eden*. It seems that he cannot get through a single conversation without shelling out a sophisticated proclamation.

A glaring problem arises in the phase of Lee's character. One must acknowledge that Lee is, of course, an Asian man written from the perspective of John Steinbeck, a white man. To my own understanding, Lee's representation has not been presented as derogatory, and has not generated significant tides of criticism for the way that Lee is presented racially. The reader is surely intelligent enough to separate the experiences of a white author in 1950 and an Asian immigrant and servant in 1914. It must be noted that despite good intentions, there is surely room for reproach in Steinbeck's representation of other races. Steinbeck writes about the various races who have inhabited the California landscape: "First there were Indians, an inferior breed without energy, inventiveness, or culture, a people that lived on grubs and grasshoppers and shellfish, too lazy to hunt or fish. They ate what they could pick up and planted nothing" (Steinbeck 6). He then goes on to describe the Spanish settlers and then the American settlers with increasing restraint.

Lee's racial characterization does not seem to be based on any person in particular, but rather, a lens to view his story differently, according to Steinbeck's journals. Steinbeck describes Lee as "a philosopher" and "a kind and thoughtful man," a character he builds to keep a neutral critic in his narrative (Steinbeck, *Journals* 73). Lee seems to be entirely made up by what Steinbeck just happened to know about Asian immigrants. His understanding is summed up in two sentences: "I have also known many of them. Remarkable people the California Chinese" (Steinbeck, *Journals*, 73). Unlike many of the other aspects of the novel, Steinbeck is rather tight-lipped about his goals or inspirations for Lee's character. Lee surely faces prejudice and racism. In one of the first scenes Lee appears in, Eliza Hamilton manages to ask Samuel

Hamilton if he thinks Lee would be “a heathen,” here meaning a non-Christian, because he is of Chinese descent. The specific wording comes off more blunt: “‘Samuel, you know that Chinese with his slanty eyes and his outlandish talk and that braid?’” (Steinbeck 200). He is often called “Ching Chong” by neighbors or townsfolk and is constantly talked to as if he does not understand English. In reality, Lee should have a more tenuous grasp on the English language as an immigrant, but Steinbeck chooses to make Lee the sophisticated voice of reason in the novel. “Me talkee Chinese talk” are some of the first words that Lee speaks. This is referred to as “pidgin,” the verbal imitation of the American dialect by one who is acclimated to Chinese dialect. Steinbeck quickly reveals that Lee can speak fluent English and simply speaks pidgin to imitate the way people expect him to speak: “‘If I should go up to a lady or gentleman, for instance, and speak as I am doing now, I wouldn’t be understood...Pidgin they expect, and pidgin they’ll listen to. But English from me they don’t listen to, and so they don’t understand it’” (Steinbeck 163). Steinbeck suggests that his characterization of Lee’s race is not to bring him down but to elevate the significance of his impact on the perspective of white central-Californians. This argument calls for Lee to be analyzed as a separate entity from Steinbeck’s opinions or views, while balancing a grasp of the connection between author and character.

### **The Importance of Lee’s Dialogue in the Novel**

According to theorist Mikhail Bakhtin, dialogue is one of the most important aspects of the novel as a literary form. In fact, Bakhtin describes how every character’s unique voice and linguistic understanding is key to the dynamic of a successful novel. Blending different characters through dialogue causes *heteroglossia*, or the function of multiple different voices speaking together in dialogue within a novel (Bakhtin 263). Lee, therefore, is a great example of a character who generates dialogue which causes the clashing of individuals and cultures. He

specifically does so through his philosophic dialogue with other characters, where he is often the most clever.

Lee influences Steinbeck's *East of Eden* in two dimensions: the psychology of the Trasks and Hamilton families, and the larger philosophical or ideological implications of the reader's world. His popular *timshel* scene has the most influential impact on the novel on both of the former dimensions. The long discussion of *timshel* begins during the naming of Cal and Aron. After Cathy shoots Adam and leaves him to raise the boys by himself, Adam falls into an almost catatonic depression. He almost entirely neglects his newborn sons, leaving them to the care of Lee for about one year before Lee travels to seek Samuel Hamilton's help. Samuel agrees to help and quite literally beats the confusion out of Adam. Adam regains a sense of understanding and agrees to name his twins with Samuel and Lee over some food and drink. Samuel brings along a Bible to browse popular names and ends up suggesting that they follow the Biblical narrative and name the boys Cain and Abel, since their father's name is Adam. (Coincidentally, Cathy fits the loose literary archetype of the "fallen woman," set in motion through Eve's temptation.) Thus begins the long discussion about the Cain and Abel story, which climaxes with Lee's unexpected, profound interpretation.

"I think this is the best-known story in the world because it is everybody's story. I think it is the symbol story of the human soul...The greatest terror a child can have is that he is not loved, and rejection is the hell he fears. I think everyone in the world to a large or small extent has felt rejection. And with rejection comes anger, and with anger some kind of crime in revenge for the rejection, and with the crime guilt--and there is the story of mankind. I think that if rejection could be amputated, the human would not be what he is. Maybe there would be fewer crazy people. I am sure in myself there would not be many

jails. It is all there--the start, the beginning. One child, refused the love he craves, kicks the cat and hides his secret guilt; and another steals so that money will make him loved; and a third conquers the world--and always the guilt and revenge and more guilt. The human is the only guilty animal...Therefore I think this old and terrible story is important because it is a chart of the soul--the secret, rejected, guilty soul" (Steinbeck 270-271).

Lee, Adam, and Samuel sit around the table once more and discuss the story after the boys are excused from the table--only now, Lee has come back equipped with ten years worth of pondering. He finds that different translations of the Bible have different words for Genesis 4:6-7, when God notices that Cain grows angry after God favors Abel's offering over his own. The King James version quotes God saying, "If thou doest well, shalt thou not be accepted? And if thou doest not well, sin lieth at the door. And unto thee shall be his desire, and *thou shalt* rule over him"; in contrast, the American Standard Bible claims God says, "*Do thou* rule over him." (Steinbeck 301). The differences between the two are slight, but fellow literary scholars can appreciate Lee's attention to semantics. "Thou shalt" suggests that God promises Cain will overcome sin. "Do thou" is not a promise, it is a command given to Cain.

This long-term contemplation and commitment to a few sentences is almost unheard of in Western culture. But Lee brings his observations to members of the Lee family, who are supposedly great scholars who could "spend many years pondering a sentence of the scholar [Americans] call Confucius" (Steinbeck 302). Four of these older scholars, the youngest being ninety years old, meet with Lee to talk about the verses in great detail. The thinkers grow excited like children and all five learned Hebrew to translate the passage in its language of origin from an educated rabbi: "After two years we felt that we could approach your sixteen verses of the fourth chapter of Genesis...And this was the gold from our mining: '*Thou mayest.*' 'Thou mayest

rule over sin.’ The old gentlemen smiled and nodded and felt the years were well spent”

(Steinbeck 303). Here, Lee lays down the philosophical climax of the novel on the tabletop.

“‘Don’t you see?’ he cried. ‘The American Standard translation orders men to triumph over sin, and you can call sin ignorance. The King James translation makes a promise in ‘Thou shalt,’ meaning that men will surely triumph over sin. But the Hebrew word, the word *timshel*--‘Thou mayest’--that gives a choice. It might be the most important word in the world. That says the way is open. That throws it right back on a man...Any writing which has influenced the thinking and the lives of innumerable people is important. Now, there are many millions in their sects and churches who feel the order, ‘Do thou,’ and throw their weight into obedience. And there are millions more who feel predestination in ‘Thou shalt.’ Nothing they can do can interfere with what will be. But ‘Thou mayest’! Why, that makes a man great, that gives him stature with the gods, for in his weakness and his filth and his murder of his brother he has still the great choice. He can choose his course and fight it through and win.’ Lee’s voice was a chant of triumph. (Steinbeck 303).

*Timshel* represents the choice that individuals have to create their own paths. The Hebrew message is translated by Chinese men for white men in Salinas, of course, within Steinbeck’s novel. Lee turns “thou mayest” into a message for all humans, not one exclusive to members of a specific religion, but one that reaches the heart of *every* human being. Adam Trask’s last words after his stroke, and the final line of *East of Eden* is simply: “‘*Timshel!*’ He closed his eyes and fell asleep” (Steinbeck 602). This is Steinbeck’s confirmation that *timshel* is indeed a key message he wants readers to take away, if not the central message. Lee, then, serves to make *East of Eden* a universal story, much like the story of Cain and Abel. He pulls together multiple

age groups, ethnicities, and religions to find common ground with one another. It's no coincidence that he roots his message in the Biblical narrative, which would be most accessible to the citizens of Salinas, and to the American readers in 1950. But Lee's wisdom expands far beyond that of Hebrew origin. By analyzing his words throughout the novel, one notices that he slips messages from philosophical Buddhism into the *East of Eden* narrative, influencing the traditionally Judeo-Christian narrative with teachings from...well, east of Eden.

### **3. Lee's Influence on a Christian Narrative with 3 Buddhist Points**

A great deal of questions come into one's mind upon trying to explain Asian philosophy through an American novel, and I shall attempt explain precisely why this important with the most liberal constitution in my arguments as possible; there are no illusions in my mind that I am able to comment with certainty on traditions and teachings whose existence have far surpassed my own. For now, my intention is to recognize the artistic complexity and significance of interpreting the words and actions of Lee's words and actions, and further, to draw parallels *from* Lee's actions *to* Asian philosophies and religions. Because the range of Asian philosophies and religions are so ridiculously broad, the focus is simply on Buddhist tenets. I will not attempt to name and identify how *East of Eden* is essentially a Buddhist novel, and I will not attempt to implicate Lee's subscription or even conscious knowledge of such beliefs. I will not attempt to suggest that John Steinbeck had any specific knowledge of Asian philosophies or intended *East of Eden* to reflect any such knowledge. Rather, I will attempt to work as Lee did, widening the vision of "Christian" or "Buddhist" ideas into ideas that are simply enriching to the human soul, no matter the ethnicity or background.

Lee's wisdom would be insignificant if he himself did not act wisely. His actions are kind and tender. Lee has a comforting presence and connects with almost every character he encounters. As evidence, we will use one of Lee's encounters with Adam, Cal, and Samuel Hamilton each. All three develop the plot in significant ways, revealing that Lee's presence is indeed pivotal.

### **1. Lee Enters the "Heart of the Buddha" in Three Dialogues**

The opening chapter of Thich Nhat Hanh's *The Heart of the Buddha's Teachings* notes that the connection with others is the first step to reaching freedom: "Buddha was not a god. He was a human being like you and me, and he suffered just as we do...For forty-five years, the Buddha said, over and over again, 'I teach only suffering and the transformation of suffering'" (Hanh 3). It is because the Buddha suffers that he understands my suffering. However, in order to begin the process of overcoming and transforming suffering, suffering must be acknowledged. That's why the Buddha teaches *two* things: "only suffering and the transformation of suffering." There is not *one* step to overcome, because the process of *accepting* suffering is a lifelong journey. This idea is not exclusive to Buddhism and can be mirrored in the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. Jesus undertakes the most brutal form of punishment so that he may understand the truth of the burden of humanity. He then overcomes death, the worst suffering. To be human means one will suffer. This is clear in both Buddhist and Christian doctrine. Lee reflects the Buddhist interpretation because he does not claim to be a god, nor does he undergo a massive sacrifice, but he shows acceptance differently with those whom he connects. He understands the truth of human existence - we all suffer, but suffer differently.

**1a.) Lee advises Adam to avoid imprisonment within his suffering.** When Cathy shoots Adam and leaves him, Adam becomes a different person entirely. The once ambitious and

dedicated man becomes dissociated from reality. Steinbeck does not spend much time describing Adam's year of "absence," but we can imagine it pretty clearly. Adam likely walked room to room with a fog in his eyes. While Lee took care of his newborn sons, Adam sat and thought about Cathy. He probably did not change them, feed them, or bathe them if he did not even have the motivation to name them for a whole year. As is common with bouts of depression, it is likely that Adam had trouble managing his own hygiene as well. Yet Lee serves the family and takes care of Adam and his sons until finally provoking change through Samuel Hamilton's fists and words. Lee embodies Hanh's quotation well: "When one tree in the garden is sick, you have to care for it. But don't overlook all the healthy trees. Even while you have pain in your heart, you can enjoy the many wonders of life - the beautiful sunset, the smile of a child, the many flowers and trees...Please don't be imprisoned by your suffering" (Hanh 3-4).

**1b.) Lee guides Cal through his turbulent emotional state to find relief.** After Adam favors Aron's gift over Cal's, Cal seeks revenge, much like Cain after God favors Abel's gift in Genesis 4:2-8. Instead of murdering Aron, Cal decides to tell Aron the truth about their mother: she is alive and owns a brothel. Aron flees from his emotions and enlists in the military and Cal gets drunk for the first time. Lee then encounters Cal burning his father's gift and attempts to provide Cal with some comfort. Instead of coming forth with a lecture about the immorality of his deeds, Lee sits silently until Cal talks to him. Avoiding scolding allows Cal to feel safe to open up -- a key to showing compassion. Cal confesses his role in Aron's disappearance and his alcohol use. Lee tells a story about how he once drank a great amount of alcohol and was caught by police hitting bats with a tennis racquet. The story makes Cal laugh and helps him to feel a bit better, but Steinbeck adds a twist: "Cal laughed with such amusement that Lee had almost

wished he had done it” (Steinbeck 568). Lee made the story up to make Cal feel like he was not alone in his suffering.

Lee then changes demeanor and reminds Cal that he is not the hero of his own tragedy - he is nothing but a “snot-nose kid,” mean sometimes and genuinely kind other times, just like everyone else. Lee jabs at several different truths here. Everyone suffers, Cal is not the greatest sufferer, and if he did not suffer or he *was* the hero, Cal would not know what it means to be human. Cal eventually understands the message that he is pointing towards, but only after Lee provokes him a little: “Lee watched him, holding his breath the way a doctor watches the reaction to a hypodermic. Lee could see the reactions flaring through Cal--the rage at insult, the belligerence, and the rage at insult that comes behind and out of that--just the beginning of relief” (Steinbeck 570). This ostensibly mirrors the Buddha’s compassion. Nhan writes, “Without suffering, you cannot grow...Go to the Buddha, sit with him, and show him your pain. He will look at you with loving kindness, compassion, and mindfulness, and show you ways to embrace your suffering and look deeply into it” (Nhan 5). Cal grows when he shows Lee his pain because Lee teaches him to look at his own suffering. By encountering Cal with a chain of different reactions, Lee ultimately is successful in relieving Cal’s guilt by showing him ways to embrace his suffering.

**1c.) Finally, Lee informs Samuel Hamilton that humans may always suffer, but they get to choose their suffering.** Samuel tells Adam that he may have a cure to his bout of foggy depression, though it may “kill him” (Steinbeck 306). Lee’s retranslation of *timshel* supposedly excited Samuel and he felt the pain of hearing the truth about Cathy would jolt him towards growth. In his final appearance in the novel before his death, Samuel dramatically proclaims the power of *timshel* in gratitude to Lee: “It was your two-word retranslation, Lee--’Thou mayest.’ It

took me by the throat and shook me. And when the dizziness was over, a path was open new and bright” (Steinbeck 308). Samuel expresses that *timshel* improved his idea of the human condition. In fact, Lee’s words create such an impact on Samuel, that he seems to feel mentally prepared to pass away, as he makes several hints that he is feeling death approaching due to age. After his final thanks to Lee, Samuel rides into the horizon on his old horse. The next chapter opens with Adam Trask in town for Samuel Hamilton’s funeral. Lee’s research gives Samuel a great inner peace that guides him softly to death once he realizes he has a choice in his suffering. *Timshel* especially is a theme that promotes the Buddha’s messages, only in different words: “The Buddha called suffering a Holy Truth, because our suffering has the capacity of showing us the path to liberation. Embrace your suffering, and let it reveal to you the way to peace” (Hahn 5).

## **2. Temporal Existence**

Buddhist practice gains its vibrancy from the focus on the present moment. Such a thing is easy in youth, but as one grows, one realizes their present moment will eventually become closer to their death. Hence, to be told one looks young as a teenager feels demeaning, and to be told one looks old in middle-age feels insulting. The timeline of the present stops for none; thus, accepting the marching on of the present is an existentially charged topic. When considering the short blip of human life compared to the long timeline of history, how could one *avoid* existential terror?

In order to continue with significance, we must comprehend how Lee--or anyone for that matter--could act like the Buddha. Jesus and the Buddha are often compared and contrasted with haste, but we must do so carefully here to understand the basic difference between the Judeo-

Christian framework of *East of Eden*, which spans from Adam Trask's birth during the American Civil War in 1862 to his death likely between 1914-1916, during the outbreak of the First World War.

Cal unknowingly commits the final act in the reflection of the Cain and Abel story when he chooses to let his brother suffer, by revealing the truth of his mother's identity to Aron. In response, Aron joins the military and is killed in action. His father, Adam, receives the letter from the post office and faints. He is brought home where he finally has a stroke, causing a sort of neurological paralysis where he loses the ability to speak and move much. Lee sits in the kitchen with Cal and his childhood friend Abra, and says: "I thought I had inherited both the scars of the fire and the impurities which made the fire necessary--all inherited, I thought. All inherited. Do you feel that way?" (Steinbeck 600)

Cal and Abra promptly answer with words no more significant than "I think so." Of course, Lee has been considering such things for about as long as they have been alive. In other words, he believes that the Judeo-Christian representation of "sin," being hereditary, is incorrect. Despite Cal's wrongs, they do not stem from anti-action, or committing no wrong acting. Lee substitutes this idea with a metaphor which reflects his final understanding of *timshel*:

"Maybe you'll come to know that every man in every generation is refired. Does a craftsman, even in his old age, lose his hunger to make a perfect cup--thin, strong, translucent?" He held his cup to the light. "All impurities burned out and ready for a glorious flux, and for that--more fire. And then either a slag heap or, perhaps what no one in the world ever quite gives up, perfection" (Steinbeck 600).

In other words, Lee realizes that we often unconsciously mirror the stories told within our genetics or culture. This "craftsperson" continues to apply fire to their creations, meaning

suffering causes us to grow. In conclusion, Lee asks if suffering is meaningless or if the fire that the craftsperson applies to us is worth it, even if we never attain perfection and we know that we will die and be added to the slag pile like our ancestors have. He asks Cal, “Can you think that whatever made us--would stop trying?” (600). These words mean a great deal when reflecting upon *timshel* and Masao Abe’s understanding of time as found in the Nirvana Sutra, or the *Mahayana Mahaparinirvana* (Abe 60). An early translation of The Nirvana Sutra traditionally reads, “To wish to know the meaning of the Buddha-nature one should contemplate the casual relation of time and occasion. If the time come the Buddha-nature will manifest itself” (Abe 61). Like Lee retranslates *timshel*, Abe realizes that one must re-translate this definition. He believes that there is no “if” in this equation because humans are left with two realizations. We suffer and we die. Our temporality, or the consistent march of time, paired with our indefinite suffering, means that we have *some* agency. At least enough to fulfill the “transformation,” or *retranslation*, “of our suffering” (Hanh 3). Abe retranslates *jisetsu nyakushi*, or “if the time and occasion come” to *jisetsu nyakushi*, meaning “the time and occasion is now” (Abe 64-65). This is the foundation of the faith necessary to commit the “leap of faith” as Lee does in the final moments of the novel.

### **3. The “Leap of Faith,” or the “Transformation of Suffering”**

Lee answers his own question with an action rather than a statement. In this movement, Lee chooses to embody *timshel* and *jisetsu nyakushi*, and reveals the truth of Aron’s death to Adam, knowing that it could mean Adam brands him with the “Mark of Cain,” or God’s symbol of rejection from Genesis 4. He accepts the reality of the “here and now” and, in a move similar to Soren Kierkegaard’s “Leap of Faith” in *Fear and Trembling*, he tells Adam that Cal was responsible for the chain of events leading to Aron’s death. But unlike the Biblical narrative, Lee

intercepts Adam before he can react and tells him that he has a choice to forgive Cal and bless him or to condemn him, the choice of *timshel*.

He asks the nurse attending Adam to leave and is promptly reminded of his embodiment even in the midst of his faithful act. The nurse spews out, "I'm not in the habit of taking orders from Chinks" (Steinbeck 601). He pushes forward, knowing what happens after he acts: Adam will be forced to either reject Cal or accept him. Yet, he moves forward and begins the heroic leap of *timshel* and reveals the truth to Adam Trask.

Lee's voice cut in, "I don't know how long you will live, Adam. Maybe a long time.

Maybe an hour. But your son will live. He will marry and his children will be the only remnant left of you." Lee wiped his eyes with his fingers.

"He did a thing in anger, Adam, because he thought you had rejected him. The result of his anger is that his brother and your son is dead." (Steinbeck 602).

Just like Samuel Hamilton before him, Lee realizes the true power that *timshel* carries, especially when encountering death. After saying these things, the heroic "leap of faith" is over, and it is up to Adam to choose to act or not. Still, Lee begs Adam to bless his son Cal and asks that if he can muster one last word before his death, it would be Cal's name. After a moment of concentration, Adam's final words finish the novel: "*Timshel!*" (Steinbeck 602).

This word finalizes the movement for Lee and proves his leap of faith successful. It simultaneously represents Adam forgiving Cal for his actions, as he had once forgiven his own brother, Charles, for attempting to murder him, reflecting the mutual understanding that the human experience can often replicate among different people with different temporal experiences. *Timshel* connects Lee, Cal, and Adam in an understanding, only successfully, because Lee accepted that he had a choice in their story and acted.

### Conclusion

There is no substantial evidence that Steinbeck had any understanding of the unity he created between the Judeo-Christian West and the philosophical East with his novel, nor are there resources outside of this text to predicate the connection. This paper purely aims at pointing out and arguing for the reflection of *timshel* and its complexity in several different cultures, which are brought together under Steinbeck's pen. Further, Christian theology, or any theology or philosophy, can potentially grow and learn from acknowledging meaning-making equivalences between several human cultures. The Buddha-mind is everywhere suffering is present, and so is the Buddha's claim, that there is "only suffering and the transformation of suffering." This applies for Buddhists and all other humans. It is the present generation's task to accept our own suffering and retranslate it to our own context. Once one realizes all people suffer as humans, it is often the case their innate response is to run from it. Before Lee, *timshel* represented a word that holds great significance in relation to its previous translations. After Lee's influence, *timshel* means to accept the human fate of temporal existence and suffering-- then to take a "leap of faith" and retranslate suffering into personal liberation for oneself or others.

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