

CONVENIENT DISGUISE: ENGAGING LEE IN JOHN STEINBECK'S *EAST OF EDEN*

A Thesis by

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The following faculty members have examined the final copy of this thesis for form and content, and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Master of Arts with a major in English.

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## ABSTRACT

*East of Eden* (1952), which John Steinbeck considered his masterpiece, constitutes a decidedly strange narrative universe, with characters residing simultaneously in the seemingly contradictory worlds of fiction/myth and nonfictional/biography. Into that frame Steinbeck places one of his most interesting but overlooked characters, the Chinese servant known simply as “Lee,” who becomes central to the development of Steinbeck’s major themes in the novel. Yet Lee is significant for another reason, too, for he might well represent Steinbeck’s most ambitious attempt to demonstrate the precariousness of ethnicity. At first he appears as a narrow stereotype of a Chinese servant, but several scenes later he emerges from that disguise as a thoughtful, educated, well-spoken man who has intentionally chosen a life of servitude and obscurity for the multiple benefits it affords him. People are unable (or unwilling) to understand him, he observes, perhaps in part because they are unable to really *see* him. He tells his friend, Samuel Hamilton, “You are one of those rare people who can separate your observation from your preconception. You see what is, where most people see what they expect” (161). Thus Lee is a character in tension, a man of dual identities created by his position as an ethnic minority. To follow him throughout the novel, then, is to engage Steinbeck’s apparent interest in Lee’s cultural identity. While Steinbeck could not fully escape the surrounding culture or his own white, masculine perspective, his portrayal of Lee in *East of Eden* demonstrates a willingness to question the validity of mainstream views, especially with regard to some of the more common ethnic stereotypes.

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Anyone interested in Steinbeck studies in general and *East of Eden* (1952) in particular would do well to note the author's own opinion of his longest novel. For Steinbeck, whose reputation had already been solidified with *The Grapes of Wrath* more than a decade earlier, this was his *magnum opus*, a book "about everything" (*Journal* 43). Writing in the journal he kept alongside his manuscript, the author remarked, "One thing I must say—I have never enjoyed my own work as I have this book. I am as excited about it now as on the day I started it.... I still think it is The Book, as far as I am concerned. Always before I have held something back for later. Nothing is held back here. This is not practice for a future. This is what I have practiced for" (*Journal* 124). The product of these efforts, the six hundred page epic with biblical-mythical overtones, was met with immense popularity but almost unanimous reproof from early literary critics, who found it moralistic, sentimental, and contrived. As one critic observed in the early 1990s, "No novel is a better barometer of how Steinbeck's reputation is faring than *East of Eden*. Upon its initial publication, it was considered a disaster; now some scholars call it Steinbeck's finest work" (Etheridge 250).

Much of the early criticism of *East of Eden* attacked one of the great experimental flourishes that Steinbeck was attempting: the introduction of a kind of (auto)biography into the world of fiction. As the title suggests, *East of Eden* draws from the biblical Genesis myth, improvising on the Cain and Abel story of good and evil, acceptance and rejection, through two generations of the fictional Trask family. Meanwhile, the story of another family, the Hamiltons, provides an account of Steinbeck's own ancestral history in the Salinas Valley, all of which episodes, Steinbeck claimed, "are true" (*Journal* 63). Early chapters vacillate between the families until Adam Trask moves to California, at which time these storylines begin to intertwine. The technique is exemplified in one particular scene, in which Steinbeck goes so far

as to invent a brief, direct encounter between his boyhood self and the wholly fictional Adam Trask on the doorstep of the Steinbecks" Salinas home: "Adam walked up the wide veranda steps and rang the bell. Olive came to the door and opened it a little, while Mary and John peeked around the edges of her" (382). This intentional mingling of fiction and biography creates a unique impression in *East of Eden*; the author is always inside his own narrative, peeking, as it were, "around the edges."

Steinbeck, wholly committed to the narrative vision of his masterpiece, had full recognition of its limitations and advantages. He even predicted critical resistance to the technique in the *Journal*, exclaiming, "But oh! Jesus am I going to catch critical hell for it. My carefully worked out method will be jumped on by the not too careful critic as slipshod. For it is not an easy form to come on quickly nor to understand immediately. As I have said before, this is not a new nor an old-fashioned book but my culling of all books plus my own invention" (31). He proudly said of the book, "I am in it and I don't for a moment pretend not to be" (*Journal* 24). Robert DeMott succinctly characterizes the various benefits of Steinbeck's method. "By entering the distant world of his own ancestors," De Mott observes,

Steinbeck granted himself license to explore the psychological and moral implications of individual actions and personal destinies (dramatized in the contiguous lives of the Hamiltons and the Trasks), to experiment with modulations of first and third person points of view (incorporating numerous subjective statements on persona, ethical and cultural values) and to trace the historical course (history serving the imaginative and mythical purposes of fiction) of his native area—California's Salinas Valley—from fabled Eden in the mid-nineteenth century to its emergence at the end of World War I on the brink of a less glamorous but more realistic age. (37)

Fortunately, Steinbeck persevered in this method, for the experimental narrative form of *East of Eden* is one of its most fascinating attributes. Steinbeck introduces his family history as a means

of furthering the fictionalized examination of the Genesis story, reinforcing the novel's claim that the ever-present contest of good and evil is "everybody's story" (268).

Into this strange narrative universe, among the fictional/mythical and the nonfictional/biographical worlds, enters one of Steinbeck's most interesting but overlooked characters, the Chinese servant known simply as "Lee." This character maintains his presence through the novel's final page, and although he mostly manages to remain in the background, his centrality to the Steinbeck's development of the novel's major themes is undeniable. Yet Lee is significant for another reason, too, for he might well represent Steinbeck's most ambitious attempt to demonstrate the precariousness of ethnicity. He first appears in a kind of disguise, dressed in traditional Chinese dress, speaking pidgin English, and deferentially carrying out his duties as a servant. Several scenes later, however, he emerges as a thoughtful, educated, well-spoken man who has intentionally chosen a life of servitude and obscurity for the multiple benefits it affords him.

Thus Lee is introduced as a character in tension, a character *of* tension, a man of dual identities created by his position as an ethnic minority. At the moment of his initial emergence, a conversation ensues between him and Samuel Hamilton, in which the various constraints and benefits of minority identity amidst their socio-historical situation (early 20<sup>th</sup> century California) are examined. To follow Lee throughout the novel, then, is to continue this conversation about his cultural identity, to examine his actions and relationships with this initial difficulty in mind. People are unable (or unwilling) to understand him, he observes, perhaps in part because they are unable to really *see* him. He tells Samuel, "You are one of those rare people who can separate your observation from your preconception. You see what is, where most people see what they

expect” (161). To bring Lee to the foreground, to really attempt to *see* him, in all his individual complexity, for the first time, is the truest objective of this study.

In a remark consistent with Steinbeck’s vision of participation in his own novel, the author wrote, “My wish is that when my reader has finished with this book, he will have a sense of belonging in it. He will actually be a native of that Valley.... I want it to be a life experience. I would like the reader to forget where he read the little essays and even think he invented them himself. That’s not too much to ask, is it?” (*Journal* 61-62). It seems Steinbeck sought, among other things, a subjective reaction to his masterpiece, a sense for the reader of participation in a world populated with real and memorable characters. One such subjective reaction to the novel can be found in Barbara Heavilin’s recent essay collection, *A John Steinbeck Reader* (2009), where Thom Satterlee presents a kind of dialogue with Lee, constructed of the author’s musings together with some of Lee’s lines from the novel. In it Satterlee exclaims, “I think you’re the most complex and interesting character in all of Steinbeck’s work. I’m afraid to get you wrong.” Lee responds, “*Is it responsibility or blame that bothers you? Sometimes responsibility is worse. It doesn’t carry any pleasant egotism*” (Satterlee 5). The dialogue continues,

“You’re a servant of the truth. That’s why, at the last page, I begin to miss you....The closer I draw to your words, the more alive and real you seem.”  
“*Maybe that’s what immortality is.*” (6)

Of all the critical commentary on *East of Eden*, Satterlee’s brief, poetic tribute to Lee comes closest to offering the kind of attention this character deserves. Lee is, indeed, a delightfully complex and thought-provoking character, and some of the novel’s most compelling speeches are his, the kind of passages worth drawing close to. I hope to embark upon this examination of Lee in that same spirit, for I, too, revere this character even as I fear the possibility—either responsibility or blame—of “getting him wrong.” I proceed in order to dwell in Steinbeck’s

valley momentarily, declaring to the critical community, as Samuel does to Adam, “I wonder whether you know what you have in Lee” (298).

For some readers and critics, *East of Eden* may represent little more than another book about white people by a popular white male author. Steinbeck is not well-known for his portrayals of minority characters, and while his most successful work, *The Grapes of Wrath*, deals directly with the marginalization of people in the United States, its concern is mostly economic; it has become the quintessential work about Depression-era *white* America. A comment by Louis Owens summarizes one prevailing opinion, which is that Steinbeck “doesn’t offer a great deal to multiculturalism. His treatment of women and what today would be called people of color leaves a lot to be desired. He was a white, middle class male from Salinas. He was a product of his times” (qtd. in Shillinglaw 40). This is, on a certain level, fair and accurate, as readings of certain Steinbeck works and characters have demonstrated.

However, while Steinbeck could not escape the surrounding culture or his own white, masculine perspective, some of his writing serves to question the validity of mainstream views. Steinbeck was interested in the more widely representative American culture, and *East of Eden* in particular demonstrates his willingness to subvert some of the more common ethnic stereotypes. Indeed, I agree with Susan Shillinglaw, whose excellent article “Steinbeck and Ethnicity” seeks to give the author, “who wrote so frequently and searingly about race and ethnicity,” some greater credit (Shillinglaw 41). Shillinglaw points out that “One third of his work either is set in Mexico or treats Mexican subjects. And it is of no small significance that his first published story—,Fingers of Cloud,” which ran in *The Stanford Spectator* in 1924—treats an ethnic confrontation and his last published book—*America and Americans*—begins with a chapter on race in America” (41). Indeed, the broader perspective of Steinbeck’s career

reveals his interest in questions of race and ethnicity, especially with regard to questions of identity and Americanness. While Steinbeck's portrayals of Hispanics and Native Americans—most controversially in *Tortilla Flat*—have drawn some critical fire, he was keenly interested in marginalized characters and never shied away portraying them in his fiction.

In Steinbeck's world of marginalized characters—from the Okies to the paisanos—Crooks in *Of Mice and Men* has a case for being the most marginalized. Notable as the “one memorable black character in [Steinbeck's] fiction” (French 8), Crooks suffers socially from the double limitations of skin color and physical handicap; he lives apart from the other ranch hands and literally tends to his wounds, further crippled by loneliness and bitterness at his situation. “This is just a nigger talkin’,” he says to Lennie, “an’ a busted-back nigger. So it don’t mean nothing, see?” (78). In spite of that claim, Crooks enjoys the rare opportunity to vent, and one of his first confessions speaks not only to his isolation but to his relative belonging: “I ain’t a Southern Negro.... I was born right here in California. My old man had a chicken ranch, about ten acres.... There wasn’t another colored family for miles around. And now there ain’t a colored man on this ranch an’ there’s jus’ one family in Soledad” (77). The fact that Crooks is a native Californian reinforces the injustice of his situation, and the dynamics continue to play out in this same scene as Crooks is silenced by the threat of racial violence; his claim to citizenship is as valid as anyone else’s, yet he is treated as an outsider, forced to live in the barn while the other men enjoy the camaraderie of the bunk house and the other benefits afforded to the ethnic majority. Crooks is just one of several “outsider” characters in *Of Mice and Men*, but only he is marginalized because of skin color, and his story represents a direct attempt on Steinbeck's part to portray the difficulties of minority experience.

Steinbeck presents a similar situation in the more developed figure of Lee, another native Californian who keenly feels the pressure of discrimination. Lee's response to his circumstances is to assume a kind of disguise, choosing simply to blend in with his surroundings rather than create confusion among people who refuse to recognize him as an individual. By creating a character who engages the world in this way, Steinbeck might be said to borrow from African-American literary tradition. Like the trickster characters of African-American oral history, Lee manipulates language and appearances to compensate for the relative lack of power inherent in his situation as an ethnic minority. Perhaps coincidentally, Steinbeck published *East of Eden* in the same year as Ralph Ellison released *Invisible Man*, the premise of which has much to do with perceptions, appearances, and resulting questions of identity related to minority (and, more specifically, African-American) experience. Perhaps unlike any other Steinbeck character, Lee invites discourse of a postcolonial or feminist nature: his situation demonstrates Steinbeck's willingness to question the validity of prevailing power structures within the dominant culture. While my consideration of Lee's character will not be limited to his ethnic (Chinese-American) identity, I view my study of *East of Eden* as an important inquiry into Steinbeck's racial attitudes and what he might be saying about race and ethnicity through Lee, one of just a few consequential non-white Steinbeck characters.

Although Lee shares his name with a character from *Cannery Row*, he is the first Asian character that Steinbeck chose to develop in depth. In "Steinbeck's Uses of the Oriental," Richard C. Bedford notes that "it is not until *East of Eden* (1952)—which Steinbeck saw as the culmination of his art—that he for the first, and last, time in his long writing career develops a major character, indeed for many readers that novel's central character, who is an Oriental" (11). Bedford detects in his reading of Steinbeck's earlier, less developed Asian characters "the

tendency to see the Oriental as cartoonist's comic stereotype" (6), and he laments Steinbeck's apparent "contradiction in motives" in devising Lee, "this Oriental who was to be at once a narrow realistic representative of the stereotype of California Chinese and at the same time a mere literary device by which Steinbeck might expound his broad philosophical views" (13). The resultant (paradoxical) claims are that Lee is at once too Asian—an "over-orientalized Oriental" (13)—and too American—a "national representative" who, in service to a melting pot mentality, eventually "trade[s] his Oriental disguise for an Uncle Sam costume" (16). While Bedford's reading follows other important critics and begins to acknowledge the complexity of Lee's character, it also would seem to dismiss Lee on the grounds of that very complexity, much of which derives from Steinbeck's deliberate attempt to examine the various aspects of Lee's minority (in this case Asian-American) identity. Furthermore, in Lee's awareness of his cultural circumstances he acknowledges the role of American society in constructing that identity for him, and his actions in the novel indicate an increasing ability to control it.

From a reader's standpoint, perhaps the most remarkable moment in *East of Eden* occurs during a buggy ride, when Samuel Hamilton confronts Lee and Lee emerges from his early disguise. The moment is one of great surprise, for at first we have no way of suspecting that Adam's newly hired "pigtailed Chinese cook" (155) will make much of a contribution to the novel. The first description we have of him comes from Cathy's point of view: "His face was lean and pleasant, his forehead broad, firm, and sensitive, and his lips curled in a perpetual smile" (159). A description of his appearance follows, noting his traditional clothing and queue, so that Lee is introduced as a stereotypical Chinese servant. But he will prove to be much more complex, and Cathy is suspicious of Lee because she cannot seem to figure him out: "Her eyes inspected him and her inspection could not penetrate the dark brown of his eyes. He made her

uneasy. Cathy had always been able to shovel into the mind of any man and dig up his impulses and his desires. But Lee's brain gave and repelled like rubber" (159). Coming from Cathy, who makes her way in the world by taking advantage of others' weaknesses, this is the greatest of compliments. While we cannot yet suspect the full implications of Lee's apparent intelligence, he seems to have earned the cautious respect of a particularly keen individual. Lee's disguise has fooled even her.

Several pages later, Cathy's suspicion that Lee is more than he appears is confirmed for the reader. The astonishing effect of Lee's unexpected emergence is difficult to convey outside the narrative moment. As he and Samuel travel down the road toward the newly established Trask farm, Samuel forgoes the small-talk in favor of a tender confrontation:

Samuel was silent for quite a long time while the buggy lurched down the wheel track toward the dusty valley. "Lee," he said at last, "I mean no disrespect, but I've never been able to figure why you people still talk pidgin when an illiterate baboon from the black bogs of Ireland, with a head full of Gaelic and a tongue like a potato, learns to talk a poor grade of English in ten years."

Lee grinned. "Me talkee Chinese talk," he said.

"Well, I guess you have your reasons. And it's not my affair. I hope you'll forgive me if I don't believe it, Lee." (160-161)

Having been born in Ireland, Samuel speaks of his own immigrant experience, and his directness shows that he assumes Lee's intelligence. Lee quickly responds, abandoning his pidgin English and emerging, as it were, from his disguise: "Lee looked at him and the brown eyes under their rounded upper lids seemed to open and deepen until they weren't foreign any more, but man's eyes, warm with understanding. Lee chuckled. „It's more than a convenience," he said. „It's even more than self-protection. Mostly we have to use it to be understood at all" (161).

Thus begins an animated interview in which Samuel peppers Lee with questions about his identity and why he maintains the facade he has created for himself. A relationship is begun here as well, for Samuel and Lee become instant friends and intellectual counterparts, using the

occasion of their friendship as a starting point for much philosophical inquiry. But most important of all in this scene is the beginning of Lee as a central character for the novel, for—thanks to Samuel’s candor—we now have the privilege of getting to know the sage masquerading in the servant’s garb. In the course of this conversation, the elements of Lee’s disguise become clear—appearance, language, occupation—as do his reasons for employing it, which grow directly out of his minority experience. His relationship to this careful disguise is critical to a complete understanding of his character, and Lee’s experience can be read as a commentary on the various ways that minority (and majority) identities are constructed.

Before turning to the various elements of Lee’s disguise, let us first examine some of the personal history he offers as evidence for his chosen approach to the world. Lee’s background story is incredibly significant, for it signals a commitment on Steinbeck’s part to moving beyond mere stereotype and developing Lee as an individual with complex motivations. While Lee’s age is never given, he has had significant life experience, and the conclusions he has come to about his minority identity are the result of “a lifetime of search” (162). Born in California, Lee is (like Crooks) nevertheless considered an outsider in his own country. He explains to Samuel, “I understand you were not born in America.... And in a few years you can almost disappear; while I, who was born in Grass Valley, went to school and several years to the University of California, have no chance of mixing” (162). When he tried “mixing,” speaking Standard English and cutting off his queue, he was met with rejection on all sides: “To the so-called whites I was still a Chinese, but an untrustworthy one; and at the same time my Chinese friends steered clear of me. I had to give it up” (162). Moreover, he has traveled to China, where he was also repudiated: “It didn’t work. They said I looked like a foreign devil; they said I spoke like a foreign devil. I made mistakes in manners, and I didn’t know delicacies that had grown up

since my father left. They wouldn't have me. You can believe it or not—I'm less foreign here than I was in China" (162). In short, Lee has tried everything. He is the consummate outsider—too American for the Chinese, too Chinese for the Americans, and suspicious even to the Chinese-Americans. In an effort to navigate these dynamics, he has chosen to play a certain expected role while attempting to maintain his own freedom of thought. His life is one of compromise.

Steinbeck's interest in Lee as an individual takes us even further back in time. Additional context for Lee's journey (and another point of emergence for him) surfaces when he recounts his family history. The story his father passed down to him, which Lee calls "a celebration of the human soul," is nonetheless difficult and terrible to tell, and the fact that he chooses to share it with Adam is an indication of his growing confidence in their friendship (356). He begins, "I'll have to tell you first that when you built the railroads in the West the terrible work of grading and laying ties and spiking the rails was done by many thousands of Chinese. They were cheap, they worked hard, and if they died no one had to worry" (353). This is not a personal accusation against Adam (though if he is to represent the Genesis Adam, the father of humanity, he is certainly implicated); by "you" Lee means "you Americans," and the account of his parents' journey to California, with its resonances of the Middle Passage of the African slave trade, is another sordid slice of American immigration history. He continues, "The herds of men went like animals into the black hold of a ship, there to stay until they reached San Francisco six weeks later. And you can imagine what those holes were like" (354). Describing the conditions of the labor camp, he says, "These human cattle were imported for one thing only—to work. When the work was done, those who were not dead were to be shipped back. Only males were

brought—no females. The country did not want them breeding.... To the bosses they were not people but animals which could be dangerous if not controlled” (355).

The greatest threat, Lee explains, was to his mother, who disguised herself as a man in order to follow her husband to California. Although she managed to maintain this disguise while doing the hard work of railroad building, the greater threat was that she had become pregnant with Lee before the journey began, so that when she went into early labor she could no longer hide. “And then the half-mad men knew and they went all mad. One hunger sharpened another hunger, and one crime blotted out the one before it, and the little crimes committed against those starving men flared into one gigantic maniac crime” (357). His father, hobbling on a newly broken leg, soon found her:

When he got there a kind of sorrow had come over the sky, and the Canton men were creeping away to hide and to forget that men can be like this. My father came to her on the pile of shale. She had not even eyes to see out of, but her mouth still moved and she gave him his instructions. My father clawed me out of the tattered meat of my mother with his fingernails. She died on the shale in the afternoon. (357)

This ugly, violent scene is one of the novel’s most disturbing. But, as Lee tells it, his father never let the story end there. “No child ever had such care as I. The whole camp became my mother. It is a beauty—a dreadful kind of beauty” (357).

Steinbeck’s inclusion of Lee’s family history in *East of Eden* is certainly significant. Not only does it deepen our understanding of Lee’s character, but it also effectively and powerfully connects him to the broader context of discrimination that influences his actions. Steinbeck demonstrates that context by describing the inhumane treatment of the Chinese immigrants, who to their captors “were not people but animals.” The occasion for Lee’s recounting of this story is Adam’s deliberation over whether or not to tell his sons who their mother is—not only that Cathy (or Kate) is alive, but that she operates the ugliest brothel in Salinas—and Lee is

concerned with the potential harm that might be caused by withholding the truth: “It’s the lie I’m thinking of,” Lee says. “It might infect everything. If they ever found out you’d lied to them about this, the true things would suffer. They wouldn’t believe anything then” (352). Lee’s story surfaces in support of his own father’s principle of truth-telling. “There’s more beauty in the truth,” his father told him, “even if it is dreadful beauty” (356). Thus Lee’s family history offers a truth about him that is both tragic and beautiful, a truth which extends to his situation as a minority in early 20<sup>th</sup> century California. Steinbeck draws on the ugly story, this American story of imported labor—without shying away from its hideousness—in order to develop Lee as a complex individual, a man whose ethnic identity is a source of tension even as he realizes a modicum of acceptance within the dominant culture. In addition, Steinbeck’s story of Lee’s mother’s desperate disguise may be seen as background to Lee’s own disguise, his means of navigating the cultural situation in a California just one generation removed from the terrible immigrant experience Lee describes.

In response to his past and present experience, Lee chooses a three-fold disguise, and while the three elements usually function simultaneously, examining them individually may prove beneficial to our analysis of his character. First I will consider Lee’s appearance, which extends not only to his dress but also to his movements and demeanor—the physical aspect of his disguise. This includes his shuffling and, perhaps most symbolically, his queue, all described initially from Cathy’s viewpoint:

His long black glossy braided queue, tied at the bottom with a narrow piece of black silk, hung over his shoulder and moved rhythmically against his chest. When he did violent work he curled his queue on top of his head. He wore narrow cotton trousers, black heelless slippers, and a frogged Chinese smock. Whenever he could he hid his hands in his sleeves as though he were afraid for them, as most Chinese did in that day. (159)

Thus Lee initially appears the mere stereotype of a Chinese servant, which of course proves merely a façade. In terms of maintaining this disguise, Lee explains, the queue is just as important as the pidgin. He must wear the queue if he is to fully match the expectations of the people around him, those who he claims are confused by any derivation from the accepted norm. When Samuel, who has “read that [the queue] is a badge of slavery imposed by conquest by the Manchus on the Southern Chinese,” asks Lee why he continues to wear it in light of that fact, Lee replies:

“Talkie Chinese talk. Queue Chinese fashion—you savvy?”  
Samuel laughed loudly. “That does have the green touch of convenience,” he said. “I wish I had a hidey-hole like that.” (161)

From Lee’s perspective at this point in the novel, the queue is a necessary component of his appearance, and its connection to Chinese slavery, while perhaps regrettable, is ultimately less important than his own disguise.

But the queue is also a significant part of Lee’s gradual relinquishing of that disguise. Eleven years later, when Samuel comes to say goodbye, he notices a change in Lee which he can’t identify. Lee clarifies for him, “It’s my queue, Mr. Hamilton. I’ve cut off my queue.... We all did. Haven’t you heard? The Dowager Empress is gone. China is free. The Manchus are not overlords and we do not wear queues. It was a proclamation of the new government. There’s not a queue left anywhere” (292). Lee’s use of the queue is interesting in that it connects him to the Chinese community, both in China and the United States. His earlier indifference to the “badge of slavery” has transformed into a newfound appreciation for the independence of his parents’ homeland. Although in cutting off the queue he will continue to blend in with other Chinese people, he seems more concerned with the freedom it symbolizes than the maintenance of any disguise.

By the end of the novel, Lee's traditional dress also has gone by the wayside, and his new appearance signifies a greater willingness to defy the cultural expectations imposed upon him:

Lee had become American conservative in his clothes since he had lived in Salinas. He regularly wore black broadcloth when he went out of the house. His shirts were white, his collars high and stiff, and he affected narrow black string ties, like those which once were the badge for Southern senators. His hats were black, round of crown and straight of brim, and uncrushed as though he still left room for a coiled queue. He was immaculate. (483)

This change in Lee's appearance is indicative of the tension he has always felt, even before he entered the world of the Trasks and the Hamiltons, before he became a servant and affected the traditional Chinese dress. Like his relinquishing of the queue, his switch to "American conservative" clothing is not a rejection of his Chinese identity, but an acceptance of his truer dual identity as Chinese-American. While he may wear the "badge" of a Southern senator, he also leaves room—in his hat, in his consciousness—"for a coiled queue."

Perhaps the most powerful element of Lee's disguise is his use of language, which, as we have seen, is also the means of effecting his initial emergence. After Lee's surprising transformation, his use of language—English, pidgin, and Chinese—takes on added significance. As Luchen Li observes, "Lee's uniqueness seems to remind the reader constantly that he is speaking a different language with a different mindset..." (128). He is introduced as a figure who manipulates language (and others' perception of him through it), and is therefore more fascinating to observe.

Lee's initial reason for employing pidgin stems from his (unhopeful) view of other people, who, unlike Samuel (the rare exception), he says are unable to "separate [their] observation from [their] preconception" (161). Lee explains, "I know it's hard to believe, but it has happened so often to me and to my friends that we take it for granted. If I should go up to a lady or a 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" (161). Although Lee converses with Samuel in English, allowing him into his confidence, he is insistent that Samuel not "talk this way when other people are listening. It would only confuse them and they wouldn't believe it anyway" (163). Lee's experience has told him that people will refuse to listen to him when he attempts to speak their language, so he has resorted to pidgin in order to avoid the confusion that results from his attempts to truly communicate with others. Thus his gradual rejection of pidgin throughout the novel indicates his increasingly optimistic view of people's capacity to understand.

But this development does not occur all at once. After his initial conversation with Samuel, we sometimes observe Lee speaking pidgin, taking advantage of his invisibility to others, occasionally with comic effect. The first such instance comes when Deputy Sheriff Horace Quinn comes to the Trask farm to investigate Adam's shooting injury. When Horace—who insists on calling Lee "Ching Chong"—asks him a direct question, Lee simply answers, "No, ma'am" (206). Horace fails to notice the jibe, but Lee has utilized the pidgin to undermine the racism of the stranger in a way that avoids actual confrontation.

After Cathy's departure, Adam becomes the second individual to be taken in to Lee's confidence, and their relationship grows in spite of Adam's silence and overall passiveness. When Samuel returns to the Trask farm, he observes, "You've dropped the pidgin, Lee" (259). "I hope for good," Lee replies. "Of course I use it in King City" (259). When Adam finally notices the change—"It's strange to me—he used to speak differently"—Samuel observes, "He trusts you now" (263). At this point, Lee is comfortable enough at home with Adam that he no longer relies on the pidgin, but he still employs it with strangers. This pattern continues for an entire decade, so that when the Bacon family arrives at the Trask place, Lee resumes his

disguise, resorting to shuffling and speaking pidgin. Mr. and Mrs. Bacon, who are shocked to learn that Lee has raised the boys—“You mean the Chinese we saw?” (340)— would certainly have difficulty overcoming their prejudices against him, separating “[their] observations from [their] preconceptions.” Finding it unnecessary (or unproductive) to engage them, Lee merely takes care of the horses and serves the tea, retreating “to the safety of the hallway,” biding his time until the visitors leave (341). Due to his eloquent musings in earlier passages, Lee’s return to pidgin—his invisibility to strangers—seems a great loss.

The final time we see Lee utilizing pidgin as a disguise is when the haughty young mechanic comes to the farm to teach Adam about his new Ford. The boy, who promptly orders Lee to take his horse, has from his three months in automobile school “gained a great though weary contempt for human beings. He spat and threw lines at Lee” (362). In response to the boy’s disrespectful attitude, Lee first speaks in articulate English before sarcastically switching to pidgin:

Lee said quietly, “So young to be so erudite.”  
The boy swung around toward him, scowling. “What did you say?” he demanded, and he asked Adam. “What did the Chink say?”  
Lee spread his hands and smiled blandly. “Say velly smaht fella,” he observed quietly. “Mebbe go college. Velly wise.” (363)

Lee’s return to pidgin here is only momentary, and he uses it to address and undermine the mechanic’s prejudices. In terms of Steinbeck’s handling of racial constructions, this scene is a particularly interesting one. The boy is the first stranger with whom Lee speaks English, yet Lee utilizes the pidgin when he recognizes the mechanic’s unwillingness (or inability) to engage him as an equal. The mechanic does not understand Lee and has no interest in trying; he turns to Adam for interpretation instead. Lee’s pidgin response mocks both the boy’s inability to understand sophisticated English and his unwillingness to recognize Lee as anything beyond his

expectations of what a Chinese servant should be. Lee's point in calling him a "velly smaht fella"—lost on the mechanic—indicts the boy's entire attitude of ignorance and disrespect. Although the boy disparages Lee particularly, his contempt is for humanity in general, and his racism appears as another extension of his ignorance. The mechanic is secure in his white masculine identity, yet he can only assert himself in this way when he encounters a figure such as Lee who he can use as a (stereotyped) counterpoint.

Lee eventually resumes this conversation in English and abandons the pidgin (for all we know) for good. After the family has moved to Salinas, Will Hamilton tells Lee, "You know, it sounds funny to hear you use all those two-bit words. I'd swear to God you used to talk pidgin" (431). Lee then replies, "I used to.... It was vanity, I guess" (431). Each of these moments of Lee's speaking pidgin effectively demonstrates his situation as characterized in the unmasking scene. As his character grows, aided by his frequent eloquent, philosophical observations, the former (however occasional) necessity for hiding behind the pidgin becomes all the more tragic and poignant. His trust in others gradually develops, but this tension is always in the background as he variously performs and challenges the roles that people expect him to play.

The third element of Lee's disguise—his occupation as a servant—is perhaps more complicated because it represents his entire way of life; his appearance and language both function in service to this final piece. In some ways, his role as a servant *is* the disguise, his mannerisms and broken English being the mere requisite components of it. Samuel immediately realizes the role of Lee's profession in service to the ruse and does not fail to question him about it, but of course Lee has an answer for this as well. He replies, "I don't know where being a servant came into disrepute. It is the refuge of a philosopher, the food of the lazy, and, properly carried out, it is a position of power, even of love. I can't understand why more intelligent

people don't take it as a career—learn to do it well and reap its benefits" (163). The subversive power Lee describes has its appeal, for, he says, "a good servant, and I am an excellent one, can completely control his master, tell him what to think, how to act, whom to marry, when to divorce, reduce him to terror as a discipline, or distribute happiness to him, and finally be mentioned in his will. If I had wished I could have robbed, stripped, and beaten anyone I've worked for and come away with thanks" (164). But this kind of power is merely a replacement for that which is lacking in Lee's life. He admits, "Finally, in my circumstances I am unprotected. My master will defend me, protect me" (164). While he may find gain some influence as a servant within a particular family, this only arises from his lack of power as a minority within the wider community. Although there is power in Lee's disguise, to wear it is to recognize his helplessness in the face of discrimination.

This paradox is always present in Lee's consciousness and apparent in his decision-making. Although he sees the benefits of his chosen lifestyle, he has other dreams as well: he would like to have a family and start his own bookstore in San Francisco. He tells Samuel of his bookstore idea during that first crucial conversation, and the goal continues to surface whenever Lee considers abandoning his servant life with the Trasks. Yet he always mentions it with mixed resolve, as though the dream will likely go unrealized. When he first reveals the idea to Samuel, he says, "I thought perhaps a bookstore. I'd like that, and the competition wouldn't be too great. I probably won't do it though. A servant loses initiative" (164).

Eleven years go by before Lee mentions the idea to his master, Adam, as a real possibility and personal desire. Adam has a fresh sense of awareness and freedom after finally confronting Cathy, and Lee recognizes this as an opportunity. He tells Adam, "Maybe if you're free, you can free me" (329). For all his talk of the virtues of servanthood, Lee still feels captive in his

situation and cannot be wholly at peace. "I don't think any man is contented," he says, "when there are things undone he wishes to do" (329). He explains, "I want to open a bookstore in Chinatown in San Francisco. I would live in the back, and my days would be full of discussions and arguments" (330). Lee desires independence, the possibility of pursuing his long-standing dream. At this point Adam persuades Lee to stay a while longer, in order to help Adam put his accounts in order and get to know the boys (for Lee has raised them single-handedly while operating the entire household). But Lee is cautious about the idea: "„You wouldn't lay a trap for me?... My wish isn't as strong as it once was. I'm afraid I could be talked out of it or, what would be worse, I could be held back just by being needed. Please try not to need me. That's the worst bait of all to a lonely man" (330).

Lee continues with full intention of leaving, and he judiciously performs the final tasks required of him. He tells Adam, simply, "You'll like the boys, I think," and helps him understand the children he has so long ignored (329). Lee puts the household in order and ensures the family's smooth departure from the valley: "Lee helped Adam and the two boys move to Salinas, which is to say he did it all, packed the things to be taken, saw them on the train, loaded the back seat of the Ford, and, arriving in Salinas, unpacked and saw the family settled in Dessie's little house" (414). Finally, he approaches Adam again and tells him of his plan to leave the family for good and finally get his bookstore. He says his brief goodbyes and leaves on the morning train.

In all, Lee's pursuit of the bookstore dream encompasses over half of his involvement in the novel. Two hundred and fifty pages pass by from the time we first meet Lee and hear of the idea until he finally goes to try it out. As John H. Timmerman puts it, Lee envisions the bookstore as "the world of dreams of his own kind of Eden," a potential escape from the internal

conflict of good and evil which he otherwise deals with philosophically (238). The novel's recurrent mention of Lee's dream reinforces the tension of his position as a servant and his longing to escape: he finds love and acceptance within the Trask family, certainly, but until he leaves to pursue his own direction, he can never fully experience the freedom he desires.

Perhaps surprisingly, Lee returns to the Trask home just six days later, lets himself in with his own key, and intentionally resumes his former life. "Nothing happened to me," he explains. "I got lonesome. That's all. Isn't that enough?... I don't want a bookstore. I think I knew it before I got on the train, but I took all this time to make sure" (419). In short, Lee had to go to San Francisco to find out if it was what he really wanted to do. His return, at the beginning of Book Four, is significant, for his transformation is complete; Lee no longer has use for any part of his disguise. He speaks Standard English, uses American dress, and finally makes himself at home with Adam and the boys: "On the ranch his possessions had never really been unpacked, for Lee had lived poised to go someplace else. Here, for the first time in his life, he built a home for himself, feathered with comfort and permanence" (428). Tetsumaro Hayashi notes the significance of Lee's return for his individual development:

...when he returns to Adam and his boys, they become Lee's real and natural family. Then Lee becomes a complete man—individually and socially—a family man who truly „mixes.“ In such an intricate, dynamic relationship—one based on love, trust, and understanding—Adam Trask can leave almost every judgment and decision, every aspect of management, to Lee, totally depending on his wisdom and resourcefulness. The sharp distinction between the master and the servant disappears, to the benefit of both. (54)

This concept of "mixing" is central to Hayashi's view of Lee: "Thus," he concludes, "Lee ultimately „mixes“ without losing his individual identity" (59). Yet Hayashi's reading is a bit too optimistic. While Lee does find independence, influence, and acceptance with the Trasks, he is still Adam's employee, and throughout the remainder of the book frequent snapshots of Lee

performing his domestic duties—making coffee, darning socks, stuffing the Thanksgiving turkey—remind us of that role. Late in the novel he still describes himself to Abra in these terms: “I’m a servant. I’m old. I’m Chinese” (494). While Adam and Lee do become friends, traces of the problematic master-servant power structure remain. Furthermore, Lee’s return signals a choice to live outside the Chinese community, where he will never be fully received. As his earlier disguise (and subsequent emergence) indicates, his identity always remains in tension, no matter the level of acceptance he finds among one ethnic group or another. The true significance of his return is not that he somehow “mixes,” but that he no longer feels the necessity for his carefully considered and executed disguise.

It should be stressed, however, that Lee’s dropping of the disguise is not necessarily a move toward assimilation. On the contrary, although the changes in his appearance and language by the end of *East of Eden* may make him seem less Chinese, we should take Lee’s word when he claims, “I seem to get more Chinese as I get older” (292). His discovery is that he can still be Chinese while dressing and speaking like an American, and in the process of shrugging off that disguise, he allows his true identity to show. His conscious decision to return to the Trask family represents not a rejection of his identity, but an acceptance of it. Most importantly, in his departure and return Lee exercises a *choice*, a kind of freedom that was not his until he requested it of Adam.

Lee’s decision is critical not only for his development as a character but also as reinforcement of Steinbeck’s overall thesis in *East of Eden*, for which Lee is the primary voice. Within Steinbeck’s exploration of the story of good and evil lies an argument for individual responsibility and freewill, which he extrapolates from a single passage in the Genesis story of Cain and Abel, the story Lee refers to as “the symbol story of the human soul” (268). Lee,

Samuel, and Adam read it together when they gather to name the twins, and Lee is motivated to dig deeper into its meaning. He consults his Chinese family elders in San Francisco who together study Hebrew in order to properly translate the pivotal word: *timshel*. A decade after the naming scene, Lee shares the fruits of this etymological study with Adam and Samuel:

“Don’t you see?” he cried. “The American Standard translation [„do thou“] *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. For if „Thou mayest”—it is also true that „Thou mayest not.” Don’t you see?” (301)

Thus developed at the center of the novel, *timshel* becomes Steinbeck’s code word for individual moral decision and responsibility<sup>1</sup>. In the universal (internal) conflict between good and evil, which Steinbeck argues is “the only story we have,” human beings have a choice, and where there is choice, there is freedom (411). Lee is the first to comprehend the idea’s significance, and it inspires him: “But think of the glory of the choice! That makes a man a man” (304). As the novel progresses, he continues to help others (most notably Cal) understand the consequence that such freewill has for them. Hayashi observes, “Lee teaches Cal to learn to transcend evil (the mother in him) and his bondage (the Cain in him) by exercising moral choice. Thus, Lee not only saves Caleb from the paralyzing guilt and despair deriving from his father’s rejection and anger, but also gives the young man a second chance to transcend the past and create a future with Abra” (58). And in the final scene he convinces the dying Adam to bless Cal—the character who best embodies the internal good-evil conflict, “crammed,” as Lee puts it, “full to

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<sup>1</sup> The correctness of Steinbeck’s translation of the Hebrew “*timshel*” has been disputed. (Technically, the verb is “*timshol-bo*,” meaning “you will rule [*timshol*] in him [*bo*]” [“*Timshel*” 377].) Lee adequately develops the interpretive possibilities here, but the translation of *timshel* as “thou mayest” was decidedly the most convenient for Steinbeck, not necessarily the most accurate. Regarding the translation, which he underwent with help from his editor, Pat Covici, Steinbeck wrote, “...at least there is a difference of opinion and that is enough for me” (*Journal* 122). The “*Timshel*” entry from *A John Steinbeck Encyclopedia* contains a helpful discussion of the various critical response to this pivotal exegesis.

the top with every good thing and every bad thing” (583)—instead of rejecting him on the basis of his poor choices. Adam’s simple blessing, the final speech of the novel, is a whispered “*Timshel*,” a gesture that sets his son free and gives him “the choice of winning!” (307). Lee’s involvement in the *timshel* discussion—the crux of Steinbeck’s argument—is one reason he has been mostly ignored by critics, generally written off as an authorial spokesman, another “one of Steinbeck’s self-reliant and wise „self” characters” (Shillinglaw 41). John Ditsky explains the prevailing view (although his study affords Lee more attention than some); Lee, he says, is “Steinbeck’s most conspicuously artificial creation in *East of Eden*.... He is as present to the novel’s central characters (though invisible to their racist neighbors) as he is removed from direct participation in its main events. He observes, and he comments, and he moves the action along” (48). Steinbeck’s own comments on Lee’s role in the novel may even contribute to this unnecessarily narrow view. In *Journal of a Novel* he writes, “Now you are going to like Lee. He is a philosopher. And also he is a kind and thoughtful man. And beyond all this he is going to go in the book because I need him. The book needs his eye and his criticism which is more detached than mine” (73). If the above critiques are that Lee seems too contrived, the accusation is probably related to Steinbeck’s “need” for him as a detached presence, a role which Steinbeck’s own involvement as a character in the story may have precluded him from occupying.

However, Steinbeck goes on to explain that Lee is of greater importance than that. He later observes, “I need Lee, not only as an interpreter but as an active figure” (*Journal* 149). Despite critical arguments to the contrary, Lee is certainly an active figure, even if much of his activity seems to occur behind the scenes. In “The Disappearance of the Oriental Philosopher in the Film Adaptation of *East of Eden*,” Hyang Mann Lee argues that while Lee may often be

regarded as secondary (as his omission from the film version would indicate), he is at once “the spiritual leader of the novel,” “Steinbeck’s ideal character,” and “a sort of moral lens through which the deeds of the other characters in the novel are revealed” (185). “In the novel, Lee is not only a character; he is also a kind of central spirit from which all the conflicts of the Trask family may gain resolution and harmony” (188). Indeed, Lee not only propounds the *timshel* principle, he embodies it, exercising his power of choice (in re-joining the Trask family) and continually urging other characters (especially Cal) to do the same. And his personal journey, including both the decision to adopt a disguise and the gradual rejection of it, may also be viewed in *timshel* terms. Although Lee initially exercises the convenience of the disguise, his movement is to a more honest approach to the world (the same principle of honesty passed down through his father’s story). In shrugging off his “hidey-hole,” Lee issues a challenge to others to see him for who he really is: a complex individual whose identity is ultimately greater than ethnicity. He does not reject his Chinese identity, nor does he fully adapt to the white culture around him. He is most importantly an individual, and in the end he is free to be as Chinese or as American as he wishes.

In addition to these roles, Lee also forms a kind of central presence between the fictional and nonfictional worlds in the novel, represented by Adam and Samuel, respectively. In “Story of a Writing,” Louis Owens argues instead that “Samuel is the point of contact between “real” and fictional worlds in the novel, the bridge,” for he is “contaminated by the fictional Trask narrative and its demands in a way the other Hamiltons are not” (69). I contend, however, that this particular role is more correctly filled by Lee. While Adam is the artificial creation, one of Steinbeck’s “symbol people,” and Samuel is his maternal grandfather resurrected through the novel, Lee is something different altogether (*Journal* 27). He is associated with the Trask

family, but he does not serve the same symbolic function they do; he resides outside the myth. Nor does he belong with the Hamiltons as a fictionalized version of an actual person, although elsewhere Steinbeck mentions having known a Chinese cook during in his childhood<sup>2</sup>. Rather, Lee serves as a mediator between these two disparate worlds, and the novel's "thesis" is produced only when he, Samuel, and Adam sit down at the table together.

Interestingly, Lee occasionally seems conscious of his role as mediator in the story, somehow aware that he is participating in Adam's quasi-mythical world as well as his own "real" historical one. This is most evident when direct allusions to the Genesis story occur, at which points Lee exhibits uneasiness with regard to the apparent correlations between text and life. When Samuel comes to the Trask farm and sees the growing boys, he is amused by the parallels between them and their biblical counterparts, Cain and Abel. Samuel learns that Aron, like Abel, cares for animals, and he asks, "Cal, don't tell me you're a gardner?" (297). But Lee is wary of even lighthearted suggestions of the family's correlation to the myth: "Lee's head snapped around and he inspected Samuel. „Don't do that,“ Lee said nervously" (297). When Samuel makes another similar reference, Lee glares at him from across the table. This encounter is nothing short of a confrontation between myth and reality, with Lee caught in the middle. Although Lee seems aware of the Genesis parallels, he cannot allow the myth to take hold. In conjunction with the *timshel* principle, Lee believes that every human being has a choice in what he or she will become. The fate of individuals is in no way predestined, so Lee must resist the notion that anything—even a myth—might prematurely shape the boys; Cal and Aron must each have a choice.

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<sup>2</sup> In *Travels With Charley* Steinbeck mentions that when he was growing up in Salinas his family had a Chinese cook named Lee. However, he only offers one anecdote about Lee's industriousness: after noticing a "speckled fawn-colored chunk of wood" with bullet holes in it, Lee fastened antlers to it and began to harvest buckshot from the log, later replacing it with a sandbag for easier collection of his "crop" (*Travels* 58).

While Lee seems to monitor the potential deterministic trappings of the myth, he also stands opposed to other forms of determinism. *East of Eden* examines these other forms as well, especially the biological and sociological. The naively “good” Adam Trask, terribly damaged by his relationship with the sinister Cathy, displays a great deal of concern about the genetic inheritance of his sons, a potent mixture of good and evil. He tells Samuel, “But I would like to know what kind of blood is in my boys” (260). Samuel, however, is conscious that other factors outweigh the biological, especially the particularly weighty forces of parenting:

“I don’t very much believe in blood,” said Samuel. “I think when a man finds good or bad in his children he is seeing only what he planted in them after they cleared the womb.”

“You can’t make a race horse of a pig.”

“No,” said Samuel, “but you can make a very fast pig.” (260)

Ultimately, however, even ostensibly positive parental expectations come to represent another dangerous form of determinism which must be overcome. Steinbeck develops the theme in connection with that of rejection inherent in the Cain and Abel story, in which Abel’s sacrifice is deemed pleasing to God while Cain’s is not. As a young man, Adam Trask suffers under the weight of his own father’s expectations, the burden of making an “acceptable” sacrifice. Yet he winds up repeating his father’s mistake, and Aron suffers in turn. Having secretly decided to drop out of Stanford after one semester, Aron receives a hero’s welcome home at Thanksgiving. He finds the weight of this irony unbearable: “He felt let down and helpless, packed like a bird’s egg in the cotton of his father’s ambition for him. He had not known its strength until tonight, and he wondered whether he would have the strength to break free of its soft, persistent force” (532). Caving under the pressure, Aron enlists in the military and is shipped away to Europe to fight in World War I, which he does not survive. These circumstances make Lee’s mentoring of Cal all the more significant. Lee’s message is that Cal need not be constrained by either the

force of evil in his blood or the necessity to always please his father; nor, in fact, is he marked by his resemblance to Cain and the potential workings of that myth. None of these factors, Lee instructs him, will ultimately decide his fate, for he is a free-thinking individual endowed with the “glory of the choice!” (302).

At its core, Steinbeck’s *timshel* principle is a cry for individuality, a concept which the author unflinchingly promotes. In the chapter that brings Adam to the Salinas Valley, Steinbeck states: “And this I believe: that the free, exploring mind of the individual human is the most valuable thing in the world. And this I would fight for: the freedom of the mind to take any direction it wishes, undirected. And this I must fight against: any idea, religion, or government which limits or destroys the individual. This is what I am and what I am about” (131). Yet while this claim helps form the core of *East of Eden* and *timshel*, so too does the idea that all humanity participates together in a single story: “We have only one story. All novels, all poetry, are built on the neverending contest in ourselves of good and evil” (413). The vision is complex, perhaps paradoxical, for it promotes individuality within the important context of that other important Steinbeck theme, the broader human community.

If this seems like a contradiction, we might consider that Steinbeck was keenly interested in the character of his country and its founding principle: *E pluribus unum*. One reason for his insistence upon including his family history in the novel was the greater historical scope that their stories provided. As he wrote in the Journal, “It will also be said that I could well leave the Hamiltons out of the book because they do not contribute directly nor often to the Trask development. And I must be very willful about this, because this is not a story about the Trasks but about the whole Valley which I am using as a microcosm of the whole nation” (65). Thus,

on a certain level, Steinbeck's dual vision of individuality within collectiveness in *East of Eden* is representative of his American vision.

Steinbeck expounded upon this late in his career in his nonfiction piece, *America and Americans*, which he opens with a chapter entitled "*E Pluribus Unum*." He begins that chapter, "Our land is of every kind geologically and climatically, and our people are of every kind also—of every race, of every ethnic category—and yet our land is one nation, and our people are Americans" (319). He continues:

America did not exist. Four centuries of work, of bloodshed, of loneliness and fear created this land. We built America and the process made us Americans—a new breed, rooted in all races, stained and tinted with all colors, a seeming ethnic anarchy. Then in a little, little time, we became more alike than we were different—a new society; not great, but fitted by our very faults for greatness, *E Pluribus Unum*. (320)

For Steinbeck, who took the country's motto quite seriously, diversity was the American identity, the oneness of the country no less significant than its many-ness.

Lee, too, is fascinated by the strange composition of America. In a passage that Steinbeck would echo nine years later in his *Travels with Charley*<sup>3</sup>, Lee muses on the American identity during one of his mentoring conversations with Cal:

We're a violent people, Cal. Does it seem strange to you that I include myself? Maybe it's true that we are all descended from the restless, the nervous, the criminals, the arguers and brawlers, but also the brave and independent and generous. If our ancestors had not been that, they would have stayed in their home plots in the other world and starved over the squeezed-out soil.... That's why I include myself. We all have that heritage, no matter what land our fathers left. (568)

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<sup>3</sup> Steinbeck writes in *Travels with Charley*, "Could it be that Americans are a restless people, a mobile people, never satisfied with where they are as a matter of selection? The pioneers, the immigrants who peopled the continent, were the restless ones in Europe. The steady rooted ones stayed home and are still there. But every one of us, except the Negroes forced here as slaves, are descended from the restless ones, the wayward ones who were not content to stay at home. Wouldn't it be unusual if we had not inherited this tendency? And the fact is that we have" (*Travels* 103).

Lee's description of the country's personality is consistent with his view of humanity as a mixture of good and evil, which is also part of his message to Cal. Of course it is also significant for Lee's understanding of himself, not only as a similar blend of good and evil impulses, but as an American whose unique experience contributes to the rich diversity of the nation.

Steinbeck concludes in *American and Americans*, published during the Civil Rights Movement of the late 1960s, that "any attempt to describe the America of today must take into account the issue of racial equality, around which much of our thinking and our present-day attitudes turn" (353). The development of Lee in *East of Eden*, much earlier in his career, shows Steinbeck's interest in the experience of ethnic minorities within that American fabric. Although in creating his wise Oriental philosopher Steinbeck may not have avoided ethnic stereotype entirely, Lee is unlike any other Steinbeck character, and his position as an ethnic minority gives him a unique perspective and voice. Beyond this, as John Ditsky asserts, Lee is a challenge to stereotype thinking of all sorts" (48), a challenge for all people to, as Lee puts it, "separate... observations from...preconceptions." In spite of its epic length and scope, *East of Eden* is a novel of individuals, and Steinbeck offers a kind of dignity to every person he creates, humanizing them all and validating their sometimes contradictory values and experiences. By developing Lee as a character who struggles with his identity (as demonstrated by his disguise and subsequent emergence), Steinbeck honors him as an individual. Yet he also honors the broader minority experience by conveying that tension with the sensitivity with which he approached all his characters. Lee is many things—indeed, too many for some critics—but he should be appreciated for that very complexity which makes him one of Steinbeck's most fascinating (and potentially most enduring) characters.

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