Thou Mayest or Thou Shalt: Discerning the Dramatic Role of *Timshel* in John Steinbeck's *East of Eden*

Poderás ou Deverás: Discernindo o papel dramático de Timshel em *A Leste do Paraíso* de John Steinbeck

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PALVRAS CHAVE: *TIMSHE*L, STEINBECK, GÉNESIS, CAIM E ABEL, INTERTEXTUALIDADE, *A LESTE DO PARAÍSO*.
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INTRODUCTION

Intertexual readings of Steinbeck's *East of Eden* as a revision or reinterpretation of the Genesis 4 story of Cain and Abel are numerous and dissenting. As Terry Wright observes in *The Genesis of Fiction*, many critics read the novel as an "assault on the big book of his [Steinbeck's] tradition". While Wright and others emphasize a more moderate reading in which the book provides "both a commentary upon Genesis 4 and a supplementary narrative based upon it" (Wright, 2007, p. 51). For biblical scholars, the account of Cain and Abel within Genesis 4, creates many opportunities for commentary. Common questions revolve around the reason for the rejection of Cain's offering, the biblical identification of the younger son prior to the mention of the elder, and the seeming inherent existence of Evil (Gilmore, 2012, p. 5). Some religious scholarship supports this interpretation of Steinbeck's story. As

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Alec Gilmore observes in "Literature as Midrash A Fresh Look at Genesis 4:7 in the Light of John Steinbeck, *East of Eden*," some scholars contend "it is not Cain but his sacrifice that is rejected and there is still hope for him; evil is an objective force to which human beings are vulnerable but coping with its consequences is still within our control" (Gilmore, 2012, p.6). This reading of the biblical account appears consistent with Steinbeck's use of the term *timshel*, a transliteration of the Hebrew word *timshol* found in Genesis 4:7: "Sin is lurking at the door; its desire is for you, but *timshol*, (variously translated) you can master it" (as translated by Alec Gilmore). Critical understandings of Steinbeck's message focus upon his transliteration and use of the Hebrew word *timshel.* Within his narrative, the Hebrew word *timshel* is translated as "thou mayest" by the Chinese immigrant, Lee. Lee's perspective comes to inform the tumultuous relationship between Adam Trask, the novel's "Adam" character, and his two sons, Aron and Caleb. This interpretation aims to offer a critical contribution of Steinbeck's work by applying this perspective to the novel, rather than the biblical passage. The reading of *timshel* as "thou mayest" means that Cal, despite his many sins, is not yet doomed, and the open-ended nature of the story supports the possibility of his redemption through the exercise of his free will.

THEMES

Beyond the use of the term *timshel,* many factors support the intertextual reading linking *East of Eden* to the fourth chapter of Genesis. First, the names of Steinbeck's characters are similar to those of their biblical analogues. The name Adam is shared by the patriarch of the Trask family and the biblical patriarch. Adam is the father of two sons, Cain and Abel, and Adam Trask is the assumed father of the two sons. The first letter of each of the son names is shared; the letter "C" begins both Cain and Cal while the letter "A" is shared by Abel and Aron. These men pursue similar occupations. Cain was a farmer and Cal invested in bean crops. Abel was a shepherd and Aron desired to enter the clergy, a role biblically associated with being the shepherd of human beings. In the bible, God, the ultimate father, showed preference by rejecting Cain's sacrifice and accepting Abel's. In Steinbeck's novel, Adam rejected the money offered by Cal and instead wishes that his son led a life more like his brother. In both cases, the father's rejection incensed the rejected son, causing him to lash out against the preferred brother. Cain killed Abel in anger, while Cal took Aron to see their mother, a brothel owner. This act resulted in shattering the illusion of her good life and death, motivating a despondent Aron to enter the military. Aron's rash decision ultimately leads to his death. In addition, the mothers of these stories share a common association

with evil. Eve is blamed for tempting Adam into engaging in the sin of eating the fruit that caused the fall of man; Cathy Ames, or Kate, is an evil woman who engages in murder in order to elevate herself to the role of a *madame* in a brothel she makes infamous for its proliferation of sexual sadism. Furthermore, similarities between Adam's generation and Genesis 4 suggest that Steinbeck was playing with the intergenerational application of the Cain and Abel narrative. Adam Trask may be interpreted as the biblical Adam, but like his son Aron, Adam has a name that begins with the letter "A." This similarity suggests that Adam Trask may be read as an Abel figure and that his father, Cyrus, may be read as the biblical Adam. In *East of Eden,* Adam Trask also endures a contentious relationship with his brother, Charles, another man whose name begins with the letter "C" shared by Cain and Cal. Cain, a farmer, is remembered as the murderer of his brother following God's rejection of his offering. Charles, like Cain, is a farmer. Charles is also the aggressor who seeks to kill his brother, but he ultimately fails in the task. Charles was also rejected by their father, Cyrus, when he attempted to offer him a knife as a gift. In contrast, Cyrus preferred the gift of a puppy from his son Adam, and he showed considerable favoritism toward Adam. God marked Cain to warn others from killing him; Charles suffers a scar after moving large rocks. These attributes suggest that Cyrus is similar to God in his preference for Adam (Abel) over Charles (Cain). The story of Cain and Abel are just one of the many intertextual connections linking East of Eden to the bible. As Pugh observes, the attempt to interpret the conclusion of East of Eden requires knowledge of many different biblical stories:

> closure in *East of Eden* depends on such masterplots as the Prodigal Son, the re-creation of Eden, the reunification of the family, the deathbed blessing of a patriarch the sanctity of last words, initiation into knowledge of a secret magical word, and so on... a complex network or lattice of alternative mythic variations which must be renegotiated. (Pugh, 2006, p. 74)

TIMSHEL

That magic word is, of course, *timshel*. Some critics, such as Terry Wright (2007), bemoan Steinbeck apparent error in presenting *timshel* as the Hebrew word *timshol*, however this decision to slightly alter the original Hebrew term found in Genesis 4:7 may highlight Steinbeck's intentional purpose in identifying one reading of the term as the most appropriate. The critical definition of *timshol* has been argued by biblical scholars. The term is alternatively translated as "thou mayest" or "thou shalt" (Gilmore, 2012, p. 6). This is a significant semantic difference which underscores the existence or absence of human free will.

This interpretation of *timshel* is consistent with Steinbeck's interest in morality. As the author explained, "Humans are caught - in their lives, in their thoughts, in their hungers and ambitions in their avarice and cruelty, and in their kindness and generosity too - in a net of good and evil. I think this is the only story we have and that it occurs on all levels of feeling and intelligence" (Steinbeck, 2002, p. 411). A critic may choose to focus an intertextual reading upon East of Eden and the Prodigal Son parable, or Cain and Abel, or the casting out of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden, and each of these interpretations have plausible evidence supporting such an interpretation. But they all share a focus upon the battle between good and evil, Steinbeck's ultimate narratological interest.

In Steinbeck's novel, the idea of "thou mayest" is introduced and endorsed through the words of a Chinese immigrant, Lee, in contrast to the view of other Christian characters. *Timshel*, according to Lee, "carried a man's greatness if he wanted to take advantage of it" (Steinbeck, 2002, p.519). Specifically, that greatness occurs through the resistance and triumph over sin. The alternative definition of "thou shalt" is consistent with the view of an omnipotent God who commands his servants to obey. Lee rhetorically distanced himself from this conservative view of God. As Lee explained, "This is not theology. I have no bent toward gods. But I have a new love for that glittering instrument, the human soul. It is a lovely and unique thing in the universe. It is always attacked and never destroyed - because 'Thou mayest'" (Steinbeck, 2002, p. 302). Lee's interpretation denies predetermination of fates and emphasizes the power of human beings to make choices which directly influence their destinies.

In theory, Lee's view might have been treated as heresy, yet it is instead viewed as revelatory; Lee's interpretation influences the perspectives of his friends. It offers hope to those otherwise predisposed toward despair. "Thou mayest rule over sin" declared Mr. Hamilton, "I do not believe all men are destroyed... But the choice, Lee, the choice of winning! I had never understood it or accepted it before" (Steinbeck, 2002, p. 307). At the close of the novel, Lee's perspective helps Adam to address his son. Adam is on his deathbed. Aron is dead, and Cal is his only living son. Adam initially does not want to reconcile with Cal, but he relents at Lee's urging.

In fact, "thou mayest" challenges easy interpretations by changing Steinbeck's narrative. Steinbeck challenges the reader by playing with the C and A pattern. Cain and Cal are not perfect matches because Cain chose to deny his role in the death of his brother, while Cal confessed it. Free will determined the different outcomes. Similarly, free will changes the father's treatment of his remaining son: "Lee manages to persuade him that he does indeed

have a choice, that he doesn't have to repeat the cycle of violence" (Wright, 2007, p. 65). With his final utterance, Adam uses Lee's interpretation to convey to Cal hope for the future.

Steinbeck's emphasis upon free will as the determination of moral destiny is consistent with the overall narratological choices maintained by the author, particularly the open-ended, and for some unsatisfying, nature of the novel's ending. At the close of *East of Eden*, Steinbeck resists the authorial urge to grant his reader closure. In "Horrifying Conclusions: Making Sense of Endings in Steinbeck's Fiction," Scott Pugh (2006) observes the manifestation of this narratological decision throughout Steinbeck's cannon, as well as the author's arguably conscious decision to engage with structural forms that inherently resist easy endings: "The short story cycle, the family saga, and the journey motif are all open--ended... This extensible structuration is perhaps significantly related to Steinbeck's interest in non-telelogical thinking" (Pugh, 2006, p. 73). These motifs are inherently open-ended. For example, a family saga can always be lengthened by adding another generation. Similarly, Steinbeck appeared to intend an ambiguous ending that would be determined by the choices of Cal after the death of his father.

NARRATOLOGICAL EMPHASIS

In contrast to Cal, Cathy Ames represents the dark side of both "thou mayest" and "thou shalt." Her status as an evil being is established soon after her introduction. Charles, the violent and abusive brother who tried to kill Adam, nevertheless warned him to stay away from Cathy. As Mimi Gladstein observes in "Steinbeck's Dysfuctional Families, A Coast--to-coast Dilemma", "When Cathy comes into the equation, Charles tries to alert Adam to the danger she represents, but, of course, Adam cannot hear him. Charles tells Adam that Cathy is a whore, a slut, and a bitch and that she will destroy him" (Gladstein, 2006, p. 44). Charles's care for his brother is limited, however. His warning and knowledge of Cathy's evil nature does not prevent him from sleeping with her, an act that renders the legitimacy of her sons questionable. Cathy later chooses to abandon her family. She chooses to kill a woman, and she chooses to become wealthy by running a sadistic brothel. At seemingly every turn, Cathy appears to choose the evil option. Her course may well be predetermined by an inherent absence of good, or she may choose to exert her free will by engaging in evil. Steinbeck leaves Cathy's exact nature ambiguous, just as he leaves the fate of Cal open to interpretation. Steinbeck's *East of Eden* is ultimately a celebration of human freedom, a characteristic which enables human beings to determine their ultimate moral destinies. Steinbeck's narratological emphasis of the translation of *timshel* as "thou mayest" identifies

human choice in the determination of moral destiny, a theme that inverts the biblical story of Cain and Abel and transforms the intertextual reading of *East of Eden* to emphasize the role of free in enabling redemption.

FRAGMENT READ:

Lee's breath whistled in his throat. "Adam, give him your blessing. Don't leave him alone with his guilt. Adam, can you hear me? Give him your blessing!"

A terrible brightness shone in Adam's eyes and he closed them and kept them closed. A wrinkle formed between his brows.

Lee said, "Help him Adam – help him. Give him his chance. Let him be free. That's all a man has over the beasts. Free him! Bless him!

The whole bed seemed to shake under the concentration. Adam's breath came quick with his effort and then, slowly, his right hand lifted – lifted an inch and then fell back.

Lee's face was haggard. He moved to the head of the bed and wiped the sick man's damp face with the edge of the sheet. He looked down at the closed eyes. Lee whispered, "Thank you, Adam—thank you, my friend. Can you move your lips? Make your lips form his name."

Adam looked up with sick weariness. His lips parted and failed and tried again. Then his lungs filled. He expelled the air and his lips combed the rushing sigh. His whispered word seemed to hang in the air: *"Timshel!"*

His eyes closed and he slept.

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RESUMO

A presente contribuição é construída em volta de uma interpretação da palavra hebraica *timshel* no romance *East of Eden* (*a Leste do Paraíso*) (John Steinbeck). A tradução da palavra hebraica *timshel* para o inglês pode ser "*thou mayest*" (podeis) ou *"thou shallt"* (deveis), dando margem considerável para interpretações do termo. Além de destacar outras referências bíblicas e intertextos parciais e plausíveis muito presentes em *East of Eden*, como a história de Adão e Eva, a contribuição concentra principalmente em pôr em relevo

a intertextualidade do enredo, ao longo de duas gerações no romance, com a história de Caim e Abel no livro de *Gênesis*. Ao preferir "*thou mayest*" (*American Standard Bible*) sobre "*thou shallt*" (*King James Bible*), Steinbeck, através das palavras do personagem Lee (um imigrante chinês), dá à humanidade a escolha e, portanto, o eleva através de seu livre-arbítrio para o estado do(s) deus(es). Considerando que, para duas gerações de irmãos cujos nomes começam simbolica e significativamente com A (Adam / Aron) e C (Charles / Call) redenção vem do esforço do livre arbítrio e da capacidade de perdoar. Finalmente, devida atenção também será dada à personagem Cathy Ames, personagem cujo nome também começa com C. como Charles Trask, e como Caim na Bíblia; como eles, ela também está marcada na testa, simbolizando que ela é uma encarnação de Thou Shallt na forma negativa, isto é, como ela encarna a completa falta daquilo ao que se chama em hebraico: *yetzer tov* (uma inclinação inata para fazer o bem).

ABSTRACT

The present contribution aims at an interpretation of the Hebrew word *timshel* in the novel *East of Eden* (John Steibeck). It will be shown how the English translation of the Hebrew notion of *timshel* can be either "thou mayest" or "thou shallt", and that by doing so, respectable latitude is assigned to the modal verbs' radius of action. Besides underscoring other biblical references and partial intertexts, very present in *East of Eden*, such as the story of Adam and Eve, the contribution mainly focusses on unveiling the biblical intertextuality of the two story lines, spread over two generation in the novel, with the story of Cain and Abel in the book *Genesis*. By emphasizing "thou mayest" (*Standard American Bible*) over "thou shallt "(*King James Bible*) Steinbeck, through the words of Lee (a Chinese immigrant), gives mankind the choice and thus elevates him due to his free will to the status of (the) god(s). Whereas to two generations of brothers, whose names symbolically and significantly start with an A (Adam/ Aron) and a C (Charles/ Call), redemption comes from the exertion of free will and from the capacity to forgive. By the same token, due consideration will also be given to the character Cathy Ames whose name also starts with a C. and who like Charles is also marked on the forehead. It will be demonstrated that she is an incarnation of "thou shallt" in the negative way, as she embodies the complete lack of *yetzer tov* (an innate inclination