About the author
John Steinbeck was born in Salinas, California, on February 27, 1902. He was of German and Irish ancestry. His father, John Ernst Steinbeck served as the County Treasurer. His mother, Olivia Hamilton was a former school teacher and it was she who encouraged Steinbeck's love of reading and writing. During the summers, Steinbeck often worked as a hired hand on the local ranches and these experiences helped him gain knowledge of the Californian countryside and its people. After graduating from high school in 1919, John went to Stanford University, initially to study English. However, he did not complete his studies, working in various different jobs before finally leaving Stanford in 1925. He then went to New York with the aim of pursuing a writing career, but he did not get any of his work published, and he subsequently returned to his native California.

His first novel, Cup of Gold, was published in 1929, but it did not meet with much success. Two more unsuccessful novels followed: The Pastures of Heaven and To a God Unknown.

Steinbeck married his first wife in 1930 and first achieved real popular acclaim in 1935 for his novel Tortilla Flat, with the book receiving the California Commonwealth Club’s Gold Medal for best novel by a Californian author. Much of his writing concerned the plight of America’s dispossessed rural population. The Grapes of Wrath, published in 1939 and set during the depression, tells the story of poor migrant sharecroppers who are driven to leave their homes by drought and who go to California in search of a better life. The novel received the Pulitzer Prize and was made into a successful movie starring Henry Fonda in 1940.

During the Second World War he worked as a war correspondent for the New York Herald Tribune, accompanying several commando raids on German-held territory in Europe. In 1943 he divorced his first wife and married Gwyn Conger in the same year. He was to have two sons with his second wife.

For a period during the Cold War he was widely criticized in the United States for his support for the underprivileged and his attention to social issues. He visited the Soviet Union in 1948 and wrote a book describing the lives of ordinary Russian people which sought to increase people’s understanding of the Soviet people at a tense time in international relations.

His works Of Mice and Men, The Grapes of Wrath, and East of Eden have all been made into successful movies.

John Steinbeck married for the third time in 1950. In 1962 he was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature. He died six years later in 1968.

Summary
East of Eden tells the story of two generations of brothers. It spans the period between the American Civil War and the end of the First World War. Adam and Charles Trask are half-brothers. They are the sons of Cyrus Trask, who fights briefly during the civil War. He is injured in his first battle then later embellishes his own military record and rises to become an influential military advisor. Adam’s mother dies very shortly after Adam is born and Cyrus quickly takes a new wife and has another son. He dotes on his son, Adam, at the expense of his younger son Charles. It is Adam whom Cyrus encourages to follow in his footsteps and join the army.

The relationship between the brothers is not an easy one because Charles is extremely jealous of his brother’s relationship with their father. He is very violent towards Adam and one day, after his father has once again shown his preference for Adam, Charles beats his brother to within an inch of this life. Soon afterwards, Adam joins the army and he remains a soldier for ten years. When Cyrus Trask moves away from the family farm to take up a job with the military, Charles is left alone in charge and there follows a period during which the brothers correspond as their relationship improves. Following their father’s death, and after some years spent traveling rather aimlessly around the country, Adam finally returns to the family home to live with Charles. The brothers find out that their father has left them a large sum of money in his will...
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and they are intrigued as to how he managed to amass such a sum on his army pay.

One day a badly beaten young woman appears on the Trasks’ doorstep. She is Cathy Ames, a beautiful but evil and manipulative prostitute, who has been left for dead by her pimp. The brothers give her shelter and take care of her. Adam soon falls in love with her and wants to marry her. Charles is set against the marriage because he is aware of Cathy’s true character. His suspicions are confirmed one night when she seduces him as his brother Adam lies sleeping. However, Adam and Cathy are married and she soon finds out that she is pregnant. Cathy doesn’t want the child and she tries to induce a miscarriage. The attempt goes badly wrong and she becomes very ill.

Adam decides to leave the family farm and start afresh with his wife and new baby. He looks for some land on which he can build a house and make a new life. But Cathy tells him she doesn’t want this new life and that she will leave him when the child is born. Adam doesn’t believe her, but soon after she gives birth to twin boys, Cathy packs her things and gets ready to leave. When Adam tries to stop her, she coolly shoots him and leaves him wounded. She leaves and returns to her life as a prostitute.

For the first year of their lives, Adam is too unhappy and depressed to give the boys names. Finally, he is persuaded by a neighbor that it is very important for him to do so, and they look to the biblical story of the Garden of Eden for inspiration. The twins are named Caleb and Aaron.

The twin brothers are raised by Adam and his Chinese servant, Lee. Aaron changes the spelling of his name to Aron (page 54). The brothers are very different and while everybody seems to like Aron, people seem more uneasy in the presence of Caleb. The father, just like in the previous generation, also appears to favor Aron. Both sons vie for their father’s affections, but Aron is more successful in this. When Caleb attempts to buy his father’s love with a gift of money he has earned via a business venture, he is rebuffed and unfavorably compared to his brother. Caleb is very jealous. He knows of their mother’s whereabouts and profession, while Aron believes her to be dead. As an act of vengeance against this father’s favorite, Caleb takes Aron to the brothel run by their mother. Aron is so grief-stricken that he enlists in the Army and is killed while fighting in France. Things get worse when Adam Trask suffers a stroke upon hearing the news of this son’s death. Caleb is grief-stricken and blames himself for Aron’s death and Adam’s sickness. He worries that he is evil because his mother was evil. However, at the end of the book, Adam’s final words to Cal seem to imply forgiveness—he reminds us, and his son, that he has free will.

Background and themes

Published in 1952, East of Eden is a story of good and evil. Steinbeck wrote it for his two young sons. He wanted to convey to them the sights, sounds and smells of the Salinas Valley. The novel is partly based on Steinbeck’s own life growing up in the Salinas Valley. His mother’s name was Hamilton, the same name he chose to give to the Trask’s neighbors. He considered this to be his greatest novel. He said about it: “It has everything in it I have been able to learn about my craft or profession in all these years.”

The novel is a symbolic recreation of the biblical story of Cain and Abel, told against a backdrop of the history of the Salinas Valley at the turn of the twentieth century. Among the many themes the book explores are the themes of love, jealousy, guilt, acceptance, and freedom. Steinbeck brings themes together by making references to the Book of Genesis and especially the story of Cain and Abel. The link between the novel and the biblical story is made very apparent by the choice of the names of both generations of brothers in the Trask family—the first letters of their names are a perfect match—first Charles and Adam, and then Cal and Aron.

But the parallels do not end there. In the biblical story, Cain works the land and Abel is a keeper of sheep. In East of Eden, Charles is a farmer, and then Caleb invests in the bean harvest. In the Bible, Adam rejects Cain’s gift of crops and prefers Abel’s gift of a lamb, while in East of Eden, Cyrus rejects Charles’s gift of an expensive knife in favor of Adam’s gift of a stray puppy. This pattern is repeated in the subsequent generation when Adam Trask rejects Caleb’s gift of money earned by investing in the bean crop and tells him he would rather he led a good life like his brother. In the Bible, Cain kills Abel after being rejected by God, while in the novel Charles almost beats his brother to death in a jealous rage after being rejected by his father. In the second generation, Caleb’s jealousy indirectly kills his brother, Aron, when he makes him so distraught over his mother that he enlists and goes to fight in the First World War.

The mark that God put on Cain in order to deter others from killing him in the biblical story is paralleled in both
generations of Trask brothers. In the first generation, Charles receives a dark scar on his forehead as the result of an agricultural accident. In the second generation, people are frightened of Caleb’s appearance, which is described as being darker and more sinister than that of Aron.

In the Bible, Cain is the only brother who has offspring. In the novel, we learn that it is probably Charles, and not his brother who is the real father of the twins. And in the second generation, Aron is killed before he has a chance to produce any children and we are led to assume that Cal will go on to have children, possibly with the former sweetheart of his dead brother.

In the story of Cain and Abel, Cain reaches the Promised Land but Abel doesn’t. This suggests that there is hope for Caleb even after he has brought about the death of this brother. He receives the love of a good woman and is given the chance to make a life for himself. He is not doomed to follow in his mother’s footsteps; he is free to do good or evil.

Possibly the main moral message of the story is that we have a free will, and we are always able to make a choice, even if that choice is a tough one. Several of the characters in the book have to face difficult choices. There is bad in all of us, but if we set our minds to it we “may rule sin.”

Discussion activities

Before reading

1 Discuss: Put the students into small groups and have them ask and answer the following questions:
   a Do you know the stories of Adam and Eve and Cain and Abel. Can you recount them to the other students in your group?
   b Have you ever seen the movie “East of Eden”? Who was the star of the movie whose picture is featured on the front cover of the book? What do you know about his life?

Chapters 1–3, pages 1–16

After reading

2 Read carefully: Working in pairs, ask the students to re-read Chapter 1 and to note down two or three important pieces of information that it gives about the history of the Salinas Valley and the history of the Hamilton family. Then, working individually, ask them to note down some similarly key points about their own home town or region and/or their own grandparents. Ask them to write down full sentences. Ask for students to volunteer to read out their sentences. As a follow-up, you could ask them to expand their sentences into a longer text, written in the style of Chapter 1.

3 Pair work: Divide the class into two equally-sized groups. Ask group A to imagine the feelings and thoughts of Cyrus and ask group B to imagine the feelings and thoughts of Charles at the point in the story on page 9 when Adam tells his father that his son Charles thinks he doesn’t love him. Then put the students into pairs so that one person from group A works with one person in group B and have them act out a conversation between the two characters.

4 Write: Split the class into two equally-sized groups, A and B. Working individually, ask the students to write a letter. Students in group A write a letter from Charles to Adam. Students in group B write a letter from Adam to Charles. Before they start writing, elicit from the class a few ideas concerning what each of the brothers might want to say to the other in writing that they could not say face-to-face. As a follow up, get students to exchange letters with a student from the other group and to write a reply.

5 Discuss: Working individually, ask students to consider the following question: Why does Adam join the army? After a few minutes, put the students into small groups and ask them to come up with reasons why they think Adam re-enlists in the army for a further five years. Then write up some of their suggestions on the board and turn the activity into a whole-class discussion.

6 Role play: Ask the students to think about the conversation between Adam and his father when his father offers to have him posted to Washington so they can work together. Ask them to imagine how each of them feels. Then put students into pairs and ask them to act out the conversation between them.

Chapter 4, pages 16–28

Before reading

7 Discuss: At the beginning of Chapter 4, we are told that Cathy Ames “was born without kindness or a conscience.” Put the students into pairs and ask them to consider the following question: Can the way a person will grow up be determined from birth or is the environment responsible for a person’s behavior?

After reading

8 Read carefully: Still working in pairs, ask the students to re-read the chapter and note down the ways in which Cathy Ames is presented as being evil. Then ask them to discuss the following question: Do you agree that Cathy Ames is “an evil beauty”?

9 Role play: Divide the class into three equally-sized groups. Allocate one of the following characters to each of the groups: Cathy Ames, Adam Trask, and Charles Trask. Ask each of the groups to re-tell the events of Chapter 4 from the point of view of their character. Ask one student per group to present the account orally in front of the whole class.
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10 Guess: Working in small groups, ask the students to imagine what is going to happen next in the story. You might like them to consider the following questions: Will Adam and Cathy go to California? Will Adam find out that his wife and his brother have slept together? What will happen if he does?

Chapters 5–6, pages 28–47
11 Read carefully: They say that love is blind. Ask the students to re-read Chapter 5 to find examples of how Adam Trask is blinded by his love for Cathy. After five or ten minutes, conduct a feedback session and write students’ suggestions on the board.

12 Discuss: Following on from exercise 12, put students into pairs and ask them to discuss the following question: Do you have much sympathy for Adam, or do you think that he brings many of his problems upon himself?

13 Role play: Put students in pairs and have them act out the dialogue between Adam Trask and Horace Quinn on pages 38–39. Ask two or three of the pairs to act out the dialogue in front of the whole class.

14 Debate: Is honesty always the best policy? Divide the class into two equally-sized groups. Tell them that they are going to have a debate on the above question. Write the following statement on the board: This house believes that honesty is always the best policy. Regardless of their personal views, allocate to one half of the class the role of arguing in favor of the statement, and to the other half, allocate the role of arguing against the statement. Give the groups enough time to prepare their arguments and to elect two spokespersons. Then proceed with the debate, with the two speakers in favor going first. At the end of the debate have the class vote on the question.

15 Discuss: Put the students into small groups. Have them answer the following question: Does Kate feel any real affection for Faye? Back up your answers with evidence from Chapter 6. After ten or fifteen minutes, conduct a feedback session with the whole class.

Chapters 7–9, pages 47–62

After reading
16 Role play: Put the students into pairs. Ask each pair to prepare to play the role of either Lee or Samuel Hamilton. Tell them they are to role play a conversation between the two men in which they decide what needs to be done about Adam and the twins.

17 Discuss: Put the students into small groups. Ask them to discuss the following question: Is Samuel Hamilton justified in hitting Adam Trask, or was there a more peaceful way of making him see sense?

18 Role play: Put the students into groups of four and have them think about the following question: What are the problems faced by people when their parents become elderly and can no longer look after themselves? Write some of their ideas on the board. Then allocate the role of one of the Hamilton children to each of the students and have them act out a conversation during which they decide what needs to be done with their father, Samuel.

19 Discuss: At the end of Chapter 9, Samuel finally reveals the truth about Adam’s wife working in a whorehouse. Put the students into small groups and ask them to discuss the following questions: Was Samuel right to reveal the truth to Adam? If so, why didn’t he do so earlier? After ten or fifteen minutes, broaden the discussion out into a whole-class activity.

20 Guess: Samuel Hamilton says that by telling Adam Trask the truth about his wife he has forced him the chose to live or die. Put the students into pairs and have them imagine what Adam is going to do now that he knows the truth. Ask several pairs to tell the rest of the class what they think will happen and write up their ideas on the board.

21 Role play: Ask the students to think about how Adam Trask must feel after seeing Cathy/Kate after so many years. Does he still love her? Does he hate her? Ask them to consider how Lee, Adam’s faithful servant feels about Adam. Then put them into pairs and tell them to write a dialogue between Adam and Lee on Adam’s return from seeing his wife again. Get them to act out their dialogues in front of the class.

Chapters 10–12, pages 62–78

After reading
22 Role play: Tell the students to re-read Chapter 10, paying particular attention to the description of the characters of Aron and Cal, and of the relationship between them. Working in pairs, ask the students to imagine a conversation between Aron and Cal that takes place after they have gone to bed on page 67, and during which they discuss the day’s events—their fight, their meeting with the Bacons, their potential move to Salinas, and the fact their father told them their mother was buried on the other side of the country.

23 Discuss: Put the students into small groups and have them discuss the following question: Should Adam tell his sons the truth about their mother? Do you agree with Lee that the greatest danger is that when they do find out that he lied about her they will never believe anything he has ever said or done? After ten or fifteen minutes, get the different groups to share their ideas with the whole class.

24 Write: As a whole-class activity, ask the students to think of reasons why Adam wants to contact his brother Charles again. Put their suggestions on the board. Then put the students into pairs and have each pair draft the letter that Adam writes to his brother Charles at the end of Chapter 10. When they have finished, ask some of the pairs to read their letter out loud to the rest of the class.
25 Role play: Put the students into groups of four. Ask them to imagine that they are a group of friends of Adam Trask and that he has come to them for advice about what to do about the news of his brother’s will. He doesn’t know whether to tell his wife about the inheritance or not. Regardless of their actual opinions, allocate roles to the students so that two of them are in favor of telling her and two of them are against.

26 Debate: Put the students into pairs and ask them to consider their answers to the following question: Do you agree with the assertion on page 72 that “a man will have only one question left at the end of his life: was it good or evil?” After ten minutes or so, ask one of the pairs to volunteer their opinions and invite the rest of the group to react to it. Continue for as long as the group remains interested in the topic.

27 Role play: Ask the students to work in pairs. Tell them they are businessmen who have to choose between the two opportunities that are described in Chapter 12—either they can invest in the refrigeration project and hope to sell frozen vegetables to the people in the East, or they can invest in beans to sell to people in war-torn Europe. Regardless of their personal opinions, allocate roles so that half of the pairs are in favor of the refrigeration venture, and the other pairs are in favor of the bean venture. Give them ten to fifteen minutes to prepare their case. Tell them to bear in mind the risks involved in each venture and to remember that in 1915, refrigeration was a relatively new technology. After the preparation period, create groups of four by bringing the pairs together two pair together, and have them role play a meeting at which they reach a decision.

28 Research: On page 75, Will tells Adam: “People in the East aren’t used to vegetables in the winter. They wouldn’t buy them.” Ask the students to do some research into how the market for imported vegetables has developed over the years. How many traditionally out-of-season vegetables are currently available in the shops? How has this changed over the past few decades?

29 Pair work: Ask the students to work in pairs. They should imagine that they can interview Lee or Cathy Ames. Ask them to decide on ten questions that they would ask and how each of the characters might answer. Then ask the pairs to act out their interview in front of the rest of the class.

Chapters 13–15, pages 79–97

After reading

30 Discuss: Put the students into small groups. Write the names of the two brothers on the board—Cal and Aron. Ask the groups to decide which of the brothers they have more sympathy for and why. Give the groups ten or fifteen minutes to discuss the topic before broadening the activity out into a whole-class activity.

31 Role play: Put the students into pairs and get each pair to prepare a short monologue by one of the characters in the book. Give them plenty of time to practice the monologue and then ask them to perform it in front of the whole class. The rest of the class has to guess which character they are playing.

32 Pair work: Working in pairs, ask the students to think of reasons why each of the brothers decides not to tell their father of their activities in Chapter 13.

33 Debate: Making money from war. Divide the class into two equal halves. Then divide each half into smaller groups to make sure everybody can participate in the activity. Tell one half of the class to think of all the arguments they can to justify making money from war (the way Cal does). Tell the other half to think of as many arguments as they can to condemn making money from war (the way Adam does). After ten minutes or so, conduct a whole-class debate on the issue. Alternatively, have different pairs of students act out an argument between Adam and Cal.

34 Research: Tell the students to do some research into the First World War. This can be very basic stuff, such as: When did the War start and finish? How many countries were involved? Where did the fighting take place? How many casualties were suffered by the different countries involved, etc.?

35 Pair work: Put the students into pairs and ask them to imagine the conversation between Cal and Aron when Cal shows his brother where his mother is on page 88. Get them to practice it and then call on volunteers to perform their dialogue in front of the whole class.

36 Write: Tell the students to imagine how Aron Trask feels when he finds out the truth about his mother. Use the board to note down the students’ suggestions. After a few minutes, tell the students to imagine they are Aron and to write a letter to their father explaining their reasons for joining the army.

37 Write: Tell the students to imagine how Kate feels when she sees Aron with Cal in the scene on page 88. Use the board to note down the students’ suggestions. After a few minutes, tell the students to imagine they are Kate and to write a letter to Adam explaining her reasons for ending her own life.

38 Discuss: Put the students in small groups and ask them to consider the following questions: Who is your favorite character in the book and why? Who is your least favorite character in the book and why?