

報復的要素：「エデンの東」における 不可解なキャシーを読み解く

The Revenge Factor:
Solving the Mystery of Cathy Ames in *East of Eden*¹

John J. Han* and Aya Kubota**

要 旨 スタインベックが「エデンの東」を発表したのは1952年のことだが、作中のキャシー・エイムズは、2012年現在でも、アメリカ文学の読者によって最も嫌悪されるキャラクターとして5本の指に入っている。復讐心の強い偏執狂、自己破滅型の生き方に周囲の者を巻き込んでいく不可思議な力の持ち主といえ、白鯨のエイハブ船長もまたしかりなのだが、彼が自らの船の乗組員同様、我々読者をも力強く引きつけていくとは異なり、作中大きな負の力を発揮しているキャシーの方はといえば、彼女の自律的世界に読者を引き込むだけの魅力には乏しい様子である。

キャシーのモデルはスタインベックの二度目の妻グウィンであると見る世間の眼を欺くように、作家自身は、「彼女のような人間は、多く存在する」と書き、その性質にイヴやデリラのような女性に潜む普遍的な邪悪さを与えようとはしたものの、この登場人物の描き方は一貫性を欠いている。別れた妻という理解しきれなかった存在への憤りが意識的無意識的にスタインベックの筆を走らせ、キャシーを悪に駆り立てる動機はほとんど呈示されることなく、彼女は一方向から平板的に描かれている。そしてまた、作品の他の部分では全知であり読者が全幅の信頼を寄せる他ないナレーターにまで、「キャシーは、理解不能な存在である」と言わせてしまっている。キャシーは、スタインベックが血の通う人間として描ききれなかった女性である。作家たるもの、理解しきれないものを感情的に描くことはならない、という戒めの一例と言えよう。

Introduction

Considering John Steinbeck's extremely negative portrayal of Cathy Ames in *East of Eden* (1952), it is unsurprising that she ranks fourth on the list of the most hated characters in American literature ("Most"). In his review of the novel, Orville Prescott also predicted that Cathy, whom Steinbeck portrays as evil incarnate, would "sicken and [...] bore many" readers (21). Indeed, most readers of *East of Eden* (1952) find her utterly dislikable. Some scholars and critics have discussed her in light of the author's professed theme of *timshel*. On his deathbed, Adam Trask forgives his son Caleb, advising him to use free will in making a moral choice. Adam's last word is "*Timshel*," a Hebrew word used in Genesis 4:7. According to Steinbeck, the word should be translated as "*Thou mayest*," not "Thou shalt," which indicates God's promise, or "Do thou," which indicates God's command (Steinbeck, *East* 349, 691). By implication, evil can be overcome through an exercise of free will. Peter Lisca also agrees with Steinbeck that *East of Eden* expresses "a faith in every man's ability to choose between good and evil" (88).

However, in the case of Cathy, Steinbeck sometimes displays his inability—or his

* Missouri Baptist University ** Bunka Gakuen University

unwillingness—to understand her, which makes readers wonder whether he maintains total control of his character. As Louis Owens rightly notes, Steinbeck’s characterization of Cathy is inconsistent: initially, she is “a monster [...] predetermined to evil”; later, she appears as “a terribly warped child and woman using what she perceives to be her only weapon—her sexuality—to defend herself, often viciously, from what she perceives to be a domineering and threatening masculine world” (83).

One may blame Steinbeck for this lack of consistency. While recognizing an affinity between Melville’s Captain Ahab and Steinbeck’s Cathy Ames in their monomaniacal, self-destructive pursuit of their respective goals and in their manipulative use of other people, Warren French points that Steinbeck fails to provide plausible motives for her evil behavior. According to French, early in the novel Steinbeck defines Cathy as a monster with psychological and genetic problems, but then the novelist is unsure whether society shaped Cathy’s criminal tendencies: “[I]f *East of Eden* were to have any unity, Steinbeck should either have fixed upon one interpretation of her behavior and stuck to it or not have attempted any and simply explained non-teleologically what she *did* and how it affected other people” (153–54, 155).

French’s comment is fundamentally right, and most scholars and critics agree that the characterization of Cathy Ames is flawed. However, biographically and psychologically, Steinbeck’s extremely negative portrayal of Cathy is understandable considering that she is likely a projection of his anger and resentment toward his second wife, Gwyndolyn “Gwyn” Conger (ca. 1916–75). Louis Owens rightly raises the possibility of Cathy’s being “a product of Steinbeck’s pondering upon what he believed to be the cruelty of his second wife” (81). Steinbeck and Gwyn were married in 1943, and Gwyn left Steinbeck and filed for divorce in 1948. During their married life, Gwyn flirted with other men, had affairs, and lied to him saying she was pregnant although she was not. Their divorce proceedings were marked by bitterness and anger.

Steinbeck considered *East of Eden* the best novel he had ever written, a carefully crafted work (Webster 35). Many readers would disagree with him, yet the fact remains that he planned and executed the novel methodically, as is evidenced by the numerous letters later compiled as *Journal of a Novel: The East of Eden Letters*. Therefore, the characterization of Cathy Ames is not an accident, no matter how implausible and lifeless she comes across to the reader.

Readers could approach her from several different perspectives. One could analyze her from a feminist perspective—as someone whose voice is silenced in a male-chauvinistic society. One could also view Cathy as a hopeless psychopath. Warren French sees her as “a monomaniac” in her manipulative behavior, in her desire for power and revenge, and in her self-destruction (153). Similarly, Louis Owens states that Cathy “evolves” from “a monster” to “a psychologically convincing character tortured by a paranoia” that increasingly alienates her from humanity (83).

The difficulty with such readings is that Cathy Ames is a one-dimensional character whose actions do not always make sense to the reader, who is left with the baffling task of having to

understand exactly what goes on in her mind. She is a simple (flat) character who lacks depth and plausibility, yet she plays an important role in *East of Eden*. William Kennedy notes that cardboard characters are not always inferior to complex (round) characters: “Except in very special circumstances, stereotypes will appear as major characters only in fiction of a very low order. But the individualized simple character may be an imaginative accomplishment worthy to take a central position in fiction of the very highest order” (33). As an example of a simple yet relevant character, Kennedy mentions Melville’s Captain Ahab. Although Ahab is not lifelike, his “total commitment to an obsession” makes him a plausible character (33). Cathy Ames does not come across as relevant to the reader as Ahab, but, as a symbol of pure evil, she seems relevant to Steinbeck himself and he likely used her as a tool for personal revenge against Gwyn Conger. *Journal of a Novel* ends with Steinbeck’s letter to Pascal Covici, in which the novelist expected to hear the comment that he had made Cathy “too black” and that she is an unbelievable character (Steinbeck, *Journal* 181). Then, he claims that *East of Eden* is “my book,” the book is “about good and evil,” and he can portray his characters “any way I want” (181). The defensive tone in this letter indicates Steinbeck was confident about his book, including his characterization. Therefore, it would be safe to assume that the character of Cathy Ames was based on Steinbeck’s careful planning. She is a cardboard character, yet she was likely designed so intentionally. This is possibly the only reasonable response to the question of Cathy’s relevance in the novel.

In this essay, we will explore the way Steinbeck uses Cathy as a projection of his second wife by borrowing insights from Paul Ricour’s hermeneutic of suspicion, an interpretive tool inspired by the writings by Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud. Ricour advocates a new way of reading a text that depends on the search for the real lying behind the appearance. Like other critical methods, Ricour’s approach, more specifically his Freudian approach, cannot always provide a full understanding of a novel. However, in the case of *East of Eden*, it can produce some insight into Steinbeck’s motives for portraying Cathy in such a harsh manner. We will examine Cathy as an allegorical figure, Cathy as an enigmatically evil character, and finally Cathy as a reflection of Steinbeck’s second wife. This paper explains how Cathy Ames is too one-dimensional to be a plausible fictional character, yet the lack of depth in her character reveals much about Steinbeck’s own troubled marital life and his hatred towards Gwyn Conger.

Cathy Ames as an Allegorical Figure

Cathy is an irrevocably evil character, someone who has no capacity for good or love. In that sense, she is a symbol rather than a person of flesh and blood. Paul McCarthy considers Cathy an allegorical character although, he acknowledges, she becomes mature near the end of the novel: she “does not arise from a fictional society, but from the ‘subjective intensity’ of an idea, reflecting the ‘suggestion of allegory’ that Northrop Frye finds characteristic of the romance” (118–19).

Jeffrey Schultz and Luchen Li also define Cathy as “an elemental force of nature” (65).

As an allegorical character, Cathy appears as a satanic, inscrutably wicked creature. Her physical features recall a monster rather than a human being:

Her hair was gold and lovely; wide-set hazel eyes with upper lids that drooped made her look mysteriously sleepy.... Her mouth was well shaped and well lipped but abnormally small.... Her ears were very little, without lobes, and they pressed so close to her head that even with her hair combed up they made no silhouette. They were thin flaps sealed against her head.... Her breasts never developed very much. Before her puberty the nipples turned inward. (*East* 83)

In addition, her eyes are “as cold as glass,” her lips “[do] not move and her eyes did not flicker,” and she “[moistens] her lips with a little pointed tongue” (*East* 154, 155).

Cathy’s personality is equally negative. While independent-minded, she is sexually perverse, sneaky, manipulative, predatory, paranoid, distrustful of other people, unsympathetic, obsessed with money, murderous, and pessimistic. She believes there is only evil in this world and that all seemingly good people are actually evil. Keen on surviving, she relentlessly pursues her goals, displaying no conscience or a sense of guilt.

Clearly, there is an element of allegory in Cathy (and Steinbeck agrees that she is evil incarnate). The problem viewing Cathy as an allegorical character is that this view is in direct conflict with the overall theme of free choice in the novel. Jeffrey Schultz and Luchen Li consider her “one of the most radically wicked characters in American literature [who] appears bereft of any decency.” They add that, despite the lack of complexity in her characterization, she still “is needed to present the choices one must make in life: a choice between morality and immorality; between equity and inequity; between virtue and vice” (62). The question is how someone who has no capacity for human behavior—or someone to whom the authors do not give the capacity for good—can hope to improve her moral character.

Cathy as an Inscrutably Evil Character

As narrator, Steinbeck attempts to figure out Cathy Ames in vain. In Chapter 8, he draws on biological determinism (biologism) in explaining her monstrosity: “As a child may be born without an arm, so one may be born without kindness or the potential of conscience. [...] It is my belief that Cathy Ames was born with the tendencies, or lack of them, which drove and forces her all of her life” (*East* 82). In this sense, Cathy bears similarity to those whose conscience is “seared with a hot iron” (1 Tim. 4:2 NRSV).

Elsewhere, Steinbeck points to a possible psychological ailment. Cathy’s paranoia is reflected

when she recalls her childhood around the end of the novel:

She was a very small girl with a face as lovely and fresh as her son's face—a very small girl. Most of the time she knew she was smarter and prettier than anyone else. But now and then a lonely fear would fall upon her so that she seemed surrounded by a tree-tall forest of enemies. Then every thought and word and look was aimed to hurt her, and she had no place to run and no place to hide. And she would cry in panic because there was no escape and no sanctuary. (*East* 631)

Cathy is an evil woman not in a theological sense but in a “mental or psychic” sense (*East* 82). As someone who does not believe in the Christian concepts of sin and salvation, he writes, “There was a time when a girl like Cathy would have been called possessed by the devil. She would have been exorcized to cast out the devil spirit, and if after many trials that did not work, she would have been burned as a witch for the good of the community” (*East* 83).

Steinbeck also implies that Cathy might be genetically problematic:

I believe there are monsters born in the world to human parents. Some you can see, misshapen and horrible, with huge heads or tiny bodies.... And just as there are physical monsters, can there not be mental or psychic monsters born? The face and body may be perfect, but if a twisted gene or a malformed egg can produce physical monsters, may not the same process produce a malformed soul? (*East* 82)

After unsuccessful attempts to define Cathy as a monstrous creature, Steinbeck now hints at the inner monstrosity that exists inside every human being. According to him, all of us are potential Cathy Ameses:

It doesn't matter that Cathy was what I have called a monster. Perhaps we can't understand Cathy, but on the other hand we are capable of many things in all directions, of great virtues and great sins. And who in his mind has not probed the black water? Maybe we all have in us a secret pond where evil and ugly things germinate and grow strong. But this culture is fenced, and the swimming brood climbs up only to fall back... (*East* 152)

This is Steinbeck's attempt to elevate Cathy Ames to the level of such idiosyncratic yet relevant, universal fictional characters William Kennedy mentions in *How to Analyze Fiction*: Hamlet, Don Quixote, and Captain Ahab (27).

Because of the narrator's shifting attitudes toward Cathy Ames and his avowed lack of knowledge of her, Steinbeck loses credibility as an omniscient narrator. Cathy is bent on revenge, but it is not clear why she is so vengeful. There indicates a lack of causality (cause/effect), which is essential for a plausible plot in the novel. She grew up in a good family atmosphere. It appears that there was no child molestation (by her father, uncle, or some other relative), which is frequently the case when a child becomes promiscuous. In Chapter 17, Steinbeck gives up his attempts at understanding her, concluding that her mind is impenetrable:

When I said Cathy was a monster it seemed to me that it was so. Now I have bent close with a glass over the small print of her and reread the footnotes, and I wonder if it was true. The trouble is that since we cannot know what she wanted, we will never know whether or not she got it. If rather than running toward something, she ran away from something, we can't know whether she escaped. Who knows but that she tried to tell someone or everyone what she was like and could not, for lack of a common language. Her life may have been her language, formal, developed, indecipherable. It is easy to say she was bad, but there is little meaning unless we know why. (*East* 212)

As narrator, Steinbeck himself does not know why, so it is up to the reader to figure out what possibly made Steinbeck portray Cathy in such a negative light.

Cathy as Gwyn Conger

Paul Ricour's hermeneutic of suspicion is based partly on Freudian psychology. As we read *East of Eden* as "an expression of the author's psyche," we can approach this novel through "recovering repressed material from [the author's] subconscious" (Beckson and Benz 218). Freud's assumption is that all artists are neurotic and the artist "escapes many of the outward manifestations and results of neurosis such as madness or self-destruction by finding a pathway back to sanity and wholeness in the act of creating, his or her art" (Bressler 159). In this regard, David Wyatt's defense of Steinbeck's characterization of Cathy Ames is accurate. According to Wyatt, Cathy is a mixture of the biblical characters Eve, Tamar, Delilah, and Jezebel. As a fictional character, she is "realized through her actions rather than her motivations," and Steinbeck presents but does not explain her to the reader. Cathy is an incomprehensible being not only because of Steinbeck's artistic shortcomings but because Steinbeck gives her "an extraordinary freedom" and does not insist on understanding her. Wyatt defends Steinbeck by noting, "Cathy is not a failure of characterization but a critique of standard notions of it.... Cathy remains untranslatable, beyond the assurances of a common language" (xxv-xxvi). Whether Cathy is a successful character is a matter of dispute. Some could argue that she is a cardboard, unconvincing character; others could argue

that Steinbeck offers an honest portrayal of a woman who defies human understanding. Regardless, Cathy can be considered a fully realized character if we view her as a symbol of Gwyn Conger.

There are some striking similarities between Cathy and Steinbeck's second wife. In his letter to Pascal Covici, however, Steinbeck defends the characterization of Cathy Ames, saying that one can find many women like her:

By the way Cathy had a curious kind of skin—very strange kind of a glow. She is a fascinating and horrible person to me. But there are plenty like her. That I know.... Once you know that Cathy is a monster then nothing she does can be unusual in a monster. You can't go into the mind of a monster because what happens there is completely foreign and might be gibberish. It might only confuse because it would not be rational in an ordinary sense. Cathy has great power over people because she has simplified their weaknesses and has no feeling about their strengths and goodnesses. Don't you know people like that? I almost hesitate to put her down. But you have to believe her. She is just one of the gallery which will move through this book. Lord, what a book—it really moves. Her skin is oil-soaked of course. That is what gives it the pearly light. (*Journal 44*)

Steinbeck also expresses his fascination with Cathy, defending her inscrutability this way: "The one person you are not going to understand in this book is Cathy and that is because you don't know her. Cathy sometimes tells the truth but she is like my friend [...] You can believe her lies but when she tells the truth it is not credible" (*Journal 60*). Likewise, Gwyn was a deceptively attractive sincere woman who, according to Steinbeck, revealed her cruelty later on.

The rancorous nature of these passages invites readers to read beneath or behind the text.² The rocky relationship between Steinbeck and Gwyn is well documented. In the beginning, Steinbeck loved her, doted on her, and idolized her; Gwyn seemed to be happy with her life with the famous author. However, during the course of their four-year marriage, both sides developed resentment and bitterness towards each other. First of all, their dispositions and life goals appear to have been incompatible. Steinbeck wanted in Gwyn a stay-at-home wife who welcomes him home, and he truly believed that he had found such a woman, as evidenced by his 1942 letter, "I know now that Gwyn can run a hospitable house where I am welcome. That's why our houses [inhabited by him and his first wife] were so doleful. There was no hospitality in them. It is curious that I sit here and plan what is probably an impossible future" (qtd. in Benson 495). Unfortunately, his last sentence proved true because he was dreaming an impossible dream. Steinbeck was a dedicated artist who needed his own space for writing and for traveling extensively in search of writing material. Steinbeck also wanted a domestic wife. Gwyn turned out to be an "active, strong-willed woman" (Schultz and Li 274) who, as a dancer-singer, had her own professional ambitions. She also became upset that her

husband had to leave her alone for a long time during his professional trips. As Gwyn's resentment against her absentee husband continued to grow, she also devised the ways to torment him:

The situation worsened when, soon after they were married, Steinbeck agreed to travel to Europe as a war correspondent for the *New York Herald Tribune*, leaving his young wife alone for almost six months. From the beginning of his trip to England as a correspondent, Gwyn had opposed to it, but Steinbeck was steadfast with his plan. When he refused to listen, she accused him of choosing the war over her. To stop him, she claimed to be pregnant. So when Steinbeck left for England, he was filled with worry for his newly married wife. But to punish him, Gwyn would not write to him for weeks. However, the worst was that Gwyn was never pregnant as she had told her husband. (Schultz and Li 274)

It seems that Gwyn was interested only in her and her sons. As Professor Kiyoshi Nakayama points out, she was jealous of her husband's talent and popularity. (Nakayama 81-82) She was a dancer-musician, but people treated her just as an addition to the great writer. That is probably why Gwyn pushed Steinbeck to cancel a tour to London and made their stay in Europe shorter in 1946. During the tour, Steinbeck received the King Haakon Liberty Cross in Norway for *The Moon Is Down*, but Gwyn chose to stay in Paris without attending the ceremony. Apparently, she had no desire to be an accessory at her husband's ceremony.

In Chapter 45 of *East of Eden*, Cathy (now Kate) also feels young after a good sleep and looks into a mirror self-conceitedly. She has never let anyone touch her real self, and nobody can intrude upon her world. Kate, who has beautiful skin like Gwyn, loves her own face. Although many readers are puzzled about her love for Aron, she actually loves only herself and her other self, Aron. She dreams of taking him to New York and impressing people with their angelic appearances.

On his part, Steinbeck became devastated after his second marriage was failing:

[W]hile Steinbeck seemed to value her in part because of her dependence on him, his frequent absences during these years of the war lead her to develop a tougher fiber. Thus a collision course was set from the beginning between what he wanted and needed her to be and what she was and, out of circumstance, became. The potential for tragedy was even greater than in his first marriage because he invested so much more emotion in this one. (Benson 496)

The deteriorating relationship with Gwyn depressed Steinbeck. Later, Gwyn herself recollected that there were few shouting matches between them but that there was "a constant tension—irritability,

sulking, and retaliation. Each was trying to outdo the other in flirting with others, feeding with jealousy and the mutual antagonism that was building between them” (Jackson 596). In his 1949 letter to Pascal Covici, who suggested Steinbeck to reconcile with Gwyn, the novelist expressed his despair and pain this way:

As to the G. matter, I would prefer to discuss that with you when I see you. But I assure you that it seems utterly impossible that anything in this world could heal that. Three years and more of treachery, consistent and careful are not got over. And the treachery continues even now. I’m afraid I built a person who wasn’t there. I’ll tell you about that some day. Not wanting to know, I didn’t know. The anger and the evil have grown greater—not less.... Life seems to be flowing back into my veins—didn’t realize how hard hit I was but it was pretty bad[.] When one’s whole pattern of thinking proves untrue it seems to cause a seismic shock. (qtd. in Benson 620)

Further, Jackson J. Benson’s assessment of the relationship between Steinbeck and Gwyn sounds accurate:

Gwyn’s tragedy was that through his idolatry, in combination with her own self-centeredness, she became a kind of monster in John’s mind. He gave her the tools by which he could be manipulated or tortured, and he seemed to expect that she would use them. He denies her as a person and made her a character, and in order to become a person again, she apparently thought she had to destroy them. (621).

In Steinbeck’s idolization of and betrayal by Gwyn, she recalls Cathy Ames in *East of Eden*, who similarly manipulates and emotionally tortures men, such as Mr. Edwards (the whoremaster) and Adam Trask. After the separation from Gwyn, Steinbeck also found her malicious in her refusal to release any of his personal items from their house, including his personal correspondence, journals, electronic typewriter, phonograph records, and books: “He had come away with very little more than the clothes on his back” (Benson 622).

Considering the bitterness between the couple and what Steinbeck thought Gwyn’s bewildering behavior, it is more than likely that Steinbeck expresses his anger at his ex-wife through Cathy. He fails to give Cathy depth in the novel but talks about her like one would talk about someone extremely close to him. As we approach *East of Eden* from the perspective of the hermeneutics of suspicion, Cathy Ames is actually Steinbeck’s his ex-wife, seen through his eyes.

Conclusion

Divorce can have a devastating impact on those who separate from the ones they once loved. As psychologist Robert S. Weiss notes, “Virtually all husbands and wives after separation feel some bitterness or anger toward the other; they have some reason for feeling disappointed or hurt, and have some justification for blaming their former spouse” (98). The unusually harsh portrayal of Cathy Ames makes it likely that Steinbeck, either consciously or unconsciously, targets Gwyn in Cathy Ames. As noted earlier, Cathy lacks lifelike qualities, and Steinbeck’s inability, and his refusal, to analyze her actions and motives lead us to assume that she is a caricature of evil rather than a person.

One might be tempted to see Cathy as a victim of society. However, if she were a victim, exactly what victimizes her? The text is silent. She grew up in a relatively good family, but she kills her parents by cold-bloodedly burning down their house, causes James Grew’s suicide and then smiles about it, and shoots her loving husband. It is hard to imagine her being victimized by anyone; she commits evil only because she is evil.

Cathy’s behavioral pattern is both perplexing and vexing. However, she is a wooden character who cannot be portrayed in any other way. She is a serpent-like woman whose warped mind is impenetrable, whose designs are inexplicably wicked, and who betrays those who love her and try to help her. One could say that this is an aesthetic weakness Steinbeck should be blamed for. On the other hand, as a symbol of Gwyn, she is an accurate replica of the author’s second wife whom he truly loved and who betrayed his dedicated love. As an anti-hero of a realistic novel, Cathy lacks plausibility, yet as a symbol of a woman who tormented the author’s emotional life, she exudes plausibility.

Notes

- 1 This paper developed out of the presentation John J. Han delivered at the Wednesday Club of St. Louis, Missouri, U. S. A., on 2 March 2011. The co-authors wish to thank Dr. Clark Triplett, Vice President for Graduate Studies & Academic Program Review and Professor of Psychology & Sociology at Missouri Baptist University, for reading an earlier draft and giving us helpful comments and suggestions. We also thank Jessica Kostelic and Melinda Golubski who read the paper for organization and focus.
- 2 Paul Ricour calls it the act of “unmasking” the text.

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