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### Manichaeism in John Steinbeck's *East of Eden*

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<b>Keywords:</b> -Manichaeism -Eden - evil - good.	<b>Abstract</b> Theories from all fields of knowledge affected the English novel directly or indirectly. This genre has become a platform of all concepts created through the other fields of knowledge. Manichaeism is a religious movement which believed in the association between darkness and evil, light and good. It will be noticed that they deal with the everlasting struggle between good and evil. This doctrine of light-good and dark-evil was the major dogma in Manichaeism. Although Manichaeism died out, its belief in the fight between good and evil can be detected in mostly all English novels. This study inspects Manichaeism in John Steinbeck's <i>East of Eden</i> . In spite of being extinct, its doctrine highlights this principal theme in all literary works.
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المانوية في رواية شرق عدن لجون شتاينبك

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**المستخلص:** لقد اثرت نظريات جميع حقول المعرفة على الرواية الانكليزية بشكل مباشر او غير مباشر. ان هذا النوع الادبي اصبح منصة لكل المفاهيم التي قدمت من قبل حقول المعرفة الاخرى. المانوية هي حركة دينية امنت بربط الظلام مع الشر و النور مع الخير. عند اللقاء نظرة فاحصة للأعمال الادبية سيلاحظ انها تتعامل مع الفكرة الازلية للصراع بين قوى الخير والشر. ان الايمان بارتباط النور-الخير و الظلام-الشر هو عقيدة اساسية في الحركة المانوية. على الرغم من ان المانوية حركة قد اندثرت منذ زمن بعيد، الا ان عقيدتها بالصراع الازلي بين الخير والشر يمكن ان يتتبع تقريباً في جميع الروايات الانكليزية. تتناول هذه الدراسة وجود الافكار المانوية في رواية جون ستينبك *سرق عدن* حيث انها على الرغم من اندثارها لا زال الاعتقاد بالصراع بين الشر والخير الفكرة الرئيسية في كل الاعمال الادبية.

## 1.Introduction: Manichaeism

It is well known that many theories (psychological, religious, social, political, etc.) have affected literature. These variations give literature power and depth to depict the human concerns, needs, problems and to inspect the predicaments of life. Moreover, it reflects what is there inside the human psyche. One of these movements is Manichaeism. Its concern with the concept of the original sin of man represented by the power of darkness and the concept of goodness represented by light has a great appeal to men of literature.

Manichaeism (216–276 a. c.) was a major religious movement. It was founded by the Iranian Mani in the Sasanian Empire. He claimed that he had revelations. He had many followers who believed in him as their prophet. Manichaeism taught an elaborate dualistic cosmology describing the struggle between a good, spiritual world of light, and an evil, material world of darkness. Mani emphasises the belief in light as the source of good and darkness as the source of evil. Through an ongoing process that takes place in human history, light is gradually removed from the world of matter and returned to the world of light, where it came from. The doctrines of Manichaeism were based on local Mesopotamian religious movements and Gnosticism. In the beginning of Mani's claims to be a prophet, Manichaeism was rapidly flourishing. It was expanded far through the Aramaic-speaking regions. It made progress between

the third and seventh centuries. In fact, at its height it was one of the most widespread religions in the world. Its churches and scriptures existed as far east as China and as far west as the Roman Empire. It was the main rival to Christianity in the competition to replace heathenism. Manichaeism survived longer in the east than in the west. However, it seemed to have finally faded away after the 14th century in south China. While most of Manichaeism's original writings have been wasted, numerous translations and fragmentary texts have survived (Wikipedia.com). These texts show the spirit of this religion, its effect upon its followers, and provide a proof of how its emphasis of the power of struggle between evil and good is a recurring theme in the world literature.

Many critics searched about this extinct religion. They shed light upon its history, founder, rituals and its literature written by its followers. Jason David Beduhn collects materials and information from different sources and places about Manichaeism. He assumes that his task was not easy to talk about an extinct religion. But, he tries to collect material from different sources especially from Arab and Iranian writings. Beduhn highlights the spirit and beliefs of this movement:

In its scriptures, sermons, hymns, and other means of discourse, the Manichaean tradition invokes the myths of a primordial combat between good and evil, and summons members of the community to remember it. The consequence of this remembrance is a recognition of the presence the Living Self both within the individual, and throughout the material world. Whatever the details of the particular version of the myth, the events it describes produce a characterization of the condition of mixture of light in the form of the Living Self with darkness. (Beduhn:34).

Prods Oktor Skjærvø makes an elaborated study of Mani and his religion. He points out that Mani's problem was, like that of many other founders of religions, given a good god and how to explain the existence of evil (Skjærvø: 43). Also, Abolqasen Esmailpour makes a survey of the Manichaean myth, gnosis, and literature. He mentions that the founder of this religion focused upon the redemption of the human soul. Moreover, he observes that “ Mani always emphasized wisdom, books, knowledge and allegories in his books and preaching. However, the wisdom which Mani suggested was based on revelation and illumination” (Esmailpour: 8). In fact, if

a close study is done to some of the works of modern writers, some of the Manichaeic thoughts or beliefs will be detected in them. John Steinbeck, the American novelist, includes in his *East of Eden* the Manichaeic conviction of the indissoluble struggle between evil and good.

### ***1- Manichaeic Concepts within East of Eden***

John Steinbeck (1902–1968) is an outstanding American novelist. *Grapes of Wrath* is his most notable work. He wrote many other prominent works. He produced various literary forms like the short story, allegory and morality play; yet, his preferable approach is realistic. In fact, he often used religious concepts to universalize his work. For example, the Eden theme and the Cain and Abel story are central in his famous long novel *East of Eden*. Also, *The Grapes of Wrath* places reliance on a combination of Old and New Testament symbols (eNotes.com).

At the heart of *East of Eden* (1952) is the conflict between good and evil. Evil people fight against good people, kindness struggles against cruelty, a man's good intentions are constantly contradictory with his repulsive and depraved impulses. Steinbeck suggests that "this struggle between good and evil is what makes us human ...the triumph and redemption of the human soul consists of this struggle" (Litcharts.com).

Maria Roxana Tudoroiu points out that Steinbeck is aware that the struggle between good and evil is a recurring idea in the history of humankind. Fighting is there in man's life very long ago. Man has been fighting beasts from the very beginning of his existence and fighting himself. Therefore, "it is a never-ending battle with two choices: good or evil" (Tudoroiu: 191). The Manichaeic thinking is mostly based upon this theme. It depicts this conflict within the human soul to find a way to purify it from the ills of evil.

Robert E. Spiller suggests that *East of Eden* Steinbeck used the same primitive base for his study of evil, to symbolize the regenerative power of earth in allowing a choice between good and evil to each of the furthest descendants of the father of human beings. He adds "The daring mixtures of comedy and tragedy, myth and reality, that crowd these pages give them a richness of texture which can excuse their inequalities of feeling and form." (Spiller: 219).

*East of Eden* is likely famous for floating Steinbeck's personal strain of the Manichean worldview, in which there exists an eternal one human story: the everlasting blazing battle between good and evil. Elaborating on this idea, Steinbeck writes that it occurred to him that evil must be constantly overpowered, while good and virtue are immortal. He thinks vice has always a new fresh young face, while virtue is honoured as nothing else in the world is (word&dirt.com). Good constantly wins the battle whatever happens and no matter how long the struggle lasts.

Thus, *East of Eden* is a suitable work to study the implication of the Manichaeic thinking in modern fiction. It is not necessarily that Steinbeck was directly influenced by the Manichaeic dogma, but it is trustworthy to say that the concepts of this movement are included within the text.

## **2- Evil: the Source of Agony**

*East of Eden* is a net of interwoven plots. Basically, it is based on the biblical story of man's first sin on earth. It reflects within its folds the story of Adam's sons Cain and Able. There are texts literally taken from the bible. However, internal evil is a dominant theme. The major plot is Adam Trask's dramatic life. His half-brother Charles hurts him because of jealousy and his own nature. Once he is almost killed by his brother because he thinks that their father, Cyrus Trask, loves Adam more than him when he accepts Adam's gift for his birthday and neglects Charles'. However, his father sends Adam to serve in the army. After Cyrus' death, both brothers get fortune. They think their father has collected it illegally.

A young woman is found at the steps of the Trask's, wounded and badly beaten. Adam takes care of her till she recovered. Without consulting anyone, he decides to marry this woman, about whom he knows nothing.

Cathy Ames is portrayed as a monster, not a human being though she is very pretty and her baby face insinuates loveliness. When the narrator mentions her for the first time, he links her to monsters:

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 malformed egg can produce physical monsters, may not the same process produce a malformed soul\* (Steinbeck: 27).

The turning point of the novel starts when Cathy burns her parents to death at night while they are asleep. She puts evidence that she is killed by the person who burnt her parents. She runs away to be a prostitute. The pimp she works for falls in love with her. She seduces him for her own benefits. When he realizes that she plans to get rid of him, he takes her near her own village and beats her. Thinking that she is dead, he leaves her. She crawls to the door of the Trask's. Adam finds her at the steps of his house. Charles for unknown reasons hates her. He warns his brother when he tells him about his intention to marry her:

“Charles began to rave. ‘She’s no damned good, I tell you. she’s a whore.’

‘Charles!’

‘I tell you, she’s just a two-bit whore. I wouldn’t trust her with a bit piece\_ why, why that bitch, that slut’ (EOE.:120).

However, at the day of their marriage, she sleeps with Charles when he returns home drunk after giving opium to Adam in a glass of drink. This is the ugliest action a woman can do. Next day, the couple travel to Salinas Valley, California. She gives birth to twin boys. Shortly, she shoots Adam in his shoulders and runs away leaving the new born to the wounded miserable father. These actions cannot be explained unless one considers her as a deformed evil soul. Nonetheless, Adam's fault is that he has married to a woman whom he does not know anything about. He collapses when the Sheriff comes to investigate the accident of shooting:

“ ‘You don’t know her name, where she came from, where she went, and you can’t describe her. And you think I’m a fool’

Adam said, ‘She had a secret. I promised I wouldn’t ask her.’... And without warning Adam began to cry. His whole body shook, and his breath made little sounds. It was hopeless crying” (EOE.: 199).

Nevertheless, throughout the novel, Cathy represents angelic goodness for Adam and he cannot accept the fact that she betrays and kills him abandoning her twin infants. Steinbeck describes the dramatic effects of Adam’s illusions in vivid terms. He does not only neglect his twins Cal and Aron, but also his ranch putting a vague look upon his face dreaming of the return of the ideal *Cathy*. Moreover, he cannot imagine his Eden without this woman (Schwieger: 83).

Audaciously, Cathy changes her name to Kate and becomes a prostitute again in a brothel. She gradually poisons the madam of the place where she works. Madam Faye leaves her properties to Kate thinking that she loves her as her own mother. She killed her in an unimaginable way unnoticed by anyone:

Faye's skin had shrunk, clinging to jaw and skull, and her eyes were huge and vacant.... 'open up, Mother. This is a new kind of medicine. Now be brave, dear. This will taste bad'. [Kate] squeezed the fluid far back on Faye's tongue and held up her head so she could drink a little milk to take away the taste. (EOE.: 239).

Joseph R. McElrath discusses the essence of evil as an instinct in *East of Eden*. Adam's wife, he argues, is a symbol of absolute evil. He suggests that Cathy is a baby-faced brute, a sexual debased, a murderer and a caricature of maleficence, duplicity and depravity. He adds that Mr. Steinbeck himself calls her a monster in one of the many interludes, in which he talks to his readers using the method of first person narration. Hence, since she is a monster, she never seems to be a human being. Nonetheless, her horrible crimes and her vile career as the owner of a brothel seem completely out of keeping in a novel concerned with ethics and a character as this disturbs the balance of the narration. Cathy may win some readers especially at the end for *East of Eden* who otherwise would never be attracted by it. But, she is sure to disgust and to bother many others, those who care about the same issues of good and evil that John Steinbeck cares about ( McElrath: 384).

In fact, Cathy's evil seems to be innate and all-consuming because she displays murderous and sexually perverted inclinations from an early age. She is a debased figure of strangeness and destruction who kills her parents and attempts to abort her own unborn children. Cathy embraces evil willingly and commits it simply for its own sake. In fact, there is no evident reason behind her actions. She believes completely that there is only evil in the world and therefore surrenders herself to it fully. Moreover, she cannot understand the good in people and instead uses their trusting natures to achieve her own wolfish ends as she does with Adam. Notably, the readers never get any sense that she uses her evil acts to reach any sort of ultimate target or aim. Therefore, some critics assume that her character represents a weakness in Steinbeck's *East of Eden*. Even the narrator himself is somewhat confounded by Cathy, as he strives to understand her and revises his opinion of her throughout the

novel. Nonetheless, Cathy is a symbol of the human evil which will always be present in the world, and her loss of power over Adam and Cal strengthens the message of the novel that individuals have the choice to reject evil in favor of good (Tudoroiu :194).

At the first moment of meeting Cathy, the readers are completely engaged with her doings. She possesses that quality which has arisen the element of suspense: a vital element for any work to be successful and interesting to be read and studied. The reader is eager to know what her motives and next moves are.

Cathy loves darkness. When she gives birth to her twins, she orders Adam to close all the curtains to make it dark. Also, after owing the brothel she makes a dark private part inside her bedroom just to keep away from light, people, and morality. Meeting her son Cal for the first time, she leads him to her private part. It is a small room within her bedroom. She allows nobody to go to this cave-like room:

He followed her into a box of a room. It had no windows, no decorations of any kind. Its walls were painted a dark gray. A solid gray carpet covered the floor. The only furniture in the room was a huge chair puffed with gray silk cushions... and a floor-lamp deeply hooded. (EOE.: 435).

The struggle between evil and good is eternal. It is as old as man's existence on earth represented by the conflict between Adam's sons. *East of Eden* dramatizes this struggle in the society of Salinas especially in the Trask's family. Cathy inflects evil for all those around her in every turn for her own benefit. Cyrus, Adam's father commits evil when he steals money from the government. In the same way of evil, Charles surrenders to jealousy of his brother thinking that their father loves Adam more than him. From the next generation, Cal is one of the twins. He struggles with the evil inside himself to be good. But, he inherits the bad qualities from his mother (Králová: 53).

One of the ugliest shocks to Adam and the readers is Cathy's confession that Cal and Aron are not Adam's sons: they are Charles's sons. For the first time after shooting him, Adam visits her to tell her that Charles is dead and left a fortune divided between them. With all the meanness in her soul, she unfold the truth of the parentage of the twins:



"Listen, my darling, and remember. How many times did I let you come near enough to me to have children?'....

' You were hurt', he said. 'You were terribly hurt'. She smiled at him sweetly. 'I wasn't too hurt for your brother' " (EOE.: 309).

Of course poor Adam does not believe her claim. But, it is true. Therefore, when he thinks of it, he is convinced and becomes sure of the truth. Nonetheless, the twins are totally different. Cal (Caleb) is like Charles who always tries to hurt his brother. Aron grows up as a naïve, open-hearted, and religious. He loves Abra, a clever beautiful girl, while Caleb has a stormy adolescence. He is torn between desires for innocence and for adventures in evil. He thinks he inherited his desire for evil and being troublesome from his mother whom he encounters after many researches. The relationship of the twins recalls to the mind that relation between Adam and Charles. Cal believes that his father favours Aron. To hurt Adam and draw his attention to him, Caleb takes his brother to meet their mother. Extremely shocked discovering that his mother is alive and a prostitute, he gives up Abra and enlists in the army during World War I (Hart: 219-20). This causes Aron's death in war. Hearing the news of his son's death, Adam falls paralysed because of a heart stroke.

The narrator always describes the twins as different in soul and body. It is significant to notice the use of the words he used to describe them:

Everyone who saw the twins remarked on their difference one from the other and seemed puzzled that this should be so. Cal was growing up dark-skinned, dark-haired. He was quick and sure and secret.... No one liked Cal very much and yet everyone was touched with fear of him and through fear with respect...

Aron drew love from every side. He seemed shy and delicate. His pink-and-white skin, golden hair, and wide-set blue eyes caught attention (EOE.: 398).

A close inspection of their personalities, one finds that they look as representatives of light and darkness. Cal's evil instincts represent an internal dark force while Aron's sweet tempered spirit represents light. It is reflected in their faces and acts.

Claire Warnick argues that Cathy is the antithesis of motherhood. Rather than paying attention to her sons, she totally rejects them from the very moment they are created in her womb. Cathy's damaging influence is demonstrated in her complete absence from her sons' lives. This absence ultimately proves to be just as devastating as her

presence would be. It is her complete lack of interest in her sons that makes Cathy “the mother from Hell”. Both Cal and Aron are psychologically influenced by the absence of their mother, Aron most especially. His desire for a present mother is demonstrated throughout the novel, particularly in his demand to Abra to act like his mother ( Warnick: 26). How like a monster is this evil mother. She is completely a monstrous being whose evil is overwhelming. She is psychologically, physically and sexually an abuser.

Cathy causes too much troubles to those around her. When Caleb takes his brother to see her, she finally collapses. The boy is very audacious. She reveals for the first time signs of weakness. She commits suicide.

When she closed the door to the grey room the outside light was cut off and only the reading-lamp threw its cone on the table.... Gingerly she fished the chain out from her bodice, unscrewed the little tube, and shook the capsule into her hand. She smiled at it. 'Eat me,' she said and put the capsule in her mouth. She picked up the tea-cup. 'Drink me,' she said and swallowed the bitter cold tea (EOE.: 520).

Cathy poisons herself. But, before that she sends a letter to the Sharif telling him that Joe, her assistant was a criminal. Then, the last act she has done is also evil. Killing herself and doing the last harmful action to a man who has served her many years strengthening the assumption that she is born with a beastly deformed soul. Thus, the Manichaeian concept of evil is vividly presented through the character of Cathy Amis and the actions of the other characters.

### **3- Roots of Goodness**

Although, evil dominates the major and principal actions of *East of Eden*, there is much goodness especially among the minor characters, particularly the Hamilton family, who are portrayed lovingly and amusingly (Prescott:384). Hamilton is an experienced wise adviser to the lost and misguided Adam Trask. His sons and daughters love and respect him. In spite of having no financial bases for a prosperous life, they live in complete harmony with what they have got. Therefore, in many ways they present a sharp contrast with the major characters: Cathy and Adam.

In contrast to the good but stupid Adam these are two good and intelligent men. Samuel Hamilton, Adam's wise friend and neighbour and Lee his devoted servant.

They are two of the finest characterizations Steinbeck has ever achieved (Prescott: 383). Adam, withdrawn and detached after the shooting, has the help of Sam and of his educated servant Lee, a Chinaman, in raising the twins, Caleb and Aron, whom he had considered naming Cain and Abel. Hoping to awaken Adam from his numbness by confronting him with reality, Sam reveals Cathy's whereabouts as a madam of a whorehouse. Encouraged by Sam's words, Adam's decision to call on her is beneficial for his recovery from his traumatic situation. At last, he discovers her inhumanity and her belief in evil. Finally, he is no longer in love with her (Hart: 219). Therefore, Hamilton serves him greatly throughout his life as his friend. He dies surrounded by his family.

However, Caleb is guilt-ridden by the sequence of events he causes them and lead to unreasonable consequences. He wants forgiveness to be changed into a good man. Hence, Adam on his deathbed recalls Lee's Biblical interpretation of the story of the first sin by Cain, and "in forgiving Caleb he gives him the chance, like that given Cain, to make a moral choice and thus to create of his life what he will" (Hart: 219-20).

In order to analyse Caleb's motifs from the Manichaeism point of view, it should be noticed that Mani's teaching dealt with the origin of evil, addressing a theoretical part of the problem of evil by denying the almightiness of God and suggesting two opposite powers. Manichaeism taught a dualistic view of good and evil. A central idea in Manichaeism is that the mighty, though not omnipotent good power (God), was opposed by Satan. The struggle between these two powers is reflected upon humanity. Also, sinned people should be purified to be accepted as good persons (Wikipedia.com). Therefore, Cal is under the influence of the fight between good and evil inside his soul. He should be purified to be accepted as a good man. Thus, he repents his deeds asking his father for forgiveness.

Since the dawn of humanity, literature was the record of Man's deeds, thoughts, beliefs, and life. The most dominant theme over man and literature is the contention between evil and good. The issue of the victory of one of them over the other has been central forever and ever. Manichaeism asserted the eternity of the struggle of these two powers. It asserted also the assumption that Man's soul is the battlefield of the war between good and evil. In one way or another, Manichaeism has influenced many

writers. Some critics think that the belief in this battle is there in John Steinbeck's *East of Eden*. It deals with the internal and external ongoing fight between the two rivals.

## CONCLUSION

Novels are works which reflect life and give complete impressions, images, repercussions of the world: old and new. Therefore, no wonder if movements from all fields of knowledge affect the novelists' outlooks. Manichaeism is a bygone religious movement; yet it affects literature in some way or another since it focuses upon the eternal issue of the everlasting struggle between evil and good. In fact, this struggle has been essential for the continuity of the human life because it fuels the human interests, desires and love of eternal existence even after life.

John Steinbeck's *East of Eden* handles the concept of evil from different dimensions. Steinbeck asserts that some people are born spiritually deformed as beasts, like Cathy Ames who over-exceeded all the levels of ugly deeds. She is a criminal, a manipulator, a killer and a thief. She is eccentric who disowns her new born children. She is unredeemable. No change happens to her attitudes towards people because she fully believes that there is no goodness inside people. For her, people are bad evil creatures and they deserve what she has done to them.

In Cal's case, he inherits evil from his mother. He cannot conceive why he acts brutishly. He wants changing himself into a better person. In fact, his internal struggle reflects the Manichaeian belief in the human soul as a battlefield of the eternal hassle between good and evil.

Exploring that the Manichaeian doctrine emphasises the connection between literature and its beliefs. Novelists are still interested in the theme of evil against good. Nonetheless, they deal with it in different ways. Wherever there is exploration of the subject, Manichaeian views can be applied for more comprehension of the literary work. Although, it is a extinct religious movement, it contributes to the overview of man's original sin and the constant struggle between two mighty powers which control man's existence in life.

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