Out of Eden: Dualism, Conformity, and Inheritance in Steinbeck’s “Big Book”

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John Steinbeck wrote in *East of Eden*, “I believe that there is one story in the world, and only one” (411). The claim that only a limited number of narratives exists was hardly original — in 1913, for example, Willa Cather wrote that “there are only two or three human stories, and they go on repeating themselves as fiercely as if they had never happened before” (60-61) — but neither was it widely accepted. Even when Steinbeck published *East of Eden*, arguing for a single story of humanity would have seemed exaggerated; today, it seems entirely naïve. This uneasiness regarding universal narratives has led critics to dismiss the novel as overly simple and reductively allegorical. Even Joseph Wood Krutch, who gave the novel a (rare) positive review after its initial publication, complains of “the tendency of the characters to turn suddenly at certain moments into obviously symbolic figures as abstract almost as the dramatis personae in a morality play” (394). Many subsequent critics followed his lead. Conversely, other critics take issue with the novel because it is not simple enough. Howard Levant, for example, has apparently little issue with allegory itself, but charges Steinbeck with trying to force too much into the allegorical framework of *East of Eden*, resulting in a “strangely unblended novel, ... a major summation of the various stresses between structure and materials which abound in Steinbeck’s novels” (234). Either way, Steinbeck’s particular use of allegory has caused much critical resistance.

According to some scholars, however, much of the critical backlash against Steinbeck’s use of allegory stems from a misunderstanding of his form and purpose. John Clark Pratt, for example, anticipates recent trends in allegory studies when he observes in his 1970 *John Steinbeck: A Critical Essay* that “applying the term ‘allegory’ in a traditional sense to Steinbeck’s works does not usually succeed” (13). Although allegory has largely been out of favor with literary critics since Romanticism, contemporary critics such as Deborah Madsen, Sayre Greenfield, and Jean Ellen Petrolle have challenged traditional approaches to allegory and argued for the place of allegory studies in literature. Like Pratt, they recognize allegory’s
capacity to strictly limit potential interpretations, resulting in unsatisfactory experiences for readers and critics. In their view, allegory too often forces readers into predetermined patterns of reading and restricts them from bringing their individual experiences, knowledge, and unique interpretive strategies to the text. As Lawrence William Jones says of this particular type of allegorical reading, “inevitably, it forces the reader to a hasty conclusion rather than inviting his meditation upon and intellectual participation in the ideological base of the story” (58).

These critics argue for a more complex understanding of modern allegory, and the approach to allegory used here draws upon their work to challenge the notion of proper and self-evident correspondences between text and referents. Certainly the allegorical connections between *East of Eden* and the Cain-Abel narrative cannot be overlooked—Steinbeck himself wrote that the novel’s “framework roots from that powerful, profound and perplexing story in Genesis of Cain and Abel” (*JN* 90)—but to focus exclusively on those connections or insist on simple, superficial correspondences misses the point. Describing Steinbeck’s method as syncretic allegory, Pratt notes that Steinbeck discards “the traditional one-to-one ratio” while trying to “utilize and retain all the suggestive power inherent in allegory” (*John Steinbeck* 13).³ The novel has roots in Genesis, but its allegory is organic and adaptable. Those who understand Steinbeck’s method realize that what some see as his “major aesthetic problem, the [lack of] harmonious unity of structure and materials” (Levant 235), is not his problem but his purpose.

One of the most promising reinterpretations of allegory for *East of Eden*, then, challenges the notion of one-to-one correspondences between the text and its referents and argues against any final or definitive allegorical reading. This approach does not dismiss allegory; it retains what Madsen calls a “systematic analogy with some external discourse” (3). It does, however, expand the number of potential bodies of referents and allow for shifting interpretations depending on when and how readers encounter the text. Furthermore, this type of allegorical reading facilitates a reconsideration of texts’ referents themselves. Instead of seeking to equate a particular allegorical element with a stable referent, readers may consider how both text and referent change through the