

East of Eden
Quotes to Ponder

When a child first catches adults out—when it first walks into his grave little head that adults do not have divine intelligence, that their judgments are not always wise, their thinking true, their sentences just—his world falls into panic desolation. The gods are fallen and all safety gone.... And the child's world is never quite whole again. It is an aching kind of growing.
(19-20)

I'll have you know that a soldier is the most holy of all humans because he is the most tested—most tested of all. I'll try to tell you. Look now—in all of history men have been taught that killing of men is an evil thing not to be countenanced. Any man who kills must be destroyed because this is a great sin, maybe the worst sin we know. And then we take a soldier and put murder in his hands and we say to him, "Use it well, use it wisely." We put no checks on him. Go out and kill as many of a certain kind or classification of your brothers as you can. And we will reward you for it because it is a violation of your early training.
(24)

...nearly all men are afraid, and they don't even know what causes their fear—shadows, perplexities, dangers without names or numbers, fear of a faceless death. But if you can bring yourself to face not shadows but real death, then you need never be afraid again, at least not in the same way you were before. Then you will be a man set apart from other men, safe where other men may cry in terror. This is the great reward.
(26)

Is it true that when you love a woman you are never sure—never sure of her because you aren't sure of yourself?
(69)

I believe there are monsters born in the world to human parents.... They are accidents and no one's fault, as used to be thought. Once they were considered the visible punishments for concealed sins. 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 egg? ...to a monster, the norm must seem monstrous since everyone is normal to himself.... To a man born without conscience, a soul-stricken man must seem ridiculous. To a criminal, honesty is foolish.
(71)

Sometimes a kind of glory lights up the mind of a man. It happens to nearly everyone. You can feel it growing or preparing like a fuse burning toward dynamite.... A man may have lived all of his life in the gray, and the land and trees of him dark and somber. The events, the important ones, may have trooped by faceless and pale. And then—the glory—so that a cricket song sweetens his ears, the smell of the earth rises chanting to his nose, and dappling light under a tree blesses his eyes. Then a man pours outward, a torrent of him, and yet he is not diminished. And I guess a man's importance in the world can be measured by the quantity and number of his glories.
(130)

In our time mass or collective production has entered our economics, our politics, and even our religion, so that some nations have substituted the idea collective for the idea God. This in my time is the danger. There is great tension in the world, tension toward a breaking point, and men are unhappy and confused.

At such a time it seems natural and good to me to ask myself these questions. What do I believe in? What must I fight for and what must I fight against?

Our species is the only creative species, and it has only one creative instrument, the individual mind and spirit of a man. Nothing was ever created by two men. There are no good collaborations, whether in music, in art, in poetry, in mathematics, in philosophy. Once the miracle of creation has taken place, the group can build and extend it, but the group never invents anything. The preciousness lies in the lonely mind of a man.

And now the forces marshaled around the concept of the group have declared a war of extermination on that preciousness, the mind of man.... It is a sad suicidal course our species seems to have taken.

And this I believe: that the free, exploring mind of the individual human is the most valuable thing in the world. And this I would fight for: the freedom of the mind to take any direction it wishes, undirected. And this I must fight against: any idea, religion, or government which limits or destroys the individual.... If the glory can be killed, we are lost.

(131)

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. Might it not be that in the dark pools of some men the evil grows strong enough to wriggle over the fence and swim free? Would not such a man be our monster, and are we not related to him in our hidden water? It would be absurd if we did not understand both angels and devils, since we invented them.

(132)

Perhaps Adam did not see Cathy at all, so lighted was she by his eyes. Burned in his mind was an image of beauty and tenderness, a sweet and holy girl, precious beyond thinking, clean and loving, and that image was Cathy to her husband, and nothing Cathy did or said could warp Adam's Cathy.

(132)

Question: What makes us run when people fall too much in love with us? Why would this be repellent to someone?

Samuel said satirically, "It's my duty to take this thing of yours and kick it in the face, then raise it up and spread slime on it thick enough to blot out its dangerous light.... I should hold it up to you muck-covered and show you its dirt and danger. I should warn you to look closer until you can see how ugly it really is. I should ask you to think of inconstancy and give you examples. I should give you Othello's handkerchief. Oh, I know I should. And I should straighten you out of your tangled thoughts, show you that the impulse is gray as lead and rotten as a dead cow in wet weather. If I did my duty well, I could give you back your bad old life and feel good about it, and welcome you back to the musty membership in the lodge.... It is the duty of a friend. I had a friend who did the duty once for me. But I'm a false friend.... It's a lovely thing, preserve it, and glory in it. And I'll dig your wells...."

(169)

“Go through the motions, Adam.”

“What motions?”

“Act out being alive, like a play. And after a while, a long while, it will be true.”

(213)

The Cain and Abel story

(265-270)

...a great and lasting story is about everyone or it will not last. The strange and foreign is not interesting—only the deeply personal and familiar.

(268)

The greatest terror a child can have is that he is not loved, and rejection is the hell he fears.... And with rejection comes anger, and with anger some kind of crime in revenge for the rejection, and with the crime guilt—and there is the story of mankind...if rejection could be amputated, the human would not be what he is.

(268)

Timshel

(299-302)

...I feel that a man is a very important thing—maybe more important than a star. This is not theology. I have no bent toward gods. But I have 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.”

(302)

I do not believe all men are destroyed. I can name you a dozen who were not, and they are the ones the world lives by. It is true of the spirit as it is true of battles—only the winners are remembered. Surely most men are destroyed, but there are others who like pillars of fire guide frightened men through the darkness. “Thou mayest, Thou mayest!” What glory! It is true that we are weak and sick and quarrelsome, but if that is all we ever were, we would, millenniums ago, have disappeared from the face of the earth. A few remnants of fossilized jawbone, some broken teeth in strata of limestone, would be the only mark man would have left of his existence in the world. But the choice, Lee, the choice of winning! I had never understood it or accepted it before.

(307)

“Dear Lord,” he said. “let me be like Aron. Don’t make me mean. I don’t want to be. If you will let everybody like me, why, I’ll give you anything in the world, and if I haven’t got it, why, I’ll go for to get it. I don’t want to be mean. I don’t want to be lonely. For Jesus’ sake, Amen.” Slow warm tears were running down his cheeks.

A child may ask, “What is the world’s story about?” And a grown man or woman may wonder, “What way will the world go? How does it end and, while we’re at it, what’s the story about?”

I believe that there is one story in the world, and only one, that has frightened and inspired us, so that we live in a Pearl White serial of continuing thought and wonder. 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. Virtue and vice were warp and woof of our first consciousness, and they will be the fabric of our last, and this despite any changes we may impose on field and river and mountain, on economy and manners. There is not other story. A man, after he has brushed off the dust and chips of his life, will have left only the hard, clean questions: Was it good or was it evil? Have I done well—or ill?
(411)

“Who he [Croesus the king] asked, “is the luckiest person in the world?”... And when Solon did not mention him, Croesus was forced to say, “Do you not consider me lucky?”

Solon did not hesitate in his answer. “How can I tell?” he said. “You aren’t dead yet.”

And this answer must have haunted Croesus dismally as his luck disappeared, and his wealth and his kingdom. And as he was being burned on a tall fire, he may have thought of it and perhaps wished he had not asked or had not been answered.
(411-12)

In uncertainty I am certain that underneath their topmost layers of frailty men want to be good and want to be loved. Indeed, most of vices are attempted shortcuts to love. When a man comes to die, no matter what his talents and influences and genius, if he dies unloved his life must be a failure to him and his dying a cold horror. It seems to me that if you or I must choose between two courses of thought or action, we should remember our dying and try so to live that our death brings no pleasure to the world.
(413)

And as a few strokes on the nose will make a puppy head shy, so a few rebuffs will make a boy shy all over. But whereas a puppy will cringe away or roll on its back, groveling, a little boy may cover his shyness with nonchalance, with bravado, or with secrecy. And once a boy has suffered rejection, he will find rejection even where it does not exist—or, worse, will draw it forth from people simply by expecting it.
(440)

Don’t you dare take the lazy way. It’s too easy to excuse yourself because of your ancestry.... Whatever you do, it will be you who do it—not your mother.
(445)

He wanted to serve his father, to give him some great gift, to perform some huge good task in honor of his father.
(453)

He doesn’t think about me. He’s made someone up, and it’s like he put my skin on her. I’m not like that—not like the made-up one.... He doesn’t know me. He doesn’t even want to know me. He wants that—white—ghost.
(493)

And it is true that there were some people that, when their sorrow was beginning to lose its savor, gently edged it toward pride and felt increasingly important because of their loss. Some of these even made a good thing of it after the war was over. That is only natural, just as it is natural for a man whose life function is the making of money to make money out of a war. No one blamed a man for that, but it was expected that he should invest a part of his loot in war bonds. We thought we invented all of it in Salinas, even the sorrow.

(516)

Abra me made his immaculate dream and, having created her, fell in love with her. At night when his studying was over he went to his nightly letter to her as one goes to a scented bath. And as Abra became more radiant, more pure and beautiful, Aron took an increasing joy in a concept of his own wickedness. In a frenzy he poured joyous abjectness on paper to send to her, and he went to bed purified, as a man is after sexual love. He set down every evil thought he had and renounced it. The results were love letters that dripped with longing and by their high tone made Abra very uneasy. She could not know that Aron's sexuality had taken a not unusual channel.

(521)

"Why am I giving the money to my father? Is it for his good? No. It's for my good. Will Hamilton said it—I'm trying to buy him. There's not one decent thing about it. There's not one decent thing about me. I sit here wallowing in jealousy of my brother. Why not call things by their names?"... Cal's mind careened in anger at himself and in pity for himself. And then a new voice came into it, saying coolly and with contempt, "If you're being honest—why not say you are enjoying this beating you're giving yourself? That would be the truth. Why not be just what you are and do just what you do?"

(535-6)

I would have been so happy if you could have given me—well, what your brother has—pride in the thing he's doing, gladness in his progress. Money, even clean money, doesn't stack up with that.... If you want to give me a present—give me a good life. That would be something I could value.

(541)

"Do you know where your brother is?"

"No, I don't," said Cal.

"Weren't you with him at all?"

"No."

"He hasn't been home for two nights. Where is he?"

"How do I know?" said Cal. "Am I supposed to look after him?"

(562)

These were my stupidities: I thought the good are destroyed while the evil survive and prosper. I thought that once an angry and disgusted God poured molten fire from a crucible to destroy or to purify his little handiwork of mud. I thought I had inherited both the scars of the fire and the impurities which made the fire necessary—all inherited, I thought. All inherited.... Maybe you'll come to know that every man in every generation is refired.

(598)