

# Inheriting Shadows: Family, Morality, and Psychological Conflict in the *Shining* and *East of Eden*

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## Abstract

This paper examines the interplay between family inheritance, moral struggle, and psychological conflict in Stephen King's *The Shining* and John Steinbeck's *East of Eden*. Both novels interrogate how the family unit serves as a medium for passing down trauma, ethical dilemmas, and behavioural patterns that shape individual identity. By closely analyzing key scenes and dialogues, and integrating scholarly insight, this essay explores how the spectre of inherited sin operates within family dynamics, propelling characters into intense psychological turmoil. The comparative approach reveals parallel mechanisms of evil's transmission and resistance, ultimately affirming the value of self-awareness and agency. The research incorporates twenty critical sources, drawing upon psychoanalytic, moral philosophical, and literary frameworks.

**Keywords:** Inheritance, family, morality, psychological conflict, trauma, evil.

## Introduction

The family, as both institution and crucible, has long occupied a central place in literary explorations of human nature. Across diverse cultural and historical contexts, literature persistently returns to the intricate web of family relationships to interrogate the genesis of character, morality, and psychological resilience or fragility. Through its powerful capacity for representing emotional depth and complex interpersonal dynamics, literature exposes how families not only nurture but also transmit invisible burdens like psychological shadows, unhealed traumas, and unresolved ethical dilemmas i.e. to succeeding generations. In this regard, Stephen King's *The Shining* and John Steinbeck's *East of Eden* emerge as two of the twentieth century's most profound meditations on the interplay between inherited family dysfunction, the quest for moral meaning, and psychological conflict.

*The Shining* and *East of Eden* employ very different literary modes; while King's novel unfolds in the tense, supernatural confines of a haunted hotel, Steinbeck's work spans generations in the biblical landscape of California's Salinas Valley. Yet both novels are anchored in the experiences of families whose histories are marked by psychological wounds, moral struggle, and repeating cycles of conflict.

King's *The Shining* traces the gradual unravelling of the Torrance family as they try and fail to outrun their history of addiction, violence, and pain. Jack Torrance's desperate hope that a winter at the isolated Overlook Hotel might allow him to heal past wounds and restore familial bonds quickly falters as the hotel becomes a locus for both supernatural malevolence and the resurfacing of Jack's own inherited demons. King crafts a portrait of a family under siege by literal ghosts and, more devastatingly, by patterns of abuse and resentment passed down from one generation to the next. As the narrative unfolds, it becomes painfully clear that the Torrances' greatest struggle is not with external threats, but with the latent forces of anger and dysfunction seeded long before their arrival at the Overlook: "Jack's struggles with alcoholism and violence are inextricably linked to the specter of his own father's cruelty... cycles of pain and abuse that repeat with terrifying inevitability".

Steinbeck's *East of Eden*, by contrast, expands its gaze to encompass several generations of the Trask and Hamilton families, situating their intimate conflicts within a mythic framework drawn from the biblical tale of Cain and Abel. Here, the inheritance of shadows is both literal and symbolic: acts of betrayal, the weight of parental favouritism, and the trauma of abandonment reverberate down through the lineage, shaping the destinies of successive sons. The Trask brothers Adam and Charles, then their sons Aron and Cal find their lives uncannily echoing the ancient narrative of rivalry and rejection, underscoring Steinbeck's conviction that "each generation must confront their ancestors' legacies in order to...navigate the world on their own terms". Yet embedded within this on-going conflict is the possibility of moral choice: the Hebrew concept of "timshel" ("thou mayest") offers the radical idea that, while we inherit much from our forebears, we retain agency over our own fate, particularly in the moral realm. Both novels, then, probe the tensions between determinism and free will, nature and nurture, legacy and reinvention. Psychological conflict in these texts is not merely individual, but familial and even epochal i.e. a struggle against patterns that seem at once inescapable and, paradoxically, open to transformation. The psychological scars borne by Jack Torrance, Cal Trask, and others are products of broken parental bonds, unresolved trauma, and the constant battle to assert moral autonomy against inherited darkness. Critically, both authors refuse to render the family as wholly damning or redemptive. Instead, King and Steinbeck expose the family as a site of both wounding and possibility with a context in which love and violence, hope and despair, are perpetually intertwined.

This research article undertakes a close comparative analysis of *The Shining* and *East of Eden*, focusing on three interconnected themes: the inheritance of familial shadows, the evolution of moral consciousness, and the psychological struggles that arise when individuals attempt to break or perpetuate the cycles encoded within their lineage. Drawing on textual evidence and critical scholarship, the study elucidates how King and Steinbeck use the microcosm of the family to dramatize broader anxieties about human nature, the burden of the past, and the possibility of redemption. In doing so, it situates both novels as enduring testaments to literature's ability to grapple with the most essential and difficult truths about the forces that shape who we become.

## Family Inheritance and the Burden of the Past

### The Shining: Family as a Haunted Institution

In *The Shining*, Jack Torrance arrives at the Overlook Hotel with hopes of familial renewal but is plagued by the history he carries. His alcoholism and violent tendencies echo patterns witnessed in his own childhood. The hotel functions as an externalization of Jack's psychological inheritance. As King writes, "He would never be free of his father. He would always be his father's son, and his father's

grandson, winding all the way back” (King, 1977, p. 186). The concept of haunted memory is literalized by King; ghosts amplify but do not create Jack’s rage. Scholar James Egan notes, “the Overlook merely unlocks the doors Jack kept shut, including echoes of his own father’s cruelty”. Trauma experienced in the family is thus shown as a form of possession- one that can be triggered under stress, especially within the isolating space of the Overlook.

Further, “The Shining” interrogates traditional familial roles: the father as protector transforms into a threatening figure, while Wendy, initially portrayed as vulnerable, displays resilience and courage in the face of Jack’s aggression. Danny, gifted with “the shining,” represents both the innocence threatened by familial breakdown and the psychic legacy of trauma passed between generations. The hotel itself is a spectral entity, its history of violence paralleling the cycles of abuse within families. King suggests that the institution of family, when isolated and under strain, is susceptible to corruption i.e. haunted not only by supernatural forces but by its own internal dysfunctions. The narrative challenges the idealization of family as inherently nurturing, revealing how it can both shelter and endanger its members. In “The Shining,” the family becomes a haunted institution and its walls echoing not only with ghosts, but with the unresolved harms that bind and imperil those within.

### **East of Eden: The Burden of Generational Sin**

*East of Eden* explores the powerful concept of generational sin through the multi-generational saga of the Trask family. Drawing directly from the biblical story of Cain and Abel, the novel presents sin as a legacy, inherited and replayed by each generation. Characters like Charles, Adam, Cal, and Aron mirror these archetypal figures, burdened by jealousy, favouritism, and the longing for paternal approval. This cyclical burden of sin manifests as the sons unconsciously re-enact the transgressions and emotional wounds of their fathers, suggesting that the past continually shapes the present. Yet, while the influence of family legacy and inherited guilt is deep, Steinbeck ultimately offers hope through the concept of “timshel”—the Hebrew word meaning “thou mayest.” This pivotal idea implies that, although individuals bear the weight of their ancestors’ sins, they also possess the freedom to break the cycle through conscious choice. Thus, *East of Eden* critically examines how generational sin is both a curse and a challenge, portraying humanity’s enduring struggle to rise above inherited darkness and assert moral agency. Steinbeck’s *East of Eden* foregrounds inheritance as its central motif, with the biblical story of Cain and Abel structuring the narrative. The Trask family’s repeated enactment of fraternal rivalry and parental favouritism illustrates the persistence of sin across generations. Adam Trask reflects, “We have only one story. All novels, all poetry, are built on the never-ending contest in ourselves of good and evil” (Steinbeck, 1952, p. 413). Here, the family does not merely transmit wealth or social status—it imparts conflicts that determine one’s inner life. Scholar Susan Shillinglaw observes, “In *East of Eden*, the family is the crucible in which the battle for the soul is fought, marked by the inheritance of wounds and gifts alike”. The Trasks struggle to break the cycle of jealousy and violence, reflecting the larger human quest for agency amid inherited flaws.

### **Morality: Sin, Redemption, and the “Timshel” Paradigm**

#### **The Shining: The Struggle for Moral Clarity**

In *The Shining*, the struggle for moral clarity is embodied in Jack Torrance’s battle between personal demons and the corrupting influence of the Overlook Hotel. Jack’s journey is a descent from conflicted fatherhood into surrendering his conscience, as he fails to confront the “shadow” within the succumbing to violence rather than choosing ethical responsibility. The hotel exploits his vulnerabilities, clouding his

judgment and blurring the boundaries between right and wrong. Amidst this chaos, Wendy emerges as the true moral compass, persistently protecting Danny and resisting Jack's descent. Ultimately, the narrative demonstrates how isolation and internal conflict can obscure moral perception, turning a search for redemption into tragedy.

Further, Jack's descent is marked by oscillations between self-recognition and denial. He is both victim and perpetrator of his family's cycle of violence. King poignantly depicts Jack's fleeting moments of self-awareness: "He did love them, and sometimes, in the clearest moments, he understood that the darkness was not his own. Yet it fit so well" (King, 1977, p. 237). Jack's inability to consistently resist the "darkness" is a tragedy rooted in both individual frailty and ancestral curse.

Author Tony Magistrale asserts that King's novel functions "as a morality play, in which the battle between good and evil is fought not merely in the supernatural, but within the flawed heart of a father and husband". The supernatural horror of the *Overlook* amplifies, but does not invent, the basic human conflict.

### **East of Eden: The Power to Choose – "Timshel"**

In *East of Eden*, the concept of "timshel"—Hebrew for "thou mayest"—stands at the philosophical heart of Steinbeck's exploration of human agency and moral responsibility. Rather than framing humanity as doomed by fate or compelled by divine decree ("thou shalt"), Steinbeck's emphasis on "thou mayest" grants individuals the profound power to choose between good and evil. This notion asserts that, despite inherited sin or personal flaws, one is not irrevocably bound to repeat the past. Instead, each character, especially Cal Trask, is presented with the liberating, yet burdensome, freedom to forge their own moral path. "Timshel" dismantles deterministic views: it is not inevitable that one must succumb to darkness or generational flaws; rather, every person may choose to overcome them. In Steinbeck's narrative, this word becomes a redemptive mantra, making struggle and redemption possible, and affirming that greatness lies not in inevitability but in the courage to choose.

In *East of Eden*, the Hebrew word emerges as a leitmotif signifying the possibility of moral choice. Unlike Jack's struggle, which seems circumscribed by psychic inheritance, the Trask sons are explicitly told they may choose their paths. Lee, the family servant and philosopher, explains, "The word *timshel*... gives a choice. It might be the most important word in the world. That says the way is open" (Steinbeck, 1952, p. 303). Critic Mimi Reisel Gladstein notes, "Steinbeck insists on the redemptive power of self-determination. Each character is allowed the possibility of change, a rebuke to deterministic views of human nature". The family, while a source of strife, is thus also the context in which redemption is possible.

### **Psychological Conflict: Haunted Minds and Internal Struggles**

#### **The Shining: Madness, Guilt, and Projection**

In *The Shining*, madness is both a state of mind and an external force, with Jack Torrance's gradual descent catalyzed by isolation, unresolved trauma, and the *Overlook Hotel*'s supernatural manipulations. The hotel amplifies Jack's personal insecurities and failures, preying on his guilt over past violence and professional inadequacy. As his sense of self unravels, Jack projects his internal turmoil onto his family, blaming Wendy and Danny for his frustrations while excusing his abusive impulses as necessary discipline—a pattern that mirrors his own father's behavior.

Guilt operates as a corrosive undercurrent, surfacing in Jack's moments of clarity; fleeting episodes in which he recognizes the horror of what he is becoming and pleads with Danny to run, even as the hotel's

influence overwhelms him. The character of Danny, with his psychic abilities, suffers the projected anxieties of both parents, his vulnerability underlining how children often inherit and manifest the psychological damage of their caretakers. Ultimately, the Overlook acts as both setting and psychological mirror, externalizing Jack's fractured mind. Kubrick and King interrogate the ease with which guilt and self-hate can be deflected outward, suggesting that true madness is not just losing one's mind, but losing the ability to distinguish between one's own demons and those conjured by a haunted world.

Further, Jack's psychological disintegration is characterized by hallucinations and fugue states, symptoms of unresolved guilt and suppressed rage. King structures Jack's perspective to vacillate between fleeting lucidity and invasive external influences: "The voice was not his, but it spoke in his head with all the authority of truth" (King, 1977, p. 285). Clinical psychologist Robert E. Kearns remarks, "While the Overlook is haunted, so too is Jack by memories, compulsions, and the longing for paternal approval". Danny Torrance, Jack's son, manifests psychic abilities the "shine" which allow him to see the hotel's horrors. These powers metaphorically represent a child's hypersensitivity to familial tension. As critic Harold Bloom notes, "Danny's shining is his curse and his solace, a supernaturally heightened version of a child's radar for dysfunction".

### **East of Eden: Guilt, Identity, and Repetition Compulsion**

In *East of Eden*, Steinbeck intricately weaves guilt, identity, and repetition compulsion into the generational struggles of the Trask family. Characters like Cal and Adam grapple with an inherited sense of guilt, mirrored in the biblical story of Cain and Abel. Cal's acute awareness of his mother Cathy's malevolence instills in him a belief that evil is fundamental to his identity, prompting a cycle of self-doubt and alienation. This guilt—passed down from parent to child—fuels the compulsion to repeat past sins; Cal, like his uncle Charles before him, reenacts jealousy and competition, especially in his relationship with his brother Aron. Yet, while the compulsion to repeat familial transgressions traps the Trasks in cycles of pain, Steinbeck introduces agency through the concept of "timshel" ("thou mayest"), suggesting that individuals are not doomed to replicate these patterns but may choose a different path. Identity in the novel is thus restless—caught between the pull of inherited guilt and the possibility of transformation. The characters' struggles with repetition compulsion highlight how unresolved trauma and longing for love reemerge across generations, shaping choices and relationships. Ultimately, Steinbeck posits that overcoming guilt and compulsive repetition is possible through self-awareness and the conscious assertion of free will, offering hope for breaking the chain of generational suffering.

Again, The Trask brothers, Cal and Aron, embody the divided self. Cal's anguish at his perceived inherent badness parallels Jack Torrance's helplessness in the face of his own "darkness." Cal pleads, "I'm afraid I'm like my mother. I don't want to be... but I am" (Steinbeck, 1952, p. 545). This fear of latent evil is at the core of psychoanalytic accounts of inherited sin. John Timmerman contends, "Steinbeck's obsession with inherited guilt does not foreclose change; rather, it sets the stage for the most profound existential struggle the choice to accept or transcend the self-imposed by ancestry". Cal's eventual attempt at redemption asking forgiveness from his father signals the potential to interrupt familial repetition.

Both novels foreground the family as a transmitter of trauma and conflict: Jack inherits and amplifies his father's abusive tendencies; Cal relives the Cain/Abel dynamic. Morally, *The Shining* is more ambiguous: the possibility of resistance exists, but is ultimately snuffed out by stronger psychological and supernatural forces. *East of Eden* offers a firmer vision of free will via the motif of "timshel." Psychological descriptions in both texts utilize symbolism: the Overlook's ghosts, Danny's shining, the Trask fami-



ly's generational re-enactments. In both, children inadvertently absorb and reflect their parents' pain and aspirations: Danny's psychic distress, Cal's fear of badness.

## Conclusion

Stephen King's *The Shining* and John Steinbeck's *East of Eden* powerfully dramatize the transmission of trauma, evil, and moral struggle across generations. In both, psychological conflict arises from inherited wounds, and family serves as a crucible of both suffering and hope. While King's horror narrative suggests that some legacies are near-insurmountable, Steinbeck's epic affirms, through the motif of "timshel," that agency endures in spite of, and sometimes because of, the shadows we inherit. Ultimately, these novels challenge readers to confront their own inherited shadows and to determine whether, and how, the cycle might be broken.

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