

UNIVERSITY OF MIAMI

EAST OF EDEN SUITE: A MUSICAL COMPOSITION AND THEORETICAL
ANALYSIS

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Chapter 1

Inspirations

East of Eden Suite is an interpretation of the Biblical account of Cain and Abel (Genesis 4:1-4:16) in the form of a musical composition. The piece's concept originated from John Steinbeck's East of Eden, which alludes to the story frequently and even explicitly analyzes it. Human drama and violence make the Cain and Abel story conducive to a musical work. It is also an extraordinary piece of literature, a point which Steinbeck reinforces repeatedly.

Impact of the Cain and Abel Story

The Cain and Abel story is important for its age, its universality, and its impact. The Bible has been a central influence on human culture for thousands of years. This passage in particular has "...haunted us and followed us from our beginning" (Steinbeck 266) and we are still discussing it thousands of years later (270). Steinbeck proposes that the reason the story has lasted so long is that "a great and lasting story is about everyone or it will not last" (270). When Steinbeck writes, "No story has power, nor will it last, unless we feel in ourselves that it is true and true of us," he suggests that the story of Cain and Abel is still relevant despite the passage of time (268). Certain details, like Cain's murderous reaction to rejection, might bother a reader. This is another testament to the story's relevance, for "If it troubles us it must be that we find the trouble in ourselves" (267). Perhaps the reason we are bothered is that we have the same human feelings as Cain, and are figuratively his descendants (269). For any combination of these reasons, the Cain and Abel story has had a tremendous impact on humanity.

Steinbeck points out that only one person in history has been named Cain but most cultures on earth know that name (266); it is “such a little story to have made such a deep wound.” (267).

Meanings of the Cain and Abel Story

Another reason the story of Cain and Abel was chosen as a basis for *East of Eden Suite* is its richness in meaning. Steinbeck’s characters initially conclude that the story is about the jealousy Cain experiences when he sees that God has favored Abel’s sacrifice. “...Rejection is the hell [a child] fears,” and it leads to anger, revenge, and guilt, which summarizes the plight of mankind (270).

Regina Schwartz is a contemporary scholar whose book, The Curse of Cain, relates the story to modern economics. Like Steinbeck, Schwartz concludes that the story’s impact derives from its timeless relevance: “We are the heirs of Cain because we murder our brothers... for similar reasons,” namely rejection (2). However, she asserts that our rejection derives from our reality of scarcity and competition. Only certain people can be blessed, and others receive a curse instead; God chooses to honor Abel’s sacrifice and so Cain feels excluded (3).

Rejection and jealousy are clearly important themes in the Cain and Abel story, but Steinbeck interprets the story further by discussing the theme of free will. After God rejects Cain’s sacrifice, Cain becomes annoyed, his “countenance fell” (Gen. 4:5),¹ and his face becomes “red as a torch” (Neusner 209). God confronts him, saying “If you improve yourself, you will be forgiven... sin rests at the door... [but] you can conquer

¹ All biblical references use the Nosson Scherman translation as indicated in Works Cited unless otherwise noted.

it” (Gen. 4:7). This passage’s ambiguity makes it difficult to explain, and differences in interpretation can have enormous theological implications. Steinbeck offers an interpretation in which he points out variations in the way different biblical editions translate the original Hebrew. The King James Version of the Bible says, “Thou shalt rule over [sin]” (Steinbeck 301), which, according to Steinbeck, is an order requiring obedience (303). The American Standard Bible reads, “do thou rule...,” (301) which implies that a person is predestined to righteousness regardless of behavior (303). Adam Trask, one of Steinbeck’s protagonists, takes this view when he says that our inheritance of sin excuses us when we sin (269). However, the original Hebrew reads “thou mayest rule over sin” (301), which implies that a person has a choice whether or not to overcome her ancestor’s sins (303). Free will is an empowering concept, and it also places great responsibility on the individual, which is a significant theme in Steinbeck’s entire novel.

Jazz as a Classical Language

East of Eden Suite is an interpretation of the Cain and Abel story, but it also serves as a demonstration of the belief that “jazz” is a contemporary strain, or language, of the classical tradition. The modern jazz musician draws repertoire largely from “The Great American Songbook,” a vast catalogue of popular songs written mostly in the first half of the twentieth century which have become “standards” over time. The genre’s major composers, such as Cole Porter, Irving Berlin, and Richard Rodgers were obviously influenced by classical music, because standards and short-form Romantic compositions have remarkably similar harmony, melodic structure, and form. Their differences are superficial and idiosyncratic. As jazz progressed, musicians were

continually aware of the classical tradition, as evidenced by the music of Bill Evans, Miles Davis, Brad Mehldau, and many others.

George Gershwin and Duke Ellington not only contributed prolifically to the Songbook, but they also experimented in larger classical forms using the jazz language. Nadia Boulanger, an influential transmitter of the classical tradition, taught jazz musicians including Quincy Jones and Art Tatum. Jazz musicians and composers from Art Tatum to Wynton Marsalis have been accomplished classical musicians.

“Motivic development,” a device which interconnects material throughout a composition through manipulation of melodic fragments, is the feature most crucial to the classical tradition. Every major composer used motivic development in some respect, whether consciously or unconsciously, and even the occurrence of repetition in music is a rudimentary form of the method. Ludwig van Beethoven is particularly known for his depth of melodic continuity, and classical composers as divergent as J.S. Bach and Sergey Prokofiev used the device even as their harmonic, rhythmic, and textural approaches differed. Even when Arnold Schoenberg discarded traditional harmony altogether and replaced it with his own system, he retained motivic development—it was the basis for Serialism.

Motivic development is not unique to classical music. Jazz musicians have cultivated it from primitive call and response into a sophisticated system of interconnecting music. Keith Jarrett’s Standards Trio provides consistent examples of jazz with remarkable melodic continuity. After Jarrett *exposes* the written melody of a standard, he *develops* motives from that melody in extended improvisation sections, and

finally *recapitulates* the written melody. The only difference in structure between Jarrett's performances and Beethoven's sonatas is that a sonata requires two themes, whereas a jazz standard typically uses a song form as its exposition and recapitulation. This structure is common in the performance of jazz, although Jarrett is particularly good at applying motivic development during improvisation, which is a difficult task. Jarrett is also an accomplished classical keyboardist, and this has undoubtedly influenced his approach to melodic construction.

East of Eden Suite as a Classical Work

East of Eden Suite is rooted in the classical tradition through its structure and form. The first movement, entitled "Cain and Abel," uses a sonata form in which part of the development is improvised. In other words, it attempts to combine Keith Jarrett's unified improvisation with sonata form by using two themes instead of song form. The first movement uses a traditional piano concerto structure, as the first theme is stated by the full "orchestra" and the second is stated by the pianist. Further, the Suite's overall structure models a complete sonata or symphony, since it has four movements, of which the first is a sonata allegro and the second is slow.

In addition to form, other devices are also heavily influenced by classical music. The suite's programmatic nature is based on works such as "Symphonie Fantastique" by Hector Berlioz and Prokofiev's "Peter and the Wolf." Its melodic themes are derived from the story's characters, and they are manipulated throughout the piece to correspond to an interpretation of the plot. Certain harmonies and textures in the suite are also classical in nature, such as the second movement. The left hand of the piano part in the

introduction uses a G-flat Lydian scale with a flatted sixth degree, a sound which resembles Rachmaninov's chromatic language. This scale includes a flatted, natural, and sharp fifth degree (C, D-flat, and D respectively), which creates an ambiguous, mysterious, Russian sound. The harmony and texture of the entire movement are built around this concept. The final movement's continually repeating pedal tone is reminiscent of Chopin's "Raindrop" Prelude in D-flat, especially in the climax of the movement when it is pitted against a strong melody in the bass like the B section of the prelude.

Jazz Characteristics in East of Eden Suite

The suite also includes distinctive characteristics of the jazz language. Its harmony is mostly modal as influenced by Wayne Shorter, meaning that it is composed by matching sounds based on their relationships to each other rather than by conforming to the rules of functional harmony. Only Abel's Theme is tonal, but it is more directly influenced by Thelonious Monk and John Coltrane than classical composers. The Suite's swing feel and cross rhythms are also distinctively jazz, as is the instrumentation, which is used on such classic jazz albums as "Kind of Blue" by Miles Davis. The inclusion of improvisation over repeating chord progressions as well as free improvisation (without written chords) are also particular to the jazz language.

Chapter 2

The Relationship between Musical Themes and Literary Characters

East of Eden Suite includes three themes, each of which is based on a character in the Cain and Abel story. These themes were designed to reflect definitions and descriptions of each character based on the Bible and Aggadah. Aggadah refers to non-legal teachings of early rabbis, and it was the “principal literary form” of the Jewish people (Book xvii). The characters’ conceptions were also influenced by contemporary commentaries and personal interpretations of the story. The Suite’s primary sources of melodic material are the three themes, and almost every melody and countermelody in the entire composition is some manipulation of at least one of them.

Cain’s Theme

The Bible discloses little about Cain and Abel’s personalities and gives no indication of where they fit on the spectrum of good and evil until Cain murders Abel. However, “...ancient interpreters subtly turned the story into an elemental conflict between good and evil” (Kugel 91), which is the stance adopted in this composition. The Bible says Eve “acquired a man with the lord” (Gen. 4:1). One commentary explains that “with the lord” means that Eve conceived Cain with the devil, who is an “angel of the lord” (Kugel 87). The word “man” is used here because at the moment Cain was born, he jumped up and ran away, retrieved a reed, and brought it back (Apocrypha 21:3),¹ also implying that he has some supernatural quality. Cain’s chromatic, dissonant, and

¹ All references to the Apocrypha use the Charles edition as indicated in Works Cited.

choppily articulated theme (Geyer 1, 5-16) evokes sinister sound.¹ It is written over Cain's Vamp (1-4), a syncopated, dissonant figure which reinforces the theme's evil sound.

Cain was a "tiller of the ground" (Gen. 4:2) or a "husbandman" (Apocrypha 23:1), and he "loved the ground" (Perke 153).² His career choice reveals selfish tendencies, since he is the first person to plow the earth for a profit (Kugel 89). Cain's Theme and Vamp are low in range to represent this occupational link to the ground, except the last fragment of the theme, which is higher to represent his inevitably aggressive behavior. The low range and small intervals of the theme also represent the decisions Cain makes throughout the story. His prioritization of convenience and laziness over nobility will be discussed later.

Cain's Theme is a contrasting period with phrases of mm. 5-8 and 11-13. The period is followed by a concluding fragment in mm. 15-16, which was influenced by "The Sorcerer" by Herbie Hancock, in which a four-measure rest is placed between a conclusive phrase and a similar fragment. The theme is constructed of two motives, which will be called "motive a" and "motive b." Motive a consists of two minor seconds a major second apart, which could also be described as the first four degrees of an auxiliary diminished scale. The first phrase of Cain's Theme includes three statements of this motive in various note orders and transpositions, with the third truncated by one note. The second phrase also starts with motive a, but it continues with motive b, which

¹ References to *East of Eden Suite* have the format (Geyer movement number, measure number).

² References to Perke de Rabbi Eliezer refer to the Friedlander translation as indicated in Works Cited.

ascends by a minor third stepwise, returns to the middle note, and then drops by one or more large intervals. The final fragment of Cain's Theme is a restatement of motive b.

Abel's Theme

As Cain's has received a connotation of evil over time, Abel has become a symbol of good. He chooses to become a shepherd (Gen. 4:2) and "loved to tend the sheep" (Perke 153), so God may prefer him since he cares for living things (Kugel 88). Steinbeck points out that, since the Bible was passed down by shepherds, they could have considered a lamb more valuable, and "A sacrifice must be the best and most valuable" (269). Abel's Theme is designed to represent his goodness through its high reaching contour, simple piano orchestration, legato articulation, and romantic sixth intervals. The tonal harmony is also more familiar and therefore noble sounding in comparison to Cain's chromatic theme.

Abel's Theme (Geyer 1, 46-61) consists of a parallel period with phrases in mm. 46-52 and mm. 56-61. It opens with a new motive, "motive c," which consists of sixths ascending stepwise. A statement of motive b follows, which is a comment that lines between good and evil are unclear—even the noble Abel has some of Cain's characteristics. Next, a different iteration of motive c is stated and the first phrase concludes with motive a. The second phrase of the period begins identically to the first, but it is cut short by Cain's Vamp as Abel's life is cut short by Cain.

God's Theme

"God's Theme" (Geyer 2, 5-11) is intended to sound mysterious, as a comment that direct contact between humans and God is difficult to perceive and is described only

vaguely in this Biblical account. The theme's ambiguity stems from the inclusion of multiple forms of the fifth and third scale degrees in both the melody and harmony. The melody's first five notes clearly outline the Lydian mode, but it immediately moves to the minor third, which is not typically part of this scale. By rotating through various modal possibilities for the tonic—Lydian, Lydian Flat-6, Lydian sharp-9, suspended, and Aeolian—the harmony remains unclear. Melodically, God's Theme is an antecedent (5-7)/ consequent (9-11) relationship.

Chapter 3

Representation of the Story in Musical Form

Cain and Abel: sonata allegro

Each of the four movements in *East of Eden Suite* is designed to represent a different aspect of the Cain and Abel story. The first movement's sonata form serves as a general introduction which defines how the characters will be interpreted by introducing their thematic material. The Exposition (Geyer 1, 1-79) opens with Cain's Vamp and leads directly into his theme, Theme I of the sonata form (5). Because Cain is born first (Gen. 4:1), his theme is stated first in the Exposition. At m. 19, the theme is repeated with varied rhythm and density, and the final fragment is stated in inverse transposition -3 (29). A bridge (39) which borrows melodic content from God's Theme serves as a transition into Theme II, which is Abel's Theme (46). The theme is repeated with new instrumentation (64), and Cain's Vamp interrupts Abel's Theme to conclude the Exposition.

The Development opens with an improvisation section (80-111) which is connected to the themes through its harmony and background figures. Harmonic material is taken from the original statements of each theme and adjusted for symmetrical phrasing. The first group of sixteen measures comes from the first statement of Cain's Theme and the second group comes from the first statement of Abel's. The first instance of backgrounds is a statement of the first phrase of Cain's Theme which starts in unison and becomes a three-voice density as the alto saxophone and trumpet split off from the tenor saxophone melody (80). The last three notes of the phrase are written in

augmentation. Motive b is played at m. 92 and the variation on motive a from Abel's Theme is played at m. 101. All of the background figures are played in the same section of harmony as their original statements.

Thematic materials are further developed after the conclusion of the solos. The first melody is a combination of motives a and c (112), and the second is a combination of a and b (117). At m. 120, motive b is inverted, then stated without inversion, and followed by motive a in canon, where the three parts combine to create the first phrase of Cain's theme. Motive a is stated again at m. 128, and then motive b is partially inverted in another example of canonic imitation. God's Theme is played at m. 134, and then the rhythm of Cain's Vamp is played at m. 142 with resolved harmony. The Development ends with the bridge which introduces Abel's Theme in the Exposition (150).

The Recapitulation (157-188) is similar to the Exposition, except that the themes are only played once each and they are reversed to make a bridge-form sonata. When Cain's Vamp interrupts Abel's Theme (169), it leads to Cain's Theme (173), which is written second to represent that he outlives Abel.

Sacrifice

The sacrifice is one of the most important yet vague moments in the Cain and Abel story. The Bible says that Abel "brought of the firstlings of his flock and from their choicest" (Gen. 4:4), which seems like a positive review of his effort. However, some interpretations translate the verse as "fat portions" rather than "choicest." Even within this translation, fat portions could be positive or negative—it could mean the fattest individual sheep from his flock or the "minimal sacrificial parts" of each sheep (Neusner

207). Another interpretation says Abel sacrifices the first shearing of wool from his first-born sheep (Perke 153).

While the Bible does not definitively judge the quality of Abel's sacrifice, it is even more unclear about Cain's. The only phrase which describes Cain's sacrifice at all says that he offered to God fruit of the ground (Gen. 4:3), which, considering that Cain is a farmer, seems completely reasonable. However, in order to explain why God favors Abel's offering over Cain's, rabbis explained that Cain's sacrifice is inferior to Abel's. Some said that Cain brings from the "refuse" (Neusner 207) and others said that he sacrifices "remnants of his meal" and "seed of flax" (Perke 153). By determining a connection between the quality of an offering and God's acceptance of it, the rabbis supported the principle that a person should behave righteously in order to earn God's favor. God also could have discriminated between the brothers' offerings based on their own histories (Kugel 90) or His own personal preference (Steinbeck 269).

"Sacrifice," the second movement in *East of Eden Suite*, is designed to sound mysterious to reflect the vagueness in the Bible's description. It also creates an atmosphere for an interaction between primitive humans and their incomprehensible God. The movement's large-scale form is binary, where the melody statements are bookends to a contrasting free improvisation section of similar harmony. Each section is composed of an ABAC form in which each A section is God's Theme (Geyer 2, 5-19), B is an abstracted rendition of Abel's Theme (21-28), and C is Cain's Theme (38-44). In this movement, Cain's Theme enters a measure into the B section and only includes the final

fragment of the theme, representing the rabbinical interpretation that Cain took his share first and then offered a portion of what was expected.

The Fight

The third movement is through-composed and chronologically follows the conflict between Cain and Abel in two major sections: the argument and the physical fight. Although the Bible only says that Cain speaks to Abel and kills him in the field (Gen. 4:8), rabbinic commentaries are rich with specific and sometimes graphic details.

When the Bible says the brothers spoke, it could also mean that they quarreled (Neusner 212), and numerous reasons are given. Cain “hated” or “envied” Abel because God reacts to the two sacrifices differently (Perke 154). “...To Cain and his offering He did not turn” (Gen. 4:5), and God “precluded” or “abhorred” it (Perke 153) rejects it (Ginzberg 107), has no regard, or is not conciliated by it (Neusner 209). However, “... God turned to Abel and his offering” (Gen. 4:4), “had respect unto [them]” (Perke 154), “had regard,” or “conciliated” them (Neusner 209).

Another interpretation says that “The quarrel was about the first woman” (Neusner 212). The biblical phrase “in the field” could refer to a woman (Perke 154), for Cain and Abel are both born with twin sisters (152). Cain is privy to Abel’s twin sister and he plots to kill Abel and take her for himself (154).

In addition to God’s favor and women, property also could be the topic of the quarrel between Cain and Abel. The brothers divide the world between them, Abel taking the “chattel” and Cain taking the land (Book 23) or Abel taking the “movables” and Cain taking the “real estate” (Neusner 212). When one of Abel’s sheep grazes, Cain claims

ownership of the land and Abel claims Cain's clothing. Abel says "Strip" and Cain says "Bug off" (Neusner 212).

At the beginning of "The Fight," a march pattern is played on the snare drum and continues throughout the confrontation leading to the fight (Geyer 3, 1-36), reminiscent of Gustav Holst's "Mars: The Bringer of War" from *The Planets*. The bass plays motive c in inversion, which signifies Abel's sheep grazing on Cain's field (2). The bass continues to play variations of Abel's Theme through m. 33, and the piano joins it in m. 19. Beginning with m. 27 in the piano, the theme is stated in its original position. Meanwhile, a fragment of motive b representing Cain enters in the horns (10) and gradually becomes more complete until the entire motive is played in mm. 25-27. The second phrase of Cain's Theme is explicitly stated in m. 31. The two themes build contrapuntally, representing increased tension between the characters. The music gradually becomes more intense through newly introduced voices, key changes, increased density, range, and dynamics. Both themes coincide in rhythmic unison on the march pattern from the snare drum, which serves as a secondary climax in the movement (35).

After Cain and Abel argue, Cain chases Abel around and then they physically fight (Book 23). The fight is represented by freely improvising, dueling saxophones, each of which represents a character. The alto, representing Cain, is instructed to play "jagged, angular, harsh" melodies, and the tenor, representing Abel, plays "broad, lyrical, noble" sounding lines (Geyer 3, 38). Abel temporarily wins the fight and holds Cain under him, Cain pleads for mercy and is released, and then Cain kills Abel (Book 23), (Neusner 212-213). The end of the improvisation section is signified by motive c, played

by the tenor four times, to represent that Abel is winning the fight (Geyer 3, 42), and then Abel's Theme is strongly stated with its original harmony, although it is voiced with strong triads this time, representing his victory (73). However, between phrases of Abel's Theme, Cain begs for mercy in the form of his vamp (80). When Cain is released, his theme and vamp are played in their original position, but in augmentation (96). Finally, the movement ends by alternating between drum fills and rhythmic hits by the full band (105). The hits represent stones with which Cain hits Abel all around his arms and legs, since he has not witnessed a murder and does not know what will kill him. Finally a blow to the neck kills Abel (Book 23). Alternately, the critical stone hits "the throat and its vital organs" (Neusner 213) or the forehead (Perke 154), and the object is a staff rather than stones (Neusner 213).

Conversation

The final movement of *East of Eden Suite* follows five stages of Cain's attitude in his conversation with God: avoidance, denial, outward blame, claim of ignorance, and repentance. Each of the first three is successively more aggressive, and the last two are successively more passive. Therefore, Cain's Theme is orchestrated three different ways in ABCBA form, with each section corresponding to a stage by reflecting its aggressiveness through texture, density, range, and dynamics. Except for one section of the movement, a constant melody is played repetitively but orchestrated differently each time as in Maurice Ravel's *Bolero*.

In the avoidance stage, Cain does not know that God is omnipotent (Perke 155), so he flees his parents. God appears to him and says that he can hide from his parents but not from God, asking “Where is Abel thy brother” (Book 23).

Cain begins his denial stage by answering “I do not know. Why ask me about him? I should be asking You where he is” (Book 23)! God asks, “Hast thou killed and taken possession,” meaning taken over Abel’s wife and flock (Perke 155).

In the blame stage, God asks if Cain killed his brother, to which he replies with the famous line, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” (Gen. 4:9). This line is important because it implies a debate between free will and predestination. Cain is implying that God is the one who created the evil inclination in him, let him slay Abel, accepted their sacrifices differently, and made him jealous of Abel (Book 23). In other words, he is blaming God for Abel’s death. God says “Thy brother’s blood crieth unto me from the ground” (Gen. 4:10), which is an outcry by Abel in complaint that God did not stop Cain from killing him (Book 23), (Neusner 214). Another interpretation says that “blood” is actually plural, meaning Abel and his descendants are crying out (Neusner 214). Abel’s outcry is represented in the fourth movement by a vamp based on his theme which serves as a foundation for a drum solo (Geyer 4, 49).

Cain claims that he was unaware that Abel would die from stoning since he has never seen a murder. He also questions how God knows what happened since even Cain’s parents do not know. God replies that he bears the whole world (Book 24).

Finally Cain repents, although only after time. Cain is cursed more than the ground, the ground will be unworkable (Gen. 4:10), and Cain becomes a vagrant and a

wanderer (Gen. 4:11). When he says “My sin is too great to be borne” (Gen. 4:13), some commentaries say he is repenting (Book 24) while others say he is not (Perke 156). Yet another interpretation translates the phrase as “My punishment is too great to bear,” which is certainly not repentance (Kugel 96). He is confused (Perke 155) and afraid of being killed (Gen. 4:14), so he repents by reciting Psalm 139:7-10 (Book 24). When God sees that Cain has repented, he puts a letter on Cain’s arm for protection (Gen. 4:15) so that he is no longer a vagrant but just a wanderer (Book 24). As the fourth movement dwindles down to a single piano note, Cain settles in Nod, “east of Eden” (Gen. 4:16).

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