

2025 Classical Literature Scholarship—2nd Place

Reading Eden

Courtney Clayson

Junior year was over, however, my yearning to be in the Socratic 11 room was not. Even after a grueling four hour drive coming back from a leadership camp, me and my book club companions had a seat at the now nonexistent blue tables outside the junior and senior Socratic rooms. We approached the middle of reading my now favorite book, *East of Eden* by John Steinbeck, although a good part of our discussion had been about our senior year looming ahead of us. With my final year approaching I began to worry. Without the pillars of mentors and classics holding up everything I knew to be true, what would my literary journey become? Would I keep discovering truth, principles, and creating virtue scales? Losing everything I had worked for, forgetting how to annotate and naturally how to think, weighed heavily in my mind. Without Maeser, who would I be? And, without these factors who would I become? Adulthood and my future in general had been a mystery for so long, but now it was my next step. Realistically, meeting up with Mz and Moser to talk about books in my 30's didn't seem likely. Before I completely spun out of control, Moser responded, reassuring me with the fact that what I prioritize and what I value, I will always come back to. No matter what I do in the future, reading and the pursuit of truth will always be part of my foundation. This theme was soon to become not only the theme of the very book we were reading but also the principle that guides the years I once feared.

In *East of Eden*, Steinbeck explores humanity's deepest struggles: good vs. evil, freedom vs. fate, inheritance vs. choice. The heart of the book is a single Hebrew word: Timshel—"thou mayest." It's introduced by Lee, their Chinese servant/[philosopher,] who explains how the word

appears in the Cain and Abel story. Not as a command—“thou shalt”—or a guarantee—“do thou”—but as a possibility. Rather than a promise or a command, timshel is a choice. Lee explains this, “For in his weakness and his filth and his murder of his brother he has still the great choice. He can choose his course and fight through it and win” (304). This later helps Cal choose who he wants to be, even through the traumatic loss of his brother and father.

[This sentiment hit hard]. Like Cal, I used to fear the mark of my past-[the expectations, who I have been, and the trauma of my past.] I worried that the way I was raised or the mistakes I’d made would determine who I was going to be. Would I continue my search for truth, or would I lose myself in the noise of adulthood? Steinbeck’s story helped me realize that fear of fate is a human one—but fate isn’t fixed. Just as Cal wasn’t doomed to be like his mother, I’m not doomed either. Timshel means I get to choose. I’ve had moments where guilt, fear, or insecurity nearly made the choice for me—but the power to decide has always been mine.

That night by the blue tables, sweaty, sunburnt, and scared about the future, I learned that growing up isn’t about leaving behind who I’ve been. It’s about returning to what I value, over and over, with intention. It’s about recognizing that no one else- not my parents, not my school, not even Steinbeck- gets to choose for me. Timshel reminds me that I will write my own story. One annotated page at a time.