



---

## **The Problem of Metaphysical Evil: Critiquing Steinbeck's *The Winter of our Discontent***

**Khair Ul Bashar<sup>1</sup>, Alam Zeb<sup>2</sup>, Sehrish<sup>3</sup>**

Lecturer in English, Qurtuba University of Science and Information Technology Peshawar, Pakistan

---

### **Abstract**

The paper critically examines the problem of metaphysical evil which is perceptible in Steinbeck's *The Winter of our Discontent*. Metaphysical evil conveys the eternal struggle between good and evil which intended to show that man cannot achieve true perfection due his limitation. The interaction with these belligerent forces kindled spark of materialistic ambition which ultimately establishes the concept of evil, resulting in the loss of human values and ethics. In the *The Winter of our Discontent*, Steinbeck draws our attention to metaphysical evil in the character of Mary Hawley who is the embodiment of evil in the life of Ethan. The novel presents the unpleasant recurring theme of our society at large. The novel indicates the belief that men as creatures of needs and requirements are determined by the tides of environment. They are set helplessly at cyclone of circumstances. Ethan being a proponent of American dreams and conflicts, he is not only surrounded by corruption but also witnessing chaotic and fast-changing society at around him. Therefore, the textures of Steinbeck's novels are coherently intertwined in the problem of evil. Each work is preoccupied with a single aspect of evil in modern life.

**Keywords:** Steinbeck, *Summum Bonum*, predominantly, *The Cup of Gold*

---

### **1. Introduction**

The conflict between good and evil and its eternal consciousness is the paramount concern of the writers since earliest times. The extensive body of knowledge in literature from Homer to the present day is founded on the vivid projection of human actions, sliced half in right and wrong. No doubt, the concept of good and evil and its obvious nature is the part of metaphysical understanding which engages every human being. Berkley rightly remarked that "He who hath not meditated upon God, the human mind and the *summum bonum*, may make a thriving earthworm but a sorry statesman." The ancient polarized religions believed that the universe is infected from the plague of evil and therefore their cultural rituals were performed to redress the evil forces and pinched the victory over the power of chaos. So the struggle between good and evil is not a mythical naïve activity but it accelerates the man's awareness within. Thus, the knowledge of good implicitly perceives the knowledge of evil as both are inseparable from each other. As Martin Buber tells us, good and evil are not diametrically opposing forces: they are similar in nature, being "erstwhile sleeping companions in the womb of their origin."

In the same way, Steinbeck has recognized the dialectic struggle in human experiences and artistically transformed it in art. His Nobel Prize Acceptance speech for Literature in 1962 traces "the release of explosive forces capable of creative good or destructive...". His portrayal of characters constituted correspondingly the problem of evil along with the optimistic attitude of factious protagonists who incessantly energize their consistent desire to sustain their survival drive. Steinbeck has observed that cosmos is massed with the power of evil in all its manifestation. He saw the modern distorted humanity had abounded with all sorts of atrocities, greed and lust, materialism and the flux of human behavior against the norms and the values of society. However, Steinbeck seems to be confused with problem of evil when he stated that "There is no 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?" it seems that he was unable to sift the nature of evil from his works. In his novel, *The Cup of Gold*, he has already voiced his query, "who can tell the limit of the power of evil?" Yet critical appraisal attempts to deem the problem of evil in fictional tales.

The present study is carried out to locate exactly the problem of evil dealt by Steinbeck in his novel. When the society paid significant concentration to the materialistic values so, we can infer that Steinbeck draws the attention to pose the problem of evil in metaphysical sense. Steinbeck's belief recurred from the fact that men, being creatures of their needs and requirements are determined by the environment. They are being sailed helplessly upon the tides of circumstances. They are not only surrounded by the moral or political corruptions but also baffled from the chaotic and fast-changing situation around them.

### **2. Literature Review**

The most leading novelists of America in 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century have been particularly concerned with the problem of evil. Indeed, it is one of the important aspects in America literature. The writers predominantly deal with the malignant forces that could have witnessed in modern society.

The earliest American authors who exposed evil in society through their writings are Herman Melville and Nathaniel Hawthorne. Hawthorne's fictions are interplay between individual and forces like poverty, puritanism and feudalism display forms of social, economic and metaphysical evil. (Stewart, 1958) <sup>[58]</sup>.

On the other hand, Melville describes man's desire to achieve his ultimate goal of absolute truth. Whatever the truth is, Melville engaged in exposing the obscure nature of universe. The nature

of evil which Melville concerned in *Moby Dick* is metaphysical. (Hillway, 1929) [2].

Steinbeck has also followed the same tradition in works. He believes that all books including Bible are primarily concerned with the conflict of good and evil. *East of Eden* is considered the Bible which presents the preoccupation of good and evil. (Levin, 1960) [3].

Pratt has discovered dialectic thought in Steinbeck which he employed to see the exaltation of sins and to find cure to it. *The Winter of our Discontent* has a hope for surviving even in corrupted modernity. (1970)

*The Cup of Gold* proposes the problem of evil which uncovers his non-teleological mind, "primarily concerned not with what should be, or could be, or might be, but rather with what actually 'is'". (Loving, 1974) [4].

### 3. Problem Statement

Steinbeck's novels deal with the problem of evil in the world. These evils are manifested in various forms such as social, political, economic and metaphysical. These problems indicate man's futile struggle for hoarding wealth and property which originates not satisfaction but frustration. *The Winter of our Discontent* reflects 20<sup>th</sup> century American Society which apparently looks organized but underlying an inherent corruption and decadent. i.e. Metaphysical evil.

### 4. Objectives of the Study

1. To investigate the problem of evil in Steinbeck's novels
2. To find out metaphysical evil in Steinbeck's *The Winter of our Discontent*

### 5. Methodology

The research employs qualitative approach which sets the direction of textual analysis of the novel *The Winter of our Discontent*. The analysis takes the wheel of inductive generalization from the point of the author which concludes a general argument. The direction is guided by the transformative worldview which assists in addressing the issue of oppression in the light of grounded theory.

### 6. Analysis

The concept of metaphysical evil emerged from the works of 17<sup>th</sup> century German Philosopher and Historian, Leibniz. He says: "This type of evil results from the...mere finitude of created beings, i.e. from the absence of a perfection not required for the natural integrity of creatures." (New Catholic Encyclopedia, 1967, P.666) [5]. Leibniz has discerned three modes of evil: Physical evil which comprises of sufferings, moral evil that consists of sins and wickedness of agents and metaphysical evil, dealing with the imperfection of creatures. Metaphysical evil can be defined as the limitation invoked by the various components of natural world between one another. Through these limitations, the objects in the natural world are mostly devoid of achieving their complete and ideal perfection. The synthetic struggle of natural objects put a barrier in the progress of being and cannot materialize their numerous ambitious and desires. Steinbeck speaks: "humans are never satisfied, that you give them one thing and they want something more." (The Pearl, 1947, P.25) [10]. However, man has an unquenchable thirst for the object in materialistic world which draws him towards the excrement of

destruction and chaos. When he realizes that his dreams are collapsed then he starts constructing his new wonderland. This provides him the bone of contention where he scuffles with an everlasting struggle between good and evil. The present research analyses Steinbeck's *The Winter of our Discontent* to seek the co-existence of sempiternal conflict between good and evil from metaphysical perspective.

*The Winter of our Discontent* throws a light on Steinbeck's preoccupation of battle between good and evil. It entails the communal theme of Steinbeck's philosophy of dialectic force of construction and destruction in human flesh. Steinbeck not only abhors absolute badness which disrupts the life of Eden but also distaste for absolute goodness which frustrates Adam and drag him to destruction. In the novel, Steinbeck demonstrates invariably the most unpleasant conflict of two forces which touches the axis of metaphysical evil. It shows how a man has struggled hard to survive in the duel of materialistic and ethical ambitious of life.

In the novel, Ethan represents puritanical ideologies from his ancestors. He honestly tries to glorify his place as Eden in the immoral society. Thus, he fails to achieve it by virtue of his limitation and his obsession for damnation. When Second World War broke, he was an infantry captain in military and later managed to settle with his family in American Baytown. He shuns himself from the glory and luxury of life. He even willingly relinquish from the post of a clerk in store whom he once owned it and leave out to Alfio Marullo, a Sicilian immigrant. He endeavors hard to sustain his individualistic moralism, domestication of his life style and avoids weave of all sorts of temptation and malignant forces from his social milieu. Even he refuses to enjoy the property of his wife, Mary. However, everything becomes run short for him and his feet trembles before the world of avarice. He ultimately lost the touch of puritanical ethos and his moralistic visions blurs strikingly in lieu for commercial and materialistic ethos.

Ethan works sincerely for twelve years as storekeeper. These twelve years have left a mark of fascination which he received from the commercialization of modern world. He has experienced the beauty of dollars and finds that everybody is rolling in wealth. He feels discontented from his status quo and conspires by the others to reestablish his economic status in community. He received similar antagonism from his family too when his wife tells him: "You are not. You're more like the manager keep the book and bank the money and order the goods." (34) She ignites the fire of ambition. "The sinews of affair" torn his mental peace and he follows misconceived theory of Mr. Baker, Marullo, Biggers and Margie Young-Hunt for standard living. He started to adopt the corrupt way of modern life and satanic temptations deviates him from his idealistic stance.

So the sudden shift in his views descends him to the shady path of righteousness. He fully conform the lessons of Marullo's business ethics and plans to have a store at low price from him. He even planned to acquire the desire site from his childhood friend, Danny Tylor, which is the town's future airport. Most importantly, he deems of bank robbery as well. He does not care his friendship and not even have a doubt to deceive him. In one case, Marullo, who is a foreigner and told Ethan in a good faith, about his problem with immigration authorities. Ethan discloses his secret news to Joey and was arrested accordingly. When Ethan learns about it he avails the opportunity and offers money

to buy the store at low price. Meanwhile he joins another chorus of inhumanity by chance or design when he deceives his brethren friend Danny. He deceitfully grabs invaluable piece of land at meager sum of \$1000 and drags him to the brink of tragic death. Therefore, Ethan seems to be completely tempted by the surreptitious glory of materialistic life. He becomes reckless in his friendship and the growth of evil disturbs his innate capacity for goodness eventually.

The struggle between good and evil has baffled him into the maze of consciousness. His morals continue for squabbling his conscience. He hears audibly the voice of deprivation in his mind and his scheme of treachery to his friend haunted him like a ghost. He is pulled over intrinsically between the two poles of materialistic and moralistic discourse of universe. His defrauded condition arises from the fact that he lost the old ways without achieving the new one. He cannot locate the proper turning point to win his spurs and ultimately realizes that he lost his soul.

He moans: "...my light is out....There is nothing blacker than a wick....It's so much darker when light goes out that it would have been if it had never shone. (P.311)

The duel between good and evil was not only within but also extrinsic. His son, Allan also tracks the habit of conduct from the corrupted way of world. He commits an unethical act of plagiarizing the essay 'I Love America' to win the contest which shows the growth of evil in him. Ethan cannot tolerate the materialistic attitude of his son. He is so confused by his moral degradation and its inconvenient effect on the hostility of his son, which he gravely deems of committing suicide. His hope for Edenic idealism turns into ashes. Thus, the conflict between good and evil has simply subverted his spirit and strength of character. In proportion to his materialistic possessions and wealth, he is hallowing within. What he gets is just like dead sea-fruit.

## 7. Conclusion

Steinbeck's novels generally reveal human drama as the manifestation of everlasting conflict between good and evil. His entire narrative discourse assumes the presence this conflict and adds to coherency. It seems that Steinbeck has profoundly concerned with the problem of evil and his entire works reflect the various aspects of evil in different forms and different times since from the Great Depression of 1930s to the moral anarchy of 1950s.

Metaphysical evil poses a serious problem at post war period which was criticized only at personal level. It is a tragedy of a man who despite of his consistent struggle cannot actualize the desire goal of life. The struggle destined to humans after the fall from the Eden and continues their legacy. However, his ongoing quest to regain the loss of paradise has always inspired him to continue his struggle and gets triumph over sin by exercising the power of will. The moral of the novel proposes to activate the conscience of the past, "Talisman" which saves the man from the decadent of materialistic mold. In the end, the very Talisman enlightens Ethan to understand the values of human life, and revisit his home in order to shield the existence of his daughter from the discontent influence of the age.

## 8. References

- 1 Buber Martin. *Good and Evil*: New York: Charles Scribners'Sons, 1952, 99. Hereafter cited as Good and Evil.
- 2 Hillway, Tyrus. *Herman Melville*. Indianapolis: BobbsMarrell Educational Publishing, 1929, 143.
- 3 Levin Harry. *The Power of Blackness*. rpt. New York: Vintage Books. 1958-1960, 31.
- 4 Loving M Jerome. *Melville's Pardonable Sin*. New England Quarterly. 1974; 47(2):267.
- 5 New Catholic Encyclopedia. New York: Mc Graw-HiU Book Company. 1967; 5:666.
- 6 Pratt, Clark John. *John Steinbeck; A Critical Essay*. William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1970, 44
- 7 Steinbeck John. *Cup of Gold*. rpt. London: Transworld Publishers, Ltd. 1929, 1971, 95.
- 8 Steinbeck, John. *The Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech in Vogue*. CXLL. 1963, 116.
- 9 Stewart, Randall. *American Literature and Christian Doctrine*. Baton: Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1958, 81-82.
- 10 Steinbeck John. *The Pearl*: rpt. New York. Penguin Books, 1947-1980, 25.
- 11 Steinbeck John. *The Winter of our Discontent*. New York City, NYP: The Viking Press, 1961, 311.