In naked beauty more adorn'd more lovely, than Pandora

- John Milton, Paradise Lost

Although the biblical story of Adam and Eve has frequently been pointed to as a model for East of Eden, Steinbeck's use of Greek mythology, in particular the story of Pandora's box, has been overlooked. Boxes appear throughout the novel associated most frequently with Cathy and Abra. In Cathy's life we find the "broken box" (116) in the tannery after she sets the fire, the "small oak box" (129) in which she keeps her money, the mahogany box that holds Faye's will (305), a safe deposit box, and many boxes of chocolate. Abra has fewer boxes: The first contains the rabbit and the marriage proposal from Aron (461), the second a gift for Lee (750), and the third a gift from Lee (754).

The myth of Pandora bears striking similarities to the Christian creation myth most frequently associated with Steinbeck's novel. In Hesiod's version, Pandora, created by Zeus as a "beautiful evil" (Panofsky 7), is given to man as a punishment for stealing fire. Although warned by Prometheus, Epimetheus ignores his brother's advice and marries Pandora, who eventually opens a box and looses evil into the world. Robert Graves points out the similarity in myths in his description of the Talmudic version of creation: "Eve . . . like Pandora, brings mischief on mankind" (35).

We must remember, however, that Steinbeck's "Eden" is by no means a direct allegory of the biblical story, and therefore it is hardly surprising to find a similar use of syncretic allegory in the Pandora allusions. For example, Aron, initially presented as the "good brother," like Abel, suddenly becomes the "wandering brother," like Cain, as Steinbeck reverses the story. Characters play several roles at once: Adam Trask would seem to be the biblical Adam but at the same time resembles both Cain and Abel. Neither character nor plot in Steinbeck's novel is destined to follow the path of the source.

Cathy's likeness to Pandora appears obvious: Adam Trask marries her against his brother's advice; the broken box appears when she brings disaster to her family and town; the struggle over the oak box (and all it represents) brings Cathy to Adam and Adam to despair; and by opening the box containing the will, Cathy begins to bring depravity to the formerly "respectable" whorehouse. The similarities between Abra and Pandora are less apparent, however. Although a box is introduced along with her character, Abra refuses to open Aron's gift and remains unaware of its contents. The ebony box that Lee presents to her contains his mother's jade button and, seemingly, no evil.

If Cathy is the "evil" Pandora, then perhaps Abra is her antithesis. By refusing to open Aron's box, Abra breaks free of the myth, or rather, Steinbeck allows her to exercise her free will and break free of the myth. Abra again resists classification when Aron attempts to make her into his own ideal of an "absolutely pure" being (642). She is not good, she insists, or at least not that good. Unlike the "pure evil" of Cathy, Abra is "pure" nothing and thus has the choice to be anything. "I'd rather be myself" (643), she says. Abra has another chance to break free of the Pandora myth with the ebony box that Lee gives her, which apparently contains good instead of evil. By opening the box she accepts Lee's offer as "substitute" father and thus chooses to create a new role for herself as Lee's daughter.

By choosing to define herself instead of being defined, Abra lays the foundation for change. We hear in the novel the collective voice of the people bemoaning changes brought by the end of the 1880s and a desire for the century to end so that the country can begin anew. "A man will have clean hands once we get the lid slammed shut on that stinking century" (169), they say. Steinbeck, however, knows that that desire is impossible. No one in his novel is allowed to escape the past, and we frequently see scenes not once but twice, as when both Charles and Caleb feel that they must compete for their father's love (39, 695). At times it seems as if each new generation is doomed to repeat the mistakes of the last, but then another "reversal" occurs, the allegory crumbles, and we see something unexpected.
It is here that we find Abra as the new Pandora. As a new generation, she has the opportunity for a future without the mistakes of her parents, but the opportunity still exists within the framework of the past. The Pandora story still exists, but it is Abra who must decide whether to open the box. The box, too, has changed, and its contents are uncertain. Abra opens Lee's box unaware of its contents but trusting in Lee. Her choice is made with awareness of both past and present. The future lies open to her, and though she may at a later time open another box with different results, she does so in all awareness of the myth, and the choice is hers.

One more box appears in the novel, in the dedication to its editor, Pat Covici, "Well, here is your box. Nearly everything I have is in it, and still it is not full," writes Steinbeck. Steinbeck had carved a wooden box for Covici, in which he presented to him the final copy of the manuscript (Fensch, 160). What Covici loosed by opening the box remains for readers to decide.

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Abstract:

An analysis of John Steinbeck's 'East of Eden' centers on Pandora's character in Greek Mythology. The novel presents a close resemblance to the Greek myth, with the significance of boxes in association with characters Cathy and Abra. The Pandora representation provides a different perspective in the novel which is written in the context of Christian creation. A comparison between Cathy and Pandora is given emphasis in the opening of the box that sowed evil and destruction. Abra represents the new Pandora who foresees a good future by learning from mistakes of the past.

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