

When Women Terrorise: The Psychopathic La Femme Fatale in *East of Eden* by John Steinbeck

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Abstract—This study focuses on the issue of female psychopathy and the portrayal of an emotionally and mentally disturbed female character in *East of Eden* (1952) by the contemporary American author, John Steinbeck. Although female characters are like male characters regarding their psychological complexity, the issues of antisocial personality disorders and psychopathy have only been examined in previous studies concerning male characters. Hence, this study focuses on the issue of psychopathy as an antisocial personality disorder explored through the leading female character based on the Psychopathy Checklist-Revised (PCL-R) by the American psychiatrist, Robert Hare (1991). A prominent view on the mentally disturbed female characters is that they are not analysed with equal attention as male characters; thus, this presumption that women are disqualified from psychological conceptions on account of their gender is a predicament by itself. Accordingly, this study examines the non-traditional la femme fatale personified through the female character, Cathy Trask, and investigates the author's portrayal of a female character with antisocial personality disorder tendencies. The findings show that, from a young age, Cathy reveals her lethal inclinations, harnessing her beauty and intelligence not only to her advantage but also to exploit those around her. Cathy also embodies the two "Personality Traits" and "Antisocial" factors and experiences many short-term marital relationships based on Hare's (PCL-R).

Index Terms—East of Eden, female antisocial personality disorder, John Steinbeck, la femme fatale, psychopathy

I. INTRODUCTION

The main issue with antisocial personality disorder comes from the definition itself since psychopathy is a very intriguing psychological condition; yet, most of its psychological constructions were formed on the observation of male cases. For the past fifteen years, all efforts to understand the psychopathic structure and its unpredictable violence were "involved primarily if not exclusively on male samples of prison inmates and forensic patients" (Warren et al., 2003, p. 224). Thus, many academic and literary studies regarding psychopathy and antisocial personality disorders were and are limited to male samples and male characters (Logan, 2011). Postmodern literature, however, offers a counter understanding of psychopathy by pushing female psychopathic killers into the spotlight; thus, the traditional definitions of 'la femme fatale' and 'psychopathic disorder' are, rightly, not exclusive to men.

Although psychopathy, as an antisocial personality disorder, has been found in both men and women (Lee & Salekin, 2010; Lehmann & Ittel, 2012), nonetheless, different studies have posited the view that male psychopaths and female psychopaths are different, especially when it comes to stress reactions, shamelessness, risk levels and aggression rates (Hicks et al., 2010; Lee & Salekin, 2010). Even when the differences between male and female psychopaths have already been established, only limited research and efforts have been undertaken to examine gender differences regarding psychopathy, specifically, and antisocial personality disorders in general. Men scored the highest when it comes to psychopathic studies and the examination of antisocial personality disorders as test subjects (Forth et al., 1996; Hicks et al., 2012; Verona et al., 2012).

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Unlike the traditional belief that female psychopaths are not regarded with the same degree of fear and damage as male psychopaths since women are not physically and internally harmful to the same extent as men, women do not frequently attack or harm strangers without any reasonable cause. Thus, this scenario can be the same for female psychopaths (Weizmann-Henelius et al., 2003). Female psychopaths are just as harmful and damaging to others as male psychopaths but maybe even more since they attack and damage not only the physical well-being but also the emotional, self-esteem, self-worth, and psychological aspects of their victims (Wynn et al., 2012).

More importantly, when it comes to the portrayals of immoral, deadly female characters, psychopathic female characters in fiction have always been labeled as “calculating gold-diggers, sinful sirens, the evil stepmother, twisted stepsister, crazy beautiful women” (Logan, 2011, p. 121). They have also been labeled as “evil and twisted” (Grossman, 2007, p. 19); more traditionally and frequently as “la femme fatales” (Hanson & O’Rawe, 2010; Doane, 2013). Although la femme fatales in literature have been categorised under different versions of ‘bad’ women, yet even research on harmful and potentially dangerous female characters has been overlooked in literary studies (Atwood, 1994; Aguiar, 2001). Atwood (1994) herself questions whether this is “somehow unfeminist to portray a woman behaving badly” (p. 1). However, Atwood (1994) also proposes that fiction needs such female representations now more than ever as “female bad characters can also act as keys to doors we need to open, and as a mirror in which we can see more than just a pretty face. They can be explorations of moral freedom since everyone’s choices are limited and woman’s choices have been more limited than men’s” (p. 8).

In particular, the novel *East of Eden* (1952) by the contemporary American novelist, John Steinbeck (1902-1968), depicts the present-day issue of female representations that challenge the traditional perception of women. The novel represents a critical and essential medium to fully understand and analyse contemporary female psychopathic complexity especially since Steinbeck’s female characters tend to challenge the typical female identity as depicted in works of literature.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. *The Concepts of Psychopathy and La Femme Fatale*

When it comes to studying and analysing psychopathic individuals, gender plays an important role in understanding and diagnosing the condition; this is simply because psychopathy has been primarily, if not exclusively, observed in male subjects only. The issue can also be seen in works of literature as many psychopathic female characters and la femme fatales are being labeled as mentally disturbed or crazy without any proper psychological analysis simply because psychopathy has been classified as a male condition. Consequently, many female characters that have been identified as exhibiting psychopathic and antisocial behaviours in previous studies on the subject were unfairly overlooked due to the psychological limitations that have been set. However, contemporary psychological studies and literary works have presented a radical outlook on psychopathy by portraying female characters as criminals rather than victims.

Psychopathy and antisocial personality disorders are among the foremost challenging and intriguing psychological conditions; until now, both disorders are difficult to research, understand and fully recognise (Lykken, 1995). Most studies and models concerning psychopathy were either personality models or behavioural examination (Lilienfeld, 1998) until the American psychiatrist, Hervey M. Cleckley (1903-1984), provided the very first comprehensive structural study on psychopathic and sociopathic personalities in his book, *The Mask of Sanity* (1941). During the past two hundred years, psychopathy has been investigated with massive attention clinically and scientifically in the psychological, medical and psychiatric fields (Warren et al., 2003, p. 223). It was not until later that the Canadian psychologist, Robert D. Hare (b. 1934), constructed the Psychopathy Checklist (PCL) and the Psychopathy Checklist-Revised (PCL-R) in 1991 followed by the Psychopathy Checklist: Screening Version (PCL-R: SV) in 1995 by Stephen Hart and David Neil Cox, which was originally based on Cleckley’s articulated clinical psychopathic description in 1941.

Hare’s PCL-R consists of twenty criteria used to assess various personality and behavioural traits associated with psychopathy. These twenty psychopathic characteristics are divided into two factors: the first factor is the “Personality Traits” factor, which consists of glibness or superficial charm, grandiose sense of self-worth, pathological lying, conning and manipulation, need for stimulation and proneness to boredom, lack of remorse or guilt, emotional shallowness, callousness and lack of empathy, parasitic lifestyle, and poor behavioural control. The second factor, the “Antisocial” factor, consists of early behavioural problems, juvenile delinquency, revocation of conditional release, criminal versatility, promiscuous sexual behavior, many short-term marital relationships, and failure to accept responsibility for one’s actions.

After clinical studies, psychopathic conditions became more attractive to vigorous research fields due to their intriguing states. Therefore, psychopathy is defined as “a clinical construct defined by a pattern of interpersonal, affective, and behavioral characteristics, including egocentricity; deception; manipulation; irresponsibility; impulsivity; stimulation-seeking; poor behavioural controls; shallow effect; a lack of empathy, guilt, or remorse; and a range of unethical and antisocial behaviours, not necessarily criminal” (Hare & Neumann, 2009, p. 893) Psychopaths, thus, are described as “social predators who charm, manipulate, and ruthlessly plow their way through life” (Hare, 2003, p. 1).

It has been argued that psychopathy, as an antisocial personality disorder, can be found in both genders yet it has

been recognised that male psychopaths are different from women psychopaths in different features, such as feelings of shame, stress reactions, and risk-takings (Lee & Salekin, 2010; Lehmann & Ittel, 2012). Nevertheless, at the same time, they acknowledge that there are limited clinical and scientific studies that have focused on psychopathic gender differences or have covered gender differences when it comes to psychopathic disorder. When it comes to antisocial and psychopathy, most studies have been on and about men, and very limited research has examined the possibility of whether psychopathy can even exist in women at all (Wynn et al., 2012). In fact, most studies have been more male-focused because male characteristics and behavioural structures relating to the disorder were untransferable to women (Cale & Lilienfeld, 2002; Forouzan & Cooke, 2005; Rogstad & Rogers, 2008; ref. in Wynn et al., 2012, p. 257).

In literature, there have been a few studies that have explored, analysed, and examined portrayals of psychopathic or psychologically disturbed male characters from different literary lenses (Dashti & Bahar, 2015; Shokri et al., 2016) yet very limited studies have examined portrayals of psychopathic or antisocial female characters in literature. Logan (2010) proposes that a psychopathic character in literature is a term that historically and literarily has always been associated with a male character and never a female character; suggesting that this antisocial personality disorder and psychological condition is only applicable to men and exclude women. Due to this literary limitation, many portrayals of potentially destructive female characters have been overlooked and undermined for years in literature. This is the gap of knowledge in scholarship on the issue of dangerous and deadly female characters in contemporary fiction which this study focuses on.

B. *John Steinbeck and East of Eden (1952)*

John Steinbeck, born in Salinas, California in 1902, is considered one of the most celebrated and recognised American writers of his time. Working and studying at Stanford University, Steinbeck spent most of his life in New York to establish himself as a full-time writer. After failing to publish any of his works for years, he achieved recognition after the publication of his short stories, *Tortilla Flat* (1935). Although Steinbeck is mostly known as a social novelist, many of his writings deal with economic, labour and social issues, such as his Pulitzer Prize winning novel, *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939). However, many of his writings also explore different themes, such as psychological complexity, as many of his characters illustrate different psychological elements. In particular, *East of Eden* (1952) is a notable example of Steinbeck's novel which portrays a psychologically challenging female character and is one of the most remarkable villains in contemporary literature (Warnick, 2014).

East of Eden is a postwar contemporary depiction of good and evil that challenges the traditional characterisation and psychological structure, especially when it comes to Steinbeck's portrayal of the female character, Cathy Ames. A study by Warnick (2014) investigates Cathy's character by applying the concept of monstrosity which has moved into a new direction; focussing not only on gothic literature by depicting supernatural and gothic elements, which is the traditional way that monsters have been explored and understood. Warnick applies the concepts of monstrosity and social fears in the novel by analysing only Cathy's characterisation. Although Steinbeck defines Cathy as a 'monster', Warnick (2014) argues that she is much more than that as she represents "a non-traditional female character that has stood against social norms" (p. 5). In addition, Mostafaei and Shabanirad (2015) examine Steinbeck's portrayal of Cathy as the devil incarnated while also focussing on the male/female relationships to address the concepts of social and gender dominations. In contrast, a study by Garcia (2016) highlights Steinbeck's female characters in three of Steinbeck's works, namely *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), *East of Eden* (1952), and the short story "The Chrysanthemums" (1937). According to Garcia (2016):

Strong women trying to break out against the social norms that force them into the background of Steinbeck's fiction [...] the female characters Elisa Allen, Ma Joad, and Cathy Trask working toward a new way of living in a male-dominated society and at times threatening or participating in violent behaviour in order to be accepted and understood. (p. 5)

Although different studies have focused on Cathy's characterisation, there is yet to research on the issue of her psychopathic personality or whether she reflects the characteristics of a contemporary *la femme fatale*. Therefore, this is the research objective in which this study will address.

III. DISCUSSION

A. *Cathy as a La Femme Fatale*

It is very difficult to overlook Steinbeck's intentions in portraying Cathy as nothing more than an evil creature; Steinbeck does not introduce Cathy until later in the novel and the style in which he introduces her tells us everything we need to know about Cathy:

I believe there are monsters born in the world to human parents. Some you can see, misshapen and horrible, with huge heads or tiny bodies ... and just as there are physical monsters, can there not be mental or psychic monsters born? The face and body may be perfect, but if a twisted gene or a malformed egg can produce physical monsters, may not the same process produce a malformed soul? (Steinbeck, 1952, p. 71)

For Steinbeck (1952), just as there is a physical evil that we can see, there is also an evil soul: "If one can be born with a twisted and deformed face and body, one can surely also come into the world with a malformed soul" (p. 41). Steinbeck makes it clear from the beginning that evilness and wickedness can exist physically and psychologically.

Cathy's character represents a textbook portrayal of a contemporary *la femme fatale* since the re-emergence of the *la femme fatale* equals social change (Harvey, 1978). This is especially true in a postmodern society where women are increasingly entering the work market; "the apparent frustration of the institution of the family in this era and the boredom and stifling entrapment of marriage and how *femme fatale* threatens to destroy traditional family structure" (Harvey, 1978, p. 62). Cathy's rejection of the standardised social norms adds more ambipolarity to her role in society since, as a woman, she rejects her role as a wife and strongly refuses her role as a mother. As discussed earlier, a *la femme fatale* is known for her uniqueness and her firm rejection of anything traditional and anything considered as a rule.

In addition to that, a *la femme fatale* uses her beauty and sexuality as she weaponises her beauty and sexual knowledge to her advantage. In the novel, Cathy's character is always linked to her outstanding beauty and physical charm combined with her sexual power which makes her even more feared and rejected by society and male authority. In the beginning, Cathy is portrayed in an angelic form, who possesses a certain charm that she uses to make men fall in love with her, including the male character, Adam Trask, who perceives her as the purest woman he has ever met:

You don't know this Eve; she will celebrate my choice. I don't think anyone can know her goodness [...] I had a gray life [...] then Cathy came [...] a kind of light spread out from her. And everything changed color. And the world opened out. And the day was good to awaken too. And there were no limits to anything [...] I'm going to make a garden so good, so beautiful, that it will be a proper place for her to live and a fitting place for her light. (Steinbeck, 1952, pp. 167-169)

A classical description of *la femme fatale* is as a modern representation of Lilith, the female demonic figure of Mesopotamian folklore, and the same can be argued about Cathy since Cathy is described in the novel as an embodiment of Lilith. Bragg (2000) argues:

Steinbeck's characterisation of Cathy owns as much to the Lilith legends as it does to the Eve myth [...] Cathy like Lilith, corrupts both young boys [her children and the young boys from her childhood] and young girl [her harlots while working as a Madam] and is invariably described in terms of demonic imagery and wickedness. (p. 442)

Cathy's rejection of the traditional female role and her disobedience to the typical female responsibilities that are set upon her do not appear until she becomes an adult, yet her counter-rebellious character has manifested at a very young age. When Cathy was just a little girl, she exhibited irregular sexual energy and unusual erotic behaviour that do not suit her age; for example, when she was only 10-years-old, her mother found her "naked to the waist" (Steinbeck, 1952, p. 75) in the carriage house tied and bound by two teenage boys. Although the two boys were punished for their actions, Cathy acted as if nothing had happened even when she was found in a very bizarre situation; "Mrs. Ames saw that Cathy's wrists were tied with a heavy rope. She screamed and flung herself down and fumbled at the knots. She carried Cathy into the house and put her to bed" (Steinbeck, 1952, p. 75). Even at the age of ten, Cathy had everything under control, and she was the one who took advantage of the two teenage boys:

Their crime was bad enough, but the lies proved an evil that not even the whip could remove [...] Cathy, they said, had started the whole thing, and they had given her five cents. They had not tied her hands. They said they remembered that she was playing with a rope. (Steinbeck, 1952, p. 75)

Everyone believed that Cathy was the victim based on the physical evidence, especially since Mrs. Ames had seen Cathy in that state: "Mrs. Ames settled down to a steady hysteria, she had been there. She had seen. She was the final authority. And out of her hysteria a sadistic devil peered. She wanted blood" (Steinbeck, 1952, p. 75). In actuality, Cathy's father is the only one who believed that Cathy was the guilty one as Mr. Ames knew of his daughter's abilities of seduction and manipulation even as a child:

There were things he did not understand, but he did not bring them up to anyone [...] in her father's mind, another question stirred, and he shoved it down deep and felt dishonest for thinking about it at all. Cathy had remarkable luck in finding things – a gold charm, money, a little silken purse, a silver cross with red stone said to be rubies. She found many things, and when her father advertised in the weekly courier about the cross no one ever claimed it. (Steinbeck, 1952, pp. 76-77)

Since Cathy was a child, she had used her intelligence and wit to gain power over men. Cathy's father was the only man who suspected that she had a maleficent soul and wicked nature, but Cathy was smart enough to convince him otherwise and forced him to forget all his suspicions, "[h]e would have felt bad if two boys were in the house for something they did not do [...] it was better if he didn't know anything, safer, wiser, and much more comfortable" (Steinbeck, 1952, p. 77). Just like the traditional *la femme fatale*, Cathy possesses power and control over men, "she exercised a powerful effect on both boys and girls. And if any boy could come on her alone, he found himself drawn to her by a force he could neither understand nor overcome" (Steinbeck, 1952, p. 77). When Cathy became a little older, she had a dream of becoming a teacher but that dream soon changed when she met Adam. Later, she starts working as a prostitute and then becomes the Madam. Antonio (2015) notes that "men created *femme fatales* in their work as an expression of what they saw in women who were beginning to declare their sexual and political freedom" (p. 3).

In the novel, Cathy is portrayed as a female character who celebrates her liberal lifestyle and freedom, especially when it comes to her rejection of her role as a wife and a mother. Antonio (2015) explores the ideology of marriage in general as "an institution for social and economic reasons" (p. 3) yet the postmodern notion of marriage views marriage

as “companionship and affection” (p. 3). However, the postmodern *la femme fatale* represents an alternative to the traditional limitation whereby women choose not to be mothers and wives; instead, they choose to have a life “without men” (Antonio, 2015, p. 4). Here, Cathy makes many men fall in love with her and abuses them for a certain lifestyle without committing to any of them; she views relationships and marriage as unnecessary and slavish to her and women in general. In fact, Adam is not the only male character who falls prey to Cathy’s charms but also Mr. Edward who spends all his life savings to buy her gifts, lands and luxurious items:

In their sexual relations, she convinced him that the result was not quite satisfactory to her, that if he were a better man, he could release a flood of unbelievable reactions in her. Her method was to keep him continually off balance. (Steinbeck, 1952, p. 93)

Traditionally, *la femme fatales* are very sexual beings whereby they use their sexuality and beauty to manipulate and lure men into submission. For Cathy, any sexual and physical experimentation is just a tool used to control and abuse men, “[w]omen such as Cathy [...] lay with a man’s sexual desire and then reject him, or engage in sex and then disparage his performance, all in an attempt to destroy his sense of worth as a masculine being” (Steinbeck, 1952, p. 138). Therefore, according to Tryforos (2018), *la femme fatales* in general “have more freedom to express their sexuality and overly seduce men for power rather than masquerading as someone they are not” (p. 40). In the novel, Cathy’s profession as a prostitute makes it easy for her to exercise all sexual liberty without limits but it does come with its risks; for instance, Mr. Edward starts to physically abuse Cathy for obedience and submission, “Every blow had been intended to crush her” (Steinbeck, 1952, p. 98). After being abused, Cathy learns that she must “never hurry” (Steinbeck, 1952, p. 238) and that she should be more aware, more intelligent and more patient until she completely asserts her domination over men.

La femme fatales, in general, challenge the traditional gender roles although they represent the *fatale female personification* whereby, they are both beautiful and deadly. Cathy is portrayed in the novel as nothing more than a monster, a demon, Lilith and a very dangerous *la femme fatale*. Yet, it is interesting to note that, according to Naremore (2002), *la femme fatale* characters are normally extended from fantastical supernatural worlds; thus, they normally exist in a “nightmarish world, which is typically a grotesque mirror wherein death, violence, treachery, illicit relationships rule the night as does the *femme fatale*” (p. 45). Broe (2009) also argues that, normally, *la femme fatales* exist in an unpredictable world whereby men have to adapt to the new system and the new gender roles that have been challenged after the two world wars. Notably, Cathy is rejected by her society for not playing her part according to the new gender role; as a result, she changes her name to “Kate” and gains control over the brothel house to create her world and kingdom according to her image:

She owns a whorehouse, the most vicious and depraved in this whole end of the country. The evil and ugly, the distorted and slimy, the worst things humans can think up are for sale there. The crippled and crooked come there for satisfaction. But it is worse than that. Cathy and she is now called Kate, takes the fresh and the young and the beautiful and so maims them that they can never be whole again. (Steinbeck, 1952, p. 304)

Cathy does not create chaos and destruction to her male clients but also to the man who loves her the most, namely Adam. When she leaves him and her children alone without a word and he later finds out that she is working in a whorehouse, he does not believe it, “Now, there’s your medicine [the truth about Cathy or Kate]. Let’s see what it does to you. ‘You are a liar.’ said Adam”. (Steinbeck, 1952, p. 304)

B. Cathy’s Psychopathy

Cathy’s characterisation as Lilith, a demon and a monster takes away the psychological complexity of her characterisation especially since she represents more than a fantastic beast in the oldest story in history. According to Hare (2003), if there is one thing that all psychopaths seem to have in common, they are all charming yet almost always deadly and dangerous individuals. Cathy’s psychopathy comes directly from her sadistic methods to exercise control; her positions as a prostitute and a Madam in a whorehouse give her the control that she needs over men and become conduits to her psychopathic needs. One of the key characteristics highlighted by Hare (2003) is that psychopaths display dangerous behavioural problems at an early age. These might consist of persistent dishonesty, deception, larceny, arson, truancy, destruction behaviour and/or precocious sexuality. When Cathy was small, she displayed a series of behavioural problems, such as violent behaviours; for example, one major incident that comes to mind is where the two young boys were punished. The crime itself is not just violent but rather also reveals an insight into Cathy’s sadistic sexual conduct, “Cathy, they said, had started the whole thing, and they had given her five cents. They had not tied her hands. They said they remembered that she was playing with a rope” (Steinbeck, 1952, p. 75).

Furthermore, Cathy’s father was also aware that his daughter had been known to steal and lie to others, and this had often happened in the town. Cathy’s profession as a prostitute and a Madam, later, helps her to demonstrate and exploit her power over men, where she possesses compromising pictures as a blackmailing tool not meant for her safety but, rather, she takes great pleasure in holding something against them. The true reason behind her blackmailing her clients is only to torture them psychologically; thus, by blackmailing them, Cathy has full control over her brothel and her clients. Cathy also displays her lack of guilt and empathy toward others many times; working as a Madam, she holds enough power to control others for her sadistic indulgence, “No one has ever escaped [...] if anything should happen to me anything one hundred letters, each one with a picture, would drop in the mail, and each letter will go where it will do the most harm” (Steinbeck, 1952, pp. 320-321).

Hare (2003) also notes that one of the main psychopathic characteristics is their arrogance and their aptitude for falsehood and manipulation; as recalled, Cathy's father knew from an early age that Cathy was more than capable of manipulating and lying to others using her intelligence and charm. Cathy does not believe that lying and manipulation are wrong especially if she employs them for her advantage as she sees herself as better than others, "I'm smarter than humans. Nobody can hurt me" (Steinbeck, 1952, p. 321). Since she believes herself to be a superior version of everyone else, this narcissistic behaviour prevents her from connecting or relating to others. Cathy, as Kate, stands as proof of her lack of empathy and understanding for human emotions, such as psychologically torturing her clients and abusing little girls to provide the requested pleasures. As Kate, Cathy is proud that no one can harm her or "no one knew [her]" (Steinbeck, 1952, p. 319). Cathy's characterisation is directed toward sadism and sexual control, and this is evident in the manner in which Kate is able to become the Madam. Kate tortures and murders the previous brothel owner, Madam Faye, who is loved by all, "a pretty damn good citizen [...] had a nice place, quiet, well run" (Steinbeck, 1952, p. 211).

Hare notes that it is a fact that both psychopathy and crime seem to connect on so many levels and that psychopaths tend to exhibit many antisocial characteristics and violent behaviours, such as "a sense of entitlement and general lack of behavioural inhibitions; also, their need for power and control constitute what might be described as a prescription for the commission of antisocial and criminal acts" (Hare, 2003, p. 12). Hare (2003) also states that psychopaths have a high tendency for violent and criminal offenses which would "explain why psychopaths find it so easy to victimise the vulnerable and to use intimidation and violence as a tool to achieve power and control over others" (p. 12). In the novel, Kate's ruthlessness and violent behaviours towards Faye are disturbing not only due to the brutality itself but rather it is unjustifiable especially since Kate does not have any motive or cause for torturing and killing Faye.

Although Cathy or Kate is said to be both beautiful and intelligent, it seems that she does not have any long-term goals even though her murder of Faye is only for money and to take control of the brothel. Kate appears to only be motivated by financial growth. Kate's lack of remorse and reasonable motives for her violent inclinations stands as another testament to her psychopathic tendencies; instead of just simply killing Faye, she wants to torture her first because Kate finds pleasure in hurting and torturing others, "[s]he had no feeling about Faye [...] there had been a time during her dying when the noise and the smell of her had made anger rise in Kate so that she considered killing her quickly to get it over" (Steinbeck, 1952, p. 500). This then corresponds to one of the main psychopathic characteristics, which is a lack of remorse or guilt and criminal versatility (Hare, 2003).

Here, Faye's murder depicts just how inhuman and brutal Kate can be and, if given the chance, she would do it again without any guilt or remorse. Toward the end of the novel, Kate becomes a well-known businesswoman:

... If they followed the rules she laid down [...] Kate would take care of them and protect them [...] the girls did have the security of knowing that they would not be punished without cause. (Steinbeck, 1952, p. 468)

Hare (2010) is also of the opinion that psychopaths and murders tend to appear to be "more predictive to general violence and sexual violence" (p. 13) and "significantly more gratuitous and sadistic violence" (Porter et al., 2003, p. 467; Hare, 2003, p. 14). Although Kate becomes the Madam for the wrong reasons and uses violent methods, it seems that Kate treats everyone fairly except her clients but even the blackmailed photographs of her clients come to an end after her death as they are found and destroyed (Steinbeck, 1952, p. 558).

Traditionally, characters who are cast as wives and mothers always seem to be presented as gentle and feminine, they are the protectors of their family and their partners. Nevertheless, Cathy acts as an unusual representation of a female figure which counters the rest of the female characters that act with empathy and kindness; even the prostitutes in the novel stand as strongly moral characters, such as Jenny, Faye, The Nigger and Fartin. Cathy is the solo character who has a destructive psychopathic nature as Gladstein (1986) states:

She [Cathy] occupies both of the categories Steinbeck reserves for women; she is both a mother and a whore. But, contrary to his usual sentimentalisation of those roles, Steinbeck shows Cathy as a malevolent mother, one who tries to abort and then abandons her children. She is also a far cry from his usual whore with a heart. (p. 98)

Conventionally, characters tend to shift from negative to positive as part of their character developmental journeys and, in many of Steinbeck's novels, the female characters cross the boundaries from being harlots to mothers. However, Cathy's character development is depicted in a psychopathic malevolent style since she has no empathy and morals for her family, clients, working girls and herself. As outlined in Hare's psychopathic checklist, one of the psychopathic tendencies displayed by many psychopaths is their rejection to take responsibility and accountability for their actions. Indeed, Cathy's refusal of her supportive and nurturing role as a wife and a mother reflects her psychopathic character. Cathy has no intention of being a mother and this is shown early on when she discovers that she is pregnant; thus, she decides to travel to California for an abortion.

However, her plan fails only because her doctor refuses to operate. After all, he witnesses "something inhuman about her" (Steinbeck, 1952, p. 134). Cathy then decides that, the moment she gives birth to her children, she will immediately leave Adam and the children alone; she even informs Adam that she will leave him soon despite his constant denial of her plan, "I am not going to stay here. As soon as I can I will go away" (Steinbeck, 1952, p. 172). It is not only that Cathy has rejected the motherhood role, even her body seems to reject birth and childbearing, "her breasts did not grow, and her nipples did not darken. There was no quickening of milk glands, no physical planning to feed the newborns" (Steinbeck, 1952, p. 182).

The moment Cathy can move physically, she leaves Adam and her twins after shooting Adam in the shoulder and telling him that she does not want anything to do with the children or him, “throw them in one of your wells” (Steinbeck, 1952, p. 199). By shooting Adam and choosing her freedom over her motherly responsibilities, she shows poor behavioural controls and failure to take responsibility and accountability for her as these two characteristics are two main traits in psychopaths (Hare, 2003; Hare & McPherson, 1984; Hare et al., 1990, 1991, 2012). Hare (2003) suggests that “psychopathic individuals are more aggressive than non-psychopathic individuals and institutionalised samples showed verbal peer and covert aggressions are highly correlated to psychopathy” (p. 13).

Hare (2003) also notes that women psychopaths display higher aggression and abuse levels than non-psychopathic women and, normally, their aggression is not only internalised but also expressed externally. Cathy’s neglect of and loathing for her role as a wife and a mother are essential for the portrayal of her psychopathic character; her elimination of being emotionally connected to anyone, even her children, stands to prove her lack of remorse and guilt. By choosing to leave everyone for her selfish reasons, her husband starts to suffer from abandonment issues and her children also grow up without a mother; both Aron and Cal are psychologically damaged by their mother’s absence, and this is established thoroughly throughout Aron’s need for a mother, “[Aron] pretended like [Abra] is his mother” (Steinbeck, 1952, p. 422).

In the novel, Cathy is portrayed as having very feminine and gentle physical characteristics which hints to us that she is innocent and weak, giving men, such as Adam, the feelings of protection and providing “a helpless child” (Steinbeck, 1952, p. 119). However, it is later that we come to fully understand Cathy’s psychopathic nature. Even when Cathy’s physical portrayal centers around her feminine energy and fragile female identity, Cathy’s psychopathic tendencies are also depicted in many scenes in the novel; for example:

Cathy’s voice could cut like a file when she wished [...] she exercised a powerful effect on both boys and girls. And if any boy could come on her alone, he found himself drawn to her by a force he could neither understand nor overcome. (Steinbeck, 1952, pp. 72-77)

In the final chapter, Cathy commits suicide which is her way of taking control of her death; yet she leaves everything she owns to her son, Aron, and signs the papers as “Catherine Trask” (Steinbeck, 1952, p. 550). Ironically, she implicitly feels that this moniker represents her original identity. Until the very end, Cathy does not display any feelings of guilt and empathy for leaving and choosing her happiness and freedom are the only thing that seems to matter to her, “[n]obody can hold me. Nobody can trap me” (Steinbeck, 1952, p. 461).

IV. CONCLUSION

Steinbeck’s *East of Eden* portrays the psychopathic la femme fatale character, Cathy, in a different and more complicated light by illustrating her as a psychopathic character, highlighting not only a very dangerous contemporary la femme fatale but also a psychologically non-traditional female character. With regards to the objective of this study, which is to examine Cathy’s non-traditional la femme fatale characterisation as a counter to Steinbeck’s traditional female characters, it is safe to state that Cathy displays her fatal nature from an early age in which she utilises her beauty and intelligence to her favour and also to abuse others.

Conventionally, la femme fatales are known for their extraordinary beauty and their intelligence as they are women who employ their sexuality and attraction to seduce and harm men. In connection to the next objective of the study, namely to investigate Cathy’s psychopathic nature with regard to her la femme fatale persona, it has been found that both issues seem to be intertwined, to some extent. Cathy clearly shows disturbing early behaviour, cunning and manipulation, zero accountability and failure to take responsibility, sexual advantages, and pathological lying to others like it is her nature. She rejects every role given to her as a daughter, a wife and a mother all for the sake of wealth and freedom. Finally, Cathy also demonstrates mutable dimensions for violence and abuse, which are key characteristics of psychopathic individuals.

After careful examination following Hare’s Psychopathic Checklist-Revised, it is determined that Cathy or Kate embodies both the two “Personality Traits” and “Antisocial” factors listed in the psychopathic checklist, namely criminal versatility, pathological lying, conning and manipulative, lack of remorse or guilt, emotionally shallow, lack of empathy, failure to accept responsibility for own actions, impulsivity, irresponsibility, poor behavioural control, early behavioural problems, promiscuous sexual behavior, and many short-term marital relationships as outlined by Hare (2003). In future studies, therefore, an analysis of psychopathic female figures, such as the femme fatale, can be conducted by employing the trauma theory by Cathy Caruth to explore whether these characters might implicitly experience post-traumatic stress disorder, contributing to their psychopathic inclinations. Furthermore, delving deeper into this subject could involve applying the standpoint theory by Sandra Harding to examine if non-traditional female characters in fiction manage to establish their unique perspectives, even after enduring marginalisation during their formative years.

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