

The Pearl

John Steinbeck

Plot Overview

- Kino, Juana, and their infant son, Coyotito, live in a modest brush house by the sea. One morning, calamity strikes when a scorpion stings Coyotito. Hoping to protect their son, Kino and Juana rush him to the doctor in town. When they arrive at the doctor's gate, they are turned away because they are poor natives who cannot pay enough.
- Later that same morning, Kino and Juana take their family canoe, an heirloom, out to the estuary to go diving for pearls. Juana makes a poultice for Coyotito's wound, while Kino searches the sea bottom. Juana's prayers for a large pearl are answered when Kino surfaces with the largest pearl either of them has ever seen. Kino lets out a triumphant yell at his good fortune, prompting the surrounding boats to circle in and examine the treasure.
- In the afternoon, the whole neighborhood gathers at Kino's brush house to celebrate his find. Kino names a list of things that he will secure for his family with his newfound wealth, including a church wedding and an education for his son. The neighbors marvel at Kino's boldness and wonder if he is foolish or wise to harbor such ambitions.

Plot Overview (cont)

- Toward evening, the local priest visits Kino to bless him in his good fortune and to remind him of his place within the church. Shortly thereafter, the doctor arrives, explaining that he was out in the morning but has come now to cure Coyotito. He administers a powdered capsule and promises to return in an hour.
- In the intervening period, Coyotito grows violently ill, and Kino decides to bury the pearl under the floor in a corner of the brush house. The doctor returns and feeds Coyotito a potion to quiet his spasms. When the doctor inquires about payment, Kino explains that soon he will sell his large pearl and inadvertently glances toward the corner where he has hidden the pearl. This mention of the pearl greatly intrigues the doctor, and Kino is left with an uneasy feeling.
- Before going to bed, Kino reburies the pearl under a stone in his fire hole. That night, he is roused by an intruder digging around in the corner. A violent struggle ensues, and Kino's efforts to chase away the criminal leave him bloodied. Terribly upset by this turn of events, Juana proposes that they abandon the pearl, which she considers an agent of evil.

Plot Overview (cont)

- The next morning, Kino and Juana make their way to town to sell the pearl. Juan Tomás, Kino's brother, advises Kino to be wary of cheats. Indeed, all of the dealers conspire to bid low on the pearl. Kino indignantly refuses to accept their offers, resolving instead to take his pearl to the capital. That evening, as Kino and Juana prepare to leave, Juan Tomás cautions Kino against being overly proud, and Juana repeats her wish to be rid of the pearl. Kino silences her, explaining that he is a man and will take care of things.
- In the middle of the night, Juana steals away with the pearl. Kino wakes as she leaves and pursues her, apprehending her just as she is poised to throw the pearl into the sea. He tackles her, takes the pearl back, and beats her violently, leaving her in a crumpled heap on the beach. As he returns to the brush house, a group of hostile men confronts him and tries to take the pearl from him. He fights the men off, killing one and causing the rest to flee, but drops the pearl in the process.
- As Juana ascends from the shore to the brush house, she finds the pearl lying in the path. Just beyond, she sees Kino on the ground, next to the dead man. He bemoans the loss of the pearl, which she presents to him. Though Kino explains that he had no intention to kill, Juana insists that he will be labeled a murderer. They resolve to flee at once. Kino rushes back to the shore to prepare the canoe, while Juana returns home to gather Coyotito and their belongings.

Plot Overview (cont)

- Kino arrives at the shore and finds his canoe destroyed by vandals. When he climbs the hill, he sees a fire blazing, and realizes that his house has burned down. Desperate to find refuge, Kino, Juana and Coyotito duck into Juan Tomás's house, where they hide out for the day. Relieved that the three did not perish in the blaze, as the rest of the neighborhood believes, Juan Tomás and his wife, Apolonia, reluctantly agree to keep Kino and Juana's secret and provide shelter for them while pretending to be ignorant of their whereabouts.
- At nightfall, Kino, Juana, and Coyotito set out for the capital. Skirting the town, they travel north until sunrise and then take covert shelter by the roadside. They sleep for most of the day and are preparing to set out again when Kino discovers that three trackers are following them. After hesitating briefly, Kino decides that they must hurry up the mountain, in hopes of eluding the trackers. A breathless ascent brings them to a water source, where they rest and take shelter in a nearby cave. Kino attempts to mislead the trackers by creating a false trail up the mountain. Kino, Juana, and Coyotito then hide in the cave and wait for an opportunity to escape back down the mountain.

Plot Overview (cont)

- The trackers are slow in their pursuit and finally arrive at the watering hole at dusk. They make camp nearby, and two of the trackers sleep while the third stands watch. Kino decides that he must attempt to attack them before the late moon rises. He strips naked to avoid being seen and sneaks up to striking distance. Just as Kino prepares to attack, Coyotito lets out a cry, waking the sleepers. When one of them fires his rifle in the direction of the cry, Kino makes his move, killing the trackers in a violent fury. In the aftermath, Kino slowly realizes that the rifle shot struck and killed his son in the cave.
- The next day, Kino and Juana make their way back through town and the outlying brush houses. Juana carries her dead son slung over her shoulder. They walk all the way to the sea, as onlookers watch in silent fascination. At the shore, Kino pulls the pearl out of his clothing and takes one last, hard look at it. Then, with all his might, under a setting sun, he flings the pearl back into the sea.

Kino

- Kino, *The Pearl's* protagonist, is an extremely simple character, motivated by basic drives: his love for his family, loyalty to the traditions of his village and his people, and frustration at his people's oppression at the hands of their European colonizers. Kino also possesses a quick mind and a strong work ethic, and he feels a close, pure kinship with the natural world, the source of his livelihood.
- At the beginning of the novella, Kino is essentially content with his life. However, two seemingly chance occurrences—Coyotito's scorpion sting and Kino's discovery of the pearl—open Kino's eyes to a larger world. As Kino begins to covet material wealth and education for his son, his simple existence becomes increasingly complicated by greed, conflict, and violence. The basic trajectory of Kino's character is a gradual decline from a state of innocence to a state of corruption and disillusionment. The forces propelling this decline are ambition and greed. At the end of the novella, Kino's tranquil relationship with nature has been perverted and reversed, a change signified by the fact that Kino finds the sounds of the animals at night threatening rather than reassuring.
- Because *The Pearl* is a parable, Kino's character can be interpreted in many ways. It can be seen as a critique of colonial politics, an exploration of how good motives can bring a person to a bad end, or even an attack on the idea of the American dream. But on the most basic level, Kino represents the dangers of ambition and greed. Kino's ruin, caused by his lust for the pearl, illustrates the extent to which ambition and greed poison and jeopardize every aspect of a human's familial, cultural, and personal well-being.

Juana

- Kino's wife, Juana, is more reflective and more practical than Kino. She prays for divine aid when Coyotito's wound leaves Kino impotent with rage, and she also has the presence of mind to salve the wound with a seaweed poultice. Juana is loyal and submissive, obeying her husband as her culture dictates, but she does not always agree with his actions. Like Kino, Juana is at first seduced by the greed the pearl awakens, but she is much quicker than Kino to recognize the pearl as a potential threat. In fact, Juana comes to view the pearl as a symbol of evil.
- As the novella progresses, Juana becomes certain that the limitations, rules, and customs of her society must be upheld. Whereas Kino seeks to transform his existence, Juana believes that their lives will be better if they keep things as they are. Kino can see only what they have to gain from the pearl, but Juana can see also what they stand to lose, and she wisely prefers to protect what she has rather than sacrifice it all for a dream. Juana thus serves an important function in the novella—she counterbalances Kino's enthusiasm and reminds the reader that Kino's desire to make money is dangerous. Juana also symbolizes the family's domestic happiness; the scene in which Kino beats her for trying to cast off the pearl thus represents Kino's tragic break from the family he longs to support.

The Doctor

- Though he does not figure largely in the novella's plot, the doctor is an important character in *The Pearl* because he represents the colonial attitudes that oppress Kino's people. The doctor symbolizes and embodies the colonists' arrogance, greed, and condescension toward the natives, whom the colonists do not even try to understand. Like the other colonists, the doctor has no interest in Kino's people. He has come only to make money, and his greed distorts his human values. As a physician, the doctor is duty-bound to act to save human life, but when confronted with someone whom he considers beneath him, the doctor feels no such duty. His callous refusal to treat Coyotito for the scorpion sting because Kino lacks the money to pay him thus demonstrates the human cost of political conquest rooted in the desire for financial profit. As his interior monologue in Chapter 1 shows, the doctor is obsessed with European society, and European cultural values grip his mind so deeply that he doesn't even realize how ignorant he is of Kino and Kino's people.

Greed as a Destructive Force

- As Kino seeks to gain wealth and status through the pearl, he transforms from a happy, contented father to a savage criminal, demonstrating the way ambition and greed destroy innocence. Kino's desire to acquire wealth perverts the pearl's natural beauty and good luck, transforming it from a symbol of hope to a symbol of human destruction. Furthermore, Kino's greed leads him to behave violently toward his wife; it also leads to his son's death and ultimately to Kino's detachment from his cultural tradition and his society. Kino's people seem poised for a similar destruction, as the materialism inherent in colonial capitalism implants a love of profit into the simple piety of the native people.

The Role of Fate and Agency in Shaping Human Life

- The Pearl portrays two contrasting forces that shape human life and determine individual destiny. The novella depicts a world in which, for the most part, humans shape their own destinies. They provide for themselves, follow their own desires, and make their own plans. At the same time, forces beyond human control, such as chance, accident, and the gods, can sweep in at any moment and, for good or ill, completely change the course of an individual's life. If fate is best represented in the novella by the open sea where pearl divers plunge beneath the waves hoping for divine blessings, human agency is best represented by the village of La Paz, where myriad human desires, plans, and motives come together to form civilization.
- Kino and Juana's lives change irreparably the moment the scorpion, a symbol of malignant fate, bites their child. Their lives then change irreparably again the moment Kino finds the pearl, a symbol of beneficent fate. Nevertheless, it is not fate but human agency, in the form of greed, ambition, and violence, that facilitates the novella's disastrous final outcome, as Kino's greed and the greed of others lead to a series of conflicts over the pearl. Kino finds himself caught between the forces of fate and the forces of human society, between the destiny handed him by fate and the destiny he seeks to create himself.

Colonial Society's Oppression of Native Culture

- The doctor who refuses to save Coyotito's life at the beginning of the novel because Kino lacks the money to pay him represents colonial arrogance and oppression. Snide and condescending, the doctor displays an appallingly limited and self-centered mindset that is made frightening by his unshakable belief in his own cultural superiority over Kino, and by the power that he holds to save or destroy lives. Steinbeck implicitly accuses the doctor's entire colonial society of such destructive arrogance, greed, and ambition. The European colonizers that govern Kino and the native people are shown to bring about the destruction of the native society's innocence, piety, and purity.

Nature Imagery

- Kino's physical and spiritual existence is intimately connected with the natural world. He lives in a brush house, and he makes his living as a pearl diver. Not surprisingly, nature imagery is an important element of the novella. Kino observes the world of his garden in the opening scene of Chapter 1 and the world of the ocean in Chapter 2. Kino and Juana's final journey up the mountain takes place on a dark night full of animal noises and cries.
- Steinbeck depicts the natural world as a realm that mirrors or parallels the human world. Overall, the work's nature imagery reflects both the natural world's idyllic innocence—the innocence Kino possesses at the beginning of the novella—and the natural world's darker qualities of struggle and flight—the struggle and flight Kino experiences at the novella's end. The Pearl's descriptions of the sea, for instance, subtly emphasize the fact that life in the sea is a struggle for survival from which only the strongest emerge alive—a struggle that mirrors the conflict between Kino and the native people against their colonial rulers. Kino's two interactions with ants—the first in Chapter 1, the second in Chapter 6—create a parallel between Kino's relationship to nature and the gods' relationship to Kino (he towers over the ants in the same way that the gods tower over him).

Kino's Song

- Throughout the novel, whenever Kino has a particularly powerful feeling or instinct, he hears a song in his head that corresponds to that feeling. When he is happy with his family in Chapter 1, for instance, he hears the Song of the Family. When he senses malice or dishonesty, he hears the Song of Evil. These songs point to the oral nature of Kino's cultural tradition. The ancient, familiar songs, presumably handed down from generation to generation, occupy such a central place in how Kino's people perceive themselves that the songs actually give form to their inner feelings. Kino is much less likely to become aware of the sensation of wariness than he is to hear the Song of Danger in his head. Similarly, he is much less likely to take action because of his own conscious judgment than because he associates the song with a certain kind of urgent behavior in relation to the outside world. The songs also point to Steinbeck's original conception of *The Pearl* as a film project; in a motion picture, the songs could be played out loud for the audience to hear and thus function as recurring motifs and melodies that would underscore the story's themes.

The Pearl

- Because *The Pearl* is a parable, the meaning of the pearl itself—the novella's central symbol—is never explicitly defined. Nevertheless, though the nature of the pearl's symbolism is left to each reader's interpretation, this symbolism seems to shift over the course of the work. At first, the pearl represents a stroke of divine providence. Kino's people have a prophecy about a great “Pearl That Might Be,” a perfect pearl that exists as a perfect possibility. Kino and Juana's discovery of the pearl seems to fulfill this prophecy, and it fills them with hope for Coyotito's future and for the possibility of a life free from the shackles of colonial oppression. The discovery of the pearl seems a happy accident, one that counterbalances the tragic accident of Coyotito's scorpion sting.
- Once the town finds out about the pearl, however, the object begins to make everyone who beholds it, including Kino, greedy. The neighbors call it “the Pearl of the World,” and while that title originally seems to refer to the pearl's great size and beauty, it also underscores the fact that having the pearl brings the outside world's destructive influence into Kino's simple life. As the dealers begin lowballing him, Kino ceases to view the pearl with optimistic delight and instead focuses on its sale with determined ambition. The pearl's association with good fortune and hope weakens, and the pearl becomes associated more strongly with human plans and desires. Juana and Juan Tomás begin to view the pearl as a threat rather than a blessing.

The Pearl (cont)

- The pearl elicits more and more greed on Kino's part, as he begins to devote all his energies and possessions to protecting it (recalling the biblical parable of the pearl of great price). It thus comes to symbolize the destructive nature of materialism. The implication is that Kino's acquisition of material wealth isn't enough to save him from the colonists' oppression, even though such wealth is the foundation of the colonists' capitalist system. In fact, Kino's shift in focus from his spiritual well-being to his material status seems to represent the colonists' ultimate triumph.
- The way the pearl is depicted through the course of the novella mirrors the changes that Kino himself undergoes. At first, the pearl is a simple and beautiful object of nature. Once it becomes entangled with notions of material value, however, it becomes destructive and dangerous. The pearl is an object of natural beauty and goodness that draws out the evil inherent in mankind.

The Scorpion

- The scorpion that stings Coyotito in Chapter 1 symbolizes a seemingly arbitrary evil that, because it has nothing to do with human agency, must come from the gods. Biblically, the scorpion generally represents the destruction of innocence, and the fact that Coyotito is a baby compounds the Christian symbolism of the event. Coyotito is touched by evil, and this natural destruction of innocence repeats itself in the novella in the destruction of Kino's innocence by his ambition and greed and in the destruction of the natives' traditional, natural way of life by the colonists.

Kino's Canoe

- A means of making a living—both pearls and food—that has been passed down for generations, the canoe that Kino uses represents his link to cultural tradition. This culture is deeply spiritual, so it is significant that Kino uses the canoe to find the pearl, which is provided by a divine power that has nothing to do with human agency. It is also significant that Kino's possession of the pearl leads directly to the canoe's destruction, in Chapter 5, an event that symbolizes Kino's devastating decision to break with his cultural heritage because he wishes to pursue material gain.

Parable and the Form of the Pearl

- A parable is a simple story that relays a moral lesson. Frequently, parables are also allegories, stories in which characters, objects, and events hold fixed symbolic meaning. Steinbeck's focus on the symbolic role the pearl plays in Kino's life is constant, as is his focus on the symbolic importance of Kino himself. In general, Steinbeck's overly simplistic portrayal of events is not realistic, or even believable, and it indicates *The Pearl's* place as a parable or fable.
- Kino is an impoverished native fisherman, but more important is his allegorical role as a man faced with the temptation of wealth beyond his wildest dreams. Because the novella is concerned with Kino's moral obligation and not his civic obligation, it concludes with Kino's casting the pearl back into the sea, a renunciation of material wealth that indicates he has learned a moral lesson. It is important that the novella does not conclude with Kino's arrest or continuing flight from justice, as a realistic novel concerned with civic punishment for ethical transgression might.

Parable and the Form of the Pearl (cont)

- Despite the apparent gulf between realism and parable, *The Pearl* attempts to show how the two are linked through the process of -storytelling. Steinbeck suggests that a culture's collective memory eventually fictionalizes all realistic experience into parable form. "As with all retold tales that are in people's hearts," he writes in the novella's epigraph, "there are only good and bad things and black and white things and good and evil things and no in-between anywhere." Storytelling gradually transforms real occurrences into simplified parables designed to teach a specific lesson. While everyday life may lack a clear lesson or meaning, the human mind is always in the process of ordering and classifying events in order to make sense of experience. It is a human tendency, and therefore a literary tendency, to classify and simplify experience, to turn reality into parable.
- As codified systems of morals that attempt to distinguish good from evil, religions depend heavily on parables. According to the New Testament, Jesus himself insisted on teaching to his disciples in parable form—in fact, the Christian parable of the pearl of great price, which tells the story of a man who gives up everything he has to win a great pearl, likely helped to inspire *The Pearl*. Steinbeck realizes that the parable form is a central element in world religion and in the cultural history of humankind. As *The Pearl* illustrates, the imagined is just as vital to humankind's understanding of life as the real, and, in the form of the parable, the two are inextricably linked.

The Struggle to Persevere Virtue

- If the pearl symbolizes goodness, Kino's struggle to protect the cherished pearl might represent the human struggle to preserve cherished qualities or attributes—moral virtue, innocence, integrity, the soul—from the destructive forces of the outside world. Just as these destructive forces corrupt and conspire to seize Kino's pearl, they can work against the virtuous inner qualities that the pearl might represent. According to this reading, Coyotito's death and Kino's voluntary relinquishment of the pearl at the end of the novel suggest that the destructive forces of the world are too powerful to be overcome.
- The Fallacy of the American Dream
- In a way, Kino's desire to use the pearl to improve his life echoes the traditional narrative of the American dream. He attempts to transform hard work into material wealth, and material wealth into education, comfort, and familial advancement. According to this reading, Kino's gradual corruption and the story's tragic conclusion hint at a fundamental flaw in the American dream: it condones sacrifice of virtue for material gain. Additionally, Kino's gradual disillusionment with the pearl (as he realizes that it won't make his life better) underscores the fallacy of the American dream itself. Rather than widespread opportunity, Kino finds a world of powerful, greedy men conniving to take his wealth away from him dishonestly.

The Effects of Colonialism on Native Cultures

- Because Kino belongs to a native tribe that, centuries after the original Spanish colonization of Mexico, is still under the thumb of the Spanish colonial authorities, the story can be read as a parable about the forces of colonization and the destructive effect those forces have on native cultures and peoples. Kino is originally driven to search for the pearl because of the unhelpfulness of the condescending Spanish doctor; after he finds the pearl, he is cheated and hunted by cynical descendants of colonials who hope to exploit and control him
- Greed is the Root of All Evil
- This moral, preached by St. Augustine and many others after him, is found in the New Testament in Paul's first epistle to Timothy (1 Timothy 6:10). Kino's investment of spiritual value in a pearl, an object of material wealth, may be misguided from the start. Juana and Juan Tomás both suspect that Kino is wrong to try to get more for the pearl than the dealers offer, and Juana tries several times to discard the pearl, believing it to be the source of her family's troubles. This reading interprets the pearl as a symbol of destruction and corruption rather than purity.