The Pearl

By. John Steinbeck
John Steinbeck (3mins)

- Born on February 27, 1902 in Salinas, CA.
- Attended Stanford University for 5 years but never graduated.
- Became an author who wrote about people and places he knew through his own experiences.
- Died of heart disease on December 20, 1968 in New York.
John Steinbeck


- Won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1962 for his novel, *The Grapes of Wrath*, about the migration of a family from the Oklahoma Dust Bowl to California.
John Steinbeck’s Writing Style

- Steinbeck’s work focuses on a deep feeling for nature and a profound sympathy for people.
- The majority of his novels have similar settings, which are Californian towns (*The Pearl*). is off the coast of Baja, California, but considered Mexico.
- Steinbeck often viewed and wrote about impoverished communities living in unfortunate situations.
In 1930, Steinbeck and his best friend, Ed Ricketts, traveled to the Sea of Cortez in Baja CA to collect sea life specimens for Ricketts’ marine laboratory in Monterey, CA, where both men lived.

Since Steinbeck loved traveling, and when in Mexico, he befriended the Mexican people, who travelled with him into parts of the back country.
Steinbeck hinted that *The Pearl* is both symbolic and literal. In other words, the story can be about the struggles of the poor or how sudden wealth can change everything for any family. It can also be seen as simply the story about one family.

- The story is more than just a plot (this happened and this and then this).
- The reader needs to understand that there is meaning below the surface of the story.
John Steinbeck’s Source for *The Pearl*, - the Parable of the Pearl of Great Price

• Steinbeck wrote that *The Pearl* is based on his personal convictions, and based the story on the biblical parable of a pearl of great price.

• In this story, a jewel for which the merchant trades everything he owns becomes the metaphor for Heaven. Everything in the merchant's earthly existence, however, becomes worthless when compared to the joys of living with God in Heaven.
However, Steinbeck uses the parable as a meditation on the American dream of success. Steinbeck, who himself had risen quickly to prosperity, explores how Kino, the protagonist of *The Pearl*, deals with his newfound prominence in the community and riches.

Matthew 13: 45-46 “Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it.”
John Steinbeck & La Paz

- Wrote *The Pearl* in 1944-45 in the setting of La Paz on the Baja peninsula in which the pearl industry is of great importance (11mins).
- This story is based upon a true story (parable) that Steinbeck heard when he was there on a marine biology expedition.
• **The Pearl** is a novella, which is a shorter novel that tells a story with several characters and may have more than one plot, with complex levels or situations, and it presents a picture of real life.

• A novella includes, besides a plot and characters, setting, theme, point of view, style (forms of expression, length of sentences, choice of words by author), and tone (author’s attitude toward story).
The Pearl, 1945

Type of work: Novella

Genre: Parable, allegory
- parable: a story that teaches a lesson
- allegory: a story whose characters represent abstract ideas in order to teach a lesson
The Pearl, Narrator & POV

• **Narrator**: anonymous narrator tells a story as if he knows it well, but tells the story as a storyteller from the time period

• **Point of view**: third person omniscient, who provides commentary on the story from three different perspectives of Kino, Juana, and the doctor.
The Pearl, the Setting

- **Setting**: late 19th century or very early 20th century in a Mexican coastal village called La Paz on the Baja peninsula (14mins).
- **Tense**: past
History of Mexico

• Watch: [History of Mexico, Mesoamerica Toltec, Maya, Aztec, Olmec, and Zapotec](#) (12mins)
• Watch: [25 Facts about the Aztecs](#) (4mins)
• Read: “The Clash of Cultures Article”
Historical Context (2mins): In the 16th century, the Spanish landed in Mexico and overthrew the Aztecs.

- The Spaniards enslaved the native people of the area.
- Today, these people are not slaves, but they make up the underclass of Mexican society.
- The descendants of the Spanish conquerors are still richer and more powerful than the rest of the population. They make up the ruling class of Mexico.

Watch: The Aztec Empire, Tenochtitlan and the Coming of the Spanish (16mins)
The doctor, the priest, and the pearl buyers are all of Spanish descent (upper class).

Kino and his family practice the Catholic religion, but still hold onto their belief in the pagan gods.

The upper class looks down on the poor native people because of their beliefs, their race, and their poverty.

Francisco Clapera, *Set of Sixteen Casta Paintings*, c. 1775 (5mins)
Like his father and grandfather before him, Kino is a poor diver, gathering pearls from the Gulf beds that once brought great wealth to the Kings of Spain and now provide Kino, Juana, and their infant son with meager subsistence. Then, one day like any other, Kino emerges from the sea with a pearl as large as a sea gull’s eggs, as “perfect as the moon”. With the pearl come hope, the promise of comfort, and of security...”
Kino

- Kino: dignified, hardworking, impoverished native who works as a pearl diver. He is a simple man who lives in a brush house with his wife and infant son, Coyotito.

- Watch the story of: Badjao Spearfishermen, Spearfishing in Bohol, Philippines (24 mins).

- He is a motivated by basic drives of love for his family, loyalty to traditions of his people, and frustration of his people’s oppression by the Europeans.

- In this parable, Kino represents the dangers of greed and ambition.
Juana

- Juana is Kino’s wife. She possesses a simple faith in divine powers of her native village, but augments the powers that the Europeans have instilled.
- Juana is more practical than Kino, but she is typically submissive as her culture dictates, even when she does not agree with her husband.
- Juana represents practicality and counterbalances Kino’s enthusiasm for money.
- She is the symbol of domestic happiness.
Coyotito

• Coyotito is Kino’s only infant son who is stung by a scorpion.
• He is helpless to improve his situation.
• The efforts of greed do more harm than good.
Kino is a poor pearl-diver, barely supporting his wife Juana and his baby Coyotito. Early one morning, a scorpion bites Coyotito. When Kino and Juana go to see the doctor in La Paz, he turns them away because they have no money. Kino and Juana leave his house angry and embarrassed.
Symbols: the Scorpion

The Scorpion (2mins)

1. This symbolizes evil that must come from the gods.
2. The scorpion usually is the destruction of innocence, as Kino shows in the destruction of his innocence of his culture and native traditional ways by his ambition and greed.
Chapter 2 Summary

- Kino and Juana return home, and prepare to go diving for pearls (they need money). Juana has prayed that they will find a pearl so that they can pay the doctor to treat Coyotito, and Kino does find a pearl. It is huge—"the Pearl of the World" (1:50min). As they marvel at the pearl, they notice that the swelling is going out of Coyotito’s arm.
Chapter 3 Summary

• Very quickly, news of Kino discovery is pulsing around the town, and everyone is suddenly interested in Kino. The doctor reconsiders treating Coyotito, the pearl buyers think their greedy thoughts, and the beggars think of alms. Kino sees in the pearl the salvation of his son: not only will he recover from the scorpion bite, but he will be baptized, wear fine clothes, and go to school. Then, no one will be able to cheat his people again, because Coyotito will know how to read.
• But Kino is uneasy, and hides the pearl. That night, someone comes to the house and tries to steal the pearl. Kino is hurt in the ensuing struggle, and Juana begs him to throw the pearl back before it destroys them. But Kino is intent on improving Coyotito's future.
• The Doctor: a small time colonial who wants to be wealthy. He represents greed, arrogance, and condescension at the heart of the colonial society (European).

• He represents the society that oppresses Kino and his people.
Chapter 4 Summary

• In the morning, Kino and Juana go to the pearl buyers in Laz Paz. They are accompanied by everyone in their neighborhood. However, the buyers offer only a meager sum for the pearl. Knowing that he is being cheated, Kino storms out of the office, claiming that he will go to the capital to sell his pearl. That night, Kino is attacked again, and Juana again asks him to destroy the pearl. Again, Kino refuses.
Characters: Juan & Apolonia

• Juan Tomás: Kino’s older brother. The loyalty and family support is here, as well as his guidance.
• Apolonia: Juan Tomás’s wife and mother of four children. She is also sympathetic to Kino and Juana’s plight and helps and supports as family devotion in the culture.
Characters: Priest, Dealers, & Trackers

• Priest: They represent moral virtue and goodness, but really only interested in exploiting Kino’s wealth as everyone else is.

• Dealers: Well-organized and corrupt cheat and take advantage of Indian pearl divers and they long to cheat Kino out of his pearl.

• Trackers: this is a group of violent and corrupt men that follow Kino and Juana.
As Kino is sleeping, Juana takes the pearl and goes down to the water to throw it back. However, Kino wakes and catches her. He grabs the pearl from her, knocks her to the ground, and walks back toward the house. As Juana heads back, she notices the gleam of the pearl behind a rock. She picks it up, and only then does she notice Kino and another body lying in the path.
There had been another struggle. Kino is still alive, but he has killed the other man. Deciding to leave immediately, Juana goes to the house to get Coyotito, and Kino goes to get his canoe. Kino finds that the canoe has been wrecked, and then he sees that his house is going up in flames. Juana and Coyotito just barely escape, and the family hides in the house of Kino’s brother Juan Tomas. They stay through the next day, and then escape to the north under cover of darkness.
Chapter 6 Summary

- Kino and Juana walk by night and hide by day. While in hiding, though, Kino sees trackers and a rifleman that have been sent out after them. They leave the road for the mountains, but the trackers follow them. Finally, Kino and Juana stop for the night by a small waterfall. The family hides in a shadow cave above the falls.
The trackers also camp there for the night, and Kino sneaks down the hillside to attack them. But before he can jump, Coyotito begins to cry. The rifleman raises his gun and shoots at the sound just as Kino attacks. Kino kills all three men, but it is for nothing, for Coyotito has been shot dead. The mournful, bitter couple then return to La Paz and throw the pearl back into the ocean.
• Themes:
  • Greed is a destructive force.
  • As Kino tries to gain wealth, he goes from a happy, contented man to a savage criminal. The pearl goes from a symbol of hope to a symbol of human destruction. Kino becomes detached from his cultural traditions and his society, as will his people in their quest for wealth and equality.
Theme: Fate & Human Agency

Fate and Human Agency:

• Fate (things of circumstance) such as the scorpion bite and finding the great pearl, shape what is to become of Kino and Juana

• Human agency (forms of greed, arrogance, ambition, and violence) facilitate outcomes and lead to conflicts.
Oppression:

- Society’s oppression of native cultures causes destruction.
- The doctor, who helps the oppression when he refuses to treat the baby, represents society’s oppression, as the European colonizers force the native Indian pearl divers and their people to submit to the new culture and ways.
Motifs: Nature

Nature Imagery:
1. Kino is connected to nature
   - Brush house/Pearl dive/Night noises/morning
2. Sea struggles/Kino struggles
3. Ants and God/Kino and God
Motifs: Kino’s Songs

Kino’s Songs:
1. When Kino feels things, he hears a song in his head that corresponds to that feeling.
   - Happy—song of family
   - Dishonesty—song of Evil
The Pearl: central to the novella it is left to each reader’s interpretation.

1. At first, it is a symbol of hope for Coyotito’s future and a life free from oppression.

2. Once the village knows of “The Pearl of the World”, it becomes evil, a symbol of destruction of their culture, and it is greed and ambition, and it is a threat.

3. The pearl itself mirrors the changes that Kino goes through.
Symbols: Kino’s Canoe

Kino’s Canoe

1. A means of making a living (both food and pearls)

2. Represents Kino’s link to cultural tradition passed down from generation to generation.

3. Kino’s decision to break with his cultural heritage and his greed of the pearl, leads directly to the destruction of the canoe.

4. The canoe represents his culture and traditions of his native people.