

# THE PEARL ANALYSIS

John Ernest Steinbeck

## The Pearl Author/Context

John Ernest Steinbeck was born on February 27, 1902 in his childhood home of the Salinas Valley in California. In this environment, Steinbeck developed an appreciation for the sights, sounds, and smells of the natural world. The connection between man and nature and the inevitability of man meeting his determined fate are two common themes in his novels.

As a child, Steinbeck grew up in a supportive middle-class family. Although his mother, once a schoolteacher, would have preferred her son to make his way in a dignified profession, Steinbeck's father gave the writer a small allowance from his own salary so that his son could pursue his writing career.

Steinbeck went to Stanford intermittently for five years without ever earning a degree, and during that time, he worked odd jobs, often involving physical labor. He liked these jobs because it brought him into contact with men of courage, strength, and honesty. He admired them for these qualities and their lack of hypocrisy.

At the age of twenty-seven, Steinbeck published his first novel, *Cup of Gold*, in 1929. From that point came thirteen novels, two collections of short stories, dramatizations of two of his novels, a play in story form, a documentary, and two volumes of reportage, as well as a journal of travel and scientific research. His novels include: *To a God Unknown* (1932), *Tortilla Flat* (1935), *In Dubious Battle* (1936), *The Red Pony* (1937), *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), *Of Mice and Men* (1940), *The Moon Is Down* (1942), *Cannery Row* (1945), *The Wayward Bus* (1947), *The Pearl* (1947), *East of Eden* (1952), *Sweet Thursday* (1954), and *The Winter of Our Discontent* (1961).

*The Grapes of Wrath* won a Pulitzer Prize in 1940, and Steinbeck received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1962. After Steinbeck won the Nobel Prize, he ceased to write any significant fiction, but he did write journalistic pieces, including *America and Americans* (1966).

Despite winning the Nobel and Pulitzer Prizes, critics weren't sure what to make of Steinbeck because his style seemed to change with every novel. Some considered these changes an example of his versatility as a writer, while others viewed it as immaturity and an inability to establish his own style.

"Those who have written about Steinbeck have disagreed far more widely – and deeply – than they have about any other important writer of our time. . . . There is at least one notable characteristic of Steinbeck's writing on which otherwise conflicting critics agree: he is a man in whom the faculty of

pity is strong and close to the surface. . . . It may turn out . . . that the essence of Steinbeck-man and Steinbeck-writer lies in these two quite uncomplicated truths: he earnestly wishes to make people understand one another and he is able, like Blake, to 'seek love in the pity of others' woe.'"

**Steinbeck died at his home in New York City in December of 1968.**

## THE PREFACE

The Pearl begins with a short preface in which Steinbeck introduces the story of the great pearl, along with his three main characters-Kino the fisherman, his wife Juana, and their infant son Coyotito. Their story has been told so often, the Preface asserts, that it lives in people's minds and hearts. The story can be considered a parable.

### NOTE: THE INTRODUCTION

*Steinbeck inserted the Preface to make sure readers understood that the story had universal importance. Through stylized language and the suggestion of a parable, he indicates that you should look beyond the simple plot in order to find a deeper meaning. Perhaps because he had been criticized for creating shallow or flat characters, this short introduction is his way of announcing that the characters are to be regarded mainly as symbols.*

### The Pearl Plot Summary

Kino, a young pearl diver in La Paz, enjoys his simple life until the day his son, Coyotito, is stung by a scorpion. The wealthy town doctor will not treat the baby because Kino cannot pay the doctor's fee, so Kino and his wife, Juana, are left only to hope their child is saved. That day Kino goes diving, and finds a great pearl, the Pearl of the World, and knows he is suddenly a wealthy man. The word travels quickly about the pearl and many in the town begin to plot ways to steal it.

While the townspeople plot against Kino, he dreams of marrying Juana in a church, buying a rifle, and sending Coyotito to school so that he can learn to read. Kino believes that an education will free his son from the poverty and ignorance that have oppressed their people for more than four hundred years.

The doctor comes to treat Coyotito once he learns of Kino's pearl, and although the baby is healed by Juana's remedy, the doctor takes advantage of Kino's ignorance. He convinces Kino that the child is still ill and will die without the care of a doctor. The doctor then manipulates Kino into unwittingly revealing where he has hidden the great pearl. Kino moves the pearl when the doctor leaves. That night, an intruder comes into Kino's hut and roots around near the spot where Kino had first buried the pearl.

The next day, Kino tries to sell the pearl in town. The pearl buyers have already planned to convince Kino that the great pearl he has found is worth very little because it is too large. This way they can purchase the pearl for a low price. But when the buyers try to cheat Kino, he refuses to sell the pearl and plans to travel to another city to sell at a fair price. His brother, Tom Juan, feels Kino's plan is

foolish because it defies his entire way of life and puts his family in danger. Kino is now on his own, although he doesn't know it yet.

Juana warns Kino that the pearl is evil and will destroy his family, but he refuses to throw it away because it is his one chance to provide a different life for his family. That night, Juana takes the pearl and tries to throw it into the sea, but Kino stops her and beats her. On his way back to their hut, Kino is attacked and he kills the man in self-defense. Juana goes to gather their things and escape and finds the floor of their hut completely dug up. While she's inside the hut getting the baby, someone lights it on fire.

Kino, Juana, and Coyotito hide with Kino's brother for a day before embarking on their journey to a new city under the cover of darkness. While they are resting during the day, Kino discovers that there are trackers following them. He knows that they will steal the pearl and kill his family if they catch them. To escape, Kino and Juana take the baby and run to the mountains where they hide in a cave at nightfall. The trackers camp just below the ridge where they are hiding. Kino sneaks down in the night to kill the trackers, but before he can attack them, Coyotito cries out. The trackers, thinking it's a coyote, shoot at the dark cave where Juana and Coyotito are hiding. As the shot is fired, Kino springs on the trackers and kills them all. Unfortunately, Coyotito was killed by the first gunshot, and Kino's journey with the pearl ends in tragedy.

Realizing that the pearl is cursed and has destroyed his family (as Juana forewarned), Kino and Juana return to La Paz and throw the cursed pearl into the sea.

## SETTING

The events of *The Pearl* take place on an estuary (the mouth of a river) somewhere on the coast of Mexico, in the fictitious town of La Paz. If you look at a map, you'll see a long peninsula descending from the U.S. state of California. The peninsula, called Baja California, is part of Mexico and is separated from the rest of Mexico by the Gulf of California. (Another name for the Gulf of California is the Sea of Cortez, or Cortes.) Steinbeck traveled in this area with his friend Ed Ricketts in 1940 and described his experiences in *The Sea of Cortez* (1941).

Geographical features mentioned in *The Pearl* give clues to the setting. In a relatively short time, Kino walks from the estuary through desert scrub to mountains. This would be possible in Baja California.

Steinbeck doesn't tell you exactly when the events of the novel take place because they came from a legend. Although no date is given, you are told that the witnesses of Kino's return were the grandfathers of the present villagers. If Steinbeck heard the legend in 1940, that would set the story somewhere around 1900.

In order to understand Steinbeck's story, it will help you to know that Indians of Mexico had been under the domination of people of Spanish descent for some three hundred years at the time of the legend. A civil-religious hierarchy governed; although church (Roman Catholic) and state were outwardly separated, they worked together in many aspects of Mexican life. You'll see in the story

how the priest and the pearl buyers act as allies in the social hierarchy, with the Indians at the bottom of the ladder. In many cases the Indians could not attend school or own land.

Although Spanish culture was imposed on Indians, the ancient religions and other aspects of the culture of the various tribes survived. Watch for places where you can see that Kino and Juana have merged both traditions—for example, Juana's combination of Catholic Hail Marys and ancient prayers.

One aspect of Mexican culture that plays a part in the novel is that of *mi tierra* (my land). The birthplace of an Indian had enormous significance. Many Mexicans, especially Mexican Indians, believed they were meant to stay where they were born, and they developed a special attachment to their birthplace. Knowing this concept might help you understand what a huge step Kino takes when he decides to leave La Paz for the capital.

## CHAPTER I

As a new day begins, Kino awakens peacefully next to his sleeping wife. He is content with his world and hears the Song of the Family playing happily in his mind. It is an indication that all is well.

### NOTE: THE SONGS AND WHOLENESS

*Throughout The Pearl you will read about various "songs" that play in the minds of Steinbeck's characters. Such songs include the Song of the Family and the Song of Evil. These are ancient songs that have been passed down by generations of Indians. Steinbeck uses them to show the traditional, almost instinctual responses of his characters to their environment. When things are happy, they hear the Song of the Family. When evil threatens, they are alerted by the Song of Evil. Kino's songs often mark occasions of celebration: he celebrates the morning and the existence of his family; he celebrates life and its events. The songs were individual parts of the Whole. This theme of wholeness is central to Steinbeck's thinking: everything has its place in the universe, and when something happens to one of the parts, the whole system is affected.*

Kino wraps himself in the one blanket that he owns, and watches the dawn break over the Gulf of California. The little Indian village is located somewhere on the peninsula of Baja California, Mexico, on the shore of the Gulf of California. While Juana prepares breakfast of corncake and pulque, Kino watches "with the detachment of God" as some ants try to outsmart each other in the dirt. His song blends with Juana's ancient song, and together they form a unity (the "Whole").

### NOTE: THE ANTS

*From the very start, Steinbeck tries to show similarities between the human and animal worlds. The ants, sabotaging and outwitting each other with sand traps, are little different from human beings on the battlefield, in the marketplace, or in other human competitions. Notice that Kino does nothing to alter the outcome of the struggle. A major theme of The Pearl is man's struggle with nature and with the historical, racial, and class differences that prevent him from fulfilling his goals. By identifying*

*Kino with God, is Steinbeck saying that man's life and struggles are not subject to divine interference? Try to keep some of these larger issues in mind as you read the novel.*

Kino returns to his brush hut, a primitive abode with a crude doorway and mats on a dirt floor. A streak of sun falls on the rope that holds Coyotito's box. Suddenly, the peace of the morning is shattered when a scorpion crawls down the rope and stings the infant. Kino grabs the insect and grinds it into the dust while Juana takes her child and sucks out the poison. She whispers some ancient magic and mutters a "Hail Mary," which shows the Roman Catholic influence in her religious beliefs. Coyotito's screaming summons the neighbors, including Kino's older brother, Juan Tomas, and his fat wife, Apolonia. Kino watches Juana in action and wonders at her strength, endurance, and patience.

NOTE: THE SCORPION EPISODE

*The scorpion attack is part of the human struggle for existence and parallels the attacks by men later on. Steinbeck uses this attack to point out the difficulty of life in general-that no matter how hard people struggle in life, there always seems to be another problem or obstacle in their path.*

Juana tells Kino to get the doctor. While this may seem like a reasonable request, it is actually an unusual one for an Indian. The class distinctions between the poor Indians and people of Spanish descent like the doctor were enormous. Kino realizes that since he is an Indian and has no money, the doctor will not come to treat Coyotito. Hearing that, Juana decides they will go to him. The theme of wholeness arises again when the villagers swarm around Juana and Kino: "The thing had become a neighborhood affair." As mentioned earlier, the Whole is affected when something happens to one of the parts.

NOTE: CLASS DISTINCTION

*Hundreds of years ago, Spanish conquerors took over Mexico and established their social, political, and economic dominance over the Indian population. The Spaniards and their descendants, because of their money and military power, became the ruling class. The Indians became the exploited, lower class.*

The villagers, amazed by this decision, follow Juana and Kino to the doctor's house, passing the four beggars who gather in front of the church. Steinbeck uses the beggars to illustrate the doctor's character: "They knew his ignorance, his cruelty, his avarice, his appetites, his sins. They knew his clumsy abortions and the little brown pennies he gave sparingly for alms." Through this unspoken knowledge about the doctor, you come to see the class struggle that is part of the lives of the members of Kino's tribe.

Everyone suspects the doctor will not treat Coyotito. But the parents must try anyway. In his rage, Kino pounds against the doctor's gate with the iron ring knocker. His thoughts about the doctor are described in the language of oppression: weakness, fear, anger, rage, and terror. The pounding of the music of the enemy mixes with the sound of the iron ring pounding at the doctor's gate.

The servant who answers the call is an Indian like Kino, yet he will not speak to Kino in his own language. He makes it clear that Kino must wait for an answer outside the bolted gate.

#### NOTE: ON LANGUAGE

*Language is used here as a sign of class distinction. When the Indian servant says, "A little moment," Steinbeck is implying that he is speaking Spanish-un momentito. The -ito ending gives a noun the meaning of "small" or "tiny." The baby's name, Coyotito, means "a little coyote." When the servant refuses to speak in the Indian language, he is reminding Kino of his lowly place. The incident also shows that people of Spanish descent set Indians against each other.*

The doctor's home, elegantly decadent, represents "the other world" and is contrasted with the primitive Indian huts. The doctor, dressed in a silk dressing gown (robe) that barely covers his fat belly, sips chocolate clumsily from a delicate china cup. He has the trappings of the rich, whereas you have seen that Kino eats corncake in the dirt, near a fire, wrapped in an old blanket. By now, you have probably noticed the tone of a parable, which is designed to teach a simple moral lesson. What message is Steinbeck communicating in this contrast between the doctor and the Indians?

As expected, the doctor, claiming that he is not a veterinarian, refuses to treat Coyotito. A wave of shame engulfs the people who witness Kino's humiliation. Kino stands at the gate for a long time, then angrily punches it. He stares at his bloody knuckles, a symbol of the struggle between people of Spanish background and Indians. The doctor's insulting refusal shocks Kino into realizing that something drastic must happen if he is to provide for his son's future. It's not that Kino or his family must "change," but that they must find some way of exerting control over their environment. Do you think that Kino is a victim of fate? Are there changes he could have made to improve his life?

#### NOTE: NATURE VS. CIVILIZATION

*Steinbeck uses nature imagery to contrast the Indians with the "civilized" life of the town. The doctor, who represents those who control the village, lives in a large home of stone and plaster, while Kino and the other Indians live in an impoverished neighborhood of small brush huts with dirt floors. Whereas the doctor drinks chocolate from a silver pot, Kino drinks pulque (a fermented drink made from a flowering plant) from an earthen jug, squatting on the dirt. The doctor sleeps in a plush bed, but Kino and his wife sleep on simple mats thrown on the ground. Yet the doctor's house is gloomy and dark, whereas Kino's hut is right on the beautiful Gulf of California. The doctor is frustrated and greedy; Kino is happy and content. The doctor has money; Kino has none. The doctor is agitated; the Indians are in tune with nature. The doctor is "refined"; the Indians have the simple, instinctual ways of animals. ("All the doctor's race spoke to all of Kino's race as though they were simple animals.")*

*What does this contrast tell you? One idea to think about is that the further one moves away from nature, the more "unnatural" one becomes. And with this move toward a culture based on money, one grows more discontent with life, more restricted and tense. The birds at the Gulf fly free, while the doctor's bird is caged. Kino is at peace when the novel begins. But he is soon thrown into conflict when he leaves nature in pursuit of money and civilization. This conflict will persist until he returns to his natural habitat.*

## CHAPTER II

In the opening description of the beach, the narrator leads your eyes inland from the sea. The beach and the water nearby are full of life, each creature living and growing in its own way and in its own place. Despite the vision of the sea teeming with life, the narrator cautions that in the Gulf, vision cannot be trusted. The hazy mirages that occur there have taught Kino's people for centuries not to trust their vision, for the Gulf has "the vagueness of a dream."

Kino's village is located on a broad estuary lined with canoes. He and Juana are proud of his canoe—a gift from his father, who had received it from Kino's grandfather. It is their only possession of value and symbolizes the ancient Indian civilization that continues to guide Kino. As his source of income, the canoe is a necessity.

That morning, when Kino and Juana come down to the beach, she makes a poultice (medicinal compress) of seaweed for Coyotito's shoulder. This is probably a better remedy than what the doctor would have offered, yet it lacks the doctor's authority. Worrying about her son, Juana prays that they will find a pearl in order to pay the doctor to heal Coyotito.

### NOTE:

*Juana's natural instincts are strong. She reacts to the situations in her life with compassion and intelligence, as her administering of her poultice demonstrates. But she is aware of her simplicity and doubts the effectiveness of her methods, when compared with those of the doctor. Keep this in mind when you read of the doctor's actions in the next chapter.*

After pushing the canoe into the water, Kino and Juana work together to paddle toward the oyster bed where Kino fishes and searches for pearls. The oyster bed has historical significance. Steinbeck notes that the Spanish conquerors had worked this bed and that the pearls taken from it had greatly aided the king of Spain, financing both his wars and the decoration of his churches.

### NOTE: PEARL FORMATION

*Pearls are formed through an accident of nature. A grain of sand becomes caught inside the fleshy folds of an oyster and, to protect itself from irritation, the oyster coats the grain with layer after layer of a milky cement. This process forms a pearl. This contrast between the natural definition of a pearl and its value to humans in terms of wealth is one of the many contrasts Steinbeck uses to tell you something significant about reality and appearances. It is also one of the many levels of symbolic meaning that the pearl conveys.*

Kino knows that a great pearl will bring him much money, but he does not dare hope for such a pearl because it is not good to want too much. As he descends into the water, he hears the Song of the Pearl That Might Be, and in the canoe above, Juana makes the "magic of prayer."

Moments after Kino goes underwater, he finds a large oyster in which there is a "ghostly gleam." It is the Pearl of the World-great and perfect and stunning. Kino's troubles seem to be over. The money he will receive from the sale of the pearl will eliminate the humiliations of poverty. Yet Kino does not hope for too much since that might drive good luck away. Kino's people have always felt a need to be tactful with both the Christian God and the old Indian gods so as not to appear greedy. Why do you think they feel this way?

#### NOTE: SUPERSTITIONS

*Juana and Kino do not want to offend the gods by hoping for too much. On one level this is a superstition inherited from their ancestors (Juana's "magic of prayer"). But on another level, it is consistent with the idea of wholeness, whereby each person plays his part in life and removes from life what is his due. Though illiterate, Juana and Kino understand the principle of balance. If you ask for more than your fair share, you may end up with even less. Notice that the pearl gives off a "ghostly gleam." Already there is a hint of death.*

Kino looks at the pearl and sees that it captures the light as perfectly as the moon. He can see dreams of a better future for his family in the pearl. This passage marks the beginning of Kino's dreams, or "visions," where reality becomes confused with the illusion of a better world. His dreams go deep-right through to his soul-and Kino will soon begin to identify his soul with the pearl. Don't forget the warning about mirages, however, at the beginning of the chapter. Will the pearl prove a lucky find or something quite different?

While Kino holds the pearl in the hand he had smashed against the doctor's gate, Juana notices that Coyotito's swelling has gone down. The poison is leaving the infant's body. Kino screams with delight as he looks at the pearl, and this causes the other divers to race toward his canoe.

By screaming so loudly, Kino attracts attention to his discovery. This sets in motion the reactions of the community, each person adding to the total reaction of the whole. Before he knows it, Kino will become alienated from the people of his own village. He will be the outsider who deviates from the natural system. And in biological systems, the deviant is usually punished, sometimes by death. If you were in Kino's shoes, would you react as he did?

#### CHAPTER III

Kino's village is compared to a "colonial animal," with a physical body, emotions, and a nervous system that communicates news in a rapid, invisible way. By the time Kino and Juana return to their house, everyone knows that he has found the Pearl of the World. Suddenly, people become interested in Kino. When the priest hears the news, he thinks of certain repairs needed by the church. The doctor, fantasizing about his younger, happier days in Paris, announces that Kino is his client and that he is treating Coyotito for the scorpion sting.

NOTE: THEME OF WHOLENESS

*With the comparison of the village to a colonial animal, Steinbeck presents his idea that each person is part of a larger whole. No event happens to an individual in isolation. The procession of villagers to the doctor's house prepared you for this idea. And it is reinforced by the closeness felt by Mexican Indians to their village. There is a feeling of belonging, perhaps because of village unity and the hierarchy of power. Rarely do people leave their village.*

The unscrupulous pearl buyers are delighted by the news. Though they pretend to be independent buyers with private little offices, they all work for the same man. They are the "arms" of his organization, and nothing gives them more pleasure than buying pearls at ridiculously low prices.

A "curiously dark residue" is created when the people think about Kino's pearl. It taps into their dreams, plans, hopes, fantasies, and desires. And the only person preventing them from fulfilling their dreams is Kino. Because of this, he becomes every man's enemy, though he doesn't know it. His discovery has provoked something thoroughly evil in the town, a "black distillate" as poisonous as the scorpion. This comparison of the pearl's effect with the scorpion's poison is one of the major biological comparisons in *The Pearl*. (Another is the description of the village as a colonial animal.) The pearl, once a source of promise and beauty, has now become an evil omen.

NOTE: GREED AND ENVY

*The pearl causes a sinister change in town. Kino has become a "have" in a world of "have-nots." As a result, he is an outsider, an enemy. The pearl has planted the seeds of many dreams in the minds of many people who have been deprived of too much for too long. Their greed and envy create a threat to Kino. In his excitement, Kino is blinded to events around him. But his brother, Juan Tomas, sees the threat and will warn Kino about it.*

Later, Kino sits with his family and friends, admiring the pearl. Juan Tomas asks what he will do now that he has become rich. Kino peers into the pearl for an answer, as if looking into a crystal ball. He has a vision of a proper church wedding, where he and Juana will be dressed in fine clothes. And he will purchase a harpoon and a rifle.

Kino wants status and recognition, and it is the rifle that seems to symbolically break down the social order that keeps the Indians under the domination of the Spaniards. While it is acceptable for Kino to imagine having a wedding, fine clothes, and other niceties, a rifle would ordinarily be an impossible purchase for poor Indians. The mere thought of Kino's owning a rifle tells you that he has crossed the line that separates his original simple life from the passion for wealth that will devour him. The rifle symbolizes Kino's intention to cease being exploited by people of Spanish descent. In the hands of an Indian, a gun could change the power structure. So could the next part of Kino's dream—an education for his son—since knowledge will eventually free the Indians from the bonds of ignorance. On an even higher symbolic level, the rifle might be thought of as the final blow of truth that allows innocence and goodness to triumph over evil. This passage about Kino's visions reminds you that *The Pearl* is an allegory in which concrete objects often stand for ideas.

At dusk, the villagers whisper that the priest is coming. Like the doctor, the priest lives in town and rarely visits these "children." Without knowing why, Kino hears the Song of Evil, but faintly, when the priest enters. The Father says Kino is named for a great man of the Church (Eusebio Kino, a Jesuit missionary in present-day Mexico and Arizona from the 1680s to his death in 1711) and that it is in the books. Kino isn't sure of this and hopes that someday his son will know what is in the books. The priest wants to make certain that the Church gets its share from the sale of the pearl. Do you think Steinbeck is implying that the Church contributes to the exploitation of the Indians?

NOTE: KINO, THE PRIEST, AND RELIGION

*The priest's visit is preceded by the suggestion that Kino might be punished for trying to change things. How are God, the priest, the future, and Kino's plans related? Kino believes that his future is vulnerable to attack because he has spoken openly of his plans. In fact, Kino feels threatened by this representative of religion. Although the priest appears to be concerned that Kino do the "right" thing, his major interest is the pearl. His stilted biblical language ("thou" and "thee") rings false. And he has not married Kino in the church or baptized Coyotito because Kino has never had the money to pay for these services. Do you think the priest's actions are motivated by self-interest? Remember that in the original story Kino wants to use the pearl's wealth primarily to guarantee his salvation by purchasing in advance the masses necessary to release his soul from Purgatory. Doesn't such a practice as buying one's salvation also suggest the corruption of the Church?*

After the priest leaves, Kino still hears the shrill music of evil in his ears. A thin dog wanders by, but as Kino looks down, he fails to see the animal. This is another sign that Kino's eyes are blind to simple, everyday events.

The doctor arrives after dark. Kino is filled with hatred, rage, and fear, but lets the doctor in when the corrupt old man says there might be a delayed reaction to the scorpion sting. In his ignorance, Kino does not know what to do, but he does not want his son to suffer.

To play on the couple's fears, the doctor puts on a grand show. He gives the baby some poisonous white powder and says he will come back in an hour, for he knows the poison will strike by then. When the doctor leaves, Kino buries the pearl in the corner of the hut. Coyotito becomes very sick again, and in an hour the doctor returns.

NOTE: *Before the doctor returns, Steinbeck inserts an important description of the estuary at night. There is the sound of big fish eating little fish, the familiar sound of slaughter—a symbol of the relationship between the Spanish and the Indians, between the rulers and the oppressed.*

The doctor has not fooled anyone, even though he gives Coyotito a few drops of ammonia in a cup of water to calm him. The doctor says that because of his knowledge of scorpion poison, Coyotito will now recover. He pretends to be surprised that Kino has found a pearl, but asks questions, hoping that Kino will glance at the place where the pearl is hidden. Kino does this, and the doctor leaves the hut knowing the location of the pearl.

Later that night, Kino and Juana are awakened by an intruder in their hut. Fearing this might happen,

Kino had moved the pearl. But he is wounded in the scuffle with the attacker.

For the first time, Juana begs Kino to get rid of the pearl. She feels it is evil and will destroy them. But Kino resists. He is infatuated with dreams of the future and refuses to surrender to outsiders.

NOTE:

*The shrewd and conniving doctor is one of the first to prey upon Kino, but he will not be the last. Juana's instincts about the pearl are correct, and Kino's stubbornness will launch him on a path of destruction. Within the scope of the parable, what does Kino's attitude tell you about the quest for money? Whose side do you take in the disagreement between Juana and Kino?*

#### CHAPTER IV

This is the day Kino will sell the pearl. Everyone in La Paz is aware of Kino's plans and will take part in the ritual. Juana wears her wedding skirt and dresses Coyotito in baptismal clothes. Kino steps out of his hut and heads up the procession, accompanied by his brother, Juan Tomas. Though Juana walks behind her husband, there will be a time when she breaks custom and walks together with him.

Juan Tomas warns Kino to beware of the pearl buyers. They are cheats, he says, and will try to fool him about the price. He reminds Kino of the time some men in the village wanted to obtain more money for their pearls by pooling them and sending an Indian agent to the capital to sell them. Twice they tried it, but on both occasions the agents disappeared. Do you think the agents ran off with the money, or were they perhaps robbed and killed?

The brothers talk about the annual sermon that the priest delivers on this incident. He insists it's a message from God that each person is meant to maintain his or her position in life, whatever it might be: "Each man and woman is like a soldier sent by God to guard some part of the castle of the Universe."

NOTE:

*When you consider the source of this sermon-the priest-you may conclude that it's a story he uses to manipulate the Indians. There is a strong political and social component-God wants you to stay in your place-and the Indians are expected to obey. It is very possible that Steinbeck wants you to regard the sermon in the same light as the doctor's remedies. Do you think Kino and Juan Tomas believe the priest's message?*

The brothers squint their eyes and tighten their lips in preparation for the pearl buyers. The people in the procession know that this is an important day, and they follow Kino's lead.

In the meantime, the pearl buyers sit at their desks, excited about the much-discussed pearl. One of them, a fat, plodding man, plays disappearing tricks with a coin while waiting. The symbolic disappearance of the coin foreshadows the episode that follows.

When Kino arrives, the villagers wait outside while he shows one of the buyers his pearl. The pearl buyers have already conspired how to handle the buying of the pearl. With a look of sadness and contempt for the poor man who doesn't know the value of things, one of the buyers tells Kino that the pearl, like fool's gold, is only a curiosity. He offers Kino a thousand pesos, but Kino knows it is worth fifty thousand.

Kino, growing "tight and hard," feels the circling of vultures and wolves. He hears the music of the enemy and knows that he is being cheated. As if to confirm his price, the pearl buyer sends for the other buyers, claiming that they know nothing of his offer. The first man refuses to do business because the pearl is a "monstrosity." The second dealer says it is soft, chalky, and worthless. The third offers five hundred pesos.

Disgusted, Kino withdraws his pearl and says he'll sell it in the capital. The men, realizing they have not fooled Kino, promptly offer fifteen hundred pesos. They know that they will be punished by their boss if they don't purchase the pearl. But Kino understands their scheme and decides to leave.

That evening, the villagers discuss Kino's decision. Some support him; others think he was wrong. Kino, however, is terrified of what he has done. He feels he has "lost one world and [has] not gained another." What do you think this means? Kino knows more about the world than he did a few days earlier. Though he is vulnerable, he must harden himself to the attacks that await him. His instinctual awareness of this causes him anxiety, as does the idea of leaving the village of his birth.

Juan Tomas sees that Kino is treading on new ground without knowing the way. He says that, in the capital, Kino will be among strangers and will be leaving behind his friends and family. (If you have been looking for the symbolic meaning of the characters, look carefully at Juan Tomas here. Do you see why some readers think he represents the traditional Indian ways?) Only Juana seems to be on Kino's side, even though the pearl frightens her.

Later on, Kino is restless and goes for a walk. Sensing danger, he feels for his knife. Juana hears a scuffle and puts the baby down to look for a rock in order to come to Kino's aid. By the time she reaches Kino, his clothes have been torn apart by an attacker looking for the pearl. He is half conscious, his cheek slashed.

Juana cleans the wound, then pleads with Kino to throw the pearl away. Kino can only repeat his dream, as if repetition will make it come true. He asks Juana to believe in him ("I am a man"), then promises they will leave for the capital in the morning.

NOTE:

*You might be wondering about the relationship between Kino and Juana at this point. It is clear that Kino has deep love and respect for his wife. She is warm and loving and also strong and secure. Yet*

*within the social structure of their society, the male is the absolute head of the family. Do you think Kino is comfortable as the decision maker? Or would he prefer to share responsibility equally with Juana? He seems obsessed with his dream and, for the moment, won't let anyone, including Juana, challenge it.*

## CHAPTER V

Kino awakens in the darkness as Juana quietly leaves the hut with something in her hand. Enraged, Kino follows her to the shore. But when she sees him coming, Juana begins to run. Kino grabs her arm before she can throw the pearl into the water. Then, hissing like a snake, he beats her. When she falls against the rocks, he kicks her viciously in the side. This is the same Kino who had so tenderly loved her two days earlier and had wondered at her strength.

What has changed him? What makes them both do what they are doing? Juana wants to expose the dream-filled destruction she sees Kino driven toward. But she doesn't fight back, because submission is part of her role as Kino's wife. When Kino beats her, he is defending his manliness and his dream, for the two have become one.

### NOTE: KINO'S DREAM

*Kino's dream has challenged the system. In Chapter IV, Steinbeck showed you the reflexive response of the town, the colonial animal, to the pearl. In the deepening conflict, Kino will lose everything that connects him to this town. The purpose of Chapter V is to show Kino's isolation. If you keep in mind the metaphor (comparison) of the town as a colonial animal, this separation can mean only one thing-destruction. Kino's battle with Juana foreshadows the death of his family. He is now like the deviant from a closely interrelated ecological system. He is separated from his natural environment. From now on, he will lack the protection of his kin and the strength of his tradition. He is a free agent, flung into the world to face ruthless predators.*

Kino is attacked again on the path to his hut-this time, by more than one assailant. In self-defense, Kino kills one of them, and with this action, Juana realizes that their old way of life is ended. She finds the pearl in the path just before seeing the two men lying there, one of whom is bleeding from the throat. She sponges Kino's wounds and revives him after dragging the dead man into the bushes. As Kino recovers consciousness, she tells him what has happened, and they realize they must leave the village before daybreak.

By killing a man, Kino has crossed a threshold; there is now no turning back to the old life. Before this, Kino could have sold the pearl and given up his dream of changing the way things are. In his quest for his dream, Kino rebels against both the natural and the social system-and tries to impose

his own will. This attempted revolt will bring Kino ever closer to destruction.

Kino instructs Juana to prepare Coyotito and pack some food while he readies the canoe. As he stumbles down to the beach, he is horrified to see that his canoe has been destroyed.

#### NOTE: THE CANOE

*For Kino, as for any fisherman, the destruction of his boat is an immeasurable loss. Not only does it mean the loss of his prized possession and his means to an income, but it also means the loss of a part of his heritage. The psychological impact of the loss of his canoe is as significant for Kino as the dead man in the path was for Juana. The old way of life is over. Filled with rage, Kino now becomes like an animal, living only to protect himself and his family. (But notice that even in his rage, it never occurs to Kino to take another's boat.) Why does Steinbeck use this animal comparison? Does Kino really have to become like an animal to preserve his dream of a better life as a man? Is Steinbeck necessarily implying that animal traits are lower than human ones?*

Juana scurries down the path with the news that their hut is on fire. She and Kino make plans to hide in his brother's house until the next night, when they will leave for the mountains. Juan Tomas tells him that there is a devil in the pearl, but he agrees to help Kino. He spends the day telling neighbors that Kino has fled the village. From each visit, he returns with something borrowed that will help his brother—a few beans, some salt, and a knife.

That night, before the moon rises, Kino sets forth with his family. Once more, Juan Tomas asks Kino to consider giving up the pearl. But Kino answers that the pearl has become his soul, and that if he gives it up, he will lose his soul.

#### NOTE: THE PEARL AS KINO'S SOUL

*Kino has become so obsessed with the pearl that nothing else matters. Every breath is devoted to making his dream come true, at the risk of placing his family in grave danger. In a material sense, a person dies when his soul leaves his body. If Kino were to throw away his soul, he would die spiritually as well. His soul—that is, the pearl and his dream—is all that holds him to life. Why do you think Kino considers the pearl as his soul? Do you see a religious meaning here? Has Kino substituted a dream of fulfillment on earth for the traditional Christian concept of salvation after death? Some readers think that the dream of the pearl has corrupted Kino's true soul, driving him to sacrifice his family and reject his past. Others see the pearl as Kino's only hope for dignity as a man. In this sense, the pearl would be a fitting metaphor for his soul.*

#### CHAPTER VI

The moment has come for Kino and his family to leave their village in search of their dream. This chapter can best be understood when divided into three parts: the flight, the confrontation with the trackers, and the return.

Kino and Juana flee toward Loreto, the city where "the miraculous Virgin has her station." They make certain, however, not to be seen in the town of La Paz where, two days earlier, they had led a procession to the doctor's house. There is a strong wind this night as the couple go "out into the world." (These words may remind you of Adam and Eve leaving the Garden of Eden in the Old Testament Book of Genesis.) Kino is grateful for the wind because it means the blowing sand will cover their tracks.

The flight has stirred something primitive and basic in Kino, as if part of his ancient Indian heritage has reawakened in him. His survival instinct (akin to animal instinct) has been revived, and he is wary of attackers.

Hour after hour the march proceeds until at last they come upon a road with deeply cut wheel tracks. Since the wind has died down, they decide to walk in the tracks as an added safety measure. A wagon cutting through the sand will easily erase their footsteps. Though the evils of the night are all around them, Kino hears the music of the pearl in his head. The screeching owls and laughing coyotes do not trouble him, since he has the knife for protection.

NOTE:

*Kino and Juana's march to Loreto resembles a pilgrimage to a religious shrine. In fact, Steinbeck notes that Loreto is the city where the Virgin Mary "has her station." Kino's passion for the pearl approaches an almost religious fervor. You've seen earlier that Kino and Juana combine ancient Indian and Catholic prayers, that they refer to God and the gods. Has the religion of the pearl taken over from both these sets of belief? Have all Kino's gods abandoned him, or is it the other way around?*

At dawn, after walking all night, they find a little hiding spot in a clearing near the road. Juana settles in to feed Coyotito while Kino returns to the road to sweep away their footprints. Before long, a cart creeks along the path, wiping out all the tracks. Relieved, Kino returns to Juana and shares some corncakes with her. While eating, Kino spots a little column of ants near his foot; he puts his foot in their way and watches them climb over it. Recall that in Chapter I, Kino did not interfere with the ants, despite his God-like position. Now he makes the ants climb over his foot, a difficult task for an ant. Is Steinbeck commenting on God's indifference to human struggle? Would God create an obstacle as carelessly as Kino puts his foot in the ants' path?

It is hot and they are far from the Gulf. Kino shows Juana the poisonous trees and bushes to avoid. In the midst of these warnings, Juana asks if they are being followed. Kino knows that this will happen and that it will prove the pearl's worth. He looks into the pearl for his former vision of the future but sees only pictures of the past—the dead man, Juana's beaten face, and the baby's illness. In an effort to blot out these images, Kino asserts that their son will have a fine education. Yet all he

sees is Coyotito's face, "thick and feverish from medicine." Alarmed by the vision, Kino hears the music of evil intermingled with that of the pearl.

NOTE: KINO'S VISIONS

*Throughout the novel, Kino has seen visions in the pearl. In keeping with a cinematic technique, Steinbeck has used the pearl as a sort of mirror in which Kino sees visual reflections of his mind. When he is excited about the future, the vision shows his church wedding, fine clothes, and Coyotito going to school. Now that he is a pursued animal, Kino's visions show only the dark, frightening aspects of life. What role do these visions play on the symbolic level of the story?*

Kino falls asleep. Steinbeck then describes the impassive Juana, sitting with the flies buzzing around her facial cuts and bruises, watching Coyotito until his innocent playing makes her smile and respond.

The two of them together make clear the difficulty of their own and their people's position. The Indians have little choice. If they submit meekly to oppression, they will be allowed to live as we see Juana living. They will be beaten any time they try to change things. But they will also be allowed a measure of innocent contentment as long as they do not peer into the future. (Do you remember how happy Kino was on that first morning? Juana is also happy watching the innocence of the baby.) If they do not submit, they will be crushed.

Kino sits up suddenly and whispers to Juana to be silent. He hears something and feels for his knife. In the distance, he sees two men on foot and one on horseback. They are trackers in search of the pearl, and Kino knows they will persist until they find him. He fears that careless footprints will reveal his whereabouts and that even his sweeping the footprints might give him away. Kino is now a hunted man.

NOTE:

*Steinbeck is a master of suspense. One of his strengths as a novelist is the ability to keep the story moving. Even with its many descriptions, The Pearl maintains a rapid pace. As it moves to a conclusion, you can almost feel Kino and Juana running.*

As the trackers approach, Kino plans to leap at the one with the rifle, then kill the other two. Juana muffles Coyotito's noises while the trackers stop at the swept spot. After closely examining the sand, the trackers move on, look back, then continue their journey. Kino knows that they will return, and he panics like a trapped animal. Flight is the only solution. Finally, Juana provokes him into making a decision: they will go to the mountains.

They hurry frantically toward the high place, not bothering to cover their tracks. Time is crucial since the trackers will soon discover the broken twigs and crushed plants. Kino wants Juana to remain in

the crevice while he plants false signs that will lead the trackers further up into the mountains. But she refuses to leave him. So they decide to move in zigzags instead of a straight line, leaving a multitude of signs to confuse the trackers.

The flight to the mountains suggests several meanings. One is that Kino's action is a natural one. "And Kino ran for the high place, as nearly all animals do when they are pursued." Another level of meaning comes from the image of the "naked granite mountains... standing monolithic against the sky." The image is a reminder of the implacable forces of both nature and society against which the Indians must struggle to survive. Some readers find a reference to another, older story of a father who takes his son to the mountains. They see the story of Kino and Coyotito as a reversal of the Old Testament story of Abraham and Isaac. (See Note on page 50.)

As the sun falls, they climb higher to a bubbling spring where animals come to drink. Kino knows that the trackers, needing water, will also plan to come here. But that's a risk he'll have to take. From this altitude, Kino spots the trackers far down the slope. They appear no bigger than swarming ants.

#### NOTE: ANT IMAGERY

*This is the third time that ants have appeared in The Pearl. Steinbeck uses them to show the parallels between animal and human behavior, and to portray the relative insignificance of individual human beings in the scheme of the universe.*

Juana takes a supply of water and heads for a cave up above. Meanwhile, Kino runs up the mountain, then down again, "clawing and tearing at the ferns and wild grape" as he goes. By misleading the trackers into climbing higher, he and Juana will be able to escape down the mountain. His one fear is that Coyotito's cries will reveal their location. But Juana says this won't happen.

By dusk, the trackers arrive at the water spring. Kino watches them from the cave entrance and realizes that they intend to set up camp. This is bad news since he and Juana know they won't be able to keep Coyotito quiet for the entire night. Kino has no choice but to kill the trackers.

Kino touches his son on the head, then feels Juana's cheek. In preparation for the murder, Kino strips the last remains of civilization-his clothes-from his body. Kino's naked, brown body now camouflages him. He must move slowly in order not to dislodge a stone. This requires great stamina-the courage of an animal on the prowl. As Kino reaches the trackers' camp, his heart thunders as he prepares for the attack.

Just as Kino is about to strike, the moon makes him very visible. He hesitates for a moment-a tragic mistake-and the baby cries, drawing the attention of the tracker on duty. In a bitter play on the baby's name, the trackers discuss whether it is a human cry or that of a coyote with her litter. The man with the rifle, taking no chances, raises the rifle to shoot. Kino springs, but he is a moment too late. The rifle goes off before Kino reaches him.

NOTE: ABRAHAM AND ISAAC

*Some readers see the fate of Coyotito in the mountains as a reminder of the biblical story of Abraham and Isaac-in reverse. In that story, Abraham was instructed by God to take his son to the mountain and sacrifice him. When Abraham showed God that he was willing to make the sacrifice, God substituted a ram for Isaac and rewarded Abraham. "I will indeed bless you, and I will multiply your descendants as the stars of heaven and as the sand which is on the seashore. And your descendants shall possess the gate of their enemies.... "(Genesis 22:15-18) In The Pearl, the son is sacrificed; God has not interceded. And there seems little chance of Kino's descendants overcoming their enemies. Unlike Abraham, however, Kino is denied the chance to save his people.*

In a frenzy of rage, Kino takes on a machinelike quality and kills all three trackers one with his knife, one with a blow to the head with the rifle butt, and one slowly and deliberately with shots from the rifle. After the sounds of the killing fade away, Kino hears mournful sounds. It is Juana-something terrible has happened to Coyotito. His head has been blown away.

Steinbeck ends the chapter with a description of the sad return of Kino and Juana to their native village. Not only do the old people who actually saw them return remember it, but also the younger ones whose fathers and grandfathers told them about it. The event truly involved everyone in the village of La Paz.

It is late afternoon when the couple returns to La Paz (ironically, La Paz is Spanish for peace). Walking side by side, Kino carries the rifle and Juana supports Coyotito's body in a bundle over her shoulder. Juana is "as remote and as removed as Heaven," while Kino is "as dangerous as a rising storm."

NOTE:

*You will recall that, earlier in The Pearl, Juana walked behind her husband. Now they walk together, side by side. What do you see in this new sign of equality? Is it an indication that they are now removed from the old system that has oppressed them? Or is it a sign that they are no longer a part of their ancient Indian culture?*

Kino and Juana walk through the town as if it weren't there. Passing the ruins of their burned hut, they proceed to the water, where Kino takes the pearl, looks into it, and sees evil faces peering at him. The pearl has become ugly, "like a malignant growth." Kino asks if Juana wants to throw it, but she tells him to do it. With that, he flings it into the Gulf, where it splashes in the distance, then drops to the bottom, its music fading away to nothing.

NOTE: SOME CONCLUSIONS

*It is bitter irony that after all Kino suffers to keep the pearl, he throws it back into the ocean, where it is lost forever. How can we understand why Kino does this and what the meanings of this story of the poor fisherman might be?*

*Does Kino throw the pearl away because he feels guilty, as some readers suggest? If this is so, then Kino must feel that he has been greedy and that his greed has caused the death of Coyotito, all the other deaths, and much pain and suffering. The original version of the legend was clearly a warning about greed. Can you see a parallel warning in Kino's final gesture?*

*We know there is rage in Kino at the end, because Steinbeck uses images like "a rising storm," "a tower of fear," and "a battle cry" in his description of Kino's return. Do you think Kino throws the pearl away as a gesture of rage and disgust? Has he learned that Indians are not allowed to dream? Is the gesture a last protest against social oppression?*

*You might also conclude that Kino's new understanding stretches even further than the boundaries of his own social system. It was not only the pearl buyers and the doctor and the tracker with the horse who betrayed him. Indians also worked against him. (He had to beg his brother for one day's refuge!) It is possible that Kino at the end looks with disgust at humans in general, regardless of social position. From this point of view, the novel seems to be a depiction of the universal weakness and selfishness of people.*

*Still another conclusion is that Kino's tragedy was not so much a victory of evil over good as it was a natural phenomenon. Throughout the novel, Steinbeck has used biological comparisons to suggest that no event happens to an individual alone. The natural order-of ants, fish, scorpions, and men-is a predatory one, and Kino just happens to get caught in it. Kino's action might suggest that he is submitting to the inevitability of the natural (and social) order-to his fate.*

*There is no single answer. The meaning you take from this story of the fisherman and the pearl will depend on how you see Kino and on how you interpret the meaning of the pearl, on your own experiences, and on many other factors. Steinbeck does not point dramatically and conclusively to one interpretation. Some readers have seen this inconclusiveness as a weakness in the novel. Perhaps *The Pearl* is not conclusive, but it does serve as a kind of record of the conflicts experienced by people-conflicts within themselves and with the systems under which they live.*

## **Themes in John Steinbeck's *The Pearl***

### **Price of Wisdom.**

Juana understands far sooner than Kino the danger in possessing the pearl. "It will destroy us all," she cries out to him. "Even our son." After Kino and Juana's way of life has been obliterated—their house burned and Kino's canoe smashed—Juan Tomás attempts to save them from further destruction. "There is a devil in this pearl," he tells Kino. "You should have sold it and passed on the devil. Perhaps you can still sell it and buy peace for yourself." Kino refuses, clinging to the pearl although he perceives it differently: "I have it ... And I will keep it ... now it is my misfortune and my life and I will keep it." When Kino is caught up in dreams of the future, he beats Juana for attempting to throw the pearl into the Gulf; at the conclusion of the story, it is Kino who returns the pearl to the sea. Juana stands beside him, the bloodied body of their dead son wrapped in her shawl—a terrible price to pay for Kino's acquiring wisdom.

What, however, is the wisdom of *The Pearl*, if indeed it is a parable? The question remains unanswered in the story, but a passage from the text suggests an interpretation:

For it is said that humans are never satisfied; that you give them one thing and they want something more. And this is said in disparagement, whereas it is one of the greatest talents the species has and one that has made it superior to animals that are satisfied with what they have.

The lesson inherent in Kino's possessing "the Pearl of the World" may be found in this characteristic of human nature: the desire for more. One of man's "greatest talents," the story suggests, is also a curse that creates dissatisfaction and destroys contentment.

Before finding the pearl, Kino lives a peaceful and secure existence, in harmony with the natural world; he finds happiness and fulfillment in the simple routines of his life—waking up beside Juana, listening to "the little splash of morning waves on the beach," watching Coyotito sleep in his cradle, and standing on the beach before dawn to watch the sun rise out of the Gulf. The morning before Kino finds the pearl is "a morning like other mornings and yet perfect among mornings." He lives within "the Song of the Family"; it rises sometimes "to an aching chord that caught the throat, saying this is safety, this is warmth, this is the *Whole*."

When the pearl comes into his possession, Kino forfeits his old life for new dreams; he gains nothing and loses almost everything of real value. When he and Juana return to their village with Coyotito's body, they have been transformed by grief and seem "removed from human experience." The pearl, once luminous and enchanting, now seems ugly and gray to Kino, "like a malignant growth." Standing at the water's edge, he flings it into the sea "with all his might." Readers find many meanings in *The Pearl*, as Steinbeck intended, but the primary truth of the story seems to be a warning as much as a lesson—to be aware of the human drive to want more than we have and to appreciate and protect what is truly valuable in our lives before it is lost.

Before the narrative begins, an introductory paragraph identifies the story of Kino and the great pearl as having been told in the town so many times in the past that it has become a part of every man's heart and mind. In the story are "only good and bad things and black and white things and good and evil things and no in between anywhere." Thus the story is a morality tale, a parable perhaps from which readers derive personal meaning. In regard to literary themes, *The Pearl* offers many themes

for readers to consider; each theme develops organically from the setting and raises universal questions about human nature and human experience. That said, however, I think the most important one is this:

### **Greed and Corruption**

As the word spreads that Kino has found a huge pearl, the news of his discovery “stirred up something infinitely black and evil in the town”; greed is a “black distillate” comparable to the poison of a scorpion. It infects rich and poor alike. The beggars in the street, the merchants, the pearl buyers, the doctor, and the local priest—all think of the pearl in terms of how they might profit from Kino’s possessing it. Greed drives some people in the town to commit acts of violence against Kino in attempting to steal the pearl. Blood is shed.

Corruption fueled by greed is evident in individual lives and in society at large. The doctor is corrupted by his love of money and fine possessions; in a silk robe, he sits in his beautiful house, sipping chocolate from a china cup, while he refuses to aid Coyotito, who has been stung by a scorpion. The baby is only an Indian, after all, and the doctor, he insists, is not a “veterinary”; moreover, Coyotito’s father, Kino, has nothing of value to give to the doctor in return for his treating the sick child. Later, the doctor uses his knowledge of medicine to make a recovering Coyotito ill in order to “save” him and gain access to Kino’s pearl. In the cold, calculated perversion of his profession, the doctor exhibits his moral corruption as a physician and as a human being.

The doctor’s attitude toward the native Indian population is rooted in centuries of colonial conquest and subjugation. He is “of a race which for nearly four hundred years had beaten and starved and robbed and despised Kino’s race, and frightened it too ....” The consequence of this history is a corrupt society determined to keep Kino’s people imprisoned by poverty and ignorance. From the pearl buyers in La Paz (secret representatives of a single buyer) who conspire to pay the Indians as little as possible for their pearls to the priest whose sermons admonish the Indians to accept their station in life, the institutions in society work in concert to deny freedom and justice to every member of Kino’s race. In doing so, those in power enrich themselves at the expense of the poor and the powerless.

### **Greed**

Before the pearl, Kino was content with his wife, Juana, and their child. He reflected on how lucky he felt to have such a cheerful and cooperative wife. As long as he had his canoe, he felt like he could provide for his family. The only reason he wanted the pearl was so that he could get medical treatment for his son, but after his son heals, Kino begins thinking about other things he might buy. His friends and neighbors can no longer be trusted as even the priest tries to figure out how to get a share of the profit. When Juana sees that the greed surrounding the pearl is destroying them, she tries to get rid of it. However, Kino catches her. 'Her arm was up to throw when he leaped at her and caught her arm and wrenched the pearl from her. He struck her in the face with his clenched fist and she fell among the boulders, and he kicked her in the side.' Kino once valued Juana as his most valued asset, but because of his greed, she became the target of his disgust to the point that he

beats her.

### **Obsession.**

In Chapter II, Kino dives for pearls in a desperate attempt to find one of value with which to pay the doctor to treat Coyotito for the scorpion sting that could kill him. Instead, Coyotito's condition improves, the result of Juana's treating his wound with an "old remedy," and Kino finds not just a valuable pearl but "the Pearl of the World." With these two events, Kino's life changes dramatically. In the magnificence of the huge, perfect pearl, Kino envisions a future unlike any he had ever dared to imagine; looking into the glowing surface of the pearl, he sees "dreams form"—new clothes for his family, his and Juana's wedding in the church, a harpoon and a rifle for himself, and most of all, an education for Coyotito. Kino's contentment with the "Song of the Family" is now lost in "the music of the pearl" that sings with "triumph" in him.

Becoming a rich man changes Kino's life immediately in ways he does not anticipate as "shadowy figures" attempt to steal the pearl. He is attacked, his home is invaded, and he kills a man in self-defense when he is attacked a second time. When Juana tries to throw the pearl back into the sea, believing that it is evil and will destroy them, Kino beats her with animal savagery and then is sickened by what he has done to her. For Kino, possessing the pearl with all its promises has become an obsession; he pursues it until his and Juana's old life is destroyed and their baby is dead.

Despite the initial death and destruction the pearl brings into his and Juana's life, Kino will not give it up. Rather than sell it to the corrupt pearl buyers for essentially nothing, he chooses to defy the system and sell it in the capital for a fair price; after his house has been burned and his canoe destroyed, he still refuses to sell the pearl in La Paz. "This pearl has become my soul," Kino says. "If I give it up I shall lose my soul." Leaving the old life behind, he takes Juana and Coyotito on a journey to the capital, leaving the trail and fleeing into the mountains when they are tracked by three men who will kill them for the pearl. Kino prevails over the trackers, killing them all, but his obsession with the pearl ends only when he realizes Coyotito has died, the innocent victim of a rifle shot. Returning to the village with Juana by his side, Kino throws the pearl into the sea.

### **Nature of Power.**

Power vs. powerlessness is a theme that runs throughout *The Pearl*. Kino's race has been subjugated for centuries by European colonialism. The oyster bed where Kino finds the great pearl is the same bed "that had raised the King of Spain to be a great power in Europe in past years, had helped to pay for his wars, and had decorated the churches for his soul's sake." Kino's conquered people have remained powerless for four hundred years, "since first the strangers came with arguments and authority and gunpowder to back up both." Once established, the subjugation of the Indians has been perpetuated by society's ensuring that they remain poor and ignorant. Any desire they might have for a better life is suppressed by the church; the priest in La Paz teaches that each person must "remain faithful" to his station in life, assigned by God, in order to protect the universe

from "the assaults of Hell."

Kino is well aware of how powerless he is in life. After finding the pearl, his dreams of the future include buying a rifle, a weapon that gives a man power. More significantly, however, he dreams of an education for his son. If Coyotito could read, "the boy would know what things were in the books and what things were not." Kino understands that real power lies in knowledge: "My son will read and open the books, and my son will write and know writing. And my son will make numbers, and these things will make us free because he will know—he will know and through him we will know." The pearl means more than wealth to Kino; it offers an end to being trapped by ignorance. "This is our one chance," he tells Juana. "Our son must go to school. He must break out of the pot that holds us in." In defying the pearl buyers and challenging the system they represent, Kino initiates a power struggle that ultimately ends in Coyotito's death.

**Pride** is also an important theme.

Kino's subjugation by society has not destroyed his pride or self-respect. Only for fear of Coyotito's dying does he ask, hat in hand, for the doctor's assistance. When he is turned away with an obvious lie by the doctor's servant, Kino feels so deeply humiliated he is overcome by rage. He stands at the gate to the doctor's house for "a long time," puts his "suppliant hat on his head," and then strikes the gate with "a crushing blow." He will not consent to being marginalized; his pride will not allow him to endure passively the doctor's insult.

Kino's pride is manifested again in his confrontation with the pearl buyers in La Paz. Knowing that he is being cheated, Kino refuses to sell his pearl to them; in declaring that he will sell the pearl in the capital, Kino asserts his independence and refuses to be humiliated again. Later, when Kino's house is burned and his canoe destroyed, the loss is more than material. To Juan Tomás Kino says, "[a]n insult has been put on me that is deeper than my life." Kino's pride, as much as his desire to secure money for Coyotito's future, demands that he challenge the system that holds him down. He has no choice, for as he tells Juana, "I am a man."

In "The Pearl" by John Steinbeck, the theme of the destructive power of greed is explored as the characters navigate their personal desires, destiny, and racism. We will explore the devastating effect of Kino's sudden change from being poor but happy, to possibly instantly wealthy.

### **Sin Brings Destruction**

John Steinbeck's *The Pearl* is a parable that demonstrates the destructive force of greed. The characters in the story begin as poverty-stricken, but happy. By the end of the story, they have been destroyed by their own greed. It begins when Coyotito, Kino and Juana's son, is stung by a deadly scorpion, but the doctor refuses to treat him because the family is Indian and has no money. Kino dives for pearls to make money to help his son, but by the time he comes upon a large, magnificent pearl, Coyotito's health improves. Kino begins to think how he can better the lives of himself and his family, but the greedy pearl buyers try to cheat him. The greed that creeps into the entire city turns friends into enemies. Over time, Kino loses everything for the sake of the pearl. Had Kino continued

to remain grateful for his blessings rather than always pursuing more, the pearl would have lost its power to destroy him. The sub-themes of destiny and racism against the indigent people by the European colonists is also addressed. The **theme** is the main point addressed in a literary work.

## **Destiny**

Kino has been taught his entire life that it is wrong to try to better himself beyond the position in which God placed him. As a child, his father taught him that the reason why pearl divers kept being cheated by agents who promised to get the divers more money for their product at the capital is because '...each man and woman is like a soldier sent by God to guard some part of the castle of the Universe. And some are in the ramparts and some far deep in the darkness of the walls. But each one must remain faithful to his post and must not go running about, else the castle is in danger from the assaults of Hell.' Despite his brother reminding him of this story, Kino persists on getting the best price for his pearl. Kino's attempt to 'leave his station' results in complete destruction of Kino's family.

Further, the pearl itself is destined to be in the ocean. Terrible things continue to happen to Kino's family until Kino finally realizes that he needs to return the pearl to its home.

## **The Pearl Topic Tracking: Evil**

### **Topic Tracking: Evil**

#### **Chapter 1**

Evil 1: Evil is introduced in the form of the scorpion that stings Coyotito. Until that moment, Kino's home is peaceful, filled with the Song of Family. But when he spots the scorpion dangling above Coyotito's bed, Kino recognizes the strains of the Song of Evil that recur throughout the story. The Song of Evil comes when anything threatens the family, and Kino does all that he can to destroy the evil and hush the sinister melody of the Song of Evil so that the Song of Family can return.

Evil 2: Kino hears the Song of Evil again when he and Juana stand at the gates of the doctor's house. Kino knows that the doctor is of the race that has abused Kino's own people for four hundred years; despite the fact that they need the doctor's help, Kino knows that the doctor is still the enemy. He will try to cheat them or abuse them as his people have always done to Kino's own race.

### Chapter 3

Evil 3: The buyers are out to take advantage of Kino and his pearl. Their goal is to cheat him and ruin his plans of happiness and peace for his family.

Evil 4: The doctor comes to take advantage of Kino's ignorance by making Coyotito sick and pretending that his illness is the result of the scorpion sting. Because Kino and Juana are uneducated, they are afraid to doubt the doctor's word, and he uses it to profit from their newfound wealth. He pretends as if he doesn't know of Kino's pearl, yet the only reason he has condescended to treat an Indian baby was to try and seek out where Kino might be hiding it. The pearl brings evil in the form of greed: many seek to take advantage of Kino's newfound wealth.

### Chapter 4

Evil 5: The buyers work together to cheat Kino of his pearl and intend to give him very little money for it. They have planned to convince him that his pearl is worthless and pretend that they're doing him a favor by taking it off his hands. The buyers are aware of the pearl's tremendous value, and intend to con the "uneducated native;" he will trust them because they are the "experts."

Evil 6: Kino believes that his friends will help protect him from the evils that might befall him because of the pearl, but instead of finding protection with his neighbors, he is attacked. His pearl has turned friends into enemies; they are jealous and envy the pearl of the world that Kino has found.

### Chapter 5

Evil 7: The pearl turns Juana and Kino against one another. The evil power of the pearl is strong enough to inspire violence between them. Juana and Kino are so close to one another that conversation isn't even needed, and yet the pearl is able to divide them. It has brought injury and danger, and now it pulls Juana and Kino away from each other.

Evil 8: Kino is forced to kill a man to defend himself and the pearl. Then Kino's hut is burned after someone searching for the pearl has ransacked it. Those who covet the great pearl destroy everything that Kino and Juana have in their attempts to find it. The Pearl is making everyone turn against them, and Kino and Juana know that they are no longer safe in their village, and must escape.

### Chapter 6

Evil 9: Kino looks into the pearl expecting to see visions of the dreams he had the night after he found the pearl, but the only things he sees are the horrible things that have happened to his family since he found the pearl. He begins to realize the evil the pearl contains, but still refuses to give it up.

Evil 10: In a dream, Kino has a premonition of danger. He wakes and discovers trackers are following his family. He knows that they will find them and kill them for the pearl. He feels trapped because there is no way for them to escape the trackers.

Evil 11: In the struggle to protect his family and survive, Kino turns into a killing machine. He attacks, swiftly and brutally, killing all three men who were tracking his family in a quest to steal his great pearl. Kino has been forced to do terrible things to survive and to protect the pearl from being stolen. The pearl's value has made it evil.

## **The Pearl Topic Tracking: Family**

### Chapter 1

Family 1: Kino hears the Song of Family in each routine of his life. Although their life is simple, the rhythm of their habits and the sounds of each part of their lives make up a song that is important to Kino. It fills his ears and he is content with the safe and sturdy song. Kino will protect this song and the family it represents because it is all he has and he loves it.

### Chapter 2

Family 2: Kino inherited his canoe, his only thing of value, from his father and grandfather, and it makes him proud. It is his legacy and he takes great care of it because it is the tool he uses to provide for his family. The canoe is the only inheritance he has beyond the songs of his people, and Kino loves his canoe.

### Chapter 3

Family 3: Kino cannot take a chance that the doctor is lying to him about Coyotito's health because he doesn't want his child to suffer. The doctor takes advantage of a parent's concern for his child to turn a profit. He knows that Kino will trust enough in the doctor's knowledge to allow him to treat Coyotito because Kino is unsure that the baby is healed.

### Chapter 4

Family 4: Kino won't give up the pearl even though it's brought nothing but pain because he sees its value as a chance to provide for his son's education, allowing him to escape their simple life. Kino does not want those with a formal education to take advantage of Coyotito, like they do to other uneducated natives. He wants more for his son and his family than their simple life, and the pearl is the key to those aspirations.

### Chapter 5

Family 5: The pearl that Kino expected to protect his family is now tearing it apart. Juana warns Kino that the pearl will destroy their family, but Kino refuses to believe it because he thinks that the wealth the pearl offers is the best way to protect his family. He thinks that by keeping the pearl, he is doing what is best for his family, but the pearl is only pushing him and Juana apart. If it is dividing them, it cannot protect the family from harm. It only makes life more precarious for them.

Family 6: Juan Tomas helps his brother in every way that he can, by diverting the neighbors and gathering supplies for Kino's journey. Juan knows that the pearl has brought evil onto his brother's

family, and he does all the he can to help them escape from it, but he cannot convince Kino to get rid of the pearl.

## Chapter 6

Family 7: As Kino, Juana, and Coyotito are making their escape, Kino believes that his family will triumph because they seem to be getting away. He begins to believe that everything will work out; the pearl promises security and peace, and they will escape the bad luck that has plagued them since he found the pearl. He believes that now his family will prosper.

Family 8: Kino considers giving himself up to the trackers because there is no way that he and his family can get away from them. The thought momentarily defeats him, until Juana reminds him that the trackers will kill her and Coyotito as well, and that prods Kino into action.

Family 9: In the midst of danger, their survival depends on keeping the baby quiet through the night. If he cries, their hiding place is given away, but if he can keep silent, perhaps Kino will be able to disarm the men and secure his family's escape.

Family 10: Juana was right from the beginning -- the pearl did destroy their son. The trackers who were following them kill Coyotito. Kino's insistence that the pearl would find peace and happiness for his family costs Coyotito his life and leaves a hole in their family that would not have been there had Kino never found the pearl.

## The Pearl Topic Tracking: Superstition

### Chapter 1

**Superstition 1:** When Coyotito is in danger of being stung by the scorpion, Juana mutters an ancient magic incantation and then some Hail Marys to protect her son. The ancient, superstitious religion of the peasantry has been mixed with the Catholicism of the Western upper class. Juana appeals to native gods and the Western God, uncertain of which holds the true power. This mingling of a polytheistic religion with Roman Catholicism is common in native countries that are colonized. The natives combine the gods of their own religion with the figures of Catholicism. Elements of their original faith remain, such as incantations like the one Juana mutters.

### Chapter 2

**Superstition 2:** Juana prays that Kino will find a pearl so that they can have Coyotito's scorpion sting treated by the doctor. She prays in an attempt to force from the gods the luck she and Kino need to take care of Coyotito. Finding a pearl of value is strictly luck. Pearls themselves are accidental, and finding a pearl is considered a gift from the gods or God.

**Superstition 3:** When Kino finds the large shell, he is reluctant to open it first because he doesn't want to show the gods or God that he wants the pearl so much. He believes that if he wants it too much, it won't happen, and so he waits to open the shell.

### Chapter 3

Superstition 4: Kino worries that the gods will get revenge against him if he finds success. He knows that the gods hate when men plan for success, and now that Kino is making plans, he fears that something will come and rob him of this opportunity.

Superstition 5: Juana believes that the pearl is cursed because it has brought an intruder into their home. She warns Kino that it will destroy them all, including their son, if they don't throw it back into the sea, but Kino won't listen. His desire to use the pearl to educate his son and make a better life for his family is too strong. He ignores Juana's warning and keeps the pearl.

### Chapter 4

Superstition 6: Juana still believes that the pearl is cursed, and she asks Kino to throw it back into the sea again, but he refuses. He insists that it is their only chance and he won't give it up. Juana, however, knows that the pearl will only bring more evil and disaster to them, and decides she must take matters into her own hands, and get rid of the pearl.

### Chapter 5

Superstition 7: Juana decides that if Kino won't get rid of the cursed pearl, she will. She takes the pearl and tries to throw it back into the sea to protect her family from any more danger, but Kino stops her. Her fear of the pearl is well-founded; Kino beats her for trying to get rid of the pearl, further proving that the pearl is cursed and evil. It has made Kino attack and harm the one person he loves most.

Superstition 8: Juan warns Kino that the pearl is cursed and that he must get rid of it to pass the evil on to someone else. He hopes that Kino can sell it soon so that the evil of the pearl will not destroy his family before Kino can rid himself of it.

### Chapter 6

Superstition 9: When Kino looks into the pearl and sees only the tragedies that have befallen his family, he begins to believe that the pearl is cursed, but he still cannot part with it.

Superstition 10: Kino and Juana throw the pearl back into the sea after Coyotito is killed by the trackers. The cursed pearl has brought about the death of their child and forced Kino to kill to survive and protect his family. The great pearl has brought nothing but misery to Kino and his family, and together they throw the cursed object back into the sea. As it sinks, the music of the pearl turns to a whisper and then disappears.

## The Pearl Major Characters

**Kino:** Kino is a young pearl diver who feels his obligation to his family very strongly. He knows his place as the provider and works hard to supply for his family's needs. He finds The Pearl of the World and expects to use it to pay for his son, Coyotito's, education. He also dreams that with the pearl he can buy his family new clothes and a rifle for himself, but the pearl only brings him trouble. His neighbors turn on him and try to steal the pearl from him and he has to leave his home after killing an attacker. Although it was self-defense, he knows that his family is in danger. He and Juana run away with Coyotito, but trackers follow them. He knows that they are after the pearl and that they will catch his family, so he sneaks into their camp and kills them all. In the shooting that goes on in the camp, a stray bullet kills his son. He and Juana return to La Paz with their dead child and they throw the pearl into the sea.

**Juana:** Juana is Kino's strong, quiet wife who takes care of her family. The rhythm of her motions is the Song of Family for Kino. She obeys her husband in most instances, but when she realizes that the pearl is only bringing trouble to her family, she urges him to throw it away. He refuses, and while he sleeps, she takes the pearl to the beach and is about to throw it in, when Kino catches her and beats her for taking the pearl. She accompanies her husband out of La Paz and urges him again to get rid of the cursed pearl, but he won't until their son, Coyotito, is accidentally shot by a tracker's rifle. After the tragedy, Kino and Juana walk side by side back to La Paz and throw the pearl into the sea together.

**Coyotito:** Coyotito is Kino and Juana's first-born child who is stung by a scorpion and needs medical treatment. Unfortunately, the local doctor will not treat the baby because Kino has no money. When the doctor hears about Kino's pearl, he comes to treat Coyotito. Kino expects that the pearl will purchase great things for his family, the greatest being an education for his son so that they cannot be cheated by the merchants and the other upper class citizens of La Paz who have taken advantage of Kino's people for four hundred years. But that great dream is destroyed when Coyotito is killed by a gunshot while Kino is killing the trackers who are following them. Kino killed them to protect his family and the pearl and the dream of the future that the pearl provided, but his dream and his family are destroyed when Coyotito dies. Kino and Juana return to La Paz with Coyotito's small body and throw the pearl into the sea.

## Minor Characters

**Juan Tomas:** Juan Tomas is Kino's older brother. Juan gives Kino advice about selling the pearl. He walks beside Kino when they travel to the pearl buyers. Later, he warns his brother that by refusing to sell his pearl to the buyers, Kino is defying their way of life and putting his family in danger. When Kino seeks refuge with Juan Tomas, he is granted it. Juan gathers supplies that Kino and Juana will need on their journey and protects his brother's family until they depart.

**Apolonia:** Apolonia is Juan Tomas' wife. She follows her husband as he escorts Kino into town to

sell the pearl, and she raises a formal mourning when Kino's hut burns and no sign of them is found.

**Doctor:** The doctor is wealthier than the peasants of La Paz, and he scoffs at natives, like Kino and Juana, who seek his treatment without money. When Kino and Juana brought Coyotito to the doctor to heal the scorpion sting, he refused them. Later, when he heard that Kino had found the Pearl of the World, he came to their hut to treat the baby. He pretended not to know that Kino had found a great pearl, so that when Kino talked about it, he could watch to see if his eyes went to the spot where it was buried in the hut. Sure enough, Kino gave its location away and that night someone came to his hut to dig out the pearl, but Kino had since moved it. Kino stabbed at the intruder, but did not make a fatal swing and the intruder (possibly the doctor) hit him in the head and then escaped.

**Trackers:** Two trackers and a man with a rifle followed Kino and Juana out of La Paz. Kino saw them coming while Juana hid in the woods. When Kino realized that they were tracking him, he and Juana hurried up to the smooth rocks of the mountains so that they would be harder to follow. When night fell, the trackers were just below the cave in which Kino, Juana, and Coyotito were hiding. Kino sneaked down the sheer face of the mountain and into their camp and killed them all. In the chaos, Coyotito was shot and killed.

**The Priest:** The priest was the local religious authority, and when he learned of Kino's pearl, he hoped that he could convince Kino to use his wealth for the good of the church. He made a visit to Kino's hut that night to talk to Kino about his duty to give part of his wealth to God, who had ultimately created the pearl.

**The Buyers:** The pearl buyers of the town acted as if they worked for themselves, but they were actually all controlled by one man. The pretense of competition among the pearl buyers made it easier to cheat the Indians out of their pearls. By putting on a show of competing over the best price, the man in charge and the buyers were adept at ripping off the natives. When they told Kino that his great pearl was worth only a thousand pesos, he got angry and left to take the pearl to the capital. That night, Kino's family was attacked in their home, and he believed that the buyers were responsible for it.

### **The Pearl Objects/Places**

**Scorpion:** The scorpion introduces the Song of Evil for Kino because it threatens the safety of his family. When the scorpion stings Coyotito before Kino can get to it, it introduces pain and panic.

**Song of Family:** The Song of Family is the rhythm that Kino hears in the life of his family, and in their routines. It's the music of their life together and reflects their peaceful interaction with one another, even in silence.

**Song of Evil:** The Song of Evil is the thundering that he hears whenever something threatens his family. The Song of Evil plays when the scorpion threatens his son and the thieves attack his family.

**Song of the Pearl that Might Be:** The Song of the Pearl that Might Be is what Kino hears when he is diving for pearls. This is the sound of his own hope that he will find a great pearl that will provide his

family with luxury and peace.

**The Pearl of the World:** Kino found a great and beautiful pearl, The Pearl of the World, and it created its own music in his life. He hoped to use the pearl to buy his family new clothes and a rifle for himself. He also wanted to send Coyotito to school so that he could learn to read and become educated. Coyotito could then know what was in the great books, and could no longer be cheated by wealthy, educated people. Despite the high hopes Kino had for his family after finding the pearl, it brought them only grief. Neighbors began trying to steal it in the night and Kino killed a villager who attacked him for the pearl. To protect his family, Kino is forced to escape the village. Trackers, lusting after the pearl, followed Kino and his family. Kino, knowing the trackers will kill him and his family, attacked. During the fight, Coyotito was shot by the tracker's rifle. The pearl that once promised peace and prosperity brought Kino and Juana only tragedy. They returned to La Paz and threw it back into the sea.

**Kino's Canoe:** Kino's canoe was the one thing of value he owned until he found the pearl. He inherited the canoe from his father and grandfather and took excellent care of it. Kino used the boat to provide for his family. After he found the pearl, someone put a hole in the bottom of his canoe, forcing Kino and Juana to escape La Paz on foot. Kino was sad at the loss of his boat because it was a part of his heritage.

### STYLE AND LANGUAGE USE

The Pearl is a short novel. Its plot is well defined, the action moves forward within a structure of six chapters, it has a core of central characters, and the suspense builds as the story moves along. Readers say the sentences reflect the spoken quality of the New Testament-perhaps an influence of Steinbeck's early reading of the Bible. The author has chosen his words with precision, a skill he developed in part by working as a journalist.

In the preface to The Pearl you learn that the story will be told in the form of a parable. A parable is a short work, usually fictitious, that illustrates a lesson, often on the subject of good and evil. This is reminiscent of the New Testament, where many of Christ's lessons are told in parable form. The biblical tone is underscored by Steinbeck's mention in the preface of the struggle between good and evil.

Also, like the Bible (and traditional folktales), The Pearl contains little dialogue. The characters speak infrequently, but their thoughts and feelings are made clear through Steinbeck's powerful descriptions. He excelled at selecting the exact word and correct turn of phrase-and his lack of dialogue emphasizes the quiet intensity and simple manner of his characters. Their nonverbal quality helps to reinforce their discomfort in the presence of the sophisticated doctor, priest, and pearl buyers, who are experts at using language.

The Pearl contains many scientific metaphors and similes-figures of speech used to compare one object with another in order to suggest a similarity between them. For example, the Indian village is compared to the habitat of a colonial animal.

## **POINT OF VIEW**

The Pearl is told by a third-person narrator who stands outside the action and knows everything about the characters and their actions. The narrator is said to be omniscient, which means all-knowing. In the introduction and in the final passage of the novel, the narrator speaks of events that happened long ago and have become important through repetition: "And because the story has been told so often, it has taken root in every man's mind."

For most of the novel, the narrator abandons the past and takes you directly into the present. This is the advantage of his omniscience: he can move back and forth, from past to present to future, whenever a different focus will help you understand his story. Perhaps the most gripping narrative in the present is the one where Kino attacks and kills the trackers. In this passage, you feel you are part of the action-as if you were standing next to Kino.

The movement from distant narration of the past to close-up narration that seems to recount the present may seem inconsistent. But remember that Steinbeck is trying to tell an old tale in the form of a novel. He needs a narrator who can communicate both the immediate action of the novel's plot and the universal nature of the tale (or parable).

The third-person narrative is also flexible in its focus on characters. It allows you to change perspectives and to judge the characters for their individual thoughts and actions. The thoughts and actions of characters are not filtered through the intelligence of one person, as in a first-person narration, but are presented reasonably objectively and with the wide-ranging facts available to an omniscient narrator.

## **FORM AND STRUCTURE**

An important novel can usually be interpreted on many levels, and this is certainly the case with The Pearl. The book's structure is as simple as the legend, or folktale, on which it is based: It begins and ends with Kino as an impoverished fisherman who, in the process of pursuing his dream, is nearly destroyed. Readers often speak of The Pearl as an allegory or a parable.

An allegory is a story meant to teach a spiritual or moral lesson, in which the characters and action symbolize abstract concepts. A parable is a short allegory, which has long been associated with the New Testament. Christ used parables to teach moral lessons (for example, the Good Samaritan and the lesson of the Talents).

Some readers see The Pearl as an allegory of social oppression. In this view, Juan Tomas is a symbol of the ancient Indian wisdom, Kino is a symbol of the Indians' desire for freedom, and the doctor, priest, and pearl buyers are symbols of the oppressive Spanish culture. The pearl represents Kino's means of escaping oppression, but the powerful forces of the social system are too strong for even the pearl to overcome. When Kino throws his great treasure back into the sea, the message seems to be that the poor Indian doesn't have a chance.

Other readers see in The Pearl a strong allegorical message about human greed. Kino becomes the

symbol of the poor but happy man who is destroyed when he begins to want the things of the material world. The pearl that was supposed to bring happiness and fulfillment brings only destruction. At the end both Kino's dream and his son are dead.

In the original story on which Steinbeck based his own, the fisher sees the pearl as a means of saving his soul through the purchase of Roman Catholic masses "sufficient to pop him out of Purgatory like a squeezed watermelon seed." (Purgatory, in Catholicism, is the temporary place or condition where the repentant sinner is absolved after death, and where mortal sins are punished before the soul can attain salvation.) When the fisher decides to throw the pearl back, he feels like a "free man" despite the insecurity of both his soul and his future.

In the novel, Kino says that the pearl has become his soul. This closely echoes the Gospel According to Matthew in the New Testament, in which the Kingdom of Heaven is compared to a "pearl of great price." If the pearl is seen as a symbol of salvation, what is the meaning of its loss at the end? Is Kino, like the fisherman of the original story, lucky to return to a state of simple human happiness and poverty? Or is he denied a soul as punishment for his reliance on material things, or for his daring to overreach his lowly status?

In his preface to *The Pearl*, Steinbeck says: "If the story is a parable, perhaps everyone takes his own meaning from it...." It's up to you to decide whether the story is a parable, and what meaning you derive from it. In order to be effective, the true parable or allegory must attempt to resolve a conflict in such a way that a consistent interpretation or conclusion can be drawn. Do you think there is one such consistent meaning? Or, do you think the novel can be interpreted on many levels?

## **. A STEP BEYOND**

### **TESTS AND ANSWERS**

#### **TEST 1**

\_\_\_\_\_ 1. The songs in *The Pearl* represent

- A. unspoken feelings and emotions
- B. domination by the Spanish
- C. the poetry Kino has inherited from his ancestors

\_\_\_\_\_ 2. Which of the following similes does Steinbeck use to describe the relationship of the townspeople?

- A. Each man's life is like a station in God's army.
- B. The pearl is like a curse.
- C. The town is like a colonial animal.

\_\_\_\_ 3. After finding the pearl in the path, Juana didn't throw it back in the water because

- A. she was afraid of getting hit again
- B. Kino stopped her again
- C. she knew the old way was gone when she saw the dead man

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\_\_\_\_ 4. Before Kino finds the pearl, his life might be described as

- A. filled with want and despair
- B. simple and relatively content
- C. monotonous and uncomfortable

\_\_\_\_ 5. The image of big fish eating little fish is symbolic of the relationship between the

- A. Spanish and the Indians
- B. pearl buyers and their unseen boss
- C. trackers and Kino

\_\_\_\_ 6. Which of the following religious references is not appropriate to The Pearl?

- A. the Abraham and Isaac story
- B. the miracle of the loaves and the fishes
- C. the expulsion from the Garden of Eden

\_\_\_\_ 7. When Kino punches the doctor's gate, you can tell he

- A. has planned the action of protest from the beginning
- B. has been provoked to this kind of violent expression before
- C. surprises himself with the violence of his reaction

\_\_\_\_ 8. In the story of the two villagers who had gone to the capital to sell pearls, it was certain that they had

- A. fled with the profits
- B. been in the employ of the Spanish
- C. never been seen again that

\_\_\_\_ 9. The doctor's actions are meant to suggest that

- A. this is the way the Spanish generally treat the Indians
- B. he is incompetent and has no business treating the baby
- C. he is different from the other Spanish

\_\_\_\_ 10. Which of the following is not true about Kino's canoe?

- A. It was passed down to him from his grandfather.
- B. It had been blessed by the priest.
- C. It was the one thing of value owned by Kino.

11. Why is Kino's dream of educating Coyotito such a dangerous one?

12. What role does Juan Tomas play?

13. Explain the symbolism of the pearl.

## TEST 2

\_\_\_\_ 1. When Kino said, "I am a man," Juana knew this meant that he

- A. no longer needed her
- B. would leave the old way of life
- C. was half insane and half god

\_\_\_\_ 2. Steinbeck uses which of the following images in his description of the Indian trackers to suggest that they were dehumanized?

- A. excited dogs
- B. crying coyotes
- C. scavenger birds

\_\_\_\_ 3. Kino beats Juana for stealing the pearl because

- A. she has disobeyed him
- B. her actions have threatened his dream
- C. she has overstepped her place as a woman

\_\_\_\_ 4. From his experiences in the world, Kino learns that the

- A. established system is the best way of doing things
- B. potential for evil lies within everyone
- C. priest was right all along

\_\_\_\_ 5. Which of the following images does Steinbeck use to describe Kino and Juana when they return to the village at the end?

- A. scorpions
- B. scuttling crabs
- C. towers of darkness

\_\_\_\_ 6. The priest's visit to Kino's hut is unusual because

- A. the priest rarely visited the Indians
- B. Kino was not Roman Catholic
- C. it was Sunday

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\_\_\_\_ 7. Which of the following is central to the theme of appearance vs. reality?

- A. the mirages on the Gulf
- B. the image of the mountains
- C. the deceit of the pearl buyers

\_\_\_\_ 8. Whenever Kino deals with the Spanish, he feels

- A. disgust and superiority
- B. pity and contempt
- C. fear and anger

\_\_\_\_ 9. Juan Tomas hesitates to help Kino because he

- A. thinks Kino is wrong to challenge the system
- B. is afraid the trouble caused by the pearl will spread to him
- C. believes helping is not part of Indian customs

\_\_\_\_ 10. The extensive use of animal imagery in Chapter VI suggests that Kino

- A. has been dehumanized by the ordeal of the pearl
- B. is now outside of the natural world
- C. is worth less than an animal

11. Choose one biological comparison from The Pearl and explain its use.

12. Some readers see The Pearl as an allegory on greed. Support or refute this interpretation, citing examples from the novel.

13. How does the point of view (narrative) of The Pearl work to make the story seem like a retold tale?

## ANSWERS

### TEST 1

- 1. A
- 2. C
- 3. C

- 4. B
- 5. A
- 6. B
- 7. C
- 8. C
- 9. A
- 10. B

11. The ruling class, descended from the Spanish, controlled the Indians by keeping them poor and ignorant. If Coyotito were sent to school to learn "what is in the books," he could challenge the authority of the system. He could also educate the other Indians and make them aware of ways they might fight their oppressors.

One scene that might be useful to review is the doctor's visit to Kino's hut in Chapter VI. There, you see firsthand how the doctor manipulates Kino through the Indian's ignorance. Kino wants to throw the doctor out, but he can't because he doesn't know if the doctor is lying about the effects of the scorpion sting. The doctor would not have been able to carry off the capsule scene with an educated person. It is this kind of control over the Indians that educating Coyotito would change, and it is too threatening for the Spanish upper class to allow.

Another scene you might want to review is the scene at the pearl buyers. Kino's people have been dealing with pearls for centuries and certainly know the look of a valuable pearl. Yet they allow the pearl buyers' tricks to make them doubt their own judgment. If Coyotito were educated, he would be in a position to fight such financial exploitation.

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12. Juan Tomas is the voice of the Indians who have survived oppression, the voice of experience. He doesn't try to stop Kino from making the dream of the pearl come true, but he does try to warn Kino that he has overestimated the powers of friendship and underestimated the dangers against him.

One place to look for details is the trip to the pearl buyers in Chapter IV. On the way, Juan Tomas reviews the situation and warns Kino that he might be cheated. He also tries to put the event in the context of tradition. It is here that Juan Tomas reminds Kino of the priest's sermon about other men who have sought to bypass the pearl buyers. Later on, when Kino says he will go to the capital, Juan Tomas warns him that he will be leaving family and friends. Here you see the concept of mi tierra, the ancient attachment to the place of birth, spoken by Juan Tomas. He is the spokesman for traditional Indian ways.

13. The pearl functions as a symbol on many levels. In your answer, you may want to consider the

pearl as a symbol of human greed, dreams of the future, and the human soul. The idea of human greed is first developed at the beginning of Chapter III with the description of the pearl's effect on the people of the town. In discussing dreams of the future, include the list of Kino's dreams or visions, as related in Chapter III. For Kino the pearl is the key to attaining these dreams. In terms of the human soul, before Kino leaves for the mountains, he tells Juan Tomas, "This pearl has become my soul." This may mean that the pearl and its visions have taken over Kino's true soul, driving him to go against hopeless forces and to sacrifice his own family. It may also mean that Kino's only hope for dignity (his own and his people's) lies in the pearl, and without it he is less than a man.

Whatever aspect of the pearl's meaning you discuss, you should account for the significance of Kino's throwing it back in the water at the end. Also, be sure to include in your answer the contrast between the pearl's great value, beauty, and promise and its ultimate role as a catalyst of envy, greed, and destruction.

## TEST 2

1. C
2. A
3. B
4. B
5. C
6. A
7. A
8. C
9. B
10. A

11. There are two main biological comparisons in *The Pearl*. One compares the effect of the pearl to the scorpion's poison at the beginning of Chapter III. This comparison suggests that greed and evil are possible within each person and can come to the surface under certain circumstances. The pearl is a catalyst that brings out such characteristics in people. Steinbeck might even be suggesting that the tendency to greed and evil is inborn, a part of human nature.

The other biological comparison equates the town with a "colonial animal." This metaphor reinforces Steinbeck's claim that humans, as well as other species, are interconnected. Nothing happens to one person (a part of the village) alone. For example, Kino alone finds the pearl, but the pearl affects everyone in the village. The village itself behaves like a single organism whose single parts (each inhabitant) react to a stimulus and together contribute to the reaction of the whole (the village).

12. The greed that you witness throughout the novel, along with Kino's final gesture of renunciation, certainly suggest that the novel can be read as a warning about the burden of money and possessions. The valuable pearl brings Kino and his family to destruction. There are, however, points of conflicting evidence to suggest the beneficial aspects of material wealth. For example, Steinbeck suggests that greed is part of human nature and that it has both good and bad aspects. Greed

makes a man look beyond himself to larger possibilities, as well as making him greedy covet the things of others. On the positive side, it is a good sign that human beings are always eager for improvements in their lives. This helps to assure the progress of humanity.

As a second example, Kino is humiliated and powerless in the face of the people of Spanish descent. If Steinbeck were trying to make antimaterialism his major theme, he probably would not have made Kino's fear and rage seem so justified a response to oppression.

13. Technically, the story of Kino is told by a third-person, omniscient narrator. This narrator speaks from a distance, especially in the introduction and at the end, to give the feeling of an old, retold tale. In other words, rather than hearing a firsthand story that the narrator has personally experienced, you are hearing a story told to the narrator. As the novel progresses, the point of view sometimes becomes more immediate in order to take the reader into the action (the way a movie camera does when it zooms in close). It seems as if the narrator is relating the events as they are happening. In Chapter VI, for example, you seem to be directly involved in the flight of Kino and Juana. Throughout *The Pearl*, the narrator moves back and forth between "close-up" action and distant storytelling

## **THEMES**

1. Explain the theme of class struggle in *The Pearl*.
2. Discuss the development of social consciousness in *The Pearl*.
3. Develop one theme that might come from a feminist reading of *The Pearl*.
4. How is the theme of appearance vs. reality developed in the novel?
5. Describe the role of religion, in general, and the Catholic Church, in particular.
6. Discuss *The Pearl* as an anticapitalist novel.

## **• FORM AND STRUCTURE**

1. Discuss how the parable form is used in *The Pearl*.
2. Discuss the use of Steinbeck's preface as a technique in the novel. What is its purpose and effect?
3. Describe the biblical motifs in *The Pearl* and explain their effects.
4. Describe the biological metaphor of the "colonial animal" in *The Pearl* and explain its purpose.

## **GLOSSARY - VOCABULARY LIST**

ALGAE - Water plants without true roots or stems, such as seaweed.

BOUGAINVILLEA - Tropical shrub with inconspicuous flowers surrounded by large purple or red leaves.

BULWARK - A wall-like structure, like a breakwater, raised for defense.

CACTI - Plural of cactus, a thorny desert plant.

CATALYST - Something (or someone) that hastens or brings about a change or a result.

CONFESSION - In the Catholic Church the admission of sins to a priest in order to gain forgiveness.

EGGSHELL CHINA - Very delicate porcelain that is so thin it is translucent.

ESCARPMENT - Steep slope formed by erosion or a break in the earth.

ESTUARY - Wide mouth of a river where the sea tide meets the river current.

INCANDESCENCE - Emission by a hot body of radiation that makes it visible.

INDIGENE - Native plant or animal.

LEGERDEMAIN - Deceptive performance that depends on manual dexterity; trickery or deceit.

MANGROVES - Tropical trees and shrubs that tend to grow together in thick masses in swampy areas.

MONOLITHIC - Made from a single piece of stone; suggesting an unyielding quality.

PEARL OF THE WORLD - Ideal pearl; largest and most beautiful pearl in the world.

POULTICE - Moist mass of cloth or vegetable matter (like herbs) applied to a sore or inflammation for medicinal purposes.

PRECIPITATE - To separate the solid part out from a solution or the substance separated out.

PULQUE - Fermented drink made from agave plants, popular in Mexico.

SEED PEARLS - Very small pearls that resemble grain or seeds in size and form.

STATION (OF THE VIRGIN) - Shrine dedicated to the Virgin Mary, to which religious pilgrimages are made.

SUPPLIANT - One who asks earnestly or begs.

WINCHESTER CARBINE - Short-barreled, lever-action rifle usually used for deer and big game, famous for its power and accuracy.

## REFERENCE

## **THE CRITICS**

### **THE SOURCE OF THE PEARL**

Steinbeck nurtured the fable he heard in Mexico four years before he consciously began to develop it. The moral-that the finder of the pearl would be "free" only when he was rid of it-probably was the original inspiration because it accorded with Steinbeck's earlier beliefs that money and possessions are an intolerable burden, though he himself saw no conflict in carrying that burden. As he imagined the characters involved, they grew and changed shape; they became part of Steinbeck's story as distinct from the legend. In changing, of course, they also shaped the story into something unlike the tale as Steinbeck first heard it.

Richard O'Connor, John Steinbeck, 1970

### **STEINBECK'S STYLE**

However meaningful the parable of the pearl may be in the abstract, Steinbeck's success in fleshing out this parable to the dimensions of a credible, forceful human adventure ultimately rests on his prose style, which is flexible to the extent that here as in most of his other novels it becomes technique as well as medium. It is capable not only of creating an aura of symbolic suggestion, but also of rendering details in terms of a camera.

Peter Lisca, The Wide World of John Steinbeck, 1958

### **THE PEARL AS SENTIMENTAL**

Steinbeck is trying in The Pearl to create a drama of the growth of conscious responsibility, but Kino's act of throwing away the pearl doesn't settle things for him as it did for the legendary fisherboy. The source offered a perfect tale of a man who consciously weighed the odds and chose hard work and poverty over being pestered all the time-a story that would have made a wonderfully tough-minded companion piece to Cannery Row.

Steinbeck, however, decided to give the legend some sentimental twists without realizing all the revisions that his first changes would necessitate. Perhaps such a basically fantastic, sentimental story does not warrant such strong condemnation; but The Pearl has been widely used as an introduction to fiction, and it provides the kind of introduction that is a disservice to its author-who wrote much better, controlled works-and to fiction itself by failing to suggest the tough-minded complexity of the greatest examples of the art.

Warren French, John Steinbeck, 1975

### **THE PEARL AS AN ALLEGORY**

Kino is identified symbolically with low animal orders: he must rise early and he must root in the earth for sustenance; but the simple, pastoral life has the beauty of the stars, the dawn, and the singing, happy birds. Yet provided also is a realistic description of village life on the fringe of La Paz.

Finally, we should observe that the allegory too has begun. The first sentence-"Kino has awakened in the near dark"- is a statement of multiple allegorical significance. Kino is what modern sociologists are fond of calling a primitive. As such, he comes from a society that is in its infancy; or, to paraphrase Steinbeck, it is in the dark or near-dark intellectually, politically, theologically, and sociologically. But the third sentence tells us that the roosters have been crowing for some time, and we are to understand that Kino has heard the cock of progress crow. He will begin to question the institutions that have kept him primitive: medicine, the church, the pearl industry, the government. The allegory operates then locally, dealing with at first one person, Kino, and then with his people, the Mexican peasants of Lower California. But the allegory works also universally, and Kino is Everyman. The darkness in which he awakes is one of the spirit. The cock crow is one of warning that the spirit must awake to its own dangers.

Harry Morris, "The Pearl: Realism and Allegory" from Steinbeck: A Collection of Critical Essays, 1972

### **Transcript of Literary Devices in The Pearl**

Literary devices in The Pearl. Simlie Metaphor This is how big the pearl was when Kino opened it. He says is was a very large pearl "It was as large as a sea-gull's egg." Page 26. "He was an animal now, for hiding, for attacking, and he lived only to preserve himself and his family." Page 69. This quote is a metaphor because it is comparing Kino to an animal who protects his family. Personification "The nerves of the town were pulsing and vibrating with the news" Page 27 This quote is personification because it says that the town was pulsing and vibrating but towns cant do that. The author was giving the town a human characteristic. Symbol The scorpion symbolizes evil because Coyotito was stung in Chapter 1 and scorpions are generally thought of as evil. This starts destruction in the family which leds to Kino's accidents.