

# Synopsis and Summary of Chapters - The Pearl Study Guide

## The Pearl Summary

The Pearl, which takes place in La Paz, Mexico, begins with a description of the seemingly idyllic family life of Kino, his wife Juana and their infant son, Coyotito. Kino watches as Coyotito sleeps, but sees a scorpion crawl down the rope that holds the hanging box where Coyotito lies. Kino attempts to catch the scorpion, but Coyotito bumps the rope and the scorpion falls on him. Although Kino kills the scorpion, it still stings Coyotito. Juana and Kino, accompanied by their neighbors, go to see the local doctor, who refuses to treat Coyotito because Kino cannot pay.

Kino and Juana leave the doctors and take Coyotito down near the sea, where Juana uses a seaweed poultice on Coyotito's shoulder, which is now swollen. Kino dives for oysters from his canoe, attempting to find pearls. He finds a very large oyster which, when Kino opens it, yields an immense pearl. Kino puts back his head and howls, causing the other pearl divers to look up and race toward Kino's canoe.

The news that Kino has found an immense pearl travels fast through La Paz. The doctor who refused to treat Coyotito decides to visit Kino. Kino's neighbors begin to feel bitter toward him for his good fortune, but neither Kino nor Juana realize this feeling they have engendered. Juan Tomas, the brother of Kino, asks him what he will do with his money, and he envisions getting married to Juana in a church and dressing Coyotito in a yachting cap and sailor suit. He claims that he will send Coyotito to school and buy a rifle for himself. The local priest visits and tells Kino to remember to give thanks and to pray for guidance. The doctor also visits, and although Coyotito seems to be healing, the doctor insists that Coyotito still faces danger and treats him. Kino tells the doctor that he will pay him once he sells his pearl, and the doctor attempts to discern where the pearl is located (Kino has buried it in the corner of his hut). That night, a thief attempts to break into Kino's hut, but Kino drives him away. Juana tells Kino that the pearl will destroy them, but Kino insists that the pearl is their one chance and that tomorrow they will sell it.

Kino's neighbors wonder what they would do if they had found the pearl, and suggest giving it as a present to the Pope, buying Masses for the souls of his family, and distributing it among the poor of La Paz. Kino goes to sell his pearl, accompanied by his neighbors, but the pearl dealer only offers a thousand pesos when Kino believes that he deserves fifty thousand. Although other dealers inspect the pearl and give similar prices, Kino refuses their offer and decides to go to the capital to sell it there. That night, Kino is attacked by more thieves, and Juana once again reminds Kino that the pearl is evil. However, Kino vows that he will not be cheated, for he is a man.

Later that night, Juana attempts to take the pearl and throw it into the ocean, but Kino finds her and beats her for doing so. While outside, a group of men accost Kino and knock the pearl from his hand. Juana watches from a distance, and sees Kino approach her, limping with another man whose throat Kino has slit. Juana finds the pearl, and they decide that they must go away even if the murder was in self-defense. Kino finds that his canoe has been damaged and their house was torn up and the outside set afire. Kino and Juana stay with Juan Tomas and his wife, Apolonia, where they hide for the next day before setting out for the capital that night.

Kino and Juana travel that night, and rest during the day. When Kino believes that he is being followed, the two hide and Kino sees several bighorn sheep trackers who pass by him. Kino and Juana escape into the mountains, where Juana and Coyotito hide in the cave while Kino, taking his clothes off so that no one will see his white clothing. The trackers think that they hear something when they hear Coyotito crying, but decide that it is merely a coyote pup. After a tracker shoots in the direction of the cries, Kino attacks the three trackers, killing all three of them. Kino can hear nothing but the cry of death, for he soon realizes that Coyotito is dead from that first shot. Juana and Kino return to La Paz. Kino carries a rifle stolen from the one of the trackers he killed, while Juana carries the dead Coyotito. The two approach the gulf, and Kino, who now sees the image of Coyotito with his head blown off in the pearl, throws it into the ocean.

# Themes - The Pearl Study Guide

## 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.

## **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.

## **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.

## 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.

## 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.

## **Pride**

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."

## **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.

## **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.

## **Good vs. Evil**

The plot of *The Pearl* is driven by a constant struggle between the morally opposite forces of good and evil. Evil in *The Pearl* can appear in both man (the doctor) and nature (the scorpion); both evil man (the doctor) and good man (Kino); both ugly shape (the scorpion) and beautiful shape (the pearl). While the scorpion's evil takes the form of lethal poison, man's evil throughout the novel takes the form of overriding greed. The doctor, for instance, is evil because he acts upon greed over human care and professional responsibility. Similarly, the neighbors are evil when they act upon greed over neighborly respect, and Kino is evil when he acts upon greed over love for his wife.

Evil in the novel is an omnipotent, destructive force. One must either bear it (as in the case of the scorpion) or avoid it (as in the case of the pearl), because to combat it only breeds more evil. When Kino tries to fight off the thieves and protect the pearl, for instance, he ends up committing acts of evil himself, on both the thieves and his wife. Kino does destroy the evil-bearers that act to harm his family—he squashes the scorpion, kills the trackers, throws the pearl into the ocean—but he only succeeds in doing so after the evil has run its course and the poison has already seeped in.

## **Race, Tradition, and Oppression**

Kino and Juana's racial heritage both provides them with the grounding force of ritual and tradition and deprives them of power under the reign of European colonizers. They continue to sing the songs they have inherited from their ancestors, but they also continue to be oppressed as their ancestors were, by white people like the doctor and by people with economic influence like the pearl-dealers. Their oppression is

brought increasingly to light throughout *The Pearl*, as Kino attempts to cooperate with the people who have the power (the money, the expertise) to help his son recover, but are the very same people that traditionally oppress people of Kino's race.

In the end, dealing in the world of White wealth and medicine leaves Kino and Juana in a worse condition than they set out in: they end up without a son, home, or canoe. By throwing the pearl back into the ocean, it seems, Kino is attempting to free himself of the colonizers' influence and escape their system of evaluation, to return to his own set of traditions and values. As readers, we might also take a step back and wonder whether Steinbeck might himself be guilty of the kind of racial discrimination that Kino attributes to the colonizers, in consistently describing him with animalistic characteristics and by making generalizations about "his people."

## **Value and Wealth**

The value and evaluation of material entities is a central theme in *The Pearl*. The value of the pearl, for example, requires reassessment throughout the novel: at the moment of its discovery, it seems to be worth Coyotito's life. That the pearl-dealers then so underestimate the price of the pearl reveals how distant the monetary worth of something can be from its perceived value, and how much value is determined by those in power. Moreover, the determination of the pearl's value has little to do with anything inherent to the object itself. As the narrator describes, a pearl forms by a natural "accident": "a grain of sand could lie in the folds of muscle and irritate the flesh until in self-protection the flesh coated the grain with a layer of smooth cement."

Kino's canoe, on the other hand, is described as the "one thing of value he owned in the world." Kino prizes his canoe not as a possession but as a "source of food," a tool that allows him to fish and dive for pearls. It seems, therefore, that Kino values things that can help him provide for his family. Unlike the pearl, whose sole function is to be possessed and looked at and whose value is assigned (arbitrarily) by people in power, the canoe is valuable because of its functionality and tradition, and its association with the dignity of work.

*The Pearl* reveals the slipperiness of value and evaluation: often, value is assessed by those who are already wealthy and powerful. What is valuable to one man (the canoe to Kino) may not seem valuable to another. Moreover, wealth in the novel is, in fact, not a source of well being, but of bad fortune or malicious greed. In the end, what remains of value to Kino and Juana is immaterial and has no price: love and the family.

# CHARACTERS AND CHARACTERISATION - The Pearl Study Guide

## Major Characters

### Kino

Kino, The Pearl's protagonist, is an extremely simple character, motivated by basic drives: his love for his family, loyalty to the traditions of his village and his people, and frustration at his people's oppression at the hands of their European colonizers. Kino also possesses a quick mind and a strong work ethic, and he feels a close, pure kinship with the natural world, the source of his livelihood.

At the beginning of the novella, Kino is essentially content with his life. However, two seemingly chance occurrences—Coyotito's scorpion sting and Kino's discovery of the pearl—open Kino's eyes to a larger world. As Kino begins to covet material wealth and education for his son, his simple existence becomes increasingly complicated by greed, conflict, and violence. The basic trajectory of Kino's character is a gradual decline from a state of innocence to a state of corruption and disillusionment. The forces propelling this decline are ambition and greed. At the end of the novella, Kino's tranquil relationship with nature has been perverted and reversed, a change signified by the fact that Kino finds the sounds of the animals at night threatening rather than reassuring.

Because The Pearl is a parable, Kino's character can be interpreted in many ways. It can be seen as a critique of colonial politics, an exploration of how good motives can bring a person to a bad end, or even an attack on the idea of the American dream. But on the most basic level, Kino represents the dangers of ambition and greed. Kino's ruin, caused by his lust for the pearl, illustrates the extent to which ambition and greed poison and jeopardize every aspect of a human's familial, cultural, and personal well-being.

### Juana

Kino's wife, Juana, is more reflective and more practical than Kino. She prays for divine aid when Coyotito's wound leaves Kino impotent with rage, and she also has the presence of mind to salve the wound with a seaweed poultice. Juana is loyal and submissive, obeying her husband as her culture dictates, but she does not always agree with his actions. Like Kino, Juana is at first seduced by the greed the pearl awakens, but she is much quicker than Kino to recognize the pearl as a potential threat. In fact, Juana comes to view the pearl as a symbol of evil.

As the novella progresses, Juana becomes certain that the limitations, rules, and customs of her society must be upheld. Whereas Kino seeks to transform his existence, Juana believes that their lives will be better if they keep things as they are. Kino can see only what they have to gain from the pearl, but Juana can see also what they stand to lose, and she wisely prefers to protect what she has rather than sacrifice it all for a dream. Juana thus serves an important function in the novella—she counterbalances Kino's enthusiasm and reminds the reader that Kino's desire to make money is dangerous. Juana also symbolizes the family's domestic happiness; the scene in which Kino beats her for trying to cast off the pearl thus represents Kino's tragic break from the family he longs to support.

### 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.

Deeply loyal to his family, Juan Tomás supports Kino in all of his endeavors but warns him of the dangers involved in possessing such a valuable pearl. He is sympathetic to Kino and Juana, however, putting them up when they need to hide and telling no one of their whereabouts.

## **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.

Like her husband, Apolonia is sympathetic to Kino and Juana's plight, and she agrees to give them shelter in their time of need.

## **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.

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

## **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 group of violent and corrupt men that follows Kino and Juana when they leave the village, hoping to waylay Kino and steal his pearl.

## **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 local village priest ostensibly represents moral virtue and goodness, but he is just as interested in

exploiting Kino's wealth as everyone else, hoping that he can find a way to persuade Kino to give him some of the money he will make from 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.

# LANGUAGE AND STYLE - Stylistic Devices - The Pearl Study Guide

## Simile

"And the music of the pearl rose like a chorus of trumpets in his ears."

"It was as large as a sea-gull's egg." Page 26. This is how big the pearl was when Kino opened it. He says it was a very large pearl

## Metaphor

"Its warm lucence promised a poultice against illness and a wall against insult."

"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.

## Symbol

An object or objects that represent an entire system of ideas.

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 leads to Kino's accidents.

## Foreshadowing

To show or indicate beforehand

"...and his mind could hardly make the leap --a rifle - but why not, since he was so rich. And Kino saw Kino in the pearl, Kino holding a Winchester carbine...'A rifle," he said. 'Perhaps a rifle.'

## Personification

Giving human characteristics or feelings to nonhuman creatures, inanimate objects, or abstract ideas.

"...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 can't do that. The author was giving the town a human characteristic.

## Exercise

| Device            | Definition   |
|-------------------|--|
| Alliteration      | The repetition of a consonant sound at the beginning of two or more words in a sentence, usually sequential        |
| Hyperbole         | Extreme exaggeration   |
| Imagery           | Descriptions with a heavy emphasis on one or more of the five senses: seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching |
| Metaphor          | A comparison of two unlike things without the use of "like" or "as"  |
| Onomatopoeia      | A word formed from the sound associated with it, (i.e. buzz, ding)   |
| Personification   | When a nonhuman object is given human characteristics  |
| Simile            | A comparison of two unlike things using the words "like" or "as"   |
| Situational Irony | When a situation occurs that is the opposite of what one would have expected to happen                             |
| Symbolism         | An object used to represent an idea, meaning, or   |

Using the information above, identify which device is used in each line of text below. Write the best answer on the line before each number. Portions of some sentences have been underlined to assist you.

1. " In the canoe she was like a strong man"
2. "...and the canoe creased the water and hissed with speed"
3. "...and the beggars set Juana and Kino down as poverty people..."
4. "...the day had drawn only a pale wash of light in the lower sky to the east".
5. "Juana went to the fire pit and uncovered a coal and fanned it alive"
6. "A thin, timid dog came close and, at a soft word from Kino, curled up, arranged its tail neatly over its feet, and laid its chin delicately on the pile. It was a black dog with yellow-gold spots where its eyebrows should have been"
7. "The procession crossed the blinding plaza..."
8. "The glaring sun threw the bunched shadows of the people blackly on the white wall"
9. "He kicked his foot free from the rock loop..."
10. "The flutes were shining black to brown, and only a few small barnacles adhered to the shell".

# GENERAL ESSAY QUESTIONS AND SAMPLE ESSAYS WITH ANSWERS

## - The Pearl Guide

### 1. In what ways does Kino defy the patterns of life in the town and how does this change him

Kino begins the novel poor and unable to think beyond the confines of his native fishing village. After discovering of the pearl, however, Kino begins to dream of possibilities for his family, most notably an education for his son, that were previously unthinkable. He sees these dreams materialize when he looks into the pearl's surface. Because he cannot simply ignore these dreams he embarks upon a course of action which eventually makes him a fugitive from his own village and a killer of men several times over. The people of the town did not trust their eyes due to the effects of the Gulf mist, yet Kino believes the things he first sees in the pearl and is deceived. The image of his son receiving an education is replaced by an image of the boy's dead body; similarly, the image of Kino and Juana being married in the church is replaced by an image of her bruised and swollen face after he has beaten her. When he returns to the village, defeated by the death of his son, he first offers Juana the chance to throw the pearl into the sea. This indicates that he has learned to appreciate her judgement and is, in a sense, yielding to her. That she insists that he be the one to throw the pearl into the sea indicates that she remains faithful to their previous way of life and, as she has always done, seeks to preserve it.

### 2. Throughout the story Kino and Juana are attuned to ancient songs that warn them of evil or nurture their sense of family. In what way do these songs serve as rhetorical devices to further the parable?

The use of the songs allows Steinbeck to emphasize Kino and Juana's essential innocence and connection with the natural world and also allows the author to sharply delineate between those things in the story which are to be read as "evil" and those that are understood to be "good". Thus, the Priest is accompanied by the song of evil and the reader knows, without being told in so many words, not to take his statements at face value. The stone that Juana uses to grind the corn, although a facet of her family's poverty, is accompanied by the song of the family and the reader is led to infer that in these simple things does the strength of goodness reside for Kino and his people.

### 3. The narrator says that to Juana men were "half-gods and half insane" and that she believed women capable of saving men at times through the woman's natural qualities of "reason, caution and sense of preservation." How are these gender roles vital to the story?

Kino believes he can capitalize on the wealth of the pearl because as a man in his native society he has always been the decision-maker and source of physical strength that has provided for its survival. Though he is initially frightened to go to the city he decides that he must make the journey in order that his family will not merely survive but prosper. Juana knows that because Kino is a man he will "drive his strength against a mountain" but "in her woman's soul" she knows that "the mountain would stand while the man broke himself." For this reason she attempts to dissuade Kino. In order for her way of life to continue, however, she must yield to his decisions until he can understand the pearl's evil himself.

**4. What characters in the novel are portrayed as overtly good or evil? What characters are portrayed as ambiguous?**

Of all the characters in the novel that of the Doctor is rendered most starkly evil and that of Juana is rendered most steadfastly good. The scene in which the Doctor dupes Juana by simply re-poisoning Coyotito and then pretends to cure him makes the Doctor seem all the more duplicitous and she all the more innocent. Ambiguous characters include the pearl buyers who, though they seek to purchase the pearls at the lowest price, are simply acting in accordance with the dictates of their profession and the trackers who doggedly pursue Kino and his family into the wilderness who, like the pearl buyers are not inherently good or bad but merely performing their duty to the best of their ability.

**5. In what ways is *The Pearl* a political novel?**

*The Pearl* is the story of a poor Indian whose people have been subjugated for over four hundred years. While the descendants of the Europeans live in stone houses, surrounded by walls, Kino and his people live in grass shacks with earth floors. Kino's struggle to better the lot of his family and his eventual failure can be read as a condemnation of the economic system which prevents Kino from realizing the value of the great pearl. Significantly, Kino's most cherished dream is that his son might receive an education and free his people from the cycle of poverty and ignorance. Coyotito's death, however, destroys Kino's family and serves as a painful reminder that the injustices, which his people have always suffered, will not be overturned by the actions of an individual. The horror of Kino's failure reminds the reader of the need for reform and aid in societies where such action cannot be successfully implemented by the dispossessed.

6. Discuss the various animal imagery that functions throughout the novel: the ants, the scorpion, the hissing snakes, the schools of fish, the oysters, the dogs, and the pearl buyers as octopuses, etc.
7. Describe in detail Kino and Juana's simple life before and after the discovery of the pearl.
8. How does Steinbeck characterize the doctor? How does he let the reader know that the white powder which the doctor administers to Coyotito is actually a poison which would kill the baby if the doctor did not return?
9. How does the priest function as a travesty of religion?
10. Why are the pearl buyers referred to as "fatherly" and "benevolent"? How does this contradict their real purposes? Are they also victimized?
11. Why are the "dark ones" and the trackers never identified? What is gained by Steinbeck's not identifying them?
12. A symbol can change its meaning during the course of a novel. How does the pearl change its meaning during the course of this novel?
13. Kino believes that it would be better to kill a person than to kill a canoe because a canoe has no relatives to revenge it. What types of values are operative in such a statement?

14. Kino and Juana function more or less on a primitive level in their lives and in their religion, yet they both want a church wedding and a christening for Coyotito. How are these values consistent with their lives? How are they contradictory?
  
15. What is the function of the many songs that Kino hears during the course of the novel?