

The Pearl - Introductory Notes

John Steinbeck

He is a great storyteller who tells stories about the lives of real people. He focuses on the homeless, the migrant workers and poor fishermen and farmers. His stories are simple ones, but are filled with love and pain. His characters struggle to live off the land, the sea and represent the struggles of all people.

Pre-reading Points to Ponder

- Novella format
- Oral storytelling tradition
- Parable - "everyone takes his own meaning from it and reads his own life into it."
- Symbolic significance of the pearl - love, happiness, affection and generosity

Motifs

- Evil
- Family
- Superstition
- Songs

Introduction to Characters

- Kino - pearl diver, provider, dreamer, protector, stubborn
- Juana - Kino's wife - strong, quiet, stubborn, loyal
- Coyotito - child of Kino and Juana
- Juan Tomas - Kino's older brother - protective, supportive

- Apolonia - Juan Tomas' wife
- Doctor - wealthy, cruel, sly, dishonest
- Trackers - followers of Kino and Juana
- The Priest - local religious authority - selfish
- The Buyers - manipulative, deceitful, selfish

Symbolism

Doctor: represents the oppression of the Indians. He thinks of the Indian as animals, but when Kino finds the pearl, he tries to trick Kino so he can get it. Very greedy.

Kino: represents the Indian's struggle for freedom. Kino wants things that will grant him freedom from the Spanish - rifle, education, money. It is the wish of all the Indians.

Juana: represents the simple way of life, in tune with nature. She does not want the pearl - her only wish is for the health and happiness of her family. Great inner strength and determination.

Juan Tomas: is a symbol of the ancient Indian wisdom. Kino turns to him for advice and guidance.

The Canoe: represents Kino's heritage. It was a gift passed down from his grandfather to his father to him. It is also Kino's only means of providing for his family.

The Pearl: at the beginning the pearl represents Kino's future. Towards the end of the novel it represents evil.

Coyotito: innocent victim

The Song of the Family: represents love, safety, security, the whole

The Song of Evil: represents evil, something bad will happen.
It can also represent someone evil.

The Song of the Pearl: represents Kino's vision, his desires.
At the end, it represents evil.

Themes

1. The struggle for existence...Kino and Juana struggle to survive. They struggle for food and shelter, against nature (scorpion) and from other human beings who burn their hut, destroy their canoe, hunt them down, and kill their child.
2. Free Will versus Determination...Can Kino determine his own destiny or does fate rule his life. Some decisions are made for him such as his race and social status. When Kino makes his own decisions, to go to the city and to sell the pearl in the capital, is he going against his fate. Who wins???
3. Social Class...Can people move from one class to another
4. Oppression of the Indians...The Spanish conquered Mexico in the sixteenth century and oppressed the people for hundreds of years. Steinbeck believes the Indians have a happier environment than the European civilization.
5. Money and possessions...Does money buy happiness? For Kino, the pearl brings unhappiness, greed, envy and even death.
6. Man as part of Nature...Steinbeck consistently compares man to the animal kingdom. The town is compared to a colonial animal, the Indians as animals by the doctor, the ants and the fish behave as people behave, preying on the less fortunate.