

"the pearl" by john steinbeck essay sample

[Literature](#), [Novel](#)



How does John Steinbeck, author of 'The Pearl' successfully convey the main themes of the novella? 'The Pearl', by John Steinbeck has been a very touching, interesting novella to read. It originally appeared in the 'Woman's Home Companion' Magazine in 1945. Set in a Mexican Indian village, the novella tells the story of Kino, a pearl diver who discovers the beautiful 'Pearl of the World'. Upon finding this large, expensive pearl Kino changes as a person and has a desire to be rich and to change his everyday life.

Unfortunately, this disruption in the usual day to day routines causes more trouble than the pearl is worth. Throughout the novella there are two main themes, one being the destructive power of greed, and the other colonial society's oppression of native cultures, which are successfully conveyed by Steinbeck using several techniques, such as use of characters, motifs and symbols. Themes are the subject of a person's writing, they are the fundamental ideas explored in literary work.

Steinbeck wants us to learn about the ways in which greed is a destructive force and how colonial society cruelly and unfairly treats native cultures and cultures less wealthy than themselves. I think Steinbeck wants us to learn a life lesson not to be greedy or to demoralise others by assuming we are better than them simply because we are from a different, possibly better off culture than them. He does this mainly through character, motifs and symbols. The main character, Kino, is a very simple man, living to support his family and watch his son grow up. Kino is a very good example of how greed and its negative forces can corrupt people; he represents how greed is a very powerful, negative force. At the beginning of the novella Kino is happy and content with his life; he has a wife and son, a canoe and a house and is a

great pearl diver. ' This is safety, this is warmth, this is the Whole.' However, after discovering the pearl, he begins to dream about changing his life, causing great corruption and unhappiness. After two events, a scorpion stinging his son Coyotito and him finding the pearl, Kino begins to covet material wealth and education for Coyotito.

His simple life is suddenly extremely complicated due to the effect greed and conflict has on him. Kino dreams of his son having a future as an equal of the white people in the village. " My son will read and will open the books, and my son will write and will know writing. And my son will make numbers, and these things will make us free because he will know - and through him we will know". However Kino's greed and desire for such a thing leads to his own unhappiness. The more he wants the material wealth he dreams about, the more complicated his life gets. Kino changes from a loving family man to a selfish, greedy, shell of a man, driven by the desire for wealth. He becomes cruel and animal like, fighting for survival, not caring who he hurts on the way. ' The people say that he was as dangerous as a rising storm.'

Throughout the novella we see Kino's happiness descend from perfectly content to practically non-existent, this shows us that, through being greedy and wanting things that aren't a necessity, your original well intentions can be twisted and warped. We see Kino change from a loving father and husband to a person barely part of his own family.

His wife Juana realises this, and she tries to get rid of the pearl without Kino knowing. Kino finds her though, and when he beats her for disobeying him we see him truly break away from his previous happy family life and become

a stranger to all that know him. From the start all that Kino wanted was for his son to be happy and to have a nice future. He sees the pearl as a way to achieve this. But instead of sticking to his original intentions, he wants more. He wants material wealth, things he doesn't need but they would be nice to have and make him look better than others. But through his greed and stubborn attitude Kino's original good intentions are destroyed along with his son, as he lets his head rule over his heart. His head told him that he wanted, needed, deserved more than what he had, yet his heart only wanted his family to be happy. Kino forgot who he was and what was important in life, through greed possessing his thoughts he lost what mattered most. Juana, Kino's wife, plays an important role in this novella as she counterbalances Kino's enthusiasm, reminding the reader that the desire for wealth is a form of greed and greed is not a good trait to possess.

Juana symbolises family, happiness and reason. When the pearl is first found she, like Kino is excited. But she is also wary, she isn't sure if the pearl is all good. Through the novella we follow her journey as she begins to realise that the pearl and wealth isn't all it appears at first sight. " This pearl is like a sin! It will destroy us". Juana tries to convince Kino that the pearl is evil and will not bring them the happiness he thinks it will, but he refuses to listen. " Throw it away, Kino. Let us break it between stones. Let us throw it back into the sea. It has brought evil." Juana, fearful that bad things will keep happening if she doesn't do something fast, decides to take action herself. She creeps out one night to throw the pearl back into the sea, but Kino realises she has gone and follows her. When he reaches her, he strikes her face with his fist and then kicks her in her side. He is overcome and his

emotions are dulled with rage. Juana realises there is no hope, and so, even though she doesn't agree with Kino, she agrees to go with him to the city as in their culture there are differences between man and woman and she accepts these.

' Although she might be puzzled by these differences between man and woman, she knew them and accepted them and needed them, Of course she would follow him, there was no question of that.' Through Juana's decisions and activities there is emphasis on how Kino changes. The doctor in the novella, on the other hand, represents both greed and colonialism. He represents greed in a very physical way. He has a very large, grotesque appearance due to greediness when it comes to food. ' His eyes rested in puffy little hammocks of flesh and his mouth drooped with discontent.' And he is also greedy as he is already rich, yet he wants more money and he wants the pearl from Kino. I also think that the theme of colonial society's oppression of native cultures is successfully conveyed through the doctor. When Kino and Juana take Coyotito to see the doctor after a scorpion stings him, the doctor refuses to see them as they are of a different, poorer culture than him and he sees them as not worth his time, as he could be earning money by curing rich, white people.

Through his refusal to treat Coyotito on the basis that Kino has no money with which to pay him the doctor is representing the colonialists' arrogance, greed and their ideas that they are superior to cultures less well off than they are. However, once he hears that Kino has ' the pearl of the world' he goes straight to Kino's brush hut. Upon arrival, he immediately sees that

Coyotito is already cured, and so he makes him ill. He gives him a white powder to make him sick, so that he can then come back and be the hero by curing him of his sickness. The doctor does this so that Kino has no choice but to pay him, and also because he knows that Kino cannot question his method as he is below him and doesn't know the first thing about medicine as he cannot even read or write. The doctor takes advantage of this, again successfully conveying the theme of colonialism.

Another way that Steinbeck conveys the main themes is through using motifs. A motif is a distinctive feature or dominant idea in an artistic or literary composition. In 'The Pearl' one of the motifs is nature imagery. At the beginning of the novella Kino is very at one with nature. He is a pearl diver and he lives in a brush house, he works with nature to make a living. But as Kino changes he loses this connection with nature. Although in the book nature is often described as peaceful, and innocent - reflecting Kino's innocence and peacefulness at the beginning of the novella - it also shows the world's darker qualities. It shows fight for survival and the cruelty greed can bring. In Steinbeck's descriptions of the sea, there is emphasis that life in the sea is a struggle for survival, and only those strong and clever enough survive. This also reflects the conflict in Kino's life between Kino's people and their colonial rulers. This again re-enforces the idea of colonial society oppressing native cultures. A second motif is Kino's songs.

From the beginning to the end of the novella, the only constant thing about Kino is his songs. He permanently has a song in his head; the song depends on his feelings. At the beginning of the book the song of the family is

referred to often, the song is made up of all that is going on at the time, for example the sounds of Juana making corn cakes and the sea lapping at the shore. There are no lyrics, unless someone near to him is singing, then that becomes a part of the song too. When he senses evil or dishonesty Kino hears the song of evil. ' In his mind a new song had come, the Song of Evil, the music of the enemy, of any foe of the family, a savage, secret, dangerous melody, and, underneath, the Song of the Family cried plaintively.' Towards the end he hears this often, but what he doesn't realise is that it is coming from the pearl, along with the song of the pearl. ' The music of the pearl rose like a chorus of trumpets in his ears.' These songs are heard by all of Kino's people; it is part of their cultural tradition. It is through the songs we learn how Kino is feeling.

A symbol is an object that represents or stands for something else; it could be an object, a character, a colour or a figure that is used to represent abstract ideas or concepts. The first symbol that conveys one of the themes is the pearl. As the pearl turns from ' the pearl that might be' to a real pearl that Kino owns, it seems to represent hope and providence. It creates hope for Kino as he will now be able to pay for his son to be treated for the scorpion sting. ' In the surface of the pearl he could see dreams form.' The discovery of the pearl counterbalances the tragic accident of Coyotito's scorpion sting. However, the pearl then changes, and it becomes an object of greed, whoever possesses it is seen as greedy. ' The pearl of the world', a name that originally symbolised the pearls size and beauty now represents how when in possession of the pearl the outside world has a destructive influence on Kino's life. The pearls association with hope and providence

weakens and the pearl comes to be associated not only with greed but also human plans and desires.

It is then that Juana and Kino's brother Juan Thomas begin to view the pearl as a threat and an object of evil rather than a blessing and an object of hope. The pearl ends as being associated with evil, greed and conflict as Kino changes trying to protect it, when what he should have been doing was protecting his family from the pearl. In Kino's mind, the pearl changes from beautiful - 'there it lay, the great pearl, perfect as the moon.' - To ugly and insignificant as he realises the truth about it - 'And the pearl was ugly; it was grey, like a malignant growth.' The final act of evil the pearl has created is the death of Coyotito. This is slightly ironic considering the reason Kino went to such lengths to protect the pearl was to ensure a bright, happy future for his son. The second symbol I think best conveys the theme is Kino's canoe. The canoe represents tradition, family and culture for Kino. It is his way of living. Without it he is nothing, with it he feeds his family by fishing and by diving for the pearls that pay for their other needs.

However, Kino's possession of the pearl leads directly to his canoe being destroyed, representing Kino's last thoughts of family importance and keeping to traditions, being destroyed also. 'He was an animal now, for hiding, for attacking, and he lived only to preserve his family.' The only reason Kino's priorities change is because the pearl has changed him and made him care only for material wealth. Once again reinforcing how bad it is to be greedy. A final symbol I think conveys the theme of greed is the scorpion that stings Coyotito. The scorpion represents evil. Through stinging

Coyotito, Coyotito is touched by evil and therefore natural innocence is destroyed. This natural destruction of innocence is then repeated as Kino's innocence is destroyed by his ambition and greed and his want to break out of the traditional native way of living undermined by colonialists.

To conclude, I think that Steinbeck has successfully conveyed the two main themes of the powerful destruction of greed and colonial society's oppression of native cultures by using characters, motifs and symbols. Through using characters he uses Kino's descending journey, caused by greed to convey the theme of the destructive force of greed. He uses the doctor to convey the theme of colonialism by making the doctor think of himself as better than Kino because he is rich and white. He also uses the doctor's grotesque appearance to symbolise greed. Steinbeck uses motifs like nature imagery to convey greed as a powerful, but very negative force and several motifs to do the same and also symbolise colonial society's oppression of native cultures.