

The Pearl

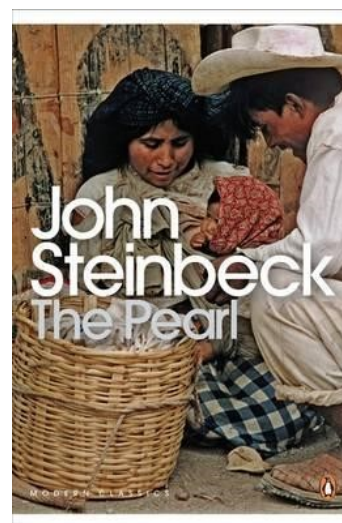
John Steinbeck

«

In the town they tell the story of the great pearl—how it was found and how it was lost again. They tell of Kino, the fisherman, and of his wife, Juana, and of the baby, Coyotito. And because the story has been told so often, it has taken root in every man's mind. And, as with all retold tales that are in people's hearts, there are only good and bad things and black and white things and good and evil things and no in-between anywhere.

If this story is a parable, perhaps everyone takes his own meaning from it and reads his own life into it. In any case, they say in the town that. . .

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Brief Author Biography



John Ernst Steinbeck Jr. (February 27, 1902 to December 20, 1968) was a Nobel and Pulitzer Prize-winning American novelist and the author of *Of Mice and Men*, *The Grapes of Wrath* and *East of Eden*. Steinbeck dropped out of college and worked as a manual laborer before achieving success as a writer. His works often dealt with social and economic issues. His 1939 novel, *The Grapes of Wrath*, about the migration of a family from the Oklahoma Dust Bowl to California, won a Pulitzer Prize and a National Book Award. Steinbeck served as a war correspondent during World War II, and he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1962.

This award was controversial in the United States. The award citation lauded Steinbeck "for his realistic and imaginative writings, combining as they do sympathetic humour and keen social perception". Many critics complained that the author's best works were behind him. *The New*

York Times ran an article by Arthur Mizener titled "Does a Writer with a Moral Vision of the 1930s Deserve the Nobel Prize?" that claimed Steinbeck was undeserving of the prestigious prize as he was a "limited talent" whose works were "watered down by tenth-rate philosophizing". Many American critics now consider these attacks to be politically motivated.

The British newspaper *The Guardian*, in a 2013 article that revealed that Steinbeck had been a compromise choice for the Nobel Prize, called him a "Giant of American letters". Despite ongoing attacks on his literary reputation, Steinbeck's works continue to sell well and he is widely taught in American and British schools as a bridge to more complex literature. Works such as *Of Mice and Men* are short and easy to read, and compassionately illustrate universal themes that are still relevant in the 21st century.

John Steinbeck's Books

John Steinbeck wrote 31 books over the course of his career. His most well-known novels include *Of Mice and Men* (1937), *Grapes of Wrath* (1939) and *East of Eden* (1952).

'The Pearl' (1947)

This story, based on a Mexican folktale, explores human nature and the potential of love. Kino, a poor diver who gathers pearls

from the ocean floor, lives with his wife Juana and their infant son Coyotito by the sea. On the same day Coyotito is stung by a scorpion and is turned away by the town doctor because they can't afford care, Kino finds the largest pearl he's ever seen on one of his dives. The pearl, which brings the potential of great fortune, ignites the neighbors' jealousy, eventually becoming a dangerous agent of evil.

Some of Steinbeck's other works include *Cup of Gold* (1929), *The Pastures of Heaven* (1932) and *To a God Unknown* (1933), all of which received tepid reviews. It wasn't until *Tortilla Flat* (1935), a humorous novel about paisano life in the Monterey region was released, that the writer achieved real success.

Steinbeck struck a more serious tone with *In Dubious Battle* (1936) and *The Long Valley* (1938), a collection of short stories. He continued to write in his later years, with credits including *Cannery Row* (1945), *Burning Bright* (1950), *The Winter of Our Discontent* (1961) and *Travels with Charley: In Search of America* (1962).

Childhood and Family

John Steinbeck was raised with modest means. His father, John Ernst Steinbeck, tried his hand at several different jobs to keep his family fed: He owned a feed-and-grain store, managed a flour plant and served as treasurer of Monterey County. His mother,

Olive Hamilton Steinbeck, was a former schoolteacher.

For the most part, Steinbeck — who grew up with three sisters — had a happy childhood. He was shy but smart. He formed an early appreciation for the land, and in particular California's Salinas Valley, which would greatly inform his later writing. According to accounts, Steinbeck decided to become a writer at the age of 14, often locking himself in his bedroom to write poems and stories.

Education

In 1919 Steinbeck enrolled at Stanford University — a decision that had more to do with pleasing his parents than anything else — but the budding writer would prove to have little use for college.

Over the next six years, Steinbeck drifted in and out of school, eventually dropping out for good in 1925, without a degree.

Early Career

Following Stanford, Steinbeck tried to make a go of it as a freelance writer. He briefly moved to New York City, where he found work as a construction worker and a newspaper reporter, but then scurried back to California, where he took a job as a caretaker in Lake Tahoe and began his writing career.

Later Life

During World War II, John Steinbeck served as a war correspondent for the *New York Herald Tribune*.

Around this same time, he traveled to Mexico to collect marine life with friend Edward F. Ricketts, a marine biologist. Their collaboration resulted in the book *Sea of Cortez* (1941), which describes marine life in the Gulf of California.

John Steinbeck's Wives and Children

John Steinbeck was married three times and had two sons. In 1930 Steinbeck met and married his first wife, Carol Henning. Over the following decade, he poured himself into his writing with Carol's support and paycheck, until the couple divorced in 1942.

Steinbeck was married to his second wife, Gwyndolyn Conger, from 1943 to 1948. The couple had two sons together, Thomas (born 1944) and John (born 1946). In 1950 Steinbeck wed his third wife, Elaine Anderson Scott. The couple remained together until his death of heart disease on December 20, 1968, at his home in New York City.

The day after Steinbeck's death in New York City, reviewer Charles Poore wrote in *The New York Times*: "John Steinbeck's first great book was his last great book. But Good

Lord, what a book that was and is: *The Grapes of Wrath*." Poore noted a "preachiness" in Steinbeck's work, "as if half his literary inheritance came from the best of Mark Twain—and the other half from the worst of Cotton Mather." But he asserted that "Steinbeck didn't need the Nobel Prize—the Nobel judges needed him."

Steinbeck's incomplete novel based on the King Arthur legends of Malory and others, *The Acts of King Arthur and His Noble Knights*, was published in 1976.

Many of Steinbeck's works are required reading in American high schools. In the United Kingdom, *Of Mice and Men* is one of the key texts used by the examining body AQA for its English Literature GCSE. A study by the Center for the Learning and Teaching of Literature in the United States found that *Of Mice and Men* was one of the ten most frequently read books in public high schools. Contrariwise, Steinbeck's works have been frequently banned in the United States. According to the American Library Association Steinbeck was one of the ten most frequently banned authors from 1990 to 2004, with *Of Mice and Men* ranking sixth out of 100 such books in the United States.

[Excerpts from <https://www.biography.com/writer/john-steinbeck> and https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Steinbeck]

The Pearl as a parable

A parable is a simple story that relays a moral lesson. Frequently, parables are also allegories, stories in which characters, objects, and events hold fixed symbolic meaning. Steinbeck's focus on the symbolic role the pearl plays in Kino's life is constant, as is his focus on the symbolic importance of Kino himself. In general, Steinbeck's overly simplistic portrayal of events is not realistic, or even believable, and it indicates *The Pearl's* place as a parable or fable.

Kino is an impoverished native fisherman, but more important is his allegorical role as a man faced with the temptation of wealth beyond his wildest dreams.

Because the novella is concerned with Kino's moral obligation and not his civic obligation, it concludes with Kino's casting the pearl back into the sea, a renunciation of material wealth that indicates he has learned a moral lesson. It is important that the novella does not conclude with Kino's arrest or continuing flight from justice, as a realistic novel concerned with civic punishment for ethical transgression might.

Despite the apparent gulf between realism and parable, *The Pearl* attempts to show how the two are linked through the process of storytelling. Steinbeck suggests that a culture's collective memory eventually fictionalizes all realistic experience into parable

form. "As with all retold tales that are in people's hearts," he writes in the novella's epigraph, "there are only good and bad things and black and white things and good and evil things and no in-between anywhere."

Storytelling gradually transforms real occurrences into simplified parables designed to teach a specific lesson. While everyday life may lack a clear lesson or meaning, the human mind is always in the process of ordering and classifying events in order to make sense of experience. It is a human tendency, and therefore a literary tendency, to classify and simplify experience, to turn reality into parable.

As codified systems of morals that attempt to distinguish good from evil, religions depend heavily on parables. According to the New Testament, Jesus himself insisted on teaching to his disciples in parable form—in fact, the Christian parable of the pearl of great price, which tells the story of a man who gives up everything he has to win a great pearl, likely helped to inspire *The Pearl*. Steinbeck realizes that the parable form is a central element in world religion and in the cultural history of humankind. As *The Pearl* illustrates, the imagined is just as vital to humankind's understanding of life as the real, and, in the form of the parable, the two are inextricably linked.

Although readers may draw a number of messages from *The Pearl*, a few primary moral lessons do emerge. Some ways of interpreting the allegory of the story include:

The Struggle to Preserve Virtue

If the pearl symbolizes goodness, Kino's struggle to protect the cherished pearl might represent the human struggle to preserve cherished qualities or attributes—moral virtue, innocence, integrity, the soul—from the destructive forces of the outside world. Just as these destructive forces corrupt and conspire to seize Kino's pearl, they can work against the virtuous inner qualities that the pearl might represent. According to this reading, Coyotito's death and Kino's voluntary relinquishment of the pearl at the end of the novel suggest that the destructive forces of the world are too powerful to be overcome.

The Fallacy of the American Dream

In a way, Kino's desire to use the pearl to improve his life echoes the traditional narrative of the American dream. He attempts to transform hard work into material wealth, and material wealth into education, comfort, and familial advancement. According to this reading, Kino's gradual corruption and the story's tragic conclusion hint at a

fundamental flaw in the American dream: it condones sacrifice of virtue for material gain. Additionally, Kino's gradual disillusionment with the pearl (as he realizes that it won't make his life better) underscores the fallacy of the American dream itself. Rather than widespread opportunity, Kino finds a world of powerful, greedy men conniving to take his wealth away from him dishonestly.

The Effects of Colonialism on Native Cultures

Because Kino belongs to a native tribe that, centuries after the original Spanish colonization of Mexico, is still under the thumb of the Spanish colonial authorities, the story can be read as a parable about the forces of colonization and the destructive effect those forces have on native cultures and peoples. Kino is originally driven to search for the pearl because of the unhelpfulness of the condescending Spanish doctor; after he finds the pearl, he is cheated and hunted by cynical descendants of colonials who hope to exploit and control him.

Greed Is the Root of All Evil

This moral, preached by St. Augustine and many others after him, is found in the New Testament in Paul's first epistle to Timothy (I Timothy 6:10). Kino's investment of spiritual value in a pearl, an object of material wealth, may be misguided from the start. Juana and Juan Tomás both

suspect that Kino is wrong to try to get more for the pearl than the dealers offer, and Juana tries several times to discard the pearl, believing it to be the source of her family's troubles. This reading interprets the pearl as a symbol of destruction and corruption rather than purity.

[<https://www.sparknotes.com/lit/pearl/central-idea-essay/parable-and-the-form-of-the-pearl/>]

You will find more useful study material for The Pearl at <https://www.sparknotes.com/lit/pearl/>

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Notes
