

## Major Works Data Sheet

**Title:** The Pearl**Author:** John Steinbeck**Date of Publication:** 1947**Genre:**  
Fiction/Novella (Parable)**Historical information about the period of publication:**Pearl Diving in La Paz

La Paz (meaning "peace" in Spanish) is in the Mexican state of Southern Baja California on the Sea of Cortez. For several centuries, the area was famous for its pearl diving and was known as "The City of Pearls." The oyster beds, however, became diseased and died out in the middle of the twentieth century.

In the mid 1900s, approximately 800 divers would submerge themselves in the waters off La Paz at depths of up to 12 fathoms. Divers had to tear the oysters by hand from their beds, a process that often left their hands with deep cuts and gashes. The number of divers decreased to about 200 by the end of the century as the oyster population declined and divers lost their lives due to accidents and shark attacks.

**Biographical information about the author:**

John Steinbeck Jr. was born in Salinas, California, on February 27, 1902. His father John served as the county treasurer in Salinas. His mother Olive was a school teacher and helped inspire her son's passion for reading. In the summers during his youth, Steinbeck worked on nearby ranches as a hired hand. This work cultivated his love for the earth, which emerges in so many of his works.

After high school, Steinbeck attended Stanford University between 1920 and 1926, where he studied marine biology but did not earn a degree. After moving to New York, he determined to make a career out of writing. He worked briefly as a reporter for the *American* before deciding to return to California. For the next couple of years, he took on odd jobs to support himself while he wrote. He worked as a painter, fruit picker, and surveyor, among other professions. Steinbeck wrote his first novel in 1929, *Cup of Gold*, which was not well received. His next two novels, *The Pastures of Heaven*, published in 1932, and *To a God Unknown*, published the next year, were also unsuccessful.

In 1930, Steinbeck and his first wife, Carol Henning, moved to Pacific Grove where he gathered material for his first successful novel, *Tortilla Flat*, a humorous story about Mexican Americans. It earned Steinbeck the California Commonwealth Club's Gold Medal for best novel by a California author. The 1937 novel *Of Mice and Men* established his literary reputation as one of America's finest novelists. Steinbeck's most celebrated work, *The Grapes of Wrath*, published in 1939, earned him the Pulitzer Prize. The book was later made into a film by John Ford and became one of the American Film Institute's top 100 classic films.

During World War II, Steinbeck wrote war propaganda and worked briefly as a war correspondent for the *New York Herald Tribune*. Some of his dispatches were later collected and published with the title, *Once There Was a War*. He wrote the screenplay for Alfred Hitchcock's film *Lifeboat* in 1944. After the war, he wrote two more successful works, *Cannery Row* (1945), and *The Pearl* (1947).

In his later years, he tried to reclaim his waning status as a major American novelist with works such as *Burning Bright* (1950), *East of Eden* (1952), and *The Winter of Our Discontent* (1961). None of these novels, however, gained Steinbeck the praise his earlier works received. Yet, in 1962, Steinbeck was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. He died December 20, 1968, in New York City and at his request his ashes were buried in the Garden of Memories Cemetery in Salinas.

**Characteristics of the genre:**

Steinbeck wrote many novels dealing with migrant worker/immigration issues. Growing up in the Salinas Valley region, he was exposed to this group of people and the many issues facing them.

**Plot summary:**

Kino, Juana, and their infant son, Coyotito, live in a modest brush house by the sea. One morning, calamity strikes when a scorpion stings Coyotito. Hoping to protect their son, Kino and Juana rush him to the doctor in town. When they arrive at the doctor's gate, they are turned away because they are poor natives who cannot pay enough. Later that same morning, Kino and Juana take their family canoe, an heirloom, out to the estuary to go diving for pearls. Juana makes a poultice for Coyotito's wound, while Kino searches the sea bottom. Juana's prayers for a large pearl are answered when Kino surfaces with the largest pearl either of them has ever seen. Kino lets out a triumphant yell at his good fortune, prompting the surrounding boats to circle in and examine the treasure.

In the afternoon, the whole neighborhood gathers at Kino's brush house to celebrate his find. Kino names a list of things that he will secure for his family with his newfound wealth, including a church wedding and an education for his son. The neighbors marvel at Kino's boldness and wonder if he is foolish or wise to harbor such ambitions. Toward evening, the local priest visits Kino to bless him in his good fortune and to remind him of his place within the church. Shortly thereafter, the doctor arrives, explaining that he was out in the morning but has come now to cure Coyotito. He administers a powdered capsule and promises to return in an hour. In the intervening period, Coyotito grows violently ill, and Kino decides to bury the pearl under the floor in a corner of the brush house. The doctor returns and feeds Coyotito a potion to quiet his spasms. When the doctor inquires about payment, Kino explains that soon he will sell his large pearl and inadvertently glances toward the corner where he has hidden the pearl. This mention of the pearl greatly intrigues the doctor, and Kino is left with an uneasy feeling.

Before going to bed, Kino reburies the pearl under a stone in his fire hole. That night, he is roused by an intruder digging around in the corner. A violent struggle ensues, and Kino's efforts to chase away the criminal leave him bloodied. Terribly upset by this turn of events, Juana proposes that they abandon the pearl, which she considers an agent of evil. The next morning, Kino and Juana make their way to town to sell the pearl. Juan Tomás, Kino's brother, advises Kino to be wary of cheats. Indeed, all of the dealers conspire to bid low on the pearl. Kino indignantly refuses to accept their offers, resolving instead to take his pearl to the capital. That evening, as Kino and Juana prepare to leave, Juan Tomás cautions Kino against being overly proud, and Juana repeats her wish to be rid of the pearl. Kino silences her, explaining that he is a man and will take care of things.

In the middle of the night, Juana steals away with the pearl. Kino wakes as she leaves and pursues her, apprehending her just as she is poised to throw the pearl into the sea. He tackles her, takes the pearl back, and beats her violently, leaving her in a crumpled heap on the beach. As he returns to the brush house, a group of hostile men confronts him and tries to take the pearl from him. He fights the men off, killing one and causing the rest to flee, but drops the pearl in the process.

As Juana ascends from the shore to the brush house, she finds the pearl lying in the path. Just beyond, she sees Kino on the ground, next to the dead man. He bemoans the loss of the pearl, which she presents to him. Though Kino explains that he had no intention to kill, Juana insists that he will be labeled a murderer. They resolve to flee at once. Kino rushes back to the shore to prepare the canoe, while Juana returns home to gather Coyotito and their belongings.

Kino arrives at the shore and finds his canoe destroyed by vandals. When he climbs the hill, he sees a fire blazing, and realizes that his house has burned down. Desperate to find refuge, Kino, Juana and Coyotito duck into Juan Tomás's house, where they hide out for the day. Relieved that the three did not perish in the blaze, as the rest of the neighborhood believes, Juan Tomás and his wife, Apolonia, reluctantly agree to keep Kino and Juana's secret and provide shelter for them while pretending to be ignorant of their whereabouts.

At nightfall, Kino, Juana, and Coyotito set out for the capital. Skirting the town, they travel north until sunrise and then take covert shelter by the roadside. They sleep for most of the day and are preparing to set out again when Kino discovers that three trackers are following them. After hesitating briefly, Kino decides that they must hurry up the mountain, in hopes of eluding the trackers. A breathless ascent brings them to a water source, where they rest and take shelter in a nearby cave. Kino attempts to mislead the trackers by creating a false trail up the mountain. Kino, Juana, and Coyotito then hide in the cave and wait for an opportunity to escape back down the mountain.

The trackers are slow in their pursuit and finally arrive at the watering hole at dusk. They make camp nearby, and two of the trackers sleep while the third stands watch. Kino decides that he must attempt to attack them before the late moon rises. He strips naked to avoid being seen and sneaks up to striking distance. Just as Kino prepares to attack, Coyotito lets out a cry, waking the sleepers. When one of them fires his rifle in the direction of the cry, Kino makes his move, killing the trackers in a violent fury. In the aftermath, Kino slowly realizes that the rifle shot struck and killed his son in the cave.

The next day, Kino and Juana make their way back through town and the outlying brush houses. Juana carries her dead son slung over her shoulder. They walk all the way to the sea, as onlookers watch in silent fascination. At the shore, Kino pulls the pearl out of his clothing and takes one last, hard look at it. Then, with all his might, under a setting sun, he flings the pearl back into the sea.

<p>Describe the author’s style:</p> <p>Steinbeck was a prolific and popular writer, but few consider him to be an American writer of the absolute first rank. Whereas most of Steinbeck’s contemporaries—Hemingway and William Faulkner, for example—wrote in clear and consistent styles, making it easy to identify their artistry, Steinbeck never stuck with one style, and his choice of narrative form varied greatly from work to work.</p>	<p>An example that demonstrates the style:</p>
--	--

**Memorable Quotes**

Quote	Significance
<p>1.“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. . . .”</p>	<p>1.This quotation is Steinbeck’s epigraph to <i>The Pearl</i>. In introducing his novella as a legend (he first heard the legend of the Pearl of the World in a Mexican village), Steinbeck sets the tone for the story. He also establishes the parable’s moral universe, in which there “are only good and bad things . . . and no in-between.” Most important, the measured formal language of the epigraph evokes biblical verse and therefore suggests that <i>The Pearl</i> is a parable before Steinbeck himself even alludes to this possibility. Because the epigraph leads directly into Chapter 1 (the first sentence in Chapter 1 effectively concludes the unfinished final sentence of the epigraph), it also creates the sense that we have been taken directly to the source of the legend. The quotes that surround the epigraph give us the sense that someone is telling us a story and that the novella that follows is the storyteller’s tale.</p>
<p>2.The ants were busy on the ground, big black ones with shiny bodies and the little dusty quick ants. Kino watched with the detachment of God while a dusty ant frantically tried to escape the sand trap an ant lion had dug for him. He watched the ants moving, a little column of them near to his foot, and he put his foot in their path. Then the column climbed over his instep and continued on its way, and Kino left his foot there and watched them move over it.</p>	<p>2.These two quotations are from Chapter 1 and Chapter 6, respectively. Kino’s two encounters with ants are not important to the novel’s plot, but they reveal a great deal about Kino’s position and attitude at two key moments in the novel and thus form an important contrast with one another. The quotation from Chapter 1 occurs during the idyllic opening description of Kino and Juana’s life. Kino’s detached attitude toward nature suggests that he is a part of nature but also above it, like God. The description of the ant caught in the sand trap is a subtle instance of foreshadowing, as it mirrors Kino’s eventual experience as a helpless prisoner of his own ambition. The quotation from Chapter 6 describes Kino after the pearl has corrupted him. He is no longer detached from nature, and therefore he is no longer like God. Yet, as he becomes more animal-like, he aspires to be more like God by trying to affect the ants’ behavior when he places his foot in their path. He does not succeed in changing nature, however; rather, nature simply renders him insignificant, as the ants methodically ignore him and climb over his shoe. As Kino’s greed brings him from his initial human dignity to a plane closer to that of animals, he loses something essential to his humanity, as well as the easy, simple relationship with nature he enjoys early in the novella.</p>
<p>3.But the pearls were accidents, and the finding of one was luck, a little pat on the back by God or the gods or both.</p>	<p>3.This short quotation is from Chapter 2, when Kino prepares to make the dive on which he finds the Pearl of the World. The narrator contends that certain occurrences that shape human life are accidents willed by a divine power, events over which human beings have no control. It becomes clear that the discovery of pearls is a function of such seemingly arbitrary divine fate. Kino’s eventual downfall can thus be seen as not entirely his own fault. The quotation also subtly alludes to the mixed cultural background of the natives in <i>The Pearl</i>: they come from a culture in which people believe in more than one god but have been governed for centuries by Catholic Spaniards who have built churches in which only a single God is worshipped. As a result, the natives are spiritually somewhat ambivalent, unsure as to whether the higher power in which they believe consists of “God” or “the gods.”</p>
<p>4.In the pearl he saw Coyotito sitting at a little desk in a school, just as Kino had once seen it through an open door. And Coyotito was dressed in a jacket, and he had on a white collar and a broad silken tie. Moreover, Coyotito was writing on a big piece of paper. Kino looked at his neighbors fiercely. “My son will go to school,” he said, and the neighbors were hushed. . . . Kino’s face shone with prophecy. “My son will read and 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—he will know and through him we will know. . . . This is what the pearl will do.”</p>	<p>4.This passage from Chapter 3 describes the moment of Kino’s pivotal decision to direct all his energies toward using the pearl to obtain an education for Coyotito. Kino’s ambition constitutes an attempt to shake the foundations of his society by placing his son on a level with the natives’ European oppressors. The vehemence with which Kino reacts to his vision, as well as the hushed silence with which the neighbors hear it, is a testament to the improbable nature of Kino’s plan not only to improve his son’s lot but to break “free” of a centuries-long cycle of oppression. From this moment forward, Kino remains obsessed with his goal, which he can achieve only by making a great deal of money from his pearl. The image of Coyotito as an equal to the colonists transfixes Kino throughout the novella.</p>
<p>5.And the evils of the night were about them. The coyotes cried and laughed in the brush, and the owls screeched and hissed over their heads. And once some large animal lumbered away, crackling the undergrowth as it went. And Kino gripped the handle of the big working knife and took a sense of protection from it.</p>	<p>5.This quotation from Chapter 6 demonstrates how Kino’s relationship with nature has changed, symbolizing his personal and moral downfall. In general, Steinbeck portrays the natural world positively in <i>The Pearl</i>, using beautiful language and images of sun-drenched scenery. This scene reverses that trend, as Steinbeck illustrates the dark and frightening aspect of nature. We sense that the universe itself opposes Kino’s course of action. Kino himself reveals an adversarial relationship with nature by his defensive gripping of his knife handle to reassure himself. Where Kino earlier lived in harmony with nature, his ambition has made him nature’s enemy.</p>

Characters			
Name	Role in the story	Significance	Adjectives
<b>Kino</b>	<b>Protagonist/Main Character</b>	The protagonist of the novella. Kino is a dignified, hardworking, impoverished native who works as a pearl diver. He is simple man who lives in a brush house with his wife, Juana, and their infant son, Coyotito, both of whom he loves very much. After Kino finds a great pearl, he becomes increasingly ambitious and desperate in his mission to break free of the oppression of his colonial society. Ultimately, Kino's material ambition drives him to a state of animalistic violence, and his life is reduced to a basic fight for survival.	
<b>Juana</b>	<b>Wife of Kino</b>	Kino's young wife. After her prayers for good fortune in the form of a giant pearl are answered, Juana slowly becomes convinced that the pearl is in fact an agent of evil. Juana possesses a simple faith in divine powers, but she also thinks for herself. Unfortunately for her and her child, Coyotito, she subjects her desires to those of her dominant husband and allows Kino to hold on to the pearl.	
<b>Coyotito</b>	<b>Baby of Kino</b>	Kino and Juana's only son, who is stung by a scorpion while resting in a hammock one morning. Because Coyotito is an infant, he is helpless to improve his situation and thus at the mercy of those who provide for him. Kino and Juana's efforts to save him by finding a big pearl with which they can pay a doctor prove to do more harm than good.	
<b>Juan Tomas</b>	<b>Brother of Kino</b>	Kino's older brother. 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.	
<b>Apolonia</b>	<b>Sister i/l of Kino</b>	Juan Tomás's wife and the mother of four children. Like her husband, Apolonia is sympathetic to Kino and Juana's plight, and she agrees to give them shelter in their time of need.	
<b>The doctor</b>		A small-time colonial who dreams of returning to a bourgeois European lifestyle. The doctor initially refuses to treat Coyotito but changes his mind after learning that Kino has found a great pearl. He represents the arrogance, condescension, and greed at the heart of colonial society.	
<b>The priest</b>		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.	
<b>The dealers</b>		The extremely well-organized and corrupt pearl dealers in La Paz systematically cheat and exploit the Indian pearl divers who sell them their goods. They desperately long to cheat Kino out of his pearl.	
<b>The trackers</b>		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.	

Setting	Significance of the opening scene
<p>The Village: In many ways, the village in which most of the story takes place, is a symbol of the oppression of the people. To create this symbol, Steinbeck personifies the town. The Gulf Another important element of the setting is the sea. It, too, takes on symbolic importance in the story. The Gulf provides the villagers with their livelihood and sustenance-fish and pearls. However, like the town, it cannot be trusted. Steinbeck uses the sea to make his readers aware that things are not always what they seem. "Although the morning was young, the hazy mirage was up. The uncertain air that magnified some things and blotted out others hung over the whole Gulf so that all sights were unreal and vision could not be trusted....There was no certainty in seeing, no proof that what you saw was there or not there [emphases added]."</p>	<p>The simple natural beauty of the opening scene recalls the beauty and innocence of the Garden of Eden before Adam and Eve’s fall. Though the comparison is not made explicitly, it is nevertheless an apt one—like Adam and Eve, Kino and Juana make choices later in the story that cause them to lose their innocence and force them to leave their paradise for the hardships of the wider world.</p>
	<p><b>Significance of the ending/closing scene</b></p>
<p><b>Symbols</b></p> <p>The Pearl</p> <p>The Scorpion</p> <p>Kino’s Canoe</p> <p>YOU MUST EXPLAIN ALL SYMBOLS</p>	<p>Kino and Juana return to the town carrying a bundle. It is not until later that it is realized that the bundle contains the dead baby, Coyotito. We realize the Kino won his fight against the three trackers but in doing so, he lost his son and, with him, all of his dreams. The pearl was to have secured for Coyotito a good education and for Kino, a good rifle. Kino does enter the town carrying a rifle but this, in terms of the death of his son, is completely meaningless.</p> <p>With their entrance into the town, a third procession occurs. This time, Juana is walking side by side with Kino. Both have learned much from the tragedy that they have shared. They have "gone through pain and [have] come out on the other side." There is almost a magical protection about them.</p> <p>Kino and Juana go straight to the Gulf, where Kino gives her the pearl to throw away. This time, Juana returns it to Kino knowing that he alone must decide what to do with the pearl. He draws back his arm and flings the pearl with all his might. Finally, it settles to the bottom of the ocean.</p> <p><b>Old AP Questions</b> ~Never used as an AP title~</p> <p><u>2004, Form B.</u> The most important themes in literature are sometimes developed in scenes in which a death or deaths take place. Choose a novel or play and write a well-organized essay in which you show how a specific death scene helps to illuminate the meaning of the work as a whole. Avoid mere plot summary.</p>
<p><b>Possible Themes</b></p>	
<p>Greed as a Destructive Force As Kino seeks to gain wealth and status through the pearl, he transforms from a happy, contented father to a savage criminal, demonstrating the way ambition and greed destroy innocence. Kino’s desire to acquire wealth perverts the pearl’s natural beauty and good luck, transforming it from a symbol of hope to a symbol of human destruction. Furthermore, Kino’s greed leads him to behave violently toward his wife; it also leads to his son’s death and ultimately to Kino’s detachment from his cultural tradition and his society. Kino’s people seem poised for a similar destruction, as the materialism inherent in colonial capitalism implants a love of profit into the simple piety of the native people.</p> <p>The Roles of Fate and Agency in Shaping Human Life</p> <p>The Pearl portrays two contrasting forces that shape human life and determine individual destiny. The novella depicts a world in which, for the most part, humans shape their own destinies. They provide for themselves, follow their own desires, and make their own plans. At the same time, forces beyond human control, such as chance, accident, and the gods, can sweep in at any moment and, for good or ill, completely change the course of an individual’s life. If fate is best represented in the novella by the open sea where pearl divers plunge beneath the waves hoping for divine blessings, human agency is best represented by the village of La Paz, where myriad human desires, plans, and motives come together to form civilization.</p>	