

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.