

The Conditions of Unhappiness in John Steinbeck's *The Pearl*.

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Abstract :

Dreams and hopes for better living conditions are quite frequent in John Steinbeck's literary works. In the Pearl, Kino and his concubine Juana are in such dire straits, that they strongly believe that only the pearl of the world could lift them from poverty upto a middle-class position.

They could not imagine that poverty as well as wealth are respectively sources of misfortunes and calamities. While living in poverty, they face many problems caused by the scorpion's stinging of their beloved Coyotito and the doctor's refusal to cure the baby because of the couple's moneyless situation

After finding the pearl of the world, the couple's hopes for a better livelihood are turned into calamities by stone-hearted buyers, who have put their heads together to cheat him, and criminal robbers that Kino has been obliged to murder. While running away to go to the town where he hopes to sell the pearl, his son is killed by one of the trackers. Then, Kino and Juana stoically return to their community to throw the pearl back into the ocean and face their destinies.

Introduction.

According to John Steinbeck, dreams keep people believing in better living conditions through unrealistic hopes for a bright future, even though their present is totally bleak. *The Pearl* published in 1947 is a good illustration of that postulate, insofar as Kino and his concubine Juana are so poor that they think that the possession of the pearl of the world could lift them from their dire straits into a middle-class position. It is generally admitted that any human being in reduced circumstances always aspires to wealth for an enjoyable life.

After finding the pearl of the world, the couple's dreams grow stronger and include their religious wedding at a catholic church, having a proper house and especially giving their child the opportunity to be highly educated. Only a lot of money could make such dreams come true, and

the sale price of the pearl of the world would definitely turn their hopes into actualities.

Unfortunately in Kino's and Juana's lives, everything around them seems to contribute to generating conditions of unhappiness, instead of taking them into a better social situation.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the conditions of unhappiness that sometimes lead people to have the wildest dreams and make unpremeditated decisions. The first section analyses poverty as the source of misfortune; whereas the second discusses prospective wealth as the cause of calamity. Finally, the third one expounds on Kino's stoic choice of acceptance of his fate by transcending the social realities and undertaking a possible mission to awaken his people.

I. Poverty: The Source of Misfortunes.

The novella starts with the morning hours, with the stars still shining, the crowing of cockerels, as well as the singing of birds. Such beautiful moments may also symbolize the hope for a beautiful life or the dreams of better conditions of existence for Kino and Juana who have been in a harsh situation of poverty for such a long time. The quiet atmosphere in their hut, where their beloved son is still sleeping, expresses the sense of nobility of the young couple, despite the uncertainty of their future, full of flying dreams like birds: « *Kino watched some birds flying towards the hills. The world was awake now* » (Steinbeck, 10).

Despite their reduced circumstances, Juana and Kino look happy according to Steinbeck, but that definitely signifies a relative happiness or rather a quiet life with no ambitions because they are imprisoned in acute poverty. To prove that the moment of happiness is imaginary or fictional, the relative peaceful atmosphere and quietness quickly turns into a moment of danger and powerlessness due to a scorpion threatening to sting their child.

Something moved on one of the ropes. Kino and Juana stood quite still and looked. A scorpion was coming slowly down the rope and its tail was straight out behind. A scorpion's tail has a sting in the end, a sting that kills (Steinbeck, 10).

That immediate danger, after the sweet moment of the early morning, reminds the reader that Kino and Juana live in a situation of dire straits, where poverty does not only mean lack of money, but also danger and inability to stop it because of want of proper means :

Kino stood still and moved his hands forward very slowly. The scorpion's tail bent over again. At that moment, Coyotito touched the rope and the scorpion fell. Kino put his hand forward very quickly, but the scorpion fell past Kino's fingers, onto the baby's shoulder. The scorpion stung Coyotito (Steinbeck, 11).

From a moment of relative happiness, the couple is now plunged into the sad reality of their daily lives made of misfortune, powerlessness, lack of money, while becoming the cynosures of the other villagers who do not react out of sympathy, but rather out of curiosity and meanness. In fact, the screams of the baby cause the neighbors to assemble in Kino's house, not to offer any real help, but to learn about what has happened to the family.

Only Juana's prompt reaction through the sucking of the poison out of the baby momentarily saves it from dying right away. However, the expertise of a physician is highly necessary for Coyotito to survive. How could they pay for the doctor's services, since they have got no money? Poverty, in John Steinbeck's opinion confines some people, like Kino and his concubine, in the realm of inhumanity where their lives are worthless; and the wealthy, like the doctor, do not care about them.

Because of their poverty, they understand that the doctor will not go to their place to cure the stung baby. Going to the physician's surgery remains then, the only possibility left to them. Although, they know in advance the answer that the doctor will give them, they nevertheless decide to visit him, followed by the curious neighbors and gossipers. Even the beggars notice the couple's extreme poverty and they are also eager

to witness the disillusionment that Kino and Juana are going to experience at the physician's:

The beggars in front of the church looked at Kino and Juana. The beggars looked at Juana's old, blue skirt and the holes in her shawl. They looked at Kino's old blanket. They could see that Kino was poor. The beggars followed because they wanted to see what was going to happen (Steinbeck, 14).

Though the reputation of the doctor's expertise is not good at all, Kino and Juana could not think of anything else, but to ask him, with a strong hope, to cure their beloved baby and save him from the scorpion's deadly poison. Hopes or dreams keep people moving forward in life, as Steinbeck implies it in the short story. Hope is the force that drives the couple to the gate of the doctor's mansion, despite their visible and obvious poverty:

In the Pearl Kino, who also lives in a shabby brush house, leads a very simple and poor life with his wife Juana and his baby son, Coyotito. At the beginning Kino is contented with his peaceful life; he even "sighs with satisfaction". But an accident makes him aware of the humiliating situations he and his people have been forced to endure. When their baby is stung by a scorpion, Kino and Juana take him to the doctor, but the physician is greedy and not interested in poor people, ordering his servant to tell them that he is not at home. Kino sees through his lies and feels humiliated (Koyoko, 87).

The outcome of the visit was foreseeable for everybody, especially for the couple's neighbors, but they all wanted to have a live experience of Kino's unfruitful attempt. Obviously, after that sad encounter with the doctor's servant, the neighbors leave the couple to their misfortune, because there is nothing else to expect.

For some religious people, Steinbeck implies that when somebody has got noble and good intentions, especially towards children, God will always reward them with something surprisingly unexpected. In that vein, Kino, his would-be-legal wife and sick baby go the sea with the other strong hope or dream of finding the pearl of the world. The latter would give them the possibility to have their child cured and enable them, at the same time, to leave their state of poverty, misfortune, shame and even of animality where they have always lived.

Steinbeck also alludes to traditional medicine or rather local plants or herbs that indigenous people resort to, either because they do not know about western medicine or they cannot afford it. The seaweed that Juana puts on the baby's wound appears to be efficient, since it soothes Coyotito's pain. In reality, the local plants constitute real wealth for people like Kino, but the influence of the foreign dominating culture has turned them into useless and dangerous ones: "*Seaweed was as good a medicine as the doctor could have given to Coyotito. But because this medicine was simple and didn't cost anything, people didn't think it was much good*" (Steinbeck, 18).

By praying for Kino to find big pearl, Juana manifests the strength of her hope and dream for her child's well-being that has become the most important concern in her life. Unlike her, Kino mainly aspires to middle-class life, his religious wedding and the education of his son.

With all those prayers, hopes and dreams, Kino dives into the deep sea. “

On the ocean floor, Kino collects oyster shells while Juana makes the magic of prayer...for she needed the luck for the swollen shoulder of Coyotito. Kino and Juana face the most horrifying event of their parental relationships, and yet they believe an answer can be found on the ocean floor (Roger, 84).

Juana's prayers have been answered by God, because Kino finds the largest pearl in the world and at that moment, the couple's dire straits start to fade away in Kino's mind. In fact, the pearl signifies the end of their poverty and all the misfortune that goes with it. Kino's scream towards the sky is nothing else but his personal way of thanking the Almighty for giving him that precious and valuable pearl. Unfortunately for the couple, their misfortune is not going to disappear for good with their prospective wealth. In reality, in the process of reaching the state of richness, they are entangled in a whirlwind of calamities that completely transform their former peaceful family life.

II. Prospective Wealth: The Source of Calamities.

No sooner had Kino found the pearl of the world than everybody in the village was aware of it. Even the beggars, the buyers and all Kino's neighbors look forward to having their shares in that treasury. Consequently, the greediest ones think of possessing it for themselves, in order to turn their own dreams into actualities. Obviously, the obstacle of Kino has to be eliminated for the fulfilment of such ambitions: *'the pearl became part of everyone's wishes and needs. Only one man stopped these people from having the pearl.*

That man was Kino. And so Kino became everyone's enemy' (Steinbeck, 25).

Thus with the possession of the pearl, Kino is turned into the first public foe in the village because of the prospective money that could be obtained from its sale. Such an idea has already generated hostile feelings towards the courageous fisherman.

Steinbeck even compares the pearl to something black and bad, in other words, the scorpion that has stung the baby and brought all the present hardships to the couple's lives. The pearl seems to have poison in it, like the scorpion and this time, Kino, Juana and Coyotito himself are going to be "stung" by the pearl and undergo much pain and suffering. However, Kino seems to be ready to bear all the calamities to reach the prospective wealth embedded in the pearl: *'He believes that the pearl will be the only chance to become rich enough to get what he wants and restore his pride. For Kino, getting out of poverty and overcoming ignorance are short cuts to the freedom and self-esteem essential for human beings*(Kyoko,88).

In fact with the discovery of the pearl, Kino contemplates the possibilities of purchasing a rifle, new clothes for the whole family, but most importantly sending Coyotito to school to be educated in order to fulfill his father's own personal dream:

Coyotito's education will make the Indians free, a social, political and economic sophistication, new clothes and a church wedding will give Kino and Juana position and respectability, again a social sophistication; the rifle will give Kino power, an intellectual sophistication (Harry, 491).

Although not educated, Kino clearly understands the power of acquiring knowledge at school. Moreover, the fisherman knows that education is a means to freedom insofar as knowledge equals liberty of thought and economic independence in most cases. Then, he quickly realizes that dreams are very often far cries from realities and making them come true is usually one of the toughest sledding.

The "stinging" of the pearl of the world starts when Kino begins to be afraid of the people in his community, as well as his own environment. He feels in his bones that something horrible is likely to happen to people that put too much hopes in dreams:

Just as the Pearl is good or becomes invested with evil because of the ways men use it, so man himself appears, becomes, emerges as good or evil because of the ways men use other men, nurturing or destroying the human relationship between them, validating or invalidating the meaning of their existence (Ernest, 2).

From that moment of worries, Kino feels but refuses to admit that the pearl is going to be the source of calamities for him and his beloved ones. Everybody's interest is now turned into him and in his treasury. Even the doctor goes to his house, notwithstanding the fact that he previously refused to cure the baby because of the poverty that had confined the family in the realm of animals.

However, the prospective wealth of Kino has "rehumanized" him in the eyes of the doctor who even poisons the baby, then cures him, to be able to benefit from the money that will derive from the sale of the Pearl. Thanks to the pearl Kino has moved from the status of "animality" to

that of the most important personality of the community.

Apart from the doctor, almost all the villagers visit Kino, with the slim hope of having a glance of the pearl of the world. Others, even without seeing it, begin to covet it. That same night, a robber attempts to steal it and faces Kino's determination to preserve his treasury at all costs: '*He felt someone's shirt and struck with his knife. He did not hit anything. Kino struck again and felt his knife going through the shirt. Then something hit him on the head*' (Steinbeck, 37).

Right after that, Juana's feminine feelings warn her about the danger that is bred in the pearl. For that lovely woman and loving mother, the pearl bears some evil power that will surely destroy her family, and she even proposes her husband to throw it back into the sea. For Kino, such an idea is something unthinkable, considering all the dreams that the pearl could make come true. In the young fisherman's mind, the pearl does not embody evil, but rather wealth that should definitely keep illnesses, needs and hunger away.

Unfortunately, Kino's hopes in the pearl are also the same as those of some thieves, probably sent by the buyers. The latter have also put their heads together to fool Kino by cheating him through paying for the pearl with a paltry sum of money:

Realizing their failure to cheat Kino, they later try to rob him. Then, directly or indirectly, after Kino has determined to circumvent that wall of monopoly by selling his pearl elsewhere, they destroy all that Kino has of value, his boat and his home (Ernest, 5).

All those evil forces, including the doctor and the priest, belong to a world that Kino does

not fully understand. However, he clings on his primitive manhood and refuses to surrender to the foreign world of all those people that are attracted by the value of the pearl. With his strong desire to safeguard his dreams embedded in the pearl, he is obliged to kill another attacker: ‘*A dead man was lying on the path and Kino’s knife was covered with blood*’ (Steinbeck, 58).

That involuntary murder is going to precipitate his leaving the community for an unknown one full of uncertainties, hostility and even deception. *The Pearl* can be read as a naturalistic novella insofar as the circumstances, around Kino, are not only full of hardships, but they are also too parlous to Kino’s will to make his dreams come true. They are operating for the complete failure of the young man’s overall ambitions and undertakings to get out of poverty.

Kino seems to be entangled in the determinism of poverty and social failure that is rampant in Theodore Dreiser’s works of fiction, such as *The American Tragedy*, *Sister Carrie* et *Jenny Gerhart* to name but a few. After the second night attack and the death of the mysterious aggressor, the burning down of his house, Kino is compelled to run away like a hoodlum for his own sake, his family’s and that of the pearl as well:

Although the neighbors demonstrate concern at the fire and grief over the supposed deaths of Kino and his family, Kino’s relationship with the community has been destroyed because of the murder; and he must leave to protect the community and his brother (‘I am like a leprosy’).(Ernest, 5).

Still trapped in that hostile environment, Kino is going to realize that he cannot flee by the sea, since his enemies have made a hole at the

bottom of his precious and ancestral canoe. The atmosphere in the village has become so hostile and unbearable that he has to become a man of the shadow, pending his departure from the community. After being given some food by his brother, Kino, Juana and the baby’s fleeing may remind the reader of the flight of owls in Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The House of the Seven Gables*, as well as the story of Pepe in the novel *Flight* by John Steinbeck:

‘Where will you go?’ Juan Thomas asked Kino. ‘to the North’ Kino answered. ‘I have heard that there are cities in the North’. ‘Don’t go near the beach’ said Juan Thomas. ‘People are searching along the beach. The men in the town are looking for you’ ‘ (Steinbeck, 64).

By leaving in the dark, Kino is determined to stay free and alive to make his dreams come true, after the sale of the pearl which has become, in the meantime, his sole reason for living. In fact, as he puts it himself ‘*the pearl has become my life*’(Steinbeck,64) obviously means that Kino is ready to sacrifice his own life for the pearl, since the latter has removed him from the peaceful atmosphere of his home and put him into the horrible state of a murderer and a hunted man:

‘If I give up I shall lose my soul’’. Already almost overburdened with multiple symbolic equivalences-it stands for greed, for beauty, for materialism, for freedom from want, for evil, for good, for effete society, degenerate religion, and unethical medicine, for the strength and virtue of primitive societies-the pearl, with these words of Kino, stands also for Kino’s soul. (Harry, 494).

While running away, the couple and the baby recover their symbolism of animals, walking in the bushes and even using coyotes' hide-outs: '*An animal had made a place in the bushes. No one could see that place from the road. Juana sat down and fed the baby and Kino went back to the road. Kino broke off a piece of tree and carefully swept away the tracks*' (Steinbeck, 65).

While in the bushes, Kino starts to realize that the pearl, as Juana once put it, is a source of the danger and misfortune that have befallen on them. Pending their tracking by three men, Kino and his family have moved into the realm of wild animals whose tracks are usually followed by determined hunters to find them. That comparison to the world of beasts reaches its epitome when Coyotito cries, justifying thus his name, insofar as that cry is very much similar to that of a little coyote. '*Perhaps it's a wild dog with some puppies, I've heard a puppy cry like a baby*'. (Steinbeck, 81).

Unfortunately that cry causes one of the trackers to randomly fire his rifle and blow the baby's head. Like a furious lion, Kino leaps on his pursuers and kills them all. With the death of their beloved child who has been the cynosure of all Kino's dreams, the parents no longer feel the need to continue their trip to the North. They decide to return to their community and Kino makes then a stoic choice and gets ready to accomplish a mission, unlike Pepe, the main protagonist in *Flight*, who is killed by his trackers.

III. Kino's Stoic Choice and Possible Mission.

By returning to their community, after a failed attempt to run away from its greedy and ruthless people, Kino and Juana have understood the determinism around their lives and the impossibility for their dreams to come true. That return also means their courageous choice to go

back to their former life of poverty, instead of the pursuit of a hypothetical wealth in the North. On top of that, even acquiring much money through the sale of the pearl would no longer have any substantial meaning, since the baby has died. That failure, in their undertakings, recalls one again the fate of the protagonists in naturalistic stories. That return certainly confirms the 'curse' that is thought to have been embedded in the pearl and which has generated much more evil than good:

Kino looked and remembered all the terrible things that had happened. In the pearl, Kino saw cruel faces and flames burning up. He saw the frightened eyes of the man in the pool. Kino saw Coyotito lying in the cave with blood on his head. And the pearl looked bad and ugly. (Steinbeck, 84).

Not only is the pearl bad and ugly for Kino, but it has also become preposterous to keep such an evil thing that has turned his beautiful dreams into horrible nightmares. After the death of Coyotito, the pearl has lost all its value and must be sent back to the deep sea where it belongs.

While Kino and Juana are walking through the village, everyone is staring at them and at the bloody bundle carried by the woman. The pearl is thenceforward understood as a thing of destruction. By asking Kino to throw it himself back into the sea, Juana gives him a chance to recover his manhood and his jeopardized honor: '*Kino lifted up his arm and threw the pearl as far as he could. Kino and Juana watched the pearl shining in the evening sun. They saw the pearl drop into the sea*'. (Steinbeck, 84).

Unfortunately, the aftermath of the episode of the pearl will not offer them any possibility to be somewhat happy or satisfied as they were

before, simply because their most important treasury Coyotito is no longer with them. Besides, they may sometimes think of the good things they dreamed of after finding the pearl.

Such thoughts will certainly not bring peace and tranquility to the couple. The strong desire for wealth, according to John Steinbeck, is understood through the novella, as one of the worst evil haunting man's life. It is also paramount to know that things of the future through dreams and hopes should not eradicate the reality of the present:

The future is of primary importance for a man; yet he must not lose sight of the present. For this has been Kino's error. In his commitment to his 'plan for the future', he has lost sight of what changes the pearl has wrought upon the family in the present. In fact the future as guaranteed by the pearl had become his only concern and achieving his plan had become his salvation. (Karsten, 6)

The Pearl is, therefore, a potent criticism of materialism and the unrealistic longing for the American Dream to become rich and successful. At the same time, the novella epitomizes the fall because of innocence and the rising up from maturity after living in hostile circumstances. The pearl is akin to the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil in the Old Testament. The couple's tragic experience can also be interpreted as an initiation process to free them from unrealistic want, and let them face their destiny by accepting their real social status.

They have walked through trial and temptation and have come out, not unscathed, but as survivors who are filled with an undertaking of life's complexity, a vision which would have been

impossible, had they not undergone the troubling discoveries of their human natures through the ownership of the pearl.

Thus, Kino and Juana do not return to their community as defeated people. Their unhappy experience in poverty and hopeful wealth can be taken as lessons about the unfair structure of their society that needs to be changed:

The only path for his mission is to stand up and fight. In doing so, he needs to enlighten his people, just as Juan Diego in *Forgotten Village* does. For if Kino stands up for his beliefs, leads an awakened people, and fights as tenaciously as Emiliano in *Viva Zapata*, he may succeed in regaining his people's pride. (Kyoko, 92).

Steinbeck was always concerned with the social status of American Indians, especially those in South America. Their extremely poor living conditions rebuked him because they continued, according to him, to believe in superstitious fortune-telling rather than scientific knowledge to stand up for their rights and stop their everlasting exploitation by foreigners.

Conclusion.

John Steinbeck's *The Pearl* is a simple story, well told and, at the same time, a very interesting work of fiction with powerful messages to mankind. The world of the Pearl is one of greed, lust, envy, mere wickedness and illusory wealth that cast a slur on human relationships.

Steinbeck has managed to highlight that poverty is one condition of unhappiness among others, especially when people, in dire straits, are confronted with social hardships such as finding money to pay for a doctor to cure suffering

beloved ones. In Kino and Juana's case, because of their acute poverty, they are confined in the world of animals that reaches its epitome when they flee from their community, tracked by pursuers.

Steinbeck has also succeeded in proving that wealth is also another condition of unhappiness. Instead of solving social problems in the story, Kino's prospective richness has raised many more, such as facing ruthless enemies, losing his home and canoe, having to commit murders and fleeing like animals in the bushes.

In the story, the pearl has been turned from something valuable and good into something evil that has destroyed the peaceful life of a family. Despite his horrible misfortunes and calamities, Kino returns to his former status of poor fisherman, but not as somebody defeated. He has, in a sense, triumphed over all his foes. However, his real victory is to have understood the realities of good and evil. That knowledge is the tool he needs to help him in his subsequent and final journey consisting in leading his community to awareness of their own identities and capacities. Steinbeck has revisited the ambiguities that plague all human beings as they struggle between choices of good and evil.

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