

PEARL & DOLL'S HOUSE GUIDE

The Pearl Summary

The Pearl, which takes place in La Paz, Mexico, begins with a description of the seemingly idyllic family life of Kino, his wife Juana and their infant son, Coyotito. Kino watches as Coyotito sleeps, but sees a scorpion crawl down the rope that holds the hanging box where Coyotito lies. Kino attempts to catch the scorpion, but Coyotito bumps the rope and the scorpion falls on him. Although Kino kills the scorpion, it still stings Coyotito. Juana and Kino, accompanied by their neighbors, go to see the local doctor, who refuses to treat Coyotito because Kino cannot pay.

Kino and Juana leave the doctors and take Coyotito down near the sea, where Juana uses a seaweed poultice on Coyotito's shoulder, which is now swollen. Kino dives for oysters from his canoe, attempting to find pearls. He finds a very large oyster which, when Kino opens it, yields an immense pearl. Kino puts back his head and howls, causing the other pearl divers to look up and race toward Kino's canoe.

The news that Kino has found an immense pearl travels fast through La Paz. The doctor who refused to treat Coyotito decides to visit Kino. Kino's neighbors begin to feel bitter toward him for his good fortune, but neither Kino nor Juana realize this feeling they have engendered. Juan Tomas, the brother of Kino, asks him what he will do with his money, and he envisions getting married to Juana in a church and dressing Coyotito in a yachting cap and sailor suit. He claims that he will send Coyotito to school and buy a rifle for himself. The local priest visits and tells Kino to remember to give thanks and to pray for guidance. The doctor also visits, and although Coyotito seems to be healing, the doctor insists that Coyotito still faces danger and treats him. Kino tells the doctor that he will pay him once he sells his pearl, and the doctor attempts to discern where the pearl is located (Kino has buried it in the corner of his hut). That night, a thief attempts to break into Kino's hut, but Kino drives him away. Juana tells Kino that the pearl will destroy them, but Kino insists that the pearl is their one chance and that tomorrow they will sell it.

Kino's neighbors wonder what they would do if they had found the pearl, and suggest giving it as a present to the Pope, buying Masses for the souls of his family, and distributing it among the poor of La Paz. Kino goes to sell his pearl, accompanied by his neighbors, but the pearl dealer only offers a thousand pesos when Kino believes that he deserves fifty thousand. Although other dealers inspect the pearl and give similar prices, Kino refuses their offer and decides to go to the capital to sell it there. That night, Kino is attacked by more thieves, and Juana once again reminds Kino that the pearl is evil. However, Kino vows that he will not be cheated, for he is a man.

Later that night, Juana attempts to take the pearl and throw it into the ocean, but Kino finds her and beats her for doing so. While outside, a group of men accost Kino and knock the pearl from his hand. Juana watches from a distance, and sees Kino approach her, limping with another man whose throat Kino has slit. Juana finds the pearl, and they decide that they must go away even if the murder was in self-defense. Kino finds that his canoe has been damaged and their house was torn up and the outside set afire. Kino and

Juana stay with Juan Tomas and his wife, Apolonia, where they hide for the next day before setting out for the capital that night.

Kino and Juana travel that night, and rest during the day. When Kino believes that he is being followed, the two hide and Kino sees several bighorn sheep trackers who pass by him. Kino and Juana escape into the mountains, where Juana and Coyotito hide in the cave while Kino, taking his clothes off so that no one will see his white clothing. The trackers think that they hear something when they hear Coyotito crying, but decide that it is merely a coyote pup. After a tracker shoots in the direction of the cries, Kino attacks the three trackers, killing all three of them. Kino can hear nothing but the cry of death, for he soon realizes that Coyotito is dead from that first shot. Juana and Kino return to La Paz. Kino carries a rifle stolen from the one of the trackers he killed, while Juana carries the dead Coyotito. The two approach the gulf, and Kino, who now sees the image of Coyotito with his head blown off in the pearl, throws it into the ocean.

THEMES

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:

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

enchancing, 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.

isabokemicah@gmail.com

CHARACTERS AND CHARACTERISATION

Major Characters

Kino

Kino, The Pearl's protagonist, is an extremely simple character, motivated by basic drives: his love for his family, loyalty to the traditions of his village and his people, and frustration at his people's oppression at the hands of their European colonizers. Kino also possesses a quick mind and a strong work ethic, and he feels a close, pure kinship with the natural world, the source of his livelihood.

At the beginning of the novella, Kino is essentially content with his life. However, two seemingly chance occurrences—Coyotito's scorpion sting and Kino's discovery of the pearl—open Kino's eyes to a larger world. As Kino begins to covet material wealth and education for his son, his simple existence becomes increasingly complicated by greed, conflict, and violence. The basic trajectory of Kino's character is a gradual decline from a state of innocence to a state of corruption and disillusionment. The forces propelling this decline are ambition and greed. At the end of the novella, Kino's tranquil relationship with nature has been perverted and reversed, a change signified by the fact that Kino finds the sounds of the animals at night threatening rather than reassuring.

Because The Pearl is a parable, Kino's character can be interpreted in many ways. It can be seen as a critique of colonial politics, an exploration of how good motives can bring a person to a bad end, or even an attack on the idea of the American dream. But on the most basic level, Kino represents the dangers of ambition and greed. Kino's ruin, caused by his lust for the pearl, illustrates the extent to which ambition and greed poison and jeopardize every aspect of a human's familial, cultural, and personal well-being.

Juana

Kino's wife, Juana, is more reflective and more practical than Kino. She prays for divine aid when Coyotito's wound leaves Kino impotent with rage, and she also has the presence of mind to salve the wound with a seaweed poultice. Juana is loyal and submissive, obeying her husband as her culture dictates, but she does not always agree with his actions. Like Kino, Juana is at first seduced by the greed the pearl awakens, but she is much quicker than Kino to recognize the pearl as a potential threat. In fact, Juana comes to view the pearl as a symbol of evil.

As the novella progresses, Juana becomes certain that the limitations, rules, and customs of her society must be upheld. Whereas Kino seeks to transform his existence, Juana believes that their lives will be better if they keep things as they are. Kino can see only what they have to gain from the pearl, but Juana can see also what they stand to lose, and she wisely prefers to protect what she has rather than sacrifice it all for a dream. Juana thus serves an important function in the novella—she counterbalances Kino's enthusiasm and reminds the reader that Kino's desire to make money is dangerous. Juana also symbolizes the family's

domestic happiness; the scene in which Kino beats her for trying to cast off the pearl thus represents Kino's tragic break from the family he longs to support.

Coyotito

Coyotito is Kino and Juana's first-born child who is stung by a scorpion and needs medical treatment. Unfortunately, the local doctor will not treat the baby because Kino has no money. When the doctor hears about Kino's pearl, he comes to treat Coyotito. Kino expects that the pearl will purchase great things for his family, the greatest being an education for his son so that they cannot be cheated by the merchants and the other upper class citizens of La Paz who have taken advantage of Kino's people for four hundred years. But that great dream is destroyed when Coyotito is killed by a gunshot while Kino is killing the trackers who are following them. Kino killed them to protect his family and the pearl and the dream of the future that the pearl provided, but his dream and his family are destroyed when Coyotito dies. Kino and Juana return to La Paz with Coyotito's small body and throw the pearl into the sea.

Minor Characters

Juan Tomas

Juan Tomas is Kino's older brother. Juan gives Kino advice about selling the pearl. He walks beside Kino when they travel to the pearl buyers. Later, he warns his brother that by refusing to sell his pearl to the buyers, Kino is defying their way of life and putting his family in danger. When Kino seeks refuge with Juan Tomas, he is granted it. Juan gathers supplies that Kino and Juana will need on their journey and protects his brother's family until they depart.

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.

Apolonia

Apolonia is Juan Tomas' wife. She follows her husband as he escorts Kino into town to sell the pearl, and she raises a formal mourning when Kino's hut burns and no sign of them is found.

Like her husband, Apolonia is sympathetic to Kino and Juana's plight, and she agrees to give them shelter in their time of need.

Doctor

The doctor is wealthier than the peasants of La Paz, and he scoffs at natives, like Kino and Juana, who seek his treatment without money. When Kino and Juana brought Coyotito to the doctor to heal the scorpion sting, he refused them. Later, when he heard that Kino had found the Pearl of the World, he came to their hut to treat the baby. He pretended not to know that Kino had found a great pearl, so that when Kino talked about it, he could watch to see if his eyes went to the spot where it was buried in the hut. Sure enough, Kino gave its location away and that night someone came to his hut to dig out the pearl, but Kino had since moved it. Kino

stabbed at the intruder, but did not make a fatal swing and the intruder (possibly the doctor) hit him in the head and then escaped.

Though he does not figure largely in the novella's plot, the doctor is an important character in *The Pearl* because he represents the colonial attitudes that oppress Kino's people. The doctor symbolizes and embodies the colonists' arrogance, greed, and condescension toward the natives, whom the colonists do not even try to understand. Like the other colonists, the doctor has no interest in Kino's people. He has come only to make money, and his greed distorts his human values. As a physician, the doctor is duty-bound to act to save human life, but when confronted with someone whom he considers beneath him, the doctor feels no such duty. His callous refusal to treat Coyotito for the scorpion sting because Kino lacks the money to pay him thus demonstrates the human cost of political conquest rooted in the desire for financial profit. As his interior monologue in Chapter 1 shows, the doctor is obsessed with European society, and European cultural values grip his mind so deeply that he doesn't even realize how ignorant he is of Kino and Kino's people.

Trackers

Two trackers and a man with a rifle followed Kino and Juana out of La Paz. Kino saw them coming while Juana hid in the woods. When Kino realized that they were tracking him, he and Juana hurried up to the smooth rocks of the mountains so that they would be harder to follow. When night fell, the trackers were just below the cave in which Kino, Juana, and Coyotito were hiding. Kino sneaked down the sheer face of the mountain and into their camp and killed them all. In the chaos, Coyotito was shot and killed.

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.

The Priest

The priest was the local religious authority, and when he learned of Kino's pearl, he hoped that he could convince Kino to use his wealth for the good of the church. He made a visit to Kino's hut that night to talk to Kino about his duty to give part of his wealth to God, who had ultimately created the pearl.

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.

The Buyers

The pearl buyers of the town acted as if they worked for themselves, but they were actually all controlled by one man. The pretense of competition among the pearl buyers made it easier to cheat the Indians out of their pearls. By putting on a show of competing over the best price, the man in charge and the buyers were adept at ripping off the natives. When they told Kino that his great pearl was worth only a thousand pesos, he got angry and left to take the pearl to the capital. That night, Kino's family was attacked in their home, and he believed that the buyers were responsible for it.

LANGUAGE AND STYLE – Stylistic devices

Simile

“And the music of the pearl rose like a chorus of trumpets in his ears.”

"It was as large as a sea-gull's egg." Page 26. This is how big the pearl was when Kino opened it. He says it was a very large pearl

Metaphor

“Its warm luccence promised a poultice against illness and a wall against insult.”

"He was an animal now, for hiding, for attacking, and he lived only to preserve himself and his family." Page 69. This quote is a metaphor because it is comparing Kino to an animal who protects his family.

Symbol

An object or objects that represent an entire system of ideas.

The scorpion symbolizes evil because Coyotito was stung in Chapter 1 and scorpions are generally thought of as evil. This starts destruction in the family which leads to Kino's accidents.

Foreshadowing

To show or indicate beforehand

“...and his mind could hardly make the leap --a rifle – but why not, since he was so rich. And Kino saw Kino in the pearl, Kino holding a Winchester carbine...‘A rifle,’ he said. ‘Perhaps a rifle.’

Personification

Giving human characteristics or feelings to nonhuman creatures, inanimate objects, or abstract ideas.

“...the nerves of the town were pulsing and vibrating with the news.”

Page 27 This quote is personification because it says that the town was pulsing and vibrating but towns can't do that. The author was giving the town a human characteristic.

Exercise

Device Definition

Alliteration

The repetition of a consonant sound at the beginning of two or more words in a sentence, usually sequential

Hyperbole Extreme exaggeration

Imagery

Descriptions with a heavy emphasis on one or more of the five senses: seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching

Metaphor

A comparison of two unlike things without the use of "like" or "as"

Onomatopoeia

A word formed from the sound associated with it, (i.e. buzz, ding)

Personification

When a nonhuman object is given human characteristics

Simile

A comparison of two unlike things using the words "like" or "as"

Situational Irony

When a situation occurs that is the opposite of what one would have expected to happen

Symbolism

An object used to represent an idea, meaning, or ideal

Using the information above, identify which device is used in each line of text below. Write the best answer on the line before each number. Portions of some sentences have been underlined to assist you.

1. " In the canoe she was like a strong man "
2. "...and the canoe creased the water and hissed with speed"
3. "...and the beggars set Juana and Kino down as poverty people..."
4. "...the day had drawn only a pale wash of light in the lower sky to the east' ' .
5. "Juana went to the fire pit and uncovered a coal and fanned it alive "
6. "A thin, timid dog came close and, at a soft word from Kino, curled up, arranged its tail neatly over its feet, and laid its chin delicately on the pile. It was a black dog with yellow-gold spots where its eyebrows should have been"

7. "The procession crossed the
blinding plaza..."

8. "The glaring sun threw the bunched shadows of the people blackly on the white wall"

9. "He kicked his foot free from the rock loop..."

10. "The flutes were shining black to brown, and only a few small barnacles adhered to the shell" .

isabokemicah@gmail.com

GENERAL ESSAY QUESTIONS AND SAMPLE ESSAYS WITH ANSWERS

1. In what ways does Kino defy the patterns of life in the town and how does this change him

Kino begins the novel poor and unable to think beyond the confines of his native fishing village. After discovering of the pearl, however, Kino begins to dream of possibilities for his family, most notably an education for his son, that were previously unthinkable. He sees these dreams materialize when he looks into the pearl's surface. Because he cannot simply ignore these dreams he embarks upon a course of action which eventually makes him a fugitive from his own village and a killer of men several times over. The people of the town did not trust their eyes due to the effects of the Gulf mist, yet Kino believes the things he first sees in the pearl and is deceived. The image of his son receiving an education is replaced by an image of the boy's dead body; similarly, the image of Kino and Juana being married in the church is replaced by an image of her bruised and swollen face after he has beaten her. When he returns to the village, defeated by the death of his son, he first offers Juana the chance to throw the pearl into the sea. This indicates that he has learned to appreciate her judgement and is, in a sense, yielding to her. That she insists that he be the one to throw the pearl into the sea indicates that she remains faithful to their previous way of life and, as she has always done, seeks to preserve it.

2. Throughout the story Kino and Juana are attuned to ancient songs that warn them of evil or nurture their sense of family. In what way do these songs serve as rhetorical devices to further the parable?

The use of the songs allows Steinbeck to emphasize Kino and Juana's essential innocence and connection with the natural world and also allows the author to sharply delineate between those things in the story which are to be read as "evil" and those that are understood to be "good". Thus, the Priest is accompanied by the song of evil and the reader knows, without being told in so many words, not to take his statements at face value. The stone that Juana uses to grind the corn, although a facet of her family's poverty, is accompanied by the song of the family and the reader is led to infer that in these simple things does the strength of goodness reside for Kino and his people.

3. The narrator says that to Juana men were "half-gods and half insane" and that she believed women capable of saving men at times through the woman's natural qualities of "reason, caution and sense of preservation." How are these gender roles vital to the story?

Kino believes he can capitalize on the wealth of the pearl because as a man in his native society he has always been the decision-maker and source of physical strength that has provided for its survival. Though he is initially frightened to go to the city he decides that he must make the journey in order that his family will not merely survive but prosper. Juana knows that because Kino is a man he will "drive his strength against a mountain" but "in her woman's soul" she knows that "the mountain would stand while the man broke himself." For this reason she attempts to dissuade Kino. In order for her way of life to continue, however, she

must yield to his decisions until he can understand the pearl's evil himself.

4. What characters in the novel are portrayed as overtly good or evil? What characters are portrayed as ambiguous?

Of all the characters in the novel that of the Doctor is rendered most starkly evil and that of Juana is rendered most steadfastly good. The scene in which the Doctor dupes Juana by simply re-poisoning Coyotito and then pretends to cure him makes the Doctor seem all the more duplicitous and she all the more innocent. Ambiguous characters include the pearl buyers who, though they seek to purchase the pearls at the lowest price, are simply acting in accordance with the dictates of their profession and the trackers who doggedly pursue Kino and his family into the wilderness who, like the pearl buyers are not inherently good or bad but merely performing their duty to the best of their ability.

5. In what ways is *The Pearl* a political novel?

The Pearl is the story of a poor Indian whose people have been subjugated for over four hundred years. While the descendants of the Europeans live in stone houses, surrounded by walls, Kino and his people live in grass shacks with earth floors. Kino's struggle to better the lot of his family and his eventual failure can be read as a condemnation of the economic system which prevents Kino from realizing the value of the great pearl. Significantly, Kino's most cherished dream is that his son might receive an education and free his people from the cycle of poverty and ignorance. Coyotito's death, however, destroys Kino's family and serves as a painful reminder that the injustices, which his people have always suffered, will not be overturned by the actions of an individual. The horror of Kino's failure reminds the reader of the need for reform and aid in societies where such action cannot be successfully implemented by the dispossessed.

6.

Discuss the various animal imagery that functions throughout the novel: the ants, the scorpion, the hissing snakes, the schools of fish, the oysters, the dogs, and the pearl buyers as octopuses, etc.

7.

Describe in detail Kino and Juana's simple life before and after the discovery of the pearl.

8.

How does Steinbeck characterize the doctor? How does he let the reader know that the white powder which the doctor administers to Coyotito is actually a poison which would kill the baby if the doctor did not return?

9.

How does the priest function as a travesty of religion?

10.

Why are the pearl buyers referred to as "fatherly" and "benevolent"? How does this contradict their real

purposes? Are they also victimized?

11.

Why are the "dark ones" and the trackers never identified? What is gained by Steinbeck's not identifying them?

12.

A symbol can change its meaning during the course of a novel. How does the pearl change its meaning during the course of this novel?

13.

Kino believes that it would be better to kill a person than to kill a canoe because a canoe has no relatives to revenge it. What types of values are operative in such a statement?

14.

Kino and Juana function more or less on a primitive level in their lives and in their religion, yet they both want a church wedding and a christening for Coyotito. How are these values consistent with their lives? How are they contradictory?

15.

What is the function of the many songs that Kino hears during the course of the novel?

The Pearl by John Steinbeck Notes –

The Pearl is a novella by American author John Steinbeck, first published in 1947. It is the story of a pearl diver, Kino, and explores man's nature as well as greed, defiance of societal norms, and evil. Steinbeck's inspiration was a Mexican folk tale from La Paz, Baja California Sur, Mexico, which he had heard in a visit to the formerly pearl-rich region in 1940. In 1947, it was adapted into a Mexican film named *La perla* and in 1987 into a cult Kannada movie *Ondu Muttina Kathe*. The story is one of Steinbeck's most popular books and has been widely used in high school classes. *The Pearl* is sometimes considered a parable.

- **Summary**
- **Setting**
- **Themes**
- **Characters**

Summary /Synopsis

The Pearl, which takes place in La Paz, Mexico, begins with a description of the seemingly idyllic family life of Kino, his wife Juana and their infant son, Coyotito. Kino watches as Coyotito sleeps, but sees a scorpion crawl down the rope that holds the hanging box where Coyotito lies. Kino attempts to catch the scorpion, but Coyotito bumps the rope and the scorpion falls on him. Although Kino kills the scorpion, it still stings Coyotito. Juana and Kino, accompanied by their neighbors, go to see the local doctor, who refuses to treat Coyotito because Kino cannot pay.

Kino and Juana leave the doctors and take Coyotito down near the sea, where Juana uses a seaweed poultice on Coyotito's shoulder, which is now swollen. Kino dives for oysters from his canoe, attempting to find pearls. He finds a very large oyster which, when Kino opens it, yields an immense pearl, which Kino therefore dubs "The Pearl of the World". Kino puts back his head and howls, causing the other pearl divers to look up and race toward Kino's canoe.

The news that Kino has found an immense pearl travels fast through La Paz. The doctor who refused to treat Coyotito decides to visit Kino. Kino's neighbors begin to feel bitter toward him for his good fortune, but neither Kino nor Juana realize this feeling that they have engendered. Juan Tomas, the brother of Kino, asks him what he will do with his money, and he envisions getting married to Juana in a church and dressing Coyotito in a yachting cap and sailor suit. He claims that he will send Coyotito to school and buy a rifle for himself. The local priest visits and tells Kino to remember to give thanks and to pray for guidance. The doctor also visits, and although Coyotito seems to be healing, the doctor insists that Coyotito still faces danger and treats him. Kino tells the

doctor that he will pay him once he sells his pearl, and the doctor attempts to discern where the pearl is located (Kino has buried it in the corner of his hut). That night, a thief attempts to break into Kino's hut, but Kino drives him away. Juana tells Kino that the pearl will destroy them, but Kino insists that the pearl is their one chance and that tomorrow they will sell it.

Kino's neighbors wonder what they would do if they had found the pearl, and suggest giving it as a present to the Pope, buying masses for the souls of his family, and distributing it among the poor of La Paz. Kino goes to sell his pearl, accompanied by his neighbors, but the pearl dealer only offers a thousand pesos when Kino believes that he deserves fifty thousand. Although other dealers inspect the pearl and give similar prices, Kino refuses their offer and decides to go to the capital to sell it there. That night, Kino is attacked by more thieves, and Juana once again reminds Kino that the pearl is evil. However, Kino vows that he will not be cheated, for he is a man.

Later that night, Juana attempts to take the pearl and throw it into the ocean, but Kino finds her and beats her for doing so. While outside, a group of men accost Kino and knock the pearl from his hand. Juana watches from a distance, and sees Kino approach her, limping with another man whose throat Kino has slit. Juana finds the pearl, and they decide that they must go away even if the murder was in self-defense. Kino finds that his canoe has been damaged and their house was torn up and the outside set afire. Kino and Juana stay with Juan Tomas and his wife, Apolonia, where they hide for the next day before setting out for the capital that night.

Kino and Juana travel that night, and rest during the day. When Kino believes that he is being followed, the two hide and Kino sees several bighorn sheep trackers who pass by him. Kino and Juana escape into the mountains, where Juana and Coyotito hide in the cave while Kino, taking his clothes off so that no one will see his white clothing. The trackers think that they hear something when they hear Coyotito crying, but decide that it is merely a coyote pup. After a tracker shoots in the direction of the cries, Kino attacks the three trackers, killing all three of them. Kino can hear nothing but the cry of death, for he soon realizes that Coyotito is dead from that first shot. Juana and Kino return to La Paz. Kino carries a rifle stolen from the one of the trackers he killed, while Juana carries the dead Coyotito. The two approach the gulf, and Kino, who now sees the image of Coyotito with his head blown off in the pearl, throws it into the ocean.

Setting

Steinbeck began writing the story as a movie script^[3] in 1944, and first published it as a short story called "The Pearl of the World" in *Woman's Home Companion* in December 1945. The original publication is also sometimes listed as "The Pearl of La Paz". He expanded it to novella length and published it under the name *The Pearl* by Viking Press in 1947. As he was writing the novella version, he was frequently travelling to Mexico where the film version, co-written with Jack Wagner, was being filmed. The film was also released by RKO in 1947 as a co-promotion with the book.

The Pearl was loosely adapted in 2001 for a film directed by Alfredo Zacharias and starring Lukas Haas and Richard Harris which was released directly to video in 2005.

Themes

Family– Throughout the novel, the plot is focused on how the family lives before and after the pearl. It is constantly the focus of the plot and many of the decisions are based on what would be best for the family. For example, the first thing that Kino desires to do with the money from the pearl was to give his wife and Coyotito a better life. This money would pay for Coyotito's education, better clothes and better protection. Later, Kino also demonstrated devotion to his family by not selling to the pearl dealer. The second buyer was trying to get the pearl for less than it was worth, but Kino, with his family in mind, declined to search for a better deal. He always has his family in mind, whether it leads to warmth and happiness or destruction. It was the reason for the Kino getting the pearl and, eventually, him throwing it back into the ocean and it was a main theme of the novel.

Paradoxes– The theme of paradoxes is displayed through Kino's desires. Once Kino discovers the pearl, he begins to dream about what could come from this fortune but as he tries to carry out this plan, the good wealth also brings destruction. Though Kino desires good for his family, there is a paradox of an evil reality that he does not want. Kino tries to "avoid life's inevitable tension" between these two but he finds that he cannot separate the good and the evil.

Characters

Kino is the main character that develops throughout the novel. He begins as a simple man that has a wife, Juana, and a son, Coyotito. He is content with his life-style as a diver, though he is not wealthy, until he discovers the pearl. After discovering the pearl, Kino gradually changes to become a completely different man. Though family is still the center of his actions, he is also driven by greed. He is no longer content with his son not being educated, or his family not being well-dressed. Quickly, he becomes obsessed with material things, which was the opposite of his life before. Instead of enjoying his family and their company, as he did in the beginning, he becomes discontent and always seeks more. He is named for the missionary Eusebio Kino.

Juana is a secondary character who is Kino's wife. She is a loving woman who cares for her husband and son. Throughout the experience, she remains loyal to her family but also perceives the evil that the pearl brings. For example, one night, she attempted to throw the pearl back into the ocean to bring back peace and happiness to her family, demonstrating her wisdom and love for her family.

The different faces of the main character in 'The Pearl' by John Steinbeck

In Summary

- The beginning of the novel reveals the first type of Kino – kind, focused and caring.

- He is a dreamer who believes that one day he will fish a pearl that will change his life, a dream supported by Juana, his wife.
- The author also limits the setting to the Gulf of California, in a village and in a town. In the town, people are individualistic.

By JANLYDIA WANJIRU MWANGLI

The Pearl by John Steinbeck reveals Kino, the main character, as a native American living in a village near La Paz.

His wife is known as Juana and he has an only child, Coyotito.

The first chapter provides a vivid description of this community. Realistic fantasy is evident in Kino's life upon discovery of the great pearl. It is a wish-fulfilment plot because through the pearl, there is a possibility to fulfil his dreams. His dreams are the dreams of the village.

The beginning of the novel reveals the first type of Kino – kind, focused and caring.

He is a dreamer who believes that one day he will fish a pearl that will change his life, a dream supported by Juana, his wife.

The author also limits the setting to the Gulf of California, in a village and in a town. In the town, people are individualistic.

Therefore, when the doctor rejects Kino's pearls as payment to treat Coyotito, it is also a rejection of the lower class in society.

Kino's action of hitting the gate at the doctor's house foreshadows his determination to get through the 'gate' that is the obstacles that have denied his son good treatment.

The blood he sheds symbolises the blood to be shed in his fight for his dream.

Another type of Kino fights the class and race war. Upon the rejection by the doctor, Kino and his wife go pearl fishing and find 'the greatest pearl of the world' (page 37).

The pearl symbolically makes Kino visible to the high class people of town.

The doctor visits the village to assist with Coyotito's illness, while the priest tries to convince Kino to tithe and have a church wedding.

To Kino, illusions move from healing the child to dreams of a better life (page 44-45). The last dream is to acquire a 'rifle' to justify his manhood.

To his neighbours in the village, the 'pearl of the world' can turn into a curse if Kino is not able to fulfil his dreams and if he leaves his native village.

This view is also supported by Kino's wife Juana after an attack by people interested in stealing the pearl (page 59,79).

The author at this point focuses on Kino's emotions and his weakness in making the right choice about the pearl.

Another type of Kino is revealed as one who is not afraid to kill to protect the pearl.

The second attack they encounter leads to a death. The death begins the symbolic elimination of passive elements that may hinder his dreams.

Kino acquires fear for his life and his family and opts to go north to find a better value for the pearl. His neighbours' predictions come true and death becomes inevitable. The pearl, ironically, becomes their misfortune and part of Kino's soul (p.g 92).

The social-economic environment of the rich and the poor affects the judgment and decision about his destiny. His flight to the north directs him to his fate while his naivety makes him not to understand that he is controlled by forces of his history that he cannot escape from. As he fights them, his son dies and his dreams come to a disastrous end. They return carrying the 'rifle' (manhood desires fulfilled) and the body of Coyotito (page 116). He accepts his old self by throwing back into the sea the great pearl.

Source: Nation, The writer teaches English and literature at Mwanawikio Secondary School in Gatanga, Murang'a County

***The Pearl* by John Steinbeck Set book: How greed brings out the worst in us.**

In Summary

- It is important to mention that as this is a parable, the interpretation of *The Pearl* can shift throughout the text and among the audience.
- The discovery of the pearl, at first, could be termed as a counterbalance for Coyotito's scorpion sting; as nature's way of compensating the family for the little boy's misfortune.
- As more people get into the picture, the neighbours calling it 'the Pearl of the world' and as it almost falls into the hands of thieves, the pearl seems to lose its initial good fortune and even becomes a threat to their lives.
- It loses its original value as a representative of hope to being a mere material object that needs to be sold off urgently.

By VERA OMWOCHA

John Steinbeck starts off *The Pearl* by setting the stage in the little town of La Paz, on the shores of the Gulf of California. He tells the story of Kino, a poor fisherman; his wife Juana, and new born son,

Coyotito.

One day, he discovers something of great value, 'the pearl of the world'. Coyotito is, coincidentally, stung by a scorpion and the town doctor refuses to treat him.

As news of the pearl travels fast in the small village, most people become excited at how they can benefit from it. The malicious town doctor suddenly 'offers' to treat Coyotito, but he first makes the boy ill. The town's pearl dealers hatch a plot to cheat Kino by greatly devaluing the price of the pearl. The priest appropriately remembers that Kino and Juana did not get married in church, that Coyotito has not been baptised and that the church needs repairs. Even the beggars hope to benefit from the proceeds of the pearl.

To Kino, the pearl represents a new and better life for his family and, most importantly, education for his son, Coyotito.

Ignoring his wife's misgivings on the danger the pearl presents, Kino, accompanied by his wife and son, sets out to the capital to get a fair price for the pearl. On the way, they are attacked by three men, all of whom Kino kills. Coyotito also dies in the commotion. Kino and Juana return to the village; defeated by fate. They throw the pearl into the sea.

It is important to mention that as this is a parable, the interpretation of The Pearl can shift throughout the text and among the audience. The discovery of the pearl, at first, could be termed as a counterbalance for Coyotito's scorpion sting; as nature's way of compensating the family for the little boy's misfortune. As more people get into the picture, the neighbours calling it 'the Pearl of the world' and as it almost falls into the hands of thieves, the pearl seems to lose its initial good fortune and even becomes a threat to their lives. It loses its original value as a representative of hope to being a mere material object that needs to be sold off urgently.

Just as the scorpion stings Coyotito's innocence, so does the pearl draw out innocence out of Kino's heart; replacing it with greed and evil.

Like all parables, Steinbeck aims at washing his protagonist in a moral lesson, from which they can recover their humanity. The tale ends with a disillusioned Kino flinging the pearl back into the sea; denouncing the wealth that would have come with it; more like fulfilling a moral obligation.

CHARACTERS

Kino, the protagonist is a simple man with achievable dreams – a better life for his family, a church wedding and education for his son, Coyotito. All these dreams spur up with the discovery of the pearl. Steinbeck presents him as a character with a deep imagination and with a touch with reality – emanating from the songs in his head.

The trajectory in his life is compounded by the discovery of the great pearl and Coyotito's scorpion sting. Kino retreats into a man driven by the desire to guard his treasure even at the expense of life. He kills to protect his pearl. Lives are lost, including his own son's. Kino's desires for a better life dies with Coyotito's death.

The simple man in Kino is gradually transformed by greed and when all cannot hold, a sense of disillusionment sweeps over him, especially on losing both the pearl and his son. As aforementioned, Kino's character can also allude to many things – how greed pollutes good morals; that one cannot dictate fate; and the struggle to preserve goodness and purity.

Juana epitomises a practical woman. Obedient, but only enough to allow for her own thoughts. Her loyalty to her husband is threatened by a foreshadow that the pearl is only a representative of evil. She tries to convince her husband to throw the pearl into the sea unsuccessfully as the pearl's fortune is already laid out in Kino's mind. Initially, she is also flattered by the quality and fortune of the pearl but when fate settles in, she becomes the sound of reason. Predictably, she discovers that they stand to lose more and decides to be content with their simple life. Regardless, she does not leave her husband's side when all her plans to discard the pearl fail and even when he beats her up. In the end, when he gives her the pearl to throw into the sea, "...she looked into Kino's eyes and said softly, 'No, you.'" Perhaps Juana is aware that just as Kino brought misfortune into their lives through the pearl, only he has the power to cast it off into the sea.

SELF-CENTRED

The doctor is a self-centred; cold individual, puffed up with a sense of cultural superiority over the townspeople. He is aware of the power he holds to save or destroy lives; and this he manipulates well to suit his desires. He refuses to treat Coyotito's scorpion sting because Kino cannot afford it but he is the first to calculatedly make it to Kino's home to 'treat' Coyotito as soon as news of the pearl's discovery reaches him.

The doctor is a representative of the European colonisers, filled with arrogance and clothed in greed. Perhaps, it is the same greed that has permeated into the minds of Kino and his people like a scorpion's venom; corrupting the town's purity and innocence. The doctor also represents the upper class/ the knowledgeable in society. Together with the pearl buyers, they are the inheritors of the colonial evils – greed topping the list.

Most of the characters in this text are motivated by self-interest. It is safe to mention that although Kino is driven by greed, he is more motivated by his family, especially Coyotito than self – interest.

THEMES

The text seems to point out the undesirable portrait that is greed; that it only destroys that which it comes into contact with. The pearl, initially meant to be a symbol of hope; quickly turns out to be a symbol of self-destruction. Not only is Kino self-destroyed, but he leads to the destruction of the very family he seeks to protect; the death of Coyotito.

In seeking a better price for the pearl, Kino's objective can be said to be education for his son . Arguably, it can be said that Kino's 'greed' can be said to be unavoidable. He does not seek more than the pearl can fetch. He is a human being presented with a huge temptation of material wealth which he cannot turn down and instead fights to protect.

Greed seems to be implanted in the people's minds. Regardless, that need completely transforms

and brings out the worst in Kino (as it does with the doctor, the priest, the pearl buyers and even Juana at the beginning). He kills those who get in his way and even beats up Juana for attempting to get rid of the pearl.

Emphasis on education is elucidated by Kino's crave for Coyotito's education. He realises that being ignorant in a society where knowledge is a fundamental is vain.

Fate: The villagers are primarily presented as a people in charge of what happens to them. They fend for themselves and make their own plans in tandem with their needs. At what point, therefore, does that force beyond human control take over and changes the turn of events for either good or bad? Is it Kino's greed, animalistic behaviour and violence that comes with being in possession of the pearl that leads to their ultimate destruction? Similarly, this can be argued in different ways. That perhaps what destroys Kino is his ambition to challenge the fate that has already been laid out for him.

It is important to question the turnout of events. Is Kino responsible for what befalls him and his family in the end? How much a hand does fate have on what eventually transpires?

A DOLL'S HOUSE

Synopsis and Summary of Acts

Synopsis

A Doll's House traces the awakening of Nora Helmer from her previously unexamined life of domestic, wifely comfort. Having been ruled her whole life by either her father or her husband Torvald, Nora finally comes to question the foundation of everything she has believed in once her marriage is put to the test.

Having borrowed money from a man of ill-repute named Krogstad by forging her father's signature, she was able to pay for a trip to Italy to save her sick husband's life (he was unaware of the loan, believing that the

money came from Nora's father.) Since then, she has had to contrive ways to pay back her loan, growing particularly concerned with money and the ways of a complex world.

When the play opens, it is Christmas Eve, and we find that Torvald has just been promoted to manager of the bank, where he will receive a huge wage and be extremely powerful. Nora is thrilled because she thinks that she will finally be able to pay off the loan and be rid of it. Her happiness, however, is marred when an angry Krogstad approaches her. He has just learned that his position at the bank has been promised to Mrs. Linde, an old school friend of Nora's who has recently arrived in town in search of work, and he tells Nora that he will reveal her secret if she does not persuade her husband to let him keep his position. Nora tries to convince Torvald to preserve Krogstad's job, using all of her feminine tricks (which he encourages), but she is unsuccessful. Torvald tells her that Krogstad's morally corrupt nature is physically repulsive to him and impossible to work with. Nora becomes very worried.

The next day, Nora is nervously moving about the house, afraid that Krogstad will appear at any minute. Her anxiety is reduced by being preoccupied with the preparations for a big fancy-dress party that will take place the next night in a neighbor's apartment. When Torvald returns from the bank, she again takes up her pleas on behalf of Krogstad. This time, Torvald not only refuses but also sends off the notice of termination that he has already prepared for Krogstad, reassuring a scared Nora that he will take upon himself any bad things that befall them as a result. Nora is extremely moved by this comment. She begins to consider the possibility of this episode transforming their marriage for the better—as well as the possibility of suicide.

Meanwhile, she converses and flirts with a willing Dr. Rank. Learning that he is rapidly dying, she has an intimate conversation with him that culminates in him professing his love for her just before she is able to ask him for financial help. His words stop her, and she steers the conversation back to safer ground. Their talk is interrupted by the announcement of Krogstad's presence. Nora asks Dr. Rank to leave and has Krogstad brought in.

Krogstad tells her that he has had a change of heart and that, though he will keep the bond, he will not reveal her to the public. Instead, he wants to give Torvald a note explaining the matter so that Torvald will be pressed to help Krogstad rehabilitate himself and keep his position at the bank. Nora protests against Torvald's involvement, but Krogstad drops the letter in Torvald's letterbox anyway, much to Nora's horror. Nora exclaims aloud that she and Torvald are lost. Still, she tries to use her charms to prevent Torvald from reading the letter, luring him away from business by begging him to help her with the tarantella for the next night's party. He agrees to put off business until the next day. The letter remains in the letterbox.

The next night, before Torvald and Nora return from the ball, Mrs. Linde and Krogstad, who are old lovers, reunite in the Helmers' living room. Mrs. Linde asks to take care of Krogstad and his children and to help him become the better man that he knows he is capable of becoming. The Helmers return from the ball as Mrs. Linde is leaving (Krogstad has already left), with Torvald nearly dragging Nora into the room. Alone, Torvald tells Nora how much he desires her but is interrupted by Dr. Rank. The doctor, unbeknownst to Torvald, has come by to say his final farewells, as he covertly explains to Nora. After he leaves, Nora is able to deter Torvald from pursuing her any more by reminding him of the ugliness of death that has just come between them, Nora having revealed Dr. Rank's secret. Seeing that Torvald finally has collected his letters, she resigns

herself to committing suicide.

As she is leaving, though, Torvald stops her. He has just read Krogstad's letter and is enraged by its contents. He accuses Nora of ruining his life. He essentially tells her that he plans on forsaking her, contrary to his earlier claim that he would take on everything himself. During his tirade, he is interrupted by the maid bearing another note from Krogstad and addressed to Nora. Torvald reads it and becomes overjoyed. Krogstad has had a change of heart and has sent back the bond. Torvald quickly tells Nora that it is all over after all: he has forgiven her, and her pathetic attempt to help him has only made her more endearing than ever.

Seeing Torvald's true character for the first time, Nora sits her husband down to tell him that she is leaving him. After he protests, she explains that he does not love her—and, after tonight, she does not love him. She tells him that, given the suffocating life she has led until now, she owes it to herself to become fully independent and to explore her own character and the world for herself. As she leaves, she reveals to Torvald that she hopes that a "miracle" might occur: that one day, they might be able to unite in real wedlock. The play ends with the door slamming on her way out.

Summary of Acts

Act One

Nora Helmer enters her lovely living room laden with packages and a Christmas tree, humming a happy tune and sneaking a macaroon. Her husband, Torvald, greets her with questions about her spending, calling Nora his "little lark," "squirrel," spendthrift," and "sweet tooth." Nora reminds him that they have no worries since Torvald has just been offered a bank managerial position, but her husband opts for caution. When Torvald inquires what she desires for Christmas, Nora asks for money. Two visitors enter the house: Dr. Rank accompanies Torvald to his study, and Mrs. Linde, an old friend who has been out of touch, joins Nora. The two women share confidences, and Nora reveals that she has hidden more than macaroons from her husband. Due to Torvald's serious illness several years prior, Nora explains, she had to finance a year of recovery in Italy. While she told Torvald that her father had left them the money, Nora actually forged her father's signature and borrowed the money from a lawyer named Krogstad. Justifying her dishonesty by saving Torvald's health and pride, Nora explains that she has been secretly working to pay off the loan, and she is almost free of her debt. Krogstad enters next, hoping to salvage his position at the bank by speaking to Torvald. After Krogstad leaves, Nora is able to talk Torvald into giving Mrs. Linde a position at the bank. Torvald, Dr. Rank, and Mrs. Linde leave, and Nora visits with her three children. Krogstad returns with a threat: Nora must get Torvald to keep Krogstad's position at the bank, or Krogstad will reveal Nora's deception and forgery. Upon Torvald's return, Nora questions him about Krogstad's past, and Torvald explains that Krogstad lost his own reputation due to forgery. Declaring that such a lie "infects the whole life of a home," Helmer returns to his study, leaving Nora anxious but determined.

Act Two

The curtain rises on the same room the next day, which is Christmas. Nora paces frantically, anxious that Krogstad will return to reveal her forgery to Torvald. The nurse enters with a box of masquerade clothes for the next evening's festivities, and Nora questions her about children who grow up without mothers. Kristine

Linde enters, and as she helps Nora repair her masquerade dress, Nora confides in her friend once again. Assuring Kristine that she did not get the money from Dr. Rank, Nora asks Mrs. Linde to play with the children while she speaks to Torvald. Promising “to scamper about and do tricks” if only Torvald would give in, Nora asks her husband to keep Krogstad at the bank. Reminding her that rumors would spread about his wife’s influence, Torvald denies Nora’s request. When she says his concerns about propriety are “petty,” Torvald becomes incensed and sends Krogstad’s termination letter to his home. Dr. Rank confides to Nora that he is dying and that he has loved her for years. Unable to ask the doctor for help after his admission, Nora asks for a lamp to be brought in. Krogstad, having received his termination, returns to threaten Nora again, and the two admit that though they have both considered suicide, neither can brave it. Krogstad leaves, but his letter revealing all is clearly heard entering the mail slot. Nora keeps Torvald from reading the letter by begging his help with the tarantella dance she will perform at the masquerade. Dancing frenetically as though her “life were at stake,” Nora keeps Torvald occupied re-teaching her the dance. But tomorrow night, she promises him, “then you’ll be free.”

Act Three

The act opens, once again, in the Helmer’s living room, where Kristine Linde awaits the Helmers’ return from the party upstairs. Nora has just danced the tarantella. As Mrs. Linde waits, Krogstad arrives at her request. Kristine asks Krogstad to give them a second chance at a relationship. Krogstad agrees, promising to retrieve his letter of revelation, but Kristine convinces him to let the truth come to light for the good of both Nora and Torvald. The Helmers arrive from the party, Kristine leaves, and Torvald’s amorous mood is interrupted by a visit from Dr. Rank, who leaves his calling card marked by the black cross that announces his impending death. Helmer tells Nora that he has often wished for some danger to befall her so that he can rescue her, and Nora seizes this opportunity to encourage Torvald to read Krogstad’s letter. Torvald reads it and immediately chastises Nora, claiming she has wrecked his happiness and ruined his future. Torvald explains that Nora can stay in the house but will be unfit to raise the children. “From now on,” Torvald claims, “happiness doesn’t matter; all that matters is . . . the appearance.” When a letter arrives including Nora’s cancelled debt, Torvald is happy again. But Nora is forever changed by her husband’s reaction, and after removing her masquerade costume, she sits down with Torvald to share the first serious conversation of their eight year marriage. Declaring she has been “wronged greatly” by both her father and her husband, Nora compares her existence in their homes to a doll in a doll house. When Torvald declares his wife cannot leave because her husband and children are her “most sacred duties,” Nora responds with “I have other duties equally sacred. . . . Before all else, I’m a human being.” Nora is determined to remain strangers unless “the greatest miracle of all” could happen – the ability to live together in a “true marriage.” Nora departs, and the audience is left with the sound of a door slamming shut.

Themes, Motifs & Symbols

Themes

Themes are the fundamental and often universal ideas explored in a literary work.

The Sacrificial Role of Women / Role of women in the society

In *A Doll's House*, Ibsen paints a bleak picture of the sacrificial role held by women of all economic classes in his society. In general, the play's female characters exemplify Nora's assertion (spoken to Torvald in Act Three) that even though men refuse to sacrifice their integrity, "hundreds of thousands of women have." The following points show how women sacrifice in this society.

In order to support her mother and two brothers, Mrs. Linde found it necessary to abandon Krogstad, her true—but penniless—love, and marry a richer man.

The nanny had to abandon her own child to support herself by working as Nora's (and then as Nora's children's) caretaker. As she tells Nora, the nanny considers herself lucky to have found the job, since she was "a poor girl who'd been led astray."

Though Nora is economically advantaged in comparison to the play's other female characters, she nevertheless leads a difficult life because society dictates that Torvald be the marriage's dominant partner.

Torvald issues decrees and condescends to Nora, and Nora must hide her loan from him because she knows Torvald could never accept the idea that his wife (or any other woman) had helped save his life.

Furthermore, she must work in secret to pay off her loan because it is illegal for a woman to obtain a loan without her husband's permission. By motivating Nora's deception, the attitudes of Torvald—and society—leave Nora vulnerable to Krogstad's blackmail.

Nora's abandonment of her children can also be interpreted as an act of self-sacrifice. Despite Nora's great love for her children—manifested by her interaction with them and her great fear of corrupting them—she chooses to leave them. Nora truly believes that the nanny will be a better mother and that leaving her children is in their best interest.

Parental and Filial Obligations

Nora, Torvald, and Dr. Rank each express the belief that a parent is obligated to be honest and upstanding, because a parent's immorality is passed on to his or her children like a disease. In fact, Dr. Rank does have a disease that is the result of his father's depravity. Dr. Rank implies that his father's immorality—his many affairs with women—led him to contract a venereal disease that he passed on to his son, causing Dr. Rank to suffer for his father's misdeeds. Torvald voices the idea that one's parents determine one's moral character when he tells Nora, "Nearly all young criminals had lying -mothers." He also refuses to allow Nora to interact with their children after he learns of her deceit, for fear that she will corrupt them. Yet, the play suggests that children too are obligated to protect their parents. Nora recognized this obligation, but she ignored it, choosing to be with—and sacrifice herself for—her sick husband instead of her sick father. Mrs. Linde, on the other hand, abandoned her hopes of being with Krogstad and undertook years of labor in order to tend to her

sick mother. Ibsen does not pass judgment on either woman's decision, but he does use the idea of a child's debt to her parent to demonstrate the complexity and reciprocal nature of familial obligations.

The Unreliability of Appearances

Over the course of *A Doll's House*, appearances prove to be misleading veneers that mask the reality of the play's characters and -situations. Our first impressions of Nora, Torvald, and Krogstad are all eventually undercut. Nora initially seems a silly, childish woman, but as the play progresses, we see that she is intelligent, motivated, and, by the play's conclusion, a strongwilled, independent thinker. Torvald, though he plays the part of the strong, benevolent husband, reveals himself to be cowardly, petty, and selfish when he fears that Krogstad may expose him to scandal. Krogstad too reveals himself to be a much more sympathetic and merciful character than he first appears to be. The play's climax is largely a matter of resolving identity confusion—we see Krogstad as an earnest lover, Nora as an intelligent, brave woman, and Torvald as a simpering, sad man.

Situations too are misinterpreted both by us and by the characters. The seeming hatred between Mrs. Linde and Krogstad turns out to be love. Nora's creditor turns out to be Krogstad and not, as we and Mrs. Linde suppose, Dr. Rank. Dr. Rank, to Nora's and our surprise, confesses that he is in love with her. The seemingly villainous Krogstad repents and returns Nora's contract to her, while the seemingly kindhearted Mrs. Linde ceases to help Nora and forces Torvald's discovery of Nora's secret.

The instability of appearances within the Helmer household at the play's end results from Torvald's devotion to an image at the expense of the creation of true happiness. Because Torvald craves respect from his employees, friends, and wife, status and image are important to him. Any disrespect—when Nora calls him petty and when Krogstad calls him by his first name, for example—angers Torvald greatly. By the end of the play, we see that Torvald's obsession with controlling his home's appearance and his repeated suppression and denial of reality have harmed his family and his happiness irreparably.

Marriage as an Unequal Partnership

At the heart of *A Doll's House* is the marriage between Nora and Torvald—one fairly typical of the era. Is it a good or exemplary marriage? Is it an equitable relationship for the woman?

A close analysis of the dialogue shows a very unequal relationship with Torvald holding all the power. In fact, the interactions between husband and wife serve a specific purpose: they illustrate the banality of the discourse between the two. Torvald does not address his wife regarding any subject of substance. Instead, he bestows her with pet names that often begin with the personal pronoun "my" and often include the diminutive "little": "Is that my little lark?" In this respect, Torvald may think he is flattering his wife. However, he is actually reducing her to a cute, harmless pet—one that is clearly owned.

And like a pet, Nora is expected to obey her owner/husband and his petty tyrannical rules: she is forbidden from eating macaroons and must do so on the sly—which she clearly resents. Additionally, when Torvald addresses Nora, he belittles her by constantly bringing up her lack of responsibility with money. Depending on the translation, Nora is "spendthrift," "prodigal" and "little moneybags." All of these terms, spoken

affectionately, are passively aggressive.

A Doll's House has few stage directions indicating tone of voice, so there is a great deal of freedom in the manner in which the actor can play the part Torvald. He can be played

like a patriarchal tyrant or a fatuous, passive-aggressive sexist. The second option is, perhaps, the better choice; Torvald's utter obliviousness to his own oppressive behavior is a driving force in the play. He berates his wife for knowing nothing about worldly matters but, ultimately, is himself unaware of the measures she has taken to save his life. Torvald is so self-centered that he continues to see his wife how he wants her to be or how she fails to be his ideal woman; he never sees the actual woman she is.

Materialism

Torvald in particular focuses on money and material goods rather than people. His sense of manhood depends on his financial independence. He was an unsuccessful barrister because he refused to take "unsavory cases." As a result, he switched jobs to the bank, where he primarily deals with money. For him, money and materialism may be a way to avoid the complications of personal contact.

Respect and Reputation

The men of A Doll's House are obsessed with their reputation. Some have good standing in their communities and will do anything to keep it; others have lost their good name and will do anything to get it back. Though the play is set in the living room of a private residence, the public eye is constantly peeking through the curtains.

Disease and Morality

Dr. Rank has inherited his consumption from his father, who lived a morally questionable life, and in much the same way, Nora worries that her morally reprehensible actions (fraudulently signing her father's name) will infect her children. Corruption, the play suggests, is hereditary. As he does in other plays, such as *The Wild Duck*, Ibsen explores the tension between real life and moral ideals.

Higher Moral Values vs. Societal Mores and Laws

As Nora reveals to Mrs. Linde, she faced a moral crisis at the beginning of her marriage. Unable to procure, in a legal manner, the funds needed to save her husband's life, she resorts to forging her father's name as guarantor of the loan. She places her love and concern for her husband's well-being above the law. Since she diligently works to pay back the loan, the offense does not seem so severe; it is a crime in definition only. In a higher sense, Nora has not acted in an immoral manner.

However, those who adhere to societal standards, like her husband, ultimately have different values. Torvald values social respectability and honor above all else, including actions done out of love. Nora values love over social honor. Consequently, a conflict emerges regarding their prioritization of values.

The Unexamined Life is Not Worth Living

This paraphrase to a Socrates aphorism applies to Torvald and Nora. However, Nora eventually stops to look at herself and her marriage and doesn't like what she sees. So she steps out of her old persona and into a new one, and then walks into an uncertain future. She has begun examining her life.

Motifs

Motifs are recurring structures, contrasts, or literary devices that can help to develop and inform the text's major themes.

Nora's Definition of Freedom

Nora's understanding of the meaning of freedom evolves over the course of the play. In the first act, she believes that she will be totally "free" as soon as she has repaid her debt, because she will have the opportunity to devote herself fully to her domestic responsibilities. After Krogstad blackmails her, however, she reconsiders her conception of freedom and questions whether she is happy in Torvald's house, subjected to his orders and edicts. By the end of the play, Nora seeks a new kind of freedom. She wishes to be relieved of her familial obligations in order to pursue her own ambitions, beliefs, and identity.

Letters

Many of the plot's twists and turns depend upon the writing and reading of letters, which function within the play as the subtext that reveals the true, unpleasant nature of situations obscured by Torvald and Nora's efforts at beautification. Krogstad writes two letters: the first reveals Nora's crime of forgery to Torvald; the second retracts his blackmail threat and returns Nora's promissory note. The first letter, which Krogstad places in Torvald's letterbox near the end of Act Two, represents the truth about Nora's past and initiates the inevitable dissolution of her marriage—as Nora says immediately after Krogstad leaves it, "We are lost." Nora's attempts to stall Torvald from reading the letter represent her continued denial of the true nature of her marriage. The second letter releases Nora from her obligation to Krogstad and represents her release from her obligation to Torvald. Upon reading it, Torvald attempts to return to his and Nora's previous denial of reality, but Nora recognizes that the letters have done more than expose her actions to Torvald; they have exposed the truth about Torvald's selfishness, and she can no longer participate in the illusion of a happy marriage.

Dr. Rank's method of communicating his imminent death is to leave his calling card marked with a black cross in Torvald's letterbox. In an earlier conversation with Nora, Dr. Rank reveals his understanding of Torvald's unwillingness to accept reality when he proclaims, "Torvald is so fastidious, he cannot face up to anything ugly." By leaving his calling card as a death notice, Dr. Rank politely attempts to keep Torvald from the "ugly" truth. Other letters include Mrs. Linde's note to Krogstad, which initiates her life-changing meeting with him, and Torvald's letter of dismissal to Krogstad.

Symbols

Symbols are objects, characters, figures, or colors used to represent abstract ideas or concepts.

The Christmas Tree

The Christmas tree, a festive object meant to serve a decorative purpose, symbolizes Nora's position in her household as a plaything who is pleasing to look at and adds charm to the home. There are several parallels drawn between Nora and the Christmas tree in the play. Just as Nora instructs the maid that the children cannot see the tree until it has been decorated, she tells Torvald that no one can see her in her dress until the evening of the dance. Also, at the beginning of the second act, after Nora's psychological condition has begun to erode, the stage directions indicate that the Christmas tree is correspondingly "dishevelled."

New Year's Day

The action of the play is set at Christmastime, and Nora and Torvald both look forward to New Year's as the start of a new, happier phase in their lives. In the new year, Torvald will start his new job, and he anticipates with excitement the extra money and admiration the job will bring him. Nora also looks forward to Torvald's new job, because she will finally be able to repay her secret debt to Krogstad. By the end of the play, however, the nature of the new start that New Year's represents for Torvald and Nora has changed dramatically. They both must become new people and face radically changed ways of living. Hence, the new year comes to mark the beginning of a truly new and different period in both their lives and their personalities.

Dress and Costume

Nora's fancy dress for the party symbolizes the character she plays in her marriage to Torvald. Take note of when Nora is supposed to be wearing it and for whom. Note too that when she leaves Torvald in the last act, she first changes into different clothes, which suggests the new woman she is to become.

The Masquerade Ball

The masquerade ball that Torvald and Nora attend represents the lies and deceit that people resort to in everyday life. At a masquerade, people hide behind masks. Their true selves cannot be seen through the costume. Nora is hiding behind a mask of lies, keeping the truth from her husband and Dr. Rank. She is pretending and "playing a part" much like people do at a masquerade ball. It is not long after the ball that the mask comes off and the truth is revealed.

The Tarantella

A tarantella is a folk dance from southern Italy that accelerates from its already quick tempo and alternates between major and minor keys. In its constant fluctuation, it is like Nora's character. In this Act, it serves as Nora's last chance to be Torvald's doll, to dance and amuse him. Also, the tarantella is commonly (and falsely) known as a dance that is supposed to rid the dancer of the bite of the tarantula. Applied to the play, its use suggests that Nora is trying to rid herself of the deadly poison of an outside force, however fruitlessly. Rather than alleviating the bite, though, the music and her life only continue to accelerate and spin out of control.

Characters and characterization

Character List

Nora

The protagonist of the play and the wife of Torvald Helmer. Nora initially seems like a playful, naïve child who lacks knowledge of the world outside her home. She does have some worldly experience, however, and the small acts of rebellion in which she engages indicate that she is not as innocent or happy as she appears. She comes to see her position in her marriage with increasing clarity and finds the strength to free herself from her oppressive situation.

Torvald Helmer

Nora's husband. Torvald delights in his new position at the bank, just as he delights in his position of authority as a husband. He treats Nora like a child, in a manner that is both kind and patronizing. He does not view Nora as an equal but rather as a plaything or doll to be teased and admired. In general, Torvald is overly concerned with his place and status in society, and he allows his emotions to be swayed heavily by the prospect of society's respect and the fear of society's scorn.

Krogstad

A lawyer who went to school with Torvald and holds a subordinate position at Torvald's bank. Krogstad's character is contradictory: though his bad deeds seem to stem from a desire to protect his children from scorn, he is perfectly willing to use unethical tactics to achieve his goals. His willingness to allow Nora to suffer is despicable, but his claims to feel sympathy for her and the hard circumstances of his own life compel us to sympathize with him to some degree.

Mrs. Linde

Nora's childhood friend. Kristine Linde is a practical, down-to-earth woman, and her sensible worldview highlights Nora's somewhat childlike outlook on life. Mrs. Linde's account of her life of poverty underscores the privileged nature of the life that Nora leads. Also, we learn that Mrs. Linde took responsibility for her sick parent, whereas Nora abandoned her father when he was ill.

Dr. Rank

Torvald's best friend. Dr. Rank stands out as the one character in the play who is by and large unconcerned with what others think of him. He is also notable for his stoic acceptance of his fate. Unlike Torvald and Nora, Dr. Rank admits to the diseased nature (literally, in his case) of his life. For the most part, he avoids talking to Torvald about his imminent death out of respect for Torvald's distaste for ugliness.

Bob, Emmy, and Ivar

Nora and Torvald's three small children. In her brief interaction with her children, Nora shows herself to be a loving mother. When she later refuses to spend time with her children because she fears she may morally

corrupt them, Nora acts on her belief that the quality of parenting strongly influences a child's development.

Anne-Marie

The Helmers' nanny. Though Ibsen doesn't fully develop her character, Anne-Marie seems to be a kindly woman who has genuine affection for Nora. She had to give up her own daughter in order to take the nursing job offered by Nora's father. Thus, she shares with Nora and Mrs. Linde the act of sacrificing her own happiness out of economic necessity.

Nora's father

Though Nora's father is dead before the action of the play begins, the characters refer to him throughout the play. Though she clearly loves and admires her father, Nora also comes to blame him for contributing to her subservient position in life.

Analysis of Major Characters

Nora Helmer

At the beginning of *A Doll's House*, Nora seems completely happy. She responds affectionately to Torvald's teasing, speaks with excitement about the extra money his new job will provide, and takes pleasure in the company of her children and friends. She does not seem to mind her doll-like existence, in which she is coddled, pampered, and patronized.

As the play progresses, Nora reveals that she is not just a "silly girl," as Torvald calls her. That she understands the business details related to the debt she incurred taking out a loan to preserve Torvald's health indicates that she is intelligent and possesses capacities beyond mere wifehood. Her description of her years of secret labor undertaken to pay off her debt shows her fierce determination and ambition. Additionally, the fact that she was willing to break the law in order to ensure Torvald's health shows her courage.

Krogstad's blackmail and the trauma that follows do not change Nora's nature; they open her eyes to her unfulfilled and underappreciated potential. "I have been performing tricks for you, Torvald," she says during her climactic confrontation with him. Nora comes to realize that in addition to her literal dancing and singing tricks, she has been putting on a show throughout her marriage. She has pretended to be someone she is not in order to fulfill the role that Torvald, her father, and society at large have expected of her.

Torvald's severe and selfish reaction after learning of Nora's deception and forgery is the final catalyst for Nora's awakening. But even in the first act, Nora shows that she is not totally unaware that her life is at odds with her true personality. She defies Torvald in small yet meaningful ways—by eating macaroons and then lying to him about it, for instance. She also swears, apparently just for the pleasure she derives from minor rebellion against societal standards. As the drama unfolds, and as Nora's awareness of the truth about her life grows, her need for rebellion escalates, culminating in her walking out on her husband and children to find independence.

Torvald Helmer

Torvald embraces the belief that a man's role in marriage is to protect and guide his wife. He clearly enjoys the idea that Nora needs his guidance, and he interacts with her as a father would. He instructs her with trite, moralistic sayings, such as: "A home that depends on loans and debt is not beautiful because it is not free." He is also eager to teach Nora the dance she performs at the costume party. Torvald likes to envision himself as Nora's savior, asking her after the party, "[D]o you know that I've often wished you were facing some terrible dangers so that I could risk life and limb, risk everything, for your sake?"

Although Torvald seizes the power in his relationship with Nora and refers to her as a "girl," it seems that Torvald is actually the weaker and more childlike character. Dr. Rank's explanation for not wanting Torvald to enter his sickroom—"Torvald is so fastidious, he cannot face up to anything ugly"—suggests that Dr. Rank feels Torvald must be sheltered like a child from the realities of the world. Furthermore, Torvald reveals himself to be childishly petty at times. His real objection to working with Krogstad stems not from deficiencies in Krogstad's moral character but, rather, Krogstad's overly friendly and familiar behavior. Torvald's decision to fire Krogstad stems ultimately from the fact that he feels threatened and offended by Krogstad's failure to pay him the proper respect.

Torvald is very conscious of other people's perceptions of him and of his standing in the community. His explanation for rejecting Nora's request that Krogstad be kept on at the office—that retaining Krogstad would make him "a laughing stock before the entire staff"—shows that he prioritizes his reputation over his wife's desires. Torvald further demonstrates his deep need for society's respect in his reaction to Nora's deception. Although he says that Nora has ruined his happiness and will not be allowed to raise the children, he insists that she remain in the house because his chief concern is saving "the appearance" of their household.

Krogstad

Krogstad is the antagonist in *A Doll's House*, but he is not necessarily a villain. Though his willingness to allow Nora's torment to continue is cruel, Krogstad is not without sympathy for her. As he says, "Even money lenders, hacks, well, a man like me, can have a little of what you call feeling, you know." He visits Nora to check on her, and he discourages her from committing suicide. Moreover, Krogstad has reasonable motives for behaving as he does: he wants to keep his job at the bank in order to spare his children from the hardships that come with a spoiled reputation. Unlike Torvald, who seems to desire respect for selfish reasons, Krogstad desires it for his family's sake.

Like Nora, Krogstad is a person who has been wronged by society, and both Nora and Krogstad have committed the same crime: forgery of signatures. Though he did break the law, Krogstad's crime was relatively minor, but society has saddled him with the stigma of being a criminal and prohibited him from moving beyond his past. Additionally, Krogstad's claim that his immoral behavior began when Mrs. Linde abandoned him for a man with money so she could provide for her family makes it possible for us to understand Krogstad as a victim of circumstances. One could argue that society forced Mrs. Linde away from Krogstad and thus prompted his crime. Though society's unfair treatment of Krogstad does not justify

his actions, it does align him more closely with Nora and therefore tempers our perception of him as a despicable character.

GENERAL ESSAY QUESTIONS AND SAMPLE ESSAYS WITH ANSWERS

1. How could the submissive, selfish and silly Nora of the first two acts transform herself into an independent woman by the end of the last act? Is the transformation realistic?

While Nora puts on a convincing performance of being a submissive, selfish and foolish woman during the first act, there are early signs that this is not the real her. When she asks Torvald for more money despite having just been on a spending spree, she appears selfish and grasping. But we soon discover, in her conversation with Mrs Linde, that she is not squandering the money to satisfy her own desires, but using it to pay off the loan she took out in order to save her husband's life. In doing so, she has denied herself new things so that her husband and children can have all they need. Her arranging the loan and the trip to Italy - and her subsequent careful management of money and of her secret - show an astonishing strength of character. In addition, she secretly takes jobs to pay off the loan, a step towards the independence she finally embraces. But in the first two acts, Nora does not dare to acknowledge her own strength, let alone use it. There are many reasons for this. Chief among them are that her beloved Torvald, and society in general, would not comfortably countenance such strength in a woman. So it is easier for Nora to keep her head below the parapet rather than risk the consequences of showing herself as she is.

Nora's submissiveness to Torvald is not all it seems. By playing the doll-child according to his wishes, she manipulates him into the role of indulgent father-figure. But in spite of her skill at 'managing' him, there is one instance in which she desperately wants him to adopt the manly and dominant role: she wants him to rescue her from the ruin caused by Krogstad's revelations. When he fails to provide the strength she needs, she realizes that she no longer loves him, as he is not the man she thought him. It is almost inevitable that she is forced to find that strength within herself. Her realization that she wants to pursue her independence is not so much a transformation as an awakening to a strength she has possessed all along.

2. In what way does A Doll's House explore social issues?

A Doll's House shines a searchlight on Victorian society, drawing attention to its hypocrisy and use of public opinion to suppress individuality. The critic Bjorn Hemmer, in an essay in *The Cambridge Companion to Ibsen*, wrote: "The people who live in such a society know the weight of 'public opinion' and of all those agencies which keep watch over society's 'law and order': the norms, the conventions and the traditions which in essence belong to the past but which continue into the present and there thwart individual liberty in a variety of ways."

Torvald lives by society's norms, and when faced with a choice of whether to support his wife or society, he sides with society. When he realizes that she has broken the law in forging her father's signature on the loan document, he never questions the morality of such a law: it is left to Nora to do that. His aim is to preserve the appearance of respectability and ensure his continued acceptance in society. He has become so shaped by society's conventions that he cannot see his wife's suffering. In *The Cambridge Companion to Ibsen*, Gail Finney writes that in Ibsen's own notes for this play, he notes that a mother in modern society is "like certain

insects who go away and die when she has done her duty in the propagation of the race." This view is confirmed by Torvald's rejection of Nora when he discovers her secret; he says she is not fit to bring up their children if her reputation is tarnished. For Torvald, public life has obscured and overtaken private self. In order to find out who she is and what she wants, Nora has to reject the life that society prescribes for her as a wife and mother, and strike out on her own. "I am going to see," she tells Torvald in Act 3, "who is right, the world or I."

But this is not simple. The nineteenth century saw a huge shift from the old social order of self-improvement within a stable rural society to a new social order founded on money. But women at the time could not control money without the authority of the man who 'owned' them, be it husband, brother or father. Single and lone women like Mrs Linde had more control over their lives and money than married women, who were discouraged from taking jobs and had to surrender money matters to their husbands. But as Mrs Linde's story shows, having no male 'provider' brought its own problems.

In sum, women had little power. Power lay with people like Torvald, who is a banker and lawyer. Torvald is able to dictate the fate not only of his family but of Mrs Linde (by giving her a job) and Krogstad (by giving away his job). He is gratified by the prospect of sacking Krogstad because he disapproves of his morality. In effect, the Torvalds of this world defined morality. As we have seen with regard to Nora's crime, they also defined the law, and therefore, who was a criminal. It is worth noting that Ibsen based the episode of Nora's forgery on a similar 'crime' committed by a female friend of his, which ended tragically for her, so he was drawing attention to what he saw as a genuine social problem. He supported economic reform that would protect women's property and befriended European feminists.

Other social issues addressed in the play include how women should be educated, both for the responsibilities of family and for self-fulfillment; the right of women to define their role in the family and society; the degrading effects of poverty on self-fulfillment (as with Mrs Linde and the Nurse); and the scourge of venereal disease (as suffered by Dr Rank).

3. How do different characters use the words "free" and "freedom"? How does the use of these words change throughout the play?

It is Torvald who introduces the concept of freedom in the play, claiming that "There can be no freedom or beauty about a home life that depends on borrowing and debt." He defines freedom in economic terms, as befits an age where power depended upon money. He is also adopting society's values, as debt was disapproved of and considered a sign of moral degeneracy. The dramatic irony behind his words lies in the fact that Torvald would not have any life at all if his wife had not gone into debt, though he does not realize this.

Like Torvald, Krogstad sees freedom as moral respectability in the eyes of society. His job at the bank is the means by which he will "cut [himself] free" from the stigma of his "indiscretion" of forgery. The problem with this approach is that his "freedom" depends upon the whim of his employer, who also sits in moral judgment on him and can withdraw his job if he finds that he falls short in that respect.

Mrs Linde feels proud that by working hard, she was able to support her brothers and mother, and "I was

privileged to make the end of my mother's life almost free from care." Like Torvald, she is defining freedom in economic terms. But she is operating at a lower economic level than he is. She is talking of being able to provide the necessities of life, whereas he is talking of the relative luxury of being free from debt.

In Act 1, Nora is delighted that soon she will have paid off her debt to Krogstad and will be "free from care, quite free from care; to be able to play and romp with the children; to be able to keep the house beautifully and have everything just as Torvald likes it!" At this point, she defines her freedom in terms of the very things that (as she later realizes) restrict her: her role as a submissive wife and mother.

By the end of Act 2, Krogstad's letter revealing Nora's debt and forgery of her father's signature is sitting in Torvald's letterbox. Nora, who fears yet hopes that Torvald will shield her by taking the entire blame upon himself, means to disappear or commit suicide, thereby saving him from disgrace. She tells him: "Then you will be free." Thus Torvald will maintain his respectability by means of Nora's obliterating herself from his world.

At the end of the play, Nora has been awakened to Torvald's narrow-mindedness and no longer sees freedom in terms of bondage to him or obliteration of herself. On the contrary, she defines freedom for herself and Torvald as complete independence from each other, as she leaves the marriage to forge a new life for herself: "I set you free from all your obligations. You are not to feel yourself bound in the slightest way, any more than I shall. There must be perfect freedom on both sides."

4. Compare Torvald's and Nora's attitudes toward money.

Torvald and Nora's first conversation establishes Torvald as the member of the household who makes and controls the money and Nora as the one who spends it. Torvald repeatedly teases Nora about her spending, and at one point Mrs. Linde points out that Nora was a big spender in her younger days. These initial comments paint Nora as a shallow woman who is overly concerned with -material delights. Yet Nora's generous tip to the porter in the play's opening scene shows that she is not a selfish woman. More important, once the secret of Nora's loan is made known to the audience, we see that Nora's interest in money stems more from her concern for her family's welfare than from petty desires. We realize that the excitement she has expressed over Torvald's new, well-paying job results from the fact that more spending money means she can finally pay off her debt to Krogstad.

While Torvald seems less enthralled by money because he doesn't talk about it except to chastise Nora for her spending, he is obsessed with having a beautiful home, including a beautiful wife. He considers these things important to his reputation, and keeping up this reputation requires money. Although Torvald accuses Nora of wasting money, Nora spends her money mostly on worthy causes, whereas Torvald uses his for selfish, shallow purposes.

5. Why does Torvald constantly reprimand Nora for her wastefulness and foolishness while simultaneously supporting her behavior? What insight does this contradiction give us into Torvald and Nora's relationship?

Torvald perceives Nora as a foolish woman who is ignorant of the way society works, but he likes Nora's foolishness and ignorance because they render her helpless and therefore dependent on him. It soon

becomes clear to us that Nora's dependence, not Torvald's love for Nora as a person, forms the foundation of Torvald's affection for her. In Act One, Torvald teases Nora about wasting money but then tries to please her by graciously giving her more. Similarly, he points out her faults but then says he doesn't want her to change a bit. He clearly enjoys keeping Nora in a position where she cannot function in the world without him, even if it means that she remains foolish.

In general, Torvald disapproves of any kind of change in Nora's constant, obedient demeanor because he needs to control her behavior. When Nora begins to dance the tarantella wildly in Act Two, he is unsettled. In Act One, Nora says that it would humiliate Torvald if he knew he was secretly in debt to her for his life, indicating that Torvald wants the power in his marriage to be one-sided rather than mutual.

6. Compare and contrast Mrs. Linde and Nora at the end of the play.

By the end of Act Three, both Nora and Mrs. Linde have entered new phases in their lives. Nora has chosen to abandon her children and her husband because she wants independence from her roles as mother and wife. In contrast, Mrs. Linde has chosen to abandon her independence to marry Krogstad and take care of his family. She likes having people depend on her, and independence does not seem to fulfill her. Despite their apparent opposition, both Nora's and Mrs. Linde's decisions allow them to fulfill their respective personal desires. They have both chosen their own fates, freely and without male influence. Ibsen seems to feel that the nature of their choices is not as important as the fact that both women make the choices themselves.

7. Using specific examples, discuss how Ibsen's "progress from one work to the other" is due to a "perpetual scrutiny of the same general questions regarded from different points of view."

8. Do you feel that Ibsen's drama is "dated"? To defend your view, cite dramatic themes in these plays which you consider to be universal, or limited in scope.

9. Show how the first act forewarns the audience of almost all the forthcoming events in the rest of the drama.

10. Point out some instances where Ibsen is able to "externalize" inner problems by using effective symbols.

11. At least one character in each play prefers an imaginary view of life to a realistic viewpoint. With this in mind, discuss the life-view of Torvald Helmer.

12. In what ways does the vocation of Torvald Helmer provide additional insight into his character?

13. Devise an alternative ending for A Doll's House, trying not to violate Ibsen's dramatic thesis. Defend either your new conclusion or the inviolability of Ibsen's original ending.

14. Explain the symbolic significance of hereditary disease in A Doll's House.

15. Do today's women face the same sort of barriers that women did in Nora's time?

16. In what ways is Torvald caged by societal expectations? What about the other men in the play? Krogstad?

Dr. Rank?

17. What is important about the title? Who is the "doll" Ibsen refers to?

18. Who is the more significant female character in terms of plot development, Nora or Kristine? Explain your answer.

19. Do you think Kristine's decision not to prevent Krogstad from revealing the truth to Torvald is a betrayal of Nora? Does this act ultimately hurt or benefit Nora?

20. How does Henrik Ibsen reveal character in A Doll's House? Is Nora a sympathetic character? Did your opinion of Nora change from the beginning of the play to its conclusion

21. Does the play end the way you expected? Do you think this was a happy ending?

22. A Doll's House is generally considered a feminist work. Do you agree with this characterization? Why or why not?

23. How essential is the setting, both in terms of time period and location? Could the play have taken place anywhere else? Would the final outcome have had the same impact if A Doll's House had been set in the present day? Why or why not?

24. Knowing that the plot is based on a series of events that happened to a female friend of Ibsen's, did it bother you that he used Laura Kieler's story without it benefiting her?

25. Which actress would you cast as Nora if you were to stage a production of A Doll's House? Who would play Torvald? Why is the choice of actor important to the role? Explain your choices.