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ABSTRACT

Despite reservations about the significance of "The Pearl" in relation to John Steinbeck's other works, a case can be made for the novel as an effective exemplification of the Greek tragic form, which Steinbeck has adapted for his own realistic purposes. Although the protagonist Kino lacks high rank and eloquence, he possesses the tragic hero's essential characteristics of intellectual superiority, courage and skill in battle, intuition, and aspiration. However, it is his pride that eventually brings him down. When he convinces himself that he can create the future by predicting it and, later, when he vows to keep the "Pearl of the World," he defies the whole structure of the secular authority as well as the gods themselves. Although Steinbeck is on the side of the rebel, he seems to be saying that Kino has ignored the "life giving relationship between tradition and the individual talent" and must pay for this affront with his most precious possession, the life of his infant son. (JB)

The Pearl As Tragedy

BARCLAY W. BATES

If John Steinbeck's *The Pearl* has pleased a generation of young people, it has been much less popular with their teachers. Some complain that it bears only indirectly on the major social problems of our time. More contend that it has little literary merit, and reputable literary critics tend to agree. To Woodburn Ross, it is "not important";[1] to Warren French, it is "paste."[2] Of Steinbeck's most serious readers, only Peter Lisca praises it. In a thorough and perceptive essay Lisca argues that "one of the distinguishing marks of Steinbeck's genius is his ability to fuse the realistic and the lyric into a fable like texture and structure" and that "his greatest success with this strategy is *The Pearl*."[3] But another kind of case can be made for the novel.

Steinbeck's works have often reminded their readers and auditors of tragedy. When nameless Okies of *The Grapes of Wrath* express "collective sentiments," Joseph Warren Beach hears "a chorus in an ancient tragedy."[4] In the late thirties Burton Rascoe contends—we can forgive him the extravagance—that Steinbeck "may be, before he is finished, a greater poetic dramatist than Sophocles." The "tragically shattered dreams of men," Rascoe says, are "like a Greek choral chant" throughout *Of Mice and Men*."[5] More recently, Joseph Fontenrose observes that as drama or novel *Of Mice and Men* is "very like a tragedy by Sophocles or Ibsen in its dramatic economy." Its "prophetic speeches, symbolic properties, and foreshadowing episodes," Fontenrose says, "point to the inevitable end."[6] This essay will argue that *The Pearl* has not only tragedy's chorus and various foreshadowings but also its major figures and something rather like its cosmology.

The Pearl is the story of Kino, a young Baja California pearl diver. After his infant son Coyotito is bitten by a scorpion, Kino desperately searches the estuary bottom for a pearl with which he can hire the greedy local doctor. He finds a great one—the "Pearl of the World."[7] Even before he starts for shore, Coyotito's condition improves markedly. Once back in the village, however, Kino meets one trouble after another.

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Anxious to share Kino's new wealth, the doctor gives the nearly recovered Coyotito superfluous medication which temporarily makes him ill again. During the night a would-be thief batters Kino, and the next day the pearl buyers offer him an absurdly low price for his pearl. That night thieves again attack; Kino again repels them. His frightened wife, Juana, tries to throw the pearl back into the estuary, but an enraged Kino recovers it from her and beats her. Immediately thieves attack a third time, and Kino kills one of them. Knowing he can expect no justice from the town's ruling class, he flees with Juana and Coyotito. Trackers follow them. At last Kino turns on his tormentors and kills them—but not before a stray bullet blows off the top of Coyotito's head. Dazed, shattered, having "gone through pain" and "come out the other side" (p. 116), Kino and Juana return to the town, and Kino throws the great pearl back into the estuary.

In *The Pearl* Kino's fellow villagers are the kind of chorus Beach and Rascoe heard in the other works. Here a single figure is the cynosure, however, and the chorus attends his fate as keenly as the Theban chorus attends the fate of Oedipus. Like the Thebans, the residents of LaPaz are curious, humble, admiring, and apprehensive. Together they rush to Kino's house when Coyotito is bitten. Together they remind Kino and Juana that the doctor will not come to the brush hut village. Together they follow the family to the doctor's house and there witness Kino's futile efforts to get the doctor's help. Later, when the doctor visits the family, "the chorus of the neighbors" clamors, " 'Kino will be a rich man' " (p. 46). After Kino refuses the pearl buyers' offers, they are uncertain. Some fear that he has "cut off his own head and destroyed himself" (p. 69). Others praise him, insisting, "From his courage we may all profit" (p. 69). But all fear he may become prideful. "All of the neighbors hoped that sudden wealth would not turn Kino's head, would not make a rich man of him, would not graft onto him the evil limbs of greed and hatred and coldness" (p. 56).

Kino obviously lacks some of the tragic hero's ennobling advantages, notably high rank and great eloquence. Yet he does have the more essential characteristics. Though ignorant, he is intellectually superior. Cunning and intuition help him thwart the pearl buyers and best the murderous trackers. His courage and skill in combat are worthy of a Macbeth or an Oedipus. He kills his three pursuers as efficiently as Oedipus dispatched Laius and his retinue. His aspiration is unmatched.

Of all the novel's characters, only he can see the value of a pearl-financed education for Coyotito.

But it is his pride that is most striking, and it is his pride that brings him disaster. After refusing the buyers' offers, he announces to all that he will go to the capital and sell his pearl there. Soon, realizing the great dangers and difficulties of such a trip, he becomes frightened; but he does not back down, for, in his view, "by saying what his future was going to be like, he had created it" (p. 37). Ceaseless trouble persuades Juana that Kino should destroy the pearl, but he refuses.

> "'No,' he said. 'I will fight this thing. I will win over it. We will have our chance.' His fist pounded the sleeping mat. 'No one shall take our good fortune from us,' he said. . . . 'Believe me,' he said. 'I am a man.' And his face grew crafty" (p. 74).

Even after the self-defense killing, the burning of his house, and the destruction of his priceless boat, stubborn Kino exclaims, "'. . . I will keep it. I might have given it as a gift, but now it is my misfortune and my life and I will keep it'" (p. 86).

Like most tragic heroes, Kino challenges the powers that be. In fact, he challenges two powers—the secular authority of the Indians' European oppressors and the transcendant authority of God or the gods. By refusing the buyers' offers and deciding to go to the capital, he has, as his brother Juan Tomas tells him, defied "'the whole structure, the whole way of life'" (p. 70). He follows what the local priest considers the bad example of their Indian forefathers, whose similar rebellion "'was against religion'" and whose losses were "'a punishment visited on those who tried to leave their station'" (p. 59). Kino ignores the warnings of Jocasta-like Juana, who pleads that the pearl is "'like a sin'" (p. 50) and who accurately predicts Coyotito's destruction. He also ignores natural events which make clear his standing in the cosmos as they foreshadow his fate. Early in the novel he watches with "the detachment of God while a dusty ant frantically tried to escape the sand trap an ant lion had dug for him" (pp. 3-4). Later he is preoccupied with the pearl while "a tight woven school of small fishes glittered and broke water to escape a school of great fishes that drove in to eat them" (p. 42). What the villager chorus anticipates comes to pass: "Yes, God punished Kino because he rebelled against the way things are" (p. 34). Dreadful ironies become apparent. The great pearl brings not happiness but misery. He who wants the best for his son brings death to his son. At the end Kino has only "a magical protection" (p. 116) comparable to the grace which comes to Oedipus after the worst.

Here one must quickly acknowledge that Steinbeck intends no brief for gods of the social order or gods of the cosmos. His world-view is not an Indian's, nor is it Sophocles's. His longer and more popular works certainly persuade us that most rebels have his admiration, and his explanation of Kino's seeming greed is sympathetic: ". . . if he could think of having a rifle whole horizons were burst. . . . For it is said that human beings are never satisfied. . . . And this is said in disparagement, whereas it is one of the greatest talents the species has and one that has made it superior to animals that are satisfied with what they have" (p. 32). Indeed, it is unlikely that Steinbeck thought of *The Pearl* as tragedy. The story is based on a folktale he heard in Mexico, and in the preface to his collected short novels he insists that he "tried to write it as folklore, to give it that set-aside, raised-up feeling that all folk stories have." Yet Sophocles himself began with folklore, and Fontenrose and others tell us that Steinbeck knew the Greeks well. Even if he was conscious of no particular debt to them, however, one may safely argue that their influence is so strong, so subtly and widely diffused, that no western writer escapes it. In one sense, moreover, Kino is truly a transgressor. Steinbeck clearly implies that without the pearl Kino has all that a man can ask: In Kino the "family song" often "rose to an aching chord that caught the throat, saying this is safety, this is warmth, this is the *Whole*" (p. 4). When Kino ignores the song and clutches the pearl, the gods he denies are not the old gods but those Steinbeck himself honors—the high truths of the human condition.

Because Steinbeck chose to stress these truths after he had so trenchantly dealt with merely social evils, his literary reputation suffered. Few have forgiven him for letting up on America's rich and its complacent middle class. That one could be poor but happy—well, that was a wicked cliche promulgated by apologists for a corrupt social order. Steinbeck's critics failed to see that Kino, though certainly oppressed, was no Joad. Before the pearl he had food and shelter. Before the pearl he had meaningful work. Before the pearl he had the respect of his peers, his wife, and himself. No one saw that Steinbeck had been strengthened by what Richard Sewall has called the "life-giving relationship between tradition and the individual talent." Teachers who must lead their students from *The Pearl* to *Oedipus, Macbeth,* or *Julius Caesar* might do well to call attention to the author's new use of an old form.

N O T E S

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2. Warren French, John Steinbeck, (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1961), p. 142.
3. Peter Lisca, "Steinbeck's Fable of the Pearl," in Steinbeck and His Critics, E. W. Tedlock, Jr. and C. V. Wicker eds. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1957), p. 291.
4. Joseph Warren Beach, "John Steinbeck: Art and Propaganda," in Steinbeck and His Critics, E. W. Tedlock, Jr. and C. V. Wicker eds. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1957), p. 258.
5. Burton Rascoe, "John Steinbeck," in Steinbeck and His Critics, E. W. Tedlock, Jr. and C. V. Wicker eds. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1957), pp. 60-61.
6. Joseph Fontenrose, John Steinbeck, (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1963), p. 56.
7. John Steinbeck, The Pearl, (New Y Bantam Pathfinder Editions, 1964), p. 29. Future c ions and page references are in the text.