



# **Illusions of Prosperity: The Socio Economic Delusions in John Steinbeck's The Pearl**

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**Author's contribution**

*The sole author designed, analysed, interpreted and prepared the manuscript.*

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## **ABSTRACT**

This article examines the extent to which the pursuit of unreal goals, terms here as "Illusions of Prosperity," alienates individuals from reality, using John Steinbeck's *The Pearl* (1945) as a case study. Focused on Kino, the protagonist, the narrative explores how his discovery of a large pearl sets off dreams of social elevation and economic freedom within a colonially dominated Mexican village. The analysis reveals that despite the pearl's promise of erasing historical humiliations and bringing prosperity, it ultimately leads to Kino's psychological and social alienation, reflecting a broader critique of the materialistic pursuit under colonial influence. This paper highlights how personal aspirations, when intertwined with colonial and capitalist ideologies, can lead to disillusionment and societal estrangement.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

In *The Pearl*, John Steinbeck narrates Kino's story, a poor Mexican fisherman who even had difficulties providing food to his little family composed of Kino himself, his wife Juana and their only son Coyotito. They were living in a hut in rubble. One day a scorpion bit Coyotito, and naturally Kino didn't have money to take him to the hospital for treatment. That misfortune became the starting point of an adventure that led Kino to a discovery of a pearl labelled "the pearl of the world" thanks to its size and beauty. That aspect of the pearl made Kino believe that it was worth much money. So, he ventured to sell it in the capital in order to gain much money and lead an exciting life. In this analysis, we are going to describe and analyze Kino's ironic attitudes in his illusions of prosperity since the pearl was not eventually sold. This work is of particular relevance as it is intended to wake up and sensitize those who tend to persistently follow a dream whatever the price, which can result in disappointment.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

A descriptive and analytical approach is followed here to describe and at the same time comment on Kino's attitudes in his attempt to fulfil his dreams of social attainment and material success. The work is divided into three parts. The first part entitled 'Coyotito, a supposedly educated boy' talks about Kino's dream to educate Coyotito so that he becomes an intellectual and help them better sell their pearls. The second part is entitled 'material acquisition yearning' and is about Kino's daydreaming of living in a modern house, and the last part is entitled 'the americanization of Kino's family'. In that part, we talk about Kino's desire to live and look like an American.

## 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 3.1 Coyotito, a Supposedly Educated Boy

The purpose of education is to intellectually, psychologically and physically develop the individual. Not only does education allow people to be socially competent but it also permits them to climb the high ladder of success. It means that if you are educated, you will be able to better interact with other people, you are also likely to

get a good and well-paid job. Another important thing is that you will know many things and you may not be subject to some social problems like being cheated. For that, education is of paramount importance in somebody's life.

Kino the Indian wants a good education for his son Coyotito. Despite not concretely having the means of paying a good education to his son, he takes his pearl as a crystal ball and imagines Coyotito in the biggest and most prestigious American Universities. Thus, education is important for Kino who associates his pearl to wealth and plans to educate Coyotito. As John Steinbeck explains here, "Kino so aptly captures this fundamentally American dream as the image of the open road stretching out toward the distant horizon." [1]. As a matter of fact, through his famous pearl that has become a crystal ball for him, Kino sees his son Coyotito dressing like an American sailor. As such, Steinbeck puts it: "But Coyotito, he was the one, he wore a blue sailor suit from the United States and a little yachting cap [...] such as Kino had seen once when a pleasure boat put into the estuary" [2]. The phrase from the United States is very telling in this illustration. It shows how America influences the rest of the world and confirms it as the first world power. Kino is eager to see his unique son become an American. He has nourished that American dream when he once saw a pleasure boat into the estuary of La Paz. The sailor who was in the boat drew all his attention, he was so astonished that he immediately said that his son would become a sailor. In actual fact, it was not about any sailor but about an American sailor who symbolically represents the United States. As he has come from there, and as that country is considered as the first world power, indeed a country where anything is possible, anything from there is logically more valuable than anything else from elsewhere. Consequently, non-American success dreamers seek to get something from America or to look like an American. Resembling an American or possessing something from America embodies modernity and success. In this stage, America appears again as the new welcoming world full of opportunities.

The American sailor has boosted Kino's dreams of good and high education. Since the main activity of the inhabitants of La Paz is trade, especially the trade of pearls, Kino wants his son

to be a mathematician or an economist in order to help them better sell and buy products. So “education prepares individuals to be self-reliant and self-sufficient participants in society” [3]. If Coyotito knows how to count and save money, he will transmit that knowledge to his community. He will also be able to fix good prices in pearls’ transactions so that his community will no longer be swindled.

In reality, the native Indians of La Paz had been scammed and exploited by Europeans for a long time because they hadn’t been educated. Europeans colonized and indoctrinated them with beliefs that maintained them in their poor social status. In *The Pearl*, the Puritan priest has played an important role in that indoctrination. According to Puritanism, richness and poverty are matters of natural selection. If someone is rich, they are selected by God, but if they are poor they are damned. That is what the priest makes native Indians believe. That moral subservience is so internalized in them that they think they don’t even have the right to improve their living conditions. Besides, Emma Goldman asserts, “The rich preach, foster, and finance both, as an investment that pays good returns. Through the medium of religion, they have paralyzed the mind of the people, just as morality has enslaved the spirit. In other words, religion and morality are a much better whip to keep people in submission than even the club and the gun” [4]. In this sense, Goldman thinks that religion is to blame because it is the first thing that initiates man into submission. Therefore, it is a disguised oppressor in Goldman’s analysis.

Through Kino’s imagination of a better life thanks to education, it can be drawn that education is a springboard to success and allows native Indians to live in dignity with white people.

### 3.2 Material Acquisition Yearning

Kino believes that fulfilling the American dream of wealth and eternal happiness is just a matter of time for him since he has in his possession the biggest and most expensive pearl of the world. The latter is seemingly worth much money. Much money means being able to acquire whatever you like on earth. That is the reason why, whenever he looks at the pearl, he sees Kino the American and not Kino the Indian. In this plot, Indians are treated by Europeans like savages. Kino who is fed up of this kind of treatment, seeks to radically change his social situation. When Kino set foot in the house of the doctor

who was supposed to treat his son’s scorpion bite, he momentarily forgot what brought him and marvelled at the doctor’s house adorned with luxury and flowers. Kino’s eagerness and happiness of possessing a new house, comes from what he saw at the doctor’s. Thus, when he got a pearl, he associated it as the assurance of a better future, ease and security. That’s when he thought about a house made of stone and plaster so as to live like “rich people who lived in the stone and plaster houses of the town” [2]. The Indians of La Paz did not know things of modernity, but once in contact with the white community, they started being fond of European style objects like houses. For that, Louis D. Rubin declares,

“The red man had lived a most vagabond, disorderly, unrighteous life, - rambling from place to place and prodigally rioting upon the sumptuous luxuries of nature without tasking her generosity to yield them anything more; whereas it has most unquestionably been shown that heaven intended the earth should be plowed and sown and manured and laid out into cities and towns and farms and country seats and pleasure grounds and public gardens, all of which the Indians knew nothing about” [5].

In reality, it is the white man who has transformed and beautified nature with buildings, roads, and other infrastructures whereas the Indians were almost savages. But white people made Indians acquire many desires after civilizing them. That fact has spoiled the Indians’ unvarnished state of mind to incorporate in them greed, hypocrisy and vanity to name but a few.

It is true that the white man has altered the wild state Indian and made him less pure, but possessing a house elevates the social status of an individual as stated here,

“Making the decision to purchase a house elevates the purchaser to a culturally significant status: that of a homeowner. Ever since President Abraham Lincoln signed the Homestead Act in 1862, subsequent U.S. Presidents—from Herbert Hoover, Lyndon Johnson, and Bill Clinton to George W. Bush—and legislators have stressed that the road to financial security and stability is best achieved by becoming a homeowner” [6].

A house is a framework that gives people ease, social security and status. In *The Pearl*, money is a source of social emancipation. Through his

imagination, Kino bears the dreams of social change of his community and epitomizes their social emancipation. Material success will be a way for native Indians to escape from a long and tough past of socio-economic domination.

A house is also synonymous of financial security and stability. Mechele Dickerson adds, "Home ownership is said to be a fundamental part of the American Dream because of the economic security it gives homeowners." [6]. Not only is a house a source of security, but it also provides health to people because if you live in the street, you live under the threat of assaults, sicknesses, etc. For that, Hanson comments, "Since decent affordable housing is a foundation for healthy families and strong neighborhoods, the failure has repercussions in nearly every aspect of life, including educational attainment, employment stability, crime prevention and mental health" [7]. A house is therefore a basic need for people to get a balanced life. According to Hanson, not having a decent house involves many other consequences like school dropouts, unemployment and crimes. All those problems indirectly mentioned by Hanson can consequently lead to mental deficiency to the individual exposed to them.

Kino who didn't have a decent house was attacked by a non-identified person referred to as the thing by the author one night. The thing attacked Kino in the dark night with a view to stealing his pearl. That phase of the plot reveals Kino's insecure hut, and how his family is exposed to crime and robbery.

Besides, Kino's dream of getting a house mirrors a more democratic face of the American dream, meaning a united family living in a nice house.

However, Kino hasn't known a better life. People, especially white people, thought that he was rich thanks to his pearl and planned to steal it to the extent of destroying his hut. And, he ends up losing the hut in rubble and sleeps under the stars. He therefore becomes poorer than before. There is irony here because Kino was considering building a very big house made of stone and plaster, but now he can't even build a hut.

Another thing Kino tried to achieve with the supposedly wealth from the pearl is to physically change and buy materials from America in order to look like and live like a native American. That idea will lead us to the next part.

### 3.3 The Americanization of Kino's Family

Americanization is a word coined in the twentieth century by a British journalist William Stead who used it as a title of his book *The Americanization of the World*. The term refers to people's assimilation to the American way of life. It is also used to designate the cultural influence exerted by America on the rest of the world. Americanization is linked to the American way of life, which adheres to the principles of *The Declaration of Independence* that are Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness. The latter includes for the American dream pursuers, dressing and living like a native American.

Since America is considered as a mythical world where everything is possible, and where everything is better than anything else from elsewhere, it necessarily becomes a reference, indeed the mirror of the world. That makes of the American dream so famous. As a result, all from America and even Americans are symbols of success.

In his dream, Kino, his wife Juana and his son Coyotito are dressed like Americans. His desire to change is so intense that he wants to renew his wardrobe and that of the other members of his family. Steinbeck explains,

"In the pearl he saw how they were dressed; Juana in a shawl stiff with newness and a new skirt, and from under the long skirt Kino could see that she wore shoes. It was in the pearl, the picture glowing there. He himself was dressed in new white clothes, and he carried a new hat, not of straw but of fine black felt, and he too wore shoes, not sandals but shoes that laced" [2].

In its conception, America gives the impression of being opened to anybody regardless of origin or birthright. It therefore opens to anybody the door of a brilliant future reserved to individual success. Thus, it becomes a center of interest for the rest of the world. Besides all the accessories of the American way of life, very often linked to modernity, become images of success. The illustration reveals that Kino is interested in the American culture and way of life. The accessories of dressing ; shawl stiff, skirt, shoes that laced and black felt are mentioned here, and showcase Kino's yearning of good and comfortable life.

Kino's desire of acquiring things from America highlights how important the American label is and how that country is itself considered by people from other countries. Through Kino's

dreams, we see that the American products are a source of a quest for non-Americans who seek to become somebody. That's the reason why the characteristics attributed to America spring up on things originated from that continent. Kino's attitude, especially when he was imagining a new dressing style, shows that he is fond of acquiring new things and, contrary to many village people, is open to the world. He was certainly poor, but he liked high-class things because he wants a shawl for his wife, and a shawl is very often put by high-class ladies.

Kino also wants to buy a Winchester, a weapon bearing the name of its American inventor. Now that he imagines himself a rich person, he naturally needs a weapon for more security. Possessing an American material means for Kino proudly being close to America and possessing something from that mythical world.

At the end of the story, we see Kino who comes back from exile with his wife ; both of them wearing ragged clothes and scaring the community who now consider them as ghosts because their long absence made people believe that they were dead. In this vein, Steinbeck says :

"Kino and Juana walked through the city as though it were not there. Their eyes glanced neither right nor left, nor up nor down, but stared only straight ahead. Their legs moved a little jerkily, like well-made wooden dolls, and they carried pillars of black fear about them. And as they walked through the stone and plaster city brokers peered at them from barred windows and servants put one eye to a slitted gate and mothers turned the faces of their youngest children inward against their skirts. Kino and Juana strode side by side through the stone and plaster city and down among the brush houses, and the neighbors stood back and let them pass. Juan Tomas raised his hand in greeting and did not say the greeting and left his hand in the air for a moment uncertainty." [2].

Even his own brother Juan Tomas now treats him as a stranger. Kino and his wife have ironically ended up becoming pariahs in their own community.

People who thought Kino was immensely rich, prosecuted him in order to take his pearl. As a result, Kino run into the mountains. Not having food supply and water to drink anymore, they decide to go back to the village though they know

that they no longer have a shelter there. There only son was even killed on their way to exile.

There is irony in John Steinbeck's narrative as Kino ends up with exactly the opposite of the good life he was yearning for. It can be drawn from Kino's downfall that the quest for abstract leads to alienation, and that "the gates to the American dream have not always been open to all" [8].

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Through the pearl, Kino had created a false illusion in which he was fully enjoying his American dream of social and economic attainment but the reality has been revealed to be something different. Instead of Coyotito at school, Coyotito is in the grave; instead of putting on new clothes, Kino and his wife finish in rags, and instead of building a new house Kino can't even build a hut and they become homeless. Kino who was once pampered by the community because of his so-called wealth, is now avoided and called a ghost. His quest for abstract has led him to his own loss. Thus his dreams have become a nightmare. For that Émile Ajar maintains, « les cauchemars, c'est ce que les rêves deviennent en vieillissant » [9] meaning in English nightmares, are what dreams become over time. That's why it is more exciting to live in illusion than in reality, as supported by Wilson in these terms : "illusion is superior to reality" [10].

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#### COMPETING INTERESTS

Author has declared that no competing interests exist.

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