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A Critical Analysis of John Steinbeck's novel: 'The Pearl'



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In this brief critical paper I would like to analyse John Steinbeck's novel: 'The Pearl'. The Pearl published in 1947 is a touching story of a Mexican Indian pearl-diver, his wife Juana and their son Coyotito. Kino's tribe has suffered at the hands of the Spaniards for four hundred years thus creating a major cultural and economic gap between the two races.

The little brush house by the sea presents the simple life miles away from luxury. The musical metaphor used by Steinbeck falls under the traditional pattern of story-telling and creates the mood for the theme of good against evil which runs throughout the novel. It effectively brings out the local colour and setting of the novel. The 'Song of the Family' which permeates through the first chapter changed into the 'Song of Evil' the moment Kino and Juana saw a scorpion.

Peter Lisca is of the opinion that it is a great success and a mark of Steinbeck's genius in fusing 'the realistic and the lyric into a fable like texture and structure'.

(1) The appearance of the scorpion gave Kino a new song, "the Song of Evil, the music of enemy, of any foe of the family, a savage, secret, dangerous, melody". (The Pearl, pp.10-11)

Coyotito is stung by a scorpion but the doctor refuses to treat him and 'Song of the Enemy' roared in Kino's ears. Kino found the 'Pearl of the World' and music of the pearl rose like a chorus of trumpets in his ears'. The 'Song of the Family was as fierce as a cry' in Kino's ears after the death of Coyotito and when the pearl was thrown into the sea 'the music of the Pearl drifted to a whisper and disappeared'. (p.65) It is this flow of music that makes the story compact with rhythm and harmony.

James Gray has aptly remarked: "Steinbeck matches manner to matter in The Pearl. The style has a subdued, foreboding lyricism which communicates easily with a reader's sympathies and never wavers towards elegiac excess. Because his people are inarticulate Steinbeck must tell their story in the language of the heart and he is able to keep its idiom warm, believable and touching".

(2) The moment Kino finds the Pearl of the World as

large as a seagull's egg' his life changes. It is this central irony which presents the conflict between illusion and reality. The pearl becomes a temptation for Kino, which is the cause of suffering. It is this sway away from the existing American culture that becomes a threat to the existing corrupt system.

Though the ambition and the desire of Kino are legitimate he poses a threat to the corrupt social system- the Establishment. The animal imagery used by Steinbeck in the form of the 'goat that sniffed and stared with its yellow eyes and a dusty ant frantically tried to escape the sand trap an ant lion had dug for him' (pp.8-9) prepares us for the coming evil.

It is this vivid use of animal imagery that brings out the wildness, cruelty and primitive instinct in man. The biological imagery used for the town that is poisoned shows that the Pearl-divers, the buyers, the beggars, the church and the doctor all have a specific role to play in the social system.

It is the treatment of evil handled at various levels which gives a new dimension to the story. The scorpion symbolises natural evil while the pearl symbolises social and individual evil. Juana had eased Coyotito's pain by sucking the poison but the doctor purposefully aggravated it and then cured it in the hope of acquiring the pearl.

The doctor represents the corrupt social system which can't be set right. The pearl had injected poison into Kino which later on becomes his soul, thus representing individual evil.

Juana aptly says: 'This thing is evil', 'This pearl is like a sin! It will destroy us', 'It will destroy us all'- 'Even our son'. (p.44) It is this struggle to survive that Juana possesses with which she tries to control the animal instinct in her 'man', Kino.

Lisca further remarks that the style of Steinbeck's narrative is "curiously remote and yet intimate, like a medieval tapestry". (3)

The neighbours in the story represent the traditional Greek chorus by commenting upon every action. Juana is a noble woman, a loving mother, a protector, a saviour and an advisor to Kino. Kino is her 'man' and she is his strength and power. He runs away along with Juana and Coyotito but is followed by three

trackers. The pearl was Kino's 'soul' now and giving it up would mean losing the soul. The death of Coyotito leaves Kino and Juana absolutely shocked. The pearl in whose surface Kino had seen prosperity now showed 'Coyotito lying in the little cave with the top of his head shot away'. The pearl was now 'ulcerous, ugly and was grey like a malignant growth'. There was a magical protective cover around them as they stride through the 'stone-and-plaster city'.

They walked with one single aim to discard the evil and appeared like other worldly beings. People of La Paz were dumbstruck and watched them in awe. Kino throws the pearl back into the sea and the music of the pearl turns into a whisper and disappears. Thinking of Steinbeck, Alexander Cowie has remarked: "Perhaps this is the final responsibility of the novelist: he must be true to his time and yet save himself for Time". (4)

REFERENCE

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