

CHP1

Just before sunrise sometime around 1900, a Mexican-Indian pearl diver named Kino awakens to the sound of crowing roosters. He lives near the village of La Paz, on the Pacific coast of the Baja Peninsula. He watches the day dawning through the crack of the door to his house, which is made of brush—bundles of straw fastened together to form walls and a roof. He then looks to a makeshift cradle, a kind of box hanging from the roof of the hut, where his infant son, Coyotito, sleeps. Finally, still resting on the mat, Kino turns his gaze to the open eyes of his wife, Juana. She looks back at Kino as she always does in the early morning. Hearing the waves rolling up on the nearby beach, Kino closes his eyes again to listen to the sound of an old song in his head.

Juana rises to check on Coyotito and starts a fire. Kino also rises, wrapping himself in a blanket and sliding into his sandals. Outside, he regards the climbing sun and the hovering clouds as Juana prepares breakfast. In the company of a goat and a dog, Kino stares “with the detachment of God” at a group of industrious ants underfoot. Behind him, Kino hears Juana singing and nursing Coyotito. Her song is simple, and it moves Kino to contemplation.

As the rest of the neighborhood stirs, Kino goes back inside the house and finds Juana fixing her hair. As they eat their simple breakfast, there is no speech between them beyond a contented sigh from Kino. A ray of light shines on Coyotito’s hanging box, revealing a scorpion crawling down the rope toward the child. Terrified, Juana recites a charm and a prayer to protect Coyotito, while Kino moves forward to capture the scorpion.

Coyotito spots the scorpion on the rope, laughs, and reaches up to grab it. Just then, positioned in front of the hanging box, Kino freezes, slowly stretching out his hand toward the scorpion. When Coyotito shakes the rope of the hanging box, the scorpion falls, lands on his shoulder, and stings him. Kino immediately seizes the creature and crushes it in his grasp, beating it to death on the floor for good measure. Kino’s retribution does no good, though, and Coyotito screams with pain. Juana grabs Coyotito at once and attempts to suck the venom out of his festering wound. The child’s wailing summons several neighbors to Kino’s doorstep, including Kino’s brother, Juan Tomás, and Juan Tomás’s wife, Apolonia. As Coyotito’s cries diminish into moans, Juana asks Kino to summon the doctor. Such a request surprises the neighbors since the doctor has never visited the poor cluster of brush houses. (The doctor belongs to the social class of the Spanish colonists of the region, a class far above that of poor natives such as Kino and Juana.) When Kino expresses doubt that the doctor will come to Coyotito, Juana resolves to take Coyotito to the doctor. Kino and Juana set out for the center of town, their neighbors trailing behind them.

Near the center of town, more people follow, curious to see the outcome of a poor man’s plea to a rich doctor. Arriving at the doctor’s house, Kino knocks at the gate. He both fears and resents the doctor, a powerful man not of his own people. Presently, the gate opens to reveal one of Kino’s own people, employed in the doctor’s service. Kino explains the details of Coyotito’s injury in his native tongue; the man ignores Kino’s use of the native language and responds in Spanish. He tells Kino to wait while he goes to speak with the doctor.

Indoors, the doctor sits up in bed, surrounded by luxuries. He feasts on biscuits and hot chocolate and thinks nostalgically of Paris. When the servant interrupts the doctor’s reverie to announce Kino’s visit, the doctor bitterly demands to know if Kino has money to pay for the treatment. Kino gives the servant eight small pearls, but soon the servant returns to Kino with them, explaining that the doctor has been called out to attend to a serious case. With this dismissal, the procession breaks up, leaving Kino furious and ashamed. Standing in shock in front of the closed gate, Kino strikes out in anger, smashing his fist into the barrier and bloodying his knuckles.

Analysis

As its short, simple sentences and heavily symbolic moral overtones make evident, *The Pearl* is based on the form of biblical parable, and the simple natural beauty of the opening scene recalls the beauty and innocence of the Garden of Eden before Adam and Eve’s fall. Though the comparison is not made explicitly, it is nevertheless an apt one—like Adam and Eve, Kino and Juana make choices later in the story that cause them to lose their innocence and force them to leave their paradise for the hardships of the wider world. The cluster of brush houses by the sea where Kino and Juana live functions as a kind of paradise, in which man and woman live together in a state of nature. Steinbeck focuses on the family’s rustic simplicity and on its reverence for a higher power. Steinbeck uses repetitious language, which evokes the Bible and other religious literature, to underscore the family’s spirituality. This scriptural structure is especially evident in Steinbeck’s frequent use of the word “and” to drive the narrative: “And a goat came near and sniffed at him”; “And the rhythm of the family song was the grinding stone”; “And he drank a little pulque and that was breakfast.”