

A Study on the Theme of Greed as a Destructive Power in 'The Pearl' by John Steinbeck

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Abstract

This study explores greed in John Steinbeck's novel *The Pearl* (1947). This study examines how the author represents greed and its consequences through the novel's characters and argues that Kino is not inherently greedy, but instead reacts to absolute greed around him. This study employs a qualitative approach with textual analysis, drawing on Terry Eagleton's *Marxist Literary Criticism* (1976) as its theoretical framework. The study shows that powerful people like the doctor, the pearl buyers, and the priest use greed as a tool to keep their control, turning human worth into something to be bought and causing harm. Kino's transformation into a lonely, desperate man is not just his own mistake but a reaction to an unfair, corrupt system. The pearl evolves from a symbol of hope into a metaphor for death, underscoring materialism's dehumanising effects. Juana's constant kindness stands as the opposite of greed and shows the lasting importance of human values. The study suggests using Marxist criticism in literature classes to reveal unfair systems and encourage deeper discussion of the problems of materialism.

Keywords: Greed, Marxist theory, *The Pearl*, Human values, Systemic oppression, John Steinbeck

1. Introduction

Literature is an important tool that reflects human life, values, and social problems such as greed, corruption, or injustice. Many literary authors wrote their works to talk about these topics. Thus, the short novel *The Pearl*, by John Steinbeck, is a perfect example. In this novel, Kino is a poor man who works as a pearl diver. One day, he finds

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a very valuable pearl and believes it will bring happiness and a better life for him and his family. However, instead of good things, the pearl brings troubles, pain, and loss. Because of that, this study falls under the field of English literature, and more specifically, it uses Marxist literary theory to examine how money, power, and material things can destroy human values and relationships among people. The study focuses on a single theme in the novel: greed. It aims to analyse the destructive power of greed, which causes suffering in the characters' lives. Therefore, this study also explores how greed can alter a person's morality and harm those around them. By using quotes from the novel and analysing symbols, actions, and consequences, the study seeks to determine how Steinbeck shows the dangers of greed and how it connects to social and class problems.

1.1. Statement of the Problem

This study seeks to demonstrate that greed has a destructive power that can undermine relationships and human values. Many previous studies have shown that Kino is very greedy and that his moral decline caused his son's death (Subekti, 2017; Urfiani, 2015; Sunyoto et al., 2022; Putrayuda & Thohiriyah, 2024). However, this study argues that Kino is an innocent, simple, honest, easygoing, and satisfied person, and his greed is a reaction to the real greed of The Doctor, who refused to treat his son, and the Pearls' Buyers, who sought to cheat him. To support this argument, the study aims to analyse and explore how greed destroys relationships among characters and undermines human values, drawing on Marxist and literary critical theories.

1.2. Research Questions

1. How did the author show the theme of greed as the reason for the collapse of human values and relationships in the novel?
2. What moral lessons does Steinbeck convey in *The Pearl* about human connections?

1.3. Objectives of the Study

- To examine how John Steinbeck presents greed as the leading cause of the loss of human values and the breakdown of relationships in *The Pearl*.

- To explore the moral lessons that Steinbeck shares in the novel, especially those related to human connections, such as trust, love, and the danger of material desire.

1.4. Definitions of Greed

The term "greed" has various meanings across the perspectives of scholars, thinkers, and researchers. Greed is defined as "individual greed benefits one person at the expense of others" (Wang and Murnighan 306). Also, greed is "a personality trait that entails an insatiable self-centred desire for more resources, monetary or other" (Krekels 24). In addition, Beryl Holtam has defined greed as "an excessive and rapacious desire, especially for wealth or possessions, that surpasses the requirements of necessity or reason" (98). A more comprehensive definition of greed is "an inordinate or insatiate longing, especially for wealth, driving individuals to endlessly accumulate wealth, which creates disparities within and between societies, highlighting its role in modern economic life" (Haseler and Meyer 21).

2. Literature Review

2.1. Introduction

This literature review explores critical analyses of *The Pearl* that examine the novel from different angles. Various studies have approached the novel through different theoretical frameworks, including structuralism, critical discourse analysis, stylistic analysis, and Marxist theory. Many studies highlight the novel's social conflicts, economic oppression, and systemic greed. However, existing research left a gap to explore how greed at both systemic and personal levels destroys human values and relationships. This review builds on these perspectives by using Terry Eagleton's Marxist literary criticism to explore greed as a destructive moral force in this novel.

2.2. Theoretical Review

The first reviewed study is a 2007 thesis by Mohamad Yusuf titled "*An Analysis of Social Interaction Reflected in John Steinbeck's The Pearl*." He examined the dynamics of social interaction—specifically cooperation, competition, and conflict—in the novel, as well as their influence on Kino's family. Yusuf uses a descriptive qualitative method grounded in structuralism, analysing the novel through close readings of its dialogue,

events, and character interactions while excluding external historical influences (25). His thesis found that cooperation is evident when the villagers of La Paz come together to help Kino's family after Coyotito is stung by a scorpion. At the same time, competition arises among the doctor, priest, and pearl buyers, each attempting to gain control of the valuable pearl (38). This greed leads to conflict and Kino's isolation, disrupting social harmony and exposing underlying class divisions and moral decline in the community (Yusuf 62). He suggests further research on *The Pearl* using other literary theories (psychoanalytic or Marxist) to explore additional dimensions of the text (42). Yusuf's study supports this thesis by clarifying social conflicts rooted in materialism, but it does not explicitly analyse greed's role in eroding human values.

In addition, Adaninggar Septi Subekti conducted an article titled "Critical Analysis of Steinbeck's *The Pearl*: Power and Silenced Voice" (2017). The article examined the power dynamics between dominant groups (colonisers, men) and marginalised voices (indigenous people, women) and revealed how healthcare and trade systems reinforce inequality. Subekti used Critical Discourse Analysis to examine dialogues and character interactions, focusing on dominant versus silenced voices, language use, and oppression to reveal ideologies (19). Colonisers oppressed natives by using weapons and controlling resources, which silenced indigenous voices, as seen when the doctor refuses to treat Coyotito because Kino is poor (Subekti 21). Pearl buyers cheat fishermen by working together to pay less and lower the value of Kino's pearl. At the same time, Kino ignores Juana's wishes, reflecting male dominance, though Juana briefly stands up against it. Subekti's article supports this study by highlighting economic oppression (pearl buyers' greed) and moral decay (doctors' exploitation) to clarify greed-driven conflicts.

Furthermore, Abbas entitled his study "The Racist Fact against American-Indians in Steinbeck's *The Pearl*" (2020) to reveal racism against Native Americans in the novel and show how the story reflects historical realities and literature as a social document. Abbas used genetic structuralism, a method that traces literary works to their socio-historical origins, to analyse intrinsic elements, social background, and to correlate the novel with historical facts (397). Colonial exploitation is shown through the doctor's racist refusal to treat Coyotito and the pearl buyers' coordinated efforts to oppress Native

Americans (Abbas 399) financially. Kino's forced displacement is similar to the Trail of Tears, and Steinbeck's story reflects how Native lands were taken for mining to benefit white settlers (Abbas 404). His study recommends studying literature as historical testimony to oppression. Abbas's study strengthens this thesis by showing that the pearl buyers' greed provides historical evidence of moral decline caused by colonialism in the story.

Another scholarly article is titled "Interpretation of Figurative Language in The Pearl through Stylistic Analysis," by Saba Zaman, Rubina Masum, and Amber Hafeez, published in 2022. The study aimed to examine the stylistic devices used in the novel and interpret their role in conveying themes such as social oppression, human greed, class struggle, and human behaviour. The researchers used a qualitative method with stylistic analysis to study *The Pearl*, focusing on literary devices (symbolism and metaphor) and drawing on theories by Leech and Short (2007) and Widdowson (1996). Their study finds that greed causes Kino's moral downfall, ultimately leading to the tragic death of his son (Zaman et al, 191). Also, they found that the use of metaphors – “The town is like a colonial animal” (Steinbeck24) – and personification enhance the novel's thematic depth. The article supports the idea that Steinbeck criticises greed and class conflict, but this current study expands on the exploration of how greed damages human values.

Along with that, a thesis by Ulfiatullfit Urfiani titled *The Representation of Class Struggle in John Steinbeck's The Pearl* (2015) analysed class struggle in the novella. It showed how the working class (Kino) is mistreated by the rich (the doctor, the pearl buyers). The study used a qualitative method grounded in Marxist theory to closely read *The Pearl*, identify examples of class conflict, and connect them to broader social and economic issues related to capitalism (16–19). Urfiani found that Kino's growing obsession with the pearl leads him to act violently and to lose his moral values, while the pearl also breeds greed and conflict in the community (49). In the end, Kino throwing away the pearl shows that poor people like him are powerless under a capitalist system (Urfiani52). Her thesis supports this current study by showing how harmful capitalism can be, while this research expands on that by using Eagleton's theory to show how greed and materialism damage human relationships.

Additionally, Sunyoto, Franco Gabriel et al. wrote an article titled "The Native American Father's Parenting Style in John Ernst Steinbeck's *The Pearl*" in 2022. Their article explored Kino's parenting style as a provider, protector, decision-maker, educator, and nurturer. The researchers used a qualitative method to study Kino's behaviour in the novel from a sociological perspective, drawing on the text and the theories of Olson and McAdoo. The study finds that Kino uses two parenting styles—strict and demanding, and caring but too indulgent—and shows that he plays five fatherly roles, while Coyotito's death is partly due to Kino's absence in protecting him (Sunyoto et al. 2555-57). Their study analysed only Kino's parenting, missing how greed shapes his choices and the story's central message about the harmful effects of materialism. While their study focuses on parenting, this current research uses Marxist theory to show how greed destroys human values, supporting their work by clearly exploring the greed that causes Kino's downfall.

Further, Putrayuda and Thohiriyah titled their article "The Development of Psychosocial Characteristics in John Steinbeck's 'The Pearl'" (2024). They used Erik Erikson's psychosocial development theory to analyse the protagonist, Kino, in the novel. The researchers used a qualitative method to analyse Kino's behaviour and speech in *The Pearl*, linking them to Erikson's stages of development, drawing on the novel and psychosocial theory. They found that Kino tries to stand up for himself by rejecting the pearl buyers' unfair offers, showing independence, but later feels ashamed as greed clouds his judgment (Putrayuda and Thohiriyah 9). While their study showed Kino's moral decline, including his guilt over Coyotito's death, this study expands on that by framing greed as a broader social problem. Their focus on Kino's inner struggle ("the pearl was ugly, like a malignant growth" [Steinbeck 86]) aligns with the argument on greed's mental impact.

Lastly, Ibrahim Khalil published an article titled "Why Marxist Ideology Matters in John Steinbeck's *The Pearl*?" in 2023. He explored how Marxist ideas appear in *The Pearl* by showing how systems of oppression operate and how institutions like religion, medicine, and business make exploitation seem normal. He used qualitative textual analysis within a Marxist theoretical framework, analysing character dialogues, actions, and societal structures to reveal ideological domination. Khalil revealed that the doctor

exploits Kino by using his medical power to refuse treatment until the pearl is found (88). In contrast, the priest uses religion to justify unfairness and demands donations (Khalil 90). The pearl traders work together to cheat Kino by undervaluing the pearl, showing capitalist greed (Khalil 92). His article supports this current study's focus on system-wide greed, such as the pearl traders' cheating. However, this study also analyses Kino's personal greed through Marxist literary theory, as outlined by Eagleton.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design to examine greed in John Steinbeck's *The Pearl*, guided by Terry Eagleton's Marxist literary criticism. The qualitative approach is particularly well-suited to literary analysis, as it allows for a deep, interpretive exploration of complex themes, character motivations, and symbolic elements within the text. To collect data, the researcher employed close reading as the primary tool, carefully analysing the novel to identify passages that reflect the manifestations and consequences of greed. Special focus was placed on key characters, including Kino, the doctor, the pearl buyers, and the priest—figures through whom Steinbeck critiques systemic and personal greed. Relevant quotations and events were selected and annotated with contextual commentary, then organised into three analytical categories: greed among characters, the impact of greed on relationships, and the erosion of human values. The data were then thematically analysed using Eagleton's Marxist framework, which emphasises the role of class conflict, materialism, and ideological control in shaping human behaviour and social structures. Through this method, the study reveals how Steinbeck presents greed not merely as an individual flaw but as a force deeply rooted in capitalist and colonial systems that corrupt moral integrity and fracture interpersonal bonds.

3.2. Theoretical Framework

This study uses the Marxist literary theory, which views literature as a reflection of social structures, class conflicts, and economic power dynamics. The central theoretical framework is drawn from Terry Eagleton, who expanded on classical Marxist theory by emphasising how ideology and material conditions shape literature and

human behaviour. Terry Eagleton is a Marxist literary theorist. He says we should read literature as ideology. In his book *Marxism and Literary Criticism* (1976), Eagleton shows that stories and novels are shaped by society and that literature can both reflect and challenge the ideas of the powerful class. Literature reflects the unfair aspects of society and how capitalism controls what people want (Eagleton, 1976). His theory supports this study by arguing that Kino's greed is not only a matter of his nature, but also due to hardships such as poverty, racism, and being used by others. The greedy actions of the doctor, the pearl dealers, and the priest reflect how systems prioritise money, leading Kino to choose money over good values. The theory can prove that Kino's fall is not only due to his own mistakes, but also to a strong system that supports greed and forgets about honesty. Greed as a Systemic Force is another concept in Eagleton's Marxist perspective (1976). Rather than blaming Kino alone for his tragic choices, this concept will help to show that external pressures, economic oppression, class injustice, and colonial dominance shape Kino's greed. Greed is not just a personal flaw, but a systemic force encouraged by capitalist values (Eagleton, 1976). At the end of the novel, Kino throws the pearl into the ocean, showing that wealth and greed bring no real happiness, only loss and suffering.

4. Analysis and Discussion

4.1. Introduction

This part includes the primary analysis and discussion in this study. It focuses on how greed destroys in the novel by John Steinbeck '*The Pearl*'. The analysis uses Terry Eagleton's Marxist literary theory to analyse quotes and scenes from the novel. This analysis explores how greed is portrayed as a destructive force that undermines societies and human values. The chapter examines important scenes, character actions, and symbols to argue that Kino's fall into greed and violence is a natural feature, but a reaction to the greedy system around him. Characters like the doctor, the pearl buyers, and the priest are the main reasons that caused greed. Therefore, this chapter analyses greed among characters, destructive greed in relationships, and greed and human values.

4.2. Greed among Characters in *The Pearl*

In *The Pearl*, the author John Steinbeck shows that greed is a powerful and pervasive force that shapes how people act and how society functions. It is not just about one person's flaw; it connects to broader systems of power and unfair control. Using Terry Eagleton's Marxist theory, this part will analyse the theme of greed among the doctor, the pearl buyers, and the priest, who represent capitalist greed, in which money controls a person's value and supports the wealthy class.

The doctor in this novel behaves greedily, even though his job is supposed to be about helping others and caring for people. The doctor represents greed tied to racial capitalism. He refuses to treat Coyotito, "Have I nothing better to do than cure insect bites for 'little Indians'? ... No, they never have any money" (Steinbeck 6) (Subekti 21). This shows how racism and greed are connected, and he only wants to help people who can pay (Abbas 382). His actions reflect Eagleton's view that "ideology signifies the way men live out their roles in class-society... and prevent them from a true knowledge of society as a whole" (Eagleton 16). When the doctor hears about Kino's pearl, his attitude changes. Suddenly, he wants to help, saying, "I was not in when you came this morning. But now, ... I have come to see the baby" (Steinbeck 15), and later even offers to keep the pearl: "Perhaps you would like me to put it in my safe?" (18). This change shows that his genuine concern is money, not health (Khalil 88). Through these actions, The Doctor reflects greed horribly.

Also, the Pearl Buyers embody greed in their cheating and unfair behaviour. They act like they are separate people competing to buy Kino's pearl, but Steinbeck explains that this is not true: "The pearl buyers were individuals acting alone ... [but] there was only one pearl buyer with many hands" (Steinbeck 21). This means they are secretly working together to trick Kino, giving the false impression of honest competition. Their actions support what Eagleton says about robust systems that hide the truth. The market looks fair, but it actually helps those who already have control (Urfiani 44). When the buyers say the pearl is "too large," "a curiosity, or even "a monstrosity" (Steinbeck 26), they are trying to lower its value in Kino's eyes (Abbas 389). This idea connects to Marx's commodity fetishism, in which real value and labour are hidden, and to Eagleton's view

that people's actions are shaped by their social and working conditions (Eagleton 14). The pearl buyers are not just greedy, but they are part of a system based on greed (Khalil 92). Their actions reflect how greed is part of the larger colonial economy, not just their own personal choices.

Furthermore, when greed comes from religious people, this is the worst. The priest adds to the greed and exploitation by linking it to religion. When he hears about the pearl, he thinks about fixing the church: "the news came to the priest walking in his garden [...] and a memory of certain repairs necessary to the church" (Steinbeck 11). This shows how religion supports the system of control (Khalil 90). The priest only blesses Kino after he promises to have a church wedding, saying, "God bless you" (Steinbeck 14). This reveals how religion helps those in power stay in control, as Eagleton explains that ideology "legitimizes the power of the ruling class" (Eagleton 15). Eagleton also says that religion and other social ideas influence how history and struggles happen (Eagleton 8). Therefore, the priest's actions turn faith into a way to take money while hiding harm behind the idea of God's will.

In conclusion, the novel presents greed as a force that shapes characters such as the doctor, the pearl buyers, and the priest. By using Eagleton's Marxist theory, the novel shows how greed connects to power, capitalism, and colonialism. This analysis reveals that greed is more than a personal flaw; it is part of a system that maintains control and wealth.

4.3. Destructive Greed in Relationships

The novel represents how greed can hurt relationships and break the connection between people. What starts as hope for a better future turns into fear, violence, and distance because of the pearl. The theme of greed ruining relationships is evident in how Kino treats Juana, how he becomes more alone, and how peace is lost in their lives and in their community.

One clear example is Juana's warning about the pearl. She says, "This pearl is like a sin! It will destroy us", and begs Kino to get rid of it: "Throw it away, Kino... Let us bury it and forget the place" (Steinbeck 20). Juana understands that the pearl brings more than just money; it brings danger. Her words show that greed is beginning to harm their

lives (Zaman et al. 191). However, Kino did not listen. When Juana tries to throw the pearl away, Kino hits her: "He struck her in the face with his clenched fist ... hissed at her like a snake" (Steinbeck 31). This is a painful moment that shows how greed can turn love into violence. Kino becomes so focused on the pearl that he hurts the one who loves him (Urfiani 49). Greed makes him lose his kindness.

Kino also begins to act more controlling. He says, "I am a man," and Juana quietly answers, "Hush" (Steinbeck 30). This shows that Kino is no longer listening to Juana. Instead, he feels the need to prove his power (Subekti 22). The pearl and the greed it brings change him. He stops respecting Juana as an equal, and their relationship becomes tense (Urfiani 48). As Kino becomes more obsessed with the pearl, he also starts to feel alone. After the buyers try to trick him, the narrator says, "Kino felt alone and unprotected... the melody of evil" (Steinbeck 14). He feels surrounded by danger and cannot trust anyone. Greed makes him pull away from Juana and neighbours, and even from who he used to be.

Others also notice that Kino has changed. The neighbours say, "He was a man transfigured... A foolish madness came over him" (Steinbeck 13), showing he is no longer the calm, kind man they knew. His desire for wealth makes him appear strange and dangerous. Greed affects not just his actions but also how others view him. His mistrust grows when he realises the buyers are dishonest: "Kino's face was perplexed and worried... 'They are cheats'" (Steinbeck 25). He starts seeing everyone as an enemy. Greed isolates him and robs him of his peace of mind. Though Juana remains with him, she knows their life has changed forever (Zaman et al. 190). When she sees a dead man and Kino's bloody knife, she realises their peace is lost: "A dead man in the path and Kino's knife ... convinced her" (Steinbeck 32). She had tried to save their old life, but greed ruined it. At the end, Kino gives her the pearl with shaking hands, but she says, "No, you" (Steinbeck 47), making him face the consequences. The pearl has brought only pain, violence, and guilt.

From these moments, the novel shows that greed can destroy love, trust, and peace. It not only damages relationships but also completely changes them. For Kino and Juana, greed does not lead to a better life, but to suffering and loss.

4.4. Greed and Human Values

Steinbeck shows greed as a deep problem in society through figures like the Doctor and the Pearl Buyers, whose actions cause moral harm and destroy human values. The doctor, meant to heal, risks Coyotito's life to get near Kino's pearl: "The doctor's eyes watered... 'I will give him something to try to turn the poison aside'" (Steinbeck 16). He pretends to help, but it is only for profit. Similarly, the Pearl Buyers secretly work together to cheat Kino while pretending to compete: "knew what price they would offer, how high they would bid" (Steinbeck 21). Their greed is not just personal; it reflects a capitalist system that exploits Kino's labour and values. As Eagleton explains, such a system leads people to follow class roles and to ignore fairness and justice.

Kino, at first a kind and hopeful man, begins to change as greed around him grows. He is forced to fight and even kill to protect his family. This violence turns him into "a terrible machine... His strength and his movement and his speed were a machine" (Steinbeck 46). This loss of humanity is not Kino's fault, but a result of the cruel world he lives in. When Kino says, "This pearl has become my soul. If I give it up, I shall lose my soul" (Steinbeck 35), it shows how deeply he identifies with the pearl. This is what Marx and Eagleton call false consciousness and commodity fetishism, when people believe their value comes from material things instead of their human values and morals.

The pearl starts as a symbol of hope and dreams; Kino sees dream forms in it, but later it becomes a sign of death and sadness. He sees Coyotito "lying in the little cave with the top of his head shot away" (Steinbeck 47), and the pearl itself becomes "ugly... like a malignant growth" (Steinbeck 47). This manifests how greed transforms hope into horror. This same greed poisons Kino's community, destroying trust and creating fear "The town... closed itself in against the night, and anyone who moved about in the darkness would be noticeable" (Steinbeck 36). Still, Juana stands for lasting human values. Her protective love for Coyotito remains strong and uncorrupted "Her eyes were as cold as the eyes of a lioness... Juana's first baby... nearly everything there was in Juana's world" (Steinbeck 4). Her care highlights what is lost when greed takes over, showing that even in darkness, genuine compassion can endure.

5. Conclusion

This study explored the theme of greed being a harmful and destructive force in *The Pearl* by John Steinbeck. It used Terry Eagleton's Marxist literary theory to examine how the desire for money and material things, along with unfair social systems, can erode human values and harm relationships. By reading the novel closely and focusing on the characters, events, and symbols, the study showed that greed in the story is not just a personal issue but part of a broader social and political system, such as capitalism and colonialism.

The findings revealed that Steinbeck uses characters such as the doctor, the priest, and the buyers of the pearl to reflect bigger systems of greed. These characters exploit Kino and his family, showing how greed destroys trust, morality, and the bonds between people. Kino, who starts as a kind and hopeful father, slowly becomes violent and alone. This change proves that even good people can fall into destruction when greedy and unfair systems surround them. Also, greed cuts Kino off from his community, ruins his relationship with Juana, and plays a part in the sad loss of their baby.

This novel conveys the moral lesson that love, care, and family are more important than money and material possessions. Juana, Kino's wife, becomes the emotional heart of the story. She keeps her kindness and strength even when everything around her is falling apart. Her deep love for the baby Coyotito and her wish to protect peace in their life is the opposite of Kino's growing greed. This shows how greed can mess up people's sense of what really matters. Steinbeck wants the readers to think about the dangers of putting money over people. He also points out that the systems that support greed can harm everyone, both the rich and the poor.

In short, this study has significant value for literary scholarship and other discussions of human morality, social inequality, and the dangers of greed. This study enriches the existing body of research on *The Pearl* by challenging previous interpretations that solely blame Kino for his downfall. This study highlights how capitalist structures manipulate and oppress the working class, forcing individuals like Kino into desperation.

Beyond literary and social analysis, this study underscores the universal dangers of greed. Students and researchers in literature can benefit from this study by learning to analyse themes and apply literary theories such as Marxism. The study guides readers to reflect on the importance of values such as love, honesty, and family over wealth and possessions.

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