Steinbeck’s Symbolic Manifestations of the Theme of Race and Ethnicity in The Pearl

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Steinbeck’s Symbolic Manifestations of The Theme of Race and Ethnicity in The Pearl

スタインベックの《真珠》に於ける
人種民族性のテーマのシンボル的明示

Tsuneko IWASE
岩瀬恒子

We have grown attached to John Steinbeck’s The Pearl over sixty years since it was published in 1947. The Pearl is a Mexican folk tale which Steinbeck heard during a trip to the Gulf of California on scientific expedition studying marine life which he described in Sea of Cortez. The novelette is about a pearl “as big as a gull’s egg” (26) and the woe it worked in the lives of those who found it. Like all folk tales, The Pearl is simple and direct, yet its emotional impact is powerful and at the same time it is a complicated work of art well constructed. All of Steinbeck’s techniques in The Pearl points in the direction of a parable and even the central and other important themes are not an exception. Steinbeck’s distinguishing treatment of the minute details of the realistic is found in several scenes and in every occasion he extends his literary skills from specific, concrete and minute to suggestive, abstract, symbolic and universal. The combination of strongly established symbolism, and social commentary makes this an introduction to the genre of a classical parable literary work. Especially, his symbolic representations of the central themes of poverty, wealth, and social justice become effective in giving the fable-like novelette literary value.

There is much truth in the fact that Steinbeck’s world in The Pearl attracted most of the first generation of Steinbeck critics: Robert E. Kingery remarks that “within that single frame, Steinbeck achieves a major artistic triumph full of subtle overtones, large fundamentals and universal significance”
(315). Writing at the same time, Ralph Habas finds *The Pearl* a “success in stirring the emotions profoundly,” however, he argues against its “rather rudimentary plot” (316).

Focusing on the argument of one detractor, we find *Time* anonymous reviewer saying that “Steinbeck’s *The Pearl* will seem a little jewel only to those readers who find important meanings in calculated ambiguities, and mistake manipulated sentimentality for emotion” (322).

Peter Lisca, one of the second generation of prominent Steinbeck critics, points out that “the story urges the reader to look beyond the physical events into their spiritual significance” (220) based on Steinbeck’s remarks of his own novelette. The author says that “I tried to write it as folklore, to give it that set-aside, raised-up feeling that all folk stories have” (Wagner-Martin xxiii). Steinbeck’s maneuvering to deal with symbolic representations of the theme, however, is critical in determining whether he really succeeded in writing as folklore.

Hence, the reader must be aware of all of Steinbeck’s statements about *The Pearl* that point in this direction, and receive his cue in his instructions to “take his own meaning” from this story, and read his own life into it” (“Introduction” 3). His suggestion helps each individual’s interpreting and appreciating this novelette and provides additional insights for us.

Before advancing to symbolic manifestations of the thematic material, let me introduce the Indian fisherman’s story. It deals with a Mexican fisherman named Kino who is devoted to his wife, Juana, and his child, Coyotito. The child is bitten by a scorpion and the white doctor refuses to treat him. Kino discovered a huge pearl, the greatest pearl in the world according to his Mexican neighbors. The doctor tries to steal it, and the pearl merchants try to cheat him out of it. In an inevitable sequence of tragic consequences Kino is forced to flee from his village to sell his pearl. The pearl now becomes both life and “soul” (73) for him. His spirit permeates the pearl and he stands on his principle and then his spirit and principle spark his passion and amplify his personal commitment. He has no choice but to murder the “trackers” (78) who come after him. In the end he has lost his home, his child, and his happiness, and he flings the pearl back into the sea and returns to his town to re-establish a meaningful existence within the community. Kino’s tragic experiences forced
reinvent himself as a Mexican Indian and made a man of Kino.

With this plot in mind, I would like to turn to the central theme. Just as the discovery of the pearl is an “accident,” so is man’s existence, and that existence has meaning within human relationships, basic of which is the family. Just as the pearl can become good or becomes evil because of the ways men use it, so man himself appears, becomes, emerges as good or evil because of the ways men use other men, nurturing or destroying the human relationship between them. Invalidation of the meaning of their existence is caused by purposeful action for an evil goal.

In this paper I have attempted to trace two symbolic manifestations of this central theme mentioned above through the novelette. The first follows Steinbeck’s use of music as a symbolic representation of the theme paralleling the basic story. The second symbolic manifestation is found in Steinbeck’s of description of “brush houses” and the city of “stone and plastic” (13) to suggest the relationships between Kino’s community and the town as social embodiments of the theme again paralleling the basic story.

Steinbeck established three main songs that are named: the Songs of the Family, of Evil, and of the Pearl. Schematically, these three melodies can be envisioned as originating on three separate planes, with the Song of the Family in the middle and the song of Evil on a parallel plane. From a plane below both, the Song of the Pearl is created and, as the story itself progresses, moves forward to become one with the Song of the Family, then to transcend it and join with the Song of Evil.

In the calm beginning of the story two songs are heard: the Song of the Family is identified along with other unnamed songs which are the heritage of Kino’s people. And the Song of Evil is heard for the first time with the attack of the scorpion and later as the music of the enemy when Kino stands before the doctor’s house. During the search for a pearl, the Song of the Pearl is given birth by the Songs of the Undersea and of the Pearl That Might Be, then is finally heard clearly and richly as Kino holds the pearl in his hand. Later in the story, when Kino and his pearl are the center of attention in his hut, the Songs of the Family and of the Pearl harmonize.

As symbolic representation, the musical parallel must now be related to the central theme. Within the human relationship where Kino’s life has meaning,
the Song of the Family is warm, clear, soft, and protecting. Herein the Song of the Family represents completeness. It continues to have these qualities as long as the Song of the Pearl does not overwhelm it. As Steinbeck writes, “one beatified the other” (29).

When the human relationship is threatened and destroyed, the Song of the Family is interrupted and then becomes secondary to the Song of the Pearl. But because life’s meaning is now dependent on the pearl rather than on human relationships, the song of the Pearl becomes the Song of Evil opposed to the Song of the Family, which is now harsh, snarling, and defensive—a fierce cry until the song of the Pearl is stilled and the human relationships are restored within the original community. Here we see how effectively Steinbeck uses symbolic musical devices to achieve suitable textualization for the central theme through the suggestive mood and tone of each song.

Steinbeck also presents a pair of symbolically descriptive phrases which he will continue to use in order to strengthen the reader’s image of the relationships already mentioned. He juxtaposes the “brush houses” of the community and the “stone and plaster houses” of the town. This basic symbolic image suggests several ideas. Perhaps the first is the idea of impermanence on the one hand and protected passivity on the other. “Brush houses” must suggest contact with nature and with life. If there is a strenuous struggle for existence in the community, there is also a peaceful assimilation with nature. In addition the possibility or desire for human contact is evident in the phrase, which suggests openness and a lack of any permanent barriers. In contrast, “stone and plaster houses” reinforces the idea of aloof coldness of retreat from the vital contest into a protected refuge from fear of the forces of nature. Besides, the key phrase, “city of stone and plaster” by which Steinbeck combines all that has been the nameless individuals of the town, such as a priest, beggars, and pearl merchants. While the image created by the term “stone” represents refuge, protection, coldness, and harshness, the term “plaster” is the image of camouflage, the shell-like mask worn by the town to conceal its parasitic nature.

Steinbeck further elaborates upon his description of “the city of harsh outer walls” and “inner cool gardens where a little water played and the bougainvillaea crusted the walls with purple, brick-red, and white,” and finally to “the secret gardens. . . the singing of caged birds. . . and the splash of
cooling water on hot flagstones” (13, 14). Later he repeats the images by referring to the wall, water, and caged birds.

The images of the “secret gardens,” “caged birds,” and fountains indicate abundant greenery and cool beauty beneath a relentless sun. Yet, if these images are suggestive of human relationships, of the juxtaposed modes of life between Kino’s community and the town, their normality must be questioned. Thus, as “stone and plaster houses” suggests a retreat from the vital contest, so too do these images suggest a refuge. Moreover, they are unnatural. A “secret garden” is the property of one who cannot appreciate nature’s garden, because nature’s garden is not his alone. Similarly, “the singing of caged birds” is only a substitute for the melodies so naturally a part of Kino’s people and a splashing water fountain is a poor imitation of the “splash of waves” (5) or the lullaby of the sea.

These images at first glance are completely acceptable; but, when examined, they confirm the picture of the town as protective and withdrawn from life and nature and suggest that the people are almost as lifeless and unnatural as their gardens.

In the phrase, “harsh outer walls,” Steinbeck not only reinforces the defensive ideas of retreat and refuge, but also suggests another idea, that is, an offensive barrier against outsiders. The economic, social, and cultural oppression of Kino’s community by the town is advanced from behind the barrier of racial prejudice. But this barrier is beautifully camouflaged with bougainvillaea. Here too, however, the camouflage itself is descriptive of the town, for the blossoms of the bougainvillaea “with purple and brick-red and white” (13) are symbolic in color. The purple can represent royalty or imperial rank or power, the conquistadors of the Spanish kings whose descendants are the oppressors of Kino’s people. It can also symbolize the grave sins of prejudice and avarice against Mexican Indians. The brick-red color can represent the extent of the hatred of the town for the community or, more likely, the blood that has been shed in the subjugation of the Indians. The white color although it very often suggests innocence and purity, can also symbolize cowardice or can refer to the white robe of the clergy.

In addition to the two symbolic manifestations of the theme mentioned above, Steinbeck has also pictures of the parasitic relationship between the
community and the town. In the first instance of symbolic metaphors from the animal world, Steinbeck observes how an ant, a social animal working for the good of its colony, has been “trapped by an ant-lion,” (7) living near the ant colony to prey upon it for his food. In the same way the individuals of the town have built “traps” to take advantage of the ignorance of the Indians and is preyed upon them for whatever they have such as wealth, labor, or services. Next the author cites the example of the hungry dogs and pigs of the town which scavenge the beach searching for “dead fish or seabirds” (8). The former represent the greedy townspeople, while the latter represent the Indians who have no power to resist.

In a third symbolic metaphor, Steinbeck describes the fish that live near the oyster beds to feed off the rejected oysters and “to nibble at inner shells” (21). Perhaps this is the most forceful of the metaphors, for the author seems to imply that the Indians, rejected and thrown back after having been robbed of their wealth by the whole system of white people, are now the prey of the townspeople. They live nearby and scavenge even upon the hopes, dreams, and souls of these oppressed people. Finally in the metaphor of the large fish feeding on the small fish or of “the slaughter of great fishes” (38). Steinbeck supplies a simple restatement of this parasitic relationship between the town and the community, and perhaps a picture of the inevitability of such a relationship in nature. Thus, through the force of symbols, we absorb Steinbeck’s theme through our pores, without knowing we do so, by osmosis.

In Kino’s community all have a sense of responsibility to one another and a respect for the humanity of each. Coyotito’s scream attracts the neighbors’ sympathetic attention as well as curiosity, and the neighbors accompany Kino to the doctor’s. Upon the doctor’s refusal to treat the child, the neighbors will not shame Kino and abandon him so that he will not have to face them. The discovery of the pearl brings them again, this time to share the joy and dreams; yet, they are more concerned for Kino than they are interested in the pearl. The neighbors again come to Kino when the doctor appears to inflict temporary illness upon Coyotito. They also go with Kino when he attempts to sell the pearl as a necessary sign of friendship; and both before and after the visit, Juan Tomas emerges from the group to represent the critical thinking of the community. During the crisis, Kino could escape; but he will not violate the
sanctity of the community by taking another’s boat. Nobody questions Kino’s Mexican Indian integrity, and it is his integrity that matters. Kino accordingly proves himself an indigenous Mexican Indian. Although the neighbors demonstrate concern at the fire and grieve over the supposed deaths of Kino and his family, Kino’s relationship with the community has been destroyed because of the murder; he must leave to protect the community and his brother. Kino says, “I am like (a) leprosy” (72). Kino tries to struggle for justice but the whole system overwhelms him.

The town, on the other hand, is like a separate organism, walled off from the life of the community, yet living only to run dry of that life. With the beggars acting as seers for our benefit, the parasitic relationship becomes clear in the actions of the nameless individuals of the town, such as a doctor, a priest, and pearl merchants, as I have already mentioned above. They are unnamed as if they were symbolic figures of impersonal forces, yet they are singled out for individual roles. Especially the doctor and the priest project as haughty white figures, and they are viewed as unprincipled in their quest for power in the mainstream of society. It is through them that we can see all the characteristics that Steinbeck’s description has implied.

“The doctor would not come” (13) say the neighbors; and when the child is taken to him, the doctor will not treat him. As a person, he is cold and withdrawn from the life around him; his only concern is his desire to return to France. He has his “secret garden,” his bedroom, where his life is that of a wealthy French aristocrat. In his actions, the doctor depicts the harsh barriers of prejudice, from his first remarks in refusing to treat Coyotito, saying “I am a doctor, not a veterinary,” (17) to his apparently inhumane experiment with the boy in Kino’s hut. When the doctor puts on his friendly face, his plaster mask, after the pearl has been found, it is only to get the right of entering Kino’s hut. He has willingly emerged from behind the harsh barrier to use his knowledge and status to discover the pearl’s hiding place and to try to steal it. Steinbeck makes us aware of this camouflage by saying that the doctor’s purpose had been discerned by the people, for he “was not good at dissembling” (38).

Another dissembler is the priest, whom the news of the pearl has brought probably for the first time in many months to see what part of the wealth he
can get for the Church. When he addresses these Indians “children,” he makes
the words “sound like a benediction” (33). Yet, in the sermon that he gives an-
nually, he associates himself with the town’s oppression and strengthens its
parasitic suppression upon the community by sanctifying it. Like the doctor,
upon learning of the pearl, the priest reacts selfishly and emerges from behind
the protective wall to raid the sudden new wealth of the community. Kino is
manipulated and exploited by the colonial powers.

It is the pearl buyer, however, who wins the prize for best hypocrite.
Steinbeck describes the boss merchant’s nervous energy inherent in the preda-
tory quest of prey in a very realistic way. While he was waiting for Kino’s
arrival, “he rolled a coin back and forth over his knuckles and made it appear
and disappear, made it spin and sparkle,” (52) and when he sees Kino’s great
pearl his poker faced secret movements of a coin trick suddenly come to an
end. “The secret hand behind the desk missed in its precision” and “the coin
stumbled over a knuckle and slipped silently into the dealer’s lap” (53). In
league with the other buyers, he tries to cheat Kino. We may call it the attack
from behind the wall of economic oppression. Indeed, all the pearl buyers rep-
resent that wall, for as agents of a single man they stand together as the harsh
barrier of monopoly. Yet, each one, since he appears to be an independent
agent, acts as camouflage, as a camouflaging blossom hiding that wall.
Realizing their failure to cheat Kino, they later try to rob him. Then, directly
or indirectly, after Kino has determined to circumvent that wall of monopoly
by selling his pearl in the capital—it is Kino’s rebelliousness that challenges
the whole system of white people—they destroy all that Kino has of value,
his boat and his home.

In general, the townspeople as presented in the novelette suggest the char-
acteristics of parasitism, especially the retreat from strenuous struggle, the pas-
sive mode of life. In addition, the pearl buyers show another characteristic,
that of retreat from independent endeavor. Finally, the doctor symbolizes the
unmistakable degeneration that results from parasitism, and he is a symbol of
corruption of the hierarchy of social economy.

Up to this point in the novelette, we can easily see that Kino’s community
nurture human relationships and validates the meaning of existence for its
members, whereas the town, as far as the community is concerned and Kino in
particular, has consistently sought by its manipulation of men to invalidate the meaning of existence, and it succeeds by forcing Kino to leave the community. From this point the images became animalistic, because the human relationships that gave meaning to Kino's existence as a man have been left behind. The pursuers personify the hatred of the town, which in its greed seeks now to destroy utterly the outsider who has defied it. Their destruction and the consequent salvation of the family, although at the sacrifice of one of its members, re-establishes the humanity and the meaning of existence to Kino and Juana only because they return to the community to begin life again by destroying the pearl. Ultimately Kino kept fighting fires on every front, and he fought to the bitter end to search for his soul.

To conclude this analysis of Steinbeck's symbolic suggestiveness, we may say that his work shows a persistent interest in the experiments in what strategies are the most effective in creating a fable-like texture and structure out of the realistic.

In 1990 Roy S. Simmonds points out that a fable-like atmosphere of this novelette mostly lies in "a preponderance of identifiable symbols, metaphors, and philosophies for the theme" (181). While some people critique Steinbeck's flaws in perilously overloaded devices, and fear that Steinbeck may be spreading his ideas too thin trying to experiment with too many different techniques at once, no one debates his frontier spirit in the measure of a true artist. Thus Steinbeck's suggestive symbolic manifestations of the central theme as noted above and these various expressions of it correlate with one another and complete the story with the finest touch.
Works Cited


【日本語抄訳】

スタインベックの『真珠』に於ける
人種民族性のテーマのシンボル的明示

岩瀬恒子

ジョン・スタインベックの『真珠』が発表されて以来60年余り、未だに読者を魅惑し続けている。彼の作品に於ける全てのテクニックは寓話を示唆しており、そのテーマさえも例外ではない。作品に表れる現実的で詳細に互いの描写はもれなく独特あるいは具体的、微細さから暗示的、抽象的、シンボル的、普遍的なものへと意味を広げている。作品の中心主題の多くのシンボル的な明示は効果的であり、寓話的な中編小説を文学的価値あるものに昇華している。