

A Study of *The Pearl* :  
On the Images of the Cave

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*The Pearl* was first published in *Woman's Home Companion* in its December issue in 1945 under the title *The Pearl of the World* and was issued in book form in 1947. Its structure is simple; there are not so many characters or changes of the scenes, but there are many elements of symbolism and allegory in it. In addition, John Steinbeck does not say what he means outright. Therefore, it is one of his difficult works to be interpreted, but at the same time, it is profound and worth appreciating.

The most important point of contention is whether the main characters, Kino and Juana, lose everything or they gain something through the hard experiences. In other words, do they suffer defeat or gain victory through the journey? When they come back to their home city at the end of the novel, they look very different compared with before:

And her wide eyes stared inward on herself. She was as remote and as removed as heaven. . . . The people say that the two seemed to be removed from human experience; that they had gone through pain and had come out on the other side; that there was almost a magical protection about them.<sup>1</sup>

From this description, it can be said that they have come to the stage of spiritual enlightenment. It seems that they met the God face to face, and this solemn atmosphere makes the people of the city who rush to see them just crowd back and let them pass without speaking anything. It is true that they lose the most precious treasure, which is their only son, Coyotito, but they are not devastated completely.

When they come back walking not in single file but side by side, it is clear that their relation has changed; that is, Juana was the mere second existence compared with Kino, and she was sometimes treated like an animal by him before, but now their value of existence becomes equal. Also, when Kino draws back his arm and flings the pearl with all his might, the readers feel that Kino and Juana have not been totally crushed. There still remains some strength in them, and they will make a fresh start. That is, they gain victory over their experiences, even though their sacrifice is very big.

Then, what makes Kino and Juana remove from human experience? In my opinion, the climax scene has the great influence on them; Steinbeck chooses the cave where Kino, Juana, and Coyotito flee from the enemy, and it is the place where Coyotito's head is shot away, too. The author includes many symbols there, and these images carefully indicate his point of view. Therefore, I would like to examine the images of the cave to prove that Steinbeck gives them the victory at the end of the novel.

There are some descriptions about caves in the Bible, and their images are not the same. First of all, a cave is the place where someone flees and hides from the enemy:

30 And Lot went up out of Zoar, and dwelt in the mountain, and his two daughters with him; for he feared to dwell in Zoar: and he dwelt in a cave, he and his two daughters.  
(Genesis, 19:30)

Also, there is a description that "these five kings [the king of Jerusalem, the king of Hebron, the king of Jarmuth, the king of Lachish, and the king of Eglon] fled, and hid themselves in a cave at Makkedah."

Next, a cave is described as the place where the dead is buried:

19 . . . Abraham buried Sarah his wife in the cave of the field of Machpelah before Mamre: the same is Hebron in the land of Canaan.

20 And the field, and the cave that is therein, were made sure unto Abraham for a possession of burying place by the sons of Heth. (Genesis, 23:19-20)

Furthermore, people use a cave to throw away something in it. For example, when Joshua was told that the five kings [the king of Jerusalem, the king of Hebron, the king of Jarmuth, the king of Lachish, and the king of Eglon] are found hid in a cave at Makkedah, his action is as follows:

22 Then said Joshua, Open the mouth of the cave, and bring out those five kings unto me out of the cave.

26 . . . Joshua smote them, and slew them, and hanged them on five trees: and they were hanging upon the trees until the evening.

27 And it came to pass at the time of the going down of the sun, that Joshua commanded, and they took them down off the trees, and cast them into the cave wherein they had been hid, and laid great stones in the cave's mouth. . . . (Joshua, 10:22-27)

From these descriptions, it can be said that there are some negative images in the word 'cave'; it is associated in the reader's mind with 'flight', 'death', or 'grave'.

However, there are some contrastive images in the word 'cave', too. After hiding in a cave, Lot's two daughters know that there are no appropriate men to come in unto them after the manner of all the earth, so they plan to preserve seed of their father:

33 And they made their father drink wine that night: and the first born went in, and lay with her father. . . .

35 And they made their father drink wine that night also: and the younger arose, and lay with him. . . .

36 Thus were both the daughters of Lot with child by their father.

37 And the first born bare a son, and called his name Moab: the same is the father of the Moabites unto this day.

38 And the younger, she also bare a son, and called his name Ben-ammi: the same is the father of the children of Ammon unto this day. (Genesis, 19:33-38)

In this case, they are not the married couple, but the cave is the place where their children are born anyway. In other words, the cave is related with the new lives.

Furthermore, a cave includes the more extended meaning in the story of the Saviour:

59 And when Joseph had taken the [Jesus'] body, he wrapped it in a clean linen cloth,

60 And laid it in his own new tomb, which he had hewn out in the rock: and he rolled a great stone to the door of the sepulchre, and departed. (Matthew, 27:59-60)

Here, the word 'cave' is not used, but it is possible to think that a cave and a grave have the similar meaning. As mentioned before, Abraham buries his wife, Sarah, in the cave of the field of Machpelah,

and he possesses it as her graveyard. Also, 'sepulchre' is the word used especially in the case of a hole which is made by being dug in the rocks. Like this, Jesus Christ is buried in a kind of cave, and the miracle happens thereafter:

6 He [Jesus] is not here: for he is risen, as he said. . . .

7 And go quickly, and tell his disciples that he is risen from the dead. . . .

9 And as they [women] went to tell his disciples, behold, Jesus met them, saying, All hail. And they came and held him by the feet, and worshipped him. (Matthew, 28:6-9)

As we can see, the cave is the place of the Resurrection of Christ here.

Therefore, it is clear that there are some positive images in the word 'cave', too; it includes the holy and mysterious elements.

In the primeval age, caves were used as the places where people would sleep protected from rain, snow, or wind; they are the original houses for the human history. In addition, a cave has the shade of meaning of mother or womb. That is, a cave has the image of birth or chain of lives.

Like this, a cave has two different images; one is negative, and the other is positive.

Steinbeck states in a letter to Pascal Covici in January 1941 as follows:

Not that I have lost any hope. All the goodness and the heroisms will rise up again, then be cut down again and rise up. It isn't that the evil thing wins--it never will--but

that doesn't die. . . . It seems fairly obvious that two sides of a mirror are required before one has a mirror, that two forces are necessary in man before he is man.<sup>2</sup>

Here, the author admits that there are two opposite elements in one thing, and when it is interpreted in the extended meaning, it means if there is only one element in something, it will be shallow and dull. In other words, he believes that everything needs two different elements and that it actually has them in itself.

In *The Pearl*, Coyotito is not resurrected because he is not Jesus Christ but a human baby; he is dead forever and will never breathe again. However, Kino and Juana have a chance to have another baby. When a new baby is born, he will be the symbol of rebirth in a sense, even though he cannot be the exact substitute for Coyotito. The life will not become extinct with the death of Coyotito, and the chain of lives will continue by Kino and Juana.

It is important that the author chooses the young couple instead of the old one. If Kino and Juana are too old, they will not have any chance to have a new baby, and moreover, they will not have enough time to make a new start. However, Kino and Juana are young and have a lot of time, so they can survive through the hardships and gain something spending a long time in the future.

In *Sea of Cortez* (1941), which includes the prototype story of *The Pearl*, the author says:

. . . it is through struggle and sorrow that people are able to participate in one another--the heartlessness of the

healthy, well-fed, and unsorrowful person has in it an infinite smugness.<sup>3</sup>

Here, it is true that the author has the very cool-hearted point of view on the one hand, therefore sometimes it seems that he is cruel and cold-hearted. For example, Kino and Juana lose nearly everything such as their house, canoe, and Coyotito. However, Steinbeck never thrusts away the almost devastated people completely; he looks them carefully and gives them the possibility of salvation, even though the sign is so slight that it is apt to be overlooked. Steinbeck sometimes makes the characters in his works stop for a while and be in great pain, but he gives them the possibility to move forward again.

When I take all these things into consideration, it can be said that Kino and Juana do not suffer defeat but get victory at the end of the painful experiences.

The author wrote about the prototype story of *The Pearl in Sea of Cortez*, and it was a story of one particular person. However, he changed the story to be true for everybody; in the prologue of *The Pearl*, he states that "If this story is a parable, perhaps everyone takes his own meaning from it and reads his own life into it." (P, p.3) Then, *The Pearl* becomes the story which may happen to everybody, and since people may feel in different ways from the same work, it becomes more profound.

Steinbeck says that there are two opposite sides in one thing and emphasizes that the positive image such as the goodness and the heroism rise up over again, even though they are cut down by the



negative image such as the evil things as mentioned before. He himself sometimes experienced hard times in his life; for example, his mother and father, who were the good supporters but sometimes the burden for him, died each in 1934 and in 1936. Once *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) created a great sensation, he hated that the circumstances were changed and went out to sea with Edward Ricketts in 1940. He divorced his first wife, Carol, whom he once had loved very much and got married to his second wife, Gwyndolen in 1943. Also in the same year, he watched the war with his own eyes. Through these things, he wrote *The Pearl*; that is, he must have believed that there would be something good in the future, even though the possibility was slight. It might not be too much to say that his hope or ideal made him write the novel.

The author always had this belief when he wrote the great work, *East of Eden* in 1952. This is the developed work from *The Pearl* in a sense, and his intention is clear:

I will tell them [Steinbeck's sons] . . . the story of good and evil, of strength and weakness, of love and hate, of beauty and ugliness. I shall try to demonstrate to them how these doubles are inseparable--how neither can exist without the other and how out of their groupings creativeness is born.<sup>4</sup>

He also says that "It is true that we are weak and sick and ugly and quarrelsome but if that is all we ever were, we would millenniums ago have disappeared from the face of the earth." (JN p.116)

When I take all these things into consideration, I come to the conclusion that the author gives Kino and Juana victory at the end of the novel, even though the sacrifice is very big. He believes, or tries to believe that there are some possibility and courage left in the people who are in the depths of distress. He needed to drive the novel this way just because he was not a strong man. The ending of *The Pearl* expresses Steinbeck's characteristic very well.

#### Notes

1 John Steinbeck, *The Pearl* with an Introduction by Linda Wagner-Martin (New York: Penguin Books, 1994) p.93. All future references are to this edition and will be indicated within the text.

2 Elaine Steinbeck and Robert Wallsten eds., *Steinbeck: A Life in letters* (New York: The Viking Press, 1975) p.221.

3 John Steinbeck and Edward F. Ricketts, *Sea of Cortez: A Leisurely Journal of Travel and Research* 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Paul P. Appel, 1982) pp.117-118.

4 John Steinbeck, *Journal of a Novel: The East of Eden Letters* (New York: The Viking press, 1969) p.4. All future references are to this edition and will be indicated within the text.