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FROM “FLIGHT” TO THE PEARL: A THEMATIC STUDY

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I

THE PEARL, PUBLISHED IN 1947, has much in common with “Flight,” written eight years earlier. Both stories are about young Indian men who are obliged to lead very poor lives. Both stories have a similar historical background, plot and setting, ending in tragedy. Both protagonists, Pepé and Kino, are pursued by trackers because, in protecting themselves or their pride, they have killed men who attacked them. Both protagonists lose their precious possessions one after another, and both *The Pearl* and “Flight” deal with a period of five days, focusing on a flight that ends in tragedy. More significant than these similarities, however, is their development of common themes. In this essay, I am first going to discuss the differences and similarities between these two stories, then examine how the theme develops from “Flight” to *The Pearl*, and finally identify the consistent theme which culminates in Steinbeck’s later work, *Viva Zapata!*

According to Jackson J. Benson, Steinbeck visited Mexico with his wife Carol in 1935, but he had also taken frequent trips there in the early 1930s (321-22). Since he had become very interested in Emiliano Zapata and the Mexican revolution, Steinbeck went to Mexico to interview the people who knew about Zapata and his people. It is apparent that during his stay in Mexico he saw many persecuted people struggling for life, most of whom were exploited and had no land.

In 1941, two years after “The Flight” was published, *Forgotten Village* was printed, and in 1947 *The Pearl* was issued. Then five years later, in 1952, the script of *Viva Zapata!* was completed. All of these works are related thematically.

II

Steinbeck's keen interest in Mexican Indians is seen in his essay "Zapata: A Narrative, in Dramatic Form, of the Life of Emiliano Zapata," which is included in the first part of *John Steinbeck/Zapata* edited by Morsberger.



MARLON BRANDO IN A SCENE FROM "VIVA
ZAPATA!" (1952),
DIRECTED BY ELIA KAZAN.

Here Steinbeck describes the history of Mexico since Hernando Cortes conquered it. According to his description, first ranked are the pure Spanish born in Spain, second ranked are the pure Spanish born in Mexico, and third ranked are those with mixed Spanish and Indian blood. Steinbeck writes, "The Indian was not even a citizen. He was a native animal." (20) It should not be overlooked that the protagonists of such works as "Flight," *The Pearl*, or *The Forgotten Village* are all Indians.

Pepé in "Flight" and Kino in *The Pearl* are Native Americans who ranked at the bottom of society, were extremely poor, and were obliged to lead an almost subhuman life. As Ito points out, the description of the Torres family explains the wretched position in which the Mexican Indians were placed (47). At the outset of "Flight," the poverty-stricken Torres family farm is described:

The farm buildings huddled like little clinging aphids on the mountain skirts, crouched low to the ground as though the wind might blow them into the sea. The little shack, the rattling, rotten

barn were grey-bitten with sea salt, beaten by the damp wind until they had taken on the color of the granite hills. (45)

This description gives us the impression that the Torres family's living standard is the worst conceivable. Their housing, especially Pepé's shack, reminds us of a cattle shed rather than a house for human beings. Indeed Pepé leads an apparently poor life, but he is proud of himself as a man. When Pepé goes out to Monterey to get some medicine and salt, he drinks wine at his aunt's house. Probably because of the alcohol, he quarrels with a man and kills him because he cannot stand the humiliation, feeling that his pride is greatly damaged. He says to his mother, "I'm a man now, Mama. The man said names to me I could not allow" (52). Since Pepé is an Indian, he has no option other than starting out on a journey that will lead him to die as a proud man. This is the story of "Flight."

In *The Pearl* Kino, who also lives in a shabby brush house, leads a very simple and poor life with his wife Juana and his baby son, Coyotito. At the beginning Kino is contented with his peaceful life; he even "sighs with satisfaction" (9). But an accident makes him aware of the humiliating situations he and his people have been forced to endure. When their baby is stung by a scorpion, Kino and Juana take him to the doctor, but the physician is greedy and not interested in poor people, ordering his servant to tell them that he is not at home. Kino sees through his lies and feels humiliated:

For a long time Kino stood in front of the gate with Juana beside him. Slowly he put his suppliant hat on his head. Then, without warning, he struck the gate a crushing blow with his fist. He looked down in wonder at his split knuckles and at the blood that flowed down between his fingers. (19)

Rejected by this insolent doctor, Kino finds his humiliation turning to fury. If his son had not been bitten by a scorpion or if he had not found the pearl of the world, he might have remained contented with his peaceful life. The discovery of the pearl makes him realize how unfairly his people have been exploited by the doctor and people like him. Steinbeck writes, "This doctor was of a race which for nearly hundred years had beaten and starved and robbed and despised Kino's race, and frightened it too, so that the indigene came humbly to the door" (15). It is obvious

that not only the doctor but the pearl buyers who try to cheat Kino belong to the same race. In *The Pearl* the social status of the Indians is described in more detail than in "Flight." While Kino and his people lead poor lives in shabby brush huts near the beach, the doctor, whose "race" defeated Kino's many years ago, lives in a fancy house which symbolizes his social status. His house has "harsh outer walls and inner cool gardens where a little water played and the bougainvillea crushed the walls with purple and brick—red and white" (14).

When Kino finds the pearl of the world, he sees in it the possibility of escaping poverty and persecution. He dreams of having a marriage ceremony with Juana at a church, of buying a rifle, and of sending his son to school. His dreams are all associated with his respectability and dignity as a human being. He thinks a rifle and education are powerful weapons for breaking out of the cage in which his people are shut. Sensing the devilish nature of the pearl, however, Juana pleads with her husband to throw it away—a plea that Kino does not heed. He believes that the pearl will be the only chance to become rich enough to get what he wants and restore his pride. For Kino, getting out of poverty and overcoming ignorance are short cuts to the freedom and self-esteem essential for human beings. He says, "Our son must go to school. He must break out of the pot that holds us in" (54). That is why he hangs on to the pearl and kills the men who try to rob him of it. Here we realize clearly that the pearl Kino happened to find plays a different role from the one in the original story which is included in *The Log from the Sea of Cortez*. The pearl in the original story simply means a wealthy and luxurious life and does not have anything to do with that which is spiritually necessary for human existence, such as self-respect and dignity. But the pearl Kino finds serves as a tool which may liberate him and his family from ignorance, poverty, and humiliation. He desperately believes he has to hang onto the pearl:

"My son will read and open the books, and my son will write and will know writing. And my son will make numbers, and these things will make us free because he will know—he will know and through him we will know." And in the pearl Kino saw himself and Juana squatting by the fire in the brush hut while Coyotito read from a great book. "This is what the pearl will do," said Kino. (38)

Both Pepé and Kino kill men and then are obliged to take flight, because they are not allowed to explain what they have done. When Mama Torres sends her son away, she knows he will be killed sooner or later. Steinbeck describes Pepé as destined to die as he comes back home after killing the man: “Before Pepé had gone a hundred yards, the outlines of his figure were misty; and long before he entered the canyon, he had become a gray, indefinite shadow” (54). And Mama Torres is aware of his impending doom as “she began the high, whining keen of the death wail” (54).

In addition, the reader senses Pepé’s approaching death in the writer’s description of the lifeless landscape as Pepé flees to the mountain trail:

Now the redwood trees were smaller and tops were dead, bitten dead where the wind reached them. . . . As soon as the trail had parted from the stream, the trees were gone and only the thick brittle sage and manzanita and chaparral edged the trail. And the soft bleak earth was gone, too, leaving only the light tan broken rock for the trail bed. . . . As he ascended the trail the country grew more rough and terrible and dry. . . . Pepé went slowly through the broken jagged pass and looked down on the other side. . . . And behind the flat another mountain rose desolate with dead rocks and starving bushes. . . . The starved brush and rocks stood out in the half light, strange and lonely in high perspective. (57-59; 62)

All of these descriptions highlight Pepé’s doom.

In his flight Pepé loses one after the other those belongings which protect him—first his knife, then his hat, then his horse, and finally his gun. As he becomes more helpless, the reader knows that his death is inevitable. Furthermore, his approaching death is also indicated by a “black figure” or “a dark form” that sneaks after him, shows up briefly, and repeatedly disappears (58, 59). In the end he dies of a gunshot wound. A number of scholars, including Robert Benton, consider Pepé’s flight as an ordeal endured to achieve manhood, agreeing that he dies courageously and proudly (21). But it should be noted that Pepé had no other choice but to be killed because he is an **Indian** and was not considered a human being with rights. Another similarity between “Flight” and *The Pearl* is that both Pepé and

Kino flee to the mountains. There are two more similarities: their desperate flights on the mountain trails are surrounded by images of death, and through that experience they reach another level of consciousness. As Timmerman suggests, "The mountains also represent self-discovery and death" (208).

In *The Pearl* the historical background of the Indians and their status in society is depicted more definitely and in more detail. Unlike the main figure in "Flight," the protagonist of *The Pearl* has a family—making the story both richer and darker. When Kino accidentally kills a man in a fight while trying to protect himself, he decides he must leave his town, knowing full well what will happen to an Indian who kills someone, whether in self-defense or not. Although Kino is like Pepé because he has to leave his home after killing a man, his flight does not necessarily suggest a journey to death. Unlike Pepé, who accepts his destiny and never dreams of fighting against his enemy, Kino has attempted to escape the humiliating situation in which his people have been imprisoned for such a long time. While Pepé is not concerned about social injustice, Kino becomes aware of it and becomes angry when he is insulted or cheated by the doctor or the pearl buyers. When Kino discovers that the pearl buyers have tried to cheat him, he cries, "Some deep outrage is here. My son must have a chance" (74). Because the canoe is his family's pride and one of his precious few possessions, he is infuriated when he sees a great hole at the bottom of his canoe, and "a searing rage came to him and gave him strength" (85).

A significant difference between "Flight" and *The Pearl* is that Pepé is single, and Kino is married—with his wife, Juana, supporting and even leading him when it becomes necessary. As Debra K. Barker and Mimi Gladstein maintain, it is Juana who gives him the courage and power to fight against the enemy. (See Barker 113-24 and Gladstein 88-89.) Knowing the pearl will invite bad luck, Juana at first repeatedly asks her husband to throw it away. And when Kino kills a man to protect the pearl, she realizes that he is defying the whole world, that he would "drive his strength against a mountain and plunge his strength against the sea. Juana, in her woman's soul, knew that the mountain would stand while the man drowned in it" (83).

Still, Juana courageously drags the dead body into the bush. When she and Kino notice the trackers are at their heels, Kino becomes helpless and desperate, saying "Perhaps I should let them take me" (102). But Juana replies, "Do you think they

would let me live? Do you think they could let the little one here live” (103)? Her words infuriate him and provide new strength: “Her goading struck into his brain; his lips snarled and his eyes were fierce again” (103). But again Kino almost loses hope and suggests he should let the trackers follow him while Juana goes in the opposite direction with their baby, so that they can meet later in a town. She firmly declines his proposal, responding, “No,” and “We go with you”—words which give him great power: “He had taken strength from her. When they moved on it was no longer panic flight” (106). Unlike Mama Torres in “Flight,” who wants her son to die proudly, Juana encourages her husband to survive rather than submit to a gloomy fate.

In “Flight” suspense grows as the story progresses toward the ending. Pursued by the trackers, Pepé goes up the wild mountain trails like a beast driven into a corner. He loses his hat, his horse is killed without warning, and his right hand is wounded by an invisible gunman. The suspense reaches its peak at the ending. This effect is similar in *The Pearl*. While the reader of “Flight” is almost certain of Pepé’s death toward the ending, the reader of *The Pearl* cannot predict what will happen to Kino and his family until the very end. To protect his family and himself, Kino decides to attack the trackers in the dark. He is about to attack when one of them shoots randomly toward the cave. Although Kino kills one man with his knife and shoots the other two with the rifle, it is too late. Their baby, Coyotito, is shot and killed.

Kino loses everything—his house, his canoe, and his son. When he returns to their hometown with Juana and his dead son, he throws the pearl back into the ocean. He still has the rifle and his wife, Juana—a highly symbolic ending. Though Warren French argues that “the conclusion of the novel leaves the impression that Kino is returning to his old life,” the renunciation of the pearl does not simply mean that Kino and his wife will go back to their original life (129). It is not possible for him to do so, because he has killed four people who apparently belong to a higher class. He will probably be arrested and executed. Further, because he has broken community rules, the people in his town will no longer accept him.

Kino’s brother Juan Tomas says to him, “We do know we are cheated from birth to the overcharge on our coffins. But we survive. You have defied not the pearl buyers, but the whole structure, the whole way of life, and I am afraid for you” (73-74). But there is another reason—probably an insurmountable one—



STEINBECK (SECOND FROM LEFT) AND
GWYN (SECOND FROM RIGHT) WITH
ACTORS OF THE MOVIE *LA PERLA*,
INCLUDING MARIA ELENA MARQUEZ
AND PEDRO ARMANDARIZ (BETWEEN
JS AND GWYN). JACK WAGNER
KNEELS IN FRONT.

that prevents Kino from regaining his original life. Once Kino has learned about the unfair structure of his society, he cannot return to his former state of contented ignorance. The only path for him is to stand up and fight. In doing so, he needs to enlighten his people, just as Juan Diego in *Forgotten Village* does. For if Kino stands up for his beliefs, leads an awakened people, and fights as tenaciously as Emiliano in *Viva Zapata!* he may succeed in regaining his people's pride. Nakayama's comment is to the point when he refers to Kino as "a man who will become an Emiliano of La Paz (231). This finale is what the reader expects of Kino at the story's end. And this is what Steinbeck wants readers to do—to create Kino's future story.

Steinbeck's attitude toward the Indians in *Forgotten Village* is similar. At the beginning of the script, the narrator says, "And this is a story about the boy Juan Diego and his family and his people, who live in the long moment when the past slips reluctantly into the future" (9). The people in the village subsist by peacefully

growing corn, but they are very poor. They still live in the past, believing in superstitious fortune-telling rather than scientific knowledge. When Paco, Juan's younger brother dies, people think it is because of an evil spirit that has entered his body rather than germs in the water. Other children in the village are dying of the same disease. The teacher, the only educated person in the village, explains, "The serum from an infected horse can cure the children" (86). But the chief of the village does not believe him: "We do not want horses' blood. Are we horses?" Although both the village people and the chief reject the teacher's advice, Juan Diego believes education can improve his people's life. Therefore, he decides to go to the city to study medicine in order to help his village. The teacher assures him that "when the people see that your sister is well, they will accept the medicine. It is the young people who will change them" (138). The narrator continues:

And the change will come, is coming; the long climb out of darkness. Already the people are learning, changing their lives, learning, working, living in new way. The change will come, is coming, as surely as there are thousands of Juan Diegos in the villages of Mexico. (141-42)

The narrator here is almost certainly Steinbeck himself.

In a scene around the middle of the script, Juan Diego reads a book about an Indian, Juarez, who became a great man and president of all Mexico: "In this one Indian who became president was bound the promise that all the people would some day be free and happy" (69). The scene is very important because it indicates that like Juarez, Juan Diego also will change the village to make his people's life better. Here Steinbeck's message is clear: the village people should be educated because education is the path to a happy and civilized life that is free from ignorance, poverty, and discrimination. This message is clear from the beginning of *The Forgotten Village*:

Among the tall mountains of Mexico the ancient life goes on, sometimes little changing in a thousand years. But now from the cities of the valley, from the schools and laboratories, new thinking and new techniques reach out to the remote villages. The old and the new meet and sometimes clash, but from the meetings a gradual change is taking place in the village. (7)

III

The Pearl ends in tragedy, but, unlike “Flight,” it leaves hope—a hope that Kino will stand up to change the social system by fighting together with his people. Kino demonstrates his strong determination to regain freedom and a respectable life without depending on the pearl when he throws it into the ocean. Kino is an awakened Pepé. He also inherits the spirit of Juana Diego. Indeed, there are several similarities between the two stories: the plot, the length of the days in which the stories are told, and a sense of suspense which builds up to the ending. The most significant similarity is in the themes that *The Pearl* and “Flight” share.

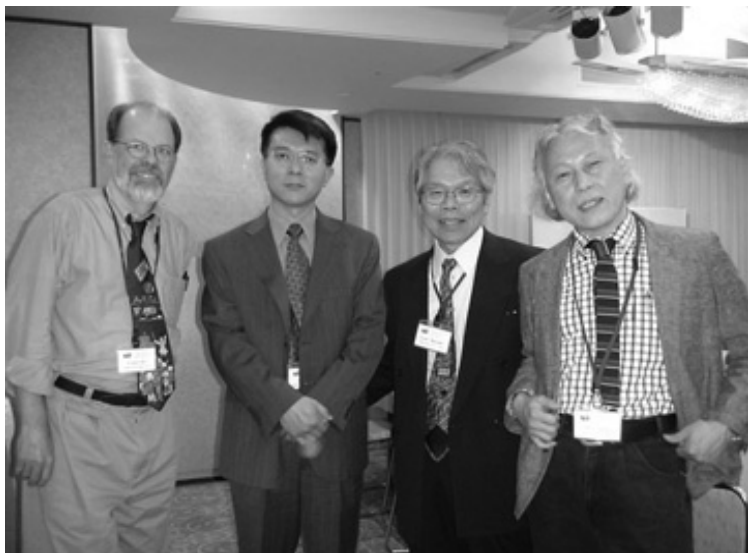
In “Flight” Steinbeck depicts the wretched conditions in which the Mexican Indians live, implying that there is no other way for Pepé to achieve manhood but to die courageously. In *The Pearl*, however, Kino refuses to be killed, humiliated and exploited. At first glance indeed *The Pearl* is based on the story Steinbeck heard when he visited La Paz during an expedition to the Mexican Gulf, but the role of the pearl differs in the two stories. The pearl Kino finds serves as a catalyst which awakens him and changes him, while the pearl in the original story is simply a means to fortune or wealth. For not until Kino finds the pearl does he realize that his life is humiliating. Both protagonists lose precious possessions one after another, but Kino does not lose everything—Juana is still with him.

The reader knows that as long as Juana is there, Kino will never yield to circumstances but will stand up to fight for their future, as did Tom Joad in *The Grapes of Wrath* and Emiliano Zapata in *Viva Zapata!* Emiliano Zapata says to his people, “If your corn is destroyed, replant. If your children die, bear more. And if they drive us out of the villages we will live on the sides of the mountains. But we will live” (104). In this statement is found Steinbeck’s belief in the human capacity to transcend circumstances: people must not yield to oppression; they must fight tenaciously for their dignity.

In “Flight,” *The Forgotten Village*, and *The Pearl*, we can see Steinbeck’s growing concern for the persecuted Indians and, on a broader scale, for persecuted people in general—a concern that would eventually culminate in *Viva Zapata!*

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*RICHARD HART, LUCHEN LI, KIYOSHI NAKAYAMA,
AND SATORU TAGAYA AT THE INTERNATIONAL
STEINBECK CONFERENCE IN KYOTO*