

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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## **THE PEARL / La Perla (1947)**

Emilio Fernández

URL: <https://youtu.be/v14E2zBWbFA>

### **OVERVIEW**

*La Perla* (The Pearl) is a film adaptation of the novella of the same name by John Steinbeck. Always a champion of the underdog and the downtrodden, Steinbeck wrote a story based in a fishing village, La Paz, in Baja California. Emilio Fernández wrote the screenplay and collaborated with gifted cinematographer, Gabriel Figueroa. With him, Fernández created a work of visual poetics that expresses not only the story of an indigenous pearl diver who finds a pearl of spectacular size and quality, but also powerful emotions of fear, hope, jealousy, greed, and rage. The film poetically expresses the injustices and impossibilities of life for indigenous Mexicans who find themselves at the bottom of a rigid and cruel social hierarchy in which the colonizers will stop at nothing to keep the indigenous desperately poor, uneducated, and without hope of advancement.

### **SYNOPSIS**

*La Perla* begins by introducing Quino and Juana, who live with their baby son, Juanito, in a thatch hut near the beach, where Quino goes out to dive for pearls to sell and feed the family. Juana and little Juanito accompany Quino on the small “canoa” boat he inherited from his grandfather. When a scorpion falls from a rope and stings little Juanito, and the local doctor of European descent refuses to treat indigenous residents, Juana prays that Quino will find a large pearl they can sell in order to obtain medical treatment for their son. Quino has amazing luck and finds a pearl larger than anyone has ever seen. Instead of having a positive effect on the family, the pearl seems to trigger a kind of manic grandiosity in Quino, and destructive envy and jealousy from their neighbors. The doctor who refused to treat Juanito is now willing to see him, but only in order to steal the pearl. Unscrupulous pearl dealers also try to cheat Quino, and then, to steal it from him, even if it means harming Quino and his family. Trackers sent by pearl dealers hunt Quino down. They burn down their thatched hut and chase them throughout the thickets and swampy areas. With little Juanito with them, they try to protect themselves, but it is difficult without food or protection. When little Juanito cries out with hunger, one of the trackers shoots toward the sound of the baby crying and hits him. Juanito dies instantly. In the meantime, Quino tries to stop the trackers. He fights and kills them. In despair, Juana and Quino return to the town. They have lost all their ambitions and only wish to be free of the cursed pearl and to have each other again. Quino gives Juana the pearl to throw into the ocean, but she gives it back to him. Quino hurls the pearl into the foaming waters of the shore break. After it falls into the foam, they hold hands.

### **STORY**

**HOMELIFE** It is early morning in a small sea-side village of La Paz in Baja California. Roosters crow and an indigenous man, Quino, awakens. He lives with his wife, Juana, and their baby, Juanito, in a thatch house, which has thatch walls and a thatch roof (palapa). The baby, Juanito, is lying in a box suspended from the roof. Juanito is pulling on a rope hanging down into his box cradle. The surf from the ocean while Juana prepares breakfast and Quino asks how they are doing for frijoles and tortillas. He has not been able to dive for oysters due to the surf conditions, and they are running out of food. As they speak, Juana prepares the tortillas by grinding corn on the metate, and then patting them together with her hands. Quino eats with satisfaction.



**SCORPION BITE** After they have eaten, Quino and Juana look up to the rope that Juanito is pulling. To their horror, they see that a scorpion is climbing down toward the child. Juana prays and recites an incantation, while Kino attempts to grab the scorpion. Their attempts are futile, and Juanito reaches up for the scorpion, which then drops onto his chubby little shoulder, where it stings him. Kino grabs the scorpion and crushes it. Juana tries to suck out the venom. Juanito screams in pain, which arouses the neighbors who come to their house.



**DOCTOR'S REFUSAL** "Please ask the doctor to come!" begs Juana. The doctor never deigns to see the indigenous townspeople. Juana races to the doctor's house, although her neighbors insist that it will be futile - he only sees the upper-class people in town and never the indigenous. They race to the doctor's home. The door is answered by a servant who is indigenous. She, however, does not let



**PEARLING** Desperate to save Juanito, Quino and Juana go to the surf, where they take Quino's boat (which was passed down to him by his grandfather) so they Quino can dive for pearls. Juana prays that Quino finds a pearl of sufficient size to pay for medicine for Juanito. Quino dives for pearls. Quino rises to the top for air, and he immediately returns to dive. Quino surfaces with an enormous oyster. They cut it open and it has a massive pearl.



**VILLAGE PEOPLE** Word of Quino's discovery has spread. Everyone contemplates the pearl, and they are suffused with greed. The businessmen, the doctor, the beggars, and even the priest, all lust after what riches the pearl will bring them. Quino and Juana are naive and they think everyone is happy for them



**TRICKSTERS** Quino intends to sell the pearl. A number of pearl buyers come to the place where Quino will organize the sale. Their goal is to trick him. At the same time, other townspeople people come, all with the intent of stealing the pearl. Juana does not trust the townspeople, nor does she trust Quino, whom she considers to be gullible. Pearl buyers come to bid on the pearl. Pearl divers are so fascinated that they come to watch what happens. Quino, Juana, and Juanito don their best clothing, and Quino dons his special sombrero. Juana and Quino go from their thatch hut to the city. He is planning to sell the pearl there, and he hopes that the pearl dealers are ethical. They are not. They have several sophisticated ways to trick the naive yet fervent Quino. The people warn Juana and Quino of the treachery of the pearl dealers. The pearl dealers collude to offer Quino much less than what the pearl is worth. Quino responds with anger. His neighbors think that Quino is being unrealistic. At the end of the day, Quino causes quite a bit of controversy by rejecting all the offers.

**ATTACKERS** Quino is attacked by men who want to steal his pearl. Quino stabs the man who attacked him. The trackers close in on their hiding place, and Quino decides to do what he can to stop them. He creeps up and attacks one of the trackers. He stabs him and kills him. In the meantime, little Juanito cries, and the other tracker fires his rifle toward the noise. He hits little Juanito, hidden with his mother in the brush.



**THROWING THE PEARL** Quino and Juana walk back to town. After cross the town, they approach the seashore. Quino gives the pearl to Juana to throw into the sea. Juana gives the pearl back to Quino, who then throws it into the ocean. Quino and Juana hold hands, united to survive in the world.



## THEMES

**Greed** The discovery of the pearl ignites the greed in almost all the individuals in the film. First, when Quino sees the size of the pearl, he seems almost possessed by demons as he laughs maniacally. When the Doctor learns of the pearl, he wants to own it, and is suddenly willing to speak to an indigenous couple. The priest would like to have a contribution to charity and the church, and the pearl dealers try to swindle Quino. Juana looks at the pearl as an evil curse, and it does seem to warp everyone it touches. The people in the village are both greedy and envious, which causes divisiveness in the village.

**Fate** Quino and Juana are following the tradition of their family in fishing and diving for pearls to provide for their basic needs. They work and use their creativity to shape their own futures. But, they do rely on the random bounty of nature, and in the advent of the workings of fate in the form of an enormously valuable pearl, they are ill-equipped to handle something so disruptive. What could have been a beneficent act of fate was not so, not only because of the value of the pearl and the envy it precipitates, but also the fact that they live within a rigid caste system to which it becomes clear they will never be able to escape. In fact, such a valuable pearl in their possession seems to reveal the cruel attitude of the gods, which is to say that the gods do not protect them, and even the Catholic priest wants to cheat them. Further illustrating the impact of maleficent fate, or random bad luck, is the scorpion's sting. With resources, they could have mitigated the risk, but in their abject poverty and their pariah caste status, they had little wherewithal to ameliorate the situation.

**Prejudice** Quino, Juana, and Juanito are indigenous, which, thanks to the colonialization of Spain and the Europeans, places them at the bottom of a rigid social hierarchy. The Doctor (of Spanish descent), treats them with great disdain, as though they were subhuman. Even when he deigns to communicate with them because he wants the pearl, it is not through respect, but through the lens of racism and prejudice. The prejudice is societal, and as such, it keeps the poor at the lowest rung, and in a daily battle to simply find food and shelter. They struggle each day for food and the basic tools to fish and dive for pearls (knife, boat), and there is never any ability to save enough even for shoes for Juana.

## CHARACTERS

Quino	Indigenous pearl diver who lives near La Paz, Baja California
Juana	Quino's young wife
The Doctor	Greedy, pearl-obsessed doctor, the only one in town, of Spanish descent
Juanita	The doctor's servant
Juan Tomás	Quino's brother, who warns him of the dangers of keeping the pearl
The Priest	Local Catholic priest, also greedy with designs on the pearl
Juanito	Quino and Juana's infant son, their only child
Pearl dealers	They cheat the indigenous pearl divers, and want to cheat Quino

## CHARACTER ANALYSIS

**Quino:** A dedicated husband and father, who has followed the footsteps of his father and his grandfather in earning his daily bread through the sea, Quino is a straight-forward man who loves his family. He is frustrated by the fact that he and the other indigenous people are oppressed and humiliated by the economically dominant descendants of the Spaniards.

**Proud:** Quino is proud of his heritage and he loves the traditions of his culture. He sings songs passed down from generation to generation, and he dances the traditional dances at the fiesta. He loves the music of the son jarocho, and he follows the traditions of diving for pearls.

**Lover of Nature:** Quino loves all aspects of nature, and in fact, he lives and works in nature. He goes out on his boat where he appreciates the surf, the swells, the sky and the breezes. He also understands and loves the reef, and knows how to dive deeply into it and then to swim through the small passages.

*Love of Family:* Quino is a dedicated father and husband. He loves his wife in a profound, spiritual way, and is willing to sacrifice himself for her well-being and for the health and safety of his son, Juanito.

*Ambitious:* Quino is ambitious and he dreams of a future for his son that would involve education, a career, and more opportunities. When he finds the enormous pearl, one of his dreams is to make sure that he provides an education for Juanito. He also wants to have a wedding in the church, and to participate in the community in a way that shows that he is no longer a member of a disenfranchised and disavowed group.

*Greed:* Before he found the pearl, Quino was content with subsistence-level living. However, with such a valuable pearl in his possession, Quino wants things he has never wanted before, and envisions violence, with rifle. Some of what may seem like greed is simply pragmatism, however. For example, when the people of the town criticize him for not settling for a low price for his pearl, he knows he was right, because they were cheating him.

### **QUESTIONS FOR REVIEW**

1. The Pearl is often described as a parable. Please define the term, parable, and explain how The Pearl could be considered a parable. Please describe specific scenes and actions. As a parable, how might The Pearl also be considered metafiction?
2. Please describe three scenes in which the photography and cinematography express either the existential or emotional condition of the characters in the scene. For example, a turbulent ocean may accompany the turbulent feelings of fear and helplessness as Juana and Quino seek to save their infant son, stung by a scorpion.
3. Explain how the film illustrates the Doctor's extreme greed and gluttony. Further explain how the Doctor dehumanizes the indigenous people in his community by refusing to treat them and by flinging Juana's religious medal back to her. At the same time, however, he dehumanizes himself with his greedy appetite, and by swirling pearls in his mouth while gulping down milk. How else does he show himself to be animalistic?
4. What is the role of religion in the film? How might the true religion of the people be something other than what is practiced in the Catholic church? What are some of the examples, which might include the incantation of spells at times of danger, of divination with the pearl, and a view of nature in terms of gods of the sun, moon, tides, and storms?
5. Describe the ways in which the cinematography and the photography in the film emphasize the unique traditions and culture of the indigenous people. Find scenes that show their clothing, their celebrations and dances, and their way of grouping together. Where are the shadows, the light, the positions in relation to the camera? When are they facing the camera, and when and why are they sometimes shown with their faces obscured? When considering all the different depictions, what does the film make you think about them in contrast with the European-descended dominant culture?