

## Marxist Reading in John Steinbeck's *The Pearl*

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### Abstract

This article explores the elements of Marxist reading focusing on Steinbeck's novella, *The Pearl*. The study employs a Marxist reading to analyze socioeconomic class divisions depicted in the narrative. The research method involved a qualitative approach, with data drawn from quotations in the novel. The results reveal that *The Pearl* reflects classist values and critiques classism. The narrative portrays the white doctor's refusal to treat the native-Indian couple's son due to their lack of money, exemplifying a class-based stratification. Steinbeck positions characters from the lower class as protagonists, challenging the traditional roles of haves and have-nots. Additionally, the article highlights a critique of organized religion, exemplified by the priest's sudden kindness towards the protagonists upon discovering their valuable pearl. This shift underscores the materialistic nature of the priest's actions, criticizing the insincerity of organized religion. In conclusion, the researcher identifies *The Pearl* as a work that exposes classist values and critiques classism, offering insights into socioeconomic disparities. The narrative also presents a critical perspective on organized religion, revealing the manipulation of religious figures for material gain.

**Keywords:** *Classism; Marxist criticism elements; Marxist reading.*

### A. Introduction

John Steinbeck, one of the Nobel winners on literature, is a very influential novelist that even influenced Indonesian writers, including Pramudya Ananta Toer (preface on the Indonesian version of

*Mice and Man*), The writing style of Steinbeck depicted the social life of people mostly in California background such as *The Grapes of Wrath*, *East of Eden*, and *Of Mice and Men* while only few that depicted out of the certain area, that is *the Pearl* that

was written in 1947 which used Mexico as the setting of place of the story. *The Pearl* is a novella that tells a husband and wife, named Kino and Juana, a poor pearl fisher family who has a baby-son named Coyotito. Like the whole villagers at the area, they are illiterate living in hut with mud-made floor. The poor living condition is contrasted with the rich doctor that comes from a white French background and the big church that white and non-white segregation. The disparity between the haves and the have-nots reflects the real condition of the people living on the Gulf of Mexico that suffer economic problem, therefore it is a kind of literary that can be studied from the social realism or to be precisely a Marxist reading.

Marxist reading on a literary work studies differences in socioeconomic class divide people in ways that are much more significant than differences in religion, race, ethnicity or gender. (Tyson, 2006:54). Therefore, this study sees that binary opposition between the haves and the have-nots is stressed. The function of Marxist reading in studying a literary

work cannot be separated from the point of view that all cultures are seen completely from the concept of ideology or a belief system (Tyson, 2006:56) and culture is constructed by the haves' ideology so that the value of them that become the hegemony of the society that is named as false consciousness. It is the assignment of Marxist reading that reveals things behind the framework of the work.

Georg Lukacs was the literary work that stated the idea that a literary work is the reflection of a society. Marxist reading on Steinbeck's works can be seen as, an ideologization of reading a work of literature as a means to reveal the bourgeoisie interest (Lukacs) and then to resist the class interest of the haves (Benjamin). Marxist reading on literary work can be possible if the researchers can apply the key elements of Marxist criticism on literary works as follows:

Does the work reinforce capitalist, imperialist, or classist values?

How is the work a kind of critique on capitalism, imperialism, classism?

Does the work support the Marxist agenda or support capitalist, imperialist, and classist agenda?

How does the work reflect the socioeconomic and the class struggle?

Does it give a critique on organized religion? (Tyson, 2006:68).

The above quotation shows that the points describe the the frame work on how a Marxist reading works in analyzing the structural form of the work. Therefore , the researchers can summarize that when Marxist reading deals with the discussion of how the classist value is reflected on the literary work, the work's criticism on the classism, possibility of the work supports the agenda or classism or Marxism, the reflection of socioeconomic and the class struggle, and the critique on organized religion.

## B. Research Method

The researchers conducted this research by applying the qualitative method. The data is taken from a John Steinbeck's novella entitled *the Pearl* that was published by Penguin Publisher, London in 2011. The source of data is the quotations that are taken from the

novel of *The Pearl* through its sentences dealing with the related topic that is discussed as the issues for this research.

## C. Results and Discussion

The researchers identified that *The Pearl* shows classist value and the criticism on the classism. The classist value that maintains the segregation life that the haves want to maintain. The following quotation shows how the white doctor reacts when he hears the baby of the native-Indian couple Kino and Juana, that is Coyotito is sent to see the doctor after being stung by a scorpion

"It is a little Indian with a baby/ The baby was bitten by a scorpion." "Has he any money?" the doctor asked, "the doctor asked ," No, they never have any money! I do not work for nothing. Ask him if he has any money." (2011:5).

The quotation shows that the white doctor thinks through the lens of classism. The doctor divides the people based on the class stratification. As a doctor, he is sworn to serve patients without regarding the background of the patients, including

the class division based on the haves and the haves-not classification. By refusing to heal Coyotito, the doctor does a classist value because he wants to maintain his higher class stratification.

Steinbeck through the character of the doctor represents the character who sounds the classist value and the classism. The critique on classism with its bourgeoisie is depicted by the doctor who does not only ignore the dying patient because the baby is poor, but also because he is from what he considers as from an inferior race. He mentions him as "monkey".

*The Pearl*, therefore brings the anti-classism point of view. This can be proved from the idea that Steinbeck, in the story expressed or used the characters of the haves are the antagonists while the characters of the haves-not are the protagonists, Kino-Juana, their child Coyotito and the illiterate villagers.

The story also shows critique on the organized religion. The shift attitude that is shown by the doctor after Kino-Juana find the biggest pearl ever, is practised by the priest in

the area. The priest, like the doctor, pays attention to Kino-Juana family just after the family gets the pearl, and suddenly become kind to them. The greed on belongings such as a pearl that the priest desires, shows that there is a critique on an organized religion. The priest who does not care on poor people like Kino and Juana and even does not give blessing his holy sacrament on marriage on the couple so that definitely the couple lives in adultery, suddenly cares and wants to give them a wedding sacrament. The following statement shows the attitude of the priest:

The priest said, "It has come to me that you have found a great pearl." Kino opened his hand and held it out. The priest was surprised at the size of the pearl. And then, he said, "I hope you will remember to thank God for his gift." Kino was silent, but Juana spoke softly, "We will, Father. We will marry now. Kino has said that..." The priest says, "God be with you, my children." (Steinbeck, 2011:14)

The quotation shows that reflects the criticism on classism that is portrayed in the story. The haves characters in the story, the doctor and

the priest suddenly change their rejection to poor people , merely for their social background describes the miserable condition of the haves-not, and the classist want to maintain the right to control the have-nots. They want to keep despising the haves-not and they suddenly become kind to the haves-not , so the changing behavior is basically about the material-pearl that Kino\_juana have, not the real good intention.

#### D. Conclusion

The researchers identified that *The Pearl* shows classist value and the criticism on the classism. The classist value that maintains the segregation life the haves want to maintain. *The Pearl* also shows critique on the organized religion. The shift attitude shown by the doctor after Kino-Juana find the biggest pearl ever, is practised by the priest in the area.

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