

# Historical Context of *The Pearl*: Steinbeck's Vision of Mexico

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John Steinbeck was fascinated by all things Mexican. He traveled frequently to Mexico, lived for three and a half months in Mexico City in 1935, and roughly a third of his works have Mexican settings, or characters, or both.<sup>1</sup> He became especially interested in Emiliano Zapata and the Mexican Revolution, which began in 1910 and lasted until 1920. His novella *The Pearl* is set in Mexico, as are two films for which he wrote screenplays—*The Forgotten Village* (1941) and *Viva Zapata!* (1952). To understand *The Pearl*, it is important to consider several factors of the historical that influenced Steinbeck and his work. First are political and social developments in Mexico between its Independence from Spain in 1821 to the beginning of the Mexican Revolution in 1911. Mexico at this time experienced extreme income inequality, including severe poverty and harsh living standards for its indigenous peoples.<sup>2</sup> The second is his relationship with Edward F. Ricketts, including the ways in which their creative and scientific efforts complemented each other. Finally, the legend on which Steinbeck based the novella, which was originally discussed in a work he co-authored with Ricketts, sheds further light on Steinbeck's vision of Mexico.

## Mexico in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries

The region that became known as Mexico has a long and rich history, having been populated for more than 13,000 years before the arrival of Spaniards in 1519. The Spanish conquistador Hernán Cortés led an expedition that resulted in the fall of the Aztec Empire and the incorporation of large parts of what was called “New Spain” under the dominion of Spain in 1521. Several centuries later, Mexico embarked on a long struggle for independence from Spanish rule, beginning in 1810, when Father Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla called upon his parishioners to join the revolt against the colonial

government in his famous *Grito de Dolores* (Cry of Dolores). With the signing of the Treaty of Córdoba in 1821, Mexico declared its independence. The country was ruled by a monarchy for the next two years, a period referred to as the First Mexican Empire. In 1824, a new federal constitution established the Republic of Mexico.

The next fifty years were extremely chaotic. Within a few decades of its establishment, the Republic of Mexico was engaged in war with both the United States and France, all while dealing with conflicts over how the newly established nation-state should be organized. The new republic was attempting to maintain control over its government and land, but continual encroachment by colonial powers kept everything in a state of flux. The Mexican-American War in 1846 to 1848, known in Mexico as the *Intervención estadounidense* (United States intervention in Mexico), resulted from the U.S. annexation of Texas in 1845. The war ended with the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848, which ceded almost half of Mexico's territory to the United States, including the areas now known as the states of California and New Mexico.

The period known as *La reforma*, from 1854 to 1876, represented a struggle between liberals and conservatives over the further transformation of Mexico into a nation-state. They clashed over the role of the Catholic Church, corporate or communal ownership of land, the role of the military, and the rights of indigenous peoples. Essentially, the conservatives wanted a centralist state ideally controlled by a monarchy, whereas the liberals advocated for a modern nation-state based on liberal principles. The conservatives were defeated on the battlefield, and Benito Juárez, the first Mexican leader of indigenous descent, was elected president in March of 1861.

Juárez soon faced new challenges, as France invaded Mexico later that year ostensibly to collect some national debts. The Mexican army then defeated the French invaders in the Battle of Puebla on May 5, 1862—a date commemorated as *Cinco de Mayo*.<sup>3</sup> The victory in Puebla was short-lived, as the French soon returned with military reinforcements. The French joined forces with local conservatives who had lost to Juárez's forces, and together they

succeeded in establishing a monarchy in Mexico, under Maximilian I, known as the Second Mexican Empire. However, this move did not stop the fighting between the sides supporting monarchy and democracy. In 1867, the liberal forces won out, executing Maximilian I and reinstating Benito Juárez. The Restored Republic lasted from 1867 to 1876, and Juárez remained in office until his death in 1872. He was praised for having resisted foreign intervention, though he was criticized for attempts to change the constitution. Juárez was succeeded by Sebastián Lerdo de Tejada in 1872, who was then overthrown in a coup led by General José de la Cruz Porfirio Díaz Mori in 1876. In the era known as the *Porfiriato*, Díaz was elected president seven times between 1877 and 1911.

Díaz's dictatorship was one of the longest in Latin American history. He held sole power for thirty-four years, except for a four-year period when he ceded power to a trusted ally, Manuel González Flores. At this time, Díaz could not be re-elected, since his coup against Lerdo de Tejada was based on a principle of no re-election. Díaz is widely credited for putting Mexico on the path to modernization, and his presidency produced significant economic growth and relative political stability. He was particularly known for inviting foreign capital, which funded a network of national railroads, revitalized mining, expanded the textile industry, and also introduced commercial agriculture.

The modernization did not, however, lead to industrialization, as Mexico supplied raw materials, agricultural products, and cheap labor supervised by foreigners in exchange for goods manufactured elsewhere (Fehrenbach 470). The land reforms, which were targeted at both the Catholic Church and the *ejidos*, communally owned land of indigenous groups, led instead to the creation of vast *haciendas*, of which there were some ten thousand by the end of the century controlling at least half the available crop land. The haciendas were large estates that included plantations or working mines or other industrial enterprises, but always with significant land holdings. This system became an extension of colonialism, whereby natural resources are sent out of the country and returned as finished goods from a mercantile economy.

Indigenous peoples made up about 40 percent of Mexico's population in 1900, but the ruling class was mostly comprised of Spaniards considered white. Most indigenous peoples lived in the central and south of Mexico on communal lands and spoke upwards of sixty languages. Beginning in the 1850s, during *La reforma*, the government began dividing the ejidos into smaller farms or confiscated them for the use of the *hacendados* (owners of the haciendas) or transferred outright to foreign investors. Díaz and his supporters also reasoned that the indigenous peoples would prefer to be yeoman farmers, rather than holding lands communally, but that notion of individualism met with Indian resistance. This process of land was accelerated during the Porfiriato.

By 1910, some ninety percent of the rural population had lost their lands, and at least half of Mexico was owned by a few thousand families and foreign companies. A surplus of labor combined with harsh working conditions and a lack of available land meant that the rural population, which was in the majority, had produced a humanitarian disaster. Historians agree that the rural standard of living was worse in 1910 than it was a century earlier when Father Hidalgo issued his Grito de Dolores. Indigenous peoples from entire villages had become tenants on the haciendas or became *jornaleros*, day laborers at very low wages, a fate also shared by mestizo peasants. Díaz was almost eighty in 1910, and while he had originally indicated that he would retire, he decided to run for election again. When results came in, they were announced as showing a massive though clearly fraudulent victory over his opponent Francisco Madero. Madero promptly called for a revolt, thus beginning the first phase of the Mexican Revolution. Díaz was forced to resign in 1911, and he fled to Spain.

The Mexican Revolution was the product of widespread anger about the policies that favored hacendados, industrialists, and foreign capitalists. Zapata's demand for land reform, principles he later incorporated in his 1911 *Plan de Ayala*, directly opposed the appropriation of land previously held communally by indigenous peoples. Although Zapata was assassinated in 1919 and did not live to see the success of the revolution, his ideas influenced Mexico for

the next century. In *The Pearl*, Steinbeck's protagonist Kino shows readers the effects of disenfranchisement and lack of opportunity for indigenous peoples and others excluded from wealth and power under Díaz and earlier governing systems. The *Porfiriato* thus forms the historical backdrop for Steinbeck's *The Pearl*.

### **Steinbeck's Friendship with Ed Ricketts**

The second major historical context necessary to understand Steinbeck's *The Pearl* is the relationship between Steinbeck and marine biologist Ed Ricketts. Steinbeck was interested in marine science even before he met Ricketts; and, in fact, some scholars have proposed that Steinbeck was "at heart a scientist," viewing "human beings as part of a group that had to be considered, ultimately, within a general ecological perspective" (Parini 37). Ricketts served as inspiration for characters in seven of Steinbeck's works, most notably as Doc in *Cannery Row*.

Steinbeck and Ricketts met in 1930 and discovered that they shared similar interests in thinking about individual and group behavior, albeit from different backgrounds. In a general zoology course he took at the Hopkins Marine Station near Monterey in 1923, Steinbeck became fascinated with the concept of the superorganism—a whole that is more than the sum of its parts—as discussed in the works of biologist William Emerson Ritter. Ricketts, who came to California in 1923, had studied at the University of Chicago with ecologist W. C. Allee, who theorized that animals behave differently as individuals than they do in groups, so that organisms that cooperate with each other ensure survival. The two spent countless hours in Ricketts' biological supply house, Pacific Biologicals, discussing the works of these two groundbreaking scientists, one a biologist (Ritter) and the other an ecologist (Alle).

Ricketts and Steinbeck were both working on their masterpieces at the same time. While receiving his only income from products of his laboratory, Ricketts spent years studying marine invertebrates of the California Coast and ultimately published *Between Pacific Tides*, co-authored by Jack Calvin, in 1939, the same year as Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*. *Pacific Tides* even today is

considered the definitive study of oceanography in California. Ricketts and Steinbeck then decided to collaborate on a handbook for nonspecialists about marine life in the San Francisco Bay. They never completed this project, but it paved the way for the more ambitious collecting expedition they undertook in 1940 to the Gulf of California.

Ricketts and Steinbeck chartered *The Western Flyer* and over six weeks in March and April covered 4,000 miles and collected specimens at some thirty stations along the route. The result of that journey was the publication in 1941 of *Sea of Cortez*. This book is part travelogue and part catalogue of marine life and anticipates the later work of such naturalists as John McPhee and Bill McGibbon. It consists of a narrative, an explanation of preparing specimens (including photographs), and an appendix of more than 300 pages, which provides a detailed catalog of what was collected. The narrative part was presented as a collaboration, although it was based on journals kept not by Steinbeck but by Ricketts and Tony Berry, the captain of the ship (Astro 13). Ten years later, Steinbeck published the narrative separately, under his name, as *The Log from the Sea of Cortez*.

In many respects, Steinbeck was following the grand tradition of Spanish expeditions to the American Southwest and northern Mexico. As he explains in the introduction, “We made a trip into the Gulf; sometimes we dignified it by calling it an expedition” (*Sea of Cortez* 1). Expeditions sponsored by the Spanish crown would chronicle all the activities, including how the money was spent but also significant information about flora and fauna and descriptions of indigenous peoples. One of the most famous of these is Eusebio Francisco Kino’s *Historical Memoir of Pimería Alta*, a work that resonates in the name Steinbeck chose for his protagonist in *The Pearl*.

The narrative in *Sea of Cortez* also contains philosophical digressions and most important, the germ of the story that became “The Pearl of the World,” which first appeared in the December 1945 issue of *Woman’s Home Companion* and later issued in book form as simply *The Pearl* in 1947. The book appears to be as much

about Mexico as it is about a study of marine biology, for every chapter describes the location and the people who inhabited it, very much in the spirit of the grand narratives of an earlier time.

### **The Legend of the Pearl**

In *Sea of Cortez*, Steinbeck retells a legend of an Indian boy who discovers “a pearl of great size, an unbelievable pearl” (102). The legend is set in La Paz, about which Steinbeck says “everyone in the area” knows its “greatness” (*Sea of Cortez* 101) and a place from which came the pearls on “the robes of the Spanish kings and the stoles of the bishops in Rome” (102). Steinbeck describes La Paz as “very venerable in the eyes of Indians of the Gulf,” and while other cities may have been “busier” or “gayer,” La Paz is “*antigua*” (102). The “pearl oysters drew men from all over the world” and “in all concentrations of natural wealth, the terrors of greed were let loose on the city again and again” (102). This vision of La Paz corresponds with the ways in which the raw materials, including metals and minerals, produced great profits for foreign investors and also how lands were plundered and taken from peasants and indigenous peoples throughout Mexico.

In the legend Steinbeck recalls, the Indian boy knew the value of the pearl and dreamed of being drunk all the time, of marrying whom he chose, and buying his way out of purgatory and moving closer to paradise, along with some of his dead relatives. Interesting about this description is the allusion to the role of agave in Mexico, which is used to make tequila. In 1900, Mexico produced far fewer foodstuffs than four centuries earlier, even though its population was roughly the same (Fehrenbach 466). So many fields formerly devoted to maize were instead converted to the more profitable agave.

The Indian boy in the legend tries to sell the pearl but is offered far less than it is worth; in fact, no one will give him a fair price, the same way no one paid for the lands confiscated from indigenous peoples throughout Mexico. The brokers are all, in effect, in cahoots. In despair, he takes the pearl to the beach and hides it under a rock but then is clubbed by greedy men and tortured again when he runs

away. Finally, he throws the pearl back into the ocean, and he “was a free man again with his soul in danger and his food and shelter insecure” (104).

Steinbeck speculates on the veracity of the legend: “This seems to be a true story, but it is so much like a parable that it almost can’t be,” for this “Indian boy is too heroic, too wise” (104). And then he further concludes that the “story is probably true, but we don’t believe it” for it is “far too reasonable to be true” (104). Presumably, Steinbeck was told the story in Spanish, but we never see an original, so he has become, in effect, a translator of a local folktale.

Steinbeck retells this story in the novella *The Pearl*, and in the epigram he repeats the suggestion that if “this story is a parable, perhaps everyone takes his own meaning from it and reads his own life into it.” Steinbeck also writes to his agent Elizabeth Otis that the legend is “a black-white story like a parable” (Benson 564). Although some have seen this epigram as referring to the parable in Matthew 13:45–46, Steinbeck does not mention it in the *Sea of Cortez*; and if anything, the one in the novella is the reverse of the one in the gospel of Matthew. The biblical parable likens the pearl to the kingdom of heaven, as a merchant of pearls would sell everything to buy this one pearl of value. On the other hand, some have seen the novella as conveying autobiographical concerns about the price of success (Parini 319).

A different reading is possible when considering Steinbeck’s understanding of the historical context of Mexico in the 1900s and the social situation of indigenous peoples. Just as in the legend, Kino, the protagonist in *The Pearl*, is refused a fair price, and he is eventually forced to throw the pearl into the ocean, after losing his son and becoming a murderer himself. Kino never received anything of value for the pearl; instead of gaining riches, his life is ruined. Because Kino never became wealthy, it is hard to see the story as a parable about the destructive power of wealth. Instead, it seems to be a confirmation of the ways in which the indigenous peoples of Mexico were robbed of whatever they possessed of any value.

It is worth noting how Steinbeck adapts or changes the folklore material of the legend and how his characters resist or transcend

stereotypical representations of Mexican peoples. The Indian boy in the legend becomes an Indian family, with Kino as the fisherman, Juana his wife, and Coyotito as the injured son in need of medical help they cannot afford. The transformation of a boy into a family unit further emphasizes the plight of indigenous peoples, who have no recourse for what has happened to them other than to eventually engage in the armed struggle led by the revolutionaries Pancho Villa and Emiliano Zapata. Class and race combine to provide no alternatives for families like Kinos, and any attempt to move upward would be met with failure.

Steinbeck was well aware of the racial and class hierarchies in Mexico. In his narrative *Zapata*, he notes that “pure” Spaniards from Spain are at the top, followed by “pure” Spaniards born in Mexico, and then those of mixed Spanish and Indian ethnicity, mestizos. But of the Indians themselves, Steinbeck writes that the “Indian was not even a citizen” but is instead viewed as “a native animal” (Zapata 20). This view is echoed in *The Pearl*, when Kino knows that “all of the doctor’s race spoke to all of Kino’s race as though they were simple animals” (9). When Kino goes to the doctor’s door to get help for Coyotito, who has been bitten by a scorpion, the servant refuses to answer him in the “old language,” presumably an indigenous one. The doctor asks his servant whether he has “nothing better to do than cure insect bites for ‘little Indians,’” for he is a “doctor, not a veterinary,” further emphasizing the view of indigenous peoples as animals (11).

Not having any luck with the doctor, Kino and Juana decide to try to find a magnificent pearl to pay for the doctor’s services. They take their canoe to the “bed that had raised the King of Spain to be a great power in Europe in past wars, and had decorated the churches for his soul’s sake” (16). They find the “pearl of the world” and immediately start dreaming of what else they could do besides cure their son. Both imagine having new clothes to replace those that clearly marked their ethnicity and class: shoes, not sandals, a hat of felt, not of straw. Kino imagines even having a rifle. As Kino dreams of all the material goods his newfound wealth will bring, he also considers how Coyotito will become literate: “My son will

read and open the books, and my son will write and know writing” (26). As one critic has observed, Steinbeck clearly wanted the reader to see *The Pearl* as a Mexican story, for he uses the formal syntax of Spanish, and not colloquial English (Augenbraum 59). Kino’s hope for his son is a direct translation from Spanish: “Mi hijo leerá y abrirá los libros. Y mi hijo escribirá and sabra escribir.” When the priest comes to visit he uses the archaic English “thou,” which is equivalent to the Spanish “tú,” the informal “you.” Race, again, enters the story when Kino and his brother Juan Tomás walk into town to sell the pearl, for they both squinted their eyes, “as they and their grandfathers and their great-grandfathers had done for four hundred years,” as “Kino’s people had learned only one defense—a slight slitting of the eyes and a slight tightening of the lips” (46).

As we know, Kino and Juana lose their son, who is shot by one of the trackers looking for them, and also the pearl, which they very publicly throw back into the ocean. By analyzing the significance of Mexico as setting and the social situation of the Indian family, one can view *The Pearl* as an allegory of ethnic relations in Mexico in the revolutionary period. Just as Steinbeck collected stories of migrants in California and transformed them into his great novel *The Grapes of Wrath*, so he took the legend of the Indian boy and his fabulous pearl and used it to produce a work that highlighted the oppression of indigenous peoples in *The Pearl* and the origins of the Mexican Revolution. Understanding the historical context, Steinbeck’s friendship with Ricketts, and the origins of the folktale about a pearl demonstrates Steinbeck’s great feeling for Mexico and why the country and its people have played such important roles in his works.

## Notes

1. Steinbeck’s relationship with Mexico also continues to be of great interest to scholars of Mexican culture, as indicated in two recent books published in Spanish, by Adela Pineda and Rogelio Martínez.
2. Throughout this chapter, I am using the term *indigenous peoples* to refer to the inhabitants of Mexico before the arrival of the Spanish conquistadors. This term more accurately represents the

first population, as opposed to *Indians*, a term that originated with Christopher Columbus, who mistakenly thought he had reached the East Indies. Steinbeck, however, called them Indians, and his term will be used for quotations from the novella.

3. Cinco de Mayo has since become a celebration of Mexican culture especially in the United States. Cinco de Mayo is only a minor holiday in Mexico, whereas the most important public holiday is Independence Day, celebrated on September 16—the date that marks the start of war against Spain in 1810.

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