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## CRUEL OPTIMISM IN JOHN STEINBECK'S THE PEARL

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### *Abstract*

This study discusses the impacts of cruel optimism portrayed in John Steinbeck's *The Pearl*. This is qualitative research with the novel as the primary data source. Supporting data are obtained from books, scholarly journals, articles, and websites. Data are collected through intensive reading and note-taking of relevant parts of the text related to the research focus. The data are then classified and analyzed using Berlant's concept of cruel optimism and Wellek and Warren's sociology of literature. This study focuses on three main impacts of cruel optimism, i.e., domestic conflict, social alienation, and obsession. These impacts are shown through the character Kino who becomes excessively attached to the pearl because he views it as the only opportunity to escape poverty and achieve a better future. This attachment gradually leads to conflict within his family, alienation from his community and social life, and obsession that characterized by paranoia and destructive actions. The findings reveal that excessive attachment to an object believed to bring hope, happiness, wealth, and social mobility becomes a source of conflict, isolation, and emotional suffering even death. In conclusion, Steinbeck in the novel vividly reflects the condition of contemporary society who remain attached to unrealistic hope and instant solutions in pursuit of a better life despite their harmful consequences.

**Keywords:** cruel optimism, domestic conflict, social alienation, obsession

### **1. Introduction**

The desire to achieve a better life has become one of the main goals in family life. Families to improve their economic conditions, obtain better social status, and secure their children's future through education and decent employment. In Indonesia, this aspiration is reflected in the increasing allocation of household expenditure on non-food sectors such as education and lifestyle. Data from the Central Bureau of Statistics (BPS, 2024) show that household expenditure on non-food consumption reached 60.09 percent of total household expenditure. Bauman (2007) argues that consumer society is characterized by the promise of happiness that can be achieved immediately through consumption. For this, many families continue to invest their limited resources in education and lifestyle in the hope of achieving social mobility. However, these expectations do not always produce the desired outcomes. Instead, they often create greater economic pressure when the expected improvement fails to materialize.

The unstable economic condition further strengthens these pressures. Although access to education is widely considered a pathway to success, higher education does not always guarantee employment or economic prosperity because job opportunities remain limited. At the same time, many families experience financial constraints that restrict their access to formal financial institutions. As a result, they increasingly rely on alternative financial services such as online lending to meet urgent needs, including education costs and household consumption. According to the Financial Services Authority (OJK, 2024), Indonesia recorded approximately 22.42 million active online lending accounts, while most loan funds were used for consumptive purposes rather than productive investment. Although online loans provide quick financial access, high interest rates and short repayment periods frequently lead borrowers into continuous cycles of debt. Therefore, the hope of improving economic conditions through instant financial solutions often becomes a source of greater financial



hardship rather than prosperity. This situation is reflected in a report by Kompas.com (2026), which tells the story of a single mother who used online loans to pay for rent, electricity, and daily household expenses. At first, the loan seemed to be a quick solution to her financial problems. However, because of the high interest rates and short repayment periods, she had to borrow money from different online lending platforms to repay her previous loans. As a result, she became trapped in a cycle of debt that made her financial situation even worse. This case shows how the hope for a better life can become attached to something that eventually creates more difficulties instead of improving life.

Berlant's concept of cruel optimism helps explain this phenomenon. Berlant (2011) defines cruel optimism as a condition in which individuals become attached to an object that they believe will improve their lives, even though the same object ultimately prevents them from achieving the life they desire. Such attachments persist because they provide emotional stability and sustain the belief that a better future remains possible. As a result, the attachment gradually becomes a source of domestic conflict, social alienation, and obsession. Cruel optimism explains why individuals continue to pursue unrealistic expectations despite experiencing repeated negative consequences.

Literary works frequently represent social realities experienced by individuals and communities. According to Wellek and Warren (1949), literature reflects social life by portraying human experiences, conflicts, and cultural conditions. Through literary texts, authors present various social problems that continue to exist within society and encourage readers to understand their broader implications. One literary work that reflects this phenomenon is *The Pearl* by John Steinbeck. Steinbeck is widely recognized for portraying the struggles of working-class communities and criticizing social injustice during the Great Depression. His literary works consistently depict poverty, inequality, and economic

exploitation experienced by marginalized people.

Previous studies on *The Pearl* discuss various issues, including social interaction (Yusuf, 2007), Marxist ideology (Rana, 2017; Khalil, 2023), racial discrimination (Abbas, 2020), materialism (Helmi, 2018), dehumanization (Kadarsih et al., 2019), figurative language (Zaman et al., 2022), psychosocial development (Putrayuda, 2024), parenting style (Sunyoto et al., 2022), and greed (Al-Ansi, 2025). These studies contribute to understanding the novel from different theoretical perspectives. However, few studies focus on *The Pearl* by applying Berlant's concept of cruel optimism. Therefore, this study fills this gap by examining how attachment to the pearl develops into domestic conflict, social alienation, and obsession through the perspective of Berlant's concept of cruel optimism.

Based on this phenomenon, this study analyzes cruel optimism in John Steinbeck's *The Pearl* by applying Berlant's concept of cruel optimism and Wellek and Warren's sociology of literature. The analysis focuses on attachment to the pearl and examines how this attachment develops into domestic conflict, social alienation, and obsession. The study demonstrates that excessive attachment to an object of hope may prevent individuals from achieving the better life they seek. Furthermore, the study shows that literature not only reflects social reality but also provides a critical understanding of the consequences of unrealistic hope in human life.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 Cruel Optimism**

Cruel optimism is the main concept applied in this study. Berlant (2011) defines cruel optimism as a condition in which individuals become attached to an object that they believe will improve their lives, even though the same object eventually prevents them from achieving the life they desire. Such attachments persist because they provide emotional stability and sustain hope for a better future despite increasing evidence



of disappointment and failure. Rather than encouraging individuals to abandon unrealistic expectations, cruel optimism explains why they continue to pursue aspirations that gradually become obstacles to their own well-being. Within this framework, cruel optimism has three major impacts, namely domestic conflict, social alienation, and obsession.

Domestic conflict refers to disagreements or tensions among family members caused by different interests, expectations, or goals. Coser (1956) argues that conflict emerges when individuals or groups pursue incompatible interests, creating tension within social relationships. Domestic conflict develops when individuals remain attached to aspirations that are increasingly difficult to achieve. As expectations become inconsistent with reality, tension and conflict may arise within family relationships.

Social alienation refers to a condition in which individuals become disconnected from society and experience a loss of belonging. Seeman (1959) explains that alienation occurs when individuals lose trust, meaningful relationships, and connection with their social environment. Although Berlant (2011) does not explicitly define social alienation, her concept of cruel optimism explains how persistent attachment to unrealistic aspirations may gradually distance individuals from others. This condition causes individuals to become increasingly isolated from their social environment as the gap between expectation and reality widens.

Although Berlant does not directly use the term obsession, her concept shows a pattern of repeated and harmful attachment to certain desires. She explains that people never willingly abandon a libidinal position, not even when a substitute is already beckoning to them (Berlant, 2011). This means that people often find it difficult to let go of something, even when it harms them. Furthermore, she explains that people continue to hold on to their attachments because they seek stability, meaning, or emotional connection. In the context of cruel

optimism, this can be seen when individuals continue pursuing the promises of the good life, such as an ideal relationship or a stable life, even after facing many disappointments.

## **2.2 Sociology of Literature**

The sociological approach is employed in this study because it is suitable for examining the relationship between literary works and the social realities they portray. Literature is not only imaginative storytelling but also reflects social conditions, cultural values, and human experiences shaped by social structures, expectations, and pressures. Wellek and Warren (1949) explain that the relationship between literature and society can be studied through three perspectives: the author's social background, the literary work as a reflection of social life, and the reader's interpretation. This view is supported by Swingewood (1972), who argues that literature not only reflects reality but also criticizes social inequality and power relations.

## **3. Research Methodology**

This study employs a qualitative method to analyze cruel optimism and its impacts in John Steinbeck's *The Pearl*. Creswell (2013) explains that qualitative research is used to understand the meaning of social or human problems through interpretive and theoretical frameworks. The primary data source of this study is *The Pearl* by John Steinbeck. The data are in the form of words, sentences, dialogues, events, and narrative, secondary data consist of books, journal articles, and other relevant references. The data are collected through comprehensive reading, identifying and selecting relevant data, and classifying the data based on Berlant's concept of cruel optimism and the sociology of literature proposed by Wellek and Warren. The collected data are then analyzed through data reduction and conclusion drawing and verification proposed by Miles and Huberman (1994).



#### **4. Result and Discussion**

*The Pearl* tells the story of Kino, a poor pearl diver who lives with his wife, Juana, and their son, Coyotito. Their simple and peaceful life changes after Kino discovers a valuable pearl, believing that it will free his family from poverty, improve their social status, and provide a better future for Coyotito. However, the pearl gradually becomes a source of conflict, fear, violence, and tragedy. Instead of bringing prosperity, Kino's strong attachment to the pearl damages his family, separates him from society, and ultimately results in the death of his son. Realizing that the pearl has destroyed everything he values, Kino finally throws it back into the sea. Berlant (2011) states cruel optimism refers to an attachment to an object of desire that promises a better life but ultimately prevents its achievement. Using Wellek and Warren's (1949) sociology of literature, the findings show that the pearl becomes an object of cruel optimism, leading to domestic conflict, social alienation, and obsession.

##### **4.1 Domestic Conflict**

The author creates characters Kino and Juana to represent people who drive into domestic conflict because of cruel optimism. Kino and Juana live peacefully despite their poverty. Their relationship is built on mutual understanding, cooperation, and affection, as symbolized through the Song of the Family: "Juana sang softly an ancient song... saying this is safety, this is warmth, this is the Whole" (26). This quotation indicates that economic hardship does not automatically create conflict within the family. Instead, the conflict begins when the pearl becomes the center of Kino's hope for changing his social and economic condition.

The family's hope begins after Kino experiences discrimination when the doctor refuses to treat Coyotito because they are poor. After finding the pearl, Kino believes that it will give his family a better future, especially through education for his son. He imagines, "In the pearl he saw Coyotito sitting at a little desk in a school... 'My son will go to school'" (49). Kino's dream

reflects the desire of parents to improve their children's future through education. This idea is similar to the Toba Batak philosophy *Anakhon Hi Do Hamoraon di Ahu*, which considers children as the greatest wealth of their parents. According to Sibarani et al. (2023), this philosophy encourages parents to work hard and prioritize education so that their children can achieve a better life. Likewise, Sorokin (1927) explains that education is an important means of social mobility because it enables individuals to improve their social status through continuous effort. However, Kino chooses a different path. Instead of relying on perseverance and long-term effort, he becomes dependent on the pearl as the only way to achieve his dream. According to Berlant (2011), this attachment is a form of cruel optimism because the object that promises a better future gradually becomes an obstacle to achieving it.

Kino's dependence on the pearl creates an inner conflict between protecting his family's safety and keeping the pearl for Coyotito's future. This struggle is represented through the opposition between the Song of the Family and the Song of the Pearl. The narrator states, "But Kino's hand had closed tightly on the pearl again, and he was glancing about suspiciously, for the evil song was in his ears, shrilling against the music of the pearl" (52). The quotation shows that Kino realizes the pearl brings danger, yet he cannot let it go because he believes it is his only opportunity to escape poverty. As a result, hope and fear exist at the same time, creating the inner conflict that becomes the beginning of domestic conflict.

The inner conflict gradually changes Kino's personality. He stops diving, the work that has supported his family for years, and places all of his hope on the pearl. As the threats increase, he becomes more defensive and suspicious. The narrator describes this change by stating, "Kino felt a shell of hardness drawing over him" (61). His fear becomes stronger when Juana asks whom he fears, and Kino simply answers, "Everyone" (61). These quotations show that the pearl no longer gives Kino confidence but fills him





with anxiety and paranoia. Berlant (2011) argues that cruel optimism causes individuals to remain attached to something that gradually produces suffering instead of happiness. Kino's emotional change weakens communication with Juana and slowly destroys the harmony that once united their family.

The domestic conflict becomes clear when Juana asks Kino to throw the pearl away because she believes it brings only misfortune. She says, "This pearl is like a sin! It will destroy us... Throw it away, Kino... Our son must live" (63-64). However, Kino refuses and insists, "This is our one chance. Our son must go to school" (64). Their different views show a conflict of interests within the family. Juana prioritizes the safety of her husband and child, while Kino continues to believe that the pearl is the only way to change their future. According to Coser (1956), conflict develops when individuals pursue different goals that cannot be achieved at the same time. The conflict reaches its highest point when Juana secretly tries to throw the pearl into the sea and Kino reacts violently: "He struck her in the face with his clenched fist" (84). Kino's attachment has now become stronger than his concern for his own family.

The findings show that Kino's cruel optimism finally destroys the family he wants to protect. During their escape, Coyotito is accidentally killed, and Kino realizes that the pearl has brought only suffering. The narrator states, "The pearl was ugly, it was gray, like a malignant growth" (117). The pearl, which once symbolized hope, now represents loss and destruction. Kino's decision to throw it back into the sea marks the end of his attachment, but it comes too late to save his family. This finding reflects Wellek and Warren's (1949) view that literature mirrors social reality. The novel shows that excessive dependence on one economic opportunity can damage family relationships when it replaces continuous effort, trust, and mutual support. This condition remains relevant today because many families still believe that one instant opportunity can solve economic

problems, yet unrealistic expectations often create conflict, violence, and the loss of family harmony instead.

#### **4.2 Social Alienation**

The author creates Kino to show how cruel optimism gradually leads him into social alienation. At the beginning of the story, Kino is portrayed as part of a close community where people help and support one another. This can be seen when Coyotito is stung by a scorpion and the villagers immediately follow Kino and Juana to the doctor's house. It is narrated: "The thing had become a neighborhood affair... then all the neighbors" (31). This quotation shows that Kino is accepted as a member of the community and still shares strong social relationships with the people around him.

The beginning of Kino's alienation can be seen through the doctor's rejection. When Kino brings Coyotito for treatment, the doctor's servant asks, "Have you money to pay for the treatment?" (35). After Kino fails to provide enough money, the doctor refuses to see the baby. This situation shows that Kino is excluded because of his poverty and social position. According to Seeman (1959), this condition reflects powerlessness, which occurs when a person cannot influence the decisions of institutions that affect his life. The rejection makes Kino realize that he has little control over his situation and encourages him to place hope in the pearl as a way to change his future.

After Kino finds the pearl, his relationship with society gradually changes. The pearl becomes the center of attention for many people in the town. The narrator states: "Only one person stood in the way and that was Kino, so that he became curiously every man's enemy" (47). This quotation shows that Kino is no longer viewed as a member of the community but as an obstacle to other people's interests. As a result, he becomes more suspicious and begins to distance himself from others. Berlant (2011) explains that cruel optimism occurs when a person becomes attached to something believed to bring a better life, even though it later creates suffering and difficulties.



Kino's alienation becomes deeper through his interactions with the priest, the doctor, and the pearl buyers. After hearing about the pearl, the priest suddenly visits Kino, while the doctor who previously rejected Coyotito now offers treatment. Likewise, the pearl buyers try to deceive Kino by lowering the value of his pearl. These experiences show that people are more interested in the pearl than in Kino himself. As a result, Kino gradually loses trust in the people around him and becomes increasingly isolated from society.

The highest level of alienation occurs when Kino and his family are forced to flee from the trackers. At this point, Kino is separated not only from the community but also from his home and social environment. The trackers continue to follow him because of the pearl, showing that the object he believes will improve his life instead brings danger and suffering. This condition reflects Seeman's (1959) idea of isolation, where a person becomes disconnected from society and no longer feels part of the social group around him.

At the end of the novel, Kino realizes that the pearl has become the cause of his suffering. After Coyotito dies, he looks at the pearl and sees it differently: "The pearl was ugly; it was gray, like a malignant growth" (117). The pearl no longer represents hope but destruction. This finding shows that Kino's attachment to the pearl gradually leads him into social alienation. This situation is still relevant today because many people place excessive hope on money, wealth, or social status as a way to achieve a better life. However, when these hopes become too strong, they can damage relationships and create distance between individuals and their social environment.

#### **4.3 Obsession**

The author portrays Kino as a representation of a person whose hope for a better future gradually develops into obsession. According to Berlant (2011), cruel optimism occurs when an individual remains emotionally attached to an object that is believed to provide happiness, even

though it has already become harmful. Kino's obsession begins with the structural conditions that shape his life. Poverty, social inequality, and limited access to education and healthcare leave him with almost no opportunity to improve his family's future. Therefore, when Kino finds the pearl, he immediately sees it as the only way to escape poverty and achieve a better life. This hope can be seen when he imagines a completely different future for his family:

In the pearl he saw how they were dressed Juana in a shawl stiff with newness and a new skirt, and from under the long skirt Kino could see that she wore shoes.... He himself was dressed in new white clothes, and he carried a new hat not of straw but of fine black felt and he too wore shoes not sandals but shoes that laced. But Coyotito he was the one he wore a blue sailor suit from the United States and a little yachting cap such as Kino had seen once when a pleasure boat put into the estuary (48).

This quotation shows that Kino does not only imagine financial improvement but also a new social identity. The pearl becomes more than a valuable object; it becomes a symbol of complete transformation. As a result, Kino's emotional attachment to the pearl begins to grow.

After finding the pearl, Kino's hope develops into repeated fantasies about the future. He imagines new clothes, a rifle, and education for Coyotito: "We will have new clothes." "A rifle." "My son will go to school." (48-49). These dreams gradually strengthen his dependence on the pearl because every future plan is connected to the same object. The neighbors also support his imagination instead of questioning it: "The neighbors... nodded their heads at his wild imaginings... 'A rifle. He will have a rifle'" (48-49). Their response strengthens Kino's belief that all of his dreams can be achieved through the pearl. Berlant (2011) explains that such attachment becomes difficult to



abandon because it provides emotional security even before the desired future is achieved.

Kino's obsession becomes stronger when he begins to ignore the dangers surrounding the pearl. Although he realizes that the pearl brings threats, he refuses to let it go. The narrator states, "Kino's hand had closed tightly on the pearl again... the evil song was in his ears" (52). Instead of reducing his attachment, the danger makes him protect the pearl even more. His fear eventually develops into paranoia when Juana asks, "Who do you fear?" and Kino answers, "Everyone" (61). These quotations show that the pearl no longer gives Kino hope but controls his thoughts and emotions. His attachment changes into obsession because he cannot separate his future from the pearl.

The obsession continues to affect Kino's relationship with Juana. When Juana asks him to throw the pearl away because it brings only suffering, Kino refuses by saying, "This is our one chance. Our son must go to school" (63-64). Later, he becomes even more determined: "No... I will fight this thing. I will win over it." (83). These statements show that Kino no longer sees the pearl as a possession but as something that must be protected at all costs. His hope for a better future gradually turns into emotional dependence, making him reject every warning from the people closest to him. According to Berlant (2011), this condition reflects cruel optimism because the object of hope continues to dominate the subject even after it has become destructive.

The highest stage of Kino's obsession appears when he identifies himself with the pearl. He declares, "This pearl has become my soul... If I give it up I shall lose my soul" (93). This statement shows that Kino no longer separates his identity from the object he desires. His emotional dependence reaches the point where losing the pearl means losing himself. Even when the pearl begins to reflect violence instead of hope, Kino still refuses to abandon it. The narrator describes this change when Kino sees not his dreams but images of blood, Juana's beaten

face, and Coyotito's illness reflected in the pearl (97). These visions indicate that the pearl has become a source of fear rather than happiness, yet Kino remains unable to release it.

At the end, Kino finally realizes that the pearl has destroyed everything he wanted to protect. After Coyotito's death, the pearl no longer appears beautiful but "ugly... gray, like a malignant growth" (117). The pearl changes from a symbol of hope into a symbol of suffering and loss. Kino's decision to throw it back into the sea marks the end of his obsession, although it comes too late to save his family. The findings demonstrate that Kino's obsession is the final impact of cruel optimism because his emotional attachment gradually replaces reason, family, and even his own identity. This finding also supports Wellek and Warren's (1949) view that literature reflects social reality. Today, many people continue to place excessive hope in instant success through wealth, viral fame, or quick financial opportunities. When these expectations become emotional dependence rather than realistic goals, they may lead to obsession, disappointment, and self-destruction, just as experienced by Kino.

## **5. Conclusion**

Based on the analysis, it can be concluded that John Steinbeck's *The Pearl* reveals cruel optimism that may lead to three major impacts, ie, domestic conflict, social alienation, and obsession. These impacts emerge when individuals become excessively attached to an object, hope, and expectation that is believed to provide happiness, success, or a better future. Although such attachments initially appear beneficial, they may gradually become obstacles to individual well-being.

The findings indicate that excessive hope placed in certain desires creates tension in personal relationships, weakens social connections, and encourages emotional dependence on a particular object of hope. This condition may lead to domestic conflict, social alienation, and obsession. These impacts show that that hopes associated with



a better future do not always produce positive outcomes and may instead contribute to various forms of suffering. Furthermore, this study shows that excessive dependence on promises of success, wealth, social mobility, or an ideal future can generate negative consequences. Instead of improving life, such attachments may lead to conflict, isolation, and obsession. Therefore, it is important to maintain realistic expectations and critical awareness toward hope that appear to promise happiness, success, or a better future. These findings are also relevant to contemporary society, where many individuals continue to pursue idealized hope of success, wealth, and social mobility. In many cases, people become excessively dependent on instant solutions, such as online loans and other promises of rapid economic improvement, in the hope of achieving a better life. However, such dependence may instead create financial difficulties, family conflict, social isolation, and emotional distress. Therefore, individuals should balance their hope with realistic expectations, continuous effort, and critical awareness in order to maintain their well-being. Cruel optimism reveals that hopes and desires do not always lead to well-being and may become sources of suffering when individuals remain attached to them despite their harmful effects.

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