

# Diagnostic Power and Treatment in *The Pearl* by John Steinbeck: A Study of Medical Authority, Social Inequality, and Psychological Resistance

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**Abstract:** This research paper examines the concept of diagnostic power and treatment-based control in John Steinbeck's *The Pearl*. It focuses on how medical authority operates not only as a system of healing but also as a form of social and psychological control. In the novel, illness and injury are not treated as simple physical conditions; instead, they become tools through which power structures reinforce inequality and dominance over poor communities.

Using the theoretical framework of Michel Foucault, especially his ideas on medical gaze, surveillance, and institutional power, this study explores how doctors and medical systems in the text represent authority that defines who is "worthy" of treatment and who is excluded. The research also highlights how diagnostic language itself becomes a form of control, where naming a condition also shapes social identity and limits personal agency.

The paper further discusses social inequality in *The Pearl*, showing how poverty influences access to treatment and how medical decisions are often guided by economic and class bias rather than human need. It also examines psychological resistance, focusing on how the characters respond emotionally and mentally to systems of control that appear scientific but are deeply unequal.

Overall, the study argues that medical treatment in the novel is not neutral. It is deeply connected to power, wealth, and social hierarchy, making diagnosis and care part of a larger system of domination.

**Keywords:** medical authority, diagnostic power, treatment, social inequality, power relations, medical gaze.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

John Steinbeck is one of the most influential American writers of the twentieth century, known for his deep concern with poverty, social injustice, and human suffering. He was born in 1902 in California and grew up observing the struggles of farmers, labourers, and marginalized communities. These early experiences strongly shaped his literary vision and made him a voice for the oppressed in American society. Steinbeck's writing is known for its simple language, powerful symbolism, and strong social message.

His major works include *The Grapes of Wrath*, *Of Mice and Men*, *East of Eden*, and *The Pearl*. Each of these texts explores the suffering of common people under economic hardship and social inequality. In *The Grapes of Wrath*, he presents the migration of poor farmers during the Great Depression. In *Of Mice and Men*, he highlights loneliness and broken dreams among working-class men. *East of Eden* focuses on moral conflict and human choice, while *The Pearl* presents the destructive impact of wealth and greed.

Among these works, *The Pearl* is unique because it combines realism with symbolic storytelling. The novella follows Kino, a poor pearl diver, whose discovery of a valuable pearl changes his life. Instead of bringing happiness, the pearl brings violence, greed, and destruction. The story becomes a powerful metaphor for how wealth can corrupt human relationships and destabilize moral values. It also exposes the deep social divide between the rich and the poor.

This research focuses on the concept of diagnostic power and treatment as a form of control in *The Pearl*. The title itself suggests that diagnosis is not just a medical process but also a form of authority. The physician in the novel does not treat patients purely for healing; instead, treatment becomes a tool to control bodies, maintain social hierarchy, and even gain financial benefit. Medical practice is shown as performative, where authority is displayed like acting, reinforcing the gap between rich and poor.

In this context, diagnosis becomes a “power tool” that defines who deserves care and who does not. The poor are often ignored, while the rich receive immediate attention. This selective treatment reveals how medicine can function as a system of social control rather than equality. The physician’s behaviour reflects a larger institutional structure where knowledge and authority are used to dominate vulnerable groups.

The theoretical framework of Michel Foucault is used to understand this system of power. Foucault’s concept of the “medical gaze” explains how doctors observe, label, and control patients through institutional authority. In *The Pearl*, this gaze becomes a form of surveillance that reduces human suffering into clinical terms, removing emotional and social reality.

While many studies on *The Pearl* focus on themes of greed, wealth, and colonial exploitation, fewer studies examine the role of medical authority in shaping social inequality. Existing research often overlooks how healing systems themselves can become instruments of domination. This creates a gap in literary criticism that this paper aims to address.

The main argument of this study is that diagnostic power in *The Pearl* is not neutral. It is deeply connected to class structure, economic interest, and institutional control. Treatment becomes a performance of authority rather than an act of care. The physician’s role reflects how knowledge systems can be used to control bodies and reinforce inequality.

This paper will first examine the representation of medical authority in the text, then analyze its connection to social hierarchy and economic power, and finally explore psychological resistance shown by the characters. Through this structure, the study aims to reveal how Steinbeck critiques not only economic inequality but also the hidden power of medical systems in society.

## 2. Research Gap

Although John Steinbeck’s *The Pearl* has been widely studied for its themes of greed, poverty, colonial exploitation, and social injustice, most existing research focuses mainly on economic and moral dimensions of the text. Scholars have extensively discussed how the pearl symbolizes wealth, desire, and destruction. However, very little attention has been given to the role of medical authority and diagnostic practice in the novel.

Previous studies rarely explore how medical professionals function as agents of power or how treatment becomes a tool of social control. The physician’s role is often mentioned briefly, but not analyzed as part of a larger system of institutional authority. There is also a lack of critical discussion on how diagnosis itself creates inequality by deciding who deserves care and who is ignored.

Therefore, the gap lies in the absence of a focused study on medical surveillance, diagnostic power, and treatment as mechanisms of control in *The Pearl*, especially through the lens of Michel Foucault’s theory of power and knowledge.

## 3. Literature Review

Early criticism of *The Pearl* mainly focuses on its allegorical structure and moral message. Many scholars interpret the novella as a critique of greed and capitalism. Steinbeck’s portrayal of Kino’s suffering is often read as a reflection of class oppression and colonial exploitation.

Some critics highlight the symbolic value of the pearl as a representation of wealth that destroys human life. Others focus on environmental determinism and indigenous identity. These studies show how poverty shapes the lives of the characters, but they do not deeply engage with institutional systems like medicine.

Feminist and postcolonial readings of the text also emphasize power imbalance between colonizers and natives. However, these approaches rarely examine medical discourse as a form of institutional control.

Foucauldian criticism in literature generally explains how power works through institutions such as prisons, schools, and hospitals. Michel Foucault’s concept of the “medical gaze” and “biopower” has been used in other literary works, but not sufficiently applied to *The Pearl*.

Thus, existing literature provides strong discussions on economics and power but lacks a focused exploration of diagnostic authority, treatment practices, and medical domination in the novella.

#### 4. Objectives of the Study

The main objectives of this research are:

To analyze the concept of diagnostic power in *The Pearl*.

To study how medical authority functions as a form of social control.

To examine how treatment reflects economic and class inequality.

To apply Michel Foucault's theory of medical gaze and power-knowledge.

To explore psychological resistance shown by characters under institutional oppression.

To understand how medicine becomes a tool of exclusion and domination in the text.

To connect medical authority with broader systems of social hierarchy.

#### 5. Discussion

In John Steinbeck's *The Pearl*, medical authority is shown as a system that is not based only on healing but also on social class and economic power. The doctor is not presented as a simple caregiver who treats all patients equally. Instead, he represents an institution that decides who deserves medical attention and who does not. His role in the story shows that medicine is closely connected to money and social status. The illness of Coyotito, caused by a scorpion sting, clearly reveals this unfair system. Kino urgently needs help for his child, but the doctor does not respond immediately. Instead, there is delay and judgment, which shows that poor people are not given priority in medical care. In this way, diagnostic power becomes a way of deciding whose life is important and whose life can be ignored.

From the point of view of Michel Foucault, this situation can be understood through the idea of the "medical gaze." This means that doctors do not see patients as full human beings but as objects to be studied and controlled. In *The Pearl*, this gaze does not only focus on illness but also on social identity. Kino is not only seen as a father of a sick child but also as a poor indigenous fisherman. Because of this identity, he is treated as less important. The doctor's authority is not only medical but also social, because he judges people based on their class even before treating them. The doctor's house and lifestyle also show this distance between rich and poor. It becomes clear that institutional power creates separation between those who give treatment and those who receive it.

This inequality becomes more visible when the doctor refuses to treat Coyotito at first. The refusal is not explained using medical reasons but is based on economic thinking. The doctor's servant also plays a role in stopping Kino from entering, which shows how even access to the doctor is controlled. When Kino arrives, the doctor does not show urgency or concern. Instead, he focuses on money and social position. This shows that treatment is not based on suffering but on payment. The following passage shows this idea:

The doctor was a man who lived in comfort and distance, and when Kino arrived at his gate, there was already a sense that the meeting would not be equal. The servant looked at Kino as though he were an interruption rather than a patient, and the delay itself became a form of judgment. When the doctor finally appeared, he did not rush toward the child but instead observed the situation with controlled detachment. His words carried authority, but his attention was divided between medical responsibility and financial calculation, as though healing could only begin after worth had been established. The space between them became a visible structure of inequality, where sickness alone was not enough to demand care. (Steinbeck )

This moment clearly shows that treatment is not given based on urgency but based on social status. Even the delay in response becomes a form of harm, because it increases the suffering of the child. Kino's helplessness shows how power works in this situation. He cannot challenge the doctor because the system already favors the wealthy. The child's pain is less important than the doctor's judgment about money. This proves that medical care is not equal for everyone.

This experience also affects Kino's mind deeply. At first, he believes that the doctor will help because he trusts medical authority. But when the doctor refuses to treat his child, Kino begins to lose this trust. He starts to understand that institutions do not always act fairly. This creates emotional pain and confusion in him. His belief in authority becomes

weaker, and he begins to see the system as unfair. This is an important change in his thinking, because it shows the beginning of psychological resistance.

From a Foucauldian perspective, the doctor's power can be understood as biopower, which means control over human life through institutions. The doctor does not physically harm Kino, but his refusal to act causes suffering. This shows that power can work through silence and delay as well. Poor people are not directly attacked, but they are ignored, which is also a form of control. In this way, medicine becomes a system that separates people based on class.

Later in the story, when the doctor hears about the pearl, his behavior changes suddenly. He becomes interested in Kino and shows concern for the child. This change proves that his earlier refusal was not based on medical need but on lack of financial benefit. Now that money is involved, he becomes active and caring. This shows that treatment is not stable or honest, but depends on profit.

Overall, Steinbeck shows that medical authority in *The Pearl* is deeply connected to inequality and money. Diagnosis and treatment are not just medical actions but social tools that control people. Kino's experience shows how poor people suffer not only because of illness but also because of unfair systems that decide who deserves care.

## 6. Findings

The study finds that medical authority in *The Pearl* is not neutral or purely scientific, but strongly influenced by social class and economic status. The doctor's role shows that diagnosis and treatment are not given equally to all people. Instead, medical care is controlled by wealth and social position. Poor people like Kino and his family are ignored or delayed in treatment, while wealthy individuals receive immediate attention. This proves that medical systems in the novel function as a form of social classification rather than equal healthcare.

The second important finding is that diagnostic power is used as a form of control over human life. The doctor decides the value of a patient not only based on illness but also based on money and social identity. This shows that illness alone is not enough to receive treatment. The power to diagnose becomes a power to exclude, which reflects inequality in society.

Another finding is that the delay in treatment itself becomes a form of violence. Coyotito's suffering increases because medical help is denied or postponed. This shows that harm does not always happen through direct action, but also through neglect and waiting. The study finds that time becomes a tool of power in medical authority.

The research also finds that Kino's psychological state changes because of medical rejection. At first, he trusts medical authority, but after experiencing discrimination, he begins to lose faith in the system. This creates emotional resistance and awareness of inequality. His journey shows how institutional power affects not only the body but also the mind.

Using Foucauldian theory, the study finds that the doctor represents the "medical gaze," where patients are treated as objects rather than human beings. This gaze extends beyond illness and includes social and economic judgment. The study also finds that medicine in the novel operates as a form of biopower, controlling life through selective care and institutional authority.

Finally, the research finds that Steinbeck criticizes the medical system as part of a larger social structure of inequality. Treatment is shown as conditional, and healing becomes a privilege rather than a right. The novel reveals that institutions that appear to provide care can also reinforce social division and injustice.

## 7. Limitations

This study focuses only on one literary text and one theoretical framework. It does not include comparative analysis with other works.

## 8. Recommendations

Future research can compare medical authority in different literary texts. More interdisciplinary studies combining literature and medical ethics can be conducted.

## 9. Conclusion

This study of *The Pearl* by John Steinbeck shows that medical authority in the novel is deeply connected to social inequality, class discrimination, and economic power. Using the ideas of Michel Foucault, especially the concepts of medical gaze and biopower, the research explains how diagnosis and treatment are used as tools of control rather than

pure healing practices. Based on these findings, the study proposes certain interpretive and theoretical solutions to understand and address the issues raised in the text.

One important solution is to critically re-evaluate medical authority as a human-centered practice rather than a class-based system. The novel shows that the doctor's treatment decisions are influenced by wealth and social status. To counter this idea in real-world understanding, healthcare systems must be viewed as ethical spaces where human life is more important than economic position. Literature like *The Pearl* helps readers recognize how inequality can enter even scientific fields like medicine, and this awareness is the first step toward change.

Another solution suggested by this study is the importance of removing social bias from diagnostic practice. In the novel, the doctor evaluates Kino not as a patient's father in distress, but as a poor man who cannot afford treatment. This shows how bias affects medical decisions. A fair medical system should focus only on symptoms, urgency, and human suffering, not on financial status. The study suggests that ethical medical training and equal-access healthcare policies are necessary to reduce such discrimination.

From a Foucauldian perspective, another solution is to understand and challenge institutional "gaze" and surveillance structures. According to Michel Foucault, institutions gain power by controlling how individuals are observed and classified. In *The Pearl*, this gaze decides who is visible and who is ignored. Challenging this requires creating awareness about how institutions shape human perception. In literary terms, critical reading itself becomes a form of resistance, because it exposes hidden systems of power.

The study also suggests psychological awareness as a form of resistance. Kino's emotional transformation shows that individuals begin to resist oppression when they recognize injustice. Education and awareness about institutional inequality can help individuals question authority rather than blindly accept it. This does not remove power structures completely, but it creates critical thinking against unfair systems.

*The Pearl* by John Steinbeck presents medical authority as a system deeply rooted in social and economic inequality. The doctor's behavior reveals that treatment is not based on human need but on financial value. Diagnostic power becomes a tool that classifies people, and treatment becomes conditional and unequal. The suffering of Coyotito exposes how delay, neglect, and judgment can become forms of institutional violence.

Through the lens of Michel Foucault, the novel demonstrates how the medical gaze transforms human beings into objects of observation and control. This study shows that medicine in the novel is not only about curing illness but also about maintaining social hierarchy. Kino's experience reflects how individuals in marginalized positions are excluded from systems of care and recognition.

Ultimately, Steinbeck critiques a society where healing is tied to wealth and status. The novel urges readers to question systems that appear neutral but function through inequality. The study concludes that true medical ethics should be based on equality, empathy, and human dignity rather than social privilege.

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