

***The Pearl* by John Steinbeck: Unit Overview**

Below are the Essential Questions, Theme Topics (Motifs), Thematic Questions, and Key Literary Terms that we will use for our analysis of *The Pearl*. These questions, theme topics, and terms will guide our discussion and analysis during this unit, so it is important for you to be familiar with them as you read. Use this overview to help guide your annotations and read through the background information before you read the novel.

Essential Questions

- How does parable transcend time and place to employ a universal theme?
- What makes a theme universal?
- Why are symbols useful to writers and their audience?
- How can writing be used to effect change in society?

Theme Topics (Motifs) from *The Pearl*

During your reading and annotating of *The Pearl* look for and mark passages that make a point or statement about these possible theme topics:

- **Money, Possessions, Greed:** Look for passages/quotes dealing with the quest for money and the desire for things of the material world, as well as references to the steps which people will take to attain those things. Also, look for passages/quotes that imply that money can buy happiness.
- **Social Oppression:** Look for passages/quotes dealing with the oppression of the Mexican Indians in the portrayal of the doctor, the priest, the pearl buyers, and the trackers. Watch for details which show how Kino and his people are treated disrespectfully, taken advantage of, and discriminated against.
- **Man as a part of nature:** Look for passages/quotes which illustrate similarities between humans and other species through comparisons. NOTICE the frequent images Steinbeck uses and think of how these passages reflect or foreshadow (give hints about future events) HUMAN events.
- **Kino's songs:** Look for passages/quotes with references to the "music" Kino hears—the three types of songs he hears and their significance. Pay particular attention to WHEN and UNDER WHAT CIRCUMSTANCES he "hears" a particular song.
- **Good vs. Evil:** Look for passages/quotes that reflect images and ideas of darkness-light, good- evil, brightness- dimness, day- night, black- white, etc.
- **Appearance vs. Reality:** Look for passages/quotes that refer to **things not being what they seem**. Consider looking for passages/quotes about visions, haze, mirages, dreams, vagueness, ghostly gleams, illusions, etc.

Thematic Questions

- How does oppression manifest in both the community and individual?
- How can society's wrongs be righted?
- How much control does an individual have over his/her "success" in life?
- How can we determine if something or someone is what or who they appear to be?
- Can money or desire change an individual?
- Is money necessary to be "successful" in life?
- What is the difference between good and evil? Are there any shades of gray?

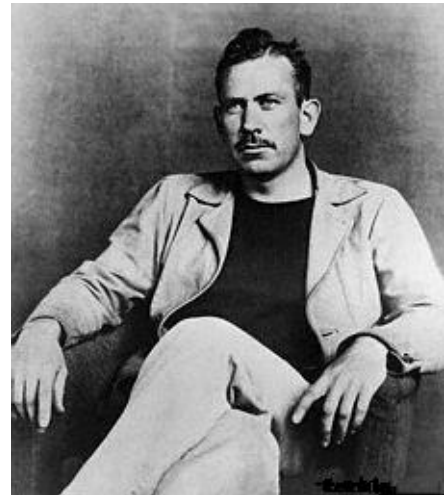
*Remember that a Literary Theme is

- the controlling idea of a story
- an arguable comment or statement an author makes about the nature of humankind or society
- a truth that can be taken from the specifics of the story and applied to society in general
- some human truth that the author wants the reader to understand about life, the human experience, or human nature

Key Literary Terms: theme, motif, characterization, conflict, symbolism, parable, allegory, setting, metaphor, simile, personification, figurative language, imagery, Freytag's Plot Pyramid

***The Pearl* – Background Information**

Author: John Steinbeck (1902-1968) was born in Salinas, California the son of poor parents. Although he was educated at Stanford University and became a celebrated writer, he never forgot his origins. Growing up in working class towns, he became an excellent observer of human nature and later wrote about the people he lived around—workers including Mexican-American and migrant workers. He discovered the harsh reality that these people were often treated poorly and without respect and had little means of defending themselves. As a result, many of the characters he wrote about were down and out, isolated and oppressed. They represent the “struggle” theme of his novels—principally the struggle between the poor and the wealthy, the weak and the strong, good and evil, and between cultures or civilizations. These themes are all evident in *The Pearl*.



Origins: In 1940, Steinbeck set out on a sailing expedition to study marine life in the Gulf of California, hoping to find universal patterns in marine species that would help him understand life in general. During this trip, Steinbeck heard about the legend of a Mexican fisher boy who had found an enormous pearl that had brought him much misery. Steinbeck developed this legend into the novel *The Pearl*. As you read *The Pearl*, watch for details about the plant and animal life in the Gulf and the many metaphors (comparisons), images and themes Steinbeck uses which are connected to these details.



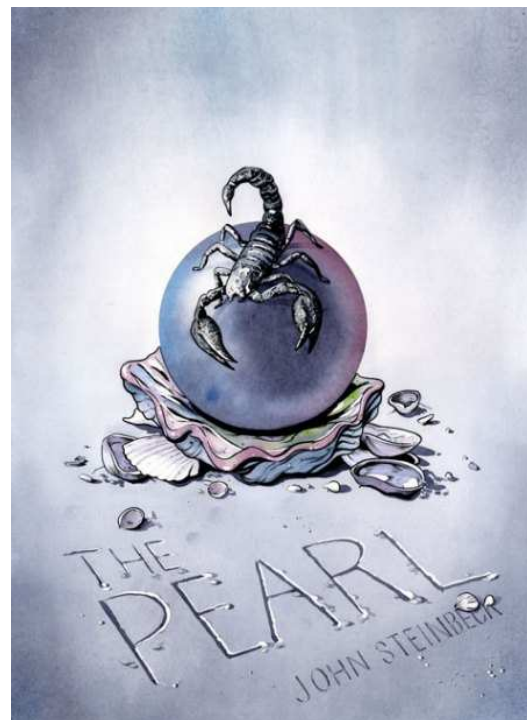
Setting: The events of *The Pearl* take place sometime around the 1900 on an estuary (mouth of the river) somewhere on the coast of Mexico in the town of La Paz. On a map the long peninsula which descends from California is called BAJA CALIFORNIA. It is part of Mexico and is separated from the rest of Mexico by the Gulf of California, also known as the Sea of Cortez.

Historical Background and Social Culture: At the time the story takes place, the Indians of Mexico had already been under the domination of people of Spanish descent for 300 years. The governing class was primarily made up of those of Spanish descent and the Roman Catholic Church who, together, kept the Mexican Indians at the bottom of the social hierarchy or social ladder. In most cases, the Indians were not allowed to attend school or own land. (Keeping people uneducated and dependent keeps them oppressed). Although Spanish culture and Catholic rituals were forced upon the Indians, they fiercely held onto many of their spiritual beliefs, cultures, and customs of their various tribes. **WATCH FOR EVIDENCE OF THIS IN THE NOVEL!**

Style: *The Pearl* is a short novel or *novella* which is told in the form of an allegory or **PARABLE**—a short, simple work with little dialogue illustrating a lesson or a larger truth often on the subject of good and evil. In a **PARABLE**, good and evil are clearly defined—everything is black and white, there are no shades of gray. For instance, the good characters have names, and the bad characters have no names. The characters and action symbolize certain universal ideas or concepts and the readers attach their own meaning to these symbols.

Point of View: *The Pearl* is told by an all knowing **OMNISCIENT** third-person narrator who is observing the characters and their actions from outside the story.

Comment: The reader is told in the preface, “*In the town they tell the story of the great pearl—how it was found and how it was lost again...If this story is a parable, perhaps everyone takes his own meaning from it and reads his own life into it.*” Thus begins Steinbeck’s novel of good and evil, *The Pearl*. It is the timeless tale of the Mexican-Indian fisherman Kino, his wife Juana, and their infant son, Coyotito. It tells of how Kino finds the Pearl of the World and dreams of breaking out of the trap of poverty and ignorance that oppresses him and his family. The violence that follows shatters his dreams, but brings him a greater understanding of himself and the realities of the world in which he lives. As you read, consider what meaning you take from Kino’s story.



Other Well-Known Novels By Steinbeck:

Tortilla Flat (1935)

The Red Pony (1937)

Of Mice and Men (1937)

The Grapes of Wrath (1939)

Cannery Row (1945)

East of Eden (1952)

The Winter of Our Discontent (1961)

Travels With Charley (1962)

***The Pearl* – Literature Guide**

As you read *The Pearl*, complete the following questions. These questions will help you remember and reflect on important plot and literary elements/techniques from the reading, so that your analysis is more in-depth. The story is simple, but because it is an allegory, there is deeper meaning at every turn. Read between the lines and analyze characters, setting, imagery, symbols, etc. *The Pearl* is a short novella and reading it several times before the start of the school year will offer you a more in-depth understanding.

Chapter I (pg. 3-13)

1. What is a parable and why do you suppose Steinbeck calls our attention to this in his preface?
2. What do the names of the characters suggest about the setting for this story?
3. Who appears to be the protagonist in this story?
4. Who would you guess the antagonists will be?
5. On pages 3-4 Kino has arisen and the day has begun. What is this song he hears and what does it suggest about how he is feeling this morning?
6. On page 5 (1st full paragraph) the song Juana sings is part of the family song and all of it, Kino perceives, is part of the **Whole**. What **Whole**?
7. While Kino's environment is safe and pleasant, how does the picture of the ants and the roosters underscore the struggle for the survival in nature?

8. On page 6, what new song comes to Kino? Why?
9. How does Juana's reaction to the scorpion show two sides of the Indian culture?
10. When the narrator says, "Kino had wondered often at the iron in his patient, fragile wife" (8) what does he mean?
11. How are the homes of the poor distinguished from the homes of the rich?
12. How is the doctor described?
13. What race do you suppose the doctor is of?
14. What does the doctor's comment on page 13 reveal about his attitude toward Indians?
15. Contrast Kino's life, which is a life close to nature, to the doctor's life, which is a life amidst civilization.

Chapter 2 (pg. 14-20)

1. How is a canoe a bulwark against starvation?

2. How is a pearl formed?

3. What does Juana pray for? Why?

4. The Indians think of God or “the gods.” What does this reveal about their religious beliefs?

5. On what two discoveries does Chapter 2 end?

6. Why does Kino howl?

7. On page 15, Steinbeck tells us that because the mixture of air and water over the gulf creates mirages, the Indians do not trust what they see with their eyes. How could this fit with the theme of “appearance versus reality”?

Chapter 3 (pg. 21-39)

1. In the opening what is the town compared to? Why do you suppose he makes this comparison?

2. How does the news of the pearl affect a) the priest, b) the shopkeepers, c) the doctor, and d) the beggars.

3. In what sense (page 23) did Kino become “every man’s enemy”?
4. How is the news of the pearl compared to the poisonous sting of the scorpion?
5. What does Kino say he will do once the pearl is sold?
6. In the middle of page 27 Kino hears “the song of evil” faintly. Who do you think brings it in to Kino’s house? Give a reason for your answer.
7. As the doctor approaches, why is Kino feeling rage?
8. On page 30 how does Kino feel trapped by his own ignorance?
9. What do you guess the doctor gives Coyotito?
10. What is suggested by the references to the fish and mice on page 32?
11. How does the doctor find out where Kino has hidden the pearl?

12. After the intruder is driven off, what does Juana say of the pearl? Why?

13. Why can Kino not do this?

14. Back on pages 28-29, why is Kino afraid of making plans?

Chapter 4 (pg. 40-56)

1. In the first paragraph how has the wholeness of the town been disrupted?

2. Why is there no longer any real competition among the pearl buyers?

3. Why is this a big day for the entire village?

4. In earlier times how did the pearl divers try to get a better price for their pearls and what happened to their effort?

5. What is suggested by the priest's sermon on pages 44-45?

6. What might lead Kino and his brother to believe this? What might lead them to be suspicious of the priest's sermon?

7. How does Steinbeck show us that despite what he says, the pearl buyer is impressed by the size and beauty of the pearl?

8. How does the pearl buyer devalue the pearl?
9. What further strategy does the buyer use to try to convince Kino that the pearl has little value?
10. How is the village divided on Kino's actions with the pearl buyer?
11. On page 52 it says, "(Kino) had lost one world and had not gained another." What world did he lose?
12. Why does it take much courage for Kino to make the decision to go to the city?
13. Why is Kino's brother afraid for him?
14. Kino's brother, Juan Tomas, is older and wiser. What insightful comment does he make about their friends? (page 53)
15. What does Kino say this time when Juana again says they should get rid of the pearl because it brings evil? What is implied in his answer?
16. At this point do you think Kino is right or is he just being stupid and willful?

17. What plans do they make for the next day?

Chapter 5 (pg. 57-65)

1. What does Juana try to do with the pearl? Why? What does Kino do?

2. What happens on the beach? What happens to the pearl?

3. Given a second opportunity after finding the pearl on the sand, why does Juana not get rid of it?

4. Why will it not matter that Kino killed the man in self-defense?

5. As they head for home, what two discoveries do they make? What does this signify?

6. What is Juan Tomas' opinion of the pearl at this point?

7. What is Kino's comment on the pearl on page 65? In what sense might this be true?

Chapter 6 (pg. 66-87)

1. Why is Kino more convinced than ever that the pearl is of great value?

2. On page 66, Steinbeck says Kino was being moved by “some animal thing.” What does he mean by this?

3. What awakens him from his sleep?

4. Who does Kino see in the road? Why does he say they will be back?

5. Why does Kino consider letting the trackers take him? What does Juana say that convinces him not to?

6. Why does Juana reject Kino’s plan to separate?

7. How are the mountain pools places of both life and death for the animals in the area?

8. What plan does Kino make to get rid of the trackers?

9. What happens to disrupt his plan?

10. In their return to the village, what is unusual in the manner that they are walking? What might this signify?

11. On page 85 how is Kino described? How are both described?

12. In Chapter I when Kino first looked at the pearl he saw a church wedding for Juana and himself. On page 86 what does he see in the pearl now?

13. What action do Kino and Juana take at the end of this story? Why?

14. If you assume that Kino threw the pearl back because he felt guilty, then what does the pearl symbolize and what is the lesson that this parable is teaching?

15. If you assume that Kino threw the pearl back out of rage and frustration then what does the pearl symbolize and what is the lesson to be learned?

16. Steinbeck is often associated with a movement in writing called naturalism. Naturalists believed that man does not have free will; rather man's fate is determined by large social and economic forces he cannot control. If that is the case, what is the lesson to be learned?

17. On the other hand, you may see the pearl as a symbol of something else with a different lesson to be learned. If that is so, write what you think that might be.