

Advanced Placement in
English Literature and Composition

Individual Learning Packet

Teaching Unit

The Pearl

by John Steinbeck

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The Pearl

Objectives

By the end of the Unit, the student will be able to:

1. articulate the significance of the novel's title.
2. discuss the credibility of the narrator and how that is measured.
3. analyze the use of foreshadowing in the novel.
4. analyze the use of symbolism in the novel.
5. discuss the function of setting and the role of nature in the novel.
6. examine the impact of the social and political issues on the novel's plot, character, and theme.
7. analyze prominent themes in the novel.
8. analyze and explain the relevance and the meaning of the symbols and motifs present in the novel.
9. analyze and explain the effects of the literary and rhetorical devices used in the novel.
10. trace the character development of the novel's protagonist.
11. evaluate the novel as allegory.
12. respond to multiple choice questions similar to those that will appear on the Advanced Placement in English Literature and Composition exam.
13. respond to writing prompts similar to those that will appear on the Advanced Placement in English Literature and Composition exam.
14. offer a close reading of *The Pearl* and support all assertions and interpretations with direct evidence from the text, from authoritative critical knowledge of the genre, or from authoritative criticism of the novel.

Introductory Lecture

HISTORICAL CONTEXT AND SETTING

While the action in *The Pearl* is easy to follow, there is one historical point to keep in mind when reading the novel. In the sixteenth century, the Spanish landed in Mexico and proceeded to subjugate and enslave the native peoples who inhabited the area. Today, while their descendants are no longer enslaved, the descendants of the Native Americans are still the underclass; the descendants of the Spanish settlers are the richer, more powerful, professional ruling class. In the story, it should be noted that the doctor, the priest, and the pearl buyers are all of Spanish descent.

Spain's influence is seen not just in the classist society in which the "Indian" people are often treated no better than animals, but in the religious influence of Catholicism. Struggling to maintain their spiritual ties with their native gods, the "Indian" people of the region did, nonetheless, embrace aspects of Christianity as well. Their religion became a blend of gods and God as the natives of the area reached out to *any* spiritual forces for guidance and hope.

The Pearl takes place in a Mexican coastal village called La Paz, probably on the Baja Peninsula where Steinbeck spent a great deal of time. The exact time period is unclear—possibly the late nineteenth or early twentieth century. It is important to note that at the time of the novel's story, the native culture had been oppressed by its Spanish colonizers for close to four hundred years. Though they sought to maintain traditional dress, homes, livelihoods, and communal living, the native "Indians" could not maintain true respect for their heritage in the presence of those who felt far superior.

NATURALISM

Many of John Steinbeck's more socially-aware novels have been tied to a literary movement called *Naturalism* which grew out of the *Realism* movement of the 1870s and 1880s. In realistic literature, the author makes no attempt to hide the hardships or ugliness of human existence; life is depicted as it really is, but the movement sought only to cover topics associated with middle-class America or "local color" topics.

The naturalism movement took place between the 1880s and the 1940s largely as a reaction to both World Wars and the Great Depression. While naturalist literature was, to an extent, not unlike the realist portrayals of society, naturalism also explored such issues as sexuality and violence, which were formerly considered taboo. In particular, naturalists sought to reveal the lives of America's lower-class, often destitute, immigrant populations; this was a dramatic change from the realists who sought only to depict the hardship of maintaining individualism within the bourgeois class.

The Pearl shares several defining characteristics of literary naturalism, but it is also important to note how Steinbeck's novel diverges from traditional naturalist texts.

Questions for Essay and Discussion

1. What social and political views does the author express? What techniques does Steinbeck use to reveal those views? And how do these issues affect the characters?
2. Discuss the significance of the novel's title.
3. Evaluate the point of view of the novel and the narrator's reliability as a storyteller. What other options might the author have considered for point of view and what would the effects of those alternate choices have been?
4. Analyze the roles of men and women in the novel. What does the author's attitude toward men seem to be? Towards women? And how do these roles change throughout the novel?
5. Explore the role of religion and spirituality. What is the difference between the two as presented in the novel? How does the character of the priest function as a mockery of religion?
6. Discuss the effects of greed, power, and materialism on the characters in the novel.
7. Reflect on the theme of appearance versus reality in the novel. Why is this theme so specific to and significant of Kino's people?
8. Consider the function of setting in the novel and how it serves to parallel theme and character.
9. Discuss the function of the animal imagery prevalent in the novel.
10. Compare and contrast Kino's life and attitude before and after he finds the pearl.
11. Reflect on the role of family and community in the novel. What commentary does Steinbeck seem to be making about the fickle nature of humanity and our changeable position within society?
12. Discuss the author's use of foreshadowing and the devices Steinbeck uses to accomplish this.
13. What does the author seem to be saying about how we measure happiness?
14. Why does the author find it necessary to include a preface to the story?
15. List possible symbolic meanings for the pearl and the corresponding lessons this allegory might be teaching.

The Pearl

Chapter One

1. What is the narrative purpose of the epigraph at the start of the novel?

2. From the first two paragraphs in the novel, what immediately gives the reader a sense of place, class, and the social standing of the characters? What details support this interpretation?

3. In paragraph 3, the reader is introduced to the prevalent motif of songs. What is the significance of these songs? What might the reason(s) be that there were “no new songs added”?

4. What is the tone of the opening paragraphs? How does the author achieve this tone?

5. Note the repetitive tasks Juana performs in the opening pages. What is their significance? How do they help to characterize Juana before we even hear her speak?

Chapter Two

1. Contrast the nature imagery in the second and third paragraphs with the tone each paragraph sets. How does the author accomplish this contrast?

2. Explain the fundamental conflict between the attitude of the “people of the Gulf” and the people in the city. What theme or themes are introduced in this conflict?

3. Examine the literal and symbolic function of Kino’s canoe.

4. Reflect on the essential difference between Kino’s and Juana’s reactions to the scorpion bite in Chapter One. How does this advance the examination of conventional male and female roles?

5. Note two examples of the interjection of the narrator’s personal opinions in this chapter. What commentary is made in each scenario?

Chapter Three

1. Trace the spreading of Kino's news throughout the town. What is the significance of the order in which the news is received? What does each person want?

2. Note the dramatic change in tone between the first six paragraphs and the seventh. What does Kino and Juana's attitude reveal about their characters? And what is the narrator's commentary on the character of man? To what does the narrator compare the town and why is this particularly significant?

3. How does the repetition of the article "the" contribute to the overall tone of paragraph six?

4. Compare and contrast Juana and Kino's responses to Juan Thomas's question, "What will you do now that you have become a rich man?" Is their behavior consistent with the reader's view of each of them in Chapter One?

5. Trace the significance of the progression of the things Kino wants from the sale of his pearl.

Chapter Four

1. How does the opening of this chapter parallel the opening of Chapter Three? How is it different?

2. How does the pearl buyers' station in life parallel the Indians'? What is the primary difference?

3. Consider the paragraph starting with "In the brush houses..." Why is it so easy for Kino's neighbors to talk about what they would do in Kino's situation? How do they know human nature so well? How is Kino's situation different?

4. Despite Juana's worries in the previous chapter that the pearl would "destroy" them, why now is this day "comparable only to the day when [Coyotito] had been born"?

5. Compare and contrast Kino and Juana's preparations for going to town. What theme do these preparations highlight? How is the rest of their community involved?

Chapter Five

1. What is the overall function of this chapter? What is the predominant imagery used to convey that function?

2. What textual clues are there that Kino has not completely transformed into an animal?

3. Beginning with the paragraph starting, “Juana dragged herself,” examine Juana’s perspective on the primary differences between men and women. How does she view her role as a woman and as Kino’s wife? What commentary is Steinbeck making about the roles of men and women in their society?

4. Why does Juana not let Kino believe that the pearl is gone?

Chapter Six

1. If the tone of the previous chapter can be described as one of desperate greed, how would you characterize the overall tone of this chapter?

2. What is the “ancient thing” stirring in Kino? How will this serve him in this chapter?

3. Consider the paragraph starting with “All night they walked...” and analyze how Kino’s relationship with nature has changed since the beginning of the novel.

4. What is the significance of the prevalence of the songs in Kino’s head at the start of the chapter?

5. Note the scene in which Kino is watching the ants moving. How does this serve as a contrast to a similar scene in Chapter One? What do these two scenes reveal about Kino’s attitude toward nature and his own position in the natural order of things?
