

Reflections:

A Student Response Journal for...

The Pearl
by John Steinbeck

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Item No. 201718

Chapter 1

1. As Kino awakens, he becomes aware of his home, his wife, and his child. He thinks of this home feeling as the “Song of the Family.” Write a brief description of how you feel when you greet your family at the beginning of the day.
2. Kino and his family are descendants of the ancient Indians who inhabited Mexico before the rich Spaniards took over the country. Their family life includes songs and customs passed down to them from their ancient ancestors. “Juana sang softly an ancient song that had only three notes and yet endless variety of interval. And this was part of the family song too. It was all part. Sometimes it rose to an aching chord that caught the throat, saying this is safety, this is warmth, this is the *Whole*.”

When Juana sings her song, it is referred to as the “Whole,” meaning that it comes from the Indians’ ancient roots. Many families in America have roots which tie them to other cultures. The customs and beliefs of these other cultures are often part of modern family life. Can you think of any family traditions your family enjoys, which are rooted in another culture? If so, describe the tradition and how you feel about it.

3. Critics believe that the animals in this story support the theme that living creatures must struggle for survival. Review the descriptions of the roosters, the ants, and the dog. Consider the ways each of these animals tries to survive in the world. What non-human creatures are part of your daily life? If it is true that all creatures must struggle to survive, relate the ways these animals fight to survive.

Response Journal

4. Kino and Juana do not have a vocal conversation in the morning. “They had spoken once, but there is not need for speech if it is only a habit anyway. Kino sighed with satisfaction—and that was conversation.” Give an example of this kind of unspoken communication which exists in our modern lives.

5. Juana realizes her son is in danger, so she repeats an ancient magic prayer to protect him from evil, and then she says the “Hail Mary,” a Christian prayer. Critics believe this incident helps the reader to understand the two sides to the Indian culture. Relate an incident from life, a movie, a book, or a television program when a mother calls on any help she can find to save her endangered child.

6. Review the paragraph below, in which Kino’s wife is described. This description is contradictory because it says she is both fragile and like iron; both qualities are accurate. In literature this is called a paradox. Write a description of someone you know who exhibits at least two seemingly contradictory qualities.

“Kino had wondered often at the iron in his patient, fragile wife. She, who was obedient and respectful and cheerful and patient, she could arch her back in child pain with hardly a cry. She could stand fatigue and hunger almost better than Kino himself. In the canoe she was like a strong man.”

The Pearl

7. Kino, his wife, and his neighbors all go to see the doctor. In the following passage, Kino is about to knock on the doctor's gate.

“Kino hesitated a moment. This doctor was not of his people. This doctor was of a race, which for nearly four hundred years had beaten and starved and robbed and despised Kino's race, and frightened it too, so that the indigene came humbly to the door. And as always when he came near to one of this race, Kino felt weak and afraid and angry at the same time. Rage and terror went together. He could kill the doctor more easily than he could talk to him...”

If you can understand how Kino feels about the doctor, write a letter to a classmate who does not get it.

8. Some critics believe that one of the themes in this story is that a simple life, close to nature, is happier than a life lived in civilization. Write a letter from the doctor's servant to Kino helping Kino to understand that the doctor is not a happy man despite his wealth and position.
9. When the doctor refuses to treat Coyotito, his (Kino's) neighbors feel Kino's shame. “They melted away. The beggars went back to the church steps, the stragglers moved off, and the neighbors departed so that the public shaming of Kino would not be in their eyes.”

If this scene were to happen today, what do you think the spectators might do?

Chapter 2

10. “The uncertain air that magnified some things and blotted out others hung over the whole Gulf so that all sights were unreal and vision could not be trusted; so that sea and land had the sharp clarities and the vagueness of a dream.”

In your experience, have your eyes ever played tricks on you so that you thought you saw something, but it was not really there? How were you able to determine the truth of what you were seeing?

11. The canoe is essential to Kino’s ability to provide for his family. It is something he inherited from his grandfather. Families pass objects, professions, and wisdom from one generation to another. Write about something that is passed down in your family. In what way does it help you to feel connected to your ancestors?
12. Juana makes a poultice out of seaweed to help the baby’s swollen shoulder. The narrator comments that this remedy is a good “as any and probably better than the doctor could have done. But [it] lacked his authority because it was simple and didn’t cost anything.” In our modern world, many people believe doctors are unfamiliar with home or herbal remedies. Do you agree with this statement? If so, why?
13. “She [Juana] had not prayed directly for the recovery of the baby—she had prayed that they might find a pearl with which to hire the doctor to cure the baby, for the minds of people are as unsubstantial as the mirage of the Gulf.”

The Pearl

How do you suppose the local priest might feel about Juana's prayer? Write a letter from the priest to Juana expressing his opinion.

14. Kino's people think of pearls as "accidents, and the finding of one was luck, a little pat on the back by God or the gods or both." To what extent do you believe that a person's good fortune is a gift from God? What do you think of someone who believes in more than one God?
15. Kino sees the pearl in the opening of the large oyster. But he waits to open it until he has pulled up his basket of other oysters. "It is not good to want a thing too much. It sometimes drives the luck away. You must want it just enough, and you must be very tactful with God or the gods."

In his heart, Kino knows he has found a pearl, but he is afraid to show his excitement. Have you ever experienced a similar feeling? Why do you suppose people feel this way?

16. One of the themes of this story is that things are not always what they seem to be. Kino seems to understand that in the following passage:

"Now Kino was reluctant to open it. What he had seen, he knew, might be a reflection, a piece of flat shell accidentally drifted in or a complete illusion. In this Gulf of uncertain light there were more illusions than realities."

Some critics believe this passage foreshadows the fact that the pearl may not bring Kino and his family the good fortune they expect. Can you think of an incident from a movie, book, life, or television program where sudden wealth hurts a person's life rather than helps?