

***The Pearl* by John Steinbeck**

Based on a Mexican folk tale, *The Pearl* centers upon Kino and his family, their struggles with poverty in their coastal village, and the great pearl that changes everything. Although short and captivating, Steinbeck's story brings you deep into human nature, for the "essence of pearl mixed with the essence of man and a curious dark residue was precipitated." Here are a few ideas to turn a joyful reading into an insightful one, too.

1) Examine how Kino changes over the course of the story and consider how the attitudes toward the pearl also change.

2) Besides the pearl, what can you identify as valuable in this story?

3) Luck, chance, fate, the gods—what forces propel the events of this story?

4) Steinbeck offers this story as a parable, which is a story offering a lesson. What lessons do you draw from this tale?

5) Consider Kino and Juana's circumstances of oppression. Spain has colonized Mexico, and the pearls and other riches harvested by the poor had "raised the King of Spain to be a great power in Europe in past years, had helped to pay for his wars, and had decorated the churches for his soul's sake." Steinbeck seems critical of the imbalance of power. Look closely at how this dynamic shapes Kino and Juana's experience. How do the doctor, the priest, and the traders fit into the power structure of the community? How do they respond to Kino and Juana?

6) Pay attention to the songs, which act as a spirit, force, or story Steinbeck tries to capture. When do they emerge? How do they help us understand Kino and Juana's story? In ways, these songs connect back to the oral tradition of their history: "His people had once been great makers of songs so that everything they saw or thought or did or heard became a song."

7) Pay attention to sight and visions. The narrator warns readers, "All sights were unreal and vision could not be trusted," and "In this Gulf of uncertain light there were more illusions than realities." Consider what the great pearl leads the characters to see.

You may want to keep a journal with any questions, thoughts, or ideas you have while reading. If there are any terms you do not understand, write them down, and we will address them during our discussion of the reading. You may want to keep a chart of the main characters and how they change throughout the novel.

We will discuss this novel, do various assignments, take a test on the reading during the first week of school. Please email me if you have any questions, thennessy@tjajags.com.