

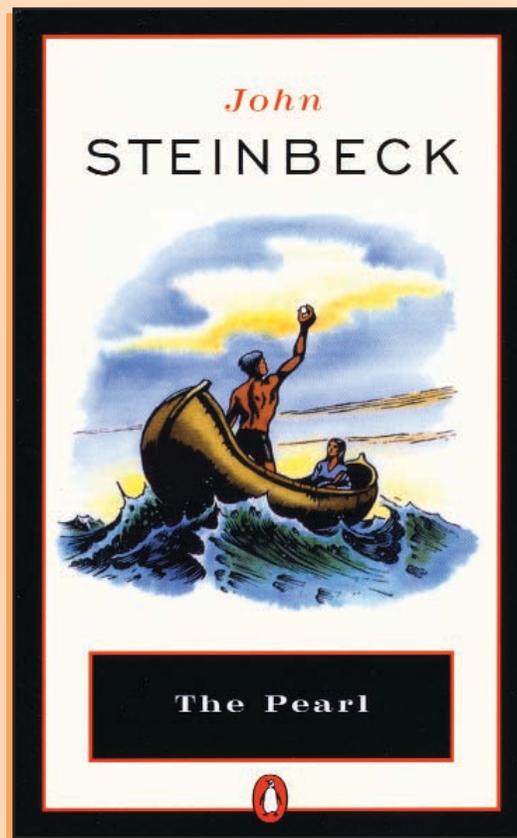


A TEACHER'S GUIDE TO THE PENGUIN EDITION OF

JOHN STEINBECK'S

# THE PEARL

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## NOTE TO THE TEACHER

This guide is designed to assist teachers in moving students beyond the surface story of Steinbeck's novella. The prereading activities prepare students for what they will read in the novel. The brief discussion of the techniques of plot, character development and theme employed by Steinbeck in his deceptively simple story provides an overview of the story as well as an understanding of its simplicity and complexity. The teaching methodologies are based on response strategies that encourage student interaction with the literary work. Teachers are encouraged to guide, help with reading, and yet allow the students to independently respond to the work.

## INTRODUCTION

John Steinbeck is one of the greatest storytellers of the twentieth century. His wonderful novellas *The Pearl*, *Cannery Row*, *The Red Pony*, and *Of Mice and Men* not only introduce readers to a fascinating, realistic cast of characters, make the hills and seacoast of California and Mexico come to life, but also tell intriguing stories of the lives of real people. Steinbeck's characters are not the rich men and women of California's boom days, but are the homeless, the migrant workers, the poor fishermen, and the farmers. However, each of these people has a deceptively simple, but important story to tell, a story filled with love and pain. The stories tell us not only of the lives of the poor who seek to live off the land, but of the struggles of all people.

*The Pearl* is the most teachable of all John Steinbeck's novellas. The story is simple but exciting. However, within its simplicity is the great complexity of a tale filled with imagery, symbolism, and thematic significance.

## BEFORE READING THE NOVEL

This novella needs little introduction. The plot itself is quite simple. However, some limited prereading information might be useful to students not familiar with the oral tradition from which this story comes.

1. It is helpful for teachers to explain the oral storytelling tradition from which this type of story comes. If you live in a part of the country in which storytelling is or was a part of the culture, it may be possible to orally read or learn to tell one or more of the "local" stories. Students can discuss these in terms of their surface meaning and also in terms of any messages or morals they held for the listener.
2. Prior to reading the story, teachers should make it clear to students that Steinbeck moves this tale a step beyond the storytelling tradition. In the told story the message or moral heard by the listener is likely to have been quite different from the message contemporary readers get from this story. Teachers can read Steinbeck's brief introduction to the students, and ask them: What is a parable? What examples do you know of parables? How does what Steinbeck suggests here ("everyone takes his own meaning from it and reads his own life into it") differ from the traditional interpretation of a parable? Teachers can alert students to listen or read for the moral that would have been heard by villagers as they listened to this story of the pearl and the fisherman who found it.

## WHILE READING THE NOVEL

Students must first understand the simple plot line of the tale before they enjoy its symbolic and thematic significance. So that students can take their own meaning from the story, it is essential to help them outline the surface story.

## THE PLOT

Coyotito, the baby of Kino, a poor Mexican fisherman, and Juana, his mate, is bitten by a scorpion. Juana sucks the scorpion poison from Coyotito's wound. When the baby falls ill, the grief-stricken parents take him to the only doctor in the neighboring town who refuses to treat him because the baby's parents cannot pay. They wrap Coyotito in a blanket and take him in their prized canoe into the water so Kino can dive for pearls. Kino finds the "Pearl of the World," and Coyotito rests more comfortably, the poison receding from his body. Kino believes the great pearl is his baby's ticket to health, an education, and a better life. Juana looks forward to being able to be married in the church now that they can pay. However, superstitions of the village begin to make Juana fear that the pearl is evil and will bring them grief. The parish priest who had never had time for Kino and Juana before comes to see the pearl and tells Kino, "I hope thou wilt

remember to give thanks, my son, to Him who has given thee this treasure, and to pray for his guidance in the future.” Juana’s fear of the pearl’s evil power is confirmed after the doctor learns of Kino’s good fortune and comes to treat the baby, giving him “medication” that makes him very ill. Kino begins to fear, hides the pearl, readies his knife, and stabs a man who attempts to enter his cabin in the night. Juana begs Kino to throw the evil pearl away before it destroys them.

The next morning Kino, Juana, and Coyotito, followed by the villagers, go to La Paz to sell the pearl. Juan Tomas, Kino’s brother, cautions him to be careful he is not cheated. When Kino presents the pearl to the dealers they tell him it is too large to sell. Finally, one of the dealers offers Kino a paltry sum. Knowing he is being cheated, Kino takes his pearl, and with the procession, returns defeated to his village. He buries the pearl, fears that it will be stolen, and decides to travel many miles on foot to the capital to attempt to sell the pearl. Juana, fearing the evil of the pearl, attempts to throw it away while Kino sleeps, but Kino chases her and beats her. As Kino walks away from Juana, he kills a man attempting to steal the pearl, and Juana knows “the old life was gone forever.” They plan to use Kino’s prized possession, the canoe, to begin their journey to the capital, but Kino finds it with a splintered hole broken in it.” Juana returns to their brush house to get Coyotito and finds it in flames. Knowing he has killed a man, Kino takes Juana and Coyotito and hides in Juan Tomas’ house, asking him to tell the villagers they were killed in the fire and the pearl was stolen. They flee the village “in the dark of the moon” relying on the wind to cover their tracks.

All night they walk; by day they hide in the shade of a tree. Juana does not sleep and Kino sleeps fitfully. Waking from a dream, he tells Juana to quiet the baby because he hears something. In the distance, he sees three men, two on foot and one on horseback. They pass the family by, but Kino knows the trackers will return. The family flees into the mountains, hoping they can lose them. Near a pool of water, Kino hides Juana and Coyotito in a cave. Finally, the trackers come and make camp near the pool. The baby whimpers, a match flares at the trackers’ campsite, the match dies, Kino sees a rifle near the tracker and readies himself to steal it. But, before he reaches the tracker the moon rises, casting too much light on the camp site. Kino prepares to leap for the gun as Coyotito whimpers in the distance. He is able to kill two of the trackers. But, when he hears Juana’s cry he knows it is the cry of death for her baby. Kino carries the rifle and Juana carries the dead baby, wrapped in her shawl, back to La Paz. They walk through the city “as though it were not there.” They walk quietly to the sea; Kino offers the pearl to Juana, but she says, “No, you.” He flings it with all his might into the lovely green sea.

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## CHARACTERS

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The characters of this story are only important in terms of how they develop the storyline. They are relatively undeveloped and in terms of much contemporary fiction, they are flat. However, this is true in most of the oral storytelling tradition. The importance of this tale lies not in the individual characters, but in what the listener takes away from the tale. However, it is important to examine some of the supporting cast of characters who take on more significance than those characters who provide the story’s action. These characters carry the symbolic and thematic message of the tale.

**The doctor:** We never know his name, but in a few pages we learn a great deal about him. He has become wealthy, although not as wealthy as he would like (“In his chamber the doctor sat up in his high bed. He had on his dressing gown of read watered silk that had come from Paris, a little tight over the chest now if it was buttoned.” “The doctor had once for a short time been a part of the great world and his whole subsequent life was memory and longing for France.”) He has also grown fat (“On his lap was a silver tray with a silver chocolate pot...His eyes rested in puffy little hammock of flesh and his mouth drooped with discontent. He was growing very stout, and his voice was hoarse with the fat that pressed on his throat.) Both his relative wealth and his weight come from his continuous oppression of the people. Although he may be able to heal, he elects to promote illness and ignorance. He only treats those who can afford to be treated spending much of his time in his chamber eating and sleeping. However, when he thinks he can gain power over Kino and, perhaps, either steal the pearl of force Kino to pay for the “treatment” of Coyotito, he is willing to reverse Juana’s healing treatment by giving the baby a dangerous substance. The doctor is the embodiment of evil and greed.

**The priest:** Like the doctor, he has little or no time for the villagers when they cannot afford to pay for his services. He does not marry Kino and Juana because they cannot afford to make a contribution to the church. When Coyotito falls ill, he does not offer to help. However, as soon as he hears of Kino’s good fortune in finding the “pearl of the world,” he goes to the village telling the fisherman and his family to remember that God has given them this good fortune.

**The pearl dealers:** They, too, play on Kino’s ignorance and fear. When he comes to town expecting them to bid against each other for the pearl, he does not understand that they all work for the same master. There is no honest competition here-their only goal is to get the magnificent pearl as cheaply as possible. Playing on his ignorance, they attempt to convince him that the pearl is too large, and, therefore, not worth much. Kino, however, does not believe them and they begin to fear retribution from their master for losing the pearl.

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**Setting:** In all of Steinbeck's books the setting is important. This tale could take place in few other settings, although similar stories could be told in any setting in which the people are oppressed and ignorant. However, Steinbeck uses his setting to help impart his symbolic and thematic messages.

**The Village:** In many ways, the village in which most of the story takes place, is a symbol of the oppression of the people. To create this symbol, Steinbeck personifies the town. The Gulf Another important element of the setting is the sea. It, too, takes on symbolic importance in the story. The Gulf provides the villagers with their livelihood and sustenance—fish and pearls. However, like the town, it cannot be trusted. Steinbeck uses the sea to make his readers aware that things are not always what they seem. “Although the morning was young, the hazy mirage was up. 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....There was no certainty in seeing, no proof that what you saw was there or not there [emphases added].”

**Imagery and Symbol:** Often, the message beyond the simple story is supplied through Steinbeck's imagery and symbolism. The major images in the story are of music and light. They symbols are found in the setting and the supporting cast of characters (as discussed above).

**Music:** Steinbeck makes it clear that music is an important part of the people of the village, however the music has remained the same for generations. However, Kino, who grew up with this music, has his own songs in his head. His songs provide him comfort and give him warning. We first become aware of his song in the first chapter, when he “sings” us the Song of the Family. This song is a peaceful and comforting song of the sounds of his mate, his baby, and his small home. It is the song of the warmth and wholeness. Kino also hears the Song of the Undersea. In this song Kino finds pride and strength. As he approaches the “maybe pearl” while he is diving, he hears its “secret melody.” The music of the pearl is at first quiet and secret; later, as Kino thinks of all the wonderful things it can provide, its music is “shrilling with triumph.” The pearl's song, like the life of the family, is changing. At times the song of the pearl seems to contradict its beauty—things are not always what they seem. Kino's song is warning him of impending danger. After the doctor leaves his home, he hears “the evil music pulsing.” And, as Kino prepares to throw the pearl back into the sea, he is drawn to the Song of the Family which has become “as fierce as a cry.” The pearl now has a different song, “distorted and insane.”

**The Pearl:** The pearl takes on different appearances throughout the story. By the time Kino throws it back into the sea it has become “ugly; it was gray, like a malignant growth.” However, earlier in the story the pearl's secret melody was, like the pearl itself, “clear and beautiful, rich and warm and lovely, glowing and gloating and triumphant.” But, Steinbeck's tone and choice of words in these earlier descriptions leads us to wonder if the pearl is really what it seems. To Kino, through “the lovely gray surface of the pearl came the little things (he) wanted: a harpoon...a rifle.” Even when Kino hears the evil music, he looks at the “beauty of the pearl, winking and glimmering in the light of the little candle.” But Steinbeck warns us that Kino is “cozened...with its beauty.” To Juana the pearl quickly becomes evil. She tells Kino, “It will destroy us all...Even our son.” The boat: The canoe to Kino has special significance. It was his grandfather's and has been passed on to him. Because of the canoe he has a special power, an ability to fish in the way other villagers may not. So, the boat is not only a symbol of his well-being, but is, in actuality, his means to a better life. When Kino goes to get the canoe so that he can take the pearl to the capital he finds it ruined. The boat's importance is more fully conveyed through Steinbeck's personification of it.

**The symbols:** The novella is filled with symbols. In addition to those discussed above, alert readers can identify many more. The scorpion is not only a symbol, but foreshadows the evil that is to come. The pearl, gray or black in color, also must be considered symbolic. The town, the sea, and the village all possess certain symbols of a way of life and death.

**The Themes:** The themes of Steinbeck's story are those that go beyond the moral that might have been heard by Mexican villagers as they listened to it. Teachers can ask students to think about the message this story might give to ignorant, poverty-stricken people and discuss the irony in this message. Students can be led to an understanding of this irony as they deal with questions such as: What message might poor villagers who cannot read hear from this story as it is told? What effect does the message they hear have on their lives?

Steinbeck's themes show the irony of the simple message heard by poor villagers: wealth (money) brings evil. Of course, this message also may be considered as one of the themes of Steinbeck's novella. However, students might be able to identify more hidden themes: ignorance leads to subjugation and oppression; things (and people) are not always what they seem; goodness is not always the result of learning; evil can be found in many forms; at times the people and institutions we most respect are the embodiment of evil—including those that preach against it or claim to heal it.

## TEACHING METHODOLOGY

Nothing is more fun than teaching a great story that is also filled with the potential to take students far beyond it. Because this is a short book (only 90 pages) and is based on a tradition of oral story telling, it is best read orally or told. Teachers may want to alternate oral reading or telling with the silent reading of the students. The length of this book makes it possible to share the entire book together during class time.

If you are a good storyteller and elect to tell the story to students, you will probably want them to read the book so that they can begin to see the difference between the simple told-tale and the complex story written by Steinbeck. In fact, this is a great technique for helping them discover that there are “hidden” messages or themes beyond the message that is likely to be heard by listeners. Once students understand this, you can lead them into an interesting and challenging discussion about the importance of reading and writing to a complex, technological society. You might ask the students: How would our society differ if we had no written (and read) language?

As Steinbeck suggests in his introduction, each reader will take from this story something different. In part, these differences in interpretation come from differences in experiences brought to the story by each reader. Therefore, it is important that teachers utilize the response techniques suggested below for both writing and discussion.

## AFTER READING THE NOVEL

### WRITTEN OR ORAL RESPONSES

Students can write about or explore a variety of ways in which to respond to *The Pearl*. One of the most important response techniques teachers can employ is the dialogue journal. While students are reading the story (or the story is being read to them), periodically have them stop reading and write to you (or to a peer or, perhaps, a local college student) about what they have read. The person to whom they are writing should respond, in letter format to the journal, to what they have written. If you are the person responding, you may want to respond in writing to five or six students per day, thereby writing to an entire class in the course of a week. If some class time is used to have the students write in their journals, you can utilize this time to write responses to them. In addition to this technique, students can respond in the following ways:

1. Personal statement—these include emotional reactions, expressions of identification or empathy with characters or place, conjecture about characters, and autobiographical associations. Suggested Activities—React in writing to the family and village life of Kino. Write about how you feel when Coyotito is bitten by the scorpion.
2. Description—statements which attempt to classify or describe the form, language, structure or content of the work; such responses can range in complexity from the simple recall of explicitly state information to an analysis of the stylistic properties. Suggested Activities—Orally, in your own words, describe what happens when Kino finds the pearl. Dramatically tell about the family fleeing from the village. Be sure to create a sense of suspense.

Write about the songs heard by Kino; write about the doctor and the priest.

3. Interpretation—responses aimed at identifying the symbolic or thematic meaning of a work; interpretation requires of readers an ability to infer the intentions of Steinbeck. Suggested Activities—Write your own interpretation of chapter three. What does Steinbeck mean by the “nervous system and a head and a shoulders and feet” of the town?

Write about why the canoe is so important to Kino. What position does it give him in the village? Read the final paragraph on page 61 and all of page 62. What is Steinbeck doing here? How does he show the importance of the boat?

4. Evaluation—responses aimed at assessing the construction, meaningfulness, or appropriateness of *The Pearl*.

### SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES

Write about the suspense you found in the novel. How does Steinbeck create it?

In a small group talk about the theme: things are often not what they seem. Discuss the pearl, the doctor, the priest, the pearl dealers. What other things in this novel may not be what they seem?

Write or discuss the irony found between the various message of this story: the message likely to be heard by the ignorant villagers when the story is told and the written theme of Steinbeck. Why are the messages different? How do these messages relate to Steinbeck's short introduction?

## ABOUT THE EDITORS OF THIS GUIDE

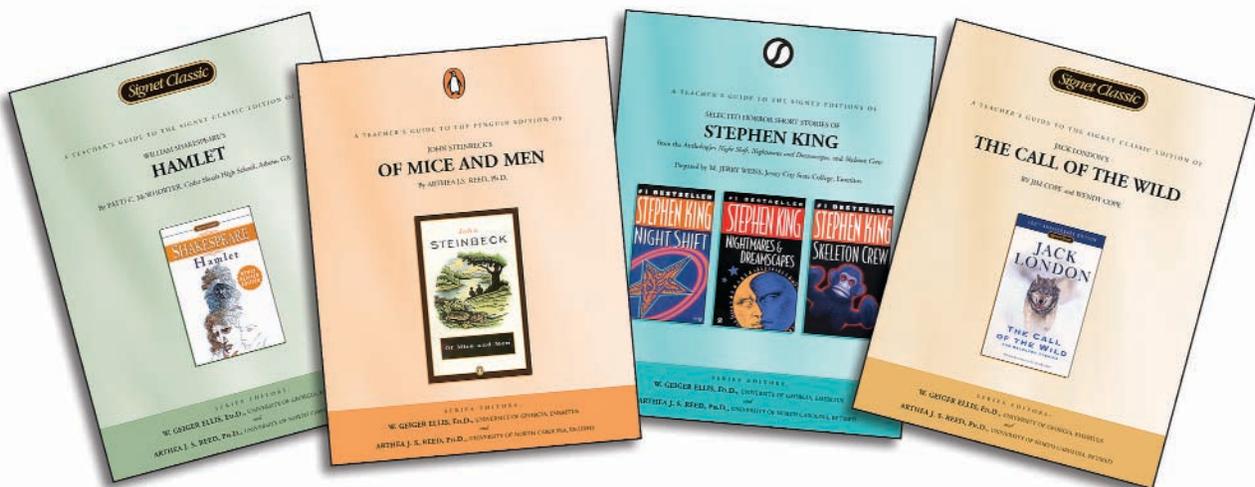
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