

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

The Pearl

by

John Steinbeck

Book Information

John Steinbeck, The Pearl
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Kino, a poor Mexican pearl-diver, believes he has received the answer to his prayers when he finds a great pearl worth a fortune, but tragedy soon follows.

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Main Characters

Apolonia Juan Tomas's wife
Coyotito a baby; Kino and Juana's only son
Juan Tomas Kino's brother
Juana the wife of Kino and mother of Coyotito
Kino the principal character in the story; a fisherman who finds a pearl of great price
the beggars men who sit in front of the church and know about everything in town
the doctor an unscrupulous, greedy man who despises the native people and longs for France
the pearl dealers buyers of pearls, who evaluate and set their prices
the priest the Father at the church, who visits Kino and Juana after hearing they have found a great pearl

the trackers a group of three men who follow Kino, Juana and Coyotito after they flee La Paz

Vocabulary

avarice an insatiable greed for riches
bougainvillea any of several South American shrubs or vines belonging to the four-o'clock family
countenanced permitted or tolerated
covert a shelter or hiding place
estuary that part of the mouth or lower course of a river in which the river's current meets the sea's tide
petulant showing sudden irritation
scorpion an arachnid of the order Scorpiones, common in warm climates, having a front pair of pincers and a long, upcurved tail that ends in a venomous stinger
tules large grasses found in California and adjacent regions

Synopsis

The story begins in the brush house of Kino, a fisherman, and his wife, Juana. A scorpion stings the baby, Coyotito, who is their only child. Although Juana immediately sucks out the poison, she wishes the baby to be seen by the doctor. The doctor refuses to see the baby after finding Kino has nothing worthwhile to offer as payment. His servant lies to Kino about the doctor's whereabouts.

Kino and Juana return to their part of the city, go to the beach, and set out in their canoe to dive for pearls. Kino does indeed find a pearl. It is more than ordinary, for it is "as large as a seagull's egg," and is "the greatest pearl in the world."

Word of Kino's treasure spreads through the brush houses and into the stone-and-plaster part of town. While Kino sees good images and hears good music in the pearl, greed is already working in the minds of others. The priest visits their brush house and reminds them to give thanks to God for the treasure. The doctor, pretending he does not know about the pearl, comes to "cure" Coyotito, who is by now almost recovered. He gives him some poison to

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make him sick and then returns an hour later to cure him. Kino's eyes flit inadvertently to the place he has buried the pearl when the doctor is questioning him.

That evening, an intruder tries to steal the pearl, which Kino had since moved and reburied under his mat. Juana urges Kino to throw away the pearl, for it has brought evil. Kino refuses. He sees it as the way to break free, to give a future to Coyotito. In the morning, Kino, Juana, Kino's brother, Juan Tomas, and his family, accompanied by the neighbors, go to the city to see the pearl dealers. The dealers are in collusion with each other and offer Kino a very low price. He claims he is being cheated and threatens to go to the capital. Juan Tomas shares his reservations with Kino, and tells him he is afraid for him.

Again, the evening brings another intruder, and Kino is slashed on his face. Again, Juana urges him to destroy the pearl. He again refuses. Before the morning dawns, Juana takes the pearl and runs toward the sea. Kino reaches her just as she is about to throw it. He strikes her and kicks her. As he turns from seeing her lying on the sand, he is attacked, and in the process of defending himself, kills his attacker. Knowing they are now not safe, Kino tells Juana to return to their home to get Coyotito so that they can flee to the capital. Meanwhile, Kino discovers that his canoe has been destroyed. Juana retrieves Coyotito just before their brush house is burned to the ground. Kino, Juana and Coyotito take refuge in Juan Tomas's house before fleeing the city at nightfall. Before leaving, Kino says the pearl "has become my soul."

The family travels along the road, a stiff wind blowing sand to cover their tracks, until the morning, when they seek shelter and sleep. Kino awakens and discovers trackers are following them. They flee to the mountains and take shelter in a cave. As Kino tries to overtake the trackers, Coyotito is shot. The story ends with Juana and Kino entering La Paz, emotionally removed from anything around them, she carrying the dead Coyotito like a sack, he with the rifle across his arm. They march to the shore, whereupon Kino offers Juana the pearl to toss. She refuses, and he tosses it back into the sea.

Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

Initial Understanding

When Kino claims, "I am cheated," and declares he will go, "perhaps even to the capital," it is as the narrator describes, "Kino had lost his old world and he must clamber on to a new one." Why was Kino fearful?

In the concrete sense, we learn that Kino had never been far from home before, and any journey to an unknown place carries with it fear, as well as adventure and excitement. However, this was more than a physical journey. By this journey, Kino would upset the system, breaking the rules that kept everyone in their place. It thus became extremely dangerous, because everyone would truly be Kino's enemy. He would threaten their way of life, expose them, and make them confront issues they did not want to face.

Literary Analysis

Juan Tomas is the older brother of Kino. What role does he play in the story?

Juan Tomas plays a number of roles in the story. His age indicates the role of a wise man. He knows the Indian ways, as well as the structure of the society and the evil that comes to one who tries to change it. He is counselor to Kino, asking him probing questions, yet not interfering with Kino's choices. He is also a protector. He gives Kino and Juana refuge and helps them in their escape.

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Inferential Comprehension

At the end of the story, Kino tried to give Juana the pearl to throw into the sea. However, Juana insisted Kino be the one to throw it back into the sea. What can be concluded from this?

Juana had tried in the past to convince Kino to part with the pearl. When he wouldn't, she tried to steal the pearl and throw it away herself. She was physically abused for that act. She also had an understanding of the nature of "a man." Kino himself had said, "This pearl has become my soul." But it was not Juana's soul. Juana knew in a deeper sense that Kino needed to throw the pearl away himself, to commit himself as a man, to control his own destiny, so that he could find his soul again. Perhaps if she threw it away, he could never separate from it, and would always see his soul as buried in the ocean depths.

Constructing Meaning

In the story, the destruction of Kino's canoe is "an evil beyond thinking." It is the source of his livelihood. His rage stems from the boat's vulnerability and inability to reproduce, protect or heal itself. What in your life, and your parents' and grandparents' lives, could you compare with Kino's canoe? How has this changed over the course of the generations?

In an industrialized society, we have moved from a hand-to-mouth existence to one where we perform a given task and are monetarily rewarded. The sources of our livelihood may be different from that of Kino's, but are still vital to the support of our families and ourselves. A computer may be vital to some, a specific tool to others, the hands, voice, or instrument of a musician, the mind of a teacher, the land of a farmer, etc.

Teachable Skills

Recognizing Setting *The Pearl* is set on the Baja Peninsula of Mexico. Have the students locate the city of La Paz on a map. Identify the Gulf to which Kino refers. How far is it to Mexico City? Look for other geographic places mentioned in

the story. Have the students name the mountain range into which Kino and Juana fled while being pursued by the trackers. Kino suggested that he and Juana separate, with Juana fleeing north toward Loreto or Santa Rosalia. How far would she have had to travel alone if she followed his advice?

Understanding Hist/Cultural Factors Before pounding on the doctor's gate, Kino hesitates, remembering the oppression that people of the doctor's race have inflicted on the indigenous people for nearly four hundred years. Research the history of the area. Find out who discovered the Baja. What was the nature of the acquisition? Was it violent or peaceful? What rights were the native people given? What resources of the area were important to the conquerors?

Understanding the Author's Craft In *The Pearl*, songs are used to symbolize good and evil. Have the students make a time line of the story. Include all characters and events. Overlaying the time line, indicate the songs that Kino heard during the events or when interacting with the various characters. If no song was heard, give some symbol of neutrality to the event or person. Evaluate what you have found. Are there any surprises? What does this say about the people we often admire or look up to in our society? What does it say about the things we value? How do the songs change?

Deriving Word or Phrase Meaning Reread Chapter VI of *The Pearl*, noting all the animal imagery used to describe Kino, Juana and their trackers. Try to identify the different animals that come to mind from each passage. Note verbs, such as, "Juana trotted behind him to keep up," as well as descriptive passages. Compare this image to the doctor's view of the indigenous people. If the doctor's view represents the view of the people behind the plaster walls of La Paz, how does this mindset perpetuate the exploitation of the native people?