*Remember that a Literary Theme is
  • the controlling idea of a story
  • an arguable comment or statement an author makes about the nature of humankind or society
  • a truth that can be taken from the specifics of the story and applied to society in general
  • some human truth that the author wants the reader to understand about life, the human experience, or human nature

**Key Literary Terms:** theme, motif, characterization, conflict, symbolism, parable, allegory, setting, metaphor, simile, personification, figurative language, imagery, Freytag's Plot Pyramid

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**The Pearl – Background Information**

**Author:** John Steinbeck (1902-1968) was born in Salinas, California the son of poor parents. Although he was educated at Stanford University and became a celebrated writer, he never forgot his origins. Growing up in working class towns, he became an excellent observer of human nature and later wrote about the people he lived around—workers including Mexican-American and migrant workers. He discovered the harsh reality that these people were often treated poorly and without respect and had little means of defending themselves. As a result, many of the characters he wrote about were down and out, isolated and oppressed. They represent the “struggle” theme of his novels—principally the struggle between the poor and the wealthy, the weak and the strong, good and evil, and between cultures or civilizations. These themes are all evident in *The Pearl.*

**Origins:** In 1940, Steinbeck set out on a sailing expedition to study marine life in the Gulf of California, hoping to find universal patterns in marine species that would help him understand life in general. During this trip, Steinbeck heard about the legend of a Mexican fisher boy who had found an enormous pearl that had brought him much misery. Steinbeck developed this legend into the novel *The Pearl.* As you read *The Pearl,* watch for details about the plant and animal life in the Gulf and the many metaphors (comparisons), images and themes Steinbeck uses which are connected to these details.

**Setting:** The events of *The Pearl* take place sometime around the 1900 on an estuary (mouth of the river) somewhere on the coast of Mexico in the town of La Paz. On a map the long peninsula which descends from California is called BAJA CALIFORNIA. It is part of Mexico and is separated from the rest of Mexico by the Gulf of California, also known as the Sea of Cortez.
Historical Background and Social Culture: At the time the story takes place, the Indians of Mexico had already been under the domination of people of Spanish descent for 300 years. The governing class was primarily made up of those of Spanish descent and the Roman Catholic Church who, together, kept the Mexican Indians at the bottom of the social hierarchy or social ladder. In most cases, the Indians were not allowed to attend school or own land. (Keeping people uneducated and dependent keeps them oppressed). Although Spanish culture and Catholic rituals were forced upon the Indians, they fiercely held onto many of their spiritual beliefs, cultures, and customs of their various tribes. WATCH FOR EVIDENCE OF THIS IN THE NOVEL!

Style: The Pearl is a short novel or novella which is told in the form of an allegory or PARABLE—a short, simple work with little dialogue illustrating a lesson or a larger truth often on the subject of good and evil. In a PARABLE, good and evil are clearly defined—everything is black and white, there are no shades of gray. For instance, the good characters have names, and the bad characters have no names. The characters and action symbolize certain universal ideas or concepts and the readers attach their own meaning to these symbols.

Point of View: The Pearl is told by an all-knowing OMNISCIENT third-person narrator who is observing the characters and their actions from outside the story.

Comment: The reader is told in the preface, “In the town they tell the story of the great pearl—how it was found and how it was lost again…If this story is a parable, perhaps everyone takes his own meaning from it and reads his own life into it.” Thus begins Steinbeck’s novel of good and evil, The Pearl. It is the timeless tale of the Mexican-Indian fisherman Kino, his wife Juana, and their infant son, Coyotito. It tells of how Kino finds the Pearl of the World and dreams of breaking out of the trap of poverty and ignorance that oppresses him and his family. The violence that follows shatters his dreams, but brings him a greater understanding of himself and the realities of the world in which he lives. As you read, consider what meaning you take from Kino’s story.

Other Well-Known Novels By Steinbeck:
Tortilla Flat (1935)  Cannery Row (1945)
The Red Pony (1937)  East of Eden (1952)
The Grapes of Wrath (1939)  Travels With Charley (1962)