

# ***The Pearl***

## **Informational Focus**

### ***Historical Context: Mexico into the Early 20th Century***

Spanish explorers conquered Mexico in 1492, initiating approximately 400 years of oppression over the peasant class. Armed with horses, guns, little **remorse** for their actions, and European diseases (unknowingly), the Spaniards attacking the Aztecs and other native peoples inhabiting Mexico were fully equipped for success. The Spaniards became the new ruling class of Mexico, despite being overwhelmingly outnumbered by the natives. Possessing very little understanding and respect for the culture, the Spanish destroyed temples and statues that represented the beliefs and faith of the natives. Their goal was to spread Christianity. Resistant but afraid, many Indians adopted the beliefs **superficially**, but continued to hold on to their old cultures as well.

In 1700, power in Spain shifted from the childless Charles II of the long reigning Habsburg family to Philip V of the Bourbon family, as the Habsburgs did not have a clear heir to the throne. The priorities of the new **monarchy** involved sending officials to Mexico, one of Spain's colonies. After almost a century of relative stability, Mexico began to fall once again. Citizens of the country were forced to pay **exorbitant** taxes for funding situations beyond their control, like wars between Spain and other countries in Europe. A lack of food and other resources left Mexico suffering as they watched the American colonies establish independence from the British over the next 100 years.

Throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Mexico remained unsettled. By 1821, Augustin de Iturbide, a Spanish general, changed allegiances and successfully **emancipated** Mexico. However, by 1823 he'd lost his following and gave up his control of the country. A succession of various rulers arose, causing a great deal of **discord**. In 1829, Spain attempted to regain control over Mexico, but troops fell to malaria and were forced to retreat. Arguments with the United States of America led to portions of Mexico being lost. Throughout, there continued to be two established viewpoints in Mexico. There were conservatives, who favored a strong government and even considered a monarchy acceptable alongside deeply seeded support for the church. The liberals, on the other hand, preferred smaller states operating under a central government and were opposed to having the church involved in leadership.

By 1857, liberals tried to officially remove all political power from the Roman Catholic Church, which **instigated** a civil war. By 1861 the liberals had won, but in the meantime the country had fallen behind on payments to the European powers of Britain, Spain, and France. All three sent troops, but only the French set up long-term placement. For almost a decade the French held their position, but the United States demanded France withdraw their troops after the end of the U.S. Civil War. After experiencing a short period of independence, Mexico came under the control of Porfirio Diaz in 1876.

As the 19<sup>th</sup> century came to a close, Mexico was nearing the end of Diaz's rule and still continued to face poverty and strong feelings of bitterness. Diaz, though technically a president, acted more like a **dictator**. Throughout his time in power, the country experienced many modern advances in transportation, communication, and the utilization of natural resources. The government also stabilized. However, this brought great wealth to those in power and did very little for the rest of Mexico. The majority of

## ***The Pearl***

the citizens felt powerless and struggled to provide for themselves. This created a vast gap between the rich and the poor throughout the country. Those living in rural villages remained helpless against the government and were subject to complete control.

Stirrings of rebellion sprouted, and by 1910 the Mexican Revolution began. It is believed to have been started by a man from the wealthier layer of Mexican society, Francisco Madero. Madero captured the city of Ciudad Juarez, and Diaz, aged and unable to put up a strong front, stepped down, leaving the position to Madero, who assured social change. Unfortunately, Madero did not have the expertise to back up his plan, and so he was **ousted** from government and was executed shortly thereafter.

Felix Diaz, Porfirio's nephew, as well as General Victoriano Huerto, were responsible for expelling Madero, and so Huerto took control. Mexican society remained unsettled, and he continued to battle with portions of northern Mexico still supporting Madero's principles. Regardless of whom they supported, northern Mexico was in favor of gaining power. In southern Mexico, a new leader emerged. Emiliano Zapata became the **advocate** for equality of the peasants.

General Venustiano Carranza, supportive of Madero, eventually killed Huerto and became president in 1915. The hallmark of his reign of power became the Constitution of 1917, which aimed to obliterate the 400 years of **subjugation** that had characterized the country. However, it wasn't until the 1930s when actual change finally began to occur.

### ***Comprehension Check: Historical Context***

RI.9-10.1, RI.9-10.4; RI. 11-12.1, RI.11-12.4

**Directions:** After reading the article on the history of Mexico into the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, respond to the following using complete sentences on a separate sheet of paper.

1. Use a dictionary to define the following terms: remorse, superficially, monarchy, exorbitant, emancipated, discord, instigated, dictator, ousted, advocate, subjugation.
2. What advantages did the Spanish have over the Mexicans upon arrival in Mexico?
3. By the mid-1800s, what two groups or parties had been established in Mexico?
4. Describe the positives and negatives of Porfirio Diaz's rule in Mexico.
5. Even though the Mexican Revolution began in 1910, why do you think it took more than 20 years for conditions to change?

# ***The Pearl***

## **Informational Focus**

### ***Cultural Aspects of The Pearl***

Within the novella *The Pearl*, Steinbeck showcases vast differences in social class through vivid descriptions of true poverty and extravagant wealth in Mexico at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The arrival of the Spanish in Mexico hundreds of years earlier created a chasm in the social structure, alienating one side – the poor peasants of the country – from the wealthy, ruling-class Spaniards. Descendants of the Spanish, as well as church officials, remained in the higher classes centuries later, keeping the natives at the bottom of the social hierarchy.

Steinbeck sets the story in La Paz, Mexico. This coastal region lies on the Baja Peninsula below California and is separated from the Mexican mainland by the Gulf of California, otherwise known as the Sea of Cortez. This geographic isolation also contributed to the extreme divide between classes at a time when Mexico was gearing up for revolution. Ideas and concepts from the mainland, such as a united desire for change, would take longer to spread far enough to include this secluded area.

Kino, the main character in the novella, lives in a pearl diving and fishing community occupying small brush houses adjacent to the water. His people have very little education, leaving them dependent on oral tradition and their community for guidance and advice. The Spanish, who live in a nearby town, often exploit this inexperience and cheat the natives. They convince the pearl divers that their findings are not valuable, thereby perpetuating their own wealth. They also use a corrupt church to convince the natives that they are best to stick to their simple lives without dreams of breaking through social barriers, or else they would be rebelling against God and the positions they were born into.

The colonialism established hundreds of years earlier by the Spanish keeps the natives submissive and naïve. This interaction between the various social classes drives the plot and generates the ultimate focus of the novella – the struggle to find a balance between needs and wants, good and evil.

All in all, Steinbeck has created a fictional, but all too realistic look at the destructive force of greed and the art of manipulation. It becomes quite easy for readers from all walks of life to find similarities between their own lives and those of the characters of the novella, no matter the time, place, or culture they hail from.

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Period \_\_\_\_\_

## ***The Pearl***

### ***Comprehension Check: Cultural Aspects of The Pearl***

**RI.9-10.1, RI.9-10.4; RI. 11-12.1, RI.11-12.4**

**Directions:** After reading the article on the cultural aspects of *The Pearl*, respond to the following questions and prompts using complete sentences.

1. Based on the article, what factors have the potential to keep Kino, a poverty- stricken native in the novella, from rising above his social class? \_\_\_\_\_

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2. What impact did geography have on the development of Mexico at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century? \_\_\_\_\_

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3. The term “perpetuating” is used in paragraph three. Using only context clues, make an educated guess about the meaning of this term. \_\_\_\_\_

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4. Compare and contrast the novella’s different settings, as mentioned in the article. \_\_\_\_

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5. In your opinion, should someone try to stand up for himself/herself against unfair treatment even though the discrimination has been occurring in his/her culture for a very long time? Explain, with examples from your own life. \_\_\_\_\_

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Name \_\_\_\_\_ Period \_\_\_\_\_

# ***The Pearl***

## **Anticipation/Reaction Activity**

**Directions:** Before reading the novella, read and think about the following eight statements. Rank them based on whether you strongly disagree, disagree, feel unsure, agree, or strongly agree. Then, revisit the same statements after you've read the novella and rank them again to see if your feelings have changed.

<b>1 Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>2 Disagree</b>	<b>3 Unsure</b>	<b>4 Agree</b>	<b>5 Strongly Agree</b>
<b>STATEMENT</b>			<b>BEFORE READING</b>	<b>AFTER READING</b>
1. People who are greedy are bad.				
2. Doctors and priests' main goal in life is to help people.				
3. People who experience bad luck should not accept help from others.				
4. People should always try to improve their lives.				
5. As people accumulate more money, they become meaner, more selfish, and generally worse humans.				
6. People can make their own luck.				
7. People are naturally judgmental.				
8. The shorter a story is, the less impact it will have on a reader.				

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Period \_\_\_\_\_

## **The Pearl**

### **Pre-Reading Reflection Activity**

**Directions:** After completing the Before Reading column, meet with a partner and compare your responses. Share your reasoning with one another, especially all that you ranked differently. Then, individually, decide which of the statements above you feel most strongly about. Write a paragraph elaborating on your feelings about this statement and save your paragraph for comparison after you've read the novella.

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### **Post-Reading Reflection Activity**

**Directions:** Revisit the eight statements and again, rank them after having read the novella. Reread the paragraph you wrote about the statement you felt strongest about as well. Now, decide what specific event, character, situation, etc. either changed your mind or solidified your opinion about the statement you wrote about in your paragraph. In the space below, write a second paragraph using specific details from the text to explain whether or not you changed your mind and why. Refer back to your novella if necessary.

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# ***The Pearl***

## **Author Biography – John Steinbeck**

John Ernst Steinbeck Jr. was born in Salinas, California along the Monterey coast on February 27, 1902 to John Ernst Steinbeck and Olive Hamilton Steinbeck. He grew up with **modest** means, as his father was a grain farmer and manager of a flour plant before eventually becoming the county treasurer. His mother was a former schoolteacher. John grew up alongside two older sisters, Esther and Elizabeth, and one younger sister, Mary. Steinbeck was very **perceptive** of his surroundings and had an active imagination. He was **intrigued** by the landscape in which he grew up. He decided early on that he wanted to be a writer and often practiced his craft alone in his bedroom, using the **backdrop** of his home as inspiration.

Upon graduating from high school in 1919, he enrolled at Stanford University. However, he soon lost interest and left the university by 1925 without ever graduating with a degree. He believed his best chance at becoming a writer meant traveling to New York City, where he worked at odd jobs and tried to break into a career as a freelance newspaper writer. He returned to California by 1929, however, to pursue writing with a different approach.

Steinbeck was returning to a place of fond memories to light the fire that would generate his next piece of writing. Geographical ties to his home, his experiences over the years working odd jobs with physical laborers and those displaced from their homes and trying to start a new life, as well as his interest in sea life, can all be seen in his later writings. After marrying Carol Henning in 1930, he continued his craft and wrote several novels and short stories. During this time his wife's income supported the family. His first novels, *Cup of Gold* (1929), *The Pastures of Heaven* (1932), and *To a God Unknown* (1933) did not bring him much popularity, however, and he remained unknown for the most part. Not until the publication of his novel *Tortilla Flat* (1935) about paisanos (people of Indian and Spanish descent) in the Monterey region of California, did he gain true fame. Following that novel, he penned *Of Mice and Men*, published in 1937, and a couple of years later, in 1939, he wrote what is often considered his best work, *The Grapes of Wrath*. This is a story about a family **migrating** west from the Oklahoma Dust Bowl to California during the depression. His ability to capture the genuine feelings of Americans during this time period, mostly because he was seeing and experiencing them first hand, helped him win a Pulitzer Prize for the story in 1940.

Later in his career, Steinbeck worked as a war **correspondent** during WWII for the New York Herald Tribune and also traveled often to Mexico to pursue his hobby of marine life with friend Edward F. Ricketts, marine biologist. These experiences also helped to inform his later writings. His work immediately following the war continued to address his concerns about social **interaction**, but had a slightly lighter tone. *Cannery Row* (1945), *The Pearl* (1947), and *The Wayward Bus* (1947) were among them. Following these, he **oscillated** between lighter pieces of entertainment, like *Travels with Charley* (1962) and attempts at another **blockbuster** novel with *Burning Bright* (1950), *East of Eden* (1952), and *The Winter of Our Discontent* (1961). However, none of these gained the same level of respect and attention as his earlier novels.

## ***The Pearl***

Throughout, Steinbeck, for the most part, remained true to his style of commentary on the unequal social and economic conditions of rural America, while also showcasing close ties to and appreciation for the land.

Throughout his career as a writer, he underwent many personal changes as well. He divorced by 1942, and quickly married again in 1943 to Gwyndolyn Conger and had two boys, Thomas in 1944 and John in 1946. This marriage dissolved in 1948. His third and final marriage was to Elaine Anderson from 1950 until his death.

Eventually, he was awarded the Nobel Prize, on December 10, 1962. It was noted that not only was he able to depict real people in real situations, but he did so with a bit of humor, raw emotion, and a true understanding of the social experience at this time in history. He died of heart failure on December 20, 1968 in New York City. His actual Nobel Prize medal was later donated to the Stanford University Library in 2005.

Many of his novels are still required reading in middle schools, high schools, and even colleges today, speaking to the timelessness and continued **relevance** of the social and economic conditions he addressed.

### ***Comprehension Check: Author Biography***

RI.9-10.1, RI.9-10.4; RI. 11-12.1, RI.11-12.4

**Directions:** After reading the article on John Steinbeck, answer the following questions using complete sentences on a separate sheet of paper.

1. Use a dictionary to define the following words: modest, perceptive, intrigued, backdrop, migrating, correspondent, interaction, oscillated, blockbuster, relevance.
2. Based on the article, the reader can assume that Steinbeck's writing was influenced by what early life experiences and situations?
3. As a writer, what topics or messages did Steinbeck aim to communicate to his readers before WWII?
4. After WWII, how did Steinbeck's style of writing change?
5. Which piece of writing did Steinbeck receive the most credit for?
6. What types of accolades, or awards/honors, did John Steinbeck receive over the course of his lifetime?
7. Quote a sentence from the text best supports the reasons that Steinbeck was awarded the Nobel Prize.



# ***The Pearl***

## **Informational Focus**

### ***Style of the Novella***

#### **Steinbeck's Intentions with *The Pearl***

Steinbeck's *The Pearl* is considered to be a novella, a fictional prose narrative longer than a short story but shorter than a novel. Readers will often find the plot complexity to be less than a traditional novel, though the themes are still very powerful and applicable to varying cultures, lifestyles, and time periods. *The Pearl* is also considered to be a parable, which is a short text that focuses on helping the reader to achieve an understanding of one or more essential principles or themes, leaving the reader with a moral or ethical lesson to be learned.

*The Pearl* specifically tackles one of Steinbeck's most favored topics, the relationship between man and his surroundings. Reportedly, this novella stems from a story Steinbeck heard during his travels through the Gulf of California in 1940. The story revolved around a young boy who found a pearl and expected it to solve all his problems. Steinbeck held on to the story for many years and even intended to make it a film before putting pen to paper. During a trip to Mexico in January 1944, Mexican film companies offered Steinbeck deals and he quickly chose the legend as his option. Steinbeck stood in awe of filmmaking and valued it as a strong medium for the spread of ideas. By the time he had finished composing the narrative, Steinbeck decided that the text would function both as an overview for filmmakers, as well as a narrative to be published. The only story of Steinbeck's to be published before becoming a book, it appeared in the December 1945 issue of *Women's Home Companion* under the title "The Pearl of the World."

Immediately, the overlap of the construction of the narrative with elements of film is evident. Chapter One refers to the "Song of the Family," the "Song of Evil," and the "Song of the Enemy," clearly describing the tone of the musical score that would be necessary to create the appropriate mood in the film version. In addition, Steinbeck clearly defines the "lens" throughout the story in terms of exactly where characters are standing and looking. The author also uses vivid imagery to depict the scenery of the coastal setting. Lastly, the text reads well aloud. It closely resembles the rhythmic beat of an oral legend. Unfortunately, upon its official book publication in 1947 alongside the release of a film version, very few readers noticed this piece of Steinbeck's work. It took many years until it began to gather some notoriety.

The story holds rich themes that focus on the battle between modern materialism and a more natural and simplistic way of life. After a series of initial desires built upon greed are explored, Kino, the main character, must learn through true tragedy that to repent and turn his back on material wealth is the only way for him and his people to survive.

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Period \_\_\_\_\_

## ***The Pearl***

### ***Comprehension Check: Style of the Novella***

RI.9-10.1, RI.9-10.4; RI. 11-12.1, RI.11-12.4

**Directions:** After reading the article on the style of the novella, answer the following questions using complete sentences.

1. Define the terms: *parable, prose, novella, theme, narrative* \_\_\_\_\_

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2. Describe the structure of *The Pearl*. \_\_\_\_\_

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3. Where did Steinbeck get the idea for his novella? \_\_\_\_\_

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4. How was Steinbeck able to generate one text that would serve both as a narrative and a film? \_\_\_\_\_

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5. How did audiences first receive the published text and film version of *The Pearl*? \_\_\_\_\_

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6. What themes are apparent in *The Pearl*? \_\_\_\_\_

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