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Teaching John Steinbeck's

The Pearl

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General Introduction to the Work

Introduction to *The Pearl*

NOT AS COMPLEX AS STEINBECK'S other works, *The Pearl* is one of his most popular due to its simplicity, its natural beauty, and its universal themes of greed, power, morality, and oppression. The novel originally appeared in installments in the magazine *Women's Home Companion* in 1945 under the title "The Pearl of the World." It was reissued as a novel in 1947. It has remained a staple on school reading lists ever since.

While the action in *The Pearl* is easy to follow, there is one historical point to keep in mind when reading the novel. In the sixteenth century, the Spanish landed in Mexico and proceeded to subjugate and enslave the native peoples who had inhabited the area. It is important to realize that at the time of the novel's story—possibly the late nineteenth or early twentieth century—the Indian culture had been oppressed by their Spanish colonizers for close to four hundred years. Though they sought to maintain their traditional dress, homes, livelihoods, and communal living, the native Indians could not maintain the respect for their heritage at the hands of those who felt far superior. The reader should remember that the doctor, the priest, and the pearl buyers in the novel are all of Spanish descent while Kino, Juana, and the others in their village are of Indian descent.

Many of John Steinbeck's more socially aware novels have been tied to a literary movement called *Naturalism*, which grew out of the *Realism* movement of the 1870s and 1880s. In realist literature, the author makes no attempt to hide the hardship or ugliness of human existence.

The basic premise of the naturalist movement is that the human race, much like the animal kingdom, is the product of its natural surroundings, basic instincts, and heredity. Naturalism, then, seeks to show the primal yet complex relationship between the individual and the environment, and that environment is often seen as indifferent to that struggle. Steinbeck illustrates this principle throughout the novel as Kino struggles to maintain his integrity and virtue despite his animalistic inclinations toward violence.

Kino's Indian heritage also plays a key role in his inability to protect his family and his future. Like the naturalists before him, Steinbeck chose a lower-class population as his primary subject while simultaneously chastising the oppression of the bourgeois class. Kino's people are seen as simple, yet honest, whereas the Spanish are ruthless and imperious. The native Indians were not immigrants, as was the case in most naturalistic texts; but their subservient role in modern society was identical.

Another major principle of naturalism is an emphasis on determinism, or a lack of free will. The fate of the characters is beyond their control, frequently determined by social and environmental factors. In *The Pearl*, there is certainly an aspect of determinism, particularly with reference to Steinbeck's discussion of "the gods ... who do not love men's plans," who "take their revenge on a man if he is successful

Marxist Approach Applied to *The Pearl*



Notes on the Marxist Approach

THE MARXIST APPROACH TO LITERATURE is based on the philosophy of Karl Marx, a German philosopher and economist. His major argument was that whoever controlled the means of production in society controlled the society—whoever owned the factories “owned” the culture. This idea is called “dialectical materialism,” and Marx felt that the history of the world was leading toward a communist society. From his point of view, the means of production (i.e., the basis of power in society) would be placed in the hands of the masses, who actually operated them, not in the hands of those few who owned them. It was a perverted version of this philosophy that was at the heart of the Soviet Union. Marxism was also the rallying cry of the poor and oppressed all over the world.

To read a work from a Marxist perspective, one must understand that Marxism asserts that literature is a reflection of culture, and that culture can be affected by literature (Marxists believed literature could instigate revolution). Marxism is linked to Freudian theory by its concentration on the subconscious—Freud dealt with the individual subconscious, while Marx dealt with the political subconscious. Marx believed that oppression exists in the political subconscious of a society—social pecking orders are inherent to any group of people.

Four main areas of study:

- economic power
- materialism versus spirituality
- class conflict
- art, literature, and ideologies



Activity One

Analyzing the Characters' Views on Money

1. Copy and distribute the handouts: Notes on the Marxist Approach and *The Pearl*: Marxist Activity One Graphic Organizer.
2. Divide the class into small groups.
3. Assign each group, or allow each to choose, one of the following characters.
 - Kino
 - Juana
 - Juan Tomás
 - the villagers
 - the beggars
 - the priest
 - the doctor
 - the pearl buyers
4. Instruct students to take notes on
 - (1) all references their assigned character makes to money
 - (2) references others make about money regarding their assigned character.
5. Have students prepare an explanation of their character's view of money—either expressed or implied. Information should be recorded on the Graphic Organizer for each group's assigned character.

Each group should consider the following questions:

 - How does the character handle money?
 - What does money mean to the character?
 - How does the character spend and/or save money?
 - How does money confer power on the character?
6. Reconvene the class and have each group report to the class about how its character views money.
7. Have students record other groups' findings on their Graphic Organizers.



Feminist Approach Applied to *The Pearl*

Notes on the Feminist Theory

FEMINISM IS AN EVOLVING PHILOSOPHY, and its application in literature is a relatively new area of study. The basis of the movement, both in literature and society, is that the Western world is fundamentally patriarchal (i.e., created by men, ruled by men, viewed through the eyes of men, and judged by men).

In the 1960s, the feminist movement began to form a new approach to literary criticism. Of course, women had already been writing and publishing for centuries, but the 1960s saw the rise of a feminist literary theory. Until then, the works of female writers (or works about females) were examined by the same standards as those by male writers (and about men). Women were thought to be less intelligent than men, at least in part because they generally received less formal education, and many women accepted that judgment. It was not until the feminist movement was well under way that women began examining old texts, reevaluating the portrayal of women in literature, and writing new works to fit the developing concept of the “modern woman.”

The feminist approach is based on finding and exposing suggestions of misogyny (negative attitudes toward women) in literature. Feminists are interested in exposing the undervaluing of women in literature that has long been accepted as the norm by both men and women. They have even dissected many words in Western languages that reflect a patriarchal worldview. Arguing that the past millennia in the West have been dominated by men—whether the politicians in power or the historians recording it all—feminist critics believe that Western literature reflects a masculine bias, and, consequently, represents an inaccurate and potentially harmful image of women. In order to repair this image and achieve balance, they insist that works by and about women be added to the literary canon and read from a feminist perspective.

Activity One

Examining Parenting in *The Pearl* from a Feminist Perspective

1. Copy and distribute the handouts: Notes on Feminist Theory and *The Pearl*: Feminist Activity One Graphic Organizer.
2. Divide the class into gender-mixed groups.
3. Have each group reread the passages indicated on the *Graphic Organizer* and note Kino's and Juana's actions and reactions in each scene.
4. Have students continue perusing the novel for any additional examples of Kino's and Juana's parenting styles.
5. Reconvene the class and have students answer the following questions with respect to each of the scenes noted on the *Graphic Organizer*:
 - Compare and contrast Kino and Juana's *reactions* in each of these scenes. What is inherently (or stereotypically) *feminine* in Juana's reactions? What is inherently (or stereotypically) *masculine* in Kino's reactions?
 - Compare and contrast Kino and Juana's *actions* in each of these scenes. What is inherently (or stereotypically) *feminine* in Juana's actions? What is inherently (or stereotypically) *masculine* in Kino's actions?
 - In an overall sense, how are their actions and reactions similar and different from one another? What does this say about the feminine versus the masculine experience of parenting?
 - In what ways, if any, does Kino strengthen Juana's parenting? In what ways, if any, does Juana strengthen Kino's parenting?
 - How do these similarities and differences change as the novel progresses? Why might this be so?

Formalism Applied to *The Pearl*



Notes on the Formalist Approach

THE FORMALIST APPROACH TO LITERATURE was developed at the beginning of the 20th century and remained popular until the 1970s, when other literary theories began to gain popularity. Today, formalism is generally regarded as a rigid and inaccessible means of reading literature, used in Ivy League classrooms and as the subject of scorn in rebellious coming-of-age films. It is an approach that is concerned primarily with *form*, as its name suggests, and thus places the greatest emphasis on *how* something is said, rather than *what* is said. Formalists believe that a work is a separate entity—not at all dependent upon the author’s life or the culture in which the work is created. No paraphrase is used in a formalist examination, and no reader reaction is discussed.

Originally, formalism was a new and unique idea. The formalists were called “New Critics,” and their approach to literature became the standard academic approach. Like classical artists such as da Vinci and Michaelangelo, the formalists concentrated more on the form of the art rather than the content. They studied the recurrences, the repetitions, the relationships, and the motifs in a work in order to understand what the work was about. The formalists viewed the tiny details of a work as nothing more than parts of the whole. In the formalist approach, even a lack of form indicates something. Absurdity is in itself a form—one used to convey a specific meaning (even if the meaning is a lack of meaning).

The formalists also looked at smaller parts of a work to understand the meaning. Details like diction, punctuation, and syntax all give clues.

Activity One

Examining Diction and Unity in the Novel

1. Copy and distribute the handouts: Notes on the Formalist Approach and *The Pearl*: Formalist Activity One Graphic Organizer One, *The Pearl*: Formalist Activity One Graphic Organizer Two and *The Pearl*: Formalist Activity One Graphic Organizer Three.

NOTE: Ideally, students should complete Graphic Organizer One for homework the previous night before beginning the in-class activity.

2. Put columns on the board with each device/symbol/motif on the *Graphic Organizers* as a heading.
3. Have students report their *Graphic Organizer One* findings and record additional examples of each device/concept on *Graphic Organizer Two*.
4. Divide the class into pairs or small groups.
5. Have each group compile a tally of the number of occurrences and recurrences of the devices and concepts on *Graphic Organizer Three*.

NOTE: Depending on the time available, you may want to redistribute the groups at least one time in order for students to compile as complete a tally as possible.

6. Reconvene the class and discuss the following:
 - Of the literary devices Steinbeck uses, which are the most prevalent? What recurrences of particular incidents of these devices are notable?
 - Which of the devices are related to *cadence* (or sound)? How does cadence affect the reader's perception of the work?
 - What do these devices contribute to the *tone* of the novel?
 - What do these devices contribute to the *meaning* of the novel?
 - How does the author's use of these devices help to *unify* the work as a whole? Do certain devices contribute more to the novel's unity than others? How?