English 10 The Pearl by John Steinbeck: **Unit Overview**

Below are the Essential Questions, Theme Topics (Motifs), Thematic Questions, and Key Literary Terms that we will use for our analysis of The Pearl. These questions, theme topics, and terms will guide our discussion and analysis during this unit, so it is important for you to be familiar with them as you read. Use this overview to help guide your annotations and read through the background information before you read the novel.

Essential Questions

How does parable transcend time and place to employ a universal theme?

What makes a theme universal?

Why are symbols useful to writers and their audience?

How can writing be used to effect change in society?

During your reading and annotating of The Pearl look for and mark passages that make a point

or statement about these possible theme topics:

**Money, Possessions, Greed**: Look for passages/quotes dealing with the quest for

money and the desire for things of the material world, as well as references to the steps

which people will take to attain those things. Also, look for passages/quotes that imply

that money can buy happiness.

**Social Oppression**: Look for passages/quotes dealing with the oppression of the

Mexican Indians in the portrayal of the doctor, the priest, the pearl buyers, and the

trackers. Watch for details which show how Kino and his people are treated

disrespectfully, taken advantage of, and discriminated against.

**Man as a part of nature**: Look for passages/quotes which illustrate similarities

between humans and other species through comparisons. NOTICE the frequent images

Steinbeck uses and think of how these passages reflect or foreshadow (give hints about

future events) HUMAN events.

**Kino’s songs**: Look for passages/quotes with references to the “music” Kino hears––

the three types of songs he hears and their significance. Pay particular attention to

WHEN and UNDER WHAT CIRCUMSTANCES he “hears” a particular song.

**Good vs. Evil**: Look for passages/quotes that reflect images and ideas of darkness light,

good- evil, brightness- dimness, day- night, black- white, etc.

**Appearance vs. Reality**: Look for passages/quotes that refer to things not being

what they seem. Consider looking for passages/quotes about visions, haze, mirages,

dreams, vagueness, ghostly gleams, illusions, etc.

**Thematic Questions**

How does oppression manifest in both the community and individual?

How can society’s wrongs be righted?

How much control does an individual have over his/her “success” in life?

How can we determine if something or someone is what or who they appear to be?

Can money or desire change an individual?

Is money necessary to be “successful” in life?

What is the difference between good and evil? Are there any shades of gray?

\*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*

**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.

**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, 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 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. (Keepingpeople 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 areclearly 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.

The story is simple, but because it is an allegory, there is deeper meaning at every turn. Read between the lines and analyze characters, setting, imagery, symbols, etc.