

English 8 – Summer Reading Guide

The Pearl by John Steinbeck

Based on a Mexican folk tale, *The Pearl* centers upon Kino and his family, their struggles with poverty in their coastal village, and the great pearl that changes everything. Although short and captivating, Steinbeck’s story brings you deep into human nature, for the “essence of pearl mixed with the essence of man and a curious dark residue was precipitated.” Here are a few ideas to turn a joyful reading into an insightful one, too.

- 1) Examine how Kino changes over the course of the story and consider how the attitudes toward the pearl also change.
- 2) Besides the pearl, what can you identify as valuable in this story?
- 3) Luck, chance, fate, the gods—what forces propel the events of this story?
- 4) Steinbeck offers this story as a parable, which is a story offering a lesson. What lessons do you draw from this tale?
- 5) Consider Kino and Juana’s circumstance of oppression. Spain has colonized Mexico, and the pearls and other riches harvested by the poor had “raised the King of Spain to be a great power in Europe in past years, had helped to pay for his wars, and had decorated the churches for his soul’s sake.” Steinbeck seems critical of the imbalance of power. Look closely at how this dynamic shapes Kino and Juana’s experience. How do the doctor, the priest, and the traders fit into the power structure of the community? How do they respond to Kino and Juana?
- 6) Pay attention to the songs, which act as a spirit, force, or story Steinbeck tries to capture. When do they emerge? How do they help us understand Kino and Juana’s story? In ways, these songs connect back to the oral tradition of their history: “His people had once been great makers of songs so that everything they saw or thought or did or heard became a song.”
- 7) Pay attention to sight and visions. The narrator warns readers, “All sights were unreal and vision could not be trusted,” and “In this Gulf of uncertain light there were more illusions than realities.” Consider what the great pearl leads characters to see.

A Separate Peace by John Knowles

After fifteen years Gene Forrester returns to Devon, his all-boys boarding school modeled after Phillips Exeter Academy, where he remembers the “well known fear which had surrounded and filled those days.” Part of that fear connects to the time period—the start of World War II when life after school meant fighting in Europe. The rest becomes the subject of his story—the darkness that surfaces between Gene and his best friend Finny. (Don’t worry. There’s a lot of boyhood mischief and fun and adventure, too.) What Gene learns, about himself and others, serves as a great study in friendship, competition, jealousy, power, forgiveness, and self-reflection. Be careful on the tree, and keep these thoughts in mind for finding the wisdom Gene later gains.

- 1) Begin by thinking about Gene and Finny as characters. How do they differ? Why are they drawn to one another? Do you recognize any of their characteristics in your friends or yourself?
- 2) Consider specifically what brings Gene and Finny joy and what motivates them, together and independently. How do these values compare to your own?
- 3) Like truly great characters in literature, these boys confront challenges that they may not be fully prepared to manage. War is a perfect backdrop for the smaller battles, unknowns, fears, and conflicts we face in our own lives. While we may never be fully prepared for such events, encountering these stories can make us more prepared for the challenges we confront in our own lives. How do the different boys respond to their individual wars? What are the consequences of following their paths?
- 4) A review on the back of the Scribner edition describes *A Separate Peace* as a “model of restraint.” As you read, consider what boils under the surface, what goes unsaid, what characters are afraid to confront. If you can recognize the unnamed sources of tension, you are on your way to being an expert English student, and you will probably be a more mature eighth grader because of it.