

## 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.

## ***The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* by Mark Twain**

*The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* is one of the best-known classical novels of the nineteenth century. Written by Mark Twain (pen name of Samuel Clemens) and set one summer in the fictional town of St. Petersburg, Missouri, in the pre-Civil War 1840's, it is, in fact, largely autobiographical, for it is based on Twain's memories of growing up with his boyhood friends in the town of Hannibal, Missouri, along the Mississippi River. Twain notes in his 1876 preface, "Most of the adventures in this book really occurred: one or two were experiences of my own, the rest, those of boys who were schoolmates of mine." Because the story depicts a time when slavery and racial prejudice were practiced and still very much tolerated by many Americans, Twain, despite his own denunciation of both, did include some racially offensive terms because he felt it was important to portray life in those times realistically. You will encounter similar language in Twain's famous sequel *Huckleberry Finn* when you read it in tenth grade and in Harper Lee's classical novel *To Kill a Mockingbird*, which you will read in class this coming year.

You will also notice that Twain makes gentle fun of some of the institutions of those days, especially the authorities of the town, church, and school- all from the perspective of a rebellious boy like Tom.

Tom is an imaginative, bold, and mischievous boy, who finds himself caught up in a number of predicaments over the course of the story. Sometimes he suffers punitive consequences; sometimes he cleverly avoids them. Twain weaves two major plot lines throughout the novel, which intersect toward the end: 1. a murder mystery centering on the evil character Injun Joe and 2. Tom's exploits with his romantic interest, the "new girl" in town, Becky Thatcher.

1. As you are reading the novel, keep track of all of the characters that interact with Tom, writing down their names and the relationships they have with him.

2. Write down the different character traits Tom reveals during the story and the incidents that illustrate these traits.

In particular, note how on several occasions Tom takes great delight in becoming the center of many adults' attention and the envy of his peers.

Also consider how Tom reveals that he has a conscience during certain episodes.

3. Mark Twain wrote that Tom was certainly not the "model boy" of his community and yet he obviously liked Tom. Why do you think he liked Tom?

## ***The Hobbit* by J.R.R. Tolkien**

No childhood is ever really complete until it is regaled by the tale of Bilbo Baggins and his quest through Middle-earth. In J.R.R. Tolkien's 1937 classic young adult fantasy epic, the hobbit Bilbo Baggins is sent on a quest by a wizard named Gandalf in search of dragon-guarded treasure and the reclamation of some unhoused dwarves' homeland. Bilbo, along with Gandalf and his twelve dwarven friends, sets out on his own two bare, leathery feet into the Misty Mountains, the goblins' tunnels, the dungeons of the Wood-elves, Smaug's dragon lair, and, ultimately, back home to the Shire. In order to pass the many tests that loom before him, Bilbo must grow up quickly. The extent to which he matures and develops a meaningful sense of identity and selflessness will ultimately determine the extent to which he can win Smaug's treasure for the hobbits and reclaim Lonely Mountain for the dwarves.

1. As you read, consider what the various "stages" of Bilbo's quest may be. If you're really ambitious, read up on Joseph Campbell's "monomyth" and consider the ways in which Bilbo's journey mirrors Campbell's idea of the "Hero's Journey"
2. Despite the fact that he is a fictional hobbit who lives in Middle-earth and is on a mythical quest with a group of dwarves who want to fight a dragon, how is Bilbo's life similar to yours? Consider some of the pressures and expectations heaped upon Bilbo. Do you relate to him in any way?
3. Make a list of character traits that would describe Bilbo in the first 10-25 pages. Then, make a similar list of traits that describe Bilbo in the final 10-25 pages. Compare these two lists. Ultimately, answer the following question: how does Bilbo change over the course of the book?
4. There are a lot of monsters and beasts in this book, but none are more exciting and terrifying than Smaug the dragon. What makes Smaug such a perfect antagonist? Why are dragons, despite being fictional, universally appealing to audiences over the course of the last 1000+ years?
5. Tolkien wrote this book in England in 1937. Is there any historical context that may have influenced his story? What could he have been saying about the past few decades in England and Europe through his (potentially allegorical) Middle-earth?