

The Gift

by

John Steinbeck

Book Information

John Steinbeck, The Gift
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Interest Level: UG

In this short story, the first of four that make up the novel *The Red Pony*, ten-year-old Jody trains the little red pony his father has given him, only to face the possibility that he might lose him to sickness.

Topics: Animals, Horses; Family Life, Illness; Short Stories, Short Stories (All)

Main Characters

Billy Buck the dependable and competent cow-hand on the Tiflin ranch
Carl Tiflin Jody's strict father
Gabilan Jody's spirited red pony
Jody Tiflin a ten-year-old boy who receives a pony from his father and learns the hard lesson of death
Ruth Tiflin Jody's sympathetic mother

Vocabulary

ague a fit of shivering
bandy-legged bow-legged
curry to groom a horse with a comb with metal teeth
hackamore a rope with a band used when breaking horses to the bridle
strangles a bacterial disease in horses

Synopsis

Jody, a ten-year-old boy, is growing up on a California ranch. He longs to ride with his father and Billy Buck, the ranch hand, but instead must go to school and do other chores around the ranch. While waiting for his father's return from a cow drive, he walks the land with his unloaded twenty-two rifle, knowing that it will be two long years before he can

use it, and even then with restrictions. His father, Carl, and Billy Buck return late and Jody hopes for a few stories when he smells brandy on their breaths, but he is told to go to bed since his father will need him in the morning.

After breakfast the next morning, Jody follows his father and Billy to the barn where he is shown a red pony. Jody is thrilled. After delivering some firm instructions, Carl leaves the barn. Billy and Jody talk about the colt and Billy promises to show Jody how to care for and train the pony. After school, Jody proudly brings his friends to see the colt.

Jody takes good care of the pony, which he has named Gabilan. His mother chastises him a little and reminds him he must not neglect his chores, though she takes pride in the responsibility Jody is showing towards his animal.

As the weeks progress Gabilan becomes gentler in Jody's presence and his training proceeds at a good pace. Billy Buck sets a goal for Jody to ride the pony at Thanksgiving. A change of weather occurs and Gabilan is kept inside the barn for a week during this wet spell. On a sunny morning, Jody lets Gabilan out into the corral, being reassured by Billy Buck that it will not rain that day. By afternoon it begins to pour and Jody is unable to help Gabilan until he returns home from school. He does the best he can to wipe off Gabilan, but the colt seems to have caught a chill. At night, Billy reassures Jody that the colt will be okay, rubs down the colt, and covers him with a blanket. But Gabilan appears spiritless.

The next morning the colt is worse, and by nighttime, Billy realizes that Gabilan has a case of the strangles. As the infection progresses, Jody helps while Billy lances a lump, and later he stays with the colt while Billy opens Gabilan's windpipe. Jody tends to his colt, alternating with Billy, to keep the hole from clogging. As Jody's hope fades he stays with the colt, dozing on and off. When morning arrives and Jody awakens, he discovers the colt is gone. He follows Gabilan's trail and sees buzzards circling. He arrives at the scene just after a buzzard has taken its first bite out of Gabilan's dead body.

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Jody grabs the buzzard and violently kills it. Billy Buck pulls him away and holds him. Carl wipes his son's face and reminds him the buzzard did not kill the pony. Jody says he knows, while Billy Buck defends Jody's behavior.

Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

Initial Understanding

At what moment does Jody know there is no hope for Gabilan? What does he do after he realizes this?

Jody reenters the barn after taking a break from swabbing the hole in Gabilan's windpipe. When he enters, he sees his pony's hair looking dry and dead and recognizes it as a sign of impending death. Jody stays with his pony, sometimes watching, sometimes dozing, until he awakens in the morning to find Gabilan outside.

Literary Analysis

How is Gabilan's death foreshadowed in the story?

Near the beginning of the story when Carl Tiflin and Billy Buck go to Salinas to lead cows to the slaughter house, Jody walks the ranch. The narrator tells the reader, Jody "felt an uncertainty in the air, a feeling of change and of loss and of the gain of new and unfamiliar things." At that moment, buzzards appear and Jody realizes some animal has died. Jody hates them, because the buzzards overlook nothing. The story ends with a buzzard landing on Gabilan's head; the buzzards do not overlook him either. Jody's attachment to Gabilan does not matter to the buzzards.

Inferential Comprehension

Why is Billy Buck so outspoken towards Carl Tiflin at the end of *The Gift*?

Carl tries to be sympathetic and kind toward Jody and tries to soothe the hurt but talks to him as if Jody is a naive child. Carl probably does not have as much emotional investment in Gabilan as Billy Buck and Jody do. Billy Buck not only instructs Jody in Gabilan's care, but also carries a certain amount of guilt for the colt's illness. Billy was a hero of sorts to Jody, and Billy knows he failed Jody in that regard, first being wrong about the weather and then about the colt recovering. So when Carl tries to calm Jody, Billy comes to his defense because he also feels Jody's anger and confusion over the colt's death. He lashes out at Carl, saying what Jody would never dare to say to his father.

Constructing Meaning

Do you think Carl Tiflin is a good father? Why?

Answers will vary. Many will say he seems very strict. Carl Tiflin shows his tenderness, though, by giving Jody the gift of the pony, offering to take him off the ranch to give him a break from his pony's sickness, and wiping the buzzard's blood from his face. He believes in responsible behavior and sets high standards. Some children may like this consistency, but others may be afraid of this parenting style and see it as extremely restrictive.

Teachable Skills

Understanding the Author's Craft The graphic detail that Steinbeck employs while describing Jody's killing of the buzzard may shock and horrify the reader. This difficult passage shows how an author's choice of language and attention to detail can create a mood. Encourage the students to write a paragraph with the intent of eliciting a specific reaction from their audience. The students should choose a mood they wish to create and carefully select adjectives, nouns, and verbs that contribute to that mood. They could read their paragraphs to the class to see if their writing creates their intended reaction.

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Comparing and Contrasting At ten, Jody has definite responsibilities around the ranch. Have the students make a time line of Jody's day by listing the things he does and how he does them. Next have students compare it to time lines of their own daily lives. They should comment on the similarities and differences. If given a choice, whose life would they choose?

Describing Actions or Events Billy Buck teaches Jody how to properly care for and train a horse. Although many students do not live near a ranch, there is often a riding stable or private horse stable somewhere in the vicinity. As a class, arrange for a visit to a stable and perhaps a horse-supply store too. Learn about the various grooming tools and other things necessary to keep a horse healthy. Have training procedures demonstrated if possible. Or have students research a specific aspect of horse care and write a summary of their findings.

Deriving Word or Phrase Meaning Steinbeck grew up in the Salinas area of California and was a person who was a keen observer of nature. Have the students review the story and note the animal-like adjectives he uses when describing people and animals or their movements. The students can then illustrate the characters and animals and label them with a caption from the text.