

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

The Red Pony

by

John Steinbeck

Book Information

John Steinbeck, The Red Pony

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Book Level: 6.1

Interest Level: UG

Ownership of a beautiful red pony teaches ten-year-old Jody about life and death.

Topics: Animals, Horses; Classics, Classics (All); Power Lessons AR, Grade 8; U.S. States/Regions, California

Main Characters

Billy Buck the Tiflins' only hired hand, a good, kind man and a hard worker

Carl Tiflin Jody's father and the owner of a ranch

Gabilan the red pony that Jody receives as a gift from his father

Gitano an old man who returns to the ranch to die near the place where he was born

Grandfather Ruth Tiflin's father

Jody Tiflin the principal character of the story; a ten-year-old boy growing up on a ranch near Salinas

Ruth Tiflin Jody's mother

Vocabulary

ague a fever with recurrent chills and sweating

carrion dead or decaying flesh

cayuse a native range horse of the western United States

disciplinarian one who disciplines or enforces order

morocco fine leather made with goatskins

rapier a straight, two-edged sword with a narrow, pointed blade

Synopsis

The Red Pony is the story of a young boy, Jody Tiflin, growing up on a ranch near Salinas,

California. During the summer of his tenth year, his father, Carl, and the hired hand, Billy Buck, return from auction with a pony for Jody. He gives his whole being to the little colt, caring for him and looking forward to the day when he will ride the horse. However, tragedy strikes one day in fall, when Jody goes to school and Gabilan, the pony, catches a chill by being left in the corral. Billy had promised to put him in the stable, but had been away from the ranch with Carl. After several days and despite much care by Jody and Buck, the pony dies of the "strangles." The distraught Jody kills the buzzard that had begun eating the pony's flesh.

The next summer, an old man, Gitano, shows up at the ranch, claiming to have been born in the crumbling adobe building on the Tiflins' land. He wants to stay at the ranch to die near the place of his birth. He fascinates Jody, but Carl Tiflin has little tolerance for the man. He agrees to feed him a couple of meals, but tells him to go to his relatives in Monterey. When Gitano leaves, it is with Carl's beloved old horse, Easter.

The following spring, Carl Tiflin decides to breed his mare, Nellie, and give the colt to Jody. It is a long year's wait, but the colt is finally born. However, Billy must kill Nellie to deliver the foal, as it is turned wrong in the womb. Billy cannot bear to break another promise to Jody, and he has promised him everything will be all right with the foal.

Finally, Ruth Tiflin's father arrives at the ranch for a two-week visit, much to the delight of Jody, but to the chagrin of Carl. Carl hates the old man's stories of his exploits as a wagon train leader. One day Grandfather overhears Carl's opinions, and agrees that he probably needs to let the past rest. The book concludes with Jody being downcast about the exchange of words, and also about the fact that the time of the wagon trains, the high adventure, is over.

Open-Ended Questions

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

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Initial Understanding

How do you think Jody felt after Gitano stole Easter?

Steinbeck writes that Jody was "full of a nameless sorrow" after watching what he thought was Gitano riding off in the distance. However, the sorrow could have had many roots. Possibly, it brought to the fore the fact that Jody was stuck on the ranch, and did not foresee ever getting to go over the mountains to see the ocean. Also, the horse leaving might have brought to mind the premature death of his own pony. Finally, Jody may have been saddened by his father's brusque attitude that Gitano "saved me from burying the horse."

Literary Analysis

Some of Jody's activities, such as the time he attacked the buzzard, or when he threw a stone at his dog, parallel his father's attitude and cruelty. What might save Jody from turning into a man like his father?

It is obvious that Jody idolizes the hired hand, Billy Buck. Billy is the protagonist to the antagonist, Carl. Billy has a much easier time than Carl speaking to the boy, teaching him things and doing favors for him. Billy demonstrates, by example, compassion, a love for animals, and honesty and hard work. He tells Jody stories and makes him promises, which he desperately wants to keep. These lessons will stay with Jody all his life.

Inferential Comprehension

Why does Jody's behavior change after Carl decides to breed Nellie?

When Jody's father tells him he is going to breed Nellie, Jody becomes the epitome of a good son--doing his chores without shortcuts and without being reminded. He is fearful of losing the opportunity to have another horse, and probably also fearful in a superstitious sort of way that bad behavior might hurt his opportunity to have anything good come to him.

Constructing Meaning

Carl dislikes hearing about his father-in-law's stories concerning the wagon train, calling them boring and repetitious. What might be another reason he dislikes the stories?

Carl appears to be a man with unfulfilled dreams. While we never really understand what is going on in his head, he seems very dissatisfied with his lot in life. Perhaps Grandfather's repeated ramblings about high adventure, and the fact that he enjoyed his time as a wagon master, eat at Carl and remind him that the Gabilan Mountains surrounding his ranch hold him in much like the corral holds in his horses, who yearn to run free.

Teachable Skills

Understanding Literary Features Steinbeck writes with a feeling of much negativity in the book; instead of seeing a close-knit family working hard to preserve the ranch, we see a dictator-father who seems dissatisfied with his life; the ranch is barely surviving; there is little happiness. Go through the book and select passages that reflect this somber attitude. Re-write them to put the characters in a more positive light. An example would be the way Carl treats Jody when he is about to show him his new pony.

Understanding Characterization When Gitano arrives at the ranch, he stirs up Jody's desire to explore areas beyond the ranch. However, Gitano is old, and reluctant to answer Jody's questions about adventure. With this in mind, write a short story on how things could have been if Gitano were a younger man, willing to take Jody on an excursion to the mountains. Encourage the use of rich, descriptive language for the setting as well as the characters.

Understanding the Author's Craft This novel is multi-level in terms of psychological understanding of the characters. On the surface, a child can read the book and see it as mostly "sweetness and light." On the next level, the reader can identify that there is conflict among

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the characters. On yet a deeper level, one can see the psychological damage being done to Jody because of the abuse of his father. This perhaps could open a class discussion of how we view child abuse today as opposed to its tolerance in the past. Discuss what can be done if someone suspects a friend is being abused by a relative or acquaintance.

Describing Actions or Events When Jody discovers Gabilan dead, there is a disturbing, climactic scene where Jody kills the buzzard. It shows his frustration and hatred, and the actions mimic the deeper attitudes of his father. Re-write the scene, making Jody more sad and compassionate, and identify how this could be a turning point of a different sort in the book, where Jody realizes that he had become bitter, and wants to change within himself.

Responding to Literature The ending of the story is rather abrupt. The last scene had Jody in a rather silly discussion with his mother, speaking about making lemonade, where she "mimics" him. Discuss why Steinbeck chose to end the story in this manner. Have students write three to five paragraphs that change the ending; brainstorm to come up with a more satisfying ending.