

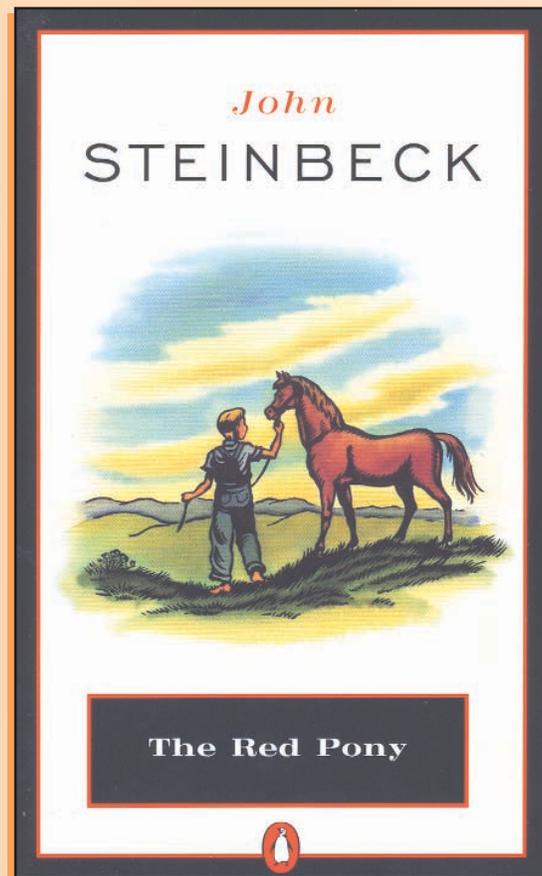


A TEACHER'S GUIDE TO THE PENGUIN EDITION OF

JOHN STEINBECK'S

# THE RED PONY

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## NOTE TO THE TEACHER

This guide is designed to assist teachers in moving students beyond the surface story of Steinbeck's novella. The prereading activities prepare students for what they will read in the novel. The brief discussion of the techniques of plot, character development and theme employed by Steinbeck in his deceptively simple story provides an overview of the story as well as an understanding of its simplicity and complexity. The teaching methodologies are based on response strategies that encourage student interaction with the literary work. Teachers are encouraged to guide, help with reading, and yet allow the students to independently respond to the work.

## INTRODUCTION

John Steinbeck is one of the greatest storytellers of the twentieth century. His wonderful novellas *The Red Pony*, *Cannery Row*, *Of Mice and Men*, and *The Pearl* not only introduce readers to a fascinating, realistic cast of characters, make the hills and seacoast of California and Mexico come to life, but also tell intriguing stories of the lives of real people. Steinbeck's characters are not the rich men and women of California's boom days, but are the homeless, the migrant workers, the poor fishermen, and the farmers. However, each of these people has a deceptively simple, but important story to tell, a story filled with love and pain. The stories tell us not only of the lives of the poor who seek to live off the land, but of the struggles of all people.

In many ways, Steinbeck's *The Red Pony* is the most accessible of his novellas to students. It can be taught at the middle or high school level, with differing emphasis. It is first a coming-of-age story about Jody, the son of a California rancher of limited economic means, who learns that no one is perfect. Secondly, it is a horse story, one of the first and best of the genre, in which Jody discovers the pain of caring for someone too much. Finally, it is a story of place, time, and family—a tale which brings to life, with few descriptive passages, the difficult, meager existence of California ranchers of the 1930s. The beauty and the isolation of the Gabilan mountains, the love of a father for his son, and the working of a family ranch are all important aspects of this carefully crafted tale.

## BEFORE READING THE NOVEL

Although the story itself is relatively easy to read, its organization makes it difficult for some immature readers. Teachers need to prepare students for reading the book by first helping them understand its organization and next helping them understand its time and place.

1. **Organization:** The short, one-hundred page book is divided into only four long chapters. Each chapter is an episode, some of short duration, some taking place over a year, that make up the life of the "little boy Jody." Like most childhoods, Jody's is remembered by a series of events of importance to him. This organization was designed by Steinbeck to help show the passage of time for young Jody.
2. **Understanding Place and Time:** Because so many of our students are urban or suburban rather than rural, it is important that we help them locate the setting of the novella and recognize the difference between life today and in the early 1930s. Students can find the Gabilan Mountains, Salinas and Monterey County, the Salinas Valley, and the Pacific Ocean on the map. Locating the story in place will help them better understand it. Photographs of this area, particularly during its more rural past, will help students picture various scenes important to the story. It is important of them to discuss what life would have been like for a young boy like Jody, on an isolated foothills ranch in the final days of the Great Depression.

## WHILE READING THE NOVEL

*The Red Pony* differs from Steinbeck's other novellas in that it is episodic. Each chapter can stand alone as a short story.

### **PLOT, THE CHARACTERS, AND THE SETTING**

Because the plot is so simple, it will be easy for students to follow. As we consider the plot we will also consider the major characters of the story, all of whom contribute to Jody's maturation. Likewise, the setting is central to the plot. It takes place in the foothills of the Gabilan Mountains not far from the Pacific Ocean and Monterey. It is set in the closing days of the Great Depression on a ranch with a comfortable but meager lifestyle.

Chapter one, "The Gift," introduces us to all the main characters: the ranch hand Billy Buck, next the little boy Jody, Jody's father Carl Tiflin, and Jody's mother, called only Mrs. Tiflin. We start on Jody's journey to manhood after breakfast as the little boy Jody walks with his dogs, picking up rocks along the way, through the hills near the family ranch.

In the second section, "The Gift," Jody's father tells him crossly, "You come with [Billy and me] after breakfast!" In the barn, Jody meets a red pony colt. Although his father lets him know he will be expected to take responsibility for him, Jody can barely contain his excitement and pride. Billy, to whom Jody looks up, promises to teach him how to break the pony, and Jody names the pony after the nearby Gabilan Mountains.

In the next section, Jody assumes increasing responsibility for the care of Gabilan. He is so busy with his new pony that he almost forgets his friends the dogs and his other chores, but both they and his mother understand. He listens carefully to what Billy tells him about breaking Gabilan and takes pride that such a "fine hand with horses" is teaching him. He sees Billy as being able to do no wrong.

Jody practices and practices saddling and riding a sawhorse. He can't wait until he can ride the pony. The weather in the mountains begins to change and Jody worries about the rain and getting Gabilan muddy. One day he decides to leave the pony in the corral while he goes to school. Billy agrees that it will "be good for him to be out in the sun" and promises to put him in the barn if the rains come. The rains do come, but Billy and Carl Tiflin are away from the ranch and the pony stays out in the rain. When Jody finds Gabilan outside he towels him off and worries that being in the rain all day will make him sick. Billy tells Jody, "Now he'll be all right in the morning."

Jody discovers Billy can be wrong about things as well as the weather. Gabilan is very ill and Jody begins to fear that he will never get well, but he still trusts to nurse the pony back to health. Jody spends many nights sleeping next to his pony and putting a mixture of bran, hops, carbolic acid, and a little turpentine and steaming water in Gabilan's feedbag, as Billy taught him to do. But, the pony keeps getting worse. Billy admits to Jody, "Yes, he's pretty sick." Billy attempts to help the pony's breathing by opening a hole in his head so the pus can run out. And, indeed, he appears to improve. One night Jody is sleeping in the barn and Gabilan attempts to leave through the door which has blown open. Jody knows this is a bad sign, but brings the pony back inside. Again, Billy tries to help Gabilan's breathing, this time by putting a slit in his throat. Jody keeps the wound open so his pony can breathe. No matter how much nursing Bill and Jody provide, the pony's health does not improve. One night when Billy is staying awake to watch the pony, Gabilan's breathing quiets and Jody falls asleep. The next morning the pony is gone. Jody and his father find the dead pony in the mountains. When Billy finds Jody he is beating buzzards of Gabilan's head. This episode ends with the ranch hand, Billy, picking up the boy, Jody, and speaking of him as a man to his father who is like all humans trying to deal with death and grief.

In "The Great Mountains," the second episodic chapter, the little boy Jody is again playing with his dogs. He is lonely without his pony and, like all boys, even those who have grown up a lot in a short period of time, he is bored and searching for fun and adventure. So, Jody goes off with a slingshot, finds a perfect slingshot stone, and kills a little thrush. At first he feels pride, but then guilt. Although he doesn't care about the bird or his life, he does care about what the adults would say about what he has done. Jody is still a boy. He feels guilty because he is told by adults that what he has done is wrong, but he still wants adventure. He asks his father, "What's on the other side [of the mountains]?" He wants to go into the mountains and not only find the mountains beyond, but find "at last the ocean," but he's a boy and he can't go. However, something happens to bring that which is beyond the mountains to Jody. An old man arrives on the ranch. He tells Jody, "I have come back. I am Gitano, and I have come back." He says he will stay on the ranch where he was born until he dies. Carl tells the old man that he cannot stay, they do not need him, Billy does what they need, they cannot feed another hand. However, he agrees to put Gitano up for this night only in the little room in the bunkhouse.

Jody asks Gitano, "Did you come out of the big mountains back there?" Gitano replies, "No, I worked down in Salinas Valley." But Jody cannot leave his fascination with the mountains alone, he asks, "Did you ever go into the big mountains back there?" And, Gitano tells him how he went into the mountains when he was a little boy, but does not remember much about them. Jody takes Gitano to see the stock. They meet the old horse Easter who is thirty years old. Gitano tells Jody, "Too old to work, just eats and pretty soon dies." Jody's father hates that he has been brutal to Gitano so, Steinbeck tells us, "he became brutal again," telling the old man that they should just shoot the horse. Billy disagrees, "The got a right to rest after they worked all their life. Maybe they just like to walk around." Jody tells Gitano, recognizing the parallel between the horse and the old man, that his father didn't mean it. Gitano eats supper with the family and beds down in the bunkhouse. Jody recognizes the cultural conflict between Gitano and his father who now owns the ranch and maintains his right to the land. In the bunkhouse that night Jody accidentally sees Gitano hold a beautiful old rapier that he says was his father's. Jody recognizes the importance of the rapier to Gitano and understands that he must never tell anyone about it. In the morning, both the old man and Easter are gone.

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The third chapter, "The Promise," is the story of how Jody gets a new horse. The chapter begins with the little boy Jody walking home from school. It is spring and along the way he fills his lunch bucket with horny-toads, lizards, a blue snake, and sixteen grasshoppers. When Jody arrives home he is told his father wants to see him down by the barn. Jody is afraid he has done something wrong. But, when he arrives at the lower pasture fence, he finds his father and Billy Buck looking at the mare Nellie. His father tells Jody to take Nellie up to the ridge ranch and get her bred by Jess Taylor's stallion and he can have the colt she throws. His father makes it clear that he must care for the colt and do what Bill tells him. Billy says he must be patient because the colt, if there is one, won't come for nearly a year. Jody knows that the family can barely afford the five dollars the breeding will cost, and he is willing to do whatever he must to have another horse.

Jody takes Nellie up the hill to be bred. After the breeding, he wonders aloud to Billy, "Do you think she's really going to have a colt?" Billy says he wouldn't be surprised, but warns Jody that they won't know for some time and he must be patient. While Jody waits, Billy teaches him about the mare and what it will be like to have a colt. He tells him that even after it's born Jody won't be able to ride it for at least two years.

Billy tells what to expect during the birth. Jody says to Billy, "You won't let anything happen to the colt, will you?" Billy recognizes that Jody no longer thinks he can do no wrong, "All sorts of things might happen, and they wouldn't be my fault. I can't do everything."

Jody waits impatiently for the birth of the colt, dreaming of riding a black stallion he calls Black Demon. Jody wants to spend his time in the barn with Nellie, but his father tells him to leave it to Billy. Words burst out of Jody's mouth. "But the pony died—" Carl replies, "Don't you go blaming that on him...If Billy can't save a horse, it can't be saved."

Finally, the greatly anticipated day arrives. Billy calls Jody to the barn, but when it is clear the colt is turned the wrong way, Billy chases the boy from the barn. He won't go, but Billy tells Jody, "Turn your face away, damn you, turn your face." Billy must cut the colt from Nellie and she dies, but Jody has his colt. "There's your colt. I promised. And there it is. I had to do it—had to."

The final episodic chapter, "The Leader of the People," begins with Jody scuffing his feet and playing with a stone. By the end of the episode, however, it is clear that Jody is growing into a man more concerned with the needs of others than with his own wants. Jody is the first to see Grandfather's cart coming east up the hill from Pacific Grove where Carl says, "He goes down and stares off west over the ocean." Carl complains to Mrs. Tiflin, "Your father only talks about one thing...Just Indians and crossing the plains." But, Jody is looking forward to seeing Grandfather, hearing his stories, and playing with him.

At dinner that evening, over a good steak, Grandfather begins to weave his tales. He remembers in a sing-song tone "that the story had worn for itself," how he was the leader of the men when there was no game to hunt. Carl's frustration with the old stories begins to show, "You'd better eat some more meat. All the rest of us are ready for our pudding." The stories continue after dinner in front of the fire until only Jody is listening. He goes to be dreaming of the exciting days of Grandfather's tales.

Jody joyously tells his mother that he and Grandfather are going to chase the mice into the slaughter. But, at breakfast, Carl is overheard by Grandfather, "Well, how many times do I have to listen [to his stories]...That time's done. Why can't he forget it, now it's done? Grandfather tells Carl, "I'm not being mad. I don't mind what you said, but it might be true, and I would mind that."

When Jody tells Grandfather that he'll wait outside for him so that they can begin the mouse hunt, Grandfather replies, "I think I'll just sit in the sun, Jody. You go kill the mice." Jody tries but somehow without Grandfather it's not fun. Jody says to Grandfather, "Maybe I could lead the people someday." Grandfather replies, "There's no place to go. There's the ocean to stop you." Jody feels very sad and asks Grandfather if he wants some lemonade. "Grandfather was about to refuse, and then he saw Jody's face." Jody goes in to make the lemonade for Grandfather. The little boy Jody is becoming a man.

## **THEME**

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The theme of the story is also simple. The events of a boy's life allow him to grow from a simple, carefree child to a man. Jody is ten at the beginning of the story. He clearly worships his father and the ranch hand Billy Buck. But, in the first episode he discovers that Billy is a man who cannot save his beloved pony and may have indeed indirectly and unintentionally caused the pony's death. Jody learns two great lessons essential to maturing: it is important and at times heartbreaking to love so much; and even those whom we love most disappoint us.

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## SYMBOLS

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Like all good coming-of-age stories, Steinbeck's novella is full of the symbols of childhood and maturation. The toys of childhood give way to the symbols of adulthood and old age. Jody's dogs, rocks, critters, slingshot, and sticks all represent childhood. When he kills the bird and feels guilt not for the death of the bird but for what others will think, he is beginning the maturation process. His beloved pony, his care of him, and the pony's death are all symbolic of his move toward the responsibilities of maturity. The mountains represent to Jody not only adventure but independence. When he meets Gitano, he first thinks of the old man as representing adventure and excitement. But soon Gitano takes on new meaning when Jody sees the parallel between him and the old horse and finds Gitano reverently holding his rapier—he is of another place and time, something Jody can learn from and respect. Like the rapier, Jody recognizes that he can't destroy the secret memories of the old. The colt, before it is born, represents to Jody a new independence, the freedom to roam the hills on horseback. But as he impatiently waits for its birth, Billy begins to teach him responsibility. And when it is born and the mare is killed, Jody recognizes that he must care for it and train it for a long time before he can enjoy the freedom the colt will bring him. Grandfather is a symbol of another time connected to Jody by blood. Jody realizes the importance to Grandfather of his stories and his memories but also understands what he can learn from them. He feels sadness rather than anger when Carl attempts to minimize their importance, and he shows his empathy and respect for Grandfather through a simple act.

## TEACHING METHODOLOGY

This novella is excellent for reading aloud. It easily can be divided into short episodes. It is also easy for most students to read silently and discuss with their peers. It is an excellent story for encouraging student response through writing. Students can respond in writing in dialogue journals in which they write letters about what they read to either their teacher, peers, or college or university students who are also reading the story. The person to whom they are writing, whether the teacher, peer, or college student, should respond, in letter format in the journal, to what they have written. If you are the person responding, you may want to respond in writing to five or six students per day, thereby writing to an entire class in the course of a week. If some class time is used to have the students write in their dialogue journals, you can utilize this time to write responses to them.

## AFTER READING THE NOVEL

### WRITTEN OR ORAL RESPONSES

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Students can write about or explore a variety of ways in which to respond to *The Red Pony*. In addition to the dialogue journal, students can respond in the following ways:

1. Personal statement—these include emotional reactions, expressions of identification or empathy with characters or place, conjecture about characters, and autobiographical associations.

Suggested Activities—React in writing to Jody's family and ranch. What do you think his life is like? How was it similar or different from your life as a ten-year-old? Write about some of the things Jody likes to do. Write about an experience with an animal you loved.

2. Description—statements which attempt to classify or describe the form, language, structure or content of the work; such responses can range in complexity from the simple recall of explicitly state information to an analysis of the stylistic properties.

Suggested Activities—Orally, in your own words, describe what happens in any one of the episodes. Learn to tell the episode using storytelling techniques.

Write about some of the incidents that cause Jody to grow up. What is the significance of Steinbeck's use of the phrase "the little boy, Jody?"

3. Interpretation—responses aimed at identifying the symbolic or thematic meaning of a work; interpretation requires of readers an ability to infer the intentions of Steinbeck.

Suggested Activities—Write your own interpretation of any one of the episodes. What is the theme of the episode? How does it contribute to Jody's maturation?

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Discuss with your small group the following symbols: Jody's dogs, the bird Jody kills, the mountains, the old horse Easter, the rapier, the long gestation of the colt, Grandfather's stories, the lemonade. How does Steinbeck use these symbols to show Jody's maturation?

4. Evaluation—responses aimed at assessing the construction, meaningfulness, or appropriateness of *The Red Pony*.

**Suggested Activities**—Write about how well the story depicts the maturation of a little boy. How might the story differ if Jody was a little girl?

In a small group talk about the theme of coming-of-age. Compare this book to other coming-of-age books you have read and discussed. How is Jody's story similar or different? Why?

Try your hand at writing a coming-of-age story about your passage from childhood to adolescence. What are some of the symbols of your maturation? Who were the important people in your life? How did you become independent from your parents?

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## ABOUT THE EDITORS OF THIS GUIDE

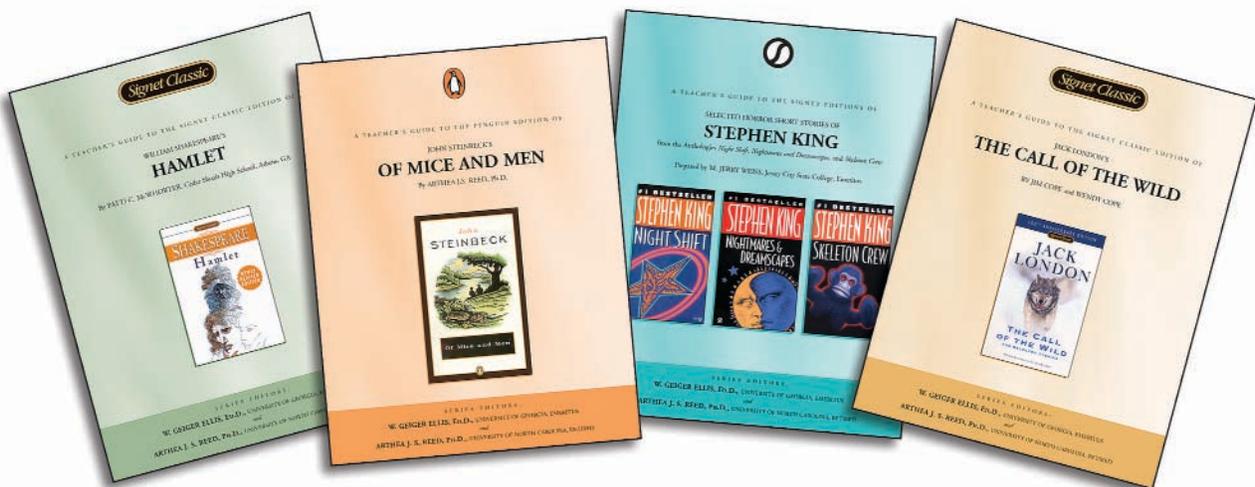
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