

ANALYSIS

The Red Pony (1938)

John Steinbeck

(1902-1968)

“*The Red Pony* has been published in several forms: a short version as a story in 1937, the complete novelette comprising four sections which are virtually individual stories, as part of *The Long Valley* in 1938, and a revised version with added material published as a separate volume in 1945. The four connected stories relate the youth and coming to maturity of Jody Tiflin, a boy on a California ranch. In ‘The Gift’ Jody’s father gives him a red pony, and under the tutelage of the wise and experienced ranch hand Billy Buck he learns how to ride it, feed it, and take care of it. But the pony takes cold and dies; in the magnificent closing scene of the story Jody, hysterical with sorrow and anger, beats of the buzzards which are attacking the corpse with his bare hands.

In ‘The Great Mountains’ an old *paisano* named Gitano (i.e., Gypsy) comes to the ranch to ask for work, claiming he was born on the land and that it once belonged to his family. Jody associates the old Mexican with the mountains to the west of the valley, an unknown wilderness which represents for him the primeval and the mysterious. But time has passed Gitano by; he is old and good for nothing, and Jody’s father will not hire him. At the end of the story Gitano disappears, taking with him a worthless old horse named Easter which the father was keeping only out of kindness. Horse and man ride away into the western mountains, and there Gitano presumably kills Easter and himself with a sword handed down as an heirloom of his family. Thus ‘The Great Mountains’ allegorizes the passing of the old Spanish order in California.

‘The Promise’ takes up again the theme of Jody’s desire to own a horse. This time the father promises him a colt to be born of the mare Nellie; Jody is to take the responsibility for the colt from the time of its conception, and thus the whole cycle of life will be made clear to him. When the colt is finally born there are difficulties, and the mare must be destroyed to save it. Jody has his colt, but he has learned that only through passion, cruelty, pain, and blood can new life come to birth.

‘The Leader of the People,’ the final section of *The Red Pony*, completes Jody’s ‘education.’ A visitor comes to the ranch: his mother’s father, an old plains scout who brought a wagon train to California in pioneer times. Scorned by the father as garrulous and foolish, the grandfather seems to Jody wonderful and heroic, a semi-mythical figure out of a past age. He tells of buffalo hunts and Indian attacks, and Jody can respond only with a description of his mouse hunts in the woodpile. The old man wryly comments on the irony of the comparison: ‘Have the people of this generation come down to hunting mice?’ The visit ends sadly when the grandfather overhears an insulting remark the father makes about him. The old plainsman realizes he is superfluous, that his time has past. ‘There’s a line of old men along the shore hating the ocean because it stopped them.’ With the disappearance of the frontier a new race of farmers has arisen, and there is no place for pioneers. This realization completes the coming to maturity of Jody, who has observed the life cycle in men and animals on the ranch and now perceives its operation in generations of human society.

The Red Pony is one of Steinbeck’s most successful works artistically; its style is faultless throughout, the mood is maintained without sentimentality, and the underlying motif is developed simply and unobtrusively. The novelette also lacks the profanity and coarseness which offends some readers in works like *The Grapes of Wrath*, and the relations of the boy with his mother and father and with his friend Billy Buck are related with great tact and insight.”

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