The Red Pony Essay, Research Paper

Literary Analysis: The Red Pony The Red Pony, by John Steinbeck, consists of four separate but intertwined stories about a boy named Jody. These stories show how Jody began as a selfish, immature young child, and became a caring, responsible young man. Steinbeck used characters and events to teach Jody about life and death. He also used much imagery and foreshadowing to set the mood for the stories. In the first story, "The Gift," Jody Tiflin was a typical ten-year-old boy who liked to sleep as late as possible and rush through his early morning chores before going to school. When he came home from school, he did his chores slowly and inefficiently. Billy Buck, the ranch hand, convinced Carl Tiflin, Jody?s father, to buy a pony for Jody. Billy thought this would help Jody become more responsible. Carl & Billy went to the town of Salinas one day and surprised Jody with the pony the next morning. Jody named his new red pony Gabilan, after the mountains to the west about which he is so curious. Billy Buck taught Jody everything he knew about horses and Jody was responsible for taking care of Gabilan. He became more disciplined: He got up every morning by himself to feed Gabilan and he took more care when he was doing his other chores. Billy Buck was right. Getting the pony helped Jody to learn responsibility. Jody never left Gabilan outside when the weather was bad. One day Billy Buck convinced Jody to leave the pony out while he was at school. Billy promised that the weather was going to be fine and that it was not going to rain (pg 21). Unfortunately, it did rain and Jody came home to find his pony drenched. The pony developed a "cold" from being out in the rain, but Billy, a great horse doctor, took care of Gabilan. He showed Jody how to make the medicine for the pony, but the medicine didn?t help. Billy even cut a hole in Gabilan?s windpipe so that he could breathe (pg 31). Jody stayed with Gabilan at night. When he saw the dry, dead hair on Gabilan, he lost all hope for the pony?s recovery. During the night, Gabilan, got out of the barn and Jody found him dead the next morning. One buzzard was sitting on Gabilan?s head, black liquid dripping from its beak, and others were circling overhead (pg 35). Jody grabbed the buzzard that was on Gabilan and beat its head on the ground. He kept beating the bird until Billy and Carl found him, long after the bird was dead. Billy picked Jody up and carried him home. Jody was very angry and blamed Billy for the death of Gabilan. Billy had promised Jody that it would not rain the day he left Gabilan out and when Gabilan became ill, Billy promised Jody that the pony would get better. Both of these promises were broken. Billy felt guilty and understood why Jody blamed him. Jody had learned a hard lesson about death and loss. The imagery of death is used quite abundantly in this first chapter and will continue throughout the novel. Jody has seen the cycle of life and death here and has been taught the pain of loss. The circling buzzards, the black cypress tree where pigs were slaughtered, and the blood spot he saw one morning in his egg were all symbols of death. Steinbeck also used the weather and time to enhance the story. It began at daybreak, symbolizing Jody?s journey towards manhood. It was early summer, the time of growth for nature and for Jody. When Gabilan became ill, the weather turned rainy and windy. "The Great Mountains," the second story, opened up on a hot summer day. Jody, being a normal child, was rebellious and stubborn, going against his father?s will. Carl loved nature and did everything he could to protect it. Jody threw rocks at swallow?s nest and baited rattraps with stale cheese, waiting for his dogs to get their noses caught in the traps. He also went up on a hill and killed a bird with his slingshot and ripped it apart. He was ashamed of what he did and hid the disemboweled bird in the bushes. Gitano, an old paisano, came to the Tiflin?s ranch, asking if he could live the rest of his life there because his old home was on their ranch. Carl did not want him to stay, but allowed him to stay the night and for breakfast the next morning. Jody questioned Gitano about the mountains and Gitano said they were full of splendor and magnificence. This satisfied Jody because his father and Billy Buck always told him that the mountains were full of danger. Gitano left before breakfast on Easter, Carl?s old horse. Carl compared Gitano to Easter by saying that they were both old and useless and should be put out of their misery. Billy responded by saying that they should be able to live the rest of their lives in peace (pp 45-46). Jody understood this and began to grow in his understanding of death. Carl, on the other hand, did not want to acknowledge sickness or death. Steinbeck again used imagery and symbolism throughout this chapter. The story began on a hot summer day, a time of serious dryness and a time of struggling. This is not only symbolic of Jody?s struggling with grief for the loss of his red pony, but also of the old paisano, thin and old and tired. Carl Tifflin wanted Jody to be very disciplined, but like most children, he was rebellious. When Jody felt sad, upset, or ashamed, he went to the mossy green tub filled with spring water and washed himself as if cleansing himself of a sin (pg 37). Jody found that in the morning, the mountains were pink, and he found peace in them. In the evening, however, they turned to a dark purple with many shadows, and they frightened him. In the third story, "The Promise," Jody walked home from school, with an imaginary army behind him. He caught many "prisoners" in his lunch pail. When Jody arrived home, he was summoned to the barn. His father told him that since he had taken such good care of Gabilan, he would be allowed to take their mare, Nellie, to be bred at a neighbor?s farm. Jody agreed that he would work as hard as he could and be responsible for taking care of Nellie. He started doing his chores with more efficiency, he was more responsible, and he started to sway his shoulders with more importance as he walked (pg 56). Jody became very doubtful of Nellie bearing a colt and asked for Billy?s assurance over and over. Jody also asked about the birth of a colt. Billy told him that if the colt was turned around backwards, the mother and/or her baby could be torn apart (pg 62). This was foreshadowing what was to happen later in this chapter. Jody begged to be present for the delivery. After talking to Billy, Jody sat underneath the black cypress tree, the symbol of death, and imagined that Nellie would have a black stallion named Black Demon. When he found himself under the tree, he ran to the spring water and washed himself. Jody became weary from waiting, but Billy assured him that the colt would be safe and strong and that it would be a good colt. He did not make any promises to Jody, because of what had happened in the past. Late one evening in February, Billy told Jody that the colt was ready to be born. As they went into the barn, Billy sensed that something was wrong. He found that the colt was positioned wrong and tried to turn it around, but it was impossible. He decided to sacrifice the mare to save the colt. Jody watched as Billy killed Nellie, cut open her stomach, and pulled out the colt alive. Billy dropped the colt at Jody?s feet and said, "Here?s your colt." (pp 72-73). Steinbeck showed in this scene that death is the inevitable outcome of birth, for everything that is born must eventually die. Jody felt guilty because he believed that he was responsible for Nellie?s death and Billy?s grief. He got his colt, but only through the sacrifice of others. This was a sign that Jody was maturing, that he was thinking about how others felt and not just about his own feelings. This chapter opened up in the early spring, a time of growth for Jody as well as nature. Steinbeck foreshadowed the death of Nellie by the "prisoners" Jody caught in his lunch pail. Jody captured toads, lizards, grasshoppers, a newt, and a snake, all ingredients that might be used by witches to make a curse. Nellie gave birth and died in February, a time of death and barrenness. The juxtaposition of the tub of spring water and the black cypress tree also pointed out that everything in life is destined to death. The final chapter, "The Leader of the People," is the climax of The Red Pony. As Jody sat and watched a flock of pigeons in the black cypress tree, he threw a rock, making the whole flock of white birds rise from the tree (pg 74). This symbolized that even though there is death, the cypress tree, life, the white birds, goes on. Jody saw his father coming home with a letter announcing that Mrs. Tiflin?s father would be arriving shortly. As Jody rushed to greet Grandfather, Carl complained about the old man because he always told the same stories over and over. Grandfather told of his westward travels in a wagon train, fighting the Indians, and braving the wilderness. Jody, however, loved to listen to Grandfather?s stories. Carl jumped into the middle of one of the stories and told the old man that he needed to forget about the past. Grandfather thought that the younger generations were becoming soft, and forgetful about their founders. Mrs. Tiflin and Carl argued throughout this chapter because of Carl?s resentment and irritation towards Grandfather. Again, as with the paisano, Carl felt that Grandfather was old and useless. The next day, Jody and Grandfather were talking, and Jody, seeing Grandfather?s sadness, offered him a glass of lemonade. Mrs. Tiflin was surprised and proud to find Jody making the lemonade for her father and not even wanting some for himself (pg 92). Jody showed that he was maturing by giving up his activities to be with his grandfather, also proving that he had become less selfish and self-centered unlike his father. It was also important that Black Demon had determination and vigor, just as Jody had at the beginning of the book. He had become the symbol of the new generation. Jody, unlike his father, had no desire to leave the past behind him. He wanted to learn from the older generation in order to be prepared for life. He showed that the past and present could coexist. The four short stories in The Red Pony have the themes of life, death, rebirth, loss, learning, and growing in common. They show how a young boy grew through his experiences and matured from a selfish boy to a responsible young man. Steinbeck used foreshadowing, imagery, and time to convey the message to the reader: Death is inevitable, but life will keep going.