The Red Pony by John Steinbeck
a study guide

**Novel Essential Questions:**

- What sometimes-difficult but realistic lessons about life does the young protagonist learn with each new experience in the novel?
- How does the author both directly and indirectly characterize the four main players: Jody, Mr. Tiflin, Mrs. Tiflin, and Billy Buck?
- What specific trait skills of idea development and word choice does the author use best?

**“The Gift” -- Questions and tasks to help you discuss the book with your peers and teacher.**

1. After the first breakfast that the author writes about, Jody walked up the hill in the back of his house. Steinbeck gives description and detail about the ranch where Jody lives. Using the descriptions, illustrate the Tiflin ranch.
2. On Jody's walk through the vegetable garden, he paused for a moment to smash a green muskmelon with his heel, but he was not happy about it. "It was a bad thing to do, he knew perfectly well." What does this tell us about Jody's character? Be on the look-out for other examples in “The Gift” (and the other chapters) when Jody does something he later feels badly about.
3. Describe the red pony Jody that was given as a gift. Why did the boy name the pony Galiban?
4. When did Mrs. Tiflin feel "a curious pride rise up in her"? Why did she feel that way?
5. Describe how the pony’s ears helped to indicate its emotions.
6. Describe the process in which Jody trained the pony.
7. How does the pony become sick? Summarize the different ways Billy Buck attempts to help the pony regain its health.
8. Compare Mr. Tiflin’s reaction to Billy Buck’s when they find the boy with the buzzard. Whose reaction was more appropriate?
10. LITERARY DEVICE QUESTION: At the beginning of “The Gift,” Steinbeck uses imagery that foreshadows what ultimately happens at the end of the chapter. What imagery described early on was a hint at what was to come?
“The Great Mountains” -- Questions and tasks to help you discuss the book with your peers and teacher.

1. How should we feel about the activities Jody does at the beginning of this chapter to overcome his boredom?
2. Why were the mountains “dear to him, and terrible?”
3. What does Gitano mean when he claims, “I have come back.”
4. What was Mr. Tifflin’s reaction to Gitano’s claim? Jody’s?
5. In the conversation about Easter and the old man, what comparison did Mr. Tifflin make? What does that tell you about Jody’s father?
6. Billy Buck and Mr. Tifflin have differing opinions about the paisanos. Why do you suppose they feel so differently?
7. What happens to Gitano and Easter? Why do you suppose Gitano does what he does?
8. THEMATIC QUESTION: For the second time in the novel, something living has wandered into the wilderness to die. Compare the two instances.
9. THEMATIC QUESTION: Gitano claimed he was born on the ranch, his family worked the land, and he therefore has a right to be there. Jody could make the same claim. Whose claim would be more valid?
10. CHARACTERIZATION QUESTION: Mr. Tifflin seems to not be surprised that Gitano steals the horse. Why? Jody’s interpretation of Gitano’s action is more imaginative than his father’s. Why do you suppose Jody is so filled with sorrow at the end of the chapter?

“The Promise” -- Questions and tasks to help you discuss the book with your peers and teacher.

1. How does Jody, walking home from school, demonstrate that he is still a boy at heart?
2. Describe the deal Jody made with his father. How did this new responsibility affect the boy?
3. “And he walked away from Jody and went into the saddle-room beside the barn, for his feelings were hurt.” Why were Billy Buck’s feelings hurt?
4. Compare Jody’s special place (his “center-point”) to the place that makes him feel “repulsive.” What does this tell you about the boy?
5. Why does Jody name the unborn colt “Black Demon”? What do you think of Jody’s daydreams about the colt?
6. What is “the promise” that is made to Jody?
7. What happens to Nellie? What do we learn about Jody from this passage: "He tried to be glad because of the colt, but the bloody face, and the haunted, tired eyes of Billy Buck hung in the air ahead of him."
8. THEMATIC QUESTION: Like “The Gift,” this chapter has a positive-sounding title, yet something harsh happens. Why does the author do this? What lessons about gifts and promises is the young protagonist learning? As someone close to Jody’s age, how do you feel about these lessons?
9. CHARACTERIZATION QUESTION: Jody, though still a boy in “The Promise,” has matured quite a bit since “The Gift.” What are some specifics from this chapter that show Jody is an older boy than he was when the novel began?
10. LITERARY DEVICE QUESTION: Were you more aware of the author’s foreshadowing in this chapter when Jody came across the cypress tree and the black kettle? Explain why or why not?
“The Leader of the People” -- Questions and tasks to help you discuss the book with your peers and teacher.

1. Why does Mrs. Tiflin become angry with Mr. Tiflin? What is something Jody learns about his parents’ relationship by listening to them quarrel?
2. What’s Mr. Tiflin’s attitude towards Grandfather? Jody’s? Billy’s?
3. After dinner, when Mr. Tiflin tries to keep Grandfather from re-telling a story, why does Jody sympathize with his Grandfather?
4. What does Grandfather overhear that morning? How does he react?
5. What does Grandfather mean when he says, “Westering has died out of people”? Why do you think he says this?
6. Why would Grandfather reconsider Jody’s offer of lemonade? What do you think Mrs. Tiflin realizes about her son when he asks for only one lemon?

7. THEMATIC QUESTION: Like “The Mountains,” this chapter features an older character whose appearance helps Jody learn a lesson about life. Compare the lesson(s) about life Gitano’s appearance taught Jody to what the Grandfather helped the boy to understand about the bigger world.

8. CHARACTERIZATION QUESTION: More than any other chapter, Jody’s father comes across in this one as cold and pragmatic. What does he specifically say and do to show both these qualities? Based on Jody’s experiences in this book, do you believe he will become more like his father, his Grandfather, or someone else?
1 & 2. His eyes were a **contemplative**, watery gray and the hair which **protruded** from under his Stetson hat was spiky and weathered.

3. Some animals had died in the **vicinity**.

4. Nearly all of his father's presents were given with reservations which **hampered** their value somewhat.

5. "It's just a show saddle," Billy Buck said **disparagingly**.

6. His ears pivoted about and his eyes turned red with fear and with general **rambunctiousness**.

7. And in the schoolyard---it was too awful to **contemplate**.

8. He **whetted** the shining blade a long time on a little carborundum stone.

9 & 10. Doubletree Mutt looked into the barn, his big tail waving **provocatively**, and Jody was so **incensed** at his health that he found a hard black clod on the floor and deliberately threw it.
1. In the humming heat of a midsummer afternoon the little boy Jody listlessly looked about the ranch for something to do.

2 & 3. His eyes narrowed, his mouth worked strenuously, for the first time that afternoon he was intent.

4. He didn't care about the bird or its life, but he knew what older people would say if they had seen him kill it; he was ashamed because of their potential opinion.

5 & 6. When the peaks were pink in the morning they invited him among them: and when the sun had gone over the edge in the evening and the mountains were a purple-like despair, then Jody was afraid of them; then they were so impersonal and aloof that their very imperturbability was a threat.

7. He turned abruptly, and ran into the house for help, and the screen door banged after him.

8. He looked secretly at Gitano, to see whether he noticed the parallel, but the big bony hands did not move, nor did the dark eyes turn from the horse.

9 & 10. The hilt was pierced and intricately carved.
1. In a mid-afternoon of spring, the little boy Jody walked **martially** along the brush-lined road toward his home ranch.

2. Now Jody marched seemingly alone, with high-lifted knees and pounding feet; but behind him there was a **phantom** army with great flags and swords, silent but deadly.

3. With a gentle forefinger he stroked the throat and chest until the horny-toad relaxed, until its eyes closed and it lay **languorous** and asleep.

4. But he couldn’t remember, and besides it was impossible to know what action might later be **construed** as a crime.

5. He dragged one foot to give an impression of great innocence and **nonchalance**.

6. Jody climbed to the top of the fence and hung his feet over and looked **paternally** down at the mare.

7. The bay mare Nellie quickly grew **complacent**.
1. Those plump, sleek, **arrogant** mice were doomed.

2. As Billy went back to his work he said **ominously**, "You'd better ask him anyway."

3. His father looked down at him **contemptuously**.

4. Directly below him, in an oak tree, a crow congress had **convened**.

5 & 6. The story **droned** on, speeded up for the attack, grew sad over the wounds, struck a **dirge** at the burials on the Great Plains.

7. A race of giants had lived then, fearless men, men of a **staunchness** unknown in this day.

8. They had been hunting gophers in the dark, and although the four cats were full of gopher meat, they sat in a semi-circle at the back door and mewed **piteously** for milk.

9. It was a terrible thing to him to retract a word, but to **retract** it in shame was infinitely worse.

10. Jody turned **disconsolately** away, and walked down toward the old haystack.