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## A Literary Analysis of the Red Pony: Steinbeck's Powerful Writing

Defining what it means to be an American is a complicated, daunting, and nearly impossible task, for the nation's broad geographical landscape makes it difficult to find a common ground for every citizen. While one man may imagine America to mean the sprawling desert ridges of the Grand Canyon, another might picture the towering forests of the Pacific Northwest, and yet another would envision the easy, rolling hills of the North East. With the physical planes eliminated, the essence of this complex citizenship must lie in the hearts of those who inhabit the country. Over his lifetime, John Steinbeck made it his mission to reveal the characteristics that make someone a true American: hard work, growth, and the journey into adulthood. Steinbeck's accurate, yet personal, portrayal of the way these traits manifest themselves in citizen's daily lives has placed him among the literary masters of the twentieth century.

In creating a raw and lasting image of his country, Steinbeck received a multitude of awards, most notably the prestigious Nobel Prize in Literature "for his realistic and imaginative writings, combining as they do sympathetic humor and keen social perception" ("The Nobel Prize in Literature 1962"). These traits are evident in his novella *The Red Pony*, which makes up for what it lacks in length with genuine emotion, fresh social commentary, and an essence of American spirit unlike any other work. In John Steinbeck's *The Red Pony*, the characterization of Jody and his father reflect the theme that blind masculinity is flawed. Jody's maturity comes slowly, revealing his character as a gentle boy growing into his own idea of manhood.

At the beginning of *The Red Pony*, Jody is just a normal boy on an American farm, "dreamy, sometimes irresponsible, and not above childish pranks" (Peck). He wants desperately to be an adult worthy of his father's attention. When his father, Carl, prepares to go out in the morning, Jody "wished he might go along", longing for a chance to prove himself to Carl (Steinbeck 3). Jody's first brush with adult comes in the form of a red pony which "quickly becomes his chief joy and responsibility" (Bernardo). The skills that Jody learns while caring for Gabilan begin his initiation into adulthood. Representing more than simple farm skills, caring for the red pony demonstrates "a child's acquisition of responsibility, industry, and independence" ("Steinbeck's 'The Red Pony': Essays in Criticism"). When the beloved pony dies, Jody deals with another adult emotion: grief. These lessons learned in the first section of the novella form the basis for Jody's characterization. Although he is clearly growing into his role as a man on the farm, he remains tender and emotional in many ways. This is exemplified when the old man, Gitano, arrives on the ranch. Jody reacts to the new visitor with excitement, declaring to everyone on the ranch "It's an old man...and he says he's come back" (Steinbeck 44). While Carl reacts

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to the man with anger and disgust, Jody still displays a childlike innocence, asking Gitano questions about his life.

When Carl sends the man off to the mountains to die, the cruel side of manhood appears compared to Jody who falls to the ground “full of nameless sorrow” (55). Although Carl attempts to teach Jody his collected and stoic ways, Jody is unable to abandon emotion. When his mare must be killed to save her colt, the experience haunts Jody. The passage of life and death should be an understood part of being a rancher, yet as Jody “tried to be glad because of the colt...the bloody face...hung in the eyes ahead of him” (79). Each of the first three stories represents Jody as a boy attempting desperately to become the man that his father has taught him to be. Jody’s character is simply too tender and kind. Although Carl would view this as a weakness, Jody’s grandfather provides him with a different perspective. When Carl interacts with Grandfather, he has little patience for his tired stories and “regard[s him] with mingled pity and scorn” (Bernardo). In the final scenes, the boy that Jody once was melts away. As Jody watches his father’s blatant disrespect of Grandfather, Jody realizes that he does not have to become the man his father is, “learn[ing] that human beings are fallible and have limits” (Price). Despite all of Jody’s efforts on the farm, this moment represents Jody’s true transition into manhood, for realizes that taking care of others is not a point of shame.

Jody’s finds strength in his empathy exhibited throughout *The Red Pony*, for “he has learned to feel and to reach out beyond himself to try to deal with the feelings and needs of others” (Price). Growth into manhood manifests itself different for Jody than for Carl, but that does not mean Carl’s way of life is the only way. In showing the successful development of Jody from boy to man, Steinbeck demonstrates that emotion can actually be a strength through his theme that a strict idea of masculinity limits the scope of one’s growth. Carl serves as a foil to Jody’s character, for where Jody is soft and tender, Carl is hardened and practical to represent the flaws in harsh masculinity. In Carl’s eyes, his twisted version of masculinity is practically necessary for survival, as “a large part of his character clearly has been formed by the harsh environment [on the ranch]” (Peck). As Jody grows up, Carl remains the same man, attempting to indoctrinate Jody into his tough ways of life. Even when Carl is being kind, as in “The Gift”, he still attempts to break Jody of his emotional spirit, for “[Jody’s] father’s presents were given with reservations which hampered their value somewhat” (Steinbeck 6-7). A key example of Carl’s character is his interaction with Gitano. Rather than approaching the situation with a degree of kindness for a man who is obviously confused and alone, Carl reacts with anger and frustration. He meets the old man’s pleas with the harsh “I tell you you can’t stay,” with no regard for the man’s circumstances (45). Although the text claims that “Carl didn’t like to be cruel”, it is clear that his first and only priority is the maintenance of the ranch (46). As Jody, a young boy being groomed to follow in his father’s footsteps, watches this unfold, he is being taught by example that a man is someone who cares for no one besides himself. When his father scoffs that he “can’t afford food and doctor bills for an old man”, Jody is also led to

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believe that a man who cannot provide for himself is hardly a man at all (45-46). The old man, forced to rely on the lacking goodwill of strangers, is no longer a man in Carl's eyes, for he "does not like to see weakness in others," (Peck). It can be argued that this way of life was necessary, for "as provider for the family, he runs his ranch with authority, certainly the dominant figure in his domain" ("Steinbeck's 'The Red Pony': Essays in Criticism"). When hard decisions regarding the ranch's livelihood are left in the hands of a single man, there is little question of how he would handle his emotions.

Feelings have no place on Carl's ranch, for feelings mean failure. Despite the perceived need for a strong presence, Carl's cruel characterization shows that the "manly" way has its flaws as well, including real harms to the people around him. The second example of this is his interaction with Jody's Grandfather, "[a man] he should treat with some hospitality and respect" ("Steinbeck's 'The Red Pony': Essays in Criticism"). Rather than recognizing that Grandfather is much wiser than him, Carl mocks him and complains about his presence. He justifies his poor behavior by claiming that the old man "just goes on and on" (Steinbeck 85). When he disrespects Grandfather, his stubbornness pushes Jody away once and for all, "inspir[ing] his son to behave as his opposite... Jody's father acts as the model of what Jody does not want to become," ("Steinbeck's 'The Red Pony': Essays in Criticism"). Carl's constant adherence to his idea of manhood and authority ultimately pushes Jody away, allowing Jody to develop into a man on his own terms. This transformation serves as the strongest advocate for Steinbeck's theme in *The Red Pony's*. Although Carl found success in a life lived with only cold reason and hard facts, this blind masculinity has a multitude of flaws in the way it pushes away other people. By creating a characterization of Carl to serve in stark contrast with Jody's developing compassion, Steinbeck forces the reader to realize that masculinity comes in many forms, not all of them as cruel disciplinarians.

Jody's coming-of-age story represents the struggles of men across America to find the balance between strength and compassion. By employing the characterization of two opposite characters, Jody's growth and Carl's stagnation represent the flaws in pursuing a strict, unbending degree of masculinity. Steinbeck's triumph shines in the way he portrays such complex struggles with simplicity. Regarded as one of the great American writers, Steinbeck encompasses the push-pull that every American man faces in *The Red Pony*. The awarding of the Nobel Prize in Literature solidifies the notion that Steinbeck fundamentally understood what it meant to be a man and a citizen in the changing landscape of the United States.

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