

OVERALL OBJECTIVE: To provide teachers with instructional materials that will enhance their students' understanding of John Steinbeck's *The Red Pony* through development of skills in the areas of vocabulary, reading comprehension, literary analysis, writing, and appreciation of the novel through a multi-level instructional approach.

SPECIFIC OBJECTIVES OF THIS PACKET: To help students

1. build vocabularies through practice and reinforcement of the language used in *The Red Pony*.
2. develop the reading comprehension skills of sequencing events, seeing cause/effect relationships, comparing and contrasting, and reading critically.
3. develop the literary analysis skills of interpreting character, theme, setting, and tone.
4. improve the skills of writing to a specific audience for a specific purpose.

APPROACHES TO THE RED PONY

Both artistically and thematically, John Steinbeck's tale of a young boy's maturing is a fruitful text for many classroom situations. Its brevity, episodic structure, and conciseness of description, together with the drama of its first and third episodes, make it exciting and accessible reading even for students of limited ability. Yet its exploration of such personal topics as growing up and learning to accept loss, and of such broad concepts as the role of the frontier in shaping America, allow for extensive discussion and reflection on the part of all students.

The book is divided into four parts, each of which can be read alone as a short story. Such use allows extreme flexibility for the teacher's needs. But the inter-relationships of the parts in theme, structure, and narrative technique can provide valuable insights into the methods of fiction, as well as the deepening of students' understanding of each part. The opening descriptive passages in each section may serve as stimuli for students' descriptive writing, while the seasonal patterns apparent from chapter to chapter allow the teacher to discuss connotation and symbolism as topics in language and literature.

Much of *The Red Pony* is concerned with the growing-up of Jody Tiflin. Steinbeck presents Jody, both physically and cerebrally, with a vividness and a realism that will reflect the experiences of many students. Jody's fantasies, for example, whether fearful or ambitious, reflect the imaginings of many youngsters and can suggest a wide range of personal writing assignments. His mixture of childishness and maturity as he tries on adult roles or reverts to petulant behavior will be a comfort to many young people who find themselves caught between childhood and adolescence.

Jody's relationships with his strict father, his more understanding grandfather, and his parent substitute Billy Buck offer a variety of models for young readers. The teacher may wish to discuss what each

of these figures represents to Jody, or to ask students for similar descriptions of adults in their own lives. Since the story hews so closely to Jody's point of view, many imaginative writing assignments can be developed by having students recount incidents or explain feelings from the viewpoint of a character other than Jody. The brief section titled "The Great Mountains" is particularly useful in this respect: students can be asked to imagine Gitano's thoughts, to describe events from his past, or to tell the story of his rapier.

All the episodes in the novel are linked by their emphasis on loss, whether through the inevitable process of aging or through the shock of sudden death. Before the novel is read, the teacher may suggest that such patterns will appear, or may lead students to see the emergence of this theme from section to section. Parts II and IV, for example, center on the experiences of old men and use such geographic symbols as mountains, prairie, and ocean to suggest the movement of human life. Parts I and III, on the other hand, explore the precariousness of dreams and of life itself through the birth or death of the family's horses. In "The Gift," Jody's hopes are dashed and his confidence in the adult world shaken, while "The Promise" shows Jody's resilience and suggests that hopes can be revived and dreams fulfilled, but not without a price. Discussion of such topics can be eminently useful in helping students accept loss in their own lives and prepare for their own futures.

The Red Pony has almost limitless uses in a variety of course units. For younger readers, it can be paired with *A Day No Pigs Would Die*, which it parallels in many respects. The two books can make an effective unit dealing with the patterns of life and death as reflected in rural life. *The Red Pony* is a valuable introduction to Steinbeck's work and can be followed by assigning *Of Mice and Men* or with more advanced students, *East of Eden*. The teacher may wish to explore adult-child relationships by reading *The Red Pony* together with such adolescent novels as *The Cay* or *Marvin and Tige*, or such classics as *Great Expectations* or *To the Lighthouse*. The topic of the frontier and the American dream can be further examined in Steinbeck's own *The Grapes of Wrath*, or in such historical works as Parkman's *The Oregon Trail* or *The Journals of Lewis and Clark*. The uses and pleasures of *The Red Pony* are so many and so varied because the book typifies, by events that are quintessentially American or Western, experiences that touch all young people . . . and all adults as well.

WHAT IS THE RED PONY ABOUT?

Ten-year-old Jody Tiflin follows a predictable round on his family's Salinas Valley farm: morning chores, school for the day, then back to the farm. The pattern is altered, however, when Jody's usually strict father buys the boy a young red colt. With the help of Billy Buck, the family's knowledgeable hired hand, Jody trains the pony and dreams of Thanksgiving, when he will at last be able to ride his horse. But one day, while Jody is at school and Billy is off working, the pony is caught in a fierce rainstorm.