The Gift Part 1:

Summary:

Billy Buck is a strong, weathered man. He brushes the horses in the stable with deliberate grace, until he hears the triangle ring and goes to the house for breakfast. Because he is only a cow hand, he waits for the family to come down to breakfast first. The ringing of the triangle has just woken Jody up; he dresses immediately and goes down to breakfast. When his father and Billy come in, he can tell from the sound of their footsteps that they are wearing boots, which means they must be going somewhere. But Jody is afraid to ask his father where they are going, as his father is a "disciplinarian."

Before going to school, Jody takes a short walk around the grounds. The dogs Smasher and Doubletree Mutt follow. He notes the whitewashed house and the nearby bunkhouse, where Billy lives. He is standing near the cypress tree, underneath which is a big black kettle where pigs are scalded. He watches some buzzards circling at a distance, and hates them. On his way back to the house, he squashes a small watermelon, but is ashamed of himself for doing so.

After returning from school, Jody's mother scolds him for being careless with his chores. After completing them, he goes out to play with his rifle. His father does not yet allow Jody to have bullets for his rifle, but he enjoys aiming it at things. That night, his father and Billy return, and Jody's father instructs him to get to bed, as he has something special for him to do in the morning.

The next morning Jody is excited to see what his father wants. In the barn, his father and Billy show him a new red pony, and tell him it is his. Jody is choked with excitement and pride. Jody names the pony Gabilan, after the most fantastic things he can think of, the Gabilan Mountains. His father, a man who doesn't like to show emotion, is embarrassed and leaves the barn. After school that day, Jody brings a gang of six boys to look at his new pony. He is glad when they leave, so he can acquaint himself with the pony in private. As he grooms the pony, he almost forgets his chores, but his mother is not mad; in fact she is proud of the interest the boy takes in his horse.

**Analysis:**

In the first few pages of *The Gift,* Steinbeck introduces all the main characters that will populate the novel. Jody's father, Carl Tiflin, is a man who wants to raise his son right. He is stern, and doesn't like to show emotion. Billy Buck is more open, and he is the closest thing Jody has to a peer. Jody's mother is caring and quiet; she will not play a large role in any of the stories but the last. Even the two dogs who pop up as minor characters throughout the novel play a role in the first few pages.

Steinbeck also introduces the daily routine that dominates ranch life. Every morning, Jody's mother rings a triangle announcing breakfast, the same thing happens at supper. Dinner, the mid-day meal, is probably no different. Jody has certain chores (filling the woodbox, finding hidden eggs) that he continues to perform throughout the novel. Steinbeck's writing style is simple. He writes in short, easily understandable sentences and paragraphs. This combination of simple writing and matter-of-fact portrayal of everyday routines and events identify Steinbeck as a realist writer.

In accordance with his unadorned style, Steinbeck's symbolism and foreshadowing are fairly obvious. The buzzards, carrion eaters, foreshadow a death. The dark cypress tree, with its big black kettle where pigs are slaughtered, is associated with darkness, even evil, throughout the novel. These simple associations go a long way towards elegantly defining the world as Jody sees it. Being a child, his understanding is fairly straightforward: he hates things that remind of death; he loves those things that give him access to some sort of adventure.

Detailed Summary and Analysis:

teinbeck's short novel, *The Red Pony,*is a classic tale of a young boy's coming of age and his initiation into manhood. It consists of four short stories dealing with the Tiflin family and with Jody Tiflin, in particular. In "The Gift," when we first meet Jody, he is ten years old, not even an adolescent; during this story and the remaining three stories, Steinbeck will focus on Jody's gradual maturation. As a typical ten-year-old, Jody is like most farm boys. In general, he obeys his parents, but as we see, he forgets to do his chores, teases wild birds, and even smashes an occasional muskmelon because of his restlessness. Already he is feeling the need to be a man — to be responsible for something that is his. This spark of independence, however, is not accepted lightly by Jody's parents. Farm life is hard, and it demands discipline. Yet Jody's parents are willing to test their young son and fulfill his dream of owning a horse of his own. In fact, the horse, Gabilan, will test them all — their patience with one another, their understanding of Jody's protectiveness, indulgence, and love for Gabilan, and their own insights into themselves when Gabilan dies. In these stories, Steinbeck's theme is, foremost, the discipline which is necessary in order to cope with life — and with death.

Because "The Gift" deals with the dawn of a young boy's manhood, note the fitting parallel as the story itself opens at daybreak. The central character in the opening scene, however, is not Jody Tiflin, nor his parents. It is Billy Buck, the cow-hand who helps Mr. Tiffin take care of his farm and tend the animals. He is a weathered, middle-aged man who has been with the Tiflins for a long time; it would seem to most people that he is almost part of the family, yet he remains separate and apart. This is due to no animosity between the Tiflins and Billy Buck; this is simply the natural order of things. Billy Buck is a cow-hand, hired by Mr. Tiflin, his boss. This is part of the strict discipline of the Tiflin family and is a discipline that has endured so long that it has become habitual. For instance, Billy Buck does not resent waiting to go into the house for breakfast until Carl Tiflin has come into the dining room. His waiting is as automatic as his rising at dawn, surveying the weather, then methodically and carefully currying and brushing the horses. Steinbeck describes Billy Buck's actions as "wasteless of time," underscoring a code that is shared by ranchers and cow-hands alike.

Carl Tiflin is characterized by Steinbeck as being tall and stern; twice during this story, Steinbeck describes Carl's act of turning off the oil lamp. Carl regulates the light, God-like; in addition, Jody's father isn't often jovial. His humor is rarely expressed. The morning that he and Billy Buck saddle up and ride away to bring back Gabilan is an exception. Carl is pleased that he feels that his son is mature enough to have his own horse — to feed it, care for it, and tame it. Jody, he senses, is ready for man-sized responsibility. The passing of responsibility from father to son is a major step; until now, Jody's chores have been, for the most part, feeding the chickens and filling the wood-box.

At first, Carl Tiflin seems to be a cold authoritarian father, but Steinbeck softens him and gives him human dimensions. He helps us to see that Carl Tiflin has plowed and farmed, defied the caprices of bad weather and poor crops, and has survived. He has realized that only the fittest survive and that survival depends, in large part, on strict self-discipline. He is a man who lives close to the soil; he observes the laws of nature, sees its checks and balances concerning life and death, and he models his own life accordingly. At the same time, Carl Tiflin has his own kind of warmth; for example, note how Steinbeck describes Carl's feeding the quail, wild birds which are capable of foraging on their own. And Steinbeck adds, "… for some reason [he] was proud to have them come. He never allowed any shooting near the house for fear the quail might go away."

Despite the fact that Carl Tiflin is Jody's natural father and it is he who gives Gabilan to Jody, it is the cow-hand Billy Buck who is largely Jody's surrogate father in "The Gift." It is from Billy Buck that Jody learns how to take care of Gabilan and it is to Billy Buck that Jody turns when Gabilan is coughing and near death. Billy Buck, as a cow-hand, does not have Carl Tiflin's authority, but because he is an expert cow-hand, he shares a special kind of kinship with Jody because of the West's caste system. Billy Buck owns no land, no horse of his own except a scrub one, and has no real home except that of the Tiflin's bunkhouse. Thus he is able to be more relaxed when he is with Jody than Carl is with his own son. Billy Buck can joke and comment to Jody about "little things" that bother Jody. As an example, early in the story, Jody objects to a spot of blood being on one of his breakfast eggs. Carl Tiflin has not sat down yet, so does not and would not comment on Jody's scraping off the spot of blood; trivial conversations are not exchanged between father and son. But Billy Buck, however, waiting for Mr. Tiflin, notices what Jody does and feels free to comment, "That won't hurt you ... that's only a sign the rooster leaves." This is the common-sense kind of discipline that Billy Buck offers to Jody throughout the entirety of *The Red Pony.*Billy Buck will be a kind of older brother, or uncle, to Jody; he will be a sort of father-confessor, but one with a strong streak of discipline, much akin to Jody's own father.

Although the morning begins much like any other morning, Jody is quick to perceive that this morning is different. His father's joking about Billy Buck's drinking is the first clue, then Carl's generalizing about not knowing when he and Billy will be back is unusual in Carl's usually regimented schedule. Ostensibly, Carl and Billy are going to sell some old cows to a butcher, but because this story will deal with a young boy's confronting the death of his first pony, you should note that already Steinbeck is inserting death imagery, in its natural context — almost casually — into the story. Recall Billy Buck's comment that the blood spot on one of Jody's eggs was "only a sign the rooster leaves." Steinbeck's motif of the death-life-death-life cycle has already begun: the fertilized egg has become food for the Tiflin family. And, probably, if the eggs had become full-grown chickens, they would have been eaten by either the Tiflins or by townspeople, just as the old cows are being herded off to the butcher. Death is a part of living, yet even adults tend to recoil about accepting death's inevitability. To the young, death often seems to be something that happens only to something or someone else. Its fierceness and unjustness are not real until someone or something valuable is death's victim. The death of Gabilan will be an epiphany for Jody in *The Red Pony;*living on a farm he is aware of death, certainly, but Steinbeck deals with many kinds of imagery throughout his story in order to show us that Gabilan's death is not merely an ordinary death.

Be aware, for instance, that after the old cows disappear over the hill toward the butcher that Jody notices his two dogs, one of which has lost an ear in a battle with a coyote, the remaining ear stands higher, as a result. The imagery is utilitarian; it colors the narration and provides for us an explanation that came to Jody from Billy Buck. Steinbeck is emphasizing Billy Buck's role of a sage old man, the stand-in father who answers the many questions that would irritate and be of little consequence to Carl Tiflin.

Steinbeck then steers young Jody Tiflin up a hill, where the boy can look back on the ranch. The story has just begun, and the main characters have been introduced and characterized. The action has commenced; now Steinbeck is giving us a sense of cinematic perspective on the Tiflin farm itself. He describes the color of the whitewashed house, the red geraniums, and the cypress tree that looms above the great black kettle where the Tiflin pigs are scalded. More death imagery follows closely as Jody observes two big black buzzards sailing low to the ground. Although he feels "an uncertainty in the air," the buzzards do not seem to Jody to be a part of it. He knows the necessity of the buzzards' finding carrion and disposing of the remains of dead cows or rabbits. It is here that Steinbeck includes a phrase that might be overlooked unless one was alerted to it. At the story's climax, Jody will battle a strong and determined buzzard for the corpse of Gabilan, and already early in the story we are alerted to the fact that Jody knows, almost by instinct because he learned it many years ago, that buzzards "could not be hurt because they made away with carrion." He knows this to be a truth, but at this time it carries no emotional quality. It is merely another part of Carl's code of discipline and Billy Buck's common sense; it is as natural as responding to his mother's clanging of the breakfast triangle.

As Jody starts off the story on his journey to manhood, he also starts off toward school, and Steinbeck is keen to remind us that this is an ordinary boy. He is still very young and so he fills his pockets with little rocks so that he can take a shot at a bird or a rabbit; he is not very interested in schoolbooks and he has the sense of late summer revolt that the rest of the schoolboys have. Later, when he returns home, his mother will have to remind him, as she probably has done numerous times, how to pile the wood in the wood-box and how to try and find out where the chickens are hiding their eggs.

His chores finished, Jody enjoys his favorite pastime — pretending that his twenty-two rifle is loaded; he aims the gun at all sorts of things, but knows that he won't be able to really shoot the gun and buy cartridges for it until he is twelve years old. His father has decreed it; it is good discipline to wait.

Jody's wait for his father and Billy Buck is celebrated inwardly as the two men enter the Tiflin house. Jody smells brandy on their breaths; for him, that means that his father may be mellowed somewhat and that perhaps he will talk to him, like Billy Buck does. He is disappointed, though, and puzzled when he hears the two men laughing after he has been sent to bed. He hears hoot-owls hunting mice down by the barn and, just before turning in, he recalls that he asked his father if they were going to butcher a pig in the morning.

Jody's earlier sensing "an uncertainty in the air" was valid; the following morning at breakfast, Billy Buck does not look at Jody and that his father speaks to his son crossly. Something has happened, Jody is sure, after his father commands him to "come with us after breakfast." His father, however, is feigning, as he often does, an imitation of strength and authority.

When Jody is finally shown the new red pony, Carl Tiflin is still curt, giving commands and threatening to sell the pony instantly if Jody does not curry and feed him properly. The tension is broken among the men and the boy only when the red pony gingerly nips Jody's fingers. Carl Tiflin leaves his son with Billy Buck then, and although Billy Buck tries to be as cool and professional about the gift of the pony as Carl was, he soon drops the pose, and he and Jody exchange the thrill of examining and touching the awkward new pony. Billy, Steinbeck tells us, knows how Jody feels and he enjoys sharing the excitement. He points out, though, that the saddle which Carl bought along with the pony isn't practical for farming, but to Jody both the saddle and the new pony are priceless.

Jody becomes a rarity among his six school friends: he has his own horse. Before, Jody had been an ordinary schoolboy to them. Now even he feels different. We enjoy watching him tell his friends what Billy Buck has told him about training the horse and the uselessness of the show-saddle; we condone the excessive pride he has in his horse and are pleased with his eagerness to exaggerate its specialness. His adulation for Gabilan grows throughout the afternoon as he curries him again and again; so enthralled with the pony is he that he does not hear his mother enter the barn and remind him that his usual daily chores have not been done and must not be neglected. She is gentle with Jody, proud too of her son's pride in his horse.

After Jody has realized that Gabilan is really his horse and that he must be responsible for Gabilan, Steinbeck re-emphasizes the change that has taken place within Jody. No longer is he bound to the rote discipline of, say, the breakfast triangle. He has replaced the iron discipline of his childhood for a new sense of self-discipline. He is no longer wholly dependent on the triangle to awaken him. His love for Gabilan and his pride in possessing Gabilan have begun to transform him towards a new maturity.

But Jody, as often as he tries, seldom manages to reach the horse barn before Billy Buck does. The old cow-hand is usually already there and it is with the help of Billy Buck's vast knowledge about horses that Jody learns practical tactics about caring for and disciplining a horse. It is Billy Buck, not Jody's father, who is the key figure in initiating Jody into this new world of responsibility. Billy teaches the young ten-year-old such practical things as reassuring the colt by lifting his legs and patting his hooves. Jody's father gives him the colt and tells him that he must be responsible for it, but it is Billy who tells Jody how to care for Gabilan. And Jody knows that he can trust Billy Buck's advice, for although Billy is just a cow-hand and his own horse is only a "stringy cayuse," the horse nearly always has won first prize at the stock trials and Billy himself is an expert in roping and steer wrestling. Thus, Billy Buck becomes almost a God-figure for the young boy, a never-ending source of comfort and knowledge, something which will prove to be a disappointment for Jody and painful for Billy Buck when Gabilan dies. Yet Steinbeck will show us that Gabilan's death is necessary for Jody to achieve a new plateau of self-realization and maturity. By coping with Gabilan's magical metamorphosis of an ordinary farm life into a new world of wonder and mystery and then being savagely severed from that world, Gabilan becomes one tool of many tools that Jody will use and fashion on his journey to adulthood.

As Jody begins to train Gabilan, we notice certain parallels within them. Gabilan, for instance, races, then quivers, "pretending to be frightened." Jody, arising early and going toward the barn, pretends how he would react if Gabilan were gone or if rats had gnawed into the red saddle. Likewise, early in the story, Jody, when he was thirsty, leaned over the wooden tub near the spring and drank close to the green mossy wood where the water tasted best. He drinks, as it turns out, like Gabilan. He does not cup his hands; he has learned "how best to drink," for when Gabilan walks to the water-trough, he buries "his nose in the water up to the nostrils. Jody was proud then, for he knew that was the way to judge a horse." And note, too, while reading this story that Jody's hair is described as "tangled and long" ("I've got to cut your hair before long," his mother says); the red pony's coat is, first off, described as "long and tangled." Steinbeck is purposely aligning the young boy and the colt. Both are learning disciplines. Both must learn to bridle their wild impulsive natures without either of their spirits being broken. Billy Buck, in fact, says that Gabilan must be broken right or "he wouldn't mind because he wanted it." This, in a sense, is what Jody is also teaching himself.

It is difficult, at times, for young Jody and for the colt to adjust to the new reality, and Jody's father cautions his son that Gabilan's tricks are annoying: "a trick horse is kind of an actor — no dignity, no character of his own." Jody too must learn not to be an actor or a dreamer. This is difficult. Owning Gabilan, teaching Gabilan, caring for Gabilan-all these things were fantasies that Jody dreamed of. We understand his riding the saddle on a sawhorse, riding "beyond the room." We understand how "he carried his rifle across the pommel. He saw the field go flying by, and he heard the beat of the galloping hoofs." Jody hopes now only that it won't rain, "for rain would spot the red saddle," but one can't keep things untouched and pristine. All things must be exposed to life and the elements and, perhaps by chance, be battered. So it is with Gabilan. He must be taught not to be afraid; he must be taught halter-breaking, have long halter workouts, learn to stop, start, trot, gallop, adjust to the saddle, and then adjust to the bridle.

We are forewarned and prepared for sorrow in this story due in part to the dramatic change in the weather. Although Jody has been promised that he can ride Gabilan on Thanksgiving Day, winter comes fast to the valley. Rain threatens, clouds hang low, and then the rains begin. Jody becomes over-protective of Gabilan. The horse is coddled as soon as the rain sets in. This is unnatural. Gabilan should have gotten used to the rain and learned to adjust to it — just as he learned to eventually adjust to the bridle. When he is soaked suddenly, then for a long time, he succumbs. Perhaps he would have died anyway, for individual strengths and weaknesses vary, but Jody was wrong to coddle him.

Gabilan is slowly eased into a macabre, terribly unnatural situation. Death itself would have been easy and quick, but Jody and Billy Buck try to defy the natural course of matters. They steam the horse, lance a pus pocket, and finally are forced to make an incision into Gabilan's windpipe, despite the horrible knowledge that if the horse survives, he will have a metal button in his neck to breathe through. Gabilan attempts to break away and force death upon himself outside the barn but is led back inside. Finally, however, he is able to escape the boy and the hired hand who are prolonging his agony; he goes to the high brush country, a place Jody has led him to, one that is so overgrown that no trace of farmhouse or man is evident. It is here that he dies and he is able to do so peacefully — as an animal, outside, away from man's interference.

When Jody discovers Gabilan, he becomes defiant. We draw back and watch this young boy who has had his first confrontation with the reality of death. Life and death have occurred according to the laws of nature and cannot be influenced by man's love or desires. We respond sympathetically to a young boy who is facing a great loss for the first time and who is discovering that neither his parents nor a close friend can prevent what has happened.

In addition to the death of the red pony, Jody also learns that his absolute trust in Billy Buck is unwarranted; however much a man might know about the nature of horses, he cannot, finally, control nature itself. Critics who suggest that Steinbeck lulls the reader into a false position by the tender and beautiful opening of the story, often fail to take into consideration the careful preparation for Gabilan's death through symbols and images which do indeed prepare us for the final, torturing reversal. In fact, the sorrow and cruelty we witness is made more poignant by Steinbeck's contrast between the rural simplicity and the knowledge of death and nature that Jody must assimilate into his life.

All of Jody's experiences in "The Gift" have served to prepare him for an eventual balanced acceptance of life and death. In training the pony, he realized the inevitable which must be inflicted upon the pony in order to train him properly. Realistically, Jody knew that the pony was going to die: "When Jody saw how dry and dead the hair looked, he knew at last that there was no hope for the pony." But however prepared Jody was for the horse's death, he still knew that he had to assert some resistance to it. This is expressed in his encounter with the buzzards as Jody takes a piece of quartz and violently kills one of them. His gory attack on the buzzards at the end of the story indicates his irrational, emotional rejection of the destructive aspects of nature, but it is only Billy Buck who understands Jody's gestures of futility; only he understands that Jody's violence against the buzzards is as illogical as was Jody's love for Gabilan.