Flight

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF JOHN STEINBECK

John Steinbeck was born in Salinas, California. He spent much of his youth working on farms and ranches in the area, often alongside migrant workers. His upbringing in this underdeveloped rural settlement was formative for him, inspiring his many stories taking place in the area and even informing his political views concerning the treatment of working-class people in the United States. Steinbeck studied English literature at Stanford University, but he never earned a degree. After failing to have his writing published in New York City, he moved back to California and met his first wife, Carol Henning. The two of them soon moved to a family-owned cottage in Pacific Grove, California, where Steinbeck was able to write without worrying about finding work. Despite this advantage, Steinbeck and his wife still often struggled to make ends meet during the economic downturn of the Great Depression, although they were able to subsist on fishing and growing their own fresh produce. Steinbeck's experiences in rural California became fertile soil for his realistic and down-to-earth works of fiction, which often focused on the poor, downtrodden, and hardworking people of the area. These include his most famous novels, *The Grapes of Wrath* and *Of Mice and Men*, as well as many short stories taking place in similar settings. Steinbeck won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1962, and he was married two more times before he died of heart disease in 1968.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Like many of Steinbeck's other works, *Flight* is influenced by the Great Depression and the Dust Bowl of the 1930s. Between the severe economic crisis and the unyielding dust storms, this was a tumultuous period for poor and working-class Americans in rural areas, including many parts of California. Migrant workers had an especially difficult life, and the Torres family in *Flight* is a prime example, with their run-down farm buildings and extremely frugal lifestyle. It's also possible that the man in Monterey who insulted Pepé did so on the basis of Pepé's race, reflecting the discrimination that was common during the time period. While Steinbeck uses some archaic language in the dialogue (like 'thee' and 'thou') to give the story a heightened and somewhat timeless quality, *Flight* is still rooted in the early 20th-century rural California setting that Steinbeck portrays so often. The facts of this historical period shape the circumstances of the story and its characters, forcing Pepé and his family into a tragic situation through a combination of financial hardship, old-fashioned ideas of manhood, and racial discrimination. Steinbeck's personal experience with the working class and migrant workers of rural California helped him give depth to the characters in *Flight* and other stories by making their hardships feel both timeless and grounded in the material realities of the Great Depression.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Flight is one of many of Steinbeck's stories that takes place in the Monterey area, a location and culture with which Steinbeck was very familiar. *Of Mice and Men* and *The Grapes of Wrath* are two of his most well-known novels that also follow the tragic lives of migrant workers trying to make a living in rural California. With his upbringing in the area, Steinbeck was uniquely qualified to depict this rugged lifestyle. His 1937 novella, *The Red Pony*, is one example of Steinbeck incorporating his own childhood memories into his stories about the hardships of growing up on a California ranch. It also features themes similar to those of *Flight*, such as coming of age and facing the brutal realities of life. Rather than emulating any particular author or style, Steinbeck mostly relied on his upbringing and experience in journalism for inspiration, making his settings and working-class characters feel organic and authentically portrayed. Two of Steinbeck's contemporaries, Ernest Hemingway and William Faulkner, wrote similar stories exploring the complications of masculinity and the struggles of life in rural America, respectively. While they didn't directly influence one another, many of their works deal with similar themes of manhood, violence, and a keen, realistic view of humanity.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Flight
- **When Written:** 1938
- **Where Written:** United States
- **When Published:** 1938
- **Literary Period:** Modernism
- **Genre:** Short Story
- **Setting:** The fictional Torres farm in California and the wild country beyond it
- **Climax:** After fleeing from his pursuers across the wasteland for days on end, an exhausted Pepé finally accepts his fate and surrenders himself to the men hunting him. He climbs onto a large rock before he's quickly shot and killed.
- **Antagonist:** Unnamed men from Monterey pursue Pepé through the mountains, hunting him down to kill him after he murdered a man who insulted him in Monterey.
- **Point of View:** Third Person

EXTRA CREDIT

Steinbeck Country. *Flight* was originally published in *The Long Valley*, a collection of Steinbeck's short stories set in Salinas Valley in California. He published so many stories about his birthplace that the areas around Salinas and Monterey are still often called "Steinbeck Country." Steinbeck's childhood home in Salinas is now a historic museum and restaurant.

Varied Interests. Steinbeck was close friends with Ed Ricketts, a marine biologist. The subject of marine biology appeared in some of Steinbeck's later works, along with discussions of history and politics. In the 1950s, Steinbeck's affiliation with leftist and communist organizations put him at risk of being investigated by the U.S. government.

PLOT SUMMARY

Mama Torres lives on the Torres farm on the coast of California, raising her three children: Pepé (a 19-year-old boy) and his younger siblings Emilio and Rosy. Mama Torres has run the farm ever since her husband died from a rattlesnake bite. Pepé is a sweet and carefree young man, often scolded by his mother for being lazy and immature. But Mama Torres is privately very proud of Pepé and loves him dearly. One morning, upon finding Pepé throwing his father's old knife into a wooden post to entertain his siblings, Mama Torres sends Pepé into town to run an errand. The farm is out of salt and medicine, and Pepé is tasked with traveling to the nearby town of Monterey by himself to purchase these supplies. Pepé is excited about going into town on his own, telling Mama Torres that he's a man now. Mama Torres disagrees, with her usual wry sense of humor. She tells her son to spend the night at the house of a friend of hers named Mrs. Rodriguez, who'll provide him with dinner and a place to sleep. As Pepé cheerfully rides off on a horse, Emilio imagines himself someday riding into town to fetch the medicine like Pepé, and he asks Mama Torres if Pepé has become a man today. She replies that Pepé will become a man when a man is needed. Seeing him dressed up on the horse makes her admit to herself that Pepé has almost reached manhood, and she's pleased at the possibility of having a man on the farm again. Mama Torres, Emilio, and Rosy make supper together and eat on the front steps at sunset before going to bed.

That same night, Pepé rides back to the Torres farm, and Mama Torres wakes up at the noise of him entering the house, wondering why he's back so soon. Pepé somberly tells his mother to light a candle, telling her that he must flee into the nearby mountains immediately. He explains that there were other men at Mrs. Rodriguez's house, and everyone had been drinking wine. A man insulted Pepé, saying names that he "could not allow." During a scuffle, Pepé killed the man with the same knife he had been playing with that morning—his father's knife. Now that there are men hunting him down, Pepé seems to have no choice but to run away into the wilderness. Mama Torres is briefly shaken by this news, but she quickly resolves to hold back her emotions and prepare Pepé for his long and dangerous journey into the mountains. She wakes Emilio and Rosy up to help with the preparations, as Pepé stands silently and grimly reflects on the fact that he really is a man now—and a murderer. He's given his father's old **black coat** to wear, as well as a sack of dry jerky, a bag of water, and a rifle to defend himself. He mounts a different horse and takes one look back before riding off into the sunrise. Mama Torres's stoic attitude crumbles shortly after he leaves, and she weeps and mourns for her son. Emilio and Rosy watch the sunrise and reflect on what's happened. Like her mother, Rosy seems to accept that Pepé is never coming back.

As Pepé progresses on his long trek through the wilderness, the landscape around him grows gradually more and more lifeless and dry. He has a somewhat relaxed attitude at first, as he rides through a lush green area by a rushing stream, but the environment sharply becomes less hospitable as soon as the path diverges from the running water. Exhausted and becoming less sure of himself, Pepé makes his way through the main mountain pass and into a wide stretch of badlands, full of large rocks, dry hills, spiky shrubbery, and very little water. He sleeps in a grove of oak trees in a rare patch of green, encountering a wildcat and keeping a constant eye out for the men hunting him down. He awakens near dawn to the sound of his horse whinnying, and he hears the sound of another horse approaching. He starts to ride away, but his horse is shot by an unseen figure behind him. Pepé is forced to continue his retreat on foot, crawling and hiding from his pursuers while he nurses a wound he sustained from an unsuccessful shootout with the assailant. Over the next few days, his journey is brutal and miserable, as he runs out of water and gradually leaves his hat, coat, and rifle behind, usually by accident. Exhausted, dehydrated, and defeated, he hears hunting dogs approaching and decides that his time has come. He climbs up onto a large rock at the crest of a hill, where he knows he'll be clearly visible, and he's shot and killed almost instantly. He tumbles forward, and a small rock avalanche falls and covers his head.

CHARACTERS

Pepé – Pepé is a sweet and good-natured young man of 19, living on the Torres farm with his mother Mama Torres and his younger siblings Emilio and Rosy. As the protagonist, Pepé undergoes the most significant changes throughout the story, beginning as an innocent farm boy but quickly becoming a murderer and a man on the run. In the early scenes, Pepé has a laid-back and carefree attitude on the farm, entertaining his siblings by throwing his **father's knife** into a post and showing

boyish excitement at the prospect of going into the town of Monterey to run an errand on his own. While he cheerfully insists that he's reached manhood as he rides into town, a sharp change in his demeanor is apparent when he returns in the middle of the night after having killed a man for insulting him. His attitude is much more somber and serious as his family helps him prepare to flee into the mountains, and he accepts his newfound manhood as a grave responsibility, rather than the exciting development he had hoped it would be. Pepé's development as a character is shaped by what he did in Monterey, but also by his conceptions of masculinity and manhood fostered by his mother, his siblings, and the memory of his late father. He flees into the wilderness not just because it's necessary for his survival, but also because it's considered a man's thing to do—something that's unavoidable because, now that he's killed someone, he's become a man. Pepé's arc is a tragic one that feels largely out of his control; the knife seemed to fly out of his hand and kill the man by itself, and Pepé's ideals about manhood are slowly stripped away during his brutal trek through the mountains. His ultimate surrender and death at the end of the story is painted as a tragic and unnecessary waste of a life that was otherwise full of potential.

Mama Torres – Mama Torres has been in charge of the Torres farm ever since her husband was killed by a rattlesnake. She continues to raise her three children—Pepé and his younger siblings, Emilio and Rosy—on her own. Mama Torres has a stern, snarky, and no-nonsense personality, shaped by the struggles and losses of many long and difficult years. But while she has a harsh and cold exterior, she harbors genuine love and pride for her children, especially Pepé, even as she scolds him for his laziness and is skeptical of his maturity at the beginning of the story. Her love for Pepé is heartbreakingly evident when she sends him into the mountains quickly and without showing much emotion but then breaks down into tears shortly after he leaves, mourning her son and calling him the family's "protector." The intensity of her feelings combined with her reluctance to show her true emotions to her son gives depth and humanity to Mama Torres's character, illustrating that she's a person who forces herself to be tough and stoic when the situation demands it. Her stern way of showing love and her mourning highlight the unnecessary tragedy of the story. She fears Pepé meeting the same fate as her husband, and this makes her reluctant to show affection directly or become too attached. And, just as she expected, her son's sudden rise to manhood is what ultimately takes him away from her forever. Mama Torres's grief demonstrates that men aren't the only people who are hurt by the traditional masculine obsession with violence and heroism.

Emilio and Rosy – Emilio and Rosy are Pepé's younger siblings on the Torres farm; Emilio is a 12-year-old boy, and Rosy is a 14-year-old girl. Their main role in the story is to passively watch events unfold and comment on what's happening as their older brother abruptly reaches manhood, but Emilio and Rosy also begin to show some development of their own. Emilio shows interest in someday becoming a man himself. He imagines his future self riding into Monterey as Pepé does, and he asks Rosy and Mama Torres constant questions about whether or not Pepé is a man yet, as well as what that entails. In this way, Emilio is framed as a possible continuation of the line of "real men" on the Torres farm, starting with his father and followed by Pepé. Emilio's boyish attitude and curiosity about becoming a man continues even as Pepé comes home with a grimmer personality. Emilio's innocence hasn't yet been fully extinguished by his brother's transformation, even though it's been shaken somewhat. Rosy, meanwhile, seems to mature significantly when Pepé departs for the mountains. She stoically accepts that her brother is most likely never coming back, and she seems to think that this situation is an unavoidable part of his becoming a man. Her sudden sense of wisdom mirrors Mama Torres's resigned and mature attitude concerning Pepé's fate, implying that Rosy might someday become just like her mother. By floating the possibility that Emilio and Rosy might be destined to grow into the same roles their parents played, the story illustrates how the tragic cycle of the Torres family could continue indefinitely.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

MANHOOD

The question of Pepé's manhood defines the story from beginning to end, informing his actions and the way people treat him at every turn. He begins as a lazy and easygoing boy, telling his skeptical mother that he's become a man now as he ventures out to complete the errands he's been given. But when he returns home, having killed a man, he begins to understand his mother's harsh conception of manhood in a more meaningful and immediate sense. The events of the story associate masculinity not only with violence, but with death and killing. Almost every "real" man in the story—including Pepé, his father, and the man who insulted Pepé—either kills or is killed. Although Pepé's father's death was an accident, it establishes the story's correlation between masculinity and an early demise. Courage, the willingness to kill, and dying an honorable death are traditionally hallmarks of masculinity, and Steinbeck uses them to full effect while still painting Pepé's grueling journey as tragic and perhaps even unnecessary. Mama Torres mourns her son as he flees toward the mountains, knowing he has little chance

of ever returning, but she seems to bravely accept that her son has become a man, and that this is what men must do. These details add up to a complex portrayal of masculinity. The story suggests that masculine violence is senselessly tragic, but at the same time, it portrays Pepé as quietly brave in his final moments, even when his "manhood" boils down to little more than valiant surrender. Although he loses all the masculine trappings and symbolic objects his father left him, he ultimately becomes a man without them, in his own way.

PREDATORS AND PREY

While the story opens in a peaceful domestic setting, there are indications from the beginning that "Flight" takes place in wild country. As Pepé travels farther and farther from home, the landscape around him becomes increasingly desolate and deadly, practically making him into a hunted animal himself. Every detail of the situation and the environment suggests that when people venture into the mountains, they're no longer fully human; they become predators and prey. As Pepé flees and hides from the people hunting him down, he encounters literal predators such as mountain lions and wildcats, narrowly escaping their attention just as he tries to evade his human pursuers. Out in this wild place, there's little meaningful difference between the kinds of creatures hunting him. As he crawls around in the brush and scrounges for food and water, Pepé becomes prey—a part of the natural landscape around him. This stripping away of his human identity is made even more literal as he slowly loses the clothing and objects that belonged to his father, until there's hardly anything left but Pepé himself. This is the wild, savage world that he's stepped into, in his accidental rush to become a man. Steinbeck's detailed, brutal depiction of Pepé's journey through the wilderness highlights the harsh realities of any young man's coming of age and venturing into the outside world alone. There are few opportunities for nobility or heroism in the wasteland; for the most part, there are only the hunters and the hunted.

LOSS OF INNOCENCE

The personality changes that Pepé and his siblings experience during the story are striking because they mark Pepé's jarring transition from a carefree farm boy to a grown man with blood on his hands—a change that underscores the way hardship and tragedy can force people to quickly come of age. While the shift in Pepé's demeanor upon returning home is surprising and distressing, it's explained by the fact that he just killed someone to defend his honor, and possibly the honor of his family. The act of killing a man with his father's knife is what suddenly pushes Pepé from childhood into adulthood. Less than a day earlier, he was tossing the same knife into a post to entertain his siblings; what was a mere toy has become an instrument of Pepé's loss of innocence. The sudden nature of this change prompts the reader to wonder if Pepé grew up too quickly—maybe he wouldn't have lost so much of his initial personality if he had developed more gradually, without the catalyst of the man insulting him.

Pepé's startling coming of age also affects Emilio and Rosy, pushing them further towards growing up and losing some of their own innocence. Their discussion of their older brother's newfound manhood at sunrise is somber and surprisingly mature, especially for Rosy, who seems to accept Pepé's likely death as a tragic inevitability, much like Mama Torres does—a sign that the disaster with Pepé has jettisoned Rosy into a new territory of maturity. This, in turn, suggests that part of becoming an adult is coming face to face with the harsh realities of the world and, as a result, having to give up the untroubled innocence of childhood. As Rosy and Emilio discuss Pepé's situation, the scene mirrors the family's more relaxed conversation while eating on the front steps at sunset the previous evening, emphasizing how quickly the situation has changed. Through these moments, Steinbeck explores how one person's loss of innocence can affect everyone around them, for good or ill. Pepé's actions lead to tragedy for both him and his family, and while this appears to mature him and his siblings, the story doesn't frame this change as entirely positive. His fall from innocence not only changes him; it also forces his loved ones to harden their hearts as they prepare for a much more difficult life without him.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

PEPÉ'S GEAR

Most of the equipment that Pepé takes with him into the wilderness represents his newfound sense of maturity, masculinity, and manhood. These items include his black coat, his hat, and his rifle. The coat belonged to his father, and it's likely that the other items did as well. By taking these objects with him on his journey, Pepé symbolically carries on his father's legacy. This entails both accepting his role as the man of the family, as well as following in his father's footsteps and dying an early, violent death. Notably, Pepé's gear causes two transformations throughout the story: he completes his transformation into a "real man" when he dons the masculine equipment at the start of his journey, but he transforms again as he slowly loses each item one by one in the wilderness. Ironically, the items do very little to help Pepé survive in the mountains—they mostly serve as purely symbolic trappings that identify Pepé as a man. Even the rifle is seldom fired and doesn't help him survive in the end; it's just another surface-

level prop that makes Pepé look and feel more like a rugged, independent, and fully grown man.

As he sheds the hat, his father's coat, and eventually his weapon, Pepé's romantic ideas about masculinity slowly fall apart, and he's forced to face the brutal, violent world that had previously been dressed up and made less frightening by his symbols of idealized manhood. Without the sense of confidence granted by his manly equipment, he accepts that—just like his father—he's become someone else's prey. In a similar vein, his father's knife is Pepé's first symbol of his newfound manhood, which he loses in the first moment of "becoming a man" as he uses it to kill the person who insulted him. Pepé instinctively reaches for the lost knife several times throughout his journey in the wilderness, illustrating how he continues to grasp for an encouraging, ideal sense of masculinity that simply isn't there for him anymore.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Penguin Classics edition of *The Long Valley* published in 1995.

Flight Quotes

And there was Pepé, the tall smiling son of nineteen, a gentle, affectionate boy, but very lazy. Pepé had a tall head, pointed at the top, and from its peak, coarse black hair grew down like a thatch all around. Over his smiling little eyes Mama cut a straight bang so he could see. Pepé had sharp Indian cheek bones and an eagle nose, but his mouth was as sweet and shapely as a girl's mouth, and his chin was fragile and chiseled. He was loose and gangling, all legs and feet and wrists, and he was very lazy. Mama thought him fine and brave, but she never told him so.

Related Characters: Pepé, Mama Torres

Related Themes:

Page Number: 28

Explanation and Analysis

At the beginning of the story, this introductory description of Pepé's appearance and disposition provides context for the startling changes to come. Here, Pepé is depicted in the middle of his youthful, boyish innocence, and the details of his appearance reinforce the sense of a carefree childhood. For example, it's clear that he hasn't yet reached manhood because his mother still cuts his unkempt hair, and his lips are described as feminine; he's distinctly "unmanly" as the story begins. Significantly, the narration mostly doesn't cast these qualities in a negative light. While Mama Torres berates Pepé for his laziness, this passage reveals that she's nonetheless proud of him, even as she keeps these feelings to herself.

Pepé's mother thinks highly of him, his personality is cheerful and vibrant, and his less admirable features—like his laziness or gangly build—are portrayed as charming adolescent quirks rather than as serious character flaws. This gives added context to Pepé's coming of age later in the story, when most of his previous personality seems to drain out of him. By painting such a positive image of Pepé in his innocent youth, Steinbeck makes Pepé's transformation and ultimate fate all the more painful to watch, encouraging the reader to question the value of traditional manhood.

Emilio said, "Some day I too will ride to Monterey for medicine. Did Pepé come to be a man today?"

Mama said wisely, "A boy gets to be a man when a man is needed. Remember this thing. I have known boys forty years old because there was no need for a man."

Related Characters: Emilio and Rosy, Mama Torres (speaker), Pepé

Related Themes:

Page Number: 30

Explanation and Analysis

As Pepé rides off towards the town of Monterey on his own to buy medicine and salt for the farm, Pepé's younger brother Emilio imagines himself fulfilling the same role someday, asking whether Pepé has become a man yet. Both Emilio's question and Mama Torres's answer reveal information about who they are as characters and how they relate to the concept of manhood. Emilio wants to emulate his older brother to an extent, but ultimately, he wants to achieve a version of manhood for himself that his family has instilled in him. He associates becoming a man with being independent and doing important tasks alone, as Pepé seems to do.

While Emilio's dialogue reveals that he idolizes manhood and is eager to reach it himself, Mama Torres's commentary is more ambivalent towards the subject. She speaks "wisely," seeming to understand how manhood works and when it arrives, but she doesn't make a value judgment about manhood one way or the other in this passage. Throughout the story, she seems glad that she'll have a man around the

farm again when Pepé grows up, but she's also afraid of what Pepé might become and what might happen to him when he reaches manhood. Mama Torres's comment about 40-year-old boys who never had to grow up implies that manhood is a messy, complicated thing and that it either happens to someone or it doesn't. Whether it's good or bad, it's out of both her and Pepé's control.

> He was changed. The fragile quality seemed to have gone from his chin. His mouth was less full than it had been, the lines of the lips were straighter, but in his eyes the greatest change had taken place. There was no laughter in them any more, nor any bashfulness. They were sharp and bright and purposeful.

Related Characters: Pepé

Related Themes:

Page Number: 32

Explanation and Analysis

As Pepé returns home early from Monterey in the middle of the night, it's clear that his personality has experienced a sudden and severe change. But while Pepé has quickly matured and steeled himself for the challenges ahead, his shift in demeanor comes off as disheartening and even a bit unsettling, especially compared to his cheerful personality thus far. Just a few hours ago, he was a vibrant, innocent youth; now he's a murderer and a man on the run. Far from a gradual progression to manhood, this incident has pushed Pepé directly into the deep end, and his change in demeanor reflects this tragic turn of events.

Pepé's sharper, more purposeful eyes illustrate how focused and mature he has suddenly become, and this could be considered an improvement on his previously carefree, lazy attitude. But all in all, the description of Pepé in this passage seems to indicate that he's lost much more of himself than he has gained. His eyes have lost their laughter; he no longer has his sheepish mannerisms that were so endearing and characterizing in the opening scenes. Even Mama Torres admits that Pepé has become a man after seeing him like this, but the tone of this scene suggests that by reaching manhood, Pepé is tragically no longer fully himself.

> When the grey shape of Pepé melted into the hillside and disappeared, Mama relaxed. She began the high, whining keen of the death wail. "Our beautiful —our brave," she cried. "Our protector, our son is gone." Emilio and Rosy moaned beside her. "Our beautiful—our brave, he is gone."

Related Characters: Mama Torres (speaker), Pepé, Emilio and Rosy

Related Themes:

Page Number: 34

Explanation and Analysis

Up to this point, Mama Torres has mostly maintained her usual stern and straightforward attitude while talking to Pepé and preparing him for his dangerous journey into the mountains. But in this scene, as she watches him ride off into a deadly wilderness, pursued at a distance by men who want to kill him, she finally lets herself break down and express her grief. She did her best to help Pepé survive for as long as possible, but she seems to know that her son is never coming home again. Describing her cries as a "death wail" supports the idea that Pepé's journey will be fatal, and it also puts her level of emotional anguish into sharp focus.

Showing the Torres family's heartbreaking reaction to the loss of Pepé makes the story more of a tragedy, demonstrating how Pepé's seemingly heroic actions have harsh consequences for the people who care about him. But even as Pepé is forced away from home by his own choices, Mama Torres still praises her son's masculine qualities and mourns their loss, calling him "brave" and "our protector." Her cry of "our beautiful" reveals the depth of her love for him—a love that she has barely ever expressed to Pepé directly, possibly because she feared that his rise to manhood would be the end of him. Pepé disappearing into the hazy morning emphasizes how he isn't simply leaving the farm; his loss of innocence has forced him to leave the world completely.

> Rosy looked around at him. She drew her knowledge from the quiet air. "He has gone on a journey. He will never come back."
>
> "Is he dead? Do you think he is dead?"
>
> Rosy looked back at the ocean again. A little steamer, drawing a line of smoke sat on the edge of the horizon. "He is not dead," Rosy explained. "Not yet."

Related Characters: Emilio and Rosy (speaker), Pepé

Related Themes:

Page Number: 34-35

Explanation and Analysis

After Mama Torres goes inside the house to mourn the loss of Pepé privately, Emilio and Rosy stay outside, watching the sunrise and reflecting on what has happened to their older brother. While Emilio asks questions as usual, Rosy seems to gain a sudden sense of wisdom and perspective on the situation, hardening her resolve in a manner similar to Mama Torres's behavior earlier in the story. In this way, Pepé's rise to manhood causes Rosy's sudden progress towards maturity, seemingly more by necessity than anything else. Like her mother, Rosy accepts that Pepé is most likely never coming home, drawing her knowledge "from the quiet air," as if Pepé's fatal journey is an immutable fact of life that she has only just realized.

Both of the siblings' reactions to Pepé's flight imply that a repeating cycle of tragedy is possible. Emilio is still curious about what manhood means, and he could easily grow up to become another Pepé, while Rosy becomes much more like Mama Torres as she passively accepts the seemingly inevitable violence and death that follows when boys become men. The children's gazing out at the horizon evokes a sense of the possible futures unfolding in front of them, but their conversation is like the dark smoke rising from the steamer in the distance: an ominous sign that their future might turn out to be a replay of their current grief.

> As he ascended the trail the country grew more rough and terrible and dry. The way wound about the bases of the great square rocks. Little grey rabbits skittered in the brush. A bird made a monotonous high creaking. Eastward the bare rock mountaintops were pale and powder-dry under the dropping sun.

Related Characters: Pepé

Related Themes:

Page Number: 37

Explanation and Analysis

The moment the mountain trail branches off from the rushing waters of the stream, Pepé is surrounded by an increasingly dry and hostile landscape. As the men pursuing him from a distance force him to ride farther and farther into the mountains, Pepé's already fractured identity and sense of humanity is gradually stripped away, making him little more than just another animal out in the badlands—someone else's prey. While the Torres farm was fairly isolated on the borders of the wild country, the intimidating descriptions of the wilderness make Pepé feel like he's entered a new and much more dangerous world than the one he knew before.

The most effective parts of these descriptions are the fine details that give the wilderness a distinct and ominous sense of place. Between the scraggly bushes, the repetitive rock formations and ridges, the circling birds of prey, and the "powder-dry" mountaintops, the environment is depicted as a lawless and desperate place, where Pepé essentially becomes an animal with little chance of survival. The use of the word "monotonous" is also significant; part of Pepé's trial is to endure the repetitive but increasingly dangerous desert landscape, using only the sun, the moon, and the crests of hills to mark his location and the time of day. This passage is the first in a relentless series of descriptions of the cruel wilderness that continues until the end of the story, emphasizing the harsh reality that Pepé wasn't ready to embark on this journey in the first place.

> He sat down in the crisp dry oak leaves and automatically felt for his big black knife to cut the jerky, but he had no knife. He leaned back on his elbow and gnawed at the tough strong meat. His face was blank, but it was a man's face.

Related Characters: Pepé

Related Themes:

Page Number: 39

Explanation and Analysis

Pepé rests in a rare grove of oak trees as his first day of travel in the wilderness comes to an end. The narration of his journey is mostly focused on outward action and suspense, but this brief moment of peace gives the reader a revealing glimpse into what's happening in Pepé's mind. He instinctively reaches for his knife several times throughout his trek, despite knowing that he left it behind when he used it to kill a man at Mrs. Rodriguez's house. His grasping for his father's knife is a sad reminder of the innocent life he left behind; he only used the knife for non-violent purposes before the incident in Monterey.

Without a knife, he's forced to eat his dry jerky like an

animal, embracing his new, brutal existence out in the wild wastes. This is reflected in his blank expression, which is ironically called "a man's face." In his past life, Pepé was a smiling and lively boy, but now that he's reached manhood, these emotions have left his demeanor to make room for his new survival instincts. In a way, he has succeeded in his rush to become a man, but at the expense of his unique personality and possibly even part of his humanity. This hyper-masculine focus on survival doesn't even save his life in the end, highlighting the senseless tragedy of Pepé losing himself in more ways than one.

> The coat of his father pressed on his arm. His tongue was swollen until it nearly filled his mouth. He wriggled out of the coat and dropped it in the brush, and then he struggled up the hill, falling over rocks and tearing his way through the brush. The rifle knocked against stones as he went. Little dry avalanches of gravel and shattered stone went whispering down the hill behind him.

Related Characters: Pepé

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 44

Explanation and Analysis

After accidentally leaving his hat behind in the oak grove, Pepé sheds his father's coat on purpose, as it makes his new injury more difficult to bear. While he abandons the coat for practical reasons, this is also a symbolic act of leaving behind his idealized concept of manhood—something he also inherited from his father. Pepé loses his coat, hat, and rifle over the course of his journey, representing how the trappings and illusions of a noble, masculine life are falling away, leaving only the brutal violence and desperation of the wilderness.

The loss of these items symbolizes the last vestiges of Pepé's original personality abandoning him, leaving him with nothing but the torn clothes on his back and his aching, dehydrated body as he's hunted down like an animal. It's significant that the coat is the only item that explicitly belonged to Pepé's father and is also the only item that Pepé abandons willingly. Even Pepé's romantic ideas about manhood embodied by his father's coat become secondary to survival when the need arises. As he abandons his masculine symbols one by one, Pepé realizes too late that all of this was a fatal mistake. The tiny avalanches of gravel he leaves in his wake are echoed by the avalanche of rocks falling on his dying body at the end of the story.

> Pepé bowed his head quickly. He tried to speak rapid words but only a thick hiss came from his lips. He drew a shaky cross on his breast with his left hand. It was a long struggle to get to his feet. He crawled slowly and mechanically to the top of a big rock on the ridge peak.

Related Characters: Pepé

Related Themes:

Page Number: 48

Explanation and Analysis

With his injured arm becoming unbearable and no sign of a change in the waterless landscape anywhere nearby, Pepé hears hunting dogs approaching and grimly accepts his fate. In his exhausted and dehydrated state, he decides to make the only decision that will end his suffering, climbing up a rock where his pursuers can see him and fire at him with their rifles. Making this final, desperate choice is the culmination of Pepé's miserable journey through the badlands, ironically requiring a kind of courage that would be expected of a grown man.

By pursuing his idealized version of manhood, Pepé had chased his own death. Just as his father died from a rattlesnake bite, now Pepé dies at the hands of a predator. But despite his slow loss of identity throughout his journey, Pepé still holds onto at least one aspect of his old self before he makes his final choice: he draws a cross over his chest, and it's likely that the hisses from his dehydrated lips are meant to be a final prayer or message to his family. Mama Torres told him not to forget his prayers, and Pepé followed his mother's advice to the end. This final moment before his demise reminds the reader that Pepé is still a human being and that he's still, in some ways, an innocent young farm boy.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

FLIGHT

The Torres family lives on a farm in California, right next to a cliffside overlooking the sea below. The farm buildings are "huddled" near the mountains, withstanding wind and sea salt to the point where they're rotting and becoming the color of the surrounding granite. Mama Torres has been in charge of the farm for ten years, ever since her late husband tripped and fell onto a rattlesnake, getting bitten on the chest. Mama Torres has three children that she now raises on her own: Pepé (a nineteen-year-old boy), Emilio (a twelve-year-old boy), and Rosy (a fourteen-year-old girl).

The description of the ramshackle farm buildings gives the impression that the Torres farm stubbornly clings to the rocks and is on the verge of being swept away into the sea below. This sense of precariousness symbolically extends to the Torres family themselves, as they struggle to hold on to their way of life in a hostile environment that claimed their father figure. The mention of Pepé's father's death establishes that the area can be dangerous and introduces a connection between manhood and an early demise.

Pepé is a sweet, gentle, and lazy young man with a feminine mouth, a fragile chin, untidy black hair, and gangly arms and legs. He always carries his father's **knife** with him, often stabbing the earth with it to keep it sharp and rust-free. Behind the barn, he flicks his wrist and throws the knife through the air, sticking the point of it into a nearby wooden post over and over to entertain his younger siblings. When Mama Torres finds him doing this, she berates him for his idleness and tells him she has an important chore for him to do.

The innocence of Pepé's youth is reflected in this initial description. Both his personality and his physical characteristics paint him as a vibrant and cheerful young man, providing contrast and context for the loss of innocence he experiences later on. For example, he uses his father's knife as a plaything in this scene, but the weapon is later used for a much more serious purpose. Pepé always keeping the knife with him indicates that he respects and cherishes his father's memory, but throwing it to entertain his siblings establishes his initially playful and carefree attitude.

Mama Torres explains that they're out of medicine and salt, and that Pepé must travel into the nearby town of Monterey by himself to buy some more. To Mama's annoyance, Pepé seems excited by the prospect of going into town on his own, as he might get to buy some candy and wear his fancy **hat** and green handkerchief. As Pepé climbs on a horse and makes preparations, Mama tells him to spend the night at the house of her friend Mrs. Rodriguez, who will give him dinner and a place to sleep. Mama Torres quietly frets over sending Pepé out alone, but Pepé reassures her that he'll be alright, insisting that he's a man now. Mama disagrees, affectionately teasing him as usual.

Pepé once again demonstrates his boyish immaturity as he shows his excitement about getting to ride into town on his own, wearing his finest clothes and possibly buying some candy. This is another scene that establishes Pepé's innocence, but it also introduces his interest in growing up and reaching what he imagines to be manhood. Pepé associates manhood with independence, but mostly on a surface level. He's riding into Monterey alone, but this isn't a choice he made himself. What seems to excite him the most about becoming a man is the appearance *of manhood: wearing his fancy hat and handkerchief and going into town by himself.*

Pepé smiles proudly as he rides away from the farm on horseback, and the rest of his family watches him go. As he passes out of sight, Mama Torres admits to herself that Pepé is almost a man, and she's pleased at the prospect of finally having a man on the farm again. Mama, Emilio, and Rosy make dinner together and discuss Pepé as they sit on the doorsteps and eat, watching the sunset. Emilio imagines that someday he'll be the one riding into Monterey for the medicine, and he asks if Pepé has become a man today. Mama explains that boys only become men when a man is needed, and so some boys never become men, even as they age to 40 or more.

As Mama Torres and her youngest children discuss the idea of manhood and how it relates to Pepé, they reveal how they think and feel about the subject, developing as characters and making the topic of manhood more complicated. Like his older brother, Emilio shows a keen interest in becoming a man someday, illustrating that he has inherited the dreams and values of his family members and made them his own. Mama Torres, meanwhile, has a more ambivalent view of manhood. While she wants a man around the house again, this is mainly for practical reasons. Her observation about boys only becoming men when men are needed demonstrates her belief that manhood is something random; it either happens to someone or it doesn't, for good or ill.

A few hours after the three of them go to bed, Pepé arrives back at the farm on horseback, in the dead of night. Mama Torres awakes, startled as Pepé walks into the house. She asks him if he got the medicine, and whether he's been drinking wine. Pepé answers yes to both these questions, and Mama tells him to go to bed, wondering why he didn't stay at Mrs. Rodriguez's house as planned. But Pepé firmly tells his mother to light a candle, saying that he must flee into the mountains immediately. His expression is hard, serious, and full of purpose, a stark change from his previous carefree demeanor.

Pepé returning home at this hour signals that something is wrong, and his new expression confirms that Pepé has lost his innocence more quickly than anyone expected. His more grave and focused behavior in this scene illustrates how much he has changed in the past day alone; he's no longer the same boy that the Torres family knew at the beginning of the story. This sharp change in personality—coupled with his immediate insistence that he needs to run away into the mountains—quickly builds suspense and hints at Pepé's sudden fall from innocence.

In the dim light of the candle, Pepé tiredly explains to Mama Torres what had happened at Mrs. Rodriguez's house. There were other men in the house, and Pepé had drunk wine. One of the men had insulted Pepé, saying "names" to him that he couldn't stand for. A fight had broken out between them. Pepé's **knife** had "went almost by itself," and before Pepé knew it, he had thrown the knife, killing the man. Mama's face grows sterner as she listens to her son recount what happened. Pepé once again says that he's a man, but now he makes the statement with much more serious conviction than before.

Notably, the reader only hears about the incident at Mrs. Rodriguez's house from Pepé's brief and vague explanation of what happened, making the event seem fuzzy and indistinct. This ambiguity complicates the seemingly heroic act that propelled Pepé from childhood to manhood. Was Pepé defending his family's honor? Or did he react in an extreme way to the man's insult? The knife flying from his hand "by itself" makes Pepé's loss of innocence feel somewhat out of his control either way. Echoing what Mama Torres discussed earlier, Pepé has found himself in a situation where "a man was needed." One way or another, manhood simply happened to him.


Mama Torres's expression softens for a moment as she admits that Pepé is indeed a man now, and that she had feared this day would come. But she quickly pulls herself together and begins bustling around the house, making hasty preparations for her son to flee from his pursuers into the mountains. Pepé confirms that he didn't hear anyone following him on his way back home, but there's no telling how long it will take for the men coming after him to arrive and kill Pepé. He wakes his siblings, and the whole family rushes to prepare him for his journey.

In this scene, Mama Torres is more emotionally open with Pepé than she is anywhere else in the story, even if only for a brief moment. Finally recognizing that Pepé has reached manhood (after she teased him about it for most of the story) indicates that their relationship to each other has fundamentally changed. But just as she begins to open up to Pepé, she's forced to toughen up again and accept what she had feared all along: that Pepé reaching manhood would ultimately take him away from her.

Along with a rifle, a waterskin, and a sack of dry jerky, Mama Torres gives Pepé the black **coat** that had belonged to his father. Pepé pulls it on and climbs on a different horse as the final preparations are made; his expression is grave all the while. Rosy asks where Pepé is going, and Mama once again reaffirms that Pepé is a man now, and that he's going on a journey with "a man's thing to do." She orders Pepé to keep riding all through the night, not stopping to rest until after the following day. She gives him advice about how to stay alive and ration his resources in the mountains, and she reminds him to say his prayers. They kiss each other formally on both cheeks.

By suiting up with supplies and wearing his father's coat, Pepé accepts the grim responsibility that has been placed on him, now that he's suddenly reached manhood. The coat represents his father's legacy, but Pepé doesn't wear it like a badge of honor; he's too focused on his own survival to take pride in the noble symbols of manhood as he did before. Mama Torres's advice and supplies emphasize the fact that Pepé is about to enter a dangerous new world, where he'll become little more than a hunted animal. Pepé gravely carrying the rifle highlights his transformation from an innocent boy into a killer.

As he begins to ride away, Pepé looks back and tries to find a soft emotion in his mother's expression, but Mama Torres is stern and fierce as she tells him to hurry up and go before he's caught. After he rides off into the hazy dawn, Mama stands silently for a few moments before breaking down into tears. She calls Pepé "our protector" as she cries and mourns the fact that he's most likely gone forever. Her other two children join her in weeping, and eventually Mama goes back inside the house alone.

As Pepé slowly becomes more indistinct before vanishing in the distant haze, he symbolically disappears not only from the farm, but from the entire world he knew before. This imagery makes Mama Torres's breakdown even more heartbreaking, as she watches yet another man of the family slip away before her eyes. Her brisk and focused attitude while she prepared Pepé for his journey demonstrates her care and concern for him, but her weeping in this scene makes her deep love for her son undeniable. It's likely that she was hesitant to emotionally connect with Pepé on a deeper level because she knew that when her son became a man, he would no longer be the innocent boy she loved—and that she would lose him as a result.

Emilio and Rosy are left to watch the sunrise together. Still wondering about what just happened, Emilio asks when Pepé had become a man. Rosy answers that it was "last night in Monterey." Emilio asks where Pepé has gone, and Rosy says that he's gone on a journey that he'll never come back from. Emilio wonders if Rosy thinks Pepé is dead. Seeming wise beyond her years, Rosy figures that Pepé is essentially gone; he's just not quite dead yet.

This is the only scene in the story that mainly focuses on the development of Pepé's younger siblings, especially Rosy, who has barely contributed to the conversations up to this point. While Emilio is still curious about the idea of reaching manhood and is uncertain about Pepé's fate, Rosy shows surprising maturity as she seems to accept the probable death of her older brother. Rosy begins to lose her own innocence in this moment, but in a different way than Pepé. She displays a sense of resolve not unlike Mama Torres's attitude during most of the story, implying that she could become like her mother just as easily as Emilio could grow to become another Pepé. The possibility of Rosy and Emilio enduring the same unnecessary hardships as the previous generation gives the story another layer of tragedy.

As he rides into the mountains on a well-trodden path, Pepé lets himself relax in the saddle. He travels through a lush and peaceful area full of trees, moss, and ferns, stopping briefly to let his horse drink clear water from the shallow stream. He eats his jerky and drinks from his waterskin sparingly, but he still has a fairly easy time until he hears the sound of approaching hooves. He quickly rides his horse behind a tree and hides, watching a fat man ride down the path. The man's horse stops and sniffs around briefly, but eventually the man rides off in the direction Pepé had come from. Pepé becomes more alert after this, loading and readying his **rifle** as he continues onward.

This early encounter with a stranger reminds Pepé that he shouldn't let his guard down. Although his surroundings so far have been fairly hospitable, he forces himself to stop relaxing in the saddle after this incident, taking this moment as an early warning. The entire sequence in this lush green area is the calm before the storm. It gives Pepé a chance to ease into the process of traveling through the wilderness, establishing that he's being hunted down like prey without putting too much pressure on him just yet. This initial trial thus gently prepares Pepé for the higher-stakes dangers to come.

As the path becomes steeper and bends away from the stream, the landscape around it quickly becomes drier and more desolate. Tired but determined, Pepé soon finds himself surrounded by scorched, cracked earth and dry, scraggly bushes on all sides. He's also more exposed, now that there's no longer a cover of redwood trees around him. He plods along on his horse, occasionally spotting mysterious black figures in the distance. These are the "dark watchers" that Mama Torres had warned him about. Pepé quickly looks away after spying the figures, not knowing who they are, but knowing that they typically leave travelers alone if the travelers mind their own business and show no interest in the watchers.

At this point in the journey, Pepé's relatively safe "trial period" ends. Now he's entering the true wilderness, where he must use every means at his disposal to survive. As he becomes more exposed in the harsher landscape, Pepé begins to become part of the wilderness himself; he's a hunted animal now, far from the world of humanity. The "dark watchers" are the only exception to this, but even they show few human traits. The only people in this place are completely indifferent to Pepé unless he bothers them first, making them almost indistinguishable from the trail's many other dangers.

When Pepé reaches the main pass through the mountains, he looks back to make sure that he isn't being followed. Then he goes through the pass and begins traveling down the long slope on the other side, at the bottom of which he sees a small green flat where a grove of oak trees grows. Upon reaching the grove, he finds a small spring, allowing him to refresh his waterskin and his thirsty horse. He ties up the horse and decides to spend the night in the grove, positioned so that he can still watch the trail. A fierce-looking wildcat appears in the grove during the early evening, but eventually it slinks back into the bushes, seemingly ignoring Pepé but unafraid of him. As night falls, Pepé instantly falls asleep, exhausted.

Pepé's brief encounter with a wildcat reinforces the fact that he's in a wild and dangerous place where he could easily be killed at any moment. To the wildcat, Pepé is nothing but a potential food source, and Pepé is lucky to avoid the beast's attention for the most part. This serves as yet another reminder that Pepé is being hunted down and must stay on his guard, even as he finds fresh water and a relatively comfortable place to rest. Out in the badlands, there's hardly any time for him to pause and reflect; like a wild animal, he can only eat, drink, travel, keep watch, hide, and survive.

Pepé wakes up in the dark, early hours of the morning, hearing his horse whinnying. He hears another whinny and the sound of hooves from the direction of the trail, so he prepares his own horse to start moving again as quickly as possible. In his haste to flee the grove, he leaves his **hat** behind, next to the oak tree he had slept under. As dawn comes and Pepé is back on the trail, he looks behind him and doesn't see anyone following. Just as he lets himself start to relax, the sound of a rifle shot from behind rings out, and Pepé's horse instantly falls over, bleeding on the ground.

In the moment before the assailant fires the shot, Pepé fails a trial for which he has been trying to prepare himself. While he quickly gets his horse moving and flees from his pursuer, he eventually lets his guard down and assumes that he has escaped from the danger for now. But out in the wilderness, Pepé is always potential prey, and he pays dearly for briefly forgetting this. Leaving his hat behind in his rush emphasizes his loss of innocence by reminding the reader of the earlier scene when he was excited about wearing his hat into Monterey. Now that he's no longer an innocent farm boy, he leaves behind his treasured hat without a second thought, focused entirely on his survival. By forgetting his hat, he leaves behind a piece of his innocent past.

The assailant shoots at Pepé again, hitting a piece of sage beside his head. Pepé scrambles into the bushes and anxiously crawls his way up a dry slope to hide behind a large granite rock on a hill. He peers through a thin fissure in the rock, but he still can't see anyone. He puts the end of his **rifle** through the fissure and fires a shot into an area of brush where he sees a rustle of movement. After a moment of silence, another shot is fired from below and strikes inside the fissure of the rock, burying a jagged piece of granite in Pepé's right hand.

After losing his horse, Pepé sustains a wound as the second cruel punishment for his brief lapse of judgment. The piece of rock in his hand is a painful reminder that the men chasing him are predators who wish only to hurt and kill him; the danger of the situation is now staring him undeniably in the face. Pepé tries to hold tough and fight off the assailant in this moment, but the harsh reality that his life is in peril begins to overwhelm him.

Using cobwebs from a small cave in the rock, Pepé dresses his wound as best he can, then he drops back down to his stomach and continues crawling up the slope, desperately trying to find cover in the sharp, dry bushes. His progress is agonizingly slow and careful as he crawls from cover to cover. He narrowly avoids running into a hissing rattlesnake, and he crushes a harmless lizard with a rock in his anxious, suspicious fever. Worn down, injured, and dehydrated, Pepé sleeps at noon in a small patch of brush, too tired to continue. He writhes and moves his bleeding hand in his uneasy sleep.

As he flees from the rifle shots, Pepé's desperate behavior reveals what the lack of dialogue obscures, giving the reader a glimpse into his intense mental state. Like a cornered animal, Pepé is in an adrenaline-fueled survival mode, grasping at whatever makeshift resources he can find. Crushing a harmless lizard with a rock is a prime example of just how far Pepé has fallen from his innocent boyhood at this point. He brutally kills the creature out of crazed paranoia, probably remembering his father's demise when he almost runs into the rattlesnake. Before, Pepé was described as gentle and affectionate, but in the wilderness, he embraces the idea of "kill or be killed"—whether he means to or not.

Pepé awakens at night, and the following day is even more desperate than the last. He removes and abandons his **father's coat**, as it presses on his injured arm, and he continues on his weary trek through the dry wilderness. He crests another ridge and finds it mostly dry at the bottom, but he wets his mouth with the damp earth and digs a basin in the ground to try and collect what little water he can while he sleeps again. He awakens at dawn to the sight of a mountain lion eyeing him curiously, but he focuses on slurping up the tiny amount of water that had gathered in the basin overnight. Eventually, the lion is scared away by the noise of approaching hooves and the yelp of a dog.

The events of this day provide more examples of what Pepé has experienced on his journey so far, with the level of danger gradually escalating all the while. He once again encounters a predator that reminds him of his place on the food chain in the wilderness, and his increasing struggle to find water makes it impossible for him to forget that he's essentially been reduced to a desperate, foraging animal. Notably, Pepé sheds his father's coat without hesitation because it isn't conducive to his own survival. This act is symbolic of Pepé's romantic notions about manhood falling away in the face of real, tangible danger to life and limb. Pepé's ideal concept of masculinity might have given him courage and made him feel like a man before, but now, ironically, such ideas only threaten to hold him back. Manhood brought him into this violent place, but it might not bring him out again.

All through the next day, Pepé flees towards the next upward slope, crouching and hiding in the brush and only daring to stand up in the darkness of night. He sleeps and awakens again on a broken hillside and continues on, but he turns back upon realizing he had forgotten his **rifle** somewhere behind. He can't find the weapon again no matter how hard he looks, and his arm is hurting more and more as he nears the top of the next ridge. He collapses from exhaustion just before cresting the ridge, but he regains his senses and starts moving again as dawn comes. He scrapes at his infected wound with a sharp stone, trying to squeeze out the green pus and clear his foggy mind with the pain.

The rifle is the last symbol of masculinity that Pepé loses, leaving him to continue without a way to defend himself in the uncompromising wilderness. The weapon and the manhood it represents are no longer helpful to Pepé as he endures his miserable trek— neither physically nor emotionally. This leaves him with nothing but his tattered clothing and his exhausted, injured body, completing his transformation into a hunted animal. His attempt to remove the infection from his arm is brave and traditionally manly, but it mostly just increases his anguish and is done out of necessity. Unlike at Mrs. Rodriguez's house, there's no room for a man to be noble or heroic here; there is only survival.

On his last legs, Pepé looks down into the next valley and finds it just as dry and unwelcoming as the last one. With his body racked with exhaustion and his dehydrated tongue swollen and blackened so much that he can only hiss when he tries to speak, he lies down behind a pile of rocks in the heat of the day and watches a large black bird circling above him. He nurses his injured arm and moans wordlessly before lifting his head, hearing the dogs on his trail again.

This is the point at which Pepé begins to surrender any hope of making it out of the wilderness alive. Exhausted and fully dehydrated, he's no more able to speak than the bird above him, cementing his loss of uniquely human traits. All of the uncaring cruelties of the badlands have worn Pepé down and culminated in this moment of hopeless desperation. He's as dry as the landscape and as mute as the other animals, wishing for death and hearing an opportunity approaching. By trying to survive, Pepé was fighting the idea of becoming prey, but in this moment, he has no choice but to finally give in.

Pepé tries unsuccessfully to speak with his swollen tongue, then he draws a cross on his chest with his shaking left hand. He struggles up to stand on a large rock at the top of the ridge, clearly visible and exposed to his pursuers. It isn't long before the first bullet chips the stone at his feet. Then the second shot flies up from below and hits Pepé in the chest. With his last breaths, Pepé staggers and tumbles forward off the large stone, creating a small avalanche of rocks and dust as he falls. The rocks fall and cover his head as he lies dying on the dry ground.

Despite gradually losing his humanity and sense of self over the course of his journey, Pepé displays one final act of innocence and personhood before he lets himself die. As he's unable to pray aloud with his swollen tongue, he settles for drawing a cross over his chest, remembering that Mama Torres told him not to forget his prayers. This moment reminds the reader that Pepé, on some level, is still himself. Some part of him is still the innocent boy from the beginning of the story—gentle, sweet, and loved by his family. In light of this, Pepé's brutal, senseless death in the wilderness becomes all the more tragic. His rush to become a man only caused grief, despite the fact that Mama Torres already considered Pepé to be "fine and brave" at the beginning of the story. Echoing his father's fate, Pepé's only reward for achieving manhood is dying a man's death.

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