

# Old Yeller



## INTRODUCTION

### BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF FRED GIPSON

Fred Gipson was born on a farm in the rural Texas Hill Country—a place that would serve as the setting for many of his novels. After studying at the University of Texas at Austin, Gipson became a journalist and wrote short stories on the side. His stories and early novels were set in Texas, and they often told stories of men and young boys navigating the hostile natural environment of the Wild West. Gipson's novels had already been widely printed and adapted for the screen prior to the 1956 publication of *Old Yeller*—but the story of a young boy, Travis Coates, and his faithful “yeller” dog became a runaway hit when Walt Disney Studios adapted it into a film in 1957. *Old Yeller*, the recipient of the 1957 Newbery Medal and the 1959 William Allen White Children's Book Award, has become a staple of children's literature over the years. Gipson went on to write several more books, including two more about the Coates family.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

*Old Yeller* is set in the late 1860s, soon after the end of the Civil War in 1865. During the events of the book, Travis Coates's Texas is in a period of Reconstruction. Though Travis and his family live in a rural community and are largely insulated from the politics of the time, the mid-to-late 1860s saw great unrest throughout the state of Texas. The newly elected Eleventh Texas Legislature refused to ratify either the Thirteenth Amendment, which abolished slavery, or the Fourteenth Amendment, which granted citizenship to Black Americans. Only in 1870 would the Texas legislature ratify the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments; then, at last, President Ulysses S. Grant proclaimed Reconstruction in Texas over and readmitted Texas into the United States. While there is no official record of the hydrophobia (rabies) outbreak that happens in the book, the first reports of rabies in Texas did come from cattle drivers (like Burn Sanderson in *Old Yeller*) who reported being attacked by “phoby cats” in the middle of the night during long drives through the desert in the mid-1800s. By 1884, French scientist Louis Pasteur developed a vaccine to aid in the prevention of rabies.

### RELATED LITERARY WORKS

*Old Yeller* was inspired heavily by Fred Gipson's own boyhood in the Texas Hill Country. Gipson likely drew inspiration from popular Western novels of the time, such as Alan Le May's *The Searchers* (1954) and Jack Schaefer's *Shane* (1949), the latter of

which concerns a grown man's recollections about his boyhood fascination with a mysterious ranch hand. In *Old Yeller*, Travis's idolization of both his Papa and Burn Sanderson mirrors Shaefer's narrator's ideas about masculinity and cowboy culture. Additionally, like *Old Yeller*, Jack London's 1903 classic [The Call of the Wild](#) centers around a brave, intrepid dog's adventures. *Old Yeller* has, in turn, inspired many novels about the friendships that can form between humans and animals—for example, Wilson Rawls's 1961 children's novel [Where the Red Fern Grows](#) also depicts an intense friendship between a young boy and his hunting dogs. Phyllis Reynolds Naylor's *Shiloh* (1991) tells the coming-of-age story of a boy who adopts a beagle who is being abused by its current owner. And Kate DiCamillo's [Because of Winn-Dixie](#) (2000) shows how a scruffy stray, just like Old Yeller, helps a young girl learn more about herself and form deeper relationships with those around her. Gipson also wrote two sequels to *Old Yeller*: *Savage Sam* (1962) tells the story of the bluetick hound fathered by Old Yeller, while *Little Arliss* (1978) follows Arliss as he grows from a boy into a young man.

### KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Old Yeller
- **When Written:** 1950s
- **Where Written:** Texas
- **When Published:** 1956
- **Literary Period:** Modernism
- **Genre:** Children's Novel
- **Setting:** Texas Hill Country in the 1860s
- **Climax:** After rabid wolves bite Old Yeller, Travis Coates realizes that he must shoot and kill his beloved dog to protect his family.
- **Antagonist:** Hydrophobia (Rabies)
- **Point of View:** First Person

### EXTRA CREDIT

**Real-life Roots.** The character of Old Yeller was based on anecdotes about a dog that Gipson's mother's family had in the mid-1800s. The family dog was a Border Collie, not a yellow mutt, and its name was Rattler.



## PLOT SUMMARY

Fourteen-year-old Travis Coates is left in charge of his family's ranch while his Papa sets off on a long cattle drive from their Texas Hill Country home to Abilene, Kansas. Papa entreats

Travis to act like “the man of the family” in his absence, and Travis promises to take good care of his Mama and his little brother, Arliss. He immediately sets to work on the many tasks that need to be done around the ranch. The next morning, when Travis goes out to fetch some meat from the storehouse, he finds a big yellow dog sleeping on the ground—the dog has eaten all of the meat. Travis yells at the dog and chases it away, but Little Arliss runs outside and defends the dog. Mama lets Little Arliss keep the dog—much to Travis’s chagrin—and they nickname him Old Yeller for his humanlike bark.

Over the next several weeks, Travis is desperate to prove his manliness and responsibility—but he underestimates how dangerous the natural world can be, such as when a pair of fighting bulls nearly destroy the Coateses’ cabin. When Old Yeller rescues Little Arliss from an angry bear one afternoon, Travis’s attitude toward the dog changes: he finds himself doting on Old Yeller and appreciating his company.

One afternoon, a neighbor, Bud Searcy, drops by with his granddaughter Lisbeth. The two of them bring their female hound, and Old Yeller mates with her. Bud informs the Coates family that some kind of “strange varmint” has been ransacking vegetable patches and storehouses around the countryside. Lisbeth also takes Travis aside and tells him that she saw Old Yeller stealing from her family’s stores. After this, Travis becomes even more protective of Old Yeller and enlists the dog’s help in all of his daily tasks around the homestead.

One day, a young cowboy named Burn Sanderson arrives and claims that he’s Old Yeller’s true owner—Old Yeller had accompanied him on a months-long cattle drive and recently ran away. But when Bud sees how much the boys love the dog, he lets them keep him. After having dinner with the family, Burn takes Travis aside and tells him that a plague of **hydrophobia** (rabies) has begun to ravage the surrounding area. Burn urges Travis to be cautious in the wilderness and to protect his family by shooting any animal that behaves strangely or aggressively. Hydrophobia, Burn warns, is highly contagious—and even humans can get the terrible disease. Travis is terrified, but the next morning he brings Old Yeller with him while he does the difficult work of tagging the Coateses’ hogs.

A few days later, Bud comes by to report that he saw a pack of young hogs that Travis missed out by some bat caves a little ways away. Travis excitedly heads out to the caves with Old Yeller in tow. He attempts to tag the hogs from the shelter of a sandbank—but the bank breaks, and the hogs severely injure Travis and Old Yeller with their tusks.

Over the next several weeks, Travis and Old Yeller slowly recover from their serious wounds. Bud Searcy and Lisbeth come around again: Lisbeth has brought a puppy (the offspring of her hound and Old Yeller), and she offers it to Travis as a gift. Travis tells her that he already has a dog, so Lisbeth gives the puppy to Little Arliss instead. Then, Bud announces that he’s leaving Lisbeth with the Coateses to help out around the house

while Travis and Old Yeller recover. Travis is embarrassed to cede his duties to a girl—but Mama is grateful for the help, and Lisbeth is good company.

One evening, when Travis’s leg is nearly healed, he hears a strange noise outside: the family’s milk heifer, Spot, is moaning and walking in circles. Then, Spot charges at Mama, frightening her. Travis wonders aloud if cows can get hydrophobia too. Spot’s condition worsens over the next several days, and an aggressive roan bull also staggers onto their property. Travis kills the bull, and they burn the body. Mama tells Travis that they have to kill and burn Spot as well. Travis is sad, but he steels his nerves and shoots Spot.

Mama and Lisbeth go out to gather more firewood for Spot’s pyre. They take Old Yeller with them for protection—Travis is still too weak to walk long distances or haul anything home. When Mama and Lisbeth don’t return by dark, Travis gets worried. Soon, he hears screams and growls. Mama calls for him to grab his gun, and Travis runs outside to see Old Yeller tussling with a rabid wolf in the front yard. When the wolf grabs Old Yeller by the throat, Travis shoots and kills the wolf. Old Yeller happily and gratefully licks Travis’s hands, but Mama starts to cry. She tells Travis that the wolf bit Old Yeller, so he must be put down before hydrophobia gets to him. Travis feels numb and dead inside as he shoots and kills Old Yeller.

After Old Yeller’s death, Travis spends many days feeling heartbroken and empty; nothing and no one can comfort him. When Papa finally returns home, he tries to tell Travis how proud he is of him for taking care of so many hard things while he was away. He urges Travis to forget about what happened to Old Yeller and keep being a strong man. Travis is devastated—he has no idea how he’s supposed to forget his best friend.

A week later, as Travis hears a ruckus in the kitchen: Arliss’s pup (the one fathered by Old Yeller) runs out of the house with a piece of cornbread in his mouth. Travis laughs at the dog’s antics, which remind him of Old Yeller. That evening, after a long walk through the woods, Travis returns home to find Little Arliss and the pup playing happily. Travis begins to laugh and cry simultaneously, experiencing a huge emotional release. He decides that it’s time to take them both out on a squirrel hunt the next day—it’s time for the pup, like his father before him, to start earning his keep.



## CHARACTERS

### MAJOR CHARACTERS

**Travis Coates** – Travis Coates is the 14-year-old protagonist of *Old Yeller*. At the start of the novel, Travis’s Papa heads off on a lengthy cattle drive from their family’s Texas Hill Country home to Kansas. Travis is excited about having the chance to prove himself as the new man of the house—but the arrival of a

thieving yellow mutt who pilfers meat from the family's storehouse throws a wrench in Travis's plans. When Travis's younger brother Little Arliss insists on adopting the dog into the family, Travis is resentful of the mutt's presence—but soon enough, "Old Yeller" proves himself to be an important member of the family. Old Yeller becomes indispensable in Travis's daily routine as he hunts, tags hogs, protects the family's vegetable patch from varmints, and defends the ranch from fighting bulls. Travis becomes confident in his burgeoning manhood as he's able to take on more responsibilities and provides for Mama and Little Arliss. But when Travis and Old Yeller are mauled by wild hogs, Travis is forced to take a step back and heal while a neighbor girl, Lisbeth, helps around the Coateses' house. Later, when there's an outbreak of **hydrophobia** (rabies) throughout the countryside, the headstrong and determined Travis tries to ignore it. He can no longer ignore the truth, however, when more and more animals around the ranch come down with rabies—and Travis's relationship with Old Yeller reaches a devastating climax when Yeller himself is infected and Travis must shoot his own dog to protect his family from the disease. Throughout the novel, Travis is obsessed with proving that he's manly, brave, and unemotional enough to do what needs to be done for his family—yet over the course of the story, Travis realizes that there's more to growing up, being responsible, and becoming a man than grit and glory. Through his relationship with Old Yeller, Travis learns to respect, fear, and appreciate the animal world and the nature all around him—and, most importantly of all, to let himself feel the full range of emotions that accompany the process of coming of age.

**Old Yeller** – Old Yeller is the titular yellow mutt who wanders into to the Coateses' homestead and quickly ingratiates himself into their lives. When Travis discovers Old Yeller raiding his family's storehouse, he's furious with the creature—but Little Arliss, who loves nature and all animals under the sun, jumps quickly to the animal's defense and begs to keep him. Mama relents—and just like that, Old Yeller is part of the family. Though Travis is initially cold toward the mischievous dog, he develops a soft spot for Old Yeller after Old Yeller saves Little Arliss from a fearsome mama bear one day. From then on, Travis recognizes how devoted Old Yeller is to the family, and he tries to dote on Old Yeller as much as he can. Old Yeller proves himself to be a fearless and intrepid companion, assisting Travis with difficult and dangerous tasks like tagging feral hogs just as readily as he aids in smaller, easier jobs like defending the corn patch from varmints. Old Yeller is quick to throw himself between his owners and danger, such as when he saves Arliss from the bear, Travis from the hogs, and Mama and Lisbeth from a rabid wolf. Old Yeller's short life comes to a swift and painful end in one of the most famous scenes in literature: after Old Yeller is bit by a **hydrophobic** (rabid) wolf while keeping Mama and Lisbeth safe as they gather firewood, Travis is forced to shoot and kill his best friend to ensure that the rabies doesn't affect his own family. The heroic Old Yeller is one

of the most iconic and beloved characters of modern fiction due to his sweetness, loyalty, grit, and tragic end.

**Little Arliss** – Little Arliss is Travis's five-year-old brother. Rambunctious, dramatic, and obsessed with nature, Little Arliss provides much of the novel's comic relief. Little Arliss is small but fierce: he has a great love for all living things, and he's constantly out playing in the woods and trying to collect and keep whatever animals he can. Little Arliss the one who comes to Old Yeller's defense when he eats the Coateses' meat supply, and his affection for the dog is what convinces Mama to adopt Old Yeller into their family. Little Arliss is fearless to the point of recklessness: he regularly brings home venomous snakes in his pockets, unaware of the danger they pose. He even gets in deep trouble one afternoon while trying to capture a baby bear, unaware that its mother is nearby and ready to attack. Arliss's intense love for nature and his desire to possess it seem to be at odds with one another—yet, as the novel unfolds, Arliss's wide-eyed reverence for the natural world helps the other characters to more deeply appreciate the rugged beauty all around them. A mischief-maker at heart, Little Arliss is always getting himself into trouble by playing in the watering hole or running after wild animals—yet Travis and especially Mama find his behavior endearing and adorable. Eventually, the Coateses' neighbor Lisbeth Searcy gifts Arliss a puppy of his own, the offspring of Old Yeller and the Searcys' female hound. Little Arliss doesn't change much over the course of the novel—by the end, even after the loss of Old Yeller, he remains the same carefree, rambunctious boy he's always been. Travis's coming-of-age journey is more or less complete—but Little Arliss still has a lot of learning to do as he navigates his own boyhood.

**Mama** – Mama is Travis and Little Arliss's mother. Though mama is a kind, generous woman, she's just as gritty as she is gentle. A hard life in the Texas Hill Country has prepared her to weather almost anything—and unlike her son Travis, she's wise to the ways in which the wilderness can intrude quickly and mercilessly on daily life. Mama is generous with her sons—she understands that although their personalities are vastly different, they must be taught to get along. She works to help them better understand and respect each other, often using Old Yeller as a point of connection that the two boys can bond over. Mama herself has a soft spot for animals and nature: though she's most often in the house cooking, cleaning, and taking care of her boys, she has no qualms about venturing out into the wilderness to fend for herself when push comes to shove. When Travis and Old Yeller are injured while tagging hogs, Mama comes to the rescue: she mends Travis's leg, sews up Old Yeller's wounds, and comes up with an ingenious method of ferrying them both home from the site of the accident. When Old Yeller saves Mama and Lisbeth Searcy from a rabid wolf while they're out gathering firewood one evening, Mama is devastated by what must be done—but she warns Travis that if he doesn't shoot Old Yeller in order to

ensure that his **hydrophobia** (rabies) infection doesn't spread from him to their family, she'll do the deed herself. Tough and resourceful yet lighthearted, Mama forms the emotional core of her family's lives and indeed of the novel itself.

**Papa** – Travis Coates's father, whom he calls Papa, is absent for much of the novel, yet his presence looms large in his family's mind. At the start of *Old Yeller*, Papa heads off for Abilene, Kansas on a lengthy cattle drive and leaves Travis in charge of all his tasks on the ranch. Travis sees his father as the ultimate emblem of masculinity and strives to emulate his father's actions and influence over the family. With every task Travis accomplishes, he thinks of what Papa would say or do in any given situation. He's guided by the lessons Papa has taught him about fear being natural, about the animal world being fearsome and worthy of respect, and about true masculinity being tied to responsibility and grit. Papa returns from his cattle drive to find his family in shambles: Old Yeller, the dog who stepped in as a protector in Papa's absence, is dead, and Travis and Little Arliss are both devastated by the loss. Papa tries to congratulate Travis on doing a good job taking care of the family and the ranch in spite of Old Yeller's death, but he fails to adequately comfort Travis or make him feel better. Papa's confusing advice to Travis is to forget about what has happened and "go on being a man," offering Travis an opportunity to at last challenge his father's concept of masculinity as the ability to soldier on numbly through whatever comes. Though Papa appears in the novel only briefly, his ideas inform Travis's ideas and thus make his perspective a central part of the story.

**Lisbeth Searcy** – Lisbeth Searcy is Bud Searcy's granddaughter. A blonde girl of 11, Lisbeth is sweet, kind, and good with animals. She's deeply protective, evidenced by how she takes Travis aside to tell him that while she knows Old Yeller has been stealing from her own family's farm and from other vegetable patches and storehouses in the area, she doesn't want any harm to come to him. Lisbeth is also generous, as she gifts Little Arliss one of the Searcys' puppies (the offspring of Old Yeller and the Searcys' female hound). After Travis and Old Yeller are injured while tagging hogs in the wilderness, Bud sends Lisbeth to stay with the Coateses and help around the ranch. Though Travis is initially skeptical of Lisbeth's ability to complete tasks he believes are men's work, he's impressed with how devoted she is to help out and do anything asked of her. Travis clearly has a crush on Lisbeth, but he's unable to communicate his feelings or even develop much of a friendship with her. He feels that she can see straight through him when they talk, and this makes him nervous around her. Thoughtful, bright, and generous, Lisbeth is a minor presence in the novel but an important part of the Coates family's journey.

**Bud Searcy** – Bud Searcy is a neighbor of the Coates family. A big, red-faced man who chews tobacco and who has a reputation for being "shiftless" within the Hill Country

community, Bud frequently visits the Coateses to socialize and eat. When Bud shows up a few weeks after Papa's departure, he brings gossip and warnings: there is a "strange varmint" stealing from Hill Country families' storehouses and vegetable patches, and there are rumors of **hydrophobic** (or rabid) animals staggering through the countryside. Bud seems to fancy himself a kind of town crier, yet he doesn't do much within his own community other than spread the word about exciting, strange, or dangerous goings-on. Bud does help the Coates family later on in the novel when he brings his granddaughter Lisbeth to stay with them and help out around the house as Travis recovers from his injuries. A lazy busybody who nonetheless seems to truly care about his neighbors, Bud provides some comic relief throughout the novel.

**Burn Sanderson** – Burn Sanderson is a young, rugged cowboy who shows up at the Coates family farm one day to announce that he recently lost his "big yeller dog"—Burn is Old Yeller's true owner. However, Travis and Little Arliss become so angry and emotional at the idea of giving Old Yeller back that Burn offers to let the boys keep him in exchange for a home-cooked meal. Mama happily obliges, and the Coateses feed and shelter the friendly Burn for the night. At the end of the evening, Burn asks Travis to show him to the watering hole so that he can give his horse something to drink. While they're down there, Burn confides in Travis about a dangerous outbreak of **hydrophobia**, or rabies, that's making its way through the Texas countryside. Burn warns Travis that hydrophobia can affect humans just as it affects animals, he urges the young man to "handle" any infection decisively and bravely by immediately killing the animal. Though Burn only appears briefly, he's an important character in the novel because he helps Travis understand the gravity of the problems that plague the animal world. Burn believes that people and animals are interconnected, and his advice for Travis to understand that connection is profound and serious.

**Jumper** – Jumper is the Coates family's mule. Named "Jumper" because of his incredible jumping skills, he's is a docile and easygoing animal who gets tired easily and hates doing too much work. Jumper's laziness sometimes annoys Travis—yet Jumper is always ready when Travis needs him most, such as when Old Yeller gets mauled by wild hogs, and Travis and Mama rig a sling so that Jumper can drag Old Yeller back home.

**Spot** – Spot is the Coates family's spotted heifer. Spot has a stubborn personality that makes her a testy and difficult milk cow. Even though Travis finds Spot difficult and annoying to deal with sometimes, he has a great deal of affection for her and enjoys the process of slowly breaking her in and gaining her trust as he trains her to be milked each day. Travis is devastated when Spot begins showing signs of being infected with **hydrophobia** (rabies)—he knows deep down that she'll never get well, yet he keeps her alive for a while and holds out hope that she'll turn a corner. Soon, however, Spot grows "crazy

mad” and becomes more aggressive than ever. Travis is forced to put his beloved milk cow down.

**Bell** – Bell was Travis’s childhood dog. An older dog who was very protective of the young Travis, Bell died when a freshly severed **rattlesnake head** bit him on the nose, injecting him with venom. Even though it’s been years since Bell died by the time the novel begins, Travis still often thinks of his erstwhile companion.

**Chongo and Roany** – Chongo and Roany are the nicknames that Mama and Travis give to a pair of fighting bulls that wander onto the Coateses’ property one day. The bulls have a violent fight, tearing up the family’s split-rail fence and creating chaos on the ranch. Later in the novel, Roany reappears, having been infected with **hydrophobia**. Travis shoots and kills Roany when Roany threatens Mama, Lisbeth, and Little Arliss.

## MINOR CHARACTERS

**Jed and Rosal Simpson** – Jed and Rosal Simpson are a father-and-son duo of ranchers who live in the Coates’s Texas Hill Country community.



## 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.



### PEOPLE AND ANIMALS

*Old Yeller* explores how the world of animals and the world of people overlap. Travis Coates and his beloved dog, Old Yeller, have an intense bond—and their connection suggests that while many people see the animal world as separate from their own, that could not be further from the truth. People and animals, the novel suggests, are deeply interconnected.

Old Yeller’s sudden arrival into the Coates family illustrates how, even though people consider themselves as separate from and even superior to animals, the animal world can easily intrude into the human world. The morning after Travis’s father Papa heads off on a cattle run to Kansas and leaves Travis alone to oversee the house, Travis finds a giant stray dog eating a store of meat that Papa hung out to dry. Travis is furious with the dog and tries to chase him away—but Travis’s nature-loving little brother, Arliss, says that he wants the dog to stay. Travis’s Mama, too, sees the benefits of having a watchdog around in Papa’s absence. There are several things about Old Yeller’s sudden appearance that speak to the idea that the human and animal worlds can’t be neatly separated—and that, in many

ways, people and animals depend on each other. Old Yeller arrives at a time of need for the Coates family, which seems almost fated or meant to be—yet, later on in the novel, Travis learns that Old Yeller wandered away from his owner and sought refuge at the Coates farmhouse. Just as Travis and his family needed a protector, so too did Old Yeller need shelter. Old Yeller and the Coates family’s relationship is symbiotic from the start—and as their lives intersect, the Coateses form a deeper understanding of the interdependency between people and animals. The overlap between people and animals is further emphasized when Travis names Old Yeller for his distinctive bark. Old Yeller’s name isn’t just a reference to his yellow (which Travis pronounces as “yeller”) fur—Travis decides that the name is perfect for the dog after hearing his bark, which uncannily resembles a human yell. This detail about Old Yeller heightens readers’ sensitivity to the ever-blurring boundary between the world of people and the world of animals.

Shortly after Old Yeller’s arrival, a dramatic incident occurs that further illustrates how people and animals aren’t neatly separated from each other. One ordinary afternoon, Travis and his family must contend with a destructive fight between two raging bulls whose territorial fighting has brought them right onto the Coateses’ property. As the bulls violently charge and collide in the Coateses’ yard, it becomes clear that the animals have no regard for the fact that they’re smashing up private land owned by humans. The bulls destroy the fence surrounding the Coates property and bombard the Coateses’ log cabin with their fighting, threatening to tear the house down. This instance shows, quite literally, how the world of animals can easily collide with the world of humans at a moment’s notice. Though Travis and his family have lived in the countryside for a long time, and have perhaps felt that they’re more connected to nature than most, they’re still shocked by how the bulls intrude on their house in such an abrupt and violent way. Through this incident, Travis, Mama, and Little Arliss learn how the danger of the animal world can directly affect them.

Finally, the plague of **hydrophobia** (rabies) that ravages the countryside surrounding the Coates family’s home proves that people can’t insulate themselves from the animal world—the issues that plague one world often plague the other. When Old Yeller’s original owner, Burn Sanderson, shows up at the Coates home to ask for Old Yeller back, he quickly realizes how attached the family is to the dog and decides to let Old Yeller stay with his new owners. Before leaving, however, Burn warns Travis that there’s been a local outbreak of hydrophobia. Animals and people alike can be affected by the debilitating disease, which attacks the sufferer’s brain and makes them vicious and disoriented. As Travis faces the gravity of such a disease, he realizes that both animals and people experience the same symptoms—and, in this way, Travis and Old Yeller’s worlds are even more interconnected. When Old Yeller is

indeed bitten by a rabid wolf while saving the Coateses from the animal, Travis makes the devastating choice to kill Old Yeller before the hydrophobia can affect him. This sacrifice illustrates Travis's understanding that the world of animals and the world of people are inextricable: he knows that if Old Yeller's condition is allowed to worsen, the dog could spread hydrophobia to Little Arliss, to Mama, or to Travis himself. Travis's killing of Old Yeller is an act of mercy not only for the dog himself, but for Travis's beloved family members and neighbors. In this way, Travis is able to see how goings-on in the animal world directly impact the human world.

Though *Old Yeller* is commonly considered a tragic story, Travis and his family's transformative love for their dog is also an educational tale about how people and animals depend on each other for health, happiness, and survival. As Travis and his family learn to love Old Yeller and embark on countless adventures with him, they all come to see how deeply intertwined their world is with the world of animals.



### MASCULINITY AND EMOTION

At the beginning of *Old Yeller*, Travis Coates's father leaves his family at their rural Texas homestead and goes off on a cattle drive to Kansas, hoping to make some money. As Papa departs, he urges Travis to "act like [a man]" in his absence. At only 14, Travis accepts his father's challenge with grit—even as he holds back tears watching his father leave. Travis's struggle to stand in as the man of the house offers a look at how masculinity and emotion intersect. While Travis thinks of masculinity as the ability to ignore or suppress one's emotions, the novel suggests that true masculinity is characterized by feeling deeply and expressing oneself authentically.

At the start of the novel, Travis sees masculinity as the hard-nosed suppression of any emotion or weakness. When Travis's Papa heads out on his cattle drive to Kansas, Papa's parting words are to tell Travis to "act like [a man]" in his absence. Travis has little idea of what it really means to act like a man; he believes that being tough and emotionless is the only way to embody masculinity. Travis therefore decides that he'll do all of his duties around the house and the farm without any complaining or emoting—he sees masculinity as the ability to suppress one's emotions and refuse help from others. While Travis is right to see independence and responsibility as important qualities in an adult, he confuses total emotional suppression for emotional strength at this point in the novel. He has a long way to go toward a healthy embodiment of masculinity, and Gipson implies that Travis has a host of misconceptions about what really makes a man a man.

Throughout the novel, as Travis navigates his new role as "the man of the family" alone, he struggles to reconcile his inner emotions with his conceptualization of masculinity. And when his dog, Old Yeller, is unexpectedly bitten by a rabid wolf, Travis

is forced to confront his conflicting ideas about what it means to be a man. Travis knows that he has to put his beloved dog down before Old Yeller begins to suffer the slow, devastating effects of **hydrophobia** (rabies). Though Mama cries at the very thought of Old Yeller's death, Travis steels himself as he prepares to kill his "big yeller dog"—an act that he knows will "kill something inside [him]" too. Even after the act is done, Travis claims that he didn't really feel anything while executing Old Yeller: "I was just numb all over," he recalls, "like a dead man walking." In the days that follow Old Yeller's death, Travis is unable to bring himself to cry—he feels "empty," even though he is "hurting worse than [he's] ever hurt." When Papa returns home from the cattle run at last, he tells Travis that he heard about what Travis had to do, and he compliments Travis on acting like a "grown man." He suggests that Travis "forget it and go on being a man." This shows that while Papa has long been Travis's model for masculinity, even Papa struggles to affect numbness and emotional detachment in difficult moments. Papa, too, has a hard time understanding that there's more to masculinity than acting tough and ignoring one's feelings.

Travis eventually understands that masculinity isn't necessarily about numbing oneself to the pain and joy of life. Rather, being a man means having the strength to fully experience and accept the most difficult, complicated parts of life. During his conversation with Papa, something inside Travis breaks, and he asks how he can go on. Papa softens and agrees that he "do[es]n't quite mean" what he just said about forgetting Old Yeller's death in order to "go on being a man." The conversation ends at an impasse, with Papa unsure of how to comfort Travis and Travis unsure of how he wants to be comforted. A few days later, however, Travis finds Arliss playing with his new pup—part of a litter Old Yeller fathered with the Coateses' neighbor Lisbeth's heeler—in the same watering hole where Travis used to play with Old Yeller. Rather than reprimand Arliss for playing in the drinking water, as he always did while Papa was away, Travis begins laughing—and that laughter soon turns to tears. In this moment, Travis has an emotional breakthrough: he is no longer constrained by the learned response to suppress and hide his emotions, the way Papa has taught him a real man should. Travis at last allows himself to cry and to mourn Old Yeller, and this marks his arrival at his own version of masculinity—not by steeling himself against the pain of losing his dog, but by fully allowing himself to feel and express intense emotions. Being a man, Travis ultimately learns, means having the strength to be vulnerable and confront difficult feelings.



### BRAVERY VS. FEAR

In *Old Yeller*, 14-year-old Travis is left alone with his mother and younger brother to be the man of the house, while his father, whom he calls Papa, heads off on a cattle drive. With Papa gone, Travis must continuously

reckon with his fears. As Travis hunts deer, breaks up bull fights, tags wild hogs, and confronts an epidemic of hydrophobia throughout the Texas Hill Country, he must constantly choose between surrendering to fear or mustering bravery. Eventually, he remembers that “Papa had told me right from the start that fear was a right and natural feeling for anybody, and nothing to be ashamed of.” This suggests that, once one learns to accept fear as a “right and natural feeling,” one can see fear not as an impediment to bravery but as a necessary and instructive part of life.

When Travis doesn't properly respect his own fear, it leads to disaster for both him and his dog, Old Yeller. As Travis and Old Yeller head out one afternoon to tag Coates family's wild hogs, Travis experiences a familiar “blood-chilling” sensation. He knows that tagging hogs is dangerous work—and in spite of his mother's fears about him doing it without Papa for the first time, Travis insists that he's up to the challenge. Travis claims that he's “used to the feeling” of being afraid and doesn't let it bother him—and when he gets word that some hogs he missed tagging during his first outing are hanging around a bat cave far out in the countryside, he heads out to tag them with stubborn excitement. On this outing, Travis finds himself in the midst of a stampede—a hog slashes his left calf with its tusk, while Old Yeller sustains terrible wounds fighting off a pack of the ferocious pigs. In this instance, Travis refuses to heed his fearful instincts about tagging hogs. In the end, he and Old Yeller are hurt as a result of his prideful stubbornness, and his refusal to understand that his fear is natural and helpful. Though Travis and Old Yeller recover from their injuries, Travis's stubbornness when faced with a dangerous task teaches him that true bravery comes from accepting and integrating one's fear rather than ignoring it.

Later on, when there's an outbreak of **hydrophobia** (rabies) among animals in Travis's community, Travis allows fear to consume him. When he first hears about the spread of hydrophobia from Old Yeller's original owner, Burn Sanderson, he feels a “scare run through [him]” from head to toe. Though Burn Sanderson urges Travis to be brave and to find a way to “handle whatever comes up” in his father's absence, Travis remains petrified of the idea that not only could nearby animals catch the disease—but that he, Mama, or Arliss could, too. Travis's paralyzing fear of hydrophobia distracts him and takes up a lot of his energy. He is so preoccupied by horrible mental images of people—and animals—losing their minds slowly and painfully that he loses sight of how fear is natural and even instructive, finding himself focused on what could happen rather than what's actually happening around him. This leads to Old Yeller being bitten by a rabid wolf, something that could perhaps have been prevented if Travis hadn't been so preoccupied and consumed by his fear of what *could* happen. This illustrates the idea that overly fixating on fear, much like ignoring or suppressing it, can have disastrous consequences.

After Old Yeller is bitten, Travis is forced to integrate his fear and learn from it in order to act bravely. His worst fear has come true: his fear of hydrophobia was “right and natural” all along. Now, however, Travis must face his fear in order to be brave and save his family. Travis's fear of Old Yeller spreading hydrophobia to him, Little Arliss, or Mama ultimately leads him to an extraordinary and painful act of bravery: he shoots and kills Old Yeller in order to protect himself and his family. In this way, Travis's fear of hydrophobia isn't an impediment to his bravery—rather, it's what allows him to muster up the courage to kill Old Yeller. As painful as this is, Travis at last realizes that fear is a healthy and instructive part of life, and that he's right to fear what could happen to Old Yeller—and to his family—if he ignored that fear. With this, the book suggests that fear shouldn't be seen as shameful or cowardly, because it's an emotion that's necessary to recognize and heed. Only then can a person be truly brave rather than ignorant, prideful, or stubborn.



### COMING OF AGE AND RESPONSIBILITY

*Old Yeller* is a classic coming-of-age novel: it tells the story of a young boy realizing what it takes to come into one's own and emerge from youth as a mature, well-rounded individual. Each coming-of-age tale prioritizes different aspects of adult behavior as the true marker of maturity. Within the world of *Old Yeller*, responsibility, and the capacity to selflessly shoulder others' burdens, are what define adulthood.

Travis's coming-of-age journey begins when Papa leaves on a cattle drive to Kentucky; Travis believes that he's capable of handling “whatever need[s] to be done while Papa [is] gone.” He immediately sets to work: he reprimands his younger brother Little Arliss when he gets into trouble, cuts wood, plows the cornfields, and hunts for deer. Travis is proud of his hard work—and with each task he accomplishes, he feels more emboldened to take on bigger responsibilities. He goes on to defend his family from a pair of fighting bulls, and he even spends nights sleeping outside with Old Yeller, a stray dog he finds, in order to keep wild animals from eating the Coateses' corn crop. And when more and more animals are infected with **hydrophobia** (rabies) after a plague breaks out across the countryside, Travis is forced to put down beloved farm animals and aggressive wild animal intruders alike. Travis's joy in taking on more and more responsibilities for his family signals that he's growing up and coming into his own as an adult. He shoulders pain and frustration, inconvenience and dire straits, all without complaining. Travis finds himself increasingly burdened by the pain of killing diseased animals—but he continues voluntarily shouldering each new burden.

Travis's coming of age is only complete when he proves that can shoulder not only physical responsibilities but emotional ones: he must put down Old Yeller after the dog is bitten by a rabid

wolf. Up until this point, Travis's responsibilities have multiplied, evolving from small duties like keeping animals out of the corn and hunting for deer to larger responsibilities like defending his family from raging bulls and sows infected with hydrophobia. The ultimate test of Travis's responsibility, however, comes when Mama tells him that if he can't shoot Old Yeller, she will. Travis knows that someone must bear the trauma of putting down Old Yeller. He sees his mother crying as she recognizes what must be done—and decides that just as he has shouldered the burden of protecting his family from physical threats, so too must he now protect them from the emotional burden of killing the family pet. Travis proves that he's a true adult as he shoulders this unimaginable responsibility and shoots Old Yeller himself.

After this traumatic incident, Travis shows what he's learned throughout his coming-of-age journey when he decides to take Arliss and Arliss's new puppy out on a squirrel hunt. Travis has learned about himself, his family, and the world around him during his father's absence—and he realizes that adulthood is defined by one's ability to take responsibility for others and to assume duties that are often hard or painful. Thus, although Travis recognizes that Arliss and the pup are still "mighty little," he thinks it's time for the pup to "start learning to earn his keep." This thought process signals that Travis has come to see responsibility as a marker of maturity and independence. Travis has had to shoulder a lot over the course of his own coming-of-age journey—and now, he knows that the only way to encourage someone else on that journey is to show them what it means to take responsibility.



## SYMBOLS

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



## HYDROPHOBIA (RABIES)

Hydrophobia (an antiquated term for rabies) symbolizes how deeply interconnected people and animals are. When an epidemic of hydrophobia spreads throughout the Texas Hill Country where Travis Coates lives, his neighbor Burn Sanderson tells Travis that hydrophobia doesn't only make animals mad and mean—the brain-wasting disease can also affect people, making them violent, ferocious, and fearful of water until they inevitably die. In this way, hydrophobia is a constant reminder of how the problems that plague animals are not at all separate from those that plague people.

Travis is acutely afraid of hydrophobia and determined to make sure that no rabid animals attack him, his family, or any of their pets. Eventually, though, rabid wolves attack Travis's dog Old Yeller while he's trying to defend Mama and Lisbeth Searcy

from the wild pack. Travis must then make the harrowing choice to put Old Yeller down, before the rabies sets in and makes the dog dangerous to the people around him. Hydrophobia thus represents the symbolic relationship between the human world and the animal world, as the health and survival of one depends on that of the other.



## THE RATTLESNAKE HEAD

The rattlesnake head symbolizes nature's unpredictability and danger. Early on in the novel, Travis remembers a day when Papa chopped the head off of a diamondback rattlesnake while baling hay, but the head continued to writhe and snap—and when Travis's confused dog, Bell, nosed at the head, the snake's mouth bit him and killed him with its venom. Travis recalls the decapitated rattler head in terrifying detail—and his recollection illustrates how people shouldn't underestimate nature's potential for unpredictability and violence. Travis learned the hard way, through watching Bell die, that the wilderness doesn't necessarily play by the same rules as human civilization. Though these worlds intersect and depend on each other, people must not lose sight of nature's particular perils.



## QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the HarperPerennial edition of *Old Yeller* published in 1956.

### Chapter 1 Quotes

☞ We called him Old Yeller. The name had a sort of double meaning. One part meant that his short hair was a dingy yellow, a color that we called "yeller" in those days. The other meant that when he opened his head, the sound he let out came closer to being a yell than a bark.

**Related Characters:** Travis Coates (speaker), Old Yeller

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 1

### Explanation and Analysis

The opening lines of the novel introduce the titular dog, Old Yeller, as well as the novel's most important theme: that the barrier separating the human world and the animal world is thin. Old Yeller himself symbolizes this idea: his bark, which sounds like a person's yell, becomes a frequent refrain throughout the novel as Travis bonds with Old Yeller and learns more about the animal world. In these lines, Gipson



establishes that Travis's love for Old Yeller is one of the central, defining forces of his life—even in the unknown future as he looks back on his boyhood. Travis will learn many important lessons from Old Yeller, and Gipson wants readers to understand right away just how vital Travis's friendship with the dog is. Travis's time with Old Yeller will shape who he becomes, how he moves through the world, and how he conceives of his own role within his family and his community.

☞ "What you're needing worse than a horse is a good dog." "Yessir," I said, "but a horse is what I'm wanting the worst." "All right," he said. "You act a man's part while I'm gone, and I'll see that you get a man's horse to ride when I sell the cattle. I think we can shake on that deal."

He reached out his hand, and we shook. It was the first time I'd ever shaken hands like a man. It made me feel big and solemn and important in a way I'd never felt before. I knew then that I could handle whatever needed to be done while Papa was gone.

**Related Characters:** Travis Coates, Papa (speaker)

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 4

### Explanation and Analysis

As Travis's father, Papa, prepares to head out on a long cattle drive from their Texas Hill Country home to Abilene, Kansas, he tells Travis that he expects him to be the man of the house and take care of anything that comes up while he's gone. Papa promises that if Travis does these things, he'll be rewarded.


This passage is significant because it shows how Travis begins to shape his priorities, and indeed his self-image, around Papa's entreaty that he "act a man's part." Travis is just 14 years old, and his father is his only real model for masculinity. Travis has a very narrow-minded view of what it means to act like a man—and as the novel progresses, Travis's intertwined ideas about emotion, masculinity, responsibility, and maturity will develop and shift. Travis is determined to fulfill the role that Papa entrusts him with here—but he'll soon have to learn what it means for him to "act a man's part" on his own terms.

☞ A big diamond-back rattler struck at Papa and Papa chopped his head off with one quick lick of his scythe. The head dropped to the ground three or four feet away from the writhing body. It lay there, with the ugly mouth opening and shutting, still trying to bite something.

As smart as Bell was, you'd have thought he'd have better sense than to go up and nuzzle that rattler's head. But he didn't, and a second later, he was falling back, howling and slinging his own head till his ears popped. But it was too late then. [...] He died that night, and I cried for a week.

**Related Characters:** Travis Coates (speaker), Papa, Bell

**Related Themes:**   

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 5

### Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Travis recalls the tragic death of his boyhood dog, Bell. Bell was killed when a decapitated (but still animated) rattlesnake bit him, injecting him with its venom. This passage is significant because it gives readers insight into Travis's understanding of nature's unpredictability. From a young age, Travis has understood how violent, dangerous, and unstable the animal world can be. Nature, Travis knows, can intrude suddenly, rudely, and devastatingly on the human world—he has learned that difficult lesson from incidents like this one.

This passage also foreshadows the journey that Travis will take with his new dog, Old Yeller, as he confronts Old Yeller's mortality. Travis's intense emotions in the wake of Bell's death show that Travis is deeply loving and sensitive to the plight of animals—but in his new role as the man of the house, he'll be pressured to suppress his intense feelings for his animal companions in order to protect his family.

### Chapter 3 Quotes

☞ I'd hit her but hadn't made a killing shot.

I didn't like that. I never minded killing for meat. Like Papa had told me, every creature has to kill to live. But to wound an animal was something else. Especially one as pretty and harmless as a deer. It made me sick to think of the doe's escaping, maybe to hurt for days before she finally died.

**Related Characters:** Travis Coates (speaker), Papa, Old Yeller

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 20

### Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Travis is out hunting deer after a stray yellow dog snuck into his family's storehouse and ate all of their dried meat. At first, Travis is annoyed that he has to go hunting, since this normally isn't his responsibility. But then, he becomes excited by the chance to prove his skills as a solo hunter. In his mind, making a successful kill will prove to his family (and to himself) that he's the man of the house when Papa is away, and that he's mature enough to take on difficult responsibilities.



When Travis hits the doe he's been eyeing, however, he fears that he hasn't made a killing shot and has instead made the animal suffer in the last moments of her life. This highlights Travis's intense compassion for animals: though he knows about the circle of life and is aware that "every creature has to kill to live," he still has an emotional response to the idea of causing any animal pain. Travis knows that in order to take care of his family while his father is away, he must assume tasks that Papa ordinarily takes care of—and that he must approach them stoically, the same way Papa does. This is difficult for Travis, who wants to prove that he's capable and tough while still honoring his love of nature.

## Chapter 4 Quotes

☞☞ We sat and ate and listened to [the bulls]. We could tell by their rumblings and bawlings that they were gradually working their way down through the brush toward each other and getting madder by the minute.

I always liked to see a fight between bulls or bears or wild boars or almost any wild animals. Now, I got so excited that I jumped up from the table and went to the door and stood listening. I'd made up my mind that if the bulls met and started a fight, I was going to see it.

**Related Characters:** Travis Coates (speaker), Chongo and Roany, Little Arliss, Mama

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 26

### Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Travis and his family are eating lunch when

they hear a pair of bulls getting ready to fight on the far reaches of their property. As the sounds of the bulls' roars get louder—and closer—Travis gets more and more excited to see an entertaining, rip-roaring fight. His reaction suggests that, even while Travis has a great deal of love and respect for the animal world, at this point he still sees it as somehow separate from his own. As the bulls become angrier and angrier, Travis sees their inevitable clash as a form of excitement and entertainment. He doesn't realize that he should have a healthy bit of fear about how these animals might intrude on his own and affect his and his family's lives. As the bulls' fight gets underway, Travis will get a rude awakening about the thin barrier between people and animals.

☞☞ But I was too excited about the fight. I didn't see the danger in time. I was still aside the top rail when the struggling bulls crashed through the fence, splintering the posts and rails, and toppling me to the ground almost under them. [...] The roaring of the bulls was right in my ears. The hot, reeking scent of their blood was in my nose. The bone-crashing weight of their hoofs was stomping all around and over me, churning up such a fog of dust that I couldn't see a thing.

**Related Characters:** Travis Coates (speaker), Chongo and Roany

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 29

### Explanation and Analysis



In this passage, Travis and his family have all headed out to the split-rail fence at the edge of their property to watch the bulls fighting just beyond it. As the bulls' fight encroaches upon the Coateses' property, the flimsy fence symbolizes just how false—even ridiculous—the idea of a barrier or boundary between the animal world and the world of people truly is.

Travis is thrown to the ground when the bulls crash through the fence, and he finds himself plunged into the heart of the fight. In this dangerous moment, he understands just how foolish he's been to imagine that because he and his family see themselves as separate from animals—or because they live behind a flimsy fence—the concerns of the animal world can't affect them quickly and drastically. As the novel progresses, Travis and his family will continue to learn that, in order to survive, people must learn just how interconnected their world is with the animal world.

## Chapter 5 Quotes

☛ Every night before Mama let him go to bed, she'd make Arliss empty his pockets of whatever he'd captured during the day. Generally, it would be a tangled-up mess of grasshoppers and worms and praying bugs and little rusty tree lizards. [...] Sometimes it was stuff like a young bird that had fallen out of its nest before it could fly, or a green-speckled spring frog or a striped water snake. And once he turned out of his pocket a wadded-up baby copperhead that nearly threw Mama into spasms.

**Related Characters:** Travis Coates (speaker), Mama, Little Arliss

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 35

### Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Travis describes how his younger brother, Little Arliss, frequently comes home with his pockets full of creatures that he's captured while playing in the yard. Little Arliss is only five years old, yet he loves nature and longs to possess and understand every animal he comes across. Little Arliss's naïveté, however, is dangerous—as evidenced by the anecdote about his bringing home a venomous copperhead snake.

This passage is significant because it illustrates how difficult it is for people to truly understand that the animal world is connected to their own. Even though Little Arliss knows that he shares territory with a slew of different animals, he doesn't quite understand just how they, and their natural environment, can affect him. Little Arliss, like Travis, has a lot to learn about how the animal world connects with his own, as well as what it means to internalize a healthy amount of fear of and reverence for the wilderness around him.

## Chapter 6 Quotes

☛ That day when I saw [Little Arliss] in the spring, so helpless against the angry she bear, I learned different. I knew then that I loved him as much as I did Mama and Papa, maybe in some ways even a little bit more.

So it was only natural for me to come to love the dog that saved him.

After that, I couldn't do enough for Old Yeller. What if he was a big ugly meat-stealing rascal? [...] None of that made a lick of difference now. He'd pitched in and saved Little Arliss when I couldn't possibly have done it, and that was enough for me.

**Related Characters:** Travis Coates (speaker), Papa, Mama, Old Yeller, Little Arliss

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 43-44

### Explanation and Analysis


In this passage, Travis describes how his feelings for Old Yeller change after Old Yeller heroically saves Little Arliss from a terrifying encounter with a wild mama bear. When Old Yeller first wandered into the Coates family's lives, Travis saw the dog as a menace and a bother. He perceived Old Yeller as somehow other or separate from his family, both because he's a stray and because he's a different species. Now, however, Travis embraces Old Yeller as a bona fide member of the family, loving and pampering the dog at any chance he gets.


This passage illustrates how Old Yeller helps Travis get more in touch with his emotions and take greater responsibility for himself and his family. Even though Travis initially believed that the responsible thing to do would be to rid the family of Old Yeller, he now sees that the dog can actually help protect them all from the unpredictable wilderness of the Texas Hill Country.

☛ This sure looked like a case of hydrophobia to [Bud] Searcy, as anybody knew that no fox in his right mind was going to jump on a hunter.

Which reminded him of an uncle of his that got mad-dog bit down in the piney woods of East Texas. This was way back when Searcy was a little boy. As soon as the dog bit him, the man knew he was bound to die; so he went and got a big log chain and tied one end around the bottom of a tree and the other one to one of his legs. And right there he stayed till the sickness got him and he lost his mind.

**Related Characters:** Travis Coates (speaker), Mama, Bud Searcy

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 50

### Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Bud Searcy recalls an upsetting anecdote from his past and shares it with Travis and Mama during a

visit to their ranch. Bud tells the story of a relative of his who was infected with hydrophobia, or rabies, after a dog bit him. As Bud goes on to describe the increasingly horrific effects of the disease, it becomes clear to Travis that hydrophobia is just as painful, frightening, and deadly to humans as it is to animals.

Gipson uses this passage to show that people like to think of themselves as separate from animals and tend to see their pain as realer or more serious than the pain that animals suffer. But as Bud Searcy describes the experience of succumbing to hydrophobia, Travis begins to see that if humans can suffer terribly from this disease, animals, too, must go through unimaginable pain when the disease infects them. This story thus teaches Travis how interconnected people and animals truly are. Pain, joy, and suffering are real for all living things—regardless of species.



☝ It made me mad. "You thievin' rascal," I said. "I ought to get a club and break your back—in fourteen different places."

But I didn't really mean it, and I didn't say it loud and ugly. I knew that if I did, he'd fall over and start yelling like he was dying. And there I'd be—in a fight with Little Arliss again.

"When they shoot you, I'm going to laugh," I told him.

But I knew that I wouldn't.

**Related Characters:** Travis Coates (speaker), Lisbeth Searcy, Bud Searcy, Old Yeller

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 53

### Explanation and Analysis

Travis finds out from Bud Searcy's granddaughter Lisbeth that Old Yeller has been pilfering eggs, vegetables, meat, and other foodstuffs from local neighbors throughout the Hill Country. Hearing this, he threatens to hurt Old Yeller and even claims that he'll laugh when Old Yeller is caught (and inevitably shot) for his trespasses.

This passage illustrates how Travis is still trying to convince himself that the human world and the animal world are separate rather than interconnected and symbiotic. He tries to embody a punishing and emotionally detached version of masculinity as he reprimands Old Yeller—but deep down, Travis can't stifle the intense empathy he feels for Old Yeller and all animals. He knows that Old Yeller doesn't steal out of malice—but he also knows that he would fail to make Old Yeller's case to his hardened, world-weary neighbors. They,

even more so than Travis, have a limited understanding of nature and its intricacies.

## Chapter 8 Quotes

☝ I didn't wait to hear any more. I ran off. I was so full of relief that I was about to pop. I knew that if I didn't get out of sight in a hurry, this Burn Sanderson was going to catch me crying.

**Related Characters:** Travis Coates (speaker), Papa, Little Arliss, Old Yeller, Burn Sanderson

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 68

### Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the Coateses have just received a visit from a man named Burn Sanderson—a cowboy who claims that Old Yeller is his dog. Old Yeller, a herding dog, wandered away in the middle of Burn's cattle drive, and now Burn wants Old Yeller back. After seeing how desperately Travis and Little Arliss love Yeller, however, Burn softens—just before this quotation, he tells the Coateses that they can keep Old Yeller.

After Travis receives the news that they're allowed to keep Old Yeller, he's so relieved that he becomes emotional, and he hurries away so that Burn doesn't see him cry. Travis tries to suppress his emotions in order to embody the stoic version of masculinity that Papa has modeled for him—not for anyone's actual good, but only to make a good impression on Burn. Burn, like Papa, is on a cattle drive—and therefore, Travis sees Burn as Papa's equal. Travis feels the same compulsion to impress Burn as he does to impress Papa—and he believes that the only way to seem like enough of a man is to prevent anyone else from seeing him emote.

☝ "You're not scared, are you, boy? I'm only telling you because I know your papa left you in charge of things. I know you can handle whatever comes up. I'm just telling you to watch close and not let anything—*anything*—get to you or your folks with hydrophobia. Think you can do that?"


I swallowed. "I can do it," I told him. "I'm not scared."

The sternness left Burn Sanderson's face. He put a hand on my shoulder, just as Papa had the day he left.

"Good boy," he said. "That's the way a man talks."

**Related Characters:** Travis Coates, Burn Sanderson (speaker)

**Related Themes:**    

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 70

### Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Burn Sanderson takes Travis aside and confides in him that he's seen signs of a quickly spreading outbreak of hydrophobia (rabies) throughout the countryside. In telling Travis this information, it's clear that Burn does regard Travis as the man of the house—a young boy who wants so badly to be mature and capable that he'll do anything he can to prove those things about himself. Burn genuinely wants to warn Travis of the danger that's afoot. He's a cowboy who spends most of his time in the wild, and he knows better than anyone that the human world is intimately connected with the animal world; the problems that plague one plague the other.

Burn also encourages Travis to act like a man as he prepares to deal with the hydrophobia. This foreshadows the difficult decisions Travis will have to make as he faces the effects of hydrophobia on the animals he knows and loves—and how he'll try to steel himself in order to face these problems in the way that he believes a grown man should. Burn's advice is somewhat unhelpful, however: by encouraging Travis to ignore his fear and focus on acting aloof and superior, he's deadening Travis to his own instincts and emotions. Rather than encouraging Travis to think critically about what's going on, Burn is essentially urging him to see a complex problem as something to be bullheadedly charged at.

## Chapter 9 Quotes

🗨️ A boy, before he really grows up, is pretty much like a wild animal.

**Related Characters:** Travis Coates (speaker), Old Yeller

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 71

### Explanation and Analysis

In this quotation, an older Travis reflects pensively on the actions of his younger self and touches on ideas about maturity, masculinity, and wildness (or the connection

between people and animals). The older Travis feels that young boys are not very different at all from wild animals. This belief, if taken as true, explains why Travis and Old Yeller have such a close relationship: though they're different species, they're not as different as they seem. Boys and wild animals, Gipson suggests, exemplify the thin barrier between nature and human civilization. Their behaviors and dispositions are similar, and their experiences of the world are not as different as one might think. This passage positions growing up—which Travis wants to do more than anything—as a kind of loss, because it suggests that growing up pulls one further and further away from a rare and unique affinity and intimacy with a different world.

🗨️ Papa had told me right from the start that fear was a right and natural feeling for anybody, and nothing to be ashamed of.

"It's a thing of your mind," he said, "and you can train your mind to handle it just like you can train your arm to throw a rock."

Put that way, it made sense to be afraid; so I hadn't bothered about that.

**Related Characters:** Travis Coates (speaker), Papa

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 78

### Explanation and Analysis



In this passage, Travis goes off on a mission to tag his family's new hogs, which run wild throughout the Hill Country but remain the Coateses' property. He struggles with feelings of apprehension about working with the dangerous and unpredictable animals. At first, Travis tries to suppress his fears—he feels that in order to prove to his family that he's a grown, capable man, he must be stoic and brave in every situation.

The more Travis thinks, however, the more he recalls something that Papa, his role model for masculinity, once told him. Papa advised Travis always to heed his fears and even try to learn from them—he clearly believes that fear is an important and very natural part of life, and that sometimes it just "makes sense" to be afraid. Travis, on the other hand, believes that fear is weak and even emasculating. This difference of opinion suggests that, in order to truly grow up, Travis must learn to heed his fears, learn from them, and become more in touch with his instincts. Only then can he truly prove himself to be the mature man he wants to be.

## Chapter 10 Quotes

☹☹ A big lump came up into my throat. Tears stung my eyes, blinding me. Here he was, trying to lick my wound, when he was bleeding from a dozen worse ones.

**Related Characters:** Travis Coates (speaker), Old Yeller

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 85

### Explanation and Analysis


In this passage, Travis and Old Yeller have just survived a vicious and life-threatening attack after angering some rogue wild hogs. The hogs gored Travis in the leg and ripped Old Yeller's stomach open, exposing his innards. Yet, even though Old Yeller's injuries are much more severe and painful than Travis's, he tries to lick Travis's wounds and comfort him before tending to himself.


This passage elicits strong emotion from Travis, as he recognizes just how much Old Yeller loves him. Travis has always seen himself as somewhat removed from the animal world. But throughout their relationship, Old Yeller has helped show Travis that animals and people aren't as separate as they seem—and now, in this passage, Travis seems to fully grasp the gravity of how similar he is to his beloved dog, and how real their emotions both are. Travis spends much of his time suppressing his emotions and hiding his frustrations in order to perform the tasks he needs to and prove his maturity and capability to his family. In this passage, as he's met with extreme tenderness, he allows himself to experience a moment of true emotion—and thus proves himself stronger, more intuitive, and more capable than ever.

## Chapter 12 Quotes

☹☹ For the next couple of weeks, Old Yeller and I had a rough time of it. I lay on the bed inside the cabin and Yeller lay on the cowhide in the dog run, and we both hurt so bad that we were wallowing and groaning and whimpering all the time. Sometimes I hurt so bad that I didn't quite know what was happening. I'd hear grunts and groans and couldn't tell if they were mine or Yeller's.

**Related Characters:** Travis Coates (speaker), Old Yeller

**Related Themes:** 

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 99

### Explanation and Analysis

As Travis and Old Yeller recover from the terrible injuries they sustained while fighting off a horde of wild hogs, Gipson continues to illustrate how Travis and Old Yeller's experiences are deeply interconnected, even though they're different species and from different worlds. Travis struggles to differentiate between his and Old Yeller's cries of pain, which suggests that Travis and Old Yeller's experiences of pain and suffering are not so different—and, by extension, that the human world and the animal world can't be neatly separated.

This passage is also significant because it foreshadows the horrific tragedy of Old Yeller's death, when Old Yeller is infected with hydrophobia (rabies) and Travis must shoot him. Old Yeller is a dog, but his feelings and experiences are just as real as Travis's. Travis, sensitive as he is to the similarities between him and Old Yeller, no doubt knows this. But in order to kill Old Yeller—and protect his family in the process—Travis must learn to dull himself to this fact. As Travis is forced to undertake increasingly difficult responsibilities on his family's behalf, he's forced to think of himself as allied more with fellow people than with animals and the natural environment. Sadly, the synchronicity and sameness he feels with Old Yeller in this passage will soon begin to fade out of necessity.

## Chapter 13 Quotes

☹☹ In a way, it sort of hurt my pride for a little old girl like Lisbeth to come in and take over my jobs. Papa had left me to look after things. But now I was laid up, and here was a girl handling my work about as good as I could. Still, she couldn't get out and mark hogs or kill meat or swing a chopping axe. . .

**Related Characters:** Travis Coates (speaker), Little Arliss, Mama, Papa, Lisbeth Searcy

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 106

### Explanation and Analysis


In this passage, Travis investigates his feelings about having Lisbeth Searcy, a neighbor girl of only 11 years old, come to stay at the ranch and help out around the house while Travis recovers from a debilitating injury. This passage is significant because it illustrates Travis's fervent need to

prove himself as a capable and manly provider for his family. Even when an injury derails Travis's ability to hunt, do farm work, and take care of other responsibilities for Mama and Little Arliss, Travis feels like he should be doing more for his family. Travis believes that unless he perfectly embodies the role of provider and "man of the house," he'll fail to live up to the standard of masculinity that he thinks Papa expects of him. In this passage, Travis tries to assure himself that although Lisbeth has taken over a large portion of his duties, there are some things that she'll never be able to take over for him.

☝ Now, I knew that Spot wouldn't get well, and this bull wouldn't, either. I knew they were both deathly sick with hydrophobia. Old Yeller had scented that sickness in this bull and somehow sensed how fearfully dangerous it was. I thought of Lisbeth and Little Arliss down past the spring. I came up out of my chair, calling for Mama. "Mama!" I said. "Bring me my gun, Mama!"

**Related Characters:** Travis Coates (speaker), Little Arliss, Lisbeth Searcy, Old Yeller, Chongo and Roany, Spot

**Related Themes:**   

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 110

### Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, one of the bulls that previously fought on the Coates family's property, Roany, comes back to the ranch—and this time, he's even more aggressive and unpredictable than he was when he had his horns locked with another bull. Travis and his family have wanted to believe that the bizarre behavior of several animals around the ranch (including that of their own milk heifer, Spot) is merely coincidental—but in this passage, Travis realizes that the hydrophobia plague he's been hearing so much about in the last few weeks has finally begun to affect his own life.

Rather than give into his terrible fear of the disease, however, Travis uses this opportunity to decisively take action and protect his family. He steps up and takes responsibility for putting an end to the new, compounded threat that Roany's presence represents when he calls for Mama to bring him his gun so that he can kill the infected animal. Travis's coming-of-age process is painful and riddled with difficult responsibilities, like killing sick but innocent animals—yet with each new challenge Travis faces, he rises

to the occasion and does what must be done.

## Chapter 14 Quotes

☝ We couldn't leave the dead bull to lie there that close to the cabin. In a few days, the scent of rotting flesh would drive us out. Also, the carcass lay too close to the spring. Mama was afraid it would foul up our drinking water.


"We'll have to try to drag it further from the cabin and burn it," she said.

"Burn it?" I said in surprise. "Why can't we just leave it for the buzzards and varmints to clean up?"

"Because that might spread the sickness," Mama said. "If the varmints eat it, they might get the sickness, too."

**Related Characters:** Mama, Travis Coates (speaker), Papa, Chongo and Roany

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 114


### Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Travis and Mama discuss the need to burn the corpse of a hydrophobic (rabid) bull that Travis recently shot dead on their property after it threatened their family. In Papa's absence, a plague of hydrophobia has begun to ravage the countryside—and it's 14-year-old Travis who has had to man up and face the grisly, terrifying side effects of a disease that turns animals rabid. As Mama and Travis discuss the stomach-turning effects of leaving a bull's giant corpse out to rot, it becomes clear that Travis will have to step up and take responsibility for disposing of the carcass, lest it spread hydrophobia even in death and thus put Travis and his family at risk of contracting the disease. This passage illustrates just how quickly and unpredictably the problems of the animal world can intrude upon people—and how much is required of people to take responsibility for protecting both themselves and their animal counterparts.

☛ I went off to the spring after a bucket of fresh water and wondered when Papa would come back. Mama had said a couple of days ago that it was about that time, and I hoped so. [...] This hydrophobia plague had me scared. I'd handled things pretty well until that came along. Of course, I'd gotten a pretty bad hog cut, but that could have happened to anybody, even a grown man. And I was about to get well of that. But if the sickness got more of our cattle, I wouldn't know what to do.

**Related Characters:** Travis Coates (speaker), Spot, Lisbeth Searcy, Old Yeller, Mama, Papa

**Related Themes:**    

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 119

### Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Travis grows faintly worried as Mama, Old Yeller, and Lisbeth Searcy take longer than anticipated as they gather firewood from the countryside. Just as Travis and Mama burned up the corpse of the hydrophobic bull that died on their property, so too must they now burn up the carcass of Spot, their own beloved milk heifer. Travis is terrified of the fact that more and more animals seem to be coming down with hydrophobia. He knows that there is only so much he can do to protect his family, and that the forces of nature are beyond his control. He is confident in how he's grown in Papa's absence and how he's handled even the toughest, most dire situations—but in this passage, it's clear that Travis is still mortally afraid of the ever-diminishing barrier between his own world and the animal world. Travis longs to prove himself as a man who is capable of defending his family from anything—but the “right and natural” fear he feels about the hydrophobia plague is intense and ever-present.


## Chapter 15 Quotes


☛ "But Mama," I said. "We don't know for certain. We could wait and see. We could tie him or shut him up in the corncrib or some place till we know for sure!"

Mama broke down and went to crying then. She put her head on my shoulder and held me so tight that she nearly choked off my breath.

"We can't take a chance, Son," she sobbed. "It would be you or me or Little Arliss or Lisbeth next. I'll shoot him if you can't, but either way, we've got to do it. We just can't take the chance!"

**Related Characters:** Mama, Travis Coates (speaker), Lisbeth Searcy, Little Arliss, Old Yeller

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 126

### Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Mama tells Travis that he needs to kill Old Yeller, who has just been bitten by a rabid wolf. A plague of hydrophobia (rabies) has already taken several animals from the Coates family—and now, Travis discovers that Old Yeller, too, is a victim of the scourge. When Travis realizes that his mother is asking him to kill Old Yeller, he immediately pivots to denial, insisting that Old Yeller might yet be spared.

This passage is the culmination of many lessons Travis has been trying to learn throughout the novel. The permeability of the barrier between the animal world and the world of people has never been more apparent: Travis has known all along that an animal can easily pass hydrophobia to a human. And in the past, he's taken a staunch, discerning approach to putting down animals infected with the disease. Now that Old Yeller has been struck by the disease, however, Travis finds himself unable to suppress his emotions and take responsibility for what needs to be done—a natural response to such devastating news. This moment tests Travis profoundly, pushing him up against his emotions and forcing him to reckon with his notions of masculinity, responsibility, and humility to animals.


☛ It was going to kill something inside me to do it, but I knew then that I had to shoot my big yeller dog.

Once I knew for sure I had it to do, I don't think I really felt anything. I was just numb all over, like a dead man walking.

Quickly, I left Mama and went to stand in the light of the burning bear grass. I reloaded my gun and called Old Yeller back from the house. I stuck the muzzle of the gun against his head and pulled the trigger.

**Related Characters:** Travis Coates (speaker), Papa, Mama, Old Yeller

**Related Themes:**   

**Related Symbols:** 



**Page Number:** 127

### Explanation and Analysis



In this passage, Travis realizes that, in order to do the responsible thing and protect his family from the ravages of hydrophobia, he must do the unthinkable and execute Old Yeller. Old Yeller has been bitten by a rabid wolf, and Travis knows that there's no way Yeller won't contract the terrible disease. As Travis steels himself for what he must do, he accepts that he'll have to become "numb all over" and "kill something inside [himself]". Travis, believing that this task is the culmination of his masculine responsibilities as the "man of the house," suppresses his emotions and coldly executes Old Yeller.


This passage illustrates the implications of Travis's misguided beliefs about masculinity and responsibility. In Papa's absence, he's tried to do what needs to be done at any cost, suppressing fear, instinct, and emotion in order to take care of his family. Now, he finds that ridding himself of his emotions prevents him from giving his best friend a dignified death and a decent farewell. Although denying his emotions may help Travis distract himself and do what needs to be done in the moment, he'll likely come to regret how unemotional and unceremonious he was here.

## Chapter 16 Quotes

☹☹ Days went by, and I couldn't seem to get over it. I couldn't eat. I couldn't sleep. I couldn't cry. I was all empty inside, but hurting. Hurting worse than I'd ever hurt in my life.

**Related Characters:** Travis Coates (speaker), Papa, Old Yeller

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 129

### Explanation and Analysis

In this quotation, Travis describes his feelings in the days immediately following Old Yeller's tragic death. In the previous chapter, Travis was forced to steel himself against his emotions in order to kill Old Yeller after he became infected with hydrophobia. As the "man of the house" in Papa's absence, Travis had to be the one to kill his beloved animal companion. Now, he finds that the suppression of emotion and feeling required of him in order to do the


terrible deed is having far-ranging implications. Travis is unable to get back in touch with his emotions, even though he feels wracked with grief. He can't express himself, even to those closest to him, nor can he take care of his most basic needs. This passage illustrates how Travis's ideas about suppressing one's emotions to prove one's masculinity and responsibility are harmful in the long run, as the expectations he places on himself prevent him from grieving Old Yeller in a healthy way.

☹☹ "Now the thing to do," he went on, "is to try to forget it and go on being a man."

"How?" I asked. "How can you forget a thing like that?"

He studied me for a moment, then shook his head. "I guess I don't quite mean that," he said. "It's not a thing you can forget."

**Related Characters:** Travis Coates, Papa (speaker), Old Yeller

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 131

### Explanation and Analysis



In this passage, Travis and his Papa, who has recently returned from a long cattle drive to Kansas, discuss the recent death of Old Yeller. Papa has just told Travis how proud he is of him for handling Old Yeller's death like a grown man, and then he utters this line about trying to "forget" Old Yeller's passing in order to continue "being a man." Travis, who has spent the novel trying his best to prove that he's a mature, responsible, rugged man, is suddenly thrown into existential misery by his father's advice. Travis has sought to emulate his father's disposition and behavior—but now, he's so distraught over the death of Old Yeller that he doesn't see how he can take his father's advice.

This is an important moment because, based on Papa's seemingly ashamed reaction, it's clear that neither Travis nor Papa truly knows how, exactly, to be a man. Both of them believe that masculinity is tied to emotionlessness and a staunch adherence to duty—but in this passage, they both begin to question what they've come to believe about manhood.

●● I started to holler at them. I started to say: "Arliss! You get that nasty pup out of our drinking water."

Then I didn't. Instead, I went to laughing. I sat there and laughed till I cried. When all the time I knew that I ought to go beat them to a frazzle for messing up our drinking water.

**Related Characters:** Travis Coates (speaker), Papa, Little Arliss

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 132

### Explanation and Analysis

In the final lines of the novel, Travis Coates sees his brother Little Arliss playing in their family's drinking water supply with his new puppy. While Papa was gone on his cattle drive

and Travis was the "man of the house," Travis often took it upon himself to yell at Little Arliss for such behavior or threaten to "beat [him] to a frazzle." Now, however, as Travis catches sight of his little brother enjoying a playful romp with his animal friend, Travis can't help but feel moved to a vast range of surprising and cathartic emotions.

While Travis has internalized an idea of manhood that's based on the rejection of emotion and the elevation of punishment, intimidation, and order, he's beginning to learn that truly being the "man of the house" actually requires emotional intelligence and compassion. This passage shows that Travis is starting to acknowledge his feelings in the wake of Old Yeller's death. He's come to see that it's unsustainable to pursue such staunch and emotionally numb respectability.



## 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.

## CHAPTER 1

Travis Coates looks back on when he took care of a dog, whom he called Old Yeller, during his boyhood. Old Yeller's name, he explains, always had a double meaning: not only was the dog yellow, which Travis and his Texan family pronounced "yeller," but Old Yeller's bays sounded closer to a person's yell than a dog's bark. Travis recalls how, when Old Yeller first strayed onto his family's property, he longed to kill him. But later, when Travis actually had to kill Old Yeller, it was like shooting a member of his family.

The book flashes back to the late 1860s in the Texas Hill Country community of Salt Licks. Travis is 14 years old, and his father, whom he calls Papa, is heading out on a cattle drive to Abilene, Kansas in order to make some money. Funds are tight for everyone in Travis's community in the aftermath of the long and bloody Civil War. Abilene is far away, and the drive will take months to complete, but Papa and several other Salt Licks men are desperate for cash. On the day Papa leaves, Travis wants to act like a "grown man," so he's determined not to cry—even as his five-year-old brother, Little Arliss, howls with sadness.

After Papa says goodbye to Mama and Little Arliss, Travis walks him to his horse. Papa tells Travis that he expects him to act like "the man of the family" in his absence. Travis will need to take care of Mama and Little Arliss, cut wood, milk cows, and tag hogs. He'll also have to keep an eye on the corn patch, so that no varmints eat up the valuable bread and corn stocks that the family is saving for winter. Before Papa leaves, Travis asks Papa if he can have a horse. Papa says that what Travis really needs is a good dog—but that if Travis is good while Papa is away, Papa will get him a "man's horse to ride." Papa and Travis shake hands. Travis feels very manly, and he becomes fully determined to handle everything that needs to be done while Papa is gone.

*This passage introduces Travis's intense relationship with his dog Old Yeller. Old Yeller has taught Travis that the line between the world of people and the world of animals is not so distinct after all, and idea that Gipson symbolizes through Old Yeller's humanlike bark. Travis himself admits that harming Old Yeller was as emotionally painful for him as harming a person, further illustrating how loving Old Yeller taught him to see animals as complex, self-determined creatures.*



*As Travis's father prepares to go off on a long cattle drive, Travis has already begun to steel himself against emotion, believing that's the only way to prove that he's mature and worthy of his father's responsibilities. At this point in his youth, Travis conception of masculinity is perhaps overly simplistic: he thinks acting like a "grown man" is as straightforward as holding back tears when he's upset.*



*This passage continues to explore how Travis thinks about what it means to be a grown man. Travis feels that stoicism, bravery, and responsibility are all key aspects of masculinity—and Papa feeds into this by promising to reward Travis with a "man's horse" that will commemorate his son's manhood. Travis feels a lot of pressure to behave a certain way in order to prove to his father—and to himself—that he's is man enough.*



As Travis walks back up to the cabin alone, he begins to wish that he had a dog. The rural area where he and his family live is dangerous: wild wolves, bears, and panthers are regularly on the prowl; American Indians often raid Hill Country homes. Travis used to have a good dog named Bell, but several years ago, Bell died when a freshly severed **rattlesnake head** bit Bell on the nose. Travis cried for a week when Bell died, and although Papa offered to get Travis a new dog, Travis couldn't bear the thought of replacing Bell.

As Travis reaches home, he spies Little Arliss playing naked in the family's watering hole, where they get their drinking water. Travis yells for Arliss to get out of the water, but Arliss refuses to obey him. But then, Travis cuts a switch off a tree and approaches Arliss, so Arliss hurries out of the water and runs for the house. Mama, hearing the commotion, comes outside and asks what's going on. Travis, using Papa's trademark language, says he's going to "wear [Arliss] to a frazzle." Mama smiles and urges Arliss to listen to his older brother. She sends Arliss to sit alone in the abandoned dog run, where the family sometimes hangs freshly hunted meat to dry. Arliss sulks as Travis starts his chores.

That day, after the lunch, Travis hurries out to finish planting corn. He hooks the family's mule, Jumper, to the plow and gets to work; he wants to finish by sundown. Jumper is an agile and friendly mule who can, as his name suggests, jump over almost anything—but sometimes, he's stubborn and lazy. This afternoon, when Jumper characteristically stops suddenly in the middle of plowing, Travis hits Jumper with a switch, and Jumper immediately starts walking again. Back up at the house, Travis finds that Mama and Little Arliss have waited for him to come home before starting to eat supper—just as they always do for Papa.

That night, as Travis crawls into bed, he is tired but satisfied with his hard work. He's taught Little Arliss and Jumper that he's not to be messed with, and he's shown Mama that he's "man enough to wait supper on." Travis falls asleep happily, confident that he will be able to handle any problem that arises in Papa's absence.

*This passage, in which Travis recalls watching his childhood dog Bell die after being attacked by a severed rattlesnake head, symbolizes the natural world's unpredictability and danger. Although a decapitated snake might seem powerless and unable to do anymore harm, the head was still animated when Bell sniffed at it. This illustrates the idea that, while people and animals are certainly connected, the wilderness doesn't follow the same rules that human civilization does.*



*Right after Papa's departure, Travis is already determined to establish his new role as the man of the house. Travis replicates his Papa's words and actions in this scene as he attempts to establish dominance over Little Arliss and quash any challenge to his own newfound authority. This passage shows that Travis conceives of masculinity as the ability to stoically control and command others—he doesn't yet have a fuller, deeper idea of what it means to be a man.*



*Travis's determination to do well in his new role as the man of the house means that he tries to embody an emotionally stunted version of masculinity. But there's a positive side to his determination as well: Travis graciously and enthusiastically takes on a new set of responsibilities and creatively solves the problems in front of him. And as Travis takes on more and more responsibilities throughout the novel, he'll find that the things required of him increasingly depend on empathy, emotion, and creativity—not on stoicism, strength, and power.*



*Travis is determined to make good on his promises to Papa, and he's proud that he's proven himself to be "man enough"—he's excited about his new responsibilities rather than annoyed. This suggests that, even though Travis has a lot to learn about what it means to be a man, his transformative coming-of-age journey is underway.*



## CHAPTER 2

The next morning, when Travis goes out to the dog run to cut a side of meat for breakfast, he's surprised to find that all the meat is gone. He realizes what's happened when he sees a "big ugly slick-haired yeller dog" curled up on the ground; the dog's belly is round and full. As the dog sees Travis, he lazily stretches and then runs toward Travis, barking happily. Travis is furious with the dog for stealing the last of the family's meat from the previous winter's hog butchering. He begins yelling at the dog and trying to kick him—but the happy dog thinks that Travis is playing a game and continues barking.

Mama and Little Arliss come out to see what all the fuss is about. As soon as Arliss spies the dog, he runs to him and hugs him. Arliss tells Travis that he'll hit him if Travis continues being mean to "his" dog. Mama laughs and agrees to let Arliss keep the stray dog—Arliss, she says, needs a playmate. Travis makes a fuss, but eventually he quiets down and resolves to secretly find a way to get rid of the dog. He remains in a dark mood over breakfast. When the meal is finished, Mama tells Travis to go out and kill a doe for some meat—and to think, while he's out, about what having a dog might do for their family.

*Travis is furious with the "yeller" dog he finds eating his family's meat. He feels that the dog threatens his ability to provide for his family while Papa is away—and this could throw a wrench in Travis's goal of proving himself to be a strong, capable man. Travis primarily sees the animals around him—Jumper and now this dog—as nuisances who only affect his world negatively. He doesn't yet understand the overlap between the world of people and the world of animals.*



*In Travis's opinion, the responsible thing to do would be to get rid of the dog, since it stole food from his family. He's so focused on maintaining order on the family homestead in Papa's absence that he doesn't see how he, Arliss, and Mama could help this animal—and how this animal could help them in return.*



## CHAPTER 3

After milking the cows, Travis grabs his rifle and saddles Jumper up with some ropes to carry back any doe he might catch. Travis and Jumper ride for a while. Knowing how gun-shy Jumper is, Travis leaves Jumper tied in a thicket while he goes on ahead to the Salt Licks, a part of the forest where many animals flock to lick ancient rocks with sedimentary layers of salt inside. Using the knowledge Papa has taught him, Travis treads carefully in the dense woods, so that no deer will detect him. He is tempted to shoot a wild javelina (a type of hog)—but having heard stories about javelinas' aggression from his neighbors Jed and Rosal Simpson, Travis decides to wait for the small hogs to move away.

As Travis crouches in wait in some underbrush for a doe to come by, he enjoys watching a roan bull and some calves, darting squirrels, and quail. The squirrels' silly antics amuse him so much that he laughs out loud, startling a doe that he hadn't realized was there. As the doe slowly creeps toward Travis, he waits for the perfect moment to raise his gun—but when he finally shoots, the doe runs away. Travis fears that he hasn't killed the deer but rather wounded her and made the final moments of her life painful and miserable.

*Travis relies on the men he looks up to—such as Papa or the Simpsons—for knowledge and instruction, drawing on this wisdom as he tries to prove that he's capable of traditionally adult responsibilities. Meanwhile, this passage shows that Travis does have some understanding of the interconnectedness of people and animals: he's learned about how animals perceive the world around them, and how they react to the threat of people in their environments.*



*Even though Travis has a hard time tolerating Old Yeller, this passage shows that he's sensitive to the rhythms of the animal world. Travis likes animals a lot, so the possibility that he's caused the doe to suffer is difficult for him to accept. He also seems to respect the fact that he and his family depend on animals for sustenance and survival.*



Travis watches as the injured doe runs through the trees. Then, the doe does something that Travis thinks is odd: she runs head-on into the trunk of a tree and then sinks to the ground. Travis has never seen a wild animal run into something as if it was blind. Travis runs over to the doe and sees that he did indeed make a killing shot—there is a bullet hole right through the doe’s middle, near her heart. Travis feels confident and strong—he’s gotten meat for the family, just like his Papa taught him.

On the ride home, Travis feels proud and accomplished on. He decides that he’ll be kind and generous with Little Arliss and the yeller dog—after all, he’s “nearly a man,” so it’s his job to put up with aggravation. When Travis arrives home, however, he sees Little Arliss and the dirty yellow dog playing in the watering hole, and he starts screaming and throwing rocks at them. He hits the dog with a couple of rocks before an angry Arliss starts throwing rocks at Travis.

Travis knows better than to start throwing rocks directly at his five-year-old brother. Instead, he heads up to the house to tell Mama what’s going on. Mama punishes Arliss for playing in the watering hole—but she also yells at Travis for being “bossy” to his younger brother. After this, Travis heads out to the yard to begin skinning and cutting up the doe. He’s angry that his mother doesn’t seem to acknowledge his good deeds—only his bad ones. And Travis is furious with the dog—whom he’s started calling Old Yeller in his head—for getting him into such trouble. When Travis is finished cutting up the meat, he hangs it in the same spot where Old Yeller stole the hog meat. Old Yeller, however, plays dumb and doesn’t approach the meat—instead, he gnaws on some discarded bones and ignores the sides of venison entirely.

## CHAPTER 4

A couple of days later, Travis, Mama, and Little Arliss are eating lunch when they hear something outside. Almost immediately, Travis recognizes the noises as the sound of bulls lowing at each other—he can tell that the bulls are gearing up for a fight. Travis and his family sit and listen to the bulls’ rumblings. Travis is excited—he can tell the bulls are getting angrier and angrier, and he loves to see any fight between wild animals. As the bulls’ cries grow louder and louder, Travis jumps up from the table and stands at the door to watch the action.

*There seems to be something wrong with the doe besides the gunshot wound, since animals don’t typically run straight into trees. This foreshadows the possibility that something strange—and potentially dangerous—is happening to animals in the Hill Country.*



*Having killed the deer, Travis feels a kind of oneness with nature—and additionally, he feels like providing for his family through hunting means that he’s “nearly a man.” When Travis gets home and sees Little Arliss misbehaving, however, he feels that all of his hard work is for nothing if his family doesn’t respect him as the man of the house in Papa’s absence.*



*Travis still doesn’t like Old Yeller, and he’s determined to force the dog to show himself for who he truly is. This is why Travis hangs the meat within Old Yeller’s reach: he’s hoping that Old Yeller will take the bait and get in trouble for stealing their food. Old Yeller, however, is a smart animal—he seems to have intuition about how his actions affect Travis. At this point, Travis and Old Yeller have a contentious and somewhat begrudging relationship. If they’re going to get along, each of them must find a way to learn from the other.*



*The close proximity of the angry bulls hints that the animal world isn’t as separate from the human world as people might like to think. As Travis gets ready for an exciting bull fight, he thinks that he’ll merely be a spectator to the animals’ battle—but as he’s soon about to see, people are never as far removed from animals as they might think.*



Travis watches the two bulls enter the clearing just below the ridge on which the Coateses' house sits. One is a mustard-colored bull with a drooping horn, or a *chongo*, according to the Mexican people who frequently pass through the Hill Country. The other bull is the same red roan that Travis saw a few days ago at the Salt Licks. Travis can tell both bulls badly want to fight, and he's excited to have a front-row seat. But just then, Old Yeller runs up from the side of the house and barks down at the bulls. Travis warns him not to ruin the show—but Old Yeller continues barking, so Travis throws a rock at him.

*Travis is so excited for the bull fight that he actively discourages Old Yeller from scaring the bulls off. This illustrates that Travis doesn't yet understand just how quickly and severely conflicts between animal can come to bear on people.*



Travis then runs outside to sit on the split-rail fence and watch the bulls. Mama and Little Arliss follow him. Travis announces he's betting on "Chongo" to win—Mama, however, thinks that the other bull, "Roany," will win. An older Travis comments that, in retrospect, neither he nor Mama thought that any real danger was afoot—but they would soon learn differently.

*As the older Travis looks back on this moment, he is almost derisive about his younger self's folly and his refusal to heed any kind of fear or instinct for self-preservation. This moment represents the last instant of Travis's life in which he was willfully blind to how the animal world affects the human world.*



As Chongo and Roany charge at each other, Travis begins whooping and cheering. The bulls collide and charge at each other again and again. Soon, Mama realizes that the bulls are headed straight for the split-rail fence, and she pulls Little Arliss away just in time. Travis, however, is unable to move—he's still sitting on the fence when the bulls knock into the fence and tear it apart. Travis fears that he's done for—but when the dust settles, the bulls are far away from him, and he's able to get up and run back to the house. He barely makes it inside before the bulls slam into the front door so hard that the whole cabin shakes.

*As the bulls fight in the Coateses' yard—and eventually right up against the family's cabin—it becomes clear to Travis, Mama, and Little Arliss that the animal world is not there for them to observe from afar. Here, the animal world comes to bear on their world in an intense, immediate, violent way.*



As Travis looks at Mama and Little Arliss, he sees terror on their faces. Travis decides that he's not scared anymore—he's mad. He reaches for a whip hanging near the door. Mama begs Travis not to further agitate the bulls, but Travis is afraid that if he doesn't stop them, they'll tear down the house. Mama urges Travis not to go outside again and suggests that he sic Old Yeller on the bulls instead. Travis sticks his head out the door and calls for Old Yeller—when Old Yeller sees Travis's whip, however, he gets scared and runs away. Travis is furious, but he knows that it's now up to him to do something about the bulls.

*In this passage, Travis recognizes his folly in not seeing how the animal world affects his own world, and he also realizes that the only way to be brave is to learn from his fear. As the man of the house, he feels that it's his responsibility to do something about the bulls—he must prove that he's capable of defending his family.*



When Travis gets outside again and sees the bulls locked in battle, he realizes that there's no way his whip will stop them. He has no idea what to do—but then, a “freak accident” turns the tide. Chongo spears Roany, lifts him up, and brings him back down right on top of a heavy two-wheeled cart in the yard. The cart rolls down the hill with Roany still atop it. When the cart crashes into a ravine at the bottom of the hill, the roan bull stands up, shakes himself off, and runs away into the woods. Chongo, too, runs away. Travis laughs—in the end, both of the confused bull thought that they'd lost the fight.

*In this passage, the bulls' fighting miraculously resolves itself through a comical incident, which allows Travis fear to dissipate into relief. Though the incident ends on a lighthearted note, Travis and his family have all seen the power of nature firsthand. They now know that the animal world can quickly and violently affect their own.*



## CHAPTER 5

Little Arliss is a nature-lover: he's obsessed with trying to catch and keep creatures and insects, large and small. Each night, when Arliss comes in from playing, Mama makes him empty his pockets—often, Arliss pulls out worms, lizards, grasshoppers, frogs, and even venomous snakes. Since Old Yeller's arrival, Arliss has, with the help of the dog, started capturing and bringing home even bigger game, like rabbits and possums.

*This passage illustrates Little Arliss's profound love for nature. Yet, although Arliss is a nature-lover, he's still quite young, and he doesn't seem to fully understand how his actions can affect the animal world—and how the animal world can affect him.*



One day, Travis watches as Old Yeller catches a fish out of the creek and brings it to Little Arliss. Little Arliss brings the fish inside, even though the fish's scales cut up his hands. Mama bandages Arliss's wounds and cooks the fish up for dinner. Throughout the meal, Little Arliss brags about how he caught the fish with his bare hands. Travis tries to call Little Arliss out for lying, but Mama hushes Travis and urges him to let his brother tell his story—Travis himself, she says, used to tell some “whoppers” when he was little, too.

*Travis knows that Little Arliss's obsession with capturing animals is potentially dangerous—but his attempt here to shame or bully his brother out of his obsession fails. Arliss will have to learn the frightening lesson about the overlap between people and animals on his own.*



A couple of days later, Travis is down at the creek splitting rails to fix up the yard fence that the bulls tore down. The work is hard, but Travis is determined to finish the job he started. Near sundown, he hears Little Arliss scream—though Little Arliss is loud by nature, Travis can sense the fear in his brother's shout. Then, Travis hears something that truly terrifies him: the roar of a bear. He immediately takes off in the direction of Arliss's screams.

*Travis has been worried about Arliss's reckless approach to trapping and catching wild animals—now, as he hears Arliss's screams, he knows that something has gone wrong. He summons the bravery to throw himself headlong into whatever Arliss is facing.*



When Travis arrives at the spring where Arliss likes to play, he finds Arliss holding onto a bear cub—and he sees the bear cub's mama rushing out of the woods right toward them. Travis knows he won't make it to Arliss in time. All he can do is watch, paralyzed with fear. Just as the mama bear approaches Arliss, however, a “flash of yellow” comes speeding out of the brush—Old Yeller collides with the bear, grabs onto her throat, and doesn't let go.

*Arliss has gotten himself into trouble with a fearsome mama bear. He presumably wanted to catch the baby bear, having learned from his previous outdoor adventures that any animal could be captured and kept—but now, he's in over his head as he faces immediate danger.*





Travis runs over to Little Arliss and forces him away from the cub. He picks his brother up and runs with him toward Mama, who has come out of the cabin at all the commotion. Travis is prepared to turn around and strike at the mama bear with his axe, but Old Yeller has the bear distracted. Travis hurries the house. Then, Old Yeller releases the bear and follows him. They all take shelter in the cabin. Little Arliss is trembling, and Mama is crying, while Travis is still paralyzed with fear. Old Yeller licks all three of their faces until they calm down.

*Though Travis helps save Arliss from the bear, it's Old Yeller who successfully puts the mama bear off—and it's Old Yeller who comforts the Coates family in the aftermath of the terrifying incident. This illustrates how Old Yeller is helping the Coates family better understand the emotional and practical overlap between the human world and the animal world.*



## CHAPTER 6

After the incident at the spring, Travis feels his attitude toward Little Arliss change. Whereas for years he simply tolerated Little Arliss, he now realizes that he loves his little brother just as much as he loves Mama and Papa. Travis also begins to feel great affection for Old Yeller, the dog that saved his beloved little brother. He's suddenly willing to overlook all of Old Yeller's bad habits, treating the dog like a friend and companion rather than a nuisance.

*As Travis's love for Little Arliss increases, so too does his love for what Arliss loves—and what Arliss loves is Old Yeller. This speaks to the interconnectedness between people and animals, as Travis begins to see Old Yeller as part of the family.*



To show his appreciation for both Old Yeller and Little Arliss, Travis takes the two of them on a squirrel hunt. Travis finds Arliss to be annoying company, but the hunt is successful: they bring home five squirrels for supper. A week later, Old Yeller helps Travis recapture a huge turkey after Little Arliss distracts Travis while he tries to shoot it, resulting in a bad shot. When Travis tries to reward Old Yeller by giving him a piece of turkey that evening, Old Yeller refuses it. Mama and Travis wonder what Old Yeller has been eating to keep himself full.

*Though Travis still often finds Little Arliss annoying, the positive shared relationship he and Arliss have with Old Yeller helps bridge many of the gaps between the two brothers. Travis and Mama, however, begin to notice that Old Yeller is almost too helpful—his behavior seems too good to be true.*



The next day, Bud Searcy—a gregarious but lazy neighbor of the Coateses—drops by with his 11-year-old granddaughter Lisbeth, a tomboyish and sweet-natured blonde. Travis likes Lisbeth—but when she looks at him, he gets nervous because he feels she can see what he's thinking. Lisbeth and Bud bring their female blue-tick hound with him—Old Yeller and the dog begin playing and romping around right away, then go off to mate.

*The Searcys' arrival—and the almost instantaneous mating that occurs between Old Yeller and the Searcys' hound—illustrates yet another way in which the human world and the animal world can be connected. The Searcys have long been the Coateses' neighbors, yet the relationship seems to have been a distant one until now: as the two dogs mate, Gipson foreshadows a deeper alliance between the two families.*



Bud, Mama, Travis, and Lisbeth sit and talk. Bud checks in on how Mama has been holding up in Papa's absence and then changes the topic to goings-on within the Hill Country. He mentions Rosal Simpson having recently seen an aggressive fox that seemed to have a case of **hydrophobia**, or rabies. Bud tells a story about an uncle of his who was bitten by a mad dog years ago—before hydrophobia could set in, the man tied himself to a tree with log chains so that he wouldn't be able to attack his family when he himself became rabid. He died within days. Bud then moves on to talking about a "strange varmint" that has started stealing from smokehouses and henhouses throughout the settlement. Travis gets an uneasy feeling, and Lisbeth motions for him to get up and come with her.

Outside, near the spring, Lisbeth tells Travis that Old Yeller is the strange varmint—she's seen him steal from her and her grandfather's own backyard, but she's not going to tell anyone. Lisbeth says that her hound, Miss Prissy, will soon have puppies—Old Yeller will be the father of the litter, and Lisbeth doesn't want the puppies' father to get shot. Unsure of how to thank Lisbeth, Travis gives her an arrowhead he found a few days ago. Lisbeth happily accepts it and runs off. Travis remains worried that someone will spot Old Yeller stealing and harm him. That night, after gathering up the eggs from the hen house, Travis offers one to Old Yeller, who refuses to take it. Travis tells Old Yeller he can see right through him. "When they shoot you, I'm going to laugh," Travis says, even though he knows he wouldn't.

## CHAPTER 7

After thinking a lot about what to do, Travis decides to tell Mama what Lisbeth told him about Old Yeller stealing from their neighbors. Mama suggests that Travis start tying Old Yeller up at night, but Old Yeller chews through the ropes. Next, Mama suggests keeping Old Yeller in the corncrib each evening, but Old Yeller howls so loudly that no one can sleep. Travis suggests Old Yeller sleep in the room with him and Arliss. Mama warns Travis that he and Arliss will pick up fleas and ringworms when Old Yeller inevitably sleeps in the bed—but Travis doesn't care.

*As Bud Searcy talks about the goings-on in the Hill Country, his observations foreshadow trouble for everyone in this region. Most importantly, he mentions a sighting of an animal infected by hydrophobia (rabies), which is one of the book's central symbols. As Bud tells the story about his uncle getting bitten by a rabid dog and slowly going mad himself, Gipson illustrates how animals and people are profoundly interconnected—diseases like rabies can plague and decimate human populations as well as animal ones.*



*This passage provides even more foreshadowing about the tragic events to come later on in the novel. Travis recognizes that Old Yeller's mischievous behavior—which Travis has come to find endearing, in a way—makes him a target for those who don't find him as likable as the Coateses do. Travis still wants to distance himself from Old Yeller—perhaps because he knows that Old Yeller, as a perennial thief, is in constant danger of being shot. He essentially tells Old Yeller that the dog will have it coming if he gets shot while stealing—but Travis knows he's already more emotionally attached to the animal than he ever intended to be.*



*This passage shows how loving and protective of Old Yeller Travis is becoming. He puts Old Yeller's needs even before his own, desperate to keep the dog safe from anyone who might seek to do him any harm. Travis is learning to take responsibility for an animal and thus empathize with and connect to nature more broadly.*



Within a few weeks, more and more varmints have begun raiding the Coateses' corn patch on a nightly basis. Knowing that he has to protect the precious corn harvest, Travis takes Old Yeller outside to sleep with him in the corn patch each night. The nights are long and restless—Old Yeller is up several times each hour fighting off raccoons and possums—but Travis loves sleeping out under the night sky. Each night, he looks up at the stars and gets lost in fantasies of the day when he will go off on a cattle drive himself. Each night, Travis grows more and more grateful that Old Yeller came to stay. Papa, he realizes, was right: Travis needed a dog, and badly.

Travis realizes just how badly he needs Old Yeller when Mama declares that it's time for a new milk heifer. The only available heifer the family owns, Spot, has been wild and ornery from birth—and when Travis and Old Yeller set out onto the property to find her and bring her to the barn, they discover that she has recently had a calf and is thus even more irritable. Nevertheless, Old Yeller helps Travis wrangle Spot down off the hill and into the barn. When Travis tries to milk Spot, she grows feisty and starts kicking at him. Old Yeller again comes to Travis's aid by standing in front of Spot and glaring at her to keep her in line. Over the next several days, Travis enlists Old Yeller's help each morning and evening—within a week, Spot has become docile.

## CHAPTER 8

One afternoon, a young cowboy named Burn Sanderson, a newcomer to Salt Licks, arrives at the Coateses' cabin. He introduces himself to Mama and explains that he has come down from San Antonio on a cattle drive, bringing along only dogs for help and companionship. The best of the dogs, a "big yeller" one who was a camp robber, has gotten away. Mama immediately knows that Burn is talking about Old Yeller—she calls for Travis to bring Old Yeller in from playing with Little Arliss. Travis immediately reacts with sadness and indignance, but he obeys his mother and goes to fetch Old Yeller and Little Arliss from the creek.

Back at the house, Burn ties a rope to Old Yeller and prepares to head back out. Little Arliss begins throwing a terrible fit and tossing rocks at Burn Sanderson. Burn Sanderson laughs at Arliss's antics. He dismounts his horse and asks if Arliss really wants to keep Old Yeller. Arliss says that he does. Burn says that since he hasn't eaten a good meal in weeks, he'll agree to let the family keep Old Yeller if they can cook him up some delicious food. Travis is so relieved that he begins to cry. He runs away so that Burn won't see him shed a tear.

*Even as the season becomes more difficult, and Travis's responsibilities continue to increase, he feels happy and capable with Old Yeller at his side. Travis is better able to help his family—and carry out Papa's duties—with the help of his canine friend, because Old Yeller can do things Travis can't. Travis is growing and maturing as he learns to take on more responsibilities, admit his past follies, and develop greater respect for nature.*



*This passage illustrates the fact that Travis is learning how to work with—not against—the animals in his world. The more Travis learns to work with Old Yeller, the more the two are able to accomplish together. With Old Yeller by his side to help deepen his understanding of nature, Travis can accomplish increasingly difficult tasks and take on greater responsibilities with each passing day.*



*Travis and Old Yeller have grown closer and closer and have worked together harmoniously as they completed the tasks around the ranch. Now, Burn Sanderson's arrival threatens to break up Old Yeller and Travis's friendship—as well as Old Yeller's relationships with Mama and Little Arliss. Travis decides that however upset he is, the right thing to do is to hold it all inside and stoically do the right thing by returning Old Yeller to Burn.*



*In this passage, Burn senses just how deeply the Coateses have come to love and indeed need Old Yeller. He realizes that his own desire to get his best cattle dog back dwarfs this family's love for the mutt, and he decides to let Old Yeller stay in Salt Licks. Again, Travis is moved—and again, he tries to hide his emotions.*



Mama cooks a fabulous multi-course meal, and everyone eats their fill. After dinner, Burn sits around and talks a little while, then announces it's time for him to head out. He asks Travis to come with him to the watering hole. As Burn lets his horse take a drink, he turns to Travis and tells him that there is a plague of **hydrophobia** going around—he didn't want to say anything in front of Travis's mother and upset her. Travis feels a sharp fear run through him. It is up to Travis, Burn says, to be on the lookout for any animals who are acting strangely: foaming at the mouth, staggering around blindly, spitting or fighting for no reason.

Burn senses Travis's mounting fear. He urges Travis not to be afraid—after all, Travis's Papa left him in charge, so Travis must be good at handling situations like this. Burn urges Travis to be vigilant and to not let anything that seems to have **hydrophobia** get anywhere near him, Mama, or Arliss. Travis says that he's not scared—he'll do what needs to be done. "That's the way a man talks," Burn says, and he claps Travis on the shoulder and rides away.

## CHAPTER 9

By the next day, Travis has already forgotten all about Burn's terrifying warning. Boys, the older Travis notes in retrospect, are like wild animals in that way. The morning after Burn leaves, it's time to mark hogs. Travis is excited about the thrilling, dangerous work of rounding up and tagging his family's hogs, which run loose on the range. The hogs are wild and aggressive—Mama is terrified of them, and she hates the idea of Travis going out to tag them alone. But Travis insists that with Old Yeller by his side, he'll be just fine—however, even Travis knows that the violent hogs will attack at the first opportunity. Still, he has always had fun marking and castrating hogs with Papa, and he's anxious to prove that he can do the task himself.

Travis and Old Yeller set out and soon encounter their first group of hogs. Old Yeller rounds the hogs up, narrowly avoiding their sharp tusks, which Travis calls "tushes." Old Yeller is fast and nimble, but Travis finds himself a bit frightened by the fierce chase. Travis climbs up into a large live oak and out onto a branch that's low to the ground but still out of the hogs' reach. Old Yeller brings the hogs over to Travis, and Travis begins picking the small young pigs up off the ground and into the tree, where he marks their ears and castrates them with his hunting knife.

*In this passage, Burn mirrors Papa's behavior earlier in the novel. He entrusts Travis, the man of the house, with distressing information—and he asks Travis to shoulder the responsibility of keeping that information at the forefront of his mind. This shows that Burn senses Travis's maturity and resolve—but Travis's reaction also shows that he's still a young, frightened boy in many ways. The hydrophobia plague will be the biggest test Travis has faced yet: it threatens people and animals alike, and the disease is largely undetectable until it's too late.*



*Burn knows that if Travis lets his fear get the better of him, he won't be able to muster up the courage he needs to keep his family safe. Burn reassures Travis that he'll be all right by appealing to Travis's very obvious desire to be seen as a mature young man. Travis has a tough road ahead of him—but he's determined to keep things under control for his mother and brother.*



*In this passage shows how the human world and the animal world overlap not just practically but emotionally. As the older Travis looks back on his foolhardy youth, he feels that at 14, he was more like a wild animal than a man. Travis endearingly recalls his refusal to feel fear: as a young man, he's determined to prove that he's responsible and mature, so he's willing to suppress his instincts in order to do so.*



*The work of rounding up, tagging, and castrating hogs is dangerous, bloody, and chaotic. Travis has a plan in place—but as he sets to his task, it's clear that Travis's position is precarious.*



As the scent of blood fills the air, the older hogs on the ground grow wild and angry. Travis knows that if he falls out of the tree, the hogs below will slash him apart. He feels afraid—but he remembers that Papa always told him that fear was a “right and natural” emotion and nothing to feel ashamed of. Travis successfully wrangles his feelings of fear just as he wrangles the hogs—in less than an hour, he’s done with the job. Travis waits in the tree for an hour after the hogs depart to make sure the coast is clear—and Old Yeller waits with him the whole time.

*As the gravity of Travis’s situation sets in, he at least begins to acknowledge the fear he’s been feeling all along and process it with the attention it deserves. Since Papa’s departure, Travis has told himself that feeling fear is an impediment to acting manly, taking responsibility, and being brave—now, however, he realizes that fear is an important part of life.*



## CHAPTER 10

It is hard and uncertain work for Travis to keep track of how many hogs he’s tagged and to be sure that he’s gotten all his family’s hogs—but he takes a piece of each hog’s ear with him to keep a count. When the count reaches 46, he figures that he’s caught them all. One afternoon, however, Bud Searcy pays the family another visit—he says that there are a bunch of hogs Travis missed out on in a nearby area full of bat caves. Travis has never been to the area before, but he feels confident about going to locate and tag the missing hogs.

*When Bud Searcy brings the news that Travis’s work with the hogs isn’t done, Travis is excited to take on the added responsibility of rounding up the hogs that have wandered far away. Travis wants to explore a new place—and he wants to be sure that he leaves no task unfinished while Papa is away.*



As Travis and Old Yeller set out into the Hill Country, Travis takes in the sights and sounds of the nature all around him. Old Yeller locates the hogs with little trouble; as Travis hurries toward the pack, he can tell that they’re in an angry mood. Travis runs off toward a nearby tree, yelling for Old Yeller to bring the hogs over to him—but at a deep cut-bank between Travis and the tree, the hogs stop under an overhang that has created a shallow cave. Travis decides to get on the bank above them and go about his usual process from up there.

*Though Travis’s last encounter with the hogs went relatively smoothly in spite of their aggressive nature, this trip seems different right from the start. There aren’t as many trees around for Travis to sit in, so he’s forced to improvise a way of getting near the hogs without putting himself too close to the angry swarm.*



The tagging goes well enough until, suddenly, the dirt bank breaks beneath Travis’s weight, sending him crashing down in a wave of sand directly on top of the angry hogs. Travis is terrified—though he can’t see or hear for all the sand, he stands and begins to run. He is not fast enough, though, and a hog gores him in the leg with its huge tusk. Travis falls down, screaming. Old Yeller rushes to the rescue, darting between Travis and the hogs. The hogs rip into Old Yeller with their tusks while Travis scrambles far away. Alone in a grove of prickly pear trees, Travis rips open his pant leg and looks at his gored calf—the gash is a bad one that goes straight to the bone, yet Travis is in too much shock to feel any pain. He makes a tourniquet for himself and stands back up—but rather than heading for home, he hurries back to Old Yeller.

*As calamity strikes, the strong and violent hogs threaten Travis’s life. Old Yeller, a faithful pet, jumps into the fray in order to stop the hogs from goring Travis further, illustrating the thin barrier between the people and nature. Though Old Yeller is only a dog, he’s so loyal to Travis that he instinctively risks his own life. In return, Travis realizes that he owes this same loyalty to Old Yeller.*



When Travis finds Old Yeller, the hogs have left the dog alone—but Old Yeller is in bad shape. When Old Yeller sees Travis, he drags himself toward him, wagging his tail even though he is cut up and covered in blood. Travis begins to cry as Old Yeller starts licking Travis’s wound. Travis can see that Old Yeller’s belly has been ripped wide open and that some of his entrails are hanging out. The sight is so terrible that Travis wants to run away. Instead, he steels himself, pets Old Yeller, and gets to work. He ties up Old Yeller’s wounds with strips from his shirt, then eases Old Yeller under the collapsed rock slab and hides him behind a large tree stump. Travis promises Old Yeller that he will be back for him. As Travis runs home to get help for his dog, Old Yeller howls mournfully.

*Old Yeller has sustained several terrible and perhaps even mortal wounds in the fight against the hogs. Travis is terrified and sickened by his beloved dog’s state—yet he knows he must show Old Yeller the care and devotion that Old Yeller showed him. Travis doesn’t just see Old Yeller as another animal or a hunting dog—he knows that Old Yeller is an important part of his life, and that their bond transcends the gap between their two worlds.*



## CHAPTER 11

By the time Travis gets home, his leg is acting up. The cut muscle jerks and twitches, frightening Mama. Mama refuses to help take Travis back out to get Old Yeller until he lets her tend to his leg. As Mama cleans the wound out with turpentine, Travis screams in pain. Mama orders him to lie down—she says he’s not to leave bed for a week. Travis, however, announces that he will not leave Old Yeller to die. He defies Mama, goes outside, and starts readying Jumper for the journey. Soon, Mama is at his side, ready to find a way to bring Old Yeller back. She tells Travis to get some cowhides and then goes inside to fetch some pillows. Mama ties the pillows and cowhides to Jumper, then helps Little Arliss and Travis up onto his back. Mama clearly has a plan.

*In this passage, Travis illustrates the intense debt he feels toward Old Yeller. Travis now knows that responsibility isn’t just about completing tasks for his family—it’s about taking care of those who can’t take care of themselves. Travis puts his own pain aside to make sure that Old Yeller has an advocate.*



As the Coateses approach the bat caves, Travis can see some buzzards flying in a circle—he knows they must smell Old Yeller’s blood. They hurry closer to where Travis hid Old Yeller and immediately hear his barks. Travis is relieved that his beloved dog is still alive. Travis rolls away the stump in front of Old Yeller’s little hideout, and Mama immediately starts tending to Old Yeller’s wounds. She orders Travis to get a long hair from Jumper’s tail, then pulls a sewing needle from her pocket and starts sewing up Old Yeller’s terrible wound. Old Yeller is patient and quiet throughout the process.

*Though Mama was originally skeptical of a plan to head back out into the wilderness for Old Yeller, here she shows that she, too, sees Old Yeller as a member of the family. She knows that, because Old Yeller saved Travis, she has a responsibility to save him.*



When Mama is finished sewing Old Yeller up, she tells Arliss that it’s time to play a game—in this game, she says, Old Yeller is sick, and Arliss must take care of him as they ride home on a cowhide full of pillows tied to Jumper’s harness. Arliss is excited to ride home on the hide. Jumper puts up with the bizarre arrangement and lets Mama lead him by the halter through the rough countryside. The group stops twice for water when Old Yeller begins whimpering. Against all odds, they make it home. Travis’s leg is swollen, stiff, and painful, but he doesn’t care—he’s brought Old Yeller home.

*In this passage, people and animals work together to ensure that Old Yeller gets home safely. Though the journey is arduous and painful, Travis and Mama know how much they owe Old Yeller. Not only has he saved Arliss’s life, but now he’s also saved Travis from certain death. This passage cements the fact that Old Yeller belongs with the Coateses. He would do anything for them, and they would do anything for him in return.*



## CHAPTER 12

Both Travis and Old Yeller spend the next several weeks recovering from their injuries. As Travis swims in and out of consciousness, he has trouble telling whether the yowls and screams of pain he hears are his or Old Yeller's. Mama works hard to keep Travis's fever down and to make sure his leg is covered in a healing poultice made of mashed-up prickly pears. When Mama isn't taking care of Travis, she's tending to Old Yeller or doing all the tasks that need to get done around the ranch. Little Arliss is too young to help with most of the work, but he's restless and lonely. He constantly pesters Mama, Travis, and Old Yeller to play with him.

One day, Bud Searcy and Lisbeth arrive to call on the Coateses—and they have a puppy in tow. It is one of the puppies from the litter that Old Yeller sired with Lisbeth's hound. Lisbeth excitedly presents Travis with the pup, telling Travis that this dog is the best of the litter. Travis, however, is in so much pain that he's not able to react appropriately to the sweet gift. He says he already has a dog and urges Lisbeth to give the puppy to Arliss. Travis can tell that Lisbeth's feelings are hurt, but she does what he's told her to do.

As Travis lies in bed, beating himself up for being dismissive toward Lisbeth, he overhears Bud Searcy telling Mama that he plans to leave Lisbeth with her to help out around the house until Travis is well again. Mama balks, but Bud insists that Lisbeth is strong, capable, and mature in spite of her youth. Without hearing another word against the plan, Bud mounts his horse and rides away.

## CHAPTER 13

In the days that follow, Travis is pleasantly surprised and even impressed by what a big help Lisbeth is. Just like Travis, she's ready for any task at any time—no job is too big or too small for her. Travis watches wistfully as Lisbeth, Little Arliss, and Mama work together to harvest corn. He's sad that he can't help, and his pride is wounded just a bit by the fact that a girl has assumed all the duties that normally belong to the man of the house.

*The Coateses care for and take responsibility for one another in times of distress. As Travis and Old Yeller recover from their wounds simultaneously, Travis sees their plights as the same: he can't even differentiate between their cries of pain. This further illustrates the book's continual blurring of the boundary between the human world and the animal world.*



*Travis likes and cares for Lisbeth—but when she brings a puppy by, ostensibly to replace Old Yeller should he fail to recover, Travis reacts without compassion. Travis is afraid of showing any weakness or emotion—even though he's in a very obviously frail state and could use all the happiness, support, and comfort he can get.*



*As Travis recovers from his terrible injury, he's forced to watch Mama and Lisbeth take over all the tasks he'd been so proud of accomplishing all by himself in the first few weeks of Papa's journey. This will likely be difficult for him, as being the man of the house and providing for his family was a source of pride for Travis.*



*Travis believes that an important part of being a man is proving oneself capable of tending to any task in any circumstance. His injury prevents him from completing tasks for his family, so he views it as a direct threat to his journey toward manhood.*



One evening, however, a problem not even Lisbeth can handle arises out of nowhere. Travis is still laid up in bed—the swelling in his leg has gone down, but he’s still weak and tired all the time after weeks of fever. He hears a cow coming toward the house, lowing as it does, and he recognizes the moos as belonging to Spot. Mama goes out to wrangle Spot back into her pen—but soon, Travis hears Spot bellowing and Mama screaming. Mama runs into the cabin and tells everyone that Spot tried to charge at her—almost as if she didn’t recognize Mama at all. What’s more, Spot walked right past her own calf like she didn’t even see it. Travis wonders aloud if cows can get **hydrophobia**. Everyone is silent.

Over the next few days, Spot’s condition worsens. She walks around in wide, confused circles, lowing and staggering. Two or three days later, the roan bull Mama nicknamed Roany appears on the ranch—he, too, is staggering, reeling, and moaning. When Old Yeller smells the bull, growls. Watching Old Yeller’s reaction, Travis feels his hair stand on end. He realizes now, without a doubt, that both Roany and Spot have **hydrophobia**—Old Yeller can sense it in both of them.

Knowing what he must do, Travis asks for Mama to bring him his gun. He can see from the window that Roany is headed right for Lisbeth and Little Arliss, who are out in the yard. Mama goes outside to call them in—but then, the bull begins charging at Mama. Unwilling to wait another second, Travis gets up on his unsteady legs, fetches his gun, goes outside, and shoots the staggering roan bull between the eyes.

## CHAPTER 14

Mama knows that the dead bull’s corpse can’t be left lying where it is—it’ll smell up the yard. Plus, she adds, other animals might come eat parts of it and get infected with **hydrophobia** themselves. The corpse is too heavy to drag away, though, so Mama suggests that they burn it. Mama and Lisbeth go out to gather some firewood, and then Travis helps them start a huge fire. When the flames die down, however, the carcass isn’t even half burnt up. Mama, Lisbeth, and Travis spend two days and two nights lighting fires to burn up the corpse. On top of everything, Spot’s horrible moaning moos continue day and night. Travis is desperate for Papa to come home.

*It becomes clear to Travis and the rest of his family that their beloved Spot has come down with hydrophobia, which introduces a new dynamic to the physical and emotional overlap between people and animals. Spot’s condition isn’t just distressing because she’s ill—it’s frightening because hydrophobia can affect people as well as animals. Spot’s illness is an immediate reminder of how fragile the boundary between people and animals truly is.*



*Roany’s arrival makes it undeniable to Travis and the others that the hydrophobia plague isn’t going away anytime soon. Old Yeller’s violent reaction to scenting the disease shows just how deeply both people and animals fear it.*



*Travis puts aside his intense fear of hydrophobia and takes decisive action to save his family. He takes decisive control of a dangerous situation, reclaiming his role as the man of the house and proving his ability to conquer his fears and act responsibly in a crisis. This incident also foreshadows how Travis will have to steel himself against hydrophobia as the plague worsens in the weeks to come.*



*Travis has been handling all of the responsibilities that have been thrown his way as best he can—but now, as the hydrophobia plague really sets in (and all its attendant horrors make themselves known), Travis feels that he’s in over his head. The problems of the animal world have come to bear on the human world, and it’s almost more than Travis can stand.*





Once Roany's corpse is gone, Mama tells Travis it's time to do the same thing with Spot—Spot has to be killed and burnt. Travis's leg is now healed enough to walk on, so he takes his gun and heads out to find Spot, who looks sicker and more starved than she did just a few days ago. When Travis comes upon some good dry land where her corpse will burn easily, Travis fires at her. She drops, and Travis returns to the cabin. He's tired, and his leg hurts. Mama and Lisbeth head out to gather some wood and begin to burn the carcass, with Old Yeller happily following them.

Travis falls asleep. When he wakes up, it is sundown, and Little Arliss is in the yard playing with his pup. Travis wonders why Mama and Lisbeth aren't back yet. He heads to the spring to get some water. As he walks, he reflects on the job he's done while Papa has been away. He figures that, even with the problem of his leg, he's done a pretty good job of handling things—but he's still frightened that more and more animals will be infected with **hydrophobia** before Papa gets back.

## CHAPTER 15

After dark, Mama and Lisbeth still aren't home, which makes Travis deeply worried and uneasy. He knows that they have Jumper and Old Yeller with them—still, however, he can't shake the feeling that something is wrong. Travis doesn't want to leave Little Arliss, though, so he gets to work feeding his brother and putting him to bed. But suddenly, Travis hears a horrible noise: the sound of wild dogs fighting. Most chilling of all is the fact that Travis recognizes Old Yeller's pained and "savage roaring." Travis then hears Mama call for him—she asks him to come outside with a light and a gun.

Travis quickly lights a fire outside and stands there with his gun. He sees Old Yeller tangling with a giant, rabid wolf. Travis is afraid to shoot—he might hit Mama, Lisbeth, or Old Yeller. He waits a moment for a good shot: when the wolf's jaws close around Old Yeller's throat, Travis aims for it and shoots. The growling and snarling stop. Travis worries that he's killed Old Yeller—but within seconds, the dog trots over to him to lick his hands and wag his tail.

*This passage shows that Travis is able to do hard things—but the demands of being the man of the house still weigh on him physically and emotionally. As Travis finds himself having to put down not just wild animals, but animals he's cared for and loved, he grows increasingly distressed.*



*Even with all of the difficulties Travis has been facing, he still feels proud of himself. Even though each new task has been challenging in its own way, Travis has met every hurdle with grit and gumption. However, his ongoing worries about hydrophobia foreshadow the fact that the hardest task of all is still ahead of him.*



*Travis knows instinctually that something terrible is afoot—and he is afraid of what might be asked of him as he faces and deals with it. When Mama yells for Travis, however, he's ready to answer her call. Travis knows that nothing good can be waiting for him outside the cabin, but he also knows that, in order to prove himself, he must be ready to surmount any challenge on behalf of his family.*



*Travis walks outside into a horrible scene, but he barely even has time to process his feelings before he must act decisively. Once again, the hydrophobia plague has impressed upon Travis and his family just how interconnected people and animals truly are.*



Mama comes over to Travis and tells him about how they encountered the wolf at the creek on the edge of the ranch while coming back from gathering wood. The wolf originally tried to attack Mama and Lisbeth, but Old Yeller came to their defense. Travis says how proud he is of Old Yeller and prepares to help everyone back up to the house. Mama, however, tells Travis that something needs to be done about Old Yeller—the wolf bit him several times. Travis’s heart freezes as he realizes what Mama is getting at: Old Yeller must be put down before **hydrophobia** claims him.

Travis begs Mama to let Old Yeller live—he claims that there’s no way to know for certain that Old Yeller will get sick. Mama, however, says there’s no way they can take a chance—if Old Yeller bites Travis, Lisbeth, her, or Little Arliss, she will never forgive herself. Travis admits to himself that there’s no chance Old Yeller can escape his fate.

Travis knows that, although it will kill him inside, he must shoot Old Yeller. He feels himself go numb, as if he himself is already dead. Travis walks away from the firelight, loads his gun, and calls Old Yeller over. When Old Yeller approaches, Travis sticks the gun against the dog’s head and pulls the trigger.

*Travis doesn’t want to believe that Old Yeller is yet another victim of the hydrophobia plague—but after hearing Mama’s account, he knows that the rabid wolf did not spare Old Yeller. While Papa has been away, Travis has realized that part of coming of age means taking responsibility for painful and difficult things. With this in mind, Travis understands that he must take responsibility for what’s happened to Old Yeller.*



*Travis falls into denial about what’s happened to Old Yeller and what must be done about it. His acute fear of the hydrophobia plague jumping the species barrier and affecting him, his mother, or his brother was intense and real earlier on—but now that he realizes he must sacrifice Old Yeller to save his family, he wants to pretend that the barrier between people and animals is impermeable.*



*In this passage, Travis numbs himself in order to carry out the painful responsibility of putting down Old Yeller before he can spread the hydrophobia that the wolf almost certainly infected him with. Thus far, Travis has had conflicting ideas about masculinity, bravery, and responsibility. Here, he decides that being a man and taking responsibility means shutting himself off from his emotions—the only way to get through this disturbing act is to detach completely from what he’s doing.*



## CHAPTER 16

As the days go by, Travis is unable to get over Old Yeller’s death. He feels simultaneously pained and empty—he can’t think of anything but his love for Old Yeller and how guilty he feels about shooting him so unceremoniously. Mama and Lisbeth try to comfort Travis, but their words are no use. One night, it rains heavily—and the next morning, Papa arrives home with a horse for Travis. Travis acknowledges that the horse is beautiful, gentle, and strong—but he doesn’t feel proud, thankful, excited. He still feels numb.

*This passage shows just how deeply Travis has internalized harmful ideas about masculinity and emotion. Travis has been through a very traumatizing several weeks—yet he feels that if he were to process his feelings about Old Yeller’s death and show them openly, he’d disappoint his family. Thus, Travis represses his emotions, resorting to numbness and detachment to get by.*



That evening, before supper, Papa and Travis take a walk down to the spring. Papa tells Travis he heard about what happened to Old Yeller—and that while he’s sorry Travis had to go through such a thing, he feels that Travis stood up to what he was dealt better than most grown men would. Papa urges Travis to try to forget what happened and to “go on being a man.” Travis asks how he is supposed to forget, and Papa admits that he doesn’t know how. He urges Travis not to focus on only the bad things that happen to him in life, because life is full of painful, unfair events. Even after the talk with Papa, Travis still feels “dead and empty.”

About a week later, as Travis feeds Jumper some lunch, he hears Mama yelling at Little Arliss’s speckled pup—the one fathered by Old Yeller. The puppy has stolen some cornbread from the kitchen. As Little Arliss screams and Papa laughs, Travis starts to feel better. He watches the puppy run around with the stolen cornbread in its mouth and feels something brighten inside of him.

Travis takes his horse out for a ride. That evening, when he returns, he spots Little Arliss and his pup playing in the drinking water. Travis is about to yell at them, but at the last minute, he stops himself. He begins laughing and then crying. When Travis is finished crying, he decides that tomorrow, he’ll take Arliss and the puppy out for a squirrel hunt. If the puppy is big enough to act like Old Yeller, Travis thinks to himself, it’s time for him to start contributing.

*In this passage, it becomes clear that Papa, too, struggles with how to “go on being a man” while also honoring one’s pain and other intense emotions. Travis is confused and hurt by his father’s suggestion that he simply try to ignore his grief over Old Yeller. Travis is afraid to acknowledge his emotions about Old Yeller’s death, but still something within him is aware that remaining “dead and empty” is not the answer, either.*



*Travis is able to work through his complicated emotions not by denying his affection for Old Yeller or by ignoring the dog’s death, but by embracing his fond memories of Old Yeller and the feelings that they bring up for him.*



*As the novel comes to an end, Travis at last allows himself to fully grieve Old Yeller before deciding to follow Papa’s advice and focus on the good in life. Old Yeller was the best animal Travis ever knew—and while this new pup won’t ever replace Old Yeller, Travis knows that he must dedicate himself to helping Arliss and the pup grow and flourish. In feeling the full range of his emotions at last—and in taking responsibility for Arliss and the new puppy—Travis comes into his own as a man.*





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