

ANALYSIS BY 12 CRITICS

All the Pretty Horses (1992)

Cormac McCarthy

(1933-)

“In the *New York Times Book Review*, Madison Smartt Bell notes that ‘where *Suttree* and *Blood Meridian* are deliberately discontinuous, apparently random in the arrangement of their episodes, *All the Pretty Horses* is quite conventionally plotted.’ For this reason, and because of the ‘presence of a plainly sympathetic protagonist,’ the novel is ‘probably the most accessible of Mr. McCarthy’s six novels, though it certainly preserves all his stylistic strength.’ For Richard Ryan in his review in the *Christian Science Monitor*, the novel is merely ‘a conventional coming-of-age novel,’ ‘woefully meager literature.’ By contrast, Irving Malin in his review in *Commonweal* sees the novel as resembling ‘[o]n one level...the traditional initiation we find in *Huckleberry Finn* or, for that matter, in Faulkner’s *The Reivers*. (The novel seems particularly “American” because of its underlying structure; it is our kind of *adolescent picaresque*.) But on a second (and deeper) level it is an occult narrative of the ultimate meanings—if there are any—of these adventures. There are echoes of a religious quest, a trip to discover the Holy Grail’....The plot is, for the most part, merely an excuse to look for ‘epistemological answers,’ and the novel will ‘assume its place as an example of the great religious novels written by any American.’

In the *Los Angeles Times Book Review*, Richard Eder complains that John Grady ‘is simply too good at everything’ and compares him to ‘Parsifal’ [the knight]....[The novel] echoes James Joyce’s story ‘The Dead’ in *Dubliners*....It also recalls in a more general way the prayer to nothingness in Hemingway’s ‘A Clean, Well-Lighted Place’....While the biblical story of *Genesis* is the most overt, other mythic substructures resonate throughout the novel, including the Greek (the *Odyssey*; the story of the Golden Fleece; the descent of Orpheus into the underworld to rescue Eurydice), the Arthurian quest for truth and the holy grail and the Bible’s story of Job. All of these imbue the novel with its timeless, archetypal quality and, despite its wonderful humorous moments, invest it with a tragic dimension....

Like *Blood Meridian*, *All the Pretty Horses* is a western, although it is considerably gentler in tone and imbued with an archetypal aura of romance. Nonetheless, it is firmly grounded in the details of time (1949-1951) and place (west Texas in and around San Angelo, southeast to San Antonio, southwest to Langtry and Pumpville, farther south to various locations in the Mexican border state of Coahuila, and farther south still to Zacatecas), and topography (mountains, mesas, marshes, deserts, rivers). And, like its immediate predecessor, *All the Pretty Horses* is infused with the tensions of conflicting and competing cultures (the Anglo, the Comanche, the mestizo, the Mexican, the Spaniard) and economies (the agrarian-pastoral and the industrial-commercial, the legal and the illegal). Like virtually all of McCarthy’s work to date, *All the Pretty Horses* is permeated with a sense of loss, alienation...and fragmentation.

The novel opens on 13 September 1949, the funeral day of John Grady Cole’s maternal grandfather, whose death John Grady clearly understands portends the loss of the family ranch. And, although he is technically a boy, only sixteen, he recognizes that he is ‘like a man come to the end of something.’ The last of his grandfather’s line with its generations-deep commitment to the land, he is certainly as powerless to protect it against foreign encroachment—twentieth-century technology and the oil interests to which his often absent actress mother sells it—as was the Comanche nation he envisions as he rides out along their ancient war trail...‘under the reefs of bloodred cloud’ after his grandfather’s funeral...The comparison to the defeated and eradicated Comanche is made explicit by John Grady’s divorced, dying father during their last horseback ride together....And, like the Comanche, the dispossessed John Grady, rejected by mother and girlfriend, will ride south shortly after Christmas on a quest of his own into a world of passion and greed, of primal ferocity and violence...where his undefeatable adversaries turn out surprisingly to be two passionate and impassioned Mexican women....

All the Pretty Horses is set in a world of comparative normalcy, which is not to say that it is any less dominated by evil, any more controlled by rationality, logic or divine purpose, than that of its predecessors. John Grady Cole may no better understand the rapaciousness of the world, the divisions of the human heart or the power struggle that occurs behind the thick walls of the Hacienda de Nuestra Senora de la Purisima Concepcion than John Wesley, Suttree or 'the kid' comes to understand the circumstances of his own destiny. But John Grady confronts them with a courage, strength of character and grace that seem to emanate from an unwavering commitment to a set of significant values he has internalized, even when he might not have been expected to do so, given his youth, his upbringing or his inexperience.

For this novel is fundamentally a *Bildungsroman*, a coming of age story in the great tradition of Hawthorne, Twain, Melville and James, that archetypal American genre in which a youthful protagonist turns his back on civilization and heads out—into the forest, down river, across the sea or, as in John Grady's case, through desert and mountain on horseback—into the wilderness where innocence experiences the evil of the universe and risks defeat by it. This initiation tale also is imbued with the uniquely American variation on the theme of the fall from innocence into experience so aptly explored by James in particular, but also by Hawthorne and Twain, in which the American naif with his straightforward, unsophisticated notions of right and wrong, his code of honor and his simplistic conception of good and evil, is challenged by the moral relativism of an older, more complex civilization to deepen that vision.

McCarthy does not provide us with the characteristic Jamesian 'center of consciousness' to explicate the conflicts experienced, to elucidate the lessons learned through an extended narrative of 'psychological realism.' Instead, character revelations are, for the most part, oblique and understated, implied through terse, sparse dialogue, inferred from the specific actions and reactions. Landscape remains, in *All the Pretty Horses*, a central character and a characterizing agent. Thus the lessons John Grady learns from his descent into Mexico and his rejection by his Mexican beloved in the very heart of that country remain elusive. His journey portrays him not solely as a modern day horse-taming cowboy, although his skills in this regard are the stuff of which legends are made, but as an unlikely knight errant, displaced and dispossessed, heroically tested and stubbornly faithful to a chivalric code whose power is severely circumscribed by the inevitable evil in a hostile world.

One reviewer has criticized the novel for John Grady Cole's larger than life heroic qualities: his horsemanship, his physical stamina, his prowess with chess pieces and knife, his capacity to endure excruciating pain, his ability to doctor himself and others, his kinship with the land. By contrast to McCarthy's other protagonists, John Grady is clearly more hero than anti-hero. However, while all these attributes serve him well, they do not ensure that he will prevail. At novel's end, he returns to the cattle ranch virtually empty-handed, albeit one horse richer, after his Mexican odyssey; he has not won Alejandra and in fact appears to have seriously compromised her by alienating her from her father. Although he was the seduced as much as the seducer, their love is powerless against the irrevocable opposition of father and grand-aunt. Ultimately, the sixteen-year-old has no recourse other than to accept Alejandra's rejection, apparently promised to her aunt in exchange for the purchase of her lover's freedom from the prison into which her wrathful father has cast the unexpectedly dangerous usurper. Equally important, John Grady fails to protect one of his traveling companions, a thirteen-year-old runaway named Jimmy Blevins, for whose death he feels responsible and in expiation for which he risks his own life to recover the magnificent horse for which Jimmy was prepared to die.

By novel's end, when he returns to his own time and place and, briefly, to the now sold cattle ranch, John Grady's fall from innocence into experience encompasses sexual experience as well as betrayal in love and expulsion from paradise; his hands are bloodied with the self-defensive murder of a fellow prisoner in the purgatory of the Mexican prison, and his conscience is troubled by his passive acquiescence to Jimmy's 'eye-for-an-eye' execution. He left a boy and returns a man, but it is a poignant and sobering rite of passage that leaves him still adrift in time and space. If it was the boy who bid goodbye to his material grandfather in the novel's second scene, in its penultimate scene it is the man who attends a second funeral, this time 'Abuela's,' or 'Grandmother's,' the surrogate mother who had worked for his family for fifty years. Her death severs the last remaining emotional tie he has to the ranch, his father having died while John Grady was in Mexico. His tears for Abuela are shed as well for the boyhood now behind him and for the somber vision of what it to come....

The novel's final scene evokes two early scenes. Just as he rode down the Comanche war path at sunset following his father's funeral, after Abuela's funeral he rides out again, across the oil fields around Irann, Texas, and past the sadly reduced few descendants of tribes such as the mighty Comanche, who are camped in wickiups on the western plains. The images closely link the two scenes: John Grady rides, leading Blevins' wonderful bay, into a red desert under a 'bloodred sunset'...Marvelously compressed, the juxtaposition of the two scenes evokes the history of a defeated and decimated people (and links John Grady with them through the image of the sun 'coppering' his face). It chronicles the despoiling of the land to which he no longer has any ties, and implies through the color imagery ('bloodred,' 'darkening') an ominous future for the land and its peoples alike.

Yet it is not insignificant that John Grady leads behind him Blevins' horse, and it is the image of the horses moving into the wind that links this sense with another early in the novel which tempers the pessimism of the novel's closing pages. Shortly after his grandfather's funeral, John Grady asks his mother to lease the ranch to him. She dismisses the notion that he could run the ranch as 'ridiculous' and ends the conversation by leaving her son sitting alone at the dining room table studying an oil painting of horses that had 'been copied out of a book'...The painting adumbrates precisely the central horse business of the Hacienda de Nuestra Senora de la Purisima Concepcion where in an ironic double entendre on his estate's name Don Hector Rochay Villareal has conceived a breeding strategy to produce a superior cutting horse by crossing his quarter horse mares with a thoroughbred stallion, 'well muscled and heavily boned for his breed.'

The horses in the painting appear to John Grady to embody precisely the same thing: Spanish stock crossed with the bloodline of Steeldust, the most celebrated Texas quarter horse stallion of one hundred years earlier. The legendary bay stallion, bred and foaled in Kentucky, was transported to Texas where he had a long and distinguished career in quarter racing, much of which is now impossible to trace. In the tradition of Don Quixote and Tom Sawyer in *Huckleberry Finn*, John Grady is given a miraculous opportunity to bring the 'picture-book horses' to life and arrives at the hacienda only just enough ahead of Rocha's imported chestnut stallion to have begun to cull out the mares and train them. Against this background, if Blevins' remarkable and presumably Texas-bred bay horse is associated with Steeldust in John Grady's mind, then the motivation for his incredible 'rescue' of the animal becomes clearer. Although the animal is never specifically identified as stallion or gelding, his legitimized possession of it at novel's end may suggest he now has at his disposal the means and knowledge to bring his 'picture-book horses' into being on his own terms.

John Grady is, of course, banished from the hacienda because Senor Rocha is not interested in a similar experiment in crossbreeding between his daughter Alejandra and the Texas import. Like the native mares, Alejandra is described as being small and slight. She rides a black Arabian mare, another ancient breed technically different from but customarily associated with the North African Barb. John Grady is a master of all he rides, with or without saddle or bridle, half-man, half-horse. His identification with the stallion, 'dripping and half crazed' from its tryst with a mare, is symbolic of his own sense of potency and vital energy...Alejandra challenges both his authority and his mastery with her own skill as horsewoman: she insists on riding the lathered stallion bareback and does so with ease, revealing that her earlier appearances in prim and proper riding hat and habit on the gaited Arabian are image and not reality. Ultimately, she is as wild and passionate as the native mares, a creature of the lake and lagoons, of the night and darkness, dark-haired and dark-horsed. When she comes to John Grady's bed in the bunkhouse on nine consecutive nights, she is more overtly the aggressor in the consummation of their romance and, in the end, she is its most insistent destroyer.

This doomed romance is the third major plot line in the novel. Along with the Jimmy Blevins subplot and the marvelously detailed business of horse herding, breaking and breeding, it, like the others, is also subsumed within the allegorical framework of the novel's carefully crafter initiation motif. The novel's four chapters divide the book into distinctive but interrelated sections: (1) the long *andante* movement of the journey south, on horseback, through an increasingly sterile and incomprehensible wasteland, a false purgatory that foreshadows the false redemption that follows: (2) an *allegro* pastoral interlude in an edenic paradise, rife with fertility of landscape and horse and the promise of Eve, the site of temptation for body as well as for spirit; (3) the *staccato* expulsion into purgatory of the newly fallen naif whose education in the

dissonances of life's injustices, chaos and confusion has only just begun; and, finally, (4) the rendering of judgment, the component parts of which include the failed quest to regain paradise, retribution and a reintegrative odyssey home.

The movement of the first and fourth sections is generally linear; the movement of the second and third sections generally circular. The uninitiated, untested boy descends southward, discovering and formulating his code of conduct as he moves into a brave new world—heaven in Chapter II at La Purisima, hell in the prison in Chapter III—that is Blakean in its divisions and also reminiscent of Melville in the malevolent and omnipotent presence of evil. Tempted in the garden by Eve, expelled by the vengeful father and defeated by the wily serpent (in the guise of Alejandra's godmother), the fallen Adam, now with blood on his hands, rides 'through a grove of apple trees gone wild and brambly and he picked an apple as he rode and bit into it and it was hard and green and bitter.' Initiated into the 'truth' of a hostile universe where 'the wildness about him' is matched by 'the wildness within,' John Grady has experienced the duality of man's nature, including his own. He has experienced first hand the fact that the chaos and anarchy, the irrationality and senselessness, of the world are perfectly capable of triumphing over love, loyalty, truth, law, justice, honor and idealism.

As he ascends homeward, traveling into the dark northern wind across a landscape briefly covered with snow, then drenched by a symbolically cleansing, purifying rain, he displays against all odds a heroic capacity to accomplish his quixotic rescue of his horses, a quest undertaken as a matter of principle, as a reaffirmation of the traditional values and principles of honor, loyalty, courage and constancy in direct response to Duena Alfonsa's refrain, 'there is nothing to lose.' As a sphinx-like voice of moral authority at the novel's philosophical center, Alfonsa has experienced the overwhelming defeat of such principles, and in her despairing and embittered idealism sees in John Grady, not their embodiment, but the false and revolutionary hope of their re-enacted betrayal.

The first chapter is the novel's longest and most leisurely. It occupies almost one-third of the book's three hundred pages and begins by chronicling the severing of ties with John Grady's family and community, depicting the innocent's forced expulsion from an Edenic childhood which adumbrates the guilty initiate's loss of paradise later on. Then it details the arduous journey south into Coahuila. While on the surface the journey may be a quest for such a paradise as young horsemen dream of—'Where do you reckon that paradise is at?'—on a symbolic level it involves in essence the stripping bare of the human soul to its simple, most elemental level to test its integrity and determine its reason for being.

When John Grady and Rawlins cross the Rio Grande, they literally strip naked, unmasking. The landscape becomes progressively wilder and more barren: roads, trucks and stores give way to desert and mountain. The animals that they hear or fear become progressively more ferocious: coyote, wolf, lion. The food that they eat becomes increasingly more primitive: first purchased restaurant food, then canned goods, followed by food offered and prepared by others, to food hunted and cooked by themselves, first a rabbit, then a buck. The people they encounter become increasingly savage: the kindly family who worry about Blevins' embarrassment, the rough 'zacateros' who ask about missing relatives, the migrant traders, the rootless waxmakers who try to buy the half-naked Jimmy, 'el rubio,' whose blondness makes him doubly alluring, and finally the horse thieves of Encantada, where Rawlins accurately predicts, 'Somethin bad is goin to happen.' There Jimmy mindlessly, carelessly, kills a man, an 'officer of the state' according to Duena Alfonsa, in attempting to retrieve his stolen pistol.

As these reductions of each boy to the elemental, untamed, isolated and independent self occur, the interplay among John Grady, Rawlins and Blevins suggests what John Grady's moral stance will be. Rawlins' function as foil in the novel serves to illuminate John Grady's character. Rawlins' growing irritation, intensifying complaints, and eventually his ill-disguised but well-grounded fear—'You ever think about dyin?' he asks—lead John Grady to question his loyalty: 'You aint fixin to quit me are you?' Rawlins has, after all, the home of his childhood to return to, so his quest lacks the seriousness of purpose of John Grady's. Rawlins' emotionalism contrasts with his friend's stoicism: his realism, which recognizes Jimmy Blevins as a dangerous force of chaos and anarchy, highlights John Grady's idealism and his sentimentality about the innocence of childhood. But Rawlins' judgments are grounded in clichés and conventions, and John Grady typically reacts against or ignores Rawlins' advice. For example, early in

Chapter 1, Rawlins comments about Mary Catherine's rejection: 'She aint worth it. None of em are,' to which John Grady responds, 'Yes they are.'

Later Rawlins remarks that '[a] goodlookin horse is like a goodlookin woman....They're always more trouble than what they're worth. What a man needs is just one that will get the job done' to which John Grady merely responds, 'Where'd you hear that at?' Rawlins' fundamental lack of sympathy for Blevins—his rudeness, his ridicule, his reluctance to ride to his rescue—all stand in marked contrast to the almost chivalrous responses of John Grady to women and to the younger boy alike. He assumes responsibility for Blevins because it is the noble and right thing to do; although he is powerless to control the senselessness and irrationality of the universe in which they must exist, he refuses to abandon Jimmy, despite his very powerlessness and Rawlins' demonstrable lack of support. Rawlins is a voice for non-engagement and convention, for self-interest and safety. He is ultimately the voice of childhood and so it sent home, bloodied, but little wiser for his adventure.

Although John Grady's incredible skills with horses are not displayed in action until the novel's second and fourth chapters, by the end of the novel's first chapter, the interplay of characters, as well as the action proper of the plot, have established his essential value system as a positive one...For 'the ardenthearted'—for Jimmy, for Alejandra, for himself, for Blevins' horse—he will risk much, for he is a man of action, of passion, of character and of honor, but he will nonetheless fail to attain paradise, although he will penetrate to the inner sanctum of its power through his confrontation with Duena Alfonsa.

The novel's fourth and final chapter, its second longest, mirrors the first in its depiction of the severing of relationships and its account of the even more arduous return to Texas, since John Grady is now physically as well as psychologically wounded. Given the controlling initiation theme, this is an appropriate structural strategy which is subtly but masterfully handled. It carries with it the implicit comparison of the boy John Grady was to the man he has become. In the fourth section, for example, the ties which John Grady now severs are those in which he has a considerably deeper emotional investment, with Alejandra, with the fertile horse country, with the horses themselves. The first chapter begins, although it gradually darkens, with a boyish exuberance, a light-hearted adventure quest where pastures are literally and figuratively greener and still feed cattle and horses rather than the 'great primitive birds welded up out of iron' of the Texas oil fields. By contrast, in the fourth chapter, the journey home is marked by a seriousness of purpose, one of its goals retribution, another judgment on both himself and others.

John Grady's rescue of 'all the pretty horses' that had been stolen from the three American boys by the Mexican authorities who are ostensibly pledged to uphold the law is simultaneously his retribution for Jimmy Blevins' death and his penance for his failure to prevent it. It is also his triumph over the power of the Rochas, who deny him Alejandra but do not manage to destroy the dream that is centered in the horse breeding enterprise, since he retains possession of Blevins' horse. If in the novel's first chapter the promised land lies just over Coahuila's Sierra Encantada, that land of false enchantment has been stripped by novel's end of its magic. Its refinement and civility have been revealed as thin veneer, and its moral code exposed as distorted and subverted.

The novel's journey south is mirrored, then, in the return journey north. Many of the specific episodes in the novel's first chapter are elegantly balanced by similar scenes in its last chapter to heighten our sense of the new self emerging from the maelstrom of John Grady's initiation into the world of experience. This structural device functions as an understated but nonetheless dramatic and highly controlled method of characterization and also to set his code of traditional values in opposition to the moral anarchy which threatens it at every turn.

The novel is framed by thirty and fifteen pages at beginning and end respectively, and these sections structurally balance each other with parallel episodes. As the novel opens, a series of brief vignettes depict John Grady disassociating himself from family, friends and community by judging them, especially his mother and girlfriend, to establish his independence before he heads off into the literal and figurative wilds of northern Mexico. By novel's end, after he emerges from the wilderness, several brief episodes depict his

reintegration into the community and his willingness to be judged by it, formally in a court of law, and more informally through the paternal wisdom of the judge.

The novel begins and ends with the funerals of Grandfather and Abuela and with brief encounters with John Grady's grudgingly loyal but ultimately unsympathetic friend and traveling companion Lacey Rawlins. John Grady's futile visit to a lawyer to ascertain whether he can do anything about the sale of the family ranch by exploring his father's right of title foreshadows his later more successful appearance in court where the judge grants him title to Blevins' horse. His visit to the judge's home, where he seeks paternal judgment as to the merits of his actions as well as absolution, echoes meetings early in the novel with his own father who urged his son to temper his harsh judgment of his mother and forgive her for her abandonment of him.

Other details reflect and refract against each other in the inverted movements of the novel's first and last chapters. John Grady's trip to watch his mother perform on stage in San Antonio is a tensely silent effort to understand her rejection of the ranch, of his father, of himself. It parallels his return trip to the hacienda and his extended conversation with Duena Alfonso, Alejandra's surrogate mother, whose rejection of him is even more ruthless, more complex. His father's brief account of his own failed marriage—'She liked horses. I thought that was enough'—and the chasm between the aspiring actress and the cowboy-gambler play out in miniature the larger conflict of class and culture in which John Grady finds himself embroiled with the exemplary horsewoman Alejandra. John Grady's bitter farewell to his former girlfriend, Mary Catherine, who has rejected him in favor of another boy, foreshadows his despairing but more compassionate separation from Alejandra, who can better cope with the loss of his love than with the loss of her father's, although the extent to which her father's wealth, status and power are implicated in her decision remains unclear.

The journeys themselves are also carefully juxtaposed through the structural counterpointing of their component episodes. The horseback ride south with John Grady's friend Lacey Rawlins and the runaway Jimmy Blevins is mirrored in John Grady's more somber return northward with their now riderless horses. In each instance a posse follows in hot pursuit, but by novel's end it is John Grady himself rather than Blevins who is the object of the pursuers' murderous intent. John Grady's rejection of the Mexican wax workers' offer to buy Jimmy adumbrates his meeting with the 'men of the country' who take the captain, the agent of Jimmy's murder, away from him, probably to execute him for crimes against the people, a judgment to which John Grady now acquiesces. The boys' casual conversation about the Del Rio radio station foreshadows John Grady's visit to the Rev. Jimmy Blevins, a Del Rio radio evangelist whose name the boy seems to have appropriated to hide his identity. Blevins' tall tale about his family's inherited affinity for being struck by lightning is balanced by John Grady's telling of his own story to a group of children in the mode of a tragic fairy tale or romance.

Finally, almost at journey's end in Chapter I, Rawlins shoots a spikehorn buck; John Grady notices matter-of-factly merely that 'it lay dead in its blood' and 'its eyes were just glazing,' but otherwise the boys' conversation revolves around the 'hell of a shot' that killed it. Contrast this episode to the parallel scene of John Grady's killing a small doe toward the end of his journey homeward. The act has profoundly deepened in meaning and recapitulates John Grady's rites of passage....'He thought the world's heart beat at some terrible cost and that the world's pain and its beauty moved in a relationship of diverging equity.' Just as the style of this passage echoes Hemingway's, John Grady is like a number of Hemingway's young protagonists in that he finds that his destiny is strangely but inevitably linked to war and revolution. Only in his case it is a war long since past, and not contemporaneous with the action proper of the novel: the Mexican Revolution of 1911-1913.

His rejection by Alejandra, to the extent that it is explained, is mysteriously rooted in the power of the seventy-three-year-old Duena Alfonso, whose monologue reveals her obsession with the life and times of the failed idealist of the revolution, the martyred Francisco I. Madero, and his family. These have become not only the emotional center of her life but the essence of Mexico since their martyrdom precipitated a bloody revolution that lasted for forty years, virtually Alfonso's entire adult life. The novel implies that the revolution in a sense is unending; the essential nature of human existence is an unending dialectical tension between law and lawlessness, order and anarchy, realism and idealism, heroism and cowardice, paradise

and purgatory, the hacienda and 'el campo.' John Grady's final rite of passage is his immersion in the anarchy of that revolution through the justification and defense of her life which Alfonsa shares with him as the ultimate explanation for his failure to claim Alejandra.

This device is strongly reminiscent of the monologue which Miss Rosa Coldfield delivers to the twenty-year-old Quentin Compson in Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* The two spinsters share a number of important characteristics, including their obsession with the central male figure in their tales, each of whom is master of a vast estate, author of a grand but failed design, soldier and revolutionary. Each man is also executed ignominiously. Each young woman is both attracted and repelled by the 'failed idealist,' by Sutpen and by Francisco Madero respectively. Like Miss Rosa, Duena Alfonsa feels compelled to justify herself and her actions across time to her youthful auditor. As it was said of Miss Rosa that she never forgave 'the final and complete affront which was Sutpen's death,' so it could also be said that Alfonsa never recovered from the 'death' of her relationship with Francisco's brother, Gustavo, or from the horror of the Maderos' executions. In her monologue, as in Miss Rosa's, Alfonsa reveals her outrage at her own sense of her powerlessness, inferiority and missed opportunities. In justifying herself, she nonetheless manages, unwittingly, to condemn herself. Both women are dominated by strong fathers who espouse compelling and destructive principles, the girlhood of each is hopelessly decimated by the holocaust of revolution, and in the sterility of her old age, each labors to craft an explanation and a defense for her own attitudes and behaviors.

It is as if all the images of blood in the novel—the bloodred clouds, sun, desert, and wind; the blood of the dispossessed Indians; the blood pounding through the veins of horse and cowboy; Alejandra's virgin blood; the spilled, sacrificial blood of Jimmy, the boy in prison, the captain, the doe and, ultimately, John Grady's own—coalesce in the central metaphor of the Mexican revolution, whose violence and madness become for Alfonsa the ultimate truth, the essential destiny: 'the ruin of a nation.... How it was and how it will be again,' Ironically, the hacienda and Alfonsa herself, then as now, are distanced from the realities of the revolution, the poverty, lawlessness and anarchy across the land which are all too apparent during John Grady's journey. Even while she espouses intellectually the revolution's reformist idealism of empowering the people, spreading agrarian reform and landing the landless, on the Hacienda de la Purisima Concepcion, it is as if the revolution never were, as if it remained only the purest conception of an empty ideal.

Alfonsa is both a radical and a reactionary. On the one hand she rebels against the suppression of women and paternal authority, refusing marriage and rejecting a conventional marriage for her great-niece. She has espoused the reformist causes of the Maderos, in her seventeen-year-old idealism, although they run counter to the traditional interests of the landed aristocracy of which she and the Maderos are members and which seems to have managed to preserve its way of life. But she is sent safely out of the line of revolutionary fire to Europe where she is checkmated by being not only unable to rebel against her father but also unable to forgive him for her deportation. Her frustration is reflected in her vision of the world as a 'puppet show.' And if she has been in her youth a puppet, so now in her old age she becomes the puppeteer who pulls the strings of her great-niece's life. What is left her is to live vicariously through Alejandra, who 'is the only future' she contemplates, whose name echoes her own. Without scruple, she bends the girl to her will and changes her destiny by taking advantage of the opportunity to save John Grady's life. She buys his way out of prison in exchange for Alejandra's promise to reject his offer of marriage.

The fact that Alejandra is precisely the same age Alfonsa was when Francisco and Gustavo returned from Europe and her 'life changed forever' is ominous. Alfonsa's life was perhaps inspired by the Maderos' revolutionary fire, which literally loosed anarchy and chaos across the land and in short order upon themselves, but her life was also ruined by it. She was exiled from country, friends and family, and the lessons learned from that experience, while admirable in their stoicism, are nihilistic. Embittered, she has watched the idealism of the reformers destroy the 'brave and good and honorable men' who fueled the revolution because they could not channel that idealism or control it.

The legacies of the revolution—a failure given the apparent changelessness of La Purisima and the poverty, corruption and lawlessness of the land beyond—to Alfonsa are reduced to the 'bonds of grief,' the 'closest bonds we will ever know' in the 'deepest community of sorrow.' The only certainty in the defeated dreams of the revolutionary world is the one constant of history, 'greed and foolishness and a love of blood

and this is a thing that even God—who knows all that can be known—seems powerless to change.’ In repeating history—in pulling the strings of Alejandra’s life and in effecting the expulsion of John Grady much as she expelled Gustavo—Alfonso is ostensibly confident that she knows best the lessons of time and history. But Alfonso may simply be deluding herself as to her motivations with respect to her great-niece.

For ultimately, as the novel is at great pains to show, John Grady is not the gentle dreamer, the failed idealist, although he is neither without ideals nor without gentleness. He is a man of action capable of negotiating the troubled terrain of the wilderness, even of mastering it occasionally. But he is also like the quixotic hero of the revolution, Madero, in that he possesses both a capacity for self-deception, believing that he can achieve the impossible, as well as the charisma of leadership, the ability to persuade others that he can achieve the impossible. That is both his promise and his threat, and therein lies the source of his rejection. Alfonso protests that she rejects him not because he is ‘young or without education or from another country.’ In actuality she may see in him the real revolutionaries of her youth, the Zapatas, Obregons, Villas and, in her native state of Coahuila, Pablo Gonzalez, for whom her destroyed aristocrats, Francisco and Gustavo, were too conservative, not radical enough. The paradoxical achievement inherent in their own personal failure as leaders was to inspire the real revolution in which, according to one account, ‘a vehement desire to regenerate everything asserted itself, an impulse to transform the whole social fabric of Mexico in its diverse aspects.’ This desire burned bright for the next forty years and is still reflected in the ‘men of the country’ who emerge as agents of justice and retribution on John Grady’s journey home.

It is possible, then, that Alfonso sees in John Grady a manifestation of the betrayers who initially supported the Maderos and then turned against them, the men of the land who are not landed, the idealists who dared dream, who aspired above their class, looked outside their station, who possessed the strength and courage and merit to upend the world if but a smidgen of power, or a single ideal, were granted to them. But ultimately her sympathies do not lie with the revolutionaries who subverted the dream into a bloody reality, illustrated most dramatically in the account of the murder of Gustavo Madero....Hers is a grim and to some extent unjust vision, rooted in the nature of existence as she as experienced it, or watched from afar. It recognizes John Grady’s inherent worth but rejects his danger, misinterprets his motives, discounts his heartfelt offer of marriage. More importantly, it takes no risks, for it is passive and sterile at its core. When Alejandra accedes to this vision—‘I cannot do what you ask, she said. I love you. But I cannot’—then John Grady realizes that his banishment from the empty garden, and his participation in the inner and outer wildness, are complete.

But John Grady does not fall prey to existential despair in an irrational and indifferent world. Nor does he withdraw from that world in bitterness, in unforgiving judgment, in self-pity as he might have, as he did in fact early in the novel in his immaturity. Instead, there is something in the history lesson Alfonso shares with him which galvanizes him to action. The rescue of his and Rawlins’ horses, as well as Blevins’ horse, seems certainly to be an impassioned response to Alfonso’s ‘there is nothing to lose.’ John Grady’s losses and disappointments cannot help but be placed in perspective by contrast with the horrifying account of the destruction of Alfonso’s beloved, a man of ideals and principles but, at least by contrast with his brother, also a man of action and practicality and hence linked with John Grady across the distances of time and place. Gustavo’s courage and stoicism in the face of violence, his fortitude in pain, his ultimate assumption of responsibility and the dignity with which he bears the consequences of his actions are all ultimately reflected in the events of John Grady’s homeward journey, the naif no longer, but a man considerably deepened and enriched by the experience.”

Gail Moore Morrison
“*All the Pretty Horses: John Grady Cole’s Expulsion from Paradise*”
Perspectives on Cormac McCarthy
Edwin T. Arnold and Dianne C. Luce, eds.
(U Mississippi 1993) 173-90

“Almost thirty years after writing his first novel, McCarthy was at last discovered by the general reading public following Knopf’s publication of *All the Pretty Horses*, the first volume of McCarthy’s proposed ‘Border Trilogy.’ In less than a year’s time, the book sold over 100,000 copies. In December of 1992 it won the National Book Award for fiction, and in March 1993 it won the National Book Critics Circle Award for

fiction. Vintage paperbacks announced plans for reprinting of all the earlier novels, starting with *Suttree* and *Blood Meridian*....

In the *Chicago Tribune*, Christopher Zenowich wrote, 'This is a prayer in prose fiction, a homage to the world. It has been for nearly 30 years present in McCarthy's work. His sentences, his vision are unique.' Madison Smartt Bell also stressed McCarthy's completely original vision: 'His project is unlike that of any other writer: to make artifacts composed of human language but detached from a human reference point. That sense of evil that seems to suffuse his novels is illusory; it comes from our discomfort in the presence of a system that is not scaled to ourselves, within which our civilization may be as ephemeral as flowers. The deity that presides over McCarthy's world has not modeled itself on humanity; its voice most resembles the one that addressed Job out of the whirlwind.' But, for the most part, the reviews of *All the Pretty Horses* contributed more to media show than to understanding. The book, despite substantial praise, received less genuine consideration than most of McCarthy's earlier novels. Its place in the canon had yet to be fully appreciated."

Edwin T. Arnold and Dianne C. Luce, eds.
Perspectives (1993) 10-11

"McCarthy's newest novel, *All the Pretty Horses* (1992), will, I think, cause further reassessment of the writer's reputation as a nihilist. The first of the proposed 'Border Trilogy,' it is set, like *Blood Meridian*, in Texas and Mexico, approximately a century later, in the late 1940s. The protagonist is again a sixteen-year-old boy, this time given a name—John Grady Cole. Unlike *Blood Meridian*, this book is quietly restrained, often beautiful, sad, elegiac. Instead of hundreds of deaths, there are exactly two, and the consequences of those deaths haunt the boy.

It is a book about the importance of choices and responsibility. It is a book about honor and courage and love. It is a book in which moral decisions count. As one of the characters, Lacey Rawlins, puts it, 'Ever dumb thing I ever done in my life there was a decision I made before that got me into it. It was never the dumb thing. It was always some choice I'd made before it.' Judge Holden argues, 'If God meant to interfere in the degeneracy of mankind would he not have done so by now?' When John Grady Cole asks, 'You think God looks out for people?,' Rawlins answers, 'Way the world is. Somebody can wake up and sneeze somewhere in Arkansas or some damn place and before you're done there's wars and ruination and all hell'....

Some of McCarthy's readers may be disappointed in this book, may feel that it is a more traditional, perhaps safer work than he has done in the past, certainly a more reassuring tale than its dark double *Blood Meridian*. It is, of course, impossible to know where the next two volumes will take us, but *All the Pretty Horses* is an affirmation of life and of humanity, however severe the experience."

Edwin T. Arnold, ed.
"Naming, Knowing and Nothingness: Cormac McCarthy's Moral Parables"
Perspectives (1993) 63-64

"Even the hacienda of *All the Pretty Horses*, perhaps McCarthy's most enduring house, is endangered. The economic vigor of that beautiful home and its family depends on the bunkhouse, which is finally too close for comfort. When an inmate of the bunkhouse undertakes an affair with the daughter of the big house, he must be brutally expelled in an effort to save the house and family, which has been altered forever, as if by encroaching rot. McCarthy engineers this so that our sympathies are with the lower-class outsider John Grady, and of course this is a standard romantic ploy. It is worth considering, however, that John Grady is a more sympathetic cousin to other, more fatal McCarthy outsiders. His effect on the established community of the hacienda is not so different from that of Glanton's men, who ride into *Blood Meridian*'s towns to a warm welcome and then turn into community wreckers, wild animals in the living room."

Terri Witek
"Reeds and Hides: Cormac McCarthy's Domestic Spaces"
The Southern Review 30.1 (January 1994) 136-42

“John Grady and Billy’s nostalgia for a time before the man digging post holes, the time of the kid’s youth, is a product of naivete, Hollywood, picture books, and youthful exuberance—a romanticizing of pre-World War I America....John Grady, in particular, would have done well to read *Blood Meridian* before setting out across the border searching for his Big Rock Candy Mountain.”

John Wegner

“‘Wars and Rumors of Wars’ in Cormac McCarthy’s Border Trilogy”
Southern Quarterly 38.3 (Spring 2000) 59-71

“*All the Pretty Horses*, in 1992, won the National Book Award. All the stops were pulled out for this one. *USA Today*, known for its literary acumen, calls it ‘Surely one of the great American novels’; *The New York Times*, a ‘major achievement.’ The *Chicago Tribune* assesses it a ‘genuine miracle in prose’—the comparison is now, not with Faulkner, but with Melville for their common descriptions of landscapes. Many of the earlier blurbs are repeated. The *Boston Globe*, renown for its dazzling literary reviewers, speaks of the novel’s ‘elegiac rhythms’ and of McCarthy’s ‘passion’—one hopes the comparison is not with Jesus Christ; and *Newsweek*, another bastion of high literacy, says he is ‘a true American original.’

Anyone trying to write seriously about McCarthy is, clearly, put in a bind. If one wants to locate him in literary terms, there are the comparisons to the greatest figures in American fiction, Faulkner, Melville, and others. If one wants to see what is original and what is imitative and hollow, one is confronted by something that seems settled: McCarthy is a master, even a legend, and tamper with that at your peril. Yet McCarthy, in part, can be defended even against his outlandish and outrageous supporters, those in the blurb and hype business. But first we must drop the Faulkner comparison, the reference to Melville, the kudos which make him incomparable, or the finest of American contemporaries. If we return from hyperbole to reality, to the novels and what they tell us, what they reach for, what their limitations are, what they do achieve, we can see them not as a red-skinned answer to pale-faced Henry James, but for some sense of newness in American fiction.

A good place to begin is by asking if McCarthy is an original. He forces several adjustments on the reader, especially on the urban reader—who is, I suspect, his major supporter. McCarthy is not simply recreating something of a West which defies the history books; nor is it that his protagonists commit atrocities of a kind usually met in the Crusades or in Hitler’s Germany. These are elements we have become accustomed to. It is that McCarthy can transcend, somehow, the bloodlust of his pages. As the serial killer of novelists, what he brings to fiction is not easy to digest because it seems so uncivilized.... Suffering comes on in waves. In *All the Pretty Horses*, ‘He imagined the pain of the world to like some formless parasitic being seeking out the warmth of human souls wherein to incubate and he thought he knew what made one liable to its visitations. What he had not known was that it was mindless and so had no way to know the limits of those souls and what he feared was that there might be no limits.’

These meditations, which amount to a philosophical-ideological position, are located at intervals throughout the novels and cannot be disconnected from McCarthy’s presentation of nature. It is implacable, far more than anything in Faulkner, where flood, fire, and the rest seem to control men’s fates. In the struggle between men and nature, bet on nature—a paraphrase of Kafka’s warning that in the battle between the world and the individual, choose the world. Even the horses, the subject of *All the Pretty Horses*, are part of that ungiving nature. Withal their beauty, their flow, their high energy, their independence, they are part of that natural world which only lets in man sideways, or through tiny slits.... If man vanished, the horses would still be running.

McCarthy’s world holds no give for men. They hack and cut and shoot and stab, but almost all in the end end. His ideological positioning is that of an amoral god who looks on, and while observing refuses to touch. Needless to say, neither good nor evil exists in this post-Darwinian, post-Nietzschean world. There is more here than the struggle to survive, since most enterprises McCarthy defines are not for survival but for the working out of one’s destiny. It is as though one had seen what the end is and then pursued it until it comes to pass....Is this a radical postmodern nihilism, one more devastating in its implications than anything in other deniers and mockers? McCarthy does deconstruct our expectations of civility and a civil society, a kind of muscular version of Joan Didion’s domestic wars. His meditations are visceral, and they seem to have the full impact of a large-scale nihilism. There are few ideas. The barbarism lies not in

patterns or conceptions but in the language itself and in the blind, survivalist activities of marginal men. Horses and men, apparently, belong to the same breed, have the same genealogy. Indistinguishable in their activism, they blend into each other—men riding, horses running, the two wedded in a common destiny. Everything in McCarthy is in movement—thus the significance of the horse, both a form of transportation and the throwback to a premodern era.

While in jail, the young John Grady Cole, in *All the Pretty Horses*, dreams of ‘horses in a field on a high plain where the spring rains had brought up the grass...and in the dream he was among the horses running and in the dream he himself could run with the horses and they coursed the young mares and fillies over the plain where their rich bay and their rich chestnut colors shone in the sun and the young colts ran with their dams...’ Like the horses, the men never back down.

Because he is so unrelenting, McCarthy presents a conundrum for the reader. As Cornelius Suttree in that novel demonstrates, the survival of the species may take place at many levels. Suttree is a river rat, a refugee from a well-born family, a man alienated from nearly everything connected to civility. Yet McCarthy’s sharpness of observation, his incredible eye for detail and accuracy of description, his sense of physical exuberance, his awareness of tastes and flavors most writers pass over or remark perfunctorily, all, do not lead to any psychological probing. Suttree, like the Kid, the judge, various killers, remains unknowable. McCarthy makes almost a fetish of not penetrating, or refusing to infiltrate the inner person. This is, apparently, a conscious decision not to probe motives because that would in turn, make behavior a matter of choice. He insists on response, reaction, pre-emptive strikes: all the moves of someone backed into a corner and forced to defend himself. His nearly exclusive male world is under siege. But the siege comes not from within but from without; the protagonist creates the pressures by his own actions, and then he must confront what he has educated....

In *All the Pretty Horses*, when Cole ‘passed and paled into the darkening land,’ that ‘world to come’—the final words—will bring some examination of man’s relationship to himself. For that is the subject McCarthy has made his own, carving out even his own vocabulary of arcane, archaic words. That refusal to take on psychological or even moral consequences creates a feral world which is McCarthy’s tribute to America near the end of the century. We recognize that the writer has struck something quite significant in the middle 1990s, a kind of frontier *American Psycho*. Amorality, anomie, lack of community, loss of rational self—all of these are ways of perceiving who we are and where we are going. They are perceptions, not truths written in stone; but for McCarthy’s big city readers, the perception is the actuality. McCarthy’s revisionist wild West is a perfect model for big city amorality and pervasive corruption. For him, survival means a return to the atavistic self: to the joys of irrational acts which lie deep within myth and legend and far from civilized repression. This is one reading of our culture.”

Frederick R. Karl
American Fictions: 1980-2000
(Xlibris 2001) 126-30

“I first included McCarthy on a multicultural literature syllabus while I was teaching American literature at Biola University, a small, private, Christian, liberal-arts university in Los Angeles County whose student population is largely white....When John Grady Cole sets out for Mexico with his best friend, Lacey Rawlins, and the tag-along Jimmy Blevins, John Grady is the only one of them who speaks Spanish fluently....Mexico remains an empty space onto which they project their ideas of a cowboy’s perfect paradise....The problem, of course, is that Mexico is not ‘an undiscovered country,’ and the boys’ ignorance of this fact will cost them dearly. In a real sense, their imprisonment at Saltillo is a direct result of the boys’ simple nativistic pride....After Alejandra confesses that she and Cole have been lovers, Don Rocha turns the boys over to the military authorities, who eventually send the Americans to the Saltillo prison. Don Rocha shows that he will go to great lengths to prevent the ‘dilution’ of the family’s bloodlines....Even Alejandra realizes that their love will not be able to overcome cultural obstacles....

On the other hand, John Grady Cole is a ‘*norteamericano*. He believes in individualism, free will, volition. He thinks every man...is an Adam, free of memory and external constraint, able to shape his illimitable “self” in any way he chooses. He is shocked when Alejandra refuses to break all ties to go with him.’ It was at this reading moment that the class began to clearly see how comparable their views and

attitudes were to John Grady's. Almost all of them were hopeful of a 'happily ever after' ending where John Grady Cole and Alejandra get married and live the rest of their lives in domestic bliss. Few were prepared for the novel's resolution, which seems to suggest that love simply cannot overcome every barrier....The novel, then, seems to offer little hope for successfully crossing cultural boundaries....The novels of the Border Trilogy—*All the Pretty Horses*, *The Crossing*, and *Cities of the Plain*—along with their 'prequel,' *Blood Meridian*, seem to exemplify this bleak view of borders. All of these novels document the violence that often occurs along borders...

The novel seems to offer only one example of domination and displacement after another: the Comanches are pushed aside because of America's 'Manifest Destiny,' and now John Grady is a historical relic, still riding a horse while his rival for Mary Catherine's affection is driving a truck and Don Rocha flies to his ranch in his personal airplane. Such a reading runs contrary to the popular conception of a warm, fuzzy multiculturalism, too often fiercely lampooned in cloying imitations of Rodney King's now infamous question, 'Can't we all just get along?' *All the Pretty Horses* seems to suggest that, no, we can't all just get along; we are condemned to live in a world of violence, mayhem, and bloodshed....McCarthy's evocation of the ghostly procession of Comanches, 'lost to all history and all remembrance like a grail the sum of their secular and transitory and violent lives,' is a dark foreboding of Cole's own eventual outcast condition....

[Nevertheless] there can be moments of connection, even in a world of alienation and loneliness. Long after the class periods set aside for discussing McCarthy's novel, we remembered the powerfully understated scene of John Grady's father giving his son the brand-new saddle; John Grady's heroic refusal to abandon Jimmy Blevins once they cross the border; and, perhaps greatest of all, John Grady's courageous decision to retrieve 'all the pretty horses'...Learning from John Grady's mistakes, students began the hard work of making themselves into *atravesados*—border-crossers, but with their eyes wide open."

Timothy P. Caron

"'Blood is Blood': *All the Pretty Horses* in the Multicultural Literature Class"
Cormac McCarthy: New Directions, ed. James D. Lilley
(2002; U New Mexico 2014) 153, 159-65

"*All the Pretty Horses* (1992) contrasts starkly with the endemic depravity of *Blood Meridian*, while returning to the same Southwestern/Mexican setting. The novel's rather tame story, its conventional plot structure, and its seemingly realistic narration have prompted Gail Morrison to suggest, '*All the Pretty Horses* is set in a world of comparative normalcy.' Morrison identifies three plot lines...John Grady's 'doomed romance' with the hacendado's daughter, Alejandra Rocha; the 'marvelously detailed business of horse herding, breaking and breeding'; and 'the Jimmy Blevins subplot'....

Parts 1 and 4 of the novel are devoted to the journeys into and out of Mexico, while part 2 covers the incidents at the hacienda, La Purisima, and part 3 covers those in prison. Deaths in the family mark the novel's beginning and end, causing John Grady to cross the border into Mexico both times....More so than the two subsequent volumes of the [Border] trilogy, *All the Pretty Horses* tries to visualize an ecopastoral alternative to the anthropocentric land management left behind in Texas, and it identifies it, for a time, in the protagonists' life and horsemanship at Don Hector's hacienda....

By the end of the trilogy's first novel there will have been sorrow enough to go around. John Grady will have lost the ranch; his father; his lover, Alejandra; and his substitute mother, Abuela. He will find himself estranged from his mother; his former girlfriend; his friend Rawlins; and Don Hector, the one employer who put faith in him. He will have witnessed Blevins being killed, and he will have killed a man himself. *The Crossing*, the novel's sequel, continues in this vein because Billy loses, in turn, both of his parents, his brother, their patrimony (the horses), and the hope to reintegrate himself into mainstream American life (through his failure to enlist in the Army and his failure to return to the parental homestead)....

The landscape and characters in McCarthy's pastoralism share fate and status as existential equals. Existential parity, not the promise of transcendence, is the allegorical meaning nature retracts in McCarthy's pastoralism. While the romanticist view of wilderness as the sublime habitat of spiritual truth

is qualified by the aesthetic parameters of biocentric writing, the romanticist turn toward material nature is intensified into a literally materialist worldview that excludes all dramatic tension between human characters and natural setting. This is the fundamental cause of pastoral failure and melancholia in the trilogy: To subsume human affairs and their history under nature's affairs and natural history in an ecopastoral sense is to render them irrelevant in the great scheme of things....

The opening scene of *All the Pretty Horses* describes John Grady watching a train in an allegory of the industrial invasion of pastoral space. Other instances of machines entering pastoral environments in the trilogy include the train that whisks Alejandra away; her father's airplane, which connects the pastoral realm of the hacienda with the metropolitan energy field of Mexico City; the army's takeover of not just Mac's ranch but of the entire valley in *Cities of the Plain*; and the explosion of the atomic bomb at the end of *The Crossing*....The trilogy cultivates the machine motif in order to dramatize the pastoral protagonists' continued alienation and melancholia as terminal, as being connected to the abjection of nature itself."

Georg Guillemin

The Pastoral Vision of Cormac McCarthy
(Texas A&M 2004) 102-03, 110, 120-21, 127

"The aesthetic achievement of *All the Pretty Horses* surpasses that of *Cities of the Plain*, if only because McCarthy is too deeply invested in John Grady Cole to let the young man (really still a boy) die with the proper distancing of authorial concern. No one will compose a rival to *Blood Meridian*, not even McCarthy, but *All the Pretty Horses* and *The Crossing* are of the eminence of *Suttree*. If I had to choose a narrative by McCarthy that could stand on its own in relation to *Blood Meridian*, it probably would be *All the Pretty Horses*. John Grady Cole quests for freedom, and discovers what neither *Suttree* nor Milly Parham needs to discover, which is that freedom in an American context is another name for solitude. The self's freedom, for Cormac McCarthy, has no social aspect whatsoever.

I speak of McCarthy as visionary novelist, and not necessarily as a citizen of El Paso, Texas. Emerson identified freedom with power, only available at the crossing, in the shooting of a gulf, a darting to an aim. Since we care for Hamlet, even though he cares for none, we have to assume that Shakespeare also had a considerable investment in Hamlet. The richest aspect of *All the Pretty Horses* is that we learn to care strongly about the development of John Grady Cole, and perhaps we can surmise that Cormac McCarthy is also moved by this most sympathetic of his protagonists.

All the Pretty Horses was published seven years after *Blood Meridian*, and is set almost a full century later in history. John Grady Cole is about the same age as McCarthy would have been in 1948. There is no more an identification between McCarthy and the young Cole, who evidently will not live to see twenty, than there is between Shakespeare and Prince Hamlet. And yet the reverberation of an heroic poignance is clearly heard throughout *All the Pretty Horses*. It may be that McCarthy's hard-won authorial detachment toward the Kid in *Blood Meridian* had cost the novelist too much, in the emotional register. Whether my surmise is accurate or not, the reader shares with McCarthy an affectionate stance toward the heroic youth at the center of *All the Pretty Horses*."

Harold Bloom, ed.

Introduction

Cormac McCarthy: New Edition

(Infobase Publishing/Bloom's Literary Criticism 2009) 8

"Until the publication of *All the Pretty Horses* in 1992, none of Cormac McCarthy's novels sold more than five thousand copies in hardback. Critical reception was seldom indifferent, and many reviewers considered him one of the finest writers of his generation....The Border Trilogy may be seen as a meditation on the distinctive historical circumstances of the late twentieth century. The context is the Second World War and its aftermath in the cold war, and the settings are often situated near the nuclear testing grounds of the American southwest. The image that concludes *All the Pretty Horses*—as John Grady Cole rides into the 'bloodred sunset,' watching a bull writhing like 'an animal in sacrificial torment'—is evocative of an atomic explosion....

This first novel in the Border Trilogy, especially when considered in the context of *Blood Meridian*, involves a softening of perspective, with a deeper, more moderate tone and a clearer sense of hope and possibility, even as it charts the destruction of the old social order and confronts the inexorable forces of the postnuclear world. In the decade following its publication, the responses of academic critics have been respectful, largely positive if somewhat varied. But reviews in the popular magazines were most commonly laudatory. The novel won both the National Book Award and the National Book Critics Circle Award, and film rights were quickly optioned by Columbia Pictures....

In *The New York Times Book Review*, Madison Smartt Bell comments on the 'extraordinary quality of his prose,' which is best described as 'overwhelmingly seductive' in its varied use of erudition, lyricism, and realistic dialogue....The author 'builds on Faulkner's work yet, more than Faulkner ever did...seems to be pulling the language apart at its roots,' evoking 'Elizabethan language in its flux of remarkable possibilities'....In the *Chicago Tribune*, Christopher Zenowich sees the protagonist John Grady Cole as 'a post-war American Ishmael, disenfranchised by his family but in search of something that goes beyond mere property.' He refers to the novel as 'a prayer in prose fiction' and 'a homage to the world,' concluding finally that readers will inevitably be moved by the singular force of imagination reflected in the novel.... The popularity of *All the Pretty Horses*...certainly emerges from the fact that it is a modern western replete with the conventions of nostalgic romance, with elegiac rhythms of language that gain strength from idyllic images of wild horses and the young men taming and riding them. But the consensus that emerges is that the novel enlivens and enriches a genre that is deceptively rich in the first place....

The novel is set in 1949, exactly one hundred years after *Blood Meridian*'s the kid confronts Judge Holden in Nacogdoches. The same issues resonate in the experiences of the protagonists: the search for self in a violent world, the confrontation with evil, the embodied mystical quality of Nature, the effects of time and historical change, and the question of God's existence and purpose in a universe that draws its essence from mystery. But as well as being a western, *All the Pretty Horses* is also a bildungsroman, a coming-of-age story told using the post popular genre in American literature and film....

John Grady Cole is the sixteen-year-old descendant of a long line of Texas cattlemen, the maternal grandson of a rancher who owned a large piece of land near San Angelo. His grandfather has died, his parents have divorced, and his mother has decided to sell the ranch to a Texas oil company. But John Grady is a consummate horseman with a mystic's sense of the animal's nature, an intimate grasp of its relation to mysterious realms that transcend. After realizing the land is lost to him, he sets out with his friend Lacey Rawlins to seek the older, premodern social order in Mexico. They travel on horseback across the border, tying their horses at gas stations, eating in cafes, hunting on the mesquite plains and arroyos of northern Mexico, and descriptions of their journey involve a strange blend of old and new: highways and cattle ranches; cafes and campfires; oil derricks and ancient traces cut by the Comanche...and blood-red skies...made so perhaps by the nuclear tests conducted in the Southwest after the war.

The young men soon encounter a bereft fourteen-year-old runaway named Jimmy Blevins, who is riding a stolen horse, and as they reluctantly take him in they are caught in a web of legal difficulty. Separating from Blevins and narrowly escaping the law, they find themselves working as ranch hands on a vast estate owned by Don Hector Rocha y Villarreal, known as the Hacienda de Nuestra Senora de la Purisima Concepcion. John Grady's gift with horses is soon recognized as he finds himself a favorite and a confidant of Don Hector, but he also becomes involved in a passionate affair with the rancher's daughter, Alejandra, who is the charge of Duena Alfonsa, the wise but jaded matriarch of the old aristocratic family. A complex interchange ensues and John Grady Cole and Lacey Rawlins find themselves imprisoned in Saltillo, where they must survive amid the violence and savagery that reign beneath a thin veneer of civilization and decorum. In the context of this experience, John Grady comes to manhood as he confronts his own potential for violent action and struggles to make sense of [the] world....A contemporary frontier romance with mythic resonance, *All the Pretty Horses* charts the slow tragedy of historical change, while engaging questions of personal responsibility...

The density of the prose both repels and attracts, depending upon the varying sensibilities of those who encounter it. The first sentence anticipates patterns of ornate imagery that are a common feature of the novel's formal texture....At certain points, dialogue is presented in Spanish, creating a sense of immediacy

and realism....The first section charts John Grady's decision to leave Texas, his journey across the border with Rawlins, and their troubling escapades with Jimmy Blevins. The second recounts the three months John Grady and Rawlins spend at Hacienda de Nuestra Senora de la Piusima Concepcion, centering on John Grady's passionate affair with Alejandra. The third involves the brutal experiences of their arrest and interrogation by the captain in Encantada, the murder of Blevins, and the time spent defending themselves against the horrors of the prison in Saltillo. The fourth is the most extensive, recounting their release from prison, the long conversation with Duena Alfonso, John Grady's final encounter with Alejandra, his rescue of the horses from the captain, and finally his return to Texas....

These extended sequences have the purposeful effect of giving the novel a surreal quality, and McCarthy is not subtle in his use of the dream motif, since this mode of perception becomes a defining feature of John Grady's character and consciousness, his particular brand of modern heroism....[The novel] portrays the differing conceptions of nature and its meaning as figured in the image of the horse. The novel's title is drawn from an Appalachian folksong of the same name that emerges from a varied oral tradition. In one version, it is a lullaby sung by a grandmother, as she sweetly conjures the image of the 'pretty horses' she hopes will imbue the child's dreams with a sense of comfort and repose. In spite of the stoic resolve, John Grady is just this child. After his arrest, as he lies on the dirt floor of the jail... 'That night he dreamt of horses in a field on a high plain where the spring had brought up the grass and the wildflowers'....

The dream resonates in his mind blending with his conscious thoughts, and in a strange alchemy of experience and mental figuration it forms his essential identity, which increasingly draws strength from the idea that the world is a confluence of the real and the unreal, the tactile and the imaginary, what is and what can be....John Grady's ability to imagine the horse and the Comanche in order to sustain himself against the reality of his experiences does not involve even a momentary denial of violence and brutality...These dreams are filled with a sense of mystery and the sublime, and they embody in their evocative power the implication, always omnipresent in McCarthy's novels, that there exists an 'other order,' an organizing principle of causality inaccessible to human reason, one that stands within and against the apparent disorder of the material world. John Grady returns to these dreams during his moments of greatest struggle, and from them he derives his stoic resolve, as well as the ethical code that defines him as a modern hero in the making.

In this sense it is through the act of dreaming that John Grady Cole attempts to ordain his future, and while he works for Don Hector the substance of that future becomes personified in Alejandra. In the extended conversation between John Grady and Duena Alfonso, after his release from prison, McCarthy deepens the thematic texture of the novel and explores the relationship between hope and the shaping reality of forces beyond the self. The interchange is largely a monologue in which the old woman explains her opposition to his relationship with Alejandra. Duena Alfonso's character and the nature of her expression reflect the influence of Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, since she emerges as a kind of Grand Inquisitor figure. Like many of McCarthy's philosopher mystics, she speaks at length to a largely silent listener. But her philosophical position is of a different order than that of the Grand Inquisitor, as McCarthy uses her to explore other issues, in this case the roles of fate, individual choice, and human action on the course of history.

Hers is a harsh and unforgiving worldview, one that speaks incisively to John Grady's nature... 'The world is quite ruthless in selecting between the dream and the reality, even where we will not.' What seems on the surface to be a simple defeatism, an old woman's belief that the ideals of youth are rarely realized, is in fact a more layered and mysterious reflection on the nature of history and self-determination, as well as on the human capacity to know the world and control it. Duena Alfonso expresses these concerns in rather lyrical terms, saying, 'Between the wish and the thing the world lies waiting. I've thought a great deal about my life and about my country. I think there is little that can be truly known.' This claim is the culmination of an extended rumination on her own life in the context of the history of twentieth-century Mexico. She has been the confidant of Gustavo Madero, the brother of the ill-fated Francisco Madero, who was a fervent intellectual, a revolutionary, and a short-lived Mexican president from 1911 to 1913.

Francisco Madero and Duena Alfonso shared much in common. The former was an emancipated cultural hybrid, educated in Europe, conditioned in the principles of democratic socialism. He was an aristocrat who was strongly influenced by Marxist social philosophy and modern principles of egalitarian democracy, and he returned to his own country committed to labor reform among industrial workers and to land reform among the agrarian classes. His revolution succeeded in the short term, and he was elected president in 1911. But social divisions and the politics of faction led to his assassination and the failure of his reforms. In her youth, Duena Alfonso shared these idealistic sentiments, even to the point of rebellion against the will of her father. But her experience of their dissolution has resulted in a lifetime of reflection on the nature of human will and its effect upon the world.

Recalling her father's contemplation of these same issues, she introduces the metaphor of the coin toss (which will be a central device for McCarthy later in *No Country for Old Men*). But here she focuses on the figure of the coiner himself, who forges the coin from a slug, and in doing so chooses between one of two images that will be cast on the face of the coin. In *No Country for Old Men*, the vicious Anton Chigurh invites his victims to 'call it,' and their lives depend entirely on how the coin lands. For him, the coin has been traveling to the current moment from the instant it was cast. But in *All the Pretty Horses*, the coin toss that determines fate is initiated by the coiner, a simple working man who comprehends nothing of the gravity of his actions, though in choosing a face for the coin he may dictate life or death in a complex and unpredictable sequence of cause and effect.

In one sense, however, Duena Alfonso's father has 'a great sense of the connectedness of things,' one that she does not entirely concede to, preferring to figure time and its passing in different and even more frightening terms: 'For me the world has always been more of a puppet show. But when one looks behind the curtain and traces the strings upward he finds they terminate in the hands of yet other puppets.' In both metaphors the origin and the effect of individual choice become utterly unknowable—yet full of consequence. In a paradoxical sense, human beings exert a tremendous influence on the world, but they are powerless to control the process by which their actions bear fruit. Duena Alfonso's story of the Madero brothers becomes a grave reflection on the consequences of idealism, which holds fast to the notion of possibility and hope derived from a faith in the human capacity to consciously ordain the history of the world. She rebels against John Grady's commitment to his own dream of a future with Alejandra, primarily because his faith is so strong, and her rejection of him hinges fully on an indirect sense that he is ill-fated and lost.

As he attempts to explain his relationship to Blevins and his indirect role in the events that led to Blevins's killing of the Mexican official, Duena Alfonso acknowledges both his innocence and his guilt, figured in the light of her conception of the world. She is not merely a traditional aristocrat protecting her niece from the suit of a poor foreigner. The past that she has told him of suggests sympathies quite the contrary. But she will not permit Alejandra to become involved with a man whose destiny is enmeshed in the dark trajectory of the coin toss and the puppet show, one who is in a strange way guilty only because he seems fated to strife. In John Grady's force of will she sees a stubborn pride bereft of wisdom. He is in that sense 'that myopic coiner at the press'...In a bleak deterministic universe in which human intentions are blighted by forces beyond understanding, she has no sympathy for those especially cursed...

Though Duena Alfonso speaks with the same authority as the Grand Inquisitor, her perspective by no means dominates the novel, and like many of McCarthy's protagonists John Grady articulates himself in the equally resounding language of action. His heroism and stoic resolve begin early and inform the narrative to the last page. Even as his hopes are thwarted, his commitment to Blevins and loyalty to Rawlins are beyond common measure, and they stand against the dark ruminations of Duena Alfonso. The potential for heroism in the modern industrial post-nuclear world is in this sense the primary subject of the novel. Of course the western, reconfigured and made contemporary in *All the Pretty Horses*, is an ideal genre to explore questions of personal identity, courage, and commitment. John Grady displays a physical strength and ability common to most conventional heroes, but his true merit emerges from his rich interiority, his reflection on hope and possibility, especially as it relates to the world at large.

At the beginning of section 4, just after his release from prison and before he returns to Don Hector's ranch, he meets a group of farmworkers. They gather for quiet conversation and share cigarettes, and after a

brief encounter John Grady reflects upon his relationship to the human community, considering the 'smiles' of the farmworkers, the 'good will which provoked them,' which had the 'power to protect and confer honor,' to 'heal men and bring them to safety long after all other resources were exhausted.' This touching conclusion regarding the value of human connection comes immediately after he has witnessed the murder of Blevins and the hellish violence in the prison in Saltillo. It is a remarkable revelation given the gravity of his experience; yet through force of will and depth of conscience, he is able to resolve in personal terms the paradox of a world defined by life and death, murder and benevolence.

This complexity of character emerges from an intensely mystical sense of purpose and order that McCarthy has dealt with in many of his previous works, one that becomes as central preoccupation in the other novels of the Border Trilogy and in later works as well. The question of how human beings come to understand their world achieves only a tentative but compelling response in the sublime image of the horse. Again, in a dream that is more real than the world he encounters in a waking state, John Grady apprehends in the horse that principle of purpose seen in the epilogue to *Blood Meridian*: 'Finally what he saw in his dream was that the order in the horse's heart was more durable for it was written in a place where no rain could erase it.'

He has worked with horses all his life—tamed and ridden them, harnessed and worked them...But even in this relationship of dominance John Grady establishes an intimacy based upon the mystical apprehension of unity, order, and value embodied in the horse, and his understanding of this reality becomes clearest in his dreams. It is by no means an order of kindness and beneficence alone, since in the end John Grady, even in his acknowledgment of mystery, comes to believe that 'the world's heart beats at some terrible cost' in a relationship of 'divergent equity,' and that 'the blood of multitudes might ultimately be exacted for the vision of a single flower.' But in this starkly naturalistic reflection, beauty itself is created and sustained by the wrenching destruction that occurs as life confronts life. From this revelation emerges a vague understanding of the paradox of blood and reverence, as violence begets the sublime image of the flower, which in the end transcends its own material existence in beauty.

Although the novel forces recognition of the omnipresent power of destruction, predicating the hero's stature upon his understanding of this mysterious conspiracy of opposites, McCarthy resolves the story on a principle of value that is by no means strictly scientific or philosophical. This notion of transcendent purpose finds its most poignant expression in tangibly human terms, as John Grady seeks to live by a strict and definite code of ethics. Even after he has survived his ordeal, his conflict is not over. This appears in his final conversation with the Texas judge who presides over the case of the stolen horse. But it begins earlier in the novel, as he explores one of the most important questions posed in McCarthy's works: the question of God's existence and nature, his presence in the world, and his role in steering the course of human lives and world history.

After their separation from Blevins and just before they arrive at Don Hector's hacienda, John Grady and Lacey Rawlins sit talking around a fire, pondering the people they have known as well as their experience in Mexico. Rawlins wonders if there is some unseen yet guiding influence that protects them. He asks the question directly: 'You think God looks out for people?' John Grady's response is simple and pointed. He acknowledges both human and natural evil as well as the divine presence that stands against them. He says: 'I'd say He's just about got to. I don't believe we'd make it a day otherwise.'

Even at a young age, John Grady defines his relationship to the world through a well-modulated paradox. Human beings are deeply flawed, with a tendency to intellectual blindness and greed, malice, and overweening self-indulgence. They are subject to unknowable forces that narrowly circumscribe their fates. But a divine presence intercedes on their behalf and saves them from themselves. It is only through the intervention of this presence that any near or long-term survival becomes possible. In his brief response to a weighty question, John Grady balances the reality of a harshly deterministic world with notions of purpose, meaning, and value made real through a mysterious yet paternal force, one that for lack of a more definitive term he must call God.

It is this tentative recognition of transcendence that separates him as an ethical being from the many characters he encounters during his journey: the Mexican captain who encourages him to lie about Blevins

to save himself; Perez, the leader of the inmates, who claims that Americans are naïve because they hold fast to such impractical ideas as the 'good' and the 'bad'; and even Duena Alfonso, who concedes perhaps too readily to the morally neutral forces of fate and destiny. John Grady is committed to a world protected by God, and he sees himself playing a humble but essential role in an ongoing creation. This becomes clear in his protection of Blevins, his friendship with Rawlins, his deep devotion to nature as seen in his relationship with horses. When he is forced to kill a boy in prison and feels the impulse to kill the captain, he is tortured with guilt. The Texas judge praises him for his courage and devotion, in essence lifting him above common humanity, but John Grady is resistant. He visits the judge at night and tells him of his experience in prison, and with regard to the captain he admits to intense feeling of hatred and malevolence. The judge tries to comfort him, suggesting that he is too hard on himself, but John Grady is firm, saying, 'It just bothered me that you might think I was somethin special. I aint.'

John Grady's heroism is derived from his unwillingness to be defined as such, from his belief that his choices, though they seem uncommon and virtuous, are nothing more than the expression of every man's obligation to act within an elaborate matrix of cause and effect, one that in the end reveals itself in sublime order—the beautiful tapestry that is the world. In this recognition, there is an assent to the truth of the coin toss and the puppet show, insofar as the outcome of human behavior is unpredictable and immeasurable in its sweeping scope. But in the end, individuals can respond to others with justice and decency. The novel concludes as John Grady, after reuniting with Rawlins and returning his horse, rides into a sunset: 'The bloodred dust blew down out of the sun' and 'horse and rider and horse passed on...Passed and paled into the darkening land, the world to come.'

The image is evocative and its potential significance is easily missed. It is 1949 and the American West is changing. Cattle ranches give way to oil fields and highways bury the ancient traces of the Comanche. The red of the sky may simply be the sunset, but it may work figuratively as the most stunning symbol of the cold war—the atmospheric burn of the atomic test. In this postnuclear world, human behavior becomes an issue of tremendous gravity, and the moderated heroism of John Gady is the soul of a modern mythology. This new narrative is informed by a code of living born of humility and obligation, emerging from an understanding of a basic truth—that human behavior has consequence, even amid the unknowable densities of an unfathomable world."

Steven Frye
Understanding Cormac McCarthy
(U South Carolina 2009) 95-113

"John Grady is also in flight from a modern, technologically frenzied, eco-destructive United States—the 'real' world—to the romantic 'unreality' of Mexico...The hegemonic reality of the modern America... occurs frequently in symbolic tableaux: the image of John Grady's horses forced off the blacktop, as semis roar past, at the end of *All the Pretty Horses*, is perhaps the novel's most vivid representation of both the implacability of this hegemony and McCarthy's ability to encapsulate it in a single vivid picture...Modern economic realities and continuing mechanization, leading to the increasing industrialization of agriculture, are making the practice of small-scale ranching in the southwestern United States impossible, and destroying the culture it creates, so McCarthy's heroes head south, still largely unsure of their reasons for doing so, to an older culture in which it appears that modernity has not yet subsumed the alternatives....

John Grady's nebulous longings for a world uncontaminated by a 'leprous' modernity are manifested in his willingness to plunge into affairs of the heart with women symbolic of an older order, in a country that represents much of what the United States has lost. In all McCarthy's fiction, these romantic interludes possess an otherworldly, quasi-spiritual quality that tends to reinforce the notion that romance is, at least partially, detached from the real world...Alejandra embodies John Grady's desires—sexual and otherwise—and is the antithesis of the realities he seeks to leave behind. The elevated quality of the language, here, could scarcely be more different from the exchange at John Grady's parting, for example, from Mary Catherine Barnett amid the commerce of San Angelo, which is firmly within the idiom of quotidian reality....

The Maderos are murdered dictatorship restored. Along with the tenets of the Enlightenment—progress, belief in the rational, the elevation of the individual, a move toward democracy—the aunt [Duena Alfonso]

also imports a belief in the redemptive power of romantic love, which allows her to embark on a doomed affair with Gustavo Madero, the brother of the future president, Francisco. She has been, like John Grady, a believer in what she now perceives as ‘myths’ and ‘illusions’: ‘In the end we all come to be cured of our sentiments. Those whom life does not cure death will. The world is quite ruthless in selecting between the dream and the reality.’ John Grady at first gains her sympathy, but realism is swift to intervene: ‘You will see that those things which disposed me in your favor were the very things which led me to decide against you in the end’....

Don Hector’s response to the imported modernity represented by John Grady Cole is to revert to the ancient codes and practices that define Mexico, or a version of Mexico that stands in opposition to post-Enlightenment Europe. Don Hector’s Mexico is overlaid with a patina of modernity, but beneath it lies the grain of an older, darker, culture whose structures are feudal, whose justice is arbitrary, and whose identity is profoundly enmeshed with the land....*All the Pretty Horses* does, however, offer the reader many different Mexicans and many different Mexicos....

John Grady Cole, having once belonged to the United States, belonged briefly in Mexico, but was removed, and is now a part of neither country; he has become psychologically and emotionally stateless.... And, of course, John Grady remains a creature of the border, to the end of the trilogy, and to his death in *Cities of the Plain*. It is notable, however, that the further into Mexico McCarthy’s wanderers penetrate, the more the cultures of the north and south conflict. Beyond the contract zone, ethnic encounter seems increasingly to become a matter of opposition and the reinstating of borders, rather than hybridization... doing little to challenge ‘political and social prejudices and caricatures that preserve...frontiers’....This, in part, is McCarthy’s response to the notion of progress: all human progress, in the vast reaches of geological time, is merely progress toward oblivion....

McCarthy exposes his marginalized heroes to evidence of this fleeting temporality, but rarely do they internalize it consciously. Instead, it is the older civilizations of the southwest to whom McCarthy gives stewardship of this insight as, significantly, McCarthy begins the novel with the Comanche, and ends it with ‘Indians’....The implication is that, for many Native American cultures, the white man is profoundly impermanent—as, by extension, is a post-Enlightenment civilization founded on technology and consumerism. Contacts with Native Americans in the novels serve, thereby, as direct reminders of the evanescent nature of capitalist modernity, and humanity more broadly, within the billions of years of the life of earth.”

Nicholas Monk
“*All the Pretty Horses, the Border, and Ethnic Encounter*”
Cambridge Companion (2013) 121-30

“Cole has become like the Indians in that his time has passed before he could inhabit it. His life too will be short and redeemed only in the sense that it will be staked and eventually lost through his willingness to risk his blood in warlike confrontation with others. The modern American world in which he dies will not understand the meaning of his life’s sacrifice, just as the Indian nations whose ghosts pass before Cole are unremembered except insofar as they live on through the doomed Cole. His death recycles and replays the death of the Indians before him. In a sense, they lead him toward his end. In one form or another, these nameless Indian warriors ‘singing softly in blood’ and ‘rattling past with their stone-age tools of war’ haunt and shape the action of McCarthy’s western novels. They represent both the ungraspable past and the destiny toward which McCarthy’s characters inexorably head.”

Timothy Parrish
“History and the Problem of Evil in McCarthy’s Western Novels”
Cambridge Companion (2013) 67-68

Michael Hollister (2014)