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The Disillusionment of John Grady Cole's Vision of the West

In *All the Pretty Horses* John Grady Cole attempts to reconcile with the reality of the west and come to terms with the life he wants and the life he will have to face. He starts out as merely a boy full of dreams and romantic notions of the west. He feels displaced when his mother sells the family farm and moves to the city to become an actress, and desperately wants to find his own place in the world. His talents and loves don't really fit the new modernized society, and his journey into Mexico serves to disillusion him and turn him into a man.

With John Grady Cole, the reader gets to experience the birth of Cole as a Cowboy Hero. Susan Lee writes that, "While the protagonist journeys to another land to develop his imagined version of utopia, the underlying inspiration for Cole is a return to the human emotions and internal desires displaced by the intrusion of modernity" (Lee 189). He starts out as boy whose family owns a piece of the perfect example of the dying west. John Grady Cole begs his father to least him the ranch. He wants to work and live the ranching style and is willing to give all his father the profits in return, but his father tells him, "You don't know what you're talking about. There's not any money. This place has barely paid expenses for twenty years. There hasn't been a white person worked here since before the war. Anyway, you're sixteen years old, you can't run a ranch" (15). But he doesn't fit in with his mother's new cosmopolitan life in the city, either. He feels displaced and cannot accept the modernization of society, so he leaves home as a boy in search of his idealized and romanticized version. John Blair comments in his article *Mexico and the Borderlands in Cormac McCarthy's All the Pretty Horses* that,

John Grady Cole's journey into Mexico... begins because of loss; his father is dying, his mother is selling the family's ranch, and his girl has left him for another boy. His motivations on the surface seem clear enough; he has nothing left to keep him in Texas, and going south to Mexico seems an appropriately adventurous reaction for a teenaged boy with no ties and no real responsibilities. (Blair 2)

Though it is an "appropriately adventurous" for him to do, he fails at first to understand the gravity of the untamed west in Mexico. Mexico, though full of the things he loves, is much more dangerous and alive than his old home. Blair goes on to comment, "He is a young man very much confused by the way in which his world is changing, and his journey southward is a search for meaning as much as it is a lark... to see the world" (Blair 2). So as much as it is a journey for adventure, it is also a coming of age story in which Cole must discover his place in life.

When Jimmy Blevins joins them, his quiet and stoic demeanor really shines, and he is kind to the boy in contrast to Rawlins, who constantly plays with his weakness to criticism. At one point, Rawlins asks Cole, "What the hell do you reckon is wrong with him?" and Cole answers, "He's just a kid" (56). He tries very hard to protect Blevins to the dangers of the west, but such an action seems impossible considering his age and attitude. He badgers Cole and Rawlins incessantly, and it is Rawlins who caves and tells him how the Mexican wanted to buy him. Rawlins is more of a no nonsense tough guy, and he hates Blevins and calls him "Goddamn pitiful" (77). It is Rawlins who seems not to have a conscience about leaving Blevins behind. Blevins ignorance and age are ultimately his Achilles heel and downfall. He is unable to handle the new rules of the west and his actions and desperation eventually lead to

him becoming a Desperado, while in contrast John Grady Cole tries as hard as he can to remain moral but strong.

La Purísima seems to be a haven for cowboys in the west. It almost fits John Grady Cole's romanticized vision. McCarthy describes,

...the ranch occupied part of the broad barrial or basin floor of the bolsón and was well watered with natural springs and clear streams and dotted with marshes and shallow lakes or lagunas. In the lakes and in the streams were species of fish not known elsewhere on earth and birds and lizards and other forms of life... (97)

Here he is able to find a livelihood on Rocha's ranch breeding horses, something that he really has an affinity for, and it seems to prove he is destined for the life of a cowboy. Cole makes the ambition claim that he can break the wild herd of horses in four days, and after some banter between Cole and Rawlins that illuminates Cole's eye for horses, Rawlins tells him, impressed, "What else do you know that you aint told me?" (101). Cole later tells him, "You pick out the one you think is craziest... and I'll give you a finished horse this time Sunday week," to which Rawlins responds, "Bullshit" (104). Cole's approach is that of something like a horse whisperer, and that is exactly what he does to break the horse. He starts out by roping it, but effectively manages to saddle it by rubbing it and talking to it. When Rawlings scoffs and asks him what good it does, Cole seems to respond with a shrug, saying, "I don't know. I aint a horse" (106). This implies that his ability is something more inherent. He just does it and it works.

McCarthy's description also makes La Purísima seem like an Eden, and there is certainly a forbidden woman for Cole there. Her father Rocha is also something of a role model

for Cole. McCarthy describes that he, "...was one of the few hacendados who actually lived on the land he claimed, land which had been in his family for one hundred and seventy years..."

(97). On the surface, Rocha appears to be living the life that Cole wanted from his own family's farm, but there is also a stark contrast between the life of a true cowboy and Rocha. But Oxby and Sickels comment in their article *In Search of a Further Frontier: Cormac McCarthy's Border Trilogy* that,

Rocha appears to be the kind of person who Cole would like to emulate—a rancher living his life on the land. As such, Cole respects and trusts Rocha, but Rocha is not what he seems. Despite being "one of the few hacendados who actually lived on the land he claimed," it is not the ranch that gives Rocha his financial independence (97). Without his business interests in Mexico City Rocha would surely not have the luxury of his family's ranch. (Oxby and Sickels 350)

So despite being in the deep west in Mexico, it seems that modernization has found its way even here.

Rocha is also not a cowboy the way Cole wants to be. He works with the corrupt Mexican law instead of against it. He no longer works the land himself, and indulges in the fruits of modernization such as flying airplanes, which disrupts the land and scare the animals. The fact that he loves to travel by plane instead of by horse also seems significant. Oxby and Sickels go on to say,

In addition, although Rocha clearly loves his ranch, he is not connected to it through working on it; he pays others to work it in his frequent and lengthy absences. Even as McCarthy writes of Rocha's love of horses, he tells us that

Rocha flies his own airplane, which at intervals... ruptures tranquillity and reinforces the inevitable decline of the pastoral dream's feasibility. Although a refuge from industrialism, La Purísima is more a vacation home than a working ranch. (Oxby and Sickels 350)

The final component to Cole's coming of age story seems to be Alejandra, the forbidden cowboy romance to go with his ideals. She comes to him playful and coy, despite being older than him, gets his hopes up. She is desperate to be independent, and she seems to use her affair with Cole to obtain that. Despite Alfonsa's and Rawlins warnings, neither of them try to stop. Alfonsa tells him, "They have a long life, dreams. I have dreams now which I had as a young girl. They have an odd durability for something not quite real" (134). When Cole makes a feeble attempt to pacify Alfonsa, Alejandra becomes very upset. Cole explains to her, "She didn't want me to be seen with you. Out on the campo," but Alejandra tells him angrily, "I won't be treated in such a manner" (140). But in reality, she is anything but free and her reputation does matter. Oxby and Sickels also write that, "Cole believes he has found a kindred spirit in Alejandra, Rocha's horse-loving daughter; against his better judgment, he begins a clandestine affair with her" (350). But like her father, she is not a woman of land, and while she also loves horses, is very much in love with the cosmopolitan life as well, which she indulges in with her mother. Oxby and Sickels continue to say, "Cole does not see it. He mistakenly thinks her love of horses and desire to ride them also indicates a desire to live the frontier life with a cowboy" (Oxby and Sickels 350). He is still seeing the world with through his imagined vision.

Later, when Alfonsa finds out Cole has disregarded all her warnings and buys him out of prison only for Alejandra's sake, he comes to her a very different man, having killed a man,

seen Blevins executed, and been tortured and beaten. But he has still held on to the dream of Alejandra. Alfonsa's rebukement of him and assertion that Alejandra will not see him again seems to be the last point of disillusionment for Cole, which he accepts with some grace. Alfonsa tells him, "I've been at some pains to tell you about myself because among other reasons I think that we should know who are enemies are. I've known people to spend their lives nursing a hatred of phantoms and they were not happy people," to which he responds, "I don't hate you" (241). He returns to Texas a different man, but so are Rawlins and the town he left behind. He decides that there is still nothing left for him in Texas, and leaves once again for the west this time as a real cowboy. It's also ironic in that despite being disillusioned, McCarthy gives him a piece of the imagined west in his exit, the vision of the cowboy riding off into the sunset. "... rider and horse passed on and their long shadows passed in tandem like the shadow of a single being. Passed and paled into the darkening land, the world to come" (301).

John Grady Cole leaves Texas in search of his imagined version of the west, and ends up as a disillusioned but true cowboy. His experiences leave him irreversibly changed. He is left by Alejandra, loses his best friend, watches another be executed, is beaten and tortured and forced to kill his first man. Despite that, he comes to possess admirable qualities associated with the west such as his skill with horses and a sense of morality. But he is also given the memorable smaller romantic experiences and features of the west such as sleeping under the stars and his ride off into the sunset that make the lifestyle fit him and seem worth it.

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