

## About This Volume

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Laura Nicosia and James F. Nicosia

It can be argued that Cormac McCarthy was a polarizing figure in American literature. The greater part of his corpus, including his 1992 novel *All the Pretty Horses* (ATPH), met with, usually, critical success and legions of literary fans. Others rejected his modernist tendencies and economical style inherited by such canonical literary figures as William Faulkner, Ernest Hemingway, and, to a lesser degree, Flannery O'Connor and even Mark Twain. Early reviewers called him a "man's novelist," and that certainly continued with ATPH. Such critics overlooked the subtle evolution of American literature exhibited in his stark but recognizable prose, preferring a more substantial postmodern ethic that rejected all things literary. McCarthy nonetheless continued to write from a place of strong stylistic foundation, opponents be damned, and his bleak 2006 novel, *The Road*, silenced most critics with its relentless desolation. Its receipt of the Pulitzer Prize made McCarthy, long admired by serious readers and critics, finally, ubiquitous. The twentieth century's most powerful critic, Harold Bloom, had long since anointed him one of the most important writers of the late-twentieth century, but his now widespread appeal (including, for better or worse, the popularization of *The Road* in movie form), cemented his place in the pantheon of American literature. His earlier corpus now had to be (re)considered. Though earlier works like *Blood Meridian* and *Suttree* had received greater general praise, *All the Pretty Horses* captured wider attention from readers and critics and achieved its status as perhaps his most readable volume.

This scholarly collection brings to light a wide range of insights into the novel that thrust McCarthy into the spotlight as one of the greatest living writers of the late twentieth-to-early twenty-first century. One of Salem's most popular series, *Critical Insights* distills the best of both class and literary criticism of the world's most studied literature. As such, this volume aims to be broad in its

discussions and discourse, as well as accessible to the thoughtful reader. The essays within this collection thus attempt to provide an all—embracing critical analysis of one of the most popular and well-respected works by one of the most highly acclaimed writers of the last 40 years.

This volume features 14 in-depth, yet accessible, essays that provide readers and researchers with several avenues into the complex and elusive work that is McCarthy's *All the Pretty Horses*. It begins with two essays on the historical context and the critical reception of the novel; each of which addresses the influence of the time period, explores the influence of the text *upon* and *within* the canon, and plumbs specific details that have captured audiences at its publication, through to today's readership.

After these first four essays, the collection follows with a comparative essay, as well as an essay that utilizes a focused critical lens to provide a focused, in-depth reading of *ATPH*. The heart of the collection then includes ten readings of a wide-ranging nature that serve to whet the reader's appetite for the diversity of methodologies to read McCarthy's novel more lucidly, more thoughtfully, more informedly. The concluding sections are valuable resources for researchers, including a chronology of McCarthy's life and a comprehensive bibliography (both compiled by Montclair State University graduate assistant, Alyssa Roberts) and index. *Critical Insights* provides authoritative insights and analysis suitable for students and teachers alike. Students come away with an enriched sense of the many ways the themes can be studied, appreciated, written, and talked about, making these important connections themselves with easy-to-use guidance.

### **Reading McCarthy, Reading Reception**

This volume begins with “*All the Pretty Horses*: McCarthy's Breakthrough into the American Canon,” a brief charting of McCarthy's ascension to canonical status that came with the publication of *All the Pretty Horses*. As a bestseller, it certainly demanded attention, but along with that success also came a broader critical respect for what McCarthy had been doing all along. The

## ***All the Pretty Horses: McCarthy's Breakthrough into the American Canon***

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Laura Nicosia and James F. Nicosia

Dwight Garner's obituary in *The New York Times* labels Cormac McCarthy a "formidable and reclusive writer of Appalachia and the American Southwest, whose raggedly ornate early novels about misfits and grotesques gave way to the lush taciturnity of *All the Pretty Horses* and the apocalyptic minimalism of *The Road*" (1). It is certainly true that *All the Pretty Horses* stands as a pivotal work in American literature. A massive bestseller that won both the National Book Award and the National Book Critics Circle Award, the novel was the first installment of McCarthy's *Border Trilogy* series (including *The Crossing* and *Cities of the Plain*). As of this writing, Amazon ranks the novel as #27 of all-time in the Westerns category and #226 overall in the category of literary fiction.

In *All the Pretty Horses* (ATPH), McCarthy's narrative famously transcends the canonical definitions of westerns or cowboy literature and in the process forges a new type of western that may or may not have any descendants. It certainly does not have any rivals. In its exploration of the American landscape (a frequently visited topic in this history of American literature and cinema), McCarthy is unexpectedly successful at capturing the essence of the American spirit, defining both modernism and postmodernism, and plumbing the slippery, evolving definitions of masculinity. As in most of his works, many hardships befall the characters in this novel, but what stands out as unique to McCarthy as a writer of this particular novel is that his visions of tragedy, violence, and death transcend the well-worn genre's typically simplistic dualisms of black vs. white, hero vs. villain, civilization vs. nature, Mexican vs. American, male vs. female. A good person can do bad things, and a bad person can do good; there is more than an equal share of ethically and morally neutral actions, as well. Yet McCarthy does not merely obliterate dualities, either, as many of his contemporary writers might have

been content to do; there is no throwing up of hands here to abandon the world to indeterminacy. Yet, where the needle actually falls in terms of ethics and morality is compellingly vague; in the words of critic Harold Bloom, literary novels that transcend summary and classification have some element of the “uncanny,” and McCarthy’s *ATPH* has the uncanny in spades.

In *ATPH*, life is full of gray zones that blur moral and ethical judgments. As Western writer James Wade explains, “[McCarthy] included all those elements from traditional Westerns, like cowboys and horses, but he also almost single-handedly brought the Western into the literary realm. . . . As Western writers we can now take chances on more metaphysical topics, and not just heroes and villains” (qtd. in *Italie*). What McCarthy recognizes, here and in most of the equally compelling, confounding fiction of his corpus that follows, is the randomness that surrounds contemporary existence has always been present; that marriage of modernist angst and subtly postmodern existentialism serves not so much, therefore, as a revision of twentieth-century modernist sensibilities as a correction of them. In short, his genius in reconsidering the American past suggests that this is what writers, in the vein of his forebear William Faulkner, should have been writing all along.

At its core, *ATPH* solidified McCarthy’s position as one of the most esteemed writers of contemporary American letters, and perhaps even American literary history. The novel touches on numerous themes that are ingrained in the universal experience: love, loss, and the search for identity. But it also pursues these themes through a uniquely American lens using the western frontier as not just its backdrop, but also its theme. Some critics insightfully argue that the frontier, the border, and nature itself are characters in his novel. Certainly, the horses are. The novel is set in the America of 1949 and follows the story of John Grady Cole, the sixteen-year-old Texan on a horseback quest of self-discovery through the Texas and Mexican badlands. Left homeless by his family and by an America that is abandoning nature in favor of civilization, Cole is free to determine his path, even as ironically he comes to recognize that there is no literal path, westward or otherwise.

## Cormac McCarthy: A Biography

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J. Gavin Paul

### Early Life

Charles Joseph McCarthy was born in Providence, Rhode Island, on July 20, 1933, at a time and in a place that seem worlds remote from the violent, lush landscapes that have come to define his fiction. The first-born son and third child of six (three sisters and two brothers) born to Charles McCarthy and Gladys Christina McGrail McCarthy, he was named after his father but at some point before the publication of his first novel later legally changed his name to Cormac, a Gaelic nickname that some of his Irish aunts used for his father. The McCarthy family moved to Knoxville, Tennessee, in 1937 when his father, a Yale-educated lawyer, took a position with the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA), a federally owned agency devoted to developing the infrastructure and industry of the state as part of President Roosevelt's New Deal.

McCarthy's intense curiosity and keen perception of the natural world flourished during his adolescence in Knoxville. He remarked in a 1992 *New York Times* profile, "I had every hobby there was. There was no hobby I didn't have, name anything, no matter how esoteric, I had found it and dabbled in it" (qtd. in Woodward 31). Despite, or perhaps because of, his aptitude and wide-ranging pursuits, McCarthy had little interest in school or academic achievement, a point that no doubt created some tension in his relationship with his parents: "I was not what they had in mind. . . . I felt early on I wasn't going to be a respectable citizen. I hated school from the day I set foot in it" (qtd. in Woodward 31). As he explored the woods and vales near his family's acreage, McCarthy's imagination gravitated toward those living on the ragged edges of society, clinging to sensibilities and ways of life that were coming under threat by the mid-point of century. Perhaps we catch a glimpse of his wanderings in the young protagonist of *The Orchard Keeper*, McCarthy's first novel (published in 1965): "These nights he could not bear to be in

## ***All the Pretty Horses*: McCarthy's Vision of Frontier Myths and Revolutionary Struggles\_\_\_\_\_**

Melinda Knight

Cormac McCarthy's novel, *All the Pretty Horses*, was published in 1992 and quickly became a bestseller as well as the winner of two prestigious literary prizes (the U.S. National Book Award and the National Book Critics Circle Award). The novel takes its title from a traditional lullaby, also known as "Hush Hush-a-bye," that has generated many recordings and adaptations, most of which focus on the promise of what will occur if children go to sleep without resisting authority by crying. In the most well-known version, the opening lyric asks babies to "hush" and not "cry," and promises that when they wake, they will have "all the pretty horses." The writer Dorothy Scarborough believes the tune had African American origins, and she documents several versions she collected in her compilation of folksongs (145–48). Though McCarthy does not mention the lullaby directly in the novel, the protagonist John Grady Cole captures the wish fulfillment of the lullaby in a scene toward the end. On his return journey to Texas, he encounters a group of children near the border who want to know more about him, and he "told them how he had come from another country, two young horsemen riding their horse, and they had met with a third who had no money or food to eat nor scarcely clothes to cover himself and that he had come to ride with them and share with them all they had" (243). John Grady tells the children everything that happened, and they debate what he could do now—"find a wise man" or "perhaps a curandera<sup>1</sup> [female folk healer]" or "pray to God" (244). Although horses do figure prominently in the novel, they serve primarily as plot devices, to move the plot along, rather than as the primary subject. What the lullaby signifies, then, is the promise of a reward, which in the case of John Grady is never fulfilled. Understanding the historical context of the novel requires an analysis of two competing

narratives: the frontier myth in American culture and the events of the Mexican Revolution.

### **The Frontier Myth in American Culture**

The image of the frontier, the promise of open land, has had a long history in American culture. Colonial settlers imagined the New World as a site for reinvention, with unlimited possibilities for exploiting the land, which coincided with eradicating Indigenous inhabitants who were the first Americans. The frontier hero mediates between the settled and unsettled world, as Richard Slotkin has suggested. In his view, the frontier presents a “wide-open land of unlimited opportunity for the strong, ambitious, self-reliant individual to thrust his way to the top” (5). Open land is an important image, as it presents an alternative to Thomas Jefferson’s concern that cities are “pestilential to the morals, the health and the liberties of man.” The idea of open, unsettled land promised endless opportunity, individual freedom, and wealth from boundless natural resources of mythic proportions; this myth of the frontier, as Slotkin explains, embodies “a set of narratives that acquire through specifiable historical action a significant ideological charge” (19).

Related to the frontier myth is the “safety-valve” theory, in which it was understood that potential violence and social upheaval in overcrowded Eastern areas could be “relieved” by migration to the open spaces offered by “free” land in the West. The Homestead Act of 1862 provided 160 acres to almost anyone (excluding those who fought for the South in the Civil War) willing to farm the land, build a home, and make improvements over a period of five years, a process known as “proving up.” About 10 percent of the total land of the United States was eventually given away, a giveaway that primarily benefitted White people and later large corporations. Although the frontier was officially declared closed in 1893, as Frederick Jackson Turner argued in his famous address to the American Historical Association at the World’s Columbian Exhibition, the frontier myth has persisted. Turner was highly concerned about what the loss of open land would mean for American democracy, and what became known as the Turner Thesis reinforced the mythic status of the

## ***All the Pretty Horses* Alters the Reception and Prestige of McCarthy**

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Amy Leshinsky

Although little attention had been paid to Cormac McCarthy's earlier works, *All the Pretty Horses* thrust McCarthy into the public spotlight. The novel won the 1992 National Book Award and the 1993 National Book Critics Circle Award for Fiction. His work was reviewed in scores of newspapers in 1992 and was propelled into the spotlight again in 1993. Random House Audiobooks released a two-cassette audiobook in 1993 narrated by internationally acclaimed actor and film producer, Brad Pitt. Columbia Pictures sought film rights immediately after the book's publication and released their film after a series of challenges in 2000. Though reviews of the film underperformed those of the book, the film had a strong budget and an impressive cast with Matt Damon as John Grady Cole and Penelope Cruz as Alejandra Villarreal.

It is well documented that McCarthy did not seek out the spotlight; Richard B. Woodward did interview McCarthy, however, prior to the release of *All the Pretty Horses*. The resulting article published in April of 1992 in the *New York Times Magazine* provided a candid profile of McCarthy and touched upon components of his writing that would be explored and discussed in early reviews. Woodward's fascinating and valuable interview with McCarthy charts his journey as a writer and provides valuable insight into McCarthy's demeanor just prior to the release of *All the Pretty Horses*, the novel that cemented McCarthy's value in contemporary American literature.

First, this essay explores McCarthy's writing style, which was examined in early reviews of his work. Second, this essay highlights the impact of *All the Pretty Horses* on the academic and public perception of McCarthy as one of the greatest living American writers. Finally, nearly thirty years after the publication of *All the Pretty Horses*, McCarthy's work remains a continuously explored



piece in U.S. classrooms and academic spaces, which requires an examination of the contemporary lens receiving and processing this great American work of fiction.

### ***All the Pretty Horses***

Prior to the May 11 release of *All the Pretty Horses*, McCarthy was profiled by writer Richard B. Woodward in *The New York Times Magazine*. While *All the Pretty Horses* was not the focus of this interview, the esteem of *The New York Times Magazine* and the prestige of Woodward captured the attention of other media outlets. Woodward's interview, published as "Cormac McCarthy's Venomous Fiction," hailed McCarthy as "the best unknown novelist in America" (28). The Woodward interview touched upon components of McCarthy's narrative style that would be examined in the subsequent weeks. Though previous reception of McCarthy's works highlights his contributions to Southern Gothic style and human cruelty, Woodward works to juxtapose the "world-class talker," who is quick to laugh, with his "terse and crude" characters. Many reviews of *All the Pretty Horses* would comment on the "stylized sparseness" of Cormac's works; Woodward's interview highlights the ability of McCarthy's prose to "magnify the force and precision of his words." This precursory interview to *All the Pretty Horses* was the first of many mainstream media outlets to positively review McCarthy's writing within the novel.

The limited punctuation and long, winding sentences packed with description were examined in early reviews of the work. As Woodward notes in his work on McCarthy, readers take less than a page of reading McCarthy's works to know his writing is "minimally punctuated." The absence of punctuation is noted by *Boston Globe* writer Gail Caldwell writes that McCarthy's "laconic dialogue is stripped of speakers and quotation marks" (B41). This style of writing, Caldwell notes, creates a "voice that is unmistakably and torrentially [McCarthy's]." Caldwell explains that while his descriptions often become too extravagant, "a moment of understated gravity comes along, when all the silence in the world can't do justice to the feeling beneath it." Madison Smartt Bell writes

## Wilderness 2.0: Redefining and Rewilding Wilderness in McCarthy's *All the Pretty Horses*\_\_\_\_

Aaron A. Cloyd

Wilderness is complicated territory in Cormac McCarthy's novel *All the Pretty Horses*. Even though the novel takes place in deserted regions of southern Texas and northern Mexico, the characters ride mostly to the west of legally designated wilderness areas in Texas. Their closest proximity to an official wilderness occurs as they cross into Coahuila, Mexico, and ride east of Maderas del Carmen. However, even if John Grady Cole, Lacy Rawlins, and Jimmy Blevins were to encounter a designated wilderness area within their travels, "wilderness" would be anachronistic, in a legal sense of the word, as none of these areas were legally recognized as wilderness in 1949, the timeline of the novel. Confounding this discussion more, the word "wilderness" does not appear in the novel.

Rather, wilderness is present implicitly throughout the novel, occurring by way of qualities traditionally associated with wilderness such as "barren" (59), "open" (256), and "wild" (87). These terms further imply wilderness to be a site beyond human influence, an idea that has long existed, but that was legally set down in the 1964 Wilderness Act. Yet, the presence of human artifacts in these areas such as abandoned ranches (23), an apple orchard (226), and a collapsing cabin (226) contest these ideas of wilderness. Further complicating matters, these human objects are crumbling or rusting, fading into the land around them. Their movement toward decay and the implied reciprocal reinstatement of natural elements indicate that wilderness in this novel is not a static site but a process where both elements of nature and humanity are fluid, visible, and even valued. Given this complex imaging of wilderness, this chapter argues that *All the Pretty Horses* is a novel that redefines wilderness in multiple ways but, most importantly, as a site that can be identified as a rewilding wilderness.

## Images of Nature and Wilderness in *All the Pretty Horses*

Throughout *All the Pretty Horses*, nature gains prominence in two ways. One, the narrator continuously draws the reader's attention to particular vegetation and precise geological features. Two, the characters raise awareness of nature by repeatedly interacting with it.

### *Attending to Nature*

To cite one example of the narrator's attention toward nature from early in the novel, John Grady and his father go riding, and the warm weather has brought the "yellow mexicanhat" into bloom (22). They begin riding "along Grape Creek," that is "clear and green with trailing moss braided over the gravel bars," before riding into "open country among scrub mesquite and nopal," a land "dotted with cedar" and covered with "traprock" (22–23). A similar focus on specific flora occurs later in the novel as the narrator describes terrain with "evergreen ash growing in the rocky draws" (59). "Persimmon, mountain gum" grows there as well, and the path before the boys is described as a series of "shaly rock switchbacks" that ends on a "gravel shelf" (59). Preparing camp that night, they hear "three long howls" of a wolf (59–60).

In both passages, the narrator's attention to specific vegetation, particular environments, and concise features of those locations, raises nature beyond a generalized backdrop or some aspect overshadowed by other features of the narrative. The exactness of the language in these sections, and others similar to them, helps foreground the importance of nature throughout the novel, and, as implied in both sections, the characters throughout the novel pay nature a similar level of attention, heightening its prominence.

Similar to the narrator, characters repeatedly deal with nature. Through sight, speech, thought, and bodily movement, they grant significance to natural elements in the narrative. Throughout the novel, the landscape is continually "looked out over" (59, 62, 70), and "looked out to" (45); it is "admired" (93), "studied" (57, 279), "took in" (49), discussed in multiple contexts (25, 34, 55, 93, 226),

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Snyder, Phillip A., and Delys W. Snyder. “Modernism, Postmodernism, and Language: McCarthy’s Style.” *The Cambridge Companion to Cormac McCarthy*. Edited by Steven Frye. Cambridge UP, 2013, pp. 7–40.

“The Wilderness Act.” *Wilderness Connect*, [wilderness.net/learn-about-wilderness/key-laws/wilderness-act/default.php](http://wilderness.net/learn-about-wilderness/key-laws/wilderness-act/default.php).

characters with strong moral viewpoints grappling with rapidly changing environments.

Cole's spirit and situation harken back to nineteenth-century American fiction and invite a comparison with American literature's first popular romantic literary hero, Natty Bumppo from James Fenimore Cooper's *The Leatherstocking Tales* (1823–41), a five-novel series. Like Bumppo, Cole appears in multiple books in *The Border Trilogy*, including *Cities of the Plain*, and shares a strong likeness with Bumppo, who intuits uncomfortable changes in his surroundings, maintains a strong moral compass, relocates as necessary, and never quite seems at home or grounded in one place, largely because the America he idealizes and desires to inhabit exists ephemerally, if at all. The book that best reveals this likeness is Cooper's *The Deerslayer* (1841), which features Bumppo at his youngest stage of life, or "just arriving at manhood" (493) as Cooper describes in the preface of an 1850 edition. Though technically the final book that Cooper wrote about Bumppo, *The Deerslayer* not only depicts his hero as roughly the same age as Cole but has also been considered the most romantic and environmentally evocative novel of the series. Although Cooper and McCarthy's diction choices and narrative styles remain starkly different, the stories they tell of American protagonists coming to terms with shifting societal values and realities are remarkably similar. The following discusses the origin and development of a personal code that elevates the idealistic Natty Bumppo (aka Deerslayer) and John Grady Cole to mythic status in American literature and accounts for the ways that both Cooper' and McCarthy's novels explore the possibility and perils of romance and violent tests to ensure survival.

### **The Formation of a Personal Code**

A key difference between *The Deerslayer* and *All the Pretty Horses* is that by the time readers during James Fenimore Cooper's time read the fifth and final book of *The Leatherstocking Series*, *The Deerslayer* functioned more or less as a prequel to a set of adventure stories many had previously read. Between *The Deerslayer*'s initial release date and the present, critics, scholars, and readers have debated the

**“ . . . one thing more of things she lay among”:  
Ecological Form in McCarthy’s *All the Pretty  
Horses***

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Seth Forrest

Near the end of *All the Pretty Horses*, John Grady Cole has returned to the Rancho de la Nuestra Señora de la Purísima Concepción, ostensibly to retrieve his belongings but primarily to pursue some degree of closure with Dueña Alfonsa. After speaking with Señora Alfonsa, John Grady leaves the hacienda with his meager belongings, an envelope of cash, and the grullo horse he had broken early in his days at La Purísima. Stopping outside a tiny village, he encounters a group of curious children, who share his sandwiches and ask to hear his story.

Es una historia larga, he said.

Hay tiempo, they said.

He smiled and looked at them and as there was indeed time he told all that had happened. He told them how they had come from another country, two young horsemen riding their horses and that they had met with a third who had no money nor food to eat nor scarcely clothes to cover himself and that he had come to ride with them and share with them in all they had. This horseman was very young and he rode a wonderful horse but among his fears was the fear that God would kill him with lightning and because of this fear he lost his horse in the desert. He then told them what had happened concerning the horse and how they had taken the horse from the village of Encantada and there had killed a man and that the police had come to the hacienda and arrested him and his friend and that the grandmother had paid their fine and then forbidden the novia to see him anymore. (243–44)

Not only does this telling encapsulate the novel’s basic plot up to this point, but it reproduces McCarthy’s own prose style, as well.

The plot falls into a linear pattern, and for the most part, so does the grammar of sentence structures:

He smiled and looked at them and as there was indeed time he told all that had happened. He told them how they . . . and that they had met with . . .and that he had come to ride with them. . . . He then told them what had happened . . . and how they had taken the horse . . . and there had killed a man and that the police had come . . . and that the grandmother had paid . . . and then forbidden the novia. . . (243–44)

The overall pattern and style of John Grady’s storytelling—this happened, and then this, and because of that another thing happened, and then finally this last thing happened—fits the occasion. It is the kind of patterning that his young audience themselves might use to tell a story, a basic kind of patterning, suitable for oral storytelling. This style is referred to as “simple.” Using ellipses here can serve to isolate the main clauses that drive the sentences, grammatically simple in their construction: “He smiled and looked. . . . he told . . . He told them how . . . they had met with . . . he had come to ride with them . . . he then told them . . . the police had come. . .”

Yet, McCarthy shows us that such a linear, additive storytelling can become incredibly complex. Although the sentences themselves emerge from simple grammatical constructions of simple subjects and active verbs, they also combine and add upon each other to evoke rich and detailed descriptions. His most powerful novels, including all three books in the *Border Trilogy*, utilize this overarching structural principle of addition and accumulation and accretion, from the sentence level on up through the novels’ plotting. It serves well for plots that involve adventures and journeys and wanderings and repeated attempts to survive under difficult conditions. And as shown in this essay, this style serves well even at the level of the sentence to establish an earthbound and ecological understanding of the world and our place within it.

## Aldo Leopold's Land Ethic in McCarthy's *All the Pretty Horses*

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Allison Harl

Conservationist and writer Aldo Leopold once said, “There are some who can live without wild things, and some who cannot” (vii). A requiem for the American frontier, Cormac McCarthy’s *All the Pretty Horses* explores the moral responsibilities of a dispossessed cowboy in the modern mechanized West. Analyzing the novel through an ecocritical lens, this essay explores the characterization of John Grady Cole as a reflection of the fragmented and degraded American landscape. The last in a long line of family ranchers, John Grady questions his ethical obligations, seeking to adapt to a rapidly changing world defined by exploitation and violence. As his family, love, and future unravel, John Grady becomes increasingly disillusioned with no one to applaud his tenacious cowboy code of integrity or his proven abilities—only a judge to whom he offers his confession of culpability.

McCarthy’s elegy echoes the values of Aldo Leopold, father of wildlife ecology, in his famous text *A Sand County Almanac*, published in 1949—the same year in which *All the Pretty Horses* is set. Having worked with the U.S. Forest Service for twenty years, Leopold pioneered a conservation movement concerned with the management of healthy ecosystems, particularly in the American southwest. In his reflections and critiques, Leopold defined a moral responsibility that derives from a conscious understanding of the interdependence of all creatures and the lands they inhabit. McCarthy’s charged prose steeped in electrical imagery illuminates the inherent natural energy at play in this interdependent system of land and people.

In his essay “The Land Ethic,” from the *Sand County Almanac*, Leopold advocates for a biocentric worldview, arguing that living organisms create symbioses, modes of co-operation that function not only biologically, but in larger societal systems of politics and



economics (202). The complexities of the intricate ecosystem are ordered around seemingly chaotic events, and “its functioning depends on the cooperation and competition of its diverse parts” (215). Reiterating Leopold’s treatise, McCarthy’s narrative dramatizes the tensions in the “seeming chaos” among many “diverse parts” (Leopold 215) of environmental, political, and social hierarchies. The novel resists reductive binaries of nature/culture, which locate humans and their societies outside of the natural systems to which they belong. Rather, the author’s southwestern borderlands function as the liminal space within this symbiotic interplay, the stage on which John Grady’s character is developed in his coming-of-age journey. In *All the Pretty Horses*, the organic balance functions without sentimentality and often with violence. McCarthy’s use of subtle metaphors depicts an enduring life force, a natural wildness inherent in the wounded terrain marred by mechanization.

McCarthy scholars have long recognized Leopold’s influence on the *Border Trilogy* novels, the first of which is *All the Pretty Horses*. According to Michael Lynn Crews, in the marginal notes of his original drafts McCarthy made only two direct references to other writers, one of whom is Leopold. He wrote, “See A. Leopold” in his manuscript of *The Crossing*, the second novel of the trilogy (234–35). Lydia R. Cooper has also acknowledged the connection between the authors, observing, “McCarthy’s project in the *Border Trilogy* in many ways reiterates Aldo Leopold’s call for human recognition of the intrinsic value of the natural world, as a corrective vision to the utilitarian ethics that guides Western views of environmental policy through the lens of ‘stewardship’ rather than complex, adaptive symbiosis” (159). Due to the clear thematic influence of Leopold on *All the Pretty Horses*, this study attempts a more in-depth analysis of these connections than has yet been explored.

### **Ethics and American Progress**

McCarthy frames *All the Pretty Horses* with questions regarding the ethics of America’s imperialistic nation-building campaign. The novel begins and ends with allusions to the displacement of Indigenous peoples from their lands. The reader is first introduced to

## The Cowboy and the American Dream: Charting the Binaries of the West in McCarthy's *All the Pretty Horses*

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Shubham Singh

Cormac McCarthy's *All the Pretty Horses* is the most acclaimed novel of his *Border Trilogy*, each of which is synthesized by the repetition of the act of crossing of a physical frontier: the Mexican American border. The individual/s crossing these limitations traverse not just physical boundaries but several ideological binaries as well. The cowboys in the narrative set out to chase the promising American dream, however, the binaries in the text work to undermine the myth. In the narrative, the North, which is representative of America, is privileged over the South, implying the Mexican countryside. But the distinction transforms from visual to the ideological, with America's value for civilization conflicted with Mexico's underdeveloped topography. The protagonist—the cowboy caught up in the midst of the clash—struggles to get past the binaries desiring to move to the uncharted Western territory, for the cherished ideals of civilization and industrialization in the American society challenge his own existence. Violence and death color the world of the novel since the very beginning where his grandfather dies, and his father returns from war injured. Suffering inherent in existence is a major theme running through the novel. The inaptitude to distinguish the grandfather from the ranch and his horses lies at the base of the narrative. His passing symbolizes the passing of the old West that creates a conflict for the baffled cowboy to find his own place to belong: “the burial of John Grady's grandfather occasions a local loss of medial space between domesticity and wilderness” (Ellis 202). Thus, the binary of space comes into play with the very onset of the novel. The horses play a unifying role in the novel in multiple ways, principally on the level of space and charting the boundaries between the North and South. Horses represent the

glory of a past when human beings had a deeper association with the natural landscape, and they become the link connecting all the characters. The horses also stand as symbols of constancy amid the transience of life. They connect the present to the past apart from serving the work function. This essay considers the novel in terms of its dramatization of the conflict between competing binaries and the crossing of the physical and philosophical boundaries that lead to coming of age of the protagonist, and also to re-evaluate the novel in the contemporary contexts.

The myth of the frontier or of the West is one of the long-established and surviving myths of the American culture. Several writers, critics, and historians have contributed to the forging of the myth of the frontier as a vast and lush uncharted territory at the edge of the civilized society waiting to be explored by the adventurous and spirited men. For centuries, the European Americans conquered the natives living in the western frontier and colonized the territory leading to expansion into North America. This became romanticized and glorified in literature to create a myth that overshadowed the violent realities of the expansion and the exploitation of the natural region as well as the Native Indians. In 1893, Frederick Jackson Turner promoted his thesis of the frontier as the “meeting point between savagery and civilization” (3), claiming that American pioneers had moved to the West in waves, and they were transformed through their interaction with the Native Americans and the wilderness of the western frontier to become self-willed individuals who cherished their dearly earned freedom. Another renowned scholar of the frontier myth, Richard Slotkin devoted his career to studying the several dimensions of the myth that he condensed in three trilogies where he begins with a general understanding of the myth of the frontier implying America to be a land of limitless opportunity, moving on to the capitalist exploitation of the natural landscape as America became an industrialized nation, to its being an agent of cultural ideology in contemporary popular culture. To put the matter plainly, there are two perspectives of the West, one being the historical west where farmers, ranchers, and certain outlaws followed their individual happiness, and the other being the

## Chronology of Cormac McCarthy's Life\*\_\_\_\_\_

- 1930** Charles Joseph McCarthy and Gladys Christina McGrail marry.
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- 1931** Helen Jacquelyn McCarthy is born to Charles and Gladys.
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- 1932** Charles and Gladys's second child, Barbara Ann McCarthy, is born.
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- 1933** Charles Joseph McCarthy, Jr. [later a.k.a. Cormac McCarthy] is born on July 20, the third of six children in the McCarthy family.
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- 1937** The McCarthy family relocates to Noelton/Cherokee Drive in Knoxville, Tennessee.  
Charles McCarthy, Sr. works as a lawyer for Tennessee Valley Authority.
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- 1940** William (Bill) McCarthy is born.
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- 1941** The McCarthy family moves to Sherrod Road and settle in a house on Martin Mill Pike in South Knoxville.  
Cormac McCarthy meets childhood friend, Jim Long later written as J-Bone in *Suttree*.
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- 1942** Mary Ellen McCarthy is born.
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- 1944** Dennis McCarthy is born.
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- 1951** Cormac graduates from Catholic High School in Knoxville, TN, and begins attending the University of Tennessee. He majors in liberal arts.

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\*a.k.a. Charles Joseph McCarthy, Jr.