

Significance of the title all the pretty horses



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

The title of Cormac McCarthy's novel, *All the Pretty Horses*, reflects the significance and variance of roles that horses play in this coming-of-age story, as they relate to John Grady. The horse, which was the social foundation of Western American culture until the mid-20th century, is described as an economical and practical asset to the boys. However, McCarthy also describes horses' abstract qualities using idyllic and impassioned diction, depicting them as animals of a highly advanced spiritual nature, similar to humans in some ways. John Grady has an intimate relationship with all horses and understands the world of horses extraordinarily well. On his journey, he learns that the world of men is very different from that of horses and is forced to rethink the relationship between humans and horses. John discovers that his preconceived notions about men and human society are false; he finds that they do not live in a romantic world as he had supposed. Therefore, the title McCarthy has chosen is ironic and epitomizes the change that John experiences. McCarthy uses the title to represent John's initial perspective on the world, which is refuted through John's later experiences. John's life, like all of Western American society during the timeframe of the story, revolved around horses, and until he runs away, he knows more about horses than he does about men. These creatures represent strength, untamed fervor, and most importantly, freedom of spirit. The veneration that the vaqueros have for horses is apparent in the tales Luis tells the boys. "The old man only said that it was pointless to speak of there being no horses in the world for God would not permit such a thing" (111). This quote demonstrates the sentiments of the vaqueros as they value horses so highly that they think of them as nearly divine. It also reinforces John's romantic notion that horses

<https://assignbuster.com/significance-of-the-title-all-the-pretty-horses/>

are highly spiritual beings. Like the vaqueros, the boys revere horses, and these animals play large roles in their lives. The boys use horses in many ways throughout the novel: as companions, as means of transportation or escape, and as a judge of a stranger's character, to name a few. John even dreams about horses, as " his thoughts were of horses...still wild on the mesa who'd never seen a man afoot and who knew nothing of him or his life yet in whose souls he would come to reside forever" (118). The diction referring to horses here " wild," " souls" is idealistic and almost poetic. Furthermore, the fact that John dreams about horses in this way and that he wants to " reside forever" in their souls shows that he thinks of them very highly, almost as mystical mentors. Throughout the novel, McCarthy uses romantic, emotional language to describe horses and their connections to humans. He portrays these animals as noble beings with wild spirits using venerating diction to describe them. With vivid imagery, McCarthy paints a poignant picture of horses. " The painted ponies and the riders of that lost nation came down out of the north with their faces chalked and their long hair plaited and each armed for war which was their life...When the wind was in the north you could hear them, the horses and the breath of the horses and the horses' hooves that were shod in rawhide" (5). This passage exhibits the passion and fervor that McCarthy attributes to horses. The mood created by words such as " painted ponies" and " the breath of the horses" is passionate and emotionally charged. The author also describes the raw energy and life that flows through the horses: " John Grady...was holding the horse...with the long bony head pressed against his chest and the hot sweet breath of it flooding up from the dark wells of its nostrils over his face and neck like news from another world" (103). These metaphors such as " the

<https://assignbuster.com/significance-of-the-title-all-the-pretty-horses/>

dark wells of its nostrils” and “ news from another world” create a forceful likeness of mysterious animals with a nature foreign to humans. The horse’s “ hot sweet breath...flooding up” displays the life and energy that fill horses. This mysterious energy is also apparent later, when McCarthy writes, “ He rode the last five horses...the horses dancing, turning in the light, their red eyes flashing...they moved with an air of great elegance and seamliness” (107). This imagery of “ red eyes flashing” and dancing horses is very mysterious yet still striking. The descriptive detail is very cinematic, and any of these scenes could easily be made into a movie. These extremely detailed portrayals are so extravagant they are almost unrealistic, but they create the desired effect in making horses seem mystical and fanciful. These are the romantic creatures that John sees, the “ pretty horses” of the title. John Grady’s connection with horses is as mystical as the horses themselves, as he is somehow able to communicate with all horses on a deeper level than any other character in the story. This is apparent on the hacienda in the scene in which John and Rawlins are breaking the new horses. John “ cupped his hand over the horse’s eyes and stroked them and he did not stop talking to the horse at all, speaking in a low steady voice and telling it all that he intended to do and cupping the animal’s eyes and stroking the terror out” (103). John’s ability to “ stroke the terror out” of the horses is reminiscent of a parent calming a frightened child; obviously, he must have some innate tie with these animals if he is able to do this. Indeed, McCarthy explicitly states that such a bond exists between John Grady and the horses. He writes, “ The boy who rode on slightly before him sat a horse not only as if he had been born to it which he was but as if were he begot by malice or mischance into some queer land where horses never were he would have found them

anyway” (23). This passage shows that John’s relationship with horses extends into the metaphysical range, a view that is reinforced throughout the novel as more is revealed about John Grady and about horses. As Luis says, “ the horse shares a common soul...if a person understood the soul of the horse then he would understand all horses that ever were” (111). It seems like McCarthy is implying that John Grady has this ability to understand the soul of the horse, and that is why his relationship with horses is so unique. John’s reliance on his knowledge of horses as a guide in the world of men eventually reveals to him that the two species are very different. When John starts out on his journey, he knows relatively little about the inner workings of human society, but he has superficially found men and horses to be similar. As McCarthy writes, “ What he loved in horses he loved in men, the blood and the heat of the blood that ran them. All his reverence and all his fondness and all the leanings of his life were for the ardenthearted and they would always be so and never be otherwise” (5). John knows that horses are “ ardenthearted” and believes that men must be the same. He thinks that his journey will be romantic and passionate, like the horses he loves, and will reinforce his view of the world, but he soon learns otherwise. Before anything unfortunate happens to him, John hears from Luis that “ among men there was no such communion as among horses and the notion that men can be understood at all is probably an illusion” (111). The first doubts have begun to creep into John’s mind, and eventually, he discovers this firsthand. Instead of “ pretty horses,” his journey is filled with murder and stealing, prison and broken hearts. His ill-fated journey validates Luis’ point, and totally destroys John’s notion that the world of men is at all an understandable thing. Finally, when it is all over, he returns home

disillusioned, only to find that both his father and his abuela have died. John's fanciful concept of the world of men now has been completely replaced by a " world that...seemed to care nothing for the old or the young or rich or poor or dark or pale or he or she. Nothing for their struggles, nothing for their names. Nothing for the living or the dead" (301). The world of " all the pretty horses" is nothing to him now but a distant memory. This reveals the title's irony: a story titled All the Pretty Horses would seemingly never involve the death and violence that is encompassed in John's travels. Indeed, John has come " full circle" and realized that his original assumptions about men were false. The title of McCarthy's novel All the Pretty Horses is not meant to be taken literally. Before he runs away, John Grady believes in the world of " all the pretty horses," because he has never known anything else. However his time in Mexico disillusiones him and forces him to believe otherwise, that the real world is not so simple, carefree, or innocent. John learns that the romanticism that he ascribes to horses cannot be applied to men. John reveres horses and experiences the praise of these animals in the folklore of the day. His relationship with horses exists on many levels ~~as~~ they are his transportation, his friends, and his spiritual companions. Furthermore, McCarthy describes horses with emotional diction creating almost a motif of passion whenever horses are described. John's unusual understanding of the fervent spirit of horses leads him to believe that men are the same. However, on his bleak and disappointing journey he learns that men do not have the same passion of spirit as horses. Instead, they are unpredictable, violent creatures, and their world is certainly not always pretty.