

# The manipulation of western tropes in all the pretty horses



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BUSTER**

Without a doubt, Cormac McCarthy's *All the Pretty Horses* stays true to many common tropes within the Western genre. However; what makes this novel so unique is how McCarthy manipulates some of these important tropes. They are still present throughout the book, in fact, some of them are magnified through each part but as a whole, McCarthy openly manipulates some of the most popular ones in an attempt to highlight the development of the protagonist: John Grady Cole. Most importantly, McCarthy works the image of the cowboy, the importance of horses, a sense of lawlessness, and the gunslinger trope into *All the Pretty Horses* and alters the impact of them throughout the novel. As a whole, McCarthy implements these tropes to ensure that the novel stays true to the western genre but he manipulates them to highlight the psychological and physical journey of John Grady Cole.

In typical Western novels, the image of a cowboy is what drives the entire plot; a lawless, tough, gunslinger protagonist with a penchant for horses is the common archetype and it never changes throughout western novels. The common cowboy archetype is first exhibited by John Grady Cole when Rawlins asks him why he is leaving St. Angelo, Texas as he replied that he was "already gone." (27) signifying the reason for John's quest, which is also a common western trope as well. At that moment, the reader then assumes that John Grady's journey by himself will occur since the idea of a lone traveler is often associated with westerns. However; that is not what occurs, which only makes John Grady's growth much more significant. Instead of being a lone traveler, John Grady starts off his quest by being accompanied with two other people in the first part of the book: Rawlins and Blevins.

What makes this important is the fact that McCarthy manipulated the image of a cowboy by splitting one's common traits between the three of them. For example, John's role in the trio's collective image of a cowboy is his love for horses since he is claimed to be "the best" (59) riders according to Rawlins. Rawlins' role in their image of a cowboy is predominantly his lawlessness, or his ability to openly express his beliefs. Through dialogue, especially between John Grady Cole, Blevins, and Rawlins, the reader is aware of the fact that Rawlins is opinionated. For example, whenever Rawlins shares his opinion, it is relatively harsh like when he told Blevins that he'd, "Get shut dead for horse stealing" and that, "It don't mean a damn thing to him. He expects it." (80) Finally, Blevins' role in McCarthy's collective image of a cowboy is one of the most obvious: the gunslinger trope.

In fact, Blevins' skills with guns is what helps John Grady Cole and Rawlins make the decision to accept him, especially since he was confident with them by telling John and Rawlins that if they, "wanted to throw something up, I'll [he'll] hit it." (48). In the first part, they all collectively build this image of a cowboy and they all share common traits associated with them, which is very uncommon for western novels. In regards to John Grady's development, this collective image lets the audience get insight on the fact that due to his upbringing and background, John Grady is unable to fit the image of the cowboy at first. The collective image that McCarthy created in the first part of *All the Pretty Horses* does not last as long as some readers would assume. In fact, the image between the three of them slowly dissipates throughout the next three parts of the novel. This is first seen in the second quarter, when the three of them are separated for the first time and John Grady is

seen as more of a charismatic front man than the others. For example, John Grady built up so much notoriety at La Purísima after he'd broken in sixteen horses that when " John Grady pointed and asked that tortillas be passed there came hands from both sides of the table to take up the dish and hand it down in this manner like a ceremonial bowl." (110) John Grady's growth in regards to him separating from the previous collective image of a cowboy can also be seen when he and Rawlins were talking the night of when Don Hector gave John that special task as Rawlins mentioned that, " It's an opportunity for you. [John Grady] Ain't no reason for you to turn it down that I can see." (116) From that point on, John Grady is seen as a separate entity from his companion, which only grows throughout the book.

Also in the second part, John Grady slowly becomes more lawless, which was previously Rawlins' assigned trait in the collective cowboy image, as he faces criticisms from people within the ranch because of his newfound relationship with Alejandra. Specifically, Alfonsa is the first to advise John Grady that, " it is not proper for you [John] to be seen riding in the campo with Alejandra without supervision." (136) and that John Grady should be, " considerate of a young girls' reputation" (136) since that is " all she has." (136). Although seeing Alejandra may seem harmless to John Grady, this is the first time he receives disapproval from a majority, and that point expands at the end of the part, when John Grady and Rawlins are arrested. From the perspective of John Grady's development, McCarthy still manipulates the image of a cowboy trope so that it is gradual rather than instantaneous, and the second part in particular highlights that.

The final two portions of *All the Pretty Horses* can be identified as very significant in regards to the manipulation of western tropes to amplify John Grady's development as a character. Previously, the image of a cowboy was manipulated by McCarthy by being split between three different characters and when that dissolved, John Grady gradually fit some of the traits associated with a cowboy's typical image. What occurs in the last two parts is all buildup of John Grady morphing slowly into that image; in the third part, he becomes much more lawless and in the final part, his lawlessness only amplifies as he becomes a lone traveler. For example, in an act of self-defense, John Grady ended up murdering a man in the prison he and Rawlins were in by, "sinking a knife blade into a cuchillero's heart." (201). This can also be seen when John is separated from Rawlins in the final part and holds the captain hostage in order to get his horses back by threatening, "When I die you die." (270). This creates a stark contrast with the John Grady presented to the reader in the first part of the novel, and the contrast is drastically accentuated in the last portion of the novel as John Grady "Passed and paled into the darkening land, the world to come." (302) as he continued to travel by himself, searching for something because he cannot find anything for him in his old town.

In regards to western tropes throughout the novel, they are still manipulated; John Grady just fills some of the characteristics because it is necessary due to the setting. He is generally a humble character who holds an unwavering honor code, but due to his circumstances, John had to fit the image of a cowboy. For example, the reader is aware that John Grady "Never thought I'd [he'd] do that." (215) after he had killed the assassin in

the prison. But Rawlins comes to his defense by claiming that he “ didn’t have no choice” (215) due to the violent atmosphere within the prison. Also, John never intended to travel alone; Rawlins wanted to leave since the emotional toll of witnessing Blevins’ death and being within the prison began to consume him. Therefore, with the idea of western tropes in mind, McCarthy constantly manipulated them because in common westerns, death does not take a negative emotional toll on cowboys nor does the cowboy want to travel with a companion. McCarthy most likely did this to show how John’s personal philosophies persist throughout each part and specifically how they had to waver due to the circumstances he was in, which gives the reader an understanding of his physical journey in comparison to his psychological journey.

A big part of the significance of *All the Pretty Horses* comes from McCarthy’s ability to manipulate the common tropes within the western genre. In comparison to other westerns, McCarthy’s novel is very uncommon in regards to character development and its relationship with other western tropes, which could be intentional. Overall, the western tropes within McCarthy’s *All the Pretty Horses*, are implemented to stay true to the western genre, but are later manipulated in order to show the relationship between the psychological and physical journey of John Grady Cole.