Mexico and the Borderlands in Cormac McCarthy’s *All the Pretty Horses*

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Cormac McCarthy’s novels have always centered around the figure of the *isolato*—the man alone in a naturalistically indifferent and shockingly violent world, trying to keep flesh and soul together in the face of existential doubt and terrible tribulation and suffering. That world in which McCarthy sets his lonely characters is thoroughly postlapsarian and thoroughly undifferentiated; the same unpleasantness is everywhere, and whether in Kentucky or New Mexico is largely a matter of detail.

McCarthy’s first “borderland” novel, *All the Pretty Horses*, on the other hand, seems to work in a different way. Whereas the author’s earlier novels dealt primarily with adults in a single relatively changeless physical circumstance, *All the Pretty Horses* details a journey that is both literal and, at least to some extent, a *bildungsroman*, a movement from innocence to experience, from purity to knowledge, from the known world into the unknown world—and the unknown world in this novel is Mexico. For John Grady Cole, the border between Texas and Mexico is the line between childhood and its end, at least in the somewhat limited sense that the border country he crosses through and lingers within becomes a medium through which he comes to understand certain truths about himself and the world.

Mexico represents the alien-ness of the Other for McCarthy’s young protagonist, and his movement away from Texas and away from home is movement into the signature state of isolation in which virtually all of McCarthy’s characters live. But Mexico and the borderlands become something more in this book; they become *tierra*, a second homeland, no stranger in reality than the place-from-which-you-come, but by the same token no less strange and no less hostile. The end of that process of maturation is the realization that no home is really home,
that the Other is really oneself looking out, and that the details of life—birth, death, love—happen where they happen, and in much the same way everywhere.

John Grady Cole’s journey into Mexico in All the Pretty Horses 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 teenage boy with no ties and no real responsibilities. But 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 on horseback with his best friend, both of them off to see the world. It is a search, in fact, for a very particular kind of meaning: a historical sense, a sense of consistent and clear-cut attitudes and values. Texas has become the United States in its larger, undifferentiated sense, a place where history is no more than the moment, where everything is new and everything is relative.

John Grady begins to understand that fact in the process of trying to understand his mother’s defection from the world in which he has so far lived his short life. The novel begins just after the death of his grandfather and opens with the image of the old man in state in his coffin, the primogenitor from whom John Grady’s conception of the world has come, laid low by time (represented by the only sound he can hear at the moment, “the ticking of the mantel clock in the front room” (3). Time is perishing, not just of the body but of the social constructs and codified patterns by which John Grady and the dead grandfather have identified themselves. His existential despair when he leaves his grandfather’s body and goes outside onto the prairie “dark and cold” and stands “like some supplicant to the darkness over them all” is as much for the loss of a sense of continuity that the death represents as for the death itself.

His world has tilted off-kilter. For him, the most salient evidence of its instability is his mother and the fact that she will not yield in her desire to free herself from the same consistency John Grady values. She will sell the ranch now that the grandfather is dead, and even her son’s clear sense of desperation will not make her hesitate in her resolve. She is the force of progress, of the American imperative to change. In the face of it, John Grady is powerless, both because he cannot communicate to her his own imperatives and because perhaps he understands hers—not the details, not the selling of the ranch but the fact that something moves her. Part of what he is learning is that his One Critical Thing is not the only critical thing; he learns that significance, like everything else, is relative.

We are told very early in the novel that “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” (6). His mother’s choice is the choice she has to make in following her ardent heart, the same motion toward meaning he himself makes in crossing into Mexico. His mother, female, different, modern, wanting more, represents both the way in which the world has advanced beyond John
Grady’s conception of self and the way in which self is determined by the desire for relevance, for the significance that comes with commitment, whatever form that commitment might take. But that aspect of his mother is one that John Grady could probably only appreciate in retrospect. What he feels initially is displacement and mystification. He goes to see his mother in her new life, goes to see the play she is in because he has “the notion that there would be something in the story itself to tell him about the way the world was or was becoming but there was not” (21). What he does not yet realize is that the answer is not in the play but in the fact that his mother has made that choice. With a single, thoroughly selfish gesture, she has abnegated much of what John Grady seems to represent—the life of cattle and horses, of simple work and simpler reward. She is, in short, of woman of a new order whose values are not John Grady’s values.

But her motivations are essentially no different than his, and what she does is no more or no less futile than what he does. Robert Jarrett suggests that “[t]he gulf between mother and son is historical, between two versions of the contemporary Texan: the modern (the mother) who repudiates her ranching past for art, and the historicist (John Grady as son) who seeks to revive and repeat the past” (101). He is correct in that the choices they have made are indeed historical, and they have certainly chosen different directions, but it is important to note as well that in a real sense they are making the same choice. It is also important to understand that John Grady does not strive to revive or repeat the past in his journey to Mexico—his choice is not historical in that sense. He instead seems to be attempting to find new meaning within a personal definition of self that is timeless in as much as it is personal. Home, the States, do not offer him in its homogenous newness a venue to find meaning in the only way he knows, though it does that for his mother. The borderlands, however, provide that venue, and he goes there as indifferent as he can possibly be to the past in its details or its meaning. What is important to him is what is inside, not what was. He does not live for the past any more than he proselytizes for it. He does not try to change the world; he simply moves to another part of it where he can live his life in a way that gives it meaning by his own terms, terms that amount to a heroic and naive ideal, but nevertheless sustain him even as they leave him homeless and adrift.

This story is not, of course, the traditional bildungsroman of the sort that Gail Morrison, for instance, sees it, a “uniquely American variation on the theme of the fall from innocence into experience [. . .] in which the American naïf 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” (176). John Grady’s vision does not need deepening; what he needs is the opportunity to employ a vision that, even at sixteen, is already quite clear. His understanding of his father, of his mother’s motivations, and of the value of a woman and the alienation from a woman’s affections suggest that he is as mature and versed in the way of the world as a man needs to be to be a man. When we discover that he is
sixteen, about fifteen pages into the novel, I think we are surprised because he clearly possesses the sensibilities and abilities of an adult. We believe him when he claims to his mother that he could run the ranch she wants to sell. But his story is still *bildungsroman*-ish in the sense that maturity requires more than simple knowledge or experience; it requires intersection with the Other that is our own potential, the lapsarian moment that brings not growth so much as completion, not knowledge so much as wholeness. He has to understand his own futility, and yet continue to live according to the values that for him make his life an authentic one.

Further, moral relativism, to use Morrison’s term, is in some sense what John Grady seems to be trying to leave behind—his mother’s betrayal, his girlfriend’s (who has left him for an older boy who owns a car), as well as the culture that allows his heritage to be sold from under him simply because the letter of the law says it can be. Rather than naïveté, what motivates him is an all too mature sense of despair at that relativism. He moves not from certainty to chaos, but from chaos to chaos, and his quest is as doomed to failure as Diogenes’s search for an honest man—because in McCarthy’s conception of the universe, everything is relative and all meaning beyond the personal is illusory.

Mexico and the borderlands represent to John Grady the possibility of the expression of whom he sees himself to be: it is an old place, a dangerous place, where little has changed and the history is violence, a place where a young man can test his own resolves and therefore the appropriateness of his definition of himself. One of the first things he sees after he has crossed the border into Mexico is a graphic and emblematic tableau: tiny birds impaled by storm winds on the spines of roadside cholla cactus, some of them still alive. The message is that he has entered a different world, one more harsh and cruel than anything the world he has left behind might offer. What is in Mexico is an atavistic (by American standards) indifference to life, a hardscrabble dependence on self that was, for instance, the kid’s situation in *Blood Meridian*, McCarthy’s only previous novel set in the southwest. The situation in Mexico has been blunted in the United States by the exactly one hundred years that have passed since the time of that novel (McCarthy’s care in making the one hundred year difference so precise suggests that he meant for those differences to be noted and considered).

Some writers, though, have suggested that McCarthy means us to understand that the borderlands are deceptive in their apparent lack of limits, and that the region is, in its own way, even more firmly striceted than the world the boys have left behind. Robert Jarrett, for instance, asserts that John Grady and his companions “will discover that they have not recovered or reopened the frontier but merely have crossed into still another ‘closed’ landscape, possessed by an aristocratic culture impervious to the allure of the cowboy myth” (101). But not all of that landscape is closed, and certainly John Grady finds what he came for—occasions for a significance that is often brutal and just as often gracious. He finds his occasions both inside the aristocratic culture Jarrett mentions and
among the common people of the campos. In the campos he finds the extremes that will confirm for him his codified sense of himself, in, for instance, the brutal violence of Jimmy Blevin’s execution by a Mexican madrina and the spontaneous justice of the hombres del país, the “men of the country,” who take the handcuffed madrina away from John Grady (we presume to carry out their own form of retribution for his crimes), who had taken him prisoner.

The imperviousness that Robert Jarrett describes exists only on the Hacienda de Nuestra Señora del la Purísima Concepción, where the Dueña Alfonza invests everything within her scope with “oldworld ties and with antiquity and tradition” (132). But even her impervious ossification is only an appearance. Her reasons for keeping John Grady away from her grandniece have nothing to do with tradition or station and everything to do with John Grady’s bad fortune at being wanted by the law. She cares not about Alejandra’s purity or her bloodline but about her survival and, as she sees it, her ultimate happiness. Alfonza, in fact, expressly fears the conventionality that interior Mexico represents for her (the “Mexico” that Alejandra travels to, away from the borderlands, for her formal training and to escape John Grady). As she tells John Grady, “Whatever my appearance might suggest, I am not a particularly oldfashioned woman” (135). She has in fact argued his case with Alejandra’s mother, but John Grady’s culpability makes him unsuitable because it makes him dangerous to her grandniece’s life and to her chances for joy in that life. This is the borderlands, even on the hacienda, and everything is possible, except when circumstances themselves—John Grady’s troubles with the law—conspire to intervene.

The borderlands seem to serve the same function for McCarthy as Europe and Africa served for Hemingway, as the place where an outsider on his expatriate journey can find both affirmation and distraction, though both are, inevitably, momentary. In a real sense John Grady Cole is another of Hemingway’s lost generation, lost for the same postmodern reasons so many are lost. Like Hemingway’s protagonists he is looking for meaning by adhering to a codified and personal sense of conduct, knowing right, sensing authenticity when he finds it, as he often does in the people he meets on his journey, and resisting authority when it is arbitrary or unjust. And like Hemingway’s heroes, John Grady seems to come to realize that the journey, though it must be taken, is in the end as futile as anything else he might have done, because no place is different, essentially, than where you came from, because you yourself cannot be any different than who you are. The final question for John Grady is the same that preoccupies the Dueña Alfonza: “whether that shape we see in our lives was there from the beginning or whether these random events are only called a pattern after the fact. Because otherwise we are nothing” (230). And as with her, the larger pattern, if there is one, is beyond his ken, and so he finds himself with nothing. The world is always going to move beyond him, and wherever he goes history is everywhere—and it is all only personal. Like every existential man, he carries his doom with him. McCarthy affirms in this novel, like Hemingway before him, that
although only the authentic life holds any meaning, even that is not enough for happiness in this lapsed world.

John Grady Cole is, as McCarthy describes him, “a man come to the end of something” (5). At the end of the novel, what he has come to the end of is himself and any hope of meaning outside of himself. When he returns to the States, his friend Rawlins tells him, “This is still good country,” and John Grady’s response is, “Yeah. I know it is. But it ain’t my country.” He means by that, of course, that it is not his because his mother has sold the ranch, but he also means that he has no country, or that whatever country he has is inside, only in his heart. When Rawlins wants to know where, then, his country is, he tells him, “I dont know where it is. I dont know what happens to country” (299). But we do: what happens to country is the realization that it is the same everywhere, that life happens where it happens and it means the same—or nothing at all—every place.

Close to the beginning of All the Pretty Horses we see John Grady’s romantic image of a nation of Indians who have disappeared from the land and taken with them an irreplaceable passion:

At the hour he’d always choose when the shadows were long and the ancient road was shaped before him in the rose and canted light like a dream of the past where the painted ponies and the riders of that last 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 and the women and children and women with children at their breasts all of them pledged in blood and redeemable in blood only. [. . .] nation and ghost of nation passing in a soft chorale across that mineral waste to darkness bearing lost to all history and all remembrance like a grail the sum of their secular and transitory and violent lives. (5)

But only at the end of the novel does John Grady see his Indians clearly, understand that the sum of “their secular and transitory and violent lives” is just transience and nothing more. As he passes a remnant group of them at the novel’s end, we are told that “[t]hey had no curiosity about him at all. As if they knew all they needed to know. They stood and watched him pass and watched him vanish upon that landscape solely because he was passing. Solely because he would vanish” (301). They, of course, will vanish, too, and that is the point. They know all they need to know about him because he is one of them.

The last image of the novel is John Grady riding quite literally into the sunset; his shadow merges with his horse’s, both of them “[p]assed and paled into the darkening land, the world to come” (302), disappearing into a future without either John Grady or the kind of man that John Grady is, a remnant himself, anachronistic but as whole within himself as he can hope to be.
WORKS CITED


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