The Discourse of the Western Myth and the American Pastoral in *All the Pretty Horses* by Cormac McCarthy

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Introduction

Writing about nature combines the literary elements of the pastoral tradition with the creation and preservation of the western myth, which are integral components of American fiction. Cormac McCarthy aims to redefine the conceptual framework of the western genre—according to the paradigm shift established by New Western historians in the 1980s and concepts of Postwestern theory—by questioning the ideologies (the frontier, Manifest destiny, self-reliance, the American dream, etc.) that upheld false consciousness about the relations of Romanticized nature and the heroism of the cowboy image. The American pastoral—a domesticated and practical, yet transcendental form of nature writing, where the protagonist encounters the hardships of the natural environment and finds divine revelations there—is criticized and demythicized as the false ideas about the imaginary southwestern landscape are deconstructed and replaced by the wildness of the terrain.

The borderland between the USA and Mexico is not a culturally, socially, politically, and naturally homogenous territory but a "middle landscape" (qtd. in Garrard 49)—as Leo Marx, the author of *The Machine in the Garden*, calls it—at the merger of civilization and wilderness that allows an ecological approach. In *All the Pretty Horses* (1993), the identity of the characters is shaped by the inappropriate and outdated nineteenth-century masculine cowboy model in the industrialized post-Second World War setting, and the collision of the postwestern approaches toward the environment (anthropocentric and ecocentric) creates serious moral dilemmas. The heritage of the late westward movement is the postfrontier that takes place on and over the borderland and affects social, economic, legal institutions, infrastructure, and cultural customs in the area. Various structures of Americanness are dismantled as McCarthy deconstructs western symbolism, the pastoral idyll, and the journey across the liminal space of the borderland, moreover, the perception of and the rhetoric about the environment are reshaped.

Pretty Horses depicts an idyllic image of the American Southwest, with cowboys and horses living peacefully in the natural environment as imagined in the nineteenth century, based on the literary pastoral tradition:

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> They ate lunch under the trees at the edge of a small cienaga. The horses stood in the marshy grass and sucked quietly at the water. . . . and they spread the cloth on the ground and selected from among the quesadillas and tacos and bizcochos like picnickers, leaning back on their elbows in the shade with their boots crossed before them, chewing idly and observing the horses. (58)

However, this illusory harmony on the USA-Mexico borderland is not a way of life but a pleasant pastime moment in the middle of the twentieth century. At the dawn of industrialization, consumerism and the capitalist endeavor, the longing for nature and the make-believe about the heroic past are merely a form of escapism from the economic changes and the smothering urban environment. The cowboy idyll implies culinary joy and consumption of Mexican meals that assumes a mutual, blended culture on formerly indigenous land.

Cormac McCarthy pays attention to details about the natural environment and the surroundings to set the context to formerly untold socio-cultural issues on the borderland and connects environmental phenomena to mental categories of anthropomorphic perception and cognition. McCarthy's new western writing style includes cautionary environmental signs and atmospheric phenomena (colors, shapes, light-dark tones, the storm, weather, etc.) which correspond to happenings, human interactions, and emotions and express various states of mind and entails the sensual perception of the natural environment. The author often uses Spanish expressions in his narrative to emphasize the ethnic, cultural, cognitive, and linguistic diversity of the territory. The rhetoric of *Pretty Horses* touches upon the concerns of the new western writing style and the use of pastoral elements in the narrative, gendered perspectives in western fiction, and the aesthetics of death and violence.

The Rewriting of the Western Myth and the American Pastoral

The southern American landscape comprises naturally occurring phenomena that are typical of the territory and man-made constructs for historical reasons. The natural environment reaches over the border and it is richly detailed with native plants and various provincial environmental forms: the creek is clear and green, moss is braided over the gravel bars, there are scrub mesquite and nopal on the open country, yucca in white bloom (36) and cedar on the hills, the ground is cobbled by traprock "as it had always been, would forever be" (23). There is snow on the northern ridges (23) and the river is red with mud (24). The

animals (desert foxes, coyotes, and horses) appearing on the prairie, the desert, and the mountains are indigenous in the place.

The two boys' journey toward the South is the ride of hope for the desired cowboy life, promising "ten thousand worlds for the choosing" (31). Despite the high expectations to find flourishing ranches in Mexico, they are compared to "young thieves in a glowing orchard" (31), who aim to live in coexistence with nature but indeed, they want to live from it, deceiving the aims of the pastoral and serving the actual goals of the western ideal in another land. The high plains and hills leading to Mexico are the postfrontier, the mirror-image, and the counter-site of the imagined and ideologically constructed west of the nineteenth-century US. The journey, across the open grassland and the salty Pecos River in Texas, is described along with windmills, wild daisies, and some cattle. Getting closer to the southern border, the wire fence from pole to pole is "like a bad suture across the grey grasslands" (39). The conflicts throughout American history have left the land wounded and people separated themselves with fences to draw the line of their territory and to defend their properties. This suture-like fence-line draws a distinct line between the two countries and cultures and defends who are within, and excludes who are outside of the barrier. Despite man-built obstacles, nature lays there continuously on the two sides of the border. In the far south, there are mountains of Mexico, the blue sierras (46)—covered with nopal cactus and creosote (50)—looking like the ghosts of mountains (43) creating a mysteriously sublime atmosphere. The natural environment comprises the clay-colored water of the Rio Grande River, the desert with dry scrublands (47) and cottonwood (58), and some swallows flying in the sky. These natural entities reach across the border without the boundaries that political and social issues constructed and cause as much hardship for travelers as crossing the state lines.

Cormac McCarthy asks the philosophical question "Where … paradise is at?" (61) in free indirect speech, through the voice of the narrator and his characters, to challenge the frontier concept about American land as a promised Eden where white settlers aimed to fulfill their dreams conforming to the ideology of Manifest Destiny. The author answers this theoretical query from an environmental-centered approach, overwriting the malfunctioning ideologically based anthropocentric notions. Besides, some further queries arise: what paradise is, who defines it, and whether American land was a paradise as the expansionist settlers imagined? In McCarthy's interpretation, "You cant tell what's in a country … till you're down there in it" (61) because it requires empirical and cognitive knowledge about the place, its inhabitants, their culture, and their integrity in the environment. The search for a paradise across the southern US border is due to the restless American character that is constantly seeking adventure. At the turning point of rapid

industrialization and agrarian recession such an enterprise is, however, unreachable within the existing borders, so the cowboys must explore the other side of the southwestern landscape, reaching into the heart of Mexico.

McCarthy writes, "a man leaves much when he leaves his own country" (229) relating to the culture, identity, language, customs, and historical heritage a homeland renders to its citizens. The Mexican ranch workers in La Purísima consider that people are born on a certain land for a reason (229). The character of the land, the environment with its weather and seasons form the social and cultural setting of people and shape the "inner fortunes of men" (229). This means that the determination by luck and destiny affects any individual who belongs to a certain community on a specific land and it is part of their culture. It is also believed that a collective fate is inherited from generation to generation. On this basis, the westward expansion that gained "new" land to Americans held the opportunity for the formation of a "newer" kind of American culture. As the environmental circumstances have been transformed by the spread of civilization (e.g.: intensive farming and ranching, oil extraction and urban pollution), the character of the land changed—offering a different culture with different fortunes. The altered prospects did not fit the expectation of those who preferred the earlier, idealized form of connection between land and culture. Thereby the mid-twentieth century cowboy-to-be teenagers, John Grady and Rawlins are disappointed from the myth of the American pastoral.

The diversity and variation of the environment (including the landscape, weather, colors, seasons, celestial bodies, etc.) are closely related to the happenings in the novel and they reflect moods and feelings connected to those events. The prison building in Saltillo is as gray and still as the rainy day in the outside darkening, signaling that the "site of siege" (212) is a place where tragic and sorrowful enmity was generated among the inhabitants. The black pools of rain reflecting the red lamps of the town in the evening darkness (213) appear like blood, indicating John Grady's guilt and reminding the reader of the bloody stabbing and the inevitable death in the community of young criminals and unfair conventions. Grady's perception of the environment and his attitude toward the land change as he returns to the hacienda in La Purísima. The atmosphere is perceived through different senses and the synaesthesia of the moon as a "single silver music note burning in the constant and lavish dark" (222) expresses the lonesome but pleasing vision and feeling of the young adventurer. The smells of earth, grain, and horses in the evening air (222) evoke the pastoral sensation and pleasant memories of the place.

The storm is usually indicative that something bad is about to happen. The darkness of the day comes with a heavy storm that is symbolic of the desert land for some upcoming evil occurrence. The downpour is detailed as the sky darkened

and the terrain turned neuter gray; then it towered above, bringing cool wind and a flash of distant lightning was glowing mutely (68). Then the first thin crack of thunder brought spits of rain that finally burst into rain like some "phantom migration" flowing like a river or a train (71), enhancing the thunder. Blevins' horse, standing restless and scared in the downpour like "the ghost of a horse" (72) is another sinister sign for the boys on a journey toward the south. Later on at sundown "a troubled light" and the "laminar bands of color to the west [are] bleeding out under the hammered clouds [and casting a] violetcolored hooding of the earth" (140). While the earlier storm was a strong warning sign for the boys that they had stepped on dangerous land, this is a visually violent caution if any unaccepted action is done.

Not only elements of the natural environment but the interior of John Grady's grandfather's house preserves older times and indicates the passing of linear time through the ticking of the mantel clock (3), while the prairie outside represents a different, cyclical measurement of time with the changing of seasons bringing the dark and cold autumn and the waking hopes of spring. The changing of seasons is described as "advanced in season" and the "long red sunset" (155) that shows the end of the summer is near. As the seasons change, so does the color and pattern of the countryside. Beyond temporal measurement, natural forces, especially the wind, seem to be stronger than the preacher's words that get "lost in the wind" (5) at the old man's funeral. This is a metaphor for Turner's observation that "the western portion of the South … showed tendencies to fall away from the faith of the fathers into internal improvement, legislation and nationalism" (Turner 28) in the expansion's course and development. Religious faith becomes useless and unheard of by people in the Southwest because the natural environment has its transcendental atmosphere that creates a specific spirit for the surroundings according to the laws of nature and because of the profit and wealth that the land holds.

The Cultural Significance of the Horse Metaphor and Bilingual Codes in New Western Writing

Several agricultural expressions are conveyed in Spanish when the narrative is about the Mexican ranch or the horse trade (hacendado, caporal, gerente, caballero, vaquero, etc.) because of the specific vocabulary connected to the land and the interactions carried out there by the members of the Spanish-Mexican cultural community. Most conversations on the postfrontier also take place in Spanish, and it makes the narrative valid and authentic. John Grady was raised by some Mexican servants, Luisa, her mother, Abuela, and Arturo, in the old man's house.

Being fostered by Hispanic people who have served the family since the previous century, John Grady became a bilingual speaker of English and Spanish—that he applies throughout his journeys —, and his identity is built upon multiethnic, multicultural, and multiclass standards.

When Grady breaks horses on the hacienda, he uses Spanish because the animals have been raised and will be kept in Spanish commands. Grady's thoughts about horses suggest a one-sided relationship; he wants to be a part of the animal's mind but refuses to be manipulated by the character of the horse. Although he rides the horse "as if he'd been born to it" (23) and cares a lot about the animals while breaking them, he refuses to be one—"I ain't a horse" (108) stressing that he is a self-reliant individual who cannot be controlled. Anyway, his thoughts constantly occupied with himself being a cowboy, dealing with horses, which are associated with the mounted cattleman in the southwestern cultural framework, have the greatest impact on his identity. Perpetual contemplation about the horses and the assumed open country (120) makes him believe he has found a new frontier across the southern US border. As a result, he determines himself as the "breaker of horses" who occupies the psychological realm of the strong and symbolic animals by keeping them in menace and under control. The repetitive, almost Biblical phrases recited in Spanish elevate Grady into a superior position, regulating and sustaining the stallion's reproductive and self-preserving instincts.

> Soy comandante de las yeguas, he would say, yo y yo solo. Sin la caridad de estas manos no tengas nada. Ni comida ni agua ni hijos. Soy yo que traigo las yeguas de las montanas, las yeguas jovenes, las yeguas salvajes y ardientes. (131)
>
> Transl. I am the commander of the mares, he would say, I and I alone. Without charity from my hands, you have nothing. Neither food nor water nor children. I am the one who brings the mares of the mountains, the young mares, the savage ones, and the mares that burn with passion. (Stevens 2)

Although John Grady's words and deeds deny he is not identical to equine species, his recurring dream of horses is an allegory of the American pastoral. In his vision, Grady sees a high plain with grass and wildflowers where he is running together with the horses. The desired aesthetic view brings an unreachable state of being free as a wild horse, but the mind can be set free during sleep. The vivid motion picture of the rich chestnut colors shining in the golden sun (163-164) and the playful and unrestrained movement of Grady among the animals create a resonance that becomes the music of the union of human, animal, nature, and

the whole environment. The union and resonance of various environmental creations and natural creatures compose a world that "cannot be spoken but only praised" (164). This pastoral idyll arouses the query: has this perfect harmony and peace ever been real or is this frail balance and peace of mind merely a "dreamscape" in the human unconscious? McCarthy answers that the idyllic environmental perception is just the projection of the mind.

Gender Perspectives in New Western Fiction

Through the lens of gender, the submission of horses takes on an additional dimension, concerning whether they were born mares or stallions. Similarly to the Mexican society, animals are separated into males and females. The feminine character of mares is used for reproduction that brings more benefits to their owners. Although the body of the female horse is used as a money mint, it is not much appreciated. However, the stallion which "bred mares almost daily for three weeks and sometimes twice daily" (130) receives great recognition among vaqueros for its masculinity and productivity, which brings new colts and big fortune to the hacendado. The stallion is reckoned as a highly beneficial animal and its dynamism is described as a machine set in motion by the rider's Machiavellian whispering:

> inside the vaulting of the ribs between his knees the darkly meated heart pumped of who's will and the blood pulsed and the bowels shifted in their massive blue convolutions of who's will and the stout thighbones and knee and cannon and the tendons like flaxen hawsers that drew and flexed and drew and flexed at their articulations and of who's will all sheathed and muffled in the flesh and the hooves that stove wells in the morning groundmist and the head turning side to side and the great slavering keyboard of his teeth and the hot globes of his eyes where the world burned. (131)

The organic mechanism and various objects with anthropocentric features suggest the material perspective of the animal.

Not only the dominance over horses is expressed verbally in the narrative, but the characters vocalize masculine hegemony over women in the southwest. Rawlins has a steady opinion about females and he talks about Grady's current unreachable love interest with disrespect: "I wouldnt let her get the best of me … She aint worth it. None of em are" (10). On another occasion, Rawlins compares a good-looking horse to a good-looking woman, pointing out his masculine attitude toward women: "They're always more trouble than what they're worth. What

a man needs is just one that will get the job done" (91). Such a scornful attitude toward female human beings is also part of the traditional western rhetoric, as the West was the "playground" of the male adventurer who intended to tame the wilderness with all of its creatures—including women. Despite John Grady's negative experiences about women and his best friend's scornful opinion about girls, external opinions do not influence his perception of people and his cowboy enterprise is a softened version of the hard-line macho spirit. Further on, Alejandra is compared to her black Arabian horse in appearance, having a fine-boned face, long black hair resembling the horsetail, and broad shoulders, emphasizing her controllable nature and inferior social role in the male-based ranch community. She looks strong, behaves with dignity, and rides the horse erect "more than well" (111), just like a horseman. Alejandra is close to the horses in the soul, being wild and free, therefore she emerges as John Grady's interest to be seduced and "tamed."

The author pays attention to female oppression in the patriarchal social and political system in Mexico and illustrates it through the character of Senora Alfonsa, whose life had been ruined by male judgment and pride. Politics excluded female members from elections and society served as a machine for the "suppression of women" (232) leaving no opportunity of choice for them. Along with the political and social empowerment of men, social polarization and economic decline, and the inability to improve the conditions of lower social classes were attributed to the leading figures. The failure of the Mexican Revolution (1910-1920) is viewed as the "rehearsal" for the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) in Europe because of the Spaniard's "yearning for freedom, but only [their] own" and the "great love of truth and honor … but not its substance" (232). Although the Spanish live on two different lands and even on different continents, their social and cultural values, and their conceptual frame for political order and social structure are the same—including the exclusion of women from public issues.

The Aesthetics of Death and Violence on the American Borderland

Violence, blood, and the beauty of animate nature make up a strange aesthetics of the world in *Pretty Horses*. Deer are noble creatures among animals with their magnificent external features and their killing has various meanings. John Grady shoots the smallest doe for a meal, but looking into the animal's eyes (warm, wet, and without fear) launches a series of associations and harrowing emotions. The doe's look suggests that she had been aware of her fate: she was born to be prey. The little body lying in blood refers not only to the sacrifice of the animal but reminds him of the Blevins kid who had been hunted down by the charro and the captain

with no legal conviction. The small victim also reminds Grady of Alejandra's sacrifice through bribery and forbiddance from the boy. Therefore, the doe is the symbol of majesty, but it also signifies death, victimization, sadness, and destiny. Furthermore, loneliness and alienation are connected to the hidden secret in the world's beauty (286); the world's pain is in diverging equity with the world's beauty, and the two are inseparable from each other and they are evenly changing. However, knowing beauty cannot be without sorrow, which creates an aesthetic duality of the bloodshed and truth represented through "the vision of a single flower" (286).

Hunting for food is the essential activity of wayfarers in the wilderness and Rawlins is good at it, while John Grady is rather a cowboy who speaks the language of horses. The portrayal of the shot spike horn buck "lay dead in its blood on the ground. … shot through the base of the skull and its eyes … glazing" (91-92) depicts the loss of life for the sustenance of another one, the hierarchy of the nutrition chain. The procession of meal from deer meat is also well-detailed and Rawlins refers to the vaqueros from whom he learned how to cut a thin piece of meat to see its "heart" (93) looking through the blood-red flesh. Along with the personification of the animal flesh, McCarthy gives nopal fruit an anthropomorphic character to emphasize the equal status of environmental elements. The fruit also feeds people with its "spines" and its blood-red (90) liquid inside, showing a human character and the act of violence on nature. Nevertheless, this "alien world" (97) with all the ordinary bloodshed and cruelty toward the non-human environment, is attractive and welcoming for the young self-appointed cowboys. The sources of admiration of the country are the pure joy of the landscape and the activities it holds for human purposes.

The death of animals and their bodies bear with symbolic meaning. The slaughtering of a sheep at Grady's returning to the Mexican ranch stands for losing Grady's innocent qualities and not only concerning his coming of age, but attributed to his violation of God's commandment regarding homicide. The buzzards feeding on a dead colt "in the tainted grass eyeless and naked" (227) also bear figurative implications concerning Grady; the lifeless body of the infant horse is the end of the new life on the ranch that Grady supported with his work by breaking the stallions and with the insemination of mares. It may also stand for the ineffective cowboy enterprise on the Mexican frontier, which the boys thought would be an equine paradise grounded in American rural ideals.

The landscape is pictured as a composite of dark tones and the colors of violence and sinister happenings. The hawk, a bird of prey, is illustrated as a paper bird, and its shadow signals the real conflict and unnecessary bloodshed on the territory. Redness of the sky like "blood falling through water" (289) bears with Biblical significance, indicating the sacrifice of Christ, who was baptized and cleansed from

all sins in water. The blood-red sunset and the "bull rolling in the dust … in sacrificial torment" (306) is also an allusion to either the practice of hunting for the inbred bison in North America or the Spanish tradition of bullfight—both generating violence using the natural character of the animal. The cordilleras darkening, the desert gold still shining, inking over the bajada (289) suggest that darkness is coming, and the darkening landscape is an allegory to the end of an era of the pastoral, the closeness to nature is ultimately over with the emergence of machines and artificial objects on the land. As the last American horseman, John Grady, is vanishing from the landscape riding into the darkness, the cowboy ideal remains a ghost of the western world, endlessly crossing the borderland.

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