

CORMAC MCCARTHY'S *ALL THE PRETTY HORSES* AND MEDIEVAL  
LITERATURE: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

by

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## **DEDICATION**

I dedicate this thesis to my son, Jordan Evans Thompson, who was born during my work on the project. There were times when I wanted to give up, but I persevered in order to set the example for him that goals can be achieved no matter how difficult the process may seem in the beginning. Jordan, I support you in whatever you want to achieve in life.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

To date, much information is still unknown about Cormac McCarthy and his personal life, which comes as no surprise to scholars who have studied him and his works in the past. Attempts have undoubtedly been made. Yet, the miniscule number of details discovered have been eagerly published and made as widely known as possible. Researchers commonly agree that the mysteriousness McCarthy abides by in his reclusive lifestyle becomes even more of a reason to delve into the life of the genius writer who has produced popular contemporary novels such as *Blood Meridian*, *All the Pretty Horses*, *No Country for Old Men*, and *The Road*. I am no exception.

What the public knows for certain is that Charles Joseph McCarthy, Jr. (changed to Cormac during his college years) was born on July 20, 1933 in Providence, Rhode Island. The product of well-off parents, McCarthy attended and later graduated from Catholic private school in 1951 in Knoxville, Tennessee. The following fall semester, McCarthy enrolled himself in courses at the University of Tennessee in the College of Liberal Arts. Yet, instead of finishing a degree, he enlisted in the Air Force and completed four years of service. He returned to the University of Tennessee from 1957-1958, bouncing from their engineering program to a major in Business Management. McCarthy never completed a degree at the University; however, he pursued his passion for writing by publishing stories in the school's literary journal.<sup>1</sup>

Through a series of small career successes (i.e. fellowships and grant awards for writing) and many hardships, McCarthy eventually landed a grant in 1965 that allowed him the opportunity to travel to Europe. He toured a variety of cities and countries but spent the majority of his two-year adventure living on an island off the Spanish coast. His

return to the States in 1967 led to a series of published works during his remaining time in Tennessee. McCarthy left his familiar life for a fresh start in El Paso, Texas in 1976. His *Border Trilogy*, beginning with *All the Pretty Horses* (1992), then *The Crossing* (1994), and wrapping up with *Cities of the Plain* (1998), developed out of this phase in his career.

For this study, I focus primarily on the first of the three novels in the series by turning to one of McCarthy's most quotable moments when he stated in a 1992 interview with Richard Woodward that "The ugly fact is books are made out of books," and that "The novel depends for its life on the novels that have been written." Not surprisingly, McCarthy admits to having read an exorbitant amount of literature that precedes his own and evidently emulated works by Herman Melville, Ernest Hemingway, and William Faulkner.<sup>2</sup> Scholars continue to link language and common themes from such writers to McCarthy's works, but still unknown is the level at which McCarthy is indebted to earlier literature from as far back as medieval England. I contend that the most important piece of personal information currently known about McCarthy is his love for reading all sorts of literature, which inherently lends some insight about the genius behind his writing.

When observing McCarthy's *All the Pretty Horses*, readers need to recognize the complexities that permeate each page. For example, while the dialogue between and among characters is generally simple, the language describing the landscape is extensive and, at times, extravagant. The linguistic binary created between the two styles demands attention and analysis. In addition, the title signifies a romanticized view of nature, but the novel deals with complex themes about self-identity, death, and religion. Essentially, the novel resembles other works that were published during and around the Middle Ages

(beginning in the fifth century and ending in the early 1500s), works we would consider “medieval literature.” My interests for this thesis lie in comparing these foundational works of literature to Cormac McCarthy’s more contemporary novels.

In the first chapter, I explain the similarities and differences between a medieval “knight” and “pilgrim.” Certain research already published on *All the Pretty Horses* identifies the main character, John Grady Cole, as a representation of a medieval knight who describes his journey as the “knight’s quest,” or, in essence, a search for the “Holy Grail.” In this sense, John Grady hopes to achieve something material or “earthly,” like love or respect or wealth. Yet, I will offer an alternative perspective clarifying that John Grady’s journey aligns more with medieval pilgrimage as a “spiritual quest.” While the knightly quest approach is reasonable and even logical for the story, the medieval pilgrimage is more representative of this type of adventure, as the result is more of an “inner journey” with many “relics” to show from it.<sup>3</sup>

In this chapter, I provide background information about medieval pilgrimages and highlight evidence regarding foundational concepts that provide insight into McCarthy’s novel. For example, I describe details about its origins in Roman Catholic churches in England, who went on pilgrimages and why they set forth on these journeys, how pilgrimages evolved throughout the centuries (including details about modern pilgrimages), and information on specific destinations for the travelers and why those destinations were/are significant.

To relate this information to *All the Pretty Horses*, I argue that McCarthy’s use of Mexico as John Grady’s destination connects with medieval literature. The rich religious heritage (specifically, Roman Catholic) in Mexico develops from the moral background

of England during the Middle Ages. Yet, the correlation here seems too significant to be considered mere happenstance for McCarthy. Because of the story's setting in Mexico, I link the background information on pilgrimages to works of literature McCarthy could have used for inspiration. Additionally, I show that McCarthy's years spent living in El Paso, Texas encouraged his personal education regarding Mexico's religious traditions as well as McCarthy's well-known penchant for full and careful research. Specific examples of the country's customs are useful for this section. Comparisons between Catholicism in medieval Europe and in modern Mexico demonstrate correlations, and information about religious sites in Mexico that were mentioned or alluded to in *All the Pretty Horses* strengthen my argument.

Because of my argument that John Grady experiences more of an internal spiritual growth process, I employ psychoanalytical criticism to analyze crucial moments in the text where his thoughts are made known to the reader. McCarthy no doubt drew upon the works of Freud and Jung, as well as other psychologists who have produced theories helping form current literary approaches. Therefore, it is reasonable to focus on their works to demonstrate how they influenced McCarthy. This approach narrows the concentration for the chapter, inherently lending greater meaning to the historical context.

For the second chapter, I compare the similarities and differences between medieval female gender roles and the female characters from *All the Pretty Horses*—particularly, Alfonsa and Alejandra and their central roles in the story—but I also touch on details about John Grady's mother and his former girlfriend in San Angelo, Mary Catherine. In evaluating the females from the novel, I correlate their personalities,

characteristics, and roles in the story with female characters from medieval literature (including the Wife of Bath in *Canterbury Tales* and Beatrice from *Divine Comedy*).

When referring specifically to Alfonsa, I examine the monologue she gives to John Grady near the middle of the story. Her simple yet powerful language emphasizes attitudes about girls and women in the Mexican culture of the time period and will help readers understand similar attitudes in medieval England. I also explore how women were treated historically considering their social status and compare and contrast those findings with attitudes about women from the novel.

For example, women from both cultures were considered objects of pleasure or as servants to men (as is Magdalena in *Cities of the Plain*). In patriarchal societies, women were allowed little say in whom they married and factors like social status of the suiting man determined their future husbands. Yet, much like the Wife of Bath, Alfonsa determines to control her romantic situation. Rather than marrying multiple men though, Alfonsa simply chooses not to marry since the man she loved was killed in war.

Even so, Alfonsa attempts to impose her own altered attitudes on to Alejandra, and ultimately on to John Grady through her monologue. I explore this dynamic further since John Grady seems intimidated but mesmerized by the powerful language. Ultimately, he decides to explore his relationship with Alejandra despite Alfonsa's warnings, but that specific moment in the text creates a bond between a protective great aunt and possible suitor to Alejandra. I argue that the moment not only stalls the plotline briefly, but it also jolts it forward and changes the fate of the plot. Additionally, I discuss cultural beliefs about women's roles during medieval England and modern Mexico relative to Alfonsa's central and complex roles in *All the Pretty Horses*.

Alejandra's character also proves complex since the decisions she makes weigh heavily on the plot. She remains mostly mysterious although predictable at times. She is undoubtedly attractive, which makes her role in the story interesting and uncharacteristic of McCarthy's female characters. Alejandra represents a figure much like Beatrice in Dante's *Divine Comedy* since she is the protagonist's object of desire. Even though John Grady shares a romantic relationship with Alejandra, both physical and emotional, her affection is ultimately unattainable. In her culture, her family's wealth determines that she cannot marry a man of a lower class. John Grady comes from a ranching family, now ranchless. Additionally, Alejandra is destined to marry a man from her own culture and similar background. Thus, John Grady's attempts at pursuing her are ill fated.

Finally, I address the role John Grady's mother plays in the story. She appears briefly in the beginning of the story, and, while she remains absent from his life, she manages to alter the path John Grady intended. Using a psychoanalytical approach, I evaluate the components formed from this mother-son relationship. Feminist and gender approaches to the text are most useful as I examine multiple theorists' ideas and align their conclusions with those implied by McCarthy in *All the Pretty Horses* with references to his other novels.

The theme throughout the third chapter focuses on dreams and dream analysis. For this section, I refer to the number of occurrences in *All the Pretty Horses* when John Grady slips into a dream phase and the contents of the dream are revealed. Critical studies on McCarthy's use of dreams lend insight into the deeper meaning behind McCarthy's writing. Psychoanalytical and deconstructionist approaches strengthen my

argument that underlying meanings exist within the story. I refer to literary theories from Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung, and Jacques Derrida specifically.

For comparison, I concentrate on dreams in medieval literature by surveying literature from the setting in which writers used dreams as a tool to integrate secondary meanings into their work. Multiple examples of this technique are found in Chaucer's *The Book of the Duchess* and *House of Fame*, as well as Langland's *Piers Plowman*. These writers, as well as others from the Middle Ages, created fictional characters who slip into a dream state and experience a scenario that would have been politically or religiously controversial for the time period. These circumstances allowed the writer to interject personal opinions about societal shortcomings without implicating himself as a criminal according to political and religious standards of the time period. I argue that McCarthy might have been familiar with *Piers Plowman*, or other similar works, and replicated such a literary device in *All the Pretty Horses*, possibly for similar purposes as his predecessors.

McCarthy uses the technique first when John Grady has already arrived at prison and has interacted with Blevins, discovering that Blevins murdered a man and was thus incarcerated for his actions (161). Yet, shortly after that conversation, John Grady is able to sleep soundly and dream of an idealized vision of horses. His dream is naïve and unrealistic in nature, despite his treacherous and unpredictable circumstances. In the segment, the reader recognizes that only bad things can come of his circumstances, but John Grady seems hopeful and unafraid. In later scenarios, John Grady dreams about death. Specifically, he interacts with Blevins and asks what it is like to be dead. And Blevins' response that "it aint like nothin at all" is perpetuated by the fact that John

Grady killed a man in prison. John Grady always had sympathy for Blevins, but now he can empathize with the situation. I explore the meanings behind the dream scenarios showing that John Grady's transformation by the end of the novel is revealed through his dream-visions.

Although the themes I discuss in these chapters permeate medieval literature and beyond, McCarthy complicates the literary traditions by re-working them to make them unique to his style of writing. His statement that "books are made out of books" has caused scholars to search high and low for those books from which he drew inspiration for his novels, and I provide evidence that the similarities between *All the Pretty Horses* and medieval literature is no coincidence.

## II. CANTERBURY, JERUSALEM, HEAVEN, AND MEXICO: PILGRIMAGE IN *ALL THE PRETTY HORSES*

Medieval literature is teeming with tales of traveling woes. And many of those stories paint pictures of epic knightly quests while others describe devout pilgrimages to holy sites. The key difference separating the two types of adventures: the outward journey, or conquest, of the knight, or the inward, metaphysical journey of the pilgrim. The Oxford English Dictionary clarifies the Middle English definition of a quest relative to medieval literature: “In chivalric or Arthurian romance: an expedition or search undertaken by a knight or group of knights to obtain some thing or achieve some exploit” (OED, “quest”). The knight focuses more on a task or mission – i.e. search for the Holy Grail – with challenges to overcome that prove heroic qualities. On the other hand, the OED describes a pilgrimage as follows: “A journey (usually of a long distance) made to a sacred place as an act of religious devotion; the action or practice of making such a journey” (OED, “pilgrimage”). Additionally, pilgrimage also means, “To travel; to wander; to stay or dwell in a foreign land; to sojourn” (OED). The pilgrim’s motive lies in his or her desire to explore religion and spirituality. Arguably, the quest and the pilgrimage serve very different purposes.<sup>4</sup>

For Cormac McCarthy’s *All the Pretty Horses*, the inherent plot lies in John Grady Cole’s physical journey on which he embarks with his companion, Lacey Rawlins. Reminiscent of tales from the Middle Ages, the two ride on horseback from San Angelo, Texas, and cross the border into Mexico. Their intentions for the journey remain unclear from the beginning except that John Grady has recently suffered the loss of his grandfather as well as the identity he finds in his work as a ranch hand and has “come to

the end of something” (5). When asked early on in their trip where they are headed, they state simply, “Mexico.” Though the country spans a large area therefore leaving their destination seemingly open-ended, the country’s symbolism is inherently pivotal to the rest of the text. And while a number of critics argue that the process or purpose of traveling is most significant to interpreting McCarthy’s intentions for the story, I contend that the location or destination of the protagonist’s travels is most significant in terms of the intertextual links between the novel and medieval texts.

Upon first impression, John Grady’s physical, or “outward,” journey resembles the knight’s quest. Charles Bailey, in his 1998 article, deems *All the Pretty Horses* a medieval “courtly romance,” with John Grady serving as the “knight-errant,” his pursuit of Alejandra is the unattainable romance and his encounters with the *cuchillero* in the Saltillo prison dub him a hero. While Bailey’s suggestions are plausible, Megan Riley McGilchrist proposes the most compelling argument describing him as a medieval knight in her article, “The Ties that Bind: Intertextual Links between *All the Pretty Horses* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.” She contends that a direct link between the texts cannot be made for certain since she cannot prove that McCarthy both read *Sir Gawain* and used it as inspiration for his novel. However, she explains: “The knight errant is a character whose motivations exist largely in the realm of the idealistic and illusory, formed in feudal patriarchy. John Grady’s similarity to this traditional character in chivalric quest literature is obvious” (24). In her viewpoint, John Grady is not only a knight, but he is also, “a postmodern reworking of the chivalric motif expressed in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*” (25). McGilchrist ultimately suggests the congruencies between the medieval knight and modern cowboy as archetypal figures and resolves that

the similarities between John Grady and Sir Gawain are abundant and undeniable. And while her explanation for the texts as examples of *Bildungsroman* is supported by strong critical evidence, she delivers only a small amount of substance behind the characters' inner, or "metaphysical," journeys.

In fact, John Grady's journey in the story lends to psychological and moral growth by the time he returns to his hometown in Texas but not until he has exhausted his opportunities to remain in Mexico. However, on a much deeper spiritual level, he embarks on his own version of a medieval pilgrimage. Since Mexico exists as an epicenter for Roman Catholicism with a devout religious following for descendants of Spanish immigrants, it serves as a prime location for a wanderer or foreigner seeking a new spiritual identity.

Similarly, literary characters such as Geoffrey Chaucer the pilgrim in *The Canterbury Tales*, Margery Kempe in *The Book of Margery Kempe*, and Dante Alighieri the pilgrim in *The Divine Comedy* travel as pilgrims during the Middle Ages, a period of great religious devotion but also of alleged corruption within the Catholic Church. The pilgrims in these works serve as narrators of their endeavors allowing readers to follow along in their psychological experiences as they travel to some of the most significant locations (Canterbury, Jerusalem, Heaven) according to Christian tradition. Throughout their journeys, Chaucer, Kempe, and Dante describe encounters transcending everyday experiences. Therefore, reintegration into their home communities upon return from their religious journeys represents the altered attitudes and behaviors resulting from their spiritual reflection.

*The Canterbury Tales* portray the pilgrimage of a group of fictional characters that exemplify aspects of medieval English Christians, each containing faults representative of sinfulness and corruption within society. The narrator of the story (also called Chaucer) begins in the *General Prologue* by describing each of the travelers, some of which only appear in this section. Some critics suggest that Chaucer (the writer) intended to create archetypal figures by replicating characteristics of individuals he may have known. However, others argue that the characters represent features the writer imagined they would embody. Regardless, Chaucer the Narrator-Pilgrim, throughout the entire poem, tells the most significant tale on the pilgrimage to Canterbury. In many ways, characters in *All the Pretty Horses* represent archetypal figures: John Grady, a chivalrous cowboy, Rawlins, a “spirit guide,” and Blevins, a young, naïve thief and murderer. McCarthy possibly drew inspiration for these characters from Chaucer’s example.

Barbara Nolan, in her essay, argues for distinguishing Chaucer the Poet from Chaucer the Pilgrim, where the poet remains omnipresent throughout the *Tales* and the pilgrim interjects into the story where necessary. While the distinction does not allow for full disclosure of the poet’s attitudes toward the subject matter on which he writes, Nolan argues that “each [voice] constitutes part of a complex argument about the nature of the poet and poetry in terms authorized by well-known medieval theory and practice” (154). Chaucer the Pilgrim’s interruptions in the *Tales* “provide a moral center from which to judge the other voices” (155) she suggests, helping to guide the pilgrimage for readers. As her ideas indicate, depictions of morality in the *Tales* lend meaning to the overall context of the journey, the spiritual significance behind the implied destination.

Arguably, Blevins, in *All the Pretty Horses*, exemplifies immorality (for murder and thievery) in the context of the story. He is condemned and punished for his actions (executed by prison guards) in the Saltillo prison in Mexico, which serves as a turning point in the plot and the source of one of John Grady's dream visions. Additionally, this experience becomes a type of relic for John Grady providing him with a memento of personal and spiritual growth. He carries the memory of Blevins with him for the remainder of his journey.

Canterbury Cathedral, the end point for the travelers, hosts St. Thomas Becket's shrine, a gathering site for medieval pilgrims to collect Becket's "blood," a badge rumored to assist in healing and miracles for some individuals who ventured there. Becket, archbishop of Canterbury from 1162 until his murder, became a martyr as a result of his assassination in 1170, which occurred inside the Cathedral (Barlow). While details of his life and death remain in question by critics skeptical of his source of sainthood since some researchers believe his actions were deserving of the title, his contributions to the church and his steadfast devotion to God remain his greatest achievements, endowing him with honorable status. Robert Worth Frank, Jr., in his essay appearing in *The Cambridge Companion to Chaucer*, describes some of the qualifications rendering sainthood: "Like all saints' lives, its message is the special grace of God revealed in the saint's power of conversion, unshakable faith, and the willing, even joyful, power" (183). Becket does in fact meet these standards to the extent that his name bears remembering, mainly from miracles, which occurred after his death.

In addition to Becket's legacy retained within the walls of the Cathedral, St. Augustine serves as a momentous figure due to his role as first Archbishop of Canterbury

around 597. Significantly, he dedicated his saintly efforts to pagan conversion to Christianity, leading the first official Christian mission from Rome to the Anglo-Saxons in Kent beginning around the same time (Mayr-Harting). Despite some level of ambiguity and transparency about his history and contributions to the church, St. Augustine's positive reputation remains one of the major reasons for pilgrimages to Canterbury during the Middle Ages.

Due to the nature of Christian history surviving in Chaucer's *Tales*, such as the significance of Canterbury and the shrines located within the city, the Biblical passages depicted in the story, and the details of individual Christian devotion in the pilgrims, some of the stories fulfill what Frank refers to as "Tales of pathos." They are defined in the OED as "expression(s) or utterance(s) that evoke sadness or sympathy" – the tales of the Man of Law, Second Nun, Clerk, Physician, Prioress, and Monk – stories in which he identifies as lacking traditional Chaucerian irony and comedy but instead using simplicity to evoke a sense of moral dilemma (178). Pathetic aspects of the *Tales* focus on spirituality, the affects of religion in society that ignite meditation, or concentration on "scenes or subjects that would bring home forcefully the crises of the human condition" (180), emotions such as pain, sadness, or even overwhelming joy. As Frank explains:

Pictorial representations of this suffering, mortal God (Jesus), loved and mourned by a mother and dear companions, call for a human, empathetic response. Lyrics report the Passion in lurid detail or express the sorrow of one meditating on the scene: in some, Christ speaks directly from the cross to the reader, bidding him see how He suffers. (180)

A prime example of this meditation on the impact of Christ's humanization in His life and death appears through Chaucer the Narrator-Pilgrim in the *Tales*, or rather, at the end of his inner pilgrimage in the 'Retraction.' Frank considers it "an explicit statement of faith and repentance" (182) as Chaucer writes, "Wherefore I biseke yow meekly, for the mercy of God, that ye preye for me, that Crist have mercy on me and foryeve me my giltes" (783). His apologies for using faulty language or wrongly depicting characters and actions proves his devotion and willingness to alter his behavior in the future with help from God. His journey to Canterbury Cathedral marks a turning point in Chaucer's spirituality; however, his meditation at the end seems skeptical, light-hearted, and even ironic in part possibly due to his experiencing a lower pathos or the journey's lack of emotive impact. His sincerity and trustworthiness remain in question by critics. On the other hand, John Grady's repentance seems sincere by the end of the novel. When he visits the judge, he confesses to wanting to kill the Mexican captain:

The reason I wanted to kill him was because I stood there and let him walk that boy out in the trees and shoot him and I never said nothin.

Would it have done any good?

No sir. But that dont make it right. (293)

Then he proceeds by explaining that he needs to return Blevins' horse to its rightful owner: "It's gotten to be like a millstone around my neck." John Grady becomes more sympathetic and apologetic as a result of his interactions with Blevins during his pilgrimage in Mexico.

Margery Kempe the Pilgrim (again, a distinction between writer and narrator-pilgrim), in her *Book*, similarly impacts her readers with emotional displays throughout

her pilgrimage to Jerusalem. Her story tends to achieve a more pathetic approach since she literally experienced the journey herself and proceeded to document it in memoir-style prose, highlighting her own emotions as she meditated on Christ's life first-hand. Kempe dealt specifically with the difficulties of traveling as a woman in the Middle Ages; she struggled with the regret of leaving behind her children and husband, neglecting her domestic duties, to travel to a foreign land. After receiving proper permissions from her priest, she initiated her pious lifestyle and parted with her previous life. She traveled with a group of fellow pilgrims who sought to gain the same benefits from visiting holy sites correlated with miracles and healing much like other shrines throughout Europe. The costs for the adventure proved great – generally a year's worth of wages – but the benefits seemed worth the sacrifices for Kempe.

Jerusalem and the entire city, for medieval pilgrims, served as a “relic in its own right,” according to Suzanne Yeager, containing sites most significant to Christian tradition. While the city boasts of its crucial part in Christ's crucifixion and burial, Jerusalem “was thought to exceed all other pilgrimages in spiritual rewards” (3) rendering its significance over Chaucer's pilgrimage to Canterbury. Susan Morrison, in her book, highlights a theme of location or place-based pilgrimages to particular shrines or sites versus space-based pilgrimage, where the act of physically traveling manifests itself in a metaphysical journey as well. Such a case proves true when dealing with Jerusalem; the city serves as a spatial reliquary, the ultimate spiritually inspirational location for a purposeful journey. In contrast, contrary to the stereotype of spiritual pilgrimage destinations, Mexico holds a similar value for John Grady in his metaphysical

or inner journey. Undoubtedly, he contemplates the existence of God during his pilgrimage:

You think there'll be a day when the sun wont rise?

Yeah, said John Grady. Judgment day.

When you think that'll be?

Whenever He decides to hold it.

Judgment day, said Rawlins. You believe in all that?

I dont know. Yeah, I reckon. You? (60-61)

Their conversation occurs almost immediately after their crossing into Mexico, which possibly comes as no coincidence for McCarthy. The country is deeply rooted in its Catholic heritage, offering a source of religious devotion for the pilgrims like Jerusalem does for Margery Kempe.

Medieval scholar Yoshikawa explains the correlation between the city of Jerusalem and its significance to experiencing communal worship and heightened devotion to God:

The centrality of the pilgrimage to Jerusalem suggests that Margery is keenly aware of the medieval view of Jerusalem as the geographical and symbolic centre of the world. For medieval Christians, who identified themselves as the descendants of Adam and Eve, going eastward to Jerusalem was symbolically associated with the journey to their heavenly homeland redeemed by the second Adam and the new Eve. (193)

An inner journey for a devout pilgrim results in “constant movement from sin toward heaven” (199), as Yoshikawa suggests, focusing on repentance and forgiveness as primary pious acts in order to turn from former sinful habits and lifestyle.

Kempe’s pathetic response while visiting Jerusalem derives mainly from the memories she conceives of events she never experienced, such as the Passion. Early in her journey, she established that she had received a spiritual gift from God, her explanation for high emotive response to the shrines at the holy sites. She continues to elicit moral and spiritual fervor affecting her thoughts and actions. Lynn Staley, in her introduction to the *Book*, explains this idea:

Moreover, the *Book* seems to suggest that the quest for holiness (which is also the impetus for the search for the Grail) may well result in an identity that can no longer be fitted back into the community, or certainly not in the same way. The conflict that is a necessary crucible for identity-making must involve a break with a past life; otherwise, from where does self-consciousness come? (xviii)

Unlike Chaucer, Kempe’s outcries and repentance seem thoughtful and sincere. She displays a charitable attitude planning to serve Christ by helping other individuals. Her prayer in chapter 77 signifies her readiness to commit to acting piously according to the standards Christ exemplified in His human life. Similarly, John Grady’s return to Texas signifies his willingness to grow from his experiences, though the man that left Texas initially is not the same man who returns after the journey. His statement to Rawlins, “But it aint my country” (299), shows his inability to reintegrate or return to his life in Texas because of his new spiritual identity.

In medieval literature, the journey ends with Dante's ascending into Heaven in the final installment of *The Divine Comedy*. Beginning with the end in mind seems relevant when referring to the literal encounters with sin occurring as Dante the Pilgrim enters the Inferno. For Dante's pilgrimage, he describes each time he comes into contact with allegorical representations of sins and other historical people according to his medieval Catholic theology. As he travels through a spatial existence accessible only in his imagination, Virgil, his wise spiritual and poetic mentor, accompanies him; this "counselor" of sorts helps guide Dante's thoughts and actions throughout his (literal and spiritual) climb upward and farther into the depths of Hell. However, as he reaches Purgatory in the second book, he manages quite literally to shed remnants of his former life and parts of his sinful nature, as he journeys closer to Heaven.<sup>5</sup>

Barbara Newman, in her article discussing language restrictions of imperfect human poets, suggests that "speaking of heaven is really a way of speaking about God insofar as human beings can experience him, and thus presses against the limits of language and thought" (1). Dante, much like the other poet-pilgrims described, experiences challenges forming concrete thoughts, thus fumbling with words, when explaining his metaphysical encounters with incorporeal beings, the plight of his inner pilgrimage. Newman asserts:

Hell is much easier to imagine, being closer to our experience on earth. Our capacity to endure pain seems almost as boundless as our skill in inflicting it, and extreme suffering stretches our sense of time to the limits. So all we need to do to imagine hell is take a moment of physical and mental torture, which seems subjectively endless, and conceive it as

objectively so. But heaven? If pain stretches time, happiness makes us all too conscious of its brevity: the more intense our joys, the more intensely we perceive that they are fleeting. Nor can we readily imagine *perfect* joy, even for an instant. (2)

Dante intends in his pilgrimage to make an attempt at containing his imaginative sense of Eternity, both theological and personal, such that he invokes his own attitudes into the context of his poem. But he also includes Biblical references and scriptural support for criticism and skepticism he imposes on his contemporaries. He readily acknowledges the flawed medieval society in which he lives, specifically referring to corrupt popes and religious figures.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, hell seems the perfect location for those sinners and Paradise remains only for those who achieve a superior level of spiritual knowledge. Ironically, Rawlins questions to John Grady, “Where do you reckon paradise is at?” (59), but John Grady seems to find his paradise and source of spiritual knowledge in Mexico.

Daniel Murtaugh addresses Dante’s vision of heaven when he ascends beyond Purgatory only to recognize the object of his courtly romance, Beatrice, who offers her guidance through Paradise. However, even in Canto X, her presence seems faulty compared to God’s:

For a moment, Dante transcends all the meditations that make his experience of Paradise a journey, a succession of stages suitable to his time- and space-bound mind. Beatrice, whose transformations are the measure and symptom of his progress, is eclipsed. His mind is “unita,” joined to the One whose act of sustaining the diversity of time and space is the announced subject of the entire *cantica*. (279)

Dante, unlike Geoffrey Chaucer and Margery Kempe, returns to his community from his pilgrimage only to write his poem but has no need for reintegration. He has reached, in his mind, the ultimate pilgrimage destination, the end for which there is no beginning.

In his final transcendence from corporeal into incorporeal being, he states:

O Highest Light, You, raised so far above  
the minds of mortals, to my memory  
give back something of Your epiphany,  
and make my tongue so powerful that I  
may leave to people of the future one  
gleam of the glory that is Yours, for by  
returning somewhat to my memory  
and echoing awhile within these lines,

Your victory will be more understood. (XXXIII, 67-75)

Finally, his words capture the essence of the pilgrimage: spreading Christianity to those not already committed to following Christ. Dante the Pilgrim achieves Common Profit for his readers by sharing his knowledge and experience with the true meaning behind Catholic tradition.

Chaucer, Kempe, and Dante each portray aspects of medieval pilgrimage that exemplify what it meant to serve Christ and live a more meditative, pious lifestyle as a result of their spiritual encounters. They confront what they believe are flaws in religion and individuals claiming to practice Catholicism; however, their insertions into their artistic mediums and their contributions to literature overall ultimately helped direct fellow Christians to alter their attitudes and behaviors to live more like Christ. By the end

of *All the Pretty Horses*, John Grady has unveiled the flaws in American society to the point that he leaves in search of a new identity. During his time in Mexico, he discovers flaws in the Mexican culture, especially in the justice system, despite the culture's Catholic tradition. However, these findings slowly develop into revelations about his own piety; suddenly he alters his actions and chooses to do right by Alejandra, his family, friends, and Blevins.<sup>7</sup>

These examples of piety and religious devotion are still apparent in Mexican culture. Kerry Weber carefully details a prime example of this tradition in her article, "My Pilgrimage to Our Lady of Guadalupe." She describes the history and significance of Tepeyac Hill, the site of the Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe, which houses a statue of Juan Diego. Additionally, Weber explains Juan Diego's encounter with the Blessed Mother on December 9, 1531 in which she appeared to him in a vision as he journeyed across Tepeyac Hill, telling him to build a church in her honor. To this day, that church stands in the center of Mexico City, or the "spiritual heart of Mexico," where the ever-present portrait of the Virgin of Guadalupe hangs overlooking the visitors. Individuals travel from across Mexico, the United States and beyond on pilgrimages to stand in her presence in hopes of experiencing a spiritual bond to the saint Juan Diego, and the Virgin of Guadalupe. Weber states that "it's impossible not to feel a connection to him, or marvel at how magnificent the actual apparition must have been, and how humbled and honored Juan Diego must have felt standing on Tepeyac Hill" (39). Her pilgrimage account to this shrine is merely one of endless stories written by modern day devout Catholics who continue the long-standing religious tradition.

While Weber's journey was specifically for religious purposes, John Grady's inner journey compares in many ways to the one she experienced, as well as pilgrimages like the ones described in medieval literature. Weber left the Basilica feeling challenged to "reflect Mary's love, her cry for justice in [her own life]" (40); similarly, John Grady leaves Mexico and returns to his hometown seemingly transformed by his experiences. Dianne Luce, in her article, portrays the phenomenon by stating:

John Grady is not after all the static hero of the adventure novel who triumphs unchanged and scarred by his ordeals. Rather, he is the romantic dreamer who gradually awakens to reality, which always lies waiting to test him, and who responds by abandoning his quest for dominance and courageously embracing instead a quest for truth and understanding. His true heroism in this novel that deploys, interrogates, and often subverts the romantic adventure tale of the wild west, is a heroism of consciousness rather than conquest; it lies in the extent to which he progresses in willingness to overcome his illusions (22).

Mexico, like Canterbury and Jerusalem, evokes a pathetic response from John Grady when he realizes in many ways he has found his Paradise. His former life has passed and his new identity lies before him.

McCarthy emulates themes similar to the ones in traditional pilgrimage literature like *Canterbury Tales*, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, and *Divine Comedy* by developing a character that reflects deeply on spiritual identity, makes amends with a former self, and progresses toward altered behaviors. Like Chaucer the Pilgrim and Margery Kempe, John Grady moves closer to finding Common Profit for his readers but does not quite achieve

it like Dante the Pilgrim. And as Luce points out, the purpose of John Grady's journey is less for dominance and more for truth and understanding.

### III. “WOMEN ARE TOUGH”: FEMALE CHARACTERS IN *ALL THE PRETTY HORSES*

Since the novel’s publication in 1992, readers and critics alike have questioned the roles of the female characters in *All the Pretty Horses*. While McCarthy claimed in a 2008 interview with Oprah, “Women are tough...I don’t pretend to understand women,” he underestimates his ability to create characters that align with the extensive research he obviously conducts before beginning the writing process for his stories. Certainly he evaluated society’s accepted traditional roles of women as caretakers and homemakers within Mexican culture during the period of the novel’s setting. Additionally, my research suggests similarities between gender roles of 1940s and 50s Mexican women and medieval European women as portrayed in historical and literary texts from the Middle Ages. These connections lend to a better understanding of McCarthy’s intentions and attitudes regarding women.

Women characters appear early in the text when John Grady Cole interacts with his mother. She abandoned him and his father while he was still a child, thus hindering his future encounters with females. In a scene near the beginning of the story shortly after John Grady attends his grandfather’s funeral, he travels to visit his mother at a playhouse in San Antonio where she works as an actress. He watches her perform but fails to make direct contact. Soon after he returns home, he decides to venture into Mexico on horseback after a break-up with his girlfriend. His callous attitude toward failed relationships sets the tone for inevitable confrontations with females throughout his journey.

Nell Sullivan speculates that McCarthy approached the story's central plot focusing on what she refers to as "narrative expulsion," the overt absence of femininity, or "containment of women." On the other hand, Linda Woodson analyzes the text from the perspectives of Alfonsa and Alejandra, the novel's most compelling females. Where Sullivan deconstructs John Grady's character in the context of the women he encounters, Woodson focuses on the female characters themselves to determine their significance within the larger picture of their antagonistic roles.

Sullivan first deals with the biological differences between males and females, identifying key elements rendering them distinct (i.e. "manliness" or "womanliness" according to Joan Riviere<sup>8</sup>). She incorporates definitions of stereotypical gender roles, explaining that *All the Pretty Horses* aligns more accurately with a traditional Western theme in which the roles are generally more overtly defined. The story's "cowboy theme" inherently supports this claim. Sullivan alternatively argues that McCarthy successfully addresses gender identity as a central theme and complicates the stereotypes by constructing both males and females who adopt opposite-sex characteristics. Specifically, John Grady becomes subservient to Alfonsa in her need to protect Alejandra from a disastrous relationship, which would inevitably ensue if she continued to pursue the lowly American. Alfonsa then assumes confrontational and dominating characteristics as she warns John Grady against interactions with Alejandra.

Alfonsa makes clear her expectations to John Grady after he returns to the ranch upon his release from Saltillo prison. In a lengthy monologue to him, she explains "[my] grandniece is the only future I contemplate and where she is concerned I can only put all my chips forward. It may be that the life I desire for her no longer even exists, yet I know

what she does not. That there is nothing to lose ... I would like my grandniece to have the opportunity to make a very different marriage from the one which her society is bent upon demanding of her. I won't accept a conventional marriage for her" (239-40). She continues:

You think I have rejected your suit because you are young or without education or from another country but that is not the case. I was never remiss in poisoning Alejandra's mind against the conceits of the sorts of suitors available to her and we have both long been willing to entertain the notion of rescue arriving in whatever garb it chose. But I also spoke to you of a certain extravagance in the female blood of this family. Something willful. Improvident. Knowing this in her I should have been more wary where you were concerned. I should have seen you more clearly. Now I do. (240)

A number of times in their conversations, Alfonsa emphasizes to John Grady that women in their family are powerful, even "willful." She reminds him of his inferiority and lower position. She reiterates that she has "no sympathy with people to whom things happen," implying that John Grady is weak and passive. He asserts himself by stating "I intend to see her," but she responds, contending "[a]m I supposed to be surprised? I'll even give you my permission. Although that seems to be a thing you have never required. She will not break her word to me. You will see" (240). Alfonsa takes an authoritative position with him and manipulates his behavior by convincing Alejandra to cut ties with John Grady.

Sullivan's most conclusive argument, however, adheres to the popular belief that McCarthy leans towards a misogynist framework for the "man's man" serving as the novel's protagonist. Ultimately, Sullivan suggests that the text includes the presence of homoeroticism between John Grady and his traveling counterpart, Lacey Rawlins. She argues that the key relational aspect in the story focuses less on the heterosexual encounters between John Grady and Alejandra than on the male bond formed between John Grady and Rawlins. Sullivan agrees with Judith Butler's gender theory by stating, "by divorcing femininity from women and allowing the male performance of both gender roles, McCarthy in effect creates a closed circuit for male desire" (171). Her claim conforms to David Mikics' definition of queer theory: "[I]t is intent on studying how, in literature and culture, normative and nonnormative varieties of sexuality depend on, or interact with, one another: how the nonnormative helps to constitute the normative (and vice versa)" (251). Thus, the absence of female presence at the core of the plot represents "nonnormative" behavior. Sullivan's speculation regarding McCarthy's "obviation of women," the creation of unnecessary female characters, reiterates this idea.

Nearly eleven years after the publication of Sullivan's article, Woodson presents a different interpretation of the interactions, claiming, "the characters of Alfonsa and Alejandra, will be placed within the context of the symbols, traditions, and history of Mexico in the years of the Revolution (1910-1913) that the novel describes and the years of the novel's action (1949-1951)" (28). This point, in her mind, "demonstrates that McCarthy achieves more fully-developed women characters...than previously recognized and a significant, complex, feminine presence" (28). Such a claim merits further

exploration since McCarthy himself dodges the opportunity to either affirm or deny the hypothesis.

In her analysis of *All the Pretty Horses*, Woodson uses historical and cultural lenses to examine McCarthy's formation of female characters. Woodson suggests that the factual evidence in the novel proves the level of research required to inform such a detail-oriented narrative and provides evidence that McCarthy intentionally used the actions and roles for each individual character to reflect Mexican tradition during the late 1940s. First, she explains that the post-revolutionary country exemplified an overall rebellious nature in opposition due to the lack of political progress the government made during the war. Specifically, the government alluded to an essential freedom it planned to achieve, but in reality, the result was a more overt domination of males within society that stripped women of their hope for equal rights.

According to Woodson, the novel's setting, or the blatant "border crossing" from America into Mexico, informs more of the plot than many other scholars acknowledge. The title alludes to the statement Alfonsa makes clarifying to John Grady that American culture varies greatly compared to the patriarchal, more male-dominated culture of Mexico. In addition to traditional Catholic influence within Mexican society, European heritage factors into the culture's gender and class constructs. When Alfonsa stands up to John Grady, she intends for him to understand that Alejandra comes from a family (and a culture) in which wealth and social class influence the mating process. Thus, she points out, John Grady fails to meet high standards for a suitable partner according to Alejandra's upper-class status.

An enlightened reading of Woodson's analysis points to Simone de Beauvoir's 1949 foundational feminist text, *The Second Sex*. The French feminist's fundamentally political hypotheses offer support for the critic's overtly historical and gender approaches. In relation to Mexico's European roots, de Beauvoir helps depict a patriarchal society in which "[Women are] determined and differentiated in relation to man, while he is not in relation to her; she is the inessential in front of the essential. He is the Subject; he is the Absolute. She is the other" (6). David Mikics assists in defining de Beauvoir's feminist attitudes relative to patriarchy:

De Beauvoir concludes that the mythology sponsored by patriarchal society, according to which femininity implies self-sacrifice and narcissism, and women are identified with the biological fact of their sex, works to sustain masculine privilege. Such patriarchal bias stands in the way of women constituting themselves as a 'we': as a collective, independent subject. (118)

The "masculine privilege" to which Mikics refers and de Beauvoir addresses signifies the attitude formed from cultural male dominance, mainly the European milieu that translated onto post-colonial societies, inherently causing oppression of women. Under these circumstances, de Beauvoir points out that women then become what she refers to as "the second sex," or "the other," denying women equality with their male counterparts.

This same oppression appears throughout medieval literature, and in many ways, Alfonsa shares commonalities with the Wife of Bath from Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. Their desire to attain female dominance and superiority over men in male-dominated cultures influences their decisions and ultimately manipulates the decisions of other

characters in the story. Alfonsa reveals in her speech to John Grady that, “[t]he societies to which I have been exposed seemed to me largely machines for the suppression of women. Society is very important in Mexico. Where women do not even have the vote” (230). Typically in marriage, women in patriarchal societies lose their identities as individuals and become subject to expectations imposed by men. Yet, Alfonsa and the Wife of Bath in Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* resist such impositions in effective and memorable ways.

The Wife of Bath begins in her *Prologue* by attempting to establish repertoire and respect by citing details from her life experiences, describing her extensive knowledge about the institution of marriage. She portrays herself as an expert on the subject of men. Similarly, Alfonsa reveals details of her past relationships with men to John Grady: “I can scarcely count on my two hands the number of women in this family who have suffered disastrous love affairs with men of disreputable character” (229). While the Wife of Bath married five husbands and Alfonsa was engaged but never married, their circumstances are the exception to traditional female gender roles for their time periods. In devoutly Catholic societies that value submission and sexual purity for women, these female characters complicate the standards and confront stereotypes about their expected behaviors.

In her *Tale*, the Wife of Bath scrutinizes the chivalrous knight archetype as she encounters one knight who objectified a woman by raping her. As a result of his actions, the knight is sentenced to death, but is pardoned by the queen and given one year to determine every woman’s greatest desire. He fails at every attempt to fulfill the queen’s demands until he encounters the wyf, who suggests that women desire sovereignty over

men. In exchange for being the instrument that spares his life, she manipulates him into marrying her. Similarly, Alfonsa spares John Grady's life when she buys his way out of Saltillo prison. The condition for John Grady is to end his romantic relationship with Alejandra and abandon any intention of marrying her. This sense of power gained by persuading/manipulating male characters gives the Wife of Bath and Alfonsa the authoritative role they desire, therefore promoting females to a greater position within the context of the stories.

Yet, these are examples of the ways in which characterization in literature impacts gender roles in a cultural context. One important consideration concerns how males have historically gained their position within society. One major cause that John Wegner examines is McCarthy's use of war and conduct associated with war to frame *All the Pretty Horses*. Wegner discusses the historical context of both the Mexican Revolution and World War II as being significant to the time period in which the story takes place—1949. The aftermath of these brutal events in history affects not only McCarthy's perspective on the cultures about which he writes, but they also influence how he develops his characters. For example, Alfonsa shares her story with John Grady about how she lost the man she loved to war: "I will tell you about Mexico. I will tell you what happened to these brave and good and honorable men" (236). According to Wegner's account, the story serves to tell less about the war itself than to display the ways war changed both Mexico and America, altering the men and women who survived.

Wegner explains, pointing to the aftermath of WWII, "More obvious, though, was the effect on servicemen returning to America" (66). John Grady and Alfonsa experience similar scenarios. He exchanges conversation with his father in the beginning of the novel

regarding the ways in which the war influenced their family. His father served in the military during the war and was taken as a prisoner of war. During this time, John Grady's mother tended to her young child out of necessity. Upon the father's return, the mother recognizes the changes that have taken place as a result of the trauma he faced and abandons her husband and child. His father confesses:

Last conversation we had was in San Diego California in nineteen forty-two. It aint her fault. I aint the same as I was. I'd like to think I am. But I aint.

You are inside. Inside you are. (12)

Regardless of John Grady's hopeful attitude that his father remains his true self, the circumstances altered his trust in relationships. Perhaps the commonalities John Grady and Alfonsa share allude to the connection they make despite cultural differences: two survivors tragically altered by war.

Traditionally, narratives regarding war reveal the tragedy as well as the heroism of soldiers (almost always males) who fought the battles. And in the case of *All the Pretty Horses*, gruesome results of the Revolution and WWII plague the individuals and societies involved. In the case of medieval literature, the Hundred Years War saturates the writing from authors of the time. Additionally, historical depictions of war suggest that the strongest, most brutal forces overpower and dominate their inferior opposition. Knights in the Middle Ages gained respect through their battle stories. In this sense, men innately contain biological characteristics providing them with advantages required during these types of physical confrontations. By this definition, patriarchy stems from man proving his ability to dominate and possibly eliminate another; therefore, he gains

superiority and approval from the society to which he returns.<sup>9</sup> Yet, women in these circumstances inevitably remain at home to tend to their households and their families; opportunities to prove themselves as powerful forces fail to be acknowledged. Alfonsa struggles to accept her appointed roles. War claims her ability to choose the partner she envisioned for herself. While her father first condemned her relationship with Gustavo Madero, Alfonsa understands that the only way to re-claim her individual power beyond marrying Gustavo is to acknowledge herself as an independent subject.

In brief, biological construction determines in many ways the societal expectations for male and female gender performance, leading to advantages or disadvantages of each sex. The times in history when war and conflict are most prominent, then, create the most adverse distinction of gender identity and equality. However, gender equality for de Beauvoir, as Toril Moi discusses in her 2010 book reclaiming *The Second Sex*, occurs when freedom is achieved. Moi explains:

The next principle is that freedom, not happiness, must be used as the measuring stick to assess the situation of women. Beauvoir assumes that woman, like man, is a free consciousness. In so far as the status of Other is imposed on her, her situation is unjust and oppressive. But with freedom comes responsibility: when women consent to their own oppression and help to oppress other women, they are to be blamed. ... Abstract equality (the right to vote, for example) is not enough: to turn freedom into reality, women must also have the health, education and money they need to make use of their rights. (3)

Her analysis proves de Beauvoir's conjecture that "[w]omen's actions have never been more than symbolic agitation; they have won only what men have been willing to concede to them; they have taken nothing; they have received" (8). The freedom de Beauvoir refers to remains foundational for feminism. Her political views framed an understanding for future feminist theorists to gain motivation for activism, or the willingness to begin "taking," sacrificing at times their happiness for moral reproach.

In *All the Pretty Horses*, freedom is achieved slowly. If Alfonsa represents war-torn women bound by necessity to perform gender roles in order to compensate for the significant decrease in men able to serve as suitable partners, Alejandra represents a modern generation with a new attitude toward women as more than sex and gender. Toril Moi's 1999 feminist text reflects Alejandra's mindset explaining that "a situation is not an 'external' structure that imposes itself on the individual subject, but rather an irreducible amalgam of the freedom of that subject and the conditions in which that freedom finds itself" (74). Alejandra unknowingly identifies with Moi's position that males and females alike experience the world through what she refers to as "situations." Moi suggests that body and identity (race, age, class, sexual orientation, nationality, and idiosyncratic personal experience) can be viewed as one whole component. Her more contemporary approach offers for women a sense of humanity and freedom instead of restricting them to biological constructs alone. Moi argues that "women's bodies are human as well as female" (8). Thus, when Alejandra ignores Alfonsa's warnings and chooses to pursue intimate encounters with John Grady, she represents an independent situation in which she embraces her femininity as well as her experiences to shape gender performance. Additionally, when John Grady suggests that she return with him to his

home in Texas, Alejandra recognizes the lack of freedom in defining her decision based on a man's request. She ends the relationship because of her continuing connection to Alfonsa's class and gender definitions.

In the end, Alejandra remains John Grady's unattainable object of desire, similar to Beatrice in Dante's *Divine Comedy*. Initially their relationship appears as a traditional "Western romance" with John Grady's first sight of her described in the most vivid and picturesque imagery:

...a young girl came riding down the road and passed them and they ceased talking. She wore english riding boots and jodhpurs and a blue twill hacking jacket and she carried a ridingcrop and the horse she rode was a black Arabian saddlehorse. She'd been riding the horse in the river or in the ciénagas because the horse was wet to its belly and the leather fenders of the saddle were dark at their lower edges and her boots as well. She wore a flatcrowned hat of black felt with a wide brim and her black hair was loose under it and fell halfway to her waist and as she rode past she turned and smiled and touched the brim of the hat with her crop and the vaqueros touched their hatbrims one by one down to the last of those who'd pretended not even to see her as she passed. (94)

McCarthy intended for Alejandra's description to be embedded in his readers' memories. However, the complexities of their circumstances complicate the idealistic portrayal of their bond, and much like Dante toward Beatrice, John Grady desires Alejandra's affection all the more despite resistance from Alejandra, her family, and society.

Dante detailed his real-life encounters with Beatrice in his *Vita Nuova* published in 1295. However, he fictionalized his actual experiences in *Divine Comedy* where Beatrice guides him through Heaven until the point that he reaches God. She cannot continue with him in his metaphysical journey after that point, so they must part ways. In life, Dante was merely a poet while Beatrice lived as a desirable female as a member of an upper class family. Dante courts her only in his mind since their relationship never would have survived in their culture. In the same way, John Grady's courtship with Alejandra ends on similar terms and the archetypal Western romance where the hero "gets the girl" fails because of Alejandra's unwillingness to risk her societal status and comfortable lifestyle.

The female characters in *All the Pretty Horses* both adhere to and defy traditional gender roles defined similarly by Mexican cultural values, which, in turn, can be seen as reflections of the way medieval literature represents gender. Regardless of whether it was intentional on McCarthy's part, Alfonsa mostly compares to Chaucer's Wife of Bath in her need to gain power over men while Alejandra most represents Dante's Beatrice in her desirable but unattainable nature. Nicole Smith, in her article "Representations of Women in Medieval Literature," describes such characters as "confined" or "unconfined" women in respect to medieval literary terms. While her definitions are narrow, the expression portrays the positive and negative associations that stereotyped medieval women based on gender roles. In this sense, Alfonsa and Alejandra would ultimately be considered "unconfined" women based on these standards.

McCarthy may claim that he neglects to understand femininity, but his female characters align with theoretical perspectives of women given their historical and cultural

contexts. Nell Sullivan seems to ignore these aspects and instead suggests an outdated misogynistic attitude leaning toward male dominance and privilege. However, Linda Woodson seems to comprehend the modern attitudes of feminists that women likely have the ability to create their identity free from oppression of patriarchy. McCarthy represents through Alejandra a shift from confined female characters to the future of feminist activism that de Beauvoir encouraged, allowing women the opportunity to prove themselves as powerful forces.

#### IV. “WHEN DEEP SLEEP FALLS UPON MEN”: DREAM VISIONS IN *ALL THE PRETTY HORSES*

Cormac McCarthy undeniably uses dreams as a literary technique to structure the plot in *All the Pretty Horses*. He formulates a dream/wake cycle that not only advances the story but also defines the complexities of the novel. In many ways, dreams lend deeper meaning to John Grady Cole’s reality as he navigates his journey from Texas to Mexico and back. Critic Ched Spellman argues that dreams serve as the “structural framework” for the novel. McCarthy, of course, did not invent this literary trope. He simply added his mark to the extensive history of writers who found fascinating the concept of dreams, including William Langland in *Piers Plowman* and Chaucer in some of his works published during the Middle Ages.

This history, as Edwin Arnold points out in his article, “‘Go to Sleep’: Dreams and Visions in the Border Trilogy,” is apparent in most literature ever written, starting with the Sumerian epic, *Gilgamesh*. Arnold describes examples from the Bible, suggesting that “the belief that dreams provide a different way of seeing and knowing ourselves and the world(s) around us dates back at least to the Assyrian ‘dream books’ and Egyptian, Greek, and Roman concepts that dreams could be means of divine guidance” (36). And with McCarthy’s level of research and experience, he undoubtedly alludes to Biblical references within his works. Arnold points to one important verse that resonates in the *Border Trilogy*: “Elihu tells Job that ‘when deep sleep falls upon men, while they slumber on their beds’ God ‘opens the ears of men, and terrifies them with warnings, that he may turn man aside from his deed, and cut off pride from man; he keeps back his soul from the Pit’ (Job 33.15-18).” The implications of this verse

illuminate much of what John Grady experiences in *All the Pretty Horses*, that his dreams contain warnings to turn from his former life. In most cases, dreams in literature, and specifically in this novel, signify supernatural and spiritual allusions, visions of the past or predictions of the future. They offer a cyclical significance that cannot be ignored.

In her article, “‘The immappable world of our journey’: The Re-emergent Medieval Dream Forms in Cormac McCarthy’s Border Trilogy,” Ashley Lynn Bourne explains the history behind medieval dream-visions as displayed throughout the multitude of literature published during the time period. Bourne emphasizes the spiritual focus of these dreams due to the culture’s Roman Catholic roots, where the dreamer receives and transmits a supernatural message sent by God to the reader. The dreamer, she argues, “wanders through a dream landscape, looking to a variety of signs and oracular figures to provide an explanation for this journey. The narratives of medieval dream-visions are organized to disregard the individual dreamer in favor of the dream-vision and its message” (5-6). The medieval dreamer was responsible for delivering spiritual knowledge for the purpose of the society’s Common Profit, while the postmodern dreamer (specifically, McCarthy’s characters) is responsible for deciphering the dream’s meaning in order to gain personal knowledge and individual growth. She states: “While the medieval dreamers try to understand an immaterial, spiritual world in attempt to make their way to God, McCarthy’s postmodern dreamers must find order in the real world, and make their way through that world with a much less clearly defined goal” (Bourne, Abstract). The exception to her argument is that while John Grady’s goal in *All the Pretty Horses* is not overtly apparent, the reader can assume that he intends to re-discover his identity outside of his life in Texas.

In her analysis, Bourne claims that McCarthy took a postmodern approach to the medieval dream vision form, and while she does not assume that he drew his inspiration from medieval works, she suggests that he translated the dream-vision concept into a modern day application. I would argue that McCarthy's intentions were not merely coincidental and that his familiarity with works like the ones she mentioned informed his interpretation. While the dreamers in McCarthy's *Border Trilogy* require a more introspective and psychoanalytical approach versus the psychosocial context for medieval dreamers, the end goal remains the same. Much like medieval authors, the dream visions in *All the Pretty Horses* and the rest of the *Border Trilogy* inherently lend context to socio-political matters of the culture.

The key to comparison between medieval and postmodern dreamers lies in the intrinsic message the author communicates to readers, whether explicit or allegorical. In the cases of *Piers Plowman* and *House of Fame*, Langland and Chaucer detailed the journeys of wandering pilgrims through veiled language that masks the author's true intentions. The language in the medieval poems appears figurative, all the while the satirical mastery is a ruse for criticizing the shortcomings of figures within the Catholic Church as well as English government. Langland and Chaucer used their poetry, specifically, dream visions, to verbalize and make strong criticism in veiled language of controversial religious and political matters. The characters slip into deep sleep with little to no warning to the reader so the character's dream often goes unnoticed if untrained to recognize the author's technique. Even more complications occur when medieval poets layer a dream within a dream, a tool used to distract audiences from the writer's contrived

and devious motives to confront divisive topics like political scandal or sinful actions of religious figures.<sup>10</sup>

Langland's Prologue to *Piers Plowman* provides prime evidence of the significance of dream visions within medieval poetry—the fact that he led with one such narrative—describing the main character named “Will” in explicit detail as a simple man. The name either allegorically represents a human's free will or refers to a specific person in society named Will—possibly the author speaking about himself—or both. He illustrates himself as “clad...in clothes as I'd become a sheep; / In the habit of a hermit unholy of works / Walked wide in this world, watching for wonders” (l. 2-4). Will recounts “And as I lay lazily looking in the water / I slipped into a slumber, it sounded so pleasant. / There came to me reclining there a most curious dream... / Of human beings of all sorts, the high and the low, / Working and wandering as the world requires” (l. 9-11, 18-19). The pilgrim, while “watching for wonders,” identifies one sinner after another—like “Beadsmen and beggars bustled about / Till both their bellies and their bags were crammed to the brim” (l. 40-41), and condemns them for their actions. Because of Langland's crafty and mischievous methods, the pilgrim cannot be held accountable for judging the unrighteous gluttons, liars, or blasphemers since he is merely expressing what he sees in his vision.

A discrepancy arises when critics of the time period questioned the reliability of both the author and the character within the story to convey the divine message as received by the wandering pilgrim. Mere humans could not be trusted to relay important messages from God because of their imperfect and unreliable nature. Bourne explains:

Dream visions in the medieval period have an inherent dichotomy, which arises from questions about the legitimacy of their source, the explanation of their outcome, and the accuracy of their content. Though dreams today in Western society are regarded primarily as a psychological phenomenon, in medieval culture the main source of disparity grew out of religious beliefs implying that dreams could very easily be either divinely inspired insights or tricks of the Devil. (7)

In the entirety of the poem, particularly the B-version, or the most widely dispersed one, exist eight dream cycles of sleeping and waking, with full descriptive visions in between. As Will experiences the visions, the author's intended religious message becomes clearer through meetings with characters like "Conscience," "Holy Church," and "Grace." Will gains the knowledge and advice on his pilgrimage to discover "Grace" and concludes with a literal as well as a spiritual awakening. However, due to the poem's satirical and allusive qualities, the narrator's integrity understandably remains problematic. How can Will be trusted to remember, interpret correctly, and then record everything he witnessed? And the author, while greatly respected for his poetic abilities, apparently received scrutiny from society for his skepticism of religious matters.

Bourne refers to Chaucer's *The Book of the Duchess* and *House of Fame*, and *Pearl* (author unknown) as other comparable examples of the dream vision framework used during the Middle Ages. These works speak to the culture's fascination with dreams and their attempts at analyzing and interpreting the underlying meanings, which derived from the guidelines and implications imposed by the Catholic Church. Yet, Bourne emphasizes that

[a]s the dream was generally accepted as signifying contact in some form with the supernatural, it is understandable that the individual dreamer—tainted by human sin and ignorance—would be subordinate to the dream itself, a symbol of ultimate understanding. The unenlightened dreamer is representative of the larger audience who were most likely struggling to understand the mysterious will of God through nebulous spiritual signs, like dreams. (6)

Medieval dreamers hoped their visions would somehow lead them closer to discernment of God and incorporeal existence. Often times, they experienced these dream visions as they embarked on pilgrimages that began in the springtime each year when signs of new life and new beginnings inspired and motivated their journeys. As Langland illustrated, medieval pilgrim-dreamers often fell short of their quests for spiritual enlightenment due to their human nature, but their intentions were likely well-intentioned and spiritually motivated.

Bourne's comparison of medieval and postmodern dreamers is convincing, though limited to one aspect of dream visions (literal and spiritual landscapes). However, McCarthy critic Edwin Arnold focuses on the psychoanalytic perspectives modern readers use to interpret postmodern dream visions. For example, Arnold discusses the psychoanalytic and archetypal approaches:

The modern interpretive concepts of dreams, linked most often to the schools of Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung, emphasized psychological as well as physical determinants for dreaming. Both men felt dreams gave access to the unconscious. Freud theorized that they revealed individual,

unacknowledged wishes and desires hidden beneath the surface of everyday knowing; Jung expanded the idea of the psyche from the personal unconscious to the collective unconscious as well, which acted as a storehouse of primordial images common to all people and expressed by shared archetypes. Dreams, each believed, offered evidence from the sleeping world for interpretation in the wakeful state, but Freud disapproved of Jung's "mystical" bent.<sup>11</sup> (36)

Dream visions in the Middle Ages provided the dreamer access to the supernatural, but the dreamer in McCarthy's works accesses his own subconscious mind through dreams. Perhaps it can be argued that the human mind is a form of supernatural existence, an eternal place of knowing and understanding. Arnold believes that "McCarthy's reiterative use of dreams and visions suggests that this narrative device is more than a convenient literary trope; rather it strongly implies the author's conviction that some ultimate source, some godhead perhaps, exists beyond the range of our normal waking knowing" (42). Arnold proves that McCarthy's dreamers in the *Border Trilogy* do inadvertently gain some access to a spiritual power in their visions. Additionally, Arnold and Spellman agree that the border crossing in the novels represents one example of the wake/sleep cycle pattern, where reality and waking occur in America and the crossing into Mexico symbolizes a dream-like world. Arnold suggests "'Go to sleep' could be the primary incantation of the Border Trilogy. Indeed, one of the many possible manifestations of 'borders' in the trilogy is that between this world and that of sleep, between our waking awareness and the mysterious knowing of the dream" (42). And Spellman argues that "[d]reams also provide a more profound narrative element. In addition to using dreams as

textual seams to tie his plot together, McCarthy also fashions his entire narrative in a dreamlike structure. The ‘there and back’ feel of the story is no accident” (168). Mexico, and more specifically, the Hacienda de Nuestra Señora de la Purísima Concepción in *All the Pretty Horses*, represents a type of paradise or dream world for John Grady.

Most scholars, including Edwin Arnold, when analyzing *All the Pretty Horses* and McCarthy’s use of dreams, cannot help but acknowledge the novel’s title and its reference to the popular lullaby, “All the Pretty Little Horses.”<sup>12</sup> The familiar lyrics are undeniably relevant to the novel’s themes and to my analysis:

Hush-a-bye, don’t you cry,  
Go to sleepy, little baby;  
When you wake, you shall have cake,  
And all the pretty little horses.  
Black and bay, dapple and gray,  
Coach and six white horses.  
All the pretty little horses.

Not surprisingly, based on the novel’s title, is the fact that the main character, John Grady Cole, literally dreams of horses. In *All the Pretty Horses*, John Grady has already arrived at prison and has interacted with Blevins, and then he discovers that Blevins murdered a man and was thus incarcerated for his actions (161). Yet, shortly after that conversation, John Grady sleeps soundly and dreams of an idealized vision of horses. His dream is naïve and unrealistic in nature, despite his treacherous and unpredictable circumstances. In the segment, the reader recognizes that because of his circumstances, only bad things can result, but John Grady seems hopeful and unafraid. Later, he dreams again of horses

(280), but his tone changes. His earlier vision of horses describes them “on a high plain where the spring rains had brought up the grass...and they moved all of them in a resonance that was like a music among them...and they ran in that resonance which is the world itself and which cannot be spoken but only praised” (161-62). The horses move about freely and elegantly through fresh grass and wildflowers, symbols of freedom and new life. However, the latter dream the horses “moved gravely among the tilted stones like horses come upon an antique site where some ordering of the world had failed and if anything had been written on the stones the weathers had taken it away again...the order in the horse’s heart was more durable for it was written in a place where no rain could erase it” (280). The cycle emerges between these two dream visions. In the first exist signs of new life, the second represents death—perhaps the “stones” are actually tombstones—or the end of something. But death in dream analysis does not necessarily refer literally to the end of human life.<sup>13</sup> Possibly, in this scenario, death symbolizes the closing of a chapter in John Grady’s life, the end of his old self. The heart has become more durable because of what it has endured, which suggests it can tolerate and withstand what the future holds.

In later scenarios, he dreams more obviously about death: “He slept and when he woke he’d dreamt of the dead standing about in their bones and the dark sockets of their eyes that were indeed without speculation bottomed in the void wherein lay a terrible intelligence common to all but of which none would speak. When he woke, he knew that men had died in that room” (205). Then he interacts with Blevins and asks what it is like to be dead. And Blevins’ response that “it aint like nothin at all” is perpetuated by the fact that John Grady killed a man in prison. He always had sympathy for Blevins, but now he

can empathize with the situation (225). At one point, Alfonsa speaks to John Grady stating that, “The world is quite ruthless in selecting between the dream and the reality, even where we will not. Between the wish and the thing the world lies waiting...” (238). Finally, when Alejandra and John Grady spent the night together in Zacatecas after John Grady’s release from prison, she tells him: “I saw you in a dream. I saw you dead in a dream” (252). Her dream could symbolize anything from the end of their relationship, a prediction of his death (he does die in the third installment of the trilogy, *Cities of the Plain*), or the death of his old self or his past life and the commencement of his enlightened self, suggesting that these dream visions are not simply phantoms in the night but also provide connections to the waking world.

Arnold is concerned with the numerous dream scenarios throughout the *Border Trilogy*, pointing to the fact that McCarthy clearly intended for them at times to be apocalyptic and at other times prophetic. In Arnold’s analysis, dreams do, in many ways, link the three novels to make one cohesive series. *All the Pretty Horses* begins with John Grady’s thoughts at his grandfather’s funeral, “that was not sleeping,” and *Cities of the Plain* wraps up with “you go to sleep now” as Billy drifts off to sleep. The progression of contents in the visions exemplifies the spiritual and personal development the characters experience on their pilgrimages. More specifically, in *All the Pretty Horses*, John Grady’s earlier dreams represent his sixteen-year-old innocence: “[h]is thoughts, however, are directed primarily on Alejandra, and it must be noted that the boy’s dreams at this stage are focused on his own egotistical desires, his personal, physical passions. Nowhere is this clearer than in the grandly written description of John Grady’s thoughts as he rides and commands the great stallion” (43). His early visions include idealized illusions of

horses. Later, Arnold points out, “Blevins now replaces Alejandra in [his] dream, and, in fact, comes to negate her and any ‘luck’ she might bring him” (45). He continues, stating that “John Grady’s last dream in the book is again one of horses, and it reveals, I think, a more mature acceptance of the tragic nature of the world” (46). From Arnold’s perspective, the novels transition from characters experiencing dreams in *All the Pretty Horses* to *Cities of the Plain*,

a magical book, a dream narrative, with Billy Parham as the primary dreamer. It moves of its own pace, is told through memory and apparition, sleep its recurring state. How many times do characters bid one another good night? How often do they think on a world recalled only in dreams? A past life, a dead love, a tender knowledge of loss: these are the sad, lovely moments that stay with one after reading the book. (52)

The growing importance of dreams throughout the series reiterates the notion that McCarthy intentionally dramatized how the characters experienced dream visions for the purpose of providing insight and helping the reader decode the mysticism of the dreamers.<sup>14</sup>

John Grady, as well as the other dreamers in the *Border Trilogy*, comes to know and reflect on their realities as they scavenge through waking and sleeping. These cycles in the novels closely mirror the patterns in medieval literature; the dreamers fall asleep only to encounter the incorporeal world causing them to reflect on the truth and human existence. Bourne points out, citing Jacques Le Goff, that “Medieval dreamers were steeped in Christian oneirology, and though the ‘connection they saw between ecstasy, dreams, and prophecy further compromised the interpretation of dreams in the eyes of the

orthodox church,' Christian leaders recognized the power of dreams because they were—and remain—a common human experience” (4). John Grady grows to fear the power of such visions because eventually he begins to see his own reality, which includes mortality and waking from his dream world.

Critics of dream visions in McCarthy's *Border Trilogy* settle on the supernatural inferences, like literal references to nature and death, for their analyses. Such scholars contextualize dreams in the stories within the three novels, among McCarthy's other works, or look to the Bible for comparison. Yet, the dream sequences in the *Trilogy* demand more attention and require further research into intertextual inspiration. McCarthy's connections to dream visions in medieval literature strengthen the interpretation that he draws from his wide reading to bolster the themes and images that underpin his fiction.

## V. CONCLUSION

The purpose of this thesis is to argue that Cormac McCarthy's works are a culmination of his endless research, knowledge, and life experiences. I am most interested in McCarthy's examination of medieval literature as it pertains to his drafting of *All the Pretty Horses* and the rest of the *Border Trilogy*. The comparisons between themes from medieval texts and McCarthy's novels seem obvious and undeniable. In the first chapter, I explored the concept of pilgrimages as they compare to knightly quests from the Middle Ages and helped distinguish more specifically the differences between the two types of journeys. I established that John Grady's travels more closely represent a pilgrimage, or a physical as well as a metaphysical quest through sacred territory. In the second chapter, I evaluated the complexities of the female characters in *All the Pretty Horses*, but looked more closely at Alfonsa's and Alejandra's roles. I suggested that McCarthy developed women who compare to characters from medieval literature and that their central function progress and complicate the plot. Finally, the third chapter deals with dreams and dream visions in the novel, a common literary technique used during the Middle Ages to reveal more complex themes and characters.

In the first chapter, I explained how John Grady travels as a pilgrim with Lacey Rawlins to Mexico, a place where he finds great satisfaction in working as a ranch hand. Scholars Charles Bailey and Megan Riley McGilchrist agree that their journey represents a medieval knight's quest, similar to King Arthur's quest for the Holy Grail; however, I argue that it follows a pilgrimage theme due to its metaphysical nature. Their pilgrimage to the Hacienda de Nuestra Señora de la Purísima Concepción is place-based because the ranch is reflective of Paradise and is in many ways healing for John Grady. Additionally,

the ranch's location in Mexico assists in its supernatural characteristics because of the country's devoutly Catholic culture and history. Modern day pilgrims visit various shrines in Mexico, but many of them visit the Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe on Tepeyac Hill near Mexico City.

For this chapter, I evaluated various medieval place-based pilgrimages including Chaucer's pilgrimage to Canterbury Cathedral, Margery Kempe's to Jerusalem, and Dante's to Heaven to show that in many ways, McCarthy likely drew inspiration from these works. For these pilgrims, the sites themselves hold religious meaning, but the journey to the holy site is in itself a "relic in its own right," according to Suzanne Yeager. The metaphysical journey, or inner journey, for these pilgrims proves to assist in "constant movement from sin toward heaven" (199), Yoshikawa suggests, and yields psychological and spiritual growth for the characters. Comparably, John Grady experiences such growth by the end of his journey, which causes the reintegration into the community of his hometown to be nearly impossible. He leaves the community again not long after his return from Mexico.

In the second chapter, I reviewed the roles of female characters in McCarthy's *All the Pretty Horses*. Specifically, I looked at each of the women John Grady encounters, including his mom, former girlfriend, the Dueña Alfonsa, and Alejandra, and the significance of their roles in his life. I reflected on the ways in which female characters are central to the novel's plot. Many times in the novel, the women complicate the circumstances and affect the direction of the plot. For example, John Grady's mother as and his former girlfriend, Mary Catherine, leave him feeling a sense of abandonment as they reject him and forsake their relationships with him. The impact of this rejection

clearly leaves him scarred with a sense that he has no reason to stay in Texas, so he ventures with his friend, Lacey Rawlins, into Mexico. He meets Alfonsa and Alejandra there, which wrenches the plot's direction. Because of his relationships with them, he ends up in Saltillo prison, but returns to the ranch after his release to pursue Alejandra. She turns down his marriage proposal and once again he leaves feeling abandoned by women in his life. He returns to Texas having accomplished practically nothing, except for more rejection from women. McCarthy scholar, Nell Sullivan, argued that McCarthy's women are mostly irrelevant in the novel and focuses on the absence of femininity in the context of the male characters, but Linda Woodson conjectures that the opposite is true and that women play a key role. Woodson argues that Alfonsa and Alejandra play antagonistic roles, that the decisions they make entirely change the plot's direction.

Additionally, I compared Alfonsa and Alejandra with characters from medieval literature. Alfonsa's need for power over male characters relates closely to the Wife of Bath in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. Similar to the ways in which the "wyf" manipulates the young knight, Alfonsa manipulates John Grady and tries to convince him, despite his resistance, to end his relationship with Alejandra. Alejandra and John Grady have a relationship similar to courtly romances in medieval literature, and more specifically, Alejandra represents the unattainable love interest like Beatrice in Dante's *Divine Comedy*. Dante sees her in Heaven, much like John Grady first sees Alejandra at the ranch in Mexico. McCarthy's description of Alejandra is lengthy and idealistic, which portrays her as a desirable woman. The importance of the women in *All the Pretty Horses* aligns with the feminist criticism of Simone de Beauvoir and Toril Moi in the sense that

they are not merely objects for the male characters to dominate. Rather, they maintain their own identities throughout the story and assert their feminism and individuality when necessary. They are not merely objects for men's pleasure as the stereotype of patriarchal societies like Europe during the Middle Ages and Mexico in the 1950s would have people believe. Rather, Alfonsa's and Alejandra's relationships with men are more complicated and compelling. While McCarthy claimed that he does not understand women, he seems to have had a profound comprehension of complex female characteristics when he wrote the novel.

In the final chapter, I explored the ways in which McCarthy used dreams as a literary technique to structure the plot of *All the Pretty Horses* and the *Border Trilogy*. I argued that the novel follows a framework similar to works from medieval literature, where dreamers slip in and out of dreams, revealing important messages to readers. In medieval literature, the dreamer focused on the spiritual message received from God, then transmitted it to others for their Common Profit. On the other hand, McCarthy and other postmodern writers used dreams to reveal more about the psychological development of the characters. I provided some examples of these scenarios within *All the Pretty Horses* and related them to examples from medieval works such as Langland's *Piers Plowman* and some of Chaucer's poetry. Critic Ashley Lynn Bourne provides a background of dreams and their importance in the Middle Ages, but also relates it to McCarthy's novels. She explains that McCarthy uses a modern re-working of the literary trope to develop the plot, but suggests that he adheres to many of the traditions of medieval writers. Edwin Arnold develops the theory that McCarthy intended to use dreams to reveal the complexities of John Grady's character, and to develop the

apocalyptic and prophetic scenarios in the novel. I agreed with the scholars that John Grady's dream visions change and mature throughout the *Border Trilogy*, which suggests that McCarthy likely reviewed the history of dreams in the context of literature, including the Bible and medieval works.

My hypotheses proved true throughout my research as I analyzed the themes and literary techniques McCarthy used to structure *All the Pretty Horses* compared to medieval writers and their works. I found through my research that the common thread tying the pieces together for McCarthy and medieval writers stems from the extensive research McCarthy conducted prior to writing his novels, and that he exists today as one of the most complex, multi-faceted, knowledgeable writers of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## NOTES

1. For a more extensive history, refer to the “Chronology of McCarthy’s Life and Works” and the first chapter by Steven Frye, “Histories, Novels, Ideas: Cormac McCarthy and the Art of Philosophy,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Cormac McCarthy*. Additionally, see Carole Juge’s “Biography of Cormac McCarthy” in *Critical Insights: Cormac McCarthy*, George Brosi’s “Cormac McCarthy: A Rare Literary Life,” and the brief biography posted on [CormacMcCarthy.com](http://CormacMcCarthy.com) (the official website of the Cormac McCarthy Society).

2. Erik Hage, in his article that appears in *Cormac McCarthy: A Literary Companion*, comments on intertextual references between McCarthy’s *Blood Meridian* and Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick* as well as William Faulkner’s *As I Lay Dying* (44). Additionally, Sara Spurgeon comments on similarities between McCarthy’s *The Road* and Ernest Hemingway’s *Big Two-Hearted River* in her introduction to *Cormac McCarthy: All the Pretty Horses, No Country for Old Men, The Road* (20).

3. “Relic” in the OED is defined:

In the Christian Church, esp. the Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches: the physical remains (as the body or a part of it) of a saint, martyr, or other deceased holy person, or a thing believed to be sanctified by contact with him or her (such as a personal possession or piece of clothing), preserved as an object of veneration and often enshrined in some ornate receptacle.

In regard to medieval literature, I use this as the primary meaning. However, when discussing McCarthy’s *All the Pretty Horses*, I allude to a secondary definition:

“Something kept as a remembrance, souvenir, or memorial; a historical object relating to

a particular person, place, or thing; a memento.” Because of my argument that McCarthy re-worked medieval themes to adapt for contemporary literature, I suggest that using two definitions for the term is appropriate.

4. In McCarthy’s first draft of *All the Pretty Horses*, he writes “pilgrims” in the margin in the part of the novel when John Grady and Rawlins are about to cross the border into Mexico. McCarthy crossed out the paragraph next to the term, but follows it with:

Where do you reckon that paradise is at? said Rawlins.

John Grady had taken off his hat to let the wind cool his head. You cant tell what’s in a country like that till you’re down there in it.

There’s damn sure a bunch of it, aint there.

John Grady nodded. That’s what I’m here for, he said.

I hear ye, cousin. (SWWC No. 91, Box 46, Folder 9)

The term “pilgrim” appears in a number of the published copies of McCarthy’s other works, including *Blood Meridian*, *The Crossing*, and *Cities of the Plain*. However, it does not appear in *All the Pretty Horses*. Since the term appears in the draft, I argue that McCarthy intended for John Grady’s journey to read as a pilgrimage.

5. I would contend that Rawlins serves a similar purpose for John Grady in *All the Pretty Horses*. He acts as a “spirit guide” and voice of reason at times, warning John Grady against making certain decisions (for example, he warns against pursuing Alejandra). Throughout their journey, they share multiple conversations about the existence of God. For example, Rawlins asks John Grady:

You ever think about dyin?

Yeah. Some. You?

Yeah. Some. You think there's a heaven?

Yeah. Dont you?

I dont know. Yeah. Maybe. You think you can believe in heaven if you dont believe in hell?

I guess you can believe what you want to.

Rawlins nodded. You think about all the stuff that can happen to you, he said. There aint no end to it.

You fixin to get religion on us?

No. Just sometimes I wonder if I wouldnt be better off if I did. (91)

6. Barbara Nolan in her article “‘A Poet Ther Was’: Chaucer’s Voices in the General Prologue to the *Canterbury Tales*” provides background information for the use of this literary technique in the Middle Ages:

Multiple voicing as a mode of argument was essential to later medieval narrative, whether in allegorical debate or exemplary private conversation or interior monologue framed by first- or third-person narration. Indeed, romance and allegory, the two dominant narrative forms of the later Middle Ages, positively required multiple voicing. These essentially dialectical forms typically pose challenging social or moral or spiritual questions to be solved by means of the narrative process. (155)

7. One of the final images representing John Grady’s altered behavior occurs when he attends Abuela’s funeral. He takes a moment of reflection:

He stood hat in hand over the unmarked earth. This woman who had worked for his family fifty years. She had cared for his mother as a baby and she had worked for his family long before his mother was born and she had known and cared for the wild Grady boys who were his mother's uncles and who had all died so long ago and he stood holding his hat and he called her his abuela and said goodbye to her in Spanish and then turned and put on his hat and turned his wet face to the wind and for a moment he held out his hands as if to steady himself or as if to bless the ground there or perhaps as if to slow the world that was rushing away and seemed to care for the old or the young or poor or pale or he or she. Nothing for their struggles, nothing for their names. Nothing for the living or the dead. (301).

Maybe in the past he would not have cared for those people either, but now he seems to care more deeply because of his life experiences, especially because of his pilgrimage to Mexico.

8. In her article, Nell Sullivan references Joan Riviere's (1883-1962) important critical work, "Womanliness as a Masquerade." Riviere is recognized for work devoted to feminist and psychoanalytical criticism.

9. For introductory information regarding the significance of war in medieval literature, see "War and Chivalry" in *A Companion to Medieval English Literature and Culture c. 1350-1500* by Richard W. Kaeuper and Montgomery Bohna.

10. See Note 6.

11. For a more detailed description on the seminal works of critics Carl Jung, Sigmund Freud, and Jacques Derrida, see the entry titled “psychoanalytic criticism” in David Mikics’ book. Additionally, relating more specifically to the topic of dream analysis is Mikics’ entry “Unconscious” as it pertains to the criticism of Freud:

Sigmund Freud explains in his essay “The Unconscious” (1915) that the psyche is filled with active ideas that are not present to the conscious mind. The unconscious, Freud’s great discovery, leaves its mark in dreams, slips of the tongue, neurotic symptoms, and other elusive phenomena that seem to evade our self-awareness. (304)

Mikics also discusses Freud’s most relevant work, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, published in 1900.

12. Mark Busby discusses the novel’s title and its reference to the lullaby “All the Pretty Little Horses” in his 2002 presentation at the Western Literature Association Conference in Tucson, AZ. He provides an excellent background description of the lullaby’s origins and relates it to McCarthy’s *Border Trilogy*, stating, “Obviously, the major tie between the song and the novel derives from the horse imagery. For John Grady Cole, the idealistic dream is represented by the world of horses, an ideal world of peace achieved in dreams, which suggests the connection between the song designed to lull a child to sleep by thinking of horses” (3).

13. For one critical perspective about the interpretation of death in dream visions, see Sigmund Freud’s *Interpretation of Dreams*. His section titled “Dreams of the Death of Persons of Whom the Dreamer is Fond” assists in explaining Alejandra’s dream about John Grady (266-88).

14. Arnold discusses in his article “‘Go to Sleep’: Dreams and Visions in the Border Trilogy” Billy’s dream within a dream in *Cities of the Plain*. He quotes the novel, and states the following:

‘But in dreams we stand in this great democracy of the possible and there we are right pilgrims indeed. There we go forth to meet what we shall meet’ (283-84). The complication provided by the ‘dream-within-a-dream’ structure of the stranger’s tale is heightened by the possibility that Billy may be dreaming the stranger himself and thus also the stranger’s dream and the dream imbedded in that dream. Moreover, since we are reading a work of fiction, and McCarthy, as author, is himself ‘dreaming’ Billy and the stranger and all that occurs between them, we must always be aware that we can never in this world find that primary level of ‘reality’ or ‘fact,’ which is, of course, the whole point of the Epilogue. As Billy notes, ‘A dream inside a dream might not be a dream’ (273); it might, in other words, be a deeper truth than we can otherwise know. (53)

Arnold’s analysis shows that McCarthy intentionally manipulated Billy’s character to provide depth and greater spiritual meaning to the Epilogue and the rest of the novel.

McCarthy possibly emulated the trope used in medieval literature for the same purposes.

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