Masculinity and manliness:

Cormac McCarthy’s cowboys in *All the Pretty Horses*

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Introduction

From infancy we make our way into the socially gendered world guided by the chromosomes that determine our reproductive organs. These biological attributes inform the concept of gender as we act it out; however, biology is only the initial determinant of how a person is male or female. Societal factors influence our preferences and decisions, guiding us toward culturally pervasive models of masculinity and femininity. Linguistic choices in discourse, specifically, exemplify the societal impact on identity construction and gender affiliation.

Masculine identity construction remains in the shadows of sociolinguistics. Feminism’s multifarious movements have successfully drawn attention to the ways females speak in a variety of situations. But we know little of how and why males speak the way they do—we just know that how they speak is different than how women speak most of the time. To this point, any mention of males in studies of gender and language have mentioned them only in their antagonist role, focusing on inequities towards females in what we might consider “men’s ways of speaking.”

In her book Gender and Discourse, Deborah Tannen (1994) explains that “the same linguistic means can be used for different, even opposite, purposes and can have different, even opposite, effects in different contexts” (p.21, emphasis added). Thus, no single linguistic factor can be considered the origination of any one conversational tactic, such as domination or submission. Tannen suggests that context is what determines an utterance’s intent (p.21), so in considering our gendered ways of speaking, we must—for both males and females—diligently remember context in order to determine motive.
In Cormac McCarthy’s award-winning novel *All the Pretty Horses*, the characterization of the young men centers on the masculine ideal of the cowboy. The protagonist, John Grady Cole, and his foil, Jimmy Blevins, both take on what Snyder (2000) calls the “cowboy codes”—unwritten laws that help to define the stoic, male, white, Anglo-American hero of the West. While both characters aim to be seen by others as cowboys, only John Grady succeeds; Jimmy Blevins fails so miserably that his failure diminishes his masculine identity and ultimately leads to his execution. What separates them, in the end, are their linguistic strategies in defining themselves in their roles as cowboys.

In this paper I will analyze the construction of identity through the “cowboy codes” (Snyder, 2000) and the masculine ideals portrayed through the societal ideals for a male hero in the American West. I will then analyze scenes from the novel that I have identified as conversations in which social identity building is evident. I will analyze John Grady Cole’s success and Jimmy Blevins’s failure, and point to specific instances in which following/rejecting the cowboy codes resulted in direct promotion/demotion of their respective masculine identities.

*In defense of literature as a means for critical analysis*

Robin Lakoff defines artistic verisimilitude as “the relationship between the representation and the reality” (Tannen, 1994, p.139). Using literature as a conduit between the fictional world an author creates (the representation) and the real one that the fictional world stems from (the reality), we can avoid the observer’s paradox, as omniscient readers, and we can view the relationship between the two worlds critically by applying the rules of our own reality to the representation. Lakoff defends the use of literary (or “artificial”) dialogue since she and
Tannen analyze scenes from a play to illustrate the linguistic clues in the decline of a marriage (ch.4).

“Great writers are both witnesses to truth and judges of what they see,” states Harvey C. Mansfield (2006), who uses literature as a vehicle for examining the sociological phenomena he calls manliness. “We readers can replicate their [writers’] insights according to our capacities… The evidence literature offers for its insights comes from the intelligent observation of those who produce it” (p.51). As readers, though, we cannot fully trust an author’s interpretation. It is our duty to be critical readers insofar as we view the artistic verisimilitude as a productive relationship between representation and our reality. Taking the literary insights Mansfield mentions and applying them “according to our capacities” may require removing them from context, which Tannen insists, early in her *Gender and Discourse*, is apt to remove intent and meaning from language (p.21, 34). Therefore, it is not only our duty to be critical readers but to be responsible with what we choose to examine in literature so that we do not take things from their contexts.

*The cowboy as a socially constructed masculine role*

Romanticized notions of the American West stem from the realities of “cow punchers” in the 1870s (Dary, 1981, p.275), which turned into the myth of cowboys that proliferated through the 1950s, long past the so-called golden age of cowboys:

The golden age of the real cowboy in the American West was gone as the twentieth century dawned. Yet a cowboy culture was still glowing brightly in the minds of Americans. While this culture still permeates our society, it is not the culture of the real nineteenth century cowboy. Rather it is a blend of fact and imagination… (p.332)
The originality of cowboys is lost by the time McCarthy’s cowboys head out on their own: “If the first pioneers were free to define themselves… the modern western hero, in contrast, is firmly rooted in the history and legends of his forefathers” (Owens, 2000, p.72-3). According to society’s romanticized idea, a cowboy is a male, white, Anglo-American. He is lawless and roams from place to place. He is the hero of the American West. In typical westerns, male roles are formed in contrast to their female counterparts—the well-defined male characteristics give predictability to actions and speech patterns; in essence, we have expectations of our cowboys, but whether we call them assumptions or stereotypes is irrelevant at this point.

**Cowboy codes**


A cowboy was expected to be cheerful even if he was tired or sick. A cowboy was expected to have courage. (Cowards could not be tolerated in the cowboy culture because one coward might endanger the whole outfit in time of danger.) No real cowboy was a complainer. (Complaints were associated with quitting, and no real cowboy was a quitter.) A cowboy always helped a friend, but if the cowhand saw a stranger or even an enemy in distress, the rule said he was to render assistance as quickly as possible. (This mutual-help principle was essential to survival on the open range where everyone helped
one another, especially during roundup time.) A cowboy did the best he could at all times. (p.278)

Dary gives the cowboy codes specifically in terms of life on the range, but in Richard Slatta’s account of American cowboys (1990), Baumann states that the character of the cowboy comes through most in his work:

He is in the main a loyal, long-enduring, hard-working fellow, grit to the backbone, and tough as whip cord; performing his arduous and often dangerous duties, and living his comfortless life, without a word of complaint about the many privations he has to undergo. (as cited in Slatta, 1990, p.47)

The roles the cowboy codes embodied, however, grew archaic (Snyder), and even though McCarthy’s cowboys picked them up for their own uses, the rest of their world did not necessarily abide by these rules.

**Manliness**

Factors of the masculinity of cowboys rest in what Harvey C. Mansfield calls “manliness,” and his book is titled as such (2006). Manliness and masculinity are not to be used interchangeably, since Mansfield describes masculinity as a deconstructed version of manliness, stripped of the “virtue or attraction” that manliness holds (p. 15-16). But manliness suits the topic of cowboys well in the sense that he imparts.

Mansfield argues that manliness is frequently overlooked as a shallow list of “unfailing characteristics of all males… confined to the lowest common denominator” (p.xi). But manliness, he says, “has more than one level” (p.xii). Society has long held the concept of manliness in contempt, essentially since feminist movements have argued against it in favor of a
gender-neutral society. The concept of manliness is not an argument designed to rationalize domination, aggression, violence, or any of the other (mostly negative) associations that may be made with the term, nor is it an antifeminist argument. Mansfield presents manliness at its core: the souls of men, though inherently different from the souls of women, are as valuable and necessary to humanity as the development of women’s souls.

Anachronism

It is at this point that I would like to warn not only myself but also the reader of the risk of anachronistic analysis in this context. Anachronism results from the attempt to employ a concept from one time to a different time, causing chronology to fall inward on itself and logic to lose its usefulness. In defining cowboys, masculinity, manliness, and linguistic phenomena, I risk applying current standards to the past. It is true that McCarthy wrote All the Pretty Horses quite far removed from the time of the cowboy; however, as mentioned before, artistic verisimilitude supports the examination of a text due to its truth as represented in fiction. I am not exempt from establishing guidelines for myself and my readers, though, since I have knowledge of both the present and past at hand.

The risks of anachronism mainly lie in our study of masculinity and manliness and application of the theories to the literature. The story is set after World War II so we must remember that feminist movements have not yet taken place and, thus, we cannot accuse any masculine or manly behavior as defying the gender expectations. They may violate the gender expectations of our time, but they cannot be held to standards that did not yet exist at the time the fictional story takes place.
To simplify, we would do well to remember the context of the text itself (in this case, a fictional world set within a non-fictional time) in order to preserve the artistic verisimilitude and, thus, as Tannen (1994) has said, its intent (p.21, 34).

**Masculinity v. manliness**

We are all affected by manliness, Mansfield (2006) says: “The evidence the social psychologists compile on the differences between the sexes is useful for refuting those who deny sex differences… sciences see manliness at its lowest as aggression” (p.x). There is much to manliness beyond mere aggression, however. Mansfield points to the concept of *thumos*, which was recognized by Plato and Aristotle as the quality of spiritedness… that induces humans, and especially manly men, to risk their lives in order to save their lives… [which is], to say the least, more complicated than the simplistic drives of aggression, domination, and self-preservation to which science tries to reduce manliness…. (p.x-xi)

I agree with Mansfield insofar that *thumos* is neglected in modern studies of masculinity. It is easier to examine what we find primal in humanity through science, and it is easier to exact stereotypes for ready reference through daily life. Perhaps it is *thumos* that prevents masculinity from being equated to manliness, since *thumos* is more of a concept related to sociality than to science. Although science, through no fault of its own, is clearly not concerned with the study of souls, so I find little fault in the reduction of manliness to masculinity within the purposes of the sciences; however, it is because there is more to women and men beyond the sciences that it is worth taking into account what manliness means to us.
In his chapter “Manliness as Stereotype,” Mansfield addresses manliness as a concept of sex and gender and I would like to assert that *thumos* may also be the element that would set apart the broadly developed aggressive masculine stereotype from the definition of manliness Mansfield provides. He considers the problems of stereotypes in “considering those who are unlike to be alike” (p.36). It is generalization and looking at pieces of people instead of wholes, he says, that keeps stereotypes in full force (p.36-37).

Some of McCarthy’s cowboys are more *manly* than they are *masculine*. It helps to have separate terms, in this case, in order to not generalize his cowboys as one democratically whole speech community as we enter into analysis of the construction of male identities in his novel *All the Pretty Horses*.

Synopsis: Cormac McCarthy’s *All the Pretty Horses*

It is just after World War II—the denouement of the real cowboy leaves the myth to roam the minds of young men while the rest of the United States is usurped in booms of population and modernization. John Grady Cole decides to leave Texas after his grandfather dies and his mother sells off the family’s ranch. His parents’ divorce leaves his war-wounded, cancer-stricken father with no rights to stop the sale, so John Grady essentially becomes homeless. He leaves with his best friend, Lacey Rawlins, and they head for Mexico in hope of being hired at a ranch.

En route, a boy who says his name is Jimmy Blevins finds them and begins to tag along. Blevins has what Rawlins says is a horse that is likely to get them shot and Rawlins even suggests trading it (p. 47). Blevins won’t hear of it. As the three boys ride deeper into Mexico, a storm begins to threaten. Blevins becomes terrified and explains a family history of being struck
by lightning. He strips down—“Shirt had brass snaps too,” he says—and while he waits out the storm his horse runs off (p.70).

John Grady finds Blevins, horseless and mostly naked, after the storm. Blevins asks for help getting his horse back. Rawlins doesn’t want anything to do with Blevins, but John Grady decides to help. Their mission goes awry when Blevins becomes hasty and goes against John Grady’s advice for getting the horse. The boys are chased off into early dawn and eventually lose the Mexicans that are chasing them, but Blevins gets separated from John Grady and Rawlins.

John Grady and Rawlins move along, finding work at the Hacienda de Nuestra Señora de la Purísima Concepción. The haciendado takes a special interest in John Grady and his abilities with horses; however, John Grady takes interest in Alejandra, the haciendado’s daughter. Alejandra’s aunt suspects John Grady’s interest and speaks to him about it. She insists that he must consider her niece’s reputation, since “here [in Mexico] a woman’s reputation is all she has” (p.136).

After Alejandra and John Grady establish a love affair, both Rawlins and John Grady are taken to a Mexican prison for horse stealing where they are reunited with Blevins, who is being charged with three counts of murder in addition to horse stealing. After interviewing with the captain, Blevins is executed and John Grady and Rawlins go to the penitentiary. They are beaten, but John Grady purchases a knife and kills a man in the mess hall to prove himself.

One day they are released and they do not know why. John Grady returns to la Purisima (while Rawlins goes home to Texas) and learns that it was Alejandra’s aunt, Dueña Alfonsa, who paid for their release. It was a conditional release, however—Alejandra was forced to agree to never see John Grady again. They meet once more to say their goodbyes, and then John Grady
goes to get back the horses. He takes the Mexican captain captive and gets his, Rawlins’, and Blevins’ horses.

Application: linguistic identity construction in McCarthy’s All the Pretty Horses

In this section I will give instances of dialogue that illustrate the use of cowboy codes. Since McCarthy is not known for his helpful attributions in dialogue, but rather his minimal use of dialogue tags, beats, and other conventions of literary style, I will color code the exchanges so that there can be no confusion about who said what in these instances.

Interactional definition

In order to establish their cowboy roles, McCarthy’s cowboys worked among themselves to self-identify. Tannen (1994) sets forth what she calls “fundamental principles of social interaction,” and they govern all that takes place from cover to cover of All the Pretty Horses:

1. Roles are not given but are created in interaction
2. Context is not given but is constituted by talk and action
3. Nothing that occurs in interaction is the sole doing of one party but is rather a “joint production”
4. Linguistic features (such as interruption, volume of talk, indirectness, and so on) can never be aligned on a one-to-one basis with interactional intentions or meanings, in the sense that a word can be assigned a meaning. (p.10, emphasis added)

From the time that John Grady and Rawlins set out for Mexico, they begin constructing their roles—the mannerisms, the speech, and the actions roll into the contextual construction of
cowboy identities. Once they meet Jimmy Blevins, though, we can note the difference between the genuine identity construction (in John Grady, in particular) and the forced manufactured identity that Blevins provides through his own interactional attempts to define himself.

**Contrasting cowboys**

John Grady Cole is sixteen years old when he runs away to Mexico to live the life of a cowboy. Though he may be new to living the cowboy lifestyle, he fits the description quite well. Throughout the book his speech is thoughtful, if sparse and usually provoked, and he harbors a healthy amount of cowboy politesse. His attitude suits his career choice, as he remains stalwart despite grim circumstances. He takes on the role of cowboy as a way to survive—his option in the face of homelessness. Our protagonist uses the cowboy codes to define his masculinity as he moves through uncertain phases of his life and succeeds, ultimately possessing manliness through his masculinity.

Jimmy Blevins, in the other hand, tries to use the cowboy codes to his advantage when he is out on his own, but fails. Not only does he lose respect from his fellow cowboys in the implementation of his role, he also exaggerates his role to the point that he does not realize that others (for example, the Mexican police) don’t operate under the cowboy codes. His inability to recognize his “rights” from wrongdoing earn his execution.

When the boys initially meet, neither John Grady nor Rawlins is impressed with Blevins (nor are they convinced of his stated identity, as they accuse him of lying about both his age [p.40] and his name [p.44]). They interrogate Blevins about his intents and whether there will be people looking for him, and finally Rawlins suggests that Blevins doesn’t seem to mind the
thought of having the two older boys looking after him. Blevins says he can fend for himself, and shows them the gun he has.

Where’d you get a gun like this? he said.

At the gittin place.

You ever shot it?

Yeah, I shot it.

Can you hit anything with it?

...

You want to throw somethin up I’ll hit it, the kid said.

...

Throw what up? said Rawlins.

Anything you want.

Anything I throw you can hit.

...

You ready, Annie Oakley? (p. 47-49)

Here we see the typical masculine adversative, as Tannen (1994) calls it, implying that males are “more likely to... engage in conflict” (p.40). In the conflict, though, is where negotiation of identity occurs. The conflict between the boys stirs up an internal discord as they attempt to identify themselves in relation to one another—Tannen (1994) calls this the double bind of communication: “Communication is a double bind in the sense that anything we say to honor our similarity violates our difference, and anything we say to honor our difference violates our sameness” (p.29). When Blevins begins to brag about his gunmanship, it’s obvious that he is trying to show the others what makes him stand out as a cowboy, but, at the same time, the exact
same exchange indicates his desire to fit in. He is trying so hard to make the cowboy codes work for him that he fails to see the sociolinguistic line he crosses from credible cowboy to wannabe.

Later in the book Blevins becomes petrified during a thunderstorm, which catalyzes the remainder of the plot. His blatant display of fear does not coalesce with the cowboy codes— “Cowards could not be tolerated in the cowboy culture because one coward might endanger the whole outfit in time of danger” (Dary, 1981, p.278)—so it is only fitting that this incident should outcast him as uncowboylike as well as unmanly.

I done been struck twice how come me to be deaf in this one ear. I’m double bred for death by fire…. 

Well what do you intend to do? 

He looked wildly toward the north. Try and outride it, he said. Only chance I got.

... 

John Grady… came upon Blevins crouched under the roots of a dead cottonwood…. He was naked save for an outsized pair of stained undershorts

What the hell are you doin? said John Grady.

Blevins sat gripping his thin white shoulders in either hand. Just settin here, he said.

(p.68-69)

Not only are Rawlins and John Grady unimpressed by Blevins’s stories of lightning-related deaths in his family, Rawlins is annoyed to the point where he wants to forget Blevins and John Grady takes pity on him—“I reckon we better go find his skinny ass. What if we just went on… I don’t believe I can leave him out here afoot, [John Grady] said” (p.71). Blevins is a coward and, therefore, not helpful; worse, he is likely to get them into trouble.
How Blevins fails

Blevins has lost Rawlins’ and John Grady’s respect cowboy-to-cowboy, and after his absurd showcase of fear the identity he has built in relation to the others begins to diminish. The shift in their relations necessitates a shift in the discourse between the boys. According to Lakoff’s four principles of communicative competence—distance, deference, camaraderie, and clarity—appropriate interaction is determined mostly through power, whether the issue is intrusiveness, politeness, openness, or relatedness (as cited in Tannen, 1994, p.140-141).

“Power,” Kiesling (1997) says in his article ‘Power and the Language of Men,’ “is usually cited as the most important factor when discussing the ways in which men’s identities are constructed” (p.65). The conflict is a power struggle as they build their identities, but now Blevins has ultimately lost face with the others.

After John Grady and Rawlins are arrested they are reunited with Blevins in the Mexican prison and learn that the mission for his horse has spawned new trouble. “The assassin Blevins,” as the Mexican police are calling him, is charged with the murder of three men. After running off with him horse, we learn, Blevins went back to retrieve his pistol and, in so doing, three men were killed. When John Grady and Rawlins question him to learn his deeds in the prison, he defends himself: “Aint done nothing that nobody else wouldnt of” (p.158). The problem here is that he has done something that most cowboys wouldn’t have done just to retrieve material possessions. Blevins has failed with the cowboy codes despite his defensiveness, bragging, poorly woven lies, and despite how hard he has tried to construct his identity to put him amongst friends he never had.
How John Grady succeeds

John Grady Cole shows tremendous restraint in difficult situations throughout the book and even exercises his right to silence as “speech.” When he does speak his words are few and to the point. When he is interviewed by the Mexican police, for example, he could have gotten angry and defensive like Blevins did or cowered and gotten frustrated like Rawlins did, but he remained strong even as he was accused of lying. He constructs his manliness in opposition of the threats provided by the captain in their interaction:

You have the opportunity to tell the truth here. Here. In three days you will go to Saltillo and then you will no have this opportunity. It will be gone. Then the truth will be in other hands. You see. We can make the truth here. Or we can lose it….

There aint but one truth, said John Grady. The truth is what happened. It aint what come out of somebody’s mouth. (p.168)

John Grady’s honesty stems back to his adherence to the cowboy codes. It is dangerous, in this case, for him to tell the truth when the police want to know a different truth, but he does it anyway. John Grady continually redefines himself as necessary, in relation to the others around him, to survive.

When John Grady is in prison, Rawlins gets hurt badly in a fight and is taken away. Trying to learn what happened to him, John Grady learns about the business within the prison and how he could get a knife to keep from ending up like Rawlins. Pérez, the man who runs the prison business, tells John Grady, “The world wants to know if you have cojones. If you are brave…. Then it can decide your price” (p.193). At this point, John Grady encounters what Mansfield (2006) illustrates as thumos (p.x-xi)—he puts his life on the line to save his life. Once he buys the knife it is not long till he has to use it because everyone in the prison knows who is
armed. He must fight a man in the mess hall. Pérez eluded to this earlier in their conversation about the business when John Grady says he hasn’t committed any crimes, Pérez says “Perhaps not yet” (p.193). And in the knife fight, John Grady kills his opponent (p.201). *Thumos* has been drawn into John Grady’s definition of masculinity, transforming it to manliness and putting him on par with the cowboys he was strived to be like.

At the end of the book, John Grady returns to Texas with his, Rawlins’s, and Blevins’s horses. After failing to locate Blevins’s parents (most likely because the kid’s name was not Jimmy Blevins, as he had claimed), John Grady visits Rawlins at his parents’ home:

> Have you been to see your mama? said Rawlins.
> No.
> You knew your daddy died.
> Yeah. I guess I knew that.
> …
> What are you goin to do?
> Head out.
> Where to?
> I dont know.
>
> You could stay here at the house.
> I think I’m goin to move on.
> This is still good country.

Yeah. I know it is. But it aint my country. (p. 298-99)
Here, too, we can call to mind the concept of manliness—Rawlins is the first to bring up parents and even seems to act like a parent by inquiring as to John Grady’s next move. John Grady insists upon roaming, as he has no roots and wants no ties to his former life, and feels he needs to find his “country.”

By the end of the story, John Grady’s connections to the cowboy codes are deeply ingrained in him, so much so that even in discourse with his closest friend he does not abandon his acquired identity. In fact, he holds true to his cowboy persona—despite Rawlins giving it up when he was the one John Grady defined himself with in the beginning—and continues to use his clipped responses to endure the situation, help his friend, and show courage like a cowboy should (as cited in Slatta, 1990, p.47 and Davy, 1981, p.278).

Conclusion

It all returns to Tannen’s assertion about meaning depending on context and communicative competence (p.21, 140). I am forced to ask questions like, if Blevins hadn’t come upon John Grady and Rawlins, would that have changed the series of events? would he still have been executed? would the youth have found his way home? There is no way to know because we must treat the literature like a past that cannot be changed.

Perhaps we can blame Jimmy Blevins’s failure on John Grady—after all, Blevins believed that he needed to act a certain way in order to fit in. Power is embodied within action, Kiesling (1997) says, and John Grady and Rawlins held the power as older, more experienced, more believable cowboys, leaving Blevins to feel like he had to try to fit in: “people believe that they should perform an action because of another action… It must be salient to the situation; the people being acted on must believe in it” (p.67). While Kiesling says that people “feel that not
acting in [certain] ways would have serious consequences” (p.67), for Blevins it was that he *did* act to fit the situation that proved to hold the deadliest consequences.

Context is clearly the most important factor to note when considering the failure and success of the characters in *All the Pretty Horses*, for as Deborah Tannen (1994) says, “The interpretation of a given utterance and the likely response to it, depends on the setting, on individuals’ status and their relationship to each other, and also on the linguistic conventions that are ritualized in the cultural context” (p. 34). The use and misuse of the cowboy codes exemplifies the necessary aspect of constructing identities, specifically masculine identities, within a community where individuals are defined in relation to the group and in context of situations and experience. “[G]ender,” then, as Judith Butler argues, “is not an essence but a performance independent of biological sex, ‘a stylized repetition of acts’ including ‘bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds’ that ‘constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self’” (as cited in Sullivan, 2000, emphasis added). The performance of masculine identities by McCarthy’s cowboys distinguish them as either just masculine, and a failed cowboy (like Blevins), or manly and a successful cowboy (like John Grady).
References

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