Masculinity and Manliness: Cormac McCarthy’s cowboys in *All the Pretty Horses*

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SPOILER ALERT

◊ I might ruin the book for you... or I might entice you to read it for all its literary beauty!
◊ There is no way to ruin the movie, however... I beg you to read the book instead/before you watch the movie.
◊ If you want to read a great book...

Focus:

- Gender as a socially-constructed idea
- The “cowboy” as a socially-constructed masculine role
- Examining speech in the novel as it adheres/diverts from the “cowboy codes”
- Discovering how two different characters construct their masculine identities in the story
What is a cowboy?

◊ According to society’s romanticized idea...

- Male
- White, “Anglo”
- American
- Lawless rogue
- Roamer (no “roots”)
- Hero of the American West
What are “cowboy codes”?

◊ Actions are valued more than words
◊ Silence is an acceptable form of communication
◊ Manliness is next to Godliness
◊ Respect and loyalty are key
◊ “Do what you gotta do.”
Manliness

◇ Should not be used interchangeably with masculinity
◇ Not an argument to rationalize domination, aggression, violence or other (mostly negative) associations with the term
◇ Not an antifeminist argument
Masculine vs. Manly

◊ Dialogues in the book define both elements

◊ But who is merely masculine and who steps up to be manly?
Cowboy codes and masculinity

◊ John Grady Cole (JGC) uses the cowboy codes to define his masculinity as he moves through uncertain phases of his life and succeeds.

◊ Jimmy Blevins (JB) tries to use the cowboy codes to his advantage when he is out on his own, but fails (and is ultimately executed for trying).
The protagonist and his foil

◊ John Grady Cole
  • 16 years-old
  • Leaves home after mom sells ranch
  • Brings best friend
  • Is the epitome of a “cowboy”

◊ Jimmy Blevins
  • Not 16 years-old (lies about his age)
  • Finds JGC and friend on trail in S. Texas
  • Talks a lot
  • Can’t “walk the walk”
How do they speak?

◊ **John Grady Cole**
  - Thoughtful speech
  - Says few words, but they are meaningful
  - Cowboy politesse
  - Silence speaks for him
  - Stalwart despite grim circumstances

◊ **Jimmy Blevins**
  - Speaks before thinking
  - Often says too much
  - Defensive
  - Brags
  - Shows fear
A scene with Jimmy Blevins

From pages 47-49. Jimmy has met up with JGC and his friend Rawlins on the trail towards Mexico. They sit to camp and eat.

Rawlins implies that Jimmy cannot take care of himself and this is why Jimmy has latched onto him and JGC.
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?
How Jimmy Blevins fails

◊ Tries to use cowboy codes, but they work against him.
◊ Rudeness - isolates himself from the only two people around him for miles
◊ Bragging - initiates a challenge and, even though he fulfills his promise, does not make friends in the deal
Interview with Mexican police

◊ Both interviewed and accused of lying
◊ Both use cowboy codes as strategy

◊ John Grady Cole
  • Says few words, exercises right to silence
  • Remains strong

◊ Jimmy Blevins
  • Speaks before thinking
  • Defensive
  • Shows fear
You have the opportunity to tell the truth here. Here. In three days you will go to Saltillo and then you will not 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 Cole. The truth is what happened. It aint what come out of somebody’s mouth.
Survival is manly

◊ JGC survives the Mexican prison.
◊ Jimmy Blevins does not.
◊ JGC has to defend Rawlins in a knife fight.)
A scene with John Grady Cole

◊ From pages 298-299. After the climax, JGC works to “tie up loose ends,” so to speak, and returns to Rawlins’ home to give back his horse.
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 don't 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 ain't my country.
How John Grady Cole succeeds

◊ He *lives* the cowboy codes.
◊ Insistence on roaming - no roots, no ties to his former life; needs to find “his country”
◊ Unassuming - postures his language in relation to his friend’s to be an equal
Does one manly success determine another’s failure?

◊ John Grady Cole
- Masculine for sure
- Very manly
- True cowboy
- Held the power, set the standard, and his success is emphasized by the failures of others.

◊ Jimmy Blevins
- Just masculine
- Not manly
- Not a true cowboy despite his use of cowboy codes
- Felt he had to fit in, tried to be like JGC, and met the ultimate failure.
References