Title

Displacement and Reinvention: Cowboy Masculinity in Cormac McCarthy's *All the Pretty Horses*

Name

Qin Rong

Abstract

This paper argues that *All the Pretty Horses* (1992) rearticulates the cowboy myth as a form of strategic masculinity in response to late twentieth-century anxieties surrounding male identity. Rather than dismantling hegemonic gender norms, Cormac McCarthy reconfigures them through the figure of John Grady Cole, who embodies both traditional cowboy virtues and emotional vulnerability. Drawing on theory of masculinity by Hamilton Carroll, the paper examines how the novel reframes masculine authority through affective suffering and ethical introspection. Grady's marginal status, romantic failure, and moral struggle do not undermine his masculinity, instead, they enable its cultural reinvestment. This softened heroic model preserves the ideological function of the cowboy while adapting it to contemporary narratives of male crisis and resilience. Ultimately, the novel functions as a cultural mechanism through which masculinity survives not by rupture, but through affective reinvention.

Keyword: Cowboy, Strategic Masculinity, Soft Heroic Mythos

Cormac McCarthy's *All the Pretty Horses* (1992) tells the story of sixteen-year-old John Grady Cole, who leaves Texas after the loss of his family ranch and rides into Mexico with his friend, Lacey Rawlins, in pursuit of the cowboy life. Grady's journey is not merely a geographical escape, but a cultural and existential quest to inhabit the myth of the cowboy, a figure long associated with rugged individualism, stoic masculinity, and moral clarity. However, this ideal proves increasingly out of step with the historical moment in which Grady lives. Set in the 1950s, a time when the social and economic structures that once sustained cowboy life were rapidly disappearing, the novel frames Grady's pursuit as an anachronistic longing for a way of life that no longer exists.

Many critics have focused on this tension between myth and history, interpreting the novel as a lament for a lost era. Sarah Gleeson-White, for instance, argues that the narrative "laments a way of life that has become obsolete or perhaps never was" (25), while Dianne C. Luce emphasizes that Grady inhabits "the world of the 1950s and the eradication of the kind of life he has so ardently sought" (163). For both critics, the cowboy dream functions not as a viable future but as a fading cultural memory, one that continues to shape masculine identity even as its material foundations erode.

While some critics read *All the Pretty Horses* as a nostalgic elegy for a disappearing world, others have interpreted the novel as a historically grounded response to late twentieth-century anxieties surrounding gender, identity, and cultural authority. Steven Frye, for example, situates the Border Trilogy[1] within the broader moral and political shifts of the postwar era, including Cold War uncertainty, the emergence of identity politics, and the decline of traditional social structures. Rather than merely mourning a lost frontier, the novel becomes, in Frye's view, "a meditation on the distinctive historical circumstances of the late twentieth century" (95). Meg King extends this historicist reading by linking the novel to the socioeconomic upheavals of post-Fordist America, particularly the disempowerment of white men and the cultural backlash against feminist progress. She contends that *All the Pretty Horses* enacts a response to the perceived emasculation of white men "resulting from social and economic developments more closely associated with the late 20th century"[2] (70). For King, the novel attempts to reclaim the male body as a site of national belonging by invoking images of manual labor, racial hierarchy, and frontier autonomy. Rather than dismantling the cowboy myth, McCarthy's narrative repurposes it as a vehicle for cultural consolidation, re-centering white masculinity through nostalgia and corporeal endurance.

While King rightly identifies the compensatory logic underlying McCarthy's invocation of cowboy masculinity, suggesting that the novel nostalgically restores traditional masculine authority in response to its perceived erosion. This essay builds on her insights by shifting the analytical emphasis from recovery to reconfiguration. Instead of viewing *All the Pretty Horses* merely as a cultural defense of embattled masculinity, this essay argues that the novel performs a strategic rearticulation of masculinity itself. Through the figure of John Grady Cole, McCarthy reimagines masculine identity not as something lost and recovered, but as something redefined through vulnerability, ethical ambiguity, and emotional negotiation.

This reimagination is not arbitrary but grounded in the novel's dual liminality[3], both historical and developmental, which together render McCarthy's reconstruction of masculinity culturally plausible. Set in the 1950s, *All the Pretty Horses* occupies a historical threshold between the vanishing pastoral and ranching world and the emergent realities of modern capitalist. In this novel, the references to "number one I C Clark that come in last year was a big well" and "the ruins of an old ranch" both register this transformation, which displaces the material

foundations of the cowboy ethos and compels new forms of masculine self-definition (McCarthy 12; 24). Within this transitional landscape, change becomes possible. At the same time, John Grady's youth[4] situates him at a personal threshold between childhood and adulthood, dependence and autonomy, innocence and moral responsibility. Grady's youth locates him in a space of formation rather completion. In this formative sense, Grady's age is not merely a marker of immaturity but the narrative mechanism through which the novel rearticulates masculinity at the very moment when its cultural foundation is collapsing. Within this doubled framework of temporal and personal transition, masculinity appears not as a fixed inheritance but as a mutable formation responsive to historical and emotional change.

To articulate this strategic reconfiguration of masculinity, this essay draws on Hamilton Carroll's theory of lability as developed in *Affirmative Reaction: New Formations of White Masculinity*. Carroll challenges the common assumption that the privilege of white masculinity lies in its invisibility, universality, or normative status. Instead, he argues that "the true privilege of white masculinity—and its defining strategy—is not to be unmarked, universal, or invisible, but to be mobile and mutable; it is not so much the unmarked status of white masculinity that ensures privilege, but its lability" (9-10). This dynamic understanding of masculinity allows for the analysis of male identity not as a fixed category, but as a set of adaptable performances responsive to historical and cultural pressures. Carroll's notion of lability offers a productive lens through which to understand the masculinity enacted by John Grady Cole. As a young man navigating emotional trauma, cultural displacement, and romantic loss, Grady embodies a masculinity that is neither wholly traditional nor entirely ruptured from the past. He performs determination, resilience, and physical mastery, hallmarks of the cowboy archetype, but also demonstrates emotional vulnerability, ethical uncertainty, and affective[5] openness. His masculinity is thus not fixed or monolithic, but enacted in tension and transition, shifting across geographic, moral, and emotional registers. Seen through Carroll's concept of lability, *All the Pretty Horses* does not merely depict a masculinity in crisis, but one in motion, strategically reformulated to survive in a world where older certainties no longer hold. Importantly, this reformulation does not signify a departure from masculinity itself. Rather, it marks the endurance of masculine identity through transformation, revealing how masculinity maintains cultural legibility precisely by adapting to new affective and ethical demands.

Building on this theoretical framework, this essay therefore treats masculinity not as a fixed essence but as a historically mutable formation that can rearticulate itself without ceasing to be masculine. It argues that *All the Pretty Horses* constructs cowboy masculinity as a form of strategic masculinity, one that reconfigures traditional gender ideals through emotional vulnerability and ethical complexity. Rather than abandoning masculine authority, the novel adapts it to the cultural conditions of the 1990s[6] by transforming the cowboy myth into a flexible, affective mode of gendered power. In order to show this, this essay will first examine the disintegration of familial and cultural structures and its role in generating a white masculine identity crisis, and then will analyze the novel's narrative practices, its depictions of violence, emotion, and language, as attempts to reconstruct masculine subjectivity. The final arguments will be that these affective and ethical strategies, while seemingly progressive, ultimately serve to reauthorize male centrality in a changing cultural landscape.

The Failure of Inherited Masculinity

From the outset of *All the Pretty Horses*, Cormac McCarthy presents John Grady Cole not as a triumphant heir to the cowboy tradition but as a figure already estranged from the familial, economic, and cultural foundations that would have sustained such an identity. His journey to Mexico is not an act of adolescent rebellion but a structural consequence of disinheritance: the death of his grandfather, the sale of the family ranch, the impotence of his father and the collapse of patriarchal continuity together all deprive him of a legible place within traditional gender scripts. This emotional and material rupture signals the broader collapse of hegemonic masculinity's institutional supports, marking both a personal crisis for Grady and a cultural moment in which conventional forms of manhood can no longer be stably inherited.

The novel opens with a depiction of Grady's physical and psychological dislocation, triggered by a complex intersection of familial and social forces. With the death of his grandfather, Grady loses not only a beloved patriarch but also a model of cowboy masculinity. His grandfather, who "never give up" (13), becomes a specter of lost masculine authority, one whose ideals remain vivid in Grady's imagination but unviable in his lived experience. This familial rupture is compounded by his mother's decision to sell the family ranch, a symbolic and material severing of the intergenerational cowboy legacy. Grady's plaintive question "Why couldnt you lease me the ranch? ... I'd give you all the money. You could do whatever you wanted" (15-16) captures the reduction of kinship to contract, and the displacement of masculine honor by transactional rationality.

Adding to this sense of familial erosion is the figure of Grady's father, whose weary skepticism about the survival of the old moral and economic order and emotional withdrawal from a reality he recognizes but cannot change reflect the exhaustion of the masculine ideal itself. Unlike Grady's grandfather, whose stoic perseverance embodies the lost integrity of the cowboy code, or Grady's mother, whose determination to sell the ranch signals a decisive break from it, Grady's father appears much more like an incapacitated witness. He recognizes the shifting conditions of the modern world yet remains emotionally tethered to the past. His pessimistic observation that "the country would never be the same. People dont feel safe no more. We're like the Comanches was two hundred years ago. We dont know what's goin to show up here come daylight. We dont even know what color they'll be" (26) exposes both his lucidity and his paralysis that he sees the change coming but cannot adapt to it. Unable to adapt himself, he can offer no guidance to his son, for the authority to instruct has vanished along with the world that once sanctioned it. Grady's masculinity is thus undercut by the very institutions like family, landownership, and inheritance that once legitimized it. McCarthy thus subtly captures the erosion of familial intimacy under the pressures of socio-economic change.

Beyond the family sphere, McCarthy situates Grady within a broader historical moment marked by the decline of the traditional frontier and the rise of capitalist modernity, which together dismantle the symbolic and material foundations of cowboy masculinity. McCarthy dramatizes this transformation, the unraveling of agrarian masculinity under modern capitalist pressures, through a series of symbolic juxtapositions. Early in the novel, as Grady stands alone on the prairie, he senses the approach of a train: "He could feel it under his feet. It came boring out of the east" (4). The image is freighted with allegorical meaning. The train is not just a machine, it is a harbinger of historical change, evoking what Leo Marx terms *the machine in the garden.*[7] The word "boring"

connotes force and violent penetration, casting the train as a disruptive agent that drills through the landscape. Meanwhile, the phrase “out of the east” reinforces its symbolic function, with the East traditionally representing modern, urban, and capitalist America in contrast to the mythic West. The train’s arrival, though not yet visible, is already materially registered through Grady’s body, suggesting that he intuitively apprehends the encroachment of modernity, yet remains paralyzed in the face of it. McCarthy here locates the decline of the cowboy ethos within a larger narrative of cultural transformation: the garden of the West is no longer pastoral but perforated.

This moment signals that the forces of historical transformation, like the approaching train, are impersonal, unstoppable, and already in motion, reshaping the world regardless of individual will. McCarthy continues to dramatize this larger structural shift through everyday encounters, where Grady’s cowboy identity increasingly clashes with a modernizing society that no longer recognizes its symbolic value. A particularly telling moment occurs when Grady carries his saddle to the street and meets a man driving a Model A Ford. What for Grady is a sacred emblem of his identity is, for Ford driver, reduced to a useless “hull” (15), a hollow shell emptied of meaning. In addition to the truck driver’s sardonic remark, the lawyer representing Grady’s mother articulates a similar ideological shift when he quips, “not everybody thinks that life on a cattle ranch in west Texas is the second best thing to dyin and goin to heaven” (18). This comment not only ridicules the nostalgic idealization of rural cowboy life but also highlights the overarching cultural movement away from the values traditionally associated with cowboy ideal.

These familial, economic, and cultural ruptures leave Grady unmoored from the structures that once conferred masculine legitimacy. His turn to Mexico is not impulsive but is driven by a belief, however idealized, that south of the border, the cowboy code may still endure uncorrupted. As scholars have noted, Mexico functions symbolically as an extension of the 19th-century American West. Gleeson-White argues that “Mexico becomes a substitute for the unscouted Territory of the Old West, a supposedly empty—yet nonetheless dangerous—space upon which Manifest Destiny could make its ‘scouring’ mark, and it is thus the antithesis of the heavily fenced modern West” (28). Similarly, Susan Savage Lee notes that “Mexico appears to him [John Grady] as a place where civilization has not yet taken effect” (160). Upon arriving in Mexico, especially on the ranch where he and Rawlins find work, they do not attract attention as foreign outsiders, rather, their identity is rendered secondary to their association with cowboy labor. As McCarthy notes, “the vaqueros asked them [John Grady and Lacey Rawlins] many questions about America and all the questions were about horses and cattle and none about them” (98). This encounter reveals that, in this Mexican ranch, cowboy identity is not a symbolic pose or nostalgic construct, but a lived, material condition grounded in shared occupational knowledge and practical engagement with pastoral labor.

Grady’s journey to Mexico thus marks more than a change of scenery. It represents a deliberate, if idealistic, attempt to reclaim a masculine identity rendered untenable by the socio-economic and cultural transformations of mid-century America. If the United States has become inhospitable to the cowboy ideal which was overrun by capitalist logics, technological advancement, and shifting gender expectations, then Mexico emerges in Grady’s imagination as a site where that ideal might still be materially enacted. In this sense, the first movement of the novel dramatizes the emotional and historical conditions that necessitate a rearticulation of cowboy masculinity. Grady’s dispossession is not only a personal loss but a structural disenfranchisement

that catalyzes his search for a new ground.

Affective Rearticulation: Violence, Language, and the Ethics of Vulnerability

While the preceding section traces the erosion of traditional masculine structures, McCarthy resists the impulse to discard the cowboy myth altogether. Instead, he reconfigures it through the character of John Grady Cole, infusing the figure with new dimensions of marginality and emotional complexity. While John Grady embodies conventional attributes such as perseverance, courage, an intimate connection with the natural world, and a high degree of technical proficiency, his story consistently challenges the stability of these masculine ideals. Far from portraying masculinity as fixed or monolithic, McCarthy allows moments of hesitation, vulnerability, and ethical uncertainty to reveal the fragility and contingency of cowboy identity. This strategic reimagining of masculinity unfolds across multiple narrative sites. It is most notably in Grady's ambivalence toward violence, his increasing reliance on emotional expression, and his romantic vulnerability, each of which destabilizes traditional paradigms of male strength and authority.

A central site in which this ambivalence manifests is Grady's experience of violence. Violence is a crucial aspect of cowboy culture during the 19th century and is closely tied to ideas of masculinity. Jacqueline M. Moore has described a "culture of honor" in Texas in the late 19th century, in which masculine identity is bound to a man's ability to exert his will over others, often through physical force, a public performance of strength and dominance. Within this code, one's social standing depends on the capacity to respond to insult or threat with immediate retaliation; failure to do so would signal weakness and invite social marginalization (Moore 31). Thus, the readiness to strike back becomes a defining trait of masculine honor. This traditional code of honor continues to inform Grady's understanding of manhood. Though the novel is set in the mid-20th century, Grady has inherited a conception of masculinity rooted in this earlier cultural logic, one that equates courage with physical dominance and moral worth with combative capacity. This belief system finds a brutal corollary in the Mexican prison where Grady is incarcerated. The prison is governed not by legal or ethical norms, but by an informal economy of power, where masculinity is constantly measured and negotiated through acts of violence. It is in this setting that Grady's internalized ideals are put to the test.

While in Mexican prison, Grady faces growing scrutiny and surveillance from others who seek to determine "Where did [he] learn to fight?" and "if [he] ha[s] cojones. If [he is] brave," so that they can "decide [his] price" (198). Exposed to this lethal standard repeatedly, Grady gradually comes to understand that he must exhibit physical strength and courage to be regarded as a man. As a result, he ultimately kills his opponent, who instigates a physical altercation with him. After killing the man, Grady's reaction embodies both collapse and renewal. Initially, "in his despair he felt well up in him a surge of sorrow like a child beginning to cry" (208), but this emotional rupture soon gives way to a sense of "new life" (208). This emotional change suggests a temporary reconciliation with the prison's brutal logic, as if Grady has internalized the idea that violence is necessary for survival and masculine recognition. This apparent acceptance reflects what James W. Messerschmidt observes in *Men, Masculinities, and Crime* that masculinity often demands physical validation

through acts of violence. As Messerschmidt writes, “[one’s] physical ability to fight when provoked convinced him of his own eminent masculine self-worth” (205). Grady’s willingness to fight and kill thus momentarily restores his standing in a world governed by lethal codes. Yet McCarthy makes clear that this restoration is neither complete nor enduring. Upon his return to the United States, Grady confesses to a judge that “when I was in the penitentiary down there I killed a boy” and “it keeps botherin me” (299). The act that once seemed to inaugurate a new life now haunts him as a source of unresolved guilt and moral dislocation. This inward turn signals the limits of violence as a stable foundation for masculine identity. In McCarthy’s vision, physical strength may offer momentary survival, but it cannot sustain moral or emotional coherence. It is precisely this insufficiency that opens a space for alternative modes of masculine performance.

In contrast to the fleeting and morally unstable affirmation offered by violence, emotionally charged dialogue and candid verbal expression emerge in the novel as key sites for the performance of an alternative masculinity. Through these verbal acts, McCarthy deliberately dismantles the myth of the silent cowboy and reconstructs masculine identity as one grounded in emotional articulation and ethical responsiveness. Grady and Rawlins, unlike the archetypal Western heroes who assert identity through stoicism and dominance, are granted narrative space to speak, feel, and reflect. In pivotal moments, they affirm their sense of self, express loyalty, and resist injustice through verbal articulation. These instances of dialogue underscore a crucial shift that masculinity, rather than being an innate or fixed essence, is portrayed as a social identity that is continually constructed and reshaped through discursive practice. For example, when Rawlins says, “I wouldnt leave you and you wouldnt leave me. That aint no argument” (81), he articulates a form of moral loyalty that transcends individual interest and offers Grady a verbal model of emotional ethics. Later in the novel, when Rawlins questions whether Grady would have escaped alone if given the chance, Grady responds, “I wouldnt of left you” (216), functions as a clear and affective affirmation that breaks with the cowboy’s traditional code of silence. This emotionally charged declaration not only reinforces their bond but also illustrates a more expressive, relational enactment of masculinity.

It is noteworthy that McCarthy allows Grady not only to break the traditional code of cowboy silence but also to articulate his emotional commitments with a degree of openness and moral urgency rarely afforded to Western protagonists. This narrative choice challenges and reconfigures the conventional model of stoic masculinity by presenting emotional expressiveness as a legitimate and even valorized mode of male identity. Rather than asserting masculinity through physical dominance, Grady affirms it through speech acts that convey loyalty, responsibility, and ethical awareness. In this way, McCarthy transforms language into a key mechanism for masculine self-definition. Grady’s capacity to speak and be heard marks a departure from the logic of bodily control and situates masculinity within a discursive and relational framework. The shift from silence to speech is not merely stylistic, it reflects a broader cultural response to the instability of male identity and underscores the performative, constructed, and contingent nature of masculinity itself.

While verbal expression within male friendship signals a shift away from stoic masculinity, McCarthy extends this emotional rearticulation into the realm of heterosexual intimacy, particularly through Grady’s relationship with Alejandra. From their first encounter, it is Alejandra who demonstrates emotional and physical agency, inviting Grady to ride with her, orchestrating their meetings, and ultimately deciding their fate by

refusing to accompany him. This inversion of romantic conventions in which the male figure typically rescues or possesses the woman grants Alejandra narrative control while positioning Grady as emotionally receptive rather than assertively dominant. His passivity throughout the relationship, despite deep emotional investment, reflects a broader cultural revision of masculinity: not as mastery or conquest, but as vulnerability and responsiveness. After Alejandra ultimately refuses to elope with him and thus brings their relationship to an end, Grady is left devastated and powerless. Yet his heartbreak, far from signaling emasculation, becomes a crucible for ethical growth. He neither retaliates nor reclaims control, but instead internalizes his pain and carries it forward, allowing it to shape a new, affectively attuned version of selfhood. This reorientation complicates any attempt to view him as a traditional cowboy hero and instead marks him as a site through which McCarthy interrogates the evolving structure of masculine identity.

Grady's emotional exposure in this romantic context dismantles the conventional gender binary that aligns masculinity with control and detachment. However, this is not merely a reversal of power, it is a productive wounding. As Sally Robinson argues, contemporary white masculinity is often marked by its visibility and vulnerability, compelled to articulate itself through emotional injury and ethical struggle. According to Robinson, "the 'marking' of whiteness and masculinity has already been functioning as a strategy through which white men negotiate the widespread critique of their power and privilege" (6). In this view, Grady's heartbreak and inability to assert control do not diminish his masculine identity but instead rhetorically reconstitute it. His woundedness functions not as a narrative of loss but as a framework for ethical legitimacy, rendering masculinity as emotionally legible and morally complex. Through this affective performance, McCarthy participates in a broader cultural logic whereby male vulnerability does not displace patriarchal authority but re-centers it within the domain of emotional authenticity and reflective subjectivity.

While the narrative arc centers on John Grady's emotional and ethical evolution, it is important to recognize that parallel models of masculine reconstruction also emerge within the novel. A revealing counterpoint is offered through his companion, Rawlins, whose response to their shared experiences in Mexico highlights a different, but equally strategic, negotiation of masculine identity. After their failed journey through Mexico, Rawlins returns to Texas and encourages Grady to do the same, affirming, "This is still a good country" (307). His declaration, made in the wake of hardship and disillusionment, reflects a form of masculine resilience that embraces stability and reintegration rather than continued exile. While McCarthy does not elaborate on Rawlins's life afterward, his faith in the possibility of a productive future, perhaps in the lucrative oil fields of Texas as he suggests, implies that a return to economic opportunity can re-anchor masculine identity. As Hamilton Carroll argues, "White masculinity has, in short, learned how to manage the stakes of its own failure, thereby turning that failure into a profoundly powerful form of success" (9). Rawlins's failure can be offset by material success, wherein financial prosperity serves as a compensatory mechanism that revalidates masculinity. He thus exemplifies how masculinity adapts strategically: in the face of emotional or ideological failure, it pivots toward practical and economically viable forms of self-assertion. His arc stands as a parallel to Grady's, offering a distinct model of masculine reconstruction grounded not in romantic loss but in pragmatic survival.

Taken together, these narrative sites, include violence, language, romantic loss, and economic

reintegration, map out a complex terrain in which masculinity is not dismantled but reconfigured. Through Grady's emotional vulnerability and ethical self-reflection, and through Rawlins's pragmatic resilience, McCarthy demonstrates that masculine identity in crisis does not vanish; rather, it adapts, performs, and survives by strategically incorporating affect, speech, and failure. In doing so, *All the Pretty Horses* participates in a broader cultural discourse that responds to the instability of hegemonic masculinity not by abandoning its myths, but by softening, revising, and ultimately preserving them.

Strategic Masculinity and the Soft Heroic Mythos

John Grady Cole's performance of masculinity in *All the Pretty Horses* represents more than an individual response to personal trauma. It is also an exploration of how American masculinity negotiates cultural transition through self-adjustment and reproduction. Cormac McCarthy mobilizes the cowboy, a quintessential American cultural icon, to reconstruct the concept of wounded masculinity, a recurring figure in 1990s American media where male authority is recuperated through narratives of pain, loss, and moral resilience. Rather than rejecting the cowboy mythos, McCarthy softens and modernizes it, allowing it to absorb vulnerability without losing symbolic power. Through his portrayal of Grady's struggles with violence, emotion, and romantic failure, cowboy masculinity is reshaped from a monolithic and hegemonic ideal into a strategic and narratively sanctioned performance, one that merges traditional ethical codes with emotional complexity to secure the male subject's cultural centrality.

John Grady's masculinity neither wholly rejects tradition nor fully deconstructs it. On one hand, he inherits the behavioral logic of the cowboy characterized by the pursuit of honor, individual autonomy, and ethical consistency. On the other, he consistently displays what might be called the softness of failure, like his grief over the dissolution of his family, his ethical hesitation in the face of violence and his obsessive longing for Alejandra, all point to a masculinity shaped by emotional vulnerability and moral complexity. This contradiction exemplifies what might be theorized as a form of strategic masculinity: a form of male identity that, when confronted with the instability of hegemonic norms, selectively integrates vulnerability, emotional depth, and moral conflict to maintain its cultural centrality. While neither Hamilton Carroll nor Sally Robinson explicitly uses the term, their work provides the critical foundation for such a formulation. Carroll argues that the cultural power of contemporary white masculinity lies not merely in its ability to exhibit vulnerability, but in its structural lability, the ability to move, adapt, and transform one's identity in terms of position, form, or meaning (10). Similarly, Robinson explores how white masculinity becomes culturally legible through the spectacle of injury. Once the invisible universal, white men become marked by emotional suffering, and that suffering becomes a form of symbolic capital. In both cases, affective injury is not a disqualification from privilege, but its reinvention, a rhetorical maneuver that recenters the male subject within the evolving politics of visibility and recognition. Grady's character embodies this logic as his masculinity is not hegemonic in the traditional sense but hegemonically renovated, made softer, more introspective, and more survivable through a strategic performance

of pain and displacement. His journey illustrates not the loss of masculine privilege, but its recalibration through narrative.

This strategic rearticulation stands in sharp contrast to what R. W. Connell defines as hegemonic masculinity, a dominant form of gender practice that maintains male power by marginalizing women and non-normative men. As Connell famously puts it, “Hegemonic masculinity can be defined as the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women” (77). In Connell’s model, hegemonic masculinity maintains its legitimacy by remaining invisible, unchallenged, and normatively unmarked. It asserts itself through strength, silence, and distance, the values that underpin traditional cowboy archetypes in earlier Westerns. However, John Grady Cole departs from this model in critical ways. His masculinity is not invisible but emotionally readable, not entitled but wounded, not dominant but ethically conflicted. He becomes legible not through power, but through pain. Importantly, this departure does not dismantle hegemonic masculinity but reshapes and preserves it in a different key. Grady’s ability to suffer, to reflect, and to endure loss becomes a new narrative mode for legitimizing male centrality. His marginality paradoxically functions as a tool of reintegration into the cultural core, exemplifying how masculinity evolves not by relinquishing its hold on cultural imagination, but by adopting new narrative and emotional strategies to sustain it. In this way, *All the Pretty Horses* illustrates how hegemonic masculinity can survive its own crisis by strategically embracing the language of injury, vulnerability, and ethical struggle. McCarthy’s novel thus participates in a broader cultural mechanism whereby masculinity is not defeated, but softly reasserted.

It is important to note that the figure through which strategic masculinity becomes intelligible is the cowboy, a historically loaded symbol in American cultural discourse. As a racialized and gendered archetype, the cowboy has traditionally functioned as an idealized embodiment of white, heteronormative, and stoic masculinity, associated with national myths of rugged individualism, frontier conquest, and moral autonomy. McCarthy’s deployment of this national figure is neither nostalgic nor wholly revisionist, rather, it stages the cowboy as a contingent site where inherited masculine ideals undergo affective and ethical transformation. John Grady Cole performs the cultural codes of the cowboy as he rides, fights, loves horses and adheres to personal honor, yet his narrative trajectory is marked by emotional loss, ethical hesitation, and social marginalization. This rearticulation aligns with Homi Bhabha’s concept of mimicry, wherein the subject imitates a dominant cultural identity but can never fully inhabit it. Grady performs the cowboy, yet remains “almost the same, but not quite” (Bhabha 89). His exile, romantic failure, and outsider status in Mexico mark him not as an authentic bearer of the cowboy myth, but as a hybridized version, one shaped by loss, dislocation, and postmodern doubt. Through this ambivalent performance, McCarthy’s cowboy becomes a site of strategic negotiation, where cultural centrality is maintained through emotional complexity rather than mythic certainty.

Within the wider cultural imaginary, John Grady participates in the ongoing reproduction of the cowboy myth within the American literary tradition. From *The Virginian* (1902) to *Shane* (1949) and now to McCarthy’s *All the Pretty Horses*, the cowboy remains a symbolic vessel for national identity and white male virtue. McCarthy does not deconstruct this legacy but infuses the cowboy figure with a soft heroic mythos, a revised narrative logic in which masculine virtue is secured not through conquest, but through affective endurance and ethical

suffering.

In sum, *All the Pretty Horses* does not merely narrate the emotional and ethical development of an individual cowboy, but engages in a broader cultural negotiation of masculinity under late twentieth-century conditions of crisis. By strategically rearticulating the cowboy myth, a historically rigid and hegemonic figure, McCarthy constructs a softened heroic model grounded in emotional vulnerability, ethical reflection, and narrative marginality. This reconfigured masculinity aligns with shifting cultural expectations of male subjectivity in the 1990s, transforming the cowboy from an emblem of dominance into a site of affective legitimacy and moral endurance. Crucially, this transformation is not a dismantling of masculine authority, but a recalibration of it, a strategy through which dominant gender norms are preserved in revised, more culturally sustainable forms. Moreover, this reconstruction of masculinity should not be viewed merely as a narrative shift internal to the novel, but as part of a broader cultural logic that seeks to stabilize dominant gender structures under the appearance of change. Rather than rejecting traditional masculinity, *All the Pretty Horses* repackages it through emotional vulnerability and moral introspection. In this way, McCarthy's version of the cowboy becomes a medium through which masculinity maintains its symbolic power by appearing softer and more ethical. At the level of cultural ideology, the novel thus participates in a wider process that translates a historically hegemonic myth into a form that feels emotionally authentic while preserving its foundational logic. Masculinity does not disappear under pressure, it adapts. By softening the heroic ideal rather than discarding it, McCarthy demonstrates how literature helps renegotiate gender norms not by dismantling old myths, but by giving them new affective and ethical forms that ensure their continued cultural relevance.

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Notes

[1] The Border Trilogy by McCarthy—*All the Pretty Horses* (1992), The Crossing (1994), and *Cities of the Plain* (1998)—chronicles the moral and emotional passage of young cowboys across the Mexico–United States border. Critics have often read the Trilogy as a unified meditation on the collapse of the pastoral ideal and the reconstruction of masculine identity in the late twentieth century (see Frye 2009). This paper focuses on *All the Pretty Horses*, where these thematic and ideological concerns are articulated in their most formative and transitional expression.

[2] Although King refers to "the late twentieth century," the phrase does not exclusively denote the 1990s. In this context, it broadly encompasses the social and economic transformations that unfolded from the 1970s through the early 1990s—namely, the shift from Fordist to post-Fordist labor, the rise of the service economy, and the impact of Second-Wave Feminism and related social equality movements. King situates *All the Pretty Horses* within this wider historical moment to suggest that the novel's portrayal of male "dislocation and emasculation" (70) resonates with the broader crisis of white masculinity emerging during this period.

[3] This paper's use of "dual liminality" draws on Victor Turner's concept of liminality as a transitional state between structures of identity or social order (*The Ritual Process*, 1969). Here the concept is used metaphorically to describe two intersecting thresholds in *All the Pretty Horses*. In historical terms, the 1950s represent a shift from the pastoral and ranching world to the modern capitalist and industrial order, as seen in the replacement of family ranches by oil fields. At the same time, John Grady's adolescence marks a personal threshold between dependence and autonomy. McCarthy's reconstruction of masculinity takes shape within the intersection of these two liminal conditions.

[4] Many critics have read *All the Pretty Horses* as a (dark) Bildungsroman (see Morrison 1999; Frye 2009), emphasizing John Grady Cole's passage from innocence to experience. While this paper acknowledges this interpretive tradition, my analysis departs from it. This paper argues that Grady's adolescence functions less as the subject of the narrative than as its structural condition, a liminal position that allows McCarthy to explore the lability of masculinity. The protagonist's youth does not merely signify development or

moral education but provides the narrative space in which masculine identity can appear in motion, negotiated between vulnerability and endurance rather than achieved as stable maturity.

[5] Here “affective” refers to emotional or relational modes of response rather than to the theoretical framework of affect studies. This usage remains consistent throughout the essay.

[6] The 1990s functions not as a narrow chronological category but as a transitional cultural moment often described as a crisis of white masculinity (see Kimmel 2006; Malin 2003). Following the end of the Cold War, the decline of Fordist industrial labor, and the increasing visibility of feminist and multicultural discourses, many cultural commentators argued that white heterosexual men had lost their central social and symbolic positions. Although *All the Pretty Horses* appeared in 1992, it reflects a cultural logic that came to define the decade.

[7] This reference to Leo Marx’s *The Machine in the Garden* (1964) is intended as a metaphorical allusion rather than a direct application of his historical framework. While Marx’s study focuses on 19th-century tensions between pastoral idealism and industrial intrusion, the concept is invoked here in a metaphorical sense to frame the symbolic disruption depicted by McCarthy.