

Dreams as a Structural Framework in McCarthy's ALL THE PRETTY HORSES

In *All the Pretty Horses*, Cormac McCarthy weaves his novel about John Grady Cole's journey into Mexico and within himself together through a distinct structural framework. The entire narrative functions chiastically in a "there and back" structure. In this construct, dreams provide the textual seams

that bind McCarthy's narrative. Cole's journey begins with a somber ending. After his grandfather's funeral, Cole senses he has "come to the end of something" (5). An experienced reader of American literature will recognize that coming to the "end of something" often symbolizes coming simultaneously to the "beginning" of a profoundly new experience. In some of the short stories of Hemingway and Katherine Anne Porter, the end of something subtly signals transition and not simply termination. Accordingly, Cole has come to the end of his way of life in America, as well as the end of his family line. As he watches the warriors "ride on in that darkness they'd become . . . south across the plains to Mexico" (6), his soul longs for freedom, renewal and escape. He recognizes that he has reached the conclusion of something and that he is "already gone" (27). This ending is where Cole's dreams begin.

On the surface, dreams provide continuity between the novel's major plot elements. Cole dreams at every turn. As soon as Cole and Rawlins begin their adventure, it becomes apparent they are chasing their dreams. When Rawlins asks about the next town, as the two are heading down a darkened highway, Cole confesses that he would "make it Eldorado" (32). Eldorado was the fabled city of gold that explorers of the New World endeavored in vain to discover in the sixteenth century. Eldorado promised wealth and adventure to anyone willing to set out in pursuit of this legendary city. In America, the concept of Eldorado was applied to the California Gold Rush as countless Americans journeyed westward to find their fortunes. Writers from Milton to Conrad have used Eldorado as a literary metaphor for an unattainable place of fulfillment, always just beyond reach. This is the experience of Edgar Allan Poe's gallant knight in "Eldorado," who sojourns his life away "in search of Eldorado," a place that lurks only in the shadows. Cole and Rawlins join Poe's gallant knight as they "ride, boldly ride" toward an imaginary place (Eldorado) that exists only in dreams. For them, Mexico is this place. As Daniel Alarcón observes, the boys must head south rather than west, because American industrialization "has placed too many obstacles in their path and erased the storybook Wild West" (149).¹ Cole and Rawlins seek a country that still harbors circumstances able to quench their thirst for the wild. Cole intrinsically yearns for such a land where he can contemplate the "wilderness about him" and "the wilderness within" him (60).

Part of this longing for the wild is revealed by the dreams Cole often has as he slips into slumber each night. Although in different times and places, most of Cole's dreams share a single theme, namely, horses and the wild. Many times, as he falls asleep, Cole's "thoughts were of horses and of the open country and of horses. Horses still wild on the mesa who'd never seen a man afoot and who knew nothing of him or his life yet in whose souls he would come to reside forever" (118). Cole continually parallels his soul and that of a horse. For Cole, horses represent the freedom for which he so desperately

longs. He feels his soul and the souls of the horses will somehow become eternally intertwined. Cole also believes “the souls of horses mirror the souls of men” (111), and for him, the horses reflect his hunger for freedom. He repeatedly dreams of horses in fields, and places himself among the young horses pounding the ground beneath them, running toward their destiny. Cole never relents from his conviction that horses “were always the right thing to think about” (204). Indeed, his love for these animals proves “more reliable and less complicated than other dreams” (Owens 72). When he moves about in these dreams, he glides fearlessly and instinctively with “a resonance that was like a music” (162). Cole views this intense connection as “the world itself” and something “which cannot be spoken but only praised” (162). While in prison, Cole’s soaring dreams supply the strength he needs to survive the drudgery and stagnant nature of his situation. They are for him an entrance into a reality higher than himself.

Aside from horses, love also affects his dreams. After hiring on to be a hand at a Mexican ranch, Cole gradually becomes smitten with his boss’s daughter, Alejandra. As Cole watches Alejandra ride one day, he experiences an amalgamation of his desires. He watches her gallop away until “the rain caught her up and shrouded her figure away in that wild summer landscape: real horse, real rider, real land and sky and *yet a dream withal*” (132; emphasis added). Cole’s love for Alejandra and his love for horses and the land combine to form the foundation of his dreams. Interestingly, rider and horse are swallowed up into the “summer landscape.” This perhaps symbolizes the unattainable nature of a lasting relationship with Alejandra. Her love is real, but Alejandra represents only a transitory element of the fleeting reality that Cole has stumbled on in Mexico. Once again, he is dreaming of “Eldorado” (32). Later in the novel, Alejandra reveals that she sees Cole in her dreams as well (252). As the two lovers part ways, Cole watches “her go as if he himself were in some dream” (254). Alejandra proves to be an emotional Eldorado that eludes Cole’s grasp and later haunts his memory. Even in love, Cole lives and moves about in a dream world.

Cole’s dreams also carry vicious images of death and emptiness. While in prison he dreams of “the dead standing about in their bones,” conveying a “terrible intelligence common to all but of which none would speak” (205). His dreams continually reflect the reality in which he finds himself. After being released from this cell and while waiting to see the *senorita* at the hacienda, Cole attempts to think of “what sort of dream might bring him luck” (225). He first thinks of memories of Alejandra, and then of his deceased friend, Blevins. He here recalls how his dreams again turn toward death. Haunted by Blevins’ memory, Cole reflects that “He’d dreamt of him one night in Saltillo and Blevins came to sit beside him and they talked of what it was like to be dead” (225). Cole thinks that if he dreams of him enough, Blevins would “go away forever and be dead among his kind” (225). Significantly,

for the first time, Cole then falls “asleep and [dreams] nothing at all” (225). Later, he dreams again of horses, but contrary to before, they move “gravely . . . like horses come upon an antique site where some ordering of the world had failed” (281). Something is happening to the nature of his dreams as they begin to convey an increasingly somber reality. Throughout, Cole’s dreams are the constant factor in all his experiences.

Dreams 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.² The “there and back” feel of the story is no accident. Viewed holistically, all of Cole’s experiences coalesce into the semblance of a most intense dream sequence. As he heads home, Cole begins to slowly and painfully “wake up” from his dreams, both the ones he has been having, and the one he is living. One morning, on his return to Texas, Cole experiences a sudden and defining moment: “When he woke he realized that he knew his father was dead” (282). Following such a long and arduous struggle, Cole finally wakes up from the dream that he has been living in Mexico. The abrupt departure from this dream is painful for Cole. After he finally crosses back into Texas, Cole thinks “about his father who was dead in that country and he sat the horse naked in the falling rain and wept” (286). He thus reenters his homeland as a seeming “apparition out of the vanished past” (287).

McCarthy’s introductory and concluding scenes further confirm this structural thesis. In the beginning, repressing the thought of his father’s death and way of life, Cole journeys toward Eldorado, while at the end, he seemingly awakens empty-handed. At the beginning, after his father’s funeral, Cole “turned *south* along the old war trail and he *rode out* to the crest of a low rise and *dismounted* and *dropped the reins* and walked out and stood like a man come to the end of something” (5; emphasis added). While at the end, after Abuela’s funeral, Cole “rose and turned and looked off toward the *north* where the lights of the city hung over the desert. Then he walked out and *picked up the reins* and *mounted* his horse and *rode up* and caught the Blevins horse by its halter” (299; emphasis added). At the beginning of McCarthy’s narrative, Cole comes to the “end of something,” and at the end of the narrative, he comes to the beginning of something, namely, “the world to come” (5, 299). Cole’s dreams and McCarthy’s dreamlike narrative structure “have an odd durability for something not quite real,” although they also show “very clearly how all . . . life led only to this moment and all after led nowhere at all” (134, 254). In the final analysis, the effect of McCarthy’s textual strategy is that both the reader and Cole experience the catharsis of entering and departing from an intense world of dreams.

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All the Pretty Horses, *dreams*, *Eldorado*, *Cormac McCarthy*, *narrative structure*

NOTES

1. Timothy Caron echoes this sentiment, observing that “Mexico remains an empty space onto which [Cole and Rawlins] project their ideas of a cowboy’s perfect paradise” (158). Similarly, Barclay Owens asserts that though “this left turn across the border traditionally has been a wrong move for the American cowboy . . . to find frontier adventures, McCarthy’s cowboys have only one choice” (65). Robert Sickels and Marc Oxoby describe this foray into Mexico as Cole and Rawlins’ quest for “a further frontier,” which they argue McCarthy’s Border Trilogy cumulatively exposes as illusory (348).

2. Edwin T. Arnold observes this structural feature with respect to the Border Trilogy as a whole, noting that “it may be that all of Cormac McCarthy’s writings constitute a prolonged dream. Reading McCarthy’s works—any one of them—is an experience not quite real” (38). Arnold asserts that this overarching structure “offers us a different way of seeing the world(s), of finding our place therein” (67). Robert Jarrett makes a similar point in positing that the “interpolated dream narratives” in the Border Trilogy “function as narrative foreshadowing and depict the dreamers as visionaries” (146).

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