All the Pretty Horses

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF CORMAC MCCARTHY

Cormac McCarthy was born the third of six children in Rhode Island. Raised Catholic, he studied liberal arts at the University of Tennessee for a few years before joining the U.S. Air Force. He returned to school but never graduated, and instead worked as a mechanic in Chicago while writing his first novel *The Orchard Keeper*, which was published in 1965. After a brief first marriage, he married a young English singer named Anne DeLisle, and in 1967 they moved to Rockford, Tennessee, though they divorced several years later and he moved to El Paso, Texas. McCarthy was awarded a Macarthur "Genius" grant in 1981. In 1985, he published *Blood Meridian*, the first of his so-called "westerns," followed by *Suttree*. *All the Pretty Horses*, published in 1992, was his first book to become a *New York Times* bestseller and grant him a wider readership. In 1999, McCarthy married for a third time to Jennifer Winkley, and they now live in Tesque, New Mexico, with their one child, John Francis. *No Country for Old Men* and *The Road* (a Pulitzer winner) are two of McCarthy's more recent novels, both of which have been adapted to film. McCarthy is notoriously private and has given few interviews over his long career.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

By 1949, when the novel takes place, World War II had propelled the United States out of the Great Depression and into a period of rapid economic expansion. Because of new technologies and enhanced transportation, particularly the Eisenhower interstate highway system growing to crisscross the nation, this industrialized economy was spreading across the country with great homogenizing influence. Family-owned ranches like John Grady's were increasingly likely to be sold off. Mexico, meanwhile, was at the start of what's known as the "Mexican Miracle," a roughly thirty-year period of economic growth and reduced inflation that lasted until the 1970s—making it quite reasonable to believe that John Grady and Rawlins could easily have found jobs there. The novel also refers to events from the Mexican Revolution, which began in 1910. In 1911, Porfirio Díaz, who had ruled for 35 years, was ousted from power, and Francisco Madero was elected until 1913, when the General Victoriano Huerto overthrew him and ruled through 1914. The Revolution was a time of great political and social experimentation—land reform was a major part of many of the revolutionaries' goals—but it was also full of bloodshed, with each new succession of leaders bringing about a spat of assassinations and executions.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

All the Pretty Horses is the first of McCarthy's Border Trilogy, a series of novels taking place in the "border country" between the United States and Mexico in the decade before and after World War II. *All the Pretty Horses* was considered McCarthy's first novel to be accessible to a more general audience: his prose is soaring and lavish, but it's not as difficult as some of his earlier novels. Stripped of most punctuation and connected by a series of "and," his sentences have often been compared to William Faulkner, whose novels probe another specific geographical setting—the American South. Like Edgar Allan Poe for an earlier era, McCarthy has proved able to mine surface material to uncover the often shocking violence and mystery beneath.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *All the Pretty Horses*
- **When Written:** 1992
- **Where Written:** United States
- **When Published:** 1992
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Novel
- **Setting:** Texas and Mexico
- **Climax:** After John Brady convinces his lover, Alejandra, to meet him before returning to her hacienda, she refuses to break her word to her great-aunt and marry him, leaving John Grady devastated.
- **Antagonist:** The nameless "captain," a Mexican prison director whose official power is questionable, but who is astonishingly cold and unforgiving, and who shoots Blevins in the woods in the middle of the novel.
- **Point of View:** Third-person limited omniscient

EXTRA CREDIT

King's Speech. McCarthy was originally named Charles after his father, but one story says he changed his name to Cormac after the Irish king; another says his family changed it, as "Cormac" means "son of Charles" in Gaelic.

Cómo se dice... McCarthy learned Spanish specifically to further his research for his first "Western" novel, *Blood Meridian*.

PLOT SUMMARY

As *All the Pretty Horses* begins, John Grady Cole's grandfather

has just died, and he's learned that the San Angelo, Texas ranch that has been in his family for generations is about to be sold. The ranch is in his mother's name, and she doesn't want any part in it anymore. John Grady first tries to convince his father to change her mind, but his father, who hasn't been quite the same since his return from a POW camp in World War II, says there's nothing he can do. Mr. Franklin, the lawyer, tells him the same thing—as a sixteen-year-old, John Grady can't take it over. Mr. Franklin also tells him his parents have recently finalized their divorce. John Grady buys a ticket to San Antonio, where he watches his mother perform on a stage, and then waits for her at a hotel lobby, where he sees her with another man. John Grady goes to see his old friend Lacey Rawlins, and they talk about leaving for Mexico. Before leaving, John Grady sees Mary Catherine Barnett, a girl who has recently dumped him, one last time.

John and Lacey leave early in the morning and as they approach the border with Mexico, a young boy who appears to have been following them catches up. He calls himself Jimmy Blevins, but they doubt it's his real name, as it's also the name of a religious radio host. Blevins admits he's run away from home. He's riding a beautiful bay horse, which the boys think may be stolen. Rawlins doesn't want anything to do with him. They separate, but end up running into each other again at the river dividing the U.S. and Mexico. That night, there's a thunderstorm, and Blevins, who is deathly afraid of lightning, hides in a river and ends up losing both his horse and all his clothes. Against Rawlins' protestations, John Grady lifts him onto the back of his own horse.

They soon reach the town of Encantada in Mexico, where John Grady and Rawlins see Blevins' horse tied in a mud barn behind one of the houses. Though Rawlins protests again, they make a plan to take back the horse early the next morning. The plan soon goes awry, as a pack of barking dogs wakes the entire town up, and Blevins risks all their lives in making sure he gets his saddle in addition to his horse. Knowing that riders are following them, the three separate, with John Grady and Rawlins heading off the road.

The pair ask people along the way where they can find work, and eventually they end up at the Hacienda de Nuestra Señora de la Purísima Concepción, a ranch owned by Don Héctor Rocha y Villareal. They're hired to take care of the cattle, though after a few days they ask the gerente (manager) if they can attempt to break or tame—in four days—the sixteen wild mares that have been captured. As they work, a crowd of townspeople gathers around them. They succeed, and as a result Don Hector gives John Grady a more important task: that of breeding mares.

Don Hector invites John Grady to play billiards with him and he discusses horses. Meanwhile, John Grady has caught the attention of Don Hector's daughter Alejandra, a beautiful teenager whom he dances with at a town dance in La Vega. They begin to ride horses together, but Alejandra's great-aunt, Alfonsa, warns John Grady that a woman in Mexico has nothing other than her honor. Nevertheless, Alejandra comes to John Grady's bunkhouse that night, and they begin to sleep together. One night he and Rawlins are on the mesa when they see a pack of greyhounds. They believe someone is hunting them, and worry that Don Hector may have found out about John Grady and his daughter. The next morning, policeman break into the bunkhouse and arrest them.

They ride off with the officers for several days into an unknown town, where they're placed in a mud cell that also houses Blevins. It turns out that Blevins had worked for a few months before returning to Encantada to retrieve his pistol. He'd gotten into a gunfight and killed a man. The captain, a Mexican official, brings John Grady and Rawlins into his office, one by one, and tortures them, trying to make them confess that they committed crimes with Blevins and that they aren't who they say they are. A few days later, the three of them are taken out of the cell and onto a truck with the captain and a few other guards. They pick up another man, the charro (cowboy), and head towards the prison in Saltillo. At one point, however, they make a detour into an abandoned hacienda. The captain and *charro* take Blevins, who seems terrified, out of the truck, and Blevins thrusts his remaining pesos at John Grady and Rawlins. He's taken into the woods, and they hear the pop of a pistol.

John Grady and Rawlins are taken to a vast prison in Saltillo, where for the first three days they're constantly in fistfights. After that, they're taken into the cell of Pérez, a prisoner who seems to be in a position of great power, able to arrange bribes to get them out. John Grady and Rawlins deny that they have any money and leave. Soon afterward, Rawlins is stabbed in the stomach, and led out of the prison yard by Pérez's men. John Grady buys a switchblade from another prisoner. A few days later, he's in the mess hall when a young cuchillero begins to fight him, apparently to the death. John Grady is wounded, and as the *cuchillero* prepares to slit John Grady's throat, John Grady stabs him in the heart. One of Pérez's men carries him, weak and bleeding, out of the yard. When he regains consciousness, he's in a black room.

Over the next few days, several men come in and out. Finally, he's sent to meet Pérez, who hands him an envelope full of money. Apparently, Alfonsa has paid to have him and Rawlins freed. John Grady wants to go back to the hacienda to find Alejandra, but Rawlins buys a ticket back to Texas. When John Grady arrives, it turns out that it was as he had feared: Alfonsa had paid for John Grady's release in return for Alejandra's vow not to continue her affair with him. Alfonsa begins a long monologue, telling John Grady about her adolescence as a radical, free-thinking young woman whose close friendship with the political revolutionaries Francisco and Gustavo Madero caused her father to exile her to Europe. She tells John Grady about the devastating brutality and violence of the

revolution, about how all their ideals turned into bloodshed. She says that his only excuse is that things happened outside his control, which is not a good reason for her to be on his side. Alfonsa relates several anecdotes about destiny and responsibility. Her own thoughts on fate seem ambivalent, though she says she believes it is human nature to want to place responsibility on someone or something.

John Grady still decides to pursue Alejandra and convince her to stay with him. He calls her from another town, Torreón, and she agrees to meet him at Zacatecas. They spend a day and a night together, but at the end, she tells him she cannot break her word to Alfonsa; in addition, she has seen how her father's love for her, which she thought was unbreakable, is in fact not so, and she can't stand to see it unravel further. After she leaves, John Grady is devastated. But he has a final task in Mexico: retrieve his and Rawlins' horses.

He returns to Encantada and forces the captain and *charro*, at gunpoint, to lead him to the horses. They bring him to an hacienda where he finds both horses and also Blevins'. Two men at the hacienda figure out what's going on and they exchange fire. John Grady is shot in the leg, but he's able to escape with the horses, and takes the captain hostage with him. They spend several days and nights riding. At one point, John Grady cauterizes his wound with a red-hot pistol barrel to prevent infection. He wakes up one morning to find a group of Mexicans taking the captain away in handcuffs.

When John Grady reaches the border, he spends several weeks attempting to find the owner of Blevins' horse. He finally gives up and hands it over to the county. He tells the judge his story at the hearing, and the judge is impressed by John Grady's actions. Later that night, John Grady shows up at the judge's house, wanting to confess that there's much he's done that he isn't proud of, and how guilty he feels. Finally, John Grady returns to San Angelo, where he returns Rawlins' horse, and they have a short conversation. It seems that they're not as comfortable with each other as they once were. John Grady's father has died, and as the novel ends, he is heading out to Mexico again.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

John Grady Cole – The protagonist of the book, John Grady Cole is a sixteen-year-old from San Angelo, Texas, who enjoys working on his family's ranch when he's not in school. Alienated by his mother's decision to sell the ranch, he sets off to Mexico with his friend Lacey Rawlins. John Grady has a special way with horses: he is particularly loyal to his own horse, Redbo, but he also earns respect and admiration from Mexicans for his ability to tame or "break" wild horses. John Grady holds an idealistic, romantic vision of Mexico. He doesn't really believe anything will go wildly wrong there, though when it does, he faces the events that confront him with grit and determination. He's naturally kindhearted, as shown in his friendliness to Blevins, but this generosity can easily become naïveté that leads to disaster. In some ways, John Grady's development over the course of the novel can be thought of as a *bildungsroman*, a novel of growing up, as he learns about life and is gradually disabused of his romantic ideals.

Lacey Rawlins – John Grady's childhood friend, a seventeen-year-old who grew up on a neighboring ranch. Rawlins is also a good horseback rider, though he doesn't have John Grady's natural gift with horses. Lacey isn't as committed as John Grady is to escaping to Mexico. Once there, though, he has a sharper sense of the dangers present, and is always keeping an eye out for potential threats. Rawlins initially thinks it's ridiculous for them to adopt Blevins, who exasperates him by talking too much and telling obviously fabricated stories. Rawlins is hard on Blevins, cursing at him and making fun of him, but he seems almost more devastated than John Grady at Blevins' death. Rawlins knows from the start that it's a bad idea for John Grady to have an affair with Alejandra, and he too suffers the consequences when they're thrown in prison. Rawlins' friendship with John Grady never fully recovers, though he remains loyal to his friend throughout the novel.

Jimmy Blevins – A young boy riding a big bay horse whom John Grady and Rawlins encounter when they're about to cross the border to Mexico. He claims he's sixteen but looks more like thirteen, and the other boys doubt that Blevins is his real name—it's also the name of a well-known religious radio host in Texas. Blevins has run away several times, presumably rebelling against a malevolent stepfather. He's even more naïve than John Grady, and seems very young: he's afraid of lightning, and is stubborn enough to risk everything just to get a stolen pistol back. Blevins is portrayed as sometimes ridiculous but entirely harmless, and his downfall is shocking to the others, portraying the extent to which evil will blot out whatever it can, however innocuous its victims.

Don Hector Rocha y Villarreal (the hacendado) – The owner of the La Purísima hacienda, where John Grady and Rawlins work for several months. Don Hector is impressed by John Grady's skill with horses, and grants him a special position breeding his horses. He is wealthy, intelligent, and sophisticated, and also seems kind and treats John Grady with respect. However, he conforms strictly to the Mexican ideal of a woman's honor, and feels no compunction about turning the boys in when he learns of Alejandra's affair with John Grady.

Alejandra Rocha – Don Hector's daughter, and a skillful horseback rider of a black Arabian on the hacienda. Alejandra attends an expensive private school in Mexico City, where she spends time with her mother, but she's impatient with society life and prefers to spend time on the hacienda. She is willful and proud, riding one of John Grady's horses against her father's

wishes, and boldly knocking at John Grady's door the first evening they sleep together. Alejandra is also fiercely loyal: it is because she has given her word to her great-aunt, and because she fears the loss of her father's love, that she refuses to run away with John Grady in the end.

Alfonsa – Alejandra's great-aunt, the matriarch of the hacienda. She was a bookish child and had radical, free-thinking ideas, making her a natural partner to Francisco and Gustavo Madero, two brothers who would help to start the Mexican Revolution. Like Alejandra, Alfonsa was always proud and stubborn—she refused to return from Europe if it meant promising her father that she would renounce her relationship to the Madero brothers. In many ways, Alfonsa is an admirable example of a woman ahead of her time. She tells John Grady that it is not his poverty or class that matters to her, but his ability to affect Alejandra's honor through his entanglement with the law. Nevertheless, Alfonsa's true motivations remain ambiguous. It's difficult to tell whether she is truly acting in Alejandra's best interests, or is instead using her compelling story to justify more selfish interests. Her monologue on fate and destiny is similarly ambivalent.

Gustavo Madero – Francisco's brother, another historical figure who sought to remake Mexico through progressive social reform. In the novel, both and he Alfonsa suffered physical accidents and bonded over their suffering: though they were never engaged and though he suffered a violent death in the Revolution, she has remained in love with him to this day.

The captain – A Mexican official of ambiguous authority, he is brutal and unforgiving. After being laughed at as a boy, he is haunted by the memory and acts viciously and pitilessly as a result. He is the one to kill Blevins, and he tortures John Grady and Rawlins as well. It turns out that the captain is weak and cowardly, as John Grady learns when he travels with him as a hostage on horseback.

Wayne Cole – John Grady's father, he only appears briefly at the beginning of the novel. It seems that the two were once close, but the father went away to fight in World War II and was imprisoned in Goshee, a POW camp, after which he was different. He seems not to care about much as the novel opens, essentially shrugging his shoulders at his ex-wife's decision to sell the ranch. John Grady thinks about his father at various times throughout the book, and feels regret at their failure to establish a closer relationship.

John Grady's mother – An aspiring actress whom John Grady surreptitiously goes to see perform in another Texas town. Recently divorced from his father, John Grady's mother seems to care little about ranch life in San Angelo. She had run away to California years ago, though his father tells John Grady that she returned for his sake. Still, she seems more concerned with social life than with mothering, and is often absent.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Francisco Madero – A historically real person, a Mexican revolutionary and the first popularly elected Mexican president. In the novel, Madero is also a friend of Alfonsa's family who helped introduce Alfonsa to the social ideals of the revolutionary era.

El charro (the cowboy) – An elegantly dressed man who pays the captain a bribe to kill Blevins, who had killed the charro's brother.

Emilio Pérez – A fellow prisoner with John Grady and Rawlins, who seems to hold almost mythical power within the prison. He is charge of the bribes that pass through the prison, without which, he claims, the boys will be doomed.

El cuchillero – A knife-bearing boy, not much older than John Grady, who is hired to kill him in the prison, but John Grady kills him instead.

Antonio – One of the vaqueros who works on the hacienda. He becomes John Grady's friend, sharing cigarettes with him and letting him know about the various dynamics at the hacienda, including how Don Hector feels about him and Alejandra.

The gerente – The manager of the hacienda, who allows John Grady and Rawlins to attempt to break the horses in four days, though he doesn't believe they'll be able to do it.

Luis – An employee at the hacienda, who tells John Grady and Rawlins stories about Mexican culture and history while they're searching for wild mares on the mesa.

Carlos – The cook at the hacienda.

María – The house attendant at the hacienda, who seems sympathetic to John Grady.

An old man – Another prisoner housed with Blevins, John Grady, and Rawlins. John Grady frees him when he returns to get the horses.

Luisa – The Mexican woman who has been on John Grady's family's ranch for years, and who, along with her mother Abuela, brought him up.

Abuela – Luisa's mother, who was also important in John Grady's childhood and who is devastated at the news of the ranch's sale.

Arturo – A man who works at John Grady's family's ranch.

Judge – A judge in Texas who rules at the hearing of Blevins' horse. After the hearing, John Grady goes to talk to the judge almost as if he is confessing his sins.

Jimmy Blevins (Preacher) – A well-known gospel radio host, whom John Grady goes to talk to in a desperate attempt to find the owner of Blevins' horse.

Mr. Franklin – A lawyer who knows the Cole family and convinces John Grady that there's nothing to be done about the ranch's sale.

Mary Catherine Barnett – A girl whom John Brady used to see before leaving for Mexico—she dumped him.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

THE IDEA OF THE AMERICAN WEST

Most readers of Cormac McCarthy will already be familiar with his setting—southern Texas and northern Mexico—from the long tradition of American Westerns, filled with cowboys and gunfights on wide-open terrain. By the time the novel takes place, in 1949, this world is no longer to be found in Texas. Instead it has become a myth, one filled with powerful values of freedom and honor, which John Grady Cole and Lacey Rawlins set off in search of in Mexico—but what they find is a much grimmer, coarser world. When the novel opens, John Grady's long family line of ranchers has begun to disintegrate, and though he's desperate to keep the family ranch going, he's too young to take it over. In 1949, as the United States is growing increasingly industrialized, Mexico seems to be a country where John Grady can revive a way of life that is dying out back home.

Neither John Grady nor Rawlins, however, can ever seriously articulate why they've gone off to Mexico. Several times they tell other characters that they're bank robbers or *bandoleros*. At one point a jail captain questions why they'd want to take care of horses in Mexico for four times less money than they could get in the States. In fact, neither of the boys sets out with a serious plan for their time in Mexico. Instead, the country serves as a place of exciting escape, populated by bank robbers and cowboys. McCarthy's lush descriptions of the plains and vistas of Mexico only underline the boys' mythical vision of the country, to which physical beauty, beautiful girls, freedom of movement, and a simpler way of life all contribute. Indeed, while their idea of the American (that is, North American) West is thrilling, it's also largely benign: it's a place where they can sharpen their sense of independence and adhere to a worldview of honor and dignity. The problem is that the boys don't understand until too late that the stakes are higher than this, and that the mythical ideals they're seeking in Mexico contain a brutal underside of violence, misogyny, and corruption. Mexico may hold the ideals of the old West, but it's also a place of extreme inequality, endemic poverty, and terrible corruption. By experiencing this side of Mexico first hand, the boys come to be disillusioned, understanding the myth of the West as just that—a myth.

ROMANTICISM AND REALITY

While John Grady's romantic notions apply most powerfully to his ideal of the American West, they also apply to other values he holds dear for much of the novel. *All the Pretty Horses* has been called McCarthy's most romantic novel, and that's not just because part of it is a romance story: it's because John Grady believes strongly in the power of love to conquer all, from economic interests to family concerns. Other characters are more realistic. In a sweeping monologue in Part 3, Alfonsa, Alejandra's great-aunt, attempts to show John Grady just how powerful politics, economics, gender norms, and other social values can be. They've impacted her own life directly, and can certainly make love impossible. Alfonsa and other characters have learned to place other values, such as stability and even happiness, above love. In fact, Alfonsa sees John Grady's stubborn pursuit of his affair with Alejandra as proof that he couldn't be trusted as head of the family hacienda. As John Grady remains willfully immune to such practicality, the novel portrays his denial of reality as admirable but also, ultimately, both doomed to failure and highly naïve.

Romanticism, of course, is more than just romantic love: one meaning of the term is a poetic movement emphasizing individual, subjective experience, heroic action, and the primacy of emotion. Such elements are evident in the way John Grady thinks of Mexico and its citizens, as well as his notions about justice. John Grady feels a deep, personal, and emotional connection to **horses**—much of the book is taken up simply with lavishly drawn scenes of riding across the mesas and plains of the country. His relationship to horses gives him a perhaps unique understanding of ownership, based less on laws and property rights than on one's subjective relationship with other living creature. This way of thinking is most intensely depicted in John Grady's attempt to get his, Blevins', and Rawlins' horses back at the end of the novel. The world, John Grady learns little by little, may support Romantic ideals in theory, but in practice a brute pragmatism tends to prevail.

INNOCENCE, EXPERTISE, AND KNOWLEDGE

In several ways, John Grady seems older than his sixteen years. Throughout his time in Mexico, John Grady is able to draw on the skills he learned growing up on a ranch, where he was responsible for many of the ranch's daily activities. John Grady gains respect and admiration for his skill with **horses**: the hacendado is impressed by this expertise and gives him a special job at the hacienda taking care of them. In addition, John Grady's knowledge of Spanish is a key skill that enables him and Rawlins to manage in Mexico—and at times ensures their survival. The novel is full of Spanish phrases, even short conversations that aren't translated. This can be disorienting for a reader who doesn't speak Spanish, though

such disorientation reflects what must be Rawlins's own experience. It also helps to situate John Grady in a position of expertise, forcing Rawlins (and the reader) to trust him.

At the same time, John Grady's Spanish skills belie his ignorance of many aspects of Mexican life—a point that is underlined when Pérez at the prison tells him he doesn't "speak the language" of Mexican prison life. Further, while John Grady has remarkable expertise in specialized skills such as horse-breaking, his real-world choices often appear astonishingly naïve to other characters, as well as to the reader. Rawlins begs John Grady not to get them mixed up with Blevins, who has most likely stolen his horse. Likewise, Alfonsa reminds John Grady of his greater ignorance, stressing several times that he hasn't lived as long as she has and lacks her wisdom about life. The scene near the end of the novel where John Grady shows up at the Texas judge's home to ask him for advice similarly highlights how lost he can feel when faced with new experiences, realities, and choices. There are different kinds of knowledge, the novel seems to be saying, and expertise at a skill is not the same as wisdom gained from life.

FATE AND RESPONSIBILITY

Is taking responsibility for one's own actions an essential part of growing up, of accepting what it means to be human? Or is it simply hubris to assume that humans can escape or conquer fate? The novel doesn't take a clear-cut position either way. Instead, the characters struggle to determine what they are responsible for and what remains beyond their control. During a long conversation between John Grady and Alfonsa, she mentions a story her father used to tell to explain his conviction that responsibility can always be traced to human decisions. The story concerns a coin-maker who chooses which way to place the metal, heads or tails. From this, all other decisions follow—heads or tails—as remote as they may become. Alfonsa isn't sure she agrees with her father, however, as she thinks that human nature makes us "determined that not even chaos be outside our own making." Alfonsa's skepticism about the ability to master fate stems directly from the twists and turns of her own life, in which suffering and pain seem often to remain outside her or anyone's control. Paradoxically, she asks John Grady to accept his fate—no longer being able to see her grand-niece Alejandra—as inevitable, even though she intervened directly to bring it about.

For John Grady and Rawlins, the tension between fate and responsibility is tied to Jimmy Blevins, who seems to simply appear in their lives and remain there, as if their fates were destined to be intertwined. John Grady and Rawlins are torn between wanting to be free of him and feeling responsible for his well-being. John Grady's deep-seated guilt, shown as he confides to the judge at the end of the novel, stems from what he sees as his inability to take full responsibility for Blevins' safety. Guilt and penitence only make sense in a world in which people are fully responsible for their actions. In addition, each time John Grady and Rawlins talk about God, they are implicitly discussing fate—if and how things could have turned out differently, and why things happen the way they do. These conversations are circular and inconclusive. While the novel never fully decrees whether humans are ultimately responsible for their own actions, it shows just how troubling this ambiguity can be, especially when other people's lives are involved.

MEANINGFUL AND GRATUITOUS VIOLENCE

Some readers might recoil at the violence of *All the Pretty Horses*, which ranges from graphic portrayals to bleak descriptions. Different characters take different attitudes towards violence, regarding if and when it can be justified, and how closely it may be tied to revenge and justice. As a whole, the novel seems to distinguish between different kinds of violence, but it also remains committed to portraying violent acts as a method of literary realism—showing how violence can be a part of daily life in the settings where the characters find themselves.

In some ways, the novel links violence to bravery and stoicism. In this conception, John Grady enters into a gunfight for a higher purpose: in trying to steal back the **horses**, he is honoring Blevins' memory and showing his loyalty to Rawlins and his own horse. The description of his gunshot wound and the process of burning it out with a pistol shaft to avoid infection is equally violent and graphic. When John Grady tells a Texas judge his story, the entire courtroom listens to him in silent awe. John Grady himself, however, is more ambivalent about the ethics of violence. He struggles over whether he should have killed a fellow prisoner, even though it was in self-defense, and confesses to the Texas judge that he's not a good person because he did so.

The novel is clearer about other instances of violence. The prison captain who marches Blevins into the woods to shoot him is portrayed as a monster. He is probably one of those to whom Alfonsa refers when she tells John Grady that many in Mexico live only by the law of violence—the only law they can follow and respect, the only one that means anything to them. The novel thus draws a line between violence that serves a higher purpose, and violence that is simply gratuitous, that obeys no law but itself.

LOYALTY AND BELONGING

One way John Grady escapes from the constant, uncertain loop of fate and responsibility is by clinging to the value of loyalty above all else. We know from early on that John Grady is fiercely loyal to his ranch—he makes various attempts to prevent it from being

sold, and finally decides that he himself must leave rather than see the ranch leave his family's possession. For the rest of the novel, loyalty directs his actions and serves as a means for him to choose between difficult options. Another way to look at John Grady's and Rawlins' relationship to Jimmy Blevins, for instance, is to understand it as not just one of responsibility, but also of loyalty. Having established a kind of friendship, the boys are now obligated to do what they can to protect him. If there's a hierarchy of loyalty for John Grady, though, Rawlins remains at the top: they've been friends from childhood and partners in their escape to Mexico. Rawlins feels similarly, even refusing to entertain the possibility of escaping from the prison's hospital ward if it means leaving John Grady behind. John Grady's loyalty to Rawlins also lasts beyond Rawlins's own departure from Mexico, as Rawlins is the first person he returns to see back home. Their relationship seems irrevocably changed by their time in Mexico, however, particularly by their time in prison. The novel seems to say that loyalty doesn't have to mean complete understanding, and it doesn't imply that to be loyal to someone is to be his or her soul mate: instead, loyalty is both weaker and more powerful than this.

The importance of loyalty in the novel is underlined in a more striking way through John Grady's relationship to **horses**. After escaping from prison and managing to see Alejandra one last time, he risks his life again (and nearly loses it) in his attempt to take back his, Blevins', and Rawlins' horses. This attempt is tied to John Grady's loyalty to Blevins and Rawlins, but it's more than that. He feels loyal to the animals themselves. John Grady feels comfortable around horses as he does around few other people. With his parents divorced and his ranch sold, Texas is no longer a true home for him—even at the end of the novel, he tells Rawlins that it's "alien country" for him. But Mexico is equally foreign, and once Alejandra refuses to stay with him, there is no one place where he can belong there either. Instead, by remaining loyal to his friends and to his horse, John Grady stakes out a space of belonging. In establishing bonds between living things, then, loyalty makes it easier for John Grady to find other ways of belonging than a specific home or country.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

HORSES

Three horses in *All the Pretty Horses* are significant enough that they can almost be thought of as characters themselves: John Grady's horse Redbo, Rawlins' horse Junior, and Blevins' nameless big bay horse. Each has its own character—John Grady's is powerful and loyal, while Blevins' is jumpier and more finicky. They can also be humans' friends: Redbo recognizes John Grady by whinnying when he comes to retrieve the horse in Encantada, for instance. But horses are more than the characters' friends or elements of Western life in the book: they are the connective tissue of the novel, drawing lines among characters, from characters to culture and society, and between the present and the past. John Grady feels a special kinship to horses, which in this way come to stand in for the kind of companionship he finds more fleetingly in friends, lovers, and in certain physical places. Horses are thus similar in some ways to men: as John Grady is told at one point, their souls are more similar to men's souls than many think. But horses also symbolize the complex, constantly shifting relationships and connections between individuals and society. For hundreds of years, horses have been mounted by men to go off to war, following the orders of far-away kings, dictators, and generals. Traveling faster than humans can on foot, they cover more ground and can see more than one person can in a lifetime. John Grady observes throughout the book how the souls of horses have borne witness to the greatest examples of the world's violence and devastation. It is suggested that horses have, in fact, a single soul, one that creates a kinship among all members of the species—in a way that John Grady increasingly comes to accept is impossible for humankind. Instead, he places his trust and respect in horses, who guide him individually through life while all the while reminding him of the larger, more impersonal forces that impact each person.

RELIGION

At several points in the novel, John Grady and Rawlins discuss faith, religion, and God. These conversations often center around God's will, and how that will meshes with or diverges from human will. Mexico is an overwhelmingly Roman Catholic country, and reminders of Christianity can be found scattered throughout the novel's setting—the statue of Jesus Christ in the hacienda's billiards room, the children in the street who tell John Grady to ask God to intercede for his affair with Alejandra, and the farmworker who prays at the end of a long table when John Grady joins them for dinner. In many of these cases, people turn to religion and God as a result of their own sense of helplessness, powerlessness, or lack of understanding. Faced with the mystery of death, unable to affect the success of the crops for a certain season, or confused as to why people act the way they do, the novel's characters find solace in religion—which, in this book, seems to have less to do with the catechism and authority of the Church than with people's daily lives. Religion, then, symbolizes the search for understanding amidst a surfeit of unknowns.

BLOOD

In a narrative punctured with pistol shots and thrusts of a knife, it is little surprise that we hear so much about blood in the novel. Human blood is, of course, tied to the theme of violence, and also to the idea that for many Mexicans, nothing can be proven if it is not made to bleed, as Alfonsa says about her fellow citizens. But blood also symbolizes the attempt to prove oneself, to embrace courage and carve out one's own identity. Rawlins worries that his infusion of blood might make him part Mexican—a humorous moment, but one that also emphasizes how easy it is for the characters to link blood to national and personal identity. In this framework, blood must be spilled for blood—this is why the *charro* hires the captain to kill Blevins in revenge. In the prison, John Grady realizes that someone's blood must be spilled, and that his only choice is to kill or be killed. The novel supplements this symbolism with imagery of blood-red sunsets and dust—all symbols of violence that take a personal turn when tied to the choices John Grady and other characters have made.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Vintage edition of *All the Pretty Horses* published in 1993.

Part 1 Quotes

What he loved in horses was what he loved in men, the blood and the heat of the blood that ran them.

Related Characters: John Grady Cole (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 6

Explanation and Analysis

John Grady has just found an old skull of a horse lying in the grass on his family's ranch, and as he looks at it he is reminded of what is so appealing to him about riding and taking care of horses. Interestingly, it is an inert, bloodless skeleton that reminds John Grady of the blood coursing through horses' veins, blood that for him symbolizes the ardent desires and courage that one needs to succeed in the American West. John Grady identifies with horses in many ways, as he measures horses so too does he measure his fellow human beings: in terms of how strong and intensely alive they are. The skull is certainly a powerful image, but it is largely important in terms of what John Grady reads into it—his romanticized view of the West colors much of what he experiences.

They heard somewhere in that tenantless night a bell that tolled and ceased where no bell was and they rode out on the round dais of the earth which alone was dark and no light to it and which carried their figures and bore them up into the swarming stars so that they rode not under but among them and they rode at once jaunty and circumspect, like thieves newly loosed in that dark electric, like young thieves in a glowing orchard, loosely jacketed against the cold and ten thousand worlds for the choosing.

Related Characters: Lacey Rawlins, John Grady Cole

Related Themes:

Page Number: 30

Explanation and Analysis

This passage is typical of Cormac McCarthy's prose, with its lack of punctuation and rousing descriptions that carry the reader along breathlessly. John Grady and Rawlins have just left, late at night, to run away to Mexico. The world seems vast and empty to them, but rather than terrifying this proves beguiling to them both: they revel in feeling like the night belongs to them, and that the land over which they ride is also available for them, beckoning them in endless "worlds" of possibilities.

As John Grady departs with Rawlins, he is simultaneously constructing a narrative about the deeper meaning of their departure. They are not just running away from home, as he sees it, but also taking part in a story of their own creation. He imagines them as "thieves" confidently riding into the night rather than two teenagers escaping their family obligations. John Grady tends to see the land of the West as wide-open, simply waiting for him to encounter adventures wherever he might find them. He has little sense at this point of the real-world compromises of this land, or even of the other people and groups with their own complicated histories also populating this space.

Way the world is. Somebody can wake up and sneeze somewhere in Arkansas or some damn place and before you're done there's wars and ruination and all hell. You dont know what's goin to happen. I'd say He's just about got to. I don't believe we'd make it a day otherwise.

Related Characters: Lacey Rawlins (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 92

Explanation and Analysis

Rawlins and John Grady have narrowly escaped being caught by ranchers as Blevins was trying to get "his" horse back. They've lost Blevins, and Rawlins has expressed some concern about the boy's safety, even though both he and John Grady have been exasperated at Blevins's naiveté when he was tagging along.

Rawlins has a greater tendency to voice his religious thoughts and doubts than John Grady, and several times over the course of this book he treats his friend as a sounding board for such questions. His suggestion here is about the interrelation of seemingly disjointed events. These connections can be so obscure and so complex, he says, that mere human beings do not stand a chance at unraveling the true causes of events; there must be a God, then, who is beyond it. The existence of a God who has written a script backing up all the causes and consequences of worldly affairs would be comforting, at least, as it would mean that Rawlins would not have to imagine himself in a meaningless void. But if all human actions are ultimately directed by a divine force, it is unclear to what extent human beings are responsible for their own actions. This is a problem that the book will return to again and again, as John Grady and Rawlins consider the consequences of their own actions, and their own responsibility for other people.

Part 2 Quotes

He said that war had destroyed the country and that men believe the cure for war is war as the curandero prescribes the serpent's flesh for its bite. He spoke of his campaigns in the deserts of Mexico and he told them of horses killed under him and he said that the souls of horses mirror the souls of men more closely than men suppose and that horses also love war.

Related Characters: Luis

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 111

Explanation and Analysis

Luis is an elderly cook with a bad leg who tells John Grady and Rawlins about his years spent fighting during the Mexican Revolution, while the boys are out in the mountains on the hunt for wild horses to bring back to Don Hector's ranch. As the boys's journey into Mexico continues, their romanticized view of the country begins to be affected by the testimony of people who have actually lived through violent, dangerous times.

Luis, at least according to this passage, seems to be deeply ambivalent on the subject of violence. In one sense, he condemns what war has done to his country, and he does not believe that the solution for war is like a solution that a healer would suggest for a serpent's bite—that is, more of the same. Luis seems to love horses as much as John Grady does, and there is a tragic element in what he relates about the horses being killed out from under him while on the battlefield. Still, Luis acknowledges that horses, like men, are fascinated by war, even if, unlike men, they do not try to impose some kind of meaning on such violence. Luis's wisdom comes not from his claim to know the solution to such violence, but rather from his own lived experience, his ability to testify to what he has seen in the past.

Finally he said that among men there was no such communion as among horses and the notion that men can be understood at all was probably an illusion. [...] Finally John Grady asked him if it were not true that should all horses vanish from the face of the earth the soul of the horse would not also perish for there would be nothing out of which to replenish it but the old man only said that it was pointless to speak of there being no horses in the world for God would not permit such a thing.

Related Characters: Luis, John Grady Cole

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 111

Explanation and Analysis

Luis, in the same conversation with John Grady and Rawlins as above, has already suggested that there is something shared between the souls of human beings and of horses. Here he qualifies that view, expressing an even more pessimistic outlook on the fate of humans. Even if there is

something shared in these beings' souls, Luis suggests, humans fail to understand that unity. Luis also continues to use his age and lived experience not to convince John Grady and Rawlins of certain truths, but rather to show how, according to what he has learned over the years, so little about human beings can be understood at all.

John Grady is fascinated by Luis and by his knowledge of horses. He takes the opportunity to run his own theories on the souls of horses past the elderly man. However, Luis is skeptical about this desire to construct theories or play hypothetical, "what-if?" games. For Luis, the world is the way it is because of what God has ordained. God has filled the world with horses, so it will remain with horses as part of his larger plan, and it is pointless to speculate on what things would be like otherwise. The book seems to privilege Luis's point of view as someone who has slowly and painfully gained knowledge and humility over the years; but it also underlines how difficult this same process will be for John Grady, who still has the innocence of youth.

❝ They went to France for their education. He and Gustavo. And others. All these young people. They all returned full of ideas. Full of ideas, and yet there seemed to be no agreement among them. How do you account for that? Their parents sent them for these ideas, no? and they went there and received them. Yet when they returned and opened their valises, so to speak, no two contained the same thing. [...] People of my generation are more cautious. I think we dont believe that people can be improved in their character by reason. That seems a very french idea.

Related Characters: Don Hector Rocha y Villarreal (the hacendado) (speaker), Gustavo Madero

Related Themes:

Page Number: 145-146

Explanation and Analysis

Don Hector, the owner of the hacienda, has invited John Grady into his billiard room and is discussing the history of his family and of Mexico. These histories are intertwined, since Hector's mother Alfonsa may have once been engaged to Gustavo Madero—Gustavo's brother Francisco was the first popularly elected president of Mexico, but waves of violence ultimately resulted in the death of both brothers. Here, Don Hector contrasts his own pessimism with the idealism of an earlier generation, which learned radical ideas from France (long a hotbed of revolutionary activity). For Don Hector, at least, those ideas failed, since instead of resolving Mexico's issues they only fostered greater disagreement; indeed, ultimately they fostered only greater war and violence.

In a way, Don Hector's story rewrites the book's emphasis on individual growth, and the replacement of a romantic view of the world with an understanding of reality, on a broader scale—that of an entire society. He argues that the knowledge and idealism gained by powerful ideas can be harmful, and is skeptical that "reason" alone can change people's minds or improve them. At the same time, Don Hector is not just giving John Grady an abstract history lesson. He knows that he is taking a risk by inviting a young American into his home, especially since he knows that his own daughter Alejandra is headstrong and independent. His words thus also have personal implications, prodding John Grady to have a sense of humility as he enters into this complex world.

Part 3 Quotes

❝ But some things aint reasonable. Be that as it may I'm the same man you crossed that river with. How I was is how I am and all I know to do is stick. I never even promised you you wouldnt die down here. Never asked your word on it either. I dont believe in signing on just till it quits suitin you.

Related Characters: John Grady Cole (speaker), Lacey Rawlins

Related Themes:

Page Number: 155

Explanation and Analysis

John Grady and Rawlins have been captured by guards and led away from Don Hector's hacienda, quite possibly at Don Hector's command (because of John Grady's budding relationship with Alejandra). They have reached the town of Encantada, and neither of the boys knows what is going to happen to them, or even what they may be charged for. Rawlins is sulking, angry at John Grady for having gotten them both into this mess. Here John Grady attempts to defend himself through two arguments. First, he says that he hasn't changed, and indeed wouldn't know how to change if he wanted to. All they can do is accept what the world has in store for them, and react to it the best way that they know how. Second, John Grady appeals to Rawlins's sense of loyalty, which he knows is strong in his friend, and to the value of determination in refusing to "quit" each other when things become difficult.

> We can make the truth here. Or we can lose it. but when you leave here it will be too late. Too late for truth. Then you will be in the hands of other parties. Who can say what the truth will be then? At that time?

Related Characters: The captain (speaker), John Grady Cole

Related Themes:

Page Number: 168

Explanation and Analysis

John Grady and Rawlins have been thrown in prison, where they encounter Blevins. Now the prison guards bring John Grady and Rawlins, separately, into the office of the "captain," most likely a police chief, who is attempting to get them to corroborate his story about Blevins's career stealing horses. Rawlins and John Grady both tell the truth, but that doesn't seem to satisfy the captain, as he orders the guards to whip them both.

The captain's words reveal a frightening cynicism about the very nature of the truth, and destroy any kind of idealized concept of objectivity. The way he employs the term suggests that the truth can be whatever he and John Grady decide that it is. He dangles the word "truth" in front of John Grady as a kind of bait, proposing that John Grady choose one version of the truth now, which will be better for both of them. In some ways, the captain is merely maximizing his own chances to get what he wants. But the narrative also wants to show how, in an unfamiliar world, all values that one might believe to be eternal and unchangeable are actually subject to being challenged. The captain's threat suggests that the "other parties" that have their own version of the truth could be even more dangerous to John Grady.

> John Grady watched the small ragged figure vanish limping among the trees with his keepers. There seemed insufficient substance to him to be the object of men's wrath. There seemed nothing about him sufficient to fuel any enterprise at all.

Related Characters: The captain, Jimmy Blevins, Lacey Rawlins, John Grady Cole

Related Themes:

Page Number: 177

Explanation and Analysis

The prison guards have loaded John Grady, Rawlins, and Blevins into a truck to carry them to some unknown place. They pause somewhere far from any civilization, and the captain takes one of the guard's guns and leads Blevins away into the woods, where he will shoot the boy. Meanwhile, John Grady and Rawlins remain in the truck, knowing that there is nothing that they can do, and until the last moment imagining that something else will happen.

This is the first moment in the book where John Grady and Rawlins are made to confront seemingly meaningless violence, spurred by rules and customs that they cannot understand, rather than merely hearing about such violence from other people. The brute force of Blevins's murder is so incomprehensible to John Grady, as shown in this passage, because it clashes with how small and unthreatening he knows Blevins to be. It is not that John Grady will mourn the loss of Blevins as a friend—Blevins is not like Rawlins to him—but he cannot understand why such an effort has been mounted to hurt and kill someone so harmless. John Grady is brought face-to-face here with the tragic gap between powerful institutions and fragile human beings, as well as the gap between his idealistic view of Mexico and the reality of the situation in which he finds himself.

> Yet the captain inhabited another space and it was a space of his own election and outside the common world of men. A space privileged to men of the irreclaimable act which while it contained all lesser worlds within it contained no access to them. For the terms of election were of a piece with its office and once chosen that world could not be quit.

Related Characters: The captain

Related Themes:

Page Number: 179

Explanation and Analysis

John Grady is attempting to grapple with the captain's killing of Blevins, especially since the captain seems to consider it as merely a business transaction, an opportunity for him to fulfill the desire of the brother of the man Blevins killed, though outside the official legal system. This passage is quite obscure, but its very obscurity underlines the confusion that John Grady feels as he attempts to draw meaning out from an action (murder, or "the irreclaimable act") that can only seem meaningless.

Through John Grady's eyes, the captain is portrayed as someone who willing chose or "elected" to murder, a choice which assigns him irrevocably to a certain class of fellow murderers. This class of people are still tied to the world—the world includes, of course, those who are murdered—and yet murderers still stand apart from them, fated to always be identified as such. This requirement of assuming responsibility for such a choice has something awe-inducing, almost admirable in it for John Grady, even as he cannot at this point imagine joining the ranks of this class. Still, he is beginning to recognize that a space where violence always seemed a weak background threat is actually full of stark choices concerning decisions of life and death.

> You dont understand the life here. You think the struggle is for these things. Some shoelaces or some cigarettes or something like that. The lucha. This is a naïve view. You know what is naïve? A naïve view. The real facts are always otherwise. You cannot stay in this place and be independent peoples. You dont know what is the situation here. You dont speak the language.

Related Characters: Emilio Pérez (speaker), Lacey Rawlins, John Grady Cole

Related Themes:

Page Number: 188

Explanation and Analysis

The prison where John Grady and Rawlins are housed is supposedly guarded over by the state, but the boys soon learn that the real authorities in the jail are certain prisoners, in particular Emilio Pérez, who rules the place through bribery, corruption, and intimidation. Like the captain, Emilio Pérez expresses to John Grady a cynical, stark view of institutional reality. John Grady and Rawlins have come to recognize that even the smallest possessions, like cigarettes, are part of a dangerous, shifting economic system—yet Emilio Pérez tells them that the reality of prison life goes far beyond those material trades. The prison, he claims, is its own social microcosm with its own tribes and leaders. The two boys cannot understand this world, not only because they are Americans, but because they do not yet speak the "language" of these social relationships. Even after having confronted violence and cynicism head-on, the boys still have to be disabused of the idea that they can simply adapt to the new circumstances by following their reason, or their thoughts on what this new life is like. They can only learn "the language" through their own harsh experiences.

> The Mexican does not believe that a car can be good or evil. If there is evil in the car he knows that to destroy the car is to accomplish nothing. Because he knows where good and evil have their home. The anglo thinks in his rare way that the Mexican is superstitious. But who is the one? We know there are qualities to a thing. This car is green. Or it has a certain motor inside. But it cannot be tainted you see. Or a man. Even a man. There can be in a man some evil. But we dont think it is his own evil. Where did he get it? how did he come to claim it? no. Evil is a true thing in Mexico. It goes about on its own legs. Maybe some day it will come to visit you. Maybe it already has.

Related Characters: Emilio Pérez (speaker), John Grady Cole

Related Themes:

Page Number: 194-195

Explanation and Analysis

Pérez is trying to win John Grady over to his side, so he continues to choose his words carefully, but as he does so he also develops a fascinating contrast between what he sees as American and Mexican ethical theories. Americans might think that Mexicans are superstitious, he says, but in fact Americans see everything as black and white, good and evil, and believe that you can simply bang evil out of something or someone, as Pérez once saw an American attack his car with a hammer out of anger since it wouldn't start. This is part of Americans' general naïveté, he believes. But Mexicans understand that evil is more clever, unruly, and thus more powerful than that: it can move "on its own legs" from person to person and from situation to situation. On the one hand, this means that a person is not inherently evil, even if he commits an evil action. But it also means that it is more difficult to track down and eradicate evil.

> I never thought I'd do that.
> You didnt have no choice.
> I still never thought it.
> He'd of done it to you.
> He drew on the cigarette and blew the smoke unseen into the darkness. You dont need to try to make it right. It is what it is.

Related Characters: Lacey Rawlins, John Grady Cole (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 215

Explanation and Analysis

John Grady has just killed another prisoner, and he is expressing the shock of what seems to have been an almost disembodied experience: he repeats to Rawlins that he never could have imagined doing such a thing. In claiming that John Grady had to kill the man, since he would have been killed himself otherwise, Rawlins is trying to comfort his friend, and also to in some way justify John Grady's actions.

John Grady refuses to accept any easy answers or justifications for why he killed. At this moment, John Grady's thoughts on the captain after he killed Blevins—thoughts expressed in a quotation above—come back to haunt him: John Grady has now joined the ranks of that class of murderers that he once perceived as so divided from the rest of the world. Even then, John Grady had considered the captain as possessing some kind of powerful secret, but now John Grady hardly revels in his new status—he has gained unique knowledge and experience, but has also lost a crucial kind of innocence forever. Now, though John Grady doesn't seem particularly emotional about his guilt, he is still apparently committed to bearing the burden of his actions and taking responsibility for them.

Part 4 Quotes

❝ They were saddened that he was not coming back but they said that a man leaves much when he leaves his own country. They said that it was no accident of circumstance that a man be born in a certain country and not some other and they said that the weathers and seasons that form a land form also the inner fortunes of men in their generations and are passed on to their children and are not so easily come by otherwise.

Related Characters: Lacey Rawlins

Related Themes:

Page Number: 226

Explanation and Analysis

John Grady has returned to Don Hector's ranch, this time without Rawlins, and he shares everything that has happened with the other vaqueros. As they express sorrow for not being able to see Rawlins again, the vaqueros simultaneously seem to understand his desire to return home. In general, this group has throughout the book seemed confident that there is an underlying order to human affairs. It makes sense to them that a person could be so tied to his or her native land because fate dictated that connection: indeed, much of their belief seems to rest on the deep intertwining of the human and the natural, the seasons and the "inner fortunes" of people. Americans or Mexicans, they imply, bear within them the actions of their ancestors and the things that happened on their land, and must take on that burden as they choose how to act themselves.

❝ Because the question for me was always whether that shape we see in our lives was there from the beginning or whether these random events are only called a pattern after the fact. Because otherwise we are nothing.

Related Characters: Alfonsa (speaker), John Grady Cole

Related Themes:

Page Number: 230

Explanation and Analysis

Alfonsa has called John Grady to him so that he might understand that she was the one who had him freed from prison, though only on the condition that he and Alejandra never see each other again. In a long series of passages, Alfonsa attempts to justify her decision to John Grady, while also musing on her own past and the way in which she sees Mexican history and individual choice within it. Alfonsa brings up a question that has beset several of the characters throughout the novel: whether there is ultimately an underlying order to the world, or whether life is only a chaotic series of events.

For Rawlins and, at times, John Grady, this question has been closely tied to the existence and the omniscience of God: if an all-powerful God exists, then he would be the author of a pattern, which would exist. Alfonsa does not refer to God in this passage, but she too is concerned with such ideas. What is terrifying for Alfonsa is that the lack of a pattern, the existence merely of random events, would to her mean that human actions are essentially meaningless. Yet she cannot, at least here, determine whether the pattern exists or not—whether there really is a kind of meaning or purpose behind the events of life.

My father had a great sense of the connectedness of things. I'm not sure I share it. He claimed that the responsibility for a decision could never be abandoned to a blind agency but could only be relegated to human decisions more and more remote from their consequences. The example he gave was of a tossed coin that was at one time a slug in a mint and of the coiner who took that slug from the tray and placed it in the die in one of two ways and from whose act all else followed, cara y cruz. No matter through whatever turnings nor how many of them. Till our turn comes at last and our turn passes.

Related Characters: Alfonsa (speaker), John Grady Cole

Related Themes:

Page Number: 230

Explanation and Analysis

Alfonsa continues to speak to John Grady about her own past and her thoughts about Alejandra's future. For her these notions are inextricably bound up with the question of fate: whether there is an ultimate pattern in everything that happens, and thus whether all that happens does so for a reason, or whether events are no more than random. Alfonsa's father, for his part, does not seem to embrace the exact notion of fate that some others, like the cook Luis, have espoused to John Grady. Rather than understanding actions as driven by an external force, God or another power, Alfonsa's father sees causes and consequences as part of an unending stream of human activity: whether one tosses a coin and sees heads or tails (cara y cruz) might seem to have nothing to do with a coiner making money out of metal, and yet these two events are tied together, however distant they may seem. One particular human being enters into this stream at a given point, but it is larger than himself or herself. However, even as Alfonsa describes this viewpoint of her father's, she doesn't align herself with it entirely, complicating the book's portrayal of fate even more.

He said that those who have endured some misfortune will always be set apart but that it is just that misfortune which is their gift and which is their strength and that they must make their way back into the common enterprise of man for without they do so it cannot go forward and they themselves will wither in bitterness.

Related Characters: Alfonsa (speaker), Gustavo Madero, John Grady Cole

Related Themes:

Page Number: 235

Explanation and Analysis

Alfonsa tells John Grady of a severe accident she suffered to her fingers as a teenager, an accident that made her, in the eyes of society, much less appealing as a marriageable young girl. However, Gustavo Madero, recently returned with his brother Francisco from Europe, was one of the few who continued to call on her and speak with her. He had a glass eye from an accident of his own, and it was Gustavo who cheered Alfonsa by talking of their shared misfortunes, and of the strength that they can draw from it.

In some ways, Gustavo's sense of those struck by misfortune as "set apart" recalls the way John Grady perceives those, like the captain, who have murdered. The difference in Gustavo's opinion is that he stressed the need to immerse oneself once again in the "common enterprise" of human activity, so as not to become embittered and isolated. Alfonsa drew solace from Gustavo's words because they seemed to suggest that meaning could be drawn from an apparently meaningless, painful accident. In addition, his words tied the two of them together as people who had experienced more than others. Especially since Gustavo would later die a horrible, violent death, Alfonsa continues to remember his emphasis on courage and constancy, and his attempt to draw meaning from tragedy and violence.

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.

Related Characters: Alfonsa (speaker), John Grady Cole

Related Themes:

Page Number: 238

Explanation and Analysis

Alfonsa finishes the story of her past to John Grady by telling him of how her father sent her off to Europe, refusing to bring her home unless she would disassociate herself from the radical Madero brothers, which she refused. As a result, she did not return home until her father, as well as both the brothers, were dead. Alfonsa recognizes now that

her father was more like than unlike Gustavo, and she regrets her stubborn idealism. She has lived long enough now to understand the difference between "the dream" and "the reality": she has accepted that even the greatest idealism is no match against the ruthlessness of the world.

The way this quotation is structured, though, leaves us with little sense that Alfonsa's growing knowledge and wisdom about the way of the world, or her dismissal of youthful idealism, has anything positive or fruitful about it. She does not embrace reality as a productive, meaningful truth revealed, but rather only forces herself to come to terms with it. Indeed, she portrays this process of maturation as tragic and inevitable, taking place as a result of vast workings on the scale of life itself.

> In history there are no control groups. There is no one to tell us what might have been. We weep over the might have been, but there is no might have been. There never was. It is supposed to be true that those who do not know history are condemned to repeat it. I dont believe knowing can save us. What is constant in history is greed and foolishness and a love of blood and this is a thing that even God—who knows all that can be known—seems powerless to change.

Related Characters: Alfonsa (speaker), John Grady Cole

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 239

Explanation and Analysis

Alfonsa was once a student of biology, which taught her that the way to best decide on causes and effects, and distinguish between them, was to put one set in an experiment aside to use as a control group: that is, a group that the experimenters never touch, so that they can compare it to what happens to the other sets that they do modify. This scientific method, Alfonsa argues, is useless for history, because there is never any group that remains outside historical forces: there is thus no way to know how things could have been different if certain events had never occurred.

Again, Alfonsa expresses her deep skepticism that experience and knowledge are positive goods. She has certainly gained wisdom, but those she loved were still violently killed, and Mexican history has only grown uglier—there is no redemptive power to that experience, as she sees it. Rather than understand God as the author of a pattern lying behind everything, she sees even God as implicated in the irrational, bloody forces of human desires. The law of violence, as Alfonsa understands it, seems to be the only way that she can make sense out of human affairs—and even this law has nothing inherently meaningful behind it.

> It's not so much that I dont believe in it. I dont subscribe to its nomination. If fate is the law then is fate also subject to that law? At some point we cannot escape naming responsibility. It's in our nature. Sometimes I think we are all like that myopic coiner at his press, taking the blind slugs one by one from the tray, all of us bent so jealously at our work, determined that not even chaos be outside of our own making.

Related Characters: Alfonsa (speaker), John Grady Cole

Related Themes:

Page Number: 241

Explanation and Analysis

Alfonsa has explained to John Grady that she has told him about her past so that he might understand her, even if he still hates her for separating him from Alejandra. Indeed, Alfonsa argues that even though things happened outside John Grady's control, that is no excuse in his favor.

Alfonsa has already positioned herself as a skeptic with regard to the existence of fate, that is, a predetermined pattern that dictates what will happen and who we will be. Here she qualifies that view. Fate, according to Alfonsa, is something we think of as an external, independent force, and yet we often use it to assign responsibility for why things happen the way they do, just as we think of ourselves or others as responsible for what we as people do (and how we affect others). Fate, then, comes to be another way for humans to put themselves at the center of the world: rather than an escape of responsibility, it is for Alfonsa another way of considering responsibility, as people become convinced that you can trace actions back to a given agent (even if that agent is a kind of personified Fate, like the coin-maker).

Alfonsa's tone suggests that she is doubtful about this possibility, and humans don't really have control over anything—there is no "responsibility" if everything is essentially random. But Alfonsa also recognizes that it

almost doesn't matter whether or not fate and responsibility exist, or whether or not she doubts their existence, since human history has proven that we cannot get away from these ideas no matter what.

He saw very clearly how all his life led only to this moment and all after led nowhere at all. He felt something cold and soulless enter him like another being and he imagined that it smiled malignly and he had no reason to believe that it would ever leave.

Related Characters: John Grady Cole

Related Themes:

Page Number: 254

Explanation and Analysis

Alfonsa had already told John Grady that Alejandra will refuse to be with him, but he has not fully believed it until now. They have met at a town called Zacatecas and have spent several nights together; now, after he has asked her to go away with him, she says that she loves him but she cannot leave with him. In this passage John Grady takes a retrospective look back at his life—a look that for us mirrors the events of the novel—and believes that, even if he could not see it at the time, this moment is the culmination of everything he has done. Now, however, with Alejandra refusing to be with him, John Grady does not see what else might give his life meaning as he goes forward. The "something cold and soulless" might be considered a kind of knowledge, the wisdom that comes from experiencing profound loss after the period of romantic and romanticized love that had formerly characterized his relationship with Alejandra.

In his sleep he dreamt of horses and the horses in his dream 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 stone the weathers had taken it away again and the horses were wary and moved with great circumspection carrying in their blood as they did the recollection of this and other places where horses once had been and would be again. Finally what he saw in his dream was that the order in the horse's heart was more durable for it was written in a place where no rain could erase it.

Related Characters: John Grady Cole

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 280

Explanation and Analysis

John Grady has taken the captain prisoner and the two of them are riding through the Mexican hills. He has told the captain that he will not kill him: John Grady is not like the captain. John Grady has dreamt of horses before, and here his dream becomes a kind of allegory for the ideas of destiny and order that have concerned so much of the novel. The "antique site" he dreams of is full of stones on which are written a meaning and pattern to the world, but now time and history have made that meaning unclear. The horses bear within them not any explicit meaning and purpose, but rather the memory of former times and places. For John Grady, however, this means that they do reflect a kind of order to the world. Even if he does not embrace a "solution" to the problems of violence, loss, and heartbreak that he must confront, having been fully disabused of his romantic innocence, horses present a way to accept the overwhelming nature of the world, and to trace some kind of an order through what might otherwise seem mere chaos.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

PART 1

John Grady Cole enters the hallway of his family's house, which is lined with dimly lit portraits of his ancestors. He looks at the body of his grandfather wrapped in funeral cloth. He thinks about how his grandfather never combed his hair that way while he was alive.

The novel enters with John Grady inhabiting a space that is both familiar and alienating: it's the home where he's lived for years, but his grandfather's death and unfamiliar hair makes John Grady feel distanced from, rather than belonging to, his past.

It's cold outside, but John Grady goes out to stand on the prairie for a long time, until he hears the train howling in from the east. He goes back inside and greets Luisa, the woman who's been working for his family for years, along with her mother, Abuela, and Luisa gives him a sweetroll. He asks her in Spanish if it was her that lit the candle in his grandfather's room, but she says that it was John Grady's mother.

The wide-open prairie contrasts with the sound of the train, a reminder of industrialization and a means of connecting one American city to another. Within this rapidly changing word, there are still signs of constancy, as in Luisa's long-lasting relationship with the Coles.

At the funeral, John Grady's father stands by himself a little away from the others, as the women hold onto their hats against the strong wind. That evening, John Grady rides his **horse** out west from the house on his normal route, to the westernmost part of the ranch where he can see the Concho River. He likes riding at night, because the shadowed road seems like something from the past, where horses and their Indian riders with painted faces would ride down from the north in search of war.

Already, we see how John Grady can sometimes feel more comfortable around horses than around other people, especially at difficult moments. His nighttime horseback rides feed his imagination, allowing him to replace dull and sometimes painful reality with a romantic past, in which war is no more than an exciting event.

John Grady finds an old **horse** skull in the brush and turns it over. He loves in horses the same thing that he loves in men: "the heat of the **blood** that ran them," that is, the ardent side of living. He rides back home, still thinking about the warriors following the laws of **blood** riding across to Mexico.

At this point in the novel, blood symbolizes what John Grady thinks of as most real and true. He equates the image of blood coursing through a man's or horse's veins with intensity, integrity, and courage.

We learn that it's 1949, and though the house was built in 1872, John Grady's grandfather is the first man to die in it. Before that, the original family ranch had been carved out of a government land grant in 1866. Five years later, the grandfather built the house and grew the ranch to 18,000 acres. All his brothers died in violent accidents before the age of 25, and his wife died in an influenza epidemic before they had children. He then married his wife's sister and they had one child: the mother of John Grady Cole—and this is the first time we learn his name.

The laws of blood seem to have already been present in the past of John Grady's family, though here they are more of an occasion for sorrow than for courageous bluster. We also learn that the family ranch has its roots in early American history: land grants were given in the mid-nineteenth century to encourage Americans to settle in the still largely unexplored American West.

John Grady meets his father in a café, where people seem to recognize them. John Grady says "she's" gone to San Antonio, and his father admonishes him not to call his mother "she," and that she can go where she wants to. His father admits he didn't want any of this for John Grady, who says he knows. His father suggests they go out and ride on Saturday, and though he repeats several times that John Grady doesn't have to if he doesn't want to, John Grady says he does have to.

Though the prose here is sparse, made up almost entirely of dialogue between John Grady and his father, we can see how strained their relationship is, and how it most likely has something to do with John Grady's mother. Horseback riding seems to be something that unites them, however. The father seems to want to mend the relationship through riding.

In the next scene, John Grady and his friend Lacey Rawlins are lying outside in the dark on saddle blankets. Rawlins asks what John Grady plans to do. "She" didn't say anything to him, John Grady says. He also says he won't go with his father on Saturday.

Like many teenagers, John Grady confides in his friend more readily than in his parents. In some ways this makes him seem younger than the horse-riding cowboy he'd like to be.

John Grady returns home and walks into his grandfather's office, where he looks at his mother's framed high school graduation photo. Out the window he can see the old telegraph poles, which his grandfather had told him the Comanche Indians would cut and splice back together with horsehair.

The Comanche Indians, by this point greatly reduced from their earlier size and might, symbolize for John Grady the romance of an earlier time and place, one whose traces he can still see in the telegraph poles.

John Grady's mother, referred to as "she," switches on the light and comes into the office to ask what he's doing. She stands there for a long time without talking before going back up the stairs.

While John Grady's relationship to his father is strained, he seems both angrier at and more afraid of his mother.

It's autumn and there are a few warm days left, which John Grady spends drinking coffee (his father whisky) in the hotel room where his father is now staying. John Grady asks him if he'd buy the ranch if he had the money, but his father says he didn't buy it when he did have the money. John Grady suggests they play chess again one of these days, but his father, who was in the army, says he doesn't have the patience anymore. He says poker's different since you can make money out of it. John Grady asks him to talk to his mother, but he says he can't—the last real conversation they had was in California in 1942. It isn't her fault, John Grady's father says: he's different now. John Grady says his grandfather never gave up, and always thought his parents would get back together.

We learn a few more things about John Grady's father in this passage: time, and perhaps the war, seem to have changed him profoundly, contributing to the disintegration of his marriage and to his constant low-level distraction. A penchant for alcohol and gambling seems to confirm his father's declining mental state. We can now better understand why John Grady is so attracted to the exciting, adventure-filled stories of the Comanche Indians. Compared to John Grady's idea of the Old West, his father seems paralyzed, unable or unwilling to act to save the ranch or get back together with his wife.

John Grady says he should be getting back home, and as they walk into the lobby his father says the Bible says the meek shall inherit the earth, but he wonders whether that's a good thing. He hands a key to his closet to John Grady and says there's something that belongs to him there. John Grady rides back up the elevator and sees a new Hamley Formfitter saddle. John Grady swears in awe and walks out of the hotel with the saddle slung over his shoulder.

As we'll see, the Bible and Christian imagery will serve as a common backdrop to scenes in the novel, as characters grapple with the implications of religious meaning in their own lives. Though he struggles to renew his former closeness to his son, John Grady's father recognizes his son's gift and passion for riding horses.

Over the next few weeks, it rains and floods, and John Grady's **horse** Redbo has to be cajoled into directing the cattle. John Grady, Luisa, and another ranch worker eat in the kitchen when his mother isn't there, and sometimes he catches a ride into town and looks up at his father's window to watch his shadow pace back and forth. When his mother returns they eat in the dining room at opposite ends of the long table. He asks why she couldn't lease him the ranch. His mother says there's not any money, and the place has barely paid expenses for years. He's only sixteen, she says, and is being ridiculous. She leaves the room and he looks at an oil painting of horses with wild eyes breaking through a corral. He's never seen horses like that, and when he'd once asked his grandfather what they were, he said they were picturebook horses.

Here, we gain a better sense of John Grady's inability to connect with either of his parents. He seems to want to have a relationship with them, but doesn't make an active effort with his father, while he and his mother talk past each other. John Grady's mother embodies the calculating, practical side of adult reality, whereas John Grady's increasingly hopeless ideas on how to keep the ranch only underline how little he knows about this adult world. The anecdote about the oil painting shows both John Grady's expertise in distinguishing horses, and his innocence in his inability to tell "storybook" from real horses.

John Grady goes to see Mr. Franklin, a lawyer, who tells him that the ranch is his mother's property and she can do whatever she wants with it, especially since she and John Grady's father are divorced—John Grady didn't know this, but it was finalized three weeks ago. John Grady asks Franklin to talk to her, but he says she won't change her mind. She doesn't want to live on a cattle ranch in west Texas, and he guesses she wants to have a better social life. Mr. Franklin says it's John Grady's father's fault for signing every paper anyone put down in front of him. He tells John Grady he's sorry he doesn't have better news, but some things in this world can't be helped.

Clearly John Grady has been ignorant of much of what's going on between his parents. He tries to enter their adult reality by paying a visit to his lawyer, but this is mostly a futile endeavor. John Grady continues to believe there must be some kind of a solution—that because he loves the ranch so much, and couldn't bear for it to be sold, proof of his love will somehow make things right. Franklin tries to gently disabuse John Grady of his idealism by telling him that there isn't always a solution to life's problems.

After Christmas John Grady's mother is always absent. Luisa is often crying. One morning, John Grady carries a leather satchel with a shirt, socks, toothbrush, and razor out of the house and waves down a hitchhiker to San Antonio. The driver tries to talk to John Grady, but then realizes he's "not much of a talker." Snow is falling on the Edwards Plateau when he crosses it and it's a snowstorm when they reach San Antonio. He walks into a café at random and orders a cheeseburger and chocolate milk. He walks around town in the snow, checks into the YMCA, and stretches out over his bed to sleep.

Often McCarthy will introduce new scenes that follow the characters closely, but won't give much context to explain why they're acting a certain way. At this point, we know only that John Grady's home life is increasingly isolating and somber, and that this has some connection with his decision to go to San Antonio. He's old enough to stay in a hotel by himself, but still a teenager who prefers to drink chocolate milk at a café.

The next day John Grady pays for a balcony seat for the town theater. At intermission he smokes a cigarette in the lobby and notices the glances of the other theatergoers. He watches the play intensely, hoping there will be something in the story to tell him about the way the world is, or is becoming, but he doesn't find it. When the lights come up, his mother comes forward several times to bow. He sits for a long time in the empty theater and then leaves.

Here we learn the reason for John Grady's visit to San Antonio (and the reason for his mother's frequent absences). Her sophisticated urban social circle has little in common with the ranch life John Grady is used to, which is perhaps why he believes the play might have something to teach him.

The next morning the temperature's still freezing and the only café open is a Mexican café, but John Grady is able to order and speak to the waitress in Spanish. He walks up Broadway and watches his mother walk through the lobby of the Menger Hotel on the arm of a man in a suit. He waits for a while and then asks the clerk at the desk if there's a Mrs. Cole registered—he says there isn't.

Most likely because of the ranch workers back home, John Grady knows Spanish well. This is especially useful in Texas, which borders Mexico. In the hotel, John Grady must accept that his mother has definitively moved on—she's no longer going by her married name, and is seeing another man.

John Grady and his father ride one last time together in early March, along Grape Creek into the hills and open country, barely speaking all day. His father looks thin and frail. He seems to look out at the world as if either he no longer saw it right, or finally did see it right. John Grady rides the **horse** more comfortably, naturally, as if he was born to ride.

The contrast between the ways John Grady and his father ride horses highlights the different ways they see the world. John Grady feels at home in the world, as if it couldn't harm him, whereas his father no longer has that kind of confidence.

They ride into town and tie their **horses** in front of a café. His father asks if he's thought about "boarding" his horse, keeping it at the ranch in exchange for feeding and cleaning stalls. John Grady says Redbo wouldn't like that. His father asks if he's still seeing the Barnett girl, but he says he isn't. He doesn't know who broke up with whom, so his father says that means it was her who ended things. He says John Grady's mother and he never agreed on much—he always thought it was enough that she liked horses. She left for California when the war came, while Luisa looked after John Grady. She wanted him to go out there, his father says, but he didn't last long. He says she came back for John Grady, not him, and he'd like to see them make up. She saved him while he was in Goshee (a POW camp), since he constantly thought of her and wrote to her. The last thing his father says is that the country won't be the same again, because no one feels safe anymore.

John Grady's conversation with his father begins haltingly and somewhat awkwardly, as his father tries to make small talk and John Grady refuses to make an effort to fill in the conversation. The reason for his father's awkwardness seems to be that he's attempting to explain things to his son and to justify his ex-wife's behavior by trying to make clear that she always loved her son. We also learn here why John Grady's father seems so haunted: he was taken prisoner during World War II, though the only thing we learn about his time there is in relation to his family. The war has forced him to accept that reality can be brutal and unsafe—a lesson John Grady hasn't had to learn yet.

That night, John Grady and Rawlins lie out beneath the stars. Rawlins asks if John Grady has told his father about leaving, and he says no. Rawlins says his father ran away from home, otherwise he'd have been born in Alabama. John Grady says he'd never have been born at all. After bickering, Rawlins says that if God wanted him to be born he'd have been born—and if he didn't he wouldn't have been born, John Grady replies. They both agree that their heads hurt. Rawlins says John Grady has more reason to leave than him, but asks if John Grady will still go without him. John Grady replies that he's already gone.

Again John Grady's finds relief from his struggles with his family by talking with Rawlins. Rawlins, as we'll see, often thinks about God, though he struggles to understand mysteries like the idea of God's omnipotence. Their conversation shows how something like Rawlins' birth can hinge on the barest of choices, like his father's decision to run away from home—but this doesn't solve their questions about fate.

John Grady sees the Barnett girl (Mary Catherine) one last time in town, running into her on the street. She says she thought they could be friends, but he just nods and says he's leaving soon. He asks if the girl's new love interest would be jealous that they're talking. She asks if he hates him. He shakes his head and she presses him, until he says it's all just talk. She wishes him the best, and he takes her small hand—the first time he's shaken hands with a woman—and tells her to take care of herself.

Before he leaves, John Grady seems to be severing relationships with many people in his life—his father, his mother, and now his former love interest. That Mary Catherine seems to have moved on is only another reason for him to depart, though the way he tells her he's leaving suggests that he hasn't entirely gotten over her.

Late that night, John Grady meets Rawlins in front of his house with their two **horses**. They ride across the open pasture onto the prairie, feeling like thieves in the night with the whole world available to them.

Escaping from home is a dream of many adolescents, but John Grady and Rawlins imagine an alternative, romantic narrative for their journey.

The day afterward, they've ridden 40 miles into land they still know. They water the **horses** and eat the sandwiches they've brought, resting under trees at midday. John Grady has only brought his grandfather's old revolver, which he doesn't know how to shoot. By sunset, they can hear trucks along a highway. They reach a gate on one side of the highway but don't see one on the other, and don't want to cross it in the dark. They see lights in the distance, probably Eldorado, and decide to sleep there until daybreak.

The boys' escape still seems like a relatively familiar, safe adventure, in known territory and with the revolver serving only as a useless prop. They're hardly in the Wild West, given that they're riding next to a modern highway. This provides a bit of humor (and shows the naivety of their journey), as the boys run into difficulty in crossing the highway, which hasn't exactly been constructed with horses in mind.

They lead the **horses** around old car parts strewn around the highway to a roadside café and order breakfast. Rawlins points to distant mountains and says that's where they're headed. After eating they go outside, where a Mexican is changing a tire on a truck. He asks where they're going and Rawlins says Mexico—they pretend they're running from the law, having robbed a bank. The man doesn't believe them, and when Rawlins asks if he knows that country, the Mexican says he's never been to Mexico in his life.

Again the horses are juxtaposed humorously against signs of the modern automobile industry. The distant mountains to which Rawlins gestures seem to them like a playground for adventure, populated with bandits and thieves. McCarthy is also being ironic when the "Mexican" turns out to be just as American as the boys are.

The boys follow a valley west, and Rawlins shoots a rabbit, which they clean to eat later. As they're cooking it that night, looking out at the black hills and crescent moon, Rawlins says he could get used to this.

In some ways, the American West hasn't actually changed much over the decades—you can still hunt and spend nights under the moon.

They ride all the next day in rolling hill country and then into a town, Pandale. They're dirty and dusty and John Grady tells Rawlins he looks like a desperado. The woman at the deli is impressed that the boys rode all the way down from San Angelo. Rawlins wonders what everyone's doing back home, and John Grady jokes that they've probably struck oil and are picking out their new cars. Rawlins asks if he ever feels just ill at ease for no reason, and if that means that you're somewhere you aren't supposed to be. John Grady says he's making no sense, and Rawlins agrees. He decides to start singing country tunes from the radio.

John Grady and Rawlins revel in how exotic they must seem to people like the woman at the deli, since they've now shed the image of the schoolboys they were back home. Still, Rawlins at least hasn't entirely relinquished his hold on San Angelo, given that he wonders about what's going on there. More than John Grady, Rawlins has some doubts about the whole enterprise, though his desire to be brave and adventurous prevents him from expressing too much unease.

The boys cross the Pecos River, the **horses** gingerly choosing their steps. John Grady says someone has been following them on horseback, but he says they should just keep riding and the follower will show or not. They ride onto a high plateau with a vista over the grass-covered country to the south. At a stand of cedars, Rawlins suggests they wait on the follower.

This is the first true event to happen to the duo: an unknown follower on horseback. John Grady and Rawlins are eager to meet this first test head-on, which is why they wait for the rider rather than continue on by themselves.

A rider (Jimmy Blevins) with a broadbrim hat and overalls, riding a beautiful, big bay **horse**, approaches them. He's about thirteen. Rawlins asks if he's following them, and the kid denies it, saying he's going to Langtry. When John Grady asks where he got the horse, the boy says it's his. He claims to be sixteen and coming from Pandale, where he saw John Grady and Rawlins. John Grady and Rawlins ask each other who gets to shoot him, and they flip a coin. The boy says they're just joking, but Rawlins asks how he can be so sure. Rawlins asks who's hunting him—or at least the horse—and the boy doesn't answer. Rawlins says he'll get them thrown in jail, and he and John Grady turn and head south alone. Rawlins is surprised the boy isn't following them, but John Grady says they haven't seem the last of him.

Within a few minutes of meeting John Grady and Rawlins, the boy seems to have told nothing but lies: about his age, where he got his horse, and where he's going. John Grady and Rawlins take the opportunity to play with the boy a little, asserting their maturity and preparedness over his uncertainty. The boy certainly seems to be in some trouble, but it's not the kind of trouble that John Grady and Rawlins were perhaps hoping for—trouble that that might play a part in their grand adventure. They're still realistic enough to turn their backs on the boy and head off alone.

That night they cross the Southern Pacific tracks near Pumpville, Texas, and make a fire in the shadow of the Pumpville water tank. The next morning they reach the river dividing the U.S. from Mexico. They ride upriver to where the river meets a creek and look for where they should cross. Before doing so, they eat lunch under willow trees. After a nap, John Grady sees the same boy riding towards them. Rawlins says they should remount and get away: they're both feeling uneasy about him. Rawlins gets his rifle and they walk down the creek to where the boy is sitting in the shallow water. The boy, who says he's called Jimmy Blevins (the name of a radio host), says no one will hunt him in Mexico, though he refuses to answer for what. He has no food or money: Rawlins asks why they would want him with them. He just says he's an American, and Rawlins shakes his head.

Again, the pair's wilderness adventure is often humorously juxtaposed with signs of modern, industrial American life, like the Pumpville water tank. Blevins seems even more eager than the other two to escape into Mexico, which strikes him not just as a place of adventure, without real worries, but as a means of escaping his material troubles in the United States. He grasps at a kind of patriotism that Rawlins, at least, finds naïve—indeed, that's how the pair consider Blevins at first, as a very young, innocent hanger-on who won't add anything to their group but probably wouldn't be a disastrous companion either.

They cross that night under the moon, and the **horses** have to swim by midriver. Rawlins holds his rifle in the air and they look like a band of marauders. Once they reach the other side, they look back at the American border silently, and then ride into a gallop while laughing and patting their horses.

It seems almost too easy: they simply cross a river on horseback and they've suddenly reached another country. At this point the group acts like the teenage boys they really are.

They camp at the edge of a plain, and when Rawlins asks, Blevins says he last ate several days ago. John Grady and Rawlins tell him their names and say they're from San Angelo, but Blevins doesn't say where he's from. Rawlins suggests they exchange his **horse** for one less likely to get them shot, but Blevins refuses. He says he has a gun, a 32-20 Colt. Rawlins doesn't believe him, but he reaches into his overalls for the pistol. Rawlins asks if he can shoot anything with it, and Blevins says anything he can throw up in the air he'll hit. Rawlins takes out his billfold and throws it up into the air, and Blevins punctures it with a pistol shot. Rawlins picks up his billfold and says they should get going.

Crossing the national border apparently has made John Grady and Rawlins feel a little warmer towards their newfound companion, or at least curious. Blevins has told enough lies that Rawlins is skeptical of his claim to have an enviable 32-20. But like John Grady with horses, Blevins seems to have a way with pistols. It looks like Rawlins is chastened and perhaps a little embarrassed by this turn of affairs. Blevins' expertise in shooting has, at least temporarily, compensated for his naiveté in other aspects of life.

They ride side by side and look around at the new country, watching hawks and low hills covered with *nopal* and *creosote* (cactuses and tar). They ride into the town of Reforma, where the main street is lined with mud-brick houses and a pole corral. They enter a store where a girl is sitting reading a comic book. John Grady asks in Spanish for something to drink, and she hands them cider, which Rawlins pays for with a dollar bill with a hole at each end. They walk outside and Rawlins notes that there's no electricity here—there's probably never been a car. He wonders what they're saying back home, and John Grady reckons people are saying that they're gone.

By deploying descriptions in Spanish, McCarthy helps the reader perceive the Mexican landscape as unfamiliar and exotic, just as it seems to the travelers. The first town they reach seems to have been forgotten by time, lacking electricity and cars. While John Grady embraces the newness, Rawlins is more likely to contrast it to life back home, which serves as a measuring stick for all his other experiences.

That evening, they come to a small *estancia* (farm) where two little girls in white dresses are standing in the yard. They eat inside at a pine table, with a framed picture of the Virgin Mary on the wall The little girls watch them eat in awe. The *estancia* owner asks them about America, which he'd seen once across the river as a boy. They're sitting on backless benches and Blevins leans back at one point, crashing to the floor. The little girls squeal in delight, but Blevins is ashamed and whispers that he can't be laughed at. He climbs over the bench and goes out, and the owners look worried. After dinner John Grady finds Blevins sitting on the ground, and Blevins refuses to get up to sleep in the house with him.

For the American boys, Mexico is an exotic dream, but at the same time easily accessible. For the estancia owner, however, America seems physically close but practically unattainable. This speaks to the unequal economic realities of each place—realities of which the boys are largely ignorant. We learn more here about Blevins' personality: he's acutely aware that he can seem young and naïve, so he acts inordinately proud as a result—shame being, of course, tied to pride.

John Grady and Rawlins sleep in the back of the house, and John Grady says that the *estancia* owner had told him there are big ranches one or two hundred miles away where they can work. Rawlins wonders if he thinks they're desperados. He asks if Blevins is just going to sleep in the yard, and says maybe he'll be gone in the morning. He spreads out the cards that were in his billfold, exclaiming that his picture of Betty Ward, a girl from school, is shot through between her eyes.

Rawlins, more talkative and direct than John Grady, is often the one to explicitly articulate their attitude towards their journey south. In many ways it's oriented outwards, to other people, whom they hope will think of them as "desperados" and thus give them a sense of confirmation and identity. Though Rawlins is easily exasperated by Blevins, he's also grudgingly impressed by his skill.

The next morning they ride out and see Blevins on the road. He asks if they have anything to eat, and the boys tell him they can't give him their lunch at seven in the morning. They eat lunch under the shade of trees next to a swamp. Blevins says that in the old days, this would be where the Comanches would lie in wait for travelers. Rawlins notes that the road seems deserted, and Blevins replies that it used to have far more people on it. Rawlins, exasperated, asks what he would know about the old days.

Blevins' pride and stubbornness evinces a lack of maturity and foresightedness, given that he'll now have no lunch like the others. Like John Grady, Blevins imagines the landscape populated by the Comanche Indians in olden times. Rawlins' exasperation is interesting, since he too has been spinning romantic yarns about the area's heritage, but he dislikes sharing them with Blevins.

That night they camp off the road and stare into the embers of their fire. Rawlins tells Blevins how good a horse rider John Grady is—that he can outride anyone he's ever seen. Blevins claims he's seen Booger Red ride, who can probably beat John Grady, but Rawlins laughs at him, saying Booger Red's been dead for years. He continues poking fun at Blevins, but John Grady tells Rawlins to leave him alone.

Rawlins continues to provoke Blevins, acting as if he's the mature adult and Blevins the naïve youngster. There's some truth to this, but Blevins' even greater innocence only makes it more difficult to see that John Grady and Rawlins aren't exactly experienced marauders either.

In the following days, they ride toward the distant *cordilleras* (mountain ranges) at the horizon. Rawlins wonders how to get there—it looks like paradise. He remarks how huge a country this is, and John Grady says that the hugeness is what he's there for.

While John Grady doesn't have concrete reasons for going to Mexico, he is at least looking to escape from a home life that feels confined and stifling. Mexico seems the opposite.

They ride down the northern slope of a mountain covered with evergreens and persimmon trees. That night, for the first time, they hear the howls of a wolf. John Grady looks up at the constellations in the sky, picking out Orion, Cepella, and Cassiopeia, and thinks about wildness in nature as well as inner wildness.

John Grady and Rawlins' usual stargazing seems different—and wilder—when framed by the wolf and by their new circumstances in Mexico. John Grady finds these two kinds of wildness mirror each other.

The next morning it's cold, and they drink the last of their coffee around a fire. Rawlins asks how long they'll last on coffee and cold tortillas, but John Grady says he isn't worried. As they watch the sun rise, Rawlins asks if there will be a day when the sun won't rise. Judgment day, John Grady answers, whenever God decides. When Rawlins asks if he believes in all that, John Grady says yes, but Rawlins isn't sure. Blevins says he's an infidel, but Rawlins tells him he doesn't know anything, and to shut up.

Much of the pair's adventure is ultimately about them trying to find a way to eat every day, though they're far from desperate. Again, Rawlins is the one to bring up God, once more in the context of if and how things are predetermined. He's still grappling with the possible answers to these questions. Rawlins's spiritual angst clashes humorously with his impatience towards Blevins.

By midmorning, they're out of the mountains, and they come across three other riders for the first time across the plain. They're *zacateros* (hay-cutters) heading to the mountains to work. The men are dressed in ragged clothes, have old, worn saddles, and smell of smoke and sweat. They seem wild and strange to the boys. John Grady watches them to see what they are thinking but can't tell at all. After speaking of the weather in the country, they wish luck on the Americans and head off.

Unlike the three boys, these zacateros have a purpose to their ride—earning their daily bread—and in fact, they're far less wild than the boys themselves. Their supposed "wildness" is a function of how different from the boys they are, with distinct pasts, families, and experiences of which the boys know nothing.

The boys ride on through the valley and camp in the low hills that evening, where they cook a jackrabbit shot by Blevins. Blevins buries it in the ground and builds the fire over it, saying that the Indians do it that way. When Rawlins asks if he's ever eaten a jackrabbit, he says he hasn't.

Blevins may be an expert shooter, but his (and the other boys') knowledge about cooking and camping is based mostly on what they've heard rather than experienced themselves.

Rawlins asks Blevins where he's from, and he says Uvalde County on the Sabinal River. He continues to refuse to answer why he's run away, but when John Grady asks if he's done it before, he says he has. He had gotten a job at a bowling alley in Oklahoma when he was bitten by a dog and it got infected. The doctor thought he might have rabies, and sent him back to Uvalde. He had saved up to go see a striptease show that was supposed to come through Uvalde, before the show's manager was thrown in prison for indecency. Anyway, the show never made it to Oklahoma either.

Blevins starts out committed to keeping his past a secret, but now he yields pretty easily to his new companions' questions. Blevins' story shows how in many ways he's a typical teenager, eager to glimpse the secrets of the adult world but ultimately subject to this world's rules himself. Blevins is perhaps a bit more stubborn than the average teenager, and living a more reckless life as well.

When Rawlins asks why Blevins wanted to go to Mexico, he says it was for the same reason as Rawlins: no one could find him there. Rawlins says no one is hunting him. Blevins says that he told his stepfather he wouldn't stand to be whipped by him (Blevins' father died in the war). Rawlins asks what he was doing when he was bitten by a dog, but at this point Blevins clams up and stops answering questions. They dig up the rabbit, which looks like a sandy effigy, but covered in hot sauce it tastes good enough.

Unlike John Grady, and especially Rawlins, Blevins is running away to Mexico to escape something very concrete—an abusive stepfather. Blevins isn't sharing the whole story here, but what is clear is that Blevins has experienced and suffered more than what Rawlins and John Grady first thought.

The next day they start to encounter caravans of migrant traders headed north to the border, plodding with donkeys bearing loads of furs, goat hides, or handmade rope and carrying water in hog skins. The boys try to buy water but they don't have coins small enough to do so. Instead, they buy a canteen of *sotol* (an alcoholic drink) and are drunk by evening. Rawlins catches sight of Blevins' **horse** with an empty saddle, and they turn back to see Blevins sitting in the middle of the road. Next time they'll leave him behind, Rawlins says. Blevins gets back on but drops the reins, and when he digs his heels in the horse goes forward and Blevins falls backward into the road. Rawlins spits in disgust and John Grady curses at him to get back on the horse.

Again, the boys' experience crossing the border—easy, joyful, fun—has little to do with the migrant traders' conception of the border. Their economic reality is underlined by the fact that the three boys don't even have small enough coins to make change when they want to buy water. Instead, we're treated to a Wild West version of the adolescent party, in which Blevins plays the part of the class clown, giving John Grady and Rawlins another opportunity to roll their eyes at him for his immaturity (here, shown in his inability to handle alcohol).

An ominous-looking storm swells in front of them and lightning glows from the distance. Blevins says he can't be outside in lightning—it turns out he's afraid of it, and is sure he'll be struck. His grandfather, uncle, great-uncle, and cousin were all struck by lightning. He explains in detail just how his relatives were paralyzed or set on fire, and says he's been struck twice, which is why he's deaf in one ear. He says wildly that he'll try to outride the storm, which John Grady tells him is impossible. But at the first crack of thunder Blevins rides out towards the north, losing his hat as he goes. Rawlins says he won't take any responsibility for him—he'll fall off and the **horse** will be back in the States before long.

Blevins' story seems like another of his outlandish fabrications, and it's difficult to believe him at first. But his fear is undeniably real. Just as at the estancia, Blevins' stubbornness kicks in here as he dreams up the wildly impractical plan of attempting to outrace the approaching storm. With John Grady having been unsuccessful at reasoning with him, Rawlins suggests they stop looking out for him. For Rawlins, Blevins' own stupidity and stubbornness frees them of any responsibility towards him.

They ride north, and eventually come across Blevins' **horse** tied to a willow tree next to a stream beside the road. John Grady rides through the willows until finding Blevins crouched under a dead cottonwood tree. John Grady tells him that if there's a flood it'll wash him away, but Blevins says he's less afraid of drowning than of getting hit by lightning. John Grady rides back up to tell Rawlins Blevins is just sitting there, and Rawlins says he knew the boy was crazy.

Again, John Grady attempts to reason with Blevins, and again, Rawlins develops his own reasoning for why they shouldn't be held responsible for Blevins, especially if he's "crazy." John Grady has a stronger sense of loyalty to the boy than Rawlins does. From another perspective, Blevins might be reasoning his way out of his worst fear by choosing a lesser danger.

John Grady and Rawlins take shelter under a rock overhang. At one point they hear a **horse** running in the rain. The storm lets up by evening, and the next morning they untie the horses. John Grady says they should go find Blevins. Rawlins wonders if they should just go on without him, but John Grady doesn't think he can just leave him there, and Rawlins agrees.

At this first major opportunity to leave Blevins behind, Rawlins is more eager than John Grady to wash his hands of the boy. Still, despite his complaining, he does seem to retain some sense of responsibility for Blevins along with his friend.

John Grady finds Blevins in the same place he left him. His clothes are washed way, and his **horse** is gone. He doesn't know what he'll do. John Grady says Blevins probably knows he's worn Rawlins out. John Grady rides downriver and finds Blevins' sopping wet shirt. He hoists Blevins up onto the back of his own horse. When Rawlins sees them, he's too dismayed to even speak.

In addition to making irrational decisions, Blevins also seems to get himself into situations that are simply absurd. It's perhaps the ridiculousness of falling off a horse or losing all his clothes that irritates Rawlins, who was so thrilled about becoming a roaming marauder—and being anything but ridiculous.

They continue riding, the country taking on bright, almost electric green and yellow colors from the rain. They ride into a camp in the footlands of a low mesa where Mexicans had dug a firebox to mount a boiler onto. Several burros are standing loaded with the *candelilla* plant that can be boiled for wax. A dozen men dressed in rags are eating off clay plates beside them. John Grady greets them in Spanish and asks if they have something to eat. They gesture at the fire and the three boys fill their plates.

Again the boys find themselves encountering locals for whom horseback riding is part of their livelihood, not just an adventure. Still, there seems to be a general camaraderie in the Mexican outback, allowing riders who encounter each other—even foreigners—to share food and enjoy some kind of kinship.

Blevins asks if John Grady will ask them about his **horse**. Rawlins says he won't get his horse back, and they should trade his pistol for clothes and a bus ticket home. But Blevins says the pistol is with the horse. After a pause, Blevins looks up to ask what he ever did to Rawlins, who responds that he hasn't done anything, and won't: that's the point. But John Grady says it won't hurt to try to get Blevins' horse back.

Once again, Rawlins makes it quite clear that he has little patience for Blevins' mistakes and fears. Though Rawlins did agree to go back for Blevins after the storm, he's now attempting to draw a thick line between the two of them. John Grady re-assumes his role as mediator.

John Grady asks the Mexican men about the *candelilla*, which looks like a bar of soap. He tests it, and one of the men asks if the blond (Blevins) is his brother. He says no, that he's just a boy—not a relation, friend, nothing. The man asks how much he's worth, and if he wants to sell him. John Grady stands up and thanks him for his hospitality, while the man offers to trade him for wax. John Grady studies him and the others, noting that they don't look evil.

Even though John Grady seems to feel more of a responsibility towards Blevins than Rawlins does, he's also quick to distance himself from Blevins when the situation seems to require it. Still, failing to claim responsibility is hardly the same thing as selling someone into slavery—indeed, John Grady seems shocked that the man is actually serious.

When John Grady heads back to the others, Blevins asks again about his horse, but John Grady says they don't have him. Rawlins asks what's wrong, but he tells them to hurry up and mount the horses. They ride south without speaking, and about a mile later Blevins asks again what the man had wanted, and Rawlins tells him the man wanted to buy him.

Being older and more world-wary, Rawlins grasps far more quickly than Blevins what happened between John Grady and the man at the camp. He and John Grady both seem stunned into silence by the clear example of human evil they've just encountered.

That night, with Blevins sleeping wrapped in a blanket, Rawlins says he looks pitiful. He asks if John Grady has thought about Rawlins' suggestion to leave Blevins behind. Something bad is going to happen, Rawlins says.

Suddenly, it's become clearer to John Grady and Rawlins that the stakes are higher than simply having to endure Blevins' silly, ridiculous decisions. There is real danger on their Wild West adventure.

At noon the next day, they ride into the town of Encantada, where they see Blevins' pistol sticking out of the back pocket of a man bent over the engine of a Dodge car. John Grady grabs Blevins before he slides off the **horse**. Rawlins says they should stash the boy somewhere safe while he and John Grady look around. They leave Blevins in the shade of some trees and continue on, eventually glimpsing the horse inside an abandoned mud house. They keep riding, but when they return to the trees Blevins is gone.

Blevins is again impulsive and reckless—in a new town, in a foreign country, he fails to plan ahead and consider his actions. John Grady and Rawlins, having received a shocking introduction into how people in this region can think, are more wary, preferring to do some reconnaissance and try to grasp the current situation before they act.

Rawlins tells John Grady that for every dumb thing he's ever done, there was an earlier choice that got him into it. This is their last chance to just leave Blevins. What if it was you? John Grady asks, and Rawlins says neither of them would leave the other one. After a while sitting and smoking, John Grady says he can't do it. Rawlins says he knew he'd say that, though John Grady says he didn't know himself.

Rawlins' suggestion underlines the flip side of fate: how one purposeful decision can lead to others. For Rawlins, the value of loyalty is unimpeachable, but his is loyal only to John Grady. Still, it's implied that Rawlins might have known what John Grady would say, and so Rawlins knew he wouldn't leave Blevins either.

After falling asleep, they wake up to find Blevins squatting watching them. John Grady says his **horse** is here without a saddle, and they'll try to help him get it back. Blevins looks at the ground, and Rawlins exclaims that they could get shot dead for horse stealing, but that doesn't seem to mean anything to Blevins. As they fall asleep, Blevins looks at Rawlins and realizes he was right, but there was no help for it.

After deciding to risk their own safety for Blevins, Rawlins is appalled that Blevins doesn't seem more grateful. This kind of loyalty, which demands gratitude, isn't as noble and selfless as are his feelings toward John Grady. Blevins, in turn, is too stubborn to admit Rawlins is right, though he's beginning to see it.

Just before dawn, they ride through the silent streets until they reach the mud house, but the **horse** isn't there. Blevins dismounts and climbs through the house's window. He doesn't come back. Dogs start to bark through the town, and lights go on. Rawlins curses, and all at once they see Blevins on his bay horse, surrounded by howling dogs, exploding into the road after breaking through a fence. The dogs swarm over the road and three pistol shots can be heard from somewhere. Blevins passes Rawlins and John Grady. The two of them race up the hill, hearing shots behind them. They turn south and gallop through the town, riding up into the low hills.

As usual, Rawlins and John Grady have thought through their plan, and are aware of anything that could go wrong, from the barking dogs to the lights in town windows. Blevins does away with any subtlety by bursting through as he does. John Grady and Rawlins, having committed to helping Blevins, are now implicated in his frantic escape and have no choice but to follow him out of town. The scene is ridiculous and almost comic, except for the deadly reminder of the pistol shots.

A mile away they catch up with Blevins. Blevins says that people are coming for them, and he tells the other two to let him take the road, while they slip into the country. He gallops away and John Grady and Rawlins ride through the brush in the dark. They hear **horses** on the road at some point, and then silence. Rawlins asks what will happen if they catch Blevins—he may well say where the others were headed. John Grady says they should just keep riding.

John Grady and Rawlins are finally free of Blevins, though not on the terms that either of them would have wanted. Having staked out their loyalty to Blevins, they now have to wonder if Blevins would be just as loyal to them, especially if facing threat of imprisonment. The pair will continue to doubt Blevins' loyalty, which to them is tied to his lack of maturity.

As Rawlins starts wondering how long it's been since they've eaten, they hear riders from far away. They keep moving. At daylight they leave the **horses** tied up and climb a hill, where they see three riders descending another hill two miles away. Rawlins swears they'll have to get past his rifle, but John Grady says he doesn't want to shoot his way back to Texas. Rawlins says he'll kill Blevins if they see him again. They ride out west, at one point glimpsing the three riders further south. By midmorning, they assume that the riders have stopped pursuing them.

Now it appears that the riders are on the hunt for John Grady and Rawlins just as they are for Blevins. The boys are able to use their horseback riding expertise to their advantage, and for the first time the possibility of having to use violence arises. For Rawlins, the entire episode is another piece of evidence for why Blevins was always a risky gamble in terms of companionship.

Toward evening, they come across a band of sheepherders, but Rawlins suggests they continue, since he's had enough of natives in this part of the country. But they're unable to find water, and later that night he says they should have asked the herders for water. As they prepare to fall asleep, Rawlins says he'll say one thing for Blevins—he wouldn't stand for anyone "hijacking" his **horse**.

The pair's latest two encounters with the locals have punctured their image of Mexicans as wild and exotic but harmless. Though Rawlins is exasperated by Blevins, he's willing to admit the boy's strong points—in addition to his shooting chops, he was courageous and determined.

In the morning, Rawlins goes off to scavenge and finds nopal fruit. As they eat, John Grady says the problem is that they wouldn't necessarily recognize the three riders. The two of them are more noticeable, though Blevins is most of all. A good-looking **horse** is like a good-looking woman, Rawlins says—more trouble than they're worth. Rawlins echoes what John Grady said: they haven't seen the last of Blevins.

Though John Grady and Rawlins appear to have shaken off their pursuers, they know that as foreigners and newcomers, they're easy to spot in this landscape. They both finally seem to be realizing that they may have gotten into more than they can handle.

They ride all day, finally finding water at noon. That evening, Rawlins manages to shoot a buck, which they cook over a fire. They're impatient to eat. As they wait, Rawlins asks if John Grady ever thinks about dying, and if he thinks there's a heaven. John Grady says yes to both. Rawlins says there's so much that could happen to someone in life. John Grady asks if he's getting religious on him, and Rawlins says no, but that he may be better off if he was. John Grady wants to be sure Rawlins won't leave him, but Rawlins reminds him that he'd said he wouldn't.

While John Grady and Rawlins both are affected by what they've experienced so far, Rawlins is more likely to vocalize his feelings. Here, he feels overwhelmed by the diversity of human experience, and wonders how to carve meaning out of a series of events that may seem random. John Grady, perhaps correctly, interprets these thoughts as revealing Rawlins' doubts about their journey.

Rawlins asks if John Grady thinks God looks out for people, and they both agree that God does. Rawlins says someone can sneeze somewhere in Arkansas and that can lead to war. While they don't know what will happen, God must know, Rawlins says. John Grady just nods. Rawlins wonders if Blevins is safe, and when John Grady says he thought Rawlins was glad to be rid of him, Rawlins says he just doesn't want to see anything bad happen to him.

Again, Rawlins grapples with how events are interconnected, and whether there's a guiding intelligence determining these connections—which, even if humans can't know these connections, would be comforting to many people. Here, his questions are directly related to Blevins' wellbeing, showing that he doesn't lack loyalty to Blevins.

The next day they ride west, chewing on the deer meat throughout the day. That night they watch lightning on the horizon, and the following day they come across pools of rainwater. On the plain before them they see *vaqueros* (cowboys) driving cattle across the dusty ground. That night they build a bonfire against the cold, and the next day they ride across a plain with grass they haven't seen before, making out the path of the cattle from the previous day.

McCarthy's novel is full of lushly written descriptions of the Mexican landscape, which portray the setting as if it were another character. The setting is one of constant, cyclical change within a vast realm: even the diversity of weather patterns underlines the almost rhythmic environment of the West, in which nature is in harmony with human activity.

They encounter the *vaqueros*, who tell them about this part of the country. Together they all drive the cattle west and then south to a road. A young girl comes riding down the road wearing English riding boots and a blue jacket, sitting atop a black Arabian **saddlehorse**. The horse, along with the girl's boots, is wet from riding in the river. She wears a wide-brimmed hat covering her hair, which falls halfway to her waist. She turns and smiles to them, and each of the *vaqueros* tips his hat to her. Rawlins exclaims about the girl to John Grady, who doesn't answer, still looking down the road after her.

Despite John Grady's and Rawlins' newfound wariness of men in this part of the country, they are often welcomed into the landscape described above. The girl on the Arabian is described just as meticulously as the land—and it is telling that while Rawlins verbalizes his admiration of her (as he tends to do for most of his thoughts), John Grady simply is unable to stop looking at her even when she heads back down the road.

That evening they help drive the cattle into a holding pen. Afterward the *vaqueros* introduce John Grady and Rawlins to the gerente (manager), who seats them in the kitchen to ask about their understanding of ranch work. The *gerente* writes down their names in his book, and they shake hands and walk into the darkness, a foreign world made slightly more familiar by the squares of window light.

John Grady and Rawlins seem to have wandered into a job. At least here, their straightforward vision of leaving for Mexico and finding work seems to have found its equivalent in reality. After so long on the move, the ranch feels like an oasis from the country's foreignness.

They clean up in a long adobe bunkhouse and join the other men for dinner: beans, tortillas, and stew. After dinner the *vaqueros* ask them about American **horses** and cattle (but nothing about the boys themselves), since for most of them America is only a rumor. They nod carefully at the answers. The *vaqueros* are skilled at their own work, and are scornful of any suggestion of knowing something secondhand.

Like other Mexicans the boys have met, these vaqueros do not see America in the same way the boys see Mexico. The unequal opportunities leading to this unbalance don't reveal anything about the innate ability or intelligence of the vaqueros, who take pride in the knowledge and expertise of their work.

That night, Rawlins whispers that the *vaqueros* seem to be good men, though he wonders if they think the two are on the run. John Grady tells him to go to sleep, but his last words are about how this is how it must have been for the old war marauders.

Having reached the ranch and stable work, Rawlins and John Grady can consider the events with Blevins as just part of their wild adventure, now safely confined to the past.

PART 2

As Part 2 begins, we learn some background about the ranch where John Grady and Rawlins have arrived, the Hacienda de Nuestra Señora de la Purísima Concepción, an 11,000-hectare ranch in the state of Coahuila. It's full of natural springs and streams packed with wildlife and surrounded by desert. The owner Don Héctor Rocha y Villareal is one of the few *hacendados* (ranch owners) to actually live on his land, which has been in his family for 170 years. He's the first in his family to reach the age of 47. His wife lives in his house in Mexico City. Don Héctor owns an airplane, but he also loves horses. That morning he rides up to the gerente's house with four friends accompanied by pack animals and greyhound dogs. John Grady and Rawlins stand in the bunkhouse doorway and watch him ride upcountry on the road. John Grady speculates that they're going to run coyotes, although they only have ropes and no guns.

The description of the hacienda establishes it as a kind of oasis within the country, lusher and greener than the rough terrain John Grady and Rawlins have come to know since they left the States. We learn that Don Hector has not abandoned rustic ranch life like other families of hacendados seem to have done. Instead, he's embraced country life and his role as owner, participating actively in the ranch. This choice contrasts starkly with the disintegration of John Grady's family's ranch—indeed, it appears that this hacienda is exactly what John Grady's been looking for by idealizing the American West.

For two days, John Grady and Rawlins brand, castrate, dehorn and inoculate the cattle in the holding pens. On the third day the *vaqueros* bring a herd of wild colts into the pen. That evening Rawlins and John Grady look them over. As they open the gate the animals get spooked and climb over one another frantically. But John Grady says that some of them have potential—he points out two that he claims are good **horses**, though Rawlins is skeptical, suggesting that John Grady has lost his touch. John Grady wonders if they could break all sixteen in four days—train them enough to stop and stand to be saddled. Rawlins doubts whether four days is enough, and says John Grady will surely be worn out, if he ever manages. John Grady says that the hacendado apparently has four hundred horses all over the mountain, having started a breeding program for quarterhorses. He points out one of the horses, who, like the others, comes from a horse called José Chiquito. It comes from the Traveler-Ronda line of horses of Sheeran's that was sold in Mexico, he says.

The boys' first few days at the hacienda are taken up with ceaseless manual labor, a chance for them to prove that they are worthy of the jobs they've been given. But John Grady, in particular, can't help but be drawn to a distinct aspect of ranch work: capturing wild horses to breed them. John Grady evinces a mix of shrewdness, skill, and bravado in setting an arbitrary deadline before which he thinks he could tame the horses. It's clear that John Grady pays close attention to his surroundings, especially where horses are concerned—he seems to have absorbed a number of facts about the hacendado's breeding program that Rawlins hasn't, though they've been doing the same work for days. This attention for detail makes him appear far more knowledgeable to the reader.

Rawlins and John Grady walk over to the kitchen, where they tell the gerente that they are *amansadores*, or horse-breakers. John Grady says they can tame the **horses** in four days. The *gerente* doesn't believe them, but he'll let them try. They begin at daybreak Sunday morning, first looking at the horses and stacks of rope outside the gate. Rawlins opens the gate and they bring in a handful of ropes, which they roll into loops. Rawlins says that his father always told him the purpose of breaking a horse was to ride it, so they may as well begin by saddling up and mounting them. Rawlins asks if they should break the horses twice—the first time they don't believe it—but John Grady says he'll make them believe it.

It's a testament to the special, romantic aura that horses retain for many on the ranch—not just John Grady—that the gerente gives in to his curiosity and allows the duo to take off from work for several days to accomplish their improbable goal. Rawlins, a relatively skilled horseman himself, has seen John Grady in action and thus bows to his expertise. Even Rawlins, however, is skeptical of John Grady's ability to break the sixteen horses all at one go, without having to repeat the task.


John Grady chooses a **horse** and hits it with his rope loop so that it bends down and he can grab its head. He holds it by the muzzle, noticing that the horse smells not like a horse but like a wild animal. He strokes the horse and speaks to it quietly. Meanwhile, Rawlins makes a slipnoose from the rope and hitches it around the horse's legs. They fit a hackamore (a kind of bridle) around its head and tie it to the leg ropes. They step away, and the horse begins to struggle, attempting to kick its legs out and falling again and again. They repeat the process, so that by midmorning eight of them are tied and the others are wilder than ever. By noon all of them are tied, and the *vaqueros* have clustered around to watch. The horses look like they're waiting for something unknown, with the breakers' voices in their heads like gods.

John Grady treats horses not so much as an owner treats property but rather as if the horse is a sentient being to be met on its own terms, though still a creature able to be understood by and to work with humans. In this first step of the taming process, John Grady and Rawlins walk a fine line between getting the horses to trust them and asserting their mastery over them. The style of the prose emphasizes this tension, highlighting the emotional subjectivity of the horses by showing how their relationship to their "breakers" is like humans' relationship to gods.


At lunch, the *vaqueros* seem to treat the two with deference, but no one talks about their horse-breaking methods. That afternoon, twenty people, including women and young children, are waiting for them back at the trap. John Grady walks up to the wildest-looking **horse** and ties a rope to the hackamore. He leads it into the corral, talking softly to it. For fifteen minutes he rubs a sack all over the animal's skin to calm it. Then he places a saddle on it, as Rawlins unties the ropes and steps away. John Grady mounts, and the horse seems relatively tame, obeying his reins. Rawlins spits and says that people haven't gathered to see so boring a show. But by dark John Grady has ridden 11 horses, many of which put up a greater fight. By this time, a hundred people have come from various towns: they build a fire to light John Grady's last five runs. It's impossible to believe that the horses were wild, frantic colts just that morning.

As the group eats lunch, the vaqueros seem to be withholding judgment from the pair's goal, though they are all respectful of the attempt. Again we see that John Grady seems to have a certain way with horses. He knows exactly what to do and how to act in order to calm them enough to accept the unknown taming process that's awaiting them. This innate skill is part of what makes John Grady an object of increasing admiration among the townspeople. Besides this natural gift, he also has a dogged commitment to continue to ride and tame the horses, however violent they may become. His unwillingness to give up is a different kind of skill altogether.

John Grady and Rawlins walk down to the bunkhouse, and several people offer them *mescal* (an alcoholic drink) on the way. Rawlins asks if he's tired, and John Grady says no, he was tired five hours ago. When they wake up at daybreak, there are still several men sleeping on the ground. By that evening, John Grady has ridden all sixteen **horses** and Rawlins has ridden each one a second time. They ride them again the next two days.

The offering of mescal suggests that John Grady and Rawlins have successfully completed a kind of test, and now, despite their status as foreigners, belong more fully to the group of other vaqueros. The pair makes sure this will remain the case by riding the horses over and over again, ensuring they're really tamed.

On the fourth day, Rawlins stays in the trap and John Grady rides one of the **horses** away from the ranch. Two miles above it, the girl on the Arabian rides past him, five feet away, and looks at him, lowering her head to see what kind of horse he's riding. He looks into her blue eyes. She speeds up her gait and, though John Grady meant to speak, he thinks that her eyes have changed everything.

Until now, John Grady hasn't exchanged any words with the girl on the Arabian: instead, vision and the gaze seems to substitute for conversation. It's a cliché to say that eyes are the window to one's soul, but John Grady appears to fully believe that he's learned something important about the girl just by gazing at her.

That evening, Antonio (a *vaquero*) and the gerente come to the trap to inspect the **horses**. Antonio rides two of the horses. He nods; he and the *gerente* look over the other horses before leaving. John Grady and Rawlins look at each other, then unsaddle the horses and head to dinner. When John Grady asks for someone to pass the tortillas, everyone extends their hands to pass it to him like a ceremonial bowl.

While John Grady's emphasis on the girl's eyes might seem romantic, it's also the case that speech is generally valued far less than other things—like action or proof of character—on the ranch. The vaqueros' eagerness to honor John Grady by passing food quickly to him is another example of this hierarchy of values.

Three days later, John Grady and Rawlins are sent into the mountains with three young *vaqueros* from the country. A *mozo* (server) comes along to cook, an old man with a bad leg named Luis who has fought at various important Mexican battles. They hunt wild **horses** in the forests and near the *arroyos* (streams) where John Grady and Rawlins had hidden before. At night, Luis tells them tales of the country, and of his father and brothers who all fought in the cavalry, and of the evilness of Victoriano Huerta. War had destroyed the country, Luis says, and people believe that the only cure is more cure, as serpent's flesh is used as an antidote for its bite. He tells of horses killed under him, saying that the souls of horses mirror those of men, and that horses love war as well. He says it is a terrible thing to see the souls of horses: they share a common soul that can be glimpsed at a horse's death.

Thanks to their successful exploit at taming the horses, John Grady and Rawlins have graduated from their task of branding cattle to more important obligations, such as finding the horses to be tamed in the outback in and around the ranch's territory. For the first time, the novel explicitly mentions the Mexican Revolution: Huerta was a notoriously brutal general who plotted a coup to overthrow Mexico's president. Luis continues to develop the novel's underlying theory of horses—how they differ from humans in their common soul, but can teach people something about what it means to be alive.

Luis says that if someone can understand one **horse**'s soul he can understand all horses. And men's souls? John Grady asks. Luis says that there is not communion among men like there is among horses, and it is an illusion to think that men can be understood. Rawlins asks about heaven for horses, and Luis says they have no need of one. John Grady says that if this is so, then if horses should all disappear from earth the soul of the horse would also die. Luis says it is pointless to speak of this, however, since God would not permit that all horses vanish.

John Grady cares deeply about horses on their own terms, but he is also hoping to learn more from Luis (an expert) about what he's already intuited—the apparent community among horses, and the potential (though it may prove overly idealistic) for humans to learn from such communion. Again the conversation turns to fate, with Luis pointing to God as the ultimate explanation for the order of things.

They work for three weeks until, by the end of April, they've brought over 80 mares into the trap. On May second, the hacendado returns from Mexico City in his red plane. John Grady comes to the ranch house, and Don Héctor, a thin gray-haired man, enters the kitchen to introduce himself. They walk through the cool, quiet house to sit at a long walnut table in the dining room. They smoke over a china ashtray.

The hacendado may be immersed in ranch and country life, but he also has ties to the modern, urban lifestyle of Mexico City, and to technology like the prop plane that allows him to move easily between these worlds. Despite his absences, he still seems well aware of the ranch affairs.

Don Héctor asks why John Grady has come to Mexico from Texas. He replies that he and his friend just wanted to see the country. Don Héctor asks if John Grady is the leader, but he says they're just friends. Asked his opinion about the new batch of mares, John Grady says there are some good ones. The *hacendado* asks about a thoroughbred **horse** named Three Bars, whose owner and races John Grady can name. The *hacendado* says the horse is on its way from "Mexico," meaning Mexico City, to be bred with the mares. John Grady says some good cowhorses have come from thoroughbreds, and that the mare is as important as the sire. Most people place more importance on the male, but Don Héctor happens to agree with John Grady. Asked to tell Don Héctor about the other horses on the mesa, John Grady divides them into a few good ones, possible cowhorses, and "scrubs," though he stops and says he's not saying anything the *hacendado* doesn't know.

Don Héctor's questions could show simple curiosity about how an American so adept at training horses made his way down to Mexico and the hacienda, but his questions also seem oriented towards probing John Grady's past and discerning whether he's a threat. Eventually John Grady is able to prove himself, based not on where he's come from or why he's come there, but on his knowledge of horses and his opinions about breeding them. John Grady's embarrassment at the end of this passage underlines how easily it is for him to slip into the language used to talk about horses, language that allows him to feel a sense of kinship with anyone else who shares his feelings for the creatures.

Don Héctor asks where John Grady is from, and he seems to studies John Grady. He asks if John Grady has read *The Horse of America* by Wallace: he has, front to back. He asks if John Grady and Rawlins rode to Mexico, just the two of them: John Grady looks down and says yes, just the two. The *hacendado* stands up, saying he'll show him some **horses**.

Don Héctor may not know who John Grady and Rawlins are, but he surely must have heard of Americans escaping on horseback after having stolen a horse from Encantada. This is the first lie, a moral compromise, that John Grady makes to preserve his idyllic opportunity at the hacienda.

In the next scene, John Grady and Rawlins are sitting on the bunkhouse bed, and Rawlins tells John Grady it's a good opportunity to work more directly with the **horses**. The next morning Rawlins goes to work at the pens alone, while John Grady gets to work on one of the new mares in the corral outside the barn. At one point Don Héctor comes outside to watch him. When John Grady is finished, he finds the *hacendado* in the barn pulling a strap onto the black Arabian of his daughter, who greets John Grady in Spanish. He watches her mount the horse and ride out the door. That night John Grady dreams of open country and of wild horses who had never seen a man and knew nothing about him, but would let him into their souls.

It seems that John Grady has passed whatever test Don Héctor set out for him. He's now directly responsible for the wild mares that will be bred, as they discussed previously. This is the first time the "girl," Don Héctor's daughter, speaks to John Grady, but again he prefers to watch her rather than respond, keeping her at a romantic distance. His dream helps to flesh out John Grady's understanding of horses as emblematic of human wildness as well—though theirs is a wildness that can be tamed to some degree.

A week later, John Grady, Rawlins, Luis the *mozo*, and two *vaqueros* go up into the mountains. After the others are asleep, John Grady and Rawlins smoke cigarettes and talk about the girl, Alejandra, who goes to a fancy prep school in Mexico City. Rawlins says she's a fancy girl, though John Grady says she isn't, and Rawlins tells him he doesn't have a chance.

This is the first time we learn the girl's name, and more about her, including her sophisticated urban lifestyle, though John Grady seems to think that she is a simple rancher's daughter at heart. He hasn't told Rawlins about his feelings, but his friend is well aware of them.

On Sunday they ride into the town of La Vega, placing fifty-cent bets to race **horses**. John Grady wins, even when they switch horses. Wide-eyed country peasants watch the boys race and yell in English. In a *tienda* (shop) they sort through the clothes and buy socks and boots for Rawlins, who says he always wanted to be a "badman."

On this Sunday outing, the two act like the carefree boys they were at the novel's start: joking, goofing around, and generally reviving the ideal of the Wild West they had initially been pursuing on their journey south.

That night, they walk into the open double doors of a grange (a country farm house) in La Vega, buy tickets, and walk into an old adobe hall lit by a string of electric bulbs covered by painted paper bags, which strew colored light over the floor. There's a stage laced with fruit cans holding lights and colored crepe, casting shadows on the floor and walls. John Grady, Rawlins, and another boy from the ranch toast their bottles of *mescal* to the "chicas," or girls. Then they stand along the wall with other young men and watch the dancers and then the girls at the other end of the wall. Alejandra, her hair tied in a blue ribbon, is dancing with a boy from the San Pablo ranch, and she smiles at John Grady when she passes him.

The social life in the area seems to happen not on the hacienda as much as in the small towns around it. Here the grange is host to a rustic, quaint country dance. This time, though, John Grady and Rawlins are attracted less to how much the event coincides with legends about the West than to the appearance of "chicas," who can be rare specimens in ranch life. John Grady seems to have an even more concrete goal in Alejandra, and he's not intimidated by evidence of possible competition.

John Grady asks Alejandra to dance, and for the first time he touches her on her small hand and slight waist. She speaks in a schoolbook English, saying she's happy he came, though she knew he would. At the intermission he buys them lemonades and they walk outside. He tells her about life in Texas, and she tells him about life with her mother in the city. Her mother gets angry with her because she always wants to come to the hacienda. They return to the dance. Alejandra says she will introduce him to her friends.

Alejandra is probably the first girl whose hand John Grady has held since Mary Catherine Bennett—and he'd also remarked on the smallness of her hand back in San Angelo. It's perhaps this parallel that allows him to open up to Alejandra as he hasn't done to others. We haven't seen John Grady talking this much at all thus far in the book.

John Grady rides back alone, since he doesn't see Rawlins at the barn. A mile from town a car full of young men passes and they throw an empty beer can at him. Redbo grows nervous and rears, but John Grady calms the **horse** and says it handled itself well.

Once again John Grady shows a special affinity for horses, as he's able to speak to the horse in a way that calms and soothes it.

In the next scene, the *vaquero* Antonio returns from picking up a **horse** the *hacendado* had bought unseen from the sales in Lexington, Kentucky. He'd left two months earlier with a truck and homemade trailer, along with letters signed by Don Héctor, for Antonio is illiterate and speaks no English. Along the way, he'd been jailed several times, and the letters he carried were dog-eared and stained with coffee and possibly **blood**. He gives his receipts and the papers for the horse to Don Héctor, and they go to see the horse, which is a beautiful, heavy chestnut.

We learn more about how the journey north from Mexico is often fraught with greater and more real danger than the equivalent journey down south, like the one taken by John Grady and Rawlins. Rather than an adventure, Antonio's trip is both a grim reminder of the unequal economic situations of the two countries and an example of Antonio's steadfast loyalty to the hacendado.

John Grady asks Don Héctor if he might ride the **horse**, as he admires it. In the next days, John Grady and the *hacendado* walk among the mares discussing horses and questions of breeding. They agree that God had put horses on earth to work cattle, and that cattle are the only proper source of a man's wealth.

John Grady seems to respect and admire Don Héctor, who in turn respects John Grady's expertise regarding horses. They also both prize a certain mentality of working with one's hands and with animals rather than embracing more modern lifestyles.

John Grady and Antonio breed the mares daily for several weeks. Antonio too loves **horses**, and conspires with John Grady in telling Don Héctor that the horses are more manageable when ridden regularly—John Grady loves riding, and loves when Alejandra watches him ride. He rides up to one of the *lagunas*, or small lakes, whispering to the horse in almost biblical phrases. He says things like he (John Grady) is the commander of the mares, and without the charity of his hands they'll have nothing. He feels the **blood** pumping inside the horse's ribs and through its body, to the globes of the horse's eyes where John Grady thinks he can see the world burning.

John Grady 's love for horses seems connected to his growing feelings for Alejandra. Riding horses allows him to feel in control, comfortable and at ease, in a way that he doesn't always feel in other parts of his life. There is a spiritual aspect to John Grady's sense of communion with horses, as well. They seem to reveal an underlying sense of order in the world, which he at times feels tantalizingly close to accessing. This longing for order and meaning connects with the many discussions about fate.

Sometimes John Grady wakes up early in the mornings to hear María, a house attendant at the hacienda, singing throughout the house, or to see a great mass of cats sitting on the tiles, or to watch Carlos, the cook, take a breakfast tray to Alejandra in the opposite dining room alone, before she rides up to the *ciénaga* (swamp) road above the marshes. John Grady hasn't spoken to her since the La Vega dance, and there's no one he can ask about her. But one evening he's riding the Lexington stallion bareback when he encounters Alejandra returning down the *ciénaga* road. He takes off his hat and waves at her to pass, but she stops and says she wants to ride him. John Grady says he doesn't know if her father would like that, but she smiles at him with pity and tells him to get off. She loops the reins over, steps into the stirrup he makes with his hands, and rides out of view.

Life at the hacienda is beginning to take on a comforting, cyclical normalcy. The daily rituals and tasks become more familiar to John Grady, so that he starts to think he might belong here. In the earlier passage, John Grady had wanted Alejandra to watch him horseback riding so that she might see how in control and assured he is. That hope no longer seems so feasible in this scene: instead it's Alejandra who seems most at ease and controlled, as she dismisses John Grady's concerns and makes clear that she is in charge of her own decisions—or at least claims to be.

John Grady rides back slowly on the Arabian, hoping Alejandra will come back so they can switch **horses** again, but she doesn't. As he walks back from the stable the light comes on in the kitchen and he hears the door open, but doesn't look back to see who it is. The last time he sees Alejandra before she returns to Mexico City, she is riding down from the mountains with her hat pulled down in front, seemingly unaware of her surroundings. John Grady sees the scene as a real horse, rider, land, and sky, but still like a dream.

Unlike Alejandra, John Grady feels like he must be more cautious with Don Héctor's wishes. It's important to note that this scene is where someone else in the household apparently learns that John Grady and Alejandra have been spending time together. He's now spoken with her, not just looked at her, but she is still an inaccessible, 'dreamlike' ideal.

The hacienda is full of old books, a piano, a pair of Greener guns, and other belongings of the *dueña* (madame) Alfonsa, Alejandra's grandaunt and godmother. There are pictures of her taken in front of European cathedrals, and oil portraits of her ancestors. John Grady had never seen her until the week after Alejandra returns from Mexico City, when, upon returning to the kitchen one evening, María says that Alfonsa is waiting for him.

The objects belonging to Alfonsa that are scattered throughout the hacienda bear witness to an aspect of Mexico that John Grady and Rawlins are probably less familiar with: the close connections of many wealthy Mexican families to European culture and history, rather than to indigenous culture alone.

Alfonsa invites John Grady into the dining room, speaking with an English accent. They play chess, and John Grady notices that her last two fingers are missing. She makes several clever moves, but he beats her twice (realizing she's wondering if he will throw the game), before she wins the third time. She pours tea, and he declines cake and crackers, saying he'll have strange dreams. Alfonsa says she now has dreams that she had as a young girl. Unlike John Grady, who says dreams are just in your head, Alfonsa believes they mean something. She asks how he learned chess, and he tells her about learning it from his father, before he lost interest after the war.

In the hacendado's family, there seem to be various tests and games that John Grady must go through before he can be accepted as an equal. It's not yet clear what Alfonsa wants from John Grady, or why she's arranged this meeting, but she seems to be attempting to read him in some way. Surprisingly, John Grady confides in Alfonsa. In this Alfonsa is like Alejandra, the only other person to whom John Grady has told personal stories.

Alfonsa says she lost her fingers in a shooting accident when she was seventeen, Alejandra's age. She says Alejandra will be at the hacienda for the summer. Alfonsa says she isn't old-fashioned, though she and her niece disagree on many things, and Alejandra reminds her of her own past self. But Alfonsa had no one to advise her, growing up in a world of men. She wants Alejandra to be happy, but won't have her gossiped about. She says Alejandra just tosses her head and doesn't understand the grave real-world consequences of her actions. It's not proper for her and John Grady to be seen riding together. Alfonsa says a woman has only her reputation here, and there is no forgiveness for women. John Grady says that doesn't seem right, and Alfonsa says it's not a matter of right, but of who gets to say. He says she didn't need to invite him just to tell him that, and she says yes, she nearly didn't invite him.

Given that John Grady himself seems to have picked up on parallels between Alfonsa and Alejandra, it's not too surprising that Alejandra is the reason for the meeting. Recall the figure inside the house that John Grady briefly noticed watching him as he returned from giving Alejandra his horse to ride. Whether it was Alfonsa herself or someone else who told her, Alfonsa seems to understand John Grady's feelings towards her grand-niece, and is quick to counsel John Grady that there is an entire reality of obligations and social mores that are far more complex—and, she believes, far more powerful—than his own emotions.

John Grady and Rawlins sit on the mesa (plateau) watching a storm from the north, and John Grady tells him about his conversation with Alfonsa. John Grady says she's easy to talk to. Then he looks at Rawlins and asks if he regrets coming down here. Rawlins says no, but he doesn't see any advantages in John Grady continuing to pursue Alejandra. It's more likely they'll both be fired instead.

Though John Grady doesn't agree with Alfonsa's points on the real-life difficulties of being with Alejandra, he still respects her. Rawlins too is more practical than John Grady, simply intuiting that little good can come from his friend's romantic sentiments.

Several nights later, Alejandra knocks at John Grady's bunk. She asks what Alfonsa said to him, and John Grady tells her. She says she won't be treated in such a way. Alejandra looks theatrical in the night. John Grady says he'll do anything she says.

If Rawlins and Alfonsa embody the sober reality of romance, Alejandra joins John Grady in putting emotion first. In her case, she also can't stand her independence being challenged.

They begin spending nights riding **horses** up the *ciénaga* road bareback, sometimes stopping two hours from the ranch to build a fire. She tells him stories of her father's family and of Mexico. One night he swims out into a lake, and Alejandra follows him, her hair floating in the water. John Grady feels that the betrayal makes the moment sweeter, and when she asks if he loves her, he says yes.

Ironically, Alfonsa's strictures have only hastened the beginning of John Grady's relationship with Alejandra. The Mexican landscape is an idyllic backdrop to their time together, and the thoughts on betrayal highlight John Grady's romantic view of the relationship, in which peril can only strengthen it.

One day John Grady and Rawlins are sitting in the bunkhouse smoking and waiting for supper when, suddenly, they see five Mexican rangers riding down the road from the north, dressed in khaki uniforms. When John Grady returns to the barn from the working, the five horses are tied to one side of the house, but the next morning they're gone. For the next nine nights, Alejandra comes to his bed, telling him she doesn't care and sleeping against his chest, before rising early in the morning.

We don't learn here what the Mexican rangers have been doing, and so must intuit along with John Grady why officials have arrived at the hacienda to meet with someone and then leave. This ominous reminder of reality clashes with John Grady and Alejandra's irrationality and risk-taking in continuing to spend their nights together, even in the packed bunkhouse.

After the nine days, Alejandra returns to the city. The next evening, John Grady speaks to the *hacendado* in the barn, but Don Héctor responds without looking at him. That evening they make notes on the mares, and the *hacendado* asks him how he's progressing on the "Guzmán," presumably a book about **horses**. He asks if he'd like to play billiards, and they walk into a dark room that smells of old wood. The antique wood table lies under a large chandelier; at the other end of the room is a wooden altar with a life-sized wooden Christ. This room was a chapel until 1911, Don Héctor says. The priest was supposed to come make it unsacred, but never did: the *hacendado* likes to feel that God is still in the house.

Once again, John Grady is called into a room of the ranch and asked—implicitly, not explicitly—to play a game. Given the novel's focus on fate, this emphasis is notable, because in games (like life) there is constant push and pull between pure chance or luck and one's skill at playing. At the same time, the intimidation factor of hosting billiards in a room with a life-sized Christ seems just as relevant as Don Héctor's apparent desire to keep the room holy, and to keep God close.

As they play, Don Héctor, who wins easily, tells John Grady of the history of Mexico and of Alfonsa and Francisco Madero, whose brother may have been engaged to her. The families were very close, but the Madero family was politically radical and Alfonsa wasn't allowed to make her own choice—she never forgave her father for it. Both brothers were later assassinated, and their family was ruined. Like the brothers, Alfonsa was also educated in Europe. They all returned full of ideas, Don Héctor says, and yet there was no agreement among them. His generation, he says, is more cautious, skeptical that people's characters can be improved by reason—which is a French idea. Alfonsa thinks he is being selfish in not wanting to send Alejandra to France, Don Héctor says, but she may be right, or perhaps Alejandra will go anyway.

Francisco Madero, in addition to his appearance as a character in the novel, was a real-life historical figure. He was Mexico's first popularly elected president and one of the instigators of the Mexican Revolution, which attempted to pass major social reforms. Don Héctor is more conservative than his predecessors, having witnessed the violence that stemmed from the rational European ideals of an earlier generation. He seems to be speaking frankly, but he also may be quite calculating in what he's sharing, especially if he knows how John Grady would feel about Alejandra being sent away to France.

Later, John Grady sits on his bunk and remembers what Alejandra had said the night before—I'll do anything you say, exactly what he had said to her. She had cried against his chest, but there was nothing to be done, and she left the next morning.

Though John Grady had scorned the practical suggestions of both Alfonsa and Rawlins, here he's aware perhaps for the first time how little control he has.

The next Sunday, Antonio invites John Grady to his brother's house for dinner. John Grady tells Antonio about playing billiards, and asks if it's worse that he's poor or that he's American. Antonio says no one can advise him. John Grady concurs, saying that he'll speak to Alejandra when she returns. Antonio seems confused, saying that she's been here since yesterday.

Rather than confiding in a profound way as he's done with Alejandra, here John Grady prefers to speak obliquely, only hinting at what has happened. His façade of nonchalance is quickly punctured when it turns out Antonio knows more than he does.

John Grady lies awake until dawn, and in the morning Rawlins says he looks terrible: Rawlins hopes he knows what he's doing. After working with the **mares** all day, in the evening he hears the plane: he can't see who's inside, but it's heading southwest.

Though John Grady has been anxious and distraught, it's not because he's awaiting or struggling over a choice. Instead, it seems like everything is happening outside of his control.

Two days later John Grady and Rawlins ride into the mountains again, camping in the same spot as they had before with Luis. Rawlins says they probably won't have many more trips up here. Suddenly three greyhounds appear in the firelight, before vanishing again. Rawlins says the dogs aren't up here by themselves—Don Héctor may be hunting them.

Until now, the mountains have been a place of safe remove from the ranch, a space to discuss broader questions than the daily functioning of the hacienda. Now, reality has intruded into this refuge, and the hints of danger are growing clearer.

Three days later they reach the hacienda at dark with eleven young mares. The next morning, at dawn, two men enter John Grady's bunk with pistols and flashlights and order him to get up. They tell him to dress, search his belongings, and lead him out of the bunk. They lead him into the barn, where he sees Rawlins sitting slumped in his **horse**'s saddles. They all ride out two by two, the *vaqueros* watching them head out north on the *ciénaga* road.

Earlier, suspicious details— the officials' visit to the ranch, the greyhounds on the mountains—now reveal themselves belatedly to have been signs foreboding nothing good for the boys. As Part II ends, their idyllic time at the ranch, immersed in the kind of work and life they'd dreamed about, is being replaced by a time of violence and danger.

PART 3

They ride all day into the mountains and the country they'd first crossed four months earlier. At a break for lunch, John Grady sits and watches Rawlins, who won't meet his eyes. The guards say little to each other and nothing to the Americans. At night they stop and offer them coffee and a dish of pale, stringy, sour food. On the third day, they ride back into the town of Encantada. John Grady asks a pair of young girls watching them to get them cigarettes. Rawlins groans at this attempt, and remains stony in response to John Grady's jokes. John Grady says they should get out of this together, and that Rawlins doesn't get to choose a time when the trouble started and blame it all on him.

It's hardly surprising that Rawlins bears a grudge towards John Grady, who's clearly at fault for their capture. Rather than joking and goofing around together, as they've done before, the boys, now divided by the choices of one of them, no longer seem to be a dynamic, loyal pair. John Grady tries to revive this sense of loyalty by challenging the idea that it was his sole decision that led to their predicament. He argues for a looser conception of cause and consequence to avoid taking all the blame.

John Grady says he had asked the officials to wake Don Héctor: they said he'd been awake a long time, and then laughed. He might have betrayed them because of some lie, he says, but Rawlins says it could have been for some truth as well. John Grady says he can't start over, but doesn't see the point in "slobbering" over it or blaming someone else. Rawlins says he tried to reason with him, but John Grady replies that some things aren't reasonable. He's the same person he always was, he never promised Rawlins he'd be safe down here, and he doesn't believe in signing on until it stops being pleasant and you quit. Rawlins says he never quit him.

It's been hinted at earlier, but now it's clear that Don Héctor had a hand in the boys' capture by the guards. In response to Rawlins' exasperation—after all, he warned his friend that this could happen—John Grady amasses several arguments to defend his choices, and to deflect Rawlins' sense of blame and responsibility, especially by referring back to loyalty. This works especially well, because Rawlins can't seem to stand being called disloyal.

The girls return with cigarettes, and ask if the two are American thieves. They reply that they're famous thieves, *bandoleros*, before guards call the girls away.

Even as their situation seems increasingly dire, the boys still pretend they're in a romantic Western adventure.

They ride through the town and then stop before an adobe building with a corrugated tin roof, entering a school with floors of pine boards and windows with missing planes of glass. A stout man in a khaki uniform watches the prisoners expressionlessly, and the guards lead them out to a small stone building with an iron-shod door. There's no light in the room, and the air smells of excrement. They can't see anything, but out of the darkness a voice asks, "Is that you all?" It's Blevins.

The boys have landed in a dingy, depressing jail cell, which seems far from everything familiar to them in Mexico so far. The reappearance of Blevins seems to stretch McCarthy's realism, but also recalls the boys' earlier sense that they weren't free of him yet. Of course, it could also be their responsibility for the horse stealing, rather than fate, that brought them back together.

Blevins doesn't know how long he's been there, but it's a long time. Rawlins accuses him of telling the guards to hunt them, but Blevins denies it. Still, they knew there were three of them, John Grady says. But Rawlins says they wouldn't have hunted them if they'd gotten the horse back—Blevins must have done something. John Grady asks what he's done, but he refuses to answer. An old man is sitting against the wall watching them, and John Grady asks him what the boy is accused of. He says it's for the murder of three men. Rawlins says they're dead men.

Rawlins continues to be suspicious of Blevins' loyalty to the two of them, which makes sense, given his own restricted loyalty towards John Grady alone. Nevertheless, through what is portrayed as a kind of fateful development, the boys' futures are now tied to Blevins. This isn't exactly an encouraging sign, as Rawlins realizes upon discovering Blevins' accused crime.

Only one of them died, Blevins pipes in. He had worked for a German family in Palau, 80 miles east, and after 2 months he'd returned to Encantada with the money he'd earned. He'd waited in front of a store until he saw the same man with his pistol go by. He snuck up behind him and snatched it from his belt. With prodding, Blevins admits that the man came at him and he shot him. As he returned to his **horse**, other men shot at him and he shot back, hitting two.

Though Blevins had been cagier about other stories from his past, he seems proud of this one and eager to clarify the facts. Blevins reveals the same kind of naïveté and bravado that had characterized his attempt to steal back his horse. He's now tried on the costume of a wild Western cowboy, but with dangerous results.

Rawlins says Blevins doesn't know how much trouble he's in. Blevins assumes he'll be sent to the penitentiary—he isn't old enough to be hung—but Rawlins says they'll lie about his age. John Grady tells Blevins not to listen: there's no capital punishment in Mexico. John Grady asks Blevins if they ever get to walk around, but he says he can't walk—they've busted his feet. They sit in silence, listening to sounds of ranchero music from afar.

Blevins doesn't fully grasp the implications of his actions, which to him were simply adventurous and ethically justifiable, getting back "his" pistol. John Grady and Rawlins have a somewhat better understanding of the true perils, but John Grady recognizes there's little use in explaining this to Blevins.

That night John Grady dreams of **horses** running in a high plain. He's one of them, and their colors shine in the sun. There's nothing but them in the world and they move in unison, none of them afraid.

Once again, horses represent a sense of order and fate that is lacking in John Grady's waking life, which now seems increasingly chaotic.

In the morning two guards handcuff Rawlins and lead him away to the captain, who's reading a three-day-old newspaper. He asks for identification, and Rawlins gives him his billfold with the photo of Betty Ward and money. The captain tells him to pull down his pants, and when he objects, the guard hits Rawlins across the head with a leather whip. Feeling nauseous, Rawlins obeys. Then the captain asks his address, date of birth, height, and weight. He says Rawlins must have a good memory—but that he's not Lacey Rawlins. He asks why Rawlins came to work here. When asked how much they got paid, Rawlins says 200 pesos a month, and the captain asks the equivalent in Texas: a hundred dollars, or 800 pesos. The captain smiles and asks why they had to leave Texas. Rawlins says they didn't have to.

From this description, the captain's interrogation of Rawlins may well amount to torture. It doesn't matter what proof Rawlins has of his identity, because the captain has a certain idea of what he wants to hear, and is unwilling to accept anything else. His violence is even more terrifying just because it is so cold and dispassionate. Still, one can perhaps understand the suspiciousness of the boys' decision to work in Mexico, which makes sense only in their pursuit of a certain idea of the country rather than for any economic purpose.

The captain insists Rawlins tell him his real name. He says Blevins is Rawlins' brother, and asks how many horses they stole, how many men they killed. Rawlins keeps denying everything and soon is close to tears. The captain asks the real name of the "assassin Blevins," and Rawlins says he doesn't know. The captain says he's foolish. They let Rawlins go, and it's John Grady's turn. Rawlins says he can tell them whatever he wants—it won't make a difference.

The captain's disregard for any facts other than those that conform to his preexisting narrative proves overwhelming and frustrating to Rawlins, who cannot find a way out of the captain's stubborn beliefs. The story the captain has developed seems fated to become the "real" story.

The captain tells John Grady that his friend told them everything, and it would be best for him to admit to everything right away. John Grady says he doesn't know anything about Blevins—he just asked to ride with them. They've been working for Don Héctor at La Purísima, he says. The captain says Rawlins is the criminal Smith, but John Grady says they were raised together, went to the same school.

We learn a bit more here about the narrative that the captain is trying to impose on the boys, including Blevins' true identity as a famous criminal. John Grady tries to counter the captain with facts and reality, not yet aware that for the captain the notion of "reality" is changeable.

The captain leans back, taking a cigarette from his shirt pocket, and his posture seems artificial with his arm perched with a burning cigarette by his ear. He asks how old the assassin Blevins is, and John Grady says he doesn't know. He tells John Grady to give him his billfold, and he spreads everything out. He asks why Blevins came here to steal horses, and John Grady says for all he knows the horse is his—at least he saw Blevins bring it into Mexico. The captain says these are not the facts, and John Grady has the chance to tell the truth here, before he is sent to Saltillo in three days and the truth will be in other hands. Here they can make truth or lose it. John Grady says there is only one truth—it's what happened, not what someone says. The captain says his town was quiet and calm before Blevins came to steal horses. He says it isn't true that Blevins was just a quiet boy who never did any harm and then came in and did such a thing. The truth is that Blevins was always like this.

This scene, in which truth and facts become dizzyingly unstable, begins with the captain spreading out the contents of John Grady's billfold, as he did with Rawlins—laying out the documents and pictures that would seem to provide evidence of reality and of a person's past and identity. Then, however, the captain challenges this notion of the truth, suggesting that truth can be "made" rather than simply uncovered. This is a radical view of the truth, but here it's put to simple and sinister results. The captain deals with uncertainty and complexity by constructing a narrative that comprises Blevins' past and present character in order to assign responsibility.

Back in the cell, the boys watch Blevins being led away. John Grady tells him they're going to Saltillo, and it seems like the captain wants to make some kind of a deal with them to keep quiet about Blevins. He says he thinks they want to kill Blevins. Rawlins says maybe they won't, and, looking away, curses.

As usual, John Grady skillfully reads his surroundings in order to make inferences about what is going on and what is about to happen. Rawlins cannot yet fully accept the reality of what's awaiting Blevins.

John Grady talks with the old man, who doesn't know what crime he's accused of. He's been told he can go after signing papers, but he can't read or write.

The old man is another casualty of the captain's cold, psychologically (and physically) violent ways.

The guards bring in the buckets filled with beans as if they're carrying slop for livestock. As they eat, Blevins asked what they'd told the guards about him. He said they could have tried to help him out, put in a good word for him, and Rawlins starts yelling and cursing at him. Damn you to hell, he keeps repeating, almost in tears, and John Grady tells him to let it go.

Blevins is generally unaware of the high stakes of his imprisonment, and instead still fixated on gaining the older boys' friendship, approval, and loyalty. Rawlins' harshness, paradoxically, shows how much he has grown to care for Blevins.

When John Grady asks the old man if they've mistreated him, he waves it off: he says there's no intrigue for them in making an old man feel pain.

The implications of this statement are chilling—pain for the captain and his men is valuable only when it is "interesting"—not justified.

Three days later John Grady, Blevins, and Rawlins are led from their cell onto a truck. The captain and guards exchange words they can't hear. The two young girls from earlier stand on the road, crying and watching. The three guards on the truck are young country boys, ordered not to speak to the prisoners.

The scene is described passively, devoid of the boys' thoughts, in a way that emphasizes how events are unfolding without their ability to master or shape them.

They stop outside a bright blue house where an elegantly dressed man, whom John Grady calls a charro, or cowboy, comes out and gets into the front of the truck with the captain. Saltillo is 400 kilometers away, and Blevins says this will be a long trip. The boys don't say anything. They stop in several towns along the way, and the guards give the prisoners orange soda. They turn south towards Torreón, and one guard looks from the road sign to the prisoners and then back again. They leave the road and barrel across rolling fields and meadows and finally stop in the yard of an abandoned *estancia* (small farm) by some ebony trees. The guards climb down with their guns, and Blevins asks, "What's here?"

Blevins is still painfully naïve, treating the trip as another adventure, with only minor drawbacks such as the length of the travel. The other boys are still unwilling to make him aware of what awaits him, most likely because they are unwilling to accept it themselves, and there is no way to stop it if they did. The cogs of Blevins' fate are now in motion. Given that one guard seems unaware of why they leave the road to Saltillo, it's likely that the captain's plans are outside of official rules and protocol.

The captain takes one guard's rifle, and that guard says "*Vámonos*" (Let's go), but "just the boy." Blevins asks what they're going to do, and Rawlins says they won't do anything. When he looks at John Grady, John Grady says nothing. The guard grabs Blevins' arm, and he wrenches off his boot, handing the wrinkled peso notes inside it to John Grady. Blevins limps away, looking back once in terror, flanked by the captain and the charro. John Grady's mouth is tight. Watching him, he thinks that Blevins seems not substantive enough to provoke anyone's wrath. Rawlins warns him not to say anything. John Grady turns to look at him and the strange land and sky and says he won't. After a while, Rawlins says they can't just walk out there and shoot him. As John Grady looks at him they hear two short pistol pops. The captain comes back carrying the handcuffs.

Blevins initially looks at Rawlins and John Grady as to older brothers who will be able to intervene in his favor, or at least explain to him what's happening. But Rawlins and John Grady are only slightly more knowledgeable than Blevins here. They don't fully understand what's taking place either, or why, and only now are forced to grasp the full reality of the situation. Even once they do—and once Blevins does—they cannot see how they can take responsibility for the events, which seem so far from what they could have expected from other human beings, particularly officials in charge.

The truck winds back out of the meadows and they reach Saltillo by ten that night. The square opposite the cathedral, where the captain stops to get out, is vibrant and busy. They finally make it to the massive doors of the prison. The captain stands watching them, as if they're all waiting for something. But the captain seems to occupy another space, the privilege to those of the "irreclaimable act"—murder—to which John Grady and Rawlins are barred access. Once someone chooses that world he cannot leave it. The captain says that the man who accompanied him was the brother of the man Blevins killed, and had paid money to take revenge. This had surprised him, since in Mexico criminals are not killed. Instead other arrangements must be made.

For the first time, John Grady contemplates the captain and struggles to identify the aspect of his character that has permitted him to kill a young boy outside the justice system without seeming to feel any remorse or responsibility. Those who kill, he concludes, belong to another subspecies of humans. This thought is perhaps somewhat comforting, because it allows John Grady to place the captain (and the violence he has wrought) into a separate, distinct category, one that he doesn't have to connect to himself.

The captain says they're not the first Americans in this prison. He has friends there, and they'll be making arrangements with them. They can't stay in prison or they'll die, and other problems—lost papers, lost people—will arise, making trouble for everyone. As the captain is about to go, John Grady says he didn't have to kill Blevins. The captain turns and says he'll tell him a story, since he was once young like him. At that time he used to hang out with older boys, and at one fiesta they all went to see one woman. The captain was the last, and the woman refused him since she was too young, or the men had played a trick on him. He says a man cannot do something and then go back; a man does not change his mind. When he came back, he says, none of the boys were laughing. Where he goes, people stop laughing—even here, when the charro lacked the courage to carry out the deed, the captain completed it.

As in the scene at the earlier jail cell, the captain seems to see the world in terms of "arrangements" and "truths," taking place on a separate, more pragmatic sphere from what John Grady would consider the truth. Though the captain lacks any remorse, he seems to want to explain his distorted understanding of violence and justice. By telling the story to John Grady, he creates a myth out of his own life and past, a myth in which power and individual character can only be proven through blood. In this twisted framework, killing Blevins—even though the charro recoiled at the last minute—is a sign of courage rather than brutality.

The boys are led out onto an iron catwalk above the prison yard and into an iron-barred cell. The next morning the list of prisoners' names is called, which takes an hour, but neither of them is on it. Rawlins jokes that they must not be in prison, then. They spend the entire first day fighting: that night Rawlins' nose is broken. The one moral standard of the prison seems to be how ready one is to kill. When the fighting starts again, Rawlins says they'll be killed. John Grady thinks they'll either kill them or eventually leave them be—there's no middle ground.

John Grady and Rawlins are joking together again, as before, but now their jokes are tinged with a grim understanding of what they're dealing with, an understanding they've been forced to confront after witnessing Blevins' death. Here in the prison, like with the captain, violence serves as the legal system as well as the code of ethics, and John Grady and Rawlins have to learn it as they might learn a foreign language.

The brutal fighting eases off by the third day. After that they buy soap and tomato soup and try to recover. Rawlins wonders why no one's looked after them better, if they think they're rich Americans, as the captain had intimated. He says he never imagined there was such a place as this, but John Grady says there must be every kind of place you can think of.

Following their sudden, vicious immersion into a new world with its own rules and standards, the boys now have time to reflect. John Grady's response underlines how their "adventure" has introduced them to grim realities they never could have imagined.

Rawlins asks John Grady about the Spanish lingo he's picked up here: words for cigarette butt, big shot, and asshole. Rawlins remarks how it was all over a **horse**, but John Grady says the horse had nothing to do with it. We think we're some tough cowboys, Rawlins says, but we could be killed at any time.

As usual, John Grady doesn't offer much more than oblique circumspection. We're left to infer that John Grady believes that entrenched ethical standards and values had more to do with Blevins' and their fates than luck or responsibility.

Two days later a tall thin man, Pérez, asks them to come with him to his single-roomed house in the center of the prison. It has an electric light, a gas heater, and a carpet. He says to them that they enjoy fighting, and John Grady cuts Rawlins off to say yes, they do. Pérez says that Americans don't stay long here—they don't like it too much. Rawlins asks if he can get them out of here; Pérez shrugs and says yes. Rawlins asks why he doesn't get himself out, and Pérez says he has political enemies, and needs money to make his own arrangements—getting out is very expensive. John Grady says they have no money: Pérez tells him nothing is possible without money.

Pérez occupies a somewhat uncertain role within the prison: he's a prisoner himself, but seems as powerful as the guards, if not more so. John Grady and Rawlins grasp pretty quickly that Pérez, though clearly an ethically questionable character, may be their only chance to escape. However, John Grady is even more practical than that, admitting right away that neither of them has any bargaining chips.

Pérez says they're naïve, because they think the struggle is for something like cigarettes, and they don't understand the real situation, don't "speak the language." In a year they might understand, he says, but they don't have time. He can only help them if they show him faith. John Grady and Rawlins push back their chairs and rise, and Pérez says they're very foolish. He has power over those under his protection, he says, but the others are outside, in a world of possibility over which he has no control.

"Speaking the language" is code here for knowledge of social norms and rules, knowledge that John Grady—even if he can impress others with his Spanish skills—can't hope to develop in such a short time. John Grady and Rawlins have been suitably disillusioned by now, and they're finally aware of how much they don't know.

The next morning, an unknown man with a knife stabs Rawlins with an Italian switchblade. Rawlins runs to John Grady, and they cross the quadrangle to the gate shack. John Grady hands Rawlins over to the guard. In the next few days, John Grady is acutely aware of his every move, relying only on the few friends he's made from Yucatán, Sierra León, and two brothers from Bautista. They all told him Pérez's power is mysterious—some say he isn't confined to the prison at all, and has a mistress in town. The guards claim to know nothing about Rawlins.

Messages at the prison are conveyed in blood, as Rawlins' stabbing seems to be a direct response to his and John Grady's unwillingness to work closely with Pérez or to "show faith" to him. In response, John Grady slowly begins to develop his proficiency in how the prison works, by making friends and by attempting to figure out exactly what Pérez's status might be.

Three days after the stabbing, John Grady arrives at Pérez's door. Pérez asks after his friend, and John Grady says that that's what he's come to ask him about. If he tells him straightaway, John Grady will just leave, Pérez says. He asks where John Grady learned Spanish, assuming it was from servants. Pérez asks why John Grady believes he's responsible for Rawlins, and when John Grady says he's not there to do business but just to ask about his friend, Pérez says Americans are so close-minded—their vision of the world is incomplete. He tells John Grady that a prison is like a beauty parlor: it's full of gossip, since crimes are so interesting. John Grady says they didn't commit a crime, and Pérez says just not yet. He says it's not a matter of what the police find, but what they choose. Once John Grady is charged it'll be too late.

Pérez seems to be toying with John Grady, blatantly enjoying his position of knowledge and power over the American. John Grady has grasped the power Pérez wields, but he stubbornly refuses to concede to this hierarchy. In other situations, this might be seen as an example of John Grady's naïveté and romanticism, as he refuses to work within a system of corruption and admit to his "crimes," even when this is the most practical option. John Grady is certainly idealistic, though here it's not entirely clear whether or not he's using his idealism as a ploy to protect himself and Rawlins against Pérez.

John Grady asks what Pérez wants to know, and he says only what the world wants to know—if he has *cojones*, if he's brave, so that the world can decide how much he's worth. Rawlins isn't dead, he tells John Grady, who pushes back his chair. Pérez says he hopes John Grady will think about his situation. He says Americans can be impractical, convinced that there are only good and bad things, and they're superstitious. He once saw an American attack his own car with a hammer since it wouldn't start. A Mexican wouldn't do this, since he doesn't believe a car is good or evil. There can be some evil in a man, but it's not his own evil—evil can visit anyone. It's the same with money, he says: Americans talk about tainted money, but money doesn't have that special quality.

Pérez seems to view the world in the same way the captain does. In this conception, people prove themselves and develop their character through courage—which is defined through the willingness to draw blood. Pérez's ideas on good and evil are nonetheless thought-provoking, developing a theory of evil in which it is not a quality inherent in a person but rather something that moves, shifts, and takes up residence in various bodies at different times. Still, this conception of evil allows Pérez to be pragmatic about violence rather than follow more rigid moral standards.

As John Grady turns to go, Pérez says he thought John Grady wanted to know what would happen out there. He says no one can know, and when John Grady says someone is in charge, Pérez replies that their confinement gives the false impression that things are in control.

Here another character muses on fate. Pérez's words suggest that he thinks things happen according to a script that's beyond his control. It's difficult to know, however, whether Pérez is just saying this to trick John Grady.

John Grady tries to buy a knife, but no one will sell one to him. Finally he finds the Bautistas and gives one of them, Faustino, his money. Faustino says it'll be ready that evening. John Grady doesn't go eat at noon, and at four he waits to sit by Faustino until the switchblade is ready. He slides it into his pocket.

John Grady seems to have learned something from his conversation with Pérez—or at least learned that he needs to be prepared for whatever is awaiting him, by violent means if necessary.

Half an hour later, John Grady heads into the dining hall for dinner. It's Sunday, so many prisoners have eaten food brought by family members, and the hall is half empty. He chooses a corner table occupied only by a young boy (the cuchillero), smoking a cigarette, who has a tattoo of a blue jaguar being suffocated by an anaconda. As John Grady sits he suddenly realizes why the boy is alone, but it's too late to stand up again. He looks up and sees that the guards are gone, and he continues eating, his heart pounding.

Starting with John Grady's entrance into the dining hall, the atmosphere becomes one of eerie tension, the half-empty hall a kind of stage for an unknown act, and the boy's tattoo symbolizing the bizarre but menacing standards of the prison. John Grady understands the meaning of this atmosphere too late, once he's made a choice that he can't go back on.

The boy stubs out his cigarette and John Grady hears sounds from beyond the prison walls, meaning that the dining hall is silent. He opens his knife against his leg. The boy stands and walks along the table with his tray. Suddenly he slices the tray towards John Grady's head. John Grady flings his own tray against it, and rolls back to scramble to his feet. Glimpsing the boy's knife, he pulls out his own and slices his tray at the boy once again, hitting his forehead. They begin to thrust and feint back and forth, and from the precise, calm movements of the "cuchillero" (knife-bearer) John Grady knows the boy is a hired assassin. As John Grady tastes **blood** from a cut, it occurs that he's going to die here. The other prisoners have risen silently from their benches and are watching, accustomed to seeing death.

In some ways, John Grady must have been expecting something like this to happen, because he's prepared with his switchblade, after all. Unlike his bleak, somber reaction to Blevins' death and his attempt to grapple with the meaning and purpose of violence, this encounter is devoid of any emotion or thoughtfulness. Instead, John Grady acts out of pure survival instinct, defending himself against the cuchillero as the other prisoners watch as if viewing a film, concerned only with who will "prove" himself.

John Grady accidentally drops his tray and, touching his shirt, realizes it's sticky with **blood**. He backs away and sinks to the floor. The cuchillero leans in and grabs John Grady by the hair, forcing his head back. As he prepares to cut his throat, John Grady reaches up and stabs him in the heart. The *cuchillero* pitches forward into John Grady's arms. John Grady pushes the body away and staggers to the door.

It is through blood that John Grady had realized he might die, but it also now gives him a renewed determination to live. By feigning surrender, John Grady is able to defend himself from the cuchillero, but at the cost of committing murder himself.

Other prisoners are still watching John Grady, but no one follows as he walks to his room with **blood** sloshing in his boots. He flings away his knife. A tall man tells him to come with him: Pérez wants to help him. John Grady steps back, twisting out of the man's grip. His vision blurs and he falls, barely perceiving the man picking him up and taking him to Pérez.

John Grady has been severely wounded, and this, along with the murder he's just committed, seems to have made him untouchable by the other prisoners. Still, even in his weakened state, John Grady doesn't want to give in to Pérez's "help."

John Grady wakes up in a dark stone room, finding it difficult to breathe. He calls out but no one answers. He half wonders if he's dead, and his despair leads to pain and then a renewed commitment to keep breathing. He struggles in excruciating pain out of the bed and to the door, which is locked. Finally, the door opens to blinding light, and a young man brings in a tray containing food and orange soda. John Grady asks the man to turn on the light, which he does before leaving the room again.

Like the blood he felt during the knife fight, John Grady's current excruciating pain gives him a motivation to keep breathing and surviving. His suffering thus becomes meaningful for him. Having faced the test of the fight, it would seem that John Grady has once again been forced to relinquish control over his body and actions.

For the next three days, John Grady thinks about the terrible things probably done to his father in Goshee, and about everything he doesn't know about him. He decides not to think of Alejandra—to save up those thoughts—and instead thinks of **horses**. He dreams of dead men standing around, silent but with terrible intelligence. He knows men have died in this room.

John Grady's own suffering allows him to begin to understand what his father has gone through. In the midst of painful thoughts, thinking about horses allows John Grady to grasp something familiar and safe.

The next time the door opens, a man in a suit and carrying a leather bag comes in, saying he's the doctor. He cuts away gauze over John Grady's wound and rewraps the dressing over his stitches. He says John Grady is a fast healer. The next visitor wears what looks like a military uniform, and asks how soon John Grady can walk to his home. John Grady walks around the room to show him. The man says he's fortunate, and then leaves. John Grady continues to sleep and wake, once enjoying roast chicken with a pear, which he savors, still thinking they might take him to the country and shoot him.

Various characters parade in and out of the room, apparently there to take care of John Grady, but unable to give him any information on where he is or why he is there. John Grady no longer harbors any illusions about people here, and instead attempts to come to terms with what might happen to him based on his new understanding of reality—even if this reality is heavily influenced by what happened to Blevins.

The next time John Grady wakes up, the man from the first visit comes in with a pile of clothes and boots. Two guards come in and he follows them into another part of the building, where he meets the "comandante," the man in the military uniform, at his desk. The *comandante* slides an envelope to him, and John Grady asks where his friend Rawlins is. He says he's outside. The *comandante* says they're leaving, which John Grady finds difficult to believe. He's led out to the street and sees Rawlins. They climb onto a bus waiting on the street.

It's still unclear what John Grady is doing in the hospital/prison, and just as unclear as why he's released by the comandante. Though he's been suitably disillusioned, even now John Grady struggles to understand the rules and reasons behind the actions of people around him. It's difficult to know what has allowed him to be released rather than shot.

Both say they thought the other had died, but then John Grady says they should sit and be quiet. It's gray and raining outside, and some of the women on the bus peer back at the prison, which looks like a site of a siege from an earlier time, when the enemies were outside its doors.

As the boys leave the prison, John Grady contrasts the idea of a fortress defending itself from enemies outside (a romantic, antiquated vision) with his modern experience of shifting enemies and alliances.

At the *centro* (town center), John Grady suggests they get something to eat: he has a whole envelope full of money—the envelope that the comandante had slid to him. As they eat their steaks and fried potatoes, Rawlins lights a cigarette and asks why they're not dead. Alfonsa the aunt must have paid them out, John Grady says. He expects it has to do with Alejandra—there is no other explanation. Rawlins says he was just in a hospital ward, and could have escaped. He says he doesn't know why he didn't, but he wouldn't have left John Grady: he says, though, that doesn't mean it wasn't dumb. Rawlins says there was another boy in there, all cut up, who died. It seemed so peculiar to him, and he says dying isn't in people's plans, is it. Rawlins says they put a liter of **blood** into him, and asks if that means he's part Mexican. John Grady jokes that he's almost a half breed, but then says blood is blood, and doesn't know where it's from.

Now equipped with clues relating to their release from prison, John Grady is able to piece together an explanation for why they haven't been killed—one that relies upon his knowledge of Alfonsa's character and on their prior conversations. Though Rawlins had been frustrated with John Grady because of the latter's responsibility for getting them detained in the first place, Rawlins now proves his loyalty by not escaping alone and leaving John Grady—even as Rawlins recognizes that, objectively, it may have been more intelligent to do so. His worries about blood show the connection common in people's imagination between blood and identity or personhood.

Rawlins says he knows John Grady wants to go back to the ranch for Alejandra and for the **horses**. Rawlins tells him not to go, but John Grady says he has made up his mind. Rawlins says there's only one kind of a deal Alejandra could have made with Alfonsa, and John Grady says he knows, but she'll have to tell him herself.

Part of loyalty is knowing someone well enough to read or even predict his or her actions. Rawlins probably knows he wouldn't be able to convince John Grady to stay away from the hacienda, but loyalty also forces him to try.

Rawlins gestures towards a kid across the street trying to sell newspapers, yelling to an empty road. Rawlins wipes his eyes, cursing and saying he keeps thinking about Blevins. He looks old and sad to John Grady, and says he keeps thinking how scared Blevins was. John Grady watches him and then says he, John Grady, isn't Blevins. Rawlins says he knows that, but isn't sure how much better off John Grady is.

Though Rawlins had never treated Blevins as kindly as John Grady had, he seems even more affected by Blevins' death. Without wanting to, he developed a sense of friendship and loyalty to Blevins as well. Blevins' death also catapulted the pair into stark reality, forcing them to face it head-on.

Rawlins and John Grady find a hotel room and, after showering, talk about how they're going to get their stitches out. They count out their money: 970 pesos, or about 120 dollars. John Grady splits the money in half. Rawlins asks what's the worst thing John Grady's ever done. John Grady says he doesn't know, and Rawlins says that in the hospital he started thinking he wouldn't be there if he wasn't supposed to be there. He says he and his friend once sold a pickup truck-full of feed to some Mexicans and pocketed the money. John Grady says that isn't so bad. Lying quietly in the dark, John Grady says Rawlins must know what happened in the mess hall. Rawlins says John Grady had no choice, but John Grady says he never thought he'd kill a man—Rawlins doesn't need to try to make it right. He tells Rawlins he bought the knife with Blevins' money. Rawlins repeats that he couldn't have acted differently: John Grady says he knows, but it wasn't Rawlins who did it.

Rawlins, again becomes preoccupied with fate and destiny but here it's tied to sin as well. In this understanding of fate, doing something wrong ensures that you'll be punished by it in some other way, whether by God or by the more impersonal workings of fate. This conception is complicated, though—if Rawlins was fated to sin and suffer, then what responsibility does he have for his own actions? While Rawlins is committed to wrestling with these questions, John Grady prefers to plainly state the intractable facts: it was wrong for him to kill a man, but he couldn't not have killed him. Both are true, though they're contradictory, and John Grady has to face the reality of this contradiction.

The next morning, they buy new clothes and hats and buy Rawlins a ticket to Nuevo Laredo. They tell each other to take care, and John Grady watches Rawlins climb stiffly onto the bus. After standing for a while, John Grady turns and walks back through the rain to the hotel. For the next few days he looks for a surgeon. Finally he has the stitches removed, while the surgeon tells him not to look at the scar, since it'll improve in time. A week later John Grady hitchhikes out of Saltillo on the back of a truck. Trying to brace himself, he stands with his hands outstretched on the roof of the truck, as if he's someone bearing news for the country, a prophet being conveyed north.

There seems to be something final in Rawlins' departure. The two have remained steadfastly loyal to each other, but their paths now split, with John Grady facing the country on his own, making decisions and wandering around towns alone rather than as part of an adventurous friendship. Part III ends with more religious imagery, which here has the effect of stressing the blunt, grim realities that John Grady has had to face and grow into.

PART 4

On the other side of Paredón, the truck picks up five farmworkers, and they ask John Grady where he's from and where he's going. One of them, older, nods at his cheap new clothes and says he's going to see his *novia*, girlfriend or fiancée. John Grady says it's true, and for a long time afterward he thinks of their smiles and good will, which can protect and honor others. At midnight they reach Monclova, and John Grady shakes hands with each one before disembarking.

The five farmworkers are the first people John Grady has met in a while who seem good and kind to him. Still maturing, he tends to take his own experience as reality, even if he's been disabused of many of his romantic notions. Here he begins to develop a more nuanced understanding of human good and evil.

John Grady sets out the next morning along the road west, hitchhiking and stopping to bathe in an irrigation ditch. He watches naked children splashing around in a pool downstream, and two girls carrying laundry smile at him, with his pale skin and scars across his stomach. He walks all afternoon towards Cuatro Ciénagas, and everyone he meets nods to him and exchanges a few words. That evening he eats with workers in their camp. An old man prays for them all, reminding them that corn grows by God's will and the entire world comes into being through His will.

In some ways, recently released from a life-changing confinement, John Grady seems more carefree and younger again, though his scars bear witness to what he's experienced. The old man at the camp nods to the novel's theme of fate. In his prayer, God's will is the wheel turning the fate of the world, and humans can only bow to this fate and will rather than bend it themselves.

John Grady sleeps under a grove of trees, and the next morning hitchhikes into the town of La Vega. He orders a Coca-Cola in a café and eyes the calendar, having no idea what day it is. It turns out he's been gone seven weeks from the hacienda, and summer is fading. He reaches the hacienda just after dark and knocks at the gerente's door. Antonio comes out, saying that Alfonsa is at home, but Don Héctor and his daughter have left for Mexico City. No one knows when they'll return. John Grady's things are still in the bunkhouse, Antonio says, and he can sleep there.

John Grady's weeks at the prison have taken place in a kind of alternate reality, one expanded to hold all that he's learned and gone through since he was forced to leave the hacienda. Like others in the novel, Antonio doesn't question what or why something has happened (such as John Grady's return), instead accepting it as part of a larger order of things, which humans may not understand.

The next morning John Grady walks up to the house, where Carlos is standing outside and nods to him gravely. María tells him that Alfonsa is still asleep, and that she will be gone all day and will return before dark. María asks John Grady nothing, but puts her hand on his shoulder as she pours him coffee. He rises to go and asks to borrow a **horse** for the day. He tries to read María's face to see what his chances are with Alfonsa, and he hopes what he reads is wrong.

María seems sympathetic to John Grady, even though, like Antonio, neither she nor Carlos ask what has happened or how he's been able to return. She seems to intuit, however, why he's come back to the hacienda. María knows Alfonsa better, and is more willing to face reality than John Grady is.

A *vaquero* calls out to John Grady as he passes the bunkhouse, saying the **horse** is happy to see him. John Grady rides out to the mesa and at noon stops for lunch, watching the country and the distant *cordilleras* (mountain ranges). He wonders what kind of dream might bring him luck. He thinks about Alejandra riding, and then of the last time he saw Blevins. He'd had a dream in Saltillo in which he'd asked Blevins what it was like to be dead, and Blevins had said it was like nothing at all. He falls asleep and doesn't dream. That evening John Grady rides through groves of apple trees and the ruins of an old cabin where hunters had built fires in the floor. It's a strange place, as if life hadn't succeeded there.

It was Alfonsa who had told John Grady, the first time they met, that she believed that dreams meant something. Now John Grady seems to be searching for direction in addition to luck by having a dream that might deliver him some kind of message. Both his earlier dream of Blevins and his lack of dreams now, however, suggest that John Grady cannot seek wisdom in this matter elsewhere, but rather must confront Alfonsa and make his case himself.

Back at the hacienda, the other *vaqueros* invite John Grady to eat with them, and he tells him about everything that happened. They're sad not to see Rawlins, but they say a man leaves much in leaving his country, and that it is no accident that one is born in a certain country and not another. No one speaks of Don Héctor, Alfonsa, or Alejandra.

Even when John Grady does tell his story, the vaqueros accept it without awe or surprise. Their response underlines their understanding of fate in the context of the country where one is born, and how that determines one's character.

After dinner John Grady waits in the kitchen until María tells him that Alfonsa is in the parlor. She stands formally and with a chilling elegance. Alfonsa says Héctor thought John Grady wouldn't come back, but she knew he would. He asks for an explanation, and she says that he's been a disappointment to her nephew (Don Héctor) and an expense to herself. He's been inconvenienced himself, John Grady says. She tells him the officers had come once before, but that her nephew had sent them away, quite confident there was nothing to it, and wanting to pursue his own investigation. John Grady had already lied to Héctor twice, Alfonsa says. The affair of the stolen **horse**, in which the thieves were American, was known before their arrival, and they had denied everything. Later his friend returned to Encantada and committed murder, she says. The facts are indisputable.

After a long build-up to this meeting, Alfonsa begins by calmly stating what she sees as the facts: John Grady had lied to Héctor and had been implicated in his friend's murder. Notably, she lists these faults without mentioning John Grady's relationship to Alejandra. In relying on these "facts," Alfonsa's speech bears chilling resemblance to the captain's search for the "truth." Here it's far clearer that reality can actually be bent to support any of several versions of events, and that the truth may indeed be malleable. John Grady is not yet willing to accept the reality that the truth sometimes depends on the observer.

John Grady asks why Alfonsa bought them out of prison. She says he knows that, and that he also knows what the terms were—that Alejandra won't see him again. Alfonsa says that many women in her family have suffered disastrous love affairs with men of questionable character—in earlier times, self-styled "revolutionaries." John Grady says she took advantage of Alejandra, and that he won't thank her. He should have been left in prison to die.

In some circumstances, knowledge is not the accumulation of new facts but the ability to better read existing ones, and John Grady probably hasn't wanted to read these signs. He continues to insist that Alfonsa was wrong to make a deal. His position is idealistic in the extreme in preferring death to compromise.

John Grady says he would have thought Alfonsa's own disappointments would have made her more sympathetic to others. Alfonsa says he thinks he knows something about her life, thinking that she is a bitter old woman jealous of the happiness of others. But that isn't true, she says. She supported John Grady's cause against Alejandra's mother's tantrums. Alfonsa is not a society person, she says. Society seems to be a machine for women's suppression, though it is extremely important in Mexico. Mexicans, she says, have a great yearning for freedom, though only their own, and for truth and honor in form but not substance. They are convinced nothing can be proven unless it is made to **bleed**.

John Grady attempts to make a connection between his struggles with Alejandra and Alfonsa's own life, but Alfonsa dismisses this comparison, claiming that John Grady knows far less than he thinks about life, and about her life in particular. She begins what will be a long monologue by contrasting her own openness to Mexican society, which, as she sees it, embraces violence for the sake of violence and fails, in a way, to grow up and face reality. For Alfonsa, many in Mexico are idealistic romantics.

Alfonsa sees a child, but also a version of herself, in Alejandra. In another life she could perhaps have been a soldier, she says, but she will never know. She has never been able to decide whether the shape of one's life was there from the beginning, or whether random events shape themselves into a pattern after the fact. John Grady, in response to her question, says he believes in fate. Alfonsa says her father thought everything was connected, though she's not sure she believes that. Her father thought responsibility for a decision could always be traced to more and more remote human decisions. His example was that of a tossed coin: it was once a piece of metal that a coiner placed in the die in one of two ways, an act from which all others followed, until our turn comes to pass. If fate ruled over all, she says, it could possibly be reasoned with, but such a coiner making his selection cannot. Her father saw in this story how origins can be accessible, but she sees no more than a puppet show—in which, behind the curtain, the strings can be traced only to the hands of other puppets, and so on infinitely. These "strings whose origins were endless" led to violence and madness in her own life, and to a nation's ruin. She will tell John Grady about Mexico, she says: he will see how and why she—originally in his favor—turned against him.

Alfonsa draws on her own past and experiences in speaking to John Grady about fate. It's difficult to unravel exactly what Alfonsa's views on fate are from her story, unlike John Grady, who states explicitly that he "believes" in fate. Her father's anecdote seems to suggest that he believed there is an order and reason behind human affairs, even if one person finds it difficult to access this order. Alfonsa, in turn, thinks that humans prefer to think that they are responsible for their actions, however violent and despicable they may be. This suggests that Alfonsa is skeptical of human agency and responsibility—or at least she sees not dignity and power but rather absurdity in people's choices, as shown through her anecdote of the puppet show. She doubts that there is any reason for Mexico's violence and madness—yet this very lack of agency has led her to make decisions for Alejandra and thus change her grand-niece's life.

As a child, Alfonsa was deeply affected by the devastating poverty in Mexico. Families owned nothing, and attempted to sell bolts from fallen trucks, confident that this had value to someone. They were intelligent, though, especially the children, who were free until eleven or twelve, when suddenly they became grave, serious adults. By the age of sixteen, Alfonsa had become a radical freethinker speaking out against injustice.

John Grady and Rawlins had come to Mexico expecting a land populated by Comanche Indians or their equivalent, a place resembling tales from John Grady's grandfather or cultural mythology. Instead they have been met with sights of quiet desperation, and from what Alfonsa says, even in the past such a romantic West never existed.

Alfonsa says her family had *compadrazgo* (loosely, comradeship or closeness) with the family of Francisco Madero. She loved his father, Don Evaristo, who was wealthy, smart, and hosted great parties at his hacienda in Rosario, with European visitors and orchestras. When she was seventeen, the two oldest boys, Francisco and Gustavo, returned from studying in Europe and the United States. Francisco set up schools for poor children, dispensed medicine, and fed hundreds from his own kitchen, all in an attempt to apply the freethinking ideals he'd learned. Everything seemed possible, Alfonsa says.

As Alfonsa describes it, the Mexico of her youth was a country of extreme income inequality, in which the poverty described above coexisted with enormous wealth and Europeanized lifestyles of hacendados. It was also European ideas that Francisco and Gustavo imported from abroad, attempting to use them to combat the two worlds of Mexico.

Alfonsa was especially attracted to Gustavo, who had a glass eye from an accident, and with whom she talked for hours about books. That autumn, she went to an hacienda in San Luis Potosí and suffered the accident to her fingers. It was devastating for a girl of the time, and causing, she felt, her father to think of her as disfigured. There was no more thought of her getting married. But after a few months, Gustavo came to call, and though she initially refused to see him, she conceded to her father's will and let him in. He treated her no differently from before, and spoke to her of his and Francisco's work, and of those who have suffered misfortune, who must treat misfortune as a gift of strength on which they can rely. Gustavo taught Alfonsa that to be a person of value meant one could not change with the hazards of fortune. All courage is a kind of constancy, and the first person a coward abandons is himself. Gustavo has been dead for forty years now, Alfonsa says, and her love for him has not changed.

Alfonsa had told John Grady in an earlier conversation that a woman only has her reputation, and without it she is nothing. Alfonsa seems to have experienced the coldness and harshness of society first-hand after suffering the accident to her fingers. Alfonsa earlier spoke critically about many of her compatriots finding meaning through blood and violence, but here she suggests that there is meaning, and courage, to be drawn from some kinds of suffering. The difference between what she criticizes and what Gustavo teaches her seems to be that suffering must be instrumental and meaningful—not used as an end in itself or merely to prove one's value to the world, but as motivation to improve the lives of others.

Soon afterward, Francisco Madero began to enter the political field, and his enemies carried his name to the dictator Díaz. He was arrested and forced to flee to the United States, but he and Gustavo returned with guns and the revolution began. Meanwhile, Alfonsa was sent to Europe. Her father refused to bring her home unless she promised to disassociate herself from the brothers. She and Gustavo were never engaged, and he ultimately married someone else, but she never blamed him. Finally, Díaz had to flee, and Francisco became the first (and last) president elected by popular vote. Alfonsa was in London, and she was too stubborn to return, unable to forgive her father.

Porfirio Díaz was Mexico's president until 1910. He changed the Constitution several times until his presidency became a de facto, 30-year dictatorship. Alfonsa shows how intellectual ideals and social goals directly impacted Mexican history, as well as her personal life—far more than the random tales of bandits and bandoleros that defined Mexico for John Grady and Rawlins. Alfonsa also shows remarkable loyalty here, a trait valued by John Grady and Rawlins.

Francisco believed in humankind's goodness, and this was his undoing, for he was constantly surrounded by schemers. Ultimately, General Huerta plotted against him with rebels. Gustavo and Francisco were arrested, and Gustavo was turned over to a mob, where he was burned, his eye was gouged out, and he was hit by a rain of rifle shots. Francisco was shot behind the penitentiary. The family went into exile, but Alfonsa is still close with Francisco's wife Sara. They are joined by bonds of pain, as Gustavo told her.

For Alfonsa, believing that one's fellow humans are good is only naïve, and yet in some ways she respects Francisco's innocence, even while decrying it. Still, her graphic description of the brutal deaths of Francisco and Gustavo show her disdain for her compatriots' violence together with her commitment to face up to the reality of the past.

Alfonsa didn't return from Europe until her father died, and now she regrets that she didn't know him better. She later realized how similar he was to Gustavo, who wasn't meant to be a soldier, and who, like Francisco, never really understood Mexico. In the end, she says, those who live long enough are cured of their dreams, and the world chooses between dream and reality. In school she studied biology, and learned that in experiments there is always a control group, in which nothing has been disturbed, so that scientists can compare the effects. History has no control group, however. There is no might have been, and she doesn't believe knowing can save us. Instead the only constants are greed, foolishness, and love of **blood**.

For Alfonsa, the process of growing up was one of letting go of her illusions—as she puts it, dismissing her dreams and embracing reality, before the world's uncaring ways exact their own reality. As an adolescent, she believed deeply in the power of ideas to change things. Now, she understands that without a control group, history simply hurtles on with no ability to step back, compare, and dispassionately choose a next step. She sees no reason or primacy of ideas in history—nothing other than the law of blood.

Alfonsa often speaks to her father at his grave, knowing he did not want to make her an exile in her own country, as a woman who embraced books because she knew she'd be denied much of the real world. The only future she can imagine is that of her grandniece, but she knows that there is nothing to lose. In her 73 years, she has known few people whose lives were satisfactory to them, and she'd like that to be different for Alejandra. She has no fixed opinions about how she should live, but just knows that she must come to value what is true above what is useful. It is not the case that Alfonsa has rejected John Grady for being young, uneducated, or foreign. But now she sees him more clearly.

Interestingly, Alfonsa was eager to face reality as a young girl. For her, books were not an escape but another way to access the real world. Still, she now knows that she did not understand all the rules of reality even as she pursued it. Having disabused herself of her illusions, Alfonsa now prides herself on being able to see through the illusions of others—to "see" John Grady clearly and thus use calculated reason and judgment to get her way. In some ways, Alfonsa has now embraced aspects of the reality that she once so deplored.

John Grady says Alfonsa won't let him make his case for being with Alejandra, and she says his case is that things happened outside his control—which isn't anything to recommend him. She says he may go to see Alejandra, but she knows Alejandra won't break her word. Alfonsa shakes John Grady's hand, explaining that she's told him about herself because she believes one should know who one's enemies are. Fate will tell whether he'll hate her. John Grady says he thought she didn't believe in fate, and Alfonsa replies that she just thinks it's human nature to assign responsibility. We are all like the coiner, determined that even chaos come from human resolve.

Alfonsa seems to admit that John Grady wasn't "responsible" for much of what happened, but given her own past, she has no patience or sympathy for those who bow to outside fate. Her final statement on fate underlines her ambivalence about it. For her, believing in fate means believing that there is a reason or order to human action, even if one cannot know it fully. She believes that much is beyond humans' responsibility, and yet there is no choice but to act as if we are responsible.

The next morning, John Grady says goodbye to the *vaqueros* and María and then chooses a **horse** to ride. As he rides, he talks to the horse about things that his experience has taught him, as well as things he thinks may be true but may not be. He shares his lunch with children along a farm road. The oldest boy asks where he lives, and John Grady has to think about it. He tells them he is riding to his *novia* (girlfriend) to ask her to be his wife. He says her father is rich and he himself is poor, and the children seem downcast at this knowledge. The older girl says the *novia* will marry him if she loves him, but the boy says she cannot go against her father's wishes. The grandmother must be consulted, the girl says, for without her help little can be expected: everyone knows the truth of this. John Grady tells them she cannot be counted on, and when the girl asks his offense, he tells them the entire story. At the end the girl tells John Grady to bring the boy Blevins to the grandmother so he can say Blevins is the one at fault. John Grady tells her Blevins is dead. They sit in silence and finally say that all that is left is to pray to God.

Once again, John Grady relies on horses to attempt to make sense of what he's experienced and of how he sees the world. Rather than maintaining his power and control as he did while whispering to his horse in an earlier scene, his thoughts are less certain now, and he's more aware of how much he doesn't know (a step beyond being unaware of one's own innocence). It helps John Grady to speak of his thorny problems to children, whom he understands—following what Alfonsa had said about children in Mexico—to have a certain wisdom on social matters. In their world, there is room to maneuver in difficult matters such as this one, but even they are ultimately awestruck by the knotty skeins of cause and consequence that have led John Grady to this point, and they see little else to do but rely upon God's will.

In Torreón, the hotel clerk tells John Grady the only place to tie his **horse** is in the lobby. He sleeps almost twelve hours, and waits most of the morning at the telephone exchange to call Alejandra. He says he has to see her, but she insists she can't. She's going to La Purísima in two days. She had no right to make the promise she made, John Grady says, and he must see her even if it's for the last time. She is quiet and then says she will meet him in Zacatecas the next morning.

If John Grady has learned anything from Alfonsa, it's her stubbornness. He's still clinging to his ideals of loyalty and sacrifice, according to which no one else has the right to save him in exchange for compromising. Though John Grady has faced reality full-on, his romanticism has not been stamped out.

The next morning John Grady wakes up at six and boards a train to Zacatecas. As he eats breakfast he feels better than he has in a long time, and his heavy heart begins to lift. He arrives in the late afternoon and checks into the Reina Cristina, an old colonial hotel. He walks through the narrow streets of the old town and looks through the shop windows looking for a gift for Alejandra. He finally buys a plain silver necklace. Her train arrives close to nine, and when she appears in a dress and blue hat he almost doesn't recognize her. They kiss and she remarks how thin he is. He sees sadness in her eyes, and he knows that he is part, but not all, of the reason for it. They walk through the streets to the hotel and eat dinner in the dining room, where other patrons glance at them.

This scene is set in an atmosphere of striking normalcy. Since they've known each other, John Grady and Alejandra have had to conceal their relationship and sneak around in order to see each other. Here we have a glimpse of what a normal, adult life could be for the two of them, though of course, it's laced with the complications of John Grady's past and Alejandra's promise to Alfonsa. In a show of maturity, John Grady realizes that Alejandra has suffered more than just for his sake.

John Grady says he must tell Alejandra what happened, everything from Blevins to the *cuchillero*. When Alejandra looks up she's crying, and she asks how she can know what kind of a man he is, or what kind her father is: she asks what are men. John Grady says he's told her things he never told anyone, but she asks what good that serves. She tells him that her aunt had threatened to tell her father they were lovers if she didn't stop seeing John Grady, so she told her father herself. Don Héctor had said nothing. John Grady was on the mesa at the time, and when he returned he was arrested. Alejandra doesn't hate her aunt, but Alfonsa says she wants Alejandra to be her own person while also constantly trying to make her *her* own person. This whole affair broke her father's heart, Alejandra says, and she destroyed everything. She didn't know her father could stop loving her, but now she knows.

Throughout the novel, Alejandra has been one of the few people in whom John Grady has felt that he could confide. In her response, Alejandra seems to echo Alfonsa, who similarly spoke of men's power in Mexico and the accompanying danger for women, who could only be victims of reputation or of the suffering wrought by men's violence. We also see a different side of Alfonsa, who occupies an ambivalent place in the novel. It's ultimately unclear whether she is selflessly imparting wisdom to John Grady, or acting selfishly for her own interest—or, perhaps, a mix of both.

Late that night they make love, and Alejandra tells John Grady that she saw him dead in a dream long ago, being carried through the streets at dawn. In the morning they walk through the streets and eat at a café, as John Grady counts the hours until the train will come again. He tells her that if she stays with him he will never abandon her and will always love her, and she says she believes him. They enter a small plaza and Alejandra tells him her grandfather died here in 1914, in this strange place, at the age of 24. That night, back at the hotel, she tells him she loves him, but she cannot do what he asks.

Dreams have come to take a significant place in the novel. John Grady's own dreams have been a chance for him to sort through his suffering and experiences, or even to fully understand what he's gone through. John Grady seems to fully believe what he's saying, and still clings to the possibility that Alejandra will remain with him. She, however, understood long ago that the demands of reality must inevitably triumph.

John Grady sees clearly how his entire life has led to this moment, and after it leads nowhere. He tries to reason with Alejandra, but it's to no avail. They walk together to the train station, and when he speaks to her she doesn't answer. She touches the silver necklace at her throat that he'd given her, leans in to kiss him one last time, and then is gone. He feels as if he's in a dream. He watches a man whirl his daughter around in his arms, laughing, but when the girl sees his face she stops laughing. That night John Grady goes to a bar, gets drunk, and gets into a fight.

John Grady's realization recalls Alfonsa's question—whether there truly is a pattern in people's lives, or whether people just assemble a pattern after the fact. During the first times he spent with Alejandra, John Grady felt as if he were in a dream, and as she leaves him the dreamlike quality returns. It's perhaps to shock himself into the reality of the situation (or even forget it) that he gets into a fight.

The next morning John Grady wakes up in a green room in an unknown part of the city. He hitchhikes out of the city, rides all day, and reaches Torreón the next day to fetch the **horse** he'd left there and to buy a box of bullets. He sleeps in a field that night and watches the stars across the sky. He is in agony, and he imagines the world's pain as a formless parasite seeking out human souls to inhabit: he fears that this process of seeking is endless.

It was neither Blevins' death nor even his own near-death experience with the cuchillero that forced John Grady to really come to terms with the extent of the world's violence and suffering—instead this farewell is the last straw. His agony stems in part from the apparent meaninglessness of such pain, whereas before he still tried to find some purpose in it.

John Grady rides all the next day towards Encantada, finally arriving to the old mud walls at dawn. He loads his pistol and rides through the streets to the old school, where he breaks in to sit at the captain's desk and take out the handcuffs. The captain enters to see John Grady aiming his pistol at him. John Grady says he's come to get his **horse**. John Grady leads the captain out the back door towards the jail, which John Grady unlocks to let out the old man, who's still sitting as before. He handcuffs the captain's hands in front of him and they go to the blue house where the charro comes out, seeming confused. John Grady says he wants his horse. Rawlins' horse is also in a mud barn behind the house. John Grady takes the reins and asks the *charro* where the other horses are, his pistol to the captain's head. He says Blevins was his brother and he had vowed not to return to his father without the captain's head: if he fails other brothers are behind him. Doubt begins to cloud the captain's face.

John Grady's actions are methodical and dispassionate. There's an interesting, if chilling, parallel with the captain's earlier actions—John Grady may have learned something from the captain, though the novel makes clear that John Grady's idealism, rather than gratuitous love of violence, is still at work here in his dogged desire to get back Redbo. This idealism, in fact, recalls Blevins' attempts to steal back his horse and pistol, though John Grady has developed a far greater competence. In John Grady's last stand in Mexico, McCarthy is perhaps suggesting a middle path between pure, dispassionate expertise and romantic idealism.

The charro tells him the other **horses** are at Don Rafael's hacienda. They all ride out the ten kilometers. At the corral John Grady dismounts, draws his pistol, and leads Rawlins' horse through the gate. He calls out to Redbo, who whinnies at him. Suddenly a man steps into a doorway, and John Grady whispers at the captain to say they have a thief and need to see the American horse. The man withdraws, and John Grady leads the captain out. As they're turning John Grady sees Blevins' horse. He assumes the man has probably gone to the house for a rifle and will soon be back. Indeed, the man calls for the captain from the stable.

John Grady's task is now growing knottier and more complex. What was initially an attempt to get his own horse back now has become an opportunity to avenge Rawlins' imprisonment and Blevins' death. John Grady's loyalty to both of them kicks in here, tied, again, to his idealism in paying little regard to his own safety or practicality in trying to take back three horses single-handedly.

John Grady hands rope to the charro and tells him to bridle Blevins' **horse**. He snaps the handcuffs back onto the captain, tells the *charro* to wait there, and pushes the captain toward the door. John Grady steps out and aims the revolver's barrels between the eyes of the man crouched there. Suddenly, his legs are slammed from under him with the crack of a rifle from somewhere else. John Grady grabs the first man's rifle and sees the man who'd shot him in the bed of a truck across the lot. John Grady fires, hitting a tire.

This passage in the novel is somewhat confusing, as men seem to pop up from nowhere, but this confusion is meant to reflect the way that, John Grady is experiencing the scene, as he attempts to deal with at least four different adversaries at one time. He's shot by the fourth, but is able to continue the fight.

John Grady yells to the charro to bring a saddle and bridle for his **horse** or he'll kill the captain. He speaks slowly to Redbo as the *charro* obeys, and then looks down at his leg, his pants dark with **blood**. John Grady tells the *charro* to bring him the other two horses. He looks at the second man kneeling with his hands up. The man says John Grady is crazy, and John Grady says he's right. He swings his leg over the saddle and backs his horse to where the captain was sitting, telling the *charro* to bring him a rope—he's figured out there's bad blood between the two of them. He hoists the captain onto Redbo and rides out the gate, leading Blevins' horse on a rope. The *charro* is holding his hat and he bends down and takes it, saying *Adiós*. There's no sign of the other two men, and when they reach the road six women and young girls are all peering out of the kitchen at them.

Having killed a man already, John Grady has now entered the "office" he imagined held by the captain when he looked at him following Blevins' death. He treats this office with gravity rather than pride, but it may give him greater credibility in his threats against the charro and the captain in this situation. John Grady is able to draw on his skill in reading people, as he's done before, in taking advantage of the "bad blood" that apparently exists between the charro and the captain. Indeed, by the end, it seems almost as if the charro is rooting him on. Also recall that the charro hadn't been "brave" enough to shoot Blevins.

They set out back toward Encantada, the captain complaining about his dislocated shoulder, which John Grady ignores. Ten minutes later four riders appear galloping from behind. John Grady fires at them and the captain pulls on Redbo's reins, stopping him in the road. John Grady hits the captain with his rifle barrel to make him drop the reins, and he sees the riders disappear into the brush. They head the other way, riding east along a broad river and up onto a gravel ridge. He sees six riders over the open country a mile below. There's nowhere to hide. He tells the captain to follow him, assuring him that he can outride him should the captain try to escape. Across the ridge, he dismounts and cuts a string of cloth from his shirt, tying it from a dead branch to the hammer of the captain's pistol. He lays a burning cigarette across the cloth, and then returns to the **horses**, driving them across the open country towards a low mesa. Halfway across he hears the pop of the pistol he'd been waiting for as the cloth burns through and the pistol fires.

The captain, who had shown such bravado when he was in charge of John Grady and Rawlins, now shows himself to be a weak and petulant coward. By portraying him in such a way, McCarthy thus creates a distinction between suffering that is gleefully inflicted and suffering that is nobly endured. It is not violence itself that is inherently unethical, but rather how it is used. This ambivalence supports the notion of reality that McCarthy has been developing throughout the novel, as multifaceted, slippery, and unable to be fully contained or understood. This helps to explain John Grady's single-minded attempt to get back the horses, which for him do reflect an underlying order to reality.

They ride through the brush and stop to rest by a creek. The captain asks why John Grady won't leave him here, and John Grady replies that the captain is a hostage. The captain points at his leg, saying he'll die, and John Grady says God will decide. The captain says he should be afraid of God, since he isn't an officer and has no authority. John Grady spits and orders him back onto the **horse**.

The captain's response to John Grady is meant to be seen as laughable. God is to be feared only if someone has no earthly authority—the captain, then, need not fear him. John Grady had earlier mentioned God's will in a different context, that of the inability of mortals to know what will happen or why.

That night they stop to camp, and John Grady builds a fire. He sticks the barrel of the pistol into the coals, and soaks his shirt in a creek. He takes off his pants and looks at his thigh wound. He wipes away the **blood**, seeing discolored skin around the wound. He drags the pistol from the coals and quickly jams the red-hot barrel into the bullet hole in his leg. He screams into the night, drops the revolver, and falls onto his side in agony. He pours water on his leg, gasping. When he turns around the captain is standing over him with the rifle. He demands the handcuff keys, but John Grady rises and takes the rifle, which is empty, from the captain. He reloads the rifle and picks his pistol back up. They leave the fire burning and continue along a ridge. The captain seems to be in pain: John Grady tells Redbo it'll be a long night.

The graphic, vivid description of John Grady's process of cauterizing his wound is meant to unsettle the reader, but also to prompt admiration. John Grady may not believe, as Alfonsa had critically said of her compatriots, that the law of blood is the only one that matters, but his willingness to inflict pain on himself in order to survive is meant to be respected rather than censured. Violence as we've learned throughout the novel, takes on different meanings depending on its context.

At dawn they rest and drink water. The captain says he can go no farther, but John Grady says they will. They rest again further on, at which point the **horses** are exhausted, and it occurs to him that the captain may die. John Grady tells the captain that he's not going to kill him—he's not like him. He tells the captain to take off his shirt, and he pulls the dislocated shoulder back into place as the captain screams.

Once again, the captain reveals his weakness and cowardice, which contrasts so sharply to the bravado he put on earlier in the novel. By making clear that he won't kill the captain, John Grady sets himself apart and chooses another law than that of blood.

They continue on up through the hills at a much-reduced pace. In the early evening John Grady glimpses riders about five miles away. As he sleeps, he hears the **horses** stepping and drinking. He dreams of horses moving among the stones, as if at an ancient site where the world's order had crumbled, carrying in their hearts the memories of this and other places where horses had been. The order in the horse's heart is more durable than that written on stones, he thinks.

John Grady's dream highlights the way he thinks about horses as a source of order and constancy in a world of dizzying change and unforeseen consequences of actions. He takes solace in the sense of history and stability that horses give him, something he finds often lacking in his own life.

When John Grady awakes there are three men standing over him with pistols. A man with a rifle tells him to give him his keys, and he continues on to the captain, handcuffing him. He asks which of the **horses** are John Grady's. They all are, he replies. The man gives John Grady his blanket and touches the brim of his hat, saying that they are men of the country, and they ride away with the handcuffed captain. John Grady never sees them again.

While John Grady has promised not to treat the captain as the captain has treated others, there are other riders who do not hold such views. John Grady is not at all portrayed as happy about the captain's fate, but simply as resigned to an outcome that doesn't surprise him. Not much seems to surprise him now.

John Grady rides the entire next day with the three **horses** through the north country, which by evening is black and cold. He shoots a small doe. The animal is still alive, looking at him without fear, when he reaches her. He wonders if the captain is still alive and thinks about Blevins and Alejandra. He remembers the sadness he'd first seen in Alejandra, which he thought he had understood, but of which he knew nothing. He feels lonely and alien to the world, though he also loves it, and feels that the world's pain counts for more than its beauty: that one flower becomes equivalent to the **blood** of many.

When John Grady had met Alejandra at the train station, it was a shock to realize that she had lived and suffered more than the small moments they'd spent together. As Alfonsa said about herself and Gustavo, it can be powerful to share in suffering, and at this moment much of John Grady's loneliness stems not from the fact that he has suffered, but that he continues to suffer alone.

When John Grady wakes up he knows his father is dead. He rides on until the evening, when he sees lights in the distance of Los Picos. The next morning he orders a large breakfast at a café and speaks with the proprietor, who's setting up the town gazebo for a wedding. He's surprised at how far John Grady has come, and says that it was good that God keeps the truths of life from the young starting out or they'd never start at all. John Grady watches the couple emerge from the church in the rain, posing for photos that he thinks already look old. A small boy runs and splashes the bride's dress. The husband scowls but then laughs, and the entire wedding party does too.

Now cognizant of the suffering awaiting him at home, John Grady confronts the places and people he meets with a kind of resigned, observant patience. The romantic nature of a wedding party might have moved him more earlier, but now that he knows such a future has been denied him, he is more aware of the unromantic aspects but also of the quiet joys evident in this wedding party in a small, unexceptional Mexican town.

John Grady rides out of the town and heads north, crossing the river to Texas in the rain, pale and shivering. He rides into Langtry, Texas, and asks some men in a pickup truck what date it is. They say it's Thanksgiving day. For weeks, John Grady rides around the border country looking for the owner of Blevins' **horse**. Just before Christmas he turns the horse over to the judge in Ozona. John Grady asks permission at the hearing to tell the entire story, which takes him almost half an hour. The judge says he doesn't think anyone could make up a story like that, but he asks John Grady three questions just to make sure—the number of hectares in the hacienda, the name of the *hacendado*'s cook's husband, and if John Grady could show the court his bullet holes. John Grady does so, and the judge says he was lucky not to get gangrene. John Grady says he burned them out with a hot pistol barrel. The court is absolutely silent.

John Grady's border crossing back into the States has nothing of the excitement, adventure, or laughter of his entrance to Mexico, and the chilly rain only underlines this contrast. The Texas judge takes on enormous proportions in John Grady's moral imagination. John Grady believes the man can pass judgment not only about the horse, but also on John Grady's own moral status. Again, John Grady's courage and the audience's awe at his story of cauterizing his bullet wounds shows how differently violence and suffering can be portrayed, as valiant or as cowardly, depending on the circumstances.

The judge says he's heard many things that make him have doubts about the human race, but this isn't one of them. That night John Grady knocks at the judge's door. He's invited in and is introduced to the judge's wife. John Grady says that he was bothered by what the judge said in the court—he doesn't feel that he was in the right. The hacendado was good to him, he says, but he believes that Don Héctor intended to kill him when he went up to the mesa to look for him—and it was all his own fault. The judge says that John Grady seems to be a little hard on himself, and that he should put it all behind him. John Grady adds that he killed a boy in a penitentiary who was trying to kill him. He could have been a good old boy, he says, and he's not sure he's supposed to be dead. The judge says he must know the boy wasn't a good old boy.

The judge's sentence seems to give John Grady what he wanted , absolving him of his guilt. But John Grady doesn't feel absolved, since he believes the judge has erred in considering him a good person. John Grady's guilt stems directly from his sense of responsibility, and the judge's response is to loosen that sense of responsibility, telling John Grady to give himself a break by accepting that he acted in the way he felt he had to. It's an interesting argument for a judge, but it stems from the inherent ambiguity in the law and in morality itself—something that a judge would certainly be well aware of.

The judge asks John Grady if he'd want to be a judge, and when he says no, the judge said he originally didn't want to either. What changed was the amount of injustice he saw in the court system. He didn't have any choice, he thinks. He still thinks about the boy he sent to the electric chair in 1932. He'd do it again, but doesn't feel good about it. John Grady says he almost killed someone again—the captain. But he didn't: he doesn't know why he wanted to. The judge says that's between him and God. John Grady says he just didn't want the judge to think he was special. As he stands up, he says that he wanted to kill the captain because he stood and watched him walk Blevins into the woods, and he never said anything. He needs to find out who the **horse** belongs to, he says: it's like a stone around his neck. The judge says there's nothing wrong with him, and he'll get it all sorted out. He tells John Grady he can come back and visit anytime.

By confiding in John Grady about his own doubts and stories from his past, the judge shows just how difficult it can be to relinquish a sense of guilt and responsibility for an action. As Alfonsa said, there are no might-have-beens in history, whether individual or societal. Only at the very end of their conversation does John Grady confide what is most likely his deepest sense of guilt: his failure to act against Blevins' murder. This failure to act is at the heart of the many debates about fate and responsibility. McCarthy never fully reveals his position on either side, only concluding that this guilt is something John Grady will not be able to escape.

The next Sunday, John Grady is in a Bracketville, Texas café when he hears a voice on the radio saying it's the Jimmy Blevins Gospel Hour, in Del Rio. John Grady arrives at the Blevins house that afternoon, and tells the small blonde woman at the door that he wants to see the reverend about a **horse**. The woman thinks he's there to have the bay horse blessed. The reverend Jimmy Blevins walks out onto the porch and says he's never owned a horse, nor knew a boy around 14 named Jimmy Blevins. There's tons of Jimmy Blevins around the country, even around the world, he says. They send him photos and letters sometimes.

John Grady and Rawlins hadn't believed that Jimmy Blevins had given his real name originally, because they already knew of the radio show. But now John Grady is growing increasingly desperate. It's unclear whether the existence of dozens of Jimmy Blevinses all around the world is meant to be reassuring, comical, or desperately sad—or perhaps a combination of all three.

The reverend invites John Grady in for dinner. He tells him how he got started, when he realized how powerful the radio could be to get people to hear the word of God. He excuses himself, and his wife tells John Grady that the reverend used to have people put their hands on the radio to be blessed. He cured many, but then people started to send dead people in crates on the railways to the house. It got out of hand, she says. But they get letters from China, from France, from Spain. People can even hear the station on Mars.

This is a somewhat melancholy interlude in the pages before the end of the book. It recalls what John Grady had told Rawlins, that there must be every kind of place one can think of in the world. The total lack of connection between this particular world and the Blevins John Grady knew seems to both present and challenge the notion that everything is connected.

John Grady never finds the **horse**'s owner. In March, he heads back to San Angelo and reaches the Rawlins'. He whistles below Rawlins' room, and Rawlins exclaims that Junior, Rawlins' horse, is there. He says John Grady must know his father died, and that Abuela is very sick. He asks what John Grady plans to do. Rawlins says he could stay at his house, but John Grady says he's going to move on. This is good country, Rawlins says, but John Grady replies that it isn't his country. He says he doesn't know where his country is, though, and Rawlins doesn't answer. They say goodbye, and Rawlins stands holding Junior and watches John Grady ride away.

John Grady has stayed unceasingly loyal to his friend Rawlins throughout his adventures alone in Mexico, just as Rawlins had stayed loyal to him by sticking with him even when John Grady got them thrown in jail. Here, however, there's a slight awkwardness between the two, and a sense that things have changed for good between them. Their saga in Mexico has contributed to this, but it may also simply be a result of growing up and apart.

It's cool and windy the day of Abuela's funeral, and John Grady stands across the road, apart from the mostly Mexican group. He crosses the road afterward and wanders past the headstones emblazoned with the Mexican names he knows, along with "Born" and "Died." Abuela had worked with his family for fifty years. He takes off his hat and says goodbye in Spanish. He holds out his hands, as if to steady himself against the world that seems to care nothing about all the anonymous people who live and die.

The novel is bookended by two deaths: that of John Grady's grandfather and that of "Abuela," or "grandmother." In between, John Grady has witnessed countless struggles of small, unknown lives that seem able to be so easily extinguished. This understanding of humans' ultimate insignificance is part of facing reality for John Grady, and it is agonizing.

After four days of riding, John Grady crosses the Pecos River at Iraan, Texas, and thinks about the time when there were still Indians on the plains. He comes across some Indians later that day. They stand watching him, though they don't comment on his riding there nor seem to have any curiosity about him. They just watch, knowing he will pass and then vanish. John Grady rides through the desert red with dust. At evening he comes across a solitary bull, and then rides on with the wind blowing out of the west, his shadow merging with the shadow of his **horse**.

After dreaming about the adventures of Comanche Indians and of how he could revive them himself, John Grady now encounters "real-life" Indians, whose lives are presumably just as full of daily difficulties, small tragedies, and struggles as his is. But the novel ends on a more hopeful note, as the shadows merge and John Grady finds some kind of redemption, if only fleeting, in riding his beloved horses.

HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

MLA

Baena, Victoria. "*All the Pretty Horses*." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 26 Aug 2015. Web. 21 Apr 2020.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Baena, Victoria. "*All the Pretty Horses*." LitCharts LLC, August 26, 2015. Retrieved April 21, 2020. https://www.litcharts.com/lit/all-the-pretty-horses.

To cite any of the quotes from *All the Pretty Horses* covered in the Quotes section of this LitChart:

MLA

McCarthy, Cormac. All the Pretty Horses. Vintage. 1993.

CHICAGO MANUAL

McCarthy, Cormac. All the Pretty Horses. New York: Vintage. 1993.