
Maturity and Independence in *All The Pretty Horses*

The journey from childhood to maturity is guided primarily by the search for meaning. In *All the Pretty Horses*, protagonist John Grady Cole leaves home to find the place where he belongs in the world. Throughout the novel, John Grady chased the ideal vision of the ranch lifestyle instilled in him by his late grandfather, but was forced to reconcile his romantic dreams of the old west with a reality of violence and injustice that was less than kind to him. The sixteen-year-old set off from home in search of the answers he was always looking for but never managed to find at home, in his relationships with his estranged mother and his inadequate father.

After Grady's grandfather died and his mother sold the ranch, he was forced to re-examine his future. He even goes as far as to visit his mother to see her performing in a play but finds no answers: "He'd the notion that there would be something in the story itself to tell him about the way the world was or was becoming but there was not" (21). He might not get answers, but he knows that the kind of life his mother leads in San Antonio is not for him. He leaves home and finds comfort in the familiar desert, in embracing the rugged cowboy lifestyle that directly contrasts with the modern industrialism he is running from. Eventually, Rawlins runs away from home with Grady for the sake of adventure, and because there is not much of a life for him in San Angelo. It becomes clear early in the trip that instead of leaving out of a longing for the freedom of the cowboy lifestyle, Rawlins views his new lifestyle as a positive consequence of his decision to leave. It is a way of life that he "could get used to this life...It wouldn't take [him] no time at all" (35). He parts ways with Grady after he finds the answers he wasn't looking for. Through his time on the road, at the ranch, in prison, he came realize that the path he was on wasn't leading him to the future he really wanted. He spent a large measure of the journey following Grady's lead even when they disagreed, but by the end he had matured through his trials and was able to define what he wanted. This shift left Grady alone to search for all the answers to his questions, such as why Alejandra had let him go, how to live with his own guilt for the death of another man, an explanation for the injustice of Blevins' death, and the true owner of Blevins' horse. In finding these answers, Grady is faced with an unsheltered view of the world that forces him to grow up.

Consequences are driven by one's choices and free will rather than by fate guiding the actions of man. Throughout the novel, John Grady, Rawlins and Alfonsa offer their own perspectives on the nature of free will and fate. Doubt and regret for his own choices lead Rawlins to struggle with the idea of whether it is fate or free will that rules his future. He questions his motivations for running away from home with his friend almost immediately: "well suppose you were ill at ease and didn't know why. Would that mean that you might be someplace you wasn't supposed to be and didn't know it?" His words appeal to some higher destiny, one that isn't being fulfilled,

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as the source of his discomfort (37). He finds no support in Grady, who solidly believes that people make their own destinies. In contemplation of the afterlife, Rawlins asks Grady if a person can believe in heaven if that person doesn't believe in hell and Grady replies, "I guess you can believe what you want to" (91). While Rawlins is trying to find the right answer, Grady tells him that there is no right answer.

For his part, John Grady is the embodiment of the American Dream. He believes that anything is possible if you just put your mind to it. This belief is what drives him to leave home in search of a future that is dying out, in the hope that he has the power to shape his future. This belief also causes him to get into trouble in Mexico when his steadfast individualist attitude clashes with the mentality of Alfonsa, a character who believes that people's lives are controlled by unseen forces, such as a societal structure and tradition, that they must play into. Through her past experiences, her injury that affected her prospects, and losing her love in a rebellion against the greater strength of the Mexican government, she came to believe that people are just puppets at the mercy of fate: "For me the world has always been more of a puppet show. But when one looks behind the curtain and traces the strings upward they terminate in the hands of yet other puppets, themselves with their own strings which trace upward in turn, and so on" (231). Grady's disagreement only urges him to pursue a romantic relationship that is doomed to fail from the start and leads him right into prison. The time in prison seems to be all the confirmation that Rawlins needs that fate has laid out a course for him: "It was in the hospital that I got to thinking: I wouldn't be here if I wasn't supposed to be here" (214). Rather than accepting that his decisions led him into this trouble, he attempts to vindicate himself by saying that he was always meant to have these experiences: "All my life I had the feelin' that trouble was close at hand. Not that I was about to get into it. Just that it was always there" (208). Rawlins interprets his experiences as proof of fate, but Grady holds to his belief, even though it is his strong faith in free will that causes him the most emotional turmoil in the second half of the novel. He is plagued with shame at not doing more to stop Blevins from being executed, regret over losing Alejandra, and guilt over killing an inmate who threatened his life. Rawlins tries to comfort Grady by reassuring him that he didn't have a choice but to kill, yet this idea goes against one of Grady's basic beliefs (215).

Although John Grady believes that man has ultimate power over his own destiny, he was faced with so much hardship and loss that was seemingly out of his control. He doesn't let go of this idea, though. By the end of the novel, rather than accepting the world as it is and surrendering to a life in San Angelo, Grady sets off in search of the life he really wants, confident in the fact that he can shape his life in any way he chooses.

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