Hoi Polloi

An Anthology of Essays

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The cover of this edition of *Hoi Polloi* illustrates the familiar, old story of the Frog Prince. Like a precious stone hidden within the earth, the prince waits for the princess's kiss to release him. Just like the Frog Prince, we, the “hoi polloi,” or common man, all possess this potential for uniqueness and greatness. These noble qualities are found in each of the fine essays represented here. Luckily, for our readers it does not require a kiss to unlock such regality, only a willing eye and an attentive mind.

This magazine presents a sampling of some literary jewels that have emerged from students at Gainesville College. It is a literary record, a diary, of our fellow students. Congratulations to all these writers whose essays are included; a short biography of each author appears at the end of the magazine. Any Gainesville College students interested in showcasing their own literary jewels in future issues are encouraged to submit their essays to their English professors or directly to the *Hoi Polloi* faculty advisor.

We would also like to thank those involved in this noble effort. Thanks to Dr. Croft, our advisor and fearless leader. Without his enthusiasm and fine organizational skills, this publication would not be complete. Thanks to the faculty and student advisory boards whose time and painstaking efforts have made this project successful. A special thanks goes to our contest judge, Russell Greer, of Texas Women’s University. Last, but certainly not least, thanks to our talented artist, Tim Dominy, for our unique cover illustration.

Finally, please note that, unless otherwise noted, all citations for quotations in the text refer to *The Bedford Introduction to Literature*, Fourth Edition, edited by Michael Meyer.

We are overjoyed to offer this finely honed masterwork to the students in the hope that they will find not only pleasure but also instruction within these pages.

Joel Ledenham
Melissa Burns

Introduction
"Good Country People," Reveals More Than It Seems to Tell

Tracy Myers

Imagine a world without color—gray skies, black mountains, and white trees dot the countryside. Every day is more white or more black, depending on the weather, and no matter what time of year it is, the world takes on the same dreariness of a winter day. Now imagine a world bursting with vibrant color that delights the senses and takes on new and symbolic meaning. Such is the world of Flannery O’Connor’s tales. Her stories (such as “A Good Man Is Hard to Find,” “Good Country People,” and “Revelation”) are full of hues that hint at a deeper interpretation of the stories’ main characters and the events surrounding them.

In “A Good Man Is Hard to Find,” O’Connor uses color to reveal the personalities of the two main characters (the grandmother and the Misfit) through the colors of their clothing. The grandmother’s clothing speaks volumes about her personality. She is wearing “white cotton gloves” (O’Connor 359), a solemn reference to the pureness the grandmother thinks she brings to anything she touches. Because purple is the color of royalty, the “purple spray of cloth violets” (359) the grandmother pins to her neckline discloses her vanity and materialism. Her revelation shows itself in the small white (the color of innocence) dots that decorate her blue (the color of vision) dress, her “head cleared” (367) as the result of events beyond her control. Although the Misfit is unaware of the extent to which he has saved the grandmother by killing her, his appearance hints at his role in the grandmother’s salvation. His “hair was just beginning to gray . . . and he was holding a black hat” (363). The black hat gives the Misfit an ominous air, and his graying hair suggests aged wisdom. O’Connor uses the contrasting appearances of the grandmother and the Misfit to shock the reader even further.

In much the same way, O’Connor uses color symbolism in “Good Country People.” The central figure in the story, Joy, has “icy blue [eyes], with the look of someone who has achieved blindness by an act of will and means to keep it” (370), an accurate description of Joy’s attitude concerning the people and events going on around her. Again O’Connor reveals blue (like Joy’s blue eyes) to be a color of vision, which Joy lacks. Since Joy constantly wears a yellow sweatshirt (yellow being the color of cowardice), the reader begins to see the veiled cowardice in Joy’s actions; she acts as though she has superior control over her life, but she seldom leaves the protective confines of the farm. Manley Pointer, the “tall gaunt hatless youth” (372) who appears at Joy’s front door trying to sell Bibles, proves to be Joy’s undoing. The color of Manley’s “large black suitcase” (372) suggests that the valise contains more troublesome objects than Bibles. His “bright blue suit and yellow socks” (372) symbolize the cowardly way Manley goes about initiating the positive change in Joy when he tricks her into removing her wooden leg and trusting another human being.

Just as Joy flaunts her need for salvation in the colors surrounding her, the same is true for Mrs. Ruby Turpin, the “very large” (390) main character of O’Connor’s “Revelation.” Mrs. Turpin has “little bright black eyes” (390) that “[size] up the . . . situation” (390). Through these very same black eyes, Mrs. Turpin passes judgment on the people around her by rating their social standing by the quality of their shoes. As a good Christian woman of high social standing, she considers herself well within her rights to judge other people; in fact, even her “hogs are not dirty and they don’t stink” (393). Mary Grace, the scowling fat girl, sends Mrs. Turpin on the road to a clearer interpretation of herself when she hurls the “thick blue book . . . entitled Human Development” (391) at Mrs. Turpin’s head. Once again the reader sees blue as a color of revelation and clear reality. Soon after, Mary Grace’s “fierce brilliant eyes . . . burned . . . with pleasure” (398) as she whispers to Mrs. Turpin, “Go back to hell where you came from, you old wart hog” (398). Later this phrase plays over and over again in Mrs. Turpin’s mind until her head clears and a “visionary light settles in her eyes” (403).

Clearly then, Flannery O’Connor’s tales are full of deep-seated symbolic color, and the colors used in her stories reinforce the stories’ messages. “A Good Man is Hard to Find,” “Good Country People,” and “Revelation” swell with hues that hint at their main characters’ dispositions and shed light on the events surrounding their salvation.
The distance of separation between men and women's conversational habits and strategy has been greatly lessened by technology. A journey through cyberspace reveals men and women conversing equally, not only on interesting topics, but also in information exchanges, and even on sexual topics. In a world run by microchips, men and women stand on equal ground. The old dilemmas over dominance are based, not on gender (such a ridiculous assumption that communication or conversational abilities depend on one's sexuality), but on criteria that actually relate to the subject: knowledge, experience, and ability.

Why is verbal communication so different from typed communication? The reason is simple—the lack of consequences. The Internet connects the world. People from Holland, Canada, Texas, and California converse simultaneously. They do not know one another, and they will probably never meet. The only rule is no real name. This lack of consequences, in addition to three other variables (use of an alias, the structure of IRC rooms, and keyboard communication), helps to bridge the gap between the sexes and lessen their communication differences.

Men and women are equally aggressive in their identities and personalities when surfing the web. “Name?” the computer asks first. The question seems so simple, but it is actually very complex and important. Here is a list of names.

King Cobra  Whisper
Big Ben    Sexyjess
Boston Freak  Cyberkitten

Hans Solo    Libra
DiNo     Digs
These two lists are obviously very different. They are both aggressive, but the women are more sensually oriented while the men are more competitive. The name is the only thing that anyone knows about the person that just stepped into the room. The name, therefore, is an image of that person; in effect, it becomes the person's identity. Users encounter a freedom in cyberspace that is relatively unknown in the “real world”; they are able to choose or alter their identities and personalities. Disguised under an alias, web surfers are free from social consequences and, thus, more aggressive in discussions and arguments. Two surfers will typically begin a discussion with a description. Consider the following two examples:

1) F/18, 5' 5", red hair, and blue eyes
Or something more fantastic:
2) Ariel sweeps into the room, a lioneess with fire glistening in her ice blue eyes; she looks as she surveys the room. The object of her attention is seated at the bar emphatically gesturing to the bartender. She strides across the room and slides into the chair beside his. A cool face masks the rage boiling beneath, a predator and her prey innocent of her intentions.

These are examples of how varied descriptions over the Internet can be. It is entirely up to the surfer how to portray him or herself.

In an IRC room or Internet Relay Chat room (typically called a “chat room”), 15 to 20 individuals interact simultaneously, this setup enables people to send and receive messages at the same time. One does not have to wait while one person drones on and on for ten minutes on a crisis in China even though he or she has never been to China. Women can politely join a conversation without feeling they have rudely interrupted or without having to scream louder than two boisterous males. Sports, music, movies, novels, class, hobbies, sex. The women and men more easily cross the gender line in referring to topics that society has typically deemed appropriate for each sex. Men converse without guilt or pressure about Tori Amos, soap operas, and hair dye, all typically feminine topics; women discuss more masculine topics such as sex, sports, and even beer. DiNo, for instance, wrote dark and passionate poetry; in contrast, one woman was very aggressive, vulgar, and bold. The weaker sex has found a weapon, thanks to technology, that undermines physical strength. Those that would dare to challenge the system must step up to the plate, but the challengers should remember that knowledge is the key, and ignorance allows one to be dominated.

For millennia Homo sapiens have communicated face to face. Even before language there were signals, body language, eye contact, and tonal variations.
These are examples of understanding and communication on an emotional and intimate level by which people communicate their overall emotional messages subconsciously. On the Internet the challenge is to overcome the lack of body signals in written communication. The writer must express emotions using only words, paint a picture using just the text. Verbs, punctuation, adjectives, and sentence structure are so important in conveying the correct image and connotation if thoughts are to be fully transmitted between two or more people. It is in this area that women and men have begun on equal ground; there can be no lame excuses for inferior expertise and ability. Come on, ladies! Both sexes are relatively new to these high-speed, high-tech conversations.

I will close this formal essay informally for two reasons. One, "you" is an easier pronoun to use than diverse forms of the third person. Two, and certainly most important, I want to illustrate how personal the Internet technology really is. It is knowledge at your fingertips and instant communication across the world. You hold the ability to create an alias which, whether it comes from an album cover, an odd phrase, or some dusty corner of the human mind, is an expression of yourself, your character in a fantasy world that borders on the "real world" through a computer screen. At this gateway the whole process of communication has evolved into a more high-speed, technological, and accurate form. Now the question is, "Can you use the English language effectively to communicate yourself to the world?"

When writing a story, an author often employs different literary devices to add depth. One such device is the symbol. According to Michael Meyer, "A literary symbol can be a setting, character, action, object, name, or anything else in a work that maintains a literal significance while suggesting other meanings" (188). In "The Hand" by Colette, a lover's hand takes on new meaning when viewed under closer inspection by his young bride. Likewise, in Nathaniel Hawthorne's "The Minister's Black Veil," the minister's veil comes to represent something so horrible to his congregation that it changes his life. In both stories, the author's use of symbolism gives greater significance to conventional, everyday objects.

As her story's title implies, Colette endows the hand with heightened significance. In the story, a young bride views her new husband's hand under close scrutiny for the first time. The young bride is "too happy to sleep" (193) as she lies in bed mentally reviewing all the fine qualities that she loves in her husband. Even though she admits that "her conjugal adventure had been little more than a kidnapping" (193), the excitement of her new marriage renders the young bride awestruck. As the light from a lamp flows onto her husband's hand, she notices his "powerful knuckles . . . [and] red hairs" (194). Having never noticed these details, she is quite taken aback: "It's as if I were lying on some animal" (194). With its thumb outstretched, the hand takes on a "vile, ape-like appearance" (194) that offends the young bride. At "the sound of a passing car,"
the hand “tense[s] up in the shape of a crab” (194), threatening to pounce on unseen horrors. Even in a state of repose, the hand remains a “pliant beast” (194), merely keeping its dangerous nature in check. While these descriptions are meant to be taken quite literally, closer inspection reveals a darker nature within the young bride’s husband. With its “splayed . . . tendons” and “fur like battle dress” (194), the hand symbolizes man’s animal instincts--his secret, inner nature about which the young wife has previously been unaware. This ominous revelation causes a change within the narrator. No longer the giddy young wife, at the end of the story, she kisses the “monstrous hand” and bravely submits herself to “a life of duplicity, of resignation, and of a lowly delicate, diplomacy” (195).

Just as the hand in Colette’s story symbolizes abstract ideas about man’s inner nature, so does the veil in Nathaniel Hawthorne’s “The Minister’s Black Veil.” With his mild temperament and humble manner, the Reverend Mr. Hooper is a man who is well-liked by everyone in his congregation. When he dons a black veil as a sort of visual sermon, however, the attitude of his entire congregation changes. One old woman says, “I don’t like it” (98). Another person exclaims, “Our parson has gone mad!” (98). As Reverend Hooper delivers his first sermon from behind the veil, however, “something, either in the sentiment of the discourse itself, or in the imagination of the auditors . . . made it greatly the most powerful effort. . . . [the congregation] had ever heard from their pastor’s lips” (99). To Mr. Hooper, the veil is not just a piece of black crape, rather, it symbolizes the secret sin in all people that impairs their view of godliness. To the reader, however, the veil represents the minister’s obsession with sin. This obsession darkens, obscures, and falsifies Mr. Hooper’s view of others in the same way that the veil physically darkens his vision. Although his fiancee Elizabeth implores him to remove the veil, the minister replies: “This veil is a type and a symbol. . . . [that] must separate me from the world” (103). When she points out that others may misconstrue his motivations for putting on the veil, Mr. Hooper simply responds: “If I hide my face for sorrow, there is cause enough . . . and if I cover it for secret sin, what mortal might not do the same?” (103).

And just as Elizabeth has predicted, the townspeople do misunderstand. They view the minister’s veil as a symbol of hidden secrets, sin, and death: “That piece of crape, to their imagination, seemed to hang down before his heart, the symbol of a fearful secret between him and them” (102). The sight of Mr. Hooper shrouded in the black veil day in and day out instills fear in the hearts of his congregation. Ironically, however, the veil’s “gloom, indeed, enabled him to sympathize with all dark affections” (104). Because the townspeople associate the veil with death and sorrow, they sometimes actually welcome the shrouded Mr. Hooper’s presence--at funerals.

Even in death, the minister refuses to remove his veil: “All through life that piece of crape had hung between him and the world: it had . . . kept him in that saddest of all prisons, his own heart; and still it lay upon his face, as if to deepen the gloom of his darksome chamber, and shade him from the sunshine of eternity” (105). Though it seems just an insignificant piece of crape, the darkness symbolized by the veil causes separation and despair for Mr. Hooper. From his deathbed, the minister demands: “Why do you tremble at me alone? . . . Tremble also at each other! Have men avoided me, and women shown no pity, and children scream’d and fled, only for my black veil?” (106). Thus, in the end, Mr. Hooper’s obsession with sin causes him to die a lonely man.

In each of these stories, seemingly ordinary objects take on vastly different meanings through the author’s use of symbolism. In Colette’s story, the hand symbolizes one man’s secret inner nature hidden from his young bride. In the case of Hawthorne’s story, the black veil symbolizes Mr. Hooper’s obsession with secret sin. In both stories, the authors have successfully used symbolism to add depth to their stories.
Many Americans believe that two nations exist in our one country: one black and the other white. In two plays by Arthur Miller and August Wilson, the playwrights apparently draw similar feelings and ideas from the grand cliche of the American dream, with a very important distinction: Miller's Death of a Salesman illustrates white America's dream, while Wilson's Fences depicts black America's dream. Although both plays' protagonists, white Willy Loman and black Troy Maxson, share a few prominent characteristics, in the methods they use to attain their goals, they reveal distinctions between the extent to which their respective cultures attain the American dream.

Within these individual plays, both set in approximately the same time period and in similar cities, Miller and Wilson share pieces of their respective cultures' idealistic dreams. For blacks and whites of the late forties and early fifties, the American dream centered very much on monetary wealth. This emphasis is evident in both plays. A blatant fascination with wealth pervades almost every American subculture's interpretation of the American dream. In order to enjoy life to the fullest, one must acquire great wealth, according to most American ideals. Both Willy and Troy frequently remark on how tight money gets around their respective households; just as often, the two men acknowledge that money could solve most of their problems. This absolute faith in the healing qualities of money held by most Americans does not escape Wilson or Miller, but it is not the only similarity shared by the two works.

To anyone who has ever read Death of a Salesman, Willy Loman's insatiable need for popularity probably stands out even more than his worship of money. Troy Maxson seems to have a similar fixation with winning the favor of his friends and neighbors. On the topic of "being well-liked" (Miller 1679), as Willy puts it, these two men from different cultures suddenly appear very similar. Much like their desire for popularity, the need for respect holds great sway over Willy and Troy. Willy hungers for the respect of everyone he encounters on his travels, but not so much from his family. On the other hand, Troy demands respect from everyone, including his family. He lectures his son Cory: "I'm the boss around here. I do the only saying what counts" (Wilson 1890). As illustrated by these two men's attitudes, respect and popularity both seem to hold prominent places within the American dream.

Beyond money, popularity, and respect, however, the two plays begin to diverge in their presentation of what the American dream means to the two Americas. Wilson effectively shows how social injustice towards blacks throughout American history influences Troy's chances of realizing the American dream. A major element in black Americans' dreams was equality in their dealings with white America, as well as the opportunity to better themselves. Fences opens with Troy demanding of his boss, "What's the matter, don't I count? You think only white fellows got sense enough to drive a truck" (Wilson 1874). From the beginning, Troy struggles against prejudice. Many blacks felt this way; if they could at least be treated with the same dignity as whites and receive the same opportunities, they could achieve success and attain their culture's self-respect. Troy tries to explain to Cory the importance of making sure that people are "doing right by you" (Wilson 1891). According to Wilson, the black community of the thirties, forties, and fifties held ideals deeply rooted in hard work and determination to reach a goal, which included earning the respect of other cultures in American society.

While Wilson idealistically presents the black American dream as more social than economic, Miller shows the reader a very pragmatic view of the white dream. Willy, who grows up under the shadow of his older brother, Ben, spends the rest of his life searching for a lucky break, like many others in the white American culture. With each flashback involving Ben, Willy asks, "What's the answer? How did you do it?" (Miller 1686). To Miller, white America seems to value hard work, but it truly admires the man who achieves success without having to work himself to death. White America pays careful attention to that bottom line, and the man with the money holds the power. Power and money, money and power—for whites, the two seem eternally intertwined. Throughout Death of a Salesman, white America's unwavering respect for money and the power it can bring shines through in Willy. Willy eventually kills himself in order...
for his family to collect on his life insurance policy, primarily so that his son Biff can fulfill Willy’s hopes. In one of his many delusions throughout the play, Willy even brags to his dead brother Ben about what Biff would become: “Can you imagine that magnificence with twenty thousand dollars in his pocket?” (Miller 1729). According to Miller, white America seems to value money for the power it brings over life itself.

Rarely have the similarities and differences between black and white America seemed so stark as in the comparison of these two plays. Though both works show that blacks and whites believe wealth, popularity, and respect all have their places in the American dream, the two plays effectively convey the unrealistic idealism of the black dream in comparison to the avaricious pragmatism of the white. These plays work well off each other, powerfully demonstrating the two nations hidden within one country.

How far can we go in justifying a criminal? Nowadays we ask ourselves this question more and more as we watch people coming up with different excuses for their malevolent actions and getting away with their crimes. No matter the cost, attorneys look for excuses and concern themselves with obtaining the verdict they desire, not justice. Acting as an attorney in his article “Abner Snopes as a Victim of Class,” Benjamin DeMott tries to justify Abner Snopes (William Faulkner’s character from “Barn Burning”). In this article DeMott presents Abner Snopes as a man who suffers many injustices; among them the writer names Abner’s lack of education, his life under economic oppression, and the “terrible frustration of an undeveloped mind” (431). Abner Snopes indeed suffers some injustices, but some other characters in the story, undergoing the same hardships, manage to maintain their human dignity.

Deprived of an education, Abner Snopes and his son Sarty are both trying “to make sense of this world” (DeMott 431); however, they each respond to their circumstances differently. By stressing Abner’s lack of education, DeMott claims that no one has taught Abner how to deal with hardship and that, as a result, he does not know how to respond to the oppression he is suffering. The writer attempts to prove that because of Abner’s lack of education he does not comprehend real justice or truth and, therefore, takes justice into his own hands by burning barns. On the other hand, this bitter character burns barns because of spite: he simply wants to “have [his superiors] beaten” (Faulkner 419). By contrast, ten-year-old Sarty, even though he has no formal education, knows the
difference between right and wrong and proves it by his actions. Aware of the consequences, Sarty thinks about telling the truth to the judge during his father’s trial. Later, aware of his father’s stubborn, unforgiving heart, Sarty asks his father to spare de Spain’s family. Finally, persuaded that truth and justice matter more than the animal instinct of sticking “to your own blood” (Faulkner 419), Sarty abandons his family. Through his behavior Sarty proves that the innate ability to distinguish between good and evil abides in every human being; therefore, Abner has no excuse for his actions.

Just as lack of education does not justify Abner, neither does economic oppression, which both Abner and Mr. Harris endure. DeMott emphasizes that Abner “has been slave labor and has seldom been fairly recompensed” (431). Living during difficult postwar times, Abner does work hard to survive, and his occupation as a tenant farmer sucks his blood and energy for a miserable wage. Even though he works like a horse, he has acquired very little: a mule, an old wagon, and a hog; therefore, he becomes very jealous of others in his social class and tries to interfere with their success. Like Abner, Mr. Harris also labors as a farmer. Obviously, he too works long, exhausting hours, but his response differs greatly from Abner’s. Mr. Harris treats the Snopeses with only kindness and understanding. When Abner’s hog gets into Mr. Harris’s corn, Mr. Harris responds with benevolence. First, he catches the animal and brings it back to the Snopeses. When the incident reoccurs, Mr. Harris gives Abner wire for a hog pen. Proud and stubborn, Abner exerts no effort to build the pen, so once again his hog gets out, destroying Mr. Harris’s crops. Only then does the longsuffering man confiscate Abner’s wayward hog. Shortly thereafter, Mr. Harris’s barn mysteriously burns down. At the subsequent trial, Mr. Harris displays further good will by refusing to force Sarty to testify against his father; Harris understands that making the son testify against his own father would ruin their already tenuous father-son relationship. Even though Mr. Harris suffers the same economic oppression as Abner, he maintains his human virtues and seeks no revenge.

Economically oppressed, Abner and his wife both suffer emotional frustrations to which they each react differently. Putting himself into Abner’s shoes, DeMott suggests that “it’s impossible [for readers] not to include with [their] indictment a sense of pity” (432) for Abner. The writer argues that because Abner labors and acquires nothing, because he must move from place to place, and because he feels persecuted and mistreated, he becomes frustrated with the whole world, and his “undeveloped mind” (431) cannot handle these emotions boiling inside. Accordingly, this frustration “has no way to express itself except in viciousness to those closest at hand” (432). For Abner, abusing his family members physically and mentally becomes routine. DeMott tries to prove that
Little birds, big birds, and even strange impaled birds are found throughout Cormac McCarthy’s novel *All the Pretty Horses*. McCarthy once served in the United States Air Force, and his experience with flying machines perhaps led him to include references to flying creatures so often in this novel. From the names of places such as the “Eagle Café” (McCarthy 7), where John Grady Cole, the novel’s protagonist, meets his father for a final talk, to trees such as the “birdseye maple” (133), symbolizing the scrutiny John Grady receives from his future lover Alejandra’s Grand Aunt, to the “little desert doves waking in the orchard” (127), with their romantic connotations representing the love birds of the story, John Grady and Alejandra, bird references abound in the novel. These everpresent bird references usually serve to foreshadow some significant future event or to symbolize some important aspect of a scene in the novel.

The first time birds appear with much frequency, Blevins, a troubled young man whom John Grady and his friend Rawlins meet on the trail, enters the story line. After Blevins’s appearance, birds begin to foreshadow future events and to symbolize various personal traits and beliefs of the story’s characters. Carrion birds and birds of prey are the first to appear. When Rawlins is talking to John Grady about what they should do with Blevins, the first mention of buzzards occurs. Next, a hawk, circling and then dropping, flies below John Grady and Rawlins while they are up on a mountain top. These two birds are important because of what they symbolize. Ugly and filthy, the buzzards and their carrion-devouring ways symbolize death—in this instance the coming death of Blevins. As for the hawk, throughout history, hawks have come to symbolize aggression and battle. In *All the Pretty Horses* this hawk symbolizes the aggression of Blevins, his magnificent horse, his shiny large caliber pistol, as well as the possibility for conflict that Blevins’s aggressive mentality and flashy possessions bring with them.

Another symbolic bird scene occurs after John Grady and Rawlins allow Blevins to join them on their journey. As they ride along, they notice several small impaled birds on the roadside. A furious storm has impaled these symbols of freedom upon the thorns of a roadside cholla plant. Like the birds, John Grady and Rawlins have come to Mexico for freedom, but because of Blevins they wind up stuck in a jail cell fighting for their lives. In Blevins’s case his fate is even worse: he winds up dead. Later, in an experience that changes his life, John Grady kills another human being in a prison fight. During this life-and-death struggle, John Grady’s attacker falls and impales himself on John Grady’s knife, similar to the birds’ impalement on the plant in the earlier scene.

All these birds have a common ground, and that common ground comes from foreshadowing the trouble that seems to follow Blevins everywhere he goes, whether from his irrational superstition against lightning or several other of his personality quirks. After the trouble with Blevins’s horse and the subsequent separation and rejoining of Blevins to the group, birds still play a role symbolizing and foreshadowing the events that happen to the small band of boys while Blevins belongs to the group. Shortly before Blevins is shot, “a nesting pair of hawks” (175) gets stirred up. Leaving their comfortable nest, the hawks symbolize the security that John Grady, Rawlins, and Blevins think they have. This sense of security is completely shattered when Blevins is shot. Blevins’s death leaves a deep mark on John Grady. The reader can see this mark when John Grady rides up on some buzzards to chase them off a dead colt. These buzzards symbolize Blevins’s death one final time for John Grady, who “[thinks] of Blevins” (225) after viewing this gruesome scene.

Just as birds foreshadow events around Blevins, they also foreshadow and symbolize events when John Grady and Rawlins spend most of the summer at The Hacienda de Nuestra Senora de la Purisima Concepcion. The first sight John Grady and Rawlins see upon reaching this sprawling ranch is “waterfowl... moving north” (McCarthy 93) as a signal of returning summer. These birds’ search for warm, fertile waters for the summer mirrors John Grady and Rawlins’s purpose in heading to La Purisima in search of fortune. A good summary of their stay at La Purisima includes “dust, sunlight, and a singing bird” (120). Hard work, time outdoors, and a general feeling of well-being seem the translation of this statement. Indeed this description truly characterizes La Purisima because it still operates like an old-fashioned Spanish Ranch that has been managed in the
same manner since its founding in 1824, has retained its original boundaries, and has passed from generation to generation for “one hundred and seventy years” (97). La Purisima’s ancestral traditions and domain are similar to the migratory birds’ inheritance of a system of migration and territory.

While at La Purisima, John Grady falls in love with Alejandra, the headstrong daughter of the ranch’s owner. Many bird references relate to John Grady and his feelings toward Alejandra, Alejandra’s physical being, or the lovers’ present or future situations. One line refers to a “flock of small birds that rose up and passed back over [John Grady] with thin calls” (109). Referring to a meeting with Alejandra along the road, this line symbolizes the feelings for Alejandra that John Grady has because he lusts for her but cannot interpret her signals. Just as it is difficult to interpret the thin bird calls, so too John Grady strains to interpret the head movements of Alejandra. John Grady wonders whether she “nodded or perhaps she only lowered her head slightly to better see what sort of horse he rode” (109).

At the dance another bird reference symbolizes the growing feelings between John Grady and Alejandra. When John Grady first touches Alejandra and dances with her, “a pair of goathawks” appear above in the partial darkness of the dance hall ceiling and then swoop down “and flare and arch upward into the darkness again” (123). These birds of the night signify John Grady’s feelings at the time. Like the birds in semi-darkness, John Grady partially hides his emotions by not going over to Alejandra until she smiles at him. At first touch John Grady’s emotions flare like the birds. Then, since he knows that he cannot act like he desperately longs for her without ruining the moment, he again hides his feelings, just as the birds return to their darkness. As a dating couple, but not yet lovers, “little desert doves” (127) symbolize the pure and new love that has grown between the two young people. Shortly before the love scene between John Grady and Alejandra, John Grady sees ducks or geese rising out of water and turning to “birds of gold” (128) in the light of the sun. Turning golden, these birds symbolize and foreshadow John Grady and Alejandra’s transformation from romantic friends into lovers by the surreal transition to gold.

Before John Grady and Alejandra become secret lovers, Alejandra’s Grand Aunt Alfonsa talks to John Grady after learning of his attraction for her goddaughter. During the talk Senora Alfonsa speaks of “shooting live pigeons” (135). Her discussion foreshadows the eventual breakup between John Grady and Alejandra, as well as the end of their midnight trysts after Senora Alfonsa forbids all contact between the two lovers later in the story. When John Grady returns to La Purisima after he gets out of jail, he hears doves calling. These doves symbolize John Grady and Alejandra, who long for each other but cannot see each other ever again, except for one short rendezvous at a hotel. At the hotel, John Grady sees a Macaw in a cage. This bird of paradise represents Alejandra and her confinement within her family’s set boundaries. At the end of this short-lived affair at the hotel, grackles are screaming in nearby treetops. These birds of iridescent black symbolize the sadness felt by the two lovers seeing each other for the last time.

In summary, birds always symbolize or foreshadow some occurrence or character trait in the novel All the Pretty Horses. The birds in the story have significance, and as two critics note, the symbols in All the Pretty Horses are “precise” and “powerful” (Cromwell 138) and “strong and regular” (Woodson 151). McCarthy deliberately uses bird references throughout the novel, thus adding another level of relevance to the story.

Works Cited


The Art of Crabbing

Eric Oliver

The salt creeks which litter coastal South Carolina are teeming with life. Millions of creatures from sea bass to tiny microscopic plankton swirl in and out of these creeks with the tide. Succulent Atlantic blue crabs also abound in these waters. In the low country of South Carolina, trapping blue crabs is referred to as "goin' crabbin'." The art of catching blue crabs can be an excellent pastime, and all that is needed to get someone started is a simple explanation.

In order to "go crabbin'," you need a few basic yet essential items. An old pair of tennis shoes is a must, as well as old clothes. A long-handled crab net, three rolls of string, wooden stakes, and a package of rotten chicken necks constitute most of the needed equipment. The last bit of equipment a crapper needs is a little patience and a quick hand.

Step one in any crabbing trip is to locate and get into a saltwater creek. Finding a creek can prove simple, while actually getting down the bank to the water requires some planning. Checking tide conditions is a must before leaving on a crabbing expedition; an ebbing tide from high to low provides the desired crabbing environment. Stepping from the bank to the bed of a creek during low tide is a tricky maneuver. Quicksand-like mud hides razor-sharp oyster shells, testing a crapper's balance at every step. Packing the chicken necks, strings, and wooden stakes into a five-gallon bucket and using the crab net for a walking stick help you to keep your balance. Next, slop through the creek until you find a firm sand bar standing two or three feet above the level of the water.

Once on the sand bar, it is time to set your crab lines. Taking the rolls of string, tie one end to a chicken neck. You get better results if the chicken neck is as rotten and smelly as possible. Toss the chicken neck tied to the string five to ten feet into the creek. Then push a wooden stake into the sand and secure the chicken neck string so it will not disappear into the water. Set three or four of these "crab lines" and get ready to test your patience.

With your lines in the water, hopefully now the time has come to catch some crabs. Stand back from the water's edge and watch your lines closely. A tightening line means that a crab is trying to make off with your chicken neck. When one of your lines tightens, hold your net in one hand and slowly pull the string to the bank. Pulling the line in is a delicate operation; pull too fast and the crab will let go of the chicken neck and disappear. After you succeed in tempting a crab within arm's reach, a lightning fast stab with the net is the only way to catch the elusive crustacean. When trying to net the crab, always aim behind and to the right of your prey. Crabs will almost always run back and to the left. When you have caught a crab in the net, dump it into the bucket and reset your line. With a little luck and some skill, you can leave the creek with a brimming bucket of fresh Atlantic blue crabs.

Perhaps this look into the art and sport of catching blue crabs will motivate you to try this exciting pastime. Crabbing in saltwater creeks is a time-honored pastime and method of providing food in the low country of South Carolina. For more than two hundred years people have realized that time spent in a saltwater creek, crabbing and taking in nature, is time well spent indeed.
In one of the most famous historical incidents ever, French peasants beheaded Marie Antoinette after she reputedly spoke the words, “Let them eat cake,” at a time when bread was unattainable. In William Faulkner’s “Barn Burning,” this same type of power play presents itself on a smaller scale. The de Spain family plays the role of Marie Antoinette and the Snopes family plays the peasants’ role. Whether they choose their station or not, the social order of class places the two families into two different respective positions. The Snopes family, particularly Abner, resents the position that it finds itself in, while the de Spain family simply enjoys the position it retains.

From the beginning of his life, society has dealt Abner Snopes a sour hand to which he never adds any high cards. In the position of a tenant farmer, he finds himself stuck without any viable means of escape. The money that he collects from tenant farming always returns to the family whose land he farms as payment for the use of the land. This predicament makes his escape from the tenant farming life close to impossible. To deal with this unchangeable predicament, Abner strikes out at the upper class in the only way that he can, barn burning. Instead of accepting the hand that life deals him, Abner feels that, if in some way he can strike the upper class where it hurts, then he wins a small triumph for himself. He realizes that the upper class takes nothing of value from him. To destroy his reputation carries no consequences for him because he already resides near the bottom of the social ladder. His status is better only in comparison to the newly freed slaves who work as servants. An attempt to deprive him of worldly possessions also fails, since he doesn’t own any such goods. Although “wood and hay kin burn” (Faulkner 417), nothing Abner owns can readily burn. Abner, however, frequently takes away the worldly goods of the upper class for the mere punishment of leaving town. If Abner would only try to improve his relationship with the upper class, he could, if not escape, at least improve his situation greatly. But Abner never makes the attempt; he seems content to strike at the upper class and stay in his present situation.

Sarty, Abner’s youngest son, does not worry about class position; he only worries about the right action to take in each situation, which he knows is not barn burning. Recognizing that his family remains in an unchangeable social position, Sarty accepts his position. Unlike his father, Sarty feels no need to strike back at the upper class. He does not blame the upper class for the stagnant position that his family occupies. Sarty sees the de Spain “courthouse” (420) as a beautiful mansion, but his father views the house as a standing testament to the unchangeableness of his social situation and the wealth of the de Spains’ social position. Sarty recognizes the beauty of the possessions of the upper class, and, even if they remain unattainable to him, he will respect them instead of resenting them as his father does. To Sarty, no real social positions exist, just different people who occupy different places in society. Some people behave meanly and others kindly. To him, position has nothing to do with the amount of money that they possess. Position has to do with the type of person that one harbors on the inside, good or bad, right or wrong. Sarty demonstrates this mind-set when he warns the de Spains that their barn is burning instead of sticking beside his father. Realizing that the action that matters is not protection of social position or family but by upholding what is right, Sarty evaluates each situation independently and then decides what action presents itself as necessary.

In the “courthouse” of the de Spains, tenant families often encounter disrespect on the basis of social standing and find themselves meeting unfair and biased punishment. The de Spains take their social position for granted. To them, the Snopes family lives as a poor tenant family that needs the guidance of a higher social order. Dominating over the Snopes family, the de Spains alienate the family instead of becoming one with them. Major de Spain becomes enraged at the thought of his barn burning. In retrospect, the barn means very little to him, considering his net worth. De Spain, however, sets out with the intention of shooting Abner. If, in the earlier rug episode, an upper-class family had ridden up and intentionally smeared his rug, de Spain might have, at most, reprimanded the family, not taken away such an amount of property as he attempts to obtain from the Snopes family. Major de Spain shows no respect for the position of the Snopeses. In the tenant house that “ain’t fitten for hawgs,” this disrespect manifests itself (420). If de Spain had respected the tenant families who work for
him, he would have at least maintained painted and patched tenant houses instead of the degraded drafty houses he currently provides. In the lofty social position he occupies, he must realize that without tenant families he could not remain where he is. He should be as upset to lose a tenant family as he is to lose a barn. In both the barn and the tenant family, work represents itself as the common thread.

In summary, all the characters in “Barn Burning” react differently to the position that class imposes on them. The Snopeses, on the whole, resent the social position they occupy. Enjoying their position of privilege without thought, the de Spains approve of their social position. Perhaps the question posed by Faulkner is what the story’s readers see in these families’ contrasting social positions—hatred or acceptance.

In a short story, the setting is essential in order to establish the framework of the story. By creating this framework in the mind of the reader, an author sets the mood for the story that follows. Writers also use setting in other significant ways. In “Araby” by James Joyce and “The Lesson” by Toni Cade Bambara, the setting gives the reader insight into the characters and the meaning of their actions.

In “Araby,” the initial setting of the protagonist’s home and neighborhood helps the reader comprehend why the boy clings to his love for Mangan’s sister. Set in a lower working-class neighborhood with “dark muddy lanes behind the houses” (325) and “dark dripping gardens where odors arose from the ashpits” (325), this story revolves around a poor child’s life. There are no facilities for children to play, such as a playground or park, so they have to play in the street: their “shouts echo in the silent street” (325). The protagonist, who lives with his aunt and uncle, feels lonely and insecure because of a lack of nurturing. When the boy’s uncle comes home at nine o’clock one evening, the little boy hears him “talking to himself and [hears] the hallstand rocking when it receive[s] the weight of his overcoat” (313). From this description, the reader “can interpret these signs” (313) with the boy and assume that his uncle is drunk. The little boy fears his uncle, for he says that “if [his] uncle was seen turning the corner [the children] hid in the shadow until [they] had seen him safely housed” (325). The reader sees that the author clearly expresses the protagonist’s need for something to cling to in the face of such fear and poor parenting. This need leads to the little boy’s love...
for Mangan’s sister. Since the little boy does not receive the necessary love and feeling of self-importance from his guardians, he looks to an outside source for security by imagining himself as the lover of Mangan’s sister. The crush quickly becomes an obsession. “Every morning” the little boy “[lies] on the floor in the front parlor watching her door” (325). The fabricated romance with Mangan’s sister eases his feelings of loneliness and rejection; situations that would normally frighten him now become attainable, for “her image accompanied [him] even in places the most hostile to romance” (325). He even likens himself to a knight who must safely escort his sacred love through a mob of enemies: “[He] imagined that [he] bore [his] chalice safely through the throng of foes” (325). By mid-story, the protagonist finds himself presented with an opportunity to prove his love for the little girl by attending the bazaar; this second setting will undo much of what the first one initiates.

The bazaar reveals reality and shatters the protagonist’s dream. The little boy imagines the setting of the bazaar in the same high-flown way he imagines his love affair with Mangan’s sister. The name of the bazaar, Araby, gives the little boy a magical picture of something that is more than a flea market: “the syllables of the word Araby were called to [him] through the silence in which [his] soul luxuriated and cast an Eastern enchantment over [him]” (326). He imagines the bazaar to be romantic and special because he thinks nothing less can originate from such a distinguished little girl. What he finds at the bazaar, however, does not differ from his own world, the world from which he so desperately wants to escape. There, “nearly all the stalls [are] closed and the greater part of the hall [is] in darkness. He recognize[s] a silence like that which pervades a church after a service” (327). He observes women flirting with men, and when asked if he wishes to buy anything, the little boy remarks that “the tone of her voice was not encouraging; she seemed to have spoken to me out of a sense of duty” (328). At this point the protagonist finds his magical bazaar no more enchanted than his home and neighborhood. The items for sale are exceptional just like those in his run-of-the-mill life. With the realization that Araby is not special, the boy concludes the same for himself, and his world crumbles. Thus, “gazing into the darkness [he sees himself] as a creature driven and derided by vanity; and [his] eyes burn with anguish and anger” (328). As the lights of the bazaar go “completely dark” (328), the little boy’s hopes and dreams vanish into the night.

Just as the settings in “Araby” reveal the little boy’s hope and anguish, the neighborhood of the children in “The Lesson” explains the children’s ignorance about their social status and the existence of worlds outside their own in the slums of New York City. This story features rash and uneducated children who are suddenly exposed to a new world. As in “Araby,” the children lack many places to play, so they resort to the street. Sylvia notes that “the winos cluttered up our parks and pissed on our handball walls and stank up our hallways and stairs so we couldn’t halfway play hide-and-seek without a goddamn gas mask” (153). The children also lack parental supervision because their “mothers [are] in la-de-da apartments up the block having a good old time” (153). Miss Moore, a neighbor who teaches the children lessons about life, tends to look after the neighborhood kids. Educated and willing to pass her skills on to the children, she is always willing to improve their lot. Some of the children think she is boring, and they do not show her much respect. Sylvia says that she “really hat[es] this nappy-head bitch and her goddamn college degree” (153). When Miss Moore tells the children to “demand your share of the pie” (154), Sylvia responds by saying she doesn’t “know what kind of pie she’s talking about in the first damn place” (157). Obviously unaware of the austere conditions of the environment in which they live, the children think their world is normal. Sylvia dislikes Miss Moore’s reference to their neighborhood as the slums, professing that when Miss Moore “gets to the part about we all poor and live in the slums” (154), Sylvia can’t see it. When Miss Moore takes the children to the toy store in the affluent part of town, Sugar asks if the children may steal. Only by understanding the harsh reality of their world and the way the children are imprisoned in it can the reader understand such incredible ignorance about basic life skills.

The second setting educates the children about the world and changes their outlook on certain aspects of life. Upon arriving on Fifth Avenue, the children have difficulty interpreting this posh world. Sylvia sees a lady dressed in a fur coat and remarks that “white folks crazy” (154). She fails to understand that the coat is worn as a status symbol, not as a guard against the nonexistent chill of a summer’s day. At the toy store, the children are astonished at the cost of the merchandise. They can’t imagine the length of time required to save up their money for such expensive items as a toy sailboat for one thousand dollars and a paperweight for four hundred-eighty dollars. Rosie Giraffe asks, “So what’s a paperweight?” (155). The children can’t comprehend who would be in the market for such items or “what kinda work they do and how they live and how come we ain’t in on it” (157). Miss Moore observes that “where we are is who we are” and always adds that “it don’t necessarily have to be that way” (157). Not all the children understand completely. This lesson brings out different responses from them. Showing a new political awareness, Sugar says that “this is not much of a democracy” (157). Rosie Giraffe still thinks white folks are crazy, and Flyboy, the slower student, only wants a shower. Sylvia realizes that an understanding of oneself is essential to knowing what one wants to become. She shows this understanding when Sugar asks her to race to Hascombs and spend the money they kept from Miss Moore. Sugar takes off running, but Sylvia says that “she can run if she want to and even run faster, but ain’t nobody gonna beat me at
nuthin" (157). The second setting brings the children to more than Manhattan: it brings them to a new understanding of what is possible and a new experience of ambition fueled in part by rage.

Clearly, setting in these two stories illumines the characters and the meaning of their actions. “Araby” begins in a state of fantasy and ends in regret, whereas “The Lesson” evolves from ignorance to understanding. Whether used metaphorically or as a motivational stimulus, setting, when used properly, allows the reader to enter the world of the characters and understand the context in which the action of the story occurs.

When considering the types of professions or jobs that I would not hold at this point in my life, I must consider only some of the professions I had thought I was interested in when I was younger. These careers varied tremendously according to my age and understanding of what these jobs entailed.

I made my first “career choice” at the age of four. I wanted to be a cowgirl. I soon changed my mind, however, when I saw a real horse and realized how much time I’d have to spend on that large and rather intimidating creature. Nevertheless, westerns continued to influence me for many more years. One day I noticed a group of ladies who seemed to be having all the fun in these movies. They wore great clothes, danced, and drank (I assumed it was soda) with everyone they met. The role of dance hall girl looked like it was made for me. When I found out what “going upstairs” meant, though, I was shocked and quickly changed plans radically—dancing was one thing; prostitution was another.

In my next career choice I thought I was on surer footing. I would devote my life to God and become a nun. I even went through a brief (very brief!) period of time when I wanted to be a saint and a martyr. I do not think I am much of a saint by nature, and I realized that it would take some time to change. And then a funny thing happened on the way to the convent—puberty. I knew that I would probably not be a great nun when I found out how much fun it was to date and smooch. I did not mind dying for God; I just wanted to keep dating. To complicate my dilemma even more, I then decided that I wanted to have eight children. Even in the most liberal of convents, that is frowned upon.
So I gave up my dream of being a sister for my dream of becoming a mother. Even though it was the sixties, I was not a “flower-child” teenager. My parents were not overbearing, but they did expect me to have a husband before I started a family. I was dating a young man who was everything my mother ever wanted for me. He was handsome, athletic, extremely intelligent, well-educated, and CATHOLIC. At the age of fifteen, I stopped thinking about my career and started embroidering, collecting dishes, and filling up a hope chest. My husband’s education became the paramount concern of both our lives, and mine became something I could pursue when I wasn’t writing his term papers or looking at Bride magazine. Our marriage lasted six years, one degree in nuclear physics, and two children.

Thus, I have never chosen a career other than wife and mother. For the past twenty-five years, although it was never my choice, I have worked as an off-site rental manager. As part of my employment, I have scrubbed toilets, cleaned stoves, painted and exterminated apartments, handled extensive Internal Revenue audits, done bookkeeping, and gone to court countless times representing the properties I have managed during evictions and suits for past-due rent.

Over the course of my adult life, I have always had others who depended on me to make a living. Not being well-educated, I learned the hard way that I would do anything that wasn’t immoral or illegal to make ends meet. I imagine that I would do the same thing today.

The Quest for Country

Melissa Burns

Everyone searches for something in his or her life. Happiness, finding the meaning of life, success, and spiritual fulfillment are all goals people strive to achieve. Old tales, such as Perceval’s quest for the Holy Grail, relate to this theme of a lone person questing for a high goal of enlightenment or fulfillment. Because this search continues to have so much relevance in our lives, many current books provide new interpretations of the quest theme. Among such contemporary treatments is Cormac McCarthy’s All the Pretty Horses. This novel explores the quest theme in terms of the search of its protagonist, John Grady Cole, for a home, a journey that parallels Perceval’s quest for the Holy Grail.

In the legend of the Holy Grail, a young knight named Perceval departs on a quest to find the Grail, the cup Christ drank from at the Last Supper. Willing to risk his life to find the Grail, Perceval experiences many challenging situations prior to its discovery. Hidden in a castle where the Fisher King lives, the Grail remains elusive. Wounds inflicted on the king many years ago prevent his kingdom from flourishing and the land remains a Wasteland. In order for healing to occur, a young, innocent knight must come to the castle and, upon seeing the wounded king and the Grail, ask the question, “Whom does the Grail serve?” If the knight fails to follow this protocol, he is coldly turned out from the castle and finds himself in a forest where he must begin searching for the castle all over again. For five years Perceval searches desperately, enduring many hardships and in many cases defending his life. When he finally locates the castle again, he has
another chance to ask the question. If he succeeds, the king is healed, the kingdom prospers again, and the young knight inherits the Grail and the castle.

The profile of the knight embarking on a quest mirrors John Grady’s character as he sets off on his own journey. In most cases, the knight must be young, innocent, and impressionable because “only the young, naive, innocent element . . . can experience the wonder and awe of the Grail . . . and can ask questions about meaning” (Bolen 43). Like Perceval, John Grady Cole is propelled along on his search by his youth and innocence. Having lived a relatively peaceful life on his parents’ ranch, John Grady knows what he wants and feels entitled by his birthright to all his desires. He begins his journey for the same reasons Perceval and other knights have: “The usual hero adventure begins with someone from whom something has been taken . . . . This person then takes off on a series of adventures beyond the ordinary” (Campbell 123). As a result of his parents’ divorce, John Grady loses the ranch that has been in his family for generations, causing him to feel displaced and hopeless. After his attempt to buy the ranch from his mother fails, John Grady realizes that the way of life that the ranch represents is disappearing as rapidly as the Comanche Indians’ way of life vanished “two hundred years ago” (McCarthy 26).

Just as Perceval’s Grail represents spiritual enlightenment, John Grady’s grail symbolizes the country he desires. Refusing to settle for a new lifestyle, John Grady resolves to find what he is searching for in another country: “John Grady quests for a ‘country,’ a discourse community where his values can still be truth” (Woodson 150). As Joseph Campbell states, “In order to [find] something new, one has to leave the old and go in quest of the seed idea . . . that will have the potentiality of bringing forth that new thing” (Campbell 136). John Grady’s seed idea centers on horses, with whom he feels a very strong connection: “Horses are . . . what John Grady wishes for in his world” (Luce 156). A painting in his father’s dining room depicts the kind of horses he longs for. Despite his father’s apathetic description of these strong, wild horses as “picture-book horses” (McCarthy 15) that don’t even exist anymore except in fantasy, John Grady remains undeterred. Young, innocent, and longing to find a ranch where he can pursue his traditional way of life, John Grady embarks on his quest “loosely jacketed against the cold and ten thousand worlds for the choosing” (30).

John Grady’s quest begins the same way Perceval’s quest begins, with his wandering in the Wasteland. Jean Shinoda Bolen describes the Wasteland as a “landscape where . . . nothing grows and life is meaningless and emotionally flat” (169). Upon entering a small Mexican town, John Grady and his friend Rawlins ride on a road deeply gullied and . . . washed out, and in the draws were cattle dead from an old drought, just the bones of them clovened about with the hard dry blackened hide” (McCarthy 52). Riding on, the boys encounter another wandering boy named Jimmy Blevins. Blevins seems to attract misfortune; a fear of thunderstorms results in the loss of his horse and his subsequent murder of three men. Because John Grady and Rawlins accompany Blevins, they become inextricably caught up in his mistakes, weakening their morale while in the barren Wasteland.

According to the legend, the land’s devastation stems from wounds inflicted on the Fisher King. Wounded externally as well as internally, the Fisher King patiently awaits the knight’s arrival to achieve healing. In All the Pretty Horses, McCarthy casts Duena Alfonsa, the grand-aunt of the ranch in the role of the Fisher King. In addition to her external injury (the last two fingers on her left hand are missing), a wound of love constitutes her internal injury. Years earlier, out of pride, Duena Alfonsa had refused the marriage proposal of her true love, Gustavo. Since he held a place of political importance during the Mexican revolution, certain rebels wanted to challenge his position. After Alfonsa’s refusal, he was brutally murdered, along with his brother Francisco, thereby creating for Alfonsa a lifelong regret. The murders of Gustavo and Francisco represented a failed revolution that led to the land’s devastation. Duena Alfonsa feels that “the world has always been more of a puppet show. In my own life I saw these strings whose origins were endless enact the deaths of great men in violence and madness. Enact the ruin of a nation” (McCarthy 231). Thus, her country lies in the Wasteland waiting for a miraculous healing.

After journeying through the Wasteland, John Grady discovers the castle he has long searched for, wherein lies the Grail. The Hacienda de Nuestra Señora de la Purisima Concepcion embodies everything John Grady has been searching for: a huge ranch with eleven thousand hectares with more than a thousand head of cattle on land that is “well watered with natural springs and clear streams and shallow lakes . . . [with] species of fish not known elsewhere on earth” (McCarthy 97). At the ranch, “John Grady is given a miraculous opportunity to bring the ‘picture-book horses’ to life” (Morrison 178-79).

In the Grail legend the young knight is “royally received, waited upon, and honored” (Bolen 142) and sees the Grail pass before him several times along with the wounded Fisher King. John Grady also receives royal treatment. After breaking sixteen horses in four days, he gains the respect of Don Hector, the owner of the ranch, as well as the admiration of the man’s daughter, Alejandra. Don Hector allows John Grady to ride the best horse on the ranch, a stallion from the United States from which they plan to breed more “picture-book horses.” Each day as “the hacienda would come up to the corral . . . he and John Grady would walk among the mares . . . and they agreed that God had put horses on earth to work cattle” (McCarthy 126-27). Soon a bond of mutual respect forms between them. To complete John Grady’s paradise, he establishes a relationship
with Alejandra. The two young people enjoy nights of horseback riding full of conversation and stories about each other's lives. Inevitably, they quickly fall in love and then consummate their relationship, much to Don Hector’s and Duena Alfonsa’s displeasure.

Just as Perceval is expelled from the castle for not asking the vital question (“Whom does the Grail serve?”), John Grady also faces expulsion, not by failing to ask a question, but by lying. Bolen describes the Grail as a “discriminator of truth” (243) that, according to Emma Jung and Marie von Franz, “divides itself into three parts, when someone speaks three lying words” and then “when anyone utters three true words the pieces unite again” (qtd. in Bolen 243). Knowing of the trouble John Grady encountered on his journey to the ranch, Don Hector questions the young man. Trying to avoid condemnation or worse from Don Hector, John Grady lies about his past history. His first lie pertains to his reason for embarking on a quest. After Don Hector asks why the young man has come to his ranch, John Grady replies, “I just wanted to see the country, I reckon. Or we did” (McCarthy 113-14). The second lie pertains to his traveling companions. Unaware that Don Hector knows about Blevins’s troubles, John Grady tells him, not once but twice, that he and Rawlins rode from Texas by themselves.

This second lie comes back to haunt John Grady later. When Duena Alfonsa expresses her reasons for expelling him, she explains that since “he denied to Don Hector his involvement with Jimmy Blevins twice . . . there was no reason to believe . . . he would not do so three times” (Woodson 153). Fulfilling her prophecy, John Grady commits his third mistake by pursuing a relationship with Alejandra despite Duena Alfonsa’s warnings. Pressured by her aunt, Alejandra confesses to her father the ongoing relationship between herself and John Grady. Outraged by their union, Don Hector restrains himself from killing John Grady, and instead turns him over to the eager hands of the law from the city of Encantada, site of Blevins’s murders.

After his expulsion from the ranch, John Grady finds himself in the next stage of his quest, symbolized in the legend as the forest where one fights for survival and yearns for the lost castle. A place of “danger and transformation” (Bolen 149), the forest challenges the young knight to serve?”), John Grady also faces expulsion, not by failing to ask a question, but by lying. Bolen describes the Grail as a “discriminator of truth” (243) that, according to Emma Jung and Marie von Franz, “divides itself into three parts, when someone speaks three lying words” and then “when anyone utters three true words the pieces unite again” (qtd. in Bolen 243). Knowing of the trouble John Grady encountered on his journey to the ranch, Don Hector questions the young man. Trying to avoid condemnation or worse from Don Hector, John Grady lies about his past history. His first lie pertains to his reason for embarking on a quest. After Don Hector asks why the young man has come to his ranch, John Grady replies, “I just wanted to see the country, I reckon. Or we did” (McCarthy 113-14). The second lie pertains to his traveling companions. Unaware that Don Hector knows about Blevins’s troubles, John Grady tells him, not once but twice, that he and Rawlins rode from Texas by themselves.

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After his expulsion from the ranch, John Grady finds himself in the next stage of his quest, symbolized in the legend as the forest where one fights for survival and yearns for the lost castle. A place of “danger and transformation” (Bolen 149), the forest challenges the young knight to “find within [himself] whatever [he] need[s] to survive” (149). Within the forest lies the potential for grave danger, forcing the knight to take responsibility for his life. John Grady’s forest experience occurs in a Mexican prison in Saltillo. Permeating the prison is a “sense of some brooding and malignant life” (McCarthy 181), and it abounds with prisoners who “all seem to be waiting for something. Like passengers in a halted train” (179). In the unwelcoming environment, the vaqueros turn John Grady and Rawlins “out into the yard to fend for themselves” (182). There the boys’ struggle for survival begins as they spend the “whole of their first day

fighting” (182) for their lives. Drawing on his inner strength, John Grady assesses what he needs to do to survive. Before his journey he had probably never seriously thought of the need to kill another man, but in the Saltillo prison that possibility becomes a probability. Knowing that in prison “every man [is] judged by . . . his readiness to kill” (182), John Grady buys a knife. Subsequently, in the fight of his life, he faces a hired killer, whom he stabs to death with his newly purchased knife. Afterwards, having narrowly escaped with his life, John Grady lies in bed near death and feels “a surge of sorrow like a child beginning to cry but it brought with it such pain that he stopped it cold and began at once his new life and the living of it breath to breathe” (203). He begins his new life of dedicated determination to find his Grail and to survive.

After his prison ordeal, John Grady, like Perceval, is given another chance to obtain the Grail, an opportunity that he fails to take advantage of once again. Although Duena Alfonsa has bailed him out of jail, John Grady must promise that he will never see Alejandra again. The weight of his past wrongs continue to tarnish John Grady’s reputation as Duena Alfonsa explains, “You will see that those things which disposed me in your favor were the very things which led me to decide against you in the end” (McCarthy 231). Facing another rejection from the Fisher King, John Grady follows his father’s advice that “if one can neither claim nor inherit land, he can marry it” (157). Journeying south, John Grady meets Alejandra and requests her hand in marriage. Marrying her would enable him to create his own “castle” back in Texas and establish a breeding program to produce “picture-book horses” (15). Again John Grady faces rejection as Alejandra chooses her father over him. John Grady now sees “very clearly how all his life [has] led only to this moment and all after [leading] nowhere at all,” leaving him feeling “something cold and soulless enter him like another being and . . . smil[ing] malignly and [giving him] no reason to believe that it would ever leave” (254). Still deep within the forest, John Grady continues to fight for his survival. He does not suffer alone, however, as Duena Alfonsa also remains unhealed. Duena Alfonsa merely repeats the mistake she first made many years ago by “effecting the expulsion of John Grady much as she [had] expelled Gustavo” (Morrison 187).

Clearly with all the parallels to Perceval’s quest for the Holy Grail, Cormac McCarthy intended John Grady Cole’s journey to be another version of the ancient myth. Although John Grady’s quest is not complete at the novel’s conclusion, ample evidence suggests that he will eventually attain his grail. While journeying back to Texas, John Grady knows that he hasn’t found it yet, but he intends to continue searching until he finds his “picture-book horses.” With Blevins’s horse, however, the grail is closer than he thinks. As Gail Morrison points out, John Grady’s “legitimized possession of Blevins’s horse at the novel’s
end... suggest[s] that he now has at his disposal the means and knowledge to bring his 'picture-book horses'... to life" (Morrison 179). Because his journey has thus far paralleled Perceval's quest, we can safely assume that John Grady will find his country and start a cattle ranch and breeding program much like Don Hector's, thereby earning the Grail that he so earnestly desires.

Works Cited


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