5. *All the Pretty Horses*

... 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. (*All the Pretty Horses* 31)

This chapter explores what I consider to be a debate on the nature of wilderness spaces in this sixth novel by Cormac McCarthy. Wild nature as first depicted by the text is invested with decidedly positive signifiers and these have much to do with the utopian side of writing American spaces, especially the Turner thesis. However, the second part of the novel explores the darker side to these self-same environments. Barbarity, lawlessness, cruelty and nature as an actively evil presence result from the same wilderness praised in the novel’s beginning. Thus, wilderness spaces, at first depicted positively, suddenly ‘flip’ to show a hellish downside. *All the Pretty Horses* then engages both sides of the debate on space, overwhelmingly positive followed by overwhelmingly negative. The environments of the novel are textual affairs in that they are bound up in utopian and dystopian traditions in the writing of American spaces (as explored in chapter two of this book). There are hints, however, at a new contract with the land and a more nuanced view of environment emerges by the end of the text.

The chapter is organized in the following way. I will first give a brief plot summary of *All the Pretty Horses*; then I will sketch out how *Blood Meridian*’s world of the nineteenth century sets the stage for the southwest U.S. and Mexico of the twentieth century. Next I will show how descriptions of the environment south of the border (the *ersatz* frontier) in the first part of *All the Pretty Horses* flow from the Edenic tradition. After that, I describe how the environment of the second half of the novel is very much in line with demonic traditions. Finally, I demonstrate that, though the text allows two points of view on wilderness spaces to play out, there are indications of a new way forward. This is best understood within the context of a new definition
of the word *country* in McCarthy’s novels that emerges through close readings.

**Plot Summary**

*All the Pretty Horses* is focalized through John Grady Cole, a sixteen-year-old Texan who grew up living on a ranch. In the first paragraphs we learn that his maternal grandfather has died and that the ranch has been sold. Shortly thereafter Cole and his friend Lacy Rawlins steal away in the night to eventually find work on a Mexican cattle ranch. The rapid industrialization and modernization of Texas makes south of the border the only place in which they can be “the all-American cowboy” (*Cities of the Plain* 3). At first, the boys seem to have found paradise until, through an accident, they run afoul of the authorities. The rest of the novel describes Cole’s various misfortunes as he is put in prison and loses his girlfriend. After a shootout with Mexican authorities he crosses back into the USA.

5.1. From the World of *Blood Meridian* to That of *All The Pretty Horses*

The previous chapter discusses the environments of *Blood Meridian*, the unofficial prologue of *The Border Trilogy* (*All the Pretty Horses*, *The Crossing*, *Cities of the Plain*). In fact, *Blood Meridian*’s the Kid is born in 1833, exactly 100 years before John Grady Cole. This link is substantiated by the fact of the Kid’s participation in the great and terrible enterprise of Manifest Destiny and the closing of the frontier—events which determine the world of *All the Pretty Horses*. *Blood Meridian*, as we have seen, describes the murderous wanderings of U.S. mercenaries in the deserts of Mexico and the southwestern USA, “terrains so wild and barbarous to try whether the stuff of creation may be shaped to man’s will or whether his own heart is not another kind of clay” (4). The epilogue of the text, set in 1878, describes the final slaughter of the buffalo, the destruction of Indian cultures and the introduction of the railroads, in short, the demise of the frontier and the completion of Manifest Destiny. Barbed wire fences, roads and railroads now partition the land making the free movement of people and animals impossible. Though the land