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Frontier Attitudes and Behavior of John Grady Cole

John Grady Cole exhibits numerous aspects of frontier attitudes and behaviors in Cormac McCarthy’s novel *All the Pretty Horses*. Throughout the novel he is portrayed as being a leader, having true poise in questionable situations, showing confidence, and dealing with tragedy. The frontier attitudes and behaviors that John Grady Cole displays in *All the Pretty Horses* are practically synonymous to those of Jeremiah Johnson in the movie, *Jeremiah Johnson*. Even though John Grady Cole and Jeremiah Johnson go on completely different journeys, they share the characteristics of a typical individual that would have experienced the frontier lifestyle. Each of their journeys led" them to difficult times, great rewards, and even circumstances that are hard to fathom. John Grady Cole and Jeremiah Johnson definitely share many similarities in the sense of aspects of frontier attitudes and behaviors.

In the novel, *All the Pretty Horses*, John Grady Cole is never really given a clear physical description. All that the reader is informed of is that he is a sixteen year old boy who is rather mature for his age. At the beginning of the novel, it seems that John Grady Cole has to grow up quicker than he would have liked due to his family situation. John Grady Cole’s parents are estranged, his mom is always on the road pursuing a career in acting, and his dad is apparently dying of lung cancer. Not only is he mature for his age, but he is extremely skilled with horses. His skill with horses ultimately provides him with a job on his journey to Mexico. John Grady Cole’s unusual experiences in the early part of his life have led him to having a few very distinct personality traits. The trait that sticks out the most is his modesty in all traces of life. Modesty is defined as, “the quality or state of being unassuming or moderate in the estimation of one’s abilities.” This definition of modestly directly correlates with the way that John Grady Cole upholds himself. Given the background that he has as being in a wealthy family and the immense amount of skill he has when it comes to horses, it would be unbelievably easy for John Grady Cole to be an arrogant individual. Rather than being arrogant, he goes on about his business and even occasionally puts down complements when they are given to him. For example, when Rawlins continually talks about John Grady Cole being a fantastic horseman Cole responds by telling Blevins, “Don’t pay no attention to him” (McCarthy 58).

There are many examples of frontier attitudes and behaviors that John Grady Cole shows in the novel *All the Pretty Horses*. The most prominent of these attitudes is his ability to be a leader. Even though John Grady Cole is sixteen years old he is able to lead Rawlins and Blevins on a journey from Texas to Mexico. Whenever the group of Cole, Rawlins, and Blevins encounters a problem or has a disagreement, John Grady Cole is able to take control of the situation. He does a phenomenal job at keeping the group focused on where they are going and what their purpose is. An example of John Grady Cole being a great leader occurs when Rawlins blames Cole for their arrest when they are in the town of Encantada. Regarding the mistake Cole previously made with Alejandra, John Grady Cole asks for Rawlins loyalty in the situation by saying, “I can’t back up and start over. But I don’t see the point in slobberin over it. And I can’t see where it would make me feel better to be able to point a finger at somebody else” (155). This quote shows that John Grady Cole is taking a leadership position by explaining how to handle a difficult situation.

Another behavior that John Grady Cole exhibits in *All the Pretty Horses* is his ability to have true poise in questionable situations. Cole shows poise throughout the entire novel, but it becomes most apparent when he is dealing with the migrant workers. After John Grady Cole has a conversation with the band of migrant workers they simply ask in Spanish if they can buy Blevins as a slave. The narrator states, “The man in the vest studied John Grady and he across the clearing at Blevins. Then he asked if he wished to sell the boy” (76). John Grady Cole calmly refuses to sell Blevins to the band of migrant workers. It would have been very easy for Cole to freak out and cause Blevins to worry, but instead Cole keeps himself together and prevents the sale of Blevins. By John Grady Cole showing such poise he was able to prevent harm to Blevins or the group of men as a whole.

An additional attitude that John Grady Cole shows in the novel is his immense amount of confidence. In every part of the book Cole displays confidence in many different ways. One instance where John Grady Cole’s confidence is memorable occurs when he decides to leave his home in Texas to head to Mexico. For a sixteen year old boy to leave his family and the entire country is flabbergasting in itself. Without an umpteen amount of confidence John Grady Cole would have never left his home in the state of Texas. Another example of Cole showing confidence is when he has sexual intercourse with Alejandra who is the daughter of his boss, Don Hector. At the ranch John Grady Cole is in a very comfortable situation, and it takes a lot of confidence for him to risk his job and even his life to have sex with Alejandra. It is evident that Cole’s confidence is a blessing and a curse.

Another behavior that is shown by John Grady Cole in *All the Pretty Horses* is how he deals with tragedy. There is one main instance in the novel, *All the Pretty Horses,* where Cole has to deal with a tragic situation. The instance occurs when Blevins is executed by the guards of the Encantada jail. John Grady Cole is visibly upset by the situation, but he is able to eventually move on from the pain of Blevins being executed. Cole being upset is seen when the narrator states, “John Grady didn’t answer. He almost reached to pull down the front of his hat brim but then remembered that they had no hats anymore and he turned and climbed up on the bed of the truck and sat waiting to be chained” (178). Based on this quote the reader can infer that Cole is deeply saddened by the execution of Blevins.

A character from a movie that has nearly the same frontier attitudes and behaviors as John Grady Cole is Jeremiah Johnson from the 1972 film, *Jeremiah Johnson*. In the movie he is described as being a middle-aged man with a rough appearance (Jeremiah Johnson). At the beginning of the movie he has a great desire to go out into the mountains of Utah to be a mountain man (Jeremiah Johnson). Through many struggles and some interesting encounters Jeremiah Johnson experiences many of the same aspects as John Grady Cole does in *All the Pretty Horses*.

Throughout the film, *Jeremiah Johnson*, Jeremiah continually shows his ability to be a leader. His leadership ability is most noticeable when he takes the mute boy, Caleb, under his wing (Jeremiah Johnson). Jeremiah Johnson clearly goes out into the mountains to be alone and it is remarkable that he is so willing to take on the responsibility of taking care of a young boy. Caleb eventually begins to feel comfortable around Jeremiah and sees him as a father figure. By Jeremiah Johnson embracing the father figure role in Caleb’s life, it truly shows his natural ability to be a leader in society.

Another behavior that Jeremiah Johnson exhibits in the movie, *Jeremiah Johnson*, is his skill at having poise in questionable situations. One questionable situation in particular in which Jeremiah Johnson shows true poise is when he first comes into contact with Caleb’s mother (Jeremiah Johnson). When Jeremiah first sees her she has a rifle pointed directly at him. He proceeds to calmly ask her to put the gun down and explain that he will help her properly bury her deceased children. For Jeremiah Johnson not to freak out when Caleb’s mother had a rifle pointed at his face is remarkable. This act of Jeremiah shows that he is very calm under pressure and has no problem showing poise during questionable situations.

An additional attitude that Jeremiah Johnson shows throughout the film, *Jeremiah Johnson*, is his immense amount of confidence. Even though Jeremiah shows confidence throughout the entire movie, there is one moment that should really stick out to the viewer. When Jeremiah is helping the Reverend to pass through the Crow burial grounds to reach the settlers he shows confidence even though he knows that it is a terrible decision (Jeremiah Johnson). It turns out that Jeremiah Johnson should have stuck to his gut and not have gone through the Crow burial grounds, but that does not diminish the fact that he portrays a great deal of confidence when he makes decisions. This confidence that Jeremiah exhibits also helps to verify his ability to lead any group of individuals.

If there is one behavior that Jeremiah Johnson can most definitely attest to it is dealing with tragedy. All throughout the film, *Jeremiah Johnson*, Jeremiah slowly grows a bond with his wife and adopted son (Jeremiah Johnson). He becomes extremely attached to them and would do anything to protect them from danger. Near the end of the film Jeremiah’s family is in grave danger. Jeremiah Johnson made the Crow Indians mad by passing through their burial grounds, so the Crow decide to kill Jeremiah’s family (Jeremiah Johnson). When Jeremiah finds his family dead he is absolutely devastated. Even though Jeremiah is not able to move on from the tragedy as easily as John Grady Cole is in the novel, *All the Pretty Horses*, Jeremiah is still able to find some peace at the end of the film. Once Jeremiah Johnson kills a large portion of the Crow tribe, he is able to find a little bit of comfort in his life.

The novel, *All the Pretty Horses*, by Cormac McCarthy and the film, *Jeremiah Johnson*, portray main characters that exhibit countless aspects of frontier attitudes and behavior that relate to each other. Both John Grady Cole and Jeremiah Johnson are portrayed as being leaders, having poise in questionable situations, showing confidence, and dealing with tragedy. Even though their prospective journeys vary immensely, their frontier attitudes and behaviors are extremely similar. It is evident that John Grady Cole and Jeremiah Johnson share practically the same mindset in their personal journeys.

Works Cited

*Jeremiah Johnson*. Dir. Sydney Pollack. 1972. DVD.

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