

My Wonder Horse/Mi Caballo Mago

Short Story by SABINE R. ULIBARRÍ (ōō'lē-bā-rē')

“Although I had never seen the Wonder Horse, he filled my imagination and fired my ambition.”

Connect to Your Life

Wild for Animals! What is your favorite wild animal? Perhaps it’s the dolphin, the wolf, the snow leopard—or maybe an animal that you’ve seen in films or only heard about. On a piece of paper, make a sketch of this animal, or if you prefer, write a description of the animal. Share your sketch or your description with a classmate.

Build Background

A Legendary Horse “My Wonder Horse” is set in the mountains of northern New Mexico. In this and other areas of the West, wild horses, also called mustangs, have lived for hundreds of years, and they survive to the present day. These horses live in bands consisting of a single stallion and his mares, which the stallion guards fiercely. Since the early 1800s, stories have been told in the West of a white stallion, sometimes known as the Pacing White Mustang, remarkable for his beauty, speed, grace, intelligence, and elusiveness. In Native American legends, the white stallion is considered a ghost horse. “My Wonder Horse” builds on this tradition of the legendary white stallion.

WORDS TO KNOW Vocabulary Preview

evolve mystic
indignity transcendent
indomitable ultimate
lethargy vigil
mandate wane

Focus Your Reading

LITERARY ANALYSIS STYLE Style is the way that a work of literature is written. Every writer has a unique style. For example, one element of Ulibarrí’s style is variety in sentence length. This can be seen in the **description** that opens the story you are about to read:

He was white. White as memories lost. He was free. Free as happiness is. He was fantasy, liberty, and excitement. He filled and dominated the mountain valleys and surrounding plains. He was a white horse that flooded my youth with dreams and poetry.

As you read this story, pay attention to the style in which it is written. Look for passages whose style you especially like.

ACTIVE READING INFERENCES ABOUT CHARACTER CHANGE An **inference** is a logical guess or a conclusion based on facts. Making an inference is like “reading between the lines.” Readers infer by combining clues in the text with what they already know in order to reach a conclusion that goes beyond what the words say.

Making inferences is useful for understanding **characters**. Often, a writer will not tell you everything that is going on inside a character. You might have to use clues in the story to figure out what the character is thinking or feeling. An example of such an inference is shown in the chart below.

READER'S NOTEBOOK Use a chart like the one shown to record clues about the **narrator's** thoughts and feelings and then to make inferences about them. Pay special attention to how the narrator’s thoughts and feelings change as the story develops.

| What the narrator says | What I know from experience | What I can infer |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------|
| I used to listen open-mouthed as my father and the ranch hands talked about the phantom horse. | People’s mouths often drop open when they are surprised or impressed. | The narrator is impressed by the stories of the phantom horse. |



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Sabine R. Ulibarri

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He was white. White as memories lost. He was free. Free as happiness is. He was fantasy, liberty, and excitement. He filled and dominated the mountain valleys and surrounding plains. He was a white horse that flooded my youth with dreams and poetry.

Era blanco. Blanco como el olvido. Era libre. Libre como la alegría. Era la ilusión, la libertad y la emoción. Poblaba y dominaba las serranas y las llanuras de las cercanías. Era un caballo blanco que llenó mi juventud de fantasía y poesía.

1

Around the campfires of the country and in the sunny patios of the town, the ranch hands talked about him with enthusiasm and admiration. But gradually their eyes would become hazy and blurred with dreaming. The lively talk would die down. All thoughts fixed on the vision evoked by the horse. Myth of the animal kingdom. Poem of the world of men.

A

White and mysterious, he paraded his harem through the summer forests with lordly rejoicing. Winter sent him to the plains and sheltered hillsides for the protection of his females. He spent the summer like an Oriental potentate¹ in his woodland gardens. The winter he passed like an illustrious warrior celebrating a well-earned victory.

B

He was a legend. The stories told of the Wonder Horse were endless. Some true, others fabricated. So many traps, so many snares, so many searching parties, and all in vain. The horse always escaped, always mocked his pursuers, always rose above the control of man. Many a valiant cowboy swore to put his halter and his brand on the animal. But always he had to confess later that the mystic horse was more of a man than he.

2

I was fifteen years old. Although I had never seen the Wonder Horse, he filled my imagination and fired my ambition. I used to listen open-mouthed as my father and the ranch hands talked about the phantom horse who turned into mist and air and nothingness when he was trapped. I joined in the universal obsession—like the hope of winning the lottery—of putting my lasso on him some day, of capturing him and showing him off on Sunday afternoons when the girls of the town strolled through the streets.

It was high summer. The forests were fresh, green, and gay. The cattle moved slowly, fat and sleek in the August sun and shadow. Listless and drowsy in the lethargy of late afternoon, I was

dozing on my horse. It was time to round up the herd and go back to the good bread of the cowboy camp. Already my comrades would be sitting around the campfire, playing the guitar, telling stories of past or present, or surrendering to the languor² of the late afternoon. The sun was setting behind me in a riot of streaks and colors. Deep, harmonious silence.

I sit drowsily still, forgetting the cattle in the glade. Suddenly the forest falls silent, a deafening quiet. The afternoon comes to a standstill. The breeze stops blowing, but it vibrates. The sun flares hotly. The planet, life, and time itself have stopped in an inexplicable way. For a moment, I don't understand what is happening.

Then my eyes focus. There he is! The Wonder Horse! At the end of the glade, on high ground surrounded by summer green. He is a statue. He is an engraving. Line and form and white stain on a green background. Pride, prestige, and art incarnate in animal flesh. A picture of burning beauty and virile³ freedom. An ideal, pure and invincible, rising from the eternal dreams of humanity. Even today my being thrills when I remember him.

A sharp neigh. A far-reaching challenge that soars on high, ripping the virginal fabric of the rosy clouds. Ears at the point. Eyes flashing. Tail waving active defiance. Hoofs glossy and destructive. Arrogant ruler of the countryside.

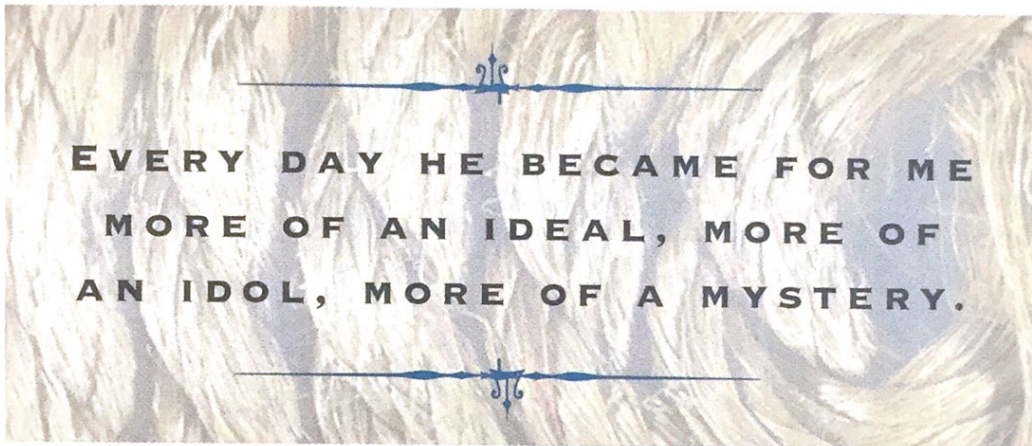
The moment is never-ending, a momentary eternity. It no longer exists, but it will always live. . . . There must have been mares. I did not see them. The cattle went on their indifferent way. My horse followed them, and I came slowly back from the land of dreams to the world of toil. But life could no longer be what it was before.

1. **Oriental potentate** (pōt'n-tāt'): Asian king.
2. **languor** (lǎng'gər): a dreamy, lazy mood or quality.
3. **virile** (vîr'əl): masculine, strong, vigorous, and powerful.

WORDS **evoke** (i-vōk') *v.* to call to mind
 TO **mystic** (mī's'tīk) *adj.* inspiring a sense of mystery and wonder
 KNOW **lethargy** (lēth'ər-jē) *n.* a state of drowsiness, inactivity, and lack of energy

That night under the stars I didn't sleep. I dreamed. How much I dreamed awake and how much I dreamed asleep, I do not know. I only know that a white horse occupied my dreams and filled them with vibrant sound, and light, and turmoil.

Summer passed and winter came. Green grass gave place to white snow. The herds descended from the mountains to the valleys and the hollows. And in the town they kept saying that the Wonder Horse was roaming through this or that secluded area. I inquired everywhere for his whereabouts. Every day he became for me more of an ideal, more of an idol, more of a mystery.



It was Sunday. The sun had barely risen above the snowy mountains. My breath was a white cloud. My horse was trembling with cold and fear like me. I left without going to mass. Without any breakfast. Without the usual bread and sardines in my saddlebags. I had slept badly but had kept the vigil well. I was going in search of the white light that galloped through my dreams.

On leaving the town for the open country, the roads disappear. There are no tracks, human or animal. Only a silence, deep, white, and sparkling. My horse breaks trail with his

chest and leaves an unending wake, an open rift, in the white sea. My trained, concentrated gaze covers the landscape from horizon to horizon, searching for the noble silhouette of the talismanic⁴ horse.

It must have been midday. I don't know. Time had lost its meaning. I found him! On a slope stained with sunlight. We saw one another at the same time. Together, we turned to stone. Motionless, absorbed, and panting, I gazed at his beauty, his pride, his nobility. As still as sculptured marble, he allowed himself to be admired.

A sudden, violent scream breaks the silence. A glove hurled into my face.⁵ A challenge and a mandate. Then something surprising happens. The horse that in summer takes his stand between any threat and his herd, swinging back and forth from left to right, now plunges into the snow. Stronger than they, he is breaking trail for his mares. They follow him. His flight is slow in order to conserve his strength.

I follow. Slowly. Quivering. Thinking about his intelligence. Admiring his courage. Understanding his courtesy. The afternoon advances. My horse is taking it easy.

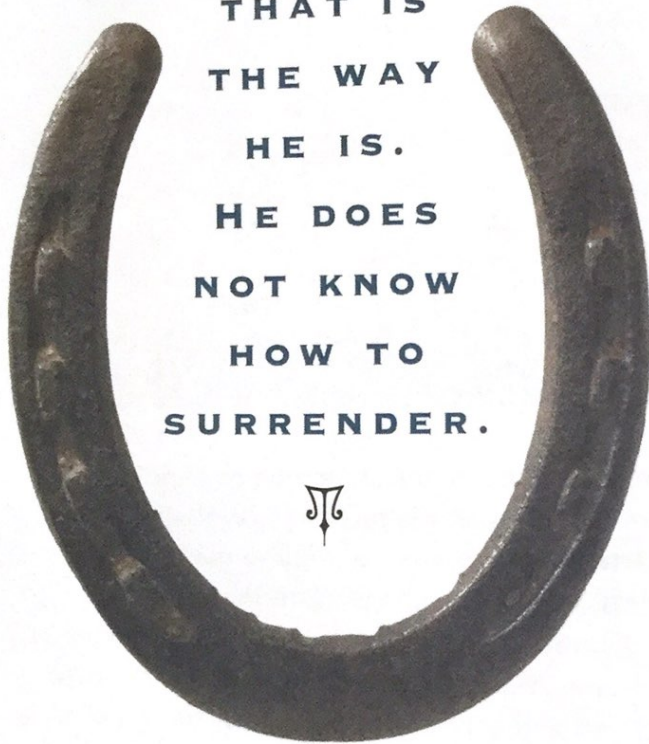
One by one the mares become weary. One by one, they drop out of the trail. Alone! He and I. My inner ferment⁶ bubbles to my lips. I speak to him. He listens and is quiet.

4. **talismanic** (tāl'īs-măn'īk): possessing or believed to possess magic power.

5. A **glove . . . face**: a defiant challenge. Historically, one man challenged another to a duel by throwing down a glove, or gauntlet.

6. **ferment**: agitation or excitement.

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He still opens the way, and I follow in the path he leaves me. Behind us a long, deep trench crosses the white plain. My horse, which has eaten grain and good hay, is still strong. Undernourished as the Wonder Horse is, his strength is waning. But he keeps on because that is the way he is. He does not know how to surrender.

I now see black stains over his body. Sweat and the wet snow have revealed the black skin beneath the white hair. Snorting breath, turned to steam, tears the air. White spume⁷ above white snow. Sweat, spume, and steam. Uneasiness.

I felt like an executioner. But there was no turning back. The distance between us was

growing relentlessly shorter. God and Nature watched indifferently.

I feel sure of myself at last. I untie the rope. I open the lasso and pull the reins tight. Every nerve, every muscle is tense. My heart is in my mouth. Spurs pressed against trembling flanks. The horse leaps. I whirl the rope and throw the obedient lasso.

A frenzy of fury and rage. Whirlpools of light and fans of transparent snow. A rope that whistles and burns the saddletree. Smoking, fighting gloves. Eyes burning in their sockets. Mouth parched. Fevered forehead. The whole earth shakes and shudders. The long, white trench ends in a wide, white pool.

Deep, gasping quiet. The Wonder Horse is mine! Both still trembling, we look at one another squarely for a long time. Intelligent and realistic, he stops struggling and even takes a hesitant step toward me. I speak to him. As I talk, I approach him. At first, he flinches and recoils. Then he waits for me. The two horses greet one another in their own way. Finally, I succeed in stroking his mane. I tell him many things, and he seems to understand.

Ahead of me, along the trail already made, I drove him toward the town. Triumphant. Exultant. Childish laughter gathered in my throat. With my newfound manliness, I controlled it. I wanted to sing, but I fought down the desire. I wanted to shout, but I kept quiet. It was the ultimate in happiness. It was the pride of the male adolescent. I felt myself a conqueror.

Occasionally the Wonder Horse made a try for his liberty, snatching me abruptly from my thoughts. For a few moments, the struggle was renewed. Then we went on.

7. **spume** (spyōōm): foam or froth.

It was necessary to go through the town. There was no other way. The sun was setting. Icy streets and people on the porches. The Wonder Horse full of terror and panic for the first time. He ran, and my well-shod horse stopped him. He slipped and fell on his side. I suffered for him. The indignity. The humiliation. Majesty degraded. I begged him not to struggle, to let himself be led. How it hurt me that other people should see him like that!

Finally we reached home.

“What shall I do with you, Mago?”⁸ If I put you into the stable or the corral, you are sure to hurt yourself. Besides, it would be an insult. You aren’t a slave. You aren’t a servant. You aren’t even an animal.”

I decided to turn him loose in the fenced pasture. There, little by little, Mago would become accustomed to my friendship and my company. No animal had ever escaped from that pasture.

My father saw me coming and waited for me without a word. A smile played over his face, and a spark danced in his eyes. He watched me take the rope from Mago, and the two of us thoughtfully observed him move away. My father clasped my hand a little more firmly than usual and said, “That was a man’s job.” That was all. Nothing more was needed. We understood one another very well. I was playing the role of a real man, but the childish laughter and shouting that bubbled up inside me almost destroyed the impression I wanted to create.

That night I slept little, and when I slept, I did not know that I was asleep. For dreaming is the same when one really dreams, asleep or awake. I was up at dawn. I had to go to see my Wonder Horse. As soon as it was light, I went out into the cold to look for him.

The pasture was large. It contained a grove of trees and a small gully. The Wonder Horse was not visible anywhere, but I was not

worried. I walked slowly, my head full of the events of yesterday and my plans for the future. Suddenly I realized that I had walked a long way. I quicken my steps. I look apprehensively around me. I begin to be afraid. Without knowing it, I begin to run. Faster and faster.

He is not there. The Wonder Horse has escaped. I search every corner where he could be hidden. I follow his tracks. I see that during the night he walked incessantly, sniffing, searching for a way out. He did not find one. He made one for himself.

I followed the track that led straight to the fence. And I saw that the trail did not stop but continued on the other side. It was a barbed-wire fence. There was white hair on the wire. There was blood on the barbs. There were red stains on the snow and little red drops in the hoofprints on the other side of the fence.

I stopped there. I did not go any farther. The rays of the morning sun on my face. Eyes clouded and yet filled with light. Childish tears on the cheeks of a man. A cry stifled in my throat. Slow, silent sobs.

Standing there, I forgot myself and the world and time. I cannot explain it, but my sorrow was mixed with pleasure. I was weeping with happiness. No matter how much it hurt me, I was rejoicing over the flight and the freedom of the Wonder Horse, the dimensions of his indomitable spirit. Now he would always be fantasy, freedom, and excitement. The Wonder Horse was transcendent. He had enriched my life forever.

My father found me there. He came close without a word and laid his arm across my shoulders. We stood looking at the white trench with its flecks of red that led into the rising sun.

Translated by Thelma Campbell Nason

8. Mago (mä'gô) *Spanish*: magician; wizard.

WORDS TO KNOW
indignity (ĭn-dĭg' nĭ-tē) *n.* something that insults or hurts one's dignity or pride
indomitable (ĭn-dŏm' y-tə-bəl) *adj.* not easily discouraged or defeated
transcendent (trăns-sĕn'dənt) *adj.* far above or beyond the usual and ordinary; supreme

Literary Analysis

STYLE **Style** refers to the special way in which a writer expresses ideas. It describes not the ideas themselves but rather how they are presented. Every writer has a unique style. Some elements that make up a writer's style are **sentence length, word choice, use of descriptive language, and tone.** One of the distinctive elements of Ulibarrí's style is his variety of sentence length, as in the following excerpt:

*Then my eyes focus. There he is!
The Wonder Horse! At the end of
the glade, on high ground
surrounded by summer green. He
is a statue. He is an engraving.*

The use of so many short sentences and sentence fragments in the passage creates an abrupt feeling that helps convey the unexpectedness of seeing the horse.

Cooperative Learning Activity With a small group, take turns sharing a paragraph from the story whose style you found interesting. For each paragraph, list the variety of sentence lengths. Discuss how the variety of sentence lengths might reflect the emotional content or the action in the passage. Decide which paragraph is the best example of style reflecting content. Then share your findings with the class.