Men Come to the End of Something: Identity Creation and Border Symbolism in Cormac McCarthy's Border Trilogy
Carl Fredrik Schou Straumsheim

This paper was written for Dr. Rosencrants’ Cornerstone course.

Introduction:
In 1985, Cormac McCarthy made a blip on literary critics’ radars. Although a novelist since the 1960s, McCarthy first gained national attention with Blood Meridian, a novel that has become synonymous with its gratuitous use of explicit violence. A decade later, McCarthy attempted something else: a trilogy, united at first by themes, then by converging plots. The Border Trilogy, consisting of All the Pretty Horses (1992), The Crossing (1994), and Cities of the Plain (1998), was originally classified as a Western saga. As the trilogy progressed, however, the narrative transcended its genre, leaving behind the two intertwined stories of John Grady Cole and Billy Parham, two boys who leave home for Mexico and return as strangers.

In McCarthy’s borderlands, identity is as ambiguous as the barren landscape. In effect, these journeys force the protagonists of the Border Trilogy to view themselves and their surroundings in light of the experiences gained during their travels—a process that challenges personal identity and commonly held beliefs, such as the function of an international border in the natural world. Moreover, no two travelers experience the journey in quite the same way, a reality that leads to the end of a long friendship and a rift between two brothers.

The Border Trilogy includes some of McCarthy’s most somber work, and may at first glance seem as an attempt by the author to distance himself from his earlier novels. But although the narrative intensifies over the course of the three novels, the Border Trilogy represents a thought-provoking representation of how journeys can form the basis of an identity, and how the symbol of the border changes due to human interaction.

Literature Review:
In order to establish where this interpretation of McCarthy’s Border Trilogy belongs in the larger critical conversation, it is necessary to track the major movements of thought within that conversation. Perhaps not so surprisingly, there occurred something of a plethora of critical writing about McCarthy following the publication of All the Pretty Horses in 1992. As some critics responded with confusion about McCarthy’s overall vision (especially after reading All the Pretty Horses), it became almost a staple of the criticism of the time to compare the fledgling Border Trilogy to McCarthy’s first five
narrative leaves no doubt about whether or not violence will be a major factor in the Border Trilogy. In fact, as the trilogy progresses, McCarthy almost appears to grow more comfortable with a rising level of violence, and ends Cities of the Plain with a fatal knife fight rendered in grisly detail.

In his article for The Suwanee Review, Walter Sullivan describes McCarthy’s early novels as containing “a lot of blood and not many flowers,” and points to Blood Meridian as McCarthy’s most violent work to date; characters who have fallen victim to his violent ways have been “scalped, decapitated, asphyxiated, impaled, staked out to bake in the sun, mutilated and left to die in the desert” (Sullivan 292). In light of the necrophilia and incest in Child of God and Outer Dark, a scene in which John Grady and Billy go hunting for wild dogs in Cities of the Plain (also told with explicit and gory effects) seems positively jovial (297). With McCarthy’s predilection for the gruesome in mind, it may not come as a surprise, then, that Sullivan describes McCarthy as having “mellowed” since the publication of Blood Meridian (293).

Other critics have attempted to connect McCarthy’s novels to pressing domestic and international topics. Vince Brewton, a professor of English at the University of North Alabama, has claimed that McCarthy’s first novels appear to have been influenced by the Vietnam War era, and that “the novels of the Border Trilogy exhibit a similar imaginative and thematic debt to … the 1980s, a landscape best evoked by the Reagan presidency and the Gulf War” (Brewton 121). Brewton credits the popularity of President Reagan for resurrecting the western genre, which in turn inspired McCarthy to create the “unambiguously heroic” characters of John Grady and Billy (132-33). Brewton concludes his analysis of violence in the Border Trilogy by connecting it to popular 1980s Hollywood tropes such as the ‘Buddy Cop’ movie and the ‘Rescue Mission’ (134), and that violence itself serves a highly symbolic role; John Grady’s knife fight in All the Pretty Horses foreshadows his death in Cities of the Plain, providing closure for the romantic tension that has been present throughout the trilogy since John Grady and Alejandra’s failed relationship in All the Pretty Horses (140).

The focus on McCarthy’s use of violence also feeds into the discussion about how to classify him as a regional writer. Much like the settings of his novels—The Orchard Keeper (1965), Outer Dark (1968), Child of God (1974), Suttree (1974), and, to a greater extent, Blood Meridian (1985).
The discussion about McCarthy’s use of violence, then, appears to be split into two camps: those who see it as highly symbolic, and those who do not. With the completion of the Border Trilogy in 1998, however, critics were able to discuss the three novels as an entity separate from McCarthy’s earlier novels. Upon its release, All the Pretty Horses was labeled as a “modern-day Western full of horses and gunplay and romance,” a description that appears rather superficial in light of the rest of the trilogy. As a result, the conversation about McCarthy’s intentions for writing the three novels gathered speed, eventually spawning critical writing that sought to analyze symbolism and theme more elaborately than earlier critics had. One of the symbols that critics seized upon was the enduring image of the cowboy in American culture. In short, this second branch of criticism highlighted the loss of an ‘old way,’ and the painful extinction of American pastoralism—the idolized rural lifestyle.

In “In Search of a Further Frontier: Cormac McCarthy’s Border Trilogy,” Robert C. Sickels and Marc Oxoby analyze All the Pretty Horses and The Crossing in light of Cities of the Plain as elegiac novels mourning the loss of an idealized frontier. The authors point out that a reading of the Border Trilogy depicts the death of pastoralism from the first scene of All the Pretty Horses; John Grady, who has just lost his father, is interrupted in his mourning by a train—another staple American symbol—that trundles across the countryside. The westbound train becomes a symbol of progress, but with it comes “the death of Cole’s way of life” (Sickels, Oxoby 349). After escaping the push of societal progress for the Mexican countryside, John Grady falls in love with Alejandra, but she has already taken her part in modern society and declines to take part in his pastoral dream (350). In The Crossing, Sickels and Oxoby point to Billy’s baby brother, Boyd, as paralleling “the freshness of [Hidalgo] county, a place of rebirth” for the newly relocated Parhams (352). But with
the domestication of the countryside, certain natural forces rebel: wolves, for example, attack the livestock as though expressing “an aversion to the technological and urban development of the country” (352). In Cities of the Plain, the transformation hinted at in the trilogy’s first two novels is all but completed. With the advent of the car, the Texan wildlife has had to suffer, replacing wild animals with their domestic counterparts (356). John Grady’s fight with Eduardo, the pimp responsible for Magdalena’s death, is not simply motivated by revenge, but can be construed to be a last stand against the forces of change (358).

John Grady’s escape from Texas and into Mexico has not been interpreted by critics simply as a refusal to join the modern world, but as an attempt to “recreate the pastoralism of ranch life” (Bourne 120). Although Billy’s reasons for traveling to Mexico involve either returning or recapturing something that belongs to the other side of the border, his journeys may also be inspired by a clandestine moment in his childhood when he steals away into the night to watch wolves play in the moonlight. Bourne suggests that his self-imposed nomadic lifestyle is maintained in an effort to return to that “mystical wild landscape” (120) that existed before technological progress began to encroach upon the unspoiled wilderness of Hidalgo County. But by Cities of the Plain, it becomes apparent that both quests have failed and that John Grady and Billy must adapt in order to find their place in a changed world.

Critics have also focused on the consequences of rapid expansion and societal advances. Jacqueline Scoones argues in A Cormac McCarthy Companion: The Border Trilogy that one of McCarthy’s major themes is the juxtaposition of the accomplishments of human history against the backdrop of all time, reducing humanity to “a fragment of the earth’s history” (Scoones 131). As a result, when humanity and its progress forces a natural being into extinction, we are unaware of its greater consequences (141). According to Scoones, McCarthy waits with offering the reader a hint of the Border Trilogy’s greater meaning until the dedication, which is not placed at the beginning of All the Pretty Horses, but rather at the very end of Cities of the Plain. The dedication, which ends with the lines “The story’s told / Turn the page … reminds us of our physical being in the physical world” (133). Judging the Border Trilogy from this perspective, it would appear that McCarthy is indeed lamenting the death of American pastoralism while urging the reader past the pages of the novels to preserve a way of life before it disappears completely.

As far as where this essay will fit between these two separate critical discussions on the Border Trilogy, it will gravitate somewhat toward the latter; criticism that focuses on McCarthy’s use of violence tends to limit itself to studying his collected works by comparing and contrasting. These critics have also largely ignored the trilogy’s epilogue and dedication. Walter Sullivan, for
example, described the former in the following manner:

…it is neither interesting for its own sake, nor is it relevant to the novel. It represents McCarthy as a philosophical fabulist, which is not at all what his talent equips him to be. (297)

Ignoring the trilogy’s conclusion is effectively ignoring its thesis. And while critics interested in pastoralism eagerly pounce on it as McCarthy’s justification for the Border Trilogy, they often fail to explain the journey that brings John Grady and Billy to become symbols of the ‘old way.’

Diverging from the criticism explained above, this analysis of the Border Trilogy will be based on two major works. The first is Ashley Bourne’s Plenty of Signs and Wonders to Make a Landscape: Space, Place, and Identity in Cormac McCarthy’s Border Trilogy. Bourne’s larger claim is that place and identity is ultimately connected in McCarthy’s trilogy, and that “Bodies and places … interanimate each other” (qtd. in Bourne 110). A lack of inhabitancy, in other words, not only erases identity, but transforms the idea of ‘place’ into the more abstract ‘space.’ Moreover, Bourne touches on the paradox she refers to as “rootedness … the sense of place,” and that characters—especially Billy—search for ‘rootedness’ while traveling from place to place (113).

Bourne’s article is interesting because it combines the topics of landscape criticism with identity creation. For that second topic, however, this essay will draw from John D. Ramage’s Rhetoric: A User’s Guide, which devotes a chapter to the study of rhetoric and identity as offspring of language and claims that the connection between the two is “perhaps the least widely acknowledged and least well understood” (33). While Rhetoric: A User’s Guide does not reference the Border Trilogy, Ramage’s theories also emphasize that travel can affect these models of identity.

Based on the criticism reviewed, this essay explores the topic of identity creation in Cormac McCarthy’s Border Trilogy in two distinct, but interconnected ways. Both characters search for the ‘rootedness’ Ashley Bourne described in two vastly different ways: John Grady’s romantic desire to recreate his childhood, and Billy’s life as a nomad. The two reach this point in their lives either by rejecting an accepted model of identity or by being forced to adapt their identity to suit a foreign setting. Through their travels, John Grady and Billy often involuntarily find their understanding of the world around them change, leading to them interpreting the places around them in light of their experiences. By traveling, these characters seem to erase boundaries within themselves—and also the borders set down by those who came before them. As a result, journeys stand as the most important factor of identity creation in Cormac McCarthy’s Border Trilogy, as they are able to redefine not only those who embark on them, but also the landscape through which they journey through.
Identity Creation:

How does McCarthy construct identities in his novels? Some critics have pointed out that McCarthy maintains a certain distance between the reader and the character, and that—although the characters of the Border Trilogy often find themselves alone during their travels—the former is rarely privy to the latter's internal dialogue. Instead, John Grady and Billy reveal their states of mind through their interpretation of the landscapes they traverse as well as the visceral dream sequences that McCarthy narrates.

Theories of identity creation may be traced as far back as the Classical Greek philosopher Plato. In his dialogue Phaedrus, he presented (through the character of his mentor, Socrates) the soul as a chariot drawn by two horses: one defined by its own restraint and morality, the other by its impulsive and lustful nature. Later, psychologist Sigmund Freud distinguished between the id, ego, and superego. In Rhetoric: A User’s Guide, John D. Ramage creates a modern tripartite division consisting of the given, readymade, and constructed parts of identity. For the first, Ramage explains:

The given identity includes all aspects of our identity that are inherited or acquired willy-nilly rather than by choice and/or by creative act. And while our given identity is not necessarily unchangeable, it constrains our choices, sometimes decisively so. The most obvious aspects of our given identity include our genetic and family structure; the time, place, and circumstances of our birth; and our pasts. (42)

The given identity, in other words, deals with the past, and includes both biological and geographical aspects.

Ramage’s second type of identity, however, has more to do with culture than science:

The readymade, meanwhile, includes those identities that we have not ourselves constructed, that have been prefabricated by others and are on offer through the workplace, the marketplace, and the cultural spaces we occupy. (42)

Ramage emphasizes the creation of these readymade identities through media and, in particular, advertising. Although his take on this type of identity is somewhat critical, he fittingly mentions the image of the American cowboy (under the title of the ‘Rugged Individualist’) as having “dominated our collective imagination that many Americans don’t think of it as a prefabricated identity; in many people’s minds, it is synonymous with pure authenticity” (Ramage 57). Ramage’s interpretation of the cowboy echoes those critics who have tracked the death of John Grady and Billy’s way of life in their analyses of the Border Trilogy.

Finally, Ramage’s third type of identity will be crucial in determining how McCarthy’s characters come to life in the Border Trilogy:

Our constructed identity, meanwhile, is as much a negative capacity as
Ramage’s description of the constructed part of identity points out that it builds on the given and readymade but focuses on the element of choice; identity is created by approving and rejecting available models.

Ramage also argues that the journey itself is a part of identity creation. First, he distinguishes between travelers and tourists—after all, John Grady and Billy do not venture into Mexico to see the sights. Tourists, according to Ramage, may travel to a well-known site only to be disappointed by its underwhelming nature; travelers, meanwhile, will change their understanding of a place in light of the underwhelming experience. In fact, Ramage claims that these disappointments may actually benefit the traveler, who reaches new levels of understanding based on these interpretations (184-85).

Secondly, Ramage quotes Swiss writer Alain de Botton’s The Art of Travel to establish a connection between travel and identity: “It is not necessarily at home that we best encounter our true selves. ... the domestic setting keeps us tethered to the person we are in ordinary life, who may not be who we essentially are” (qtd. in Ramage 186). Although Ramage is hesitant to claim that true identity can only be created through travel, he does agree that “travel gives us the freedom to seek out different selves” (186). Simply put, breaking de Botton’s ‘tether’ grants travelers the option to explore available models of identity away from home. In this analysis of the Border Trilogy, then, a traveler is defined as a person who comes to interpret the world around him based on the experiences gathered during a journey.

Although Ramage devotes more attention to the readymade and constructed part of identity, the last third—the given—is of particular importance to the Border Trilogy. Even though southern New Mexico and Texas and northern Mexico greatly resemble each other geographically, they are separated by an internationally recognized border. Additionally, since the inhabitants of this area often exhibit bilingualism—including John Grady and Billy, both of whom are fluent in both English and Spanish—the topic of national identity in McCarthy’s trilogy is gradually reduced to something of a formality, a box on some official document. Still, there are times when McCarthy’s characters are painfully reminded of their own nationality, though this topic is often broached by government officials, whose purpose in these three novels seems to consist of maintaining that line of artificial separation between the two countries.

Coincidentally, the value of national identity became a focal point of several Supreme Court cases of the late 1950s—a few years after the
culmination of the Border Trilogy in Cities of the Plain. In Perez v. Brownell, for example, the court upheld that Congress had the right to strip a natural-born American of his citizenship. Clemente Martinez Perez, although born in Texas, had raised a family with his wife in Mexico. Because Perez had taken part in a political election in Mexico, the Court decided that he had exhibited “a dilution of undivided allegiance,” which served as the major tipping point in the defendant’s (US Attorney General Herbert Brownell Jr.) favor. In his dissenting opinion, Chief Justice Earl Warren criticized the decision, claiming that “[c]itizenship is man’s basic right, for it is nothing less than the right to have rights.” The connection between Warren’s opinion and Ramage’s idea of given identity is clear: if a person is stripped of his given national identity, he loses the foundation on which to construct himself.

The Supreme Court also voted on a second case involving national identity—Trop v. Dulles—on the same day that Perez v. Brownell was decided. But in contrast to that case, the court found that Congress was acting unconstitutionally by stripping wartime deserters of their citizenship. Chief Justice Warren, in this case leading the majority, cited the Eight Amendment to deem such an act cruel and unusual punishment. Moreover, he claimed that denationalization would cause “total destruction of the individual’s status in organized society.” Nearly a decade later, the Supreme Court came to a final conclusion on the topic of denationalization. Afroyim v. Rush, which was decided in 1967, deprived the government the right to revoke citizenships as a punishment. As a result, this decision not only overturned the outcome of Perez v. Brownell, but it also set a powerful precedent for the Fourteenth Amendment, which grants citizenship to all American-born individuals.

Prior to the outcome of Afroyim v. Rush, citizenship appears to have been closely tied to geographical area; viewed in the light of Perez v. Brownell, it appears that in order to be subject to denationalization, a person not only has to leave his country, but actively take part in another. With that in mind, John Grady’s journey appears to come closer to denationalization, especially in light of his relationship with Alejandra and his admission that he could stay in Mexico for “a hundred years.” Still, John Grady decision to leave the United States is not motivated by desertion, but rather by a wish to recreate the decaying idyll of his childhood. Billy, meanwhile, travels to Mexico because of a strong sense of belonging, an offshoot of national identity. But by becoming travelers, the two effectively erase their given identities, causing their national identities to give way to what they constructed during their journeys.

Going back to the original purpose of this essay—to look at how the border changes because of human interaction—Ramage’s writings on identity creation serve as the guidelines needed to analyze McCarthy’s characters. By mapping out John Grady and Billy’s given, readymade, and constructed identities—and by focusing in particular on national identity—it becomes
easier to contrast the consequences of the journeys in Cities of the Plain with how the characters are presented in All the Pretty Horses and The Crossing.

**John Grady Cole—The Romantic:**

He rode with the sun coppering his face and the red wind blowing out of the west. He turned south along the old war trail and he rode out to the crest of a low rise and dismounted and dropped the reins and walked out and stood like a man come to the end of something. (Horses 5)

John Grady Cole’s journey begins with a series of losses—a combination of the sixteen-year-old horseman willingly or unwillingly shedding his given identity. His grandfather, the last in a line of ranchers, passes after fighting disease—possibly cancer, and his estranged mother, a fledgling starlet in San Antonio, ends the Cole legacy by selling their land. His father, meanwhile, is even more distant, causing John Grady to step up as a candidate to run the ranch. When his childish wish is denied, he refuses to enroll in school, breaks up with his girlfriend (in a particularly cowboy-like fashion—squaring off with her in the middle of a busy street), and escapes to Mexico with his best friend, Lacey Rawlins. Apart from John Grady’s horse and the clothes on his back, Rawlins becomes his only link to the world—and identity—that he leaves behind in search for a home away from home—a journey fueled by his romantic desire to restore the past.

The fact that John Grady loses his grandfather at age sixteen is of vital importance to his own development. On the one hand, it highlights the fact that he is lacking a strong father figure—a given model of identity—to shape himself after. On the other hand, had his father been able to run the ranch, there might not have been a need for John Grady to ever assume the role of the traveler. From the brief scenes in which the two interact, it can be construed that John Grady owes much—if not all—of his knowledge about horses to his grandfather. And although John Grady does not approve of his grandfather’s cigarette addiction, he trusts him with running the ranch. McCarthy leaves out the finer details of their relationship, but if John Grady’s grandfather had remained healthy, his grandson may even have had the chance to receive formal education. Instead, John Grady’s journey becomes an education in itself, forming the foundation of his adult identity.

After traveling through the borderlands, John Grady and Rawlins finally reach the ranch, where they are immediately welcomed as able-bodied farmhands. As a result, John Grady’s reaction is one of instantaneous bliss. “How long do you think you’d like to stay here?” Rawlins asks as the two bunk down with the rest of the cowboys; “About a hundred years,” replies a satisfied John Grady (Horses 96). His relief goes beyond finding a resting stop from the harsh landscape, however; he has successfully traded the comfort of the Cole ranch for a Mexican equivalent. While the situation is temporary, the fact
that John Grady risked the journey into Mexico is what allows him to briefly continue to construct his identity in a setting that he is already comfortable with.

John Grady seems content with his journey as an attempt to reconstruct the relationships that he left behind. His knowledge about horses soon catches the attention of the proprietor of the ranch, Rocha, who promotes him. In the beginning, John Grady confuses Rocha for a potential father figure—Sickles and Oxoby referred to him as a “superficial” role model, for example (350)—but Rocha has one foot in the modern world that John Grady is attempting to avoid. The conversation between the two also reveal that John Grady is not aware of what he is attempting to do at Rocha’s ranch: when asked what he is doing in Mexico, John Grady replies with a simple “I just wanted to see the country, I reckon” (Horses 114). His hesitancy to explain his true motives may come from the fact that he is currently undergoing the process Ramage outlined, although subconsciously; he is attempting to reinterpret his identity in terms of his recent experiences.

The chance for a promotion also reveals the purpose that Rawlins fulfills in John Grady’s attempt to construct a home away from home. Before making a decision about whether or not to accept the position, John Grady confers with his friend and tries to appease him by stressing that “You just say the word and I’ll tell him no.” Rawlins, though somewhat jealous, repeats the line “It’s a opportunity for you” (Horses 116). Although the response is nowhere near as positive as John Grady would have liked, he seizes upon the opportunity offered by Rocha—a chance to continue strengthening his identity as a rancher.

With an assumed father figure and a job as a ranch hand secured, John Grady begins to explore a romantic relationship with Alejandra, Rocha’s daughter, to serve as a substitute for his relationship back in the United States with Mary Catherine. Similar to how he misinterprets Rocha, John Grady also fails to see that Alejandra has joined the modern world. This oversight is also what causes him not to comprehend why she eventually rejects his marriage proposal. While discussing her with Rawlins, John Grady mentions that she goes to “some kind of a prep school or somethin.” Rawlins immediately understand the implications of Alejandra’s schooling, calling her “a fancy sort of girl.” John Grady simply replies “No she aint” (Horses 118), highlighting the fact that he still has not managed to reinterpret himself in a foreign setting.

It is John Grady’s inability to change that leads to his idyll being shattered. When Jimmy Blevins, their temporary third companion, kills a man in a nearby village, Mexican authorities eventually track down John Grady and Rawlins at the ranch. Rocha, although initially protective of the two, hands them over when he learns of John Grady’s relationship with Alejandra. Up until that point, McCarthy has tempted the reader with a story of a young man who is able to
live the life of his choice by escaping from change. Instead, the departure from the ranch in Mexico signals a major shift in tone. From there, John Grady and Rawlins are confronted by situations that force them, according to Ramage, to “experiment with identities” (186) in order to stay alive. Through the combined impact of these episodes, the two eventually emerge as thoroughly different individuals.

Their first challenge highlights the importance of national identity in the Border Trilogy. After being taken to the jail in La Encantada, John Grady and Rawlins are interrogated separately. When the latter is brought before the captain, Rawlins is instantly ordered to produce a passport. Instead, Rawlins offers his driver's license, and successfully recites all the information printed on it. The captain, unimpressed, demands to see a work permit, eventually pushing Rawlins to the verge of tears. John Grady, meanwhile, comes to his interrogation without a single form of identification, and calmly responds to the captain's allegations. The difference between these two scenes is the anticipations that the two go into their interrogations with. Rawlins goes in as an American citizen, and takes great insult from being called a liar. John Grady, however, has not been able to find a substitute for his given identity, and brings only his constructed identity.

The differences between John Grady and Rawlins grow more apparent in the later parts of All the Pretty Horses. After being thrown into the jail in Saltillo, the two experience a constant fight for survival; John Grady, for example, narrowly survives a knife fight with a fellow inmate. While in recovery, Rawlins admits that he received a blood transfusion, and worries that a liter of Mexican blood has somehow changed his nationality. “Well a litre would make you almost a halfbreed,” John Grady quips to a mortified Rawlins, before adding “No. Hell, it dont mean nothin. Blood’s blood. It dont know where it come from” (Horses 210-11). This exchange emphasizes how little importance John Grady places on nationality.

The long line of rejections in the second half of his journey is the catalyst that causes John Grady to undergo the process of reinterpreting himself. After his failed attempt to win back Alejandra, John Grady finally returns to the United States, but has come to see his home in a radically new light. When faced with the news of his father’s death, John Grady responds indifferently, and turns down Rawlins’s offer to stay at his house. The final exchange between the two summarizes the impact that the journey has had on John Grady:

[John Grady:] I think I’m goin to move on.
[Rawlins:] This is still good country.
Yeah. I know it is. But it aint my country.
... Where is your country? [Rawlins] said.
I dont know, said John Grady. I dont know where it is. I dont know what happens to country. (Horses 299)
John Grady Cole initially leaves Texas in order to grow up and build his identity in a setting that resembles his home. The fact that he finds that place in Mexico, however, is not of particular importance. As a romantic, he struggles to reconstruct the idyll of the past, but his success is only temporary. Upon his return to Texas, John Grady has tried on a multitude of different models of identity—a lover, a fighter, a diplomat—and although his perception of home is changed as a result of this process, his underlying desire to recreate the past remains a driving force for the narrative in Cities of the Plain.

**Billy Parham—The Nomad:**

He had not known that you could see yourself in other’s eyes nor see therein such things as suns. He stood twinned in those dark wells with hair so pale, so thin and strange, the selfsame child. ... As if it were a maze where these orphans of his heart had miswandered in their journey of life and so at last arrived beyond the wall of that antique gaze from whence there could be no way back forever. (Crossing 5)

At first glance, the character of Billy Parham greatly resembles John Grady Cole: both are fluent in Spanish and display an advanced level of horsemanship, for example. What sets the two apart, however, is their sense of family. Whereas John Grady is the last in a weak paternal line—not to mention a product of a broken home—Billy more or less grows up in a nuclear family: mother, father, two children, and even a dog. The Parhams’ move to Hidalgo Country represents a fresh start for the family, since “In the country they’d quit lay the bones of a sister and the bones of [Billy’s] maternal grandmother” (Crossing 3). But through their turbulent past, the family has grown closer. As a result, Billy’s personality is defined by a strong desire for belonging—a character trait that drives him to travel into Mexico and through the process of self-reinterpretation.

McCarthy sets up Billy’s first trip to Mexico by providing an example of his emphasis on belonging. In an early scene, Billy and his younger brother, Boyd, encounter a Native American who intimidates them into bringing him food. Even though he could have refused, Billy obliges, and brings the stranger a full meal from the Parham’s pantry. It is not until the two boys return from their nighttime confrontation that the danger of the situation begins to dawn on them:

> We ought not to of gone out there to start with, Boyd said. ... Ought we. No. Why did we? I dont know. (Crossing 12)

Billy’s response greatly resembles John Grady’s when asked why he had come to Mexico. And just like John Grady was unaware of his romantic attempt to recreate the past, Billy is equally as oblivious to the fact that his
sense of belonging is what causes him to respect the Native American’s request—after all, Hidalgo County once belonged to someone else other than the Parhams.

It is only when Billy finally traps the she-wolf that has been ravaging the livestock in the area that the reason why McCarthy included the passage about the Native American becomes apparent. Driven out of Mexico to search for new hunting grounds, the wolf accidentally crosses into New Mexico. After an extensive game of cat-and-mouse, Billy finally outsmarts her, and after neutralizing the animal, Billy almost immediately decides what to do with her: “I’m just takin her down [to Mexico] and turnin her loose. It’s where she come from” (Crossing 68), he explains. In Billy’s mind, the wolf—a natural thing—belongs to the man-made creation that is the area known as Mexico.

Billy’s first journey serves to challenge his definition of belonging, a trait integral to his identity. He chooses to return the wolf to Mexico because it failed to respect the border separating two countries, but by doing so, he commits the same mistake himself. When he is accused of treating Mexico like some dumping ground for wild animals, Billy explains that he only crossed into the country because the wolf’s tracks led in that direction; “He said the wolf knew nothing of boundaries” (Crossing 118). Unbeknownst to Billy, he failed to pay a fee when crossing the border; by continuing his journey, Billy shows the same blatant disregard for the law as the wolf. As Billy’s first journey into Mexico ends with him having to end the wolf’s life, he also deals his identity a similar blow: “His home had come to seem remote and dreamlike. There were times he could not call to mind his father’s face” (Crossing 135). Defeated, Billy returns to the United States with his idea of belonging so badly bruised that home itself has become a foreign place.

Still smarting from the lessons learned in Mexico, Billy crosses back into the United States at a border crossing and experiences no complications—in fact, the guard even happily lends Billy some money. Once back in Hidalgo County, he too comes to understand his home in a radically new way—although not through introspection and reinterpretation, as in John Grady’s case (after all, Billy does have two more trips to Mexico to go). The Parham house is empty, its occupants slain. Billy lingers only briefly, spending a restless night on the plains north of his old home. In addition to assuming the role of the traveler, he embraces a nomadic existence, though his identity lacks the romantic element that drives John Grady to attempt to recreate the past.

Although he has lost his parents, Billy still has a tether to his old life: Boyd. Together, the two set off into Mexico in pursuit of their parents’ murderers, as well as to reclaim the horses that they stole. In this sense, Billy’s second journey is also inspired by belonging. Shortly after crossing the border, however, they are warned by a performer in a traveling show of the potential consequences of their journey:
It is difficult even for brothers to travel together on such a journey. The road has its own reasons and no two travelers will have the same understanding of those reasons. If they indeed come to an understanding of them at all. (Crossing 229).

Chronologically, The Crossing takes place before the events of All the Pretty Horses, yet McCarthy uses the narrative of the former to explain the motivations behind writing the latter—and, for that matter, the entire Border Trilogy. Through the character of the opera singer, McCarthy explains how journeys affect the travelers in different ways, and that the identities that the travelers eventually adopt may no longer suit each other. Because McCarthy waits until the second novel of the trilogy to begin to explain its overarching themes, it may not come as a surprise, then, that critics attempt to understand All the Pretty Horses in light of McCarthy’s previous works.

Naturally, the opera singer’s prediction comes true; Billy and Boyd drift even farther apart than John Grady and Rawlins. While searching for the murderers, Boyd is shot through the chest. Billy, blaming himself for placing Boyd in harm’s way, goes to great lengths to nurse him back to health, and eventually enlists a doctor to save his brother’s life. Once he has regained his strength, however, Boyd disappears with a girl. Boyd, once so dependent upon Billy to be able to live a nomadic existence, learns to adapt his identity to a new setting faster than his brother—perhaps because of his younger age. Since Boyd had less time to build his identity back in Hidalgo County, he completes the process of reinterpreting himself more easily.

Upon returning from his second trip to Mexico, Billy does show signs of having altered his identity. Whereas the border guard had greeted him cheerfully before, Billy notices that the guard hesitates before allowing him to pass. “I’m an American, he said, if I dont look like it” (Crossing 333), he snaps, as though he feels a need to reaffirm himself. Again, his return to the United States alerts him to momentous changes—in this case, the United States’ involvement in World War II. Perhaps in an effort to reinforce his national identity, Billy tries to enlist, but is turned down due to a heart murmur. After several failed attempts, he continues his nomadic way of life for several years, drifting from ranch to ranch across the southwest, but finding only temporary work. Rejected by both his country and his countrymen, Billy is left with no other option but to return to Mexico one last time.

Billy’s third journey is not motivated by belonging until he learns of his brother’s death. From that point on, Billy makes it his mission to return Boyd’s remains to the United States, but not for Boyd’s sake—Billy states that he does not think his brother “had a home to go to” (385). Instead, his motivations are highly personal: he wants to bury Boyd in his own—Billy’s—country (Crossing 419). Despite his numerous rejections, Billy still claims a strong sense of belonging to the United States—a stubbornness not so different from what
John Grady displays in All the Pretty Horses. Still, at the end of The Crossing, Billy is alone, caught between one temporary home and the next.

Billy Parham’s journeys into Mexico gradually sever his tether to the Parham’s home in Hidalgo County; for every trip he embarks upon, he returns to find that a part of his given identity has disappeared from the world. In effect, these journeys seem to displace Billy in the world, despite his insistence that he feels a strong belonging to the United States. As a result, Billy is unable to settle down permanently, restricting himself to a life as a sojourner.

Conflicting Identities in Cities of the Plain:

They stood in the doorway and stomped the rain from their boots and swung their hats and wiped the water from their faces. Out in the street the rain slashed through the standing water driving the gaudy red and green colors of the neon signs to wander and seethe and rain danced on the steel tops of the cars parked along the curb. (Cities of the Plain 3).

McCarthy ends the first two novels in the Border Trilogy by leaving the main characters’ fates undecided, thereby setting Cities of the Plains up as the trilogy’s unifying work. By having John Grady and Billy develop a close relationship, McCarthy provides a novel’s worth of examples of how their lives as travelers have caused these two originally similar characters to construct highly different identities. Moreover, the novel solidifies John Grady as the true protagonist of the Border Trilogy, as his now self-destructive romantic desires come under heavy scrutiny by the older Billy Parham.

Since Cities of the Plain takes place closely after the events of All the Pretty Horses, John Grady has not had the time to reflect on his journey into Mexico. His time at the cattle ranch in New Mexico, then, is also characterized by a wish to recreate his time at the Cole ranch of his childhood. But whereas his last attempt at Rocha’s ranch was motivated more by a desire to restore his given identity, this third attempt seems to be driven by sheer stubbornness. And while his continued efforts to recreate the past may seem to indicate that John Grady has seen no personal development since the events of the first novel, his actions betray him; John Grady, once the master horseman, is injured while trying to break a stallion. As far as stubbornness goes, John Grady’s longing for the past may be interpreted as an attempt to prove that the journey into Mexico has not changed him.

The major point of disagreement between John Grady and Billy—and also one of the novel’s main elements—is how their time as travelers has shaped their understanding of love. John Grady, heartbroken since his rejected marriage proposal to Alejandra in All the Pretty Horses, pursues a young prostitute, Magdalena, who greatly resembles Alejandra. Billy, still hurting from being abandoned by his brother, has lost all belief in love. In The Crossing, he responded with confusion to Boyd’s departure, but his years as
a nomad has led him to accept his life as a traveler. As a result, he finds John Grady’s romantic personality somewhat foolish. While explaining John Grady’s motivations for wanting to buy Magdalena’s freedom to Eduardo, Magdalena’s pimp, Billy suggests that John Grady “thinks she’s in love with him.” Eduardo responds by asking Billy if he believes in love, and after some hesitation, Billy gives a definite answer: “No” (Cities 131). Through these conversations, Billy reveals that he has had enough time to process the events of The Crossing and reinterpreted himself in light of his experiences.

Unfortunately, the same is not true for John Grady, and in his attempt to win over the love interest—a vital piece of his old identity—he is forced to give up several of the objects that link him to his past, including his grandfather’s rifle. Even these sacrifices do not lead to success—as Magdalena tries to escape into the United States, she is intercepted and murdered. Enraged, John Grady confronts Eduardo and engages him in a knife fight. The parallels to All the Pretty Horses could not be more evident, but the differences reveal changes in John Grady’s character. Whereas the knife fight in the first novel had John Grady defending himself from the attack, he goes on the offense in the trilogy’s final pages: “I come to kill you or be killed” (Cities 346), he tells Eduardo, effectively sealing his own fate. This recklessness is a far cry from the boy who fought for his life in a prison in Saltillo.

Billy was never able to save Boyd, and arrives too late to the scene to redeem himself. Three days after John Grady’s death, and hurt by another failed personal relationship Billy once again slips into the role of the nomad, even though the cattle ranch has given him the steady job that he had been searching for. As the epilogue draws to a close, Billy is old and homeless—a full-time sojourner. In his old age, he is taken in by a family in New Mexico, and tells the mother of the house the story of his life, finishing with the line: “I’m not what you think I am. I aint nothin. I dont know why you put up with me.” The woman, having heard his story, answers: “Well, Mr. Parham, I know who you are. And I do know why” (Cities 291). Although Billy believes that his nomadic existence has erased his given identity, the opposite is true—his travels have come to define him.

**Border Symbolism:**

The characters of the Border Trilogy are not alone in their ability to develop and alter their identities over the course of the three novels—the border displays a linear progression through the three novels. In All the Pretty Horses and The Crossing, the border is not depicted as a simple line, but as a vast area separating two different areas of habitation. This description could not be more different from Cities of the Plain, where the legitimacy of the border has diminished due to rapid expansion. Overall, the border in McCarthy’s trilogy is a largely artificial creation that nevertheless holds great symbolic value in his
characters’ minds, as it comes to define an area of emptiness lacking either habitation or humanity.

In order to see how the symbol of the border changes as the trilogy progresses, it follows logically to analyze the books in chronological order rather than based on their dates of publication. The earliest depiction of the border, then, can be found in The Crossing, which provides an example in its very first paragraph: Hidalgo County is described as “rich and wild,” and that “[y]ou could ride clear to Mexico and not strike a crossfence” (3). This lack of distinction between where the United States ends and Mexico begins suggests a landscape that has yet to be tamed.

Billy’s first crossing into Mexico highlights not only that the border exists more as an area rather than a line, but also that exists in the minds of those who invented it:

... they crossed sometime near noon the international boundary line near Mexico, State of Sonora, undifferentiated in its terrain from the country they quit and yet wholly alien and wholly strange. ... To the east he could see one of the concrete obelisks that stood for a boundary marker. (Crossing 74)

The presence of the marker is the only hint that alerts Billy to the fact that he is crossing into foreign territory. Had there been no visual aid, Billy would not have known that he had entered Mexico until meeting ethnic Mexicans. As it stands, there exists no natural reason for why the border is drawn where Billy encounters it.

In All the Pretty Horses, however, westward expansion has begun to set down the parameters missing from the open landscape in The Crossing. The last thing John Grady and Rawlins do before setting out, for example, is push their way through the crossfences and into the periphery. And while the borderlands may be more well-defined that before, it also means that they have become heavily trafficked. Billy’s first journey into Mexico is one of solitude; John Grady and Rawlins, meanwhile, cross paths with several parties of travelers--most of them heading north into the United States. It is not until they draw closer to the town of Zaragosa that they truly begin to interact with the inhabitants of Mexico.

Their first meeting could not be more foreboding. Whereas McCarthy often renders much of his dialogue in Spanish, he allows the narrator to make a rarely-seen intrusion into the flow of conversation in order to make sure that the reader does not overlook the importance of the conversation: “The man in the vest studied John Grady and he looked across the clearing at Blevins. Then he asked John Grady if he wished to sell the boy” (Horses 76). Bourne’s claim that human beings animate spaces that then become places still stands in All the Pretty Horses, for although the travelers come in contact with other human beings in this empty landscape, they appear largely void of humanity.

At first glance, a similar confrontation seems to occur in The Crossing
when Boyd is shot. Moreover, the culprits appear just as mysterious as the Mexicans who offer to buy Blevins: the narrator merely describes the gunmen as “five men riding” (Crossing 268). The difference between this act of unprovoked violence and the inhumane offer in All the Pretty Horses is that the latter occurs completely out of the blue. After all, Billy and Boyd’s mission in Mexico is to hunt down their parents’ murderers. Instead, their actions cause them to draw attention to themselves, which lead to Boyd’s being shot. The gunmen have a reason for being in the borderlands and do not exhibit the same lack of humanity that the mysterious band of riders in All the Pretty Horses does.

McCarthy signals the shift out of the borderlands and into “the country of which they’d been told”—from space to place—by a change in the landscape:

The grasslands lay in a deep violet haze and to the west thin flights of waterfowl were moving north before the sunset in the deep red galleries under the cloudbanks like school fish in a burning sea and on the foreland plain they saw vaqueros driving cattle before them through a gauze of golden dust. (Horses 93)

But the difference in the landscape is ultimately connected to the presence of permanent residents. John Grady and Rawlins are searching for a ranch that can provide them with employment. It follows, then, that the land around such a place will be cultivated and show signs of inhabitancy by both people and animals.

As the trilogy progresses, these people expand in the direction of the border, which gradually decreases the area of emptiness surrounding it. In Cities of the Plain, the dense population in the El Paso-Juarez area has grown to such an extent that the act of crossing the border has become a mere afterthought. In fact, the only reason why John Grady, Billy, and the other ranch hands travel into Mexico so often is the presence of whorehouses—in other words, to find a specific group of people not present in the United States. At the same time, the border that separates El Paso and Juarez is tied to a natural entity: the Rio Grande River. Even though the people of the area may be intermixed, the border does at least have an anchor in the natural world, as opposed to the artificial point that Billy crosses into Mexico in The Crossing.

The population growth and societal change that McCarthy documents in the Border Trilogy also create a need to redefine the purpose of a border. In The Crossing, the southwestern United States consists of open, unexplored territory. As a result, its border with Mexico consists of an expansive, uninhabited area. Once the land becomes cultivated in All the Pretty Horses, the borderlands become more traveled, although their lack of humanity still remains one of its defining traits. Finally, the border in Cities of the Plain cuts through a largely uniform area. Its existence is still warranted, however; for while the border in the trilogy’s first two novels is maintained largely by artificial
markers and armed guards, the concluding chapter features a border that doubles as a geographical feature in the Rio Grande River. Most importantly, though, McCarthy ties the border to the presence of people. In her article, Ashley Bourne correctly connected human identity to the process that causes space to become place, as seen in Cities of the Plain. When it comes to the border, inhabitancy can even lead to a disappearance of border itself.

**Conclusion:**

Cormac McCarthy’s Border Trilogy shows an immense patience with the subject matter, opening with a gritty Western novel in All the Pretty Horses, delving into solitude in The Crossing, and constructing the trilogy’s final chapter, Cities of the Plain, as both a resolution for its characters and an epiphany for the reader. In the first two novels, McCarthy gracefully builds the characters of John Grady Cole and Billy Parham before allowing them to deconstruct their identities through reinterpretation brought on by becoming travelers. McCarthy’s prose style fits this topic beautifully; with the narrator hardly present, the reader simply observes how the two protagonists rebuild themselves through their own words and actions.

The trilogy also paints the image of the border in three different ways: first as an artificial boundary in The Crossing, then as an area void of humanity in All the Pretty Horses, and finally, as an indistinguishable entity in Cities of the Plain. What drives this transformation is the movement of people—distance, unsurprisingly, causes separation. More significant, however, is that when these people settle closer to the border, the result is not necessarily a cry for protectionism, but a gradual melding into a more uniform area. Over time, differences fade away, and with them, the border diminishes in importance.

Any discussion about the symbolism of the border in McCarthy’s trilogy must end with a reflection on the ones responsible for its existence: people—McCarthy’s characters. Through their journeys, they contribute not only to their own development, but also the evolution of the border. Ultimately, the process of reinterpretation that these characters experience transcends adapting personal identity and becomes an integral part of breaking down the barriers enforced in both the lives and minds of those who dwell in the borderlands.

**Works Cited**


