

Jon Danielsen Berglund

Cormac McCarthy's Border Trilogy: Identity and the Pastoral Dream

Bachelor's thesis in English
Supervisor: Yuri Cowan
June 2022

Jon Danielsen Berglund

Cormac McCarthy's Border Trilogy: Identity and the Pastoral Dream

Bachelor's thesis in English
Supervisor: Yuri Cowan
June 2022

Norwegian University of Science and Technology
Faculty of Humanities
Department of Language and Literature

Abstract

This thesis revolves around Cormac McCarthy's Border Trilogy. The focus will be on the characters identity and how it is tied to their pastoral dream. The thesis will explore how the degradation of the character's pastoral dream becomes the degradation of their identity and sense of self. Using the scholars such as Bourne (2009) and Gullemin (2012), I will explore how the degradation of the characters identities are entwined with the degradation of their pastoral dream.

Key words

Pastoralism; Identity; Codes; Modernization

Acknowledgements

I want to take this opportunity to thank Yuri Cowan for supervising this thesis and for providing great advice and constructive feedback. I would also like to thank NTNU for providing me a place to write my thesis and an overall fantastic student experience. And finally, I would like to thank all my friends at Dragvoll, who made the entire process a fun and rewarding experience.

Table of contents

Abstract.....	1
Acknowledgements.....	2
1. Introduction.....	4
2. Coming of age in the Mexican wilderness	7
3. Journey through the pastoral world	15
4. Conclusion.....	23
5. Works Cited.....	24

1. Introduction

Cormac McCarthy is one of the most celebrated and highly praised living American authors. During his prolific career he has been well known for his unique prose and graphic depictions of violence. Though he has been published since the 1960s and widely acclaimed by critics for novels such as *Suttree* (1979) and *Blood Meridian* (1985), it was in the 1990s he gained international attention. The focus of this dissertation will be on The Border Trilogy, which consists of *All the Pretty Horses* (1992), *The Crossing* (1994) and *Cities of the Plain* (1998).

I have been a fan of McCarthy's work ever since I read *Blood Meridian*. I was immediately intrigued by his beautiful prose, his uniquely nihilistic worldview and disturbing, almost Lovecraftian, descriptions of not just the violence, but also his worlds. I have also had a long fascination with the western genre and its codes and conventions. The subversion of these conventions and tropes can lead to some very interesting storytelling, and this is definitely true in the case of McCarthy. And even though he is not a "western"-writer, he has written mostly within that genre since the 1980s. I found his views on masculinity, alienation, and lawlessness interesting as it subverts many of the traditional tropes of the western genre. This is especially true for the Border Trilogy, where the conventions of the "heroic cowboy" is turned into something much darker, melancholic and existential, highlighting how lonely and isolated that lifestyle can be. It mourns the death of "traditional cowboy" way of life while it often questions the morals and codes of the old west. I believe analysis of these kinds of books are important because it gives new perspectives about culture and be a reflection of today's society. New readings of McCarthy's work are important since it can help to make his works stay culturally relevant. Today, the themes of alienation in the modern world might be even more relevant than when it was published. It can also give me a unique opportunity to examine the literature in a new light.

The focus of this analysis will be the cowboy identity of the protagonists, John Grady and Billy Parham, and how they fit into this increasingly modernized culture and world. This thesis will explore how the degradation of the character's pastoral dream becomes the degradation of their identity and sense of self, as they struggle to find a place in the world outside their dream. I will define the cowboy identity as their distinguishing traits and personality. These traits, such as roaming free through the country, living off the land and/or ranching and forging your own path (either within or outside the law) are closely tied to their dream of living a pastoral life. All John

Grady and Billy knows, and want to know, is the life of a cowboy. And when that lifestyle is disappearing from the American and Mexican cultural environment it causes an identity crisis as they no longer have anything to root themselves to. I will at look what this degradation of their dream does to the characters. How do they react? How do they change? In what way do they change? And do they manage to find a place in the new world?

The current literature surrounding McCarthy, and in particular, the Border trilogy is often related to nostalgia, pastoralism, the characters search for a stable identity and his use of violence. In this thesis I will engage with authors such as Phillip A. Snyder, who in “Cowboy Codes In Cormac McCarthy’s Border Trilogy” argues that their identities are tied to the world they inhabit. I will look at how that effects the characters as when the world they know is changing into something alien to them. It is the changing world that initiates the protagonist identity crisis as they can no longer find a place to live out the life they feel so connected to. Another scholar, Ashley Bourne, in ““Plenty of signs and wonders to make a landscape”: Space, Place and Identity in Cormac McCarthy’s Border trilogy” claims that there is a deep connection between place and identity throughout the trilogy. This article is important since it highlights how the landscape is taking part in obfuscating their identities as it makes it difficult for the protagonists to find something to root themselves to anyone or anything in both the American and Mexican landscape. Meanwhile, George Gullemin’s ““As of some site where life had not succeeded”: Sorrow, Allegory, and Pastoralism in Cormac McCarthy’s Border Trilogy” explores the traditional cowboy codes and how they relate to new order of the world. Gullemin’s writing on the border trilogy is relevant because it delves into the death of the pastoral dream and the displacement of identity it causes. Using these scholars and others, I will examine the connection between the protagonists dream of living a pastoral life and what that means for the identity they have built around it.

Because the first two novels are only connected by themes and the protagonists first meet in the final installment, this thesis will focus on all three simultaneously. I will not be comparing the character development in one book versus another but rather all three as “one book”, which is the way I read it. I will look at different episodes in the books that are relevant to the thesis and view them up against my secondary literature and my own opinions about the primary literature. I also will structure this thesis around themes such as pastoralism, alienation and codes of the cowboy to show the degradation of the characters dream and identity throughout the trilogy. I

have divided the thesis into two sections, each focusing on different parts of the protagonist's identity and their pastoral dream. I begin by looking at the characters upbringing and start of the journey, then I cover how modernization and the landscape effects the characters. In the second section I examine loss and the pastoral dream and at the end I summarize my dissertation. I will not utilize titled subsections as it feels unnatural to the way I have structured my thesis.

The methodology I used was to search the internet and school libraries for peer-reviewed and scholarly articles concerning McCarthy's work. I tried to limit my search to works related to the Border trilogy, rather than McCarthy's whole body of work. I looked for works relating to character development, identity, pastoralism and the world of the Border trilogy. I used search engines such as Oria, Google scholar and Jstor. The key words I used was: Cormac McCarthy, The Border Trilogy, Identity, Pastoralism and Liminality. Throughout the thesis close reading of the primary literature is utilized. Using the secondary literature and my own thoughts and opinions I try to strengthen my own arguments surrounding the questions of identity and character development in the trilogy. Close reading was the most important method because literary research often deals with questions of meaning and representation and aesthetic. Close reading can therefore allow for potentially new and interesting readings of the material.

2. Coming of age in the Mexican wilderness

The first section of the thesis is focused on the characters journeys across the border. This section covers such things as the cowboy codes, isolation, modernization and how that tie into their pastoral dream and cowboy identities.

The first part of the trilogy, *All the Pretty Horses* takes place in 1949 and chronicles John Grady Cole's journey into Mexico. His home life is disrupted by the impending sale of his family ranch, the death of his grandfather and the increasing urbanization of the area. This is exemplified by the train running past his home as John Grady is out with his horse on the prairie (*All the Pretty Horses* p.3). The train breaks up the idyllic scene and signals the death of his current way of life (Sickles and Oxoby s.349). Because of the increasing urbanization in the area John Grady sets out on a quest to re-create a "simpler, more pastoral existence in Mexico" (Sickles and Oxoby p.347). This is very early in the first novel, so from the very start John Grady's issue is the changing of the current status quo. At the start of *The Crossing*, Billy Parham's little track of land is also being disrupted. However, it is not by the modernization of America, but rather a remnant of the old world, a she-wolf killing their cattle. Both character's home life is being disrupted and that is what sets them out on their archetypical heroes' journey. They assume they will be able to live out their fantasies on the other side of the border only to be confronted with the grim reality of the Mexican frontier. John Grady and Billy Parham begin their journeys at the age of 16, meaning that their respective quests are coming of age stories. *All the Pretty Horses* and *The Crossing* are examples of a bildungsroman and the protagonists experience many of the typical tropes associated with the genre, tropes such as leaving home, becoming orphaned, confronting violence and death.

John Grady tries to attach his cowboy identity to La Purisima, a ranch they discover during his stay in Mexico. Here he does not realize that it is the same kind of life he is trying to escape from in America. Even though John Grady's skill with horses earns him respect for the owner he is only an underling to another wealthy elite, Don Hector. This part of Mexico has also taken a step into the modern world. He is an old-fashioned boy whose dreams do not belong in this developing country and the way of life he seeks is just as unattainable in Mexico as in Texas (Sickles and Oxoby p.351). Here we can see how desperate John Grady is to live out his ideal life, being willing to sell his labor cheaply to another rich man, rather than building something of his own. He is still dependent on others to fulfill his pastoral dream, not just vocationally, but

also domestically as he is desperate to court both Alejandra, Don Hector's daughter, and later Magdalena. The dream of being a cowboy is becoming increasingly more difficult because of the more modern industries such as oil production and the military. John Grady's mother decides to sell the family ranch since it is not profitable enough. Mac McGovern, in *Cities of the Plain*, has to eventually shut down his ranch so the army can use the area as a base.

Billy Parham has a slightly different view on the pastoral dream. He builds his cowboy identity around being a wandering nomad. The second novel in the trilogy, *The Crossing* takes place about ten years prior to *All the Pretty Horses*, and it narrates Billy's three trips into Mexico. His pastoral quest is an inner journey toward an integration of his personal freedom and individual responsibility (Snyder p.200). On his first trip he tries to return a she-wolf to its home country, he comes to sympathize with it and even relate to its struggles and tries Billy tries "to see the world the wolf saw" (*The Crossing* p.51). As he relates to the wolf, he might look at it as a symbol of his own independence and autonomy. He uses the wolf as an excuse to break away from his family and the rest of the community, escaping into nature, into the wilderness, to live his own life. This might have been a bad choice as part of the cowboy identity is not just rooted in individual excellence, but also in the relationships to family and other communities (Snyder p.204). The "lone cowboy" identity of the stories he heard as a child is just that, stories. He does not realize that being on the fringes of society with few or no people to attach himself to makes it even more difficult to find a place where he belongs. He sacrifices the safety of his community for essentially nothing. But he sees something beautiful in the wolf and wants to roam the land in isolation, just like it does. Billy, just like the wolf is estranged from its own family, which is why he might want to preserve it. The preservation of the wolf could also be part of his cowboy identity, living up to the codes of a traditional hero, which protects and saves lives. Especially as the narrator's description of the wolf reveals Billy's identification with it as well as his longing for a time that is passing, as the wolf "already ran among the mountains at once terrible and of great beauty" and "which cannot be held never be held and is now flower but is swift and a huntress and wind itself is in terror of it and the world cannot lose it" (*The Crossing* p.127). The world itself endures, but the old creatures, such as the wolf and Billy himself, are now vanishing, moment by moment. He gets more than he bargained for as the consequence of Billy's quest to return the wolf cost him any sense of home, security and attachment (Barrera p.14). However, I believe that the wolf also symbolizes the destruction of the pastoral dream. The wolf, just as the

pastoral lifestyle, is being eradicated by the forces of human civilization (Gullemin p.113). The wolves in the area have been hunted to near extinction, so much so that the characters are surprised when it shows up in that part of the country. It comes up from Mexico, which might be why Billy wants to see that country, to find a place where such creatures still roam the land. He wants to preserve it so he can still believe in his own ability to live according to the cowboy identity. When it dies, he loses a part of himself since it is the first of many signs that his way of life is coming to an end. Wandering in freedom back and forth across country lines is no longer acceptable in this new world.

At this stage in their lives, John Grady and Billy's identities have not yet been fully formed outside of their family life, and they have a need to secure a sense of identity with their own autonomy and without pressure from others and the outside world (Pilkington s.320). John Grady is coming of age in a time where the world as he knows it is disappearing, which makes him doubt the pastoral dream exists in America. He ignores his own intuition and doubt, and when he tries to re-create the pastoral dream outside of "the cultural space it was created" (Cox p.43), he predictably fails. The characters go through the "heroes' quest", going from being a young adult to adulthood in the foreign and unknown Mexican wilderness. Their ideas about life are different, leading to different choices, though it might not matter in the end, as the forces of change are indifferent to their dreams and hopes. Although the trilogy displays many of the traits of a bildungsroman, their choices never result in a completion of their respective quests. The cultural environment that is required for their quests no longer exist, it has been replaced with a modern, capitalistic society which does not allow for the type of individualization John Grady and Billy strives for.

John Grady's worldview and identity is closely tied to the idea of the "all-American cowboy" and the pastoral dream of the west. The life he had in America when his grandfather was still alive is his idea of a perfect, simple life in nature. In many ways he (and Billy Parham) is an example of the typical western hero, he stands out by his ability to adapt to, and survive, in hostile terrain, to live off the land, to cover his tracks and to leave places undisturbed (Gullemin p.118). With this persona John Grady has created for himself comes a certain moral code he tries to live by. Unlike most western protagonists, John Grady and Billy does not boast about their lethal power or try to force their morals upon others. They usually try to deescalate a situation through words and are willing to listen to others, even the antagonists. John Grady's "morally

right” choice to help Belvins, another traveler they meet along the way, is a large part of what sets the two travelers on their path to ruin. Belvins represents a test to John Grady’s ethics and his willingness to take responsibility for others (Snyder p.206), no matter what the cost might be. All Belvins had to say to get help was “cause I’m an American” (All the Pretty Horses p.45). This is an integral, though outdated, part of the cowboy identity, choosing to do what is right, even if it puts them in harm’s way. The pastoral dream clouds the protagonists thinking as the codes they wish to live by are no longer appropriate. But they refuse to let go of these codes since they are a part of their identity and will only lead them to further ruin. I agree with Susan Kollin when she states they are only “playing” cowboys (Kollin p.573), following the outdated codes that they assume will carry them safely through the country. John Grady’s codes ends up functioning like his clothes. He is stripped of the false romantic and ideal promises of the cowboy codes when he crosses the border, his codes mean nothing in Mexico (Barrera p.6). Later, they will not mean anything in America either. Their cowboy identity they are trying to create for themselves is also built upon the stories of their forefathers, which were ranchers and cowboys. They are compelled by these stories to forge their own path, but the cultural landscape of America has changed so much because of modernization the land their forefathers lived in simply does not exist anymore. They also assume that the codes and ethics of these stories are a practical way to live their lives. This is an unrealistic fantasy and later they will pay the price for their uncritical idealism.

The Border trilogy explores the interaction between its protagonist’s fondness for self-isolation and their fascination for duty towards others as an integral part of their cowboy identity. After the death of his brother, Boyd, Billy wanders the west looking for a new life, which is actually his old way of life. *The Crossing*, more than its predecessor, shows the cowboy life as lonely and isolated. Billy lives his life as a nomad who never manages to connect with other characters, only losing those whom he cares for and forming an identity as a nomad (Kollin p.577). The protagonists willingly isolate themselves, though their loneliness eventually pushes them to return home. When they return home, they feel like both insiders and outsiders at the same time. They never manage to fully re-integrate to life in America and become “men without countries” (Cox p.10). They are still Americans, but they are so removed from the current cultural environment that they are like something foreign and unknown to the other inhabitants, as exemplified in this passage:

“When he walked out into the sun and untied the horse from the parking meter people passing in the street turned to look at him. Something in off the wild mesas, something out of the past. Ragged, dirty, hungry in eye and belly. Totally unspoken for. In that outlandish figure they beheld what they envied most and what they most reviled. If their hearts went out to him it was yet true that for very small cause they might also have killed him.” (*The Crossing* p.170)

Billy is described here almost like some sort of monster from a horror novel. After his travels in Mexico, he is completely unrecognizable. He has become estranged from the place that first shaped his identity, and he is now a completely different person, “exiled” from his own country and he cannot return to the past. The passage mentions that he “beheld what they most envied and what they most reviled”, even his own countrymen can see that he no longer belongs among them, he is something to be disgusted by and looked down upon. At the same time, it suggests that they might envy him in his freedom. He has no ties to anyone or anything, and there is a sort of unique freedom in that. He can build himself up from nothing, but will he be able to? *The Crossing* here shows the negative aspects of Billy’s cowboy identity. In his pastoral quest to become a wandering cowboy, he has lost everything, even his sense of belonging. By the end, Billy has paid an overwhelming cost for the price of his pastoral dream.

Though Billy’s cowboy identity is also tied to the pastoral dream, it is less so than John Grady. Billy, just like John Grady, still exemplifies the classic hero in many ways. They are good men, who are good at what they do, and they never seem to shift the blame onto anyone else or their circumstances. Even after Billy has lost everything, his home, his parents and his brother he still says “I been more fortunate than most. There aint but one life worth livin and I was born to it. That’s worth all the rest.” (*The Crossing* s.420) Part of the cowboy identity is stoicism in the face of adversity, which is a trait that both Billy and John Grady embody. When he meets people in Mexico, he always refers to himself as a “vaquero”, a cowboy, which he takes great pride in, including the isolated lifestyle that it includes. Though he manages to live in this self-sufficient way for some time, he must return home. He epitomizes the pitfalls of romanticized individualism as the ideas of the pastoral dream cloud his thinking (Cox p.29). The old Indian man Billy meets on his way back from his first trip tells him to cease his wandering. He tells him that “to wander in this way would become for him a passion and by this passion he would become estranged from men and so ultimately from himself” (*The Crossing* p.134). He is

warned against his self-isolation as the identity of an individual is dependent on the identity of the group he belongs to. Sadly, Billy learns this lesson too late. He does not realize that the pastoral dream of the old America was built by communities which allowed that era to exist. His constant movement makes it so that he cannot attach his identity to anyone or anything. He is drifting aimlessly through the world, not being able to make a connection. A counter argument to this is when the gypsy says to Billy in *The Crossing*: “Movement itself is a form of property” (*The Crossing* p.410). Movement in space gives Billy a personal identity and the past is both evoked and destabilized through motion and movement (Bourne p.118). However, when he runs away from home and human interaction to discover his own identity, it only complicates his sense of self (Cox p.21). When he has no one to guide him through life, he eventually becomes lost. The idealized life of a lone cowboy does not work as he wished; he is more dependent on a community and family than he realizes. He also becomes dependent on someone to look after. When his brother leaves him, he wanders aimlessly through Mexico. Helping others becomes a part of their self-realization, (Snyder p.205) which is what Billy does for his brother and John Grady does for Belvins. And this is part of the reason why the nomadic lifestyle is not viable in the long run for the protagonists. While John Grady seeks to re-create the pastoralism and his memories of his life on the ranch, Billy seeks the mystical wild landscape. This is what drives him to his nomadic existence, trying to recapture the feelings of being in the woods as a child, where he senses “another world entire” (*The Crossing* p.4). While John Grady found his ideal pastoral life on his grandfather’s ranch, Billy comes from a poorer family. His precious childhood memories come from him and his brother playing outside in the wilderness. It is this feeling of freedom and exploration he wants to recapture and build his cowboy identity around.

Years later, in *Cities of the Plain*, the two main characters from the previous novels are working together as cowboys on the failing McGovern Ranch outside of El Paso. At this point they are doing what they have claimed to want to do for a living, though there is still something missing from their lives. The ranch provides refuge and solace for the travel-weary cowboys (Sickles and Oxoboy s.349) and the fact that the army is shutting it down showcases even further how modernity is killing the protagonist’s pastoral dream. America has changed even more since the events of the previous novels. Soon there will not be anything left for them to tie their cowboy identity to. By the time both protagonists finally meet, they have both seen the world transition into something they do not belong in. In this part of the trilogy, they take frequent journeys into

Mexico to visit the whorehouses in Juarez. On one of these trips, John Grady falls in love with an epileptic prostitute named Magdalena. Magdalena is owned by a pimp named Eduardo, who is also in love with her. John Grady chooses a woman who has been pushed so low that it is impossible for him to save her from the depths (Ellis p.212). The reason he chooses her is possibly because she is someone he cannot taint. He is using someone who has sunken even lower than himself, to fulfill his pastoral dream. Both Magdalena and Alejandra are not perfect people, but John Grady treats them as such. Alejandra was willing to give up their love for her father's wealth and might have been using him for the excitement that romance provided. Magdalena, in comparison, has lived a horrible life and John Grady might look at her as someone he can save, as a typical western hero might do. He does not see their faults because he is blinded by his pastoral dream, and he falls in love with both of them at first glance. Though they are two very different women, he might be "using" them both, subconsciously, to fulfill his own vision of a perfect life and his cowboy identity.

John Grady and Billy can compose some of their identity through rivalry and respect, as the self can be defined through difference, and the enemy, in whatever form, helps to make that possible (Snyder p.215). Even the harsh Mexican environment is an adversary, populated with hostile beings with lethal power. And with this respect even their adversaries can serve as mentors for the two boys (Snyder p.217) and many of the most important exchanges in the trilogy is between protagonists and their enemies. An example of this is Duena Alfonsa, Alejandra's great aunt, as they argue over their love and concern for Alejandra. Though John Grady wants to live his life with her, the Duena is right, and it leads him out of harm's way. The Duena tests John Grady's discourse skills, while in a similar way, Eduardo later tests his knife fighting skills. Billy is even able to form a sort of pragmatic relationship with Eduardo in their mutual disapproval over his courtship of Magdalena. They even seem to have some semblance of respect for one another (Snyder p.218). Eduardo gives Billy advice about John Grady's romance:

"What is wrong with this story is that it is not a true story. Men have in their minds a picture of how the world will be. How they will be in that world. The world may be many different ways for them but there is one world that will never be and that is the world they dream of." (*Cities of the Plain* p.134)

Eduardo recognizes that John Grady's wishes are just dreams and stories, something he has made up in his own mind. He informs Billy of that John Grady's fatal flaw is his misunderstanding of the world. Despite the fact that John Grady is one of the heroes of the story, Eduardo becomes the voice of reason here. Even he can see that John Grady's pastoral dream will lead him nowhere good. As Billy's relationship with John Grady bears a strong resemblance to the one he had with Boyd, and he tries to discourage him from pursuing a life with Magdalena, so he will not suffer the same fate as his brother. Similarly, Billy's relationship to the she-wolf is also adversarial while being respectful. The hunting of the wolf reflects his eagerness to engage, as well as his reluctance to kill his enemy. Their fates align and the wolf becomes his alter ego who haunts him for his inability to take responsibility for her, same as with his brother and John Grady.

The epilogue of the novel, and the trilogy, takes place fifty years later with Billy Parham as an elderly, homeless man. Ironically, the man who was most tied to the wilderness and being a man of the road ends up "homeless" in someone else's home (Ellis p.221). Billy is punishing himself for once again losing his truest companion, first his brother, then his best friend and he is forcing himself into exile for the rest of his life. He is still wandering without a place to call home or a family of his own. He is taken in by a family that gives him shelter. When he says to Betty, the woman of the house, "I'm not what you think I am. I aint nothing", she tells him: "Well, Mr. Parham, I know who you are. And I know why." (*Cities of the Plain* p.292) The woman speaks for the reader, reaffirming the value of the cowboy codes that are explored throughout the trilogy and the cowboys that embody these values. "Their deaths stand in for our own, we love them, we honor the path they have taken, and we listen to their tales" (Snyder p.225). He is an admirable man after all. Betty's position as the woman of the house is important as McCarthy compares the room Billy sleeps in, to the room he slept in as a boy (Ellis p.222). She reassures him that he has value. This is important for him since he lost his own mother at such a young age. This might be the first time in his life where a woman of any authority has acknowledged his existence in this way. It might be the first time, since he was a young boy, he is accepted in this way, for being himself and nothing else. It is debatable what this value is though as both characters have everything taken away from them by trying to go their own way.

3. Journey through the pastoral world

This section of the thesis covers the importance of landscape, loss and how the protagonists struggle with abandoning their pastoral dream.

The landscape is often described in a way that conveys a strong sense of loss while it is simultaneously romanticized. There is a focus on the connection between bodies and places, showcasing that “the protagonists struggle to establish their own identities as entwined with the identities they assign to certain places” (Bourne p.110). Examples of this are John Grady’s family ranch and Billy Parham’s home. Both characters lose their childhood homes, and this alters their identity in different ways. Bourne also highlights that the metaphysical descriptions of the landscapes replaces the characters internal thoughts. The characters rarely express their emotions or opinions; their thought processes then are reflected in the landscape, and therefore “their identities are so entwined with the terrain” (Bourne p.114). An example of this is when Billy is left alone when Boyd has left him in Mexico:

“He slept that night in a field far away from any town. He built no fire. He lay listening to the horse crop at the grass at his stakerope and he listened to the wind in the emptiness and watched stars trace the arc of the hemisphere and die in the darkness at the edge of the world and as he lay there the agony in his heart was like a stake.” (*The Crossing* p.256)

This passage highlights how Billy’s isolation has brought him to one of the lowest points in his life. He feels himself slipping away, just like the stars falling away into the darkness. He has isolated himself even further from others, choosing to sleep outside of town in the cold darkness and not even giving himself warmth from the fire. This focus on visual representation of the environment is what illustrates the connection between identity and the landscape. The reason we get descriptions of the landscape instead of the characters thoughts might be because the characters are so focused on the external rather than the internal. Using the landscape instead of their thoughts to show their emotions highlights how they have not found peace with themselves. They are unable to process their emotions internally because everything they want is external. In McCarthy’s pastoralism the landscape and the characters share the same fate due to the destruction of the earlier pastoral dream due to forces outside of their control. Both are changing and passing away. A passage that highlights this is:

“For a moment he held out his hands as if to steady himself or as if to bless the ground there or perhaps as if to slow the world that was rushing away and seemed to care nothing for the old or young or rich or poor or dark or pale or he or she. Nothing for their struggles, nothing for their names. Nothing for the living or the dead.” (*All the Pretty Horses* p.301).

After the funeral of his nursemaid Abuela, John Grady is at another low point. He has this realization while he is focused on the ground and the way he reacts to her gravesite seems almost meditative, just taking in the misfortune of his travels and the world in silence. The pastoral dream, like the rest of the world, is rushing away from him and he now seems to realize that he can do nothing to stop it. In the passage, John Grady is trying to physically root himself to the landscape to not lose himself. This is because he has not been able to attach himself to something stable internally and he is desperately trying to hold onto anything that can make sense to him, though he does not find it. As we will see later in the books, this does not stop him from pursuing his dream. However, he does realize that the world around them is truly indifferent to their attempts to incorporate their identity with the pastoral dream.

The border is not just physical as it represents broader themes such as the difference between civilization/wilderness, past/present and myth/truth. This reoccurring theme of metaphoric borders are significant as the characters and setting are deeply connected in the novels (Barrera p.4). For example, as the earlier mentioned La Purisima, where John Grady and Rawlins break horses, where they believe they will be able to live out their fantasy. When faced with the reality of the power structure there it reveals the border between myth and truth which has far reaching consequences for John Grady. At the hacienda, the border between race and class are showcased through his relationship to Alejandra (Barrera p.5). Bourne also points out that by situating the novels in border space, where the characters continually cross and re-cross the border, it creates a “liminal landscape where place is constantly transformed back into space disengaged through the process of movement”. This transformation is what propels the fluid process of identity formation (Bourne p.113). As the characters move from one place, the memory of that place is overwritten by a new one. When Billy rides through the Mexican wilderness his “senses of identity and “placeness” are transformed by the space he enters, distancing him from the comforting memory of home place” (Bourne p.114). Both characters have a desire for a stable, knowable identity, but neither of them truly finds it searching the Mexican frontier. I agree with

the statement that movement distances them from their memories of home. But I believe that because of John Grady's stubbornness, his identity, for better or worse, is stable mostly throughout the trilogy. His identity formation is not as fluid as Billy's. Therefore, Billy struggles more with his sense of identity since he is not as attached to the pastoral dream.

At the end of the trilogy, neither John Grady nor Billy Parham escapes what haunts them. A line from *The Crossing* encapsulates the situation they find themselves in: "Deep in each man is the knowledge that something knows of his existence. Something knows and cannot be fled nor hid from" (*The Crossing* p.148). Deep down they might know that their dream is not real. However, they have based their entire identities around it and abandoning the dream means they must abandon almost everything that they are. The characters have a desire to reclaim a version of the mythic west, though there are unavoidable forces that will eradicate this myth. This loss of the "myth" is something that defines both the characters and the regions they inhabit. Ashley Bourne argues that there is a deep connection between place and identity throughout the trilogy, that the environment and the characters are in constant flux (Bourne p.109). It is this flux that creates a deep sense of loss, as the characters never manages to attach themselves to anything or anyone. Bourne raises the idea that though the characters crave stability and a homelife, they are still compelled to perpetual motion. This aligns with Kollin's interpretation, as she states that "Mexico becomes a region where the hero from the north of the border loses his bearings and his sense of identity" (Kollin p.580) in a radicalized geography, the space is continually mystified in the novel". Because their cowboy identities are so tied to the pastoral dream they struggle with their sense of self. What they value in themselves and who they are is rooted in something that is too intangible and fleeting. What they seek to make themselves whole is external and that is their problem. They are unwilling and/or unable to attach their identity to something valuable internally and that is why they lose themselves along the way. What you value in your self can be what you are and if that value is predicated on something external you can easily lose yourself. This is the case for both John Grady and Billy Parham. What they value is now being eradicated by the forces of time, and they will disappear along with it. John Grady and Billy's desire to retain the memory of their stable homes and to base their identities on that home, is always shifting, changing, and disappearing. As if they are incapable of transition or settling down, even though they claim that is what they want (Chaney p.7). This can be shown in how they are often offered to stay with the various inhabitants of Mexico. They always decide to

move on alone, even in bad weather or the middle of the night. They are always moving, as if they look at stability they claim to want; and see stagnation instead. The characters might believe that if they attach themselves to a location, the same that has happened earlier might happen again. John Grady lost his home because it was no longer as economically valuable, and Billy Parham lost his home when his parents were murdered. If they keep moving to new places, they have less to lose, but potentially less to gain.

All the Pretty Horses is a quest for a pastoral lifestyle, *The Crossing* is a journey through the pastoral world and *Cities of the Plain* signifies the widespread death of that pastoral dream (Gullemin p.95). They progress through three stages of the pastoral dream, disengagement, quest and reintegration. They seek out a simpler more independent life outside of their current constraining social circumstances. They travel on their quest for a new life and when that does not work, they reintegrate themselves into civilization, having changed considerably in the process, either through enlightenment or dissolution (Gullemin p.111). In *Cities of the Plain*, John Grady is still trying to integrate himself through building a life with Magdalena. Billy, on the other hand, alienates himself even further from society. Billy might find it easier to isolate himself as he never found anything as romantic as John Grady's life at the hacienda. He only found some of the pastoral dream in the nomadic lifestyle of the wandering cowboy.

The traditional pastoral protagonist is identified as “a liminal figure who moves back and forth across the borderland between civilization and nature” (Gullemin p.116). This of course is a fitting description for the protagonists of the Border trilogy as they travel in nomadic ways, homeless, migratory horseman at home in neither world. And as they occupy a liminal space between two countries, they become stateless beings as well (Cox p.41). The border functions as a rite of passage for the characters, each time they cross it, they change. They go looking for something to complete their identity, but each time it brings forth their potential downfall. They underestimate the significance of their crossings as they are trespassing into another culture they do not truly understand, thinking it will help them achieve their pastoral dream. In comparison to many other western heroes who set out on a similar quest, they do not do it out of necessity, but rather of their own choosing in search of “childish adventure”. Their escapist journey comes from their increasing alienation at home. This also account for their melancholia (Gullemin p.117) and their wish to be closer to nature rather than civilization. It is also motivated by Weltschmerz and the grief that the characters feel is caused the inherent futility of their pastoral

quests (Gullemin p.124/125) as the world is changing to such a degree that it will no longer exist no matter what. And despite the protagonist's best efforts to achieve their pastoral dream, they ultimately can do nothing but fail (Chaney p.2).

The characters of the border trilogy are often defined by their losses. John Grady loses his home, grandfather and is estranged from his former girlfriend, Rawlins, Don Hector and Alejandra. His final loss being Magdalena. Billy loses his entire family, their horses, his chance to enlist in the army and in the end, he also loses John Grady. The novels permeate with a sense of loss, alienation, displacement and fragmentation, (Gullemin p.97), a consistent feeling of melancholia. Through all of this they still remain "true cowboys", restless, resourceful and independent (Gullemin p.97). This is highlighted as John Grady thinks towards the end of the first novel that he "felt wholly alien to the world although he loved it still" and "he thought that in the beauty of the world were hid a secret" (*All the Pretty Horses* p.282). All this loss shows that for these characters, nothing is permanent, everything is fleeting, especially their dreams. Through all this loss they remain hopeful and idealistic. As they are cowboys, men of action, they must see it through to the end, for better or worse. But towards the end both characters reach their breaking point. When John Grady loses Magdalena, he has nothing left of his pastoral dream and he goes to his death at the hands of Eduardo. Eduardo becomes the embodiment of their failure. Because of his code John Grady has to kill or be killed and his death becomes the final nail in the coffin for the pastoral dream in the trilogy, proving that it is unsustainable. Billy gives up his dream after John Grady dies. He has now lost the last person he truly cares for.

Because their identity also defined through loss, it is challenged, broken down and replaced with something different. When they have nothing to tie them to their old ways of life or ideals, they have to form their own true identity outside of the pastoral dream. This does not work, and John Grady never quite manages to give up on the dream, leading to his death. Ever since the events of *All the Pretty Horses* he has never been able to find something to fill the hole within himself. He has a realization towards the end of the book about his existence:

"He saw very clearly how all his life led only to this moment and all after led nowhere at all. He felt something cold and soulless enter him like another being and he imagined that it smiled malignly, and he had no reason to believe it would ever leave." (*All the Pretty Horses* p.254)

John Grady accepts his “hopeless” situation without surrendering his will to live. Though he is not completely at odds with the world, both he and Billy still struggle to find their place in it because their fate is so strongly tied to a way of life which is disappearing from the west. However, here John Grady feels something alien enter him, a feeling he will never rid himself of. It is this emptiness that prohibits him from abandoning his dream, as he needs something to fill the void where his belief in himself should have been, rather than attaching it to an unrealistic dream. John Grady claims at one point that he would probably have been a veterinarian if he could not be a cowboy, but his delusion regarding the cowboy life makes that impossible for him.

Through their journeys across the border, both men have undergone significant personal changes. John Grady becomes further obsessed with the pastoral dream, while Billy comes to terms with, though reluctantly, the fact that the dream no longer exists. John Grady is unable to see that his way of life no longer exists, even as it disappears in front of his own eyes. He refuses it to influence his own future. Billy adapts to the changing times, which allows him to live to his old age. As mentioned earlier, Billy, in comparison to John Grady is a lot more solemn and weary, even from the start. As he is not as tied to the pastoral dream either, he struggles to find an identity outside of being a nomad. Billy was also never as dependent on a home as John Grady. There are a lot fewer scenes of being indoors with others in *The Crossing* than its predecessor. Most often when Billy comes across a house it is abandoned and when he is offered shelter, he would rather eat outside alone and leave in the dead of night than stay until morning. Billy and Boyd also come from a more modest family, living on a small farm rather than ranch and they do not own the house they live in.

Their ideas about place and their sense of self are connected, as they lose their homes, they lose part of their current identities (Bourne p.122). As the main characters are young adults, they are uncorrupted by time, more of a tabula rasa and through this struggle they can form their identity (Kollin p.565). Billy even seems to think to himself as he becomes more detached from himself and everything around him, the narrator points out:

“He seemed to himself a person with no prior life. As if he had died in some way years ago and was ever after some other being who had no history, who had no ponderable life to come.” (*The Crossing* s.382)

He sees himself as a relic from the past. In this breakdown of their identities, they have acquired some wounds that will never heal. The degradation of their pastoral dream ends up being a degradation of their identity as they never find a place in the world without it. In the end, they have to assimilate to the new world or die especially after their attempt to relive the old west in Mexico are unsuccessful.

The social structures of America can no longer support their dreams and ideals (Cox p.3). The quality of life their parents and grandparents enjoyed, is no longer available as the areas are now used for oil production rather than ranching. And like their fathers before them, they seek self-actualization in the work, not just money. Their pastoral dream cannot exist because they are being exploited by the intuitions in power for work (Cox p.5). However, when they set out for Mexico, they do not realize that the same thing occurs in there at ranches such as at La Purisima. At the end of *All the Pretty Horses*, Rawlins even encourages John Grady to work at an oil rig instead of pursuing the life of a cowboy. John Grady replies that “it aint my country” and “I don’t know what happened to my country” (*All the Pretty Horses* p.299). In McCarthy’s stories, the individual cannot truly win against the world (Brewton p.136), it is a futile struggle against an indifferent force. This is often represented through the rich and powerful in Mexico, such as Don Hector and Eduardo. The most significant border in the three books might be the border between the ideal and reality, a zone where conflicting elements produce an uncertain identity for John Grady and Billy (Snyder p.201). So, at the same time as the trilogy is chronicling the characters growing up, it is also an elegy for the west. “Vanish” is a word that is often used throughout the books to reinforce this feeling (Luce p.164). The drifter that Billy meets in the epilogue highlights this, reminding him that his life and the world “vanishes at its own appearance. Moment by moment. Until it vanishes no more” (*Cities of the Plain* p.273). As this is repeated so often, it becomes a mere fact of life for the inhabitants of this world. John Grady and Billy Parham both stand at the border of the world, “like a man come to the end of something” (*All the Pretty Horses* p.5). No matter how bad things get for the characters, they keep going forward. Just as the blind revolutionary soldier in *The Crossing* says that “like every man who comes to the end of something there was nothing to be done but to begin again” (*The Crossing* p.291). Sadly, they never truly manage to shed themselves of their ideas of a “perfect life”. John Grady never finds his own homestead and Billy is crushed under the reality of the modern world. And by the end of the trilogy, in *Cities of the Plain*, the transformation of the American west is almost

complete. The wildlife has been heavily domesticated and eradicated, and the characters have traded in their horses for cars. They are horsemen, but they have now accepted not only cars as transportation, and they are more accepting of the destruction of wildlife that comes with it (Luce p.162). Such as when they are traveling through the country and driving over the owls in the process.

Though the story takes place in the 1930s-1950s, it can be related to today's society. Especially with such strong themes of alienation, modernization and the loss of self. Many people today might relate to the protagonists struggle to fit into modern society because of technological advancements such as social media. The modern work environment does not allow for as much individualization as earlier times and that might also lead to people not living the lives they want to just like John Grady and Billy. Possibly being alienated from themselves in low autonomy jobs.

4. Conclusion

Throughout this thesis I have tried to highlight how the degradation of the pastoral dream became the degradation of the characters cowboy identities. When the cowboy life disappears from the west it causes an identity crisis for John Grady and Billy Parham. Both characters try to live out their pastoral dream but because of the modernization of both America and Mexico that proves impossible. I have shown what effect that has on the protagonists, how they react to it and how it changes them. For John Grady it proved impossible to live outside of the pastoral dream, while Billy eventually gave up his dream and he never found his place in the world, drifting aimlessly for the rest of his life. I have looked at different themes and tropes such as alienation, modernization, coming of age stories and the codes of the west and what effect this had on their identity formation as they traveled throughout the western landscape. I have used examples from the primary and secondary literature to show other scholars viewpoints and thoughts. It was difficult to find someone who criticized McCarthy's pastoralism or identity formation, so I was often in agreement with scholars.

5. Works Cited

- Barrera, Cordelia. "The Haunted Frontier: Cormac McCarthy's Border Trilogy". *Critical Insights: Southwestern Literature*, Salem Press. 2016, pp. 1-17.
- Bourne, Ashley. "'Plenty of signs and wonders to make a landscape': Space, Place, and Identity in Cormac McCarthy's Border Trilogy". *Western American Literature*, Volume 44. 2009, pp. 1-19.
- Brewton, Vince. "The Changing Landscape of Violence in Cormac McCarthy's Early Novels and the Border Trilogy". *The Southern Literary Journal*, Volume 37. 2004, pp. 1-23.
- Cox, Michael G. *Cormac McCarthy's Border Trilogy and the Modern American Identity Crisis*. Grand Valley State University. 2019. Masters dissertation.
- Chaney, Matthew Miles. "*No Order Save That Which Death Has Put There*": *Identity Formation in Cormac McCarthy's Border Trilogy*. College of William and Mary. 2012.
- Ellis, Jay. "From Country to Houses in *The Border Trilogy*". *No Space for Home – Spatial Constraints and Character Flight in the novels of Cormac McCarthy*. Edited by Willam E. Cain, Routledge, New York & Lonon. 2006, pp. 199-223.
- Gullemin, George. "'As of some site where life had not succeeded': Sorrow, Allegory, and Pastoralism in Cormac McCarthy's Border Trilogy". *A Cormac McCarthy Companion: The Border Trilogy*. Edited by Edwin T. Arnold, University Press of Mississippi. 2012, pp. 92-130.
- Kollin, Susan. "Genre and the Geographies of Violence: Cormac McCarthy and the Contemporary Western". *Contemporary Literature*, Volume 42. 2001, pp. 557-588.
- Luce, Diane. "The Vanishing World of Cormac McCarthy's Border Trilogy". *A Cormac McCarthy Companion: The Border Trilogy*. Edited by Edwin T. Arnold, University Press of Mississippi. 2012, pp. 161-197.
- McCarthy, Cormac. *All the Pretty Horses*. New York, Everyman's Library, 1992, pp. 1-302.
- McCarthy, Cormac. *The Crossing*. New York, Everyman's Library, 1994, pp. 1-426.
- McCarthy, Cormac. *Cities of the Plain*. New York, Everyman's Library, 1998, pp. 1-292.

Pilkington, Tom. "Fate and Free Will on the Frontier". *Western American Literature*, Volume 27. 1993, pp. 311-322.

Sickles, Robert C. "In Search of a Further Frontier: Cormac McCarthy's Border Trilogy". *Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, Volume 43. 2011, pp. 1-14.

Snyder, Phillipa A. "Cowboy Codes in Cormac McCarthy's Border Trilogy". *A Cormac McCarthy Companion: The Border Trilogy*. Edited by Edwin T. Arnold, University Press of Mississippi. 2012, pp. 198-227.

