

ABSTRACT

Redemption in Cormac McCarthy's Border Trilogy

Austin Gould

Director: Dr. Luke Ferretter

Cormac McCarthy's Border Trilogy is a complicated and violent group of novels. However, the central messaging of the trilogy is hopeful and redemptive. A brief overview of scholarly opinion of Cormac McCarthy's Christianity is made to start the introduction. This is followed by an examination of the biblical sources of redemption through the Hebrew and Greek words, *go'el*, *pada*, and *lutron* which all refer to a form of redemption. Using these two understandings as a launching point, a study of redemption in *All the Pretty Horses*, *The Crossing*, and *Cities of the Plain* follows with every novel being examined for one chapter. The conclusion of the thesis is that Cormac McCarthy is a Christian writer who uses grace to redeem the acts of violence found in the Border Trilogy.

APPROVED BY DIRECTOR OF HONORS THESIS:

Dr. Luke Ferretter, Department of English

APPROVED BY THE HONORS PROGRAM

Dr. Elizabeth Corey, Director

Date: _____

Redemption in Cormac McCarthy's Border Trilogy

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By

Austin Gould

Waco, Texas

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INTRODUCTION

The Christianity of McCarthy and Biblical Redemption

The novels of Cormac McCarthy are dark. Often the violence in the novels is driven by central characters. This tendency to create characters who commit acts of violence has readers wary of a Christian reading of McCarthy's works. But some of McCarthy's most important Christian themes emanate from novels where protagonists commit serious acts of sin. John Grady Cole, the protagonist of the Border Trilogy, is one of McCarthy's characters who commits acts of violence. But John Grady Cole is also a Christian character. Cormac McCarthy creates violent characters who are also Christian. The redemption in McCarthy's works is what makes this possible. John Grady commits acts of violence, but these acts are part of his journey of personal redemption.

There is scholarly debate concerning the spirituality of Cormac McCarthy's writings. To some, the idea that McCarthy is writing from a theologically grounded position is convincing. To others, McCarthy is writing from a nihilistic viewpoint unhindered by and attacking the naïve beliefs of Christianity. What is the reader to do with this important question surrounding McCarthy's works? Is McCarthy a positively spiritual writer? A summary showcasing the two sides of the debate can provide a framework of thinking about McCarthy's religious views which will be helpful when examining redemption in The Border Trilogy.

The most reasonable place to start looking for evidence would be *Suttree*, McCarthy's novel detailing the existential wandering of a character that resembles McCarthy in many ways. Theological conclusions in *Suttree* hold a large degree of

influence over the question of the author's spirituality because of the novel's personal nature. *Suttree* is not an autobiographical text, but it can still lend some degree of insight into the thoughts of McCarthy because of the personal nature of the work. *Suttree* is a complex narrative featuring a troubled protagonist. Suttree, the character, meanders through a world of fallen and pitiful characters who regard him with varying degrees of respect (and dis-respect). Additionally, *Suttree* features actions of debauchery which seem to make the novel unholy. The characters of Gene Harrogate, Doll Jones, and the family which Suttree lives with for a time on the banks of the Tennessee River all serve to give the reader a window into the violence and suffering of the world. Gene Harrogate shows this through his half-cocked plans for sexual gratification and inventive robbery. The time Suttree spends living with the family showcases tragic death and grotesque sexual exploitation. The family also alienates Suttree from the reader as he engages in actions of pedophilia and abuse. Surely these dark themes and characters should convince the reader of the pagan nihilism of *Suttree* and the author. A vivid description of the Tennessee river reads, "gouts of sewage faintly working, grey clots of nameless waste and yellow condoms roiling slowly out of the murk" (7). The novel exhibits disgusting imagery and action throughout.

But these images of squalor and anguish can contribute to the reading of *Suttree* as a Christian work, as argued by Jay Aaron Beavers in his article "'Stairwell to Nowhere': The Darkness of God in Cormac McCarthy's *Suttree*." Beavers argues that

Suttree undertakes a definite spiritual journey throughout the course of the novel, and even makes some progress toward an undefined goal, but his spiritual awareness

comes through the images of death, absence, and void that surround him and signal the presence-in-absence of McCarthy's dark version of God.

This reading of *Suttree* uses the dark passages to ground a Christian perspective in the novel. The absence of God in the life of Suttree is evident throughout much of the novel. Many passages which seem evil on the surface reveal the need for spirituality because of the effect evil has on the character of Suttree. This deeper reading of the novel reveals the importance of God through the absence of goodness. Christ is present through the impact of his absence. There is a certain helplessness that surrounds Suttree as he interacts with pitiful characters. This reflects an understanding of the rarity of goodness throughout the novel. Therefore, the novel *Suttree*, while not being an explicitly spiritual text, speaks into the violence that McCarthy writes about.

While some critics like Jay Aaron Beavers see spiritual themes in the darkness of Cormac McCarthy's novels, there are others who read the catastrophic plots at face value. Perhaps the novel which most troubles readers is *Child of God*, McCarthy's third novel. The work features a character who reaches the furthest boundaries of perversity. Like the other memorable characters in McCarthy's novels, Lester Ballard dominates the dialogue and plot of *Child of God*. Ballard is a freakish serial killer set in a Southern-Gothic world filled with Christian language. While the surface language of the novel often involves religious platitudes, the central actions in the novel are anything but. The title and initial action of the novel set up an impression of Ballard as a "child of God." But it soon becomes clear that the character is a perverse social outcast with desires so warped the novel takes on a disgusting tone. By introducing Ballard as "a child of God much like yourself perhaps", McCarthy is playing with the reader by connecting readers with his

unholy character (4). McCarthy is trying to get readers to invest in Ballard and wrestle with his actions. This notorious line is hardly indicative of the actions that Ballard takes, and it also raises the question: what God does Ballard serve that would endorse such a depraved human?

Woods Nash argues in his article “Serving a Severe God: The Subversive Theology of Cormac McCarthy’s *Child of God*” that the deity Ballard serves is not the Christian God. Nash thinks that Ballard “pays tribute to a god characterized by violence, greed, and folly.” It is interesting that Nash rejects a Christian interpretation of the novel, as Ballard could be read as an example of a fallen man in need of redemption. Instead, Nash concludes that Ballard is in active worship of this violent and oppressive deity. Nash believes the novels’ setting in a Christian community is superficial. The religion Ballard practices is his own pagan ideal of a violent god. The novel contains many instances of sexual violence, and the most perverse of these are done by Lester Ballard as his manner of ‘worship.’ Undoubtedly, this argument for the existence of a violent, greedy, and foolish god directing Ballard’s actions is not an argument that favors a spiritual reading of *Child of God*. Instead, it characterizes the novel as a nihilistic critique of human nature and even of the Christian culture with which the novel is permeated. Ultimately, Nash thinks the moral severity of Ballard’s actions point to the worship of evil desires.

Woods Nash and Jay Aaron Beavers both interpret McCarthy’s novels in terms of their moral significance. However the critics arrive at different conclusions as to whether the books are Christian. Nash argues Lester Ballard is worshiping an evil deity. Beavers on the other hand, interprets similar moral actions in an entirely different way. The

unholy actions of Suttree convince Beavers of the evident need of a savior in the novel. Beaver's reads a spiritual significance into the absence of goodness in *Suttree*. What should readers do with the fact that critics of his work interpret similar evidence in two completely different ways? Perhaps clarity can be arrived at by examining their arguments in the context of one of McCarthy's newest works and criticism surrounding that work.

The Road is an outlier when compared to other novels written by McCarthy in some respects. It contains more hope than many of his previous novels. It also contains a healthy relationship between a father and son which is foreign to much of McCarthy's work. However, the novel does contain widespread existential themes of hopelessness and apocalypse more than his other novels, perhaps except for *Blood Meridian*. But while these dark themes do permeate the novel, brighter themes such as the longing for goodness and love are thrust to the forefront of *The Road*. For these reasons, *The Road* can be read as a hopeful novel. More important for this discussion, *The Road* offers ample evidence of spiritual life. Some critics, such as Michael Chabon in his review *Maps and Legends* thinks the father in *The Road* "feeds his son a story." Chabon does not read the religious themes in *The Road* as truly hopeful, but rather as the actions of a despairing father fighting to give his son hope, even if this hope is based on a falsehood. Chabon is arguing that McCarthy is showcasing the origin of a false religion to serve his own ends, even if those ends are praiseworthy. Humans in desperation need a cause to strive for existence. The concept of the divine is fabricated by the father to provide this hope in Chabon's opinion.

But other critics interpret a more positive message in *The Road*. Stefan Skrimshire establishes himself as one of these in his article “‘There is no God and we are his prophets’: Deconstructing Redemption in Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*.” Skrimshire reads *The Road* in this way because redemption provides the father and son hope of survival in such a cruel reality. They are placed in an incredibly violent world, much like the other worlds of McCarthy’s literature. But the world of *The Road* contains more widespread destruction and environmental decay than other novels by McCarthy. Skrimshire argues that *The Road* “interweaves themes both of resistance (the refusal to die) and mourning (the passing of irreversible loss). In doing so, the novel powerfully engages the reader with the very porous nature of redemption in the context of its post-apocalyptic environment.” The pair of protagonists in *The Road* choose to live a meaningful life and refuse to admit defeat in the face of nearly insurmountable odds. Skrimshire thinks this decision is a redemption of human life. He also thinks “the difficult and paradoxical redemption offered in *The Road* is very far from resurrecting the old God of metaphysics.” It is certainly true that there is no Garden of Eden waiting for the boy and his father. The father ends up sacrificing his life to save his son, who ends the novel with hope and the company of other “good people.” But even this happy ending is engaged with the qualifier that the boy still lives in a brutal apocalyptic world. Skrimshire further qualifies, “redemption is nowhere conceived or expressed as the restoration of peace. Nor is it infused with any hope in the renewal of the earth, or even of the narrative of new beginnings for the scorched landscape.” While Skrimshire reads a positive morality in *The Road*, he does not go so far as to read a clearly religious one in the novel.

Skrimshire is correct to recognize redemption in *The Road*. But he is incorrect to think the redemption in *The Road* is not part of a bigger Christian message. This is because Skrimshire's understanding of redemption is too narrow. The examples of redemption in *The Road* reflect a biblical concept of redemption. The flaw of Skrimshire's reasoning is that the biblical conception of redemption is indeed broad enough to encompass the examples found in *The Road*. Applying this same line of thought to Cormac McCarthy's other novels, the religious themes in his novels come into focus. The following chapters will detail examples of biblical redemption in The Border Trilogy. But first an examination of biblical redemption needs to be made.

A Biblical View of Redemption

There are differing understandings of redemption, and this is the biblical one. Biblical redemption explicates the meaning in McCarthy's novels in the most fitting way. There are three significant terms in the bible pertaining to redemption, two from the Old Testament and one from the New Testament, that mean redemption. The first is the Hebrew term *go'el*. *Go'el* in some instances means "kinsman redeemer," but in different Old Testament passages the meaning becomes more nuanced. *Go'el* contributes to three different understandings of redemption, one is redeeming a kinsman from slavery, one is redeeming a kinsman's property, and one is redeeming a kinsman's life (blood redeemer). The second term is the Hebrew word *pada*, which means "ransom" and can be found, like *go'el*, in the Old Testament. The third term that means redemption in scripture is *lutron*. *Lutron* is found in the New Testament, and it refers to the payment of Christ on the cross

for the sins of humanity as a final payment for those debts. This payment for sins which stems from *lutron* is a much broader definition of redemption than definitions found in the Old Testament. This denotes the transformation of the concept of redemption throughout scripture. It begins as a narrow legalistic term and by the time redemption is used in the gospels, it is a broad gift given to all humanity to save them from hell.

Biblical redemption is a complicated concept, and different contexts contribute to slightly different meanings of the word. At the base line, redemption is an economic term. It denotes payment for a debt to a debtor. The payment can be made by the holder of the debt or an outside intervention. One understanding of redemption in the Old Testament is tied to the word *go'el*. *Ga'al* means to deliver, ransom, and to redeem. *Go'el* can also refer to the concept of the kinsman redeemer in the Old Testament. This concept manifests itself in many ways throughout the history of Israel. God sets this concept of *go'el* in the Hebrew law. Three meanings of *go'el* emerge in the Old Testament. The first is denoting the right of redeeming a piece of property that has been sold outside the family. The second is the right of a kinsman to redeem a relative who has been sold into slavery, presumably to pay a debt. The third definition of redemption involves the concept of the blood avenger who is a relative who avenges the murder of another relative.

Go'el defined as redeeming a kinsman's property can be found in Leviticus 25, a part of the Israelite law given to them by God. Leviticus 25.25 "If your brother becomes poor and sells part of his property, then his nearest redeemer [*go'el*] shall come and redeem [*ga'al*] what his brother has sold" (ESV). This command is simple to follow and

demands exact obedience from the Israelites. The kin of the person who sells the land, will help his brother and buy the land back as a kinsman redeemer.

Go'el also applies to situations in which Israelites have been sold into slavery. Leviticus 25.47 “If a stranger or sojourner with you becomes rich, and your brother beside him becomes poor and sells himself to the stranger or sojourner with you or to a member of the stranger’s clan, then after he is sold he may be redeemed [*ga'al*]. One of his brothers may redeem him” (ESV). These laws surrounding redemption signify the Lord’s desire to have the Israelites care for one another and be willing to buy one another out of slavery and other hard situations. The end of the chapter laying down the law for redemption of property and of kinsmen out of slavery ends: “For it is to me that the people of Israel are servants. They are my servants whom I brought out of the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God” (Leviticus 25.55). The Lord demands the services of the Israelites for his own purposes. These purposes are denoted by his commands in the Old Testament, of which the concept of redemption is certainly one.

The final meaning of *go'el* in the Hebrew law can be found in Numbers when Moses is writing out the Old Testament law that the Israelites must follow as part of the Covenant with God. Numbers 35.16 “But if he struck him down with an iron object, so that he died, he is a murderer. The murderer shall be put to death.” But what is important about this passage is the identity of the person putting the murderer to death in verse 19 [*go'el*]. “The avenger of blood shall himself put the murderer to death; when he meets him, he shall put him to death” (ESV). Blood redemption is the repaying of a debt in the Old Testament. The Hebrew law is transferring responsibility to the blood avenger.

An example of redemption can be found in the book of Ruth. Ruth is in a vulnerable position. She has left everything to follow her mother-in-law into a strange land out of loyalty. But the pair of women are in a vulnerable position because of their low place in the patriarchal society of the Israelites. Ruth must beg for food in the fields. The Hebrew laws concerning redemption do not explicitly command redemption of kin who have fallen on hard times like Ruth and Naomi. Yet the Hebrew word *go'el* is used to denote what happens next in the story. When Boaz learns of Ruth's situation, he says, "And now my daughter do not fear. I will do for you all that you ask.... And now it is true that I am a redeemer [*go'el*]" (Ruth 3:11-12, ESV). In Ruth 4.4 this process is explicated as Boaz talks to Naomi's closest relative about the matter, "So I thought I would tell you of it and say, 'Buy it in the presence of those sitting here and in the presence of the elders of my people.' If you will redeem [*ga'al*] it, redeem it. But if you will not, tell me, that I may know, for there is no one besides you to redeem it, and I come after you" (ESV). Boaz is letting the other man know that he is willing to take responsibility for Ruth in the spirit of the Hebrew laws of redemption. But Boaz's actions aren't specifically fulfilling the letter of the law surrounding *go'el*. His actions are somewhere in-between *go'el* and levirate marriage, the law concerning responsibility to marry the childless widow of a brother. *Go'el* concerns redeeming land, kin from slavery, or the life of a murdered kinsman. This act by Boaz to restore his kin to security isn't fulfilling the exact law of the Israelites. More accurately, Boaz's actions are fulfilling the intent of the law rather than the letter of the law. This is done with to honor the covenant between God and the Israelites. This covenant is critical to the conception of redemption

in the Old Testament. Boaz's act of redemption in Ruth marks the transformation towards a broader sense of when redemption is the right course of action.

Another form of redemption in the bible is tied to the Hebrew word *pada*. *Pada* is “translated as ‘ransom’, and is used in a related sense of a redemption of a life...The fullest theological sense applies when God himself acts to restore or reestablish with Israel as the chosen people” (Court, 301). The term is used in Exodus 21.29-30 to flush out the Hebrew law concerning debts, “But if the ox has been accustomed to gore in the past, and its owner has been warned but has not kept it in, and it kills a man or woman, the ox shall be stoned, and its owner shall be put to death. If a ransom is imposed on him, then he shall give for the redemption [*pada*] of his life whatever is imposed on him.” These verses show the nature of redemption as a payment for sin. In verse 29, the sin is established as negligence which leads to the death of another human. The price for this is laid out in the law as death. But also in the law is the possibility of redemption for the sinner in the form of a redemptive intervention or payment. This is the ‘ransom’ and this concept is also seen in the bible when Job replies to the accusation of sin from Bildad. Job 19.25 “For I know that my redeemer [*go’el*] lives, and at last he will stand upon the earth.” Job is referring to God as the redeemer of his life. In the face of accusations, Job uses his status as a kinsman redeemer [*go’el*] as his qualification from God to marry Ruth. God's redemption is a gift given to renew the covenant of relationship, and Job is appealing to this redemption to show he is worthy.

In the New Testament, a different word is used to denote redemption: the Greek word *lutron*. This is a more permanent redemption, as it denotes the final payment for the sins of all humanity. The word is tied directly to the resurrection and Jesus Christ's

atonement for the sins of humanity. In Mark 10:45, while providing context to his disciples concerning glory and authority, Jesus emphasizes his point stating, “For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom [*lutron*] for many.” This concept of giving life as a ransom for many is at the core of New Testament redemption. The Greek word *lutron*, “goes beyond the underlying metaphor of a financial transaction, in a ‘once for all’ action which gives to humanity the forgiveness and restoration which only God could bestow” (Court, 301). This concept of forgiveness and redemption for all is the culmination of the biblical concept of redemption and it is realized with the divine sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Jesus’s moral standing as the son of God makes his act of redemption for sinners priceless.

In the bible the concept of redemption travels from the Old Testament meaning to the New, ranging from a narrow economic barter to the redemption that has the potency to save all life. The forms of redemption found in scripture, *go’el*, *pada*, and *lutron*, are influenced by the overarching concept of the biblical covenant that God makes with the Israelites. It is important to understand how central redemption is to the covenant. In his article, “A Biblical Theology of Redemption in a Covenant Framework”, William Most argues that the Old Testament Covenant made between God and Abraham is directly related to the redemption of the Israelites both in the New and Old Testaments. The nature of God’s covenant with the Israelites is odd, because a covenant must have two sides that uphold the promise to one another. But the Israelites continuously break their side of the agreement. In Exodus 24.7, the people bind themselves “then (Moses) took the Book of the Covenant and read it in the hearing of the people. And they said, ‘All that the Lord has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient’” (ESV). From this point on, God’s

people continue to break their promise to follow God's law, and God steps in to redeem the relationship in a continuous cycle of grace and love. Most argues that God choose the Israelites to make this covenant promise because "we may not unreasonably conjecture that Israel, being a stiff-necked people, needed special help and care, more so than other nations. A good Father gives more care to a child who needs it" (Most). God's continuous redemption of the Israelites is indicative of the strength of his love for them. It also shows that God's tool to right sinful and violent actions is redemption.

The laws of the covenant governing the Israelites, part of which are the laws concerning redemption, are lifegiving to God's people. When the Israelites fail to fulfill the laws that God has prescribed, God renews his relationship over and over as the wilderness narratives in Exodus and Numbers make clear. Even more significant, as the concept of redemption develops in the scriptures, so does the covenant between God and his people. A whole new connotation for the covenant relationship between God and his people emerges in scripture in prophetic literature. Jeremiah 31.31-34 says:

Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the Lord. For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest,

declares the Lord. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.

The Lord is stating his intent to replace the redemptive practice of *go'el* and *pada* with that of *lutron*. The New Covenant is based on the figure of Jesus. The son of God's unlimited redemptive power extends the covenant relationship to all peoples of all nations, not just the Israelites.

The biblical view of redemption is rich and powerful. It is a transformation from narrow to broad. At first redemption is only relevant to the Israelites. This can be seen in the Hebrew law in the three purposes of redemption connotated by *go'el*: redemption of property, kin fallen into slavery, and redemption of a kinsman's life. These narrow laws are transformed as seen in Ruth by the actions of Boaz into a broader understanding of just redemption. Just as God redeems his covenant with the Israelites throughout the Old Testament when they continually disobey his commands, his plan for a new covenant based on everlasting redemption begins to come to fruition. Jesus' death on the cross was the payment which allowed all humans to escape the punishment from their sins. God's covenant was remade with all people using this redemption.

The biblical concept of redemption fits best with Cormac McCarthy's works because the actions of McCarthy's characters mirror the disobedient Israelites. Just as the Israelites continually turn away from God's plan in the Old Testament and the New, so do McCarthy's characters. Furthermore, the violence which the Israelites commit with regularity is reflected by McCarthy's characters. Evil exists in McCarthy's works in the form of Judge Holden from *Blood Meridian*, Saltillo Prison and Blevins from *All the Pretty Horses*, Anton Chigurh from *No Country for Old Men*, and many other instances.

But just as evil exists in McCarthy's works, so does the yearning for the good, the beautiful and the true. McCarthy's characters yearn for goodness, and their evil natures demand the need for a broad kind of redemption like that seen in the New Testament scriptures from the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross paying for all sins. This central desire for redemption is most clear in *The Crossing* when Billy Parham talks with the Witness, "Every word we speak is vanity. Every breath we take that does not bless is an affront. Bear closely with me now. There is another that will hear what you have never spoke...In the end we shall all of us be only what we have made of God. For nothing is real save Grace" (158). The Witness speaks of Grace, which is needed to redeem a fallen human. Everyone continually offends the divine order of the world according to the Witness in *The Crossing*. God hears "what you have never spoke" so in the end it doesn't matter who commits more violence than others. According to the passage what matters is pursuing God's grace for "nothing is real save Grace." This redemption which covers all people equally, is the only form of grace that could matter in McCarthy's novels because of their depravity. No other form of redemption could possibly be powerful enough to atone for the sins of McCarthy's humans. This is the redemption spoken of the Bible, which starts in the Old Testament with the Israelites and matures into the all-powerful redemption found in the New Testament. This is the only grace which could save the humans in McCarthy's works, who are at the end of the day, just children of God.

Chapter One

The Murders of the All-American Cowboy

John Grady Cole is the All-American Cowboy. Young, full of longing, and anxious for adventure, this hero is complicated. *All the Pretty Horses* is a novel about this fundamentally American character's maturation process. John Grady loses his innocence when he murders a boy who fights him in a Mexican jail. The final pages of the novel reveal John Grady Cole's internal turmoil as he attempts to learn from the evil he took part in and experienced. John Grady transforms from a naïve cowboy seeking the American dream into a man with knowledge of good and evil. The actions which John Grady Cole take after he has learned this brutal truth reveal a determination to redeem the brokenness of the world. By remembering the life of Blevins, pursuing the hand of Alejandra, and wrestling with his own sin, Cole's approach to the reality of the modern world is a hopeful and redemptive one.

But what exactly is redeemed in *All the Pretty Horses*, and who is doing this redemption? For one, John Grady Cole seeks personal redemption for his actions in Mexico. Regardless of the extenuating circumstances around those decisions, he still reckons with the brokenness he has caused. Secondly, the life of Jimmy Blevins is redeemed. Thirdly, John Grady Cole seeks to redeem the profession of the All-American Cowboy, and by extension, the American dream. But while this redemption may begin in *All the Pretty Horses*, it continues for John Grady Cole into *Cities of the Plain*.

The All-American Cowboy is an idealized myth. This myth is part of the American dream which is found in American literature and films. The All-American

Cowboy is not a real person, it is a myth that many Americans wish they could become. The mythical figure stands for many American values such as independence, success, oneness with the natural world, talent, swagger, white supremacy, and justice. This myth is something which John Grady Cole and Rawlins buy into fully and part of the reason they go into Mexico. Furthermore, the All-American Cowboy is a part of the American dream to achieve success and live prosperously. This myth is also tied into how John Grady Cole and Rawlins perceive cowboying and the cowboy life. Rather than see life through the lens of reason, they view it through this idealized myth of the All-American Cowboy and the way this myth realizes their version of the American dream.

The idea of the American Cowboy envelopes the character of John Grady Cole and impacts the whole border trilogy. Rawlins and John Grady are rebelling against the modernization of the American frontier. This space that lives in the national imaginary as a seemingly never-ending frontier created for adventure and conquest dominates the dreams of both young cowboys. Cormac McCarthy deliberately choose to write these novels interacting with the idea of the “wild west.” This ideal is something which John Grady Cole thinks he understands, but he does not. John Grady Cole and Lacy Rawlins ride into Mexico looking for open pastures, good work, and the opportunity to be American Cowboys. This is a goal which John Grady Cole gives up his hometown and family heritage for. But the ideals of the American Cowboy which John Grady Cole pursues with Rawlins are revealed to be flawed. Some of the values of the American Cowboy are innocence, the importance of truth, and the swagger which comes with being American. These beliefs, influenced by colonialism and manifest destiny, are stripped away from the protagonist when he is confronted by reality. Opposed to the naïve values

of John Grady Cole are those of violence, injustice, and patriarchal society. Violence especially seems to be found everywhere during his time in Mexico once John Grady outstays his welcome on the Hacienda. John Grady Cole also discovers that truth is not paramount, but rather law is. Finally, he has discovered that there is a difference.

Both John Grady Cole and Rawlins realize throughout the course of the novel that they have been guiding their lives according to this myth. They realize the All-American Cowboy is a false goal. Trying to become one is dangerous both for oneself and others. This is what gets Blevins killed and John Grady Cole in a knife fight in Saltillo Prison. John Grady Cole and Rawlins redeem the idea of the All-American Cowboy by rejecting the lies which the myth had perpetuated in their lives and replacing those lies with truth. When John Grady Cole learns from the naïve beliefs which get him in trouble and replace those with wisdom and respectful insights from Mexican life, this reflects a redeemed understanding of what it means to be an American Cowboy.

All the Pretty Horses opens on a ranch in Texas which is no longer profitable. John Grady's mother has just inherited the ranch. For both financial and personal reasons she is bent on selling it, against the wishes of her son. The ranch is John Grady Cole's version of the American dream. It represents a way of life that John Grady sees as his inheritance. When he asks his mother to let him work the land as a leased property, she says "You don't know what you're talking about. There's not any money. This place has barely paid expenses for twenty years" (15). When John Grady Cole, with the same goal in mind, asks his mother's lawyer about the affair, the lawyer says, "Son, not everybody thinks that life on a cattle ranch in west Texas is the second best thing to dyin and goin' to heaven....If it was a payin proposition that'd be one thing. But it aint" (17). John

Grady Cole has a romanticized idea of ranch life. To him, the dream existence is life on a ranch in west Texas. While this may be a desire somewhat rooted in immaturity, the reasons John Grady Cole wants to live this life are central to his character and important when understanding his redemptive arc as a character. Centrally, John Grady Cole is motivated by a desire to attain independence, and then ranch cattle and break horses. Additionally, John Grady Cole may have room for a wife and some children living on the property, but centrally his desire for the ranch life is what motivates him. His whole existence and expertise are geared toward this goal. This is important to understand because John Grady Cole seeks to redeem his understanding of what it means to be a cowboy in *All the Pretty Horses*. Originally, he starts out thinking he can accomplish anything through ranching. This can be seen through his relationships with Alejandra and Blevins. But when the novel ends, John Grady knows there are many different people in the world with their own agendas who are willing to commit acts of violence.

The lack of ranching prospects and the reliance upon the profession make John Grady Cole and Rawlins strike out for Mexico together. When they find work at the Hacienda de Nuestra Señora de la Purísima Concepción, they are thrilled. Rawlins asks John Grady Cole “How long do you think you’d like to stay here?” and John Grady answers “About a hundred years.” This answer may be hyperbolic, but it reflects the real desires of the two young cowboys. The Hacienda is an important place for them because it is a ranch big enough to allow them to practice their craft. Later in the novel when John Grady Cole is discussing horses with the hacendado, “there were two things that they agreed upon wholly and that were never spoken and they were that God had put horses on earth to work cattle and that other than cattle there was no wealth proper to a man” (127).

This is a central belief, a kind of religion even, for John Grady Cole. Life on the Hacienda allows him to practice this religion.

If ranching cattle with horses were a religion, John Grady Cole would be the prophet. Upon arrival at the Hacienda, he immediately picks out a bunch of wild horses that have just arrived from the mountains. Although wild, these horses have a lot of potential and John Grady goes with Rawlins to talk to the Gerente about breaking the horses, which is a tall task for an experienced cowboy, never mind two young boys from Texas. When translating the Gerente's response to Rawlins, John Grady reveals that the man "said we were full of shit. But in a nice way." (102). Thankfully for the youthful pair, the Gerente allows the boys to make the attempt, even though he does not have high expectations.

The scene of John Grady Cole breaking the wild colts is a high point of the boy's adventure in Mexico. The youths have not seen the corruption and evil in store for them. They met Blevins and were present when the boy stole his horse back from a village, but this seems like a faded scene once they have secured jobs at the Hacienda. The life of a cowboy is alive and thriving during this passage, and for good reason. McCarthy's language detailing John Grady Cole's mastery of the horses is beautiful:

Before the colt could struggle up, John Grady had squatted on its neck and pulled its head up and to one side and was holding the horse by the muzzle with the long bony head pressed against his chest and the hot sweet breath of it flooding up from the dark wells of its nostrils over his face and neck like news from another

world. They did not smell like horses. They smelled like what they were, wild animals. (103)

In this passage, the ideal of the cowboy is being lived out by John Grady Cole and Rawlins. For John Grady, horses are an important part of the cowboy's life. According to Rawlins, "There's a lot of good riders. But there's just one that's the best. And he [John Grady Cole] happens to be settin right yonder" (59). The ability to handle horses is the measure of a man. When John Grady breaks the wild colts upon arrival at the Hacienda, he immediately earns the respect of the other vaqueros and the Don. The handling of horses is a currency on the ranch, and John Grady Cole is a talented professional when dealing solely with horses. This passage reveals that John Grady, and to a smaller extent, Rawlins, do have some legitimacy in their longings for ranching. Both boys are extremely good at the profession, and perhaps even more importantly they are both fulfilled by it. This showcases the meaning which can be found in communion with nature.

When John Grady Cole and Rawlins set out on their expedition into Mexico, there is no blemish on the idea of becoming the all-American Cowboy. Sara Spurgeon outlines why this idealized profession of the two boys is important in her essay "'Pledged in Blood:' Truth and Redemption in Cormac McCarthy's *All the Pretty Horses*." Spurgeon details the American ideal of the cowboy: "The figure of the cowboy personifies America's most cherished myths-combining ideas of American exceptionalism, Manifest Destiny, rugged individualism, frontier democracy, communion with and conquest of the natural world, and the righteous triumph of the white race." John Grady and Rawlins are

seeking these ideals with all of their might when they venture south together. To be fair, the pair of friends are good at the pursuit, but they soon learn that they are playing the game by an idealized and unrealistic set of rules. When they set out, John Grady and Rawlins are expecting this “righteous triumph of the white race” which Spurgeon outlines. The pair is viewing the world from a lens of a privileged white cowboy who can accomplish any task set in his way through pure grit. By the time John Grady limps out of Mexico this idea has been demolished.

Spurgeon notes that “the iconography of the mythic West remains a potent form of national fantasy in part because...icons mark a gap or attempt to cover a problem the symbolic order does not solve.” The problems which Spurgeon notes, national identity, race relations, and human interaction with the natural world are all things which John Grady Cole feels. Part of the reason John Grady Cole and Rawlins disappear into the Mexican countryside is because their idealistic cowboy jobs are disappearing in Texas. John Grady Cole’s family ranch is being sold to make way for the more productive and modern pursuits of industrialization. John Grady Cole chooses to disappear into the more forgiving Mexican countryside to pursue his antiquated dream rather than face the reality that his dream is barely relevant anymore.

The pair of friends also seem to have naïve ideas about what their cowboy identities mean for their relations with Mexicans. They depend on personal excellence and knowledge of horses to be the sole factor in disputes and relationships, failing to recognize the nuances of life in Mexico. Thus, when John Grady Cole tries to live up to the ideals of the profession by pursuing a romanticized and unrealistic relationship with Alejandra, that is when he starts to fail as a cowboy. There is nothing inherently wrong

with viewing life through one's profession, but John Grady Cole allows his profession to be the only lens he views life through until he is thrown in prison because of it. He expects everyone to live under the romanticized morality of the cowboy lifestyle which is built around him. Mexico is not an amoral land, however it is a more lawless one than the United States and more nuanced than the ranching politics which John Grady and Rawlins understand. Ironically when John Grady takes back Blevins' horse at the end of the novel, this shows he has redeemed his idealized and privileged view of the world. When he takes the horse, he is ruthless and violent with the captain, John Grady does not expect any preferential treatment or magical *deus ex machina* to occur. He takes the adequate steps to secure Blevins' horse and understands that the endeavor may not succeed.

John Grady Cole and Alejandra's relationship parallels that of Adam and Eve. The hacienda is John Grady Cole's Garden of Eden. He has been given free reign by the patron and he is even in a position of honor on the ranch. He discusses his craft with the patron and is regularly called up to the ranch house to visit with the wealthy patrons. Sarah Gleeson-White in her article "Playing Cowboys: Genre, Myth, and Cormac McCarthy's *All the Pretty Horses*" discusses this parallel allegory, "the hacienda is described in terms of the New Garden in the New World, again drawing on the Edenic fantasy that defines so many Western narratives." So if John Grady Cole is Adam, and Alejandra is Eve, then sexual relations are the forbidden fruit of the new Eden. When the relationship does become sexual, John Grady is no longer welcome at the Hacienda. John Grady Cole's place on the Hacienda was based on his expertise as a cowboy. The pursuits which he decides to take with Alejandra venture outside this wheelhouse. Alejandra's

position is a fragile one, as revealed by her grandmother the Dueña Alfonsa. She is not married, and because of the patriarchal society in which she lives, she cannot engage in sexual relationships without endangering her future. John Grady, in his narrow view of the world, does not understand this. Furthermore, John Grady does not understand how his relationship with Alejandra endangers his own lifestyle as a cowboy. When the Hacendado learns of the relationship, he notifies the authorities that John Grady Cole and Rawlins match the descriptions of the suspects who accompanied Blevins.

One of the clearest examples of violence is the character Jimmy Blevins. Blevins commits acts of violence, and in turn has them committed against him. Blevins is by no means an innocent character, but the ideals of the American Cowboy which surround John Grady Cole seem to envelop Blevins at times and he does operate with a perceived sense of invincibility. Blevins also possesses the innate swagger associated with American Cowboys. When Lacy Rawlins asks Blevins, “what the hell would we want you for?” Blevins responds bluntly, “Cause I’m an American” (45). This sense of nonchalant entitlement is exactly the kind of naïve overconfidence which lands the trio of cowboys in hot water. Inevitably, Blevins’ confidence is confronted by the violent reality of life. Blevins does not expect his horse to be stolen, nor does he expect to be stopped from recovering his stolen horse. So, he responds as someone in the right: by physically taking back his horse. But the reality of the situation is not what Blevins perceives it to be, and although he may be in the right, but this truth means little.

The boy’s mindset when he is in the prison with John Grady Cole and Rawlins shows Blevins’ lack of understanding. Rawlins remarks that “They ain’t goin to send you to the penitentiary” meaning that Rawlins expects Blevins to pay for the murders he

committed recovering his horse. To which both John Grady Cole and Blevins respond in disagreement, “I ain’t old enough to hang” (160). Rawlins understands that it does not matter who is technically in the right, but instead it matters who holds the power. The fact that the horse was Blevins’ before he stole it back does not matter, what matters is that the Mexican authorities in charge don’t recognize this, and they also want to hold him accountable for the murders Blevins committed. This violence which Blevins does commit shows the false irony of the ideals of the American Cowboy. Blevins showcases the falseness of the American Cowboy’s morality when he murders the Mexican trying to prevent him from stealing the horse. The Mexican’s life was worth far more than the horse. But instead, Blevins decides that he cannot wait to attempt to rectify the situation and pulls the trigger. This act is based in over-confidence and a misunderstanding of who is in charge. Blevins expects to bully his way into control of the situation. Instead, he grossly miscalculates reality and puts himself in mortal danger. Furthermore, his sense of being wronged shows the hypocrisy of his idealized American identity. He expects to be able to murder for his property but does not expect to be brought to justice for the murder.

The death of Blevins is justice. He dies at the hands of a relative of the victim. Blevins’ blustering pride keeps him from anticipating the consequences of his actions. John Grady Cole’s conversation with the captain just before the death of Blevins shows how Blevins, and by extension the American Cowboy, does not understand the differences between truth and law. The captain is interrogating John Grady Cole about his identity and is refusing to believe the story that John Grady is telling him. The captain states “You have an opportunity to tell the truth here. Here. In three days you will go to

Saltillo [prison] and then you will not have this opportunity...Then the truth will be in other hands” to which John Grady Cole responds “There aint but one truth” (168). This conversation between adversaries illustrates the different understandings of what actually matters in life. John Grady Cole, from his idealized perspective, thinks the truth still holds importance. But the captain, talking from the viewpoint of the law, knows that in the modern experience, law overrules truth and law is determined by power. John Grady Cole has an idealistic understanding of truth and the impact it has on reality.

In *All the Pretty Horses*, the captain’s viewpoint, that of violence and law, is typified as the Mexican experience and the idealistic and naïve viewpoint as the American experience. But McCarthy is not simply characterizing violence as Mexican and innocent stupidity as American. The concepts explored in the novel are more nuanced. When John Grady Cole is talking to Perez, the big shot of Saltillo prison, this becomes more apparent. Perez tells the boys, “You don’t understand the life here...you know what is naïve? A naïve view...you don’t speak the language” (188). Rawlins misunderstands Perez and says, “He speaks it” to which Perez shakes his head and responds “No, he said. You don’t speak it. Maybe in a year here you might understand. But you don’t have no year” (188). Perez is aware of the violence required to survive in Saltillo. He is also aware this is a violence which John Grady and Rawlins don’t have. The boys don’t understand that there is more than a cultural difference between them and the men they are in prison with. Perez knows that simple words cannot educate them. Indeed, this is proven by the change wrought in John Grady Cole after his fight and departure from the prison. There is no turning back for the boy into the previous life that he led, and Perez was aware of the probable arrival of this shift in worldview. When John

Grady Cole fights for his life and kills the boy who senselessly attacks him, his view of the world shifts permanently. The world is no longer rational and morally upright, and truth does not determine reality. John Grady receives an education in prison that can guide him in life. It also destroys the viewpoint that ranching is the way to become ultimately fulfilled.

John Grady Cole's redemption of the American Cowboy is grounded in his response to his own act of violence. He does not throw his ranching worldview away, but instead chooses to refine it. Right before John Grady Cole kills the Mexican boy in self-defense, he has one last lesson with Perez that cements the shift in John Grady's head from the naive American Cowboy to a realistic understanding of the world. Perez says to the boy, "Even in a place like this where we are concerned with fundamental things, the mind of the Anglo is closed in this rare way. At one time I thought it was only his life of privilege. But it is not that. It is his mind" (192). Perez is guiding John Grady into a worldview that will be able to survive Saltillo prison. John Grady Cole thinks that because he is innocent, he will survive. Perez is teaching him that this does not matter outside of the play mythical world of the American Cowboy. Perez continues to try to teach John Grady Cole, "I hope you will have given some thought to your situation. Americans have ideas sometimes that are not so practical. They think that there are good and bad things" (194). Perez is trying to tell John Grady Cole that there is nothing standing in between him and death, any hope for deliverance from others is delusional. After this conversation John Grady Cole buys the switchblade which he uses in the knife fight. This purchase signifies his character change.

When John Grady Cole buys the knife and brutally murders the boy who attacks him, he kills his dream of becoming the mythical All-American Cowboy. But his response shows what it means to be a cowboy in his newly redeemed framework. For one, he pursues morally justified routes of action, while still keeping a realistic edge to that action. His pursuit of Blevins' horse exemplifies this. It is obviously a reckless pursuit of justice, but it is also a calculated and violent one. He is willing to kill the captain to get what he needs and does not hesitate to exact his will through gunplay in order to ascertain his escape. John Grady Cole was changed in Saltillo prison into a person who knows the difference between right and wrong, but also knows that it often does not matter what is right or wrong. This hybrid between the American Cowboy and a more realistic mindset shows a redemption of the classic American Cowboy trope. The new cowboy who John Grady is choosing to be chooses to do the right thing but goes about doing so in a realistic manner. This is a redemption of a fallen ideal, the All-American Cowboy by making it new.

The life of Blevins is tragically lost in *All the Pretty Horses*. He is a foolish character who exemplifies the ideals of the All-American Cowboy. The character of Jimmy Blevins comes into the novel as morally ambiguous. He rides into John Grady and Rawlins' path on a suspect horse. Rawlins has a good read on the boy from the beginning of his introduction. He asks Blevins, "Your name aint Blivet is it?" to which Blevins replies "It's Blevins." Rawlins goes on to inform the boy "A blivet is ten pounds of shit in a five-pound sack" (46). But to Rawlins' displeasure, John Grady Cole seems to be unwilling to make the boy ride off, and so the trio is formed. When Blevins gets lost in a thunderstorm, Rawlins asks John Grady "What if we just went on?" John Grady

responds, “I don’t believe I can leave him out here afoot” (71). John Grady has tied his path in with Blevins, and because Rawlins is dedicated to his friend, he is tied with the troubled boy as well. Rawlins makes one last-ditch attempt to show John Grady Cole what following Blevins’ path will mean. He says, “Every dumb thing I ever done in my life there was a decision I made before that got me into it. It was never the dumb thing. It was always some choice I’d made before It....This is our last chance” (79). But in the end, John Grady responds, “I can’t do it” and the fate of the pair is determined, as Rawlins suspected it would be.

Blevins’ death is complicated. It is a tragedy. It is also a justified killing. Blevins is in no way an innocent party in *All the Pretty Horses*. Nothing is sure about his character. Even his name, Jimmy Blevins, is probably stolen from the famous radio host preacher of the same time period: Jimmy Blevins. He has little regard for life and a brash naïve sense of importance about himself that was bound to get him in trouble. But even with all of these things being true, the death of Blevins is a tragedy. He is a young boy on his own, probably fourteen according to Rawlins’ guesswork. Throughout the novel, Blevins rides the line between victim and aggressor. After he loses his horse and clothes in the thunderstorm, Blevins, John Grady, and Rawlins come across a group of travelers. The group of travelers give food and water freely and seem to be a friendly group. After the meal, John Grady goes to talk to the travelers, and he is taken aback when a man “asked John Grady if he wished to sell the boy” (76). John Grady is appalled at the evil that is found among such an ordinary looking group of strangers and he returns to his friends with the grim news. One of the very next scenes is the one in which Blevins steals back his horse and outlaws the trio. This is not the action of a victim, but the rash action

of an angry youth who has no conception of consequences. If he had played out his hand more patiently or worked with John Grady Cole and Rawlins on a plan that was more sustainable, the three boys may not have become outlaws. This act ultimately dooms the three. On Blevins' return to the village, he kills three men, who know nothing of the wrongs which the boy accuses them of. They simply found the horse and the pistol, and while they may know they belonged to somebody, Blevins seems to have an expectation that they knowingly wronged him. When they are all in jail together, he tells John Grady and Rawlins "I didn't want to shoot the dumb son of a bitch. That was never any part of my intention" (160). In reality though, Blevins walked up behind the man and pulled his pistol out from his belt. There was no way the altercation was going to end peacefully. Jimmy Blevins' character is half fool, half violent youth. That is a bad combination for someone who wants to live.

The moments before Blevins' death are filled with grim desperation. As Blevins begins to realize what is coming, "he looked at John Grady. John Grady said nothing at all. The guard reached and took Blevins by the arm" (177). But right as the guard is leading Blevins away to his death at the hands of the relative of the man that he killed, he reached out and "thrust into his hand a wad of dirty and crumpled peso notes." This last act of Blevins turns out to be the very thing which John Grady Cole needs to survive the horrors of Saltillo prison. After Rawlins and John Grady Cole are reunited and John Grady has killed the boy, the two are talking about the experience. Rawlins asked John Grady where he got the knife and John Grady responds, "off the Bautistas. I bought it with the last forty-five pesos we had. / Blevins' money. / Yea. Blevins' money" (215). This scene is poignant because it is admitting that without Blevins' gift, John Grady

would not have survived the prison. This is complicated, because without the violence which Blevins commits, John Grady and Rawlins wouldn't have been in trouble in the first place, but nevertheless, Blevins last action was one of grace which saved John Grady. Blevins' character is by no means perfect, but there is hope and grace involved because of his last action.

John Grady Cole himself is on a redemptive arc in *All the Pretty Horses*. Setting out, he is a naïve cowboy in search of adventure, freedom, and the ability to practice his trade. But it soon becomes clear that these desires are not going to play out exactly how the boy hoped. John Grady Cole goes on a journey both physically and morally throughout the book. He has many teachers along the way. Rawlins tries to make his friend wise to the dangers of keeping Blevins around. Perez tries and succeeds in instilling knowledge of the difference between the "Anglo" and the "Mexican" way of thinking in the prison. And even the captain acts as a sort of teacher in the novel, showing John Grady Cole the difference between truth and law, and the difference that this has on the outcomes of situations. But perhaps the lesson which John Grady takes to heart the most, and also hates the most, is the one that he gets from the Dueña Alfonsa. The crux of this message is hidden in a conversation the two are having after the Duena has paid for John Grady and Rawlins to be released from prison in exchange for Alejandra's promise that she will never again see John Grady. The Dueña says, "What is consistent in history is greed and foolishness and a love of blood and this is a thing that even God- who knows all that can be known- seems powerless to change" (239). This is the primary reason that she has decided against allowing John Grady to pursue her daughter, and despite anything that the boy can say, she will not change her mind. John Grady does not consent to

believing this message at first, but even in his actions before the Duena explicitly taught this to him he shows his belief in the consistency of violence. John Grady told Rawlins, “I knew when I bought the knife what I’d bought it for” (215). By this point John Grady knows the score. He knew he would have to kill to escape the prison alive, and he was willing to go through with it in order to do so. But the words of Rawlins do not appease his sense of guilt for the action, and so he searches for yet another teacher to tell him where he went wrong and how to redeem this act.

In the final pages of the novel, John Grady finds a teacher who he thinks can absolve him in the judge. John Grady tells him, “When I was in the penitentiary down there I killed a boy...it keeps bothering me” (291). Later on in the conversation, John Grady continues unburdening his guilt, “the reason I wanted to kill him (the captain) was because I stood there and let him walk that boy out in the trees and shoot him and I never said nothin” (293). But the judge has no absolution for the guilt that John Grady feels. He tells the boy, “there’s nothin wrong with you son, I think you’ll get it sorted out” and then lets the conversation die out. In the end, John Grady is left with the lessons that he has learned and shapes his philosophy of life from his experiences in Mexico. He searches for the owner of Blevins horse but cannot find it. This interaction reveals that while John Grady has undergone significant change in *All the Pretty Horses*, he still has character growth to achieve.

Chapter 2

Billy Parham, the Wolf, and the Witness

In *The Crossing*, Billy Parham takes over from John Grady Cole as the protagonist of the Border Trilogy's second novel. Containing similar themes as *All the Pretty Horses*, *The Crossing* deals with nature, God, and relationships. Parham shares many similarities with John Grady Cole as he ventures into Mexico and is forced to mature quickly during his time there. Billy's life is a troubled one and the protagonist spends much of the novel trying to redeem acts of violence.

Redemption is a central theme in *The Crossing*. The first section of the novel is concerned with Billy's capture and attempted release of a wolf. This entire saga is formative as it introduces the concepts of redemption and violence to the young man. The wolf comes to represent beauty and the inherent goodness of nature. Initially Billy sets out to trap the wolf to kill it. But he ends up upending his life for the good of the creature.

Nature is important to Billy. When he interacts with nature it makes him feel emotions of peace and appreciation. One of the first windows into Billy's character is the scene where he sneaks out of his family's house to view a pack of wolves running freely through a snowfield by his house. Billy takes painstaking measures to get a good view of the cold winter morning. The language gains a layer of intimacy when describing the passing of the pack of wolves, "There were seven of them and they passed within twenty feet of where he lay. He could see their almond eyes in the moonlight. He could hear their breath. He could feel the presence of their knowing that was electric in the air" (4). Once Billy leaves the scene, the passage notes that Billy "didn't tell (Boyd) where he'd been nor what he'd seen. He never told anybody" (5). The experience was an important

one for Billy. At that point in the novel, Billy was a largely unformed and innocent character. Something about the natural beauty and power of the pack of wolves appealed to him, yet it is not clear exactly how this will impact his formation. This is shown by the effort he exerted to view the wolves and it is further emphasized by the fact that he chose not to share his experience with Boyd. The experience was formative and personal. It will also influence his decisions moving forward in the novel.

The she-wolf is a symbolic part of Billy's character development and outlook of the world. When he encounters it, he is a largely unproven young man in the world trying to fulfill a demanding task given to him by his father: trap the wolf. After his time with the wolf, Billy is searching for answers to existential questions. Furthermore, the wolf advances Billy's understanding of the sacred in unforeseen ways. Petra Mundik, in her article "All was Fear and Marvel" describes the concept which Parham will soon learn: "for those whose lives are immersed in bloodshed, blood is simultaneously a source of violent death and of life-giving vitality. As a hunter, the world understands the dual-functions of blood" (11). The wolf is viewed by humans as a predator who is seeking victims. The language used around wolves in the novel is weighted to indicate the important role they play in nature. Billy emphasizes the importance of the she-wolf's life in a way that no other character in the novel does. Humans respect the wolf because of the violent potential and reputation that it has. For example, when Billy is trapping the wolf on his own, he runs into a rancher that lives close by. Rather than answer the rancher's queries honestly, Billy "knew the old man wanted to hear that he was trapping coyotes and he wouldn't lie or wouldn't exactly lie" about what he was actually trapping (37). The language that McCarthy uses in the novel around wolves is sacred both because

of the fear people have for wolves and because wolves take on a mythic quality to the ranchers of New Mexico.

Even once Billy does end up trapping the wolf, the humans who see it often refuse to acknowledge the she-wolf's existence. For many, the violent potential of the wolf is the only defining quality they can give the beast. The wolf's violence is inherent to her nature. McCarthy writes "the wolves in that country had been killing cattle for a long time but the ignorance of the animals was a puzzle to him...the ranchers said they brutalized the cattle in a way they did not the wild game. As if the cows evoked in them some anger. As if they were offended by some violation of an old order. Old ceremonies. Old Protocols" (25). The ranchers who interact with wolves in *The Crossing* view wolves as one-dimensional predators who are bad because of the violence that they enact. But the language that McCarthy uses around wolves and violence indicates that there is some depth to the violence of the wolves which the ranchers cannot fully appreciate.

For Billy the sacred quality of wolves is due to this "old order" which McCarthy writes about. The violent acts of wolves hold more significance than just simple acts. These bloody actions are ones that wolves are meant to engage in. But more than this, the cycle is valuable because of the tradition and interconnected nature of the relationship between wolves and their prey. McCarthy is exhibiting the beauty of the rules of the natural world. The power and place which wolves hold in the natural world is beautiful to Billy Parham. The relationship in which wolves feed off other creatures holds some inherent beauty for Billy which cannot be glimpsed by other humans in the novel. Billy seeks to grow closer to nature in this section of *The Crossing* by engaging with the apex predator which is the wolf he traps. Although he sets out with the intention to trap the

wolf, as Marcel Decoste notes in “One Among and Not Separate From”, his motivations change and “Billy’s bond with the wolf is fed by a longing for communion, a desire to live as the wolf seemingly does, in harmony with creation” (443). The young man comes to recognize that there is more to the wolf than simple violence and danger, the wolf contains dignity, mastery of self, and communion with nature.

The relationship between the humanized understanding of wolves perpetuated by ranchers and the more naturalized understanding of wolves which Billy grasps is important to note. To human society, the wolf is a violent menace and a financial liability. But to the natural order of the world, wolves signify the honored process of nature. This relationship is not an inherently bad thing, even though it is violent. But because humans order the world artificially, wolves have been characterized as bad. Furthermore, this is the understanding of wolves that Billy has grown up with. Therefore, they are hunted almost to extinction in his part of the world. It is ironic that the person who understands wolves in the same way as Billy is an old wolf-trapper that Billy visits. He pursues this conversation because he is struggling to track the wolf but leaves it with a confirmation of his admiration for the wolf. The extreme intellect of the wolf is making it hard for the boy to track and trap her. Billy and his father go through the process of setting elaborate traps. The process is detailed and Billy’s father “with the screen box carefully sifted the dirt back over it and with the trowel sprinkles humus and wood debris over the dirt” the set “looked like nothing at all” (23). The father and son set seven more traps in likely places, but a couple days later, the wolf recognized and uncovered all of them so that “when she left the set the trap was sitting naked on the ground with only the handful of dirt over it” (26). The intelligence and ability shown by the wolf personifies

her. She is outsmarting the detailed efforts of Billy's father who is an experienced rancher. So, Billy travels to talk to Mr. Echols, a famed outdoorsman with experience in trapping wolves who is well past his prime. Echols has a long and meandering conversation with Billy, in which Billy receives little in the way of practical hunting advice. Instead, Echols seems to be trying to impart some deeper knowledge about the nature of the wolf to Billy. The interaction is noted as "the old man went on to say that the hunter was a different thing than men supposed. He said that men believe the blood of the slain to be of no consequence but that the wolf knows better. He said that the wolf is a being of great order and that it knows what men do not: that there is no order in the world save that which death has put there" (45). In the character of the old hunter Echols, McCarthy has established an apologist for the natural order of the world. Echols perspective reveals that hunters understand what casual ranchers do not: the fact that the wolf is valuing life and contributing to nature through her violent acts.

Furthermore, Echols' order shows that wolves act violently towards cattle because cattle disrespect their natural order. The natural order is that beings should exert themselves to pursue survival. For cattle, this is avoiding predators. For wolves, this natural order dictates that they must attack cattle. McCarthy is arguing the extra ferocity wolves harbor towards cattle is reasonable and directed by an urge to punish creatures subjugated by humans. The natural order of the world is to fight tooth and nail for survival. When mankind has corrupted this cycle in the breeding and captivation of cattle, wolves punish cattle with especially fierce brutality. By extension, cattle do not value their own life as much as they should, and the wolves punish them more brutally for it. Billy starts out trapping the wolf to perpetuate the artificial ordering of nature. Wolves go

against the utilitarian order which ranchers support because wolves kill cattle and diminish profits. Because they are a financial liability, wolves have been hunted to extinction. Billy is vaguely aware of the natural beauty of wolves, but he does not know how intelligent and fiercely resilient they are. As the hunt goes on, the extreme intellect of the wolf and the intensity of its fierceness forces Billy to get to know the wolf on an intimate level. This leads to Billy's decision to redeem the life of the wolf by trying to honor the natural order instead of pursuing the money for her reward.

The first aberration Billy Parham makes from utilitarian instincts regarding the treatment of wolves, what ranchers would call "common sense", occurs when he finds the wolf trapped in one of his steel traps. Billy's father ordered Billy to get him if he found the wolf unable to move in a trap. However, because of the unconventional nature of Billy's methods trapping the wolf, he is worried she will be killed by the time he returns with his father. Rather than kill the wolf himself, Billy chooses to tie up and muzzle the wild beast. This risky decision is extremely unconventional, and proof of this occurs when Billy runs into a rancher on his way back to his family cabin. The man asks Billy "Have you always been crazy?"/ 'I don't know. I never was much put to the test before today'" (59). The "natural" action for Billy to take according to the rancher and all conventional wisdom would be to shoot the wolf and collect the bounty. This action would give Billy financial profit, safety, and the goodwill of his community for removing a menace from their ranches. But this route seems wrong to Billy, and he continues to take steps away from human "common sense." After deliberations with various ranchers and himself, Billy decides to take the wolf back to her original freedom in the mountains of Mexico rather than sure death and depravation in America.

Unfortunately for both boy and wolf, Billy has a naïve conception of Mexico, especially in comparison with his own ability. He fails to understand that the wolf will be viewed in the same way in Mexico as the ranch lands of America. Furthermore, Billy has an inflated idea of how own ability to protect the wolf from humans in Mexico as he was in America. Even though Billy's intentions are meant to honor the natural dignity of the wolf, there is a disconnect between this dignity and the reality of the world that Billy inhabits. Billy thinks the utilitarian treatment of nature by humans is wrong. His actions to free the she-wolf in her habitat are an attempt to redeem the wolf's life as it is meant to be lived. David Morton in his essay "Geographies of Space and Time in the Border Trilogy of Cormac McCarthy" writes that Billy is trying to reach "a world that lies beyond the apocalyptic commodification of all things" (836). The wolf understood by humanity is a manifestation of violence. Billy's refusal to agree with this understanding means he is fighting this when he acts to take the wolf into Mexico.

Almost immediately across the border, Billy begins to face pointed questions and resistance. His journey is just as unnatural in Mexico as it was in the United States. The wolf poses the same financial and personal threats for the inhabitants. At first, the men that Billy encounters try to buy the wolf from his possession. They ask what the animal's price is, and when Billy replies that it is not his to sell, the men are confused. Prodded again, Billy replies that "the wolf was the property of a great hacendado and that it had been put in his care that no harm come to it" (90). Billy clarifies further that the 'great hacendado' lives in many places which is a thinly veiled allusion to Billy's view that the wolf has been put in his care by God. This is an acknowledgement tied to the wolf's dignity and beauty in the order of nature. The passage also makes it clear that Billy is

motivated because he believes the wolf has been placed into his care by an almighty power. The natural worth of the Wolf's life is evident to the boy. His motivations for freeing the wolf relate directly to the providence and redemption which Billy believes God provides.

Billy's motivations to keep the wolf away from captivity are merited when the wolf does fall into captivity. While crossing a river, Billy loses control of his horse and the wolf, and when he regains control of the situation, the wolf has fallen into the hands of local authorities. As could be expected, the authorities have questions for Billy. When his answers are deemed unacceptable, the wolf is unceremoniously seized, held in captivity, and monetized. The captors of the wolf use it both to make money as an exhibit and as an antagonist in dog fights. When everyone but Billy knows the destiny of the wolf is to die fighting dogs for entertainment in a cage, Billy finds the animal and makes "her promises that he swore to keep in the making. That he would take her to the mountains where she would find others of her kind. She watched him with her yellow eyes and in them was no despair but only that same reckonless deep of loneliness that cored the world to its heart" (105). Even when Billy may not be able to recognize the futility of his words, the wolf knows she is no longer the strong and free beast that once dominated nature. Billy made promises that he could not keep because he is blinded by his desire to free the wolf. The captivity of the wolf is exactly what Billy was trying to prevent. But in pursuing her freedom, his actions led to the wolf's captivity and torture. In the end, Billy makes the choice to end the life of the wolf rather than letting it drag out for the pleasure of others. The wolf has been fighting dogs for hours when Billy finally concludes that he cannot save the wolf. He makes the somber decision to end the wolf's

torture by shooting it in the middle of the arena at considerable risk of health and freedom.

Billy was right to think that the wolf had no place in society, but in trying to free the animal he ultimately led it to demise, humiliation, and lengthy torture. His pride and inexperience led him to believe that he could redeem the life of the wolf despite the tremendous odds. Nevertheless, Billy's urges to redeem the wolf's dignity as a member of God's creation were worthy. When the wolf dies, Billy trades his rifle for the body of the wolf so that it can keep some semblance of honor. In the process of finding a burial site, Billy passes through the natural habitat of the wolf's existence and his imagination wanders, "he could see her running in the mountains, running in the starlight where the grass was wet and the sun's coming yet had not undone the rich matrix of creatures passed in the night before her. Deer and hare and dove and groundvole all richly empaneled on the air for her delight, all nations of the possible world ordained by God of which she was one among and not separate from" (127). This is ultimately the lesson which Billy has learned and been seeking to honor: the beauty of the wolf's life in communion with creation. The way that humans viewed the wolf devalued it. Billy saw this and sought to redeem it by freeing it in Mexico. Even though he was naïve in embarking on his task of redemption, the motivations were honorable and just.

A central passage that needs to be explicated to understand *The Crossing* and the role of God in the novel is Billy's conversation with the Witness. Billy loses himself in the wilds of Mexico after he buries the wolf, eating little and presumably lost in thought. The death of the wolf was devastating for the young man. The formative feelings which Billy felt for the wolf trouble him once he is forced to kill it tragically. Billy's dejection is

understandable. But it is given even more context when Billy's motivations are understood in a religious context. There is strong textual evidence that Billy was acting because of a perceived divine command such as his reference to the "great hacendado" who lives in many places. Billy felt directed by God in his quest. Billy was responsible for her capture, and although he was not able to free her, Billy ended the wolf's suffering and commodification by killing her. While the action may seem confusing, Billy killed the wolf to honor its life and the responsibility he felt God had given him to protect her. But once the wolf was dead, Billy's view of his relationship with God must have changed in some way. Prior to the killing of the wolf, Billy was acting as a steward of God's creation to redeem the captivity of the wolf and return her to a natural one. If Billy was correct to believe in his divine task, and that is supported by the text, then why was the young cowboy thwarted in his task? The wolf was a sacred part of divine expression and Billy was acting with considerable risk to honor the creature's place in nature. Thus Billy, and by extension the reader, is introduced to the paradox of evil in a Christian context. It is no coincidence the passage immediately following this is Billy's interaction with the Witness who has been wrestling with this very existential question for much of his adult life.

The problem of evil is the question which has started to haunt Billy after he kills the wolf. The problem arises when one believes both in the existence of evil and an all-powerful God. Many conclude that if both of those things are true, then God cannot be a good God. Or if they believe that God is both good and evil still exists, then they conclude that God is not all-powerful. This problem has led to many Christians falling away from their belief in the goodness, existence, or power of God.

Billy is ready to wrestle with the problem of evil when he meets the Witness. He is fresh off the traumatic killing of the wolf in which he played the central role in a tragedy that he was primarily responsible for. Furthermore, Billy spent the days immediately following the event wallowing in the wild hills of Mexico eating little and probably spending time in some state of depression. He is emotionally raw and probably somewhat scattered. When he meets the Witness, Billy is receptive to the older man's tales of suffering and soul-searching. The Witness is a destitute character when Billy meets him, living alone and greeting the boys with an account of the last man he saw who was "buried in the church yard" (139). The man is a self-proclaimed custodian of the dilapidated church in an old, abandoned village in the hills of Mexico. What then transpires in the novel is a deep and profound tale told by the Witness of the town, his own life, and the life of a Witness who lived there before him. At Billy's prodding, the man reveals his intentions when he arrived at the town, he was:

seeking evidence for the hand of God in the world. I had come to believe that hand a wrathful one and I thought that men had not inquired sufficiently into miracles of destruction. Into disasters of a certain magnitude. I thought there might be evidence that had been overlooked. I thought He would not trouble himself to wipe away every handprint. My desire to know was very strong (140).

The man is dealing with the exact problem of evil that the young Billy Parham has come to so naturally in his own life. Here in the middle of *The Crossing*, Cormac McCarthy delivers explicit insight into his religious positions. The Witness dives into questions of divinity and morality. The actions that Billy Parham has taken up to this point in the

novel and all of the actions he takes after are framed through the lens of this conversation.

When the Witness arrived at the town in which they have the conversation, the church was in ruins. The ex-priest reveals that he was struggling with the goodness of God when he arrived at the town and could “not believe that He would destroy his own church without reason” (142). He had come to the town to find some proof of the town’s evil which might have provoked the natural disaster which wrecked it. But in fact, there was “Nothing. A doll. A dish. A bone” (142). The Witness continues his tale of another man who lived in the town before him whose son died in an earthquake. The Witness whom Billy is having the conversation with speaks about the other man’s life after his son’s death, and remarks that “it was never that this man ceased to believe in God. No. It was rather that he came to believe terrible things of Him” (148). Through the thoughts of this man, the reader is given a window into McCarthy’s view of God, “weaving the world. In his hands it flowed out of nothing and in his hands, it vanished into nothing once again...A God who seemed a slave to his own self-ordained duties” (149). This view of God as an all-powerful but detached being who morphs the world into repeating visions of violence is a view that seems to mirror McCarthy’s works as an author. Evil is a constant presence in McCarthy’s novels, as it is in *The Crossing* and the entire Border Trilogy. In a parallel manner, evil pervades the world outlined by the Witness in the conversation with Billy.

The man in the story is a puzzle to those who know him, and when he moves back to the town and lives in peril under the unstable steeple of the old church the priest comes to hold a discussion with him. Deep questions surrounding Christianity and the nature of

God are addressed through the retelling of this conversation to Billy. When the oldman responds to the priest's defense of religion with shouts of "you know nothing" and the priest goes away with misgivings in his heart because of the truth he heard in the oldman's shouts. The man tells Billy that the two men continued to hold debates, but that "both were heretics to the bone" (152). The priest was a heretic because he saw good in everything, and thereby saw God in everything, and thus had no response to the evil that existed in the world. The old man was a heretic because he claimed that "God had preserved him not once but twice out of the ruins of the earth solely in order to raise up a witness against him" (154). And so the old man lived out his days pacing and proclaiming the evil of God and the futility of believing in his goodness. But then at the final hour, when the priest was reluctantly called to give a final goodbye to the old man, the old man concluded "that he was indeed elect and that the God of the universe was yet more terrible than men reckoned" because He did not need a witness (156). Billy's interaction with the man reveals that the Witness he is having the conversation with is actually the priest from the story who has turned into the Witness now that he has realized the futility of his views as a priest. But rather than turn to agnosticism, the Witness "came to believe that the truth may often be carried about by those who themselves remain unaware of it...then one day in that casual gesture...they wreak unknown upon some ancillary soul a havoc such that that soul is forever changed" (158). This wreaking upon the ancillary soul is salvation. McCarthy is arguing that salvific knowledge resides in many humans, and that one day when the time arrives, those people "awake", so to speak, and thus change into a state of grace. Indeed, the Witness ends the conversation with this bold proclamation, "in the end we shall have all of us be only what

we have made of God. For nothing is real save His grace” (158). The Witness is arguing that all knowledge of good, evil, and God is in some ways false to a degree because all humans sin, and this sin makes human knowledge fallible.

The only real thing in this understanding of spirituality is God’s grace and redemption of evil. Redemption is central to McCarthy’s understanding of evil. Just as it is impossible to know God completely, it is hard to understand exactly how good and evil interact in the world. Petra Mundik in her article “The Illusion of Proximity: The Ex-Priest and the Heretic in Cormac McCarthy’s *The Crossing*” that “the ex-priest recalls how his belief system was profoundly altered by his exposure to heretical views. In other words, the heretic served as a catalyst for the young priest’s spiritual development” (29). In a similar way, the Witness is now acting as a spiritual guide for Billy Parham, who is vulnerable because of the suffering he caused in the life of the wolf. The Witness acted as a reactant in Billy’s exploration of evil in his own life. The Witness confronts him with the evil in his life and this makes Billy process his experience with the wolf. Furthermore, the words of the Witness surrounding the mystery of evil prove instrumental in the actions of Billy throughout the rest of the novel and into *Cities of the Plain*. The only adequate response to evil is not seeking understanding but seeking redemption. Evil cannot always be understood because of the lack of human understanding of divine workings. What the Witness has come to understand and communicate to Billy is that acts of redemption, not understanding, are the correct response to scene of evil in the world.

The persistence of evil in McCarthy’s works is mirrored by the persistence of redemption. In many cases, the more wicked the action, the more salient the redemption

that follows. In such a way, the evil that Billy finds when he returns home after his conversation with the Priest is redeemed by his actions. Although Billy may not find complete retribution for the wrongs that have been done to him and his family through their murders, it is the seeking out of justice that matters, because as the Witness has just argued, “nothing is real save His grace” (158). The sins committed against the Parham family that Billy and Boyd set out to set right into Mexico cannot be completely re-written, but that is not the point. No action can measure the grace of God, and it is in line with this truth that Billy seeks out Boyd once he finds out about the murders that await him at home.

Immediately after returning to his family’s homestead and finding devastation there, Billy’s thoughts turn to the location of his brother once he finds out he survived from the sheriff. Billy just says, “I aint decided what all I’m goin to do. First thing I got to do is go get Boyd” (169). When Billy locates Boyd at a nearby ranch, the boys don’t have to discuss what their next moves are. Billy just asks, “Are you ready to go?” and Boyd responds with, “Yea, just waitin’ on you” (171). The boys waste no time lamenting the tragedy that has befallen them, but instead set out to redeem the lives of their parents and the horses that have been taken from them. These actions mirror the concepts of biblical redemption set out in the covenant in Leviticus 25:25 which states “If your brother has become poor and sells part of his property, then his nearest redeemer shall come and redeem [*go’al*] what his brother has sold” (ESV). The terms of the transfer of property are different, but the concept of the law stays the same. Boyd and Billy set out to redeem the property of their family no matter what the consequences. Furthermore, they also act as blood redeemers for the death of their parents who were brutally murdered.

The brother's prospects for survival when they head into Mexico are not optimal. They have little experience, one shotgun, little money, and they are facing the prospect of trying to recover stolen horses that they realistically have little claim too. But Billy and Boyd are determined to seek righteous vengeance for their parents and recover stolen property. These actions parallel the redemptive moral set forward for by the Witness after Billy's search for truth in Mexico. The Parham brothers could have easily given up their claims to justice and stayed in America. Instead, they didn't even consider any alternative and journeyed south to try to set the situation straight.

Ultimately, this quest ends in tragedy for both Boyd and Billy. Boyd runs away from Billy with a Mexican girl and becomes a revolutionary hero after the pair of brothers spend time recovering their family's horses. After Billy discovers his brother ran away for the revolution and adventure, he leaves for America. When time passes in America, he returns to Mexico attempting to find Boyd again but learns that Boyd died famously for the sake of the war. And so, the themes of loss and violence continue in the border trilogy. But continuing alongside all the violence and loss is Billy Parham, trying to preserve what is good and fulfill the promises of beauty that he sees in life. He has lost all his family, possessions, his sense of innocence, and the life of a wolf by the time that the novel concludes. All of the evil which Billy Parham has encountered in his young life has given him a cynical viewpoint of the world which will be mirrored when the reader comes across him again in *Cities of the Plain*. But more importantly, Billy has gained an understanding of redemption from his interaction with the Witness that will equip him to deal with the evil he encounters when he meets John Grady Cole in *Cities of the Plain*.

Chapter 3

Redemption in *Cities of the Plain*

Cities of the Plain is the third installment of Cormac McCarthy's border trilogy. It deals with repeating themes from *All the Pretty Horses* and *The Crossing*. But Billy and John Grady Cole begin the novel from a cynical worldview. This is a contrast from the more open and inexperienced positions familiar to their characters at the beginning of *All the Pretty Horses* and *The Crossing*. This shift makes sense, as both characters experienced treacherous and traumatic incidents in the previous novels.

In many ways Billy and John Grady are parallel figures, in others they contrast one another. Billy is haunted by the tragedies of his past and lets them haunt his actions in the present. He is disillusioned with morality. John Grady Cole on the other hand could not be more upright. In *Cities of the Plain* John Grady Cole is the epitome of the All-American Cowboy in continuation with his character arc from *All the Pretty Horses*. At the same time, the pasts of both characters impact the ways they act. John Grady is open to love. In loving Magdalena deeply, he opens himself up to heartbreak and ultimately death. Billy, even though he closes himself off and calls John Grady a fool for committing to such a hopeless case, feels his friend's heartbreak because of their close relationship. Ultimately, John Grady decides to act for justice regardless of consequences and pursue his love of Magdalena, acting to free her. When she is mercilessly killed by her pimp, Eduardo, he fully commits and engages Eduardo in a mortal duel. In committing fully to his love for Magdalena, John Grady attempts to redeem his life, the life of his lover, and their unlikely relationship. John Grady does this because it was the true thing to do in accord with his character. He is aware the endeavor has a low

probability of success, and yet he follows through with it. The difference between the ways that John Grady Cole and Billy Parham react to life portray the author's dueling views on how to interact with evil, truth, and goodness. Both John Grady Cole and Billy Parham redeem their ability to love, therefore making themselves vulnerable to be hurt. McCarthy is making the argument through these characters that it is more important to be true to one's personal beliefs in the face of hard prospects than to compromise for the sake of safety.

The relationship between John Grady Cole and Billy Parham reflects earlier relationships the two men had in their earlier novels. John Grady's relationship with Lacy Rawlins was strong with brotherly love. The two were nearly inseparable and depended on one another in order to survive the ordeals of their journey to Mexico together. Similarly, the strong relationship in Billy's past with his kid brother Boyd is central to character growth. But the trajectories of both character's prior relationships were different. Lacy Rawlins ultimately separated from John Grady when Grady decided to pursue Alexandria. John Grady was willing to forego his strong bond and the advice of Rawlins to pursue his love of Alexandria. The pair did not part in a state of misunderstanding, but rather acknowledgement their paths were separating. Boyd left Billy because of Boyd's own wild nature. While the two were close in *The Crossing*, there was always something deeply different between the two, and Boyd's actions as a revolutionary in the war were infamous for their daring, bravery, and risk. Ultimately Boyd was shot and killed, and Billy spent time trying to retrieve his brother's body. Billy still loved Boyd after his brother left him. Billy's loyalty to his brother was central to his character, he often puts his relationship with others over what he thinks is best for

himself. Ultimately, the loss and betrayal of Boyd have burned Billy and he is reluctant to see John Grady engaging in risky behavior with Magdalena.

John Grady Cole and Billy Parham have a relationship of their own in *Cities of the Plain* that merits explication. The pair have fallen in together working for the same man, Mac McGovern on a small ranch in west Texas near El Paso. This allows for a coming together of themes from both character's prior novels. McCarthy built the characters in parallel ways so that they would fit well together in the final part of the Border Trilogy. John Grady Cole can wax poetical about the merits of horses and exhibit his elite skill training them, while Billy spends time speaking cynically to distance himself from emotional scars. John Grady Cole still sees truth and value through the lens of his experience with horses, and Billy will not attach himself to anything emotionally because of the many times he has been burned in his past. But as the novel progresses, both characters exhibit character change in these areas.

Important to understanding *Cities of the Plain* is understanding the theme of cynicism which runs throughout the novel. The two main characters, John Grady and Billy, were both somewhat naïve in their prior lives. Both characters saw death up close because of this, and both characters lost people they were in love with either to never see again, (John Grady with Alexandria), or death (Billy with his younger brother Boyd). In response to these heart-wrenching losses, both men close themselves up to love and pursue fulfillment in other areas where they are much less vulnerable. Both men have become increasingly cynical about life, but while John Grady's cynicism is not heart-felt, Billy's conception of life is truly cynical. He does not look for beauty or truth on his own anymore but only goes through the motions of what it takes to do his job as a cowboy.

This is perfectly exhibited by the opening of the novel in a whorehouse. John Grady and Billy are with another cowboy, Troy. The trio enter the establishment out of the rain and Billy and Troy examine the women loudly, making obscene judgements, “I come down here for a fat woman and that’s what I’m havin’. I’m goin to tell you right now, cousin, when the mood comes on you for a fat woman they just won’t nothin’ else satisfy” (4). The men are crudely judging the woman simply for their sexual values, something common in their patriarchal society. They are flippant and boisterous, and while John Grady does not join into either the boisterous conversation or the following actions, he is present in the environment. But there are clear cracks forming in the men’s idea of a good time. Troy returns from his trip to the back of the house, “and sat on the barstool and ordered another whiskey. He sat with his hands folded on the bar before him like a man at church. He took a cigarette from his shirtpocket. ‘I don’t know, John Grady’/ ‘What don’t you know’/ ‘I don’t know’ / The barman poured his whiskey. ‘Pour him another’” (5). The men know that the empty sex they are pursuing is both wrong and unfulfilling, but they carry through with the actions anyways. This knowledge of wrong without change is deeply troubling. This is especially true for Billy Parham and John Grady Cole, who have both attempted morally righteous yet incredibly risky feats in their past. The men are in the whorehouse because they are lost, and they do not know where to turn in life to be fulfilled.

The perception of women as sexual commodities is problematic. The men know it is wrong, and yet they continue with the practice. There is an understanding of certain women as ‘whores’ and of others as valuable women. To further complicate this, there is hardly another female figure acting in *Cities of the Plain* other than the help of Mac

McGovern, a woman named Socorro who acts as part mother and part cook to the cowboys. Yet, a central theme in the novel is the redemption of Magdalena, especially the redemption of her perception as a sexual commodity. While the public views her as worthless woman, useful only as a commodity for sex, John Grady attempts to redeem this perception and give Magdalena the chance to seize her inherent value as a person, escaping her life of sex-work.

It is important to notice this is the environment in which John Grady is introduced to Magdalena. But his perception of her is not of a corrupted or dirty woman, but “a young girl of no more than seventeen and perhaps younger was sitting on the arm of a sofa with her hands cupped in her lap and eyes cast down. She fussed with the hem of her gaudy dress like a schoolgirl” (6). John Grady does not view Magdalena as a whore, he sees the victim that she is. Magdalena is young and out of place in that line of work. He thinks that she would look more at-home in a school, and this is problematic to him. It is this reframing of Magdalena not as a sex-worker but as an actual human being who should be a schoolgirl, that allows John Grady to fall in love with her. His perceptive thoughts are revealed to be truthful later when the reader sees the exploitive things which happened to Magdalena to place her in the establishment. John Grady views Magdalena as a victim, not someone who has been morally corrupted and is now working as a prostitute.

The naiveté that John Grady and Billy’s characters exhibited so fully in their prior experiences is rejected in *Cities of the Plain*. The pair is in a conversation later in the novel, after they have left the whorehouse and have been cowboying for a few days. They fall into conversation about their profession and the past. John Grady asks Billy, “You

think you'd of liked to of lived back in the old days?" to which Billy responds, "No. I did when I was a kid. I used to think rawhiding a bunch of bony cattle in some outland country would be just as close to heaven as a man was likely to get. I wouldn't give you much for it now" (77). Billy shows the evolution of his character from a deep desire to live as a cowboy, to a cowboy who knows there are more important things in life. Sarah Gleeson-White in her article "Playing Cowboys: Genre, Myth, and Cormac McCarthy's *All the Pretty Horses*" argues that what is appealing to many about the western genre is, "agrarianism, masculine autonomy, and the strenuous life: the seminal tropes of American nationhood." These are surely the aspects of life that appealed at one time to John Grady and Billy. Now that they are both living these values, they are dis-encharmed by them. The problem is that much of the appeal was due to the myth of the western lifestyle. According to this myth, the west was a place of freedom and masculine domination, but in reality, John Grady and Billy have found it is a place of poverty, violence and sexual exploitation. It is indeed masculine dominated, but this has not led to happiness or freedom for either of the young men.

These realizations have led them to places of deep existential questioning. Billy says, "I guess what I wanted wasn't what I wanted" (78). When John Grady asks in response what he does want, Billy says, "hell, I don't know what I want. Never did." Farther on in the conversation Billy continues, "when you're a kid you have these notions about how things are goin to be. You get a little older and you pull back some on that. I think you wind up just trying to minimize the pain. Anyway, this country aint the same. Nor anything in it" (78). Billy and John Grady don't know where their life is heading exactly, but they know that it has not played out like they thought it would. Their

idealized conceptions of the cowboy life crashed. While they still hold some of the values such as community, horses, and nature, the life as a whole is empty to their conception of it. The idealized version of cowboys they grew up with as children made them think that realizing their careers would transcend them into independent, dominant, and fulfilled men. This has not happened, and John Grady and Billy are trying to find answers now.

Cormac McCarthy portrays John Grady Cole as the person who makes morally correct decisions no matter the exertion required to realize the action. This makes his perspective important, especially concerning Magdalena. McCarthy shows this through John Grady Cole's continued excellence handling horses. Truth and goodness are inherently connected in *Cities of the Plain*. For an action to be good, the person, the action and the context of the situation all need to be true. John Grady Cole is deeply concerned with truth, and he finds truth in his time with horses. In a conversation he has with another farmhand, Oren says, "Mac always claimed a horse could tell the difference between right and wrong" to which John Grady responds shortly, "Mac's right" (53). This encapsulates John Grady's view of horses. Uncorrupted horses know the difference between the right and wrong and they need to be treated as such by those who train them. This is partly why John Grady is so concerned with morals and why he gets along so well with horses. The reader gets even more of a window into John Grady's perspective on horses and morality further into the conversation, "when you've got a horse to that place you can't hardly get him to do somethin' he knows is wrong. He'll fight you over it. And if you mistreat him, it just about kills him. A good horse has justice in his heart" (53). All of this adds context for John Grady's commitment to Magdalena.

The relationship between John Grady and Magdalena is of the utmost importance for interpreting *Cities of the Plain*. It is the tool that McCarthy uses to develop his characters and move the plot along, and yet it is also useful in identifying the central messages within the novel. John Grady Cole is about as stubborn as people come. But when he meets Magdalena, he is a man without a clear idea of who he is and what his future holds. His past is checkered and his experience in romance has been tragic and destructive. Even though his experience with love has been painful, John Grady decides to pursue the feelings he has for Magdalena, although he argues that this is not a choice.

The pair's initial meeting was brief and somewhat nondescript. John Grady noticed Magdalena with his buddies in their usual spot, and they remarked upon her perceived age and on the fact that she did not seem to fit the environment of the establishment. John Grady is in the whorehouse because he is following his friends, he has little interest in partaking in the business itself. And yet this small interaction is enough to make John Grady both remember and pursue another interaction with Magdalena. He must venture into the world of the Juarez underground to find a man who will tell him where she went for a large sum of money. When John Grady returns to Mac's ranch with the information of Magdalena's location, an institution called the White Lake, Billy says, "You better stay out of the White Lake, son" to which he follows, "It aint no place for a cowboy" (59). Billy is ominously signaling to the reader that John Grady is about to descend into a world he is not equipped for, and his extreme, stubborn morality will be met with some other force. It is evident that John Grady is not equipped financially to enter the world of the White Lake because he takes out a month's worth of pay from Mac McGovern, and his cowboy lifestyle does not fit his destination in other

ways. The White Lake is cutthroat, expensive, and promiscuous, all in contrast to John Grady.

What does make John Grady pursue Magdalena? And is this pursuit a choice that John Grady makes? It seems that before John Grady knows what choice he has made, he has already made it. John Grady visits the White Swan and spends the night with Magdalena. In what should be a sadly ordinary night for Magdalena, both John Grady and Magdalena have an experience that does not fit the ‘romance’ of a prostitute’s usual sexual encounter. After, John Grady, “held her while she slept and had no need to ask her anything at all” (71). The chemistry between the pair is unusual for a monetary sexual interaction, and both John Grady and Magdalena view their relationship in a different lens than her usual clients. John Grady speaks to the blind pianist of the White Swan after he leaves Magdalena another night. He speaks favorably of John Grady’s attempts to pursue the girl, but when John Grady asks the man if Magdalena is a good person, the man simply responds “Oh my,...oh my” as if this is an un-answerable question . He leaves John Grady with his general thoughts concerning the girl, “My belief is that she is at best a visitor. At best. She does not belong here. Among us” to which John Grady, misunderstanding, responds, “I know she don’t belong here.” The man corrects John Grady, “I do not mean in this house. I mean here. Among us” (82). John Grady has entered a relationship, and a serious one, which he cannot sustain without considerable trouble. There is a significant amount of foreshadowing concerning the evil of Eduardo, Magdalena’s pimp. The language surrounding Magdalena signals to the reader the tragic ending in store for the relationship.

There are two general responses from those in the novel to John Grady's pursuit of Magdalena. The more widespread response, whose main proponent is Billy, is that John Grady is a fool for entering into the relationship. The other perspective is that the relationship is risky, but the pair love each other and must try to make it work, no matter how bleak the prospects are. When John Grady sits Billy down and asks him to help, Billy exclaims, "You want me to go to a whorehouse in Juárez Mexico and buy this whore cash money and bring her back across the river to the ranch. Is that about the size of it." When John Grady responds in the affirmative, Billy exclaims again, "I can't believe my goddamn ears. I think I'm the one that's gone crazy. I'm a son of a bitch if I don't. Have you lost your rabbit-assed mind...I never in my goddamn life heard the equal of this" (119). Billy's response to John Grady's plan comes with the unspoken context that he thinks John Grady is a fool for falling in love with a whore. Although in this case Billy thinks John Grady is infatuated with the girl rather than truly in love with her. From the outside looking in, John Grady is a foolish and lonely country boy who has become overly infatuated with a prostitute who is an especially good looking and young. John Grady vehemently defends his plan to his friend arguing that "two months ago I'd of agreed with you. Now I know better. There's some things you don't decide. Decidin had nothin to do with it" (121). John Grady is arguing the perspective that his relationship with Magdalena is not one made in a hasty fit of passion, but rather one that is consensual and merits a level of serious commitment from him.

Hidden within this explosive conversation is another glimpse of John Grady's outlook on truth, and how to respond to it. He feels that his relationship and commitment to Magdalena are not negotiable. John Grady told Billy when Billy questioned him that

his concerns were valid, but that John Grady's perspective on the matter was decided and he had no control over this. His phrasing makes it clear that this is not a decision he made, but rather a reality which he is living out. This raises an interesting question: Did John Grady make the choice to continue his relationship? He is convinced that although his relationship with Magdalena may be destined to lead to violence and possibly heartbreak, he has to try it. It is interesting this is John Grady's perspective on the situation, when Eduardo, his rival and nemesis, also considers truth to be important in the matter. When Billy goes to talk to Eduardo on John Grady's behalf at the White Swan, the two argue for some time about the nature of the 'transaction' to buy Magdalena. Eduardo seems to be playing with Billy, taunting him by prolonging the conversation and not flat out refusing. Eduardo ends up talking poetically about truth and the situation to Billy

Your friend is in the grip of an irrational passion. Nothing you say to him will matter. He has in his head a certain story. Of how things will be. In this story he will be happy. What is wrong with this story?... What is wrong about 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. Do you believe that?

Eduardo is arguing that John Grady's professions of love for Magdalena are the passions of an irrational man who thinks the impossible can happen. Eduardo does not believe

John Grady's dream can come true. Ironically, John Grady agrees his prospects of success are low, but his love for Magdalena makes it necessary for him to pursue the girl, no matter the chances. John Grady's conception of truth and Eduardo's conception of truth do not contradict each other directly. In fact, the tragic ending of *Cities of the Plain* proves this to be true. John Grady and Magdalena commit fully to their relationship, and she tries to escape. But Eduardo kills her, therefore making the dream of a happy marriage impossible. Truth is important in the novel, and although it may end in tragedy, it is true to the nature of the characters, especially the evil of Eduardo.

Why does it matter so much for John Grady to pursue Magdalena, especially if he knows this pursuit could, and ultimately will, end up in the death of both? Furthermore, is this pursuit problematic in the sense that he is contributing to the practice of sex-slavery and viewing Magdalena as a commodity? Even more so, John Grady is portrayed in the novel as a stubborn force for good, so how does trying to buy a prostitute fit into this conception of the character? The answer to all three questions lies with John Grady's view of Magdalena herself. He does not view her as a commodity to be bought from Eduardo. His attempt to have Billy offer to pay for her freedom was a symptom of his lack of experience in the world of pimps and his love for Magdalena. It was made because he wanted to end the agony she was suffering under the ownership of Eduardo. John Grady's feelings for Magdalena are true ones. He does not love her simply for her sexual appeal. If John Grady was viewing her simply through this lens, as many men view women whether they are prostitutes or not, Magdalena would have simply been another prostitute to him. The language John Grady uses to talk about Magdalena is language one uses towards a valued lover. John Grady loves Magdalena because of the

beautiful qualities she holds as a person, not because of her sexual promiscuity. Billy tries over and over again to convince his friend out of pursuing Magdalena, “She ain’t American. She ain’t a citizen. She don’t speak English. She works in a whorehouse. No, hear me out. And last but not least---he sat holding his thumb—there’s a son of a bitch who will kill you graveyard dead if you mess with him” (137). There’s no reason for John Grady to continue his pursuit of Magdalena other than his deep love for her. She has a long history of victimhood at the hands of violent abusers. She has been forced to have sexual relations with scores of men, and her monetary value to Eduardo means that he will retain her presence in his establishment unless paid off adequately, something John Grady does not have the means to accomplish. All of these things would turn away many men in John Grady’s shoes, especially because of the commodification based in sexism that many women are viewed with. But John Grady loves Magdalena despite these things and pursues her even when he knows there is a high likelihood of a tragic ending.

Much of this does not seem particularly coherent from a Christian perspective. John Grady and Magdalena have been having sex outside of marriage and John Grady kills Eduardo. But in the context of the situation, John Grady is acting to redeem the inherently valuable life of Magdalena when he seeks to kill of Eduardo. His relationship with Magdalena is a redemption of the conception of women as sexual objects, valued only for their surface level appeal. Where the majority of men would have turned away from the trouble Magdalena is sure to bring and the sexual history she has, John Grady sees a beautiful girl who has been victimized by evil people in power who merits an honest relationship because of the person she is. Matthew Potts in his article ““There is no God and we are his prophets’: Cormac McCarthy and Christian Faith.” discusses the

relationship between the lack of concrete theological concepts in literature and that literature being religiously meaningful. When discussing this concept in *The Road*, Potts says “the lack of fictive theologians doesn’t mean that characters in fiction lack faith, or even that our works of fiction no longer demand from readers theological understanding and attention. Indeed, those of us who have walked the road with Cormac McCarthy, I think, can only make any useful sense of the terror and sadness we find there with great help from the theological tradition” (493) Potts is arguing that even though McCarthy’s works are short on theological characters and concepts and heavy in violent imagery and plot, there is theological value to be found. Even more importantly, the violent and realistic imagery of human sin which McCarthy depicts regularly makes the reader search out theological explanations for the evil which is showcased. One of these theological concepts is redemption. John Grady attempts to redeem the sins that have been committed against Magdalena and shows her the respect due a human being made in God’s image. He does this by seeking marriage and then vengeance for her unjust and brutal death. It is significant that Magdalena is choosing to both sleep with John Grady and marry him. This is breaking the cycle of abuse Magdalena has experienced, allowing her to choose her own destiny. Even though this destiny is tragic, it is one which Magdalena chose for herself. Magdalena and John Grady fought against the cycle of violence to build something beautiful together.

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