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THE MEANING OF PAIN  
IN CORMAC MCCARTHY'S BORDER TRILOGY

By

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B.A. University of Montana, Missoula, Montana, 2004

Thesis

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
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English Literature

## The Meaning of Pain in Cormac McCarthy's Border Trilogy

Chairperson: Dr. Brady Harrison

While the majority of McCarthy's work graphically depicts brutal violence, it often avoids portrayals of subjective pain. Although his first four novels incorporate descriptions of subjective pain at crucial points in the narrative, in the Border Trilogy McCarthy overtly elucidates the myriad ways we make meaning from pain. An analysis of the depictions of subjective pain in the Border Trilogy, this paper suggests, can aid in a more complete understanding of McCarthy's entire oeuvre. This study approaches the problem of pain in McCarthy's work from a perspective that joins medical science and the humanities to show how this nearly universal phenomenon forms the foundation of McCarthy's model of identity.

In his western trilogy, McCarthy shows the psychological effects of pain and suffering on individual psychological development. At each stage of life pain takes on a new ability for meaning. In youth, pain seems temporary and physical, and to avoid it one must not get "hurt." But a person of experience in the Border Trilogy knows that growing old means knowing pain. The crossing from youth to maturity, as McCarthy presents it, constitutes gradual awakening to the responsibilities of adulthood, informed by the meaning individuals make from their experiences of pain.

In the Border Trilogy, McCarthy shows the ways that pain informs cultural notions of maturity, authority, and empathy, as well as individual notions of justice, love, and purpose. While McCarthy's fiction does not ignore the ways in which pain makes life miserable, it negates the notions that pain is meaningless, inconsequential, or merely useful as a warning against death. Instead, as this paper shows, the Border Trilogy confirms our ability to change the meaning of pain so that it affirms rather than demeans life. In the trilogy, and throughout his collected works, McCarthy shows that the pain of loss and the agony of grief serve to reaffirm the emotional ties between individuals.

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## INTRODUCTION: A SKETCH IN THE SAND

I. McCarthy's Border Trilogy: Developing Subjectivity

Main characters in McCarthy's first three novels include a sociopathic outcast with a fetish for necrophilia and a group of three vicious men who participate in infanticide and cannibalism. While these novels contain vivid depictions of brutal violence, they notably lack descriptions of subjective pain. Other contemporary writers, such as Bret Easton Ellis in *American Psycho*, call attention to their characters' subjective experiences of pain with varying results; but even in *Blood Meridian*, "the bloodiest book since *The Iliad*" (Woodward par. 32), only a handful of descriptions convey what the characters *feel* during all this violence. Although very little scholarship has been devoted to their analysis, these moments seem to hold a special key to McCarthy's work.

The Border Trilogy marks a major shift in the writer's career as he begins to focus more acutely on representations of his characters' inner lives. This turn toward human subjectivity finds the writer concentrating on the role of pain in human development. In comparison to *Blood Meridian*, the Border Trilogy contains fewer depictions of violence. In the latter work, however, McCarthy uncharacteristically dwells on his characters' subjective experiences of pain. Instead of creating detachment between reader and character through impersonal descriptions of violence, the Border Trilogy invites the reader into its characters' consciousnesses. In particular, descriptions of pain serve to connect the reader with the characters. Within this distinction, an underlying theme in McCarthy's work emerges: violence severs human bonds while pain has the ability to reinforce them.

After alluding to the significance of pain at crucial points in his earlier works, the role of pain in psychological development becomes exceedingly clear in McCarthy's Border Trilogy. Throughout an individual's development, pain takes on new meaning. In youth, one often views pain as temporary and physical, and to avoid it one must not get "hurt." Scars become physical memories of lessons learned; the youth takes on the appropriate attitude toward the agent of the pain and moves on. But a person of experience in the Border Trilogy knows that growing old means knowing pain. Adults in

McCarthy's world realize that while memories fade, personal scars verify experience; those who survive to old age understand that to make a sufficiently stable meaning for one's experiences, an individual must come to learn to acknowledge the meaning of pain. As memories fade one becomes numb to the pain of loss, but to the individual's disadvantage, for the presence of pain affirms the meaning of interpersonal bonds.

This analysis builds primarily upon three theoretical concepts, which provide a stable foundation from which to explain McCarthy's model of development. Charles Taylor's discussion of "frameworks," the beliefs, experiences, and assumptions that provide individuals with a necessary sense of certainty for making moral choices, serves as the basis for my discussion of McCarthy's model for identity. In *Sources of the Self*, Taylor describes a framework as an ethical orientation (34), necessarily expressed through narrative (50), which forges identity in relation to others through the act of interlocution (29). The Border Trilogy adds to this model by showing that the construction of a mature framework requires making meaning from experiences of pain and loss. In turn, McCarthy presents this meaning as the focus of the ethically responsible adult self.

In "Cormac McCarthy's Vanishing World," Dianne Luce provides important insights into the nature of loss in the trilogy, exemplified in the cowboy's diminishing way of life. In "The Road and the Matrix, The World as Tale in *The Crossing*," Luce investigates the connections between narrative, witnessing, and meaning in the trilogy's second installment. These analyses prove useful for understanding the dominant agents of pain for McCarthy's characters, as well as its most successful treatment. The reality of death causes pieces of the world to actually vanish, and the narrative act remains humanity's only device for preserving this, now past, world's meaning. The loss of the external world, as in Billy's experiences with the wolf, reinforces one's relationship to realities outside one's self, but the personal loss, that causes McCarthy's adults such intense pain, results in an awareness that the meaning of memory exists only as it relates to the pain of loss. Dealing with this pain becomes the dominant struggle of adulthood, and an enduring aspect of life in a perceptibly unstable world. The trilogy contrasts this notion of the "vanishing world," with what Elaine Scarry calls the "certainty" of pain (4).

The common observation in the trilogy, that “nothing had changed and all was different” (*The Crossing* 277-8), corresponds to the inevitable experience of pain and its effect on one’s subsequent world-view. Scarry essentially encapsulates this paradox in the title of her monumental book: *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World.*” The trilogy’s pervasive pain of loss devastates its victims’ frameworks, effectively enacting Scarry’s observation that pain “[destroys] the contents of consciousness” (31). Pain empties the mind of everything except the sensation of pain, effectively destroying one’s inner reality, as well the world outside oneself. In addition to pain’s ability to destroy an individual’s framework, however, Scarry notes that the creative result of one’s recovery from pain, notably signified by a return to a communicative state:

To witness the moment when pain causes a reversion to the pre-language of cries and groans is to witness the destruction of language; but conversely, to be present when a person moves up out of that pre-language and projects the facts of sentience into speech is almost to have been permitted to be present at the birth of language itself. (Scarry 6)

While McCarthy often focuses on what Scarry calls the “world-destroying” (108) aspects of pain, the trilogy also supports the assertion that “‘having pain’ may come to be thought of as the most vibrant example of what it is to ‘have certainty’” (Scarry 4). We see this in the trilogy when John Grady and Billy describe their deepest reflections on their individual experiences in terms of pain. These characters adopt views that define life in contrast to death, with the presence of pain as the differentiating factor. According to this view, pain becomes, in Scarry’s terms, “the equivalent in felt-experience of what is unfeeling in death” (Scarry 31). The trilogy’s young protagonists fail to acknowledge that pain verifies the injuries of the past, validates personal identity in the present, and influences the choices they will make in the future. McCarthy presents life in the trilogy by contrasting it with death, and pain becomes the fundamental feature of both physical and intellectual existence.

In McCarthy’s western trilogy, the protagonists’ gradual awakening to the responsibilities of adulthood directly relate to the meaning they attribute to pain. In this model of development the meaning of pain changes over time, but serves as a consistent



phenomenon that lends stability to individual conceptions of identity, history, and physical reality. McCarthy depicts youth as a state of ignorance and innocence, during which one remains oblivious to claims of the social and natural world. But through physical pain the youth comes to understand the limits of the corporeal self: its vulnerability to violence, and its proximity to death. Emotional pain signifies the limits of desire, knowledge, and interpersonal communion. John Grady and Billy describe an existential pain that encompasses the production of meaning based on these physical and psychological certainties. While John Grady and Billy freely move between categories such as “youth” and “maturity,” McCarthy clearly demarcates these stages in terms of pain.

## II. McCarthy’s Western *Bildungsroman*

My analysis of pain in *The Border Trilogy* begins with the narrative’s classification as a *bildungsroman*. We can call the first two volumes of the *Border Trilogy* novels of “apprenticeship” according to the Hegelian definition of the modern *bildungsroman*, which focuses on the psychological development of a “quester hero” (Jeffers 199), a role which John Grady and Billy enact with precision. The “modern” *bildungsroman* represents a story of apprenticeship which, according to Hegel, describes “the education of the individual into the realities of the present” by which “[these realities] acquire their true significance” (qtd. in Jeffers 199). Hegel describes this development as a psychological transition that results in an altered perception of the self and the world:

For the end of such apprenticeship consists in this, that the subject sows his wild oats, builds himself with his wishes and opinions into harmony with subsisting relationships and their rationality, enters the concatenation of the world, and acquires for himself an appropriate attitude to it. (qtd. in Jeffers 199)

Hegel’s model may be described as the traditional modern *bildungsroman*, which notably focuses on the “development of [the hero’s] inner life” (Jeffers 50), rather than describing maturation in terms of physical accomplishments or social exploits. In this regard, the *bildungsroman* focuses not only on “the hard facts of growing up, but the youth’s soft

feelings about them” (Jeffers 50). The trilogy explicitly invokes such “hard lessons” in *Cities of the Plain*, when Mr. Johnson tells John Grady that the “hardest [...] is] just that when things are gone they’re gone. They aint comin back” (126). Coming to terms with this fact becomes the painful requirement for constructing a mature framework in McCarthy’s world. McCarthy contrasts this model of development with the traditional *bildungsroman* as the characters’ struggle to make sense of their pain becomes the primary impediment in the acquisition of an “appropriate attitude” toward the world. However, the young protagonists go through many rites of passage that locate them firmly within a tradition that goes beyond any exclusory aspects of an interlocutor community.

Phillip A. Snyder, in “Cowboy Codes in Cormac McCarthy’s Border Trilogy,” writes that both *All the Pretty Horses* and *The Crossing* “reenact the western male initiation pattern” (200), and in deconstructing this initiation pattern, Snyder finds that “McCarthy critiques and renovates, at the same time as he reaffirms, the cowboy codes which structure the behavioral patterns of John Grady and Billy” (201). Snyder distinguishes between the “western male initiation pattern” and the conventional *bildungsroman*, by emphasizing that while Billy and John Grady are unable to relinquish their “essential cowboy self-identity,” their actions serve to show the inefficacy of the *Bildungsroman* as a model for development: “McCarthy consistently undercuts the ideological and pragmatic foundations of the *bildungsroman*, a genre committed to the articulation of the fulfillment of a developmental human ideal: a mature character who comes to be at home in the world” (Snyder 201). This analysis argues that while John Grady and Billy fail to maintain a recognizable state of maturity, the Border Trilogy offers unique insights into McCarthy’s depiction of the transition between youth and maturity.

As noted earlier, Taylor’s discussion of theoretical “frameworks,” provides a model of identity from which to analyze the ethical and existential implications of psychological development in McCarthy’s work. Frameworks may be described as the defining “commitments and identifications” that reveal an individual’s deepest convictions about the nature of reality (Taylor 27). Because these beliefs establish limits on each individual’s possibilities for action, they constitute the “frame or horizon [...]

within which things can take on a stable significance,” (Taylor 27). One acts within this horizon at all times, but one’s framework necessarily requires interlocution, which forces an individual to defend an ethical position. Taylor notes that “[t]o articulate a framework is to explicate what makes sense of our moral responses” (Taylor 26). Thus, the framework also constitutes the structure for meaning “within which I am capable of taking a stand” (Taylor 27).

Verification of one’s framework from another party requires the construction of a common meaning from necessarily incommunicable experiences. But the narrative act allows individuals to situate their personal perceptions in context with others and often postpones violence, as in the knife fight between John Grady and Eduardo at the end of *Cities of the Plain*. In this scene Eduardo tells his younger adversary to “[c]hoose life,” but John Grady replies: “I come to kill you or be killed. [...] I didn’t come to talk” (248). Narrative interlocution allows individuals to test their frameworks and establish meaning for their experiences without the consequences of violent action. This is why “often in a fight the last one to speak is the loser” (*Cities of the Plain* 248).

Individuals inherit the frameworks that inform their initial understanding of themselves and the world from primary interlocutor communities such as the immediate family. The ability to linguistically make and express meaning arises out of the “common language” of the primary groups of interlocution (Taylor 35-6). The ability for a youth to “take up a stance which is authentically his or her own,” constitutes a search for personal meaning that is always “enframed in a social understanding of great temporal depth” (Taylor 39). That is, one’s initial framework finds its limits in the knowledge transmitted by other individuals, but the youth’s horizon inevitably expands to include unique experiences. The overall shape of this journey proves common for John Grady, Billy, and others within their various interlocutor communities. As we hear around the campfire in *Cities of the Plain*, many young men from the southwest have taken part in similar crossings.

The boys’ deep connection to the places of childhood, and subsequent journeys into unknown land as adolescents, becomes a recurrent trope in the Border Trilogy, which underscores the movement from one framework to another. Grounded in a shared tradition but based in the need to create a separate identity, the crossing from youth to

maturity consists of a modification or revision of one's deepest convictions, if not a complete substitution of one framework for another. One does not, however, change frameworks easily or without discomfort. During such an "identity crisis" (Taylor 27), "meaning [...] is unfixed, liable, or undetermined (28). Like McCarthy, who uses similar language to describe identity, Taylor notes that this existential disorientation "is a painful and frightening experience" (28).

### III. Theorizing Pain

Before going any further, it is important to take a moment and define our terms. This section sets out to define "pain" in order to more readily identify it in McCarthy's work. The International Association for the Study of Pain (IASP), a self-described "multidisciplinary organization focused specifically on pain research and treatment" founded in 1973, defines pain as "an unpleasant sensory and emotional experience associated with actual or potential tissue damage, or described in terms of such damage" (Hardcastle 128). Since pain may occur even when tissue damage is not evident, this definition reinforces the view that while pain may emanate from physical injuries, it constitutes an essentially psychological phenomenon. This distinction reinforces pain's ability to traverse what often seem to be unyielding boundaries. Vaheed Ramazani situates pain "at the crossroads between biology and culture" and underscores the vital role pain plays in determining our individual and collective frameworks:

A nearly universal feature of human physiology, pain is also an interpretation—not just a sensation but an emotional response arising from the same nervous subsystem as other culturally freighted perceptions and meanings. [...] In other words, pain engages the entire self, including, beyond one's most basic sense of corporeal identity, the feelings and cognitions that comprise "extended" or "autobiographical" consciousness. (3)

Ramazani's description of pain, like the IASP's, relates a concept of pain beyond the body, and reliant upon the entire experience of being. Morris substantiates Ramazani's claim, noting that the too often unheard voices that relate pain narratives "suggest that pain is never the sole creation of our anatomy and physiology. It emerges only at the

intersection of bodies, minds, and cultures” (Morris 5). The production of meaning around this experience becomes the defining feature of adult characters in McCarthy’s work.

Morris argues that a more comprehensive understanding of pain requires a return of attention to the voice of the patient, a change evident in McCarthy’s *Border Trilogy*. Pain, however, remains a notoriously difficult phenomenon to describe: “Because the existing vocabulary for pain contains only a small handful of adjectives, one passes through direct descriptions very quickly” (Scarry 15). In addition to the limits of individual vocabularies, Scarry also notes pain’s ability to actually destroy language: “Physical pain does not simply resist language but actively destroys it, bringing about an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language, to sounds and cries a human being makes before language is learned” (4). Because of pain’s ability to evade language, doctors have a difficult time understanding the symptoms of their patients. But literature offers eloquent and thoughtful representations of subjective representations of pain, “that can be borrowed when the real-life crisis of silence comes” (Scarry 10).

The trilogy’s turn to the protagonists’ inner lives results in a work that focuses on young adult characters in search of a connection to nature, a place in society, and essentially, the meaning of life. McCarthy’s distinctive pairing of pain and subjectivity in the trilogy contrasts distinctly with the “mindless violence” of his early work (*Blood Meridian* 3), and the absence of pain in *Blood Meridian* calls attention to its presence in the trilogy. The abruptness with which McCarthy turns his attention to representations of pain in the *Border Trilogy* suggests that the writer has chosen to take a different approach to familiar concerns. But rather than emphasize the devastating cultural aspects of war and violence, McCarthy chooses to depict the psychological implications of pain and loss.

While pain often results from physical violence, *Blood Meridian* demonstrates Scarry’s observation that it is entirely possible to represent violence “as though the pain were not there”: “while the central activity of war is injuring and the central goal in war is to out-injure the opponent, the fact of injuring tends to be absent from strategic and political descriptions of war” (12). Though filled with bloodshed, McCarthy’s writing clearly distinguishes between depictions of violence and representations of pain; and

these concepts may be further distinguished from suffering. Three examples from *Blood Meridian* will help to illustrate this point. In the first excerpt, the Glanton gang raids a peaceful village. This passage exemplifies a “painless” description of physical violence:

The others had begun to run, old people flinging up their hands, children tottering and blinking in the pistolfire. A few young men ran out with drawn bows and were shot down and then the riders were all through the village trampling down the grass wickiups and bludgeoning the shrieking householders.

(*Blood Meridian* 174)

The next passage objectively depicts Davey Brown’s physical pain as the kid removes an arrow from his leg:

The kid took a hold of the shaft close to the man’s thigh and pressed forward with his weight. Brown seized the ground on either side of him and his head flew back and his wet teeth shown in the firelight. The kid took a new grip and bore down again. The veins in the man’s neck stood like ropes and he cursed the boy’s soul.

(*Blood Meridian* 162)

The first passage is typical of descriptions of violence throughout the McCarthy’s work. Here, “shrieking” and “flinging up” one’s hands signify terror, and “tottering and blinking” gives impressions of an expansive yet focused perspective. However, these descriptions offer little insight into the characters’ subjective experiences. When compared with the second description it becomes evident that the first passage deliberately ignores the subject’s perception of pain.

The second passage uses precise detail to describe a unique character, and these particulars create space for the character’s internal perspective, within which the reader imagines a similar feeling of pain. Even though the narrator again ignores the injured party’s subjective experience, Brown’s apparent grimace and spasms relate his uncontrollable physical discomfort, while his grasps at the ground relate his sense of instability, or weakness. Together, with his acts of speech, the reader obtains a thorough depiction of a person who is obviously in pain. McCarthy’s narrator declines to describe Brown’s thoughts, however, and withholds content of his speech. These modes of description show the distance created between reader and character through different narrative styles and highlight the differences between pain and violence in McCarthy’s

work. A further distinction may be made, however, between McCarthy's depictions of the subjective experience of pain and the objectively described passages quoted above.

McCarthy depicts the subjective experience of pain only once in *Blood Meridian*, and the distinction between pain and suffering becomes clear in the contrast between the kid's experience of pain and the existential pain portrayed in the trilogy. The following passage depicts the kid's subjective experience as he recovers from leg surgery:

He was desperate with thirst and his head was booming and his leg was like an evil visitant in the bed with him such was the pain. [...] He did not sleep again.

The water that he drank ran out through his skin and drenched the bedding and he lay without moving as if to outwit the pain and his face was gray and drawn and his hair damp and matted. (*Blood Meridian* 310-1)

Here, as in the description of Brown, McCarthy describes various physical symptoms of pain: perspiration, pallid complexion, thirst. But the narrative focus draws even closer in this example as we learn of kid's perception of pain, approximated in the simile that compares the kid's leg to an "evil visitant." Furthermore, the kid's attempt to "outwit" the pain suggests his internal struggle to mentally overcome his physical discomfort. The figurative language aids McCarthy in the same way it might help the kid; the use of simile helps to make sense of pain, a strategy common for "mak[ing] sharable what is originally an interior and unsharable experience" (Scarry 16). The narrator attempts to communicate the kid's psychological experience through the emotional signifier, "desperate," which conveys the inefficacy of his personal will when confronted by such an adversary. As we see, depictions of the subjective experience of pain quickly lead to implicit statements concerning the character's deepest beliefs.

As the narrative focuses more closely on his characters' subjective experiences, McCarthy's depiction of despair becomes the focus of the trilogy. What I call an "existential pain" appears throughout the trilogy, most obviously in John Grady's description of the "pain of the world" in *All the Pretty Horses* (256), and Billy's description of the "enmity of the world" in *The Crossing* (131). These depictions represent a form of "suffering" which goes beyond objective descriptions of physical pain because they "involve [...] the entire being" (Rey 3). Morris defines suffering as "distress that does not confine its damage to the body alone, kind of damage that extends

beyond the body to afflict the mind or soul or spirit too.” (Morris 246). The trilogy’s most common depictions of suffering describe a type of chronic emotional pain resulting from experiences of personal loss. While more acute physical pains eventually disappear, this pain remains present in a way that fundamentally alters the way one sees the world.

#### IV. Chapter Summaries

This analysis approaches the Border Trilogy as one complete text, at work on a project that none of the three novels encompasses on its own. Edwin T. Arnold remarks, in light of the fact that *Cities of the Plain* existed as a screenplay for over a decade before the publication of *All the Pretty Horses*, that the first two volumes of the Border Trilogy serve to “create[...] the background histories” of the protagonists (Arnold 228).

Concordantly, Robert L. Jarret emphasizes that due to the serialized nature of the trilogy, each volume, “ironically erases and revises its tradition and the previous novels within the series” (325). Thus, *Cities of the Plain* becomes “a self-referential rewriting of the earlier novels of the trilogy and of his entire corpus” (Jarret 314). This analysis confirms these statements, by showing that throughout the trilogy McCarthy develops the themes and concerns of his *bildungsroman* into a model of development crystallized in *Cities of the Plain*. Though each chapter of this paper will primarily engage a single volume of the Border Trilogy, references to the others will help illuminate the continuity of the themes at hand.

The first chapter of this analysis focuses on John Grady’s development of a mature philosophical framework in *All the Pretty Horses*. Although John Grady seems to revert to a state of immaturity in *Cities of the Plain*, his development in *All the Pretty Horses* rests on his eventual incorporation of the meaning of pain—his own as well as that of others—into his ethical framework. The boy’s eventual decision to spare the captain’s life constitutes a moment of self-actualization in which John Grady expresses his identity in terms of his ethical orientation to the other. McCarthy packs all this into the young man’s terse statement to the captain: “I aint goin to kill you, he said. I’m not like you” (*Horses* 278).



John Grady's subsequent conversation with the judge at the end of the novel shows the boy enacting McCarthy's model of psychological development. In this interaction John Grady expresses many of his newly obtained convictions through personal narrative, and effectively articulates an ethical framework based on the meaning of pain. This process aids John Grady's transition into an adult aware of the pain of others such as his father, Alejandra, and Blevins. The end of the novel seems to show John Grady's acquisition of an "appropriate attitude" toward the world, but in the final chapter of the young man's story he chooses to pursue his desires to a tragic conclusion.

The second chapter focuses on the role of narrative in making meaning from pain in *The Crossing*. Sabine Anders, in *Pain is Always New: Reading Cormac McCarthy's Westerns*, provides important insights into the ways in which McCarthy upholds and destabilizes various conventions of the western and *bildungsroman* genres in the trilogy. In agreement with Anders, I focus on the implications of Billy's absence in the text, and the narrative's appropriation by the stories and storytellers Billy encounters in his adventures. I argue, however, that Billy's ostensible lack of development corresponds to his refusal to create a coherent personal narrative as exemplified in the interjected tales. Because his past proves too painful for the young man to face, Billy attempts to "outwit" his pain by avoiding human relationships.

Asked into the houses of strangers, where he fills his most substantial needs of food, shelter, and companionship, the wandering Billy hears tale after tale of personal history. Like Alfonsa's speeches in *All the Pretty Horses* and Mac's, Troy's, and the Maestro's conversations in *Cities of the Plain*, these interpolated stories add to the trilogy's developing philosophy of pain. Each story develops further the connections between pain, maturity, and meaning. The three longest tales Billy hears are based around experiences of pain, specifically the pain of loss. As I stated above, the impact of these stories on Billy's development remains unclear until *Cities of the Plain*, but in *The Crossing* the stories represent pain's influence on individual frameworks. The inevitability of pain is the foundation of McCarthy's adult frameworks, and as in *All the Pretty Horses*, the ability to narrate one's painful past becomes an important part of personal identity. Billy eventually participates in this act near the end of *The Crossing*, although his descent into despair at the novel's conclusion presages his enactment of the

painful cycle of witnessing and experiencing pain that constitutes adulthood in McCarthy's trilogy.

The third chapter of this analysis concentrates on the trilogy's final volume, *Cities of the Plain*, in which the protagonists from the preceding novels come together and effectively reenact scenarios of their youths. The repetitive aspects of the narrative reinforce the cyclical nature of human development, as *Cities of the Plain* portrays the inevitability of witnessing and feeling pain over the course of one's life. Rather than portraying such moments of suffering as individual rites of passage, however, McCarthy shows that one must repeatedly go through the process of making meaning from these experiences. Older characters such as Mac, Mr. Johnson, and the maestro understand the certainty of pain and the inevitability of loss. Thus, the contextualization of John Grady's and Billy's stories within a community whose members share a common experience offers insight into the process by which individuals must produce a stable meaning for their unique, yet common, experience pain.

The trilogy's Epilogue and Dedication bring together the various conceptual strands that make up the theoretical fabric of the trilogy, and together offer insight into the treatment of existential pain. McCarthy again reinforces the human dependency on interlocution to make sense of a world based on irrevocable loss, and inevitable pain. These addendums to the narrative succinctly restate the meaning of pain in the trilogy, and place responsibility on the reader to validate the lives in this story, as well as to extend this obligation to each individual whose narrative enters one's own.

CHAPTER ONE - CONSTRUCTING A FRAMEWORK  
IN *ALL THE PRETTY HORSES*

I. Locating Pain in McCarthy's World

Moving through McCarthy's oeuvre, from early novels such as *Outer Dark* and *Suttree* to later works like *The Road* and *The Sunset Limited*, one finds this writer's continual commitment to depicting pain and suffering, as well as his persistent development of the psychological and philosophical dilemmas related to these conditions. But while the early novels tend to merely show characters in pain without reference to their subjective experience, most clearly illustrated in *Blood Meridian*, characterizations in McCarthy's later work tend to concern his characters' perceptions of pain. This physical and psychological phenomenon becomes the dominant focus in the writer's work in the Border Trilogy.

Widely read as an extended novel of development, but one in which the protagonists fail to fully mature, the trilogy shows the insufficiency of many "traditional" rites of passage to offer the type of experience by which one becomes an adult. Phillip A. Snyder argues that the trilogy's protagonists prove unable to create stable identities: McCarthy consistently undercuts the ideological and pragmatic foundations of the *bildungsroman*, a genre committed to the articulation of the fulfillment of a developmental human ideal: a mature character who comes to be at home in the world" (200). Snyder states that the first two volumes of the trilogy apparently "reenact the traditional western male initiation pattern," by which one adopts a framework representative of the "cowboy code":

[T]he initiate-protagonist escapes the confines of home, finds sufficient vocational mentors for guidance, and undergoes the requisite series of physical and spiritual trials out of which he emerges tried and true to the developmental ideal of the western man: self-determined, self-contained, self-assured and self-evident. (200)

*All the Pretty Horses* and *The Crossing* set up the trilogy as a regionally specific, gendered, serialized *bildungsroman*. But McCarthy destabilizes this paradigm as the trilogy continues, as *Cities of the Plain* "continues to trace the initiation denouement, or

unraveling, of John Grady and Billy” (Snyder 200). Thus, McCarthy “critiques and renovates, at the same time as he reaffirms the cowboy codes which structure the behavioral patterns of John Grady and Billy” (Snyder 201). Snyder’s analysis focuses on John Grady’s and Billy’s development into interlocutor communities that help define their identities as “cowboys,” and argues that the “central issue” of the entire trilogy is “the shifting locus of American cowboy identity and the displacement of the vocation within which that identity and its attendant values once flourished” (198).

While Snyder focuses on the instability of the cowboy identity, Luce expands this notion into a conception of McCarthy’s “vanishing world” (163), discussed in length in chapter three of this analysis, which is evident in every aspect of human life. Snyder explains that the protagonists’ most important developments in the trilogy revolve around their ability to adapt their “cowboy” identities to “a new western environment” (199). But in the trilogy, the protagonists’ transgressions against authority, exiles from home, sexual experiences, and acts of violence only serve to reinforce the significance of a greater initiation. In this model of development the youth gains a greater understanding of the certainty of pain, the reality of loss, and the meaning of human relationships.

McCarthy depicts the central act of maturation as the construction of what Taylor calls a “framework.” Frameworks constitute individual identities and consist of the “commitments and identifications” which provide the “horizon [...] within which things can take on a stable significance” (Taylor 27). The framework, then, constitutes the fundamental beliefs that allow people to make sense of their situations in the world. Taylor explains:

[W]hen we try to spell out what it is that we presuppose when we judge that a certain form of life is truly worthwhile, or place our dignity in a certain achievement or status, or define our moral obligations in a certain manner, we find ourselves articulating inter alia what I have been calling here “frameworks.”  
(26)

Individuals inherit the frameworks that inform their initial understanding of themselves and the world from their families, because the ability to linguistically make and express meaning arises out of the “common language” of the primary groups of interlocution. In other words, one’s initial horizon finds its limits in the frameworks of other interlocutors.

But as the youth grows and learns, the horizon broadens to include interpretations of past events (Taylor 35-6).

While the trilogy's protagonists fall short of constructing a mature framework due to an inability to validate the pain of the self and the other, the narrative offers insight into the ways in which one may find meaning in painful experiences. McCarthy shows that experiences of pain not only have the ability to shatter one's preconceived notions about the self and the world, it inevitably serves as the foundation for the new worldview one must build in response to these moments of crisis. The later installments of the trilogy expand upon notions that arise in the first volume, but focus on the role of personal narrative and interlocution in building meaning against the certainty of loss. In *All the Pretty Horses*, McCarthy provides a background for these deeper issues, as he shows the way in which physical pain and emotional pain come to the forefront of the developing adult framework in what becomes a cyclic process of enduring and witnessing pain.

With *All the Pretty Horses*, McCarthy turns his full attention to pain and its effects, as he depicts the intellectual, emotional, and ethical development of John Grady Cole. An adolescent from southwest Texas, John Grady endures many conventional rites of passage before finally entering a state of maturity through an initiation into pain and loss. In McCarthy's model of development, the exclusively subjective experience of pain becomes the center of the individual's self-image and worldview, and learning to recognize pain in others leads to the implementation of an ethical orientation based on this common phenomenon. The process of development represented in the trilogy requires communion through interlocution, and the mutual construction of a shared meaning based around the experience of pain. Thus, the mature framework, or set of beliefs which determine one's ethical orientation and self-conception, must take into account the inevitability of pain and the reality of loss in order to affirm the meaning of one's own life, and the lives of others.

Though the topic has received less than adequate attention, the role of pain in the development of the trilogy's protagonists, has been commented upon directly by several notable scholars. Luce describes John Grady's development in *All the Pretty Horses* as an "initiation into evil," similar to the experiences of other characters in McCarthy's

work (“When You Wake” 62). This analysis contends, however, that while John Grady comes to view the world as a malevolent place, this notion becomes only a small part of a greater rite of passage apparent in McCarthy’s work, and presented most acutely in the Border Trilogy. John Grady eventually discerns the malicious intentions of the cuchillero at Saltillo, and of the captain, Raúl, which leads him to an awareness of the necessity of reconciling personal desire with the claims of others. But rather than depicting an innately evil world, McCarthy presents a world in which the meaning one attributes to pain shapes the way one sees the world.

Luce insightfully observes that because the youth proves “willing to endure necessary physical and emotional pain in a series of ordeals imposed on him by the world of reality, he returns from Mexico with his integrity restored” (“When You Wake” 62). Indeed, as John Grady rides into the sunset at the end of the trilogy’s first volume, he seems to have crossed a threshold that should lead him to an understanding of the effective limits of his will. Luce observes the significance of pain in John Grady’s transformation, but his pain does more than restore his integrity, it becomes the focus of his deepest existential revelations. The significant change in John Grady’s character results from his acknowledgment of pain as a fundamental human experience. His experiences of pain and loss radically alter the way he sees the world, and while John Grady may interpret these newly apprehended features of the world as “evil,” the narrative suggests that others may avoid this mistake.

Rather than leading him to “honor reality over fantasy, truth over expediency, [and] courage over avoidance,” as Luce argues of John Grady in *All the Pretty Horses* (“When You Wake” 62), the trilogy’s final volume shows that in spite of an apparent transformation, he continues to assign a consistently detrimental meaning to his experiences of pain. John Grady’s actions in *Cities of the Plain* show that the meaning he makes from pain leads him to repeatedly deny claims external to his own, and his audacity underscores his refusal to live in a world outside his control. Although “John Grady Cole grows toward a more mature understanding of the nature of loss and of justice,” Arnold writes, “he will continue to force his personal issues to a violent and destructive conclusion” (“Go to Sleep” 59). This analysis also shows that the meaning

John Grady attributes to his pain results in another misconception of the realities of human experience in the world.

While the youths in the Border Trilogy frequently become aware of “evil” in the world, their initiations into the realm of adult responsibility take effect only when they become attentive to the suffering of others. McCarthy foregrounds the role of pain in this process in *All the Pretty Horses*, as the novel begins to reveal a theory of pain developed in detail over the course of the trilogy. The remainder of the Border Trilogy builds upon the knowledge John Grady gains from the painful experiences of physical violence and personal loss, which shape his understanding of reality, identity, and morality. The boy initially develops his sense of self against the individuals in his primary interlocutor community, refusing to acknowledge their pain in an attempt to move beyond their limitations. But over time John Grady comes to understand the common ground of pain and loss upon which every individual must build meaning. And while John Grady never fully realizes the potentially life-affirming aspects of these difficult phenomena, his story conveys the meaning of physical and emotional pain in McCarthy’s model of development as well as enacting the most effective treatment for the pain which pervades the writer’s depiction of adulthood.

## II. The Youth at Home

In what becomes a recurring pattern in the Border Trilogy, early in the novel the youthful protagonist experiences the intense pain of personal loss. At the outset of the story, John Grady’s grandfather has just died, and although the narrative understates the significance of this loss for John Grady, dealing with this concept and the pain associated with it becomes the major struggle for the trilogy’s protagonists, and the defining feature of adulthood. The initial encounter with such pain first occurs for John Grady when his grandfather’s death severely destabilizes his framework. Suddenly exposed to personal loss, John Grady seeks something resistant to this reality that can help him create a stable identity.

John Grady desires a stable identity, and acceptance into an adult community, but the loss of the ranch challenges the boy’s ability to find coherence between what he has

known in the past and the particulars of his present situation. The vocation to which the young man aspires requires a persona that would be incompatible in a different environment. In addition, the disintegration of his family leads John Grady to question the value in others' perspectives. John Grady perceives his mother's decision to sell the ranch as a betrayal of his trust, and combined with his father's resignation to this choice, these actions reveal the emptiness of human interactions. In the face of this loss all seems false to the boy; as if in death others have bent his grandfather to their will. John Grady tells the corpse: "You never combed your hair that way in your life" (*Horses* 3). We receive his other thoughts through third-person narration: "That was not sleeping. That was not sleeping" (3). In this first scene of *All the Pretty Horses* we witness a John Grady making meaning from this experience of loss in a way that will be re-enacted throughout the Border Trilogy. Witnessing his grandfather's death leads the young man to an understanding of death as an irreversible loss which clearly demarcates that which was from that which is.

The painful loss of his grandfather serves as a catalyst for John Grady's transition from a framework based on the primary influences of his immediate family, into a new framework for self-identification. The loss of his family's ranch threatens the validity of John Grady's most fundamental beliefs, resulting in his dissociation from these inherited frameworks in an attempt to once again find certainty. Taylor calls this type of experience an "identity crisis" and notes that such episodes of transition characterize the maturation process through which one becomes disillusioned due to experiences which contradict one's beliefs (27). The development of a mature framework requires reconciling the present situation with one's past beliefs. This process occurs repeatedly throughout an individual's life, and existence as an adult requires consistently undergoing this process. Thus, the process of development, in the Border Trilogy, aspires to a state in which the adult individual recurrently adapts his or her ethical orientation, self-conception, and worldview to fit the particulars of the present.

The significant change that takes place in John Grady in *All the Pretty Horses* materializes in his eventual ability to empathize with his father and see him as a unique individual, but one who shares the common experience of pain. Before realizing the way in which pain alters one's perspective on the world, John Grady cannot imagine his father



beyond his present condition. Stephen Tatum notes that early in the novel John Grady's idealism inhibits his ability to empathize with his father:

Cole's sentimental idealism underpins his charismatic presence and defines his naiveté, his innocence as well as his immaturity. It also defines his capacity for self-deception. He refuses to accept that his father's divorce, terminal illness, and harsh experiences as a POW in World War II have changed the man where it counts, on the "inside." (40)

John Grady cannot understand what the past means for his father because he was not there to witness it, and because his father cannot adequately convey his experience; but also because as of yet he has no experience with which to empathetically connect with his father. Introduced in the novel through John Grady's perspective, Mr. Cole seems inaccessible and disconnected: "He saw his father at the funeral. Standing by himself across the little gravel path near the fence. Once he went out to the street to his car. Then he came back" (*Horses* 4). Isolated of his own accord, and separated by a path of broken stones and fence, this image represents John Grady's view of his father at the time of his grandfather's death. Mr. Cole attempts to explain his point of view so that his son may come to understand the changes in his character since his experiences in the war, but John Grady resists his father's explanation of his condition:

I aint the same as I was. Id like to think I am. But I aint.

You are inside. Inside you are.

His father coughed. He drank from his cup. Inside, he said.

They sat for a long time. (12)

John Grady's response to his father's statement sets the precedent for his denial of the necessity to adapt one's framework to incorporate the meaning of the types of existential pain embodied by his father. John Grady sees his father as a broken reflection of a formerly stable person, and although at this point the boy fails to acknowledge his father's pain, the text reveals Mr. Cole's misery.

In the opening pages of the novel, McCarthy introduces John Grady's ancestry, the mythic males who experienced violent deaths at a young age, and contrast significantly with John Grady's father and maternal grandfather: "His grandfather was the oldest of eight boys and the only one to live past the age of twenty-five. They were

drowned, shot, kicked by horses. They perished in fires. They seemed to fear only dying in bed” (*Horses* 7). The first man to die in the Cole house in seventy-seven years, the grandfather, according to John Grady, has neither died valiantly nor passed on the tradition embodied in the ranch. The boy romanticizes his ancestors’ deaths in spite of his self-proclaimed desire to remain on the ranch like his grandfather. Thus, the patriarch’s legacy exists only outside John Grady’s awareness, in the remnants of the boy’s inherited framework. Although the bloodless, vague deaths of the boy’s ancestors noticeably contrast with the more specifically painful depictions of John Grady’s father, the boy vastly underestimates the emotional and physical pain Mr. Cole must persistently feel. As a survivor of the Bataan Death March as a prisoner of war in World War II, Mr. Cole has certainly experienced physical injury and emotional pain to a degree at least as intense as John Grady’s valorized uncles. But John Grady only recognizes his father’s physical weakness; he does not yet understand the significance of his suffering.

From his son’s point of view, Mr. Cole’s every action betrays his impotence although the father’s actions only further indicate his emotional anguish and preoccupation with memories from the past:

His father stirred his coffee a long time. There was nothing to stir because he drank it black. He took the spoon and laid it smoking on the paper napkin and raised the cup and looked at it and drank. He was still looking out the window although there was nothing there to see. (*Horses* 24)

McCarthy frequently describes characters “looking at nothing,” but in this instance, as elsewhere, the image represents a person deep in thought. John Grady’s eyes follow his father’s gaze, in an unsuccessful attempt to see what has captured his attention. But Mr. Cole’s statements after this moment of introspection relate the actual object of his thoughts: “Your mother and me never agreed on a whole lot. She liked horses. I thought that was enough” (24). John Grady does not understand the significance of his father’s painful memories, but Mr. Cole speaks with his son in an attempt to convey the change that has taken place. Simultaneously, Mr. Cole performs an action which helps him make sense of his present situation. In this interaction John Grady unknowingly participates in the mature activity of making meaning from painful events as he witnesses his father’s

pain as he listens to his story. However, Mr. Cole's restrained communication demonstrates the difficulty of sharing one's pain.

Viewed through a window from the street, the boy's limited perspective accounts for his father's observable discomfort, but his failure to comprehend this pain's meaning pitifully dehumanizes his father: "his father's shape or father's shadow would pass behind the gauzy window curtains and then turn and pass back again like a sheetiron bear in a shooting-gallery only slower, thinner, more agonized" (*Horses* 15). Rather than a former soldier, John Grady sees a degraded target. Although John Grady cannot, at this point, understand the meaning of his father's pain, this description draws attention to the appearance of suffering. This distinction brings out one of the most striking signs of John Grady's youth, his ability to perceive pain in others, but inability to comprehend the significance of that pain for the other. John Grady's transition into an adult capable of empathy, clearly demarcated in his thoughts and actions toward his father, shows the necessity of coming to terms with the pain in oneself and others by attributing meaning to both past experience and present pain. However, the world does not bend to one's perception of it, and the boy must first learn to meet it on its own terms.

At the novel's beginning John Grady seems somewhat aware of the cultural bonds which already hold him. As a "son," "minor," and "boy," John Grady lacks the experience and years which grant adults autonomy in the eyes of the community. The scenes between father and son early in the novel show a definite hierarchy between the generations. John Grady attempts to reprimand his father for smoking but gets disciplined in return: "When I come around askin you what I'm supposed to do you'll know you're big enough to tell me" (*Horses* 8). John Grady's relative financial security, evident when his father asks him if he needs money, becomes an important and paradoxical symbol of his family tradition. While his family's support allows him a life of comfort, accepting it signifies dependence on others and contradicts his assertions of self-reliance. In addition, the entire family has conspired in such a way as to preclude John Grady's inheritance of the ranch, which has traditionally been the family's primary source of income.

At this point in the novel, John Grady sees the adults in his life as absent, dead, or impotent, and effectively blocking his inheritance. John Grady's interaction with Mr.

Franklin, the family lawyer, shows the boy's frustrated attempts at invoking the law due to his young age. Franklin repeatedly states that John Grady's desires do not match the common adult framework: "Son, not everybody thinks that life on a cattle ranch in west Texas is the second best thing to dyin and goin to heaven. She don't want to live out there, that's all. If it was a payin proposition that'd be one thing. But it aint" (*Horses* 17). Franklin tells the boy that his father could have done something to save the ranch, but let his now ex-wife implement her will. A proponent of conservative responsibility, Franklin tells John Grady, "Some things in this world cant be helped, he said. And I believe this is probably one of them" (18). John Grady's vague response, "Yeah," offers little insight into his actual thoughts on the issue, but this affirmation of impotence results in the decision to go to Mexico where he imagines he can exercise his independence.

The conversation with Franklin reveals Mrs. Cole's active role in the family's affairs and in contrast to Mr. Cole's presence, her absence does nothing to limit her agency. Since the Cole's divorce "was final before the old man died," Mrs. Cole became the sole inheritor of the ranch even before the death of her father (*Horses* 17). The mother's status as owner of the ranch makes her power real and present, but her acting career requires her to frequently be absent from home, and her divorce from John Grady's father removes a part of what John Grady has come to view as her identity. Mrs. Cole lights the candle for her deceased father, and she decides to sell the ranch, but mother and son do not have a single conversation in *All the Pretty Horses*. Rather than speaking directly to his mother, John Grady travels away from home to see her on-stage, acting in a play, in an effort to gain indirect guidance: "He'd the notion that there would be something in the story itself to tell him about the way the world was or was becoming but there was not. There was nothing in it at all" (21). Instead of conversing with his mother in an attempt to know her story or to express his own, John Grady only endeavors to understand the meaning of the play in which she acts. This becomes a pattern for the young man, as he proves unwilling to acknowledge the particular meanings of individual lives. Instead, he pursues a transcendent meaning that will validate his experience. However, one by one the boy's inherited frameworks fall apart as John Grady recognizes the incompatibility of his perspective with others around him.

As John Grady and his father enter their regular restaurant, “Some at the tables stopped talking when they came in. A few men nodded to his father and one said his name” (7). The community accepts Mr. Cole; its constituents acknowledge who he is, and what he goes by. But alienated from the world of adults, without agency in the eyes of the law, John Grady mistrusts this community and seeks entrance into another adult community through his abilities as a horseman. Mr. Cole validates John Grady’s self-image and provides the boy a saddle, a means for setting out on his own.

Father and son share an understanding of horses as a symbol of natural truth and beauty, and the gift of the saddle signifies Mr. Cole’s approval of his son’s intended vocation. The narrative continues to focus on the father’s physical appearance from John Grady’s perspective, culminating in a long descriptive passage which juxtaposes representations of youth with those of maturity. In their last ride together father and son “scarcely spoke all day,” but their physical features and actions suggest the particular similarities and vast differences between man and boy:

His father rode sitting forward slightly in the saddle, holding the reins in one hand about two inches above the saddlehorn. So thin and frail, lost in his clothes. Looking over the country with those sunken eyes as if the world out there had been altered or made suspect by what he’d seen of it elsewhere. As if he might never see it right again. Or worse did see it right at last. See it as it had always been, would be forever. The boy who rode on slightly before him sat a horse not only as if he’d been born to it which he was but as if were he begot by malice or mischance into some queer land where horses never were he would have found them anyway. Would have known that there was something missing for the world to be right or he right in it and would have set forth to wander wherever it was needed for as long as it took until he came upon one and he would have known that that was what he sought and it would have been. (*Horses* 23)

In this paragraph the father’s physical vulnerability corresponds to his broken self-image. In Taylor’s terms, Cole’s experiences in World War II left him bereft of a framework which would allow him to feel confident about finding meaning in his life, and in the world. Like the blind man who advises John Grady in *Cities of the Plain*, Mr. Cole may believe that the pursuit of desire offers as much happiness as can be found and does not

try to deprive his son of the ability to live and make mistakes. But he nevertheless notices the naiveté in his son's perception of the world. Mr. Cole's framework was shattered in the war, and he projects this change onto the world itself: "The last thing his father said was that the country never would be the same" (*Horses* 25). These terms provide the common language of adulthood in the trilogy, as many adult characters express their most deep-seated beliefs about the world and the self through the description of the changing, or unchanging, land.

Throughout the trilogy, McCarthy's characters explain their philosophical orientations in terms of a "change in the world." Mr. Cole's belief that the country has changed shows that his experience has subverted what were fundamental beliefs concerning justice, human rights, and the pain of life. Experience opened his eyes to a world beyond his youthful comprehension in its capacity for pain. Like Franklin, Mr. Cole now believes some things exist outside the limits of personal control. In contrast, John Grady still believes that he can effectively change the world. *All the Pretty Horses* depicts the evolution of this belief, as John Grady enters into manhood, and a world of obligation and responsibility. Through exile John Grady attempts to break from his inherited frameworks, which now seem changed, or exposed as something he does not understand. Thus, he sets out in order to forge and test the framework which will legitimize his adulthood.

In light of events described much later in the narrative, the trilogy's opening sentence, which describes the flickering of the candle flame, seems to correspond to John Grady's thoughts upon seeing his grandfather's body: "The candleflame and the image of the candleflame caught in the pierglass twisted and righted when he entered the hall and again when he shut the door" (*Horses* 3). The movement of the flame indicates the wind, the unseen force that with little added intensity can take away the light. The reflection suggests the multiple perspectives from which McCarthy presents John Grady throughout the novel, as well as the various ways the young man sees himself and others. However, John Grady remains oblivious to the vulnerability of the flame to unseen forces. Instead, he presses his finger into the pool of wax, and asserts his identity as a "man of action," who will make his mark on the world.

### III. Hombres del Campo

Throughout *All the Pretty Horses* John Grady tests the philosophical frameworks of those around him in an attempt to find meaning in his own experience. In traditional *bildungsroman* form, and fitting Taylor's description of developing frameworks, the first step in the hero's effort to make his own path - leaving home - asserts his independence, and tests his vocational skills. Taylor notes that especially in America, the culturally accepted tradition of leaving home becomes "expected of [the youth]" as a way of "taking up a stance which is authentically his or her own (39). Thus, "the very possibility of this [rite] is enframed in a social understanding of a great temporal depth, in fact, in a 'tradition'" (Taylor 39). Such socially sanctioned traditions actually allow for the transmission of meaning across generations, and attempt to define abstract concepts such as "youth," and "adult," in terms of shared physical and psychological experiences.

John Grady's reliance upon Lacey Rawlins as friend and interlocutor supports Taylor's observation, noted above, that the construction of an ethical framework inevitably forms through "conversations with parents and consociates" (40). The boys' friendship hinges upon a mutual recognition through which each person confirms the other's experiences. Each individual tries out his framework on the other and plays at other roles to find out the limits of their identities, illustrated in their conversations on the road to Mexico and in their contributions to the fantasy that they are famous "outlaws" and "banditos" (*Horses* 37). But when their conversations approach the realm of pain or fear of death, John Grady becomes unwilling to find common ground with his friend. When Rawlins betrays his fear to John Grady soon after they set out, John Grady admits no such apprehension, saying one should be "ill at ease" only when "you're someplace you aint supposed to be" (37). However, the young man will later display his inability to tell the difference between things he should and should not do. Violence and danger have long been components of John Grady's framework, introduced to the boy through narratives about the country's bloody history. But thus far John Grady knows neither the power of physical pain nor the sharpness of emotional pain, that each of these individuals necessarily experienced in the past. Soon, however, John Grady realizes the transitory nature of life, and learns that pain exists at the heart of human experience.

The awe-inspiring vastness of the Mexican desert affects the boys profoundly as it leads Rawlins to openly philosophize about life and death, God, and religion, and leads John Grady to deeper introspection and self-evaluation. Arriving in Mexico, the boys look off into a “blood red” sunset and Rawlins asks, “Where do you reckon that paradise is at?” (*Horses* 59). Rawlins could be asking where “*that* paradise is at,” meaning the idyllic ranch they seek, or he could be asking rhetorically, “don’t you think this is paradise?” John Grady’s equally ambiguous reply, “You cant tell what’s in a country like that till you’re down there in it,” disregards the religious implications and focuses on the quality of the land, and the accuracy of one’s perception of it (59). In any case the boys agree that there is “damn sure a bunch of it,” and John Grady says, “That’s what I’m here for.” This revealing passage shows Rawlins’ skepticism and John Grady’s confidence as they venture into the unknown. Already we see the stubborn, introspective individualism that comes to define John Grady’s character in contrast with Rawlins’s interdependent concern for the external and metaphysical. As the journey continues John Grady searches deeper within himself in an attempt to reconcile the world he sees around him with his present identity, not just the man he desires to be: “He lay a long time listening to the others breathing in their sleep while he contemplated the wildness about him, the wildness within” (*Horses* 60). But while listening to Blevins and Rawlins sleep, he does not imagine his connections to them, but his relation to wild nature. Here, John Grady begins to form his identity as a “man of the country,” and will build a moral framework based on this vague identification with nature.

Venturing outside his country, John Grady remains faithful that his view of the world maintains its efficacy. But while the boy believes that his experiences will lead him to a certain meaning, the men he meets throughout his journey relate the necessity of recognizing the instability of the world due to physical change, personal transformation, and the claims of others. Although his skill as a horseman helps him enter into the world of men, John Grady refuses to accept the cultural boundaries placed on the country which all adults necessarily negotiate. The boys’ meeting on the road with a group of zacateros, cultivators of hay, contrasts these men of the country with the American boys (*Horses* 61). Once again, McCarthy reveals the characters’ worldview through the presentation of their perspectives concerning the land. The narrative reveals the men’s skepticism with



regard to the physical world, and their part in its existence: “They looked out over the terrain as if it were a problem to them. Something they’d not quite decided about” (*Horses* 62). John Grady attempts to read the men’s eyes for their thoughts, “but he could tell nothing” (62). Although he values first-hand knowledge, he remains reluctant to rely solely on his experience, and as with his mother’s play, he can find nothing in the appearance of others to tell him of his life. Rather than uncovering the source of the *zacateros*’ distrust through communication, which may lead him to insight concerning their experiences, John Grady focuses on the external agent, expecting there will be something outside himself to struggle against, and overcome. Having finally found “paradise,” at La Purisima, the boys find work as *caballeros* and acceptance into an adult community. However, John Grady degrades the common experience that provides the foundation for interpersonal meaning in such a community by refusing to acknowledge the necessity of adapting to thwarted desires and inevitable pain.

In *All the Pretty Horses* John Grady becomes aware of pain’s function as a signifier of individual experience and the bonds between individuals, and the narrative indicates his acceptance of its inevitability. But contrary to the novel’s relatively optimistic ending, the boy never actually learns to maintain a mature framework based on the common phenomenon of pain due to his refusal to acknowledge claims external to his own. Even intense physical pain, which exposes John Grady to the vulnerability of the body and his proximity to death, does not radically alter his immature framework. Rather quickly, however, emotional pain affects the way John Grady sees the world, and its inevitability comes to dominate his developing framework. Although he incorporates the concept of pain into his worldview, in *Cities of the Plain* John Grady proves unwilling to participate in the cycle of loss, pain, and interlocution that defines maturity in McCarthy’s fiction. The narrative does, however, offer insight into the process by which pain becomes central to the adult psychological framework. John Grady’s story portrays pain as the foundation upon which one makes sense of life experiences, and one’s response to it determines the individual’s ethical orientation, self-conception, and worldview.

#### IV. Developing Pain

Enacting many aspects of the cowboy code, John Grady and Rawlins embrace the discomfort of the saddle, do not mind sleeping on the hard ground, and although they take advantage of the restaurants and estancias along the road, they prove worthy hunters who don't mind missing a meal. These hunger pains and sore joints provide a baseline from which we can judge the other instances of pain in the novel, the most severe being the type of "existential pain" embodied by Mr. Cole in *All the Pretty Horses*, Billy, in *The Crossing* and in *Cities of the Plain*, and related in numerous stories throughout the trilogy. This is the pain of which Alfonsa speaks when describing the terrible suffering that unalterably changes one's perception of the world, and necessitates the modification of one's framework to fit this newly realized reality.

The considerable reduction in representations of violence in the trilogy, when compared to other of McCarthy's novels, notably *Blood Meridian* or *No Country for Old Men*, makes the presence of pain all the more conspicuous. Jacqueline Scoones notes that "[t]he violence and battles McCarthy describes in the Border Trilogy are actually far less graphic than the images he portrays in *Blood Meridian*" (147). In contrast to the looming threats of world wars and atomic bombs, "the scenes of personal violence McCarthy explicitly describes in the trilogy all incorporate the relatively basic weaponry of fist, knife, and gun" (Scoones 147). Scoones's observation of the "remote and impersonal" quality of modern warfare's "advanced weaponry" (147), alludes to the detail that these more "basic" depictions of violence acutely depict individual injuries. While McCarthy clearly avoids the portrayal of subjective experience in *Blood Meridian*, the trilogy exhibits a comprehensive awareness of psychological aspects of pain, and their effects on the human development of a mature philosophical framework. In *All the Pretty Horses*, McCarthy uses acute physical pain to introduce the deeper pains of sadness, loss, and despair.

The acute descriptions of the boys' initial injuries in prison focus on head trauma, specifically to the sense organs. After a day in Saltillo "they were bloody and exhausted and Rawlins' nose was broken and badly swollen" (*Horses* 182). After three days "they were both half naked and John Grady had been blindsided with a sock full of gravel that

took out two teeth in his lower jaw and his left eye was closed completely” (183). These particular descriptions demonstrate the power of physical injury to destroy the world, as they impair John Grady’s ability to connect with the outside world through sight and speech. The brutality of images such as these in the Border Trilogy, which are notably less vicious than the depictions of violence in *Blood Meridian*, confer the impression of pain due to the narrative’s focus on the inner lives of the characters.

The violence in *Blood Meridian* seems “senseless” not only because it is unreasonable, but because no one seems to feel pain. In the first pages of *Blood Meridian* we witness a cartoonish example of violence as the kid kicks Toadvine in the face rather than stepping out of his way. Though the violence may be gory, the scene proves mildly humorous because the matter-of-fact tone implies the absurd regularity with which similar scenes must occur. Here the presentation of subjective consciousness in the kid’s thoughts as he approaches Toadvine seems dryly comic: “The kid wasn’t going to do that [get out of Toadvine’s way] and he saw no use in discussing it. He kicked the man in the jaw” (*Blood Meridian* 9). In the Border Trilogy, however, McCarthy does not blur the line between violence and humor as in *Blood Meridian*.

Only after the boys’ initial incarceration and subsequent disillusionment does the narrator first use the word “pain,” and significantly, it comes up in a description of psychological distress: “John Grady could see part of Rawlins’ face broken into squares in the light from the grid. Turning slowly. The pain in his eyes. Ah God, he said” (*Horses* 157). In this interaction with Rawlins, John Grady comprehends the impact of his actions on other individuals, as this glimpse of his friend’s face conveys the danger of their situation. Moreover, he instantly understands that Rawlins fears for his life, and that he regrets the decisions that brought him into this situation. Instantly, he invokes God to witness the event, a reaction Billy reenacts in *Cities of the Plain*. While the text maintains an awareness of the inability to ever fully understand the subjective experience of another, this interaction depicts the mutual awareness of an unspoken bond. In effect, this glance conveys each individual’s interpretation of the other’s experience, a meaning that may only be approximated with language. Interlocution remains necessary, however, as a means for situating personal narrative within a larger context of meaning. Through dialogue, individuals cooperatively participate in a shared experience.

Pain serves as a conduit between individuals just as it serves as a link between “entirely different realms of value” (Morris 125). As pain disrupts an individual’s connection to the external, material world, it causes substantial changes in one’s philosophical framework. Morris notes that long periods of pain, whether psychogenic or caused by physical injury, completely alter the way one sees the world: chronic pain forces one to adopt “new patterns of behavior and thought and feeling” (Morris 288). Over the course of *All the Pretty Horses*, McCarthy portrays this process of coming to terms with pain as a perpetual cycle of identity crisis and re-construction. The narrative regularly depicts this notion in the conversations between the youthful protagonists and their more experienced, and often older, advisors. Such pain alters an individual’s sense of self, and forces a reorientation of one’s world: “Our priorities change. We see things with different eyes” (Morris 126).

Soon after meeting Alejandra, John Grady shows signs of an emergent awareness of the experiences of another human being. When Alfonsa forbids their relationship, John Grady sees the disappointment in Alejandra’s countenance: “She looked up at him and her face was pale and austere in the uplight [...] and he saw in her face and in her figure something he’d not seen before and the name of that thing was sorrow” (*Horses* 140). Here John Grady witnesses an emotion he has never acknowledged, and this encounter leads him to alter his ethical framework in deference to Alejandra’s desires. John Grady and Alejandra validate each other’s perspectives, but build their bond on the rejection of external claims: “Sweeter for the larceny of time and flesh, sweeter for the betrayal” (141). The sorrow that John Grady sees in Alejandra, and the pain in Rawlins’s eyes as he contemplates death, prefigure the “infinite sadness and infinite loss” (*Cities* 266) that Billy perceives in the trilogy’s Epilogue. At this point, however, John Grady remains oblivious to the necessity of constructing meaning on the shared ground of this common experience.

The consequences of fighting in Saltillo affect the boys differently than their other agonizing successes breaking horses. After breaking sixteen horses in a day, Rawlins and John Grady feel sore and tired, but they seem to never have known the kind of pain they feel in prison. This distinction lies in their relative ability to control these experiences. For these characters, the meaning of the pain changes according to the particulars of each

situation. The boys choose a physically demanding vocation, and the resulting pain makes them proud of their achievements. But when forced into a situation that requires the endurance of extreme pain for survival, Rawlins and John Grady come to an entirely different understanding.

The prison scene accentuates the differences between Rawlins's and John Grady's emerging frameworks, which the boys put into practice as they fight for their lives, and endure pain according to the whims and wills of others. Badly beaten, Rawlins tells his friend, "there aint a place on me that dont hurt," and John Grady's responds with empathetic sarcasm: "I know it. I know it and I dont care" (*Horses* 183). While John Grady here presents the façade the cowboy code requires, the fact that they have this conversation lets us know its importance. This direct reference to subjective pain, by its mere existence, shows an emotional connection between John Grady and Rawlins. These moments show how experiences of pain serve as anchors for emotions that influence the construction of meaning. In this case the boys' mutual recognition of each other's pain reinforces their bond of friendship. During their incarceration the boys maintain their vows not to "quit" each other, but after prison each goes his own way, with a new philosophical framework created through this torturous experience (*Horses* 91). John Grady retains the view that he adopted in prison, that violence constitutes a necessary course of action when faced with the threat of death. Rawlins, however, embraces a non-violent ethic, and chooses to cut his losses and return home.

Subjected to an unnamed but suspiciously circumscribed form of torture, prison-yard beatings, and near disembowelment, these experiences significantly impact Rawlins's adult worldview. Rawlins deals with pain in a consistent way throughout the novel: he travels the path of least resistance, attempting to avoid unnecessary encounters that endanger his life. His experiences lead him back home, to a place of comfort among his group of primary interlocutors, where he will not leave Blevins's death behind (he references the incident when he and John Grady meet again), but find stable ground upon which to make meaning of these experiences. In contrast to John Grady, who has lost his home and financial inheritance, and Blevins, whose status as a fugitive forces him into exile, Rawlins, like few other major male characters in the trilogy, maintains the ability to go home. As he establishes his adult framework, Rawlins comes to believe that his desire

to live the adventurous life of a cowboy requires the endurance of too much pain, and through his experiences comes to value his familial relationships more deeply than in his recent youth.

In prison John Grady ignores his own pain as he helps Rawlins. As Rawlins complains of his painful injuries, John Grady mashes beans in a can for his friend to eat. Whereas Rawlins simply believes he and his friend will be killed in prison, John Grady says, "I intend to make em kill me. I wont take nothin less" (*Horses* 182-3). John Grady then heads out to fight an inmate that has been eying him, "just to save him the trip" (183). Emotionally detached from his pain, though he recognizes it in others, John Grady has confirmed suffering as a fundamental condition of existence and bases his actions around this certainty. But already we see the self-destructive tendencies of this perspective. Only after losing his lover does John Grady admit to his inability to control, or to limit, his pain; and not until moments before his death does John Grady confess that he cannot diminish the pain of others. Although John Grady realizes broader philosophical horizons as he makes meaning from his recent experiences, he remains oblivious to the implications of this awareness. Thus, the boy moves back and forth between acknowledging his responsibilities to himself and to the other, and attempting to exert his will regardless of these claims.

#### V. The Meaning of Pain

Proceeding through the trilogy, the reader encounters many adult personalities who serve as interlocutors with the young protagonists; and while each of these storytellers and advisors relates a unique experience, pain serves as the common thread in their stories. The first adult in the trilogy to speak philosophically with John Grady about such concepts as life, death, desire, and authority, the dueña Alfonsa exemplifies the adult framework, which takes into account the meaning of pain as it pertains to individual development and collective identities. In an attempt to convey the insignificance of the boy's relationship with Alejandra, Alfonsa speaks to John Grady about the inevitability of loss, and the certainty of pain. Alfonsa tells the young American that "those who have suffered great pain of injury or loss are joined to one another with bonds of a special

authority” (*Horses* 238). Alfonsa was separated from the person she loved and the loss of her fingers serves as a physical reminder of the pain of her emotional loss. “Scars have the strange power to remind us that our past is real,” she tells John Grady (135). Although wounds may heal, physical and emotional scars remain to substantiate past experiences.

In jail an old man tells the boys, “pain for the old [is] no longer a surprise,” and over the course of the Trilogy, each character must come to terms with this fundamental truth (*Horses* 172). In a later conversation with John Grady, Alfonsa comments on the Mexican peasant children during the Revolution: “They lost their childhood overnight and they had no youth. They became very serious. As if some terrible truth had been visited upon them” (232). The narrator reiterates this statement in *The Crossing* as Billy sees in his brother a knowledge of “a terrible sadness [...] some vast tragedy not of fact or incident or event but of the way the world was” (177). At the time of this conversation with Alfonsa, John Grady has not gained this awful knowledge. However, the young man soon learns that some experiences of pain never completely subside, and if one should succeed in eliminating the pain, the meaning of the experience disappears with it.

The physical pain John Grady endures in prison prepares the way for his recognition of an emotional pain which unsurprisingly exceeds the youth’s comprehension. Physical pain proves relatively easy to ignore for John Grady throughout the trilogy. Later in *All the Pretty Horses* he will insert a red-hot pistol-barrel into a wound in his leg, and in *Cities of the Plain* he attempts to break a horse while suffering from a broken ankle. In such instances John Grady deals with his physical pain matter-of-factly, in stoic adherence to the cowboy code. But when seized by emotional pain after Alejandra’s refusal, John Grady envisions pain as an agent other than himself which actually occupies his very corpus: “he felt something cold and soulless enter him like another being and he imagined that it smiled malignly and he had no reason to believe that it would ever leave” (*Horses* 254). Nothing in McCarthy’s work up to this point so acutely depicts a character’s process of making meaning from an experience of pain, although this depiction certainly builds upon the description of the kid’s pain in *Blood Meridian*. His disappointment with Alejandra leads him to a feeling of powerlessness reinforced by his history of failures to satisfy his desires. Adding heartbreak to

disinheritance, John Grady experiences an anguish arising from his experiences of loss that extends the limits of the boy's imaginative conception of the world.

Absolutely depressed and disillusioned after his failure with Alejandra, John Grady imagines the sensation of this existential pain as a permanent condition of his life: He imagined the pain of the world to be like some formless parasitic being seeking out the warmth of human souls wherein to incubate and he thought he knew what made one liable to its visitations. What he had not known was that it was mindless and so had no way to know the limits of those souls and what he feared was that there might be no limits. (*Horses* 256-7)

John Grady's pain severely weakens his conviction in certain fundamental beliefs concerning the world, the self, and the individual's connection to others. Without a solid foundation upon which to establish a stable meaning of his experience, the young man subsequently avoids human interlocution, and foregoes physical comfort: "He slept that night in a field far from any town. He built no fire. He lay listening to the horse crop grass the grass at his stakerope and he listened to the wind in the emptiness" (*Horses* 256).

Unable to articulate his own destabilized framework, John Grady cannot imagine any other, and this feeling of inexorable pain becomes the defining feature of existence, the only thing that joins him to the world: "as he lay there the agony in his heart was like a stake" (256). The shooting stars which "trace the arc of the hemisphere and die in the darkness at the edge of the world" relate to John Grady's intimations of a vast body of knowledge outside of his understanding, and the flashes of awareness that pass with new experiences of pain and loss. Here we see the youth's initial incorporation of pain into his framework, which results in despair, but when confronted with ethical dilemmas later in the novel, John Grady shows that one's responsibility to others overshadows apparent meaninglessness of individual pain. Although *Cities of the Plain* will show the necessity of continually enacting this process, a reality which John Grady eventually rejects, the young man's construction of a mature framework becomes evident in his treatment of the captain.



## VI. Enacting Adulthood

The last of *All the Pretty Horses*' four sections describes John Grady's exploits following his release from Saltillo prison. After returning to La Purisima and confronting Alfonsa, John Grady temporarily reunites with Alejandra; although the young girl chooses the security of home and family over her passion for the American cowboy. Here the narrative changes as John Grady begins to seek revenge, rather than love or the craft of horsemanship, and it seems as if the young man may commit murder to avenge the injuries inflicted upon himself, to Rawlins, and to Blevins. John Grady's return to the town of Encantada to recover his confiscated horses culminates in a role reversal between the young man and the captain. In this thrilling section of text, the narrative contrasts the young man's newly established framework with that of the captain, Raúl.

Intolerant of pain in himself, the captain seeks to inflict pain on others. Moreover, his tendency toward domination, control, and torture show an attempt to implement his will by invalidating the will of the other. Emotionally scarred as a child, the captain has maintained a self-described "way in this world" which seeks to avoid pain by inflicting it on others: "I am the one when I go someplace then there is no laughing. When I go there then they stop laughing" (*Horses* 181). The narrator elaborates on the ethical position of the captain, whose legal authority subjects others to his world-view:

[T]he captain inhabited another space and it was a space of his own election and outside the common world of men. A space privileged to men of the irreclaimable act which while it contained all lesser worlds within it contained no access to them. For the terms of election were of a piece with its office and once chosen that world could not be quit. (179)

The captain exhibits a framework that fails to incorporate any awareness of the meaning of the other, except as it pertains to his authority. Willing to commit atrocious acts of torture, and murder, the captain refuses to acknowledge other individuals' claims to life. Furthermore, the "irreclaimable act" in which the captain participates actually changes the world through the elimination of its inhabitants. John Grady also commits murder, and as the role-reversal suggests, his framework is not entirely different from the captain's. The impacts of these acts of violence on these characters' consequent

worldviews prove clearly dissimilar, however, and demonstrate the ethical implications of interpreting pain.

During his incarceration the captain holds the boy's lives in his hands, but with the threat of violence and the use of force denies his own vulnerability. In John Grady's view, which the captain effectively corroborates, not even God holds as much power as one human holds over another. The captain states, "You should be afraid of God [...]. You are not an officer of the law, you don't have no authority," to which John Grady replies, "Get on that horse [...]. You ride ahead of me. You drift out of my sight and I'll shoot you" (*Horses* 272). In the "rage of pain" resulting from the burning out of his wounded leg, John Grady considers killing the captain, but instead knocks him to the ground. But only later does John Grady realize that "the captain might die" (277). When he sees the captain in this vulnerable state, as just "a gray and shrunken figure," John Grady comes back to the ground of his framework. He will not kill this man because he understands that it will not alleviate his own pain.

Alone, in Los Picos, after surviving these life-threatening encounters, John Grady has clearly crossed a threshold. In an image recalling John Grady's last view of his father, John Grady reflects on inevitability of pain:

He stood at the window of the empty café and watched the activities in the square and said that it was good that God kept the truths of life from the young as they were starting out or else they'd have no heart to start at all. (*Horses* 284)

This passage, however pessimistic, shows a significant change in John Grady since leaving Texas. Previously, John Grady's idealism knew no bounds. But here he acknowledges the limitations that extend beyond youth, and influence the framework of each individual. Eventually, in *All the Pretty Horses*, John Grady sees the meaning of his life in the lives of others, as is shown in his acknowledgement of Alejandra's sadness, Rawlins's anguish, his father's physical and emotional pain, and his remorse for killing his prospective assassin.

After rescuing the horses and meeting the "hombres del pais," John Grady kills a doe and as his thoughts move from the doe to the captain to Blevins to Alejandra, John Grady's transition from innocence to experience, youthfulness to maturity becomes

evident (*Horses* 181). Once again, McCarthy utilizes the omniscient third-person perspective to depict John Grady's subjective experience:

He remembered Alejandra and the sadness he'd first seen in the slope of her shoulders which he presumed to understand and of which he knew nothing and he felt a loneliness he'd not known since he was a child and he felt wholly alien to the world although he loved it still. (282)

This passage describes a developing young man's attempt to reconcile the past with the present, in order to find meaning in his experience. He realizes the connection between people, but feels the unalterable singularity of existence. He has not lost hope; the decision to love the world illustrates his persistent desire to "comfort" others, a sentiment described in the next episode of John Grady's story (*Cities* 204). The young man now realizes the inevitability of pain, and shows an awareness of the experiences and feelings he shares with others.

Rather than accepting the aspects of painful experiences that validate interpersonal bonds, however, John Grady comes to view the world as a place in which some cruel order exists outside human comprehension, which causes the suffering that epitomizes human existence: "He thought that the world's heart beat at some terrible cost and that the world's pain and its beauty moved in a relationship of divergent equity and that in this headlong deficit the blood of multitudes might ultimately be exacted for the vision of a single flower" (*Horses* 282). Here, John Grady attributes meaning to the act of injury rather than to the pain itself, and in this way undermines the value of his experience. John Grady's conception of pain, once described as a parasitic being, has come to include the relationship between pain and beauty as evidence that the world must be sustained by human misery. This despair must be regarded as a projection of John Grady's feelings onto the world in an attempt to take the event out of his own hands. In these scenes McCarthy sets the pattern for the rest of the trilogy, which will continue to scrutinize the ways in which the intense suffering represented in such passages influences his characters' mature frameworks.

The following day John Grady must test this framework against a principal agent of existential pain, that of the loss of a loved one: "When he woke he realized that he knew his father was dead" (*Horses* 282). After these realizations, on the penultimate

page of the novel, John Grady acknowledges that the meaning of his life depends upon the meaning he gives to other lives. As he mourns the death of his surrogate grandmother, the young man seems to understand the sacrifices of others and their impact upon his life. The loss of his primary interlocutor community forces John Grady to acknowledge that the meaning of his life depends upon the meaning he gives to others. When he calls out to his deceased “abuela,” and says “goodbye,” the young man understands that she no longer exists in the world, but only in his memory (301).

Due to the constancy of pain and assured loss, from John Grady’s perspective, the world “care[s] nothing for the old or the young or rich or poor or dark or pale or he or she. Nothing for their struggles, nothing for their names. Nothing for the living or the dead but knows that his meaning for her life” (*Horses* 301). After his grandfather’s death at the beginning of the novel, John Grady demeans the experiences of others in favor of self-justification, and the young cowboy continues to fight against the pain and loss that characterize “the world.” His story must be read in light of his violent and irreverent actions, which result in the deaths of himself and several others. In a structural trend that persists through each subsequent volume of the trilogy, John Grady first participates in the mature process by which one produces meaning, before once more succumbing to despair. In his interaction with the judge John Grady narrates his experience, an act which exemplifies a fundamental aspect of maturation.

## VII. Narrating Pain

John Grady’s struggle to establish a mature framework includes crossings and re-crossings from youthful states of narrow-minded desire to moments of expansive awareness of the responsibilities and bonds between individuals. Concordant with this pattern, John Grady’s appearance in court at the end of the novel, where he tells his story, serves as another step in the development of his mature framework and one which leaves the reader hopeful for John Grady’s future. In an attempt to find out the owner of “the Blevins horse” John Grady ends up having to defend himself in an informal hearing to a Texas judge. Although John Grady says he needs to tell the story of the horse, his own role in the story draws the attention of the court: “It took him almost half an hour. When

he was done he asked if he could have a glass of water. No one spoke” (*Horses* 288). The judge’s reaction to the story signifies his interest not in the horse, but in the young man before him. He asks John Grady to show him his scar, which corroborates his story as a mark of certainty. Here, the young man confesses: “I burnt em out with a hot pistolbarrel” (289). Once again the witnesses become speechless, the presence of this evidence of pain effectively takes their language. Ruling in favor of John Grady, the judge remarks, “I’ve sat on the bench in this county since it was a county and in that time I’ve heard a lot of things that give me grave doubts about the human race but this aint one of em” (289). Offering his ruling on this case of “mistook identity,” the judge recognizes John Grady’s adulthood in the eyes of the law.

Telling his recent life story, however, leads John Grady to deeply question his own actions. Here the boy voluntarily participates in the mental struggle to create a stable framework, which may be effectively expressed through language. He goes to the judge’s house later as a supplicant, willing to confess further in order to be sure of his absolution. He tells the judge he “almost done it again,” meaning that in addition to the cuchillero he killed out of self-defense, he almost killed the captain as well: “I hadnt made up my mind about it though. I told myself that I had. But I hadnt. I dont know what would have happened if they hadnt come and got him. I expect he’s dead anyways” (*Horses* 292). Perhaps this desire for stability proves John Grady’s downfall. As he continues to develop his framework with pain in mind, the young man establishes his adulthood; but John Grady still seeks a rigid and universally applicable framework. His regret leads him to a desire to inflict pain on enemies such as the captain as an expression of control. “The reason I wanted to kill him,” John Grady tells the judge, “was because I stood there and let him walk that boy out in the trees and shoot him and I never said nothin” (293). John Grady’s statement relates his acknowledgement of vulnerability of life, and the ease with which one may exert their will against another’s existence. In the face of this knowledge John Grady believes in an obligation to protect the life of another.

The judge takes a more expansive view of the situation, however, and implies that the sacrifice of one’s own life for another already lost only contributes to the violence. “Would it have done any good,” the judge asks in response to John Grady’s statement of regret (*Horses* 293). “No sir,” the young man replies, “[b]ut that dont make it right”

(293). Unwilling to accept what he deems unjust, John Grady will continue to resist the claims of the world, which he never succeeds in fitting to his desires. Alfonsa tells the young man during his final visit to La Purisima that she has witnessed the consequences of a framework blind to the claims of the world: “In my own life I saw these strings whose origins were endless enact the deaths of great men in violence and madness”

(231). Ensnared like a wild horse that fights against its breaking, John Grady continues to defy the inevitability of pain:

The horse struggled up and turned and shot out one hind foot and snatched itself around in a half circle and fell over. It got up and kicked and fell again. When it got up the third time it stood kicking and snatching its head about in a little dance. It stood. It walked away and stood again. Then it shot out a hindleg and fell again. (104)

John Grady stands and falls time and time again, and as we will see, he will never be broken. At the end of *All the Pretty Horses* it seems that our hero has learned to outwit pain by avoiding self-destructive quests, but John Grady refuses to acknowledge the life affirming possibilities of what he and Billy describe as the pain of the world. *Cities of the Plain* details the consequences of this attitude.

The question arising from the move from *Blood Meridian* to *All the Pretty Horses* is not how does one survive in a violent world, but how does one persist in the presence of pain. *Cities of the Plain* returns to the story of John Grady Cole and we find his answer evident in his actions. The trilogy’s subsequent narrative moves from 1951 at the end of *All the Pretty Horses* to 1931 at the beginning of *The Crossing*, to tell the story of Billy Parham, whose experiences with pain offer a different perspective on the subject. Though it reiterates many of the generic Western and *bildungsroman* conventions at play in volume one, volume two of the Border Trilogy moves our focus away from the protagonist as it stresses the importance of narrating pain and what we can learn from listening.

CHAPTER TWO: THE PAIN OF THE PAST IN *THE CROSSING*I. Adding to McCarthy's Developmental Model

In the previous chapter I began to explain the importance of pain in McCarthy's representation of adulthood, specifically citing John Grady Cole's recognition of the vulnerability of human life as an example of pain's fundamental role in creating a mature ethical framework. The adults who speak most deeply about existential matters in *All the Pretty Horses* confirm the fact that growing old necessarily entails knowing pain; that witnessing pain in others may be powerful enough to strip away juvenile innocence; and that pain of loss and injury forge and reinforce interpersonal bonds. Painful experiences become ways of knowing, the feeling becomes a medium for meaning, and the expression of this knowledge constitutes a performance of identity. In this chapter I explore how *The Crossing* substantiates Charles Taylor's claim that "self-understanding necessarily has a temporal depth and incorporates narrative" (50). McCarthy's character depictions adhere to this description, and Billy's tale demonstrates the central role of pain in this process. In the trilogy's second installment McCarthy turns his attention to the role of narrative in creating meanings from experience through the construction of individual and collective identities, and following the suit of the first volume, foregrounds the pivotal role of pain in this process.

The hermit's story, as Dianne Luce notes, implies that "the meaning of our lives that can be known and of value to us as we live is the meaning we put there by exercising our human gift for storytelling or narrating" ("World as Tale" 202). This valuable observation takes on new significance when we look more closely at the unifying theme of pain running through the many narratives that make up the Border Trilogy. The interpolated stories within Billy's primary narrative, such as the hermit's tale, relate the meaning of pain in experience, the knowledge which epitomizes adulthood. The various narrators in *The Crossing* place great emphasis on witnessing, and demonstrate the necessity of expressing personal narrative within an interlocutor community. Luce describes this process as a "matrix of witnessing, [...] in which we are our lives not only as we live them from day to day, but also as we are tabernacled in the hearts and

memories of others who participate in creating the meaning of our lives” (198). Once again pain crosses the boundaries between the ineffable particulars of a singular existence and a collective meaning based on common experiences. By focusing on the production of meaning regarding events of what I call “existential pain,” McCarthy shows the importance of social responsibility and its expression through a functional adult framework.

The novel indicates that the construction of a mature framework requires autobiographical narrative expression, a notion suggested at other places in McCarthy’s oeuvre. John Grady’s confession to the judge at the end of *All the Pretty Horses* situates him as an experienced but confused young man who seeks an outside perspective from an older man with a presumably more stable framework. In the conversation at the judge’s home, the judge validates John Grady’s decisions, and reinforces the boy’s ethical framework by sharing his own experiences. *Blood Meridian* provides another example of this necessity for narrative expression in the kid, whose confession in jail forms an integral part of his maturation. The kid’s transition into maturity further resembles the changes undergone by characters in the Border Trilogy, as his experience of pain plays a central role in this development.

Luce’s “The Road and the Matrix: The World as Tale in *The Crossing*,” remains an important analysis of the connection between Billy’s seemingly thwarted development and his difficulty sharing the painful experiences of his past. Without a coherent personal narrative, Billy’s life “becomes mere motion, having no meaning beyond the living of it from moment to moment, from one experience of pain and thwarting to the next” (Luce 198). Wandering from place to place temporarily relieves him from the cycle of recovery and re-injury, but Billy cannot avoid the human relationships whose sundering causes him so much pain. Situating pain at the center of Billy’s narrative allows McCarthy to develop many themes that were explicitly introduced in *All the Pretty Horses*, but *The Crossing* more quickly turns to the effects of loss on the development of the protagonist.

As a developmental novel, *The Crossing* shows the importance of enduring and coming to terms with pain, specifically the pain of loss, as a common rite of passage. Although the novel’s conclusion finds Billy bereft of a stable framework with which to make meaning of his experience, he does participate in other essential aspects of



adulthood. Over the course of the trilogy, Billy enacts a cycle of maturation based on his relationship to other individuals, and his ability to come to terms with their deaths. Billy's maturity, then, may be measured based on his willingness to accept the responsibility of intimate human relationships, and to effectively incorporate the painful experiences that inevitably result from these relationships into a comprehensive personal narrative. A stable framework requires a coherent narrative, communicated by oneself or through another. Although the narrative is necessarily selective, a willingness to draw upon the entirety of one's experience proves indispensable for creating a consistent narrative in McCarthy's trilogy.

Taylor's discussion of the function of narrative in creating meaning from life relates the importance of one's "whole past life" which clearly differs from Billy's reluctance to narrate his personal experiences of loss:

We want our lives to have meaning, or weight, or substance, or to grow towards some fullness [...]. But this means our *whole* lives. If necessary, we want the future to "redeem" the past, to make it part of a life story which has a sense or purpose, to take it up in a meaningful unity. (50-1)

To leave out sections of one's past because they seem "unredeemable," in Taylor's terms, "is to fail to meet the full challenge involved in making sense of [one's] life" (51).

Because the pain proves too great to face, Billy refuses to incorporate his experiences of loss into his life story. Like Taylor, David Lowenthal succinctly states of the relationship between memory and identity as he emphasizes the need for inclusion of past experiences of pain: "Ability to recall and identify with our own past gives existence meaning, purpose, and value. [...] Even traumatically painful memories remain essential emotional history" (41). As long as Billy refuses to incorporate the *essential* memories that make up his traumatic past into a personal framework expressed through narrative, he lacks an adult identity.

Luce notes the irony that many of the stories Billy hears prove "parallel" or "tangential to his own" (196), and might serve to advise the youth: "the *gitano*'s extended story is designed specifically to offer Billy an alternative to his despair by validating the narrative acts that could give meaning to his life and to his terrible losses" (198). Billy's frustrating refusal to assign meaning to his life thwarts the reader's attempts to detect a

psychological transformation in Billy, and Luce's general claim that one may attribute Billy's lack of development to his lack of a personal narrative pinpoints the cause of this failure.

Dealing with the past never proves easy for McCarthy's characters. John Grady's intimations of infinite pain at the end of *All the Pretty Horses* have their basis in the refutation of his immature belief that pain subsides when wounds heal. Early in *The Crossing*, however, Billy feels a similar pain which has no foreseeable end. Thus, for John Grady and Billy, despair has its basis in a fear of the uncontrollable future. Lowenthal writes that "completion also makes the past comprehensible" (62), but the pain of their parents' losses seems to both John Grady and Billy to transcend time and exceed the limits of physical, specifically corporeal, space. Because the pain will not end, it cannot be easily adapted into a completed narrative about one's past, and therefore defies the limitations of the youth's framework. According to David Morris, pain sometimes eludes all attempts at understanding because it "contains areas of darkness or mystery where firm answers may be simply unavailable" (26). Therefore, its meanings must take into account not only "what we know and will come to know but also for what may remain forever unknown," a recognition painful in itself (Morris 26). McCarthy's boy-heroes not only endure violence and physical pain, but they learn about an emotional pain of loss, and come to know a despair which outreaches their young imaginations.

Part of the problem these characters encounter arises from pain's resistance to human knowledge and desires. John Grady, especially, cannot abide the mystery of pain long enough to perceive its possibilities for life-affirming meaning. Morris observes that pain "spends its existence moving between the extremes of absolute meaninglessness and full meaning" (35). Even the attribution of "meaninglessness," though, gives an object meaning, as it deems it worthy of valuation (Morris 35). The blind revolutionary tells Billy that the loss of his eyes essentially allowed him to see because he no longer bases his framework on the superficialities of sight, but on what he encountered in the experience of loss itself: "in the deepest dark of that loss [...] there also was a ground and there one must begin" (*Crossing* 291-2).

Morris takes up a similar argument, and he finds that even attempts to demean pain "establish [...] a kind of foundation" for creating meaning from this phenomenon

because “the meaninglessness of pain is what allows us to recognize the very different occasions when pain begins to take on crucial and complicated significance” (35). A bridge between meaning and meaninglessness, pain is “an act of interpretation” (Morris 37), as well as the medium onto which we assign the interpreted meaning. Morris notes that pain “always remains open to impermanent personal and social interpretations,” and we continually revise the meanings attributed to pain to fit our ever-changing geographical, cultural, and historical contexts (26). Because pain plays a central role in human experience, this re-evaluation necessitates a fresh consideration of the deeply held beliefs constitutive of one’s ethical framework and conception of identity.

## II. Billy’s Apprenticeship

Billy models his childhood framework on the example provided by his father, which leads him to hunt and trap the wolf out of concern for their cattle, the source of the family’s livelihood. McCarthy signals Billy’s initial steps into adulthood after he catches the wolf and takes it to Mexico against his father’s will. The wolf becomes the impetus for fulfilling the *bildungsroman* requirement of exile from home, and would seem to signal Billy’s assertion of independence and a step toward the construction of an individual framework. But like other rites in *The Crossing*, Billy’s disastrous journey with the wolf into Mexico results in a desire to escape from responsibility rather than an awareness of the claims and obligations of adulthood.

Although his father validates Billy’s new role as trapper, Billy steps outside his father’s guidelines when he sets the trap in the fire. The father reprimands Billy, sends him back to remove the trap from the fire, thereby invalidating the boy’s autonomy: “If by any chance at all she should be in a trap you come and get me” (*Crossing* 30). As he rides out to track the wolf his father gives him a gun, and with it more responsibility, but the narrator continually calls attention to Billy’s immaturity. The boy and his horse, the narrator states,

looked new born out of the hand of some improvident god who’d perhaps not even puzzled out a use for them. That kind of new. The rider rode with his heart

outsized in his chest and the horse who was also young tossed its head and took a sidestep in the road and shot out one hind heel and then they went on. (31)

Billy's demeanor betrays his ignorance of the pain with which he will soon become accustomed, which the narrator expands to implicate the divine authority which allows it. The phrase "some improvident god" implies a deity whose plan does not take into account that a false impression of the world in youth may lead, with age, to deeper sadness. The passage, then, contradicts John Grady's statement in *All the Pretty Horses* that "it was good that God kept the truths of life from the young as they were starting out or else they'd have no heart to start at all" (284). The narrator seems to have become more cynical in the second volume and highlights the fact that although Billy feels that the responsibilities placed on him by his family have made him a man, so far in *The Crossing* he remains unaware of the dreadful inevitability of emotional pain. This does not mean, however, that the narrative proves that moments of such naïve joyfulness should be regarded as somehow detrimental to the maturation of the youth, or as meaningless and idealistic. The narrative calls attention to the transience of this youthful state, and shows that the knowledge gained through experiences of intense pain inalterably change the way one sees the world. Capturing the wolf and disobeying his father serve as small steps in Billy's rite of passage, but until he gains the knowledge imparted through pain, he remains stuck in between the stages of youth and maturity.

The interaction with the rancher who, along with his wife, treats the wolf's wounded forepaw calls attention to Billy's liminal state as he seemingly changes from boy to man and back at the whim of his interlocutors. The man's eventual decision not to tell Billy's father of the young man's plans, shows his acceptance of Billy as an adult, a person responsible for his own decisions. But as Billy leaves the homestead, the narrator draws our attention to the image of the adolescent adventurer headed into an unknown darkness: "The boy raised one hand and reined the horse about and set out across the darkening land with the wolf hobbling behind" (*Crossing* 72). The adult world is dark and dangerous beyond Billy's understanding, and leaving the safety of the rancher's homestead, the boy and his captive companions become "swallowed up and lost [...] in the oncoming night" (72). Billy's situation, in regard to the wolf, illustrates the proximity of dangers that so far have been kept perilously at bay. The boy yet sustains a

sense of control over his world, although he actually exerts his domination over this deadly predator with only strong will and a short rope, the inadequacies of which the narrative makes obvious in this first section of the novel.

The crossing from youth to adulthood will become for Billy a descent into a world darkened by painful experience, a journey which reveals the insufficiencies of traditional rites of passage. Immediately following the image of the boy descending into darkness, the narrator ironically indicates Billy's manhood while drawing attention to the ineffectiveness of such formerly meaningful signifiers in the image of the fenceline:

They rode up off the plain in the final dying light man and wolf and horse over a terraceland of low hills much eroded by the wind and they crossed through a fenceline or crossed where a fenceline once had been, the wires long down and rolled and carried off. (*Crossing* 73)

Although the signifier, "man," reiterates the rancher's acceptance of Billy as a man, the broken fenceline betrays the impotence of the conventional rite of passage of leaving home. This image fits into a prominent motif in the trilogy, which Luce calls the "vanishing world" ("Vanishing World" 163). This notion will be thoroughly discussed in the next chapter as it relates to the cowboys' loss of their way of life. Here the "vanishing world" becomes evident to the reader well before it has meaning for Billy. These fences no longer serve their intended purpose, and Billy's ease in crossing them only reinforces his naïve plan to take the wolf to the mountains. Over the course of the novel, Billy crosses many boundaries, often without his knowledge of their existence. These transgressions result in the death of the wolf, a traumatic event to be sure, and an incident Billy barely survives. Although the wolf's death contrasts significantly with those of Billy's parents, this first experience of the pain of loss provides a point of departure for analyzing his developing framework.

Although Billy seems to feel a special affinity for the wolf, this captive animal does not fulfill the fundamental role in human relationships, that of interlocutor. Billy seems to communicate with the wolf physically, but the wolf remains unable to stand as witness for herself or for Billy due to her inability to communicate through language. Billy's attempts at stewardship unfortunately leave the wolf worse off than before, and each decision Billy makes marks only another transgression. Billy remains oblivious to

the inadequacies of the wolf as an interlocutor and witness, and similarly ignores the cultural boundaries he trespasses by taking the wolf to Mexico. Billy cannot justify any relationship to the wolf, and once in Mexico he repeatedly states, untruthfully, that the wolf is “property entrusted into his care” (*Crossing* 99).

Stepping into the ring after Billy takes possession of the dying wolf, “the young hacendado” asks the young man why he brought the wolf to this place, but Billy has “no answer” (*Crossing* 118). Billy cannot explain his situation, or his motivation, because, he “never thought about this country one way or the other” (119). Having crossed boundaries of which he remains unaware, Billy enters another culture, and interlocutor community, in which his framework is revealed to be insufficient. In this scene Billy realizes a broader “horizon,” within which he must re-negotiate his basic conception of the world. Billy eventually appeals to his antagonist, maintaining the wolf’s ignorance of such human contrivances. But the young hacendado tells Billy that while the wolf may know nothing of international boundaries, “whatever the wolf knew or did not know was irrelevant [...] the boundary stood without regard” (119). Equally oblivious to the meaning of geographical and cultural boundaries, Billy does not choose to engage this new horizon, but to escape into an imaginary past where he may be free from this terrible new knowledge.

When the men take the wolf from Billy, the youth becomes aware of boundaries that exist outside his control. His later decision to enter into the ring signifies his acceptance of this situation and he makes the decision to kill the wolf because he believes that the other young man will shoot her. He unchains the wolf and in this moment Billy looks “*like a man standing on a scaffold seeking in the crowd some likeness to his own heart,*” and the aguacil steps in and saves the confused boy (*Crossing* 120; emphasis added). Here Billy shows a willingness to accept the consequences of his actions, a mark of maturity, but his willingness to go to death for a doomed prospect only reinforces his immaturity because it negates the meaning of his own life in favor of a lost cause. Made aware of other dimensions of the world, represented by the claims of others, Billy must modify his framework. His response to the death of the wolf signifies the limits of his understanding and introduces the reader to the pattern of behavior he demonstrates throughout the trilogy after events of such serious consequence.

The vision Billy sees as he holds the lifeless body of the wolf bears a distinct resemblance to John Grady's thoughts at the end of *All the Pretty Horses* and signifies a similar state of despair. In this passage we witness Billy's first attempt at making meaning from the excruciating experience of loss:

He took up her stiff head out of the leaves and held it or he reached to hold what cannot be held, what already ran among the mountains at once terrible and of a great beauty, like flowers that feed on flesh. What blood and bone are made of but can themselves not make on any altar nor by any wound of war. What we may well believe has power to cut and shape and hollow out the dark form of the world surely if wind can, if rain can. But which cannot be held never be held and is no flower but is swift and a huntress and the wind itself is in terror of it and the world cannot lose it. (*Crossing* 127)

In this initial experience of loss, Billy sees the fundamental paradox John Grady recognizes after killing the doe, that the world's "terrible" qualities, such as pain and loss, destroy the "beautiful" aspects of life. The carnivorous flowers evoke John Grady's similar symbol of ephemeral beauty, and the two young men similarly imagine an essence beyond human understanding, which is appealing and vicious, as well as resistant to human will. One of the few philosophical passages from Billy's perspective, the thought attempts to incorporate the philosophy of Don Arnulfo, who has previously told Billy the metaphor of desire as a snowflake, which disappears upon the instance of its captivity. As Luce notes, Billy experiences "moments of awareness of an essential aspect of man's tragic place within the world—his complicity, even with the best of intentions, in the destruction of the world he loves" ("Vanishing World" 186). These insights implicitly challenge indefinite notion that "the world cannot lose it." Soon Billy is reacquainted with the loss he first experienced with the death of his sister, as his family's violent end demonstrates the fact that human life can be lost.

Strangely deified, in death the wolf becomes the center of creation, as well as unified with all else: "[d]eer 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" (*Crossing* 127). In contrast to John Grady, whose contemplation of the doe's death leads him to reconsider the human relationships in his

life, Billy's contemplation of the wolf's death leads him to forsake human relationships, to refuse the responsibilities of adulthood: "He wandered on into the mountains. He whittled a bow from a holly limb, made arrows from cane. He thought to become again the child he never was" (129). When confronted with death, and the pain of loss, Billy seeks to return to a state of innocence, but the fascinating phrase that concludes this quote states that Billy cannot return to a state of childhood because it has never existed for him. Adhering to the pattern of development demonstrated throughout the trilogy, the statement implies that some incident of great magnitude must have altered his early framework in such a way as to make the boy aware of the certainty of pain and the fact of loss. The death of Billy's sister, occurring early in the boy's life, may constitute such an event, and would certainly exemplify the type of transformative pain found elsewhere in the trilogy. References to her death occur quite often, beginning with the second sentence of *The Crossing* and culminating with the detailed description of Billy's dream in the Epilogue. Consequently, Billy's most significant change in *The Crossing* occurs through his eventual willingness to revisit this experience through language, an event discussed later in this chapter. Although the novel's ending portrays Billy in a state of despair, the narrative exhibits the process through which one produces meaning.

Seeking solace and transformation in nature, and desirous of a spiritual union with the wolf, Billy follows a commonly prescribed course in American literature as he exhibits signs of what Richard Slotkin calls the "Boone-Bumppo myth," in which a character gains a "reverence for all life" as he takes refuge in the American wilderness (507). Arnold finds a similar, though more spiritual variation on this myth in the trilogy, which he describes as a union of "Native American cosmology" and Christianity à la Boehme ("McCarthy and the Sacred" 217). According to Arnold, the trilogy asks "that we 'relinquish' this 'myth' [of human apartness]" and "alter our anthropomorphic view of existence, that we acknowledge and engage our oneness with the natural, atomic, and finally cosmic world" (217). The wolf's matrix represents the interconnectedness and unity of what Boehme so precisely names, "everything," an observation which seems to correspond to Billy's naïve thoughts concerning the wolf (Arnold 222). But McCarthy stresses the insufficiency of the traditional rite of passage of communing with nature and



the impossibility of empathy between humans and animals due to a lack of common language.

The senseless, though symbolic, aggression toward the hawk constitutes a complete denial of the ethic Billy enacted when attempting to save the wolf. However, this act of violence does seem to incite in Billy a moral impulse to seek retribution for his role in the death of the hawk and the wolf: he makes “a cut in the heel of his hand with his knife and watche[s] the slow blood dropping on the stone” (*Crossing* 130). No longer does communion with, or violence toward, nature suffice for developing a mature framework that remains functional in the face of what Billy views as the inevitability of meaningless pain and arbitrary violence. Furthermore, the violence Billy inflicts on himself proves even less meaningful in the future; when a girl reads Billy’s palm later in the novel there is no mention of a scar, and no memory called forth. Also, due to his solitude, Billy has no interlocutor community within which to articulate his sense of self. When Billy comes upon the hermit, the man immediately recognizes the youth’s state of disorientation and tells the boy he is lost (139).

Taylor refers to the framework as an “orientation” (48), and Billy’s perception of the landscape after he kills the hawk exhibits his disorientation: he sees the river “running backwards. That or the sun was setting in the east behind him” (*Crossing* 130). In Billy’s view the world itself has changed, life no longer fits his conception of it. The pain he feels has so completely upset Billy’s view of the world that he becomes convinced that natural laws no longer apply. He waits to “see what the sun would do or what the river” in an attempt to find some meaning for this change from the natural world (130). But the river’s illusion only reinforces Billy’s inability to find meaning in the natural world except that which he projects onto it. The pain of loss he later feels for his parents and sees in Boyd’s body destroys his delusion that his pain results from a change in the world. Billy’s experience provides evidence for the view that pain remains one of the few consistencies in an individual’s life experience. In the trilogy the process of narrating one’s past marks an important stage in the development of a mature framework and an adult identity.

### III. The Brothers' Reunion

Reunited, the brothers speak little of their parent's deaths and Billy does not mention the wolf, even when Boyd asks what happened to his saddle. Boyd's confession that the marauders called out his name, "like we was friends," marks one of the only fragments of pain narrative either of the boys relates to the other (*Crossing* 173). Billy's response, "go to sleep," shows his disinclination toward hearing his brother's story (173). Billy does ask Boyd later what's on his mind, and says, "[i]t wasnt nobody's fault" (177), but the double negative resolves to a positive and only reinforces the guilt that each of the boys feels. The older brother encourages the younger to put the thought of their parents' deaths out of his mind: "you'll just make yourself crazy," Billy says (177). Boyd's response, "you dont have to try and make it better than what it is," shows a sensibility similar to John Grady's (173). The younger, though more experienced, brother, views his pain as a part of life, or at least recognizes that the event was not meaningless: "It is what it is" (173).

In a later conversation with Billy, Boyd insinuates that he gained an unspeakable knowledge by witnessing his parents' deaths, something that cannot be known except through experience. The younger boy tells his older brother that it "aint no use you askin me a bunch of stuff" (*Crossing* 175), but the dialogue that follows Billy's statement, "You're lucky you aint dead too" (176), indicates Boyd's awareness of the life-changing effects of pain depicted throughout the trilogy. Traumatized and depressed, Boyd replies, "I dont know what's so lucky about it" (176). And when Billy condescendingly states, "That's a ignorant thing to say" (176), Boyd puts an end to the conversation by ominously invoking Billy's relative inexperience: "You dont know." According to Boyd, Billy's experiences with the wolf do not compare with the violence Boyd witnesses, and neither young man proves willing to tell the story of his experience. The narrator responds to Billy's unanswered question, "What dont I know," adding: "But Boyd didn't say what it was he didnt know." Here the brothers fail to find common ground in their experiences; though united, their pasts remain separate, and uncertain.

Jacqueline Scoones notes that in McCarthy's trilogy, "characters who suffer loss do so not with operatic grief, but with intensely private pain" (142), and here Boyd

provides evidence for this statement. But the pain Boyd feels is no secret to adults in McCarthy's world. Although it may be evident in others, it exceeds the comprehension of the uninitiated. The knowledge obtained through witnessing such a painful event has become apparent in Boyd's physical features:

He looked up. His pale hair looked white. He looked fourteen going on some age that never was. He looked as if he'd been sitting there and God had made the trees and rocks around him. He looked like his own reincarnation and then his own again. Above all else he looked to be filled with a terrible sadness. As if he harbored news of some horrendous loss that no one else had heard of yet. Some vast tragedy not of fact or incident or event but of the way the world was.

(*Crossing* 177)

After witnessing his parent's deaths, Boyd exhibits a countenance that suggests to Billy the kind of ubiquitous, and personal pain that John Grady Cole imagines in *All the Pretty Horses*. This description recalls the eye contact between Boyd and the Indian which indicates Boyd's early loss of childhood innocence. In the Indian's eyes Boyd sees the setting sun and seems to have an epiphany as he becomes aware of his own mortality. Using the common metaphor of the setting sun as a symbol for death, McCarthy depicts Boyd's recognition of his own vulnerability in the eyes of another: "He stood twinned in those dark wells with hair so pale, so thin and strange, the selfsame child. As if it were some cognate child to him that had been lost who now stood windowed away in another world where the red sun sank eternally" (*Crossing* 6). In this moment Boyd understands that "beyond the wall of that antique gaze [...] there could be no way back forever," and already shows an awareness of the information imparted to Billy in the interpolated stories (6). We witness ourselves in the other, and understand our mortality through a realization of the precarious situation in which life exists. Witnessing and/or experiencing intense pain, McCarthy shows, radically alters one's ethical framework and forces a redefinition of identity. The meaning we make from pain determines our response, which, in turn, becomes a performance of identity.

After surviving a nearly fatal gunshot wound, Boyd does not wish to recover their horses and return home. Instead, if the corrido contains some truth, Boyd chooses, like John Grady in *Cities of the Plain*, to act on behalf of others. Both Boyd and John Grady

possess exceptional skill as horsemen and strive toward a marriage-like status in their relationships with women, and these characteristics uphold Western American literary conventions which traditionally mark the entrance into manhood. While John Grady will prevent Magdalena's attempt to share her personal narrative in *Cities of the Plain*, his openness to Alejandra's emotion, like Boyd's heart-to-heart interlocution with the girl, constitute genuine attempts at mature communication. However, these two young men also exhibit a tendency to try and fit the world to their desires, a characteristic of immaturity in the world portrayed in the trilogy. The ganadero says of Boyd: "[he] is young enough to believe that the past still exists [...]. That the injustices within it await his remedy" (*Crossing* 202). While Boyd remains too aware of the past and desires to achieve retributive justice, Billy attempts to minimize the meaning of the past, and merely focuses on the task at hand, recovering horses. But the ganadero does not take into account that the present grows out of the past and that while changing the past remains impossible, its meaning certainly affects how one may act in the future.

Though eager to take action in the wolf episode and in the scene in which "the indian" asks the boys for food, Billy responds to his emotional pain not with an active desire for revenge or justice, but with sadness and guilt which lead to apathy and inaction (*Crossing* 5). Here Billy begins to show a pattern of deflecting personal encounters in order to avoid the pain of loss which becomes more evident in *Cities of the Plain*. Boyd's injury, however, marks one of the few times that Billy shows empathy for another human being, and his emotions at the sight of his brother's pain and vulnerability reinforce the meaning of their bond. Boyd's subsequent disappearance only reinforces Billy's depression over the impermanence of life and the inevitability of loss and grief. From another perspective, however, Boyd's disappearance shows a development into a more mature interlocutor who expresses a coherent framework incorporative of the painful events of his past. The girl tells Billy that he thinks he knows Boyd but that in fact he does not and Billy defends himself arguing that he knew "things about his brother that only his family could know" (*Crossing* 323). But in fact the girl and Boyd share secrets unknown to Billy, especially his opinions and beliefs which make up his developing framework.

Billy's despair permeates *The Crossing*, and although he seems to have overcome it by the beginning of *Cities of the Plain*, life seems to lose meaning for him again after John Grady's death. Billy thus provides a negative example of the necessity for narrative in the construction of identity as his lack of a mature framework may be attributed to his refusal to incorporate the painful events in his life into a narrative which assigns meaning to the past, gives one direction into the future, and gives one a solid ground from which to make decisions in the present. Billy's protracted struggle through adolescence in *The Crossing* contains many similarities to John Grady's development in *All the Pretty Horses*. But the Parham boys experience more abrupt, violent, and seemingly arbitrary loss in a much shorter period of time than we find in Rawlins or John Grady. In *The Crossing*, McCarthy picks up with Billy's emotional pain where he left off with John Grady, and the bulk of the novel depicts a protagonist struggling with the inevitability of pain and the inconsequentiality of personal desire. And while *All the Pretty Horses* briefly alludes to the importance of narrative self-expression and witnessing in John Grady's confession to the judge, *The Crossing* foregrounds these themes in long, meta-fictional stories.

The death of the wolf, and to a greater extent Boyd's disappearance, result in Billy's dissociation from other people, an alienation reproduced by the narrative itself. As Billy's despair deepens, he becomes little more than a focal point around which the events of his life occur for the benefit of the reader. Almost unresponsive to the events around him, and seemingly unaffected by the pervasive violence of his environment, Billy provides little subjectivity for the reader to follow, not unlike the kid in *Blood Meridian*.

Sabine Anders perceptively notes that McCarthy shifts the narrative attention "from the perceived to the perceiver" (155), from "the actor of the Western tale (Boyd) to its spectator (Billy and the reader)" (151). Boyd more adequately fulfills the conventions of a western hero, and Billy becomes his witness. The interpolated tales then serve to complicate the structure of the narrative which "draw[s] attention to the fact that it is he himself [the reader] who is responsible for ordering the novel's material" (Anders 144). But rather than merely advocating a reader-response theory for reading *The Crossing*, Anders argues that the narrative focus on witnessing the witness foregrounds a cycle of

response in which the reader creates a structure for interpreting the novel just as Billy must selectively interpret the stories he hears and the experiences in his past. The novel's resistance to a single static meaning, then, "shifts the focus from finding the novel's meaning itself to *how* meaning is generated by the reader in the first place: by imposing the best interpretation he can come up with on the episodic randomness of the plot's events" (Anders 144). Working from a similar understanding of Billy's inaction in the novel, the remainder of this chapter explores the role of pain the construction of meaning through the act of witnessing, an act in which one both interprets others and is interpreted by others. This act of creating meaning constitutes another requirement for meeting the demands of adulthood in the Border Trilogy. As in *All the Pretty Horses*, the development from youth to maturity necessitates making meaning from one's pain. While the narrative descriptions of Billy's journey show his failure to effectively complete this process, the interpolated tales offer insight into the ways one may succeed in creating life-affirming meaning from pain.

#### IV. The Ground of Loss

Three longest tales Billy hears address the philosophical implications of the of a framework centered around one's experience of pain. which provides sufficient stability for the basing of opinions and beliefs which determine one's identity and the form it takes in action. I will refer to these tales in relation to their narrators, hence, the first interpolated narrative, "the hermit's tale," relates the story of the heretic and the priest, told by the priest/hermit; the second long tale, "the blind man's story," relates the story of a soldier who loses his eyes in the Mexican Revolution and is told by the man's wife, as well as the man himself; in "the *gitano*'s story," the final long narrative told to Billy, a "gypsy" relates the story of an artifact, an airplane, which has been recovered from the mountains. Each of these stories offers a unique perspective for viewing the topics at hand, specifically, the role of pain, memory, and narrative in making meaning of life experiences.

Like Alfonsa's speeches in *All the Pretty Horses* and Mac's, Troy's, and the Maestro's conversations with the protagonists in *Cities of the Plain*, the interpolated

stories of *The Crossing* relate a coherent philosophy of pain and the past. Each story develops further the connections between pain, maturity, and meaning. These stories deal with the insubstantial nature of history, of individual and cultural pasts, and argue that the physiological and psychological experience of pain forms a link between the past and the present. As previously noted, the impact of these stories on Billy's development remains unclear until *Cities of the Plain*, but in *The Crossing* the stories reiterate recurrent themes in the trilogy of pain's influence on individual frameworks in regard to the protagonists' development. The inevitability of pain is the foundation of McCarthy's adult frameworks, and the ability to narrate one's painful past becomes vital for constructing personal identity.

Billy's psychological presence fades in and out of the novel, and offers little solid ground from which to conceive a coherent framework. In the presence of interlocutors Billy contributes little to the conversation, and rather serves as a sort of vacuum for stories which have little perceptible effect on the boy. We learn Billy's thoughts most often in the presence of animals, or in descriptions of his dreams which prove problematic due to the simple fact that these internal expressions never assert their presence through language. Billy's disinclination to reciprocate the ritual of telling life stories reinforces the alienation he already feels from the loss of his family. The stories he hears, however, shed light on the many ways that Billy could make meaning from his experience, rather than attributing it to the sheer enmity of the world.

Occurring just after the death of the wolf, the opening statement of the second section of *The Crossing* indicates the psychological change Billy undergoes after his initial experience of disappointment and loss. "Doomed enterprises divide lives forever into the then and now" (*Crossing* 129), the narrator states, and Billy and the reader soon understand that after the death of the wolf the boy will never be the same. Moments of success or pleasure, the narrator implies, mean less to one's framework than experiences of failure, sorrow, and pain. Morris writes that pain "takes us out of our normal modes of dealing with the world. It introduces us to a landscape where nothing looks entirely familiar and where even the familiar takes on an uncanny strangeness" (Morris 25). The subsequent loss of his family, then, only supports this statement and we cannot believe that the boy's lack of emotion around this second catastrophe means he remains

unaffected by it. Rather, Billy's apathetic wandering in search of his family's horses affirms his alienation as much as his disappearance into the wilderness after the death of the wolf. And although Billy fails to acknowledge the instability of his framework as an effect of his loss, the stories he hears confirm the destructive effect of such deep emotional pain. In contrast to Billy's response to pain, however, the long stories Billy hears emphasize the necessity of rebuilding one's framework on the ground of this loss, rather than avoiding the relatively stable meaning afforded by such experiences and becoming lost in the abyss of despair.

One of the three major themes brought out in the interpolated stories is the notion that catastrophic experiences of intense pain necessitate the reevaluation of one's deepest philosophical beliefs and the reconstitution of a modified philosophical framework. Each of the long stories Billy hears relates an experience of agonizing loss. The hermit tells Billy the story of an unfortunate man, called the "heretic," who survives his parents' murders as a child and later loses his son in an earthquake. The story centers around the man's horrible survival of these events, and his inability to find meaning in life in the face of ubiquitous loss. The blind man's story centers on the loss of his eyes, and his wife's loss of four brothers and her father to execution in the Mexican Revolution. Finally, the *gitano's* story recounts another father's loss of his son in an airplane crash. The narrator of each story calls attention to the devastating effects of these painful events on one's framework. The heretic's loss leads to an inability to find common ground with others: "[h]is claims to the common life of men became tenuous, insubstantial. He was a trunk without root or branch" (*Crossing* 147). The branches, the hermit insinuates, would reach out to God as well as to other people, but this man's pain exceeds his conceptual horizons and its boundless power renders him unable to commune with others: "That which speaks in us one to another and is beyond our words or beyond the lifting or the turning of a hand to say that this is the way my heart is, or this. That thing was lost in him" (146).

Similarly, the *gitano's* story relates the story of an American father who, after losing his son, seeks to recover artifacts from his death in order to ease the pain of his loss. By recovering the airplane in which his son died from the mountains, the man seeks to "bleed it of its power to commandeer his dreams" (*Crossing* 406). But the *gitano* tells



Billy the airplane has “no real power to quiet an old man’s heart” because after its recovery, “nothing would be changed.” What the *gitano* means here, is that rather than altering his framework to incorporate the meaning of the pain of his loss, the father seeks to fit the loss to his previously held beliefs. The man’s framework has proven insufficient for making meaning from this experience, and his desire to regain control over the event only discloses his inability to do so. But the point is not to withstand the pain of loss or to take control of the experience, but to adapt one’s framework to the new situation created by such a life-altering experience. While despair such as that the man in the story feels is all too common, the narrative within which the man exists offers a way out of despondency and this makes McCarthy’s work distinctive.

Of the three long interpolated tales, the blind man’s story attends most to the framework destroying power of loss, and the necessity of making meaning from this pain on its own ground. The blind man undergoes a similar disorientation as the loss of his eyes leaves him unsure of the substantiality of the world itself, much less his ability to make sense of it. The beginning of his story emphasizes the strength of his framework before his injury; his wife’s narration stresses the man’s autonomous decision to go to war, and to defend his post although “he could have saved himself” (*Crossing* 276). But the loss of his eyes results in the dismantling of the world as he knows it. The narrator’s description emphasizes the change in the man’s perspective which he views as the world falling apart: “He could see his own mouth. [...] The ground swang wildly underfoot” (277). Eventually the world grows “dim and colorless and then it vanishe[s] forever.” Unable to rely on his most substantial sense, blindness forces the man to forge a new framework based on this new perspective, and his story not only shows the difficulty of this process, but also enacts it.

Like the kid’s physical pain in *Blood Meridian*, and John Grady’s emotional pain in *All the Pretty Horses*, the blind revolutionary anthropomorphizes his pain as despair occupies him “like a lodger. Like a parasite that had turned out his very being from its abode and taken up the shape of that space within him where it once had been” (*Crossing* 278). The inhabitation of despair within his very body signifies the extent to which this man’s despair comes to define his identity, and the extent to which he is forced to deal with it. No longer able to see pain as something that happens to the body, the man

understands that the pain exists within his mind and body. This happens, however, at the expense of his former self-conception. The pain usurps his body and crowds his mind; the only thing real to this man is the pain he feels, although it alienates him from his own body as well as the world:

his thoughts were that other than wind and rain nothing would ever come again to touch him out of that estrangement that was the world. Not in love, not in enmity. The bonds that fixed him in the world had become rigid. Where he moved the world moved also and he could never approach it and he could never escape it.  
(*Crossing* 279)

The narrator of the story, the man's wife, describes the destruction and reconstruction of his philosophical framework. The profound alienation he feels results from the expansion of the horizons of his understanding and the physical pain of losing his eyes proves less detrimental than the excruciating experience of losing one's way in the world: "His pain was great but his agony at the disassembled world he now beheld which could never be put right again was greater" (276). The physical pain of losing his eyes, the disorientation of losing his sense of sight, and the dread of the unknown future forces the now blinded man to revise his framework and adapt it to this radically different perspective. Yet in a way very different than the heretic in the hermit's story, the blind man sees that the experience of pain contains meaning in itself. Although pain destroys the contents of consciousness (Scarry 31), it also serves as an undeniable example of the living connection between mind and body. Likewise, the sensation provides evidence for the existence of the agent of injury. Thus, pain serves as a conduit for meaning which distinguishes the boundaries of the self, while reinforcing the permeability of these borders.

The recently blinded man's state of despair at the loss of his eyes actually allows his injury to cloud his greater vision and as he forsakes himself, "the world and all in it" becomes nothing more than "a rumor" (*Crossing* 282). When approached by others from out of the darkness, however, the man is forced into interlocution. He repeatedly tells his story and attempts to justify his actions, and these narrative acts lead the man to two important realizations: that if the world is an illusion, then the loss of the world is an illusion also (*Crossing* 283), and that the experience of loss, even of one's

comprehensible identity, offers a ground stable enough for the foundation of a new framework. While the “stable ground of loss” may seem oxymoronic, the paradox proves sufficiently solid if we understand that the pain felt in response to the loss becomes a concrete reminder of the meaningful bond now broken.

After temporarily succumbing to despair, the blind man perceives a change in his reality: “nothing had changed and all was different” (*Crossing* 277-8). The man understands that the world had always been the way it was after he lost his eyes, his perspective has changed. Morris notes that when we process experiences of pain mentally, “we transform it from a simple sensation into the complex mental-emotional events that psychologists and philosophers call perception” (29). Thus, such significant events as serious physical injury, psychological trauma or emotional scarring inevitably results in an altered point of view and the modification of one’s framework to fit the new state of awareness. The man’s loss of his eyes caused such a cataclysmic change in perspective that after recovering from it he feels as if he was blind all along to the true nature of the world. The blind man realizes that one cannot escape pain, in blindness or in sight. “To move is to abut against the world,” the man says, “sit quietly and it vanishes” (*Crossing* 291). The implicit advice in this statement appears relevant to Billy, who has already been warned not to “simply pass among” men, but to “live with” them so as not to become estranged from the human community or from himself (134).

In response to experiences of loss, Billy denies the advice apparent in the blind man’s story as his wandering and avoidance of human relationships only reinforce his alienation. The blind man implies that scrapes, bumps, and bruises are unavoidable in life, just as emotional pain cannot be averted; in any case one cannot escape pain and remain awake to what it means to be alive: as pain vanishes, so does the basic foundation of meaning. Because “pain is always new,” it substantiates the meaning of one’s past only in relation to the present moment; but this means that “in the deepest dark of [...] loss,” exists “a ground” upon which one may construct a new framework (*Crossing* 291-2). The blind man’s story complements Alfonsa’s description of the bonds formed through experiences of pain and loss, and further reinforces the role of witnessing in making meaning of experience. The pain of the present becomes an anchor for memories of the past and proves essential in creating meaning from experience.

## V. The Pain of Memory

The pain of memory reinforces the meaning of the past, but its intrusion into the present destabilizes the continuity of experience. To achieve a coherent identity, one must be situated in an interlocutor community that performs both functions of the witness, to observe and to respond, and validate the present meaning of past events. Thus, the construction of a mature framework, functional for establishing a meaningful identity, requires interlocution. The meaning of the past must be communicated in the present to another individual who either validates, invalidates, or complicates the meaning put forth during this exchange.

Many of the tales related within the larger narrative of *The Crossing* exemplify the process described above, and focus on the relationships between pain, memory, and meaning. The hermit tells of the unfortunate man whose loss of his family leaves him with only memories:

He remembered his father. Certain things. He remembered his father lifting him in his arms to see puppets performing in the alameda. Of his mother he remembered less. Perhaps nothing. [...] He has promised to return with a gift for his young wife. He sees her standing there. [...] He has no likeness of her other than that which he carries in his heart. Think of that. (*Crossing* 144-145)

Confronted by the deaths of his family, Billy soon realizes that all he has left of his parents are similar memories, a connection which goes unspecified in the novel, but reinforces the similarities between Billy's story and those of the people he meets. Like the heretic, Billy unintentionally avoids the catastrophes that destroy his family, and each views his survival as the definitive aspect of his life. But while McCarthy's protagonist seeks to "minimize the pain," as he states in *Cities of the Plain*, the heretic deliberately bases the meaning of his life on these past injuries. In either case, the character must deal with the phenomenon of pain in order to construct a stable meaning of one's experience in the world. The divergence that creates individuality, in McCarthy's world, is significantly impacted by one's response to pain.

According to the hermit, the heretic "had no plans for forgetting the injustices of his past life. The ten thousand insults. The catalog of woes. He had the mind of the

injured party, you see” (*Crossing* 155). Pain anchors these events in the hermit’s memory, and he resolutely concentrates on them as the foundation of his entire worldview. The heretic consciously constructs his self-image and ethical framework in light of the loss of his parents and child, events which radically alter his perspective. Bound to his pain, the heretic validates the meaning of his past life, but in this process he demeans his present because rather than acknowledging the affirmative meanings accessible through remembrance, he focuses solely on the loss.

The hermit curses his life because he recognizes the insufficiency of the past to generate meaning that can make absolute meaning for the present. The things he cares most for have been lost, and he chooses to forsake his future rather than proceed with his life in a way that might diminish the presence of their memories. As the *gitano*’s story suggests, in the case of photographs, memories, and dreams, the spectator receives no reciprocated acknowledgement of the meaning of his or her own life. The entirety of meaning falls on the shoulders of the living observer, because the intangible subject of the memory cannot validate its own meaning. The photographs in the *gitano*’s story signify the ultimate alterity of meaning in life: “the kinfolk in their fading stills could have no value save in another’s heart so it was with that heart also in another’s in a terrible and endless attrition and of any other value there was none” (*Crossing* 413). Like figures in dreams or memories, the photographs may hold meaning for the viewer, but they cannot serve as witnesses.

This noteworthy lack proves similar to that described earlier in Billy’s relationship with the wolf, whose lack of language makes the process of mutually affirming the other’s identity impossible. Humans need interlocution to create coherent frameworks, to test their interpretations of reality against others’. Billy resists this process due to a profound sense of alienation which leads him to withdraw from human contact; thus, Billy denies the only thing that will ease his suffering. Acknowledging the painful experiences of the past is crucial for making meaning of one’s present experience, but cultivating injury does not help one heal. The trilogy depicts certain unavoidable experiences which eventually make every individual an “injured party,” and this common condition brings one’s thoughts into the singular experiences of the body. However,

articulating such experiences allows people to share the meaning of pain, and exposes the interpersonal bonds related in such narratives.

The heretic's reaction to the pain of loss finds a counterexample in the blind revolutionary's story. Asked after losing his eyes if he feels pain from his injury, the blinded man says he feels "only the pain of memory" (*Crossing* 289). But this pain proves beneficial as it lends certainty to the man's present existence, and to the existence of his past. The blind man tells Billy that "as the memory of the world must fade so must it fade in his dreams until soon or late he feared that he would have darkness absolute and no shadow of the world that was" (289). For this man pain affirms the bonds now sundered by the loss of his life, although it took a great change in perspective to acknowledge this fact. Over time the man finds that "words pale and lose their savor while pain is always new" (293). He tells Billy to hold on to memories, and "do not let sorrow die for it is the sweetening of every gift" (288). This philosophy sounds quite sadistic, but Morris notes that one may view pain as something more than a "sensation" to be endured, and that by incorporating pain "within a system or circle of thought that endows it with meaning" one may see sorrow, grief, and even physical discomfort as an interpretation (44). Making meaning of suffering makes us "hurt" less, but in order to do this, one must meet pain on its own ground.

## VI. Witnessing Pain

In the introduction to *Narrative, Pain, and Suffering*, Carr, Loeser and Morris note that "narrative is intrinsically transactional" because "[s]tories always imply at least two parties—a teller and a receiver, actual or implied" (5). Storytelling places responsibility on each participant to acknowledge the contribution of the other, to accept the meaning transmitted through the narrative, which "resides in complex and open-ended negotiations not only among the parties involved but also involving history, culture, semantics, and communication codes" (Carr, Loeser, Morris 5). Each party in this transaction occupies a space of interlocution positioned in relation to one's particular geographical, historical, and cultural surroundings. The expression of where one stands in relation to these surroundings becomes the representation of identity: in order to state

who I am, I must become “an interlocutor among others, someone with one’s own standpoint or one’s own role, who can speak for him/herself” (Taylor 29). However, without another to witness the expression of our frameworks, we are merely shouting in the wind, without something outside ourselves to validate or contradict us.

Trapped in a cycle of meaningless self-witnessing, the heretic believes that since all “acts have their being in the witness,” and God has no witness, then the world itself, which only God may witness, becomes ultimately transitory and meaningless for the individual (*Crossing* 154). The heretic “understands that the narrative is itself in fact no category but is rather the category of all categories for there is nothing which falls outside its purview” (155). Unable to believe that anything exists outside this “category,” the man becomes a heretic, but in spite of his nihilism he ultimately acknowledges that meaning for our own lives must be found in the lives of others: “the lesson of a life can never be its own. Only the witness has power to take its measure. It is lived for the other only” (158). This idea comes to its illogical conclusion in the death of John Grady Cole. The young man comes to believe that his life has no meaning without Magdalena, and therefore meets his death willingly.

The hermit offers insight into the production of meaning for one’s own life by recognizing the meaning in another’s. The hermit’s description conveys an epiphanic moment that relates the vulnerability of human life:

We go from day to day, one day much like the next, and then on a certain day all unannounced we come upon a man or we see this man who is perhaps already known to us and is a man like all men but who makes a certain gesture of himself that is like the piling of one’s goods upon an altar and in this gesture we recognize that which is buried in our hearts and is never truly lost to us nor ever can be and it is this moment, you see. This same moment. It is this which we long for and are afraid to seek and which alone can save us. (*Crossing* 153)

The hermit describes a moment of complete awareness, salvific in its production of substantial meaning for life, of both self and other which also arises involuntarily and unpredictably. The recognition produces a dual sense of fear and longing: longing to glimpse our own meaning in the other and fear that we will betray each other by destroying the situation that makes this awareness possible. This is a moment of self-

sacrificial *presence* which actually reaffirms the self. Typically obscured by the meanings attributed to past experience and desires for the future, the moment described above requires total attention to the other and seems to momentarily take one out of time and space. However, as one becomes aware of this vulnerability, an ethical dilemma unfolds, and one must draw on the meaning of the past to make sense of the present situation and act in light of this knowledge.

The agonistic relationship between the self and the other, then, confirms the hermit's pronouncement that humans define themselves against each other. The hermit tells Billy that in searching for God we seek some Other who can impose upon us an all-encompassing framework. We seek "the worthy adversary" who can provide a larger narrative and tell us our place in it:

[W]e strike out to fall flailing through demons of wire and crepe and we long for something of substance to oppose us. Something to contain us or to stay our hand. Otherwise there were no boundaries to our own being and we too must extend our claims until we lose all definition. Until we must be swallowed up at last by the very void to which we wished to stand opposed. (*Crossing* 153)

Human relationships create common ground in the void because through the act of witnessing, which requires observation as well as testimony, individual existence becomes a shared experience. In the heretic's view the problem with God is the same as that with memories and photographs: they do not perform the role of witness that will either validate our worldviews or invalidate them and offer another framework in their place.

In order to tell Billy the meaning of his own life, the hermit/priest feels he must tell the story of another person's life, the history of the cultural and geographic landscape, and of the meaning others have made of these events. Out of this necessity arises another theme taken up in each of the long interpolated tales in *The Crossing*. The hermit most clearly states the idea that stories not only connect the teller to the listener, but reveal that a larger meaning, common to all stories, reinforces the necessity of storytelling and witnessing for generating meaning in life. The hermit tells Billy that "[t]hings separate from their stories have no meaning" (*Crossing* 142), and that all tales tell the same story, "for there is only one to tell" (143). In this case, then, we must inquire about its genre, its



audience, its narrator, and author. With Taylor, I would argue that that genre of this ur-story is that of a quest narrative (52), and that the plot primarily concerns the search for meaning. The trilogy's developmental model constitutes a cycle in which one continually strives to attain a stable meaning for past experiences; as the present becomes past, and one goes through many of the same experiences again and again, one must modify the meaning of this evolving personal history. Although Billy repeatedly enacts the western-male quest narrative in his trips into Mexico, he effectively arrests the development of meaning for these experiences when he fails to incorporate them into a personal narrative.

Anders notes that *The Crossing* calls attention to “the artificiality of genre, narrative, and reality” (138), as Billy's consciousness fades into the background of the narrative and the reader must reinterpret and reconfigure the seemingly arbitrary events in an attempt to find their meaning (144). The episode in which Billy hears the blind man's story demonstrates Anders's point, which recapitulates the hermit's argument that all tales are one and explains the necessity of structuring narrative around a common theme. As she attempts to keep Billy awake, the woman tells the boy that “in all stories there are three travelers with whom we meet on the road” (*Crossing* 284), a statement which sets off Billy's doubt about the truth of the tale. But the man interrupts “to say that indeed the tale was a true one. He said that they had no desire to entertain him nor yet even to instruct him. He said that it was their whole bent only to tell what was true and that otherwise they had had no purpose at all” (284). These statements reiterate the benefit the teller gains through the act of narration; the story needs neither to “entertain” nor to “instruct” the listener, but verifies the existence of each of the individuals through discourse. Structuring his experiences by narrating them allows the man to create meaning for himself through the act of narrative transmission. The listener witnesses by listening and responding, or by taking over the role of storyteller, as does the man's wife.

The blind man says that although he did meet others on the road, the “three strangers at issue” are “principals” in the story because “he spoke of his blindness” with them (*Crossing* 285). Through interlocution with these three individuals, the man was able to create a sufficiently stable meaning from his experience, and his current framework hinges upon this meaning. Similarly, the narrator spends a great deal of time

relating the stories Billy hears to the reader, and his example, it seems, might be followed by Billy in that he has the opportunity to learn from these moments by participating in interlocution. But the boy proves unwilling to perform the second half of the witness's function: providing testimony. Like Boyd and his female companion, the man and woman each validate each others' imposed structures, and realize a shared understanding of a common experience.

## VII. Billy's Resistance to Context

After Boyd's disappearance, Billy hears news of the war and the corridos that tell his brother's tale, but like the heretic in the hermit's story, Billy avoids personal injury and lives out his life in a state of unsolicited fortune. Rejected from military enlistment in World War Two due to a heart defect, inexplicably saved by the aguacil at the dog fight, and surprisingly spared from what seems like an inevitable bar fight with a Mexican veteran, Billy escapes the harmful situations in which he places himself. However, the persistence of Billy's emotional pain becomes the focus of Billy's nomadic existence. Billy's unwillingness to become involved in human relationships, which the young man knows will inevitably lead to loss, creates distance between himself and an encounter that could help relieve his pain.

The carrier of a yet untold story, Billy finds little relief from emotional pain in his adventures, and instead seeks closure for his brother's death by controlling the conclusion of the plot. The attempt to manipulate the present to make a certain meaning for the past proves a common response to painful events in the trilogy. In *Cities of the Plain* John Grady essentially writes the script for his own story's ending due to a similar resistance to the fact of pain. Despite these similar reactions, Billy's vision of pain in the world differs distinctly from John Grady's. While John Grady imagines the pain of the world as it affects others, Billy's despair leads him to the belief that if he chooses to live it is only for the sake of himself: "the enmity of the world was newly plain to him that day and cold and inameliorate as it must be to all who have no longer cause except themselves to stand against it" (*Crossing* 331). In *The Crossing* and again in *Cities of the Plain*, Billy loses the people he most loves, but survives, forced to deal perpetually with the pain of

his past. Billy's experiences show the difficulty in situating one's self in a meaningful cultural or historical context. Rather than providing a stable meaning for a completed event, Billy's heart-rending retrieval of his brother's bones reinforces the instability of meaning built without confirmation through interlocution. Billy's journey relies upon unsubstantiated connections to actual events; even basic facts about the narrative cannot be verified. The bones he takes to New Mexico may not even be Boyd's.

Billy downplays the facts of his experience while also refusing to fill in the gaps in the stories around him. Rather than acknowledging the power of his brother's story, Billy seeks comfort in the retrieval of Boyd's bones which will allow Billy to end the story on his own terms. The faults in this plan become evident near the end of the novel, when the *gitano* and his American employer relate different histories of the plane. As with the airplane and with Boyd's bones, Lowenthal notes that altering relics results in a manipulation "which refashions their appearance and meaning" (263). Although Billy exemplifies the human need for "a stable past to validate tradition, to confirm [...] identity, and to make sense of the present," his experience illustrates the problem of "rely[ing] on a past that is fluid and alterable" (Lowenthal 263). Billy's attempt to change the past shows his disavowal of the greater narrative in which he exists, and until he situates himself in a cultural, historical, and geographic space, he remains unable to create a cohesive narrative of his past.

While the novel concludes with Billy in a state of hopeless desolation, however, the interaction between the young man of the road and the owner of the airplane tells an entirely different story. In this scene Billy willingly participates in a process definitive of adulthood as he finally articulates his personal pain narrative:

My brother was shot and killed down here. I'd come down to take him home. He was shot and killed south of here. Town called San Lorenzo. [...] My daddy was shot and killed in New Mexico. That's his horse layin over yonder. [...] My mama was from off a ranch up in De Baca county. Her mother was a fullblooded Mexican didnt speak no English. She lived with us up until she died. I had a younger sister died when I was seven but I remember her just as plain. I went to Fort Sumner to try and find her grave but I couldnt find it. Her name was

Margaret. I always like that name for a girl. If I ever had a girl that's what I'd name her. (*Crossing* 419)

In this passage Billy expresses a comprehensive personal narrative, which includes the most agonizing events of his past, describes the efforts he has made to verify their meaning, acknowledges the past's relation to his situation in the present, and communicates his aspirations for the future. In this act of interlocution Billy presents a clear and stable picture of himself and of his situation.

The man validates Billy's statements, saying, "[i]t's a cruel world," and "[y]ou sound like you've had your share of troubles in this world" (420). But here, uncharacteristically, Billy affirms the positive aspects of his own life: "I been fortunate than most. There aint but one life worth livin and I was born to it. That's worth all the rest" (420). However, this statement becomes ironic when Billy loses hope at the end of *The Crossing* and arrives at the perspective he relates to John Grady in *Cities of the Plain*: "I used to think rawhidin a bunch of bony cattle in some outland country would be just as close to heaven as a man was likely to get. I wouldnt give you much for it now" (77). When interacting with this interlocutor Billy finds a common ground from which to articulate his experience and this act of communication proves more meaningful than the boy's relationship with animals, the land, relics of the past, or memories of loved ones. After this conversation the retrieval of Boyd's bones becomes merely a symbolic act, and one with little practical value. The pervasive despair evident in Billy after his final quest back across the border reveals the insufficiency of this act to create substantial meaning.

The novel ends as Billy witnesses the first tests of the atomic bomb and sleeps in a dilapidated adobe waystation. The invocation of the atomic bomb appears directly after Billy's inhumane treatment of a crippled dog who seeks shelter in the adobe ruin. Arnold calls Billy's violence toward the non-threatening dog "unusually mean-spirited, quite at odds with the lessons of charity he should have learned in his journeying" (62). Immediately recognizing his indiscretion, and his desire for the companionship of the dog, Billy calls after the dog: "He called and called. Standing in that inexplicable darkness. Where there was no sound anywhere save only the wind" (*Crossing* 425-6). Billy has entered a state of absolute isolation, as if the rest of the human world had vanished with the test at the Trinity Site. Here, at the end of the novel we have an image

of Billy Parham that contrasts distinctly with the unbroken, albeit badly bent, John Grady Cole at the end of *All the Pretty Horses*. After the incident with the dog Billy wakes to the “white light of the desert noon,” (*Crossing* 425), that is not caused by the midday sun but rather, the light from an atomic blast. McCarthy once more uses the character’s thoughts concerning perceived inconsistencies in the natural world as representative of a fractured philosophical framework. While John Grady rides into the sunset in an optimistic, though naïve, attempt to fulfill his desires elsewhere, Billy is nearly paralyzed by despair: “He took off his hat and placed it on the tarmac before him and he bowed his head and held his face in his hands and wept” (426).

The primadonna’s prophesy for Billy appears accurate regarding his relationship to Boyd, and later to John Grady. Without his knowledge he has become a man of the road. The primadonna tells Billy that “[t]he road has its own reasons and no two travelers will have the same understanding of those reasons,” she says, “if indeed they come to an understanding at all”:

Listen to the corridos of the country. They will tell you. Then you will see in your own life what is the cost of things. Perhaps it is true that nothing is hidden. Yet many do not wish to see what lies before them in plain sight. You will see. The shape of the road is the road. There is not some other road that wears that shape but only the one. And every voyage begun upon it will be completed.

Whether horses are found or not. (*Crossing* 231)

This elaborate and multifaceted metaphor makes the pain of loss the currency that gives value to the past. The problem lies in Billy’s resistance to the pain of his past, without which his present is rendered meaningless. The quest for meaning in the face of loss becomes the obvious plot of each personal narrative, the material realities, such as horses, eventually prove insubstantial for generating meaning in human life. The primadonna’s insistence that Billy “will see,” forecasts his witnessing of Boyd’s and John Grady’s deaths, and the recurring memories that cause him great pain in his old age. But Billy does not completely lose heart in *The Crossing*, as his willingness to enter into an interlocutor community in *Cities of the Plain* shows. Thus, Billy’s story depicts the process of development as a cycle in which one repeatedly re-constructs a conception of the self, of the world, and of an approach to moral dilemmas based on experiences of pain

and loss. Although it acknowledges the “inexplicable darkness,” that symbolizes the inameliorate enmity of the world, Billy’s story also bears witness to the fact that individual pain and death do not mean the end of the world.

The novel’s final lines reinforce Billy’s role as witness to the world, which will always exist beyond the understanding of the human mind. When, “after a while the east did gray and after a while the right and godmade sun did rise, once again, for all and without distinction,” we understand that although Billy has not developed a framework capable of making sense of the world, this matters little to the world (*Crossing* 425). However, *Cities of the Plain* shows that Billy can neither escape the necessity of human relationships, or the claims of the world. His development relies upon embracing these necessary aspects of generating meaning for one’s life.

In *Cities of the Plain* Billy talks about his past, situates himself within a specific cultural and historical moment, and demonstrates his attainment of a framework which incorporates even the painful events of his life and present situation. This demonstration of narrative self-expression allows Billy to become a successful interlocutor, capable of dealing with disappointment, as shown by his reaction to Maggie’s death. The subsequent chapter focuses on the necessity of locating oneself within a cultural and historical moment, and orienting oneself within a geographic space, a task that proves difficult for the cowboys who see the vast country disappearing before their eyes. These men live in a world in which pain and loss constitute certainties of existence, and the production of meaning relies upon one’s acknowledgement of bonds these shared experiences signify. The trilogy’s disastrous ending, which relates both protagonists’ failures to maintain stable, mature frameworks, will then be discussed in light of the themes thus far presented: the ethical, intellectual, and biological aspects of identity, and their relation to pain in McCarthy’s work.

CHAPTER THREE - *CITIES OF THE PLAIN* AND THE SHARED GROUND OF  
INTERLOCUTION

I. The Final Stage of Development

Completed as a screenplay before the publication of *Blood Meridian*, the concluding novel of the Border Trilogy, *Cities of the Plain*, stands as Cormac McCarthy's most condensed vision of human psychological development. In the fourteen years between the circulation of the screenplay and the publication of the novel, McCarthy's work takes a turn toward the representation of subjective human experience; and as his attention moves inward, the writer begins to unequivocally address the phenomenon of pain. For the characters in McCarthy's western trilogy, pain affirms, as well as deconstructs, the boundaries between physical and mental existence, the self and other, and the world and one's perception of it, thereby forcing its victims to modify the set of beliefs, or framework, that provides them with a foundation for making ethical decisions. This process of making meaning from pain epitomizes McCarthy's model of development throughout his work. As time passes one becomes aware of the certainty of pain, and the tremendous implications of permanent loss. The way an individual deals with these experiences becomes the primary signifier of their level of maturity. However, McCarthy displays the implications of such an assumption, and his portrayal of psychological development in *Cities of the Plain* exemplifies the difficulties, inconsistencies, and paradoxes of an ethical framework, personal narrative, and temporal identity based around one's understanding of pain.

McCarthy's earlier novels quietly address the effects of chronic pain on the psyche, but the novels published after *Blood Meridian* directly confront the phenomenon David Morris calls, "an immense, invisible crisis at the center of contemporary life" (Morris 5). To help relieve this affliction, Morris intends to help make this crisis visible, notably by encouraging individuals to share their pain. Similarly, McCarthy's fiction suggests that the most effective treatment for such pain is to acknowledge the substantial meaning associated with this profound phenomenon.

In *Blood Meridian* the author conspicuously avoids depicting his character's subjective experiences, thus, this violent novel avoids pain almost entirely. In his

subsequent work, however, pain becomes the undeniable center of McCarthy's depiction of human experience and human subjectivity. With *All the Pretty Horses*, McCarthy focuses on pain caused by physical violence and emotional trauma as the primary signifier for corporeal and metaphysical existence. In this first installment of a multi-faceted *bildungsroman*, McCarthy shows that the construction of a mature ethical framework involves acknowledging the pain of the other. In *The Crossing*, McCarthy directly addresses emotional pain, the pain of loss, and the necessity of narrative for constructing a framework capable of making sense of this experience. In its final form, as the novel that concludes the Border Trilogy, *Cities of the Plain* reiterates the themes of the previous volumes, while sustaining an ever-changing discussion about the role of pain in human subjectivity which continues through later works such as *The Stonemason*, *The Road*, and *The Sunset Limited*.

McCarthy's Border Trilogy comments upon a deep despair originating from the experience of loss; a fundamental condition of human experience, and one which utterly changes the way one sees the world. *All the Pretty Horses* and *The Crossing* depict John Grady Cole's and Billy Parham's initiation into adulthood, and as the previous chapters have shown, McCarthy situates pain at the center of their developing frameworks. At the end of the first two volumes, the protagonists seem to have hit rock bottom; but as the trilogy comes to a close, we find John Grady and Billy reenacting their most painful experiences. In *Cities of the Plain* McCarthy shows these characters' responses to pain, as they come together within a community of men and test their matured frameworks. The trilogy's concluding novel consistently portrays John Grady and Billy as unsuccessful in dealing with pain, but in the stories of their interlocutors one finds ground for a shared meaning in this common phenomenon.

Although the end of *All the Pretty Horses* suggests John Grady's growth into an adult whose formative years have instilled a sense of reverence for human life, the final volume of the trilogy shows that this "all-american cowboy" essentially reenacts his past, with tragic results (*Cities* 3). The case of John Grady resembles the characterizations of both Boyd in *The Crossing* and Troy's brother, Johnny, from *Cities of the Plain*. He has taken up the stoicism characteristic of the cowboy code and once again plays the outlaw



who would rather die trying than admit something outside his control. According to Troy, Johnny was destined to die young because:

[I]f he hadn't found that girl he would of found something else. You couldn't head him. Elton says he changed. He never changed. [...] People always said he was bullheaded but it wasn't just that. [...] There's a kind of man that when he can't have what he wants he won't take the next best thing but the worst he can find.  
(*Cities* 28)

John Grady shares this self-destructive tendency, as he proves unable to relinquish his desire to control the future. In the face of unrequited love, persistent physical and emotional pain, and an awareness of the inevitability of loss, John Grady refuses to alter his framework to fit the world as he now sees it. Rather than live a life filled with pain, or adapting his framework to fit the demands of the world, the young man eventually seeks death.

While John Grady enters a downward spiral, the development of Billy's character takes a different trajectory. As stated in the previous chapter, Billy's character changes considerably in the gap between the second and third novels. Although the image of the rising sun puts Billy's despair into perspective, the end of *The Crossing* shows Billy at his weakest moment. As Arnold notes, Billy's uncharacteristic violence toward the crippled dog suggests the depth of his feelings of alienation, defeat, and meaninglessness. In the final installment of the trilogy Billy never completely overcomes his grief, and the Epilogue suggests that he never will. Instead, Billy returns to a childlike state which makes it impossible to read the trilogy as a successful *bildungsroman*. But the trilogy's ending certainly offers more stability than its protagonists realize. By the end of *Cities of the Plain*, the narrative has become Billy's story, and suggests that the most stable framework comes about through a mutual construction of the meaning of pain through interlocation.

In the trilogy's final volume, McCarthy expands upon the notions put forth in the previous installments, and uses a different story to get back to his continuing theme: the role of ethics, narrative, identity, and interlocation in human psychological development. The stories of John Grady's and Billy's interlocutors in *Cities of the Plain* reinforce a shared meaning at the heart of an incommunicable subjective experience. Confronted by

an ever-changing world in which pain provides certainty of experience when memory, corporeality, and the physicality of the world all prove subject to an insatiable loss, one does not achieve maturity by constructing a stable, fixed framework, but by continually reorienting one's perception of the world to fit the particulars of the present. This process forces one to construct and re-construct an identity limited by one's cultural/historical situation, and pain becomes a signifier of the limits of the body, as well a tangible example of the insufficiency of language to convey subjective experience. McCarthy shows, however, that if we are to construct a stable meaning from experience, we must be willing to embrace our own pain and acknowledge it in other individuals.

As the previous chapters have shown, volumes one and two of the trilogy have already stated this notion, and the events which take place in the third novel only reinforce concepts to which the reader has already been introduced. The question becomes, then, if McCarthy wrote *Cities of the Plain* so early, why create back stories for the protagonists? As Billy asks in the Epilogue, "Why not just tell the story" (*Cities* 278)? In this final novel of the trilogy, McCarthy shows the difficulties in merely "telling the story," without first relating the personal narratives of his protagonists. Like the narrator of the dream in the Epilogue, McCarthy first establishes a ground upon which the story may generate a contextualized meaning by communicating his protagonists' histories. Without a history, the man in the Epilogue states, "one can come upon no footing where even to begin" (*Cities* 278). This becomes a considerable problem when one takes into account the insubstantiality of the past, and the fallibility of memory.

## II. The "Vanishing World" and the "Certainty" of Pain

Set in the 1950s shortly after the events described in *All the Pretty Horses*, the trilogy's final installment takes up the notion that instigated John Grady's journey into Mexico: that the cowboy way of life has become nearly impossible because the world has changed in a way that no longer supports that particular world-view. According to one's perspective, this notion reinforces either a change in human culture or a change in the natural world, although both of these perspectives result in the perception of what Dianne Luce calls "The Vanishing World of Cormac McCarthy's Border Trilogy": "[t]he world

of the Border Trilogy is a vanishing world, beginning with the death of John Grady's grandfather and ending with the death of John Grady himself and the implied death of Billy beyond the last page of *Cities of the Plain*" (163). The certainty of loss serves as the foundation of each experienced individual's framework in McCarthy's world, as the "vanishing world" described by Luce becomes more evident. Luce notes that "McCarthy's prose [...], as in his earlier works, valorizes the concrete world of nature and of man's crafts. It is this vanishing world that John Grady and Billy love and that their texts invite readers to mourn" (Luce 168). These characters lament the loss of their shared way of life as cowboys, as well as the common conditions of loss in all human lives. For Luce, "the trilogy is an elegy for the evanescent world of the Southwest and a celebration of the great hearts of those who live alienated in '[t]he world [grown] cold'" (164). At the end of the trilogy, as at the end of the preceding novels, John Grady and Billy fit the description of these isolate individuals, despite their attempts at, or opportunities for, communion. McCarthy presents an awareness of loss and pain as the defining feature of adulthood, and old age becomes a state of perseverance, in which the management of such existential pain depends upon the meaning constructed through discourse.

The trilogy depicts the development from youth to maturity as an evolving awareness of the ephemeral nature of the life, and of the known world. As one grows older one observes changes in landscape, and community, as well as within one's own physical and subjective self. The older characters who populate the trilogy's pages witness parts of the people, animals, places, and even memories disappear. Mr. Johnson's comment that he "aint heard a wolf howl in thirty odd years" (*Cities* 126) relates to the concept of the "vanishing world" or viewpoint which has escaped him and now seems impossible. Although Mr. Johnson says he does not miss the pain of "pullin a tooth with a pair of shoein tongs and nothin but cold well water to numb it," he misses the experience of encountering new worlds: "I miss the old range life. I went up the trail four times. Best times of my life. The best. Bein out. Seein new country. There's nothin like it in the world. There never will be" (187). But again, the old man's attention turns to human connections and narrative as he describes the "old waddies" telling stories (187).

The defining aspect of the vanishing world for Mr. Johnson is the loss of human life. Mr. Johnson misses “knowin whatever become of certain people. Where they’re living at and how they’re gettin on or where they died at if they did die” (187). This loss of connection with other people becomes intertwined with Mr. Johnson’s nostalgia for the way of life he knew as a young man. An “old waddie” himself, Mr. Johnson exemplifies the development from youth to maturity, and then to old age in the trilogy. According to the dominant model of adulthood in the trilogy, he describes a continual reorientation of one’s self within an ever-changing world. In a conversation with John Grady, Mr. Johnson comments on the barren landscape in which they live: “Aint nothing to burn out there. I remember when you could have grassfires in this country” (*Cities* 126). Mr. Johnson’s nostalgia for the past leads him to value even potentially devastating events such as grassfires, due to their ability to verify the existence of a world consistent with the meaning one has learned to assign it. Mr. Johnson understands that the only world John Grady knows is one in which the desert does not burn; it is a fundamentally different place than the context of his past. For McCarthy’s postmodern adults who have witnessed the atrocities of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century wars, and lived to see a way of life vanish, the only persistent feature of existence is the pain which denotes the combination of physical sensation and mental processing which constitute life. But as time passes, scars heal, and memories fade, and for the old men in the trilogy the past becomes as voluble as the future.

The notion of the vanishing world calls into question all versions of history, and the problem of maintaining a stable identity when faced with discontinuities between the past and present. While the previous two chapters outline various features of adolescence and adulthood that may be employed to create a stable personal narrative guided by an ethical orientation related through interlocution, *Cities of the Plain* calls into question the meaning of the past. As Lowenthal notes, “[t]here can be no certainty that the past ever existed, let alone in the form we now conceive it, but sanity and security require us to believe that it did” (xxii). In order for an individual to function, one must create a sufficiently stable framework based on the past. However, this version of the past is inherently constructed through subjective interpretation: “all history depends on memory,

and many recollections incorporate history. And they are alike distorted by selective perception, intervening circumstance, and hindsight” (Lowenthal xxii).

Because one’s framework develops continually over time, individuals may go through various phases in which their ethical orientation takes a completely different shape. As the protagonists’ experiences in the trilogy show, “[d]oomed enterprises divide lives forever into the then and the now” (*Crossing* 129), and these moments of pain make distinct the differences between the past and present, the self and other, and the world and one’s subjective perception of it. These experiences also affirm the instability of those boundaries and the dangerous implications of this situation. When one enters a state of disorientation in which the past becomes irreconcilable with the present, the individual loses a solid framework that allows one to make sense of the world. Taylor calls this state an identity crisis, which McCarthy’s fiction seems to suggest, is a contemporary problem in American society.

Acknowledging the frequency with which people lose their bearings, Lowenthal notes that memories must be continuously reinterpreted (200). Therefore, maintaining an up-to-date concept of the self essentially necessitates simplifying the past: the “pace and scope of alteration preclude a consistent self-view anchored in memory. Few can afford to become aware of this deficiency; it is too painful to recognize the discrepancies between one’s present and past views” (Lowenthal 200). The “narrator” in the trilogy’s Epilogue makes a similar assertion, stating that an individual, fictional or otherwise, “cannot exist without a history” (*Cities* 274). The inability to find coherence between the past and present inhibits one’s ability to narrate and make sense of experience. The connection between the loss of a framework and pain which causes one to see the world in a way that makes the past irreconcilable with the present, becomes most evident in old age, as is shown in characters who acknowledge the loss of memory. It is this type of loss that haunts modern culture: “Modern habits of self-analysis render dubious the integrity of our own remembered past. And the frequency with which we update and reinterpret our memory weakens coherent temporal identity” (Lowenthal 199). Experiences of pain create vivid memories as they leave physical and emotional scars, which in turn provide stable threads through an inconsistent past.

For the characters in McCarthy's western trilogy, the world itself, as well as the physical self, and memory, all become agents of pain, and in doing so cause the world to vanish while making one acutely aware of corporeal existence. Scarry describes this "de-objectifying process as "the unmaking of the made" (41). The sensation of pain causes the person's mind to focus on the agent of pain. In many cases the body becomes the agent of pain because the agent is absent. In either case the person's focus on the corporeal experience limits subjective thought, "caus[ing] the world to disintegrate" (Scarry 41). In addition, "the disintegration of the world is here, in the most literal way possible, made painful, made the direct cause of the pain. (Scarry 41). Scarry describes a paradox between pain's ability to help the world "vanish," and provide certainty of one's existence. However, interlocution holds the key to making meaning of pain and sharing it with others in an act of creation of the world, self, and other.

The pain of loss pervades *Cities of the Plain*, as the memories of loved ones lost to death remain present through their representation in language. The death of Margaret, Mac's wife and Mr. Johnson's niece, hangs heavy over the ranch, and the threat of war overseas means that the government could soon take the land for nuclear testing. Mac says that he will never get over the loss of Maggie: "Not now, not soon, not never" (*Cities* 12). Mac cannot imagine life without the pain of loss because the pain of loss comes to define his existence. This type of pain lies at the heart of the depictions of despair commonly found throughout McCarthy's work, particularly in the Border Trilogy, *Suttree*, *The Stonemason*, and *The Sunset Limited*. Not only do people die and are eventually lost to memory, the possibility of former perspectives eventually becomes impossible. With each consecutive generation, the wilderness becomes more fenced-in, making the ways of life known to many of McCarthy's characters unfeasible.

For Luce, witnessing proves the only way of countering this vanishing world, as it validates the existence of the self and the other through verification by another consciousness. Philosophical ground upon which one may set forth a meaningful personal narrative, in this case, arrives via a confluence of meaning between witnesses. The narrative's repeated insistence on the negligible disadvantage of blindness in seeing the true world conveys a deeper "sense" of human experience. Luce notes that in *The*

*Crossing*, the blind veteran apprehends a world unseen, mediated by corporeal experience, and the awareness of the illusory nature of the physical world:

The blind man's consolation, that his blindness has enabled him to see the world itself in its truer and more enduring form, that to live and move means continually abutting against the "vanished" world, stands opposed to the palpable despair he felt at losing his eyesight; and it is counterposed against the concrete and prevailing imagery of the vanishing world in the Border Trilogy" ("Vanishing World" 168).

While Luce never concretely defines the "consolation" in the trilogy, she sketches its relationships to other ideas, suggesting an "immanence of spirit" represented primarily by the wolf, which "stands opposed" to human blindness. Blindness thus becomes the concrete metaphor for the loss of a philosophical framework. The blind man, however, learns of a metaphysical bond between individuals which arises out of the shared experiences of witnessing pain and loss.

The physical world is undeniably a world of "infinite sadness and infinite loss," as Billy observes (*Cities* 266). In *Cities of the Plain* McCarthy emphasizes that when confronted with this vision of transience, interpersonal bonds become the foundation of a meaningful existence. In addition to physical existence, however, McCarthy's characters experience intimations of a subjective self which binds one to other living things. John Grady has intimations of a soul during the knife fight in which he feels a "lightness that he took for his soul and which stood so tentatively at the door of his corporeal self" (256). And McCarthy repeatedly draws attention to the reliance of these interrelated mediums of experience upon one another to adequately orient one's self toward the world beyond the self. The "narrator" of the dream, whom Billy meets in the Epilogue, states that "[t]hings need a ground to stand upon. As every soul requires a body" (272-3), thus affirming the connection between the corporeal and the metaphysical. Since pain traverses the boundary between mental and physical existence, it comes to signify a type of ground upon which one may build a self- and world-defining framework.

As a phenomenon that simultaneously assures one of existence and changes the way one perceives the world, McCarthy presents pain's ability to verify personal experience, provoke a feeling of responsibility for the other, but also cause a skepticism

that contributes to one's feelings of singularity. However, if one can overcome the ways in which pain confirms singular experience, it can become a shared experience that provides certainty of the meaning of the life of the self as well as of the other. Human interlocution creates ground to stand on in the story of the other. As we validate the experience of the other, we verify our own lives, and create stable meaning through interlocution.

### III. Responding to Pain: John Grady and Billy

*Cities of the Plain* depicts the protagonists of the earlier volumes in the process of making meaning of the devastating loss and physical pain that have come to dominate their young-adult frameworks. But in contrast with the protagonists' feelings of isolation and alienation, in *Cities of the Plain*, McCarthy describes a community that offers opportunities for the interlocution necessary for making meaning of experience. A more domesticated work than the road narratives that distinguish the trilogy's preceding volumes, *Cities of the Plain* reinforces the bonds between the two young cowboys and their interlocutors. These bonds place value on something greater than the self, and constitute the continuous transfer of meaning between individual lives. At Mac McGovern's Cross Fours Ranch, John Grady and Billy find a home, and here we see the young men assimilated into a community whose individuals share markedly similar stories to those related in the trilogy's previous installments.

Witnessing through listening to narrative again proves important in this process as the best way to gain perspective on one's situation. Nights beside the campfire find the young men participating in interlocution that bridges gaps between singular experiences by allowing the speaker and the listener to acknowledge the commonalities in their separate but integrated stories: "They told stories of the old west that once was. The older men talked and the younger men listened and light began to show in the gap of the mountain above them and then faintly along the desert floor below" (*Cities* 91). The juxtaposition of the image of sunrise with the description of the narrative act illustrates the ability for interlocution to create a shared world of meaning between individuals. This is an instance similar to what Scarry describes as the formation of the world in the



absence of pain. As stated earlier in this chapter, pain takes away one's ability to communicate with language, but as the pain subsides, the recovery of language occurs, and with it, a world verified through communication:

It is only when the body is comfortable, when it has ceased to be an obsessive object of perception and concern, that consciousness develops other objects, that for any individual the external world (in part already existing and in part about to be formed) comes into being and begins to grow. (Scarry 39)

The world already exists inside and outside one's perspective, but the potentiality of a third perspective in which interlocutors combine their visions of experience constitutes the world "about to be formed." This process does not occur when the victim's consciousness becomes narrowly fixated on the individual experience of pain, and although some of the stories involve returning to painful events, the act of narration helps treat the pain as one attributes meaning to it. During these moments of interlocution, the speaker and listener cooperatively construct ground from which they make sense of their shared situation.

The construction of a world of shared meaning proves important for the cowboys in *Cities of the Plain* who, due to the decline of the ranching business, must face a world in which their chosen way of life is quickly becoming impossible. For these men who face a vanishing way of life and an ever-changing world, interlocution creates a space in which they may validate each others' experiences and pass on the meaning of the past. Dianne Luce's characterization of Billy in *Cities of the Plain* connects his apparent dissociation from a world of loss to willful oblivion achieved through callous perseverance:

If Billy does not allow himself to react [to the owl incident], it is because he has learned not to feel so deeply his pain at the extermination of the Mexican wolf in the Southwest, the incursion of technology and government into the terrain of his youth, the vanishing of the cowboy and his way of life ... or to acknowledge it consciously. ("Vanishing World" 162)

As Billy recognizes by the end of the novel, the cowboy's "vanishing world" is only one aspect of larger losses; those of life, memory, and meaning. Coming to terms with this notion once remains the defining feature of adulthood for McCarthy. Billy makes this

transition as he comes to acknowledge his inability to eliminate pain and the meaning of the other's life, specifically Boyd's, in his own. After Boyd's death Billy constructs a framework which seeks to decrease the chances of pain by avoiding human relationships which may result in loss. As he attributes a fixed meaning to pain, that it signifies injuries that could have been prevented by taking a different course of action, Billy invalidates the meaning of the present by invalidating his own framework. Projecting his experience onto the rest of the world, Billy sees the problem as an individual dilemma, but also as a cultural and historical phenomenon: "Anyway this country aint the same. Nor anything in it. The war changed everthing. I dont think people even know it yet" (*Cities* 78).

In terms of McCarthy's model of development, the deaths of Billy's immediate family members constitute experiences of life-altering pain, and the way he responds to these deaths becomes the defining feature of his adult framework. Billy tells John Grady that "[w]hen you're young 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 just wind up tryin to minimize the pain" (*Cities* 78). Billy's only romantic interests are superficial engagements with prostitutes, and it seems that after burying Boyd, he has made little attempt to seek out lasting relationships other than the one with John Grady. However, Billy states that he was raised as a man of the road, as his willingness to help a van of migrant workers with a flat tire shows, and this ethic is based on an understanding of pain and loss which Billy arrived at after the loss of his brother. Although Billy seeks to diminish the presence of pain by avoiding human relationships, counter to this advice, he takes a chance at intimacy in his relationship with John Grady. Unfortunately, this decision ends with John Grady's death, and Billy returns to the same state of despair that he exhibited at the end of *The Crossing*. As disheartening as this cycle appears, McCarthy depicts it as a common experience among human beings. Billy's survival necessitates his encounter with pain and loss, and while each successive experience reinforces the misery associated with these conditions, he cannot escape their import if he is to create a stable meaning for his life's story.

John Grady, on the other hand, pursues a relationship which he deems worthy of death, unless the world proves willing to adapt to his intended path. The young man

seeks to test his will against the world in spite of prior experience, through which he gained a greater perspective regarding the limits of the human body and mind. But John Grady's statement on the possibilities of mastering horses signifies his refusal to accept the world as it exists. John Grady's declares that one may gain complete control over another being using neither force, nor linguistic communication: "If a man really understood horses he could just about train one by looking at it. There wouldn't be nothing to it. My way is a long way from workin one over with a tracechain. But it's a long way from what's possible too" (*Cities* 54). John Grady recognizes the impossibility of communicating with animals by use of a spoken language, but claims that with little effort one may completely negate the perspective of the other in deference to the human will. Sadly, the self-destructive young man applies this theory to human lives as well, which results in the deaths of his beloved, of himself, and of those others who opposed his will.

John Grady's belief in the human ability to master nature corresponds to his notion that the course of a life may be willfully determined; a philosophy the young man tests with fatal results. In doing so, John Grady ignores his pain, as when he attempts to break a horse while suffering from a broken foot. Unsuccessfully, he attempts to fit the world to his preconceived framework, rather than changing his perspective in a way that allows him to see the confluent meaning between his life and those of his interlocutors.

John Grady's failure to imagine a world outside himself, similarly evident after Alejandra's refusal in *All the Pretty Horses*, here demonstrates his inability to validate the very lives to which he professes dedication. He refuses to hear Magdalena's story because he will not undergo the experience of witnessing her pain. When she shows John Grady the scar from a broken arm and tells him of such abuse he places his hand over her mouth and refuses to hear more. This unwillingness to share pain through interlocution becomes the primary sign of John Grady's immaturity. As he says to Billy, "It dont make no difference, you know. What anybody thinks" (*Cities* 146). Later he will tell Billy that giving advice to others is "really just a way of tellin yourself. And you cant even do that" (219). However, Billy becomes the third party who validates the couple's relationship when he speaks to Eduardo on John Grady's behalf. When Billy takes on the role of intermediary, he validates his friend's perspective when no one else will.

Although John Grady often ineptly chooses which advice he puts to use, the young man regularly asks the opinions of others, and in the fashion of advisor throughout the trilogy, these older men offer counsel through narrative. Mr. Johnson knows a portion of John Grady's story, but does not realize the danger of John Grady's situation. Thus, the old man tells John Grady "follow [his] heart" (*Cities* 188), and to avoid keeping his beloved waiting because, "[t]hey won't tolerate it" (187). These comments come during conversations in which Mr. Johnson repeatedly invokes events that occurred outside of his control; near death experiences that changed the way he sees the world. But instead of taking note of the lessons learned by his elder, John Grady uses Mr. Johnson's stories to validate his own view. The boy's accomplishments as a horseman, and fighter, in conjunction with the painful experiences of losing a father and grandfather, and witnessing his parents' divorce, give John Grady a false sense that he has learned all there is to know about the world. Although he has learned the name of every bone in a horse's body from a book, Oren and Mac agree that they "know some things that he didn't learn out of no book" (*Cities* 114). While John Grady's statement exemplifies the young man's faith in the future, Oren and Mac suggest that John Grady possesses little of the knowledge that arrives along with gray hairs, scars, and faded memories.

In Mexico, John Grady begins a relationship with another counselor, to whom the young man divulges the entirety of his unlikely story. Like many of the older characters in the trilogy, "the maestro" tells John Grady a long story that reinforces the fact of loss, and the necessity of coming to terms with pain. But the maestro indicates the necessity of acknowledging the particulars of one's situation and proceeding accordingly, rather than forcing one's desires to a destructive conclusion. While Mr. Johnson seems to adhere to the adage, "all for love," the maestro says that "love makes men foolish, [...] we are taken out of our own care and it then remains to be seen only if fate will show to us some share of mercy. Or little. Or none" (*Cities* 195). Here the maestro describes an underdeveloped framework which relies on the mercy of fate to justify one's decisions, and although he relates a deterministic philosophy to John Grady, the old blind man affirms the ability for individuals to construct a particular meaning for their pasts, and thereby alter the possibilities for the future.

The maestro admits that people have little control over their destinies because each act leads to the next in an irrevocable series of events. He tells John Grady that people are “free to act only upon what is given. Choice is lost in the maze of generations and each act in that maze is itself an enslavement for it voids every alternative and binds one ever more tightly into the constraints that make a life” (*Cities* 195). Alfonso’s puppet strings, in the maestro’s view, become “a vast and endless net,” as “each act in this world from which there can be no turning back has before it another, and it another yet” (*Cities* 195). John Grady’s love, in particular, proves dangerous, with implications beyond his imagination. In *Cities of the Plain*, John Grady refuses to hear Magdalena’s story, the story which he seeks to join with his. The maestro notes that John Grady’s love “has no friends” (*Cities* 199), and this statement affirms the solipsistic nature of John Grady’s questionable affection for Magdalena.

In a state of love, the maestro claims, people advance through life carelessly, and although they may like to think that they arrived according to their own will, there may be no way of knowing which choices determine the present situation. In any case, the meaning at which one arrives after processing an experience depends upon the circumstances of that moment of consideration, and can never completely replicate the initial vision of the experience. This is the snowflake metaphor from *The Crossing* restated in a way that suggests a sentience in the world beyond human perception. The maestro also discusses the world’s role as witness in the lives of humans because it constitutes an eternal other that can never be engaged due to its lack of language:

The world is watching. It stands in for the dead man. Who by his audacity has pressed it into his service. For the world does have a conscience, however men dispute it. And while that conscience may be thought of as the sum of consciences of men there is another view, which is that it may stand alone and each man’s share be but some small imperfect part of it. (*Cities* 193)

In this view there is a reality, here called “the world,” which exists outside the imaginations of human beings, but one that cannot be known except as it is mediated by consciousness. Just as corporeality ceases to exist with the extinction of consciousness, the conditions of meaning rely on the interaction between subjective experience and an objective “reality.” But this statement does not denounce the meaning arrived at through

human interlocution, but acknowledges that the ground of interlocution necessarily excludes outside perspectives. In this way the maestro juxtaposes the singularity of existence and the necessity of shared meaning, while noting that the dependency of the two upon each other does not overcome their inherent disjunction.

The maestro's story relates the paradoxical nature of the pain of memory to an unresponsive John Grady. The older man attempts to make the boy aware of the significant meaning in loss, in order to dissuade him from pursuing a course of action which will result in death, and the invalidation of the meaning of the lives involved. Instead of giving him direct advice on his situation, the maestro tells John Grady a story of two enemies. This story shows the way in which these two individuals become joined in a bond based on witnessing, memory, meaning, and loss. In the story a dying man asks his adversary to become "padrino" to his son, and the maestro emphasizes the significance of this act, which signifies a commitment that is both personal and universal. In this act of interlocution, which both enacts and describes the process of forging a human bond based on shared meaning, the naming of the role of the caretaker, "padrino," which the maestro repeatedly emphasizes, only reinforces the stability of the ground this act creates. That is, the act of using particularized language further defines the conditions of the agreement, and the meaning of the communication.

The maestro's story contends, in accordance with the overall philosophy of the trilogy, that the fact of loss and the act of interlocution can serve as ground for human connections. Pain proves an enduring, and meaningful, aspect of human existence, and solidifies meaning in such a way as to overshadow experiences one may more willingly remember:

He knew that those things we most desire to hold in our hearts are often taken from us while that which we would put away seems often by that very wish to become endowed with unsuspected powers of endurance. He knew how frail is the memory of loved ones. How we close our eyes and speak to them. How we long to hear their voices once again, and how those voices and those memories grow faint and faint until what was flesh and blood is no more than echo and shadow. In the end perhaps not even that. (*Cities* 193)

According to the maestro, the world exists only in the present, because it exists in the combined meaning of shared perspectives, and ceases to exist in the absence of a witness. Here again the maestro reiterates the concept noted earlier that one needs an effectively stable version of the past in order to create a consistent identity in the present, while acknowledging that eventually those who witnessed the past will cease to conserve its meanings due to their own finitude. Thus, sustaining the meaning of these lives requires passing the stories on through interlocution.

Billy's conversations with John Grady suggest that Billy has come to acknowledge the problems with human desire and the inevitability of pain. He tells John Grady, "My daddy once told me that some of the most miserable people he ever knew were the ones that finally got what they'd always wanted" (*Cities* 219). In this last conversation between the two young men before the fatal knife fight the two protagonists share their perceptions concerning the nature of the individual will and its effect on the world:

Well, said John Grady. I'm willin to risk it. I've damn sure tried it the other way.

Yeah.

You cant tell anybody anything, bud. Hell, it's really just a way of tellin yourself. And you cant even do that. You just try and use your best judgment and that's about it.

Yeah. Well. The world dont know nothing about your judgment.

I know it. It's worse than that, even. It don't care. (*Cities* 219)

John Grady's anthropomorphizing of the world gives him a will with which to struggle, while Billy believes that personal will plays little part in the events that determine a life. Billy's attitude toward life in *Cities of the Plain* is that he seeks to avoid situations that may result in emotional pain, but that the world "knows nothing" of human subjective experience. This distinction shows the importance of acknowledging the role of human witnesses who provide opportunities for interlocution. John Grady persists in making the meaning of pain about the unfortunate nature of the world, instead of seeing it as a part of life which provides a common and fundamental experience from which to make sense of the world.

#### IV. Witnessing the Death of John Grady Cole

As the plot progresses in *Cities of the Plain*, the narrative delays in distinguishing between the two young men. This technique emphasizes the interchangeability of these two characters according to superficial physical descriptions or general situations. The semblance of the two characters is even commented upon by Billy, who actually calls John Grady his “cuate [twin]” (*Cities* 238). But while the two young men share many similarities, their distinct personalities directly result from the way each deals with pain. The narrative repeatedly uses the gendered pronoun, “he,” to describe the characters until the protagonists seem almost interchangeable, but then distinguishes between the characters as their interpretations of the situations are revealed, thus associating the character’s identity with their operative philosophical framework. Further, Billy associates John Grady with Boyd, and refers to both using his brother’s former nickname, “bud.” This conflation of identities replicates the narrative technique, and Billy’s need to make meaning of one story in relation to another.

As *Cities of the Plain* begins to interweave the protagonists’ divergent stories by alternating perspectives, the reader is helplessly drawn into witnessing the self-destruction of John Grady along with Billy. Magdalena’s murder signals the beginning of the end of John Grady’s story, whose violent conclusion reiterates the young man’s naiveté regarding the inevitability of pain and the inefficacy of human desire. John Grady’s instigation of the fight with Eduardo exhibits his inability to construct an ethical framework based on his current situation and the pain of the past. Eduardo, who speaks at length during the knife fight and touches upon many of the themes of interest in this analysis, unequivocally lectures John Grady on the relationship between pain and life as he proposes to perform a “medical transplant. To put the suitor’s mind inside his thigh” (*Cities* 250). This successful, though self-destructive, procedure exemplifies Scarry’s assertion that pain in the body constitutes certainty of existence while effectively destroying the external world. Eduardo tells John Grady that although life necessarily involves pain, “[i]t doesn’t hurt so bad. It would hurt tomorrow. But there will be no tomorrow” (253). This statement affirms John Grady’s hope for death to take away his pain, but he dishonorably seeks the death of another in order to ease his agony.



Billy characteristically downplays the severity of John Grady's wounds, saying, "Hell, I've had worse scratches than that on my eyeball" (*Cities* 258). As usual, John Grady denies his interlocutor's perspective without fully comprehending it: "He said it wouldn't hurt. The lyin son of a bitch. Whew. It's getting daylight, aint it?" (259). Although he kills Eduardo and survives a few more hours, John Grady confirms his enemy's prediction. The boy never acknowledges Eduardo's proclamation, but the narrative reveals that he knows he has lived to see the "new day because he [is] in agony" (258). In his final moments John Grady seeks external validation of his framework outside himself but only in recognition of his own life. At the time of his death, John Grady cannot formulate a solid foundation upon which to construct a meaningful sense of self. He tells the young boy whom he recruits to help him that he is "a great filero and that he had just killed an evil man," once again romanticizing his identity and situation rather than seeking to transmit any meaningful information (256).

Just before his death, John Grady tells Billy that he no longer values life after the death of Magdalena, "when I seen her layin there I didnt care to live no more. I knew my life was over. It come almost as a relief to me" (*Cities* 259). Here John Grady proves unwilling to witness the pain and death of the other in a way that validates both lives as he would rather die than live with the pain of this experience. This point is further realized in John Grady's untimely realization of the necessity of interlocution. When Billy asks his dying friend if he should go get him some water, John Grady says, "[d]on't go [...]. Maybe when the boy gets back" (259), as the presence of an interlocutor offers comfort in the face of death. However, Billy eventually leaves and his friend dies before he returns.

Billy's absence prevents John Grady from gaining validation of life outside of his experience of pain, now depicted as both an emotional and physical wound. John Grady's dying words, "Help me. If you think I'm worth it. Amen" invoke an unresponsive other (257). For Billy, too, God becomes an unresponsive witness: "he called out to the broken day against them all and he called out to God to see what was before his eyes. Look at this, he called. Do you see? Do you see? (261). Both young men seek external validation outside the human realm, however, the older men in the novel all point to the human bonds which give life meaning. The unintended witnesses of

Billy's exclamation demonstrate this notion as their stories converge with those of the trilogy's protagonists. The "schoolchildren," who see Billy carrying John Grady's lifeless body, become unintentional witnesses of the same type of pain that every individual inevitably experiences. But once again McCarthy reinforces the various possibilities for meaning even in this situation. In this encounter the children observe a sight that conveys the certainty of pain and loss, and learning this lesson becomes an initiation into the adult world, as the meaning of this sight will remain with them.

The cycle of witnessing shows the transfer of meaning through the interpenetration of seemingly disconnected stories, as the children observe Billy carrying the dead John Grady. These young and inexperienced witnesses recall the children of whom Alfonsa speaks in the trilogy's first volume. These children, like Boyd in *The Crossing*, grow old instantly at the sight of such suffering (*Horses* 232). The narrative immediately reflects the alterations in their young frameworks as the detail of the scene acknowledge John Grady's loss of life in his loss of sight which reaffirms the living existence of the watchful observers:

They could not take their eyes from him. The dead boy in his arms hung with his head back and those partly opened eyes beheld nothing at all out of that passing landscape of street or wall or paling sky or the figures of the children who stood blessing themselves in the gray light. (*Cities* 262)

This image depicts an exposure to that which conveys the absolute vulnerability of the other, and in turn, signifies the precariousness of one's own life, and of life itself. Earlier in the novel, Mr. Johnson tells a story which bears out Alfonsa's statement that when one witnesses extreme violence it affects that person permanently. As a young man Mr. Johnson sees a man murdered from such a close distance that the gunshot wound splatters him with gore:

I was standin almost next to him. I seen it in the bar mirror. I'm partially deaf to this day in this one ear on account of it. His head just damn near come off. Blood everywhere. Brains. I had a brand new Stradivarius gabardine shirt and a pretty good Stetson hat and I burned everthing I had on save the boots. I bet I took nine baths handrunnin. (*Cities* 185)

This short tale is important because through it Mr. Johnson describes a moment which led to a permanent change. Although he was able to wash off the blood, the details in the story convey the indelible image the old man will never forget. Experiences of witnessing such as this one prove unavoidable, and each character's response to pain in others delineates his development of a mature framework. The commonality of this often involuntary act shows the basic way in which personal stories become joined together through the act of witnessing. Although the children pass out of sight of John Grady and Billy, they have added certainty to the events that have taken place, and like the young men, their developing frameworks will subsequently depend on the meaning each witness makes of the experience. The children watch "[t]his man and his burden [pass] on forever out of that nameless crossroads," but as they proceed to their "appointed places" they take the memory with them (262).

The effect of John Grady's death on Billy demonstrates the power of witnessing to substantially change the way one sees the world, a process the trilogy depicts as a recurrent and unavoidable experience. As in his relationship with Boyd, Billy feels that he "should of looked after [John Grady] better" (*Cities* 263). Here Billy expresses guilt for his contribution to his friend's death, in spite of the fact that the story ends because John Grady refuses to witness the pain of the other or to share the pain within himself. Although he experiences the pain of loss, and builds an ethical framework based on its meaning, John Grady never finds sufficient meaning in the life of the other. Although he seeks to comfort others, he fails to meet them on their own ground, or to cooperatively build a new foundation for meaning. Billy's decision to validate John Grady's perspective shows his willingness to validate the life of the other in spite of his pain, but the disastrous result of his actions demonstrate the necessity of finding common ground with an interlocutor, rather than merely accepting the view of the other. The loss of John Grady forces Billy into his now familiar state of mourning, in which he loses faith in his ability to make sense of the world: "In everything that he'd ever thought about the world and about his life in it he'd been wrong" (266).

## V. The Epilogue

The Epilogue finds Billy back at the ranch, three days after John Grady's death. He leaves with John Grady's puppy in the bow of his saddle, reminiscent of the image which began his story, in which Boyd sat cradled in Billy's care. Hereafter, Billy once more resorts to solitary wandering, refusing interlocution in the present while lamenting the loss of the past. Unable to find meaning in his experience, Billy lacks the ground that would provide him with a way of making sense of the world. Seemingly dumbstruck by the traumatic experience of John Grady's death, Billy immediately finds that "men [have] little to say to him or he to them" (*Cities* 265). He has become an outcast, as predicted in *The Crossing*, due to his unwillingness to share his experience with others.

A lack of interlocutors once again comes to portray the despair resulting from an inability to come to terms with the pain of loss, exemplary of the ability of pain to destroy language. Billy's lack of interlocution results in the absence of a story, thus, after John Grady's death Billy grows old in eight sentences:

He rode out in the dark long before daylight and he rode the sun up and he rode it down again. In the oncoming years a terrible drought struck west Texas. He moved on. There was no work in that country anywhere. Pasture gates stood open and sand drifted in the roads and after a few years it was rare to see stock of any kind and he rode on. Days of the world. Years of the world. Till he was old. (*Cities* 264)

In this passage Billy wanders through a world that perpetually vanishes and reconstitutes itself. The end of one day marks the beginning of another, but Billy finds no consolation in the pain that indicates this succession. Billy's experience suggests the cyclical nature of development in McCarthy's world, in which one must continually adapt to the present situation by incorporating the meaning of others' stories into one's personal narrative. This process requires an acknowledgement of one's role as witness, and the responsibility to seek common ground from which to construct a shared meaning with the other.

Billy's misery results from his inability to communicate with those loved ones lost to death, as if one more conversation with Boyd, or John Grady, could convey their meaning in his life. The narrative suggests that while that opportunity has passed, it

would have been possible while the individuals were living, and the story invites the reader to acknowledge this possibility. Although Billy shows an awareness of his deep desire to make meaning of his experience through interlocation, he proves unwilling to act on this knowledge except in his dreams. He eventually becomes an extra on the sets of cinematic westerns; merely playing the role of his former self, with no obligation to identify himself to others. The man Billy meets in the Epilogue, however, draws Billy into a provocative conversation which offers insight into Billy's situation. Once again, the narrative shows the power of interlocation to overcome pain through the re-formation of one's framework.

At this point Billy is in his seventies, an old man filled with painful memories, though they cannot provide a connection between the past and the present because they are not supported by the ground of interlocation. As in Billy's dream of his sister, the dreams recall vivid memories, "[h]e saw her so clearly. Nothing had changed, nothing faded," but they also reinforce the reality of the loss:

he knew that she would never enter there again nor would he see her ever again and in his sleep he called out to her but she did not turn or answer him but only passed on down that empty road in infinite sadness and infinite loss.

(*Cities* 265-6)

Billy's dreams remind him of stories that fill him with a pain that signifies the meaning of his loss. Sharing these stories with others would allow Billy to substantiate the meaning of his own life through his validation of meaning in another. But because these ensuing relationships will inevitably result in loss, Billy resolves to silently carry his pain.

The man's decision to draw a map of his life so that he may look for a pattern within it that will help determine his path in the future results from a mysterious dream. The map becomes a metaphor for language itself, which cannot be trusted to convey a precise meaning. However, the man's story implies that one must attempt to make meaning through language at any cost. Repeatedly drawing attention to this fact, the man tells Billy that one's interpretation of the map depends upon the context in which it is viewed, that as with all things, "there were different perspectives one could take" (*Cities* 269). For McCarthy, perspective constitutes identity, as the process of making meaning from corporeal and metaphysical experience comes to determine the way one sees the

world and the self. One's perspective, however, depends upon one's reading of the entire story; when one comes to the end of a story, or attempts to construct meaning from any narrative, one begins a new tale, that of the personal experience of making meaning from the narrative of another. Thus, taking perspective on another's story entails creating a new perspective on one's own.

The man's dream, which he relates to Billy as if reciting from lucid memory, calls into question the distinctions between fact and fiction, the past and the present, and even self and other. In his story he claims to have had a dream in which a man, not himself, lays down to sleep and dreams a separate dream, but one contained within the first. The narrative layering enacts one of the recurrent themes in the trilogy: the way in which stories become embedded in one another and come to verify the meanings of each other. In the dream, a man participates in an act of violence, against himself, without knowledge of his interlocutors' backgrounds. Because of the situation in which he finds himself, he participates in a ceremony with no definite meaning. In doing so the man contributes to a process by which he forgets "the pain of his life," and becomes "like a child again" (*Cities* 279). The dream, therefore, supports the narrative's depiction of human development as an encounter with pain, experiences of which come to define one's identity as it becomes the foundation for an ethical framework. McCarthy's model of development relies upon acknowledging the responsibilities of the self to the other, life-affirming bonds based on the ground of shared human meaning in the face of terrible pain and non-recuperative loss. The act of interlocution allows people to share their pain and receive validation of experience through the recognition of the similar situation of the other.

The narrator of the dream ends with a question that casts the act of witnessing as a personal dilemma because the meaning one makes from the other's experience will either invalidate or validate their actual experience. The dream-narrator's final words ask if Billy, and the other witness, the reader, will "listen to his tale," and "honor the path he has taken" (*Cities* 289). The ending to this episode situates the recognition of the other at the center of identity and the cultural interpretations which make up its composition. Although McCarthy continually underscores the insufficiency of language to convey the world itself, the trilogy shows that firm footing for orienting oneself in the world can be

found in the common experience of pain. Billy's interaction with Betty, the mother in the family that takes him in at the end of the novel, shows her ability for compassion based in universal experience which validates individual lives:

I'm not what you think I am. I aint nothin. I dont know why you put up with me.

Well, Mr. Parham, I know who you are. And I do know why. You go to sleep now. I'll see you in the morning.

Yes mam. (*Cities* 292)

Here again Billy returns to a childlike, though experienced, state in which he feels an utter lack of a stable identity. But in Betty we find the foundation for a framework based on interpersonal meaning in the face of loss which affirms the meaning of human relationships. Betty neither minimizes nor over-emphasizes the fact of death and loss, but validates Billy's role in her own narrative and hers in his. The final image of the trilogy, Betty's observation of Billy's hands alludes to the world-creating ability of human interlocation and its reciprocating reinforcement of corporeal existence:

She patted his hand. Gnarled, ropescarred, speckled from the sun and the years of it. The ropy veins that bound them to his heart. There was map enough for men to read. There God's plenty of signs and wonders to make a landscape. To make a world. (*Cities* 291)

Again McCarthy brings the focus back to the body, whose marks and scars transmit a message beyond language which affirms the person who survived them. In McCarthy's fiction, one must work to make the world, or struggle to keep it from vanishing. However, this dynamic tension allows for the space in which meaning is made.

The end of the Epilogue leads to the Dedication, which closes the novel and the trilogy. Encapsulating what has been shown as the trilogy's major theme, the speaker of the poem suggests the common ground of human interlocation: *I will be your child to hold / And you be me when I am old / The world grows cold / The heathen rage / The story's told / Turn the page*" (*Cities* 293). These six lines make a strong statement about the human life cycle, the sensation of corporeal existence, the otherness of the world outside the self, and the importance of narrative in the face of non-recuperative loss. The opening couplet suggests an exchange of roles in which each person validates the life of

the other. Although the indifferent world may rouse ignorant anger, with the end of one story begins another.

Reflecting back on the narrator's story, the poem proposes a cooperative experience through which singular individuals arrive at a common, and emergent meaning. Of the character in his dream, the man states:

My view is that whatever he may be or of whatever made he cannot exist without a history. And the ground of that history is not different from yours or mine for it is the predicate life of men that assures us of our own reality and that of all about us" (*Cities* 274).

The "predicate life" of which the man speaks consists of the narratives which make up our worlds. Stories lay dormant in every aspect of our surroundings, and combine with the person's who hears them. Stories are not all identical, but they are intertwined, and the key to sustainable meaning is constructing shared meaning through interlocution with the other.



CONCLUSION - "A COMMON PROVENANCE IN PAIN":  
TOWARD A THEMATIC TRAJECTORY

As the preceding chapters have shown, Cormac McCarthy's Border Trilogy situates pain at the center of human psychological development. A nearly universal physiological and psychological phenomenon, this complex experience serves as the foundation upon which McCarthy's characters build their conceptions of selfhood, the natural world, cultural significance, and ethical responsibility. While the trilogy provides the clearest depiction of pain's meaning in the lives of individuals, this set of novels actually develops, complicates, and explains themes that are evident in McCarthy's earliest published writings, as well as his most recent work. The implications of this concept far exceed the scope of this analysis, but in conclusion I would like to suggest a few correlations between the depiction of pain in the trilogy and the larger concerns of McCarthy's oeuvre.

From the beginning, McCarthy has chosen to focus on matters of life and death, (see Woodward par. 23) and has proven to live up to his claim that his writings may "encompass all the various disciplines and interests of humanity" (qtd. in Woodward par. 11). Throughout his work, however, McCarthy locates pain at the center of the philosophies which motivate these "disciplines and interests." McCarthy consistently shows the impact of pain and loss on human psychological development, and emphasizes the importance of interlocution in coming to terms with these phenomena. In many ways McCarthy presents these acts as inescapable. But to be conscious to the meaning of pain and aware of its means of production, constitutes adulthood in McCarthy's world.

The early short-story, "A Drowning Incident" (1960), published while McCarthy was attending The University of Tennessee, depicts a young boy's first encounter with meaningful loss when he discovers that his father has deliberately drowned two beloved puppies. Although the central character in this story seems younger than McCarthy's subsequent protagonists, the story proves consistent with the writer's later depictions of human development. The puppies' deaths at the hands of the boy's father resemble the wolf's execution in *The Crossing*, as each boy witnesses the death of an animal which causes a profound disillusionment. After finding the dead puppies the boy becomes

“numb and stricken,” and filled by “a great hollow feeling” (“Drowning” 4). While the narrative only refers indirectly to pain, the boy’s numbness reveals his incapacity to make sense of this emotional injury. However, the narrative anticipates the model of development found in McCarthy’s later work, as the boy’s comprehension of these violent events leads to his “sense of outrage” (4). This sentiment shows the formation of an ethical framework based on an obligation to other living beings.

The unnamed boy experiences his father’s betrayal as an act which confirms his personal meaning of the recent past. The presence of the newborn baby indicates that the boy has recently become a brother, and the negative emotions resulting from this situation become his impetus for revenge: “What prompted his next action was the culmination of all the schemes half formed not only walking from the creek but from the moment the baby arrived. Countless rejected, revised, or denied thoughts moiling somewhere in the inner recesses of his mind struggled and merged” (“Drowning” 4). The boy places the dead dogs in the baby’s crib, aware that his father will be forced to witness this atrocity. While this short narrative only scratches the surface of McCarthy’s preoccupation with pain, the writer already depicts traumatic experiences of loss as the defining events in human psychological development.

Each of the three earliest Appalachian novels implicitly revolves around its protagonists’ experiences of pain and loss. Although McCarthy only subtly alludes to John Wesley Rattner’s feelings concerning his father’s death in *The Orchard Keeper*, the narrative centers around this loss. The story connects each of the main characters through the unknown bond of the father’s death. In the subsequent novel, McCarthy inverts this structure, as the depiction of Rinthy Holme’s postpartum pain in *Outer Dark* becomes a physical expression of her bond with the missing child. In this case the physical pain signifies a biological need, the satiation of which relies on a psychological sense of certainty; as the doctor notes, Rinthy’s pain will end when she reunites with her child, or when she ascertains its death. In these first novels, McCarthy alludes to the presence of pain, but denies the reader any insight into his characters’ subjective interpretations of their experiences. The writer continues this trend in *Child of God*, as Lester Ballard’s sociopathic tendencies indicate an individual isolated from community due to his apparent incapacity to see others as subjects rather than objects. Though these

early novels neglect their protagonists' subjective experiences, they set the stage for what will become the dominant struggle for characters in McCarthy's later work, coming to terms with the pain of loss.

Following the three early Appalachian novels, McCarthy publishes a semi-autobiographical *bildungsroman*, which, according to generic convention, details its protagonist's inner life much more acutely than the previous novels. In *Suttree*, McCarthy unambiguously presents the title character's major transformation as a process through which he makes meaning of his pain:

He lay in his chrysalis of gloom and made no sound, share by share sharing his pain with those who lay in their blood by the highwayside or in the floors of glass strewn taverns or manacled in jail. He said that even the damned in hell have the community of their suffering and he thought that he'd guessed out likewise for the living a nominal grief like a grange from which disaster and ruin are proportioned by laws of equity too subtle for divining. (464)

In this passage we find the blueprint for John Grady's and Billy's philosophical revelations in the trilogy. Already we see McCarthy outlining the paradoxical experience of pain, which emphasizes an interpersonal meaning based on this common, though singular phenomenon. While Suttree understands that "there is one Suttree and one Suttree only" he finds common ground for meaning with others in the certainty of pain and loss (461). Learning to share his pain becomes a treatment for the type of existential despair evident throughout McCarthy's work. Following *Suttree*, however, McCarthy resolves to depict the brutality of war as objectively as possible, while only alluding to the psychological effects of pain from violence.

In *Blood Meridian* McCarthy carefully avoids depicting his characters' subjective experiences, excluding one important scene in which we witness the kid's perception of physical pain. This framework-shattering pain contrasts significantly with the "mindless violence" that suffuses the majority of the novel (*Blood Meridian* 3). If the kid undergoes any sort of change in the novel, it certainly results from this experience, as his subsequent actions suggest a heretofore unseen ethical sensibility. How else might one explain the kid's uncharacteristic response to Elrod's question, "[y]ou aim to shoot me" (321)? The protagonist, now called "the man," replies, "I aim to try to keep from it"

(321), and though he eventually kills the young boy, the man's attitude toward his actions shows the significant change in his character.

Judge Holden's eternal youth, represented by his "childlike" face (*Blood Meridian* 6), and "hairless" body (93), contrasts with the kid's explicit transformation over the course of the novel. The judge's quest for eternal life goes hand in hand with his desire for domination, and according to the developmental model expressed elsewhere in McCarthy's work the judge may never grow old because he inexplicably fails to perceive pain. The judge's motivations portray an immature framework that invalidates the value of other lives in favor of personal gain; thus, he occupies a place outside the human community which acknowledges the common experience of pain, not unlike Raúl, the captain in *All the Pretty Horses*. Each of these men shows an awareness of the vulnerability of the other but refuses to acknowledge that the meaning of his own life depends upon the meaning one recognizes in others. Since McCarthy began writing the screenplay that became *Cities of the Plain* before the publication of *Blood Meridian*, it seems plausible that the keystone of the Border Trilogy intentionally explores notions of subjective pain that were only implicitly suggested in McCarthy's earlier masterpiece.

As shown in earlier parts of this analysis, in the Border Trilogy McCarthy contextualizes, clarifies, and expands on the conception of pain presented in his first five novels. *All the Pretty Horses* and *The Crossing* seem to pick up where *Suttree* leaves off as far as detailing the process for making meaning from pain. When *Cities of the Plain* connects the stories of John Grady Cole and Billy Parham, McCarthy shows that the result of this process not only distinguishes youth from maturity, but becomes the dominant experience of the mature framework. As an individual grows old, and inevitably experiences pain and loss, the meaning of existence becomes defined by the attitude one takes toward these experiences. This notion becomes the central concern of McCarthy's most recent work.

The post-trilogy era of McCarthy's fiction essentially builds upon the developmental pain portrayed in his earlier *bildungsromans*. *No Country for Old Men* develops the representation of the common perception of adulthood in McCarthy's writing, expressed by Sherriff Bell in the novel. As the title suggests, the novel focuses on a world that proves dangerous to the mature framework portrayed in *Suttree* and the

trilogy. McCarthy quickly follows *No Country for Old Men* with *The Road*, which focuses on the psychological dilemma of a man who has survived an unnamed catastrophe, and wanders toward the coast with his son. In the vanished world of *The Road*, the man struggles to maintain the motivation to continue living from moment to moment. The cataclysmic disaster that radically alters the physical world initiates cultural changes which result in the violent deaths of the majority of the human population. In no other work does McCarthy so clearly depict the radical transformation by which an individual alters his or her framework to incorporate the meaning of pain and the certainty of loss.

The man's conception of his responsibility to his son recalls Alfonsa's description in *All the Pretty Horses* of "the bonds of a special authority," which are formed through common experiences of "great pain and loss" (135). The man echoes this sentiment when watching his son sleep. The entire meaning of the man's life has become based upon the existence of his son, and the realization that they, too, will die leads the man to perceive the paradoxical nature of life and death: "All things of grace and beauty such that one holds them to one's heart have a common provenance in pain. Their birth in grief and ashes. So, he said to the sleeping boy. I have you" (*Road* 54). The son's relationship with the father demonstrates the boy's reliance upon his father's beliefs to make sufficient sense of the world. But the father equally relies upon his son for making a meaning of his experience that can shine a light in the void which constitutes their bleak future.

Like others in McCarthy's fiction who have experienced events of catastrophic pain, the father struggles to reconcile his present view of the world with the vanished past. The mother's suicide thus becomes a clear option for dealing with loss, but the man's ethic requires the preservation of life as the means to a meaningful existence. Aware of his son's vulnerability to hopelessness, the man invents a metaphor to sustain belief in a common goal: they must continue to "carry the fire" (*Road* 278). While this novel has been read as uncharacteristically redemptive in comparison to McCarthy's previous publications, this reader finds a consistent view of what are called in *Cities of the Plain*, the "hard lessons" of life (126). *The Road* exemplifies Mr. Johnson's notion

“that when things are gone they’re gone” (*Cities* 126), but simultaneously reinforces the potential for a meaningful bond based on the shared pain of this inevitable loss.

McCarthy’s most recently published work, *The Sunset Limited: A Novel in Dramatic Form*, removes external plot devices in order to portray two distinct characters explaining and defending their conflicting philosophical frameworks. In this extended dialogue, two men discuss matters of life and death in relation to despair, after “Black” saves “White” from suicide. The men reveal the particulars of their divergent worldviews in the ensuing conversation, as Black tests his beliefs against the remnants of White’s now shattered framework. Guided by his faith in God, and an impulse to help himself by helping others, Black argues for the necessity of interpersonal meaning: “You must love your brother, or die” (*Sunset* 51). Conversely, White has come to realize an existential pain which completely undermines his former humanistic framework of beliefs: “The efforts that people undertake to improve the world invariably make it worse” (52). Echoing Billy’s sentiment in *Cities of the Plain*, White says, “I think about minimalizing pain. That is my life. I dont know why it isn’t everyone’s” (*Sunset Limited* 52). These two characters represent two divergent responses to the experience of pain, and allow McCarthy to explore a notion that has preoccupied his writing since the beginning of his career.

*The Sunset Limited* eventually complicates the assumption that grief causes the type of despair found throughout McCarthy’s work, as Black notes that “if it was grief that brought folks to suicide it’d be a full time job just to get em all in the ground come sundown” (*Sunset* 55). Thus, the question becomes, in Black’s words: “What kind of pain we talkin about” (55). When asked why people choose suicide, White says: “I cant speak for others. My own reasons center around a gradual loss of make-believe. That’s all. A gradual enlightenment as to the nature of reality. Of the world” (51). As in other of McCarthy’s work, this character marks development in terms of his awareness of the “pain of the world” (*Horses* 256). But Black notes the narcissistic quality of White’s philosophy, which supposes its own awareness of the pain of the world is somehow more expansive than that of other individuals. Both Black and White attest to the nearly universal presence of pain, but while White views this pain as evidence of the ultimate meaninglessness of life, Black sees the world as a canvas upon which one paints the

meaning of experience. Each of these views represent various aspects of McCarthy's apparent philosophy of pain, and the play ends, as all lives do, in separation. However, the staging of the production, which shows the characters enacting what has consistently been portrayed in McCarthy's work as the most successful treatment of such existential pain, affirms the position that interlocution proves the most effective way to establish a shared meaning for necessarily singular experiences. Although White ultimately carries out his self-destructive plan, the men participate in communication that creates common ground that validates the meaning of each life.

While McCarthy's recent work explores the psychological implications of pain even more explicitly than the Border Trilogy, it will be interesting to see how his forthcoming publications complicate, revise, and develop these pervasive themes. Much work remains if we are to disentangle the extensive implications of McCarthy's model of development, and its apparent fixation on pain. Chances are that the writer will continue to investigate the role of pain in human psychology, as he has from the beginning of his career. I close with a quote from "A Drowning Incident," which suggests McCarthy's comprehension of the power of pain to fundamentally alter the way one sees the world. The narrative's final image of the devastated young boy depicts the powerful imprint of pain on the human psyche: "He is sitting on his bed, his mind a dimensionless wall against which only a grey pattern, whorled as a huge thumbprint, oscillates slowly" ("Drowning" 4). This passage reveals the "thumbprint" of human identity as the product of one's perception of pain. In the early stages of development, the meaning of pain constitutes an indistinct impression on a yet undefined consciousness, but as McCarthy's writing shows, over time its significance becomes the clear focus of subjectivity.

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