The Myth of Masculinity in Cormac McCarthy's Border Trilogy

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Abstract

This thesis sees Cormac McCarthy's Border Trilogy as a celebration of the nostalgia and romance characteristic of the Western and the attendant mythologies of masculinity that the genre implies. My argument runs counter to readings of McCarthy's texts that view them as revising or querying the mythologies of American culture, such as the argument laid out by John Cant. The initiation process undertaken by the two protagonists in the trilogy is compared to the story of *Iron John* by Robert Bly. The narratives of both are seen as reactions against feminism, and as being involved in the process of remythifying a male coming-of-age story. In relation to this I will discuss John Grady Cole's role as an embodiment of the mythical cowboy hero. My analysis then interrogates the dearth of female characters in the Border Trilogy, and uncovers some problematic roles for the females that do feature in the books. I go on to identify certain films that have resonances with McCarthy's fiction. These occur both thematically in their approach to the 'damsel in distress' motif, as seen in *The Searchers* and *Cities of the Plain*, and with the representations of Mexico seen in *The Wild Bunch* and the Border Trilogy. Although it is tempting to read the Border Trilogy as a mythoclastic work, it relies on certain Western conventions and finally celebrates rather than queries the mythologies of American culture, and specifically the mythologies of masculinity.

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Abbreviations

For the sake of brevity, in the in-text citations I refer to the books of the Border Trilogy as follows:

All the Pretty Horses – APH

The Crossing – TC

Cities of the Plain – CoP

When citing the film version of *All the Pretty Horses* the title is written in full.

Introduction

The Border Trilogy, Western Mythology and the Mythopoetic Men's Movement

THE WORKS

Described by Harold Bloom as the "worthy disciple" both of William Faulkner and Herman Melville (1), Cormac McCarthy has also been perceived by many as a "writer's writer" (Tatum 12). Alongside of these comparisons, it has also been said that McCarthy draws from a tradition that includes Dostoyevsky, Stephen Crane, Hemingway, Jack London, Joyce, Southern literature, Westerns, Shakespeare, Cervantes and Twain (Busby 141). Rather than dispute it, McCarthy admits the debt that his style owes to his literary predecessors: "'The ugly fact is books are made out of books,' he says. 'The novel depends for its life on the novels that have been written.'" (Woodward). His work prior to *Blood Meridian* owes more to the genre of the Southern gothic than any other, and is seen as dark, frightening, often difficult, and complex to the point of inscrutability. His first novel, *The Orchard Keeper* (1965), features the decaying body of a man and a boy who does not know that the body is his father's. *Outer Dark* (1967) is his second novel, and it is the story of an incestuous brother-sister pair and their missing child. The protagonist of *Child of God* (1973) is the murderer and necrophiliac Lester Ballard, and *Suttree* (1979) is the comparatively humorous story of a Knoxville drunk and his tangles with the law. Cornelius Suttree's final act in that tale is to leave his "alcoholic existence in Knoxville" and thumb a ride heading West (Jarrett, *Cormac McCarthy* 4), the direction that McCarthy himself took physically and also thematically in his work following *Suttree*.

The publication of *Blood Meridian* in 1985 signalled the beginning of a long period of writing Westerns for McCarthy. In one of his few interviews to date he commented: "I've always been interested in the Southwest. There isn't a place in the world you can go where they don't know about cowboys and Indians and the myth of the West" (Woodward). *Blood Meridian* can be read as a fusion of the Southern Gothic style of McCarthy's earlier work and the literary Western, a direction in which his later novels were to turn with the publication of the Border Trilogy (Tatum 17). The trilogy began with *All the Pretty Horses*, published in 1992, followed by *The Crossing* in 1994 and finally *Cities of the Plain* in 1998. Prior to the publication of *All the Pretty Horses*, McCarthy had received little public attention, although he did garner critical praise and developed a small yet "devoted coterie" of academic as well as general readers (Tatum 12). That all changed after *All the Pretty Horses* came out. It was due to the accessibility of the subject matter and the themes of the novel – romance, the departure-return adventure plot, the cowboys – that the general reading public took notice of McCarthy's writing. To date it is still arguably McCarthy's most accessible novel, the one with the lowest body-count, the most romance, and the most conventional hero: John Grady Cole.

All the Pretty Horses, by contrast to McCarthy's earlier works, is "a linear tale of boyish episodes" – the two protagonists meet vaqueros, join up with a hapless companion, break horses on an idyllic ranch in Mexico and are unjustly thrown in jail – "the book has a sustained innocence and a lucidity new in McCarthy's work. There is even a budding love story" (Woodward). The story is played out in the form of a Western *bildungsroman* by John

Grady Cole, a young and talented horse-breaker and cowboy, whose romanticised exploits with horses, his loyal partner Lacey and the beautiful Alejandra come close to the saccharine at certain points. When asked about the relatively low number of deaths in the novel McCarthy replied: "You haven't come to the end yet. This may be nothing but a snare and a delusion to draw you in, thinking that all will be well" (Woodward). True to his word, the novels of the Border Trilogy increase in calamity and violence as the series progresses, and the ending of the final novel, *Cities of the Plain*, is heartwrenching all the more for the familiarity with which we regard the characters.

The second novel in the series, *The Crossing*, details the story of teenager Billy Parham who attempts to rescue a wolf and return her to Mexico. Following that unsuccessful journey he returns to find his parents have been killed, and he and his brother seek revenge. Billy's brother dies in Mexico, and it becomes Billy's final quest to return his bones to the United States. Like *All the Pretty Horses* the novel covers the borderlands of the American Southwest and Mexico and also approaches the subject of masculinity via its cowboy hero. Unlike *All the Pretty Horses*, *The Crossing* has an explicit environmental angle, and there is no recognisable love story. The novel shows an increased interest in spirituality, mysticism and the nature of man, with more interpolated tales, philosophical speculation and less of the action seen in *All the Pretty Horses*. In *The Crossing*, rather than a personal fate for his hero, it is the fate of disappearing lifestyles and species which seems to interest McCarthy.

Whilst the first two novels of the trilogy revised the theme of the journey which has been a hallmark of McCarthy's work (Jarrett, *Cormac McCarthy* vii), the trilogy's finale, *Cities of*

the Plain, sees the two main protagonists of the previous novels making shorter journeys across the border to frequent a Mexican brothel whilst working on a ranch in Texas. The narrative details the vicissitudes that follow, centred around John Grady's love affair with a prostitute, and finally culminates in John Grady's violent death and Billy's wanderings as an elderly man. Busby describes the novel as a combination of the "varied elements of the first two books" in an end of the millennium "examination of human responsibility, desire, chance, folly, the changing natural world, and of the ineluctable human desire to make sense of things" (162).

Despite the critical and popular success of the Border Trilogy, comparatively little has been written about *Cities of the Plain*. The fact that it was being written long before the first two novels in the form of a screenplay speaks to the assertion that McCarthy had conceived of the Border Trilogy as a coherent whole (Arnold 222; Woodward), and it assumes some narrative and thematic cohesion between the three novels. It might also suggest that *Cities of the Plain* should be the text that interests us the most for its plot conclusions and the judgments it makes regarding a coming-of-age process for John Grady and Billy. *Cities of the Plain* also hold the dubious honour of leaving the reader with an image of the Southwestern borderlands that privileges American morality over that of Mexico. Another facet to this final novel of the trilogy that encourages consideration is how we should read it. Robert L. Jarrett avers that the the "textual gap" existing between *All the Pretty Horses* and *The Crossing* resulting from the lack of continuity between those two novels leads us to choose between two contradictory readings of *Cities of the Plain*: to read it as a work which stands alone and can be interpreted as a novel in its own right, or to regard the text as the "final installment of a serialized work" ("Sense" 313). The problem involves the role of narrative and the question raised when

interpreting the Border Trilogy of whether there is a "superstructure" of plot, theme, language, imagery and ideology cohesive enough to link all three works into a single narrative (Jarrett, "Sense" 313). Stacey Peebles considers the trilogy an "artistic whole" ("What Happens" 127), and suggests that a reading of the trilogy in its entirety is necessary. Similarly, my reading of the Border Trilogy links the three novels as parts of a serialized whole, but prioritises the final installment, *Cities of the Plain*, as having the ability to strengthen or undermine the ideologies that underpin the first two novels. Additionally, this seems to be McCarthy's intention, as his interview with Woodward reveals that the uncharacteristic romance and softness of *All the Pretty Horses* could signify an ulterior motive; "this may be nothing but a snare and a delusion to draw you in".

WESTERN MYTHOLOGY

Cormac McCarthy's "allusive density" is one aspect of his style that has received much critical attention (Shaw, "Introduction" xv), and in the Border Trilogy we can see the powerful influence that Western literature and film has had. The trilogy is set in the Southwest borderlands of the United States and Mexico and features two young cowboy protagonists, John Grady and Billy. Few people have not heard of the West, as McCarthy admits, and by utilising the evocative landscapes and images of the Western in his trilogy McCarthy is identifying and strengthening the myths that the genre has engendered. Shaw considers McCarthy not only a proponent of some of the mythologies of the West but a "propagandist" (Shaw, "Introduction" xx), actively adding to the stock of Western mythologies and updating them as he does so. The West that McCarthy imagines is violent and bloody, and almost exclusively populated by men, but these features serve only make it

more alluring and more like the "earthly paradise for men only" that exists in the American imagination (Fiedler 355). Shaw argues that McCarthy's metaphysical intent is to reinvigorate the West and to convince readers that the West is still as viable in the twenty-first century as it ever was; "still as mythic, still a place to escape to" ("Introduction" xx). On the other hand, McCarthy's intention may well be to critique or unsettle certain assumptions that exist about the West, but he is paradoxically maintaining the growth of the mythical West at the same time (Shaw, "Introduction" xxii). This is a risk inherent in any postmodern text that critiques ideology in a self-reflexive style, although whether McCarthy's Border Trilogy texts can be considered strictly 'postmodern' is up for debate. Jarrett seems to think there is little argument – he describes *Blood Meridian* as a "postmodern western" and the Border Trilogy as "psychologically complex postmodern fiction" (*Cormac McCarthy* ix). John Cant disagrees, claiming that although McCarthy works in a self-reflexive style, his writing is not playful enough to be considered postmodern, and additionally McCarthy's view on human nature is that it is essential rather than contingent, a position that would be at odds with postmodernism (5).

Cant's main interest is not in deciding whether or not McCarthy should be considered a postmodern writer, but in exploring and exposing McCarthy's ostensibly mythoclastic bent as it is reflected in his body of work. My thesis has relied greatly on Cant's ideas as expressed in his book *Cormac McCarthy and the Myth of American Exceptionalism* in order to inform my own analysis of McCarthy's mythological approach. The argument that Cant lays out is strongly underpinned by the assertion that McCarthy depicts modern America as a "Waste Land" (12), an Eliotesque counter-mythic landscape that is hostile to its protagonists due to their inferior understanding of the world which in turn has been engendered by American

culture. Cant's argument is that for "McCarthy's heroes the "world's dream" is the American dream", the dream born out of the mythologies of American culture which are in fact ideologies disguised as truth (15). As Cant sees it, McCarthy's heroes structure their consciousnesses by means of the illusory 'American dream', and the end result is that "most are destroyed by it, one or two escape, but not unscathed" (15). Certainly no character escapes unscathed in the Border Trilogy, but this is typical of the type of mythology McCarthy is invested in. The genre in which McCarthy is writing is part American *bildungsroman*, part Western, so it should come as no surprise that his characters will suffer, and some will die. In fact, the obsession with death is well documented in Westerns, "death is everywhere in this genre" (Tompkins 24). Cant is arguing that McCarthy's characters die in a different kind of way to the characters of the Westerns that defined the genre. Perhaps McCarthy's characters are killed off by an excess of irrelevant mythology. Explained in his own words, Cant attempts to prove that "McCarthy deliberately sets out to give his texts mythic form and that he does so in such a way as to point out the destructive consequences of structuring the consciousness of individuals by means of powerful mythologies which they are not in a position to live out" (9). Regardless of McCarthy's own intentions, and in contrast with Cant's findings, I see him as a purveyor of myth, and his protagonists as unwaveringly mythological. McCarthy offers up a well-known story with recognisable characters and sub-plots, and as such the Border Trilogy works to further the re-mythification of the West and helps to maintain the growth (or at least slow down the demise) of the cowboy myth and its corollary: the myth of masculinity in America.

MALE MALAISE

Born in 1933, Cormac McCarthy has "lived through a period in which America has moved from the economic catastrophe of the Great Depression to a position of unchallenged hegemony" (Cant 17). The novels that he has authored are thus marked by the major historical events and changes of that time period, and in the Border Trilogy McCarthy portrays an America in which "material progress" has been significant, but where the "spiritual or moral counterpart" to this progress has been more ambiguous (Cant 17). In a more specific sense, some of the largest changes that took place over the course of McCarthy's life have been to do with gender roles, and American culture's response to feminism. The primary dissatisfaction with society that emerges from an analysis of the trilogy is one concerning the role of men and masculinity in contemporary America, and what is addressed in McCarthy's Western novels is what Michael S. Kimmel has termed a "deep current of malaise among American men" (*Manhood* 211). The source of this dissatisfaction, according to Kimmel, is the fear of "feminization"; that men have lost the ability to claim "manhood in a world without fathers, without frontiers" that has existed for over a century (*Manhood* 211). A putative panacea to this 'softness' and enervation has been identified in the figure of the mythical cowboy, the very picture of masculine vitality. McCarthy re-invigorates the cowboy figure in the person of John Grady Cole, and, to a lesser extent, Billy Parham, which Cant argues is in order to critique this figure and empty him of some of his mystique. Unfortunately the critical commentary that his work might be making is subsumed beneath the drama and romance of the stories of the Border Trilogy. McCarthy's attempt to undermine accepted modes of masculinity, if it exists at all, is also hidden effectively behind the stereotypical gender roles that he has assigned, and the relegation to the margins of the narrative of almost all of the females in the trilogy. The evocation of a cowboy hero is also

too familiar, too powerful to resist, and although a critique might lie behind the layers of allusion, the reader has trouble detecting this as they are beguiled by an old favourite; the mythological cowboy hero, the epitome of American masculinity. In reality, this figure is poorly understood. The cowboy is anachronistic and artificial, a cultural creation rather than an actual person, and yet so widely recognised that we have trouble separating the myth from the reality. Following years of cultural hegemony, Kimmel feels that the cowboy should finally be retired and that "the disappearance of the cowboy as the model of American masculinity will be a gain, not a loss" (*History* 103). By responding to a sense of dissatisfaction amongst American men, McCarthy has created a new world for the cowboy that lives on into the twenty-first century and re-virilizes this stock image of American masculinity, to the detriment of society.

Leslie Fiedler notes in his 1966 publication *Love and Death in the American Novel* that a strong current exists amongst writers of great American fiction to ignore issues of heterosexual love and domesticity, and to focus instead on a man's journey away from home and his subsequent manly adventures. The fable he highlights as a parable of "masculine protest" is that of Rip Van Winkle who escapes his shrewish wife with joyful "deliverance" (Fiedler 341). Rip became an American archetype, in Fiedler's view, and in many ways was also a prophet of things to come; "misunderstood at home, the natural man whistles for his dog... picks up his gun and leaves the village for Nature" (341). The mission that Rip undertakes is copied years later by the men of the mythopoetic men's movement. It is reasonable to say that in the two years prior to the publication of *All the Pretty Horses* McCarthy would have been aware of the growing momentum of this movement, catalysed by the publication of Robert Bly's *Iron John* in 1990, and that this may have influenced his

subsequent writing. In the years following the publication of Bly's bestseller, American men chose to respond to their felt deficiencies by following the lead of this poet and author. His answer to encroaching feminization and the deficiencies of the "soft male" (Bly 3) was for men to get together without women, and it had as its purpose the quest to retrieve a lost sense of "deep manhood" (Kimmel, *Manhood* 208). This masculinity was embodied most notably by the archetypal Wild Man of the woods, a giant, prehistoric man who was terrifying to behold and covered in rust-coloured hair. Bly's answer to the felt inadequacies of late twentieth century masculine identity was, in short, more mythology. The response to Bly in the early 1990s was significant, as men across the United States went into "full-scale retreat" (Kimmel, *Manhood* 208), isolating themselves in all-male groups in the forest and attempting to reconnect with their own innate manhood.

In *Iron John*, a "loose adaptation of Jungian psychology" (Dudley 175), Bly reprised a Grimm's fairy tale and dressed it up as an enduring and perpetual fable of male social and emotional development. The story tells of a young Prince who must undergo certain quests necessary to reclaim his instinctive masculinity, including separation from the mother, meeting the frightening Wild Man, receiving "the scarring wound", and the subsequent recovery of masculine virtue (Kimmel, *Manhood* 208). One of the key plot developments in *Iron John* is that the Prince separates from his mother, and so it would follow that an incomplete separation leads to an inferior masculinity.[1] In response to this mandate the mythopoets eagerly took to the woods, where neither mothers nor the insecurities and

1 By contrast with this view, feminist psychoanalysts argued that there was too much separation between men and their mothers, and that this is what caused the deficiency in contemporary men (Kimmel, *Manhood* 209).

uncertainties raised by contemporary feminism and the complications of modern living could follow. This movement of men and the project of a manhood that could be put to the test became equated with an ongoing effort to "repudiate femininity" and came to be seen as "a frantic effort to dissociate from women" (Kimmel, *Manhood* 209). In the course of this effort, the movement's actual rituals (a decontextualized hodgepodge of rites from various cultures and continents) were undertaken as sex-segregated celebrations, being only about men and having nothing to do with women. This form of masculinist separation was heard by feminists as a cry for reinvigorated initiation rites which sounded ominously familiar, "like a cry to reinforce the crumbling walls of those men's clubs whose primary interests were exclusion and self-perpetuation" (Baumgaertner 596). Accessing an inner man who diminished or ignored a woman's role appeared to be nothing more than a celebration of the oppressor, or at least a misguided rejoicing in one's own privilege. Furthermore, that the message in *Iron John* encouraged the mythopoets to identify with the Prince in the story meant that they saw themselves as the rightful heirs to the throne of men's privilege, which worked towards reproducing a sense of entitlement. The movement thus offered a possibly inadvertent but nonetheless insidious "political program" that reinforced the imbalances of power that already existed between men and women (Kimmel, *Manhood* 211).

It has been noted by John Dudley that McCarthy's first commercially successful novel, *All the Pretty Horses*, was published in 1992, a short time after *Iron John*, which also coinciding with the "emergence" of the mythopoetic men's movement (175). *All the Pretty Horses* and the other two novels of the trilogy seem to indulge in precisely the sort of masculine archetypal initiation quests, full of "allusions to chivalric romance" (Dudley 176) and corporeal violence that Bly decried the absence of in late twentieth century America and

Europe. Bly notes that male initiation in various cultures begins with two events: a "clean break with the parents" after which the boy goes into the wilderness and the occurrence of a "wound that the older men give the boy" (Bly 28). The narratives of John Grady and Billy both contain not only an emphatic separation from the parents but also a number of heroic quests, a meeting with a frightening wild animal in Billy's case, and the incident (or rather incidents) of the "scarring wound" (Kimmel, *Manhood* 208). John Grady's mythopoetic initiation cannot be in question as he is grievously wounded by "older men" (Bly 28), to the extent that twice in *All the Pretty Horses* his shoes fill with his own blood (202, 268). His boots "sloshed" and his clothes dripped with blood when he was stabbed in prison by the *cuchillero* (201), and his leg wound when he is shot turns his trousers "dark with blood" (266) until he cauterises that wound with his own gun barrel. The final, fatal wounding that he receives sees John Grady eviscerated by Eduardo's knife. Billy, the other protagonist of the trilogy inflicts his own wound cutting himself purposefully in *The Crossing* and watching "the slow blood dropping on the stone" (130).[2] It is telling that John Grady suffers more physical scarring, a more profound initiation than Billy, as he is the hero, the truly masculine man, where Billy is not. Billy's own wound is not legitimately received, and as a result he is never properly 'initiated'. Apart from the two key events that mark a young man's initiation, McCarthy expresses in the Border Trilogy certain themes that resonate with the mythopoetic men's movement, such as a retreat into the wilderness, the inclusion of Native American forms of spirituality – McCarthy describes the "ghost" of the Comanche nation and aligns John Grady with them (*APH* 5) – and an all-male "homosocial preserve" (Kimmel, *Manhood* 207) that comes in the form of Mac MacGovern's Cross Fours Ranch. In Billy's attempt to join the army we see another expression of the wish to be away from women and "reground"

2 See Nell Sullivan's "Boys Will be Boys and Girls Will be Gone" for further explication of bloodletting and its implications in the performance of gender in the Border Trilogy. *Cormac McCarthy Companion* 228-255

masculinity on the basis of the exclusion of the Other (Kimmel, *Manhood* 207). The marginalisation, or even "obviation" (N. Sullivan 229), of women in the Border Trilogy further emphasises McCarthy's alignment with masculinist attempts at reclaiming a lost, innate masculinity at the turn of the twenty-first century.

By drawing a link between *Iron John* and the Border Trilogy I hope to have adumbrated the themes and conclusions of the chapters to follow. Chapter One explores the genre of Western *bildungsroman* and deals with the figure of the cowboy hero in its most emphatic incarnation: John Grady Cole. By offering up an uncomplicated, impossibly heroic man in the person of John Grady, the trilogy is lauding the masculine stereotype of the cowboy. Cant has argued strenuously that McCarthy is in fact a mythoclast, working to undermine the ideological moorings of American exceptionalism and its attendant oppressive constructs, but my argument runs counter to this reading, whilst taking into account that the author's intention and the work's effect are not necessarily identical. McCarthy's densely allusive writing, whilst obscuring some of the patriarchal ideologies that underpin the narratives of his texts, borrows much from mythology, and by writing within this mythological style he is furthering and reproducing some of the oppressive ideologies represented therein. Chapter Two details the marginalisation as well as the absence of females, and the implications that this has for reading the Border Trilogy as a set of texts that work to re-mythify rather than debunk the masculine mythologies of the West. Chapter Three is an investigation into film and the resonances that the myths evoked by certain Western films such as *The Searchers*, *Monte Walsh* and *The Wild Bunch* might have with the Border Trilogy. In particular, I look at Richard Slotkin's notion of "search and destroy" (*Gunfighter* 466-467) as an outcome to the mythological rescue narrative as it is expressed in *The Searchers* and the Border Trilogy.

Some attention will also be given to McCarthy's representation of Mexico as a foil to the United States, and its role as America's "dark doppelgänger" (Sugg 118). Overall, this thesis aims to show that by revitalizing some of the oldest and most recognizable myths of the West, McCarthy is subtly undermining the feminist movement and the multiculturalist critique of white supremacy. McCarthy is a writer of obvious intelligence and skill, and so we are inclined to look for a grand design in his Border Trilogy that goes beyond the cliché Western plot with its troubling gender dynamics, impossibly heroic cowboy figure, reductive portrayals of Mexicans, and ubiquitous violence. Unfortunately the effect of the invocation of familiar mythologies is that the most untenable ideologies are given an innocent and "eternal justification" (Barthes 143). Far from being mythoclastic, the Border Trilogy is a literary vehicle in which American myths are replayed, defended, and finally celebrated.

Chapter One: The Cowboy Hero

"He always thought he would write the great American western."
(DeLisle quoted in Woodward)

INTRODUCTION

Near the beginning of *All the Pretty Horses* the protagonist, John Grady Cole, absconds from the family home and sets out on his wanderings with his friend, Lacey Rawlins. The loss of his family's ranch and rejection by his mother makes him an outcast, hoping to find the "something missing" that would complete the world or complete him (Tatum 22; *APH* 23). The search for that absent thing is seen by Vereen Bell as the desire "to be one with the earth and to live in genuine human communion" (926), a desire that is here acted out in quest form. The missing element that John Grady could just as plausibly be searching for is something that relates less to the earth and more to his own identity as a young man, his sense of his own manliness. Incorporating the themes of communion, both with human beings and the earth, Robert Bly outlines a man's search in *Iron John* as being the quest for an innate "deep" manhood (Bly 6) that has been lost over time due to the feminizing influence of industrial society. A consistent "obsession with masculinity" marks the Western (Mitchell 3), and the genre is viewed as a reaction against feminism (Mitchell 152; Tompkins 39-40), so it is fitting that the quest structure of the protagonists' narratives suggests the genre of Western *bildungsroman*, a particularly American blend of both *bildungsroman* and Western. Unsurprisingly the protagonists of these narratives are cowboys as we typically imagine them – young, physically strong, white and male. The cowboy is one of the most recognizable

figures of American culture in both books and film, and this character has proven himself to be both powerful and enduring.

There is a great deal of scholarly material that has been written to date about Cormac McCarthy's particular interest in the mythology of the West and the role that his protagonists play within this canon of mythology. Much of the content of this writing has focussed on McCarthy's ability to evoke the stock images of the Western in his nostalgic additions to the genre, or on the other hand, his interest in questioning the accepted myths that have been implied. John Cant in particular believes that McCarthy is a "mythoclast" (6), one whose interest lies in querying and undermining the myths of American exceptionalism and all of its attendant fallacies. Cant argues in his book *Cormac McCarthy and the Myth of American Exceptionalism* that a unifying theme of McCarthy's work is his depiction of the failure of American culture, handed down in the form of the "grand narrative" of American exceptionalism (5). The question that needs to be posed in response to this is why then have the stories and characters within the Border Trilogy remained so steadfastly mythological? This chapter takes the position that rather than questioning the mythologies of the West, including the masculine ideals expressed via the figure of the cowboy, McCarthy is revivifying them within a more contemporary cultural milieu.

A WESTERN *BILDUNGSROMAN*

It is worth noting that there has been some commentary from other writers on whether one should read the texts of the Border Trilogy as separate works or a single, composite piece. Prior to 1998 critics would not have had all three novels at their disposal, and this has led to

an understanding of the works as singular narratives in and of themselves. By contrast, the benefit of considering the books as part of a serialized text is that one can pay attention to such aspects as character development and plot as they occur, from the separate narratives of John Grady and Billy through to the merging of the two protagonists' stories and their ending. The Border Trilogy and the novels that comprise it have been categorised according to a multitude of genres. Georg Guillemin sees the novels of the trilogy as "picaresque initiation quests" that incorporate modified aspects of the Western to form an "inverted frontier" tale where the frontier is represented as a last barrier against civilisation rather than civilisation's vanguard in the wilderness (93). Gail Moore Morrison takes a slightly different view, regarding *All the Pretty Horses* as a classic example of a *bildungsroman* in the American tradition, where a "youthful protagonist turns his back on civilization and heads out... in John Grady's case, through desert and mountain on horseback – into the wilderness where innocence experiences the evil of the universe and risks defeat by it" (178). By comparison, James D. Lilley sees *All the Pretty Horses*, and by inference the Border Trilogy as a whole, as a Western, revelling in nostalgia, and not a *bildungsroman* which would trace the forward progress of an individual in the time of the open frontier, when America was seeking to define its "geographical boundaries" (274). This is supported by McCarthy's obvious interest in Westerns which is in turn reflected in the statement that he made in his interview with Woodward, that there is nowhere in the world where people do not know about "cowboys and Indians and the myth of the West" (Woodward). The view that resonates the most with my reading is also held by Barcley Owens who, in blending the genres, sees the trilogy as telling a story in congruence with the Western *bildungsroman* tradition where the characters are both seen as passing through their rites of initiation with "transcendent moments of honor" and "becoming experienced in the ways of the world" (63). By seeking to

define the genre within which McCarthy is writing I am attempting to show that he has a deep investment in the various mythologies of America. To define his work as a Western *bildungsroman* is to note that it shares characteristics with these two genres, both of which are implicated in the celebration of the myth of American exceptionalism and masculinity.

NOSTALGIA

What makes the tales of John Grady and Billy atypical of a Western, however, is the complicated relationship to nostalgia that McCarthy sets up in the narrative of *All the Pretty Horses* through to its culmination in *Cities of the Plain*. One of the central assumptions to Cant's argument is that McCarthy offers the past no special place or spiritual superiority, but attacks the myth of the pastoral in America as a means by which to undermine it and to "deconstruct as a destructive lie" the myth of the West (7). Nostalgia and longing for the past is expressed prominently in the Border Trilogy, however, with specific reference to nostalgia for the pastoral Eden that Cant believes McCarthy has no investment in. On the surface, all three novels are deeply nostalgic, and feature protagonists who are already anachronisms in their own world, riding horses when motorcars are already ubiquitous, and longing for the rapidly disappearing lifestyle of the cowboy. John Grady's nostalgia for a premodern pastoral paradise is made clear right at the outset as his mother's lawyer tells him "Son, not everbody thinks that life on a cattle ranch in west Texas is the second best thing to dyin and goin to heaven" (*APH* 17). The complication occurs when in conjunction with the yearning for a lost Eden, as is fitting of a Western, John Grady's nostalgia also uncovers traces of a past full of violence and a debt owed to those who have been injured by the history of white America. To McCarthy's mind, however, there is no alternative to violence. Hobbesian in his view of

human nature, McCarthy envisages no possibility other than a life on earth that is bloody and transient. McCarthy's characters "*in extremis*" show that he believes in an "all too powerful "essential" human nature and that violence is inherent to that essence" (Cant 5). As the author himself has said; "there's no such thing as a life without bloodshed" (Woodward). His vision of humanity is of "cosmic insignificance" (Cant 5) and modern man as the representative of a culture that will ultimately become nothing more than "myth, legend, dust" (*The Orchard Keeper* 246). It is for this reason that Cant refutes the assertion that McCarthy's texts are elegies for a lost American Eden (9). The strong sense of loss that pervades all three novels in the trilogy seems to contradict this refutation, however, as the present is figured as disorientating for the young protagonists, and their yearning for a past lifestyle is the motivation behind many of their quests. Guillemin's observation that the trilogy demonstrates an "inverted frontier" tale is apt (93), as the frontier as a last stronghold against civilisation further supports the reading that the past is viewed with nostalgia, if we take civilisation to represent the future. By setting the story in the West and describing the "vanishing" lifestyle of the cowboy (Luce, "Vanishing World" 161), McCarthy's argument is that all is temporary and everything subject to extinction. The past is not shown to be perfect, although the protagonists may regard it as idyllic, but it is preferable to the present and the future, where motorcars have replaced horses, cowboys are going extinct, and atomic bombs are exploding in the heart of Southwestern cattle country. Cant insists that the past has no spiritual superiority as "McCarthy implicitly and consistently attacks the myth of the pastoral in all its forms" (6), and yet the two places where the protagonists find respite from the complications of modern life are Don Hector's ranch in Mexico, the 'paradise' from which John Grady is finally expelled, and Mac MacGovern's Texas ranch. When they have first arrived at La Purísima Rawlins asks John Grady "This is how it was with the old waddies, aint it?" and

then asks how long he would like to stay for, to which John Grady replies "About a hundred years. Go to sleep" (*APH* 96).

John Dudley notes that McCarthy invokes nostalgia in the form of John Grady and Rawlins' anachronistic adventures, although he cautions that the novel "is as much about nostalgic longing as it is an example of this form" (176). A particularly telling passage occurs early on in *All the Pretty Horses* when John Grady leaves his grandfather's funeral and chooses to ride away from the house and on "the western fork of the old Comanche road coming down out of the Kiowa country":

> ...the ancient road was shaped before him in the rose and canted light like a dream of the past where the painted ponies and the riders of that lost nation came down out of the north... all of them pledged in blood and redeemable in blood only... nation and ghost of nation passing in a soft chorale across the mineral waste to darkness bearing lost to all history and all remembrance like a grail the sum of their secular and transitory and violent lives. (5)

This is one of a number of references to Native Americans in the trilogy. The spiritual superiority of the past that Cant argues against is demonstrated in this passage by the romantic vision of the riders and their "painted ponies", harking back to the days of the frontier. In its yearning for the past the trilogy echoes some of the impulses of Robert Bly's mythopoetic movement towards an earlier time, before feminists started to undermine male

privilege, when men were 'hard' and not "soft" (Bly 2). Michael S. Kimmel explains that the gatherings of these mythopoetic weekend warriors "evoked a misty preindustrial past through which to view our dilemma", Bly being in favour of a kind of "primitivism" (*Manhood* 209) that hearkens back to a time before the complications and sophistications of the industrial era. In evoking the past at the same time as they effected an emulation of supposedly Native American culture, the mythopoets were appropriating cultural and spiritual material from a disenfranchised and othered ethnic group, which one writer went so far as to name "spiritual colonialism" (Kimmel, *Manhood* 210). The mythopoets in essence adopted "Redface", taking on "putatively Native American rituals" to allow white men access to "community, spirituality, communion with nature" that they felt they had lost (Kimmel, *Manhood* 210). This could be compared to nineteenth-century minstrel shows in which white performers would don blackface, an act that we view today as clearly racist. In order to access his own "warrior energy", John Grady imagines himself to be riding in the tracks of the Comanche. His face is even turned "copper" as he rides their war trail and witnesses the "red wind blowing out of the west" (*APH* 5). His father makes an emphatic connection between their two races when he says "we're like the Comanches was two hundred years ago. We don't know what's goin to show up here come daylight. We don't even know what color they'll be" (*APH* 25), consciously identifying with a people whose lifestyle became endangered with the arrival of Europeans, in the same way that the cowboy lifestyle became endangered with the advent of industrialisation, civilization and its domesticating, feminizing influence.

COWBOYS AND PIONEERS

The figure of the cowboy needs no introduction, being "the most historically resonant heroic figure in American mythology" (Dudley 177). However, far from the romanticised ideals of cowboy life that have come to serve as stock images for the Western, the lives of cowboys were in reality unromantic and were characterised by social isolation and economic disenfranchisement. Essentially manual labourers, cowboys were generally considered undesirable in society due to their rough manners, unwashed clothes and uncivilised ways. Earning "barely more than the average industrial worker" cowboys were "overworked, underfed, poorly paid, ill-educated laborers" (Mitchell 25). Cowboys typically did not get married, and rarely lived in any sort of comfort. That they were often in possession of firearms was one of the few alluring features of these ranch workers, and one that has fuelled their mystique and the mythologising of an otherwise unremarkable profession. As Lee Clark Mitchell puts it, a cowboy was simply a hired hand, "a shepherd with a gun" (25). The fact of their carrying guns has been instrumental in securing the appeal of the cowboy figure as they were lent an air of masculine self-sufficiency and confidence by the weapons. To attempt to answer the question of what else fuelled the mystique of cowboys is to enter "vexed historical terrain" (Mitchell 26), but a large portion of this mystique must surely be derived from the quality that is so strongly associated with cowboys: that of 'manliness'. The cultural hero that the cowboy represents is a clear manifestation of American masculinity, being "fierce and brave", willing to venture into the wilderness in order to tame it for its "less-than-masculine inhabitants" (Kimmel, *History* 94).

Sara Spurgeon tells us that the cowboy, as well as being a complex historical persona and a powerful media figure, is an American myth (79). Rather than being a realistic and complex persona,"mythic characters are representative of large generalized ideas, values and aspects of culture" (Cant 11). The actual, historical cowboy was no more exceptional than a bank clerk, and yet he came to be imbued with enduring power through the process of being mythologised. Myths are ubiquitous in society because they are the means by which information and ideas are passed on to groups of individuals based on national, cultural, gender, class and personal identity. The stories that have been "drawn from society's history" are what constitute these myths (Slotkin, *Gunfighter* 5). Roland Barthes explicated the power of mythology by pointing out the function of myth in convincing us that the "ideological is the natural" (Cant 8). Rather than denying things, myth "purifies them, it makes them innocent, it gives them a natural and eternal justification" (Barthes 143). Mythology is as present and potent in America as it ever was in European society, and a case for this has been laid out in Richard Slotkin's 1973 book *Regeneration Through Violence: the Mythology of the American Frontier 1600 – 1860.* Slotkin claims that myths do more damage than good, and that "through mythology the values of the past are transferred to a present in which they are no longer viable, with negative results" (Cant 9). As Slotkin explains:

> Through myths the psychology and world view of our cultural ancestors are transmitted to modern descendants... with such power that our perception of contemporary reality and our ability to function in the world are directly, often tragically affected. (5)

Ideology is thus disguised as nature, and the effect of this camouflage is damaging to those consumers of mythology who do not differentiate between the two. Cant considers McCarthy to be an author who is acutely aware of myth and its dangers and works towards querying the beloved mythologies of America. Certainly, McCarthy is aware of the inescapable nature of myth (Cant 7), but rather than revising the mythology of the West he celebrates it and revitalizes its most damaging ideologies within the mythical narratives of the Border Trilogy.

The Southwestern setting of McCarthy's Border Trilogy is a culturally appropriate backdrop on which to tack a man's initiation process in the masculinist tradition of 'going West', and heading for the frontier. The closure of the frontier occurred almost a century before the trilogy is set, thus necessitating the designation of a new frontier, and this emerges in the narrative as the state line between the United States and Mexico. The frontier land on which Billy and John Grady plot their separate courses is envisaged as one of cultural borders, the state line acting as the gateway into an unfamiliar environment where laws are unclear and justice is not always just. The physical act of crossing a border has long been associated with initiation for men in America, and when Horace Greeley urged men in 1837 to "Go West... and grow up with the country," history shows us that men were eager to follow (Kimmel, *History* 22). The restlessness and adventurous spirit of these early pioneers is also reflected in the characters John Grady and Billy, who cross the border frequently and seem unable to stay in one place. The myth of the pioneer is a distinctively American one, and inherent to the pioneering spirit is the mobility of this character and the link between "geographic mobility, social mobility, and self-recreation as men" (Kimmel, *History* 24). Richard Slotkin, who has detailed what he calls the "frontier fable", writes this:

> The protagonist is usually represented as having marginal connections to the metropolis and its culture. He is a poor and uneducated borderer or an orphan lacking the parental tie to anchor him to the Metropolis and is generally disinclined to learn from book culture when the book of nature is free to read before him. His going to the wilderness breaks or attenuates the Metropolitan tie, but it gives him access to something far more important than anything the Metropolis contains – the wisdom, morality, power and freedom of Nature in its pure wild form. (*Fatal Environment* 374)

The irony, of course, is that by pioneering into the Western region in order to ostensibly 'escape' civilization, these individuals are taming the region for civilization to follow, becoming its "advance guard" (Kimmel, *History* 25). Nevertheless, the myth of the frontier hero remains potent, and is reflected in the travels of Billy, an orphan with no connection to the Metropolis, and John Grady, figuratively orphaned and uninterested in book learning. Similar to the frontier fable's protagonist traced out by Slotkin, Billy is especially eager to learn from the "book of nature" and develops his own morality from this (*Fatal Environment* 374). Rather than offering a revision of the frontier fable, McCarthy simply transposes this allegory onto a new kind of frontier, the state line between America and Mexico, which also represents the escape from civilized urbanization into the more primitive rural setting of Mexico.

BILLY PARHAM

An historical character who might have inspired Billy Parham is Daniel Boone, famous in the 19th century as a paragon of independence, freedom and man's conquest of nature. A backwoodsman of mythical status and legendary mobility, Boone was also represented as the "natural man", disinterested in wealth and material possessions and "never weighted down" (Kimmel, *History* 24). A legend claims that when Boone heard that a farm was being cleared 12 miles away from his home he declared the area "too thickly settled" and moved away (Kimmel, *History* 24). This antisocial attitude resonates with the character of Billy in *The Crossing*,[3] who speaks little and is constantly on the move, most comfortable with himself in the wilderness with no company save his horse and an untameable wolf. Boone and Kit Carson were both alive and active in the 1810s and 1820s, and Davy Crockett in the 1830s, and yet all of them became well-known, mythical hero figures in the 1840s and 50s, when their life stories were reprised as frontier fables and "primitivist narratives of innate, instinctual manhood" (Kimmel, *History* 24). At a time when the ills of urbanization were associated with feminization and the destruction of an older code of masculinity, the mobility and independence of the three men was a key aspect of their masculine mystique. This will to move on was not aimless, but rather focussed towards escaping from civilization. The popular biographies inspired by these pioneers and backwoodsmen elevated them in status from historical characters to mythical exemplars of American masculinity, and it is in their footsteps that Billy and John Grady tread.

3 As I will go on to explain, his character changes significantly in the final novel of the trilogy, *Cities of the Plain*.

The desire to live apart from society appears as a characteristically masculine trait in the Border Trilogy. Women are confined to domestic spaces – homes, haciendas and brothels – whilst men escape from the comforts of home and community in order to venture into the wilderness. The prime example of this will to separate from society is Billy. In a scene where Billy meets an Indian shaman, the shaman tells Billy "that although he was huerfano [orphan] still he must cease his wanderings because to wander in this way would become for him a passion and by this passion he would become estranged from men and so ultimately from himself" (*TC* 133). The shaman advises Billy to "live with men and not simply pass among them", even though he may feel as though he "no longer belonged among men" (133). Billy's sense of not belonging "among men" (133) is not an expression of simple misanthropy, but rather a result of disillusionment, and a symptom of his "abdication" from the authoring of his life (Luce, "The Road" 195). The disillusionment that Billy feels is a result of his growing awareness that the lifestyle he identifies with, which is in turn associated with masculinity, is threatened by a changing world. Cattle ranching and the livelihood of cowboys are both becoming obsolete, and Billy's sadness is, for the most part, a strong nostalgic yearning for the past.

Billy's own masculinity and "warrior" energy is also called into question (Bly 146), as it emerges that his younger brother Boyd is the more manly of the two, a stronger and more 'natural' man than Billy will ever be. If we view Billy's story through the lens of the *Iron John* initiation narrative, we can see his deficient sense of masculinity as being a result of his incomplete initiation. This is in turn a result of Billy's imperfect separation from his mother and sister, and also of his never having legitimately received his "scarring wound". In contrast to this view, Cant avers that rather than being a result of an incomplete initiation,

Billy's sorrow comes as a result of his having fallen "victim" to the cowboy myth (201). And yet near the end of *The Crossing* he asserts his own conviction in it: "There aint but one life worth livin and I was born to it. Thats worth all the rest" (*TC* 420). Billy, the young man who suffers so greatly, insists that being a cowboy is what gives his life meaning. Rather than being a victim of this myth, Billy is comforted by it and he uses it as justification for the hardships he has endured. Here we can see evidence of McCarthy's lionising of the mythical cowboy figure as a true representation of manhood in America, and one that functions to make even lesser men feel validated. What is at stake in McCarthy's rendering of Billy's story is that a young man's initiation is presented as a necessary rite of passage, complete with primitivist leanings and separation from females. Billy's role in the mythology of the West is that of the loyal side-kick due to his diminished masculinity, a position that he identifies with. All the while, the hero is being played at first by his brother Boyd, and subsequently by John Grady who proves to be the 'real' man, the true cowboy.

JOHN GRADY COLE

The Border Trilogy privileges the past via John Grady's (and the reader's) nostalgia, over the present in which large and catastrophic changes are occurring in the country. This demonstrates that the future is negated "in the name of nostalgia" (Sugg 129), which is quite as romantic as any utopian progressive politics. Which leaves us with two disparate readings of the trilogy, is John Grady a nostalgic hero or a warning against the dangers of holding to accepted mythologies? This thesis takes the position that John Grady is the former, the embodiment of American masculinity whose fate is as romantic as his character is unrealistic, the purported purveyor of 'truth' and justice, and the ideal, uncomplicated cowboy hero. In

large part, the power of the cowboy myth comes from the ability of the cowboy to be a hero. Unlike the anti-heroes of revisionist Westerns, McCarthy gives us likeable, dynamic and truly heroic characters in the Border Trilogy, most notably John Grady Cole. The qualities that any Western requires of its protagonist are "self-discipline; unswerving purpose; the exercise of knowledge, skill, ingenuity and excellent judgement; and a capacity to continue in the face of total exhaustion and overwhelming odds" (Tompkins 12). The heroes' means of "self-fulfilment" in Westerns is the testing of their nerve (Tompkins 13). Battling the elements, travelling for days or months with little food, starving in the desert, freezing in blizzards, getting shot at, robbed and stabbed, are all accepted parts of the protagonists' existence. The mythical cowboy figure is embodied by John Grady Cole who is an earthy, self-sufficient character with deep loyalty to his horse and companion. Born in 1933, which is interestingly also the year of McCarthy's birth (J. Bell 2), John Grady's life is aligned, at least chronologically, with that of the author. As a sympathetic character, we cannot help responding to his mystique, and John Grady complies by embodying all the imagined aspects of the cowboy code of conduct: "honesty, loyalty, courage" (Spurgeon 80).

A strong argument can be made for the opinion that John Grady is the ultimate good guy. In contrast to this view, Timothy Parrish thinks that McCarthy's characters, like those in Sam Peckinpah's *The Wild Bunch* and Sergio Leone's *Once Upon a Time in the West,* are not so easily placed within a clear moral framework consisting of "good guys versus bad guys" (71). According to Parrish, in McCarthy's Westerns "defining what is a moral act is less important than telling the story in which characters' acts and destinies become known in relation to the countless acts and destinies that have preceded them" (71). The acts that Parrish judges to be 'bad', yet performed by 'good' characters are rather insipid by the average Western's

standards, and especially in the context of a McCarthy novel, and only somewhat transgressive. For example, John Grady's courts Alejandra against the wishes of her father and lies about his role in the Blevins situation. John Grady's initiation into the role of tragic romantic hero is only possible through his love for the unattainable woman, epitomised by Alejandra and Magdalena in turn. The archetypal hero would claim the girl in spite of her father. John Grady seeks justice, the calling-card of a typical 'good guy', and it is awarded to him at the close of *All the Pretty Horses* when he is given ownership of Blevins' horse, thus fulfilling the promise of the titular lullaby. The ultimate justice of revenge is his when, at the end of the trilogy, he kills Eduardo. The fact that John Grady is capable of shedding blood does not exclude him from hero status, but rather acts as his strongest endorsement. As D.H. Lawrence notes in *Studies in Classic American Literature,* "the typical hero implied by much of American fiction is a cold, stoical killer" (Parrish 76). Certainly John Grady kills, and he does so with the most morally justifiable reasons: out of self defense in Saltillo prison, and later as an act of heroic revenge on Eduardo in *Cities of the Plain*. He is so unassailably 'good' that even when he admits to the prison killing he confesses his own remorse, saying that he does not believe it was right to kill another in order to survive. Parrish even acknowledges that "he risks his life repeatedly to do what he thinks is right" (72), and he finally dies in the act of avenging his murdered girlfriend, his final moments underscoring the 'goodness' of this particular hero.

The title of the first novel in the Border Trilogy, *All the Pretty Horses*, is derived from the name of a lullaby which promises the sleeper possession of "all the pretty horses" upon waking. John Grady's "ardenthearted" desire for dominion is revealed in his will to own all the horses, as well as his ability to break horses (Moore Morrison 184). Horses' bodies and

Alejandra's body are presented in similar terms, and like the world he turns "dead center" to (*APH* 119), they are represented as taut and trembling which discloses John Grady's "grandiose, possessive desire for mastery and control" (Tatum 45). That John Grady is able to turn "dead center to the world" (*APH* 119) where others are not shows the heroic nature of his character. This "utopian dream of mastery and control" is made real for John Grady by the end of *All the Pretty Horses*, and it has come with the boon of manhood in the form of an initiation, a productive "fall from innocence into experience" (Tatum 28). Cant argues that John Grady's fate is that he has his "identity dependent on a set of conditions that no longer exist – on a mythology that can no longer sustain existence in a changed world" (184). And yet he is so successful and so likeable, and he manages to win at almost everything he sets out to do. McCarthy represents the outdated mythology of American exceptionalism as productive and supportive of a hero in the John Grady mould. John Grady's dream of mastery, arguably the quintessential patriarchal desire, is realized at the end of the first novel when he returns to America with all the recovered horses in tow, and in possession of Blevins' fine bay mare. At the conclusion of his first story, a final victory for our young hero is when he unexpectedly receives the blessing of the court judge, a father figure, who grants John Grady ownership of the horses and thus offers absolution for John Grady's misdeeds.

Having succeeded in reclaiming "all the pretty horses" in the first book, John Grady is ensconced at Mac MacGovern's ranch at the beginning of *Cities of the Plain*, where he has met Billy Parham. Stacey Peebles notes that this later version of Billy is more "realistic", whereas John Grady has become more "mythical" (Peebles). Having completed his quests in *All the Pretty Horses* he continues to play the role of powerful male protagonist in *Cities of the Plain*, with the crucial difference that he is now a grown man rather than a boy. In *Cities*

of the Plain John Grady is "near-faultless" (Peebles), he breaks difficult horses, beats Mac at chess, defeats a shady horse dealer and wins the heart of the beautiful girl. The fact of Billy's reference to John Grady as "the all-American cowboy" is notable for the mythical significance – John Grady is the "inheritor of the American cowboy tradition in its most romanticized and idealized form" (Cant 219), and in Billy's eyes, John Grady can "do no wrong" (Peebles). Cant argues that it is this inheritance which ultimately leads to John Grady's death, but the narrative conclusion is insufficient to dampen his mystique and acts only to further illuminate him. His tragic romantic demise secures his place as a mythical hero, the all-American cowboy at his most glorious. That he ends his life in a knife fight with a villain is fitting as he is transformed from naïve boy, to ardenthearted youth, to a righteous death seeker in the tragic romantic fashion. His life ends as we would expect it to: not with a whimper but a bang.

If we took John Grady to be a young man initiated in the Robert Bly fashion, we would notice that he succeeds in many aspects of the initiation process where Billy does not. John Grady experiences a clean break with his mother, refusing to even speak of her after she abandons him. Billy asks if he ever writes to his mother and John Grady replies "what's my mother got to do with anything?" (*CoP* 251). Billy, on the other hand, does not act decisively in separating from his own mother but is absent when she is killed, a death that he is partly responsible for. John Grady is initiated into the world of men by his wounds, of which there are many, and which are always inflicted by "older men" (Bly 28), whereas Billy is wounded only when he cuts himself. John Grady is capable with horses, and as a result he is popular at the all-male ranch, whilst Billy relies on him socially.

John Grady's mythical quest to save Magdalena indicates a willingness on his part to marry and enjoy "human communion" (V. Bell 926) where Billy shows no such desire. As we know, the rescue attempt ends in tragedy, and John Grady is killed. He dies a 'true' man, however, younger than Billy in years but much more developed in his strength, righteousness, masculinity as a result of his 'successful' initiation. Billy is left with an ambiguous masculinity, as he is still emotionally tied to his mother and sister and has yet to receive a legitimate "scarring wound" (Kimmel, *Manhood* 208). The shaman, an "older man" (Bly 28) in a form the mythopoets would approve of, tries to guide Billy in *The Crossing* by telling him to "cease his wanderings" and "live with men and not simply pass among them" (134). Towards the end of his life Billy was still wandering, and "looked for the grave of his sister but he could not find it" (287). He dreams of his sister who died seventy years previously, but "nothing had changed, nothing faded" (*CoP* 263). Lingering connections to his female relatives cause Billy to remain an archetypal child figure who is never sure of anything and always full of doubt. He awakens from the dream of his sister and thinks about his life: "In everything he'd ever thought about the world and about his life in it he'd been wrong" (*CoP* 263). Compared to John Grady who turns "dead center to the world" (*APH* 119), Billy is an unfulfilled man. This arrested masculinity results from disjunctures in his identity-forming process, that is, an incomplete initiation, which thwarts his ability to live productively and confidently "among men" (*TC* 134).

In most respects, then, John Grady is the mythologically ideal version of a man, but the creation of him as an unambiguous hero figure runs counter to McCarthy's perceived "mythoclasm" (Cant 6). Why, if one was interested in turning accepted mythology on its head, would one create a character who is steadfastly mythological? Cant answers this

question by arguing that McCarthy purposefully gives his novels a mythic form in order to demonstrate "the destructive consequences of structuring the consciousness of individuals by means of powerful mythologies which they are not in a position to live out" (Cant 9). Certainly there are numerous instance in which the main characters suffer "destructive consequences" (Cant 9), but if one follows all arcs of the story to their conclusion at the end of *Cities of the Plain* we can see that John Grady has exacted his revenge and died in the manner of a true tragic hero, martyring himself for what is 'right'. An element of destruction is not only inevitable, but necessary. As a Western, it is fitting that John Grady dies, as Westerns demonstrate a "certain necrological impulse" (Mitchell 172) and often kill off their heroes. Thus, inserting into the mythical canon a hero who dies towards the end of the narrative is not undermining the myth, but rather writing within it. The future is contained in the Epilogue where we see Billy wandering with a deepening understanding of the world, both material and spiritual. His story is unexpectedly sad, but also redemptive. A kindly woman takes pity on him and reassures him that he has an important place on earth, meanwhile John Grady is "symbolically reincarnated" (N. Sullivan 245) as a young girl so infatuated with horses that she would go out late at night to talk to her colt (*CoP* 290).

CONCLUSION

Although McCarthy may not have consciously referenced Robert Bly's mythopoetic men's movement, the narrative resonances in the Border Trilogy are apparent, and John Grady would be a prime candidate for the archetypal Prince in the story of *Iron John*. Billy is a more complex figure, and he and John Grady are vastly different characters, yet both of them embody strongly mythological character traits generated by stories of the West. Billy's

characteristics are similar to those of Daniel Boone, a traveler, a loner and a pioneer. John Grady is a man of action who manifests many, if not all, of the idealised character traits of the perfect cowboy hero, including a spiritual connection with horses, unfailing loyalty, and a willingness to die for what he believes is right. Kimmel feels the cowboy can safely be retired as a hero, and it is worth examining why this mythological character might be damaging, or at least unhelpful, to our contemporary notions of masculinity. One reason that the cowboy is no longer a valid hero is that his existence is based on nostalgia for an Edenic past that did not exist. He was an anachronism almost before he came to life in literature and film, and his longevity is due to the proliferation of cultural artefacts made in his honour, the hegemony of America, and his "masculine mystique" (Woodward). The main, overriding reason that we can seriously query the validity of the cowboy is that he is a lone male whose evocation expresses "compacted worlds of meaning" (Tompkins 6), the most problematic one being a man's life without women. The cowboy is not a caring husband nor nurturing father, but a nomad and an exile, gunslinging his way across whichever frontier happens to exist. Although Cant would have us believe that the Border Trilogy is a searing critique of the myths that make up American culture, the evidence for this critique is too ambiguous to be relied upon. Within the Border Trilogy McCarthy has renewed and reproduced some unhelpful masculinist fantasies of the cowboy hero, escape from civilization and the frontier as a site of freedom and independence and the testing of one's manhood. He has offered a deeply nostalgic set of texts as the evidence that American mythologies of manhood are still valid and valuable, when in fact they are not.

Chapter Two: Female Absence in Cormac McCarthy's West

"Uncle Bud Langford used to tell people, said:
It would take one hell of a wife to beat no wife at all." (*The Crossing* 352)

INTRODUCTION

Cormac McCarthy has frequently been described as a "man's novelist" (Woodward), and alongside this designation he has received criticism for including very few women in the primary action of his stories, relegating females to the margins, confining them spatially or metaphorically, or including them only as conventions of the plot. McCarthy's earlier Southern novels contain no caring mothers, wise grandmothers or supportive wives and, likewise, his Western novels demonstrate his reluctance to feature females prominently. Even when women are present in the narratives of the Border Trilogy, these females "do not emerge from the androcentric narratives with attributes enough to define them as distinct personae" (Shaw, "Female Presence" 258). To McCarthy's apologists, the shortage of strong females in the Border Trilogy is only a problem if one is misreading the texts, that is, failing to read them mythologically. Female absence is "consistent with McCarthy's critique of American culture" says John Cant, who also claims that the fact "that Western society remains strongly patriarchal in character" should be taken as "axiomatic" and thus not queried or revised (16). Cant's defense of McCarthy implies that he agrees with the author in focussing heavily on male characters and eliding women almost entirely from the texts of the Border Trilogy. The trilogy seldom focusses on women, and this can be taken as symptomatic of its close thematic and stylistic alignment with the Western, and also of its more subtle association with the mythopoetic men's movement of the 1990s, both being reactions against

"feminism and female authority" (Mitchell 152; Tompkins 39-40). Similarly, McCarthy is repeating the shortcomings of many American novelists before him by failing to address adult heterosexual relationships, focussing instead on a man's escape from the family home and sphere of domesticity, and by eliding women from his texts. This thematic pattern was uncovered by Leslie Fiedler in *Love and Death in the American Novel* where it was noted that the American novel is not traditionally interested in women or heterosexual love at all, but rather in adventure and escape, and consequently death, incest and "innocent homosexuality" (12).

The female characters that do appear in the trilogy tend to be peripheral, and to represent essentialised aspects of femininity. These will be uncovered as the chapter progresses, beginning with the historical impetus behind a man's escape from women, in the light of which John Grady and Billy's respective flights from home are considered. Following that I will discuss how female characters are figured almost exclusively as the property of men ('Women as Property'), and how involvement with a female is often harmful to the protagonist ('Fatal Plot Facilitators'). The last three sections deal with the conflation of the female characters into types in 'Mirror Images', the impossibility of successful marriages in 'Marital Union', and finally, in 'Female Ghosts', I describe the existence of dead women who only emerge within the narratives of the Border Trilogy for the significance that they have to male characters. Cant's defense of McCarthy is that he sees him as a mythoclast, working towards revealing the destructive lie that is American mythology. My argument is that rather than denouncing American mythology, McCarthy delights in it. The Border Trilogy incorporates the main conventions that Leslie Fiedler describes as being typical of American fiction: entirely androcentric, focussed on a male protagonist and featuring an escape from

domesticity and mothers. Thus, the trilogy works towards remythifying rather than debunking myths of American masculinity which is evident in the position it takes regarding women, and the relative paucity of female characters within the trilogy.

THE ESCAPE FROM WOMEN

Historically, as Michael S. Kimmel points out, since the early 19th century, American men have been escaping to the frontier, the mountains "the forests, high seas, battlegrounds" in order to locate and reclaim something that they felt was missing; some essential part of their identity or their manhood (*History* 20). The mythopoetic men's movement of the 1990s, with its insistence on all-male refuges and a manly connection to nature, only reiterated this felt need. Fiedler has uncovered the existence of a dominant theme in American literature which supports Kimmel's observation: that of same-sex social bonding between men which necessitates an escape from women. In their treatment of themes there is a distinct difference between the novels of American authors such as Washington Irving,[4] James Fenimore Cooper and Mark Twain, and the classical works of European authors. Fiedler claims that the European novel interests itself in heterosexual relationships, and usually focuses on a couple who are dealing with sexual, family and domestic issues. The American novel, by contrast, is marked by "the absence of sexuality, the absence of marriage and families – the virtual absence of women entirely" (Kimmel, *History* 25). What the American novel typically concerns itself with is adventure, escape, a journey undertaken by a male away from society into the wilderness, or "some place, at least, where mothers do not come" (Fiedler 181). Both

4 Irving's story "Rip Van Winkle" about a man's escape from his domineering wife leads Kimmel to dub the author "the nation's first Robert Bly" (*History* 26)

of the protagonists of the Border Trilogy embark on this sort of voyage, making McCarthy a quintessentially American author, being "a man's novelist whose apocalyptic vision rarely focuses on women" and who also refrains from writing about "sex, love or domestic issues" (Woodward). Rather than revising the familiar American narrative of male escape from women to the frontier, McCarthy is holding to it and reinvigorating its troublesome ideological moorings. In *All the Pretty Horses* John Grady's journey involves a conscious effort to separate himself from women: denied of his mother's ranch he travels down to Mexico with little chance of seeing his mother or his sweetheart, Mary Catherine, again. His escape from society is also a flight from America's increasing urbanization as he finds himself on a ranch in the Southwest in *Cities of the Plain* that maintains the image of agrarian simplicity that John Grady longs for. Billy's departure from the family home in *The Crossing* can be read as an example of this same type of masculinist retreat from feminization, whether this feminization comes in the form of females themselves or the larger social effects of increasingly industrialized urban culture which "denies men the opportunities for manly adventure" (Kimmel, *History* 20).

WOMEN AS PROPERTY

The Border Trilogy concludes with *Cities of the Plain* in which border crossings continue to take place, specifically between the twin cities of Juarez and El Paso. By contrast to the previous texts, rather than journeying into a strange and alien culture the novel sees the two men (boys no longer) travelling into Mexico frequently in order to exploit a milieu of cheap alcohol and prostitutes that they fully comprehend and "with which they are complicit" (Cant 217). The bar room scene that opens the novel describes the ease with which the cowboys

utilise the brothel, echoing what Fiedler has noted about the saloon as being the "antitype of the home" and a refuge for men that is almost as archetypal as the wilderness (263). The earthy, crass dialogue of the cowboys in the brothel demonstrates that the naïveté of young John Grady and Billy has been replaced by the cowboys' willful utilisation of Mexico's economic and social reality. We are made aware through descriptions of the cowboys' quotidian existence that although they can be seen as taking advantage of this alternative cultural space, they are themselves to some extent exploited as cheap labour on Mac MacGovern's ranch. History shows that cowboys were usually socially marginalized and unable to stay in one place, a side-effect of which was their inability to marry which had the effect of making the cowboy figure that of the "eternal bachelor-adolescent" (Jarrett, "Sense" 316), a characterisation which is shown in the opening passages of *Cities of the Plain* when Billy steps into a Juarez brothel:

> Damned if I aint half drowned, Billy said. He swung his dripping hat. Where's the all-American cowboy at?
>
> He's done inside.
>
> Let's go. He'll have all them good fat ones picked out for hisself.
>
> The whores in their shabby deshabille looked up from the shabby sofas where they sat. (*CoP* 3)

The "adolescent antifeminism" (Jarrett, "Sense" 316) demonstrated in the cowboys' jokes and the quip that Billy makes later equating the whore with a horse expresses their social,

economic and sexual reality (Jarrett, "Sense" 316). The flippancy with which Billy and the other men discuss the prostitutes indicates that they are not strangers to the brothel, and that – bar a few possible exceptions – the only relations they have with women take place there. It is at the brothel that John Grady meets Magdalena, a young, epileptic prostitute whom he determines to rescue and marry.

John Grady's relationship with Magdalena signals a "narrative return" to Billy's relationship with the she-wolf in *The Crossing* (N. Sullivan 244), the distressed female in both cases being the object of the rescue quest. Both the human and the animal females are considered property: the she-wolf belonging first to Billy once he has trapped and captured her and later to the Mexicans who use her for monetary gain, in the same way that Magdalena is a captive, used for financial gain by Eduardo. An echo in imagery between the females occurs in *Cities of the Plain* when Magdalena, lying naked, is having a seizure and Tiburcio "unbuckled his belt and whipped it from about his waist and caught it and folded it and seized the girl's jaw and forced the leather between her teeth" (*CoP* 181). This moment is strongly reminiscent of the scene when Billy binds the she-wolf whose nakedness is described by her teats which are just visible through the "thin fur of her underbelly" (*TC* 52). Using leather and rope, Billy traps her and finally "he pulled until he'd shut off her air and then he jammed the stick between her teeth" (*TC* 54). Being bound and gagged in this way suggests bondage and ownership, in the case of both Magdalena and the wolf. Nell Sullivan notes that both Magdalena and the wolf move through "increasingly lethal forms of confinement" in the novels until both females are dead (231-232). It hardly needs to be mentioned that the confinements suffered by both wolf and human female are at the hands of men.

Alongside the plot and the imagery, McCarthy's lexicon also indicates that women are owned by men, whether literally (as in the case of Magdalena and the she-wolf) or symbolically (as in Alejandra's case). When John Grady and Alejandra make love for the first time the narrator describes how the act is "sweeter for the larceny of time and flesh, sweeter for the betrayal" (*APH* 141), the language indicating theft which in turn indicates property. Eduardo more emphatically invokes the terminology of ownership, calling Magdalena "property to be exchanged between men and according to formalized rules" (N. Sullivan 248) when he says: "everything that has come to pass has been the result of your friend's coveting of another man's property and his willful determination to convert that property to his own use" (*CoP* 240). As with property of any kind, women's bodies can be accessed by trade in all three novels of the trilogy, although a negotiation needs to occur – between men – for this to happen. John Grady's unsuccessful initial bid to free Magdalena was a forthright offer to buy her from Eduardo. When he attempts to raise the money to see Magdalena he pawns his grandfather's gun, the symbol of a cowboy's independence and masculinity, just as Billy trades his father's rifle in exchange for the wolf's corpse in *The Crossing*.[5] John Grady tells the pawnbroker that he will return for the gun, but the pawnbroker indicates a case full of revolvers and says that "all of them belonged to somebody's grandfather" (*CoP* 94), knowing that this transaction is not reversible (N. Sullivan 244). The act that John Grady has committed, like Billy before him, is to relinquish his masculine self-mastery and his family inheritance in the same instance in an attempt to "lay claim" to the female body (N. Sullivan 244), an act which proves lethal. The implication is that losing one's masculine

5 See Nell Sullivan for a deeper exploration of the implications of trading a gun for a female body in "Boys will be Boys" (237, 244).

independence, symbolised by a gun, for the sake of a female is a poor trade, and the result is death. Following this trade, John Grady dies, and death touches Billy's life by taking every family member and his best friend. The female whose body was being traded is thus the catalyst of the hero's undoing, and it is she who is blamed. Eduardo's last words before John Grady shuts his jaw with a knife are "For a whore... For a whore" (251). The same sentiment, incredulity at a life wasted over a woman, is repeated in Billy's heartfelt cry at John Grady's death, "goddamn whores" (259).

FATAL PLOT FACILITATORS

The quests that comprise the protagonists' journeys throughout the course of the trilogy often fixate on a female object. Winning the heart of the landlord's daughter, returning a wolf to her home range or rescuing a whore from her enslavement are some of the goals of Billy and John Grady's quests, forming three of the primary plot threads. Apart from, but perhaps as a result of, being property to appropriate or rescue, women are frequently the cause or the catalyst of the male protagonists' undoing in the Border Trilogy. Patrick W. Shaw refers to the females in the Border Trilogy as "plot facilitator[s]" ("Female Presence" 260), a role which sees the female characters as objects with little to no ability for self-determination. Similarly Katherine Sugg has noted that young, pure and yet also "sexually available and adept Mexican women that John Grady Cole (and Boyd Parnham [sic] in *The Crossing*) fall in love with... function as chimera that inevitably lead these Anglo youth to violence and death" (128). The females in question are seldom prioritised as characters in the novels and are imbued with such dubious agency as to be more like props than characters. On the other hand Shaw also suggests that the subtle female influence is more intellectual and

manipulative than the action of males, who spend their time "fighting, riding, killing, dying" whilst "the passive women regulate those actions through a keen sensitivity to the male ego and to the female's covert powers in an overtly patriarchal society" ("Female Presence" 262). He goes on to suggest that Magdalena's "revenge" is when Eduardo and John Grady kill one another in a fight that "eventuates because of her subtle manipulation of both men" ("Female Presence" 262). That there may exist within the narrative a covert female power-base where women intelligently manage to maximise their own prerogatives is unfortunately wishful thinking. Shaw's assertion that Magdalena would have the ability (or the desire) to manipulate the two men into killing each other even after her own death is not indicated by the novel, but might be a confusion between Magdalena and Alejandra and the latter woman's modicum of agency, demonstrated by her role in freeing John Grady from prison by agreeing to never see him again. The suggestion of clever manipulation indicates a misreading of Magdalena's place in the text. She is not a character as much as a device, a catalyst to the action, and an object to be admired obliquely in a mirror but never fully understood, and certainly not endowed with complex motives. Her ability to manipulate, if it exists at all, is only latent and never realised as she possesses none of John Grady's "willful determination", she is simply the "property" that he wishes to "convert... to his own use" (*CoP* 240). Magdalena and the she-wolf are conflated in the stories as captive females, being bound either physically or figuratively, whose own stories are never told – Magdalena's because she speaks only Spanish (which is never translated) and the wolf because of her inability to speak. These two characters are more prominent than other females, except perhaps Alejandra, but they have the least agency.

It should be noted that the women who facilitate the plot towards the demise of male characters are not so powerful as to effect radical change, and the catastrophes that befall the protagonists as a result of their involvement with these female characters are more to do with unevenness of male power, issues of exchange, or the relations between men, than with the females themselves. Examples of this are the hostility of Don Hector, Alejandra's father, towards John Grady which lands him and Rawlins in prison, or Billy's severed ties with his father as a result of trapping the she-wolf and absconding with her, and his subsequent conflict with the Mexican dog fighters who claim the wolf. The narrative pattern that emerges throughout the Border Trilogy is men trading (or fighting) with other men for female bodies, which reaffirms much of the masculine mythology of the West and fails to undermine or question the patriarchal status quo. The first instance in which we detect female-related trouble is John Grady's first journey away from home in *All the Pretty Horses* which occurs as a result of his mother selling the family ranch, effectively leaving him homeless and without parental support. Her "nebulous role" (Shaw, "Female Presence" 259) in the novel is accentuated by her lack of a name, she is only referred to as "Mama" or "she" (*APH* 8). After page 22 she is effaced from the text without ever speaking or acting in a way that would serve as a defense of her perceived selfishness (Shaw, "Female Presence" 259). The second notable incident of female-related trouble for John Grady happens after he meets Alejandra and his illicit relationship with her causes him and Rawlins to be arrested and thrown in Saltillo prison at the behest of her father, Don Hector. He is stabbed and almost killed in prison, and escapes with the aid of the Dueña Alfonsa, Alejandra's great aunt, in an inversion of the myth of the knight rescuing the damsel.[6]

6 Counter to my reading, Jarrett suggests that Alfonsa and Alejandra control John Grady's fate in a move that denies him access to Alejandra whilst ensuring his release from jail, which suggests that John Grady is the item of transaction rather than Alejandra (*Cormac McCarthy* 110).

Having mentioned Alfonsa, it would be prudent to offer an analysis of her character. Her position in the narrative is almost certainly one of "plot facilitator", but in other ways she stands out as an exception to the rule of female portrayal. Fiedler demonstrates how the great novelists of America have refused to represent any "full-fledged, mature women" but have preferred to offer up "monsters of virtue or bitchery" (24). The women I discuss in this chapter almost exclusively fall into the latter category, as Alejandra, Magdalena, Margaret, and Margarita are all sanctified, idealised and virtuous[7] females. An example of a "monster of... bitchery" can be seen in John Grady's distant, uncaring mother, and also in the person of the Dueña Alfonsa. Alfonsa is the one woman in the trilogy who narrates her own tale, which comes in the form of a long parable, addressed to John Grady. Her monologue in *All the Pretty Horses* is of unprecedented length, and unlike the young beauties that John Grady falls in love with, she has a position of power within the narrative, as it is her machinations that negotiate John Grady's freedom from prison, with the condition that he never see Alejandra again. During her speech she reprises the tale of the martyred Mexican revolutionary Francisco Madero and his family, the failures of whom have come to form "the emotional center of her life" (Moore Morrison 187) as well as a significant part of Mexican history. This seventy-two year old spinster has never released her obsession with Gustavo, Francisco's brother, ever since his bloody death, and the love of this revolutionary has embittered the Dueña Alfonsa to the point that she willfully sabotages her niece's relationship with John Grady, just as her own father forbade her love with Gustavo. Her outrage is expressed in her monologue about "her own sense of her powerlessness, inferiority and missed opportunities" (Moore Morrison 188) and she labours to craft "an explanation and a defense for her own attitudes and behaviors" (Moore Morrison 188). Alfonsa's vision of the

7 This may seem inaccurate in Magdalena's case, but the chapter will go on to explain the means by which she is figured as virtuous.

world is described as “grim” and “unjust” (Moore Morrison 189), and her role in John Grady’s story is that of a villain. She facilitates his release from prison, but as the puppet-master of that exchange she has ensured that John Grady cannot see Alejandra again. Her motives for disliking him are obscure, she purposefully tells John Grady that it is not because he is American or penniless, but rather because he is unlucky. Her caprices show in her self-indulgent monologue: “you will see that those things which disposed me in your favor were the very things which led me to decide against you in the end” (*APH* 231).

The Dueña’s alter ego is the one-eyed *criada* of *Cities of the Plain*, just as Alejandra is reflected in Magdalena in the latter novel. The merger of the two characters further demonstrates that women in these texts are indistinct, merging into one another as the trilogy progresses. Alfonsa is by far the most overtly feminist of all of the characters, and fittingly she plays a part in the unhappy fate of the cowboy hero. She wears her frustrations on her sleeve, saying “I knew that as a woman the world would be largely denied me” (239), and her manipulation of John Grady can be seen as her belated and unjust punishment against the male sex for the misfortunes of her own life. She is also hypocritically unsympathetic, saying to John Grady “I have no sympathy with people to whom things happen” (240), even though she has experienced great misfortunes herself. Her experiences have made her bitter, and in that sense she is monstrous. She might be considered by some critics to disprove the point that McCarthy does not write about women, as she is an agentival female character and thus the exception to the rule, but she is more fittingly thought of as a token feminist, and a woman whose vindictiveness towards our cowboy hero serves to vilify rather than redeem her.

The Dueña Alfonsa's grand niece, Alejandra, has no distinctive qualities besides those typically attributed to the Latin female: her hair is black and she is "arrogant, flirtatious and temperamental" (Shaw, "Female Presence" 259). What happens to Alejandra after John Grady parts ways with her is never revealed – it is immaterial because she exists only to facilitate plot.[8] Chastened by his experiences but characteristically lacking foresight, he attempts to rescue Magdalena in *Cities of the Plain*, a plan which culminates in her death as well as his own. Billy's undoing also happens as a result of his dealings with a female, in this case a wolf. In trying to rescue the she-wolf he spends months away from home during which time his parents are killed. Billy tells the Sheriff: "The only gun on the place was a forty-four forty carbine and I had that with me", to which the Sheriff says "it wasn't much use to em, was it?" (*TC* 167), implicating Billy in the deaths of his parents. The rifle that "wasn't much use" to Billy's parents contained within it the symbolic masculine power of the father which left the home undefended. By taking up with the she-wolf Billy inadvertently caused the death of his own parents and, furthermore, failed to save her. It is evident that much of the key conflict in the three novels is acted out and performed by men, but that it involves females only insofar as they are the objects of the conflict, devices within the plot or props that are acted upon, bound, rejected, and frequently killed off.

8 Sugg disagrees, claiming that "though it is seldom commented upon by critics, the novels emphasize the border romance's negative impact on these Mexican women: Alejandra loses the love and respect of her father, and Magdalena in *Cities of the Plain* is killed by her pimp in Juarez" (128). These outcomes are not emphasized, however, but emerge only to the extent that they have an impact on the male protagonist, John Grady.

MIRROR IMAGES

An ideological assumption is expressed in the Border Trilogy that women are closer to nature than men, and more able to merge with the natural landscape. Women are consistently associated with water in the trilogy, which Cant views as McCarthy's attempt to connect women with the most fundamental element of life, and thus to endow them with a "special mythic significance" (16). Unfortunately the association with fertility stops there, as none of the females show any indication of being life-givers, except for the wolf who is pregnant. Women have long been connected to water in mythology, and McCarthy references this throughout his texts. One of the earliest examples in the trilogy of this association is when Alejandra appears for the first time on the banks of the lake with light reflecting on the hide of her horse, and "she turned and looked off across the lake where the late sun glinted" (*APH* 129), incorporating the imagery of reflection. Billy's glimpse of the naked diva occurs when she is bathing in the lake, and John Grady first sees Magdalena at the brothel in Juarez when it is raining, and she subsequently moves to another brothel notably called the White Lake. The reflective nature of water is repeated throughout, and it ties all of the women together and reveals their narrative similarity as devices rather than characters. The conflation of the various female characters with one another furthers their subjective insignificance. Furthermore, the submersion of so many of the women in water, either literally or figuratively, encourages the notion that beyond being simply close to nature, women are part of it, and might be considered landscape itself. True to this understanding, in Mexico it is Latin females who enter the narrative, a designation often indicated by their dark hair, as this is congruous with their role of adding to the verisimilitude of the Mexican landscape. A female out of place is the Mexican wolf in the United States, and Billy attempts to correct the error by returning her to the mountains from whence she came. Males, on the other hand, are

free to traverse locales as they wish, to be American in Mexico, for example, and it is this privilege that John Grady takes advantage of frequently, and that Billy exploits in his endless wanderings.

It is raining when the cowboys arrive at the brothel in Juarez, and John Grady, the cowboy who can do no wrong, naturally wants to rescue the youngest and most fragile of the prostitutes. Ignoring all of the "fat" women (*CoP* 1), John Grady's first sight of Magdalena is a reflection in a mirror rather than direct perception (Cant 219):

> … John Grady was studying something in the backbar glass. Troy turned and followed his gaze. A young girl of no more than seventeen and perhaps younger was sitting on the arm of the sofa with her hands cupped and her eyes cast down. (*CoP* 6)

Even the name of John Grady's friend, Troy, carries a connotation of the Greek myth of the attempted rescue and return of the female Helen. The sighting of Magdalena looking demure and schoolgirlish is mediated by the "backbar glass" (*CoP* 6) which obfuscates John Grady's vision, and he could well be looking at Mary Catherine, his childhood sweetheart, or Alejandra. The inability to apprehend her directly indicates that John Grady is still labouring under the romantic myths that caused his chastening in *All the Pretty Horses* and his resultant "expulsion from paradise" (Moore Morrison 175). Rather than perceiving a real woman, John Grady sees the template of a young, helpless thing, like the puppy he rescues, and he

determines to save her. Later in the story Magdalena is even directly compared to a puppy when she is described as "pretty as a speckled pup" (*CoP* 200). Magdalena is thus reduced to the position of a young frightened animal, an object to be rescued, and this is the extent of what Cant calls her "special mythic significance" (16). In my view this is unsatisfactory, as a mythic significance does not undo the objectification suffered by Magdalena and most of the other women in the trilogy. Reducing the female characters to mythical conventions would be acceptable if the males were similarly reduced, but they are not.

There is a strong current of conflation within the trilogy, where certain characters are echoed and repeated throughout the books, and this especially affects the female characters. The similarities between Magdalena and the wolf when they are physically bound and gagged has already been discussed, but there is also the connection between the two females because both are 'prostituted'; Magdalena is literally made to work as a prostitute and the wolf is used as the object of a kind of peep show at the fair, and then made to fight in the dog ring. Alejandra is also connected to the wolf whose eyes "burn" (*TC* 79) and who is discovered at first in the dead fire pit, and frequently compared with fire and reflective water "as she lowered her head to drink the reflection of her eyes came up in the dark water" (*TC* 79). Alejandra is described thus: "She was so pale in the lake she seemed to be burning. Like foxfire in a darkened wood. That burned cold" (*APH* 141). The reflectiveness of water and of fire is emphasised with relation to the female characters, whose purpose as moving parts of the landscape is betrayed by their elemental descriptions. Both John Grady and Billy are transformed by their initial visions of the female, John Grady by "Alejandra and her pale, reflected other, Magdalena" at the White Lake (Cant 220), and Billy by the diva who bathes in the river.

> A hundred feet away in water to her thighs stood the primadonna naked. Her hair was down and it was wet and clinging to her back and it reached the water... She turned and swung her hair before her and bent and lowered it into the river... He took off his hat and stood with his heart laboring under his shirt...She bent and caught her falling hair in her arms and held it and she passed one hand over the water as if to bless it and he watched and as he watched he saw that the world which had always been before him everywhere had been veiled from his sight. She turned and he thought she might sing to the sun. (*TC* 220)

Robert Jarrett compares this scene with Stephen Dedalus's epiphanic vision of a woman bathing in Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, which is the moment at which Dedalus assumes the role of artist (*Cormac McCarthy* 109). Billy's epiphany is a similar event, but seems to imply more that he is apprehending the beauty of the natural world and desiring union with it, but once the natural world has been identified as an object outside of oneself and merger is impossible, Billy is left with a keen sense of his own isolation: "she opened her eyes and saw him there on the bridge... and the sun rose and the river ran as before but nothing was the same nor did he think it ever would be" (*TC* 220). Nell Sullivan sees this scene as a showcasing of the diva as a "disclaimer" against Billy's homosexuality or zoophilia (231).[9] The fact that Billy never forms a heterosexual relationship besides the

9 Robin Wood uses "disclaimers" to mean any character who only exists in order to prove the hero's heterosexuality (229). Wood, Robin. *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan.* New York: Columbia University Press, 1986. Print.

casual transactions he enjoys with Mexican prostitutes does not necessarily indicate that he is homosexual, but it does imply a timidity, especially around women, that Billy does not show when he is with John Grady or the other cowboys on Mac's ranch. The diva could also be seen as one of many textual echoes that McCarthy weaves within the lines of the plot, which is itself reiterated throughout the trilogy, in that her dramatic persona is a mirror reflection of John Grady's mother who is an amateur actress.

As with the descriptions of the diva's hair when she is bathing, hair imagery pervades the scenes describing sexualized or desirable women throughout the trilogy, focalized by the gaze of the two protagonists. The hair of the female characters seems to have special significance, as when John Grady sees Alejandra riding her horse "her black hair twisted and blew about her shoulders" (*APH* 131), and in the lake "her black hair floating on the water about her" (*APH* 141). Similarly when he sees Magdalena for the first time "her long black hair fell across her shoulder and she swept it slowly away with the back of her hand" (*CoP* 4). Metonymically hair stands in for the whole female body, and feminine beauty, and this appears to be true of all the sexualized females in the Border Trilogy. Nell Sullivan suggests that this obsession with hair blends all of John Grady's lovers into the same female: "the descriptions of both Alejandra and Magdalena fixate on their long black hair and their blue clothing" (247).[10] Significantly, Alejandra tells John Grady of her premonition of Magdalena when she meets with him for the last time "They carried you through the streets of a city I'd never seen... Lloraba tu madre. Con más razón tu puta" (*APH* 252; Your mother was weeping. More to the point your whore), which presages the scene that occurs at the end of

10 See evidence of this in *All the Pretty Horses,* pages 94, 123, 141; and in *Cities of the Plain,* pages 6 and 229.

Cities of the Plain. This vision blends Alejandra and Magdalena, a conflation which is further emphasised by the film in which Alejandra's meaning is altered so that she is calling herself John Grady's "puta" (*All the Pretty Horses*). Alejandra has the Dueña Alfonsa taking care of her in the first novel, whilst Magdalena is under the watchful gaze of the one-eyed *criada* in the third. Having already mentioned that McCarthy is fond of including echoes throughout his writing it could be said that the two young girls, appearing at opposite ends of the trilogy, are simply another example of the repetition used to underpin the structure of the narrative in the trilogy. This may be so, but it further emphasises the secondary importance that females have because the male characters are subjected to no such reduction. Their narrative repetitions and resonances tend to be action-based, performing similar quests over and over but remaining distinct and changeable as individuals, and for the most part in control of their own narratives. The females, on the other hand, do not act in any decisive way, and simply echo one another in appearance, age, and the types of confinement they suffer at the hands of men.

Dianne C. Luce also notes the interchangeability of John Grady's "*inamoratas*" (N. Sullivan 247) when she claims that Alejandra stands in for Mary Catherine, the girlfriend who John Grady lost to an older boy with a car ("When You Wake" 158-59). The implication is that symbolically he could defeat this shadowy older male by "winning" Alejandra from her father, the powerful and propertied Don Hector (Luce, "When You Wake" 158-59). Magdalena is then aligned with the "prelapsarian" Mary Catherine (N. Sullivan 247) when we first see her in *Cities of the Plain* looking very young and fussing "with the hem of her gaudy dress like a schoolgirl" (*CoP* 6). At the end of *Cities of the Plain* John Grady unconsciously invokes all of his past lovers without mentioning Magdalena by name; "She

was so goddamned pretty, bud", thus conflating all of the women into one nebulous "she" (259). Shaw notes that early in *All the Pretty Horses* John Grady is scolded by his father for referring to his mother as "she" ("Female Presence" 259), but that the woman has no other label, being named only by the pronoun. Without delving too deeply into Freudian territory, the pretty "she" that John Grady is referring to could be his mother, the template for all of his subsequent experiences with women. The women of the Border Trilogy, in short, are interchangeable, and this is possible because their identities are not as important as their "function within a structure" (N. Sullivan 248), they are objects to be traded and transacted and facilitators of the male-focussed plot.

MARITAL UNION

"Marriage dismays the American writer" according to Fiedler (337), and the Border Trilogy shows no evidence that McCarthy is anything but a typical American writer in this regard. McCarthy, as Sugg has noted, is "overt in his refusal of both domestic spaces and state-sanctioned couplings of any kind" (Sugg 126) which gives his male characters an aura of dispossession and homelessness until they find their way to an all-male social space in which they feel validated. Terri Witek likewise has noted the absence of domestic homes and "dwelling places" in McCarthy's work, where his "male protagonists' primary domicile is most often a series of "campsites" and other makeshift homosocial spaces" (Sugg 151).[11] The adobe house that John Grady fixes for himself and Magdalena is an exception to this rule, although it should be noted that they never live in it as they both die before they have the

11 Witek, Terry. "Reeds and Hides: Cormac McCarthy's Domestic Spaces." *Southern Review*. 30:1 (1994): 136–43.

opportunity to get married. This is the violent resolution of a crisis, as the mythology of the Western has demonstrated and made natural the idea that cowboys cannot marry unless they "stop being cowboys" (*Monte Walsh*). An expression of the reality in which cowboys lived is shown by Billy's scepticism about John Grady's plans to marry. Marriage seems impractical enough, but knowing the object of John Grady's desires to be the whore, Magdalena, Billy says:

> You've gone completely crazy and that's all there is to be said about it. Aint it?
>
> I don't know.
>
> … You're in a dangerous frame of mind, son. Did you know that?
>
> Maybe.
>
> I've seen it before. (*CoP* 118)

What Billy has seen before is his brother's reckless behaviour in Mexico when he rescues the unnamed 'girl', and to his own emotional state when he decided to try to rescue the wolf (*CoP* 118). Billy's concern for John Grady echoes the sentiments of some other characters who warn Billy about trying to save the pregnant wolf in *The Crossing*, even as far as vocabulary goes, calling him "crazy" and "peculiar" (59, 68). In comparison to the previous two novels, *Cities of the Plain* reveals the first indication that marriage is a viable option for the protagonist. By wishing to marry the fallen woman John Grady is willing to affirm the

possibility of union between man and woman, a possibility that has not been supported previously in the novels of the Border Trilogy. The actual events of the novel, however, undermine the viability of the notion of marriage by forbidding this union from taking place, thus leaving the model of men living with other men, separated from women, intact.

The first two novels of the trilogy present family relationships as conflicted, such as John Grady's ambivalent relationship with his distant father and callous, incomprehensible mother, or Billy's feeling of alienation within his family that rapidly transforms into his orphan-status, and with the death of his brother, the isolation of complete bereavement. Families are not a source of comfort in the Border Trilogy, and yet Cant sees *Cities of the Plain* as finally affirming the "sustaining family" and figuring it as a real possibility (221). He interprets marital union in the novel as "a boon in its realization and a deep sadness in its loss" (Cant 221). However, it is the very fact of the "loss" of this kind of union within the novel, or the impossibility of attaining it, that speaks to a more steadfastly masculinist outlook than Cant recognizes. Marriage is not something that lasts, in McCarthy's vision, and the narrator describes various cowboys and rancheros who are either sworn bachelors, widowers or divorcees. To take the inhabitants of Mac's ranch as an example: Oren is divorced, Mac is a widower, Mr Johnson is a bachelor, Troy is a bachelor, his brother Johnny was involved with an unnamed woman and ruined by her, and Billy is a bachelor. John Grady is the only one who seems intent on marrying, and for this Billy calls him "crazy" (*CoP* 118). The most significant marriage that exists is only a potentiality between John Grady and Magdalena, and this never occurs but catalyzes the events that lead to the deaths of both young people. Marriage is no "boon" as Cant sees it to be (221), but rather it is a threat to the stability of the all-male lifestyle of the ranch, and therefore it must be avoided at all costs.

McCarthy gives us the first sight of a viable or at least extended romance in *All the Pretty Horses* when John Grady falls in love with Alejandra (Arnold 236). Following that we see somewhat successful but all equally short-lived love affairs in Boyd's relationship with the Mexican girl in *The Crossing* and then John Grady's love for Magdalena in *Cities of the Plain*. The bond that Billy forms with the she-wolf lasts for one third of *The Crossing*, and she is arguably the female character with whom we are most familiar, who inspires the most sympathy and the finest lines of prose. Her 'relationship' with Billy is highly unstable and unsustainable due to a difference of species, and when Billy finally buries her he buries the pups in her womb at the same time, foreclosing the possibility of offspring. Margaret MacGovern, the deceased wife of Mac, haunts the narrative of *Cities of the Plain*. She is offered a place of significance in the text, she is frequently mentioned or alluded to, and it is her wedding ring that Mac offers to John Grady to propose to Magdalena with. Due to this unprecedented importance, it should be noted with dismay that she is not physically present, that her union with Mac did not last, and that she dies without having given birth to any children. The fact of marriage has not been completely ignored in the trilogy, but it is certainly not figured as a desirable, or at least a stable, possibility. Marital union is seldom realised and then not for long. As Eduardo tells Billy, no man gets what he wants, "or perhaps only briefly so as to lose it" (*CoP* 134-135). Finally, these pairings between men and women in the trilogy are temporary, unsuccessful at best and at worst fatal, and the suggestion of sterility, "childlessness" and "barrenness" reigns (Arnold 236).

FEMALE GHOSTS

It has already been mentioned that certain deceased women are nonetheless significant for their presence in the narratives within the Border Trilogy. John Dudley states that although "women frequently occupy marginal positions" in the trilogy, "McCarthy's male protagonists are nonetheless haunted by the presence of the feminine in several forms" (178). *The Crossing* features the spectral presence of Margarita Evelyn Parham, Boyd's twin sister who died in infancy and who never physically appears. Shaw sees her as the epitome of the feminine in the text, "haunting" the narrative and "subsuming" all other females (Shaw, "Female Presence" 260). Similar in name and nature, *Cities of the Plain* features Margaret McGovern who is also deceased but remembered fondly by the men on the ranch. She is arguably and ironically the most significant female character in the text as it is her death that haunts the book. The fact of her death lends the novel an elegiac quality, as her absence is felt by the men of the ranch and contributes to their nostalgia for a simpler time in a world "distinguished by sorrow and loss" (Arnold 238). Margaret's death causes grief but also removes "heterosexual love and passion" from the ranch (Arnold 238). Mr Johnson tells John Grady that "life's hardest lesson" is that "when things are gone they're gone. They aint comin back" (*CoP* 126). He refers to Margaret, but this could easily be a reference to the endangered lifestyle of the cowboy (Cant 222), or even the extinction of the wolf. Mac, Margaret's widower, expresses his grief most plainly in a passage that invokes both the drought and the woman's death, another textual moment equating women with the element of water:

> No rain... People imagined that if you got through a drought you could expect a few good years to try and get caught up but it was just like the seven on a pair of dice. The drought didn't know when the last one was and nobody knew when the next one was coming. He was about out of the cattle business anyway... His wife would be dead three years in February. Socorro's Candlemas day. Candelaria. Something to do with the Virgin. As what didn't. In Mexico there is no God. Just her. He stubbed out the cigarette and rose and stood looking out at the softly lit barnlot. Oh Margaret, he said. (*CoP* 116)

Mac's sigh at the end of the passage expresses his sense of loss and equates it with the drought. Billy and John Grady are sensible to the effect the loss of Margaret has had on the ranch, Billy even implying that he stayed there only because Margaret died. The last "vestige of the life-giving female" that remains on Mac MacGovern's ranch is Socorro, the Mexican housekeeper (Cant 225). She is marginalised as both a woman and a Mexican, and her role in the quotidian life of the ranch is as a 'helper' (the meaning of her name in Spanish), thus not a sexualised woman, fulfilling her role by cooking endless meals for the all-male cowboy group. The "presence of the feminine" (Dudley 178) thus emerges as Margaret McGovern's ghost in this instalment of the trilogy, and if we take her to be an important female character it should be noted with consternation that she is deceased before the story begins, and thus not able to speak or act, but exists only as a memory in the minds of the men she has left behind.

CONCLUSION

In a retrospective glance of the plot lines of each tale, what is striking is the dearth of women available for consideration. The females who are allowed to exist are seldom central figures, but are treated as objects of exchange, or they are absent from the narrative action altogether but are implied or mentioned in passing, such as John Grady's mother, or deceased, such as Billy's dead sister and Mac's late wife. Simultaneously the role of the hero cowboy is elevated, and the significance of women and non-masculine others is diminished by this powerful male character. When women are present in the narrative it is only temporary, they soon disappear, and they act not as self-determining characters but as props or catalysts in the story and as a result involvement with a female usually gets the protagonist into some kind of trouble. Rather than being undermined or problematized, the dominance of masculinity in the texts thrives partly by means of the exclusion of female characters as part of what Nell Sullivan calls the "obviation of women" (229). Cant feels that in *Cities of the Plain* female absence is "the underlying principle of the text" (Cant 321), and it is certainly true that there are few women present in the story. The absence of women, however, is not necessarily emphasised or specifically indicated, just as few Westerns would draw attention to the fact that there are no women in the action. Without women around, the all-male group on Mac's ranch seem content with their nostalgia, camaraderie and their mutual love of horses. The identities that they have found are a result of the work they do, supported by the romantic cowboy myth. Even though Mac knows that his ranch must be sold, he is optimistic and tells Billy: "You've always got a job here. The army's goin to take this place but we'll find something to do" (*CoP* 264). The army is the next incarnation of a homosocial stronghold for the men of America, so it seems fitting that they should be taking over the land and the all-male lifestyle that the ranch hands have thus far enjoyed. The inverse of this positively

affirming all-male world has already been witnessed in the scene of the Juarez brothel, a place of exploitation and unwholesomeness. That McCarthy has chosen the Western as his genre for this trilogy is telling, as it has been recognized as a genre that reacts against feminism and that opposes female authority. Westerns are marked by an "obsession with masculinity" (Mitchell 3), and this preoccupation intrudes upon the texts of the Border Trilogy to the extent that female characters are pushed to the very margins of the story. In short, the Border Trilogy does little to dispute Jane Tompkins' assertion that the mythical West is, and remains, a "womanless milieu" (44).

Chapter Three: The Border Trilogy and Film

INTRODUCTION

Cities of the Plain, with its carefully conceived, vivid visual atmosphere, effective use of dialogue, central romance plot and plentiful action is arguably the most cinematic novel of the Border Trilogy. This is unsurprising as *Cities of the Plain* was originally written as a screenplay (Arnold 222), and yet despite this, the only novel from the trilogy that has been adapted for screen to date is *All the Pretty Horses.*[12] The novel that McCarthy wrote based on the *Cities of the Plain* screenplay displays an awareness of cinema which in turn pervades the whole trilogy. This chapter deals with connections between the Border Trilogy and film, and looks particularly at films of the Western genre that have been influential. The outmoded mythologies prevalent in classic Westerns as embodied by such actors as John Wayne are recapitulated with delight in McCarthy's work, and this chapter aims to uncover the manner in which this recapitulation occurs. In particular, the doomed quest to rescue Magdalena, which echoes Billy Parham's attempted rescue of the she-wolf in *The Crossing*, is compared to the rescue mission for Debbie in *The Searchers* in order to explore Richard Slotkin's notion of "search and destroy" and the destructive power of masculine control (*Gunfighter* 466-467). Zane Grey's novel *Wildfire* is mentioned for its depiction of this same "search and destroy" mission. Finally, Sam Peckinpah's *The Wild Bunch* is discussed for its nostalgic and problematic representation of Mexico which echoes the conclusions reached by both film and novel versions of *All the Pretty Horses*, and the Border Trilogy as a whole. Peckinpah and

12 Woodward claims that McCarthy and Pearce have come "close" to making the *Cities of the Plain* film but that producers "always became skittish about the plot".

McCarthy are both seen as offering a reductive image of Mexico and Mexicans, placing Mexico in the role of "dark doppelgänger" to America (Sugg 118). In these various ways, it is apparent that the Border Trilogy does not successfully upend accepted mythologies about American nationhood and manhood, as John Cant would argue. Cant is a firm believer in Cormac McCarthy's mythoclasm, but by comparison I see McCarthy's Border Trilogy as actively reviving the phantasm of the mythical West, populated by a John Wayne-like hero, damsels in distress and corrupt Mexicans.

AN EIDETIC QUALITY

Cormac McCarthy has written a number of plays for stage and screen, and four of his novels have been adapted for film. In total he has been involved, in some capacity, in the authoring of six films to date – *The Gardener's Son*, *All the Pretty Horses*, *No Country for Old Men*, *The Road*, *The Sunset Limited, Child of God* and *The Counselor*. As Stacey Peebles has noted, there lies in McCarthy's work something that lends itself to cinema ("McCarthy and Film" 162), what Cant calls an "eidetic" quality (217). Even within the narrative of the Border Trilogy we can see a trace of theatricality adhering to certain characters. An example of this is John Grady's mother who leaves the ranch in order to be an actress in California, "that most contemporary of states" (W. Sullivan 297) and the diva from *The Crossing* who is both a singer and actress. Furthermore, McCarthy "consciously acknowledges this relationship to film culture and the western genre" (Cant 318) on at least two occasions in *Cities of the Plain.* One such scene shows Billy lying on his bed reading *Destry* (*CoP* 49), the name 'Destry' referring to the mythic cowboy protagonist of the dime novels that served as "the source for the cinema's westerns" (Cant 318). Later on, as an older man Billy finds

himself "working as an extra in a movie" (*CoP* 264), one assumes in Hollywood's version of the West. This may even be an autobiographical reference, as McCarthy noted in an author's questionnaire in 1964 that he had held a number of jobs including "dishwashing" and "motionpicture acting" (Peebles, "McCarthy and Film" 162).

Besides McCarthy's personal interest in cinema, the connection between the Border Trilogy and film lies in the fact that much of what is known about the social, cultural and geographical realities of the region has been presented to the public in the form of Hollywood movies, the West's "most powerful and widely effective representation" (Cant 217). When McCarthy turns his attention to the borderlands of the Southwest "he writes of a people and a territory already made familiar" by popular novels and movies in the Western genre (Cant 251). The West as a place of conquest and self-determination for a white male has been ingrained into popular consciousness largely because of the popularity and ubiquity of Western films in the English speaking world in the twentieth century. As Jane Tompkins explains, between "roughly 1900 to 1975" a large portion of the "adolescent male population" spent every Saturday afternoon at the cinema, watching Westerns (Tompkins 5). Some of these films – such as *High Noon* and *Shane* – have become so culturally established as to be "part of the permanent repertoire of American culture" (Tompkins 5). To investigate how film may have informed the plot and characterisations within the Border Trilogy is not to say that there is an emphatic influence on McCarthy's part, but that an effect is almost inevitable when aspects of plot and certain ideological convictions apparent from within the various narratives overlap as they do.

One such overlap occurs in the aspiration that both Westerns and the Border Trilogy have in common – "the mythic resolution of crises" (Mitchell 24). Much like director John Ford, McCarthy appears to see through this dialectic at the same time as he revels in its recapitulation (Mitchell 24), allowing his protagonists to resolve their various crises in the only way a cowboy knows how – with violence. The most heroic of the cowboys, John Grady, is not coincidentally also the most violent of them. His knife fight in Saltillo is the near-death experience on which he cuts his teeth, and is followed by being shot in the leg and finally his fatal knife fight with Eduardo. The crisis created by the attempted rescue of Magdalena is resolved in the violent deaths of all three actors; Magdalena, Eduardo and finally John Grady himself. The crisis of the wolf's suffering in *The Crossing* is similarly resolved when Billy takes up his rifle and kills the animal. More violence is to follow as he discovers his parents have been murdered and his brother is killed in Mexico. This is nothing new to the average American audience, or any audience familiar with the cultural products of America, as violence is pervasive in films of the Western genre. The visceral appeal of Westerns has been attributed to their brutal, sometimes even gratuitous scenes of violence. As an example of this brutality, Sam Peckinpah's point in *The Wild Bunch* is made through the extensive editing of his scenes of death, and that is to express how the "Western's secret desire has always been for violence – justified if possible but violence nonetheless" (Mitchell 248). Whilst Peckinpah's intention might have been to question the legitimacy of violence, he simultaneously revelled in the Western's tendency towards the repeated representation of bloodshed. McCarthy can be seen to celebrate violence in a similar manner. By repeating and rehashing the Western's obsession with violent resolution, McCarthy is harking back to some of the ideologies most central to American culture, especially as they pertain to masculine control. John Wayne is a figure who embodies many of these values and meanings, and

although they may appear anachronistic to a contemporary audience, the Border Trilogy reignites them and injects the contemporary American cultural milieu with new justifications for celebrating the type of manhood that Wayne popularised, resurrected and made accessible once again by John Grady Cole.

SEARCH AND DESTROY

Cities of the Plain is structured in a series of "vignettes" in the "same manner as a John Ford movie" (Cant 216), which is especially apt as the novel is focused on the West that Ford worked towards mythologising. As with the other novels in the trilogy, the realism of *Cities of the Plain* should not disguise the mythical nature of the tale. That the main thrust of the story is John Grady's attempt to 'rescue' Magdalena, a young woman in captivity, speaks to the continuation of McCarthy's work of referencing mythology and writing anew the myths of old. The name Magdalena alludes to the mythic nature of this ostensibly realistic text, referring to the New Testament's Mary Magdalene, which assists in illuminating what is obscured by McCarthy's allusive meditations on fate and the nature of man, the love story's reliance on "that cliché plot of the masculinist Western, The Whore With a Heart of Gold—or in this case, the whore as Christ-figure and stigmata" (Sugg 128). Magdalena encompasses sweetness, youth, sadness and illness and unfortunately, rather than redeeming her, these character traits only emphasise her place as a convention of the genre and a stock image of the Western. She is the "saloon girl" (Tompkins 6) whose very presence contains within it "compacted worlds of meaning" (Tompkins 6) and standards by which we judge her. A predecessor of Magdalena is Martine, Monte Walsh's lover in the eponymous film, who is also a saloon girl and prostitute (*Monte Walsh*). Martine is foreign and speaks English with an

accent, whilst Magdalena speaks Spanish. Martine is also ill, like Magdalena, but rather than epilepsy she suffers from tuberculosis, and like Magdalena, she too dies. This is not to say that McCarthy based Magdalena's character on Martine's, but it certainly demonstrates the ubiquity of the recognisable character that both women represent. Westerns have a habit of recycling stereotypes, and McCarthy has referenced some of the most striking and recognisable of these in *Cities of the Plain*. The problems that emerge from this act of recycling is that the "worlds of meaning" (Tompkins 6) contained within each archetypal character are already set out by their previous incarnations. Rather than undermining the mythology whilst writing within the form of the Western, McCarthy's powerful evocations of the conventional archetypes of the Western genre have the opposite effect. The women that appear in McCarthy's Border Trilogy are usually peripheral features in an otherwise overwhelmingly homosocial environment, and as such they represent "markers of desire" (Sugg 128). The patriarchal and conventional nature of this function serves to highlight that McCarthy's trilogy works towards a reinvigoration of outdated mythologies of the West rather than having, as Cant suggests, a mythoclastic effect.

Monte Walsh's wish to marry Martine is echoed in John Grady's wish to marry Magdalena, the desire seemingly borne out of feelings of compassion and righteousness. John Grady's will to save the lost female from her moral degradation is a common theme of "traditional patriarchal narratives" (Cant 220), and John Ford's 1956 Western *The Searchers* is the best example of a film that expresses this theme cinematically. Ethan Edwards, played by John Wayne, is the protagonist of the film, an older white male who hates Indians, and who for this reason is the "evil twin" version of James Fennimore Cooper's Natty Bumppo (Slotkin, *Gunfighter* 462). Edwards' cultural fluency with the Indians (he knows them and hates them)

parallels Billy and John Grady's fluency in Spanish, and that they both "know" Mexicans.[13] Besides their familiarity with an alternative culture, John Wayne and John Grady also have their hero status in common. Hollywood produced a "succession of uncomplicated heroes" in its first fifty years, and John Wayne features near the top of this list as a figure whose main features are strength, manliness and male virtue (Cohen 22). Wayne, whose name is associated unequivocally with Westerns, became the ultimate "symbol of American masculinity from World War II to Vietnam" (Tompkins 5) and an example to men of how a 'real' man should be. John Grady's lack of years might seem to put him at odds with the older characters played by Wayne, such as Ethan Edwards, but his position as a stereotypical hero is only strengthened by his youth. The hero in both Western and Eastern literature evolved as a man who was "young, aggressive, sexually powerful, masculine and when faced with problems, could resolve them" (Cohen 19). This description fits John Grady well. He is remarkably adept at solving problems such as breaking recalcitrant horses, and seems to succeed at most tasks he turns his hand to, whether it is beating his opponents at chess or in a prison knife-fight. The brave man who takes it upon himself to rescue the captive woman is a role that sits comfortably with John Grady. As such he could be seen as the heir to the Ethan Edwards legacy, but John Grady is less complicated than Edwards, and more of a true hero, more deserving and more sympathetic than Edwards himself. Where Edwards wishes to kill Debbie 'mercifully', John Grady wishes to marry Magdalena and act out the alternative mythical resolution of a crisis. Edwards would surely not attempt to rescue a woman who was not white, a virgin and a Christian, whereas the more sympathetic and honourable John Grady is especially drawn to Magdalena whose primary characteristics are that she is Mexican and

13 Katherine Sugg rightly points out that although he may "embody a history of cultural contact on the border and be comfortable with both Mexican peasants and landowners, such characteristics ultimately make John Grady Cole even more emphatically a "classic" Western hero" (127).

patently not a virgin. McCarthy has written into being a more righteous and honourable version of the quintessential Western hero that John Wayne embodied. In certain aspects John Grady seems to be the rightful heir to the Wayne throne, representing a masculinity that is powerful, independent, passionate and controlling, but also principled and fair. John Grady is white, young, and the picture of American masculinity, and in this sense he does not deviate from the accepted model of the cowboy hero. The imagination seems to have stalled on the person of John Wayne and everything that he stands for, and while some more critical Westerns may attempt to revise the outmoded values that were once held dear, the Border Trilogy does not.

Besides the impossibly ideal cowboy hero, another troublesome narrative motif that the Border Trilogy celebrates, especially in the final novel, is that of the damsel in distress. The part of the damsel is played by Magdalena in *Cities of the Plain*, and similarly by Debbie in John Ford's *The Searchers.* Debbie was kidnapped at a young age, and the purity that she represents is contingent upon her youth, because as soon as she becomes a woman it is assumed that the Comanche chief, Scar, will take her as his wife and she will be 'polluted' by intercourse with him. Slotkin explains how Edwards' mission to find Debbie transforms from "search and rescue" to "search and destroy" as the likelihood of her becoming "Indianized" by Scar's "blood" increases with time (*Gunfighter* 466 – 467). Her purity is assumed to be in jeopardy and her 'pollution' by her Indian captor would be a fate "worse than death" from which the only possible salvation, in the mind of Edwards, would be actual death (Slotkin, *Gunfighter* 467). The symbol that Debbie represents to Edwards is that of the virgin and the embodiment of white and Christian values, and so when she comes to Martin to tell him that the Comanche are now her "people", rejecting her own innate whiteness, Edwards is incensed

and intent on killing her. In McCarthy's text Magdalena whose name "may fit too well and carry too much literary and historical weight" (W. Sullivan 295) is the captive woman whose rescue would be the "vindicating climax of the hero's mythic endeavour" (Slotkin, *Gunfighter* 467) in the mythology of the West. Magdalena is Mexican and a prostitute, so neither white nor a virgin, although her religious piety is demonstrated by her only treasured possession, a wooden *santo* (*CoP* 218). Magdalena is unlike Debbie in both race and virginity, and in this sense she is closer to Mary Magdalene, a fallen woman who seeks absolution and salvation from a man. And yet, although she does not possess the quality of literal virginity, Magdalena's story of a life in captivity is what purifies her, as she was sold at a young age to settle a debt. As she reprises her story of abuse and imprisonment to John Grady, compassion threatens to overwhelm him. Her youth, victimhood, illness and piety all act as sanctifying elements to her character, and innocence is bestowed upon her as a result, just as it is for Debbie. Debbie and Magdalena are both characters who fulfil the role of victim, and as such they are ideal objects for the white man's conquest of the other, in Debbie's case Scar the Comanche chief, and in the case of Magdalena wicked Eduardo, the Mexican.

During the course of the narrative of *Cities of the Plain*, and despite the cruelty she is subjected to at the hands of her pimp, Magdalena seems to accept her fate as Eduardo's property, and wanders back to the White Lake late at night, ignoring a strange woman's offer of sanctuary. In *The Searchers*, Debbie also seems ambivalent about her rescue and fails to leave the Indian camp when she realises what Ethan Edwards and Martin Pawley are attempting. The two women do not choose rescue, and seem at times to thwart it, making the hero work even harder to save them. The complicated relationship between abductor and

abductee is set up to be a challenge, and one that must result in violence. The men must naturally battle it out between them, and the female object of rescue must accept the outcome. Thus we can see the quest for the captive woman in the case of Debbie and Magdalena as being two similar but distinctive rescue missions with the actual woman representing a "rescue object", a totem, with the purpose of sanctifying the aggressive invasion of another's territory (Slotkin, *Gunfighter* 470), be it a Comanche camp in *The Searchers* or the brothel in Juarez in *Cities of the Plain*.

Another occurrence of the hero's mythic endeavour to rescue a woman can be seen in one of Zane Grey's many novels, entitled *Wildfire*. Although the work is not a film, it has been included in this chapter for its influence on Western films, and its powerful rescue narrative. Grey, who is considered "perhaps the most popular Western writer of all time" (*Gunfighter* 211), typically utilised the mythological convention of a rescue in his stories. The object of the rescue is usually a "white woman" who is saved by the story's "hero" in an act of violence, "morally redemptive because it rescues" the woman (Slotkin, *Gunfighter* 212). Convention dictates that the woman then accepts the hero as her husband, tying the narrative together in a redemptive close, not unlike the resolution set up but not quite achieved in *Cities of the Plain*. In *Wildfire*, the hero in question rides through a fire on a horse of the same name in order to save a girl who has been tied naked to the back of another horse. The fire which is burning out of control is symbolic of the hero's own passion, and in a cataclysmic moment he awakens "to a wild and terrible violence of heart and soul. He had accepted death; he had no fear" (Grey 247). His quest becomes murder, the last thing that he wants to do is kill the girl "mercifully" (Tompkins 94). Lust, love and murder all intermingle in this final scene, just as the forest fire, the horse and human passion, all three figured as

"wildfire", are conflated and "blended indistinguishably" (Tompkins 95). This demonstrates the propensity for a hero's quest to switch radically from "search and rescue" to "search and destroy" because of the rescuer's sexual impulse of ownership over the female. The wishes of the woman are not fully articulated, and not taken into consideration any more than the wishes of an animal would be. The extension of this motif to *The Crossing* sees the she-wolf as the totem to be rescued, and further emphasises the "search and rescue" turned "search and destroy" pattern that McCarthy is invoking in the Border Trilogy. The various females I have mentioned, be it Debbie in *The Searchers*, Lucy in *Wildfire,* or Magdalena and the wolf in the Border Trilogy, are all objectified by this narrative theme of rescue. The cliché of the damsel in distress figures females as a prize to be won, following the conquest of the 'monster' which is represented in these examples as a Comanche chief, a forest fire, a Mexican pimp, and Mexican dogfighters.

MEXICO

The Border Trilogy concerns itself with the line that exists between America and Mexico, both physically and figuratively, and as such it is focusses on a white male's interactions with an alternative culture which is at once alluring and dangerous. John Cant praises McCarthy for referencing alternative cultures within the Border Trilogy: "it is clear that he is increasingly concerned to depict the racial and cultural variety of the southwest" by rendering passages in Spanish, and also drawing on *Don Quixote* (184-5). However the word "increasingly" is misleading, as it implies that the Border Trilogy is more multicultural than the texts that preceded it. In fact *Blood Meridian* is the more democratic of the Western novels in its depictions of violence, as every race and nation is figured as equally

bloodthirsty, which is not the case in the Border Trilogy. *Blood Meridian* also shows a less binary and polarised view of Mexico and America and the differences between the two nations and cultures. In their journeys across the border John Grady and Billy discover that Mexican men are corrupt, violent, and cruel, and that Mexican women are beautiful, temperamental and sexually available, or otherwise conniving, bitter spinsters, such as the Dueña Alfonsa and her subsequent incarnation, the one-eyed *criada*. That is not to say that there are no helpful and benevolent Mexicans at all, for there are many kind peasants who aid John Grady and Billy in certain situations, but as Katherine Sugg has noted, "the key moments in each of the novels seem to involve an Anglo boy's confrontation with some Mexican man's sadistic character and opaque blood-lust" (141). Sugg has noted a tendency in border narratives to juxtapose one nation against another, in this instance, the United States against Mexico. Such "distinctions between violence and chaos in Mexico and a bleak culture of civility in Anglo ranches and towns read nostalgically" partly because these distinctions serve to contrast America's modernity with Mexico's apparent "savage innocence" (Sugg 141), thus reiterating mythologies of American nationhood and manhood. The distinction that McCarthy has drawn between America and Mexico in the Border Trilogy is unlike *Blood Meridian'*s "equal-opportunity violence" where Mexicans, Indians, and Anglos are all shown to be bloodthirsty and all commit horrifying acts of violence. The reason for this change is often seen as McCarthy's own "co-optation by the Anglo-centered romance of the West" (Sugg 141). This Anglo-centrism is further emphasised by the fact that the Mexican characters who have participated in the protagonist's stories are no longer contemplated once they have played their part. The Mexicans who have added "local color and contrast to his dramas of white masculinity" (Sugg 147) are forgotten once they are out of the protagonist's sphere of experience, and the future for Mexico and Mexicans is never envisioned.

The reductive image of Mexico and Mexicans is emphasised rather than mitigated by Billy Bob Thornton's 2000 film version of *All the Pretty Horses*. The film illustrates the unfortunate persistence of Hollywood's Mexican stereotype, both of men and of the nation. Adapted from the novel, "the film relies on long-held conceptions of Mexican men as brutal and enigmatic figures located in a desolate and poverty-stricken, though beautiful, landscape" (Sugg 118). Women are equally simplified, Alejandra is a typical Latin female, passionate, beautiful and arrogant, and her grandaunt the Dueña Alfonsa is an obstructive, embittered old woman. For McCarthy's white protagonists, the Mexican setting suggests opportunities that had been foreclosed in America since the second World War, such as "open pastures and freewheeling cowboys working outside the constraints of corporate and urban culture" (Sugg 118). But there is a price to pay for the freedom of this pre-modern paradise, and in John Grady's case the price is banishment, imprisonment, and finally death. Mexico is unsympathetic to the white hero, and the culture is alien and opaque to him. As the Dueña Alfonsa explains to John Grady: "This is another country" (*All the Pretty Horses*). An unflattering distinction between Mexico and America can be seen, both in the novel and film versions of *All the Pretty Horses*, in the portrayal of the respective justice systems of the two countries. John Grady is falsely imprisoned and his young friend Jimmy Blevins summarily executed whilst in Mexico. Justice, as a Western audience would understand it, is of no consequence to the corrupt Mexican captain, who claims to be able to "make truth" (*All the Pretty Horses*), and once in Saltillo prison there is no respite for the young white prisoners who are forced to battle vicious *cuchilleros*. There is no justice for the boys in Mexico, but once John Grady returns to America law and order is reinstated, and the judge benevolently grants him ownership of 'all the pretty horses'. Thus we can see how the mythic role that Mexico plays in comparison to America is of "dark doppelgänger", and this is established by

the representation of Mexico's justice system as "corrupt and arbitrary", which conveniently contrasts the discrete forms of nationhood and manhood that are attributed to each country (Sugg 118).

Sam Peckinpah's *The Wild Bunch* is commonly dubbed a revisionist Western as well as the most "complex, controversial and arguably the most popular" of the three 'Mexico Westerns' released in 1969 (Slotkin, *Gunfighter* 591-2). Lee Clark Mitchell sees the film as a reflection of Peckinpah's own "serious, somewhat rueful devotion to a genre that has always celebrated native landscape, indigenous history, and masculine ideals but that no longer feels confident about the ideals of such celebration" (243). Mitchell's interest is in describing how Westerns have helped to mediate certain crises in American culture, focussing especially on the crisis of masculinity. He explains that Peckinpah directed *The Wild Bunch* as a result of his desire to resurrect the appeal of the Western, with its "historically irrelevant yet mythically compelling terms" (239) and in doing so he invoked the filmic conventions of the genre (243). Peckinpah achieves the "resurrection of the myth of a heroic West" through his ageing actors and a "mediated desire (their desire to see it again creating a similar desire in us)" (242), and in so doing he fosters a strong strain of nostalgia, a wish to be back in the 'good old days'. Mitchell sees Peckinpah's mission as one of respectful destruction, claiming that Peckinpah would like to eviscerate Westerns whilst simultaneously honoring them, which has led to him choosing a more "sympathetic view" that refuses to explode the modes of the genre unequivocally, but rather "measures the genre's inadequacy in terms of belatedness" (239). The result is an ambivalent homage, as Peckinpah seems to revise the myth, whilst he cherishes it and mourns its passing. The film polarised opinion, mostly due to its graphic depiction of violence and especially violence against women, but it is controversial also for

its portrayal of Mexico and Mexicans. The film delves into the landscape and politics of Mexico in order to reassert American national mythologies by "creating a field of difference" (Sugg 118) in which the two countries oppose one another ideologically. The creation and recuperation of American mythologies of masculinity occur as a result of the comparison drawn between America and Mexico in films and novels that invoke the scenery of the latter country.

In *The Wild Bunch*, Mexico is represented as a "tribal utopia", a place of trees and water "in the midst of a desert" (Slotkin, *Gunfighter* 599). The vitality of the Mexican villagers' rural culture, wholly integrated and self-sufficient, is seen to stand in contrast with the "heartlessness of modern America" (Mitchell 242), and also with the corrupt alternate version of Mexico that we witness in the scene that follows. The sense of peace and plenty evoked in the utopian forest village by soft greens, plentiful water, smiling women and children is shattered in the scene immediately afterwards when the Bunch arrive in Agua Verde, a village made of stone and ruled by the tyrannical General Mapache. In this village we see a society "ruled by force and money in which the strong lord it over the weak, taking the best of food, drink and women" (Slotkin 600). The General himself rides into town in a gold and blood-red motorcar, a symbol of modernity, wealth and corruption, to which Pike exclaims "Now what in the hell is that?" (*The Wild Bunch*). The village is dry and dusty, the colours of sand and blood, demonstrating that life is cheap and nourishment scarce. There are no smiling children, only women with scowls and crying babies wandering through the dust. The film's characterisation of Mexico is thus rather two dimensional; it is a land of natural beauty, a prelapsarian Eden that is welcoming to travelers, but the corruption of its rulers means that it is also unwelcoming, perilous, a desiccated desert ruled over by tyrants and despots. The

country that we see in Peckinpah's film is binary and essentialized, the innocence of Mexico contrasted with its cruelty, highlighting the differences between American modernity and Mexico's "savage innocence" (Sugg 141).

Just as systems of justice are used as a point of comparison between Mexicans and Anglos in *All the Pretty Horses*, so they are utilised in order to highlight notions of national morality in *The Wild Bunch*. General Mapache's inhumanity contrasts with the morality of the Bunch, who have principles and a sense of justice despite being outlaws. This moral code is celebrated "exorbitantly" (Mitchell 244) in *The Wild Bunch* and invoked by characters who express it as loyalty, restraint, veracity and "a commitment to underdogs", all qualities that Zane Grey would envision in his own heroes (Mitchell 244). "We ain't nothing like him," Dutch proclaims following a comparison to Mapache, "we don't hang nobody" (*The Wild Bunch*). Mapache's wickedness is all the worse for the fact that it is state-sanctioned, and that he has soldiers and guns at his disposal. In the Border Trilogy, likewise, Mexican men are possessed of a greater evil than Americans. John Grady is attacked by a hired *cuchillero* in prison, and he "looked deep into those dark eyes and there were deeps there to look into. A whole history burning cold and remote and black" (200). In a parallel knife-fight scene Eduardo tells John Grady that Mexicans "will devour you, my friend. You and all your pale empire" (*CoP* 251). In this we see evidence of how Mexico takes the "mythic role of dark doppelgänger for the United States", establishing a "convenient contrast between forms of nationhood and manhood in the United States and Mexico" (Sugg 118). This resonates with representations of Mexico as a nation, in that "McCarthy's vision of Mexico embodies the violence of the Old West" (Owens 116), and that beyond the violence there is also the allure of possibilities as Mexico appears to 'pale' Americans as "the glittering night dream of

adventure" as well as "a gray land of death" (Owens 116). McCarthy's Mexico, as with Peckinpah's, is a land of inescapable lawlessness, where police captains arrest young gringos arbitrarily, officials are corrupt and prostitution and murder are rife, all of which comprises "the portrayal of the Mexican justice system as corrupt and arbitrary" and contrasts Mexico again with the superior morality of America (Sugg 118). On the other hand Mexico is also represented as a land of possibility, a blank slate where civilization has not encroached. The journeys undertaken by John Grady, and those of Billy, into Mexico are not the establishing of a new domain but rather the attempt to seek out and reclaim an old way of life that has been lost in America. The "oilcompany roadmap" that John Grady consults at the start of his journey is blank beyond the border of Mexico, showing "roads and rivers and towns on the American side of the map as far south as the Rio Grande and beyond that all was white" (*APH* 34). Rawlins looks at the blank map of Mexico and comments "There aint shit down there" (*APH* 34), but what the boys find is that Mexico is the site of a new Eden. They arrive at La Purísima ranch, where water is plentiful (the calling card of a utopia), John Grady finds a father figure in Don Hector and where he meets and falls in love with the beautiful Alejandra.

Alejandra and Magdalena are important for what they represent in the discourse surrounding Mexico and America. The Mexican woman, according to José Limón, has a crucial function in the narrative that uncovers a border romance, because she represents the object of desire and thus "she illustrates the tensions and breaks within the prevailing social order of the border" (Sugg 122). A Mexican woman who is sexually available, even promiscuous, and falls for the white, usually fair-haired cowboy is "ratifying and extending the right of Anglo conquest to the sexual" (Limón 601). The woman is often cast as a go-between between the

Anglo hero and the crooked, deceitful Mexican (Limón 599), as we see in *The Wild Bunch* where the catalysing incident is Angel killing his old flame Teresa and thus enraging Mapache, her lover, forcing a confrontation between the predominantly Anglo Bunch and the Mexicans ruled by Mapache. We see this too in *All the Pretty Horses*, where Alejandra's relationship with John Grady is what causes the altercation between him and Don Hector, and in *Cities of the Plain* when John Grady (who never learns his lesson) falls for Magdalena and ends up killing her pimp Eduardo. In their "forbidden desire" for the Mexican female, the Anglo protagonists of several popular Southwestern texts, including songs and films, engage in an "ambivalent" transgression, something akin to guerilla warfare (Limón 609). Limón's argument is that the protagonists' desire for a Mexican woman becomes a means for these men to show a certain ambivalence about their own power as white men in the Southwest and uncovers a "contestatory masculinity" (Sugg 122). I would argue that the same hypothesis could be applied to the she-wolf from *The Crossing*, even though what transpires between Billy and the wolf could hardly be termed a 'romance'. By making the decision to return her to the mountains of Mexico, Billy is asserting his dominance over her and also showing some ambivalence about his own role in her fate in that he is refusing to shoot her outright. He purposefully ignores the advice of his father and traps the wolf, physically dominating her in a scene that recalls rape, and leads her behind his horse down into Mexico. The rescue mission that Billy is finally left with is a case of "search and destroy" – she is near death in a dog fighting ring and against the wishes of the Mexican men who are making her fight, Billy shoots her in the head. As a contest between Mexican and American masculinities, it is plain to see that America has come out as the braver, morally superior of the two. In his final act of domination over her body Billy trades his rifle for the wolf's corpse and buries her, the

spiritual superiority of this act contrasting starkly with the Mexicans' incomprehension over the uneven trade.

CONCLUSION

Although John Cant would have us believe that Cormac McCarthy is actively undermining the outmoded masculine mythologies of the West, we can see in the mythical figure of John Grady that he invokes and animates the spirit of the hero he is supposedly burying. Cant claims that "the fact that social and cultural forces so often turn McCarthy's ardenthearted Americans to self-destructive and at times all-consuming violence is an aspect of his critique of American culture, and by extension of Western culture as a whole" (6). But he has failed to mention that crises are usually resolved through violence in Westerns, and the classic tragic romantic hero is typically self-destructive. Rather than performing a critique of the frontier myths, McCarthy is harking back to them in his trilogy and resurrecting John Wayne in the character of John Grady. There is a clear link between the novels of the Border Trilogy and the films that have popularised the fiction of the West and the mythology of America, and both have been actively recapitulating some irrelevant mythologies that are no longer helpful. One such myth is that of the 'damsel in distress', the trope of "search and rescue" that becomes "search and destroy", which can be found in many popular films and texts of the Western genre. Another unhelpful stereotype is the one made popular by Mexico Westerns, the image of Mexico as the dark, chaotic other to American modernity and sophistication. This finds its expression in Sam Peckinpah's *The Wild Bunch* just as it does in the Border Trilogy and the filmed version of *All the Pretty Horses*.

Conclusion

At the University of Cape Town's Library, the Border Trilogy is categorised under the subject "Boys – Fiction", a subject it shares with *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Much like Huck Finn, in their respective stories John Grady Cole and Billy Parham both choose to "light out for the territories". The fact that the Border Trilogy concerns itself with boys and men is not remarkable, but what does bear mentioning is the anachronistic mythology of masculinity that the trilogy resurrects. To claim that there is a problem, or at least an issue, of masculinity for contemporary readers should not seem overly presumptuous. It has been noted that in the past the problem of masculinity and the attempt to achieve "an ideal of masculinity" have been closely connected to the popularity of feminism in the United States, especially in the years following World War II when more women were entering the workplace and men were in fear of becoming "domesticated" (Mitchell 152). Westerns emerged as a reaction to America's second wave of feminism, and the genre's ebb and flow has also coincided with interest in feminist issues. Interestingly, the Westerns that emerged in response to feminism focussed not so much on what men thought of women but on what men thought of themselves, and what it meant to be a man (Mitchell 152). Perhaps the social dynamics of a time in which pressure was being put on the nuclear family helped to hasten the cowboy's rise to fame as these men were notorious for their freedom, demonstrated by their bachelor status and their nomadic lives. In the forty years following World War II "almost every study of sexual roles" was dominated by the question of "what makes men less masculine than they should be and what can we do about it?" (Mitchell 153). The solution to this problem seemed to be contained within the figure of the cowboy. The cowboy is

independent, physically strong, confident and, above all, manly. This figure has been the poster boy of masculinity in America for years, and has been so enduring that his mystique has lived on in American imaginations and cultural products long after the cowboy had vanished from the American plains in reality. The major drawback of this model of masculinity is that women are excluded entirely, as cowboys are known to be nomadic, and will not marry or settle down lest they lose their cowboy credentials. The violence that goes hand in glove with our cultural understanding of a cowboy's life is also problematic, and countless Westerns, in both film and literature, have shown that violence is the means by which a man proves his masculinity.

Cormac McCarthy revels in violence. He makes no apologies for his scenes of bloodshed, and admittedly it is in these scenes that McCarthy's talent as a writer shines through. The mythical cowboy figure is without a doubt the hero of the Border Trilogy, and in keeping with the genre his demise is violent. In this trilogy, McCarthy suggests to a contemporary audience that our old ideas of manhood may still be valid; that boys need to leave their mothers in order to grow up, and that a world without women is a world in which men can truly find their own deep sense of masculinity. In both reality and the dreams and fantasies of American fiction men have run away to join the army, traveled overseas, been lost on desert islands, or gone West (Kimmel, *History* 20). For male audiences of the late twentieth century, the years in which the Border Trilogy was published, the notion of "intense male bonding" (Mitchell 27) and a social environment conducive to this, such as a ranch, were not without their appeal. This is evidenced by the popularity of the reaction to feminism known as the mythopoetic men's movement, where men gathered in "homosocial" refuges in the wilderness (Kimmel, *Manhood* 207) in order to reclaim something of the innate, deep

masculinity that they felt they had lost. In McCarthy's novels we can see a similar sex-segregated refuge in Mac MacGovern's ranch. The American myths of masculinity that have supposedly been discredited over the years are precisely the ones that McCarthy is hearkening back to. Although it may be tempting to read his works as indicating the "destructive consequences" of old mythologies (Cant 9), the effect that McCarthy's trilogy has is one of re-mythification, rather than mythoclasm.

At the end of the trilogy, "childlessness" and "barrenness" reigns in *Cities of the Plain* (Arnold 236). This leaves the male characters with no permanent home, no wives and no children. What this implies for masculinity in the United States is that men do not nurture, and are not capable of being loving and caring husbands or fathers. The assumptions that the trilogy makes are that men are inherently violent, and need to be with other men in order to grow up. This is an unhelpful idea in the twenty-first century, because it leaves no room for alternative masculinities, or even for women. For a post-mythopoetic sense of masculinity we should consider the possibilities of including women, rather than eliding them. This thesis has focussed on certain thematic motifs within the Border Trilogy in order to form an analysis of the texts that focusses on mythology. I have been at pains to discuss Westerns, the absence of women, the cowboy hero, the connection to film, the dichotomous relationship between Mexico and the U.S. and also, to a lesser extent, the mythopoetic men's movement. Further research could approach the theme of war in the trilogy and how this informs the notions of masculinity that are represented by the novels. The birth of the atomic bomb is one of the cataclysmic changes that occurs during the course of the trilogy, and if this were a longer project I would certainly have addressed this technological breakthrough as it is represented in McCarthy's oeuvre. My primary intention in writing this paper was to underscore the ways

in which McCarthy assists in the perpetuation of the mythologies of masculinity in his Border Trilogy. John Cant is a believer in McCarthy's mythoclasm, and he makes many useful and insightful points on this subject. Unfortunately his analysis glosses over some of the most troubling issues with the Border Trilogy by claiming that McCarthy is simply writing mythologically. In this thesis I have attempted to outline where Cant's argument might have overlooked certain aspects of the novels, and in so doing I have argued that the Border Trilogy is implicated in the reinvigoration of the old mythologies of masculinity in America.

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