

NARRATIVE EVENTS AND STORYTELLING ENCOUNTERS
IN CORMAC MCCARTHY'S *THE BORDER TRILOGY*

by

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Introduction

Cormac McCarthy and Storytelling

Cormac McCarthy's awareness of his role as storyteller is clear in his deliberate treatment of the storytelling and conversations in *All the Pretty Horses*, *The Crossing*, and *Cities of the Plain*—which together comprise *The Border Trilogy*. Dianne Luce explains that McCarthy is “concerned with the role or function of story in human experience of life, not only our own stories, our autobiographies, but our biographies of others, our witnessing” (“Road” 195). The capacity for witnessing other’s stories and the subsequent retelling of those tales has a powerful psychological and emotional effect on human relationships, and when McCarthy or his characters tell stories, they create a new existence separate from the original object about which the story is being told. Luce’s observation reinforces comments made by storytellers in the trilogy, like when the ex-Mormon priest says, “Acts have their being in the witness. Without him who can speak of it? In the end one could say even that the act is nothing, the witness all” (*Crossing* 154). The blind revolutionary also discusses the nature of storytelling when he explains to Billy the method for choosing the subjects of one’s stories:

...the blind man said that he did meet other people on the road ... but that the three strangers at issue were those with whom he spoke of his blindness and that they must therefore be principles in a cuento whose hero was a blind man, whose subject was sight. Verdad? (*Crossing* 285)

This very deliberate discussion of storytelling might seem to leave McCarthy open to a double-bind paradox: if he philosophizes too much about the nature of storytelling, his

stories might fall short of his criteria; on the other hand, without this deliberate discussion, his stories might lose some of their intended impact.

McCarthy's storytelling techniques make his narrative especially memorable and complex. In *The Border Trilogy* he weaves stories within stories, introducing interlocutor storytellers into the journeys of John Grady and Billy, in an attempt to examine the acts of narration and storytelling and how they create meaning, truth, hope, vindication, and even the individual. In addition, he is examining what it means to be both a storyteller and a listener of tales.

Luce infers from Billy's encounter with the priest in *The Crossing* that "the meaning of our lives that can be known and of value to us as we live is the meaning that we put there by exercising our human gift for storytelling or narrating" ("Road" 201-02). Edwin Arnold echoes this idea when discussing the meaning of Billy's encounter with the old man under the overpass in the epilogue of *Cities of the Plain*: "The essence of the traveler's story is that we create in retrospect the narrative of our lives; we give shape to the events that have occurred, whether they have inherent connection or not" ("First Thoughts" 241). For McCarthy, the narrative act emerges as a powerful tool of creation and identity, as well as a tool for relating and connecting to each others, and he brings the narrative act to the forefront by weaving stories within stories and creating storytellers within his own story.

Arnold also points out other issues that McCarthy seems to wrestle with in his narratives. He claims that McCarthy is dealing with some of the following issues:

Who has created the story we have just read? What ... are the storyteller's obligations to his readers? To his characters? Why bring John Grady and

Billy to these ends, especially after engaging the reader to them so completely in the two previous books? (242).

Arnold believes that McCarthy is trying to show through his stories the limitations or paradoxes to which the storyteller is bound: “The author’s options are limited, and the tale much stronger than the teller. The same is true of life itself. Although we give personal shape to our existence by the narration we place upon it, the essence of that narrative is not ours to control” (242). McCarthy truly wrestles with the meaning of narration and storytelling—the story itself, its being told, and its being heard.

Specifically, he wants to explore what it will mean for us (and for John Grady and Billy) to witness a story being witnessed second hand. And, as always, McCarthy questions what it means to be the storyteller.

So, how does McCarthy do it? First, he weaves intricate stories revolving around the lives of his heroes. Second, he introduces us to other characters who do their own intricate storytelling. And third, the storytellers often philosophize about what it means to tell stories.

On one level, we can take these tales for their surface meaning by simply looking at the content of the stories being told and interpreting what they mean. For example, a story about a horse thief might exist to teach its listener a certain moral or ethical lesson about the disadvantages of horse thievery. The story told to Billy by the ex-Mormon heretic in the crumbling church might be a moral lesson about faith, the existence of God, and dealing with one’s own existence in the face of unbelievable loss and destruction, as it appears to be. On another level, the content or plot of one of these stories might be secondary to another purpose, a purpose that deals more with the effect the story has on

its listener, the structure of the narrative, or on the reader of the novel. Although the content or message of the story might, in fact, directly influence the effect that the story has, the effect of the story might hinge more on timing, or structure, or the interaction between the speaker and listener that characterize the *act* of storytelling.

The Border Trilogy provides a consistent *bildungsroman* pattern: boy goes on journey, overcomes dangers, and defies death; and in McCarthy's version, the boy bumps into loquacious storytellers, conversationalists, or interlocutors along his way to becoming more of a man. The questions then arise regarding these rest-stop storytellers: why does McCarthy interrupt his heroes' journeys for these conversations? On how many different levels are these encounters functioning—for the reader, for John Grady or Billy, and for the narrative structure? What do the stories or ideas expressed by the interlocutors mean for the structure or message of *The Border Trilogy* as a whole? Why, for example, does John Grady listen to tales about Mexican revolutions, loss, betrayal, and following one's heart? Why does he listen to men discuss the nature of evil, the dangers of false realities, and about one's ability to control one's path in life? Why does Billy listen to a wise, plane-toting gypsy expound about meaning, semiotics, and the relationship between the world and its witness? Why does he hear tales about the nature of knowing, the nature of knowing God, and the nature of truth, existence, and loss? None of these stories directly influence the plot or direction of the story. Are they simply detours from McCarthy's real story? Arnold, referring to the highly philosophical epilogue of *Cities of the Plain*, also asks why McCarthy resorts to such philosophical, often esoteric storytelling. He says, "The answer seems to be that a different language is demanded by the subject, and that language ... can be found only in an alternate way of

experiencing and knowing the world” (“First Thoughts” 242). And for McCarthy that alternate way usually ends up in a storytelling event or narration, an act with the amazing power to connect its participants, both listener and storyteller.

I believe that these characters are more than minor detours or distractions during the journeys of John Grady and Billy. Instead, they provide the flesh in which the skeleton of their own stories can reside, for without the stories provided by the encounters, the journeys of John Grady and Billy would be simple travel logs recounting event after event. Instead, the novels become dynamic and meaningful because of these interlocutors. The encounters provide the much needed mental, and often spiritual, refueling for the boys on their grueling, life-changing journeys. Each encounter also somehow either changes the way John Grady and Billy think, or it reflects and comments on an already set way of thinking.

In addition, these rest-stop stories function in the narrative as a way of expressing much of John Grady’s or Billy’s own belief systems through other voices. The narrative voice throughout the three novels regularly expounds on the inner thoughts of the usually non-loquacious protagonists, yet the secondary characters provide a convenient way for McCarthy to reveal his own mindset and the attitudes of his protagonists through dialogue. By looking at some of the rest-stop characters in the novels, we can see more clearly how McCarthy deals with the meaning of storytelling—the act of telling, of describing, of narrating events that occurs when two people meet—and the impact that these stories can have on their audience, both we and our heroes, John Grady and Billy.

Although I occasionally use the terms *story* and *narrative* interchangeably—usually for the sake of style or when a distinction is not crucial—their definitions within

the scope of this project are distinct for me and should be clarified here. A *story* or *storytelling* can generally be understood to mean anything that is related between a teller and listener. A *story* does not necessarily contain all the elements of a traditional tale—plot, conflict, a beginning, an end, characters, etc.—but it does usually involve the explication or description of some idea, event, or thing. So, in a large sense, practically every encounter or conversation for John Grady or Billy becomes a *story* or a *storytelling* event, whether it involves a traditional tale or not. A *narrative*, on the other hand, is a story that does contain the traditional elements of a formed tale, with a clear and recognizable structure. In other words, McCarthy's novels form a large narrative comprised of smaller narratives and many storytelling events, and in most cases, the distinction between an event being a *story* or a complete *narrative* is not crucial to our understanding of the way it functions for John Grady, Billy, or the reader.

Michel de Certeau and Michael Roemer

Several different narrative theories can enlighten our understanding of Cormac McCarthy's storytelling philosophy, and perhaps McCarthy's own ideas will eventually emerge as a theory of their own.

De Certeau. In his book *The Practice of Everyday Life*, the French sociologist Michel de Certeau discusses narrative as an event of production. He explains that narration "is characterized more by a way of *exercising itself* than by indicating the thing it indicates. And one must grasp a sense other than what is said. It produces effect, not objects. It is narration, not description. It is an *art* of saying" (79). De Certeau seems to emphasize the *act* or the *event* of the storytelling, as opposed to the meaning or the central message of the story itself. He places an emphasis on the moment of exchange

between narrator and audience. This, he says, is where the true importance of a story lies, not in the particulars, but in the telling of it. The telling produces effects and affects change; it does not produce objects. For example, a narrative told by a grandfather to his grandson could easily have historical importance or some didactic lesson that would acquaint the young man to his predecessors or help him to avoid making similar mistakes. But, the real power of the narrative probably comes from the relationship and connectivity that develops as a result of the grandfather and grandson sharing that storytelling moment, regardless of the narrative related or its practical lesson.

De Certeau adds to this discussion by citing Marcel Détiénne, a historian and anthropologist who also deals with the storytelling event. Détiénne says:

[Stories are not] objects of knowledge and also objects to be known, dark caverns in which hidden ‘mysteries’ are supposed to await the scientific investigation to receive a meaning.... [rather] these tales, stories, poems, and treatises are already practices. They say exactly what they do. (qtd. in de Certeau 80)

Again, as with de Certeau, the emphasis is on the act and the result of storytelling, not on the story. The purpose of reading a story is not to discover its deep, hidden meanings, but rather to take part in the event of the narration, to experience the sensation of the act. This act, as de Certeau explains, is not an expression of a practice, or an expression of a movement, or an expression of a production—the storytelling act *is* that production. In many ways, McCarthy’s novels support de Certeau’s insightful view of the productivity aspect of storytelling and help his theory to emerge as a viable one.

Michael Roemer. But what exactly does the storytelling act produce? If it's not an object or an expression, what is it? Certainly it is difficult to ignore the content, message, or moral lesson within a narrative—and perhaps we shouldn't—but the key to understanding how storytelling functions is to look at it in a reductive manner.

Regardless of the content, all narratives share certain characteristics, and all storytelling events have common threads. These common threads and similar characteristics help us to see not so much *what* a particular story means, but rather *how* a story creates effect.

In his book, *Telling Stories: Postmodernism and the Invalidation of the Traditional Narrative*, Michael Roemer outlines many of the concerns, assumptions, and questions of narrative theory. Several of these ideas can provide some keen insight into how McCarthy's stories within stories function on their various levels.

First, Roemer establishes the preclusive nature of stories and the connection between the reader/listener and the narrator/storyteller. He says, "Stories appear to move into an open, uncertain future that the figures try to influence, but in fact report a completed past they cannot alter. Their journey into the future—to which we gladly lend ourselves—is an illusion" (3). In other words, narratives such as novels and oral narratives are finished before we join the characters as an active audience member. The illusion lies in the false perception that the narrative and its characters move toward an unknown end, when in fact the teller of the narrative has already constructed the end. Because of this preclusive nature, the person who listens to a story becomes both observer and participant. Although the listener is very aware of the preclusive nature of story and the fact that the hero's story is already written, the listener becomes attached to the fictive figure. For example, we watch Billy's journey unfold and we become so

connected to him as a hero that we soon forget that his fate (the outcome) has already been sealed. We find ourselves cheering for him, wondering how he's going to save the wolf, or how he's going to outrun the bandits and save his brother, or how he's going to get his pa's horses back. In essence, according to Roemer, we become Billy. We relate so closely that the fictive figure gains the illusion of freedom. We believe he is free to act and change his fate. This narrative effect is part of the appeal of storytelling. It's part of why we read stories, even though they are all finished before they begin. And perhaps it's part of why McCarthy introduces John Grady and Billy to storytellers—to give them a taste of what we're getting from them through watching their stories.

Second, Roemer points out that the fictional figure is necessarily blind to his own fate. He is a victim to a sealed fate, yet he doesn't see himself as a victim. He sees himself as free to change and shape his fate (as John Grady tries so consciously to do), as a figure in a story who is blind to his hopeless, precluded situation. Roemer says, "We who watch or listen are aware of the inevitable outcome, but he [the fictive figure] struggles blindly on" (19). This blindness, however, is a necessary element for narrative because it allows the character to maintain a hope that is realistic and convincing. It also creates a situation where figures in fiction are obliged to act and submit to the reality that their actions cannot change the precluded outcome. Billy hopes to return the she-wolf to her home; he hopes to save his father's horses; he hopes to return Boyd's bones to America. Billy believes he can change his destiny, and this conviction becomes a crucial part of who he is. Roemer points out that this "blindness [or 'false confidence'] of the fictive figures, which at first seems a mere limitation, turns out to be necessary" (20). As

readers, we thrive on this illusory freedom that we find in stories. It gives us excitement and surprise under the illusion that destiny is being changed before our eyes.

Third, Roemer establishes the connecting factor of stories. He says, “like all structures, story integrates and relates. The narrative relates all of its parts to each other and is, in turn, ‘related’ by a narrator to the audience” (11). When we read or listen to a story, we are participating in an event that is meant to pull together, to make connections between things or ideas that didn’t have connection before, and we are losing ourselves in another’s journey, another person’s way of giving meaning to the world. Roemer discusses the power of narratives to connect us into communities:

We come to story in large part to be placed. For just as it integrates the central figure into the whole, so it joins us who are watching or listening into a community ... To be separate from the group—from our place and matrix—is frightening and dangerous, and story countermands it by placing, connecting, and “immobilizing” us. (144)

We see an example of this connecting power when Billy encounters the priest in Huisiachepic after wandering the Mexican countryside for weeks, maybe months, following his burial of the destroyed wolf. He has no place to go and no one to talk to. He is searching for a connectivity, some sort of community into which he can be integrated. Only when he encounters the priest and hears his story does Billy finally feel inclined to head back to America, not as a result of the tale told, but because of the connectivity that came as a result of the storytelling event. Roemer might say that Billy finally achieved a small sense of place, of connection, of immobility within a community of people who have suffered similarly to him. We, too, as readers, gain the same

sensation through watching Billy. To put it simply, McCarthy has expanded the connective matrix of influence of his narrative by placing stories within stories, where the matrix or web of connectivity extends from author to protagonist to secondary character to reader.

Finally, Roemer makes a connection between stories and the sacred. In narrative, many things are at work, and many more are at stake: fate, misfortune, God, existence, birth, life, and especially death. He points out that death is the “most immediate evidence we have for the ‘real’ or sacred” (84), and he says that the certain knowledge that each of us must die may be the governing idea in our lives. Still, while death is certain and unavoidable, it remains unknown. We don’t know when our time will come, and we can’t say with finality what will become of us when we die. In other words, death, like the sacred, remains beyond our knowledge. Roemer says:

Just as death limits and governs our existence, so it governs traditional story. We know how the story—like our lives—will end, but not, generally, how the figures will get there. Death is, indeed, the source of story’s authority, “the sanction of everything the storyteller can tell.” (85)

Story, then, serves as a “safe arena” (85) where we can stare down the paralyzing questions of humanity that govern our existence, yet still keep them at a safe distance. The story is kept within its realm and within its own rules, where the story can take on the illusion of real threat, and knowing that we are safe, we consciously “render up a part of our consciousness” (87) to the story. It would be an understatement to say that McCarthy’s narratives deal with death or the threat of death. For John Grady and Billy, something of mortal consequence is almost always at stake, and when they stop to listen

to storytellers and philosophers, their conversations rarely deviate from topics related to death or the sacred. John Grady and Billy both hear tales about bloody revolutions; Billy listens to tales about fatal natural disasters and macabre funeral processions; and John Grady even listens carefully to a narrative during the knife-fight that eventually ends his life. Death and the sacred are never absent in McCarthy's storytelling vignettes in the trilogy.

The Border Trilogy gives our heroes a long string of storytelling encounters: wise old Mexican men and women, blind revolutionaries, heretic priests, introspective gypsies, homeless wanderers, Indian philosophers, Mexican law enforcers, American judges, pragmatic pimps, and even shoe-shine boys. It is very true that McCarthy is concerned with the story itself, its being told, and its being heard. He wants to explore what it will mean for us (and for John Grady or Billy) to witness a story being witnessed second hand. This project deals closely with several main encounters in each of the three novels in *The Border Trilogy*. John Grady Cole's conversations with interlocutors and storytellers during his adventures in *All the Pretty Horses* (1992) give us a sense of his early education and introduction to storytelling in Mexico; Billy Parham's journeys in *The Crossing* (1994) introduce him to several philosophically rich storytelling moments; and the final narrative encounters in *Cities of the Plain* (1998) feature both John Grady and Billy in a beautifully crafted final installment to the trilogy. Each novel highlights the narrative act and the storytelling event differently, but finally we see the relationship between the stories as they create the overall effect that McCarthy intended to achieve by creating stories and storytellers within his own larger tale.

All the Pretty Horses

“In the end we all come to be cured of our sentiments. Those whom life does not cure death will. The world is quite ruthless in selecting between the dream and the reality, even where we are not. Between the wish and the thing the world lies waiting.” (Dueña Alfonsa to John Grady in *ATPH* 238)

In *All the Pretty Horses*, 16-year-old John Grady Cole faces the inevitable selling of his family’s cattle ranch after decades of ownership, a ranch that he felt was his birthright. He and his best friend, Lacey Rawlins, decide that Mexico might be the last, true paradise for traditional cowboys like themselves to get away from their parents and live out their dreams of working with cattle and sleeping under the stars in an unfenced range. They ride south and eventually cross the river into Mexico, meeting up along the way with pistol-packing Jimmy Blevins, an “amoral, unlovable, ridiculous, and yet somehow pathetic” thirteen-year-old on a magnificent horse (Luce *Cormac McCarthy* 133). Once in Mexico, their dangerous adventures begin and we follow John Grady’s journey through beauty, love, pain, isolation, blood, betrayal, death, and revenge. It has all the makings of a classic Western *bildungsroman*, “with the uniquely American variation on the theme of the fall from innocence into experience” (Morrison 178).

Along the way, John Grady meets many people who speak with him, telling him stories and philosophizing about life, love, meaning, and Mexico. Although many of *All the Pretty Horses*’ most important conversations occur between John Grady and Rawlins, many don’t involve Rawlins at all. Several of John Grady’s conversations occur on or around the Hacienda de Nuestra Señora de la Purísima Concepción spread in Mexico,

where he listens to Don Hector, the Dueña Alfonsa and some of the Mexican ranch hands. Other storytelling interlocutors meet up with John Grady in prison, on the range, in a courtroom, or other places along his travels.

John Grady Cole

Where's the all american cowboy at? (Billy in Cities of the Plain 3)

McCarthy writes about John Grady:

What he loved about horses was what he loved in men, the blood and the heat of the blood that ran them. All his reverence and all his fondness and all the leanings of his life were for the ardenthearted and they would always be so and never be otherwise. (*ATPH* 6)

And what John Grady loved in other men can be seen in him as well. He is an ardenthearted, passionate, caring, truthful young man. Gail Moore Morrison describes him as a man who “will risk much, for he is a man of action, of passion, of character and of honor” (184), with “a courage, strength of character and grace that seem to emanate from an unwavering commitment to a set of significant values he has internalized” (177). No matter how fantastically skilled and heroic John Grady appears, his strengths tend also to be his weaknesses. These very weaknesses eventually lead to pain and devastation. Morrison calls him a “knight errant, displaced and dispossessed” (178), whose heroism and stubbornness to the cowboy code of chivalry are severely circumscribed by the evils of hostile Mexico. John Grady grew up admiring the old cowboy traditions of the dying West in America, where a man’s righteous action and keeping his word would eventually reward him. Displaced from his ranch in Texas, John

Grady finds himself living in a country where different values and different braveries are rewarded, while anything less could be fatal.

John Grady is a fearless character, a natural horseman who tames herds of wild horses and thus gains the reverence of all around. He will fight viciously for what he thinks is right or against what he thinks is wrong. John Grady is also the ultimate friend, a protector of the weak and small. When Rawlins is more than willing to abandon Blevins for having a “loose wingnut” (*ATPH* 70), for example, John Grady consistently stands up for him: “I reckon we better go find his skinny ass...I don’t believe I can leave him out here afoot” (*ATPH* 71). Simply put, John Grady can’t stand to see anyone else suffering, a personality trait that continues on into his later years (age 19) in *Cities of the Plain* where he is driven to save mongrel puppies and an epileptic Mexican prostitute. And though he works with a calm, cool precision whenever he takes action in defense of his values, he often acts without regard of self or without a rational thought process to back it up. In many ways, John Grady is driven purely by emotion, passion, and selflessness, becoming as Billy later calls him, “the all-american cowboy” (*COTP* 3).

Another important aspect of John Grady’s character is his strong will. Luce explains that it is this very will that leads him to lose everything that he went to Mexico for in the first place: “But his youthful denial of the capacity for evil in himself and others and his reluctance to face what is, rather than insist on what should be, cost him his newfound paradise” (*Cormac McCarthy* 133). He struggles with the violence he witnesses and the violence he carries out himself, leading to his failure to forgive himself and accept the world as it is. This inner struggle can be seen clearly when he confesses to the judge about killing the boy in the prison and doing nothing to prevent Blevins’

execution. Although he learns direct lessons about the dangers of trying to make the world fit his mold, or become the world he wants it to be, the great losses he faces never entirely rid him of the strong will. Eventually, in *Cities of the Plain*, it is this very character trait that eventually leads to his death at the hands of the Mexican cuchillero Eduardo, the pimp who tries to teach him his final lesson during the doubly mortal knife fight.

Dueña Alfonsa and Don Héctor

What I was seeking to discover was a thing I'd always known. That all courage was a form of constancy. That it was always himself that the coward abandoned first. After this all other betrayals came easily. (Dueña Alfonsa to John Grady in *ATPH* 235)

When John Grady arrives at the Hacienda de Nuestra Señora de la Purísima Concepción spread in Mexico, he quickly earns a reputation as a man skilled beyond his years. The Mexican work ethic and camaraderie suit him just fine and he soon wins a favored place in the respect of Don Héctor, the hacendado of the large ranch. John Grady also finds favor with the hacendado's mysteriously beautiful daughter, Alejandra. Theirs is a passionate relationship of midnight liaisons and bareback rides on sweatsoaked animals, but it is ill fated from the beginning. John Grady cannot fully comprehend the deep-roots of Alejandra's Mexican heritage, and the heartbreak that stems from the forbidden relationship greatly shapes who he becomes by the end of *All the Pretty Horses* and on into *Cities of the Plain*. Much of his early education about the Mexican way of life comes via the Dueña Alfonsa and Don Héctor.

Don Héctor, the hacendado of the ranch and father of John Grady's love interest, invites John Grady to a game of billiards. During their brief conversation, Don Héctor tells John Grady about "the revolution and of the history of Mexico and he spoke of the dueña Alfonsa and of Francisco Madera" (*ATPH* 144). He tells John Grady about the European education of many of the young people in the generation before him. He says that they came back with so many ideas, but none of them could agree, especially on the notion of reason. Don Héctor then refers to Cervantes' *Quixote* by saying "Beware gentle knight. There is no greater monster than reason," but goes on to explain to John Grady that "That of course is the Spanish idea ... But even Cervantes could not envision such a country as Mexico" (*ATPH* 146). John Grady seems to be getting a quick lesson on the different ways of thinking among the Mexicans. Most importantly, he is being taught a lesson that could be of great value to himself through his journeys: let reason be your guide, at least while you're in Mexico. In other words, the caution for John Grady is that he should not let his emotions take over, nor should his desires to change the world be stronger than the Mexican sense of rationale and calculated thinking. It seems that Don Héctor recognizes John Grady's intense interest in Mexico, its people, its way of life, and its mysteries. Don Héctor recognizes that John Grady's heart will never be far from Mexico, and he tries to teach him a simple lesson that could save him from future troubles in Mexico. By sharing this narrative event with Don Héctor, John Grady momentarily connects with the Mexican rancher, seeing Mexico the way he does, understanding the Mexican way, if but momentarily. While John Grady may later forget the content of Don Héctor's stories, the effect of the shared narrative leaves him indelibly marked with a bit of Mexico on his heart. McCarthy's use of a storytelling conversation

here shows the weight he gives to narrative. The storytelling moment creates an effect—a view of the Mexican mindset—both for the reader and John Grady, a moment that can be marked as the beginning of his sporadic education and passion toward Mexico, which lead toward his eventual downward spiral in *Cities of the Plain*.

The Dueña Alfonsa, Alejandra’s “grandaunt and godmother” who invests the hacienda with “oldworld ties and with antiquity and tradition” (*ATPH* 132), isn’t blind to the secret relationship, and she takes an interest in John Grady. McCarthy shows us two conversations between our young American protagonist and this passionate and stern older woman. These two conversations frame a long period of suffering, pain, and hardship for the young John Grady, and we can surmise that many of the lessons that Dueña Alfonsa teaches John Grady in their second conversation have already been discovered through experience.

In their first conversation during a chess match, the dueña Alfonsa warns John Grady to be careful in his relationship with the rebellious Alejandra:

You see that I cannot help but be sympathetic to Alejandra. Even at her worst. But I won’t have her unhappy. I won’t have her ill spoken of. Or gossiped about. I know what that is. She thinks that she can toss her head and dismiss everything. In an ideal world the gossip of the idle would be of no consequence. But I have seen the consequences in the real world and they can be very grave indeed. They can be consequences of a gravity not excluding bloodshed. Not excluding death. (*ATPH* 136)

The dueña recognizes a bit of John Grady’s impassioned spirit and his tendency to want to shape the world to his liking. She hopes to use her stories to impress upon him a

lasting impact regarding the gravity of death, the gravity of bloodshed. She wants John Grady to feel and experience through her stories a bit of what she felt as a young woman, what it feels like to be a Mexican in a modern world. She goes on to warn him that “There is no forgiveness. For women. A man may lose his honor and regain it again. But a woman cannot. She cannot” (*ATPH* 137). John Grady argues that it “don’t seem right” and the dueña tells him that it is not a matter of right. The dueña’s conversation with John Grady at this point in his journey is very poignant. He has not yet realized the gravity or ruthlessness of life, and he hasn’t yet learned that he cannot shape the world to fit his mold. Although she is speaking particularly about a young girl’s virtue, her message is really about the dangers of rebelliousness against the world that is, which she later clarifies when John Grady returns to demand her explanation for freeing him from the prison in Saltillo. The dueña typifies the power of storytelling described by de Certeau: rather than the object being the thing created by the story’s subject, the effect from the shared moment lingers forever. Although the dueña’s story is about Alejandra’s background and upbringing, the dueña hopes to help John Grady see things as a Mexican would, a lesson that could save his life.

When Don Héctor discovers that John Grady lied to him about coming into Mexico alone, he turns them over to the Mexican authorities. The authorities transport John Grady and Rawlins back to a jail cell at Encantada where they discover a hobbled Jimmy Blevins who is about to face execution. When the corrupt law agents are marching Jimmy to his death, John Grady gets his first real sense of his true lack of control. He cannot defend or protect Jimmy, and he cannot change the course of events that the world has dictated for him. He is unable to rebel against the world or shape it to

his desire. Later, in the Saltillo prison, John Grady learns additional lessons about the ruthlessness and malevolence of the world against him. He and Lacey fight to survive, and John Grady eventually kills a hired assassin in a cafeteria blood bath. John Grady successfully stands up to the tests of the Mexican world that is, but he still depends on the power of narrative to reinforce these lessons, so he returns to the hacienda to learn from the dueña Alfonsa what it might all mean.

When John Grady is freed from the prison by the dueña's ransom, he returns to demand an explanation and explore his chances with Alejandra. She graciously speaks to him at great length about "her own history and Mexico's, of responsibility and courage, or desire and loss" (Luce *Cormac McCarthy* 134). She teaches John Grady about the nature of fate and existence in this world, that all consequences cannot be traced back to some human decision. Instead, she tells John Grady, the world is a puppet show, "but when one looks behind the curtain and traces the string upward he finds they terminate in the hands of yet other puppets, themselves with their own strings which trace upward in turn, and so on" (*ATPH* 231). By explaining this concept to John Grady as part of her larger narrative, the dueña allows John Grady to understand her point of view about the nature of fate, destiny, and one's lack of control over a predicated path. In addition, McCarthy's careful treatment of the dueña's puppet metaphor reminds the reader about the function of narrative. He reminds us that she—along with John Grady and the other characters—remains a puppet in a story crafted by a master storyteller, a story whose end has already been decided and toward which all the puppets' strings are being pulled.

The dueña's concept of each person's path in the world contrasts John Grady's view—that we each have a fate or destiny and that we can work, and act, and decide to

shape the world to take us toward that fate or destiny. His view demonstrates Roemer's idea of the illusory freedom that fictive figures achieve. John Grady doesn't realize, despite the dueña's intimations, that his story is already written, that it is being read and witnessed by others as it occurs. His second conversation with Alfonsa comes at a time when John Grady has just experienced several weeks of no control. The puppet strings of others' whimsical finger movements have challenged his destiny, and McCarthy's pen has been the deciding factor behind all of it, a fact that the reader easily forgets in the illusive narrative moment. John Grady may realize the hostility of the world, but he may not be prepared to accept the fact that he can't control it. Dueña Alfonsa continues to explain, "In the end we all come to be cured of our sentiments. Those whom life does not cure death will. The world is quite ruthless in selecting between the dream and the reality, even where we will not. Between the wish and the thing the world lies waiting" (*ATPH* 238). This statement really serves as more of a prediction than a lesson for John Grady. In the end, life hasn't really cured him of his sentiments, but death finally does. He knowingly takes a path in *Cities of the Plain*—trying to control the puppet strings of his life and others'—that leads to his bloody death, appropriately in Mexico, and interestingly similar to his first knife fight test where he came out alive with one lucky thrust. And the impact of the dueña's stories becomes increasingly less apparent.

Finally, the dueña Alfonsa recognizes a little bit of the futility of trying to teach John Grady to understand and accept the world as it is, so she uses her narrative to teach him two other important lessons about loss and courage. She says that

those who have endured some misfortune will always be set apart but that it is just that misfortune which is their gift and which is their strength and

that they must make their way back into the common enterprise of man for without they do so it cannot go forward and they themselves will wither in bitterness. (*ATPH* 235)

Perhaps she recognizes John Grady's intensely compassionate heart and knows that he will suffer, at least in his mind, great misfortune, and McCarthy uses their shared narrative moment to hint at the possibility of John Grady's potential downfall. If John Grady had truly taken her advice to "make [his] way back into the common enterprise of man," he might have been able to think more rationally before beginning his downward spiral of revenge and self-pity that leads to his death. However, John Grady might have taken another of the dueña's lessons more to heart. She tells him that "those who have suffered great pain of injury or loss are joined to one another with bonds of a special authority and so it has proved to be" (*ATPH* 238), perhaps with the insightful implication that she and John Grady are connected, not only because of the shared narrative moment but also because of their pain and suffering. John Grady truly senses this "bond" throughout his short life. He never forgets his witnessing of Blevins' execution, or his loss of Alejandra's love, and he can't look past his pain when Magdalena is murdered by her Mexican pimp. John Grady always feels this bond of "special authority" through the short three years that we watch him, and his conversation with the dueña Alfonsa makes us aware of this theme and points us to a place where perhaps he learned to justify that feeling. Again, McCarthy uses a narrative encounter to introduce and begin developing this theme, an ability that illustrates his true power as a storyteller.

Alfonsa also teaches him about courage and how one should act in the face of opposition and the knowledge about the way the world is. She says to John Grady, "That

all courage was a form of constancy. That it was always himself that the coward abandoned first. After this all other betrayals came easily” (*ATPH* 235). After leaving the hacienda for the last time, says Luce, John Grady “finds within himself a renewed integrity with which to face down life’s pain, putting into action another of Alfonso’s lessons” (*Cormac McCarthy* 143). Although he learns about the uncontrollable nature of the world that is, John Grady also learns from the dueña that the only noble way to face the world is to value it and face it with courage and fortitude, to not let things “happen” to you. She tells him to “value what is true above what is useful,” and she clarifies truth as “what is so” (*ATPH* 240). From the old Mexican woman, John Grady receives an education that leaves him wiser but perhaps still confused, especially considering his relative inexperience and youthful energy. He is not entirely willing to accept the facts: that he is unable to change his destiny through action and bravery, that he is unable to map and define his world through conscious choice, and that he will not be able to live the romantic life of his dreams, whether in Mexico or Texas. Luce says, “Through his conversations with Alfonso and later with Alejandra, he comes to accept that because of their shared denial and irresponsibility he has lost Alejandra, though he still only dimly sees that her loss has been at least as great as his” (*Cormac McCarthy* 143). Because of John Grady’s ardent-hearted shortsightedness, he is only able to see where his actions were misplaced and misdirected. He leaves the dueña Alfonso having gained from her a sense of the world’s nature, but with a greater desire to do something about it. This increased desire, “the thing itself” (*ATPH* 235), as Alfonso calls it, eventually leads to John Grady’s downfall and bloody death.

The Prisoner Pérez

But this type of world, you see, this confinement. It gives a false impression. As if things are in control. (the prisoner Pérez to John Grady in ATPH 195)

While John Grady and Rawlins fight for their lives in the Saltillo prison, John Grady has several encounters with the powerful inmate Pérez. In one instance John Grady goes to inquire of the influential inmate about the whereabouts of Rawlins, who had been brutally attacked and stabbed in the prison yard. John Grady approaches Pérez in typically resolute, unbending fashion, but Pérez takes the opportunity to educate John Grady in much the same fashion as the dueña will after he gets out of prison. Pérez gives John Grady his philosophy about the mindset of the anglo, the nature of good and evil, and the lack of control that men have over the world.

Again, John Grady gets a lesson about the differences between Mexicans and Americans. Pérez tells John Grady that the problem with the closed mind of the anglo “is that his picture of the world is incomplete. In this rare way. He looks only where he wishes to see” (ATPH 192). John Grady is the epitome of only seeing what he wants to see. He has created in his mind the ideal of what it means to be a loyal friend, of what right and wrong are, of how the world is, and he can’t see outside it. During a later conversation with Rawlins, John Grady tells his friend about his guilt for killing the boy in the prison and Rawlins tries to justify the death. John Grady says, “You don’t need to try and make it right. It is what it is” (ATPH 215). No matter how others persuade him to perceive the world from different perspectives, John Grady’s mind is set and he continues to see the world in his own way.

Pérez recognizes this blindness in the young man and warns him of the dangers of working against the world. He says, “The world wants to know if you have cojones. If you are brave.” John Grady says that he ain’t afraid to die and Pérez replies, “That is good. [The world] will help you to die. It will not help you to live” (*ATPH* 194).

Whereas John Grady thinks that Pérez is simply a dangerous foe, perhaps rightly so, he doesn’t recognize the pragmatic lesson in the prisoner’s words. John Grady believes that he does, in fact, have courage, that he isn’t afraid of death, but he doesn’t realize that he is still unable to use his courage to shape the world to his needs. McCarthy tries to give him this lesson through a narrative encounter with Pérez.

Pérez tries to give his didactics a little more context by explaining to John Grady another difference between Mexicans and Americans: their perception of good and evil in things. In a way that is similar to many discussions that Billy has in *The Crossing*, Pérez explains about the forms and qualities of things. He explains that things have their original nature and form, but that they cannot be tainted by evil, as Americans suppose. Referring to an inanimate object, he says,

But it cannot be tainted, you see. Or a man. Even a man. There can in man be some evil. But we don’t think it is his own evil. Where did he get it? How did he come to claim it? No. Evil is a true thing in Mexico. It goes about on its own legs. Maybe some day it will come to visit you. Maybe it already has. (*ATPH* 194-95)

John Grady does, in fact, encounter many versions of evil in his few remaining years, especially in Mexico. This narrative moment creates a powerful effect on John Grady, giving him a perspective on the nature of that evil that seems to leave him confused at a

time when he hasn't realized his own capacity for violence and evil. Again, by creating a Mexican character who can narrate about violence and evil, McCarthy helps John Grady find a connection to those ideas. Rather than only witness the evil, John Grady experiences it through story as well. Although Pérez gives John Grady a clear outline of the different ways of perceiving evil, John Grady is torn between the two different thoughts, part Mexican and part American. Because of his background as a young boy listening to stories on an American ranch, his mindset is strongly flavored with the American West. He sees clear distinction between good and evil, between right and wrong, between moral and immoral; but because of his storytelling encounters with Mexicans, he has begun to connect to their way of thinking, a way that is characterized by its pragmatic view of the world as an indifferent place where people or things are not necessarily black or white.

Pérez also reinforces a lesson that John Grady is continually taught through his conversations with other people: the world cannot be controlled. He tells John Grady about the false impression the prison gives, which reflects the world as a whole, perhaps implying that every inhabitant of the world is a prisoner bound within a set of walls. He says, "But this type of world, you see, this confinement. It gives a false impression. As if things are in control. If these men could be controlled they would not be here. You see the problem" (*ATPH* 195). The world of the prison, then, serves as a microcosm for the world as a whole, and Pérez tries to teach John Grady that just as things may give the impression of being controlled, as in the prison, things are in fact out of any man's control. John Grady never fully understands this particular lesson, but views himself instead as one man with cojones who will never give up trying to make the world into a

better place. He never gives up trying to control that space that lies between the world that is and the world that he wishes to be.

The Judge

There's nothin wrong with you son. I think you'll get it all sorted out. (the judge to John Grady in *COTP* 293)

After John Grady reacquires Rawlins' and Blevins' horses, he heads back across the border to America to search for the owner of Jimmy's horse. When several men swear out papers claiming to own the horse, John Grady stands before a local judge to defend to prove that those men did not own the horses. John Grady doesn't have any evidence other than his story, so he says that he'd "like to tell it from the beginning. From the first time ever I seen the horse" (*ATPH* 288). He goes on to detail the events of his adventures with Rawlins and Blevins, and he eventually convinces the judge that he should get the horse back. Later that night, John Grady goes to the judge's home to seek further justification for some details that he left out of his narrative, and the judge uses a narrative to connect to the boy. The judge also provides an interesting contrast to some of John Grady's earlier conversations with Mexican figures, perhaps reinforcing the very ideas that people like Pérez related to John Grady.

John Grady visits the judge hoping to get a little more closure and understanding to what he has done in Mexico. He tells the judge, "I don't feel justified" (*ATPH* 290). He recognizes the problems that he caused by lying to Alejandra's father, and he sees that he is the only person to blame. Still, he still feels guilty and ashamed for the immature way he handled the situation. The judge says:

Son...you strike me as somebody that maybe tends to be a little hard on themselves...Maybe the best thing to do might be just to go on and put it behind you. My daddy used to tell me not to chew on somethin that was eatin you. (ATPH 291)

In this brief exchange, McCarthy creates a father figure for John Grady through the judge's narration about his own father. By sharing the narrative moment, John Grady can connect with the judge momentarily and envision the judge's father as his own.

Considering John Grady's semi-strained relationship with his father, McCarthy wisely chooses to invoke the father figure through the judge. The judge's simple answer is also an appropriate one for John Grady. Especially during the early stages of his development in *The Border Trilogy*, John Grady is especially hard on himself, especially for failing to prevent the execution of Blevins. He isn't angry with the captain for killing a friend; he is angry because he didn't do anything to stop it. He tells the judge, "The reason I wanted to kill him was because I stood there and let him walk that boy out in the trees and shoot him and I never said nothin" (ATPH 293). John Grady's pain in this case is not so much for the loss of a loved one, but rather for his failure to act. The judge tries to point out that trying to stop the execution wouldn't have done any good, but John Grady just says that it doesn't make it right.

John Grady also seeks justification for killing the boy in the prison in Saltillo. He tells the judge, "I don't know nothin about him. I never even knew his name. He could have been a pretty good old boy. I don't know. I don't know that he's supposed to be dead" (ATPH 291). The judge tries to point out that he was provoked and was simply defending himself, but John Grady is still bothered by it. He says, "I don't know nothin

about him. I never even knew his name. He could have been a pretty good old boy. I don't know. I don't know that he's supposed to be dead" (*ATPH* 291). John Grady seems to have taken a bit of Pérez's philosophy about the nature of evil, but then he responds in just the fashion that Pérez would have predicted, by viewing the evil to reside within the boy. The judge says, "You know he wasn't a pretty good old boy. Don't you?" and John Grady says, "Yessir. I guess" (*ATPH* 291-92). The judge then tells John Grady a story about how he once sent a boy to the electric chair, and how he still thinks about, but he says, "Would I do it again? Yes I would" (*ATPH* 292). By using a narrative, the judge knows he can help the young boy connect to his own story and feel the sense of community that Roemer explains can come through narration. The judge tells him "There's nothin wrong with you son. I think you'll get it sorted out." John Grady replies prophetically, "Yessir. I guess I will. If I live" (*ATPH* 293). John Grady's response shows that he is willing to believe the judge's words, but it also shows that he may not have connected enough through the judge's story to be impacted permanently. With a relatively cynical attitude toward the world's potential for goodness, John Grady leaves the judge's home feeling only slightly better because he had confessed his story and heard the judge's own narratives, but he does not feel completely justified.

Unfortunately, John Grady's life only lasts a brief three years longer, and it remains clear that the judge's words of absolution never really sink in for him. Though he seems more hardened and more cynical toward evil in *Cities of the Plain*, John Grady always feels guilty for not taking action to help Blevins. This guilt is seen by the way he feels compelled to take action to save the mongrel puppy from certain death, the way he feels driven to save his Mexican girlfriend from prostitution, and the way he feels the

necessity to punish her murderer. John Grady's encounter with the practical, friendly judge may have provided brief comfort and direction, but the consolation doesn't last for long, nor does his life, perhaps as a direct consequence of his guilt and self-denial.

The Crossing

He passed back north through the small mud hamlets of the mesa, through Alamo and Galeana, settlements through which he'd passed before and where his return was remarked upon by the poblanos so that his own journeying began to take upon itself the shape of a tale. (Crossing 331)

The second of the three installments that make up *The Border Trilogy* is *The Crossing*, a road narrative and adventure story that follows young Billy Parham on three journeys into Mexico. Sixteen-year-old Billy and his younger brother Boyd are living with their parents on a small ranch in the New Mexico mountains in the late 1930's when they discover their cattle are being killed by a wolf. Billy and his father struggle to trap the wolf until Billy finally finds a successful technique. One day while out riding the trap lines alone, Billy discovers the she-wolf captured in the jaws of his number four trap, and he secures it alive. While returning the she-wolf to his father's ranch, he suddenly decides to take it home to Mexico where he believes it came from. This decision begins an epic journey that takes him—and eventually his brother, Boyd—into Mexico where he meets many challenges and learns to deal with great loss.

During his journey, however, Billy also learns many lessons of about life, and *The Crossing* emerges as a much more philosophically demanding novel than its predecessor, though the broad narrative pattern, the *bildungsroman* journey of a young boy, remains

basically the same. Edwin Arnold points out that one of the peculiar strengths of *The Crossing* is this increased depth that supersedes at times the plot structure itself. He says:

[*The Crossing*] inverts the structure by making the adventure story of secondary importance to the metaphysical and theological meditations that form the beating heart of the novel. A much denser, more demanding work, *The Crossing* is a painful and exhausting and finally devastating narrative. (“First Thoughts” 221)

The Crossing takes us deeper than just a young boy trying to return a wolf to her freedom, trying to protect his younger brother from harm, trying to return that same younger brother’s bones to American, and trying to retrieve his dead father’s horses. The significant passages that remove us momentarily from the action of the narrative flow are conversations that Billy has with rest-stop, storytelling characters. Similar to John Grady in *All the Pretty Horses*, Billy seems to listen attentively and reflect on the ideas expressed to him through stories and narratives along his journey.

Three key conversations stand out in *The Crossing*, and each will receive detailed treatment below for their value as narrative moments. First, after losing the wolf to the torturous locals, Billy wanders aimlessly for some time through the Mexican countryside and eventually encounters an old, Mormon-born hermit living in the rubble of an abandoned church. For the next twenty pages McCarthy lets the old “priest” speak to the quiet Billy, telling a story within a story. The tale the priest tells is of deep, spiritual importance. He tells of a man who loses everything to tragic disasters and searches for evidence of God’s existence, only to find that “God had preserved him not once but twice out of the ruins of the earth solely in order to raise up a witness against Himself”

(*Crossing* 154), that he had been saved from earthquakes and destruction simply to prove that God existed. The priest's stories are about the nature of knowing, the nature of knowing God, and the nature of truth and existence.

The second key story that Billy hears is the tale of the blind revolutionary and his wife. The blind man's wife tells the story of how his eyes were gouged, how he wandered hopelessly in his blind condition, how he met his wife, and how he finally came to really see the world around him. The blind man picks up the story and tells Billy about the nature of light and dark, good and evil, seeing and blindness, and storytelling. He says that the real cannot be touched, for what can be touched are "only tracings of where the real has been" (*Crossing* 294).

Billy's third major storytelling encounter is with the gitano leader of a group of gypsies who are transporting the wreckage of a plane from Mexico to America. He elaborates on the nature and value of artifacts from the past and how they (the plane, the photographs of his family) only have value in another's heart, just as every heart only has value in another's heart "in a terrible and endless attrition and of any other value there was none" (*Crossing* 413). Billy learns many things from the gitano, among them, as the narrator says, "That movement itself is a form of property" (*Crossing* 410). The gitano also tells Billy that the world can provide no witness for history, for "This is the third history. It is the history that each man makes alone out of what is left to him. Bits of wreckage. Some bones. The words of the dead" (*Crossing* 411).

Billy Parham

He'd quit singing and he tried to think how to pray. Finally he just prayed to Boyd. Don't be dead, he prayed. You're all I got. (Crossing 274)

To get a better understanding of how the rest-stop, storytelling encounters influences the narrative and Billy, we need to have a clear picture of our protagonist, Billy Parham. In comparison to John Grady, Billy is more of a dynamic character because he seems to develop more in the time between *The Crossing* and *Cities of the Plain*. When we first meet Billy during his Mexican adventures, he is a “quiet, sad boy” (Arnold 232). In many senses, Billy is also the epitome of the true cowboy or the Western hero, matching many of the characteristics of the cowboy codes and ethics. His loyalty to friends, family, and companions is unmatched, as is his willingness to take quiet, precise action in the face of difficult situations or danger. He is also a very sensitive, emotional young man, completely aware of his role and duty as protector and companion to those weaker and smaller than he. His self-introspective, soul-searching nature and loyalty to others makes him emerge as the quiet (at least in *The Crossing*), sad boy that Arnold describes. McCarthy gives us a taste of Billy's quiet introspection:

Walking back to the fire those nights he often thought about Boyd, thought of him sitting by night at just such a fire in just such a country....He seemed to himself a person with no prior life. As if he had died in some way years ago and was ever after some other being who had no history, who had no ponderable life to come. (*Crossing* 382)

Early in the novel a blind man tells him he is an orphan, and though his prediction is literally true, it is also figuratively accurate. Billy a lone man in a dreary world, and he is

very aware of his lonely station in the world, focusing his thoughts on others whose ghosts almost torture him with guilt and sadness.

Similar to John Grady of *All the Pretty Horses*, Billy “attempts what almost everyone attempts, to script his own life. But each destination he sets for himself in pursuit of his sense of rightness or justice...brings unforeseen consequences and calamitous loss” (Luce “The World as Tale” 197). More than John Grady, though, he actually recognizes the difficulty and the futility of trying to shape the world to fit the way he wants it to be. And while he is willing to take action in an effort to move in a positive direction, the calamitous loss that he experiences heavily weighs him down, reducing his perception of himself as a simple man of unimportance. In his final journey to Mexico Billy joins a tense poker game in a Mexican tavern, and he challenges the drunken men in an almost suicidal manner. One of the card players refers to Billy as “un hombre muy serio,” and when they ask him who he is, Billy simply replies, “Un hombre...no más” (*Crossing* 358). Partly because of the stories and lessons he learns from his encounters, Billy comes to view himself simply as a humble man, an idea that remains with him until age seventy-eight when he tells the woman caring for him that “I’m not the man you think I am. I aint nothing” (*COTP* 292).

Many of Billy’s personality traits come to a tragic, though subtle, end for Billy at the close of the novel. He has fairly successfully returned Boyd’s bones to America, only partially protected the she-wolf from pain and carnage, and recaptured only one of his father’s horses. Then after all this he chases a mangy, crippled dog out of the abandoned adobe hut where he was sleeping, only to arise in the night and in the final lines of the novel call out to it in the dark:

He called and called. Standing in that inexplicable darkness. Where there was no sound anywhere save only the wind. After a while he sat in the road. He took off his hat and placed it on the tarmac before him and he bowed his head and held his face in his hands and wept. He sat there for a long time and after a while the east did gray and after a while the right and godmade sun did rise, once again, for all and without distinction.

(*Crossing* 425-26)

In many ways, this moving passage summarizes who Billy has become and who he already is, though it contrasts the loud, boisterous Billy we meet later in *Cities of the Plain*. The image of the lone cowboy in *The Crossing*, quiet and sad, weeping for his lost brother and the extreme loneliness that he feels, truly captures Billy's essence as a youth who has learned many lessons from many people on his journey to this point. Luce describes Billy as

[a boy] who discovers too early and too crushingly what cannot be held and whose spirit suffers a grievous wound. His innate capacity for narrating the world...which we see in his boyhood storytelling for his beloved brother and in his visions of the wolf...is never restored. ("Road" 211)

Although Billy's understanding of storytelling increases through his encounters, his capacity to participate and narrate the world decreases. And in McCarthy's world, "the human capability for narrative...is our primary means of accessing and perhaps communicating the thing itself: the world which is a tale" (Luce "Road" 208). In the end, Billy's main connection to the world's tale is through the several storytelling encounters

which help him connect through story to the matrix of people around him, maintain the illusory freedom that helps him pursue his destiny, and feel the sense of community necessary to struggle on in devastating loss and tragedy.

The Priest

Things separate from their stories have no meaning. (the priest to Billy in *The Crossing* 142)

When Billy meets up with the old priest in the crumbling ruins of Huisiachepic, he has just spent an unspecified number of weeks wandering the Mexican countryside. The old man tells stories and comments on the epistemology, the nature of knowing God, and the nature of truth and existence. Billy listens intently for twenty pages. After the man finishes talking, Billy leaves in typically sudden fashion, without really saying anything. Billy finds renewed direction in his journey and returns home, and the interlude with the old man in the church seems unimportant to both plot and character development. The question then arises: why does McCarthy interrupt Billy's archetypal journey to make him listen to the ramblings of an old heretic priest?

Billy's encounter with the ex-Mormon heretic priest at Huisiachepic provides not only deep food for thought, but it also gives a good model of many of the narrative issues described by Michel de Certeau and Michael Roemer. Therefore, it seems reasonable to assume that McCarthy was purposeful in his treatment of both the structure and content of this storytelling encounter. In other words, McCarthy was interested in exposing Billy to the particular philosophies being discussed in the story, but he was also interested in exposing Billy to the storytelling event as well. It will be most effective to look at this storytelling encounter from two directions: 1) what type of effect is created by this

particular storytelling event and how does it happen, and 2) how does the encounter or the story create meaning for Billy and his journey?

Effect. To answer these questions I will go back to Michael Roemer's ideas about the nature of all narratives. First, we need to consider the connection between the reader/listener and the narrator/storyteller. As mentioned earlier, Roemer believes that the person who listens to a story is at once observer and participant; although the listener is very aware of the preclusive nature of story and the fact that the hero's story is already written, the listener becomes attached to the fictive figure. Essentially, according to Roemer, the reader becomes Billy. And, because Billy relates so closely to the man in the priest's story, he becomes, if momentarily, that man.

When Billy listens so intently to the priest's story, he is connecting (along with us) to the old man who had survived the terrible losses in the earthquakes. Billy joins the old man in trying to understand why he had been saved. Essentially, Billy is the one asking the same question as the old man in the priest's story: "For what he was asked now to reckon with was that he'd been called forth twice out of the ashes, out of the dust and rubble. For what?" (*Crossing* 146). As witnesses of Billy's journey, the reader too joins Billy in asking the question: why have I been saved from my misery? How should I deal with tremendous loss and my own survival? The effect, then, is of a stepping in for another man. McCarthy uses the old priest to demonstrate this effect that occurs through storytelling between narrator and listener, and the priest demonstrates his own understanding of narrative and human nature by telling a story that works with Billy's state of loss, despair, and loneliness to create a powerful effect.

In addition, this particular storytelling encounter creates effect through its power to connect Billy into a community of people, something that he had not experienced to this point. Roemer writes, “To be separate from the group—from our place and matrix—is frightening and dangerous, and story countermands it by placing, connecting, and ‘immobilizing’ us” (*Crossing* 144). Billy encounters the priest in Huisiachepic after wandering the Mexican countryside for weeks, maybe months, following his burial of the destroyed wolf. He has no place to go and no one to talk to. At this point in the novel, he (and, therefore, we) lacks connectivity, some sort of community to be integrated into. By relating to Billy the story of the unfortunate old man who had lost everything in natural disaster upon natural disaster, the priest helps Billy to join a community. Billy no longer feels sorry for himself because he realizes he is not the only person who has suffered unjustifiable and terrible loss. Only after he encounters the priest at Huisiachepic and hears his story does Billy finally feel inclined to head back to America. McCarthy gives us a touching farewell scene between Billy and the priest, two who have joined together in a community through narrative:

You ride to America? he said.

Yessir.

To return to your family.

Yes.

How long since you have seen them?

I don't know [...] I don't even know what month it is, he said.

Yes. Of course.

Spring's comin.

Go home.

Yessir. I aim to.

The man stepped back. The boy touched his hat.

I thank you for the breakfast.

Vaya con Dios, joven.

Gracias. Adios. (*Crossing* 159)

Whereas we read McCarthy's story to feel a connection to Billy Parham, McCarthy realizes that Billy could benefit just the same from hearing stories about people to whom it would be helpful to connect. Through the priest's story, Billy experiences the same sensations that we experience when we watch his story. He joins us as audience to the priest's story, and together we connect with the old man who defied death and tried to reconcile his existence. As Luce explains, the stories are "designed specifically to give Billy an alternative to his despair by validating the narrative acts that could give meaning to his life and to his terrible losses" (*Crossing* 198). Billy relates to the man's sorrow and loss, and perhaps he senses that only more loss is ahead, for his mother and father have been murdered in their bed and Boyd will soon be a bag of bones being dragged home. Still, this storytelling experience teaches Billy something about the futility of trying to understand or plan one's destiny, and it teaches him the value of momentarily living life through the witnessing of others' lives. It helps him to find a connection to some sort of community and thus bring him out of his sorrow and self-pity.

Meaning. Throughout the priest's story, we hear very little from Billy. After his few initial questions, Billy drops out of the conversation, and the conversation becomes the priest's monologue. Still, because the point of view stays with Billy, we can assume

that Billy is a very attentive listener. In other words, Billy pays close attention to the priest's story. We've seen how the storytelling created an effect on Billy, but how does the story itself or the priest's belief system create meaning for Billy or the narrative structure as a whole?

The first thing the priest teaches Billy is the importance of telling stories, the importance of the storytelling event. The priest explains:

Things separate from their stories have no meaning. They are only shapes. Of a certain size and color. A certain weight. When their meaning has become lost to us they no longer have even a name. The story on the other hand can never be lost from its place in the world for it is that place. And that is what was to be found here. The corrido. The tale. And like all corridos it ultimately told one story only, for there is only one story to tell.

(Crossing 142-143)

And he goes on:

...and the tale has no abode or place of being except in the telling only and there it lives and makes its home and therefore we can never be done with the telling. Of the telling there is no end. And whether in Caborca or in Huisiachepic or in whatever other place by whatever other name or by no name at all I say again all tales are one. Rightly heard all tales are one.

(Crossing 143)

How can the priest justify his statement that all stories are the same? Obviously, every story has different details, characters, plots. Turning to de Certeau can shed some light on this important question. Although every story's subject or resulting object might be

different, every store shares the element of the storytelling event, the meeting of storyteller and audience. While any narrative may be an attempt to accurately recapture some artifact from the past, the real purpose according to de Certeau for sharing that story in the first place is to create an effect upon the listener. De Certeau explains: “[Stories] say exactly what they do. They constitute an act which they intend to mean. There is no need to add a gloss that knows what they express without knowing it, nor to wonder *what* they are the metaphor of” (80). In other words, the act of storytelling does exactly what the subject of the story is meant to do, and discovering meaning or metaphors is unnecessary to understanding a story’s real expression. A story then becomes less significant than the telling, just as the priest tells Billy that the telling has no end and the telling can never be lost, while the artifacts they represent can disappear.

The old man’s introduction to stories and storytelling is appropriate philosophical training for Billy. In his future travels he will encounter many more storytellers, including the acting troupe, the blind revolutionary and his wife, and the gypsy in charge of moving the plane. Billy carries the priest’s narrative theory with him through his journeys, as is evident at the end of *Cities of the Plain* when Billy is 78-years-old and he encounters the final storyteller while wandering the Southwest. The old man tells Billy a story about a dream within a dream, and he talks about the “immappable journey of our world” (*COTP* 288). Billy, impatient with the man’s ramblings and philosophizing, gently criticizes him: “I think you got a habit of makin things a bit more complicated than what they need to be. Why not just tell the story?” (*COTP* 278). Billy doesn’t want to be bothered by trying to understand the meaning and structure of the old man’s complex story. Instead, he just wants to take part in the storytelling event. Because of his earlier

encounter with the priest, Billy understands that all stories are one, a lesson that prompts him to seek after meaningful storytelling encounters, rather than meaningful stories.

Again, what does McCarthy mean by saying that there is only one story to tell? Billy, taking him a little too literally, wonders the same thing and asks the old priest “What is the story?” He answers by telling Billy the story of the man who survived the earthquakes but lost everything. Does this mean that the only story to tell is about surviving earthquakes? Michel de Certeau might argue that there is only one story to tell because the story told is not of importance, but rather the *act* of narrating that produces relationships, community, and effects (*COTP* 79-81). On the other hand, we might find evidence that McCarthy truly believes all stories are basically about the same thing, with minor variations. The old priest tells Billy, “The task of the narrator is not an easy one...He appears to be required to choose his tale from among the many that are possible. But of course that is not the case. The case is rather to make many of the one” (*Crossing* 155). We can speculate that “the one,” for McCarthy at least, might be the story of everyman’s journey from birth to death, through suffering, violence, companionship, loss, and discovery. Or, as Luce says, in stories “all lives encounter moments of grace, reflecting the primary gift of life, and losses unexpected in their particulars though generally predictable, prefiguring the protagonists’ ultimate deaths” (“Road” 198). These very well could be descriptions of the “one” story, but the most likely lesson that Billy learns from the priest is that there is power in the telling of a story, a power that goes beyond the content of the story itself.

There is yet another lesson—perhaps more important—that Billy learns from the priest’s tale. The priest tells about the old man who had sought to reconcile his existence

in terms of being a witness against which God could terminate or prove Himself. The old man failed in this attempt and was only left with a deep understanding of God's true universality. The old man tells Billy:

He saw that he was indeed elect and that the God of the universe was yet more terrible than men reckoned. He could not be eluded nor yet set aside nor circumscribed about and it was true that He did indeed contain all else within Him even to the reasoning of the heretic else He were no God at all.
(*Crossing* 156)

And the priest tells us what the old man's final words were:

In the end he said that no man can see his life until his life is done and where then to make a mending? It is God's grace alone that we are bound by this thread of life...Ultimately every man's path is every other's. There are no separate journeys for there are no separate men to make them. All men are one and there is no other tale to tell. (*Crossing* 156)

Billy learns a compact lesson about his own existence and the existence of God. He learns from the priest that his journey is not separate from any other man's, a lesson that reflects a philosophy that Billy hears sixty years later in the epilogue of *Cities of the Plain*.

This lesson about man's relationship to other men gives Billy an increased sense of connection and sense of purpose that he carries with him through the rest of his youthful journeys and his future companionship with the ill-fated John Grady. It makes Billy less willing to try to map his separate journey, less willing to test fate. Instead, he becomes more willing to join his life with others. Especially later in life, Billy doesn't

really struggle against his life path, in contrast to John Grady who consistently works to shape his. While John Grady challenges the cards he's been dealt by trying to rescue his Mexican girlfriend and kill her pimp, Billy tries to save him from the destiny he's chasing after. Whereas Billy learned from the priest about the futility of trying to map one's life, John Grady always felt he could fight against his destiny. Instead, he goes to his death bold, confronting a destiny that came about because he tried to change it, and in the end he knows it. John Grady says to Eduardo, "I come to kill you or be killed" (*COTP* 248). By contrasting Billy with John Grady in *Cities of the Plain*, it's easy to see that Billy has a more mature, spiritual perspective of life. And perhaps much of that perspective came from a morning's encounter with an old, ex-Mormon priest in a crumbling church in Mexico.

Another key issue that arises in the storytelling encounter with the priest is the nature of the sacred in McCarthy's *The Border Trilogy*. Many factors indicate that this conversation might very well be the center of everything McCarthy is trying to say about the trilogy, about John Grady and Billy. The story is situated near the center of the middle novel in the trilogy and its strong religious content provides a turning point from which almost everything descends to its natural conclusion at the end of the third novel. In other words, this encounter could be viewed as the core of the novel and the trilogy. McCarthy's deliberate placement of a religious discussion—Billy's catechism, if you will—in its key location says much about the importance that religion plays in the narrative. McCarthy is exploring the importance of each man's personal relationship with God when the priest says,

To God every man is a heretic. The heretic's first act is to name his brother. So that he may step free of him....In the end we shall all of us be only what we have made of God. For nothing is real save his grace. (*The Crossing* 158)

The priest claims that the only thing remaining for each man after death is his position with God. The novel can easily be seen, then, as the justification of men—especially Billy and McCarthy himself—as heretics trying to discover their relationships to God. In the opening sentence of *The Crossing*, the first act of McCarthy as author and Billy as narrative persona is to name Boyd, the first act of the heretic. For the heretics in McCarthy's novels, the act of storytelling might be the thing most useful to them in discovering their relationship to the divine. Roemer believes that stories may be a key to easing a man's dealings with death and the sacred: "Like the child at play, the storyteller—and we who are his audience—can transform our relationship to the sacred into a game or play, and cease to be overwhelmed by it" (168). By engaging in stories about others' dealings with death and the sacred, our heretic protagonists (and the reader) can connect safely to a fictive figure and feel less threatened by their imperfect faith and failings, just as we use John Grady and Billy as proxies for our adventurous spirits.

Finally, the conclusion to the priest's story might give a clue to an optional reason for the title *The Crossing*, other than the obvious crossings of rivers to and from Mexico. The old man in the priest's story grabs the priest's arm "midway in its crossing there in the still air by his deathbedside," halting his words of absolution, and told him, "Save yourself. Save yourself" (*The Crossing* 157). For Billy, then, perhaps the message comes clear that he is a heretic who needs to discover what it means to cross himself and

discover his relationship to God. *The Crossing*, then, becomes not so much Billy's journey of self-discovery and loss, but his journey of confession, repentance, prayer, forgiveness, and sanctification experienced almost entirely through the stories related by others, just as we experience these same feelings through the story told to us by McCarthy.

Blind Revolutionary and his Wife

The Blind man broke in to say that indeed the tale was a true one. He said that they had no desire to entertain him nor yet even to instruct him. He said that it was their whole bent only to tell what was true and that otherwise they had no purpose at all. (The Crossing 284)

Billy's encounter with the old, blind revolutionary and his wife occurs immediately after Billy leaves his brother Boyd, shot through the chest, with a truckload of protective Mexican laborers. He outruns his pursuers and ends up being fed by the old woman and her husband at their remote station. The blind revolutionary's tales "focus primarily on the survival of great loss and narrate their protagonists' attempts to make meaning of their bereavements" (Luce "Road" 198). His tales also deal with the meaning of sight and blindness, the nature of light and dark, and good and evil. Although Billy doesn't find complete comfort in the knowledge that his grief is universal, he seems to listen very intently and come away with an increased knowledge of things. By choosing to include a conversation with a blind man about blindness, evil, and the realities of perception, McCarthy is telling us much about Billy and the subject of the novel as a piece. In addition, McCarthy may be using these interlocutor characters to tell his readers

exactly how he views himself as narrator: his responsibility to the narrative, to the characters, to the readers, to the truth, and to the impact that he can have on each of these.

While Billy peels the shells from boiled eggs and slowly eats them, the blind revolutionary and his wife tell the story about how the old man's eyes were sucked from the sockets by a deranged German mercenary during the height of the Mexican revolution. In great detail, the old man's wife narrates most of the story she herself had probably heard a thousand times before—about the old man's blind, barefoot journeys through the countryside and how "his heart was filled with despair. More than filled. Despair was in him like a lodger" (*The Crossing* 278). As she describes it, the first portion of his journey is a long painful road toward some sort of self-discovery of his own worth, his own ability to see, his own purpose in the world, and his utter despair and solitude.

The most interesting element of this first portion of the journey, however, is its amazing similarity to Billy's own condition at the end of *The Crossing*—a weeping, lonely man who feels he has lost everything in an uncaring, unsympathetic world. Several passages appear to be a purposeful use of parallelism on McCarthy's part. The blind man's wife describes his first night alone and blind in the country. She tells how he felt a powerful sense of loneliness and a sense of having a rigid place in the world where "other than wind and rain nothing would ever come to touch him out of that estrangement that was the world. Not in love, not in enmity." She then paints the image of the old man sitting on the roadside in the rain and weeping (*The Crossing* 279), an image that is repeated in Billy's own final scene of the novel. Billy, like the blind man, feels that the world has changed forever for him, that he may never be able to feel the love,

companionship, and happiness that he could have felt before his great losses and solitude. He, too, finds himself standing in the “inexplicable darkness” of the desert, “where there was no sound anywhere save only the wind.” And McCarthy describes so beautifully Billy’s weeping, similar to the blind man’s tears: “After a while he sat in the road. He took off his hat and placed it on the tarmac before him and he bowed his head and held his face in his hands and wept” (*The Crossing* 426). The repetition of the images of darkness, solitude, loneliness, and weeping at the end of the novel seem to heighten the importance of Billy’s encounter with the blind man. Perhaps Billy’s internalization of the blind man’s struggles to come to terms with his loss of sight and the nature of seeing gives him the strength to live, the strength to move on through the rest of his journeys in *Cities of the Plain* and beyond. In any case, this storytelling encounter allows Billy to connect safely with another who has endured terrible loss and begin to understand the potential for great loss, all in preparation for his own future loss of everything he loves dearly.

Another powerful image or idea that is repeated at the end of the novel is also raised during this same storytelling encounter. While the blind man’s wife is narrating the story, the blind man interjects on the topic of change over time. He says that “on the contrary nothing had changed and all was different. The world was new each day for God so made it daily. Yet it contained within it all evils as before, no more, no less” (*The Crossing* 277-78). This comment directly reflects the very last sentence of the novel when Billy, alone in the “alien dark” of the desert where he had chased away a mangy dog, sits weeping in the middle of the road. McCarthy writes, “He sat there for a long time and after a while the east did gray and after a while the right and godmade sun did

rise, once again, for all and without distinction” (*The Crossing* 426). The repetition of images and ideas shared between the blind man’s story and Billy’s implies that their stories may be the same, that Billy’s issues of dealing with despair and the “ultimate sightlessness of the world” (*The Crossing* 294), as the blind man calls it, are the same as a blind man’s. In other words, Billy is blind to the world and is searching for a new way to see it, a new paradigm for viewing the world.

The blind man’s wife’s theory about the nature of storytelling supports the idea that Billy’s story may very well be about his own blindness. In the middle of her storytelling, the woman stops to explain that every story, including her husband’s, mentions three travelers whom the hero meets on his journey: a woman, a man, and a boy. Billy is suspicious that the blind could possibly only run into three people on the long road to Parral, and the blind man teaches Billy about the importance of choosing one’s subjects for one’s stories. McCarthy writes:

but the blind man said that he did meet other people on that road and that he received many kindnesses but that the three strangers at issue were those with whom he spoke of his blindness and that they must therefore be the principles in a cuento whose hero was a blind man, whose subject was sight. Verdad? (*The Crossing* 285)

This raises a simple question about McCarthy’s storytelling. Is McCarthy deliberately giving us a formula for his own stories? We could easily interpret the old man’s ideas to be somewhat similar to McCarthy’s and easily conclude that the storytelling strangers encountered by John Grady and Billy tell us everything we need to know about our heroes’ journeys. Perhaps John Grady and Billy both meet up with more people than we

read about in the novels, and we can assume that those encounters that are included are included for a reason. In other words, if McCarthy subscribes to the blind man's ideas, or if the blind man's view of the narrator's role reflects McCarthy's, McCarthy's selection of which encounters to include in the narration of our heroes' journeys tells us much about the journeys themselves and the meaning of the novels.

Billy, too, seems to recognize the significance of the blind man's explanation of how to choose the secondary characters in one's storytelling, and the implication that it might have on the hero of a story. He asks the blind man if the blind man in the story is truly the hero of the story. He says, "Es héroe, este ciego?" and the blind man simply replies that it is best to "wait and see. That it was best to judge for oneself" (*The Crossing* 285). In one simple discussion of the choosing of subjects for one's stories, and through his subsequent repetition of the scenes and images indicated above with Billy, McCarthy forces us to question, if momentarily, Billy as the hero of our story.

A final image that provides an important connection through repetition is the scene in the blind man's story when he has been rescued from a feeble attempt to drown himself in a shallow river. Another man comes along and helps find his stave, smokes with him, and listens to the blind man speak of his blindness and his view of the world. The stranger also gives the blind man a chance to touch his face and feel the life beneath his eyelids. The blind man then silences the stranger with his talk of the world: "darkness was its true nature and true condition and that in this darkness it turned with perfect cohesion in all its parts but that there was naught to see...that the world was...black beyond men's imagining" (*Crossing* 283). Perhaps the stranger sees the blind man's loss of hope and his extreme pessimism, but in the end, after their farewells, the stranger

simply says, “Hay luz en el mundo, ciego [There is light in the world, blind man]” (*Crossing* 284). Though it doesn’t change him immediately, the blind man’s encounter with the stranger seems to prepare him emotionally for his coming encounter with his future wife and his subsequent resolve to live life to the end and to its fullest. The blind man and the stranger depart by indicating the direction they are traveling: “Al norte, he said. Al sur, said the other” (*Crossing* 284). This image helps us to recognize the parallel of this scene to the epilogue in *Cities of the Plain*, where Billy (our blind hero, perhaps) meets up with a stranger under a bridge and asks him which way he is going: “Al sur. Y tú?” And, Billy, like the blind man in the story he heard fifty years earlier, replies, “Al norte” (*Cities of the Plain* 267). At this point, seventy-eight-year-old Billy has already lived a long life, suffered many terrible losses, and endured them all, yet he still seems to be searching for direction, a way to see the world and find meaning in its meaninglessness. The old stranger in the epilogue inspires him, just like the stranger inspires the blind man to see the light in the world, to honor the man whose death stands in for our own and find meaning in his story: “Do you love him, that man? Will you honor the path he has taken? Will you listen to his tale?” (*Cities of the Plain* 288-89). The keen difference between these two scenes is that we don’t really have a chance to witness the rest of Billy’s story, to see the changes that take place as he lives out the remainder of his years, perhaps with the woman Betty who takes him in. Though his hands are “gnarled, ropescarred, speckled from the sun and the years of it” (*COTP* 291), they may still handle many adventures in the time beyond the last sentences of the trilogy. Still, the repetition of scenes and imagery provides an interesting parallel that

connects Billy to the blind revolutionary in *The Crossing*, a connection that affects the way we view Billy as hero and McCarthy as storyteller.

The Gitano

Billy smiled. He said that he wished to hear the true history. (Crossing 404)

After Billy exhumes Boyd's bones, he begins his third journey back to America to rebury his brother. Before he goes very far, a group of thieves insists on seeing the contents of Billy's odd-shaped bag. Caught unprepared, Billy is unable to draw his rifle, and before he can prevent it, the thieves drag his brother's skeleton to the ground and kick it about. Then, in a moment of shocking violence, one of the thieves plunges his knife into the breast of Billy's horse before riding off with his companions. Billy is left with a dying animal and a mangled skeleton, but fortunately a group of men appears on the trail hauling the skeletal wreckage of a plane. The gitano leader calls for the team to stop, and prepares a poultice for the horse's wound while telling Billy about their adventures with the plane. At a moment in Billy's journey that is perhaps his loneliest and most confusing, McCarthy gives him a substantial storytelling encounter packed with narrative meaning and storytelling effect.

Before the narrative begins, Billy and the gitano make a brief exchange in preparation for their storytelling event. The gitano shows clear interest in finding out what Billy might be looking for in a story, and he shows willingness to adjust or create his narrative to fit the needs of the occasion. When Billy asks about the plane, the gitano tells him that the plane has three histories and asks him which he would like to hear. McCarthy writes, "Billy smiled. He said that he wished to hear the true history. The gypsy pursed his lips. He seemed to be considering the plausibility of this" (*Crossing*

404). McCarthy is not only preparing Billy and his gypsy storyteller, but he is preparing the reader. He wants both Billy and us to understand the difficulty of finding the truth in a story, while maintaining his own ability to focus on the telling of the story. By emphasizing the gitano's difficulty in finding the "true" version of the story, McCarthy subtly suggests that the narrative event is more important than the truth or whatever object is described. Michel de Certeau describes the nature of storytelling that makes it difficult to come near the "real." He writes:

In narration, it is no longer a question of approaching a "reality" (a technical operation, etc.) as closely as possible and making the text acceptable through the "real" it exhibits. On the contrary, narrated history creates a fictional space. It moves away from the "real"—or rather it pretends to escape present circumstances. (79)

Just as De Certeau realizes how narrative by nature is moving away from the real, so does the gitano, and he eventually chooses to tell Billy all three stories regarding the plane's history.

The gitano realizes, too, the importance of making the most of his storytelling moment in order to let the event carry the most weight with the young Billy. Though his stories do have a clear content, the gitano knows the impact that stories have beyond their subject matter, just as De Certeau explains:

Narration does indeed have a content, but it also belongs to the art of making a *coup*: it is a detour by way of the past ("the other day," "in olden days") or by way of a quotation (a "saying," a proverb) made in order to take advantage of an occasion and to modify an equilibrium by taking it

by surprise. Its discourse is characterized more by a way of *exercising itself* than by the thing it indicates. And one must grasp a sense other than what is said. It produces effects, not objects. (79)

For de Certeau, then, the storytelling is made more important by the “occasion” in which it is told, rather than by the story itself, though the content of the story greatly shapes the effect it may have. The gitano does not intend to “surprise” Billy, or shock him, but because he learns that Billy is seeking for the truth, or the true version of the story, he decides to show Billy the futility of telling the “true” version by giving all three histories and bringing in to question the “truth” that Billy is so set on discovering.

Luce explains further the effect the gitano is trying to achieve by shaping his story the way he does: “Clearly the gitano’s intention is to heal both *ninos*, and his stories seem invented for that purpose as he ponders his words before he tells each segment of his tale” (“Road” 202). She points out that the gitano’s compatriots listen as if they haven’t heard the stories about the very plane they have been carrying and that the American who follows the group tells Billy the stories are a fabrication. She then explains the obvious parallelism between the gitano’s story and Billy’s own:

The tales of the airplanes sought and retrieved from the Mexican mountains at the behest of the grieving father of the pilot parallel Billy’s own grieving journey to retrieve Boyd’s bones, as the airplane the gypsies tow on the float echoes the bones Billy draws behind him on the travois.
(*Road* 202)

The gitano’s understanding of the nature of the narrative event emerges in the way he carefully crafts his story based on the needs of his listeners and the occasion.

The gitano not only narrates his story to create an effect, but he also goes to great lengths to make sure that Billy understands the nature of his narrative and narrative in general, specifically in terms of the difficulty of artifacts and representation in a vanishing world. In words that echo de Certeau's discussion of the creation of object versus effect through storytelling, the gitano tells Billy "that men assume the truth of a thing to reside in that thing without regard to the opinions of those beholding it while that which is fraudulent is held to be so no matter how closely it might duplicate the required appearance" (*Crossing* 405). In other words, men assume that truthful artifacts will remain truthful regardless of how a person describes, defines, or perceives it, while a fraudulent artifact will emerge as a fake no matter how closely it resembles the real. The gitano believes, however, that narrative and storytelling can do much to create truth or fraudulence for any artifact, an idea that shapes the story he tells to Billy. He goes on to explain that "as long as the airplane remained in the mountains then its history was of a piece. Suspended in time. Its presence on the mountain was its whole story frozen in a single image for all to contemplate," and that "could he remove that wreckage from where it lay year after year in rain and snow and sun then and then only could he bleed it of its power to commandeer [the dead pilot's father's] dreams" (*Crossing* 405-06). Still, the gypsy confesses to Billy that "La historia del hijo termina en las montañas" (406), implying that while the boy's living story ends in the mountains, the tale can be retold in any way. As Luce points out, the gypsy affirms that the attempt to remove the plane and rewrite the story may prove "psychologically freeing" (*Road* 203), but the story still remains in the mountains and every story still ends in death. By taking great effort to explain to Billy the power of his story's subject, the gitano reinforces the importance of

the narrative moment. In other words, Billy might be saying, “Here are my stories, Billy, but don’t be fooled by their content. Just listen to the story and experience the hearing of it, for it is this exchange between the two of us that creates and forms reality, at least in this moment. The artifacts we are discussing are past and dead, but this storytelling is ‘real’ and alive. The artifacts help us to recover, through our imagination, only a portion of the past and only a portion of that past is real. Still, it is worth my time to tell these stories.” In McCarthy’s words, the gitano says that “the history that each man makes alone out of what is left to him” (*Crossing* 411)—not artifacts, such as Boyd’s bones—is the basis for stories and the partial recovery of the past. Billy learns from the gitano that people make stories out of “Bits of wreckage. Some bones. The words of the dead. How to make a world out of this? How live in that world once made?” (*Crossing* 411). Among all of Billy’s encounters with storytellers and narrators, the gypsy arriero stands out as perhaps the most self-aware and introspective interlocutor. He is acutely aware of the impact of the stories he chooses to weave for the young Billy, and he makes lengthy attempts at explanations regarding the meaning and futility of trying to narrate the past to create reality.

Still, the gitano insists that although the “witness” and the witnessing are inherently flawed in their recovery of the past, they remain the only thing we have, making narration and storytelling paramount to the survival of ideas and images. The gitano tells Billy about the old, found “photographs and tintypes” that his father collected and hung by clothespins from the crosswires above their cart as they wandered the countryside in their gypsy travels. He explains how as a boy he stared at the cracked, sepia faces on the photographs, seeking “some secret thing they might divulge to him

from the days of their mortality” (*Crossing* 412), until they became very familiar to him. Finally the intriguing nature of these storytelling images forced the young gypsy to the following conclusion:

What he came to see was that as the kinfolk in their fading stills could have no value save in another’s heart so it was with that heart also in another’s in a terrible and endless attrition and of any other value there was none. Every representation was an idol. Every likeness a heresy. In their images they had thought to find some small immortality but oblivion cannot be appeased. (*Crossing* 413)

In other words, the images that survive hold nothing in this world of artifacts, a world that depends on the witnessing. The storytelling about the artifacts are the only things that will keep alive the memory about the subjects of the artifacts. Earlier the gypsy comments on the false authority of artifacts in relation to the witnessing, or storytelling, that must accompany an such artifact: “A false authority clung to what persisted, as if those artifacts of the past which had endured had done so by some act of their own will. Yet the witness could not survive the witnessing” (*Crossing* 411). For the gypsy, then, storytelling remains the only power he has to understand the fragile world of artifacts and give it life beyond the artifacts themselves or their original witness. Yet he cautions Billy that the world that exists through storytelling and witnessing is still only like a corn husk, a thin covering to what used to be. He says, “For the world was made new each day and it was only men’s clinging to its vanished husks that could make of that world one husk more” (*Crossing* 411). In other words, even stories sometimes fall short at explaining or recreating the world for man’s reckoning.

Billy's encounter with the gypsy supports de Certeau's argument that stories create effects, not objects, that there is nothing really to be found in the story being told but rather in the telling event. The gypsy's thorough discussion of this concept—though he uses the different terms “artifact” and “witness” instead of “subject” and “storyteller”—stands out as a clear lesson for Billy on the concept of storytelling. The effect created is also very appropriate, considering Billy's current endeavor to retrieve and reacquaint Boyd's bones with his home soil, an act which the gypsy seems to recognize as inherently unnecessary or futile. Through the gypsy's own story with several versions, he demonstrates (creates effect) for Billy the uselessness of trying to recapture artifacts and therefore recapture their stories rather than letting them live in their narratives where they died. Boyd's bones should not be collected as a memento, nor should Billy attempt to gain possession of his brother's story through the possession of the bones. Rather, as the gypsy explains, Billy should rely on the power of narrative and the witnessing to create the effect achievable through story, an idea also described by de Certeau.

Luce also claims that McCarthy has shown a pattern of exploring the power of narrative over the power of artifacts or objects, and “has increasingly suggested in his works that artifacts also misrepresent the vanished world they pretend to symbolize” (“Road” 205). Boyd's bones, for example, cannot do justice to the short life that Boyd experienced, or the memories that he created. McCarthy uses the gitano, then, at an appropriate time in Billy's journey. Though the gitano's message is not subtle in its nihilistic approach to the “terrible and endless attrition” of one man's value found only in another's heart, he finally seems to give hope to Billy through story. Just as the

Mexicans sing the corrido about Boyd, so too can Billy give life to his family's past through his stories and thus create the connectivity that Michael Roemer explains can occur through narration. Luce concludes:

To construct tales of others and of ourselves, not still artifacts but moving images of the living world that embody the value that is in our hearts, is to connect with life: it is, perhaps, to fulfill that aspect of human nature that is in God's image—to imitate Him in His weaving the matrix. (“Road” 206)

Nearing the end of his epic journeys in Mexico, Billy receives this final lesson from the plane-toting gypsy: seek your comfort not in the objects of the world that represent some vanishing, unrecoverable past, but seek instead the comfort of connectivity and life-giving power that can be found through the simple act of storytelling. Because of this lesson about storytelling and the beautiful way McCarthy executes it, *The Crossing* ends as a memorable tribute to—and example of—the special power of narration.

Cities of the Plain

Bear with me, the man said. This story like all stories has its beginnings in a question. And those stories which speak to us with the greatest resonance have a way of turning upon the teller and erasing him and his motives from all memory.” (COTP 277)

The third installment of McCarthy's *The Border Trilogy* stands out in several ways from the previous two novels. Rather than follow the bildungsroman-esque journeys of John Grady or Billy, McCarthy brings them together in a domestic setting as they work

together on a New Mexico ranch in 1952, settled from their wanderings, but not settled in their hearts. The novel gives more focus to the traditional vocation of the cowboy—from horse auctions, breaking horses, and roping wild dogs, to playing chess and sitting on the porch late at night exchanging “tales of the old west” (*COTP* 185)—and their casual conversations and daily routines bind them and define them in simple eloquence.

Seemingly beyond the rite of passage journeys of *All the Pretty Horses* and *The Crossing*, and slower in its pace, *Cities of the Plain* might appear to be in a different world. Arnold describes the world in *Cities of the Plain* as “a post-war West suffering through its final mockeries and subtractions, a world hard pressed for heroics and depending instead on simple decency” (222). For the reader accustomed to McCarthy’s novels, this world comes as no surprise, but the relatively diminished heroism and decreased action (though roping wild dogs qualifies as action) set this novel apart from the rest. Still, as Phillip Snyder points out, *Cities of the Plain* is the final piece of the puzzle that snaps perfectly into place in its relation to the other novels in the series:

The novel continues to trace the initiation denouement, or unraveling, of John Grady and Billy, each of whom still refuses to relinquish his essential cowboy identity—John Grady as the mythic cowboy in search of a lost homestead and Billy as the loyal saddle pard in search of a balance between the demands of idealism and pressures of reality. (3)

Though the basic settings have changed, and though the characters live in a different mode of existence, the story maintains certain patterns of plot development and style. For example, upon first glance, the novel may appear to lack the philosophical substance evident in *The Crossing*, but the subtly rich conversations and eloquent storytelling

finally rival even those in McCarthy's previous novel, though they are not nearly as numerous. To sustain his exploration of the power of narrative and storytelling in the face of life and death, McCarthy gives us a final installment where perhaps conversation and storytelling are ultimately paramount to a cowboy's existence, and where the lessons learned from years of prior wanderings and storytelling encounters come to a head.

Edwin Arnold describes *Cities of the Plain* and its place in the trilogy:

[It] is a necessary work, the one towards which the first two have journeyed in all their richness, and it is not without its moments of quiet splendor. It may, in fact, prove ultimately to be the wisest of the books and, in its cumulative effect, the one that in retrospect will move us the most deeply. (222)

Just as Snyder and Arnold assert, McCarthy carefully builds his first two novels to lead toward the natural continuation of the denouement and tragic conclusion that ends with John Grady's death and Billy's old age wanderings.

One powerful consistency that provides a link between the first two novels and *Cities of the Plain* appears to be McCarthy's use of storytelling characters and narrative encounters. Because of the presence of both Billy and John Grady, we witness McCarthy deliberately choose the different stories for his secondary characters to weave for our two protagonists. This not only gives the novel an unrivaled richness, but it allows us to compare and contrast the way both Billy and John Grady respond to the storytelling encounters. When the end finally comes and we see Billy "all dark with blood bearing in his arms the dead body of his friend" (*COTP* 261), we join him on his journey into old age and witness together the final, perhaps most powerful, summation of storytelling in

the epilogue. The effect that McCarthy creates on us through his storytelling becomes at least equal to the effect felt by Billy during his storytelling encounter with the old man he mistook to be death. Finally, *Cities of the Plain* ends in appropriate fashion with Billy taken in by a family who sees him for who he is. They see in his hands the life he has lived, the world he has experienced. In the final touching moment, Billy says “I’m not what you think I am. I aint nothing. I don’t know why you put up with me,” and the woman replies “Well, Mr. Parham, I know who you are. And I do know why” (*COTP* 291-292). And in the end, we too know who Billy is, for we have become him through the sharing of his stories, just as Roemer claims we can through narrative and storytelling.

McCarthy’s final installment provides both John Grady and Billy several storytelling encounters to create the connectivity and touching effect that is a culmination of the mostly similar storytelling meetings we share in *All the Pretty Horses* and *The Crossing*. While John Grady is caught up in his love affair with the young Mexican prostitute Magdalena, he spends time on the ranch house porch listening to the stories of old Mr. Johnson. He tells John Grady stories about the old west and the old range life and inadvertently gives him some extra courage and justification for his attempt to rescue his whore girlfriend.

Immediately following this conversation with Mr. Johnson, John Grady crosses over to Juarez, Mexico, where he spends some time with the blind maestro in the Moderno saloon. During the conversation, John Grady asks the blind maestro to be his girlfriend’s padrino, a role similar to a godfather. The blind man then tells John Grady an extended story about a man who, in his dying words, asked his enemy to be padrino to his

son. From this story, the blind maestro teaches John Grady about love, fate, death, and destiny.

The final storytelling moment occurs for Billy at the ripe old age of seventy-eight under a freeway overpass, homeless and nomadic, waiting patiently for death to come find him. The strange old man he meets in this epilogue tells him about a dream wherein a traveler witnesses a macabre, dreamlike death ritual. The old man's interpretation of the dream within his dream leads him to tell Billy about the nature of the world, death, and existence, as well as storytelling. Finally, he explains to Billy that "we pursue one path only" (*COTP* 286) in our destined journeys, but that our world is finally immappable and all leads to death, our own and each other's. As the major philosophical ending of *The Border Trilogy*, Billy's encounter with the old man under the overpass stands as the last word for McCarthy, an important spot in the trilogy worth a close look.

Mr. Johnson

Best times of my life. The best. Bein out. Seein new country. There's nothing like it in the world. There never will be. Settin around the fire of the evening with the herd bedded down good and no wind. Get you some coffee. Listen to the old waddies tell their stories. Good stories, too. Roll you a smoke. Sleep. There's no sleep like it. None. (Mr. Johnson to John Grady in *COTP* 287)

In *Cities of the Plain*, the normal dialogue of every day life comes to the forefront, and we see more normal speech between cowboys who are well acquainted with each other. Though the speech is ordinary, it would be unfair to classify it as unimportant or lacking in profundity (Snyder 33). In fact, the ordinary speech on the

ranch, often in the form of stories or brief narratives, creates a powerful effect similar to that of the philosophically profound narrative encounters with loquacious strangers. John Grady's evening conversation with old Mr. Johnson on the porch illustrates McCarthy's storytelling skill and narrative repertoire.

John Grady prompts Mr. Johnson's first story about witnessing a shooting in a bar when he asks the old man if he ever went over to Juarez. Mr. Johnson gives John Grady the gruesome details about the blood and the exploded brains and how afterward he burned all his clothes that he had been wearing. He tells John Grady about how the body slumped lifeless and immediate to the floor. He says, "Just dead weight. The movies don't ever get that part right neither," and finally ends with a brief phrase, almost a thought spoken aloud: "Tales of the old west" (*COTP* 185). Is Mr. Johnson trying to incite wonder in John Grady, or is he trying to make him feel relief that he doesn't live in the good old days? John Grady sits next to the old man, like a young philosopher before the ancient wise one, eager to understand and absorb the ways of the past that are long gone. He has been making his regular trip to Juarez, perhaps in an attempt to regain from Mexico what he is unable to find in America, and he is eager to hear Mr. Johnson's stories. The tales told in this setting to John Grady, at his request, and mostly due to his questioning, create the illusory effect of nostalgia for John Grady, though he has never really lived in any time period like Mr. Johnson. In fact, John Grady guides Mr. Johnson's stories toward things that are gone, things that John Grady knows he may never experience but which he is willing to try to regain, no matter the cost. He asks, "What else do you miss?" and Mr. Johnson simply shakes his head and says, "You don't want to get me started" (*COTP* 187). Mr. Johnson also tells John Grady about the old

range life, sitting around the campfire listening to the cowboys who “tell their stories. Good stories, too” (*COTP* 187). In the end, Mr. Johnson’s stories, though nostalgic by nature, give subtle warning to the traditionally-minded John Grady, who is clearly “goin to town” toward danger, but John Grady is too caught up in his desire to rediscover the world that Mr. Johnson so dearly misses.

This simple storytelling moment shared by John Grady and Mr. Johnson on the porch creates a possibly profound effect. John Grady is about to leave for Juarez to make a dangerous liaison with the girl for whom he is preparing a post-nuptial home. Mr. Johnson’s story may have given John Grady the impression that although all the truly good days are past, they can be reclaimed or sought after. Mr. Johnson’s final piece of advice for John Grady may be the justification John Grady is seeking: “I think you ought to follow your heart, the old man said. That’s all I ever thought about anything” (*COTP* 188). For John Grady, this bit of guidance, from a man he respected and admired, probably increases his resolve to follow through with his plans of marriage to the end, bitter or not. Because of this ordinary narrative event shared on a quiet porch, John Grady senses through the stories a little bit of what it is like to be Mr. Johnson, living in the good old days, the old days on the range, and he leaves with the determination to turn back the clock and seek for a better way of life than the one that he sees dwindling in the American West. The narrative event helps John Grady find a connection to the old man and essentially become him for a moment through his stories, giving John Grady the chance to experience things he might not have been able to feel otherwise. In other words, McCarthy crafts a storytelling encounter to give John Grady a proxy experience that helps shape and define his character within the context of his own larger story.

Blind Maestro

Men imagine that the choices before them are theirs to make. But we are free to act only upon what is given. Choice is lost in a maze of generations and each act in that maze is itself an enslavement for it voids every alternative and binds one ever more tightly into the constraints that make life. (Blind maestro to John Grady in COTP 195)

After John Grady's conversation with old Mr. Johnson, he makes another trip across the river to Juarez, Mexico. There, in perfect McCarthy fashion, John Grady meets up with a wise blind man who invariably sees the world with much greater clarity and wisdom than his young seeing friend and whom John Grady has met during his trips to meet Magdalena in a variety of whore houses and saloons. This blind piano man takes interest in the young American and his love affair with the ill-fated hooker. After John Grady receives Mr. Johnson's encouragement (uninformed) to "follow [his] heart" (COTP 188), he approaches the Mexican maestro and asks him to be Magdalena's padrino (godfather or sponsor). The maestro considers this request carefully and finally tells John Grady the story about a man who, on his deathbed, asked his lifelong enemy to be the padrino for his son. The story itself leads the blind maestro to reflect on the nature of the world, man's ability to freely choose his course of life, and love and fate. John Grady's conversation with the blind maestro is significant in several ways.

First, the effect of the storytelling contrasts with the stories John Grady has just heard from Mr. Johnson across the river in America. Mr. Johnson's and the blind maestro's different perspectives on life directly relate to John Grady's constant journeys back and forth between America, where his preferred way of life is dying away, and

Mexico, where his lover and an older set of values reside. By juxtaposing these two storytelling encounters and conversations, McCarthy creates a powerful effect for the reader and for John Grady. As Roemer might assert, the reader becomes John Grady through the stories and likewise John Grady becomes the subject of the various stories. In Mr. Johnson's story, John Grady becomes one of the old-time "waddies," sitting around the fire, telling good stories while the cows are bedded down. In the blind maestro's story, John Grady becomes the man who swore to his dying enemy that he would be the padrino for the man's son, and eventually stands in for the dead man. John Grady, then, senses the need to decide between living the life on the American range and living a life of Mexican values with his Mexican wife. Finally, John Grady becomes so torn that he is unable to recognize the futility of trying to live either life, the former long gone from the American way of life and the latter unwelcoming to him as a foreigner without a Mexican mindset. The blind maestro tells John Grady, "Your love has no friends. You think that it does but it does not. None. Perhaps not even god" (*COTP* 199). Together with John Grady, we sense through his storytelling encounter with the maestro the danger he will encounter. Finally, however, the maestro validates John Grady's attempts to seek his true love:

A man is always right to pursue the thing he loves.

No matter even if it kills him?

I think so. Yes. No matter even that. (*COTP* 199)

The effect for John Grady must have been a tremendous one, for his two recent storytelling tutors have given him their support, perhaps ultimately giving him the resolve to go through with his intended rescue of Magdalena. Although the issue of American

versus Mexican ways of life can easily be seen outside the stories told by Mr. Johnson and the blind maestro, McCarthy recognizes the special power of the narrative moment, especially in its ability to connect the listener or reader to the subject(s) of the stories being told, thus creating an effect beyond the story's object.

Secondly, the blind maestro's story reflects similar stories told to Billy regarding the nature of a life, death, and fate, thus strengthening the reader's sense of connection between these two friends. Billy learns a hybrid of the blind maestro's lesson from both the old priest in *The Crossing* and the old man in the epilogue of *Cities of the Plain*, who tells him that "Every man's death is a standing in for every other" (288). John Grady's chance to learn this lesson comes through the blind maestro's story about the unwilling, but eventually overdoting, padrino. The maestro tells how the Mexican man became the padrino to his enemy's son and was eventually ruined because of his vast love for him. He says, "love makes men foolish... We are taken out of our own care and it then remains to be seen only if fate will show to us some share of mercy. Or little. Or none" (*COTP* 195). John Grady can easily compare himself to the padrino in the story, for he too finds himself out of his own control for the sake of his love for another. We see this very thing in the way John Grady is driven to save the mongrel pups and Magdalena from certain death. By hearing the maestro's tale, he feels that his emotions and his actions are unavoidable and simply a part of some predicated plan. The maestro explains how the boy's choices and his destiny are probably beyond his control:

Each act in this world from which there can be no turning back has before it another, and it another yet... Choice is lost in the maze of generations and each act in that maze is itself an enslavement for it voids every

alternative and binds one ever more tightly into the constraints that make a life...Our plans are predicated upon a future unknown to us. The world takes its form hourly by a weighing of things at hand, and while we may seek to puzzle out that form we have no way to do so. We have only God's law, and the wisdom to follow it if we will. (*COTP* 195)

Before receiving this lesson about choices and fate, John Grady's passion has already driven him to disregard the path that seems obvious to him, opting instead for a path that might lead to danger or death. The maestro's lesson helps him to understand and justify why he might make seemingly reckless decisions. Billy, on the other hand, remains a pragmatic and willing subject to the very fate and path that is set for him. Perhaps the most interesting idea to remember is that the master storyteller, Cormac McCarthy, has already decided each of these character's destinies. Furthermore, the storytellers McCarthy employs to teach his protagonists within his story may very well understand their role in a larger predicated story told by their own creator. Michael Roemer points out this very idea when he discusses the preclusive nature of narrative and the necessity for the characters to sense the illusion of freedom: "The blindness of the fictive figures, which at first seems a mere limitation, turns out to be necessary" (20). McCarthy and his storytellers, however, turn this idea of illusory freedom upside down and consistently remind both John Grady and Billy that they are *not* free, but rather are characters in a matrix of decisions and destined paths that they can't change no matter how they try. Still, the blind maestro encourages John Grady to foster his passionate and ardent heart as he takes action in the face of this predicated life. He says, "I only know that every act which has no heart will be found out in the end. Every gesture" (*COTP* 196). Ultimately,

John Grady leaves the blind maestro with a greater understanding of the world and his predestined fate within it, but he also leaves with an increased resolve to follow his heart.

Old Man in Epilogue

He saw that a man's life was little more than an instant and that as time was eternal therefore every man was always and eternally in the middle of his journey, whatever be his years or whatever distance he had come. (old man to Billy in COTP 282)

After John Grady's death, McCarthy tells us that Billy "rode on. Days of the world. Years of the world. Till he was old" (*COTP* 264), and he reintroduces us to him fifty years later, penniless and homeless in Arizona. There, under a freeway overpass, Billy meets another old traveler who narrates to Billy the final extended story within McCarthy's *The Border Trilogy*. The old man tells Billy about a dream story in which a traveler witnesses a macabre funeral procession and bloody ritual. The two men discuss the nature and reality of dreams versus the nature of what we think is real, and the old man tells Billy that the dream world collides with the world created by God, that it is "the immappable world of our journey" (*COTP* 288). He goes on to remind Billy about the unavoidable nature of death, saying that "every man's death is a standing in for every other" (288), hearkening back to the words of the blind maestro to John Grady.

Why would McCarthy use the final thirty pages of his trilogy to bring in a stranger who tells an even more strange story? Why place Billy in a narrative moment outside the context of the natural movement of the trilogy's plotline? Again, McCarthy demonstrates the validity of de Certeau's claim that narration "creates a fictional space. It moves away from the 'real'—or rather it pretends to escape present circumstances" (79).

For McCarthy, then, the purpose of this storytelling episode is to create a lasting effect beyond the object of the story, an effect for both the reader and for Billy. Snyder asserts that the epilogue “reinforces this sense of inevitable loss and suggests that the only balm available to assuage its attendant grief may be narration and the ethical relation it implies” (“Cowboy Codes” 34). In other words, the narrative moment shared by Billy, the old stranger, and the reader emerges as equally important to the story itself, because of the connectivity and effects created through the shared storytelling event. McCarthy may have been alluding to this very power of narrative when the old priest in *The Crossing* tells Billy that there is only one story to be told, that all stories are one (143). Throughout *The Border Trilogy*, the narrative moment or storytelling act consistently stands out as the “one story,” regardless of the story told, including the epilogue of *Cities of the Plain*.

Even though the narrative event may be more important than the tale told in the epilogue, the stranger’s ideas still provide some interesting fodder for Billy and the trilogy. His message focuses on several themes. First, he tries to impress upon Billy the idea of man’s existence among generations and how that existence shapes our stories and our storytelling:

The world of our fathers resides within us. Ten thousand generations and more. A form without a history has no power to perpetuate itself. What has no past can have no future. At the core of our life is the history of which it is composed and in that core are no idioms but only the act of knowing and it is this we share in dreams and out. (*COTP* 281)

For the old man, the generations give him his identity and material for his dreams, implying to Billy that through the narration of his stories he can find connectivity to his predecessors. The old man goes on to explain how the narrative then gains a life beyond the material in ones' soul or in one's dreams:

Yet it is the narrative that is the life of the dream while the events themselves are often interchangeable. The events of the waking world on the other hand are forced upon us and the narrative is the unguessed axis along which they must be strung. (*COTP* 283)

This interchangeability of a story's events reminds us of other McCarthy storytellers and the importance they place on the narrative event, as opposed to the tale itself. Billy originally learns this idea from the ex-Mormon priest at Huisiachepic in *The Crossing* and he never forgets its importance, as we can see from his comment to the old man when he starts getting diverted from the storytelling: "I think you got a habit of makin things a bit more complicated than what they need to be. Why not just tell the story?" (*COTP* 278). Billy might even recognize the fact that the story the old man tells him may be a fabrication for the sake of achieving the same effect through narrative. He says, "You sure you aint makin all this up?" (*COTP* 277). At the age of seventy-eight, Billy demonstrates a pragmatic, matter-of-fact attitude toward existence and the storytelling that surely comes as a result of years of careful observation and witnessing of others' lives whose tales he has heard.

The second issue raised by the old man under the overpass reminds us of the advice given to John Grady by the blind maestro regarding destiny and fate. The blind maestro essentially tells John Grady that "choice is lost in the maze of generations and

each act in that maze is itself an enslavement” (*COTP* 195), an idea expressed by the old man to Billy in slightly different words:

Our decisions do not have some alternative. We may contemplate a choice but we pursue one path only. The log of the world is composed of its entries, but it cannot be divided back into them. And at some point this log must outdistance any possible description of it. (*COTP* 286)

By repeatedly relating this similar idea about paths and choices to both John Grady and Billy throughout the trilogy, McCarthy gives us a stronger sense of their special relationship. This relationship and its tragic ending becomes more rich as we see how John Grady and Billy respond differently to the knowledge that perhaps their lives are part of a larger script, where their actions ultimately lead to the same end—death—at the end of a story already predicated and written on the tablets of the world. Billy finally recognizes, just as the old man in the epilogue tells him, “the template for the world and all in it was drawn long ago” (*COTP* 287), and he knows too that his life, as well as Boyd’s and John Grady’s, is scripted by some master storyteller to whom he must pay homage.

Finally, the old man teaches Billy a view about death similar to that which the blind maestro taught John Grady when he told him that the world “stands in for the dead man” (*COTP* 193), implying an ethical relationship between man and the world where those in the world exist in the place of those who have passed on. The old man under the bridge similarly explains to Billy the nature of death:

Every man’s death is a standing in for every other. And since death comes to all there is no way to abate the fear of it except to love that man who

stands for us...who stands in the dock for us until our own time come and we must stand for him. (*COTP* 288)

Because of Billy's close relationship to both Boyd and John Grady gained through shared experiences and stories, we wonder why Boyd and John Grady die young while Billy lives a long life. The answer may be that Boyd and John Grady are standing in for Billy until his own time comes. When Billy meets the old man under the bridge he suspects—almost hopefully—that he may be death. Billy tells the old man that “more and more [death] looks like a friend” (*COTP* 267), and nobody other than Boyd or John Grady could epitomize the image of a friend in Billy's mind. To be sure, Billy's encounter under the overpass serves as a potent reminder of the loss and pain he has witnessed through his own eyes and through the tales of storytellers. The encounter also reminds readers that McCarthy's characters are no exception to the illusory freedom of fictive figures, but rather they are bound to a destined fate scripted by McCarthy.

Conclusion

Michel de Certeau tells us that a “story does not express a practice. It does not limit itself to telling about a movement. It *makes* it” (81). In other words, while the subject of the story does no more than narrate some past event or describe some physicality, the *act* of storytelling itself becomes a powerful event that can create knowledge, identity, relationship, and effect. McCarthy continually uses this concept to his advantage in *The Border Trilogy* by incorporating complex storytelling encounters within the road narratives of his characters. His characters experience the power of narrative through the secondary interlocutor characters while we simultaneously

experience it through the witnessing of the protagonist's journeys. He weaves an intricate matrix of stories within stories, and he finds a way for his storytellers to theorize about the meaning of storytelling while telling their own stories. Cormac McCarthy truly emerges as the master storyteller for the twentieth century and beyond.

For us and for McCarthy's characters, the stories and the act of witnessing change our lives. Luce points out that the tales told to Billy "create eddies in the flow of his own tale, still pools in which the forward course of his own life lulls and he becomes audience to other lives parallel and tangential to his own" (196). We, too, experience the same lull in our lives when we stop to witness the journeys of John Grady Cole and Rawlins, Billy and Boyd Parham. And when McCarthy introduces the wise storytellers into our heroes' adventures, he ties us close together and forms our journeys into one, for "every man's path is every other's...and there is no other tale to tell" (*Crossing* 156-57).

Ultimately, Cormac McCarthy's novels demonstrate and introduce us to a practical theory about narrative, the narrator, and even the novel, a theory which reflects certain elements of de Certeau and Roemer. He weaves memorable tales of loss, love, violence, friendship, and death, but he also reflects and contemplates his own role as narrator. In *The Crossing*, McCarthy uses the old priest's voice to define the role of a storyteller: "The task of the narrator is not an easy one...He appears to be required to choose his tale from among the many that are possible. But of course that is not the case. The case is rather to make many of the one" (155). In *The Border Trilogy*, McCarthy makes a good case for this argument by making the many smaller stories—by and large repetitious stories—that fit within his own principal story, the story all about telling a story. Arnold echoes this idea:

What becomes clear in reading the complete trilogy is how thoroughly and complexly McCarthy uses repetition, not simply to retell the same story (for, as his characters so often say, all stories are one) but to create a deep resonance as each parallel story moves toward its inescapable conclusion.

(232)

McCarthy's repetition and emphasis on the act of storytelling has clearly extended the storyteller's impact above and beyond the subject of one's story, and today's writers now face a higher standard because of it. After studying McCarthy, few readers could be satisfied with anything less than a moving storytelling event that both weaves a memorable tale and reflects inward on its own impact as a narrative act. Truly, McCarthy and his storytelling characters have raised the bar for novelists, storytellers, and narrative theorists.

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