

DIFFERENCES IN CULTURAL PERCEPTION: A COMPARISON OF  
JOHN GRADY COLE & BILLY PARHAM IN CORMAC  
MCCARTHY'S *THE BORDER TRILOGY*

A Senior Honors Thesis

by

KATRINA ANN RIPPERDA

Submitted to the Office of Honors Programs  
& Academic Scholarships  
Texas A&M University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the

UNIVERSITY UNDERGRADUATE  
RESEARCH FELLOWS

April 2001

Group: Humanities

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## ABSTRACT

Differences in Cultural Perception: A Comparison of John  
Grady Cole & Billy Parham in Cormac McCarthy's  
*The Border Trilogy*. (April 2001)

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The border between one understanding of life and another is a recurring theme in the novels that make up *The Border Trilogy*. But borders do not necessarily have to separate two lands, nor even two culturally different peoples. A border can also separate ideas. Truth and fiction must border each other, else the reader could not believe the fiction. Dreams must border reality in order to affect men as they do. And one's history must border both the present and the future before any of the three can have meaning. The author explores concepts of truth, dreams, reality, history, and borders as they are represented by both two major characters and the foreign culture they encounter in *The Border Trilogy*, and the ways in which their interactions with the foreign culture are shaped by the differences in cultural perception.

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## CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

*The Border Trilogy* by Cormac McCarthy follows the adventures of John Grady Cole and Billy Parham, separately and together, across and around the border between the United States and Mexico. The experiences of John Grady Cole and Billy Parham as they wander are shaped by the interaction between cultures as they leave behind their known lives, and encounter a culture they will find passingly familiar yet completely alien. The interaction between the two cultures is a journey in and of itself. The border between one understanding of life and another is a recurring theme in the novels.

In its most common usage, “border” means a line delineating or separating two things: the thing that makes A different from B. But another meaning of “border,” as listed in the American Heritage Dictionary, is “to be almost like.” A “border” defines both the differences and the similarities between the two things that it separates. But borders do not necessarily have to separate two lands, nor even two culturally different peoples. A border can also separate ideas. Truth and fiction must border each other, else the reader could not believe the fiction. Dreams must border reality in order to affect men as they do. And one’s history must border both the present and the future before any of the three can have meaning.

A border is a man-made construct. To say that Americans believe one thing and that Mexicans believe something else merely because they live on different sides of a river is inaccurate. It is not because of the river that one believes this, and the

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<sup>1</sup> This thesis follows the style and format of the *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*, 5<sup>th</sup> edition.

other believes that. It is merely that two different cultures with two different ways of looking at the world have agreed to lay claim only to land on the closest side of some arbitrary line. And in drawing a line between nations, people, and cultures, they have drawn a line between beliefs. The two beliefs, one American and one Mexican, that are under discussion may in fact be the same idea, but because this man lives here, he calls it this, and that man, because he lives there, calls it that. Even as men define borders, the borders come to define them. A border is not real; it is a construct of men who feel the need to define things, to define "self" and "other." Yet, the border is real because men believe it to be so. And although men have agreed upon the definition of the border, each man's understanding of the border is necessarily different. It is in these understandings of the border that the conflicts in *The Border Trilogy* lie. And it is in the personal understandings of the border, and in the ability to understand another man's understanding of the border that the true character and finally the fate, of the two main characters lies. John Grady Cole and Billy Parham are very much alike, in some ways interchangeable. But they see the border in different ways, understand it in different ways. This difference separates them, leads to their disparate fates: a gory young death for John Grady Cole and a long life for Billy Parham. The differences in their approaches lie in their different perceptions of truth, dreams, reality, and history. It is not simply their own understanding of these concepts that leads to their respective fates, but their ability to understand and accept the border between their conceptions and the Mexican conceptions.

## CHAPTER II:

## REALITY

John Grady Cole and Billy Parham are very much alike in their attitudes about reality. The view of truth, dreams, and reality that they both share is very different from the Mexican understanding. It is their reaction to the Mexican understanding that separates them.

## TRUTH

Both John Grady and Billy believe in truth. Something is either true or it's not. If an event happened the way it is told, then the telling is true. There is no gray. Both insist on the truth throughout their lives. But the people they meet in Mexico do not see truth as an absolute. Truth is merely what men have agreed upon as the accepted version of events.

In *The Crossing*, when Billy tries to retrieve the wolf from a fighting pen, he tells the 'true' story of how she came to be there, but the hacendado in charge responds with another history for the wolf which would have been equally possible, but which never happened. It doesn't matter what the true history of the wolf is, though, merely that she is held by the hacendado who therefore may choose whatever truth he pleases as the history of the wolf (*Crossing* 118).<sup>2</sup>

Later, Billy meets a band of gypsies, one of whom begins to tell him the tale of the airplane they are transporting. He tells Billy that the airplane has three histories or

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<sup>2</sup> *The Border Trilogy* is composed of three novels: *All the Pretty Horses*, *The Crossing*, and *Cities of the Plain*. The text used by the author of this thesis contained the entire trilogy. Each novel within the text was separately paginated; whenever page numbers are given in parenthetical notation, the author has specified the novel to which they refer.

stories, and asks him which one he wants to hear. Billy responds that he wants to hear the true history (*Crossing* 403-4).

In *Cities of the Plain*, Billy approaches Eduardo, the manager of the White Lake, in an attempt to purchase Magdalena for John Grady. Eduardo tells him that John Grady “has in his head a certain story. Of how things will be.... What is wrong with this story is that it is not a true story. Men have in their minds a picture of how the world will be. How they will be in that world. The world may be many different ways for them...” (*Cities* 134). Eduardo claims that the story that John Grady has in his head is not a true story. By John Grady’s standards, the story can have no truth until it happens. Until then, it is merely speculation. But for Eduardo, truth is the version of events that is accepted. And he refuses to accept John Grady’s version of events; he will not allow that version to come to pass.

In *All the Pretty Horses*, when John Grady is arrested, he tells his story exactly as it happened. The captain insists that John Grady should tell the truth: “You have the opportunity to tell the truth here. Here. In three days you will go to Saltillo and then you will no have this opportunity. It will be gone. Then the truth will be in other hands. You see. We can make the truth here. Or we can lose it. But when you leave here it will be too late. Too late for truth. Then you will be in the hands of other parties. Who can say what the truth will be then?” (*Horses* 168). John Grady responds, “There aint but one truth.... The truth is what happened” (*Horses* 168).

The captain is not interested in the truth the way John Grady understands it. For John Grady, the truth is immutable, unchanging, fixed in place. The truth is always the



same to all men. But for the Mexicans, events are interpreted by men, and the interpretation they agree on is called truth. But Billy and John Grady continue to insist on the truth.

#### DREAMS

These different understandings of truth can be traced to different concepts of reality. Another layer of this reality consists of dreams. Many, many dreams are described in the course of *The Border Trilogy*; John Grady and Billy regard dreams as nothing more than dreams, without deeper significance. But the people they meet in Mexico regard dreams as more meaningful. To them, dreams are powerful things with the power to change waking events. In the epilogue of *Cities of the Plain*, Billy meets a Mexican man on the road who tells him of a dream he experienced. Throughout the telling, it is obvious that Billy's attitude toward the existence and nature of dreams is very different from that of the man. In *All the Pretty Horses*, dueña Alfonsa talks with John Grady Cole about dreams:

- [Alfonsa]: They have a long life, dreams. I have dreams now which I had as a young girl. They have an odd durability for something not quite real.
- [Cole]: Do you think they mean anything?
- [Alfonsa]: She looked surprised. Oh yes, she said. Dont you?
- [Cole]: Well. I dont know. They're in your head.
- [Alfonsa]: She smiled again. I suppose I dont consider that to be the condemnation you do. (*Horses* 134)

John Grady Cole obviously has a very different understanding of dreams and their importance. Throughout, Billy and John Grady are told of dreams by Mexicans, but although they experience dreams themselves, they never talk about them to anyone else, because they do not accord the same importance to their dreams. Yet the dreams in *The*

*Border Trilogy* are indeed important. Both John Grady and Billy dream of their fathers' deaths; during the course of the novels, their fathers do die. They may even be dreaming of their deaths at the very moments that they are happening, although it is never made clear that they are.

Alejandra tells John Grady in *All the Pretty Horses* that she has dreamed that he was dead, that his mother wept, and so too did his whore, "They carried you through the streets of a city I'd never seen. It was dawn. The children were praying" (*Horses* 252). Billy also dreams of John Grady's death in *The Crossing*, although he doesn't know that it is John Grady, "he held his dying brother in his arms but he could not see his face and he could not say his name" (*Crossing* 325). And indeed, at the end of *Cities of the Plain*, when Billy is looking for John Grady, he calls him his *cuate*, which can be taken to mean buddy, but means literally 'twin;' he is calling him brother (*Cities* 238). After he finds John Grady, he speaks to him as he lies dying, but Billy never calls John Grady by name, only 'bud.' After John Grady dies, Billy carries his dead body through the streets of Juarez, "in the gray Monday dawn," past "children who stood blessing themselves" (*Cities* 261). John Grady Cole's death comes to pass exactly as it has been dreamed.

Not all the dreams in the novels will come to happen, and not all of them are quite so literal, but they all have significance. The reader is told in *Cities of the Plain* that "All his [John Grady's] early dreams were the same. Something was afraid and he had come to comfort it" (*Cities* 204). John Grady's early dreams are all of taking care of other creatures. Whether his dreams of comforting a fearful person or animal were an omen of his future, or simply a strong influence upon a young mind, they do come to

pass: John Grady devotes much of his life to taking care of creatures weak, sick, young, or otherwise unable to care for themselves.

## REALITY

Billy and John Grady see dreams as not “real,” but to those they meet dreams are very real; they are simply a different kind of reality. This understanding of reality is a fundamental difference between these American boys and the people they encounter in Mexico. To Billy and John Grady, reality is what it is. There is only one reality, and it cannot change. But to the people of Mexico, reality is malleable. Reality is different for every person, and it changes with each passing moment. Perhaps this difference is based in religion; Billy and John Grady may believe in God, but they rarely think about Him. The people they meet, though, are often devoutly religious, and they contemplate God and religion. Perhaps it is this contemplation of God that allows the understanding of reality as something that can change, can bend, as something not quite solid.

In *The Crossing*, an indian tells Billy that “the world could only be known as it existed in men’s hearts. For while it seemed a place which contained men it was in reality a place contained within them” (*Crossing* 134). Another man tells Billy that the world “is not a thing at all but is a tale. And all in it is a tale and each tale the sum of all lesser tales and yet these also are the selfsame tale and contain as well all else within them” (*Crossing* 143). To these men, the world is not the world, and reality is not reality but for the men who live in them. But if men are necessary for reality to exist, then in some manner, reality must be created or defined by men. And if each man defines reality, then reality is necessarily different for each man.

### CHAPTER III: HISTORY

In the epilogue of *Cities of the Plain*, a Mexican man tells Billy, “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 [emphasis added]” (*Cities* 281). For this Mexican, it is only by knowing the past that the future can occur and its significance be understood: the present is nothing without a past to give it meaning.

John Grady Cole, the protagonist of *All the Pretty Horses*, wants nothing more than to be a cowboy. When he loses his past, the ranch that he has grown up on, he sets out for Mexico, looking for a future. But he cannot find his future, because he isn’t connected to his past. At the opening of the novel, John Grady Cole’s grandfather has just passed away, taking any real sense of family, home, or history with him. Within the first paragraph, the reader is told that John Grady Cole knows little of his antecedents: “Along the cold hallway behind him hung the portraits of forebears only dimly known to him...” (*Horses* 3). A few pages later, the reader is told about the life of John Grady Cole’s grandfather: about his first wife, who died childless; about his second wife, who bore him one child—a girl—who became the mother of John Grady Cole. The section concludes: “The Grady name was buried with that old man the day the norther blew the

lawnchairs over the dead cemetery grass. The boy's name was Cole. John Grady Cole" (*Horses* 7).

The boy could have been introduced in many different ways, yet the author chooses to introduce him in this way, separating him from his forebears, dividing him from any possible sense of his own history. John Grady is not close enough to any of his family to understand them, or they him. His grandfather's response when John Grady had asked him about a painting in the dining room, "he'd once asked his grandfather what kind of horses they were and his grandfather looked up from his plate at the painting as if he'd never seen it before and he said those are picturebook horses and went on eating," is symbolic of their entire relationship: they think differently, and don't necessarily understand each the other (*Horses* 16).

Similarly, John Grady is distant from his parents. His mother lives in another city, and rather obviously does not have a close and loving relationship with her son. His father is distant, still dealing with the ghosts of his time served in World War II. John Grady knows that his mother spent some time in California when he was very young, but he doesn't know that his father also went to California in a failed attempt at reconciliation (*Horses* 25); three weeks after it happens, John Grady is still unaware that his parents' divorce has been finalized (*Horses* 17).

His present and future have no recognizable meaning without a past, so John Grady seeks a stronger sense of the past in order to discover his future. The life that he settles into at the Hacienda de Nuestra Señora de la Purísima Concepción for a short

while seems to be exactly the life he wants. Part of his yearning for this life is the sense of connection with history that is so strong at La Purísima:

The Dueña Alfonso was both grandaunt and godmother to the girl and her life at the hacienda invested it with oldworld ties and with antiquity and tradition. Save for the old leather-bound volumes the books in the library were her books and the piano was her piano. The ancient stereopticon in the parlor and the matched pair of Greener guns in the Italian wardrobe in Don Héctor's room had been her brother's and it was her brother with whom she stood in the photos taken in front of cathedrals in the capitals of Europe, she and her sister-in-law in white summer clothes, her brother in vested suit and tie and Panama hat. His dark moustache. Dark Spanish eyes. The stance of a grandee. The most antique of the several oil portraits in the parlor with its dark patina crazed like an old porcelain glazing was of her great-grandfather and dated from Toledo in seventeen ninety-seven. (*Horses* 132)

He is told tales of the history of La Purísima, the family that lives there, and of Mexico by many different people. The mozo (porter or waiter) talks at night, telling them "tales of the country and the people who lived in it and the people who died and how they died" (*Horses* 110). Alejandra tells him of her family's history and of the history of Mexico (*Horses* 141), and later she shows him the plaza where her grandfather died, fighting for his beliefs in the revolution (*Horses* 253). The hacendado subtly warns John Grady away from his daughter by speaking of the history of the family and of Mexico, the intersection of the two (*Horses* 144-6). This sense of history gives meaning to present and future, and it is a similar meaning that John Grady seeks. But although he finds the sense of history in Mexico at La Purísima, it is not his own history, so he cannot share in it with those to whom it belongs. He does not fit into the present or the future at La Purísima because he does not share the past with its inhabitants.

In contrast, Billy Parham seems to have all the sense of his own history that he needs. *The Crossing* begins with his past, his memories of his childhood. His family,

although certainly not perfect, is much more close-knit than John Grady's family. His love for his younger brother Boyd is especially strong, and is demonstrated even in the first paragraph of the novel: "He carried Boyd before him in the bow of the saddle and named to him features of the landscape and birds and animals in both spanish and english. In the new house they slept in the room off the kitchen and he would lie awake at night and he would whisper half aloud to him as he slept his plans for them and the life they would have" (*Crossing* 3). Although he does not perhaps know the complete story of his lineage, Billy has a much clearer knowledge of the events of his own early life, and of his family's recent history. Because Billy has a sense of his own history, his present and future have meaning, and he feels no need to seek past, present, or future in Mexico, but merely the means to an end. Billy is not rejected in the manner that John Grady is because he doesn't try to share the history of a well-established family, or of Mexico itself.

## CHAPTER IV: THE BORDER

Differences in perception separate Billy and John Grady from the world they encounter in Mexico. They contribute to the gulf separating these boys from the Mexican culture they travel through. But finally, it is the creation and understanding of a border that makes them different. The differences in perception analyzed by characters in the novel are always traced back to the border between Mexican culture and Anglo culture. Again and again, Billy and John Grady are told that they are Anglos, that they are not Mexican, that they do not know Mexico, that they cannot understand. It is a sense of “other” that the Mexicans sense that keeps them from accepting Billy and John Grady as one of their own. The hacendado at La Purísima in *All the Pretty Horses* tells John Grady “One country is not another country” (*Horses* 145). He is speaking of the differences between Mexico and Europe, but the idea applies to Mexico and the United States. They are not the same. A man in prison tells John Grady that the mind of the Anglo is “closed” (*Horses* 192). It is not simply a personal characteristic of John Grady that he refuses to understand the man or to accept what he says, but a characteristic of his Anglo culture. John Grady does not fully understand this otherness, or perhaps he refuses to accept it. He thinks that he could live in Mexico, falls in love with two different Mexican girls, but he cannot succeed because fundamentally he is not Mexican.

Billy understands this difference, accepts it, even rejects a Mexican philosophy, or way of life. When he first enters Mexico in *The Crossing*, he has no notion of accepting or rejecting a Mexican philosophy. The hacendado who has taken possession



of the wolf tells him, “You think that this country is some country you can come here and do what you like,” to which Billy responds, “I never thought that. I never thought about this country one way or the other” (*Crossing* 119). But the hacendado continues on to say that “if the wolf had crossed that boundary it was perhaps so much the worse for the wolf but the boundary stood without regard” (*Crossing* 119). Billy very quickly comes to understand this difference, and rejects the Mexican way for the American. In one scene, he sits down to drink whiskey with some Mexicans, but one will not drink whiskey, but insists on mescal. Billy in turn refuses to drink the mescal, saying “You want to drink that stinkin catpiss in favor of good american whiskey... you be my guest” (*Crossing* 361). When the man fills Billy’s glass with mescal, Billy drains the glass and spits it out on the floor, physically denying that he is trying to be Mexican.

In *Cities of the Plain*, Billy and John Grady discuss returning to Mexico. John Grady says he’d like to return; Billy says he’s had enough (*Cities* 217). Billy makes no claims on Mexican culture; John Grady would like to live there. Billy is acceptable as a tourist, but John Grady is not acceptable as an inhabitant, or even as a tourist, because he doesn’t understand that he is trespassing. His inability to accept the fundamental difference between him and the people of Mexico leads to his death; Billy accepts the difference and lives to quite an old age. John Grady dies as a result of injuries incurred in a knife fight with Eduardo in *Cities of the Plain*. Eduardo tells John Grady why he is killing him, but he does not say that it is because of John Grady’s actions; it is because of his nationality, his inability to understand Mexico:

You think we have not seen your kind before? I have seen your kind before. Many and Many. You think I dont know America? I know America....

[Americans] drift down out of your leprous paradise seeking a thing now extinct among them. A thing for which they no longer even have a name.... By now of course longing has clouded their minds. Such minds as they may possess. The simplest truths are obscured.... Your kind cannot bear that the world be ordinary. That it contains nothing save what stands before one. But the Mexican world is a world of adornment only and underneath it is very plain indeed. (*Cities* 248-53)

Yet even when he is dying, John Grady wishes to remain in Mexico. Billy finds him dying, and promises to return him to the states, but John Grady tells Billy to leave him, that he won't be able to get him across the border, anyway (*Cities* 258). Perhaps he thinks that after his death, Mexico will no longer reject him. But finally, the Mexican belief is as the vaqueros at La Purisima tell him in *All the Pretty Horses*, "a man leaves much when he leaves his own country. They said that it was no accident of circumstance that a man be born in a certain country and not some other and they said that the weathers and seasons that form a land form also the inner fortunes of men in their generations and are passed on to their children and are not so easily come by otherwise" (*Horses* 226).

The border is not just a line between countries, or even simply cultures. It is symbolic of a separation between understandings. But Billy and John Grady are not the only ones who cannot successfully cross the symbolic border; the reader also cannot cross it. Several methods subtly alienate the reader from the narrative, leaving the reader with an echo of the alienation of John Grady and Billy from Mexico.

Both John Grady and Billy are fluent in Spanish, which is helpful in their travels. But McCarthy presents many conversations in Spanish, and often uses Spanish words instead of an English equivalent. In some places, this poses no problem, because the

words or phrases are common enough that the average reader would know them. But in other places, important phrases or even entire conversations that are pivotal to understanding a scene are in Spanish. For instance, Magdalena, the prostitute John Grady tries to save in *Cities of the Plain*, is epileptic, but this is revealed in a scene in which all the dialogue is in Spanish (*Cities* 72-3). The non-Spanish-speaking reader is left confused, unclear as to what's occurring, because crucial sections are written in Spanish. The effect is to distance those readers who do not have a reading knowledge of Spanish from the story. The gaps in understanding reinforce to the reader the idea of an uncrossable border.

The reader is further distanced from the characters of Billy and John Grady, despite sharing approximately a thousand pages with them, by McCarthy's terse style and aloof attitude. The inner workings of their minds are never revealed, and only rarely are the characters' actions or motivations explained, through their conversations with other characters. Finally, the reader may feel distanced from the story by explicitly gory passages, such as the description in *The Crossing*, of a doctor tending a gunshot several days after it first occurred (*Crossing* 304-13), or the description, also in *The Crossing*, of the blinding of an old man Billy encounters:

The German then did something very strange.... He was a very large man with enormous hands and he reached and seized the young captive's head in both these hands and bent as if to kiss him. But it was no kiss. He seized him by the face and it may well have looked to others that he bent to kiss him on each cheek perhaps in the military manner of the French but what he did instead with a great caving of his cheeks was to suck each in turn the man's eyes from his head and spit them out again and leave them dangling by their cords wet and strange and wobbling on his cheeks. (*Crossing* 276)

This description is revolting; it forces the reader to draw back in horror. There can be little identification with any character that has experienced this particular horror. The reader is left appalled by such descriptions, without a strong understanding of the minds of the protagonists, unable to fully understand the experiences of Billy and John Grady along the border. The reader may not even notice this distancing, but the alienation of the reader subtly mimics and underscores the alienness of Billy and John Grady to the lands they travel in.

The border is not simply an artificial boundary between two countries. It is created by men to define and separate concepts of “self” and “other.” In order to successfully do so, the border must define men as “self” or “other.” The border stands between men, separating them. This idea of separation by the border is reinforced again and again throughout *The Border Trilogy*.

## CHAPTER V:

## CONCLUSION

John Grady cannot accept the Mexican conception of the world; Billy will not. For them, truth exists because reality is fixed. Yet for the people of Mexico, truth exists because reality is not fixed. The world exists because men live in it. Men create reality. In creating reality, they must also define it, and each man will define it differently. Truth is merely the definition or interpretation that men agree on. But men must agree, or it is not truth. That is why the captain insisted that John Grady should tell the "truth;" the more men who agree that an event happened in this manner, the more true it becomes.

A man is the sum of his history. It is not simply that he has been shaped by his history, but that he exists because of his history; he is defined by his history; he is his own history. Billy and John Grady do not have the same history that the Mexicans have. Their histories make them fundamentally different from the Mexicans. They cannot change their histories, so they cannot change their perceptions of truth, dreams or reality. Billy and John Grady must accept that the culture they encounter south of the border is alien to them, as they are to it. This culture can never accept them, because they are not a part of it, and they are incapable of changing their perceptions and understandings to become part of it. John Grady is unaware that he must adjust to be accepted; Billy is aware of this necessity, but rejects Mexican culture altogether in refusing to adjust. John Grady is unable to change; he tells his companion in *All the Pretty Horses*, Lacey

Rawlins, "I'm the same man you crossed that river with. How I was is how I am and all I know to do is stick" (155).

John Grady thinks that the border is simply a dividing line between countries, a formality. He thinks that because men define borders, because they are not fixed, but changeable, that they are less real. Billy at first believes the same. But if he learns nothing else from his time in Mexico, he learns to comprehend the Mexican understanding of the border. The Mexicans in Cormac McCarthy's *The Border Trilogy* believe that the border is not less real because men can define the border or change it as they choose, but all the more real; men may define borders, but those borders in turn define men.

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