

# **Cities of the Plain Study Guide**

## **Cities of the Plain by Cormac McCarthy**

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# Contents

<a href="#">Cities of the Plain Study Guide.....</a>	<a href="#">1</a>
<a href="#">Contents.....</a>	<a href="#">2</a>
<a href="#">Plot Summary.....</a>	<a href="#">3</a>
<a href="#">Ch. I Pages 3-26.....</a>	<a href="#">4</a>
<a href="#">Ch. 1 Pages 27-54.....</a>	<a href="#">6</a>
<a href="#">Ch. I Pg. 54-82.....</a>	<a href="#">8</a>
<a href="#">Ch. II Pg. 83-106.....</a>	<a href="#">10</a>
<a href="#">Ch. II pg. 106-127.....</a>	<a href="#">12</a>
<a href="#">Ch. II Pg. 127-152.....</a>	<a href="#">13</a>
<a href="#">Ch. III Pg. 153-177.....</a>	<a href="#">15</a>
<a href="#">Ch. III Pg. 177-204.....</a>	<a href="#">17</a>
<a href="#">Ch. III Pg. 204-227.....</a>	<a href="#">19</a>
<a href="#">Ch. IV Pg. 228-246.....</a>	<a href="#">22</a>
<a href="#">Ch. IV Pg. 246-262.....</a>	<a href="#">24</a>
<a href="#">Epilogue, Pg. 263-292.....</a>	<a href="#">26</a>
<a href="#">Characters.....</a>	<a href="#">28</a>
<a href="#">Objects/Places.....</a>	<a href="#">35</a>
<a href="#">Themes.....</a>	<a href="#">37</a>
<a href="#">Style.....</a>	<a href="#">39</a>
<a href="#">Quotes.....</a>	<a href="#">42</a>
<a href="#">Topics for Discussion.....</a>	<a href="#">44</a>



## Plot Summary

John Grady Cole, a Texas cowboy with an almost supernatural gift for training horses, falls in love with a whore from across the border in Mexico. She is guarded by a pimp who has also fallen in love with her, but John Grady, aided by his friend Billy Parham, is determined to get her away and marry her. The results are heroic but equally tragic.

John Grady Cole and Billy Parham work on Mac McGovern's ranch in Texas. While visiting a whore house, John Grady sees a beautiful girl working there, but does not sleep with her.

Billy Parham and Troy go out to visit another ranch run by Troy's brother Elton. They are considering working there instead of with Mac but decide not to.

John Grady goes back to the whorehouse, but the girl, whose name is Magdalena, is not there anymore. After searching all over town he finds out she now works at a place called the White Lake, the most expensive brothel around. He spends almost all the money he has to sleep with her and it is clear he has fallen hopelessly in love. After several more visits, she falls in love with him too and they decide to get married. There is great danger in the task though because the pimp, Eduardo, who runs the White Lake has also fallen in love with the girl. We also find out, though John Grady does not, that the girl is epileptic.

Determined to get Magdalena out, John Grady asks Billy to go to the pimp and find out how much it would cost to "buy" her. The pimp makes it clear that she will never be allowed to leave.

As the months pass John Grady makes preparations to marry. He fixes up a little house in Bell Springs that they can live in. He sells his horse to have enough money to bribe people to help Magdalena get a green card. There are several adventures during this time as well, including a hunt where all the ranch hands track down a pack of wild dogs that have been killing their cattle. Then John Grady and Billy find a litter of wild puppies and John Grady keeps one for himself.

When it is finally time for Magdalena to make her escape she is betrayed and Eduardo's hired fighter Tiburcio murders her. When she does not show up at their meeting place John Grady goes to the morgue where he sees her body. He goes back to the ranch, gets his knife and goes back to the White Lake for a final showdown with Eduardo. He kills the pimp, but only after being cut up so badly that he dies in agony the next morning shortly after Billy finds him.



## Ch. I Pages 3-26

### Ch. I Pages 3-26 Summary

John Grady, Billy, and Troy visit a whorehouse just across the Mexican border called La Venada. John Grady, a fairly young man for a cowboy, stares at a beautiful Mexican girl among the whores. She is also very young and perhaps 15 or 17 years old. John Grady however does not sleep with anyone. The next morning all the field hands that work for Mac eat breakfast before heading out to various chores.

After Billy and John Grady spend a day out with the cattle, John Grady goes back to trying to break and train a headstrong horse. Billy comes back from town and finds out John Grady is on crutches after the horse reared and fell on his foot. Nonetheless, John Grady works the horse late into the night, but it is so wild that it wakes everyone up. John puts the horse away and Billy gives him a hard time about being "really something."

Billy and Troy take a long drive and talk about why they stay on at the ranch. Troy is thinking about leaving and going back to work for his brother Elton. Troy tells the story of a time when he took a long car ride through the desert and his car grill got filled with rabbit heads. They arrive at Elton's ranch and eat dinner with Elton and his wife, Rachel. We learn that Billy was 4-F and could not fight in World War II. Billy also tells us that his brother died in the war and they had bad blood between them before he left.

### Ch. I Pages 3-26 Analysis

This is a book that forces you to pay very close attention to hints and word pictures. You are never spoon fed anything. The author tells you what is happening and what is being said and that's about it. You are almost never told about a person's past unless a character is talking about something that happened in the past. The author never stops the action to give you exposition about the why and how.

In the very first paragraph, you are dropped in amongst Mac's ranch hands as they visit the whorehouse. You start getting a feel for these cowboys very quickly. They stomp, smoke, swear, and make fun of each other, but it is all with a sense of camaraderie. Everything is in good fun. While they may joke about the prostitutes and even compare them to horses such as "She's five gaited or I never rode," (pg. 6) they are lighthearted and likable.

Then there is John Grady. In the midst of his friends' jokes, he is quiet and almost goes unnoticed. The author has not yet told us which characters are important and his little moment of looking at the young girl across the moment is quickly over. The next we see of them, on the ranch, it becomes more clear that Billy and John Grady are our main characters. John Grady's quiet reserve in the bar is matched by his sheer determination to ride a horse that does not want to be ridden.



Pages 21 and 22 are devoted to a story Troy tells about a trip he once took to Amarillo, when his car grill got filled with dead rabbits. This is perfect example of Cormac McCarthy's writing style. Life on the ranch seems a bit idyllic, like a cowboy's paradise, with everyone getting along okay, horses and wide-open spaces. This story is a startling and unexpected installment of horror. While humorous in a dark and twisted sort of way, the picture painted of dead rabbits sticking out of the grill foreshadows more death and destruction to come. If you did not suspect that there would be violence and tragedy in this book before you started reading it, you should certainly expect it now.

Billy, Troy, and Elton also spend a good deal of time talking about people and events that happened in the first two books. While this section may be confusing, do not expect it to be cleared up by what happens later in the book. What is important to take from these conversations is that Billy has already seen a great deal of tragedy and death in his life.



## Ch. 1 Pages 27-54

### Ch. 1 Pages 27-54 Summary

Troy and Billy ride all day. Billy tells Troy about a time when his dead brother Johnny fought their father. Even though their father kept beating him bloody, Johnny would not stop fighting until the he gave up in horrified frustration.

They arrive in Fort Davis by evening and load their horses into a horse trailer with a truck. On the drive back to Mac McGovern's ranch, they see a group of Mexicans with a broken down truck off the side of the road. Despite Troy's objections, Billy pulls over and gives them a hand. They have a flat tire which Billy helps them to patch.

After the Mexicans have driven off and Troy and Billy get started on their journey again, they hit an owl. The impact smashes the windshield of the truck and Billy has to drive by looking out through a tiny corner where it isn't cracked. They agree to split the cost of replacing the windshield.

John Grady goes back to the whorehouse where he saw the girl. He goes back twice but she is not there either time.

John Grady plays chess with Mac and wins twice. When he wakes up the next morning, he helps Billy replace the windshield on the truck.

A man who wants his new horse trained at Mac's ranch brings his horse in a trailer. John Grady watches the horse walk around for a few minutes and tells them to take the horse back because she's lame. They find that the horse's hoof is cracked, but was filled in with wax and dressing to make it look okay.

The next morning, John Grady goes out and takes care of the cattle. He pulls out a piece of wood that had been splintered up inside a calf's leg.

Billy tells John Grady that Troy has decided not to leave Mac's ranch. The man who owned the lame horse calls and offers John Grady some work, but he turns it down.

### Ch. 1 Pages 27-54 Analysis

The focus of the novel is still on Billy for the time being. When he and Troy help the Mexicans with the flat tire, Troy asks him why. Billy's story about the Mexicans that helped him and his brother get away from trouble is another excellent window into how Billy's mind works. He is loyal, conscientious and he remembers when good is done for him.

Then they hit an owl. The owl busts up their windshield. Keep in mind, if they had not stopped to help the Mexicans, they would not have hit that owl. The odds are a million



to one of having something like that happen. They did however and it happened. Again, the author is making a point that you should carry with you through the book. In the world of this novel, karma is not a factor. Doing a good thing for someone does not earn you cosmic points. Bad things do happen to good people.

When we are back with John Grady, he has returned to La Venada. The most important sentence on page 37 is "He stood there for two hours." He goes to the whorehouse looking for the girl he saw and waits. He is so anxious he does not even find a place to sit down. He is patient and determined.

One of the most entertaining episodes in the first chapter of the book is when John Grady sees that a horse brought to him for training is lame. No one else notices the dressing on the horse's hoof and no one can quite figure out how he spotted it either. Then he will not be bribed. John Grady is an idealist and it is hard not to love him for it.



## Ch. I Pg. 54-82

### Ch. I Pg. 54-82 Summary

John Grady goes to the local brothel again and this time asks the barman about the girl he saw there. The barman does not know and neither do the other girls, but a cab driver offers to take him around to other whorehouses. Eventually they find a man named Manolo who offers to tell John Grady where she is for fifty dollars. He calls her an "epileptica." John Grady gives Manolo thirty dollars, which is all he has. Manolo tells him she is at a brothel called the White Lake.

Back at the ranch, he mentions the White Lake to Billy, who tells him that it is really expensive and to stay away.

John Grady goes to Mac and asks for an advance of one hundred dollars from his next month's pay. Mac gives it to him and asks how he knew the horse with the cracked hoof was lame. He tells Mac that every time the horse put down that foot, her ear twitched.

The old man of the ranch, Mr. Johnson, has a long talk with John Grady. He tells him about the death of Colonel Fountain and his family and about the only time he was ever shot at and a bit about the Mexican Revolution.

When he finally visits the White Lake, John Grady finds the woman that he has been looking for. Her name is Magdalena and she speaks no English, but John Grady speaks Spanish. He pays fifty dollars to spend the entire night with her.

After he has left, the girl has a seizure. Her pimp, Eduardo is furious when the other whores treat her as if she is possessed by a demon.

Back at the ranch, John Grady and JC help to breed a mare. Billy and John Grady talk about whether they could have been cowboys in the old days. John Grady says he could have and Billy says he could not.

Eduardo is told that John Grady has come back to the White Lake.

As John Grady leaves after another night with Magdalena, he meets the old blind piano player who works there and the man's daughter. The old man tells John Grady that he believes Magdalena really does like him, but also tells him she may not live very long.

### Ch. I Pg. 54-82 Analysis

Again, pay very close attention or you will miss something in this book. Read a page twice, even three times if you have any doubts about who said what. If you read too quickly you'll miss it when the pimp Manolo tells John Grady that the girl he is looking for is "the epileptica." John Grady is searching everywhere he possibly can to find a girl





who has epilepsy. She is a whore and that is certainly enough of an issue, but epilepsy is a serious disease and he's just a plain cowboy with little experience with women. Maybe John Grady does not know what "epileptica" means. Maybe he does not care or understand. It is an important detail however that we are given before we ever really meet Magdalena and John Grady continues undeterred.

Do not let the simplicity of the writing in the book fool you. It often feels nearly childlike in its straightforward way of recording things. Then you start reading a conversation between John Grady and Mr. Johnson and you realize there are entire histories behind each of these characters. Notice the blunt way Mr. Johnson talks about the time he got in a shoot out. It is an adventure, but he does not tell it that way. It happened and it was not worth it, he says.

John Grady's first night with Magdalena is gently and delicately portrayed. Every word is kind. Every movement is soft. Somehow, without saying it, the author lets us know that this is a moment stolen between lovers. Perhaps the best clue given to us is what Magdalena says when the pimp comes by the room to collect John Grady's money: "Tenemos que pagar." (pg. 69.) That translates to "we have to pay." She does not say "you" have to pay. They are in it together. If they are to spend the night together then they together must pay for that chance.

Just as it seems good things are happening and our two lovers have come together, we are introduced to their great enemies. Magdalena has a seizure and Eduardo comes into the picture. He is violent and he is possessive of Magdalena in a way that signifies danger.

The second time John Grady comes to the White Lake, we are introduced to the blind piano player. This character tends to be used by the author as an oracle. He "sees" a great deal, even though he is blind and all of his predictions about John Grady's love and Magdalena's fate come true. In one of the few instances in the novel where we are directly told about a character's thoughts John Grady carries "the blind man's words concerning his prospects as if they were a contract with the world to come" (pg. 82.)



## Ch. II Pg. 83-106

### Ch. II Pg. 83-106 Summary

John Grady waits in a hotel, but she does not show up. Having gone back to the ranch and his bunk, he is there when Billy comes back from a dance at Mesilla. Billy asks him if he has been seeing a girl and John Grady tells him he is.

He goes back to the White Lake, but can not afford to see Magdalena. She gets a message to him through one of the waiters, "She say you no forget her."

The next night he meets the blind man and his daughter at the Moderno where they listen to musicians play and watch people dance.

Billy, JC, Archer, John Grady and Travis take the dogs out at night to hunt a mountain lion. While the dogs hunt they sit around the campfire and tell stories of the Mexican Revolution and their travels across the country. When the dogs come in one of them has been pretty torn up.

Billy watches Mac and Jon Grady play another game of chess and this time Mac wins.

John Grady pawns the pistol his grandfather gave him.

Magdalena prepares for the evening and then finds John Grady waiting for her at the bar of the White Lake. She tells him it is too dangerous for them to keep meeting. She tells him that Eduardo will kill her.

John Grady awakes from a strange dream to the sound of old Mr. Johnson wandering around and talking to himself. He goes out and sits with the old man until dawn.

### Ch. II Pg. 83-106 Analysis

John Grady's love looks pretty hopeless at this point. Magdalena does not come to meet him and he cannot afford to buy another night with her. Fortunately, she manages to get a message to him through one of the waiters. And the blind piano player is still a friend to him, so hope is not truly lost.

The other cowboys have started to notice John Grady's rather odd behavior, but he is still hesitant to tell anybody. He may be stubborn, but the boy is not stupid. Telling your friends you are falling in love with a prostitute who speaks no English is not going to win you any points. As a result, he has become even more of an outsider among the ranch hands. While they sit out, listening to the dogs hunt, John Grady is away by himself sleeping and when he wakes up, he goes off with one of the dogs to sit by himself.



The chess game on page 93 shows just how distracted John Grady is. He always beats Mac easily and impresses everyone. It is very odd for him to lose. After he pawns his pistol, desperate to get as much as he can for it, he meets the shoeshine boy. The boy describes himself as a black sheep and an outlaw. John Grady connects with the boy. It feels like this kid is more of a friend to him than anyone. The way this book goes we as readers are tempted to believe that John Grady has always been an outsider, but we are reminded here that it is love making him an outlaw. As he says to the shoeshine boy, "I'm just kind of gettin the hang of it" (pg. 99.)

As Magdalena is getting ready for the evening's work, she has a touching moment with the criada. It is obvious the old woman cares about her on some level. The girl is discouraged and maybe frightened. However, the criada tries to comfort her, telling her she will marry a rich man, that she has seen many girls do so over the years, including girls without as much "dignity or grace" as Magdalena.

Tiburcio makes his first real appearance as a threatening figure here. John Grady is at the bar, but Magdalena sees the pimp watching him and tries to warn the boy about the danger. When she tells John Grady that Eduardo will kill her if they keep meeting, she is not exaggerating.

As you read John Grady's dream on page 103, think of it as a poem. He is dreaming of Magdalena's world and the things that threaten her life and threaten her innocence.



## Ch. II pg. 106-127

### Ch. II pg. 106-127 Summary

Mac, Oren, and John Grady are at a horse auction. They have an old rivalry with a man called Wolfenbarger and they try to out do him and get the better horses. They buy several, Mac relying heavily on John Grady's advice.

Back at the ranch, Mac contemplates how long the drought has been going on, how much of his ranch he has already been forced to sell and his dead wife Margaret.

The cowboys meet at Maud's saloon to drink, play shuffleboard, and gamble. John Grady takes Billy aside and tells him about "the girl and about the White Lake and about Eduardo." He tells Billy he wants to marry Magdalena. Billy tells him he is crazy and John Grady says he cannot help it. He tells Billy he is planning to give Eduardo two thousand dollars to buy the girl.

John Grady sits out late with Mr. Johnson. They talk about the horses Mac bought at the auction and they talk about Margaret, Mr. Johnson's daughter and Mac's wife. He tells John Grady about a stampede he had to deal with when a bandit set a cat on fire and threw it into the herd.

After the old man goes to bed Billy tells John Grady he should not spend so much time with the Mr. Johnson, but John Grady insists the old man is not crazy.

### Ch. II pg. 106-127 Analysis

The first few pages of this section develop the friendship between Mac and John Grady. Mac relies heavily on the boy's advice at the horse auction and by now the readers can understand why.

After the auction, there is another of those rare moments where the author actually lets down the curtain and shows us into someone's past and someone's heart. We watch Mac as he contemplates what it was like to live in his little house on another part of the property. He thinks about Mexico and his dead wife and his thoughts carry an intense grief. As John Grady's story continues, remember the amount of loss, the depth of feeling that we have seen in both Billy and Mac.

When John Grady finally tells Billy about the girl he loves, the reaction is as comic as anything in the book when Billy says, "Have you lost your rabbit-assed mind?" pg. 119. Billy is the voice of reason in this book. He is the voice of the practical and the pragmatic and he thinks there is no way that this love will work.



## Ch. II Pg. 127-152

### Ch. II Pg. 127-152 Summary

Billy goes to the White Lake and asks the barman if he can speak to "el patron," Eduardo on a business deal. The barman makes him pay twenty dollars before he calls in the pimp, Tiburcio. Again, Billy asks for Eduardo, saying he has a deal he might be interested in. Tiburcio takes him back through to Eduardo's office.

Billy offers to buy a girl from Eduardo on behalf of his friend, but Eduardo says they are not for sale, that they are not held against their will. He tells Billy the girl has an illness and that she is a "whore to the bone." He then admits that the girl owes him money for her clothes and jewelry.

When Billy returns to the ranch, he tells John Grady the answer was no and that he can't buy her. Billy tells him he's crazy and then goes to bed

John Grady meets with Magdalena again, this time out in the woods. She tells him about her past. She was sold when she was thirteen years old to pay for a gambling debt. She was beaten and raped by the man who bought her. When she ran away, the police treated her just as badly before returning her to the man. He beat her so badly her arm will not straighten properly. He does not let her finish telling the story because he is crying. She tells John Grady she will marry him.

The next John Grady tells Mac he wants to get married and that she is a Mexican girl. He asks if he can fix up an old house by Bell Springs that Mac owns so he and his bride to be can live in it. Mac agrees.

John Grady and Billy go out to the little house and find it an absolute mess, full of old trash and rusted pipes.

Mac and Crawford help John Grady sell his horse. He gets three hundred dollars for it.

### Ch. II Pg. 127-152 Analysis

We don't actually see the scene between Billy and John Grady where Billy changes his mind and agrees to speak with Eduardo. Instead, he is suddenly there asking the barman about where the pimp is. As usual, the author did not tell us who was talking or where he was. It is startling and a little bit funny when we as readers realize what Billy is up to. The last time we saw him he was practically shouting at John Grady that he was crazy. The man is too loyal for his own good perhaps.

Any conversation that Eduardo is involved with is convoluted. He always seems to know more than he is saying and to revel in everyone else's ignorance. When Billy comes to ask about the girl, Eduardo already knows that Billy is not asking for his own sake, but



for someone else. He never really answers the question of whether the girls are "free" or enslaved in some way. He makes it clear that they can't leave, but doesn't get specific as to why. Billy has his own intuition of course and understands the game of words being played, even if he does not necessarily win it.

Ever the voice of reason, Billy does what he can to talk John Grady out of his scheme, giving a succinct list of reasons, but it doesn't do any good. He can tell how dangerous Eduardo is.

The meeting between John Grady and Magdalena on page 138 erases any doubt. She loves him and will do anything to be with him. This is the first time she really opens up to him. The story of her life is heartbreaking. John Grady cannot even listen all the way to the end and we, as readers are lucky he stops her from going on. From the story it is reasonable to conclude that John Grady is the first man to ever treat her gently, or with respect.

Telling Mac that he wants to get married actually goes fairly well. He leaves out the fact that Magdalena is a prostitute, but tells him many of the other problems involved. She is only sixteen, she is Mexican, and does not speak English. Mac is sympathetic and agrees to let John Grady move into the little house by Bell Springs. Unlike Billy he smiles and chuckles about the whole thing, though Billy reminds John Grady that Mac wouldn't be so happy if he found out the girl is a whore.

One thing the author used the horse auction for was to teach us was how much good horses sell for. They went for five hundred dollars or more at auction, so when John Grady only gets three hundred for the stallion he has worked so hard to train, it is a bit unsettling. It is a good thing that he is able to sell the horse since he needs the money, but a cowboy without his horse is like a king without a crown and we know he did not get as much money as we would have wanted him to.



## Ch. III Pg. 153-177

### Ch. III Pg. 153-177 Summary

Something has been killing cattle. Jon Grady finds a dead calf in open country surrounded by drag marks, but no prints. When Billy comes to check things out they figure it can't be a lion or coyotes, so dogs must have killed it. They decide to hire Travis' hounds to track them.

Early the next morning, when the hounds and their handlers arrive they find the scent pretty quickly and set off across the desert. The cowboys keep the loops on their ropes small so they can catch the wild dogs with them. They toss a loop around the dog's neck and stop their horse suddenly. When the rope pulls tight it breaks the dog's neck.

They do this to several dogs before a pack of them head to the top of a mesa. It is so difficult for the horses to get up to the top, but John Grady and Billy make it up after tying jackets over their horse's eyes. They chase the last of the wild dogs and both of them rope the same dog at once. It explodes from the force of being pulled in two directions at once. They catch one last dog and then leave the rest of them to run off.

The next day John Grady convinces Billy to go back to the Mesa because he figures there is probably a litter of puppies hidden in the rocks somewhere. They hunt and track, finding dog hair all over the place and finally Billy figures out where the pups are. They are hidden deep in a hole under an enormous rock "the size of Mac's kitchen."

John Grady chops down a small tree and takes all the branches off of it to use as a massive lever. They tie the horses to the tree and walk them along to pull on it. It takes a couple of tries, but eventually the rock moves and uncovers the litter of puppies. John Grady claims the fattest of the group for himself.

### Ch. III Pg. 153-177 Analysis

This section is a nice interruption from the main love story and primary plot lines of the book. It is a bit like old-fashioned cowboy tales, or the original Lone Ranger stories. The pack of wild dogs are the outlaws and the cowboys are the lawmen. Billy and John Grady actually joke about this when they call themselves "range riders," "detectives" and "Pinkertons." Allan Pinkerton organized Abraham Lincoln's bodyguards and oversaw a group of spies and detectives that became the original secret service.

It is noteworthy that John Grady can set his mind so completely to this task. He does not seem distracted or unsettled and Billy is distinctly aware that his friend is able to keep his mind where it belongs, on the job at hand.

Even though the story of the dog hunt is thrilling, there is a moment of heightened and disturbing violence. Most of the dogs die of broken necks when the lassos catch them.

The deaths are not fun, but they are a great deal less horrific than the one dog who gets caught by two ropes at once. His head is taken off completely and the burst of blood is described as "bright and unexpected as an apparition." (Pg. 167) It looks like a red ghost exploding in the early morning sunlight. Joaquin, one of the other cowboys laughs, but Billy and John Grady are obviously disturbed by what has happened. Much like the dead rabbit story, the moment is a startling reminder that death, violent death is a part of this world. It happens in the blink of an eye.

Before the story of the puppies, most of the interactions between John Grady and Billy have been mildly combative, even if it is a brotherly combat. As they go out to find the wild dog's litter of pups we finally see them in a setting that is purely friendly. Billy is grumpy as usual and a bit irritated by John Grady's enthusiasm, but he comes along for the ride and certainly isn't as annoyed as usual. We are finally seeing their friendship at its best.





## Ch. III Pg. 177-204

### Ch. III Pg. 177-204 Summary

John Grady spends a month cleaning and repairing the little house Mac is letting him have, putting in glass windows and new shelves. One day Billy comes up and helps him do some painting. He asks how long it has been since John Grady has seen Magdalena. John Grady tells him it has been three weeks, but he has faith she's still waiting for him.

Eduardo comes to see Magdalena in her room. He asks her to whom she prays ("A quien le rezas?"). She says she prays to God. He asks her who answers. She says nobody or "Nadie."

When a client comes to sleep with Magdalena, she has another seizure. The client goes to find help and Tiburcio comes and makes the girl bite down on his belt so she won't bite off her tongue. He tells the man to leave and "speak to no one."

John Grady sits and watches the sunset with Mr. Johnson. They talk about the old west and why there were so many gunfights. John Grady asks him if he thinks he should get married and the old man tells him about why he never did get married.

After getting his shoes shined by the outlaw shine boy, John Grady goes to the Moderno and meets the blind piano player there. He tells him Magdalena has agreed to marry him. Then he asks the blind man to be her godfather. The blind man refuses and tells the story of another man he knew who was made a godfather. The man in the story ended up loving the child more than his own life and was made terribly miserable when the boy became wild and eventually a murderer.

The blind man tells John Grady he believes Eduardo will kill Magdalena if she tries to leave and that is why he will not be her godfather. He asks John Grady if he will pray to god for help, but he says no, because he wouldn't know what to ask for. John Grady asks the blind man if he thinks he is a fool for pursuing what he loves and the blind man says no.

John Grady and Hector bring up furniture and sheets and a Santo to the little house by Bell Springs. The repairs are finished. When he gets back to the ranch house, Oren tells him about his short-lived marriage. Then John Grady goes to his room and tries on the new black suit he has purchased to get married in.

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Grady actually joke about this when they call themselves "range riders," "detectives" and "Pinkertons." Allan Pinkerton organized Abraham Lincoln's bodyguards and oversaw a group of spies and detectives that became the original secret service.

It is noteworthy that John Grady can set his mind so completely to this task. He does not seem distracted or unsettled and Billy is distinctly aware that his friend is able to keep his mind where it belongs, on the job at hand.

Even though the story of the dog hunt is thrilling, there is a moment of heightened and disturbing violence. Most of the dogs die of broken necks when the lassos catch them. The deaths are not fun, but they are a great deal less horrific than the one dog who gets caught by two ropes at once. His head is taken off completely and the burst of blood is described as "bright and unexpected as an apparition." (Pg. 167) It looks like a red ghost exploding in the early morning sunlight. Joaquin, one of the other cowboys laughs, but Billy and John Grady are obviously disturbed by what has happened. Much like the dead rabbit story, the moment is a startling reminder that death, violent death is a part of this world. It happens in the blink of an eye.

Before the story of the puppies, most of the interactions between John Grady and Billy have been mildly combative, even if it is a brotherly combat. As they go out to find the wild dog's litter of pups we finally see them in a setting that is purely friendly. Billy is grumpy as usual and a bit irritated by John Grady's enthusiasm, but he comes along for the ride and certainly isn't as annoyed as usual. We are finally seeing their friendship at its best.



## Ch. III Pg. 204-227

### Ch. III Pg. 204-227 Summary

Magdalena meets John Grady one last time in a hotel. After they make love John Grady tells her his story, much the same way she told him hers the last time. He tells her the plan for her final escape; that tomorrow there would be a driver named Ramon Gutierrez with the papers she will need. He will pick her up at the café in La Calle de Noche Triste. Before she leaves, she asks him if he believes there is forgiveness for sins when she says, "se creees hay perdon de pecados." He tells her that "a God unable to forgive is no God at all."

On the cab ride back to the White Lake, Magdalena has another seizure. She wakes up in a hospital strapped to a steel table. The nurse lets her loose and then leaves the room to get the girl something to drink. Magdalena sneaks out in only her shift. Once outside she is lost and is bothered by men in cars and barking dogs before being found by a woman who asks where she is going. When Magdalena tells her she is going to the White Lake the woman offers to take her in and help her, but she refuses. She gets back to the White Lake, shivering and bleeding. Eduardo confronts her and asks if her lover knows she is sick. She tells him he does not know.

John Grady tells Mac he wants to get married on February 17th, the last day before lent. Mac gives him his dead wife's wedding ring for the girl. John Grady and Billy have a long talk about how crazy the whole scheme for him to get married is.

Magdalena gets dressed up and leaves the White Lake. She has money to pay the old woman or the criada who takes care of the girls, but after she takes the money she begs Magdalena not to go. Magdalena goes to the café on Calle de Noche Triste where the driver is supposed to meet her. A man she does not recognize, but claiming to be her driver, arrives. He does not take her to the border, but instead to an out of the way spot near the river. When the cab comes to a stop Tiburcio is waiting for her.

John Grady waits for Magdalena for more than three hours. He is sitting in the ranch truck, by the side of the bar. Travis sees him waiting in the truck and stops to talk to him. John Grady says he may be in a bit of trouble over a girl before starting up the truck and driving off.

### Ch. III Pg. 204-227 Analysis

As Magdalena and John Grady meet we are introduced again to the concept of a God who does not listen. The two lovers will continually question whether God hears their prayers. This time it is Magdalena who questions it, saying she cannot pray for them. John Grady's response is both faith-filled and a bit comical. "Dile ques es importante," (pg. 205) which translates to "say it is important." The idea being that she should pray



and let God know this time what she is praying for matters, that this time something just has to go right for her.

John Grady shares his history much the same way she shared hers. Since this is the third book in the trilogy the author assumes we already know these stories and skips over them rather quickly, but his openness with her is touching.

Again she questions him about God and whether God forgives sins. Again, John Grady answers with hope and with faith that God forgives, or else is no God at all. In a way, John Grady is telling her that he forgives her for all of her sins and will never hold her prostitution against her. Yes, God can forgive all sins, but it is hard to imagine a man could tell someone their sins will be forgiven if they themselves would not be willing to forgive.

The next episode in the book is the perhaps the darkest. As Magdalena heads back to the White lake in a cab and they encounter the funeral procession the author describes it in great detail. Notice the similarities between this procession and John Grady's dream. For example, both involve a mass of people surrounding a single soul being carried. In both the dream and the procession the person being carried is young and seemingly innocent.

After the seizure, when Magdalena finds herself in the hospital the straps and her inability to find her clothes are all things out of a nightmare. The nurse seems kind enough, but after Magdalena runs away she is hunted and chased by men in cars, men who we can only barely see, but whose motives we instantly understand. This episode is Magdalena's world in miniature, a constant fleeing from men who want only one thing from her. Also, when she has the chance to be saved by the kind woman she turns it down because John Grady is coming to rescue her. She dares danger to reach the man she loves.

Eduardo's reaction to her disappearance is more impatient than usual. It is more openly threatening than usual, but even so he maintains an air of control. When telling her the other whores won't help and asking her if John Grady knows about her illness, he is using his understanding of other people to cow her, to make her feel as alone as possible.

Mac gives John Grady his dead wife's wedding ring in an act that is essentially fatherly. It is an act of blessing.

They don't know it yet, but the conversation between Billy and John Grady starting on page 216 is the last one they will have before disaster strikes. The next time Billy sees the all-american cowboy the boy will be dying. But Billy has stopped trying to convince him that he is crazy. The two of them have come to an understanding. John Grady will do what he will do no matter what anyone says.

Something is obviously wrong when the wrong man comes to meet Magdalena. We are not told what happened to Ramon, the driver who was supposed to meet her, but we know there is a problem. When it is Tiburcio who meets her at the river the conclusion is

fairly clear. She is as good as dead already, though we are spared the details of her murder.



## Ch. IV Pg. 228-246

### Ch. IV Pg. 228-246 Summary

When John Grady gets to the café on Calle de Noche Triste, nobody remembers seeing Magdalena. He goes to the Venada, the Moderno and every bar in town that is open that early in the morning, except for the White Lake, but does not find her. He goes to the morgue and finds her lying dead on an exam table with her throat cut. He leaves as the attendant is yelling after him to fill out the paperwork to identify her.

Riding out on the open range John Grady is confronted by a cowboy from another ranch. He looks upset and the cowboy invites him to come eat at his place, but John Grady rides off. He goes to the little cabin and then to Mac's ranch. He stables the horse, gathers up his slicker, a hunting knife his father gave him and some money before leaving again. There is a powerful thunderstorm going outside. Hitchhiking, he gets a ride with an old rancher driving home.

Billy crosses the border into Mexico, looking for John Grady. He goes to the White Lake and walks straight to the back rooms. Tiburcio confronts him and pulls a knife. Billy punches him in the jaw, knocking him down and knocking away the knife. Tiburcio gets up again, this time with a penknife. Billy hits him again, this time so hard he breaks bone. Finally, the pimp tells him Eduardo is in his office and Billy goes there. He kicks the door right off of its hinges. Eduardo tells him the girl is dead and the police are looking for John Grady Cole as a suspect for the murder.

When he goes to the police, Billy tells them John Grady is a good man. He tells the policeman "You know that pimp killed her" and accuses him of corruption. The policeman tells him the story of his family and how many died in the Revolution, ending by saying "I do not answer to pimps." Billy calls the ranch and tells Mac not to let John Grady leave if he comes back home at all.

### Ch. IV Pg. 228-246 Analysis

If there was any doubt remaining it is erased when John Grady sees Magdalena on the exam table in the morgue. Magdalena is dead. The author, in a rare glimpse into John Grady's mind, tells us that he would have crushed his own skull if he could have. He calls out, "Oh God," twice and calls upon the God who he had hoped would keep her safe.

We next see John Grady riding through Cedar Springs, which we have already been told is close to the little house. Obviously upset, the man from a neighboring ranch that he meets tries to convince him to stop by their place for some food. This rancher treats John Grady much the same way you would treat a drunk, coaxing, but uncertain what to say or if the person is really as bad off as they look.



John Grady is wrapping up his business when he goes back to the little house by Bell Springs and then to the ranch. You can see from posture and movements that he is upset, but true to form the author leaves the cowboy's thoughts to the reader's imagination. He leaves the horse at the ranch since he does not own it. He puts his money in plain sight and grabs the only weapon he owns, his knife, since he pawned his pistol.

The old rancher describes a life that John Grady probably imagined for himself. He owns his own place, takes care of his animals and is married to a woman he does not feel he could ever have deserved. With Magdalena's death that life has become impossible for the young man.

There is no way for Billy to know that Tiburcio is the one who actually killed Magdalena, but one of the most enjoyable moments in the whole book is when Billy slams the alcahuete in the jaw and then in the head, cracking bone and wreaking a kind of vengeance on the murderer. We see Billy at his most ferocious. After watching his laidback and sarcastic approach to life, it is a bit surprising to watch him demolish Eduardo's murderous henchman.

Of course, after that moment of victory it is entirely frustrating to watch Eduardo's attempts to make Billy feel guilty. Fortunately the attempt seems to fail, but it is infuriating nonetheless.

The author presents the Mexican police captain in a positive light. The man is honorable, but restricted by the materials at hand. John Grady is the most likely suspect of course, he was the lover and he disappeared immediately after showing up at the morgue. Billy knows and we know that Eduardo is the culprit, with Tiburcio as his right hand, but there is no proof and the Captain makes an excellent point: "I don't see how a man could run such a place if he fell in love with the girls." As unlikely as John Grady's love for Magdalena may be, Eduardo's love for her is even more bizarre in its way.



## Ch. IV Pg. 246-262

### Ch. IV Pg. 246-262 Summary

John Grady gets to the White Lake and kicks the window in on Eduardo's car. He blows the horn, and Eduardo comes out. John Grady tells him "I come to kill you."

He wraps his raincoat around his right arm as a kind of shield and takes his hunting knife in his left hand. He makes the first swipe, but the pimp dodges it. They go back and forth, with John Grady batting away the first few swipes with the rain slicker on his arm. John Grady gets a couple of slices on the pimp's arms, but eventually Eduardo puts a deep gash in the younger man's leg, then two more. Eduardo tells him he is marking him with an "E."

They grapple and John Grady slices the pimp across the stomach, but takes a cut himself on the arm and loses his knife. Eduardo cuts the boy again, but lets him pick up the knife.

The muscles of John Grady's stomach have been severed and he has to keep pressure on his stomach to keep his intestines from coming out. At last the pimp lunges forward and John Grady does not dodge away. He takes another painful wound across the ribs, but stabs up in a way Eduardo does not expect, jamming his knife up through Eduardo's jaw and into his brain, killing him after a few moments.

After wrapping Eduardo's silk shirt around himself as a kind of bandage, John Grady goes in search of a place to hide. He falls asleep in an alley and wakes up when a young boy is trying to steal from his pockets. John Grady grabs the boy and convinces him to help. He gives the boy his money and the boy takes him to a little clubhouse his friends have made. Once the boy has left with instructions, John Grady lays in the dark and prays for help.

Billy looks in the little house and not finding John Grady, goes back to the ranch. He tries to sleep and dreams of Magdalena before Socorro wakes him up and tells him there is a phone call.

The next morning Billy finds John Grady still in the playhouse. John Grady tells him he doesn't want to go to heaven if Magdalena won't be there. Then tells him where his pistol was pawned at and where his money and Mac's wedding ring are. Billy goes to get him some water but when he comes back, John Grady is dead. He picks up the dead boy and carries him away from that place.





## Ch. IV Pg. 246-262 Analysis

The two adversaries meet at last. This is their first real conversation. John Grady has known about Eduardo and Billy has had conversations with him, but the Pimp has never really confronted the boy until this moment.

Despite the fact that they are about to fight to the death, neither man seems afraid. The pimp is utterly confident in fact. He is certain he will win. Notice, he does not threaten the boy with death, instead he offers him life. He gives John Grady a chance to "choose life." It is Eduardo's twisted version of mercy.

As the fight begins, Eduardo does not just fight, giving blow for blow. He is so confident and skillful that he toys with John Grady. Perhaps he is punishing the boy. Perhaps he just likes fighting, but whatever the reasons he marks John Grady's thigh with an 'E,' for Eduardo, even though the delay gives the cowboy chances to slash back a bit.

The imagery interspersed with the fight is fantastic. John Grady is obviously over-matched. The pimp is described as moving like a cat and like a conductor leading an orchestra. His movements are smooth, fluid and very fast. The only way John Grady manages to kill him is a fearless, self-sacrificial, downright suicidal move. After John Grady has been cut many times he must realize he is going to lose. Instead of fending off death for as long as possible he lets Eduardo lunge again, but this time does not dodge, or duck at all. He stands still and purposefully lets himself get cut again so that he can kill the pimp. The villain's arrogance, the way he foolishly underestimates John Grady's determination, is really what kills him.

As John Grady lays dying in the playhouse made of packing crates, he prays, but it is once again a prayer full of questions. He says, "Help me...if you think I'm worth it." This may be the great question of the book. Does God think of us as worth helping, even with all of our mistakes?

Billy does not find him until the next day. By now it is too late and John Grady has lost a lot of blood and is in a great deal of pain. He essentially gives Billy a verbal last will and testament, giving away, or giving back the last of his possessions.

John Grady dies alone. Billy leaves him alone to get water and the boy dies before he gets back, so in his last moments he was entirely alone. This time it is Billy's turn to ask God if he sees what has happened.

John Grady says more than once during the novel that he is not certain he has any control over what is happening to him. His love and the path he has to take to rescue Magdalena seem like things that have been decided before he ever came along. Billy, Magdalena, and John Grady have all asked if God sees what happens to them or hears their prayers. This ending suggests that not only does he see it, but that he wove their tale into the fabric of the universe.



## Epilogue, Pg. 263-292

### Epilogue, Pg. 263-292 Summary

Billy leaves Mac's ranch. Mac tells him again that the army is about to commandeer the land, but he always can have a job with Mac if he needs it. He rides out into the desert and away from that part of Texas. The next we see of him it is the year 2002 and he has gotten old, working where he can and living in a hotel until his money runs out. His boots have worn out.

He goes to sleep beneath and underpass and dreams. Then a man catches his eye from across the way. The two sit and split a package of saltine crackers.

Billy tells the stranger he thought for a moment the stranger was Death, coming to get him. The stranger tells him about a time when he drew a map of his life and could make no sense of it. Then he tells him about a dream he had.

In the dream, a man is traveling through the mountains and comes to a stone where sacrifices have been made. It is stained with blood. The dreamer does not know who the traveler is. The traveler lays on the rock to go to sleep. The traveler within the dream begins to have his own dream. He is awakened by a storm and sees a group of men approaching with ornamental weapons and instruments. They are carrying a litter with a young girl on it who appears to be dead. The troupe offers the traveler a cup and he drinks from it. The drink erases his memory and he becomes a captive to the troupe. He tells them, "I will tell you nothing." The girl kisses him and then they cut off his head.

Now the traveler within the dream wakes up and the strangers dream continues. He and the dream traveler walk into an abandoned camp. Then the dreamer woke up.

Billy continues wandering, out of Texas and into New Mexico. He lives on the kindness of strangers, drinking at natural springs and eating where he can. As fall turns to winter he is taken in by a family and sleeps in their shed. He helps teach their children how to ride a horse. When he calls out in his sleep, the mother comes to him and reassures him.

### Epilogue, Pg. 263-292 Analysis

After three books, each of which tells the story of a tragic event in the life of Billy Parham, we find him wandering. The people he loves have died and now he wanders. His way of life and the way of the cowboy is pretty much gone.

Billy doesn't seem especially surprised and definitely does not seem disappointed at the idea of death just paying him a visit.



The story of the stranger's dream is open to wide interpretations. Perhaps the easiest theme to draw from it is the nature of reality. Billy and the stranger argue briefly about whether the man in the dream can have his own dream. Does that make the dream man's dream a separate thing, or just part of the dreamer's dream? If the dream man can have a dream does that make him real within his own mind?

Also notice that the dream discusses things and ways of life that are long gone from the old west such as human sacrifice and powerful shamans who can mix potions for erasing your memory. These are things out of legend, from a time when the Wild West was truly wild.

The way Billy talks to the stranger about death it seems to foreshadow his demise. Instead, the author gives him a second chance to be a part of a family. As the book concludes he is accepted into a home, given comfort when he has bad dreams and a chance to pass along some of what he knows about horses. It is, amazingly enough, a very hopeful and happy ending to a very tragic book.



# Characters

## John Grady

Nineteen years old, John Grady has a gift for working with horses. His best friend, Billy Parham, has nicknamed him "the all-American cowboy." He works as a cowboy for Mac McGovern, herding cattle and training horses. He has a knack for chess and speaks Spanish.

When the rest of the ranch hands go to La Venada, a small brothel in Mexican they are making bawdy jokes and laughing about what kind of girl they're going to get, but John Grady is quiet and watches Magdalena through the mirror behind the bar. He doesn't sleep with her, or any other woman even though they are available.

At the ranch he is trying to break stallion that is so wild it throws him three times in one day. John Grady is so stubborn that even when the horse falls on him and sprains his foot he wants to keep riding, with one foot in a stirrup and the one in the cast hanging free.

It becomes obvious that John Grady has fallen in love with the girl he saw at La Venada but she doesn't work there any more. He searches everywhere he can for her and even pays a pimp just to find out where she is. Even though John Grady only makes about one hundred dollars a month, once he finds Magdalena he pays fifty dollars to spend the night with her.

She falls in love with him almost as quickly as he did with her and begins sneaking out to meet him as often as possible. He sells his horse, pawns the gun his grandfather gave him and spends months fixing up a little house Mac is letting him use, all so he can marry the girl.

His friends all tell him he is crazy. Others say no woman is worth this much trouble. The blind piano player who works at the White Lake tells him it is right to follow his heart, even if it kills him. All John Grady says is that it doesn't matter what anybody thinks. He even expresses doubts about whether he has any choice in the matter at all, as though fate, or destiny is drawing him into whatever is coming.

When it is finally time for his love to make her escape she is murdered. John Grady is not a fighter and has sold his gun, but he takes his hunting knife with him to go find Eduardo, the pimp that ordered Magdalena killed. When he fights it is obvious how experienced and vicious his opponent is, but John Grady is so determined to kill Eduardo that he finally just stops dodging. It is a crazy and desperate move, practically suicidal, but while his opponent slices John Grady across the ribs he jams his knife up through the pimp's jaw and into his brain.

Covered in blood and so cut up he has to hold his intestines to keep them from spilling on the floor, John Grady finds a lonely place to hide and pays a little boy to call Billy.



When Billy finds him, John Grady's last words are heartbroken, full of more concern for the woman he loved and the people he left behind than for his own death. He even welcomes the end of his life now that Magdalena is gone.

## Magdalena

We are introduced to Magdalena while she works as a whore at La Venada. John Grady sees her from across the room, but does not approach her. After that we find out she has been found by Eduardo. He takes her from La Venada, which is a small, cheap brothel and takes her to the White Lake, which is larger, fancier and much more expensive.

John Grady tracks her down and spends the night with her. She is genuinely interested in the young cowboy. She does not speak English, but his Spanish is good enough for them to communicate.

She is not more than seventeen years old and may be younger, but has lived a terrible life. First of all, she is an epileptic; she has violent seizures, biting her tongue and terrifying those who do not understand the disease. Also, she was sold by her family to cover a gambling debt, then beaten, raped and mistreated, even by the police when she tried to escape. She is a tiny girl, thin and frail, but so beautiful that everyone notices her. Even her pimp Eduardo falls in love with her and that proves to be the biggest disaster of all.

At one point she tells John Grady to stop coming to see her because Eduardo will kill her. Still, she sneaks out over and over again so they can be together and eventually agrees to marry him.

Magdalena holds onto an almost otherworldly innocence. Being a prostitute has not destroyed her fear of God, or her ability to love deeply. She asks John Grady if God will forgive her sins, but expresses fears to him and to Eduardo that God does not hear her any more and that no one will answer her prayers. Even so, she acts with great faith that John Grady will save her. After their final visit together she has a chance to be taken in by a kind woman who could help her, but Magdalena turns down the offer because "in three days' time the by she loved would come to marry her."

When she tries to escape, she is tricked and murdered by Eduardo's hired man.

## Billy

A few years older than John Grady Cole, Billy Parham cares for him like a brother. They are both cowboys on Mac McGovern's ranch and when one or the other of them has a scheme they usually do it together.

They are fairly different men. While John Grady Cole always dives into things with both feet, Billy tends to be the sarcastic voice of reason. When John Grady starts talking



about fixing up the little house Mac is letting him use and Billy says "What's this we shit? You got a rat in your pocket?" (pg. 145.) When John Grady suggests they hunt the wild dogs on a Sunday, Billy says the owner will not let them and will not let them borrow the dogs either, saying, "Anyways the dogs wont hunt on Sunday either. They're Christian dogs" (pg. 157.)

Nonetheless, Billy is loyal to the end. He tells the all-American cowboy over and over that he thinks he is crazy for loving Magdalena, but when John Grady asks for help he usually gives it. He even goes to Eduardo with the proposition that maybe someone could buy Magdalena away from the White Lake and helps with fixing the house from time to time.

When John Grady Cole goes missing, Billy goes to look for him at the White Lake. He is an experienced fighter. When Tiburcio, Eduardo's hired killer, tries to knife him Billy clobbers the man twice, breaking his jaw and smashing his face. When he finds John Grady, sliced up and dying, he tries to convince the boy that they can get him out alive, but it is certainly too late.

After losing his friend, he leaves the ranch forever behind. We aren't told why exactly, but the epilogue gives us a picture of Billy as an older man after a long and supposedly rather lonely life of drifting across the country looking for work. At one point he sees a man approaching him and wonders if the man is actually Death, coming to take him at last. He says more and more Death looks like a friend. When he is taken in by a family at the end of the novel it is great to see him find a little peace.

## Troy

Description

## Eduardo

The pimp who runs the White Lake is a cool and frightening character. At some point he finds Magdalena working at La Venada and hires her to work at the White Lake instead. How, or why he falls in love with Magdalena is not explained to us. We are just shown the intensely possessive way he acts towards her.

He is usually calm and collected, though when Magdalena has a seizure he gets violently angry at the other women for the way they treat her like a demon possessed freak.

Forty years old, he looks at the world with a knowing eye, reading and understanding other people's weaknesses almost as well as John Grady reads and understands horses. When Billy threatens to beat him up in his office the pimp simply stares him down, takes out a cigar and starts talking. He understands Billy's protective feelings towards John Grady and uses Billy's own guilt to talk him down. He doesn't necessarily convince Billy that all of this is his fault, but he does make Billy understand the



hopelessness of his situation. He says Billy "almost certainly colluded in enticing away one of the girls in my [Eduardo's] charge in a manner that has led to her death."

It is not until he fights John Grady that we see what a dangerous man Eduardo can be. As he fights with his switchblade the author describes him as a conductor leading an orchestra, as a cat and describes the movements of his knife as "scythelike," suggesting the scythe of death. It is only by refusing to defend himself, by refusing to fight with any style, or fear that John Grady is able to kill this deadly, dangerous man.

## Mac

Mac McGovern runs the ranch where John Grady and Billy work. The government is about to commandeer the land he owns, but he is determined to keep working it until they do.

He has a great appreciation for John Grady's talents with horses. Even though John Grady is a very young man, Mac leans on his advice to make all of his decisions when buying horses at auction. When John Grady tells Mac he is planning to get married Mac allows him to use a little house he owns out in the hills. He also gives the boy his dead wife's wedding ring since John Grady can't afford one to give Magdalena. These are acts a father usually does for his son.

## Tiburcio

The Spanish word *alcahuete* is used to describe this man. In English the word means pimp, but he acts more like the hired muscle for Eduardo, the "grand *alcahuete*." He is small and light, but always carries at least two knives. He is described as being "like Lucifer" and an "incubus." Long story short, the man is portrayed as pure evil without a personality. When Magdalena is trying to escape the reader knows she is as good as dead at the very mention of Tiburcio's name.

## The Criada

This is an old woman given charge of the girls who work at the White Lake and who helps them prepare before the men come to do business. She has only one eye.

She has a bit more understanding of epilepsy than the whores that work there, but not much and so does the best she can to help with Magdalena's episodes. When Eduardo starts thrashing everyone in the room after the girl has a seizure the criada stands up to him and tells Eduardo that he should hit her if he is going to hit anyone. This does get him to stop.

She is also fairly attached to Tiburcio. When Billy knocks the pimp out cold she rushes over and cradles the man's head in her lap, sobbing.



## The Old Blind Piano Player

John Grady meets the old man and his daughter after one of his visits to Magdalena at the White Lake. The piano player has an understanding of John Grady's situation. He has been paying attention to the boy's visits.

One of the most moving and complicated stories in the book is told later on when John Grady asks the old man to be Magdalena's Godfather. He tells a story of a man who asked his worst enemy to be his child's Godfather. The man was dying and his enemy felt honor bound to accept. The enemy ends up having a great love for his Godson and is completely destroyed by that love. Despite his best efforts the boy becomes wild and eventually kills someone. The Godfather goes broke trying to get the boy out of prison and is emotionally devastated.

The blind man tells the story to illustrate why he cannot become the girl's Godfather. He thinks she and John Grady are in trouble and he does not wish to be responsible for them when it happens. Even so, he tells John Grady that it is not foolish to pursue what he loves. Even if it gets him killed.

The blind man also talks about blind destiny and how odd it is to call destiny blind. "...what sort of destiny is that?" (pg. 195) Keeping that in mind, the author seems to be using the old man as an oracle. He "sees" John Grady's downfall coming as clearly as anyone else and can also "see" into John Grady's motives and desires better than anyone.

## Mr. Johnson

Mr. Johnson is Mac's Father in law. His daughter died a while before the novel begins and he has not gotten over it. The author makes it sound as though he is mystified at the very idea she could be dead. He tends to wander out late at night without any clothes on, or in just his long johns. John Grady won't let the others call the old man crazy and often sits with him, listening to his stories of how things used to be in the west.

## The Shoeshine Boy

This smart aleck kid stops John Grady on the way to see Magdalena. He teases the all-American cowboy about going to see a girl while wearing dirty boots. As he shines up John Grady's boots they talk and the kid describes himself as a black sheep, an "outlaw." John Grady says he is one too.





## Troy

Another one of the ranch hands for Mac McGovern and a close friend of Billy's, he is thinking of leaving the ranch at the beginning of the book. He goes with Billy to Elton's ranch, thinking they may start to work there instead. After the visit they decide to stick with Mac.

## Oren

Also a ranch hand for Mac, Oren is the grumpy one of the group.

## Socorro

Socorro is a Mexican woman who works as the cook at Mac's ranch. She is kindly towards the men, especially Billy and John Grady.

## Joaquin

He is the only Mexican ranch hand on Mac's payroll.

## The Old Rancher

This man gives John Grady a ride while it is pouring down rain. The boy is headed back to the White Lake after he finds out Magdalena has been murdered. The old rancher is driving home to take care of an animal that is hurt. He tells John Grady about his wife and how he thanks God every day for her and could never have done anything to make him worthy of having a woman like that. It is a heartbreaking moment, since the old man has no idea that John Grady's love has died.

## The Thief

A little boy tries to steal John Grady's wallet when he passes out after fighting Eduardo. John Grady wakes up, grabs the boy and convinces him to call Billy and give him a place to hide.

## The Stranger

In the epilogue, a man sits with Billy and tells him the story of a dream he had. The dream is complicated and they argue about what dreams mean and whether a person within a dream can have their own dreams. At first Billy thinks the man might be Death coming to claim him.

## Betty

A family in New Mexico takes in Billy Parham before the weather turns cold. The mother, Betty, is particularly kind to him and comforts him after he has a dream about Boyd, his younger brother who died.



## Objects/Places

### Mac McGovern's Ranch

John Grady and Billy work on this Texas cattle ranch, along with JC, Oren, Troy, Joaquin, and a few others. The land it is on is about to be taken over by the US Military. It was once a place of rich grasslands where cattle could graze easily, but the land has suffered under a drought for a long time and it is more desert than anything.

### The White Lake

This is the most expensive whorehouse around. It is in a town just across the Mexican border from where Mac's ranch is. Eduardo runs it and Magdalena works there as a whore. As Billy says, "It ain't no place for a cowboy."

### La Venada

Before Magdalena goes to work at the White Lake she is a whore at this smaller and less expensive brothel. This is where the ranch hands usually go if they are looking for female company.

### The House By Bell Springs

When John Grady tells Mac he wants to get married he asks if he can use this little house. It has been abandoned for many years and is a complete mess. It does not even have indoor plumbing. But, Mac agrees and John Grady works hard to fix it up until it is warm and inviting.

### The Cafe on Calle Noche Triste

We aren't told if the café actually has a name, but the name of the street it is on means "Sad Night." Magdalena goes there to meet a driver who is supposed to help her escape from the White Lake and give a green card. The man who meets her there actually betrays her and takes her to Tiburcio.

### The Clubhouse

After John Grady kills Eduardo a little boy hides him in a clubhouse made out of crates and old drapes. Billy finds him there before John Grady dies.



## John Grady's Horse

Everyone thinks he is crazy for working with a horse as wild as this one. It throws him over and over again. It even falls on him and breaks his foot, but still he refuses to give up training the animal. Eventually he decides to sell it because he needs the money to marry Magdalena.

## The Auction

John Grady, Mac and Oren go to an auction at the local arena to buy horses. They pay anywhere from five hundred to eleven hundred, trying to get the best deals on horses and settle old scores with competing ranch owners.

## The Herd

The cowboys work a sizable herd of cattle. They have to be on the alert for predators that might be killing the cows. They also have to look out for injuries, such as when John Grady pulls a piece of wood out of a cow's leg.

## Wild Dogs

After they find a half eaten cow carcass John Grady and Billy decide it is the work of wild dogs. They get some hound dogs to hunt the wild ones, track them, and use their lassoes to rope and kill as many as they can.

## The Mexican Revolution

Mr. Johnson is one of several characters in the book that saw the Mexican Revolution first hand. It was a vicious fight that was the first taste of war, or blood for many of those that saw it. The author uses it to emphasize the wild nature of Mexico. It is a very volatile place and the people of Mexico are still struggling to define their country in ways that American's take for granted.

## World War II

A number of characters in the novel fought in WWII. They are set apart from the others to some extent because they were a part of something. Troy still carries a lighter marked with his regimental number.

Billy was declared 4F, which means he was physically unfit for service in the military for some reason. He still tried to join up four times. The shoeshine boy had a brother who lied about his age to get into the army. Signing up was considered a matter of honor and not getting in was a mark of disgrace.



# Themes

## Horses

A cowboy is nothing without his horse. When John Grady sells his horse, he is sacrificing his most valuable possession for the sake of Magdalena. He is declaring her to be the most important thing in the world. John Grady believes a horse can tell when you are lying and that if you are honest about yourself, then the horse will trust you. To him they are four-legged mind readers and judges of character. He credits his ability to work with them to the fact that he is not a very good liar. He tends to talk to his horse, asking his mount what they want, or what they are willing to do. The gentle way he treats them and the respect he gives to them is part of what endears us to John Grady in the first place.

The relationship between horses and people is talked about a lot between all the cowboys. Oren and John Grady discuss how hard it is to train a horse that has already been around too many people. John Grady says the best horses have been around a lot of children and "Maybe what they [horses] need is to just think people are trees until the trainer comes along" (pg. 54.) The idea being that they need human contact, but only someone who can treat a horse with respect, authority and understanding should initiate them into the ways of being ridden. Most people are just too demanding of a horse before the horse even understands it is expected to follow orders.

The horse is also a symbol of a way of life. Billy has no horse at the end of the book and that is a mark of how much he has lost. When he is taken in by the family at the end of the book and gets a chance to work with the children and their horse it is a big deal because he is getting that part of his life back and passing on this great tradition.

## Prayer

In the Bible, there is a woman named Mary Magdalene. She is said to have been a prostitute, forgiven of her sins by Jesus. Magdalena's name is not an accident. She too is looking for forgiveness and is very worried about her sins and what they mean and she questions whether God can hear her. Before they sleep together the first time she even asks if John Grady is married because she believes it would be more of a sin for them to have sex if he is married. As the book goes on, both she and John Grady express fears that God cannot hear them because she is a prostitute and they try to understand whether prayer will make any difference.

Eduardo asks her to whom she prays and she says she prays to God, but He doesn't answer. However, when she tries to escape from the White Lake she does not take much with her, but she does bring a Santo, a statuette of a saint used during prayer. It would seem she has not given up entirely.



She tries to tell John Grady that she does not think God hears her. His response is a actually a little funny. He says, "Say it is important," which is as though God is busy and needs to be reminded that this time what she is asking for is a big deal. However, it is also a faith-filled response. It is a response that says God will listen if you really bring your problems to him, so do not give up.

Billy offers the final prayer of the book. It is a cry of rage and frustration, asking God "Do you see? Do you see?" (pg. 261) but it is also a prayer. The author does not come to any specific conclusions about whether God listens, or hears, or considers us worth helping or forgiving. He does confront the question repeatedly and fill the characters with a need to understand and a need to call out to something greater than themselves.

## Value and Sacrifice

"What is it worth to you?" This question comes up over and over in the novel. Whether at the horse auction, or in the pawnshop, it feels as though nothing in this book has a set value except for whiskey. Everyone wants to know what someone is willing to pay.

The examples are too numerous to go over in detail, but a few examples: The pimp Manolo negotiates with John Grady for the information about where Magdalena is. Eduardo and Billy discuss what Magdalena is worth and whether she can be "purchased." The horse trader with the lame filly wants to know what it will take to get John Grady to tell a lie for him and offers him a bribe. When John Grady first visits Magdalena the amount he has to pay is based on how long he wants to spend with her.

John Grady makes some very clear statements about what he values based on the sacrifices he is willing to make. He bargains with the pawnbroker over his grandfather's pistol so that he can see Magdalena again. Then He sells his horse, which could be called his most important possession, when he wants to marry her. The bigger the value of what he is after the bigger the sacrifice he is willing to make.

In a more symbolic example, the center of the stranger's dream in the epilogue is a massive stone used for making sacrifices. It is stained with blood of humans and animals and the dreamer is also killed on it, though it is not entirely clear what he is being sacrificed for.



# Style

## Point of View

Cormac McCarthy uses a very restricted, third-person, and omniscient narrative style. The story follows multiple characters and can therefore be considered all knowing, but the narration normally remains detached, never entering the minds of the characters. If a chapter is following Billy it merely follows him, watching him much as a camera might. We do not get the story from Billy's perspective. As a result the narrator is completely dependable because it only describe what happens and does not make any guesses.

We as readers are almost never explicitly told what a character is thinking or feeling. Instead the author describes their actions and gives us their words. From them we can infer emotion.

The only exception to this detachment is Magdalena. She is the one character whose emotions we are told about. For example, when Eduardo confronts her about leaving the White Lake without his permission we are told "the more reasonably he spoke the colder the wind in the hollow of her heart" (pg. 212.) Even so, these glimpses are rare and used to create a very specific effect. Magdalena is the most fragile and tragic of the characters in the book and when we are told how intensely her fears affect her, it is very chilling.

## Setting

Mac McGovern's cattle ranch in south Texas and a Mexican border town host the majority of the novel's action. It is some time in the late 1940's after World War II has ended. The story takes place over several months from summer of one year to just before Lent of the next.

Mac's Ranch is a large stretch of land where they herd cattle and train horses. There has been a long drought so the land is dry and almost barren. Most of the plants are creosote bushes, just shrubs really. Here and there are vast mesas and huge piled rock formations. There is a barn for the horses and a ranch house where the cowboys sleep and eat. Not far off is a town where the boys go for dances, buying goods and grabbing a drink.

Across the river that marks the border between Texas and Mexico is another town. This is where they go to find whorehouses. There are several, including La Venada and the White Lake, which is much more expensive and not really meant for men of their income level.

The environment the story takes place in is dry, dusty, and almost a desert. At the very end of the novel, there is a rainstorm that changes all of that and the final knife fight



takes place in a downpour while the men try to keep their soaking wet hair out of their eyes.

## Language and Meaning

Much of the book reads like a poem, or like a play. The author does not use quotation marks to indicate speech. He very rarely indicates which character is speaking. You just have to keep track based on the last person who the narrator referred to. Don't be surprised if you have to read a page twice or even three times to be sure you know who said what. Most of the novel is made up of dialogue. Characters tell long descriptive stories, or banter in short naturalistic phrases and the important plot points are usually driven by these conversation.

These stretches of dialogue are interspersed with beautiful descriptions of poignant scenes and powerful actions. In particular, the knife fight between Eduardo and John Grady contains some incredible descriptions. Eduardo does a great deal of talking, but the scene is filled out so that the blood, the rain and the figures of the two fighters are always in your mind's eye.

As we never see the world through the eyes of the characters, these interjections of description are often unsettling. We do not know how much of it the characters themselves see or understand. When Magdalena's cab drives by a funeral procession just before she has a seizure we can assume she sees it because she crosses herself, but we are merely told about the two events and neither the narrator does not purposefully connect them or tells us what the girl thinks. As a result, the coincidence feels that much more frightening. We as readers are not instructed to believe that the funeral procession has anything to do with the girl's seizure. We just know it does.

Though the book is written mostly in English, the Spanish-speaking characters usually left without translation. The narrator explains anything really important eventually, but some very dramatic moments can be if you are prepared to look things up.

When John Grady and Magdalena speak to each other, it is always in a mixture of Spanish and English, but mostly Spanish. The result is haphazard, but beautiful and poetic interactions.

## Structure

Bear in mind that this novel is the third book in a trilogy. This has a big impact on the novel's overall structure because the beginning is in many ways wrapping up the end of *The Crossing*, which is book two.

The beginning of *Cities on the Plain* focuses on Billy and Troy. They take a long drive out to Elton's Ranch and tell stories and work out much of the history between them. This can make for very difficult reading if you have not read the other two books because they are constantly referring to characters we have not met in this novel and





who will never be referred to again. After page thirty-six the story refocuses away from Billy. We watch John Grady begin to search for Magdalena and his story remains the focus from then on.

The book is divided into four sections and an epilogue. Section I takes us to the point where John Grady is in love with Magdalena, but has not really told his friends about it. Eduardo is aware that a cowboy has come to visit Magdalena several times. This is all set up. The stakes are low, the tales are pleasant and the looming dangers are only hinted at.

In section II, he finally tells Billy about his love and enlists his help. Magdalena agrees to marry him and his friends all think he's crazy. This is a section about character development. We finally get a decent introduction to Eduardo and we are convinced that John Grady is loved by the girl the same way that he loves her. The stage is set.

The beginning of section three is similar to old-fashioned cowboy tales. The adventure of roping the wild dogs takes the reader's mind off of love, while also foreshadowing the violence to come. If you didn't know Cormac McCarthy could kill something in style then you do know it after John Grady and Billy rope one dog at the same time and it explodes in a shower of blood.

The second half of the section is the height of the book's tragedy. Magdalena's murder is contrasted with all of John Grady's hope and the completion of his preparations to marry her.

The final section is not tragic in the same way as the third. It is the story of John Grady finding out his love is dead and then following the story to the end by killing Eduardo. Then he dies himself, but somehow the sense of destiny that John Grady carries with him makes the ending more victorious than tragic.

The epilogue wraps up the whole trilogy. The trilogy was about Billy Parham, not John Grady. It is about his life and his losses. The long story about the stranger's dream is convoluted, but the simplicity of the denouement when he finds a little peace living with the family in New Mexico is a fitting end to the story.



## Quotes

"Above all, a deep knowing that beauty and loss are one" (Chapter I, Cities of the Plain, pg. 71.)

"My belief is that she is at best a visitor. At best. She does not belong here. Among us" (Chapter I, Cities of the Plain, pg. 81.)

"Wake up and piss, he said. The world's on fire" (Chapter III, Cities of the Plain, pg. 175.)

"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"  
(Chapter III, Cities of the Plain, pg. 199.)

"...for a thing once set in motion has no ending in this world until the last witness has passed" (Chapter III, Cities of the Plain, pg. 205.)

"I damn sure don't know what Mexico is. I think it's in your head. Mexico. I rode a lot of ground down there. The first ranchera you hear sung you understand the whole country. By the time you've heard a hundred you don't know nothin" (Chapter III, Cities of the Plain, pg. 218.)

"There's a difference between quittin and knowin when you're beat" (Chapter III, Cities of the Plain, pg. 218.)

"You've rewrote the book for crazy. If all you are is crazy then all them poor bastards in the loonybin that they're feedin under the door need to be set loose in the street" (Chapter II, Cities of the Plain, pg. 137.)

"Holding himself close that he not escape from himself for he felt it over and over, that lightness that he took for his soul and which stood so tentatively at the door of his corporeal self" (Chapter IV, Cities of the Plain, pg. 256.)

"He spoke in reasoned tones the words of a reasonable man. The more reasonably he spoke the colder the wind in the hollow of her heart" (Chapter III, Cities of the Plain, pg. 212.)

"In his time the country had gone from the oil lamp and horse and buggy to jet planes and the atomic bomb but that wasn't what confused him. It was the fact that his daughter was dead that he couldn't get a hang of" (Chapter II, Cities of the Plain, pg. 106.)



"Que clase de hombre compartara sus galletas con la muerte?  
Billy shrugged. What kind of death would eat them?"  
(Epilogue, *Cities of the Plain*, pg. 267.)



## Topics for Discussion

What might be a better way to describe what Eduardo's feelings towards Magdalena? It is described in the book as love, but is that accurate?

What are the advantages to the author's use of punctuation? For example, why might he have decided not to include any quotations marks?

Eduardo tries to place some of the responsibility for Magdalena's death on Billy's shoulders. Is Eduardo right? How much is Billy to blame for what happened?

What are the similarities between the circus in John Grady's nightmare and the funeral procession that passes by Magdalena before she has the seizure in the taxi? What are the differences?

What seems to be the author's conclusion or standpoint on God's benevolence or God's ability to forgive?

Would the book be improved or impaired if John Grady had survived the knife fight and gone on without Magdalena?

The West is changing and Mac's ranch will be requisitioned by the army soon after the events of the novel. What is the author's attitude about the disappearance of the Old West as it once was?