

The Crossing Study Guide

The Crossing by Cormac McCarthy

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Contents

The Crossing Study Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Plot Summary.....	3
Chapter One, Pages 1-51.....	4
Chapter One, Pages 51 through 125.....	7
Chapter II.....	9
Chapter III.....	12
Chapter IV, Pages 333 through 363.....	15
Chapter IV, Pages 364 through 426.....	18
Characters.....	21
Objects/Places.....	24
Social Sensitivity.....	26
Techniques.....	27
Themes.....	28
Style.....	31
Quotes.....	33
Adaptations.....	35
Key Questions.....	36
Topics for Discussion.....	38
Literary Precedents.....	39
Related Titles.....	40
Copyright Information.....	41



Plot Summary

Billy Parham and his younger brother Boyd are teenagers in Cloverdale, Arizona, in the early 1940s when a wolf, apparently having traveled up from Mexico, finds her way onto the Parham land and takes down several cows. Billy and his father, Will, begin to work a trap line, hoping to catch the wolf before losing any more cows to the wolf's hunger. The wolf finds the traps and exposes them to the light of day without springing them. Billy's father is disgusted with their efforts and Billy continues to work the line, often alone. He notes that the wolf digs one day in the abandoned campfire of a group of vaqueros, so Billy sets a trap in a newly-abandoned site. When he returns the following day, the wolf is caught in Billy's trap. Billy now faces the dilemma of what to do with the animal he's trapped. He initially intends to go home and tell his father of the catch but can't bring himself to leave her behind, apparently fearful that she'll escape. Instead, he creates a makeshift muzzle and prepares to lead her home as one would lead a dog on a leash. When he comes to the crossroads - one direction toward his own home and one toward Mexico - he realizes that he feels the need to return her to her home rather than taking her to his.

Billy crosses the border and continues toward the mountains. He and the wolf come to an understanding of sorts so that she accepts it when he forces her on her side and dribbles water into her mouth and feeds her bits of rabbit liver and heart. Then Billy is confronted by some officials who take the wolf from him. Billy is helpless as the animal is pitted against many dogs. When the wolf, beaten and bloody, is shot, Billy trades his rifle for the animal's body and takes her on to the mountains to be buried.

Billy returns home to find that his house is deserted and learns that his parents were murdered. Boyd is being kept by a family and he and Billy, with almost no conversation, pack up and head into Mexico in search of the horses taken from their farm because they believe the horses will lead them to the murderers.

The boys have many near misses and then rescue a girl from bandits. Boyd is shot by some men associated with the horses taken from the Parham farm and when he recovers, Billy wakes one morning to find that Boyd and the young girl are gone. Billy returns to the United States but is driven to return in search of his brother. He's told where Boyd's body is buried and learns that Boyd had shot two men for no apparent reason. A friend of one of the men tracked down Boyd. Billy returns his brother's body to the United States and buries him there.



Chapter One, Pages 1-51

Chapter One, Pages 1-51 Summary

Billy Parham and his family move to Hidalgo County, New Mexico, when Billy's younger brother Boyd was "little more than a baby." On the year Billy encounters the wolf, Boyd turns fourteen and Billy is sixteen. Billy notes that the family leaves behind the bones of his sister and grandmother. Years earlier Billy had heard the wolves howling one night and had been drawn to their sounds. On a particular day when the boys are older, Boyd is riding the travois as he and Billy return from gathering wood. The boys encounter an Indian and Billy tells the Indian that they have nothing of value but promises to bring him some food after the family has supper. The boys seem a bit intimidated by the Indian and Billy says they'll bring him out some coffee later, but when they leave the Indian's campsite, Billy tells Boyd that they won't return.

Billy does chores the following morning and then rides his horse to the Indian's campsite and finds the Indian gone. . The boys go in for dinner and find their father there with news that a wolf had been sighted and that the animal had taken down a veal at Foster Draw. Later, Billy, Boyd and their father go to the SK Bar Ranch where Mr. Sanderson lets them into Mr. Echols' cabin to borrow traps and lure. They search for the traps and Boyd finds them in a box under some stove wood. Asked why he looked there, he says simply that his father had told him the traps were "somewheres," and that he'd looked to see. Their father chooses eight of the traps and a bottle of lure. They go home and boil the traps in a washtub on the stove, then coat them with beeswax. Later Billy and his father go in search of the wolf.

Billy and his father remain on their horses as they search for the wolf, careful not to walk around on the ground where they plan to set traps. When Billy's father finds a likely spot for a trap, he puts down a calfskin to stand on and uses deerhide gloves when he touches the trap. The trap set is made carefully and when he finishes, it looks "like nothing at all." Billy sets the next set trap.

The wolf had crossed from Mexico into the United States after having seen her mate caught in a trap. She hadn't wanted to leave, but her mate had snapped and snarled, trying to chase her away from the danger. She'd been nearby when the men had come. Now she is ultimately careful, never returning to a kill, crossing roads in daylight, or going under a fence in the same place twice. Just west of Black Point, the wolf stops. She's scented the trap but it takes some time for her to figure out exactly what's happened. When Billy and his father return, they find that one of the traps is exposed. The next day, several are exposed. They return to Echols' for some additional traps and lure. Boyd goes with Billy and their father the following day to work the traps but doesn't wear a coat and his father eventually gives Boyd his own. Later, Boyd and Billy are working with the cows when Boyd's girthstrap breaks. The cow he'd roped jerks the saddle off his horse and drags it through the woods, tearing it to shreds. At home Billy



says that the saddle hadn't been worth much. His father says he'll trade for a new saddle for Billy so that Boyd can have Billy's current saddle.

Billy goes off alone the following day to run the traps with his father's instruction regarding what to do if he'd caught the wolf. He's told to come get his father unless the wolf's leg is broken, in which case Billy is to shoot her because she might otherwise "twist out." Billy has no more luck than he and his father had had with the previous sets but does find another dead cow, this one a two-year-old heifer. Later in the day Billy encounters a group of vaqueros from Pendleton's. The men are around the campfire and Billy joins them, eating his own lunch and sharing their coffee. Billy continues to follow the wolf trail and eventually goes home. When his father asks if he wants to go back the next day, Billy says he plans to. His father says that they'll go together to run the sets on Sunday, but his mother objects and his father says they'll go on Monday. Boyd asks Billy what he plans to do with the wolf if he catches her and Billy says he hasn't thought about it, but he'll probably collect the bounty.

Billy encounters a man in a Model T who questions Billy about his activities. Billy doesn't say he was trapping a wolf but implies he's trapping coyote. The man tells Billy that his nephew has "some dogs" and says that he wouldn't want to see any of them caught in a trap. Billy tells him generally where the trap line runs and the man leaves.

On Monday, Billy and his father run the traps and make some changes. The next morning, they find a coyote in one of the traps. Boyd and Billy work the cattle and find the wolf has killed two more calves and another heifer. Billy says they shouldn't say anything to their father about the dead cows unless he asks. Boyd doesn't understand or seem to agree with Billy's reasoning but gives in.

Billy goes to visit an old man and asks him about trapping. The old man is bedridden and doesn't seem to offer any real advice about how to catch the wolf. He does say that Billy's quest is like trying to catch a snowflake - that you can catch it but when you open your hand, it's simply gone. As he prepares to leave the house, the woman who is apparently the man's caregiver says that the old man would be completely alone if not for her. She then tells him that it could happen to him as well.

Two days later, Billy travels back past the place where the vaqueros shared their coffee with him and finds that the wolf has been digging in the campfire where the men had scraped their plates. Billy makes some new sets but has lost the belief that he's going to catch her. Then he sees the smoke from another campfire. He goes there and finds that the vaqueros have recently left the area. Billy, without taking the time to stand on the calfhide or to hide his scent in any way, sets a trap in the middle of this newer campfire. He writes a message in the dirt, warning the vaqueros of the trap, and goes home. When he tells his father what he's done, he isn't scolded, but his father says that Billy must pick up the trap the following day. Billy rides out early the following morning and notes that it's the last time he sees his father.



Chapter One, Pages 1-51 Analysis

The scene with Billy and Boyd meeting the Indian is a look at the relationship between the brothers. Billy, as the older, is somewhat protective of Boyd but he doesn't really take any overt protective action. In fact, his protectiveness is almost off hand, but there's no doubt about his stand where Boyd is concerned. When the Indian says that Boyd should stay behind while Billy goes for coffee, Billy straight out refuses. Later, Boyd's saddle will be broken and Billy will stand up for him when their father questions them. Another aspect of the relationship is that Boyd seems somewhat resentful of Billy's role as the older brother though he is dependent on Billy. Boyd wakes one night to find that Billy isn't in bed. When Billy asks what woke Boyd, he says that Billy did. Billy counters that he couldn't have made any noise because he wasn't in the room. Boyd says that's the point.

Billy's relationship with his father is similarly explained in the opening pages. Billy locks the dog up in the smokehouse so the dog won't follow them to the Indian's campsite but forgets to release the dog. When his father comes in the next morning asking why the dog is in the smokehouse, Billy says he put him there and forgot to let him out. When his father asks why the dog was in the smokehouse, Billy says only that he'll go let him out now and his father lets the question drop. Later, Billy sits down to eat and his mother warns not to "even breathe the steam" of his breakfast until he's "said grace."

While Billy is eating breakfast the morning after the encounter with the Indian, he asks his mother what time his father got home and she says that he "rode all night" to be home. Where his father has been is never explained. Later, Boyd waxes part of the traps and his mother asks why he's "sulled up." Boyd denies it and when he later leaves the room Billy asks if he should talk to him. Their father says no. When Billy and his father prepare to go out to work the traps again, Boyd is chopping wood. Billy asks if he wants to go and Boyd declines. Billy tells him not to "be an ass." There seems to be something at the heart of the story that isn't yet revealed and the reader may take these as foreshadowing or may dismiss them as insignificant.

Boyd tells Billy that he had a bad dream about a "big fire on a dry lake," and Billy says that perhaps Boyd ate something that didn't agree with him. Boyd tells Billy that he had the same dream twice and Billy says that probably means Boyd ate the same thing twice.



Chapter One, Pages 51 through 125

Chapter One, Pages 51 through 125 Summary

When Billy arrives at the campfire set, he sees the wolf caught in the trap. His immediate reaction is that his father told Billy to come get him but finds that he can't remember the qualifying instructions. Billy finds that he isn't really prepared, doesn't know whether to kill the wolf or go get his father. He debates for a while, then dismounts and gets out his rope. He lassoes the head and feet and stretches the wolf out so the animal can't stand. He then makes a muzzle from a rope and a stick, using the stick like a bit. With the wolf trussed up in this manner, Billy sets out to take the animal home. When he turns the hind feet loose, the wolf tries to run. When she tries to run and hits the end of the rope, Billy is pressed to hold onto her. His next problem is that the horse doesn't want to be near the wolf and grows frantic.

Billy has almost got the situation under control when the man in the Model A comes down the road. At that point the wolf grows wilder and Billy winds up wrapping his legs around the animal to retain control. When the man sees the situation, he's amazed. He asks Billy if he's always been this crazy and Billy admits that this is probably the first test of his sanity. Billy tells the man to please move the vehicle as it's making the wolf nervous, which makes the man laugh. The man catches Billy's horse for him but asks if Billy thinks he can make the wolf and the horse cooperate. Billy says that neither is going to have any real choice in the matter. He tells the old man that the wolf came from Mexico, and the man responds that the wolf isn't the only thing that's come up from Mexico.

Billy, leading the wolf and riding the horse, seems to make a sudden decision and turns toward the Mexico border away from his home. Billy comes to a ranch where dogs break loose from their chains to try to attack the wolf. This rancher recognizes Billy. He says he hadn't realized Billy was a lunatic and that he'd thought he knew all the lunatics in the country. He invites Billy for dinner telling him that they'll put the wolf in the smokehouse. The rancher says that he can't leave the wolf outside because someone who saw her would come collect the rancher "with a butterfly net." After dinner, the rancher's wife, Jane Ellen, sees that the wolf is injured and insists that one of the ranch hands help sew up the animals' leg.

Billy crosses over into the Mexican State of Sonora with the wolf. He is cold that first night though warmer because of a blanket given to him by Jean Ellen. Billy seizes an opportunity to shoot a rabbit and chops up the liver and heart for the wolf, though she initially refuses it. Billy pushes her down on her side and trickles water into her mouth periodically and she comes to accept this as the way to have a drink. She eventually accepts the rabbit as well. There are several problems along the way, including when the wolf gets loose from the homemade muzzle at one point. As Billy is trying to solve that situation, he tells himself that if she gets at him there won't be anything left but his



belt buckle. But he gets her back under control and they continue their journey. When he manages to shoot a turkey, he and the wolf eat the entire bird.

Billy has trouble again when he's trying to cross a river and the wolf, probably because of her muzzle, can't make the swim. When he jumps off his horse and returns to the other side of the river, there are men waiting for him. They ask for his documents and when he tells them he has none, they take his rifle and demand that he follow them. When they come to a small town, Billy is told that the rifle will be returned, but the wolf will be confiscated. He says that the wolf has been entrusted to his care and refuses to leave without her. He later follows her to a place where she's pitting in a fighting ring against dogs, often two at a time. When Billy objects, he's ordered out at gunpoint. He returns to the ring just in time to see the son of the property owner pull out a pistol and shoot the wolf who has by now been bloodied and torn to shreds.

A man has been promised the wolf hide and Billy trades his gun for the dead wolf. The hide would have been worth little, but the man pretends to weigh the trade before accepting. Billy picks up the wolf and takes her away, traveling on toward the mountains where he had intended to set her free. There he wraps her in sheeting given to him by Jane Ellen for bandages for the wolf's leg. After wrapping her, he settles down to wait until daylight so that he can choose a proper place to bury her.

Chapter One, Pages 51 through 125 Analysis

Billy is basically leading the wolf by a rope and when he reaches the point where he would turn in one direction to go home and another to head toward the Mexican border, Billy hesitates before choosing the latter. Billy doesn't give any reason for his decision or seem to give any thought to the impact this decision will have on his family. He simply turns toward Mexico. Billy's words upon making the decision are, "Damn all of it." It seems that Billy hasn't chosen this path lightly and that he's simply doing what he believes to be right in the current situation.

The fact that the rancher who invites Billy knows Billy's family is not really significant except that the rancher tells Billy he'd considered sending word to Billy's father of the boy's whereabouts. Billy says that he knew the rancher would do so. The rancher says that Billy's father might "want to whip me over" not calling for him and Billy assures him that his father won't be angry. This almost seems to point to the fact that there's something deeper going on in Billy's family than has been revealed at this point.

Billy realizes he's in trouble when he's asked for his documents and has none to show. What could have been the end of his journey turns into a time of waiting as Billy refuses to leave the Mexican town without the wolf. The death of the animal seems to be exactly as the old bedridden man had predicted - that Billy would catch the creature and then, like a snowflake, it would simply be gone.



Chapter II

Chapter II Summary

Billy buries the wolf, notes that the kits die in her womb, and leads his horse away. He makes a bow and arrow from a holly limb and cane, and he and Bird live on the sparse gleanings of the land - a few trout for Billy and grass or lichen for Bird. They arrive at El Tigre where a girl asks if he's sick then invites him in for a meal of tortillas and beans. Just as he prepares to leave, the girl wakes her sister, Clarita, who was sleeping in another room. Clarita touches Billy's face before disappearing back into her bedroom. He stays for awhile with an Indian tribe and an old man warns him of the dangers of being too much alone with no home, saying that this would ultimately make Billy a stranger to all, including himself. Billy thanks the man and moves on.

By now Bird has lost his shoes and Billy admits that the horse has probably given some thought to "quitting him." He encounters a man who lives as the only inhabitant of a ghost town. The man asks if Billy is sick or lost and Billy says he's neither. The man cooks four eggs for Billy and tells Billy that he arrived here as a "heretic fleeing a prior life." The man tells a convoluted story of a man who loses his son and spends the rest of his life as a "witness against God." When Billy is leaving, the man tells Billy that everyone needs a home and urges him to return home.

At Santa Maria, a child takes Billy into a house where he is fed and the horse cared for at the stable. Billy wonders if his invitation inside is a mistake but doesn't meet anyone who seems to be in charge. While he is inside, he sees a horse that he identifies as his father's horse walk by on the street but doesn't locate it again. He spends the night and wakes the next morning to have breakfast alone. He leaves a thank-you message written in flour on the kitchen counter and rides out. He rides through a storm and crosses back into the United States at Douglas, Arizona. Billy borrows a half dollar from a border guard named John Gilchrist with the promise that he'll return the money as soon as he gets home.

Billy rides the rest of the day, arriving in Cloverdale after midnight. He sees no lights and the dog doesn't come out to meet him. Billy immediately senses that something is very wrong. He walks into the house and finds no one is home. He goes to his room and lies down, waking at daylight to eat a tin of stewed tomatoes from the pantry. He then rides to the SK Bar ranch where Mr. Sanderson tells Billy about his family. Billy returns to his house and turns over the mattress in his parents' room, finding a large blood stain. The next day he rides to Lordsburg and talks to the sheriff where he learns that his parents' attackers were likely Indians. Billy asks where Boyd is and the sheriff says that Boyd, as a minor, can't be released, especially considering Billy is also a minor.

No one is home when Billy arrives at the house where Boyd is staying. Boyd arrives in a few minutes and says he's been waiting for Billy. The two steal some cash money, food and supplies - including a shotgun - and ride away on Billy's horse, accompanied by the



dog. The dog's throat had been cut during the attack on Billy and Boyd's parents and no longer has the ability to bark. Boyd says he doesn't want to talk about the murders but does say that the attackers called him by name. Billy says that it means nothing and encourages Boyd to go to sleep. They encounter a rider who says that he'll tell the property owner that Boyd and Billy are "just a couple of drifters." The boys talk later about Billy's absence, and Boyd says he'd wondered if Billy had gone to California. On another night, Boyd seems quiet and Billy says that there's nothing Boyd could have done to prevent the murders and that he shouldn't worry about it. Billy says that he has already made himself crazy thinking about it. As Billy and Boyd cross the border into Mexico, Billy leaves the half dollar he owes Gilchrist from the money they'd taken.

The boys ride into Morelos where they see one of the horses taken from the Parhams at the time of the murders. Boyd takes Billy's horse, Bird, out of sight and Billy unsaddles the horse they've just found, Keno. Boyd takes both horses out of sight and Billy goes into the house where he finds that a German doctor had purchased Keno from some Indians. Billy says that he told the doctor that the horse had been stolen from him, and that the doctor had gone in pursuit of the Indians.

Later, the boys are bathing in a stream when some Tarahumara Indians arrive, share some food while barely acknowledging the two boys. The boys ride on to Casas Grandes the following day to find another man linked with the horses. The man questions the boys and Billy says that they're not so much interested in the horses as in the man who had them in their possession. The man advises that Billy and Boyd return home and Billy says the boys don't have a home to return to.

As the boys travel on one evening, they see a young girl walking. They pass the girl who then walks past them when they stop for a rest. Later, the boys meet some men on horseback. After that, they stop to wait for the girl to catch up, but she doesn't come and the boys eventually ride back where they find the girl in the hands of the riders. Billy and Boyd rescue the girl who rides behind Billy. The boys take the road for a distance then cut across country, hoping to escape the men who are likely to pursue them.

Chapter II Analysis

It seems likely that Billy would turn toward home as soon as he buries the wolf, but he apparently doesn't. There is up to now no indication that Billy is dissatisfied with his life at home and there seems to be no reason for this decision. In fact, it almost seems that Billy hasn't made any conscious decision at all but that he's simply wandering as the will takes him. The only clue lies in the words, "He thought to become again the child he never was," seeming to indicate that Billy's difficult life has not been of his choosing.

The presence of Billy's father's horse in Santa Maria is a foreshadowing of what Billy will find when he returns to his home.

The two boys talk only briefly when Billy arrives at the home where Boyd is staying. Boyd says he's been waiting for Billy to show up, and it seems to be completely



understood between them that they'll go to Mexico in search of the men who killed their parents. This seems to show a deeper level of their relationship and that relationship continues to grow through the coming weeks as they travel together. Much later, there's a brief discussion between the boys as to whether their father would have agreed to having the boys on this quest. They say they know what their father would have said but don't say what that would have been.

When the boys have tracked down a man connected to the horses in Casas Grandes, there's an extensive discussion about their reasons for searching for the horses and the killers. At one point the man says that Boyd is younger and likely believes that injustices within the past "await his remedy." The man seems to be saying that the boys are hoping to undo an injustice by tracking down the killers and that Boyd doesn't realize that finding the horses or the men would change nothing at all. An interesting point here is that the man doesn't seem to realize that Billy isn't so young as to believe this.

The dog is an interesting character in this story. The dog survives the attack on him but is no longer able to bark. The animal seems attached to Boyd and follows them as they set out. Over the coming weeks, as the boys travel around Mexico, the dog will travel with them. At one point, the boys wake to some danger and Billy seems aggravated with the dog, but Boyd points out that the dog couldn't have warned them with a bark because of the animal's injury. The animal seems to become a symbol for what the boys have lost in their lives and the dog will become an important part of the epiphany ending of this book, though throughout the book the presence of the dog is merely something the boys seem to accept without interest. They occasionally feed the animal but when they are riding hard and long across country, the dog trots along with the boys seeming to pay little attention. When Boyd is shot, the dog immediately goes to the boy's side and remains there.



Chapter III

Chapter III Summary

The boys and the young girl remain in a village of farm workers over the coming days. Boyd and the girl connect, though Boyd had been upset that the girl was along. Boyd tells Billy the girl wants to come with them, but Billy denies the request. Nevertheless, they ride out together the following day. Boyd argues Billy into lending the girl one of their horses so she can go home with the agreement to meet later. The boys continue their travels and then find several more of the horses taken from the farm. There are two young boys with the horses and one of them rides off, apparently for help, when Billy and Boyd insist on taking the horses they claim as their own. Billy and Boyd consider making a run for it, and Billy says they're probably going to have problems now, but Boyd counters that they were headed for trouble when they left home. They decide they probably can't continue to outrun the boy that's trailing them and that they'll eventually be caught by the boy who went for help.

When the boy catches up with Billy and Boyd, he has some vaqueros with him. Billy produces papers of ownership, but the man keeps the papers and demands the horses back anyway. Boyd seems on the verge of refusing to return the horses but Billy tells him to release them. Boyd and Billy follow the horses. They then encounter a man who seems to be in charge. They tell the man about the theft. He takes them to where the herd is being held. The man tells Billy to take their horses and Billy asks for a paper of ownership. The man writes the paper and hands it off. Billy tells Boyd that he believes the papers will protect their ownership while on that property but probably won't be worth anything later.

Boyd and Billy have tacos later and after they've eaten a group of men arrive with the obvious intention of recovering the horses. There's a scuffle and one of the men is thrown from his horse in the melee, breaking his back. As Boyd and Billy escape, Billy knows that the man will soon be dead. The boys stop in a stand of cottonwoods. When Billy goes out to check the countryside, he discovers they're being followed. He tells Boyd they're going to have to "make a run for it." As Boyd goes for some of the horses, Billy sees Boyd's shadow billow out in the back and Boyd falls. It's a second before Billy realizes that Boyd has been shot. Billy helps Boyd onto Nino, the horse his father had ridden as his own, and sets out in an effort to escape. When Billy encounters a truck filled with farm hands, he stops and they take Boyd aboard while Billy continues riding. Billy catches up with some of the other horses, including one that was shot and his own horse, Bird. He rides hard until he knows that both he and the horse have to have water. When he finds a stream he stops and walks the horse for a distance.

Billy finds refuge in the home of a blind man. The man's wife makes boiled eggs for Billy and the two tell Billy about the man's role in the revolution and how he had his eyes "sucked out" as punishment for his actions. Billy eventually makes his way back to the Munoz farm where Boyd is being kept. There he finds that Boyd is feverish and in pain



but conscious. Boyd says that he turned fifteen on this day. Billy also learns that there is no local doctor and that a "bruja" had packed Boyd's wound with herbs. Billy is angry and leaves immediately to fetch the doctor from the nearest town.

Billy arrives at the home of the doctor who asks if Billy has any way to pay for the care. When he says that he has no money but wants to give the doctor his horse, the doctor declines that as payment. The doctor, his servant and Billy get into the doctor's car and go to the Munoz farm where Boyd is. They arrive and the doctor goes immediately to examine Boyd. The doctor checks vital signs and listens to Boyd's heart and lungs using a stethoscope. The doctor sends Billy for some things he needs, including water and a chair. The doctor unpacks his equipment and has Billy give Boyd lots of water to drink. When they turn Boyd on his side, the doctor sees the bullet's exit wound, which the old woman has also packed with herbs. The doctor says that the wound looks good. He then trims flesh from the edges of the wound and removes a chip of bone - a piece of Boyd's rib - from inside the wound. The doctor irrigates Boyd's wound thoroughly, causing some new bleeding, and then applies sterile gauze. The doctor leaves with instructions for Boyd's care over the next few days and again refuses Billy's offer to trade the horse for the services.

Boyd tells Billy that the time to meet the girl is approaching and asks Billy to go get her. Billy declines at first but Boyd insists. The following day the doctor's servant arrives with Billy's horse and Billy agrees to go meet the girl. The girl asks if Boyd is dead and Billy assures her that Boyd was alive when Billy left the Munoz farm.

Billy and the girl talk about many things during their return trip to the farm. The girl says that her grandmother had been married and widowed three times by the age of twenty, and that her grandmother's advice about men is that men of valor are always successful except in times of war, when these are the men who risk everything and die. The girl says that the other side of this situation is that men who are unwilling to kill for his woman is equally useless. Billy says that she probably believes she knows a lot about Boyd but that there are some things she doesn't know - such as the fact that Boyd had a twin sister who died. The girl agrees that she doesn't know about Boyd's twin, but that he now has "another." Billy and the girl arrive to find Boyd continuing to improve. Over the coming days, Boyd and the girl spend a great deal of time together. One day Boyd tells Billy not to worry, that "I'm alright," and Billy counters that he isn't alright. Then one morning he wakes and finds that Boyd and the girl are gone. Billy notes that his life is less because he is now alone. He rides out without talking to anyone. Billy goes directly to the home of the doctor where he learns the doctor has died.

Chapter III Analysis

An interesting scene occurs after Billy has been shot and the two boys split up. Billy walks through much of the night, trying to gain distance from his pursuers but is forced to ease up on the horse. At some point he finds the house where the blind man lives. The story told by this man of his role in the revolution is a long, convoluted tale and Billy continues to sit and listen to this story, interrupting occasionally to ask questions of his



own which indicates the level of his attention, though his brother may already be dead for all he knows. This kind of scene is typical of the story and the storyteller. The fact that this long, detailed story has nothing to do with Boyd and Billy, and especially has nothing to do with their current situation, is likely to be distracting to some readers. These scenes dramatically slow down the pace of the story.

While Boyd is recovering from his gunshot, Billy begins to hear questions and stories about Boyd's role in the death of the man during the scuffle over the horses. Billy tells them that the stories they hear and are repeating are "greatly exaggerated," and that Boyd is only fifteen. As is the case with all stories such as this, the people Billy talks to about this pick only the one detail offered that they are interested in and are even more amazed because Boyd is so young to have participated in such daring feats of justice. Boyd is quickly becoming a folk hero. This is another example of foreshadowing in this story because a man who has a reputation such as this will be challenged to fights and his life is constantly in danger.

Billy is jealous of Boyd's emerging relationship with the girl and Boyd's reaction is interesting in that he seems completely indifferent. Of course, it could be argued that Boyd, at fifteen and involved with his first crush, is so taken with the girl that he's willing to make stupid decisions - such as walking away from his older brother in a foreign country. Billy's jealousy seems to prompt his announcement to the girl that there are things about Boyd that she doesn't know and that Billy is the only living person who does know them. The girl responds that she hadn't been aware of Boyd's twin sister, but that he now has another. This statement isn't explained but it seems that she's referring to herself as Boyd's twin or perhaps as his soul mate.



Chapter IV, Pages 333 through 363

Chapter IV, Pages 333 through 363 Summary

Billy crosses the border into the United States at Columbus, New Mexico. He stops to talk to the border guard who tells Billy that he can join the military now that the United States has become involved in the war. Billy rides toward Deming and the people he encounters on the road seem interested in him but give him plenty of room. Billy's clothes are ragged and he's wrapped in a blanket. He arrives in Deming at midnight and spends the night in the bus station. He goes into a café to ask where he can join the army and a woman tells him the recruiting office won't yet be open. She asks if he wants coffee but Billy tells her he has no money. She sets coffee and then a breakfast of eggs, bacon and toast, warning him not to tell where he got the free meal. He thanks her and eats it all.

When the recruiting office is open, Billy and three other young men are waiting. The recruiter lines them up in front of his desk and then asks which among them is younger than eighteen. When none of them say anything, he says that "one in four" who sign up for the military aren't yet eighteen, and that he wants to know which of the four it is this time. Billy admits that he's only seventeen. The recruiter says that Billy's mother or father will have to sign for him to go into the army but Billy says they're both dead. The recruiter says that he'll then have to have some other relative sign and Billy says he knows of no relatives at all. The recruiter has him wait until the other three are taken through the process, then hands Billy a form and says that even if Billy's mother has to "come down from heaven," the form must be signed before he can join.

Billy and the others are given meal tickets and told to go for a physical at a local doctor's office. The others go for their physical first, but Billy goes for the meal first, signing the name "Louisa May Parham" to the form, though his mother's name was Carolyn. At the diner, the same waitress who gave him the eggs that morning tells him that it's too early for lunch and asks if he really wants to eat breakfast again. Billy assures her that he's still hungry and asks how much food he can order off the meal ticket given to him by the recruiter. She tells him he can have anything he wants and he orders, eating another four eggs with the trimmings. Billy then goes to the doctor who says Billy will be disqualified from the military because of a "heartmurmur." When Billy says that the doctor could pass him anyway, the doctor agrees that he could but says that Billy would just be sent back during the army physical. Billy works for Mr. Chandler at a stable long enough to save money for bus fare to El Paso where he tries again to join the army. He's again turned down. Billy uses his meal ticket to eat lunch at the diner before returning by bus to Deming. Mr. Chandler says that there are recruiting stations set up all over the country and that a man could "make a living" at joining the army. Billy says he plans to try again and is again turned down. This doctor tells Billy that even if he slips through the first physical, the army doctors will find the irregularity.



Billy returns to Deming to pick up the horse and sets out on what will turn into a long journey. He goes first to the SK Bar ranch and talks to Mr. Sanders. Mr. Sanders said he thought that maybe the boys were dead. He asks where Boyd is. They have dinner that Mr. Sanders' granddaughter cooked and Mr. Sanders says that he worries that the girl will someday go off and get married, leaving him to cook for himself. After the meal, Billy looks at the photos hanging on the wall, including Mr. Sanders' deceased wife. When Mr. Sanders asks Billy what he's going to try to do now, Billy says he'll probably try to "hire on somewheres," and Mr. Sanders says that his outfit is on the verge of closing, prompting Billy to say that wasn't a request for a job.

Billy rides on that night and finds a job with an outfit formerly known as Hashknives. Billy notes that he goes several months without seeing anyone, working a solitary line camp. In March, he draws a payday and sends twenty dollars he'd owed Mr. Sanders back to the man before going into a bar where some seem angry that Billy isn't in uniform. The barman says that he is thirty-eight years old and that he tried to join but the military refused him. At one point a soldier who is in the bar says that the United States uniform means nothing to Billy, and the barman says that if there were uniforms coming down the street with red stars on the collar Billy would be more interested in the U.S. military uniforms. Billy never explains that he'd tried to join as well and had been turned down.

Billy works for the outfit for another nine months before moving on. By then he has a packhorse, bedroll and some money. When he leaves out he tries to buy some supplies and discovers it's Christmas day. Billy travels on, working occasionally and then goes to see Mr. Sanders again. The man asks about Boyd and Billy says that he never heard from him at all. Mr. Sanders' granddaughter has married and a Mexican woman is now cooking for him. Billy stays for a meal and then agrees to spend the night. The next morning he cares for the horses and has breakfast before heading back into Mexico.

Soon after crossing the border, Billy stops at a cantina and there gets into an altercation with a man who shows Billy scars from having been shot. This time the confrontation seems to be over nationality because the man refuses to drink American whiskey and Billy refuses to drink Mexican mescal. The two don't come to blows, though at several points it seems inevitable.

Chapter IV, Pages 333 through 363 Analysis

The recruiter seems to take an interest in Billy, especially when Billy says his parents are both dead and that he knows of no other relatives. When the recruiter gives him the form, he asks if Billy understands what he's supposed to do with it. Billy says that he's supposed to sign his dead mother's name on the paper and the recruiter immediately snaps at him that he never told Billy to do that. Billy agrees that the man didn't say that and prepares to leave the office. The recruiter stops him and tells him to be certain to return after lunch time that day. Billy stops and listens to the recruiter's instructions and says that he will. Then the recruiter says that Billy has nowhere else to go and again urges him to return. The recruiter seems to realize that Billy isn't lying to try to get around the requirements and that he really is alone in the world. The recruiter seems



genuinely concerned for Billy, which is interesting because the recruiter is seeing dozens of young men pass through his office daily. Billy later tells a doctor that he has no home and that he believes he needs to be in the army. He says that if he's going to die from a heart problem, they might as well use him in the military.

An interesting point about this story is that there are few insights into Billy's thoughts and that it's only his actions that give a clue as to his state of mind and what he's thinking. For example, he travels around the United States for about a year, working for ranchers. During that time the reader has no idea what Billy is thinking and whether he misses Boyd. Then Billy stops and visits briefly with Mr. Sanders and heads into Mexico. This seems to be an indication that Boyd's absence is weighing on Billy, though Billy never says so.

The scene in the bar is somewhat confusing in that the man who shows Billy his scars from having been shot seems to be some sort of representation of Boyd. The altercation over which kind of liquor to drink almost ends in bloodshed, but it's noted that the objective is almost always to avoid that ending. At the end of the scene, Billy simply gets up and walks out.



Chapter IV, Pages 364 through 426

Chapter IV, Pages 364 through 426 Summary

After leaving the cantina, Billy is drunk and stops in the first open barn he finds. He wakes the next morning with a horrible hangover to find children laughing at him. There's a woman there who provides food, saying that the children had said he was sick. He admits that it's a hangover and she says that having a hangover is a sickness as well. The woman reads Billy's palm and asks about his two brothers - one who is dead and one who is alive. Billy says that he has only one brother and that he has a sister who died but the woman is insistent. When Billy tries to question her about what she's seen, she insists that it's "only a game." Billy rides next to the Munoz house where he had stayed with Boyd and the girl, but there's no one there.

Billy goes next to the town where the girl had been from, but no one there claims to know where she has gone. Billy finds a man dead in a house and remains for the funeral. Then a girl begins talking to Billy and tells him that she is aware of his identity and knows Billy's brother. She said that his brother is buried at San Buenaventura. Billy soon rides out, heading in that direction.

Billy encounters the man who had given the boys permission to take their horses. The man says that Boyd had become "very popular with the people." The man says that Boyd had killed two men in Galeana and that he doesn't know why. One of the men had a friend who tracked Boyd and killed him. The man says that Boyd was hunted so that his death was inevitable. The discussion turns to who had the responsibility for caring for Boyd, and the man says that Boyd didn't want to be cared for, that he'd only wanted to shoot people.

Billy travels on and finds the cemetery. Boyd is buried against the southern wall and the date indicates that he died on February 24, 1943. Billy buys a shovel and searches for a caretaker of the cemetery. Finding none, he starts digging. After several hours of digging, he strikes the box. He almost considers stopping there but uses the horse to bust the box open. Boyd is there, in his funeral shroud. He rolls the body in a tarp and puts it on the packhorse, heading for the United States. He hasn't traveled far when he encounters a group of riders. There is a scuffle in which the men of the group cut Boyd's body from the packhorse and then kicks Boyd's body. Billy is immediately angry and in the ensuing fight, Billy's horse is stabbed in the chest. The horse Billy is riding, Nino, rears up and one of the men grabs at the reins and plunges a knife into the horse's chest. Billy flings the knife away and stands holding his hat against the wound but the blood flows freely. The leader of the group yells at the bandit who stabbed Nino, telling him to come on and berating him for killing "a good horse for no reason."

When the men are gone, Billy strips the saddle from Nino and the two stand, quivering. Billy fears the animal is going to die and feels a sense of despair in the horse that matches his own. He walks the horse to the nearby river and stands as the animal



drinks. Billy clutches some clay from the riverbank and packs the wound, hoping to staunch the bleeding. After awhile, Billy takes the horse back into the nearby trees out of sight of passersby. He goes back to the site of the encounter with the bandits and recovers all his belongings, then picks up Boyd's body.

The following day passes slowly. Billy finds the knife that had been used to stab the horse. Billy finds red ants near Boyd's body and picks up the body, wedging it into the fork of a tree. The packhorse is gone and he doesn't see it again though he searches. That night he dreams about Boyd. In the dream, Boyd squats down beside the fire and Billy asks what it's like to be dead but Boyd only looks away without answering. When Billy wakes and sees Billy's body in the tree, he cries.

The horse is lying down as it has been since soon after the stabbing. Billy tries to give the animal water but the horse can't drink without rising up and Billy gives up. Soon after, Billy hears someone approaching and he goes to the road to meet them. The travelers are gypsies and are dressed in gaudy costumes. They have oxen pulling a cart, and in the cart is an airplane. They ask about the horse and Billy tells them what happened. One of the men asks if the horse is for sale, and Billy knows that the animal will, after all, live. The men heat water with some leaves in it and use a funnel and hose to pour the contents into the horse.

Billy remains at the place the horse was stabbed for several days and the horse does recover. When the horse seems well enough, they travel on to the United States. At the cemetery, he selects a spot and starts digging a grave. The sheriff arrives while Billy's working and says he'd expected it would be Billy. The sheriff says that Billy can't just go around digging graves and that the land he's digging on might belong to someone. He then says that he'll go see what he can do about a death certificate and tells Billy to come to his office the following day, then leaves him to his task. Over the coming days, Billy takes to the country again, riding with no particular destination evident.

One evening, the desert wind is "spitting rain" and Billy looks for shelter. He finds it in the form of an abandoned way station. The buildings are adobe and Billy finds a place to sleep in a dusty barn. He pours water into an old hubcap for the horse and prepares to bed down in some hay. Billy has noted that something has been sleeping in the barn and as the rain blows in, a dog arrives. The animal is obviously old and is crippled in its back legs. There is evidence of severe arthritis and the dog has an "illjoined" gait so that he crabs sideways as he walks. The dog stops at the door, unable to see, and smells the air to figure out what Billy is. Then the dog slinks into the shelter and lies down on a pile of hay that he's obviously occupied before. Billy yells at the animal and throws a clod of mud at it, but the dog doesn't budge. Billy finally grabs a pipe and chases the dog out of the barn and into the rain. The dog runs off far enough to escape the immediately danger but seems unwilling to go farther. Billy flings the pipe and the dog runs off into the night, howling horribly. The next day, the Billy wakes "in the white light of the desert noon," and the sun suddenly fades away soon after he rises, making the landscape appear as if dusk had fallen. Billy looks at the fading light and then begins to call for the dog. He can't explain how the darkness fell so quickly and he listens to hear



no sounds at all. Then he sits down on the roadway and begins to cry. After a while, the sun rises again, "for all and without distinction."

Chapter IV, Pages 364 through 426 Analysis

The stories about Boyd have apparently continued to grow with Boyd being credited with killing the man who fell and broke his back during the altercation over the horses. This is an example of how folk heroes sometimes come to be and of why tall tales and exaggerations are so common. The story seems to have become more elaborate, and Billy's own attempt to quell the rumors by saying that Boyd was only fifteen at the time has likely added to the story. The man who tells Billy about Boyd's death says that he'd heard the story long before Boyd was even born. The man says that Boyd is "where he's supposed to be."

One of the gypsies tells Billy that the father of the man who died in the airplane contracted to have the plane taken from the mountains. Billy later learns that the airplane had been stolen. The story woven by the gypsies regarding this plane is similar to that told about Boyd's exploits.

Billy has one other visitor while waiting for the horse to heal enough to travel. He encounters a man who somehow gets Billy talking. Billy says that his "bud" was better at life than Billy. Billy seems to be referring to Boyd. Billy says that Boyd is "smarter than me" and that this knowledge included horses. Billy's next statement is that he knew this as did his father and that was nothing more to be said about it. Billy, as usual, explains nothing of this statement and it seems strange considering that things were strained between Boyd and his father.

The incident with the dog is not fully explained and is left largely to interpretation. There seems to be a parallel between this dog and the dog that had been Boyd's pet before their parents were killed. There is no real indication that the two are the same dog, but it seems more likely that the second dog stands for all the Billy has lost in his short life. Billy's decision to call the second dog back after having chased it away seems an analogy for Billy's own life and his desire to recall at least some of the events of that life. The fact that the day seems to pass quickly from noon to dusk seems to represent the fact that life passes quickly and that it's impossible to change that. The certainty of the sun rising again is also inevitable in life, and those who deserve to rise again will have the sunrise as well as those who don't deserve it.



Characters

Billy Parham

Billy is sixteen the year he catches the wolf. He's an experienced rancher already, learning all he knows from his father. The two spend a great deal of time together, and Billy is respectful of all adults and seems especially so of his father. This interaction is first seen when Billy and his father are setting traps and Billy watches carefully. Billy seems to accept his role in life, likely because he has never known anything different. He never complains at being wakened in the pre-dawn and is willing to work at whatever he needs to do until the job is finished. His determination is seen as he sets out to catch the wolf. Regardless of the fact that the wolf initially finds and upsets all the traps set by Billy and his father, Billy continues to work at the chore until he catches the wolf. An interesting point of Billy's character is that he never seems to think at all about the fact that his parents will be worried about him while he's gone. Billy's personality is such that he seems to feel he can do nothing about it when his brother leaves him in Mexico, but he can't quite shake the idea that he is responsible for Boyd and should go looking for him again. Billy is just a teenager himself when faced with the death of his parents and the horrible responsibility of trying to find their killers. Again, Billy's personality seems to be such that he can't simply find a way to move on with life with Boyd rather than going in search of the killers.

Boyd Parham

Billy's younger brother, Boyd turns fourteen the year Billy captures the wolf. There is something between Boyd and his brother that seems to put a strain on their relationship that does not exist between Billy and his father, but that something is never detailed. In fact, Billy says that Boyd was the smarter of the two and that his father was well aware of that. Boyd is headstrong and is often accused of being "sulled up." At one point, Billy asks Boyd how long he's going to remain "sulled up," and Boyd doesn't say that he's not angry but that he'll remain so until he gets "unsulled." Boyd seems jealous of Billy but typically defers to Billy's instructions and requirements. Boyd is not happy with the situation when Billy insists on stopping and helping the young girl, but it's Boyd who connects with the girl. It's interesting that Boyd runs away with the girl, leaving Billy behind. There is no insight offered as to why Boyd chose the girl over his brother.

Carolyn Parham

Mother of Billy and Boyd, Carolyn Parham is a religious woman who worries about her family and serves as a caregiver in all the traditional roles of a woman of this era. When Billy is going out to check traps, his father tells Billy to be home on time so that he doesn't worry his mother. When Billy sits down to eat alone, Carolyn tells him that he'd



better not even "breathe the steam" from the meal before he's said grace. Carolyn is murdered while Billy is in Mexico the first time.

Will Parham

Father of Billy and Boyd. Will is a hard man in many ways but seems to genuinely love his family and takes his role as provider very seriously. There is some problem between Will and Boyd that isn't fully discussed but seems to have caused a gap between the two that doesn't exist between Billy and his father. Will is murdered while Billy is in Mexico the first time.

Mr. Echols

The man who owns the traps and lure that Billy and his father borrow in their attempts to catch the wolf. Mr. Echols isn't home but has an array of baits, all in bottles, some without labels. He also has many traps and is apparently one of the area's expert trappers.

Mr. Sanders

Owner of SK Bar ranch, it's Mr. Sanders who tells Billy and his father that they can go to Echols' cabin in search of the traps. It's also Mr. Sanders who gives Billy the details about the murder of his parents. Mr. Sanders is elderly by the time Billy stops by again soon after having buried Boyd.

The Rancher in the Model A

He is never named but encounters Billy on two occasions while Billy is setting traps. On one of those times he tells Billy a joke and then tells him that he should never marry because all women are crazy, even the ones who seem not to be. When he finds that Billy has caught the wolf, he asks whether Billy has always been crazy, and Billy admits that this is probably the first real test of it. The man helps Billy get his horse back while Billy holds onto the wolf and tells Billy that it's been a very interesting encounter.

Jean Ellen and Her Husband

The rancher and his wife who own the land where Billy stops soon after making the decision to head into Mexico. The woman sees the wolf has been injured and insists on medical care, calling on a Mexican to sew the wolf's leg back up. She provides sheeting for bandages and ointment for the wound. He tells Billy that Will Parham may want to whip him for allowing Billy to go on but Billy assures him that his father won't mind.



The Girl in Mexico

A girl who encounters Billy and Boyd on the road in Mexico and is then rescued by the two from bandits. The girl connects with Boyd and runs away with him, leaving Billy behind.

The Sheriff

The law enforcement official who tells Billy some of the details about the deaths of his parents and who questions Billy as to whether he knows anything about the murders. The sheriff accuses Billy of having no manners when Billy is unwilling to say whether he has any idea who might have killed his parents and tells Billy that Billy can't take Boyd because both the boys are minors.

The Army Recruiter

The recruiter immediately asks whether any of the group Billy is in is under eighteen years of age and doesn't seem surprised when Billy finally admits he is. The recruiter seems skeptical when Billy says his parents are dead and he knows of no living relatives at all. The recruiter seems interested in Billy, helps him get around the signature requirement, and urges him to return after lunch, reminding Billy that he has nowhere else to go.



Objects/Places

Hidalgo County

Where Billy Parham and his family live.

New Mexico

Where Hidalgo County is.

Foster Draw

Where the wolf kills the first calf.

Colonia de Oaxaca

Where Billy is crossing the river when he encounters the deputies that take the wolf from him.

Bird

The name of Billy's horse.

SK Bar Ranch

Where Billy, his father and Boyd go to borrow traps. This is the ranch owned by Mr. Sanders.

West of Black Point

Where the wolf encounters the first of the traps set by Billy and his father.

Casas Grandes, Mexico

Where Boyd and Billy find the man who sold one of their horses.



Douglas, Arizona

Where Billy crosses into the United States after his first stay in Mexico and where he and Boyd cross back into Mexico together.

Columbus, New Mexico

Where Billy crosses back into the United States after Boyd runs away with the girl.

Deming

Where Billy first tries to join the army.

San Buenaventura

Where Boyd is buried in Mexico.

Social Sensitivity

One issue that *The Crossing* deals with is family responsibility and the breakup of the family unit. When Billy Parham, the novel's protagonist, at age sixteen says, "Just damn all of it" and decides to return the wolf he has captured to the mountains of Mexico rather than returning to his own home, he not only deserts his family without explanation, but he also takes with him the rifle, which leaves his family more vulnerable to the attack that results in his parents' murder. Billy thus has to deal with guilt over the consequences of his early action. Billy also has to weigh his responsibility to protect and care for his fourteen-year-old brother, Boyd, against his desire to recover the stolen horses so that he can regain his honor and secure a certain amount of justice or, perhaps, revenge. After Boyd is shot, Billy begins to have doubts about the decisions he has made. What remains of the Parham family unit is broken apart once again when, following his brother's earlier example, Boyd leaves without explanation with his sweetheart.

Another of this novel's social concerns, evident in the first section, is an environmental sensitivity, since the story of the wolf carries an implied criticism of humans' attempts to extinguish predatory species. Twice Billy recognizes his blood kinship with predatory animals when he compares his own blood to the wolf's and to a hawk's. In one passage the wolf is described as dreaming of man as "that malignant lesser god come pale and naked and alien to slaughter all his clan and kin and rout them from their house. A god insatiable whom no ceding could appease nor any measure of blood." The wolf's right to exist should be respected, the novel indicates, because the wolf is "one among and not separate from" the natural "world ordained by God."

Like most of McCarthy's novels, *The Crossing* also takes up the question of people's proper relationship to civil authority. The inadequacy of the law is depicted since U.S. officials have no jurisdiction in Mexico, where the murderers of Billy's and Boyd's parents have fled. The boys thus replace reliance on the law with a frontier personal code. Their quest for personal justice is also paralleled on a grander scale by the Mexican people's quest for justice. Like the Parham brothers, the Mexican workers have replaced faith in governmental authority with a reliance on camaraderie and community.



Techniques

This is a picaresque novel, loosely structured around Billy's three journeys down into Mexico and back.

These three failed quests are also echoed by Billy's three unsuccessful attempts to join the army. Despite the episodic progression of the plot, some circularity is achieved by the fact that both the first and last sections of the novel culminate in burials.

In this novel, McCarthy also makes his most extensive use to date of the "story within the story" technique.

Through this method he explores the power of stories both true and false and he reinforces the metaphor of life as a tale.



Themes

The Importance of Doing What One Feels to be Right

This theme is exhibited by Billy throughout the story, including his decision to return the wolf to her home. Billy seems to feel this is the right thing to do, though he doesn't express his reasons for believing this. Billy does what he believes to be right again when the wolf is taken from him. He waits for a chance to get the wolf back and goes so far as to trade his rifle for the dead animal in order to return her to her home. When Billy returns home and finds his parents have been murdered, he seems immediately set on the idea of going to Mexico to search for the men who killed them. An interesting point about this is that Boyd seems also to be set on the idea. He says that he has been waiting for Billy's return. There are other points in the story in which doing the right thing becomes an important theme, including when the doctor goes with Billy to save Boyd's life and when the gypsies stop to help Billy with his injured horse—both decline payment for the services. Finally, Billy's decision to take Boyd's body back to the United States qualifies in this theme. Though the action may not make sense, there's no doubt that Billy believes it to be the right thing to do.

Destiny

The question of whether a person is destined for a particular role is questioned at several points throughout the book and is put into words near the end, soon after Billy learned that Boyd is dead. It's at this point that Billy encounters a man from a traveling caravan that entertains for a living. The man tells Billy that men are destined for a certain path and that every time a man takes a step, he is taking a step toward that eventual destiny. This man seems to have no doubt that men are predestined, though he doesn't discuss what or who has charted a man's destiny. Billy seems to have a different opinion when he says that men "shape their own lives." However, he then qualifies that statement by saying that men are all headed toward death and that it really doesn't matter what they do in the meantime because when it's time for death, death will come no matter what action the man takes to avoid this outcome.

Billy seems to have had a similar idea when he came to the crossroads and decided to take the wolf back to Mexico. Though he doesn't reveal his reason for the decision, he seems to believe that he has no real choice in the matter and that he has to go to Mexico. Though Boyd never tells what happened to their parents, Billy seems to have a similar stand on that point and tells Boyd that there's nothing he could have done to prevent the murders. This could be a sign that Billy knows his brother but could also be a sign that Billy believes in the inevitability of a predetermined time of death.



Coming of Age

Billy ages only a year over the course of the story but matures dramatically during that time. To fully understand this theme, it's important to understand Billy as he is at the beginning of the story. He is responsible, respectful of others and goes about his chores with no outward signs of rebellion. When Billy takes on the task of trying to catch the wolf, he goes about it seriously. He braves the elements without flinching and is thoughtful about the chore. In this way, Billy is already mature beyond his years. The coming of age occurs as Billy comes to realize that his life has taken specific turns and that there's nothing he can do to change it. Billy expresses this when he says that he's been to Mexico three times and that the time he goes to get Boyd's body is the only trip in which he attains his objective. Up to this point, Billy has held to the hope that Boyd is alive and well. After this, he knows that he is fully alone in the world. Billy has not physically aged more than a year but has matured in his realization of the impact of events on his life.

Significant Topics

The she-wolf in the novel helps focus attention on one of the novel's important themes — the question of human nature. At least one reason that the wolf fascinates Billy Parham is its wildness. Though the wolf is occasionally mistaken for a dog, Billy recognizes that the wild wolf is worlds apart from domesticated dogs. As Billy examines his own connections to the animal kingdom, he may be wondering if the nature of humanity is primarily wild or domestic. When he forsakes the comfort of home life for the trail to Mexico, tethered to a symbol of predatory power, he seems to answer his own call of the wild.

McCarthy also returns once again to an initiation theme in *The Crossing*. At different points in the novel both Billy and Boyd by their actions declare their independence. Billy sees the prima donna (which aptly means "first lady") naked, after which "nothing was the same nor did he think it ever would be." Billy and Boyd both encounter cruelty and death, and Billy's youthful idealism is constantly challenged by the harshness of reality. His idealistic quests each time end ultimately in failure, and he must settle for trying to salvage something through the noble, although perhaps futile, gesture of properly burying the remains of what he had been entrusted with protecting — whether that be the she-wolf or his brother, Boyd. Ironically, Billy achieves more independence than he probably bargained for, ending up without family, without home, totally alone.

Billy's aloneness, together with the journey motif, suggests that the novel also grapples with some existential themes. Because of the problem of unforeseen circumstances and because of rules and restrictions, it is clear that Billy is not in total control of his fate.

Despite his earnest desire and threetime efforts to join the army, for example, he is rejected because of a heart murmur. Billy is also forced to face up to great loss in his life as he winds up a homeless, orphaned wanderer. His existence is both literally and



figuratively a lonely journey which he must make without a map. Billy once "said that he did indeed have a long journey.

He said he did not know what the end of his journey would look like or whether he would know it when he got there." Billy becomes a man of the road by the novel's end despite the earlier warnings of an old Indian wise man who cautioned him to "cease his wanderings and make for himself some place in the world because to wander in this way would become for him a passion and by this passion he would become estranged from men and so ultimately from himself."



Style

Point of View

The story is written in third person, limited almost completely to the perspective of Billy Parham. There are some minor exceptions, including a section in which the story shifts to the perspective of the wolf. The author seems to use the story of how the wolf came to be in the area as a way of making the reader connect with the wolf as a character. In this respect, it is fully acceptable and achieves the purpose. There is some humor as seen by Billy, but the majority of this is a dry humor that some readers may not fully appreciate. For example, when Billy is trying to get the wolf under control to take it home, the old rancher approaches. The scene is funny in and of itself, but with the rancher's comments and perspective added, the scene becomes hilarious. Billy asks the rancher for help and the rancher replies that he'd like to help Billy keep from being eaten. The rancher asks Billy how he came to be in this situation and Billy, seeming to realize just how ridiculous the entire story is going to sound, says that it's "kindly a long story." The rancher replies that he'd "sure like to hear it." When Billy asks the rancher for help catching his horse, the rancher says that the horse isn't going to put up with the situation. Billy responds that if he can catch the horse, the horse won't have much choice in the matter, going on to add that the wolf also isn't going to have a choice. There are other points of the story in which the fact that someone else is inserted into the scene to share the perspective adds depth to the story. Sometimes this additional character is Billy's horse, Bird, or even the wolf.

Setting

The story is set in New Mexico and Mexico probably in the early 1940s. Billy sees a calendar once with a photo of a "new 1027 Buick," which seems to lead the reader to believe that the year is 1927. However, Billy returns in less than a year to the United States and discovers that America is at war, presumably World War II. The timeline is supported by the fact that there are cars, though they seem to be few in number and horses remain a source of transportation. There are extensive descriptions of the settings, focusing greatly on the land through which Billy Parham travels in his efforts to set the wolf free. Some readers may find the descriptions overdone in that there are minor details offered that have nothing to do with the story. In this way, the action of the story tends to lag somewhat, but the reader who enjoys learning about other places will likely find the descriptions interesting.

Language and Meaning

The tone of the story is basically one of hope and determination, though there are points of hopelessness and insurmountable odds. The language and meaning of the story is somewhat convoluted, largely because of the lack of punctuation and the number of



run-on sentences. Quote marks and dialogue tags are not used at all throughout the entire book. This is sometimes confusing, especially when there is a conversation between two people. When this happens, the only division is that the quote of one character is included in an entire paragraph and the next person's quote is on the next paragraph. This paragraph division is the only clue as to the changes of speakers. The reader has to decide who is talking through clues in the dialogue. Often, the speaker will address someone else by name or refer to something specific that make it evident who is involved in the conversation.

The run-on sentences are another distraction. An example of this kind of sentence is found on page 29, "Boyd booted his horse through the trees and cut her off and got a loop on her and dallied and when she hit the end of the rope the girthstrap broke and the saddle was snatched from under him and disappeared down the slope behind the cow whacking and banging off the trunks of the trees." The meanings in these sentences are sometimes difficult to follow. In addition, humor - such as that seen in this sentence - is sometimes lost in the sheer number of times the author uses the word "and." However, the writing is consistent and most readers will likely adapt to the writing style after reading a few pages. There are also sections written in Spanish. It's not absolutely necessary to know the language, but the reader without that knowledge will miss out on some points of information.

Structure

The book is divided into four sections of varying lengths, each ending at some particularly important point of the story. For example, the first section covers the story up to the time Billy takes the dead wolf to the base of the mountains where he plans to bury it. The section ends with Billy waiting for daylight so he can find a place to bury the wolf. The sections are not titled and are identified only by number. The first section ends on page 127; some readers may dislike the lack of traditional chapters as a stopping place. The book is the second of McCarthy's "border series." The first is "ALL THE PRETTY HORSES;" there are some similarities between the two books, though the plots are different. Each of the books stands completely alone, and there are no references between the two. The similarities are the use of a teenage boy as the main character and the fact that the characters set out from America into Mexico on a particular quest.



Quotes

"Dont you even breathe the steam and you aint said grace,' his mother said." Chapter I, Page 14

"She would not return to a kill. She would not cross a road or a rail line in daylight. She would not cross under a wire fence twice in the same place. These were the new protocols. Strictures that had not existed before. Now they did." Chapter I, Page 25

"Echols one time told me that tryin to get the best of a wolf is like tryin to get the best of a kid. It aint that they're smarter. It's just that they aint got all that much else to think about." Chapter I, Page 27

"'Let's be careful about openin this door,' the man said. 'If that thing has come out of that muzzletie you'll wish you was in a bathtub with a alligator.'" Chapter I, Page 69

"The little wolves in her belly felt the cold draw all about them and they cried out mutely in the dark and he buried them all and piled the rocks over them and led the horse away." Chapter II, Page 129

"Riding like a young squire for all his rags. Carrying in his belly the gift of the meal he'd received which both sustained him and laid claim upon him. For the sharing of bread is not such a simply thing nor is its acknowledgment." Chapter II, Page 161

"She said that in every trade save war men of talent and vigor prosper. In war they die. Her grandmother spoke to her often of men and she spoke with great earnestness and she said that rash men were a great temptation to women and this was simply a misfortune like others and there was little that could be done to remedy it." Chapter III, Page 322

"For the enmity of the world was newly plain to him that day and cold and inameliorate as it must be to all who have no longer cause except themselves to stand against it." Chapter III, Page 331

"The few cars that passed gave him all the berth that narrow road afforded and the people looked back at him through the rolling dust as if he were a thing wholly alien in that landscape. Something from an older time of which they'd only heard. Something of which they'd read." Chapter IV, Page 334

"He said that men believe death's elections to be a thing inscrutable yet every act invited the act which follows and to the extent that men put one foot before the other they are accomplices in their own deaths as in all such facts of destiny." Chapter IV, Page 379

"I don't think he even cared about the horses, but I was too dumb to see it. I didn't know nothing about him. I thought I did. I think he knew a lot more about me." Chapter IV, Page 387



"This is my third trip. It's the only time I was ever down here that I got what I came after. But it sure as hell wasn't what I wanted." Chapter IV, Page 416

"It had perhaps once been a hunting dog, perhaps left for dead in the mountains or by some highwyside. Repository of ten thousand indignities and the harbinger of God knows what." Chapter IV, Page 424

Adaptations

The Crossing is Random House audio-book. Read by Brad Pitt. New York, 1994.
Abridgment.



Key Questions

Reviews of *The Crossing* have been sharply split, so a good place to start a discussion might be an evaluation of the novel. Is the language pretentious or profound? Is the action static, or is there an identifiable progress to the plot? Does the use of Spanish make the story more authentic or merely more difficult? In general, it should be interesting to discuss whether at this late stage in McCarthy's career his narrative powers are growing or diminishing. This discussion could also include an analysis of the ways in which *The Crossing* is less commercial than *All the Pretty Horses*, since the later novel is longer, more open-ended, and bleaker.

Another major issue to explore could be McCarthy's views on existence. This author is always rewarding to study because he never shies away from the most profound and problematic issues of our lives. What does the novel suggest about human existence, justice, fate, death, evil, and religion?

1. Why does Billy chase off the pathetic yellow dog at the end of the novel? Why did he shoot the hawk earlier? How does he feel about his actions?
2. Does Billy Parham complete his "crossing" into adulthood? What has he learned as a result of his journeys?

Which of his decisions do you see as unwise?

3. What does the pregnant she-wolf symbolize? What do the horses symbolize? The guns and knives?
4. Does Billy qualify as a hero despite his failures? If so, what kind of a hero is he? Is he less of a hero than Boyd?
5. Assess the significance of Billy's encounters with the several types of wise men/women in the novel.
6. Explore the relationship of stories, history, and the truth. What is suggested about the power of a story, especially a false story?
7. Discuss the novel as metafiction.

What does McCarthy say about the task, methods, problems, and purpose of a storyteller?

8. What is the function of the stories within the story? How similar is this technique to Melville's famous digressions?
9. Examine the mythic underpinnings of the novel, as for example when Billy's discarded bow is described as the "legacy of some drowned archer, musician, maker of



fire." Or discuss the bearing that the many wolf stories from fairy tales and folklore might have on this novel.

10. What does McCarthy imply about suffering in the world? Is it meaningful or simply absurd?



Topics for Discussion

Describe all you know about Billy's family and the relationships between the members.

Why do Billy, Boyd and their father go to Mr. Echols? What happens during this trip? Describe the efforts at catching the wolf.

What happens when Billy catches the wolf? Why does he choose to go to Mexico instead of going home? What is the outcome of that trip?

Billy goes to Mexico three times. Upon the return from his third, he says that this was the first time he'd found what he'd gone looking for and that he wasn't happy about having found it. Describe what Billy was looking for each of the three trips and the result of each.

How do the stories about Boyd get started? What fuels them? How do these stories that are repeated about Boyd differ from what really happens?

Who is Mr. Sanders? Jean Ellen and her husband? The man in the Model A? The army recruiter? The sheriff? What role does each play in the lives of Billy and Boyd?

What happens to Will and Carolyn Parham? What details does Billy learn about the event? What details are missing? Why do you believe these details are never revealed?

What is the significance of the dog in the story? What are some other aspects of the story that could be interpreted as symbolic for specific aspects of life?

Literary Precedents

Like Ike McCaslin of Faulkner's "The Bear," Billy becomes an expert at hunting a powerful, mysterious, elusive beast. Both boys must become students of nature and of ancient values before their goals can be realized.

The first section of the novel may also remind readers of Jack London's *White Fang* (1906) and the scene in which Billy shoots the she-wolf to protect her from further suffering has some of the same power as the scene in which George shoots Lenny in Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* (1937).

The Crossing is also very much in the tradition of American frontier literature, especially Westerns, and it even has some elements in common with the epic and with tragedy. Like King Lear, Billy makes some unwise decisions and loses nearly everything he loves.

Related Titles

The Crossing is the second volume in McCarthy's Border Trilogy. The upcoming last novel in the series, according to the Woodward interview (please see the biographical entry), will return to the character of John Grady Cole (from *All the Pretty Horses*, 1992) and will focus on his relationship with a prostitute.

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