

EXISTENTIALIST MOTIFS OF ALIENATION AND DEATH IN MCCARTHY'S *BORDER TRILOGY*

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Abstract. The article closely reads Cormac McCarthy's *Border Trilogy* in light of the existentialist motifs of alienation and death. The aim of the study is to analyse the literary representation of these motifs in the trilogy. The applied methodology involves close reading, which facilitates identifying the motifs of death and alienation in the novels; character analysis, focused on exploring the main characters' experiences of death and alienation; and comparative analysis, which is used to compare the representation of the existentialist motifs in the novels. The study reveals that in *The Border Trilogy*, the existentialist motif of alienation manifests itself through the desire of the main characters to free themselves from social conventions and to mend the wrongness of the world they live in. This motif takes forms of madness, alienation from other characters, and isolation from society. The protagonists, looking for their place in the world, face hardships, encounter resistance, and therefore constantly feel estrangement. In the novels, the existentialist motif of death serves for a better understanding of human nature and is one of the driving forces of the protagonists' existence. This motif manifests itself through blood and bones, dreams, natural and violent deaths, the extermination of nature, and the disappearance of established traditions. Symbolising the end of existence, death prompts the main characters to search for the purpose of their lives and strive for authenticity.

Keywords: Cormac McCarthy, *The Border Trilogy*, existentialist motifs, death, alienation

INTRODUCTION

The feeling of alienation connected with death prevails in a modern world full of endless wars and military conflicts. The global turmoil is reflected in literature, where prominent writers question the principles of society, emphasising existential issues about the aim and value of human life. Among them is Cormac McCarthy, a legend of the modern American western genre, who contributed to world literature in his pursuit of understanding the notions of alienation and death, inter alia. The author's novels often delve into themes of darkness and

violence, revealing the most depressing and disgusting flaws of the world while also examining metaphysical questions about the capacity for good and evil in human nature and the place of humanity in the universe. The author explores the legacy of American history that is marked by invasion, conquest, slavery, racism, the exploitation of the poor and the working class, and the attempted genocide of Indians in the US and Mexico (Spurgeon, 2011: 3). McCarthy uses diverse literary strategies to develop this range of literary themes. In his novels, the writer skilfully blends elements of Shakespearean language, which is characterised by the use of archaic words and figurative language, with Hemingway's simplicity of style, which reflects McCarthy's preference for minimalistic and direct prose (ibid.). Additionally, the writer incorporates Faulknerian sentence structures by crafting extended complex sentences through subordination (Gugin, 2016: 89) and employs atypical punctuation. This includes a refusal to use commas, apostrophes, quotation marks, etc., as the author believes that good writing does not require unnecessary distractions. Besides, McCarthy's works are known for unforgettably ambiguous opening and closing scenes and well-written dialogues, which make it obvious who is speaking due to the use of regional dialects (Spurgeon, 2011: 3-4). In order to preserve the local colour and authenticity of the narrative, some conversations are written in Spanish, as, for example, in *The Border Trilogy*, where the main characters quite often speak with Mexicans in their native tongue.

The Border Trilogy, which includes the novels *All the Pretty Horses* (1992), *The Crossing* (1994) and *Cities of the Plain* (1998), may be perceived as a magnificent example of realism in which the problems of society are represented in the light of the lives of mid-20th-century cowboys. The scene takes place in two countries, the USA and Mexico, which share the same border but are very dissimilar in their culture, politics, and way of life. The time span of the novels comprises the period from the end of World War I to the early 1960s. Chronologically, *The Crossing* presents the subject line in the period between World War I and World War II, while the events in *All the Pretty Horses* take place in 1949 and 1950, and the last novel, *Cities of the Plain*, is set in 1952.

The novels of *The Border Trilogy* have already been a subject of academic interest for such scholars as Bloom (2004), Arnold and Luce (2001), Lincoln (2009), Hillier (2017), Estes (2013), O'Sullivan (2014), Spurgeon (2011), Owens (2000), Tavlin (2017), and others. While their studies have shed light on essential aspects of the novels, such as recurring themes, genre, the author's distinctive style, and the philosophical foundation of his storytelling, the books have not yet been thoroughly analysed in light of the existentialist motifs, specifically those of death and alienation. Thus, the aim of the study is to explore the literary representation of the existentialist motifs of death and alienation in *The Border Trilogy*. The methodology involves close reading, which helps identify motifs of death and alienation in the novels; character analysis, focused on examining the main characters' experiences and existential dilemmas; and comparative analysis, which aids in comparing the representation of existentialist motifs in the novels.

The Border Trilogy raises philosophical questions about the nature of human relations, the value of life and the inevitability of death, the fatality and presence of a choice, love, and devotion. The main characters are looking for their place in the world, which is why they cross and recross the border between America and Mexico. Their journeys result in a re-evaluation of their core values and principles; their road life evokes in the protagonists the feeling of detachment, teaching the boys to accept the imminence of death. The main characters question the value of human life and search for the essence of their existence.

The Border Trilogy belongs to the western genre. This genre is characterised by a more romanticised depiction of the West and its problems; the events usually take place in the western US territories (Saricks, 2001: 351), also known as the frontier. The protagonist is mostly a cowboy with an iron will and strong convictions who is not devoid of human frailties. The hero strives to rectify the evil in the world, even if it may lead to violence in the end; he wants to take revenge and/or has to fight for survival in a harsh and lawless world (ibid.: 352). However, in the novels, the stereotypical cowboy Stoicism is reshaped into a deep and lasting philosophy of life (Hillier, 2017: 99), which the protagonists adopt and practice. The landscape is generally alien and hostile for newcomers, so they ought to go through a myriad of perils to achieve their aim (Saricks, 2001: 355). Dialogues are sparse and laconic, which corresponds to the disposition of cowboys as people of action and few words.

To achieve that, McCarthy uses the basic formulas of the genre: the novelist avoids unnecessary sentimentality, cursory nostalgia, and underserved happy endings (Bloom, 2009: 74). The western, for McCarthy, serves to explore the relationships between being and witness, truth and desire, violence and empathy. Each of the novels in *The Border Trilogy* starts in a naturalistic manner, but as the main characters cross into Mexico, elements of nightmarish surrealism come into play (Wood, 2016: 179), intensifying the conventional struggle between right and wrong that the protagonists must confront. John Grady Cole and Billy Parham both have moral convictions and are guided by their own principles, although there is an inner conflict regarding their actions and motives (Bloom, 2009: 75). Even though they both are fond of horses, the protagonists have somewhat different worldviews shaped by their life experiences and past, which determine their estrangement from humanity and death drive. Their contrasting perspectives complement each other, adding depth to their characters and enriching the author's exploration of morality, alienation, and loss of life within the western landscape.

Initially, all the novels in *The Border Trilogy* were imagined as a single screenplay entitled *Cities of the Plain* (Lincoln, 2009: 101). Later, they evolved into three different books, each with its own distinctive features. *The Crossing* is the darkest of them all and delves more into metaphysical inquiries about the nature of culture and identity (Spurgeon, 2011: 12). *All the Pretty Horses* resembles an adventure story with teenagers full of enthusiasm and vigour who endeavour to lay their path to a better future but see the world through rose-coloured spectacles, believing that they may easily overcome any obstacles just because they wish it wholeheartedly. However, gradually, the novel evolves into a realistic story that questions

the cornerstones of a society in which humanity is a derelict and corruption is a virtue, where life is marked by misery, estrangement, agony, demise, and murder is a common thing. Together with *The Crossing*, the novel has the structural characteristics of a Bildungsroman, encompassing themes of initiation, maturity, and self-awareness (Owens, 2000: 61). The narrative in the novels is built upon two border paradigms: the myth of progress (*All the Pretty Horses*) and the primitive-pastoral myth (*The Crossing*). The stories revolve around romantic heroes; in the first myth, the hero embodies national hopes for the future while simultaneously battling the Other to defend Anglo-American dreams (ibid.: 66). This reference is quite deft in the context of the exploration of the motif of alienation in *The Border Trilogy*, inasmuch as the protagonists of the novels withstand their national identity abroad, thus fulfilling one of the aspects of the American dream. Namely, it is the right to become a self-made person. In the second myth, the timeless themes of human connection with nature, the allure of the wilderness, and the challenges of existence in a rugged landscape are investigated (ibid.: 68). *Cities of the Plain* explores the nature of human relations and the consequences of human action or inaction. Both protagonists adamantly hold on to their core cowboy self-identities: John Grady embodies the legendary cowboy on a quest for a lost homestead, while Billy remains a steadfast saddle companion, striving to harmonise the demands of idealism with the challenges of reality (Arnold and Luce, 2001: 200). In the novel, the cowboy codes, which form the behavioural patterns of the protagonists, are renovated to embody ideas that extend far beyond the confines of the classical Western frontier in US-American literature. It reflects a broader national identity concept while exposing a significant American anxiety regarding the perceived fragility of that very identity (ibid.: 201). Thus, the search for belonging of the main characters reflects not only an individual struggle but also the collective concerns of a nation.

All the novels are built around the border and its crossing. Thus, the main characters, the teenagers, not only live at the frontier but frequently cross the borderline between the two countries. In the first book, *All the Pretty Horses*, John Grady and Lacey Rawlins set off on their journey to Mexico to become cowboys, as in America all the ranches are slowly disappearing due to technological progress and cars are gradually supplanting horses. On their way, the boys meet a thirteen-year-old wanderer, Jimmy Blevins, who, in the end, becomes the cause of their imprisonment. Looking for a land of wonder, they find poverty and dereliction; searching for freedom, they end up in prison. Facing cruelty and death, all their illusions vanish. After the murder of their newly-gained road-fellow Blevins, Rawlins and Grady sorrowfully return home, estranged from society and each other.

In *The Crossing*, Billy Parham crosses the frontier three times, and each journey is eye-opening and heartbreaking, as he never achieves what he intends to in the first place. The first time, Billy comes to Mexico to save the wolf that he has caught, but only manages to bring to the mountains the wolf's dead body. The boy reveals that the world is far from being kind and sympathetic. Having come back, the young

cowboy finds his family dead and their horses stolen. The only relative left is his younger brother, Boyd, with whom Billy sets off for another journey, a fruitless attempt to disgorge property. In the end, Billy again returns to America, but alone, as Boyd has run off with a Mexican girl. For the last time, Parham crosses the border to find his brother, but he has been long dead, so the only thing he restores are Boyd's remnants that he buries in his homeland.

In the last book, *Cities of the Plain*, Billy Parham and John Grady are employed on a ranch in Texas, not far from the border. The friends do the job they love above all else in the world—looking after horses—and from time to time cross the border to go to a bar or a whorehouse. Grady, who has a romantic disposition, falls in love with a whore, which eventually leads to his and her fatal deaths. After the loss of his friend, Billy goes to Mexico, where, as an outcast, he aimlessly wanders across the country.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

In existentialism, alienation is a separation from one's true being, which means that a person lacks authenticity and is unable to perceive themselves as ultimately free and responsible (Michelman, 2010: 31). On the other hand, estrangement creates possibilities for a higher existence (Hegel, 1998: 206). For example, when individuals experience a sense of disconnection from their usual reality, they may gain a new perspective and a deeper understanding of themselves and the world around them. Also, alienation arises when a person becomes consciously aware that the image they have of themselves does not align with how others perceive them (Barnes, 1968: 128). Heidegger in *Being and Time* (1927) stresses that one may achieve authenticity only by extracting oneself from alienating social conventions and taking responsibility for one's own life through a solitary confrontation with death and anxiety (Heidegger, 2008: 295; Michelman, 2010: 32). Thus, alienation could mean that a person cannot find their own place in the world, therefore feeling lonely and abandoned. This is the fate of the protagonists in *The Border Trilogy*, who, after the confrontation with harsh reality, become disillusioned, and their worldview is shattered. They can neither find their own place in society nor free themselves from its conventions; thus, they end up estranged from both people and the world. Their alienation makes the main characters reconsider their own lives in search of the meaning of their existence.

Death, in existentialism, is considered not as a physical event or biological process but rather as the awareness that one is going to die. The awareness of death is a constitutive of existence that is not merely a physiological state of presence and that has its connection to the awareness of freedom and to the exercise of authenticity (Michelman, 2010: 112). Jaspers (1969: 118) believes that death is one of the limit situations that serves for the emergence of existence. In the presence of death, life deepens, and existence becomes more self-assured (ibid.: 199). As a contingent fact, death is associated with facticity, and life's finitude plays a role in

determining freedom (Sartre, 1956: 546). According to Heidegger, a full existential awareness of death is a necessary condition for authenticity, as death gives one's life a properly finite and personal perspective (Heidegger, 2008: 294; Michelman, 2010: 112). In *The Border Trilogy*, the protagonists observe the interconnectedness of life and death. They become aware that the existence of life is only possible due to the existence of death, as the final form of life is death. All creatures, including human beings, will eventually die, and only the understanding of the finitude of existence, which is solely the prerogative of intelligent beings, makes them appreciate their lives. Each character's quest for identity, purpose, freedom, and a place in the world is inextricably linked to their acknowledgement of mortality. It is in this stark confrontation with the finitude of existence that they affirm the significance of their own lives.

PROCEDURE OF THE STUDY

1 EXISTENTIALIST MOTIF OF ALIENATION

In *The Border Trilogy*, alienation is not limited to one dimension but rather spans across different realms of existence. It takes several forms, namely madness, estrangement from people, and isolation from society. This multifaceted depiction of alienation provides a deeper understanding of human emotions and relationships, showing how it influences their perception of the universe and their role in it. The experience of estrangement serves as a catalyst for the main characters self-discovery and a deeper understanding of both themselves and the world around them.

A form of escape from the turmoil and conventions of the world, madness allows an individual to detach from reality. When a person is overwhelmed with suffering, the only way to forget pain is to descend into madness. In *Cities of the Plain*, a rancher, Mr Johnson, begins to lose his sanity after the tragic loss of his daughter: 'The old man is getting crazier and crazier' (McCarthy, 2011b: 11). Being unable to cope with his sorrow on his own and receiving no solace from the world, the man gradually alienates himself from society. However, formally, he remains within the community despite his mental state, while in *The Crossing*, Billy meets a hermit who lives in isolation. The man is eccentric in his own way; through the story he tells young Parham, the older character reveals the sorrow and grief of his own life, to escape from which he has chosen insanity: 'Such a man is like a dreamer who wakes from a dream of grief to a greater sorrow yet. All that he loves is now become a torment to him' (McCarthy, 2011a: 149). Madness, for the hermit, is also a way to keep living in the alienated world that has rejected him. Similarly, Billy feels like an outcast in the harsh reality where he is forced to execute the wolf to free her from suffering. This experience deeply unsettles his mental wellbeing, driving him to seek salvation in the wilderness. A chance meeting with the Indians, who respect lunatics believing that they have a unique connection to the spiritual world: 'All of whom may well have thought him mad for the regard with which they

treated him. They fed him and the women washed his clothes and mended them and sewed his boots' (ibid.: 136), which only intensifies Billy's sense of estrangement. His experiences of solitude and moments of apparent madness become integral to his evolving understanding of identity and purpose, giving him a new perspective on the world. However, insanity is not always an individual matter. If it becomes prevalent within an entire community, it can lead to the exclusion of certain groups of people from society. In *All the Pretty Horses*, Dueña Alfonsa highlights the absurdity of the world and the madness of men who degrade women by denying them their social rights, thus leaving them on the outskirts of society in the first half of the 20th century: 'Society is very important in Mexico. Where women do not even have the vote. In Mexico they are mad for society and for politics and very bad at both' (McCarthy, 2001: 231). This connection between personal mental alienation and its potential impact on the country highlights the intricate interplay between individual experiences and the broader dynamics of society. Thus, madness, as a form of alienation, reflects the emotional turmoil that can lead to isolation and disconnection, affecting both individuals and specific social groups.

Alienation from people and isolation from society are closely connected, as they often reinforce and exacerbate each other. When an individual experiences estrangement from others, it can lead to a sense of isolation and exclusion from society. This isolation, in turn, intensifies the feeling of detachment from society's norms, values, and interactions. In *All the Pretty Horses*, John Grady experiences estrangement when he realises that his efforts to overcome the primordial alienation of a foreign country and make it his new home (Tavlin, 2017: 117) are in vain. His distinct cultural background and limited understanding of Mexican traditions, nuances, and unspoken rules mark him as an outsider. Therefore, his relationship with Alejandra, the daughter of a rich ranch owner, is doomed not only because they belong to different social classes and have dissimilar positions in society, but also due to the cultural gap between them. In Mexico, the role of a woman is strictly defined and constrained by societal norms. Alejandra's aunt, mentioned above, Dueña Alfonsa, warns Grady about that: 'I want you to be considerate of a young girl's reputation [...] Here a woman's reputation is all she has' (McCarthy, 2001: 136). However, he tries to challenge the world, to eliminate injustice, and to marry his mistress, but in vain. The primordial traditions cannot be so easily overruled, and the cultural gap cannot be so easily bridged. The protagonist experiences disappointment and solitude due to the loss of the person he loves: 'He felt a loneliness he'd not known since he was a child and he felt wholly alien to the world although he loved it still' (ibid.: 282). John's frustration further leads to his detachment from society, where he has no place.

Grady's estrangement has deep roots: his mother, the first woman he loved, abandoned him when he was an infant, as John's father recalls: 'We were married ten years before the war come along. She left out of here. She was gone from the time you were six months old till you were about three' (McCarthy, 2001: 25). John's mother, weary of the rural life and driven by her dreams, leaves the family, creating a void in Grady's soul and sparking a yearning for acceptance and validation. His father

feels guilt for not recognising the differences between him and his wife, instead focusing solely on their shared love for horses, which he believes to be the crucial bond between them: 'Your mother and me never agreed on a whole lot. She liked horses. I thought that was enough. That's how dumb I was' (ibid.: 24). Horses play a significant role in the trilogy, symbolising the beauty and independence of nature while also reflecting the innate human longing for freedom—the freedom that John so eagerly pursues and that his mother finally attains. The reference to horses in the title signifies the connection between humans and the wilderness. This wilderness constantly tests John, much like he attempts to tame horses. Moreover, the title of the novel directly refers to an African American lullaby, *All the Pretty Little Horses*, creating the atmosphere of a nursery rhyme (Estes, 2013: 139). One of the lines, 'poor little baby crying momma', serves as a reference to the harsh lives of slaves. During that time, mothers were often separated from their children to perform exhausting work. Similarly, the main character is separated from his mother and thrust into an alienated world, which, over the course of the story, will change his naïve view and shatter his perception of the world.

Similarly to *All the Pretty Horses*, in *Cities of the Plain*, John Grady experiences alienation due to his inability to find his own place in the absurd reality and the loss of his beloved person, Magdalena. Though the girl is a prostitute, she differs from those whores who have no moral standards and welter in vice. Despite working as a prostitute since her early teens, she has managed to preserve her childish disposition and optimistic worldview. Afflicted with epilepsy, Magdalena always feels like an outcast, even in the whorehouse, where other women treat her as if she is cursed:

The girl's mouth was bloody and some of the whores came forward and dipped their handkerchiefs in the blood as if to wipe it away but they hid the handkerchiefs on their persons to take away with them and the girl's mouth continued to bleed. They pulled her other arm free and tied it as well and some of them were chanting and some were blessing themselves and the girl bowed and thrashed and then went rigid and her eyes white. (McCarthy, 2011b: 73)

Comparable with John, the young girl is alienated from her surroundings, and her very right to exist is denied by her master Eduardo: 'What are you [...] You are nothing' (ibid.: 185), which leads to feelings of estrangement and despair. John sees the wrongness in this world in which children are forced to hard labour or prostitution, where a person can easily become someone's property and human life has no value at all: 'She had been sold at the age of thirteen to settle a gambling debt. [...] Then they sold her to the prisoners for what few pesos they could muster or traded her for cigarettes' (ibid.: 140). Therefore, Grady strives to free Magdalena from her alienation and give her and his life a new meaning and purpose, but the odds are not in their favour. Finally, he sacrifices his life to revenge her, as he is no longer able to live alone in the alien world: 'When I seen her layin there I didn't care to live no more. I knew my life was over' (ibid.: 261). Thus, not being able to free themselves from the conventions of the existing society, the main characters fell prey to them.

In *The Crossing*, Billy's alienation and isolation from society are caused by his strangeness. Parham is different from other people in the way he treats animals. Unlike the majority, who view them as mere tools or pests, Billy engages with them on a personal level, which is exemplified by his conversation with the wolf: 'He talked to her a long time [...] he said what was in his heart. He made her promises that he swore to keep in the making' (McCarthy, 2011a: 108). His attitude towards animals reveals his empathy and desire for harmonious coexistence with the environment. Billy tries to capture the essence of the world through the perception of another creature:

He tried to see the world the wolf saw. He tried to think about it running in the mountains at night. He wondered if the wolf were so unknowable as the old man said. He wondered at the world it smelled or what it tasted. He wondered had the living blood with which it slaked its throat a different taste to the thick iron tincture of his own. (McCarthy, 2011a: 53)

The young cowboy seeks to understand another living being in order to gain a deeper comprehension of his own existence. However, his strangeness is strikingly evident to others: 'I was always just like everybody else far as I know. Well you aint' (ibid.: 70), which leads to his exclusion from society. As Cant (2008: 196) states, the protagonist fails to overcome isolation despite his heroic efforts; thus, much of the time he is completely forlorn contemplating his purpose in life. The death of his parents and his brother's desertion with the girl he rescued intensify Billy's feeling of estrangement: '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' (McCarthy, 2011a: 340). His life has lost its lure, and Parham decides to volunteer for the army, but he is rejected because of his medical condition (a heart murmur). Thus, society once again deprives him of his choice and leaves him without a sense of belonging. Boyd's death acts as the culmination of Billy's overwhelming feelings of isolation and alienation. Despite the differences they have, Parham still loves his brother, who is the only person linking the protagonist to reality, and his death signifies the end of Billy's previous life: 'He seemed to himself a person with no prior life. As if he had died in some way years ago and was ever after some other being who had no history, who had no ponderable life to come' (ibid.: 392). Thus, the severity of the world results in alienation and loneliness for the main character.

John Grady and Billy Parham confront a world that starkly contrasts with their idealised childhood outlook. For the protagonists, the Old West frontier embodies their imagined version of the past (Bloom, 2004: 21), which they try to restore. However, the transformations that the world undergoes lead to alienation of the main characters as America turns into a nation of consumption rather than manufacturing, and the protagonists cannot easily accustom to the new reality, in which the old working practices and traditional forms of living seem not to be valued anymore (O'Sullivan, 2014: 147). Therefore, in pursuit of an unattainable cowboy pastoral, the protagonists cross the border.

But in his search for his own place, John Grady comes to the realisation that his perception of Mexico is flawed—it is not the country of his dreams. The land is hostile and alien, as are the people who inhabit it. In *The Crossing*, Billy Parham arrives at the same conclusion, emphasising the foreignness of the country: '[...] the international boundary line into Mexico, State of Sonora, undifferentiated in its terrain from the country they quit and yet wholly alien and wholly strange' (McCarthy, 2011a: 76). In *All the Pretty Horses*, the striking disparity between American and Mexican mentalities serves as an additional source of estrangement for John: 'It is not that he is stupid. It is that his picture of the world is incomplete. In this rare way. He looks only where he wishes to see' (McCarthy, 2001: 192). The protagonist struggles to adapt to a foreign land with its distinct traditions and laws, yet his efforts are in vain, reinforcing the notion that a person may only truly feel at home where they have grown up:

They said that it was no accident of circumstance that a man be born in a certain country and not some other and they said that the weathers and seasons that form a land form also the inner fortunes of men in their generations and are passed on to their children and are not so easily come by otherwise. (McCarthy, 2001: 226)

Paradoxically, departing from Mexico, John finds himself once again without a sense of belonging, left with a feeling of rootlessness and displacement: 'But it aint my country [...] Where is your country? he said. I dont know, said John Grady. I dont know where it is' (McCarthy, 2001: 299). Once more, the harsh reality tests his resilience against adversity, taking from him the people he loves and overwhelming his soul with despair and estrangement. Similarly, in *The Crossing*, Billy faces an unforgiving world, experiencing the loss of his entire family, and encounters nonacceptance in a foreign country: 'They looked like what they were, outcasts in an alien land. Homeless, hunted, weary' (McCarthy, 2011a: 305). Grim and hostile surroundings mirror his detachment: 'The landscape lay gray under a gray sky' (ibid.: 401), serving as a visual representation of the emotional isolation that he experiences. In *All the Pretty Horses*, Grady's emotional turmoil is also reflected in the natural world: 'He looked at the place where they were, the strange land, the strange sky' (McCarthy, 2001: 176). On returning to America, the terrain around him appears wild and deserted: 'He [...] took the road north, a mud track that wound up through the barren gravel hills' (ibid.: 285), which further intensifies his feeling of alienation. The vast emptiness surrounding the protagonists serves as a constant reminder of their isolation and the void left by the loss of their loved ones, deepening their longing for a sense of belonging that remains elusive.

2 EXISTENTIALIST MOTIF OF DEATH

In *The Border Trilogy*, death is an inseparable part of human existence that does not always come naturally and can take the form of a war, revolution, natural disaster, or homicide. It manifests itself through various facets: blood and

bones, dreams and reality, natural death or violent murder. It stands not only as the end of an individual's existence but also signifies the extinction of nature and the disappearance of former traditions.

Blood and bones become powerful symbols of the finitude of life. In *All the Pretty Horses*, scattered animal remnants highlight the natural order of life and death: 'In the draws were cattle dead from an old drought, just the bones of them cloven about with the hard dry blackened hide' (McCarthy, 2001: 52). They indicate the inevitability of the decay of all living beings, which may happen at any time and for various reasons. Similarly, the bones of Billy's relatives in *The Crossing* serve as a reminder of omnipresent death, which claims both the young and the old without distinction: 'In the country they'd quit lay the bones of a sister and the bones of his maternal grandmother' (McCarthy, 2011a: 3). However, for Billy, his brother's bones also serve as a remembrance of him: 'He gathered the bones in his arms' (ibid.: 409). That is why he decides to rebury Boyd in their homeland with his family. Moreover, bones hold significance beyond representing physical death; they also function as evidence that a person is still alive, which is exemplified in *Cities of the Plain*: 'The flesh and bone living under the cloth of her dress' (McCarthy, 2011b: 139). The use of symbolism deepens the intricate relationship between life and death, underscoring how the portrayal of bones acts as a potent reminder of the delicate nature of the human body and its proneness to deterioration.

Often paired with bones, blood represents both vitality and mortality. In *All the Pretty Horses*, it symbolises not only the physical life force, highly valued by the protagonist: 'What he loved in horses was what he loved in men, the blood and the heat of the blood that ran them' (McCarthy, 2001: 6), but also functions as a marker of identity and heritage. Thus, realising that he has been given a blood transfusion, 'They put Mexican blood in me' (ibid.: 210), Rawlins starts to fear losing his national identity and being associated with Mexicans, even though he has been dreaming of becoming a cowboy in the country. However, his fear is groundless, as Grady states: 'Hell, it dont mean nothin. Blood's blood' (ibid.: 211). The same concept is conveyed in *The Crossing*, emphasising that blood merely serves as evidence of one's existence. Therefore, when Billy tries wolf blood, he arrives at the conclusion that it is like his own: 'The blood which tasted no different than his own' (McCarthy, 2011a: 129). This marks the initial step towards comprehending his mortality. Alone in the forest, the main character contemplates his existence once again, even going so far as to cut his hand: 'he made a cut in the heel of his hand with his knife and watched the slow blood dropping on the stone' (McCarthy, 2011a: 133). This act reassures Billy that his body is a mortal shell that will eventually be shed. Likewise, in *Cities of the Plain*, John Grady acknowledges his mortality and close demise by observing his own blood: 'in that alien land where he lay in his blood' (McCarthy, 2011b: 258). This experience prompts him to realise that he will depart from this world without truly attaining the sense of identity and belonging he has yearned for. Thus, blood acts as a powerful reminder of the fleeting nature of life and the inevitability of death.

The other element of the death motif, a dream, is a gateway to the subconscious, which allows a person to glimpse at death and hidden fears and desires. In *The Border Trilogy*, dreams illuminate the protagonists' inner world and add complexity to the narrative while being rich in symbolism and allegory. In *All the Pretty Horses*, Alejandra's dream about John's death is not only an undoubted manifestation of her trepidation but also bears a metaphorical meaning representing their future separation: 'I saw you in a dream. I saw you dead in a dream' (McCarthy, 2001: 252). The prophetic power of a dream can also be observed in *The Crossing*, as Boyd foresees the destruction of his family through symbolic elements: 'There was this big fire out on the dry lake. [...] These people were burnin. The lake was on fire and they was burnin up. [...] I had the same dream twice' (McCarthy, 2011a: 37). The image of the burning lake reflects the ruin and death that will soon engulf his home, emphasising the interconnectedness of dreams and reality. In the novels, a dream serves as a link between different worlds, helping the living meet the dead. Thus, being far away from his homeland, in his slumber, Billy sees his father and learns that he has passed away: 'His father stood looking toward the west where the sun had gone and where the wind was rising out of the darkness' (ibid.: 115). While in *Cities of the Plain*, Parham confronts deceased Magdalena, who fruitlessly attempts to warn him about Grady's injury: 'He had a dream in which the dead girl came to him hiding her throat with her hand. She was covered in blood and she tried to speak but she could not' (McCarthy, 2011b: 259). Her dreadful appearance indicates that she has been violently murdered. In *All the Pretty Horses*, John encounters in his sleep dead Blevins, and they discuss the nature of death: 'He'd dreamt of him one night in Saltillo and Blevins came to sit beside him and they talked of what it was like to be dead and Blevins said it was like nothing at all and he believed him' (McCarthy, 2001: 225). The protagonist finally acknowledges that death means the finitude of existence and the loss of individuality. Similarly, in *The Crossing*, in one of his sleeps, Billy attempts to explore the nature of death from his murdered brother, yet he does not reveal this enigma:

In the dream he knew that Boyd was dead and that the subject of his being so must be approached with a certain caution for that which was circumspect in life must be doubly so in death and he'd no way to know what word or gesture might subtract him back again into that nothingness out of which he'd come. When finally he did ask him what it was like to be dead Boyd only smiled and looked away and would not answer. (McCarthy, 2011a: 411)

Boyd subtly hints that death signifies the end of life, a truth that can only be fully comprehended through personal experience. However, a living being cannot survive their own death (Heidegger, 2008). Even death faced in a dream fails to unveil its true essence, for upon waking, one returns to the reality of life, much like Billy: 'I woke from that world to this. Like the traveler, all I had forsaken I would come upon again' (McCarthy, 2011b: 290). Thus, through dreams, the main characters contemplate the mysteries of mortality and seek further understanding of the interconnectedness between life and death.

Death, in *The Border Trilogy*, also symbolises the disappearance of former traditions and beliefs. In *The Crossing*, the old Mexican woman complains about the shift in morality, pointing out that the new generation forgets their roots and casts aside religion: ‘She said that the young nowadays cared nothing for religion or priest or family or country or God’ (McCarthy, 2011a: 89). The values and cultural heritage that once provided a foundation for the community are disregarded, which presents a threat to the collective identity and shared beliefs that give meaning to the existence of a nation. A similar transformation can be observed in the USA, where once-established traditions have also become a thing of the past. In *All the Pretty Horses*, which opens with the funeral of John’s grandfather, death is perceived as an ordinary occurrence that is noble and even desirable:

His grandfather was the oldest of eight boys and the only one to live past the age of twenty-five. They were drowned, shot, kicked by horses. They perished in fires. They seemed to fear only dying in bed. (McCarthy, 2001: 7)

However, the demise of the grandfather not only signifies the finitude of life but also bears a symbolic meaning, as it denotes the end of the family business and the extinction of former traditions. Ranches start to disappear across the whole country, and the profession of a cowboy slowly becomes obsolete. In *Cities of the Plain*, the protagonists are confronted with the changes in society and start to contemplate their identities: ‘What would you do if you couldn’t be a cowboy?’ (McCarthy, 2011b: 219). Thus, as old ways fade away and new perspectives emerge, the main characters are challenged to adapt and seek meaning in the face of these profound changes.

Death as a physical termination of life, in the novels, rarely comes naturally and more often is an act of murder. At the beginning of their journeys, the protagonists do not take death seriously, as they are still young and full of optimism and hope. In *All the Pretty Horses*, the main characters perceive it as remote, vague, and unlikely to happen in the near future, which is why they do not fear it: ‘I aint afraid to die’ (McCarthy, 2001: 194). However, in Mexico, Grady and Rawlins reveal extreme poverty and unemployment due to revolutions and learn a vital lesson: that the world is ruthless and unforgivable, especially to those who are weak. The wisdom shared by Dueña Alfonsa with John further illuminates the stark realities of the world:

But I have seen the consequences in the real world and they can be very grave indeed. They can be consequences of a gravity not excluding bloodshed. Not excluding death. I saw this in my own family. (McCarthy, 2001: 136)

Society still follows archaic traditions and believes in vendetta, notwithstanding the law. Thus, for killing a man, Blevins’s life has been taken despite his young age. John and Rawlins are sent to jail as his accomplices, although they are innocent. There, the young cowboys learn the real nature of the world, in which corruption

substitutes for justice and money may redeem one's sins. In prison, the boys conceive that a human life has no value at all, and in order to survive, one should discard humanity:

Underpinning all of it like the fiscal standard in commercial societies lay a bedrock of depravity and violence where in an egalitarian absolute every man was judged by a single standard and that was his readiness to kill. (McCarthy, 2001: 182)

Being involved in mortal combat with a cuchillero, John is forced to kill him; otherwise, he may die himself. Such is the law of this ruthless world—kill or be killed—which is observed in the natural world and serves to demonstrate the principle that the fittest survives. The following scene becomes a poetic parallel to this law in the text of the novel:

A pack of dogs was coming up the street at a high trot and as they crossed in front of him one of their number slipped and scabbled on the wet stones and went down. The others turned in a snarling mass of teeth and fur but the fallen dog struggled up before he could be set upon and all went on as before. (McCarthy, 2001: 255)

McCarthy anthropomorphises this episode: with the example of animal behaviour, the novelist states the ground law of human beings. The fight for survival is a primal instinct that transcends time and culture, revealing the darkest aspects of human nature, which find their manifestation in war and death: '[...] each armed for war which was their life and the women and children and women with children at their breasts all of them pledged in blood and redeemable in blood only' (ibid.: 5). It reinforces the harsh reality that in a world where vulnerability is exploited and weaknesses can lead to one's downfall, individuals must often make agonising choices to secure their own wellbeing.

After encountering death in such proximity, John Grady's perception of mortality undergoes a profound transformation. The very act of taking another person's life forces him to confront the inherent fragility of human existence. He begins to fear death as the ultimate end of his own life. Consequently, having awoken in the hospital, he initially doubts whether he is still alive, and the primal dread grips him. Yet, with the eventual realisation of his existence, a sense of relief emerges:

He half wondered if he were not dead and in his despair he felt well up in him a surge of sorrow like a child beginning to cry but it brought with it such pain that he stopped it cold and began at once his new life and the living of it breath to breath. (McCarthy, 2001: 203)

The awareness of his own mortality and the unavailability of death draw Grady back to horses, which, he believes, are fearless of death: 'They were none of them afraid horse nor colt nor mare and they ran in that resonance which is the world itself and which cannot be spoken but only praised' (ibid.: 161-162). For John, these animals encompass a positive and mystical perception that underscores

the interconnectedness and harmony among all living beings (Hillier, 2017: 101). Horses represent John's desire to release himself from the conventions of society and find the aim of his existence. However, by taking human life, Grady loses his childish innocence and, through his entire life, must bear the heavy burden of a deadly sin: 'When I was in the penitentiary down there I killed a boy [...] It keeps botherin me' (McCarthy, 2001: 291). Redemption he may find only in death, which is the final healer: 'In the end we all come to be cured of our sentiments. Those whom life does not cure death will' (ibid.: 238). Thus, the world remains indifferent to his struggle and pain, proving that life is just an instant that ends with death:

As if to slow the world that was rushing away and seemed to care nothing for the old or the young or rich or poor or dark or pale or he or she. Nothing for their struggles, nothing for their names. Nothing for the living or the dead. (McCarthy, 2001: 301)

Similarly, in *The Crossing*, death dominates society and leads to endless bloodshed: 'A world construed out of blood and blood's alcahest and blood in its core' (McCarthy, 2011a: 75). The ruthlessness of the world is represented in the description of the violent extermination of people, exemplified by the terrible fate of the defenders of Durango:

The captured rebels stood in the street chained together with fencewire like toys and this man walked their enfilade and bent to study each in turn and note in their eyes the workings of death as the assassinations continued behind him. (McCarthy, 2011a: 284)

Human life is of low value when it comes to the ambitions of those in power. This harsh reality becomes even more evident when considering the historical context of the indigenous population of America, which has been almost extirpated and whose rich cultures and ways of life have been brutally disrupted. Indians fell prey to the greed and prejudice of Europeans and were forced to live on the margins of society:

Nation and ghost of nation passing in a soft chorale across that mineral waste to darkness bearing lost to all history and all remembrance like a grail the sum of their secular and transitory and violent lives. (McCarthy, 2001: 5)

Animals have also been treated violently by people, who have been destroying their natural habitats and transforming them into fields, farms, villages, and cities for centuries. In the novel, wolves have been recklessly exterminated, which pushes them to the verge of extinction in the areas that have been theirs for millennia:

The beast who dreams of man [...] of 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. (McCarthy, 2011a: 17)

Knowing that wolves are rare, Billy decides to save the one he captures. However, from the moment she is taken from him, the wolf's fate is predetermined. Thus, to release her from needless suffering, Billy makes the agonising decision to kill her: 'He [...] walked toward the wolf [...] and took aim at the bloodied head and fired' (ibid.: 126). As Lincoln (2009: 120) points out, the wolf's death represents a deep sorrow for savage terror and the transient beauty of all living beings. Altering the protagonist's worldview, it reveals that life can be abruptly extinguished, sweeping away all aspirations and dreams in an instant.

The world in *The Crossing* is severe and hostile to the main character, with death acting as a compelling force within it. The revelation of the finitude of one's life gives it a deeper meaning, highlighting the intricate relationship between life and death and emphasising the need to confront mortality in order to truly understand the value of existence: 'Death was the condition of existence and life but an emanation thereof' (McCarthy, 2011a: 390). However, the violence with which the protagonist is confronted undermines his childish beliefs in humanity. First, his parents are violently murdered, and their property is stolen. Following that, in a foreign country, his brother is killed. Finally, Billy witnesses the catastrophic consequences of the human desire for destruction, as exemplified by the terrifying false dawn of the world's first atomic bomb test:

The road was a pale gray in the light and the light was drawing away along the edges of the world [...]. He looked out down the road and he looked toward the fading light. Darkening shape of cloud all along the northern rim. (McCarthy, 2011a: 436)

Thus, death is at the core of the world, shaping its very essence and influencing the lives of its inhabitants. It acts as a powerful catalyst for change, prompting individuals to re-evaluate their beliefs, confront their fears, and seek deeper meaning in the face of mortality.

In *Cities of the Plain*, on the one hand, death is a natural process that puts the world in order; that is why it should not be feared but taken for granted: 'Every man's death is a standing in for every other. And since death comes to all there is no way to abate the fear of it except to love that man who stands for us' (McCarthy, 2011b: 290). On the other hand, it is the aftermath of wars and revolutions that always results in ruin and immense bloodshed: 'There were thousands who went to war in the only suit they owned. Suits in which they'd been married and in which they would be buried' (ibid.: 65). Although no battles take place in the book, there are several allusions to them. John's coworker Troy, for example, is a war veteran who survived World War II but lost his brother, and Mr. Johnson is a witness of a Mexican revolution: 'I saw terrible things in that country. I dreamt about em for years' (ibid.: 65). Extreme violence can also be observed in the description of a hunt on stray dogs that kill calves. Similarly to the hunt for wolves in *The Crossing*, it not only refers to the cruel slaughter of animals devoid of their natural habitat by people but also serves as a metaphor for the extermination of indigenous tribes, whose lands were likewise seized by immigrants. The cruelty of a scene depicting

the death of the last dog is a stark reminder of the brutal forces at play in both nature and human society, where life can be extinguished with ruthless efficiency: 'The big yellow dog rose suddenly from the ground in headlong flight taut between the two ropes and the ropes resonated a single brief dull note and then the dog exploded' (McCarthy, 2011b: 168).

However, this grim reality extends beyond the natural world or battlefields; it finds expression in everyday life through acts of murder, thereby highlighting the omnipresent potential for violence. Thus, Magdalena has been killed by Eduardo's men because the pimp cannot acknowledge her right to freedom and happiness. The latter finds it impossible for a prostitute to have her own free will, and John's desire to revenge his beloved seems to him ridiculous; thus, he gives Grady a choice: 'Change your mind, he said. Go home. Choose life. You are young' (ibid.: 249). However, the protagonist remains determined and, adhering to his cowboy principles, chooses death instead: 'I come to kill you or be killed' (ibid.: 249). In accordance with Sartre's (1956: 547) idea of personal freedom to choose one's death, John's decision to die on his own terms can be viewed as an assertion of his existential autonomy. With this final act, the protagonist transcends the constraints of a violent and unforgiving world, affirming his existence as a self-determined person.

CONCLUSIONS

The existentialist motifs of alienation and death revealed in the trilogy illuminate the universal struggle of individuals to find meaning and authenticity in the harsh realities of existence. Experiencing alienation, the main characters grapple with their own isolation and the challenge of finding their own place in an unfamiliar territory. In the novels, alienation takes the forms of madness, estrangement from people, and isolation from society, thereby emphasising the fragility of human relationships and the complexities of forming authentic connections in a world shaped by societal norms and marked by suffering. The protagonists struggle to eliminate the conflict between reality and their expectations, which impels them to search for their place in the world and the aim of their existence. Similarly, the motif of death, symbolising the inescapable end of life, prompts the characters to confront their own mortality and seek authenticity in their brief existence. In the novels, death manifests itself through bones and blood, which serve as a reminder of human mortality; dreams that act as a conduit between the worlds of the living and the dead; natural death, which puts the world in order; and violent murder, which reminds one of the cruelty of society. Additionally, it takes forms of potential extinction in nature, which is exemplified through the extermination of species and the disappearance of former traditions and beliefs. Hence, death marks not only the end of a living being but also of a community, society, and nation. Thus, McCarthy's portrayal of alienation and death transcends the confines of fiction, inviting readers to contemplate their own struggles for meaning and belonging in

a world often defined by isolation and mortality. These existentialist motifs continue to resonate as profound and timeless reflections on human existence, inspiring further exploration of their significance in literature.


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