

1999 ENGLISH LITERATURE

Question 2

(Suggested time—40 minutes. This question counts as one-third of the total essay section score.)

2. In the following passage from Cormac McCarthy's novel *The Crossing* (1994), the narrator describes a dramatic experience. Read the passage carefully. Then, in a well-organized essay, show how McCarthy's techniques convey the impact of the experience on the main character.

By the time he reached the first talus¹ slides under the tall escarpments² of the Pilares the dawn was not far to come. He reined the horse in a grassy swale and stood down and dropped the reins. His trousers were stiff with blood. He cradled the wolf in his arms and lowered her to the ground and unfolded the sheet. She was stiff and cold and her fur was bristly with the blood dried upon it. He walked the horse back to the creek and left it standing to water and scouted the banks for wood with which to make a fire. Coyotes were yapping along the hills to the south and they were calling from the dark shapes of the rimlands above him where their cries seemed to have no origin other than the night itself.

He got the fire going and lifted the wolf from the sheet and took the sheet to the creek and crouched in the dark and washed the blood out of it and brought it back and he cut forked sticks from a mountain hackberry and drove them into the ground with a rock and hung the sheet on a trestlepole where it steamed in the firelight like a burning scrim standing in a wilderness where celebrants of some sacred passion had been carried off by rival sects or perhaps had simply fled in the night at the fear of their own doing. He pulled the blanket about his shoulders and sat shivering in the cold and waiting for the dawn that he could find the place where he would bury the wolf. After a while the horse came up from the creek trailing the wet reins through the leaves and stood at the edge of the fire.

He fell asleep with his hands palm up before him like some dozing penitent. When he woke it was still dark. The fire had died to a few low flames seething over the coals. He took off his hat and fanned the fire

with it and coaxed it back and fed the wood he'd gathered. He looked for the horse but could not see it. The coyotes were still calling all along the stone ramparts of the Pilares and it was graying faintly in the east. He squatted over the wolf and touched her fur. He touched the cold and perfect teeth. The eye turned to the fire gave back no light and he closed it with his thumb and sat by her and put his hand upon her bloodied forehead and closed his own eyes that he could see her running in the mountains, running in the starlight where the grass was wet and the sun's coming as yet had not undone the rich matrix of creatures passed in the night before her. Deer and hare and dove and groundvole all richly empaneled on the air for her delight, all nations of the possible world ordained by God of which she was one among and not separate from. Where she ran the cries of the coyotes clapped shut as if a door had closed upon them and all was fear and marvel. He took up her stiff head out of the leaves and held it or he reached to hold what cannot be held, what already ran among the mountains at once terrible and of a great beauty, like flowers that feed on flesh. What blood and bone are made of but can themselves not make on any altar nor by any wound of war. What we may well believe has power to cut and shape and hollow out the dark form of the world surely if wind can, if rain can. But which cannot be held never be held and is no flower but is swift and a huntress and the wind itself is in terror of it and the world cannot lose it.

¹ A sloping mass of rock debris at the base of a cliff

² Steep slopes

GO ON TO THE NEXT PAGE 



The overnight sensation who is marveled at and held in esteem of the highest literary order is hardly a new comer. Born in 1933 and winning his first literary award for creative writing in 1959 he had his first novel, *The Orchard Keeper*, published in 1965. No author on this continent has enjoyed the critical successes and watched the commercial failures to the degree he has. His first 5 books provided him with half a dozen major grants, including the McArthur Fellows hip... one of their so-called genius grants, in 1981. Ironically, non of these 5 books sold even their modest first printings of about 2,000 copies, without being remaindered. In 1992 *All the Pretty Horses*, the first volume of the *Border Trilogy* was released. It became a *New York Times* bestseller and sold 190,000 copies in hardcover within the first 6 months of publication. Then came the awards.... The National Book Award and The Book Critics Circle Awards both went to McCarthy for "Horses". How

can this be? In a world so full of thrill seeking no brainer writing successes, a true literary work is reprinted over twenty times in it's first year. Must be a mistake, eh? The second volume of the *Trilogy*, *The Crossing*, was released in 1994 with an initial printing of 200,000 copies and required a second printing of 25,000 more within the first month. It re-kindles faith that we, the public, are willing to read true literature. And read it we must. And re-read it. For, you see, McCarthy's works are complicated. Complex webs and threads tie themes together, all penned with a command of language unequalled in contemporary writing. McCarthy is a master. He strokes his words like a violin maker touches his creations. Be prepared to be shocked and even appalled at the contents of his stories. Don't seek happy endings and look for rainbows. You are more apt to cry tears of fear and confusion than tears of joy when you read his work. One thing is sure. The books written by this man are increasing in value faster than any other American author. Five years ago you could buy all 5 of his first books for well under \$100 apiece. Today they are near, or over, \$1,000 each. His reclusive nature has driven the price of his rarely signed books to near double that of non signed first editions.

Early Works

- o THE ORCHARD KEEPER. (NY) 1965. Random House. First Edition.
- o OUTER DARK. (N.Y.) 1968. Random House. First edition.
- o CHILD OF GOD. (N.Y.) 1973. Random House. First edition.
- o CHILD OF GOD. (London) 1973. Chatto & Windus.
- o SUTTRIE. (N.Y.) 1979. Random House. First Edition.
- o BLOOD MERIDIAN; OR THE EVENING REDNESS IN THE WEST. (N.Y.) 1985. Random House. First edition.

Recent Works

- o ALL THE PRETTY HORSES. (London) 1993.
- o ALL THE PRETTY HORSES. (N.Y.) 1992. Knopf. First edition.
- o ALL THE PRETTY HORSES. (N.Y.) 1992. Knopf. First edition. Presentation Copy
- o ALL THE PRETTY HORSES. (London) 1992. Picador. First edition.
- o THE STONEMASON. A PLAY IN FIVE ACTS. (Hopewell, N.J.) 1994. Ecco Press. First edition.
- o THE STONEMASON. A PLAY IN FIVE ACTS. (Hopewell, N.J.) 1994. Ecco Press. Limited edition.
- o THE CROSSING. (London) 1994. Picador.
- o THE CROSSING. (N.Y.) 1994. Knopf. First edition.
- o THE GARDNER'S SON. A SCREENPLAY. (Hopewell, N.J.) 1996. Ecco Press. Limited Edition.

Amazon.com

The opening section of *The Crossing*, book two of the Border Trilogy, features perhaps the most perfectly realized storytelling of Cormac McCarthy's celebrated career. Like *All the Pretty Horses*, this volume opens with a teenager's decision to slip away from his family's ranch into Mexico. In this case, the boy is Billy Parham, and the catalyst for his trip is a wolf he and his father have trapped, but that Billy finds himself unwilling to shoot. His plan is to set the animal loose down south instead.

This is a McCarthy novel, not *Old Yeller*, and so Billy's trek inevitably becomes more ominous than sweet. It boasts some chilling meditations on the simple ferocity McCarthy sees as necessary for all creatures who aim to continue living. But Billy is McCarthy's most loving--and therefore damageable--character, and his story has its own haunted melancholy.

Billy eventually returns to his ranch. Then, finding himself and his world changed, he returns to Mexico with his younger brother, and the book begins meandering. Though full of hypnotically barren landscapes and McCarthy's trademark western-gothic imagery (like the soldier who sucks eyes from sockets), these latter stages become tedious at times, thanks partly to the female characters, who exist solely as ghosts to haunt the men.

But that opening is glorious, and the whole book finally transcends its shortcomings to achieve a grim and poignant grandeur. --Glen Hirshberg

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From *Booklist*, May 15, 1994

McCarthy's National Book Award-winning *All the Pretty Horses* (1992) told of young John Grady Cole, a Texas rancher's son who loses his father and his inheritance and strikes out almost aimlessly into Mexico. This sequel is not about Cole or any of his compadres, however, but is instead a parallel story concerning Billy Parham, 16, and his kid brother, Boyd, growing up about 10 years previously on a high desert ranch in southern New Mexico. A vagabond Indian appears who warns the boys of dire events, and then a she-wolf begins pulling down the Parham cattle. Billy ingeniously traps the wolf but cannot bring himself to kill her; almost on a whim, he crosses the border to return her to the distant mountains she came from. When he comes home after months of wandering in the desert, he finds that his parents have been killed by Mexican horse thieves. He and Boyd go after their family's remuda--much as John Grady Cole did in the preceding novel. Boyd is killed, and Billy returns to the U.S., a rootless, restless young man with an uncertain future. At the heart of *The Crossing* is a pitiless religious inquiry, exemplified in the long story of a failed priest whom Billy meets in an abandoned mining town. This heretic offers a critique of the mind of God that Billy absorbs and, finally, serves to illustrate. A disquieting sequel, though told in high style and with a mournful humor, and McCarthy's insistent use of Spanish dialogue adds a distinctively southwestern, almost romantic flair. The third volume will be much anticipated. (See also the review of McCarthy's play, *The Stonemason*.) *John Mort*
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From Kirkus Reviews , April 15, 1994

Volume two of McCarthy's Border Trilogy--following the much-acclaimed National Book Award-winning *All the Pretty Horses* (1992)--treads familiar territory but probes deeper into the darkness of the human animal. Like its predecessor, *The Crossing* concerns a young American rancher living near the Mexican border in the 1930s, a time when the old West is grudgingly entering the modern world while Mexico is being torn apart by revolution. And like volume one's memorable hero, John Cole Grady, 16-year-old Billy Pawson is drawn south in a nearly mythical journey to find himself. Billy initially crosses into Mexico to take a wolf he had trapped on his New Mexico ranch back to the animal's native mountains. When he returns, he finds that his home has been plundered, and he and his 14-year-old brother set off for Mexico to find their family's stolen horses. Traveling through the lawless ruins of the post-revolutionary Mexican countryside, they encounter Gypsy wanderers, carnival actors, horse-traders, horse thieves, revolutionary soldiers, and men of various religions. All offer sage advice about the journey, and Billy's failure to heed their wisdom sometimes has horrifying results. Relentless, frequently brutal, and morbidly fatalistic, the novel expresses once again McCarthy's essentially bleak vision. Because he is one of America's foremost literary craftsmen, it is also passionate and compelling. The author convincingly elevates seemingly ordinary events into near-religious moments: "They smoked the way poor people eat which is a form of prayer." Written in McCarthy's trademark prose--clear, blunt, and often startlingly beautiful--*The Crossing* "tells the tale of that solitary man who is all men." Like the tales of Homer and Melville, his timeless work will resonate for ages. (First printing of 150,000; Book-of-the-Month Club main selection) -- Copyright ©1994, Kirkus Associates, LP. All rights reserved. --This text refers to the hardcover edition of this title

Book Description

In *The Crossing*, Cormac McCarthy fulfills the promise of *All the Pretty Horses* and at the same time give us a work that is darker and more visionary, a novel with the unstoppable momentum of a classic western and the elegaic power of a lost American myth.

In the late 1930s, sixteen-year-old Billy Parham captures a she-wolf that has been marauding his family's ranch. But instead of killing it, he decides to take it back to the mountains of Mexico. With that crossing, he begins an arduous and often dreamlike journey into a country where men meet ghosts and violence strikes as suddenly as heat-lightning--a world where there is no order "save that which death has put there."

An essential novel by any measure, *The Crossing* is luminous and appalling, a book that touches, stops, and starts the heart and mind at once.

The Border Trilogy, Volume II

The Crossing (1994), publicized as the second installment of McCarthy's Border Trilogy, is the initiation story of Billy Parham and his younger brother Boyd (who are 16 and 14 respectively when the novel opens). The novel, set just before and during World War II, is structured around three round-trip crossings that Billy makes from New Mexico into Mexico. Each trip tests Billy as he must try to salvage something once he fails in his original goal. On both his first and last quest he is reduced (or perhaps exalted) to some symbolic futile gesture in his attempt, against all obstacles, to maintain his integrity and to be true to his moral obligations. This novel explores such issues as guilt, the acquisition of wisdom, heroism, and the crucial importance of stories.

The first section of *The Crossing* is the story of Billy Parham's learning the ways of wolves as well as the ways of men. Like Ike McCaslin in Faulkner's "The Bear," Billy becomes increasingly expert about the wild so that eventually he is able to corner the beast that is the object of his obsessive search. This section also may put readers in mind of *Moby-Dick*, for as the white whale surfaces out of the primal depths, McCarthy's she-wolf comes up into the United States from the primitiveness of the mountains of Mexico. After many failed attempts, Billy finally traps the pregnant she-wolf, elaborately strings it out, and eventually succeeds in tying its muzzle closed, no easy task. At this point, Billy, seemingly on impulse, decides to leave home without any farewell or explanation in order to return the wolf to Mexico.

Billy's motives for separating from his family so unceremoniously are not spelled out, though he has experienced some tension in his relationship with his father. He may simply desire more independence and an escape from domesticity. But Billy seemingly gets more than he bargained for when he answers the call of the wild. He must defend the wolf against both dogs and men. He repeatedly refuses to sell the wolf to men who see it only in monetary terms as a commodity, while for Billy the wolf is a mysterious symbol, djinn-like. Billy's plans and good intentions go awry when Mexican authorities stop him and confiscate the creature in his charge. When Billy is released, he searches until he finds the wolf ignominiously caged in a sideshow and then follows it when it is moved to a circus to be sacrificed in a lengthy bout of wolf-baiting. A tense intervention attempt fails, so Bill decides to finish off the battle-battered wolf with a shot from his rifle, and then he trades his rifle for the rights to the wolf's carcass.

As the novel's second section begins, we learn that Billy has buried the wolf in the mountains and has grown leaner and more ragged. He eventually crosses back into New Mexico, finds his home abandoned, and learns that his parents have been murdered, allegedly by two Indians. The killers have also cut the family dog's throat, though it survived, and stolen the family's six horses. After Billy goes to see the sheriff and picks up Boyd from a neighbor's house, the two boys set out for Mexico to recover their horses. After "stealing" back their horse Keno, the Parham brothers encounter a young Mexican girl who is crying. Part II of the novel ends with Boyd's and Billy's daring rescue of this girl from two men who apparently intended to rape her.

Part III chronicles the growing romantic relationship of Boyd and the girl, and it narrates the story of Boyd's transformation into a hero of the people. The boys suffer fluctuating fortunes in their ongoing attempts to regain their horses until the original quest is doomed by their second hostile confrontation with a one-armed ranch chief. As this jefe tries to deprive Billy and Boyd of three of their horses for the second time during a street altercation, Billy spooks his horse, which tumbles to the ground, breaking the jefe's back. Soon afterwards, the one-armed man's compatriots track down and relentlessly shoot at the young Americans, wounding Boyd gravely.

Boyd escapes death only through the generous help of some workers on a flatbed truck, who begin to create and spread a heroic legend about him. After Boyd regains his health, he and his sweetheart leave together without telling Billy, which echoes Billy's earlier desertion of the family. At this point, the focus of Billy's quest is no longer the horses but his brother, whom he cannot find even after weeks of searching.

Part IV begins with Billy's crossing back into the United States, where his three attempts to enlist in the army at the time of WW II are unsuccessful because he has a heart defect. After drifting through various ranch jobs for about three years, Billy undertakes a third journey into Mexico, this time seeking his brother. He finds only Boyd's bones, which he decides should be returned to his homeland. Billy suffers a new low point in his existence when four robbers stop him, dump and desecrate Boyd's remains, and stab his horse Niño for no good reason. Struck with frustration and confronted with the tragedy and absurdity of his situation, Billy weeps. Nevertheless, he completes his gesture of faithfulness to his brother when he gathers up the bones, crosses into New Mexico, and re-buries them there, thus paralleling the earlier burial of the wolf. The novel ends with Billy weeping once again after he has abusively chased away a pathetic, crippled dog that had "howled again and again in its heart's despair."

The Border Trilogy, which began with *All the Pretty Horses*, concludes with *Cities of the Plain*.

Style Analysis: 1999 English Lit. AP Exam Essay
Question 2. From McCarthy's novel, *The Crossing*

Paragraph #1

The first paragraph is told by a narrator in third person. The narrator seems to be only an observer who occasionally comments on the images and surroundings.

The first image of **blood-soaked pants** shocks the reader—Whose blood? The fact that the **blood** is dry, "**stiff**" also indicates some length of time has passed.

The wolf is wrapped in a sheet much like a shroud—the beginning of religious symbolism/diction in the passage. Diction: Wolf is "**stiff**"—repeated from up above to describe pants—"cold," "bristly with the blood dried upon it." Source of the blood on the pants is the wolf's. The tactile images of **stiff** and bristly intensify the wolf's death and the fact that the boy does not seem to notice discomfort.

"The **coyotes**" introduce the auditory image—"yapping"—not a very noble sound—one that is almost annoying—but intensifies the loneliness, the night. The cries have "no origin other than the night itself." creating an atmosphere of hopelessness and the absence of a greater power? Syntax/Structure—The 1st paragraph closes *here*—Sets the scene, introduces the boy, the wolf, creates a reverent, solemn tone.

Paragraph #2

Point of View continues to be third person observer. *Here* and *there* the narrator seems to enter the mind of the boy.

At the end of the long sentence, the sheet drying on the trestlepole is likened to a "burning scrim" and images of primitive rituals, "rival sects" or "celebrants" add to the religious and sacred atmosphere of the scene. The narrator speculates that the celebrants had "fled in the night at the fear of their own doing." This is the first indication that the boy may feel some quilt.

The night is **cold** and the boy now waits until dawn *where* he may find "the" not "a" "place *where* he would bury the wolf." This paragraph ends as the horse comes back from the creek, "trailing the wet reins through the leaves," as a riderless horse might return from a battle or an accident with no one to hold the reins and give direction.

[By the time he reached the first Talus slides under the tall escarpments of *the Pilaes*] the dawn was not far to come. He reined the horse in a grassy swale and stood down and dropped the reins. His trousers were **stiff** with **blood**. He *cradled* the wolf in his arms and *lowered her* to the ground and unfolded the sheet. She was **stiff** and **cold** and *her fur* was bristly with the **blood** dried upon it. [He walked the horse back to the creek and left it standing to water and scouted the banks for wood with which to make a fire.] **Coyotes** were yapping along the hills to the south and they were from the **dark** shapes of the rimlands above him *where their cries* seemed to have no origin other than the night itself.

[He got the fire going and lifted the wolf from the sheet and took the sheet to the creek and crouched in the **dark** and washed the **blood** out of it brought it back and he cut forked sticks from a mountain hackberry and drove them into the ground with a rock and hung the sheet on a trestlepole] where it steamed in the firelight like a burning scrim standing in a wilderness where celebrants of some sacred passion had been carried off by rival sects or perhaps had simply fled in the night at the fear of their own doing. He pulled the blanket about his shoulders and sat shivering in the **cold** and waiting for the dawn that he could find the place where he would bury the wolf. After a while the horse came up from the creek trailing the wet reins through the leaves and stood at the edge of the fire.

[Intro adv. Clause indicates that whatever is happening has been building to this point.] "*The Pilaes*" seem to be the destination. Setting is the mountains—the traveler is at the bottom of a steep cliff—If one were to look up from the character's vantage point, it might seem as if he is in a majestic cathedral—The majesty of it all is apparent. It is **dark**, but close to morning—the traveler has ridden all night. indication that he is tired.

Wolf is introduced. Diction—"cradled," "lowered," the pronoun "*her*" rather than "it" all indicate some sort of emotional attachment—caring, love, respect? that the boy/man has for the wolf.

Taking care of the horse—syntax—[a series of predicates/verb phrases connected with the conjunction "and"—known as polysyndeton.] These acts are done in a methodical fashion—almost as if the boy knows to do it, instinctively, but isn't thinking about it. The boy is well aware of what must be done—knowledge of the wilderness—connection between the boy and the wolf.

Dark and light images throughout the piece.

Time shift—Some time has passed. The fire is made and "going." Syntax: [First sentence is a run-on with 6 verb phrases each connected with the conjunction "and."] [The second independent clause, which is still part of the 1st sentence, continues the activities of the boy to wash the sheet in preparation for the burial of the wolf. The sheet as implied above, will be used to wrap the wolf as a shroud.

[This clause also contains 3 verb phrases each connected by "and." This use of parataxis makes the boy's preparations seem as one continuous activity without thought.] One writer noticed this lack of thought as a great "set up" for the end when the syntax is more a stream of consciousness.—He is working by instinct rather than intellect at this point.

Paragraph #3 opens with another direct religious image as the boy "falls asleep with his hands palm up like some dozing penitent." The image of asking for forgiveness further implicates the boy. He does not sleep long, however, because it is "still dark" when he wakes.

[At this point, the boy turns to the wolf, and the syntax of the piece changes dramatically to short complete sentences. As he touches her fur, teeth and finally closes her eyes with his thumb as a Catholic priest would give the last confession to the dead and make the sign of the cross with his thumb, the syntax begins to change to one long run on sentence. The narrator enters the mind of the boy and the reader moves through his thoughts in a stream of consciousness fashion.]

In a similar move, the boy touches the wolf's head and closes his own eyes and seems to experience a sort of epiphany or a "oneness" with the wolf. He envisions her running in the night with such power and magnificence that the coyotes "clap shut" their "cries" out of "fear and marvel." The words running and ran give the wolf motion and swift movement.

The wolf almost becomes a sort of deity or monarch as which controls the other animals in her nation which is as all nations are "ordained by God."

The boy recognizes the wolf's place in nature, and as he lifts her "stiff head out of the leaves," he reaches "to hold what cannot be held." Perhaps this is the wolf's spirit, her instinct and fierce natural cunning.

The boy, or perhaps only the narrator, realizes that there is something more essential to bone and blood than merely the elements that make it up. That the one important element of life, all life, is mortality. That death is terrifying. That all living creatures die. But the spirit of the wolf is eternal and cannot be lost. McCarthy relates the universal human experience. Diction—Words repeated; cries, coyotes, stiff, cold, fur, eyes, blood, dark, light, ran, running

He fell asleep with his hands palm up before him like some dozing penitent. When he woke it was still dark. The fire had died to a few low flames seething over the coals. He took off his hat and fanned the fire with it and coaxed it back and fed the wood he'd gathered. He looked for the horse but could not see it. The coyotes were still calling all along the stone ramparts of the Pilares and it was graying faintly in the east. [He squatted over the wolf and touched her fur. He touched the cold and perfect teeth.] [The eye turned to the fire and gave back no light and he closed it with his thumb and sat by her and put his hand upon her bloodied forehead and closed his own eyes that he could see her running in the mountains, running in the starlight where the grass was wet and the sun's coming as yet had not undone the rich matrix of creatures passed in the night before her.] Deer and hare and dove and groundvole all richly empaneled on the air for her delight, all nations of the possible world ordained by God of which she was one among and not separate from. Where she ran the cries of the coyotes clapped shut s if a door had closed upon them and all was fear and marvel. He took up her stiff head out of the leaves and held it or he reached to hold what cannot be held, what already ran among the mountain sat once terrible and of a great beauty, like flowers that feed on flesh. What blood and bone are made of but can themselves not make on any altar nor by any wound of war. What we may well believe has power to cut and shape and hollow out the dark form of the world surely if wind can, if rain can. But which cannot be held and is no flower

but is swift and a huntress and the wind itself is in terror of it and the world cannot lose it.

The fire is personified with the use of the verbs to describe its actions as "died," "seething," "gave back." In addition, the boy coaxes the fire and "feeds it. The other animals that have shared this scene, the horse and the coyotes are mentioned—the horse is not within his vision and the coyotes are still "calling." This personification of the coyotes calling for each other in the night, the horse wandering off, begin to connect again the boy with the world of nature and its creatures.

The use of polysyndeton to list the animals who revered the wolf seems endless: "deer and hare and dove and groundvole."

McCarthy creates a powerful simile by likening the wolf to "flowers that feed on flesh."

The diction used is again religious in connotation "power to cut and shape the world," "altar." In addition the narrator shifts to a first person plural point of view in the 2nd to last sentence, with the reference to "What we may well believe has power to cut and shape." Pfeifer 1999