

“War is god” versus “You Ain’t Nothin”:

Deified Violence and Responses to It in Cormac McCarthy’s *Blood Meridian*, *No  
Country for Old Men*, and *The Road*

By

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## Acknowledgements

When I first read *The Road* in the summer of 2007, I was completely floored. I felt dizzy and if I just had the wind knocked out me. Not many books have ever affected me quite like that; so, I decided to go out and read other books by this new author I discovered. I read *No Country for Old Men* and *Blood Meridian* and had similar reactions of pure awe. With my first acknowledgement, I have to thank Cormac McCarthy for writing such emotionally affecting and powerful material.

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## Abstract

Cormac McCarthy is often mentioned as one of the, if not *the*, greatest living American author. Unfortunately, the critical dialogue surrounding McCarthy, has not adequately addressed the most compelling component of his work: his unique use of violence. McCarthy describes violence in a deeply pervasive, deified fashion. The violent antagonists in McCarthy's novels, which come to represent the kind of violence he describes, appear like elemental figures without origin and wreak havoc on the land. Although the violence is nearly omnipresent, the protagonists of the novels manage to mount some resistance to it. The villain overcomes the protagonists in the end, but their defiance in the face of this overwhelmingly violent figure is something to behold. This thesis examines this dynamic and the language McCarthy uses to describe it in three novels, *Blood Meridian*, *No Country for Old Men*, and *The Road*. Since these novels are set in radically different time periods, I am able to determine whether this dynamic changes or remains the same throughout the course of time.

Chapter I of this project examines some chief influences of McCarthy-Herman Melville and Flannery O'Connor- and the impact they have on these three novels. McCarthy lifts structural and thematic similarities from Melville and O'Connor to describe the violence in these novels. He frees these techniques from the very local, contemporary concerns of Melville and O'Connor and uses them to show how violence comes to all people in his literary world. These methods are the individual components as to how McCarthy expresses the deeply pervasive violence and the resistance to total submission to it.

Chapter II studies *Blood Meridian* and *No Country for Old Men* through the eyes of Richard Slotkin. Although he did not write directly on McCarthy's work, Slotkin's discussion of violence in relation to myth-making in his book *Regeneration Through Violence* has a lot to say about McCarthy's structure. With the aid of Slotkin's terms like archetype and universe, I set out to show McCarthy as an anti-mythic writer who exhibits mythic tendencies.

The third and final chapter looks at *The Road*, which is set in the not too distant future. The chapter begins by directly connecting this novel to the others previously discussed by examining the lighting of fire at the conclusion of *Blood Meridian* and *No Country for Old Men*. As the unnamed man and boy traverse through the apocalyptically ravaged landscape in this novel, the man often tells the boy that they are "carrying the fire" to keep him motivated and moving in the face of overwhelming bleakness. The boy takes this saying to heart and actively exhibits moral action in the face of total chaos even when his father finds it difficult to do so. This chapter also studies the unique plot element in McCarthy's work that one protagonist, the boy, survives at the end of the novel. This somewhat optimistic conclusion comes with the caveat that a protagonist only survives when the world has been nearly completely destroyed. Despite the desolation, McCarthy deifies the love of the man and the boy have for each other. With this move, in a literary world filled with violence and depravity, McCarthy is remarkably able to put the deified love on the same footing as the deified violence.

## **Table of Contents**

Short Titles .....	5
Introduction .....	6
<i>“War is god” versus “You Ain’t Nothin”</i>	
Chapter One .....	12
<i>The Ugly Fact of Influence</i>	
Chapter Two .....	38
<i>Richard Slotkin, The Origin Myth, and The Anti-Myth</i>	
Chapter Three .....	60
<i>The Road: The Importance of Fire, Childish Morality, and The Individual Light</i>	
Conclusion .....	74
<i>The Temporal Trilogy</i>	
Works Cited .....	76

**Short Titles**

BM: McCarthy, Cormac. *Blood Meridian, Or, the Evening Redness in the West*. New York: Vintage Books, 1985.

NCFOM: McCarthy, Cormac. *No Country for Old Men*. New York: Vintage International, 2005.

TR: McCarthy, Cormac. *The Road*. New York: Vintage Books, 2006.

## Introduction

### “War is god” versus “You ain’t nothin”

In between the moments of slaughter in his novel *Blood Meridian*, Cormac McCarthy allows one character-the judge- to philosophically muse about all the death and carnage that surrounds him and his fellow band of scalpers. McCarthy writes,

It makes no difference what men think of war, said the judge, War endures. As well ask men what they think of stone. War was always here. Before man was, war waited for him. The ultimate trade awaiting its ultimate practitioner. That is the way it was and will be. That way and not some other way. (BM 248)

The judge’s view expressed in this passage and seen throughout McCarthy’s works is a vision of a violence that is omnipresent; it is as elemental as stone. The judge personifies it slightly by suggest that war and violence just bided their time until mankind gained consciousness. By this point in *Blood Meridian*, the judge has established himself as an extremely powerful and mysterious-much like the war he describes; so, when he makes such a bold philosophical claim as the one stated above, the construct of the novel makes it difficult to refute such an assertion. Looking at the bloodshed that came before this moment and the bloodshed in the text, the lonely counter of Brown to the judge’s argument of everlasting war (“You’re crazy Holden. Crazy at last”) appears wholly inadequate (BM 249). The judge smirks and carries on with his discourse.

Cormac McCarthy is one of the more well-known modern day authors, but the kind of violence discussed in the passage above is not really discussed in current the critical dialogue examining violence and the representation of it in literature. Nancy Armstrong and Leonard Tennenhouse's *The Violence of Representation* demonstrates a shift into looking for literary violence in places that critics traditionally overlook. They write,

[A]t this moment in history, we feel it is somehow dishonest to speak of power and violence as something that belongs to the police and military...[violence as something] practiced by someone somewhere else. For clearly the subtler modalities of modern culture, usually classified as non-political, keep us in line, just as they designate specific "others" as the appropriate objects of violence. (Armstrong and Tennenhouse 4).

The authors are setting out to show the violence does not take place only in a far away land between two warring armies. Armstrong and Tennenhouse set out to examine where violence lurks in the more commonplace. To effectively to study their subject, they make a surprising move by deriving their definition of violence from *Jane Eyre*. The authors declare that this novel in particular shows the gender and class struggle which typifies the modern study of violence. For examples of violence in *Jane Eyre*, they point to the bad relatives and people she meets who "suppress Jane's prodigious capacity for growth and development" (Armstrong and Tennenhouse 5). They also mention that the evil people Jane encounters "are violent

in a culture-and class-specific sense”(Armstrong and Tennenhouse 5). The violence described in *The Violence of Representation* takes place in the form of the mistreatment of a lower-class, young girl; physical violence and bloodshed are not necessary for an act to be classified as violent.

Even though this type of analysis does not seem relevant to the McCarthyian type of violence described in the opening paragraph, contemporary cultural criticism’s way of analyzing violence in texts typified by Armstrong and Tennenhouse does prove the point of the judge. The modern criticism shows violence in different contexts- gendered, class, religion, race- and in doing so, this criticism demonstrates this omnipresent violence in these arenas that were seen as “not political” or not places where violence could occur. This sort of work is uncovering the less represented and showing how violence can be experienced just as much on the battlefield as it is in the struggle of adolescence. McCarthy’s claims about the nature of violence are broader in nature than this new wave of criticism. The omnipresent aspect of what McCarthy describes contains within it reasons for the violence present in the class, gender, and race. The judge explains, “[W]ar is at last a forcing of the unity of existence. War is god”(BM 249). This deified violence unites all of mankind for McCarthy.

As much as the theme of deified violence is essential to understanding McCarthy’s works, the theme of resistance to this sort of violence is just as important and prevalent. A typical McCarthy protagonist is characterized in an everyman type fashion (i.e. hard-working, not overly intelligently). The protagonist

does not get lengthy sections of dialogue like the antagonist-such as the judge- does. What a McCarthian protagonist loses in rhetorical flourish, they make-up for it with sheer bravado. For instance, the protagonist of *Blood Meridian*, the kid, boldly stands up to the judge towards the end of the novel and tells him “You ain’t nothing” (BM 331). The kid says this to the judge in the face of certain death. The judge wants to murder the kid because he demonstrated “clemency for the heathen” and exhibited some moral action in the morally depraved world of the novel (BM 299). With such demonstrations being common, I cannot rightfully claim violence is completely omnipresent or pervasive; the protagonists of McCarthy repeatedly exhibit moral virtue by not fully submitting to the god of war. The consequence for this expression of a hint of morality, this refusal of submission, however, is the life of the protagonist. This tension between the overwhelming, but not totally omnipresent violence and the opposition to it drives McCarthy’s literature.

When I turned to look at the critical work examining McCarthy’s writing career, I was disappointed to not find books and essays that dealt with the issue of the interplay around violence as intensely as I feel the work demands. Typically, a lot of the critics examine themes of borders, father and son conflict, religion, optimism versus pessimism, McCarthy in the Southern tradition, and the inherent mythical quality of his books. I read two full length critical books: *No Place for Home: Spatial Constraint and Character Flight in the Novels of Cormac McCarthy* by Jay Ellis and *Cormac McCarthy and the Myth of American Exceptionalism* by John Cant. In both books, the issue of violence always seemed to be at the periphery of their analyses, not the focus.

I believe that violence should be more at the forefront of critical analysis also because of one of the very select commentaries McCarthy has given on his own work. In an interview with Richard Woodward of the *New York Times* in 1992, McCarthy says, "There's no such thing as life without bloodshed... I think the notion that the species can be improved in some way, that everyone could live in harmony is a really dangerous idea" (Woodward <http://www.nytimes.com/1992/04/19/magazine/cormac-mccarthy-s-venomous-fiction.html> ). McCarthy rarely gives interviews and almost never makes large philosophical claims such as the excerpt above outside of his novels. Due to this scarcity of authorial insight, such statements merit more critical attention than it has previously been given. In this passage, he intends 'harmony' to mean the more traditional meaning of the word instead of the 'unity of existence' the judge references. Not to imply McCarthy advocated the type of mass murder that the judge commits in *Blood Meridian*, but this quote seems to be similar to rationale of the judge.

This essay examines the brutal dialogue between the antagonist representing the deified violence and the morally defiant protagonists in three McCarthy novels: *Blood Meridian or The Evening Redness in the West*, *No Country for Old Men*, and *The Road*. I am going to focus on these three novels in particular because they are set in radically different time periods. *Blood Meridian* is set in the 1860-1870s, *No Country for Old Men* is set in the Post-Vietnam 1980s, and *The Road* takes place in a post-apocalyptic, not too distant future. By studying these three novels in particular, we see McCarthy try to give some answer to the question of what does it mean to have a

sense virtue in the world of deified violence across different centuries in American history. The kid dies in *Blood Meridian*, but what does it mean when his same spirit of resistance is similarly seen in Llewellyn Moss in *No Country for Old Men* and the man in *The Road*? As unrelentingly as he can be with his graphic depiction of violence, McCarthy does not let the god of war rule dictatorially over these three novels.

## Chapter I

### The Ugly Fact of Influence

In Cormac McCarthy's first ever interview, Richard B. Woodward of the *New York Times* attempts to outline influences of the reclusive author; McCarthy makes an overarching statement about the effect of literary influence in his work. "The ugly fact is books are made out of books," McCarthy says, "The novel depends for its life on the novels that have been written" (Woodward <http://www.nytimes.com/1992/04/19/magazine/cormac-mccarthy-s-venomous-fiction.html> ). The word choice in this quotation suggests that novels of today need the novels from the past to have meaning. McCarthy insinuates that he feels constrained by his obvious literary influences by calling it an "ugly fact." Without the work of past authors, however, he could not have written his novels.

This chapter examines the works of Herman Melville and Flannery O'Connor in relation to McCarthy's fiction. These two authors are consistently mentioned in reviews and essays about McCarthy as chief influences and for good reason. In the Woodward interview, McCarthy names Melville as one of the "good writers." He even mentions *Moby Dick* as his favorite book. Woodward goes on to also list Flannery O'Connor as an influence on McCarthy due to both authors consistent depiction of the outsider in society. Woodward's article and the numerous reviews mention these authors but do not offer in-depth analysis as to how these authors directly affect McCarthy's literature. In this chapter, I illuminate how McCarthy draws specific techniques and thematic elements from Melville and O'Connor and applies these lessons in *Blood Meridian* and *No Country for Old Men*. McCarthy does

not just copy methods from these literary giants; he alters their techniques to carve out his own literary identity and express his own vision.

### **Flannery O'Connor- Intellectual Violence**

Unlike McCarthy, who reveals very few biographical details, O'Connor's biographical information is essential for understanding her literary work and the role of violence in it. O'Connor was a devout Catholic, and her religion played a central part in her work. She was not a proponent of secular, modern views on the power of the individual, but she was nonetheless critical of some of the trends she saw in Catholicism. In his book *The Art and Vision of Flannery O'Connor*, Robert H. Brinkmeyer, Jr. presents a rather succinct summary of O'Connor's views on Catholicism. He writes,

She saw Christ not herself, at the center of the universe. Nonetheless, O'Connor was painfully aware that people could become isolated from everyday reality and other people through this faith. Such separation frequently occurred when people embraced their faith with unquestioned enthusiasm, completely ignoring the problems and concerns of the wider world. (Brinkmeyer 8)

Even though O'Connor was a devout Catholic, she did not blindly accept the religion without intellectually engaging with it. O'Connor desperately tried to avoid the "unquestioned enthusiasm" towards Catholicism that Brinkmeyer mentions. In fact, her fiction typically deals with characters that are complacent with their religion and their place in the world. Since she sees such self-righteousness and close-

mindedness as a problem, O'Connor strives to shake her characters out of their comfort zones by suddenly disrupting their world with violence. With these disruptions, she is able to allow her characters to see the "concerns of the wider world."

In O'Connor's short story "A Good Man is Hard to Find" –which clearly has a thematic influence on McCarthy's *No Country for Old Men*- she uses a violent intrusion to make her main character see an intensely real religious truth. This short story focuses on an unnamed grandmother who is living with her older son, Bailey, and his young family, where she is clearly not appreciated. The grandmother really does not want to go on a family vacation, so she desperately tells them that a convict named the Misfit has escaped from prison, making it far too dangerous to travel. The family goes on the trip anyways. As Brinkmeyer points out, the first ten pages seem like "a relatively gentle satire on the American pastime of the family vacation" (Brinkmeyer 185).

A car accident caused by the grandmother's cat disrupts this idyllic family vacation and creates the perfect situation for the family to come face to face with the escaped convict, the Misfit who is the harbinger of intrusive violence in this O'Connor tale. The henchman of the Misfit takes the family into the woods to kill them; the grandmother is left alone with the Misfit to talk. While her family is being slaughtered in the woods, the grandmother listens to the Misfit's philosophy on life and religion that drives him to commit violence. He says,

Jesus was the only One to raise the dead... and He shouldn't have done it. He thrown everything off balance. If He did what He said, then it's nothing for you to do but throw away everything and follow Him, and if He didn't, then it's nothing for you to do but enjoy the few minutes you got left the best you can-by killing somebody or burning down his house or doing some other meanness to him. No pleasure but meanness... If I had been there [when Jesus raised the dead] I would of known and I wouldn't be like I am now (O'Connor 132)

Since violence has the distinct purpose of forcing O'Connor's main character to see the wider concerns of the world, the violence in the text should not appear mindless. O'Connor gives the violence some deep meaning by giving the Misfit this philosophy. Deep religious thought about the very nature of Jesus Christ disturbs him enough to do 'meanness.' The Misfit does not disrespect Jesus, evidenced by the capitalization of pronouns referring to Jesus, but it is clear that he has intellectually dealt with the central tenets of Catholicism. He does not definitively come down on the authenticity of Jesus' actions or not; he evaluates potential outcomes of both by prefacing most of his statements in the passage with 'if.' Since the Misfit is unsure of the truth, he resorts to a life of crime driven by this doubt.

Confronted with the massacre of her family and a killer with a perverse religious outlook that drives him to do terrible things, the grandmother is sufficiently shaken from the bubble that was her life and sees the evil that lies inside of some people. Even in the horror of the event, however, the grandmother is able to

see “the wider concerns of the world” and the humanity in the Misfit. She says, “Why you’re one of my babies. You’re one of my children”(O’Connor 132). In his analysis of this moment, Brinkmeyer writes, “The Misfit pressures the grandmother with the violence of religious vision-perverted as it is- into a higher understanding of Christ’s presence in the world” (Brinkmeyer 187). By exclaiming that the Misfit is one of her children, the grandmother recognizes that even the murderer of her family still has some remnants of Jesus Christ inside of him. In the beginning of the story when reading the newspaper article about the Misfit, the grandmother exclaims, “I wouldn’t take my children anywhere with a criminal like that loose”(O’Connor 117). This abrupt, violent interruption by the Misfit and listening to the code that motivates him allow the grandmother to get past her clichéd, preconceived notions about people and see how the presence of Jesus is inside of them just as much as it is inside of her. The Misfit ends up killing the grandmother for her sudden outburst of affection, but before her death, she achieves a higher level of grace and better understanding of her religion through her encounter with the Misfit.

In *No Country for Old Men*, McCarthy does not have the same evangelizing goal that O’Connor has, but his novel has a similar structure of killers with codes and violence as a force that reveals a higher understanding of the world. The characterization and descriptions of the Misfit and Anton Chigurh of *No Country for Old Men* are where the key differences between O’Connor and McCarthy really take form. These differences illustrate McCarthy’s representation of violence in his fiction.

One of the most obvious differences is in the backgrounds of the Misfit and Chigurh. "A Good Man is Hard to Find" is only a seventeen page short story, but O'Connor gives much more background information and physical description of the Misfit than McCarthy gives in the whole 309 pages of *No Country for Old Men*. For instance, upon first seeing the Misfit, the narrator describes, "His hair was just beginning to gray and he wore a silver-slimmed spectacles that gave him a scholarly look. He had a long creased face and didn't have on any shirt or undershirt. He had on blue jeans and a hat that was too tight for him" (O'Connor 126). There is nothing particularly extraordinary or jarring about this description. It does, however, give the Misfit tangible physical qualities that McCarthy does not give his readers for Chigurh. During Chigurh's first moment in the book, he acrobatically gets himself out of a pair of handcuffs, brutally strangles a police officer to escape custody, kills a man on the interstate with a cattle gun, and then steals his car. These events all take place in two and a half pages without any background information, physical description, or reason why Chigurh would do such a thing.

Forty pages later, McCarthy offers a very brief physical description of Chigurh through the lens of a terrified gas station owner, revealing Chigurh's inner nature. He writes, "The man looked at Chigurh's eyes for the first time. Blue as lapis. At once glistening and totally opaque. Like wet stones" (NCFOM 56). This brief passage is one of the few physical descriptions the reader gets of Chigurh, and it describes Chigurh in an extremely vague fashion. The passage's strongest language illustrates that Chigurh's eyes are related to stones, since lapis is a stone as well as a color. Obviously, stones do not possess human qualities. They are also elemental

things that have been around as long as the Earth itself. By introducing the reader so suddenly to Chigurh's violent ways and not giving a normal physical depiction like O'Connor does, McCarthy gives his killer an almost mystical quality. This passage is much like in *Blood Meridian* when Tobin describes how the Judge "set on a rock in the middle of the greatest desert you'd ever want to see. Just perched like a man waitin for a coach" as the band of scalpers was out of ammo and massively outnumbered by Apaches (BM 124). In McCarthy's works, these killers are elemental figures that rise out of the land to raise hell beyond normal human description. O'Connor goes to greater lengths in "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" to demonstrate that the Misfit is a regular person who happens to go around murdering people. McCarthy describes Chigurh as anything but normal in *No Country for Old Men*.

These descriptive tactics employed by McCarthy are very different from the tactics O'Connor employs to describe the Misfit after he kills the grandmother, particularly in reference to his eyes. She writes, "Without his glasses, The Misfit's eyes were red-rimmed and pale and defenseless-looking"(O'Connor 132-33). O'Connor does not simply list adjectives with commas to describe The Misfit; she uses the conjunction 'and' to really force the reader to linger on each word. Those words showcase The Misfit's humanness. The Misfit's eyes look that way because he is traumatized by the words the grandmother said to him. His eyes are not cold as stone like Chigurh, but rather, they exhibit some emotion. The grandmother appears to see it when she expresses that he is still one of God's children. By describing him this way, especially as "defenseless-looking," O'Connor really tries to emphasize the

humanity of the Misfit. In emphasizing the human qualities, O'Connor sets to prove to her mostly southern Christian readers that even a character like the Misfit should be viewed as one of God's children. She makes this recognition easier by illuminating these human characteristics of the Misfit.

Another area of convergence and divergence between O'Connor's and McCarthy's characters is in the scene when the killers share a conversation with the women whom they are about to murder. In *No Country for Old Men*, Chigurh tracks down Carla Jean the wife of the protagonist Llewellyn Moss, to hold her accountable for a deal Chigurh and her husband made. Llewellyn does not bow to Chigurh's proposition to give him the money Llewellyn found in the desert to spare Carla Jean. Moss dies before he can kill Chigurh; so, Carla Jean has to pay the consequences. Her obligation to this deal is totally beyond her control; she is a victim of her husband's actions of her husband. Much like the grandmother and the family with their car accident in O'Connor's short story, fate is cruel to Carla Jean.

In the conversation scene between Carla Jean and Chigurh, he reveals the code that motivates his actions much like the Misfit in "A Good Man Is Hard to Find." He claims that he has to kill her because he gave his "word" to Llewellyn. He offers her a coin flip for her life, and Carla Jean chooses the wrong side of the coin. After she realizes she really has no chance to live, Chigurh philosophizes,

I had no say in the matter. Every moment in your life is a turning and every one a choosing. Somewhere you made a choice. All followed to this. The accounting is scrupulous. The shape is drawn. No line can be

erased. I had no belief in your ability to move a coin to your bidding. How could you? A person's path through the world seldom changes and even more seldom will it change abruptly. And the shape of your path was visible from the beginning. (NCFOM 259)

Chigurh tries to demonstrate that he totally lacks agency in this situation. His terse sentences underline their definitiveness. Chigurh leaves no room for debate or response in this moment; the tone of his code mimics its deterministic nature. The passage underscores Chigurh's lack of human qualities by showing how dispassionate he is right before he is about to kill this woman. He believes that he is simply a vessel of fate doing what he is supposed to do, nothing more nothing less.

As illustrated earlier in the physical descriptions of their respective characters, McCarthy's word choice echoes the beliefs seen in his novels that violence is an otherworldly, ever-present force, while O'Connor's word choice underscores her point that even a murderer can be seen as one of God's children. Through the language and rhetoric of the passages in which they appear, the Misfit and Chigurh make it seem like they have no other choice but to commit the brutal actions they do. Serving his artistic purpose, McCarthy has Chigurh speak in an extremely dense language that most of his victims do not fully understand to illustrate his lack of human qualities. Conversely, O'Connor has the Misfit speak colloquially to show that his killings are not mindless but rather motivated by religious confusion. As seen in the close reading of the moments when the Misfit and

Chigurh reveal the code that drives them, both characters attempt to deny their agency and responsibility for their actions.

As for the victims of these killers, the grandmother and Carla Jean also share some similarities and differences. Just like the grandmother in "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," Carla Jean is shot and killed by the murderer with whom she was having a conversation. When confronted with violence, both women also see the higher understanding that each author is trying to show. Unlike O'Connor's grandmother, however, McCarthy's Carla Jean does not die valiantly in defiance of the monstrously deterministic Chigurh; rather, she ends up agreeing with him. He gets Carla Jean to see this nearly omnipresent violence that he represents. Chigurh begins, "They are not some other way. They are this way. You're asking that I second say the world. Do you see? Yes, [Carla Jean] said sobbing. I do. I truly do. Good, [Chigurh] said, That's good. Then he shot her" (NCFOM 260). Much like violence in O'Connor's work, Carla Jean's encounter with Chigurh shakes her out of her regular lifestyle and forces her to see the wider concerns of the world. While O'Connor uses the violent climax of the confrontation between the grandmother and the Misfit to underline her religious imperative, McCarthy uses his climax to lead to a much more depressing sort of higher understanding: his antagonist is correct. Although the grandmother in O'Connor's story is murdered, the reader can take some solace in that she achieved some higher level of grace in seeing the humanity of the Misfit. He also shows some remorse and thinks about his murderous actions. McCarthy gives the reader nothing similar to hold on to. He sets up the revelatory moment like O'Connor does in "A

Good Man Is Hard To Find,” but perverts the moment by vividly showing how Chigurh’s violence coldly conquers all in its path.

In another similarity, the grandmother and Carla Jean both obtain special status in their respective stories. In O’Connor’s story, the grandmother reaches a deeper understanding of her Catholicism. Carla Jean’s special status in McCarthy’s fiction is due to her mere presence in *No Country for Old Men*. It is rare for a woman to play a role of any significance in a McCarthy novel. Women are usually only seen in the background in his novels. In *Blood Meridian*, the only female characters are prostitutes in the streets and Native Americans slaughtered on the plains. Women show up in a few important places in *The Road*, but they are only in the novel for less than fifteen pages. Carla Jean is given a unique place in McCarthy’s literary world by simply being a female who gets a few extended scenes of dialogue.

Although Carla Jean’s femininity is exceptional, McCarthy illustrates how the deified violence comes to all in *No Country for Old Men* by not drastically altering the dynamics of her death scene from the other depictions of death in the novel. For instance, Chigurh has a similar scene earlier in the novel with Carson Wells, a hit man who is also trying to find the drug money. Much like with Carla Jean, Chigurh tracks Wells down and has a conversation with him in his hotel as he prepares to kill him. The two men go back and forth, with Wells attempting to buy his way out of the situation and Chigurh stating analogous philosophical points about fate and free will as he did with Carla Jean. At one point, Wells says, “You don’t have to do this... I’m a day trader. I could just go home”(NCFOM 173). Akin to that sentiment, Carla Jean

says, "You've got no cause to hurt me"(NCFOM 255). In reference to both of these quotes, Chigurh states, "I see people struggle with it. The look they get. They always say the same thing... You don't have to do this"(NCFOM 257). Wells and Carla Jean reach the exact same end, and Chigurh points out the pattern that applies to all. Chigurh does not claim to have any power of his violent actions or that he is somehow favored by fate because he gets to do the killing instead of being killed. His belief is rather simple: he is just doing what has to be done. In this novel and *Blood Meridian* as well, violence comes to all people regardless of their sex or race.

### **Herman Melville- History and Narrator Intrusion**

Many scholars have drawn connections between McCarthy and Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*. For example, in one of her lectures on *Blood Meridian*, Yale University Professor Amy Hungerford points out moments in the text when McCarthy appears to have taken events from *Moby Dick* and placed them directly in his novel but altered them in interesting ways. A scene in which Toadvine threatens to kill the Judge after he scalps a young Native American boy is similar to the scene when Starbuck considers killing Ahab to save the crew. The difference is that McCarthy does not give his reader the internal monologue for Toadvine that Melville offers for Starbuck. Hungerford argues that not giving Toadvine an internal monologue to ponder the consequences of his actions shows how the characters in *Blood Meridian* lack "moral machinery"(Hungerford).

While the links between McCarthy and Melville's *Moby Dick* are not difficult to recognize and have been addressed in scholarship, in my opinion, the similarities

between *Blood Meridian* and Melville do not end with *Moby Dick*; definite connections exist between *Blood Meridian* and Melville's short story "Benito Cereno." These two works share not only thematic connections, but as seen with O'Connor, McCarthy borrows a specific narrative technique from Melville's short story in *Blood Meridian*. "Benito Cereno" depicts a slave revolt on a slave vessel through the eyes of the hapless Captain Amasa Delano. Delano boards a ship off the coast of Massachusetts that looks suspicious but cannot quite figure out what the problem is. Melville makes it fairly obvious to the reader that slaves are in control of the ship, not Benito Cereno whom the slaves fool Delano into believing is the ship's leader. Once Delano finally figures out the reality of the situation, violence ensues as the revolt is quashed. History and the representation of this slave revolt are where the connections between *Blood Meridian* and "Benito Cereno" begin to take form.

*Blood Meridian* and "Benito Cereno" both use historical accounts from around the same time as a basis for their story and alter historical facts for their own purposes. They both take place in the early to mid-nineteenth century in the time of slavery and aggressive expansion of American borders. Deep undercurrents of violence flowed strongly in these times in American history, and both authors depict them. Furthermore, *Blood Meridian* and "Benito Cereno" are both based on memoirs written by participants in the actual events about which the authors write. For "Benito Cereno," Melville read Captain Amasa Delano's *Narratives of Voyages and Travels in the Northern and Southern Hemispheres*, which was published in 1817. Delano is the main character in "Benito Cereno." In his book *Notes on Blood Meridian*, John Sepich leaves little room for doubt that McCarthy read Samuel

Chamberlain's *My Confession: Recollections of a Rouge* which detail Chamberlain's experiences in the 1840s. John Joel Glanton, Judge Holden, and many others are real people in Chamberlain's book and characters in *Blood Meridian*. Sepich even believes that McCarthy loosely bases his main character, the kid, on Chamberlain.

Although both works are based on historical accounts, Melville and McCarthy manipulate the facts of these memoirs for their own purposes. In an excerpt her book on Melville, Laurie Robertson-Lorant lists some of the numerous changes Melville made to Delano's memoir for "Benito Cereno." For example, Melville made up the slaving vessel's cryptic motto 'follow your leader.' The concept of who is the leader is meant to be up for debate since the slaves were able to take control of the ship and put on a performance to fool Delano. Robertson-Lorant also points out that Melville changed the date of the incident from 1805 in Delano's memoir to 1799 in his fictional adaptation. She believes that Melville changed the dates "to evoke the memories of the [slave] revolution in Santo Domingo," and thereby demonstrate to his readers that a similar revolution could be coming to America if the slavery issue was not resolved (Robertson-Lorant 293). Another apt symbol Melville put into his story was the addition of a Gordian knot on the boat. When Delano sees the knot, he has no idea how to untangle it. Alexander the Great undid this knot in ancient times by cutting it with his sword. The Gordian knot and all of these symbolic alterations to Delano's historical account suggest that the slavery situation for Melville is a problem that will only be solved by violently slicing it open.

While Melville plays with the factual account for political reasons, McCarthy tweaks his historical account to exaggerate the character of Judge Holden. Chamberlain describes numerous horror stories about Holden that fit with McCarthy's version of Holden, including that he is terrifically violent, abnormally tall, and almost hairless. For the novel, McCarthy plays off the fact that there is no other mention of Judge Holden in any other historical account outside of Chamberlain's memoir, which he uses to give a mythical quality to give his judge Holden. As mentioned earlier, Tobin describes how the Judge "set on a rock in the middle of the greatest desert you'd ever want to see. Just perched like a man waiting for a coach" as the band of scalpers was out of ammo and massively outnumbered by Apaches (BM 124). The mysterious and elemental quality of Judge Holden represents how violence is also as sudden and basic. As with Melville, McCarthy twisting the facts of a historical account helps him ground the view of violence in his work. Holden appears to be some sort of demigod in the novel, but by basing this character on loose historical fact, McCarthy makes Holden's views all the more terrifying.

In addition to modifying historical accounts, another connection between "Benito Cereno" and *Blood Meridian* is how both authors break with the consistency of the narrative form at crucial moments in the story. With these narrative interventions, the authors are emphatically pointing out the high stakes of the texts to the reader. Both instances of this technique occur immediately preceding climactic acts of violence. By breaking right before these pivotal moments in their texts, Melville and McCarthy underline the main points of their works.

Melville's fissure comes towards the end of the story just after Delano finally recognizes that the slaves are really in control of the ship and Benito Cereno is just a pawn being led around by the revolt's leader, Babo. This moment of revelation comes very late for Delano while Melville subtly lets the reader know earlier in the story what is really going on. For instance, Babo takes Cereno in for his shave in the midst of Delano's boarding of the ship. Babo's insistence on Cereno getting his shave seems odd to the reader but Delano just goes along with it. During the shave, Delano says that Cereno's story of drifting from Cape Horn to St. Maria for two months is too ridiculous to believe, but because it is Cereno, Delano concludes that he trusts "his" story. Melville describes Cereno as being given a "start" at hearing Babo's lie exposed. Upon seeing Cereno's reaction, Babo cuts Cereno's face to keep him in line. Delano, however, is not astute enough to read his reaction correctly. This moment is only one instance of many of Delano's inability to comprehend the situation.

"Benito Cereno" is not told from Delano's first person point of view. Rather, Melville uses a third person narrative style that is seen almost totally from Delano's perspective. Due to this structure, the reader can tell for certain that Delano could not offer the insight given at the point where the third person narrative style is most clearly broken. After Cereno jumps from his ship onto Delano's small boat to escape, Melville writes, "All this, with what preceded, and what followed, occurred with such involutions of rapidity, that past, present, and future seemed one" (Melville 85). Someone who continually misses obvious signs that things were very wrong on the ship does not seem capable of making such an observation. Melville intrudes in the story here to point out the societal significance that slavery

has pushed the Africans to violence and that they are more than capable of carrying out sophisticated attacks. This sentiment is also echoed in the changes to Delano's memoir laid out by Robertson-Lorant, especially changing the year of the events from 1805 to 1799 to more closely coincide with the revolution in Santo Domingo. In this passage, Melville does away with the subtleties and the slow, suspenseful build-up of the Delano dominated point of view to make certain that his readers are able to recognize the storm that is brewing over slavery.

McCarthy employs a similar move in *Blood Meridian* with his non-depiction of the death of the kid. The manner in which he describes the demise of the kid gets to the core of what McCarthy is saying in his works about the nature of violence. McCarthy maintains a level of extreme violence throughout the novel, and yet, when it comes to describe the death of the kid, McCarthy turns his narrative eye away. Like the Melville passage quoted above, this narrative interference is not consistent with how McCarthy portrays violence in the rest of the novel.

In his description of the death of Capt. John Joel Glanton, McCarthy stays with the typical intensity of violent descriptions in this novel. After the camp the band of scalpers is protecting is ambushed by Yuma Native Americans, McCarthy writes,

Glanton spat. Hack away you mean red nigger, he said, and the old man raised the axe and spilt the head of John Joel Glanton to the thrapple...[The Yumas] raised up Glanton's body and bore it aloft in the manner of a slain champion and hurled it onto the flames. (BM 275)

Although this violent scene is not as long some of the other passages in the book, it is still extremely graphic. The detail of going to the “thrapple” basically means the Yuma spilt Glanton’s head all the way down and through the throat. McCarthy’s use of Glanton’s full name forces the reader to slow down during the murder because he rarely denotes any characters with their full names. This reference to the full name keeps the reader’s focus on the action, not allowing him or her to turn away.

McCarthy spares the reader no expense with the mention of how the Yumas further desecrate Glanton’s body by casting it into of a fire with rest of the camp they destroyed. This scene shows that McCarthy does not have a problem with graphically depicting the death scene of a main character.

With such intense depictions of violence throughout, McCarthy’s decision not to depict the kid’s death at the hand of the Judge is all the more shocking. McCarthy writes,

[The kid] opened the rough board of the door of the jakes and stepped in. The judge was seated upon the closet. He was naked and he rose up smiling and gathered him in his arms against his immense and terrible flesh and shot the wooden barlatch home behind him... In the saloon two men wanted to buy the hide were looking for the owner of the bear. (BM 333)

With the polysyndeton structure of the long second sentence, McCarthy slowly builds the terrible suspense of what the judge is going to do to the kid instead of using commas foregoing a list-like feel. This sentence is not all that different in

execution from Glanton's spit and provocation of the Yuma. The key divergence comes when McCarthy figuratively shuts the door on the reader while the judge literally shuts the door on the jake to cover up his deed. The paragraph ends with the barlatch closing, and he moves directly on to two random men in the bar that the kid and the judge just left. McCarthy is deliberately avoiding describe the kid's death any way he can to underscore the great loss.

To continue evading presenting the kid's body, McCarthy does not show the aftermath of the murder as he did with Glanton. He follows the two men to the jakes where they are told by a third man to not to go in there. One man looks in but does not tell the other what he sees. McCarthy writes, "[The man who looked] stepped past the other and went back up the walk. The other man stood looking after him. Then he opened the door and looked in...In the saloon they had rolled the bear onto a wagonsheet" (BM 334). McCarthy has another opportunity to portray the kid's body but roughly cuts away to the saloon again as the man looks upon the corpse. After this moment, McCarthy focuses on the judge dancing to celebrate his murder of the kid; it was the last chance to see the damage done to the kid. By refusing to show the kid's death and dead carcass twice, McCarthy explicitly breaks with his usual depictive style of violence in *Blood Meridian*.

I believe that McCarthy does away with narrative and descriptive consistency here to explicitly illustrate the moral uniqueness and overall importance of the kid. Harold Bloom aptly interprets that "McCarthy subtly shows us the long, slow development of the kid from another mindless scalper of Indians to the courageous

confronter of the judge in their final debate in the saloon”(Bloom 257). Bloom makes this assertion because of the discreet moments in the text when the kid acts contrary to the rest of the band of scalpers by helping others and showing mercy. I do not mean to suggest that the kid acts like a chivalrous knight with a strict moral code, but in the world of *Blood Meridian*, where the violence and degeneracy are so prevalent, any small act of kindness stands out. For example, a member of the band, Brown, is dying from an arrow in his leg. The men all laugh at him while he writhes in pain, but the kid volunteers to help Brown. Brown violently struggles while the arrow is being pulled out, but the kid gets it out eventually. This act prompts Tobin to say, “Fool... Don’t you know he’d of took you with him? He’d of took you, boy. Like a bride to the altar”(BM 163). By saving Brown’s life, the kid does something no one else in the gang was willing to do. Tobin tells the kid that he was an idiot to risk his life to help another. Self-preservation is the predominant philosophy among this group of men, and the kid goes against it in this passage and a few other instances. By looking out for someone other than himself, the kid demonstrates his uniqueness. The kid is not a saint, however, because he is still a part of this scalping band. The moral rareness of this character and the protagonists in *No Country for Old Men* and *The Road* is determined comparative to the other characters in these novels. With this violence that is all enveloping, even someone who engages in some acts of violence and resists it eventually, and resorts to using it in self-defense can be considered to have acted morally.

The most important moment for the kid’s maturation and the moment that cements his distinctive nature in *Blood Meridian* comes when he challenges the

judge's rhetorically grand philosophical musings on the nature of man and violence. The judge has many soliloquies in the novel in which he essentially says that man is forever prone to violent behavior. The gang of scalpers does little to disprove this notion and always accepts the judge's assertion about the world without retort. After tracking the kid down after almost twenty years since the Yuma massacre and not looking a day older, the judge continues to spout off about his own excellence and agency. After listening to all this talk and knowing full well that the judge intends to kill him, the kid tells the judge, "You ain't nothing" (BM 331). The judge did many terribly violent yet awe-inspiring acts throughout the whole novel and to tell him that he is nothing is quite a powerful statement. The kid lacks the rhetorical flourish of the judge, but that does not diminish the sheer bravado of this three-word sentence. This bravery exhibited here and the few acts of selflessness show that at least the kid is somewhat morally above the judge's belief in eternal and prevalent violence.

This refusal to look by the narrator is McCarthy's way of underscoring the tragic element to the kid's death. Because he is an anomaly in the eyes of the judge and demonstrates that some moral action is possible, the kid's death is a tragic one. McCarthy teases the reader by giving us a character in the kid who is wanted by the judge because he "demonstrated clemency for the heathen" only to have him murdered, overcome by the novel's end (BM 299). The loss of such a figure is too much for McCarthy's narrator to bear, so, he clams up twice when the moment to describe the dead body arises. Glanton, for example, had slaughtered numerous Native Americans on the plains. He is not a very sympathetic character; therefore,

the narrator has no qualms about showing his death in a graphic manner. Since the kid qualifies as a sympathetic character—a rarity in *Blood Meridian*—his death is portrayed in a different way than the other characters in the novel. With these differences, McCarthy proves that resistance to this nearly omnipresent violence is possible, but he also clearly demonstrates that this defiance has limits.

Even though McCarthy shows that the rebelliousness to the extremely ubiquitous violence cannot overcome its manifestation in the antagonist, when we look *Blood Meridian*, *No Country for Old Men*, and *The Road* in conversation with each other, it becomes clear that McCarthy uses the kid's death to signal the beginning of the resistance to the judge's philosophy of eternal violence. I do not mean to infer that McCarthy is being resoundingly optimistic, but in comparison to Melville's dire warning that turned out to be correct, he is striking a more positive tone than Melville. The first instance of resistance comes from the narrator in his refusal to show the kid's murder. As discussed earlier, the clamming up of the narrator emphasizes the tragedy of the loss kid's uniqueness, but this narrative fissure could simultaneously be read as the narrator joining in with the kid's defiance against the violent philosophy of the judge. This reading is strengthened by the fact that the kid's dead body is intentionally not shown twice. The narrator refuses to adhere to how he consistently represents violent moments throughout the rest of *Blood Meridian*.

The other way McCarthy mimics Melville after his narrative intrusion is how he supports the point made from the break in narrative consistency resulting from

the narrator's infringement. In "Benito Cereno," Melville fulfills the warning by showing a full out battle between the slaves on the ship and Delano's men.

McCarthy augments the resistance from showing the kid's corpse with an epilogue detailing an unnamed man lighting fire in the fields. McCarthy writes,

In the dawn there is a man progressing over the plain by means of holes he is making in the ground. He uses an implement with two handles and he chucks it into the hole and he enkindles the stone in the hole with his steel hole by hole striking fire out of the rock which God has put there. (BM 337)

The verb 'progressing' jumps out immediately because it just syntactically sounds odd. McCarthy could have used "moving" over the plains instead, but by using "progress" immediately following the murder of the protagonist, this verb choice accentuates the narrative resistance to the judge's physical conquering of the kid. Not only is the narrator refusing to depict the judge's dominance, he is also going out his way to show some sort of progress being made in the face of the loss of the one character-the kid- who demonstrates some moral agency. Harold Bloom has a similar reading of the epilogue. First, he claims that the subtitle to the novel- *The Evening Redness in the West*- refers to the judge. Bloom continues, "Perhaps all the reader can surmise is that the man striking fire in the rock at dawn is an opposing figure in regard to the evening redness in the west... A new Prometheus rising to go against him"(Bloom 263). His assertion of the start of a resistance is given more credence when looking at the *Blood Meridian* in conversation with *No Country for*

*Old Men* and *The Road*. Similar characters like the kid are present in both of these novels. The motif of fire lit in the darkness carries on by these characters demonstrating some sliver of moral action in a world where violence reigns supreme. Just like the kid, however, the protagonists reach the same end in both *No Country for Old Men* and *The Road*. In fact, all of McCarthy's protagonists' deaths are described in similar ways with the narrator breaking with depictive consistency. This Melvillian narrative intrusion only underlines that some resistance and moral action against the judge is possible; it does not render the judge's arguments false or stop the violence.

### **Gleanings from the "ugly fact" of influence**

Flannery O'Connor spoke very directly and passionately to the religious issues she felt were pertinent in her time. In "A Good Man Is Hard To Find," the tool for examining her concerns about religious complacency and the isolation it can cause are a killer with a code in the Misfit violently jarring the nice, little world of the grandmother. Violence has a divine purpose for her in that it forces her average, stock characters to look beyond their clichéd notions of the world and see God's grace in even the strangest places. O'Connor, however, limits herself to issues with Catholicism, and constricts her topicality to her time. Even though he uses this technique of hers, McCarthy conveys an idea contrary to O'Connor: violence lacking a divine purpose.

Herman Melville fictionalizes and alters important details of Amasa Delano's shipping journal to illuminate to his 1840s audience the explosive powder keg

situation that the institution of slavery created. He subtly hints to the reader that something is terrible wrong on the slave ship, but Delano cannot quite figure it out. Melville does away the literary web of complexity at a key moment to vociferously call attention to this fragile situation. He charges "Benito Cereno" with an immediate political significance, a prophetic warning. As with O'Connor, McCarthy uses the tool of narrative intrusion in the passage of the death of the kid but uses it in a different way: to underscore the tragic loss of a figure that can resist the overwhelming force of a seemingly omnipresently violent force.

By using these tools from authors past and conveying the opposite meaning from what these motifs were originally intended, Cormac McCarthy frees himself from the very local and contemporary concerns of O'Connor and Melville. McCarthy's version of violence is without direction or aim. Its main purpose is to destroy, and while resistance to it is possible, it can only do so much. When characters come into contact with the antagonist who embodies this spirit, they can see this brutal truth and comprehend this higher understanding of the machinations of the world in McCarthy's literature. When the antagonist kills the somewhat morally valiant protagonists, McCarthy underscores the tragic element to this loss by withholding graphic depiction of the scene. The awareness of the techniques of these earlier authors reveals the skeletal outline of the individual components in his literary superstructure. Since I argue that these novels speak to each other across time, I feel it is important to note that McCarthy is engaged in this question of temporality by looking back on this past authors and contemporizing their methods

to portray the nearly omnipresent violence and the resistance to this domineering force.

## Chapter II

### Richard Slotkin, *The Origin Myth* and *The Anti-Myth*

Although he does not literally write on McCarthy's work, Richard Slotkin gets to key themes and symbols like much of the criticism exclusively on McCarthy does not. Slotkin's critical work *Regeneration Through Violence* examines the role that myths play in the creation of the American identity. In the beginning of his book, Slotkin writes, "The mythology of a nation is the intelligible mask of that enigma called the 'national character'" (Slotkin 3). He argues throughout his work that America hides the uglier parts of its formative history; it veils the corpses of dead Native Americans and the ruin of the wilderness. If the consciousness of the nation is focused on these historical facts, however, the founders would have had a difficult time forging the nation. Slotkin argues that myths try to justify the violence because something comes from the carnage: a new nation. He writes, "The first colonists saw in America an opportunity to regenerate their fortunes, their spirits, and the power of their church and nation; but the means to that regeneration became the means of violence, and the myth of regeneration through violence became the structuring metaphor of the American experience" (Slotkin 5). Violence was the means to secure the ability to craft what the colonists wanted, but the fictionally exaggerated myth of their nation is what allowed them to hold onto what they brutally created.

I argue in this chapter that McCarthy is an anti-mythic writer that works in opposition to the myth crafters seen in *Regeneration Through Violence*, but does the work of Slotkin in fictional form. For instance, Slotkin juxtaposes the myth of Davy

Crockett with accounts of the real Davy Crockett that shows him to be “an uncivilized animal,” “lust for the killing,” and “a true frontier wastrel”(Slotkin 555). Analogously, McCarthy does not deal with the mythical Davy Crockett but forces his audience to look at the real Davy Crockett. *Blood Meridian* does not sentimentalize the Manifest Destiny myth of the mid-1800s, but, rather, shows it as an extremely vicious slaughter of Native Americans. He tears the mask away and forces his reader to see the violence that is there. He highlights the problem that these nation-shaping myths over-simplify our complex and bloody history. McCarthy is able to get this past problem with his pervasive use of violence throughout his novels. Violence is the way into the discussion that McCarthy weaves into the three novels that I am studying.

Even though the overall thematic goal of the identity making myths that Slotkin studies are not totally similar, McCarthy employs some techniques and motifs- calling on past traditions and archetypes- seen in these myths to express his vision. One quality in a mythmaker that Slotkin discusses is the ability to “look back over a span of time in which myths have developed and decayed, have shaped and been shaped by human and national history”(Slotkin 13). I describe how McCarthy demonstrates this skill in drawing on the work of past authors in chapter I. McCarthy thinks of authors who greatly affected him, and he uses their techniques in his stories. In the first chapter, I show how Chigurh from *No Country for Old Men* heavily draws upon from Flannery O’Connor’s the Misfit in “A Good Man Is Hard to Find,” and how he uses the narrative intrusion from Melville’s “Benito Cereno” in *Blood Meridian* to underline the key point of that work. In regards to the definition

of mythology, Slotkin writes, “ [A myth] recapitulates that people’s experience in their land, rehearses their vision of that experience in its relation to their gods and the cosmos, and reduces both experience and vision to a paradigm”(Slotkin 6). The connection between this concept and McCarthy using literary influence is not exactly the same, but I believe Slotkin’s analysis accurately describes why McCarthy would look back into past literature to craft his own tales: the work of Melville and O’Connor were an important part of his experience as an author and writer. Just as an American myth-maker could not ignore the war heroes of conflicts with Native Americans, McCarthy uses the techniques from Melville and O’Connor to recall his past literary journeys but also to show how he is different when he alters those authors’ methods. Myth-making also creates a sense of newness out cultural artifacts. McCarthy’s draws on yet slightly changes these methods to help creates his sense of uniqueness while also referencing the past influences.

In the three novels that this project is scrutinizing in particular, McCarthy uses universal archetypes that Slotkin frequently mentions to links the three works together. For Slotkin, a protagonist and a universe for this protagonist to act in “enable us to identify with the world of the myth”(Slotkin 9). In the world of these three McCarthy novels, the protagonist is characterized in an everyman-type fashion (i.e. hard-working, not overly intelligent). Although he may not know it, this character is taking part in a debate with a philosophically, rhetorically-gifted person who argues and acts in ways that advocates violence, nihilism, and death. These nihilistic characters are usually the last ones left standing by the novels’ conclusion while the protagonists die. This structure of McCarthy’s novels does speak to the

universal concerns of all that Slotkin observes (i.e. “All men are born and must die, feel the need for love and begetting children...”), and it sets up the paradigm that is so essential to a myth’s being in general and McCarthy’s literary world in particular (Slotkin 5). In this paradigm, the antagonist comes to represent this omnipresent violence seen in all three McCarthy novels.

By recalling on the lessons from the authors of the past and establishing a paradigmatic structure clearly seen in *Blood Meridian*, *No Country for Old Men*, and *The Road*, McCarthy creates his own mythical world that is in the same vein as described by Slotkin but also different in goals than the nation identity-forming myths that he is studying. The rest of this chapter proceeds to look at this dynamic in action in *Blood Meridian* and *No Country for Old Men* and how McCarthy uses pervasive violence to examine the complex, bloody history that the myths often mask. Since *Blood Meridian* is set in the earliest time period and written first, it lays the foundation of ideas upon which *No Country for Old Men* and *The Road* further develop. Characters in both of these novels “recapitulate the experiences” in *Blood Meridian*. This paradigm that McCarthy establishes allows the three novels that I am studying to speak to each other.

### ***Blood Meridian*- The Origin Myth**

*Blood Meridian* is the origin myth on which *No Country for Old Men* and *The Road* build upon. Since violence is so central to the inner workings of all these McCarthy novels, it is appropriate that the introduction of the protagonists, the kid, and the antagonist, the judge, illuminate this omnipresent aura of violence. On the

novel's very first page, which describes the birth of the kid, McCarthy writes, "The mother dead these fourteen years did incubate in her own bosom the creature who would carry off her off... [The kid] can neither read nor write and in him broods already a taste for mindless violence. All history present in that visage" (BM 3).

Through no intentional fault of his own, obviously, the kid violently comes into the world by taking the life of his mother; his very first act on this earth involved taking a life. The second sentence demonstrates that the kid- after very few years of growth -already has a taste for violence. This curiosity about "mindless violence" must be innate. The passage comes from the third paragraph of the whole novel and is the first mention of the word 'violence.' The kid's father is a schoolmaster, and there are no mentions of the father mistreating the child or the child witnessing any acts of violence. Since the kid is illiterate, he could not have picked a taste for violence through reading books or poem; he is just born with this desire.

The rest of this opening section of the chapter briefly details the kid's exploits after he ran away from home at the age of fourteen, which involve all sorts of fights and gun battles. In *Regeneration Through Violence*, Slotkin depicts the early settlers committing acts of violence to build up their new colony and drive out the natives that disturb them. In the opening scene of this trilogy that I am studying, McCarthy asserts that violence can be something that can come about without a direct cause while Slotkin demonstrates reasons for the destruction. the kid does exhibit some signs of moral development throughout the novel in assisting some others in the gang of scalpers and showing "clemency for the heathen;" so, he does

not remain totally beholden to the instinctive draw towards violence discussed above.

While the kid unintentionally kills his mother upon birth and seems born with a taste for violence, the antagonist of *Blood Meridian*, the judge, takes joy in inciting violence. In his first scene in the novel, the kid encounters him in a makeshift church in a border where the judge proceeds to inflame the crowd against the preacher by claiming that the man is not really a preacher, illiterate, and a molester an eleven-year-old girl in his priestly clothes. When questioned by men as to how he knew all those incriminating things against the reverend in the bar after the incident, the judge says, "I never laid eyes on the man before today. Never even heard of him... He raised his glass and drank"(BM 8). The judge essentially admits that he had the crowd kill the reverend just for fun and without real cause. Again, this moment in the text shows how violence in *Blood Meridian* and the other works discussed in this project does not necessarily have a cause or reason.

Although the scene is the first time the reader sees the judge in *Blood Meridian*, it is not the earliest noted instance of his presence within the universe of the book. One of the members of the band of scalpers, Tobin, describes how the Judge "set on a rock in the middle of the greatest desert you'd ever want to see. Just perched like a man waitin for a coach" as the band of scalpers was out of ammo and massively outnumbered by Apaches (BM 124). This description is about all the reader gets regarding the origin of the judge. By giving the reader so little description, McCarthy gives the judge an aura of mystery. He is an elemental force

much in the way violence is described. The novel covers around twenty years of time, but from his first scene in the tent to his final scene in the bar with the kid, the judge seems “little changed or none in all these years”(BM 325). By making the judge appear immortal, McCarthy uses him as a symbol for this instinctive, violent presence in all men.

Since the judge comes to symbolize this omnipresent violence that is seen so obviously in McCarthy's work, it is fair to say that the judge comes to represent the Slotkinian “universe in which a hero may act”(Slotkin 8). Slotkin more fully describes his conception of universe as “a reflection of the audience's conception of the world”(Slotkin 8). As I established at the outset, it is not possible to completely map Slotkin's assertions about myths on McCarthy's work. When looking at these novels in conversation with each other, seeing this same structure repeat, and looking at McCarthy's own words in his *New York Times* interview from 1992, however, I believe that it is reasonable to assume the McCarthy places his characters in a world where violence is pervasive, elemental, and deified. This outlook may not reflect the “audience's conception” completely, but it accurately reflects McCarthy's conceptions and the conceptions of the characters in his novels.

With the judge postulated as symbolizing Slotkinian ‘universe,’ interesting intersections and divergences with the Davy Crockett example from earlier become illuminated. For Slotkin, the real Crockett wasted the natural resources of the land; the myths surrounding Crockett claimed that he only killed animals and took from the land when it was absolutely necessary. Slotkin sets up this example by

demonstrating how the hero (Crockett) of this myth is in one-sided conflict with the universe he inhabits. Since McCarthy does away with the nationalistic, mythic coverage for real Crockett's actions, I cannot analyze the relationship between the mythical Crockett and the real Crockett, but the relationship between the real Crockett and the land is relevant to the connection between the kid and the judge in *Blood Meridian*. Instead of Crockett- the hero in the myth- destroying his universe, the omnipresent violence-the universe in the case of *Blood Meridian*- wages a one-sided conflict against the kid-the hero of the story. The judge ends up conquering the kid by murdering him by the books; the kid never really had a chance, yet he remained defiant until the end. Here, McCarthy is doing the work of Slotkin in his fiction by showing the dark violent past of the west, but McCarthy manages do it by symbolically inverting Crockett's relationship to the land in the forms of the kid and the judge.

In the book of essays *Cormac McCarthy*, Sara Spurgeon's "The Sacred Hunter and the Eucharist of the Wilderness: Mythic Reconstruction in *Blood Meridian*" argues for McCarthy's inversion and perversion of the ancient hunter myth. Spurgeon uses Slotkin's *Regeneration Through Violence* to help explain the ancient hunter myth and advance her argument. Spurgeon writes,

"The myth of the sacred hunter is one of regeneration through violence enacted upon the body of the earth...In many versions, the prey allows itself to be hunted and killed, willingly sacrifice its life to sustain the life of the hunter, who must in turn give honor and thanks

to the prey...Following the hunt, he or his community either literally or figuratively consumes the prey in a eucharist of the wilderness, thus renewing the hunter and providing the life for those he serves. The eucharist, Slotkin argues, which enacts a sexual union between the hunter and the body of nature”(Spurgeon 77).

The most central theme of the ancient hunter myth is the close relationship of the hunter to his universe, which references to the land and the animals that the hunter shares the land with. The animals of the land help the hunter by willingly giving themselves up, and the hunter gives thanks to the land by only taking what he needs and allowing the land to regenerate. This relationship between the ancient hunter and the universe is a reciprocal one. In *Blood Meridian*, the land that the gang of scalpers travels is not appreciative in the same way. McCarthy writes, “Crouched under their hats they seemed fugitives on a grander scale, like beings for whom the sun hungered” (BM 248). The brutal sun hungering for this band does not demonstrate the same kind of sentiment. I see the judge representing the universe in which the kid acts as much as if not more so than physical land. Their relationship is anything but a reciprocal one because the judge murders the kid.

I believe that there is strong evidence that part of Spurgeon’s claim is correct in that McCarthy perverts the myth of the ancient hunter through his inversion of it by having the universe turn against the protagonist. I, however, contest her claim of the total degenerative nature of the violence in the novel. She writes,

[T]he new order judge has helped bring into being in which humankind's relationship to the wilderness is one of butchery on a scale scarcely imaginable. The outcome is not regeneration, for no animals remain alive to carry on the relationship. This new version of the ancient hunter myth represents degeneration signified by the images of enormous mountains of bones, miles long, stretching across the prairies, in which the mythic figure of the sacred hunter has been reduced to that of the bonepickers, ragged children gathering dead evidence of the now vanished herd (Spurgeon 90).

She is correct in asserting that the judge has ushered in this violence through his rhetoric centered on the necessity and awe of it. I also do not mean to deny that violence within this novel serves the purpose of the regeneration in the world of *Blood Meridian*. The violent acts that were done in the novel inflict much carnage without any thought to the consequences of it. As discussed earlier, McCarthy strips away of the mythic layers that Slokin discusses which hides the bloody truth of America's expansionist history. Even though the land is left ravaged and the ugly truth behind the Manifest Destiny is revealed, McCarthy does not suggest that everything is lost; there is something that transcends the extreme violence depicted.

Spurgeon touches on the transcendent quality of the kid but does not fully describe it. She writes,

As Tobin and the kid crouch in the desert after the slaughter at the ferry crossing, the kid receives his final chance to seize his place as

hunter within the new myth and fails once again when he refuses to shoot the unarmed judge. To do so would have been proper within the relationship of the hunter and prey...When the kid will neither shoot him nor join him, the judge charges, 'There's a flawed place in the fabric of your heart... You alone were mutinous. You alone reserved in your soul some corner of clemency' (299)"(Spurgeon 96).

For Spurgeon, this moment shows the kid going against the new myth the judge created out of his perversion of the ancient hunter myth. The kid is refusing to engage in degenerative violence seen so frequently throughout the rest of the novel. Spurgeon, however, also sees this moment as the kid betraying "the sacred office he once occupied as the hunter of men in the new myth, and it is this betrayal for which the judge castigates him in the prison"(Spurgeon 97). I think that Spurgeon does not give the kid enough credit for his refusal in this moment of defiance. She does not acknowledge his other acts of moral courage earlier in the novel, like when he saved Brown from sure death on the battlefield when no one else would.

Instead of looking at the kid's defiance of the judge as him revolting against Spurgeon's new myth, I believe the kid's revolt to be an archetype for McCarthy's own mythic structure. McCarthy acknowledges the importance of the kid's rebellion twice by not depicting the violence done to him by the hands of the judge. The obvious rupture in the consistency of the level of the graphicness of the violence at the conclusion of *Blood Meridian* clearly shows McCarthy giving the kid special treatment. The violence is so pervasive and essential to the meaning of the work and

his deconstruction of mythic layers that the decision to not depict the kid's death appears to be paradox. If violence is the tool that McCarthy uses to depict his worldview in the novel, why would he not graphically show the violence done to his main character? This literary move is also an intentional, structural decision of McCarthy's myth. Later, I examine this same move in *No Country for Old Men* and *The Road*; the repetition of it warrants studying it. Giving special honor to the death of the protagonist is a key aspect of the mythic structure. The kid dies at the end of *Blood Meridian*, but his spirit and traits live on in the other main characters in *No Country for Old Men* and *The Road*. In this way, the violence committed towards the protagonist is not totally degenerative, but rather somewhat regenerative in the next two novels.

Even though McCarthy in *Blood Meridian* is doing the work of Slotkin *Regeneration Through Violence*, this tearing away of the veil of American political myth is essential to McCarthy's own mythic structure. He is an anti-mythic in the Slotkinian sense, but McCarthy also derives his mythic nature and structures from these anti-mythic tendencies. *Blood Meridian* is very much the origin myth in relation to *No Country for Old Men* and *The Road*. By being anti-mythic, McCarthy establishes his own mythic structure the other two works add to and modify.

### **No Country for Old Men- The Anti-Myth**

Along with *Blood Meridian*, McCarthy is looking backwards through time to write about the past in *No Country for Old Men*. Published in 1985, *Blood Meridian* looked back about 120 years in the past. The historical look is not as great for *No*

*Country for Old Men*; the novel is set in the 1980 and was published in 2005. Since McCarthy is not looking so far back in the past in *No Country for Old Men*, the tone and mood of this novel is much grittier, more realistic. Jay Ellis offers a keen observation for the differences between the two novels when he says “we no longer see devils or angels in our time”(Ellis 229). The American West of the mid nineteenth century is much less fraught with mystery than the American West of the post-Vietnam 1980s. *No Country for Old Men* may have a less mythic mood than that of *Blood Meridian*, but it still contains the same structure and archetypes of the McCarthyian mythic structure with some significant variations. For instance, considering *Blood Meridian* to be the origin myth, the antagonist, Anton Chigurh, has moments in the text where he acts and speaks very much like the judge, but in this more modern time, he does not strike as much wonder and awe into the novel as the judge did in *Blood Meridian*. The same can be said of the protagonist, Llewelyn Moss; he represents the kid figure in the novel, but he also does not quite have the same aura about him that the kid had. Unlike in *Blood Meridian*, however, I would even say that *No Country for Old Men* has more than one protagonist who carries the torch of the kid. The aesthetic level of language that McCarthy uses in this novel is more muted, less spectacular than seen in *Blood Meridian* as well. Looking at these factors together, McCarthy beings to show the “dangerous notion of progress” in this novel set much farther forward in time.

On the surface, Chigurh and the judge from *Blood Meridian* seem very much alike, but when closely analyzing their words and actions, significant differences become apparent. These differences demonstrate how the manifestation of the

deified violence is less powerful than its original incarnation in the judge. One example of this concept is how the two antagonists use language to talk about their own wills. For instance, when talking to a man he is about to murder-Wells- about the opening scene of the novel where he kills a police officer, Chigurh says, "I let him take me into handcuffs. I'm not sure why I did this but I think I wanted to see if I could extricate myself by an act of will. Because I believe that one can. That such a thing is possible. But it was a foolish thing to do. A vain thing to do. Do you understand?"(NCFOM 175). The most striking aspect of this passage is Chigurh equivocating language. He is "not sure why" he would do such a thing, and awkwardly repeats the same idea when he mentions, "Because I believe that one can. That such a thing is possible." Chigurh is not coming outright and saying that he is powerful enough to overcome the officer; such a proclamation is there, but it comes after much conditional and passive language.

The equivocal language and the inelegant sentences of Chigurh are deemed so when being compared to the judge. In the final conversation before the judge murders the kid, he strongly opines about the force of his will. He says,

The dance will become a false dance and the dancers false dancers. And yet there will be one there always who is a true dancer and can you guess who that might be?...Hear me, man, he said. There is room on the stage for one beast and one alone. All others are destined for a night that is eternal and without name. One by one they will step

down into the darkness before the footlamps. Bears that dance, bears that don't. (BM 331)

Unlike Chigurh, the judge speaks in long, stylish sentences laced with metaphor. His rhetorical skills are blaringly superior when putting it in juxtaposition Chigurh's passage. The talk of dancers basically refers to the philosophical battle between the kid and the judge. Since he demonstrates "clemency for the heathen" in the eyes of the judge, the kid becomes a false dancer in the dance of war the judge so lovingly speaks of. In this dancing metaphor, the judge twice insinuates that he is the one, true dancer. Compared to the question Chigurh posits to Wells, the question in the passage is meant to be a mocking one; the judge knows that the kid gets what he is saying but chides him anyways. Chigurh's question seems sincere; he actually wants him to understand his philosophy before he kills him. After obviously insinuating that he is the one true dancer, the judge uses the rest of the passage to unequivocally state that he will be the one dancing on the stage through his use of assertive verb and word choice. Chigurh and the judge both end up killing their adversaries in the end, but Chigurh does it with much less linguistic style. The archetypical McCarthyian antagonists appear to lose the rhetorical flourish as he jumps forward in time.

McCarthy does not change the end results for these two the judge and Chigurh because both their adversaries are killed in the end, but he does not have Chigurh achieve the same accomplishments as the judge. These alterations make him a weaker villain in comparison to the judge. One very simple reason for this fact

is that Chigurh does not get to kill Llewellyn himself. Another band of drug dealers get to him first, so, he has to settle for killing Llewellyn's defenseless and innocent wife. Obviously, this conquering of the protagonist is much less satisfying for the antagonist than the judge's brutal murder of the kid.

The last image that McCarthy leaves his reader with these two characters also reveals much about the absence of mystery in this modern setting and further degrades Chigurh in comparison to the judge. In the mythical by comparison past of *Blood Meridian*, the judge gets a glorious ending after murdering the kid. The strange, near hallucinatory final paragraph shows the judge nimbly dancing. McCarthy writes, " Towering over them all is the judge and he is naked dancing...He dances in light and in shadow and he is a great favorite. He never sleeps the judge. He is dancing, dancing. He says that he will never die"( BM 335). The dancing of this passage harkens back to the metaphor he made to the kid described earlier. The repetition of the word 'dancing' quoted here and in many other places in the paragraph creates a hypnotic effect. The repetition of 'He says that he will never die' also adds to this feeling. The recurrence of these words emphasizes how this manifestation of the omnipresent, deified violence that the judge represents will never go away and appears to be an extremely strong and present force to be reckoned with. The echoing of those phrases also adds an element of mystery and awe about the judge.

When describing Chigurh's final scene in *No Country for Old Men*, however, McCarthy rips down the façade that builds Chigurh up as this almost superhuman

force. He still represents the deified violence of the judge in this novel, but, again, that manifestation is just not as omnipotent as it is in *Blood Meridian*. Like the judge, Chigurh has conquered the protagonist by killing Llewellyn's wife for his refusal to turn over the drug money to him. Immediately following the page break after Chigurh murders Carla Jean, McCarthy does not give the reader a scene of celebration or even satisfaction for Chigurh. Instead, he describes the aftermath of a car wreck that breaks his arm. McCarthy writes, "The car that hit Chigurh in the intersection three blocks from [Carla Jean's house] was a ten year old Buick that had run a stop sign... He crawled out of the passenger side door and staggered to the sidewalk... Bone sticking up under the skin. Not good"( NCFOM 260). In keeping with Chigurh's assertion of determinism and his lack of agency in his decisions in whom he kills, McCarthy focuses on the speeding car that Chigurh is helpless to stop; he is only mentioned in a subordinate clause in the first sentence. The dizzying effect of the repetition of certain phrases seen at the end of *Blood Meridian* is not here. The judge would often speak of a deterministic world, but he fate would always seem to favor him in that he would succeed where others fail. In his final scene, Chigurh is a victim to fate who is left crawling around with a bone sticking out of his arm. Now, he does end up walking free from the scene of the crash and the violence he symbolizes is also seen in *The Road*, but in this modern manifestation of it, Chigurh is a straw man version compared to the judge.

The forward shift in temporal focus also has a similar effect on the status of the protagonist Llewellyn Moss. In *Blood Meridian*, McCarthy depicted the kid's moral development in the face of the ever-present violence he was constantly

exposed to. Llewellyn, on the other hand, does not change very much from the beginning of the novel until his death. He finds the two million dollars worth of drug money in the desert and spends the rest of the novel running from Chigurh who wants the money back. Due his snatching of this money, Llewellyn puts his wife in danger as well. He does demonstrate one moment of self-awareness right before hit men ambush him. In a conversation with a teenage hitchhiker, Moss says, "Your notions about startin over. Or anybody's. You don't start over. That's what it's about Ever step you take is forever. You can't make it go away. None of it"(NCFOM 227). Llewellyn recognizes the precarious situation he has placed himself and his wife Carla Jean in by trying to keep the two million dollars. Unfortunately, he does nothing to resolve the situation; he just keeps running. The kid at least acts contrary to the groupthink of the scalping band by saving Brown at the risk of his own death. Llewellyn does not really exhibit any sort of selfless heroism akin to that action.

Even though the same sort of moral development is not there, Llewellyn still stands up the symbol of deified violence in Chigurh, much like the kid. At one point in the novel, Chigurh is able to get Llewellyn on the phone and tells Llewellyn to turn over the money or else he will kill him and his wife. Preceding this event, Chigurh had tracked Llewellyn down and put a few bullets in him that landed him in the hospital. Despite witness the prowess of him firsthand, Llewellyn responds to Chigurh,

I'm goin bring you something all right, Moss said. I've decided to make you a special project of mine. You aint goin to have to look for me at all.

Chigurh: I'm glad to hear that. You were beginning to disappoint me.

Moss: You won't be disappointed

Chigurh: Good.

Moss: You don't have to by god worry about being disappointed.

(NCFOM 185)

After being tracked across Texas by this man, being shot at and having him and his wife threatened by Chigurh, Llewellyn still has the nerve to remain defiant in the face of this powerful, graceful assassin. Compared to *Blood Meridian*, however, this defiance is not quite as powerful since Chigurh is not as mythical and omniscient as the judge. Llewellyn's quarrel with Chigurh is mainly driven by his greed and pride instead of the more philosophical back and forth between the judge and the kid in the saloon. Despite these key differences, boldness in the face of such an obviously superior opponent is given respect by McCarthy.

McCarthy really shows his respect for Llewellyn by giving his death similar treatment as the kid in that it is not depicted at all. The last image we get of Llewellyn Moss is he walking up some hotel stairs back to his room. After a large paragraph break, McCarthy describes the vehicle carrying the murderers away from the crime scene. He writes, " There was blood and other matter streaked over the

glass and over the sheet-metal... He washed the car and rinsed [the blood and other matter] off and got back in and pulled out onto the highway going west” (NCFOM 236). In this novel, McCarthy totally and obviously avoids depicting anything related to the actual killing of Llewellyn. Instead, he only shows the aftermath and reaction of Sheriff Bell and Carla Jean to it. For the kid in *Blood Meridian*, the narrator clearly refuses to describe his dead body two separate times. Since the murder is much alluded to in *Blood Meridian*, this refusal to represent the violence done to the kid seems much more like the narrator being unable to illustrate the horror. For Llewellyn, the narrator clamming up and not showing the event or his body just does not have the same tragic element to it that the kid’s death had.

The final area where we see a tension between the comparative mundane modernity in *No Country for Old Men* to the mythically, even more violent past of *Blood Meridian* is McCarthy’s descriptive language of representation of violence. In *Blood Meridian*, McCarthy writes, “Blood bubbled from the man’s chest and he turned his lost eyes upward, already glazed, the capillaries breaking up. In those dark pools there sat each a small and perfect sun” (BM 159). Within the blood of this dying man, something totally beyond his humanness: a small and perfect sun. In this passage, McCarthy does not just linger on simply the grotesque, bodily attributes of this dying man but instead looks to see what is beyond it. McCarthy does not fully resolve what exactly the small and perfect sun means, but it definitely has a mysterious, transcendent vibe to it. As seen with the differences between Chigurh and Llewellyn and the judge and the kid, the language is more gritty and realistic without the mysteriousness. For instance, in the opening pages when Chigurh kills

the police officer who took him into custody, McCarthy writes, “ [The police officer] was strangling on his own blood... The deputy’ right carotid artery burst and a jet of blood shot across the room and hit the wall and ran down it. The deputy’s legs slowed and then stopped. He lay jerking. Then he stopped moving altogether” (NCFOM 6). McCarthy does of course grittily describe the violence in *Blood Meridian*, but there is that occasional description towards the enigmatic that is not present in *No Country for Old Men*. In this novel set in modern times, the deified violence is still omnipresent by McCarthy’s depictions of it are less forceful in comparison to the origin myth of *Blood Meridian*.

By showing the comparative malaise of the villain and the hero in contemporary times, McCarthy is being anti-mythic towards the origin myth of *Blood Meridian*. This move demonstrates McCarthy expressing “the dangerous notion of progress” he speaks about in his 1992 New York Times interview. The symbol of nearly omnipresent violence in *No Country for Old Men* ends up bloodied in a car accident after only getting to kill the protagonist’s wife instead of the actual protagonist. Llewellyn stubbornly resists Chigurh even in the face of his immense power and reach, but McCarthy does not give the reader the moral arc and development like the kid. In the superstructure of the three novels being examined in this project, *No Country for Old Men* has McCarthy going anti-mythic on his origin myth of *Blood Meridian* for the purpose of demonstrating his own strange idea of progress. I am not suggesting that this dark novel reveals McCarthy to be a believer in large-scale transformative change in his literature. It is undeniable, however, that manifestation of the deified violence is much less powerful, and yet the resistance of

the protagonist is still bold. This fact cannot be called anything less slight progress in a world of deeply pervasive violence. In the anti-mythic *No Country for Old Men*, McCarthy diverts the arc of the antagonists downward and tilts the arc of the protagonists upward. *The Road* is still an extremely dark and violent novel, but McCarthy does further pull apart these tilts in the trajectories of the antagonist and protagonist. In other words, the bad guys become even more of a mockery of the judge, and the good guys maintain and even gain a stronger sense of morality. This accentuation in *The Road* leads to unexpected answers as to what it means to maintain a sense of morality when the temptation towards ruthless violence for survival is immense.

### Chapter III

#### ***The Road: Importance of Fire, Childish Morality, and The Individual Light***

Thus far, this project has drawn connections between *Blood Meridian* and *No Country for Old Men* due to similar structures and character archetypes. *The Road* has these characteristics as well, but before analyzing them and their importance, I want to draw a direct connection between these three novels. The explicit link is seen in the epilogues of *Blood Meridian* and *No Country for Old Men*, and the symbol is carried out at much greater length in *The Road*. Fittingly, since elemental violence is so central to these works, it is appropriate that the direct connection involves the elemental entity of fire. Just as the spirit of the protagonist and antagonist transfer to different individual characters across time in *Blood Meridian* and *No Country for Old Men*, the fire in these epilogues comes to represent the traits of both of these character archetypes. Fire contains within it the duality seen in McCarthy's work; it is both violent and destructive but also represents enlightenment and some moral calculus.

Immediately following the final paragraph of the judge dancing and the official ending of the novel, McCarthy includes an ambiguous epilogue with a man striking fire from the ground to make fence posts. Harold Bloom reads this epilogue partly correctly. He writes, "Perhaps all the reader can surmise is that the man striking fire in the rock at dawn is an opposing figure in regard to the evening redness in the west... A new Prometheus rising to go against him" (Bloom 263). Bloom argues-and I concur- that the kid morally develops throughout the novel, and

he reads this epilogue and the fire being lit as an extension of the kid's defiant spirit. This spirit is seen in Llewellyn in *No Country for Old Men* and to an even greater extent in *The Road*. When looking at these three novels in conversation with each other, however, one cannot deny that the spirit of the judge also remains strong. New Prometheuses rise and resist but are ultimately defeated at the hands of the antagonist. Bloom does not pay enough attention to the final two sentences of the epilogue. Describing the man making the fence and the bonepickers looming ominously around him, McCarthy writes, "He strikes fire in the hole and draws out his steel. Then they all move on again" (BM 337). The man making the fire is always followed by the bonepickers; they all move together as well. McCarthy does not show one side completely overtaking the other. The elemental fire attracts the resistance and the opponent to that resistance. Since *Blood Meridian* functions like an origin myth in my argument, I find it appropriate that McCarthy ends this novel with image of the new Prometheus moving along with hungry bonepickers.

In *No Country for Old Men*, McCarthy does not bring the issue of fire until to the very end of the novel, but it plays an extremely important role to the meaning of the novel. Along with a traditional third person omniscient narrator, McCarthy puts in excerpts from the diary of Sheriff Ed Tom Bell to provide perspective on all the carnage in the tale. Bell retires after seeing Chigurh escape free and seeing Llewellyn and his wife murdered because of the drug money Llewellyn took. He leaves office feeling defeated, but the dream he reveals in the final pages-involving fire- leaves some shred of hope. McCarthy writes of Bell chasing his dead father on horseback in the night,

He just rode on past and he had his head down and when he rode past I seen he was carrying fire in a horn the way people used to do and I could see the horn from the light inside of it. About the color of the moon. And in the dream I knew that he was going on ahead and that he was fixing to make a fire somewhere out there in all that dark and all that cold and I knew that whenever I got there he would be there. And then I woke up. (NCFOM 309)

After seeing so much death and destruction, Bell still has a dream about a spark of fire in the wilderness. The lighting of fire at the end of *Blood Meridian* did not quite conjure up the best Prometheus in Llewellyn, but it still burns slightly in Bell's dream. Per usual for McCarthy, this ending cannot be read as totally optimistic or pessimistic. The fire is in a dream, and Bell cannot fully grasp it. On the other hand, the fire is going to be in lit in the middle of the darkness and cold, a symbol of the protagonists' resistance to the all-enveloping violence in the world.

Unlike the previous two McCarthy novels this project has examined, *The Road* is not written from the present looking backwards into history. Instead, McCarthy writes of a world in the near future devastated by an almost apocalyptic event where the world's ecosystem is ravaged and the sun does not shine. Even though we only barely see signs of civilization outside of the violent exploits of the main characters in *Blood Meridian* and *No Country for Old Men*, there are still faintly there. In *The Road*, they are all gone. In the other two novels, the antagonists symbolized the Slotkinan universe for which the protagonist would act against.

Since everything is obliterated in *The Road*, the antagonists and the physical environment represent this deeply pervasive violence because it completely surrounds the man and the boy. This father and son represent the fire lit in the coldness and darkness in the woods. Throughout the course of the novel, to keep the boy motivated, the man tries to inspire him by saying that they are “carrying the fire”(TR 83). The fire is not introduced in the end as an ambiguous evocation to something beyond the novel, but rather, *The Road* is a prolonged examination of what it means to be that lone fire in the cold and the dark. The world of this novel is a world completely created by McCarthy. He is not constrained by looking back on the historical connotations inherent in writing about the past.

A key reason for *The Road* being such an effective examination of responses to the deified violence is because McCarthy develops the man’s character much more deeply than he does with the kid and Llewellyn. Although the terse exchanges between those protagonists and their respective antagonists were brave and loaded with meaning, McCarthy never really shows the reader much of the inner workings of these characters. I do see all these characters as extensions of the same spirit just working in different times, but McCarthy gives the man in *The Road* the ability to best articulate the reasoning behind the dissent from seemingly omnipresent violence. For example, the man makes the boy a flute, and while he plays it, the man muses,

A formless music for the age to come. Or perhaps the last music on earth called up from out of ashes of its ruin. The man turned

and looked back at him. He was lost in concentration. The man thought he seemed some sad and solitary changeling child announcing the arrival of a traveling spectacle in shire and village who does not know that behind him the players have all been carried off by wolves. (TR 77-78)

The man demonstrate in this passage his belief in the value of keeping him and his son alive, but he can also step outside of himself to see the potential folly of his actions. The kid and Llewellyn's responses to the judge and Chigurh are very one dimensional; they aggressively defy their opponent with great bravado. Llewellyn briefly displays such ability when he speaks of the irreparability of the past, but he does not do that with the same frequency that the man does. If anything, this passage demonstrates that the man exhibits full awareness of his situation but knowingly does not always make the most logical decision.

Unlike the kid and Llewellyn, the man does not have one single antagonist that he is engaging. The antagonist symbolizing the physically violent nature of the judge and Chigurh is the band of cannibals that chase the man and boy throughout the novel. This band is not a single, centralized enemy like the judge or Chigurh. They also lack a code and the rhetorical flourish of the antagonists of past novels. Just like Chigurh in *No Country for Old Men*, in comparison, this cannibalistic band is much weaker manifestation of the judge and Chigurh. In one way, it continues the downward tilt in the quality of the villain started in *No Country for Old Men*.

Although she is only the book for a few pages, but the man's memory of the last night with his wife is definitely an antagonistic moment. The woman does not seek to do physical violence to the man like the other antagonist though. Since *The Road* is a prolonged discussion of the value of the dissent in the face of deified violence, his wife's visceral attack on the man's stubborn defiance is an extremely violent act due its personal nature. The judge and Chigurh are elemental figures that rise out of the land and wreck, but the man knows the woman very well. Needless to say, She was not set on a rock in the middle of nowhere clearly waiting for the man like the judge did to Glanton's band. The background to this antagonist is extremely different from the others discussed so far, but to the man, her actions feel just as violent.

In her brief time in *The Road*, the woman engages the arguments of the man and proceeds to rip them apart. For instance, when speaking about his stupidity in not wanting to commit suicide, she says, "You have two bullets and then what? You cant protect us. You say you would die for us but what good is that? I'd take him with me if it werent for you. You know I would. It's the right thing to do"(TR 56). The woman inverts the man's moral self-aggrandizing by implying that keeping the family alive in this miserable world is morally the wrong thing to do. She cuts beneath the man's clichéd reasoning of that a Christ-like sacrifice dying to save his family will accomplish anything. The woman sees but the man has trouble admitting that the façade is totally gone and the bands of hungry cannibals do not care about "carrying the fire." They are just going to do what they have to do to survive and if they have to rape and kill the man, the woman, and the boy, so be it.

In response to these points raised by the woman, the man responds just like the kid and Llewellyn react to the philosophy of their antagonists when he says, “You’re talking crazy”(TR 56). The man really does not have much to say to support his position in this argument and he admits so after recounting this memory. He muses, “And she was right. There was no argument The hundred nights they sat up debating the pros and cons of self destruction with the earnestness of philosophers chained to a madhouse wall”(TR 58). Passages like this one demonstrate that the man is not delusional in recognizing the irrationality of his quest, but he continues to “carry the fire” despite his wife convincingly arguing the irrationality of his insistence on life in the face of overwhelming death and chaos. Even when McCarthy gives his everyman-like protagonist more intelligence than he did in the past, the response in the face of this deified violence is still the same. By modifying the individual characteristics to his heroic archetype across the temporal settings and not changing their reactions, McCarthy shows the stubborn irrationality of his protagonist, but *The Road* celebrates that seemingly irrationality with the potentially redeeming but complicated story arc of the man’s son.

While the kid was born into world “with a taste for mindless violence, “ the boy is born into an even more dynamic world with no recognizable form of civil institution and subjected to violence very early in his life, but unlike the kid, the boy becomes troubled when confronted by violence and does not lose his sense of moral decency. For instance, a man from the band of cannibals grabs the boy, and the man shoots and kills him. The boy is so stunned by this act of violence that he refuses to speak with the man. When he eventually does speak to him, the boy asks, “Are we

still the good guys?" (TR 77). Even though that cannibal grabbed the boy and wanted to eat him, the boy is still most concerned that he and the man maintain their morality. This type of response is radically different from the reactions of the protagonists of the other stories. The boy is not just concerned with mere survival or intellectually besting the antagonists; he just wants he and his father to stay the "good guys."

Even though the man agrees with the woman's derision his clichéd, ridiculous reasoning, his irrationalism is continually digested by the boy and influences his actions. The boy never hardens after the first incident with the cannibal wanting to eat him and the other numerous encounters they have along the way with the band. For example, a thief steals the cart which has all of the pair's belongings in it, and when they catch up to him, the man forces him to get naked and put his clothes in the cart in order to punish him for taking everything. Knowing full well that thief's actions could have very well killed the boy and his father, the boy still begs and pleads with his father to help the man. After the following exchange of the dialogue, the boy gets the man to go back and leave clothes for the thief. The man tells his son that he is not the one who has to worry about everything, and the boy replies, "Yes I am, [the boy] said. I am the one" (TR 259). This point in the novel draws a distinction between the roles of these two protagonists. The man acts very much like the kid and Llewellyn in the face of the deified violence in the sense that he engages in it when he has to in order to survive but does not submit to the excessive murderous violence seen in other characters. The boy reaffirms most strongly here his concern for the moral fitness of him and his father. He does not

simply regurgitate phrases like “carrying the fire” or ‘we’re still the good guys.’” Instead, he asserts that he has to take on the role of the moral survivalist of the two because to him that is everything to the boy.

Per usual for a McCarthy protagonist, the man dies of an illness, but unlike the *Blood Meridian* and *No Country for Old Men*, a protagonist- the boy- does not die at the novel’s end. Finally, after traversing from the 1840s all the way into the near future, the spirit of the dissent in the face of the near omnipresent violence actually ends up alive and relatively well. The carrier of the fire described in the other two novels is neither ambiguous nor seen only in a dream, but a sympathetic character that McCarthy follows throughout the whole novel. A family of “good guys” finds the boy, and McCarthy makes it plain that it is not a trick by a bunch of people desperate to kill and eat the boy. When the man who finds the boy brings him back to meet his family, his wife embraces the boy and comforts him. Since the boy cannot talk to God like she does, he talks to his dead father, and the woman responds, “[T]hat was all right. She said that the breadth of God was his breath yet though it pass from man to man through all of time”(TR 286). With such a warm reception, the man’s seemingly irrational persistence in the face of such gloom actually pays off. Death was not the only way like his wife so fervently insisted.

This chance for a protagonist to actually live at the novel’s end, however, comes with a steep price: only after the near destruction of everything the protagonist is not conquered by the antagonist. *The Road* is also the only McCarthy novel in this study that is not looking back on a specific time in history; the world of

the novel is completely created by McCarthy while *Blood Meridian* and *No Country for Old Men* are mostly created worlds by McCarthy rooted within their temporal setting. When looking at a time yet to come, outside the arc of history and myth, only then does McCarthy allow his protagonist to survive.

To put perspective on this unique conclusion in his work, McCarthy employs the similar strategy seen in *Blood Meridian* and *No Country for Old Men* of ending the novel with a distinctly different narrative voice or image. As in those other two novels, this move jars the reader into paying particular attention to the change in tone and what significance it holds. The key difference to the ending of *The Road* is that this conclusion feels conclusive; there is no further moving across the plain like the anonymous man in *Blood Meridian* or chasing of a dead father carrying fire like in *No Country for Old Men*. In this near apocalyptically destroyed world of *The Road*, McCarthy steps in and gives final commentary on the grand scale of the violence to men and the world. He writes,

Once there were brook trout in the streams in the mountains.  
You could see them standing in the amber current where the  
white edges of their fins wimpled softly in the flow. They  
smelled of moss in your hand. Polished muscular and torsional.  
(TR 288-87)

The man is dead, the boy cannot have a memory of brook trout because he was born after the cataclysmic event, and no other speaker is introduced before this passage, therefore, it is reasonable to assume that speaker of this passage is not a character

we have previously encountered. Since *The Road* is the only novel in this project with a completely created environment without the details of a historical era to worry about, McCarthy has complete knowledge of it because he is its creator. The intricate, loving details in this passage describing the trout suggests that this speaker has immense understanding of how the world used to be before the incident. By starting off the passage with “once,” I cannot help but look at this passage as McCarthy getting ready to tell a ‘once upon a time’ story.

The rest of this concluding paragraph, however, adds an extremely tragic element to the reminiscence of the speaker, but it also points to where a sliver of redemption can come from. McCarthy continues,

On their backs were vermiculate patterns that were maps of the world in its becoming. Maps and mazes. Of a thing which could not be put back. Not be made right again. In the deep glens where they lived all things were older than man and they hummed of mystery. (TR 287)

Just as the protagonist only finally lives in this fully fictional world, McCarthy also stresses here that the world in which the boy has survived in can never be fully rectified. It is permanently scarred by the near apocalyptic event and the violent transgressions committed upon it over many centuries. With such beautiful creatures lost forever and the structure of the world in its making with them, would the boy be better off dead like his father and mother?

Even with all of these caveats and difficulties I point out surrounding the boy's survival, I contend that McCarthy does not wish to leave the reader believing that the boy is better off dead and that the world is totally without any chance of repairing. The fact that McCarthy ends this novel with the word "mystery" in this otherwise rather definitive conclusion in comparison to his other endings demonstrates a level of uncertainty. If he would have ended the paragraph with 'not made right again,' it would have made perfect sense with what came before it. Throughout this thesis, I describe the nearly omnipresent violence as something fundamental to the land. Here, McCarthy references "all things older than man," elemental things and how they brim with mystery. These elemental things in this passage are not just manifestations of violence like the judge sitting on a rock in the desert waiting for Glanton's band. These beautiful yet important trout are just as elemental as that deified violence. Therefore, all things elemental are not only the violent things in nature, but beautiful things as well.

With its repeated occurrence in all three novels that take place across the centuries, the resistance of the protagonist to the violence in the world should also be considered elemental in nature. This conflict is a back and forth between the McCarthyian protagonist and antagonist with antagonist usually physically overcoming the protagonist, but the spirit of rebellion living on in the fire. In *The Road*, the outcome between this elemental battle is not certain, but rather mysterious. By ending this novel with an invocation to mystery, McCarthy gives the boy a fighting chance in his beleaguered environment. Looking at *The Road* in conversation with *Blood Meridian* and *No Country for Old Men*, at time much farther

ahead in the future, the spirit of the resistance of the protagonist is still not squelched, and neither is the spirit of that nearly omnipresent violence. The deified violence, however, is scattered and decentralized while McCarthy has a protagonist finally live in this future time.

Another reason to see some hope and virtue among all of this carnage are some words the man thinks about his son at the very beginning of the novel. McCarthy writes, "He knew only that the child was his warrant. He said: If he is not the word of God God never spoke," and McCarthy also writes of the man and boy that they are "each the other's world entire" (TR 5,6). The physical universe will not be kind to the boy and the bands of cannibals that represent the violent, Slotkinian universe will also not hesitate to kill the boy if it means their survival. The disintegration of both the physical and Slotkinian forms of the universe is in keeping with McCarthy's anti-mythic tendencies. The relationship between the man and the boy and the kindness of the strangers he meets at the end of the novel, however, as evidenced by the quotes above, remain mostly untouched by McCarthy's anti-mythic techniques. With the world in such chaos, the boy still has his new family and the memories of his father. The patterns on the backs of the trout are gone forever, but the boy has his morals and the ability to love.

As God's breath passes through all men like the kind woman at the end of the novel says and the boy being God's word to the man, McCarthy deifies the love these humans share for each other. The seemingly childish morality ploy of 'carrying the fire' is redeemed and proven true in some ways. These individuals who clung to the

fire inside them and did not submit to the deified war of the judge end the arc of these three novels with power of a god. McCarthy places the deified version of love seen in *The Road* on equal standing the deified version of violence presented by the judge. McCarthy does not take sides, but at the end of this temporal chain of novels, to see the power of morality and love manifested in the boy placed on the same deified footing as the judge is a rather remarkable feat by a writer who so heavily and famously features graphic violence in his work.

## Conclusion

### The Temporal Trilogy

When I look at literary criticism on McCarthy, I would almost always see *The Border Trilogy* posited as the only trilogy in his canon. In conclusion to my thesis, I want to propose that *Blood Meridian*, *No Country for Old Men*, and *The Road* as a trilogy all their own. With the techniques taken from Flannery O'Connor and Herman Melville, McCarthy draws connection not only between himself and the past literary tradition but also brings in these three novels specifically. The paradigmatic super skeletal structure of myth presented by Richard Slotkin maps onto these works as well. Applying his scholarship to McCarthy, we can see how McCarthy's novel in this study contains echoes of myth but also strongly reverberates with the anti-mythic. As with O'Connor and Melville, McCarthy does not want just to totally follow their lead or just be a mythic or anti-mythic writer. He combines all of these disparate components together, throws into conflict with each other and creates something exciting, mysterious.

This Temporal Trilogy eloquently mimics that chaotic creative process thematically. McCarthy presents to the reader the arc of human conflict spanning American history in the battle between his own kind of archetypal antagonist and protagonist. In this trilogy, we can see that blindly labeling McCarthy as an inherently pessimistic writer is an extremely tenuous claim. Rather, the work of Cormac McCarthy is a nuanced examination of a world where violence is nearly omnipresent, the brutal consequences to opposing it, but also the virtue of this

opposition with *The Road* being the culmination of the benefit in not submitting the deity of violence. I sincerely hope that future criticism on Cormac McCarthy gives more attention to how eloquently he thematically walks the line between writing about the darkness of the world and its very few sources of goodness.

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