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There Will Be Violence: A Critical Analysis of Violence in the Works of Cormac McCarthy

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Abstract

This discussion of McCarthy's use of violence in his western novels will focus primarily on the books *Blood Meridian or the Evening Redness in the West* and *No Country for Old Men*. Both novels feature antagonists who use war and violence to impose a new societal order. They fail in the end – they cannot succeed so long as there are individuals who refuse to conform to a widespread acceptance of violence that follows Judge Holden's doctrine of war. In McCarthy's novels, violence is used to impose a new order of existence. The opposition of individuals cause these imposed orders to fail, and enforces the fact that violence is not the final word. There will always be those who resist its subjugation.

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Introduction

There is no escaping the violence that plagues the human condition. No matter what is done to prevent it, violence always finds its way into the realm of modern thought. The nature of humanity's perpetual violence has been an issue as far back as the beginning of historical documentation. Violence covers humanity's past – from wars to religious practices. It is often seen as ritualistic or a major aspect of a culture's way of life. Even when it is not, it is unavoidable. It will impact each person in some way.

Violence has been a major topic in literature, especially in the works of 19th century authors Melville and Dostoevsky. Both authors have written novels featuring scenes of violence with the understanding that no one will ever truly escape it. These are the works that contemporary authors, including Cormac McCarthy, draw from when presenting the reader with extensive passages of violence.

The heavy question is: if one understands an act of violence as horrible, then why does it seem so natural? The answer is because it is the nature of all living things, and there is nothing that can be done to change that inherent instinct. However, there is more to humanity's violent tendencies beyond simple reflex. René Girard explores this topic in his work titled *Violence and the Sacred*. Here, Girard explains that:

Once aroused, the urge to violence triggers certain physical changes that prepare men's bodies for battle. This set toward violence lingers on; it should not be regarded as a simple reflex that ceases with the removal of the initial stimulus... it is more difficult to quell an impulse toward violence than to rouse it, especially within the normal framework of social behavior. (*Sacred 2*)

Humans learn violence through mimesis – they witness violent behavior, and it influences them to the point that it is engrained into the way they act. When violence is retained, it becomes second-nature. When that happens, violence spreads like a plague, engulfing all landscapes as it influences humanity.

The inescapable nature of violence is crucial to exploring the works of Cormac McCarthy. McCarthy is a writer who deals with characters whose ways of life are marred with the blood of their victims. This violence is especially shocking when it becomes clear that there is no specific “victim” – the violence is being unleashed on anyone living in these landscapes. There is no discrimination. Girard expresses a concern for the “sacrificial crisis,” which is the danger of violence being denied – “if the gap between victim and community grows ... all similarity will be destroyed” (*Sacred* 39). The violence found in McCarthy’s novels is so appalling because it has reached the point where there it has no true target. The strong will dominate the weak, and the humanity of these characters will be challenged in the process.

McCarthy established himself as “a southern writer with a remarkable gift for language, a writer of dark and violent novels who work has often been compared with that of William Faulkner and Flannery O’Connor” (Parrish 67). Published in 1985, *Blood Meridian* began McCarthy’s movement away from southern fiction towards a western setting. The difference is, unlike the “Western” stories of that time, this tale was disturbing on multiple levels. Cowboys were no longer heroes – no one was a hero. The men kill endlessly, racking up a body count that would give most grindhouse productions a run for their money.

However, there is more to the novel than just its high levels of gore. Judge Holden uses his philosophy to indoctrinate Glanton’s gang of scalp-hunters as they travel between Texas and Mexico killing anyone they find. Holden imposes a new societal order built on war and violence.

Holden is the primary source of the carnage featured in *Blood Meridian*. As Timothy Parrish explains, “along with portraying Americans pursuing their destinies on a mythic American western landscape, McCarthy compresses into his cowboy stories an engagement with Western literature, philosophy, and theology that reaches practically to the origins of European thought” (Parris 67). The themes in *Blood Meridian* are ambitious, and they seem to lead directly in to those found in *No Country for Old Men* – another Western novel published in 2005 that “arguably sums up the themes first advanced in *Blood Meridian*” (67). There is a lot at work in these novels, and often things are not as they first appear. There is more to the violence than shock value, but it is often difficult to find those truths at first.

One of the most common labels associated with *Blood Meridian* is “revisionist Western” – that it is a novel that attempts to re-evaluate the way in which American culture interprets the ideas of Manifest Destiny and Westward expansion. At a time when John Wayne’s cowboy movies were at the forefront of Hollywood success, McCarthy presents a depiction deeply rooted in violence, which is made obvious by one of the most memorable scenes early in the novel where Captain White and his soldiers are massacred by a group of Comanche warriors with McCarthy’s prose providing grisly detail:

... they had circled the company and cut their ranks in two and then rising up again like funhouse figures, some with nightmare faces painted on their breasts, riding down and leaping from their mounts with knives and running about on the ground with a peculiar bandy-legged trot like creatures driven to alien forms of locomotion and stripping the clothes from the dead and seizing them up by the hair and passing their blades about the skulls of the living and the dead alike and snatching aloft the bloody wigs and hacking and chopping at the naked bodies,

ripping off limbs, heads, gutting the strange white torsos and holding up great handfuls of viscera, genitals, some of the savages so slathered up with gore they might have rolled in it like dogs and some who fell upon the dying and sodomized them with loud cries to their fellows. (*Meridian* 56)

Although one can interpret this scene as McCarthy accurately representing historic facts, it is impossible to ignore the fact that *Blood Meridian* does not “discriminate by any means of human classification . . . assassins and victims alike are white, black, Indian, or Mexican” (Kim 170). Building upon this, Steven Frye argues in his essay “*Blood Meridian* and the Poetics of Violence” that “establishing the novel in deliberate and problematic relation to [the Western] genre speaks directly to his [McCarthy’s] awareness of the artifice of myth, its inherent excess, its transformative aesthetic properties, and the integral relationship of the artistic sphere to the question of human ethical consciousness” (Frye 110).

Writing off *Blood Meridian* as nothing more than an ultra-violent parody of Western mythologies fails to address the obvious questions raised by the reader when met with such morally ambiguous depictions of violence such as the Comanche attack. Frye explains that “the ethical implications of the atrocity are given greater clarity for lack of narrative commentary, which, typical of cinema, heightens the excesses of violence through the omission of a qualifying human consciousness” (Frye 115). Steven Frye believes that McCarthy’s aesthetic choice evidenced by his depictions of violence in novels like *Blood Meridian* is what “makes ethical considerations unavoidable” – this is the “poetics of violence” that he speaks of in the title (115).

Judge Holden and Anton Chigurh are not just mindless killers. They have a worldview, and they intend to impose it upon the world. They are brilliant men, but in their intelligence they have convinced themselves they can contort society, forcing it to submit to their philosophy.

Their worldview affects everyone in *Blood Meridian* and *No Country for Old Men* – just as no one can escape violence, no one can escape their domination.

Whether they are ruthless killers, additions to the piles of dead bodies, or resisters, no character stands higher than Holden and Chigurh. Their philosophy influences their action, which is why they are so secure in their positions above humanity. At the conclusion to both novels, it is difficult to find hope. Because of this, it is easy to reach a nihilistic conclusion. However, there is a deeper meaning to McCarthy's novels than simple nihilism. Although there is a nihilistic presence to the novel and its themes, the opportunity to fight back exists, and there are characters who take that stand. Their protests are what ultimately cause the imposed order to fail, and it is for that reason that violence cannot be the final word.

Imposing Orders through Violence

It is impossible to interpret *Blood Meridian* without first interpreting the actions of its antagonist. Judge Holden is a character who sees the world as something that is to be dominated and used for his own purpose. He tells the men who ride with him that “the truth about the world” is that “anything is possible”:

The universe is no narrow thing and the order within it is not constrained by any latitude in its conception to repeat what exists in one part in any other part. Even in this world more things exist without our knowledge than with it and the order in creation which you see is that which you have put there, like a string in a maze, so that you shall not lose your way. For existence has its own order and that no man’s mind can compass, that mind itself being but a fact among others.

(*Meridian* 256)

The wording used in his teleological views builds upon his statement that he must give everything permission to exist – “whatever in creation exists without my knowledge exists without my consent” (207). When the judge collects and studies creatures both dead and alive, he does so in order to further hold domination over existence. “The freedom of birds is an insult to me,” the judge states as he justifies his pursuits to Toadvine, and it is the reality that much of what humanity understands as existence falls into a specific order that drives the Judge to understand it in hopes of conquest (208).

In order for his conquest to succeed, the Judge employs war and violence – actions that he classifies as “the ultimate game” (*Meridian* 261). According to the Judge, the nature of games is one that men are born for, because “the humiliation of defeat and the pride of victory are in themselves sufficient stake because they inhere in the worth of principals and define them”

(260). This is the way in which the Judge believes men are meant to exist, and war is the game of choice:

This is the nature of war, whose stake is at once the game and the authority and the justification. Seen so, war is the truest form of divination. It is the testing of one's will and the will of another within that larger will which because it binds them is therefore forced to select. War is the ultimate game because war is at last a forcing of unity of existence. War is god. (261)

It is with this passage that the reader comes to truly understand Judge Holden's morality. In saying that "war is the truest form of divination," he is expressing his belief that through acts of violence and war, one will know their place in existence better than they ever have before (261). Acts of violence allow Holden to analyze and understand responses to subjugation, furthering his position above humanity. He seeks to understand all of creation in order for it to be subject to his order and his order alone, where "war endures" and violence is the only way for creation to exist (259).

For Holden, war "orders the world and the men in it," placing his "absolute faith in violence, commanding others to do the same ... by the sword" (Kim 169). Holden cannot tolerate difference in his world – "not in men, in creation, or even himself" (169). His doctrine of war is, in a sense, insecure; unable to "sustain evaluation" and only promoting "brute force" (169). The god of this doctrine is a god of metaphysical greed that can only be appeased through continuous bloodshed, while offering no "redemption or transcendence" in exchange (169). What war does is keep all men equal in the never-ending slaughter that is seen throughout the landscapes of *Blood Meridian*. For the judge, this is ideal. Indifference is impossible under this

god. His order is a united congregation that worships this god without question through offerings of endless violence.

However, what makes Holden more than just a figure of violence lies in his education. The judge knows the world he lives in, and for him, “the process and achievement of knowledge parallels the attainment of divinity” (Kim 172). Holden is working towards turning himself into a god – the “attainment of divinity” that Kim is emphasizing (172). The judge is a man of power, status, and success. Such achievements cannot be possible if mystery – a lack of understanding – exists. He must know everything, or abolish what he does not know. His goal to remove mystery from existence is both an example of his authority in this imposed order as well as the removal of anything that threatens his lordship. For Holden, there is no distinguishing between war and writing – “just as the skins of newly discovered animals record the judge’s increasing knowledge, the flesh of each of his victims yields another tally of blood to underscore his doctrine of universal violence, war, and death” (172).

Holden’s doctrine of war unites him with others, creating a band of warriors that enforce his beliefs of violence. The judge’s doctrine and his “obsession with knowledge inspires others” (Kim 171). Tobin describes Glanton and his men following the judge “like the disciples of new faith” (*Meridian* 136). The judge forms a congregation that worships his god of violence. This is a creation of his united band of warriors that enforce his imposed order.

The Kid is “the most anonymous [character] throughout the novel,” and yet he is the one who “emerges in stubborn individuality against Judge Holden’s pursuit of individuality” (Kim 172). Upon joining Glanton and his gang of scalp-hunters, the Kid “appears in only a few of the novel’s ceaseless scenes of violence, essentially disappearing from the narrative after his recruitment” (173). This proves important when what follows are several scenes of Holden’s

order – his doctrine of war – being enforced. As these events unfold, the Kid is no longer present. His individuality is apparent through this observation: “according to the judge’s metaphysic, violence and war are universal,” which means that “the kid’s narrative absence from communal scenes of violence represents a refusal of participation and significant break from this universe” (173). The Kid separates himself from the judge and his communal killings, allowing himself to be the individual figure who stands against the judge’s universal enforcement.

As the plot progresses, the main conflict of *Blood Meridian* reveals itself to be one of the individual standing against an agent of war who believes that for all of humanity, the final word is violence. From the first page, the Kid is presented as a character who is separate from the societal expectations that have been set for him:

The mother dead these fourteen years did incubate in her own bosom the creature who would carry her off. The father never speaks her name, the child does not know it. He has a sister in this world that he will not see again. He watches, pale and unwashed. He can neither read nor write and in him broods already a taste for mindless violence. All history present in that visage, the child the father of the man. (*Meridian* 1)

The Kid is young, ragged, and uneducated – unlike his father, who “has been a schoolmaster” (1). He feels like an outcast, and he takes the easy way out of this order that he has, in a sense, been forced into against his will – “at fourteen he runs away” (2). He leaves his home of Memphis, Tennessee and travels to the Texas-Mexican border – an act of defiance that shows the Kid’s first act of rebellion in *Blood Meridian*. In showing the Kid’s rebellious and individualistic mindset, McCarthy is able to convey that the Kid as a character is the embodiment of the individual separated from society – for better or for worse.

When Judge Holden is introduced, he is presented as a man of the law, yet he proceeds to lie, resulting in a minister's public murder, for the sake of his own amusement. After his accusations of the minister being a fraud, he claims: "I never laid eyes on the man before today. Never even heard of him" – this ends in laughter among the Judge and other men (*Meridian* 9). In her contribution to *Modern Critical Views: Cormac McCarthy*, Grace Kim describes Judge Holden's sadistic and violent nature as deriving "from the pleasure he gains from dominating over a weaker other" (Kim 170). In the scenario that has been set up, the Kid's individualistic nature becomes his championing feature "among the cast of Judge Holden's universalized warriors," which leads to the Kid "threatening the necessary unity of the Judge's doctrine" as a result (Kim 170). There is a systematic nature to Holden's violence. He is an intellectual, carefully documenting the world around him and how it functions. The ideology behind his violence is what makes his doctrine of war so dangerous – he has discovered humanity's weakness for violence, and he will exploit it to elevate himself above everyone else.

Throughout most of the novel, the Kid "does not seem to differ from the general troop in any way" (172). This is made apparent from the outset: "in him broods already a taste for mindless violence" (*Meridian* 1). Upon first reading, it is difficult to sympathize with the Kid. He seems just as violent as any other, including Holden. However, the Kid's violence is "mindless" – being acted out by an alienated individual. It never reaches the level of Holden's ideological violence. He is present at every violent act committed by the Judge or one of Glanton's thugs, but after all of the heinous acts have been committed, he distinguishes himself from the rest of the men by fleeing the Judge and the remaining survivors of Glanton's gang. The Kid holds on to the humanity that Holden has abandoned. It isn't until the Kid becomes the Man that the Judge is able to confront him, and Holden kills the Man for refusing to shoot him while

he was vulnerable. The Judge, “who despises even the freedom of birds as personally insulting” kills the most individualistic because he refuses to conform to the order that he is imposing upon all of humanity. The Judge survives and his doctrine of war appears to win over the Kid’s attempts at resistance in the end.

In terms of belief and action, Anton Chigurh from McCarthy’s *No Country for Old Men* mirrors Judge Holden in almost every way. Throughout the novel, Chigurh uses random acts of violence in order to destroy the society where people abide by laws against violence and to create an order where, like Judge Holden’s order in *Blood Meridian*, “war is god.” Throughout the novel, Chigurh’s violent actions as he hunts down Llewelyn Moss appear to be the result of his relentless devotion to his objective, but it is as he confronts Moss’s wife Carla Jean that he reveals the greater philosophy behind his grisly behavior:

You’re asking that I make myself vulnerable and that I can never do. I have only one way to live. It doesn’t allow for special cases. A coin toss perhaps. In this case to small purpose. Most people don’t believe that there can be such a person. You can see what a problem that must be for them. How to prevail over that which you refuse to acknowledge the existence of. Do you understand? When I came into your life your life was over. It had a beginning, a middle, and an end. This is the end. You can say that things could have turned out differently. That they could have been some other way. But what does that mean? They are not some other way. They are this way. You’re asking that I second say the world. Do you see? (*Country* 259-260)

What Chigurh is doing is showing his superiority over the ways of understanding nature and the laws that govern it – the same thing that Judge Holden is doing in *Blood Meridian*. This method

of madness is the way in which his personal order functions, and it exists to be imposed upon the rest of society. Chigurh says in his speech: “They are not some other way. They are this way. You’re asking that I second say the world.” (260). By this he means that the forces of randomness have dictated that Carla must die at the end of his gun, and it is his sovereign duty to carry out the sentence that the world has given. When Chigurh carries out this sentence, he transcends randomness – it may decide one’s fate, but it is Chigurh who ultimately enforces the order built upon randomness.

Chigurh knows that humanity is subject to forces like randomness, mortality, and hierarchy. The randomness of the coin toss is an example of his manipulation of those forces in order to enact dominance upon those who, in his eyes, are weak. The strong wreak havoc on those beneath them – this is a necessary part of existence for both Chigurh and Holden. Without it, their philosophies have no basis. It is because such truths exist that these two get so far. They know that humanity is subject to randomness, to death, and yet they still believe their lives have meaning beyond those greater forces. They use these forces to their advantage, granting them the power to enforce their philosophies through violence.

Earlier in the novel, Chigurh uses a coin-toss to showcase the importance of randomness in his imposed order. Chigurh cannot call it himself – “it wouldn’t be fair,” he says. “It wouldn’t even be right” (*Country* 56). When the shop-keeper (whose life is on the line against his will) questions why he should since he has not bet anything on the toss, Chigurh explains that he did through mere existence: “Yes you did. You’ve been putting it up your whole life. You just didn’t know it ... It’s [the coin’s] been travelling twenty-two years to get here. And now it’s here. And I’m here. And I’ve got my hand over it. And it’s either heads or tails. And you have to say. Call it.” (56).

The shop-keeper does not understand Chigurh's words because, like most people, he fails to understand the order behind Chigurh's randomness. The act of a coin-toss is being used by Chigurh to exemplify the reality that "anything can be an instrument" in the order of randomness (*Country 57*):

Small things. Things you wouldn't even notice. They pass from hand to hand. People don't pay attention. And then one day there's an accounting. And after that nothing is the same. Well, you say. It's just a coin. For instance. Nothing special there. What could that be an instrument of? You see the problem. To separate the act from the thing. As if the parts of some moment in history might be interchangeable with the parts of some other moment. How could that be? Well, it's just a coin. Yes. That's true. Is it? (57)

Chigurh's use of the coin-toss is just another act of violence justified by his imposed order. Chigurh is there with the shop-keeper; he has a quarter; because he flipped it, the shop-keeper must call it. When Chigurh uses the coin-toss again later on against Moss's wife, and the nature of the wager is revealed to be one of life and death, the ambiguity of this early exchange becomes clear. Chigurh is the overseer of the randomness in his imposed order. Like Judge Holden, he understands that humanity is subject to the greater forces of randomness, violence, and mortality. This is the reason they seem invincible – they have learned of humanity's weakness, and in order to separate themselves from the rest of society, they have transcended these greater forces. They value themselves as equal to these greater forces. They hold domination over humanity through their actions – their enforcement of their order.

Critics on McCarthy's Violence

It is no great secret that McCarthy's prolific use of violence in his novels as well as his ability to create unstoppable antagonists causes many to interpret works like *Blood Meridian* and *No Country for Old Men* as nihilistic. Literary critics have used the violent actions of the Judge as well as other characters of *Blood Meridian* as their theses since the first years after its publication. Barclay Owens, in the chapter of his compilation concerning *Blood Meridian's* violence, describes *Blood Meridian* as "History 101 with a vengeance" (Owens 1). He explains that "McCarthy plunges us [the readers] headlong into an unrelenting thematic exposition in which 'riding on' only leads to more of the same" – the violence in this depiction of the Wild West is inescapable (1). The savage brutality instinctively perplexes the reader, "paradoxically attracting while repulsing" (14).

The first reaction of many literary critics has been to interpret this violence paradox as nihilism through three general possibilities that Owens has summarized:

1. The novel embodies contemporary historical revisionism and its moral indictment of European conquest as it developed in the West.
2. McCarthy isn't as good a writer as his prose first indicates.
3. McCarthy is a mad genius with a fetish for sensational violence. (Owens 10)

Owens essentially dismisses all three of these interpretations, primarily because they simply do not hold up in the wake of more in-depth literary analyses.

As he explains in the following paragraph, "McCarthy draws on contemporary images of violence from the news media and popular films, and while *Blood Meridian* is indeed part of the continuing reassessment of violence in American culture, it is not a political ally of the revisionist movement" (Owens 10). Reducing *Blood Meridian* to a contextual allegory of the

violence of the Vietnam War ultimately fails to take into account the greater forces that McCarthy is working with in order to make a character like Judge Holden the seemingly indestructible antagonist that he is in the novel.

Another reason that nihilistic interpretations of *Blood Meridian* and *No Country for Old Men* are prevalent in the realm of literary criticism is because “in these novels, seemingly good characters suffer and seemingly evil characters thrive” (Parrish 73). Timothy Parrish explains in his essay found in *The Cambridge Companion to Cormac McCarthy* that the characters that the reader is most likely to label as evil are “the ones who seem to have the most control over their destinies” (73). It is easy for the reader to label Judge Holden and Anton Chigurh as “evil” not just because their deeds and spoken philosophies support a selfish and destructive way of ruling those beneath them.

The danger in simply writing these characters off as evil and nothing more is that there are no characters in these novels that one can classify as “good” with the same support that the “evil” characters receive. Parrish explains that “just as McCarthy complicates what is meant by ‘American’ history, so does he challenge the notion that good and evil are necessarily opposed” (Parrish 73). He poses the question: “How then to separate ‘good’ from ‘evil’ when they are always mutually constitutive possibilities?” (73). Judge Holden and Chigurh can be labeled as madmen, but doing so would support a nihilistic view while also ignoring the issue of “how the world is known and ordered ... [and] how this ordering is made manifest through either works of God or humans” (77).

During an exchange with a Tennessean named Webster, the judge states: “whether in my book or not, every man is tabernacled in every other and he in exchange and so on in an endless complexity of being and witness to the utmost edge of the world” (*Meridian* 147). This

declaration supports the notion that each person exists in the lives of everyone. When people are “tabernacled,” they are given a sacred space within each person. The judge’s use of the word “tabernacled” is important in understanding how fragile these spaces are. When a person’s sacred space is desecrated, evil is born. Holden understands this reality, which is why he knows of and enforces the existence of evil. In the judge’s book, there is no mystery – nothing exists without his knowledge of it. Holden has enforced his doctrine, creating an order in which he is the agent of god. He has created a band of warriors – a congregation united under his doctrine of war.

Another common interpretation of the violent content found in novels like *Blood Meridian* and *No Country for Old Men* is in the categorization of the novels as “part of the continuing trend of literary naturalism” (Owens 45). William Harmon’s *A Handbook to Literature* defines a naturalistic depiction of humanity as “that of animals in the natural world, responding to environmental forces and internal stresses and drives – none of which they can control or understand” (*Literature* 315). Owens explains in *Cormac McCarthy’s Western Novels* that:

Writers who envision hard times in naturalistic terms share several characteristics:

1. A Darwinian worldview, emphasizing ruthless competition and survival of the fittest in harsh environments as well as random accidents in an uncaring universe.
2. Realism in speech and action, using regional dialects and historical details.
3. Amoral, arrogant characters involved in ironic, absurd circumstances.
4. Comic, grotesque images of wounded or misshapen humanity.

5. A prevailing mood of pessimistic determinism in nineteenth-century naturalism and a sense of pessimistic uncertainty in contemporary naturalism. (Owens 36)

The grotesqueness of *Blood Meridian* is typically associated with the “ubiquitous scenes of mindless violence” found throughout McCarthy’s blood-stained landscapes (Owens 51). As Glanton and his gang wreak havoc upon the Texas-Mexico border, the descriptions of where they go present what Owens describes as a “historical nightmare”:

They passed ... maimed beggars sad-eyed in rags and children asleep in the shadows with flies walking their dreamless faces. Dark coppers in a clackdish, the shriveled eyes of the blind ... lepers moaning through the streets and naked dogs that seemed composed of bone entirely ... old women with faces dark and harrowed as the land squatting in the gutters ... Small orphans were abroad like irate dwarfs and fools and sots, drooling and flailing about ... where racks of guts hung black with flies and flaying of meat in great red sheets now darkened with the advancing day and the flensed and naked skulls of cows and sheep with their dull blue eyes glaring wildly and the stiff bodies of deer and javelin and ducks and quail and parrots, all wild things from the country round hanging head downward from hooks. (*Meridian* 76-77)

McCarthy’s scenery is covered with “sublime realism” – a harsh environment in which *Blood Meridian*’s characters are manipulated by the judge, becoming killers without any reason (Owens 55).

These scenes of blood-soaked landscapes accomplish more than exemplify McCarthy’s realism. It also provides a clear contrast to American exceptionalism. Eric Carl Link explains

that “transferring this cosmic optimism to the American experience allowed for a vision of America as a truly exceptional place, and evidence of America’s destiny was manifest in the opportunities and successes of its people” (Link 157). McCarthy challenges this optimistic view of America, with violence being “the explicit manifestation of the conflict inherent in natural systems ... it is the embarrassing cousin of Manifest Destiny and American exceptionalism; it defines McCarthy’s America” (157). Elements of naturalism are clearly present in *Blood Meridian*, but it is important to understand that naturalism is not what the novel sets out to practice. *Blood Meridian* uses literary naturalism as a tool. The elements of naturalism provide a way to examine these common traits of American thought as well as the way in which history and violence are understood by society. The presence of naturalism creates a landscape for the reader to see the greater forces at work – the ways in which humanity is subjugated to randomness and mortality.

If viewed under the lens of literary naturalism, the imposed order of Judge Holden can be interpreted as the judge’s enactment of naturalistic ideas upon humanity. He explains to Toadvine that the violence of the naturalistic world can be overcome with determination:

The man who believes that the secrets of the world are forever hidden lives in mystery and fear. Superstition will drag him down. The rain will erode the deeds of his life. But that man who sets himself the task of singling out the thread of order from the tapestry will by the decision alone have taken charge of the world and it is only by such taking charge that he will effect a way to dictate the terms of his own fate. (*Meridian* 207-208)

Unfortunately, none of the characters in *Blood Meridian* truly overcome their fated violent deaths – “man does not change destiny” (Owens 56). Even the Kid, who may survive much

longer than anyone else in the group of warriors that the judge has created, falls victim to the judge's universal truth: "order is not set aside because of their [Holden's followers] indifference" (342). He explains to the Kid: "this desert upon which so many have been broken is vast and calls for largeness of heart but it is also ultimately empty. It is hard, it is barren. Its very nature is stone" (344).

The judge concludes his conversation with the Kid in this section by explain the war-dance to him:

I tell you this. As war becomes dishonored and its nobility called into question those honorable men who recognize the sanctity of blood will be excluded from the dance, which is the warrior's right, and thereby the dance will become a false dance and the dancers false dancers. (*Meridian* 344-345)

The judge's dance is essentially a mockery of the Kid's attempt at individual success, with the judge asking: "Where are the ladies, ah the fair and tender ladies with whom you danced at the governor's ball when you were a hero anointed with the blood of the enemies of the republic you'd elected to defend?" (*Meridian* 344). The final speech that the judge gives solidifies his philosophical view that mankind is violent by nature, and failure to accept this naturalistic order is why humanity fails to "fully enter the warrior's victory dance" (Owens 60). These revelations support the thematic motif first hinted at in the first pages of the novel – the true nature of humanity is "a genetic heritage in common with apes and wolves" completed with the "mindless violence" found in the Kid despite his childlike innocence (Owens 4).

Naturalistic approaches to *Blood Meridian* have often led to nihilistic interpretations, especially in the literary criticism of Vereen M. Bell. In his publication *The Achievement of Cormac McCarthy*, Bell concludes that the violence found in war is not only holy, but an

inescapable reality that is pieced together by Judge Holden's metaphysics. Bell begins his analysis of "The Metaphysics of Violence" using Brown, "one of the more articulate among the band of Indian-hunters," to present authority as a "power of nature" (Bell 116-117). Brown tells the farrier to "cut the barrels down," which the farrier refuses to do despite Brown offering to pay him double (*Meridian* 277). Aside from the barrels of a shotgun being more useful to Brown in his line of work, Bell explains that "he seems to know instinctively that the gun is a symbol of an order of being, aesthetic and economic, that his whole existence denies" (Bell 117). The farrier is "bravely stubborn" while wielding the "better nature" of humanity (117). However, in his inability to handle the situation on his own, he calls for military authority to come to his aid. Brown simply uses his tools on his own to cut the shotgun barrels down, and when the farrier returns, "it finally dawns on him that he is in the presence of something the law itself cannot manipulate, and it is then that he prudently withdraws" (117). Brown prevails in this situation because "he inhabits human existence at its geological center ... where all excrescence, illusion, and philosophical affectation are pared away, leaving a seductively unambiguous core" (117). He is a character that is "unalienated" wherever he is – he survives because he refuses ethical discrimination or social nuances. His existence remains pure, presenting an example of humanity's core without outside interference (117).

Brown and his men have "transcended fear," which has ultimately led them to a "metaphysically safe place" – "in their opportunistic nihilism ... there is no difference for them between what they do and what is" (Bell 118). There is no reverence among the men, yet they are "at one with the world" (118). Judge Holden is the spokesperson for this enacted principle, stating that "the mystery is that there is no mystery" – the judge has removed mystery – any lack of understanding – from his equation, making that which he abhors no longer an issue as far as

he is concerned (*Meridian* 262). What is seen here is *Blood Meridian* pressing “the psychology of the frontier theory to its logical, appalling extreme ... it compels us to call forth from ourselves a capacity for understanding evil that the various meanings of our lives otherwise cause to be suppressed” (Bell 119).

Bell explains that Judge Holden seeks to fill this empty, nihilistic void with his own presence. Bell believes that “if the judge is a failed priest, he may as well be Satan; but if he is Satan, he may as well be God also” (Bell 122). Holden cannot be God without being Satan, and it is for this reason alone that he cannot be interpreted as either one. The arguments for the judge being representative of God are also applicable to the judge being Satan, and as Bell states: “in that paradox lies the appalling moral of the judge’s story” (122).

The rhetorical strategy used by McCarthy in *Blood Meridian* emphasizes the elusive nature of truth on multiple occasions. Bell explains that “the book itself makes his [McCarthy’s] point more persuasively, and the *whole* point includes the crucial but recessive one that a better world *can* be imagined, though the source of such a notion is obscure and the making it real is impossible” (Bell 127).

In the second chapter of the novel, the Kid comes into contact with an old man after he has ran away from his home in Tennessee – it is here that the novel’s rhetoric expresses this theme directly:

The old man swung his head back and forth. The way of the transgressor is hard.

God made this world, but didn’t make it to suit everybody, did he?

I don’t believe he much had me in mind.

Aye, said the old man. But where does a man come by his notions. What world’s he seen that he liked better?

I can think of better places and better ways.

Can ye make it be?

No.

No. It's a mystery. (*Meridian* 20)

The mystery here that is present in the rest of *Blood Meridian* along with the rest of McCarthy's work is "the mystery as much of art as of human nature, for the other truth of this story lives in words and apart from the action, from character, from the judge's rhetoric, from the ordinary and sense-making facility of the mind" (Bell 127-128). Bell interprets *Blood Meridian* as being "haunted by the mystery that its own language challenges the very nihilistic logic that it gives representation to" – that logic being Holden's philosophy and his doctrine of war. It is important to understand that the judge is a man of action, and it is through violence that his nihilistic logic becomes a part of reality (128).

In the end, Bell concludes that in *Blood Meridian* the evil within humanity's nature has reached the point of no return, stating that "human evil, as Judge Holden would have it ... prevails, the sworn enemy of unreason and the ideological murderer of innocents – of a Mexican boy, of an Indian girl, of a mere puppy, and of the kid who has betrayed by his scruple – he also dances" (Bell 134). Bell's understanding of the final scene of the judge's "war dance" is that in "looking off into the heart of an imminent darkness is a small apocalypse, a primitive ceremony in which life and death have been forced to become one" (134). Judge Holden and the violence that he embodies are, according to Bell, allowed to prevail, which causes "everything that is otherwise allowed to flourish in language and its mediation of nature and the world ... must become extinct" (135). In the end, truth is an "unending contest between the stubbornness of fact and the irrepressibility of desire" (135). Nothing can take a stand as truth, because as Bell would

have it be understood, “anything that *stands* in this sense by definition cannot be true” (135). This nihilistic interpretation presents Judge Holden as predominant, and as the novel comes to a close, he is seen “dancing, dancing ... he will never die” – so long as war indeed remains god, Holden’s ideas of human nature will remain consistent (*Meridian* 349).

However, despite it being easy to reach such a conclusion, not every reading in the realm of literary criticism interprets McCarthy’s work as nihilistic. In Bell’s *The Achievement of Cormac McCarthy*, the idea that these books are “essentially nihilistic, devoid of conventional plot, theme or moral reference” is the central take-away (Arnold 43). Where Edwin T. Arnold differs with Bell is in his belief that “it seems ... McCarthy’s characters are clearly motivated by those emotions we all share – love, loneliness, guilt, shame, hope, [and] despair” (44). As he explains in his essay “Naming, Knowing and Nothingness,” although he recognizes the “postmodern celebration of McCarthy’s exuberant violence ... there is, in addition, always the possibility of grace and redemption ... although that redemption may require more of his characters than they are ultimately willing to give” (44). He is aware that the line between good and evil is difficult to determine in McCarthy’s novels, but in order to understand McCarthy’s underlying morality, one must take into account the need for a character’s sins to be “named and owned before they can be forgiven; and those characters who most insist on the ‘nothingness’ of existence, who attempt to remain ‘neutral,’ are those most in need of grace” (52).

In the desert after the massacre at Yuma ferry, Tobin approaches the Kid, demanding that he kill the judge: “do it for the love of God. Do it or I swear your life is forfeit” (*Meridian* 298). The Kid refuses, stating that “he ain’t nothin. You told me yourself. Men are made of the dust of the earth. You said it was ... no parable. That it was a naked fact and the judge was a man like all men” (309). Tobin begs the Kid to face Holden, but he refuses to commit an act of murder.

Arnold concludes from this scene that “the kid ‘sees’ but he does not ‘perceive’ ... blind to the ‘secret’” (Arnold 62). Arnold follows this by pointing out that although it is never obvious that the Kid “actively participates in the scalp-hunting atrocities, McCarthy rarely shows us the kid in action: we never actually see him scalping and hacking and raping” (62). This can be interpreted as the result of a lack of conviction within the Kid, which Arnold cites as the reason the judge is able to pin the massacre entirely on him – “in a broad sense he is, for he has failed to confront the heart within, to ‘face down’ the judge” (62). His insistence on remaining neutral has brought him to this all-time low, and it is here that Arnold concludes that the Kid’s neutrality is the representation of the fact that “we are blind to the mystery that is the very stuff of existence” – the mystery that Holden works so hard to solve (64).

It is impossible to deny that *Blood Meridian* “sings hymns of violence, [with] its gorgeous language commemorating slaughter in all its sumptuousness and splendor” (Shaviro 143). Steven Shaviro in his essay “‘The Very Life of Darkness’” accepts the fact that the violence of *Blood Meridian* is inescapable:

Blood Meridian performs the violent, sacrificial, self-consuming ritual upon which our civilization is founded. Or better, it traumatically re-enacts this ritual, for foundations are never set in place once and for all. More blood is always needed to seal and renew the pact. The American dream of manifest destiny must be repeated over and over again, ravaging the indifferent landscape in the course of its lemmings’ march of the sea. (155)

Shaviro’s interpretation of McCarthy’s novel is that “there is no escaping this ritual,” which has led him to believe that “everything in *Blood Meridian* is violence and blood, dying and

destruction” (155). This is the manner in which humanity as we know it has been founded, and it will remain that way for the rest of eternity.

At this point, we have explored three different interpretations of the violence seen in McCarthy’s novels. We have seen Bell’s nihilistic approach, Arnold’s ethical approach, and Owens’ naturalistic approach. It is clear through such varying conclusions that “*Blood Meridian*’s violence has always frustrated attempts to overcome the fact that, as Dana Phillips writes, “[i]n McCarthy’s work, violence tends to be just that; it is not a sign or symbol of something else” (Dorson 106).

In an article written for the *Journal of Modern Literature*, James Dorson attempts to understand the way in which violence works in *Blood Meridian* through an unravelling of Judge Holden’s character – “there is no way of making sense of the violence in *Blood Meridian* without also making sense of its central character ...the indomitable Judge Holden” (107). Dorson writes that the reason why the judge is such a difficult character to grasp is due to the fact that he “stubbornly refuses signification as does the violence in the novel” (Dorson 107). He lists many characters and works of literature that the judge has been likened to – Zarathustra, Captain Ahab, Milton’s Satan, Faust, and Mephistopheles, to name a few. However, Dorson has found one common thread in literary criticism surrounding the judge and *Blood Meridian* in general – “no one has seen the judge for what a judge by definition represents: *the law*” (108). Even doing this creates perplexities because there is ultimately “no ground to base his [the judge’s] rule upon, just ‘the shore of a void’ from which all of his unfathomable malice arises” (111).

Judge Holden is an ambiguous character by nature, but the lack of a legitimizing factor in *Blood Meridian* results in the presentation of him as “the perfect image of a groundless violence” (Dorson 111). If it is understood that such violence is coming from an individual who is meant to

be a man of the law, then that makes “a clear connection between the form of justice that the judge deals in and a bartering economy” (112):

The judge smiled. The fool was no longer there but another man and this other man he could never see in his entirety but he seemed an artisan and a worker in metal. The judge enshadowed him where he crouched at his trade but he was a coldforger who worked with a hammer and die, perhaps under some indictment and an exile from men’s fires, hammering out like his own conjectural destiny all through the night of his becoming some coinage for a dawn that would not be. It is this false moneyer with his gravers and burins who seeks favor with the judge and he is contriving from cold slag brute in the crucible a face that will pass, an image that will render this residual specie current in the markets where men barter. Of this is the judge judge and the night does not end. (*Meridian* 322-323)

Holden’s money metaphor explains the idea of justice that he bases his judgements on – “it puts a price on the particulars of existence, allowing them to be measured on the scales of justice held by the judge” (Dorson 112). Such an image of justice is sinister – when the scales of justice act only through what is accepted to be law from the perspective of Judge Holden himself.

However, Dorson’s reading does not echo Bell’s nihilism. Instead, Dorson states that: “Dystopian as *Blood Meridian* reads, however, there is some evidence of cracks in Judge Holden’s rule of law, that his words are not finally substantiated” (Dorson 113). *Blood Meridian* contains such a high level of violence because it is in violence that much of modern society is grounded in it. The judge knows this, and he uses the fears of Glanton’s men to manipulate them to enforce his law. The men are searching for purpose, and the judge gives one to them. With this in mind, Dorson concludes that *Blood Meridian*’s violence is ultimately “not the result of a

violent strain in the human genome, but the product of a chronic yearning for narrative meaning to make sense of the world” (116).

Resisting the Nihilism

The moralistic interpretations of Edwin T. Arnold improve on Vereen M. Bell's overwhelming nihilism, and Dorson's claims build upon Arnold's even further. Yet there is even more to this discussion that Dorson did not include in his article. McCarthy's novels border on nihilism in order to acknowledge the fact that there are partial truths found in the imposed orders of Judge Holden and Anton Chigurh. In *Blood Meridian*, the judge's domination is based in the reality that humanity cannot escape from the greater forces of randomness and mortality – the greater forces that Chigurh and Holden believe themselves to be agents of:

Suppose two men at cards with nothing to wager save their lives. Who has not heard such a tale? A turn of the card. The whole universe for such a player has labored clanking to this moment which will tell if he is to die at that man's hand or that man at his. What more certain validation of a man's worth could there be? This enhancement of the game to its ultimate state admits no argument concerning the notion of fate. The selection of one man over another is a preference absolute and irrevocable and it is a dull man indeed who could reckon so profound a decision without agency or significance either one. In such games as have for their stake thee annihilation of the defeated the decisions are quite clear. This man holding this particular arrangement of cards in his hand is thereby removed from existence. (*Meridian* 260-261)

The judge uses fate as a foundation for his order. In this sense, he is the spokesperson of fate, deciding whether someone should live or die based on their position in the world compared to his.

The reason that Judge Holden appoints himself to such a position is due to his self-fulfillment of his philosophy that the strong must dominate the weak. In the Anasazi ruins, he tells Glanton and the men a tale that connects the destruction of the Anasazi culture as a result of American expansion with the massacre of Indians that Glanton's gang seeks. To conclude his tale, Holden uses a cryptic metaphor that enforces his belief in fate's power over humanity:

For whoever makes a shelter of reeds and hides has joined his spirit to the common destiny of creatures and he will subside back into the primal mud with scarcely a cry. But who builds in stone seeks to alter the structure of the universe and so it was with these masons however primitive their works may seem to us.

(Meridian 152)

Judge Holden is the one who "seeks to alter the structure of the universe," and as the dominating figure in the gang, he holds dominion over the rest of the men, who will subside just like he describes. The men do not respond because they either do not understand the judge's story, or they realize they are the weaker of the two parties involved. Either way, the reality that the common man is subject to the judge's rulings based on fate is as clear to the reader as it is to the characters involved.

Anton Chigurh uses fate as his weapon in a similar manner in *No Country for Old Men*. The randomness of a coin-toss is what he uses to make an example of his power over fate that he uses to subjugate those around him. When the proprietor questions Chigurh as to how he could call it when he has not bet anything yet, he responds: "Yes you did. You've been putting it up your whole life. You just didn't know it" (*Country* 56). The man is unaware of his weakness in the face of such a great force. To the end of this scene, he does not understand that Chigurh has his life on the line – "He laid the coin on the counter and ... put both hands on the counter and

just stood leaning there with his head bowed” (58). He says nothing, just like the men in Glanton’s gang. He is with the rest of humanity – subjugated to these forces he can neither understand nor control.

Early in *Blood Meridian*, the Kid comes across an old hermit who first introduces to the Kid the notion of human frailty prevalent in the novel. He tells the Kid: “A man’s at odds to know his mind cause his mind is aught he has to know it with. He can know his heart, but he don’t want to” (*Meridian* 20). Because of the frailty of the human consciousness, most of the men choose to follow Judge Holden’s doctrine of war. Humanity is vulnerable to the forces of randomness and violence – the forces that dictate mortality. Holden is aware of this frailty, and he uses it to his advantage. Such human frailty is the reason for Glanton and his men being unable to reach the conclusions that the judge has, and in his knowledge of this fact, the judge uses their frailty against them – the men live in “mystery and fear” otherwise.

The human frailty in *No Country for Old Men* is seen most clearly when Chigurh is about to kill Moss’ wife – the moment when he reveals his abuse of humanity’s weakness to hold power over them. He tells her: “It’s a hard thing to understand ... I see people struggle with it. The look they get. They always say the same thing ... You don’t have to do this” (*Country* 257). At this point in the novel, Carla Jean is broken, saying: “I’ve suffered a loss of everything I ever had” (*Country* 256). In response, Chigurh tells her that she has actually “suffered a loss of faith” – a loss of hope in her previously held understandings (256). This is what Chigurh expected, and for him, it was all necessary because that is the how fate works. He cannot control fate. He can only enact what it determines, as he tells her before taking her life:

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 ... Yet even though I could have told you how all of this would end I thought it not too much to ask that you have a final glimpse of hope in the world to lift your heart before the shroud drops, the darkness. Do you see? (259)

Carla cannot escape her condition, for her condition is one that all of humanity suffers. It is the condition that subjugates humanity to such greater forces. Chigurh stands behind the gun because he believes he is the greater force, and it is he whom she must answer to at the end of the day.

Because such a pessimistic outlook on the human condition is so prevalent in *Blood Meridian* and *No Country for Old Men*, it is easy to see why literary critics so easily reach nihilistic conclusions. Holden and Chigurh spend the majority of these novels toying with the lives of those around them, and their justification is in the fact that they seem to be above the randomness of fate to which the rest of humanity is subjected. In the final pages of *Blood Meridian*, Holden tells the Kid: "Drink up ... the world goes on" (*Meridian* 344). Humanity's existence shall continue, and fate will forever hold dominion over it no matter what societal evolutions occur in the future.

However, the nihilism found in the imposed orders of Judge Holden and Chigurh are not the final word in *Blood Meridian* and *No Country for Old Men*. McCarthy writes these novels in a way that courts misinterpretation, but also provides the possibility for hope to exist in the wake of such despair. Ending the discussion here is where nihilistic interpretations go astray. There is hope to be found in the violent wastelands of these novels, but they are not as simple as nihilism.

The actions of the characters in these two novels in the wake of such ruthless domination show a side of humanity that can never be conquered. Through resistance and endurance, the human condition can survive the onslaught that the violence of Holden and Chigurh's imposed orders has in store for the subjugated.

In the scene previously mentioned in which Moss' wife Carla comes face-to-face with Chigurh, he demands that she call the coin-toss. The scene parallels what happened earlier in the novel when Chigurh demanded the same out of the proprietor, only here Carla Jean does not comply with Chigurh's demands:

Call it.

I won't do it.

Yes you will. Call it.

God would not want me to do that.

Of course he would. You should try to save yourself. Call it. This is your last chance. (*Country* 258)

She refuses to call it because she refuses to be a part of Chigurh's order – an order in which human lives are at the mercy of randomness. Chigurh claims “it could have gone either way,” but she knows that he is only using the illusion of randomness to give the illusion of method to his madness – “The coin didn't have no say” she says; “It was just you” (258).

Carla tries to convince Chigurh not to kill her, but doing so would ultimately undermine his domination. He asks: “Do you see,” to which she replies “I do. I truly do” (*Country* 260). In this final phrase, she expresses an understanding that Chigurh is acting based on the idea that he is the enforcer for the randomness of fate, and she wants no part of it. He kills her, but in doing

so she solidifies her defiance. She dies with her individuality intact – away from the subjugation that Chigurh hopes to hold humanity under.

Even *Blood Meridian* shows that there is a chance to escape the impositions of the judge. The Kid is approached by Judge Holden at the end of the novel, but Holden is not met with kind words:

The judge watched him. Was it always your idea, he said, that if you did not speak you would not be recognized?

You seen me.

The judge ignored this. I recognized you when I first saw you and yet you were a disappointment to me. Then and now. Even so at the last I find you here with me.

I aint with you. (*Meridian* 341)

In this exchange, it becomes clear that the judge is aware of the Kid's awareness – his free will. The Kid has refused subjugation up to this point, and that makes him a threat to Holden's order. Even now, the Kid distances himself from Holden – his actions showing that he holds onto his individuality – he will not become one of Holden's subjects.

The Kid takes a more forceful approach to his direct resistance than Carla Jean does in *No Country for Old Men*. As the judge begins expressing how important it is that the Kid be where he is and that he act as if he is a part of the judge's order, the Kid gives minimal replies, no longer tolerating Judge Holden's doctrine of war:

I tell you this. As war becomes dishonored and its nobility called into question those honorable men who recognize the sanctity of blood will become excluded from the dance, which is the warrior's right, and thereby will the dance 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?

You aint nothin.

You speak truer than you know. But I will tell you. Only that man who has offered up himself entire to the blood of war, who has been to the floor of the pit and seen horror in the round and learned at last that it speaks to his inmost heart, only that man can dance.

Even a dumb animal can dance. (*Meridian* 345)

For the judge, only his universalized warriors – those whom he has tricked into being a part of his doctrine of violence under the pretense that they are the ones who are in control – are the ones who survive in a reality as harsh as this one. What the Kid does here is throw that argument back in his face – he has had enough of the judge and his belief that war is the only enduring factor of humanity. He refuses to take part in the same vein that Carla Jean refuses Chigurh – they exemplify what is left of humanity in the face of dominating violence.

Direct resistance is not the only way in which the characters in McCarthy's novels resist the impositions of their respective antagonists. Through subtle acts, the characters in *Blood Meridian* and *No Country for Old Men* express their humanity in ways that show they are not at the mercy of antagonistic impositions. At the beginning of *No Country for Old Men*, when Moss first discovers the crime scene of the drug deal gone wrong, he finds that one of the men is not only still alive, but begging for water:

The man's face was bloody. He moved his lips dryly. Agua, cuate, he said. Agua, por dios.

...Agua, the man said. Por dios.

I aint got no water.

Agua. (*Country* 12-13)

When he finds the briefcase full of money, he abandons the man, unable to accommodate him and distracted by the discovery of money.

However, Moss' humanity cannot just let the man die. He gets up at 1:06 AM, and goes back out with intentions of bringing the dying man water. He arrives at the scene with the water, but he finds that he was not the only one who found the scene: "The man had fallen sideways over the console. Still trussed in the shoulderbelt. Fresh blood everywhere. Moss took the flashlight from his pocket and shrouded the lens in his fist and turned it on. He'd been shot through the head" (*Country* 27). Moss returning to the scene was an act of compassion that his conscience could not allow him to avoid. However, that act is what causes him to realize he is caught in something more dangerous than he thought – "He could see the truck ... there was someone standing beside it ... in the distance he heard a truck start ... he began to run" (27-28). Moss' act of compassion is what sets the events of the novel in motion. In a sense, it alerted the previously described greater forces to his humanity. It is through his grace that he becomes a target for Chigurh, who now knows that Moss is a player in this game of his – a game from which he believes Moss cannot escape.

Passivity, Endurance, and the Failure of Impositions

The Kid is present during every gruesome event in *Blood Meridian*, yet he seems to disappear from the narrative once Glanton and his gang begin their scalp-hunting. Up until the final confrontation with the judge at the end of the novel, the Kid fails to actively participate in the enforcement of Holden's doctrine, which is why Steven Frye reaches his conclusion that the Kid cannot stop the violence because he cannot be redeemed. Frye's interpretation concludes that if the Kid were to receive grace, it would be through confronting the violence head-on – a hero of the West who succeeds in defeating the evil that stands before him.

While the Kid does not kill the judge in the end, he does keep himself from becoming a member of Holden's congregation, holding on to the individuality that initially separated him from the rest of the judge's followers. His passivity is proof of his humanity. The Kid never takes the steps required to join Judge Holden's imposed order – he will not be a part of Holden's dance. This act of humanity is what keeps Holden from being the true victor in the end. In order for Holden's order to succeed, the Kid must hunt Holden down and kill him – it is what is called for in the doctrine of war. This is why Holden thinks the Kid is at the bar. However, the Kid insists he is there “to have a good time” (*Meridian* 341). The Kid says: “Everybody don't have to have a reason to be someplace” – the act of existing in the moment is an identifying factor of being alive and being human (341).

Holden argues that “order is not set aside because of their indifference,” but because the Kid and the other men hold on to their individuality, Holden's order is resisted (*Meridian* 342). By refusing to study Holden's “dance,” the Kid refuses to participate, remaining a passive player until the end of his life. Holden kills him, but the worldview that the Kid stood for through his passivity is the act of humanity that defies the imposed order. The judge “will never die,” but he

will never succeed so long as there are those who hold on to their humanity in the midst of Holden's doctrine of war (349).

In *No Country for Old Men*, Sheriff Bell hunts for Anton Chigurh, who is trying to kill Moss. Bell never arrives on time to catch Chigurh before he unleashes his wrath upon those around him. This can be interpreted as nihilistic because of its appearance that good always fails to triumph over evil. It is easy to say that Bell's string of failures is an example of how hopeless it is to try and stop Chigurh's imposed order. Bell even admits that he has reached his limits: "I aint sure we've seen these people before. Their kind. I don't know what to do about em even. If you killed em all they'd have to build a annex on to hell" (*Country* 79).

Bell's interior monologues make up the introductions to each chapter of the novel. In these sections, the reader sees a picture of Bell holding onto his humanity as hard as he can after his job takes unfortunate turns. One of these monologues shows Bell reflecting on humanity's battle between pessimism and optimism:

People complain about the bad things that happen to em that they don't deserve but they seldom mention the good. About what they done to deserve them things. I don't recall that I ever give the good Lord all that much cause to smile on me. But he did. (*Country* 91)

This acknowledgement of his mindset shows why he can endure so much pain and disappointment. He has gone through so much, and yet he never gives up, even in the worst of times:

I've lost a lot of friends over these last few years. Not all of em older than me either. One of the things you realize about gettin older is that not everybody is goin to get older with you ... This county has not had a unsolved homicide in

forty-one years. Now we got nine of em in one week. Will they be solved? I don't know. Ever day is against you. Time is not on your side. I don't know as it'd be any compliment if you was known for second guessin a bunch of dopeddealers.

(216)

Sheriff Bell is a character who sees the frailty of humanity through every failure – if there is any character that should break under the pressure of Chigurh's imposed order, it is him. Despite this, he still keeps himself from falling into this trap. He knows he cannot do more than he already had – he knows the limits of his humanity. However, that never stops him from doing all he can. Bell resists Chigurh's order through endurance, and his humanity remains as a result.

In an exchange with an old man after Chigurh's accident, Bell expresses his weariness over everything he has had to go through, which is where nihilism would be most evident.

However, that idea is ultimately rebuked by the presence of hope for the future:

But you go into battle it's a blood oath to look after the men with you and I don't know why I didn't. I wanted to. When you're called on like that you have to make up your mind that you'll live with the consequences. But you don't know what the consequences will be. You end up layin a lot of things at your own door that you didnt plan on. If I was supposed to die over there doin what I'd give my word to do then that's what I should of done. You can tell it any way you want but that's the way it is. I should of done it and I didn't. And some part of me has never quit wishin I could go back. And I cant. I didnt know you could steal your own life. And I didnt know that it would bring you no more benefit than about anything else you might steal. I think I done the best with it I knew how but it still wasnt mind. It never has been. (*Country* 278)

After their conversation, the old man says: “I expect you might come out of it a little better than what you think,” to which Bell replies: “Yessir ... I surely hope so” (280). It is a brief statement, but it is crucial in understanding that despite all that he has suffered, his humanity – his hope – has survived. Bell could have given up, but doing so would enforce Chigurh’s rule over him. It may seem like his constant failures support the futility of resistance. However, those who try to push forward against all odds are the ones who keep the fight going. Sheriff Bell stays strong. He does not submit to the dominating forces imposed upon him, and sometimes the only possible method of resistance is endurance.

Chigurh’s imposed order is one that relies on the assumption that he is above randomness. Unfortunately for him, that proves not to be the case when he is hit by a car after killing Carla Jean. It is clear that it was mere chance that the Buick hit him as well as the fact that he did not ever wear a seat belt:

The car that hit Chigurh in the intersection three blocks from the house was a ten year old Buick that had run a stop-sign. There were no skidmarks at the site and the vehicle had made no attempt to break. Chigurh never wore a seatbelt driving in the city because of just such hazards and although he saw the vehicle coming and threw himself to the other side of the truck the impact carried the caved-in driver side door to him instantly and broke his arm in two places and broke some ribs and cut his head and his leg. (*Country* 260)

Chigurh learns the hard way that he is not as powerful as he believed. It turns out that he is subject to the forces of nature that he thought he could control. This is the moment in which Chigurh’s imposition fails. He may have killed Moss and his wife, but it is ultimately determined that succeeding was only another aspect that was out of his own control. Randomness is not a

force that any human will ever control, and although Chigurh dedicates his existence to such a futile concept, even one with his persistence fails in the end.

Chigurh's subjugation is even more evident when he must turn to the help of two teenage boys, who happens to be in the area at the time of the accident: "Let me just sit here for a minute ... what will you take for that shirt? he said" (*Country* 261). The way in which he interacts with these two boys shows a distinct tonal shift in Chigurh's dialogue. He tells the boys "take it and you dont know what I looked like" – he is desperate and weak. He is more aware of his insignificance in the face of nature. His beliefs, his goals, and his place as a dominating force have been destroyed.

Blood Meridian sees Judge Holden's imposed order meeting a similar end, but it is more subtle than Chigurh's in *No Country for Old Men*. As Kim states in "'They All Move On Again:' Knowledge and the Individual in Judge Holden's Doctrine of War," in Holden's metaphysic, "violence and war are universal, the kid's narrative absence from communal scenes of violence represents a refusal of participation and significant break" from the universalization Holden seeks (Kim 173). It is clear throughout the events of the novel that Judge Holden cannot stand individual freedom, which is why he finds such enjoyment in being above the rest of humanity – "the judge's desire for violence derives from the pleasure he gains from dominating over a weaker other" (170).

It is true that on the surface "the Kid does not seem to differ from the general troop in any way" (Kim 172). However, as is made apparent from the final scene in the novel, even though Judge Holden does end up killing the Kid, he will never be victorious because his doctrine of war is no longer viable. The Kid's refusal to kill him has more repercussions than it seems at first glance. The Kid's life ends with him standing firm in his individuality – an action that defies the

subjugation needed for the judge's doctrine to be universal. The implication of such defiance is that humanity is not subjugated in its entirety. Judge Holden believes himself to be above humanity just as Chigurh, but the existence of individualistic traits among humanity ultimately defies their impositions. Neither one of them will succeed. The judge will "never die" because there will always be those who see themselves as the judge sees himself. However, they will never be triumphant because there will always be individuals who choose to fight back (*Meridian* 349).

The problem with most of the early criticism of *Blood Meridian* is that the critics do not look at the violence of Judge Holden in a way that fits what McCarthy is trying to do with his novels. It is easy to see why such brutal violence leads one to a nihilistic interpretation. The judge's doctrine of war is a force that seems impossible to escape, and the events that end *Blood Meridian* do not leave the reader with a great sense of optimism. However, this is an impression that comes from only the first reading. Upon further study, it becomes clear that under this doctrine of war the Kid would have to hunt the judge down and kill him, which is exactly what the judge thinks the Kid has done when he finds him in the bar.

Throughout the novel, the Kid has kept himself at a short distance from truly being indoctrinated into the judge's band of warriors. It is at this point that he must choose whether to go one way or the other. By refusing to kill him, the Kid shows a side of humanity that can survive in the wake of such violence. The Kid's refusal to accept Holden's doctrine ultimately undermines his philosophy that he uses to impose his sovereignty. Holden fails because he did not succeed in converting the Kid – he stayed true to his humanity, and in that act of resistance is the truth that despite how overbearing humanity's violent tendencies become there is a way to push back against it.

By bordering so closely to nihilism, McCarthy acknowledges the partial truths of the forces at work. However, through his characters, he shows his readers that there is a light in the darkness. The characters resist because they accept the violence of reality, and they are able to endure it, keeping their individuality intact despite the imposed orders universalizing everyone else. Violence is not the final word, and there is a way out that does not lead to more violence. Through endurance and sometimes direct resistance, humanity can combat these violent impositions. There may be no end in sight, but the actions of a few show that it is there – hidden in the darkness of the human condition.

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Integration of Faith and Learning

The story of my faith begins in a large Southern Baptist church in Fredericksburg, Virginia called Spotswood Baptist. For the first eighteen years of my life, I was required to attend this church. My parents were both heavily involved in the church – my father was a deacon, and also sang in the choir, while my mother was a Sunday school teacher and a leader in the youth group. However, when I was six years old, my parents divorced, and their roles in the church diminished. My father was asked to leave his position as a deacon, and they forbade him from continuing with the choir due to the divorce, which caused him to leave the church altogether. My mother stayed in the church, and although she was not required to stop being a youth leader, she stepped down as part of her own conviction.

This is the environment that my faith began in – a harsh, fundamentalist church that was hard to be in for those who did not adhere to their strictly-conservative beliefs. Despite that, I did enjoy my time in the church as a child – I was too young at the time to worry about all the doctrinal policies that concerned my mom, who made a point to ensure that my sister and I remained in the church even though my father had left. As a result, I grew up learning all of the don'ts of the Southern Baptist tradition – don't believe in evolution, don't watch R-rated movies, don't be gay, etc.

The authoritarian nature of the church frequently clashed with the teachings of God's love in my head. It was never explained to me why exactly it was wrong to believe in evolution or to be gay, but the youth leaders always told me and the other kids that that was what the Bible said, and because of that, we had to accept it and live accordingly. Unfortunately for them, I did not want to accept it. Growing up, I never liked being told how things were supposed to be without a reason. My father had always made it a point to give solid reasoning for the decisions

he made when he was alive. My mother, on the other hand, seemed more than happy to accept this authoritarian doctrine without question, which meant that she expected me to do the same. I pretended to follow her wishes until I turned eighteen, which is when I refused to continue going to Spotswood – I had grown tired of Fundamentalist Christianity, and I decided that if that was what God was all about, then I wanted nothing to do with Him.

Despite my disassociation with the Southern Baptist church, I did not rid myself entirely of my faith. I held on to the teachings I had learned of God's love, and of the sacrifice that Jesus made for me and the rest of humanity. I use the basic teachings of Christ's love as my foundation, and that foundation influences my studies as well as the way that I choose to live my life. I chose to leave the path of dogmatic Christianity behind the moment I denied the Southern Baptist tradition, and that decision has brought me to where I am today – my faith is on a journey and it is far from the end. I do not know where my journey will lead me, but I believe that this is the nature of true faith – to be led by God and nothing else.

When it comes to academic discipline, I am convinced that nothing satisfies my faith's foundation in the same way that the humanities does. In my study of literature and the practice of creative writing, I have the opportunity to observe what it means to be human as well as the various aspects of living that affect humanity on a level that goes beyond the surface. Because of God's calling to love our neighbors, it is important to make a conscientious effort to truly understand the life and struggles of others. The study of literature provides an opportunity for me to study aspects of human life that I would not be able to otherwise through a literary lens, and the open-ended nature of the field allows for an exploration similar to my faith – a journey's road laid upon a simple yet strong foundation.

In the end, it is my belief that in order to work towards a better humanity, the current state of the human experience must first be examined and understood. My academic work stewards my personal intellectual gifts in the service of my beliefs by providing a way for this conviction to be possible. My analysis of the violence present in Cormac McCarthy's novels has been more rewarding than I ever imagined. The presence of violence in the human experience is a disturbing yet real issue that many must sadly confront, and in studying the theme of violence, I have built upon my academic ability as well as furthered my journey towards understanding and loving my neighbors in the same way that Christ did during His time on Earth.