

UNIVERZITA KARLOVA V PRAZE
FILOZOFICKÁ FAKULTA
ÚSTAV ANGLOFONNÍCH LITERATUR A KULTUR

Diplomová práce

Barbora Kubalová

**The Role of Violence in *Blood Meridian* and *The Road*
by Cormac McCarthy**

**Role násilí v románech *Krvavý poledník* a *Cesta* amerického
spisovatele Cormaca McCarthyho**

Praha, 5.května 2015

Vedoucí práce: Prof. David L. Robbins

Prohlašuji, že jsem tuto diplomovou práci vypracovala samostatně a výhradně s použitím citovaných pramenů, literatury a dalších odborných zdrojů a že práce nebyla využita v rámci jiného vysokoškolského studia či k získání jiného nebo stejného titulu.

V Praze, dne 7. května 2015

I declare that the following MA thesis is my own work for which I used only the sources and literature mentioned, and that this thesis has not been used in the course of other university studies in order to acquire the same or another type of diploma.

Prague, 5 May 2015

.....

Acknowledgements

My sincere thanks are due to my supervisor, Prof. David L. Robbins. I am immensely grateful for his willingness to find time in his busy schedule to supervise my thesis, for his inspirational suggestions and advice, and for his unending patience and kind attention given to my thesis. I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my beloved father and sister for their unconditional love and support, which I cherish above all. Among many other things for which I am forever indebted, I owe the successful completion of my degree to them.

Klíčová slova:

Cormac McCarthy, násilí, gotický román, western, apokalyptický román, utváření identity

Keywords:

Cormac McCarthy, violence, Gothic novel, Western, Apocalyptic novel, identity formation

ABSTRACT

Violence has always been conspicuously present in the American nation, its culture and literature. Considering the immoderate abundance of violence in current entertainment industry, it would seem natural for the emotions to be dulled and able to process any abhorrent excess of violence; the reactions that both *Blood Meridian* and *The Road* by the American author Cormac McCarthy have gathered are thus all the more surprising. Face to face with the novels' unspeakable evil, many readers do recoil in horror and the pervasive violence of McCarthy's writings has provoked a wide range of critical perception. The novels may differ significantly in the setting—the Borderlands of the 19th century in *Blood Meridian* contrast strongly with the post-apocalyptic future of *The Road*—but the apparent gulf between both groups of characters and mainly between them and the reader is only another ruse of McCarthy's scheme, whereby he unveils uncomfortable truths about humankind. Although his meticulous study of sources might support the inevitability, even a penchant for bloodshed and carnage in specific conditions, it would be erroneous to conclude that it is a simple anomaly. The hostility in the novels should not be understood as a feature of a particular region or nation, but as an example of a subconscious cultural mechanism. By thorough depersonalization, McCarthy makes the characters mere representatives of characteristics typical for all humankind. However, to great surprise of many readers and critics, even in the work of an author renowned for his bloodcurdling scenes, it is possible to find a spark of hope. That point testifies to one of the most representative features of McCarthy's *oeuvre*, for it is impossible to find an unshakeable and clearly demarcated system in the works which exceed every possible limitation.

ABSTRAKT

Násilí bylo vždy přítomné v americkém národu, jeho kultuře a literatuře. Pokud vezmeme v úvahu nezměrné množství násilných scén v současném zábavním průmyslu, bylo by přirozené, aby byly emoce diváků otupeny do té míry, že by byly schopny zpracovat jakkoli odpudivé násilné výjevy. O to více jsou překvapivé reakce na romány *Krvavý poledník* a *Cesta* amerického spisovatele Cormaca McCarthyho. Tváří v tvář popsanému zlu mnozí čtenáři ucukli hrůzou a všudypřítomné násilí obou děl podnítilo řadu ohlasů z obce kritiků. Romány se sice výrazně liší dobou, do které jsou zasazeny (jihozápad USA 19. století v *Krvavém poledníku* silně kontrastuje s post-apokalyptickou budoucností *Cesty*), ale zdánlivá propast mezi oběma skupinami postav a především mezi nimi a čtenáři je pouze další léčka McCarthyho plánu, skrz nějž nám odkrývá nepříjemné skutečnosti o lidském rodu. Ačkoli by autorova důkladná analýza dostupných zdrojů mohla snadno působit jako systematická výpověď o nutnosti, ba dokonce o zálibě v krveprolití a vyvražďování specifické pro dané podmínkách, bylo by mylné vyvodit závěr, že se jedná pouze o anomálii. Nepřátelství, které opanuje oba romány, nelze chápat jako typický rys konkrétní oblasti či národa, ale jako příklad podvědomého kulturního mechanismu. Důsledným Jako velké překvapení pro čtenáře i kritiky pak působí zjištění, že i v románu autora proslulého hrůzostrašnými scénami lze najít jiskru naděje. Tato je jednou z nejvýznačnějších charakteristik autorova díla, neboť je nemožné najít neochvějný a jasně vymezený systém v dílech, která překračují jakoukoli možnou hranici.

Table of contents

1. INTRODUCTION.....	9
2. Defining Violence and Its Literary Representation	12
3. <i>Blood Meridian</i>	16
3.1 Literary Traditions in <i>Blood Meridian</i>	17
3.1.1 Rewriting the Western.....	17
3.1.2 Gothic Tradition.....	18
3.2 History in the Novel.....	22
3.2.1 History and Its Multiplicity.....	22
3.2.2 The Myth of the Frontier and the Cost of Imperialism.....	25
3.2.3 The Influence of Surroundings	29
3.3 The Delineation of the Characters	30
3.3.1 The kid.....	30
3.3.2 The Others.....	33
3.3.3 The Road	35
3.4 The Image of Nature.....	37
3.5 Judge Holden.....	39
3.5.1 The Judge, His Abilities and Competences.....	39
3.5.2. War and Dance	42
4. <i>The Road</i>	45
4.2 The Apocalyptic Genre	47
4.3 Gothic Devices in <i>The Road</i> and Its Structure.....	50
4.4 The Apocalyptic Ramifications	53
4.4.1 Cannibalism	53
4.4.2 All That Is left.....	55
4.5 The Identity.....	57
4.5.1 The Formation of Identity and the Ethics	57
4.5.2 Hope	59
4.6 The Mother, the Father and the Son.....	61
4.6.1 The Mother, the Father	61
4.6.2 The Boy	63
4.7 The Ending	66
5. Conclusion	70

Bibliography.....75

1. Introduction

Violence carries a peculiar prestige in American literature, as was noted in D.H. Lawrence's famous statement: "The essential American soul is hard, isolate, stoic, and a killer. It has never yet melted."¹ The inexhaustible list of authors who have delved into the dark and violent depths of human nature, such as Herman Melville, Toni Morrison or William Faulkner, testifies to the sempiternal position of violence in U.S. literature. American authors and their readers are as often fascinated by violence as they are horrified, its hideously alluring kernel has turned it into one of the inextricable institutions of literary canon.

Blood Meridian was published when McCarthy was relatively unknown and struggling through the literary arena. Even though Harold Bloom compared the novel to a masterpiece of American literature, *Moby Dick*, it was only with later novels that the writer established his position in literary circles, and not until publication of *The Road* that McCarthy won international acclaim and the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction. Throughout his oeuvre McCarthy has relentlessly been advancing excruciating revisions of human nature and its gaping depths, which have received polarized reception of both critics and readers. One of the crucial points which divides both groups is violence and its portrayal. While some praise it as exhilarating or baroquely opulent, others degrade it for the plethora of brutal scenes which either horrify or dull the reader. McCarthy's accounts of the violent pivot of American literature are rooted in the brutal facts of human evolution; his consummate studies of historical sources and proverbial

¹ Ezra Greenspan. et al., eds. *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of D. H. Lawrence: Studies in Classic American Literature*(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,2003) Google Books.
<http://books.google.cz/books/about/Studies_in_Classic_American_Literature.html?id=IHSM6SIGi1AC&redir_esc=y> 11th January 2015

consorting with the scientists of the Santa Fe Institute unearth inextricable sides of human nature. Critics tend to be divided into two camps: those who insist on reading McCarthy's canon as highly symbolic and allegorical with a convoluted theological dimension, and those who overlook textual indicators and regard them as "red herrings". The texts operate on various stylistic, allegorical and symbolical levels, which invites as well as it hinders interpretation. When analyzing his oeuvre, it is important to bear in mind that his narratives are hard to classify and do not fall neatly into a single clearly delineated category, since McCarthy has been redefining the restrictions of a number of identifiable literary traditions; challenging the essential elements—style, theme, structure and character—he has pushed the boundaries and blurred the dividing lines. This work aims to uncover and elucidate an intricate role that violence plays in both *Blood Meridian* and *The Road*.

It is essential to note why I find these novels particularly apt for comparison. The existence of numerous studies concerning *Blood Meridian* and *The Road* testifies to the difficulties of striving to map out the landscape of violence in McCarthy's key novels. Both novels present the height of McCarthy's oeuvre. Many critics claim that the author has not surpassed the literary impact which was achieved by *Blood Meridian*, however, as noted above, *The Road* has been awarded Pulitzer Prize and placed McCarthy firmly in the literary canon. As a necessary starting point, both novels are replete with highly explosive images of violence, whose energies concoct gut-wrenching, repugnant effects and a perverted feeling of pleasure; McCarthy's comic and terrifyingly beautiful words have the power to sicken as well as exhilarate the reader. Yet the power of imagery should not weaken our attention to the complicated imaginative contexts which they explore. We end up with a significantly different angle of approach if we think of McCarthy's violence not as serving dramatic purposes but as an interrogative placed in

the liminal spaces of the narrative; consequently, his violence takes on a different and more intriguing imaginative valence. The convoluted structures which violence weaves in the novels create an intricate view of the phenomenon, affording a useful vantage from which to evaluate McCarthy's position on the subject. Since his violence tends to be viewed related to the notions of good and bad and his ethics as a system which these concepts reflect, I deem it necessary to include the concepts that his novels delineate. I am aware of the fact that it would seem necessary to include an overview of religious concepts that could easily be applicable; biblical references abound in both novels and they often have a direct relation to the concept of violence. However, a thorough analysis that would not neglect important details goes far beyond the limitations of my thesis, since it would require far larger scope. As a consequence, I am forced to omit such a valuable direction, knowing that it would undoubtedly lead to a more comprehensive grasp of violence in McCarthy's novels. The structural elements of *Blood Meridian* are to some extent echoed in *The Road*; however, these aspects are altered and reworked, which results in a completely different outlook on violence. Whereas *Blood Meridian* traces back the Western expansion and focuses on the scalphunting gangs in the westward expansion, *The Road* paints an apocalyptic story of a man and a boy on their journey through dead wastelands towards the South. The similarities as well the differences suggest the critical directions from which the topic of violence can profitably be studied. In order to analyze the role which violence plays in the novels, I aim to draw on both of them and subsequently map the elaborate net of meanings that McCarthy's violence can carry.

2. Defining Violence and Its Literary Representation

Before anything else, it is indispensable to define several notions that will be used in this study: violence and its use in literature. Violence comes from the Latin verb *violare*, its stem is derived from the Latin *vis*, meaning force. The word in its meaning of the exercise of force is connected to the Latin *fortis*, which carries in Latin also the meaning of violence, among others. The term *violence* is complex and conflictive; the attempt to define it raises questions, to which there is a multitude of answers based in disciplines such as sociology, psychiatry, physiology, anthropology, jurisprudence, politics, and religion. In *Deadly Musings: Violence and Verbal Form in American Fiction*, Michael Kowalewski defines violence as “an act of aggression that is usually destructive, antisocial, and degrading in its consequences and that usually seems deliberate.”² Benjamin B. Wolman sees it as “physical or verbal behavior that aims at harming and/or destroying someone or something. Violent behavior is a part of nature, and nature is violent.”³ Patrick W. Shaw in *The Modern American Novel of Violence* defines violence “as any action, premeditated or not, that is performed with the purpose of injuring or killing another living creature, especially another human.”⁴ In McCarthy’s works, there are instances of violence aplenty, concerning both the animate and inanimate, and frequently leading to the death of the living creature or destruction of the object.

² Michael Kowalewski, *Deadly Musings: Violence and Verbal Form in American Fiction* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997) 7.

³ Benjamin B. Wolman, “Foreword,” *Violence and the Prevention of Violence*, eds. Leonore Loeb Adler, Florence L. Denmark, (Westport: Praeger Publishers, 1995) xv.

⁴ Patrick W. Shaw, *The Modern American Novel of Violence* (Albany: Whitston Publishing Company, 2000) 2.

However, as will be illustrated in my work, the sufferers do not involve only clearly defined categories of objects and living creatures. The English verb violation also carries the meaning of encroachment and desecration which mirrors itself in many an institution that McCarthy includes in the group that suffers from violence.

With this being said, it is crucial to ponder upon the incentives to commit violence. Is it an anthropological constant or might a state of things deprived of violence imaginable? Is it a true universal that goes hand in hand with humankind? Is it a culturally determined reflex or an aberration? Is it always deplorable or are there cases in which it can be justified? In the “modern” view, violence tends to be understood as an obstruction to the road to human perfection. While there are many instances of violence in the natural world, a number of critics have noted the distinctions between humans and animals. Erich Fromm, among others, made the important point that Homo Sapiens “is the only primate that kills and tortures members of his own species without any reason, either biological or economic, and who feels satisfaction in doing so.”⁵ Benjamin Wolman raises a point that will prove to be particularly interesting in relation to *The Road*:

There are two main sources of violence, namely the fear of death by starvation and the fear of death by being killed. The fear of having nothing to eat leads to offensive violence, and the fear of being eaten up leads to defensive violence. To eat and not be eaten up, this is the question.⁶

Despite the huge number of theories, no one of them seems to succeed in explaining all forms and instances of human violence. As we will see later, Cormac McCarthy does

⁵ Erich Fromm, *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1974)

5.

⁶ Woolman xv.

not strive systematically to examine the violent behavior of humankind, although his attitude towards the phenomenon was clearly articulated in the interview with Richard B. Woodward:

There is no 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. Those who are afflicted with this notion are the first ones to give up their souls, their freedom. Your desire that it be that way will enslave you and make your life vacuous.⁷

Dispelling the humanistic fallacy that humankind could be improved, for McCarthy violence is contiguous to humankind. However it appears dubitable to state that McCarthy clearly expresses an articulated philosophy of violence. Concomitantly, McCarthy does not map society's reactions to violence; his picture lacks any traces of the perception of opposing "sides" of the incidents. In his oeuvre, violence does not have a single value on which we could pass our moral judgment. Rather, violence takes on different meanings and inflections depending on the system of thought, historical approaches and ideological stances within which it is analyzed. A mere binary that would classify violence as either good or bad is completely absent.

Violence in literature is verbally mediated and the expressive forms, literary devices and immeasurableness of the imaginative grounds offer a wide array of combinations to channel literary violence into readers. John Cawelti maintains that violence in fiction cannot be understood "simply as violence," for its meaning depends on the place it plays in the overall structure.⁸ The assemblage of individual authors entails the aesthetic

⁷ Woodward, Richard B. "Cormac McCarthy's Venomous Fiction." *NYTimes.com*. New York Times Magazine, 19th April 1992: 28-31. <<http://www.nytimes.com/1992/04/19/books/mccarthy-venomous.html?ex=1235451600&en=2eb016670446ee36&ei=5070>> 15th April 2015.

⁸ Kowaleski 4.

force and literary impact with which the violence is endowed in a particular novel. However, we would do a disservice to many grand authors to indict them for the use of violence solely for dramatic purposes. The ways in which individual writers work out violence in their fiction directly determines the aesthetic force and perceptual impact that violence has. The style that McCarthy uses to paint the instances of violence has been one of the main aspects of his work for which he has been lauded; the heart-rending vividness mixed with colorful grandeur marks the works which have arguably surpassed the literary potency of violence.

3. Blood Meridian

Cormac McCarthy insists on ubiquitous violence as a phenomenon attendant on human history since its commencement. Human existence does not represent the only precondition of the omnipresent slaughter; the impervious wilderness which forms the kernel of the American continent that consequently determined the development of the nation becomes the place that gives birth to prehistorical evil. The barbarity of nature demonstrates the insignificant role of humankind and rebuts the myths of the irreplaceability and exceptionality of humankind. In *Blood Meridian* McCarthy's splendid and pompous language litters the pages with corpses, its sumptuousness of omnipresent carnage and slaughter stupefy the readers whose feelings alternate between horror and fascination. In Steven Shaviro's words, "*Blood Meridian* sings hymns of violence;"⁹ Harold Bloom sees it as "an ultimate dark dramatization of violence."¹⁰

⁹Steven Shaviro, "The Very Life of Darkness": A Reading of *Blood Meridian*, *Perspectives on Cormac McCarthy*, eds. Edwin T. Arnold, Dianne C. Luce (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi 1999) 145.

¹⁰ Leonard Pierce, "Harold Bloom on Blood Meridian," *The A.V. Club*, 15th June, 2009
<<http://www.avclub.com/article/harold-bloom-on-iblood-meridians-29214>> 1st May 2015.

3.1 Literary Traditions in *Blood Meridian*

3.1.1 Rewriting the Western

The prestigious MacArthur Fellowship gave McCarthy an opportunity to bury himself in thorough study of historical sources and the Spanish language culminating in his *magnum opus*, in which he started a literary pilgrimage towards West Texas. Exemplifying some important aspects of Southern literature, McCarthy “can be seen as a postmodern avatar of that restless drive toward the West that has been a key motive in Southern literature.”¹¹ Hand in hand with the protagonist of *Blood Meridian*, McCarthy leaves a “flat and pastoral landscape”¹² for wildly barbarous frontier land. The move towards a new region determined the choice of genre, with which McCarthy responded to the considerable increase of Southern writers’ interest in the Western. However, McCarthy’s melange of southern grotesque and grim approach markedly reformulated the genre and took the novel into uncharted waters. Virtually every critic considers *Blood Meridian* a dramatic rewriting of the traditional Western, some opt for the term anti-Western, Jonathan Pitts calls the novel a devious Western, John Cowelti regards it as “pre-Western post-Western.”⁷ Set in the West, the novel spans the life of a character called the kid from his birth in 1833 until his death in 1878 and thus covers most of the heyday of westward expansion and emergence of its cowboy culture. Even though the Western has been analyzed through many different lenses, one of the reasons for its popularity seems to be the affirmation of the uniqueness and exceptionalism of the American experience related to their own history and reinforcement of the values and beliefs their ancestors fought for and imposed upon the west. In *Six-Gun Mystique*

¹¹ Jeffrey J. Folks and James A. Perkins. *Southern Writer’s at Century’s End* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1997) 165.

¹² Cormac McCarthy. *Blood Meridian or the Evening Redness in the West*. London: Random House, 1992. 4. All future page references will be to this edition and will be included in parentheses in the text.

John Cawelti defines the codes of the Western by which the hero resists a series of temptations through inner control succeeding in the destruction of the threat. “But the story is so structured that the responsibility for this act falls upon the adversary, permitting the hero to destroy while appearing to save.”¹³ Consequently, he attributes the popularity of the genre to its representation of legitimated indulgence in violence¹⁴, concluding that Western novels are “a vehicle for exploring value conflicts” and formulaic works that provide readers with a vehicle for escape and moral fantasy” and “justify that their ancestors’ actions when settling the country were right and good and necessary.”¹⁵ If traditional Westerns aim at validating their own cultural group, *Blood Meridian* succeeds in demolishing the oppositions of good and evil or civilization and savagery, since McCarthy, whose writing was preceded by a diligent research of the historical epoch, derides taming of the conflicts into false dichotomies: the story does not portray heroic and laudable pioneers who bring civilization to a savage wilderness; the marauding Glanton gang enkindles more brutal and savage culture in the borderlands than the ethos of the people it seeks to exterminate. The morality of ‘good guys’ is distorted; the nobleness of spirit takes a hideous form; the moralizing lesson is ridiculed. McCarthy subjects the genre to new critical scrutiny, transforming it into a completely different microcosm.

3.1.2 Gothic Tradition

Stomach-churning scenes similar to the following example infuse the narrative to such a degree that it appears as if their author may revel in morbidity and perversion.

¹³ John G. Cawelti, *The Six-Gun Mystique* (Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1999) 11.

¹⁴ Cawelti 11.

¹⁵ JoEllen Shively, “Cowboys and Indians: Perceptions of Western Films Among American Indians and Anglos,” *American Sociological Review* 57 (1992): 729, JSTOR <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/2096119>> 15th May 2014.

They were skewered through the cord of their heels with sharpened shuttles of green wood. They hung gray and naked above the dead ashes of the coals where they'd been roasted until their heads had charred and the brains bubbled in the skull and steam sang from their noseholes. (226-7).

The novel is replete with gory details, many of which tally with the conventions of the Gothic genre. Gruesome description of violence rendered in a splendid language arouses both fascination and repulsion, presenting an assortment of Gothic motifs including monstrous misfits, evil misdeeds or macabre scenes. Imperturbably, McCarthy offers detailed descriptions of atrocious slaughters of the belligerents, mutilations, death by goring, hanging, or vicious massacres of the innocent. Despite the ungraspability of the category of Gothic, its definition has been broadened beyond bone-chilling enigmas and deformed individuals to “a tradition of oppositional literature, presenting in disturbing, usually frightening ways, a skeptical, ambiguous view of human nature and of history,”¹⁶ writes Charles L. Crow. He goes on to define the standards of the Gothic to expose “the repressed, what is hidden, unspoken, deliberately forgotten, in the lives of individuals and of cultures.”¹⁷ Taking it as a working definition, *Blood Meridian* is an immaculate Gothic piece in its insistence on the impossibility to perfect individuals or societies and its revelation of the historical facts that are cached in human memory. The liminal codes of *Blood Meridian* reveal disquieting realities concerning American history and their overlaying ghastly shadow which is cast on the nature of American identity. The Gothic term *uncanny* dating from the publication of Sigmund Freud's essay ‘Das Unheimliche’ is particularly apt to describe the feeling of the reader who is pressed to face the fact that the comforting

¹⁶ Charles L. Crow, *The American Gothic* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2009) 2.

¹⁷ Crow. *The American Gothic* 2.

stories of American colonization are turned into an ominous touchstone of human nature.

Only through a fusion of elevated prose and revulsive grotesque could McCarthy orchestrate scenes such as the description of the Comanches' assault of Captain White's gang, painting their miscellaneous accoutrement and haphazard costumes, whose aesthetics allegorize the multicultural violence of the borderlands. The "legion of horrible" (52) is clad in "silk finery and pieces of uniforms still tracked with the blood of prior owners, coats of slain dragoons," wardrobe in "a stovepipe hat," "white stocking and a bloodstained weddingveil", "the armor of spanish conquistador," costumes "done in another country by men whose very bones were dust" (52-3). The attack depicted in a lurid style is evidently woven out of the accounts of historians and personal narrators, which also seem to have served as an inspiration for the Apaches' flamboyant fashion. McCarthy's rendering of the scene does not lack the scalping and mutilating of the Anglos; the Comanches are "seizing them up by the hair and passing their blades about the skulls of the living," "hacking and chopping at the naked bodies, ripping off limbs, heads, gutting the strange white torsos and holding up great handfuls of viscera" (53). The capability to rouse horror and disgust mixed with variegation and splendor of the language abounds in the novel leaning at times towards the grotesque. The term in its meaning of distorted or monstrous applied to characters reverberates throughout the novel. When a vampire sucks Sproule's blood like a demonic harbinger from past times, he turns into "a wrinkled pug face, small and vicious, bare lips crimped in a horrible smile and teeth pale blue in the starlight" (66). Nary a death is graceful, the actions are indecorous, even more so when contrasted to the elevated style of prose with which they are described. *Blood Meridian* treads a thin line between the grotesque and pure atrocity; however, that line narrows and thickens as it derives from preconceptions

and responses of a reader. Some readers do not cease to be outraged throughout the novel; others feel blasé as the bodies pile up. *Blood Meridian* has been criticized for overindulging in minute details of barbaric violence; consequently, the excessive use of literary devices to depict the atrocities may lose its impact and bore the reader. Pointing out the humor present even in the bloodiest episodes, Steven Shaviro notes that “the scariest thing about *Blood Meridian* is that it is a euphoric and exhilarating book, rather than a tragically alienated one, or a gloomy, depressing one.” On one hand, twistedly humorous passages can serve as a mitigating factor in the context of violence in their use to alleviate the horrors; on the other hand, the continuous thread of persistent humorous violence may make the reader insensitive to the carnage and blunt the emotions. However, violence and death were substantial elements in the West of the nineteenth century. By placing the novel in the border area, McCarthy represents one of the key representatives of the Gothic tradition in the borderlands, which has the frontier as its defining characteristic. Frontier Gothic and its engagement with the violence and bloodshed during the conquest of the West represent a Gothic double of American civilization, as Ronja Vieth would have it, which serves as “a means of confronting our demons and rewriting our origin myth.”¹⁸ McCarthy addresses the nation’s unacknowledged ghost that arose in its expansionist past, on account of which the impenetrable wilderness became a distinctly Gothic territory, embracing “the tangible substance of Southwestern Gothic [and] the fundamental spirit of this place whose prehistory is inscribed in the landscape.”¹⁹

¹⁸ Ronja Vieth, "A Frontier Myth Turns Gothic: *Blood Meridian: Or, the Evening Redness in the West*." *Cormac McCarthy Journal* 8.1 (2010): 47–62

¹⁹ Vieth 56.

Evil embodied in the inscrutable wilderness consequently reflects itself in the Gothic duality within humankind, which, according to Vieth, is strikingly present in both the judge and the kid. In the same vein, Martin Procházka, who plunges into darker depths of American conscience relating to history, points out the importance of American ruins, which he describes in terms of “ghost town syndrome”. In the Gothic duality, the judge becomes the principal representative of the quasi-eternity of evil and violence and a substitute for God.²⁰ As such he represents the ambivalent question of justice that, in relation to American ruins and the ghost town syndrome, envelops the Mexican war, which affected the history of the West and the whole United States. Holden’s pivotal speech about the ruins of the Anasazi emphasizes “the conflict between the typological reading of the Bible and the virtual impossibility of representing its key moment, the conquest of the West. The violence personified by the judge leads to the expunging of all alternative histories [...] from American memory,” which leaves “unlimited space for deceptive rhetoric.”²¹

3.2 History in the Novel

3.2.1 History and Its Multiplicity

As mentioned above, McCarthy diligently researched the historical sources to orchestrate his novel. In *Notes on Blood Meridian*, John Sepich illustrates that the novel owes much of its factual account to the historical records; Samuel Chamberlain’s memoir, *My Confession: Recollections of a Rogue*, bears chief importance in the focus of the story. However, it is evident that McCarthy’s research goes beyond

²⁰ Martin Procházka, "American Ruins and the Ghost Town Syndrome," *A Companion to American Gothic*, ed. John Crow (West Sussex: John Wiley & sons Ltd, 284) 30.

²¹ Procházka 36.

Chamberlain's account of his adventures, for he draws on numerous sources for his historically verifiable characters, places, and events. The conflicts in and among the states of Texas, Chihuahua, New Mexico and Arizona involved a huge number of groups: Mexicans, United States Army troops, Texans, Comanches and Apaches, and Anglo gold-rush travelers. The Apaches' and Comanches' raids aimed at Mexicans, for whom horses, slaves, and livestock were a cornerstone of subsistence, as they traded them to Indian tribes and Anglo traders; early on in the novel, we see the group of Comanches, who bring doom to Captain White's troop, driving "a herd of several hundred" (52) head of stolen livestock. In the forties, Chihuahua, desperate to stop the intrusions, hired Anglos to kill the raiders, which institutionalized the barbarous practice of scalphunting, with the mercenaries using scalps as receipts for significant payment. The gang leader Glanton, who thrusts the reader into the turbulent Mexican wars and the practice of scalphunting, is a verifiable historical figure, who appears in a number of histories of the mid-nineteenth-century Southwest.²² His racial hatred and animosity towards Indians hindered any compunction, as it did for the scalphunters for all of whom it was mere business. As such, it eventually turned against dark-haired Mexicans, since their scalps were not distinguishable from the Indians' and eventually the scalphunters were "reeking with the blood of the citizenry for whose protection they had contracted" (185). The author unabashedly details the rampant violence of the American scalphunters that Patricia Nelson Limerick claims Americans are hesitant to face up to.²³ When it comes to savagery, the crew slaughtering all that crosses their path has nothing on the barbarous practices of the Comanche or Apache, e.g. when the

²² John Emil Sepich, *Notes on Blood Meridian* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011) 11-45.

²³ Patricia Nelson Limerick, "Foreword," *Shadows at Dawn: An Apache Massacre and the Violence of History*, Karl Jacoby (London: Penguin Books, 2009) 12.

Americans encounter “a band of peaceful Tiguas camped on the river and slaughter them every soul” (173).

Yet there is another key reason why McCarthy grounds his grandiose narrative upon historic subtext. The author does not submit a subjective realistic account of the history, his is a snippet, which presents a part that is popularly overlooked, but his point is also to challenge the validity of historical archives and the teaching of history. Seemingly, he complies with the opinion that history could only emerge from a multiplicity of viewpoints, but he enunciates the fact that the way we perceive history, albeit compounded of multiple views, is embedded in our cultural frame and thus cannot be comprehensive in scope. Patrick Shaw points out the fragility of history, which is reflected several times by means of personal interpretation, for example in the episode about a harness-maker who kills a traveling stranger and then confesses to his son who himself becomes a killer. The story rouses a passionate debate:

Then all began to shout at once with every kind of disclaimer. He was no harnessmaker he was a shoemaker and he was cleared of them charges, called one.

And another: He never lived in no wilderness place, he had a shop dead in the center of Cumberland Maryland.

They never knew where them bones come from. The old woman was crazy, known to be so.

That was my brother in that casket and he was a minstrel dancer out of Cincinnati Ohio was shot to death over a woman. (145)

Each has his own version of history and while we would incline to believe the judge, that belief would be solely based on his sophisticated manner of narration; however, we

must take into consideration the fact that he is a trickster and probably the most unreliable of them all. Such use of history also relates to the portrayal of violence, for the image of violence is very specifically determined by the culture.

3.2.2 The Myth of the Frontier and the Cost of Imperialism

The myth linked to the settlement of the West has acquired a symbolizing function, since the mythogenesis is a key aspect in building the American identity. In his influential frontier trilogy, Richard Slotkin considers the Myth of the Frontier an extremely important and persistent operative myth/ideological system that forms American culture, “arguably the longest-lived of American myths, with origins in the colonial period and a powerful continuing presence in contemporary culture.”²⁴

The novel clearly demythologizes the American West, challenging its image as a heroic place representing one of the cornerstones of American independence. In *Blood Meridian*, the statuesque ideals of American colonization turn into pervasive violence, short of mythic dignity and glamour. Timothy Parrish views the story as a description of the plague in the form of American expansion, which caused “cycles of death and destruction.”²⁵ McCarthy molds the novel as continuous repetitions of nations devouring one another and people who with wolfish rapacity resort to mindless slaughter.

The trail of the argonauts terminated in ashes as told and in the
convergence of such vectors in such a waste wherein the hearts

²⁴ Richard Slotkin, *The Fatal Environment: The Myth of the Frontier in the Age of Industrialization, 1800-1890* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998) 15.

²⁵ Timothy Parrish, *From the Civil War to the Apocalyptic. Postmodern History and American Fiction* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2008) 80.

and enterprise of one small nation have been swallowed up by another. (153)

The very title of the novel seems to reverberate the ambivalence of American expansion to the West. In Frederick Jackson Turner's *The Frontier in American History*, the frontier becomes "the line of most rapid and effective civilization."²⁶ But the colonization in McCarthy scarcely entails "the disintegration of savagery by the entrance of the trader;"²⁷ rather, he insinuates that if the frontier is "the meeting point between savagery and civilization,"²⁸ it is one where the civilized behavior crumbles. Manifest Destiny was not only the concept that American settlers should expand and colonize the continent; it also comprised the myth of chosen-ness which vested them with the mission to redeem the West and spread the ideas of democracy and liberty. However, McCarthy impugns all the urges to improve humankind. The self-presumed agent of Manifest Destiny, Captain White, is firmly persuaded of the necessity and rightness of their mission.

What we are dealing with, he said, is a race of degenerates. A mongrel race, little better than niggers. And maybe no better. There is no government in Mexico. ... We are dealing with a people manifestly incapable of governing themselves. And you know what happens with people who cannot govern themselves? That's right. Others come in to govern for them (34).

²⁶ Frederick Jackson Turner. *The Myth of the Frontier* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1921) 4. Project Gutenberg. <<http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/22994>>. 3rd May 2014

²⁷ Turner 11

²⁸ Turner 3

Pompous as White's imperial rhetoric is, his noble endeavor is short-lived, for his head ends up pickled in a jar at a bazaar. By the same token, the kid appears to endorse the mission, fighting with men of "all races, all breeds(4)", "men from lands so far and queer that standing over them [...] he feels mankind itself vindicated (4)", echoing the classic struggle between civilization and wilderness and the American *soi-disant* intention to bring democracy to other lands. Even though the conflict of the United States and Mexico was deep-rooted and the war officially carved out the American Southwest, McCarthy discomfits the reader with the complexities that form the historical bedrock of the American Southwest. In that vein Vereen Bell observes that despite the fact that both sides are fabricated products of the imagination,

discontinuous from any known patterns of human behavior...

We have the queasy feeling that we are being told, for the first time, the raw, unromantic truth about both sides of the war for the Southwest territories.²⁹

Blood Meridian represents a tale of mindless violence that preceded white settlement, in which the Anglo fights the Mexican or Indian he seeks to eradicate and U.S. imperial expansion takes the form of a "heliotropic plague" (78). The Glanton gang crosses a blood-spattered meridian, indulging in lawless killing to create a monstrous trade in dead human beings. It certainly rings true that McCarthy is aware of the fact that the view of the history is to a high degree colored by ideological perspectives of the era that endeavors to explore it. However, as far as the depiction of history is concerned, it is difficult to determine McCarthy's position on the subject, for the book hardly contains any elements of judgment or moral stance towards the events. Vivid as his descriptions

²⁹ Sepich 47.

may be, they are not judgmental. Not only does the novel eschew the issue of ethics, it does not even point out “the conspicuous absence of moral positions.”³⁰ Moreover, there is also a number of literary critics who draw parallel between the novel and the Vietnam War, namely Barclay Owens, Richard Godden and Colin Richmond; Richard Drinnon highlights the similarity of the scalphunters’ trophies to the U.S. Army division Tiger Force’s collection of Vietcong ears. McCarthy does not tiptoe around the issue of imperialism and its costs; however, the ongoing slaughter does not make a clear political statement; the novel does not concern the American imperialism exclusively. McCarthy is versed in more than American history. Calling on the linear concept of genealogy, the invoked ancestry centers not only the runners-up of the history, who have been overshadowed by the victors, but also the uncomfortable truth that traces back the origin of human being to apes. Judie Newman notes the novel’s connection between the brutal scalphunters and the prime genealogical forebears, referring to Robert Ardrey’s *African Genesis* and *The Territorial Imperative*, Desmond Morris’s *The Naked Ape* and *The Human Zoo*, Konrad Lorenz’s *On Aggression*, all of which purport the thesis that human is an instinctively aggressive being. Such reading is supported by one of the epigraphs which traces back the history of scalping to the pre-historic era.³¹

As Newman would have it, the shoulders that the foundation of American development rests on are not of the founding fathers or heroic liberators, but the filibuster gangs joined by the “violent children orphaned by war.”³² Both the kid and Judge Holden are placed within the childlike scope; while the former remains the kid for the most part of the book, his foil appears to bear characteristics of neoteny, which is defined as a

³⁰ Ashley Kunsu, “Maps of the World in Its Becoming: Post-Apocalyptic Naming in Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*,” *Journal of Modern Literature* 33.1 (Fall 2009): 58
<<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/jml/summary/v033/33.1.kunsa.html>> 15th March 2015.

³¹ Judy Newman, *Fictions of America: Narratives of Global Empire*. (New York: Routledge, 2007) 132-149.

³² Newman 135

retention of juvenile traits and their prolongation into adult life. Such hypothesis would be supported by the absence of hair or little limbs joined together with his well-developed brain and bipedal skills. Moreover, simian imagery abounds in the novel and hardly is it designated for the scalphunters only. The slain victims lie “gazing up with ape’s eye.”(153) Mexican prostitutes paint their faces “in indigo and almagre gaudy as the rumps of apes.” (200) Yet, the gang’s motion is the one that continually resembles a group of primates. Sitting “among the rocks without fire or bread or camaraderie any more than banded apes,” (148) there is “nothing about [them] to suggest even the discovery of the wheel.” (232)

3.2.3 The Influence of Surroundings

With regard to the setting in the West, it is important to ponder whether there is a defining influence of environment on the core of the human mind.³³ Some critics would admit that scalphunters might have been cruel and barbarous, but they would ground their refutation of McCarthy’s insistence on the violent nature of humankind in the fact that he presents a bygone era and environment, which dictated that man be brutal and ruthless in order to survive, but such conditions are a fragmentary and distorted memory. The fact that the violence is executed by the “representatives” of the American society, who should play the part of heroic fighters seeking to extirpate the bloodshed initiated by others, seemingly makes the book devoid of any moral principles. This appears to take the novel to a boundary beyond which some readers find it unacceptable to go—in linking such morally unrestrained barbarities with the historic representation of American society. It would be pretentious and hypocritical to base such a condemnation on the premise that the world has attained a higher moral order, since modern civilization is partially based on horrifying exploits by culturally and geographically

³³ Steven Frye, *Understanding Cormac McCarthy* (Columbia: The University of South Carolina Press, 2012) 18.

diverse “historical forefathers, separated [...] by only three or four generations.”³⁴ I would strongly agree with Harold Bloom on the fact that to read *Blood Meridian* as a clear condemnation of the American imperialism would be to understand in too simplistic terms.³⁵ Not only has history hitherto proven the precariousness of the noble contention that the moral achievements of civilization have been firmly established, but in his novel McCarthy also insists that environment (including “civilized” environment) plays only a limited role in the formation of self-identity. In *Blood Meridian*, McCarthy gives us vignettes of natural man, who is endowed with an innate penchant for violence. In *The Road* and its references, as well, McCarthy contends that violence, deeply enrooted in human nature, can be awakened in every human by crossing a certain boundary.

3.3 The Delineation of the Characters

3.3.1 The kid

While the book lacks the classical setting from the beginning onwards, the first chapter is a harbinger of the important themes that would gain prominence in the course of the book. The introductory sentence “See the child” (3) announces the symbolical scope of the character. According to Andersen, the sentence could paraphrase words uttered by Pontius Pilate at the trial of Christ, thus setting the scene for an emphasis on suffering and making the child both a Christ-like figure and an everyman representing

³⁴ Edwin T. Arnold, “Naming, Knowing and Nothingness,” *Perspectives on Cormac McCarthy*, eds. Edwin T. Arnold, Dianne C. Luke (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi,) 61.

³⁵ Peter Josyph. “Tragic Ecstasy: A Conversation about McCarthy’s *Blood Meridian*,” *Sacred Violence: A Reader’s Companion to Cormac McCarthy*, eds. Waden Hall and Rick Wallach, (University of Texas at El Paso: Texas Western Press, 2002) 205-220.

humankind.³⁶ Based on the reference to the Leonids, the kid was born under the astrological sign of Scorpio, which is ruled by the planet Mars. Named after the Roman god of war, it stands as a hint of violence to which the kid will incline. “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” (4). The ironic play on Wordsworth’s poem leaps to the mind; however, while the Wordsworthian child is an epitome of a pure humankind endowed with innate goodness, the taste for violence lurking in the kid’s soul reconfigures the Romantic vision of childhood dominated by innocence and virtue uncorrupted by judgment and reason; the child becomes an incarnation of the interminable cycle of violence, established by the prefatory news clipping. Inverting the motif of a child’s mind as *tabula rasa*, McCarthy adumbrates the penchant for violence inherent in humankind that will thread through all the passages. The redemptive and holy “cult of the child” is repudiated for the second time, as the mere birth of the kid begets one of the many demises in the book: “The mother dead these fourteen years did incubate in her own bosom the creature who would carry her off” (4). As far as the paternal figure is concerned, “[h]is father has been a schoolmaster. He lies in drink, he quotes from poets whose names are lost” (4). The impossibility of inheriting his father’s cultural awareness portends the doom pervading the kid’s childhood from the beginning onwards and it highlights the primitive nature of the kid, who will act only upon his primal instincts. While “he comes down at night like some fairybook beast to fight with the sailors,” his “face is curiously untouched behind the scars, the eyes oddly innocent” (4). The ostensible veil of purity cloaks the description, but its actual sense contradicts the Wordsworthian notion of a child, for we

³⁶ Elisabeth Francisca Andersen, *A String in the Maze: The Mythos of Cormac McCarthy* (Saarbrücken: VDM Verlag Dr. Müller, 2005) 198-199.

are firmly placed in a much darker place. Furthermore, his name also connotes the Western image of a hero associated with youth, vitality and benignity, which McCarthy utterly pulverizes; on the other hand, his general and non-specific denomination hints at his being a representation of a whole human class. His first initiation to the world of skirmishes and violent encounters takes place among the sailors, who “fight with fists, with feet, with bottles of knives. All races, all breeds. Men whose speech sounds like the grunting of apes.”(4) The abovementioned affinity between ape and man appears points to the heritage of violence that the species share in its origin and it links the kid to the final epigraph from The Yuma *Daily Sun* regarding the archeological discovery of a three-million-old fossil skull that appears to have been scalped, a piece of evidence which affirms the existence of the phenomenon of scalping at the outset of humanity. When leaving the place and embarking on the road,

only now is the child finally divested of all that he has been. His origins are become remote as is his destiny and not again in all the world’s turning will there be terrains so wild and barbarous to try whether the stuff of creation may be shaped to man’s will or whether his own heart is not another kind of clay.(4-5)

The snippet poses a few different questions and raises puzzling doubts of its meaning. Could we grasp or unravel the true nature of man? Could we ground it in the origins and destiny? Or is it forever hidden under the mist of its impalpability, unable to be uncovered under any circumstances? These highly challenging and vexing questions form one of the most important parts not only of *Blood Meridian*, but of McCarthy’s whole body of work. The author lends its narrative to elaborate systems of contraries, but those readers who expect his endeavor to reconcile the essential contradictions of the world defined by the good and evil, morality and malevolence, are bound to be

chagrined, since his work invites multiple readings and considerations and defies unambiguous answers. In Steven Frye's words, "[t]he governing motive [...] is the question of meaning, purpose, and value in a universe that yields answers only in bright but fleeting glimpses."³⁷

3.3.2 The Others

Akin to the kid's undecipherable nature, McCarthy eschews providing the reader with psychological insight into each and every character's mind. In this vein, the critic Vereen Bell observes that: "The motivation of the characters is usually tantalizingly obscure. [...] All of the characters threaten to become almost eerily unselfconscious."³⁸ The lack of interiority of the characters makes a crucial difference, since even the slightest sort of identification with or comprehension of the characters is precluded. The writer employs an objective narrator who appears to be untouched and distant from the occurrences or motivations of the characters; similarly, the novel lacks any traces of a classical plot. The aesthetic achievement seems remarkably powerful in his description of scenery, and perusal of all his novels reveals that he relies more heavily on the setting than on characters or a plot. The exuberant style of the descriptions is not extended to the characters, in either their speech or their thoughts and feelings; the landscape seems oblivious to human existence, completely detached from the interiority of the characters. The violence scattered throughout the book hinders the reader from grasping any semblance of a plot in the novel, for it intersects the story, looming over it, and stands out as the pattern that is the essential thread of the novel's fabric. It seems as if the book is a continuous stream of violent clashes which are randomly interrupted by

³⁷ Frye 67.

³⁸ Vereen M. Bell, *The Achievement of Cormac McCarthy* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1988) 4.

short peaceful interjections, under whose surface there always creeps a stifling portent of more upcoming carnage. The historical archives and sources mentioned above justify the view of the West as a place where violence is an unavoidable means to stay alive and life is a continual dialogue with death; apparently McCarthy's heroes have learned to domesticate such fear by butchering whoever comes in their way, riding on towards repetitive scenes of bloodletting and carnage. In his characters, McCarthy hardly refrains from overlooking the violence of human beings. As his motley crew combines white Anglos, Afro-Americans and Indians, who participate in the bloodslaughter to the same degree notwithstanding their origin, he universalizes a human being as a creature capable of horrendous atrocities. After the kid joins Captain White's gang, they come across a Mennonite who foretells them a dire fate, a prophesy, whose veracity will soon be revealed

The wrath of God lies sleeping. It was hid a million years before men were and only men have the power to wake it. Hell aint half full. Hear me. Ye carry war of a madman's making onto a foreign land. Ye'll wake more than the dogs.”(40)

The prophet reminds us of Elijah, who accosts Ishmael and Queequeg in *Moby Dick* at the same structural position of the book, echoing Ahab's monomaniacal quest which is mirrored in the framework of *Blood Meridian*. The quotation announces the self-destructive element in the violence which encumbers the Glanton's gang. When Jackson verbalizes the posse's credo “that he that lives by the sword shall perish by the sword” (248), he invokes the lofty hope for heroic death on the battlefield. There are thousands of deaths in slaughterhouse raids and fierce combats indeed; despite that, they appear to be grotesque and laughable rather than noble. They are a derisive representation of a

“storied hero [riding toward] what beast of war” (272), since their quest is suicidal; their inevitable doom rises up from the bloody description of the landscape: “they had turned their tragic mounts to the west and they rode infatuate and half fond toward the red demise of that day, toward the evening lands and the distant pandemonium of the sun” (185). Their death, however, does not point to a higher cosmic harmony or a metaphysical view of death. There is no structured mystical philosophy; the characters are mere figures in a world which is nothing but “a hat trick in a medicine show, a fevered dream, a trance bepopulate with chimeras having neither analogue nor precedent, an itinerant carnival, a migratory tentshow” (245).

3.3.3 The Road

Another important point should be noted in relation to the formation of characters of *Blood Meridian*. All McCarthy’s novels, *Blood Meridian* is no exception, are delineated by the road, travelled by a myriad of characters living on the fringes of society. The kid wanders from Tennessee to Texas directly after the Mexican-American war participating in filibustering gangs whose goals is to get rid the earth of heathen tribes below the newly formed border. Brian Evenson points out that the kid and similarly other members of Glanton’s gang classify as nomads, as defined by Poststructuralist theorists Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, who emphasizes the nomad’s rootlessness and his constant movement. “The movement is not from one point to another, but becomes perpetual, without aim or destination, without departure or arrival.”³⁹ The unbeaten track that the kid and Glanton’s band follow is also defined symbolically by the fact that they exist outside the moral paths given by the society. The

³⁹ Evenson, Brian, "McCarthy's Wanderers: Nomadology, Violence and Open Country," *Sacred Violence: A Reader's Companion to Cormac McCarthy*, eds. Waden Hall and Rick Wallach (University of Texas at El Paso: Texas Western Press, 2002) 52.

space they move across is violated by the sprouts of social structures, but, more importantly, it is encroached upon other nomads, which will inevitably result in violent clashes. The violence is a necessary action for the nomad, to eliminate the obstacles that could fetter his movement. Thus, seemingly the gang indulges in unrestrained violence with no regard to race, gender or age, but their reason is highly determined by their necessity to continue their journey. Interestingly enough, Deleuze and Guattari claim that

the important thing is the position of the mass, and above all the position of the subject itself in relation to the pack [...] how the subject joins or does not join the pack, how far away it stays.⁴⁰

There is one character who refuses to join the pack, to form an infallible piece of the group: the kid. When the gang slaughters their victims, the kid is never mentioned; in the most horrific massacres he disappears from the narrative altogether. Reproaching the kid for his passivity, the judge plays the role of the leader of the pack who is unerringly aware of the necessary coherence. However, it would be far-fetched to admonish the kid for his detachment, since his role does not stand out in relation to the gang, but to the judge. Therefore, as Evenson claims, the gang's downfall does not stem from the kid's shortcoming; it is their failure to preserve nomadic life, the disruption of proper spatial relationships. Even though Glanton's appropriation of the ferry ends in an exploitative business, they abandon their incessant motion and put down roots in a particular locale only to be overrun by the Yumas in a bloodbath.⁴¹

⁴⁰ Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* (New York: The Athlone Press, 2004) 32.

⁴¹ Evenson 55.

3.4 The Image of Nature

Nature is an overarching agent in the novel completing the variegated mosaic of violence and inevitable quest for “death [which] seemed to be the most prevalent feature of the landscape” (48). The landscape itself is painted in deathly terms; it is truly a “terra damnata” (61), a “purgatorial waste” (63) with “bloodred clouds” (21), lit by “urinecolored sun” (47), which sears all the living creatures. At one point, it “rose out of nothing like the head of a great phallus until it cleared the unseen rim and sat squat and pulsing and malevolent behind them” (44-45). The sun defiles nature, but nature itself is not a virgin entity, it is innately violent and barbaric to the same extent as man is. While we see the inescapable interlacing of human and nature throughout the novel, both seemingly serve as opposing forces that alternately have command of each other. The novel does support such reading, as the images of landscape are typically sinister and ominous, the western sky bears apocalyptic overtones; at one point, we read that “sun to the west lay in a holocaust” (105), another time that “to the west lay reefs of bloodred clouds” (21). In such a “godless quadrant” (293) the exceptionality and irreplaceability of man is but a deception. But I would disagree with those who insist that nature and man are the ultimate agents of the struggle against each other. Neither is there any harmonic vision of humankind living in peace with nature, nor a cruel battle of man against wilderness. In this vein, Dana Phillips argues, “Human beings and the natural world do not figure as antagonists—*Blood Meridian* does not have that kind of dramatic structure. They are instead parts of the same continuum and are consistently described by McCarthy as such”.⁴² The barbaric landscape subsumes man and nature, both of them on equal standing; the uppermost defining element of the relationship is sheer indifference. They do oppose each other in their stylistic striving to overtrump one

⁴² Dana Phillips, “History and the Ugly Facts in Cormac McCarthy’s *Blood Meridian*,” *American Literature* 68.2 (June 1996): 446. JSTOR. <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/2928305>> 4th March 2015

another in their capability for bloodcurdling atrocities. All the representations of nature in relation to humankind are invested with violence and death, and nature is a hostile place which erases all prints or trails that would give evidence of human presence.

In the days to come the frail black rebuses of blood in those sands would crack and break and drift away so that in the circuit of few suns all trace of the destruction of these people would be erased. The desert wind would salt their ruins and there would be nothing, nor ghost nor scribe, to tell to any pilgrim in his passing how it was that people had lived in this place and in this place died. (174)

Nevertheless, the landscape does not obliterate man without detriment; it notes the scalphunters passing as they ride across a dry lakebed

As if the very sediment of things contained yet some residue of sentience. As if in the transit of those riders were a thing so profoundly terrible as to register even to the uttermost granulation of reality. (247)

Crossing the desert, the “pilgrims” leave more horrific traces since they are ineffaceable. While in the beginning the gang “hunted the wild buffalo on the plain,” (120) “little wild pigs [...] and herds of antelope,” (43) they have “ransacked the country” (317), and at the end they pass “enormous ricks of bones, colossal dikes composed of horned skulls and the crescent ribs like old ivory bows heaped in the aftermath of some legendary battle” (324). Nature might regenerate and the impact may seem imperceptible, but violence that the brutal encounters bring sinks its talons into the

earth's layers, continuously tearing them away throughout the course of history until nothing is left but the ashen scabland of *The Road*.

3.5 Judge Holden

3.5.1 The Judge, His Abilities and Competences

When analyzing violence in the novel, it is not possible to dodge its protagonist, the monumental Judge Holden. Foremost of Glanton's gang, his eerie character poses a challenge to critics similar to the one that the institution of violence does, for he relentlessly defies coherent classification. His description couples childlike attributes and monstrous height: "He was bald as a stone and had no trace of beard and he had no brows to his eyes nor lashes to them. He was close on to seven feet in height. [...] His face was serene and strangely childlike. His hands were small" (6). Looking like "an enormous infant" (335), "like something newly born" (282), he bears attributes of neoteny. In addition, as he remains "little changed or none in all these years," (325) he seems to be a creature out of this world. His intellectual capacities are no less striking; McCarthy paints him as a portentous polyhistor, who takes on the roles of an orator, philosopher, naturalist, conjurer, draftsman, lawyer, and dancer. He is also an eclectic representation of Western grand evil characters, viewed as a double of Conrad's all-cultured Kurtz, Melville's monomaniacal Ahab, or Milton's demonic Satan. Able to perorate on a myriad of topics, he gives "references to the children of Ham, the lost tribes of Israelites, certain passages from the Greek poets," he cites "cases civil and martial" and talks about "the ferric nature of heavenly bodies and their powers and claims" (240). The judge's superior intelligence can be paired with the opening epigraph, which comes from a little-known essay by Valéry, published in the collection

Writing at the Yalu River. Valéry's quotation highlights the scope of the book, as it points out violence as a characteristic trait of modern civilization. Recording an imaginary dialogue with a Chinese sage, it presents a meditation on the distinctive features of Eastern and Western cultures. The Chinese scholar deprecates Western ideals and says to his listener:

You are in love with intelligence, until it frightens you. For your ideas are terrifying and your hearts are faint. Your acts of pity and cruelty are absurd, committed with no calm, as if they were irresistible. Finally, you fear blood more and more. Blood and time.

(1)

Judge Holden is portrayed as a direct opposite of Western ideals. A skillful handler, he employs his intelligence towards petrifying results, whose utmost horror hinders any absurdity. He murders on a whim, but instead of being fearful, he indulges in violence and warfare, which actuate him and make him immortal.

With his first trick he takes the threads of the literary tradition of *confidence man*, as he weaves an elaborate lies about the Reverend Green, which provokes mayhem among the onlookers who set out to chase the preacher. Later, the judge is seen very pleased with himself for destroying Green's reputation and endangering his life. His first appearance, invested with a destructive force, foreshadows the violence and self-complacent malevolence that will follow his every step. Even though he may seem a comical figure as he walks "naked atop the walls, immense and pale in the revelations of lightning, striding, the perimeter up there and declaiming in the old epic mode" (167), the ungraspable nature of his character looms large above all the other characters and seemingly comical moments have undertones of carnage. After the quoted passage, a

boy is found violated and murdered and it is most likely that he represents one of the many victims of Judge Holden's cruelty.

Holden echoes the parody of the Americanly incessant urge to master all in the name of progress and humanity and the desire to rectify mankind, which ascends to the colossal heights of an unbridled desire to conquer every piece of the world. "The freedom of birds is an insult to me. I'd have them all in zoos" (199). His lust for command of the world takes the parody of Western colonization to its extreme; whereas the others festoon themselves with human ears and scalps, Holden meticulously sketches natural items and human artifacts with the "intention to expunge them from the memory of man" (140). Nonetheless, reading him as a mere parody of colonization would be a gross oversimplification. Judge Holden is a multi-layered character, each layer presenting a critical challenge. A particularly noteworthy approach to the analysis of his character views him as the incarnation of the devil. His coalescence with hell is reflected when he "like a great ponderous djinn stepped through the fire and the flames delivered him up as if he were in some way native to their element" (96). The gang's view of the judge is also colored by a diabolic shade: "You would think to look at him that he could outdance the devil himself now would ye? (123) The infernal kinship is accentuated when McCarthy invites readers to see the judge as a direct parallel to Satan, who is an emissary from Hell and adversary of God, as he models the scene in which the judge concocts an explosive mixture on *Paradise Lost*, where Satan instructs his fiends how to make gunpowder. Similarly to Satan, the judge informs his companions that "our mother the earth [...] was round like an egg and contained all good things within her" (130). The gang follows him "like the disciples of a new faith" (130) to participate in a diabolic ritual, in which the judge mixes nitre with sulphur and human urine of all the participants to create a "devil's batter" (132). After everyone receives his

share like “communicants” (134), tellingly it is the ex-priest who speculates as they cross volcanic terrain “Where for aught any man knows lies the locality of hell” (130). His diabolical nature would also account for his immortality, which is reaffirmed at the end of the novel: “He says that he will never die” (335). Consonant with Satan, the judge is a compelling and charismatic character, with an immaculate gift for rhetoricity and as such he outclasses all the men, able to persuade them of his divine truth until they become “right proselytes of the new order whereupon he laugh[s] at them for fools” (116). His sinews of evil subjugate everything in the name of violence to turn him into a “suzerain of the earth” (198).

3.5.2. War and Dance

The utmost formulation of what the judge stands for is the motto engraved in the gunstock of the judge’s rifle, which reads “*Et In Arcadia Ego.*” The words are from Virgil’s *Eaclods*, where shepherds see them engraved on a tomb. The aphorism also hints at the timeless and tranquil idyll of a pastoral world which is however encroached upon by death. Charles L. Crow raises an interesting point that it contrasts the nostalgic vision of the old West as an Arcadian, bountiful land imbued with freedom and heroic deeds with the immanent presence of the savagery;⁴³ such view adds another critical piece to the mosaic of McCarthy’s revision of historic myths. Viewing the judge as a representation of the savage barbarism of the West is foregrounded by the incessant warfare inherent in his image. The judge advances the rhetoric of war, when he states his preferences of war as the most sincere vocation of man. In his view, only war is holy. By definition he represents the law, his legal domain being violence; which has

⁴³ The American Gothic 153.

led critics to call him the “best theorizer of violence and its best practitioner,” who understands “war as characterizing the universe’s amoral design.”⁴⁴

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 the unity of existence. War is god. (249)

War is the ultimate game, because each player wagers his life. All the characters in the novel participate in the game that is nothing but “a child’s game yet with some terrible forfeit at hand” (228).

Surviving the skirmish with Toadvine and the kid’s chances to kill him, he is the only one who remains unvanquished. Indeed, the kid does not get a second chance to “best the judge any other way” (285). Even though Tobin claims that the judge is not a parable, but a man like any other, the failure to kill him points to his immortality and the impossibility of his being killed by a human being. However, the relationship of the judge and the kid is not univocal; it forms one of the salient structures which is pregnant with a multitude of meanings. The judge singles him out and sets him apart from himself and the gang.

I know too that you’ve not the heart of a common assassin. [...]

There’s a flawed place in the fabric of your heart. Do you think I

⁴⁴ Christopher Douglas, “The Flawed Design: American Imperialism in N. Scott Momaday’s *House Made of Dawn* and Cormac McCarthy’s *Blood Meridian*,” *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 40.1 (2003): 3– 24. Taylor & Francis Group. Published online: 26th March 2010. <<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/00111610309595323>>. 11th January 2015.

could not know? You alone were mutinous. You alone reserved in
your soul some corner of clemency for the heathen (299).

Such clemency is an infringement of the judge's laws and an encroachment on his system of values, and for his part, it cannot be tolerated. Unable to defeat the judge and forfend his own demise, the kid stands as a representative who cannot escape its innate penchant for violence. The kid's destiny, soon to be executed by the judge's hands, is sealed at the last stage of the narrative. When coming upon an old woman kneeling amid the rocks, he tells her what seems to be a confession, but when he shows compassion and wants to "convey her to a safe place" (315), his pledge is unheard, for she is "just a dried shell and she has been dead in that place for years" (315). His attempt to step out has always been futile. There is no way to halt the interminable cycle of violence in the world; Judge Holden's violent realm is absolute and eventually the kid would always become a victim. The judge's final victory confirms violence to be the driving force of the world's turning, whose fulcrum is the unshakeable stage for Judge Holden's impeccable dance of war.

4. The Road

The images of a doomed world permeate McCarthy's works; even the world of *Blood Meridian* is a darkling wasteland. His oeuvre comprises grand narratives of the first magnitude which reveal the tragic fate of humanity in a harrowing and stifling reality; the mayhem and moral maelstrom seem to pre-doom his characters to downfall. There is a fierce consistency throughout McCarthy's work, which culminated in his Pulitzer Prize winning novel *The Road*. In one of the sparse public appearances of Cormac McCarthy, on the Oprah Winfrey's show, he explained the source of the book's vision, which originated during a visit of El Paso with his son:

One night (John was asleep) ... and I just stood and looked out of the window at this town ... I just had an image of what this town might look in fifty or a hundred years, I just has this image of these fires up on the hills and everything being laid waste and I thought a lot about my little boy.⁴⁵

The apocalyptic landscape is gloomy and dark, and humanity is bereft of moral order; the novel is chockfull of gore, viscera and blood-spattered scenes. Indeed to a large extent *The Road* presents the invigoration of the previous templates; however, as seen from the quotation above, McCarthy endowed the novel with a human bond unseen in his previous novels.

⁴⁵ Oprah Winfrey, Cormac McCarthy, Personal Interview, Oprah Winfrey Show, 6th June 2009. <<http://www.oprah.com/oprahsbookclub/Oprahs-Exclusive-Interview-with-Cormac-McCarthy-Video>> 15th December 2014.

4.1 The Catastrophe

The intertextual references convey the image of a world defined by the grey darkness of charred earth, the blackening sun, earthquakes and lightning. The only information about the nature of the catastrophe which has befallen the world that the text gives us is that “The clock stopped at 1:17. A long shear of light and then a series of concussions.”⁴⁶ The source of the large-scale disaster has been subject to much scrutiny, with answers ranging from divine intervention to a meteor colliding with the Earth. The nature of apocalypse is delimited by the ranges and figments of human imagination; the references to apocalypse became a constant after World War II and the concomitant development of the atomic bomb. In our turbulent era, apocalyptic themes have been in the ascendancy in relation to ecological disasters and fierce clashes of political and religious sets of ideas. In this vein, *The Road* has been viewed as a premonition of the impending environmental disaster; Andrew O’Hagan called it “the first great masterpiece of the globally warned generation;”⁴⁷ the environmentalist George Monbiot hailed it as the “the most important environmental book ever written.”⁴⁸ In contemporary discourse, climate change is relentlessly ascribed to human actions; as a stronger emphasis on man’s involvement in the catastrophe, many critics identify the vestiges of the world in *The Road* as a representation of nuclear winter. John Cant, who finds several discrepancies in such a hypothesis, views the results of the apocalypse as “a metaphor for the condition of man in the realization of his cosmic insignificance.”⁴⁹ I am strongly inclined to agree with those who maintain that McCarthy envisages the

⁴⁶ Cormac McCarthy, *The Road* (London: Picador, 2010). 54. All the future page references will be to this edition and will be included in parentheses in the text.

⁴⁷ Cormac McCarthy, *The Road* (London: Picador, 2010). The quotation is on the back cover.

⁴⁸ George Monbiot. ‘Civilization Ends with a Shutdown if Human Concern: Are We There Already?’ *Guardian*, 30th October 2007

<<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2007/oct/30/comment.books>> 17th December 2014.

⁴⁹ John Cant, “The Road,” *Cormac Mccarthy*. ed. Harold Bloom Sterling (New York: Bloom’s Literary Criticism, 2009)186.

apocalypse as a consequence of human behavior, for throughout his works, McCarthy insinuates that it would be the violent nature of the human race which would end the world. By connecting our capacity for self-destruction with its result, an apocalyptic world inhabited by people who prey on one another, McCarthy envisages the human race as a juggernaut driven by innate violence and lust for power. Despite this fact, McCarthy's resistance to revealing elaborate details of the disaster highlights his intention to focus attention solely on the blight which has arisen; the cause of the catastrophe should not bear excessive importance in the analysis of the novel; the primary concern is the post-apocalyptic world and the relationship of the father and his son.

4.2 The Apocalyptic Genre

It appears that McCarthy significantly swerved away from the line delineated by his previous novels, which were firmly placed in American history. Set in a vaguely specified future, McCarthy paints an apocalyptic story in a dystopian world. As such, time and space might necessarily be construed differently compared to his previous novels. The grounds on which *The Road* lies are not stripped bare; the remainder forms the cornerstone that determines the unwinding of the story, time seems to be at a halt, as if the boy and the man were in the time vacuum in which the striking clock became silent at 1:17. The broad strokes of history have changed radically the notion of the world, the past has been erased and the future no longer holds the continuity which time provides: "Ever is a long time. But the boy knew what he knew. That ever is no time at all" (28). The man recalls painful memories, the boy does not hold any, and for both of them the future is a vague notion which affords scarce hope. The very style of narration

points to the notion of time; the absence of transitions indicates the absence of time. Naturalistic descriptions of the charred landscape jumble with philosophical ruminations; the narration is disrupted into short paragraphs which resemble the rhythm of the pair's journey.

Dystopian literature tends to be viewed as a sinister vision of ominous aspects, which are magnified to give a true portrayal of a disaster. Lyman Tower Sargent defines dystopia "a non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as considerably worse than the society in which the reader lived,"⁵⁰ Hannah Stark says that "Dystopian literature is a repository of our already existing fears, projected into a future world."⁵¹

It is true that the writers of the post-apocalyptic genre gaze at the gaping abyss of our days and McCarthy draws on a myriad of horrendous phenomena that have appeared throughout history, some of which are not even as remote as the historical setting of *Blood Meridian*. When choosing the crucial tenets of the novel, McCarthy derived the notion from historical events:

We talked about if there was a small percentage of the human population left, what would they do? They'd probably divide up into little tribes and when everything's gone, the only thing left to eat is each other. We know that's true historically.⁵²

⁵⁰ Quoted by Jane Donawerth in "Genre Blending and the Critical Dystopia," *Dark Horizons: Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination*, eds. Tom Moylan, Raffaella Baccolini (New York: BloomRoutledge, 2003) 29.

⁵¹ Hannah Stark. "'All These Things He Saw and Did Not See': Witnessing the End of the World in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*," *Critical Survey* 25.2 (Summer 2013): 72. JSTOR <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/42751035>>. 16th March 2015.

⁵² John Jurgensen, "Hollywood's Favorite Cowboy," *Wall Street Journal*, 20th November 2009, <<http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052748704576204574529703577274572> > 18th November 2014.

It is interesting to note that in his film adaptation of the novel John Hillcoat eschewed computer-generated imagery and instead filmed American landscapes of disaster, areas ruined by strip mining and volcanic eruptions, and interwove them with found footage of Hurricane Katrina and the terrorist attacks of 9/11 to create a raw wasteland through which the characters wander.⁵³ In Arthur Redding's words, we thus witness the end of the world not as a cinematic product, but "rather as the variegated whimperings of the quotidian, as the overvalued currency of current events. Apocalypse is not doomsday, it is just everyday."⁵⁴

However far-fetched the story seems, its demolition of the vision of humankind embracing progress does resemble a number of outcomes of the twentieth century, for it construes social degeneration in the wake of disaster, uncomfortably resembling the chronicles of our times. As the man notes, "The frailty of everything revealed at last." (28) Such view adds a piece to the critical debate concerning McCarthy's attitude towards the category of history, which is surprisingly present even in the portrayal of the apocalyptic society. The debate poses a different question: "Is McCarthy a historically informed writer who conceives of humanity in temporal and culturally specific terms, or a universalist, committed to a transhistorical grasp of human nature?"⁵⁵ The dystopian vision of a non-existent society seems to favor a conception of his novels as a concoction of historical facts that mirrors itself in the vision of the world after a world-scale disaster; as seen in McCarthy's quotation above, he insists on the verity of the conditions, justified by history.

⁵³ Arthur Redding, "Apocalyptic Gothic," Charles L. Crow, *The Companion to American Gothic*, (New Jersey : John Wiley & Sons Inc., 2014) 448.

⁵⁴ Redding 447.

⁵⁵ Christopher Pizzino, 'Utopia At Last: Cormac McCarthy's "The Road" as Science Fiction,' *Extrapolation* (University of Texas at Brownsville) 51.3 (Fall 2010): 370. *Academic Search Complete*. EBSCOhost. <<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=58833792&lang=cs&site=ehost-live>>. 26th December 2014.

4.3 Gothic Devices in *The Road* and Its Structure

Not only does the genre mark a significant transition, *The Road* scarcely offers McCarthy's stylistic signature, which was defined by opulently splendid, decorative style. It is defined by fragmentary sentences, terse syntax, and short repetitive dialogues. It may be a literary challenge to reflect the natural world which has been reduced to ashes and where one can hardly find "anything of color" (2), and it seems that to express the scantiness of the world where humankind has been decimated vividly enough, McCarthy eschewed all the flourishes to convey the picture of the world in which the language has also been reduced to the basics. When honoring McCarthy with a McArthur scholarship, which McCarthy was awarded before writing *Blood Meridian*, Saul Bellow praised his "over-powering use of language, his life-giving and death-dealing sentences,"⁵⁶ and that mark of style is inextricably present in both novels. In spite of the fact that the style, which was lavished on the descriptions in *Blood Meridian*, is translated into a minimal prose, *The Road*, albeit succinct with short repetitive dialogues, does not fail to achieve the same poignant effect. The dead in *The Road* resemble those of *Blood Meridian*:

The mummied dead everywhere. The flesh cloven along the bones,
the ligaments dried to tug and taut as wires. Shriveled and drawn

⁵⁶ Alison Flood, "Cormac McCarthy Wins Lifetime Achievement Award," *The Guardian* (7 May 2009) < <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2009/may/07/cormac-mccarthy-lifetime-achievement-pen> > 4th May 2015.

like latterday bogfolk, their faces of boiled sheeting, the yellow palings of their teeth. (23)

In his vivid descriptions, McCarthy imbues *The Road* with the conventions of the Gothic genre, holding affinity with the tradition of the Apocalyptic Gothic, which was anticipated by Jack London in his novel *The Scarlet Plague*. The apocalypse seems a particularly fertile soil for the Gothic tradition, as it is replete with spectral figures wandering through ghostly towns and uncanny landscapes. In *The Road* McCarthy turns from haunting legacies of the past to haunting legacies of the present, which acknowledge nightmare as the defining frame for the future development of humankind. However, even in the sparse style of *The Road*, McCarthy applies the mix of horror and sublime beauty, which appeared throughout *Blood Meridian*:

Human bodies. Sprawled in every attitude. Dried and shrunken in their rotten clothes. The small wad of burning paper drew to a wisp of flame and then died out leaving a faint pattern for just a moment in the incandescence like the shape of flower, a molten rose. (48)

The Gothic genre brings the novel back to the southern region, which was a setting of McCarthy's first novels. The track of the protagonists' pilgrimage has been analyzed scrupulously; Laura Godfrey came to the conclusion that they travel through the Appalachian Mountains to the Gulf of Mexico;⁵⁷ another geographically knowledgeable critic, Wesley G. Morgan, carefully traced their journey and deduced that they travel from Kentucky to South Carolina.⁵⁸ With the close attention to physical details, it seems McCarthy returned to Knoxville and the southeast, where he had spent the earlier years

⁵⁷ Laura Gruber Godfrey, "'The World He'd Lost': Geography and 'Green' Memory in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*," *Critique* 52 (2011): 163-175.

<<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/00111610903380113>> 4th December 2014

⁵⁸ Wesley G. Morgan, "The Route and Roots of *The Road*," *The Cormac McCarthy Journal* 6 (Autumn 2008): 39-47. <<http://www.cormacmccarthy.com/category/society/journal/>>. 21st January 2015.

of his childhood. The association of Southern literature with the apocalyptic was noted by Anthony Dyer Hoefler, who finds apocalypse as a reservoir particularly suited to support a variety of southern histories.⁵⁹ Despite the stark contrast of *The Road* to McCarthy's previous novels, the novel does not represent a decisive break with the previous imaginative construction and basis for his novels. The novel echoes the view of the land as a mythic space, specifically reminding us of the Myth of the Frontier. Brian Jarvis notes that the representation of space in American literature tends to "gravitate towards utopian and dystopian extremes. It was the best of places, it was the worst of places, but always the land itself loomed large in the imagination of America".⁶⁰ In *The Road* the wilderness that once defined the frontier areas is seemingly turned on its head, since all traces of nature turn into dust. Yet, the space which the man and the boy roam is literally a vast unexplored area and the setting thus takes on a darker and possibly gloomier atmosphere than the desert in *Blood Meridian*. Ironically enough, there is a pronounced sense of space, but its traditional element has been encroached upon by the disaster; it is a non-place which has severed ties with the foundational vision of the South. Still, the man evokes it as a symbol of the only, albeit improbable, survival; even the boy starts to weave his own fantasies "[h]ow things would be in the south" (55). However, as they enter the southern regions, it becomes apparent that the doom has also befallen the promising region, even more so as the places resonate with the indissociable southern historic markers. One of the notable examples is the scene when they enter an old mansion where victims are stored in a horrific larder. When the novel notes that "Chattel slaves had once trod those boards

⁵⁹ Anthony Dyer Hoefler. *Apocalypse South: Judgment, Cataclysm, and Resistance in the Regional Imaginary* (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2012) 4.

⁶⁰ Quoted by Chris Walsh in *The Post-Southern Sense of Place in The Road, The Cormac McCarthy Journal* 6 (Autumn 2008): 39-47. < <http://www.cormacmccarthy.com/category/society/journal/> > 21st January 2015.

bearing food and drink on silver trays” (112), it brings to mind an inextricable part of the region, the heavy burden of the South’s racial history.

4.4 The Apocalyptic Ramifications

4.4.1 Cannibalism

The scarcity of basic conventions necessary for the sustenance of the human race defines the social codes of conduct; humanity is bereft of any vestiges of moral values. There is fast deterioration of the society, severance of human relations and values.

People sitting on the sidewalk in the dawn half immolate and smoking in their clothes. [...] Others would come to help them. Within a year there were fires on the ridges and deranged chanting. The screams of the murdered. By the day the dead impaled on spikes along the road. (23)

The word chanting with its religious connotations is hardly a coincidence, for the violence and slaughter have replaced the belief systems and become a mechanism which unwinds the earth. The psalms have been replaced by the hymns of the murderers and spiritual rituals take the form of horrific reenactments of ancient traditions.

Facing a desperate scarcity of food, a number of people succumb to cannibalism. In regard to McCarthy’s work, the phenomenon does not make its first appearance in *The Road*; in *Outer Dark*, the mute one of the triune sucking at the infant’s throat suggests that the child is later consumed, to which we can also add the possible interpretation of the ending of *Blood Meridian*. Feral gangs wander through the country preying on other

human beings, for they are one of the scarce sources of food. In such a world, there is no place for ethical codes; the roadrat who tries to attack the boy before being shot by the man is in turn eaten by his comrades; when the man returns, he finds “the bones and skin piled together” (73). The picture of the roadrat is animal-like: “The reptilian calculations in those cold and shifting eyes” (79); however, the depiction of humans who have been killed as victims are described in similar terms, having “been field-dressed and hauled away” (94). Based on their tattoos and “old scars with old motifs” (94) they have possibly been members of another gang, which was defeated and eaten by a superior enemy, who later impaled their heads as another evocation of the ancient traditions. McCarthy does not fail to evoke the uncomfortable facts, for the instances of the cannibalism have been chronicled from the outset to recent history; what is more, in his novel he invokes the natural cycles, which, though erased in the natural world, have been established in the remainders of human society.

The apparent function of the phenomenon, that is, to survive in situations of extreme necessity, may be complemented by the ritual meaning, according to which it adopts a regenerative function, for the consumption of flesh endows the cannibal with the spiritual power of the deceased. The ritual demarcation is supported by Christopher Sharett who adverts to anthropological studies that have corroborated that “anthropophagy occurs in a period when a given society perceives its breakdown and finds a need to descend to an extreme level of experience through collective violence or sexual orgy, which leads to or is associated with cannibalism.”⁶¹ Nonetheless, in Western civilization cannibalism has always been paired with evil; as such, it defines a society in the state of decay rather than regeneration. Richard Slotkin places the phenomenon into American context, in which it was traditionally associated with the

⁶¹ Christopher Sharett, *Planks of Reason: Essays on the Horror Film* (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2004) 311.

native inhabitants; for Puritans, cannibalism belonged to “the dark things that the spell of wilderness might compel Christian men to enact.”⁶² As far as the role of cannibalism in *The Road* is concerned, even though slaying and field-dressing of victims accompanied by chanting may resemble a ritualistic killing, there is scarcely a trace of rite that would indicate any possible regenerative function. In a world where the animate has been annihilated, human beings, the only living creatures, have inescapably become a source of sustenance. However, cannibalism also plays a very important symbolic role, since for the man and the boy it is specifically the last resort that distinguishes “bad guys” from “good guys.”

4.4.2 All That Is left

Hand in hand with human beings, the vestiges of great achievements meet their doom. States, houses, and machines are slowly crumbling away; books are covered with ash, mildewed and decaying. Even the central setting of the novel will eventually be a subject to erasure. When the roads meet their doom, they will decay, since their true meaning will be lost and the encroaching nothingness will dust everything. While the lesson of *Blood Meridian* teaches us that man might die but the land endures, there is nothing that will last in *The Road*. The obliteration of any significant traces that would hint at the past flourishing of either nature or human development echoes the condemnation of the endeavor to bring humankind to perfection or even the idea of such possibility, for it portrays a society in which all social codes have been torn down and all the progressive ideas have vanished in desperate struggle for survival.

One of the things that is divested of its meaning is language.

⁶² Slotkin 237

The world shrinking down about a raw core of parsible entities.
The names of things slowly following those things into oblivion.
Colors. The names of birds. Things to eat. Finally the names of
things one believed to be true. More fragile than he would have
thought. How much was gone already? The sacred idiom shorn of
its referents and so its reality. Drawing down like something trying
to preserve heat. In time to wink out forever. (93)

It is perhaps the expunction of McCarthy's domain that most reveals the frailty of humankind. Language as the inseparable product of man is disappearing; signifiers die hand in hand with signifieds. The obliteration of language mirrors itself in the ethical concepts that are no longer distinguishable; the concepts of good and bad do not hold anymore, as their representations are blurred. Even violence stands as a precarious sign whose signified has radically changed its meaning.

The state of human community may offer a foreboding vision, but the truly lugubrious image is that of the landscape. Similarly to *Blood Meridian*, the landscape is gloomy, described in dreary terms such as cauterized terrain or ashen scabland; however, while nature in the borderlands, indifferent to human existence, seems to outlive man to a certain extent, there is no animate nature in *The Road*. While the sun in the former appears as a great phallus looming large over the desert, in the latter the "banished" sun moves "unseen beyond the murk." (13) Nature has been violated into a barren world with "raw dead limbs," (40) "dead seaots" (236). "The weeds they forded turned to dust about them" (5). The landscape plays as important a role as in the previous novels, but whereas the Western sceneries are always sparkling and splendid, albeit cruel, the deathly vistas in *The Road* emanate ubiquitous greyness; everything is covered with a thick layer of ash, erasing any visible differences between locations. The only things

“rich in color” (20) are the man’s dreams connected to the past. Even the ocean is “vast and cold and shifting heavily like a slowly heaving vat of slag” (230). Nature, which could partly regenerate in the previous novels, does not reclaim the world any more. While the title *Blood Meridian* refers to a natural space tainted by humankind, the title of *The Road* refers to a human product, one of the few that survived the apocalypse. Contrary to *Blood Meridian*, the core of the novel is fully occupied by man. Even the environment is described in anthropomorphical terms. The blackness of the nights is “sightless” (15, 234). The ash that they move through closed behind them silently as eyes” (193).

4.5 The Identity

4.5.1 The Formation of Identity and the Ethics

Domestic space in *The Road* is obviated; similarly to *Blood Meridian*, to settle down means an imminent death and constant surveillance of the road is a necessary action to avoid perilous encounters. There are infrequent moments the man and the boy halt their journey, the rhythm of the narrative creates a dynamic pattern for the narration. The preponderance of nouns define the man’s ruminations, the violent actions are defined by a strong emphasis on verbs. The inhabitants of the earth in *The Road* are homeless, as the gangs in *Blood Meridian* are. They are nomads who wander through the country with a shopping cart as an evocative image of the homeless wretchedness of human existence. The absence of a harbor consequently defines the formation of identity. When facing the results of the annihilation, the man feels the necessity of creating a resort to base existence upon different from the one that has been viable in the previous world.

“So be it. Evoke the forms. Where you’ve nothing else construct ceremonies out of the air and breathe upon them” (77-8) In Steven Frye’s word, McCarthy’s work engages the reader as it “engages the ultimate questions—the nature of the real, the possibility of the divine, the source of ethics and identity.”⁶³ All these questions reverberate throughout *The Road*. The opaque theological system is concomitant to the precarious notion of reality and its categories that reflect themselves in the construction of the self. Identity is formed through the identification of others, and it subsequently constitutes a part of the community. However, the classification of a community in *The Road* is to a great extent indeterminate, for its coherence is disrupted and is characterized by the absence of ethical systems. In the stripped-bare earth, all the moral foundations seem to have been reduced to the categories of good and evil, which are the only levels that seem to remain in the classification of morality. However, such highly precarious concepts make *The Road*—and all McCarthy’s works—impede unambiguous conclusions. Putting murderous marauders and the man and the boy in opposition, *The Road* does seem to present the concept of evil sparked by the struggle for survival contrasted to the ideas of goodness and the ethically hard-won in the course of history. Many have argued that the image of a human being endowed inherently with goodness is the central motif of the novel,⁶⁴ as it is put to the test whether it could hold out even in the face of the rape of all human values paired with the collapse of social institutions. Ethical codes that might have applied before the apocalypse have not only been shattered, they have even become life-threatening. Identity cannot thus be construed on any sound basis, since the world is encompassed by depredations of moral conduct including murder, rape, suicide, theft or plundering; not even cannibalism and filicide are unacceptable. In this regard, it is interesting to raise Rune Grauland’s point that the desert is a central motif in

⁶³ Frye 4.

⁶⁴ See for example Thomas H. Schaub, “Secular Scripture and Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*,”

McCarthy's writing.⁶⁵ While it was a dominant setting in *Blood Meridian*, the word itself appears but once in *The Road*. However, such a point rings particularly true in the latter novel, since the void or absence as its main element determines the overall characteristic of the apocalyptic world. "Ashes of the late world carried on the bleak and temporal winds to and fro in the void" (13). The desert here works on a symbolical level; its main application is the erasure of moral significance. The symbolical scope of the text is heightened by the fact that none of the characters is given a name (except for Elly, yet his name proves to be false). The two protagonists are simply called the man and the boy, a stylistic device that reminds us of the kid in *Blood Meridian*.

4.5.2 Hope

The criticism of *The Road* divides between two camps which argue whether the book offers a redemptive hope for humanity, or presents a threnody to the world which is utterly annihilated beyond the point of no return. The perusal of the novel justifies a wide array of answers, which are derived from the choice of the cornerstone for the examination. The critics who take the state of the apocalyptic world as a basis for their interpretation insist that it would certainly be alluring to believe in the mission of carrying the fire as a representation of a redemptive future, but the unrelenting picture of doom which McCarthy paints throughout the book makes the journey of the father and son pathetic. To mention two examples, Michael Chabon finds the book inconsistent with McCarthy's usual nihilism⁶⁶; Rune Graulund maintains that "the

⁶⁵ Rune Graulund, "Fulcrums and Borderlands: A Desert Reading of Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*," *Orbis Litterarum* 65.1 (February 2010): 57-78. *Academic Search Complete*. EBSCOhost. <<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=47508771&lang=cs&site=ehost-live>>. 4th May 2014.

⁶⁶ Michael Chabon, "After the Apocalypse," *New York Review of Books* 54.2 (15th February 2007). <<http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2007/feb/15/after-the-apocalypse/>> 23rd April 2015.

encroaching nothingness will in the end extinguish all that was once human.”⁶⁷ Those, who believe that the book conveys a sense of hope, base such assumption on the relationship of the father and son, outside which the multifarious facets of social breakdown offer a mournful outlook. Ashley Kunsu maintains that through the relationship *The Road* incorporates “the seeds of [...] unexpectedly optimistic worldview.”⁶⁸ Such a reading is, nonetheless, dubitable. The novel unrelentingly implies that the father’s relationship with his son is rare, in comparison to the number of survivors who are capable of consuming other human beings, including their own children. Moreover, the father’s tenacious endeavor to avoid others, let alone help them, is inconsistent with his mission to sustain his son and save him from any perils, for his own health is deteriorating and not finding a new community would entail his son’s death. The story of “good guys,” who are “carrying the fire,” must necessarily presuppose the existence of other individuals “carrying the fire.” Despite that, when his son insists on finding a little boy whom he believed he had seen, the father regards the act as tantamount to suicide. “Do you want to die? Is that what you want?” (89) A parallel example would be the incident, when they explore a solitary house. They “c[o]me upon themselves in a mirror” (139) and the father almost raises his pistol, but the boy whispers “It’s us, Papa. . . It’s us.” (139) Andrew Hoberek sees the scene as an indictment of “the father’s defensiveness as a form of self-violence, a shutting out of the world that eventually turns its aggression inward.”⁶⁹ If the father persevered in his approach, which may seem protective and justifiable given the omnipresent danger, the pair’s journey would inevitably lead to their death and to the preclusion of one possible continuation of civilization.

⁶⁷ Grauland 61

⁶⁸ Kunsu 55-74.

⁶⁹ Andrew Hoberek, “Cormac McCarthy and the Aesthetics of Exhaustion,” *American Literary History* 23.3 (Fall 2011): 483-499 < <http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/alh/summary/v023/23.3.hoberek.html> > 04th May 2015.

4.6 The Mother, the Father and the Son

4.6.1 The Mother, the Father

The corpses that are littered throughout the book are not only victims of each other's hunger and savagery, or of the apocalyptic cataclysm itself; the reader encounters some of the deceased who have been dispatched by their own despair from the outset of the novel: "Inside the barn three bodies hanging from the rafters" (16). Suicide also seems to be the only solution for the mother, desperate at seeing the annihilation of the world, which convinces her of the imminent and atrocious death of herself and her family. As the world plunges into the darkness which ensues following the disaster, she acknowledges the meaninglessness of the existence on the barren earth: "As for me my only hope is for eternal nothingness and I hope it with all my heart" (59). At the same time, however, she violates the maternal bond, which is deemed one of the most sacred of human trusts; she thus erodes a fundamental touchstone of the social structure, weakening the pillars of society and failing to abide by the oldest covenant. The mother is the first one to acknowledge the presence of death and embrace it. Naturally, her act has been seen by many critics, for example DeCoste, as a pure expression of selfishness and cowardice, which entails the nullification of love and repudiation of hope, an action that precludes not only humanity, but futurity.⁷⁰

⁷⁰ Marcel DeCoste, "A Thing That Even Death Cannot Undo: The Operation of the Theological Virtues in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, *Religion & Literature* 44.2 (Summer 2012): 67

Nevertheless, the father does not stand as a stark opposite to the mother; at times, he feels that she has chosen the right option and he inclines toward surrender himself. The moral struggle is particularly present in his ruminations. “Some part of it always wished it to be over” (163). “There were few nights lying in the dark that he did not envy the dead” (245). In the world where “[e]verything is a lie” (254) existence itself seems to be an utmost representation of meaninglessness, since there is no right or wrong, neither a truth to base life upon, nor even a lie. The sole meaning of the man’s existence is the existence of his son, who is “his warrant” (3), and the man’s endeavor takes on a sacred form: “My job is to take care of you. I was appointed to do that by God. I will kill anyone who touches you. Do you understand?” (80) The existence of the boy is presented as undoubted good and the novel gives justification for the view which presents him as a biblical figure: “If he is not the word of God God never spoke.” (3) From the father’s standpoint, the acts which the protection of his son entails are sanctified and excuse his resorting to unethical acts. Throughout the novel, he commits acts that are at least reprehensible, which raises puzzling questions about the limit that defines what acts are morally defensible. The pair’s repetitive insistence on their characterization as the “good guys”, with the identification of others who cross their path as the “bad guys”, therefore does not make a clear-cut division of good and evil, but rather reinforces a view of the world where such limits are hard to distinguish. The symbol of fire might represent their attempt at morals, but as Ellis writes, “the limitations of violence against even such a palpable evil are exposed: the father loses his humanity in his fear of inhumanity.”⁷¹

<<http://connection.ebscohost.com/c/articles/89644101/thing-that-even-death-cannot-undo-operation-theological-virtues-cormac-mccarthys-road>> 3rd May 2015

⁷¹ Jay Ellis, “Another Sense of Ending: The Keynote Address to Knoxville Conference,” *The Cormac McCarthy Journal*, Vol. 6, Autumn 2008. 30

< <http://www.cormacmccarthy.com/category/society/journal/>>. 15th January 2015.

4.6.2 The Boy

The boy may see his father as “a being from another planet that no longer existed,” because, born soon after the catastrophe, he is a child of the new world. He takes the role of a moral compass in the text, as he constantly urges his father to help the people they encounter: the man struck by the lightning, Elly or a boy, who he is convinced he has caught a glimpse of. The importance of fairness for the boy is also reflected in his vigilant behavior concerning the man’s overriding concern to keep him alive. When the man pours him cocoa taking only water himself, he admonishes him: “I have to watch you all the time” (35). Whereas all the father’s motivations are subsumed in the struggle for survival, the boy constantly strives to find an additional meaning, an additional reason, for the endeavor to go on. His motif for the journey seems to be grounded on radically different concerns; the mission of carrying the fire expresses his desperate need for a higher moral order. Such attitude runs counter to the motivations of his father, who sees acts of compassion as merely increasing the possibility of physical assault or death by starvation. The man recognizes the widening gap that arises between them as he fears that “something was gone that could not be put right again” (144). Towards the end of the novel, the man consents to something that put them at jeopardy when he allows his son to use a flare gun. What may seem a simple act of love for the little boy is in fact an acknowledgment of the necessity to give value to his story of carrying the fire as they signal to another “father and his little boy” (231) on the other side. It is concomitantly mirrored in the father’s decision in the face of death. Even though he vows to take his son with him, he proves unable to pull the trigger, recoiling from the idea that he would see his son dead in his arms. It seems that the man eventually discerns the remnants of hope in his son, as he urges him to go on to carry the fire and tells him “You dont know what might be down the road” (297). The picture

of the son with an aura around him reinforces his father's conception of him being a supernatural being, the only one who truly carries the fire.

The boy's attempts to convince his father to act differently may be tentative at first, but he firmly builds his moral system throughout the novel to give a clear answer to his father who tells him that : "You're not the one who has to worry about everything" (277). It becomes glaringly clear that he realizes that: "Yes, I am. I am the one" (277). The consolidation of his position is demonstrated in his indictment after a man steals their clothes and the father leaves him naked on the road. The boy is visibly shaken, "crying and looking back at the nude and slatlike creature standing there in the road shivering and hugging himself. Oh, Papa, he sobbed" (276) The reaction does not derive only from the compassion that he has shown throughout the novel but also from the warping of his father's morality. He later observes, "[w]e did kill him;" (278) yet because of the use of the pronoun *we* the remark is not formulated as a reproach. The boy still considers himself and his father a community fully responsible for the acts either of them does.

However, the boy has no pre-given knowledge of the world, therefore his desire to help everyone, albeit genuine, is also very naïve; as Louise Squire points out, "he has no means to grasp the ethical dilemmas embedded at the heart of contemporary death-thinking."⁷² From such point of view, it is the son who endangers their love because of his compassion and faith in humanity. Although I see the basis for such reading, it obviates the picture of the son that is ultimately connected to his adherence to communal values. Certainly, the boy does not know any other world or existence, thus

⁷² Louise Squire, "Death and the Anthropocene: Cormac McCarthy's World of Unliving," *Oxford Literary Review* 34.2 (December 2012): 211-228. *Researchgate*. <http://www.researchgate.net/publication/270083534_Death_and_the_Anthropocene_Cormac_McCarthy%27s_World_of_Unliving>. 17th June 2014.

his sense of life does not apply to the classical scheme and it is crucial to ponder upon how his idea of goodness develops throughout the book. Seemingly, the idea is passed down from the father, to whom the boy turns for assurance, which is clearly articulated in their insistence on being “the good guys.”

Are we still the good guys? he said.

Yes. We’re still the good guys.

And we always will be.

Yes. We always will be.

Okay. (81)

The phrase paired with their mission of “carrying the fire”, resembles a litany which they recite as a ritual expression of belief and hope; they resort to the phrases several times in the story, specifically after they have witnessed shattering scenes. Nevertheless, the repetition of the phrase hardly carries for the boy the idea of compassion that sparks his impulse to help the doomed wanderers they come across. His thinking contrasts with the model that is presented by his father whose only distress concerns their own survival, since he is aware of the high possibility of their death caused by starvation or exposure to fatal assaults. Throughout the story, the boy develops his own belief system and becomes aware of the gulf between him and his father. While he asks his father to narrate “old stories of justice and courage” (42) at the beginning, he is unwilling to listen to them towards the end. As Christopher Pizzino points out, the boy tries to bridge the gap between the stories, which encourage responsibility for the world at

large, and the way the man acts, which gives primacy to himself and the boy only.”⁷³ When the boy appears to have seen a little boy and runs after him, his father admonishes him, to which the son answers: “I just wanted to see him, Papa. I just wanted to see him.”(89) It may be one of the crucial points of the novel, for the boy needs to see proofs of the stories his father narrates. However, the boy views his father as an incarnation of ethical codes, which is reinforced at the end of the narrative, when the woman who takes him in “talks to him sometimes about God. He tried to talk to God, but the best thing was to talk to his father and he did talk to him and he didn’t forget” (306).

Going right against the grain of McCarthy’s nihilism, the possible explanation for the boy’s goodness would be the author’s belief in the innate ethicality in humankind, specifically in his son, on whom the boy is modeled. The man bids his son farewell ensuring him of his love, “You have my whole heart. You always did. You’re the best guy. You always were.” (298) The proclamation conspicuously remind us of McCarthy’s appreciation addressed to his son: “he is the best person I know, far better than I am.”⁷⁴

4.7 The Ending

The ending of the book may leave many readers perplexed, as it disrupts the gloomy atmosphere which is built throughout the novel. It seems that the boy has finally encountered the other good guys, a family who take him in. The strong contrast between the plight of the protagonists’ journey and its ending led some critics to consider the

⁷³ Christopher Pizzino, ‘Utopia At Last: Cormac McCarthy’s “The Road” as Science Fiction,’ *Extrapolation* (University of Texas at Brownsville); Fall 2010, Vol. 51 Issue 3, 358

⁷⁴ Richard B. Woodward, “Cormac McCarthy’s,” *Vanity Fair*, August 2005. Quotation taken from *Cormac McCarthy: No Country for Old Men, All the Pretty Horses, The Road* by Sara L. Spurgeon. (New York: The Continuum International Publishing Group, 2011) 18.

ending mawkish and inconsistent with the rest of the novel. The introduction of a *deus ex machina* at the end is a radical conclusion, which lends resonance to the belief that the novel's overall structure communicates optimistic hope in the goodness of humankind that perseveres even in the face of evil. According to John Cant, "the inherent vitality of the ardenthearted"⁷⁵ stands unvanquished even in the face of a global disaster. The mission of "carrying the fire," which can be read as a symbol of civilization, is to be accomplished. Nevertheless, since the world offers no living conditions whatsoever, the existence of "ardenthearted", and consequently the existence of civilization is subject to erasure, the apparent salvation of the boy as an insinuation of redemption or resurrection of humankind is out of the scope of tangible reality.

In connection with the ending, it is interesting to emphasize one particular moment of the novel. Towards the end, the man stands contemplating the road. "The salitter drying from the earth."(279) The term *Salliter* takes us back to *Blood Meridian* and its epigraph taken from Jacob Boehme. The German mystic and philosopher belonged to the proponents of a divine substance and in his first book manuscript *Aurora, Morgenröte im Aufgang*, he introduced his notion of the divine substance *Salitter*. "[I]dentified with the corporeal determinacy of things with their origin or 'seed', and with the powers of fertility in them,"⁷⁶ it "designated the embodiment of the total force of divinity, the compendium of all forces operating in nature and in the human psyche."⁷⁷ In *Aurora* Boehme distinguishes two types of *Salitter*, one celestial and the other earthly. The former is pure and clear and angelic creatures are shaped out of it; the

⁷⁵ Cant 187

⁷⁶ Lawrence M. Principe and Andrew Weeks, "Jacob Boehme's Divine Substance Salitter: Its Nature, Origin, and Relationship to Seventeenth Century Scientific Theories," *The British Journal for the History of Science* 22.1 (March 1989): 54. JSTOR. <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/4026678>>. 3rd May 2015.

⁷⁷ Principe 53

latter is “dark, stinking and poisonous”, dimly reflecting its divine counterpart.⁷⁸ Thus, the desiccation of the substance from the earth would suggest an irreversible end to the world in its present form. However, the angelic aura of the son, whose breath becomes “the breath of God” (306), which “pass from man to man through all of time,” (306) would point to the world, which, after being subjected to an utter disintegration, arises to an upcoming onset embodied by the angelical figure of the son.

Nonetheless, typically for the writer, the narrative is complemented by an epilogue that forms a counterargument to the reading of the end in terms of hope. The epilogue is an elegiac coda, a reminiscence of trout whose backs are mapped with: “Maps and mazes. Of a thing which could not be put back. Not be made right again” (307). The final point tears down the hope in restoration of the world to its previous state and does little to affirm belief in an alternative of state of things in which humankind could survive. Similarly to the previous novel, I would disagree with those who relentlessly strive to find a precise ideological system in the novel that gives clear and unambiguous answers to the questions the narrative poses. First and foremost, the novel does not concern the future as much as it is a painting of the present that has originated in the violent nature of man, a nature magnified by conditions in the novel. It lacks firm tenets that would weave a consistent ideological system justifying categorical conclusions. In relation to the apocalyptic genre, Malcolm Bull asks particularly apt questions: “What is apocalyptic? A genre in which the heavenly mysteries are communicated through supernatural revelation? A belief that all history has a single irreversible conclusion? A teleological framework for the understanding of evil?”⁷⁹ The desire to find answers to such questions, to find in McCarthy’s work a moral system that might explain humanity

⁷⁸ Principe 56

⁷⁹ Hoefler 5.

and its particular penchant for violence, must inevitably lead to false closures, which are shattered by every page of the novel.

5. Conclusion

The purpose of this thesis was to outline the pattern that defines McCarthy's employment of violence in his novels *Blood Meridian* and *The Road*. I have scrutinized the historical background, structure, characters, and ethical codes to which the novels could possibly adhere; special attention was given to the stylistic features of the narratives and the genres which they embrace. Both of the works which constitute the height of McCarthy's *oeuvre* testify to the intricate role which violence plays throughout his works. The definitions of violence and its use for literature served as starting points for the analysis; however, as was proven in the chapters dedicated to the novels, McCarthy's violence can embrace a far broader concept than the one which is defined by mere aggressive behavior destined to cause injury or damage to animate and inanimate entities.

In *Blood Meridian* McCarthy reworks a number of literary traditions, most notably the Western, altering its structure in order to revise the significant mythogenesis of the American nation. Drawing on historically verifiable characters, he replaces laudable pioneers that are supposed to have brought civilization into the wilderness with feral scalphunting gangs. Moreover, as McCarthy's quotation in the introduction hinted, the author condemns the desire to improve humankind by means of colonization or democratic efforts, both of which could lead to a potentially dangerous state. McCarthy thus forms a part of criticism which disrupts an American identity that derives itself from the individual's noble struggle against savagery; the forerunners of American nation bred more violence than they were supposed to extirpate. *The Road* deals with the notion of identity as well as the significance of human beings in the universe. It seems to pick up the threads of *Blood Meridian*, since a possible formation of identity

crumbles when placed in the apocalyptic wasteland. In a way similar to *Blood Meridian*, McCarthy revises the notion of possible perfection of humankind, since, when placed in a state defined by lack of basic necessities for life, human beings turn into murderous cannibals that are able to resort even to filicide. In that way *The Road* conforms to the dystopian genre, which projects dreaded fears of the present into the future. The affinity with the dystopian genre, which is usually defined by the opposition of a few survivors driven by a desire to commence a new civilization, to the murderous majority who threatens them, is reflected in a structurally simple story of a man and a boy facing the fear of omnipresent death.

Both novels derive from the historic development of humankind. *Blood Meridian* is firmly grounded in sources corroborating the existence of the characters and the veracity of events of the narrative as has been substantiated by literary studies aplenty; but *The Road* also does not fail to draw on uncomfortable facts of history. It has been connected to growing concerns in relation to environmental disasters and ideological and religious wars invoking humankind's capacity for self-destruction, which resonates throughout *Blood Meridian*. There seems little point in soothing ourselves that the first novel concerns a bygone era, since the atrocities recrudescence in the post-apocalyptic future of the latter. By this means McCarthy disrupts an image of the world whose march is characterized by continual progress. Even though the novels seem to overtrump each other in offering barbarous cruelties that these inhabitants are capable of, the view from *The Road* may well be the more horrific of the two, for it nightmarishly places the narrative in a place and time that are in close proximity to our era.

In both works, the movement of the characters is incessant and perpetual. Discontinuance of the journey would lead to imminent death; the unremitting movement is necessary as a means of survival. The journey forms an internal part of the interminable cycle of violence, closely connected to the natural world through which the characters wander. Nature plays an important role in both novels, in relation to the setting and genre. The Western landscape is sparkling and colorful, standing as an inextricable element of the cycle of violence. However, similarly to man, it is encroached upon by death and violence, showing its susceptibility to scarring by man. The concept seems to culminate in the natural world of *The Road*, annihilated, probably by human activity, into a dark and grey wasteland, whose only living remnant is humankind. Both landscapes are described in deathly terms, but while the landscape in *Blood Meridian* in its cruel vivacity of natural elements poses a dire threat to the wanderer with every element s/he encounters, in *The Road* there are scarcely any elements left. The hostility and indifference, which are often mentioned in relation to the nature of *Blood Meridian*, prove to be intrinsic characteristics of the dead landscape in *The Road* as well.

When facing horrific scenes in both novels, one would suppose that the nucleus of McCarthy's fiction is graphic violence as a reflection of human evil; McCarthy's blood-curdling descriptions are second to none, possessing a great deal of aesthetic quality thanks to the author's immaculate style. The language of *Blood Meridian* and *The Road* goes far beyond the aesthetic qualities of the carnage. To achieve such effect, McCarthy applies a wide array of literary traditions. The novels maintain affinity with the Gothic genre; they arouse blended feelings, from disgust to attraction to awe. The concoction of sublime beauty with horror, which is often accompanied by grotesqueness, alleviates the impact of the bloodiest scenes. The categories of the genre to which they pertain

diverge, based on the setting. *Blood Meridian* is viewed as Frontier Gothic, *The Road* classifies as Apocalyptic Gothic. The Western desert and apocalyptic landscape prove to be particularly fertile grounds for images of ghost towns and spectral visions of humankind. Despite using the Gothic as a frame for many violent depictions, the styles of the novels differ significantly; the opulent and resplendent language that was lavished on images in *Blood Meridian* is translated into the succinct syntax, restrained in description, which characterized the minimal prose of *The Road*. However, albeit terse, the effect is no less terrifying in its cruel portrayal of human depravity. One of the most notable features of *Blood Meridian* is the literary element of the characters. The reader is never given insight into the mind or consciousness. The eeriness of the characters goes hand in hand with the indiscernible plot. McCarthy's narrators stand as eyewitnesses to constants in human history, recording the atrocities, but their narrations are bare of moralizing. Neither do they emphasize any possible moral virtues of their character, nor do they stigmatize them as deviants. The structurally simple plot of *The Road* uses an omnipresent narrator; however, that voice is interpolated by the man's ruminations. The only character to whose thoughts the reader is given insight echoes the precariousness of applying basic ethic codes that define our culture to gauge the protagonists' acts.

Nevertheless, populated by humans capable of the most atrocious slaughters, the novels tend to portray a penchant for violence innately present in man. Such a presupposition applies to the protagonist of *Blood Meridian*, the kid, who shows an outstanding ability in the bloodshed that accompanies scalphunting. Contrastingly, the little boy in *The Road* is a representation of goodness; his acts are motivated by compassion throughout the novel. Due to the lack of names, both characters are given symbolical scope, but

whereas the kid is seen as a carrier of “mindless, atavistic violence”, the little boy is endowed with limitless mercy and kindness; as such, he complies with the Wordsworthian notion of childhood, which is invoked in the description of the kid. Even though the kid seems to oppose the monstrous Judge Holden, showing “clemency for heathen”, he forms an inherent part of the colossal warfare of the novel; however, as a consequence of his failure to represent a flawless part of the machine, he falls prey to Holden, the ultimate incarnation of war. The diabolical scope of the character paints a picture of the world where violence is an ineliminable part of the human landscape. The ending of the man and boy’s journey stands in stark contrast not only to the conclusion of *Blood Meridian*, but to all of McCarthy’s works. The little boy survives, is taken in by a community, and goes on to “carry the fire.” Although the novel suggests that his journey may not be destined to lay the foundations of a new civilization, the potential in the text for the alternative outcomes presents a hope unseen in the previous McCarthy’s works.

The convoluted net of roles that violence plays in both the novels makes the reader wonder whether violence is a predictable result of human nature when all guarantees of law are absent. However, as noted above, the books do not tangle a web of moral codes that might be used to evaluate them, nor do they offer unambiguous answers regarding human nature. Undoubtedly, the author believes violence forms an inextricable element of human nature. However, that fact is not subjected to moral judgment; violence in the novel stands for what it is. The gloomy outlook on humankind takes a different turning in *The Road*; notwithstanding the images of human depravity and squalor, McCarthy insists that even though humankind is inherently violent, it may harbor sparks of goodness.

Bibliography

Arnold, Edwin T., Dianne C. Luce. *Perspectives on Cormac McCarthy*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1999.

Bell, Vereen M. *The Achievement of Cormac McCarthy*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1988.

Cant, John. "The Road." *Cormac Mccarthy*. Ed. Harold Bloom Sterling. New York: Bloom's Literary Criticism, 2009. 186-203.

Chabon, Michael. "After the Apocalypse." *New York Review of Books* 54.2 (15th February 2007). <<http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2007/feb/15/after-the-apocalypse/>> 23rd April 2015.

Cowelti, John G. *The Six-Gun Mystique*. Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1999.

Crow, Charles L. *The Companion to American Gothic*. New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons Inc., 2014.

DeCoste, D. Marcel. "A Thing That Even Death Cannot Undo: The Operation of the Theological Virtues in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*," *Religion & Literature* 44.2

(Summer 2012): 67-91. *Academic Search Complete*. EBSCOhost.

<<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=64853560&lang=cs&site=ehost-live>>. 3rd May 2015.

Deleuze, Gilles, and Félix Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus*. New York: The Athlone Press, 2004.

Donawerth, Jane. "Genre Blending and the Critical Dystopia," *Dark Horizons: Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination*. Eds. Tom Moylan, Raffaella Baccolini. New York: Routledge, 2003. 29-47.

Douglas, Christopher. "The Flawed Design: American Imperialism in N. Scott Momaday's *House Made of Dawn* and Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*." *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*. 40.1 (2003): 3– 24. Taylor & Francis Group.

Published online: 26th March 2010.

<<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/00111610309595323>>. 11th January 2015.

Folks, Jeffrey J., James A. Perkins. *Southern Writer's at Century's End*. Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1997.

Flood, Alison. "Cormac McCarthy Wins Lifetime Achievement Award," *The Guardian*. 7 May 2009. <<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2009/may/07/cormac-mccarthy-lifetime-achievement-pen>>. 4th May 2015.

Fromm, Erich. *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1974.

Frye, Steven. *Understanding Cormac McCarthy*. Columbia: The University of South Carolina Press, 2012.

Godfrey, Laura Gruber. "'The World He'd Lost': Geography and 'Green' Memory in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*." *Critique* 52 (April 2011): 163-175. *Academic Search Complete*. EBSCOhost.

<<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=59271946&lang=cs&site=ehost-live>>. 4th December 2014.

Graulund, Rune. "Fulcrums and Borderlands: A Desert Reading of Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*." *Orbis Litterarum* 65.1(February 2010): 57-78. *Academic Search Complete*. EBSCOhost.

<<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=47508771&lang=cs&site=ehost-live>>. 4th May 2014.

Greenspan, Ezra, et al., eds. *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of D. H. Lawrence: Studies in Classic American Literature*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003. Google Books.

<http://books.google.cz/books/about/Studies_in_Classic_American_Literature.html?id=IHSM6SIGi1AC&redir_esc=y> 11th January 2015

Hoefler, Anthony Dyer. *Apocalypse South: Judgment, Cataclysm, and Resistance in the Regional Imaginary*. Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2012.

Hoberek, Andrew. "Cormac McCarthy and the Aesthetics of Exhaustion." *American Literary History* 23.3 (Fall 2011): 483-499. *Academic Search Complete*. EBSCOhost.

<<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=64853560&lang=cs&site=ehost-live>>. 4th May 2015

Jurgensen, John. "Hollywood's Favorite Cowboy." *The Wall Street Journal*. Dow Jones & Company. 20th November 2009.

<<http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052748704576204574529703577274572>>. 18th November 2014.

Kowaleski, Michael. *Deadly Musings: Violence and Verbal Form in American Fiction*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997.

Kunsa, Ashley. "Maps of the World in Its Becoming: Post-Apocalyptic Naming in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*." *Journal of Modern Literature* 33.1 (Fall 2009): 55-74.

<<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=47081595&lang=cs&site=ehost-live>>. 15th March 2015

McCarthy, Cormac. *Blood Meridian or the Evening Redness in the West*. London: Random House, 1992.

---. *The Road*. London: Picador. 2010.

Monbiot, George. ‘Civilization Ends with a Shutdown if Human Concern: Are We There Already?’ *Guardian*. The Guardian. 30th October 2007.

<<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2007/oct/30/comment.books>>.

17th December 2014.

Morgan, Wesley G. “The Route and Roots of The Road.” *The Cormac McCarthy Journal* 6 (Autumn 2008): 39-47.

<<http://www.cormacmccarthy.com/category/society/journal/>>. 21st January 2015.

Parrish, Timothy. *From the Civil War to the Apocalypse. Postmodern History and American Fiction*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2008.

Pierce, Leonard. “Harold Bloom on Blood Meridian.” The A.V.Club. The Onion. 15th June, 2009 <<http://www.avclub.com/article/harold-bloom-on-iblood-meridians-29214>>.

1st May 2015.

Pizzino, Christopher. “Utopia At Last: Cormac McCarthy’s “The Road” as Science Fiction. *Extrapolation* (University of Texas at Brownsville) 51.3 (Fall 2010): 358-375.

Academic Search Complete. EBSCOhost.

<<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=58833792&lang=cs&site=ehost-live>>. 26th December 2014.

- Dana Phillips, "History and the Ugly Facts in Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*," *American Literature* 68.2 (June 1996): 446. JSTOR. <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/2928305>> 4th March 2015
- Principe, Lawrence M., and Andrew Weeks. "Jacob Boehme's Divine Substance Salitter: Its Nature, Origin, and Relationship to Seventeenth Century Scientific Theories." *The British Journal for the History of Science* 22.1 (March 1989): 53-61. JSTOR. <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/4026678>>. 3rd May 2015.
- Sepich, John Emil. *Notes on Blood Meridian*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011.
- Shaw, Patrick W. *The Modern American Novel of Violence*. Albany: Whitston Publishing Company, 2000.
- Shively, JoEllen. "Cowboys and Indians: Perceptions of Western Films Among American Indians and Anglos." *American Sociological Review* 57 (1992): 725-734. JSTOR <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/2096119>>. 15th May 2014.
- Slotkin, Richard. *The Fatal Environment: The Myth of the Frontier in the Age of Industrialization, 1800-1890*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998.
- Spurgeon, Sara L. *Cormac McCarthy: No Country for Old Men, All the Pretty Horses, The Road*. New York: The Continuum International Publishing Group, 2011.
- Squire, Louise. "Death and the Anthropocene: Cormac McCarthy's World of Unliving," *Oxford Literary Review* 34.2 (December 2012): 211-228. <http://www.researchgate.net/publication/270083534_Death_and_the_Anthropocene_Cormac_McCarthy%27s_World_of_Unliving>. 17th June 2014 .
- Stark, Hannah. "'All These Things He Saw and Did Not See': Witnessing the End of the World in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*." *Critical Survey* 25.2 (Summer 2013): 71-84. <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/42751035>>. 16th March 2015.

Svěrák, Michal. *Svět v hrsti prachu*. Prague: Argo, 2012.

Turner, Frederick Jackson. *The Myth of the Frontier*. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1921. Project Gutenberg. <<http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/22994>>. 3rd May 2014

Wallach, Rick, and Waden Hall. *Sacred Violence: A Reader's Companion to Cormac McCarthy*, University of Texas at El Paso: Texas Western Press, 2002.

Walsh, Chris. "The Post-Southern Sense of Place in *The Road*." *The Cormac McCarthy Journal* 6 (Autumn 2008): 48-54.

<<http://www.cormacmcCarthy.com/category/society/journal/>>. 21st January 2015.

Winfrey, Oprah, Cormac McCarthy, Personal Interview. Oprah Winfrey Show. 6th June 2009. <<http://www.oprah.com/oprahsbookclub/Oprahs-Exclusive-Interview-with-Cormac-McCarthy-Video>>. 15th December 2014.

Wolman, Benjamin B. "Foreword," *Violence and the Prevention of Violence*, Leonore Loeb Adler, Florence L. Denmark. Westport: Praeger Publishers, 1995. xv-xxvi.

Woodward, Richard B. "Cormac McCarthy's Venomous Fiction." *NYTimes.com*. New York Times Magazine. 19th April 1992: 28-31.

<<http://www.nytimes.com/1992/04/19/books/mccarthy-venomous.html?ex=1235451600&en=2eb016670446ee36&ei=5070>>. 15th April 2015.

Works consulted

Frye, Steven, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Cormac McCarthy*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013.

Svěrák, Michal. *Svět v hrsti prachu*. Praha: Argo, 2012.

Schimpf, Shane. *A Reader's Guide to Blood Meridian*. New York: Bon Mot Publishing, 2008.