

NATURALISTIC DETERMINISM IN THE BORDER FICTION OF CORMAC MCCARTHY

by

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(Under the Direction of James Everett Kibler)

ABSTRACT

This thesis seeks to explore the naturalistic elements of Cormac McCarthy's border novels from Blood Meridian to No Country for Old Men. In particular, I explore the role of determinism in the major novels.

INDEX WORDS: Naturalism, Determinism, Cormac McCarthy, Blood Meridian, All the Pretty Horses, No Country for Old Men

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
CHAPTER	
1 INTRODUCTION	
THE CRITICAL RECEPTION OF CORMAC MCCARTHY	1
AMERICAN NATURALISM AND CORMAC MCCARTHY	3
2 GIVING MEANING TO MADNESS: THE NATURALISTIC PREOCCUPATIONS OF <i>BLOOD MERIDIAN</i>	6
3 THE BORDER TRILOGY: JOHN GRADY COLE'S DESIGN	17
4 <i>NO COUNTRY FOR OLD MEN</i> : A PESSIMISTIC DEPARTURE	31
WORKS CITED	36

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

THE CRITICAL RECEPTION OF CORMAC MCCARTHY

Cormac McCarthy is one of the most important living novelists in contemporary American literature. He received the National Book Award for *All the Pretty Horses* in 1992 and was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 2007 for his post-apocalyptic novel, *The Road*. Although he is now widely read, criticism devoted to his work has been limited. The dark conclusions of McCarthy's early novels and the often extreme and horrifically violent behavior of his characters left critics struggling to find a critical approach that could give meaning to the works. What often emerged was a strong praise of his style accompanied by a disclaimer asserting that a thematic analysis was impossible. Walter Sullivan states of *Child of God*, "In spite of all the effective writing and the generation of dramatic tension, it is not a consummate work of art but an affront to decency on every level" (7). Dana Phillips similarly argues that *Blood Meridian* "does not seek to resolve conflicts that trouble its characters, much less its narrator or author. It is not really a narrative, then, but a description-and some would say it is not really a novel either" (28).

Vereen Bell published the first book devoted entirely to McCarthy's novels in 1988, thereby establishing a foundation for McCarthy studies. In *The Achievement of Cormac McCarthy*, Bell lauds McCarthy's complex style and diction, but he also asserts that the early novels, through *Blood Meridian*, contain a "prevailing and nihilistic mood"

(1). “Meaning does not prevail over narrative and texture” he claims, because the protagonists are “solitary and unsocialized” and therefore “have no interest in ideas about how societies are sustained and kept coherent” (5). Bell asserts that because the characters are “eerily unselfconscious,” the novels “resist the imposition of theses from the outside, especially conventional ones, and . . . they seem finally to call all theses into question” (4, xiii).¹ Unfortunately, Bell’s conclusion that McCarthy’s early novels are “as innocent of theme and of ethical reference as they are of plot” has maintained an overly authoritative position in McCarthy studies (6).

Much has changed, however, since Bell accurately asserted that McCarthy’s novels were scarcely read (xi). McCarthy’s popularity has expanded along with his canon, but criticism has until recently been largely limited to regional interpretation. According to Rick Wallach, “about five years of intense local-color analysis” followed Bell’s pioneering work (xi). Many southern critics—particularly Bell, Edwin T. Arnold, and Dianne C. Luce—claim that McCarthy’s early novels clearly follow in the footsteps of the southern modernist tradition of Faulkner and O’Connor. However, following the publication of *Suttree*, McCarthy and his fiction moved beyond the South and the scope of the southern literary tradition.

The relocation of McCarthy and the setting of his fiction from the hills of eastern Tennessee to the southwestern borderlands of the United States and northern Mexico in *Blood Meridian* and his four subsequent novels brought a new wave of critical and popular attention. The new setting also led to a new regional interpretation of his work. Just as southern critics attempted to claim McCarthy as a southern writer primarily

¹ It should be noted that Bell does not exclude *Suttree*. *Suttree*, in the very least, is “self-conscious,” and his entire concern, I would argue, is the preservation of his Knoxville community and keeping that community coherent.

concerned with southern themes, so the “western camp” has approached his later works from a southwestern and western perspective.² Harold Bloom has called *All the Pretty Horses* “the ultimate Western not to be surpassed” (v). In her compelling essay on the Border Trilogy, Sara L. Spurgeon makes a compelling argument that the Border Trilogy effectively shatters the national myth of the sanctity of Manifest Destiny and the western cowboy code. Similarly, Robert Sickels and Marc Oxoby assert that the “McCarthy’s trilogy chronicles the death of the traditional American pastoral dream” (347). Although these regional interpretations provide significant insights into individual works, an analysis of the recurring thematic concerns of McCarthy’s novels from *Blood Meridian* to *No Country for Old Men* clearly demonstrates that McCarthy’s border fictions exhibit the preoccupations of a much earlier literary movement, American Naturalism.

AMERICAN NATURALISM AND CORMAC MCCARTHY

Émile Zola is credited as the father of the literary school of naturalism in Europe. Zola’s absolute faith in empirical science at the end of the nineteenth century led him to view the novelist as social scientist “proceed[ing] toward the discovery of truth through observation and experimentation” (Westbrook, 91). The duty of the novelist, Zola asserts, is to recreate a world in which the characters were subject to the same natural laws that governed man (91). The novelist could then objectively observe the character’s reaction to those laws. Man, he claims, lives in a world conditioned absolutely by environmental, social, historical, and biological forces beyond his control. According to Willard Eddy, Zola

writes with the purpose of showing cause to effect relationships as he conceives them. . . . If he interprets the principle of physical causation as applying to

² Pilkington, Spurgeon, Lilley, and Woodson.

choice itself, the result is determinism in the realm of human action, man being subordinated to nature in such a way as to leave no intelligible grounds for effecting reform, and the result is a thoroughgoing pessimism. (224)

Zola's assertion that man is incapable of overcoming the determining forces that influence his life became a foundation concept of American naturalism in the 1890's.

Zola's naturalistic philosophy, however, is not synonymous with that of American naturalism. The extent of Zola's influence continues to be a source of much critical debate. At the root of the debate is the influence of Zola's deterministic philosophy, and to what extent American naturalism posits a deterministic view of the world.

Deterministic philosophy asserts that man is not merely limited and restricted by external forces, but that he is controlled absolutely. Sydney J. Krause claims that determinism is the central premise upon which naturalism is based. Krause argues that the tragic fate of the heroes and heroines of naturalism is derived "from the philosophy of determinism, which self-evidently implies absolute causality, and which, from the point of view of our humanity, is pessimistic" (2). Donald Pizer, however, rejects a restrictive definition of naturalism. "The ideological core of American naturalism," he states, "does not produce a simple and single deterministic creed" (6). Naturalism cannot be reduced to a pessimistic determinism, because it finds affirmation in man's ability to survive and endure:

The naturalistic novelist is willing to concede that there are fundamental limitations to man's freedom but he is unwilling to concede that man is thereby stripped of all value. In particular, he finds significant the human drive to understand if not to control and he finds tragic the human capacity, whatever one's class or situation, to suffer pain and defeat. (Pizer 10)

McCarthy's border fiction falls squarely under Pizer's definition in every way. The heroes of the border novels struggle against forces that inevitably determine the outcome of their lives, and their struggle is often the central conflict of the novel. But McCarthy's border novels do not necessarily posit a pessimistic conception of existence. McCarthy's heroes are ultimately capable of making choices, even if only to accept their own fate. While many succumb to the forces imposed on them, his truest heroes resist, defy, and fight to their end. Some realize moments of triumph, others do not.

CHAPTER 2

GIVING MEANING TO MADNESS: THE NATURALISTIC PREOCCUPATIONS OF

BLOOD MERIDIAN

Clark, who led last year's expedition to the Afar region of northern Ethiopia, and UC Berkeley colleague Tim D. White, also said that a re-examination of a 300,000-year-old fossil skull found in the same region earlier shows evidence of having been scalped.

The Yuma Daily Sun, June 13, 1982

The above epigraph to *Blood Meridian* or *The Evening Redness in the West* signals that McCarthy's fifth novel, like its predecessors, will present a world in which violence is an inherent and inextricable element of humanity. *Blood Meridian* traces the descent of the historical Glanton Gang into Chihuahua, Mexico, as they carry out the provincial governor's policy of exterminating all Native Americans in the region. The Glanton Gang's carnage quickly turns to bloodlust and eventually consumes them. They begin killing Indians and Mexicans indiscriminately. The scalps, whether Indian or Mexican, bring the same return. The Glanton Gang is eventually driven out of Mexico by the same government that hired them. They capture a ferry and are ultimately, and ironically, slaughtered by a band of Yuma. All die except the Judge, his idiot slave, the kid, Tobin the priest, and Toadvine. The survivors escape to the desert, and it is there that the kid's fate is sealed.

Blood Meridian is the most violent, if not the most disturbing, of all McCarthy's fiction. Tom Pilkington describes it as "one of the bloodiest books ever penned by an

American author” (128). The author’s inclination for violence is hardly surprising. In his first interview with *The New York Times* in 1992, McCarthy revealed his own thoughts on the subject:

There’s no such thing as life without bloodshed. I think the notion that the species can be improved in some way, that everyone could live in harmony, is a really dangerous idea. 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. (Woodward 4)

Despite the gluttony of violence, *Blood Meridian* is the pivotal work in McCarthy’s canon. It was his first novel to receive widespread critical recognition and praise. Harold Bloom declared that *Blood Meridian* was “the authentic American Apocalyptic novel,” and he called McCarthy “the worthy disciple both of Melville and Faulkner,” two of the author’s admitted influences (Bloom v; Woodward 3). The novel is often compared to *Moby Dick*, which, not surprisingly, McCarthy claims as his favorite book (Woodward 3). Like Melville’s masterpiece, *Blood Meridian* resists traditional classification.

Critics have held that *Blood Meridian* is not a naturalist text. Dana Phillips asserts that “Human beings and the natural world do not figure as antagonists—*Blood Meridian* does not have that kind of dramatic structure” (32). But he also argues that the novel “does not seek to resolve ‘conflicts’” and is “not really a narrative” at all, but only a “description” (28). Phillips, however, is far too reductive. He gives credence to a naturalistic interpretation when she states that “*Blood Meridian* treats darkness, violence, sudden death, and all other calamities as natural occurrences—like the weather, which

can also be vicious in McCarthy's landscapes" (23). *Blood Meridian* is a historically based narrative of philosophical and moral conflict and contradiction. Although the novel does not clearly "resolve" the conflicts of race, national identity, nihilism and morality, and fate vs. free will, they are confronted by both the characters and the narrative itself. The ideological conflict that dominates the narrative is the naturalistic theme of Fate vs. free will. Tom Pilkington argues that "the inextricability of fate and free will has never been more vividly dramatized" (130). The novel's hero, known only as "the kid," ultimately faces an epistemological crisis the outcome of which has dire consequences. He must assess the authority of fate and the power of his own volition in a violent and unsympathetic land. This ideological contest is revealed in the opening chapter. When the kid arrives in Nacogdoches with Toadvine, he is "finally divested of all that all that 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). True to McCarthy's style, the kid's epistemological crisis and its resolution are conveyed through action, not contemplation.

Judge Holden, the novel's antagonist, is a character like no other in American Literature. Harold Bloom declares that the Judge is "the most frightening figure in all American Literature" (vi). He is a "man of learning" who espouses a scientific and deterministic understanding of the world. He asserts that God "speaks in stones and trees, the bones of things," and he lectures the Glanton Gang on the geological origins of the earth as he breaks and analyzes rocks (116). He perceives the world as a force comprised of all history that influences every aspect of an individual's life, and against

which man is powerless. When the Glanton gang comes upon the ruins of the Anasazi, Judge Holden proclaims that

All progressions from a higher to a lower order are marked by ruins and mystery and a residue of nameless rage. So. Here are the dead fathers. Their spirit is entombed in the stone. It lies upon the land with the same weight and the same ubiquity. For whoever makes a shelter of reeds and hides has joined his spirit to the common destiny of creatures and he will subside back into the primal mud with scarcely a cry. But who builds in stone seeks to alter the structure of the universe and so it was with these masons however primitive their works may seem to us (146).

Despite their rage at the indifference of the universe, the Anasazi cannot change its structure. They have disappeared from the canyons and the earth, “and of them there is no memory” (146). The abandoned ruins of the Anasazi serve only as artifacts of their failure and a foreshadowing of the inevitable fate of the Glanton Gang. The Anasazi have been replaced by the “marauding savages” who will soon be exterminated by the Glanton Gang, who in turn will be replaced by ranchers, sheriffs, and ultimately savages such as Chigurh in *No Country for Old Men*. The Judge perceives this cycle as the fate of mankind. “The way of the world is to bloom and to flower and to die,” declares Holden, but man inherently resists this natural cycle. Man attempts to establish order where there is no order, and it is therefore a “false” order doomed to the same fate as that of the Anasazi. The height of man’s accomplishment, the Judge claims,

signals the onset of night. His spirit is exhausted at the peak of its achievement. His meridian is at once his darkening and the evening of his day. He loves

games? Let him play for stakes. This you see here, these ruins wondered at by tribes of savages, do you not think that this will be again? Aye. And again. With other people, with other sons. (146-7)

At best, mankind is in eternal fluctuation between order and chaos. At worst, the Judge states, the zenith of man's time on earth has already passed and the "degeneracy of mankind" has begun (146).

Holden's proclamation underscores the naturalistic themes that run throughout McCarthy's border novels. These themes are, in part, a rejection of the nineteenth-century romantic conception of the value of experience and the Spencerian belief that evolution is synonymous with progress. Donald Pizer argues that,

the underlying theme of much American naturalistic fiction is the tragic incompleteness of life—how little we are or know, despite our capacity to be and our desire to know—it is not surprising that the shape of the allegorical representation of man's fate in the naturalistic novel . . . is often the circular journey, or the return to our starting point, with little gained or understood despite our movement through space and time. The effect of this symbolic structure is to suggest that not only are human beings flawed and unfulfilled but that experience itself does not guide, instruct, or judge human nature. One of the principal corollaries of a progressive view of time is the belief that man has the ability to interact meaningfully with his world and to benefit from this interaction. But the effect of the naturalistic novel is to reverse or heavily qualify this expectation. (Pizer, 8)

In the world of *Blood Meridian*, there is no perceivable progress, nor is there beneficial interaction with the world. There is merely survival. The role of fate, as prescribed by the Judge, is absolute.

Man's struggle to exert control over his own fate is clarified through Judge Holden's various "sermons." He reveals his deterministic creed in a series of lectures to the Glanton Gang and to the kid. In one of his most telling lectures, the Judge reveals his belief in the divinity of war. He tells the gang,

Suppose two men at cards with nothing to wager save their lives. Who has not heard such a tale? A turn of the card. The whole universe for such a player has labored clanking to this moment which will tell if he is to die at that man's hand or that man at his. What more certain validation of a man's worth could there be? This enhancement of the game to its ultimate state admits no argument concerning the notion of fate. The selection of one man over another is a preference absolute and irrevocable and it is a dull man indeed who could reckon so profound a decision without agency or significance either one. In such games as have for their stake the annihilation of the defeated the decisions are quite clear. This man holding this particular arrangement of cards in his hand is thereby removed from existence. This is the nature of war, whose stake is at once the game and the authority and the justification. Seen so, war is the true 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 God, he proclaims, because it compels forth all history to determine men's lives. But Holden's proclamation does not pass unchecked. Irving, whose appearance in the novel is limited to this scene, rejects the Judge's deterministic view based on his religious or ethical principles. "Might does not make right," Irving states, "The man that wins in some combat is not vindicated morally" (250).

The disagreement between Irving and the Judge is perhaps the most illuminating episode of the novel. They possess different views of existence, and those views have dire consequences. Irving's appeal to morality foreshadows the kid's ultimate failure, and their debate reveals the ideological crisis the kid faces at the climax of the novel. But their arguments also allude to the philosophical debate over fate and free will at the end of the nineteenth century. Irving's objection clearly reflects William James's central premise in *Will to Believe*, while Judge Holden reiterates, almost exactly, Nietzsche's rejection of morality in *Will to Power*.

William James rejected determinism on moral grounds, claiming that in a true deterministic universe, there could be no distinction between good and evil. In *Will to Believe*, James asserts that "Calling a thing bad means, if it means anything at all, that the things ought not to be, that something else ought to be in its stead. Determinism, in denying that anything else can be in its stead, virtually defines the universe as a place in which what ought to be is impossible" (161-62). James' claim, however, is transparently subjective. His argument is predicated on his belief in the inherent existence and righteousness of morality. He argues that "what ought to be" is a morally ordered world, one in which things "bad" do not exist. However, the harsh world of *Blood Meridian*, like the world in which we live, is clearly other than what "ought to be."

Irving's preference, like that of James, for a morally ordered world over the real world expresses a desire that, according to Nietzsche's *Will to Power*, is symptomatic of man's degradation (3.586). Nietzsche argues that morality is nothing more than an "invention of formulas and signs" that serve to deceive man into believing he possesses control over his own fate (3.584). According to Nietzsche, morality attributes false meaning to events. James' belief in morality is flawed because it requires man to deceive himself into believing that "this world, in which we live, is an error—this world of ours ought not to exist" (3.585). In the true world, Nietzsche claims, "everything is bound to and conditioned by everything else," and therefore, "the expression 'that should not be,' 'that should not have been,' is farcical" (3.584).

Judge Holden's reply to Irving's appeal to morality is both Nietzschean and deterministic. As the Judge perceives the universe, there is no right or wrong, no moral vindication, because there is no "should have been." Holden declares,

Moral law is an invention of mankind for the disenfranchisement of the powerful in favor of the weak. Historical law subverts it at every turn. A moral view can never be proven right or wrong by any ultimate test. A man falling dead in a duel is not thought thereby to be proven in error as to his views. His very involvement in such a trial gives evidence of a new and broader view. The willingness of the principals to forgo further argument as the triviality which it in face is and to petition directly the chambers of the historical absolute clearly indicates of how little moment are the opinions of what great moment the divergences thereof. For the argument is indeed trivial, but not so the separate wills thereby made manifest. Man's vanity may well approach the infinity in capacity but his knowledge

remains imperfect and however much he comes to value his judgments ultimately he must submit them before a higher court. Here there can be no special pleading. Here are considerations of equity and rectitude and moral right rendered void and without warrant and here are the views of the litigants despised. Decisions of life and death, of what shall be and what shall not, beggar all question of right. In elections of theses magnitudes are all lesser ones subsumed, moral, spiritual, natural. (250)

The Judge does not subscribe to an absolute determinism. Man's fate is determined by forces beyond his control and outside the scope of his understanding, but entering into war, or any contest in which the outcome is "the annihilation of the defeated," brings those forces to bear. By "singling out a thread of order," man is able to "dictate the terms of his own fate" (199).

The conclusion of *Blood Meridian* has generally been received as pessimistic.³ The kid, who has survived approximately 30 years since he last saw the Judge, meets his grisly fate when he encounters the Judge outside a saloon at Fort Griffin. The Judge tells him "this night thy soul may be required of thee" (327). The kid exerts one final act of defiance. He tells the Judge, "You aint nothin" (331). When the kid enters the jakes, the Judge "gathered him in his arms against his terrible flesh and shot the wooden barlatch home behind him" (333). He kills the kid in the outhouse. The novel concludes with the Judge dancing naked, pronouncing his own immortality.

Harold Bloom perceives the conclusion as further evidence that that the Judge is "immortal as principal, as War Everlasting" and that the kid is no match for him (viii). He maintains, however, that "To have known Judge Holden, to have seen him in full

³ Vereen Bell, Steven Shaviro, Dana Phillips, David Holloway.

operation, and to tell him that he is nothing, is heroic” (xii). But any affirmation gleaned from the kid’s last words is overwhelmed by his tragic and seemingly inevitable death at the hands of Judge Holden. If the kid’s defiance of the Judge, who by the end has become the physical embodiment of Fate, reveals the existence of volition, that volition is ultimately powerless and meaningless. *Blood Meridian*, however, is not entirely pessimistic. The determination of the kid’s fate does not take place in the jakes at Fort Griffin, but earlier in the desert, where we are told the kid must decipher “whether the stuff of creation may be shaped to man’s will or whether his own heart is not another kind of clay” (5).

The Judge is an invincible, all-powerful force throughout the entire novel. He is vulnerable only once. After the Glanton Gang is attacked and massacred by the Yuma, the survivors flee into the desert. The Judge plays to the greed of the survivors, and barter insane sums of gold for their belongings. His intent is clear, and the kid and Tobin realize that they cannot all make it out of the desert. The Judge is unarmed, and he offers his coins for the kid’s pistol. The kid has checked his loads in the well, and he is fully capable of killing the Judge at that moment. Tobin, the priest, urges him on “Do him . . . You’ll get no second chance lad. Do it. He is naked. He is unarmed. God’s blood, do you think you’ll best him any other way? Do it, lad. Do it for the love of God. Do it or I swear your life is forfeit” (285). The kid *chooses* not to kill the judge when he is unarmed, even at the pleadings of the priest, and despite his full awareness of the probability that the Judge would kill him. He *chooses* to let him go, to fight another day under more equal circumstances.

Pilkington rightly claims that in both *Blood Meridian* and *All the Pretty Horses*, “McCarthy does not posit a wholly deterministic universe. Humans do make choices—frequently bad choices, but choices nonetheless—that critically affect their destinies” (128). While Pilkington’s comment applies to John Grady, which will be explained in the next chapter, it is especially applicable to the kid. The kid makes a terrible mistake, and it is his allegiance to his belief in morality, or code of ethics, that leads him to that mistake. The Judge later tells the kid, “You were witness against yourself. You sat in judgment of your own deeds. You put your own allowances before the judgments of history . . . If war is not holy man is nothing but antic clay” (307). The kid seals his own fate. He should have challenged the Judge when he had the chance. The hero of McCarthy’s next novel will not make the same mistake.

But the kid has chosen, and like McCarthy’s truest heroes, he has resisted, defied, and fought a world pervaded by evil. Although the kid is ultimately defeated, he has made his mark. He is both right and wrong in saying the Judge “aint nothin.”

CHAPTER 3

THE BORDER TRILOGY: JOHN GRADY COLE'S DESIGN

I think that man's free will functions against a Greek background of fate, that he has the free will to choose and the courage, the fortitude to die for his choice, is my conception of man, is why I believe that man will endure. That fate—sometimes fate lets him alone. But he cannot count on that. But he has always the right to free will and we hope the courage to die for his choice

--William Faulkner, *Faulkner in the University*, 38-9.

In the Border Trilogy, McCarthy returns to the setting of *Blood Meridian*.

Approximately one hundred years have passed since the blood-soaked borderlands of southern Texas and northern Mexico were terrorized by the Glanton Gang. McCarthy's sixth novel, *All the Pretty Horses*, presents a Texas landscape in stark contrast to that faced by the kid. The chaos and violence of old have been replaced with order and government. Once open range, the land is now tamed, divided into plots, fenced with barbed wire, and crossed by train. The plains buffalo and wolves have vanished from the region. The wagon roads are paved and dominated by automobiles. When Lacey Rawlins asks "how the hell do they expect a man to ride a horse in this country," John Grady Cole can only reply, "They don't" (31).

The world presented in the Border Trilogy is drastically different from McCarthy's earlier works. The world John Grady confronts is recognizable, which is perhaps why the Trilogy is commonly perceived as McCarthy's most accessible work. It

is certainly his most optimistic. The Border Trilogy is, as Edwin T. Arnold has noted, “an affirmation of life and of humanity, however severe the experience” (Arnold, 66). While violence remains an undeniable human characteristic, it is not his signature trait, and it does not necessarily dominate man’s experience.

Despite the differences, the Border Trilogy contains many of the same themes found in McCarthy’s earlier works. Like the kid of *Blood Meridian*, John Grady Cole’s life is a continuous struggle against determining forces for control over his own destiny. From the very beginning of the novel, John Grady’s dire circumstances are made clear. He is the victim of his family’s disintegration, a changing environment, and his own limited knowledge of the world. When he is only sixteen years old, he is dispossessed and displaced. His way of life is under attack by a modern and expanding industrialized society. His maternal grandfather, the family patriarch who owns and runs the family’s 18,000 acre ranch, has just died. His parents have recently legalized their divorce, and his mother plans to move to the city of San Antonio. To achieve that end, she has sold the ranch that has been in the Grady family since 1877. It is the land that John Grady planned to inherit and work like his grandfather. When he leaves home and rides south on the Comanche trail to Mexico, he, like “the kid” before him, enters into a world in which he must decide “whether the stuff of creation may be shaped to man’s will or whether his own heart is not another kind of clay” (*Blood Meridian* 5).

John Grady’s descent into Mexico and his attempt to marry Alejandra has generally been interpreted as a manifestation of the American myth of Manifest Destiny.⁴ In her enlightening essay on *All the Pretty Horses*, Sara Spurgeon argues that John Grady’s idealism indicates his adherence to the American cowboy myth, which combines

⁴ Gail Morrison, Sara L. Spurgeon, Andrew Spencer.

“ideas of American exceptionalism, Manifest Destiny, rugged individualism, frontier democracy, communion with and conquest of the natural world, and the righteous triumph of the white race” (79). Spurgeon claims that these myths hide “the true nature of the world” from John Grady (84). Accordingly, it is the Dueña Alfonsa, godmother of Alejandra, who challenges John Grady’s idealism, urging him to have “the courage to see the world without ignorance and without faith” (84). But John Grady’s ideals are not based on an understanding of Manifest Destiny, nor are they derived out of ignorance. While elements of Manifest Destiny contribute to John Grady’s philosophy, they are not the driving force behind his actions. His actions are reactionary, and his ideals are a response to the determining forces that threaten his identity. In the face of these forces, John Grady forges a design, much like Faulkner’s Sutpen in *Absalom, Absalom!* Like Sutpen, John Grady’s design is flawed by the principles upon which it is built, and it is fated to bring about his own tragic fall.

The blueprints of John Grady’s design are evident in the first chapter. After burying his grandfather and learning of his parents’ divorce and the loss of the ranch, he goes to his father for advice. When he presents the circumstance of his predicament, his father replies, “I don’t think there’s much you can do” (13). While his answer refers to his son’s lack of legal recourse to save the ranch, it also recognizes his helplessness in the face of these changes. When they meet a second and final time, they do not discuss the future, which is grave for both of them. His father does not have long to live, and John Grady has lost everything he values and identifies with. But his father’s parting gift reveals an understood truth: John Grady has no options left. His father gives him his old saddle because he recognizes that his son *needs* it. John Grady is not going to finish high

school as his mother wishes, nor is he going to live in San Antonio. He has been stripped of control over his life and identity. He has lost his grandfather, his family, and his home. Still, he refuses to surrender his way of life. Shortly after his last visit with his father, Rawlins asks him to wait until June to leave for Mexico. John Grady replies, “I’m already gone” (27).

John Grady’s father plays a significant, but generally overlooked, role in the novel. Although John Grady recalls his father only twice throughout the Trilogy, he is perhaps the most influential character in John Grady’s life. He is a stock figure of American Naturalism: “a figure whose potential for growth is evident but who fails to develop because of the circumstance of his life” (Pizer 6). His father is the product of the modern world and its inconceivable wars. His marriage ended, he says, after he shipped out from San Diego in 1942 (*All the Pretty Horses* 12). He is irrevocably damaged from his horrific experience as a prisoner of war in Goshee during World War II.⁵ Although he retains honorable characteristics, he has lost his identity. He tells John Grady, “I aint the same as I was. I’d like to think I am. But I aint” (12). He has lost hope and become pessimistic and afraid. The last thing he ever says to John Grady is that “People dont feel safe no more. We’re like the Comanches was two hundred years ago. We dont know whats goin to show up here come daylight” (25-6).

John Grady’s design has two primary objectives; he hopes to gain control of his life and to avoid his father’s fate. He perceives the modern world that threatens his own identity as the same force that destroyed his father. He looks to his Grandfather, the male

⁵ No historical reference to Goshee could be found. John Grady explains that while his father was missing in action during the war his mother lost hope and was going to throw his clothes away, but grandfather Grady refused to lose hope and would say, “let’s not have a funeral till we got somthin to bury, if it aint nothing but his dogtags.” John Grady’s father replies, “They might as well of . . . Only thing fit me was the boots” (13).

of strength and hope who raised him in his father's absence, as a model for his design. He assumes his grandfather's name in place of his own, and he never refers to himself again as John Grady Cole. The Grady family established the ranch in 1866 and expanded it to 18,000 acres. John Grady's design is to restore the Grady legacy and own a ranch of his own. In order to do so, he believes he must travel south into Mexico where he thinks the old way of life remains.

John Grady's plan is flawed from the outset. He has forged his design on an American model outdated by a hundred years, and he lacks the necessary knowledge of Mexican culture to realize that he cannot export the American dream. After he buries his grandfather, "he rode where he would always choose to ride, out where the western fork of the old Comanche road coming down out of the Kiowa country to the north passed through the westernmost section of the ranch and you could see the faint trace of it bearing south over the low prairie" (5). It is no coincidence that John Grady follows the old Comanche trail into Mexico. As depicted in *Blood Meridian*, the Comanche who traveled that trail south to escape the onslaught of American westward expansion met a violent and merciless end at the hands of the Glanton Gang. John Grady's journey, it seems, is doomed from the beginning because he follows a trail of doomed men.

When Rawlins and John Grady arrive at the ranch of Hacienda de Nuestra Senora de la Purisima Concepcion (The Ranch of Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception), John Grady believes that he has found the ranch of his dreams. La Purisima is a spread of eleven thousand hectares that contains over a thousand head of cattle. It is literally a paradise in the desert. The ranch runs west "into the Sierra de Anteojo to elevations of nine thousand feet" and occupies a large valley "well watered with natural springs and

clear streams and dotted with marshes and shallow lakes or lagunas” (97). Before they are even hired by the owner, Don Hector Rocha, John Grady tells Rawlins that he would like to stay there for “a hundred years” (96).

John Grady’s knowledge of horses and his ability to break wild stallions quickly earns him the respect of Don Hector, who seeks his advice on breeding his most prized stallions and mares. But John Grady is not satisfied with simply working Don Hector’s horses. Upon learning of Alejandra, Don Hector’s daughter and the sole heir of the Hacienda de Nuestra Senora de la Purisima Concepcion, John Grady is immediately infatuated with her. The Dueña Alfonsa, Alejandra’s great aunt and godmother, is knowledgeable of John Grady’s desire for her grandniece. She calls him to a meeting before Alejandra returns to the ranch for the summer and warns him to control his passion. His involvement with Alejandra, the Dueña Alfonsa states, could jeopardize her future, and, for him, there could be “consequences of a gravity not excluding bloodshed. Not excluding death” (137). But John Grady does not heed her advice. He remains undeterred in his design, and soon after Alejandra returns to the ranch they consummate their relationship.

John Grady’s love for Alejandra appears, at least superficially, to be the driving motive in his pursuit of her. However, his true motive is revealed when he relates his conversation with the Dueña Alfonsa to Rawlins. Rawlins states, “She thinks you got eyes for the daughter” (137). John Grady affirms that he does indeed, but Rawlins next question is telling. “You got eyes for the land” he states (138). When John Grady states that he does not know, Rawlins replies with an affirmative “Sure you don’t.” The

confidence with which Rawlins responds suggests that John Grady's desire to acquire the ranch takes precedence over his love for Alejandra.

Sara Spurgeon argues that by carrying out his illicit affair with Alejandra, John Grady embraces the values of Manifest Destiny and the sacred cowboy myth, which stipulate "that a worthy young man should end up with a ranch of his own, a lovely young wife, and 'all the pretty horses' simply by virtue of being Anglo, male, a cowboy, and the descendant of colonizers" (83). John Grady does not succeed in fulfilling the myth, Spurgeon claims, because the doctrine he clings to is founded upon false principles.

Although John Grady's actions certainly replicate elements of Manifest Destiny, his motives are based on his experiences, not theory. He carries out the illicit affair, in part, because the Dueña Alfonsa has made it clear that he cannot pursue Alejandra through honorable channels. He does not honor the wishes of Don Hector or the Dueña Alfonsa because he does not see himself as they do. He envisions himself as a landowner, the grandson of a rancher and the rightful heir to a prosperous eighteen-thousand acre spread. The Dueña Alfonsa also suggests that she is aware of John Grady's design. When he tells her that he sometimes has foolish dreams, she states, "They have a long life, dreams. . . . They have an odd durability for something not quite real" (134). Once again, John Grady does not comprehend her intent. He does not consider his design to be a dream. John Grady's faith in his design and his belief in a morally ordered world prevents him from recognizing the reality of his position on the Mexican ranch. He agrees with Don Hector that "God had put horses on earth to work cattle and that other than cattle there was no wealth proper to a man," but John Grady

owns no cattle or wealth of any kind and therefore does not possess the necessary means to marry Alejandra. When the Dueña Alfonsa tells him that Alejandra has been forbidden to see him, he replies, “I guess that dont seem right” (137). “No. No. It’s not a matter of right,” the Dueña Alfonsa declares, “You must understand.”

John Grady’s design fails ultimately him at La Purisima because he fails to recognize the indifference of the world and the power of the determining forces that exert control over his life. When his affair with Alejandra is revealed, Don Hector has John Grady and Rawlins thrown in jail for an act he knows they did not commit. After he is expelled from Don Hector’s ranch, John Grady undergoes two crucial experiences that force him to question his belief in morality: the execution of Jimmy Blevins and John Grady’s first killing.

Jimmy Blevins is a thirteen-year-old runaway who trails John Grady and Rawlins to the Texas border and demands to be allowed to accompany them across the Rio Grande and into Mexico because he’s “an American” (45). Although the only farcical episode in the Border Trilogy centers on Blevins’ irrational fear of lightning, he is not a farcical character. Gail Morrison argues that John Grady’s perception of Blevins as an innocent youth “highlights John Grady’s idealism and his sentimentality” (183). Lacey Rawlins, Morrison claims, is a realist because he “recognizes Jimmy Blevins as a dangerous force of chaos and anarchy” who will bring them trouble (183). But Blevins is not a dangerous force of chaos, and he does not bring them trouble. The “murder” Blevins is charged with is committed in self-defense when he is attacked while trying to regain possession of his own horse. After being tortured by the corrupt police captain, Rawlins complains to John Grady that their dire situation is “All over a goddamned

horse” (185). But John Grady tells Rawlins that the “Horse had nothing to do with it” (185). It is John Grady who is responsible. Blevins’s actions have simply provided Don Hector with a convenient, and perhaps less violent, means of dealing with his problem.⁶

John Grady perceives Blevins as an innocent youth because that is exactly what he is. He is also, in many ways, a mirror-image of John Grady. He is only thirteen years old, and he has no family to speak of. Although his reasons for fleeing to Mexico are vague, he appears to have no other option. “There wont be nobody huntin me in Mexico,” he tells John Grady (44). Blevins lives by a strict code of principles, and like John Grady, he has been forced into an adult world of chaos and violence in which his principles, though honorable, appear irrational, idealistic, and ineffective. John Grady identifies with Blevins and admires him for his principles and his willpower. Even Rawlins, who is nothing but critical of Blevins, admits that “The little son of a bitch wouldnt stand for nobody high-jackin his horse” (88).

Despite the hazards, Blevins is unwilling to relinquish his principles, and he possesses the courage to fight and ultimately die to maintain them. As the Captain is dragging Blevins away from the truck to be executed, he struggles free just long enough to pull his savings from the sole of his boot and stuff “a wad of dirty and crumpled peso notes” into the hand of John Grady. He is then jerked back by a guard and taken out into a field and shot. Blevins’ pesos allow John Grady to buy the knife he uses to defend himself in prison against Perez’s assassin. Without the money, John Grady would not have survived. Blevins’ final act is the most heroic and affirmative event in the Border Trilogy.

⁶ Dueña Alfonsa has previously warned John Grady that his indiscretions with Alejandra could have “consequences of a gravity not excluding bloodshed. Not excluding death” (136).

Blevins' unjust execution forces John Grady to recognize the essential flaw in his design: it is based upon a belief in an inherently benevolent and morally ordered world. He realizes that his appeals to moral authority are false appeals to what "ought to be" and hold no sway in reality. John Grady also realizes that Blevins' adherence to his own principles and his defiance of the unjust world affirm the power of man's will. Blevins believed his principles were worth dying for, and by dying for them, he made them so. This understanding proves to be crucial to John Grady's survival during his time in prison.

As soon as John Grady and Rawlins enter prison they are brutally attacked. Rawlins is scared, and states, "They're goin to kill us" (182). John Grady replies, "Dont let em think they aint goin to have to. You hear me? I intend to make em kill me. I wont take nothing less. They either got to kill us or let us be. There aint no middle ground" (182-3). The prison is analogous to the outside world. Perez, a prisoner of authority, states that prison "gives a false impression. As if things are in control" (195). He tells John Grady that the only thing the world wants to know is "if you have cajones. If you are brave" (193). The next day John Grady is attacked by an assassin in the prison cafeteria. The knife fight between John Grady and the assassin is reminiscent of Judge Holden's proclamations of the sanctity of duels and war in *Blood Meridian*. In contests that "have for their stake the annihilation of the defeated," all moral codes and beliefs are negated (*Blood Meridian* 249). The contest is an appeal to fate. John Grady is severely wounded in the fight, but he succeeds in killing the assassin. As he lies in the cafeteria, he believes he is dying, "and in his despair he felt well up in him a surge of sorrow like a

child beginning to cry but it brought with it such pain that he stopped it cold and began at once his new life and the living of it breath by breath” (203).

John Grady’s moment of despair is his epiphany. While he is healing he thinks of his father’s experience as a prisoner of war in Goshee. He has always known “that terrible things had been done to him there and he had always believed that he did not want to know about it but he did want to know” (204). He did not want to know before because he did not want to recognize the pervasive injustice and suffering in the world. He now sees the world as it is, absent of morality. After they are released, Rawlins tries to assure John Grady that because he killed his assailant in self-defense, his act was not morally wrong. John Grady replies, “You don’t need to try and make it right. It is what it is” (215).

All the Pretty Horses concludes as it begins, at a funeral in Texas. John Grady buries his Abuela, who raised him in his mother’s absence. He does not plan to stay in Texas. It is no longer his country. Gail Morrison asserts that at the end of *All the Pretty Horses*, “the lessons John Grady learns from his descent into Mexico . . . remain elusive” (178). But it is clear that John Grady has learned about both the world and about himself. When a border town Judge praises Grady after hearing his tale, John Grady seeks him out. He tells the Judge, “It just bothered me that you might think I was something special. I aint” (293). He has lost his idealistic belief in a moral world. He now recognizes that the world “care[s] nothing for the old or the young or rich or poor or dark or pale or he or she. Nothing for their struggles, nothing for their names. Nothing for the living or the dead” (301).

The ending of *All the Pretty Horses* is ultimately ambiguous. John Grady has survived tremendous odds and endured much hardship. His survival and his willingness to go forward affirm his courage and fortitude. He has relinquished his idealistic beliefs about the world, mankind, and his own individual fate. Yet, despite his realization, he does not forfeit his design. As he tells Rawlins when they get out of prison “How I was is how I am and all I know to do is stick” (155). He never speaks truer words about himself. He has retained his identity and sense of self. He has maintained his code of honor, his sense of right and wrong, and the bravery with which he faces the world. He realizes that, like Blevins, he can control his fate, but only if he is willing to sacrifice and suffer for that control. What he is willing to sacrifice becomes clear at the dramatic conclusion of *Cities of the Plain*, the final novel in the Border Trilogy.

The second novel in the trilogy, *The Crossing*, focuses on Billy Parham’s journey of into Mexico. Billy’s story parallels that of John Grady. His first journey into Mexico shatters his romantic perception of the world. His wolf is taken by local authorities and made to fight to the death in a series of dogfights. In his second journey across the border, Billy is accompanied by his brother Boyd, whose courage and strict adherence to his principles are reminiscent of John Grady and Blevins. Like Blevins, Boyd is killed. Ultimately, Billy, like John Grady before him, returns to America disillusioned of his belief in a morally ordered world. He recognizes that “while the godmade sun did rise,” it rose “for all and without distinction” (425). But Billy is never forced to a point where he must act on his beliefs. That decision rests on the shoulders of John Grady in the final novel of the trilogy.

Cities of the Plain is in many ways a retelling of *All the Pretty Horses*. John Grady's determination to carry out his design remains the driving force behind his actions, but his design is no longer idealistic. He has reduced his expectations to the lowest possible standard in every regard. Don Hector has been replaced by Mac Johnson, a senile man whom John Grady continuously catches wandering in his sleep. Unlike the lush, utopian La Purisima, Mac Johnson's ranch is the sorriest land the army could find in seven states (11). Most importantly, the virgin Alejandra is replaced by Magdalena, the epileptic prostitute who is literally owned by Eduardo the pimp. Despite the degradation of his expectations, John Grady's design is destined to fail. The army's acquisition of the ranch is inevitable. Even if he could free Magdalena, the ranch they will live will not remain. In his bid to exert control over his life, he is willing to accept less and less until finally he is left with nothing at all. It is at that point when he chooses to control his fate and take affirmative action against Eduardo.

When Eduardo kills Magdalena for trying to escape, John Grady faces the same dilemma as the kid in the desert. But unlike the kid, John Grady is willing to act. He is not willing to allow the determining forces of the world to control his life any longer. Following the logic of Judge Holden, he decides to engage Eduardo in a contest of life and death. John Grady ultimately sacrifices his life in order to take the life of Eduardo, his nemesis and the murderer of his lover, Magdalena. John Grady succeeds where the kid fails. He has the courage to defy the determining forces of the world, and though he dies, it is a willing, affirmative death. He has endured life, and he has rejected the despair and pessimism that destroyed his father. In the end, he exerts control over his life and Eduardo's. He chooses to die in order to control his fate. Ultimately, in its own way,

his design works. He has avoided the fate of his father, and he has maintained his identity.

CHAPTER 4

NO COUNTRY FOR OLD MEN: A PESSIMISTIC DEPARTURE

No Country for Old Men is McCarthy's most pessimistic border novel. It is also his most straightforward. Like *Blood Meridian* and *All the Pretty Horses*, the central conflict of the novel remains man's struggle for control against the determining forces of the world. In *No Country for Old Men*, that determining force is evil. Sheriff Ed Tom Bell believes it is his responsibility to protect the people of his small town and the surrounding area, but he must contend with a ruthless killer whom he believes to be the "true and living prophet of destruction" (4).

Anton Chigurh, the antagonist of *No Country for Old Men*, is the incarnation of evil. If, as Bloom stated in 2000, Judge Holden is "the most frightening figure in all of American literature," Chigurh must now be considered his equal (vi). Chigurh and Judge Holden share many of the same characteristics. They both possess absolute confidence in their actions, and they both espouse a deterministic philosophy. But they are also different in critical ways. Unlike Holden, Chigurh is not manipulative. He does not reveal a taste for violence, and he limits his death-dealing to the individuals who happen to be in his way. Violence is literally his business. He also appears to be invincible throughout the novel. His only display of vulnerability is that he *can* be hurt. He is shot by Llewellyn Moss, and he breaks his arm in a car crash after he kills Carla Jean Moss. However, neither wound deters him from his task.

What truly differentiates Chigurh from McCarthy's previous antagonists is his unique deterministic creed. Unlike the Judge, Chigurh's determinism does not allow for change. He believes that every action is predetermined and that man has no control over his own fate. When the owner of a filling station notices Chigurh's license plate, Chigurh tosses a coin to determine the proprietor's fate. When the man objects that he didn't wager anything on the toss, Chigurh replies, "Yes you did. You've been putting it up your whole life. You just didn't know it. You know what the date is on this coin? Its nineteen fifty-eight. It's been traveling twenty-two years to get here. And now it's here. And I'm here. And I've got my hand over it. And it's either heads or tails. And you have to say. Call it" (56). The man calls heads, and he lives. Before Chigurh leaves the store, he tells the proprietor,

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

Like Judge Holden, Chigurh perceives the appeal to morality, or what "ought to be," as man's fatal flaw and weakness. The universe, according to Chigurh, is amoral and indifferent.

At the end of the novel, Chigurh once again employs the coin before he kills Carla Jean Moss. When Carla Jean arrives home after her mother's funeral, Chigurh is waiting

for her in her bedroom. In response to her appeals, he places responsibility on the coin, stating, “This is the best I can do” (258). Carla Jean calls heads. The coin lands on tails. Chigurh states,

I had no say in the matter. Every moment in your life is a turning and every one a choosing. Somewhere you made a choice. All followed to this. The accounting is scrupulous. The shape is drawn. No line can be erased. I had no belief in your ability to move a coin to your bidding. . . . the shape of your path was visible from the beginning. (259)

Chigurh’s faith in a wholly determined and amoral world relinquishes him of all responsibility for his actions, and his confidence in that belief is never contested in the novel.

No Country for Old Men begins with Sheriff Ed Tom Bell’s declaration that he has locked eyes with the personification of evil. He even admits that he is unwilling to “stand up and go out to meet him” (4). From the very beginning, Ed Tom Bell distances himself from McCarthy’s true heroes.

All of the protagonists of McCarthy’s border novels are forced from page one to respond to a harsh and violent world. The meaningless violence that ultimately overwhelms Ed Tom in *No Country for Old Men* is the ancestral remnant of the chaos and bloodshed that dominated the borderlands approximately a century and a half earlier in *Blood Meridian*. Determining forces exert control over McCarthy’s heroes, and the protagonists are ultimately forced to decide whether they believe in a wholly determined world or the power of their own free will. They are all led to a point in their lives where they are required to act on their beliefs. The kid of *Blood Meridian* chooses not to kill

the Judge at that crucial moment in the desert. He is not prevented by fear, but by his belief in a moral code. He will not kill the Judge unarmed. When John Grady Cole learns that Eduardo has killed his lover, Magdalena, he faces the same decision as the kid. But John Grady chooses to engage his enemy in a fight to the death. Although he dies from his wounds, he successfully imposes his belief in justice on the world by killing Eduardo. John Grady Cole is McCarthy's greatest hero because he refuses to succumb absolutely to despair despite the tragedy of his life.

Ed Tom Bell, however, lacks the mettle of his forbearers. He has spent the last thirty years of his life regretting his failure to act in WWII when he left his dying comrades and fled from the approaching Germans. When his uncle Ellis assures him that he had no choice, Ed Tom replies, "I had a choice. I could of stayed" (277). But he has not learned from his mistake. When he leaves the motel room where Moss was killed, he knows that Chigurh is in the parking lot. Ed Tom has the opportunity to face Chigurh, but he chooses to retreat once again (244). He is unwilling to die for his beliefs. When he quits his job as Sheriff, he admits that "a good part of [quitting] is just knowin that I wont be called on to hunt this man" (282). Unlike his predecessors, Ed Tom accepts despair and admits defeat (306).

No Country for Old Men is McCarthy's most pessimistic novel because it is a novel without heroes. Llewellyn Moss is brave, but his defiance and death are ultimately meaningless. Like the Judge at the conclusion of *Blood Meridian*, Chigurh is the last man standing in *No Country for Old Men*. If McCarthy offers any hope in his border fiction, it lies in man's ability to reject despair when confronted by determining forces. Sydney Krause claims that

the characteristic mood of deterministic naturalism is mixed and paradoxical. Its key paradox centers on the brute refusal of the human to be sucked down into the vortex of natural law. It is because of their cheerless prospects that we are cheered by the moral drive of the individual characters who suffer much, but . . . still manage to hold themselves intact as human beings despite the animal ruthlessness of others and the natural and social causalities that confine them.

(Krause 9)

Although Ed Tom will not face Chigurh, he can still be faced. We know from the actions of John Grady Cole and the defiance of the kid that man can exert control over his own fate if he is willing to die for his beliefs.

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