



## **Re-negotiating the Western: A Study of Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian***

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### **Abstract**

A curiously distinctive American product, Western is a genre of fiction which has enjoyed considerable popularity in and outside its birth place. Often considered as a prime example of popular culture, the Western nevertheless has withstood the test of time and continues to capture the imagination of both creative artists as well as the readers. The Western characters and tropes are instantly recognizable often owing to their steadfast loyalty to their generic preoccupations. Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* with its specific geographical setting, its historical time frame and its direct allusion to some culture specific myths of the frontier, naturally demands its own rank amidst the canon of the Western. A truly consummate artist as McCarthy, however, does not just stop at simply subscribing to the essential tropes of the Western while writing his novel. What he does instead is alongside evoking the recognizable patterns of the Western, he provides a covert critique or rigorous revision of them which in turn provides his readers with a much more complex albeit rewardingly insightful reading experience. This paper provides a brief anatomy of the basic narrative structures of a Western novel and tries to analyze how McCarthy in *Blood Meridian* attempts to re-negotiate with them.

### **Keywords**

Western, frontier, violence, Manifest Destiny, history

*Blood Meridian, or, The Evening Redness in the West* published in 1985 is often considered as Cormac McCarthy's masterpiece with critics like Harold Bloom calling it the most "strong and memorable" (Bloom 1) novel by any contemporary living American novelist. *Blood Meridian* is also remarkable vis-a-vis McCarthy's career as a novelist for it marks a discernible shift from his earlier novels. Whereas McCarthy's previous novels are generally bracketed in the sub-genre of the American Southern Gothic, with novels like *Outer Dark*, *Child of God*, *Suttree* having their settings in and around Tennessee and Appalachia, *Blood Meridian* is the first novel with which he moved westward situating it around the borderlands of present U.S.-Mexico region. His subsequent novels, namely *All the Pretty Horses*, *The Crossing*, *The Cities of the Plain* and *No Country for Old Men* also follow this convention, engaging with and exploring the American 'West' in general and the Southwest in specific. In a sense, therefore, McCarthy's later works and most specifically his *Blood Meridian*, can be taken into consideration as prominent literary examples of the Western genre. What is significant, however, is how McCarthy provides a contemporary treatment to this particular genre by appropriating the conventional narrative structures and the socio-cultural myths associated with it and in providing such a fresh take on such established tropes, McCarthy often goes on to transcend the generic limitations of the Western. This paper will attempt to read Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* through the prism of the narrative strategies of the Western and try to understand whether it complies to or subverts the paradigms of the genre or does both in simultaneity.

The 'Western' as a literary genre has often been considered to be a distinctive American product. It has been broadly described as a fictional narrative set in the American West. This might appear at first glance to be an extremely simplistic definition, but John G. Cawelti in his landmark book *The Six-Gun Mystique Sequel* would like to argue that, "the Western is initially defined by its setting" (Cawelti 19). Cawelti however does not want to limit the scope of the Western just to its setting for there are exceptions to this proposition which relies only on the geography. Cawelti thus proposes that the

... geographical definition must immediately be qualified by a social and historical definition of setting: the Western is a story which takes place on or near a frontier and consequently the Western is generally set at a particular moment in the past. (Cawelti 19-20)

From the mere perspective of its setting alone McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* can undoubtedly be considered to be a Western. *Blood Meridian*'s central action takes place in the American Southwest and major parts of Mexico. The 'Southwest' as Sara L. Spurgeon notes:

... can be seen as a condensation of the West, containing all the mythic elements commonly associated with both the West and frontiers while concentrating them in the vicinity of the borderlands between the United States and Mexico. This region is seen as intensifying the idea of a harsh and difficult landscape and a feeling of exciting but ominous closeness between multiple races and cultures. Both the myth of the frontier and of the West are shot through with twinned tropes of the perceived danger and rewards of conquering a wild, hostile landscape, and the perceived west, with its arid deserts and mountains, its numerous native tribes and peoples, as well as the largest population of Spanish speakers outside of Mexico, handily accommodates both strains. (Spurgeon 6)

McCarthy therefore directly resorts to the basic premise of the genre by situating the novel in a special geographic locale of the Southwest. He does not however limit the scope of his novel just there. Rather he fulfils Cawelti's other propositions too by setting the novel in an often forgotten yet crucially significant historical past of America. *Blood Meridian* is almost a fictional retelling of the bloody history of American expansion in the Southwest during the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century as it recounts the tale of the almost mythical Glanton gang, a historical band of merciless mercenaries who were commissioned to massacre and scalp hunt Native Americans and other indigenous population of that specific frontier region justified by the ideology of progress.

Talking about the past and the 'frontier', one is duly reminded of one of the foremost historical theoreticians of the American frontier, Fredrick Jackson Turner. Turner in his scholarly paper, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History" argued that the American frontier was a mobile space. Analyzing the history of settlement in the American continent, Turner argued that successive generations of European settlers who arrived in the East coast kept on pushing forward the line of settlement and wilderness towards the west. This volatile space between the two was where civilization and savagery continuously clashed to create a distinctive American national character. The Western directly resorted to the trope of such a clash albeit in most cases watering down the ethical ramifications of such a confrontation. Cawelti posits that

... the Western formula tends to portray the frontier as "meeting point between civilization and savagery" because the clash of civilization ("law and order") with savagery, whether represented by Indians or lawless outlaws, generates

dramatic excitement and striking antitheses without raising basic questions about American society or life in general. (Cawelti 20)

McCarthy's narrative follows a gang of scalp hunters led by Captain John Joel Glanton. The mission of the gang being officially approved and sanctioned by both the American and the Mexican governments makes the gang apparent torchbearers of the ideals of Manifest Destiny. Robert Jarett claims that *Blood Meridian*

... is not a novel written under the predominantly realistic and modernist esthetic of the Southern fiction but a historical romance written under a new postmodern esthetic [...] (It) imagines the human dimensions of the conquest by the North American empire of the Southwest territories and the Native American tribes inhabiting them. (Jarett 63)

The narrative therefore revolves around people who can at the first glance be assumed to be the representatives of 'civilization' out on a sacred purpose of conquering the wilderness and its extended living counterparts and aiding the foundation of democracy in hitherto barbaric lands. They appear to fit into the role of the heroes of these Westerns who are on their way to tame the outlaws and in this process the violence they resort to thus must be justified or must have some high moral rationale. The narrative in *Blood Meridian* hardly shifts its attention away from the journey of the gang which occupies most part of its length. As a result, the textual representation of the 'other' is conspicuously scanty. This again is in accordance with the basic strain of most Westerns where the Native American characters hardly have any graver significance other than providing a solid antithesis to the protagonist and even if they do, they are consciously presented to be lacking any psychological complexity. Cawelti argues:

The Western formula seems to prescribe that the Native American be more an aspect of the setting than a character in his/or/her own right. The reason for this is twofold. Giving the Indian a more complex role would increase the moral ambiguity of the story and thereby blur the sharp dramatic conflicts. Second, if the Indian represented a significant way of life rather than a declining savagery, it would be far more difficult to resolve the story with a reaffirmation of the values of American society. (Cawelti 22)

The clashes between the forces mostly occur with the vast stretches of deserts and prairies often acting as immediate settings where the actions are dramatized. This specific topography often functions in a special way where the milieu induces certain dispositional significance in the characters. Cawelti theorizes:

The rocky aridity and climatic extremes of the Great Plains complement the hostile savagery of Indians and outlaws, On the other hand, the vast openness, the vistas of snow covered peaks in the distance, and the great sunrises and sunsets...suggest the epic courage and regenerative power of the hero. In every respect, Western topography helps dramatize more intensely the clash of characters and the thematic conflicts of the story. (Cawelti 24)

*Blood Meridian*'s very subtitle 'The Evening Redness in the West' covertly hints at the multifaceted connotation of this referred topography. What is fascinating however is the very title of McCarthy's novel which precedes the subtitle. When grasped together they render a different sort of a meaning which poses a challenge to the very foundations of the romantic visions of the American West. McCarthy's text renders in graphic details the horrifying brutality that occurred in the region of the Southwest during the national expansion. Harold Bloom notes that "the *meridian* of the title probably means the zenith or noon position of the sun in the sky" (Bloom 6). "Blood Meridian" therefore might possibly suggest the climactic bloodshed that ensues out of the gory extreme violence running almost throughout the entire course of the novel. Talking about the volatile space on which the action of the novel takes place Neil Campbell writes,

The mythic space' of the West is an emptiness that challenges the self to assert its existence against the death that always lurks there. McCarthy's 'blood meridian' is the point at which one reaches the fullness of life and simultaneously recognizes the proximity, even the inevitability, of its end. (Campbell 57)

In both the literary and celluloid versions of popular Westerns, the heroes mostly in cowboy attires are often found to be riding their battle-worn yet steady horses with great vigour towards a sunrise or a sunset symbolizing hope for salvation or promise for fresher adventures. In *Blood Meridian* the sun appears to be a sinister entity that keeps on burning like "some great fire at the earth's end" (McCarthy, *BM* 21). 'Evening Redness' in its subtitle therefore is not just a metaphor for the sunset across the sprawling vistas of the West; it rather more pertinently symbolizes the limitless bloodshed that tinges the topography in red.

Shifting the focus away from the setting, it is often argued that distinctive characters often define a Western. The protagonists in Westerns are often runaways from home who arrive at the frontier territories to help out others in need, fighting against forces meant to destroy law and order. *Blood Meridian*'s protagonist (if he may be called so) is an unnamed fourteen year 'white' male, referred to in the text just as 'the kid' who flees home in

Tennessee and lands in Texas. McCarthy opens the novel with his description – “See the child. He is pale and thin, he wears a thin and ragged linen shirt.” (McCarthy *Blood Meridian*, 3) and goes on to describe how the kid has a strained relationship with his father, doesn’t know the name of his mother and is permanently separated from a sister whom he may or may not actually have. In a passage tinged with nostalgia McCarthy depicts what ‘the kid’ would be leaving behind once he sets off his personal journey:

At fourteen he runs away. He will not see again the freezing kitchen house in the predawn dark. The firewood, the washpots. He wanders west as far as Memphis, a solitary migrant upon that flat and pastoral landscape. Blacks in the fields, lank and stooped, their fingers spiderlike among the bolls of cotton. A shadowed agony in the garden. Against the sun’s declining figures moving in the slower dusk across a paper skyline. A lone dark husbandman pursuing mule and harrow down the rainblown bottomland toward night. (McCarthy, *BM* 4)

There is a palpable tenderness that can be discerned from the passage and the kid appears to be decidedly vulnerable under all the pathos weighing him down. He appears to be the embodiment of the concept of American Adam with all his innocence and purity who sets forth on his quest of discovering the land. The illusion of innocence is however extremely short lived for McCarthy doesn’t waste time to expose the kid’s inner propensity – “in him broods already a taste for mindless violence. All history present in that visage, the child the father of the man” (McCarthy, *BM* 3). The taste gradually materializes in concrete manner as the child passes his personal violent rites of passage leaving behind the last residues of innocence in his heart to gradually become the ‘kid’. McCarthy depicts,

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. (McCarthy, *BM* 4-5)

As the novel progresses the kid is seen to be joining the Glanton gang where he soon starts to rival the bloodthirst of its other members. His initiation in the gang occurs through witnessing an act of violence, he travels along with the gang engaging in violence and his death too occur in an extremely grim and violent fashion. This poses a direct challenge to the ethical code of the Western hero who resorts to violence only when there is absolute need to. Cawelti says that

... the cowboy hero does not seek out combat for its own sake and he typically shows an aversion to the wanton shedding of blood. Killing is an act forced upon him and he carries it out with the precision and skill of a surgeon and the careful proportions of an artist... This controlled and aesthetic mode of killing is particularly important as the supreme mark of differentiation between the hero and the savage. The Indian or outlaw as savage delights in slaughter, entering into combat with a kind of manic glee to fulfil an uncontrolled lust for blood. The hero rarely engages in violence until the last moment. (Cawelti 40)

The kid along with other members of the gang engage in mindless act of violence first systematically and then in an absolute random fashion killing and maiming whoever and wherever they please. An extremely graphic example from the text might elucidate the degree of violence the gang resorts to.

When Glanton and his chiefs swung back through the village people were running out under the horses' hooves and the horses were plunging and some of the men were moving on foot among the huts with torches and the dragging the victims out, slathered and dripping with blood, hacking at the dying and decapitating those who knelt for mercy. There were in the camp a number of Mexican slaves and these ran forth calling out in Spanish and were brained or shot and one of the Delawares emerged from the smoke with a naked infant dangling in each hand and squatted at a ring of midden stones and swung them by the heels each in turn and bashed their heads against the stones so that the brains burst forth through the fontanel in a bloody spew and humans on fire came shrieking forth like berserkers and the riders hacked them down with their enormous knives and a young woman ran up and embraced the bloodied forefeet of Glanton's warhorse. (McCarthy, *BM* 156)

Commenting on the gang's journey, Ignier-Anne Softing mentions that

(It is) repeatedly broken by eruptions of mindless violence. This violence is sometimes motivated by trivial episodes, sometimes apparently not motivated by anything at all. It is never heroic or in any way justified or justifiable... The novel's final effect is a nauseating feeling of abyss, of nothingness. (Softing 16)

Talking of the hero of the Western and his reluctant resorting to violence Cawelti further posits that the "hero sometimes fights with his fists at an earlier point in the action, but he never kills in this kind of direct hand-to-hand combat" (Cawelti 41). *Blood Meridian's* most

enigmatic character Judge Holden, a man of supreme erudition and bestial strength, who is a part of the gang and yet somehow is superior to it, engages in such proximal violence often and on throughout the novel. McCarthy's luminous prose renders the Judge's violence in graphic details:

The survivors were making for the daylight in the doorway and the first of these encountered the judge there and cut at him with his knife. But the judge was like a cat and he sidestepped the man and seized his arm and broke it and picked the man up by his head. He put him against the wall and smiled at him but the man had begun to bleed from the ears and the blood was running down between the judge's fingers and over his hands and when the judge turned him loose there was something wrong with his head and he slid to the floor and did not get up. (McCarthy, *BM* 179)

Judge Holden's hypnotic verbosity is also in stark contrast with the stock Western hero who is generally found to be the brooding reticent type. Argues Cawelti that "like his gun, language is a weapon the hero rarely uses...In addition, the heroes taciturnity reflects his social isolation and his reluctance to commit himself to the action that he knows will invariably lead to another violent confrontation" (Cawelti 41-42). The Judge is just the opposite of being taciturn. In fact he is master orator capable of inciting riots just with his rhetoric. The very introduction of the Judge in the novel is immediately followed by him calling out a priest Reverend Green and exposing him as a fraud and a rapist in front of a gathering. The mass which was so long rapt in attention hearing the sermons of Reverend is brainwashed within minutes by Judge Holden who makes them turn against the priest. What ensues is a bloodbath which claims many innocent lives as collateral damage of the blind rage of the mass. Moments later, the Judge is found to be sitting at a bar drinking whiskey. The men who all were rioting gradually approach and gather round him. When one among them asks the Judge where he met the Reverend first whose sins he just recounted a while ago, the Judge nonchalantly proclaims – "I never laid eyes on the man before today. Never even heard of him" (McCarthy, *BM* 8). The mob is left dumbfounded and it takes a while for them to mentally register that it is a prank albeit extremely cruel one that has been played by this man upon them. Once they come to their senses, all the people around the Judge break into chaotic laughter while the Judge appears to be revelling at his gift of the gab.

In the typical Western, the hero is often entrusted the sacred job of protecting vulnerable townspeople from the outlaws. In *Blood Meridian*, the authorities sanctioning the Glanton gang can be considered to be the townspeople if we stretch the analogy. It therefore

should have been a sacred duty for the gang to be protecting them with all their resources. The gang initially sticks to such a mission carrying out the task that has been bestowed upon them. But once things go haywire, they drop the remaining vestiges of their (almost non-existent) code of conduct. They go on to the extent of massacring even their employers whom they were meant to protect. Their depravity doesn't stop here. Maddened by violence they even turn on each other. The Judge more than often is suggested to have raped young boys and cannibalized upon them. Commenting on one such instance from the text Sara L. Spurgeon says that the "judge both literally and symbolically consumes that which is forbidden, the child as a living representation of the community the sacred hunter is bound to serve and protect." (Spurgeon 29)

Examples such as these where McCarthy attempts deliberate inversion of the narrative order of the Western abound the text. Rightly does Spurgeon note that McCarthy's "voice and the frontier heroes he creates are both a continuance of the tradition of Western writing and a dark and complex counterpoint to it" (Spurgeon 17). Western being a culture specific genre, McCarthy successfully digs into and employs its fundamental tropes and motifs in *Blood Meridian*, only to revert them to suit his purpose of presenting a story which is at once a glowing memoir as well as a glaring indictment of a violent chapter of the American history.

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