Deconstructing the Myth of the Western in Cormac McCarthy’s
*Blood Meridian or the Evening Redness in the West*

Supervisor:
Prof. Dr. Gert Bue lens

Dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of “Master in de Taal- en Letterkunde: Nederlands – Engels” by Matthias Schutz

2010-2011
Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the following for advice and encouragement during the writing of this thesis: first of all professor Buelens who acted as my thesis supervisor and to whom I am greatly indebted for agreeing to be on my thesis committee despite his busy schedule, his commitment to English literary study inspired me to hand in an honest and proper work, secondly my parents who have been supportive throughout my entire academic career and who were always keen to buy me the books I needed, and finally my girlfriend for spending a considerable amount of time watching Western films with me that she probably didn’t enjoy as much as I did.

A special mention goes out to Sara Spurgeon. Completing a thesis is a challenge and that challenge begins with finding a topic that is both interesting and feasible. This initial phase was made much easier for me with the help of Spurgeon. She is an expert on the work of Cormac McCarthy and the myth of the West, and her accessible academic work made it possible to build my own thoughts on the matter in a more sensible and structured manner.

Needless to say the faults of the text are entirely my own.
# Contents

Acknowledgements .................................................................................................................. 1

Contents .................................................................................................................................. 2

0. Introduction ............................................................................................................................. 3
   0.1 Manifest mythmaking on America’s Frontier .................................................................... 3
   0.2 Choosing *Blood Meridian*: a Postmodern Western ..................................................... 5

1. Literature Review ................................................................................................................... 8

2. The Western ............................................................................................................................. 9
   2.1 Defining the Western ....................................................................................................... 11
      2.1.1 Genre ..................................................................................................................... 11
      2.1.2 History .................................................................................................................. 15
      2.1.3 Characteristics ....................................................................................................... 17
   2.2 Myth of the Frontier ........................................................................................................ 23
   2.3 The Revisionist or Anti-Western .................................................................................... 25

3. Cormac McCarthy’s *BLOOD MERIDIAN* ........................................................................ 27
   3.1 Cormac McCarthy .......................................................................................................... 27
   3.2 *Blood Meridian* ............................................................................................................ 30
      3.2.1 The Characters and Their Mythic Roles .................................................................. 31
      3.2.1.1 The Kid ............................................................................................................. 33
      3.2.1.2 Judge Holden .................................................................................................. 50

Conclusion ................................................................................................................................. 58

Works Cited ............................................................................................................................... 61
0. Introduction

0.1 Manifest mythmaking on America’s Frontier

March 4, 1897: in his First Inaugural Address, 25th president of the United States of America William McKinley assures Americans, “We want no war of conquest; we must avoid the temptation of territorial aggression. War should never be entered upon until every agency of peace has failed; peace is preferable to war in almost every contingency” (ourwhitehouse.org). Notwithstanding his statement, McKinley in 1898 advocated the annexation of Hawaii, he said that “We need Hawaii just as much and a good deal more than we did California. It is Manifest Destiny” (cf-usa.org). Since then there has been historical debate about whether the annexation of Hawaii was a case of pure imperialism, or if overseas expansion is merely an extension of Manifest Destiny. McKinley at the time was influenced by imperialistic winds running through office. This type of notion of the Manifest Destiny Doctrine and the subsequent expansion continental and overseas was the result of the spirit of mythmaking that had been actuated since the independence of the United States. Americans seemed to transform Puritan ideals into ideas of myth that helped reassure themselves as chosen people living in a prosperous country. These great myths were indoctrinated into American minds and made possible an improved way of life, as “one nation under God.”

America has often been called the Land of Opportunities, a nation of rugged individualism where people search for the American Dream through hard work, self-reliance and righteousness. Even from early on in American history when Puritan governor John Winthrop of the Massachusetts Bay Colony delivered his sermon “A Model of Christian Charity” in 1630, he already spoke about the “City upon a Hill”. He took the phrase from the parable of Salt and Light from Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount. Besides the obvious biblical source of the speech came some words of inspiration as well, as Winthrop said: “the eyes of all people are upon us”. He foresaw this community of New England as a place with a special purpose, destined for greatness. They would not only be under the eyes of God or their fellow Americans but were to become an example to the entire world.

In 1989, over three and a half centuries later, Ronald Reagan borrowed the image of the city upon a hill in his Farewell Address to the Nation. He said, “I've spoken of the shining city all my political life, but I don't know if I ever quite communicated what I saw when I said it. But
in my mind it was a tall, proud city built on rocks stronger than oceans, windswept, God-blessed, and teeming with people of all kinds living in harmony and peace; a city with free ports that hummed with commerce and creativity” (americanrhetoric.com). Reagan was admired for his belief in his country and his attempt at restoring American pride and patriotism. He had also been extremely popular as the first president to attack the “Evil Empire” of communism. Being a former actor and a famously good political speaker he knew very well how to play the American people. The Great Communicator, as he was nicknamed at the time, did not shy away from a touch of grandeur or populist rhetoric in his speeches. Myths had always been part of American history, and presidents like McKinley or Reagan, perhaps not coincidently both Republican Party members, have cleverly made use of them to push through their own agendas. These myths give room to ways to feed the public with excuses for entering non-American nations and antagonizing them, be it for colonial expansion, to protect America from external dangers such as communism or terrorism, or in the name of God almighty himself.

The belief that American expansionism westward and southward was inevitable, just, and divinely ordained, was first coined by John L. O’Sullivan, editor of the United States Magazine and Domestic Review. The annexation of Texas, O’Sullivan wrote, was “the fulfilment of our manifest destiny to overspread the continent allotted by Providence for the free development of our yearly multiplying millions” (Norton et al. 195). The Western is in many ways a similar form of myth, justifying American conquest of Texas, former Mexican territory, and the killing of its many Indian inhabitants. Sometimes in modern day speech when reporting on American politics, for instance during George W. Bush’s presidency, journalists talked about a “cowboy foreign policy”, which is a remarkable choice of words. The frontier seems to indeed have moved from the American West to other corners of the world. Virile cowboys and pioneers who brought freedom and civilization to the wild Indian people on America’s frontier are now powerful politicians and army generals leading American troops into threatening countries abroad for the establishment of democracy and freedom of man. The myth of the American West is reinvented here in order to fit American identity. As outsiders it makes us look at America through different eyes, America as a country with an ambiguous history. The idea of an ambiguous national identity was probably intriguing to me with current complications in our own country in mind. One could say supporters of Flemish nationalism use myths as well, to confirm their own identity and ultimate goal of Flemish independence. They are nonetheless at the same time jeopardizing
the future of Belgium as a federal state. With these critical insights in mind, the idea for Blood Meridian as an Anti-Western commenting on the American myth and imperialism was constituted.

0.2 Choosing Blood Meridian: a Postmodern Western

Serious writers of westerns know both the country and the history.
—D. T. Herald, Genreflecting

Whatever in creation exists without my knowledge exists without my consent.
—Judge Holden, Blood Meridian

Within the mainstream genre that the traditional Western is, every aspect that makes the tradition what it is, is neatly defined, so that readers or viewers can immediately recognize the style. In postmodern literature, writers have taken this so called myth of the West and created out of it a new type of mythology, undermining the original form. A leading example in this context is Cormac McCarthy’s 1985 novel Blood Meridian or the Evening Redness in the West. It is hailed as the author’s masterpiece and has been described as a highly symbolical, richly-detailed epic (Manachova). The overall object of this thesis will be to trace the typical characteristics of the Western, and try to find out how these are deconstructed by Cormac McCarthy in his bloody tale. Moreover, I will make an attempt at finding the purpose of this deconstruction, if there is any. His vision of the West is a relentless one, and shows us another world, completely opposite to the assumed western reality. McCarthy in this sense is brilliant in creating an entirely unfamiliar, in-between zone in Blood Meridian, where, as one progresses in the story, there seems to be no recognizable typically Western style left at all.

The novel has thirteen chapters and follows a young boy known only as The Kid. The story starts with the boy running away from his Tennessee home and ending up in Texas as member of a party of armed guerrillas under the command of a certain Captain White. After the commando enters Texas, they are ambushed and almost all of them are brutally killed by Comanche warriors. The Kid survives but gets arrested and put in jail where he is acquainted with Toadvine, his jail cell neighbour. Toadvine is able to convince authorities that he and The Kid would make valuable Indian hunters for the state’s new scalp hunting business. The two join
the Glanton gang where The Kid meets the uncanny Judge Holden and gang leader John Glanton. The bulk of the novel then revolves around the adventures of the newly formed team of bloodthirsty irregulars, telling a violent story of epic proportion about the American westward expansion.

My thesis will be divided into two major parts. The first part will focus on an exposition of the Western. In a second part, the main interest of my study, namely a discussion of Blood Meridian as a dismantling of that same Western genre, that novel will be further analysed through certain key passages and with the help of specific scholarly publications on it.

In the introductory chapter of the first part I will set out to define the Western - by grouping together themes and types – as a popular but stereotypical genre. My aim is to give a clear and full view of what is essential in explaining the customs of the Western with regard to plot, character development, setting, conflicts and resolutions, etc. Furthermore, it is necessary to clear up some of the historical starting points that are often used for many of the genre’s exponents. I will also briefly touch upon the socio-cultural background and the rise of the Western genre. To be able to do these things adequately I will not only need literary sources, but, because the Western genre is highly appreciated in film as well, cinematic analysis and criticism will prove to be very relevant sources of information.

A second chapter then will be dedicated to a more historical angle, namely the myth of the frontier. Here, it is of importance that the terms “frontier” and “myth” are elaborately defined, the meaning of those two as separate words and the signification of frontier myth as a single term. Throughout this explanation I may already address some of the idealisations that go with the frontier myth and that are regularly seen in Western novels.

In the third and final chapter on the Western, a modern variety of the Western, what is called the Revisionist Western or Anti-Western, is up for examination. This sub-genre of the Western has produced a great many quality films since the 40s up until recent years, illustrated in movies such as High Noon (1952), The Magnificent Seven (1960), The Wild Bunch (1969), Unforgiven (1992), The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada (2005) or The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford (2007). In literature however, the Anti-Western has yet to produce a noticeable number of meaningful novels. Blood Meridian may well be the most significant and authoritative example of Anti-Western literature to date. Note that there is a critical difference between the term ‘Anti-Western’, meaning a revision of the classic Western genre, and ‘anti-western’ as a
feeling of antipathy against anything American or western, often felt today as a sentiment that feeds radicalism in for instance the Middle East or China.

The second large component of the dissertation is the analysis of the novel. Essential questions that need to be tackled are: How is *Blood Meridian* different from a traditional Western novel, or in other words, how is *Blood Meridian* a deconstruction of the traditional Western? And, in what ways does *Blood Meridian* uncover the myth of the West? When searching for answers to these questions, the main problem we might face is that we cannot consider the author as the one who is deconstructing or uncovering, but that it is the narrator in the text and the text itself that are the object of our analysis. Interviews with author Cormac McCarthy or other aids can of course be considered but these are secondary to the text. The general definition, meant to give an overview of the manner in which I will address the topic, is that the Western is intrinsically a very traditional popular genre representing conservatism in America while the postmodern approach to the Western is often very atypical and more critical of American conventions. In the approach to the conduct of the research, the reader will find that I have aimed for a motivated choice of procedure. The analytical procedure will simply be to collect carefully selected passages, closely read them, and draw conclusions based on the information I got from these passages. Considering the importance of the leading characters in Westerns, I have chosen to give particular attention to the character of The Kid and the character of Judge Holden.
1. Literature Review

The argument I developed in this thesis is greatly indebted to Sara Spurgeon, associate professor of literatures of the American Southwest at Texas Tech University in the US. She has written extensively on Cormac McCarthy’s work in her books and articles. All of these contributions to the scholarship of Cormac McCarthy were incredibly helpful. However, it is undeniably so that her expertise was especially appealing to me in Exploding the Western: Myths of Empire on the Postmodern Frontier (2005), her third book publication, because it combines three relevant subject matters I write about. These are: the Myth of the Western, the Myth of the Frontier, and of course her analysis of Blood Meridian, while also mentioning other novels by McCarthy. My knowledge of such topics would surely have remained more limited if it weren’t for her book.

In Exploding the Western she first talks about her roots and how her personal interest in Western Americana grew, and goes on to “consider the treatment of the 19th century ‘frontier myth’ by contemporary American novelists” (Allmendinger 2006). Blake Allmendinger praises Spurgeon’s study in his review of the book: “Spurgeon has done an excellent job of tracing the frontier myth through works of the late twentieth century. She proves that there continues to be a conversation – if not a consensus – about what the West means in American literature.” Still, there is some critique as well: “Although Spurgeon defines the terms ‘myth and ‘frontier’, she never defines the term ‘postmodern’, even though the book is about ‘the postmodern frontier’.”

It is true that there is no clarification of the term in Spurgeon’s book, so I am eager to try and make it clear what “postmodernism” is, and what its relevance is in connection with Blood Meridian.

I was also immensely stimulated by John Sepich’s Notes on Blood Meridian (1993). Because of the novel’s great complexity, some guidance in wholly understanding the work is no superfluous luxury. This classic reference work helps readers fully appreciate Blood Meridian by sharing the novel's wealth of historically verifiable characters, places and events. An expanded and revised version of Notes goes on to explore key themes and issues in Blood Meridian in a new preface and two new essays. Finally, I am obligated to mention Diana Tixier Herald’s Genreflecting: a Guide to Reading Interests in Genre Fiction (1995) and Steve Neale’s Genre and Hollywood (2000). These proved to be great references for genre studying and contained accessible discussions of the Western genre which I am focusing on.
2. The Western

Every gun makes its own tune.
—The Man with No Name, The Good, the Bad & the Ugly

You will not find a genre as popular and culture-defining in America as the Western. When thinking of a classic Western, which image comes to mind? Perhaps one of the Old West with its saloons, horses and gunmen quick on the trigger like the great Hollywood cowboys John Wayne and Gary Cooper. A stereotypic Western can be identified on the first page or in the first few scenes. Most likely, such a story would start off with a lone rider finding himself in untamed land, maybe a desert or a valley, with canyons and monoliths all around, when suddenly a shot is set loose causing the rider’s horse to stagger. His opponent appears and a cowboy duel begins.

Let us have a look at a real example of how a popular, and by popular we mean with the intention to be favoured by the masses, Western story begins, and find out how the novels’ setting and characters are exposed in the first paragraphs.

The excerpt is taken from Zane Grey’s Riders of the Purple Sage (1912):

A sharp clip-clop of iron-shod hoofs deadened and died away, and clouds of yellow dust drifted from under the cottonwoods out over the sage. Jane Withersteen gazed down the wide purple slope with dreamy and troubled eyes. A rider had just left her and it was her message that held her thoughtful and almost sad, awaiting the churchmen who were coming to resent and attack her right to befriend a Gentile. She wondered if the unrest and strife that had lately come to the little village of Cottonwoods was to involve her. (5)

This instance illustrates precisely the conscious act of the writer to compose a distinguishable Western setting. The “iron-shod hoofs” and “clouds of yellow dust” are all it takes for a reader to know “this is a Western”. The passage also carries archetypical aspects of the West such as the religious connotation, which, one assumes, comes from research into the history of the region mentioned. Riders of the Purple Sage, inspired by the well-known classic Western The Virginian (1902) by Owen Wister, was critically acclaimed as having created and established the formula of
the popular Western genre. Despite this acclaim, Grey received negative criticism as well. His characters were unrealistic, there was too much violence and it was generally overly romanticized.

A second, relatively more recent, case to demonstrate the way in which prose writers of Westerns work to achieve their goal of shaping a recognizable setting from the beginning is seen through the eyes of a boy, as is to some extent also the case in Blood Meridian. We will discover in its analysis however that the portrayed boy of Blood Meridian is different from anyone else, to say the least.

This excerpt is taken from Jack Schaefer’s Shane (1949):

He rode into our valley in the summer of ’89. I was a kid then, barely topping the backboard of father’s old chuck-wagon. I was on the upper rail of our small corral, soaking in the late afternoon sun, when I saw him far down the road where it swung into the valley from the open plain beyond. In that clear Wyoming air I could see him plainly, though he was still several miles away. There seemed nothing remarkable about him, just another stray horseman riding up the road toward the cluster of frame buildings that was our town. Then I saw a pair of cowhands, loping past him, stop and stare after him with curious intentness. He came steadily on, straight through the town without slackening pace, until he reached the fork a half-mile below our place. (…) As he came near, what impressed me first was his clothes. He wore dark trousers of some serge material tucked into tall boots and held at the waist by a wide belt, both of a soft black leather tooled in intricate design. (1)

Schaefer then goes on in the first chapter of the novel with a studied description of the cowboy’s look and attitude. What is striking here is the elaborateness with which this is done. A lot of effort and detail goes into setting the right atmosphere, which has always been part of the traditional Western’s appeal. Later on, the reader learns that the man described is Shane, a mysterious ex-gunfighter, and the narrator is Bob Starrett, a farmer’s boy, whose family will play part in the travelling gunman’s life. Any further introduction to or analysis of this novel is not important here, but what is important is the fact that Shane is considered a classic Western work, though perhaps leaning more towards typical pulp Western, with its violent range wars and rather shallow development of characters. Riders of the Purple Sage, The Virginian and Shane have in common their prototypical approach, and the latter two incorporate protagonists that “helped
construct the popular image of the western cowboy as an all-natural nobleman on horseback” (History.com).

Having given a rough idea of how universally known symbols of Westerns are presented in popular Western novels with the help of excerpts from genre-defining examples of those novels, it is now time for a more profound and in-depth study of how the genre is instituted in the world’s literature.

2.1 Defining the Western

Owen Wister’s *The Virginian* was one of America’s first novels to be critically appreciated as a Western (Freeman Jr.). With its romanticized life in the American West and the establishment of the cowboy as a folk hero, it became an instant classic. Published in 1902, *The Virginian* turned out to be an inspiration for a great deal of stories about the Old West for future generations of Western writers, and made Owen Wister “the father of the Western”. This institution of the genre in the world’s literature inaugurated some of its primary characteristics. For instance, we already know that the cowboy is most often the central character and that there are idealizations that go with the plot. What we need though is more than a general idea to thoroughly define the Western, because the Western can be a meticulously crafted genre, and so a meticulously crafted description is what is aimed for. I will try to define the Western in three separate sections. One section will be dedicated to providing an insight into the idea of genre, a second then to the history of the Western, and a third will try to give the most essential characteristics of the Western. The discussion of the Western’s typical features will make place for a general defining of the genre though it is the intention to also concentrate on the Western essence of *Blood Meridian*.

2.1.1 Genre

But first, an attempt at handling the idea of “genre”, by giving comments on its definition by Thomas Schatz, professor of film at the University of Texas at Austin, and applying that definition to the Western. The reason I want to work with the writings of Schatz, a film historian and expert on Hollywood genres, to help me define the Western genre is because of the
Western’s “importance to Hollywood” (Schatz). Though the genre has been popular in literature as well, it is less prominent in American literature compared to its significance in American film. Consequently, the Western is far better documented as a film genre than as a literary genre, so working with Thomas Schatz’s expertise seemed the sensible thing to do.

We have been talking about the Western “genre”, but what is actually the meaning of “genre”? In film, Schatz argues, the genre film “is predetermined and essentially intact” (Neale 208). What this means is that there appears to be a predetermined path which needs to be followed. We will learn that in Western or Cowboy fiction a set of preconditions exists to which the story is chained. These conditions are not prone to change. We need to think of them as a fixed body of rules. Schatz goes on to say “the narrative components of a non-genre film – the characters, setting, plot, techniques, etc. – assume their significance as they are integrated into the individual film itself. In a genre film, however, these components have prior significance as elements of some generic formula” (208). Translated into terms of written narrative this characteristic of prior significances remains just the same as in visual narrative. The components that together form the main story-line of a Western carry meaning even before the story has begun. Those meanings are of a common nature. This overall generality in Western story-lines has the benefit of making authors able to construct such a type of narration with limited means, as pointed out in the introduction to this chapter. It also makes it easier for readers to identify the genre of the story.

Finally, the last, and perhaps most knowledgeable of Schatz’s arguments on the world of genre, reads “This formula is established by repetition. Generic elements are repeated. So too are the ‘formal, narrative and thematic’ contexts in which they conventionally occur. Repetition also helps generate audience knowledge, allowing viewers to weigh a ‘film’s variations against the genre’s preordained, value-laden narrative system’” (208). The identification of the story is made possible not only through the prior significance of the narrative components of the genre, but also with the help of audience knowledge. Schatz already pointed out the grave importance of these predetermined meanings of elements and their context in genres like the Western. He is also right in stressing the importance of audience knowledge. Again, if we translate this in terms of written narrative, the meaning of audience knowledge in literature will stay just the same, but could be named more appropriately readers’ awareness. I may return to these arguments on genre while uncovering more of the Western’s typicality.
Although very helpful to our study, we do not want to generalize the definition of genre film by Schatz to the whole concept of genre without adding another expert’s vision on the meaning of the Western genre. To start off with general, easily understandable claims on genre and more specifically the Western genre, John G. Cawelti gives a simple answer in his book *The Six-Gun Mystique Sequel* (1999) on what the Western is. He says “the Western is a popular genre about the West;” and, according to Cawelti, genres are “groupings of texts which become recognized by creators, critics, and audiences over the course of time and which are seen in terms of complex structures of conventions, consisting of things like recurrent plots, stereotyped characters, accepted ideas, commonly known metaphors and other linguistic and narrative devices” (Cawelti 14).

More challenging thoughts on genre and Westerns are found in one of Cawelti’s articles on the concept of formula in the study of popular literature. In it, he mentions Canadian literary critic Northrop Frye’s suggestion that genres “embody fundamental archetypal patterns reflecting stages of the human life cycle”, a very fruitful idea according to Cawelti. In Frye’s sense of the term, “genre and myth are universal patterns of action which manifest themselves in all cultures”. Following Frye, Cawelti presents a formulation of genre as “a structural pattern which embodies a universal life pattern or myth in the materials of language; formula, on the other hand, is a cultural pattern; it represents the way in which a culture has embodied both mythical archetypes and its own preoccupations in narrative form” (Cawelti 120). So what was previously discussed about a stereotypical Western being easily recognizable is not only attributable to our notions of genre, but also of formula. Cawelti goes on clarifying this distinction with the example of the Western and the spy story. He claims that though both stories can be seen as embodiments of the archetypical pattern of the hero’s quest, these do not account for the basic and important differences in setting, characters and action between a Western and a spy story. These are clearly “cultural differences and reflect the particular preoccupations and needs of the time in which they were created and the group which created them: the Western shows its nineteenth century American origin while the spy story reflects the fact that it is largely a twentieth century British creation” (120).

To make his point on formulas and culture unmistakably clear he argues in the conclusion of his article that:
Formula stories like the Western are structures of narrative conventions which carry out a variety of cultural functions in a unified way. We can best define these formulas as principles for the selection of certain plots, characters, and settings, which possess in addition to their basic narrative structure the dimensions of collective ritual, game and dream. To analyze these formulas we must first define them as narrative structures of a certain kind and then investigate how the additional dimensions of ritual, game and dream have been synthesized into the particular patterns of plot, character and setting which have become associated with the formula.

(123)

In a final attempt to settle the meaning of the Western as a genre, another segment of Cawelti’s *The Six-Gun Mystique Sequel* book publication is relevant enough to be pulled into the discussion. In this book, he analyzes western frontier culture and he again makes use of the words of another field expert on the defining of the Western as a popular genre to then summarize in his own words the meaning of the Western. The late professor Peter Homans suggested to Cawelti that he should analyze the basic pattern of the Western in relation to its special cultural position. Homans also suggested that we define Westerns by attempting to understand it as “a unified narrative construction” (11). Homans’ method involves three main steps: 1) isolation of the characteristic elements, the setting, characters, events and themes of the Western; 2) analysis of the distinctive way in which Western organizes these elements into an ordered pattern or plot; and 3) a determination of the cultural significance of this pattern. These steps may be adopted later in our attempt at understanding *Blood Meridian*.

Cawelti finds these suggestions excellent. He briefly redefines his thoughts on popular genres. For Cawelti, they are “essentially structures of narrative constructions that carry out a variety of cultural functions in a unified way” (19). He says we can best define these genres in terms of paradigms for the selection of plots, characters and settings of such a sort that these narrative elements “not only create effective stories, but become endowed with certain aspects of collective ritual, game and dream” (19). To analyze these genres, he goes on to say, we must define them as narrative structures of a certain kind. This definition reminds us of his claims on Frye’s ideas and his own thoughts on genre and formula (see supra).
2.1.2 History

The Western can be put at the centre of tradition because yearning for the past is one of its main themes. It is a nostalgic genre, reminiscent of the time of the expansive, untamed American frontier at the borderline between civilization and wilderness. As one of the oldest, most characteristically American genres, the popularity of the Western has had its ups and downs though the most prolific period for Westerns was in the 1930s to 1960s. Chronologically speaking, the genre’s roots lay in the first half of the 19th century. Forerunners of the Western in American literature were the tales that sprung up at the frontier. The best known historical novel of this period is James Fenimore Cooper’s The Last of the Mohicans: a Narrative of 1757, which got its first publication in 1826. The book was the second of a series of five novels by Cooper called The Leatherstocking Tales, in which the same independent frontiersman, Natty Bumpo, also known as Leatherstocking, plays the main hero. Because the Western is a genre that dwells on the conflict between man and nature, the setting of the Western is always a key issue. Man had to conquer nature, in the form of hard life at the frontier, and, most of the time, himself as well. In pre-1850 times, the frontier was set at the Appalachian Mountains, and as the conquest moved further west of the Mississippi River, so did the setting of the tales.

Soon the Western became a more specialized genre. Circa 1850-1860, Western and frontier stories were printed as dime novels, early U.S. pulp fiction containing a variety of serial stories and articles. These weekly papers were enormously popular and particularly cheap because of their mass production and use of rather low quality paper, the predecessor of what is now the paperback. The novels that were written around that time also had a distinctive historical background influence. If you try to recall the most famous characters in Westerns you might know, the names you will come up with will all have been verified as actual people that were described in the stories between 1850 and 1900. Pioneer men, lawmen or outlaws like Buffalo Bill, Wild Bill Hickok, Billy the Kid or Jesse James are all familiar to us now, perhaps from older Westerns, but also from more recent Western novels, films or series in which they are still popular personae. These individuals gave an extra shine to the Western because of their extraordinary and charismatic personalities. It was only a matter of time before writers overseas would pick up on the potential of the genre. Most well-known exploit of this is German author Karl May. He made the Western novel huge in continental Europe and had a large part in bringing the adventure novel set in the American West to our parts of the world.
In the States, the recognition of the genre grew further when Owen Wister and Zane Grey, founding fathers of the Western as an actual literary genre, started publishing their milestone novels in the early 20th century. The rise of pulp magazines and the simultaneous boom of the Western film in the 1920s gave it another push, though the genre hadn't yet peaked at this point. *The Oxbow Incident* (1940) by Walter Van Tilburg Clark (with the eminent image of early American culture in its title, the oxbow; see also Thomas Cole’s painting “View from Mount Holyoke, Northampton, Massachusetts, after a Thunderstorm” or “The Oxbow”) was a novel that once again showed the immense possibilities for the future development of the Western. It was a more mature Western work with interesting psychological insights into the nature of violent men and the violation of the justice system in which they were supposed to believe most firmly. In literary criticism it is said that the genre peaked in the 1960s. Mostly due to the parallel popularity of the Western movies in that same decade, Western novels also reached their peak. And, because Western movies were overly exposed on television on account of their being so popular at the time, it was inevitable that after a while, people would become fed up with the genre. As the popularity of the Western genre in both mediums had risen simultaneously, so did the decline. Fewer and fewer readers were interested in its literature and by the late 60s the official burnout of the Western was official.

Louis L’Amour, who had been accepted as a Western author back in the 1940s, experienced a revival in the 1970s, as one of few writers of frontier stories to keep a loyal following. In ’84 he received the Presidential Medal of Freedom from the hands of Ronald Reagan, then president. In 1985, Larry McMurtry and Cormac McCarthy both published a monumental contemporary Western work. *Lonesome Dove* and *Blood Meridian* gave the Western back its sense of dignity, as a genre that was both refined and erudite. From that period, to the beginning of the 21st century, up until now 2011, the Western as a literary genre has not had the demand or readership it had received earlier. Media and publicity focused on other fashions in literature, and the Western caught the stamp of being an outdated genre. However, in recent cinema, with highly appreciated, big-budget Western or Western influenced films such as *There Will Be Blood* (2007), *Australia* (2008) or *True Grit* (2011), a new regard for the style has emerged. The original attractiveness of the genre appears to have come back in an up-to-date form. As the esteem of the Western had its best moments in the 1950s-1960s, when Western cinema was also big, the return of the Western in modern film must have the indirect capability of causing the return of Western literature as well.
2.1.3 Characteristics

The Western is a quintessential American genre in literature and film. The general approach to defining the Western genre is one where attention is given to story-telling though you can also find the Western in the different arts such as photography, paintings or sculptures. Western stories are most commonly set in the American West, and usually depicted in an idealized way. They are almost always set in the 19th century, generally between the antebellum period (pre-Civil War America) and the turn of the century. Many of the stories integrate the Civil War into the plot. Their time-setting may however extend back to the time of the American colonial period. The geographical setting includes not only American but also Mexican territory. Characters in Westerns are often drifters who roam from town to town in these territories, owning but a few possessions. They seem to need no more than the clothes on their back, a pistol and a horse. In 19th century life, things are reduced to simple elements, and in addition, the plots of Westerns are fundamentally simple too. Westerns embrace these simple elements to tell a story of morality.

Crucial knowledge is that in a Western, moral values are very different from those we have come to learn and respect in our contemporary society. Although maybe just a background feature to some, yet not unimportant to the Western as a whole, the way in which society is portrayed, is perhaps what truly defines and differentiates the genre from others. In science fiction stories, for example, dystopian societies are very popular, and in Westerns too we can find a general trend towards a specific type of society. Since accurate representation was never the point of the Western, this kind of glorified depiction of society is actually no more than a romanticized version of the part of American history on which Westerns are based. That part is when the West was yet to be won, a time of cowboys and Indians, of independent trailblazing communities that embraced a special code of honour. It was life in an era with a distinguished pioneering spirit that came to the fore. This free spirit brought with it the toleration of a fading of the boundaries of moral and law. Society in Westerns was often under rule of a different kind of law, with different sorts of principles that were held high, those between men, a form of hegemonic masculinity, not often as rational as in modern times, but more of an amalgam of

1 The Western may appear as exclusively American, but this is in fact not the case. “A Western is defined by an attitude toward life -the ‘complete life mode’, which is not dependent on the historical limits of the West in the United States” (Herald 16).
unspoken rules and unwritten laws. 19th century men had an incredible sense of honour and in some cases an overall violent attitude, which could for instance lead to quick pistol duels instead of trials based on rational principle.

Western tales usually revolve around the actions and adventures of a single cowboy or drifter. The most popular themes in such stories range from the conquest of the wilderness in the name of civilization, historically speaking the entire westward movement in North America, to stories in which feuds over land are fought out. Obviously, just as any genre, Western novels have multiple themes. In what follows, a short overview of some of the most consistently found themes is presented, together with their historical origins and one or more examples of books reflecting these themes or types. I will only pay attention to those themes that are to the purpose of the novel discussed in this dissertation. These themes and types were consulted in D.T. Heralds Genreflecting.

**Texas and Mexico**

The settling of Texas and the war with Mexico are a topic for many westerns. The Mexican-American war took place between 1846 and 1848 and started as a dispute over the appropriation of Texas. If the U.S. were to go through with the annexation of Texas, Mexico threatened to attack it. This move by the Americans was all part of the spirit of Manifest Destiny but shortly after the declaration of the Texas annexation in 1845 the act resulted in border warfare.

In *Blood Meridian* we follow the Glanton gang, a pack of hired gunfighters, who are on a mission to free the villages around the border of enemy Indians and Mexicans alike. On this mission of genocide the gang leaves a bloody mess in their trail. It is supposed to be part of American imperialism or a general craving for freedom and independence.

Another example of a book based on the special character of the border country and the battles with Mexico is Alan LeMay’s *The Unforgiven* (1957). The book was adapted into motion picture in the 1960 same-titled *The Unforgiven*, starring Burt Lancaster and Audrey Hepburn.

---

2 Other themes and types that *Blood Meridian* is less concerned with are: Wagons West and Early Settlement, Mormons, Railroads, Mining, Indian Captivities, Range War, Cattle Drive, Town Marshal, Romance, The Indian Today, Picaresque and the “Adult” Western.
The Army in the West

Closely related to the theme of the conflicts with Mexico are the Indian wars and campaigns to control the tribes. In Westerns using the Army in the West as a background, scouts or officers were often the main heroes. In classic Westerns these stories became descriptions of the life for men and horses, stories both realistic and romantic, the so called cavalry-and-Indian story. These were usually told from the perspective of the cavalry.

When looking for heroes in Blood Meridian, the most obvious hero is The Kid, because he is presented at the beginning of the book and remains in sight until the end. However, there has been debate about whether Judge Holden, who is the main antagonist of the novel, is not the real hero or anti-hero in this case. Although his actual appearance as a full character comes later in the story, he dominates the plot from then on. Regarding the Army in the West as a starting point for the novel, we need not look at either of these heroes but focus on the leader of the gang to which they are affiliated, ex-U.S. officer John Joel Glanton. His Glanton gang is based on historical facts and so John Joel Glanton too is considered part of American history. He was a 19th century American mercenary and former participant in the fight for the independence of Texas. As leader of the scalp hunting Glanton gang he was portrayed in Samuel Chamberlain’s memoir My Confessions: the Recollections of a Rogue (1846), which in turn was the main source and inspiration for Cormac McCarthy’s Blood Meridian. More often than not, history and myth are intertwined, and here as well, it was never made absolutely clear whether these portrayals of Glanton and his gang by Chamberlain are fact, fiction or perhaps both. Before joining the Glanton gang, The Kid was a member of another party of U.S. Army filibusters, still trying to fight the Mexican War. They were ambushed and slaughtered after entering Texas, but The Kid managed to get away.

An additional example of a well known Western novel depicting the military West is the suitably titled novel by Luke Short Ambush (1958). It tells the story of a troop of cavalry men in the 19th century U.S. Army trying to complete their mission of war in the face of Apache ambush. We recognize this story-line from the beginning of Blood Meridian, when the unit led by Captain White gets trapped. He and his men were also caught by surprise at night by Native forces, and eventually massacred. The sudden Indian attack is a clever way for the Indians to get an advantage over the white opponents. They lack the artillery but know the country better than most of those men do.
The Indian

The attitude towards Indians in tales based on The Indian as a protagonist provide a sharp contrast with the attitude toward the Native American common in many westerns. From the Indian perspective it is a more disturbing outcome than is seen in other Western stories. These are also full of detailed narrations containing historically based writings on Indian customs. Writers of these historical novels aimed for a certain degree of authenticity so some systematic investigation to establish facts was most necessary.

*Blood Meridian* draws on several Indian wisdoms also, such as how to survive in the desert, which is very interesting and McCarthy as well had to presumably do some research to pick up these kinds of facts. But, the more societal benefit of using The Indian as a protagonist is that it gives the Indian viewpoint in Westerns, in the past a rather rare thing to find.

Classic of Southwestern literature on the American Indian is Elliott Arnold’s *Blood Brother* (1950). The book was made into award-winning film *Broken Arrow* (1950) and is widely considered as the first Western to depict the Indians as friendly people.

The Hired Man on Horseback

Great hero of the West is the cowboy. Although appearing in almost every Western, he is seldom seen as a working man. Since cowboys were originally hard-working cattle herders, it is not surprising that the cowboy as a working man became a theme in Western stories. Shunning the image of the cowboy as a man making a decent living out of herding cattle in this kind of popular story, the cowboy had to become the complete opposite, a ruthless hired man on horseback. These were lonely, nomadic men, dragging with them a legendary status as gunfighters, but they could also be rude, dangerous and illiterate bad guys.

In *Blood Meridian* as well it is specifically mentioned that The Kid is a hired man on horseback and is illiterate. The Kid and the whole Glanton gang function as soldiers of fortune, taking out Indians on contract. Clarence E. Melford’s *Hopalong Cassidy* novel (1904) contained such a rough character. For the extremely popular *Hopalong Cassidy* films, the character was made into a clean-cut hero with a refined speech and sense of morality.
Black Cowboy
From early Westerns or the majority of popular Western stories readers would never have known that black cowboys existed. Several more recent Western novels do have black cowboys as protagonists, such as Henry Will’s *One More River to Cross* (1998).

*Blood Meridian* also contains clear descriptions of a black member of the Glanton gang they call Jackson the nigger. Almost comical is the fact that there is a white Jackson in the Glanton gang as well. The two do not get along and get into fight in which one of them is killed. The reader has to do his utter best to find out if it is the black or the white Jackson that survives the altercation. Sadly enough, there have been no Western novels portraying the fictional Mexican cowboy or Indian cowboy as leading characters.

Bad Men and Good
Hardly romantic or noble yet a very popular figure in many Westerns is the flawed hero. In the roughness of the frontier it is hard for a good man to remain good, at least if he wants to stay alive. He is restrained from his duty as an ever prevailing cowboy hero. This new breed of hero was always treated as a dramatic one in Westerns, though not always a stereotyped one, as in the following books: Zane Grey’s *Lone Star Ranger* (1915), E.L. Doctorow’s *Welcome to Hard Times* (1960) and W.R. Burnett’s *Bitter Ground* (1987).

What Judge Holden is preaching throughout *Blood Meridian* is along the same line of thought as the theme from good man to bad. If you want to survive, there is no other option than to kill. The cliché war-saying goes “kill or be killed”, and the Judge’s morbid and sinister words instigate the very idea of murder as a natural and justifiable cause. For him there is no difference between good or bad, right or wrong.

Boy into Man
The frontier was a demanding country, and boys had to prove their competence from an early age. Most of the Western’s heroes are young men, but in these books, they range from children to teenagers. The plot development of Westerns containing the theme of boy into man is in a way like the build-up in a Bildungsroman. The psychological aspect of such a Western, the self-development of the cowboy hero, follows a similar emotional and moral evolution.

The Kid, for whom the reader never learns his actual name (confer Clint Eastwood’s role as “The Man with No Name” in *The Good, the Bad & the Ugly*), goes through a series of events in
the book that forces him to become a man. In the book, he is from then on no longer named The Kid but The Man. Examples of other novels are David Wagoner’s *Where Is My Wandering Boy Tonight?* (1970) and Matthew Greg’s *The Further Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1983).

**The West Unromanticized**

The West Unromanticized portrays the darker side of the Western experience. These stories respect the literary tradition but are more violent and horrifying, not for the faint-hearted, with brutally realistic descriptions of incidents between cowboys and Indians.

By now, *Blood Meridian* is an obvious example of this category. It is also mentioned as such in Herald’s *Genreflecting*, and is generally considered a standard work for Westerns using The West Unromanticized as general theme.

Another classic example of the kind of novel that turned the Western on its head is Pete Dexter’s *Deadwood* (1986); though probably even more well-known is the HBO series *Deadwood* which was inspired by the *Deadwood* novel. It shows us a 19th century desolate town in complete chaos, trying to establish civilization whilst dealing with local warlords.

In summary, we can list some of the essentials of the Western as we have identified them thus far: set in the 19th century American West, portraying conquest of the wilderness, a simple plot of right and wrong, lawless dominantly male society, stories can be inspired by historical events and centre around the life of a cowboy drifter.

Other elements that will also become more evident in the further discussion of *Blood Meridian*:

- **Character roles**: the main character is the rugged cowboy type with a strong sense of justice. The main antagonist is the one who seeks out a confrontation with the protagonist. There is sometimes also a third main character, a gunslinger or reformed outlaw.

- **Setting**: the importance of the landscape, often isolated and bleak, used to support the action in the narration. Typically the setting is described in beautiful detail.

- **Action**: the action revolves around the cowboy wrangler. He sets out to complete an adventurous mission and help free innocent villagers from a lurking threat.
2.2 Myth of the Frontier

“Those who stand for nothing fall for anything.” This meaningful line you will find in any decent quotations book or on any self-respecting quotations page on the web. Alexander Hamilton, first U.S. Secretary of Treasury, Founding Father and American nationalist is famous for saying it. The powerful phrase tells us something about American tradition and culture. It illustrates the importance for Americans of having a clear position or opinion, an ideal point of view. If we extend this thought to the general common nature of Americans, we could say that they, as a people made one, are not difficult to distinguish from other nations’ people. And, they are also fairly easy to describe, a feature that doesn’t hold true for just any of the countries in the world. Would a person in Portugal even know how to begin to explain the difference between Swedish and Danish people? Could an African or a Chinaman easily describe what the Canadians are like? Characterizing an American is simple, and, more importantly, those characteristics are historically traceable. Inquisitiveness, that quick and inventive thinking, absolute individualism and an amazing feeling of freedom are just some of the traits that are acknowledged as being typically American, and that can be connected to the characteristics of the 19th century American frontier settlers. Nowadays, some of those American peculiarities are not always perceived with as much positiveness. Americans are a creative and progressive folk with high moral principles on the one hand, or they are basically people suffering from a superiority complex, religious freaks with an anti-government tradition disguised as freedom of belief and a healthy mistrust of government on the other.

As mentioned, part of these attributes stem from the time of the existence of the frontier. Historian Frederick Jackson Turner devoted his Turner Thesis to this subject. He first announced and underlined the importance of the frontier in his 1893 paper “The Significance of the Frontier in American history”. According to Turner the frontier is “the outer edge of the wave-- the meeting point between savagery and civilization” (xroads.virginia.edu). He highlights the battle at the frontier as the most important event in American history and explains it as that point in time from which the development towards American greatness and “exceptionalism” has sprung. The latter is a term that is mostly accompanied by the adjective “American”, as in “American exceptionalism”. It refers to the notion that America is the first new nation born out of revolution, different from any other nation in the world and driven by an ideology that stands for liberty, egalitarianism, individualism, populism, and laissez-faire.
In late 19th century America, Turner had enough material to form a thesis about the apparent inland expansionism. He claimed it most necessary to expand, and said it had everything to do with the happenings at the frontier and the spirit that was developed there. But, would this expansion be endless? There was no way of knowing at the time if and when the hunger for more land would be stilled. Because America was at that point not yet contemplating going overseas, nothing was mentioned on the possibility of it eventually happening. We know now that it did occur and when it did, that was for America once again a frontier that had to be conquered. As a result of America’s transatlantic undertakings resembling the struggle on the 19th century frontier, the terminology was picked up in the 20th century by several presidents. When those presidents or other high profile politicians wanted to go through with delicate tasks, and when they had to deliver a speech on foreign policy or even a business challenge, the rhetoric of the frontier continued (e.g. J.F. Kennedy’s New Frontier Speech). These new challenges, they would say, were “as new frontiers to be explored, conquered and made safe” (Duncan & Goddard 19).

So, we have come to a basic understanding of the frontier according to Turner, and have tried to explain the meaning of the myth in the modern age, but, to really bring the idea of the frontier into our time, the definitions and thoughts of Sara Spurgeon and also Annette Kolodny, professor in comparative cultural and literary studies, on frontier as well as myth, are very useful. Spurgeon sees myths as “what we wish history had been - a compressed, simplified, sometimes outright false vision of the past but a vision intended to serve a specific purpose in the present and, just as importantly, to bequeath a specific shape to the future” (Spurgeon 3). She says a whole lot with just the one sentence formal definition, but before going further into explaining what exactly is said, she quotes Annette Kolodny’s view on the frontier: “it is the meeting place between two or more cultures encountering each other for the first time, often in a landscape perceived as dangerous and unfamiliar to at least one of the cultures involved” (Spurgeon 7).

What we want to do is bring together Spurgeon’s definition of myths and Kolodny’s of the frontier and see what fresh understandings of the frontier myth they could give us. If we read Spurgeon’s words once or twice, it sounds a lot like the main principle Frederick Jackson Turner put forth in his explanation of the influence of the frontier. Jackson Turner claimed that the frontier and the attitude of individualism that was developed there had and will have its influence on the evolution of American society. He does mention some of the problems such as the atrocious conditions, the harshness or inhumane behaviour of the settlers, but focuses on the
hard times these men had to go through that shaped their whole being. What consequences these times would have on future generations of Americans was what fascinated Turner and other historians after him.

The frontier of the 19th century is used as an alibi for the actions and customs of Americans in the 20th century and probably further into the 21st century. They have become self-fulfilling prophecies as it were, and what Sara Spurgeon says in her own words about myths, that they are what people would want the past to be, is bordering on the same ideas Turner had on the influence of frontier. Its objective is to give a hint to the American citizen, to hand over knowledge of his cultural inheritance and get a clue on what it is that has shaped him up until this point in time. The myth of the frontier, as Kolodny (and again also Turner in his, less nuanced, words) says, is “the meeting place between two or more cultures for the first time”. It is almost certain that this “meeting between cultures” did not go without any difficulties or bloodshed, and the overcoming of the “dangerous and unfamiliar landscape” was not a task that was taken lightly. Yet these facts of the frontier would often be disregarded; America needed history to be mythologized, for its destiny would lie in the roots of these events.

2.3 The Revisionist or Anti-Western

The Western is a simplification, a feel good story thriving on the archetypical conflict of good versus bad. Its uniformity in plot and style gives us an impression of unanimity. American politics has often thrived upon the appreciation of unanimity to create a sense of patriotism. With an open mind it is easily noticed that there is a self-evident link between the Western and our conception of patriotism. Assuming that unanimity stands for patriotism, the opposite, diversity and scepticism, a form of subversion, must be on the other end of the twofold. An opposition that has brought about the creation of a revised Western. In this third and final point on the Western I will explain the meaning of “Revisionist Western” as opposed to the more general notion of the Western genre. Revisionist Western and Anti-Western will be used as synonyms throughout the text.

We have come to understand that the Western is a genre that is set in the American West and that embodies the spirit and the struggle of the frontier. We have also learned that the genre is easily identifiable due to a number of conventions found in the greater part of the literature.
These Western works share a certain setting, a particular kind of characters and even explicit values. The setting is as we have described it before: large stretches of bare desert along a small settlement, the perfect scene for a stand-off between courageous men who stand for law and order and the civilization they have brought to the untamed frontier. They fight those who stand for the exact opposite, trigger-happy outlaws, eager to keep their wild way of life, wanting to stand their ground against the taming of the West by any means necessary.

In the exploration of society in Westerns, and more precisely in the search for value-creation in the places described in Westerns, there is clearly a desperate yearning for civilization and law, the “eastern” values, often out of fear for the unknown factor of the frontier. Such areas need to be settled and set free from the element of surprise that the untamed land has unwillingly given them. With regards to feelings for others, besides the males who dominate the Westerns, we can be quite clear: women, Mexican and Indian characters are always downsized to meaningless beings only meant for the story’s background. Almost never will you see one of these types of persons play any role of substance.

The Revisionist Western was born out of feelings of criticism towards American society and American values. Feelings that started to grow more prominently in the 1960s, the age of youth, revolutionary thinking and fundamental change of American everyday life. This new awareness found an outlet in filmmaking. If traditional Western films symbolized the “old” way of thinking, celebrating the American lifestyle, filmmakers who took conventions used in the classic Western, turning them upside down, created a whole “new” kind of thinking and with that a new kind of Western, the Anti-Western. The Western was formerly seen as the standard-bearer of American “exceptionalism” and an important expression of everything American. With the anti-movement, national identity and ideology were questioned, and so the Western as an embodiment of American ideology was questioned as well. The Anti-Western put a mirror to American society and showed the audience the superior and often condescending manner of acting towards others. This suggests that Revisionist Westerns could preferably be read as films (or books) that oppose the established conventions of the traditional Western genre, and thus oppose established fundamentals of American society.

To conclude, we can say that the big idea of the Revisionist Western is to leave behind the traditional conventions of Westerns and use the opposition between the classic Western and the revised Western to question the established principles of the genre, and by extension to confront American ideology and society as a whole.
3. Cormac McCarthy’s *BLOOD MERIDIAN*

3.1 Cormac McCarthy

Penning down the biography of a writer who guards his privacy like Cormac McCarthy is not always a very easy or grateful task. There are very few relevant facts known to the general public about McCarthy’s life, he has never given any lectures on his work (“everything I have to say is there on the page” dixit McCarthy) and the number of interviews with him can be counted on the fingers of one hand. Only after winning the Pulitzer Prize for *The Road* (2006) was there a first televised interview with the 78-year old author on Oprah’s Book Club. The show was aired in June of 2007. It was however unable to live up to its high expectations that were mostly caused by the indisputable historical nature of the interview. Winfrey was said not to have gotten out of the interview its full potential. The peaking popularity of his books and how McCarthy feels about millions of people reading them were questions that created a rather long winded and dry conversation.

Most of the information I found was in a 1992 interview with him in *The New York Times*, the only interview to which he had ever agreed being published until then, by arts critic Richard B. Woodward. And there as well it is obvious, when you read what he has to say, that the writer does in fact enjoy a good talk, just not about himself. Still, his life and writings have caught the interest of many who read his books, and even those who don’t, perhaps more than any other living author of his category. McCarthy’s silence about himself has doubtlessly created a mystique that appears to have made him even more appealing.

The following account of his life is aimed to be restricted to the essentials and contains important connections with the writing of the novel *Blood Meridian*.

Cormac McCarthy was born in Rhode Island in 1933 but grew up just outside of Knoxville after his parents moved to Tennessee in 1937. His father, an attorney at law, began working there with the Tennessee Valley Authority, which he continued to do for over 30 years. McCarthy was originally named Charles after his father Charles Joseph but renamed himself later on after King Cormac MacArt of Ireland where the family’s ancestry lay. Raised as a Roman Catholic, the young McCarthy attended parochial school before entering the University of Tennessee in 1951.
where he majored in liberal arts. In ’53, McCarthy decided to join the Air Force, putting his university studies on hold. He was stationed for two years in Alaska where he hosted a radio show, but, after a total of four years with the service, he left and returned to university. He then dropped out for the second time and began writing novels in ’59, never actually finishing his degree. His writing career was however officially launched during those years in academic circles, with the publishing of two short stories and subsequently collecting two awards for creative writing in ’59 and ’60.

He left university for good now and moved to Chicago where he began writing his first novel *The Orchard Keeper* (1965). His personal life also found a new beginning as he married a fellow student of the University of Tennessee and settled with her in Tennessee. The marriage brought forth a son Cullen in ‘62 but stranded around the time of the publishing of *The Orchard Keeper*. McCarthy’s editor at Random House for *The Orchard Keeper* was Albert Erskine, who was also William Faulkner’s long-time editor. McCarthy has been paralleled with Faulkner and in the rare interviews with McCarthy he has on occasion mentioned Faulkner, leading us to believe he not only reads and respects the author Faulkner but maybe sees him as a literary source of inspiration.

For the following years, McCarthy, now a divorcee, explored other parts of the world outside of the United States after receiving several grants. He first went to Ireland in search of his Irish ancestors and met his second wife whilst on the trip. They married soon after. With the money of the Rockefeller Foundation Grant in ’66 the newly-weds travelled Europe before settling on Ibiza, at the time an island filled with artists from all over the world. There he completed his second novel *Outer Dark* (1968). The couple returned to America in ’67, mostly at the request of his wife, and moved to Rockford, Tennessee. In ’73, his third novel *Child of God* was published. The book was inspired by actual events in Sevier County, his former home in Tennessee before having moved abroad. While the first two novels received overall positive reviews, this third book caused rather mixed reactions. In ’74-’75 McCarthy worked on the screenplay of the film *The Gardener’s Son* (1977) which was again based on actual historical events, this time occurring in the state of South Carolina. These works showed some of the potential that the formula of McCarthy’s writing, namely a combination of fact and fiction, had to offer. It was a direction that would later evolve and culminate in the writing of his magnum opus novel *Blood Meridian or The Evening Redness in the West* (1985).
In 1976 the author moved to El Paso, Texas where he would stay for 20-something years. He had split up with his second wife two years earlier and decided not to stay in Tennessee. This point in time was unmistakably a critical phase in his personal life because it affected the nature of his literary work. Most likely, the content and of course the setting of his novels changed on account of the author changing locations. Although it is already unthinkable for McCarthy to write about land that he is unfamiliar with, it is also fair to assume that if the writer hadn’t moved to Texas, the novel Blood Meridian would not have been thought up. Before beginning to write Blood Meridian, he published a fourth novel, Suttree (1979), the only novel to seem strongly autobiographical. The book was in some way a transgression between two periods in his life, which resulted in a long and conclusive story containing amongst others two characters in a dysfunctional father-son relationship. But, it was also a humorous and inventive book, sometimes Ulysses-like in structure and language.

The events that he had gone through in his personal life and the work that McCarthy had delivered in his profession as a writer seemed to lead to what is now considered a turning point in his career, the monumental novel of the mythic West, Blood Meridian. It is widely regarded as his most accomplished work and the ultimate proof of McCarthy’s story-telling abilities. The book, praised for its magnificent language, is heavily based on actual historic events and contains numerous cross-references to other major works such as Herman Melville’s Moby Dick (1851) and the Bible. Notwithstanding the magnitude the novel would have in the literary world later on, the book did not get much attention around the time of its publication. When Albert Erskine retired, McCarthy changed publishers, going from Random House to Alfred A. Knopf. There he began to get more media exposure and it was also then that he permitted the sole interview up until then with the New York Times in 1992 (see supra). His first novel with Alfred A. Knopf, All the Pretty Horses (1992), was the first volume of The Border Trilogy and an immediate hit with the larger reading public. The Border Trilogy consist of three Western novels written over different periods of time ranging in plot from a romantic exploration in All the Pretty Horses over a coming-of-age story in The Crossing (1994) to a binding together of the previous two separate tales in the third and final volume Cities of the Plain (1998). McCarthy now finally caught

---

3 McCarthy has cited in the past Moby-Dick as his favorite book while criticizing the work of authors such as Henry James who he regards as avoiding the larger and darker themes of life.
the attention of the public and with that the wider readership that had been missing in the past. He still insisted on guarding his privacy all the same and kept on writing.

Around 1998 he married his third wife and they had a son John who would later be an inspiration for the novel *The Road* in which once again a father-son relationship is the central dynamic for the story. The family has also relocated to Sante Fe, New Mexico where they still reside today. The book *No Country for Old Men* (2005) is another example of the research and knowledge of the land McCarthy is used to obtaining before creating an environment to build a chronicle on. New Mexico is known for its drug trafficking and violent gang-related wars. *No Country for Old Men*, adapted into motion picture by the Coen Brothers in 2007, follows the connected lives of three main protagonists in the aftermath of such a drug deal gone badly wrong at the border between Texas and Mexico. His latest book *The Road* won international praise and deals with the issue of climate change, without dwelling on any scientific details of the matter. The novel shows us the end of modern civilization delivered in the form of a post-apocalyptic world. There seems to be an immense shortage of gasoline and food, and thugs, cannibals and other dark figures cross the path of the protagonist father and son on their journey to the sea. Environment and terrorism are the kind of present-day themes McCarthy is known for in his more recent work, but he has never ceased to lose sight of the larger theme of life and death.

The author is currently at work on a new novel containing for the first time a female protagonist and has already revealed some of the plot, saying in a 2009 interview with *The Wall Street Journal* for the promotion of the film *The Road* that “it has to do with a brother and sister. When the book opens she’s already committed suicide, and it’s about how he deals with it. She is a very interesting girl.” He is also stated to have said in the interview that it will be a long book, confirming his aversion to short stories: “Anything that doesn’t take years of your life and drives you to suicide hardly seems worth doing”. This classic McCarthy remark leads us straight back to *Blood Meridian*, certainly the most time-absorbing work of his oeuvre.

### 3.2 Blood Meridian

As time progressed, the image of the West became increasingly romanticized. This image is carried by the figure of the American pioneer and trailblazer, an exalted representation of honour, strength, pride, loyalty and freedom, materialized in literature by the cowboy adventurer. With
Blood Meridian, Cormac McCarthy brings realities of the American Old West to the reader’s attention. He adroitly takes apart these myths of the West by denying the establishment of right and wrong. In his graphically rich but dark and realistic portrayal of the violence and depravity that came with the westward expansion, McCarthy spawns an anti-myth, mirroring the image of the idealized Old West. Through an extraordinary use of language and the total absence of even a single hero, an entirely new, ruthless and cruel world is made up. Readers are forced to consider how the construct of the American frontiersman and his role in history is altered.

Character roles seem harder to define in Blood Meridian. We need to consider the existence of primary figures in the novel even though the standard distinctions between protagonists and antagonists are missing. The main character, traditionally a strong and morally upright cowboy, is played in Blood Meridian by the troubling character of The Kid, a 14-year-old Tennessean. His principal opponent is Judge Holden, an evil and murderous figure. Other principal characters are those of the scalp-hunting gang leader John Joel Glanton and gang members Toadvine and ex-priest Tobin. The focus in the story is often on the landscape instead of on the characters. A typically bleak setting, reminiscent of hell. What is described is an open desert landscape onto which a seemingly endless journey is cast, past demonic figures and things both living and dead. The dominant action in the story revolves around the gang’s mission to rid the state of Indians, and war is the central topic of the novel.

3.2.1 The Characters and Their Mythic Roles

Arguably, the most important element of a work of fiction is character development. Without it, a story is bound for failure. For a writer, designing the many aspects of a character’s development is almost like a craft. Creating a character’s alignment, his merits, flaws and motivations takes time and patience, but when done properly, the reward is a life-like figure that can capture a reader from beginning to end. Unfortunately for readers of Westerns, most of the novels in the Western tradition rely more on shoot-outs than on character development. The characters in Westerns have however always had a symbolical meaning. The part of the protagonist can for instance be a symbol for a region’s promise or its future.

Throughout the text of Blood Meridian it becomes clear that the major characters have no apparent significance of their own nor do they seek any closure in the story. This lack of
character depth, found through standard character analysis, gives room to the highly symbolical and mythical role that the protagonists of the story play. Fascination for these roles has motivated the different approach to the analysis of the novel and its characters.

As was already stated in the introduction part, the methodology to the analysis of Blood Meridian is to follow the characters of The Kid and Judge Holden over the course of the novel by selecting specific fragments. In the analysis of The Kid especially, the plan will be to find out how he as a hero is incomparable to heroes in classic Westerns. Furthermore it is the intention to reveal the weaknesses of the Western genre and discover in doing so how the myth of the West is exposed. The analysis of The Judge will be done from a slightly different angle, though the primary intention to uncover Western myths stays. Because Judge Holden is to many the most memorable character of the novel, a literary villain “worthy of Shakespeare, Iago-like and demoniac, a theoretician of war everlasting” in the words of American writer and literary critic Harold Bloom, he has become the central topic for most of the academic articles on Blood Meridian. Even though it would be much easier to simply restate what has been written on the character of The Judge, I will aim for a critical dialogue with the material at hand, without denying its expert character. Moreover I see a chance to describe some of the interactions between the two characters that have not been fully explored and questioned in the scholarship on Cormac McCarthy and Blood Meridian.

We have considered The Kid and Judge Holden as the two principal characters in the novel, and because of this, the decision was made to use these two figures as umbrella instruments for the analysis of the novel. The ambition is to keep The Kid and The Judge in our argumentation and try not to divert too much from the analysis of the two characters. But, it is unavoidable that there will be parts of analysis where there is no full connection with The Kid or The Judge. In the choice for fragments in the novel to be discussed, it is the objective to consider as much of the novel as possible, taking into account two specific criteria: first, the extracts should have enough spread, meaning that there will for instance not be five fragments taken from the first hundred pages or so, and then only two from the last hundred pages (if done otherwise I will of course motivate that choice); second, the excerpts need to be suitable for the deconstruction of the Western myth, meaning that they ought to have a typical Western quality in that they describe either fights or other acts of violence, or contain descriptions of a Western panorama or share encounters with local villagers. For the fragments in the part on The Judge
this is also the case but to a lesser extent because there I was mostly concerned with selecting parts where The Judge is speaking.

Because the samples are chosen after considering these criteria, the element of arbitrariness is to a certain extent reduced, making our choices less random. There are however still a large number of other meaningful sections that could have been chosen. Our choice of fragments should thus not be perceived as wholly flawless. Also the order of the fragments does not always follow the chronological order of the book.

3.2.1.1 The Kid

The Kid is the main protagonist of the story. He is introduced in the beginning of the novel as an abandoned 14-year-old savage child. McCarthy informs us that “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” (McCarthy 3). A metaphorical egg of violence is brooding inside The Kid, waiting to hatch. It nurtures the violent nature that was given to him at birth since he is merely the next part of a cyclical chain. Before him there had been violence and after his death there will be more violence. Violence that he cannot escape and will also not be able to shake in the future passages of his life. Even if The Kid has an inherent violence that he cannot control, he, ex-priest Tobin and The Kid’s former partner Toadvine seem the only major characters in the book who carry any resemblance of normal moral development. The Kid shows that he is willing to help others (at one point in the story he stitches one of Tobin’s wounds, and later he will help remove an arrow from a wounded man’s leg) while the rest of the gang, with Judge Holden as an instigator, mock the very thought of helping injured weaklings like Tobin. Compassion and generosity would create a dependency relationship and with that a social hierarchy which is a typical feature of the traditional Western. This is thus undermined in Blood Meridian as there is no hierarchy at all, not even between things and beings.

Blood Meridian begins as an oddly disturbed coming-of-age novel, following the experiences of the young delinquent known only as “the kid”. When The Kid falls in with John Glanton’s group of outlaws, the narrative’s focalization is retracted from The Kid’s point of view and stretched as the happenings of Glanton’s gang become the central action of the story. While along the way The Kid’s character is formed, the horrendous events that follow in the development of the novel, the killing, raping and scalp hunting committed by Ganton’s gang, are
essentially de-personalized through the use of pronoun “they” instead of the more personal “I” form for the telling of the story. Also through the choice for the unholy figure of Judge Holden as the story’s dominant narrative voice, an effect is created that makes these beastly acts an almost amoral issue of which there is no judgement at all. The manner in which said events are conveyed also have a troubling effect on the reader as he is made to question his own judgment of the matter. For the greater part of the story’s central plot, The Kid’s own actions are thus absorbed by the gang’s “they” because The Kid can find no way of breaking out of the gang’s seemingly contagious violence and continuous thirst for war. Evidently, the encounters The Kid has together with Glanton’s gang have an immense impact on his personality making him evolve from a kid to a man.

Although just a young boy, we will learn that The Kid already has a certain maturity about him. He carries an intrinsic violence in him and knows about death and other “secrets” a child is normally kept from. Secrets about the world, about life and death and living that can permanently change a young person. A very similar way of acting and thinking we find in the boy from The Road, who is also confronted with death at a young age. Another striking resemblance between The Kid in Blood Meridian and the boy in The Road is their namelessness. Why would stories with such special content have nameless protagonists? The characters in Blood Meridian are not explored in the customary sense because “as actors in the myth, their individualities are less important than the roles they are playing” (Spurgeon 25). The hero’s face is interchangeable, therefore The Kid does not need a proper name. Meaning resides solely “in the actions the characters take and the power of their story to shape the world of those who hear it” (25). Contrary to the well-known iconic figures of mythic American frontier stories, characters in Blood Meridian seek no closure, nor is it their aim to create any kind of order in the chaos of history. Instead they try to unfold the chaos of history and lay bare its true origins. Myths about the past have been made up like this, with the intention to develop in the mind an absolute order for all things gone by and all things to come. The character of The Kid is part of the uncovering of such myths in Blood Meridian. His adventures in the novel make us reconsider the winning of the West and the influence of the experiences at the frontier on the development of American character.

From early in the story The Kid is described as a character far from virtuous or upright. The year in which the story begins is 1849, the setting eastern Tennessee where the motherless Kid runs away at fourteen only to find himself as far west as Memphis and eventually St-Louis,
New Orleans a year later. Once there he does no more than work, drink and fight. Later in the story he will keep rivalling adults in “his capacity for brutality” (Kollin 565). The Kid is clearly not a symbol for the region’s promise (confer supra) but serves instead as “an allegorical figure for a depraved America – a youthful nation”, Kollin states (565). If he is nothing like the cowboy figure with his simple meaning known from classic Westerns then to what purpose is the character of The Kid? As said, he is purely an instrument for the writer, used to shape a counter-history, a revision of the classic Western story.

In the beginning of the text we get a description of The Kid’s personal history. The narration of his life is written in a fashion that reminds us of children’s literature with its simplified sentence structure and absence of character or event analysis.

See the child. He is pale and thin, he wears a thin and ragged linen shirt. He stokes the scullery fire...

At fourteen he runs away. He will not see again the freezing kitchen-house in the predawn dark...

A year later he is in Saint Louis. He is taken on for New Orleans aboard a flatboat.

The style of the narrative is emblematic here for the innocence and naivety of youth. Obsession with the figure of youth has made it a central theme in Anglo-American literature since the 19th century (Kollin 567). The most famous instance of this theme in American literature is Huck Finn, of which The Kid is a corrupted reversal according to several critics (567). Readers and critics of Blood Meridian have sometimes compared the novel to and put it in the same class as Mark Twain’s Huckleberry Finn (1885) and Herman Melville’s Moby-Dick (1851), because of their strikingly similar protagonists. Although Huckleberry Finn and Moby-Dick are comparably essential books by masters of American literature, The Kid is more of a twisted version of Huck Finn and Ishmael than an actual analogous character.

McCarthy worked with the figure of a young child or man in most of his work but contrary to other writers he is interested in rethinking the authentic and unspoiled worldview a character of youth has to offer. In Blood Meridian this tradition of youth is made into a parody as we can read from the opening lines (see above). An unwanted child that is no longer unaffected by the corruption of the outside world but is “as tainted and immoral as the Old World against which it defines itself” (Kollin 565) is presented to us. After The Kid’s first steps in life have
been fully introduced, the overall tone of the story changes drastically as The Kid seems more and more removed from his original position as a young boy. He has witnessed and become part of the harshness of his surroundings and the narrative style is only responding to this. From an immature and rudimentary style to a dryer, more developed turn of phrasing.

Now further into the story, The Kid finds himself apprehended by Mexican officials and put in jail. On the open courtyard of the jail there is a wall where a few young boys lean over to try and taunt the inmates by urinating on them. The men return the favour by throwing rocks up at the boys.

All day small boys perched on the walls and watched them by shifts and pointed and jabbered. They’d walk around the parapet and try to piss down on sleepers in the shade but the prisoners kept alert. Some at first threw stones but the kid picked one from the dust the size of an egg and with it dropped a small child cleanly from the wall with no sound other than the muted thud of its landing on the far side. (75)

Whereas readers would normally be drawn to the character of a child, feeling pity for it, these children are fully stripped of their innocence and have lost every form of appeal. The young boys leaning over the wall as well as The Kid are described in such an unsentimental manner, unlike the way in which children are usually treated in classic Westerns or other genres for that matter, that we are no longer able to consider the mythical values of The West to be believable. The fundamental elements of The Kid’s personality had been corrupted from the start, as he was born with violence, and here again he is portrayed as a dangerous individual despite his youthful age. Of course the heroes in classic Westerns use violence also, but it serves a greater cause. Violence in classic Westerns always has the approval of the reader and if the hero commits an act of violence, readers do not witness it. Kollin argues that “McCarthy’s use of violence thus complicates the tradition of the Western hero”. The way in which The Kid handles himself is totally incompatible with the stature of a cowboy hero, making it impossible to remain sympathetic with The Kid as the novel’s principal hero. When The Kid uses violence, it is there for everyone to see it and this is not the case with the traditional Western heroes. For if readers would witness what the hero commits, the character “might lose his heroic status” (Calder 123). As Jenni Calder points out, there is a strict code of decency, courage and loyalty, “not just for their own sake but because they are the things that make life bearable” (176). The Western has in
fact relied on the construct and the establishment of a cultural hero, a hero like in Owen Wister’s *The Virginian* who has a certain charisma and boyish charm. This hero has no rough edges to his personality, and if he did, these would be smoothed to remain sympathetic with readers. Over the years however, these types of heroes have developed from the adolescent and rather innocent hero to a more adult hero. By rethinking the innocence of the Western hero, Kollin says, focusing in particular on the figure of the child, McCarthy intervenes in these understandings of the genre with the character of The Kid. What the novel does is “encourage us to rethink the problems posed by Westerns, arguably the most imperial of all American genres” (Kollin 568). This rethinking of the problems posed by Westerns begins with reshaping its main characters. The hero, in the form of The Kid here, has in essence become a perversion of the traditional cowboy hero.

Sara Spurgeon explains that “by uncovering the most ancient bones underlying these myths and using them to construct a new mythic vision of history, McCarthy is deliberately deconstructing the imperialist aims and justifications of the old myths while disrupting assumptions about the ideas and identities they were intended to uphold” (Spurgeon 19). It is those “identities” of which Spurgeon speaks that are particularly interesting in the context of the analysis of The Kid. The identity that we as readers are assumed to expect has been radically altered to an identity on which we cannot rely. This causes us to distrust the character of The Kid instead of identifying with it and eventually embracing it. Besides the disruption of ideas and identities in the text there is also the plain fact that we have no access to the thoughts or feelings of The Kid or any of the other characters, which again complicates our connection to these characters. Although the writing in *Blood Meridian* is rich, the focus is never on one of the characters. It could easily be said that in *Blood Meridian* there is no real protagonist, not even The Kid. Only for analysis’ sake do we try to lift from the text the character of The Kid to get an idea of his role in the entirety of the novel.

The following passage is an extract from the novel that shows exactly the “new mythic vision of history” Spurgeon speaks of in *Exploding the Western*. It sheds a new light on the old myths. The scene is just after the one where The Kid strikes a young boy off a wall with a “egg-sized stone”. He and the other prisoners have been riding under escort for five days through the desert when the sergeant of the expedition decides to enter a city that is set in a valley behind a mountain gap.
They entered the city in a gantlet of flung offal, driven like cattle through the cobbled streets with shouts going up behind for the soldiery who smiled as became them and nodded among the flowers (..) and among the niches in the carved façade hard by the figures of Christ and the apostles (..) about them flapped on the wind the dried scalps of slaughtered Indians strung on cords. They passed old alm-seekers by the church door with their seamy palms outheld and maimed beggars sad-eyed in rags and children falling asleep in the shadows with flies walking their dreamless faces. Small orphans were abroad like irate dwarfs and fools and sots drooling and flailing about in the small markets of the metropolis and the prisoners rode past the carnage in the meatstalls and the waxy smell where racks of guts hung black with flies and flaying of meat in great red sheets now darkened with the advancing day and… (76)

This goes on for a while. It is the type of passage that sometimes gives the book the feeling of being one long descriptive narrative. McCarthy spends great effort in creating moods and atmospheres in his description of places. These are not just empty illustrations of his abilities but facilitate our comprehension of history as he has rewritten it. The beginning of the description brings to mind the image of victorious soldiers entering a town under loud applause of the townsmen and women who are grateful for their coming. While the passage initially starts with the happy laughter of locals, and beauty in the form of flowers and religious iconography, this joyful mood is soon repressed as we are made aware of the Indian scalps the party has brought with them. The party then goes deeper into town and descends into a rancid and dark place full of “sad-eyed beggars” and “dwarflike orphans”. In terms of the original Western myth, a description like this in a classic Western would be one of a cowboy coming to a settlement in the desert where he receives a warm welcome and has a comfortable arrival. The first part of the description brings to mind that familiar image, but then the image becomes unfamiliar and strange, leaving an unwanted feeling of distress caused by the repulsiveness of the village and its inhabitants. It is portrayed in such detail that there is no choice but to see the brutal reality of life in such a village. Even though that may be quite unpleasant, we as readers get a full visual experience of it, as if there is no control over the amount of realism. A description of Glanton’s gang horse riding through the desert later in the text says it all:

Under the hooves of the horses the alabaster sand shaped itself in whorls strangely symmetric like iron filings in a field and these shapes flared and drew back again,
resonating upon that harmonic ground and then turning to swirl away over the playa. As if the very sediment of things contained yet some residue of sentience. As if in the transit of those riders were things so profoundly terrible as to register even to the uttermost granulation of reality (McCarthy 260).

The passage of the expedition entering a Mexican village can also be seen as an alternate version of Jesus triumphant entry into Jerusalem. Like the arrival of the expedition, Jesus and the apostles’ revelry did not last either, when Jesus was arrested, tried and put on the cross to die. On this occasion, because it is still early in the book, The Kid does not enter Mexican territory as a free man, since he is under the control of the Mexican authorities after having been arrested. The arrest was made around the time The Kid had joined the scalp-hunting party of Captain White. The group, led by Captain White, was ambushed in the desert and almost completely annihilated by Indians. The Kid survived but had to make an ultimate quest through the desert to finally arrive in a town far away from familiar country and then be arrested there. The Kid’s quest has been compared to Jesus’ journey through the desert in the way the journey is described. This confirms our belief that the entry of the party of prisoners led by Mexican officials in that desert village is also an adapted version of a Biblical story. There are numerous descriptions like this in the text that are written in a religious language. These are not your typical description of a real landscape but instead describe “some kind of primitive, hyperbolic hell”, Holmberg claims, in which a “neomythical” zone is created (150). Neomythical meaning that a new approach to an ancient topic is constituted, and out of this approach a space has been cut out that is both real-world and otherworldly, unreligious and religious. The narrative shows Texas and Mexico, but the language says Old Testament. McCarthy has created this peculiar, undefined zone in Blood Meridian. Holmberg says he “located a biblically inscribed hell in the middle of Texas” (150), as is illuminated in one of the ex-priest’s speeches to The Kid:

Where for aught any man knows lies the locality of hell. For the earth is a globe in the void and truth there’s no up nor down to it and there’s men in this company besides myself seen little cloven hoofprints in the stone clever as a little doe in her going but what

---

4 I have found no tangible evidence for this assumption, but there are so many other descriptions and scenes in the novel that carry a religious connotation or that have a Biblical reference that it is my interpretation that McCarthy was knowingly or unknowingly mimicking Jesus’ triumphant entry into Jerusalem.
little doe ever trod melted rock? I'd not go behind scripture but it may be that there has been sinners so notorious evil that fires coughed em up again and I could well see in the long ago how it was little devils with their pitchforks had traversed that fiery vomit for to salvage back those souls that had by misadventure been spewed up from their damnation onto the outer shelves of the world. Aye. It's a notion, no more. But someplace in the scheme of things this world must touch the other. (137)

Assigning the surroundings described in the fragment above appears to be somewhat tough. Is it the world of a Western or is it a biblical world? The environment shares characteristics of both. Only in a postmodern context can such an overlapping of two worlds be thought up successfully. How the ex-priest tries to grasp the idea of a real and “neobiblical” world touching each other is indeed hyperbolic, but, as Holmberg correctly indicates, is this not the reality of McCarthy’s West? While we have been arguing that Blood Meridian is a more real view on how the West was won, with The Kid as one of the main helpers to unravel the myth of the West, it is still a story that can hardly be categorized as pure realism. The notion of a devil-like figure such as Judge Holden, running around in West Texas, is only possible in the outlandish world created in Blood Meridian. Due to the original and real life setting (with its mentioning of real Western cities and regions ranging from San Antonio to San Diego), and the chronological positioning in the mid-nineteenth century West, the story may at first seem difficult to read as completely imagined. And in fact the story starts in a more real world, the world of Texas, but then leaves that world and enters into a “quasi-unimaginable land of the post-apocalypse” (Holmberg 150).5 This world has to be in the West because McCarthy’s stories never go anywhere else, but it is not the world of the Western. In the world of the Western there are moral codes people live by and in this dim world there isn’t even the idea of morality. In Blood Meridian there is no trace of a God and no definite distinction between things and beings, The Kid and the gang are left in this world without order becoming strangely similar to soulless things like rocks, unlike the social hierarchy found in traditional Westerns:

5 The Good, the Bad & the Ugly is one of the only stories where we get a similar grim view of the Western landscape as in Blood Meridian. The reason for it looking unlike the American West is because the film was shot in Spain and ironically enough this relates back to Blood Meridian’s creation of an undefined West as a zone of juxtaposed realities.
The very clarity of these articles belied their familiarity, for the eye predicates the whole on some feature or part and here was nothing more luminous than another and nothing more enshadowed and in the optical democracy of such landscapes all preference is made whimsical and a man and a rock become endowed with unguessed kinships (McCarthy 261).

Going back to the story, The Kid had left the desert along with the accompanying party of Mexicans and went into town where he was set free under certain conditions from his jail-cell together with his jail-mate Toadvine. The pair had to become part of the state’s new plan to get rid of the Indians living there so they join the Glanton gang. The Kid and the gang will have multiple similar arrivals in settlements in the desert like the one The Kid had visited before as a prisoner of the Mexicans. Bearing in mind our initial idea of Blood Meridian as a comment on American imperialism we see a resemblance between the arrival of The Kid and Captain White’s party of filibusters, or The Kid and Glanton’s gang, and the arrival of American troops in foreign countries. American soldiers entering enemy territory to set free the local villagers are most often described in an idealized way. We are supposed to believe that they are welcomed there with open arms by the inhabitants of the country the Americans are invading, that those people are grateful for the arrival of the Americans and the supplies they have brought, but also the moral values they bring with them that are so desperately needed by the barbarous and uncivilized folks. In reality however, we have come to learn that Americans, when entering nations like Iraq, Afghanistan or Pakistan, have tremendous difficulty in gaining the trust of native citizens. Like in Iraq, when Iraqi people even stated that it was better living under dictator Saddam Hussein than with an American military presence, that they wished the Americans hadn’t come to their country. Or like when we saw on the news how Pakistanis were protesting on the streets carrying signs that said “number one terrorist in the world: USA”. There are a lot of these anti-American feelings in the countries the U.S. wants to help redevelop. America is so wealthy and has such enormous military strength that they feel they have to do something good with it. But, because of America’s blatant disregard for other populations they have incurred the dislike of the communities they intend to help and of course of the nations that form a threat to the U.S., as
the saying goes “Be nice to America or we bring democracy to your country”. To give an example of America’s disregard, the American CIA chief has recently accused Pakistan of being incompetent, and of withholding information on Osama Bin Laden’s whereabouts. Pakistani people on their part were insulted by the U.S.-team’s mission to kill Bin Laden because they weren’t notified in advance. They also claimed the raid was a violation of their sovereignty and this ultimately caused the current troubled relationship between both countries. The positive images of people celebrating the death of Bin Laden we get to see in the media are thus ways to keep the myth of the West, the national mythology as it were, alive. In a novel like Blood Meridian where the aim is to deconstruct that very mythology, myths cannot become reality without the subsequent destruction of that mythology. If ever a neomythic narrative were to distort the historic West, it would look something like McCarthy’s Blood Meridian (Holmberg 152). The continued conflict between facts in the form of history and the fictive narration of the novel, between the Biblical undertone and the mythological overtone, has the air of a profound irony. Because the landscape upon which the figures of Blood Meridian are placed is a historical and biblical desert, this concurrently commends and weakens the somewhat senseless belief found in the classic Western that any land is ever unsettled. We will go further on this argument in the discussion of Judge Holden.

The story and its main characters work to unravel traditional notions of the Western while simultaneously allowing the use of Western features, making it both a Western and an anti-Western novel. It is necessary to understand that as a consequence a realm is created that is both historical and apocalyptic, the future is foretold in the past as the “child is the father of the man”. The Kid has indeed become somewhat of a prophetical figure in the book, as his life is a recollection of the past and a foreshadowing of the future. A complex structure of national history and myth is built in this postmodern interpretation of the Western. Postmodern on account of the novel drawing from sources of the past. It takes a popular genre, subverts it and says: Look what we’ve done.

Crossing into unknown territory is basically a sign of crossing the border between civilization and savagery. The image of crossing the (Mexican) border is used in Blood Meridian

---

6 I got this saying from an interview with Robert Fisk in Vacature Magazine that appeared on 26/03/2011. In the interview he was quite critical of America’s foreign policy and more precisely America’s priorities in the War on Terror.
for the same purpose, but there it is also symbolical for the beginning of the spree of violence led by Judge Holden and John Glanton. Their crossing the border, like that of Captain White and his men, and the slaughter of Mexicans and Indians that follows, serves as a historical and political comment on American imperialism. Glanton and his gang become “alien and savage, not because they cross the Mexican border, but because they cross some other, more metaphysical border toward which, it is implied, they have been travelling all along” (Spurgeon 64). So, rather than becoming savage by entering Mexico, as was initially stated, they “seem to bring savagery to Mexico, dragging it in their wake in the antithesis of the civilizing progress of Turner’s frontiersman” (64). The suggestion is made that Americans in their quest for democracy have set out to cross other uncivilized nations with the intention to bring civilization and freedom. However what they have actually done is bring the very thing they are there to undo. The figure of the frontiersman as an inventive and moral character with good intentions towards the unfamiliar land he has entered is perverted in Blood Meridian. Captain White, John Glanton or Judge Holden are no pioneering men. They have clearly come to Mexican territory for their own cause, their own personal goal of getting money in hand for the collected scalps, or simply because they get pleasure from war like Judge Holden. In the course of all this, the character of The Kid is one of the only to uphold a certain sense of morality. Although he has indulged in violence to others as well, he is the one who is conscious about his acts which tells us that he is still human, a moral being. The others in the gang, besides the ex-priest and Toadvine, have lost their humanity to become demonic figures, with The Judge, a Satan-like character, as their leader from hell.

I have picked out two final scenes to be discussed as illustrations of the uncovering of the Western myth. To conclude the part on The Kid there will definitely be a discussion of the ending chapter of the novel in which The Kid finally shows real indications of wanting to stop the “mindless violence” that has haunted him all his life.

The first of two scenes is taken from chapter eight in the novel, and because it is a rather long passage, it is cut up into two separate fragments. Toadvine, The Kid and the rest of the gang have taken a pause from their mission and entered a cantina to sit down for a little drink and possibly a bit of entertainment:

He (The Kid) was standing like the others with his back to the bar and he looked over the room. At a table in the far corner men were playing cards by the light of single tallow
candle. Along the wall opposite crouched figures seeming alien to the light who watched the Americans with no expression at all. There's a game for ye, said Toadvine. Play monte in the dark with a pack of niggers. A man was shuffling toward them out of the gloom. He had a bottle under his arm and he set it on the tiles with care together with his cup and spoke to the barman and the barman brought him a clay pitcher of water. He turned the pitcher so that the handle of it stood to his right and he looked at the kid. He was old and he wore a flatcrowned hat of a type no longer much seen in the country and he was dressed in dirty white cotton drawers and shirt. You are Texas? he said. The kid looked at Toadvine. You are Texas, the old man said. I was Texas three year. He held up his hand. The forefinger was gone at the first joint and perhaps he was showing them what happened in Texas or perhaps he merely meant to count the years. (108)

We get in the excerpt above yet another common scene known from the traditional Western. It is once again adopted in Blood Meridian to display the lie that the Western myth is. The so called “bar-scene”, when a cowboy enters a bar or tavern to sit down, have some whiskey and play cards gives the audience that typical Western Americana feel. This particular scene’s typicality however is interrupted by the all-embracing hardness of the backdrop. A darkened bar with eerie bar goers creeping up along the walls contrasts with the American cool with which bars in Westerns are normally described. The scene is also rather vulgar and gruesome due to its explicit language and content. Firstly in the way Toadvine addresses The Kid about the black men he could play cards with, calling them “niggers”, then in the way the old Mexican man tells about how he spent some time in Texas and while doing so shows one of his lost fingers. The scene goes on as the old Mexican speaks again:

You are sociedad de guerra. Contra los barbaros. Toadvine didnt know. He looked like some loutish knight beriddled by a troll. The old man put a phantom rifle to his shoulder and made a noise with his mouth. He looked at the Americans. You kill the Apache, no? Toadvine propped his elbows on the tiles behind him. He looked at the old man and he spat on the floor. Craziern a runaway nigger, aint ye? he said. How much monies they pay you? the old man said. No one spoke. You kill Gomèz they pay you much monies. Who can ride against the Tejanos? They are soldiers. Que soldados tan valientes. La sangre de Gomèz, sangre de la gente… He looked up. Blood, he said. This country is
The old Mexican now starts talking in Spanish to Toadvine and The Kid. His words guise an implacable suspicion when he calls them “sociedad de guerra”, literally meaning “society of war”. He is identifying them as the group of war who have come to fight the savage Indians (“contra los barbaros”). The old man may appear mad and he probably is but he is no fool, he immediately recognizes them as Americans who have been paid a lot of money to kill the Apaches with their rifles. “You kill Gomèz they pay you much monies”, he says.

In the Old West there was hardly any law or order of any kind and so bloodshed was something that happened on a daily basis. The merciless killing in Blood Meridian is not just the result of the inadequacy of the judicial system of that time, it is also the trade of The Kid and the gang he is affiliated to. The Glanton gang is appointed by the Mexican governor of Chihuahua to eradicate the Indians and to track down the leader of the pack of Indians circling the territory violently killing people, a man called Gomèz. Gomèz is wanted for the butchering of a small community within the state. The Indian desperado has become famous among the Texans and Mexicans and his death would be an ultimate signal to others that there will be a zero tolerance policy towards Indians in the future. Those who do not abide, will immediately be done away with. Glanton’s gang travel the desert searching for tracks of Indians and executing each one they find. After having slayed them, the gang cuts off their scalps as proof of their deed. The scalps become battle trophies but what the gang are mostly interested in is the bounty they will collect for the scalps.

“Who can ride against the Tejanos?”; the old man then asks. “They are soldiers, what brave and heroic soldiers they are”.

Is the old Mexican being sarcastic? He seems to be mocking Toadvine and The Kid, not believing that they can stop Gomèz and the Indians. From the look of it, the man has stood through hard battles himself since he is missing a finger and has in all probability become somewhat deranged. In his apparent nonsensical monologue he predicts nothing good for Gomèz or his people: “The blood of Gomèz, the blood of the people…” We then get the old man’s final say on the matter when he says in his own menacing

---

7 Tejano is a term used to identify a Texan of Mexican descent.
8 Loosely translated by myself.
way that there has been a lot of bloodspill in this country of Mexico, the blood of a thousand Christs, and the land is always thirsty for more. McCarthy is presenting to us a counter-history, “in contradiction to the meaning generated from most official histories of the period” (Spurgeon 20). A fresh but heavy interpretation of history, as we are lead to believe that the killing of Indians was not done so Americans could be free but that it was purely an act of greed. What the text is telling and showing us through the words of an old veteran is the other side of war, in some way a survivor’s story. There is no glory in battle worth the blood it costs, Dwight D. Eisenhower said. We mustn’t think warfare is all about freedom, because the prize to win for the blood that’s shed is not only the glory of battle but also money, blood money. That is possibly the real cause of war, for one has to ask himself: Who profits from war? The people or the military contractors, suppliers of military materials and those who are paid for military skills? If those who paid for war would be the ones who decide on war, there would be no such thing as war. However, those who decide on war, the politicians, do not pay for it. That task is passed on to the tax payers (Molyneux).

Blood Meridian is thus on top of a deconstruction of the Western myth also a cautionary tale, to warn for the dangers of contracting mercenaries to fight a war. In One nation under contract: the outsourcing of American power and the future of foreign policy (2009) Allison Stanger talks about the threats of privatization of military security functions. She was a guest on the Daily Show with Jon Stewart on March 2nd of 2011 and there she discussed the worrisome evolution that in Vietnam 14% of Americans were contractors and now in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan that number has risen to 50%. Glanton’s gang in Blood Meridian are working under contract as well, making peace as the purpose of war a far-fetched ideal. This change has us wondering about the risks of war, and about the men that engage in warfare, what is their function? How many are actually fighting people as opposed to for instance engineers? There seem to be quite a few private security contractors, and it is a dirty secret that it is being done this way. It seems to have become necessary to outsource this. Figures state that there has already been pumped tens of millions of dollars into Iraq with no record keeping, making war-time contracting a case of

---

9 The blood of Christ was shed by Jesus on the cross for the salvation of the people. That the old Mexican uses the symbol of Christ’s blood to express the amount of blood that has been shed in his country is in a sense quit bitter, for the people of Mexico will not be saved by the American Indian war on their land.
corruption and abuse. These contractors are often paid 3 to 4 times as much as men or women in uniform making us question American principals of integrity and patriotism.

In some of the scenes discussed so far we have repeatedly been seeing the questionable actions of The Kid and/or the gang and we have supposed that The Kid and the gang are literary symbols for the real American soldier and the real American army. As a consequence of the violent and lawless killing committed by the gang, a new light was thus shed on the American Indian war. This was a stimulation to try and make a small inquiry into the nature and causes of American warfare. These were as expected not unbiased from the American point of view, but because we are wearing the uniform of the outsider, it was less complicated to make statements on the how and why of American mythmaking in the context of war. These myths are at the heart tools to put up a positive picture for the outside world.

In the final excerpt I want to discuss, more questions arise on the integrity of the Glanton gang contractors in Blood Meridian. It is the 17th chapter in the novel, the gang have just left Tucson and are now heading for the Colorado River.10 They have set out to ride at dusk and meet with the Indians, indeed a strange but not unthinkable encounter in the abstruse world of Blood Meridian:

In the long dusk the savages rode out to meet them and the whiskey was exchanged for upon a Saltillo blanket spread on the ground. Glanton paid little attention to the proceedings. When the savages had counted out gold and silver to the judge’s satisfaction Glanton stepped onto the blanket and kicked the coins together with his booteel and then stepped away and directed Brown to take up the blanket. Mangas and his lieutenants exchanged dark looks but the Americans mounted up and rode out and none looked back save the recruits. (255)

One of the essential elements of the conventional Western is the conflict between the good guys and the bad guys, between colonizers and Indians, between civilized men and savage men, between law and lawless. These two extremes are contrasted so that there is never any confusion on who is playing which part. In the predictable endings of Western stories there is usually a

---

10 Tucson is a city in the southern part of the state of Arizona near the Mexican border. The Colorado River runs all the way through Arizona and crosses Tucson. In the next chapter the gang does a takeover of the Yuma ferry on the Colorado River which ends in total massacre.
shoot-out between the good guy and the bad guy and the good guys always come out on the winning end. As a result of *Blood Meridian* denying the establishment of right and wrong, the good and the bad have however converged to an indeterminate position where the afore mentioned labeling of characters becomes meaningless. The Americans are portrayed equally and in fact even more barbaric as the Natives they plan to kill, leading them into pure carnage and chaos as the story evolves.

In the scene described in the fragment above we are witness to an exchange between Glanton’s gang and a group of Indians. The two groups had a small altercation a little earlier in the story when Glanton and his men found themselves suddenly surrounded in the desert by Chiricahua warriors, a group of Apache Indians mainly living in New Mexico and Arizona territory. As the leader of the Indian group approached Glanton, Glanton’s horse bit the Indian’s horse’s ear causing it to start bleeding heavily. An argument followed until a second, smaller group of Apaches appeared with a huge-headed leader who introduced himself as Mangas. The man is described in the book as a cordial man who speaks Spanish well. The Judge, Glanton and Mangas make an arrangement to meet again in three days to solve their mutual problem with the exchange of whiskey. The short passage is an account of that meeting.

If we make an evaluation of the contact between Glanton’s gang and the Chiricahua Apaches and try to see the broader picture we come to the conclusion that the whole experience was highly remarkable. Considering what we have seen the Glanton gang do to the Indians they have come across, a confrontation between the gang and Apaches that doesn’t end up in brutal violence is unusually rare. It is understandable that the gang did not use any force because they were outnumbered. Still the compromise that was made between the leaders of both packs is something that would never occur in a traditional Western where the Indian savages are the enemy and there is no possibility of negotiating with them. In *Blood Meridian* though there is no well-defined difference between both sides, they both have a taste for whiskey and even start doing business together. The Glanton gang neither manage their mission with an absolute

---

11 Mangas Colorades was an actual Apache tribal chief and war leader and has appeared in several other Western literature also.

12 Again we see a similar situation in *The Good, the Bad & the Ugly*. At one point in the movie there is a conversation between Blondie and Ramirez (“The Good” and “The Ugly”) where one of them says something about joining the Union army.. “one thing in common with those on the other side, both smell of liquor”.
integrity or have a straightforward approach to it, for if they see an opportunity to make some extra money, albeit with the Indians, they will not let that opportunity pass.

Now for the conclusive paragraphs of this part I would like to fully return to the character of The Kid. The closing chapter in the book ends with The Kid’s death and with that the adventure is also brought to an end. Although The Kid has had a hard and tiring journey, he never receives the kind of cathartic reward one would expect a hero to get. But then perhaps The Kid never fit the hero pattern to begin with, Bent Sörensen properly indicates (22). He is a born killer and that is exactly the career he embarks on and follows almost to the end of his life Sörensen adds (22). It is only near the end of the novel that The Kid, now a fully grown, experienced man, finds himself contemplating his own morality. He has finally made some sense of his emotions and is prepared to put a halt to the violence in his life. It is late winter 1878 and The Kid is stranded in the plains of north Texas where he bumps into a group of children. One of them is a young boy named Elrod who reminds him a lot of himself, The Kid from the beginning of the book, 15 years old and keen to pick a fight with anyone that crosses his path. When the boy provokes him: “You aim to shoot me?” , the older and wiser Kid says: “I aim to try to keep from it” (McCarthy 339). Elrod keeps stubbornly challenging The Kid to a pistol fight until The Kid finally gives in. He lets Elrod shoot first but then kills the boy with a single shot, mumbling “You wouldn’t of lived anyway” (322). The fact that he lets the boy shoot first can be interpreted in two different ways. Either he rather wanted to die before killing someone again, or he knew the young boy would miss. His muttered words can also be read in various ways. According to Sörensen, the words of The Kid that the boy “wouldn’t of lived anyway” is an expression of guilt or a justification of yet another murder (22). The murder is justified because it is settled that the boy would have led a similar life to his, with violence and killing, and he would one day be on the losing end. So if that day is today or some other day makes no difference.

The Kid had before only refrained once from shooting a man, this was near the end of the exhausted gang’s journey. That man was of course The Judge, who afterwards taunts The Kid: “I know […] that you’ve not the heart of a common assassin. I’ve passed before your gun sights twice and will pass a third time […] There’s a flawed piece in the fabric of your heart […] You alone reserved in your soul some corner of clemency for the heathen” (299). The Judge is again attacking The Kid for his weakness of heart and his lack of firmness in will when he fails to shoot him. In The Judge’s world, a world where only the fittest survive, an act of mercy will get you killed. The fact that The Kid shows mercy for the second time with Elrod, but nevertheless
kills the boy, tells us that the last confrontation with The Judge won’t end without the defeat of one of them. This ultimate encounter takes place in a “dark and damp place, the outhouse outside a dance hall and bordello where The Kid has sought some gratification” (Sörensen 22). The Kid is picked out by one of the whores and after the two do the deed The Kid goes down to the saloon. He watches for a while at the edge of the dancefloor but then goes out back where he steps into an outhouse. There, seated upon the closet is The Judge. There is no actual account of how The Judge kills The Kid but it has to be terrible since the men in the saloon warn each other not to go in the outhouse. The setting of this closing scene is a final parody of the classical Western, but is very appropriate for a story that continually ridicules the concepts of heroism and mercy, myths and weaknesses.

3.2.1.2 Judge Holden

The Judge’s first appearance in the book is at a revival meeting tent in Nacogdoches, Texas. The preacher in the tent had been playing to a full house daily until one night a dark figure (The Judge) stepped out from the back of the tent and accused the allegedly innocent Reverend Green of sexually abusing an 11-year-old girl in Fort Smith “who had come to him in trust and whom he surprised in the act of violating while actually clothed in the livery of his God” (McCarthy 7). “Oh God!” cried the Reverend “Lies, lies!”, and in fact it was lies as The Judge later in the text answers a man who asks “When was you in Fort Smith?”: “I was never in Fort Smith in my life. Doubt that he was” (8). But it was already too late for the Reverend by then as the angry mob in the tent had lynched him. The evil and false lies of The Judge would be a prediction for his part in the rest of the story. The violation of a child and the profaning of a sacred office by the figure entrusted with upholding and protecting it will be enacted again and again throughout the novel with The Judge playing the leading role (Spurgeon 22). He intentionally cultivates myths to then break them down and use them to his own purpose.

The literary hero within the Western landscape is said to be “a lone male in the wilderness” (Kolodny 147). He seeks out to conquer the wilderness of the land. This land is referred to as feminine, simultaneously a fertile mother and an immaculate virgin. When looking at the history of early American literature we see that it has stepped off from that earlier image of the yeoman farmer responding to the female landscape. The farmer was the main pillar in the stories of American writers from the years of the early republic. A famous example is for
instance Jean de Crèvecoeur’s *Letters from an American farmer* (1782). Because the figure of the farmer was not appealing enough to remain popular, an American version of a more intriguing and romantic figure surfaced, the character of the hunter. Sara Spurgeon follows Richard Slotkin’s explanation that the myth of the sacred hunter is one of “regeneration through the violence enacted upon the body of the earth. The hunter must leave the safety of his community, track his game, and slay it” (Spurgeon 21). She argues that Judge Holden portrays a new version of that myth of the sacred hunter.

McCarthy constantly demonstrates the perversion of original myths through the character of The Judge. Judge Holden functions not only as the maker of a new mythology but also as a judge\(^\text{13}\) of both nature and man. Throughout the novel he directs the power of the natural world. He is a shepherd who manipulates the minds of the Glanton gang, a priestlike figure in alignment with the dominantly religious mood of the novel, though we must not make the mistake of seeing the story as preaching a Christian worldview; *Blood Meridian* merely applies sacred symbols for the ultimate goal of destroying the dogmatic acceptance of myths. The Judge is undoubtedly an evil character, but still not totally unappealing, he has a certain allure and is cunning and very intelligent, sometimes charming and wise. It is hard to pinpoint his character while in traditional Westerns the character of the antagonist is easier to despise. Here we must be aware not to make a fatal identification with the bad guy and be drawn in by his mesmerizing words. His extreme cruelty (he is a paedophile and a child murderer\(^\text{14}\) however could be that of the figure of horror in a horror story but we cannot make out why he does it. There is no understanding of it because he speaks in hollow terms. His stance comes close to what Nietzsche calls “pure will”, free of any metaphysically moral criteria, making it harder for us to cope with his brutality and violence.

There is a famous passage in the book where The Judge discusses war with the men of the gang by a campfire. His argumentation on the subject of war is unrestrained and audacious, even arrogant. He claims “war is the ultimate game because war is at last a forcing of the unity of

\(^{13}\) The title of judge implicitly gives away his role as the higher power in the novel, a malignant authority, a fierce God-substitute.

\(^{14}\) On one of the evenings with the gang, The Judge lures a young boy the gang had taken from one of the villages on their path to sit on his lap. The next morning as the gang awakens they find the boy dead and the suggestion is made that the boy was raped. They see The Judge sitting on that same place as the night before with an evil smirk on his face.
existence. War is God” (63). He shocks the scalphunters with his words, men who have been stranded far away from their home since their childhood, savage creatures without families, everything that they have left behind is dead to them, and even these men are slightly offended. The Judge goes on:

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 forego further argument as the triviality which it in fact is and to petition directly the chambers of the historical absolute clearly indicates of how little moment are the opinions and of what great moment the divergences thereof. For the argument is indeed trivial, but not so the separate wills thereby made manifest. (263)

He is saying morality is a lie, an invention to protect the weak. The idea of “pure will” is repeated in the words he speaks. The Judge ridicules the moral attitude of men. To him it is a pointless and historically unjust way of living. He is in fact using strong arguments to justify the act of murder. Although he uses a determined logic we have to see through him and not fall into his trap. We could say The Judge is a representation of typical right-wing conservatives in America with their treacherous speeches. These figures also have their own philosophy in life but it is often a deceitful philosophy that is only to the purpose of their hidden agenda. The Judge is intelligent enough not to have to use populist rhetoric, but his ulterior motive is the act of war.

Because of his intelligence and scientific knowledge, The Judge is able to break through the mystery of the sacred myth and disrupt our conception of the order of the universe. The following passage shows how he can control the minds of simple men and deconstruct the myths of the world:

In the afternoon he sat in the compound breaking ore samples with a hammer, the feldspar rich in red oxide of copper and native nuggets in whose organic lobations he purported to read news of the earth’s origins, holding an extemporary lecture in geology to a small gathering who nodded and spat. A few would quote him scripture to confound his ordering up of eons out of the ancient chaos and other apostate supposings. The
judge smiled. Books lie, he said. God dont lie. No, said the judge. He does not. And these are his words. He held up a chunk of rock. He speaks in stones and trees, the bones of things. The squatters in their rags nodded among themselves and were soon reckoning him correct, this man of learning, in all his speculations, and this the judge encouraged until they were right proselytes of the new order whereupon he laughed at them for fools. (123)

The Judge has them listening, convincing them of his mythology and making them doubt their own. He is gathering followers and inviting them to join him in his new religion. After having degraded Reverend Green, the spokesman of the old religion, he will make the scalphunters his disciples, leading them into a bloody perversion of the old myth. The setting for this ancient parable made anew is a place of which it is said that “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 another kind of clay” (McCarthy 5). Whether the stuff of creation may be shaped to man’s will is one of the central questions of the novel, Spurgeon says (24). This implies that the question is asked whether man is able to conquer the wilderness. If we look further into the statement and relate it to the West, the question is not just limited to the conquest of the mythical wild frontier, but the question that is really asked is if America can have an influence in the creation of the entire world. We are once again getting a comment on American imperialism and the overall attitude of Americans to any non-American people. Dana Philips argues that McCarthy is questioning the privileged position of human beings to the rest of the world (24). I would agree with the assumptions of both Spurgeon and Philips but feel that there is even more to it. What Spurgeon says is absolutely correct though I want to plead for an interpretation in which the novel’s purpose and by extension the purpose of life is included. If the stuff of creation cannot be shaped to man’s will and if man’s heart is just another kind of clay, we have to accept that there is no purpose and that all men are equal, that even man and nature

---

15 I specifically chose the term parable because the Western is truly a fable, a moral story, a teaching from ancient times. In this new version that morality has been abandoned and the acceptance of the myth deconstructed by The Judge.
are equal\textsuperscript{16}, giving this rather nihilistic view on the world a positive meaning as well. Philips is right that the privileged position of human beings to the rest of the world is questioned, although in my view he is being too general in stating that it is the position of all human beings that is questioned. I suspect that the privileged position of Americans is disputed here, what has been called “American exceptionalism”, part of America’s so called Manifest Destiny.

When doing a superficial examination of what is said about the “stuff of creation” we are urged to believe that creation cannot be shaped by man’s will. That man’s will is oppressed by forces beyond his power. However, a deeper analysis suggests that in fact man’s will is the most potent of forces. It is ultimately man’s will that shapes myths, and, McCarthy implies, it is our myths that also ultimately shape the world (Spurgeon 24). Judge Holden seems the only character who fully understands the potential of the force of will. He recognizes the power of pure will, a will unbounded by morality, whereby one shakes off the assessment of one’s actions, no longer examining and determining them in accordance to some wisdom or religion. Accordingly, in the world of Blood Meridian there is no room for a Christian god or the moral structures he represents (25). The Judge alone claims to understand the mystery of the natural world and only he can solve the problems that are presented to the gang and he does so “through science and a skewed rationality cloaked with the rhetoric of religion” (25).

If we consider the scalphunters as a group playing the part of the sacred hunter, sinister adaptations of Western heroes like Buffalo Bill, their mission can be read as a leaving of the community they have come from to step into the wild for the renewal and regeneration of the land through the act of hunting the Indians and killing them. The hunters seek a human prey in this version of the myth, but the intent remains the same, the protection of the Mexican community from the Indians that are threatening it. When the prey of the sacred hunter changes to become human, a world of killing is permitted and imperialism is justified. The Judge functions here as an advocate of war and the apocalypse, revealing the cruelty at the core of the myth and the society that has produced it.\textsuperscript{17} He turns the scalphunters into violators of the sacred myth while still seeming to work according to the internal rules of the myth.

\textsuperscript{16} This reminds us of the formulation on the equality between man and nature in our discussion of the world without order in which The Kid and the gang are stranded (see p.42). The passage there states that “a man and a rock become endowed with an unguessed kinship”.

\textsuperscript{17} Spurgeon draws parallels here with the character Kurtz from Joseph Conrad’s Heart of Darkness (1902).
We can by now conclude that The Judge has created a new myth, but uses the rituals of the old myth to do so. He had to acknowledge and accept the old myth, be in total control of it, to be able to fully destroy it. The notion of the wilderness as a virginal female world waiting for the male hunter to conquer it is corrupted by the ritualistic methods of that new myth. As we saw in the previous fragment, The Judge has talked the gang into become his disciples, but to become true followers of his new religion they all have to join in a united ritual, engaging themselves to this new myth, this new way of life:

He worked it up dry with his hands and all the while the savages down there on the plain drawin nigh to us and when I turned back the judge was standin, the great hairless oaf, and he’d took out his pizzle and he was pissin into the mixture, pissin with a great vengeance and one hand aloft and he cried out for us to do likewise... We hauled forth our members and at it we went and the judge on his knees kneadin the mass with his naked arms and the piss was splashin about and he was cryin out to us to piss, man, piss for your very souls for cant you see the redskins yonder, and laughin the while and workin up this great mass in a foul black dough, a devil's batter by the stink of it and him not a bloody dark pastryman himself. (139)

This scene, with the brutal rape of mother earth and the subsequent murderous crusade\textsuperscript{18}, is an intense moment of anti-myth imagery. McCarthy’s exceptional methods to take the familiar icons of the national mythology and twist them and present to us a counter-memory is both shocking and inventive. He transforms the generally accepted history of America’s explorations and the consequential takeover of the wilderness into what appears to be a debauchery party. The Judge cries out “Piss man piss for your very souls!” while laughing all the while and turning the filthy mass over and over like some sort of mentally deluded baker. I found this scene quite comical, which was a welcome gift considering the constant heavy symbolism used throughout the book.

The shaping of American beliefs about their imperial escapades and the justification of those escapades has been distorted, reshaped into a new version and accepted in the chronicle of Blood Meridian. By this point in time the scalphunters have been completely absorbed by the anti-myth in the story and cannot possibly return to a world in which the wilderness of the old world

\textsuperscript{18} The gang’s crusade symbolizes the genocide of the American Indians.
is related to them. They pass the landscape without notice as the implementation of the perverted sacred myth has been fully installed, leaving the natural world to be irreversible to its former state. The novel then introduces a new world in which the hunter and those who like him follow the new order as it was created by The Judge. A different relationship between man and wilderness is constituted in this strange arrangement where a mind-boggling amount of slaughtering has taken place, just as the murderous Judge had schemed. The prairies have now been emptied of wild life and nature is completely gone to become an endless dry desert. Spurgeon reverses Slotkin’s definition of the sacred myth in stating that “this new version of the ancient hunter myth represents degeneration”. Instead of regenerating through the act of the sacred hunter, civilization has gone into full decay without it even noticing, a culminating moment and an ultimate comment on the American imperialistic regime and the consequences of the acceptance of the Western myth.

I leave a big gap in the narration here between the part where The Judge converts the gang and the final chapters of the story where The Judge and The Kid are separated from the gang and are on their own. In that in-between time the Glanton gang with The Judge up front commit the terrible murders of Indians and ultimately take over the Yuma ferry before getting killed themselves. Except for The Judge and The Kid no survivors are mentioned. What I think is important for the argument I want to make, is that the undertakings of the gang in that middle part of the story have been the complete opposite of the original Western story of hunters protecting their community by means of chasing their prey and slaying it. In connection to this opposition between the original myth and the myth as it is told in Blood Meridian, the reading of Slotkin’s book on the mythology of the American frontier gives some clarification of the meaning of that opposition. He claims that any fundamental conversion of the narrative structure of the myth signals some profound shift in the culture that produces it. This moment of serious change has joined together America’s haunting past and its fearful present. Here we see how national mythology has given scalphunters, wild life extinction and mass deforestation a heroic status it doesn’t deserve. The open prairie in the final chapter of the book is desolate and lifeless, stripped of its riches and natural resources:

---

19 The chronicle of Blood Meridian being the converted narrative structure of the myth and the West/America being the culture that produced it.
When he (The Kid) came upon the bonepickers he’d been riding three days in a country he’d never seen. The plains were sere and burntlooking and the small trees black and misshapen and haunted by the ravens and everywhere the ragged packs of jackal wolves and the crazed and sunchalked bones of the vanished herds. (334)

Only bone gatherers are found in this land, they follow the fallen hunter, digging post holes and fencing in the final piece of land that belongs to the natural world. The drifting cowboy in the story now has a post-hole digger instead of a rifle, ironically enough marking with it his own decline. The act of post hole digging and fencing in the unsettled land can be seen as a continuance, each post-hole digger aimlessly following the other, perhaps symbol for the commencement of a new cycle of blood. It is also the validation of The Judge’s corrupted counter-myth. This breaking of the bond between man and nature as we know it from the old Western myth opens up the eyes for a Western structure we would not dare look at but have been shown in Blood Meridian. The notion of American identity as created through the myth of the frontier is consequently not credible or trustworthy anymore. Alternately, identity must be perceived as uncertain, dubious and unfixed. McCarthy suggests that all empires of man are. McCarthy has “recast the lens of myth through which American history and identity is viewed, thus challenging the mythic language by which the American nation understands itself, its beliefs, and its role in the world” (Spurgeon 40).
Conclusion

*Blood Meridian* is an erudite, postmodern novel that plays with the conventions of the classic Western genre. It is a thought-provoking parody of the Western that requires multiple thorough readings to fully grasp the complexity of the story. Through its excessive use of intertextuality and its alteration of history as we know it, the story manages to strip down nearly all the elements of the Western myth. One can never read a Western in quite the same way after having read McCarthy’s approach to it.

The goal of my dissertation was to explain how the traditional Western is built around the idea of myth and find out how McCarthy breaks down that myth while additionally making an attempt to find the underlying implications of his deconstruction. In the introductory part on the Western I discussed the characteristics and the roots of the genre. I then added my thoughts on the frontier myth which is closely related to the story of the Western. For the final part of the theoretical framework I gave an introduction to the genre of the Revisionist Western. This relatively new genre has a clearly different attitude towards the romanticized tales of the old West, putting the emphasis more on the violence and lawlessness of the period plus placing it in a more realistic setting. This new perspective is also found in *Blood Meridian*. Some critics have claimed that the novel is not an Anti-Western but the truest form of the Western. While I understand what they mean, I hope that it was pointed out sufficiently that, though the story draws on some of the features of the traditional Western, it cannot be categorized as a classical Western.

Because the Western centers around the opposition between good and bad, civilized and savage, and because these components are personified in the protagonist and antagonist of the story, I decided to analyze the novel through means of its two main players, namely The Kid and The Judge. One of the problems I then ran into was the fact that although these characters in the book may show resemblances to the typical protagonist and antagonist, they are in reality nothing like the leading actors of the classic Western.

For the part on The Kid I focused primarily on finding suitable fragments that made possible a comparison to certain aspects of the Western, such as the introduction of the cowboy hero, the arrival in a settlement, an encounter in a bar or a confrontation with the Indians. These are all typical scenes of the traditional Western that have been wrapped up in the untruthfulness
of myth. I then analyzed those scenes and unveiled the idealized truth behind the myth of the West, showing the greed, corruption, senseless violence and exploitation of the land that came with the spirit of Manifest Destiny and the expansion across the North American continent.

With the part on The Judge I thought it would be more fascinating to figure out what The Judge is really saying in the novel and moreover try to scrutinize every word, what it could mean in the context of the deconstruction of the Western myth. What I found was an unprecedented twist of the myth of the sacred hunter. The Judge cold-bloodedly carries the Western world of Blood Meridian to an apocalyptic state by means of a meticulously planned out scheme. First he degenerates our notions of morality, our vision of the order in the world and our concept of right and wrong until they are completely without value or meaning to then lead the human race into a world of emptiness and corruption. After the old world has gone through this transformation it becomes a new world. This creation of a new world can in my view be seen in relation to “The New World” as the Americas and the Western hemisphere were coined in the late 15th century when the continent was discovered, making Blood Meridian a comment on the New World Order.

For a European like myself it is perhaps harder to understand all of the historical references to American history in the novel, but it allows me to be more open-minded in my evaluation of the criticism on how America distorts its self-image. How the world views America is very different from how America views itself, and I believe McCarthy has successfully made this clear in Blood Meridian. Employing a prototypical American genre like the Western to show the brutal realities of American warfare is a daring undertaking for an American writer. McCarthy lives in New Mexico, a state in the South, where people are particularly sensitive to political issues and more precisely the topic of America’s overseas wars. In the new era, with president Barack Obama as leader of the free world, there has been a change in the relationship between the United States and the rest of the world. It signals a convergence of interests. A great example of how America has become less narcissistic and less fearful of losing face is the recognition of Obama that he cannot win in Afghanistan by military means. For the first time there has been speculation on Obama welcoming a talk with the Taliban. If this is the right approach only time will tell, but it is now finally clear to one of the greatest players on the world stage that it is much easier to win wars than it is to win the peace.

For further research into the works of Cormac McCarthy I would suggest that his latest, most appraised novel The Road is an excellent example of how McCarthy depicts the future of our
world. An analysis could be done of *The Road* as a decomposition of the traditional quest story to tell a story that, very much like *Blood Meridian*, changes our worldview.
Works Cited

Film

The Good, the Bad & the Ugly. Dir. Sergio Leone. Screenplay by Age & Scarpelli & Luciano Vincenzoni & Sergio Leone. United Artists, 1966. DVD.


Print


Holmberg, David. “In a time before nomenclature was and each was all: Blood Meridian’s Neomythic West and the Heteropian Zone.” *Western American Literature* vol 44 2 (2009): 141-156


Web


