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“THE LAST OF THE TRUE”:
THE KID’S PLACE IN CORMAC MCCARTHY’S *BLOOD MERIDIAN*

By

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B.A. University of Mississippi, Oxford, Mississippi, 2005

Thesis

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English Literature

“The Last of the True”: The Kid’s Place in Cormac McCarthy’s *Blood Meridian*

Chairperson: Dr. Brady Harrison

In this study I examine the relationship of “the kid” and “the judge” in Cormac McCarthy’s *Blood Meridian Or The Evening Redness in the West* (1985), specifically, how and why the kid resists Judge Holden’s overbearing existential philosophy.

In my introduction I set the stage for Judge Holden’s imperial philosophy and practice through a brief explanation of his character, both historical and fictional, and the novel’s success because of his tyrannical grandeur. I then juxtapose the recalcitrant character of the kid against this megalomaniac to set up the rest of the examination of their relationship. In my chapter on Judge Holden’s universe, I outline his worldview through close readings of his endless lectures and soliloquies, and argue that his ultimate concern is for control. Chapter Two lays out the particulars of how the kid resists this control through various strategies that directly oppose the judge’s controlling mechanisms. Finally, my third chapter examines the implications of the kid’s resistance and how it affects the judge on the narrative level, and how it affects readers’ ability to approach this juggernaut anew. Maintaining a focus on the kid, as the judge does throughout the novel, despite both the novel’s noticeable focal shift off of him, and his reluctance to engage on a dialogic level, argues for a new reading of the kid. Though he kills and raids with the rest of them, the judge’s inability to extend his usual control signals something morally unique in the kid. Not enough to save his life, but enough to lend some heroic credence to the mysterious figure of the novel’s epilogue.

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INTRODUCTION

Blood Meridian Or The Evening Redness In The West (1985), has been hailed by scholars and critics as a masterpiece of American literature, and as Cormac McCarthy continues to publish, it continues to be credited as his masterwork. In his introduction to the Modern Library Edition of the text, Harold Bloom places it alongside *Moby-Dick* and *As I Lay Dying* on the bookshelf of the great American novels and calls McCarthy “the worthy disciple both of Melville and of Faulkner” (Bloom v). *Blood Meridian* encompasses what all readers love about our modern day Melville – unapologetic grand prose and scrambling-for-dictionary vocabulary, beautiful renderings of painful images, and the loftiest of themes.

McCarthy’s commercial success came with the publication of *All the Pretty Horses* (1992), and catapulted this academically celebrated writer to a wider, popular audience. Movie deals and Oprah’s Bookclub followed, but in terms of style, originality, and brilliance he has yet to surpass the story of the nameless “kid” and the atrocious, hyper-violent account of his trip across the American west during the 1850s. Even McCarthy’s Pulitzer Prize winning, *The Road*, pales in comparison to the “bloodiest book since the *Iliad*” (Woodard).

Blood Meridian is about many things. Like all successful novels, its applicability goes beyond the historical period it presents. It is written on what Edmund Wilson calls the “long range plane,” allowing for a “comprehensive picture of human life over an extended period of time,” while at the same time taking into account the “immediate interests” of its time of publication and of the historical period it presents (Wilson 593).

The novel's ability to function on both of these planes allows for readings of *Blood Meridian* as specific as Brady Harrison's "'That immense and bloodsoaked waste': Negation in *Blood Meridian*," in which Harrison identifies westward expansion and its violence as correlative to the violence perpetrated in Southeast Asia during the Vietnam War, to Dennis Sansom's "Learning from Art: Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* as a Critique of Divine Determinism." An indictment against Manifest Destiny and the filibustering politics of the American government in the mid 19th century it certainly is, but its universal authority serves more as a caustic condemnation of all humanity. Derridian deconstructive readings open up the text, as do structuralist renderings, and Modern, as well as Late-Modern considerations of the novel are all appropriate and have been taken. It is a book about many things.

Blood Meridian's success, both as a philosophical work of literature and as a sweeping adventure story, owes a debt to the formidable force of Judge Holden, who strides through the text the way he enters the revival tent in our first encounter with him. He pauses only to shake the wet off his hat before immediately going to the front of the makeshift pulpit to take over the proceedings. His chaos-inducing indictments against the Reverend Green (for crimes we learn he himself is guilty) are simply for the pleasure he takes in pandemonium. Likewise, he charges the pages he resides on with effusive charm and repulsion, inspiring mayhem and facilitating the destruction of peoples of every race and age. When not directly participating in the slaughter of innocents like the Gilenos, he counsels others into their demise like the Yuma of the Lincoln Ferry massacre (BM 155; 263). Iconic images of his naked body dancing or single-handedly wielding a howitzer etch themselves in the mind as much as his seemingly irrefutable anti-gospel of war.

Learning that McCarthy closely bases such a villainous monster on an historical figure frightens readers. We are somewhat relieved to learn he appears in only one actual account, *My Confession: Recollections of a Rogue* by Samuel Chamberlain, a narrator notorious for his unreliability. Chamberlain no doubt led an exhilarating life, but his consistent role as the hero in his many unbelievable tales should raise some suspicions in this self-written chronicle. Taking into account Chamberlain's possible fabrications eases our minds only slightly, however, when we read how McCarthy lifts some of the more gruesome tales and physical features of the Judge, almost verbatim, from the historic raconteur: "Who or what he was no one knew but a cooler blooded villain never went unhung . . . He stood six feet six in his moccasins, had a large fleshy frame, a dull tallow colored face destitute of hair and all expression" (Chamberlain 271). Chamberlain reports on the judge's pedophilic desires and relates an account of his involvement in the rape and murder of a ten year old girl. McCarthy needs no help writing characters who hack or charm their way into readers' minds, but even with Chamberlain's possible exaggerations and literary embellishments, this man's maliciousness persists regardless of attempts to explain him away. The judge fiddles his way right back into our nightmares.

His haunting physique and heartless actions calcify in readers' minds, as do his words and powerful rhetoric. If one could close one's eyes to the man, or look away from his ignoble actions, one would still be faced with his incessant voice in the text. Judge Holden densely delivers extensive exegeses on fate, destiny, and human will seemingly unopposed. The few men who vainly hold to scriptural arguments are proved false either through their heretical actions or via a quick rebuttal from the judge himself. Those characters unfortunate enough to find themselves in his company either go along with

Holden for the protection he offers in the desert (at least until they earn his destructive attention), they perish at the hands of Natives, or they succumb to the unblinking eye of the sun, which kills without respite. His textual mass causes us to gravitate toward him and his voice is hard to resist.

But resist the kid does.

From the first three word sentence of the novel, “See the child,” our attention turns to this nameless protagonist, cluing us into his importance, and his uniqueness (BM 3). *Blood Meridian* is the story of the kid. It begins with him as a child, follows him through his calamitous life as “the kid,” and ends a few pages after his death as “the man.” An abridged breakdown of the novel’s plot renders up this brief buldingsroman, but anyone with more than a passing familiarity with the novel knows the difficulty in establishing his development, especially his moral development.

What the judge lacks in reticence the kid makes up tenfold. Aside from a few physical descriptions, “pale and thin,” with “big wrists, big hands” and “eyes oddly innocent,” we have no real idea of what the kid looks like, and the narrative’s third person limited perspective offers no insight into his psyche (BM 3; 4). He speaks as little as possible, and, as many have pointed out, he disappears from the text when engaged in a larger party’s activity, only occasionally appearing briefly before retreating again into the blood and dust of skirmish, as if the textual voice loses interest in its own protagonist. Yet the judge maintains an intense focus on this rather bland hero. Why this judicial attention?

As critics have noted, *Blood Meridian* centers around the kid and the judge’s relationship. Such a powerful text needs an equally powerful conflict to successfully

reveal its scope, and their relationship possesses particular tension, due in part to its distinctiveness. Judge Holden relates to others as either enemies or subordinates. He humors the governor of Chihuahua, Trias, but never consents to his rule and instead turns his city into a maniacal nightmare. Though officially outranked by Glanton, he consistently asserts his authority beyond his place as second in command, when he steps in to translate or to facilitate the sale of firearms. The “secret commerce” of Holden and Glanton’s “terrible covenant” when the gang first come upon the judge is not one of rank recruitment by Glanton, but of fiendish deal-making by Holden (BM 126). He himself explains that the power he wishes to hold “countermands local judgements” in its totality (BM 198). Holden answers to no one. Indeed, he rarely considers others unless their travels or studies intersect with his. He tolerates the rest of the Glanton gang, wasting some of his most erudite and interesting thoughts on their ignorant ears; hardly a mental workout for Holden, whose audience can only reply with quiet guffaws or half-hearted appeals to unread scripture.

Holden never lets up on the kid; as his knowing smiles throughout the text indicate, his focus remains constant. I argue that the reason the judge concentrates on the kid with such unflinching intensity is because the kid threatens the judge. Functioning as dual protagonists, their *relationship* is central to the novel. To explore this assertion fully, I examine Holden’s existential paradigm, how the kid renounces this, and how this resistance threatens Judge Holden.

Chapter One studies the means by which the judge attempts to establish his control and authority primarily through two avenues. One, by representation in his ledger, which, with its insistence on empirical data, renders Holden an extension of

enlightenment reasoning (albeit without the usual hopeful outlook on humanity). Holden harbors nothing but contempt for those who see the world's processes as beyond their understanding. He esteems, instead, the rigorous scientific methodology which seeks to understand and make predictable natural occurrences. He must record as much as possible into his ledger, and through this encyclopedic enterprise attempt to single out the thread of existence and grasp autonomous control - and control of those around him. When representation fails, he superintends along another route, and resorts to annihilation and destruction to achieve his aims. This plays out in both his theological exegesis on war, rendered in his (somewhat) obfuscating speeches, and his religious practice of combat, shown through his amoral rampage through the novel.

Chapter Two focuses on how the recalcitrant kid resists the judge's preached and lived worldview through his insistence on being excluded from the ledger and his moments of anti-war morality. Looking at textual evidence of the kid's actions and what other characters say about him, as well as the few passages where the kid himself verbalizes what he believes, reveals that the kid's namelessness and silence leave the judge little to scribble in his book, rendering the kid un-comprehensible in a world where mystery cannot exist for the judge. The kid's viciousness obscures the kid's ethics, like his "eyes oddly innocent," behind the scars of the novel's overwhelming violence, but his moral thread exists (BM 4). His moments and expressions of these values speak against the judge, sometimes implicitly, and sometimes explicitly. Like a religiously zealous father, Holden desperately wants the kid to partake in his ecclesiastical teachings and life, but the kid refuses to come under Holden's patriarchal control. The kid does not participate in Holden's war religion and his refusal to "dance," to celebrate and worship

the judge's war god, is simultaneously his final act of defiance and the last straw for the judge.

Chapter Three addresses the implications of the kid's novel resistance to the judge's unwavering attention and insistently fundamental worldview. The kid's defiance threatens Judge Holden's life – physically, and threatens his philosophy - metaphysically. This threat simultaneously, and importantly, points out the weakness of the judge's otherwise un-contented, amoral philosophy of war-deification. The kid's mere *survival* through the perilous pages of *Blood Meridian* directly opposes the judge's un-remitting notion that the un-remitting animosity of the universe defines its hostile nature. That is, according to the judge, the kid's merciful actions should have taken him out of the game far sooner than their final encounter in Fort Griffin. The kid's continued defiance also exposes the judge's lack of control over the kid's free agency, which in turn, inaugurates new readings of the judge, not as an indestructible juggernaut, but as a character established on much shakier ground. The kid's obstinacy in the bald, powerful face of Holden and his ability to hold onto his own life despite the moral concessions he gives in a world seemingly devoid of compassion establish the kid as the novel's protagonist hero.

This re-placement, which may seem vaguely innocuous, is of utmost importance in a novel so dominated by the Armageddic nihilism of a monster like Judge Holden, a monster who William C. Spencer correctly identifies as "Evil Incarnate in *Blood Meridian*: Cormac McCarthy's Seductive Judge." "In several respects this Titan," Spencer writes in reference to the judge, "is more the novel's focal point than is the kid who is its supposed protagonist" (Spencer 100). Reading the kid as the novel's heroic focal point -which the narrative itself compels us to do - dramatically reduces Judge

Holden's self-proclaimed authority. This reduction, due to the kid's courageous place as protagonist, adversely affects the judge: it puts the villain in perspective, quiets his sought after auctorial voice, and allows for readers to scrutinize his otherwise deafening diabolic diatribes.

Throughout *Blood Meridian, Or The Evening Redness In The West*, the kid stays elusive. Unfortunately, his consistent resistance prevents readers from concretely placing anything upon him which might clue us into why he is unique enough to warrant the judge's devotion. Is simple non-response or compliance enough? Surely the kid is no paragon of virtuous perfection, as we see him kill specifically and generally throughout the text, even as "the man" – though he gives young Elrod plenty of warning and truly does not desire the violent confrontation. The kid cannot stand diametrically opposed to the judge for he does not possess antithetical characteristics in totality. He does, however, express a moral character the judge lacks and explicitly condemns.

JUDGE HOLDEN'S UNIVERSE

Readers do not know what to do with Judge Holden, where to put him and make him manageable. With his monstrous hilarity, cerebral power and prowess, and nihilistic rhetoric, he demands an audience and a response. His problematic placement forces us to do what many do when faced with something wholly new - we compare. The problem remains, however, that the number of literary villains which rival the judge for his eloquence, malignancy, panache, destructiveness, and charm, in all his totality, are so few. The judge is frequently held up to Milton's Satan and Melville's Ahab to assist in comprehending him, but Satan's general understanding as an understandable, if not admirable, anti-hero and Ahab's moments of compassionate humanity, in his exchanges with Starbuck, soften these two titans when held up to the judge. Even English literature's first villain has been rewritten by John Gardner, Jr. in *Grendel*, portraying Beowulf as the malicious force who cannot understand a monster's need for community. Perhaps all literature has left is *King Lear's* Edmund, or *Othello's* Iago, hopefully with whom no one will find empathy. John Sepich, compiler of *Notes on Blood Meridian*, fears the judge in his essay on why we should believe the judge's many heavy handed assertions, and pleads along side Tobin, "Kill him if you can, if he can be killed" (Sepich 141). Sepich's grand project of sorting out McCarthy's sources takes the search for Holden's historical antecedents as far back as possible, and has to conclude that "Holden comes out of the archetypes" (Sepich 141).

Comparisons do not do the judge justice, however, as his baneful austerity extends out of the bounds of the novel and his exegeses on the nature of the universe and

his physical presence in the universe of *Blood Meridian* affect readers as much as the scalphunters with whom he rides. Sepich rightfully fears the judge because he threatens more than the characters' lives: he threatens readers' sensibilities. Encountering Judge Holden is wholly new, and the text itself warns us "whatever his antecedents he [is] something wholly other than their sum, nor [is] there system by which to divide him back into his origins for he [will] not go" (BM 309). Contrast and compare the judge with the worst of literature, however one may, his perniciousness knows no bounds.

Richard Slotkin's much referenced *Regeneration Through Violence* contains an appropriate passage in which he writes of human agency in the "New World," of "the relative absence of social restraints on human behavior, the relative ease with which a strong man could, by mastering the law of the wilderness-jungle, impose his personal dream of self-aggrandizement on reality" (Slotkin 34). Slotkin refers to the American frontier explored and charged through in *Blood Meridian*, which certainly lacks these "social restraints." The judge shows mastery over the desert time and again, and no hyphenation suits him better than "self-aggrandized." He not only survives, but thrives in this landscape void of the social restraints of culture, embodied and observed in manners, customs, etiquette and other forms of cotillion, all superimposed on top of humankind's baser, animalistic nature. The judge removes himself from civilized society to stretch his war mongering wingspan to its fullest potential, "beyond," we read, "men's judgements" where "all covenants [are] brittle" (BM 106). The arena for Holden's combative existence is set, and when his attempts to establish the control he desires through representation fail, his locality lends itself to the destructive alternative of warfare.

Judge Holden's malignancy comes from his unwavering desire for *control*. We fear the power Holden already wields over the gang, the landscape, and even the text itself, and shudder to think what would happen if he attains the authority he lusts after. We must understand what the kid resists to see how he resists it and why. Fortunately, Holden never wants for an audience or words to deliver his worldview. His view of the universe - how it operates - revolves around a powerful desire for control. Holden attempts to achieve and maintain this gubernatorial control by two means. The first via representation, both linguistically and pictorially, though this study will focus on his pictorial pursuit exemplified in his ledger. Secondly, Holden exerts his physical force to crush and subdue any opposition to his power-mongering.

Much has been written about the judge's infamous ledger, and rightly so, for he draws in it frequently, speaks about it much, and it serves a totemic function in his philosophy. In the telling of the Glanton gang's fateful meeting of the judge, Tobin, "the expriest" of the gang, bends the kid's ear about how the judge, even while being pursued by Apache, "would stop to botanize and then ride to catch up . . . Pressing leaves into his book," and how, while patiently waiting for his makeshift gunpowder to dry, he contentedly makes entries into "his little book" (BM 127; 132). He values inclusions in it more than his own safety. Between its covers lie his observations and representations of the natural world as he encounters it across the western frontier either in peace or war. This vast, unexplored (at least by Americans) land yielded many flora and fauna never seen by European eyes, plants and animals never recorded or figured into scientific studies of the western world. In "'A Certain but Fugitive Testimony': Witnessing the Light of Time in Cormac McCarthy's Southwestern Fiction," John Beck explains how

photography changed the way easterners encountered the west and how this photographic shift altered held perceptions. He speaks of photography “as essential a component in the transmission of information about the West,” and calls Western photographers “the first official witnesses” of the land (Beck 209). Beck emphasizes the unmediated nature of photography as representational aesthetics, but before the unflinching eye of the camera was available, visual representations of the west were acquired by the painter’s brush¹. Landscapes which needed to be seen to be believed were written about and painted.

The judge’s scholasticism leads one to believe he must carry a veritable library, but in truth, he harbors a suspicion of books. “Books lie,” he answers when the gang attempts to refute his geological reckoning of the age of the world which contradicts biblical history, and his vast knowledge of places and peoples are in fact from personal experience (BM 116). He learned Dutch “off a Dutchman,” and knows of Paris and London because he has “been all over the world” (BM 123). The only book we see him with is his own, recording what he sees with graphic aplomb, and inscribing its pages with his renderings.

The judge sees superstition as a misunderstanding of the natural world’s processes and refuses to be under the control of such “mysteries:” “The man who believes that the secrets of the world are forever hidden,” he lectures, “lives in mystery and fear. Superstition will drag him down” (BM 199). We read how Black Jackson lives in this fear when traveling conjurors take up with the gang and tell the men’s fortunes. The fortune-telling Mexican couple goes through a significant ritual before they begin their divination with the assistance of tarot cards: “She swept up her skirt and composed

¹ Chamberlain relates how, while traveling with Judge Holden, who repulses him, but also attracts him with his knowledge of the landscape and various Native nations, the Glanton gang “were the first white men who ever saw the Grand Canyon” (Chamberlain 284).

herself and he took from his shirt a kerchief and with it bound her eyes” (BM 92). Her consented blindness to see into the future is the antithesis of how the judge operates. The judge eases his chalky bulk into the bath waters of Chihuahua, “and when he had submerged himself to the eyes he looked about with considerable pleasure,” leaving his egged dome out (BM 167). This image of his cranium out of water reads as orbital – his head, a world of its own, a crocodilian predatory world, a world “more predacious yet” under his authoritative gaze (BM 146). His eyes are always open, ready to take in the present and investigate the past to give him insight into the future. The scientific understanding, for example, that a lunar eclipse is simply the earth’s shadow cast upon the moon in a rhythmic and predictable pattern and not divine retribution for an individual or tribal offense is the sort of supremacy this enterprise gives Holden. His sketchbook facilitates this understanding of the natural world as it acts as his log of logic.

Through his rigorous empirical investigations of the natural world, he appeals to the scientific in an attempt to remove the mystery from life. This enlightenment strategy illuminates the past, enabling Holden to reasonably infer future events. In “Lacking the Article Itself: Representation and History in Cormac McCarthy’s *Blood Meridian*,” Dan Moos calls Holden “the ideological skeleton of a new imperialist scientific world order sprouting from Enlightenment rationality,” and his collection attempts “to control the world around him. Collection and categorization allow him power over his surroundings through a scientific reproduction of nature and history” (Moos 28). Through his scientifically minded approach, the judge takes the superstition of divination out of his existentialism.

For all of the judge's self-aggrandizing qualities and assertions of his power, he does not seek to be a *creator* of the natural world, just a "suzerain" of it (BM 198). He attempts this suzerainty through the careful cataloguing and pictorial representation of nature in his notebook. After a particular artistic inclusion in it, "he seemed much satisfied with the world, as if his counsel had been sought at its creation" (BM 140). The judge draws out what he sees, captures the natural world in a vampiric act, which inversely gives him power from its destruction. David Holloway focuses on the "ideology of representation in *Blood Meridian*" and argues that "it is Holden's ownership of language and meaning, his control over the act of representation, which underpins his agency and guarantees his suzerainty" (Holloway 192). He exploits existing creation into working for him through his depictions. The judge recognizes the impossibility of being a creative force upon the earth and compromises with representation and destruction.

In "Gravers False and True: *Blood Meridian* as Gnostic Tragedy," Leo Daugherty finds the judge frustrated "since his will is not yet fulfilled in its passion for total domination" (Daugherty 163). The judge's frustration can be alleviated, however, since it does not depend upon his ability to create, but rather, his ability to categorize and represent. In his critical explanation of representation's function in literature and aesthetics, W.J.T. Mitchell writes of how "representation is that which we make our will known" (Mitchell 21). The judge not only makes his will known through representation in his ledger, but goes a step further to exert his will via this representation. The power of taxonomy satisfies him.

Joshua J. Masters comments on the judge's nomenclature-based power in his essay, "'Witness to the Uttermost Edge of the World': Judge Holden's Textual Enterprise

in Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*," and writes that the judge's grand project sorts out the complex, but ultimately, knowable universal order. Masters ties the judge's control to his language and says the judge "alone controls the meaning behind words, and he alone controls their application" (Masters 30). Not content with cursory examinations, the judge roots out the "pockets of autonomous life" from under the rocks and out of the trees of earth, cataloging, with his scientific eye, and taking away the objects' free will, imposing his own, deistically proclaiming, "In order for it to be mine nothing must be permitted to occur upon it save by my dispensation" (BM 199). His sketchbook is his attempt at this universal taxonomy, as he explains to the rest of the Glanton gang, because "only nature can enslave man and only when the existence of each last entity is routed out and made to stand naked before him will he be properly suzerain of the earth" (BM 198).

His ledger-bound history, a natural history, differs from the verbal exchanges in which he engages. He has no problem fabricating events concerning human history, as he succinctly tells the kid, "Men's memories are uncertain and the past that was differs little from the past that was not," but his pictorial representations differ not nearly as much (BM 330). Webster, a member of Glanton's gang, looks over his journal and concludes that Holden must have "been a draftsman somewheres" and remarks on how accurate his representations are, "them pictures is like enough the things themselves" (BM 140-141). The narrative also comments on his ability to render the world he sees realistically, "[h]e is a draftsman as he is other things, well sufficient to the task" (BM 140). Though the text never describes explicitly what his drawings look like, there is no doubt concerning their realism. He is not only capable but exceptional at everything he attempts, be it dance,

fiddle, fight, or speech. We see him excel in all these, and there is no reason to believe his ledger is not full of da Vincian exactness. By this I mean, he does not have pictures of unicorns or griffins in his ledger. As Steven Shaviro notes of Holden's obsession with mimesis in "'The Very Life of the Darkness': A Reading of *Blood Meridian*," "The judge affirms an ontological parallelism between thing and representation, between 'being' and 'witness'" (Shaviro 154). With such an emphasis on the representation of things *being* those things, the judge must personally encounter them, and they must be encounter-able and represent-able.

The judge holds this act of witnessing, and its implied complementary act of testifying, in higher regard than comprehension. When Holden serves as translator between the Mexican Sergeant Aguilar and the Glanton gang, Black Jackson refuses to shake the sergeant's hand. Holden quickly steps in, alleviating the tension with his charming explanation, in Spanish, of Black Jackson's own "problematic career" and the rational reason for his seeming affront (BM 84). Black Jackson, wary of his reputation, hostilely demands to know what the judge has said. Here, the judge answers more than the gang member's demand. Holden says that it makes no difference if the men comprehend the transpiring events, but it is necessary for these events to "find a repository in the witness of some third party" (BM 85). Broadly speaking, Holden, through the use of his notebook, witnesses and testifies, becomes the repository he speaks of and exerts his control from his place as keeper and interpreter of the natural world. His ledger testimony is built upon reliable eye-witness accounts; his own. For Holden, as he says to the gang, seeing is more than believing, it is existential confirmation: "the very nature of the witness" is "no third thing but rather the prime, for what could be said to

occur unobserved?" (BM 153). To be included, tabernacled, in his sketches, he must witness the object. This serves his purposes quite well, and he will not give an artist's rendering from hearsay, or conjecture because he needs to destroy the object once it is in his possession, in his book, existing with his knowledge and consent.

The rise of encyclopedic volumes during the Age of Reason, like *Cyclopaedia* (1728), *Encyclopedie* (1751), *Encyclopedia Britannica* (1771), and *Encyclopedie Methodique* (1777), emphasized science and secular concerns over theological understandings. All were attempts to categorize human knowledge, and in the case of the *Encyclopedie Methodique*, Robert Darnton explains in *The Business of Enlightenment: A Publishing History of the Encyclopedie 1775-1800*, an attempt to "encompass all of human knowledge" between its covers (Darnton 395). This sounds like a project the judge could get behind, and though he rhetorically agrees with Webster that "no man can put all the world in a book," with every inclusion he increases his governorship (BM 141).

These volumes predate and prefigure the judge's enterprise, that of "singling out the thread of order from the tapestry" of life, to establish control and ultimately "dictate the terms of his own fate," as Judge Holden remarks, when elaborating on the nature of his book (BM 199). Again, he does not need to weave the tapestry, just like he does not need to create the birds of the air, finding the thread is enough to give him the power he needs. It is not the un-locking of a mystery for him, it is the rational explanation of once misunderstood natural occurrence. Flannery O'Connor succinctly writes in her *Mystery and Manners*, "mystery is a great embarrassment to the modern mind," and Holden's scientific view of the world reflects this modernization and abhorrence of mystery

(O'Connor 124). His science ends the uneducated speculations, predictions and prophecies of oracles and diviners, and where the tragedies of life befall all men regardless of their intelligence, his learned nature sets him apart from "The man who believes that the secrets of the world are forever hidden," a man who "lives in mystery and fear" (BM 199). The early 20th Century chemist Erwin Chargaff, while instrumental in discovering the double helix of DNA strands, laments the dissecting nature of science in the same terms as Holden: "The wonderful, inconceivably intricate tapestry is being taken apart strand by strand; each thread is being pulled out, torn up, and analyzed," he writes in *Heraclitean Fire: Sketches From A Life Before Nature* (Chargaff 56). Chargaff sees such an attempt, similar to the judge's even in its metaphor, as destructive and reductive. The chemist recognizes needed limitations on whether or not science *should* pursue certain avenues of inquiry, not simply if they *could*.

In his consideration of why we should believe Holden, Sepich helps explain the judge with the use of Carl Jung: as Jung writes, "Our intellect has created a new world that dominates nature . . . In spite of our proud domination of nature, we are still her victims, for we have not even learned to control our own nature" (quoted in Sepich 146). Sepich rightly finds this echoed in the hermitic anchorite's aphoristic conversation with the kid, "It's a mystery. A man's at odds to know his mind cause his mind is aught he has to know it with. He can know his heart but he dont want to. Rightly so. Best not to look in there" (BM 19). Jung and the hermit's recognition of the depravity of man's essential nature both speak back to the epigraph's invocation of Valery, "Your ideas are terrifying and your hearts faint . . . you fear blood more and more," which points out how, for all of man's intellectual advancement, our base natures remain foundational and ineluctable

(BM 1). Sepich pits the hermit and the judge at odds, but while the judge practices these enlightenment ideals, celebrating the power of the rational intellect, he never deludes himself on the bestial nature of man. He does not “fear blood more and more,” he celebrates it. He knows his own heart, the murderous hearts of the Glanton gang, and the merciful heart of the kid.

This is why, in his backhanded way, Holden agrees with Tobin’s condemnation of the fortune teller’s practice as idolatry, but not for the same philosophical reasons (BM 93). His knowledge of chemistry allows for his, and the Glanton gang’s, survival with the concoction of his “foul matrix” of gunpowder. For the judge, the man who catalogs more, knows more, and has supremacy over his fellow man, still frightened of the seemingly random nature of the universe. Further, the judge’s power extends over that same universe, now proven to be not so random after all. In the same way meteorologists gather data to reasonably predict the weather patterns of the future, Holden takes the mystery out of tomorrow by examining yesterday. In his essential *Philosophical Essay on Probabilities* (1820), the Marquis de Laplace writes of predictability based on observed and collated data, and presents an agent strikingly similar to the judge,

an intelligence which could comprehend all the forces by which nature is animated and the respective situation of the beings who compose it – an intelligence sufficiently vast to submit these data to analysis – it would embrace in the same formula the movements of the greatest bodies of the universe and those of the lightest atom; for it, nothing would be uncertain and the future, as the past, would be present to its eyes. (Laplace 4)

Laplace uses this example to point to a divine intelligence (perhaps *the* divine intelligence), but one can imagine Holden finding this passage, from a widely read treatise, particularly appealing and self-applicable.

The judge links destiny to the words of this divinity when he tells Black Jackson of “that larger protocol exacted by the formal agenda of an absolute destiny,” and similarly speaks of words as things, whose “authority transcends [one’s] ignorance of their meaning” (BM 85). The multi lingual judge breaches the language barrier between Black Jackson and Sergeant Aguilar, but Holden’s translations go beyond human language and his ability to listen to the words of God spoken through “stones and trees, the bones of things” allows him insight into the authority of their meaning (BM 116). “It is only by such taking charge that he will effect a way to dictate the terms of his own fate,” he lectures the skeptical Toadvine, and this taking charge necessarily relies on his ability to understand the world’s words (BM 199). His science becomes prescience.

The Enlightenment foresaw a golden era of civilization based on applied reason and understanding to resolve disputes, a civilization where humans fully express their mental capabilities to develop technologies and sciences in an effort to further the separation between our baser, animalistic nature and the spark of the divine within. Obviously, Holden does not subscribe to these tenets of the scientifically empirical based philosophy, and understands humanity’s doom as stemming from our inability to supersede, fully, our primal natures. War and violence have always been the remainders left from enlightenment’s long division, Holden knows this, and takes a unique place. He takes a forward thinking approach and appeals to a scientific understanding of the nature of the universe, but he also applies this to his view of humanity’s existence as well, and

hardly expresses a progressive faith in humanism. Shane Schimpf begins his *Reader's Guide to Blood Meridian* with an essay in which he reads Holden as a literary Nietzschean *Übermensch*. According to Schimpf, after Nietzsche pronounces God dead, he explains how science takes His place and understands the moral ramifications of this: "Everything can be explained solely in terms of nature and natural laws," Schimpf writes of Holden's rationality and takes the judge's worldview to its logical conclusion regarding the sticky question of ethics, "the question of what is good and bad is no longer just a theological question" (Schimpf 23).

Following the judge's infamous sermon on the divinity of war, the gang members rightly feel even their compromised morality infringed upon. The gang's interest in morality seems hypocritical in light of their trade, but in truth, reading of what they consider immoral only dramatizes Holden's total lack of an ethical consciousness. Even they treat his rape and murder of the Mexican boy as an affront, prompting Toadvine to put his gun to Holden's head. In a dramatically ironic statement, Doc Irving replies, "Might does not make right . . . The man that wins in some combat is not vindicated morally" (BM 250). The gang's field nurse provides more than enough tender to fuel the judge's well-thought out explanation of "moral law," which he explains,

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. (BM 250)

The judge bases his paradigm of existence on this historical law, a law which he sees established with no regard for the improvable. Historical law establishes itself by what remains to be seen. The winners of the ultimate test write history, and the ultimate test,

the ultimate game, for the judge is war where “decisions of life and death, of what shall be and what shall not, beggar all question of right” (BM 250). History and war leave a winner and loser.

Holloway points out how Holden’s relationship with the Age of Reason yields diverse readings, how he can be an “embodiment of enlightenment grand narrative” for some critics, and “a grotesque configuring of anti-enlightenment critical theory” for others (Holloway 191). These divergent readings synthesize with an understanding of how the judge sees history and how he functions as an overt symbol of this temporal perspective. Over and over again in the course of history we find humanity reaching a new level of scientific understanding and technological advancements. These cerebral growth spurts inevitably inspire hope in humanity’s ability to rise above past atrocities with new capacities for rationality. These predicted golden ages have never come to fruition, however, and are instead inevitably followed by some of the darkest eras in history’s timeline, usually with the aid of those same technological advancements (the Industrial Revolution following this Enlightenment Age, the Reign of Terror following the French Revolution, and the World Wars following the Gilded Age, just to name a few). In fact, this trend in human history is the titular “meridian” (of which) the judge symbolizes. We read that the Glanton gang meets him, as Tobin tells the kid, “about the meridian of that day” (BM 125). They meet Holden as the sun reaches its apex, with more of the day behind them than in front, and the judge makes his symbolic tie to the zenith of the day verbally explicit when he later tells the gang how man, at

the noon of his expression signals the onset of night. His spirit is exhausted at the peak of its achievement. His meridian is at once his darkening and the evening of his day. (BM 146-147)

Here the judge asserts that human history is not a linear progression, but rather, a circular, cyclical movement of ascension and declination. Like the hands of a clock, or the sun's circular movement, people possess the ability to rise above their baser natures, but the very expressions of this evolution – philosophical and technological advancements – facilitate the downward return to violent dark ages. The recurring, revolving images of wheels (mankind's benchmark invention), grinding through the desert sands of time, across the western frontier, gesture to the judge's notion of technology's fulcrumic place². The judge holds the howitzer cannon, a symbol of this technological advancement used for war instead of peace, at one side of him with the drooling idiot, a symbol of man's degeneracy, "stuck close to his [other] side" (BM 275). No matter the sophistication our technology attains, war returns us to our elemental roots, and the judge can see it no other way.

Control is power for the judge and power is hierarchal. His rhetoric and actions continually suggest a movement above and beyond the men around him. "Men are born for games," he believes, and treats events, both comic and tragic, with playful levity (BM 249). His calm when facing bands of Apache, or the barrel of Toadvine's drawn pistol appeals to gang members, and reflects his gamesome nature.

² The text places the wheel at the onset of mankind's technological advancement and places this advancement as an evolutionary demarcation. The Glanton gang enters the garrison of Tucson and we read "Save for their guns and buckles and a few pieces of metal in the harness of the animals there was nothing about these arrivals to suggest even the discovery of the wheel" (BM 232).

The judge is an incredibly in-control character. Every aspect of his life, and the lives of his companions, teeters on precarious grounds. The landscape where he resides is harsh enough, but dehydration follows a close second to being attacked by Comanche, Apache, or the Mexican regulars patrolling the same contested desert. So little of man's ability to survive in this wilderness depends upon their own capacities. Most of the factors that can destroy them are beyond their control. Tobin's tale of the gang's first meeting with the judge highlights his in-control nature, when they come across him in the desert, "And there he sat. No horse. Just him and his legs crossed, smiling as we rode up. Like he'd been expectin us . . . He didnt even have a canteen" (BM 125). Here Holden, in the middle of a wasteland littered with the bones of men who perished from lack of water or a proper mount, contentedly awaits what comes, satisfied in his ability to handle his circumstances, even the human agencies which may be directly out to destroy him. This is the kind of control the judge possesses, and it is a control dominated by his adherence to his own worldview.

"All other trades are contained in that of war," the judge replies, when asked to defend his obsession with "notebooks and bones and stuff" (BM 249; 248). The judge stakes his existential paradigm upon mankind's lowest common denominator, our nature to kill one another, and raises it up, exalts and worships it, because of war's omnipresence in history. "What joins men together . . . is not the sharing of bread but the sharing of enemies," Holden tells the kid in a devilish aphorism sounding like a proverb brought back by Blake from his *Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (BM 307). The judge rationally reduces all philosophical, theological, and scientific inconsistencies to war's ubiquitous - therefore supreme - place in man's inmost heart. "Is not blood the tempering

agent in the mortar which bonds?," he rhetorically asks the kid; all of Judge Holden's lectures and actions are to the glory of his god, war (BM 329).

The "terra damnata" of *Blood Meridian's* Mexican landscape is littered with the ruined Catholic churches of the Christian faith, some run down by time and non-use, while others have obviously met their destruction at the hands of Indian attacks (BM 61). The church the kid and Sproule come upon after they survive the "death hilarious" Comanche attack has "no pews . . . and the stone floor was heaped with the scalped and naked and partly eaten bodies of some forty souls who'd barricaded themselves in this house of God against the heathen" (BM 60). The church has not simply fallen into disuse and abandonment, but has been attacked and ruined in the very time of its need. Another church proves useless against the terrors of warring man when the gang rides into a nameless town scattering the inhabitants all about, and we read "many of the people had been running toward the church where they knelt clutching the altar and from this refuge they were dragged howling one by one and one by one they were slain and scalped in the chancel floor" (BM 181). Church walls cannot save man from man, and instead, serve as an ironic temple, parodying the golden rule of neighborly love. While recruiting the kid, Captain White half-correctly says, "there's no God in Mexico" (BM 34). The Christian God does not reside in Mexico, but Judge Holden's god of war thrives. The dilapidated missions and cathedrals dotting the landscape re-enforce the judge's faith as he travels preaching his anti-gospel.

Among the variety of things the judge has a propensity for, one of the more thematically important is his gracefulness on the dance floor. His light footedness uncannily juxtaposes with his physical size, stressing his dominant energy. In *The Man*

Who was Thursday, mystery-writer and lay-theologian G.K. Chesterton gives his copious character, Sunday, gracefulness, prompting another to say, “We always think of fat people as heavy, but he could have danced against a sylph . . . Moderate strength is shown in violence, supreme strength in levity” (Chesterton 165). The judge shows his moderate strength through his violence, but also exercises this supreme strength through his pirouettes. Towards the end of the novel he tells us that “the dance is the thing with which we are concerned and contains complete within itself its own arrangement and history and finale there is no necessity that the dancers contain these things within themselves as well” (BM 329). The dance, with its rigorous steps, rhythm and musically guided movements, allegorizes the judge’s view of the universe, where human agency is consistent with the dancers’ inability to deviate from the structure of the dance. But the judge finds a way to control the dance and thus control men’s movements through the time and space of existence. The novel concludes with the horrifying image of the judge taking “possession of one of the fiddles and he pirouettes and makes a pass, two passes, dancing and fiddling at once” (BM 335). The “either handed as a spider” judge’s ability to do two things at once is never more threatening than right here (BM 134). Dancing and fiddling makes the judge both the leader and a participant of the existential fandango. He calls his own movements and the movements of others in the dance of divine war, keeping his own time, not beholden to the tempo of another music maker. This explains his ability to preach his “war is god” gospel and also assert his own autonomy, how he can be “no godserver but a god himself” as he paradoxically judges Tobin (BM 25). When resistance makes inscription impossible, Holden takes his empirical mission to the dance floor of combat.

“Let them praise His name in the dance: let them sing praises unto Him with the timbrel and harp,” the psalmist writes, and Judge Holden perversely agrees (Psalm 149:3). Dennis Sansom, in “Learning from Art: Cormac McCarthy’s *Blood Meridian* as a Critique of Divine Determinism,” sees the judge’s dance as the same worshipful expression, just to a different god, “not an act of gratitude toward a benevolent deity but the bloodlust of a shaman who worships a God that uses cruelty as easily and purposefully as compassion” (Sansom 9). The judge corroborates this reading when he preaches to the kid, “Only that man who has offered up himself entire to the blood of war, who has been to the floor of the pit and seen horror in the round and learned at last that it speaks to his inmost heart, only that man can dance” (BM 331). For the judge, the dance is an authoritative expression. He insists that extant existence originates from a Kurtzian recognition of the malignancy of the universe, those who understand and accept this express it through the dance. However, there is one in Fort Griffin, “the biggest town for sin in all Texas,” who refuses the judge’s invocation to war with his invitation to dance, the kid (BM 319).

THE KID RESISTS

Blood Meridian is a difficult book to get through. Like the deserts of the southwest the gang rampages through, its terrain is hostile, bitter, and uncaring for both its characters and readers. The oases of human compassion are few and far between leaving readers breathless with no time for recovery. The majority of the novel chronicles the ultra-violent world of scalp-hunters, filibusters and other marauders to render the world of human depravity. The novel's focus on the kid drags us through the text, and though he sometimes fades out of the narrative focus, he always surfaces again to survive another stint alone within the desert landscape.

For better or worse, *Blood Meridian's* gaze follows the kid through his life. The complex relationship between protagonist and narrative, however, gives rise to many critical complications and divergent interpretations. Some critical considerations seek to dislodge the kid as protagonist, or downplay the narrative's choice to give him this place of attention.

Eminent McCarthy scholar, Edwin T. Arnold, reacts to many early readings of McCarthy's work as overtly nihilistic by pointing out how the novelist has in fact written "Moral Parables." In "Naming, Knowing and Nothingness," Arnold easily moves through the first four novels in McCarthy's canon, but, owing to the oblique narrative, noticeably stalls when he addresses *Blood Meridian*. Arnold accepts the kid as the novel's protagonist and remarks on the narrative's choice to exclude or obscure him during many of the gang's warring engagements, but underestimates the kid with his overestimation of Tobin, writing that the "Most opposed to the judge is Tobin" (Arnold 63). He pits the

expriest against the judge so explicitly because of Tobin's replies to Holden and his instructions to the kid on how to react to the judge.

However, Tobin never threatens the judge and he never imparts wisdom to the kid. Arnold pays particular attention to the desert stand off, concluding that "the kid will not take a stand" and kill Holden as Tobin begs (Arnold 63). The kid does not stand up to the judge on the judge's terms, but does take issue with him. Tobin tells the kid, "Look around you. Study the judge," and maintains that the judge is, in fact, "a thing to study," to which the kid quickly replies, "I done studied him" and acts accordingly (BM 122; 135). As Arnold observes, "the kid 'sees' but he does not 'perceive' the truth of the judge" and construes the judge's charge that the kid is "no assassin . . . And no partisan either," as "the lack of choice which damns the kid" (Arnold 64). However, the exact opposite of this is true. The kid has options and exercises a choice to let the judge live, to harbor clemency for the heathen; it is the judge who has no choice but to destroy the kid because these merciful acts cannot fit into his worldview.

For Arnold, the kid fails "to examine his heart, to name and face the judge, to acknowledge responsibility" but these are precisely how the kid succeeds in his dealings with Holden. The kid may not be a match for the judge's eloquence or turn of phrase, but he is a formidable foe in his ability to see people for what they are. The judge claims his prominence as a judge of character when he tells the kid, "I recognized you when I first saw you," but the kid also never forgets a face, as he tells Toadvine after their second encounter, "I'd know your hide in a tanyard," and he passes judgement on Sproule, "I know your kind . . . What's wrong with you is wrong all the way through you" (BM 328; 73; 66). The kid examines others' hearts, claims to have examined the judge and knows

enough to stay out of his sketchbook and keep quiet (both in the desert west of the Yuma Ferry to keep his physical life and throughout the novel to maintain his autonomy). The kid does acknowledge his responsibility, albeit to the mummified corpse of “the eldress in the rocks,” but the reader is still afforded this rare opportunity to see into the kid’s heart:

He told her that he was an American and that he was a long way from the country of his birth and that he had no family and that he had traveled much and seen many things and had been at war and endured hardships. He told her that he would convey her to a safe place, some party of her countrypeople who would welcome her and that she should join them for he could not leave her in this place or she would surely die. (BM 315)

This outpouring of the kid’s heart, as close to confession as *Blood Meridian* allows, must come from an inward examination, and yields an understanding of the possibility of redemption with this compassionate gesture. The fact that “She was just a dried shell and she had been dead in that place for years,” seems to validate the judge’s worldview of depravity, but the kid’s vulnerability, and compassion signals a morality which may one day be strong enough to oppose Holden (BM 315). And the kid takes specific measures and great pains to *keep his name safe*. He examines his own heart, he names the judge (while keeping his own), faces the judge, and he acknowledges responsibility - all to the consternation of the judge.

Arnold, perhaps, gives the kid too little credit and closes his consideration of *Blood Meridian*, after ruling the kid out as a worthy adversary to the judge, with the promise that “moral choice remains; the judge can still be faced” (Arnold 65). Though he

does not say, perhaps Arnold means the mysterious figure of the epilogue, but he vaguely associates the fence building figure with Holden. Certainly, he cannot expect Tobin to be the force to oppose the judge, even on moral grounds. Arnold correctly writes that “moral choice remains” but does not read the kid as the force to face the judge. The kid is the *only* force with the morals and evasiveness to oppose the judge, yet his failure to carry out this charge is another matter. Despite the taciturn nature of the kid, and the narrative swerve the novel sometimes takes in relegating him to its perimeter, the kid remains the overall focal center of the text because of his adversarial worth.

Shaviro reads the auctorial voice issuing from the world itself. The narrative language of the novel, he argues, “is rather continually outside itself, in intimate contact with the world in a powerfully nonrepresentational way” (Shaviro 153). For Shaviro this power lies in the fact that we are denied any subjective perspective in the text, and

are given instead a kind of perception before or beyond the human. This is not a perspective *upon* the world, and not a vision that *intends* its objects; but an immanent perspective that already *is* the world . . . and its observations cannot be attributed to any fixed center of enunciation, neither to an authorial presence nor to a narrating voice nor the consciousness of any of the characters.

(Shaviro 153-154)

Shaviro eloquently explains why psychological readings of the novel prove difficult. The narrative voice is further removed than third person limited, and lacks even a compassionate tone, which would render it even vaguely human. It does not care for characters’ intra-diegetic perspectives, even its protagonist’s.

The relentless violence of *Blood Meridian* leaves readers desperate for some sort of identifiable character worthy of empathy. One needs to find more than regeneration through violence in its pages to re-read the book, and one feels desperate for an overt protagonist to stand up and directly challenge the judge or the narrative itself. Unfortunately, the kid's need to evade the judge with his namelessness and silence necessarily takes him out of the narrative focus and makes him a most difficult cipher. But he is our hero and he does resist the two fundamental aspects of the judge's worldview outlined in the previous chapter, ledgeric representation and merciless warring.

Vereen M. Bell writes to explain *The Achievement of Cormac McCarthy* in the first book length study of McCarthy. Early in his work, he addresses the position of the narrator in McCarthy's writing in relation to characters and readers alike, and how this position impacts readers' engagements with the novels:

Ordinarily the omniscient narrator in McCarthy's novels is recessive – merely narrating – and the characters are almost without thoughts, certainly without thought process, so neither the narrator nor characters offer us any help with the business of generalizing . . . the motivation of characters is usually tantalizingly obscure . . . All of the characters threaten to become almost eerily unselfconscious. (Bell 4)

Bell's point provides a needed understanding of how the narrative represents McCarthy's characters, rendering them at an inaccessible, but not uninteresting distance. But while correct in pointing out how most of his protagonists remain at this distance, the manifold motivations of the judge, the novel's antagonist, are hardly obscure. The judge's

eloquence and desire to vocalize his well rationalized thought processes invite a more complete understanding of him than any other character in the novel. As discussed in Chapter One, the judge's motivations base themselves in his desire for control, which, according to his destructive worldview, necessarily means the abdication of another's autonomy, if not life. The kid then, as the novel's protagonist, resists the judge in two broad approaches. The first being his refusal to be included in Holden's empirically based ledger and the second being his resistance to war.

The kid resists inclusion into Holden's sketchbook. His refusal to be wrangled by the judge facilitates his autonomy, for, as Rick Wallach writes in "Judge Holden, *Blood Meridian's* Evil Archon," "Holden the journal keeper busily inscribes not only his own destiny, but the destiny of his comrades-in-arms" with his ledger reckonings (Wallach 6). He exerts control through this inscription, but needs names for his categorization and taxonomy. *Outer Dark's* own evil archon, "the bearded man," withholds his name from the text, saying, "I wouldn't name him because if you caint name something you caint claim it. You caint talk about it even. You caint say what it is" (*Outer Dark* 177). This same sobriquet silence keeps the kid at a remove from the matriarchal memory of his mother, as his "father never speaks her name, the child does not know it" (BM 3). In describing the Glanton gang as a primal whole, the narrative compares them to "a time before nomenclature was and each was all" (BM 172). Names mark one out of a group, and in the world of *Blood Meridian* to be noticed is to be threatened. In his unpublished screenplay *Whales and Men*, McCarthy writes, "Language is a way of containing the world. A thing named becomes that named thing. It is under surveillance" (*Whales and Men* 58). Judge Holden similarly surveys things and attempts to capture, categorize, and

control. The process of singling out the thread of existence searches for the one in the many, and names facilitate this specificity.

Masters gives the judge's manipulative process and power tremendous authority when he extends it to the act of naming: "the judge not only interprets the world and its history, but also creates that world through his ability to apply language, to *name*" (Masters 36). While I concede the judge *uses* names and needs them to maintain comprehensive control, Masters gives him too much credit with being able to attach, successfully, monikers to individuals, especially the kid. The judge attempts, once, to give the kid a Christian name when the gang's fortunes are divined. "Young Blasarius yonder," he tells the juggler, gesturing toward the kid (BM 94). This particular utterance of the judge causes much casual debate among many McCarthy critics, but I read it as an attempt by the judge to establish the sort of naming-power Masters claims him capable. The name, as the word's unique capitalization and spelling suggest, appears nowhere else in the text and the juggler's immediate, confused response, "Como?," forces to the judge to resort back to the narrative's concession, and call him "El joven," to which the juggler is able to locate the kid in the group (94). If the judge tries to give the nameless kid a handle here, he fails and, as Masters puts it, "preserved some portion of himself outside the judge's textual domain" (Masters 34).

For the frontiersmen forging out during westward expansion, functional power lay in possessing the names of things. Conquering and maintaining conquered lands necessitates cartography, and this mapmaking must include names for reference. The empire enforcing psychology of changing the names of newly acquired lands is something victorious rulers have done since the beginning of conquest. Borders and place

names are manmade abstractions imposed by men onto lands that do not physically change with their new designations – the west was “won” in just such a fashion. But the kid never gives over his name. We are told his physical description, but his moniker, the first step into his psyche (for readers and the judge) remains in his tight-lipped mouth.

The text touches on this explicit connection between names and maps. During the kid’s post-operation fever dream he encounters the judge in a surreal exchange which, like his desert confession, affords exclusive insight into his thoughts, especially his considerations for remaining nameless. The judge leers at the kid in his dream and the kid ponders his own reflection in the

lashless pig’s eyes wherein this child . . . saw his own name which nowhere else could he have ciphered out at all logged into the records as a thing already accomplished, a traveler known in jurisdictions existing in the claims of certain pensioners or on old dated maps. (BM 310)

The judge, using his ledger as a map of creation, needs more than the kid gives him for inclusion.

During one of his sketches, Webster tells the judge “dont draw me . . . For I dont want in your book,” to which the judge replies “Whether in my book or not, every man is tabernacled in every other and he in exchange and so on in an endless complexity of being and witness to the uttermost edge of the world” (BM 141). Here the judge binds existence to the witness and testimony of a third party. A testimony, he implies, which can find expression in a compendium such as his, and despite Webster’s response that he will “stand for [his] own witness,” after the judge’s rhetoric, this autonomy seems impossible (BM 141).

In fact, Webster's proposed autonomous action is one of the more explicit ways the kid confounds Judge Holden. As he tells the kid,

You came forward . . . to take part in a work. But you were a witness against yourself. You sat in judgment on your own deeds. You put your own allowances before the judgments of history and you broke with the body of which you were pledged a part and poisoned it in all its enterprise. (BM 307)

According to the judge, the kid's transgression is that he attempts, as Webster claims to try to do, to stand for his own witness and defy the determining principles of the universe set forth by Holden. This is problematic for the judge, who needs to locate others in his own reckoning, to understand and control their destinies. As Yoojin Grace Kim asserts, "the judge continues to rely on knowledge of the *other* and not self for his immortality. The kid's *self*-witness and *self*-judgment, according to the judge, are abominations against his order that require atonement by blood" (Kim 179). The kid knows that which exists in Holden's book, *only* exists in Holden's book, the subjects being destroyed once they are captured.

If the text of *Blood Meridian* itself acts as a sort of ledger, with the atrocious events unemotionally recorded in its pages, then the kid already dangerously resides there regardless of the secrecy of his name. The frustrating part for readers, and another of his attempts to remain outside of Holden's book, is his near absence from much of the narrative. Critics note the narrative focal shift from the kid to the gang as a whole in their violent altercations, and how the judge's charisma pulls the narrative gaze toward him and away from our alleged protagonist. In her comprehensive examination of how narratives operate, *Narratology*, Mieke Bal explains,

The writer withdraws and calls upon a fictitious spokesman, an agent technically known as the *narrator*. But the narrator does not relate continually. Whenever direct speech occurs in the text, it is as if the narrator temporarily transfers this function to one of the actors. (Bal 8)

This direct speech is somewhat difficult to ascribe to characters in *Blood Meridian* due to its noticeable absence of quotation marks, but the judge's overwhelming presence in the novel comes, in larger part than his physical size or even his diabolical crimes, in his copious speech. In Bal's explanation the relationship between narrator and character, a temporary "transfer" of such a powerful function, seems too generous to suit a novel like *Blood Meridian*. Murders and acquisitions are the *modus operandi* of these characters, of this landscape; the judge hijacks or absconds with the narrative's relating function with his monologues.

Speaking in this novel establishes, makes one noticed. Both the kid and the judge know this and the kid's noticeable absence in the novel, especially the more judge-heavy portions, stem from this silence. It is a purposeful silence for the kid to resist inclusion in the judge's ledger. The judge rightfully questions this particular strategy of the kid in Fort Griffin: "Was it always your idea . . . that if you did not speak you would not be recognized?" (BM 328). In "Politics and Reason," Michel Foucault insists on the inclusive power of verbalization, writing that when a man speaks "His freedom has been subjected to power. He has been submitted to government" (Foucault 84). The kid hopes his silence will exclude him from the judge's attempts at this tyrannical control. Strategic reticence is the kid's idea, though he knows it not to be sufficient to keep the judge's gaze

away, as he answers Holden's somewhat rhetorical question with the obvious, "You seen me," which the judge ignores (BM 328).

Wallach attributes the judge's devilish appeal to his unique position within the text: "he does seem to stand, or perhaps hide would be a better word, within the very narrative, guarding the secret of inscription" (Wallach 6). We are enthralled, according to Wallach, because we feel he knows more than he tells us and while reading the novel leaves one with the impression that repeated readings will clarify. Ultimately we are left with the unsettling realization that Holden will hold onto whatever supreme knowledge he possesses, but for everything Holden is, inconspicuous he is not. His overt presence calls into question satanic readings of his personhood. He hides not himself or anything in the text. His attempts to root out the universe and verbally or visually to show what he finds are everywhere in the text. Characters see his ledger and they certainly hear what he has to say about the discoveries he makes, as do readers. Tobin tells the kid to stop his ears from the judge's constant verbal barrages because the judge never lets up. He is not the red devil upon the shoulder of consciousness whispering subversion into a puppet's ear. Hardly, he is the great naked three hundred and thirty six pound mammoth, dancing upon the mountain sides with lightning for stage lights and thunder for his chorus, shouting out the inner workings of the universe. If anyone hides in the text or remains reticent it is the kid.

Mitchell points out the unpredictable nature of textually representing objects or characters, "the uncontrollability of representations, the way they take on a life of their own that escapes and defies the will to determine their meaning" (Mitchell 20). The judge's ledger-based method of representing objects in his unceasing bid for control is

exactly this “will to determine [the] meaning” of his representations, but Mitchell points out how, even once recorded in representation, an object can persist in its shifting. If the judge cannot even transcribe the kid with any satisfaction in his journal, how can he establish enough control to properly study the kid? He needs the kid to give him more than the kid is willing, his name, and more verbal responses, so the judge can include him in his notebook and explain him away.

The kid’s namelessness, and his overall silence in the text obscure his nature to the judge. “Why not show yourself?,” Holden asks the literally hidden kid to reveal his special location, but also to reveal his existential motivations which are as obscured to the judge as the scrub brush (BM 299). Holden knows the expriest Tobin inside and out, and their ongoing arguments amuse the judge as prey amuses a predatory cat. The judge may claim extensive knowledge of the kid’s inner workings, but the judge would not express such overwhelming frustration toward the kid if he were satisfied with his understanding. The kid’s namelessness, overall silence, and confounding nature make it difficult for Holden to render him in the controlling mechanism of his ledger. The kid complements this passive resistance with active countermeasures which expressly go against Holden’s philosophy via his merciful actions.

The debate over the kid’s moral development continues and divides readers considerably. Some emphasize the *taste* of his “taste for mindless violence,” suggesting it may be something he grows out of, while others point to the same characteristic and use it as evidence for his total depravity (BM 3). No one, however, can successfully argue for the kid’s total innocence. Even his birth brings about the death of his mother, and from then on violence surrounds his life, some brought about by his own hands - his first

encounter with Toadvine (“he saw no use in discussing it. He kicked the man in the jaw”), their subsequent murder of “Sidney” for reasons never explained, and his murder of the Mexican bar owner – all brutalities where he figures directly into the action of the narrative and cannot be exonerated (BM 9). But violence also befalls him without his instigation, and though Holden calls him “Blesarius” (a misspelled arcane term for “incendiary”) the kid is not directly responsible for all of the bloody melees in which he finds himself. It is a dangerous world.

The significant danger of living in this world informs the judge’s suggestion for child rearing when Tobin asks, “What is the way of raising a child?,” to which the judge replies, “[children] should be made to run naked in the desert,” “they should be put in a pit with wild dogs,” and face life-threatening encounters from the first to hone their survival skills, to weed out the weak in preparation for life in a world where survival is all, and difficult (BM 146). Life is cruel, brutish and short, especially in the western frontier where we find these men, and, according to the judge, assisting in another’s survival here (when not directly self beneficial) shows a weakness which should be expunged. Natural law does not favor the merciful.

Holden has not spoken explicitly against moral law yet, but in this childcare scene he admits no belief in the Judeo-Christian God’s moral presence, stating, “If God meant to interfere in the degeneracy of mankind would he not have done so by now?” (BM 146). The kid’s morality shows itself through his generous and life-endangering assistance to others, and it countermands the judge’s theory of war survival (which he sees as all life) as validation (explained further in Chapter Three). If everyone helps the weak survive, then the judge’s process of ascending the survival ladder and establishing

control becomes more and more difficult, if not void. Assisting in another's survival subverts the rules of Holden's war games. The kid cheats with his moral moments.

The kid explicitly shows mercy to four members of his two companies, the first being his non-abandonment of Sproule, a comrade-in-arms from Captain White's failed entourage, after Comanche attack the troop. The kid rises with the darkness of the battlefield and finds Sproule has survived too, although with a debilitating wound which impedes his ability to progress in the harsh wasteland. Sproule tells the kid to "Go on . . . Save yourself" at the menacing approach of some unknown Mexicans (BM 63). The kid stays with his wounded and sick fellow until Sproule's final demise from the gangrenous wound. Instead of going along with the judge's survival-of-the-fittest theology, the kid's subversion here throws a wrench in the judge's understanding of who should be living. The next three instances involve members of Glanton's gang and Holden is privy to the kid's disobedient benevolence.

A Native's arrow impales Davy Brown's leg, and while his first impulse, "I'd doctorfy it myself," reflects the self-reliance needed for survival, the arrow's location necessitates the assistance of one of his fellow men (BM 161). "Will none of ye help a man?," he begs the other members of the gang, who turn their deaf ears to his plea, or like the judge, make light of his life threatening injury (BM 161). "Will you do her, Holden?," Brown directly asks, to which the judge sarcastically replies "No, Davy, I wont. But . . . I'll write a policy on your life against every mishap save the noose" (BM 161). The kid proves to be quite the field nurse when he acts as Holden and the others will not, and his success insures Brown's survival, at least until he meets his fate, as predicted, at the gallows. Tobin's concern here, when he hisses "Fool . . . Dont you know

he'd of took you with him. He'd of took you, boy. Like a bride to the altar," further distinguishes the kid from the rest of the gang because of this merciful act (BM 162-163). The gang's inaction proves the judge right in his assertion of the hostility of the universe, of men's relationships, of war's supremacy, and he expresses his satisfaction with his sarcastic offer to insure Brown's life. One can feel the tension of the situation, not only between Brown and the kid, who if he fails will most surely incur the wrath of Brown, but also between the kid and the judge who has a chuckle over the scene before the kid's merciful aid.

The next instance, however, explicitly goes against Holden's holdings of the universe. "Wolves cull themselves," he answers the expriest's question on the way of raising a child (BM 146). The judge preaches to the men and calls upon the very hostility of the world to testify to his claim that "the race of man [is] more predacious yet" (BM 146). His appeal to the animalistic survival instinct admits no place for the kid's merciful acts, and when the gang needs to thin out the ranks of the wounded who cannot ride, a literal culling, the kid proves truant. The scene finds the kid drawing yet another arrow, though this time from Glanton's quiver in an act which much satisfies the judge for it plays out his philosophy or anti-theology. For all of his uniquely human scientific learning and artistic ability with the fiddle or charcoal, Holden insists that the killing of these wounded men further establishes the supremacy of the animal in the human. The baser nature reigns.

The kid's charge to kill Shelby plays out importantly. Of the four men who the gang needs to leave, two are Delaware Indians, who are dismissed by members of their own tribe, the third is a Mexican, who we read "was shot through the lungs and would die

anyway,” but the kid’s responsibility, Shelby, “had had his hip shattered by a ball and was clear in the head” (BM 207). Again, the kid chooses mercy, a choice Tobin says Brown would not have made if the roles were reversed and a choice Shelby himself says he would not offer the kid if placed in the other’s position. The kid leaves Shelby to a fate which excludes him from deciding death, hiding the wounded man, and with filling the ensconced man’s flask with water from his own canteen, actually places his own life in danger.

The judge kills with extreme prejudice and would no doubt cull with impunity, enjoying the validation of his view of the world, but the kid disobeys a direct order with this humanitarian act. He then catches up with Tate, whose lame horse has slowed him down after his dispensing of the dying Mexican, and again places the life of another before his, or at least places the same value on both. “Go on if you want,” Tate tells the kid, both knowing Elias’s troops hound them, to which the kid spits and says, “Come on” (BM 210). The kid’s insistence on assisting Tate ends up endangering his own life again. Elias’s scouts catch up to the men forcing them into another gunfight and the kid winds up alone in the snowy highlands, now without a horse. If the kid follows Glanton’s orders, based on Holden’s utilitarian philosophy of kill or be killed, his life would be more secure with the gang - provided he stays healthy.

The final instance of the kid’s benevolence threatens more than the judge’s philosophy, and Holden ironically benefits from the kid’s mercy. The kid and Tobin hide in the desert while being pursued by the judge after the destruction of the Yuma Ferry and the demise of the Glanton gang. They do not choose to confront him in violent engagement, not explicitly a merciful act considering their chances of victory in such an

open exchange. But the kid has opportunity to kill Judge Holden, in relative safety, with a sniper shot he is more than capable of making. The judge calls out to the kid in his hiding place, “I know too that you’ve not the heart of a common assassin . . . No assassin . . . And no partisan either. There’s a flawed place in the fabric of your heart” (BM 299). The judge sees this kid’s peacefulness as a character flaw and another affront to his worldview. The judge also sees this exchange as a game, “the value of that which is put at hazard,” being his existence and therefore the ultimate game (BM 249). The judge’s philosophy sees this precarious encounter, when lives are on the line, as the ultimate forcing of wills. For the judge it is a game, which needs validation through the death of a participant, but the kid refuses to play his game, and retards the weeding-out process of survival. The judge passes three times in front of the kid’s gun sights almost literally naked and survives, but the kid survives as well. A physical stalemate at least, but a philosophic defeat for Holden at best.

The kid’s compassion, understanding, and self-sacrifice infuriate the judge. Not only is the kid’s silence and namelessness an obstacle in the judge’s way of control through his ledger, but these merciful actions, which Holden calls “clemency for the heathen” - also go against the picture of the universe Holden attempts to paint (BM 299). Daugherty agrees: “because the kid *has* shown them mercy, the judge must *not* show *him* any – and does not” (Daugherty 164). These moments of mercy stand out in their juxtaposition with the atrocities in a book full of violence, but to the kid, violence is not sacred. It holds no affirming power, and while it may ontologically prove certain truths about the brutality of nature and man, it is not *the* unifying agent Holden holds it to be.

But why should the judge glare at the particular merciful acts of such an unfleshed character as the kid? Chapter Three examines Holden's intensifying focus on the kid as the novel progresses, but for now we can say this attention boils to a head during the kid's incarceration in San Diego. Holden visits the kid, safely behind bars, and admits intensely strong paternal feelings for the kid, "Don't you know that I'd have loved you like a son?" (BM 306). Again the kid resists.

From the end of the first page of the novel readers are aware that the kid desperately desires his own autonomy. Readers are told to observe the kid with the first sentence, but the child also stares at his drunken and posthumous poet-quoting father, "All history present in that visage, the child the father of the man" (BM 3). The Wordsworthian allusion here plays out ironically; the kid's lack of "natural piety" propels him to promptly run away after this particular scene, "At fourteen he runs away" (BM 3). The kid, desirous of self-agency, flees his hereditary history so that "Only now is the child finally divested of all that he has been. His origins are become as remote as is his destiny" (BM 4). Significantly, in a novel noted for its body count, the first death the kid sees (his mother's occurs before the narrative begins) is the "parricide hanged in a crossroads hamlet" (BM 5). The Oedipal desire to kill the father has no place in the kid's life because his mother is already dead, so the kid's self-willed emancipation from his alcoholic father acts as a sufficient metaphorical sever to initiate his free agency. Chapter one begins with the kid and the father and ends with the kid and the judge exchanging precarious stares, with this parricide in between.

The kid most boldly enacts this severance again when he refuses the judge's explicit attempt to act as surrogate father to him. The judge's desperation for the kid and

the kid's staunch remove from him reaches its climax, not in the jakes, where the judge finally "embraces" him, but during the kid's incarceration, when the judge visits, but is physically prohibited access to the kid by the bars of his cell. At this point the judge reveals that he has been speaking to the kid all along, "I'll speak softly," he tells the kid, "It's not for the world's ears but for yours only" (BM 306). Then, in his most vulnerable moment, the judge begs the kid "Let me see you. Dont you know I'd have loved you like a son?" (BM 306). Only after the judge's almost embarrassingly blunt admission to wanting to adopt the kid does he go from auditory ("listen"), to visual ("let me see you"), to the final physical contact he has desired, "Come here . . . Let me touch you" (BM 307). The kid steadfastly remains against the back wall of his cell, and the bars between them symbolize the resistance the kid has shown through their whole relationship. We have seen the kid interact with a father figure before with the novel's opening and there, as here, he remains reticent. The judge's futile appeal to the kid's cowardice, "Come here if you're not afraid," signal his own dependence more than the kid's fears, and the kid's terse reply, "I aint afraid of you," rings true (BM 307). He is not afraid of the judge, though he should fear the judge's physical power. The judge uses rhetoric and cunning when he can, but appeals to brute force when necessary.

The judge takes the kid's refusal to adhere to his religious teachings as hard as any devout father, and he vehemently reduces his theology into one "if, then" statement: "If war is not holy man is nothing but antic clay" (BM 307). War serves the Promethean function of giving free will to man because in war man's will is tested with another's and the universe. The other mention of man and clay occurs right after the kid leaves his father in Tennessee, "finally divested of all that he has been," to go out into the world "to

try whether the stuff of creation may be shaped to man's will or whether his own heart is not another kind of clay" (BM 4; 5). The judge worships war, for to him, it proves man's ability to shape creation to his will. The kid's clemency and mercy, briefly shown, indicate a moral development away from the judge's precepts, a development away from war and a relinquishment of agency. Twice the kid refuses a father figure to give himself more freedom.

"I aint studyin no dance," the kid tells Holden matter of factly in the Fort Griffin bar, but the judge persists despite the kid's protest and speaks of the dance regardless of the kid's attentiveness, the way he has spoken of the science of nature, destiny, and war to these deaf ears before. The judge, who finds religious ecstasy expressed in the dance, cannot understand "What man would not be a dancer if he could" (BM 327). The judge consistently reigns victorious in his combative encounters throughout the novel, whether it be the violent skirmishes with Apache or the Mexican armies, or the "legal" conflicts which are decided in his favor, and he particularly enjoys his debates with Tobin the expriest and the rhetoric or intellectual supremacy established with them. Only when he butts heads with the kid do we see his frustration, see him truly struggle. His string of "adopted" children throughout the text (the Apache child, the idiot James Robert) meet their gruesome fates at his small hands, but they never directly oppose him. Through his own existential affirmation of war he reigns supreme over everyone in the narrative, even Glanton, his superior officer in their military chain of command. A philosophical conquering of the kid is what the judge wants more than anything. This explains his insistence on getting the kid to the dance floor - "Plenty of time for the dance," "You're

here for the dance,” “What man would not be a dancer if he could” - instead of just dispensing with the kid physically, if the kid dances, then he affirms the judge (BM 327).

The judge and the kid are the last of the Glanton gang and the last of *Blood Meridian*'s main characters. The kid has survived so far despite the judge's speeches that his merciful actions should have weeded him out of existence by now. The kid shows readers and the judge that survival does not necessarily mean following the judge in going along with his philosophy, and morality and ethics do not have to be dismissed for survival in the world. Perhaps if the kid stays away from Fort Griffin, he will not come across the judge, but he goes to the north Texas town which, we read, is “as lively a place for murders as you'd care to visit,” a place to which the judge would no doubt be attracted (BM 319). No surprise to readers then, and possibly no shock to the kid, the judge has come to the same saloon, and the kid “tried to see past him. That great corpus enshadowed him from all beyond” (BM 327). The kid has been trying to see past the judge for the whole novel. He wants to not only see past him, but to live past him as well, live past his injunctions and mandates. This is one of the reasons the kid does not kill Holden in the desert. To kill Holden would be a physical validation of his philosophy. Through the kid's multiple modes of resistance he tries to prove the judge wrong, to live another way, but he cannot move past the juggernaut, cannot even see past him here, and hears the first, but not the last about the ensuing dance.

Throughout the novel the judge intensifies his focus on the kid. Seeing how the kid progresses through the elimination of life by death's selective hand, the judge recognizes the worthiness of his opponent and how winning this powerful character over

to his side would lend incredible credence to his warring enterprise. The kid's consent to the dance here would be a confirmation and acceptance of the judge's paradigm.

The judge recognizes the kid's difference from the others in the gang: "I recognized you when I first saw you" he tells the kid, and sees his merciful moral nature as a failure, "you were a disappointment to me." (BM 328). Nevertheless, he acknowledges that the kid's presence attests to another mode of existence. "Even so," the judge says, meaning, despite how the kid has gone against the ways of the universe as the judge has explained them, "at last I find you here with me" (BM 328). The judge preaches the inefficiency of "moral law" in the face of humanity's overwhelming past of warring historical law, but the kid acts in discordance with the judge, both directly and indirectly, and survives longer than anyone else save the bald beast. The kid's existence and presence in Fort Griffin speaks to a truth – validated by the judge's belief that the fittest survive – that he does not hold with. Since the judge cannot talk the kid into accepting his worldview, cannot get the kid to dance, he must wipe away all physical trace of the kid. The judge operates in this comply or obliterate mode and duly extinguishes the kid in the jakes.

"You're here for the dance," the judge tells the kid with no suggestive rhetorical question mark and when the kid responds with his brief, "I got to go," the text tells us the judge "looked aggrieved" (BM 327). Here the kid makes, perhaps, his life ending mistake. We read that he reaches for his hat, "but he did not take it up and he did not move" (BM 327). Mysteriously, the kid waits around to hear what the judge has to say of the dance. The kid turns deaf ears to the judge consistently throughout the text, but does not here, and this sets the stage for their first real verbal exchange, and their last. The

judge does not know, however, how it will play out. He advises the kid to “Drink up. This night thy soul may be required of thee” (BM 327). Importantly, the judge hedges his advice with the “may be” here because he lacks certainty. The kid could dance that night, give himself over to Holden’s war god and go along with the judge as a war disciple, until the time came for their inevitable confrontation down the line.

Yet the kid does not, will not, dance in the judge’s ceremony meant to mimic the ritual of blood-letting war. The kid’s morality, and significantly, the surviving power of his morality, opposes Holden’s war religion. The judge fears that “as war becomes dishonored and its nobility called into question,” the unworthy and unfit for life will not be weeded out (BM 331). The dance will no longer mean anything, no longer signal the physically capable and the fated or destined chosen. The kid’s life and resistance supports the judge’s fear. Not celebrating war, not joining in Holden’s dance, but living a life which contains room for the moral particulars, as the kid’s life does, will lead to a dance floor full of participants who are not worthy. The judge sees this as a travesty because the warriors “who recognize the sanctity of blood will become excluded from the dance” rendering it “a false dance and the dancers false dancers” (BM 331). The kid’s refusal to dance is not only a glaring resistance and affront to Holden but is also a blasphemous, heretical inaction of non-praise and a threat to the dogmatic orthodoxy of his war religion.

The kid’s last, simple words to the judge ring loudest and unpacking them speaks volumes against Holden’s voluptuous orations. Following some of the judge’s most beautifully horrific exegesis on the blood and horror of the dance, the kid answers, “Even a dumb animal can dance” (BM 331). In fact, we have just seen the bear in

anthropomorphizing human dress dance to the organ grinder's cranked out song. The judge bases his philosophy on the animal kingdom ("Wolves cull themselves") and he admires the natural instinct of the animal kingdom to kill or be killed, but the kid takes issue and distinguishes between the animal and the human (BM 146). The kid sees no higher glory in simply obeying our most basic animal natures, and while the judge extols what he sees as virtues in animals, he also practices the uniquely human frequently.

Holden's sophisticated language alone speaks directly to the fact that he esteems the complicated, well thought-out verbal parlay – an encounter no two members of the purely animal kingdom are able to engage in. Secondly, animals run naked, and while the Apache boy and the idiot he adopts go without clothes (as does he when in the desert), Holden takes great care in his garmeted appearance. His linen suit in San Diego is "bespoken," combining both the solely human language and clothing, the judge says exactly how he wants his clothes to fit (BM 310). If he preached a total return to the animal, he would run naked, communicate with grunts and growls and only sing, as the songbirds, if he needed music, and certainly would not dance in any formal way. With the kid's final words he undercuts the judge's philosophy or at least raises questions which the judge cannot answer and he is therefore forced to wipe out the questioner. The judge now knows that talking to the kid or rhetorically vying for his involvement in the dance of war is impossible. He sets his bottle on the bar, a gavel sentencing slam, and condemns the kid to "a night that is eternal and without name" (BM 331).

IMPLICATIONS OF RESISTANCE

What are the implications of the kid's resistance to the judge? After all, though readers (creatively) disagree with the particulars of *how* Judge Holden dispenses with the kid in the Fort Griffin jakes, everyone agrees that the judge *does* obliterate him: the kid resists the judge's life-threatening encroachments but eventually fails. Holden's deterministic appeal to war, which forces men down the paths to their doom regardless of their discretion, proves true in their final encounter. If it is true, as Judge Holden tells the kid, that man can "only come at last to that selfsame reckoning at the same appointed time" no matter how much they struggle, then why are we told, by the narrating voice, to pay such close attention to the kid in the first place (BM 330)?

A close reading of the novel illuminates the intensity of Holden's focus on the kid. As I discuss in Chapter One, the judge pays close attention to many things in order to establish control through the ordering of his observations, but, like everyone else in this ultra-violent drama, the judge does not merely watch, but watches *out* for those who might destroy him. Sergio Leone would no doubt have a field day with the eye-squinting close-ups a film adaptation of this novel calls for, as characters constantly study each other for possible weaknesses and, more importantly, threatening strengths. The judge's persistent ocular attention to the kid - from the first chapter we read exchanges, "As the kid rode past the judge turned and watched him," to their subsequent reunion in Chihuahua, "When the judge's eyes fell upon him [the kid] he took the cigar from between his teeth and smiled," and on into the rest of their roving with the Glanton gang, the judge positions himself "the better to see the kid" - renders their relationship unique,

and this unique focus points to the fact that the kid's resistance ultimately *threatens* the judge (BM 14, 79, 95). First, it threatens his life, physically, and it threatens his philosophy, metaphysically. Furthermore, the kid's attempt to subvert the judge, detailed in the previous chapter, ultimately signals the weaknesses of the judge's otherwise airtight existential paradigm. Both the kid's survival, and his ability to elicit such an overwhelming emotional response from the judge, subtly, but nonetheless dramatically, reduce Holden's controlling authority. Lastly, the power the kid wields re-establishes him as the novel's hero, an important qualification in a text where the monstrous antagonist seems to thrive unopposed.

The judge's intensely physical philosophy makes sustaining a strictly dichotomic split of the physical and metaphysical difficult; there is no Platonic mystery behind the veil of the concrete for Holden. The physical is the metaphysical and vice versa. The universal divine lies hidden, but not behind an impenetrable obscurity that is only approachable through transcendence. Rather, the secrets of the universe disclose themselves to those who understand how to listen and Holden claims to listen attentively to this call of nature through his rigorous *physical* interaction with the world. The judge, physically, picks up "a chunk of rock" during one of his impromptu sermons to visually aid his preaching that God, his war-god of historical law, "speaks in stones and trees, the bones of things" (BM 116). For the judge, the *un-comprehended* cannot be *in-comprehensible*. The physical and metaphysical commingle in his lived philosophy, so a gradual transition will have to suffice rather than a hard drawn line of distinction.

Clearly the kid is no match for the judge in his physical size or power - no character matches him pound for pound - but, as many historians point out, the playing

field levels with Samuel Colt's invention. Tobin's tale of the Glanton gang's first meeting with the judge exemplifies this reversal of dominance via superior firepower. The Glanton gang scramble for their lives in front of pursuing Apaches. They are directionless, until they stumble on the judge upon his rock, who then runs with them – though now to a destination. They run from the Apache who threaten them with superior numbers and weaponry (spears, bows and arrows), superior to the gang's "advanced" firepower, now rendered useless for lack of gunpowder. The judge leads them to guano-covered bat caves and then to a sulfurous peak to concoct his "foul matrix" of gunpowder (BM 132). Once they one up their foes in this literal "arms race," the fact that they are outnumbered ceases to matter. They now have the superior technological implements of war and rain ballistic fire down. Speyer, the arms dealer, succinctly puts it to Glanton, "What is your life worth?," while the two haggle over an agreed price for a cache of Colt revolvers (BM 83). The price of life in the frontier is the price of your pistol.

The West was "won," not with physical power, but with fire power. In this the kid is second to none. His superior shooting ability during the Yuma Ferry massacre ensures his, and the ex-priest's, escape. Tobin expresses his admiration for the kid's ability to dispatch three of the Yuma in five shots with a "low whistle," and whispers encouragement, "Aye, you're a cool one" (BM 280). Although the judge carries his silver mounted rifle, aptly inscribed *Et In Arcadia Ego*, "a reference to the lethal in it," he kills most violently with his bare hands (BM 125). The kid would, indeed does, lose a naked wrestling match with the judge, but a Peckinpah-inspired shootout would not be so one-sided.

In a text with violent confrontation after violent confrontation, McCarthy centers the most suspenseful moment of the novel around an absence of encounter. One's heart hammers in the sand alongside the kid and Tobin as they hide from the judge in the desert after the Yuma Ferry massacre and the dissolution of the Glanton gang. The judge's voice, which strikes fear as he attempts to undermine the men's understanding of the universe, throws readers into a panic here as he gives away his proximity to the kid's hiding place, when he asks, "Why not show yourself?" (BM 299). The suspense builds with their game of cat and mouse culminating in the judge passing before the kid's gun sights three times. The judge's literal nakedness highlights his vulnerability here as the kid can physically dominate him – in true western fashion - with the use of his pistol. The kid poses a real and genuine threat to the judge, but does not pull the trigger for metaphysical reasons.

These metaphysical considerations form the second prong of the kid's threat to Holden. After all, Toadvine physically threatens the judge with a gun barrel to his head after the mutilated Apache boy is discovered dead, but this perilous situation, along with many others, does not draw the sort of unflinching attention Holden gives the kid. The philosophical threat the kid poses as he opposes Judge Holden's worldview gives the judge more pause. The kid "may seem little or nothing in the world" of *Blood Meridian* or Judge Holden, "yet," as the judge refers to his collection of specimens, "the smallest crumb can devour us. Any smallest thing beneath yon rock out of men's knowing" (BM 198). The kid personifies this "smallest crumb" of not just the *un*-knowable, but the *in*-knowable to the judge, minutely, but significantly, undermining Holden's empirical enterprise.

The judge understands Tobin. He knows the expriest falls into his rigorously violent view of mankind, knows, as he tells the hidden pair, “the priest has led you to this, boy,” when trying to coax the two out of their desert hiding places (BM 299). And the judge is correct. The previous page tells us “The expriest at his [the kid’s] side seized his arm and hissed and gestured toward the passing judge” in an effort to get the kid to pull the trigger on Holden (BM 298). Tobin presents no metaphysical threat to the judge because their relationship has been an open exchange of dialogue, and the scalphunting Svengali manipulates the expriest at will. He knows Tobin urges the kid to kill, but does not really know why the kid refuses. As Kim writes of the judge’s worldview, “the order of war must prevail even if that order commands his own death,” which it does here (Kim 178). The kid’s purposeful non-subscription to Holden’s war through his resistance is one thing, but the kid’s purposeful, merciful grace toward Holden here strikes the judge deepest. As Kim articulates further, “the judge’s will becomes superfluous in the kid’s unresponsiveness,” and indeed, the kid threatens Holden most by threatening his formidable will (Kim 178).

Holden’s ledger attempts to account for all human understanding. The kid does not give over his name for inclusion, does not consent to the judge’s ledgeric recounting or allow the judge to represent him. The kid stays just out of the judge’s mental grasp, still a dangerous position, for as Wallach points out, the judge “substitute[s] obliteration by violence for resolution” when confronted with a mystery (Wallach 9). Yet mystery has no place in the judge’s prescribed view of the universe and the kid’s recalcitrance makes him a mystery to the studying smile of the judge. The judge’s grand act of obliterating the kid in the jakes, then, is charged with symbolism. He overpowers the kid’s two threats to

him. The judge's nude, blood embrace accomplishes his dominance over the kid's two fold threat. The kid, without his fire arms, cannot defend himself against the judge's bulk and the judge engulfs him in his arms, in the basest form of physical understanding. The judge cannot mentally grasp the kid's benevolence, and resorts to the basest method of his control, obliteration. The kid's resistance to the judge always confounds the judge. His identity and power is based on an understanding of the universe, but there is a kid-shaped hole in his encyclopedia. Since this cannot be accounted for, or explained away, it must be expunged from the memory of man. The kid alive represents a flaw in the judge's scheme. But the kid's death is the erasure, not the correction, of that flaw.

The judge murders the kid, but this erasure comes after a slew of other life-threatening encounters for the kid, who survives. His survival, then, up to the point of his annihilation, threatens the judge. Why is someone who survives such a threat to the judge? Holden sees through people. He appeals to man's basest nature, when the chips are down and existence is at stake (the steady state in the desert of *Blood Meridian*), and the judge expects men to behave from their primal instincts no matter how cultivated or civilized they may seem. The judge knows how people will react, or preaches that he knows, needs to know, that when lives intersect, one life will surmount and be validated existentially. With this in mind, he approaches his favorite subject, war.

He loves war because he sees it as the ultimate binding force – what joins us to each other and to each generation from the last to the first in human history. “War endures,” he tells the gang, “Before man was, war waited for him . . . That is the way it was and will be,” and the 300,000 year old fossilized skull of the epigram speaks to his point (BM 248). No sort of moral development has sufficiently stopped men from

scalping each other in the trade of war. The Glanton gang could just have easily operated a quarter of a million years ago and could conceivably find work half a million years from now.

The judge continues his sermon of war and compares war to games, which he says “men are born for” (BM 249). He emphasizes that value is not found in the game itself, but rather in the wager placed by the game’s opponents. Since man ultimately possesses only existence, the ultimate wager one can put up is life. Thus, any game to the death speaks to man’s inmost heart. The judge understands war to be this ultimate game, and the survivor, the ultimate winner.

The judge says that these ultimate games – a card game with the only wager being life for the winner and death for the loser, the toss of a coin with a psychopath³ – are the ultimate validations of existence because they prove that the winner deserves to live and the loser to die. The judge untangles the tricky “might does not make right” ethical dilemma by pitting historical law against this moral law. Moral law has no empirical provability, where historical law leaves a visible, provable, winner. Sansom connects “moral nihilism” with “divine determinism” and explains how these two are not mutually exclusive. Sansom sounds quite like the judge when he insists that “in a blood meridian war is the instrument used by God to work out an implacable will and plan, a will that shows human autonomy and hence human moral responsibility are merely nominal at best and illusory at worst” (Sansom 9). Similarly, the judge’s pedagogy re-enforces this notion that war’s divine will cannot be derailed by any human invention like morality, or moral law: “A moral view can never be proven right or wrong by any ultimate test,” the

³ A metaphor McCarthy most overtly employs with Anton Chigurh of *No Country For Old Men*, who resembles the judge in his appeal to the deterministic revelation of these sorts of games of “chance.”

judge says, insisting on empirical logic, and “decisions of life and death, of what shall be and what shall not, beggar all questions of right. In elections of these magnitudes are all lesser ones subsumed, moral, spiritual, natural” (BM 250). The words of Holden’s war god speak to him in his understanding of the natural world, and he prophesizes to the men of this war god’s supremacy. Follow the historical laws of warfare, over the moral law of man’s invention, the judge says, and your resulting survival will validate your amoral existence.

The judge does not give credence to that which cannot be proven with hard, physical evidence. Existential superiority and inferiority never reach abstractions like morality for him, and the person who lives to tell is historically and existentially vindicated. This methodology, contingent upon survival, becomes the most important factor in the judge’s paradigm. It does not matter how “right” or “wrong” your philosophy is, because if dead, no one will hear you explain it.

As the novel progresses, or as time passes in the narrative, the kid consistently comes through deadly exchanges intact. The preeminent tenet of the judge’s universe is dominance, physical dominance *over* others, and he exemplifies a Darwinian “survival of the fittest” model. Therefore, by the judge’s own logic and emphasis on survival of these games of war to establish your place, your rightful, justified place at the table of existence, the kid’s mere endurance threatens the judge. He alludes to their harrowing trials through the desert as some sort of single elimination tournament, “the last of the true,” he tells the kid in their final meeting in Fort Griffin, “the last of the true. I’d say they’ve all gone under now saving me and thee” (BM 327). Most of the time we have to read the judge’s dialogue carefully, pay attention to his specific word choice, but here we

know what he “says,” that everyone else from the Glanton gang has met their destruction is factually true as well. The kid’s ability to survive, despite his outright and implied refusals to adhere to the judge’s war religion, frustrates the otherwise in-control judge.

The kid’s consistent survival depends not only upon his own quick thinking or craftiness, but also upon the divine agency of determination that the judge preaches. As previously noted, the kid somewhat disappears from the narrative when the killing becomes general, so we do not know, for example, how he is left, the “one soul [rising] wondrously from among the new slain dead” after the first melee with the Apache (BM 55). But we do see how he makes it out of the nighttime surprise attack by General Elias’s scouts: luck. “His feet slid and he went to one knee,” we read, after he realizes the scouts have found him in the high snows, then “a musket fired behind him . . . The man stopped and raised his elbows and the kid dove headlong. The musket ball went racketing off among the branches” (BM 211). He does not out-draw the threats to his life, and though his marksmanship is superb, the fateful happening of a slipped foot saves his hide as successfully as his purposeful, agile bullet dodging.

Interestingly, these happenings, which do not reflect the kid’s physical superiority, threaten the judge more than any sharp shooting could: “This enhancement of the game to its ultimate state,” Holden says of life and death encounters,

admits no argument concerning the notions of fate. The selection of one man over another is a preference absolute and irrevocable and it is a dull man indeed who could reckon so profound a decision without agency or significance either one.

(BM 249)

According to the judge then, the kid's re-emergence, after conflicts which should have obliterated him, signal a determining agent singling out his survival. One of the judge's proverbs is "War is the truest form of divination," and the kid's survival becomes a blessing from the god of war, a benediction and justification of the kid's existence (BM 249). So much so, that the narrative alludes to the kid being a begotten son of war when it likens him to "some reeking issue of the incarnate dam of war herself" (BM 55).

In "History and the Ugly Facts of Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*," Dana Phillips reads the text issuing from what he calls the "optical democracy" of the narrative's detached voice (Phillips 443). The unique perspective the novel presents to readers, he says, accounts for its highly stylized sound. While I agree with Phillips that the narrative seemingly issues more from an uncaring objective eye than an entity with anything resembling compassion, we part critical company when he insists that this detachment extends to *Blood Meridian*'s characters. He writes, "If a grizzly bear eats one of Glanton's Delaware scouts or a wild bull gores one of their horses, it is business as usual as far as the scalp hunters are concerned," referring to two particularly surprising "natural" deaths in the novel (Phillips 446). The men appear to be unaffected and stoic in their perpetual movements away from these kinds of jarring tragedies, but these intense, apparently random acts of natural violence systematically thin the ranks of the Glanton gang, an act the watchful judge must notice. Phillips rightly points out how the narrative does not care how many men are in the Glanton gang, but extending this disregard to the men, especially Judge Holden, misses much of the judge's whole point of existence. The judge takes note of the gang's numeric reduction, and where "they ride on" as before, eventually, the judge insists, this will become "*he* rides on." As the judge attempts to

single out the thread of existence from life, so he sees survival – from the war of man to the hostility of nature – as singling out the determined true. “They ride on” but not without significance to the judge. He believes those who survive warring encounters are chosen, and the kid, as the last of the gang to die, signals a threat to Holden: one or the other must die.

Every human encounter for Holden is a conflict. Men do not come together amicably at the table of brotherhood to share in life’s bounty, but clash on the battlefield of existence to fight for the meager scraps life makes available. The judge says existence is one grand game with the players’ lives at stake. “The whole universe for such a player,” he insists, “has labored clanking to this moment which will tell if he is to die at that man’s hands or that man at his” (BM 249). Much of *Blood Meridian* confirms the judge.

Indeed, the kid’s initial meeting with his eventual comrade, Toadvine, nearly plays out the judge’s notion that any contact with another life means conflict with another life. The two walk towards each other on a narrow plank to traverse a muddy street, when Toadvine advises the kid, “You better get out of my way,” to which we read “The kid wasn’t going to do that and he saw no use in discussing it. He kicked the man in the jaw” (BM 9). The two struggle in the bloodied mud until the kid realizes his defeat and the mercy of Toadvine allows him to call quits. The judge does not see this melee, but would no doubt object to what he would see as unfinished business. Toadvine and the kid do not completely follow through with how the judge says mankind interacts.

The kid’s last violent encounter, before his final meeting with Holden, similarly seems to validate the judge at first read. The kid, now “the man,” does kill Elrod on the

road to Fort Griffin, but only after sufficiently warning the impetuous youth's companions, "You keep him away from me . . . I see him back here I'll kill him" (BM 322). The kid flirts with adopting Holden's worldview, but stops short of subscribing to it wholeheartedly. In any event, the kid proves one does not need to view every human exchange with a strictly "kill or be killed" attitude, that there is room for mercy, room for fair warning. The kid extends these moral concessions to others and existentially persists despite the judge's harsh assertions that those who do not kill with prejudice will be killed. The kid proves the judge wrong by simply, but not easily, surviving to the ripe old age (in *Blood Meridian* years) of forty-five.

In the judge's final attempt to make the kid see the world from his malicious perspective he points out a Fort Griffin bar patron, and uses this man as an everyman, whose "complaint that a man's life is no bargain" (BM 330). This, he explains,

masks the actual case with him. Which is that men will not do as he wishes them to. Have never done, never will do. That's the way of things with him and his life is so balked about by difficulty and become so altered of its intended architecture that he is little more than a walking hovel hardly fit to house the human spirit at all. (BM 330)

The novel repeatedly shows how Holden's physicality very much holds the human spirit. His youthful enormity bursts with the exuberant authority of man's uniquely destructive human qualities, and, though often compared to Conrad's Kurtz, only Holden's morality is sick and weak. Every other aspect of his being contradicts this pathetic everyman pointed out and psychoanalyzed. The judge blueprints his "intended architecture" in his

ledger and men do what he wishes – all men but the kid (BM 330). The kid's resistance alters the judge's course and shows how one can throw this mighty force askew.

The kid's resistance, though failing to save his life from the embrace of the judge, succeeds in exposing the flaws of Holden's philosophy. The judge's unyielding desire for control in all situations makes moments when he seems out of emotional control extremely significant. The judge is a relatively affect-less character. He keeps cool in combat, escapes the Yuma Ferry slaughter without firing a shot, and even when Toadvine's pistol barrel threatens to blow the smile off his face for good, he calmly says "either shoot or take that away. Do it now" (BM 164). He is collected and in control, but just as the kid makes collecting difficult, he makes controlling difficult too, and the judge's slightly different speech and demeanor in the final chapter of the novel belie some newly exposed nerves in him. This is why seeing him upset, or emotionally shaken, is so striking. The judge can have no place for the moral abstractions of emotions in his philosophy, but he approaches these excitements with his relationship to the kid.

Noting where the judge swings out of his general characteristic control, then, reveals a great deal about the chinks in his armor. In their final exchange, the judge makes this movement known with his telling admission to the kid: "Dont you know that I'd have loved you like a son?" (BM 306). Emotions, especially those of love, play so little a role in *Blood Meridian*, both in the narrative and in the judge's rhetorical occupation, that readers should pay close attention to the judge's alarming statement. The only other time the judge uses the word "love" is when he explains to the men, "war endures because young men love it and old men love it in them" (BM 249). The judge intentionally makes it easy to get lost in his rhetoric, but paying close attention to the

uniqueness of his emotional admission to the kid in Fort Griffin exposes an unusual sincerity. He speaks of a paternal love both times, when talking of love, and significantly, uses the past tense to say he “*would* have loved” the kid, revealing that the kid had enough war in him to elicit the judge’s amorous affections, but now, his contrary benevolence proves too much for the judge. The judge expresses an animalistic desire for the flesh of the squatters’ halfbreed boy, the young Apache, and, we can infer, for the idiot James Roberts, but these innocent creatures cannot or do not harbor this love for war which would attract Holden. His “affection” for them never approaches the paternal pride he sees potential for in the kid. The judge loved the kid once, loved the war in him, but the kid falls out of this filial favor and meets his end, like the judge’s other innocent conquests, in the animalistic, physical consumption of the judge’s death grip, not the spiritual consummation of the judge’s embrace. Their relationship does not turn out the way the judge wants.

Everything else works out for the judge. He never loses control of a situation in an environment where everyone else teeters on the brink of oblivion. At one point he calls the desert, where the men are essentially marooned, the “great siliceous griddle” where the sun “cook[s] impartially its inhabitants,” but he never really seems in danger of succumbing to the desert’s annihilating force, or to other vicious men who call it home (BM 284). Everything works towards the judge’s favor, goes his way, everything, that is, except the kid’s compliance. The kid, a rogue, a “free agent” (a term Tobin applies to the kid and to which the judge agrees) occupies the judge’s universe for so long without completely adhering to his monomaniacal prescription for living and dying, and therefore problematizes Holden’s existential paradigm (BM 284).

Ultimately, the kid's ability to threaten Judge Holden's physical and metaphysical condition, to oppose continually his overbearing exegesis and successfully call into question (with his actions) the judge's worldview, all establish the kid as the novel's hero. Of course, the kid and the narrative itself do much to discredit conventional notions of heroic action and one understands why some readers and critics struggle with allowing the kid to take this heroic place. Phillips goes to great lengths in pointing out how the novel deconstructs previously established notions of literary classifications. Reiterating that a Western novel needs a proper hero, he writes "*Blood Meridian* is only very loosely centered around the character identified to the reader simply as 'the kid'" (Phillips 434). He goes on to call the work "a Western without a hero," and "a novel in which none of the protagonists has anything remotely like 'a sense of himself'" (Phillips 434; 444). Though no one can disagree with the novel's lack of an intra-diagetic perspective of the kid, one can take issue with the possible causes of this absence. I agree with Phillips's (and many others') reading of the novel as "loosely centered," but emphasize that it nonetheless does *center* around the kid. Also, the fact that we are not privy to the characters' inner psychologies does not mean they possess none. Ironically, the kid's intense desire to maintain control over his own psychology - and thus his autonomy - from the judge, necessitates the psychological distance kept by him from the reader. Keeping yourself (and your sanity) together in Judge Holden's company takes just such staunch refusal to divulge the inner workings of your psyche to those around you.

Phillips says the novel "only very loosely" keeps its attention on the nameless kid, but the judge reacts quite differently to his antagonist. From the kid's first encounter with Judge Holden in Reverend Green's revival tent, to the fateful embrace in the jakes, the

judge always seems to have the kid in mind. The suggestive smiles that accompany any eye contact they share, alludes to the fact that the judge's speeches, heard by all, are directed explicitly toward the kid. Therefore, a close study of what the judge says about the nature of the universe will serve as a study of what the judge says to the kid or what he wants the kid to believe about the universe. In fact, the judge's impromptu lectures follow a trend of technically being for the whole gang's benefit early in the novel, but as the gang's story progresses (by that I mean as the body count mounts and fewer of the gang are left alive) the judge reveals that he has been speaking explicitly to the kid all along: "Do you think he speaks to me?" Tobin excitedly asks the kid, while hiding from the judge in the desert wilderness (BM 293). Aside from serving as a usable foil in fireside discussions, Tobin does not concern Holden, and his focus remains on the kid. No place exists for the kid's moral development in the judge's universe and, like a loose tooth, the judge attends and prods until the kid either conforms or is expunged.

The kid's strategy of silence, though hindering the judge's understanding and possibly preventing earlier conflicts, actually serves to mark the kid in his solitary reticence. Shaviro points out that "it is the kid's very silence and unresponsiveness that the judge singles out in him" (Shaviro 152). Surely, the judge's power finds ways around anyone's defenses and the kid's ultimate inability to survive Holden's literal embrace speak to this, but he does survive longer than his fellow filibusters and scalphunters.

The implications of all this is that the kid's resistance and the judge's unique reaction to the kid because of his resistance point to the weaknesses in the judge's otherwise airtight existential philosophy. According to the judge, the kid should have been dead long ago. His survival to the point of being "the last of the true" along with the

judge counters the judge's insistence that a moral life leads to ruin (BM 327). Not the spiritual ruin of an amoral life, but real, physical ruin. The judge values the empirical for evidence and also because he does not see any existence beyond the physical. His premium on physical life does not allow for the moral concessions the kid gives. That is, the judge's steadfast religious fanaticism of his own theology, or war religion, as the only true religion, leaves no room for an infidel, like the kid, in its fundamental extremism. True, the kid does die, but his mere survival and persistence in existence points to more judicial failures than successes. The kid says "no" to the judge, to the universal laws he claims to read in the rocks and does not immediately suffer for his heresy.

This all takes the piss out of Holden, the most formidable foe in American literature, and though he frightens and threatens readers, we can glean a little of the kid's fearlessness and approach him anew. "You think I'm afraid of him?" the kid asks Tobin, referring to the judge, and though the expriest does not answer, after reading the kid's stoicism in the face of the judge, we answer in the negative (BM 219). But this answer means more than simply strengthening the character of the kid in readers' minds. Appropriating the kid's courage allows us to approach the judge with a more discerning eye, an eye which can now read the novel proper's apocalyptic closing scene more carefully. "He never sleeps, he says. He says he'll never die," we read, and the judge reiterates his diabolic insomnia, "He says that he will never die," but whereas the rest of the Glanton gang and the novel's characters would believe the judge's proclamations here, one can now imagine the kid with an attitude more of disregard (BM 335). We can now point out the fact that the narrative carefully tells us the judge is the one to *say* he will never die. We can slow the judge's persistent voice down to close reading speed and

examine what he says because of the kid's ability to resist inclusion and the subsequent frustration of the judge. Tobin plays into the judge's hands as much as he claims to oppose the bald monster and supports him, a member of the devil's party without knowing it, as much as Glanton. Powerful though Judge Holden may be, the kid's ability to frustrate and confound him lets us know of his vulnerability.

The kid's heroic placement gives readers breathing room needed to consider Holden anew. This respite affords the audience a dissenting voice to the judge's rulings. His infantile qualities can be read, not as violence induced regeneration, but mere immaturity. Faulkner writes of those, like the judge, who see war as a determining deity, invested, and interested, in the outcome of a skirmish, as hopelessly juvenile. "There was the War now," he writes in *Absalom, Absalom!*,

Who knows but what the fatality and the fatality's victims did not both think, hope, that the war would settle the matter, leave free one of the two irreconcilables, since it would not be the first time that youth has taken catastrophe as a direct act of Providence for the sole purpose of solving a personal problem which youth itself could not solve. (Faulkner 95)

Recognizing the subtly subversive voice of the kid as threatening, speaks back to the judge's view of war as holy, and calls it sophomoric. The narrative traces the maturation of the kid from "the child," through "the kid," and on into "the man" – a progression, not contingent upon Holden's redundant view of humanity's cyclic nature.

James Bowers writes the Western Writers Series installment for *Blood Meridian*, *Reading Cormac McCarthy's Blood Meridian*, and discusses a reader's approach to the heroic difficulty inherent in the novel. Bowers points out that "the kid's invisibility and

lack of interiority in the first half of the novel *does* challenge the reader's own heart – some readers will find it difficult to care” (Bowers 19). What Bowers reads here as the kid's “invisibility” presents manifold problems for readers, but careful attention reveals that the kid purposefully strives for this invisibility in order to maintain his own interiority in opposition to Judge Holden's conquering methodology. By pointing out the kid's resistance and the ways in which these stubborn confrontations cause the judge to reveal more emotions than he usually displays, we can reposition the kid to his rightful place as the narrative's protagonist. The kid purposefully makes reading him as the hero of the novel difficult, for the obfuscating reasons stated, but keeping the kid in heroic placement importantly helps readers situate him in relation to the other characters, specifically the judge who desires that central placement. The first thing the narrative tells us to do is to “See the child” and though it may draw our attention elsewhere during the course of the text, it is important to keep this inaugural injunction in mind (BM 3). The kid seeks his own agency away from the judge's overpowering impositions and strategically obscures himself from the judge and from, at times, the narrative itself.

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