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Redemption Denied: Variations of the Underworld Descent in Cormac
McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* and *The Road*
by

Nathan Wade Calley


A Thesis Presented to the Graduate Faculty of the College of Liberal Arts in

Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in the Field of English

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July 2015

Redemption Denied: Variations of the Underworld Descent in Cormac

McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* and *The Road*

Research

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ABSTRACT

The classic device of the underworld journey has seen countless incarnations in literature, the most popular of which occurs in Dante's *Inferno*. While the mythic origins of the hell descent have inspired numerous imitators, very rarely are the biblical origins considered. Focusing on the Old Testament books of Jonah and Job, this study seeks to illustrate the importance of biblical intertextuality as a model for analyzing the redemptive aspects in the hell narratives that precede Cormac McCarthy's renditions of the journey in *Blood Meridian* (1985) and *The Road* (2006).

Following theories of archetypal analysis set forth by Northrop Frye, I argue that by defining the descent in metaphorical terms, one is better able to trace the biblical origins of the hell journey in later literature. Using the stories of Jonah and Job as a template, this study analyzes the intertextual aspects of the hell narrative in Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," Melville's *Moby-Dick*, and Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. Linking these three works allows for a clear trajectory of the shifting attitude concerning the redemptive function of hell narratives, which is later reflected in McCarthy.

Treating *Blood Meridian* not only as a logical continuation of the hell journey, but also as reflective of the twentieth century mindset on redemption, I position *Blood Meridian* as indicative of the unrepentant nature of modern man, who is neither equipped nor willing to obtain salvation. Then, following McCarthy's continued exploration of the hell journey with *The Road*, I argue that McCarthy attempts to modify his views on redemption. In allowing the son to survive—the preservation of goodness—I posit that McCarthy's ultimate intent is not merely the salvation of the boy, but of the world of the

reader. Finally, this study evaluates McCarthy's philosophy of the "one-story"—which is founded in Judeo-Christian belief—as indicative of why the hell descent is so prevalent in literature. Returning to the biblical roots, I conclude that the desire for God's love and salvation—even in and from death—drives the reenactment of the hell journey.

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Citation Abbreviation Key

“The Rime of the Ancient Mariner”	“Rime”
<i>Moby-Dick</i>	<i>MD</i>
<i>Heart of Darkness</i>	<i>HOD</i>
<i>Blood Meridian</i>	<i>BM</i>
<i>The Road</i>	<i>TR</i>
<i>The Crossing</i>	<i>TC</i>
<i>The Sunset Limited</i>	<i>TSL</i>

Chapter 1

Introduction: The Origins of the Underworld Journey in Literature

1.0—Significance & Thesis

The harrowing experience of descending into the underworld is common in much of the Mediterranean mythology¹ that has influenced European western literature, so much so that the hell journey has become a profound and exceptional motif, and its usage a time-honored tradition. Emanating from the well-spring of mythology, classic works such as Homer's *The Odyssey*, Virgil's *The Aeneid*, and even the Mesopotamian *Epic of Gilgamesh* make use of the netherworld descent not only because such journeys evoke the pathos of terror², but also because they represent the universal desire to know what happens to the soul after death. Judeo-Christian literature adopts similar hellish themes in the stories of Jonah and Job, and, most notably, with Christ, albeit with a more focused end goal of offering an alternative to an endless existence in the realm of the dead separated from God. Admittedly, classical mythology is typically read metaphorically (fictional), whereas the Bible is too-often viewed as literal (factual), which creates a problem when trying to reconcile the influence of the underworld journey in secular and non-secular texts. Regardless of origin, the central purpose to all such journeys is the spiritual moral, or rather, that which humanity can learn about itself in relation to a higher power. "The epic descent," Lillian Feder writes, "is always a journey to find someone who knows the truth" (290). Thus, though it appears to trivialize the more gruesome aspects of going to hell, in reality the journey is not half so important as the purpose for

the journey.

While by no means the first in western literature to incorporate such a device³, Dante's *Inferno* functions as the major literary forerunner for the hell journey. With *Inferno*, the author explicitly makes the descent into hell the central plot, while at the same time allegorizing the experience for the sake of presenting his philosophies. Yet the simple matter of turning the tale into allegory allowed for two important outcomes; it freed later western authors⁴ from the limitations of thinking only in terms of the literal, and it allowed for a strong Christian perspective in longer works of fictional prose. Moreover, once the hell journey is perceived metaphorically, it allows for a return to interpretive meaning, as was the case in initial mythic conception.

With allegory in mind, reading literature that spins off of the hell journey tradition proves to be a rewarding enterprise, for it traces the intertextual roots of a valuable trope, and serves to clarify why authors today continue to produce such works. However, rather than seeking out a broad range of literature that incorporates the underworld descent, this study focuses on the literary traditions of the redemptive aspects associated with the nether realm journey, while tracing the primary thematic influences of Cormac McCarthy's literary predecessors upon his two masterpieces *Blood Meridian* (1985) and *The Road* (2006). In doing so, I argue that not only do *Blood Meridian* and *The Road* serve as modern-day variations of the hell-journey, but also as the author's shifting philosophical rebuttal to the alteration from the formerly enlightening nature of the underworld descent to the nihilistic disillusionment and secularity characteristic of the twentieth-century mindset.

As hinted at above, what is most significant about this study is that it seeks to

connect and analyze the great influence of the underworld tradition from ancient texts to modernity. McCarthy studies, which have grown in popularity since the publication of his 1992 breakout novel *All the Pretty Horses*, have so far focused primarily on individualized evaluations, or on the cumulative effect of McCarthy's work⁵, with limited intertextual analyses⁶. Thus far, there has been no exhaustive analysis of McCarthy's perpetuation of the underworld tradition, let alone as to how it functions as expressive of the human condition. It is my goal to create a dialogue with readers concerning the power of myth and the innate human desire for redemption as reflected in McCarthy's work through the hell descent. With that in mind, this study progresses naturally from early traditions of the underworld journey, as exemplified with Dante's *Inferno* and biblical literature, then onward to the more obvious literary forerunners—"The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," *Moby-Dick*, and *Heart of Darkness*—before finally bringing in McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* and *The Road*.

1.1—Literary Framework: Intertextual Readings of Hell

In one of his first few recorded interviews, the reclusive McCarthy states: “[t]he ugly fact is books are made out of books. . . . The novel depends for its life on the novels that have been written” (Woodward). Such an elucidating statement emphasizes the influential nature of past literature upon McCarthy⁷, while at the same time proving to be quite the enigma. Who can say with any degree of certainty what an author actually meant in writing something, or what exactly they found to be of great influence? The answer is, definitely, no one. However, an absence of certainty does not negate the

potentiality of correctly determining the influential origins of plots, characters, and themes in literature. T. S. Eliot writes: “No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artist. You cannot value him alone; you must set him, for contrast and comparison, among the dead” (115).

In consequence, studies concerning the nature of intertextuality simply cannot break away from the importance of mythic traditions, among which we find precursory imagery. As mythologist Joseph Campbell, in a footnote in his seminal *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*, writes: “The tradition of the ‘subjectively known forms’ ... is, in fact, coextensive with the tradition of myth, and is the key to the understanding and use of mythological images” (Campbell 19). Thus, naturally, the role of the archetype⁸ in comparative studies cannot be denied.

However, owing to the complicated nature of this study and field of archetypal criticism⁹, I have chosen to narrow this analysis by sticking closely to the interpretations of archetypal patterns presented by theorist Northrop Frye, on which he writes: “... the profound masterpiece seems to draw us to a point at which we can see an enormous number of converging patterns in significance. Here we begin to wonder if we cannot see literature, not only as complicating itself in time, but as spread out in conceptual space from some unseen center” (“Archetypes” 100). However, when it comes to the tracking down the “converging patterns” in McCarthy’s renditions of the underworld journey, identifying that elusive “center” is a daunting task. Yet if we consider McCarthy’s words to Woodward not as a red herring but as a revelation, then it merely becomes a matter of locating the intertextual elements that appear to have fed McCarthy’s novels¹⁰. For

instance, one of most profound parallels McCarthy makes to this kind of interconnectedness occurs in *Blood Meridian*, when the devilish Judge Holden states: “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” (141). On the one hand, Holden’s lack of credibility as the satanic trickster of the novel throws all his proclamations into suspicion, yet read in light of McCarthy’s statement to Woodward, a deeper meaning ensues, suggesting that McCarthy intends his own works to be viewed as intertextual discourses. Taking a cue from the later, by tracing through the roots of the underworld descent, we are able to better understand McCarthy’s intended message with *Blood Meridian* and *The Road*.

Before continuing, however, it is necessary to set out the basics of a metaphorical interpretation of the hell journey. Northrop Frye writes: “[i]f we may now pull together these descent motifs and see what their undisplaced form is, the descending hero or heroine is going down into a dark and labyrinthine world of caves and shadows which is also either the bowels and belly of an earth-monster, or the womb of an earth-mother, or both” (*Secular* 119). In the case with the literature studied herein, Frye’s assertion becomes even more essential, for hell doubles for any of the following symbols: the sea, a river, a monster or dragon, a wilderness, a wasteland, or a night world. “A symbol like the sea or the heath,” as Frye notes, cannot be contained in the literature in which it originates because “it is bound to expand over many works into an archetypal symbol of literature as a whole. *Moby Dick* cannot remain in Melville’s novel: he is absorbed into our imaginative experience of leviathans and dragons of the deep from the Old Testament onward” (*Anatomy* 100). On such a mythic creature specifically, Frye elaborates, stating:

“leviathan is usually a sea-monster, which means metaphorically that he *is* the sea, and the prophecy that the Lord will hook and land the leviathan in Ezekiel is identical with the prophecy in Revelation that there shall be no more sea. As denizens of his belly, therefore, we are also metaphorically under water” (*Anatomy* 191, emphasis not mine).

Granted, such an interpretation appears overly inclusive, especially considering the fact that anytime a character is submerged in water, especially the sea, this can metaphorically be an entering of hell. In consequence, if such symbols or patterns can be reinterpreted as forms of hell, then the entire concept of labeling a story as a hell narrative can become arbitrary. What is to stop one from calling every story a hell journey? To position a framework for literature that follows the structure of the underworld descent, I propose the following four limitations. First, and a given, the story must be allegorical in nature¹¹. Second, the environment in which the story occurs must be removed from the world at large. Locales such as the sea, the desert, or a city easily follow such a limitation. However, stories that take place in non-exclusory settings do not. To expound, if the tale involves a broad range of locales, and all of which do not also all serve as allegorical interpretations of hellscapes¹², then the story does not fit this framework. Third, the protagonist(s) must be excluded from society at large¹³. The fourth, and final, limitation is the overall sense of timelessness¹⁴ of the hell conveyed.

Thus, when applied parsimoniously, such an analysis can yield fascinating results. In consequence, the hell journey becomes but an aspect of a larger story, or hero’s journey: “if the leviathan is death, and the hero has to enter the body of death, the hero has to die, and if his quest is completed the final stage of it is, cyclically, rebirth, and, dialectically, resurrection” (*Anatomy* 192). Treating this as the literary framework for

analyzing the hell descent, all that is left is to individually interpret the purpose of the underworld trope and the moral outcome of the “resurrection”—if any—the protagonist endures.

1.2—The Quest for Knowledge: From Classic Myth to *Inferno*

As stated above, the more important focus in any underworld journey, be it in mythology and contemporary texts, is the knowledge shared upon completion of the cycle. Not surprisingly, the very thing that most often pushes a protagonist into a hell descent is a sensation of either restlessness or an absence of direction. Odysseus, having wandered for years, is required to visit the underworld—so as to hear the warning prophecy of Tiresias¹⁵—before he can return home to Ithaca. Aeneas, wandering just like Odysseus in the aftermath of the Trojan War, descends to the underworld and is prophesied to concerning the soon to be established Rome. As poetic and thrilling as such moments may be, the pivotal information obtained in the underworld is what really matters in the grand scheme of things.

Such a lost figure in search of the elusive truths of life and the universe occurs in Dante’s *Inferno*, which begins with the poet: “In the midway of this our mortal life, / ... in a gloomy wood, astray / Gone from the path direct” (1). The implicit meaning is not merely that the protagonist is physically lost, but spiritually lost from God. Edmund Gardner, in his introduction to *The Divine Comedy*, writes:

Coming to himself in the dark forest of political anarchy and alienation from God, the forest into which he has, as it were in slumber, strayed,

Dante, representative of the human race, is guided by Virgil (who stands for Human Philosophy and natural reason), through Hell and Purgatory, to the state of temporal felicity figured in the Earthly Paradise. (xv)

As the designated “representative” of the times, the journey upon which Dante embarks is designed specifically to restore “the human race” (the reader) to the straight path of God, or as Gardner explains: “The object of his poem is professedly to remove men from their state of misery, and to lead them to the state of felicity” (xiv). As with the case of eschatological writings, the function of Dante’s hell journey follows the tradition of warning the reader (or hearer) of the horrors that await the sinful in the afterlife. Granted, “Dante’s Hell is the wickedness and corruption of the life that he saw around him, revealed in its proper aspect” (Gardner xv), hence the extremes and the great lengths the poet goes in depicting evil, but it still serves the same purpose.

For this reason, Dante takes readers to the very bowels of hell, all the way to a confrontation with the enormous, eternally suffering Dis, of whom the poet remarks:

... If he were beautiful

As he is hideous now, and yet did dare

To scowl upon his Maker, well from him

May all our misery flow. (145)

Logically, if Dante’s journey deeper and deeper into hell teaches the reader of the consequences of a sinful life, all such underworld literature should likely be viewed in the same dark light. The importance of Dante’s *Inferno* to the literature analyzed in this study cannot be denied¹⁶, especially since many include similar confrontations with the archfiend, Satan, himself. However, I posit that an even greater influence exists in the

biblical stories of Jonah and Job.

1.3—Underworld Forerunners in The Bible: Jonah and Job

Frye writes: “[t]he undisplaced, or death-and-rebirth, form of the dragon quest is a descent through his open mouth into his belly and back out again, the theme that appears in the biblical story of Jonah and is later applied to Christ’s descent to hell” (*Secular* 119). Yet it is not the slaying of the dragon that matters so much as the return journey and the imparting of the wisdom thereby obtained, a universal theme in descent literature. Thus, though figures such as Jonah and Job are forced to endure physical torments that can be interpreted as the agony of hell, what makes these stories such a profound influence upon later works of literature is their redemptive quality, and the manner in which these protagonists are utilized as teachers of faithfulness and devotion to God.

The story of Jonah is the most obvious influencer for mariner based tales, like that of Coleridge’s “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” or Melville’s *Moby-Dick*, whereby the prophet Jonah resists the will of God and seeks to flee, by ship, from his responsibility of warning the sinful people of Nineveh to repent, lest they be destroyed. It is amidst the vast waters of the Mediterranean Sea that an unrelenting storm batters the ship and crew harboring the wayward prophet Jonah. The mixed faith crew calls upon their various gods to silence the wind and waves, but to no avail. Upon mystically drawing lots to determine who is responsible for the tempest, the lot falls on Jonah, who reveals to the crew that his sin of running from God has brought everything to pass. But rather than turn to God and ask forgiveness and mercy, as the crew suggests, Jonah tells them to cast him into the

depths of the ocean, for he cannot face what God has asked of him and would rather die. When the crew flings him from the ship into what will surely be his death, Jonah is swallowed by the divine manifestation of a great fish, or whale. Above water, the storm abates, and the crew learns of the power of the Hebrew God, becoming converts to the Jewish faith. As for Jonah, upon spending “three days and three nights” (*ESV*¹⁷, Jon. 1.17) in the belly of the beast, he cries out to his God in repentance. This moment of prayer is especially profound, for Jonah states: ““out of the belly of Sheol I cried, / and you heard my voice”” (Jon. 2.1). As Sheol is the place of the dead—and therefore another name for the underworld—Jonah’s prayer from the belly of the whale likens this time to death. Regarded alongside Frye’s earlier assertion, Jonah was destined for hell the moment he was cast into the sea. Yet despite Jonah being in the metaphorical depths of hell, in crying out to God, Jonah finds forgiveness and is therefore spat out upon the shore, enabling him to go forth and perform his duty in Nineveh as directed. The poetic beauty of the Book of Jonah—running from God, being swallowed by the fish of the Lord, finding forgiveness, and fulfilling one’s duty—explains why it is that both Coleridge (partially) and Melville (excessively; even so much as making it the basis of a sermon told by Father Mapple in the early part of the novel) chose to use the prophet’s story as a template for their allegorical hell stories in “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” and *Moby-Dick*, respectively.

Less directly associated with the hell descent, and the works of Coleridge, Melville, and Conrad, is the Book of Job. The story of Job is far longer, and much more complicated, than the story of Jonah, however it can be summed up rather simply: a good man is put to the test by Satan to determine his devotion and loyalty of God, and despite

losing his land, his property, his family, and even the health of his body, Job still believes in God. Upon understanding his hubris in wishing for justification from God for his suffering, Job repents. For this, his faith is rewarded and he is given back not only everything that he had before, but in abundance as well. From a philosophical standpoint, what complicates the story of Job is the fact that God allows Satan to test Job. In fact, one could even argue that God sets up the entire matter so that Satan can fail in the end: “And the LORD said to Satan, ‘Have you considered my servant Job, that there is none like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, who fears God and turns away from evil?’” (Job 1.8). Understood in contemporary Judeo-Christian thought, because God sees all and knows all, even the outcome of such a trial, God therefore knows Job’s loyalty is sound. Even when Job is left with nothing, and his flesh is covered in boils, Job’s own wife both taunts and tempts: “‘Do you still hold fast your integrity? Curse God and die’” (2.9). And yet Job remains faithful: “‘You speak as one of the foolish women would speak. Shall we receive good from God, and shall we not receive evil?’” (2.10). What truly complicates, and lengthens, the story of Job is the series of dialogues he has with three friends about the nature of the suffering he has endured. These dialogues place the blame on Job, even though he is adamant of his blamelessness. Feeling no relief in his pain, Job often cites that he longs for death: “‘Oh that you would hide me in Sheol, / that you would conceal me until your wrath be past, / that you would appoint me a set time, and remember me!’” (14.13). While it can be argued that to choose death is akin to running away from God, and therefore a sin, Job’s greater sin is to charge that God come forth with an explanation, and, furthermore, to believe that he is worthy of such a direct confrontation. Another man among Job’s friends, Elihu, younger than the others,

chastises Job for his hubris and explains that ““God is greater than man”” (33.12) and that God speaks, ““though man does not perceive it”” (33.14). Elihu explains that God speaks to man in dreams so that ““he [man] keeps back his soul from the pit, / his life from perishing by the sword”” (33.18), but also through sickness and ““pain on his bed / and with continual strife in his bones”” (33.19), so that ““His soul draws near to the pit, / and his life to those who bring death”” (33.22). There at the precipice of hell, man has the opportunity for a redeemer who can ““declare to man what is right for him”” (33.23) and take pity upon him so that: ““then man prays to God, and [God] accepts him; / he sees [God’s] face with a shout of joy, / and [God] restores to man his righteousness”” (33.26). Elihu wisely argues: ““For according to the work of a man he will repay him, / and according to his ways he will make it befall him”” (34.11), thus asserting that Job’s punishment is just, for it stems from arrogance. Yet it is only when God literally enters the conversation that the lesson is finally revealed. God’s argument is simple: he is God and Job is not. When God presents his side of the matter, tantalizing intertextual comparisons arise:

“Have you entered into the springs of the sea,
or walked in the recesses of the deep?
Have the gates of death been revealed to you,
or have you seen the gates of deep darkness?” (38.16-17)

That God should liken the depths of the sea with the depths of hell is precisely the kind of analogy that enables for the allegorical beauty of the later story of Jonah. Likewise, God’s mentioning of Leviathan—typically viewed as a whale—draws further parallels to Jonah, and likewise to *Moby-Dick*:

“Can you draw out Leviathan with a fishhook
or press down his tongue with a cord?
Can you put a rope in his nose
or pierce his jaw with a hook?” (41.1-2)

and

Can you fill his skin with harpoons
or his head with fishing spears?
Lay your hands on him;
remember the battle—you will not do it again!” (41.7-8)

Of course, in the presence of God, upon hearing of the many mysterious of the world of which he had no knowledge of, Job repents.

With repentance comes salvation, for both Jonah and Job, who are then useful as agents of revelation. Just as with the classic heroes Odysseus or Aeneas¹⁸, Jonah and Job emerge from their respective descents wiser men. From a story-telling perspective, that is the ultimate goal when attempting to achieve a moral. Predictably, later authors incorporate this same system of bringing the protagonist out of the mouth of hell with the fruits of wisdom. Yet the manner in which this wisdom adheres to a moral code, such as Christianity, serves as the fluid element in the works covered in this study.

1.4—Shifting Ideologies: The Rise of Nietzschean Thought

The conception of good and evil as it is depicted in literature has varied with the times, allowing readers to trace the pattern of moral and spiritual values of any given

period. Often in classical literature, both evil and good serve as absolutes of either extreme. Questioning of such moral absolutism first occurred in mass during the Renaissance era, thanks in part to the concept of humanism, when authors and playwrights found that audiences were more receptive to ambiguous—and therefore more realistic—characters. This revolution, influential as it was, proved short-lived, for soon literature saw the return of moral absolutes, which presided over the bulk of the writing up until the middle of the nineteenth century, and which likewise catered to a predominately Christian viewpoint. Yet, with the emerging popularity of radical thought—such as evolution, psychoanalysis, and socialism—from equally revolutionary figures such as Marx, Darwin, and Freud, new liberal and secular viewpoints took dominance of educated thought, and likewise influenced what would become modern literature. Adapting to these darker times, moral absolutes were no longer required, for such absolutism was unrealistic and, therefore, un-modern.

Perhaps more significant to the shifting ideology of modernism were the philosophies of Nietzsche, who is viewed by many as the poster child for existential atheistic thought, which is fitting considering the effect of statements such as: “‘Whither is God’ he cried. ‘I shall tell you. We have killed him—you and I. All of us are his murderers. . . . Do we not hear anything yet of the noise of the gravediggers who are burying God? Do we not smell anything yet of God’s decomposition? Gods too decompose. God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him’” (*Gay Science* 95). Indeed, Nietzsche’s wild pronouncements have proved not only shocking, but also polarizing. Contemporary Christian scholars, such as apologist Ravi Zacharias, have argued that the wide acceptance of Nietzsche’s proclamation “God is dead,” has served as

one of the greatest proponents for the massive bloodshed initiated during in the twentieth century, with World War II as a historical zenith: “Hitler took Nietzsche’s writings as his philosophical blueprint and provoked the bloodiest, most unnecessary, most disruptive war in history, changing irremediably the pattern of the world” (Zacharias 62). Whether Nietzsche can be blamed for any war¹⁹ is not worth debating here, but Nietzsche undoubtedly influenced modern thought.

Interestingly, even Nietzsche writes about the hell descent, and also goes so far as to link it to the concept of intertextuality:

The journey to Hades. I too have been in the underworld, like Odysseus, and I shall yet return there often; and not only sheep have I sacrificed to be able to talk with a few of the dead, but I have not spared my own blood. Four pairs did not deny themselves to me as I sacrificed: Epicurus and Montaigne, Goethe and Spinoza, Plato and Rousseau, Pascal and Schopenhauer. With these I must come to terms when I have long wandered by myself; they shall tell me whether I am right or wrong; to them I want to listen when, in the process they tell each other whether they are right or wrong. (“Mixed” 67, emphasis not mine)

Although writing metaphorically, Nietzsche appears to have understood that the goal in any reading is to obtain knowledge from those who have gone before us. While few readers would admit to going on a journey to hell, the process by which one projects their own life upon that of a literary character has always been one of the primary draws in the experience of reading stories in the first place.

Cormac McCarthy, arguably one of the greatest American writers of the twentieth

century, understands the value of storytelling. Though it breaks with “modern” literary trends, McCarthy is not averse to occasionally utilize allegorical characters that embody moral absolutes in his writing, albeit in a manner that still includes morally ambiguous figures so as to cater to the “everyman” perspective desired by modern audiences.

1.5—Preview of Upcoming Chapters

Chapter 2 evaluates Coleridge’s “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner,” Melville’s *Moby-Dick*, and Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, as direct literary forerunners to Cormac McCarthy’s renditions of the hell journey. Aside from identifying the common biblical intertextual elements, I argue that upon enduring the hell-descent, it is the penitent act of narrating the story of the journey which functions as the part of the redemptive process necessary to spiritual rejuvenation. Thus, special attention is placed on the variations of redemption as depicted in each work. Likewise, in situating *Heart of Darkness* as a moral turning point, I argue that Conrad’s elimination of the redemptive act for Marlow effectively consigns the journeyer to a state of permanent disillusionment, even upon sharing the tale, which is reflective of changing attitudes in the wake of Nietzschean thought.

Chapter 3 follows the manner in which this trend is carried forth in all its ingloriousness into the later part of the twentieth-century with Cormac McCarthy’s *Blood Meridian*. In addition to analyzing the intertextual elements, I posit that the altered narrative perspective of third person, from the first person perspective of the previous works, not only changes the manner in which the hell journey story is conveyed, but also

aids in McCarthy's commentary of the acts of redemption and salvation, both of which are absent in the novel, and therefore reflect the disillusionment of the modern world. By killing his protagonist, I propose that McCarthy echoes the pessimistic twentieth century viewpoint, which rejects not only the possibility of redemption, but of enlightenment as well. Yet, McCarthy's intention is not to outright present his own philosophical views, but rather to reflect that which he sees in the world, which explains why he masks the potential for salvation amidst the violence and corruption of *Blood Meridian*.

Chapter 4 analyzes *The Road* as a natural evolution of the same hell journey begun with *Blood Meridian*, tracking the intertextual exchange and mapping out the manner in which McCarthy breaks with tradition. However, special emphasis focuses upon McCarthy's subtle shift from the hopelessness of *Blood Meridian* to what I consider to be his primary goal, encouraging redemption on the part of the reader. I argue that by allowing the goodness of the child to survive—even in the hell of a post-apocalyptic world—McCarthy seeks to present a different kind of redemptive process, whereby it is not the revelation or the story-telling of the journeyer that brings about redemption, but the act of experiencing the journey as an invested reader who desires to rise up out of hell, even if the characters cannot.

Chapter 5 provides an analysis of McCarthy's intentions in continuing the underworld descent tradition. Furthermore, I hypothesize as to the requirements and potentialities of future incarnations of the hell-journey, which can thereby advance and build upon the tradition, rather than simply retread old ground.

Chapter 2

“And penance more will do”¹: Redemption and the Intertextual Hell

2.0—The Biblical Intertext at Work in Coleridge, Melville, and Conrad

In the introductory chapter I proposed an intertextual reading that focuses on the usage of the biblical stories of Jonah and Job as precursory model. This chapter seeks both to analyze the scriptural interplay in Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner,” Herman Melville’s *Moby-Dick*, and Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, and to synthesize the relation with McCarthy’s later *Blood Meridian* and *The Road*. As with any scripturally inspired text, the focus here is primarily the variation in redemption in each work. However, consistent with the hell-descent trope, a by-product of that goal is the analysis of the importance of story telling as a part of spiritual growth. Thus, in understanding how recitation of the story aids in redemption, we track the philosophical shift from hopefulness to nihilism.

Endowed with the archetypal templates of Jonah and Job, one thing that becomes quickly evident is that both “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” and *Moby-Dick* contain the same essential attributes as a foundation of their respective narratives. In both, a wayward man (the Mariner or Ishmael) commits a sin (killing the albatross; joining a whaling ship) and is separated from God, and after enduring terrible suffering comes to a point of repentance, whereupon the suffering ends and the sinner returns to God. But, to add further stipulation for their sins, as well as to provide a lesson and moral so as to warn off those who would do ill, the repentant sinner is given the task of sharing their

tale². This action proves to be the necessary step in their penance with God.

The trouble with the Jonah and Job model arises when attempting to fit it with Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. While it initially suggests an effort in futility, upon some degree of contemplation, the template actually works with *Heart of Darkness* as well. Conrad's protagonist, Marlow, much like Ishmael, is a wanderer that foolishly aligns himself with a company of sinful death seekers (in this case, imperialist ivory hunters), who because of which he endures a kind of hell of Earth (traveling deeper into a jungle hell by way of the Congo River). So too does Marlow meet a maniacal figure that he comes to both admire and fear (Kurtz). So too does he nearly die. Ultimately, the difference between Conrad's tale and that of Melville or Coleridge is that Marlow does not appear to be repentant upon completion of the journey, nor does he appear to be one with God again at the end, though the tale itself is a kind of penance.

With that argument in consideration, it now becomes possible to examine more closely the individual works of Coleridge, Melville, and Conrad, so as to evaluate the manner in which each story manipulates the Jonah/Job template, as well as how the stories work with each other in a fascinating intertextual exchange.

2.1—"The Rime of the Ancient Mariner"

With Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," the first question that should be addressed is whether or not the events that occur to the Mariner are because he is a sinner from the beginning, or because he is among other sinners. At the start of his tale, the Mariner describes a devilish storm which chases his ship to the polar seas: "And

now the storm-blast came and he / was tyrannous and strong: / He struck with his o'er taking wings" ("Rime" 41-43). Clearly this tempest is fated, and, if nothing else, intended to situate the Mariner in a position to commit the sin of murder. However, one thing that should be considered is that the crossbow—a weapon intended for killing and hunting—used to shoot the albatross belongs to the Mariner. The implication of that possession is a predisposition toward violence, but when combined with the ease and accuracy in which the Mariner kills the bird, it is clear that Coleridge intends the reader to view the Mariner as a seasoned killer. Thus the initial tempest is likely heaven sent, which is suggested in likening the storm to an adversary: "As who pursued with yell and blow / Still treads the shadow of his foe" (46-47). In this instance, the "foe" that is the storm hunts down the ship. For what reason would this occur other than because it is a vessel crewed by sinners?

Concerning an element related to that fact, critics have long debated the seeming lack of motivation in the Mariner's act of killing the bird³. Robert Penn Warren, however, argues otherwise:

Original Sin is not hereditary sin; it is original with the sinner and is of his will. There is no previous determination of the will, because the will exists outside the chain of cause and effect, which is of Nature and not of Spirit. ... The bolt whizzes from the crossbow and the bird falls and all comment that the Mariner has no proper dramatic motive or is the child of necessity or is innocent of everything except a little wantonness is completely irrelevant, for we are confronting the mystery of the corruption of the will, the mystery which is the beginning of the "moral history of Man." (673).

As Warren suggests, it is easy to trivialize the actions of the Mariner, yet such a reading misses the interconnectedness between man and animal that Coleridge suggests in the aftermath of the albatross's slaying. "At the very least," Paul H. Fry suggests:

the Mariner must be said to have violated the spirit, the nature, of something that is larger than it appears to be: a dove appearing to the ark with the olive branch of its friendship typologically looking forward to the doctrine of the Holy Ghost; an image of imaginative flight beckoning to the mind through the fog and fridity of ordinary perceptions, then forcing the mind in denial of this calling to wear lifeless wings in mockery of the totemistic identity it has rejected; or a bird, simply, whose apparently tutelary presence implies the bond among all living things that the Mariner violates simply in holding life cheap. (Fry 21)

However, the Mariner, with the benefit of hindsight, and as the wizened narrator of the tale, reflects that it was "a hellish thing" ("Rime" 91). So "hellish" in fact that "[t]he act re-enacts the Fall [of Man], and the Fall has two qualities important here: it is a condition of will, ... and it is the result of no single human motive" (Warren 673). Admittedly, while suggesting that the slaying of a bird is the equivalent of Adam and Eve betraying the command of God seems ludicrous, it actually fits the pattern of tracing sin back through its biblical roots. Adam and Eve's sin is interpreted as having caused the first death, which is later repeated in violence through their sons Cain and Abel, and downward throughout history. Coleridge, in choosing to work symbolically, has the Mariner lashing out like the confused and misunderstood Cain. For those puzzled as to why Coleridge would offer up symbolism instead of outright murder, Warren writes:

“[t]he Mariner did not kill a man but a bird But they [readers] forget that this bird is more than a bird” (674). Coleridge lays out an analogy that cannot be denied, which hearkens back to the precepts of God’s covenant with man as dictated in the Ten Commandments. The Mariner reveals: “As if it had been a Christian soul, / We hailed it in God’s name” (“Rime” 65-66). Thus, as Warren suggests, it is “a crime against Nature [which is] a crime against God” (675). To elucidate further, while it is already a sin to kill, to kill a blessed creature, must therefore be an even greater sin. Furthermore, to justify such an action, as does the crew of the ship, proves to be just as awful.

While at first condoning the Mariner’s actions—“Ah wretch! . . . the bird to slay, / That made the breeze to blow!” (“Rime” 95-96)—the crew soon flip-flops their opinion, stating: “’Twas right, . . . such a bird to slay, / That bring the fog and mist” (101-102). Thus, not only is the crew too easily swayed by physical signs—proof of an inconstant heart—but also complacent in the Mariner’s immoral actions toward the bird. Frances Ferguson suggests that the crew’s punishment may be viewed as unjust, but rationalizes the matter as beyond their control:

in Part III of the poem, the Mariner is awarded to Life-in-Death, while all the rest of the crew become the property of Death. We never know whether this eventually is a delayed punishment for their first opinion or a more immediate punishment for their second. Since the Mariner did the killing when they only expressed opinions about it, there fate seems cruel indeed. But the implications seems to be that every interpretation involves a moral commitment with consequences that are inevitably more far-reaching and unpredictable than one could have imagined. (704)

Regardless of reason, the crew is condemned alongside the Mariner.

Interpreting the nature of the condemnation is the mystery. Although Coleridge's poem never explicitly states that the cursed Mariner dies and goes to hell, what ensues can only be likened to a hell-on-earth. Punishment begins with an unbearably hot and "bloody sun" ("Rime" 112) looming over the ship, which is stranded in an unearthly stillness and "silence of the sea" (110), caught in a windless, expansive, watery wasteland:

Day after day, day after day,
We stuck, nor breath nor motion;
As idle as a painted ship
Upon a painted ocean. (115-118)

And as if the agony of thirst in having "Water, water, every where, / Nor any drop to drink" (121-122) isn't enough, "every tongue, ... / [is] withered at the root" (135-136) so that the wishy-washy crew is mute—silent as the grave. Yet it is in voiceless, too-little-too-late, chastisement of the Mariner, that the crew hangs the dead albatross around his neck, "[i]nstead of the cross" (141). As typically interpreted, this action suggests that the crew holds the Mariner as responsible for the evil that has befallen them. Yet a further aspect worth noting in the substitution of the cross for the dead bird is the implication of the crew's rejection of Christian faith in favor of some type of pagan worship, likely for the purpose of appeasing the plaguing spirits that have stalled the winds and brought forth the searing heat. This very same quest for appeasement of God occurs in the Jonah story, albeit in reverse order—after they are aware of the Mariner's guilt. Returning to the nature of the initial act as a "crime against God," Warren notes that "here we get a

symbolic transference from Christ to the Albatross, from the slain Son of God to the slain creature of God. And the death of the creature of God, like the death of the Son of God, will, in its own way, work for vision and salvation” (675).

Interestingly, the silence that befalls the crew and the Mariner has its origins in classical depictions of the dead in the underworld, such as in *The Odyssey*. In Book 11 of Homer’s classic, Odysseus travels to the realm of the dead to speak with the ghost of Tiresias, who only after having “drunk the dark blood” (109) of a sacrifice is capable of prophecy. Coleridge plays upon this same concept when the Mariner exclaims: “I bit my arm, I sucked the blood, / And cried, A Sail! a sail!” (“Rime” 160-161). Gruesomely akin to the temporary muteness of the dead, only upon consuming his own blood is the Mariner able to cry out the arrival of the ghost ship that will herald the next phase of his punishment.

This ominous ghost ship, which speeds along “Without a breeze” (71), contains but two passengers, a pale woman (Life-in-Death) and Death, who roll dice to see who will take possession of the souls of the sailors. Curiously, Life-in-Death is described in a manner that is both sensual and abominable: “Her lips were red, her looks were free, / Her locks were yellow as gold: / Her skin was as white as leprosy” (190-192). Indeed, the description here paints Life-in-Death as though she were a harlot, and suggests that she is meant to be perceived as lecherous and tempting to the Mariner and the mute-stricken crew. Yet in this instance, what is most appealing about such a figure is not her sensuality, but her nature as a symbol associated with death⁴. Indeed, that association is only further exemplified by the paleness of Life-in-Death’s skin, which so too is echoed in the running motif of whiteness as death seen in the other works covered in this study⁵.

Strangely, Life-in-Death spares the Mariner, so as to enable the next phase in his hellish punishment—isolation and guilt, or what is most clearly the period in which Jonah resides in the belly of the whale. However, rather than our wayward Mariner being swallowed by a giant fish, he is forced to endure the torment of being denied death: “Alone on a wide wide sea! / And never a saint took pity on / My soul in agony” (233-235). Indeed, this solitude is so harsh for the Mariner that he later states: “So lonely ’twas, that God himself / Scarce seemed there to be” (599-600). It is with this solitude that the Mariner is meant to call upon God, as Jonah did, however the Mariner finds that he cannot pray for: “a wicked whisper came, and made / My heart as dry as dust” (246-247). The Mariner’s inability to pray stems from his continued dismissal of the natural world, as evidenced upon seeing the “many men, so beautiful!” (236), though dead all around him, while “a thousand thousand slimy things / Lived on; and so did I” (338-339). It is with disrespect that the Mariner sees the creatures of the deep, and with disrespect that he likens his sinful soul to them. For that reason, the Mariner is forced to endure a week of silent hell: “But oh! more horrible than that / Is the curse in a dead man’s eye!” (259-260). Yet, miraculously, that week provides the Mariner the time to learn to appreciate the “water-snakes” (273) at play in the sea beneath his ghost ship, whereby he comes to understand the glory of life:

O happy living things! no tongue
Their beauty might declare;
A spring of love gushed from my heart,
And I blessed them unaware. (282-285)

Blessing these “slimy things” proves to be the vital step toward redemption for the

Mariner⁶, for it is then that the Mariner can pray, and so too become free of the albatross. This blessing and prayer leads naturally to the moral the Mariner espouses at the end of his story: “He prayeth well, who loveth well / Both man and bird and beast” (612-613). Thus the Mariner learns that only upon recognizing the value in all living things “both great and small” (615), can a soul be close to God, and find true salvation: “For the dear God who loveth us, / He made and loveth all” (616-617).

Though repentant, and free from the corpse of the dead bird, the Mariner’s duration in hell is not yet concluded, for he is not free from the corpses of the crew damned by his actions. In fact, he is forced to work along side the dead, including his “brother’s son” (341), who are animated by “a troop of spirits blest” (359)—or angels—turning the vessel into a true ship of the dead⁷. But as survival is an essential part of the Mariner’s penance, the spirit-powered ship finally brings the Mariner to his homeland, which he sees with both relief and disbelief: “O let me be awake, my God! / Or let me sleep alway” (470-471)⁸. From this blessed shore, the Mariner sees his rescuers—the Pilot, the Pilot’s boy, and a Hermit priest, the last of whom is one of the most important figures in the poem, for it is the Hermit who will “shrieve [the Mariner’s] soul, [who will] ... wash away / The Albatross’s blood” (512-513). This is an important detail, for the Mariner understands that confession is necessary to the cleansing of his soul⁹.

As the rescue skiff approaches, the would-be rescuers realize there cannot be a soul alive on board such a ghostly ship. And when the ship quite suddenly sinks, going “down like lead” (549), they are amazed and horrified to find the body of the Mariner, who floats “[l]ike one that had been seven days drowned” (543). Believing the Mariner to be dead, when he finally speaks, all on board are aghast, with even “The holy Hermit

rais[ing] his eyes, / And pray[ing]” (562-563). So desperate to reach the shore, the Mariner takes the oars and begins rowing the skiff, which causes the dumbfounded Pilot’s boy to madly exclaim: ““Ha! ha! ... full plain I see, / The Devil knows how to row”” (568-569). The suddenness with which the Mariner startles his rescuers serves to substantiate the metaphor of returning from the dead, for until this point the Mariner had been enduring the fiercest torment of hell.

Once upon the land the Mariner begs the Hermit to hear his confession. But still in a state of shock, the Hermit asks: ““What manner of man art thou?”” (577). The question is valid not only because it initiates the confession of a sinful man, but also because the Mariner appears supernatural in nature thanks to his seeming resurrection¹⁰. When the Mariner answers the Hermit, he reveals not only his sins, but also the entire torment that he endured. It is here that the Mariner comes to understand what his “penance more” actually entails. Conceptually similar to penance of Jonah speaking to the sinners of Nineveh, it is the Mariner’s duty to share his tale so that the listener has the opportunity to repent from their own sins. Only when the “ghastly tale is told” (584) does the Mariner obtain a sense of peace, which explains why the Mariner has stopped the wedding-guest at such an inopportune moment. More than confession, the telling of the Mariner’s story is a teaching tool for sinners to repent, enabling each to go forth as “a sadder and a wiser man” (624). Paul H. Fry rightly asserts the difficulty in viewing the poem as part of “the Christian story of sacrificial trespass and redemption” (19), thanks largely in part to the obvious flaws in the Mariner’s post-redemptive figure:

if the Mariner is truly the protagonist of this sort of story then he ought somehow to benefit from it. He should seem transfigured, dignified,

holy—and not the ‘grey-beard loon’ traumatized by survivor guilt, suffering through period fits of compulsive speech, whose supplementary punishment of this kind (we would call it being sentenced to community service) will be everlasting. (19-20)

However, Fry’s reading neglects the lesson of “treasures in heaven” versus “treasures on earth” (Matt. 6.19-20), which likewise implies that bodily perfection is less important than spiritual perfection. Yet even the story of Jonah ends in similar cynicism, with the prophet greatly disappointed in his inability to assert his own will before God’s will, an ending which resounds with the cliché: the Lord works in mysterious ways. The same can be said of *Moby-Dick* as well.

2.2—*Moby-Dick*

Herman Melville’s take on the Jonah story follows many of the same notes as Coleridge’s “Rime,” but it takes longer for one to understand that the nautical journey our verbose narrator, Ishmael, embarks upon is in fact an epic¹¹ trek through hell. Early on, Ishmael alludes to the fact that it is a restlessness and boredom with everyday life that leads him to thoughts of violence and suicide. Furthermore, “Ishmael is not merely an orphan; he is an exile, searching alone in the wilderness, with a black man for his only friend. ... [H]e is man, or as we like to think, modern man, cut off from the certainty that was once his inner world” (Kazin 42). Thus, for Ishmael, the answer is the sea, which he initially describes as: “the image of the ungraspable phantom of life; and this is the key to it all” (*MD* 20). In a manner not unlike Ahab’s monomaniacal quest, in seeking out the

unfathomable sea, Ishmael is really seeking death¹². As Christopher Sten aptly states: “Like the *Divine Comedy*, *The Waste Land*, and other spiritual epics, *Moby-Dick* opens with its hero in a fallen state of emotional torpor and confusion. Starting his story before his transforming experience on the *Pequod*, Ishmael says he is like a spiritually dead man in a spiritually dead land, seeking the relief of the condemned everywhere” (5-6).

When examined closely, much of Ishmael’s initial behavior stems from his doubting and inquisitive soul. It is that same desire to know the secrets of the grave that drives Ishmael out to sea on a ship captained by an antichrist¹³, crewed by heathens, all hunting the ultimate symbol of the unconquerable leviathan¹⁴, the sperm whale. Prior to embarking on his journey, Ishmael philosophically speaks about the memorial plaques of those who have died at sea: “What bitter blanks in those black-bordered marbles which cover no ashes! What despair in those immovable inscriptions! What deadly voids and unbidden infidelities in the lines that seem to gnaw upon all Faith, and refuse resurrection to the beings who have placelessly perished without a grave” (*MD* 45). Curiously, this final statement would thus indicate that Ishmael himself would “refuse resurrection,” which appears to be the furthest one could run away from God. Some time later, Ishmael romanticizes death at sea for another shipmate, arguing that to do so includes an immortalizing inscription on a church wall—not to mention immortalization in his story:

better is it to perish in that howling infinite, than be ingloriously dashed upon the lee, even if that were safety! For worm-like, then, oh! who would crawl to land! Terrors of the terrible! is all this agony so vain? Take heart, take heart, O Bulkington! Bear thee grimly, demigod! Up from the spray of thy ocean-perishing—straight up, leaps thy apotheosis! (97)

Though the men who die because of the paradoxically entwined furies of Captain Ahab and Moby-Dick may achieve infamy in Ishmael's story, one has to wonder if Ishmael's poetic language isn't merely a front for his doubts. Apotheosis, literally becoming god-like, requires immortality, and if the earlier statement of Ishmael concerning the lack of resurrection for those who die at sea, then there can be no everlasting life for such men¹⁵.

At the start of the novel, Ishmael's suicidal quest to join a whaling vessel takes him to the dreary and deathlike town of New Bedford, last stop before the island of Nantucket, where he is chased about by the bleak snowy weather into whatever sanctuary he can find—including, briefly, a black church known as "The Trap," in which the preacher speaks "about the blackness of darkness, and the weeping and wailing and teeth-gnashing there" (*MD* 24)—before ultimately settling on The Spouter-Inn, run by a man named Coffin. Though seemingly innocently named, these ominously elements readily establish the allegorical aspects that foreshadow Ishmael's journey through hell, especially since a spouter is, of course, a whale, and the novel ends with Ishmael using a coffin as a life-raft. Yet Ishmael is not just a man that longs for death, he is in fact a man seeking the truth. Moreover, he is more than just "[a] lone man somehow persisting in a hostile universe, buoyed up on a miniature version of the world we all inhabit—part life-buoy, part coffin—Ishmael in the end is an image of us all, gifted with life and miraculously surviving, moment by moment" (Sten 81).

Unlike the Mariner, Ishmael's sin is not traceable to singular event, but is rather multifaceted, though it mostly stems from associating himself with the disreputable whaling crew of the *Pequod*, Ahab's ship. The first of these unsavory whaler types is the noble savage Queequeg¹⁶, who Ishmael befriends before joining Ahab's vessel. Though

primarily meant by Melville to show that even a “cannibal” can prove to be quite friendly, what Queequeg truly does is soften Ishmael up for the pagan life he will lead as a hand on the *Pequod*. The night after they share a bed, Ishmael spots Queequeg, though not a Christian, attending the church—albeit that this is probably one of the few establishments open at the time—of the moralizing Father Mapple, whose lengthy sermon on the story of Jonah provides the greatest of lessons:

“Delight is to him, who gives no quarter in the truth, and kills, burns, and destroys all sin though he pluck it out from under the robes of Senators and Judges. Delight,—top-gallant delight is to him, who acknowledges no law or lord, but the Lord his God, and is only a patriot to heaven. . . . And eternal delight and deliciousness will be his, who coming to lay him down, can say with his final breath—O Father!—chiefly known to me by Thy rod—mortal or immortal, here I die. I have striven to be Thine, more than to be this world’s, or mine own.” (54)

Father Mapple’s words leave no room for compromise for the true Christian. And though Ishmael apparently seems to remember all of the intricacies of Father Mapple’s speech, he does not take the lesson of the sermon to heart. Rather, almost as soon as he leaves the church, he resolves to solidify his relationship with Queequeg by worshiping the dark image of Yojo¹⁷.

But Queequeg is only the first of the pagans that Ishmael unites with in worship. The second is the *Pequod* itself, which Ishmael likens to a living entity: “[s]he was a thing of trophies. A cannibal of a craft, tricking herself forth in the chased bones of her enemies” (70). The fact that bones decorate the ship would be warning enough for most

to stay clear of such a vessel, but since Ishmael is seeking death, the *Pequod* is the perfect craft. Upon hearing of the enigmatic Ahab, Ishmael is further drawn in the lure of the ship: “‘Ahab’s been in colleges, as well as ‘mong the cannibals; been used to deeper wonders than the waves; fixed his fiery lance in mightier, stranger foes than whales” (78). Indeed, if Ishmael is seeking to understand the unknown, he chooses the right place. Not surprisingly, upon signing a three-year contract with the ship, Ishmael is accosted by a mysterious “beggar-like stranger” (88) who ominously asks of Ishmael:

“Anything down there about your souls?”

“Anything what?”

“Oh, perhaps you hav’n’t got any No matter though. I know many chaps that hav’n’t got any,—good luck to ‘em; and they are the better off for it. A soul’s a sort of a fifth wheel to a wagon.” (87)

Such words ring quite blasphemous, especially for a man named for the prophet Elijah. Even still, the stranger’s purpose is rather to imply that the *Pequod* is in fact a ship on its way to hell, and that Ahab—who Elijah refers to as “Old Thunder” (87)—is the devil. Ishmael, however, dismisses Elijah as “a humbug” (88) and a false prophet, and rejects his unwanted attempts at prophecy¹⁸. Elijah’s parting words to Ishmael resound as especially grim: “Good bye to ye. Shan’t see ye again very soon, I guess; unless it’s before the Grand Jury” (91). Curiously, another false prophet named for Elijah occurs in McCarthy’s *The Road*, this time with a partially-blind old man in rags with the assumed name Ely, who similarly speaks in ominous and blasphemous phrases, such as: “Where men cant live gods fare no better. You’ll see. It’s better to be alone” (*The Road* 145). Yet, for Ishmael, a prophet (false or otherwise) is not enough to deter his joining of the

Pequod, nor in partaking of the sin of whaling¹⁹.

Much has been, and can be said, about Captain Ahab²⁰, but what is most vitally important here concerning the mad whaler is how he serves as the wayward shepherd of wayward sheep. In terms of physicality, he is hardly different than the savage Queequeg in grotesqueness, what with his “barbaric white leg” (*MD* 109) of whale ivory, or the mysterious white “slender rod-like” (108) scar running down his face and neck like a perverse mark of Cain²¹. And to add to this peculiar appearance there is the power of his voice, which speaks with poetic glory, but almost exclusively in regard to hunting the elusive Moby Dick: “Aye, aye! and I’ll chase him round Good Hope, and round the Horn, and round the Norway Maelstrom, and round perdition’s flames before I give him up. And this is what ye have shipped for, me! to chase that white whale on both sides of land, and over all sides of the earth, till he spouts black blood and rolls fin out” (139). Unsurprisingly, one cannot help but notice the similarity between Ahab’s words and those of Satan in the Book of Job, when the devil answers God’s question about where he has been: “From going to and fro on the earth, and from walking up and down on it” (1.7)²². Though Ahab extends his reach to the sea, he is still intent on traversing the globe if need be in his hunt for the whale. Strangely, when Ahab at last reveals to the crew what their true purpose is, none chooses mutiny. Not even the noble Starbuck, who often disagrees with, and attempts to dissuade Ahab from his “blasphemous” (*MD* 139) hunt, though he knows it could (and does) result in the death of them all. Ishmael, as a mere extra hand on the ship lacks the credibility to assert his own feelings on the matter²³. But why should any one of the crew attempt a mutiny against Ahab, when they are all in the same business really, hunting death.

Indeed, Ahab has grown so adept in his evil and madness as to have acquired his own personal familiar spirit in the form of the devilish Fedallah, who clings to Ahab's shadow at all times and even prophesies both their fates: "But I said, old man, that ere thou couldst die on this voyage, two hearses must verily be seen by thee on the sea; the first not made by mortal hands; and the visible wood of the last one must be grown in America" (377). Under Fedallah's command, is a crew of "tiger-yellow" (181) men, who remain hidden on the ship until the first whale hunt commences. Concerning Fedallah and his men, no more apt description arrives than from the character Stubb, who exclaims: "...never mind the brimstone—devils are good fellows enough" (182). Recalling Father Mapple's preaching, good Christians do not align themselves with devils, proving that the crew of *Pequod* cannot wear that distinction. Regardless of the seeming evil of the "phantom crew" (186), they are nothing compared to the devilishness in Ahab's breast: "Only the infidel sharks in the audacious seas may give ear to such words, when, with tornado brow, and eyes of red murder, and foam-glued lips, Ahab leaped after his prey" (186).

And very much amongst this rabble crew stands Ishmael. Ishmael too drinks of the dark communion with the rest of the crew, which acts as the sinister bond in their collective hunt for Moby Dick. Ishmael too is in accord when Ahab shouts: "Death to Moby Dick! God hunt us all, if we do not hunt Moby Dick to his death!" (142). Thus it must be remembered, that though not a harpooner, nor chief-mate, nor a pilot, Ishmael still acquiesces to play his part in Ahab's "devil's chase" (189), which is fitting when one considers that it is really just a extreme version on what he had been seeking all along: "...here goes for a cool, collected dive at death and destruction, and the devil fetch the

hindmost” (189). Yet in many ways, Ishmael is the hindmost who is not fetched by the devil. Rather, he is the “orphan” (427) who rides up from the depths of hell on a coffin²⁴.

To understand Ishmael’s survival, when a far more suitable candidate for life exists in the figure of Starbuck, one must understand that it is Ishmael who comes to appreciate the beauty of the animal world. Much like the Mariner in Coleridge’s poem, Ishmael often speaks of the grace and glory of the whale²⁵, whether it is in the majesty of the deceased creature’s anatomy—of which he goes to great lengths to discuss—or of living whales in majestic pods:

And how nobly it raises our conceit of the might, mist monster, to behold him solemnly sailing through a calm tropical sea; his vast, mile head overhung by a canopy of vapor, engendered by his incommunicable contemplations, and that vapor—as you will sometimes see it—glorified by a rainbow, as if Heaven itself had put its seal upon his thoughts. (293)²⁶

It is with such fascinating observations that Ishmael comes to link the blessing that Heaven provides the whale with the blessings that Heaven provides mankind: “And so, through all the thick mists of the dim doubts in my mind, divine intuitions now and then shoot, enkindling my fog with a heavenly ray” (293). This connection which Ishmael makes, though not explicit, recalls the moral of Coleridge’s poem: “For the God who loveth us, / He made and loveth all” (“Rime” 616-617).

Contrasted with the coarseness of Ahab—who at one point boldly claims “I’d strike the sun if it insulted me” (140), and later “Light thou thou be, thou leapest out of darkness; but I am darkness leaping out of light, leaping out of thee!” (383)—Ishmael is indeed a saint. But what further saves Ishmael is the poetic voice he has, which he is

allowed to utilize in sharing his tale, such as when he vividly describes the hellishness of melting down whale blubber:

Wrapped, for that interval, in darkness myself, I but the better saw the redness, the madness, the ghastliness of others. The continual sight of the fiend shapes before me, capering half in smoke and half in fire, these the last begat kindred visions in my soul, so soon as I began to yield to that unaccountable drowsiness, which ever would come upon me at a midnight helm. (327)

And in a line that seems to foresee Nietzsche's 146th aphorism in *Beyond Good and Evil*—"He who fights with monsters should be careful lest he thereby become a monster. And if thou gaze long into an abyss, the abyss will also gaze into thee"—Ishmael states: "Look not too long in the face of the fire, O man! Never dream with thy hand on the helm!" (*MD* 328). But in spite of Ishmael's poetic tongue, it is difficult to say that he has a moment of direct repentance to God. Rather, the moment of repentance seems to belong to Ahab, when weeping about leaving behind his wife and son: "'the madness, the frenzy, the boiling blood and the smoking brow, with which, for a thousand lowerings old Ahab has furiously, foamingly charged his prey—more a demon than a man!—aye, aye! what a forty year's fool—fool—old fool, has old Ahab been!'" (405). Perhaps it is Ishmael's penitent confession in the overall tale of *Moby-Dick* that serves as his repentance, what with the importance of biblical allusion and philosophical musings, which proves that it is better to spare a sinner that sees the glory in nature than a madman that exclaims: "'Where do murderers go, man! Who's to doom when the judge himself is dragged to the bar?'" (407). Then, too, if one returns to the entire purpose of the hell-descent in classical

works—hearing what tales dead men have to tell—thus Ishmael has to survive so as to relate Ahab’s story. Hoffman sums up Ishmael’s role best: “[h]e survives to preach to us, his Nineveh” (65). Consequently, we as reader and Nineveh to Ishmael’s Jonah have the task of repenting from our own sins. This is, however a revelation that is more difficult to ascertain in *Heart of Darkness*.

2.3—*Heart of Darkness*

Like *Moby-Dick*, Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* also eschews the direct repentant act for its protagonist. However, unlike the works of Coleridge and Melville, Conrad’s rendition of the Jonah story reads as more allegorical, certainly more blasphemous, and even, at times, atheistic—which stems both from the bleakness of the subject matter, and from the hollowness of the ending. However, when read as the natural progression of the influence of nihilism in western thought, *Heart of Darkness* functions as a key guidepost for shifting ideologies, whereby the hell we are presented with is run on the commerce of souls, bought through slaughter and cruelty. Of the novel, Lilian Feder asserts: “[b]y associating Marlow’s journey with the descent into hell, Conrad concretizes the hidden world of the inner self. Through image and symbol, he evokes the well-known voyage of the hero who, in ancient epic, explores the lower world and, in so doing, probes the depths of his own and his nation’s conscience” (280). Juliet McLauchlan posits a similar reading: “*Heart of Darkness* embodies an insight which has brought home to humanity time and time again during the Twentieth Century: elevated words can serve the light or the dark depending upon the way their embodied ideas and aims are, or are not, put into

practice” (390). Under imperialistic rule, those aims are almost entirely based on greed, serving as much of the basis for Terence N. Bowers statement: “Such indifference to human suffering is logical when God has been replaced by money, which Conrad shows, is the guiding idea—indeed, the religion—of imperialism. . . . And the presiding angel of this religion is Kurtz, the once idealistic, not satanic being, made evil by the quest for ivory” (94).

Verily, this is a theme established from the start of the novel, as imperialism is equated with idol worship, being “something you can set up, and bow down before, and offer a sacrifice to” (*HOD* 10). Just as with the sea-faring trade of the Mariner or those of the doomed *Pequod*, it is money and commerce that drives men out to sea and enables them to commit atrocities against nature and man alike. But imperialism is more than simple capitalism, more than simple exchange of values, for it involves the collectivist mindset of an empire, which includes its own philosophical indoctrination. Conrad hints at this indoctrination early on in *Heart of Darkness* when he writes that the representatives of imperialism sail out: “bearing the sword, and often the torch, messengers of the might within the land, bearers of a spark from the sacred fire” (8). Yet the falsehood and foolishness of imperialism quickly comes to bear when one sees the horror that is achieved in the name of serving the light. Rather, as with Kurtz’s symbolic sketch of “a woman draped and blindfolded carrying a lighted torch” (27) before her, imperialism merely blindly sets ablaze all that it comes across. So too does the hell of imperialism set ablaze the souls of those it comes in contact with, exacting punishment without justification of the crime²⁷.

It is into just such a thoughtless and wicked world that Marlow aligns himself. A

restless wanderer just like Ishmael, Marlow's journey into hell takes him down a river²⁸ "resembling an immense snake uncoiled, with its head in the sea, its body at rest curving afar over a vast country and its tail lost in the depths of the land" (12). Not unlike the biblical snake²⁹ in the Garden of Eden, this symbolic snake tempts and "charm[s]" (12) Marlow in such a fashion that leads him straight into the belly of the beast. And deep in the bowels of that hell, Marlow finds the mysterious Kurtz, who transcends imperialism and Christianity by embracing pagan savagery—even to the point of self-deification before the natives. But just like Ishmael, Marlow is only aware of these symbolic elements after the fact, after he has returned from hell, which enables him to weave such a profound and bleak story for the listeners on the *Nellie*³⁰. As Robert O. Evans writes: "It is a journey through the underworld for the purpose of instruction as well as entertainment, calculated to bring into focus Conrad's moral vision, as it affects the mass of humanity struggling on the brink of the 'tumid river'" (56).

As with the Mariner and Ishmael, the company Marlow keeps is what damns him deeper into the pit. This is a point that even Marlow stresses when describing his initial meeting in a city that looks like a "white sepulchre" (13) with the Belgian trading company "run[ing] an oversea empire" (13). Indeed, the bleakness of the office, where Marlow is shepherded in and out by two women knitting "black wool" (13) who resemble the Fates Clotho and Lachesis³¹, or Marlow's hasty meeting with "[t]he great man himself ... his grip on the handle-end of ever so many millions" (14)—obviously a representation of either a personified Death or the third Fate, Atropos—cannot be understood properly if only read in the literal sense. Rather, when taken metaphorically, it is at this juncture that Marlow is setting on a path to hell, meeting with death at the grave.

Only then can he sail the endless “monotonous grimness” (16) of the sea toward “the centre of the earth” (16) in the Belgian Congo.

Once among the “faithless [European] pilgrims” (26) who have joined the company because of their lust for ivory—symbolic of not only death, but also money—Marlow learns the depths of human depravity³². As soon as his feet are on African soil, Marlow witnesses the inhumane treatment of the natives, with a group of six slaves shackled together, wearing “iron collar[s]” (19), their bodies emaciated to the point where Marlow can “see every rib” (19). And as if these walking skeletons were not horrifying enough, when Marlow goes into the tree line to escape the sight of the dying prisoners, he finds only more dying men: “Black shapes crouched, lay, sat between the trees, leaning against the trunks, clinging to the earth, half coming out, half effaced within the dim light, in all the attitudes of pain, abandonment, and despair. . . . The work [imperialism] was going on. The work! And this was the place where some of the helpers had withdrawn to die” (20). Setting the trend for the mistreatment of the natives, the accountant, the first company man Marlow comes across, exclaims: ““ . . .one comes to hate those savages—hate them to the death”” (22). And it seems that no imperialist is free of this same guilt, hatred that leads to the wholesale butchery. Even the mysterious Kurtz, who seems to have found a way of controlling the natives, uses fear and murder as a tool for conquest, as evidenced when Marlow describes the “heads on the stakes” (57) which adorn the posts around Kurtz’s compound³³.

Like Ahab, Kurtz is a man of stature and voice, yet whereas Ahab is still a conflicted soul, Kurtz embodies the absolute horror of hell. Evans writes: “Kurtz is plainly alive when Marlow begins his journey and still alive when Marlow reaches him,

but symbolically there is no doubt that he is the arch-inhabitant of Hell or that Marlow, too, has been journeying through Hell, much as Dante did in the *Inferno*” (56). The favored Kurtz—destined to “go far, very far, ... [to be] somebody in the Administration before long” (*HOD* 22)—embraces the evils in the heart of man, and in so doing becomes a kind of living death among the savagery of the innermost recess of hell. Concerning Kurtz’s appearance, Conrad writes: “The wilderness had patted him on the head, and behold, it was like a ball—an ivory ball; it had caressed him and—lo!—he had withered; it had taken him, loved him, embraced him, got into his veins, consumed his flesh, and sealed his soul to its own by the inconceivable ceremonies of some devilish initiation” (49). Describing the darkness of evil as having “loved him,” recalls treating death—or Death—as a lover. Indeed, it seems that Kurtz was always betrothed to death. Even Kurtz’s “intended” (49), when described at the end of the novel appears a dark and withered thing:

She came forward all in black with a pale head, floating towards me in the dusk. She was in mourning. It was more than a year since his death, more than a year since the news came; she seemed as though she would remember and mourn for ever. ... I saw her and him in the same instant of time—his death and her sorrow—I saw her sorrow in the very moment of his death. (72-73)

Taken in allegorical sense, the eternal mourning of Kurtz’s fiancée merely highlights the depraved death fixation³⁴ that takes hold of Kurtz. But to love Death only decimates the self, which is why Kurtz is left a “hollow sham” (*HOD* 67) and “an impenetrable darkness” (68) that can do nothing but senselessly seek “to swallow all the air, all the

earth, all the men before him” (59). And when the hollow body is dead, and the “deep voice” (61) expires, what is there but “something [to bury] in a muddy hole” (69). Even Kurtz’s death cry lacks substance, though it clarifies some of the philosophies Conrad toys with in the novel. Robert Wilson argues:

The actual cry of Kurtz, “The horror! The horror!” elevates him in Marlow’s opinion to the highest wisdom. Conrad implies that at an extreme point, Christian and Buddhist doctrine concur that the innermost soul of things is an abyss, a thoughtless and cruel nonentity. The story ends with the suggestion that the waterway the *Nellie* is to follow—path to knowledge—will yield the same results. (146)

Indeed, much of the mystery of the book appears to leave one feeling with a vast sense of hopelessness.

This is fitting, since, in truth, loving death is very much a kind of syphoning or vacuuming of life. This turns Kurtz into an overly possessive hoarder of death, in the form of ivory. Yet even possession of the ivory is not enough, because it shifts into a matter of possession of the soul. Marlow explains:

Everything belonged to him—but that was a trifle. The thing was to know what he belonged to, how many powers of darkness claimed him for their own. That was the reflection that made you creepy all over. It was impossible—it was not good for one either—trying to imagine. He had taken a high seat amongst the devils of the land—I mean literally. (*HOD* 49)

In accord with his ravenous lust for death, Kurtz is—to loosely paraphrase a line from

Shakespeare's Sonnet 73—consumed by the very thing that he consumes.

And as a journeyer into the metaphorical depths of hell, Marlow is very nearly swallowed too by the madness and senseless horror. Suffering from a terrible sickness that leaves him “wrestl[ing] with death” (69), Marlow believes he only survives: “to show [his] loyalty to Kurtz once more. Destiny. My Destiny!” (69). And Marlow must survive because he is “to have the care of [Kurtz’s] memory” (51), and is thus capable of sharing the voice of the dead with the living. Yet Marlow does not return from his journey a man of hope and light: “Droll thing life is—that mysterious arrangement of merciless logic for a futile purpose. The most you can hope from it is some knowledge of yourself—that comes too late—a crop of unextinguishable regrets” (69). As J. Hillis Miller asserts: “The Aufklärung or enlightenment in this case is of the fact that the darkness enters into every gesture of enlightenment to enfeeble it, to hollow it out, to corrupt it and thereby to turn its reason into unreason, in pretence of shedding light into more darkness” (52). Thus Marlow, though presented as a “meditating Buddha” (76), brings not enlightenment to the world, but only the grimness and dissatisfaction with the mystery of death: “If such is the form of ultimate wisdom then life is a greater riddle than some of us think it to be” (69). Ultimately, Conrad’s tale leaves readers with another reluctant Jonah whose somber confession and prophecy falls upon the deaf of an unrepentant world of imperialism, but hopefully not upon the deaf years of modern day readers.

Chapter 3

“Aint this hell”: Allegorical Western Underworld

3.0—All Quiet as the Grave on the Western Front

Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* has received a remarkable amount of attention in the three decades since its publication, ranging in focus from analyses of the book's gnostic influences, to debates on whether or not it serves as a revisionist western, to explorations of the theme of American exceptionalism during westward expansion. In-depth studies, such as those done by John Sepich¹, have paved the way for intertextual readings of *Blood Meridian* and its many influences, however none have thus far taken to linking the biblical interplay of the stories of Jonah and Job as a foundation for understanding the allegorical elements of the underworld journey, nor have they seriously included the likes of Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" or Conrad's "Heart of Darkness" as thematic forerunners for McCarthy's novel. With that in mind, my analysis of *Blood Meridian* pays close attention to the same elements as discussed in the previous chapter, while elucidating on the manner in which McCarthy spins the format from his literary predecessors.

Positioning *Blood Meridian* as a spiritual continuation to what Conrad began in *Heart of Darkness* opens up a fascinating avenue for exploration, primarily because when read as a variation of the same hellish allegorical journey, one sees just how far away from hope the late twentieth-century had drawn since the days of Marlow's abysmal enlightenment. *Blood Meridian* commences with the same enigmatic and brooding

darkness that marks the close of Conrad's meditation of the evils of man. But whereas the character Marlow must descend and later emerge from the bowels of hell, McCarthy drops his protagonist, the kid, straight into the darkness of the pit from the first page: "See the child. He is pale and thin, he wears a thin and ragged linen shirt. He stokes the scullery fire. Outside lie dark turned fields with rags of snow and darker woods beyond that harbor yet a few last wolves" (3). The only attention the "pale and unwashed" (3) child receives from his neglectful, dipsomaniac father are lecture-like ramblings: "Night of your birth. Thirty-three. The Leonids they were called. God how the stars did fall. I looked for blackness, holes in the heavens. The Dipper stove" (3). All the while, the child goes ironically uneducated by his "schoolmaster" father, which leaves only "a taste for mindless violence" (3) in the boy, who soon chooses to run away from home, rather than continue on in mute observance of his father's unlife.

Yet the boy's great escape is no iconic romp through the wilderness like that of Twain's Huck Finn, but, rather, it is one that brings him deeper into suffering. McCarthy writes that at the age of fifteen, barely a year on his own, the boy: "lives in a room above a courtyard behind a tavern and he comes down at night like some fairybook beast to fight with the sailors" (4). In one such incident, the boy is twice fired upon, once in the back and "again just below the heart" (4). Considering the time frame in which the novel occurs, as well as the severity of his wounds, to suggest that the kid actually survives such an incident is astounding, perhaps even impossible to believe. My argument is not so much that the boy does not survive the shooting, and is thus in the underworld from then on, but rather that the boy is born into Hell from the beginning.

3.1—Welcome to the kid’s Hell: “the terms of his own fate”

To make such a claim, allow me clarify a few things. I am not the first to propose such a reading. James Bowers briefly alludes to the notion, stating: “‘the kid’ will remain forever without Christian name in his Inferno-like descent into the depths of all matter of damnable terrors” (12). Bowers later more forcefully claims: “[t]he effect that the kid’s journey is through the land of the dead is only deepened by the company’s [Captain White’s] slaughter” (22). Shane Schimpf lays out his interpretation with a similar claim: “*Blood Meridian* is a meditation on a Nietzschean world where God has died. McCarthy has given us a hell on earth where there is no God; everything is in a state of chaos and steady decline both physically and morally” (3). That stated, it is possible to lay out the basics of viewing *Blood Meridian* as a literal hell journey.

According to generally accepted Christian views of the afterlife, time does not exist for the dead. Thus, if one were to go to Hell, there would be no passage of years, at least not in any normal sense that is agreed upon and able to be evaluated by the dead. And if eternity for a soul really means a state of changelessness, then Hell is an everlasting and unalterable punishment beyond the reckoning of mankind. The Gospel of Mark presents a fine description of the horrors of Hell awaiting sinners, while also attempting to dissuade those who would sin, calling Hell the place of “the unquenchable fire” (9.43), and also “where their worm does not die” (9.48). Viewing Hell as a place out of time explains how a fire can remain “unquenchable” or how the “worms” that consume the dead would never die. But if there is no time in Hell, and those inhabitants of *Blood Meridian* are all in Hell, how is it that time seems to pass for the kid, who later

becomes “the man?” The answer technically reeks of both new-age mysticism² and psychoanalytical conjecture: Hell must therefore be a product of the mind. And if the power of the mind—or the spirit—is infinite in terms of creativity, surely the power of the mind continues on individually for those in Hell. Thus the Hell I refer to is the Hell of one’s own making. In the case with *Blood Meridian*, we are witnessing the personal Hell of the kid, which explains why the kid ages, why some individuals can “die,” and why the looming presence of the unchanging judge is so palpable throughout the narrative. I posit that the control the kid exhibits in this Hell is precisely what creates the bulk of the conflict between himself and the judge. For instance, midway into the novel, the judge, during one of his many enigmatic sermons for the Glanton gang, explains that in order for himself to be absolute ruler—suzerain—then “nothing must be permitted to occur upon it save by [his] dispensation” (199). To further explain, the judge adds:

The man who believes that the secrets of the world are forever hidden lives in mystery and fear. Superstition will drag him down. The rain will erode the deeds of his life. But that man who sets himself the task of singling out the thread of order from the tapestry will by the decision alone have taken charge of the world and it is only by such taking charge that he will effect a way to dictate the terms of his own fate. (199)

Though the judge appears to be referring to himself as the one with the bravery “to dictate the terms of his own fate,” it is the kid who is the genuine audience for this revelation, almost as though he were in fact challenging the kid to challenge his rule³ of the world, or Hell, as it were.

All throughout the novel, it is the kid who counters the judge’s sovereignty—

literally at times stating “You aint nothin” (331)—and who attempts to make up his own destiny. Yet only if the kid is in his own version of a nightmare Hell can the inexplicable mystery of *Blood Meridian* be explained. To further justify this claim I call upon three telltale elements. First, there are the cyclical aspects of the narrative, whereby our protagonist is continually caught in events and scenarios that play out again and again. Take for instance the numerous times in which characters are caught in a wasteland of bones and death, only to be drawn right back toward a violent incursion—be it against the innocent or “the heathen” (299)—which will in turn end in a return to wandering. Second, there are the many doubles that exist in the novel, to the point where characters appear to be shades of others come before. Captain White appears as a precursor to Glanton; the hermit appears as a precursor to the ex-priest Tobin; the kid’s father appears as a loose precursor of the judge; and even the kid serves as precursor to the impetuous and suicidal Elrod⁴. Third, there is the judge himself, who appears untouched by time at the novel’s close, and who is described by Tobin as being as ubiquitous as the Melville’s white whale: “Every man in the company claims to have encountered that sootysouled rascal in some other place” (124). When the man sees the judge once more, McCarthy writes:

he was among every kind of man, herder and bullwhacker and drover and freighter and miner and hunter and soldier and pedlar and gambler and drifter and drunkard and thief and he was among the dregs of the earth in beggary a thousand years and he was among the scapegrace scions of eastern dynasties and in all that motley assemblage he sat by them and yet alone as if he were some other sort of man entire and he seemed little

changed or none in all these years. (325)

Can there be a more fitting description of the unchanging nature of evil, or of the omnipresence of wickedness surrounding this devil figure? If *Blood Meridian* does not take place in Hell, then the earth in which the narrative occurs is like unto none other than Hell. With that in mind, it becomes possible to apply the biblical stories of Jonah and Job to *Blood Meridian* more directly.

3.2—The kid as Prophet: “You sat in judgment on your own deeds”

Unlike Coleridge’s “Rime of the Ancient Mariner” or Melville’s *Moby-Dick*, it is much more difficult to argue that the kid’s story meshes with that of the reluctant prophet Jonah. However, certain important points do converge. The first and most obvious element from the story of Jonah is the kid’s act of running away from home—literally from his father. Granted, though the kid’s action lacks the gravitas of running away from God, the Father, the analogy proves solid. In fact, it becomes easy to read the kid’s act of fleeing home in the same fashion as that of the Mariner or Ishmael heeding the restlessness in their own hearts, which drives them off to sea, where they likewise participate in acts of violence. Furthermore, the idea of running away from God is paralleled with the kid’s rejection of the ideology of his surrogate father, Judge Holden. Frequent McCarthy critic Petra Mundik notes: “[t]here are several instances in the novel where the kid makes a point of standing up to the judge, even if only by demonstrating that he is not afraid of him” (“Luminosity” 206). Beyond mere physical resistance, however, it is the kid’s philosophic rebellion against the violence and evil preached by

the judge that creates the deep enmity between the two. Josef Benson writes, “[e]ven though the kid participates in the violence of the gang early on, he eventually repudiates the judge and gang, once again striking out on his own to forge a new identity outside the shadow of a father” (241). In the mind of Judge Holden, the “flawed place in the fabric of [the kid’s] heart” which allowed for “clemency for the heathen” (*BM* 299), is tantamount to the ultimate sin, breaking the greatest commandment: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind” (Matt. 22.37). Of course, for the judge: “War is the ultimate game because war is at last a forcing of the unity of existence. War is God” (*BM* 249). Furthermore, the judge views war as a dance, with himself as the “one beast” (331) fit for the stage. Thus, the kid is the worst of sinners.

More important for its ties to the story of Jonah, however, is the issue of the kid’s tendency toward redemption. Perhaps the greatest stretch for a reader to embark upon when tackling *Blood Meridian* is the mercilessness and inhumanity of the characters. Sure, there is much to laugh at, or even enjoy in a perverse capacity, but the Glanton gang is infested with butchers⁵. What is there to like about any one of them? An observant reader will note the narrative trick of pulling back the kid from the bulk of the action in scenes of violence, just as is the case with Ishmael disappearing at times from the whale-slaughter in *Moby-Dick*⁶. Coupled with the kid’s random acts of kindness⁷, such as helping remove the arrow from a fellow killer when everyone else would have left the man for dead, a burgeoning picture of a repentant sinner emerges, which contradicts the narrator’s initial claim of the kid’s “taste for mindless violence.” Yet nothing proves more contrary to the novel’s predilection for violence than when the kid “kne[els] on one

knee” before and confesses the deeds of his life to the “dried shell” (315) of the “eldress of the rocks” (305), which the kid had mistaken as an old woman deep in prayer and suffering—in wake of the massacre of the penitents from the previous scene. But upon offering to “convey her to a safe place,” the kid comes to realize that the reason this would-be “Abuelita”—grandmother—cannot hear him, is because “she ha[s] been dead in that place for years” (315). Of this revelatory moment, James Bowers writes that “[s]omething of the state of the kid’s own heart is intimated” (50) with the shock of discovering that the woman is but an ancient corpse. This recalls the same failings of Marlow as the unrepentant Jonah of *Heart of Darkness*, for the kid recognizes too late that there is no real truth to be gained in the dried up bones of the dead. Yet the very deed itself does point at the possibility of redemption⁸, even if the kid is oblivious of that fact.

The kid’s quest in seeking some higher truth beyond the rhetorical trickery of Judge Holden is best viewed as a striving for a return to God. But since the kid has had improper spiritual guidance, he is incapable of following through with his journey to wholeness. Though the kid carries a Bible—“no word of which he c[an] read” (*BM* 312)—and resembles a preacher, these things are not enough to provide his needed redemption. While he understands the value of the Bible, thanks in part to the ex-priest Tobin’s half-hearted mentorship, what the kid does not understand is the power of faith. For many, the concept of faith simply implies belief that a higher power has control of destiny, and in so believing, one aligns themselves to the will of God. But faith is also belief in the power of being healed, of being redeemed. That is the faith that pulled Jonah out of the belly of the whale, Job out of his torment, the Mariner out of his punishment, or Ishmael out of the wreckage of the *Pequod*. Like Marlow, who doubted his own ability

to cry out one last breath as did Kurtz in the face of death, the kid stands in silent witness before the onslaught of death that is Judge Holden. Thus, in spite of the kid's desire for salvation, he simply lacks the faith needed to combat the evil of the judge. And rather than call out in a voice of strength and confidence, the kid can only denounce the judge with words that are simply unimpressive next to anything Holden can say⁹. The truth of the matter is that mere words that do not have the backing of faith are incapable of defeating the "potency of the judge's rhetoric" (J. Bowers 41). However, if the kid believed, as prescribed in Judeo-Christian doctrine, that the power of the word of God is unstoppable, then perhaps the judge could be overcome. Alas, this is a power that the kid fails to grasp, primarily because he is illiterate, for which he has his drunken father to thank, but also because he is not a true believer.

Yet McCarthy would have readers believe that the kid is capable of transcending the life of violence to one of thoughtful penance, possibly in the name of the Lord. Easily the most telling sign of the kid's potential for redemption comes when the kid takes shelter from the cold under the warmth of a burning tree in a poise consistent with prayer:

It was a lone tree burning on the desert. A heraldic tree that the passing storm had left afire. The solitary pilgrim drawn up before it had traveled far to be here and he knelt in the hot sand and held his numbed hands out while all about in that circle attended companies of lesser auxiliaries routed forth into the inordinate day.... A constellation of ignited eyes that edged the ring of light all bound in a precarious truce before this torch whose brightness had set black the stars in their sockets. (*BM* 215)

Writing of the "spiritual significance of the scene," Mundik astutely notes the importance

of “the kid’s posture. Ostensibly warming his hands by the fire, he adopts the gesture of religious supplication” (“Luminosity” 201). Mundik further analyzes the “ceremonial quality” (201) of the presence of the many creatures that share in the warmth of the “heraldic tree.” McCarthy subsequently describes the occurrence as a “vigil” (*BM* 215). Such obvious religious implication suggests that in the presence of this blatant variation of the miraculous burning bush—thus making this the most potent presence of God in the book—both man and beast can and do exist in harmony with one another. Recall Isaiah 11.6: “The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the young goat, and the calf and the lion and the fatted calf together; and a little child shall lead them.” Thus, when read with its full biblical significance, the kid—arguably still a child—leads the beasts of the desert waste into harmony before the light of God. Admittedly, every creature shuffles or slithers off prior to the kid’s awakening, but one cannot help but consider it a holy moment, even if it is quickly negated with more hellish imagery of “strange coral shapes of fulgurite in their scorched furrows fused out of the sand where ball lightning had run upon the ground in the night hissing and stinking of sulphur” (*BM* 215). Likewise, it should not be viewed as accidental that McCarthy then has the kid leave, “following the small demonic tracks of javelinas” (215), in search of water, and then shortly thereafter resume his previous sinful behavior as a member of the Glanton gang, showing him to be thus far unredeemed.

Before moving on, I do want to dwell upon McCarthy’s vigil scene a bit longer, for it deserves closer examination in light of its other intertextual implications. Surely this evident communion between nature and man has its roots in *Moby-Dick*, best displayed when Ishmael spots the nursing pod of whales, who “serenely revelled in dalliance and

delight” in a fashion which causes Ishmael to espouse a deep reverence for the same creatures he has embarked to destroy: “But even so, amid the tornadoed Atlantic of my being, do I myself still for ever centrally disport in mute calm; and while ponderous planets of unwaning woe revolve round me, deep down and deep inland there I still bathe me in eternal mildness of joy” (*MD* 303). Though McCarthy was perhaps unaware of the influence of “Rime of the Ancient Mariner” upon *Moby-Dick*, this reverence for life also recalls the Mariner’s blessing of the “happy living things” (282) of the deep, which thereby releases him of the burden of the albatross corpse. While no such reverence for the animal kingdom emerges in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, Marlow does develop an admiration of the cannibals on the river boat with him, whose unfailing “restraint” in the face of “the devilry of lingering starvation” (43) serves in stark contrast to the lack of restraint for the European pilgrims, who, without any consideration of the consequences, continuously resort to acts of mindless violence and cruelty for the sake of amusement, for wealth, or for imperialism. Each of these tales continues from that moment forward with the protagonist having learnt something vital about themselves and the world, and the same can be said of the kid in *Blood Meridian*.

Although it takes the kid witnessing the continued massacre of lives, both savage and innocent, to openly break away from the judge and the Glanton gang, the kid does eventually position himself as desiring to be on the side of light. But that is precisely the point: the kid only desires to be good, he never succeeds¹⁰. He may abstain from killing for many years, until the unfortunate interaction with Elrod, but that does not make the kid a good person. Take his abandonment of the eastward moving pilgrims, for instance. Though “one of five at hire,” there is no telling what horrors might befall such a group of

“dusty and travelworn” (*BM* 313) souls in the kid’s absence. Perhaps the answer comes in the form of the very next group of travelers the kid comes across, the “troubled sect” of religious pilgrims that appears in the mountains “like heralds of some unspeakable calamity leaving only blood footprints on the stone” (314). When the kid finally stumbles across this “company of penitents” again, they have all been savagely “hacked and butchered” (315), likely by those of a similar character to the long-dead Glanton gang¹¹. Yet rather than dwell upon the slaughter, or contemplate the fate of those he has abandoned, the kid sees the old woman and goes about his meaningless confession and vow to protect her. Because these penitents have been torn apart, and because the pseudo-Virgin Mary that the kid finds is actually a corpse, one cannot deny that this suggests that the very idea of repentance in *Blood Meridian* is itself being killed¹². How can the kid hope for salvation when all those he sees as Christian are either mercilessly murdered or long dead? What the kid does not understand is that it isn’t enough to want to pray, to want to read the Bible, to want to help people, or to want to save rather than to destroy, one has to act and do. The kid, however, does nothing, or, rather, as Steven Shaviro writes, “[h]e drifts from place to place, never taking the initiative, sidestepping mortal engagements and warily refusing the judge’s continual seductions” (151). Barclay Owens sums up the kid’s flaws quite succinctly, “the kid cannot articulate, cannot defend, civilized moral sensibilities; he does not develop into a man capable of understanding the judge” (62).

And even though the kid attempts to own his guilt with a “scapular of human ears, which he wears until his death as penance or as trophy, or both” (Luce 40), such a grotesque variation of the Mariner’s albatross is surely not part of the expected garb of a

follower of the way of Christ. Rather, the necklace of ears is proof that the kid—even as the man—can neither escape nor overcome his own evil past. Curiously, it is that same necklace that provokes the violence that ensues between Elrod and the man¹³. When challenged on the veracity of this trophy of his inglorious days, the man chooses to threaten, rather than to turn the other cheek. Dianne Luce perceptively argues that killing Elrod, his likeness, “shatters the man’s pretense of reforming his life. In destroying this image of violent history, the man paradoxically resumes the path the judge would have him follow” (42). Thus proving that the whole time the kid has been living a lie, that of the false penitent. This is why the kid proves to be a failure, and ultimately why he deserves whatever punishment the judge bestows upon him in the jakes.

3.3—Judge Holden as Satan: “Give the devil his due”

The character of Judge Holden has been interpreted in any number of ways, from his role as a Gnostic archon¹⁴ to that of a classic trickster¹⁵. Yet the most obvious, and one of the easiest readings to argue for, is to view Judge Holden as a variation of Satan. While most critics tend toward a unanimous view of Holden as the devil figure of the novel, some, such as Harold Bloom, persist in arguing that such a reading is “too simple, too reductive” (Josyph 16). True, it is simplistic to say that Holden is Satan, but in what way is it simple to characterize Satan? Even Bloom, in his introduction to the anniversary edition of *Blood Meridian*, describes Judge Holden as “the most frightening figure in all of American literature” (viii). Yet would Holden be nearly as frightening if he were not modeled after the devil? And can there be another figure in all of literature more

terrifying than Satan? This isn't to suggest that unconventional interpretations are not without merit. For instance, Steven Frye's interpretation of Holden as a representation of the Nietzschean Übermensch¹⁶ in *Understanding Cormac McCarthy* is quite profound and fascinating, and likewise coalesces with the Nietzsche inspired intertextual relationship of *Blood Meridian* and *Heart of Darkness*, and that book's version of the overman, Kurtz. But in plain terms, couldn't McCarthy have intended for the judge to be both the devil and the Übermensch? As Iain Bernhoft wisely asserts: "He is Ahab and Whale, Iago and Macbeth; a Gnostic archon and Shiva the destroyer; the personification of Enlightenment rationalism, Nietzschean nihilism, or Manifest Destiny; the devil himself or culture itself" (65). Certainly one role does not negate another, nor does it reduce the potentiality for complex analysis.

Thus, to dismiss Holden as Satan would be foolish¹⁷, especially since the novel is absolutely overflowing with devil allusions. Holden's very first appearance in Nacogdoches in the first chapter elicits the following response from the wrongfully accused Reverend Green: "This is him. The devil. Here he stands" (*BM* 7). James Bowers aptly writes: "McCarthy would seem to agree with Flannery O'Connor, another literary forebear who makes use of criminals, that it is the devil who teaches most of the lessons that lead to self-knowledge" (15). The issue is moot, and rather than belabor the point, I will proceed under the assumption that Holden's satanic traits are self-evident. While many interpretations of Holden stress the influence of Shakespeare, Milton, or Melville, I wish to shift the discussion back to Holden's similarities to Satan as he is depicted in the Bible—specifically in the two primary instances in which the devil is most directly

presented, in the Book of Job and in the Gospels.

When Satan appears in the Book of Job, he has, as he claims, been wandering over the face of the earth. He then, when asked to “consider” the faithfulness of Job, launches—appropriately considering his role as Satan, or “adversary”—into his accusations: “Does Job fear God for no reason? Have you not put a hedge around him and his house and all that he has, on every side? You have blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land. But stretch out your hand and touch all that he has, and he will curse you to your face” (1.9-11). Judge Holden functions in a very similar fashion to the biblical Satan, primarily because he seems to enjoy testing people. Whether he is inciting a crowd of churchgoers to attack their preacher¹⁸, or subtly prompting the Glanton gang to further acts of violence toward “the heathen,” Holden is perpetually set upon engaging in battles of wills and wits. Unlike the battle between Satan and Job, the kid never defeats Holden, though he does come closer than any other figure in the book¹⁹. As discussed above, it is not a question of why the kid fails, it is a question of why the kid is the one chosen to challenge the judge in the first place. With the story of Job, one cannot deny that God sets up Satan to fail, even at the cost of creating serious, albeit temporary, discomfort and loss for his faithful servant. Yet, with *Blood Meridian*, the curiously absent God cannot have designed the horrors that the kid endures as a test of the kid’s faithfulness, as though he were a prophet of the Lord. But that seems to be precisely how the judge views the kid in his resistance. Does the judge know something the reader does not? Perhaps the answer lies not in the Book of Job, but in the New Testament Gospels concerning Christ.

During Christ’s forty day fast in the desert, Satan comes upon Jesus and attempts

a three-part test to bring about the fall of the Christian savior:

“If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.”

...

“If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down [from the top of the temple in Jerusalem], for it is written,

‘He will command his angels concerning you,’

and

‘On their hands they will bear you up,

lest you strike your foot against a stone.’”

...

“All these [kingdoms of the world] I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me” (Matt. 4.3,6,9).

Of course, Jesus responds to each with an appropriate refusal founded in scripture. Yet also found in those same refutations are the seeds of wisdom towards proper Christian behavior, which the kid could stand to learn. Of the first part, Jesus exclaims that man is to feed on the word of God. Obviously, the word of God is best exemplified by biblical scripture²⁰, and thus Jesus imparts that man should thus feed on the wisdom of the God passed on in scripture. In the second part, Jesus pointedly exclaims not to test the Lord. This is one of the most puzzling aspects, for the followers of God in scripture—such as Jonah, Moses, David—often stray, and thus break this commandment by putting the Lord to the test. For the final part, Jesus flatly admonishes Satan, stating that: ““You shall worship the Lord your God / and him only shall you serve”” (Matt. 4.10). This returns to

the first of the Ten Commandments, which states roughly the same thing. All of the refutations of Jesus are founded in scripture, and indicate genuine piety before the Lord. However, if Judge Holden is the same kind of tempter as that of the Gospels, then does he too tempt the Glanton gang, or the kid, in like fashion?

Concerning the word of God, the judge has the following telling exchange with Glanton:

Books lie, he said. [Holden]

God dont lie. [Glanton]

No, said the judge. He does not. And these are his words.

He [the judge] held up a chunk of rock.

He speaks in stones and trees, the bones of things. (*BM* 116)

One cannot help but read the similarity of Holden's response to that of the temptation of Christ, but here combined so as to suggest that the stone is the word, rather than urging for the substituting of the stone for bread. Holden is a "formidable riddler" (141) after all, since he is more than capable of twisting scripture to his own ends. But what is most crucial about this first aspect of the temptation recalls the lesson Jesus teaches. Rooting the self in the word is the only way to stay nourished in the spirit, and though the kid appears to be on the path toward redemption, because he cannot read, he is incapable of feeding his soul with the word of God²¹. No other member of the Glanton gang, not even Tobin, has the potential that the kid has, but how far can that go without the wisdom of the Lord?

As per the second part of Satan's tempting, putting the Lord to the test is not only about eliciting a challenge to God, but also about betraying the Commandments. Thus, in

terms of not testing God, the kid fails at every turn, for he breaks every single Commandment in *Blood Meridian*. The kid is godless (Commandment 1), he prays before a false idol²² (Commandment 2), he blasphemes (Commandment 3), he does not celebrate the Sabbath (Commandment 4), he is a runaway (Commandment 5), he is a murderer (Commandment 6), he is an adulterer²³ (Commandment 7), he is a thief²⁴ (Commandments 8 & 10). In fact, the most difficult sin to trace for the kid is that being a false witness (Commandment 9). Though the kid is admittedly an oath-breaker, there are yet two standout moments where the word “witness” occurs in the text that elaborate on this matter and thus seal the kid’s fate. After the judge has concluded the parable of the murderous harnessmaker, he adds a “rider” for the tale, discussing the lost son of the murdered Christlike traveller. Holden philosophically reveals that it is: “the death of the father to which the son is entitled and to which he is heir, more so than his goods. He will not hear of the small mean ways that tempered the man in life. He will not see him struggling in follies of his own devising. No. The world that he inherits bears him false witness. He is broken before a frozen god and he will never find his way” (145). Such a revelation suggests that despite the heirdom to which the son is “entitled,” there is no inheritance to be gained. This could be more of the judge’s rhetorical trickery, or he might just be emphasizing that the kid is himself the son that “is broken before a frozen god” who “will never find his way.” If that is the case, it is rather the world that lies to the kid, not the other way around. However, the second, and equally profound, point where the word “witness” occurs sheds further light on the kid’s sins. Though dressed in appearance like a “sort of preacher” (*BM* 312) and toting a Bible, McCarthy writes that the kid: “was no witness to them, neither of things at hand nor things to come, he least of

any man” (312). Thus the kid appears to be in disguise, seeking to trick those he interacts with, and himself, so as to separate himself from his fellow sinners. Judge Holden even calls out the trickery of the kid in the final chapter: “[w]as it always your idea . . . that if you did not speak you would not be recognized?” (328). Of course, the kid denies his actions as being a matter of deception. But to present himself as pious or saved only proves the kid has in fact broken every Commandment.

And as per the final part of Satan’s test of Christ in the desert, man is to have no other gods. But since the kid has no god at all, and claims to have “heard no voice” (124) of the Lord speaking to him, he then has nothing to cling to so as to strengthen his resolve when face to face with his accuser. Indeed, if the kid has any god at all, it is the same god that the judge claims to represent, War. However, the kid turns his back on the judge, as Holden eloquently explains:

You put your own allowances before the judgements of history and you broke with the body of which you were pledged a part and poisoned it in all its enterprise. Hear me, man. I spoke in the desert for you and you only and you turned a deaf ear to me. If war is not holy man is nothing but anticlay. Even the cretin acted in good faith according to his parts. For was any man’s share compared to another’s. Only each was called upon to empty out his heart into the common and one did not. (307)

The above quotation likewise recalls Satan speaking to Jesus in the wilderness, tempting him to sin. And that is precisely what Judge Holden does all throughout the novel, tempts men to sin. But the apparent failure to fully convert the kid to his vicious religion is what aggravates the judge most of all. This same scene—spoken while the kid sits in a

California prison—also reveals the judge’s main point: “[o]ur animosities were formed and waiting before ever we two met. Yet even so you could have changed it all” (307). Holden suggests that had the kid accepted the judge as father²⁵ and preacher, then all would have gone differently²⁶. But can the judge be trusted when he makes such statements? Recall the words of Jesus in John 8.44: ““You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father’s desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies.”” The kid knows that the judge is and always has been a liar, yet Holden is correct when he states: “even if you should have stood your ground, . . . yet what ground was it?” (*BM* 307). Everything cycles back to faith, which the kid lacks.

Another possible reason for the natural “animosity” between the judge and the kid stems from a reading of the kid as the novel’s Christ figure. Steven Frye notes the implied elements of the Christ analogy, such as how the kid’s murder in the wake of his rebellion “becomes a measured victory that echoes Christ’s death on the cross, at least insofar as he is destroyed but never internally defeated, and he stands as an example of moral rectitude and heroism in the face of omnipresent evil” (90). John Vanderheide sees similar Christ imagery in the death scene, and goes further with an interesting interpretation of the aftermath of the kid’s murder: “The two men may replace the Marys, the outhouse the tomb, and the tightlipped man the revelatory angel, but the structural resemblance between the scenes is too striking to ignore” (180). And if such a shocking claim were not bold enough, Vanderheide further argues that: “one can read the judge and the man as representative of the two aspects, divine and mortal, of a single, Christ-

like entity. As the mortal aspect of the equation, the man is thus literally *eliminated* in the apotheosis, and what is left, of course, is the judge, the vacant closet, and the odor heretofore mentioned” (181, emphasis not mine). Admittedly, I find Vanderheide’s claim of the judge/kid dual nature to be a misreading, and cannot fathom such a combination being considered “Christ-like,” but I see where he is attempting to lead discussion in terms of the mystery surrounding the kid’s fate. Perhaps instead of the jakes standing in for the tomb, it stands in for Golgotha, where Christ was crucified. If this is the case, then perhaps what the witnesses see, which the reader does not, is a variation of the crucifixion, with the kid strung up—likely upside-down, as in the hanged man card in tarot decks. Just as the Apostle Peter asked to be crucified upside-down, not feeling worthy of the same death as Christ, the judge would seek to mock both the kid and Christ with a similar alteration to the usual position. Such a sight would certainly invoke the “Good God almighty” (*BM* 334) exclaimed by one of the witnesses. But thanks to McCarthy’s narrative reticence in the matter, this will have to remain a mystery.

Yet the death of the kid is not the only Christ reference. While discussing astrological influence on characterization, John Sepich notes that the “generous and kind elements” in the kid’s nature are owed to Leo, the “sun sign” (126). Though Sepich does not press the Christ analogy, it is but a single step away. While sun worship has long been associated with pagans, especially for the followers of Apollo, Christ is also worshipped on Sunday. Admittedly, some records²⁷ indicate that Constantine the Great’s conversion to Christianity and alteration of the Sabbath from Saturday to Sunday was merely a ploy to celebrate the sun god—Sol Invictus—suggesting that Constantine was not really a follower of Christ. Other historians²⁸ view the shift of date as a matter of

convenience to add in the propagation of Christianity. Yet even if Constantine was a secret worshiper of Apollo, it does not negate the logical Christian affiliation with Sunday. According to New Testament scripture, Jesus was crucified and entombed on a Friday, remained in the tomb on Saturday, and arose on Sunday. Continuing the analogy then between sun and Christ, it is just as easy to argue that all forms of light or fire likewise denote the power of God. Thus, when returning to scenes such as that of the burning tree, the book is in fact brimming with scenes that conform to the Christ comparison. Even the judge's mockery of the kid, calling him "[y]oung Blasarias" (94), implying the kid's arsonist past²⁹, still matches the fire or light motif.

Admittedly, if the kid is meant as the novel's Christ figure, then he is a poor one. It likewise implies that there is no hope for salvation or grace in the world in which these characters inhabit. Taken even further, it implies that there is no hope for salvation in the world that the reader inhabits, and that is a frightening thought. Steven Shaviro perceptively sums the bleakness of the novel: "*Blood Meridian* is not a salvation narrative; we can be rescued neither by faith nor by works nor by grace" (148). But perhaps the novel should not be viewed as entirely without hope. In the Gospels, Jesus alludes to the prophet Jonah when chastising those who sought to witness him performing miracles as though they were parlor tricks: "An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah" (Matt. 16.4). The generally recognized interpretation of this is that of the three days it takes for the resurrection of Christ paralleling the three days Jonah spends in the belly of the fish.

Whether McCarthy intended the kid to be the Christ figure of the novel, or a Jonah figure, does not lessen the impact of Holden as a Satan figure. Yet, perhaps Satan

is too strong a word for some. Even if Holden is called a supreme agent of evil, or viewed as a personification of death, then the impact is roughly analogous. Likewise, when compared to the types of personified evil witnessed in Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," Melville's *Moby-Dick*, or Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, the judge is right at home. The monstrous white Life-in-Death of "Rime" casting dice for the souls of the Mariner's ship certainly recalls the perverse pallor of the judge himself. The physicality of white-whale notwithstanding³⁰, Holden better embodies the brilliance and monomania of Ahab. And who can read about the judge's extreme baldness and not recall the baldness of Kurtz, touched by the wilderness. Each figure from these respective works reads like a variation of death, for that is what they worship and inspire in others. Judge Holden just so happens to be the most blatant of death figures compared to Satan, and rightfully so, for *Blood Meridian*'s hopeless underworld deserves a suzerain like none other. Yet if the book must have the devil, must it not also have God? And if it must have God, then it must too have a prophet, which brings us back to Jonah.

3.4—Fort Griffin, the Unrepentant Nineveh

When Jonah finally sets out to do the will of God, he visits the sinful city of Nineveh and preaches of the wrath of God. And just as Jonah "feared," the city repents. Of all the novels heretofore mentioned as being Jonah inspired, *Blood Meridian* is the only one to have a literary equivalent to Nineveh³¹. However, McCarthy's version of Jonah does not visit the city of sin for the purpose of saving it. Rather, the kid—now the man— goes there to be among sinners, where he feels he belongs. In Fort Griffin the

man comes upon the judge, upon death, one final time. This is the seemingly destined moment between these two oppositional figures, but unlike Jonah who was fast in the word and in faith, the man is grossly unprepared for the encounter. Dianne Luce writes that “[d]espite his terror and passivity, . . . the man delivers himself to the judge in the jakes in response to the most elemental of human urges” (41). This implies that the man longs to face death. Jonah too longed for death, but in his time in the belly of the fish he quickly realized better of that and repented³². The man, however, has no such change of heart, though he lacks the courage to confess his true purpose for being there.

When the judge questions why the man has come to Fort Griffin, the exchange that occurs between them is quite revealing of the man’s ignorance:

Everybody dont have to have a reason to be someplace. [the man]

That’s so, said the judge. They do not have to have a reason. But order is not set aside because of their indifference.

He regarded the judge warily.

Let me put it this way, said the judge. If it is so that they themselves have no reason and yet are indeed here must they not be here by reason of some other? And if this is so can you guess who that other might be?

No. Can you?

I know him well. (328)

The answer is obvious. These sinners, the man as well among them, are there because of the judge. They are there to die. And for this same reason, the man meets the judge in the jakes and puts up no resistance.

3.5—Epilogue Reevaluated: Sign of the Times, Prometheus, or Christ?

In the dawn there is a man progressing over the plain by means of holes which he is making in the ground. He uses an implement with two handles and he chucks it into the hole and he enkindles the stone in the hole with his steel hole by hole striking the fire out of the rock which God has put there. On the plain behind him are the wanderers in search of bones and those who do not search and they move haltingly in the light like mechanisms whose movements are monitored with escapement and pallet so that they appear restrained by a prudence or reflectiveness which has no inner reality and they cross in their progress one by one that track of holes that runs to the rim of the visible ground and which seems less the pursuit of some continuance than the verification of a principle, a validation of sequence and causality as if each round and perfect hole owed its existence to the one before it there on that prairie upon which are the bones and the gatherers of bones and those who do not gather. He strikes fire in the hole and draws out his steel. Then they all move on again. (BM 337, italics not mine)

Blood Meridian's enigmatic epilogue has puzzled readers since the novel's publication. Many critics have weighed in, interpreting the passage as everything from the beginnings of the fencing off of the land in the west³³, to a new Promethean figure who might stand a chance of succeeding against the judge where the kid failed³⁴. My reading treats the passage the same way the rest of the novel should be viewed,

allegorically³⁵. This traveling man “*striking the fire out of the rock which God has put there*” reads more like a metaphor for the faithful. If anything, here is the true Jonah of the novel, lighting the way, while everyone else in the scene “*wanders in search of bones*” or in search of nothing at all. This lone figure “*progress[es] over the plain*” with certainty and conviction, while all others are lost. The Christian implication is quite apparent. Only the man who “*strikes fire in the hole*” is capable of following a straight, or narrow path. The others may “*cross in their progress one by one that track of holes,*” but they are not in fact following the way. They remain of the dead, little more than “*mechanisms*” of instinct. All those that came before in the novel, with the exception of the judge, are of the same ilk as these dead wanderers. Still, it is impossible to state with any degree of certainty what McCarthy intended with this puzzling epilogue. What is clear, however, is that McCarthy provides readers with a metaphor-laden image of stark contrast, whereby the lost “wanderers” haphazardly follow the trail of a resolute, “progressing”—therefore enlightened—man. Curiously, *The Road* appears to be built on the very same metaphor³⁶.

Chapter 4

“Nights dark beyond darkness:” *The Road* to Hell is Paved with Charred Bodies

4.0—Through the Wasteland: “Everything paling away into the murk”

Shortly after the 2009 release of the film adaptation of *The Road*, McCarthy gave an interview in which he stated: “Things I’ve written about are no longer of any interest to me, but they were certainly of interest before I wrote about them. So there’s something about writing about it that flattens them. You’ve used them up” (Jurgensen). While *The Road* is certainly unlike anything McCarthy had written before, he does appear to return to the same hell journey that he had begun with *Blood Meridian*, suggesting his interest in the allegorical here-after was not quite satiated. Not only does the landscape of *The Road* at times resemble the desert wastes¹ that the Glanton gang treks through, but the entire world is equally lost in a timeless void², where the wholeness of things has been fractured, and there is nothing that has not been “uncoupled from its shoring” (*TR* 10). In *The Road*³, father and son struggle desperately against the ubiquitous darkness⁴, seeking out a place of warmth to provide a positive antithesis to “[t]he cold and the silence” (9) of the lifeless world they inhabit. Indeed, “[t]he man and boy exist in a space between life and death whose empty temporality operates as the horrifying excess of structured historical time” (Hellyer 54). All that this pair finds is struggle and hardship, savagery and brutality, cannibalism and murder. Yet still they cling to one another like the final torchbearers in existence, which is precisely what McCarthy intends readers to believe, for the world has moved on and these two are all that is left of the “good” of what was.

To read *The Road* as anything other than allegory diminishes the beauty of the story, for if it were a straight post-apocalyptic narrative, there would truly be no sense of hope either for the protagonists, or for the world that the reader inhabits. Of the multifaceted use of allegory in *The Road*, Grace Hellyer writes:

In a world where the possibility of meaningful human existence has been radically diminished, indeed, all but extinguished, the work of this allegorizing consciousness is positioned as nothing less than a means of survival. The fragile constructions of allegory maintain both a distance and a means of engagement between the man and the boy, as well as a means of keeping faith with a world that no longer seems to offer any possibilities for the continuation of meaningful human life. (46)

Yet, when also read as a continuation of the literary hell journey, the novel becomes a part of a greater tradition, and thus the story becomes a quest⁵ or pilgrimage of salvation. Many have noted the similarities between *The Road* and other hell narratives, such as Homer's *Odyssey*, Virgil's *Aeneid*, Dante's *Inferno*⁶, which is fitting since McCarthy's novel is likewise a road narrative. Just as with *Blood Meridian*, this expedition is a one-way trip to the pit, with no merciful salvation for the denizens of hell.

Recalling the biblical scourging spoken of in eschatological scripture, the world of the novel serves as a physical embodiment of the fiery punishment promised for the unfaithful and the damned: "On the far side of the river valley the road passed through a stark black burn. Charred and limbless trunks of trees stretching away on every side. Ash moving over the road and the sagging hands of blind wire strung from the blackened light poles whining thinly in the wind" (*TR* 7). And the unexplained devastation lingers for the

inhabitants of the world, for “[t]here were fires still burning high in the mountains and at night they could see the light from them deep orange in the sootfall” (26). In *The Road*, anything that is not burnt up by fire, or destined for it, is choked to death by the lack of sunlight and warmth. Indeed, the word “dead” is used so frequently in the first few pages of the book when referring to the environment—“dead trees” (4); “dead reeds” (5); “dead perch” (11); “old crops dead and flattened” (18); “everything dead to the root”(18); “the mummied dead everywhere” (20)—that one cannot help but read the world as dead, or as Michael Chabon writes: “utterly defoliated and sterilized—the greatest corpse of all.”

Despite the physical damage fire inflicts upon the world, the promise of fiery wrath is not solely for the earthly. Recall the final book of the Bible, which states that the wicked are to suffer in the fires of hell for all eternity as punishment: ““But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the detestable, as for murderers, the sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars, their portion will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death”” (Rev. 21.8). In terms of McCarthy’s novel, is there a description more fitting of the world in *The Road* than to be viewed as Hell?

However, if *The Road* is about Hell, how is it that the two protagonists have arrived in such a place? While the man can surely be argued a sinner, how can one claim likewise for the boy? To do so seems incongruous. Yet, therein lies the genuine mystery of the work, which I shall elaborate on later in the chapter. Suffice it to say for now, the punishment endured by the father and son in the novel is less severe than that of the kid in *Blood Meridian*, for though the kid and the father both die in their respective endings, the son lives on.

4.1—Denizens of Hell: “We’re not survivors”

Though *The Road* never discusses a rapture-like event, one cannot help but wonder about those who are left behind. With the exception of the family that takes in the boy at the end, every human that is encountered in the book is in some way disreputable, despicable, or downright evil⁷. And in the most basic of explanations, it all comes down to hunger. Without sunlight, there is no agriculture, without agriculture, there is no food supply. There are few descriptions of famine more memorable than the following from *Heart of Darkness*: “No fear can stand up to hunger, no patience can wear it out, disgust simply does not exist where hunger is, and as to superstition, beliefs, and what you may call principles, they are less than chaff in the breeze. Don’t you know the devilry of lingering starvation, its exasperating torment, its black thoughts, its sombre and brooding ferocity?” (*HOD* 43). The survivors in *The Road* are people who resort to cannibalizing their own children—such as the unfinished meal of a “charred human infant headless and gutted and blackening on a spit” (*TR* 167) which a small group hastily leaves upon the approach of the man and his son—or others survivors—such as the human livestock, among them “a man with his legs gone to the hips and the stumps of them blackened and burnt” (93), which some road scavengers keep hoarded in an underground cellar. Not surprisingly, the father is perpetually concerned about the presence of strangers, though in fact they come across very few survivors on their journey.

Perhaps what creates the sheer scarcity of people, assuming that many are not simply in hiding from the cannibals, is the quality of their character. Those that do not succumb to death by starvation or fire, end up as prisoners and potential food for the

roving “marauders” and “bloodcults” (14). And anyone that is not devoured, is left as a gruesome warning to others to beware: “the dead impaled on spikes along the road. What had they done?” (28). Aside from the obvious degeneration of civilization, it is clear that the left overs of this world are more monstrous than they are human. Indeed, this bestial shift recalls the “unearthly” (*HOD* 37) darkness of the jungle alluded to by Marlow, as he journeys toward the inner station. Despite the father’s belief that, “the bloodcults must have consumed one another” (*TR* 14) by that point, one night the man wakes up believing, “that he’d heard bulldrums beating somewhere in the low dark hills. Then the wind shifted and there was just the silence” (15), not unlike the prehistoric “roll of drums behind the curtain of trees” (*HOD* 37). Such primal savagery certainly accounts for how it is that the man and the boy go so long without crossing other survivors⁸, but when father and son do encounter strangers on the road, they are often little or no threat, as is the case with the first person they meet in the novel, the lightning struck man: “[h]e was as burntlooking as the country, his clothing scorched and black. One of his eyes was burnt shut and his hair was but a nitty wig of ash upon his blackened skull” (*TR* 42)

Yet none of the fellow travelers that the father and son encounter is quite so memorable as Ely, the only named figure in the book⁹. Of Ely, Erik Wielenberg explains: “[t]his old man has survived not through divine assistance but rather through random chance; he and all the other survivors of the catastrophe are prophets of atheism, bearing witness to the absence of God from the universe” (2). Although his name is an obvious play on the biblical prophet Elijah, Allen Josephs writes:

Some of the criticism takes Ely to allude to Elijah, a connection I fail to see except on the most superficial level. The wise old biblical prophet,

other than caricature or intentional reversal, he is not; even less is he Melville's Elijah from Chapter 19 of *Moby-Dick*—and I don't understand any link beyond some weird possible version of Elijah's sharing of the Passover meal, a flimsy tie, for what it is worth. (135)

However, McCarthy is not twisting scripture, or merely giving a loose antithesis of the faithful Elijah. I posit instead that McCarthy is presenting a rendition of the false prophet Elymas spoken of in the New Testament Book of Acts. Understandably, Elymas is less famous than Elijah, but that does not negate the importance of the intertextuality associated with him, to which McCarthy is obviously alluding. In Acts, the Apostle Paul curses a false prophet named Bar-Jesus, also known as Elymas, for attempting to sway people from the Christian faith:

... Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked intently at him and said, "You son of the devil, you enemy of all righteousness, full of all deceit and villainy, will you not stop making crooked the straight paths of the Lord? And now behold, the hand of the Lord is upon you, and you will be blind and unable to see the sun for a time. Immediately mist and darkness fell upon him, and he went about seeking people to lead him by the hand. (13.9-11)

Admittedly, it is a brief mention, easily overlooked by casual readers, but McCarthy is clearly no casual reader, for he has his own Ely suffering from a type of partial blindness, only able to see shapes. Furthermore, when compared to the Elijah of *Moby-Dick*, McCarthy's Ely is in fact an adequate continuation of Melville's character, for even Ishmael calls the man "a humbug" (88), which can be interpreted as a form of false

prophet, for the man only speaks in riddles, encouraging Ishmael to dismiss his proclamations as farcical, though in fact they were genuine. As Donovan Gwinner writes: “If he is a prophet, a post-apocalyptic Elijah, he is an anti-prophet, not unlike the man’s wife, one who bears witness to the abyss, to nothingness” (149).

Along these same lines, it is clear that Ely is meant to serve as a classical example of an antichrist. And what other interpretation is there for a man who can paradoxically claim: “There is no God and we are his prophets” (*TR* 143). Though he may appear harmless to unattuned readers, the evasive and shifty Ely provides no truths, only temptations to bring the man and the boy to a breaking point, to instill the desire toward death: “We’ll all be better off. We’ll all breathe easier. . . . When we’re all gone at last then there’ll be nobody here but death and his days will be numbered too. He’ll be out in the road there with nothing to do and nobody to do it to. He’ll say: Where did everybody go? And that’s how it will be. What’s wrong with that?” (145-46). Ely even suggests that everyone is dead already: “I think in times like these the less said the better. If something had happened and we were survivors and we met on the road then we’d have something to talk about. But we’re not. So we dont” (145). If either of Ely’s claims prove true, the world is indeed a sorry place, with only a oblivion to hope for, despite the existence of the good-hearted child.

4.2— Father as Runaway Prophet: “How many days to death?”

The hell that the father endures is made all the more horrifying because of his role as sole custodian to an underage child. Rightly so, the father’s inability to kill his own

son out of mercy rather than leave him to the cruelty of the unjust world recalls the plight of Abraham in the Book of Genesis: “the father is placed before the paradox of having to kill his own son, for there is no possibility of offering himself as propitiatory victim. And he is haunted by the terrible question of whether he will truly be able to sacrifice the boy if and when the time comes, or whether he should do it right away, without running the risk of having no time to act” (Broncano 130). If the entire novel is meant to be a test from God of whether or not, like Abraham, he will offer up his only son, the father fails miserably. But considering that Christianity recasts the Abraham and Isaac story with God offering up Jesus as sacrificial lamb for the sins of the world¹⁰, should such a reading even be attempted? “I cant hold my son dead in my arms,” the father exclaims prior to his death, “I thought I could but I cant” (*TR* 235). Perhaps the reason why it is difficult to treat the father as a failed Abraham is because he makes for a better failed prophet in the vein of Jonah and Job.

Admittedly, on the surface, the father does not appear to be running from God at the start of the narrative, unlike the kid in *Blood Meridian*, but it does become apparent early on that the father wavers in his faith. Nothing is more evident of this than when McCarthy reveals that the man is sick and dying from some lung illness. The man coughs and curses out a whispering, pleading prayer: “Are you there? ... Will I see you at the last? Have you a neck by which to throttle you? Have you a heart? Damn you eternally have you a soul? Oh God, ... Oh God” (10). And just a few pages earlier, McCarthy creates a fantastic metaphor linking fathers to God, when the man picks up a telephone in a dilapidated gas station and attempts to call “the number of his father’s house in that long ago” (6). And when the father finally reaches his family residence, the house is in

decay like the rest of the world, stripped of everything burnable, and his own son is frightened. “We shouldn’t have come” (22), the man admits. Read metaphorically, as any allegory should be, the implication is that the father is a believer in God, but not a lover of God. And that separation between himself and God continues through much of the novel, suggesting he is more like *Blood Meridian*’s the kid than it would seem.

With Jonah, running away was a matter of not wanting to see Nineveh redeemed. But in *The Road*, the father hasn’t been tasked with preaching repentance. How then can the father be Jonah? The answer is simple, he was supposed to preach, or rather share the word of God¹¹. In fact, the father’s voice is often downright preachy, indicating that he may have even been a pastor before the end of the world. Take for instance the father’s strangely elucidating musing: “On this road there are no godspoke men. They are gone and I am left and they have taken with them the world. Query: How does the never to be differ from what never was?” (27). This quote can be read one of two ways. Either the father is the last of the “godspoke men,” or he is living in a world post-rapture, where the faithful have departed. However, if the latter is true, why would the father’s query allude to scripture, albeit distortedly: “‘I am the Alpha and the Omega,’ says the Lord God, ‘who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty’” (Rev. 1.8)? I posit that the father is the last of the “godspoke men,” or at least was meant to be, but has since fallen from grace.

The father himself states that he was tasked by God to protect the boy: “My job is to take care of you. I was appointed to do that by God. I will kill anyone who touches you” (*TR* 65). Likewise, the father treats his role as father as a sacred quest, despite whatever horrors they encounter: “This is my child, ... I wash a dead man’s brains out of

his hair. That is my job” (63). However, the stress of caring for a child in the wake of his own impending demise weighs heavily on the man’s conscience, often leaving him with bleak pronouncements—“Do you think your fathers are watching? That they weigh you in their ledger books? Against what? There is no book and your fathers are dead in the ground” (165)—and even grimmer thoughts—“There were few nights lying in the dark that he did not envy the dead” (194). And when his hopes are all but crushed, the father pledges steadfast loyalty to his son: “I will do what I promised, . . . No matter what. I will not send you into the darkness alone” (209). Thus, though he may not be the greatest servant of God, it can at least be said that the father never wavers in his task as protector of the boy, except for when he finally succumbs to his illness. Yet the mere fact that these two make it such a long way implies that the man and child are blessed, perhaps even chosen by God.

Many scenes in the book take the father and son the brink of death, yet then offer a miraculous salvation. Wielenberg questions this very concept: “Are these events little miracles—the hand of God reaching into the burned-out hellscape to protect the child—or are they just strokes of good fortune? The answer to this question remains unclear. There are hints of divine activity, but they are never more than hints” (1). There is much more at work than mere hints. On several occasions, when the father and son are starving to death, they quite accidentally and fortuitously stumble across food—wild mushrooms, dried apple husks, mason jars of home canned items, and even a fully stocked underground shelter. When either the man or the boy become sick, no matter how bleak things seem to get, they always bounce back—with the exception of the father’s final bout with his illness. Aside from simply keeping the plot moving along, these

occurrences must be meant to denote the importance of these two survivors.

One scene that stands out as tangible proof of the blessing¹² bestowed on father and son is when the man finds a “cistern filled with water so sweet that he could smell it” (103). Dehydrated and malnourished, the discovery of this glorious find proves miraculous for the father, who brings “the water to his mouth a palmful at a time” (103). It should be noted that the father’s actions while drinking recall an episode from Judges, when Gideon’s army is told to drink from the water so that the chosen ones could be separated from those not chosen:

So he brought the people down to the water. And the LORD said to Gideon, “Every one who laps the water with his tongue, as a dog laps, you shall set by himself. Likewise, every one who kneels down to drink.” And the number of those who lapped, putting their hands to their mouths, was 300 men, but all the rest of the people knelt down to drink water. And the LORD said to Gideon, “With the 300 men who lapped I will save you and give the Midianites into your hand, and let all the others go every man to his home.” (7.5-7)

The simple manner in which the father drinks from the cistern casts him among the more refined of Gideon’s army, making him one of God’s chosen. Of course, even Gideon fell from grace, thanks to hubris.

Aside from resembling the classic prophets like Abraham and Jonah, or chosen leaders like Gideon, the father also has shades of Job, none more so obvious than his physical deterioration and the threat of losing his boy. However, another important biblical allusion occurs thanks to the man’s wife. Just as Job’s first wife was faithless, so

too is the man's. In fact, it is the long dead wife that haunts the man through much of the book, serving as a figure of the temptation of death—a role similar to that of Ely. Early in the book, McCarthy describes one of the father's haunting and eerie visions: "In dreams his pale bride came to him out of a green and leafy canopy. Her nipples pipeclayed and her rib bones painted white. She wore a dress of gauze and her dark hair was carried up in combs of ivory, combs of shell. Her smile, her downturned eyes" (15). The man's "pale bride" can easily be interpreted as death, or even a variation of Coleridge's *Life-in-Death*. Likewise, considering the wife's predisposition toward death, she is a clear forerunner for the role of ultimate seductress. In a flashback scene, the man and his wife argue about suicide:

It's the right thing to do. [wife]

You're talking crazy. [man]

No, I'm speaking the truth. Sooner or later they will catch us and they will kill us. They will rape me. They'll rape him. They are going to rape us and kill us and eat us and you wont face it. (48)

Obstinacy or hope keeps the man clinging to life, while his wife sees death as the best possible outcome:

You can think of me as a faithless slut if you like. I've taken a new lover. He can give me what you cannot.

Death is not a lover.

Oh yes he is. (48)

In the end, the man's argument is unable to counter his wife's determination to die. Not even maternal instinct can inspire her to carry on living: "My heart was ripped out of me

the night he was born so dont ask for sorrow now. There is none” (48-49). And so the woman exits their lives, choosing death over love. “She was gone,” McCarthy writes, “and the coldness of it was her final gift” (49).

This coldness is hard to fathom as a reader, making it almost impossible to sympathize with the mother. Curiously, even the son seems to have expected his mother’s departure, for the following morning he asks, “She’s gone isn’t she?” (50). Though the father replies, the child’s question did not necessitate an answer, for the woman was always gone from his life. At first glance, it would seem that McCarthy has intentionally portrayed this woman as negligent and unworthy of motherhood, in the way that many other women in his works are portrayed¹³. But perhaps this woman is merely aware of things that the man and the son cannot understand. Susan Kollin writes: “The woman’s decision to kill herself and forego the journey comes not from some post-traumatic response, but from having a different set of embodied experiences that have provided her with a different knowledge and understanding of what the future might entail” (170).

In the everyday non-end-of-the-world sense, pregnant women are already physically and emotionally taxed, especially as they draw nearer to delivery, but just imagine the awful disadvantage of being pregnant in a world without reliable food sources, proper sanitation, or safety. Then taking into account the world in which they do reside—where there are constant threats of enslavement, rape, murder, and cannibalism—motherhood is but an added burden for women. True, motherhood is sacred and worthy of reverence, as evidence by the innumerable myths of the mother goddesses the world over¹⁴, but for those who face that role after a global scourging, nothing could be further from the truth. For this reason alone, the mother deserves at least a modicum of sympathy from the

reader. And it should likewise be put to question: in a post-apocalyptic world, if motherhood is more terror than blessing, should fatherhood be considered in like fashion? Such a conundrum haunts the man throughout his hopeless journey, often leaving him with brutal internal dialogues as whether or not his wife's actions were the best option after all:

Can you do it? When the time comes? When the time comes there will be no time. Now is the time. Curse God and die. What if it doesn't fire? It has to fire. What if it doesn't fire? Could you crush that beloved skull with a rock? Is there such a being within you of which you know nothing? Can there be? Hold him your arms. Just so. The soul is quick. Pull him toward you. Kiss him. Quickly. (96)

The obvious reference to the words of Job's wife aside¹⁵, the implication here is that everything is a test of the man's faithfulness. But it must be considered that God allows Job to be tormented, a fact Job is painfully aware. On this, Hanna Boguta-Marchel postulates:

...although he is not unlike the biblical Job, tempted to curse God for their futile lingering and for being impelled to helplessly watch his son grow thinner and more destitute with each passing day, God is the one whom he perceives as the author of the events they are experiencing. It is therefore also God whom he questions of the future ..., and whom he holds responsible for all their forlorn suffering. (172)

Because of that, the father's faith is called into question, and thus the man equivocates his true feelings on the matter. In Christian terms, for not trusting in faith, the father is

essentially challenging God every step of the way¹⁶. In fact, the only thing that the man can be said to trust in is the goodness of his son, who he continually lies to in regard to their chances of survival and of their role as the “good guys” of the story. But the man is not a good guy¹⁷, rather, he—like Ahab—suffers from a monomania—that of protecting his son, even if it means perpetuating a falsehood that the child slowly sees deteriorating before his eyes:

Do you want me to tell you a story? [father]

No. [son]

Why not?

The boy looked at him and looked away.

Why not?

Those stories are not true.

They dont have to be true. They’re stories.

Yes. But in the stories we’re always helping people and we dont help people. (225)

In his quest to save his son’s life, the man taints his credibility with the boy, who is a far superior prophet in this dark tale than any other.

4.3—Son as Prophet to Come: “What if I said that he’s a god?”

In such a bleak and lifeless world, the importance of the boy to the man is far beyond mere paternal bond, for time and time again in *The Road*, McCarthy portrays the child as something akin to the latest and final manifestation of God on Earth. Reviewing

the novel, author Michael Chabon writes:

For the father their life of constant motion, his intermittent good luck at finding provisions, and above all his long habit of seeing his boy as the only thing in the world worth saving and the saving of him as his only reason to live have engendered a religious sense of mission with regard to his son that is inevitably defined as a greater salvation: it verges explicitly on the messianic.

Steven Frye expresses similar sentiments:

The man sees the boy not only as his son but also as a figure of divine import, and though the boy will display extraordinary qualities of kindness, the man's belief in the boy as the incarnate Word of God could be taken as an expression of mere sentiment, were it not for the many reference to divinity, in the context of description and allusions to God. (*Understanding* 172-73)

Likewise, other critics have noted the obvious comparison between the boy and Christ. Manuel Broncano argues that, in the form of a returned Jesus, the boy: “has not come to judge the dead, but to lead mankind to a second rebirth, to build a new world on the ashes of the biblical book that has finally been closed forever. The son's only judgment is that which distinguishes between good and bad guys, between those willing to sacrifice others in order to survive themselves” (127). Allen Josephs rightly asserts that, “[t]he boy, born after the disaster, has been raised, we must assume, without church or scripture, and his scriptural echoes must therefore issue forth from narrative design or divine inspiration. They cannot be—not in a Cormac McCarthy novel—inadvertent echoes or unintentional

allusions” (138).

Seeking out a biblical indicator for McCarthy’s intentional deification of the boy sheds light upon some of his language when describing the boy. For instance, Isaiah 9.2 reads: “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shone.” This coalesces directly with sentences which describe the child, such as: “Golden chalice, good to house a god” (*TR* 64), “The boy’s candlecolored skin was all but translucent” (109), or “He [the boy] took the cup and moved away and when he moved the light moved with him” (233), not to mention the numerous references to “carrying the fire.”¹⁸ If such is the case, and this miracle child is the physical embodiment of the divine, then we must read him more like a variation of Jesus than any other prophet.

Isaiah 9.6 adds a familiar verse that is often interpreted as prophecy for the coming of Christ: “For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.” Although less majestic than the scene generally depicted at the birth of Jesus, McCarthy intones a similar prophetic nature in the manner in which the father views the child birth into this dead world: “Her cries meant nothing to him. Beyond the window just the gathering cold, the fires on the horizon. He held aloft the scrawny red body so raw and naked and cut the cord with kitchen shears and wrapped his son in a towel” (*TR* 50). That reverence and awe that the man feels as a father turns into religious fervor, whereby he believes conclusively that his son is more than just a child.

But even others that encounter the boy have similar proclamations. When the

father and son come upon Ely, the old man is bewildered when he first sees the child:

He looked down at the boy. Are you a little boy? he said.

What does he look like? his father said.

I dont know. I cant see good.

Can you see me?

I can tell someone's there. (140)

Admittedly, such a scene shouldn't be read without recalling the numerous biblical references to blindness as a metaphor for spiritual ignorance¹⁹, in which case the fact that Ely recognizes something peculiar about the boy implies the same type of reception Jesus often received when encountering those in need. Likewise, when Ely shares a meal with them, the old man muses:

I've not see a fire in a long time, that's all. I live like an animal. You dont want to know the things I've eaten. When I saw that boy I thought that I had died.

You thought he was an angel? [father]

I didnt know what he was. I never thought to see a child again. I didnt know that would happen. (145)

The father takes that moment to put forth his own philosophy on the boy: "What if I said that he's a god?" (145), to which Ely only denies such a possibility: "I'm past all that now. Have been for years. Where men cant live gods fare no better. You'll see. It's better to be alone. So I hope that's not true what you said because to be on the road with the last god would be a terrible thing so I hope it's not true" (145). Ely's refusal to see the child in the same manner as the father does not negate the child's exceptional nature, but it

does call into question the father's view of the divine. Yet this view appears to be reaffirmed by the woman that becomes the child's new mother when the boy is taken in by the generous family after the death of the father. "I am so glad to see you" (241), she tells the boy when they meet, once more returning to the notion of sight and faithfulness. Later, the woman reveals to the boy "that the breath of God was his breath yet though it pass from man to man through all of time" (241). Such overt references cannot be ignored, and how can they be when the only visible essence of goodness in the world is the boy himself? Thus, though a sin, the father turns from God and puts all of his faith in his son.

Yet the boy also serves another important function for the father, as his sole purpose for living, which his wife taunts prior to her suicide departure: "The one thing I can tell you is that you wont survive for yourself. I know because I would never have come this far" (49). But this same idea is stated earlier in the novel when McCarthy writes: "He held the boy close to him. So thin. My heart, he said. My heart. But he knew that if he were a good father still it might well be as she had said. That the boy was all that stood between him and death" (25). But though protecting the boy becomes a holy quest, the father is not wrong in projecting the mantle of a god on the child when one considers the ubiquitous generosity of the child, who seeks at every turn to help those in need, even if it puts a strain on their limited resources. Thus earning the child the title of "best guy" (235), a farewell blessing from his father, who knows intimately the worst of what man can do.

But suppose the man was right when he said the child was a god. Is there any proof of such a claim in the book aside from the boy's goodness? Allen Josephs writes:

“[t]he textual case for God, or more specifically a Christ-like figure in the boy, difficult to imagine without some a priori God, however aloof, comprise more evidence than the negative case, and more convincingly” (137). While I concur with Josephs, as well as with the lucidity of the evidence he utilizes, I wish to add some further points to the discussion. There are two scenes which shed a great deal of light on the matter, and which have heretofore, to my knowledge, gone overlooked. The first scene is when the boy is playing in the road with a yellow toy truck. McCarthy writes: “The boy took his truck from the pack and shaped roads in the ash with a stick. The truck tooled along slowly. He made truck noises. The day seemed almost warm and they slept in the leaves with their packs under their heads” (*TR* 51). Immediately thereafter, an actual truck drives by, preceded and followed by a band of “[s]tained and filthy” (51) survivors, one of whom the father is then forced to murder while defending his son. What is one to make of this coincidence? Is it only a touch of light and arguably lazy foreshadowing, or is it possible that the boy is not only “shap[ing] roads in the ash” but also the very world itself²⁰?

Though at play, the boy drawing in the ash recalls Jesus writing in the dirt when a group of Pharisees and scribes question Jesus about their right to stone a woman for adultery. John 8.6-8 reads: “This they said to test him, that they might have some charge to bring against him. Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. / And as they continued to ask him, he stood up and said to them, ‘Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her.’ / And once more he bent down and wrote on the ground.” Likewise, this same image is later invoked when the boy makes a village in the sand while they are camped at the beach. Here the outcome is somewhat different.

The father asks the boy, “Can you write the alphabet?” / “I can write it” (TR 206). The boy decides he would like to “write a letter to the good guys,” but the father ruins this act of kindness by questioning the boy, “What if the bad guys saw it?” (206). This of course initiates a period of doubt and despair for the boy, who in the next scene asks his father, who has attempted to cheer him up by firing a flare gun:

They couldnt see it very far, could they, Papa?

Who?

Anybody.

No. Not far.

If you wanted to show where you were.

You mean like to the good guys?

Yes. Or anybody that you wanted them to know where you were.

Like who?

I dont know.

Like God?

Yeah. Maybe somebody like that. (207)

The boy’s response is halfhearted, lacking in certainty, for the world he knows is not the same as that of his father. In fact, it reads of doubt and disbelief, especially when the boy’s exclamation from two scenes earlier is recalled: “I dont know what we’re doing” (206)

This brings us to the second scene of note, which is when the boy becomes violently sick the morning following the flare scene. If the boy is capable of creating the world, then his very will is in fact a god-like force. Justifiably then, the boy’s sudden

doubt in the power of God to see through the blanket of the dark sky could be the actual cause for the illness. The father blames the sickness on food poisoning, but when read closely, the duration of the boy's near death encounter is quite telling. Talled up, the total amount of time is three days, just like the number of days in which Christ was in the grave. Christ mentions that the only sign nonbelievers will receive is he sign of Jonah, taken to mean both the three days he is dead, but also in the form of the holy spirit, which is often depicted as a dove—the meaning of the name Jonah. However, the only bird of hope that exists in this novel is a ship named “Pájaro de Esperanza” (188), wrecked off the beach near to where the father and son make camp, and where the tainted food was discovered. Obviously McCarthy intends for readers to make the connection between the name of the ship and the miraculous three day recovery of the boy, but the book still lacks the joy and fulfillment of hope.

The subsequent scenes progress at a rapid pace thereafter, in which the boy requests clemency for a “scared” (218) man that they catch in the act of stealing their cart. This proves to be a major turning point between father and son, whereby: “[t]he ethical darkness of the father and the difference in the father's and the son's values are brought into relief by a revenge scenarios involving a thief who loots all of their possessions” (Gwinner 151). At first, the father wishes to murder the man, but then he lessens his revenge to merely stealing all his possessions—his clothing—despite the boy's pleas for mercy. However, even when the father relents and returns the thief's clothes, the damage is done. The boy rightly feels that they have killed the stranger just the same by not leaving him food from the abundant stores of their cart. Seeing his father for what he really is, the boy is once again left feeling despondent. Interpreting the

renewed rift between father and son, Gwinner asserts: “as much as he loves Papa, he can no longer relate to him as a fellow traveler in the family narrative—good guys fighting for survival and helping those in need—which has sustained them” (152). This renewed depression seems to affect the earth: “[t]hen a distant low rumble. Not thunder. you could feel it under your feet. A sound without cognate and so without description. Something imponderable shifting out there in the dark. The earth contracting with the cold. It did not come again. What time of year? What age the child?” (*TR* 220). It is not long afterward that the man is shot by an arrow during an ambush, and later succumbs to his lung illness²¹, begging the question: would the outcome have differed if the man had proven to be one of the “good guys” he always lied to son about? Unfortunately, there is no way to know if such a thing is even possible for someone as stubborn as the father in *The Road*. What can be said, though, is that if the boy is the reincarnation of God, he is a poor substitute for Jesus.

The greatest paradox in the father’s decision to deify his son is that he knows that he will die and leave the boy behind. In the years that follow, without the proper guidance and nurturing, how can the child ever become anything remotely like the Messiah? Sadly, the reason the boy is ultimately not the prophet the world is looking for is because he will grow up to be a man without God.

Though the father was not unaware of God at every turn, he chooses rather to willfully ignore the teachings of God. In fact, in many regards, the father seems to hate God all together. For what other reason would the man convince his son that if the boy talked to him after he was dead, the man would respond in the boy’s head? The act seems harmless enough, almost genius in that it would give the boy a reason to go on living. But

when the woman who takes the boy in at the end attempts to get the child to speak to God, he is unable to do so. As Wielenberg explains, “[i]t ends with the child choosing to talk to the man rather than God” (14). Chris Danta elaborates, stating: “[t]he boy feels he can continue on after the disaster and after the loss of his father only by personifying God and the good. He chooses to commemorate the mortal breath of the father rather than the immortal breath of God. In so doing, he acknowledges the continuing fragility of both the world and the heart” (23). This begs the question: can readers really take comfort in the voice of the father—a false prophet—in the ear of the son—pseudo-messiah—for ever and ever amen? The genuine tragedy of the novel is not that the boy must face this horrifying world alone, it is that the boy is incapable of praying to God, and thus forever denied salvation²².

4.4—Reading the World as Nineveh: “Is the dark going to catch us?”

Scripture suggests that humanity has the opportunity to repent, even until the final hour, so long as it turns back from wickedness. Yet time after time, humanity forgets, refuses, or remains faithless. In each of the works I’ve covered so far, the role of repentance is paramount. Yet in every one, there is no example of a repentant Nineveh. Instead, once more with *The Road*, we are presented with a series of moral dilemmas that encourage the reader to choose a philosophical stance on issues of right and wrong, good and evil.

At one point in *The Road*, the father warns his son: “If you lie down you’ll fall asleep and then if I call you wont answer and I wont be able to find you” (*TR* 61). This

potent allusion recalls the many reminders of Jesus to be vigilant in the faith. Recall Mark 13.32-33: ““But concerning that day or that hour, no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. / Be on guard, keep awake. For you do not know when the time will come.”” Yet for all the biblical intertextuality, nothing proves to be more evident in *The Road* than the fact that the world appears to have slept through the end of the world, rendering the warnings of Christ and the prophets moot. What are we to make of this? Does this mean that the book is to be taken as apocalyptic (as in revelatory), or is it pure nihilism?

Perhaps the answer lies in scripture. Isaiah teaches:

Behold, the LORDS’s hand is not shortened, that it cannot save

or his ear dull, that it cannot hear;

but your iniquities have made a separation

between you and your God,

and your sins have hidden his face from you

so that he does not hear.

For your hands are defiled with blood

and your fingers with iniquity;

your lips have spoken lies;

your tongue mutters wickedness. (59.1-3)

The implication with this particular passage, is that salvation is never an impossibility. But it is difficult to read such verses and ignore the father’s continual “separation” from God—how his hands are “defiled with blood,” how his “lips have spoken lies,” to himself, to his son, and to God, and how his “tongue mutters wickedness.” Because of

this, the father serves as the ultimate stand in for the sins of all humanity, who likewise is separated from God. However, even then²³, a promise of eternal salvation after the apocalypse is present for all of mankind.

Revelation 22.5 states: “And night will be no more. They will need no light or lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever.” Isaiah 66.22-23 reads: “For as the new heavens and the new earth that I make shall remain before me, says the LORD, so shall your offspring and your name remain. / From new moon to new moon, and from Sabbath to Sabbath, all flesh shall come to worship before me, declares the LORD.” Thus, according to the Bible, peace reigns eternal in this future world, meaning that the horrors of *The Road* are only temporary. No longer will anyone be forced to “carry the fire,” for the fire will be with them always.

As Hanna Boguta-Marchel puts it, it is possible to read *The Road* as a warning for all the world to repent: “however risky such a pronouncement might seem, its overall import proves to be deeply akin to that of the biblical prophecies” (172). However, the promise of reunification with God that exists in apocalyptic scripture is seemingly absent in McCarthy’s works, which leaves one with a potential sense of hopelessness.

Yet certain critics have declared the book to be less nihilistic than is apparent. Ashley Kunsu notes: “The paradoxical achievement of McCarthy’s novel is that it accepts the disjunction between where the world/fiction has been and where it is going, and in this moment of possibility—after the old and before the new—reconciles barbarous destruction with eloquent hope” (69). Manuel Broncano’s reading of the ending is both profound and hopeful, albeit blasphemous to a degree:

Certainly, the son’s adoptive family still cherishes the idea of God and the

value of prayers, but by adopting the boy and what the boy represents, they may be adopting as well a new way of understanding the role that religion may play in the new world, if there is any, a religion divested of guilt and of fear, of ritual and penance, of heaven and hell, a religion without gods and without demons, based on the brotherhood and sisterhood of those who still claim themselves as human, a religion, in the end that will not even need a name. (139)

Though I too see the chance for hope in the novel's ending, it still doesn't change the fact that the novel is missing something vital—salvation.

4.5—*Deus Ex Machina*: “You’ll be all right.”

Whether this is the biblically foretold punishment for those on the Earth during the end of days, or the punishment of the damned in the bowels of Hell, *The Road* provides no clear picture. What is clear is the seeming inalterability of what ensues for those that have been punished. The final paragraph of the novel alludes to the message we are meant to take away from the book: “Once there were brook trout in the streams in the mountains. ... On their backs were vermiculate patters that were maps of the world in its becoming. Maps and mazes. Of a thing which could not be put back. Not be made right again” (*TR* 241). In McCarthy's terms, once judgment is passed, it cannot be revoked. When the world is gone, it is gone²⁴. But we have to wonder, is Hell really forever?

Here, I wish to posit a radical view of the novel, based on something both

ominous and unsettling that the father's unfaithful wife proposes to him. Prior to her suicide, after warning the man that he cannot live for himself, the wife explains: "A person who had no one would be well advised to cobble together some passable ghost. Breathe it into being and coax it along with words of love. Offer it each phantom crumb and shield it from harm with your body. As for me my only hope is for eternal nothingness and I hope it with all my heart" (49). There are two obvious ways in which to read the wife's words.

First, she is teaching him the necessary lesson which he realizes he must pass on to his son before he too is dead, thus encouraging his supplantation of God with himself as a "passable ghost"—the voice in his son's head. Otherwise, without the contrived will to live, there is no "hope" other than "eternal nothingness." And the boy seems to succeed almost immediately at creating a mock dialogue with his deceased father. When the man is close to death, after having planted the seed of postmortem communication in the boy, McCarthy writes:

I'm really scared Papa.

I know. But you'll be okay. You're going to be lucky. I know you are.

I've got to stop talking. I'm going to start coughing again.

It's okay, Papa. You dont have to talk. It's okay. (235)

The very next paragraph has the boy attempting this twisted prayer before his father has even died. However, it is after one last dream for the man that a revealing final conversation takes place:

Do you remember that little boy, Papa?

Yes. I remember him.

Do you think that he's all right that little boy?

Oh yes. I think he's all right.

Do you think he was lost?

No. I don't think he was lost.

I'm scared that he was lost.

I think he's all right.

But who will find him if he's lost? Who will find the little boy?

Goodness will find the little boy. It always has. It will again. (236)

This sentimental and touching exchange reads like the final blessing of goodwill from father to son, but when considered in relation to the man's encouragement of the boy's mock dialogues, everything changes. In their previous talk, the man could hardly speak thanks to the pain of coughing up blood. How is it that here the exchange goes off without a single mention to the man's suffering? Likewise, the man's typically negative responses are flipped with constant affirmations of hope, which merely rephrase the boy's words in a positive light. Taken as such, this last conversation cannot be between father and son, but between the boy and himself, granting him the willpower to carry on living.

The second, and more profound interpretation of the wife's words is to view the father and the son as two parts of the same soul. Thus, not only is *The Road* a hell narrative, but a story about single soul's attempt at redemption. On the importance of the human soul in the book, Steven Frye posits:

...the novel is a narrative of the soul's nature; its moral embodiment in human form; its visibility in human action, whether in acts of brutality or

self-sacrifice. *The Road* also explores the soul's capacity to transcend, perhaps in passing moments of hope, and more important in the permeant inscription of the Word, gone now from the pages of books, but resident with latent emotional force in human memory" (*Understanding* 166)

Returning to both the wife's and Ely's proclamations that there are no survivors in this world, it is a simple matter to view the entire narrative as taking place in the private hell of the man. Thus every figure the man encounters is there to tempt and torture him, but through the separation of his darker self from his lighter self, he is able to save his soul.

If the father and the son share the same soul, by divesting himself of his sinful nature and dying, all that is pure and good in him (his son) is theoretically capable of ascending from the depths of hell. We must wonder, though, if the goodness of the child can overcome the limit of not speaking to God. Matthew 7.21 explains: "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven." According to scripture, without enacting "the will" of God, the child will not be redeemed. But the boy, fragment of the man, is yet young, and may, with the help of his adoptive family, give glory where it is due. Recall 1 Corinthians 13.8-12:

Love never ends. As for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away. / For we know in part and we prophecy in part, / but when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away. / When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I gave up childish ways. / For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in

part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known.

The son, “golden chalice” of the man’s soul, is meant to represent love, which is powerfully spoken of in 1 Corinthians 13.13: “So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.” And it does seem that the angelic adoptive family that takes in the boy do provide love and stability for him, which suggests that the *deus ex machina* may have more God to it than machine. If interpreted as such, then *The Road* does indeed end on a happy note²⁵, though the novel suffers under the weight of religious obscuration.

When asked about what readers should get out reading *The Road*, McCarthy reveals: “It would be just simply care about things and people and, and be more appreciative. Life is pretty damn good. Even when it looks bad. And, we should appreciate it more. We should be grateful” (Winfrey). If the reader indeed “has a heart,” as the man so brazenly asks of God, then McCarthy succeeds in that regard.

Chapter 5 Conclusion

5.0—Literary Philosophy: There is Just One Journey

One aspect that renders close study of McCarthy's novels both tedious and rewarding is his predilection toward philosophical interjection¹, most frequently achieved through extensive character monologues, as opposed to the voice of the primary narrator—which is typically objective, rarely directly commenting on matters of life or death. Yet these monologues often read as though they are in fact the unique voice of the author, creating for numerous insightful interpretations. Among McCarthy's recent southwestern works, *The Crossing*, the second volume in *The Border Trilogy*, is a difficult text to read due to its slow, cyclical and repetitive plotting, and also because of the sheer complexity of the monologues that the protagonist, Billy Parham, is privy to throughout the novel. However, *The Crossing* reads as a paragon of philosophical musing, shedding light in particular on McCarthy's potential views on religion.

At one of the low points in Billy's journey, the boy comes across an old priest that feeds him and tells him a lengthy tale about man's quest for God. The story is framed around the life of an obstinate old heretic who challenges God to kill him by staying night and day under the precariously hanging dome of a ruined church. Yet the core message of the tale concerns the priest's philosophy of the oneness of existence, taught to him during his exposure to the heretic. As a man weak in faith, the priest claims to have gone forth in life "seeking evidence for the hand of God in the world" by examining the "miracles of

destruction” (TC 142). Yet the priest comes to realize that his goals were foolish:

What was here to be found was not a thing. Things separate from their stories have no meaning. They are only shapes. Of a certain size and color. A certain weight. When their meaning has become lost to us they no longer have even a name. The story on the other hand can never be lost from its place in the world for it is that place. And that is what was to be found here. The corrido. The tale. And like all corridos it ultimately told one story only, for there is only one to tell. (142-43).

In what can best be viewed as a form of the monomyth, McCarthy’s curious philosophy of the “one story” recalls Judge Holden’s quote from *Blood Meridian* cited in Chapter 1 of this study². Yet even Joseph Campbell’s interpretation³ of comparative mythology seems to come up short in regard to what McCarthy is implying, for it is not necessarily true that all stories contain the requisite elements of the hero’s journey as laid out in Campbell’s monomyth. Rather, McCarthy’s message seems to be less complicated.

John Steinbeck presented a profound interpretation of this philosophy in his novel *East of Eden*, claiming: “[w]e have only one story. All novels, all poetry, are built on the never-ending contest in ourselves of good and evil. And it occurs to me that evil must constantly respawn, while good, while virtue, is immortal. Vice has always a new fresh young face, while virtue is venerable as nothing else in the world is” (413). One cannot deny that the beauty in Steinbeck’s philosophy hinges on the simplicity of his rendition of the classic battle of good versus evil. Most poetic, is Steinbeck’s acquiescence that the battle occurs “in ourselves,” rather than outside of ourselves. However, there is no way of knowing if McCarthy has been influenced by Steinbeck’s philosophy, for he has never

publicly acknowledged such a thing. Furthermore, while there appears to exist an inherent hope in Steinbeck's philosophy, the opposite is true in McCarthy's works when similar proclamations are made, such as when the priest in *The Crossing* explains:

Yet even so there is but one world and everything that is imaginable is necessary to it. For this world also which seems to us a thing of stone and flower and blood is not a thing at all but is a tale. And all in it is a tale and each tale the sum of all lesser tales and yet these also are the selfsame tale and contain as well all else within them. So everything is necessary. Every least thing. This is the hard lesson. Nothing can be dispensed with.

Nothing despised. (143)

If one agrees with the words of the old priest, then it does appear to return to a battle between two extremes. In part of the priest's story, just prior to the death of the heretic, the latter intones the terrible and disconcerting truth of the one journey:

It is God's grace alone that we are bound by this thread of life. He held the priest's hand in his own and bade the priest look at their joined hands and he said see the likeness. This flesh is but a memento, yet it tells the true.

Ultimately every man's path is every other's. There are no separate journeys for there are no separate men to make them. All men are one and there is no other tale to tell. (156-57)

Though the heretic's revelation described here suggests that all men share the same soul, it does not negate the centrality of the conflict between good and evil for humankind, reiterating the beauty of Steinbeck's words:

Humans are caught—in their lives, in their thoughts, in their hungers and

ambitions, in their avarice and cruelty, and in their kindness and generosity too—in a net of good and evil. . . . There is no other story. A man, after he has brushed off the dust and chips of his life, will have left only the hard, clean questions: Was it good or was it evil? Have I done well—or ill? (411)

Curiously, such a system of belief is very much inspired by classical Christian thought. Saint Augustine's *City of God* presents a comparable philosophy:

There is on the one hand, the society or city of all men, who loving God in Christ, are predestined to reign eternally with God. On the other hand, there is the city of all those men who do not love God, and who are to suffer eternal punishment along with the demons. St. Augustine has, therefore, never conceived the idea of a single universal society, but of two, both of which are universal—at least in the sense that every man whatsoever is necessarily a citizen of one or the other. (Gilson XXVII).

Even Coleridge shared a similar theory of the oneness of life and God. He first hints at this concept in his poem “Effusion XXXV:”

And what if all the animated nature
Be but organic Harps diversely fram'd,
That tremble into thought, as o'er them sweeps,
Plastic and vast, one intellectual Breeze. (36-39)

Later, Coleridge elaborates on the subject in prose form:

In the Bible every agent appears and acts as a self-subsisting individual: each has a life of its own, and yet all are one life. The elements of

necessity and free-will are reconciled in the higher power of an omnipresent Providence, that predestinates the whole in the moral freedom of the integral parts. Of this the Bible never suffers us to lose sight. The root is never detached from the ground. It is God everywhere: and all creatures conform to his decrees, the righteous by performance of the law, the disobedient by the sufferance of the penalty. (“Statesman’s” 361)

Thus, though McCarthy’s works often appear to equivocate on the matter of a Christian viewpoint, his works are very much inspired by the classic struggle of good and evil⁴.

However, perhaps the difficulty in classifying McCarthy’s works as Christian⁵ stems from how none of the figures in his narratives can be considered as an absolute believer. Though the failed priest in *The Crossing* has the prescience to explain, “[m]en do not turn from God so easily you see. Not so easily. Deep in each man is the knowledge that something knows of his existence. Something knows, and cannot be fled nor hid from. To imagine otherwise is to imagine the unspeakable” (148), because he has not had the affirmation of God’s presence in his life, he is incapable of truly devoting his life to God. McCarthy’s protagonists, such as John Grady Cole in *All the Pretty Horses*, the kid in *Blood Meridian*, and the father in *The Road*, suffer from the same doubts and disbeliefs. Thus, it is this tragic lack of faith that becomes the universal condition, whereby the absence of proof negates belief. Yet, strangely, *The Crossing*’s priest knows that there is no doubt when God speaks to man:

His voice is not to be mistaken. When men hear it they fall to their knees and their souls are riven and they cry out to Him and there is no fear in them but only that wildness of heart that springs from such longing and

they cry out to stay his presence for they know at once that while godless men may live well enough in their exile those to whom He has spoken can contemplate no life without Him but only darkness and despair. (152)

That particular “longing” appears to be precisely what the priest desires, and yet lacks in his life. Curiously, it is the very same longing present in every protagonist reviewed in this study, and thus the cause of their initial restlessness.

McCarthy seems predisposed to this very issue, for his 2006 play, *The Sunset Limited*, contains numerous conversations on the presence or absence of God in our lives. In the story, a character named White is “saved” from suicide by another man named Black. Knowing that White is in need of help, Black takes it upon himself to attempt to convert the suicidal man. The bulk of the play is in fact the philosophical dialogue between the two men regarding faith and the prospect of life after death:

White Even God gives up at some point. There’s no ministry in hell.
That I every heard of.

Black No there aint. That’s well put. Ministry is for the living. That’s why you responsible for your brother. Once he’s quit breathin you cant help him no more. After that he’s in the hands of other parties.
So you got to look after him now. (TSL 76-77)

Black’s born-again Christian, however, comes up against the stark nihilism of the hell-bound White, who bleakly admits: “I yearn for the darkness. I pray for death. Real death. If I thought that in death I would meet the people I’ve known in life I dont know what I’d do. That would be the ultimate horror” (135). While Black holds true to the precepts of Christian salvation⁶, not all of his views mesh with popular Christianity. In fact, Black

admits to having views about universality and oneness, which are decidedly new age⁷:
“He [Jesus] couldn't come down here and take the form of a man if that form was not
done shaped to accommodate him. And if I said that there aint no way for Jesus to be
ever man without ever man bein Jesus then I believe that might be a pretty big heresy”
(95). Despite Black's best efforts, White refuses to see anything other than hopelessness:
“The shadow of the axe hangs over every joy. Every road ends in death. Or worse” (137).
Near the end, White's hopeless admission has left Black without the words to combat
White's suicidal philosophy:

Black Dont go out there. You know what's out there.

White Oh yes. Indeed I do. I know what is out there and I know who is
out there. I rush to nuzzle his bony cheek. No doubt he'll be
surprised to find himself so cherished. And as I cling to his neck I
will whisper in that dry and ancient ear: Here I am. Here I am.
Now open the door. (140-41)

Black appears a failure with White, but is the point of the story that Christianity fails, or
merely that we live in a world where some choose to embrace the love of God and others
choose to embrace death? Black's words partway into the play illustrate the human
condition: “The light is all around you, cept you dont see nothing but shadow. And the
shadow is you. You the one makin it” (118). This quote recalls Christ's parable: ““The
eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of
light, / but if your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light in
you is darkness, how great is the darkness!”” (Matt 6.22-23). Blind to God, McCarthy's
protagonists seek without knowing why, or for what. Yet the archetypal Christian

perspective of the interconnectedness of life through God is just beneath the surface.

For this reason, an analysis of the hell journey must naturally move beyond the basics of intertextuality, and instead pay closer heed to the role of the one-story philosophy in literature. Admittedly, such a philosophy is challenging to follow, for it often coincides with religious thought, as evidenced in *The Crossing*: “For the path of the world also is one and not many and there is not alter course in any least part of it for that course is fixed by God and contains all consequence in the way of its going and outside of that going there is neither path nor consequence nor anything at all. There never was” (157-58). However, to impose a religious perspective on literature is not without merit, especially if that literature involves the hell descent.

5.1—Questioning the Purpose of Hell in Light of the One-Story

If one is to agree with the concept of the one-story, and thus conclude that all journeys are the same, then one has to wonder why the hell descent turns up so frequently as a part it. What is it about hell that resonates so well with the human condition? Archetypal analysis proves useful for answering part of this question. Discussing the nature of such stories, Northrop Frye expounds:

...although in a world of death nothing is more absurd than life, life is the counter-absurdity that finally defeats death. And in a life that is a pure continuum, beginning with a birth that is a random beginning, ending with a death that is a random ending, nothing is more absurd than telling stories that do begin and end. Yet this part of the counter-absurdity of human

creation, the vision that comes, like the vision of the *Bhagavadgita*, to alienated figures on a battlefield of dying men, and ends with finding one's identity in the body of the god or gods who also contains the universe. (*Secular* 125)

It is through the struggle to determine a meaning for existence that mankind comes upon higher truths. Without that struggle, there is but mystery and no revelation. Nonetheless, regardless of the numerous renditions of the hell journey in literature, if such a descent is in fact part of the human condition, then it is a trek that must be undergone alone. Though in some stories there often appears a guide, like Virgil in Dante's *Inferno*, or a partner, such as the son in *The Road*, to apply the one-story formula to the hell descent means that the hero stands solitary. In fact, as Frye puts it:

[t]he only companion who accompanies us to the end of the descent is the demonic accuser, who takes the form of the accusing memory. The memory is demonic here because it has forgotten only one thing, the original identity of what it accompanies. It conveys to us the darkest knowledge at the bottom of the world, the vision of the absurd, the realization that only death is certain, and that nothing before or after death makes sense. (*Secular* 124-25)

However, to suggest that death is the end misses the point of the one-story, for even death cannot be final. Redemption must always be a possibility. In order for "true" journey of the soul to be expressed in story telling, both extremes of physical and moral spectrums must be equally represented. Therefore each protagonist who comes into contact with the underworld should be offered the chance at redemption, in the form of either bodily or

spiritual resurrection. However, more often than not, such a resurrection requires not only repentance, but also genuine faith in a higher power that both desires to and can save the soul. Unfortunately, current trends in literature suggest that this will not be the case with future renditions of the hell journey.

5.2—Faith and the Ideal Hero

In the first chapter I stressed the importance of the hell journey itself. At this point, I wish to impart a brief synopsis of the folly of cynicism. Any literature that overly fixates on the underworld, especially in absence of redemption, cannot lead to enlightenment. As it is, far too many people seek out evidence of evil and suffering to justify their own views concerning the afterlife, be it for the purpose of affirming either belief or disbelief. While it is certainly true that contrast aids in understanding, both *Blood Meridian* and *The Road* appear to have taken the process of the hell descent as far as it can go without regressing into pure and pointless nihilism. Though neither novel contains what can be declared as a happy ending, both works are still founded in a moral system based on Christian philosophy. In the absence of such a code, what sort of literature would exist but pessimism and vulgar pointlessness? Such is the mistake in current renditions of the hell journey depicted in cinema and video games⁸, whereby the protagonist only learns that they are dead and in hell so as to restart the entire process, leaving the soul of individual damned forever.

If, however, the hell descent trope is to be continued in literature properly, it will require a continuance of the classical journeyer, who is in fact the traditional hero—one

who is founded in the principles of a strict moral philosophy of good and evil. Without such a code of values, there can be no hope for escape from hell for either the protagonist or the reader. Still, the mere suggestion that one can be pulled out of hell appears to contradict Christian views of the rightful punishment bestowed upon the damned. Saint Augustine's theories of Heaven and Hell serve as a definitive example of wide-held Christian theology, however one aspect that appears flawed in his conception is that of his rejection of the idea of redemption for the damned. Augustine's view states that because "the Devil and his angels" (500) are promised to suffer for all eternity, so too must fallen souls. Augustine argues: "And since this is true of the Devil, how can men—whether all or some—be promised an escape, after some indefinitely long period, from this eternity of pain, without at once weakening our faith in the unending torment of the devils" (501). Even so, Augustine's fear—shared by many believers—is that the word of God, literally the Bible, will be contradicted if people believe in redemption for those in hell. Yet, perhaps Augustine was forgetting the instances where biblical figures suffering in a metaphorical hell, such as Jonah and Job, cried out to God for mercy and were thus saved. Even Christ claims: "I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Matt. 28.20). Christ, or God, cannot be with us "always" if he cannot also be with us in hell, and logically, if the Messiah can be with us in hell, then so too can he draw us out of hell. Thus, though Augustine's argument is sound, it does not stand as infallible, whereas—in Christianity—the word of Christ does. This principle is even referenced in *Blood Meridian*, during the revival sermon in the first chapter. The soon-to-be slandered Reverend Green preaches about a particular conversation with a sinner:

Neighbors, ... he couldnt stay out of these here hell, hell, hellholes

right here in Nacogdoches. I said to him, said: You goin to take the son of God in there with ye? And he said: Oh no. No I aint. And I said: Don't you know that he said I will foller ye always even unto the end of the road?

Well, he said, I aint askin nobody to go nowhere. And I said: Neighbor, you dont need to ask. He's a goin to be there with ye ever step of the way whether ye ask it or ye dont. I said: Neighbor, you caint get shed of him. Now. Are you going to drag him, *him*, into that hellhole yonder? (6, emphasis not mine)

Naturally, one cannot agree with both the assertions of Reverend Green—founded in the words of Christ—and Augustine, for one negates the other. Rather, it becomes a simple matter of understanding that a just and loving God would not permanently abandon his children, regardless of their sins. In illustrating the necessity of the salvation of the damned, Frye explains:

...if the leviathan is the whole fallen world of sin and death and tyranny into which Adam fell, it follows that Adam's children are born, live, and die inside his belly. Hence if the Messiah is to deliver us by killing the leviathan, he releases us. In the folk tale versions of dragon-killing stories we notice how frequently the previous victims of the dragon come out of him alive after he is killed. Again, if we are inside the dragon, and the hero comes to help us, the image is suggested of the hero going down the monster's open throat, like Jonah (who Jesus accepted as a prototype of himself), and returning with his redeemed behind him. (*Anatomy* 190)

Thus, in the case of stories incorporating the hell descent, for the “redeemed” to be freed from the awful confines of their prison hell, there must be a worthy hero. Granted, though there can be only one Christ, the principle of the messiah archetype proves that humanity has an innate desire to see the fallen redeemed. The logical question that arises when considering these elements is: does contemporary philosophy allow for idealistic conceptions like a savior to exist?

The prevalence of modern secularism would suggest that this is not the case. However, this does not prove that morality is dead, only that the very notion of morals has been called into question. Cormac McCarthy is quoted as saying:

“There’s no such thing as a life without bloodshed. ... I think the notion that the species can be improved in some way, that everything could live in harmony is a really dangerous idea. Those who are afflicted with this notion are the first ones to give up their souls, their freedom. Your desire that it be that way will enslave you and make your life vacuous.”

(Woodward)

As cynically as McCarthy’s statement is, it holds true with much of modern thought, which denies the possibility of a perfect world. While, it is true that to be a believer in God, people must “give up their souls”—that is, to overcome their selfishness—nothing can be further from the truth than to say that a life lived in “harmony” and absolute goodness is “vacuous.” The trouble with such a pessimistic and, frankly, anti-collectivist view likely stems from the limitations of the human perspective, which attempts to force notions of the extremes—all good or all evil—upon the physical world, which is naturally an imperfect place. However, when freed of arbitrary physical confines, ideas such as

Heaven and Hell allow for the existence of absolutes. Furthermore, if one were residing in either of the extremes, only with in the absence of God's presence in their life would one feel "vacuous."

Yet in such a scientific and evidence based world, it is unsurprising that there is such a prevalence of doubt in the world. Faith is a concept hard come by. Just as the priest in *The Crossing* longed for physical proof, so too does the world. Still, while those that believe blindly may be perceived as fools, recall the following exchange from the aftermath of Christ's resurrection from death, the aftermath of his hell journey:

"Then he [Jesus] said to Thomas, 'Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side. Do not disbelieve, but believe.' / Thomas answered him, 'My Lord and my God!' / Jesus said to him, 'Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed'" (John 20.27-29). Though lacking the argumentative punch of Christ's words to doubting Thomas, Saint Augustine's words on belief are likewise profound: "faith is really faith only when, in hope, it awaits that which is not yet seen in substance" (254).

Perhaps the obsession with hell is really just a matter of hoping to have the existence of Heaven verified. It seems easier for people to believe in the devil than to believe in God, so why wouldn't the same be true of the afterlife. Christ's parable of the workers hired to work a vineyard, from Matthew 20, comes to mind. In the story, the master of a house agrees to pay his laborers a specific wage to work that day. At different times in the day, the master goes out and hires additional workers, yet he offers them the same pay. When the last of those hired, the so-called "eleventh hour" workers, receive their payment, those who had been hired earlier:

grumbled at the master of the house, / saying, “These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.” / But he [the master] replied to one of them, “Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius? / Take what belongs to you and go. I choose to give to this last worker as I give to you. / Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?” (Matt. 20.11-15)

Though most theologians interpret the eleventh hour salvation as referring to those who are redeemed prior to the second coming of Christ on Earth, it is not illogical to also view the parable as referring to those caught in the depths of Hell. Should mankind then, as Jesus teaches, “begrudge” the “generosity” of God? Thus, though the fickle, the doubters, the wicked, and the layabouts may all find themselves in a place where, as Augustine writes, “there will be sufferings for both soul and body hold that the body will be burned in fire while the soul will be gnawed, as it were, by the ‘worm’ of grief”(498), they need not be forever consigned to eternal damnation. Not so long as the repentant cry aloud, as in Psalm 30: “O LORD my God, I cried to you for help, and you have healed me. / O LORD, you have brought up my soul from Sheol; you restored me to life among those who go down to the pit. / Sing praises to the LORD, O you his saints, and give thanks to his holy name” (2-4).

5.3—Finding Peace in the Harrowing of Hell

If one can take comfort in the existence of a place of punishment for the wicked,

then, logically, one can do the same for a paradise for the good. With that in mind, it is thus possible to view bleak underworld narratives as enlightening, and ultimately good for the soul. Theoretically, so long as humanity continues to gaze into the abyss, they will likewise have a reason to hope for Heaven. Frye refers to this as a “demonic epiphany” whereby the journeyer realizes the humor in darkness:

At the bottom of Dante’s hell, which is also the center of the spherical earth, Dante sees Satan standing upright in the circle of ice, and as he cautiously follows Virgil over the hip and thigh of the evil giant, letting himself down by the tufts of hair on his skin, he passes the center and finds himself no longer going down but going up, climbing out on the other side of the world to see the stars again. Tragedy and tragic irony take us into a hell of narrowing circles and culminate in some such vision of the source of all evil in a personal form. Tragedy can take us no farther; but if we preserve with the *mythos* of irony and satire, we shall pass a dead center, and finally see the gentlemanly Prince of Darkness bottom side up. (*Anatomy* 138-39)

Such a realization that “[t]ragedy can take us no farther” imbues the journeyer with a renewed sense of authority over one’s demons, enabling for the possibility of redemption of anyone willing to make the attempt.

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NOTES

Chapter One:

¹ Examples of such journeys include: Egyptian myth—the death and resurrection of Osiris (albeit as judge of the dead); Mesopotamian—the descent of Ishtar (goddess of fertility) which leaves the world temporarily infertile; Greek—the theft of Persephone, through which the earth is barren in fall and winter.

² As for much of humanity, what is more frightening than death?

³ That honor likely goes to one of the originators of Easter/Passion plays, which are known for their allegorical elements.

⁴ Paving the way for such classics as Mallory's *Le Morte d'Arthur*, Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*, and Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*.

⁵ Most concerning the usage of violence or religious allusions.

⁶ Generally dealing with parallel readings.

⁷ Timothy Parrish aptly notes: "...in McCarthy's western novels one encounters traces of Homer, the Greek tragedians, the King James Bible, Dante, Shakespeare, Cervantes, Milton, Herman Melville, and Mark Twain, not to mention Lucretius, St. Augustine, Charles Darwin, and Nietzsche" (67).

⁸ Northrop Frye defines archetypes as a form of "symbol," or "a typical or recurring image" (*Anatomy* 99). In clarifying, Frye explains:

I mean by an archetype a symbol which connects one poem with another and thereby helps to unify and integrate our literary experience. And as the archetype is the communicable symbol, archetypal criticism is primarily concerned with literature as a social fact and as a mode of communication. By the study of conventions and genres, it attempts to fit poems into the body of poetry as a whole. (99)

⁹ Which could just as easily be an analysis of Jungian forms as of the monomyth.

¹⁰ For instance, Eric Carl Link argues that: "McCarthy and Melville shared a vision of God—or, at least, they explored a similar portrait of God in a few of their works. He is the Weaver God, whose foot works the treadle of the loom of time on which chance, free will, and necessity are woven into the fabric of the natural world" (159).

¹¹ If the reader is meant to imagine that the story is happening in the real world, then the entire point of the hell journey is lost.

¹² For instance, a story might include elements that are described as "hellish"—as is typical in works of horror—but that does not make it a hell narrative.

¹³ In fact, the only way for a story that includes a collective of individuals to work as a hell story is for the collective to be excluded from society—as inhabitants of hell—however, that too breaks with the frame of the hell descent.

¹⁴ As with any mythic tale, universality is a necessary attribute when it comes to a narrative's acceptance across cultures, enabling the reader to reposition and tailor the tale to their own needs. In the case with the descent narrative, and because hell is in essence a realm out of time, such works should be likewise imbued with a classical sense of timelessness.

¹⁵ Which Odysseus and his men later fail to heed.

¹⁶ Take for instance some of the criticisms concerning Marlow's *Heart of Darkness*, which directly reference Dante's allegory. Terence N. Bowers' "Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and Dante's *Inferno*" strives to reconcile "the differences between the Inferno Marlow visits and the one Dante describes. These differences clarify the peculiar nature of the Hell formed by European imperialism, its logic of punishment, and its guiding idea" (91). Robert O. Evans' "Conrad's Underworld" seeks to "show that he [Conrad] did in fact make extensive use of the Inferno in the general structure of the story, and by his adoption of epic techniques and epic themes he accomplished something almost unique in the short story, or novelette" (56-57).

¹⁷ Subsequent Bible quotes are for the *English Standard Version*, therefore I have opted to remove the *ESV* reference from all future parenthetical citations.

¹⁸ Forced to wander in the aftermath of the Trojan War, where they too took part in violence and bloodshed—as the central protagonists of the works discussed herein participate.

¹⁹ Jacob Golomb and Robert S. Wistrich's *Nietzsche, Godfather of Fascism?: On the Uses and Abuses of a Philosophy* (2002) attempts to rationalize and debate the usage of Nietzschean philosophy by Hitler and Mussolini during WWII.

Chapter Two:

¹ Coleridge: "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" line 409.

² Admittedly, while there is nothing in the story of Job that suggests he was forced to confess or to relive the details of his hardship after his restoration, neither is there proof that he did not use it as a valid lesson for his children, or anyone else, that could come to doubt the supremacy of God. Likewise, the mere fact that story exists at all is a testament to the power of allegorical persuasion in story telling, be it truthful or fictitious, for someone had to first share the tale, which was later retold, and eventually collected into the Old Testament.

³ Wordsworth, Coleridge's friend, even suggests the Mariner lacks depth: "the principal person has no distinct character, either in his profession of Mariner, or as a human being who having been long under the control of supernatural impressions might be supposed himself to partake of something supernatural."

⁴ Curiously, the original 1798 version of "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" contains a different tag to the above description of Life-in-Death: "And she is far liker Death than he" (188). Yet even if one assumes that Life-in-Death is not meant to be any other kind of temptation, she is still an obviously an allegorical representation of the vice Lust, enticing men toward their deaths through sexual desire, which therefore fashions her "far liker Death than he" after all. Furthermore, because the sin inducing Life-in-Death is still the lover or "mate" ("Rime" 189) of Death, she is therefore just as capable of destruction.

⁵ Many critics have noted the concept of whiteness as an object of horror or evil. Of *Moby-Dick* Richard Chase writes: "Still the idea of the whale's whiteness is indispensable. Whiteness is the paradoxical color, the color that involves all the contradictions Melville attributes to nature. It signifies death and corruption as readily as

virginal purity, innocence, and youth” (60). Of *Heart of Darkness*, Ian Watt notes: “In the first section, Marlow’s European conception of blackness as inferior or evil is undermined when he finds no moral darkness in the black inhabitants of Africa, but is forced to link many of the traditional negative connotations of darkness with the colour white. In *Heart of Darkness* it is the white invaders, for instance, who are, almost without exception, embodiments of blindness, selfishness, and cruelty” (332). Some standout instances of whiteness as a form of death: in Melville’s *Moby-Dick*: the white-whale itself, the whalebone leg upon which Ahab stands, and in the white scar that cuts down Ahab’s face; in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*: the ivory (bones) sought by the imperialists, the ivory-colored Kurtz worshipped by the natives, and with the pale “Intended” haunted by Kurtz’s ghost at the end; in McCarthy’s *Blood Meridian*: the bald, white and devilish Judge Holden, and the corpses and bones of the dead; in McCarthy’s *The Road*: the paleness of the child, and (once again) the bones of the dead.

⁶ Ferguson views the poem as both spiritually and morally ambiguous—even so far as to suggest that the Mariner’s blessing of the sea-snakes can be construed as Satanic:

But if it seems like a conversion for a man who killed a rather appealing bird to see beauty in snakes, there is also room for a different interpretation. The bird is spoke of in Part V of the poem as something of a Christ figure, and we all know about the spiritual connotations of snakes. The Mariner’s conversion, then, may be a redemption, or, merely a deluded capitulation to the devil. (709).

⁷ The presence of angels working alongside the Mariner suggests that his prayers have been heard, who likewise defend the Mariner against the Polar Spirit that wishes vengeance for the dead albatross: ““The man hath penance done; / And penance more will do”” (“Rime” 408-409). Part of that penance is the continued guilt the Mariner feels upon seeing his shipmates, who still have “their stony eyes” (436) on him as the reason for their deaths: “The pang, the curse, with which they died, / Had never passed away” (438-439).

⁸ And as though to verify the sight of the Mariner’s homeland, the dead crew once more collapses, and from out of each formerly animated corpse stands “a seraph-man” (490) who wave one final good-bye and depart.

⁹ Two further notes on the Hermit. (1) “He is also the priest of Society, for it is by the Hermit, who urges the Pilot on despite his fears, that the Mariner is received back into the world of men” (Warren 681); (2) “The Hermit also speaks, and in his voice we hear the accents of religion modulated and enriched by admiration of the natural world. He is distinguished from the abject superstition of the Pilot and Pilot’s boy—but can we blame even them in the circumstances?—by his superior reflectiveness and honorable willingness to perform his ministry even in peril. But the Hermit is the first who apparently needs to hear the Mariner’s story, just as the Wedding Guest is the most recent.” (Fry 17).

¹⁰ Likewise, the Hermit’s question thematically recalls two of God’s question to Satan in the Book of Job: ““From where have you come?”” (1.7) and ““Have you considered my servant Job, that there is none like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, who

fears God and turns away from evil?” (1.8). God’s first question acts as a trigger for Satan to confess his sins, as the Hermit asks of the Mariner, while God’s second question calls for Satan to judge the quality of Job’s character, which the Hermit is also seeking to ascertain.

¹¹ Many critics assert the “epic” nature of Melville’s novel. Alfred Kazin writes: “*Moby-Dick* seems to be far more of a poem than it is a novel, and since it is a narrative, to be an epic, a long poem on any heroic theme, rather than the kind of realistic fiction that we know today” (40). Christopher Sten asserts: “In its most heightened form, it is also the subject of the world’s great modern epics, particularly spiritual epics, such as *The Divine Comedy* and *Paradise Lost*, that tell the story of a hero who makes a life-transforming journey into the deepest realms of the self and back out again” (1-2).

¹² Conrad echoes a similar concept at the start of *Heart of Darkness* when he mentions “[t]he fascination of the abomination” (10), or the quest to understand the mysteries of the dark parts of the world, including those in the hearts of men. Ishmael’s “abomination” is not only the sea, but rather Captain Ahab, and at times, the white-whale Moby-Dick. The undercurrent throughout the novel, however, is Ishmael’s fascination with death.

¹³ On this, critic Daniel Hoffman draws a curious parallel with the story of Jonah: “But where Jonah confessed his apostasy and the crew threw him overboard, Ahab’s ‘confession’ on the quarter-deck puts his entire crew in league with him. The Anti-Christ is at this stage an Anti-Jonah, welcoming the catastrophe his own mad pride had created” (64).

¹⁴ On Leviathan, Marius Bewley writes: “It is a symbol in which Melville was not only able to express his growing horror of evil in the universe, but his positive affirmation of an indestructible good. It is a deeply tragic symbol redeemed by a yet profounder religious intuition” (100). Daniel Hoffman eloquently asserts:

But Moby Dick is no more the God of *Moby-Dick* than Leviathan is the God of the Book of Job. The inscrutable whale, titanic in power, lovely in motion, ubiquitous in space, immortal in time, is the ultimate demonstration and absolute conviction of all anarchic, individualistic, egotistical, human doubt that there is a God beyond the powers of man to plumb. (70)

¹⁵ Curiously, critic Richard Chase argues: “For Melville there is little promise of renewal and reward after suffering. There is no transcendent ground where the painful contradictions of the human dilemma are reconciled. There is no life *through* death. There is only life *and* death, and for any individual a momentary choice between them” (58, emphasis not mine). While Chase is correct in the literal sense, reading *Moby-Dick* as allegory does in fact offer the “promise of renewal” for Ishmael, otherwise there would be no tale to tell.

¹⁶ Queequeg serves as the epitome of the pagan other, for when first mentioned, he is wandering about town attempting to sell “the heads of dead idolators” (*MD* 32). Upon finally making a physical appearance, Queequeg proves to be uniquely foreign, for he has no hair on his head, except for “small scalp-knot twisted up on his forehead” (34), and he is covered from head to toe in tattoos. And as though the strangeness of his appearance

and business practices are not enough, Queequeg's private habits are even more peculiar: he uses a harpoon to shave with, and he prays daily to a small black idol—the god Yojo.

¹⁷ To convince himself that it is acceptable to break the first of the Ten Commandments, Ishmael reasons to himself that God cannot “possibly be jealous of an insignificant bit of black wood” (*MD* 57), and in so doing “turn[s] idolator” (57), which certainly means that Ishmael has failed to “destroy all sin” as preached by Father Mapple. Furthermore, had Ishmael consulted the Book of Jonah, he would have found the following reminder: “Those who pay regard to vain idols / forsake their hope of steadfast love” (2.8).

¹⁸ Though, clearly, Elijah's words strike the wiser, post-adventure Ishmael as true.

¹⁹ On this particular motif, two important statements made by Daniel Hoffman stand out. The first paints the act of whaling as part of hero's quest: “The narrative of the hunt embodies the seminal myth of a divinely-endowed hero who in hand-to-hand combat rids his people of the evil monster that was their scourge. Ahab appears to belong in the company in which Ishmael jocularly enrolls himself: among Perseus, Theseus, and Saint George” (Hoffman 60). This is then contradicted, for “[w]hen the hunt is for a whale who seems to embody divine power, when the Hunters and Seekers are also Rebels against divinity or candidates for repentance and redemption, it is inevitable that the Biblical legend of Jonah govern much of the metaphor and the action” (Hoffman 61). Thus, while appearing noble, the act is in fact directly responsible for self-damnation, and the eventual requirements of salvation—achieved through repentance.

²⁰ Such as Kazin's assertions to Ahab's heroic qualities: “But Ahab is not just a fanatic who leads the whole crew to their destruction; he is a hero of thought who is trying, by terrible force, to reassert man's place in nature. And it is the struggle that Ahab incarnates that makes him so magnificent a *voice*, thundering in Shakespearean rhetoric, storming at the gates of the inhuman, silent world. Ahab is trying to give man, in one awful, final assertion that his will *does* mean something, a feeling of relatedness with his world.” (44, emphasis not mine)

²¹ Which hearkens back to the Mariner's sin of murder.

²² Nor is it surprising that Ahab is quite often mentioned in relation to *Blood Meridian's* resident devil: “If ‘Suttree’ strives to be ‘Ulysses,’ ‘Blood Meridian’ has distinct echoes of ‘Moby-Dick,’ McCarthy's favorite book. A mad hairless giant named Judge Holden makes florid speeches not unlike Captain Ahab's” (Woodward).

²³ Bewley writes: “From the very beginning, Moby-Dick is not a symbol of evil to Ishmael, but a magnificent symbol of creation itself” (107).

²⁴ Hoffman adds the following: “‘Saved’ by the ship, the *Pequod* for him becomes the whale it so curiously resembles. When it sinks, he is cast forth as Jonah was spewed from the mouth of the fish” (65).

²⁵ Concerning such matters, Sten writes: “Not the Whale, but the grace the Whale embodies—this is what the hero must seek. The Whale's ‘grace’ cannot be destroyed, as Ahab would have it, for it is of the very essence of life; and life, we must know from Melville's tale, is the abiding, indestructible mystery” (82).

²⁶ Of this particular scene, Bewley writes: “It seems obvious to me that the source (though probably the unconscious source) of this vision of circling whales is Canto

XXVIII of the *Paradiso*” (103).

²⁷ “In the Hell created by European imperialism death and torment are meted out in an arbitrary, irrational fashion’ (T. Bowers 93).

²⁸ The Congo River in Conrad’s tale is traditionally viewed as representative of one of the great rivers of the underworld. Robert O. Evans writes: “Africa represents Hell and the great river, Acheron, Phlegethon, Styx, of all the rivers of Hell together is a traditional interpretation of the story” (56). Harold Fisch argues: “Marlow in *Heart of Darkness* is a questing hero who, like Aeneas, visits the underworld there to confront Erebus, son of Chaos, and to behold Phlegethon, the river of Death. There are also arguable traces of Dante’s *Inferno* in Marlow’s journey up-river. Kurtz—who is not only an adventurer but also a poet, painter and musician—re-enacts Orpheus’s descent into the region of Hades, there to behold forbidden things and eventually to be torn to pieces by the Thracian women” (116).

²⁹ Furthermore, the biblical serpent is also associated with Leviathan.

³⁰ Juliet McLauchlan writes: “The tremendous power of *Heart of Darkness* consists in its revelation of the capacity of a human soul, without external religious sanctions of any sort, to struggle with itself, to find within itself values by which it can and must judge its actions—and condemn them” (382).

³¹ On the Fates, Ian Watt argues: “Several critics have made the two knitters a primary basis for a large-scale symbolic interpretation of *Heart of Darkness* in which Marlow’s whole journey becomes a version of the traditional descent into hell, such as that in the sixth book of Virgil’s *Aeneid*, and in Dante’s *Inferno*. This kind of critical interpretation assumes that the symbolic reference of the verbal sign must be closed rather than open, and that it arises, not from the natural and inherent associations of the object, but from a preestablished body of ideas, stories, or myths. The present passage certainly makes symbolic reference to associations of this kind: Marlow presents his own experience in the general perspective of the pagan and Christian traditions of a journey to the underworld” (324).

³² Robert Wilson explains: “Ivory is the main topic of conversation at the next circle of the *Inferno* that Marlow visits, the region of hell proper (the Central Station) where Satan (the manager) and his cohorts reside. The demons plot to gain as much ivory as possible to insure their dominance in the world” (143,145).

³³ Those heads recall the “cannibal business” (*MD* 32) of Queequeg selling shrunken heads, and yet also precede the severed heads in McCarthy’s *The Road*: “The wall beyond held a frieze of human heads, all faced alike, dried and caved with their taut grins and shrunken eyes” (76).

³⁴ The idea of death as a lover reoccurs in “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner,” with the lecherous figure of Life-in-Death—of whom the Mariner asks: “Is Death that woman’s mate?” (189)—and in *Moby-Dick* with Ahab’s abandonment of his “widowed” (405) wife for the thrill of hunting death—turning the harpooning and slaughter of whales into a kind of sexual eroticism, as well a form of infidelity. Even McCarthy alludes to a similar concept in *The Road*, when the father argues with his wife about suicide:

I dont care. It’s meaningless. You can think of me as a faithless slut if

you like. I've taken a new lover. He can give me what you cannot. [wife]
Death is not a lover. [man]
Oh yes he is. (48)

Chapter Three:

¹ *Notes on Blood Meridian*.

² Specifically, the “law of attraction” principle, popularized in Rhonda Byrne’s *The Secret* (2006), which suggests that people’s thoughts create or shape reality.

³ On this, Timothy Parrish writes: “The judge’s power is limited only by his recognition that he did not make the world he explores and presumes to name. Arguably, he is usurping the power of the Creator; through his acts of destruction he assumes a knowledge that is unique and lays claim to possessing the origin of the world he explores” (75).

⁴ In discussing this very aspect, Dianne Luce writes that Elrod serves as: “the kid’s double. The man’s opposition to him suggests his repudiation of the youth he has been and his belief in his own moral progress” (40). How appropriate is it then that the murder that brings the kid—now “the man”—back into the hands of the judge is in fact a variation of his former self?

⁵ Robert L. Jarrett perceptively notes: “The Glanton gang of scalphunters, McCarthy’s choice of subject matter in *Blood Meridian*, are antiheroic borderers who can wield their ‘trade’ profitably only in the frontier, at the margins of American society and of the geographical nation” (75). Indeed, any murder is a marginal figure.

⁶ On this matter, Cassie Polasek writes:

Unlike Ishmael, the kid does not narrate the story. Rather, their anonymity establishes a similarity between the kid and Ishmael; the reader knows little of their lives before they came to join their respective crews. Perhaps, this anonymity allows one to look beyond Ishmael and the kid in order to discover one over-arching theme present in each of these complex works: ambiguity. (83)

⁷ David Williams writes that in such instances: “The kid, then, has violated the rules of the dance according to the Judge” (20).

⁸ Patrick W. Shaw notes: “Misled by the Christian icon he carries, and possibly having wandered too long in the desert with expriest Tobin, the kid impulsively confesses to the penitent in rhetoric reminiscent of a questing Christian knight in thrall to the Holy Virgin” (113).

⁹ David Williams explains: “The challenge to the Judge’s reign is the extension of mercy. The kid is not a hero, and his challenge to the Judge is unintentional and unreflective, but there is no denying that he does extend aid to other, and this, according to the Judge, is how he broke faith with the gang” (20).

¹⁰ Robert Jarrett asserts: “The kid’s ‘good heart,’ which the judge refers to as ‘a witness against yourself,’ suggests an ethical repudiation of the judge’s and the gang’s violence, although as member of the gang’s culture the kid participates in and benefits from that violence” (87).

¹¹ On the butchering of the penitents, Josef Benson astutely writes: “These gruesome, striking images suggest that previous laws of morality have broken down and given way to laws overseen by the judge. Religious asylums exist as false refuges for the weak instead of places of healing” (240).

¹² On a similar note, Mundik writes: “Many of the massacres in *Blood Meridian* seem to take place within churches, suggesting that the so-called house of God is a place of false hope, offering no sanctuary against an evil world” (“Striking” 86).

¹³ Interestingly, while it functions separately from my argument, Patrick W. Shaw reads the Elrod scene as a challenge to the kid’s heterosexuality, forcing the kid to kill the boy so as to maintain his heterosexual stance.

Elrod the bonepicker exemplifies the Neanderthal culture that roams a landscape from which Indians, buffalo, and practically all other forms of natural life have been extirpated. Ironically, for one so seemingly inconsequential, Elrod is textually preeminent. He is the character who unites the judge’s pedophilia, the kid’s heterosexual truculence, the Marian impulses, and event in the impeding jakes scene. (Shaw 113-114)

¹⁴ Leo Daughterty: “And it is the warrior judge’s work to achieve dominion—to be the realized territorial archon of *this* Anaretic planet—through becoming the totalizing victor in all conflicts, real and perceptual, involving his will” (164, emphasis not mine).

¹⁵ Dianne Luce notes: “His blatant manipulation of the men and then ridiculing their belief should alert them to resist his rhetorical bullying, but they are as dazzled by the intellectual displays as by the physical ones and, except for Tobin, little armed by education or temperament to meet him on these grounds” (23-24).

¹⁶ Other critics have picked up on this fact as well. Eric Miles Williamson writes:

Judge Holden seems to be the embodiment of Nietzschean philosophic and aesthetic principles, a working out of Nietzsche’s concern with moral values and the value of these values themselves. This is not to say that the judge represents McCarthy’s ideological stance, or that McCarthy deliberately fashions Judge Holden after Nietzsche’s Superman: to be sure, however, Judge Holden is unlike other typically obsessed or evil characters in fiction, characters which usually serve at some level a didactic purpose. Ahab, Lear, Kurtz, Wolf Larsen and Sutpen, for instance, clearly have their faults and are destroyed because of them. . . . Judge Holden, on the other hand, not only seems faultless (if we take the issue of morality out of the equation), but emerges victorious and dancing. (262).

Russell Hillier adds: “McCarthy’s image of the meteorite as a gargantuan, grinding tooth speaks to *Blood Meridian*’s abounding instances where the Judge, as a self-styled Nietzschean superman, supervises the action with his vast, wide, sinister smile” (60).

Steven Frye elaborates: “Given that the judge is destructive and malevolent, it may appear that McCarthy is critical of Nietzschean ideas, but he allows the judge to speak at length in a distinct blend of philosophical argument and poetic expression. Readers are forced to consider the legitimacy of his claims regardless of how he chooses to apply

them” (“Histories” 7).

¹⁷ Stephen Pastore argues against the Satan role for the judge:

But if he is simply satanic, then where is God in this tale? Even the most fervent atheist would be compelled to acknowledge the existence of God if the devil is known to exist. But he [the judge] is neither charming, beguiling or attractive in any way. Judge Holden is a physical monstrosity. Satan is the consummate conman; he must, therefore, possess attributes that attract people, not repel them. (108).

However, Pastore fails to consider two important aspects. First, Dante’s Satan is equally, if not more so, hideous in *Inferno*. Second, God need not always appear in stories at the same time as the devil, for that would convey a simplicity of plotting akin to the passion plays, providing a deus ex machine to a story without a genuine hero. But if searching for God in *Blood Meridian*, one merely has to look back to the scene with the burning tree.

¹⁸ Commenting on the Reverend Green scene specifically, Williamson writes:

McCarthy accomplishes two things here: one, that the judge is not only outside religion, but he, like Nietzsche, has contempt for it; and two, that even those who claim to be religious (the men at the revival who later laugh at the judge’s slander and buy the judge a drink) are in their hearts not religious in the Judeo-Christian sense—they enjoy lies and they enjoy the suffering of others. (264).

¹⁹ “The judge’s unyielding law ironically provides a space where a comparatively ineffectual character like the kid can be heroic. The kid does fail but not before inadvertently exposing the judge and his abominable philosophies. Others, like the expriest, disagree with the judge, but only the kid lives long enough to construct an identity outside the judge’s pale” (Benson 232).

²⁰ Coleridge writes:

The Bible is the appointed conservatory, an indispensable criterion and a continual source and support of true Belief. But that the Bible is the sole source; that it not only contains, but constitutes, the Christian Religion; that it is, in short, a Creed, consisting wholly of articles of Faith; that consequently we need no rule, help, or guide, spiritual or historical, to teach us what parts are and what are not articles of Faith—all being such-- and the difference between the Bible and Creed being this, that the clauses of the latter are all unconditionally necessary to salvation, but those of the former conditionally so, that is, as soon as the words are known to exist in any one of the canonical Books; and that, under this limitation, the belief is of the same necessity in both, and not at all affected by the greater or lesser importance of the matter to be believed;—this scheme differs widely from the preceding, though its adherents often make use of the same words in expressing their belief. (“The Bible” 587-88)

²¹ Likewise, the kid’s loner tendencies prevent him from surrounding himself with a genuine preacher of the word, who could share the gospel to an illiterate man.

²² With the “eldress of the rocks,” pseudo Virgin Mary.

²³ Though McCarthy never writes a sex scene for the kid, there are a few hints. In the first chapter, McCarthy writes: “At night whores call to him from the dark like souls in want” (*BM* 5). In his final verbal confrontation with the judge, Holden exclaims: “Where are the ladies, ah the fair and tender ladies with whom you danced at the governor’s ball when you were a hero anointed with the blood of the enemies of the republic you’d elected to defend?” (331). Lastly, just prior to his death, man’s attempt at sex with a “dark little dwarf of a whore” (332) is foiled by what appears to be impotence.

²⁴ Of possessions, as wells as scalps.

²⁵ Judge Holden: “Dont you know that I’d have loved you like a son?” (*BM* 306)

²⁶ I further add that the judge is not only seeking a son, but his own likeness. In a hallucinatory dream parable, the kid witnesses the judge hovering over a counterfeiter: “It is this false moneyer with his gravers and burins who seeks favor with the judge and he is at contriving from cold slag brute in the crucible a face that will pass, an image with will render this residual specie current in the markets where men barter. Of this is the judge judge and the night does not end” (*BM* 310). Leo Daugherty writes: “It is clearly outside the judge’s will for the forger to succeed . . . , whereas it appears to us as more likely that this *would* be the judge’s will” (166, emphasis not mine). While the judge does appear finicky, I believe that the judge was seeking a replication of himself—his likeness in the kid. However, only upon realizing the incomparable difference between them, does Holden pass final judgment.

²⁷ According to “a pagan orator” Constantine had “a vision of Apollo . . . at a shrine in Gaul” (Matthews), which acted as the drive for his pseudo conversion.

²⁸ Such as William Fredrick, who writes:

The Gentiles were an idolatrous people who worshipped the sun, and Sunday was their most sacred day. . . .

. . . To change the Gentile’s day would have been an offence and a stumbling block to them. The church could naturally reach them better by keeping *their* day. And since one day is no more holy than any other, it could make no difference to the church whether they kept the *first* or the *last* day of the week. (169-70, emphasis not mine)

²⁹ The kid and Toadvine set fire to a hotel, to which the judge was witness: “When he passed back through the town the hotel was burning and men were standing around watching it, some holding empty buckets. A few men sat horseback watching the flames and one of these was the judge. . . . When the kid looked back the judge smiled” (*BM* 14).

³⁰ Critics have made the connection between Holden and the whale. Petra Mundik notes: “This gigantic, hairless, albino creature—which stands nearly seven feet tall and weighs around 300 pounds—evokes the sinister whiteness and monstrosity of *Moby Dick*” (“Striking” 80).

³¹ An alternative viewpoint is to see Fort Griffin as the deepest pit of Hell, the bottom of Dante’s *Inferno*. However, for the sake of my argument, I read this city of sin less as the City of Dis and more as Jonah’s Nineveh.

³² Though, Jonah seems predisposed toward thoughts of death. After the repentance of Nineveh, Jonah again longs for death because of his dissatisfaction with enacting God.

This provides the Lord with another teaching experience, that of the value of the lives of those in Nineveh.

³³ Jay Ellis.

³⁴ Harold Bloom.

³⁵ Though not necessarily meshing with my argument, Daugherty adds an interesting interpretation of the ending passage: “I think McCarthy may be showing us in the epilogue, in parable form, his reading of himself as writer—particularly in opposition to others” (170).

³⁶ Steven Frye writes:

In *Blood Meridian*, the kid travels through the American west, perpetually tempted to acts of violence, and in the end he resists the judge’s ethic of war. Especially in *The Road*, the blighted earth is, upon a close and historically grounded reading, without doubts this same typological wilderness. The post-apocalyptic and wasted world has often been misread as simple metaphor, as an existential void in which father and son can only find meaning in the brief and contingent love that binds them, in a universe devoid of hope or God. Read carefully in the context of the tradition that informs McCarthy, a new and more informed reading emerges. Father and son wander a typological wilderness, vividly reminiscent of the Old and New Testaments, where they ponder the existence of God, the role of goodness and decency, and, similar to Christ, encounter a Satan figure Ely who tempts them to abandon all hope and faith. Clearly theirs is a spiritual trail prefigured in the Bible, and father and son must decide whether human kindness is worth preserving, with the question of God emerging frequently in discussion. (“Histories” 8)

Chapter Four:

¹ On the wasteland motif, Northrop Frye explains:

The vegetable world is a sinister force like the ones we meet in *Comus* or the opening of *Inferno*, or a heath, which from Shakespeare to Hardy has been associated with tragic destiny, or a wilderness like that of Browning’s *Childe Roland* or Eliot’s *Waste Land*. . . . In the Bible the waste land appears in its concrete universal form in the tree of death, the tree of forbidden knowledge in Genesis, the barren figtree of the Gospels, and the cross. (*Anatomy* 149)

² Indeed, it is possible to place the story in the confines of many classic tales of wandering through wastelands. For instance, Susan Kollin writes: “McCarthy places the American landscape of *The Road* alongside the prehistoric and the pharaonic; his environment is thus Homeric, biblical as well as contemporary” (166).

³ Of the book’s name, Linda Woodson notes: “[t]he very title, *The Road*, alludes to the road of life on which the human journey is distinguished from that of all other journeys only by the complexities of human language, as well as by the capacity for witnessing the history of those journeys made possible through language” (22).

⁴ Darkness is particularly important in the hell narrative. Northrop Frye notes: “The demonic divine world largely personifies the vast, menacing stupid powers of nature as they appear to a technologically undeveloped society. Symbols of heaven in such a world tend to become associated with the inaccessible sky, and the central idea that crystallizes from it is the idea of inscrutable fate or external necessity” (*Anatomy* 147). *The Road* is very much a place need and suffering.

⁵ It is worth noting that the original working title of *The Road* was “The Grail” (Josephs), which naturally implies a holy quest of a God appointed knight.

⁶ Novelist, and sometimes critic, Michael Chabon writes: “The world post-apocalypse is not Waterworld; it’s the Underworld. In his stories, his memories, and above all in his dreams, the father in *The Road* is visited as poignantly and dreadfully as Odysseus or Aeneas by ghosts, by the gibbering shades of the former world that populate the gray sunless hell which he and his son are daily obliged to harrow.” Manuel Broncano argues that the protagonists’ journey “resembles Dante’s route into hell. ... Like Virgil, the father escorts his son—or is it the son who escorts his father?—through the circles of the Averno while trying to instill in him memories of a past that for the boy is but a tale, the story told by his father of a world that he never knew and can hardly imagine” (126). Thomas H. Schaub writes: “From the time they first take up the novel, readers so inclined cannot help reading *The Road* as an allegory of spiritual survival. ... We are to read *The Road* then as a story of a quest” (154).

⁷ For instance, the second human being father and son encounter holds a blade up the child’s throat and attempts to kill them. The only survivors they meet are liars, thieves, murderers, and cannibals.

⁸ After the father shoots the “roadrat” that had threatened his son, McCarthy writes: “This was the first human being other than the boy he’d spoken to in more than a year” (*TR* 64).

⁹ Linda Woodson discusses this element: “Because Ely is the only named character in the narrative, a number of readings of his presence in the text are possible. His relationship to the linguistic landscape is clear, however. Ely, rather than being the usual blind seer or wise prophet, is merely a survivor, and the details he shares about his survival are lies. Instead of a message of hope, he offers a dark prediction” (23).

¹⁰ Something McCarthy is likely aware of given his Catholic (Christian) upbringing.

¹¹ Recall the father’s quote from the beginning of the novel: “If he is not the word of God God never spoke” (*TR* 4). However, the father is selfishly protective of his version of the word of God.

¹² Curiously, Donovan Gwinner writes of these blessings as a form of reward for proper conduct: “The narrative order of confronting cannibalism directly and disavowing any possibility of indulging in it leads to two closely placed high points of their scavenging, finding the home with the cistern and the orchard and, most gloriously, uncovering the stocked bunker. ... it is as if the boons reward them for reaffirming the cannibalism taboo” (147).

¹³ Assuming that these mothers are even alive, they are often reticent and uncaring. In *All the Pretty Horses*, for instance, John Grady Cole’s mother hardly speaks to him during the brief time she appears in the book, and that is only to undermine his desires of

running the Grady ranch by selling it off to an oil company. She even disappeared from his life for a few years when he was a child, to pursue her acting career, leaving John Grady with more affection for the domestic helpers Luisa and Abuela as his genuine maternal figures. Further worth considering is the ending to McCarthy's recent screenplay *The Counselor*, which has the villainous Malkina, after walking away with a great deal of stolen money, pregnant from an unknown male—likely Westray, who Malkina has killed by severing his head with a “bolito.” Of all the unworthy mothers in McCarthy's works, Malkina pregnancy is really quite terrifying, for when asked about the father, Malkina jests: “The best kind of father is a dead father” (180).

¹⁴ In Christianity alone, note the sheer number of people that pray to the Virgin Mary, deified by Catholicism because she was the mother of Christ.

¹⁵ “Do you still hold fast your integrity? Curse God and die” (Job 2.9).

¹⁶ Going back to the First Commandment: how can the man love God if he will not trust in Him?

¹⁷ Chris Danta writes: “[t]hroughout the story, the son acts as the moral compass for his father, checking the father's survivalist tendencies whenever these result in cruel or amoral behavior toward others” (16). The implication being that if the son were not present, the man would have digressed into savagery long before.

¹⁸ Which, as Gwinner defines, is “a metaphor that connotes civilization itself, civility as honorable behavior, and that which is sacred” (148).

¹⁹ A few examples are: “I will bring distress on mankind, so that they shall walk like the blind, because they have sinned against the LORD; their blood shall be poured out like dust, and their flesh like dung” (Zeph. 1.17); “Then a demon-oppressed man who was blind and mute was brought to him, and he healed him, so that the man spoke and saw” (Matt. 12.22); “Let them alone; they are blind guides. And if the blind lead the blind, both will fall into a pit” (Matt. 15.14); “So they said again to the blind man, ‘What do you say about him, since he has opened your eyes?’ He said, ‘He is a prophet.’” (John 9.17); “Jesus said, ‘For judgment I came into this world, that those who do not see may see, and those who see may become blind’” (John 9.39); “And Jesus said to him, ‘What do you want me to do for you?’ And the blind man said to him, ‘Rabbi, let me recover my sight’” (Mark 10.51); “For whoever lacks these qualities is so nearsighted that he is blind, having forgotten that he was cleansed from his former sins” (2 Pet. 1.9).

²⁰ This recalls a notion suggested in the previous chapter regarding the kid's own personalized version of Hell.

²¹ Gwinner notes: “Oddly, it is as if the father must die for the boy to find what the father is seemingly unprepared to find: good guys, namely the veteran and his family. While the father lives, there is never a truly promising opportunity to expand the family by joining with others” (153).

²² Gwinner writes: “In the truncated portrait of his new life, a brief paragraph sketching the fulfillment of what the boy had wanted all along and what his father had prophesied for him, there are three references to ‘God,’ but the boy seems unable to embrace the holy fire of religion to carry it” (154).

²³ I stress the point because it is so prevalent in scripture.

²⁴ Of this, Gwinner accurately notes: “If there is one thing actual readers *cannot* know, it is the world after the kind of global cataclysm depicted in *The Road*, but readers *can* experience the scene of the final paragraph: trout still exist; they can be seen” (155-156, emphasis not mine).

²⁵ However, Paul Patton provides one potential reading of the end paragraph that returns to the nihilism of Nietzschean thought: “We can take this to suggest the possibility of a world without humans, but we can also suppose that the boy represents not so much the messiah as the possibility of a genuine metamorphosis of the human animal. He is like the child whose coming is announced at the end of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*: the first of Zarathustra’s children, an indication or sign that humanity in its present and past incarnations will be succeeded by an ‘overhuman’ being freed of resentment and the ascetic ideal that ministered to this sickness” (142-143).

Chapter 5:

¹ On this matter, Steven Frye writes: “McCarthy’s inquiry into philosophy has been life-long and varied. Although he has been reluctant to discuss the books he has read, his novels engage a broad range of philosophical systems both ancient and modern. At times, he works to integrate them in a single novel or play. However, McCarthy encourages readers not to assume that his works imply articulate philosophy in the novel form. In *Blood Meridian*, perhaps his most overtly philosophical novel, McCarthy’s narrator warns readers that even Judge Holden, who expresses his ideas at length, cannot be contained or characterized by any one system” (“Histories” 5).

² “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).

³ Summed up best with his cycle of the hero’s journey, on which he writes:

The changes rung on the simple scale of the monomyth defy description. Many tales isolate and greatly enlarge upon one or two of the typical elements of the full cycle (test motif, flight motif, abduction of the bride), others string a number of independent cycles into a single series (as in the *Odyssey*). Differing character or episodes can become fused, or a single element can reduplicate itself and reappear under many changes. (Campbell 246)

⁴ Morality—literally right and wrong—is often the issue at heart in McCarthy works. For instance, in *No Country For Old Men*, one of the protagonists, Llewellyn, makes a choice to steal a case of money from drug dealers, which initiates a chain reaction that culminates in the death of himself, and eventually, his wife.

⁵ To counter that point, however, I argue that just because the protagonists lack spiritual direction, does not mean the works themselves are not rooted in Christian thought. Take for instance the scene in *All the Pretty Horses* where protagonist John Grady Cole, shares a meal with field workers. Before they eat, an elder among them offers up the following prayer, paraphrased by McCarthy’s narrator: “He asked that God remember those who had died and he asked that the living gathered together here remember that the corn

grows by the will of God and beyond that will there is neither corn nor growing nor light nor air nor anything at all save only darkness” (221).

⁶ Black’s philosophy follows the way of peace and love: “Suppose I was to tell you that if you could bring yourself to unlatch your hands from around your brother’s throat you could have life everlasting?” (*TSL* 78).

⁷ Though not too shocking, especially when one considers lines like: “And he [Christ] said to all, ‘If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. / For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it’” (Luke 9.23-24). The implication of following Christ is the desire to be Christ, which includes crucifixion and resurrection.

⁸ The *Silent Hill* video game and film series is a prime example of this. *Silent Hill 2* (2001) is a perfect example of this, containing a rather shocking and nihilistic ending in which the audience learns that the protagonist, James Sunderland, has been doomed to hell from the start because he murdered his own wife (albeit out of mercy). Other entries in the series toy with the notion of insanity being the reason the protagonists are in hell.