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John VanOverbeke
University of St. Thomas

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Thoreau, *Blood Meridian*, and the Myth of the Gunslinger

by

John VanOverbeke

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of the requirements for the degree

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ABSTRACT

The gunslinger archetype has appeared in countless western stories and seems almost synonymous with the genre itself. Yet this fixture of the western genre has escaped critical attention and has been conflated with the related, yet separate characters of the cowboy and the outlaw. This archetype finds its metaphorical and mythological roots in the writings of Henry David Thoreau and undergoes an evolution from its first major appearance in *Riders of the Purple Sage,* through *Shane,* to *Once Upon a Time in the West,* finally culminating in the character of the Judge, from Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian.* This evolution reveals how the gunslinger is an embodiment of the tension inherent to the wilderness/civilization binary which these texts employ and attempt to surpass. As each of these texts tries to reckon with the tensions the gunslinger embodies, we see that it is the pervasive use of violence that defines the gunslinger's narrative role.

Critics and historians have worked tirelessly to explore every corner of the vastness of what has become known as the American West, both the actual history of the conquest and settlement of the western territories and the legends and myths, which now populate the American popular imagination. Those legends and myths as they appear in film, television, literature, and even video games, are strikingly dissimilar from the historical events that took place in the latter half of the 19th century. As these fictions have taken on a life of their own, and formed their own patterns and expectations, it is possible to trace over time how the genre of the western and its archetypes took shape. Instead of lamenting the discontinuity between the genre of the western and the original social, political, and economic contexts that preceded it, rather, let us explore how (and why) the homesteader, the marshal, the rustler, and the cattle baron archetypes formed as they did. John G. Cawelti argues in *The Six-Gun Mystique* that the study of the western genre is focused on understanding the development and evolution of the fictional conventions and archetypes that entertained Americans for a century, rather than an exploration of historical facts. This study will strive to emulate this critical approach, and exploring of the foundation and evolution of the gunslinger archetype in the American consciousness.

As this study unfolds, I will show the necessity of differentiating the gunslinger archetype from other figures of the American West, particularly the cowboy and the outlaw. This fine distinction has been absent from previous inquiries and serves to bring the gunslinger archetype into significant social and mythological relief. While the cowboy and the outlaw are important, and play their own vital roles in a full understanding of the western myth, the distinction between their narrative function, and the role filled by the gunslinger, is significant.

Furthermore, this study is not intended to address the origin of the term gunslinger, which the Oxford English Dictionary indicates was understood as synonymous with gun-man, and which was first used in 1953. This definition and its date further underscores the temporal disjunction between the historical American West, and the generic archetype with which this study is concerned.

While both the cowboy and the outlaw have enjoined significant critical attention for their roles in the American West, the gunslinger has escaped sustained analysis. All three could potentially be handy with a gun, but a cowboy is not defined by his use of violence, but rather as his role as a hired hand tending to livestock. Whether on a cattle drive, or as merely a ranch hand, the cowboy's social position is defined economically by his employment. He is a hired hand. The outlaw, conversely, is defined entirely by his relationship to the law. He functions, willfully and consciously, outside the boundaries of lawful society. Furthermore, their respective social roles rest comfortably on either side of the wilderness/civilization[1] divide. The cowboy's position within society is justified and economically secure. The outlaw's opposition to lawful society is equally steadfast. It is the gunslinger, who, while he may be handy on a cattle drive, who may work as a ranch hand, and who may even be on the wrong side of the law, is not defined by belonging to one of these categories. Rather, the gunslinger archetype moves in, out of, and beyond the economic, legal, domestic, and moral structures of society to

[1] The binaries of wilderness and civilization, chaos and structure, and savagery and enlightenment, are of course deeply problematic and reductive. Nevertheless, such binaries were actively at work in, and in many ways defined, the social and political frameworks that gave rise to the myth of the American West. My use of terms associated with these binaries is not an endorsement of them, but rather an acknowledgment of the frameworks within which the tropes and archetypes of the mythic west developed throughout the 19th and 20th centuries.

fulfill a deeper mythic need. While he may be both cowboy and outlaw at once, he is also more than either. In this way, the archetype is made to embody a presumed liminality between what are deemed wilderness and civilization. This distinction, from the cowboy and outlaw, as well as the continual and central presence of violence are critical. For, in my conception of the figure, the gunslinger speaks to a tension between individual freedoms and social constraints, a tension often figured through the wildness/civilization binary. As such, the gunslinger embodies the desire to see that tension resolved through the violent triumph of the individual. Transgression of the social contract by the individual is usually justified with an appeal to higher moral laws (as is the case with Thoreau), but it eventually it broadens into gunslinger figures like Judge Holden, whose violent and monstrous embodiment of individual action problematizes the nature of this individualistic power fantasy. This definition necessarily suggests the gunslinger archetype can appear in other genres, but his birthplace still resides within that genre and in relation to the conceptual binary of civilization and wildness. I will argue that the gunslinger can find his roots in the writings of Henry David Thoreau and that resting on this foundation, the archetype evolved and crystalized alongside the western genre itself, reaching the limits of the archetype in Cormac McCarthy's novel *Blood Meridian*, which challenges the underlying desires and tensions upon which the archetype is built.

While it may seem unusual to suggest that a supposedly peaceful writer from New England could be associated with the development of a violent western archetype, Thoreau's writings on wilderness are particularly useful and resonant in tracing the development of the popular American conception of the West. Though Thoreau rarely ventured far from his beloved Concord, his ideas of the Frontier serve as a primary metaphor when understanding

the development of the western genre. Furthermore, it is necessary to highlight one more distinction, critical to an exploration of the gunslinger archetype. When I argue that the archetypes roots can be found in the writings of Thoreau, it is not intended as a matter of history, but rather of genre. Indeed, if we wish to explore the historical facts of the West, Richard Slotkin's three volumes on the development of the frontier myth in America history is indispensable. As a portion of his thesis, Slotkin suggests that in the struggle over the vast lands of North America, white settlers began to fetishize and mythologize the solitary hunter/Indian-fighter figure. In the battle between civilization and savage wilderness, the individuals that could harness the supposed savagery and violence of the Indian to make way for the encroachment of civilization were highly regarded and developed their own mythic status. Examples are wide-ranging and can include everything from James Fennimore Cooper's Leatherstocking to George Armstrong Custer. As will be seen shortly, this historical analysis even applies to Thoreau's writings on John Brown. Slotkin argues that Brown fulfilled the racially justified role of hunter/Indian-fighter, but in a context where his righteous violence was turned back on his own civilization. While this historical analysis is important, for the sake of this paper, which seeks to understand the mythopoetic and generic origins of an archetype, it can only take us so far.

Despite Thoreau's widespread reputation as an advocate of non-violence and his inspirational role in the non-violent movements of Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr., much of Thoreau's writing is decidedly pro-violence. Patrick Dooley goes so far as to suggest that, "Thoreau began espousing pacifism, tolerance, populism and anarchy in the sense that laws and political authority are in-essential. In the end, he advocated violence, arrogance, elitism

and anarchy in the pejorative sense of disorder and chaos" (Dooley 181). Though Thoreau has gained a reputation as an advocate of nonviolence, particularly from his essay "Civil Disobedience," many of his writings, particularly "Walking," and "John Brown," suggest a broad willingness to use violence to achieve what he considers higher moral goods. Across these three texts, we see how his views on violence and its social function both recall the classical tradition of the Knight Errant, and begin to outline the archetypal figure of the western gunslinger.

Since it forms the basis of his reputation for non-violence, "Civil Disobedience" must serve as a beginning point. Though it has been read as a call to non-violence, another approach to the text suggests that it is not violence to which Thoreau is opposed. As it is, what we are left with is a text that is more personal than political and is at best rather ambivalent about the use of force. Thoreau writes:

> A common and natural result of an undue respect for law is, that you may see a file of soldiers, colonel, captain, corporal, privates, powder-monkeys, and all, marching… against their wills, ay, against their common sense and consciences … They have no doubt that it is a damnable business in which they are concerned; they are all peaceably inclined. Now, what are they? Men at all? ("Civil Disobedience" 228-229).

What are readers to make of this section? Thoreau is criticizing not violence as such, but institutions, such as civil society, and the government, which prevent individuals from acting in accordance with their higher principles. This is a critical distinction that should alter our perception of Thoreau, and it is crucial for contextualizing his defense of John Brown. What Thoreau is discussing here is not violence as opposed to nonviolence, but rather social control as opposed to individual moral action. That Thoreau believes that individual liberty is not

expressed primarily through democratic systems, or organized political action, is of critical importance. A government has no inherent right to moral legitimacy; it is the individual conscience that must discern what is moral. For Thoreau, government action and political opinions are not enough, and he writes that "Even voting *for the right* is *doing* nothing for it. It is only expressing to men feebly your desire that it should prevail. A wise man will not leave the right to the mercy of chance, nor wish it to prevail through the power of the majority" ("Civil Disobedience" 232). Thoreau does not feel, and does not want his readers to feel, bound by the democratic tyranny of the majority. The opinion of the masses means nothing compared to an individual's moral sense. It is not merely desirable to oppose a government or society that contradicts these higher laws, but admirable. Thoreau never wavers on this point. It specifically undergirds his defense of Brown. The rightness of an individual outweighs the will of the majority and Thoreau writes, "When a man stands up serenely against the condemnation and vengeance of mankind, rising above them literally *by a whole body*, — even though he were of late the vilest murderer, who has settled that matter with himself, — the spectacle is a sublime one…" ("A Plea for Captain John Brown" 9). For Thoreau, acting in accordance with a higher moral law abdicates the need to live in harmony with society's laws or customs. And it is not surprising, based on his passion for resisting social control, that his resistance can take any form necessary. He writes, "Thus the State never intentionally confronts a man's sense, intellectual or moral, but only his body, his senses. It is not armed with superior wit or honesty, but with superior physical strength. I was not born to be forced. I will breathe after my own fashion. Let us see who is the strongest" ("Civil Disobedience" 239). It is difficult to see how such a challenge is compatible with pacifism. "Let us see who is the strongest," illustrates clearly the

extent to which Thoreau seems ready and willing, and even game for the challenge, to use force when it is necessary.

If Thoreau's views on violent action in "Civil Disobedience" are implied more than clearly spoken, his vociferous defense of Captain John Brown, and Brown's violent insurrection, is entirely the opposite. For Thoreau, John Brown's violent uprising was a legitimate, and even heroic, moral action. In his justification of Brown's actions, Thoreau criticizes those who, not only do not understand, but refuse to understand Brown's deeds. Returning to Richard Slotkin's analysis, Brown's actions are nothing more than those of the hunter/Indian-fighter, at that point an already long-revered figure in American society. The only difference being that Brown turned this racially and morally sanctioned bloodshed back toward his own society. Furthermore, what is of particular importance in understanding the foundations of the gunslinger archetype, is the fact that not only does Thoreau defend Brown's cause, but rather defends his means, suggesting that anything less than violent action would not be enough. In fact, he even distances Brown's heroism from his own chosen contribution to the cause of abolition, implying that merely writing a pamphlet, or an essay, or attempting to influence the political climate in a peaceful way, would not have been becoming of a hero such as Brown. He even suggests that it would have undermined Brown's actions. Thoreau writes:

> If he had had any journal advocating "*his cause*" any organ, as the phrase is, monotonously and wearisomely playing the same old tune, and then passing round the hat, it would have been fatal to his efficiency. If he had acted in any way so as to be let alone by the government, he might have been suspected. It was the fact that the tyrant

> must give place to him, or he to the tyrant, that distinguished him from all the reformers of the day that I know. (“A Plea for Captain John Brown” 12)

The violent confrontation is imperative. Not only is Thoreau defending Brown’s means, his violent actions, but Thoreau is going so far to suggest that had Brown acted in a legal way, in a nonviolent, nonbelligerent way, his stature in Thoreau’s eyes would be diminished. Nevertheless, despite his full-throated approval of Brown, Thoreau does make some qualifications regarding his stance on violence, and, at least in part, tries to illustrate scenarios where he does not approve of its use, writing:

> I know that the mass of my countrymen think that the only righteous use that can be made of Sharps rifles and revolvers is to fight duels with them, when we are insulted by other nations, or to hunt Indians, or shoot fugitive slaves with them, or the like. I think that for once the Sharps rifles and the revolvers were employed in a righteous cause. The tools were in the hands of one who could use them. (“A Plea for Captain John Brown” 13)

This passage complicates Slotkin’s comparison between Brown and Indian hunters, suggesting Thoreau is not merely comparing Brown to such figures, but thinking in different terms. Regardless, we are reminded again of Thoreau’s earlier statements in “Civil Disobedience.” He continues to be critical of government sanctioned violence, and violence which forces men to contradict their own consciences, but it is not the violence itself that troubles him. Rather, that this violence is directed or enacted from on high, and not by the individual consciences of the men that make up the army, is what makes its use problematic. As a part of Thoreau’s approval

of John Brown, he is careful to maintain a space in which individual violent action is necessary, and even laudable.

In "Civil Disobedience" Thoreau implies the usefulness of individual violent action, and in his defense of John Brown, he found an individual who acted in accordance with his standards. In his essay "Walking," Thoreau combines his acknowledgement of the need for violence in support of higher moral laws, with the effects of wilderness on society. This synthesis is hinted at in Thoreau's defense of John Brown's ferocity and bloodshed at Harper's Ferry, which Thoreau sees as fulfilling the same function as the wilderness. Let us recall a short section from the chapter "Higher Laws" in *Walden*, where Thoreau writes, "I found in myself, and still find, an instinct toward a higher, or, as it is named, spiritual life, as do most men, and another toward a primitive rank and savage one, and I reverence them both. I love the wild not less than the good" (*Walden* 143). If Thoreau suggests his individual moral judgement is superior to that of society, and is willing to reverence the savage part of himself, loving it, "not less than the good," it becomes clear than he feels that a savage and violent element, at least at the individual level, is necessary for the health and development of society. This violence, embodied and enacted in an individual, is valuable because it channels the influence of nature, the influence which Thoreau argues is necessary for the "preservation of the world" ("Walking" 273). Throughout his writings, Thoreau argues that wildness preserves society, preventing it from becoming stultifying and suffocating to an individual's moral sense. Thoreau's experiment at Walden and many of his essays express his concern that men or women are too domesticated, too restricted by society and too out of touch with nature and its enlivening wildness to act with clear moral judgement.

> I would not have every man nor every part of a man cultivated, any more than I would have very acre of earth cultivated; part will be tillage, but the greater part will be meadow and forest, not only serving an immediate use, but preparing a mould against a distant future, by the annual decay of the vegetation which it supports. ("Walking" 282)

Delineating the exact nature of Thoreau's thought on the relationships between wilderness and civilization, the individual and society, is beyond the scope of this essay, but for the sake of the gunslinger archetype, that Thoreau sees the potential for an individual to embody the violent and moral influence of the wilderness[2] cannot be missed. Patrick Dooley writes, "[Thoreau] has less confidence in the basic goodness and moral up-righteousness of his countrymen. Accordingly only the moral perceptions of those uncontaminated by society are trustworthy," (Dooley 183). Thoreau does not make explicit the connection between violence and wilderness in his essay defending John Brown, but critics such as Andrew Menard have not failed to see the interlocking and mutually reinforcing connection. He writes, "Citizens who failed to bring their 'sills up to the very edge of the swamp' (p. 241) essentially failed Thoreau's test of patriotism—as did the entire country, so long as it refused to see itself as a nation on 'the very swamp,' a nation of 'backwoodsmen,' as it were, willing to 'go in the back way' to 'front' the fecund natures of its identity" (Menard 610-611). John Brown did, and Thoreau saw himself as doing the same. They both embodied this frontier mentality, the liminal space between absolute society and absolutely wilderness. They incorporated the influences of nature, in an attempt to

[2] Again, let us be reminded that in Thoreau's conception, words like "wilderness," "savagery," "chaos," and "primitive" function as the binary oppositions to concepts such as "civilization" and "society," etc., even as his own usage of these terms fluctuates. My use of these terms is not an endorsement of those binaries, simply an exploration of how Thoreau's thinking in this way eventually re-expressed itself in the figure of the gunslinger.

purify the individual's moral sense, harden it, and sharpen it, both for conquering the wilderness and for leading society. For Thoreau, true "men" or "true Americans" must be in touch with this sort of wildness, and live on this frontier. In his famous work on the frontier in American literature, Edward Fussell points out how Thoreau's writings on the frontier help illustrate the divergence between the historical west and the mythic west. Fussell writes, "The frontier metaphor enables Thoreau to entertain capacious and flexible, if also caustic, views of the subject, and especially to preserve whatever he likes from either conception" (Fussell 214). Furthermore, when Thoreau sees himself as such a frontier figure in "Walking," embodying the corrective and even violent powers of wilderness on an individual level, he comes his closest to explicitly describing the future gunslinger archetype, writing, "…I live a sort of border life, on the confines of a world, into which I make occasional and transient forays only, and my patriotism and allegiance to the state into whose territories I seem to retreat are those of a moss-trooper" ("Walking" 284). Thoreau's "moss-trooper" reference is particularly resonant for the development of the gunslinger archetype. It comes from 17th century Scottish outlaws who would terrorize both civilians and soldiers, operating on the fridges of society, then retreating into the Highlands of Scotland. These "moss-troopers" were generally considered outlaws and brigands. Thoreau is aligning himself with this sort of liminal figure, both within society and without it, operating on either side of the law, a figure historically defined by violence and opposition to society.[3]

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[3] It is also certainly worth noting that, whereas Thoreau has always to this point advocated for violence in service of higher moral laws, at least in this case, the figures to which he refers have no particular moral guidelines, but rather operate with their own morality.

Now that the relationship in Thoreau's thinking between wilderness, violence, the individual, and society have been more clearly delineated, let us examine how Thoreau's conception of the West fits into these patterns. In his essay "Walking," Thoreau again draws a direct connection between social health and development and the influence of "the Wild," which in this essay, he entirely conflates with "the West." In doing so, he creates the ethical, social, and now literal geographic space the gunslinger would come to serve in Western mythology. Thoreau reiterates his views on the relationship between society and wilderness this way, notably adding a bit of mythological flair:

> The West of which I speak is but another name for the Wild; and what I have been preparing to say is, that in Wildness is the preservation of the world. Every tree sends its fibres forth in search of the Wild. The cities import it at any price. Men plow and sail for it. From the forest and wilderness come the tonics and barks which brace mankind. Our ancestors were savages. The story of Romulus and Remus being suckled by a wolf is not a meaningless fable. The founders of every state which has risen to eminence, have drawn their nourishment and vigor from a similar wild source. It is because the children of the empire were not suckled by the wolf that they were conquered and displaced by the children of the northern forests who were. ("Walking" 273)

Though it is often assumed that Thoreau's description of the need for "the Wild" is simply encouraging the reader to appreciate nature, it is imperative to note that in referencing the myth of Romulus and Remus, the foundational myth of the founding of Rome, Thoreau is again explicitly binding together the need for nature and the implicit need for violence to ensure the vitality of society. Indeed, his ideal of social health is identified with the martial spirit which

inspired the founding of Rome, implying that such a martial bearing would well serve the American people. In fact, while Thoreau often merges natural imagery with metaphysical speculation, his choices of mythological and historic references seem to clearly indicate that he was aware of the violent undertones his appeals to nature contained. The violent implications of his references recall Thoreau's feelings when viewing the carcass of a dead horse at Walden, "I love to see that Nature is so rife with life that myriads can be afforded to be sacrificed and suffered to prey on one another; that tender organizations can be so serenely squashed out of existence like pulp—tadpoles which herons gobble up, and tortoises and toads run over in the road; and that sometimes it has rained flesh and blood!" (*Walden* 213). Thoreau's contention that nature's influence is vital to the health of society cannot be separated from the violence that Thoreau acknowledged and even appreciated about nature. Here again the idea of the frontier serves to make sense of Thoreau's thought. When writing of fellow abolitionist Wendell Phillips, Thoreau concluded his remarks by saying, "For as yet the red-cross knight has shown us only the gallant device upon his shield, and his admirable command of his steed, prancing and curveting in the empty lists; but we wait to see who, in the actual breaking of lances, will come tumbling upon the plain" ("Wendell Phillips Before the Concord Lyceum" 314-315). The implicitly violent figure of the knight currently only prances and displays his shield, yet when actual violence breaks out, it will break out on the plain. The individual of society (the knight) and the natural landscape (the plain) seem equally important in forming the complete picture.

Let us return to "Walking." For here it is that Thoreau himself brings these disparate threads of philosophy and metaphor, the raw bones of myth, together to sketch out almost completely the outline of a new sort of character. He alludes to a special class of nomadic

wanderers that he characterizes as walkers. He refers to them as “professionals,” a class of people into which you must be born. He even includes himself in this category and even suggests that he is “alone” in practicing this “noble art.” Perhaps, in his mind, John Brown was one such professional as well. Regardless, the language itself is striking, particularly for the way it fits, almost word for word, into the later tradition of the western, which often refers to the “art” of the gunslinger. At this point we have come right up to the edge of the language and tropes which came to characterize the mythological and archetypal gunslinger. Thoreau writes of the walkers, “…a still more ancient and honorable class, I trust. The chivalric and heroic spirit which once belonged to the rider seems now to reside in — or perchance to have subsided into the Walker — not the Knight but Walker Errant” (“Walking” 261). Thoreau’s “walker” is an individual operating on the outskirts of society, under a moral code which society either rejects or cannot maintain for itself. The philosophical and metaphorical bedrock of this figure has already been sketched out in Thoreau’s previous texts. The figure is metaphorical, mythological, and now, nearly literal in the person of Thoreau himself. In his writings on violence, nature, and individual action, Thoreau has begun sketching out the metaphorical characteristics and, in some cases even literal appearance, that would come to characterize the gunslinger. And though those characteristics had not yet fully coalesced into the recognizable archetype, what Thoreau was able to precisely define was the necessity and the social benefits of individuals violently opposing society when they felt it justified or necessary. Obviously, Thoreau could not have fully realized his role in translating the knight-errant into the walker, or foreseen the eventual mythological realization of the gunslinger, but what he defended in John Brown, the language he has used to describe himself, and the social function that he envisions for

wilderness and for wild figures, perfectly describe the sort of moral code and violent inclinations of the archetypal figure that would become synonymous with the American West.

The first fully-formed gunslinger, that fills the archetypal space that has been discussed, is that of Lassiter in Zane Grey's 1912 novel, *Riders of the Purple Sage.* Grey's novel introduces numerous tropes and plot elements that continue to be reused in western stories to this day. The strong frontier woman, a secret conspiracy to steal either land or cattle (in this case, both), a desert oasis, landscape as a character unto itself, a villain with a secret, and finally Lassiter, a man who, though he has the skills of a ranch hand, both in herding and riding, his primary distinguishing ability is his skill with his guns. Referred to multiple times, Lassiter's "big black guns" orient the reader to the nature of his character, and they go hand in hand with his overall appearance. Clad in all black, from his sombrero down to his chaps, Lassiter is immediately recognized by the Mormon antagonists of the novel:

> "Look!" hoarsely whispered one of Tull's companions. "He packs two black-butted guns—low down—they're hard to see—black akin them black chaps."
>
> "A gun-man!" whispered another. "Fellers, careful now about movin' your hands."
>
> The stranger's slow approach might have been a mere leisurely manner of gait or the cramped short steps of a rider unused to walking; yet, as well, it could have been the guarded advance of one who took no chances with men.
>
> "Hello, stranger!" called Tull. No welcome was in this greeting only a gruff curiosity.
>
> The rider responded with a curt nod. The wide brim of a black sombrero cast a dark shade over his face. (Grey 20).

Lassiter is immediately recognized as a gun-man and throughout the novel he displays skills in riding, herding, and tracking. Nevertheless, his violent nature, and the extent to which he is willing to inflict his will on the town's Mormon authorities, separate him from a mere outlaw or cowboy character. What is perhaps most striking about Grey's text is the way in which so many of the tropes and archetypes that typify the western make an appearance in it, albeit in an inchoate form. However, it is Lassiter who seems to step off the page as the fully realized gunslinger archetype. Not partially formed, but fully realized. The frontier mentality and liminality between wilderness and civilization is in place, the emphasis on violence is in place, and even the outfit and clinking spurs are in place. Nevertheless, though the archetype of the gunslinger appears fully developed in this novel, the character and its role in the western genre will evolve across many later works. One particular element that is to change is that Lassiter has no counterpart. Though he faces several adversaries, including Tull and Bishop Dyer, and has comparable riding skills to Tull's henchman Jerry Card, no one comes close to matching Lassiter's gift for violence. Whereas later texts, including *Shane* and *Once Upon a Time in the West,* will feature characters of the gunslinger "class" on either side of the moral spectrum, *Riders of the Purple Sage* features only one. In this way, Lassiter fulfills the role that Thoreau had imagined. In this narrative, an individual stands up to the forces of society for morally justified reasons. The individual, the gunslinger, in this case Lassiter, must stand up and oppose the Mormons. He is the only one who has both the violent abilities, shooting, riding, tracking, etc. Furthermore, *Riders of the Purple Sage* illustrates why both elements of the wilderness/civilization binary are necessary and present in the gunslinger. There are numerous characters who recognize the oppression of the Mormon leaders, but since the Mormons are

the lawful authorities of the community, it requires an outsider to upend the situation. If there were a lawful sheriff, he would work for the Mormons. A cowboy, such as Venters, would not have the necessary skills to take on the Mormons, and an outlaw would not have the moral sense required to right the wrongs of the town. *Riders of the Purple Sage* demonstrates the narrative's requirement of a character to straddle these disparate characteristics, but leaves the more complicated questions of such a character's moral desirability unasked.

Shane may be the quintessential classic western. The name is synonymous with the western genre, and to explore the evolution of the gunslinger archetype, it cannot be ignored. Alan Ladd's Shane is a gunslinger character the rides into town and protects the decent, hardworking homesteaders from the greedy cattle baron Rufus Ryker. The plot is relatively simple and straightforward: the virtuous townsfolk win the day, thanks to the quick draw of Shane, and live happily ever after, while Shane having successfully secured the safety and security of the society, and finding no place for himself or his talent for violence there, retreats into the wilderness whence he came. For the purposes of this paper, what is most significant about the film *Shane* is how it continues the evolution of the gunslinger. In *Riders of the Purple Sage*, Lassiter had no equal. None of the Mormon henchman could stand up to his skills with a gun. Yet in *Shane*, the heroic gunfighter does have an equal. A doppelganger that represents the interests of the cattle baron Ryker. This character, the black-hatted Jack Wilson, is implied to be the equal of Shane, only is service of a morally repugnant cause. Though it may be difficult, almost seventy years on, to recognize the significance of this shift, for audiences of the time, it must have been monumental. With Shane representing the upright values and concerns of the homesteaders and Jack Wilson standing in for the greedy cattle baron Ryker, the entire

moral conflict of the film is abstracted into the violent showdown between the two sides' champions. Indeed, this showdown, follows the description written by Mathew Carter, "the fatal violence of the gunfight, although illegal in the eyes of the laws of civilisation is, nevertheless, acknowledged as necessary for the foundation of law upon which civilisation is to be built" (Carter 38). It is not merely that the clash of Shane and Jack Wilson will determine the material and economic conditions of the valley, but rather, their showdown determines what sort of civilization there will be at all. As Thoreau implies in his resistance to the state, "It is not armed with superior wit or honesty, but with superior physical strength. I was not born to be forced. I will breathe after my own fashion. Let us see who is the strongest" ("Civil Disobedience" 239). The moral and ideological confrontation between the homesteaders and the cattle baron is resolved, not by law, or argumentation, but by two gunslingers meeting in a saloon. Rather than the moral clarity which typified *Riders of the Purples Sage,* this film begins to complicate the stakes and generic positioning of the gunslinger figure. That both the noble homesteaders and the evil cattle baron have their respective champion gunslingers, figures who transgress laws of violence in service of their cause, complicates the straightforward endorsement of extra-legal violent individual action that we see in Thoreau and Gray.

A final example of this sort of iconography comes from Sergio Leone's film, *Once Upon a Time in the West.* Leone's film focuses on a widowed heroine, Claudia Cardinale's Jill, the evil railroad baron who is trying to steal away her valuable property, and an outlaw that decides to help the widow. If the setup and characters feel familiar, it is because Leone admitted outright that the plot and characters were purposefully culled from classic western plots and stereotypes. And of course, there are gunslingers. Again, as in Shane, there are two. And *Once*

Upon a Time in the West also helps demonstrate the separation between an outlaw and the gunslinger archetype. Whereas Jason Robards's character Cheyenne is an outlaw, and a notorious and violent one at that, the film clearly demarcates him as a different breed of man from the gunslingers of the film. Charles Bronson is Harmonica, clad in muddy white, and Henry Fonda is in all black. Indeed, as Frank and Harmonica circle each other before the final duel, their minor exchange illustrates the escalating otherness of the gunslingers as the western genre evolved. The gunslingers have become more and more separated from the rest of humanity, more in touch with wildness, removed (or elevated) from the economic, social, and material values of civilization.

> FRANK: Morton once told me I could never be like him. Now I understand why. Wouldn't have bothered him, knowing you were around somewhere alive.
>
> HARMONICA: So, you found out you're not a businessman after all.
>
> FRANK: Just a man.
>
> HARMONICA: An ancient race. Other Mortons'll be along, and they'll kill it off (*Once Upon a Time in the West*).

These two men, who have their own connection separate from the concerns of the rest of the plot, are defined by their skill with guns, their use of violence and their clarity of purpose. And their separation is not merely that of outlaws alienated from the law like Cheyenne. Their sense of superiority, that characterizes the material violence of gunfighters in general, sets them apart from everyone, to the point that, in Leone's film, they begin to seem almost otherworldly.

They have achieved a truly mythic remove. This suggests that the fully *human* individual can no longer easily achieve the triumph of individual right. Like heroes of the past, such as Gilgamesh, or Odysseus, the gunslinger has now become "part" immortal divinity and part moral human. This transformation, while seeming to embrace the moral role of Thoreau's "walkers," actually shows a deep pessimism about the ability of a merely human gunslinger to do what is right. Yet this remove still echoes the way in which Thoreau wrote about John Brown, "For once we are lifted out of the trivialness and dust of politics into the region of truth and manhood" ("A Plea for Captain John Brown" 8).[4] To return once more to Richard Slotkin, who in *Gunfighter Nation* describes the film *High Noon,* and its depiction of the "Killer Elite," writing, *"*It forthrightly adopts a solution that emphasizes the moral privilege and entitlement to power of the man of superior knowledge, courage, and capability, and it denigrates the moral and historical claims of popular democracy" (Slotkin 396). Thoreau's own words perfectly fit alongside Slotkin's analysis. What Thoreau began sketching out in his imagined frontier, seems to have come to full fruition. Nevertheless, Cormac McCarthy took the fullness of this archetype from Leone, the mythic and nearly superhuman gunslinger and explored the horrific side of a creature defined by violence, more powerful and dangerous than a man, and created the character of Judge Holden.

Blood Meridian's Judge Holden serves as the most extreme example of the gunslinger archetype ever created, and seems to demonstrate the narrative limits of what the gunslinger archetype can sustain. To create a character more extreme than the Judge in terms of violence,

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[4] These echoes also allude to the role that conceptions of masculinity play in the western myth, a conversation I have purposefully eschewed for the purposes of this essay.

refinement, or otherness would be to create a character that ceases to function in a narrative sense as a gunslinger. In the midst of violence, destruction, and death, the Judge stands out as particularly extreme in a novel full of extremes. Indeed, as Inger-Anne Søfting writes, "Excess is in many ways this novel's most striking device. Situations and ideas are carried to their utmost extreme, to the point where they appear fantastic and totally out of order." (Søfting 16). Since exploring the foundations of the American gunslinger archetype found in the writings of Thoreau and tracing it through *Riders of the Purple Sage, Shane,* and *Once Upon a Time in the West,* it is now fitting to examine what seems to be the breaking point of the archetype itself.

Judge Holden takes the elements that have come to define the gunslinger archetype, the combination and embodiment of wilderness and civilization, the reliance on violence, and a sense of set-apartness from the rest of humankind, and ratchets those characteristics up considerably. In the earlier westerns, Lassiter and Jane Withersteen are cut off from the rest of civilization after the rockslide in the pass into hidden valley, Shane choose to leave the valley he has saved through violence because he knows he doesn't belong, and Harmonica never even considers remaining in Sweetwater after he has killed Frank. Yet this element of isolation is dwarfed by the way in which the Judge is entirely othered in *Blood Meridian*. It is not merely that his violence has separated him from polite society, but rather that his entire character separates him from a recognizable humanity. Indeed, the violence and dominance that had come to characterize the "otherness" of the gunslinger as seen in the previous western examples, pale in comparison to Judge Holden. Again from Søfting, "In *Blood Meridian* the judge in many ways fills the role as frontier hero. The judge is the man who knows Indians and who knows how to survive in the wilderness. However, the judge offers no consolation, no

assurance, that man in his encounter with wilderness did not become savage indeed, no consolation that man even before his encounter with wilderness was not inherently savage and evil" (Søfting 17). The balance between wilderness and society that has previously defined the gunslinger archetype is in danger of breaking, for both sides of the scale are weighted down so heavily. As a part of his liminality, the gunslinger is characterized by civilization and by wilderness, and the tension between them informs his violent actions, creating both the skill and will to wield his weapon, and the intelligence and moral sense to use it for some justifiable purpose. The Judge incorporates this duality, but while the Judge does inhabit this liminal space between savagery and society, he exists entirely at its extremes, threatening to pull it apart, and creating a character that begins to exceed the narrative "bounds" of what the gunslinger archetype can do. Thomas Pughe describes the Judge as "A highly cultivated man who speaks several European and Native American languages and is interested in geology, paleontology, botany, zoology and history, he seems to be the extreme opposite of the brutish men with whom he rides. But of course his association with the Indian killers compromises his culture and suggests that that culture is just the ideological facade of the killers' genocidal campaign" (Pughe 378). The Judge is educated and cultured beyond any previous gunslinger. His philosophical and scientific and legal and economic knowledge would push the bounds of reality for any character in the western genre, let alone a member of a Indian scalping party. And yet, at the same time, as the reader is grappling with the Judge's extremes of civilization, culture, and society, his other extreme, of violence beyond description, is elevated to a horrific extent.

Indeed, in terms of the violence of the archetypal gunslinger, the Judge is superior to any that have come before. Not only is he violent, but savagely, brutally, genocidally violent, too. He purchases two dogs from a boy and throws them into a river only moments later. He seemingly befriends and later scalps another young boy for what seems to merely be his own amusement. The Judge is bigger, stronger, and more violent than everyone else in the novel. He is more, in every possible sense. Any page of *Blood Meridian* is rife with shocking violence, with the Judge mired in the gore. Whereas previous gunslingers retained a sense of their humanity, albeit in an elevated sense, there is no commonality between the rest of the characters of *Blood Meridian* and the Judge. He is elevated past humankind in every conceivable way, and this extreme concentration of the attributes on the opposite poles of the gunslinger binary threaten its entire structural efficacy. The level of this particular gunslinger's savage violence and cultured otherness force us to call into question the applicability of the gunslinger archetype. To increase the Judge's extremes in either direction, would be to break the character away from the gunslinger archetype entirely. Which is not to say that a more violent character could not be created, but that such a character would cease to function in the mold of the gunslinger archetype.

Nevertheless, despite the brutal extremes of the character, the extremes which seem to nearly force him out of the archetypal bounds of the gunslinger, the Judge does still fit into the archetypal pedigree in several ways. His introduction unfolds like something out a classical western:

> An enormous man dressed in an oilcloth slicker had entered the tent and removed his hat. He was bald as a stone and he had no trace of beard and he had no brows to his

> eyes nor lashes to them. He was close on to seven feet in height and he stood smoking a cigar even in this nomadic house of God and he seemed to have removed his hat only to chase the rain from it for now he put it on again. (McCarthy 6)

McCarthy's text is full of rich and stylized imagery, and the introduction, action, and bearing of its übergunslinger is no different. As Søfting writes that, "The visual pleasure that McCarthy's discourse clearly offers is akin to that of Sergio Leone's meta-westerns. Leone's love for the vacillation between stills and extreme close-ups, and a panning camera that sweeps over an amorphous dusty landscape, is reflected also in McCarthy's style. The spectral music of Ennio Morricone would probably not have appeared out of context in *Blood Meridian*" (Søfting 19). Indeed, while the Judge seems to push the bounds of the archetypal gunslinger to its breaking point, throughout the novel are descriptions and occasions that still manage to recall the classical tropes and imagery of the western. Judge Holden, lurking in the shadows of a dim saloon, is described this way:

> He was sitting at one of the tables. He wore a round hat with a narrow brim and 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. (McCarthy 338)

The language others the Judge in a way that pushes him out of the conventional western genre, but at the same time, the setting, of a dim saloon, with what are little more than the stock stereotypes of countless westerns, keeps him within the bounds of western generic tradition And though there is no final duel in a dusty street, the Judge and the kid do meet for what amounts to a final showdown. The sort of violent confrontation that underlies both the western genre itself, and the gunslinger archetype in particular. McCarthy's showdown however, remains unique among western conventions. First, the kid stubbornly defies the grandiose philosophizing of the Judge in the barroom for what amounts to a half eloquent, half mumbled verbal showdown, and finally the kid meets his fate in a muddy outhouse, the action, and specifics left to our gruesome imaginations. "The judge was seated upon the closet. He was naked and he rose up smiling and gathered him in his arms against his immense and terrible flesh and shot the wooden barlatch home behind him" (McCarthy 347). Though the gunslinger archetype is distorted and stretched to the breaking point, the character of Judge Holden still operates very much in the mold of a classical gunslinger, embodying the tension between wilderness and society, violence and humanity, those same binaries that Thoreau contended with after his own fashion. The Judge simultaneously fulfills the role of the gunslinger archetype, existing within the locations and settings of classical western lore, all while his savagery, intelligence, and unhuman otherness, push past those same archetypal, structural, and generic conventions.

As has been shown, the gunslinger archetype is one that was grew out of the specifically American western genre. The gunslinger should be understood as a separate from the cowboy and the outlaw, two categories that can apply to the gunslinger, but do not encompass his

mythological and philosophical complexity. In fact, he stands as a generically specific archetype, designed to suit the mythological and political needs of a developing nation. In particular, what the gunslinger and his evolution helps us understand is the complicated dynamics of individual resistance to societal control. Henry David Thoreau saw this sort of individual action as a morally justified and positive corrective to corrupt of stultifying societal structures. Yet, the evolution of the gunslinger, particularly into its most extreme iteration in the form of Judge Holden, seems to question both the morality and desirability of individuals who violently flaunt the social order whenever it suits them. This range of gunslinger figures allows us to explore the parameters within which we either celebrate or condemn individual violence. This foundational question, given a rich foundation in the writings of Thoreau played out through the gunslinger archetype across the canvass of the West, taking many forms throughout the years. As the genre of the western formed and evolved, so too did the role of the gunslinger. From *Riders of the Purple Sage,* to *Shane*, to *Once Upon a Time in the West,* we can see a figure straddling the line between civilization and savagery, marked by his skill in violence, and existing in a plain removed, or elevated above normal human beings—an imaginative figure both realizing and questioning our desire for individuals to have the power to violently challenge their societal limitations. The Judge's use of extreme, brutal violence as well as his ease with multiple languages, laws, and cultures, demonstrate the liminal positioning of the gunslinger as a figure of both civilization and wilderness. His striking figure, seven feet tall and entirely hairless, literalize the otherness that came to characterize the gunslinger. There will be new gunslingers on the literary horizon, and they will embody the traits and tensions that have evolved down from Thoreau's thought all the way to Judge Holden. They will continue to excite us, embody

our fantasies, and expose the dark side of even seemingly justified violence. From intellectual writer to savage judge, the gunslinger will ride on.

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